

The Birth of Jesus Christ, Part 1

Luke 2:1-3

Well, we are into Chapter 2 of Luke's Gospel, so please turn in your Bibles there. As we look at Luke Chapter 2 starting in verse 1, it is fitting here at the end of the year as we're looking ahead to another Christmas season that we come into this portion of Scripture. We're going to end the year celebrating the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and I'd like to begin this morning by just reading a significant portion of this chapter, the second chapter in Luke.

Follow along as I read. We'll start there in verse 1. "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with

child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

“And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.’ Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!’

“When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.’ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and

the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. At the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

“And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, ‘Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord’) and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.’ Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, took

him up in his arms and blessed God and said, 'Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'

"And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, 'Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that the thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.'"

We'll stop reading there and we stop reading there, because we need to remind ourselves of the setting, the soberness of this story. We need to remind ourselves, especially at this time of year, that the nativity story is not the stuff of Christmas pageants, cute kids dressed up as shepherds and magi and angels, cuddly farm animals and the like. It's really ironic that a warning followed close on the heels of Simeon's praise. From Matthew's account, over in Matthew Chapter 2, the words of Simeon came to pass and what he said about the conflict that would come

through Christ's birth, those words came to pass almost immediately. It seemed to begin in Matthew chapter 2 well enough. The passage begins, "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem saying, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.'" Sounds great, sounds appropriate, but then this, "When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him." If you were a resident of Jerusalem, you didn't want Herod troubled. You wanted him to remain very, very calm because a troubled Herod meant people were going to die.

And as you know at the end of the magi's visit to worship the baby Jesus, a massive slaughter ensued of innocent children. It says there, "Herod when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old and younger, according to the time he ascertained from the wise men and then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud

lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted because they are no more.'”

It's just really important to note as we set the record straight about the truth of Christianity, the picture was not painted in the soft, saccharin hues of a Thomas Kinkade painting. There is no sentimentality in the real Christmas story. When the light that Zechariah prophesied in just the few verses prior to Luke 2, when that light that he prophesied began to blaze over the landscape, it revealed a harsh, violent world of pain and suffering. We should never forget that baby Jesus was born into a world of darkness, wasting away underneath the shadow of death. We should never forget as Simeon warned, as he warned Mary about the sword that pierced Mary's soul, which was really a soldier's lance, pierced the side of her own son up on a cross. We should never forget here at the beginning of the story that Jesus was born to die. It's ironic, isn't it? That the real cause for our rejoicing comes because Jesus died on the cross for sins.

Notice verse 11 in Chapter 2. The angel said, "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior." The shepherds visited their Savior, verse 16, and then they left, verse 20, it says, "Glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them." But listen, that salvation meant ultimate suffering. Simeon, too, he lifted the holy child in his arms and blessed God saying in verse 30, "My eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence," the full knowledge, "of all the peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." So it really is a bitter irony that these expressions of profound joy are set in a context of intense suffering. The rising glory of the son of God was charting a course through the unparalleled suffering of pain and death. And even though Jesus triumphed over the suffering, though he conquered death, rose from the grave and he now lives eternal and immortal, the violence against him and the truth of his story continues to this very day. Opposition to his story continues now whether it's the distortion of these truths, especially at this time of year when the Gospel truths are drowned out in a flood of sentimentality and commercialism, or whether it's through the rejection and denial of the truth outright.

In fact, as we look at these first couple of verses in Luke 2, we're looking at a hotly contested text right here in verse 2 of Chapter 2. The consensus opinion of modern scholarship is that Luke made an embarrassing factual error in dating the census of Quirinius in the days of Herod. They say that Luke contradicts himself and contradicts Matthew in his chronology. They say the Gospels are untrustworthy and by extension so is the rest of Scripture. We'll consider that in a moment, those claims, but as I said, the violence against the story started then, continues down to this very day. It is constant, it is unrelenting. Yet, as we study this text for ourselves, we, like Simeon, like the prophetess Anna, like Mary and Joseph, like the shepherds, we're going to find every cause for profound joy as this truth is vindicated before our very eyes. As I said, it's an unexpected irony to find joy through this opposition.

There's another irony we find in this second chapter, just what I read there. And it's found in the characters that Luke introduces us to. Right away we meet some very, very important government officials. Caesar Augustus, the first Roman Emperor. He is the most powerful man in the entire world at that time. His imperial power and his influence, had reached to the outer



extremities of his empire, namely through this man, Quirinius. He made a decree, he set people in motion, he spoke, people obeyed. But Caesar Augustus and Quirinius, as important as they are in the world stage, they are not the focal point of this chapter. They're almost incidental. At center stage is a newborn baby, helpless, weak, needy, dependent and he's surrounded by some very humble people: peasant parents, no-name shepherds. He's celebrated by an old man with hope in his eyes and longing. An old widow, this prophetess, Anna. These people here are hardly the paragons of power. They're hardly the source or the foundation of building an entire kingdom of God. They have no authority, no influence, no say. These humble, lowly people lived in captivity. They lived under Roman domination; they were powerless subjects in an empire that was vast and dominating. They lived in submission in their own land under a foreign authority.

