

# Christmas Paradoxes

By Ty Blackburn

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**Providence Church**  
2146 Buford Hwy  
Buford Hwy, Duluth, GA 30097

**Website:** [www.providenceduluth.org](http://www.providenceduluth.org)  
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I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Luke 2, a very familiar story. I remember in seminary I was challenged by a professor that actually passed away just this past year, Knox Chamblin, I remember several of his lectures and I can remember them vividly where he was really moved by the Scriptures as he was teaching us through the New Testament and one of the things that stands out in my mind was when he was talking about Luke 2 and he said, "You will find the temptation," he says, "it's common but it is so sad that there will be the temptation for you to try at Christmas to say something new and clever and different when just the reading of the Gospel story of what happened is worthy of our consideration, not only at Christmas but every day of the year." It's such a glorious story so he said, "Don't try to pretty it up. Just present it."

So I want us to look at this account, Luke 2:1-14 and we're going to have a few comments that we're going to make on that. Luke 2:1,

1 Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. 2 This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. 4 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, 5 in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. 6 While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. 7 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. 8 In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; 11 for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly

host praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."

Let's pray together.

*Father, we ask that your Spirit might now work in our hearts to help us understand and apply your word to love you, to love your Son, and to walk in humble obedience, and to experience the great joy that comes through Jesus. We pray this, Lord, for his glory and in his name. Amen.*

I want to share with you just a few paradoxes about the Christmas story. Sometimes it's a story that is so familiar to those of us as Americans, Christmas is something that is a regular part of our lives growing up and most people have heard the story a number of times and those of us who are followers of Jesus and in the church have heard it year after year after year, but it's something that we should treasure but it's something that sometimes when something becomes familiar, we don't look at it as closely as we ought. One of the challenges in reading the Bible is always to try to read the Bible with a freshness and a full attention, to read it as if you have not read it before so that you don't miss anything and we find as we do that we see more and more of the wonder of what God has said in his word.

I want to share with you three paradoxes in this story that just are worthy of our consideration. The first is, so kind of three points, as it were: the decree of the Emperor and its impact on the unborn child. The decree of the Emperor and its impact on the unborn child. I'm talking about in verse 1, "a decree went out from Caesar Augustus." So Caesar Augustus is the great Emperor of Rome, the most powerful man in the world at that time, the first true Emperor of the Roman Empire, the one who brought about the Pax Romana, who is argued by many to be the greatest Emperor that Rome ever had. His name "Augustus" means itself "great one or the illuminated one, the venerated one"; it's a name of dignity and exaltation.

So Caesar Augustus, the great ruler of the world, issues a decree and this decree creates havoc in the life of a young man who has a wife that is about to deliver a baby and those of us who have had children and as fathers, you know, our wives have had children, and we have taken care of pregnant wives, imagine that you got word that you had to travel with your 8 month pregnant wife or 8 1/2 months pregnant wife, you had to make a 90... Nazareth to Bethlehem, 70 miles as the crow flies but 90 miles walking. You had to make a 90 mile journey, a 90 mile hike basically in the mountains with your 8 1/2 month pregnant wife. Gee, that sounds like a great plan. That's what happened. So Joseph and Mary had to get moving and make the journey to Bethlehem because you don't just disobey what Rome says to do and so they make the journey and, like I said, it's a mountainous journey because Israel where they are, they are in the mountains and they go down from the mountains and up other mountains and Bethlehem is just past Jerusalem which is up another mountain and then beyond it and they make this journey. Rugged mountainous terrain, probably took them close to 10 days of travel and you see that, Luke tells it in just such an unassuming offhanded way and I think it is tongue-in-

cheek because what he basically points out, first of all, the historical nature of the revelation we have in Scripture.

Look at verse 2. Isn't it interesting that he stops and says, "This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria." Luke, ever sensitive about historical details, in fact, I read a couple of years ago he was given, Luke, the writer of Luke and Acts was given the award of historians as the greatest historian of antiquity because of his precision in all of the details because, of course, the word of God is precise. But he's the one that gives you as he goes through Acts, he gives you the right title and the location and the time of everything and he notes for us, "This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria." That is, these events, this event of Jesus coming into the world, the Son of God coming into the world, is a true historical event. It's not just a story made up. It's not just an idea. It is reality rooted in history. But the tongue-in-cheek part is that you see Caesar issue a decree and it seems that the unborn child in the womb of Mary is subject to the decree. Man, how rough is that?

