

THE BIRTH OF JESUS

Luke 2:1-7

INTRODUCTION

I read of a study where academicians were asked to define the greatest single moment in history. The result of this query was that there was no consensus on a single moment in history. But this was really an unnecessary exercise.

History has answered this question. The event is the birth of Christ. The most monumental event in all human history is when God came into the world. It is when Jesus Christ, Son of God, was born. Everything before this event is B.C., Before Christ, and everything after this event is A.D, *Anno Domini*, the year of our Lord.

Even those who try to remove Christ by using B.C.E and C.E.
→ Can't escape the fact → the birth of Jesus split the history of the world.

In fact, the vast majority of humanity dates their checks 2018.
Japan started using the Gregorian calendar in 1873.
Thailand – 1889.
Korea – 1896.
China & Taiwan – 1912.
Saudi Arabia – 2016.

This is the great event of world history that rises above everything else. This is the most profoundly influential, most deeply impactful, and most dynamically shaping of all of human history, the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ into the world.

READ Luke 2:1-7

Proposition: Three movements of Christ's birth narrative:

- I. **Providential Sovereignty**
- II. **Particular Selection**
- III. **Pitiful Setting**

I. Providential Sovereignty **2:1-3a**

Point – Luke, the meticulous historian, portrays God as the Lord of History

Proof – “^{1a}**Now it came about in those days**”

This takes us back to the days of **1:5** – “In the days of Herod, king of Judea”

In the economy and plan of God, Luke was not able to get the exact date of Jesus’ Birth → **3:23** – “when He began His ministry, Jesus Himself was about thirty years of age”

“^{1b}**that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus,**”

Neither of these are names. They are both titles.

- **Caesar** is a title like King or Emperor.
- **Augustus** is an adjectival title meaning highly regarded, esteemed, revered, and honored.

Caesar Augustus was born **Gaius Octavius** in 63 BC in Rome. When he was 20 years old, in 43 BC, his great-uncle, Julius Caesar, was assassinated.

In his will, **Julius Caesar** named **Octavius** as his heir.

Octavius and **Marc Antony** defeated **Brutus** and **Cassius** in the Battle of Philippi in 42 BC to avenge the betrayal and murder of Julius Caesar.

Octavius later defeated **Antony** and **Cleopatra** at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC.

In 27 B.C., the Roman Senate gave **Octavius** the title **Augustus**. From then on, he became known as **Caesar Augustus**.

- Rome shifted from a Republic to an Empire
- he was the first Caesar of the Roman Empire
- he reigned for 40 year from 27 B.C. to 14 A.D.

Caesar Augustus was one of the most powerful men in all of human history.

The Roman Empire was the summit of world power at that time. → Here's an example: Remember Nebuchadnezzar's dream in **Daniel 2** of a great statue. There were four kingdoms represented by this statue → Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and then the greatest (human) kingdom → Rome!

God used **Caesar Augustus** to create the world that would facilitate the spread of the gospel. Among other things, God used the most powerful Empire in the world with its network of roads, the common Koine Greek language, and the Pax Romana established by **Caesar Augustus**.

Caesar Augustus also populated a town called **Philippi** with veterans retired from the war and it became “**a Roman colony**” (Acts 16) → and he issued “**a decree**” that caused Joseph and Mary to go to Bethlehem where they have their baby that fulfills prophecy and God's eternal plan.

Beloved, there are no accidents in the realm of God. Had **Caesar Augustus** made his decision three months earlier, or three months later, or maybe one week earlier, or one week later, Jesus would not have born in Bethlehem. ☺

Neither the lowly nor the mighty function in a vacuum; both live and move and have their being in the living God.

“^{1b}**that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth.**”

- what is meant here is all of The Roman Empire
- the purpose of a census is for taxation and/or military service.
- most historians think the Jews were exempt from military service

- this census was most likely for taxation purposes

Now, as we step through our text, we go from the most powerful man in the world ... to the most vulnerable ... a baby in a feeding trough.

