

The Birth of Jesus Christ, Part 2

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's 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.'"

Not only did God exercise his divine sovereignty over global empire, which was a Roman Empire at that time, God also exercised sovereignty over regional affairs. God is sovereign over regional affairs. Look at verse 2, "This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria." Of the three censuses that I mentioned, the one in 28 BC, the one in 8 BC, and then the one in 6 AD, Caesar had other officials oversee the first and the third censuses, but that second one, the one in 8 BC, Caesar oversaw that one personally. This was the decree that

set things in motion eventually in Syria and Palestine and that region, when Quirinius, he sent him to be a direct agent to oversee that census. Quirinius was appointed and sent by Caesar himself.

Luke here has given us three important pieces of information in verse 2, that we can use to triangulate the time when Jesus was born. Now, he doesn't give us an exact date. Systems for dating change over time. In fact the one that was being used in Rome at that time was dating things, 1, 2, 3, all the way from 753 BC to the founding of Rome. That had been obliterated by the birth of Jesus Christ. So it wouldn't do any good for Luke to use human dating systems. He uses names of people. He uses events: the reign of Herod, Luke 1:5; decree of Caesar, Luke 2:1; and here, the first registration of Quirinius, Luke 2:2. Names of people, memorable events by comparing and contrasting those, we get a sense of what was happening in those days. And get this, I want you to understand this. It's Luke is a historian. He is a dead accurate, precise historian, but it's not just dates that Luke wants us to get here. He doesn't just want us to get a sense of the time. He wants us to see what was happening. He wants us to get a sense of what was going on in

the region when Jesus was born. And that one sentence summary in verse 2 says it all, “This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.” Now, it’s lost on us, 2,000 years later, but for the original readers of Luke’s Gospel, that told them everything that they needed to know. They could picture those days. Believe me, it wasn’t a pleasant picture. It’s like saying today, Oh, that was, remember the time when Kennedy was shot, or Remember when Martin Luther King Junior, when he was shot? Remember what was going on then? Or the Bay of Pigs. When I say those things to you, you don’t just remember dates. I mean a date doesn’t just pop into your head unless you’re some history major or something. You remember what was happening then. You remember the sense and the culture. You remember the feel, what those times were like. That’s what Luke is doing here. It’s not about precise dates, even though Luke is impeccably precise. This is about events. This is about a feeling at that time. The danger and the foreboding that dominated the region and remember all of this is happening, even the foreboding, even the danger, all happening by the sovereign plan of God.

Josephus gives us a little more information. He adds to what we know of Luke's single-sentence summary. And it's this paragraph that I'm about to read to you that provides unbelieving critics with an objection to Luke's accuracy. Here's what Josephus wrote, he said, "When," Syrinus, or that's Quirinius, "When Syrinus had now disposed of our Archelaus' money," Archelaus is Herod's son, "and when the taxings were come to a conclusion, which were made," here's the date, "in the 37th year of Caesar's victory over Antony at Actium. He," that is Quirinius, "deprived Joazar of the high priesthood and he appointed Ananus the son of Seth, to be high priest." So a number of things going on there in that quote. You've got Quirinius disposing of Archelaus' money, funds which really did belong to Herod. Taxing has come to a conclusion, which seems to have the sense of, Oh, it's the census. 37th year of Caesar's victory over Antony, he deposed a high priest and replaced him with another high priest. That gives us a good bit of information to fill in the details that Luke leaves out.

But one detail, as I said, that contradicts Luke's chronology is the one, "in the 37th year of Caesar's victory over Antony at Actium." That's 6 AD. Herod wasn't alive in 6 AD. Is

