



Introduction

Well we have three Sunday's until Christmas and so we are going to take a break from our study in 1 Corinthians and focus our thoughts around the narrative of Jesus birth in preparation for Christmas. In fact we will actually be away from 1 Corinthians till mid January since we'll have several special messages around the beginning of the year. But even though we leave the text of 1 Corinthians, thematically we are staying in the exact same place. For this Christmas season we are going to borrow from our study of 1 Corinthians this theme of gospel weakness and gospel power and use it as a lens through which we will view the Christmas narrative.

And so today we will begin this short little Christmas series by looking at the unexpected weakness of the Messiah's birth.

Let's look at the NT account with fresh eyes. Be shocked. Be surprised by it. Because what we have recorded here would have never in a million years been anticipated by the OT saint.

Let's do a fill-in-the-blank. I'd never in a million years have thought that the Messiah's birth would have been surrounded with such _____? I think the best word for it is stigma.

Stigma is a mark of disgrace or a stain of reproach. In fact in ancient usage the word was used to describe the mark left by a branding iron used to identify criminals or slaves. You've been permanently labeled. You've been ostracized and you are now devalued according to perception people have of you.

Being born with stigma is like starting out in debt. You have to earn just get to zero. And one of the most shocking aspects of the Messiah's birth was that God chose for him to be born stigmatized.

There were three significant stigma's that Jesus had to overcome.

THREE STIGMAS SURROUNDING THE MESSIAH

1. Civil Stigma

Civil Stigma

Think about all the texts we have in the Bible that talk about the origins of Jesus. There are three major ones: Mt 2, Lk 2 and John 1.

If you go to Matthew and Luke, we're told Jesus was born in Bethlehem, which was not a sprawling metropolis. It's a tiny town. It's a nothing town.

There's an interesting way to illustrate how small this town really was that's connected to part of the Christmas story. Do you remember when Herod realizes he's been tricked by the wise men, he throws himself into a rage, and he decides just to make sure that no prophesied king usurps him, he's going to kill all the babies in Bethlehem that are two years and under.

Well that's a well-remembered part of the Christmas story but that's where the memory ends. Secular historians can't find this event recorded outside the pages of Scripture. And so because they can't find this extra biblical confirmation some will claim it was invented. We can find other massacres of Herods so why isn't this one recorded?

You want to know the most likely explanation of this? Bethlehem was such a small town, that this didn't even move the needle enough to register in the pen of the historian. Bethlehem was such a small town that all the kids in the town 2 years and under would have probably 10-12 kids. Sadly this was commonplace and simply no big deal for Herod. The elimination of kingly threats is one of the things that characterizes his rule and this slaughter of children in this tiny little town was so insignificant it didn't even get recorded by the courts.

Now what's the point. It's an unlikely place for a world changer to originate. What chance does Bethlehem have of birthing the next Roman emperor. How likely would the president of the United States arise out of Parma. Zero.

So he was born in Bethlehem, but where was he raised? Nazareth. In the book of John you don't have any birth narratives, but we read that Jesus grew up in Nazareth which means nothing to us, but definitely meant something in Jesus' day.

John 1:43-46, The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."

In case it isn't clear, that's a slam. It's like saying does any good thing come out of Greenleaf, or Notus, or Melba? You can almost hear the snobbery in it. "Oh my word! Nazareth really? Ugh, I can't imagine living there.!"

Nazareth was part of this region called Galilee. This entire region was rural and small subsistence farms. Compared to Rome or even Jerusalem this entire region was pretty backwater. Interestingly, Nathanael who makes this comment, himself was from this region. Sure, I might be from Galilee but at least I'm not from Nazareth. Sure, I'm from Notus but at least I'm not from Arco. If you know where Arco is, you're probably an Idaho native. If you've never been there, your missing out on precisely nothing.

The point is that inside Galilee there was a pecking order and Nazareth was at the bottom. The best thing I've ever seen come out of Nazareth is a ripe olive. What thing of consequence could ever come out of Nazareth?"

So there was this civil stigma, but there was an economic stigma as well.

THREE STIGMAS SURROUNDING THE MESSIAH

1. Civil Stigma
2. Economic Stigma

Economic Stigma

We know that Joseph and Mary were poor, and I think we can safely say they were VERY poor. One of the ways we know that is because of the offering they bring to the temple.