He not only has to make that journey but then they don't have any place to stay and he is born in a stable but the irony is that whose decree really is ultimately the ultimate decree? You see, Jesus, the unborn child, the human baby, the embryo in Mary's womb, also fully God, the God in her womb, is the one who inspired the entire Old Testament. Micah 5:2 was spoken by Jesus. He's the one who is called "the Word." God speaks and the Son speaks throughout the whole Old Testament and he gave us Micah 5:2, "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you were least among the clans of Judah, out of you will go forth a ruler whose goings forth are from the days of eternity." You, Bethlehem Ephrathah. That's where the Messiah is to be born but Joseph and Mary aren't making reservations and plans to get to Bethlehem from Nazareth. They don't know. So the Son of God from the womb decrees that Caesar Augustus will decree a census. He's the one commanding. That's the irony. He's on the throne. In the weakest, most vulnerable position, he is the one ruling history and Luke says that in such an understated way, leaving it for those of us who know our Bibles, "Wait a minute, it's not an accident that Caesar Augustus decided it's time for a census." They didn't do them every 10 years like we do. It was more random. And so Augustus, thinking he's doing what he wants to do, issues a decree and he finds out that he has obeyed the one who rules over everyone, the King of kings and Lord of lords who is being born.

That's the first paradox. The second paradox, the weakness of a newborn and the power displayed in the fields nearby. The weakness in the manger and the power in the pasture. You see in verse 7, she gives birth to her firstborn son, she wraps him in cloths and she lays him in a manger because the baby is a baby. He's a true baby, completely dependent upon his mother. He can't walk over and place himself in the manger. He's a baby and so he needs her to nurse him, he needs her to wrap him, he needs her to change him. I remember reading a book some years ago where the man, he said, "What would the angels have been thinking when they watched the Son of God, the one who created them, making himself so weak and vulnerable? What must the angels have thought as they watched Jesus learn to walk?" The weakness in the manger is really revealed to not be weakness at all but power in weakness when you compare it with what's happening in the

fields nearby. What the angel demonstrated, what the shepherds saw, was the power of God.

The angel in verse 9, "an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them." The angel appears and the glory appears and what happens? They are terrified. This is one of the things that we often miss because of the familiarity of the story and, I think, sort of the precious momentization of the Bible. I just coined that term. You ought to write that down. That's pretty good. Precious momentization. That's not that good but anyway, my point is that we see things and they kind of pretty it all up. The angel, you know, is like a little child with wings. That's not the angel that they saw. That's not the angel that anyone ever saw in the Bible. What you always...what's the first thing that the angel always says when he shows up? "Don't be afraid," because when you see an angel, the first thing that you feel is terror because you're seeing a being that is so great and so powerful that immediately you know that you are nothing. And the one angel terrifies them. The glory of God shining around them. Then that angel gives them the wonderful message that the child that has been born, that baby robed in weakness, is actually the Savior because we all need a Savior. If we are not knowing the Savior, we will be damned; we will experience eternity apart from God. So he is a Savior. He is Christ. He is the King. He is the true King. And he is the Lord, that is, he is God.

Then after he delivers that message and the message is of great joy because this Savior is available to all people, then we are told that, "suddenly," verse 13, "there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God," basically a multitude of the heavenly armies appears, an innumerable number of angels arrayed for battle appears and the shepherds are overwhelmed by this. What is this? It is happening out there where no one else can see it because God comes quietly onto the stage of human history but he's letting us know that what's happening in the manger, what's happening in the stable, is the greatest invasion that could have ever happened in the world; that though he is coming robed in weakness, true man of true man, he is coming to deliver, he is coming as a mighty Savior. That baby in weakness is actually the one that those angels would cower before. I love, there is a verse in one of the songs, "O, thou in whose presence my soul takes delight." It says this, "He looks," think about this, Jesus, the Son of God looks, "and 10,000 angels rejoice." He just looks in their direction and the angels are thrilled that, "He has looked at me!" These beings who are so great, are so small in comparison to the one who is the baby in Bethlehem. That is the paradox, the apparent weakness and helplessness of the newborn just shows that he has come in that form to do a great work but he is the Almighty God.

