



Luke 2:1–4

3 With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated every

Reflection

Today's passage comes from Luke 2:1–4 which I'll read for us now,

2 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took

place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to their own town to register. 4 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.

As we saw in the opening sentence of his Gospel, Luke is both an historian and a literary artist. In what might just be the most perfect Greek sentence in the New Testament Luke lay down his credentials to chronicle and record the biography of Jesus Christ in a manner that even modern historians respect and professors of language can only marvel at. Luke's work is a masterpiece of ancient history and literature.

For Luke the historian and literary artist, in his opening chapter, Herod the Great's reign served as a chronological marker for John the Baptist's birth. Today, in the same way now Caesar Augustus' reign is used to mark the birth of Jesus. The mention of these two rulers not only places Luke's account in a real place and time in history, but also serves as a painful reminder that Israel was still in captivity even in their own land. Herod's heir would soon put John to death, and Caesar's governor Pontius Pilate will put Jesus to death. And so at the beginning and the end of Luke's Gospel, the Romans are doing the two things most hated by their subjects: taxation and crucifixion.¹

1 David E. Garland, *Luke* (Zondervan exegetical commentary series on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2011), 117–19.

You see the census mentioned in verse one of our passage today had to do with taxation. I'll read it again,

2 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

Luke mentions the census four times. It is for tax purposes. And social control. Direct taxation required direct rule and the census was a reminder of both. The census was not simply a means of organising the tax rolls but also a means of demonstrating control of the world. And this policy flowed directly out of the reign of Caesar Augustus – one of the most important emperors in the history of the Roman Empire; perhaps the most powerful human being before the day Jesus was born.

Great-nephew to Julius Caesar and adopted by him into his family, Augustus was a born fighter who clawed his way to power by defeating Antony and Cleopatra and then through his considerable genius and force of person, gave the Roman empire a solidness that would endure for centuries. He began all kinds of building programs and set up a massive system of centralised government, regulating commerce and trade. He strengthened the military and for his entire reign Rome was at peace. With his leadership was born that famous period known as the *Pax Romana* (the peace of Rome) where dissidents were made such an example of by Roman military might that an uneasy peace prevailed for fear of brutal reprisal. Inside Rome, in the Forum, the doors of

the Temple of War remained closed for forty years in large part due to him. Rome and Augustus had managed to bludgeon every foe into submission. He did much to advance the culture of the Roman empire. Towards the end of his life he said, 'I found Rome bricks and I made it marble.' He distinguished himself as probably the greatest statesmen of his time.²

But for Christians the reign of Augustus would be remembered darkly as the period when religious worship of the emperor took hold. Augustus, whose name means 'holy' or 'revered' took the title *Dominus et Deus*: Lord and God. And it was this title and allegiance to it that would produce

² R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth* (Preaching the word; Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2015), 83–84; Garland, *Luke*, 117–19; R. C Sproul, *A Walk with God: Luke* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2011), 28–29.

grave persecution in the years to come for Christians who refused to worship the emperor. And this isn't even to mention the risk to Jesus whose followers began to refer to him as 'My Lord and My God'. The name 'Lord' Jesus took on a whole new revolutionary significance in the first century as this title belonged to the Caesars.³

And yet in today's passage we see the most powerful emperor acting out the decree of God.

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³ Sproul, *A Walk with God*, 28–29.

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Long before Caesar's decree that saw Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem, God had issued a decree through the prophet Micah,

2 'But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.'

...

4 He will stand and shepherd his flock

in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

And they will live securely, for then his greatness

will reach to the ends of the earth.

Micah 2:4, 6

And so God uses perhaps the most powerful human being ever to walk the earth before Jesus to orchestrate the birth of one far more powerful than he. Luke pits the might of the Roman Empire against God's eternal reign. The child born in Bethlehem to parents subject to Roman tyranny will ultimately challenge the existing political order and create an astonishing reversal

of authority and power, not through violence but through obedience to God and the giving of his life. Perhaps appropriately the little town in which Jesus was born had originally been called the city of war, and with the change of one letter in the Hebrew, was renamed the city of bread and a city of peace.

And so we have Caesar and one to be born in the line of David. The Roman King over the nation of Israel and the rightful King over the nation Israel. Augustus' reign will end with his death in AD 14. Jesus' reign will have no end (1:33). And God uses Israel's oppressor, the most powerful man on earth, to unwittingly orchestrate the birth of the Messiah, God's anointed king, whose kingdom unlike Augustus' or any kingdom of the earth will never end.

Think & Pray

It's easy to forget God's sovereignty over everything: from the lives of the rich and famous, the powerbrokers and politicians like Caesar Augustus, right down to the mundane moments of everyday people's lives like Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph. God is utterly sovereign. He's working right now in the lives of the great and humble alike to fulfil his purposes in our world. He's at work in your life and mine. Perhaps you're feeling out to sea at the moment, caught up in something well out of your control. If so, we can take great comfort that there is nothing out of the control of our God. He's known you since before the beginning of time. He's planned out your life since before time

began, every single step. And he promises us in his word that in everything he works for the good of those who love him and who have been called according to his purposes (Rom 8:28).

Take this thought out with you today, and live this day to his glory. And pray for our Christian brothers and sisters in those parts of our world who are suffering under the heavy yoke of oppression. Pray that they would experience the rule and reign of Jesus Christ even in their difficult circumstances and that the prince of peace would flood their hearts with joy amidst their sufferings and a longing for the victory he won on the cross to be fully and finally revealed at his return. Pray also that justice would be done today and that he would deliver them from this evil.