

Jesus is Born

Couples who have pictures of their wedding day have often been surprised when they compare themselves to those early pictures. I have looked at my pictures and said to myself, “Wow, you sure look different now!” Today I am slender, but in those days I was skinny. On our wedding day our automobile had a mechanical failure. The radiator had a leak, and we had to spend a majority of the money that we had planned to use for our honeymoon for the repair. It was an unwelcome expense for a newly married couple with limited funds. But God used that experience in our lives.

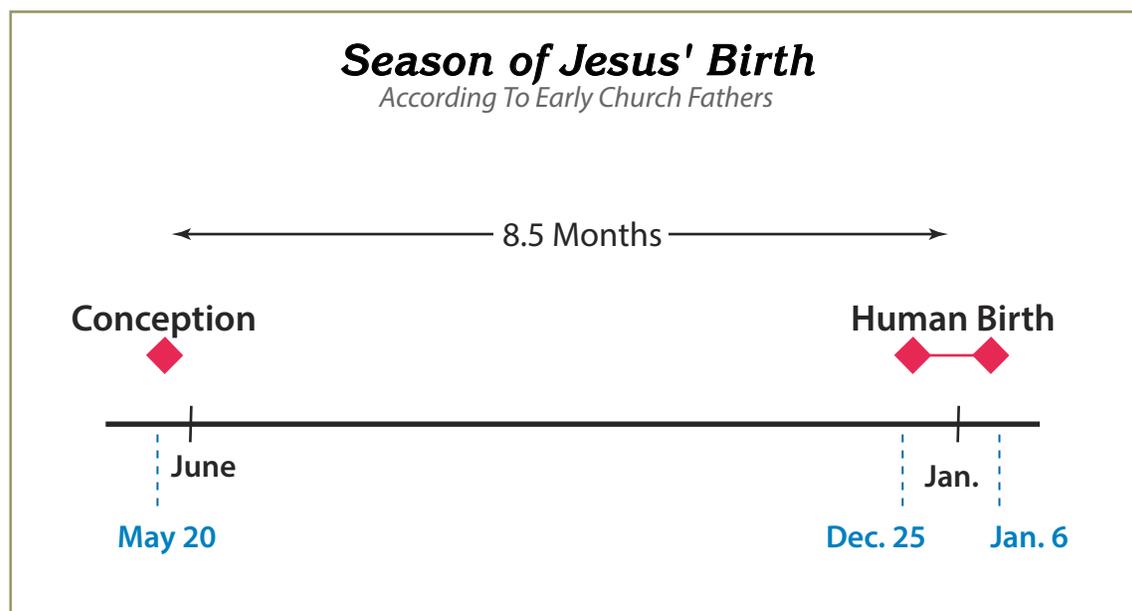
We do not know much about Joseph and Mary, but we know that they were poor, because they offered only birds at Jesus’ dedication in Jerusalem (Luke 2:21-24). Their marriage also started with a misunderstanding over Mary’s pregnancy. God solved this by speaking to Joseph through a dream, and he probably apologized for doubting Mary. This was really about trust - a personal issue. It is doubtful that the family was able to stop the gossip about Mary in the community. People enjoy bad news more than holiness. The marriage had a difficult start and now it was going to get worse.

THE DECREE. Luke 2:1-3 tells us that the bad news came in the person of Caesar Augustus who had issued a decree that a census be taken. Quirinius was responsible for making it happen.

Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. (NASB) Luke 2:1-3

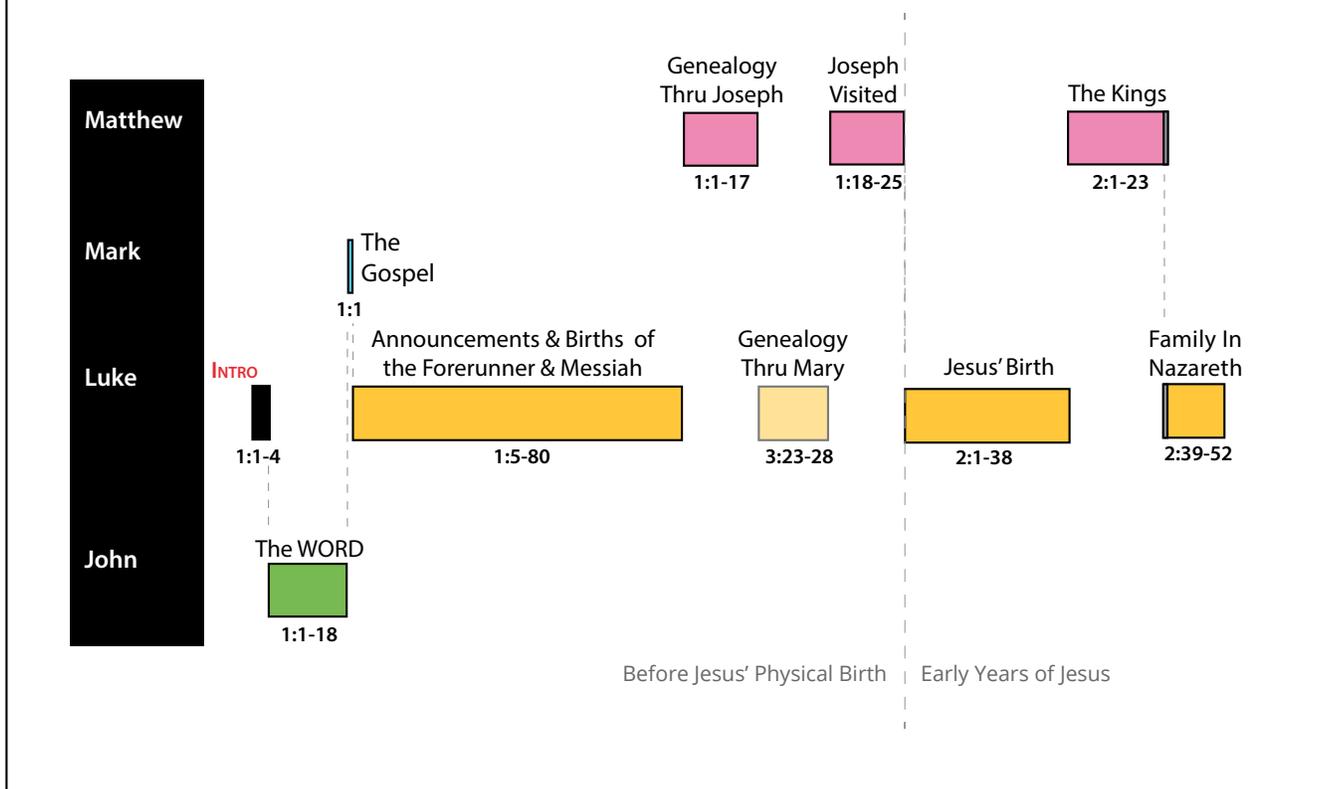
Most likely the census was part of a taxation program. This was not good news for Joseph and Mary because they were poor and because Mary was in the last month of the pregnancy. The trip to Bethlehem was probably not welcome, except that it did give them a reason to escape the gossiping community. Both Joseph and Mary were descendants of King David and therefore they had to go to Bethlehem, David’s home town (1 Sam. 17:12). Why did this happen to Joseph and Mary? Was this just one more “bad thing”?

Actually, it is a wonderful example of God at work through circumstances! Have you ever wondered how God



Life and Heart of Jesus

Before Jesus' Physical Birth - Early Years of Jesus



accomplishes His will? Sometimes we look at the events in our lives and complain. On other occasions we are surprised that God has answered our prayer through someone or by some event. That is what God did. He accomplished His will through other people. How did Joseph and Mary react? Did they know that God was at work?

Micah 5:2 records a prophecy that predicted that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem, and Matt. 2:5-6 tells us that it was fulfilled. But the gospel of Luke records how God motivated this couple to make the trip to Bethlehem in time for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem and thus fulfill the prophecy. This is incredible! God used what appears to be random “circumstances” to accomplish His will. God motivated Caesar Augustus to take a census and thus accomplish His will.

