

The Birth of Jesus Christ, Part 1

Luke 2:1-3

November 8, 2015

Well, we are into Chapter 2 of Luke's Gospel, so please turn in your Bibles there. As we look at Luke Chapter 2 starting in verse 1, it's fitting here at the end of the year as we're looking ahead to another Christmas season that we come into this portion of Scripture. We're going to end the year celebrating the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and I'd like to begin this morning by just reading a significant portion of this chapter, the second chapter in Luke.

Follow along as I read. We'll start there in verse 1. "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. And Joseph also went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is

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called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 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.

“And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.’ Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!’

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"When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.' And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. At the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

"And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, 'Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord') and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.' Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been

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revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, 'Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'

"And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, 'Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that the thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.'"

We'll stop reading there and we stop reading there, because we need to remind ourselves of the setting, the soberness of this story. We need to remind ourselves, especially at this time of year, that the nativity story is not the stuff of Christmas

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pageants, cute kids dressed up as shepherds and magi and angels, cuddly farm animals and the like. It's really ironic that a warning followed close on the heels of Simeon's praise. From Matthew's account, over in Matthew Chapter 2, the words of Simeon came to pass and what he said about the conflict that would come through Christ's birth, those words came to pass almost immediately. It seemed to begin in Matthew chapter 2 well enough. The passage begins, "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem saying, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.'" Sounds great, sounds appropriate, but then this, "When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him." If you were a resident of Jerusalem, you didn't want Herod troubled. You wanted him to remain very, very calm because a troubled Herod meant people were going to die.

And as you know at the end of the magi's visit to worship the baby Jesus, a massive slaughter ensued of innocent children. It says there, "Herod when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he became furious, and he sent and killed all the

male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old and younger, according to the time he ascertained from the wise men and then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted because they are no more.'"

It's just really important to note as we set the record straight about the truth of Christianity, the picture was not painted in the soft, saccharin hues of a Thomas Kinkade painting. There is no sentimentality in the real Christmas story. When the light that Zechariah prophesied in just the few verses prior to Luke 2, when that light that he prophesied began to blaze over the landscape, it revealed a harsh, violent world of pain and suffering. We should never forget that baby Jesus was born into a world of darkness, wasting away underneath the shadow of death. We should never forget as Simeon warned, as he warned Mary about the sword that pierced Mary's soul, which was really a soldier's lance, pierced the side of her own son up on a cross. We should never forget here at the beginning of the story that Jesus was born to die. It's ironic, isn't it? That the real

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cause for our rejoicing comes because Jesus died on the cross for sins.

Notice verse 11 in Chapter 2. The angel said, "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior." The shepherds visited their Savior, verse 16, and then they left, verse 20, it says, "Glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them." But listen, that salvation meant ultimate suffering. Simeon, too, he lifted the holy child in his arms and blessed God saying in verse 30, "My eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence," the full knowledge, "of all the peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." So it really is a bitter irony that these expressions of profound joy are set in a context of intense suffering. The rising glory of the son of God was charting a course through the unparalleled suffering of pain and death. And even though Jesus triumphed over the suffering, though he conquered death, rose from the grave and he now lives eternal and immortal, the violence against him and the truth of his story continues to this very day. Opposition to his story continues now whether it's the distortion of these truths, especially at this time of year when the Gospel truths are

drowned out in a flood of sentimentality and commercialism, or whether it's through the rejection and denial of the truth outright.

In fact, as we look at these first couple of verses in Luke 2, we're looking at a hotly contested text right here in verse 2 of Chapter 2. The consensus opinion of modern scholarship is that Luke made an embarrassing factual error in dating the census of Quirinius in the days of Herod. They say that Luke contradicts himself and contradicts Matthew in his chronology. They say the Gospels are untrustworthy and by extension so is the rest of Scripture. We'll consider that in a moment, those claims, but as I said, the violence against the story started then, continues down to this very day. It is constant, it is unrelenting. Yet, as we study this text for ourselves, we, like Simeon, like the prophetess Anna, like Mary and Joseph, like the shepherds, we're going to find every cause for profound joy as this truth is vindicated before our very eyes. As I said, it's an unexpected irony to find joy through this opposition.

