

# Followers of the Way

## Census – All Things Work Together for Good to Those Who Have Faith

Steve Campbell, 10-12-23

Luke 2:1-7; 25-35

This beautiful passage from Luke 2:1-7 is familiar to us from the traditional Nine Lessons and Carols heard at this season of Advent, but I hope familiarity does not breed contempt. My prayer is that we will approach this well-known story with an open mind and heart, and hear afresh what God is saying to us.

Luke, the physician, was also an able historian and meticulous in detail. He sets the story of our Saviour's birth firmly in its historical context. 'In those days...' is how Luke begins this chapter, and that could refer to any unspecified time period, like a fairy tale beginning, 'Once upon a time'!

But Luke does not leave us hanging in the air, he grounds these events in a particular period of history – during the reign of Caesar Augustus.

Octavian, given the name Augustus by the senate, ruled from 27BC to AD14 and was the first Roman Emperor. Under his rule he introduced the Pax Romana, an Empire wide peace following years of war. To consolidate his Empire he ordered a census of the entire population for the purposes of army recruitment and taxation.

Ever since the Exile to Babylon, the Jewish nation had been under foreign rule: Babylonians, Persians, Greeks; apart from a brief period of relative independence under the Macabees and Hasmonaeans. Now, under Rome, they were a fully subjugated people, and the time for Messiah's birth was imminent. Why?

In Gen 49, Jacob blesses his twelve sons from his deathbed. To Judah he says,

The sceptre will not depart from Judah,  
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,  
until he to whom it belongs shall come  
and the obedience of the nations shall be his.

(Gen 49:10)

The sceptre had departed from Judah: Herod the Great was only a puppet king from Idumean descent placed there by Rome; peace prevailed throughout the lands; an excellent road system connected the whole Empire and Greek was the language everyone spoke. On top of this, Jewish messianic hopes had been increasing in intensity.

This truly was the moment Paul later wrote about in Galatians 4:4,

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law...

All was in place for God's anointed to enter the world. But ... one thing was still missing. Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth and, according to prophecy, the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem.

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. (Micah 5:2)

This is where the census comes in, the means of getting Joseph and Mary out of Nazareth to Bethlehem, so that Jesus, Great David's Greater Son, could be born in his ancestral town.

Little did the proud Emperor Augustus know that he was simply an instrument in the hand of the God of Israel, to carry out the eternal purposes of the King of kings!

It must be noted, nevertheless, that this census is one of the most hotly debated 'facts' in the New Testament. The problem arises because Quirinius was not governor in Syria until AD6 when a census was ordered. Much of the information comes from extra-biblical sources such as Josephus, who wrote in the late first century.

Those of a liberal mind accept his writings, rather than those of Luke, but why follow the words of what JC Ryle calls 'uninspired writers', rather than the inspired, infallible Word of God?

As I said before, Luke was meticulous in detail and careful in recording historic facts, and he was closer to the events he recorded than Josephus, having heard first hand from eye-witnesses.

There are ways to reconcile the various accounts which we don't have time to go into, but when we read in vv.1&2 of a census, we can be sure it took place.

Both Joseph and Mary had been given angelic visitations, to assure them of what God was doing. Mary, the young peasant virgin and Joseph, the humble carpenter, needed faith to believe what they had seen and heard. They had been given the immense task of bearing and caring for the Son of God.

Humanly speaking, this was an impossible ask, but as the angel Gabriel said to Mary, 'nothing is impossible with God.' (Luke 1:37) The Lord had granted them the grace and strength to cope for almost nine months, and now the time of her delivery was drawing near.

So this census ordered by the Emperor was not only an inconvenience, but also a big risk for one so heavily pregnant. Now it was only required for Joseph to return to his ancestral home at Bethlehem to register. Yet knowing the circumstance of Mary's conception and the rumours that had spread, he was unwilling to leave her in Nazareth.

One possible rumour is that Mary had an affair with a Roman soldier and Jesus was the result of that encounter. This unfounded rumour persisted in Jesus' lifetime and beyond. In John 8 where He

is arguing with some Jews about being Abraham's children, they make the statement 'We are not illegitimate children!' (Jn 8:41) with the inference being, 'But *you* are!'

