

Luke 2:1-7: The Humble Birth of Christ

OUTLINE

God moving earthly powers
God fulfilling Davidic promises
God becoming fully human

INTRODUCTION

When I say 'Christmas' what comes to mind? Santa Claus, stockings, reindeer, Christmas trees, gifts, food.... Most of our associations have to do with lights, and music and festivities, and large family gatherings with lots of gifts and food and a large expenditure of money. The big name stores have visual merchandisers hired to dress their windows for Christmas. But not so at the first Christmas. Luke 2:1-7 gives us the humble and simple account of one of the greatest miracles of all time, God becoming man.

As we look at these unadorned verses I want to point out the mysterious way in which God brings His greatest plans to pass. In many ways the birth of Christ in such humble conditions is a lesson in the typical ways in which God works in history and in our lives as well. Let's put all the tinsel aside and appreciate how God works. We will see in our text that God uses the most powerful forces in the world to perform His will. We will see the grand promises made to David quietly fulfilled. And the grand miracle of God becoming man coming to pass in an animal's feeding trough. Reminding ourselves of these things will feed our own faith as we think about God's working in our own lives.

God moving earthly powers

V1-3, 'In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³And all went to be registered, each to his own town.' The strongest earthly power in the world in the first century was Rome. The leader of Rome was Caesar Augustus otherwise known as Octavius. He was the grandnephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar. After the murder of Julius Caesar he joined with two others to form a triumvirate to overthrow Brutus and Cassius, the murderers of Julius. Octavius overcame Lepidus one of the three, the other was Mark Antony. Mark Antony was married to Octavius's sister but divorced her to return to his affair with Cleopatra. Then they promoted a son that Cleopatra had with Julius as the new Caesar, this resulted in battle and defeat with Mark Antony and Cleopatra committing suicide. He ruled from 31 BC to 14 AD. 'Augustus's ascension to the throne marked the beginning of the Roman Empire. He restored unity and orderly government after a long period of destructive civil wars, and ushered in the Pax Romana, an era of peace and prosperity throughout the Greco-Roman world that lasted for two centuries. He is arguably the most significant person in Roman history.'¹

This is the man who ordered the decree. The registration was for the purpose of taxation, and it was a common thing at the time. Luke indicates in the words, 'In those days' that he does not have an exact date for it. What should stand out for you is how God moves the heart of the most powerful man in the world to do an action which will bring His own purposes to pass. God had prophesied that the Saviour be born in Bethlehem, this is how God secures His will. This act of

1 MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (2009). [Luke 1-5](#) (p. 143). Chicago: Moody Publishers.

government was probably deemed by Octavius' own wisdom to be wise. For many it was the act of an oppressor who was seeking to extort money from those under his power. God was in control of it all. The sin in the heart of Octavius was his own, but all things were being worked out according to God's sovereign will.

Do you trust God? Are you undergoing a situation in your life where people in power seem to be doing their own thing? Are you like Mary and Joseph deeply impacted and inconvenienced by these things? Remember that God has your life in His hands, the days of your life were written before you were born. He is not reacting to the present situation hoping for the best and trying to make the best of a bad situation. No, all the events of our lives are in His hands and being brought to pass according to His design. There are mysteries about how people sins fit into the will of God; we do not want to give the impression that God is the author of sin or that He does not take those sins seriously. But what we need to see in this text is that in the midst of the lives of the powerless and the weak God is bringing His big plan to pass. It is not your job to know the future, nor is it your job to fret over all the evil that is going on, it is your job to be faithful, to commit your life into God's hands and trust in whatever He is bringing to pass. Anxiety over your life is one of the biggest things that can stress you out and cause ill health, loss of sleep, etc. observe then how the most powerful man in the world as he feathers his own nest, treading on the little person to do so, is doing the will of God to undo all evil. This is how God works in our lives too.

God fulfilling Davidic promises

V4-5, 'And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.'² The text before us is quite particular in stressing the connection of the birth of this child to David. There are various promises in the OT which relate to the Messiah and our portion here. Firstly, the Messiah will come from the tribe of Judah, this is the tribe that Joseph belongs. The Messiah will come from the house of David, our text tells us that Joseph is of the house and lineage of David. Thirdly, there is a prophecy in Micah 5:2 that the Messiah will be born in the city of David, in Bethlehem, '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.' 'Ephrathah' is named because it was the district in which Bethlehem was found. It lies about 5 miles South of Jerusalem. This is the town where Ruth went to live with Boaz and where David was finally born. This verse highlights the size of Bethlehem as being 'too little.' This is to emphasize that God brings His strength out of our weakness. He has done this consistently in saving His people thereby glorifying Himself and pointing us away from ourselves to Him. We see Abraham a 'dead' man as the father of nations and Sarah who was barren as the Mother of nations. We see David who was the youngest son and a mere shepherd rise to the throne of Israel. And Christ, the God-man was born to a poor family who were oppressed and on a forced errand. He was born in an insignificant town in a temporary dwelling. No doubt this was a reminder to God's people of His ways when they are such a small and harassed flock.