BIRTH DATE. When was Jesus born? Historical records suggest that Caesar Augustus reigned from 43 B.C. to A.D. 14. Herod reigned from 35 B.C. to 1 B.C. Quirinius reigned

on 3-2 B.C. and A.D. 6-9. If we put this all together, we conclude that Jesus was born about 3-2 B.C. There is a full, detailed discussion about the date of Jesus birth in the Daniel study titled, “Messiah Is Alive.” We want to encourage you to read it. Isn’t it amazing what nuggets of information the Holy Spirit has left for us in the pages of scripture!

SEASON OF HIS BIRTH. Have you ever wondered if Jesus was born on December 25? Several early church fathers claim that Jesus was born on December 25 or on January 06. The first date is supported by Clement of Alexandria, and the second one by Epiphanius (A.D. 315-403). Epiphanius says that Jesus was born on January 6 and was conceived on May 20. Epiphanius was very precise in his dating, giving numerous alternate dating methods not only for Jesus’ birth date but for the year of His birth as well. Hippolytus of Rome and John Chrysostom add support to a winter birth and give other supporting data for a December 25th birth date.



Modern City of Bethlehem



Bethlehem Marketplace

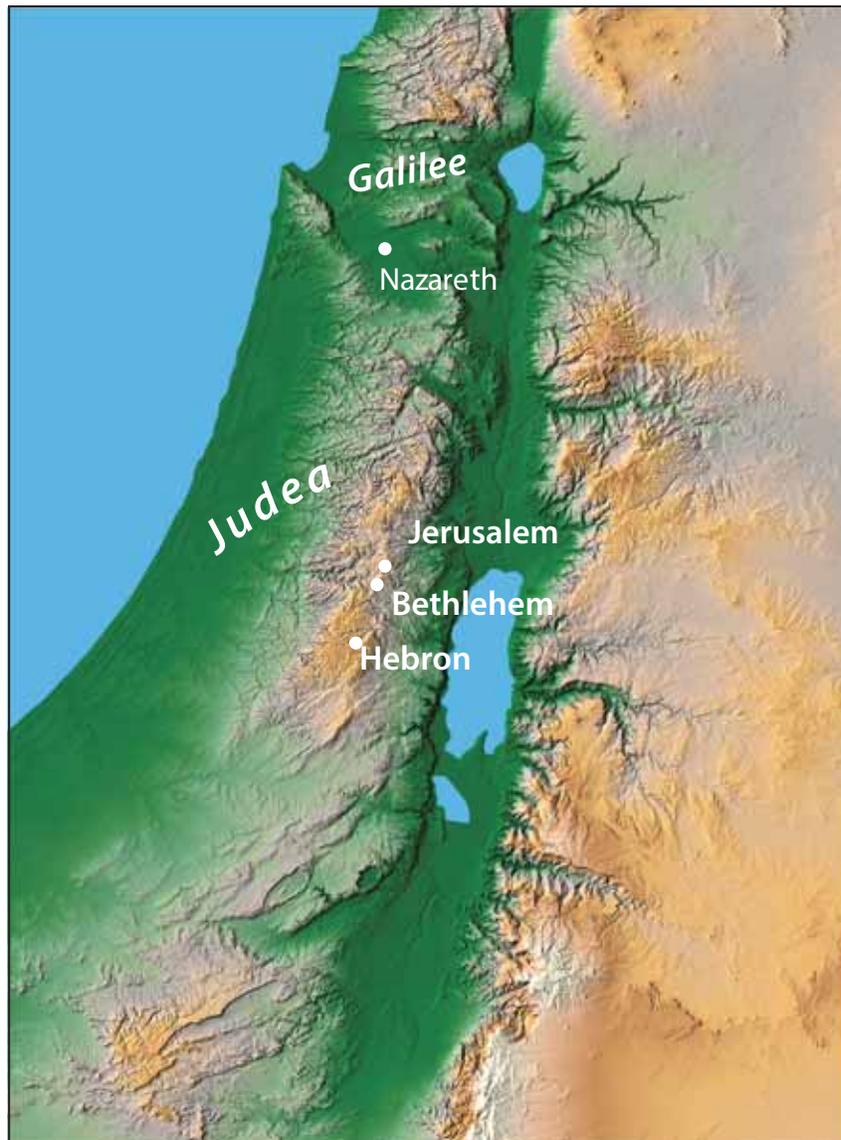
Many have questioned the December-January time for Jesus' birth because they believe that the shepherds would not be out in the cold winter weather with their sheep. Those who live in the north part of our planet sometimes forget that Israel is nearer the equator and the temperatures in December normally range from 60 to 80 deg. Fahrenheit. That is comfortable weather for sheep and humans. Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that men could have been shepherding sheep in December. This also agrees with the statements of the early church fathers who lived closer in time to Jesus' birth. However, we cannot know for sure the month and day Jesus was born, but there is evidence to believe He was born in 3-2 B.C.