In fact, that's what sent Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem in the first place in verse 3. It says, "All went to be registered," right? Then verse 4 says, "And Joseph also went up." He's part of the "all." He's got to do what he's required to do, and he's taking Mary with him, his betrothed and, by the way, very pregnant

wife. And it's by means of Caesar's decree. It's by means of Quirinius' registration, all under the jurisdiction of Herod. But it's through all that that the Most High God brought his son into the world. He's the one. He's the one who's making all this happen. Let's pause for a moment and not miss the encouragement that we can find in this observation in our day and time. Proverbs 21:1 says, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will." Just like a pool of water in your hand, you turn it, it goes one way; you turn it another way, it goes the other way. That's the king's heart in the hand of God. The seats of power and authority that we see on this earth seem sometimes corrupt, sometimes ignorant, sometimes vacillating, sometimes willing to do whatever it will take to keep in power. All those seats of power and authority are mere instruments to fulfill the will of our sovereign God. Never let your heart be troubled by any powerlessness you feel in the world around you because our God reigns supreme.

Let's unpack that theme, okay? In this text, it's the theme of divine sovereignty, and we find it here in the opening verses of Luke Chapter 2. We're going to see here how God's providence unfolds as Luke tells us the greatest story that has ever been

told. What we see here is divine providence. From the largest scale on the world's scene, to the very smallest scale in an individual family. It moves from the throne of the world to a manger in a cave, in a stall. It goes from the international to the personal. It goes from the most remote to the most intimate. God moves the imperial authority of Caesar, who then moves the regional authority of Quirinius, all to accomplish his sovereign will in the lives of these humble servants of his to bring about the birth of his son. As Galatians 4:4 says, "In the fullness of time, God sent forth his son." Not Caesar, God. And it happened precisely when he wanted it to happen and at exactly the right location.

Let's see how that happened. Point one: God is sovereign over global affairs. God is sovereign over global affairs. Verse 1 says, "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered." The opening phrase, "In those days," that connects the narrative back to Luke 1:5, where it says, "In the days of Herod, King of Judea." The Greek wording there is almost identical in those two verses. And this, as I mentioned before, corresponds with Matthew 2:1, which we read earlier. "Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of

Herod the king.” Herod is on the throne in Judea and he rules with Roman backing as a client-king. The puppet master that was pulling his strings is Rome. Herod received his throne, his authority by the authority of the Roman Senate, and now that Caesar Augustus rules, he’s underneath that authority of the emperor. Herod has the prerogative to administrate his kingdom as seems best to him, as fits the region. He’s got relative autonomy, but he pays homage and tribute, which another word for tribute is people’s taxes.

So he take taxes from the people, he takes a cut for himself, and he delivers a big chunk to Rome. He raises those taxes from the people in the land of Judea. But the supreme power on earth behind Herod, behind all the other provincial governors, the supreme power at that time was Caesar Augustus. And he was one of the longest ruling emperors; his reign as sole emperor lasted 44 years. This man ruled for a long, long time. One of the wisest marks of his imperial administration, Caesar Augustus was, he wasn’t interested in adding more lands to the empire. He had no interest, really, in direct rule, administrative oversight directly of an unruly people who were always going to revolt and rebel, whose language he didn’t know

and customs he didn't know. What he did want to do is build foundations in his own land, in Rome, in Italy. He wanted to solidify a base of power and then from that base of power, he wanted to extend and exert influence, Roman influence around the entire world. That allowed him the benefit of taking the wealth from the surrounding provinces and from the client states taking their wealth and having them provide for him and his own without taking on the headache of direct rule and administration.

Augustus believed that was the way to a strong, prosperous long-lasting empire. He saw an empire ahead of him that would never, ever end. He once said, here's his quote, "May I be privileged to build firm and lasting foundations for the government of State. May I also achieve the reward to which I aspire; that of being known as the author of the best possible Constitution, and of carrying with me, when I die, the hope that these foundations which I have established for the State will abide secure." His plan to put that into effect depended on keeping the entire empire connected, maintaining reasonably fair and flexible governance. That meant supply lines had to be in place. That meant transportation needed to continue unhindered, that meant roads. It was Alexander the Great who unified the

Empire, the world, by Hellenizing it, spreading the culture and the language of Greece. But it was the Romans who brought the world together, quite literally connecting them with the roads. Roman legions marched across the world on roads that connected the imperial capital of Rome to all of its provinces and client states.

