

Luke 2:1-7

NIV Harmony 36; Compassionate 31-32

Introduction

1. Today's passage may be a most familiar one to you and one that you read at least once each year.
 - a. Let the word speak afresh and anew with the power of God's work on display in the birth of Jesus.
 - b. It's almost time for us to get out the pieces of the nativity set out of the box and put them together.
 - c. We have been getting the pieces of the nativity out of God's word for the past several weeks.
 - 1) Mary heard God's message sent by the Angel Gabriel that she would miraculously conceive a baby, Jesus, by the Holy Spirit. He would be the Son of God and sit on David's throne forever. Mary obeyed God as she submitted herself as a humble servant of the Lord.
 - 2) Joseph, Jesus' earthly father, also heard and obeyed God's angelic message by accepting Mary as his wife instead of divorcing her and by accepting Jesus as his own son instead of rejecting Him.
 - 3) In this lesson, we are ready to set in place the most important piece of the nativity, Jesus.
 - d. Here is how Luke sets the scene and puts the key pieces of the nativity scene together.

2. Read Luke 2:1-7.

A. Setting of the Savior's Birth (1-5)

1. "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree (Gk., *dogma*) that a census (Gk., *apographestai*) should be taken of the entire Roman world." (1)
 - a. "In those days . . ." refers to the period known in history as the *Pax Romana*. The peace of Rome lasted about two hundred years (27 BCE – CE 180) as the Roman Empire dominated the western world.
 - b. G. Campbell Morgan elucidates, "Caesar Augustus was the first Roman emperor. His real name was Gaius Octavius. He was a great-nephew of Julius Caesar. The word Augustus is significant. That was his title. He took the name Caesar by courtesy and by adoption. In process of time the title Augustus was dropped and the title became Caesar. . . . Augustus, [is] derivable from the word Augur; and consequently indicating a religious sanction. He was moving towards that which happened subsequently, the claim of deity on the part of the supreme ruler of the Roman Empire" (G. Campbell Morgan, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 34).
2. Luke parenthetically explains, "(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)" (2)
 - a. Warren Wiersbe comments, "Rome took a census every fourteen years for both military and tax purposes, and each Jewish male had to return to the city of his fathers to record his name, occupation, property, and family" (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Compassionate*, 31).
 - b. Robert Stein adds, "This is the *crux interpretum* due to the historical problems incurred in this text. These problems include the lack of an extrabiblical reference to a universal census of the whole Roman Empire and the unusual nature of Joseph's returning to this birthplace for the census and Mary's normally unnecessary presence at the census. The date of the census causes the most difficulty. . . . It must be confessed that there is no easy explanation at the present time for this historical problem of the census date, but some new evidence might in the future vindicate the historical accuracy of Luke on this point" (Robert Stein, *Luke* in NIV, 105-6)
 - c. Charles Erdmans proposes another reason for Luke's statement when he says, ". . . these facts are mentioned by Luke not so much to fix the date of the birth of Christ as to explain how this occurred in Bethlehem when the home of his parents was in Nazareth. Only a legal necessity would have made them willing to take such a journey at such a time, but thus it appears that the emperor of the world was concerned unconsciously in the fulfillment of divine prophecy concerning the Savior of the world" (Charles Erdmans, *The Gospel of Luke*, 32).
 - d. The ultimate purpose of this census in Palestine was for the collection of taxes since Jews were exempt from Roman military service. The Romans wanted to know how many people there were and where to send the tax bill.
3. Luke noted the general submission of the Jews to the Roman Empire when he said, "And everyone went to their own town to register." (3) – Caesar commanded, and the people obeyed.

4. "So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David." (4)
 - a. Joseph literally went up since the elevation of Nazareth is 1,100 ft and Jerusalem is up at 2,500 ft.
 - b. The distance from Nazareth to Jerusalem is 85 to 90 land miles depending on the route taken.
 - c. Luke clarified the reason that Joseph went up from Nazareth to Bethlehem was because ". . . he belonged to the house and line of David." (4)
 - d. Bethlehem was the hometown of King David. Bethlehem means "house of bread."
 - e. Wiersbe notes it was ". . . the ideal birthplace for the Bread of Life (John 6:35). Its rich historic heritage included the death of Rachel and the birth of Benjamin . . . the marriage of Ruth, and the exploits of David. It is worth noting that the name *Benjamin* means 'son of my right hand,' and the name *David* means 'beloved.' Both of these names apply to our Lord, for He is the Beloved Son (Luke 3:22) at God's right hand (Ps. 110:1)" (Wiersbe, 32).
5. "He went there to register (Gk., *apographestai* – This same word is translated as "census" in Lk 2:1.) with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child." (5)
 - a. Why would Joseph take Mary, who was nearly full-term, with him for a tax registration?
 - 1) Perhaps he took her to avoid the ridicule and wagging tongues of people in Nazareth.
 - 2) Perhaps Mary was not welcome in her parents' home or any other home in Nazareth.
 - 3) Perhaps Joseph felt the need to ensure that Mary was safe in trying and uncertain circumstances because he alone was committed to care for her and her child no matter what.
 - b. Morgan writes ". . . the really insignificant person in the drama is the little puppet in the city on the seven hills, called Caesar Augustus; and the significant personalities are the woman in whose womb tabernacles the Son of God, and the man guarding her. They went up, because Caesar had issued an edict. Why did he do it? Matthew answered the question. . . . 'It is written through the prophet.'" (Morgan, 35).
 - 1) The Prophet Micah had prophesied, "But you Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old from ancient times" (Mi 5:2).
 - 2) These words of prophecy would soon be fulfilled with the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.
 - c. We assume there was a donkey for Mary to ride, but maybe not. Donkey or not, it was still a long hard trip for a man with a pregnant wife in her ninth month.

