

# RECOGNIZING GOD'S POWER

LUKE 2:1-7

*We Often Fail To Tap Into God's Power Because We Don't Know Where To Look For It Or Recognize It When We See It.*

## **I. The Illusion Of Worldly Power (Vs 1-3)**

We Often Find Ourselves In Awe Of Worldly Power Forgetting That God Is Totally Sovereign.

- A. King Of The World (1)
- B. King Of A Province (2)
- C. King Of Kings (3)

## **II. The Illusion Of Worldly Obedience (Vs 4-5)**

God Uses The Conventions Of This World To Accomplish His Will.

- A. More Than A Hometown (4)
- B. More Than A Fiancé (5)

## **III. The Illusion Of Obscurity (Vs 6-7)**

Since God's Kingdom Operates On Totally Different Values Than Worldly Kingdoms, We May Find Ourselves Looking In The Wrong Places.

- A. Unlikely Parents (6-7a)
- B. Unlikely Surroundings (7b)

# Recognizing God's Power

Luke 2:1-7

I hope that you have been noticing how Luke has been intertwining the conceptions, births, and ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. Last time we left off with the birth of John and his father Zechariah's outburst of prophetic praise. We left John off in the desert growing in spirit.

This morning, Luke will describe the birth of Jesus. What you will notice about Luke's description of Jesus' birth is his incredible restraint. It seems as if Luke simply reports the facts without emotion or without fanfare. However, it seems to me that there are incredible theological truths simply in stating the facts. Theologians and academics have tried to reconcile the concepts of God's total sovereignty over all that happens in the universe and at the same time affirming the free will of human beings. In other words, if God foreknows everything, doesn't that somehow limit human being's freedom?

What's really creepy about this whole thing is that I am writing this sermon just a few days after my son and I went on a vacation together. For about one hour and a half, as we drove through Indiana, my son kept pressing me on this very question. I'm sure I didn't give him a satisfactory answer. I really don't feel that bad about it since people much smarter than I have not really solved the problem.

About all I can affirm are two things the Bible asserts are true. First of all, God is sovereign. He is in complete control. Secondly, we are completely free to choose good or evil at every moment of our lives. I think this passage will demonstrate both truths nicely. In God's Word, He prophesied through the prophet Micah that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem. Micah's prophesies took place 700 years before the event we are describing this morning. If you want to read about all the other prophesies the birth of Christ fulfilled, take time to read through the Gospel of Matthew. But Luke doesn't mention the prophesies. He merely records the context and the birth of Jesus. God used godly people such as Elizabeth, Zechariah, Mary, and Joseph. God also used pagan rulers and emperors. God got Mary to Bethlehem at just the right time to give birth to Jesus.

Secondly, I'm not sure Luke meant to do this, but he also describes the differences between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. Caesar Augustus is king of the world and rules from a palace in Rome. His governor rules from a palace in Syria. They both live in opulence and are protected by soldiers.

On the other hand, the King of kings and Lord of lords is born in a stable and has only His mother and father to care for Him. But that is only true if we look at these events from only a human perspective.

We often miscalculate power and where it resides. Let me give you an example. I hang around with a bunch of guys who all like to think we are macho. One day at lunch our friend Fred said, "I just finished reading a new book entitled, You Can Be The Man Of Your House. Yesterday I stormed into the kitchen and announced to my wife that from now on you will cook what I want when I want it. From now on, my word is law. You will serve me in the dining room and will

make sure I am taken care of before you sit down. Further, I will go where I want when I want and I will not ask you for permission. When I get home, you will draw my bath water, bathe me, give me a massage, and get my robe. Then tomorrow, guess who's going to dress me and comb my hair?" "What did she say?" we were breathless. My wife replied, he said, "The funeral director would be my first guess."