BORN IN BETHLEHEM. Joseph and Mary left their

home town of Nazareth, which was located in lower Galilee, and traveled to the city of Bethlehem in the south part of Judah. Their purpose was to register for the census in order to satisfy the Roman decree.

Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. (NASB) Luke 2:4-5

Mary was still engaged to Joseph during this time since they had not yet had sexual relations. A Jewish marriage was not consummated until sexual relations occurred.



While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (NASB) Luke 2:6-7

We do not know if Mary gave birth shortly after they arrived in Bethlehem or if they were there for some time before Jesus was born. God does not tell us. But it appears that they had just arrived because Joseph and Mary were not able to stay in an inn. The only place available to them was a stable with a manger.

The Greek word for inn is KATALYMA and is the same word used for an inn, a guest-room or an upper room, such as the one in which Jesus and His disciples had the Passover. Luke 2:7 says that Joseph and Mary were unable to find a regular empty room in which to stay. The only place offered to them was the room in which the animals stayed for the evening. That would mean the room was on the lower floor of the building. In ancient Canaan, animals were usually brought indoors for the evening. While the Bible does not tell us exactly what happened, more than likely Mary and Joseph stayed with the animals along with some other travelers. The manger was a feeding trough - the only bed they could find for their baby. An early church father, Justin Martyr, states that Jesus was born in a cave (Letter to Paulinus, 58.3). Today, the Church of the Nativity, originally built in 325 A.D., stands over the traditional site of the cave. .

COMFORT. I wonder how this poor, tired, troubled couple felt? What a humble beginning. Yet, their baby was going to change everything for them. Babies are soft, cuddly, and fun. They are a joy from the Lord. But after awhile their sin nature becomes obvious, and they can become very unhappy individuals. Any mother and father who have had a little baby knows that little ones can be selfish, demanding, and disobedient. But Jesus must have been a surprise to Mary and Joseph. He was God in human flesh - a perfect baby. Did He sleep through those early nights? Why did God visit us in the weakest possible way? He came as a weak baby!

They were all looking for a King
To slay their foes and lift them high.
You came, a little baby thing,
That made a woman cry! - George MacDonald

Why did God enter our world like this? Why not have the angels announce His birth to the world? Why come as a baby and lie in a manger in some cave? Why did He choose a poor mother and not a rich one? He could have been born to a rich family and lived in a palace with power and prestige. Why did He come like this? He came to experience the life most of us experience and not that of a rich man!

THE SHEPHERDS. There were no announcements, except to a group of shepherds in the dark of night. Shepherding was not the most desired occupation when Jesus was born. There were better professions, but isn't it wonderful that God announced Jesus' birth to humble, poor shepherds and not to rich people? God cares about everyone!

In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. (NASB) Luke 2:8-9

Suddenly the shepherds' dark night was aglow with an angel's presence. The Greek text implies that the angel was actually standing on the ground and was not up in the sky as depicted in many paintings. The night was aflame with fire, and the shepherds were very frightened. The Greek text says that "they fearing fear greatly." These men and/or women were unbelievably afraid. This was a gut-wrenching experience for them. Have your teeth ever "chattered" because you were afraid? Or, maybe you could not speak? These shepherds were scared.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT. Do angels care about us? Can angels understand us? The answer is found in the angel's reply to the shepherds. He knew how the shepherds felt, and he cared that they were afraid. Therefore, he encouraged them not to be afraid.



Entrance to Church of the Nativity



Traditional Place of Jesus' Birth



Shepherds In Bethlehem



Announcement To The Shepherds

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people . . .”
(NASB) Luke 2:10

Not only does God care about us, but so do His angels. And if the holy angels can understand us, then the unholy angels or demons can also. This is a warning to us to put on the armor of God and to flee temptation (2 Tim. 2:22). It is also a comfort that God’s angels care about us too!