2 [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Lk 2:4-5). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

God promises that from this little town someone is going to come forth for Him. The words 'for me' indicate that this person is of God's sending and His representative, but also that this promised person is coming not to do our will but God's will. We find this emphasis in the Gospels when Jesus talks about doing His Father's will and not meeting public expectations. This person we are told is to be ruler in Israel. When Christ ministered in Israel we can clearly see that He did reign as King. We see the demons obeying Him, sicknesses and death obeying Him, we see the winds and the waves obeying Him, and Jesus Himself calls Himself the King in John 18:33-38.

Then we are told that His 'coming forth is from of old, from Ancient days.' This is a very interesting phrase, it has one of two possible meanings, meanings we are not forced to choose between because both are true with regard to Christ. Firstly, 'from of old' is a reference that can be applied to God to refer to His eternal nature, we see this in Psalm 74:12, 'Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth.' Yet the reference when referring to the realm of men is about a prior historical time. In this meaning it would be a reference to the ancient lineage and promise to David. David received a promise many years before of a Son who would sit on his throne forever. An old promise of an eternal King, 2 Sam 7:12-13, 'When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.' Also Isaiah 9:6-7, 'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.' All those old promises that seemed far fetched have come to pass and in Christ we have both the Eternal Son (John 8:58), and the promised Son of David.

God becoming fully human

V6-7, 'And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.' Here we have the description of the most important baby ever born. It is a simple and brief description. This reinforces for us the fact that Jesus' birth was like any other human birth. Mary would have experienced labour pains the false notion of those who venerate Mary that she had a painless delivery is a denial of this ordinary human birth Jesus underwent. Please notice that Jesus is described as her firstborn son. In the Greek the word is *prototokos*, a common word to describe the firstborn. It is not the *monogenes* the word that we translated only begotten. Some have tried to teach that Mary was perpetually a virgin and had no other children, but Jesus was simply her first. She and Joseph went on to have other children, Matt. 12:46, 'While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him.' (13:55-56; Jn. 2:12; 7:3, 5, 10).

The humble and dirty scene of Jesus birth is often emphasized. Our verses tell us that there was no room at the inn. This has unfortunately given rise to a false conception that Joseph arrived at an inn and an innkeeper turned them out. The word for inn here is more like the communal camp ground used by travelers

passing through. It was a communal lodging situation and for a town the size Bethlehem would have been small. We are told that Jesus was laid in a manger, some have inferred from this that Jesus was therefore born in a stable. This is likely but not what you have in mind. Ordinarily a house would have another room on it where the animals would be kept, it is probably a room like this where Jesus was born. There is an early tradition that Jesus was born in a cave, it was common for caves to be used for animals as well. It is possible that the present Church in Bethlehem is built around the very cave where Jesus was born, but we cannot know this for sure. Remember, we are not concerned to find relics or holy sites, we have direct access to God's presence by the Spirit through prayer and in prayer are on ground more holy than any holy site in Israel today.

The great miracle though is that God has come down to earth. God the timeless one has been born into time. The Second person of the Trinity, the Son, who upholds the universe by the word of His power is now sustained Himself by His mother. The impassible God who is subject to no weakness and change has become a child who will have to grow through hormonal growth spurts, cry from pain, and experience disappointment. The one who knows all things and the Creator of knowledge and speech will have to learn how to speak and read and write. The One who has accepted all the praises of the heavenly court has come in obscurity. The One who dwells in perfect light and peace is born into the dirty and oppressive conditions of a first century Bethlehem animal shed.

What would Adam be thinking at this time? What were the angels of the heavenly court thinking? What an amazing thing it is that God should be born, but for what? This is no empty spectacle and mere performance of impossible things. This birth was for a reason. God stepped into time to walk on our shoes, He stepped into the pain and filth and temptation of our existence all pictured in the animal shed to deliver us from our sins. This baby was born to die. This salvation has come into the world in a way we did not expect. Where we would expect a Saviour to look like our modern day superheroes God comes in weakness so that our so called strength would be exposed as weakness, that our wisdom would be shown to be folly, that the honest brokenness of our situation which cannot be fixed by ourselves would be apparent.

He came into this world like any other baby. He would have come in squalling, he would have needed someone to clear his throat, He would need to be wrapped in swaddling cloths for warmth, and to be breastfed. He had to be fully human so that He could be a representative for us. He did not come into this world like Adam fully formed and mature, but instead took a more difficult path going through every stage of our development to obey the law in every stage on our behalf because of His love for sinners. Christmas is not about the glamour and the glitz and the polished scenes, but a reminder of our brokenness and God's strength made perfect through weakness.