Luke wrong? The date doesn't reconcile with Luke's earlier date for the census. In fact there's no way to reconcile those two dates. It's about ten years difference. Here's the question: Who do we believe, Luke or Josephus? For me, I'm going to presume the absolute truthfulness and accuracy of Luke. Why? Because he's the divinely inspired author of Scripture, and the Holy Spirit doesn't make dating mistakes, chronology mistakes. That's a right attitude, but I want to warn, at the same time, we do not want to fall into the error of what's called, fideism. That is just believing simply without examining any evidence. It's the attitude of that old child's song, "God said it, I believe it, that's all that faith demands." That is true. And it's commendable to believe the Bible and to take it at its word. Absolutely. What's not commendable is to be lazy when it comes to examining the evidence. We shore up our faith and strengthen our faith when we take the time and do due diligence to examine the evidence even in light of objections. New believers count on us to do that. Our children attending school from grade school all the way through university, they are continually being assaulted with unbelieving presuppositions, *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseam*, over and over again. It's like a dripping faucet. It's like Chinese water torture in the school systems trying to un-seat kids view of God, their belief in the Bible, their belief in anything



transcendent. They're being told not only should they not assume that the Bible has a higher integrity, higher accuracy, higher reliability than any other text on earth, they're being told that they should always suspect the bias of Biblical writers. Writers like Josephus and others they say are infinitely more reliable than the writers of the Bible. Why? Because writers of the Bible, like Luke and others, they're biased by religious belief. They believe in myths, fairy tales. They believe crazy things like God created the world out of nothing.

In fact, you want to know what your kids are going to find when they Google, Census of Quirinius? Go put that into your search engine. Top result is the Wikipedia article, which says this, second paragraph, "As the census took place in 6 CE," Common Era, "and Luke's second marker is the reign of King Herod who died in 4 BCE," Before Common Era, "the Gospel is inconsistent with the historical evidence." Really? Where did it get that? Josephus. "Most modern," continuing, "most modern scholars explain this as an error, but the authors of the Gospel were ignorant on many points about the early life of Jesus, and both the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Matthew put Jesus' birth in Bethlehem in order to match a prophecy in the Book of

Micah that the Messiah was to come from that place.” End quote. Not only are they telling you, Don’t believe the facts in the Bible; they presume to know what was going on in the heads of the writers themselves. Such audacity. Such arrogance. It’s absolutely insidious, isn’t it? It’s pernicious and it’s blatant in undermining faith in Scripture. And sadly, there are far too many Christians who have capitulated to these unbelieving prejudices as well. In one article I read, Daniel Schwartz is quoted as saying, quote, “It seems fair to say that the scholarly consensus today,” get this, “shared even by many conservative Christian scholars is that Luke is wrong.” End quote.

Listen, the only way to arm our young people, and even to arm ourselves, beloved, against this kind of stuff, number one, is to assume the accuracy of the Bible. Doesn’t Luke, with all of his accuracy, I mean I could take the time, but I can’t, I don’t have the time. I could take the time to catalogue how accurate Luke is. Shouldn’t he get the benefit of the doubt? Just on a human level? And just assuming the fact that what the Bible says about him is true, that the Holy Spirit inspired these writings and superintended the writing so that it says exactly what God wanted to say, shouldn’t we bring our

understanding of divine inspiration into this? Shouldn't we assume the accuracy of the Bible, number one? But, number two, shouldn't we then demonstrate the accuracy of the Bible? Shouldn't we look at the criticisms? Shouldn't we look at what was being said? And bring truth to bear? Listen, the truth had nothing to hide against the critics. If I'm going to question which source has made a mistake, it is not going to be the Biblical writer. Josephus and Luke are both men, to be sure, and prone to make mistakes, but only one of them wrote under the inspiration and authority of the Holy Spirit. That is the writer who gets the benefit of the doubt.

But that's not where we leave it. We study, we read, we research so we can find an answer to the challenges of the skeptics, who are trying all the time to shipwreck the faith of weaker Christians, to dissuade others from hearing what the Bible has to say, which includes our kids. So first of all, we've got to make sure we've got the Biblical text right. Look at the Biblical text there in Luke 2:2. We need to start by carefully observing what Luke says and what he doesn't say. What Luke doesn't say is that Quirinius was governor. It says he ruled. Our English translations, so accurate, so good most of

the time, but here they let us down just a bit and they translate an adverbial participle as a noun instead of translating this as it should be, when Quirinius was exercising authority in Syria, or when Quirinius was ruling, leading, commanding in Syria. It says, "When Quirinius was governor of Syria."