The angels’ announcement was great news to these shepherds who were guarding and protecting sheep that were to be offered at the temple in Jerusalem. Bethlehem is about

The angel then gave them a sign. Jesus was wrapped in cloths and was in a manger. The cloths were long strips of fabric. They were used to comfort the baby and hold him firm. Why did the Holy Spirit mention “cloths?” It told the shepherds that he was still a baby.

“This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.” (NASB) Luke 2:12-14

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.

5 miles (8 Km) southwest of Jerusalem. In Jesus’ day sheep and goats were held there until they were needed for a sacrifice. The Jewish rabbis required that any animal which was found between Jerusalem and the Migdal Eder, a spot near Bethlehem, was automatically presumed to be a sacrificial victim (Mishnah, Shekalim 7:4). However, one of the rabbis stated that the animal had to be inspected first. These shepherds were taking care of these sacrificial animals. Why is this important? Well, look at the angel’s message,

“ . . . for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” (NASB) Luke 2:11

The angel wanted these shepherds to know that a savior had been born for them, and he made it personal. He did not announce that the Savior was simply for the whole world. He made it personal - “for you.” A Savior for their sins had been born. The perfect lamb of God which will take away our sins had been born for them and for us. The very animals that they were shepherding could never take away sin. He was also their Messiah. This was great news to these shepherds. Did they understand all of this? We do not know. Scripture does not record everything that was said or done.

The baby was also in a manger. Together, these two facts would help them locate Jesus. Then the choir of angels arrived and gave honor to God and promised peace to us.

THE SEARCH. After the angels disappeared, the shepherds rushed into Bethlehem to find Jesus.

When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, “Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.” So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. (NASB) Luke 2:15-16

Historical documents tell us that Bethlehem was a very small town. When Jesus was born, it was probably 100-200 people. Therefore, it is not surprising that Joseph and Mary had trouble finding a room in the town, and it explains why the shepherds did not have any trouble locating Jesus. If the town had been 100,000 people, their task would have been impossible. But they did have to search and they found Jesus in a manger.

THE EVANGELISTS. We are not told what the shepherds did when they saw Jesus. Did they talk to Mary? Did they

worship Him? We do not know, but one thing is for sure, they started telling everyone about Jesus. ous one!

When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds . . . The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them. (NASB) Luke 2:17-18, 20

This is not the action of some shepherds who believed that Jesus was an unimportant baby. We are told that the shepherds “went back.” That is, after they delivered their sacrificial animals to Jerusalem, they went back home. They were telling people as they went to Jerusalem and as they returned home, and those who heard them were extremely interested. They were the first human evangelists for Jesus. The shepherds were eager and excited individuals. They knew that something extraordinary had occurred.

CONCLUSION. Both Joseph and Mary benefited from the shepherds’ visit. This poor, humble, criticized couple was comforted by God as He worked miracles and confirmed to them that this miracle birth was of Him. In addition to Joseph’s dream, the shepherds’ visit must have been encouraging to him that he did not just have a dream. His dream was from God. Mary had been seeing God at work: the angel Gabriel, the birth of John the Baptist to Elizabeth, Joseph’s dream and her vindication, and now some shepherds talking about angels singing.

But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. (NASB) Luke 2:19

The Greek implies that Mary was thinking and thinking about all of this. She was reviewing all of this in her mind. She treasured them! God had given her gifts: a miraculous birth, the one and only Emmanuel, the divine Savior for her sins and those of the world, the promised Messiah, a loving husband, and a miracle - shepherds talking about angels making announcements and singing songs. What a joy for this couple. They experienced the real Christmas - a glori-

O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by:
yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee to-night.

O morning stars, together
proclaim the holy birth,
and praises sing to God the King,
and peace to men on earth.
For Christ is born of Mary;
and, gathered all above,
while mortals sleep, the angels keep
their watch of wondering love.

How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is given!
So, God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming;
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him still,
the dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem,
descend to us we pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in:
be born in us to-day.
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell:
O come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Emmanuel.

- Phillips Brooks (1835-93)