

“It Came to Pass”

Luke 2:1-7

What came to pass? This passage tells us Cesar Augustus decreed that all the Roman world should be taxed. It came to pass, but that is not what we are primarily interested in this morning. This passage also tells us that Mary and Joseph travelled from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It came to pass. But again, that’s not what we are primarily interested in this morning. The incredible event that is recorded in this passage is down in verse 7: It came to pass that Mary “brought forth her first born son.” Jesus, the Messiah, was born. Everything that came before had been building up to this event. All history since has looked back on the life of Jesus Christ. He was born. The Messiah had come. God’s promised Redeemer had arrived. It came to pass.

I. The Decree from Caesar Augustus (v. 1-3)

Verse 1 tells us, “There went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.” Caesar Augustus was the first Roman emperor. He was born Gaius Octavius. He was the adopted son of his great-uncle, Julius Caesar, who had no male heir of his own. When Gaius was 18, Julius Caesar was assassinated and young Gaius received his estate, and also became the political heir

to his great uncle. By the time he was 36 he was Caesar Augustus, the first emperor of Rome.

One of the many changes he brought to the Roman world was a reform of their system of taxation. The taxes Rome had previously collected were inconsistent. Caesar Augustus established a system where a population census was taken for each province, and then taxes were levied in proportion to the size of the population. The census that was required under this system of taxation is likely what Luke is referring to in verse 1.

Now imagine, Caesar Augustus, sitting in Rome. He has done what should have been impossible: he was able to consolidate political power and popular support to become emperor. His will was supreme among men in the Roman world. He was viewed by some as a god among men. In fact, his name or title “Augustus” was of religious significance. It means “majestic” or “great.” It was previously used in connection to things considered divine or sacred in the religious practices of Rome. In different forms and to varying degrees he was worshipped as a god throughout the Roman world.

What sort of thoughts do you think Caesar had of the one, true, living God? Do you think he had studied the Old Testament prophecies about God’s promised messiah? Maybe he had heard that the angel Gabriel had appeared to Mary and he thought, “Oh no, this is wrong, the Messiah needs to be born in Bethlehem. I know, I’ll order a census of the Roman world to fix this.”

No. He was just a politician, doing what politicians do. He was just trying to fix a cashflow problem. He wasn't thinking about God's plan. He was simply doing exactly what he wanted to do in his own, free, sinful will. But the will of Caesar wasn't supreme (and it still isn't). Caesar could do all he wanted, but all he did ultimately served God's purposes. God, in His sovereignty, was working in and through this census to accomplish His perfect will.

The Bible tells us that the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, and that He turns it wherever He wills (Proverbs 21:1). God was ordering events for the coming of the Messiah, the long-awaited deliverer. God is Sovereign: He is in control and He is working His perfect will. There are a lot of things in this world that are outside of our control, but there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that is outside of His control.

Next, consider the significance of this tax for the Jewish people. Josephus, the Jewish historian of the first century, argued that this tax was ultimately to blame for the Jewish rebellion that resulted in the destruction of the temple in AD 70. The Jews despised this tax. They opposed this tax on religious grounds. As a Roman tax, it had to be paid in Roman currency. The Roman coins bore the image and inscription of the emperor who, again, was seen as a divine figure. For the Jews, this was idolatrous and blasphemous. Jesus alluded to this when He was asked about Roman taxes and he said, "Render . . . unto Cæsar the things which are Cæsar's; and unto God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:17).

The Jews also opposed this tax on political grounds. This tax represented their subjugation to the Romans. Even some Gentiles opposed this tax with one non-Jewish writer calling it a “badge of slavery.”¹ And remember the pride of the Jewish people. In John 8:33 the Jews who were following Jesus said, “We be Abraham’s seed, and were never in bondage to any man.” This tax served as a constant reminder that, no, in fact they were in bondage under the iron hand of Rome.

But when this tax was decreed, marking a new low for the Jewish people, God was at work. The prophecy given in Genesis 49:10 was fulfilled. Genesis 49:10 says, “The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be.” When it appeared that the scepter would finally and forever be plucked from the tribe of Judah, Shiloh came. It came to pass. Jesus Christ was born.

A decree went out from the Emperor. All the people under the control of Rome were to be numbered and taxed. This was a sweeping decree that affected millions of people. But between verse 3 and verse 4 the focus is narrowed down from all the people of the Roman world to just two: Mary and Joseph. In verses 4 and 5 we read that Mary and Joseph travelled to Bethlehem.

¹ Tertullian

II. Mary and Joseph Travelled to Bethlehem (v. 4 and 5.)

Back in Luke 1:56 we are told that Mary had returned to her own house, in Nazareth of Galilee, after her visit with Elisabeth. In Matthew 1 we read how an angel then appeared to Joseph in a dream and instructed him to take Mary as his wife. In Matthew 1:20 the angel said, “Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.” And in verses 24 and 25 we are told, “Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS.”

