

Luke

The Decree

Luke 2:1-7

With Study Questions

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And it came to pass in those days *that* a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. ³So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. ⁴Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. ⁶So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. ⁷And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn (Luke 2:1-7).

Introduction

We are deep within a season where, at some level, there is worldwide acknowledgment of the nativity, the incarnation, that is the birth of Jesus. Though one is hard-pressed to find one Christmas production of any kind that actually addresses the virgin birth and its implications. This time of year is often used to highlight other sentimentalities. Things like the beauty of family, the value of integrity, the power of a positive attitude, the hominess of a small town, or other similar things.

The birth of Christ becomes a sort of springboard for a variety of heartfelt interactions. Jesus becomes a sort of ladder, getting everyone on the roof deck of a sort of mundane time of cheer. And once on this roof, we kick the ladder to the ground as that which is no longer necessary.

Whether aggressively intentional or semi-psychological, it is common to relegate this great birth (this time of Immanuel-God with us, God entering His own history) to mythology, lacking historical testimony. It is a fine thought, as the assertion goes, and I can be moved by it in various ways. But it didn't really happen. Like many myths, it is an artistic, creative

way to either explain things or motivate cheer and goodness. But that's the extent of it. It is not real history.

But Luke, the physician, does not allow for such a way to read his gospel. He writes of “**eyewitnesses**” and of “**an orderly account.**” He wants his reader(s) to “**know the certainty of those things in which [they] were instructed**” (Luke 1:2-4).

What Luke does here, and will do elsewhere, is place his account of things in the context of undeniable history. Caesar Augustus, Quirinius, Tiberius Caesar and others cannot be consigned to the likes of Bilbo Baggins or even Aslan. These are historical people and events that actually took place. There was a time when Augustus decreed that there should be a registration, a census.

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Worldwide Census

Though not germane to the current passage, it should be noted here that the “**world**” in its various uses, passages, and translations, does not always mean every last person on earth. I mention this that it might be helpful elsewhere in our Bible study (e.g., Revelation 3:10). The “**world**” is the current passage in Rome.

More to the point, Caesar Augustus decreed a census be taken. The passage does not go into great detail as to why. Augustus (Gaius Octavius), who was Julius Caesar's grandnephew, was a sort of adopted son and followed Julius as the monarch of Rome. And though he may not have been as evil as other Caesars (Nero or Caligula) it is no stretch to suggest that this census was not likely designed for the best interest of the people.

Although I wouldn't in principle be against census taking, it can be thought of as a historic form of data mining which can be used against the very people in the census. I recall a number of years ago I was given the long form census and it asked more questions than I was comfortable answering. As I delayed filling it out, I received numerous visits (one man

came to my back door) where I was aggressively confronted, even threatened with a type of public exposure.

In this aggressive attempt to get me to fill out the census, the man continually told me that it is completely safe and confidential. I reached out to one of our former elders who savvy on these sorts of things. He informed me that it was the Census Bureau that provided the statistical information necessary for the successful, yet very questionable, internment of 110,000 men, women, and children of Japanese ancestry from 1942 to 1945.

I made a personal visit to the census office to speak to the manager about the way I had been approached and added this new information to the discussion. Things mellowed. Maybe I made a bigger deal out of it than I should have. Hard to say. But the census in our current text was the mandate of a tyrant.

Calvin points out that in this census, people gave their names and afterward paid an annual tax that would have previously been a tithe to God. Augustus was, in effect, “reducing the Jews to entire subjection, and forbidding them to be thenceforth reckoned as the people of God.”¹

Powerful Irony

Yet herein lies the powerful irony. Only a student of history can give the order of the Caesars or recall Augustus’ relationship to Julius or the reason for a census, etc. It was the big news of the day. It uprooted everyone’s life. And yet here we are, thousands of years later, celebrating the unintended consequences of a tyrant. Everybody knowing that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

Caesar had a decree, but God had His own decree. A decree from eternity past and revealed numerous times in His word. The **“fulness of time had come” (Galatians 4:4)**. Now was the time for the Messiah to be born according to Daniel’s prophecy (written hundreds of years prior). In the **“days of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed” (Daniel 2:44)**.

¹ Calvin, J., & Pringle, W. (2010). [*Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*](#) (Vol. 1, p. 109). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

Let it not escape us that God employed a wicked tyranny in order to fulfill that which was necessary for the salvation of His people. Hendriksen observes,

A decree was issued by Caesar Augustus. When the emperor sent out this order, little did he realize that God was using this decree for the realization of his own purpose with respect to the church. What a comforting passage is Rom. 8:28! Cf. Eph. 1:11.²

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will (Ephesians 1:11).

