

Jesus' Birth in Bethlehem, Part 1

Luke 2:1-7

42-22

I would invite you to turn with us to the Word of God, Luke, the gospel of Luke and chapter 2. We've finally arrived at this familiar and wonderful chapter that describes the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. Surely this chapter is the most widely-known chapter in the Bible because it tells the story of Christmas. This chapter, this story, of course, has been the source of songs and carols and cards and celebrations and gifts and books and dramas and pageants since it occurred, very familiar story. And yet I think we're going to be seeing it in some profound and rich and perhaps unfamiliar ways as we come to grips with its great truth.

Two thousand years ago the Creator of the universe, the eternal God, entered human society as a baby. The Creator of the universe put on humanity. The Lord of heaven came to live on earth. On a night like every other night in Israel, with no fanfare, no celebration by anybody, a child was born. It was a night like any other night but it wasn't a child like any other child. This child was the Lord Jesus Christ, God and man fused together in indivisible oneness. This birth was so monumental that it became the high point of history, the peak, the apex. All history before this birth is B.C., Before Christ. All history since is A.D., Anno Domini, Latin for "the year of our Lord."

The birth of God in human form then is the most important moment in all of history. Let me read to you the first seven verses of chapter 2, which in plain, simple, and clear language describe this great event.

"Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all were proceeding to register for the census, everyone to his own city, and Joseph also went up from Galilee from or out of the city of Nazareth to Judea, the city of David, which is called Bethlehem because he was of the house and family of David in order to register, along with Mary who was engaged to him and was with child. And it came about that while they were there the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and she wrapped Him in cloths and laid Him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn."

Very familiar words. Behind these simple, straightforward, unembellished words of narrative offered with delicacy and reserve, unmistakable meaning and significance there is the profoundest event in the history of the world. But as I said, the story of Jesus is generally familiar to anybody who knows anything about Christianity and many people who know very little about Christianity. Sadly the worldwide celebration of the birth of Christ, which is called Christmas, has become so cluttered and so confused with paganism and personal indulgences as to obscure the simple, clear reality of the birth of God in human form. In fact, it's pretty refreshing to be able to preach a Christmas message in June because you, at this particular point, are not cluttered with the other kind of Christmas clutter. The world celebrates the birth of Jesus in December for all the wrong reasons, for the expression of

self-indulgence, materialism, partying, social events of all kinds. But largely misses the point, as we know. The real significance of the birth of God in human form is overlooked, treated trivially, overshadowed by everything else that's going on.

And I suppose it's a fair question to say: How can you take such a simple story as we've just read in seven verses and come up with such a complicated celebration? How do you get from the account of Luke and the account of Matthew, how do you get from those accounts to what we have today?

Well, I'll give you a little bit of history. You might find it interesting. About the middle of the fourth century right at the time of the establishing of the great world empire of Rome under Constantine, the bishop of Jerusalem wrote to the bishop of Rome and he asked him to determine the actual date of Christ's birth. Well, no one knows the actual date of Christ's birth. The fact of the matter is we don't even know for sure the actual year of His birth. But the bishop of Rome sent word back to the Bishop of Jerusalem that it occurred on December 25. By the end of the fourth century that had been accepted by the church, was really put into church fiat, or church law, it became the regularly accepted day to celebrate the birth of Christ.

Now most scholars would tell you today, if not all of them, that the bishop didn't know the day of Christ's birth because we don't know the date of Christ's birth. December 25 is purely arbitrary. But he didn't do it for purely arbitrary reasons. He was a...a fairly shrewd guy and he had a reason for putting the celebration of the birth of Christ on December 25. And here was his reason. For centuries before Christ was born, the month of December had been an occasion long established and still being celebrated at that time as a pagan festival of significance. In fact, most boisterous pagan revelries were celebrated in December. It marked the winter and great celebration was held in anticipation of the coming spring. Everything around was dark and dreary and trees were without leaves and things didn't grow. And in the midst of winter they put on these great celebrations for the hope of the return of the sun, the return of the strength of the sun to bring back the spring and make things grow and warm up the cold. Feasting was part of it. Parties were part of it. Adorning your house with evergreens, anticipating those deciduous trees and plants that would soon bloom, they even adorned their houses with mistletoe. They exchanged gifts. There was a general merry making held at that time of the year held by the pagans. This was all a part of their traditional pagan celebration.

Now the bishop's idea was, now this is such an orgy, this is sort of like carnival in our modern world, this is the worst of a pagan decadence celebrated, the bishop's idea was, let's take the birth of Christ and put it on the same day around the same time to coincide with all the ancient festivals and all the wild winter revelries, in that way we will bring a sanctifying influence into this celebration and draw the attention of the people away from those things that they're engaged in to more spiritual pursuits and start making them think about the fact that God came into the world in a human form.