So as tax money poured into Rome from the provinces and the client states, Augustus showed great generosity to Rome and its citizens, not always to the provinces and the client states, you understand, but to Rome and his people. He contributed always continually and generously to the public good with games, theaters, public baths. He once boasted, "I found Rome built of bricks. I leave her clothed with marble." People hailed him, sometimes publicly, standing ovation at games and theaters, calling out to him, saying, "Oh, just and generous lord!" They viewed him as the savior of the world. In fact, at his birth an astrologer, seeing some signs that were lining up about him, said this, he cried out saying, "The ruler of the world is now born." Subsequent successes, his rise to power, his astounding victories all fed the public perception that this was no mere

man. This is more than a man; he's a god. In fact, after his death, he was paraded in final triumphs, he was deified.

I'm so grateful in light of all that, that our Savior doesn't require our tax money to build his empire. If I'm reading Revelation correctly, it doesn't matter if you're a dispensationalist or a covenantalist. If I'm reading that correctly, he has funded that whole building project of the New Jerusalem from his own pocket. I think that's right. I think I'm getting that right. He's an amazing ruler, our God. Amazingly powerful, amazingly generous, and you know what? Instead of requiring gifts from us to make it all run, he gives to us everything. From the first to the last, it's all of God. But for Augustus, he needed money, he needed money from the masses and a lot of it. So, to make sure the taxes were collected in an accurate and efficient and timely manner, he had to keep track of people. So, he had an IRS, Imperial Revenue Service. He needed to know who the people were, where they lived, what they owned, and what they owed. From time to time, Augustus required citizens and subjects to register themselves and their families. He required them to submit to an inventory of their goods and holdings, their money, their property.

So Caesar Augustus conducted several official censuses of his citizens and there were three of them: 28 BC, 8 BC and 6 AD. Roman citizens, by the way, weren't required to pay taxes. Citizenship meant by birth. So citizens were not required to pay taxes. They had to register for military service, the men did, but they didn't owe any taxes. The official censuses of Rome and Roman citizens then triggered other censuses around the Roman Empire, spreading out through the provinces and the client states that Caesar Augustus raised his money from. So it's kind of like when the Department of Transportation here says, Hey, we're going to go ahead and build a new road, or We're going to improve I-25. Well, that, that decree may come out in January of 2015, but it may go on for a while, right? And you may be inconvenienced not just at this point in the road, but then at that point in the road, then that point in the road. And it just continues on for years and years to come. If it's like where I came from in Los Angeles, nothing is ever fixed. They're always building something and repairing something. But a census was like that, it rolled out, it took time to spread around to the Empire. And, again Caesar Augustus didn't raise money from his own Roman citizens; he raised it from the rest of the world, the provinces, the client states.



I just want to pause here for a moment in all this history. God didn't raise up Caesar because he wanted to beatify Rome, to turn it from brick to marble. From Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon to Cyrus of Persia, to Alexander in Greece to right here, Caesar Augustus of Rome, all of this has been an outworking of God's sovereign plan to bring one person into the world: his Messiah. You don't need to turn there, but you can write it down, Daniel Chapter 2. In Daniel Chapter 2, you remember, that Daniel was brought before Nebuchadnezzar to reveal to King Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, reveal to him, not just the interpretation of his dream, but the dream itself. He had to tell him the dream and then tell him what it meant. Here's what Daniel said as he told Nebuchadnezzar his dream, Daniel 2:31 and following, "O King, you saw, and behold, a great image. This image, mighty and of exceeding brightness, stood before you, and its appearance was frightening." You younger kids might think of those movies with giant robots that stand in your room, towering over you about to destroy you, that's kind of like what King Nebuchadnezzar was seeing. Some giant figure, mighty, exceedingly bright and terrifying in appearance. "The head of this image was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its middle and its thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, and its feet

partly of iron and partly of clay. As you looked, behold, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold all together were broken in pieces and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors and the wind carried them away, so that not even a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.”

After Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar about that dream, he then revealed the interpretation of the dream. This image was all about the coming empires of the world, how God would raise up each one and then supplant the final one with a rolling stone that would destroy the memory of all the empires. Guess what? That stone is rolling, folks and it's heading right for Rome on Roman roads. As Daniel said, the head of gold was the Babylonian Empire ruled by Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonian Empire carried out God's decree that Israel would be judged and carried off into exile. The chest and arms of silver was Medo-Persian. The Medo-Persian empire, Cyrus, king of the Medo-Persian empire, he decreed Israel's return into the land. All by God's design. The torso, the thighs of bronze that was the empire of Greece, ruled

by Alexander the Great. He is the one who decreed the language that would carry the message about this Messianic stone around the whole world. In fact, it was the very language in which the New Testament was written, Alexander's language.

Finally, this iron strength of Rome intermixed with the brittle clay of the provinces and the client states, Rome's Emperor, Caesar Augustus. He's the very one who decreed by the hand of God, the registration of this little stone in a little town called Bethlehem. A stone that would supplant his kingdom and take over the entire world to leave all other kingdoms, all other empires completely forgotten, like chaff that the wind blows away. Can you see the sovereignty of God here over global affairs? Because that's what's being taught here in Luke Chapter 2. That's what Luke is showing us.