In Leviticus 12 we are told that a special offering needs to accompany the birth of a firstborn child. This was a once in a lifetime offering. You only did it for the firstborn child. And it was supposed to be a lamb. But if you were really poor, there was a provision in the law that would allow you to replace the lamb with a turtledove or a

pigeon.

Now I want you to think about this. Mary and Joseph had been visited by the archangel Gabriel, this high ranking angel to be told that she was pregnant with the Savior of the world. That's a pretty big deal, no? I think I would take it pretty seriously if I was visited by an angel with a message like this. You couldn't have a more serious setup.

Now think about it. Nine months goes by between this announcement and the birth. They know this sacrifice is coming. They are students of the OT and they know for certain, that this sacrifice is required of them. Of any offering you don't want to skimp on, it would be this one. Sure if it's just your average baby, maybe a turtledove would do, but for the Son of God, maybe we should up it to a lamb. Of any offering you'd want to pull out all the stops and really go for it, it would be this one.

I have to think, they must have really been poor to have had to offer this turtledove in place of the lamb. My point is that I can almost guarantee that stinginess wasn't motivating this route. I'm sure everything in them wanted to offer a lamb, but how could they? They had to have been just dead broke. What a stinging stab to their hearts to have to take this provision.

That just establishes the fact of their poverty. But we are thinking about the stigma of it. Why are the poor stigmatized? Because the poor are disadvantaged. They are handcuffed from making any sort of a difference in the world for 10,000 reasons.

- The poor have the worst land,
- the worst houses,

- the worst education.
- They have the least access to people of influence,
- the least number of opportunities presented to them,
- the least amount of encouragement.
- The poor are judged unfairly, stereotyped, and eventually believe everything they've been told.

All through history the poor are taken advantage of by the rich so that they can't ever work their way out of their poverty.

There are unbelievable exceptions when someone actually breaks out. We make feature length films of them because they are so rare. We call them Cinderella stories because it's a miracle, it takes Disney magic to escape the social forces that want to resist any change in economic advancement. Sociologists have studied this for decades and they will all tell you the same thing. It's really, really hard to advance.

So there was community stigma, economic stigma, but the worst of all, by far was the...

THREE STIGMAS SURROUNDING THE MESSIAH

1. Civil Stigma
2. Economic Stigma
3. Social Stigma

Social Stigma

Now this one has been well discussed but no matter how much you've thought about it, it's hard to emotionally appreciate just how significant this would have been.

When you read Matthew's genealogy you see that while he is a descendant of David, Jesus' lineage is not unblemished. He does not descend from an uninterrupted line of nobles and kings. His genealogy includes the outcast, the foreigner and the scandalous.

But the scandal of all scandals was his very own mother. He was born to an unwed, pregnant, teenage girl who certainly in that small-town culture would have been disgraced and stigmatized the rest of her life, so would the family, and so would Jesus.

Getting pregnant outside of marriage in our culture happens all the time and sadly we never see it because so many of the babies are aborted. But even if you do carry the baby through to term, there is

no stigma to it. You're a courageous mother.

And even if you were to carry some stigma, if you came from a large city, you could just disappear from those who knew your story and start over. Not Mary. Her culture is going to shame her and she can never escape. She's going to carry this stigma for the rest of her life. That's a bummer. Everywhere she goes she will feel the stares of disapproval as the bump on her belly grew. She will feel the eyes burn into her as they label, condemn and judge her. She will bear that scarlet letter.

No amount of goodness in her track record is going to overcome this. Nobody is going to say, "Well, Mary has always been such a good kid. I guess, we're forced to believe her. Somehow she miraculously just happened to get pregnant." That actually is ludicrous. This is why an angel had to tell Joseph. I don't care what Mary's character said of her, nothing could have made Joseph believe. Listen, Mary, I love you an all, but ever since the dawn of time there has never been an exception to this rule.

If you've never experienced severe unjust stigma, which I haven't, it's hard to appreciate just how crippling and life-ending this can be.

We know this stigma stayed with Jesus clear to his adult life. You may remember in John 8, Jesus was exposing the evil of the religious leaders and saying, "Listen if Abraham was your father, if you were children of Abraham, you'd be acting like Abraham." Children do what their father's teach them to do.