From the human perspective → we move from an Emperor to a Governor to a carpenter to an adulterer to a whippersnapper (I had to search for that one ☺ – a diminutive, insignificant, person)

“²This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ^{3a}And all were proceeding to register for the census,”

Luke is anchoring his Gospel in concrete historical reality.

These are real people, in real places, in real history. Luke does not begin his narrative with, “Once upon a time ...” or “The story is told” or “The legend...” This event stands the scrutiny of historical research, of true science.....of anything.

To fix the date of Jesus’ birth → Probably 4 B.C.

Quirinius was delegated authority from the throne in Rome to govern an entire province. He served as governor of Syria twice.

Dictators may plan, Armies may march, and the Governments of the nations may think they are controlling the affairs of the world ... but the mighty men of the earth are only dust in the chariot wheels of God’s Providence.

→ His is the Hand behind the Headlines

Illustration – The story is told of an old lady who was a woman of great faith. She lived in an apartment building with a younger neighbor who was an atheist. He had long grown tired of her attempts at evangelism and her displays of peace, love, and joy in the face of his profanity-laced rejection of her and her faith

The time came where her very meager income had been exhausted because of unexpected medical bills. She was without food and without any hope of being able purchase any. The young arrogant atheist was passing by in the hall and heard her calm confident prayers to God – thanking Him for His promise that even as He cares for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, so she knows He will care for her and provide just what she needs to survive.

The atheist thought, “Ahah! Now I’ve got her. I’ll show her once and for all there is no God.” He went to the store, bought groceries, placed them outside her door, and waited for her to return from her daily walk around the park.

When she came home, she saw the bags filled with wonderful groceries and immediately began thanking and praising God for His gracious provision for an unworthy servant like her.

Her vile neighbor jumped out, “Ahah!” “You silly old fool. You think God provided these groceries for you. I provided them! I bought them. I left them right there for you. Here’s the receipt to prove it. God didn’t provide for you. I did!”

The old woman, full of grace and beauty, gently replied, “Oh no my dear neighbor. God did provide for me.”
“I prayed. God heard. God provided.”

“He just had Satan pay the grocery bill.” ☺

Application – The Lesson? Beloved, do not worry about circumstances. → God designs all of them.

Our times are in God’s hands. He knows best for His people. He rules our lives. He knows just when to send relief. God may not come when you want him, but he’s always on time.

God is sovereign over the timing of Jesus’ birth.

God is also sovereignly providential over the place of Jesus' birth.

II. Particular Selection 2:3b-5

Point – The step down from **Quirinius**, the Governor, to **Joseph**, the carpenter, is a VERY big step. Not just a carpenter, but a carpenter from the 'wrong' side of the tracks.

We move from the universal (**world**) to the national (**Judea**)

Proof – “^{3b}everyone to his own city.”

Caesar Augustus gave the countries and the provinces in the Roman Empire a measure of freedom to operate their own government policies.

This was not a Roman requirement. The Empire would be happy for people to register in their current town.

- Going back to the city of ancestry is a Jewish requirement, either by Herod or by Israeli leaders.

“^{4a}**And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth,**” – in Scripture, ‘went up’ means in elevation/topography, not in latitude (map)
→ **Nazareth** ~ 1800 ft. above sea level; **Bethlehem** ~ 2700 ft.

Nazareth is not mentioned in the Old Testament. Nor is it mentioned in any secular writing –it is non-descript, off the beaten path, a blue-collar town –an obscure village, maybe 2000 people
→ If not for the New Testament, we would not even know it exists in history.

Steve Lawson – called Nazareth “a town of losers, leftovers, and nobodies”

Nobody went there for culture. Nobody ever went there for commerce. “Nowheresville” ... on the wrong side of the tracks

Illustration – A certain unnamed **copper mining town** that Zac’s GCS football team played on a number of occasions - from the very first season of GCS football (Junior High) to the state championship his senior year - was known for the horrible behavior of the fans during the football games.

→ Fans were thrown out of Junior High football games. There was just a darkness in the town ... it is a dead end town, literally, there are no roads that pass through the town

In the same way, **Nazareth** is a remote town with a very bad reputation → **John 1:46** – “And Nathanael said to him, ‘Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?’”