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There's another irony we find in this second chapter, just what I read there. And it's found in the characters that Luke introduces us to. Right away we meet some very, very important government officials. Caesar Augustus, the first Roman Emperor. He is the most powerful man in the entire world at that time. His imperial power and his influence, had reached to the outer extremities of his empire, namely through this man, Quirinius. He made a decree, he set people in motion, he spoke, people obeyed. But Caesar Augustus and Quirinius, as important as they are and really as much time as we're going to spend on them this morning, as important as they are in the world stage, they are not the focal point of this chapter. They're almost incidental. At center stage is a newborn baby, helpless, weak, needy, dependent and he's surrounded by some very humble people: peasant parents, no-name shepherds. He's celebrated by an old man with hope in his eyes and longing. An old widow, this prophetess, Anna. These people here are hardly the paragons of power. They're hardly the source or the foundation of building an entire kingdom of God. They have no authority, no influence, no say. These humble, lowly people lived in captivity. They lived under Roman domination; they were powerless subjects in an empire that was vast and dominating. They lived in submission in their own land under a foreign authority.

In fact, that's what sent Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem in the first place in verse 3. It says, "All went to be registered," right? Then verse 4 says, "And Joseph also went up." He's part of the "all." He's got to do what he's required to do, and he's taking Mary with him, his betrothed and, by the way, very pregnant wife. And it's by means of Caesar's decree. It's by means of Quirinius' registration, all under the jurisdiction of Herod. But it's through all that that the Most High God brought his son into the world. He's the one. He's the one who's making all this happen. Let's pause for a moment and not miss the encouragement that we can find in this observation in our day and time. Proverbs 21:1 says, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will." Just like a pool of water in your hand, you turn it, it goes one way; you turn it another way, it goes the other way. That's the king's heart in the hand of God. The seats of power and authority that we see on this earth seem sometimes corrupt, sometimes ignorant, sometimes vacillating, sometimes willing to do whatever it will take to keep in power. All those seats of power and authority are mere instruments to fulfill the will of our sovereign God.

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Never let your heart be troubled by any powerlessness you feel in the world around you because our God reigns supreme.

Let's unpack that theme, okay? In this text, it's the theme of divine sovereignty, and we find it here in the opening verses of Luke Chapter 2. We're going to see here how God's providence unfolds as Luke tells us the greatest story that has ever been told. We see here, what we see here is divine providence. From the largest scale on the world's scene, to the very smallest scale in an individual family. It moves from the throne of the world to a manger in a cave, in a stall. It goes from the international to the personal. It goes from the most remote to the most intimate. God moves the imperial authority of Caesar, who then moves the regional authority of Quirinius, all to accomplish his sovereign will in the lives of these humble servants of his to bring about the birth of his son. As Galatians 4:4 says, "In the fullness of time, God sent forth his son." Not Caesar, God. And it happened precisely when he wanted it to happen and at exactly the right location.

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Let's see how that happened. Point one: God is sovereign over global affairs. God is sovereign over global affairs. Verse 1 says, "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered." The opening phrase, "In those days," that connects the narrative back to Luke 1:5, where it says, "In the days of Herod, King of Judea." The Greek wording there is almost identical in those two verses. And this, as I mentioned before, corresponds with Matthew 2:1, which we read earlier. "Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king." Herod is on the throne in Judea and he rules with Roman backing as a client-king. The puppet master that was pulling his strings is Rome. Herod received his throne, his authority by the authority of the Roman Senate, and now that Caesar Augustus rules, he's underneath that authority of the emperor. Herod has the prerogative to administrate his kingdom as seems best to him, as fits the region. He's got relative autonomy, but he pays homage and tribute, which another word for tribute is people's taxes.

So he take taxes from the people, he takes a cut for himself, and he delivers a big chunk to Rome. He raises those taxes from the people in the land of Judea. But the supreme

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power on earth behind Herod, behind all the other provincial governors, the supreme power at that time was Caesar Augustus. He was born Gaius Octavius, or as he's been known to history, Octavian. He was born on September 23, 63 BC. He was the great nephew of Julius Caesar, who was the last general of the Roman Republic. His grandmother Julia, Octavian's grandmother Julia was Julius Caesar's sister. Octavian was only four years old when he lost his father. From that point, he really grew up quickly. He grew up in wealth. He grew up in favor and having status. He was only 12 years old when he delivered an oration at the funeral of that grandmother, Julia, Julius Caesar's sister. His skill, his affection for his grandmother won him the favor of Julius Caesar. Julius Caesar had his eye on this young man from a very young age. At only 16 years old, Julius awarded decorations to Octavian. Julius had won a military victory in Africa and even though Octavian was too young to travel and serve overseas in the military at that time, he was still awarded military decorations from Julius.

So as Julius watched young Octavian grow up, his affection for his young nephew grew. Octavian showed, he responded, reciprocated with great loyalty toward his uncle, his great

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uncle. He demonstrated courage and character, sometimes even at the, at significant personal expense. On one occasion, his loyalty to his great uncle almost cost him his life. None of that was lost on Julius Caesar. Later on when Julius was murdered by Brutus and Cassias on March 15, 44 BC, Octavian was devastated. This was a personal loss. He was only 18 years old at the time and he could have and was actually advised to surround himself with soldiers and bodyguards. Assassination of leaders at that time and the plots involved really eradicating the entire family, especially those who were loyal, especially those who might have a claim on the throne. Young Octavian ignored the counsel of those who told him to run and hide. He went directly to Rome, a very bold move.

