

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 12/8/02 Brad Brandt

Luke 2:1-7 "A Birth the World Ignored"**

Main Idea: When we look at the account of the birth of Jesus in Luke 2:1-7, we discover three unique characteristics of our Lord. When you get to know the truth about the birth of Jesus it will change your life.

I. We see the might of Jesus (1-3).

A. Caesar Augustus was in control.

1. He issued a decree.

2. Everyone obeyed him.

B. Caesar Augustus wasn't really in control.

1. The Lord is in charge of history.

2. The Lord is in charge of your life.

II. We see the majesty of Jesus (4-5).

A. He was born into obscurity.

B. He was born into royalty.

1. Do you believe Jesus is the king?

2. Is Jesus your king?

III. We see the meekness of Jesus (6-7).

A. The Lord humbled himself in His birth.

1. Mary delivered him.

2. Mary wrapped him.

3. Mary laid him in a manger.

B. The Lord expects us to humble ourselves.

1. You must humble yourself to be saved.

2. You must humble yourself to live the Christian life.

3. You must humble yourself to appreciate the significance of Christmas.

I'm concerned about something. Many people don't know the truth about the birth of Jesus. To complicate things many people who *think* they know the truth about the birth of Jesus *don't*. The fact of the matter is, Christmas today is a mixture of biblical truth, church tradition, folk custom, and commercialism.

A little boy and girl were singing their favorite Christmas carol in church the Sunday before Christmas. The boy concluded "Silent Night" with the words, "Sleep in heavenly beans." "No," his sister corrected, "It's not beans. It's peas."

Sometimes the confusion is humorous. Sometimes it's not so funny. Indeed, there are eternal consequences for not knowing the truth about the birth of Jesus.

We may doubt that in this day of relativism where we're told that truth doesn't matter. "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe something," the experts say. If you believe that Jesus was born of a virgin, fine. If you believe he entered the world as the result of an illicit relationship between Mary and some soldier in Galilee, that's fine too. And if you want to believe that Jesus is merely the spirit-brother of Lucifer, as the Mormons teach, one god in a pantheon of gods, born through physical incest between Mary and God the Father, that's okay, too. So we're told in our pluralistic society. As long as you feel good about Christmas, why get hung up on the particulars? The important thing is that we have a holiday that warms our souls.

Wrong, wrong, wrong! The truth does matter. The Bible says that if you want to have a relationship with God you must know and believe the truth about Jesus. Certainty is linked to truth. That's why we're beginning a series today I've entitled, "The Truth about the Birth of Jesus," an exposition of Luke 2.

This week: "A Birth the World Ignored" (2:1-7)

Next week: "A Birth Heaven Applauded" (2:8-14)

In two weeks (evening service): "A Birth That Can Change Your Life" (2:15-20)

I'm convinced that we need to take a close look at the *truth about the birth of Jesus*, and that Luke can help us do just that.

Dr. Luke wrote the gospel of Luke. According to his introduction (1:1-4) he dedicated it to a special friend named Theophilus. It's not clear whether Theophilus was a believer. Undoubtedly he had heard about Jesus. But apparently he had doubts. Maybe he couldn't buy the part he heard about Jesus being born of a virgin. Or maybe he had questions about Jesus' resurrection. Maybe it all sounded far-fetched to him.

This much we know. Luke was burdened for his friend. He wanted Theophilus to come to know personally the security that comes to a person who comes to know the historical Jesus. So Luke set out on an investigation. He researched. He interviewed people who were eyewitnesses of Jesus. And finally he wrote a biography of Jesus Christ.

Why? He tells us in 1:4, "So that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." What did Luke want his friend to find? *Certainty*. That involves intellectual conviction, yes, but it's more than that. It has to do with security. True security, true assurance is available only to those who believe in Jesus Christ.

Luke didn't write this biography to entertain us. Luke never intended his treatise to be reduced to children's bedtime stories. Luke wants to help us to get to know the real Jesus. And once we do, we'll gladly place our complete confidence and trust in Him and have *certainty*.

