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TRINITY
BIBLE CHURCH
DALLAS

The Sermon

Dr. Steven J. Lawson

Luke 2:1-7

"The Birth of Jesus"

December 24, 2023

TRANSCRIPT

So, Luke chapter 2, we're going to be looking at the first seven verses today. And we could not have a better passage on the Sunday before Christmas than what we have this morning. So as always, I want to begin by reading the passage, I'll pray, and then we'll look carefully at what it says.

Luke chapter 2, beginning in verse 1. I hope have your Bible open and are following along. "Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." This is the reading of God's word. May it truly be used in our lives today. Let us go to Him in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, as always, as we approach Your word, we come clothing ourselves with humility, that Your word is Your very word that reveals Your mind to us. And what is recorded here is for our instruction and for our good. And so we desire that Your Holy Spirit would take this passage

and bring it home to our hearts. I pray that everyone here today that You would bless them, You would meet with them at exactly their point of need, that those here today who need to be encouraged will be built up, and those who need to be humbled will be convicted. I pray that those who need to be saved will be converted. I pray that those who need to know Your will will find direction even from this text. So, Lord, we appeal to You to do Your work in us that only You can do. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. [End]

The title of this message is "The Birth of Jesus." In these verses we read about the birth of Christ, and it is easily the most important birth that has ever taken place upon this earth. There have been billions of births, but this one stands out head and shoulders of above them all. In fact, all human history is divided by this birth. Whatever took place before this birth is marked by BC, before Christ; and whatever happens after this birth is marked AD, signifying that it would be after this year of the Lord. In fact, the whole Bible is divided by this verse. Everything preceding this birth is Old Testament, and everything following beyond is New Testament. It stands right here almost like the continental divide that separates our country and the flow of water to bodies of oceans.

No birth has ever been more pivotal in the history of the world than the one we will look at today. And yet what strikes us about this most significant birth is how insignificant it appears to be. There are no heavenly trumpets playing here. There are no royal heralds to announce His arrival. There are no celestial fanfares signaling His coming. It's not a Broadway production with bright lights and costumed attendance. That would be entirely inappropriate. It is not a Hollywood musical with dancing bears. That would be inappropriate. It would be wrong.

No, this is the humiliation of the second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God, coming all the way down to become the Son of Man. This is the incarnation of Christ as He goes from the throne to the trough. He will be wrapped not in a kingly robe, but in swaddling clothes. He comes not to be born in a palace, but in the midst of animals. And so, why is this? Well, what we read here, as unspectacular as it is, what we read here is but a reflection of what is taking place in the invisible world that we cannot see,

that the King of glory is now condescending to come down into this world of woe and enter the fallen human race, yet He Himself be without sin.

This is really not a time for an extravaganza, this is a time for the simple, humble, lowly Jesus to be born in the same manner. And so as we look at this passage, I think we marvel at how earthy it is, how lowly it is, because that's exactly what is taking place in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is not the ascension, this is the condescension of Christ into our world. And so as we look at this passage, there are three headings that I want to set before you, and the first is in verses 1 and 2. It's the decree. This narrative begins with a decree being issued.

We read in verse 1, "Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus." When he says, "in those days," it's actually a reference back to chapter 1, verse 5 that reads, "In the days of Herod, king of Judea." It's in these same days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus. Caesar is the most powerful man on planet earth. He is the most sovereign ruler on a human level that there is. In fact, the title Caesar, that's not his name, it's a title, like President, like Prime Minister, like Emperor. Caesar Augustus. Augustus is another name that has been given to him. It's not his real name, it really reflects a title again. It means the August one, the sovereign one. In fact, it is a name so exalted that it actually suggests the veneration of him as a god.

