

## Who is this King of Glory?

Luke 2:1-7

Series: *Advent 2017*

**Introduction:** Take your Bibles and join me in Luke 2, Luke chapter 2. Perhaps you have heard the term “upper crust” used to describe the elite of society. That phrase finds its origin in 1600’s England where they would use a bread oven next to the fireplace in the kitchen. “The bread was put, as a raw lump of dough, straight into the bread oven. No bread tin, it just sits on the floor of the oven. The oven is heated by the fire and is very hot at the bottom. When the bread is done baking and taken out to cool, the base of the loaf is overcooked, black and also dirty. The top of the loaf is done just right, and still clean. The bottom of the loaf is for the servants to eat, while the upper crust is for the master of the house.”<sup>1</sup> This is such a fitting analogy for how human society typically works. The prominent and powerful experience the best, while the lowly and powerless get the worst. That seems to be what confronts us in Luke 2. There is definitely an upper crust and a lower crust in this text. The upper crust is the supreme ruler over an almost universal Roman Empire who flexes his political muscle to show off his glory. The lower crust is an obscure couple, constrained by the command of this Roman Emperor to go to a small town in Judah, who, while there, welcome their first child into the world by laying him in an animal feeding trough. At first glance it appears that Caesar Augustus is the king of glory in this text, and this baby Jesus is simply an afterthought. But in reality, the glory in this text resides in the bottom of the loaf – the lowly baby born in a manger. Luke 2 verse 1 gives us the account of Jesus’ birth this way. *Read 2:1-7.*

When we last left Mary, she had just received the news of her miraculous conception. The Holy Spirit would come upon her and the power of the Most High would overshadow her, and she would conceive and bear a son and his name would be Jesus, because he would save his people from their sins. Now, in Luke 2, we are fast forwarding to the end of Mary’s pregnancy. God has kept his promise to Mary, and she did indeed conceive as a virgin through the miracle of divine intervention. Joseph has taken her to himself as his wife, accepting by faith all that God has told them. They have not consummated their marriage vows, and so Mary is both Joseph’s betrothed and his wife. And now, in Luke 2 Mary and Joseph find themselves in the vortex of political power, bustling crowds, and the fullness of pregnancy. It all reads as though it is terribly out of control, but the exact opposite is true. Though God’s name is nowhere listed in this text, the details of the text display to us the great glory of God as seen through His providential work.

### I. The Strong Providence of God

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from <https://illustrationexchange.com/illustrations?category=549&search=glory>

- a. This text puts forward to us the strong providence of God. By the providence of God I am referring to the outworking of God's sovereign ways through the normal events of human life. It is the behind the scenes working of God to bring about the outworking of His plan. The psalmist declares that all things are the Lord's servants, and that He does whatever he pleases with and in all things. But this providential work of God which cannot be thwarted, is not always glaringly obvious from the human perspective. But it is always right, it is never late, and it is absolutely strong. God will have His way, and it will be marvelous in our eyes.
- b. This text in Luke 2 is the outworking of God's strong providence to directly fulfill His promise made through the prophet Micah. In Micah 5:2 God said, "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 of old, from ancient days." From the beginning of the Old Testament God had promised a redeemer for mankind from the seed of the woman. As that prophecy narrowed in its scope through further revelation, we were told that this redeemer would be of the house and lineage of David, and in Micah 5, that he would be born in the city of David. In other words, God is guaranteeing that the Son of David who would one day rule on the Throne of David for all of eternity, would be born in the town of David – the city of Bethlehem. This will provide incontrovertible proof that Jesus, the son of Mary, is actually the Son of God in the flesh come to be the Son of David – the fullness of time redeemer of God's people.
- c. But to accomplish this birth of the Messiah in the town of Bethlehem, God used some incredibly odd means. Instead of just sending Gabriel back to Joseph and Mary and telling them to travel to Bethlehem to have the baby there, God allows and uses the decree of an egomaniacal emperor from far away Rome to get them to Bethlehem. The study of history is a study of the sovereign power and plan of God carried out through His providential means. So, by looking to the historical context of Jesus' birth we see the unalterable strength of God's providence. Luke simply says in verse 1 – "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered." In those days points to a time between 8 BC and 4 BC when both Caesar Augustus and Herod the Great were ruling and when this decree was given and enforced in Israel. These two leaders were both pagan power mongers who amassed unto themselves vast political strength. But they went about it in different ways. Herod the great was cruel and harsh, as seen in his command to have all of the young boys of Bethlehem killed after the wise men told him that the new King of the Jews had been born there. But Caesar Augustus was more benevolent and generous, and at times, even more moral, in his rule. He was the grand-nephew of Julius Caesar, and was hand-picked by Julius to take over the Roman Empire upon his death. The Roman government had shifted from a representative republic to more of a dictatorship under the