You want to talk fathers, huh, since we are on the subject. Well Jesus.

John 8:41, They said to him, "We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father-even God."

That's pretty low. What was the work of Jesus' father according to the Pharisees? So Jesus, like father like son right? It's a pretty low dig. The point is that this is street knowledge into Jesus' adult life. Jesus the illegitimate. We are sons of God."

So imagine the weight of all this stigma. The son of God in a hay holder. He wasn't born surrounded by heads of state but by shepherds who were social invisibles, nobodies, bottom of the social ladder.

Bethlehem. Nazareth. His parents. Every marker on Jesus, every brand we see from the outset, as far as the world was concerned, "Here's a guy of no consequence at all."

Everything about Jesus was unimpressive. Everything about Jesus was, "Are you kidding me! Nazareth! Bethlehem!" But here's the theme.

Power in Weakness

In that manger, in that vulnerability and deficiency, in that stigma, was the greatest “royalness” and kingliness the world would ever know. In that apparent weakness was the greatest strength.

Anyone looking on would say, bummer for that baby; he has no possible chance. And yet there lay the most history-changing person the ever would know or ever will know. In that manger, in that manure stained feeding trough, absolute glory was at work, and nobody saw it.

It wasn't hidden, they just weren't look for it. They didn't know how to look for it. All the information was there, they just couldn't organize it or make sense of it. It was hidden among the obvious. Why? Because true greatness is always invisible to human eyes. The universities and business and organizations of the world, can't see it.

Listen again to 1 Corinthians 1 and I think you will hear in it the Christmas story,

1 Corinthians 1:27-28, But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are,

What a beautiful description of the Christmas story. In choosing Mary and Joseph to be the parents of Jesus, in deliberately placing on them a stigma, in placing them in a situation that prevented them from multiplying wealth God was choosing the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

Shaming the Wise

Now I want to take the remainder of our time to think on that phrase, "shame the wise." How does the humble, powerless birth of Jesus "shame" the strong? To even answer that question at all in any meaningful way we need to understand what shame even is. We have almost entirely lost the concept in our culture. In fact shameless describes us pretty well. That was not the case at all in Jesus' day. Much of the east, even to this day is very much an honor/shame culture.

One of the best ways, I think of defining shame for us who have lost the concept, is to compare shame with embarrassment.

Embarrassment is a feeling we understand. Embarrassment is that feeling we get when the image we want to project to others is suddenly jeopardized.

Here's for example:

- So maybe you want others think you have it all together or you are a clean person or whatever but then unannounced someone shows up to your house and it's a mess and you find yourself embarrassed.
- Or maybe you picture yourself as super athletic and coordinated but then you get out of the car and trip over a curb.

So embarrassment is your response when an unfavorable image of yourself slips through the cracks, you're hair is out of place, you got some cake on your face, etc. With embarrassment we are dealing with something that is morally neutral. Listen carefully: shame is a response to something you did or someone else did to you that is morally wrong.

- For example, you might have shame that you were caught cheating on a test or lying.
- Or someone might call you out on the fact you spoke about them behind their back and your response is a feeling of shame.
- Or you might have shame for a sexual sin of pornography or adultery or homosexuality.

Shame is more significant than embarrassment because embarrassment has to do with image. Shame has to do with a fixed assessment of value based on an absolute standard. You've been judged by this standard and found to be lacking. This is why of course the concept of shame is disappearing in our culture because there is no standard on morality and so there can be no shame. So that is what shame is.

Now back to our question, How did God chose what is weak and foolish in the world to shame the wise and strong. If Jesus is the ultimate example of strength in weakness, then he must also be the ultimate example of how the weak things of the world shame the strong.

The strong in Jesus day would have been the Roman Empire, the religious and political leaders that sat in seats of authority in the Sanhedrin. How did the weakness of this stigmatized child in a feeding tray shame them?

- How did he create this consciousness in the wise of moral failure,
- this consciousness in the strong of impropriety,
- this consciousness in the powerful of being dishonorable?

It's a fun question to explore.

How Does the Weak Shame the Wise?

Now open your Bibles to Matthew chapter 11 where we will be for the remainder of our time. I think this is one of the best texts to really illustrate how Jesus' weakness shamed the wise. This is such an amazing text.