Matthew Henry keenly remarks,

That which Augustus designed was either to gratify his *pride* in knowing the numbers of his people, and proclaiming it to the world, or he did it in *policy*, to strengthen his interest, and make his government appear the more formidable; but Providence had another reach in it.³

What was providentially true of Mary and Joseph is no less true when it comes to our own lives. Whatever your current issue or trial, God's providence has another reach in it. And the reach is very specific.

Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child (Luke 2:4, 5).

² Hendriksen, W., & Kistemaker, S. J. (1953–2001). [*Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke*](#) (Vol. 11, p. 146). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

³ Henry, M. (1994). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume* (p. 1827). Peabody: Hendrickson.

To Bethlehem

The Savior couldn't be born just anywhere. They had to get to Bethlehem. Bethlehem signifies *the house of bread*; a proper place for him to be born in who is the Bread of life, the Bread that *came down from heaven*.⁴ In Micah (written hundreds of years earlier) we read,

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 (Micah 5:2).

The scribes knew where the Messiah was to be born when they advised the evil King Herod (Matthew 2:5, 6). Many of the common people seemed to be aware as well (John 7:42). Bethlehem was far away (about 80 miles depending on the route taken) and Caesar, who was no friend of redemption, unwittingly made sure this trip would be made. There is an invisible hand that governs the affairs of humanity.

We learned in *The Magnificat* that Mary, though young, had a solid grasp of the things of God. This would be a very difficult journey in her condition. But when one is confident of a divine purpose, as we all should be, we have greater alacrity when it comes to strength, peace and contentment.

Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹² I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me (Philippians 4:11-13).

This is in no way to be understood as a license for lethargy or negligence in our affairs, whether they be in the church, the family or the state, but in an ultimate sense, we should take great comfort that...

⁴ Henry, M. (1994). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume* (p. 1827). Peabody: Hendrickson.

The king's heart *is* in the hand of the Lord, *Like* the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes (Proverbs 21:1).

So off they went to Bethlehem because their lineage was of David and that was his town, the place of his birth.

So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered ⁷ And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn (Luke 2:6, 7).

Emptying of Self

Theologians like to categorize things. One such categorization has to do with the humiliation (despised by men) versus the exaltation (when every knee shall bow) of Christ. Sometimes we speak of His active obedience (righteous things He did) and passive obedience (things done to Him). To put it in more biblical terms, we might ask at what point did Jesus **“empty Himself” (Philippians 2:7)?**

To be sure, the acme of the humiliations, passive obedience and emptying of self was on the cross where He became sin (2 Corinthians 5:21), where He became a curse (Galatians 3:13). But what we must understand as we look at a passage such as this is that His emptying of self began much earlier than the cross.

...but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men (Philippians 2:7).

We are made aware of this in a passage where we are told to the same **“mind among yourselves, which is your in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5)**. The difficulty surrounding the birth of Christ (of the trip, the birth itself, the lack of lodging, etc.) was not merely to create a quaint Christmas story. It has a twofold purpose.

First, and primarily, that we may know the blessed humility of Christ. That we might appreciate what was necessary for that glorious, wonderful, eternal victory, heavenly riches and peace.

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Even at His birth He was refused lodging that we might never be refused lodging in heaven, in the presence of God. In Christ's work of redemption, He would begin with nothing.

Second, we are also to look to Him as having a mind (by "mind" we mean entire character) that we are to follow. I am of the conviction that Christians should have a wonderful and powerful impact upon the world in which we live. But that will never happen if we abandon the mind of Christ. In his efforts to improve our own virtue, Paul builds to the incarnation with these words,

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ²complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men (Philippians 2:1-7).

The Bible has some pretty remarkable things about where God takes His children, to sit with Him on thrones and such. But let us be careful to avoid being like the sons of thunder who seemed to have an unhealthy posture when it came to these things. In order to accomplish the great task of redemption, Jesus (in a certain sense, as the hymn by Elliott indicates) left His throne. It is this humility we are to imitate.

It's been said that He who made swaddling bands for the sea (Job 38:9) was himself wrapped in swaddling bands. At times I feel like many of us are clutching our thrones. And this produces little in our own hearts and

does nothing but quell the advancement of the rich kingdom which will later be established by this Baby's own blood.

Questions for Study

1. Respond to the assertion that the Scriptures are mythology (pages 2, 3)?
2. Can you list some reasons why a census might be taken? Why do you suppose Augustus had a census taken (pages 3, 4)?
3. Compare and contrast the decree of Augustus with the decree of God. How do you find this ministerial (pages 4, 5)?
4. Are there things that would have been a source of encouragement to Joseph and Mary as they headed to Bethlehem? How can these types of things be an encouragement to you (pages 5, 6)?
5. What does it mean to empty oneself? How did Jesus do this? How can you (pages 7, 8)?