That was a nice thought. Let's sanctify these celebrations by imposing on the same day the celebration of the birth of Christ. Well, needless to say the heathen festivities never missed a beat. They kept on going at the same pace they were always going at and the church, which frowned on them and wanted to change them finally accepted them and let them be assimilated into the celebration of Christmas so that today Christmas is a conglomeration of all that is distinctively Christian and biblical and all that is distinctively pagan.

To the Romans, for example, this winter December festival, this feasting and orgy, was called

Saturnalia, named after Saturn, who was the god of agriculture. And it was he who presided over the planting of crops. And during the time of celebration of Saturnalia, gift giving was the most popular custom. That's where we get that from. The most common gifts of the Saturnalia were small idols, small deities, small gods, replicas of the Roman gods made out of clay, sometimes marble and sometimes silver. Candles were used extensively in their idolatrous celebration and evergreen branches were given to friends to hang on their houses and sometimes trinkets were placed hanging on those evergreen branches, forerunners to what we know today as Christmas decorations and trees.

In the really barbaric north lands among the Norsemen, a similar winter festival was held and it was called Yule, or Yuletide as we refer to it. It was in honor of the gods Odin and Thor. It involved feasting and music, drinking to drunkenness from horns.

In Persia fires were kindled to the god Mithra. And if you know anything about legend you know Mithra was believed to be the god of light. And so at this time of year when the daylight was briefer than another time and winter was on them, they would pray and celebrate the god of light in anticipation of the sun and the spring and summer.

In England it was the Druids who gathered sacred mistletoe and they made live sacrifices to their many gods. Mistletoe, by the way, was venerated by the English, it was venerated by the Druids, it was venerated by a lot of pagans in pre-Christian times. The Druids, for example, gathered mistletoe during their December celebration. They had some priests, they would get a few white-clad priests and they would march to a sacred oak tree with a large entourage where the mistletoe would grow. And then they would have the chief priest climb the tree, he would go with a golden sickle, he would cut the plant which would fall from the tree and be caught in a cloth so as not to be defiled by touching the ground. Then two white oxen were sacrificed and the mistletoe given to the people to be hung in their homes.

Now the mistletoe was supposed to be an emblem of peace and an emblem of good fortune and whenever, the tradition of the Druids was, whenever an enemy passed under the mistletoe you had to embrace the enemy and it was supposedly a little ploy to try to help people reconcile; hence kissing under the mistletoe which is some deviated form of that original embrace.

Adding to that you have the drama of the crib, or the creche, the manger scene which was popularized by St. Francis in the thirteenth century. Three hundred years after that Martin Luther, of all people, brought a tree into his house at this season of Christmas and decorated it with candles. He said he put the candles on it to simulate the starry sky glittering over the stable where Christ was born. But long before pagans had used bows of evergreens decorated with trinkets to celebrate their own pagan holidays.

In Holland there was a favorite saint by the name of St. Nicholas. This white-bearded bishop of Asia Minor was believed to have appeared around December 6 riding a white horse, leaving gifts for good children and leaving switches for the parents of bad children. And he would leave one or the other on the porch. The Dutch called St. Nicholas Sinterclaus, from which we get the derivative Santa Claus.

Caroling started in the fourteenth century along with jesters and musicians and mummers and there's still a mummers parade, I think it's in Philadelphia. People wearing all kinds of masks and crazy garb,

eight-hour feasts; that all comes from fourteenth century partying.

Now stockings, where did they come from? Well, it was believed in Holland that St. Nicholas, when he was dropping his switches and his good stuff on the porch on some occasions threw coins down a chimney. And they just happened to land in some stockings hanging there to dry. Out of that came the whole idea that Santa Claus comes down the chimney and fills your stocking.

Christmas cards were first printed in London in 1846 at the request of Sir Henry Cole, who was owner of an art shop. And the Christmas cards first printed all showed merry drinking scenes. About that same time, about middle nineteenth century, the celebration of Christmas was accepted by the church in the United States and became a regular part of church life.

Well the old bishop might have had a good motive for what he did, but it didn't help. Putting the birth of Jesus Christ on the same day as all the rest of this only served to clutter the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ with a whole lot of unrelated pagan elements. That's why I say it's kind of refreshing to do this in June, to study the birth of Christ, because at least we're not in the middle of all of that stuff. We can just go through the faithful and true account of Luke and the simple unembellished, uncluttered story of the birth of Jesus.

For the moment...back to the text...for the moment in Luke's history the curtain has fallen on the story of John. The curtain fell on the story of John momentarily in verse 80 at the end of chapter 1. Speaking of John who was just born, just circumcised, the child continued to grow, to become strong in spirit, he grew physically, he grew spiritually, he lived in the deserts or the wilderness, the Judean wilderness in the south of the land of Israel. He lived there until the day of his public appearance to Israel. His public appearance to Israel will be taken up in the third chapter of Luke. We'll meet John the Baptist again as he was known in the third chapter of Luke. But we don't know anything about what happened from the eighth day when he was circumcised and his father Zacharias gave the great song of praise that ends the chapter...we don't know anything about his life from the eighth day of his circumcision until he began his ministry. All the rest is contained in one verse. All we know is he grew physically, he grew spiritually, he lived in the wilderness, that's all we know. But all that time we know God was preparing him to be the forerunner of Messiah, to proclaim Jesus as Lord and Messiah.