John the Baptist has just been put in prison. He's been arrested by Herod Antipas and he's about to die by beheading. And Jesus begins to talk about John the Baptist to the crowds who are standing by.

Matthew 11:7-ff, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses.

In other words, for whatever reason, the crowds were not being attracted to the powerful? Isn't that odd? The powerful were in massive palaces. I mean massive and impressive in every way.

They had the finest things. But for some reason, they went 15 miles out into the desert descending 1200 feet into dead sea basin, in the middle of this absolutely desolate wilderness, to see this crazy man. Why? Explain yourself. This is pretty abnormal. What about him attracted you?

What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, "'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.

Malachi predicted that before the Messiah came, a prophet would come in the spirit and power of Elijah. And here he is. There was something this prophet had that interested them more than the nobility, the educated, the talented, the wealthy, the influential. They chose the desert over all that.

They could tell that John the Baptist had a greatness about him.

And Jesus confirms this, among those born of women, meaning either all men and women alive during that time, or perhaps even more shocking all men and women that had ever lived previous, there was none greater than John the Baptist.

This guy who was dressed in smelling, hot, scratchy animal skins, crudely sewn together and who had grasshopper legs stuck between his teeth. He's the greatest man who has ever lived? Why? What did he do to that made him so great?

He answers this by telling you how to be even greater than him.

Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

So apparently John the Baptist was great because he chose to be servant of all. John the baptist's greatness was measured by his servility. If you are least, if you are the most others oriented, if you are the most serving, if you are the most weak, you're even greater than he. Now there's a very real problem this inverted kingdom ethic produces. If you try to live this way, people will take advantage of you.

From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.

What does that mean? That means, that those who try live with this kingdom value of weakness will be run over and marginalized. The immediate context references John's imprisonment. He's about to be beheaded. The kingdom of God is easy to overrun by force because it won't use those tactics and John the Baptist is exhibit A.

But here's why kingdom weakness is really the strongest possible power and will ultimately win. Here's how God uses the weak in the world to shame the strong. Sure John will get his head cut off and served on a platter to the daughter of Herodius. Did Herod win?

Whenever self-serving power is exerted over the weak there is an unanticipated side-effect. Here it is. When men use their power to try and crush godly weakness, it produces shame.

The weak and the foolish things of the world will shame the wise. John in his death shamed Herod. Do you think beheading John produced fulfillment and joy? Do you think Herod walked away saying, "He deserved that." Do you think he sensed in his soul

satisfaction and peace? You know, this is what I was made to do. This is what life is all about, true fulfillment, contentment. Without saying a word, John shamed him.

The righteousness of John, the servant nature of John the Baptist shamed Herod. And John, we are told, is the forerunner of Messiah, the ultimate form of shaming the wicked by simply being righteous.

Now we don't have time to go through the intermediate verses here, but in verses 13-24, essentially what Jesus is going to say is that John as the forerunner to Messiah, and Messiah would preach a message that nobody wanted to hear.

This message would go against worldly values and his enemies would attack him for it. Jesus would be put into a no win situation:

- If he didn't drink alcohol, he'd be accused of having a demon.
- If he did drink alcohol he'd be accused of being a drunkard.
- If he didn't perform miracles he was disbelieved.
- If he performed miracles, he was disbelieved.

What has Jesus done. Why has Jesus become the enemy? He was born low. He heals the sick. And he is cast out? Why? Because he's struck a nerve.

- His very life had shamed them.
- His righteousness revealed their unrighteousness in the same way that stark white reveals off-white.
- What had happened is that Jesus exposed them.
- Jesus drug their self-serving, self-righteous attitudes out into the light and absolutely exposed and humiliated them.

How? By choosing to serve rather than be served. By choosing to

be weak. Remember, shame arises from measuring our actions against moral standards and discovering that they fall short. That is where shame comes from. This is not just a definition we made up here. In Jesus' day probably the book that defined shame more than anything else in popular culture would have been Aristotle's book the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

In that book Aristotle points out that "shame arises when we notice in others who are just like us, honorable things. And that shame is compounded especially if the lack of those honorable things is our own fault and therefore owes to our moral badness."

That is exactly what happened to the Pharisees when they looked on Jesus. They saw that Jesus loved others in such a way that it absolutely exposed their selfishness.

