

# **To Seek and To Save the Lost**

## **The Birth of Jesus Christ**

*Luke 2:1-7*

**Rev. Freddy Fritz**

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# The Birth of Jesus Christ

## Scripture

We are studying the Gospel of Luke in a series of sermons I am calling, "To Seek and To Save the Lost." Today I would like to study one of the best-known passages in all of Scripture. It is read every Christmas in almost every church all over the world. It is Luke's account of the birth of Jesus in Luke 2:1-7.

Let us read about the birth of Jesus Christ in Luke 2:1-7:

**<sup>1</sup>In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup>This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup>And all went to be registered, each to his own town. <sup>4</sup>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, <sup>5</sup>to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. <sup>6</sup>And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. <sup>7</sup>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. (Luke 2:1-7)**

## Introduction

One commentator says, "If you try to point out something to a dog, the dog will often look at your finger instead of at the object you're trying to point to. This is frustrating, but it illustrates a natural mistake we all make from time to time."<sup>1</sup>

It's a mistake that many people make when thinking about the Christmas story. What do people in our culture think

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 21.

about when they think of Christmas? They think about gifts and angels and shepherds and wise men and animals and a manger and parents and, oh yes, a baby. Most people in our culture really do not understand why Jesus was born.

And yet, Jesus' birth is the most significant birth in all of history. Our western calendar recognizes this by dividing history into events *Before Christ* (BC) and events *Anno Domini* (AD), that is, After Christ.

Today I would like to examine the birth of Jesus Christ. I would like to explain the details of his birth, and then conclude with the reason for the birth of Jesus Christ.

## Lesson

So, let's learn about the birth of Jesus Christ so that we can understand the reason for his birth. Let's learn about:

1. The Decree by Caesar (2:1-3)
2. The Destination of Joseph (2:4-5)
3. The Delivery by Mary (2:6-7)

### I. The Decree by Caesar (2:1-3)

First, we learn about the decree by Caesar.

#### A. *The Person Behind the Decree (2:1a)*

First, notice the person behind the decree.

Luke began his account of the birth of Jesus by stating that **in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus** (2:1a). **Caesar Augustus** was not his name, but rather his title. **Caesar** means "emperor," and **Augustus** means "majestic, sublime, highly revered."

**Caesar Augustus** was born on September 23, 63 BC, and his name was Gaius Octavius. His grandmother was Julius Cae-

sar's sister, making Octavius his grandnephew. After Julius's assassination in 44 BC, Octavius learned that Julius Caesar had adopted him and made him his heir. In keeping with Roman custom, he took the name Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus (usually shorted in English to Octavian).

Octavian's ascension to the throne in 31 BC marked the beginning of the Roman Empire. The Roman Senate conferred on him the title of **Augustus**. He restored unity and peace after a long period of destructive civil wars, and ushered in the *Pax Romana*, an era of peace and prosperity throughout the entire Roman world that lasted for two centuries. He is arguably the most significant person in Roman history.

**Caesar Augustus** died in 14 AD, having ruled for almost 45 years. He left a legacy of peace, prosperity, wise administration, and many public works. The network of excellent roads he built enabled the easy spread of the gospel by Christians after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus.

### *B. The Extent of the Decree (2:1b)*

Second, observe the extent of the decree.

The decree that went out from Caesar Augustus was for **all the world** (2:1b). This phrase refers to the whole Roman Empire and not to the entire world. One commentator said that "to the Romans, their empire was the entire world and they considered the other parts of the earth to be relatively unimportant."<sup>2</sup>

### *C. The Purpose of the Decree (2:1c)*

Third, look at the purpose of the decree.

The reason Caesar Augustus issued his decree was so that

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<sup>2</sup> Richard C. Blight, *An Exegetical Summary of Luke 1-11*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), 77.

all people residing in the Roman Empire **should be registered** (2:1c). This registration, or census, had two purposes. One was to register people so that they could be taxed, and the other was to register young men for military service. Since Jews were exempt from Roman military service, this registration was to be used as a basis for collecting taxes.

*D. The Time of the Decree (2:2)*

Fourth, notice the time of the decree.

Luke said that **this was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria** (2:2).

According to the Jewish historian Josephus, **Quirinius** was governor of Syria in 6-9 AD, and conducted a census in 6 AD (which Luke is aware of and mentions in Acts 5:37). But this cannot be the census Luke is referencing here, since it occurred *after* the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC, and it is known that Jesus was born *during* Herod's reign (cf. Matthew 2:1; Luke 1:5).