So the curtain falls at the end of chapter 1 on John and we don't meet him again until he's an adult. The curtain rises in chapter 2 with the birth of Jesus. We've already gone through the birth of John. We've already heard the annunciation of the angel Gabriel to Mary. She told him that... He told her, I should say, that she was going to have a child, that the child would be born to her as a virgin and that that child would be the Son of the Most High, the Son of David and He would reign on the throne of David forever and ever. His Kingdom would have no end. She asked, chapter 1 verses 31 to 35, "How is that going to be since I'm a virgin?" And the angel Gabriel told her that the Holy Spirit, the Most High God, the Holy Spirit would come upon her, overshadow her and that would be placed in her womb which was actually a miraculous creation of God so that she would become pregnant without a man. She then is a virgin. She is ready to bring forth the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of God as we come to chapter 2. And the curtain rises on the birth of Jesus Christ.

Now Luke does a wonderful thing here, simple, straightforward, unembellished language. That's important, it's uncluttered, it's marvelous and it's clear. But as clear as it is and as simple as the language is, what's going on here is profound and far-reaching. Now everybody in Israel knew some

things about Messiah. Everybody in Israel knew the Messiah would come and be King, that He would come and He would be in the line of David and He would reign on the throne in Jerusalem and He would establish the glorious kingdom for Israel. They knew that He would come with a rod of iron. The psalmist has said it, as I read in Psalm 2 this morning. They knew some things about Messiah. And one thing that was absolutely explicit about Messiah was recorded by the prophet Micah, in the little book of Micah, chapter 5 verse 2, the prophet Micah said, the Messiah would be born in a village called Bethlehem," originally in Genesis 35 called Ephrathah, but came to be known as Bethlehem which means "house of bread." The Jews all knew that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, at least that's what the Old Testament said.

Well Luke, in writing this passage never quotes Micah. He doesn't refer to Micah. But he shows us how God orchestrated the birth of Messiah in Bethlehem in explicit fulfillment of that prophecy in what really was an amazing work of God; because if things had just gone on normally, Jesus never would have been born in Bethlehem. He had to be, by word of the prophet, and the veracity of the Word of the Bible was at stake, but God did some mighty working to make it happen and exactly and precisely on time. Joseph and Mary were only in Bethlehem for a matter of days. It had to be exactly the days when that child was born. Luke makes us understand this without ever quoting Micah because he knows his readers know that passage. He gives us here some profound insight into the fulfillment of Micah 5:2 that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

Now as we come to these seven verses, and I'm only going to give you the first of it, he gives us three settings here. He gives us a world setting. He gives us a national setting with Israel. And he gives us a personal setting. And all three of these are very important in identifying the nature of Messiah, in identifying the fulfillment of prophecy, and identifying His role to the world. He is to be the Savior of the world and it's important to understand the setting in the world when He comes. He is coming as the Messiah to Israel. It's important to understand the prophetic Scriptures that relate it to Israel. And He is coming as the Savior of every individual who puts their trust in Him and it's therefore important to understand something of the personal circumstances of Joseph and Mary. So we're going to see the setting for the birth of Christ.

The whole story of the birth of Christ is in verse 7, the first part, "She gave birth." That's all it says. That's all it says, "She gave birth." Unembellished. But what is coming together at that moment involves the world, the nation and Joseph and Mary personally. It's wonderful to see the Savior who came to save the world and how He in His own birth is literally involving the world. He came as the fulfillment of Jewish Scriptures and it shows here how He fits into the Jewish anticipation because of the Old Testament prophecies. He comes to redeem individuals who for the most part are common and humble, like Joseph and Mary. We see that in the personal setting. So the world setting, the national setting, the personal setting.

Sadly I have to say, and it's common knowledge, the world has largely rejected Him. The nation Israel has largely rejected Him. And among the lowly and the humble and the needy, few have believed in Him and been saved. That continues to be true. Let's go back to the story.

Let's look at the world setting. I find this fascinating. I take off my theologian's hat from chapter 1 and put on my historian's hat and I hope you'll enjoy the lesson this morning.