Caesar Augustus is the greatest of all the Caesars that ever sat in Rome. He has succeeded Julius Caesar, but he stands on the shoulders of Julius Caesar and wields a far more powerful scepter. He is the one who actually transformed the Roman Empire from being a republic to, really, a dictatorship, as he extends the Empire, the Roman Empire, into the whole known world, to cover the entire Mediterranean world – Northern Africa and Europe and the Middle East. And all of this is, really, the result of him conquering another general in a civil war within the Roman Empire. He conquers Mark Anthony of Anthony and Cleopatra in the year 31 BC, and it was such a devastating victory that he won. He had the empire in the palm of his hands, and he transforms it into a tyranny where he is in control. And

so he is the most significant person as far as wielding power on the entire planet.

And we read here he issues a decree. A decree is an imperial edict. It's like today, an executive order. He doesn't need the Senate to confirm what he says. He doesn't need other tribunals to back him up. He has unilateral power and authority to issue a decree, and it will become now the law for the entire Roman Empire. And the decree is "that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth." There is no one else who could have issued such a far-reaching decree as Caesar Augustus. "The inhabited earth" here, really, refers to all of the territories and countries that are under the dominance of Rome have been annexed into the Roman Empire, and they just are continuing to push the fenceposts out and to enlarge their borders and to take in more and more territory.

He issues a decree that a census be taken. He does so because he needs more money. He wants more money. He wants to be able to tax and issue poll tax so that he can build up stronger armies, and build larger buildings, and rule with an iron fist. And so he issues this decree that a census be taken. "Everyone is going to have to now go register so that we can know how much money to take from you." It'll also be used in other parts of the Roman Empire as a draft to recruit soldiers for his army. It is issued as a part of his unilateral control over the entire Roman Empire.

And Luke, who is a very careful historian – and there have been many attempts by liberals and infidels and unbelievers to undermine the historical accuracy of Luke's writings, and that they cannot find a crack in the dam, it all stands up. He is a very brilliant physician, and he tells us in the first chapter that he has researched all this and gone to eyewitnesses and read different records, and with great care this historical accuracy at the beginning of this second chapter is just spot on.

And in verse 2 we read, "This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria." Quirinius was a Roman official who had been put in place by Caesar Augustus to rule over Syria, and the land of Israel is under

the sway of Syria as well. And there were two censuses that were issued, and Luke is very careful to designate, "No, it's the first census." And this helps us begin to bring into focus exactly the year that Jesus was born, because He was not born in the year 0, and He wasn't born in the year 81. No, this census, this first census was issued somewhere between 7 and 6 BC. And so Jesus, as we will see, will be born in either 6 or 5 BC.

But what we need to know at this point is that Luke is a very accurate historian and gives us meticulous detail regarding people and places and time. And what Luke wants us to know here is that God has set the table of the world scene perfectly, that there is the invisible hand of God that cannot be seen with the naked eye but that is putting Caesar and putting decree and putting Quirinius and putting different bit pieces together for the coming of His own Son into the world. And it will be this decree to be issued that will actually move Joseph and Mary from Nazareth for the moment to come all the way down to Bethlehem in order to register. That's important, because Micah the prophet said that the Messiah would be born not in Nazareth where Mary is, but that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. And in order to move them from point A to point B, from Nazareth to Bethlehem, God must move the heart of Caesar Augustus.

And we read this repeatedly in the Bible how God just turns the heart of a reprobate ruler. He did it with Cyrus in Isaiah 44 and 45. He did it with Pharaoh to let the people of God go in the exodus. It was God who hardened his heart in order that God's perfect plan would come to pass. And that is exactly what is taking place here. It's not stated, it's clearly implied. Proverbs 21:1 says, listen to this, "The heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord; as rivers of water, He channels it whichever way He will."

You see, God doesn't have to have a Christian leader in place in order for His purposes to be carried out. God never has to have the circumstances just right in order for God to work. Where God doesn't rule, He overrules. And this is a good word for us to be reminded. He doesn't have to have a Christian in the White House in order for God's purposes to come to pass. I want a Christian in the White House; please, don't misunderstand. But God can work through a reprobate like President Biden to bring about His

sovereign will and purpose. God has always done it this way. God is bigger than any heart of any ruler on this planet, and we need to be reminded of this. And we see it at work again right here, though it is not directly stated. We take the whole rest of the Bible like a frame around a masterpiece, and it is the frame of theology that brings this masterpiece into focus. You need to understand that God is never limited in how He carries out His purposes here upon the earth.