Various plausible solutions have been proposed. Some interpreters believe that because **governor** (*hēgemoneuō*) was a very general term for "ruler," it may be that **Quirinius** was the *administrator* of the census, but not the governor proper.

Another solution is to translate the verse, "This was the registration *before* Quirinius was governor of Syria," which is grammatically possible. This would make sense because Luke would then be clarifying that this was before the well-known, troublesome census of 6 AD.

One additional proposal is that Quirinius was governor for two separate terms, though this lacks confirming historical evidence. Though the year cannot be determined with complete certainty, there are several reasonable possibilities that correspond well to Luke's carefully researched investigation (Luke 1:3-4) and to the historical and geographical accuracy

evidenced throughout Luke and Acts. The most reasonable date for the decree is late in the year of 6 BC or early 5 BC.<sup>3</sup>

*E. The Providence in the Decree (2:3)*

And fifth, see the providence in the decree.

Whatever the precise date, the registration was ordered, **and all went to be registered, each to his own town (2:3).**

And here is where Luke teaches us about the wonderful providence of God. The most powerful ruler on earth was demonstrating his power by decreeing this registration. However, God was using Caesar Augustus to accomplish his own redemptive plan. As one commentator describes it, “Caesar Augustus’ relentless arm stretched out to squeeze its tribute even in a tiny village at the far end of the Mediterranean. Thus it came about that a village carpenter and his expectant teenage bride were forced to travel to his hometown to be registered for taxation.”<sup>4</sup>

Although Caesar Augustus would never know it, he was unleashing a chain of events that would turn the world upside down. He was causing Joseph and Mary to travel to Bethlehem, which is where the prophet Micah said that the Savior would be born. Micah wrote, “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 of old, from ancient days” (5:2).

What is so ironic is that God used Caesar Augustus to get Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem so that Jesus could be born there. God was providentially orchestrating the most powerful man in the world to serve his own divine redemptive plan.

Another commentator said, “For Augustus the taking of

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<sup>3</sup> Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1947.

<sup>4</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 82.

censuses was one of the ways he employed to get control over various parts of his empire. But—and here is the irony of the thing—in the process, as he thought, of tightening his grip on his huge empire, he so organized things that Jesus, Son of Mary, Son of David, Son of God, destined to sit on the throne of Israel and of the world, was born in the city of David, his royal ancestor.”<sup>5</sup>

God is providential control of all history. He does not merely rule over the church. He rules over all creation.

## II. The Destination of Joseph (2:4-5)

Second, we learn about the destination of Joseph.

### A. *The Compliance of Joseph (2:4a)*

First, notice the compliance of Joseph.

In response to the decree that went out from Caesar Augustus **Joseph also went up from Galilee** (2:4a). Joseph was a law-abiding citizen. And so he complied with the decree that was issued.

Scripture tells us that we must obey the government (Romans 13:1). This does not mean that we are to obey laws that are clearly unbiblical. However, it is a mark of righteousness to obey the laws of the land, even if they cause inconvenience.

### B. *The City of Destination (2:4b)*

Second, look at the city of destination.

So Joseph also went up from Galilee, **from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called**

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<sup>5</sup> David Gooding, *According to Luke: A New Exposition of the Third Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 52.

**Bethlehem** (2:4b). The journey from **Nazareth** to **Bethlehem**, which is only a few miles south of Jerusalem, is almost 100 miles. It was a tough, arduous journey, made even more difficult because of Mary's pregnancy.

*C. The Lineage of Joseph (2:4c)*

Third, observe the lineage of Joseph.

The reason Joseph had to go to Bethlehem is **because he was of the house and lineage of David** (2:4c). **David** was from Bethlehem and, as we shall see in Luke 3:31, Joseph was a descendant of **David**.

God was orchestrating the fulfillment of his promise in the Old Testament that David's greater son, who would be ruler in Israel, would be born in Bethlehem, as Micah said (5:2).

*D. The Betrothed with Joseph (2:5a)*

Fourth, notice the betrothed with Joseph.

Of course, Joseph did not travel alone. He went to Bethlehem **to be registered with Mary, his betrothed** (2:5a). It is not clear whether Mary had to register as well. Nevertheless, she went with Joseph. An angel had visited Joseph when he wanted to divorce Mary. So, he also knew that Mary was pregnant with the Son of God, the Savior of sinners. Knowing the significance of the child Mary was carrying, he undoubtedly wanted to be on hand to help her when the baby was born. Furthermore, it is possible that Mary faced severe criticism in Nazareth because she claimed to have become pregnant by the Holy Spirit and not by any man. Whatever the reason for her journey, she was with Joseph on the trip to Bethlehem.

