

The Birth of Jesus

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[0 : 01] We're going to read now in Luke chapter 2 and verses 1 through 7. Luke 2 verses 1 through 7. This is on page number 805 of your Black Pew Bible.

Hear then the Word of God. 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. 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.

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 clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence. May your Word be our rule, your Spirit our teacher, and your greater glory our supreme concern, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

[1 : 32] Amen. North Humberland is our happy place. We go there as a family at least twice a year.

Every time we go, we always go to Holy Island for a walk. The first time we went to Holy Island, we were stunned by its dramatic scenery and its historical buildings.

The second time also. But the more we go, whilst not precisely getting bored, we've kind of seen everything there is to see, and there's no more surprises.

Having said that, we still like to walk around Lindisfarne and feel the fresh air of the eastern wind on our faces. For all that we've, for all that we love Holy Island, we've seen most of what there is to see.

But you know, when it comes to the Bible, it's always a different story. Passages that we've read a hundred times before, rather than becoming tired, reveal new truths about the gospel of our Lord.

[2 : 38] So we've read this passage in Luke 2 verses 1 through 7 hundreds of times, and think we know everything it has to teach, only for a new reading to reveal fresh truths which shed new light on the glory of the birth of Jesus Christ.

The Christmas story begins to assume new levels of joy as we go deeper into the significance of the incarnation of the Son of God.

This morning, as we begin our journey to the stable in Bethlehem to worship the Christ who was born there, we want to see four things about Him from this passage. Let's allow these old truths, presented perhaps in a new way, to warm our hearts and to fill us with the same joy and amazement experienced by the shepherds and the wise men as they too journeyed to that stable to worship Jesus.

First of all then, we have the glory of Jesus, the glory of Jesus. Our passage begins not in Jerusalem or in Judea, it begins in Rome, the capital city of the Roman Empire.

It begins with an edict being issued by Caesar Augustus from the imperial palace. Now, Caesar Augustus was the most powerful man in the world.

[4 : 17] They used to say, you know, that the sun never set on the British Empire, in that our territory stretched all the way around the world, but even then the edicts of Queen Victoria didn't reach into the darkest and most remote parts of the British Empire.

But for whatever we might think of the Roman Empire, the Roman Empire at the time of Caesar Augustus, while not as geographically extensive as ours, was far more in control.

It held a vice-like grip on all its citizens. What Caesar said, the people did without question. For all we talk about...

For all we talk about... The Roman Empire was governed by fear and by force. The merest hint of rebellion was met by the iron fist of the legions and a life of slavery for the guilty party. Caesar Augustus held the fate of millions in his hands. At the slightest whim, he could order a massacre. Supposing he woke up one morning with a headache, it could signal the ethnic cleansing of a nation.

[5 : 34] He was the most powerful man in the world. By contrast, in verse 7, our passage ends with the birth of a child in a stable in Bethlehem.

In that stable, we see the most vulnerable, fragile of all human beings. A baby boy who, without his mother's care, would not survive.

He wasn't born in the golden temples of Rome or in the decorated hall of an imperial palace. He was born in a stable in a far-off province of the Roman Empire.

Today, we helpfully talk about power imbalances. And here in Luke chapter 2, verses 1 through 7, in the contrast between these two figures, the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus and the newborn child Jesus, we have the ultimate power imbalance.

The baby Jesus has no armies to command, no political forum in which to speak, and no legal court from which to rule. All he has are the loving arms of his mother to nurture him.

[6 : 45] By contrast, in this world's terms, Caesar Augustus has all the power and all the glory of imperial Rome at his disposal. Beginning with the same Augustus mentioned in verse 1, Roman emperors began to encourage their citizens to worship them as gods.

Thus began the imperial cult of emperor worship, which lasted for 300 years. If you visit the city of Rome today, you can still see some of the statues which adoring Roman worshippers bowed down before Augustus and his successors at.