And so, this is the decree from Caesar Augustus, and it is the result of a higher decree that has been issued from heaven, that was written from before the foundation of the world. Ephesians 1:11 says, "He works all things after the counsel of His will." That is the God that we worship. It is mysterious to us, and we can't always interpret it and see it. But, nevertheless, God has the whole world in the palm of His hand, and He has all the leaders of this world in the palm of His hand. We don't know what God is doing right now. God may be putting the pieces in just the right place before the return of His Son the Lord Jesus Christ. And we read in the Bible that it will be difficult days and dark days before Christ returns. We don't know but that God is doing that this very moment. I don't know and you don't know, but none of us can say God's not doing it. He may well be.

So, that's the decree, the imperial decree that is simply the effect of a far greater cause, which is the sovereign decree in heaven. This leads, second, to the departure. It's in verses 3-5. And before I read verse 3, I need to ask this question: If he issues this decree, how will it be made known, even all the way down here to Palestine in Israel? How does he communicate this? And we know that Caesar had his heralds who live close to his palace. And when he issues a decree, the heralds are brought into the palace and they are given from Caesar the royal edict that he makes, and they are dispatched and commissioned, and they are to go out into the highways and the byways, and they are to go to the cities and towns and villages and hamlets and gather the people around and cut their hands and give the royal, the imperial decree.

And that is what would have taken place, almost like a relay race or something of a domino effect, until this message comes down into the Holy

Land. And now, here it comes in verse 3, "And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each in his own city." When Caesar Augustus speaks, you do more than listen, you obey. And so we read here that everyone in the entire empire, "everyone was on his way to register for the census." "Register for the census" is actually one word in the original language, and it means to write down, to write out, to write down. You would go to the home city of your ancestral background and you would write in your name so that they would know that you need to be taxed, and they would assign a value, an amount. And so everyone immediately scurries to register for the census, "each in his own city," refers to his tribal origin, his ancestral background, especially here in the Holy Land where the genealogies of the Jewish people were kept and was so important.

And so we read in verse 4 that those who were on their way included Joseph and Mary. Verse 4, "Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem." Joseph, as you know, is engaged to Mary to be married. They are still engaged. And it says, "he went up from Galilee."

Now, we need to understand, Galilee is in the north, Bethlehem is in the south. It would seem like he would be coming down, not going up to Bethlehem. But the reference is to elevation. Galilee is situated obviously where the Sea of Galilee is. The Sea of Galilee is below sea level, and Nazareth is about 1,000 feet above sea level. Bethlehem is in the hill country in the south, and it is slightly more than 2,600 feet in elevation. So it's a 1,600 foot difference. And so in that sense, he went up, climbing up the topography, to a higher elevation from Galilee. Galilee, again, is in the north from the city of Nazareth.

Now, Nazareth, as I've already told us in past studies, is nowhere. I mean, it's the other side of the tracks, it's Hicksville. I mean, it's just a bump in the road at best. I mean, a common saying was, "Can any good thing come from Nazareth?" And the answer to that is nothing good has ever come from Nazareth, it's a source of nothing, of any good. And yet, here is Joseph and Mary coming from the city of Nazareth. This is so much like God, to always take, or usually take the most insignificant person from

the most insignificant place to do the most significant work. This is how God loves to operate, because by this way He receives all the glory.