Well I guess my friend found out where the real power resided in his house. The main idea of this morning's text has to do with misunderstanding where the real power is. WE OFTEN FAIL TO TAP INTO GOD'S POWER BECAUSE WE DON'T KNOW WHERE TO LOOK FOR IT OR RECOGNIZE IT WHEN WE SEE IT. In other words, the Bible is very clear about this point. The kingdom of this world is trying to occupy the same space as the Kingdom of God. There is a power struggle going on. And even though the kingdom of this world seems to be powerful and God's Kingdom seems to lack power in the public arena, the truth is that God's Kingdom is on the move and will ultimately destroy the kingdoms of this world. There are two conscious decisions we need to make. The first decision is what kingdom we choose to belong to. In other words, God gives us a choice. We can either choose to be in His Kingdom or we can reject Him and choose to belong to the kingdoms of this world. Secondly, if we choose to belong to God's Kingdom, we must live according to His Kingdom rules. That means that even though we may appear to be weak and foolish according to worldly standards, we are called to imitate our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

## I. THE ILLUSION OF WORLDLY POWER

In verses 1-3 Luke describes the illusion of worldly power. WE OFTEN FIND OURSELVES IN AWE OF WORLDLY POWER FORGETTING THAT GOD IS TOTALLY SOVEREIGN. When I hear Christians and non Christians alike talking as if politicians and governments have so much power, I am really amused. They talk as if we elect the right candidate, life will really be great and if we elect the wrong candidate, life will really be bad. Even though Governments, politicians, courts, and militaries look powerful and overwhelming, Christians ought never to forget that they are merely rulers, powers and authorities of the kingdoms of this world. We belong to the Kingdom of God. He is the only real Sovereign. Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords. There is no higher or more powerful.

Let's look at the king of the world in verse 1. Luke tells us that Caesar Augustus issued a decree that the whole world should be registered. First let me deal with the translations. The NIV and NLT translate the whole world as the Roman Empire. That is indeed what it would turn out to be. But the wording is important. Luke says the whole world. For people living in the Roman Empire, even in the remotest outpost would think of Rome as controlling the entire known world. Caesar Augustus was considered to be the emperor of the entire world. He issued a decree that everyone in the empire should be registered. People were registered for tax purposes and military duty. The Jews were exempt from military duty, but not taxes. They had to pay taxes to Rome. Caesar Augustus was born in 63 BC. He was the great-nephew of Julius Caesar. When Caesar was assassinated by Roman senators and leaders, most notable Brutus, Caesar Augustus was elected to rule with two other representatives, Mark Antony and Lepidus. Lepidus fell from power and that left only Mark Antony and Caesar Augustus. Mark Antony got involved with Cleopatra which got him in a war with Augustus. Mark Antony lost and that left

Caesar Augustus as sole emperor of the Roman Empire in the year 31 BC. If you want to study him in history his full name is Octavian Caesar Augustus. He revived emperor worship and instituted the cult that worshiped Julius Caesar as god an Augustus was referred to as the son of god. He was an incredible administrator and builder. Roads were built throughout the entire Roman Empire which made travel relatively easy. Rome was beautiful. He was arguably the most powerful man in the world. And when he died, at his funeral, it was said that he was a god.

He declared that a census be taken so that he could make sure to collect all taxes and draft people into the military. This was done approximately every 14 years and we have some of these actual documents that date back all the way to the year 20. This census was probably taken about the year 8 BC. In those days refers back to the birth of John the Baptist also. And these are the times that Jesus will enter human existence.

Verse 2 goes on to describe the king of a province. The census was taken under the governorship of Quirinius. He was a great soldier and a great administrator. Luke mentions him because he is governor of Syria. Israel was located in the province of Syria. And that is where the birth of Jesus will take place. Quirinius was made Governor of Syria around 10 BC but didn't actually take office until around 8 BC.

Make no mistake. These were two very powerful and able rulers. What they decreed would be carried out immediately. They had no knowledge or respect for the God of the Hebrews. Their gods were human power, fortune, and fame. They had total control. We would come to think that, wouldn't we? Verse 3 reminds us that there is a King of kings. Luke simply says, "And everyone went to his own town to register." That seems straight forward enough. When the government commands us to pay our tax or draft us into military service we pay our tax and enter the military. Especially in our modern times, the government seems to have a great deal of control over our everyday lives. But to think in those terms is to forget who our King is. God had ordained that John would be born somewhere in the hill country of Judea around Jerusalem and Jesus would be born in Bethlehem at this exact time. Even though Caesar and Quirinius have no intention of serving God, through their acts of free will they are the immediate cause that gets Joseph and a very pregnant Mary to Bethlehem to deliver Jesus at His appointed birthplace. Joseph and Mary were a godly couple and desired to serve God. They had already committed themselves to that. And God used a secular government edict to get them to the right place at the right time.

