

## **EXPOSITION OF LUKE 2:1-7 (Christmas 2012)**

As we come to this text, we come to a famous and interesting story for us, but we also come to a burdensome and problematic story if you are Mary or Joseph. Because of a legal demand placed on them by Rome, Joseph and Mary were forced to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, some 70 or 80 miles from their home. Mary was in her latter stages of pregnancy, so a three or four day trip would be strenuous and painful. Not to mention dangerous. No nice, safe cars or jets—you walked or rode horse or donkey through dangerous country with animals like lions or bears or thieves. There would have been added expenses involved in making this trip, something someone who is about to have a baby doesn't need. There was going to be a census taken for tax purposes, a decision that would cost you more money. Through the eyes of Joseph and Mary, they are being forced to make an expensive trip because of some wild decree of Caesar Augustus. From a purely human perspective this was a very difficult moment, but from a Divine sovereignty perspective this was a very important, critical moment. What Joseph and Mary didn't know was that God had put this entire situation together so that He could get them to Bethlehem so they could fulfill Micah 5:2. God's program demanded that His Son be born in Bethlehem and He used this decree of Caesar Augustus to accomplish it.

**NO MATTER HOW UNUSUAL, UNTIMELY OR UNSETTLING THE SITUATION OR CIRCUMSTANCE, GOD IS SOVEREIGNLY ACCOMPLISHING HIS SOVEREIGN PROGRAM AND HIS PERFECT WILL.**

There are four key, factual realizations that Luke wanted Theophilus to have:

**FACTUAL REALIZATION #1** – God's Sovereign Program is accomplished by negative, Governmental decision. **2:1-2**

The Apostle Paul, in writing to the Romans, said: "Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God" (Rom. 13:1).

God uses even godless, heathen political leaders in order to accomplish His purposes and His program. That is precisely what is happening here.

Caesar Augustus was the grand-nephew of Julius Caesar. Julius Caesar had been a dictator approximately 50 years prior to this event. His philosophy was if the city or state does not willingly submit to Rome, you take it. Josephus describes Julius Caesar as a high priest and dictator (p. 299).

Julius Caesar was known for making decrees concerning the Jews:

- 1) He decreed who was to be the high priestly family—Hyrcanus.
- 2) He decreed that Hyrcanus was to have total rule over the Jews.
- 3) He decreed that the Jews were to pay a yearly tribute to Jerusalem.

When Julius Caesar was assassinated on March 15, B.C. 44, by Cassius and Brutus, the Roman world went decree crazy. The Jews became very angry and it led to their further hatred of Rome.

Caesar Augustus, whose real name was Octavius (Octavian), began to reign in 31 B.C. He was officially given the title “Caesar Augustus” four years later in 27 B.C.. He decided to come up with another decree, “that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth” (**2:1**). The words “all the inhabited earth” refers to all the people in the Roman world. To the Romans, they controlled the whole world and this decree affected everyone. An article before “inhabited earth” indicates this includes a specific Jewish census.

The decree was that everyone should be registered for a census registration (i.e. **2:1, 2, 3, and 5**). These words “census” or “registration” refer to a statistical enrollment for taxation purposes. This registration would have been a personal registration that would have included an income and possession report for taxation purposes. Augustus thinks this will give a lasting foundation to the Roman Empire. It will stabilize this world—little did he know this would really save the world. **Verse 2** states that this was made when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Quirinius was a powerful political agent who obviously worked very closely with Rome.

The naming of Quirinius has presented a slight problem because according to the most viable historical sources, Quirinius was a powerful political leader over Syria beginning in A.D. 6. We know that Christ was born somewhere near 6-4 B.C. because Christ was in Egypt at the time Herod died (i.e. Matt. 2:15, 19) and Herod died in 4 B.C.. The problem is resolved by the historian William Ramsey who discovered that Quirinius served two major terms in Syria; the first one in 6-4 B.C. and the second in A.D. 6-9. The word “first” of **verse two** refers to the first census that Quirinius was connected to in 6 B.C.

Now the historian Josephus gives us some good insight as to what happened in the mind of the Jews when this registration was demanded. He says, concerning the second census Quirinius was involved with, that it so infuriated the Jews that there was a major rebellion against Rome and a man named Judas tried to encourage the Jews not to pay the taxes and to refuse to be registered. Luke refers to this in Acts 5:37. Josephus goes on to say that it was this census registration that ultimately led to such a rebellion by the Jews that this was the issue that ultimately led to Rome destroying Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and the famous Masada stand in A.D. 72.

The Jews hated this Roman dominance. They hated this registration census and they hated giving money to Rome. From a human perspective, this political decree was absolutely godless and senseless. It was a ruthless decree by power-crazed Romans who wanted the Jews’ money. You would NEVER expect God to cause this, but He did. God was sovereignly using this very hated decree to get Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem so He could bring His Son into the world.

God was behind this decree of Caesar Augustus. What appeared to be a governmental decision of dominating power was really a sovereign fulfillment of Divine prophecy.

One cannot read these incredible verses and not be reminded of the words found in Proverbs 21:1–“The king’s heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes.”

