**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**“The Manger Scene - Revisited”**

**Luke 2:1-7**

**December 22, 2024**

From the moment Mary said, “*I am the Lord’s servant, be it done to me according to your word*” (Luke 1:38), her life would never be the same. She gave up any plans she may have had to be a part of the fulfillment of Messianic prophecy. Because she believed God’s Wordand yielded to His will, He performed a miracle in her life so that she would be the mother of the long-awaited Messiah.

God had promised that the Savior would be a descendant of Eve (Gen. 3:15), the seed of Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3) and the star of Jacob (Gen. 24:17). He would come from the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:10) and the family of David (2 Sam. 7:11-16). He would be born of a virgin (Isa. 7:14) in Bethlehem, the city of David (Micah 5:2). All of these amazing prophecies came true, just as the Scriptures said. Mary soon recognized that the fulfillment of God’s promises was growing in her womb.

Both Matthew and Luke tell us the story of the Savior’s birth. Matthew tells it from Joseph’s perspective (Matt. 1:18-25), while Luke tells it from Mary’s (Luke 1:1-20). Thanks to the latest revision of the NIV (2015 and 2020), we now have a better understanding of an important part of Luke’s well-crafted and beloved Christmas story:

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the

entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

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.

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to

her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there

was no guest room available for them.

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Many of us are familiar with this story. It’s an old story, but it is always a new story. God’s people never tire of hearing it, especially during the Christmas season. It’s a story that Luke unfolds in three seamless parts.

**First**, he establishes the social and historical context of the Messiah’s birth (vv. 1-3). He tells us why Joseph and Mary had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem in order to fulfill Micah’s prophecy (5:2). **Second**, he narrates their journey 90 miles south to Bethlehem (vv. 4-5). When they travel “*up from the town of Nazareth*,” Luke doesn’t mean they’re traveling north. He’s referring to the rise in elevation. Bethlehem is 2,350 feet above sea level, surrounded by fertile farmland. It’s a rural, isolated community, five to seven miles from Jerusalem.

**Third**, Luke describes the humble circumstances of Jesus’ birth (vv. 6-7). As we have just read, Mary and Joseph never sought out an “inn.” Nor is there any “innkeeper” who turns them away. Nor is there a stable or wooden shed, as we so often see in modern manger scenes. But none of that is necessary. Luke’s point is that the King of Kings wasn’t born in a palace. His place of birth, as we shall see, was in an ordinary home of some common peasant. He is wrapped in strips of cloth and put to bed in a feeding trough for animals. That bed is in the family living room of the host family who has graciously welcomed Mary and Joseph into their home. That home is in the lowly, little village of Bethlehem.

**A. The Social and Historical Setting (2:1-3):** “*In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register*”.

Caesar Augustus was the greatest of the Roman emperors, and the most powerful ruler of his day. He was a gifted administrator, a famous organizer, a superb military leader, and a great builder. He also gave the world a lengthy period of unprecedented peace (*Pax Romana*) and was the first to recognize emperor worship (“Caesar is Lord”). But in Luke’s story he’s only background material. The real focus of attention is on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea, nearly 1,500 miles away, where what’s *really* important is happening.

Augustus had demanded a census in order to determine how much he could raise taxes. It was customary to return to one’s ancestral home for such a census, and “in Syria, the Roman province in which the Holy Land was located, women 12 years of age and older were required to pay a poll tax and therefore to register” (NIV Study Bible notes, 2008). Mary’s pregnancy aside, this would have been the reason for her to accompany Joseph on the long, arduous trip to Bethlehem.

Luke‘s reference to this being the first census while Quirinius was governor of Syria has raised some historical questions. The first known census under the governorship of Quirinius took place about ten years *after* the birth of Christ (AD 6-9). Luke refers to this later census in Acts 5:37, as does Josephus, the Jewish historian. If we believe that Luke is reporting reliable information, then he must be referring to a different, earlier census during a possible first term of Quirinius’ governorship (6-4BC). Details of this census may have been common knowledge in Luke’s time but are now lost to us.

**B. The Journey to Bethlehem (2:4-5).**  In these next two verses, we see the hand of Providence at work in the long- awaited fulfillment of Messianic prophecy. “*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*.”

Joseph was a descendant of David through Solomon (Matthew 1:6-7, 16), and Bethlehem was “the city of David” because it was the place where David was born (1 Samuel 17:12; 20:6). Mary also was of the house of David (Rom. 1:3) through Nathan, another of David’s sons (Luke 3:31). Both, therefore, would have been required to register in Bethlehem. This journey from Nazareth (in Galilee) to Bethlehem (in Judea) was approximately ninety miles and would have taken them at least 7 to 10 days to travel on foot.