The third and last paradox: the true King and his first throne. The true King and his first throne. So he said, "He is the Messiah. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords," and yet his first throne is a manger. And here, again, the precious moment pictures that it's a stable, stables stink. It's not a place for a human being to spend the night and it is certainly not a place for a baby to spend the night but this is Jesus' first home and his throne is a manger, a feeding trough. Cows, sheep would eat straw out of that trough. Their saliva, the smell of dung and urine in the air. Cold, damp. Just out of the elements

but barely because you don't take care of your animals like you take care of people and here is the place, this is the throne of the Son of God.

Why? That's exactly the question we are supposed to ask. Why? What does this mean? Why is he not coming in Rome? He is the King of kings and Lord of lords, why is he not appearing directly in Rome and Caesar bowing down before him? That's what ought to happen. Or if not in Rome, why not in Jerusalem? Why is he not hailed by the chief priests and the rulers of the people immediately? Why are they not notified? Because God is coming in a way unexpected. He's going to do something that is going to be mind-boggling but necessary to save us.

The throne, the lowly place of birth, the more lowly place of birth could not be imagined and that is actually a picture of the cross. The reason he has come is to identify with our weakness and our sinfulness and our great need and he has come all the way down. He has left the glory of heaven and he has come all the way down to actually being lower than us. No one in this room was first laid in a manger. He has become lower than us so that he might lift us up to heaven. It's there even in the manger because what would happen? From the manger to the cross, that's his path. Born in a stable, laid in a manger because he has come, as he said as he began preaching when he was 30 years old, "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve." He didn't come to be served by slaves but to be a slave and to give his life a ransom for many. He came and did what he must do to save us. The manger tells us how great our sin is, how profound our need of salvation is.

It's not a small thing to save you and me. We think it is. We say things like and betray our complete lack of understanding of how offensive our sin is to a holy God and we say things like, "To err is human, to forgive divine. You know, of course I'm a sinner. I'm imperfect." No, sin truly understood from God's standpoint which is all that matters, sin is cosmic rebellion. Sin is to look into the face of the one who has loved us and sustained us and created us and to spit in his face and say, "I will do things my way. I will live my life for my purposes and you will stay out." That's the essence of sin. It's like the dog that bites the hand that feeds it except the dog goes for the jugular.

That's what you and I have done and to be saved, what must happen? Jesus must come and experience the full penalty for that wickedness and the manger testifies it's going to be something that is completely beyond our imagination, something so great, so awful, almost unspeakable. That's what the cross was. When Jesus hung on the cross, he was treated as if he had committed every sin of everyone who would ever believe. They were all piled upon him and God abandoned him, turned his back on him and he was cursed by the Father and bore the wrath, God's holy wrath, against sin. That's why the cross was so agonizing. That's why the spiritual pain of the cross was so great that he dreaded that moment in Gethsemane asking three times, "Father, if there is any other way, save me from this hour. I don't want to drink the cup of your wrath. Nevertheless, not my will but your will be done." But he was willing to do that.

That's the cost of our salvation and, praise God, he did not turn back. The manger tells us he came for that purpose. He came and he didn't turn to the right or to the left but he went straight to Calvary. He gave himself as a sacrifice for our sins and then God raised him up from the dead and gave him because he was willing to go so low, God is giving him a name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father and Christmas is about you and I being confronted with that message and invited to receive him as your personal King, your personal Savior. That's the wonder of it. God is a God of mercy and grace who extends his offer of peace and says, "Come to the one I have appointed, my Son, the Savior, the glorious one, the beautiful one, the loving one, the gentle one, that if you will come to him, he will not turn you away. But if you will not come to him, you will know his wrath." The message of Christmas. What a glorious God. What a wonderful Savior.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

*Our Father, we give you praise and honor for the great work that you have done, for the great glorious plan of salvation, too wonderful human minds could never have conceived. Truly, eye has not seen, ear has not heard nor has it entered into the heart of man the things that God has prepared for those that love him. Your way of dealing with your people is beyond our ability to conceive. Father, we pray for everyone in this room that we would each look to Jesus, those who know you already would look to you and continue to love and treasure so worthy a Savior. Help us to turn from our sins, to make all of our thoughts, all of our actions aimed at worshiping him, lifting him up. And for those that have not yet come to him, those who have not truly repented and placed their faith in Jesus, may today be the day of salvation for them. May they receive the joy, the good news of great joy, may it be for them today because they turn from their sins and place their faith in Jesus for he is able to save. Save us from our sins. We pray, Father, that you would be exalted in the hearts of your people and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*