That’s where we left Mary and Joseph. They are together, but they are in Nazareth, up in Galilee. They need to be in Bethlehem in Judea.

Bethlehem by itself was an insignificant village in the hill country of Judea. It was one of hundreds, if not thousands, of similar little villages scattered throughout that region. What made Bethlehem significant was the history and the prophecy associated with it.

Bethlehem first appears in Biblical history in Genesis 35:19 and 20 where we are told, “Rachel died, and was buried in the way to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem. And Jacob set a pillar upon her grave: that is the pillar of Rachel's grave unto this day [the time of Moses].” When the Israelites conquered Canaan Bethlehem was within the area controlled by the tribe of Judah (Joshua 19:15).

The next significant mention of Bethlehem is in the book of Ruth. It was the home town of Naomi, and became the hometown of Ruth. Ruth married Boaz who was also from Bethlehem and together they had a son, Obed, who was the grandfather of David. David, you recall, was born in Bethlehem and was anointed there by the prophet Samuel as God's chosen king of Israel.

But after David's time, Bethlehem faded into obscurity once again. It is mentioned in passing by Ezra and Nehemiah, but nothing else significant is tied to this little village in the hill country of Judea. And there Bethlehem may have been forgotten to history, except for a prophecy we find in the book of Micah.

Micah 5:2 says, "But thou, Beth-lehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting." This was a well-known prophecy about the Messiah. In Matthew chapter 2 when Herod asked the chief priests and scribes where the Messiah would be born, they quoted this passage to him. Bethlehem was prophesied to be the city of the Messiah's birth. The name "Bethlehem" means "house of bread," and there Jesus who was the "bread of life" (John 6:48) would be born.

The tax Caesar decreed was a tax for men who were of military age. Women were not normally counted and taxed. So it is clear why Joseph went down to Bethlehem to be numbered in the city of his fathers, but why did Mary, who was "great with child" accompany him?

It is possible that the Romans were aware of the political situation in Israel and wanted to keep more strict records about the family of David, the royal family in Israel. But there is no historical or biblical record to support that.

It has also been suggested by some that Mary and Joseph knew that the Messiah needed to be born in Bethlehem and that is why Mary went with Joseph. But again, Scripture is silent on this point. We are not given any indication that Mary and Joseph were aware of the significance of Jesus being born in Bethlehem. If anything, they kept the location of His birth quiet. When the religious leaders were privately discussing if Jesus was a prophet they said in John 7:52, “Search, and look: for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet.” They assumed that He was born where He had been raised, in Galilee. Throughout His ministry, and even on the card Pilate nailed to the cross, Jesus was called “Jesus of Nazareth” not “Jesus of Bethlehem.”

Mary may have travelled with Joseph simply because Joseph was a poor man, he could not make this journey quickly, and he did not have the means to leave his wife in Nazareth to be cared for until he could return and so they travelled to Bethlehem together.

My wife and I looking forward to the birth of our fourth child in just a couple weeks. If we were suddenly required to take a journey of 100 miles over rough terrain on foot, that would be a trial. That would be difficult. I’m sure Mary

and Joseph felt the same way. When a baby is about to be born you want to be settled. You want to be safe and secure. You don't want to be traveling.

But again we see God's hand in the trials. Though this journey would have been a difficult thing for Mary and Joseph, God allowed it. This journey was part of God's plan. Through this journey it "came to pass" that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

You may be facing terrible trials right now in your life. You may wonder, "Why has God allowed this?"

I don't know.

You don't know.

We may never know.

But this we do know: God is sovereign. He is in control. And ultimately, whatever He allows will be for His glory and for the good of us, His people. That doesn't always make the trials easier, but it allows us to bend our knees and bow our heads in faith and confess with Job: "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

The emperor in Rome decreed a new tax. Mary and Joseph travelled to Bethlehem. These two events were related, but on their own they would be insignificant. Rome had taxed people before this. Many people had travelled to Bethlehem. What makes these two events significant for us this morning is found in verses 6 and 7.

III. Jesus is Born (v. 6-7)

All four gospel accounts tell us about Jesus' death on the cross. All four gospel accounts tell us about Jesus' resurrection. But Luke is the only gospel that gives us the details of Jesus' birth. Every detail that is given here shows the lowly circumstances of Christ's birth and illustrates His humility.

First, verse 7 tells us that Mary "brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him." This wrapping of infants was one of the first things done after a child was born. Usually this process which included washing and then wrapping the infant was done by a midwife who helped at the birth. This verse tells us that Mary did this herself. Mary and Joseph were poor and alone. The Messiah, the Son of God, stepped off His throne in heaven and entered His creation, He was born as a baby, and there were not even any helping hands to wash Him and wrap Him. His mother wrapped Him.