One of Julius Caesar's generals, Mark Antony, he thought he was next in line to power. He'd served Julius Caesar on the campaigns faithfully. He figured he was the one, but when the will of Julius Caesar was read publicly, it revealed some world changing decisions. Julius had adopted Octavian as his son. He named him as his political heir. He had left him two thirds of his own estate. So due to Octavian's temerity, his boldness, his courage, he was present in Rome to make his claim. So the

Senate, the Roman Senate awarded him the Pretorian rank, put him over Julius' armies and sent him out. A great rivalry ensued between Octavian and Mark Antony. The two operated for a time under the Roman Senate, part of a triumvirate of generals consisting of Octavian, Antony, and Lepidus. And together those three were really the protectors of Rome, but all three were really jockeying for position to be number one.

That's the way power is. Antony was busy solidifying his personal power making alliances, as you may know, with Cleopatra down in Alexandria, Egypt. Octavian had other motives in mind as well, besides personal power. He had to fight a number of civil wars after the death of Julius Caesar, including one against Brutus and Cassias, the men who murdered his great uncle. But Suetonius tells us about Octavian's motive, that it was also to avenge Caesar and keep his decrees enforced. Octavian was fiercely loyal to his uncle. He even adopted the surname Caesar to show loyalty and solidarity to his great uncle Julius. Caesar, by the way, is a nickname meaning hairy. I don't know if Caesar was especially hairy. Some people take it as a joke because he had a receding hairline so they thought, in a Roman-

style of humor, called him, hairy, as a joke, so he just adopted it. But nonetheless, Octavian was now Gaius Julius Caesar.

Octavian eventually deposed the general Lepidus, one of the three, sent him into exile, and then, as you know, and history tells us, he defeated his main rival Mark Antony at the Battle of Actium in Greece, September 2, 31 BC. You remember that famous romance, right? Mark Antony, Cleopatra, the Egyptian princess? Well, after that Battle of Actium, Octavian pursued Antony to Egypt. He there defeated the armies of Antony and Cleopatra in Alexandria on August 1, 30 BC, just one year after Actium. So when Antony and Cleopatra both committed suicide, Octavian emerged as the sole military power in Rome. He was the one. Octavian had proven himself through all these campaigns to be a capable general. He was cunning and courageous in battle. He was respected by his soldiers. But he was even more effective as a politician. He was a shrewd administrator, a wise ruler. He was also, and especially saying this for a politician, he was a very sincere man. He set about to reform this outdated and irrelevant constitution of the Republic. He worked with the Roman Senate and together they worked together to abolish the old Roman Republic and writing a new constitution, they

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inaugurated a new Roman Empire. Roman Senate honored Octavian with the title Augustus in 27 BC and that means, as the name sounds, it means, august, revered, majestic, venerable and Julius Caesar was where we get the month July from, and August comes from Augustus, remembering those two men.

So he's, now, leaving Octavian behind, and no longer does he keep his family name. Now he is Caesar, in remembrance of his great uncle, and Augustus, the first Roman Emperor. And he was one of the longest ruling emperors; his reign as sole emperor lasted 44 years. If you include the time with ruling with the other three, it was 12 years; other time as well, this man ruled for a long, long time. One of the wisest marks of his imperial administration, Caesar Augustus was, he wasn't interested in adding more lands to the empire. He had no interest, really, in direct rule, administrative oversight directly of an unruly people who were always going to revolt and rebel, whose language he didn't know and customs he didn't know. What he did want to do is build foundations in his own land, in Rome, in Italy. He wanted to solidify a base of power and then from that base of power, he wanted to extend and exert influence, Roman influence around the entire world. That allowed him the benefit of taking

the wealth from the surrounding provinces and from the client states taking their wealth and having them provide for him and his own without taking on the headache of direct rule and administration.

Augustus believed that was the way to a strong, prosperous long-lasting empire. He saw an empire ahead of him that would never, ever end. He once said, here's his quote, "May I be privileged to build firm and lasting foundations for the government of State. May I also achieve the reward to which I aspire; that of being known as the author of the best possible Constitution, and of carrying with me, when I die, the hope that these foundations which I have established for the State will abide secure." His plan to put that into effect depended on keeping the entire empire connected, maintaining reasonably fair and flexible governance. That meant supply lines had to be in place. That meant transportation needed to continue unhindered. That meant roads. It was Alexander the Great who unified the Empire, the world, by Hellenizing it, spreading the culture and the language of Greece. But it was the Romans who brought the world together, quite literally connecting them with the roads. Roman legions marched across the world on roads that connected

the imperial capital of Rome to all of its provinces and client states.