Now we're led to go on a wild goose chase through the documents of history to find where does a document identify Quirinius as governor. Our translations give Quirinius a position he didn't hold at the time and one that Luke didn't intend to convey either. During the reign of Herod, immediately before his death, there was a man named Varus who was governor in Syria and you understand Israel is here, Syria is above it. Okay, so Syria, Varus was governing then. His governorship lasted from the last years of Herod the Great until after his death. Before Varus, Saturninus was the governor of Syria. So, there's no way Quirinius could have been governor of Syria at that time before Herod's death. Besides, Quirinius was way too busy to be the governor of Syria at that time; he was fighting a war up in what's now southern Turkey. This guy is quite an interesting man, actually. His full name was Publius Sulpicius

Quirinius. Try to say that ten times fast. He was born just south of Rome. He also rose quickly through the ranks. In his thirties, he was awarded with the office of Consul, the title of Consul, so he was on the level in authority with other governors around the provinces. Even if he didn't hold a governorship, he still had that authority. And he used that authority as a personal representative of Caesar. In his early forties, he won a victory over these, these people in southern Galatia, as I mentioned, modern-day Turkey. For his victory, Quirinius was awarded a military triumph which was the highest honor bestowed on a general for bravery and victory on the battle field. He was paraded through the streets with people hailing him. Caesar August trusted Quirinius so much that he assigned him to be the advisor to his nephew, his adopted son, Gaius Caesar. It's this Quirinius, he's highly respected official. He's a trusted emissary not of the Roman Empire, he a trusted emissary of the Rome's Emperor. He's a personal assistant and representative of Caesar Augustus himself.

And that's precisely what makes Luke's mention of Quirinius so fascinating because this points to time in Jerusalem in Judea when Caesar felt the need to insert himself into the affairs of

this client kingdom ruled by Herod. Things were falling apart. So, Caesar needed someone trustworthy, he needed to send a man to restore order, to reassert Roman authority, to carry out the tax registration of the Jewish people. I'm not going to go any further into the chronology, the details about the chronology, but there's some recent scholarship that has been challenging in the past decade or two the critical consensus that condemns Luke in favor of Josephus. One article, which I highly recommend if you have an interest in this kind of thing, is by a man named John H. Rhoads, R.h.o.a.d.s, Rhoads. And this article by John Rhoads is titled and I appreciate him putting the thesis of his paper in the title, *Josephus Misdated the Census of Quirinius*. I appreciate that clarity. Don't you? It leaves no doubt where he stands. But using source criticism, critical scholarship, Rhoads demonstrates and documents Josephus' approach to doing history, his use of sources, which unwittingly lead Josephus to an occasional error. Sometimes Josephus is susceptible to duplicating accounts. Sometimes he reports simultaneous events from different sources as if they happened at different times. It's not that Josephus is intentionally misleading, certainly not sloppy, but if modern readers don't recognize how he uses sources or his method of doing history, they are easily misled by ignorance, really, of his methods. Bottom line, Josephus was

wrong to date Quirinius' census at 6 AD. That's what you need to understand and take away from this.

Luke is correct in dating it before Herod's death, sometime between 4 BC and 1 BC. Rhoads' article absolutely vindicates Luke against his critics, helps us read Josephus more accurately, at the same time. Josephus here, when he dated it 37 years from Actium, he either misread his source with the date, or the name of the city, or he simply changed the date to fit his historical reconstruction. Frankly, Josephus made other errors in his work, which are documented. It doesn't make him a bad guy. It doesn't make him an unreliable source, just human. But, as I said, crucial difference between Josephus and Luke, Luke was under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit in his research and his writing. Not one error. Having said that, go verify what I said by doing your own research, okay?

