

Text: Luke 2:1-20

Title: The Birth of Messiah

Truth: God sent His Son into the world to save it.

Date/Location: Sunday 9/3/2023 at FBC

I. A Difficulty with the Bible? v. 1-2

- A. Historian Luke has often been charged with an error in tying the census to Quirinius. Faith ensures us that God would not permit an error in his word. That faith is, as always, well-founded faith because it rests in God, who cannot lie or err. Consequently, for me, this is a thing that I might have stressed about years ago, but it is sort of academic now. It is a waste of time to argue about it because Luke is simply too obviously a good historian for this to be some huge error. But some more information is available, and I'll mention it just now in case this question has bothered you.
- B. Our trust that this passage accurately records truth is also historically justified faith because historical data appears agree with Luke. Before we get there, however, note that Quirinius is attested to be governor of Syria in 6-9 A.D. This is too late for the birth of Jesus because it was after Herod's death, which historians place at either 4 B.C. or 1 B.C. (As an aside, Herod did not live long after the birth of Jesus, so that Joseph and Mary did not have to reside in Egypt for a significant length of time.)
- C. An archaeological finding in 1764 near Rome showed that apparently Quirinius had two terms as governor. It is during his earlier term that it appears Christ was born, sometime between 6-4 B.C.
- D. Questions about the census abound. Was it for taxes? Population count? I cannot say for sure; perhaps it had multiple purposes. When did it happen? Historians seem to be comfortable that there was a census around 6 A.D. But there could just as easily have been one 10 years earlier. (We have a census every decade in the United States.) Luke does indicate that the census "first took place" or "was the first registration" implying a second or more occurrences of a similar event. If we go back a decade or more, we can find evidence of a decree for a census in 8 B.C. and it may have taken a couple of years for that to be completed, particularly if there were logistical or political difficulties involved. This would put the earlier census right around the time of the birth of Christ.
- E. In the end, the difficulty dissolves because there is a reasonable explanation for it. Luke was closer to the events than we are: within 30 years and perhaps during his lifetime. Now, this does not guarantee

accuracy, as any historian will tell you, but Luke's care is evident and makes his accuracy far more likely than not. Furthermore, we need not think that we are obligated to satisfy every critic to the nth degree.

II. An Upheaval, v. 3-5

- A. Any parent recognizes the challenge that Joseph and Mary went through as first-time parents. What a challenge for them, in the 8th or 9th month of pregnancy, to have to travel 50+ miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. On the modern road system in Israel, it is 90 miles and takes about 2 hours by car. In the first century, with the hill country intervening, it would be very difficult for someone who was fit and athletic, not to mention pregnant. It would have taken many days.
- B. All this trouble was because the government made a bureaucratic decree. Could not the counting have been done elsewhere? But God had ordained that Messiah would come out of Bethlehem!
- C. I imagine—or least I hope—the young couple experienced some joy thinking that they would appear in these official government records as married (essentially, if not completely). This was probably their first trip together too—which would be somewhat of an adventure despite the difficulties!
- D. As an aside, I wonder what ceremonial things they did to memorialize their marriage...or if there were no such niceties and instead Joseph had to bear the (misunderstood) stigma of a baby born before the appropriate time. Joseph was a good man and was not willing to make a spectacle of Mary—and that was *before* he knew what was really going on. Afterward, he may have had to suffer the shame heaped upon him by people not so righteous and not so well informed about the situation. Sometimes righteousness has that kind of cost because no one else understands all the ins and outs of the situation. The righteous one just quietly takes it on the chin and soldiers on. Think of Jesus. Quiet as a lamb. But if only His persecutors would have understood, they would not have killed the Lord of glory. They would have been horrified at what they were thinking about doing. But He took it silently, without reproach. Only He understood the full implications of what was happening.

III. The Birth of Jesus, v. 6-7

- A. The account is, as has often been written, simple and unadorned. From the world's perspective, another mother had another baby, and it was no big deal. She wrapped him up to keep the little one warm and snug, like every mom and dad does. She had her "firstborn," by which Luke implies

that she had other children, which the text of Scripture records that she did. All of this indicates how normal, how *human* was the birth of the Messiah.

- B. The main difference with this birth: no one offered a room in their home, or space in their room in the inn, for the pregnant mother to have the baby. It is shameful, really, but even this accomplished the will of God for our Savior to be of lowly birth. Jesus was the lowly teacher, the lowly king, the one with lowliness of mind (Matt. 11:29, 21:5; Phil. 2:3-5). His life illustrates for us that God prizes humility and hates pride. Pride is a pernicious and sometimes subtle sin that hides itself under layers of invisibility. On this subject, see Psalm 119:21; Prov. 6:17, 15:25, 16:18-19, Rom. 1:30.
- C. About that character trait of pride...notice to whom God announced the birth of His Son.

IV. The Shepherds and Mary, v. 8-20

- A. God did not send angels to Herod, or to the Roman governor, or to the Caesar, or to the Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees, chief priests, elders, or San Hedrin, or to the wealthy people of the Jewish nation. God sent the angels to *shepherds*. In the commonly-held social credit system, they were very low—speaking in modern terms, they were the lowest of blue-collar workers. They were looked down upon as dirty and poor. Yet God sent the angel to tell *them* of the salvation that He was providing through the Messiah. See 1 Cor. 1:26-27 for more on this idea of God taking the message to the lowly. You can tell a person is proud if they do not make significant room in their hearts for Jesus.
- B. The message of the birth of Jesus is a bundle of good tidings to all people because His birth was the birth of the Savior for all humanity. Their message was not one to bring fear or judgment, but salvation—John 3:17.
- C. A throng of angels joined the messenger angel and praised God with a couple of statements. The first was, “Glory to God in the highest.” He deserves maximum glory because of the wisdom in providing for the rescue of humans from their plight in sin and death. He deserves glory for His kindness and grace in reaching down to humanity to lift those who trust in Him.
- D. The second statement has become the occasion for debate. Most Greek manuscripts contain text translated this way: “And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”

From manuscripts favored by most Biblical scholars, the ESV has: “and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

A single letter in Greek makes the difference—some manuscript copies having that letter and others not. No worries about this. We can certainly see an expression of God’s kindness toward the entire world here; but the peace of God truly only comes upon those individuals whom he favors with it. If you have a life of turmoil inside your mind, it may well be that you lack that peace that comes from the Savior’s work.

E. The shepherds visited the child and his parents and then spread the word widely. Those who heard wondered at all this.

F. The other person I want to focus on is Mary. Verse 19 along with 2:51 show her mindset, like that of Jacob in Gen. 37:11. All that was happening she treasured and pondered in her heart. Play this out in your mind: how mom would cherish these events and think about them over the course of the remainder of her life.

Conclusion

I wish that I could unlock your mind and put these things in there and turn on the “treasure and ponder” switch. I cannot do that. God can, however. And you have a part to play in it. About these most significant human events you have a choice to treasure them or reject them. A choice to ponder them or ignore them. A chance to believe them or scoff at them. An opportunity to be grateful or dismissive. You can consider them carefully as the days pass by, or the days can pass you by until you perish in your sin.

We have here before us true history—it really happened that a man came from God. All the evidence we see later in Scripture points in the direction that He was extraordinary, unique, different than every other man. Christians embrace that this uniqueness points to His deity, that He in fact is Lord of heaven and earth, that he died for sinners and rose again from the dead. That’s the *whole point* of Christmas—that Jesus came to save His people from their sins.

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