

The Birth of Jesus Christ, Part 3

Luke 2:4-7

We are in Luke Chapter 2. Our Lord was born in a time of great turmoil in Judea and Judah, that whole area. The long shadow of Rome reached into the land of Israel and was mediated through a brutal, maniacal administration of Herod the Great. And as he was nearing the end of his life, he was getting worse and worse. It was a time of tumult, a time of social and political anxiety, a sense of foreboding around Herod's kingdom, a sense of churning in the air, a time of nagging doubt, grim uncertainty.

In the midst of all the chaos, God was still ruling. He was still reigning as sovereign. He was still directing everything according to his good and wise providence. He was sovereign over King Herod. He was sovereign over Quirinius, directing all of his affairs. He was sovereign over Caesar Augustus. He had put them in those places of leadership and authority for this time in world history to accomplish his purposes, namely, bringing his son, the Savior, into the world.

And as God directed all those things globally and regionally, let's not forget that he was also paying careful attention to the individual affairs of his people, His son, Jesus Christ, his parents, Joseph and his betrothed, the Virgin Mary. God never forgets about the individual. He's always concerned about people and their problems, even while he manages great world events, even as he raises and demolishes empires, even as he fulfills prophecy, while he's keeping galaxies spinning through the universe, stars in their places, orbits all on track, he's careful and concerned about us. I love how Jesus put it Luke 12:6 and 7. He says, "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten before God. In fact, even the hairs on your head are all numbered. Do not be afraid; you are more valuable than many sparrows." That's something we need to remember, isn't it? Especially in these turbulent, changing times.

In this story about Jesus Christ being born into the world in violent times, God remains on the throne. He governs human affairs now as he always has, whether globally, regionally, or individually. His sovereign hand is guiding all things by his good and wise providence. God is active in and through human decisions, whether it's the decree of an emperor, the administration of a regional official, or the individual

decisions of a young married couple. Divine providence works through our day-to-day actions, our reactions, our decisions, our activities, all that to accomplish God's sovereign ends. We're going to see God's strategic and practical provision for his son Jesus Christ.

But as we move through these verses and cover those points, what I want to highlight, that there are very human decisions that Joseph and Mary had to make as they navigated through the changing circumstances and the demands of their own world. You can't miss the fact that they are a very normal young couple. They're no different than you and me. As you'll see, they make their decisions, they live their lives; as they do that, God is doing his work. God is accomplishing his work. They don't force anything. They're not trying to make things happen. They're pursuing righteousness before whatever is presented to them. But God is leading them down the path that he's laid out for them. As they make their decisions, God does the rest. In this case, the result of their decisions is the birth of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior right at the time he was supposed to be born, right in the location he was supposed to be born. Only God could arrange all of that.

Let's begin just by reading the passage. We're just going to read the short section from verses 1 to 7. "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." Or he was governing in 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 the swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

Our first point is going to cover verses 3 to 5, and it's God's strategic provision for Jesus. His strategic provision. And again, don't miss how God's provision involved the free decisions of Joseph, as Joseph navigated, brought his family, really, through a changing set of circumstances. This is the stuff of human life. This is what we all live through. This is what we all face. We make decisions every day, planning and acting and then reacting as we respond to new information, as we respond to changing circumstances and situations.

Through it all, God directs us as well. He provides strategically to lead us in his perfect way. Luke starts with the global scene. He looks at the ambitions of the very first Roman Emperor. Luke 2:1, "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered." "Those days," as we said, were the days of Herod the Great, really the end of his days. Caesar Augustus issued an imperial decree to gather census data, to register people for taxation. He was wise and effective in his administration. And because of that, it ushered in what we call the Pax Romana, a time of unprecedented peace. He intended to maintain the stability in the Empire, to maintain that Pax Romana, the Roman Peace. And that required money, that required funds and that's the reason for the census. People throughout the empire in the provinces, the client states, they were required to register for tax assessment. The Empire levied taxes from its non-Roman citizens, a poll tax, a tax on property. So Caesar Augustus decreed this census in 8 BC and he oversaw, that one personally. He commissioned high-ranking consular officials throughout the Empire to conduct that registration, levy the taxes, then collect. We said Quirinius was one of those men. The decree in 8 BC had a ripple effect around the Empire, rolling through the Empire at varying rates

of speed throughout the provinces, depending on the regional situation.