So the provinces were ruled by politicians of a conciliar rank, a senatorial rank. These guys were Roman citizens. Client states, though, they were ruled by indigenous kings like Herod. They were not Roman citizens, so their loyalty was not always reliable, and they needed to always be kept on a short leash, always watched, always managed and paved roads were essential to maintaining Roman influence around the entire empire. So the Roman legions built, maintained, protected those roads. They kept the supply lines open. They kept communication flowing. They enabled transportation and commerce and, of course, let's not forget, taxes. Taxes flowing right back to Rome. We need your money to keep the government flowing, right? So, Augustus kept the heart of the empire protected: Italy, Greece, north coast of the African continent. And he surrounded the heart of the Roman Empire with a buffer of provinces and client states all around. So revolts and insurrections that would inevitably rise were hopefully kept at a distance, kept at the extremities, not threatening Rome. It's the same kind of insulation by the way, that we feel here in North America, separated from the rest

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of the world by two great bodies of water. It's quite a formidable thing to attack this continent.

Augustus responded to insurrections that arose with violent force. Roman power was swift, ruthless, crushed revolutions like iron vessels smashing clay pots. They punished insurrections very severely, either crucifying or burning the leaders publicly just to set an example. Augustus believed that the bloodshed was justified. He called it the price of maintaining the Pax Romana, the price of maintaining and keeping peace. You've got to have a little bit of the element of fear there.

So as tax money poured into Rome from the provinces and the client states, Augustus showed great generosity to Rome and its citizens, not always to the provinces and the client states, you understand, but to Rome and his people. He contributed always continually and generously to the public good with games, theaters, public baths. He once boasted, "I found Rome built of bricks. I leave her clothed with marble." People hailed him, sometimes publicly, standing ovation at games and theaters, calling out to him, saying, "Oh, just and generous lord!" They

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viewed him as the savior of the world. In fact, at his birth an astrologer, seeing some signs that were lining up about him, said this, he cried out saying, "The ruler of the world is now born." Subsequent successes, his rise to power, his astounding victories all fed the public perception that this was no mere man. This is more than a man; he's a god. In fact, after his death, he was paraded in final triumphs, he was deified.

I'm so grateful in light of all that, that our Savior doesn't require our tax money to build his empire. If I'm reading Revelation correctly, it doesn't matter if you're a dispensationalist or a covenantalist. If I'm reading that correctly, he has funded that whole building project of the New Jerusalem from his own pocket. I think that's right. I think I'm getting that right. He's an amazing ruler, our God. Amazingly powerful, amazingly generous, and you know what? Instead of requiring gifts from us to make it all run, he gives to us everything. From the first to the last, it's all of God. But for Augustus, he needed money, he needed money from the masses and a lot of it. So, to make sure the taxes were collected in an accurate and efficient and timely manner, he had to keep track of people. So, he had an IRS, Imperial Revenue Service. He

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needed to know who the people were, where they lived, what they owned, and what they owed. From time to time, Augustus required citizens and subjects to register themselves and their families. He required them to submit to an inventory of their goods and holdings, their money, their property.

So Caesar Augustus conducted several official censuses of his citizens and there were three of them: 28 BC, 8 BC and 6 AD. Roman citizens, by the way, weren't required to pay taxes. Citizenship meant by birth. So citizens were not required to pay taxes. They had to register for military service, the men did, but they didn't owe any taxes. The official censuses of Rome and Roman citizens then triggered other censuses around the Roman Empire, spreading out through the provinces and the client states that Caesar Augustus raised his money from. So it's kind of like when the Department of Transportation here says, Hey, we're going to go ahead and build a new road, or We're going to improve I-25. Well, that, that decree may come out in January of 2015, but it may go on for a while, right? And you may be inconvenienced not just at this point in the road, but then at that point in the road, then that point in the road. And it just continues on for years and years to come. If it's like where I

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came from in Los Angeles, nothing is ever fixed. They're always building something and repairing something. But a census was like that, it rolled out, it took time to spread around to the Empire. And, again Caesar Augustus didn't raise money from his own Roman citizens; he raised it from the rest of the world, the provinces, the client states.