rule of Julius Caesar, and this was further solidified during the rule of Caesar Augustus. The term Caesar means ultimate ruler with absolute authority. The modern day equivalent would be Kaiser or Czar. Julius had amassed enough power to himself within the Roman Empire that he adopted the title “Caesar” as part of his name. After Julius Caesar’s suspicious death there was a power struggle, which ended in Octavian overpowering Antony and centralizing the power to himself. He had been given the title “Caesar” by his great uncle, Julius Caesar, and then the Roman Senate bequeathed upon him the name Augustus, which means, “majestic one” or “highly honored one.” So, by his name we learn how he viewed himself and how others in the Empire viewed him. He was to be highly honored as the supreme ruler!

- d. And he was a superb ruler. Under his rule all the civil wars within the empire came to a halt and his rule was extended to the boundaries of the civilized world. His rule was marked by military and political skill that united an empire under his authority. And as part of the solidifying of the Empire, he ordered a recurring census which was to happen every 14 years in which everyone needed to be registered, and the main purpose of this was for the poll tax. In other words – he wanted to know who lived in his empire, so that he could be sure to get the taxes needed to run his vast political and military machine.
- e. So, capture the scene here. The supreme political power of the day, whose reign basically covers the whole civilized world has sent out an empire wide decree that all people must submit to his supremacy by registering in the census. This census was then going to be used to further his power by enabling him to enact more taxes as he increasingly built his kingdom! This emperor is flexing his strength. But behind it all, there is a supremely sovereign God who is working through the edicts of puny little human emperors to accomplish his eternal plan of redemption, to its finest detail. God here uses the authoritative decree of an arrogant king to bring about the fulfillment of the minutest point of Messianic prophecy – that the Savior would be born in Bethlehem.
- f. But why would God work in this way – through a worldwide leader’s universal edict? Why not just send Gabriel back to Joseph and tell him to get his betrothed to Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus?
  - i. Well, for one – doing it this way guaranteed that Joseph and Mary wouldn’t get too settled in Bethlehem. If they had been given instructions by Gabriel to go to Bethlehem for the birth, then they would have probably been prone to plan on just moving there for good. I mean – a fresh start after a scandalous pregnancy like this one might be a good move. And if Jesus was to be the Son of David from the city of David, then he might as well grow up there too. But God had other plans for Jesus. Plans which included his growth and development in a place far from Jerusalem, in the obscurity of Nazareth. So, instead of giving Joseph and

Mary time to think about and plan for this trip, God sprung it upon them through edict of the Emperor. And, other than an appearance of an angel, this legal necessity would be the only thing that would compel Joseph to take this 90 mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem with a wife who was about to give birth.