The world setting is in verses 1, 2 and 3. "Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census

taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria and all were proceeding to register for the census, everyone to his own city." Critical, critical that everyone go to his own city. Critical that Joseph and Mary go to Bethlehem, which was their own city, so that they would be there when the Messiah was born so the prophecy of Micah would come to pass, absolutely critical. Little did Caesar Augustus know that he was being moved by the Spirit of God to do exactly what he did on time, on schedule to effect exactly the result God wanted. There was a few days in which Joseph and Mary had to be in Bethlehem, right at the very time of the birth of the child. God knew exactly when that moment was, exactly when that day was. He knew when they had to be there and He had planned for that to happen under the authority and power of a Caesar who was far removed from the little village of Bethlehem and utterly removed from the purposes of God and utterly ignorant of the Word of God. But nonetheless he was a main player in bringing the prophecy to pass, which shows the mighty, incomprehensible, providential work of Almighty God.

Verse 1 says, "Now it came about in those days." What days? Well, the days just spoken of, the days of chapter 1. Go back to chapter 1 verse 5, "In the days of Herod king of Judea," in those days. Herod, by the way, was still on the throne and he was on the throne when Jesus was born and for a little while afterwards. We know a little about him, don't we? We know about his animosity toward the birth of one who might take his throne and how he slaughtered all the babies in that region hoping that somehow he would kill a rival king who had been born. So we know about Herod. It was in those days, the same days when Gabriel came to Zacharias and Elizabeth, the same days when Gabriel came to Mary, the same days when John was born, the days of Herod. Herod was still alive though he died soon after the birth of Jesus. These were the days not only of Herod ruling in Israel. Herod wasn't even a Jew, by the way. He was an Idumaeen, he was an Edomite, and the Edomites were despised by the Israelites. They had been cursed because of the way they treated Israel and God. But nonetheless they had an Idumaeen king by the name of Herod. He was a vassal king under Rome. He was allowed to have a measure of power in Israel. Caesar Augustus was a wise man. He was a...in fact he was a brilliant and astute man and he gave the nations and the provinces under the authority of Rome in the Roman Empire some freedom to operate their own government to lessen the tension a little bit and that was the reason Herod still had some authority in Israel. Herod was still alive, as I said.

These were the days though of Roman occupation in Israel. These were the days not only of Roman occupation but that dreaded Roman taxation. Those two things really bothered the Jews greatly. They hated Rome and occupation because Romans were Gentiles. They didn't like Gentiles. They felt that Gentiles were outside the covenant. They felt that Gentiles were unclean. A Jew rarely... If he was committed to his Judaistic tradition wouldn't go into the home of a Gentile because he would be defiled by even entering that place. He wouldn't eat on utensils prepared by Gentiles because they would be unclean and defiled. If he had to leave the borders of Israel and travel in a Gentile land, he would come back and he would do what's become a familiar phrase, he would shake the dust off before entering Israel lest he bring Gentile dirt in and pollute his nation. They had no love for the Gentiles. And they had no love particularly for the Romans because they had these many gods and they were...they were a multi-god nation, they were polytheistic, they had all these idols which, of course, were distasteful to the Jews at that time as well, and had been ever since the Babylonian captivity many years before. They brought their idols in on the banners that they waved, on the suits of armor when they had the image of Caesar. They brought their idols in when they put Caesar's image on a coin and they believed Caesar to be a god. So they saw the coinage of Rome as idols. They hated those expressions of idolatry in Gentile disbelief in the true God.

And secondly, they despised Roman taxation. They didn't think the Romans had any right to be in their land, they certainly didn't think they had any right to exact taxes from them. And mostly they hated more severely the Jews who bought franchises to collect taxes for Rome. They were the ultimate outcasts, the ultimate defectors, the ultimate traitors, people like Matthew and Zacchaeus. You meet them in the New Testament. When somebody really wanted to call you an outcast, he would call you a tax collector.

So they hated Roman taxation. They hated Roman occupation. Now the best we can do in dating the birth of Christ is this, "It came about in those days." Sometime in those days during the time of Caesar a decree went out. Sometimes, by the way, Luke is very precise. Chapter 3 verse 1, "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene. Boy! That is really specific stuff. Sometimes he's very, very specific, but sometimes he's very general. For example, chapter 3 verse 23, "when He began his ministry Jesus Himself was about thirty years of age."

Now here he's not very specific. He just says "in those days," in those days, a decree went out. A decree is an imperial edict. The same is used in Acts 17:7. You can use that as a comparative. Now this is common. The emperor — that's what imperial means — the emperor made an edict. He would pass a law, a mandate, a given order. And it would come from Rome from the throne and it would be addressed to all the subjects and it would have certain requirements. This edict went from the emperor right out of Rome, was carried to far off Judea and had critical bearing on the birth of Jesus Christ, critical bearing.

Now let's look at the edict. This edict that came out of Rome went out from the reigning Caesar of the day, Caesar Augustus. Neither of those is his name. Caesar is a title like king, or emperor, or pharaoh. It is not a name. Augustus is not a name. Augustus is an adjective to describe somebody. Augustus means august, revered, highly esteemed, highly regarded, honored. So this decree came out from one of the Caesars who was called Augustus because he was given that name as an indication of how they honored him.

