

## **Luke 2:1-7 — What Does The Birth Of Jesus Teach Us About God's Love?**

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Merry Christmas! My name is Kurt. I am one of the pastors. I am thankful you can join us as we celebrate the birth of Jesus. Tonight we will learn a little bit about what Jesus' birth teaches us about God's love for us.

We will take a few minutes to look at what is probably one of the most familiar passages in the Bible, Luke 2:1-7. This is the passage we just heard read to us. It is the story of Jesus' birth. Since this is such a familiar story, it is easy for us to read through it so quickly that we miss the significance of the story. I want us to slow down a bit and look at these verses a little closer.

Let's begin with a little backstory. Nine months before Jesus' birth, the angel Gabriel visited the small blue-collar town of Nazareth. He visited a young virgin girl named Mary. She was probably 12-14 years of age. Gabriel told her that she would conceive through the Holy Spirit. She would have a son. That child that would be the Son of God.

When Mary appeared to be pregnant, Joseph, her fiancé, was obviously upset. All he could think of was infidelity. At that time, God broke into his life, just as God broke into Mary's life. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. The angel told him to not be afraid to take Mary as his wife. He was also told to name the child Jesus and that the child would be Immanuel. That is God with us. That means God in the flesh! Joseph was also told about Jesus' mission in life. He would be the one to save his people from their sins. Joseph and Mary were given clear instructions about Jesus' identity and the significance of what Jesus would do in his life.

When we come to Luke 2, nine months have passed. Mary was full-term. She was about to give birth. In these verses, Luke gave us what was happening when Jesus was born. First, he told us what was happening in the world. Second, he told us what was happening in Israel. Third, he told us what was happening in the life of Mary and Joseph. Taken together, they show us God's incredible love for us.

These verses focus on what was happening when Jesus was born, first on the world scene, then in Israel, and finally in the lives of Mary and Joseph.

### **What happened in the world when Jesus was born?**

**In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. Luke 2:1–3 (ESV)**

These verses show us how God orchestrated events on the world scene so Jesus would be born in Bethlehem. It doesn't matter how powerful people are. It doesn't matter if they are willing or unwilling parts of God's plan. God is in charge. He directed leaders on the world scene to make decisions that bring Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem for Jesus' birth.

The first man we meet in these verses is Caesar Augustus. His actual name was Gaius Octavius. He was known as Octavian. Caesar was his title, like king or president. Caesar was not a name. Caesar meant the ruler of Rome. Augustus was not originally his name. It is an adjective. It meant honored one or revered one. The title Augustus was given to Octavian in 27 B.C. by the Roman Senate as a way of honoring him. Before that time he was known as Caesar Octavian. The senate renamed him Caesar Augustus, the revered and honored Caesar.

This honorary title was appropriate in many ways. Caesar Augustus was a brilliant man. He created the Pax Romana. That is the peace of Rome that stretched over most of the world, allowing the Roman Empire to flourish. It spanned from Europe to the Middle East. Caesar Augustus was a gifted and respected leader.

He was so revered that archaeologists have unearthed stones in Roman that have written on them “Caesar Augustus, the savior of the world.” That shows us how highly revered this guy was in Rome. He was considered the savior of the world. Romans also worshipped him as god.

What I find interesting is Caesar Augustus --- who was ruling the world, who was considered by many to be the savior of the world, the man who was worshipped as god --- was completely oblivious to the fact that the one who was truly in charge of world history --- the one who is the true savior of the world, and the one who is actually God --- was born in Bethlehem right under his nose.

Caesar Augustus, who thought he was in charge of the world, had no idea that the true God of the world was actually controlling him. The God of the universe moved Caesar Augustus’ heart so he would declare a worldwide census that would move Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem so Jesus would be born in Bethlehem to fulfill prophecy.

So who was really in charge? Caesar Augustus or Jesus? Caesar thought he was in charge. In reality, God moved his heart into whatever shape he wanted it to be as effortlessly as a child molds a piece of clay. Proverbs talks about this.