The Gospel of Luke, you will know this, is the first part of a two-volume work, the second of which is the Book of Acts. Both were written by Luke.

Luke, Volume 1, the Gospel of Luke. Luke, Volume 2, the Acts of the Apostles. The Gospel of Luke records the life of Jesus from his birth to his resurrection from the dead.

The Book of Acts records the heavenly ministry of Jesus through his Holy Spirit by the apostles forming and establishing the early Christian church.

[8 : 05] So here at the beginning, in Luke chapter 2, verse 1, we are located in Rome, in the beating heart of imperial Roman power, the emperor himself, Caesar Augustus.

Acts ends with the Apostle Paul in Rome, waiting for an audience with the Roman emperor. Not this time Caesar Augustus, for by that stage Augustus was dead, but in all probability with Nero.

We know from other books of the New Testament that by this time, by the time Paul reached Rome, there was already a thriving Christian church there. He wrote an entire letter to them which we now know as the Book of Romans.

So in the space of 60 years, the influence of this child born in that stable in Bethlehem had reached the golden palaces and imperial temples of Rome itself.

And as we look back in history from the present day, which of these two figures have proved themselves to be greater in power and glory? Caesar Augustus and his followers or the Christ child?

[9 : 23] Today, over two billion people identify themselves as followers of Christ and none followers of Augustus.

The temples and palaces of Rome are in ruins, whereas Christian communities and its church continue to grow. We talk about power imbalances, but at the end of the day, only one figure from the stories left standing, and it isn't Caesar Augustus.

Over the 2,000 years since Augustus died, the world has been ruled by many other powerful men, but again, the baby born in the stable has outshone them all. Will we never learn this lesson as we listen to the news today?

that the great and powerful of our day will also fall short and their glory will fade, but that of the Lord Jesus Christ will continue to grow and shine in our world.

It's time for us to stop putting our trust in our politicians and our governments and to put it where it really belongs at the feet of the Jesus whose birth we celebrate at Christmastime.

[10 : 41] after all, whose glory is greater? The glory of mortal human beings whose time is short and whose power is so very limited? Or the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, before whom the angels worship and to whom the Father has given a name that's above every name that

at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord?

So we have first the glory of Jesus. We have second the history of Jesus, the history of Jesus. In the first couple of verses of this passage, Luke goes into great detail about the events which led to Jesus being born in Bethlehem.

He writes, 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.

So Luke's providing us here with historical places, historical people and historical events all of which we can check and verify for ourselves.

Let's all take a trip down to the British Museum in London and let's scan their documents and they'll prove to us that there was a Roman governor of Syria called Quirinius and that towards the end of the reign of Caesar Augustus he issued an edict Caesar Augustus that is commanding that a census should be taken of the people in his empire requiring that the head of each household must register in his own hometown.

[12:27] these are historical events and these are historical people. There's nothing fictional there's nothing legendary about any of these events.

Luke's burden here is to reinforce the historical factual nature of these truths. For many of his older readers these events took place when they were little children.

some of his first readers may even have remembered having to travel with their parents to register for the census. But we who live 2,000 years later don't have the same luxury.

However as I say we do have access to written historical records which prove the factual nature of what Luke is saying here. He is embedding the birth of Jesus in historical time and space.

To proclaim that the birth of Jesus was no fiction or fantasy it really did happen. Just as Caesar Augustus reigned in Rome and Quirinius was governor of Syria just as surely as there was a census taken so in the small Judean town of Bethlehem Joseph and Mary went to be registered and while there the baby Jesus was born.

[13:49] The birth of Jesus in other words is a historical fact. You know isn't it strange today that people have no problems about the historical reality of Caesar Augustus but they do about Jesus Christ when there is actually more historical evidence of Jesus existence than there is of Augustus's.

The Jewish historian Josephus and the Roman historian Tacitus both contain reliable accounts of Jesus' existence and his life.

