

Luke 2: 1-20—¹In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ²(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³And everyone went to his own town to register. ⁴So 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. ⁵He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. ⁸And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ^[a] the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.’ ¹³Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.’ ¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.’ ¹⁶So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. ²¹On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived. ²²When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the Law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord,’ ²⁴and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: ‘a pair of doves or two young pigeons.’”

Luke 2: 1-20—¹**In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree**

- Caesar Augustus, the grandnephew of Julius Caesar, who ruled from 27 B.C. to A.D. 14.
- One of the outstanding characteristics of Augustus was his administrative and organizational abilities.
- What Augustus did here was not simply to conduct a census, but to institute an system of regular, predictable censuses.
- *Hendriksen*: “...what the emperor actually ordered was not just one census but a regular system of censuses: a registration with a view to taxation that would occur at equal time intervals.”¹ Note verse 2.

that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

- In the Roman Empire censuses were taken periodically for two purposes:
 1. The purpose of assessing taxation levels
 2. To discover who was available for compulsory military service.
 - Although the Jews were exempt from military service.
- Such censuses were taken every fourteen years from A.D. 20 to A.D. 270.

¹ William Hendriksen, *Luke*, in the *New Testament Commentary* series (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 138.

- Why did Caesar Augustus choose right then to decree the census?
 - **Galatians 4:4** “But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law...”
 - **Ephesians 1:10** “to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ...”
 - **Proverbs 21:1**—“The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.”
 - The OT had prophesied that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, so Joseph had to get Mary there.

²**(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)**

- **Note:** For many years it was believed that this account in Luke was fabricated two or three hundred years after the death and resurrection of Christ.
 - It was widely held that such a person as Quirinius never existed but that it was a name made up by a redactor hundreds of years later.
- However, in the early 1900s, in an archeological dig, a large plaque was unearthed that had the inscription of one “Quirinius, Governor of Syria.”
- Later objections arose that, according to Josephus (Antiquities, XVIII.1), Quirinius began as governor in Syria in 6 A.D. to “make an assessment” about a certain Judas who had instigated a rebellion; not 8 B.C.
- However, William Ramsay discovered that Quirinius was ‘governor’ in Syria both before and after the birth of Christ.²
- Luke was right!
- An additional objection has been raised that it is “extremely unlikely” that every man had to go to his own city to be enrolled. However, archeologists have discovered actual governmental edicts. Here is one from Egypt:
 - “Gaius Vibius Maximus, Prefect of Egypt orders: ‘Seeing that the time has come for the house to house census, it is necessary to compel all those, who for any cause whatsoever are residing outside their districts to return to their own homes, that they may both carry out their regular order of the census, and may also diligently attend to the cultivation of their allotments.’”³

³**And everyone went to his own town to register.**

- The trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem was roughly 90 miles.

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.**

- This was a clear requirement for the Messiah: He had to be a descendent of David AND that he had to be born in Bethlehem.

⁵**He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷and she**

² With brief interruptions, Quirinius functioned as a military governor in Syria from 12 B.C. to 16 A.D. See William A. Ramsay, *Was Christ Born in Bethlehem?* (no publisher given, 1898), 129, 132; and A. T. Robertson, *Luke the Historian in the Light of Research* (New York: 1923), 123.

³ A. Deissmann, *A Light from the Ancient East* (New York, 1927), 270, 271, including figure 51. See also, F. G. Kenyon, and H. I. Bell, *Greek Papyri in the British Museum*, Vol. III, London, 1907, 125; also quoted in William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1956), 15.

gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

- Why was there no room in the inn?
 - The usual answer because Bethlehem was overcrowded with people who had returned to be registered for the census. However, that answer is probably incomplete.
 - More likely, the town was filled with the officials and soldiers of the Roman government that had come to take the census.
 - Jews had an aversion to the too close of interaction with non-Jews. They would have quartered them as far as possible from private homes and in something public.
- BTW, don't be too hard on the inn-keeper. There simply wasn't room. What was he supposed to do?

