

Session 4: The First Christmas (Luke 2:1-15)

Luke 2:1-15

1 In those days a decree went out from **Caesar Augustus** **A** that the whole empire should be **registered**. **B** 2 This first registration took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. 3 So everyone went to be registered, each to his own town. 4 Joseph also went up from the town of **Nazareth** **C** in Galilee, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called **Bethlehem**, **D** because he was of the house and family line of David, 5 to be registered along with Mary, who was **engaged** **E** to him and was pregnant. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 7 Then she gave birth to her firstborn son, and she wrapped him tightly in cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no **guest room** **F** available for them. 8 In the same region, **shepherds** **G** were staying **out in the fields** **H** and keeping watch at night over their flock. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, “Don’t be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for **all the people**: **I** 11 Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be the **sign for you**: **J** You will find a baby wrapped tightly in cloth and lying in a manger.” 13 Suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: 14 Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people he favors! 15 When the angels had left them and returned to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go straight to Bethlehem and see what has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.”

Exploring Key Words

A Born Gaius Octavius in 63 BC, he became the first Roman emperor. He was renamed Augustus by the Roman Senate in 27 BC and reigned until AD 14.

B The census served two purposes: identifying who could be taxed and who was eligible for military service. Since the Jews were exempt from military service, this was about taxation.

C A town more than 70 miles from Bethlehem. The journey would have been difficult for Mary in the late stages of pregnancy.

D Hebrew village about five miles south of Jerusalem. It was David’s hometown, and its name literally means “house of bread.”

E In Jewish life, engagement carried the same legal weight as marriage. This is why Joseph considered “divorcing” Mary (see Matt. 1:19).

F Joseph and Mary may have been seeking a single room in a home rather than a room in an inn. The same word is used to describe the upper room in Mark 14:14 and Luke 22:11.

G Shepherds stood low on the social ladder, but they weren’t complete outcasts. Abraham, Moses, and David were all shepherds. In Psalm 23, God Himself is described as a Shepherd.

H Shepherds and flocks outside suggests that Jesus was born in the spring. The winter date and images related to Jesus’s birth came much later.

I The Greek word here (*laos*) suggests a people united by ethnicity and language (like Israel). In verse 14, however, Luke used *anthropos*, which means all people, regardless of ethnicity.

J The shepherds didn’t need a star to lead them to Jesus. They would have been familiar with the “City of David” (Bethlehem) and knew to look for a baby in a manger.

TALKING POINTS

The Location (Luke 2:1-5)

- Luke explained that Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem in response to a census (registration) decreed by Caesar Augustus.
- Luke also noted that Quirinius was governor at this time and that the couple traveled from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea because Joseph was a descendant of King David.
- Mary was pregnant when they traveled.

The Birth (Luke 2:6-7)

- Luke pointed out that the time for Mary to give birth arrived while they were in Bethlehem. She wrapped Jesus in clothes and placed Him in a manger because the couple found no other accommodations.

The Declaration (Luke 2:8-15)

- Luke told of shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem who were approached by an angel. The angel calmed the shepherd's fears and declared to them the joyous good news of the birth of the Savior, the Christ.
- The angel gave the shepherds a sign, telling them to look for a baby wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger. An assembly of angels then appeared and sang praises to God.
- When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds decided to go to Bethlehem and see the child revealed by the angel.

Summary Statements

God's authority is seen in His offer of eternal life through His Son, Jesus Christ.

- God demonstrates His authority in fulfilled prophecy.
- God demonstrates His authority through humble means.
- God invites all people to witness His power.

Key Doctrine

God the Son

Christ is the eternal Son of God. In His incarnation as Jesus Christ He was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. (See Micah 5:2; Matthew 1:18-23.)

EXPLORE

1. THE LOCATION (LUKE 2:1-5)

What is your holiday travel routine? How have those routines changed over the years?

- "In those days" may appear to be an inconsequential statement, but it demonstrates that everything Luke wrote actually happened, involving real people at a real time.
- Augustus made a "decree." This decree was a census for taxation. No one in the Roman Empire was exempt.

Why was it important for Luke to include the details about the ruler and the couple's travel?

- Bethlehem was Joseph's ancestral home and probably had about 300 residents. It was anywhere from seventy to ninety miles from Nazareth, depending on the route.
- While Augustus was the most powerful man in the world, God used him to fulfill His plan. The Lord orchestrated history to get Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem in time for Jesus to be born, fulfilling prophecy (Mic. 5:2).