The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will. Proverbs 21:1 (ESV)

This is great application for us right now. In our current political climate, with runaway inflation, it is comforting to know our God is in control of world history. He will move the hearts of our leaders in whatever direction he wants them to go in order to accomplish his good purposes. No earthly leader can thwart God's good plans. They only unwittingly accomplish his plans.

Luke also says this was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. This helps us date the census. While we don't know the dates of all Roman censuses, we know there was a Roman census in the year 6 A.D. We also know the Romans typically had a census every 14 years. That would mean this particular census probably took place around 8 B.C.

The purposes of these censuses' were for military conscription and for the paying of taxes. While the Jews were exempt from serving in the Roman military, they were not exempt from Roman taxes. These censuses were used by the Romans to justify raising taxes. As you would expect, the Jews were not thrilled to comply with a census that would help the Romans raise taxes. From what we can tell, the Jews tried to delay these censuses. Sometimes they held them off for two to four years, until non-compliance was not an option. At that point, Rome typically set a hard date for the completion of the census, similar to what April 15 is like for us when it comes to taxes. This seems to be what forced Mary and Joseph to travel 90 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem when Mary was nine-months pregnant. The grace period for the Roman census was over. For the Jews, the census had to be complete, and it had to be completed now! The Romans were done being nice.

Here is what I find fascinating. From the perspective of most people, it looked like the politics between the Romans and the Jews were spinning out of control. Nothing could have been further from the truth. God had their politics under his control. The decision in Caesar Augustus' heart to take the census was put there by God. The delays in taking the census by the Jews were also orchestrated by God. It all worked together to force Mary and Joseph to travel to Bethlehem at just the right time so Jesus would be born in Bethlehem even though Mary and Joseph would have naturally done everything they could to not travel to Bethlehem when Mary was nine months pregnant!

I told you Jesus needed to be born in Bethlehem. The reason he needed to be born in that city is that God had prophetically spoken hundreds of years before that Bethlehem was the city where the Son of God would be born.

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. Micah 5:2 (ESV)

Bethlehem was a tiny town 5 miles outside of Jerusalem. In this no-name little town would be born one who would be the ruler over God's people. Notice how this ruler is different. His coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. That means his origins are in eternity past. The one who has always existed before space and time were created would be born as a child in space and time in the city of Bethlehem. The only one who has existed before space and time began is God. That means this child would be God in the flesh!

Luke 2 also tells us that everyone went to their own city for this census. From what we know, that was not a Roman stipulation. That was a Jewish stipulation. The Jews were very much into genealogies. Look at parts of the Old

Testament and the beginning of Matthew and Luke in your New Testament, and you will see what I mean. If [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com) was around, they would have loved it. Why did the Jews care so much about their genealogy and their ancestors? In the Old Testament, when the Jews conquered the land of Israel under Joshua, different tribes were given different portions of land. It was very important for you to be able to verify your heritage because that gave you land rights. If you could demonstrate that you came from the tribe of Levi, that gave you the right to serve in the temple. For this reason, the Jews kept detailed genealogical records. At this time, those records were kept by scribes in local synagogues. This is why the Jewish leaders directed people to be registered for this census in their hometown. That way, it was not just the Romans that conducted a census, but the Jews were also able to update their genealogical records during the census.

Shortly after this, the Jews moved all genealogical records to Jerusalem instead of keeping them in small-town synagogues. In 70 A.D., when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, they intentionally destroyed hundreds of years of genealogical records when they destroyed the temple. That is why those genealogical records no longer exist.

In these verses, we see God controlling Caesar Augustus' heart, directing him to take a census. God also moved the hearts of the Jewish leaders to delay the census until the Romans lost patience with the Jews and set a hard date for the completion of the census. That is what forced Mary and Joseph to travel to Bethlehem when Mary was nine-months pregnant. God also directed the hearts of the Jewish religious leaders so they would insist that everyone return to their

hometown during the census to update their genealogical records. That is what forced Mary and Joseph to return to Bethlehem for Jesus to be born and prophecy to be fulfilled.