The passage before us this morning is very familiar. Many of us learned to quote it as children. Some of you read it every year as part of your family Christmas tradition. "And 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 (Luke 2:7)."

But here's the problem. The words sound familiar, but the meaning is foreign. For many people, the story of Jesus' birth is practically all they know of Christianity. But think about something. How many verses did Luke devote to the story of the birth of Jesus? There are seven. Do you know how many verses are in his entire gospel? Over 1000! Here's the dilemma. We don't see the connection between the Christ of Christmas and the rest of our lives. We don't know the *whole truth* about the One who was born in Bethlehem.

John Wesley once made this observation, "When I was young I was sure of everything; in a few years, having been mistaken a thousand times, I was not half so sure of most things as I was before; at present, I am hardly sure of anything but what God has revealed to me."

Where must we turn to find the truth? To God's Word, the Bible. Our opinions don't matter, but what God says does. Let's begin to look carefully at the truth about Jesus.

In terms of its structure Luke 2:1-7 includes three scenes surrounding the birth of Jesus. We see the decree (1-3), the destination (4-5), and the delivery (6-7). It's a simple story. But it's also more than a simple story for each scene teaches us something very important about the Christ of Christmas.

When we look at the account of the birth of Jesus in Luke 2:1-7, we discover three unique characteristics of the One who was born. If you don't know them, you can't have *certainty*. But God wants you to know them. Knowing the truth—and accepting it—will change your life.

I. We see the might of Jesus (1-3).

Verse 1 begins, "In those days." Immediately we must ask, "In what days?" Luke just told us which days he had in mind back in chapter 1. The event we're about to consider occurred in the days of Herod the Great (1:5). Herod was king of Judea from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C.

Furthermore, it took place in the days of a priest named Zechariah (1:5b). Those were dark days religiously. God had not spoken to His people for 400 years since Malachi was prophet in Israel. Judaism had turned into an oppressive religious machine. But that was about to change now that "those days" had arrived.

Something else had just happened that set the stage in "those days." Just prior to Luke 2:1 angels made two magnificent announcements. One message was given to Zechariah which said, "You're going to have a son, and you are to name him John (1:13)." The second angelic message was for Mary, "You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus (1:31)." The first birth took place as predicted, as John the Baptist entered the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth. That paved the way for the second birth.

In "those days" something happened. What was it? Verse 1 says, "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world." To appreciate the birth of Jesus we need to know two things about Caesar Augustus.

A. Caesar Augustus was in control. Caesar Augustus was the #1 man in the world at that time. His real name was Caius Octavius. He was a great nephew of Julius Caesar. The word Augustus is significant. When he became ruler of Rome, he didn't want to be called dictator or king. Those titles weren't good enough. So he consulted with the Roman senate and created a new word, Augustus. It was a word with religious connotations, a title which eventually involved the claim to deity.

Augustus Caesar was the most powerful man in the world. What he said went. Not surprisingly, Luke tells us that...

1. *He issued a decree.* He gave this order around the year 8 B.C. What was it? He wanted a census taken. He required "that all the world should be registered," as the KJV puts it.

In the Roman Empire, a census was taken every 14 years. The purpose was twofold. One, the census served for tax purposes. And two, the census served to discover the names of people who were liable for compulsory military service. Since the Jews were exempt from serving in the Roman military, the census in Israel was primarily for tax purposes.

By the way, in the past some scholars have objected that Luke 2:1 is not historically accurate. But archaeologists have actually discovered census documents in dust heaps of Egyptian towns.

Dr. Luke, being the analytical investigator that he was, was a stickler for details. Look at verse 2, "This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria." Why this detail? Remember Luke's goal of *certainty*. This isn't a make-believe fable. This is real history. Luke records real names. There were real rulers in real places. Jesus was a *real person*. In fact, know this. Jesus lived in the *real world* we call home. He was no fictitious character made up by His deluded followers.

You say, "Why does the historicity of this account matter anyway?" It matters because our sinful world needed a substitute. We needed someone who could walk in our shoes and reverse the curse of our sinful choices. That's what Jesus did. Of that you can be *certain!*

What was the result of this decree by Caesar Augustus? Verse 3 says...