1. You might be wondering why they had to make the journey just then. Why couldn't they wait until after the baby was born to make the journey to Bethlehem? Why couldn't they have gone sooner and avoided the arduous travel with a very pregnant woman? Well, the text doesn't tell us, but we can guess based on historical evidence. The empire wide edict for registration was likely given by Caesar Augustus in 8 BC. We also know from other historical evidence and from the timeline of the Gospels that the earliest Jesus could have been born is sometime in 6 BC, but more likely it was late in 5 BC or early in 4 BC. Herod died in 4 BC, so it couldn't have been any later than that. Speaking of Herod, he had jurisdiction over the region of Israel, and he and Rome didn't always see eye to eye. Plus Rome knew all too well how much of a powder keg this part of the world could be, so the Emperor was more patient with Herod's antics than he might have been with other leaders. So, when you put all of this together, I'm guessing that the edict for all to be registered went out about 8 BC, but Herod delayed its being carried out in Israel. Maybe he used it as leverage to get something he wanted from Rome . . . who knows. But finally, the edict goes out, and the deadline is fast approaching. Rome has lost patience and Herod demands that all of his people get registered by an impending date. And so now, Herod's 2-3 year delay becomes everyone else's instant emergency. Joseph and Mary must get to Bethlehem now to be registered. And yet, behind it all is a completely sovereign Lord who is providentially working through pompous world leaders to work out the smallest details of his plan of redemption.
- ii. Remember, that we are answering the question why God didn't just send Gabriel to Joseph and Mary and tell them to go to Bethlehem. Another reason is seen in the contrast between the Emperor of Rome and the King of Creation. By God providentially working through Caesar Augustus he is showing for the rest of eternity that his power is greater than any human king. The greatest of human powers is but a pawn in the hand of the Almighty One. While the human king demands praise from men by making himself a supreme ruler and even referring to himself as deity, the true King earns praise from mankind for all of eternity by coming in the

lowliest form of humanity to redeem mankind from their sins. While the human king declares his authority through universal edict, the true King quietly exercises his absolute authority over every last detail! The true glory of the King of Kings is especially seen when contrasted with the tawdry tinsel kind of glory of a human king. And so, for this reason, God used this supreme human ruler as a mere servant in the completion of His glorious plan.

- iii. Only God could have come up with this, and only God could have made it all happen. Only His strong providence could have orchestrated all of these independently moving parts to guarantee the birth of Jesus in the city of David at just the right time. And this lets us know that Luke's account is true. Never in man's wildest dreams would we come up with this kind of birth for our Savior. No Jewish sect would have ever dreamt up this kind of entrance into the world for their Messiah. We don't put our heroes and saviors in mundane and normal and obscure realities. Rather, we create glory and honor for them by making them greater than they actually are. We give them names which elevate their character and overstate their accomplishments. But not so with Jesus! He doesn't need us to add anything to Him. He is so great that he can come in the humblest of realities, live out the most common of lives as a carpenter in Nazareth, and ultimately prove himself to be the great I Am! Only Jesus!

## II. The Strange Providence of God

- a. This strong providence which brought about the birth of Jesus, is also a very strange providence, at least from our limited human perspective. Wasn't it enough for Mary and Joseph to have to deal with a scandalous conception and birth? Now they are being forced by edict from Rome to travel 90 miles in the final days of pregnancy, during the winter months, which most likely means rain and cold, to a town where they know no one and have no accommodations lined up. And then they get to this strange town and it is overrun with Roman officials and Jews from all around, coming to be registered so that they can be further taxed by an oppressive foreign power. And because of the crowded conditions they are unable to find a place to stay at in the public inn, so they find themselves seeking shelter in some form of animal stall. It is all so strange!
  - i. Just a word of explanation on where they ended up staying in Bethlehem. There are many different ideas of what this place could have been. Some have suggested that it was the main gathering room in a house, where they would bring in their personal animals for the night. So, not the normal guest room, but kind of the common area of the house. Others have said it is the ground floor section of a public two story building that served as the inn for travelers. The top floor would be where the travelers would sleep, and in the middle there would be a large open courtyard.

Below the sleeping quarters would be a place for the travelers to keep their animals and their belongings. So, some have suggested that Mary and Joseph couldn't find room in the upper level, but there was room on the ground floor of this large open courtyard style building which served as an inn. But the best historical evidence points to the young couple finding shelter in a cave which served as a stall for animals. This is probably the most likely of places, but the reality is – we don't know because God doesn't want us to know. The specifics of the type of place are not important. In God's strange providence he has this young faith-filled couple taking up residence in some kind of animal shelter because there is nothing better for them.