I just want to pause here for a moment in all this history. God didn't raise up Caesar because he wanted to beatify Rome, to turn it from brick to marble. From Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon to Cyrus of Persia, to Alexander in Greece to right here, Caesar Augustus of Rome, all of this has been an outworking of God's sovereign plan to bring one person into the world: his Messiah. You don't need to turn there, but you can write it down, Daniel Chapter 2. In Daniel Chapter 2, you remember, that Daniel was brought before Nebuchadnezzar to reveal to King Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, reveal to him, not just the interpretation of his dream, but the dream itself. He had to tell him the dream and then tell him what it meant. Here's what Daniel said as he told Nebuchadnezzar his dream, Daniel 2:31 and following, "O King, you saw, and behold, a great image. This image, mighty and of exceeding brightness, stood before you, and its appearance

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was frightening.” You younger kids might think of those movies with giant robots that stand in your room, towering over you about to destroy you, that’s kind of like what King Nebuchadnezzar was seeing. Some giant figure, mighty, exceedingly bright and terrifying in appearance. “The head of this image was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its middle and its thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, and its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. As you looked, behold, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold all together were broken in pieces and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors and the wind carried them away, so that not even a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.”

After Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar about that dream, he then revealed the interpretation of the dream. This image was all about the coming empires of the world, how God would raise up each one and then supplant the final one with a rolling stone that would destroy the memory of all the empires. Guess what? That stone is rolling, folks and it’s heading right for Rome on

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Roman roads. As Daniel said, the head of gold was the Babylonian Empire ruled by Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonian Empire carried out God's decree that Israel would be judged and carried off into exile. The chest and arms of silver was Medo-Persian. The Medo-Persian empire, Cyrus, king of the Medo-Persian empire, he decreed Israel's return into the land. All by God's design. The torso, the thighs of bronze that was the empire of Greece, ruled by Alexander the Great. He is the one who decreed the language that would carry the message about this Messianic stone around the whole world. In fact, it was the very language in which the New Testament was written, Alexander's language. Finally, this iron strength of Rome intermixed with the brittle clay of the provinces and the client states, Rome's Emperor, Caesar Augustus. He's the very one who decreed by the hand of God, the registration of this little stone in a little town called Bethlehem. A stone that would supplant his kingdom and take over the entire world to leave all other kingdoms, all other empires completely forgotten, like chaff that the wind blows away.

Can you see the sovereignty of God here over global affairs? Because that's what's being taught here in Luke Chapter 2. That's what Luke is showing us. That's point one. Not only did

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God exercise his divine sovereignty over global empire, which was a Roman Empire at that time, God also exercised, point two, sovereignty over regional affairs. Same point two: God is sovereign over regional affairs. Look at verse 2, "This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria." Of the three censuses that I mentioned, the one in 28 BC, the one in 8 BC, and then the one in 6 AD, Caesar had other officials oversee the first and the third censuses, but that second one, the one in 8 BC, Caesar oversaw that one personally. This was the decree that set things in motion eventually in Syria and Palestine and that region, when Quirinius, he sent him to be a direct agent to oversee that census. Quirinius was appointed and sent by Caesar himself.

Luke here has given us three important pieces of information in verse 2, that we can use to triangulate the time when Jesus was born. Now, he doesn't give us an exact date. Systems for dating change over time. In fact the one that was being used in Rome at that time was dating things, 1, 2, 3, all the way from 753 BC to the founding of Rome. That had been obliterated by the birth of Jesus Christ. So it wouldn't do any good for Luke to use human dating systems. He uses names of

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people. He uses events: the reign of Herod, Luke 1:5; decree of Caesar, Luke 2:1; and here, the first registration of Quirinius, Luke 2:2. Names of people, memorable events by comparing and contrasting those, we get a sense of what was happening in those days. And get this, I want you to understand this. It's Luke is a historian. He is a dead accurate, precise historian, but it's not just dates that Luke wants us to get here. He doesn't just want us to get a sense of the time. He wants us to see what was happening. He wants us to get a sense of what was going on in the region when Jesus was born. And that one sentence summary in verse 2 says it all, "This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria." Now, it's lost on us, 2,000 years later, but for the original readers of Luke's Gospel, that told them everything that they needed to know. They could picture those days. Believe me, it wasn't a pleasant picture. It's like saying today, Oh, that was, remember the time when Kennedy was shot, or Remember when Martin Luther King Junior, when he was shot? Remember what was going on then? Or the Bay of Pigs. When I say those things to you, you don't just remember dates. I mean a date doesn't just pop into your head unless you're some history major or something. You remember what was happening then. You remember the sense and the culture. You remember the feel, what those times were like. That's what Luke

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is doing here. It's not about precise dates, even though Luke is impeccably precise. This is about events. This is about a feeling at that time. The danger and the foreboding that dominated the region and remember all of this is happening, even the foreboding, even the danger, all happening by the sovereign plan of God.