Who is this Caesar Augustus? Well let me tell you a little bit about him. He fascinates me, frankly. This versatile and able ruler of the Roman Empire was born September 23 of 63 B.C. His name when he was born was Gaius Octavius. Later on he became and is often referred to as Octavian. Now Gaius Octavius, born in 63 B.C., Before Christ, had a mother named Atia, A-T-I-A. His mother, Atia, was the daughter of Julia. Julia was the sister of Julius Caesar. Now this made Gaius Octavius the grand-nephew to Julius Caesar. So he was born in high places. For whatever reasons, Julius Caesar took a tremendous affinity to this boy. He adored little Gaius Octavius. He lavished him with gifts and he honored him.

In 43 B.C. Gaius Octavius had reached the age of twenty. Julius Caesar at that point adopted him as his own son and declared him to be the heir to the throne of the Roman Empire, literally established his future at that point. One year later, it was one year later that Julius Caesar was murdered, and when he was murdered at that point Gaius Octavius learned of his choice as Julius Caesar's heir. At that point he changed his name to Gaius Julius Caesar in honor of his adopted father. So he's really got a silver spoon in his mouth, he's headed for the throne. Caesar, you remember, was murdered by his friends, namely the familiar Brutus. One of his sisters married Mark Antony. Mark Antony is a very, very dominant figure in Roman history as you know.

So here he was, the grand-nephew of Julius Caesar, adopted as a son and heir; his sister married to Mark Antony who was a powerful person. At the death of Julius Caesar three people reigned in Rome. It wasn't...It wasn't that immediately Octavian was pushed into that place. There were three. There was Lepidus, there was Octavian, and there was Mark Antony, a triumvirate who ruled Rome. It wasn't long until Lepidus fell out and the rule of Rome was left with Octavian and with Mark Antony. They ruled together for a while until Mark Antony began to do things that bothered Octavian. First thing he did was he left his wife and his wife, as I told you, was the sister of Octavian. He didn't like that. He left his wife because he became infatuated with the legendary and bewitching Cleopatra, queen of Egypt, who really is legendary as to her powers of seduction and ability to bewitch. Well she bewitched Mark Antony successfully.

By the way, when I was in Egypt one time I was taken to a special store and told by the proprietor of the store that his family and others prior to his family had preserved the formula for the perfume that made Cleopatra so alluring. And wide-eyed, I thought, I'm going to buy some of that for Patricia. He told me the formula had been passed down and preserved and was still in place. This was the very formula by which Cleopatra had bewitched Mark Antony. So I thought, this has got to help, I mean, it's not as if she's not already alluring, but this has got to help. So I had my little bottle which I discovered half way across the Atlantic had lost all its fragrance. Remember that? Yeah! Well nonetheless, we've stayed together all these years.

But anyway, Mark Antony was drawn to Cleopatra. Eventually he began to show more concern for Egypt, more concern for the successes of Cleopatra, more concern for her personally and his own welfare than he did for Rome. And so the irritation to Octavian began to escalate. After all, he had divorced his sister and now he was turning his heart away from Rome. The result of all of this was tremendous conflict between Mark Antony and Octavian, which ultimately brought them to a great battle, a battle that the Egyptians never should have gotten involved in because it was a sea battle, or it was a battle on water in which the Egyptian navy tried to fight the great Roman navy and was soundly defeated. It was called the battle of Actium. It was in 31 B.C. and at that battle Octavian literally devastated and destroyed the Egyptian fleet, destroyed the power of Mark Antony and Cleopatra and became sole ruler of the Roman Empire, 31 B.C. is when that occurred. Both Mark Antony and Cleopatra soon after that committed suicide together and Octavian was left to rule.

Officially then his rule ran to 14 A.D. Forty-five years this remarkable man was the absolute monarch of the Roman Empire. Great military skill, great political skill, great social skill, he put an end to all civil wars, literally extended the Roman Empire from the west of Europe deep into the Middle East, as far east as the desert region of Iraq today, vastly dominating the entire inhabited known world at that time, at least known to those people.

He brought in the amazing *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace which was often called the *Pax Augusta* in tribute to this man. He literally, not only conquered the world, as it were, but he brought peace to all that realm by the skill that he had as a leader. This Roman Peace literally made soft borders everywhere. Then he built massive Roman roads and effective transportation systems in all directions for the extent of this great power of Rome in the world. And what it did was it facilitated the easy spread, the rapid spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was perfect timing. Galatians 4 says, "In the fullness of time God sent His Son." One of the elements of the fullness of time was into a world where you had the most rapid, easy access to take the gospel everywhere. And because Rome controlled it all, there were no borders. There were no points to stop. There was just fluidity

and facility and the gospel spread rapidly and fast and it went largely along Roman roads and Roman trade routes by sea and by land. The *Pax Romana* brought an unheard of...in human history, an unheard of period of peace at the hand of this great, great leader.