Notice also that Luke said that **Mary** was Joseph's **betrothed**. Betrothal was like our modern engagement, except that it was much more binding. One had to get a divorce to



break off the betrothal. So, they were **betrothed** but not yet married.

*E. The Concern of Joseph (2:5b)*

And fifth, observe the concern of Joseph.

Joseph would no doubt have been concerned about Mary because she **was with child** (2:5b). She was clearly near the end of her pregnancy, but the decree of Caesar Augustus had forced them to make the lengthy journey to Bethlehem.

### III. The Delivery by Mary (2:6-7)

And third, we learn about the delivery by Mary.

*A. The Time of the Delivery (2:6)*

First, notice the time of the delivery.

Luke said that **while** Joseph and Mary **were** in Bethlehem, **the time came for her to give birth** (2:6). Luke did not say how long they had been in Bethlehem, or whether they were still waiting to register, or whether they had registered and were still staying in Bethlehem so that Mary could give birth before they traveled back to Nazareth.

*B. The Child of the Delivery (2:7a)*

Second, look at the child of the delivery.

Luke simply said that Mary **gave birth to her firstborn son** (2:7a). There were no angels, no heavenly trumpets, and no voices from heaven announcing the birth of the Son of God. She was alone with Joseph, her young betrothed, and far way from family and friends, when she **gave birth**.

One commentator vividly imagines the birth of Jesus. He

says, “If we imagine that Jesus was born in a freshly swept, county fair stable, we miss the whole point. It was wretched—scandalous! There was sweat and pain and blood and cries as Mary reached up to the heavens for help. The earth was cold and hard. The smell of birth mixed with the stench of manure and acrid straw made a contemptible bouquet. Trembling carpenter’s hands, clumsy with fear, grasped God’s Son slippery with blood—the baby’s limbs waving helplessly as if falling through space—his face grimacing as he gasped in the cold and his cry pierced the night.”<sup>6</sup>

One of the best-known Christmas carols is “Silent Night.” But as Andrew Peterson has written in his song, “Labor of Love,”

It was not a silent night.  
There was blood on the ground.  
You could hear a woman cry  
In the alleyways that night  
On the streets of David’s town.

And the stable was not clean.  
And the cobblestones were cold.  
And little Mary full of grace,  
With tears upon her face,  
Had no mother’s hand to hold.<sup>7</sup>

Luke carefully notes that the child was Mary’s **firstborn son**, not her only son. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that Jesus was Mary’s only child and that she remained a perpetual virgin until her death. But that is not what this passage teaches. Furthermore, Matthew 1:25 says that Joseph “knew her not *until* she had given birth to a son.” Clearly, that implies that Jo-

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<sup>6</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 83.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Volume 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 71.

seph and Mary had normal marital relations after Jesus was born. And finally, Matthew 13:55-56 tells us that Jesus had four brothers and at least two sisters, “Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us?”

In addition to making the point that Mary had at least six other children after Jesus was born, Luke wanted to point out that as the **firstborn son** Jesus had primary right to the family inheritance. And this is particularly important because Jesus was now heir to the throne of David, his ancestor.

*C. The Care After the Delivery (2:7b)*

Third, notice the care after the delivery.

After Jesus was born Mary **wrapped Jesus in swaddling cloths** (2:7b). Strips of cloth were used to bind the baby snugly for warmth, security, and to keep his limbs straight. The point is that Jesus was treated like any other baby. He was not dressed in royal robes but in the normal wrappings that other babies wore.

*D. The Place for the Delivery (2:7c)*

And fourth, observe the place for the delivery.

Having given birth to Jesus, Mary **laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn** (2:7c). Luke does not tell us any more than that.

Undoubtedly, Bethlehem was crowded with people who had also come to be registered. There simply **was no place for them in the inn**. The poor innkeeper is portrayed as a heartless, unkind man who turns away a young teenager about to give birth. But, again, the Bible does not say that.