Josephus gives us a little more information. He adds to what we know of Luke's single-sentence summary. And it's this paragraph that I'm about to read to you that provides unbelieving critics with an objection to Luke's accuracy. Here's what Josephus wrote, he said, "When," Syrinus, or that's Quirinius, "When Syrinus had now disposed of our Archelaus' money," Archelaus is Herod's son, "and when the taxings were come to a conclusion, which were made," here's the date, "in the 37th year of Caesar's victory over Antony at Actium. He," that is Quirinius, "deprived Joazar of the high priesthood and he appointed Ananus the son of Seth, to be high priest." So a number of things going on there in that quote. You've got Quirinius disposing of Archelaus' money, funds which really did belong to Herod. Taxing has come to a conclusion, which seems to have the sense of, Oh, it's the census. 37th year of Caesar's victory over Antony, he deposed a

high priest and replaced him with another high priest. That gives us a good bit of information to fill in the details that Luke leaves out.

But one detail, as I said, that contradicts Luke's chronology is the one, "in the 37th year of Caesar's victory over Antony at Actium." That's 6 AD. Herod wasn't alive in 6 AD. Is Luke wrong? The date doesn't reconcile with Luke's earlier date for the census. In fact there's no way to reconcile those two dates. It's about ten years difference. Here's the question: Who do we believe, Luke or Josephus? For me, I'm going to presume the absolute truthfulness and accuracy of Luke. Why? Because he's the divinely inspired author of Scripture, and the Holy Spirit doesn't make dating mistakes, chronology mistakes. That's a right attitude, but I want to warn, at the same time, we do not want to fall into the error of what's called, fideism. That is just believing simply without examining any evidence. It's the attitude of that old child's song, "God said it, I believe it, that's all that faith demands." That is true. And it's commendable to believe the Bible and to take it at its word. Absolutely. What's not commendable is to be lazy when it comes to examining

the evidence. We shore up our faith and strengthen our faith when we take the time and do due diligence to examine the evidence even in light of objections. New believers count on us to do that. Our children attending school from grade school all the way through university, they are continually being assaulted with unbelieving presuppositions, *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseam*, over and over again. It's like a dripping faucet. It's like Chinese water torture in the school systems trying to un-seat kids view of God, their belief in the Bible, their belief in anything transcendent. They're being told not only should they not assume that the Bible has a higher integrity, higher accuracy, higher reliability than any other text on earth, they're being told that they should always suspect the bias of Biblical writers. Writers like Josephus and others they say are infinitely more reliable than the writers of the Bible. Why? Because writers of the Bible, like Luke and others, they're biased by religious belief. They belief in myths, fairy tales. They believe crazy things like God created the world out of nothing.

In fact, you want to know what your kids are going to find when they Google, Census of Quirinius? Go put that into your search engine. Top result is the Wikipedia article, which says

GRACE CHURCH

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this, second paragraph, "As the census took place in 6 CE," Common Era, "and Luke's second marker is the reign of King Herod who died in 4 BCE," Before Common Era, "the Gospel is inconsistent with the historical evidence." Really? Where did it get that? Josephus. "Most modern," continuing, "most modern scholars explain this as an error, but the authors of the Gospel were ignorant on many points about the early life of Jesus, and both the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Matthew put Jesus' birth in Bethlehem in order to match a prophecy in the Book of Micah that the Messiah was to come from that place." End quote. Not only are they telling you, Don't believe the facts in the Bible; they presume to know what was going on in the heads of the writers themselves. Such audacity. Such arrogance. It's absolutely insidious, isn't it? It's pernicious and it's blatant in undermining faith in Scripture. And sadly, there are far too many Christians who have capitulated to these unbelieving prejudices as well. In one article I read, Daniel Schwartz is quoted as saying, quote, "It seems fair to say that the scholarly consensus today," get this, "shared even by many conservative Christian scholars is that Luke is wrong." End quote.

GRACE CHURCH

Greeley

Listen, the only way to arm our young people, and even to arm ourselves, beloved, against this kind of stuff, number one, is to assume the accuracy of the Bible. Doesn't Luke, with all of his accuracy, I mean I could take the time, but I can't, I don't have the time. I could take the time to catalogue how accurate Luke is. Shouldn't he get the benefit of the doubt? Just on a human level? And just assuming the fact that what the Bible says about him is true, that the Holy Spirit inspired these writings and superintended the writing so that it says exactly what God wanted to say, shouldn't we bring our understanding of divine inspiration into this? Shouldn't we assume the accuracy of the Bible, number one? But, number two, shouldn't we then demonstrate the accuracy of the Bible? Shouldn't we look at the criticisms? Shouldn't we look at what was being said? And bring truth to bear? Listen, the truth had nothing to hide against the critics. If I'm going to question which source has made a mistake, it is not going to be the Biblical writer. Josephus and Luke are both men, to be sure, and prone to make mistakes, but only one of them wrote under the inspiration and authority of the Holy Spirit. That is the writer who gets the benefit of the doubt.