And that's why Luke provides this additional time marker, which is kind of like a parenthesis there in verse 2 in the narrative to help the reader locate that imperial census that affected this region. Luke 2:2, "This is the first registration when Quirinius was governing in Syria." Took good three to four years from 8 BC to start taking effect in Judea. It probably slowed down, no doubt, by the customs of the Jews. Translating this verse to give the impression that Quirinius was actually the governor of Syria at the time is a bit misleading because that's not what the grammar says there. Quirinius exercised governing authority, consular authority, governing power, which is really a more accurate understanding of the verb that is used there. He wasn't the governor, but he was still a very important high-ranking official and, commissioned by Caesar himself.

Quirinius and Ameilius conducted the censuses in Syria and the Apamean community and then in Palestine, among the Jews, people were registered in the Apamean community, and in Syria they were registered right where they lived. That was the typical Roman method, tax people where they lived, where they work. In Palestine it's different. Quirinius and Caponius took a

different approach in Palestine. Since they administered that registration in cooperation with King Herod, they didn't conduct the census in the normal Roman way. They deferred to Herod's tendency to accommodate Jewish customs. Wise approach. That meant for registration purposes, the Jews had to travel to the territory of their tribe to be registered, exactly as we see here.

In Joseph's case, verse 4, this meant he had to return to Bethlehem because he was of the tribe of Judah. It says there, look at it, "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." So this census really provides the context of God's strategic provision for his son. It's the context this is essential to ensuring that the Messiah would be born in the City of David because God had a prophecy to fulfill. Micah 5:2, you're familiar with it, it says, "But you, O Bethlehem, Ephrathah," which by the way, there two Bethlehems in Israel at that time, one in the North near Galilee and this one in the South. Micah 5:2 specifies the southern Bethlehem. "You, 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 of Israel, whose coming forth is from old, from ancient

days,” or you could translate that, “from eternity.” It’s really talking about the eternal Son of God coming on the earth.

God intended the City of David to be the birthplace of the Son of David. God is working in every single detail. He is directing this young couple through his hidden hand of providence, sending them to this small, seemingly insignificant town in the eyes of the world, but very important, prophetically speaking, very important for his plan. As a righteous young man, Joseph had every intention to submit to the will of Rome. rebellion was in the air. Rabbis of the Pharisee party, men like Judas the Galilean and Matthias, they were stirring the people up. They were teaching people in the Law of Moses that righteousness meant opposing Rome, opposing Herod. It’s not hard to sympathize with that approach, that viewpoint, is it? Especially for us as evangelical Christians as we watch our country being dismantled by the governing authorities. Not only would submitting to the Roman census lead to a diminishment of personal wealth, further weakening all the Jewish people, worse than that, their tax money was funding the Roman occupation. They were effectively paying to keep the Roman legions in place. They were funding the government that oppressed them. Not only that, but their tax money funded false religion, built temples for Roman idols, furthered Roman licentiousness.



As I said, today's evangelicals can easily understand that and sympathize with the teachings of Judas the Galilean. In fact, in some corners of evangelicalism, I hear the same arguments being made. Same arguments. We should remember Judas fomented rebellion, and he paid the price for it. Rome didn't bear the sword in vain, or light them on fire in vain, as Herod did.

Joseph, he wasn't concerned about any of that. In his pursuit of righteousness, he intended to obey the government. He intended to obey quietly, peacefully, to do what was required. His duty before God was to submit to the government. He left Rome to answer to God for what it did with his tax money. Taking a trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem would be, for Joseph, inconvenient to say the least. It was 80 miles one way. It was winter time. Joseph had a pregnant wife to consider. It's not like he could take a day off from work, zip down to Bethlehem in a car, register and come back and make it a day trip. The journey for him would take four or five days on foot one way. And as a carpenter, taking a couple weeks off of work, it's not like he had stored up a bunch of vacation time. For him, not working meant not eating. Still, Joseph fully intended to make the necessary arrangements to make the inconvenient trip to register himself.