2. Everyone obeyed him. "And everyone went to his own town to register."

Someone has said that this was the darkest hour the world has ever seen. On the throne in Rome sat a man. He ruled with totalitarian authority. No man or woman dared object to his order. When he commanded "all" the world to be registered, it was so. No exceptions, not even a pregnant woman. Caesar Augustus ruled with absolute sovereign power. He was in control.

But was he really? No. The fact is...

B. Caesar Augustus wasn't really in control. Oh, he thought he was, sure. He thought he ruled. He thought he alone made the decree that would send a peasant man and his espoused wife to the village of Bethlehem. But little did he know that he was merely a pawn in the hands of the sovereign King of the universe! He was oblivious to the fact that the womb of a Jewish girl named Mary was the tabernacle of the Son of God Himself. He had no idea that his edict was already predetermined, 650 years before he uttered it.

Listen to the prophecy of Micah 5:2, "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."

There's scene #1 of the birth narrative, the decree. What characteristic of Jesus do we see in it? We see His *might*. Behold the sovereignty of Christ, my friend! You can be sure of two things.

1. *The Lord is in charge of history.* When you read Luke 2 it sounds like Caesar Augustus is in control. He barks and everyone jumps. When you read today's newspaper you may wonder who is in control. What's going on in this world? The Lord knows. The Lord is in charge of history and is preparing things for His second coming just like He did for His first.

Did you realize that the baby Mary carried in her womb simultaneously held the universe in His hands?! That's what Colossians 1:15-19 indicates. Did you realize that Jesus Christ is sovereign over the affairs of this world today? He is sovereign over the decisions of rulers like Saddam Hussein, as He is over our president, George Bush.

And did you realize that Jesus Christ is sovereign over the details of your life right now? Yes. Let me make it personal...

2. *The Lord is in charge of your life.* You are here today by His decree. He has something in store for you.

In the birth account we see the sovereign *might* of Jesus. There's more.

II. We see the majesty of Jesus (4-5).

The second scene focuses on the destination. "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. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child (4-5)."

The decree of Caesar Augustus obviously applied to Joseph too. He headed to his ancestors' stomping grounds for the registration. The trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem was 80 miles. Means of travel for a peasant carpenter like Joseph were primitive. But Bethlehem was the city of his ancestors, so to Bethlehem he must go.

Notice a few geographical terms used by Luke. First he says Joseph "went up." Though heading south, he went up in elevation. He left "Galilee" and headed for "Judea," both terms refer to regions in Israel. He left "Nazareth" and ended up in "Bethlehem," again these are the names of real places in the first century world.

So that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

However, though Luke gives us accurate history, his intent isn't merely to give us history. He wants to introduce us to a real person, namely Jesus the Messiah. In this second scene Luke informs us of two aspects of Jesus' birth.

A. He was born into obscurity. The Son of God could have picked any home on the planet, but He chose this home, the home of Joseph.

Luke introduces us to Joseph back in 1:27. We actually know very little about this man of God. Matthew informs us that he was a just man (Matt 1:19), a kind man, that he wasn't willing to see Mary endure public disgrace. Yet for the most part he was a behind the scenes kind of man.

Just think of it. We don't know how far along Mary was in her pregnancy when Joseph left Nazareth. But undoubtedly the townspeople knew she was with child. And the rumors and gossip must have been vicious. The embarrassment would continue when this betrothed couple reached Bethlehem. When Joseph filled out the registration papers and next to him stood his nine month pregnant, espoused wife, what could he say? "It's not what you think?" No explanation would make sense to carnal minds.

In fact, you may recall that later in Jesus' ministry He was called a "glutton" and a "drunkard" (Matt 11:19). If you investigate the Jewish background of these terms, you'll discover something. Among Palestinian Jews, these terms were flung at a person whose birth was illegitimate.

When Jesus entered the world, He was born into obscurity. But there's a second aspect to His birth that Luke emphasizes for us.