But that's not where we leave it. We study, we read, we research so we can find an answer to the challenges of the skeptics, who are trying all the time to shipwreck the faith of weaker Christians, to dissuade others from hearing what the Bible has to say, which includes our kids. So first of all, we've got to make sure we've got the Biblical text right. Look at the Biblical text there in Luke 2:2. We need to start by carefully observing what Luke says and what he doesn't say. What Luke doesn't say is that Quirinius was governor. It says he ruled. Our English translations, so accurate, so good most of the time, but here they let us down just a bit and they translate an adverbial participle as a noun instead of translating this as it should be, when Quirinius was exercising authority in Syria, or when Quirinius was ruling, leading, commanding in Syria. It says, "When Quirinius was governor of Syria."

Now we're led to go on a wild goose chase through the documents of history to find where does a document identify Quirinius as governor. Our translations give Quirinius a position he didn't hold at the time and one that Luke didn't intend to convey either. During the reign of Herod, immediately

GRACE CHURCH



Grace

before his death, there was a man named Varus who was governor in Syria and you understand Israel is here, Syria is above it. Okay, so Syria, Varus was governing then. His governorship lasted from the last years of Herod the Great until after his death. Before Varus, Saturninus was the governor of Syria. So, there's no way Quirinius could have been governor of Syria at that time before Herod's death. Besides, Quirinius was way too busy to be the governor of Syria at that time; he was fighting a war up in what's now southern Turkey. This guy is quite an interesting man, actually. His full name was Publius Sulpicius Quirinius. Try to say that ten times fast. He was born just south of Rome. He also rose quickly through the ranks. In his thirties, he was awarded with the office of Consul, the title of Consul, so he was on the level in authority with other governors around the provinces. Even if he didn't hold a governorship, he still had that authority. And he used that authority as a personal representative of Caesar. In his early forties, he won a victory over these, these people in southern Galatia, as I mentioned, modern-day Turkey. For his victory, Quirinius was awarded a military triumph which was the highest honor bestowed on a general for bravery and victory on the battle field. He was paraded through the streets with people hailing him. Caesar August trusted Quirinius so much that he assigned him to be the

GRACE CHURCH

Greeley

advisor to his nephew, his adopted son, Gaius Caesar. It's this Quirinius, he's highly respected official. He's a trusted emissary not of the Roman Empire, he a trusted emissary of the Rome's Emperor. He's a personal assistant and representative of Caesar Augustus himself.

And that's precisely what makes Luke's mention of Quirinius so fascinating because this points to time in Jerusalem in Judea when Caesar felt the need to insert himself into the affairs of this client kingdom ruled by Herod. Things were falling apart. So, Caesar needed someone trustworthy, he needed to send a man to restore order, to reassert Roman authority, to carry out the tax registration of the Jewish people. I'm not going to go any further into the chronology, the details about the chronology, but there's some recent scholarship that has been challenging in the past decade or two the critical consensus that condemns Luke in favor of Josephus. One article, which I highly recommend if you have an interest in this kind of thing, is by a man named John H. Rhoads, R.h.o.a.d.s, Rhoads. And this article by John Rhoads is titled and I appreciate him putting the thesis of his paper in the title, *Josephus Misdated the Census of Quirinius*. I appreciate that clarity. Don't you? It leaves no doubt where he

stands. But using source criticism, critical scholarship, Rhoads demonstrates and documents Josephus' approach to doing history, his use of sources, which unwittingly lead Josephus to an occasional error. Sometimes Josephus is susceptible to duplicating accounts. Sometimes he reports simultaneous events from different sources as if they happened at different times. It's not that Josephus is intentionally misleading, certainly not sloppy, but if modern readers don't recognize how he uses sources or his method of doing history, they are easily misled by ignorance, really, of his methods. Bottom line, Josephus was wrong to date Quirinius' census at 6 AD. That's what you need to understand and take away from this.

Luke is correct in dating it before Herod's death, sometime between 4 BC and 1 BC. Rhoads' article absolutely vindicates Luke against his critics, helps us read Josephus more accurately, at the same time. Josephus here, when he dated it 37 years from Actium, he either misread his source with the date, or the name of the city, or he simply changed the date to fit his historical reconstruction. Frankly, Josephus made other errors in his work, which are documented. It doesn't make him a bad guy. It doesn't make him an unreliable source, just human.

GRACE CHURCH

Greeley

But, as I said, crucial difference between Josephus and Luke, Luke was under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit in his research and his writing. Not one error. Having said that, go verify what I said by doing your own research, okay?

