

MERELY AMAZED

For the last couple of weeks, we've been considering parts of the Story of Christmas in Matthew's Gospel, as well as in the Gospel of John. But, we really haven't talked too much about the Gospel of Luke. And there is a reason for that. I've been holding it back for Christmas Eve because it is my favorite version of the Nativity. It always has been. I realized that many years ago, way back in 1965 when I was still a child. And it was then that I saw that classic Christmas show on TV entitled—"A Charlie Brown Christmas," by Charles Schulz. I expect that many of you have seen it too. I loved the part when Charlie Brown had picked a spindly little Christmas tree and put it there in the auditorium where they were going to have their play. And Lucy and the others just derided him for making such a poor choice of a tree and stomped off the stage laughing. And Charley Brown is just outdone by all of this and asks in despair, "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?" Then Linus steps forward on the stage with his blanket in hand, and says "Sure, Charlie Brown. I can tell you what Christmas is all about." And Linus proceeds by reciting part of the Christmas Story from the 2nd chapter of Luke. And, of course, he recited the King James Version. The full Nativity narrative in Luke 2 reads like this—it's long, but on Christmas Eve, it's almost mandatory reading: ¹ And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. ² (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) ³ And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. ⁴ 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:) ⁵ To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. ⁶ And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. ⁷ 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. ⁸ [And this is the part where Linus steps forward and narrates some of the most wonderful words in Scripture:] And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, ¹⁴ Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. ¹⁹ But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them. Luke 2:1-20 (KJV)

What a wonderful story. But it's not a **story** in the fictional sense—like the “stories” of *Sleeping Beauty* or *Beauty and the Beast* are “**stories**”. The account of the Nativity of Christ, as presented to us in the Gospels, is a historically true story that provides the **factual** narrative of the birth of Jesus. Now how do we know that to be the case? Well, have any of you seen the new *Star Wars* movie? This last one, like many of the others, begins with that now familiar print scrolling down the screen—I think they call it the opening **crawl**. It provides a short description of what has happened leading up to what the movie is about to show you. In the first *Star Wars* movie back in 1977, it began with an opening crawl that announced: “**A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away . . .**”—and the story then moves forward. It's one of those “**Once upon a time!**” opening lines. These, of course, are the typical phrases used at the beginning of any fairy tale.

But Luke starts off with a different introductory phrase—he begins his story with: “And it came to pass in those days . . .” So, we have to ask ourselves whether or not that is a normal way to begin a fairy tale, or was it intended as the introduction to a fact-based story? Well, the best way to determine that is to consider exactly what Luke means when he says that it had come “**to pass in those days.**”

And so, he tells us that, “**there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.**” Then, he tells us that this “taxing” activity happened “when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.” Now that gives us something to work with. And so we'd naturally ask, “Was there ever anybody in ancient history named ‘Caesar Augustus’?—and “what about this guy named ‘Cyrenius’?” Are they real or fictional? Well, as we all know, Caesar Augustus was a real person who was also known as the Emperor Octavius. History tells us that Augustus was noted for reorganizing Roman administrative functions—particularly as they related to taking a census of the empire at periodic intervals. Under Augustus, the Romans conducted a census every fourteen years in the ancient Middle East. And when the King James Version states that the whole world was “taxed,” it is actually making reference to these census activities that enabled the Romans to more efficiently tax the subjects of the empire. So Luke's references to Augustus and to the census are strongly supported as being historically true—they weren't fictional; they really happened. If you were a Roman citizen and refused to pay your taxes on the basis

that they were a mere fairy tale—they wouldn't pat you on the head and say, "That's O.K.,"—no, they'd take out a sword and whack your head off.

