

## EXPOSITION OF LUKE

### Message #9

Luke 2:1-7

In this series of verses, Dr. Luke writes one of the most famous and interesting stories in all of history. It is the story of the birth of Jesus Christ. When we read it, it seems somewhat glamorous, but if you were Mary and Joseph living this story, it was anything but that.

Because of a legal demand placed on them by Rome, Joseph and Mary were forced to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem. This was a 70-80 mile trip. Dr. H.A. Ironside said he made the trip by car and with stops it took him 8 hours. If you were to make this trip by foot, or horse or donkey, it would take 3-5 days.

Mary was in her latter stages of pregnancy, so making a trip like this would be grueling. This would be strenuous and uncomfortable, not to mention very dangerous. They could not go through tight security and get on a jet. They could not get in a nice care and have the doors lock. They had to make this trip out in the elements. There were many dangers- weather; animals; robbers. Furthermore to make this trip there would have been added expenses, which is something know young couple needs when they are about to have a baby.

Then, when they actually get to Bethlehem, they had to be involved in a census registration for tax purposes. So this trip would require more out of pocket expenses. This was not cheap.

So if you are Joseph and Mary, you are being forced to make this trip at this time in your life because of some decree by Caesar Augustus who is enjoying a plush life in Rome. From a purely human perspective this was a hard and humiliating moment; but from a Divine perspective this was the most honorable moment in all of history.

What Joseph and Mary did not know was that God had put this entire situation together with them and their baby in mind. God was in all of this, working out His sovereign plan to get them to Bethlehem so they could fulfill Micah 5:2.

It is very probable that neither one thought about Micah 5:2 because they are not going to Bethlehem via some Biblical study, but because of some Political decree. God's program demanded His son be born in Bethlehem and God used this decree by Caesar Augustus to accomplish it.

There is a great lesson to learn:

**GOD IS SOVEREIGNLY WORKING OUT HIS PERFECT PROGRAM AND WILL EVEN IN THE MIDST OF POLITICAL DECISIONS MADE BY GODLESS PEOPLE.**

This whole thing to Joseph and Mary appears to be one untimely, expensive hassle in life. God was in this. God was working out His will in this very situation. Joseph and Mary were in the perfect will of God and God was about to lead them to the greatest blessing of their lives. Do not ever forget that God is sovereign in your world when it appears to you to make no sense.

When seemingly godless people who are over you come up with things that pressure you and hassle you, God is still sovereign and may be directing you to His greatest blessings.

**Now the birth of Jesus Christ is a fact of history.** What that means is the birth of Jesus Christ took place at a specific time and in a specific place. There are four historical facts that are brought out in these verses that Luke carefully documents for Theophilus:

**HISTORICAL FACT #1-** There was a decree made by Caesar Augustus at the time Jesus Christ was born. **2:1-2**

Notice **verse 1** begins with this decree being made “in those days.” Those days were the days after John had been born and Jesus was about to be born.

**The truth is, this decree is all about Jesus Christ being born. Caesar Augustus made the decree not even knowing the sovereign, silent, secret hand of God was prompting and directing it.**

Caesar Augustus was the grandnephew of Julius Caesar. Julius Caesar had been a dictator, approximately 50 years prior to this event. Julius Caesar had a philosophy and it was this: If the city or state does not willingly submit to Rome, you force it and you take it. Josephus describes Julius Caesar as a high priest and dictator (*The Complete Works of Josephus*, 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, 44 B.C. by Cassius and Brutus, the Roman world became unsettled. The Jews were angry and it led to a further hatred of Rome. Augustus was named chief heir but ruled with Mark Antony and Lepidus for the next several years.

Caesar Augustus, whose real name was Octavius (Octavian), began to reign in 31 B.C., when he won a decisive victory over Antony at Actium and he was officially given the title of “Caesar Augustus” by the Senate 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.” (**Luke 2:1**) Those words “all the inhabited earth” refer to the entire Roman world.

The decree was that everyone should be registered for a census registration (2:1,2,3,5). **These words “census” and “registration” refer to a statistical enrollment for taxation purposes.** This registration would have been a personal information registration that would have included a report of possessions, property and income.

Caesar Augustus thinks this will bring a lasting stability to the Roman Empire. What he did not know is that this would actually divide the whole world. Jesus Christ was coming in this historical context to save sinners and this fact would divide the world, not unite it.

**Verse 2** says this decree was made when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Quirinius was a powerful political ally of Rome and he would back this registration of the Jews.

Now the naming of Quirinius has presented a slight problem because according to most viable historical sources, Quirinius was a political leader over Syria beginning in AD 6. It is assumed that Jesus Christ was born somewhere near 6-4 B.C., because Christ was born and was in Egypt at the time Herod died (Mt.2:15,19) and most believe Herod died in 4 B.C..

The problem was solved by William Ramsey who discovered that Quirinius served two major terms in Syria. The first one was 6-4 B.C. and the second one was AD 6-9. We have something very similar in our history. Grover Cleveland was the 22<sup>nd</sup> President of the United States and then also the 24<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. In between the two terms was Benjamin Harrison.

According to **verse 2**, the birth of Christ is connected to the first census that Quirinius was involved and that occurred in 6-4 B.C..

The historian Josephus gives us some good insight as to what happened in the mind of the Jews when this census registration was demanded by Rome. He says that when Quirinius was involved in the second census the Jews were so infuriated that there was a major rebellion against Rome and a man named Judas tried to encourage the Jews not to pay the taxes and 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 AD 70 and the famous Masada stand in AD 72.

The Jews hated this Roman dominance. They hated this registration census and they hated giving money to Rome. Roman taxes took money out of their pockets and gave it to an oppressive and godless government.