I think that Christians spend much too much time and energy getting involved with Caesar in our day. Jesus will later say, Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God." The Apostle Paul told us to pay our taxes and obey the law. That's pretty simple. Of course we will have to disobey the government when it commands us to do something immoral. However, our King is Jesus and we belong to the Kingdom of God. In my opinion we would be much better off living out our Christian faith and caring for one another as the Bible commands and preaching the Gospel rather than spending so much time with Caesar. Remember God is Caesar's King and He will ensure that we get to where we are supposed to be. The problem with the modern day church is this. WE OFTEN FIND OURSELVES IN AWE OF WORLDLY POWER FORGETTING THAT GOD IS TOTALLY SOVEREIGN.

Please do not miss the importance of what I am saying. Some scholars estimate there are over 300 prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures that predict the person and ministry of Jesus. All of

them are at least 500 years before the birth of Jesus. The world is moving on. We were introduced to four godly people seeking to do God's will involved in the grand plan. We see the intrigue of the Roman government playing itself out. All these individual and governmental decisions including Rome ended up issuing a decree that would fulfill God's plan even though they were unaware of it. Do not fear and never fret. God is using secular governments and modern events to bring us and the world to a place where He has already predestined. Let's just keep in mind which Kingdom we belong to.

## II. THE ILLUSION OF WORLDLY OBEDIENCE

In verses 4-5 we see the illusion of worldly obedience. I have already alluded to this but GOD USES THE CONVENTIONS OF THIS WORLD TO ACCOMPLISH HIS WILL. Like I just said, even though worldly governments, politicians, and militaries look very powerful, God will use them all to get each one of us to fulfill our destinies.

In verse 4 we see that Bethlehem is more than a hometown. Even though Luke just states the fact that Joseph belonged to the line of David and his hometown was Bethlehem, we know there is a lot more to it. So in obedience to the governmental decree, Joseph and Mary head from where they were living in Nazareth to Bethlehem. It's about an 80 mile journey. Luke says they are headed from Nazareth up to Bethlehem. Usually when people travel from north to south, we say they are going down to that place. For example, if we were in Chicago traveling to Florida, we would say we are going down to Florida. If we were traveling from Florida to Chicago, we would say we are going up to Chicago. Nazareth is north of Bethlehem so we would expect them to go down to Bethlehem. It's true that Bethlehem is at a higher elevation, but for the Jew, any movement towards Jerusalem is up. And further, going to a place where the Messiah was going to be born would be a journey upward.

Keep in mind that Joseph and Mary were simple people. They were obeying a government decree to go to their hometown and register. It just so happened that Joseph belonged to the line of King David. Listen to this prophecy:

*"16Your dynasty and your kingdom will continue for all time before me, and your throne will be secure forever" (II Samuel 7:16 / NLT).*

This was a promise God gave to King David himself. This was made about 1000 years before the event we are discussing this morning. There are many other verses that predict that the Messiah would come from the tribe of Judah and in particular the family of King David.

And later through the prophet Jeremiah said:

*"5"For the time is coming," says the LORD, "when I will place a righteous Branch on King David's throne. He will be a King who rules with wisdom. He will do what is just and right throughout the land" (Jeremiah 23:5 / NLT).*

And how did it just so happen that Bethlehem was Joseph's hometown? Listen to this prophecy given by the prophet Micah around 700 years before Jesus' birth:

*“2But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village in Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you, one whose origins are from the distant past” (Micah 5:2 / NLT).*

So God had planned from long ago that Jesus would be born into a family that descended from King David and that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem. This is God’s chosen place.

In verse 5 we see that Mary is more than a fiancée. Luke says that Joseph took Mary who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. First of all, Mary is carrying the Promised Messiah of Israel. Mary is carrying God incarnate. Secondly, it is most likely that what Luke is saying here is that they were civilly married however; they had not consummated the marriage yet. Otherwise, there would be no need for Mary to make the trip to Bethlehem.

Without anyone’s direct help, God has used governments, rulers, conventions of government and society to get Jesus where He wanted Him at the specific time He wanted Him there. Jesus was now in the womb of Mary, ready to enter the world, in Bethlehem. Look if we are truly Christian, we won’t spend so much time fretting about governments and world events. God will get everyone where they are supposed to be. Like Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and Joseph, we would do well to be pursuing righteousness in our own lives, be sensitive to God’s leading, and obey Him every chance we are presented with a choice. God will take care of the rest. **GOD USES THE CONVENTIONS OF THIS WORLD TO ACCOMPLISH HIS WILL.**

### III. THE ILLUSION OF OBSCURITY

I really hope we are starting to get the idea of true power because in verses 6-7 we will see the illusion of obscurity. **SINCE GOD’S KINGDOM OPERATES ON TOTALLY DIFFERENT VALUES THAN WORLDY KINGDOMS, WE MAY FIND OURSELVES LOOKING IN THE WRONG PLACES.**

We really have been mesmerized by politicians, governments, and the media. We have come to think we must possess political power to accomplish our goals. And so we look to the government to be our agents and to work for us. Sooner or later, one thing is clear throughout human history. The kingdom of this world will clash with the Kingdom of God. It is inevitable because at their core they are incompatible with each other.