Luke's reference to Cyrenius being the governor of Syria during Roman rule is also historically correct. Cyrenius is known to have conducted a census in Palestine in the year 6 A.D. Now that particular census would have taken place a bit after Jesus' birth. But, scholars point out that the KJV's translation could be improved on here. A better rendering of the Greek that Luke used might be translated: "*And this [census—the one involving Joseph and Mary] happened **before** Cyrenius governed Syria*"—which confirms that Luke was absolutely correct in reporting the facts from a historical perspective.¹

So what is Luke's point here in mentioning Augustus, Cyrenius and the census? Well, he avoids using any fable-like, "*once upon a time*" language and deliberately places Jesus' birth within the context of historical figures and historical events. Luke wants us to know that the birth of Christ is just as real historically as anything Caesar Augustus or Cyrenius ever did. Everybody back then knew that the Roman census was a historical event—and so was the birth of Jesus. God is the God of history. He holds history in His hand and controls events according to His plan. So what might appear to have been an unrelated administrative directive by Caesar to conduct a census throughout the Roman Empire was the very thing that God used, in His pleasure, to put into motion a whole sequence of events that would send Joseph and Mary to the little town of Bethlehem where a manger awaited the coming New King. It's as if Luke's language here anticipates something that the Apostle Paul would later write in his letter to the church in Rome when he stated: "All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." Romans 8:28 (NET1)

Yet, it is not unusual to hear those who claim that the story of Jesus' birth is a fairy tale. The atheistic Richard Dawkins Foundation claims that "Christmas is only 'Christian' because ancient winter pagan celebrations were incorporated by the Church"—i.e. they claim the Gospel is simply made up. It's too bad that they don't take the time to review the evidence for Christ. Lee Strobel was a former atheist who did take the time to study the facts about Jesus Christ and his earthly existence. And from his own personal study that he began in the hope of disproving the Christian worldview, he ended up being converted to Christianity. Strobel tells us: "Whereas much of what we know from ancient history is derived from one or two sources, we have no fewer than nine ancient sources, inside and outside the New Testament, corroborating the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus." He goes on to say: "That's an avalanche of data. I was thoroughly stunned by the quantity and quality of the evidence for Christ."² The story of the birth of Jesus, like the rest of His story, is no fairy tale.

Now, having said that—I want to make it clear that I am not opposed to fairy tales. In fact, I think it may be worthwhile to consider why it is that people are so attracted to fairy tales in the first place. Timothy Keller in his book entitled, *Hidden Christmas*³, suggests that people love fairy tales because, in them, they see the things that they yearn for: Good overcomes evil; death and suffering are vanquished by the kiss of a handsome prince, the injustices of life are banished to some far away land. These are the things that we long for. But, in real life, they seem so elusive. Yet in fairy tales, they all come true in the end, and so we love to read them or see them so wonderfully displayed in movies. That’s why I love to still play the *Snow White and the Huntsman* DVD, again and again. But, we can’t live our lives in a dream world. The realities of life are hard to contend with, and we need something real to cling to for our hope to survive. Throughout history, emperors and kings have claimed to offer the solution. Caesar Augustus himself declared his Pax Romana—the great peace of Rome. But of course, it was not a lasting peace because the world’s peace is a temporary and shallow substitute for the real peace that Linus spoke about on that stage in Charley Brown’s play. The Prophet Jeremiah knew the nature of those who proclaim such worldly peace apart from the true peace that only God can offer, when he proclaims: “[They say,] ‘Peace, peace,’ but there is no peace.” Jeremiah 8:11 (NASB) It is so very interesting how precise the Prophet Isaiah was in assessing the world’s skewed understanding of peace and justice. Isaiah tells us: ⁸ “The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths; they have made their roads crooked; no one who treads on them knows peace.” ⁹ Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not overtake us; we hope for light, and behold, darkness, and for brightness, but we walk in gloom.” Isaiah 59:8-9 (ESV) Seven hundred years before that holiest of nights in Bethlehem, Isaiah points to that Baby in a manger, born of the Virgin Mary, as the only permanent solution for peace and justice, righteousness and light. Perhaps referring to the shepherds, but certainly referring to you and me, Isaiah proclaims: “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.” Isaiah 9:2 (KJV) Then he tells us that that Great Light is also the **Prince of Peace**.⁴ Whatever peace that humanity tries to attain apart from Jesus Christ is but the pursuit of fairy tales—fairy tales that can merely scratch the itch, but never cure it.