⁸And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

- *Question:* Was Jesus actually born on December 25th?
 - *Answer:* No
- So then why December 25th? In fact, why do we celebrate Christmas at all?
- Only in relatively recent times, the past 200 years, has Christmas even been celebrated by most Christians.
- Concern about pagan origins?
 - *Question:* Does anyone know what the original holiday on December 25th was called?
 - *Answer:* Saturnalia
 - It was a pagan celebration that was observed by both the Greeks and the Romans
 - It was a weeklong festival of self-indulging debauchery
 - As far back as history is recorded, midwinter festivals were held in Babylon and Egypt.
- Actually, Christ was not born on December 25th (Shepherds were watching their flocks in the fields—they would not be doing that in the winter).
 - Most likely this was in the springtime from what we know of Romans census practices.
- Early church leaders wanted to counteract the ancient wild festival of the solstice.
- In 125 AD, Telesphorus, the bishop of Rome, declared that church services should be held to memorialize the nativity of Christ.
 - Still no day was set aside as his official birth date.
 - The first Christmas services were actually held in September, during the Jewish Feast of Trumpets (modern-day Rosh Hashanah)
 - Eventually, the most common date for celebrating Christ's birth was January 6th—Epiphany.
 - The fact that the church did not choose to designate a single date for Christmas indicates how little emphasis was placed on this celebration.
 - Until the 4th century the big holiday was Easter
 - Many of the pagan festivals continued on these early years.
- In 320 Pope Julius grew tired of seeing the birth of Christ celebrated on so many different days, he officially specified December 25th as the official date.

- Five years later, Constantine the Great, introduced Christmas as an immovable feast on December 25th.
- But change did not come quickly.
 - The vast majority of the people continued to celebrate the pagan holiday. This went on for over a thousand years.
- The holiday was marked by looting, vandalism, alcoholism, and a general mean-spiritedness.
- In fact, Christmas celebrations were outlawed by the Puritans because of the fact that it resembled Mardi Gras far more than anything sacred.
 - i. In most of the world, especially in early England and America, Christmas was not a time of worship, prayer and reflection; it was a day for singing bawdy songs, drink rum, and riot in the streets terrorizing citizens
- Even in the early United States Christmas was not celebrated.
 - Beginning in 1789, and on each Christmas for the next 67 years, Congress met on December 25th.
 - During these meetings no one stopped to acknowledge Jesus' birth.
- One place where things were different was Germany.
- Germany has a much longer history of celebrating Christmas
- The real change came when in 1840 Queen Victoria married her German cousin Prince Albert.
 - "Their relationship was one of great love and admiration. Together they [had] nine children - four sons and five daughters: Victoria, Bertie, Alice, Alfred, Helena, Louise, Arthur, Leopold, and Beatrice."⁴
- Albert brought many of the reverent, family-oriented Christmas traditions with him to England.
- Soon his family was celebrating Christmas with many of the German traditions, and because this was the royal family the traditions quickly caught on.
 - December 25th was chosen because it was a pagan holiday that the Christian church attempted to take over
 - Concern about too much hype?
 - Disneyland:

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
hail th' incarnate Deity,
pleased as man with men to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel.
Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the new born King!"

⁴ <http://www.victorianstation.com/queen.html>. Additionally, In 1837 Queen Victoria took the throne after the death of her uncle William IV. Due to her secluded childhood, she displayed a personality marked by strong prejudices and a willful stubbornness. Barely eighteen, she refused any further influence from her domineering mother and ruled in her own stead. Popular respect for the Crown was at a low point at her coronation, but the modest and straightforward young Queen won the hearts of her subjects. She wished to be informed of political matters, although she had no direct input in policy decisions. The Reform Act of 1832 had set the standard of legislative authority residing in the House of Lords, with executive authority resting within a cabinet formed of members of the House of Commons; the monarch was essentially removed from the loop. She respected and worked well with Lord Melbourne (Prime Minister in the early years of her reign) and England grew both socially and economically.

Adam's likeness, Lord, efface,
 Stamp Thine image in its place:
 Second Adam from above,
 Reinstate us in Thy love.
 Let us Thee, though lost, regain,
 Thee, the Life, the inner man:
 O, to all Thyself impart,
 Formed in each believing heart.
 Hark! the herald angels sing,
 "Glory to the New-born king!"⁵

- Shepherds were despised by the 'orthodox people' of the day. They were not able to keep the details of the ceremonial law; they could not observe all the meticulous hand-washings and other regulations.
 - The result was that regular people (not to even mention the religious leaders) looked down on them as the most base element of society.
 - They were not allowed to give testimony in the courts.⁶
- Incidentally, it is very possible that these shepherds were in charge of the flocks from which the Temple offerings were chosen.
 - It is an intriguing thought that the shepherds who looked after the Temple lambs were the first to see the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world.

