

RELIGION

God used Caesar's taxation to pave a path for Jesus

A mighty empire, a massive taxation machine, a sprawling governing power — all these things might seem of little consequence to a newly betrothed couple with a baby on the way. Still, they were of the utmost importance to the first Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus.

Caesar Augustus recorded in his journal, "The Deeds of Divine Augustus," that he ordered censuses of Rome and its territories in 28 B.C., 8 B.C., and 14 A.D. Caesar Augustus was the self-made title of Gaius Octavius, born Sept. 23, 63 B.C. Adopted by his great uncle, Julius Caesar, dictator of Rome, Octavian took the reins and completed Rome's transition from the Roman Republic to the Roman Empire. Octavian became Rome's first emperor.



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Perhaps on the first Christmas, all eyes were on Caesar Augustus with his census. His name and census begin in Luke 2:1 the narrative of the greatest king — Jesus. Caesar was unknowingly God's pawn, helping set an ancient prophecy from Proverbs 21:1 in motion.

How did Caesar Augustus pave the way for the greatest king, and what lessons can we learn? The first lesson learned: seldom are the main dramas center stage. Augustus' census might have dominated the spotlight of the first Christmas, but the real story,

as detailed in John 1:1, 14, is that God came to earth and put on flesh in the person of Christ Jesus.

The first thing that jumps out about how Augustus paved the way for Jesus: understanding the Pax Romana, "the peace of Rome." The Pax Romana afforded Mary and Joseph safe travel on roads that were well-maintained for the first century. The Pax Romana would also aid the fast spread of the gospel in the mid to late first century.

A second thing that jumps out is related to how Augustus paved the way for Jesus. Jesus' birth in Bethlehem was foretold prophetically by Micah in Micah 5:2. It was necessary that Jesus be born in Bethlehem. Without Augustus' census, Mary and Joseph would

have had no reason to visit Bethlehem.

The second lesson learned: even taxation had a purpose in God's plan. More than likely, the reason for the census was to analyze Rome's ability to tax. Taxation with purpose: God's purpose was to get Mary and Joseph to the correct place for His son to be born. Every detail is significant to God.

The final lesson learned is detailed in Colossians 1:16: all power and dominion belong to God. God used Augustus, but when it came time in Luke 2:9-14 to split the sky and send his angelic messengers to earth to announce the arrival of the greatest king, King Jesus, God did not ask Augustus' permission. God, in His sovereign time and by His sovereign

will, allowed every event to unfold so that everything would play out as He foretold through the prophets. Never stress because God is not caught off guard. Know that He is working in every detail to accomplish His plans. (See Psalm 138:8.)

With its taxation machine, the mighty Roman empire could care less about a poor couple in an outlying province. God cared. God used Caesar Augustus' census for a far more critical purpose than Caesar knew. God used the Roman census to fulfill prophecy and point to the greatest ruler of all — Jesus.

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When Jesus was born 'unto you,' that meant us, too

The most-quoted verse during the Christmas season was written by Luke. Though we may be quite separated by the centuries between us, we would do well to remember there was a bit of a gap between Luke and Jesus, too.

Most likely, Luke never saw Jesus in the flesh. His life was changed by the body of Christ that introduced him to the life and teachings of Jesus, but Luke never laid eyes on Jesus Himself. Luke got all of his information either through divine understanding through the Holy Spirit or eyewitness accounts and teachings from those who knew and understood Jesus.

So, what is the most-quoted Christmas verse? Luke 2:10 tells



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us that shepherds heard a message from heaven through angels that a baby had been born that it would be good

news for all people in the world. Even the understanding of what "the world" was to Luke is significantly smaller than we understand. The world, to the good Greek that Luke was, meant the Mediterranean rim which was then the reach of the Roman Empire.

Luke couldn't know that children in Siberia, the Philippines and the New World would sing about the man who came

to be "with us."

Luke follows this verse with another very famous phrase. "Unto you" are the words chosen. Luke pulled upon the great Messiah prophet, who prophesied 700 years before that "unto us" (Israel) a child is given. A child, not a king, dynasty, religion, mountain or temple. A child was coming to save Israel. Luke tells us a baby has come, but not for Israel alone. Jesus came for all people.

He's here to save, minister and rule all people. "All people" is significant, because I need you to know today that you are in the Bible! Unto you is born a baby, and He will change everything!

This world is filled with disease, debt and death, but Jesus comes to bring good news that nothing

can steal away from us. You can lose friends, but not this friend. You can lose your savings, but not your Savior. You can lose your reputation, but not the love Jesus has for you.