A question comes up at this point, as you read through the narrative, and it's a significant question. We understand why Joseph wanted to do what he did. But what motivated Joseph to bring Mary along with him on his trip to Bethlehem? Mary was pregnant, verse 5. So why risk the trip? Why not leave her in the hands of family? Why not take the trip by himself, go down there to Bethlehem and come back in time for the birth. As far as we can tell, there was nothing legally that required Mary to be registered for taxation purposes, just Joseph. Even if it were required for her to register for that poll tax, which women, by the way, did pay, Joseph could have registered for both of them. So, why bring her along? Especially with child. Some say that Mary may have owned property in Bethlehem, and so she went back to register as a property owner. That seems a bit of a stretch to me especially since their first offering in the temple, verse 24, was a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons, which that's the poverty stricken offering. That's the offering that people would pay if they had nothing else to give. Not property owners. Others suggest that Joseph and Mary they knew Micah's prophecy so they were kind of theologically motivated, Micah 5:2, to get down there to Bethlehem to participate in the fulfillment of that prophecy. That's possible, but even that seems unlikely.

It's impossible to go back 2,000 years, get inside their heads, but two things are significant to me about this text in Micah 5:2. First of all, Luke doesn't mention Micah's prophecy in the text at all. Luke is silent about it. He had access to all the written records of Jesus' family in doing all of his research, which he mentions in the first four verses of his Gospel. A reference to Micah 5:2 doesn't register here though, especially when it would be so natural to show up in the narrative, explain why they went. Secondly, what does register here is what Mary had just heard at the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Mary had heard Zechariah's prophecy. Light shining on those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. And as familiar as Mary was with Scripture, she would have associated those words of Zechariah's prophecy with Isaiah's prophecy. Isaiah 9:1 and 2, "There will be no gloom for her who is in anguish. In the former times he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali," Where Nazareth is located, by the way, "but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shone." That would have immediately come to her mind. So it's quite likely that if

Joseph and Mary were thinking theologically, and they were, by the way, they're thinking biblically, they would have expected Jesus to be born right there in Nazareth, not down in Bethlehem. Leaving Nazareth especially with her in the second or third trimester of her pregnancy, probably not in their original thinking, probably not in their original plan.

So we're back to that question: What motivated Joseph to take Mary out of Nazareth, away from her family, and bring her to Bethlehem in time to deliver the baby there in Bethlehem? Theology probably didn't play a factor. Legal requirement probably didn't play a factor. Securing Mary's property probably not in the equation either. In fact, in some ways it might seem best for Joseph to leave Mary behind, get that trip done and over with, get back in time to paint the nursery, right? The answer is hinted at in verse 5 at the end. Notice the final phrase there. "Joseph 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 what? "with child." That was the motivating factor right there. She's with child. Mary's with child. But get this, not by Joseph.

During the betrothal, the revelation of her pregnancy as she started to show would start to generate some pretty uncomfortable questions in the little village of Nazareth. I've been somewhat surprised, maybe mildly amused as I've moved from Los Angeles, 20 million some people or whatever in the whole metro area and moving here to Greeley and I find people who know things about me I had no idea. Where I get my hair cut; they know all my family. The girl that sits and cuts my hair says, "Hey, how's your father-in-law doing?" I'm like I didn't even know about my father-in-law. How'd you know that? Things just get around here in this town. Some of it is just gossip, isn't it? Sinful. But not everything. But certainly, something like this in Nazareth, much, much smaller than Greeley, by the way. This would get around. But God-ordained census of Caesar Augustus now rolling through the area through Quirinius' authority, this gave Joseph and Mary the perfect opportunity to get out of town.

To get a little more insight to how this all went down, turn over to Matthew's Gospel for a moment. Matthew's gospel, and look at chapter 1, verse 18. "Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed

to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." Uh-oh, that's a problem for Joseph. So verse 19, "Her husband Joseph, being a just man, unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly." You say, What's so just and merciful about divorcing Mary in her time of greatest need? Well, how was Joseph to understand this? How was he to understand Mary's confession that she's pregnant and that it's by the Holy Spirit? He knows her character. He doesn't immediately suspect that she's done something sinful, but this is hard, very hard for him. Mary's pregnancy to him looked like a violation of their betrothal, which was, in those days, adultery, punishable in the Law of Moses by stoning. So, sympathize here with Joseph. He didn't know what to believe. So he thought, divorce her quietly, break this betrothal. He could help her family deal with the pregnancy issue in some way, but he was in a very difficult situation.

