

The Birth of Jesus Christ

Luke 2:1–20 (ESV)

INTRODUCTION: The passage before us today is one of the most familiar of all of Christian scripture - The Christmas Story. I can hardly read it without hearing the voice of Linus in the background beginning with, *“Light’s please”*.

I have found that the most familiar passages are often the most difficult to preach. Every Pastor of every denomination of Christianity has read this text aloud, often many many times. Some of you will almost be able to quote it from memory.

It is to our advantage, however, that we are looking at it apart from all of the trappings of Christmas. No cinnamon in the air, no tinsel, no ornaments adorning trees, no bells jingling.

Like a priceless piece of furniture, today we will sand of the thick coats of lacquer and see the text as it actually is, or at least as it was, on that night when Christ was born.

My hope is to present this text to you under three perspectives -

1. The Historical
2. The Theological
3. The Practical

Let’s begin with...

1. The Historical Nature of Christ’s Birth -

TEXT: Luke 2:1–21 (ESV)

¹ In those days a decree went out from **Caesar Augustus** that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration when **Quirinius** was governor of Syria.

Notice that Luke begins by rooting this event in actual history. This did not happen, “Once upon a time”, or, “a long time ago in a land far, far, away.” Luke is doing the work of a historian not a writer of fables.

Immediately, we notice that there are some aspects of this narrative that are unfamiliar to those of us who did not have the benefit of a *“Classical Education”*.

- **Modern education** focuses on a common core of information that prepares students to pass exams.
- **Classical education** gives you the building blocks of learning. You become familiar with the language of the ancients, the history of the Greeks and Romans.

This was the education that produced the founding fathers of this Country.

When **Alexander Hamilton** entered King’s College in 1773, he was expected to

already have a mastery of Greek and Latin grammar, be able to read three orations from Cicero in the original Latin, and be able to translate the first ten chapters of the Gospel of John from Greek into Latin.

While I am grateful for my public school education - it did not equip me to study ancient texts like the scriptures.

- **World History** was taught by an assistant football coach who preferred to show reruns of Saturday Night Live than dig into the annals of ancient Rome. We had a superficial understanding at best.
- **Geography** wasn't much better. Growing up in rural Alabama, the boundaries of my world ran from Nashville to Birmingham. I wasn't sure where Rome was but I figured it was west of Mississippi.

Let me help you get your bearings.

[MAP - Roman Empire]

The first red star is Rome - it was there that the Empire was ruled by **Gaius Octavius Caesar**, the adopted son of Julius Caesar.

The red star to the right is the land of Israel. The territory promised to Abraham and his descendants forever.

Rome was the forth of a series of Empires envisioned by the **Prophet Daniel**. Remember, he had a vision of a great statue, with a head of Gold, a chest of silver, a torso of bronze, then legs of iron.



- The Golden head represented the **Babylonian** Empire.
- The Silver Chest represented the **Medo-Persian** Empire.
- The Bronze Torso represented the **Grecian** Empire.
- Then the legs of Iron represented the **Roman** Empire that would be split in half east and west.
- We await the final empire a 10 nation federation indicated as feet and toes of clay.

Incidentally - ***understand that scripture doesn't present culture as evolving in a positive direction - but rather devolving from Gold to Clay.***

Luke tells us that the Birth of Christ happened during the time of Caesar Augustus ruling over the Roman Empire which would have been from **31 BC – 14 AD**.

Then we see in the text that **Quirinius** was governor of Syria. [MAP 2 - Israel under the Herod's]. Syria is in red, that was the nearest region not ruled by a Herod. Which is likely why Luke used Quirinius as a point of reference. Then we see **NAZARETH** and **BETHLEHEM**. [LEAVE MAP UP]



Quirinius held Governorship in Syria on two separate occasions. The first between 12BC and 2BC. Considering Herod the Great was still living when Christ was born, **This would place the birth of Christ in late November of 5 BC.** ¹

The massive enterprise that was Rome required a immense cash flow to remain in power. The process of taxation was the life blood of the Empire. In order to properly plan the budget of the empire, regular census's had to be taken.

³ And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David,

That raises the next point not only the Historical nature but the...

2. The Theological Nature of Christ's Birth -

Joseph was of the house and lineage of David. What is the significance of that?

- **ADAM** - Well as you read your Bible you will see that sin came into the world with the first human couple, they reproduced thus the entire human race was affected and infected by sin. But immediately after the fall - God promised that the SEED of the woman would somehow make things right.
- **ABRAHAM** - There were roughly 2,000 years from Adam to Abraham. God made a covenant with Abraham - God promised that through the seed of Abraham the entire world would be blessed. Abraham had a son named Isaac, Isaac had a son named Jacob (also known as Israel).
- Israel had 12 sons, the 12 tribes of Israel. ***God would have to choose one of those 12 boys to be the tribe that Messiah would come through.***

¹ Paul L. Maier, "The Date of the Nativity and the Chronology of Jesus' Life," in Chronos, karios, Christos: Nativity and Chronological Studies Presented to Jack Finegan [ed. J. Vardaman and E. M. Yamauchi; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989], 113-30

JUDAH - Toward the end of Genesis we read the story of Joseph (one of the 12 sons). Joseph is sold into slavery taken to Egypt where he grows very powerful. A famine hits the land of Abraham and 10 of the remaining brothers go to Egypt in search of food. There they find Joseph in power, but they do not know who he is. NOW, it appears that Joseph is being set up to be the tribe through which Messiah would come.