**FACTUAL REALIZATION #2** – God’s Sovereign Program is accomplished in circumstances that affect all people. **2:3**

All people were required to go to their Jewish tribal headquarters for this census. Joseph’s hometown was Nazareth (2:39), so it was the fact that he was in the Davidic line which required him to travel to Bethlehem. Bethlehem was the birthplace and hometown of David (**2:4**; i.e. I Sam. 16:1, 4). If we were to write a script on how to get Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, I am certain it would not have been through a census registration for the whole world. After all–this is the Son of God. Perhaps we would have written the story with another dramatic angelic appearance informing them to go to Bethlehem. Perhaps we would have written some great job opportunity luring him to Bethlehem. We would have probably NOT written a census registration for the entire public. We would not have wanted Joseph and Mary to get lost in a shuffle like everyone else, but we would have been more specific, keeping them immune from the pressures everyone else faced.

There is an important lesson we can learn from this, namely, when God is going to do great things in our lives, He will do it when we are going through the same things, facing the same type of situations that everyone else is facing. God’s people, even God’s greatest people, ARE NOT protected from life’s pressures and problems, but God’s people will be greatly used by God IN life’s pressures and problems. Godly people get sick, lose jobs and watch loved ones die. God does not normally work in a monkish or monasterial environment; He works in the real world. There are times we feel like a number–you cannot even talk to a human–you talk to a computer. Joseph could have said: “I am not going to Bethlehem to pay my taxes, my fiancé and pregnant wife is going to give birth to the Messiah.” But God was in these mundane circumstances working out His will.

**FACTUAL REALIZATION #3** – God’s Sovereign Program is accomplished in circumstances that affect God’s specific people. **2:4-5**

John Kitto states that all men ages 14-65 and all women ages 12-65 were required to register at this census. From a purely humanistic perspective, this was the WORST possible time for Joseph to take Mary to Bethlehem because she was about to give birth to a baby.

But regardless of the extra expense and the physical difficulty, **verse 4** informs us that Joseph and Mary obeyed the edict of Caesar Augustus and left Nazareth to take a 70-80 mile trip to the south of Bethlehem.

As we have already discussed, there were some Jewish zealots who absolutely refused to submit to this Roman edict. Their primary argument was we give our money to God, not to a heathen Roman government. Joseph had two possible options available to him: 1) He could have rebelled against the decree; 2) He could submit to the decree. Joseph submitted to the decree and the rest is sacred history.

God will usually accomplish His purposes when His people are submissive to governing authority and not rebellious against it. God works with the meek and lowly of spirit, not the proud and rebellious. God was in these circumstances and He was working out His program for His specific servants Joseph and Mary. Had they rebelled against the edict of Rome, they would have missed the fulfillment of God's perfect, sovereign program.

The truth of the Bible is we will be more spiritual and more usable by God if we shut-up and submit. Joseph quietly and faithfully submitted to a very difficult edict, which placed a major hardship on him and Mary, yet it was this faithful obedience that led Joseph and Mary to the exact place where God wanted them to be. As we near the end, many will desire authority (II Peter 2:10).

**FACTUAL REALIZATION #4** – God's Sovereign Program is accomplished in circumstances that are humiliating for God's people. **2:6-7**

We need to put this in some perspective. God has moved Caesar Augustus to make a decree so Joseph and Mary can get to Bethlehem. This is His program, it is His decree. He could have given Joseph and Mary the best room in the city. He could have given them the finest quality room known to man, but instead God allows them to wind up in an animal barn.

This was Mary's "first-born" son. She would have other children, but this was her first-born, the Son of God. This was the greatest son ever born. It was customary for Jewish women to do four things with a newborn baby (i.e. Ezek. 16:4): 1) Cut the navel cord; 2) Wash the baby in water; 3) Rub the baby in salt; 4) Wrap the baby in cloths. These were strips of cloth that protected the baby and also saw to it that the limbs grew properly. We know for sure that Mary wrapped the babe in cloth.

After she wrapped the baby in cloths, she laid him in a manger. The word for "manger" (φαρτη) is a word which specifically speaks of an area to house and feed animals. This same word is used again in Luke 13:15, and there it is translated "stall" (φαρτης). This is not a nice wood barn for horses like you would see in Kentucky, this was a shed.

From a human perspective:

- 1) You have been forced to make a trip that you don't necessarily want to make.
- 2) You are forced to pay out money for this trip and for taxes that you don't necessarily want to pay.
- 3) You cannot find a place to stay in Bethlehem.
- 4) You wind up in an animal shed where the baby is born—and you must lay him in the same place as dirty animals. Why? Because there was no room—no room for Jesus—there has never been much room for Him. People fill their lives with everything but Him.

Humanly speaking, when Joseph and Mary got to Bethlehem, they didn't even get as good a treatment as the average person. There were no lights , no fanfare , no heavenly announcements. If we would have been Joseph and Mary, I am certain we would begin to feel as though we had been shafted. We would have certainly written the script differently.

God used all of these circumstances to bring Jesus Christ into this world. He brought Him here for many reasons, the most significant of which was to die on a cross, to shed His blood so we might have everlasting life. We have two options in regard to Jesus Christ. We can rebel against Him or submit to Him. Which will it be in our lives? Will you give Jesus room in your life? Or will your testimony be "no room"!