B. The Birth of Jesus (6-7)

1. "While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born." (6)
 - a. As we noted earlier, the exact date of Jesus' birth is unclear, but it came in God's time, at just the right time. Most likely Jesus was born sometime between 6 to 4 BCE, prior to Herod the Great's death.
 - b. Paul put it this way to the Galatians, "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Gal 4:4-5).
2. Mary ". . . gave birth to her first-born (Gk., *prototokon*), a son" (7a)
 - a. Jesus was not simply Mary's first child but so much more.
 - b. Morgan writes, "Firstborn does not mean only first in time; it means also first in place, first in order, first in importance. In the New Testament He is called 'Firstborn of creation.' He is called 'Firstborn from the dead.' He is called 'Firstborn among many brethren.' The Son of God. That is what happened in that manger. There in that little town of Bethlehem Ephrathah, the son of God, in human form, had entered the stream of human history" (Morgan, 36).
3. Mary ". . . wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger." (7b)
 - a. There were no doctors, nurses, or orderlies. There was only Mary and Joseph and the Son of God.
 - b. Mary wrapped the baby in swaddling cloths that were most likely taken from her own clothing.

- c. Mary and Joseph laid Baby Jesus “. . . in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them” (7c)
- 1) “manger” (Gk., *phatne*) refers not to a baby’s cradle but to an animal’s feeding trough. It most likely was a hollowed out rock.
 - 2) Why would they place Jesus in a feeding trough?
 - a) Literally Luke says, “. . . because there was not for them a place in the unburdening place” (*ouk ‘en autois topos en to katalumati*)
 - b) The word translated as “guest room” (NIV) or “inn” (KJV) in Greek is *katalumati* which comes from a root word means “unburdening.” It is a word used figuratively and points to the place where the “. . . the straps and packs of the beasts of burden are unbound and taken off; or, more correctly from the fact that the traveller's (*sic*) garments, tied up when he is on the journey, are unloosed at it end)” (Source: <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/kataluma.html>).
 - c) Morgan notes, the *kataluma* “. . . was merely an enclosure, just walls into which travellers (*sic*) might drive their cattle for the night, and in which sometimes there were apartments in which they themselves might rest; but no traveller (*sic*) could obtain food there. There was water, always, water, but no food, no host, no entertainment. There was no room even there. There was no room even in the enclosure for cattle” (Morgan, 36).
 - 3) Erdmans notes, “Their exclusion from the inn was not due to any lack of hospitality; much less did it express hostility to Jesus; it was due simply to the crowded condition of the town. However, it is suggestive of the obscurity and discomfort and poverty of Joseph and Mary” (Erdmans, 32).
 - 4) The *kataluma* where Jesus was born may have been a cave in a hillside that was used as a barn.
 - a) The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is built over a cave believed to have been the place of Jesus’ birth. There is also a stone trough there that is said to have been His manger bed.
 - b) “The glory of it, the wonder of it. When He came He passed the court, and passed the palace, and passed the dwelling-place, and passed the inn, and passed the kataluma; and was born into this world so low down that no baby can ever be born lower” (Morgan, 36).
 - 5) Notice that there is no recorded encounter with an innkeeper, as we often see in Christmas pageants. There is no mention of animals being present. There is no drummer boy. There are not even any angels and shepherds, yet. It is only Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. The core of the nativity scene is in place. Jesus has been born.

C. Questions/Thoughts for Reflection

1. Frequently, God takes what seems to be small and insignificant and uses it in a mighty way to reveal His love and to bring glory to Himself.
 - a. He brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus not by the command of a Roman Emperor but in fulfillment of His own ancient, prophetic word.
 - b. He brought forth the Savior in humble Bethlehem, a backwater village just outside great Jerusalem.
 - c. He brought forth the Savior not as a mighty warrior but as a meek and helpless babe.
 - d. He entrusted His child not to royalty but to the care of a peasant girl and a humble carpenter.
 - e. His child lay not on silks in a royal nursery but on the prickly straw of a feeding trough wrapped in the homespun cloth of common man.
2. Praise God for making room for you not in a cattle stall but in the courts of heaven!
3. Thank God for His strange ways by which He sent Jesus to be our Savior!
Share "Strange Way to Save the World" from *O Little Town of Bethlehem* cantata by Mauldin & Smith.

Strange Way to Save the World

Don Koch, Mark Harris, and Dave Clark

I'm sure he must have been surprised at where this road had taken him.
'Cause never in a million lives would he have dreamed of Bethlehem.
And standing at the manger, he saw with his own eyes,
the message from the angels come to life.
And Joseph said, "Why me? I'm just a simple man of trade.
Why Him, with all the rulers in the world?
Why here, inside this stable filled with hay?
Why her? She's just an ordinary girl.
Now I'm not one to second guess what angels have to say,
but this is such a strange way to save the world."

To think of how it could have been, if Jesus had come as He deserved,
there would have been no Bethlehem, no lowly shepherds at His birth.
But Joseph knew the reason Love had to reach so far,
and as he held the Savior in his arms, He must have thought,
"Why me? I'm just a simple man of trade.
Why Him, with all the rulers in the world?
Why here, inside this stable filled with hay?
Why her? She's just an ordinary girl.
Now I'm not one to second guess what angels have to say,
but this is such a strange way to save the world."