Point – And yet ... our Lord is “Jesus of Nazareth”

→ 1 Cor 1:28 – “God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might bring to nothing the things that are”

“^{4b}**to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David,**”

Joseph was born in **Bethlehem**, which is about 6 miles from Jerusalem. This, too, is a **city of David**.

First mention of Bethlehem → **Gen 35:19** – “So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).”

1 Sam 17:12 – “David was the son of the Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah, whose name was Jesse”

Interesting → neither **David** nor **Jesus** are recorded in Scripture as ever having contact with Bethlehem after their birth.

“⁵**in order to register, along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child.**”

Mary is probably 13 or 14 years old. **Joseph** is also most probably a teenager, best guess 16 to 17 or 18 years old. These

teenagers take the journey about 85-90 miles from their home in Nazareth down to Bethlehem.

Luke records Mary as being “**engaged**” to Joseph. **Matthew** tells us Joseph married Mary after the revelation from Gabriel, but did not consummate the marriage until after Jesus was born (**Matt 1:24-25**).

Mary was not required to go with Joseph. There are 3 possible reasons why Mary is accompanying Joseph:

- 1) Joseph is not going to leave Mary in Nazareth where her pregnancy is her **scarlet** letter to the haters. → She is an **adulterer** in their eyes.
- 2) Joseph is not going to leave Mary to have “the Son of God” by herself while he goes on a census trip.

Illustration – Have you ever looked inside a clock? The wheels of a clock move in different directions. They seem to move contrary to one another. But they are always forwarding the motion of the clock. They, even with their opposing and seemingly conflicting movements, make the alarm strike at the perfect time. The chimes sound just when they are supposed to.

So, the movement of the **Providence of God** may seem to be moving in opposing directions. It may seem to be in opposition at times ... in the history of the world ... in your life. But the alarm of God rings precisely when it is supposed to ring. The chimes of God’s clock for your life and your walk sound just when they are supposed to chime.

Here, the Providence of God to fulfill **Mic 5:2** – “But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, *too* little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.”
→ Written 650 years before Caesar Augustus issues his decree

- 3) Both **Mary** and **Joseph** might have been conscious of the fulfillment of the prophecy of Mic 5:2

Application – Beloved, God has no problem getting you where you need to be. And if He chooses to use a Roman Emperor, so be it. If He chooses to use a ‘close to being ready to give birth’ pregnant teenager from humble background traveling 85-90 miles in the ancient world with no planes, trains, or automobiles ... so be it.

III. Pitiful Setting 2:6-7

Point – Moved from the universal to the national and now to the personal.

Now, the **Gospel According to Luke** is the **longest book** in the New Testament. It has 24 chapters and well over 1000 verses. **Luke/Acts** is the most extensive comprehensive history of the New Testament.

This historical narrative spans almost 70 years → from 5 B.C (Zacharias and Elizabeth) to A.D. 61 (Paul’s first imprisonment in Rome).

Luke goes back farther historically than any other Gospel author AND he goes further forward → **His Gospel** spans from the announcement of John the Baptist to the ascension of Jesus the Christ.

Point – This most momentous occasion is captured in only 2 verses ... with **staggering simplicity** → the humanity, the normalness

It is captured with unremarkable and seemingly mundane language.

Note the contrast between the staggering announcement in 1:26-30 and the straightforward and subdued arrival of 2:1-7

I was going to title this sermon “The Birth of Christ” but there is such emphasis, or lack of emphasis on the Deity that I chose

“The Birth of Jesus”.

- The deity of Christ is brought out in Gabriel’s announcement.
- Also in Zacharias’s Song

The only way to explain Luke’s very subdued manner here is Divine inspiration.

We move to the **lowest rung of the ladder** moving down → **baby Jesus** - Emperor, Governor, carpenter, adulterer, to a whippersnapper

Proof – “**6And it came about that while they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth.**”

→ 280 days of gestation

“**7aAnd she gave birth to her first-born son;**”

Quite the understatement.

→ It is true that this birth is just like any other birth.

