

Today we'll be talking about the birth of Jesus Christ. By way of background, in the last few classes we have covered the story leading up to the birth of Jesus Christ. We talked about the genealogies in Matthew and Luke. We talked about conditions that had to be right in that part of the world—the *Pax Romana*—for the appearance of the Messiah and for the message of the gospel of the Kingdom of God to go out. We talked about the appearance of the angel Gabriel to Zechariah, telling this elderly priest that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a son whom they were to name John, and John the Baptist would be the one who prepared the way for the coming of the Lord.

Then we talked about Gabriel's appearance to the young woman Mariam, or Mary, told her that she would supernaturally conceive and give birth to the Messiah. We talked about her visit to Elizabeth. And then we talked about Joseph, who was engaged to Mary, and how an angel appeared to him in a dream and told her that her child had been divinely conceived and that he should go and with plans to marry Mary. We talked about the timing of the conception and pregnancies of Elizabeth and Mary and how Jesus was most likely born on the Feast of Trumpets or the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles.

Today we pick up the story in **Luke 2:1** with the circumstances of the birth of Jesus the Messiah. **Luke 2:1 And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.**

**2 This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria.**

Caesar Augustus, nephew of Julius Caesar, is the Roman Emperor at the time. He reigned from 27 B.C. to A.D. 14, or up until Jesus was about 18 years old. The Roman Empire is ruling over the entire Mediterranean region, including the Holy Land, during this time. Quirinius was a close friend and military advisor to Caesar Augustus.

Continuing in verse 3—

**3 So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city.**

Some people have wondered about this, questioning why the Romans would've ordered people to return to their own city or town to be registered. They think Luke must've been wrong about this. But at least three different documents have been found from the first and second centuries that show that the Romans indeed ordered people to return to their hometowns for a census. Here's how one of them reads:

**“Gaius Vibius Maximus, Prefect of Egypt orders:** ‘Seeing that the time has come for the house-to-house census, it is necessary to compel all those who for any cause whatsoever are residing outside their districts to return to their own homes, that they may both carry out the regular order of the census, and may also diligently attend to the cultivation of their allotments.’”

As we discussed in previous classes, God uses external circumstances to carry out His plan. We talked about how God used the conditions that existed in the Roman Empire—the *Pax Romana*, the Roman road system, the universality of the Greek language, and the Roman mail system—to set the stage for the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of His Church that would begin to take the message of the gospel to the world. It could not have happened previously. And now God uses some even more specific circumstances—a Roman Emperor's census—to bring to pass the fulfillment of prophecy about the birth of the Messiah.

**4 Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child.**

There are several things to consider here. Most of you probably are aware that when the Bible talks about **going up to Jerusalem**, that means that they are going from a lower attitude to a higher altitude because Jerusalem is located at about 2800 feet elevation along the central ridge of mountains forming the central spine of Israel. When we talk about going up today, we're usually talking about traveling north. But that's not the language of the Bible. The language of the Bible is if you go up, you're going up in altitude. So Galilee and Nazareth are to the north of Jerusalem, and they are traveling south and past Jerusalem to Bethlehem, but they have to go uphill to get there.

Another thing to consider: We know from the genealogies that both Joseph and Mary are descendants of David, which is why they have to travel to Bethlehem for this census. So if their ancestors, their families, are from Bethlehem, why are they living way up north in Galilee?

Two historical factors are at work here that aren't mentioned in the Gospels. One is that many Jews have migrated to Galilee because they are expecting the Messiah to appear there. They are familiar with the messianic prophecy in **Isaiah 9:1-2**:

**Isaiah 9:1—The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, . . . By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, in Galilee of the Gentiles.**

**2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined.**

They knew this was a prophecy of the Messiah, and they wanted to be there in Galilee when this prophecy was fulfilled. **Where does Jesus begin His ministry?** In Nazareth, in the land of the tribe of Zebulun. Where does He then move to? To Capernaum, in the land of the tribe of Naphtali. So Jesus was fulfilling this prophecy that the people of Galilee would see a great light.