How do you feel knowing that God can move the hearts of leaders to accomplish His will?

2. THE BIRTH (LUKE 2:6-7)

How does Luke's account affirm the humble arrival of Jesus? Why is this significant?

- As Micah prophesied, Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2). Luke was unclear as to whether He was born after they had been in Bethlehem a while or immediately.
- "Firstborn son" is significant. According to the law, the firstborn son was dedicated to God (Ex. 13:1-2, 11-16). Also, six times in the Bible, Jesus is called the "firstborn" of God, proclaiming His deity, sovereignty, and preeminence (Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:15, 18; Heb. 1:6; 12:23; Rev. 1:5).
- Mary laid Jesus in a manger, a feeding trough. This means they could have been staying in a stable or in the room of a home where animals lived under the same roof as the people. Regardless, Jesus's birth identified Him with the needy, lowly, and humble of the world.

Bonus: Imagine being either Joseph or Mary in these verses. What might have been going through your mind?

3. THE DECLARATION (LUKE 2:8-15)

What moves you to praise and worship God most often? Why?

- The fact that the shepherds were outside suggests the timing could have been during the warmer months between March and November. The sheep being watched in the region around Bethlehem were likely being raised to become sacrifices at the temple.
- The angel's intention was not to strike fear into the shepherds but to give them "good news of great joy." This is the first record in the New Testament of the gospel message being proclaimed.
- The angel then invited the shepherds to go see the child and gave them a sign so that they would know they found the right baby.
- The "peace" and "favor" proclaimed are reserved for those who are saved by grace through faith in Jesus.

How is the angel's message about the baby related to Jesus's mission? (PSG, p. 44)

CHALLENGE

As a group, discuss why it's important to show that the birth of Jesus was the fulfillment of prophecy.

How might the details of Jesus's birth be used in sharing the gospel message?

Encourage individuals to reflect upon the outcasts in our society and how God may be calling them to reach these people.

Who are some people in your community needing to hear the good news of Jesus, yet overlooked by the church? What are some ways you can join God in inviting these people to experience His power and grace?

Connect Old Testament prophecy to its New Testament fulfillment.

There are scores of Old Testament prophecies concerning Jesus Christ. Zero in on those related to His birth and connect the prophecy to the fulfillment. Read Isaiah 7:14 and Luke 1:30-35; 2:6-7. Also read Micah 5:2, Matthew 2:4-6, and Luke 2:4.

Encourage adults to complete the Bible Skill activity on page 41 of the PSG. After allowing them a few minutes to read through the listed verses, talk about how Jesus fulfilled the prophecies from the Old Testament.

Emphasize that Jesus’s fulfillment of these prophecies is one reason we can have confidence that He is who He claimed. Explain that this validates the angel’s proclamation through Luke that He is the “Savior . . . the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:11).

DIG DEEPER

SHEPHERDS

Shepherds have been given a bad rap in religious scholarship. Sermons and commentaries often describe them as a despised class—dishonest, unclean, and rejected. Some even contend that their testimony was inadmissible in first-century courts, making the fact that shepherds were the first to tell the news of Christ’s birth all the more remarkable.

However, in his book *Urban Legends of the New Testament: 40 Common Misconceptions*, biblical scholar David Croteau points out that there is no evidence to support this belief. Some of the confusion can be traced to Aristotle, who lived 300 years before Jesus. Some of it comes from the Babylonian Talmud, which was compiled about 500 years after Jesus.

However, the best source for understanding how Jews in Bible times would have thought about shepherds comes from the Bible itself. We know that the greatest figures of the Old Testament—Abraham, Moses, and David—were all shepherds. David also described God as a shepherd in Psalm 23, and God even used the image to describe Himself in Ezekiel 34. If shepherds had been as bad as modern scholars claim, it’s unlikely that God ever would have compared Himself to one.

Jesus’s birth narrative also pokes holes in this idea that shepherds were despised. In Matthew 2:6, the wise men quote Micah 5:2 to Herod to support the fact that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem: “Out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.” Indeed, Jesus would later refer to Himself as “the good shepherd” (John 10), and leaders in the early church were tasked with shepherding the church of God (Acts 20:28).

So, it seems that while shepherds may have been fairly low on the social ladder, they weren’t despised pariahs either.