From the Jews perspective this decree was a godless, senseless abuse of power. This was a decree made by power crazed greedy political leaders who wanted the Jews money. **This decree was affecting the whole world, but frankly this decree was focused on two people, Joseph and Mary. God wanted them in Bethlehem and this was the way He got them there.**

**You would never expect to find God in this decree; but God was right in it. He was sovereignly at work so He could get Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem so He could bring His saving Son into this world.**

When we analyze this story of Joseph and Mary, we cannot help but think of Proverbs 21:1 that says "The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes." God was behind this decree of Caesar Augustus. His sovereignty was fulfilling His prophetic program.

**HISTORICAL FACT #2-** Everyone was required to participate in this census. **2:3**

There was a lot of movement with all the people, but this is about two people. Joseph's home town was Nazareth (Luke 2:39). So it was the fact that he was in the Davidic line that required him to travel to Bethlehem. Bethlehem was the birth place and home town of David (Luke 2:4; I Sam.16:1,4).

Now if you and I were writing the script on how to get Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, I am absolutely certain it would not have been through some census registration for the whole world. After all, this is the Son of God that will be born there. If we were writing the script, we would probably have had another angel show up and tell them to go to Bethlehem. Perhaps we would have had Joseph get a great job offer to lure him there. We would not have had some worldwide tax census for everyone. Joseph and Mary could get lost in the crowd. You would think this moment would spot light these two alone, not everyone.

This is a great lesson to learn. When God is directing us to do and accomplish great things, we will face the same kind of pressures and frustrations as everyone else. We will have bills to pay and we will have taxes to give. Those God greatly uses get sick, lose jobs and watch loved ones die. They face pressures like everyone else, but God is the one directing those events and He is the one actually working out His will for you.

**HISTORICAL FACT #3-** Joseph and Mary travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem for the census registration. **2:4-5**

This would appear to be 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 hassle, Joseph and Mary took off from Nazareth to make the 80-90 mile trip to Bethlehem. Bethlehem was located 6-7 miles southwest of Jerusalem. **Verse 5** says that Mary was traveling with Joseph while engaged and while pregnant. So this trip is humiliating in many ways. You have to travel to register to pay taxes to Rome and that is humiliating. Then if someone asked any questions, you have a pregnant woman who isn't even married yet and that is humiliating.

There were some Jewish zealots who refused to do this. Actually Joseph had a couple of possibilities. 1) He could obey the decree of the government no matter how negative; 2) He could rebel against the government and refuse to do it. Joseph obeyed the government and the rest is sacred history.

God does His powerful work with people who are submissive to governing authority and not rebellious against it. God works with the meek and lowly of spirit, not the proud and the arrogant.

One of the things that will characterize the end of the church age is that there will be an arrogant and even demonic despising of authority (II Pet.2:10). God will always do His greatest work with those who submit to authority, not rebel against it.

**HISTORICAL FACT #4-** Jesus is born while Joseph and Mary were in an animal outbuilding in Bethlehem. **2:6-7**

I am convinced that Mary is telling this story to Luke. She is reliving the details. Now put this in perspective. God has used a decree of Caesar Augustus to get Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. God is in sovereign control of this. He could have given Joseph and Mary the red carpet treatment once they got to Bethlehem. He could have given them the finest quality room in the city, but instead they hunker down in a barn.

There was no room for them in the inn. Wealthy people make reservations for the best rooms, but a poor carpenter often doesn't get luxury rooms. So they were staying in some animal out building. It just doesn't seem right.

Next to the inns were stables and barns and sheds for the animals. People traveled by animal so a motel would have some sort of corral where people could house their animals. That is where Joseph and Mary ended up.

When we were in Smyrna, I had a beautiful suite that overlooked the Aegean Sea. Polycarp was killed in that city and as I looked out from the balcony, I thought this isn't right. Here I am staying in a luxury room and the man who laid down his life for Jesus Christ was burned at a stake in this very area.

It was in this setting that Mary gave birth to her baby. This was Mary's first born son. What this means is that Mary would have other children, but this was her first born, the Son of God. This would be the greatest son ever born to any woman.

It was customary for a Jewish woman to do four things with a newborn baby:

- 1) Cut the navel cord.
- 2) Wash the baby in water.
- 3) Rub the baby in salt.
- 4) Wrap the baby in strips of cloth.

These strips of cloth made sure the limbs grew properly. Now after she did this, she laid Jesus in a "manger." The Greek word (*fatnh*) is a word that specifically speaks of an area to house and feed animals. This was not a nice clean animal barn like you would see in Kentucky with multi-million dollar pure-bred horses.

In fact the actual word where they laid Jesus does refer to a manger (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p.467) A manger is a long box or trough that was used to feed animals.

Here are the historical facts:

- 1) You have been forced to make a trip you don't want to make.
- 2) You are forced to pay out money you don't want to pay.
- 3) You cannot find a nice place to stay in Bethlehem.
- 4) You end up in an animal barn and you must lay your baby in a feeding trough.

Why? Because at the end of **verse 7** we read "there was no room for them in the inn." That statement is very personal and very theological.

There has never been room for Jesus Christ in this world. In fact, people fill their hearts and minds with everything but Him.

When Joseph and Mary got to Bethlehem there was no special welcoming committee, there were no heavenly announcements and there were no special lights or fanfare.

When Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin returned from the moon in Apollo 11 in 1969, we honored them. We certainly would not put them in an animal barn. Well here was God coming to this world from heaven and He is in this barn.

What is amazing is that all of the Godhead members were in on this historical setting. They were the One's calling the shots. The next time you find yourself in some humiliating situation, you remember this. God is sovereign over your world even when your world seems to make no sense.