

Advent

Born a Child and Yet a King

Luke 2:1-7

Luke gives significant attention to the birth narrative of Jesus. Interestingly, however, the birth itself is described with a great sparsity of details. In just a few verses Luke tells of the entry of God into the world. But the great significance of this event is not lost. Through the angelic announcements to Mary and then Joseph we have learned that the Messiah would be Immanuel, God with us come to save his people from their sins. We learn that his conception would be miraculous, transcending the natural laws of human procreation. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and would thus possess both a human and divine nature. This is the incarnation; the chief miracle and deepest mystery God ever communicated to the mind of man.

Luke locates these events for us through two historical markers. This happened during the reign of Augustus Caesar which lasted from 31 BC to AD 14. More specifically, we are told that it occurred during that period of Augustus' reign when he commanded the census which occurred during Quirinius' governorship of Syria. These details serve as an important reminder to us that Christianity lives or dies on historical events. Christianity is not a religion of spiritual techniques. It is not even chiefly about ethics, though obedience to God's law is vital. Christianity is chiefly about the promises of God being fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. He was born as God incarnate in human flesh. He lived and carried out his earthly ministry with perfection. He died for sinners, bearing upon himself the wrath of God. He rose again on the third day and lives to make intercession for God's people until the day he returns to judge the living and the dead. These events are (or will be) historically verifiable realities.

The birth of Jesus was filled with sacred ironies. Augustus was declared the savior of the world and lived in all the splendor Rome could afford. Meanwhile the true Savior was born in humble circumstances and raised as the son of a carpenter. Through military might and the forceful suppression of enemies, Augustus accomplished the *Pax Romana* or "the Peace of Rome." That peace was fleeting. But the baby born in the city of David would make peace between God and sinners. Augustus sat upon a throne which would be lost to barbarians in just a few hundred years. But the child in the manger was given an everlasting throne. He is Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

The birth of Jesus teaches us about the character of God.

1. The Sovereignty of God

The when and where of Jesus' birth

- Vv. 1–3 – "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town."
- Luke anchors the birth of Christ in historical events. Christianity is a religion based upon historically verifiable facts. It is not a religion of mystic experience or spiritual experimentation. Christianity is not even primarily a religion of ethics (though biblical ethics are extremely important). Primarily Christianity is a religion that is anchored in God's actions in history through Jesus Christ to save his people from their sins.
- The opening verses of chapter two display the sovereignty of God over the kings and kingdoms of this world. Not even Caesar Augustus can resist being used as a pawn in God's redemptive purpose.
- God's sovereignty is comforting truth for God's people. As J.C. Ryle wrote:
 - "Let us ever rest our souls on the thought that our times are in God's hands. He knows the best season for sending help to His church and new light to the world. Let us beware of giving way to over-anxiety about the course of events around us, as if we knew better than the King of Kings when relief should come."

2. The Humility of God

The circumstances of Jesus' birth

- Vs. 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 lodging.”
- The way we understand God’s humility is fundamentally different from the way we understand humility in humanity. God is not obligated to be humble. On the other hand, we are. Also, our humility is fitting because of our sin, flaws, and frailty. God’s humility is demonstrated in deliberate actions connected to his redemptive purposes. Of course God’s humility is seen most clearly in the incarnation. In Philippians 2 Paul writes that Jesus “emptied himself” by taking on the form of a servant. That is, Jesus emptied himself not by divesting himself of anything but by taking on a human nature.
- God took on flesh; he condescended to our lowliness so that he might become a sacrifice for our sins. In the birth of Jesus we see the first act of God humbling himself for us and our salvation.

* The noun typically translated “inn” is actually better translated “lodging” or “guest room.” Nolland translates verse 7 as, “...because they had no space [for him] in the lodgings.” (p. 97). The noun which would indicate a traveler’s inn is used by Jesus in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Bethlehem, being a small town not located on a road to any major locations, most likely did not have a traveler’s inn at that time. However, there was a high priority placed on hospitality at that time in that culture (and remains so to this day). The text does not actually suggest that Mary and Joseph were not welcomed into a home as the others travelling to Bethlehem for the census would have been. Indeed, it is nearly inconceivable that a young woman great with child would have not found a family willing to make room for her. The manger, or feeding trough, would have been located under the same roof as the family because the animals were typically kept at night in a space adjacent to or under the family’s dwelling. Verse 7 merely suggests that given the understandably crowded conditions of the house in which they lodged, the newborn baby had to be laid in a manger in the area of the house typically reserved for the animals. Nevertheless, the conditions were profoundly humble considering the true identity of the One born that night. We can correct misconceptions of the event without missing the humble circumstances of Jesus’ birth.

3. The Grace of God

The purpose of Jesus' birth

- Vs. 4 – “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.”
- In the humble circumstances of Jesus’ birth we are given a window into the way in which God would save his people. Luke’s double reference to David is highly significant. Biblical prophecy proclaimed that the Messiah would be in the line of David and that he would inherit the throne of Israel’s great king. The reign of David ushered in an unparalleled period of security and prosperity for God’s people. That period symbolically pointed the way to God’s kingdom in the age to come which would begin to break through in the present age with the advent of Jesus. God’s kingdom is one that is ruled by our Savior.
- Vs. 7 – “And she gave birth to her firstborn son...”
- How can we hear those words and not think of John 3:16? Jesus was Mary’s firstborn Son. But far more than that, Jesus was the miraculous embodiment of the eternally begotten Son of God. For our salvation the Father put forth the Son to die for sinful wretches who did not know they needed saving. “For God so loved the world that he gave *his only begotten Son* that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.”