But in Gen. 44 something happens. Joseph tricks the brothers and makes it look like Benjamin stole a golden cup. The penalty was to be DEATH. Benjamin was to die. But then Judah speaks up out of love from his father Jacob and says, "Let me bear the penalty and let the boy go".

Perhaps it was then that Ancient of Days leaned over the portals of glory and said, "there is our man!", the one who offered his life for another.

From then on - Judah would carry the scepter of Israel. David was of the tribe of JUDAH. Messiah would be the LION OF THE TRIBE OF JUDAH.

When Israel blessed his sons, of Judah he said **Genesis 49:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

Israel's second King, the man after God's own heart was of the tribe of Judah - King David. So this is no accident that both Mary and Joseph is of the line of Judah, a descendant of David.

- **Incidentally** - There were roughly 2000 years from Adam to Abraham, roughly 2000 years from Abraham to Jesus. How long has it been since our Lord walked the Earth - roughly 2000 years. It may be prudent to expect something significant to happen in our lifetime.

Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

Now, remember we have already seen that Joseph and Mary were betrothed, which was just as legally binding as marriage. Yet they had not yet been intimate. The child Mary carried was of the Holy Spirit, the Son of God.

⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

It is difficult to overstate how understated this place was. The birth likely happened in cave prepared to keep their animals - sheep, donkeys and the like, out of the elements. So it was dry, it was warm, but it was very common.

One commentator suggested it was the first century equivalent to a **10 minute oil change, lube shop**. Imagine the King of all Kings born in such a place. Then laid in a basket that had been previously used to hold valve stems. Wrapped in grease rags.

Theologians use the term **VULGAR** to describe the setting, meaning common, ordinary, belonging to the masses. Jesus's birth was common, belonging to the masses.

No matter how low your station in life might be, Jesus can relate. He does not look down on you, he does not demean you. His birth was the definition of ordinary.

BUT, it seems that His HEAVENLY Father wasn't ok with it JUST being ordinary. So He dispatched a Legion of Angels to announce the birth.

⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

Well, we've looked at the Historical and Theological nature of Christ's birth... notice thirdly

3. The Practical Nature of Christ's Birth -

When reading a text, we must always ask, "so what?" What are we to do with this information? What difference should this make in our lives? I think the text tells us.

In verse 15 and following there are 3 ways people responded to the birth of Jesus Christ. I would think these are the ways God would have us respond as well.

a. We Ought to Investigate these Things

¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.

Whatever else a shepherd may have been, they were never the elite of society. It was a job for young children and very old men. It was the lowest rung on society's ladder. But when they had the Heavenly encounter - **they had to see it**.

Later, Wise Men, Magi from the East would arrive - but by that time Jesus was walking and Mary and Joseph were in a house. The first visitors were these shepherds.

Perhaps you hear the story of Christ's birth as one would hear a fairy tale. Perhaps you are skeptical about pregnant virgins, new stars, angels filling the heavens. Fair enough - but please consider that all of the events surrounding this birth had been foretold to the smallest detail, long before it occurred.

- Prophecy told of when Messiah would arrive.
- Prophecy told of where Messiah would be born.
- Prophecy told of How wise men would come and adore Him.
- Prophecy told of the virgin nature of His birth.
- Prophecy told of the necessity of Him being born in Bethlehem.
- Prophecy told of the tribe and lineage He would be born into.

At the very least, one might find that ironic that every detail happened just as the Prophets foretold.

In the words of that **great Theologian Alanis Morissette**... "A little too ironic, don't you think"?

Young men, I know that some of you will go down the rabbit hole on YouTube or TikTok to investigate the possibility of aliens or the latest conspiracy theories... Don't let the fact that your parents went to church, cause you to miss the greatest rabbit hole of all time. The birth of the man who split time in half.

Investigate his birth...see if these things are true...

b. Contemplate these Things

¹⁸ And all who heard it **wondered** at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary **treasured** up all these things, **pondering** them in her heart.

What does it mean to wonder, to treasure, and to ponder? The Psalmist had a word for it, "**Selah**" which means something like *mediate on this... draw conclusions from it*.

What does it mean if the God of the Universe has stepped into TIME and SPACE and became a MAN? What if any difference should that make in your life?

What would cause Him to do such a thing? Did he who spoke the Universe into existence have to learn to say, "**Abba and Ema**", Hebrew for Daddy and Mommy?

Well as we read the rest of Luke we will discover that this all happened because of you and FOR you. If that is the case - does this story and this person have His proper place in your reality?

Investigate these things...

Contemplate these things...

c. Acclaim these Things

If these things are true, then the only reasonable response would be to Praise, Honor, and Glorify God with all that is within you. That is exactly what the Shepherd did...

²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

CONCLUSION/INVITATION:

That is what the best of Christmas hymns help us to do -

O holy night!

The stars are brightly shining

It is the night of the dear Savior's birth!

Long lay the world in sin and error pining (how long? 4000 years at this point)

Till he appear'd and the soul felt its worth. (Has your soul felt its worth? That God would do this for you?)

A thrill of hope the weary soul rejoices (Oh how it wearies the soul to try to fix one's self, to jump through religious hoops and find that sin remains... but now one has come to fix all of that - do suffer in our stead) We feel the thrill of hope our weary soul rejoices

For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn! If Christ has come, this changes everything! It is the most glorious morning since the first day light shone on the face of the Earth.

HOW MIGHT WE RESPOND???

Fall on your knees

Oh hear the angel voices

Oh night divine

Oh night when Christ was born