B. He was born into royalty. Notice this detail about Joseph in verse 4, "He belonged to the house and line of David."

Why does Luke want us to know that Joseph was a descendent of David? It's because Joseph was Jesus' legal guardian. Joseph belonged to the royal line. So did Mary, for that matter (see the Luke 3 genealogy).

Notice something else. What does Luke tell us about Bethlehem in verse 4? He calls it the "town of David." So twice Luke mentions David in verse 4.

Why is that important? Never before or since had Israel known a king like David! He was a man of God, a true shepherd over God's flock, Israel. And he was a man to whom God gave this promise in 2 Samuel 8:

Verse 8, "Now then, tell my servant David, 'This is what the LORD Almighty says: I took you from the pasture and from following the flock *to be ruler* over my people Israel.'"

Verse 12-16, "When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up *your offspring* to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom.¹³ He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and *I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever*.¹⁴ I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men.¹⁵ But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you.¹⁶ *Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me*; your throne will be established forever."

By Joseph's day, it had been many years since a son of David had ruled in Israel. Anticipation for the Messiah was at fever pitch. The Jews awaited the promised Deliverer. And Luke says, "He's come." When you look at the birth account you discover that Jesus was born both into obscurity and royalty.

What characteristic of Jesus do we see in this episode? Scene 2 presents His *majesty*. He is royalty. He is worthy. He has the necessary credentials to rule the world. He is the son of David. He also has the necessary credentials to rule your life.

That being the case would you answer two vital questions?

1. *Do you believe Jesus is the king?* Do you agree with the biblical record that the One who was born in Bethlehem is the Promised King of kings who will rule the universe for ever and ever? If so, answer this...

2. *Is Jesus your king?* Have you submitted your life to His rule?

Bethlehem means "house of bread." How fitting that the Bread of Life would enter the world there! Know this about King Jesus. He is unlike any other king. He rules, yes, but He meets the deepest needs of His subjects.

That's why He came to earth. He came to do for us what we couldn't do for ourselves. Thirty-three years after the event we're studying, Jesus sacrificed His perfect life on a Roman cross to provide an atonement, a covering for the sins of His people. The King died for His people! Three days later He rose again. One day He will return to this world and rule in righteousness, His people at His side. Is He your king?

If you want to know the truth about the birth of Jesus, there's one more characteristic to consider. We've seen His might and His majesty. In verses 6-7...

III. We see the meekness of Jesus (6-7).

The next two verses are breathtaking in their simplicity. Luke calmly relays the greatest news ever told. *God entered human history.* Luke's record is quiet, very matter of fact.

Verse 6—"While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born." How long were Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem prior to the birth? We don't know. A lot of living involves *waiting*. God gives His people enough light for one step at a time.

Finally the day came, the day of her delivery. Verse 7—"And 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."

Do you see the meekness of Jesus in this? Luke makes it very clear that...

A. The Lord humbled himself in His birth. There never was a greater demonstration of humility than the incarnation. We're told here that the Lord subjected Himself to three actions accomplished by Mary.

1. *Mary delivered him.* She "brought forth her firstborn son."

Luke is very specific. This was "her" son, not Joseph's. And this was her "firstborn" son. He was firstborn in two senses. He was first in TIME, since others would come later. He was also firstborn in another sense. The word means first in IMPORTANCE. The New Testament refers to Jesus as the "firstborn of creation (Col 1:15)," the "firstborn from the dead (Col 1:18)," and "the firstborn among many brethren (Rom 8:29)."

2. *Mary wrapped him.* She "wrapped Him in cloths," in "swaddling clothes."

Luke again is very graphic. Mary wrapped the child. Mary herself did it. There was no one to do it for her. Think of the loneliness of the occasion!

I can't help but wonder what Joseph and Mary were thinking as they beheld the birth of this child. Joseph

had heard the angel say to him, "That which is conceived of her is of the Holy Spirit. . . He will save His people from their sins (Matt 1:20-21)." And Mary heard the angel announce, "Behold, you will conceive and bring forth a son. . . He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest. . . (Luke 1:31-32)." They both knew this was God's anointed Deliverer, the long awaited Messiah.