With that out of the way, that problem out of the way, I just want to take a few minutes to paint the picture of what was actually happening in Jerusalem at this time, which, again, as I said, is the sense that Luke wants us to get. What is it that required Caesar Augustus to send a trusted emissary, Quirinius, into that region to exercise authority over this first registration? As Herod's life was coming to a grinding and painful end, he was suffering from a disease of intestines and bowels, and it was very unpleasant. He was also suffering from a madness of a lust for power, and paranoia that someone was going to take it from him. He was so anxious that someone was lurking in the shadows to assassinate him and take his power away, he started murdering everyone around him, every possible contender. Herod surrounded himself with bodyguards. He had the city of Jerusalem crawling with secret police and spies spying on everybody, reporting to him about everything. Herod even became suspicious of his favorite wife, Miriam, and had her executed.

GRACE CHURCH

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He later accused his two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, of high treason. He had them executed. The next son in line for the throne was Antipater. Next is not where you wanted to be. But Antipater was also charged of an assignation plot. Herod had him killed just five days before his own death. Herod's penchant for murder was so well known that Caesar Augustus said, "It's better to be Herod's dog than one of his children."

So while Herod is here busy in these days killing off his family, the Jewish population is becoming more fed up with Herod and his catering to Rome, his sucking up to Rome. Two Pharisees from the Galilean regions, Judas of Galilee and Matthias, rabbis, they taught zeal for the Law of Moses, and they also taught the reward of dying for the sake of righteousness. These guys gathered a cohort of young men, zealous for the law, indignant at Herod's collaboration with the Romans. So when Quirinius' census was instituted, Herod and the High Priest Joazar both encouraged the Jews to participate. Hey, go along with it. Rome doesn't mean anything by this. Many did, including Joseph and Mary, but not the angry young men. The disciples of Judas the Galilean and Matthias, they went to the temple and they tore down the Roman eagle that Herod had put there on the

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Greeley

temple to represent Rome over the temple of God himself; tore that down. They attacked Herod's armory, and for their trouble they were caught. Herod ordered Judas, Matthias, and the main collaborators to be burned alive publicly. Luke records Gamaliel's reference to that event. In Acts 5:37 it says, "Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered."

After the death of Judas and Matthias, to pacify the Jews, to diffuse the tension, Quirinius deposed Joazar from his position as High Priest, he installed this man Ananus. Joazar had, Remember, supported the Roman census, keeping him in place was a risk and so, Quirinius, he wanted to avoid another bloody insurrection. He wanted to restore order. Replacing him was the only thing that was reasonable to do. Now, what's interesting about all of this in relation to the census? If a Roman, like Quirinius, was directly administering the census for himself, people would have been registered in their place of residence. Joseph and Mary would not travel anywhere. They'd stay right there in Nazareth of Galilee. That's the way censuses were running all throughout the empire, all through the provinces.

But since Quirinius was running the census through the administration of Herod, a client king, he deferred to Herod's tendency here to cater to Jewish customs and that meant for registration purposes, Jews traveled back to their place of origin, back to their tribe. Even in the midst of this regional violence and chaos; another demonstration of divine sovereignty directing every action, every act of revolt, as well as every act of restraint, all according to his perfect plan.

That's where we come to a third and final point we're going to develop in more detail next week. God is sovereign over global affairs, number one. Regional affairs, number two. And then number three, God is sovereign over individual affairs. Look at verses 3 to 5. "And all went to be registered, each to his own town. 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, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child." As I said, when Caesar Augustus spoke, the world obeyed. People moved. People went in motion. And Joseph obeyed, too. He made the 80-mile journey in the winter with a very pregnant wife from Galilee in the north to Judea in the south, from Nazareth,

GRACE CHURCH

Greeley

little town, to the little town of Bethlehem, because the son of David had to be born in the city of David. And God, even here, is at work in every single detail directing this young couple through his hidden hand of providence, sending them to this very, humanly speaking, insignificant city; prophetically speaking, very important city.

Micah 5:2 says, “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 old, from ancient days.” By the decree of Caesar Augustus, Jesus was born, and, by the way, registered, in a Roman census, in the city prophesied of old to be the birthplace of the true ruler and savior of the world. This “stone cut by no human hand” it started to roll, and it grew, eventually, to become the size of a “great mountain that will fill the whole earth.” More on that next time. Let’s pray.

Heavenly Father, we are grateful to you once again for the detail and the clarity of your word and the sense that we’re supposed to get in reading it. And we’re grateful to you for the

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Greeley

confidence that you give us that you are in charge of all things, every single detail from the large scale to the small. We look forward to what you have to say to us more, next time, next week in the rest of this passage as we see the birth of your beloved son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray, Amen.