

Pondering the True Meaning of Christmas

Today we begin a new series from Luke 2 that touches on the birth of Jesus. We could hardly get the full meaning of what Luke would have us to see in this passage without seeing that God can, and does, use world rulers, and, yes, even very common and ordinary people to fulfill his purposes. As we begin our look at this passage today, I want us to take a moment to *Ponder the True Meaning of Christmas* and to think: “Where do I fit in this story?” As we begin, I want us to note that the birth of Jesus did not happen by accident. It was a:

—Sovereign Plan

History records for us that in 63 B.C. the Roman army, under General Pompey, marched into Jerusalem. Although there was fierce fighting initially, before it was over, Jerusalem fell and the Jewish lands came under the control of the Roman Empire. At about this time a boy was born who was named Gaius Octavius, later simply called Octavian. The fact that Octavian was related to the Roman ruler, Julius Caesar becomes an important part of this story. When Julius Caesar was murdered on March 15, in 44 B.C., it was discovered that it was Caesar’s wish that Octavian, his grand-nephew, be given the honor of being named Caesar’s son and heir. Octavian changed his name officially to Gaius Julius Caesar.

After Caesar’s murder, a political and military leader by the name of Mark Antony was in a position to rule a part of the kingdom that Caesar had ruled, but he had competition from Caesar’s grand-nephew and adopted son, Octavian. It was suggested by many that Octavian rose to power, not only on his family connection to Julius Caesar, but by other less than honorable means. When many in Rome sought to elevate Julius Caesar to “divine status” after his death, Mark Antony opposed it. This cost him much support within Roman society, support that transferred naturally to Octavian.

There became a growing tension in the Roman Empire between Antony and Cleopatra on the one hand and Octavian on the other. All this came to a head in 31 B.C. at the Battle of Actium, in Western Greece. Antony and Cleopatra were defeated by Octavian. They later fled back to Egypt where they both committed suicide within one year. A few years later, in 27 B.C., Octavian had essentially established peace throughout the entire Roman world. This is what is known historically as the *Pax Romana* or Roman Peace. For his leadership, Octavian was given, by the Roman Senate, the title Augustus, which means “highly, revered, or majestic.” From that time on he was called Caesar Augustus. He reigned until his death in A.D. 14 at the age of 76.

This is the man that we meet here in Luke 2:1. “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.” Although it would take more time than we can give to try and describe the division of powers between Octavian Augustus Caesar and the powers of the Roman Senate, suffice it to say that this one man was the most powerful individual in Rome at this time. Luke would seem to support the reality of power by saying that it was Caesar’s own decree that put in motion events that would lead to Jesus being born in

Bethlehem, just as the prophet foretold.

If the question is asked, “Who is the true Sovereign behind this Sovereign Plan,” Luke wants us to see that it is *God* who sovereignly moves a pagan Roman Emperor to decree a census. And because of this, Jesus would be born in Bethlehem just as had been foretold by the prophet Micah over 700 years earlier. The census was for the purposes of taxation. Although Jewish people were not required to serve in the Roman military, they *were* required to pay taxes to Rome. Because of this census, Joseph and Mary would end up traveling to Bethlehem and would be there when the baby was born.

Archeologists have uncovered an inscription which reads, “Augustus Caesar, son of a god, emperor of land and sea, the benefactor, and savior of the whole world.” Let’s not miss the *contrast* that Luke is calling our attention to. Here is Caesar Augustus, a picture of *earthly* power, prestige, and wealth who is called “savior,” contrasted with the *true Savior of the world* who comes to us in the most humble of circumstances. The *true* Savior is born in a place where animals were kept, where it’s most likely filthy, unsanitary, cold and dark, and is wrapped in torn strips of cloth for warmth and protection, and laid in an animals feed trough. *What a contrast!*

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