- b. And this is followed by Mary giving birth in these conditions because the time of her delivery had come. Again, the text is not specific here. Did she give birth to Jesus the very night they arrived in Bethlehem, or a few days later? We don't know. We do know that it was at night, but it might have been right away when they arrived, or a few days later. But either way, she gives birth to Jesus in this animal shelter where they had taken up residence for a time. There is no mistake from God here. This is exactly the script that God wrote before the foundation of the world. This is how His Son would enter into this world. He would leave the heights of Heaven and the eternal riches and full glory of dwelling with the Father, and He would enter into His creation like this.
- c. When a couple prepares for the birth of their firstborn nowadays we have baby showers to prepare for every possible physical need the baby might have for the first 6 months. And we have gender reveal parties so that people know what color of clothes to buy, and we paint a bedroom and we buy a new crib and we color coordinate the sheets and the wallpaper and the stuffed animals. And when the birth actually occurs we demand the finest and most sterile of conditions and we welcome family and friends to rejoice with us when it is all over. But here in Luke 2 is the most important baby ever born. Here is God in the flesh. And he is born into a pitifully poor family, who at the moment find themselves many days journey away from those they know and love, as they take up shelter in the humblest of conditions! What a strange way for God to fulfill His promise of sending a Redeemer – His very own Son.
- d. From the very get go of this human life, Jesus was to know the lowest and most common realities of life in this world. He was not going to be pampered or sheltered or carried on flowery beds of ease. He came from the infinite riches of Heaven – but he doesn't just come to the finite riches of earth – but rather, he comes to the abject poverty of earth – the lowest of the low. Even the slave babies were not born in a cave and laid in an animal feeding trough. Jesus goes from one end of the spectrum to the complete opposite end. From Heavenly riches he clothes himself in earthly poverty. From Heavenly glory and fame he is robed in

earthly obscurity. From Heavenly power and authority He is birthed into earthly helplessness and weakness. As Augustine has said:

Man's maker was made man,  
That He, Ruler of the stars, might nurse at His mother's breast;  
That the Bread might hunger,  
The Fountain thirst,  
The Light sleep,  
The Way be tired on its journey;  
That the Truth might be accused of false witness,  
The Teacher be beaten with whips,  
The Foundation be suspended on wood;  
The Strength might grow weak;  
That the Healer might be wounded;  
That Life might die.<sup>2</sup>

- e. Jesus didn't come to Earth in any kind of partiality. He didn't kind of become man, or kind of experience our hardship or our weakness. He didn't come to dip his toe in the pool to see how cold the water was. No, when Jesus spanned that unimaginable gap between God and man, he jumped into the deep end. His incarnation, or his en-fleshing, was thorough, complete, and absolute.
- f. This strange providence of God was working a great work of God. What appears at first glance to be chaotic at best and ludicrous at worst, is actually one of the finest sections of the tapestry God is making of human history. Because Jesus came in abject weakness in complete obscurity in unimaginable conditions, we know that He came to be our perfect High Priest. From his very first breath He came to know by experience our every weakness and our every temptation. And no man would know the compound weakness and temptation like Jesus would, and yet he remained, without sin. This precious and oh so normal babe who lays in this feeding trough in verse 7 has begun his journey down the long corridor of obedience which will take him from the humility of birth in a cave to death on a cross! This is what God is doing in Luke 2 through this strange providence. He is working His greatest work.
- g. Maybe you are facing some of God's bitter or strange providences in your life today. Things that just don't make sense to our human minds. Things that drive us constantly to the question – why God? Why would you do that, or why would you allow that? I don't know how much Joseph and Mary knew about God's plan to have the Messiah born in Bethlehem, and the text doesn't tell us how much they complained or didn't complain about all of these very strange and bitter providences of the Lord. But at the end of the day, through all of the hard and inconceivable strokes of providence, they could look back and see that God was

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted in Mark Jones, *Knowing Christ*, pg. 33-34.

working a great work – and for this He deserved all the more glory. Can you trust this God with whatever it is that He has allowed into your life? These bitter providences certainly aren't accomplishing as great a work as the birth of the Messiah, but know from this text that God doesn't waste any brushstrokes. He is a Master Artist whose every stroke will combine with the whole to paint a masterpiece which will bring Him eternal glory and joy. So, when his brush has black on it for your life, know that this must be the background for one of the most magnificent sections of His work. Some of his strangest providences are at the core of His greatest works!