With that out of the way, that problem out of the way, I just want to take a few minutes to paint the picture of what was actually happening in Jerusalem at this time, which, again, as I said, is the sense that Luke wants us to get. What is it that required Caesar Augustus to send a trusted emissary, Quirinius,

into that region to exercise authority over this first registration? As Herod's life was coming to a grinding and painful end, he was suffering from a disease of intestines and bowels, and it was very unpleasant. He was also suffering from a madness of a lust for power, and paranoia that someone was going to take it from him. He was so anxious that someone was lurking in the shadows to assassinate him and take his power away, he started murdering everyone around him, every possible contender. Herod surrounded himself with bodyguards. He had the city of Jerusalem crawling with secret police and spies spying on everybody, reporting to him about everything. Herod even became suspicious of his favorite wife, Miriam, and had her executed. He later accused his two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, of high treason. He had them executed. The next son in line for the throne was Antipater. Next is not where you wanted to be. But Antipater was also charged of an assignation plot. Herod had him killed just five days before his own death. Herod's penchant for murder was so well known that Caesar Augustus said, "It's better to be Herod's dog than one of his children."

So while Herod is here busy in these days killing off his family, the Jewish population is becoming more fed up with Herod



and his catering to Rome, his sucking up to Rome. Two Pharisees from the Galilean regions, Judas of Galilee and Matthias, rabbis, they taught zeal for the Law of Moses, and they also taught the reward of dying for the sake of righteousness. These guys gathered a cohort of young men, zealous for the law, indignant at Herod's collaboration with the Romans. So when Quirinius' census was instituted, Herod and the High Priest Joazar both encouraged the Jews to participate. Hey, go along with it. Rome doesn't mean anything by this. Many did, including Joseph and Mary, but not the angry young men. The disciples of Judas the Galilean and Matthias, they went to the temple and they tore down the Roman eagle that Herod had put there on the temple to represent Rome over the temple of God himself; tore that down. They attacked Herod's armory, and for their trouble they were caught. Herod ordered Judas, Matthias, and the main collaborators to be burned alive publicly. Luke records Gamaliel's reference to that event. In Acts 5:37 it says, "Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered."

After the death of Judas and Matthias, to pacify the Jews, to diffuse the tension, Quirinius deposed Joazar from his position as High Priest, he installed this man Ananus. Joazar had, Remember, supported the Roman census, keeping him in place was a risk and so, Quirinius, he wanted to avoid another bloody insurrection. He wanted to restore order. Replacing him was the only thing that was reasonable to do. Now, what's interesting about all of this in relation to the census? If a Roman, like Quirinius, was directly administering the census for himself, people would have been registered in their place of residence. Joseph and Mary would not travel anywhere. They'd stay right there in Nazareth of Galilee. That's the way censuses were running all throughout the empire, all through the provinces. But since Quirinius was running the census through the administration of Herod, a client king, he deferred to Herod's tendency here to cater to Jewish customs and that meant for registration purposes, Jews traveled back to their place of origin, back to their tribe. Even in the midst of this regional violence and chaos; another demonstration of divine sovereignty directing every action, every act of revolt, as well as every act of restraint, all according to his perfect plan.

God is sovereign over global affairs, number one. Regional affairs, number two. And then number three, God is sovereign over individual affairs. Look at verses 3 to 5. “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.” As I said, when Caesar Augustus spoke, the world obeyed. People moved. People went in motion. And Joseph obeyed, too. He made the 80-mile journey in the winter with a very pregnant wife from Galilee in the north to Judea in the south, from Nazareth, little town, to the little town of Bethlehem, because the son of David had to be born in the city of David. And God, even here, is at work in every single detail directing this young couple through his hidden hand of providence, sending them to this very, humanly speaking, insignificant city; prophetically speaking, very important city.

Micah 5:2 says, “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from old, from ancient days.” By the decree of Caesar Augustus,

Jesus was born, and, by the way, registered, in a Roman census, in the city prophesied of old to be the birthplace of the true ruler and savior of the world. This “stone cut by no human hand” it started to roll, and it grew, eventually, to become the size of a “great mountain that will fill the whole earth.” More on that next time. Let’s pray.

Heavenly Father, we are grateful to you once again for the detail and the clarity of your word and the sense that we’re supposed to get in reading it. And we’re grateful to you for the confidence that you give us that you are in charge of all things, every single detail from the large scale to the small. We look forward to what you have to say to us more, next time, next week in the rest of this passage as we see the birth of your beloved son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray, Amen.