Now, Nazareth is 75 miles due north from Jerusalem. "And he now travels from Nazareth," - 75 miles north of Jerusalem - "to Judea," - verse 4 says, which is in the south, it's south of Jerusalem in the hill country, and it's also parallel with Jerusalem - "to the city of David" - because this is where David has come from, King David - "which is called Bethlehem." Now, Bethlehem, in some ways, is much like Nazareth. It's a very tiny hamlet. It's a small, insignificant village. And as he travels down, it is a trip of 80 miles going up 1,600 feet. It's not an easy trip to come register.

And he says in verse 5, "in order to register" - meaning to write down - "along with Mary, who was engaged to him," - meaning promised in marriage - "and she was with child." Please note, it's not a fetus, it's a child in the mother's womb. And any abortion would be murder of a child. No, it's a child that is in the womb, and she's pregnant. She's been impregnated by the Holy Spirit in the virgin birth. And for these many months, she has been pregnant with child, and now she is very pregnant. So, Mary, when she said, "Yes, Lord," did not know exactly what all that would mean, she just knew that she must surrender her life to the Lord.

And so, she now makes this journey at the end of her pregnancy 80 miles. We're not told whether she's on the back of an animal, she's walking. We're not told any of that. But we know it would be very hard for just a man by himself to make this journey of 80 miles - 75 miles to the north, 5 miles to the south - would take about three days. But with a woman who is now, perhaps, nine months pregnant, it would take at least a week, because there would be many stops that would be needed to be taken, as Mary has advanced in her pregnancy. And, yet, this really speaks to her determination to be used by God at a great price.

Anytime we are ever being used by God, it always comes at some measure of sacrifice. There is no service for God that is easy. There are no easy places to serve the Lord. Anytime you are being used by God, it will always

come at some cost and some sacrifice. And we need to understand that. And so, from a human perspective, Mary and Joseph could have complained about this decree that went out. I mean, "This is government overreach. This is unfair taxation. This is hard travel. This is very difficult and demanding to leave home while my wife is nine months pregnant."

And some have questioned, "Well then, why did Mary come?" Well, she's ready to deliver, and she's going to want Joseph to be with her, and she doesn't want to stay behind in Nazareth by herself with all the speculation and all of the talk in town, how she's pregnant out of wedlock. So, of course, she has come on this trip, and she's come to Bethlehem just as the Scripture has said.

And there's one verse to which I want to refer us to now, and it's Micah, the prophet Micah, chapter 5, verse 2, in which God is the speaker, and God addresses Bethlehem. And God says, "But as for you, Bethlehem, too little to be among the clans of Judah," too small in size, too small in stature, too small in strength, too small in success. No, God reaches to the bottom of the barrel when He reaches down into the city of Bethlehem. He says, "Too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel," for one to have and to exercise authority and dominion.

Now listen to this, "His goings forth," His. So it'll be a man who will come from Bethlehem. "His going forth are from long ago," - and we would ask the question, "For how long ago has he been proceeding to Bethlehem to this moment?" and we read - "from the days of eternity." It's referring to Christ and His birth. He literally stepped out of eternity and into time. He stepped out of heaven and onto the earth. And so, this is all a part of God's sovereign will and design to move Mary and Joseph from up north down here to the south so that the Scripture would be fulfilled.

And it makes me really pause and think just for a moment about your life and my life, how God has moved us from one city to another city according to His sovereign plan and purpose for the greater good. And it may be that you find yourself here in Dallas right now. You are here by divine design

you know. And it may be you're here because you lost a job someplace else. But God had a greater plan and a greater purpose. Or it may be because you married someone who had some ties here to Dallas, and so you've moved here to Dallas. And you went through all of the prayer and soul searching to make the decision to be here; but in reality, it was God who was moving you around like a piece on a chessboard to put you in a place of greater blessing.

And it's not just to Dallas, but it's to this church, to Trinity. And I know that many of you are thriving in your spiritual life right now because you have been brought into the fellowship of this church, and you are meeting kindred spirits and life like-minded people that you love to fellowship with them, and you're being taught the word of God. This is God's wonderful design for your life, to move you from point A to point B. That's the way God works. That's the way God operates. And that's what's taking place in this Christmas story.