I am inclined to think that the innkeeper offered them a

place in the stable with the animals of the travelers, because after the birth of Jesus Mary **laid him in a manger**. A **manger** was usually carved out of stone, and food for the animals was put into it. One commentator said, “When Jesus came into the world, he was born in the most comfortless conditions—a smelly, filthy, chilly shelter, surrounded by noisy animals.”<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the birth of Jesus Christ as set forth in Luke 2:1-7, we should thank God for the birth of Jesus.

But why should we thank God for the birth of Jesus? Because Luke tells us the reason for the birth of Jesus. Commentator Philip Ryken notes that the birth of Jesus shows us three truths.<sup>9</sup>

*First, the birth of Jesus shows us the depravity of our sin.* When the Son of God was born in Bethlehem, hardly anyone took notice of his birth. To be sure, God told a few people who did recognize Jesus as the Son of God. But most people were so busy and preoccupied with their own concerns that they were unaware of what God was doing in the world.

And throughout his entire ministry people rejected him. Oh, people by the thousands flocked to see him do miracles and heal the sick, but as soon as he talked about submission and suffering, they drifted away. He was “was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (Isaiah 53:3). It wasn’t just in Bethlehem that there was no room for Jesus. As one commentator put it, “When Christ first came among us we pushed him into an out-

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<sup>8</sup> John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Luke 1–5*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 150.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Volume 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 71-75.

house; and we have done our best to keep him there ever since.”<sup>10</sup>

Sadly, many people today make no room for Jesus. As another commentator observed, “What the inhabitants of Bethlehem did in their ignorance is done by many today in willful indifference—they refuse to make room for the Son of God. They give no place in their feelings, their affections, their thoughts, their views of life, their wishes, their decisions, their actions, or their daily conduct.”<sup>11</sup>

The birth of Jesus shows us the depravity of our sin. It shows how unwelcome Jesus is to us until God, by his grace, reveals him to us as our Savior and our God.

*Second, the birth of Jesus shows the humanity of our Savior.* In very simple terms Luke tells us that Jesus was born to a young mother in very difficult circumstances. Mary held the body of a real human being when she held Jesus. He really was a person.

This is truly amazing. The God of the universe entered our time and space in the person of a little baby. He set aside the prerogatives of deity, and accepted all the limitations of our human condition. He became one of us so that he could sympathize with us and, more importantly, so that he could save us. It was necessary that Jesus be fully human so that he could fully obey God on our behalf and fully offer his body as a sacrifice for our sin. Bible commentator Philip Ryken said, “Salvation comes through faith in God incarnate—the Son of God who lived, and died, and lives again in true humanity.”<sup>12</sup>

*And third, the birth of Jesus shows us his humility in our salvation.* We need to remember that God is infinitely superior to us. He is the Creator, and we are his creatures. For Jesus to

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<sup>10</sup> J. R. H. Moorman, *The Path to Glory: Studies in the Gospel According to St. Luke* (London: SPCK, 1960), 19.

<sup>11</sup> Norval Geldenhuys, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1951), 102.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Volume 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 73.

leave the perfection of heaven, and the perfection of interaction within the Trinity, to enter into our fallen world was utter humiliation. It was infinite condescension on the part of Second Person of the Trinity to be born in this world. Bishop J. C. Ryle said, “We see here the grace and condescension of Christ. Had he come to save mankind with royal majesty, surrounded by his Father’s angels, it would have been an act of undeserved mercy. Had he chosen to dwell in a palace, with power and great authority, we should have had reason enough to wonder. But to become poor as the very poorest of mankind, and lowly as the very lowliest, —this is a love that passeth knowledge. It is unspeakable and unsearchable. Never let us forget that through this humiliation Jesus has purchased for us a title to glory.”<sup>13</sup>

The birth of Jesus shows us his humility in our salvation. He humbled himself in his birth, and he humbled himself in his death. As the Apostle Paul said in Philippians 2:8, “he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” And the reason for the humiliation of Jesus is our salvation.

So, let us thank God for the birth of Jesus because the birth of Jesus shows us the depravity of our sin, the humanity of our Savior, and his humility in our salvation. Amen.

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<sup>13</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke, Vol. 1* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1879), 52.

# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons)
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## Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

*Answers for Life!*

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: [Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org](mailto:Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

Web site: [www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org](http://www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

**PRAYER:**

O Lord our God, we thank you for the birth of Jesus. Although his conception was miraculous, his birth was normal, like any other baby. And yet, his birth is the most significant birth in the entire world. Jesus entered our human existence in order to save sinners such as us. O Lord, if there is anyone here today who is not yet a Christian, please grant that person faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And for all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God!