From the world’s perspective, the only reason Joseph and Mary were leaving their hometown of Nazareth was because a man calling himself “Augustus” had required them to register in person for his census. But in God’s providence, Augustus was merely carrying out His plan of redemption. Micah’s prophecy, which the Lord had given to the people of Judah seven hundred years earlier, was about to be fulfilled: “*But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be named among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler over Israel, whose coming forth is from old, from ancient days*” (Micah 5:2). In the words of Dr. Dale Davis, “Emperors can make such fine servants, even if they are utterly clueless about what is taking place.”

**C. The Humble Circumstances of Jesus’ Birth (2:6-7)**. When we come to these last two verses, we will have to set aside our traditional view of the Nativity in light of the simplicity of Luke’s account: “*While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them”* (2:6-7).

The first thing to note is that Luke does not say how long Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem before Jesus was born. “The text neither affirms nor denies the popular image of the couple arriving in Bethlehem just as the baby was about to be born. Luke simply states that the birth took place while they were there (v. 6)” (Walter Liefeld, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary).

As already noted, it’s significant that Luke makes no mention of an innkeeper (popularized by our Sunday School Christmas plays); nor is there any inn. “’No room in the inn,’” writes Kenneth Bailey, “has taken on the meaning of ‘the inn had a number of rooms and all were occupied.’ The ‘no vacancy’ sign was already switched on when Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem” (Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes). But the word that Luke uses is not the ordinary Greek word for a *commercial* inn. There *is* such a word, which Luke *does* use when he tells how the Good Samaritan took the wounded man to an “inn” (Luke 10:34). But in this story (v. 7), he is using a different word. It’s the same word that is translated “guest room” in Luke 22:11, which was the “large upper room” in a private home where the Last Supper took place (Luke 22:12).

This would make perfect sense when applied to the Christmas story. When Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem, they were returning to the village of their origin as descendants of King David. They would have been welcome just about anywhere in town and would have stayed in a private home. But as the latest translations of the NIV read, there was “*no guest room* *available for them*” (v. 7). It was already occupied by other guests who had arrived for the census. Thus, the host family would have graciously offered them the only other room in the house. This would have been the family room, where the entire family cooked, ate, slept, and lived.

At the back of this room there would have been a “manger.” In Luke 13:15, this same word is translated “stall.” This was the feeding trough for the family’s animals, which were often brought inside the family’s living quarters in the evenings, for warmth and protection. This feeding trough, or “manger,” which would have been filled with fresh straw, and was ideal for Mary’s use as a crib when she wasn’t nursing her son. One of our best Christmas hymns has captured the significance of this amazing scene: “Infant holy, infant lowly, for his bed a cattle stall; oxen lowing, little knowing, Christ, the babe, is Lord of all.”

Today, only a small handful of history buffs are familiar with the name, Gaius Octavius. He was the Roman emperor who loved to be called “Augustus” (“supreme ruler”). He really thought he controlled most of his known world. Little did he know that he would be such a “fine servant” of the living God, the one whom God would use to deliver the “Lord of all” to the lowly manger in Bethlehem. “Bethlehem” means “house of bread,” which was the ideal birthplace for Jesus, who would later say, “*I am the bread of life; He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty*” (John 6:35). That’s the real story of Christmas – it’s the story of how the Bread of Life came to the House of Bread, so that those who come to Him and believe in Him may have eternal life.

Many years ago, I saw a Christmas card that explained the true meaning of Christmas. The words of John 3:16 were printed on the front, followed by descriptive phrases after each part of the verse. The message of Christmas reads as follows:

“**For God** (*the greatest Lover*) **so loved** (*the greatest degree*) **the world** (*the greatest company*), **that He gave** (*the greatest act*) **His only begotten Son** (*the greatest gift*), **that whosoever** (*the greatest opportunity*) **believes** (*the greatest simplicity*) **in Him** (*the greatest attraction*) **should not perish** (*the greatest promise*), **but** (*the greatest difference*) **have** (*the greatest certainty*) **everlasting life** (*the greatest possession*). The title of the card simply said, “*Christ – the Greatest Gift*.”

Jesus Christ is the greatest Gift that God could ever offer because He is perfectly suited to meet our greatest need. We are sinners, deserving of God’s wrath and judgment. More than anything else, we need a Savior. Jesus Christ is the only Savior. He lived a sinless life, and He died to satisfy God’s wrath and to secure the forgiveness of sins for all who trust in Him by faith alone. Are we indifferent? Or have we responded to the offer and believed in Christ with all our heart and soul, so that we can now say, along with millions of others, “*Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!*” (2 Cor. 9:15)?



(Taken from Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, Kenneth E. Bailey, IVP Academic, 2008)