So, this leads us to the last heading, it's in verses 6 and 7, the delivery. The long-awaited time for the entrance of the Messiah has now come. And so, we read in verse 6, "While they were there," - while they, Joseph and Mary, were there in Bethlehem to register with the government - "the days were completed for her to give birth." The days of her pregnancy had been brought to the fullness. She has come now full term, and those days are now fulfilled for her to give birth. She has been carrying the Eternal Son of the living God inside of her. Her womb is like a palace in which the Son of God has been, yet joined with sinless humanity. Now the God-man within her, and His humanity has developed and grown inside the womb just like any other baby would grow and develop.

And verse 7 is so important. It's the only verse in the entire Bible that describes this birth. All the other passages in the Bible describe something about who this baby is: Eternal Father, Prince of Peace, Wonderful Counselor. All the other passages talk about what precedes afterwards - and we'll look at it next week when the angels appear to the shepherds in the field, "Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, good will towards men, with whom He is pleased," and they make their way here. Or, in

Matthew chapter 2, and the Magi who come from the east following the star, I think it's the shekinah glory of God, and they are led. And Herod goes into a rage and wants all the baby boys two years and younger to be put to death so he has no rival to his throne.

This passage, this text, verse 7, is the only one that actually pulls back the veil and allows us into to the delivery room to see this birth. So, verse 7, "And she gave birth to her firstborn son." Ahe very simple statement, very straightforward statement. "Firstborn son," that implies there will be other sons who will be born. And Jesus will have four more brothers who will be sired not by the Holy Spirit, but will be sired by Joseph, such that these other four brothers will be half brothers. And you know the names of two of them because they would become authors of books in the New Testament. Their names are James and Jude, the authors of the epistles of James and Jude. They grew up with Jesus.

And so here, Luke, who's such a careful historian, wants us to know Jesus is the firstborn son, and that Mary gave birth to him quietly in an obscure village out of the spotlight away from the watching world. But there's more here: "and she wrapped Him in cloths." She wrapped him in strips of cloth, swaddling clothes, to give Him warmth, to give Him a sense of security. For He has been in the tight confines of Mary's womb. And now to have the cloth wrapped around baby Jesus gives the sense of security. And for health reasons, "she wrapped him in cloths," - like any other baby would be wrapped - "and laid Him in a manger."

The word "manger" is a little hard to interpret. It will be interpreted later in Luke 13:15, it's a rare word. A stall, a stall for an ox that verse says. And so it's like a place where animals would feed. It's possible to translate "manger" as a feeding trough for animals. And it probably was not made out of wood, it probably had been dug out of the ground. And food would be put into this kind of a shallow hole in the ground for the animals to bend over and to be able to eat from. And so as Jesus is now in the arms of Mary, He would be put down into this hollowed out part of the dirt.

It's hard to imagine a more humbling, lowly entrance into the world than what is described here. Jesus is now surrounded by barn animals. He's surrounded by donkeys, perhaps mules, where they are tied up, where they ate, where they eliminated, where they slept. Jesus now finds Himself in a situation as low as any person could possibly be, probably laying in a hole in the ground. It's earthy. It's smelly. It's crude. It's filthy. It's crass. It is as it is intended to be by the Father in heaven.

And the reason why He is in such a lowly place, we read at the end of verse 7, as a result of Luke's research, "because there was no room for them in the inn." The word "inn" is also a difficult word to interpret. It is translated in Luke 22:11 as a guest room. It's translated in Mark 14:14 is a guest room. In this context, it probably refers to a lodging place, like a public shelter. Don't think of a modern-day hotel, think of a very minimalist public shelter where groups of travelers would stay in probably one room. Think of a caravan with multiple families, or caravans plural, all descending now upon Bethlehem in order to register for the census, and they're all just jammed and packed in together. Hardly any breathing room, and, certainly, no privacy.