In 14 A.D. he died. He was succeeded by Caesar Tiberius, a familiar name to anybody who studies the New Testament because Tiberius, taking the throne in 14 was the Caesar through the latter life and ministry of Jesus Christ. He is the Caesar that we read about in the gospels during the ministry of Jesus Christ. He ruled Rome during that time. Tiberius, by the way, is immortalized certainly for any visitor to Israel because there's a beautiful little town on the west of the shore of the...western shore of the Sea of Galilee called Tiberias, named after him. It's a lovely place.

Now in the year 27 B.C., three years after he began his rule, the Roman Senate gave him the title Augustus, which means majestic one, highly honored one, as I said. From then on he became known as the Caesar who was called Augustus, thus Caesar Augustus. Actually, Augustus could mean holy one. It was a term reserved for the gods. It was used to refer to the gods and always referred to the gods before this man but now it was being used to refer to him because he was viewed as if he were a god. Then it began to be used for Julius Caesar, who himself had wanted to be treated as a god. So it was after that 27 B.C. titling of Caesar Augustus that the idea that the Caesar was a god took root.

At the time Luke wrote, which would have been long after this time, at the time Luke wrote by that time many Greek cities had identified September 23, which was the birthday of Caesar Augustus in 63 B.C., they had identified September 23 as such an important holiday that they made it the first day of the new year. So their year actually started on his birthday, this, decades after he had died, in celebration of this great man. He became known and even during his reign was known — listen to this — as the savior.

There is a place called Halicarnassus in the Mediterranean. Halicarnassus was the hometown of Herodotus, a famous Greek writer. At Halicarnassus there is an inscription. It is inscribed to Caesar Augustus and it says, "Caesar Augustus, savior of the world." At the very time a false savior of the world was riding high on the throne of his own glory the true Savior of the world was born in obscurity. The false savior was on the world stage. He dominated it in full honor and privilege. The true Savior was born without honor, without privilege in humble obscurity. The false savior was sitting on the highest pinnacle of the highest throne in the dominant city of Rome. The true Savior was born in the humble non-descript village of Bethlehem. The false savior made it clear who he was. The true Savior couldn't even speak.

But this man, Caesar Augustus, was a remarkable man. He literally created the world that facilitated the spread of the gospel. Not only did he do that in general but in specific he made an edict that caused Joseph and Mary to have to go by a certain date to Bethlehem where they would have their baby and fulfill prophecy.

To sum up the character of this man we could say once...once you look at him in the beginning of his rule, he was ruthless. I suppose he had to be to effect what he did. He mellowed out later. He became a wise administrator, a famous organizer, specially competent in the organization of the military and his own bodyguard, which are referred to in Philippians 1:13. He chose his general wisely. Consequently he won many, many great battles. He had many generals. He had tremendous skill in dealing with his subjects. He gave them autonomy. He gave them freedom. He allowed the

conquered provinces they... Though Rome had conquered them all he allowed them to retain some of their own independent rule and self-rule. He respected their customs, their religion, all of that. He stimulated the arts. He encouraged cleaning up literature and making it more noble. He was a great builder, amazing man, humanly speaking.

Although he did pass a law that made adultery a crime, his own personal life really did undermine the sanctity of marriage. He had a wife by the name of Scribonia who didn't produce a son. That was a bad thing in ancient times. She did give birth to a daughter, Julia, so he had a daughter named Julia. But he divorced Scribonia because she couldn't give him a son, and he married Livia, some lady he'd supposedly fallen in love with. And Livia already had a son by a former marriage. Her son's name was Tiberius. So he forced Tiberius to marry his daughter Julia and therefore Tiberius sort of became a son-in-law and he passed to him the right to become the next caesar. Tiberius, by the way, was married at the time so he had him divorce his wife to marry his daughter. Soap operas are not new, folks, and they've always existed in courts of royalty.

Let's look at his edict. He made an edict and this was the edict. The census was to be taken of all the inhabited earth. All the inhabited earth would simply be another way to say all the known world which would be all the Roman Empire which covered the known world in that area. A census, *apographē*, simply a registration, to write something. This was done for two reasons. It was done to draw people into the military service, to find out who all the military-age young men were. But the Jews had been exempted from that. In wisdom, as I said, Caesar Augustus had given a little in to some of these nations and some of their quirks and religious convictions and the Jews were free from providing military forces for Rome. The census on this occasion was not for that. We know what it was for because Joseph and Mary were involved in it. It was for the registration of a census for the purpose of taxation, taxation. This was the other reason they took a census. They were to go and register their name, their occupation, their property, their family, entered into the Rome IRS agency for the purpose of taxation. This was to happen everywhere in the entire Roman world.