He was wrapped in swaddling clothes. In Job 38:9 God says, "I made . . . thick darkness a swaddling band for [the sea]." This same God who figuratively spoke of binding the sea in the swaddling clothes of darkness is Himself now wrapt up in swaddling clothes, a helpless babe. "The Ancient of days became an infant a span long."²

² Matthew Henry Commentary on this passage.

Next, we are told that he was laid in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. An inn could be a public boarding house where you would pay for a place to stay, but this word could also be used to describe a guest room in a house. This word is only used two other times in Scripture, and both of those times it is used to describe the “upper room” where Jesus and the disciples ate the last supper (Mark 14:14 and Luke 22:11).

By the time Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem all the normal accommodations for guests were full. They were unable to find a place to stay.

If Joseph had enough money, he could have bought a place to stay. The world always makes room for money.

If Joseph was an important man and had influence, a room would have been found for him and his wife. The world makes room for those it considers worthy.

But Joseph and Mary and the baby Jesus, the Son of God, found no room open for them. He came unto his own, and his own received him not (John 1:11). This would be a theme in Christ’s life and ministry.

Tradition says that Jesus was born in a stable. That’s possible. But all this verse tells us is that Jesus was laid in a manger, a feeding trough for animals. Mangers were often set up outside, so it is also possible that Jesus was born in the open air. The Lord of all the earth did not even have a proper place to lay his head.

Surely, for God to be born as a man would be humility enough. Were he born to the emperor’s daughter in the richest and most lavish accommodations of

this world, still we would be in awe that God had entered His creation as a man. But the humility of Christ goes further. He did not simply humble Himself as God, but He humbled Himself among men. Luke 2:6, 7, “And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.”

John Keble wrote the following lines:

“Wrapt in His swaddling—bands,

And in His manger laid,

The hope and glory of all lands

Is come to the world's aid.

No peaceful home upon His cradle smiled,

Guests rudely went and came where slept the royal Child.”³

Where is the glory? Where is the fanfare? the trumpets? the crowds? the rejoicing? the worship? This is one of the most incredible moments in history. Where is the glory?

In this simple description of Christ’s birth, the Word of God pulls our attention away from the passing glory of this world, and instead shows us the incredible humility of Jesus Christ.

³ <https://mypoeticside.com/show-classic-poem-14645>

One day soon, Jesus is going to return for us, His people. In just a few moments we are going to come to have Communion together as a church. We do this in obedience to the Lord's command to show his death, until he comes again (I Cor. 11:26). He is coming again. And when He comes He will be seen in His strength. Jesus said that he would come "in the clouds of heaven with power." In Revelation 19 (verses 11-21) this second coming is further described for us:

"And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself. And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS. And I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the fowls that fly in the midst of heaven, Come and gather yourselves together unto the supper of the great God; That ye may eat the flesh of

kings, and the flesh of captains, and the flesh of mighty men, and the flesh of horses, and of them that sit on them, and the flesh of all men, both free and bond, both small and great.

And I saw the beast, and the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against him that sat on the horse, and against his army. And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him, . . . These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone. And the remnant were slain with the sword of him that sat upon the horse, which sword proceeded out of his mouth: . . .”

When Christ returns, He will come in great power. His glory will be seen in His strength and all the wicked will be judged. When that happens, when you die or when Christ returns, the day of God’s grace will have passed and the day of God’s judgment will have come. But that day has not yet come. Today is the day of God’s grace.

Our text this morning has revealed the humility of Jesus Christ. He entered His creation in the most humble of circumstances. He was born, He lived, He suffered, and He died as a man, that we might have eternal life. One day every human who has ever lived will see Christ’s glory revealed in His strength and judgment. This morning, by the grace of God, we have the privilege and honor of seeing Christ’s glory revealed in His humility. If you are not saved, if you have

never repented of your sins and put your faith in Jesus Christ, I would remind you that there is a universal gospel call that goes out to all people everywhere to repent and believe.

Today is the day of God's grace. Today God is longsuffering toward your sin. Today you can see Christ's glory in His humility. But tomorrow, that day of grace may be forever gone. Don't assume upon the mercy of God. Don't put off repenting of your sin. Lay it aside and flee to the cross of Jesus Christ.

And for believers, I hope and pray that every time we read this passage, we will be struck with the incredible humility of Jesus Christ that is revealed here, at the scene of His birth. "It came to pass." Jesus Christ was born. God entered creation as a man to perform the work of redemption.

Philippians 2:5-8 says, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."

We should rejoice in the humility of Jesus Christ. We should stand in awe and worship when we consider the humility of our Lord. And finally, we should emulate the example of our Lord's humility: "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus."