

IN THOSE DAYS
(1) A DECREE WENT OUT

Luke 2:1-4
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SCRIPTURE

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David (Luke 2:1-4 NRSV).

MESSAGE

“In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus” (2:1). With these few words we are introduced to one of the most powerful persons of the ancient world. His name was Octavian (or Octavius). But he added the name “Caesar” to his own name because he wanted to be associated with his great uncle, Julius Caesar, who had set the stage for turning the Republic of Rome into the Roman Empire. The Roman senate conferred upon Octavian the honorific of Augustus which means something like, “Revered One” or Majestic One.” So down through history he became known as Caesar Augustus¹. He ruled the empire from 27 B.C. to A.D. 14. and initiated a two hundred year period of peace known as the Pax Romana.

It was said of Augustus that he came to a Rome made of brick and left it a city of marble. Indeed, he transformed the entire Mediterranean world with his roads and armies, his architecture and political policies. To the citizens in the city of Rome he was technically not an emperor. But to those in the outlying provinces he was more than an emperor – he was a god. Imperial temples began showing up throughout the provinces. This would later prove to be an agonizing problem for Christians.

During the reign of Augustus he reorganized the administration in several parts of the empire and carried out fresh censuses for the purpose of taxation and military conscription. In our Scripture text, we read of one such census that leads Joseph and his betrothed, Mary, to the city of David, also known as Bethlehem.

A journey to the ancestral home would have fit Jewish practice, so that the custom was

¹ Later in Roman history the word “Caesar” became synonymous with “emperor.”

done in a culturally inoffensive manner (2 Sam 24). Nazareth to Bethlehem was about a ninety mile trip, assuming that Samaria was bypassed. Such a journey may have taken several days. But why did Joseph take his pregnant wife-to-be on such an arduous journey? Surely it would have been safer to have left Mary back in Nazareth.

Luke hints at the answer when he tells us that the administrator for this part of the census is the Syrian governor Quirinius. The province of Syria at this time would have included Judea which would have included Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Unlike most of the other provinces, Syria taxed both men and women. So if Mary also had a connection to Bethlehem, she would have been required make the journey as well, regardless of her condition.

The appearance that this story projects is striking. Augustus must have been an exceedingly powerful ruler if one of his decrees could bring about such an extraordinary chain of events. Bruce Larson puts it this way:

The man believed to be a god intercepted in time and space the God who became a man. And this mightiest man of his time decreed that a census was to be taken, which forced Joseph and Mary to travel to Bethlehem.²

But is Augustus, in fact, the real power behind what happens? If we dig deeper we learn the truth. What that pagan emperor did not know was that his taxation decree was overshadowed by the decree of a greater Lord. Hundreds of years before Augustus came to power in Rome, God had decreed that a ruler would be born in David's town, the little, unremarkable village of Bethlehem.

We might ask, “Who then determines history—the Caesars, the kings, and the presidents?” But the answer is, “none of these.” We believe that God is not only the Ruler of all things, but even the Ruler of human history. All serve him, though most do so unwittingly.

The problem with the way we observe Christmas in the church is that we treat it like it’s a nice story we love to re-tell once a year. “In those days” we declare, “Jesus was born in Bethlehem.” And by “In those days” we mean something that took place 2,000 years ago. That’s a really long time ago! We’re talking about something that is part of ancient history. But when we treat the story of Christmas this way, when we treat the story of Jesus this way, we are communicating to the world that the story of Jesus is boring and

² Larson, B., & Ogilvie, L. J. (1983). *Luke* (Vol. 26, p. 48). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc.

irrelevant to our modern lives.

“In those days something wonderful happened.” Great. Fantastic. What about now?

We spend all this time and energy commemorating the birth of Jesus, and then, when Christmas finally arrives, we sort of let the story come to a stop right there. It may be possible so to emphasize Christmas that we never get beyond this holiday. . . to what God had in mind, in the long run, when he sent his Son in human form to be born among us – God with us. Sometimes it seems as though the baby Jesus never gets a chance to grow up. We celebrate his being born this year ... and next year he'll be born again ... (so to speak).

Nancy Dugan was nearly four as Christmas drew near. The parents and four older children all had tried to prepare Nancy for Christmas by talking with her about the real meaning of Christmas and why the family celebrated it. Nancy had a wonderful Christmas with a lot of presents and toys. A few days later, Nancy was talking with her older sister about what a great Christmas she had, and said, "I sure hope Joseph and Mary have another baby."

It is not hard to misunderstand what Christmas is, especially if you are new at it. Lights, presents, and decorations are easier to grasp than abstract concepts of "peace on earth, good will to others." My granddaughter, Naomi, upon seeing her first ever Christmas tree erected in her home, reached for a branch and shook it like it was a hand and said, "Nice to meet you Christmas!"

But perhaps Christmas is more concrete and real than we think it is. Once God had gone to all the trouble of having his Son appear in human form, as an infant, have you ever considered how the story continued – how it still continues?

“In those days a decree went out” – and it turned out that the decree that really mattered was not Caesar’s but God’s.

Here is Good News! We can say “In these days” God’s decrees are still going out. And God’s decrees are still the ones that really matter. It also means that the story is not over. The plan continues and you and I are part of the plan. Let’s not be like the characters described by the psalmist who said:

“But they soon forgot what [God] had done and did not wait for his plan to unfold” (Psalms 106:13 NIV).

There are many who we want to believe that life should be easy, but the obvious truth is that life is hard. Most of us have more medical tests in our future than in our past, more

tears to come than we've already shed. The carefree days never last long enough.

Some of us worry about being alone. Will we spend our lives by ourselves? Others worry about family. Will our marriage get better? We're afraid for our children and our grandchildren. What kind of world will they live in? We're afraid that our parents are growing old. How are we going to care for them? We worry about our health. Some of us are growing old, too. Life is hard. The world is dark. The state of the world leads us to pessimism. The world is at war and no one has an exit strategy. So many bad things happen that we become numb to the suffering of others. We'll spend most of our lives hoping for a better day and a better world.

We need to remember that in these days God's decrees are still going out. God is still at work. God will accomplish his purpose for us (see Phil 1:6). Because of Christ, the world will be better than it is now. Peace will overcome hostility. Love will defeat hatred. Fears will become laughter. One day, everything the biblical prophets hoped for will be. One day we will not learn war anymore. One day those committed to the way of Christ, and the promise of peace will be proven right.

Steven Curtis Chapman wrote a song entitled, "Glorious Unfolding." A portion of it goes like this:

Lay your head down tonight
Take a rest from the fight
Don't try to figure it out
Just listen to what I'm whispering to your heart
'Cause I know this is not
Anything like you thought
The story of your life was gonna be
And it feels like the end has started closing in on you
But it's just not true
There's so much of the story that's still yet to unfold. . .

God's plan from the start
For this world and your heart
Has been to show His glory and His grace
Forever revealing the depth and the beauty of
His unfailing Love
And the story has only begun.