Everything in this life will pass away, but what Jesus introduced will last forever. Jesus changed the world when He came. The governments are on His shoulders. He rules. And, this almighty and everlasting God is born unto you. He is yours as much as any, and with Him all things are possible.

Isaiah's message of hope pales in comparison. Isaiah promised to Israel that one would come to fix everything and He would bless their nation. Luke tells us that every individual is invited to be involved with the one that comes to save us. His salvation is perfectly personal and His destiny for us is universally purposed to influence the world.

If you struggle with confidence or insignificance know today that Jesus was sent to you and given to us for you.

The hope of the world can change your life today just as He has the world for the past 2,000 years. Jesus is yours and because of Him you can have hope because your faith is in Him.

God loved you enough to send His son, and this son is yours.

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Advent and the coming of Christ

Some scholars believe that early on there was little connection between Advent and Christmas. They think the adventus (coming/arrival) or Advent was at least three-fold: the incarnation as represented by the Magi's visit to the baby Jesus as detailed in Matthew 2:1-11; the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptizer in the Jordan, which is detailed in John 1:29-34; and Jesus' first public miracle at the wedding feast in Cana, which is detailed in John 2:1-11.

By the 6th century, Advent had been tied to the coming of Christ. But it was the second coming they had in mind. However, by the early Middle Ages (500 AD to 1000 AD), the Advent season was expressly linked to the first coming of Christ at Christmas.

The Advent wreath is symbolic of many things. The wreath's circular shape, without beginning or end, symbolizes God, while the evergreens represent eternal life. The ever-brightening light (all the candles lit) celebrates our coming out of the darkness as we anticipate the coming of Christ. The light of the world, hope, preparation (waiting or prophecy), joy (peace), and love (adoration) are represented by the candles on the perimeter. The white candle in the center represents Christ.

Discussing this "great light" Isaiah 9:1-2 states, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; Upon those who dwell in the land of gloom, a light has shone. You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing."

The Advent Season represents our present situation as God's people await the return of Christ in His glory. We can be reminded to reflect on



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Christ's coming over 2,000 years ago and then look forward to His return. As we listen to the Advent Hymn, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," we are reminded of this:

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appears.

Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

Immanuel or Emmanuel is interpreted as God with us. That hymn doubles as a prayer for the first and second coming of Christ.

As Israel would have sung the song in expectation of Christ's first coming, we now sing the song in tribute to the first and anticipation of the second coming. Praise God for His son! In these last days of Advent, we will focus on New Testament passages about the announcement of Christ's arrival by John the Baptizer and the angels. That is the promise of the church of Jesus Christ: He has come and will come again.

We began the Advent season on Sunday, Nov. 27th, and will reach its end this Saturday, Dec. 24. That is a time of preparation for the coming of our Lord. The first coming occurred at the Incarnation and birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and continued throughout His life here on earth.

We await a new and final visit, which is what we profess each time we recite the Apostles Creed.

"From thence He shall come to judge the quick (living) and the dead" is the traditional language of that Creed. We anticipate His return, even though we know not the time. We only know we are to be ready for Him in the present moment.

Bible readings for Advent 2022 are as follows: first week, Nov. 27, Isaiah 9; second week, Dec. 4, Isaiah 40; third week, Dec. 11; fourth week, Dec. 18, John 3.

We can only pray not to be distracted in this Advent Season. We must open our hearts to prepare for the joy and hope of Christ's birth and ask to be filled with His presence. As little children, we must ask to be restored in the wonder of Christ's birth.

The announcement of the birth of our Savior came first to ordinary people: Shepherds tending their flock by night. As Luke 2:9 reminds us, "An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them." The shepherds made a corporate decision to "now go" or "make haste" to see this miraculous babe. They didn't arrive with elaborate or expensive gifts like the Magi — they only brought awe and wonderment. They "hurried" to obey God despite many reasons not to. Make us obedient, just as the shepherds were.

Most definitely, I should examine my behavior and intent. Am I lackadaisical in my relationship with my Lord, or am I excited and alive with the Holy Spirit, eager to share the Good News with all I meet? Lord, fill me with Your Spirit.

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HAVE YOU HEARD THE STORY OF CHRISTMAS?

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

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.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them,

Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward all people.

And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them."

And that's what Christmas is all about. But wait there's more..... Christ is coming again!!

Have a blessed Christmas

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