This also helps us understand something else that puzzles people when they read the Gospels. This migration of religious Jews into Galilee in the century or two leading up to this time is why we see such a strong religious presence when Jesus is teaching in these areas. He's continually encountering scribes and Pharisees and religious teachers, but this isn't talking about Jerusalem, it's talking about *Galilee*. The reason for this is that a lot of very religious Jews have settled in Galilee because they know from Isaiah's prophecy that the Messiah will appear there, and they want to be there when that happens.

There's another reason why Joseph in particular may have not wanted to live in the Bethlehem area. One is Joseph's occupation? He's a craftsman. In the years leading up to this time, King Herod the Great, the great builder, has been conscripting thousands of men to work on his grand construction projects in Jerusalem and nearby. **He is building the great temple** in Jerusalem, which we've all heard of, about six miles from Bethlehem, but also not far from Bethlehem he's building a giant monument to himself called **the Herodium**. This is what it looked like— basically a man-made mountain wrapped around a palace-fortress about 8 to 10 stories high. This is **what it looks like today**. Herod liked this place so much that he wanted to be buried there, and he was a year or two later. Archaeologists found the remains of his tomb there only a few years ago.

So if you were occupied in the building trades like Joseph and you did not want to be conscripted into **Herod the Great's building projects**, you just might want to pack up and move a hundred

miles north to Galilee where you'd be far removed from such building projects and try to build a life for yourself mostly out of the reach of Herod. We don't know this for sure, but this might help explain why Joseph is no longer living around his ancestral home of Bethlehem.

So now we have Joseph and Mary living up north in Nazareth, about 100 miles north of Jerusalem. But according to prophecy, where is the Messiah to be born? Where is the prophecy that tells us? It's in **Micah 5:2**—

**Micah 5:2—But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting.** So the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem.

So how does God to arrange to have Joseph and Mary, who were living up north in Nazareth, have their son born in Bethlehem, and at the time of the autumn Holy Days so He can be born on the Feast of Trumpets or Feast of Tabernacles? As we've said before in these classes, our God is a God of purpose and planning and perfection in all He does.

And He uses the desire of an emperor far away in Rome wanting to do a census of the people in his empire to create the circumstances to fulfill the prophecy that the Messiah would be born in *just the right place at just the right time* to carry out His plan. I'm not saying it *had* to be done this exact way; it didn't. I think God could've done it any number of ways. But He chose to use these particular circumstances to carry out His will and have prophecy fulfilled in this way at this specific time—so that the Bread of Life would be born in Bethlehem, whose name means “House of Bread.”

Continuing with the story in **Luke 2:6**—

**6 So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered.**

Notice this phrase, “*while they were there.*” The popular picture is that Joseph and Mary show up just at the last minute, and they're rushing around trying to find a room because she's about to deliver her baby, and they can't find a place because everything is full. But that's far from what's indicated in this wording. It says, “*while they were there.*” In other words, they have been there for some time already, and while they were there it came time for her to give birth. Joseph wasn't some irresponsible husband and father who brings his nine-month pregnant wife there at the last minute hoping to find a place to stay. No, they've been there a while. How long, we don't know.

**7 And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.**

Let's notice several things here. First, it says, “her *firstborn* son.” Why would Luke say *firstborn* if Jesus was her only son, as some people believe? But as we showed from Scripture last time, He was Mary's firstborn and she went on to have four other sons and at least two daughters. As usual, Luke is careful in choosing his words to say exactly what he means.

Luke says they wrapped him in strips of cloth for a newborn, “**and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.**” And it's from this line that people get the idea of Jesus being born in a barn surrounded by cows and hay and all kinds of farm animals. But when we look at this from the standpoint of what we've learned from archaeology and first-century culture, this popular picture of the birth of Jesus falls completely apart. So let's look at it more closely.