Verse 20, "As he considered these things," no doubt sleeplessly wrestling in his bed, "behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken

by the prophet: 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel' (which is God with us)."

So God solves this dilemma for Joseph. Sends an angel, visit him in a dream, verify Mary's story. That's so helpful, right? He's assured by the angel that the Holy Spirit has indeed, just as Mary said, has indeed caused her to conceive miraculously, thereby fulfilling, as the angel quotes there, Isaiah 7:14. Don't you love how God's revelation brings couples together? Doesn't drive them apart. You hear so many stories of one spouse or another getting some supposed word from God that sends them away from the marriage to pursue some fanciful ministry, ambition, or something like that. In these nativity stories, God's revelation brought Zechariah and Elizabeth together. It brought Joseph and Mary together. God's revelation, beloved, always unites. True revelation from God unites; it does not divide. When Joseph awoke, he's fully on board. He's all in. Verse 24, "When he woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife." The verb there in verse 24 is interesting; it's pretty strong. It's *paralambano*, to take to oneself, to take for oneself. Matthew's trying to tell us Joseph wasted no time here. He woke up and he married that girl right away.

When we compare these accounts here in Matthew and Luke, we can surmise that Mary, when she told Joseph about her pregnancy, she was probably about three months pregnant. You know, when she told about the angelic visit, when she told him about her pregnancy, the conception, all that kind of stuff. Remember, she had left right when she heard Gabriel's prophecy. She left immediately after that and visited Elizabeth, when Elizabeth was in her sixth month of pregnancy. Luke 1:36, 1:39 tells us that. And then she returned from Elizabeth's house after the birth of John the Baptist about three months later. So ladies, is the baby bump showing yet at three months? Not likely. Especially dressed like they were dressed, hidden underneath those long Middle Eastern robes, probably couldn't detect it. So when Mary returned from Elizabeth's house, she told Joseph everything that had happened, which sent Joseph into a tailspin. He was contemplating all of this when the angel of the Lord appeared to him and solved it completely. Joseph woke up, immediately ended the betrothal by entering into a public marriage. He took Mary into his home, but verse 25, Matthew chapter 1, "He knew her not until she had given birth to a son."

So Joseph was obedient to the angel of the Lord. He followed through with taking Mary into his home, that is that he married her in a public ceremony then took her into his home.



That marriage ceremony that solemnized the marriage covenant publicly before God, before man, legitimized the marriage socially. Everybody in Nazareth was satisfied, but Joseph did not consummate the marriage until after Jesus was born. So Joseph and Mary legally married, legally allowed to consummate their marriage, released from the strictures of their betrothal. Everything was above board, but they didn't follow through with everything, did they? Before the Lord, the two were technically still in a state of betrothal, which is why Luke refers to Mary as his betrothed in verse 5, very accurate.

You can turn back to Luke 2:5, by the way. So why is this change in marital status significant? Why am I taking you through this? What's important about it? If Joseph and Mary, if they were merely betrothed when they traveled south to Bethlehem, their traveling together would have been considered scandalous. The marriage ceremony saved that couple from public scandal. Their status now as a married couple, no longer betrothed, but now married in Nazareth, enabled Joseph and Mary to be able to travel together, for Joseph to take Mary with him to Bethlehem. The young couple needed to leave Nazareth before too long because Mary would be starting to show. The more her pregnancy was revealed, the more their nosy neighbors would start doing the math, calculating how long they'd been married,

figure out something was fishy here. Whatever inclination they may have had to stay in Nazareth, the Lord overcame that, didn't he, by his providence? God strategically caused several events to converge all at this point and expel the couple from Nazareth by their own free will, by their own desire. They wanted to leave. Joseph didn't dare leave Mary behind.