But there's no room for Mary and Joseph. It's overcrowded. There's no vacancy. So whether it's out back or whether it's adjacent, I mean, we're not told; but the animals have to be kept someplace and tied up and fed. And that's the only place that Joseph and Mary have to go. There's no place in the inn, which was no bargain in itself. But now here they are, Mary giving birth where the travelers animals were kept. This is the grand entrance of the Messiah, the Son of God, into this world.

I want to say it again. It was not a Broadway musical. It was not a Hollywood production. There were not dancing, support actors. There were not bright lights. That would have been entirely inappropriate for the condescension and the humiliation of the Son of God to come all the way down into this world of tribulation and trials and sin and suffering. He has been let down, as it were, on a rope, down into a deep well of this world, and it is anything but a beautiful sight. He has come all the way down. The Sovereign has taken the form of a servant. The Infinite has become an

infant. The Son of God has become the Son of Man. And Jesus has come down to this scene, to this setting, to be with sinners who are just like these animals, to identify with you and me, who are smelly and filthy and dirty. He's come all the way down to us to identify with the last and the least and the lost.

It would have been inappropriate if He had been birthed in a palace. It would have been a contradiction of the gospel. And it is to indicate that there is no one in the world who is too lost for Jesus to save, that there is no one too sinful, too smelly, too stinking for Jesus to save. His lowly entrance into this world reveals this, as He is laid most probably in the dirt, in a hole in the dirt. No one could be any lower than this when they're born. He came all the way down from the throne of heaven to a trough surrounded by animals on a mission to save the least of sinners.

And I want to say to you, that no matter how soiled your past, Jesus can save you; that there is no one beyond the long arms of saving grace to rescue those who are perishing in their sins. But in order to be saved by this Jesus, who has come to seek and to save that which is lost, who has come not to be served but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many; that in order to be saved by this Jesus, you must confess your soiled past, you must confess your present sin, and you must believe in God's Son the Lord Jesus Christ. You must come to the end of yourself. You must entrust yourself to Him. But there is no one here today who is so far gone but that God cannot yet save you and redeem you and reconcile you and use you in a mighty way. And so this is the good news of the gospel.

Again, if Jesus had come to Rome to be born, if He had come to Jerusalem to be born, if He had been born in Caesar's palace, we might say, "Oh, I'm not good enough to be saved by this Jesus. I'm not among the elite. I wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth. I wasn't born in the top drawer of society." But, no, He came all the way down to the very bottom to show us that even the dregs of society can be washed in the blood that He would shed upon the cross at the end of His life.

So, wherever you are today, if you have never come to faith in Christ, hear me say this again. And if you're visiting and you've never heard me say this, hear it, perhaps, for the very first time in your life, that "whosoever ever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." That's broad enough to include you: "Whosoever." If your own name had been put into a verse in the Bible, there are other people on this planet who have the very same name. How would you know it meant you and not someone else with the very same name?

I've checked into hotels before, and Steven Lawson has already checked in, and I just got there. No, it's far better for the Bible to say, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life." That is wide enough to drive not just a semi through that word "whosoever," the whole world through that word "whosoever."

And so why would you hesitate to come, when He has come all the way down to you? He's come for you and to you. Why will you not come to Him? Why would you hesitate? Why would you hold back when God bankrupted heaven and brought His own Son into this world?

Do not hesitate. Do not put Him off. He has come for sinners just like you. And His very entrance into this world shows us how far down into the dirt He has come to be identified with those whom He came to save. May you truly be a believer in Jesus Christ. And may this Christmas, may you know as never before, it's all about Christ. It's all about Him.

[Prayer] Father, thank You for recording this for our benefit today, that Dr. Luke has done so much research and interviewed so many people and reconstructed an accurate account of the birth of Christ, so that now we, in this year, it could be as though we were there at that manger and a part of this scene, observing, smelling, hearing. Lord, make it real in our hearts this day, in Jesus' name. Amen. [End]

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all." God bless you. Merry Christmas.