In verse 6 and the first half of verse 7 we see some very unlikely parents. Luke simply says,

*“While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.”*

That’s a pretty simple and understated description of a medical birth. Mary and Joseph, a pretty obscure, young couple has just given birth to the King of kings and Lord of lords. Think about this for a moment. Octavian Caesar Augustus was born a nephew of the great Roman soldier and emperor Julius Caesar. There was a great fanfare to receive him and many were aware of his birth and his lineage. He was titled son of god.

On the other hand, an obscure couple in a backwoods town has just brought the King of kings into the world. The only lineage they have is from King David who lived about 1000 years earlier. Nobody knew them and nobody would make note of this birth. Perhaps the birth was

recorded in the census but for the most part, there was no fanfare to receive the One and Only authentic Son of God.

And that brings us to the second half of verse 7 where we encounter some unlikely surroundings for a King to be born in. Caesar Augustus was living in an opulent palace with many servants to wait on his every whim. Soldiers guarded him and he enjoyed the best of everything. God chose to be born in very common and humble surroundings. Mary wrapped Jesus in strips of cloth as was the custom of the time. These strips of cloth were bound around the limbs of the newborns in order to keep their limbs straight.

Now it says that Jesus' first crib was a manger. First of all a manger can refer to a stall or a feeding trough. People often lived with animals in the house. Tradition has it that Jesus was brought into this world in a cave where animals were boarded. In our Christmas pageants, we portray the inn keeper as this fat, greedy man. In fact, Bethlehem was a small town and didn't even have a legitimate inn. Often times, people lived in these stalls with a common courtyard. But at any rate, God chose the time and place where He would be born.

Jesus is no respecter of human titles or privilege. He wants to reside in your heart. The inn keeper had no room. The question for us is do we have any room for Jesus? Or have we become filled up with the things of this world? Have we become enamored with worldly power, wealth, status, and values? Have we crowded our lives with so much worldly stuff that we no longer have any room for Jesus? As I said earlier in the sermon, we have a critical choice to make. We are perfectly free to make this choice. Which kingdom do we want to belong to? Do we want to belong to the kingdom of this world or do we want to belong to God's Kingdom? And then once we make the choice to belong to God's Kingdom, we need to commit ourselves to making good choices along the way. I know it's easy to get confused. **SINCE GOD'S KINGDOM OPERATES ON TOTALLY DIFFERENT VALUES THAN WORLDLY KINGDOMS, WE MAY FIND OURSELVES LOOKING IN THE WRONG PLACES.**

It really is sad that people will use their freedom to freely reject Jesus and choose to belong to the kingdom of this world because the flash, the glitter, the power, and enchantment look very appealing. However, what is more sad is people who have chosen to live in the Kingdom of God but are confused by the glamour and power of this world and never fully tap into God's power because they don't have any room for Jesus. It really is sad that **WE OFTEN FAIL TO TAP INTO GOD'S POWER BECAUSE WE DON'T KNOW WHERE TO LOOK FOR IT OR RECOGNIZE IT WHEN WE SEE IT.**

My greatest fear is that God is going to have to purify His church through persecution. At that time, it will become clear who belongs to the kingdoms of this world and who belongs to the Kingdom of God. I'm hoping that we prepare ourselves for these times. Listen to how William Barclay sums up this section:

*"That there was no room in the inn was symbolic of what was to happen to Jesus. The only place where there was room for Him was on a cross. He sought an entry to the overcrowded hearts of those around Him; He could not find it; and still His search – and His rejection – go on."*

Where are you today? Are you focused on politics, governments, and militaries? Are you so enamored or awed by the things of this world that you have forgotten to which Kingdom you

belong? Please make room in your heart for Jesus. He is the Only true and authentic Sovereign of the world and the universe. Jesus is the King of kings and Lord of lords.