### III. The Sure Provision of God

- a. This strong and strange providence of God brought about the sure provision of God. God had told Mary and Joseph that she would conceive by the power of the Most High overshadowing her, and she would give birth to a son, and he would be the savior of His people. And now they wrap in swaddling cloths the very fulfillment of that promise. These swaddling cloths, by the way, were the standard attire for a newborn of that day. It was a larger rectangular cloth on which the baby was laid diagonally and then wrapped up, much like mothers still do today. And then they were strips of cloth that would be bound around the baby to keep everything in place, to keep the child secure, and to keep him warm.
- b. We are given just the bare facts about the birth and about the accommodations and about the first outfit and about the exact location, because this is not what is vital. The work of humiliation which here took place is what is vital. The fulfillment of the promise of God through the incarnation of the Son of God – that is what is vital here. God the Father was providing the fullness of time redeemer, and this provision was birthed in the context of his strong and strange providence. This humble entrance into our commonality is but the gate through which Jesus passes into further weakness. His life does not begin in humility and then end in human regality. He is not born in human obscurity to then die in human fame! No, his life is one step after another down the pathway of humble obedience which leads constantly into greater depths of weakness. There will be flashes of fame from great crowds, but this will quickly fade. His descent will reach its bottom rung as He hangs upon a cross and cries out – My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? He who has humbled himself here in Luke 2 will further humble himself to the point of death, even the cross-kind of death.
- c. This addition of humanity to Jesus' deity will be the greatest act of self-emptying ever seen. And all of this is in keeping with God's perfect plan to redeem those who will believe upon His name!
- d. And so, that is the issue before you this morning. This fullness of time redeemer could find no place in the world that would welcome him. He was born without their notice, and really without their care. The rulers of Bethlehem, the rulers of Israel, even the great rulers of Rome couldn't have cared less that there was a



baby born in a stable in Bethlehem on this night. The shopkeepers didn't take notice. The manager of the inn couldn't have been too bothered by it. The normal, average person was more attuned to Herod and Caesar Augustus than they were to this King of Kings who was born to a young virgin named Mary. And this is the way it has been ever since with humanity. Most have had little time for Him, and certainly no room for Him to be born in their lives by faith. Sure, he's important and all, and He did some great things and taught some great lessons, but we have more important things to do. I wonder, do you have any room for Jesus? God's promise to Joseph and Mary was kept by God, in part because Joseph and Mary believed God and their whole lives were reoriented around what God had said. This is faith. And God blesses this kind of faith with the sure provision of salvation through His Son. Repent of your unbelief, of your distraction, of your sinful excuses. Jesus says to you – come to me you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Stop the rat-race of trying to save yourself – and look to Jesus and live. And say to Him, come to my heart Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for you!

**Conclusion:** Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved! If you know this salvation, then the issue before you this morning is to follow His lead. He has called you down this path of humiliation too. He has called you to self-empty, to abandon your plans and your will and your reputation and your hopes for human glory and accomplishment. He has called you to walk after Him as a slave in the obedience of faith. He who was rich became poor so that we who were poor could be made rich in Him. And we are to have His mindset, his way of thinking. Does your discipleship look like this? If you truly know this babe in a manger who eventually hung on a cross, and if you truly worship Him in the humility of faith, then you should be growing ever more in your own humiliation. You should find yourself increasingly willing to give more and more of yourself in absolute submission to this King of Glory. You should willingly give up any and all rights you might think you have to self-protection and self-promotion, and you should increase today in a heart that is willing to be clothed in the obscurity and humility and weakness which is evidenced by Jesus laying in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. The strong and strange providence of God is worthy of your trust. Follow your Lord! Let's pray!