Now we shouldn't need them of course because the Bible ultimately is trustworthy but for the person for whom the Bible is a book of fairy stories all they need to do is to consult the ancient sources and they will find ample evidence for the historical reality of Jesus.

In other words what we're celebrating at Christmas isn't a legend it's not a myth it is a historical event in a Bethlehem stable in the Roman province of Judea a child was born whose name was Jesus and he was the son of God that child was flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone he looked like any other child but he was so much more because he really was the Messiah and king of the world this really did happen this really is true and as such we can't ignore it we can't sweep it under the carpet and say so what it is something the significance of which we all must come to terms with for if this is true then everything else in the ministry of Jesus is true all his works all his words all his commands all his invitations all his threats the choice each of us have to make to repent and believe the gospel or to close our ears and reject the gospel so we have the history of Jesus third the kingship of Jesus the kingship of Jesus from verse four onwards the passage changes tone and moves from Roman to Jewish history so the significant figures in the story change from being Caesar Augustus and Quirinius to being Joseph Mary and King David just because it moves from Roman to Jewish history doesn't make it any less reliable it just changes the focus of the events and places them in a Jewish context what's important here is how Luke emphasizes that Joseph was of the house and lineage of David Bethlehem not Jerusalem was David's hometown and that's why Joseph went there with Mary and therefore that's why Jesus was born there Luke is at pains to point out that Jesus was a descendant of Israel's greatest ever king King

[17:09] David I was recently watching a BBC program excellent BBC program called Who Do You Think You Are featuring celebrities being helped to work out their family trees and learn from whom they are descended I'm sorry this is a spoiler alert I'm just going to tell you right the episode

about the famous British adventurer Bear Grylls is especially interesting you know Bear Grylls the adventurer Christian it turns out that he is descended from Robert the Bruce the most famous king of Scotland imagine that Robert the Bruce is descended is Bear Grylls it came as a great surprise to Bear Grylls because in our culture actually family trees aren't that important but in Jewish culture who you're descended from is very important indeed it establishes you in

Jewish society so it's not surprising that even though King David lived a thousand years before the events related in Luke 2 Joseph knew that he was a direct descendant of Israel's greatest ever king now sorry Luke adds this piece of information not as an incidental detail it's very much central to his argument both in Luke and Acts for this child Jesus is not merely born of royal lineage but is born to be a greater king than

David ever was the reference to royalty here at the end of verse 4 emphasizes Jesus birth as king it might not seem so he's been born in a stable but the child born in Bethlehem is the heir of David at this time Herod was the king of Judea but he was only a half blood Jew hated by most and he certainly was not descended from David but Jesus was he had a clearer claim to the throne than Herod ever did but there's far more here for us King Charles the third is the figurehead of the British nation but with all respect to him what it means to be British isn't about him he is a mere figurehead he is a decoration of state he doesn't carry on his shoulders the hopes and the dreams of the British people again unlike the Jews of Jesus day we're a free people we're not under the occupation of a foreign power in the Jewish world of the day all the hopes and dreams of the nations were condensed in the figure of the king what it meant to be Jewish was all contained in him for hundreds of years the Jewish nation had been under the occupation of foreign powers it had no king of the line of David that rightful kingship having died out during the Babylonian captivity 500 years before so with all this talk of Jesus being directly descended from King David Luke is raising again the prospect of a Jewish king rising to prominence in Israel fulfilling all the hopes and the dreams of the Jewish nation and liberating them from their foreign occupiers he is declaring to us all that

Jesus is the long awaited Jewish Messiah the legitimate king for whom the Jews had been waiting for hundreds of years we know him best as Jesus Christ that word Christ means king his name means King Jesus in him is embodied everything it means to be Jewish all the hopes and dreams of the Jewish nation are fulfilled in him which makes it all the more ironic that as the apostle John later says he came to his own but his own did not receive him by and large the Jewish nation rejected and still rejects Jesus as their king we await the promised wholesale receiving of him but in the interim millions and millions of Gentile peoples like us non-Jews have discovered