It turned out the hearts of Roman leaders, Jewish leaders, and even the Jewish religious leaders were all being directed by God to fulfill God's good plans. All these leaders did not realize God was directing their desires. Their politics were not out of control, God had their politics completely under control in order to move Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem at just the right time for Jesus to be born.

What a great reminder for us today. While the politics of our country look out of control and many people feel we are living in cultural chaos, we know our God is large and in charge. He will turn the hearts of our leaders in whatever direction he desires in order for his good purposes in this world to be accomplished. Since we know God is large and in charge of world history, we do not fear.

### **What was happening in Israel when Jesus was born?**

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, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. Luke 2:4–5 (ESV)

Here we move from the world scene to the national scene in Israel. This is the travel of Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

It says Joseph “went up” from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in the land of Judea. If you



look at that on a map. The city of Nazareth is on the top of the map. The city of Bethlehem is on the bottom of the map. It looks like they are going down to Bethlehem, not up! Why does the Bible say they went up to Bethlehem, but the map makes it look like they went down to Bethlehem? Do any of the junior high students who had geography know what is happening?

The reason this appears backward is the Bible is not talking about a map. It is talking about elevation change. Bethlehem is almost 2,564 feet higher than Nazareth. That is why it says they went up to Bethlehem. This was not just a 90-mile trip for a woman nine-months pregnant, it was also an uphill trip.

Let's look a little more at the prophecy in Micah that told us Jesus would be born in Bethlehem.

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. Micah 5:2 (ESV)

Remember the significance of what it says. Someone who has always existed from eternity past, from before space and time, would be born in space and time in the city of Bethlehem. That person would become the ruler of God's people.

We know what this means. Does anyone know when this was written? God spoke this through the prophet Micah. He wrote that 700 years before Jesus' birth. That is like somebody writing a detailed description of COVID and the Omicron variant that we are experiencing today in the year 1321. That is crazy! No human being can predict that kind of detail about the future. Only God knows the way history will unfold. Only God can tell us the way history will unfold.



While the world scene teaches us that God controls men's hearts, the national scene teaches us that God controls history. He can say exactly what will happen hundreds of years before it happens!

That brings us to the final verses.

### **What happened in the life of Mary and Joseph when Jesus was born?**

And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 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 2:6-7 (ESV)

We know Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem when Mary gave birth, but do we know where Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem when she gave birth? We have no idea. All we know is there was no room for them in the inn. They were not in a place where people stayed. They had no lodging. They were on the street. They were homeless.

As Pastor Stephen pointed out earlier in this series, Jesus' birth was no different from other births. There was a lot of crying and pain on Mary's part. It was her first child. It was probably a long, painful labor. Even though the Christmas song says, "No crying he makes," that is not true. When he was born, I am sure he cried. Jesus' birth was a normal birth with all the discomfort and pain that comes with having a child. There were no doctors, no nurses, no mother to help, just a 14-year-old girl with a husband in his late teens who had no idea what was going on.

Think of this --- the one who existed before time began, the one who, according to Hebrews 1 created the universe --- was born that night.

...but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. Hebrews 1:2 (ESV)

The one who effortlessly controls the hearts of powerful world leaders, who controls history and determines the way it will unfold, poured all of himself permanently into a human body in the womb of Mary. At that moment, when Joseph held a 7-10 pound baby in his hands, he held in his hands the one who created the universe and was running the universe.

Luke says Mary wrapped him in swaddling cloths. Wrapping a baby in swaddling clothes was typical for the day. It was taking long strips of cloth and wrapping the arms, legs, and body tightly to keep the body warm and protect the child. Do you wonder why the Holy Spirit directed this detail to be included? I will tell you why. It tells us Mary treated baby Jesus just like any other baby. Jesus looked like any other child. He was physically like any other child. He did not glow. He did not have a halo. He did not wear a king's robe. He nursed, just like any other baby. He slept, just like any other baby. He cried when he was hungry, just like any other baby. He filled his diaper, just like any other baby.