⁹An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

- This is the universal reaction of humanity to angelic beings—fear.
- The 'glory of the Lord' is light that comes from God's resplendent being that shines forth. Normally veiled, on this particular evening, God allowed His visible presence to be seen by men.

¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

- The good news is the gospel. It was not simply for the Jewish race (which they frequently thought); rather it was (and is) for all kinds of people. There is no people group exempt.

¹¹Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

- The name 'Jesus' means savior.
- What does Jesus save from?
 - Unfulfillment?
 - Many people find themselves working in jobs that they never would have chosen when they were younger. They don't find the fulfillment in life they were looking for.
 - Enslaving habits?
 - Compulsive eating disorders?
 - Bondage to pornography?
 - Uncontrollable anger?

⁵ http://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/hark_the_herald_angels_sing.htm#Note01.

⁶ Hendriksen, 149, footnote 116.

- Fear (of all sorts)?
 - Are these the types of things that Jesus saves us from?
- What Jesus saves us from is the penalty of our sin.

¹²**This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."**

¹³**Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, goodwill to men on whom his favor rests."**

- Peace on earth. What does that mean?
 - Is it the cessation of hostilities between kingdoms, countries and nations?
 - Is it amicable relations between you and your neighbor? Your relatives?
 - According to Romans 5: 10; Col. 1:21 we were enemies of God because of our sin.
 - It is the cessation of hostilities between us and God.
 - According to the Bible we were born into this world with a relationship with God already established. It was a relationship of hostility.
- **Philippians 3:18**—"For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.
- **Romans 8:7**—"the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.
- **Colossians 1:21**—"Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.
- **Ephesians 2:3**—"Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.
 - God views our attempt at independence from Him as insurrection
 - **John Piper:** "If all the universe and everything in it exist by the design of an infinite, personal God to make his manifold glory known and loved, then to treat any subject without reference to God's glory is not scholarship, but insurrection."⁷
- The good news of the gospel is that God has declared an end to the hostilities.
 - God has declared that even though we are guilty of cosmic treason, He has truncated the war and pronounced peace. As a token of His goodwill He has offered the greatest gift available in heaven or earth: not the end of suffering in the world, or bad-habit destroying power, etc. He has offered His very Own Son. Jesus Christ the Lord.
- The gospel is *not* simply about Jesus being born, it is about everything he came to do.
 - **His Birth:** is about God condescending to become like us (human)
 - **His Work:** Upholding God's law perfectly
 - **His Death & Resurrection:** Taking our penalty upon Himself
- The gospel is the news that although God was extremely angry with us for our sin, Jesus came and took upon Himself the punishment that justice demanded.
 - What was the punishment that justice demanded: Death.
- Jesus is the sign that though God was angry He intensely loves His people.
 - Isn't God love? Yes, but it is a holy & just love; a loving justice.

⁷ John Piper, *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God's Delight in Being God* (Sisters: Multnomah, 2000), 298.

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." ¹⁶So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child,

- Spreading the word was simply the fulfillment of their joy.
- **Desiring God:** "...the most obvious fact about praise—whether of God or anything—strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honor. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise.... The world rings with praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game...My whole, more general, difficulty about the praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us...what we delight to do, what indeed we can't help doing, about everything else we value. I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation."⁸

¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

- **Jonathan Edwards:** "God glorifies Himself toward the creatures also in two ways: 1. By appearing to . . . their understanding. 2. In communicating Himself to their hearts, and in their rejoicing and delighting in, and enjoying, the manifestations which He makes of Himself. . . . God is glorified not only by His glory's being seen, but by its being rejoiced in. When those that see it delight in it, God is more glorified than if they only see it. His glory is then received by the whole soul, both by the understanding and by the heart. God made the world that He might communicate, and the creature receive, His glory; and that it might [be] received both by the mind and heart. He that testifies his idea of God's glory [doesn't] glorify God so much as he that testifies also his approbation of it and his delight in it."⁹

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958), 94-95.

⁹ Jonathan Edwards, "Miscellanies," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13, ed. Thomas Schafer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 495, miscellany #448.