It is interesting that God chose the shepherds to be the recipients of the angels’ great announcement of the arrival of His Prince of Peace. If Jesus’ birth had happened today, we’d think that the angels would have contacted CNN or Fox News. But, contacting the shepherds first was comparable to making the announcement today to some cowboys out on the range or maybe to Native Americans residing on an isolated reservation. So why, of all people, would God send His angels to make this

pretty big production to lowly shepherds. Shepherds were chosen because they had no high social standing and certainly were anything but wealthy. They were just plain, ole hard working people going about their daily lives—trying to get by, trying to find a little peace in this world to hold onto. So the angels told them where to find it. In choosing the shepherds, God wanted to send a clear signal that He cares about all people and extends his grace to everyone—the cowboys, the Native Americans, the banker, the plumber, the homeless guy—everyone. We are all in need of God’s love and grace.

So how did the shepherds react upon hearing the angel’s announcement and the chorus of praise from the heavenly host? Well, they made up their minds to search for Jesus. And when they found Him, they didn’t just keep it to themselves. They told everyone they met about the wondrous things the angels told them about the Baby Jesus—that He was Christ, the Lord. Not only that, but they continued on praising God. That is how the shepherds reacted. But, what was the reaction of the people that the shepherds contacted? All we know is that they “wondered at those things,” or a several modern translations put, they were “**amazed**” (NIV, TEV, NRSV, HCSB). But, there was no indication that they did anything—nothing to indicate that they went in search of Jesus. They were just for the moment **amazed**—then presumably went about shucking some corn, or whatever they did back then to pass the time. They never found Christ because their initial amazement apparently turned into indifference.

All of which turns the focus upon you. What will your reaction be?—Amazement, then indifference? Or like Mary, will you **ponder** these things in your heart? This pondering means that she **treasured** these things and kept them **in her heart** where she let the treasure grow, day to day, year to year.⁵ The people of Joseph’s and Mary’s day awaited the coming Messiah. Some found Him and treasured Him, others stood in amazement on the side—yet, they simply let Him pass by or either rejected Him outright. Are you merely amazed by Jesus—but do not engage Him at any deeper level? Do you treasure Him as Lord and Savior, or are you merely amazed that He is such a good moral teacher? Are you Linus or more like Lucy laughing in derision as you leave the stage?

Without question, Mary and the shepherds are the ones here who exhibit the faith and testimony that should be reflected in God’s people. Nevertheless, often the great wonder of the Christmas story gets treated as if it were all there is to tell about Jesus. But this very historically based story is only the beginning.⁶ You see Christmas isn’t so much a Season **in Time**, as it is a **Place in your Heart**. This year, let us bow down to the New Born King in our own re-born hearts—taking our cues from Mary and the shepherds. They were truly amazed, but didn’t allow their amazement to fade into the darkness. With the coming of the Christ-Child, the world has, indeed, seen a Great Light. Let that

Light shine in you this day forward—season after season, year after year—in the peace and love that comes only from Jesus Christ. And that, Charley Brown. . . and Lucy and Snoop and everybody else, is what Christmas is all about!

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church
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Pastor Darvin Satterwhite ©2017

¹ New Commentary on the Whole Bible - New Commentary on the Whole Bible – New Testament: Based on the Classic Commentary of Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown.

² Jonathan Petersen, “[The Case for Christ: An Interview with Lee Strobel](https://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2016/09/the-case-for-christ-an-interview-with-lee-strobel),” Sept. 7, 2016.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2016/09/the-case-for-christ-an-interview-with-lee-strobel>.

³ Timothy Keller, *Hidden Christmas: The Surprising Truth Behind the Birth of Christ*, New York, New York : Viking (2016).

⁴ Isaiah 9:6 (KJV) For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

⁵ Luke 2:19 (NET1) “Mary treasured up all these words, pondering in her heart what they might mean.”

⁶ Darrel Bock, *NIV Application Commentary, The – Luke: From biblical text...to contemporary life*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 89.