Now I want to give you some little history on this, very important. This census is called "the first census" in verse 2, the first census. Now that's important because Caesar Augustus didn't just call for one census, he called for a series of censuses apparently at fourteen-year intervals. Now you can track these series of censuses every fourteen years, all the way, I think it's to the year 270 A.D. Every fourteen years there was a census. And he was big on this. He was very careful, very thoughtful, and very statistical. When he died he left in his own handwriting rather copious statistics on taxation which were derived from the census that had been taken during his reign. We do read some literature that's existing today from antiquity out of Egypt that indicates that Egypt was committed to census every fourteen years. And so that supports the idea, because Egypt at the defeat of Mark Antony and Cleopatra, came under the power of Rome and apparently went on to carry out these every-fourteen-year census events. That would have been similar to what Syria would have done. Syria was the region in which Judea exists. So when it says Quirinius was the governor of Syria, that would include Judea... was a component of Syria large.

Well Rome then passed this edict on that everybody had to go and register because of the census. The Jews hated this. It was alien to them. It was a pagan thing. It was intruding into their life distastefully. They wanted nothing to do with it. But God was at work. Just like He had been work in...work in the decree of Cyrus that liberated Israel, to send them back to reestablish their nation after the captivity, just as He was at work in the case of Nebuchadnezzar who ended up doing exactly what God wanted him to do for His own purposes. God takes pagan kings, pagan rulers and

uses them as His own servants for His own purposes. Don't you think for one minute that God isn't sovereign in all the palaces of the world. He is. And He was in the palace of Caesar Augustus.

Verse 2 says this was the first census, the first of the cycle of fourteen-year censuses which Caesar Augustus had set in motion. Now we get a further input here. When was the first one? Well it was taken while a man named Quirinius was governor of Syria. Syria again is that large area in which Judea would exist. And over that area this man, Quirinius, had some responsibility. Let me take the word "governor" for a minute. It's a non-technical word. It doesn't mean he was the number one man. It doesn't define for us the nature of his leadership. It's a word like leader. It's a word like ruler, person in authority. It's not specific, it's non-technical. The Romans had technical titles which you can see in a pecking order in a hierarchy. There were legates. There were proconsuls. There were prefects. There were procurators. And those are identifiable connected roles in the hierarchy of Rome. "Governor" is a generic for "leader." So this was the first census taken and it was taken at a time while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Now the reason Luke is telling us is to help us pinpoint the time of the birth of Christ. This is a historical event. This isn't a figment of somebody's imagination. It was in that first census that occurred under the authority of Caesar Augustus and it occurred at the time that there was a ruler in Syria by the name of Quirinius. This helps us get a little closer to when this happened.

And by the way, I want to tell you something. The people who read Luke in Luke's day would know exactly when it was. We don't anymore because so much time has passed, very hard for us to be precise about this. His name was Publius Sulpicius Quirinius. He was known to have governed Syria, listen carefully, A.D. 6 to 9; A.D. 6 to 9. A well-known census was taken in Palestine in A.D. 6. Josephus, the great Jewish historian, records that it sparked a violent Jewish revolt which is mentioned by Luke who quotes Gamaliel and it's mentioned by Luke in Acts 5:37. So Luke even refers to this census which provoked a revolt which occurred in A.D. 6. Quirinius was responsible for administering that census. He also paid a major role in quelling the subsequent rebellion. However, listen very carefully, that census can't be the census Luke has in mind here because it occurred about a decade after the death of Herod. I have a note on that in Matthew 2:1. It's much too late to fit here.

So we know there was a census in A.D. 6. We know that Quirinius at that point was a leader in Syria. But here you have a little indication that that is not that one, verse 2, "this is the first census." So if that one occurred in 6 A.D. and they were normally at fourteen-year intervals, all we need to do to find the first one is back up how many years? Fourteen years. That would take us to 8 B.C.; 8 B.C. Now in my note I say in the light of Luke's meticulous care as a historian, it would be unreasonable to charge him with an obvious anachronism or an error. Indeed archeology has vindicated Luke. A fragment of stone discovered at Tivoli, which is near Rome, in A.D. 1764, a fragment of stone discovered, it contains an inscription in honor of a Roman official who it states was twice governor of Syria and Phoenicia during the reign of Augustus. Now we're starting to make sense. Somebody was governor twice. That could be just what we need. Once in A.D. 6 to 9 and another time previously back in the B.C. time when that first census took place as what Luke says. The name of the official is not given on that fragment, but among his accomplishments are listed details that as far as is known can fit no one other than Quirinius, and we do have some historical records about him.

Isn't that wonderful? We had to wait until 1764 to have the Bible verified. The Bible is true. Whenever there is something found like that, it always verifies it. Thus he must have served as governor of

Syria twice. He may have been a military ruler or leader at the same time that history records Varus was the civil governor there. With regard to the dating of the census taking it a step further, some ancient records found in Egypt mention a worldwide census ordered in 8 B.C. That would be exactly right. Now we've got Egyptian material saying there was one in 8. That fits the fourteen-year pattern exactly.