When we see those Christmas cards that have Jesus in the manger and he is glowing or has a halo on him, that is not true. The point of the way the Bible describes Jesus' birth is that Jesus did not look differently from any other baby.

When baby Jesus slept, it says Mary laid him in a manger because there was no room in the inn. A manger is a feeding trough for animals. Mary and Joseph were homeless and on the street. They did not have a crib.

From the fact they laid Jesus in a manger, many people conclude that Mary gave birth to Jesus in a stable. We don't know that. It doesn't say anything about a stable. There is tradition, an old tradition, that says Jesus was born in a

cave for animals. We don't know that for sure either. All we know is Jesus was laid in a manger where straw for animals to feed on was kept. This manger could have been inside a stable or cave or it could have been outside under the stars.

Remember that when Mary gave birth to Jesus, she was homeless. Jesus was born around animals in what was the ancient equivalent of a parking lot.

The one who created the universe, who was controlling hearts and history in the universe was not born in a hospital or home. He was born to a homeless mother and stepfather on the street. Jesus came into the world and was born in the most uncomfortable, smelly, cold, and filthy conditions. He was born to some of the most vulnerable people.

The same God who controls the hearts of rulers, the same God who controls history, the same God who is worshipped in heaven, loves us so much that he came down, all the way down, to become one of us. He came down to completely identify with us in every way and be born to the lowliest of us. He came to completely identify with us in every way so he could be the perfect substitute to die for us, in our places, to save us. That is how much God loves you!

If you think the smell of the manure, the foul smell of the dirty animals and body odor were terrible at his birth, that is not nearly as repulsive as a little more than 30 years later when Jesus chose to hang on the cross and absorb into himself the filth and stench of your sin and my sin as he died in our places for our sin. He experienced the wrath of God against our sin that we deserved. That is how much Jesus loves us!

## The Contrast

In these verses, we see an amazing contrast. We see Jesus as the one who is so powerful that he controls the hearts of the most powerful people in the world. He is also so powerful that he controls history and the way it will unfold. He is also the one who loves us so much that he set aside the beauty of heaven to humble himself to take on a body just like ours forever. The creator of the world humbled himself to become one of us to die to save us.

Let me summarize what these verses teach us and what kind of response God deserves from us.

**The greatness of Jesus and the humility of Jesus demands the worship of Jesus.**

We understand the greatness of Jesus. We understand the humility of Jesus in his birth and his death, but what does it mean to worship Jesus? Worship sounds like a churchy word.

There are a lot of people here tonight. Imagine that Tom Brady or John Elway were with us. I know what would happen after church. Immediately, you would want autographs. You would break out your cell phone and want a picture with one of those great quarterbacks. You would tell your friends about what happened and you would be filled with excitement about what happened. Those are all forms of worship.

Here is what we must realize. What Tom Brady and John Elway have done with football is nothing compared to what Jesus has done for me and you. How can we not be thrilled with Jesus? How can we stop thinking about Jesus and thanking Jesus for what he has done? Why would we not be more excited about Jesus than any present under the tree? That is what it means to worship Jesus.

Tonight, there are two groups of people in this room. Some of you don't know Jesus. If that is you, tonight, I ask you to ask Jesus' death on the cross to save you from your sin and to make you into a new person. If you ask him honestly in your heart, he will. When Jesus makes you into a new person, that is the best gift you can receive at Christmas.

Others of us know Jesus, but we have lost excitement for Jesus. We are not enthusiastically worshipping Jesus. If that is you, my prayer is that you go away from tonight with a greater enthusiasm for Jesus after seeing the extent of his greatness and the humility that he went through in order to save us because he loves us.



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