- When people saw Jesus, how he didn't grab for power or grab for money or grab for recognition, it exposed in them the fact that they did do all that.
- When Jesus spoke gently it exposed their harshness.
- When Jesus responded with grace it exposed their self-righteousness.
- When Jesus responded with judgment it exposed their pandering.
- The very fact that Jesus would not use his power for his own interest revealed that they wanted nothing more than to use their power for their own interest.

Do you see it? Now pick it up again with me in verse 25

At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will."

Jesus says, I praise you Father that you have hidden "these things" from the wise and understanding. What things? If you follow the train of thought here this is almost certainly a reference back to verse 11, this is the point of the entire section, "The one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

Any child could look on Jesus and say, "Now there is a great man because he serves." That simple truth was hidden from the Pharisees. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.

Now I want to take a moment to apply this very specifically to your life. We live in a day an age just like Jesus. We sense in our spirit that the strong in the world are getting away with murder.

- The strong control the media.
- The strong control and manipulate the money.
- The strong hold the keys of influence and positions of power.

And our tendency is to look at their strength and use all the same techniques they do to engage them in battle. We need to fight for justice here. We need to amass giant sums of money here so we can run this campaign against this. This isn't God's way.

God shames the wise and powerful through weakness.

How do you do this? Let me suggest you follow Jesus' way. Focus your time and your energy on stuff that nobody sees.

- Be faithful to God in ways that are completely invisible.
- Bear burdens that nobody knows you bear.
- Love people in real and genuine ways and get nothing in return.

Doesn't that bother you? Of course it does! Why? Because it's weak. I should spend my time doing things that have a sort of pay off.

In light of Christmas it should not surprise you in the slightest that true greatness is always invisible to human beings. Don't be surprised if your work goes unnoticed as you try to honor the Lord. Don't mourn the fact that nobody sees the greatest sacrifices you're making.

Don't be bitter. Don't be surprised, because somebody does see. The only eyes that count see. That's what Christmas is saying. Jesus was born in a manger. Nobody noticed. He was raised in Nazareth. Nobody cared and yet that literally changed the world.

Look at Jesus' life. You can go to the land of Israel today and it's literally scarred with archaeological evidence of Herod the Great. He was one of the greatest builders of the ancient world. And yet look

for a single artifact from Jesus. Not one building, not one document. Nothing. And yet it was the blinding brilliance of who he was that just exposed everyone else around him. Character is forged in private. Character was forged in the prayer closet. And when that blinding white crystal emerges, it changes the world.

How did Jesus change the world? By simply being the Son of God? How can you change the world? By simply being like him.

Communion Transition.

Now today is communion Sunday and I want to think for a moment about the significance of the gospel message represented in the bread and the cup.

The problem of the Pharisees is the same problem all of us have.

Shame arises not just in the Pharisees, but in all of us as we measure our actions against the moral standard set by Jesus. We instantly see that we fall short. And we are shamed. We notice in Jesus honorable things. And we are shamed. And that shame is compounded when we realize that the lack of those honorable things in our experience is our own fault. We are shamed because we recognize our badness.

What do we do with that? The Pharisees took the standard and nailed him to the cross. Erase the standard and erase the problem, right? No. It only produced more shame. Judas hung himself in shame.

They tried to prove that they were stronger and better than Jesus by nailing him to a cross but the opposite happened. They saw in that body they nailed to the cross infinite strength. It would take infinite

strength to allow sinful men to nail him to a tree.

Why would he do this? So that he could give us his strength and his righteousness to men who he need it. Read with me in verse 28

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

What did Jesus mean here? There are two options. You can stand in the brilliant presence of Jesus and compare yourself and realize your own moral badness and try either remove the standard or pretend to be righteous on your own. You can pretend Jesus doesn't exist, you can try and rewrite the standard or erase standards all together. But let me assure you, that is a heavy burden.

Or you can surrender and receive a righteousness that is not your own. Sure there is a burden associated with it. You will have to be weak like Jesus was weak. You will bear the same rejection Jesus bore. But that is a very, very light burden compared with the burden of dealing with your shame all alone. The cross of Jesus Christ allows us to give away our shame? It allows us to receive forgiveness and a new righteousness that is not our own so that our

shame is forever erased. That is what we are here to celebrate.