[22 : 25] Jesus to be the king we've always needed and we've always wanted Jesus was descended from David but is a far better king than David ever was he is the king in whom all our hopes and dreams are embodied and fulfilled the king who knows us each by name he knows your name and he lovingly guides and provides for every one of us here we never tired of hearing the name King Jesus for we have a king over us who will defend us from all our enemies and will love us freely so we have the glory of Jesus and the history of Jesus and the kingship of Jesus and then lastly we have the humility of Jesus the humility of Jesus well for all perhaps that we like to learn new truths from scripture it's the old truths which we learned as children which are the most satisfying are they not the old truth of

Jesus humility is what inspires us we would have Mary in verse 7 she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn let's translate this passage from the cozy passage we've made it into to the reality of what it was Mary gave birth to her firstborn son not in a hospital bed in the QEU but in a stable among the hay manure and smelly animals she wrapped him not in a cozy blanket she wrapped him in the ancient equivalent of bandages she laid him not in an incubator or a child's cot or a Moses basket but in a feeding trough from which just a few minutes earlier the animals had been feeding far from the sanitized cozy picture of the nativity scenes we might have in our minds the stable outside

Bethlehem was a pigsty and yet it was here the baby Jesus was born he whose glory outstripped that of Caesar Augustus and whose kingship was sure and better than that of King David what humility shown by the baby Jesus such that he could have chosen to have been born in the temple of Jerusalem or an imperial palace in Rome and they would not have been good enough for him but he chose to become incarnate in a stable he was not surrounded by the smell of incense but by the

smell of animal manure he was not surrounded by the sounds of rejoicing but by the sounds animals make he was surrounded not by the sights of golden walls but by the sights of wood and straw with what humility Emmanuel God with us was born the apostle Paul under whose influence Luke wrote this gospel would later write of Jesus though he was in very nature God he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but made himself nothing he made himself nothing the Nicene Creed confessed by all Orthodox Christians reminds us of the humility of Jesus saying for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made human this creed reminds us of something very important relating to our passage it was for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven it was for us and our salvation he was born of the Virgin Mary wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger for us and for our salvation he was born in a stable for there was no room in the inn to all

God so for our so for all men he grew into a man of humility and he died in humility on a Roman cross all for us all for our salvation he was born in shame he lived in shame and he died in shame all for us all for our salvation all in order to bear our shame to the cross and give himself as substitute for us there may be some Christians among us today who driven by apathy have lost our spiritual edge we've taken away our eyes from the centrality of Jesus and we've fixed them on worldly objectives pleasure possessions career and the like can we do this at least can we return to the wonder we first experienced when we realized that it was for us and for our salvation

[28 : 07] Jesus came down from heaven and did all these things he who knows us so well loves us so much that for us he made himself nothing it rather puts our worldly pursuits in the shade does it not there may be others among us who are not yet Christians we may not have heard the Christian message before or we may have heard the Christian message before and thought it to be a noble and morally good message but subconsciously considered it irrelevant to modern life if that's us today we need to ask ourselves what we're going to do with the historical reality of Jesus Christ what we're going to do with the glory of Jesus Christ what we're going to do with the kingship of Jesus Christ what we're going to do with the humility of Jesus Christ how it was for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven and was made man we cannot and we must not sweep him under the carpet we must wrestle with this question what shall I do with Jesus of Nazareth well we began with holy island we conclude with holy Jesus we might see all that is to see of Lindisfarne but we'll never see all that is to know about Jesus and each new discovery of him brings with it new heights of joy wonder amazement and assurance but in the last analysis it is what we already know of Jesus which fills us with love peace and hope that it was for us and our salvation he was made human what shall I do with Jesus we'll entrust our lives to him we'll believe in him we'll have faith in him and we'll live for him and all the good will be ours and all the glory will be his amen