That has some problems though because when you put all the chronology of the birth of Christ together, you can't have it any earlier than 6 B.C. and probably even 4 B.C. is better. How do you solve that problem? Pretty simple really. Augustus probably made the decree in 8 B.C. but Judea didn't comply with it until two to four years later and that's what I put in the note. It was actually carried out in Palestine two to four years later, most likely because of political difficulties between Rome and Herod and conflicts.

Now let me tell you something else. Why else would Joseph and Mary go down to Bethlehem in the dead of winter, sometime in the late part of the year anyway, when it could be cold, when it could be rainy, when it could be snowy, why would she, nine months pregnant, be bumping on a mule or walking eighty-five to ninety miles from the north down...really upward to Bethlehem because it's ascent in terms of terrain? Why would she do that at the very end of her pregnancy unless there had been a deadline dropped a la April 15? It must have gotten to the place where perhaps non-compliance on the part of Israel had reached its limit and Caesar had said, that's it, this is the deadline and you've got to be there by then. Otherwise it would seem reasonable that they would have waited until the child was born at some later time. Joseph could have gone on his own and taken care of the matter. It may be an indication that there was some extremity that had been perpetuated by the reluctance of Israel to comply. And after all, Judea was a faraway land from Rome and certainly loved to exercise its independence. Therefore the precise year of Christ's birth can't be known with certainty. We don't know. The people who read Luke originally probably had a good idea, may have known exactly. But it was probably no earlier than 6 B.C. and certainly no later than 4 B.C. by our dating. As I said, Luke's readers would have known.

So this is the best we can do at setting the time by our calendar, somewhere by what we call...they didn't call it dating that we do because that came later when we dated B.C. and A.D. But somewhere in what we call 4 to...6 to 4 B.C. this birth of Christ took place. It says in verse 3, and here's the point, "And all were proceeding to register for the census, everyone to his own city." That sets the scene. That sets the scene. There's no other reason why they're going to travel at a time like this.

Now the Romans would normally register people in their own place of residence. They didn't make them go back to some initial homeland. That must have been a Jewish custom or something that Herod required. And the Jews we know were big on ancestry. You remember when they came into the land of Canaan, the whole land of Canaan, you remember, was divided into tribal areas and every tribe had their own area. And within those tribal areas there were towns and villages that belonged to certain families. And through the years those families were connected to those villages and they owned the land. You remember every seven years the land would go back to the original owner so that genealogies were very, very important. They kept very careful, very detailed records of families. And so they would go back to their tribal area, back to their family home area, back to their father's village. That's where they went to register. And that sets the scene perfectly, to put Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem when the baby is born in specific fulfillment of Micah 5:2, this by virtue of a decree from a pagan, godless monarch who had no idea of any word of any Hebrew prophet or of any of its significance.

This was the world setting. This was how God was controlling the world events crucial to the birth of Christ. It set everything in motion for what for that little couple must have been a miserable trip physically, distressing her to go far from home, far from her mother, far from her family, far from everybody who knew her and loved her and cared about her to have a baby on the road, as it were, in an obscure place. And remember, she was thirteen, or fourteen and her husband was fifteen. But it was essential and they must have gone because they didn't have a choice.

There are no accidental occurrences, folks, in the realm of the Holy Spirit. Had the Emperor Augustus made his decision three months earlier, or three months later, or one month earlier or one month later, or maybe one week earlier, or one week later, Jesus wouldn't have born in Beth...been born in Bethlehem. But He was. God knew how long it would take to get the registration machinery in place. God knew how long Herod would resist it. God knew how long it would take for that little couple to trek those eighty-five to ninety miles in the winter. God knew exactly how long it would take so that they would be there for just a few days, but in those days the baby would be born. Every single detail was in the hand of Almighty God. And God still directs history and He still holds every king, every monarch, every ruler in His hand for His own purposes.

So there's the world setting. It sets the scene for the coming of Messiah. Next time we're going to look at the national setting in Israel and the personal setting with Joseph and Mary.

Let's pray.

Father, we acknowledge that You are the omnipotent, sovereign God who rules all the affairs of men and accomplishes His purposes no matter what. We know that You can move the mind of the king who doesn't know You and doesn't know about You to do Your will. Even Satan is Your servant and all men are subject to Your sovereign providence and power. Oh Father, how we see Your hand in this immense, immense event, a baby born, God in human flesh. How You moved to make history set the scene. We give You praise and glory that You, the God of creation, the God, the sovereign of history are the sovereign God of our hearts whom we know and love through Jesus Christ. We thank You that we have come to know You personally, that You are our personal God. You live in us, You love us, You bless us, You forgive us, You fill us with peace and hope and joy. You have given to us the promise of eternal bliss in heaven with You. God, we are in awe of Your greatness and of Your grace. Help us, Lord, to worship You, the God of sovereign power, the God of history. We thank You for this most monumental of all moments in history when Your Son and our Savior was born, Jesus who would save His people from their sins. In His name we pray. Amen.

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