Yet when He was born, there was no fanfare, only poverty and obscurity and rejection. They must have thought, "He deserves better than this!"

Notice the third action of Mary recorded by Luke.

3. Mary laid him in a manger. She "placed him in a manger."

When God entered the world, He did not come to the household of Caesar, or Herod, or the High Priest. In fact, He chose that which was reserved for animals.

His first stop was a "manger." The same word is translated "stall" in Luke 13:15. It can mean either a feeding trough or an enclosure for animals. Some scholars feel Jesus was born in a cave where animals were sheltered. Others feel Jesus was born in a peasant home. It was common in such homes for the animals to live under the same roof as the people (for two reasons: added heat, and to keep them from being stolen). Still others suggest that Jesus was born in the open air, under the stars, in some roofless cattle pen.

Whichever is right, of this we can be sure. The Lord humbled Himself in His birth.

But why? Why was Jesus placed in a manger? Luke tells us, "Because there was no room for them in the inn." What a sad account! No room. The only place available for Jesus was one usually occupied by animals. J. R. H. Moorman made a fitting observation, "When Christ first came among us we pushed Him into an outhouse; and we have done our best to keep him there ever since."

So ends scene #3, the delivery. Which characteristic of Jesus does this scene convey? We see His meekness, His amazing humility. Everything associated with His birth rings with humility: peasant parents, the donkey trip, the feed trough cradle, the absence of a nurse to help Mary. What a humble birth! What a humble Savior!

Let this sink in, beloved. Jesus humbled Himself. You can't help but see His humility in this story. But did you realize there's a lesson here for us? That's what Philippians 2:5 says, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." And verses 6-8 show us what His attitude was:

"Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!"

Yes, not only did the Lord humble himself in his birth, but...

B. The Lord expects us to humble ourselves. If you want to please God you must humble yourself in three areas.

1. You must humble yourself to be saved. It's humbling to admit, "I'm lost. I'm a sinner. I'm helpless. I can't save myself. I need help." That's humbling, but there's no other way to be saved. Perhaps you are here today and to this point in your life you have refused to humble yourself before God and admit the truth about yourself and Jesus. I exhort you to look at the manger scene. If the Lord would humble Himself in such fashion to provide salvation for you, how can you proudly refuse to humble yourself and receive His gracious offer? Submit to Him right now and He will save you. You must humble yourself to be saved.

2. *You must humble yourself to live the Christian life.* We must humble ourselves every day. "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6)."

Why do we get so hung up on our rights? Our Savior lowered Himself voluntarily. Shouldn't we?

We all know people who aren't in church today because someone slighted them once, or took their seat in the sanctuary, or they got their feelings hurt. It could happen to us, too. But it won't happen, not if we humble ourselves as did our Savior.

Maybe you're struggling with your lot in life right now. Maybe you feel you deserve better—better health, a better family, a better job, better friends. If so, I urge you to think this thought...

There was no room for Jesus in the inn. In fact, throughout his life, there was no room for Jesus anywhere, except one place. Do you know where that was? On the cross.

And He went there willingly. For me. For you. He humbled Himself.

It's no different for us. To be saved, you must humble yourself. To live the Christian life, you must humble yourself.

Something strikes me as ironic when I read Luke 2. Christmas for Jesus was humbling. Not for us. Did you ever stop to think of all the things we do at Christmas that bring attention to ourselves? We receive new clothes and wear them to church and want everybody to notice. We give gifts, sometimes in order to get a gift in return. We decorate our houses with lights, often again to make an impression. Granted, we can do these things for the right motive, but it's a battle, isn't it?

For us Christmas is showy, almost sensational. For the Lord it was humbling. No fancy lights, no elaborate decorations. Just a stable. No audience but a few animals. In fact, His first visitor as we'll see next time was not Caesar, nor Herod, nor the High Priest, but some lower-class, unclean shepherds.

Know this. Just like you must humble yourself to be saved and then to live the Christian life, you must do the same in a third area.

3. *You must humble yourself to appreciate the significance of Christmas.* I challenge you as I do myself. Let's humble ourselves today and then we'll begin to appreciate the real significance of Christmas.