

In Nomine Iesu

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Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child,
Make Thee a bed, soft, undefiled,
Within my heart that it may be
A quiet chamber kept for Thee. *Amen.* (ELH #123, v. 13)

I. And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)

Perhaps the greatest emperor in Roman history is Caesar Augustus. He initiated a long era of peace in the land and was instrumental in improving and expanding the infrastructure of the empire. Periodically he issued decrees for the people in the kingdom to be counted, so that they might be taxed. Luke writes about such a census. He also gives the name of a Roman governor, translated Cyrenius or Quirinius, who ruled over Syria. But why did Luke think it was important to provide these details, including the names of two Roman rulers?

Well a proper answer is that he was inspired to do this by the Holy Spirit. And that was certainly the case. We can also say that Luke recorded these details because he was writing about events that actually happened at a certain point in history. This is no fantasy; it is not make-believe. Those reading Luke's Gospel, especially early on, could say, "Oh yes, I know what time period these things took place." They would have understood why a very pregnant Mary would have traveled the many miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. In fact, there is probably not much besides the decree of a Caesar that could have coaxed Joseph and Mary to make the trip.

Caesar Augustus had no idea that he was playing a part in something bigger than his own rule, bigger even than the Roman Empire. Within his lands, a great King was about to be born, a King who would be called "*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*" The government would be upon His shoulder, and of the increase of His government and of peace there would be no end (Is. 9:6-7).

Hymn: #153, 1 & 4-6 - "The People That in Darkness Sat"

II. And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)

Joseph lived about 1000 years after King David reigned in Israel. He was a descendant of David's son Solomon who was conceived by David and Bathsheba (Mt. 1). Since David in his youth tended sheep for his father near the town of Bethlehem, this is where Joseph now

traveled for the census. Mary was also a distant descendant of David and Bathsheba through their son Nathan (Lk. 3). This meant that Jesus would have been counted as the legal descendant of David through Joseph and a blood descendant of David through Mary.

This fulfilled the words recorded by the Prophet Jeremiah, *“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land”* (Jer. 33:14-15). Bethlehem was not the likely place to look for a King, either David or Jesus. But God saw fit to honor this little town, a town that otherwise would not have stood out much more than the towns of Saude or Jerico do today.

But God delights in elevating the humble and glorifying what the world despises. This was true of Jesus who *“humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,”* and now whom *“God has highly exalted”* at His right hand (Phil. 2:8-9). This is also true of you and me. We do not look like royalty to the world, sons in line to inherit the eternal riches of the mighty God. But that is just what we are through faith in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:26). The Lord has honored and elevated us by His grace, just as He did with that little town of Bethlehem.

Hymn: #137, 1 & 3 – *“O Little Town of Bethlehem”*

III. To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

Mary was *“great with child.”* What a common event – a woman was pregnant, about to give birth. But this was no ordinary pregnancy. The LORD had predicted it right after sin came into the world. He said to the devil, *“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring”* (Gen. 3:15), or her Seed. Years later, the LORD would explain more about this promised Seed through the prophecy of Isaiah, *“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel”* (7:14).

How could this be? A virgin conceiving a child? That is impossible. Mary said the same thing when she was visited by the angel Gabriel. He replied, *“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God.... For nothing will be impossible with God”* (Lk. 1:35,37).

Listen to those words again: *“nothing will be impossible with God.”* Do you ever wonder how God could forgive a sinner like you? One who knows what you should do and continuously fails to do it? One who has left such a trail of sins that you are ashamed even to remember them? Do you think you have sinned so much that God cannot forgive you? Would that be impossible for Him? Of course not. Your sins are the reason that the Virgin Mary was *“great with child.”* Jesus came to be our *“Immanuel”* – *“God with us.”* He came to save the world of sinners through His perfect life and innocent death. He came to save you, because He loves you, even more than a mother loves her dear child.

Hymn: #113, 1-2 – *“A Great and Mighty Wonder”*

IV. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And 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.

“The days were accomplished.” “The fullness of time had come” (Gal. 4:4). Immanuel was here. He deserved to be offered the finest apparel, but was instead wrapped in swaddling clothes. He deserved a finely crafted, ornate cradle, but was instead laid in a manger. Even the best that humankind can offer would not have been good enough for this Baby, for He was the eternal God come in the flesh. He could have come to condemn the world, to pour out judgment against all who broke the law of God. But He came to save (Jn. 3:17). To do this, He had to become man. He had to be *“born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law” (Gal. 4:4-5).* He had to go to the cross to take the punishment of God that you and I deserved. He had to rise again in triumph over our death. This is what the firstborn Son of Mary was here for.

His arrival was much anticipated. The Apostle Peter writes, *“Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look” (1Pet. 1:10-12; also Lk. 10:23-24).*

You do not have to wait anymore for salvation from God. Salvation unto us is come! What Jesus has done for you, and what you now have the privilege of hearing week after week are things that the prophets longed for, things that amaze the angels. The holy, almighty God came to save you. He forgives you all of your sins. You are not at enmity with Him like the devil is. Jesus was born in Bethlehem in order to effect peace between you and God. By faith in Him, you now live in this heavenly peace. And when your time in this world comes to an end, by the grace of God you will also sleep in heavenly peace.

Hymn: #140 - “Silent Night”

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