→ But ... this Child is not just like any other child!

→ Conception without union → Conception without insemination

- Mary contributed the X chromosome
- The Y chromosome was supernaturally created

Isaac Williams, *The Nativity* (1852) – “*The unfathomable depths of the divine counsels were moved; the fountains of the great deep were broken up; the healing of the nations was issuing forth; but nothing was seen on the surface of human society but this slight rippling of the water.*”

“**7band she wrapped Him in cloths,**”

These were long strips of fabric and this is normal. This is routine to keep the baby comfortable and warm and snug and immobile which is comforting to the baby.

Illustration – OK dads, it’s a contest right??? I can wrap my baby more snug than you ☺ I mean ... he’s like a shrink-wrapped burrito ☺ we could play catch with my wrapped baby like a football ... I’m not suggesting this course of action ☺

Point – See the normalcy of what is happening here. There are no royal robes. There is no fancy clothing. He doesn’t come into the world with a little halo over His head.

→ He comes out like everybody else comes out.

When Lord Jesus entered this world, He laid aside His garb of heaven.

Mary gives birth, she wraps her baby, she lays Him in a manger. There are **no attending angels** she can see. There are **no trumpets**. There is **no fanfare** ...she is just faithful in her circumstances.

Application – Beloved, this is the kind of person God uses ... a person who steps forward when there is a price to pay for ministry.

Mary ... she wrapped her baby in swaddling cloths ... the One who would one day wrap her in His cloths of Righteousness.

“^{7c}**and laid Him in a manger**”

- feeding trough

Tradition says a stable, but this is never said in Scripture. It is possible. A lesser tradition says it was a cave. It could have been a poor house where the animals shared the living space.

Steve Lawson – called his sermon on this passage – “From the Throne to the Trough” ☺

“^{7d}**because there was no room for them in the inn.**”

This is not a three-story motel as we might often imagine when we filter it through our 20th century Western world lenses.

22:11 – “you shall say to the owner of the house, ‘The Teacher says to you, “Where is the guest room in which I may eat the Passover with My disciples?’””

The point in the text here is not a lack of hospitality.

Most of the Jews in the Promised Land at this time were from Judah and Benjamin.

So, all the towns and villages are very full because of the census.

Caesar would have been sleeping in a palace, probably in a golden bed, with fine silk linens, watched over by his praetorian guard ... compare that to a baby in swaddling cloths, in a feed trough, attended by animals → Unbelievable contrast.

The poverty of the manger suits the shame of the cross. They bring together one seamless message of extraordinary humility.

He who was a Son by nature became sin so that we who were sin by nature could become sons.

He who was a Son by nature became a slave to righteousness so that we who were slaves to sin could become sons by adoption.

He came to pay a debt He didn't owe because I owe a debt I cannot pay.

2 Cor 8:9 – “you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.”

CONCLUSION

Many would tremble to approach a throne, but who trembles to approach a feeding trough? To approach a throne, you need to show the policemen at the gates your invitation; you need to be instructed in royal protocol, what to wear, how to address the monarch, where to stand.

→ You don't need any of this to approach an old dusty feeding trough.

No one could have been more approachable than God's Child. There are no armed guards around him pushing away those who come with their petitions. The hem of his garment is always within their reach. His hand is always ready to stretch out to the sick. His ear is always open to your cries.

Application – The invitation to come to Jesus is free to all and, therefore, free to you personally. No class or rank is excluded, no form of etiquette is necessary for entrance. You cannot buy Jesus; the price is more than all the universe and heaven combined, but he offers himself freely to you in the gospel.

Many sometimes imagine their sin is so great they have excluded themselves from Christ and the gospel. But no one is authorized to keep you away.

I was listening to the hymn “O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing” this morning and one line stood out to me:

“His blood can make the foulest clean”

Jesus is born in a place that is freely accessible to all who are led to it, all who come to it, all who need it, and all who want it. Since God has not shut you out of the stable, do not shut yourself out.

→ The door is open and there is room.

Gal 4:4-5 – “when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, ⁵in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.”