So Joseph, being a noble and righteous man, was not going to risk Mary facing false accusations or worse from her fellow townsfolk, so he took her along to Bethlehem. It was an arduous journey of perhaps 120 miles, taking around a week to complete. Not easy at the best of times, but for someone so heavily pregnant, a very dangerous undertaking indeed. Yet they both trusted in God and He brought them safely to their destination.

What happened when they got to Bethlehem?

Warning, here's a spoiler alert! The popular version which has been acted out in a zillion nativity plays, where the couple knock on endless doors only to be turned away, until a friendly inn keeper gives them shelter in his stable, has no founding in scripture. The text simply states,

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. (Luke 4:7)

We picture in our minds a first century Holiday Inn, crammed to the rafters, with Joseph and Mary left out in the cold stable. But this is an unfortunate translation. We come across an inn with the parable of the Good Samaritan, where he brought the injured Jew and paid for his keep.

The word translated 'inn', here in v.7, actually means guest room and is different from what we find in the parable of the Good Samaritan. It makes much more sense that Joseph brought Mary to his relative's home in Bethlehem, but as the upper guest room was already occupied by other family members, they slept downstairs, in that part of the house where animals were kept, hence the use of the manger, or feeding trough.

So Jesus, the Messiah, the son of David, was born in Bethlehem, because of the census ordered by the secular Emperor Augustus. God, as sovereign, so ordered the circumstances to bring about His purposes and fulfil the prophecies about Jesus. And although it was inconvenient and dangerous for them, Joseph and Mary had faith to believe God would be with them and help them.

So all things worked together for those who had faith.

But ensuring that Messiah was born in the town of David was not the only prophecy fulfilled by the census, it also enabled an elderly man to realise a prophetic promise made to him long before – Simeon.

We read in vv.25-26, 'Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.'

This devoted servant, who was righteous or just – that is, he was in a right relationship with God through keeping His Law – also had faith. He no doubt knew Habakkuk 2:4, 'the just shall live by his faith.'

Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel, as no doubt were many Jews at that time. But we're also told that the Holy Spirit was upon him. This is very significant: the word translated 'consolation' is *paraklēsis*, and later in John 16:7, Jesus refers to the Spirit as the paraclete.

The Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's anointed. He patiently waited in faith for that day to come; and it came when Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus to the temple to offer the prescribed sacrifices. The old man knew the time had come, he stepped forward, took the baby in his arms and sang what we know as the Nunc Dimittis,

'Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,  
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.

For my eyes have seen your salvation,  
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and the glory of your people Israel.' (Lk 2:29-32)

This was a special moment for Simeon; now that he not only saw the Messiah with his own eyes, but actually held Him in his arms, he could depart this life in peace, in full assurance that God had fulfilled His prophecy to him. And yet, the old man not only received what had been prophesied, he made a prophetic utterance of his own. In his song, he spoke of the salvation which Messiah would bring about being not only the glory of Israel, but also a light for revelation to the Gentiles. This was, of course, always part of God's plan and Jews believed it would happen by Gentiles becoming proselytes.

But no! Salvation was offered to all through repentance and faith, for both Jew and Gentile, in Jesus, who would give His life as a ransom for many. That is why Simeon also prophesied in vv.34-35,

This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.

That sword did indeed pierce Mary's soul as she watched her son dying on a cross.

Joseph and Mary were in the right place at the right time for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem and to hear the prophecies of Simeon, all because of the census. God had worked all things together for the good of His purposes, and all of them had faith to believe.

There are times when we may wonder about the circumstances of our lives, and even question God – 'What is going on?' But if we approach this with faith, then we will see how God uses these circumstances to fulfil His good purposes.

I worked for Prudential Assurance Co in Belfast. Every year I was passed over for promotion, even though I prayed about it. I became an insurance agent, but felt unsettled. The call to full time Christian service came through a missionary speaker. I went on short-term mission to India and eventually was ordained in the Church of Ireland. If I had been promoted I may have remained in that job, never had the privilege to minister, and never met my beautiful wife!

So whenever you are faced with difficult circumstances, don't ask 'What's going on?' Rather, 'Lord, what are you teaching me through this?'