Let's look first at this word translated “inn.” **The Greek word is *kataluma*,** which means “guest room.” There's a perfectly good Greek word for inn, *pandocheion*, and Luke uses it in the parable of the good Samaritan in **Luke 10:34**—

**Luke 10:34—So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn [*pandocheion*], and took care of him.**

So clearly there were inns at that time where travelers could stay, though probably not in Bethlehem since it was small and not on a main road where a lot of travelers would pass through. So that's not what's being talked about here. What is being talked about is a guest room. It says literally, **"There was no space in the guest room"**—not "there was no room in the inn." So what is the guest room mentioned here?

**Here is a cutaway depiction of what an average first-century house** looked like in Judea at that time. Here is the main living area that was used for everything—for living, for cooking, for sleeping, for storage for whatever possessions the family had. And notice this little room off to the side—that's the *kataluma*, or guest room. Hospitality was very important in this culture, and nearly every house, regardless of how big or how small, had a room for a guest to stay. But again, it was small—barely large enough for one or two people to sleep in.

So with a baby coming, there was no space in the *kataluma*, or not enough space for Joseph, Mary, and a newborn baby. Perhaps another family was arriving for the Feast of Tabernacles and they would be staying in the *kataluma*, or maybe there just wasn't enough space for Joseph, Mary, and a newborn baby, or some combination of the two.

So what did they do, and how does the newborn Jesus end up in a manger? Take another look at this illustration of a first-century house. Other than the house itself, what's the most valuable possession these people own? It's *their animals*. Their animals provided milk and meat for food, eggs if they had some chickens, and wool and hair for clothing. So many houses in farming and agricultural areas were built over a shallow cave or they had a kind of sub-basement in which they would bring in their animals at night to protect them from wolves or wild dogs or thieves. This would keep the animals safe, and on colder nights the animals' body heat would also help warm the entire house.

This sounds odd to us, but this is referred to in the Bible.

**1 Samuel 28:24—Now the woman had a fatted calf in the house . . .**

And there's the story of Jephthah and his vow in **Judges 11:30-31—**

**Judges 11:30-31—And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, "If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, then it will be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD'S, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering."**

Jephthah was obviously expecting one of his animals to come out of his house when he returned home, and he was devastated when instead it was his daughter who came out first. Both of these incidents refer to people keeping their small animals inside the house with them, and this continued on into the time of Jesus' birth.

So what is being described here is there isn't enough room in the *kataluma* or other guests are arriving and staying there, and Joseph and Mary move down into this lower level where the animals are normally kept. **Here's a photograph of one that still exists today.** So Joseph and Mary will have more peace and quiet and privacy there, and depending on the size of this area, the animals were probably moved outside or penned up. I should mention too that when the animals were kept inside overnight, they'd clean up after them the next morning, with the animal droppings either used as fertilizer or put out in the sun to dry out, and later they'd be used as fuel for fires. They couldn't afford to let anything useful go to waste.

The manger probably wasn't this wooden box like you see in the Christmas scenes, but was likely carved out of the limestone, like this one shown here, or maybe made out of plaster. And Jesus would've been laid in that as a makeshift cradle. So Jesus isn't born in a barn because the local Bethlehem Motel 6 is full, Joseph and Mary are staying in someone's home, probably a relative since both of them are descendants of David who is from Bethlehem, and because the guest room isn't large enough they temporarily move to the area where the animals are kept inside overnight.

So that's the real story of the circumstances of Christ's birth, and it's quite different from the conventional picture.

Now we come to the next part of the story. Once Jesus is born as the Son of God in the flesh, whom does God the Father call to celebrate the event? Continuing in **Luke 2:8—**  
**8 Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.**

Let's notice a few quotes about the timing of these events:

"As these shepherds had not yet brought home their flocks, it is a presumptive argument that October had not yet commenced, and that, consequently, our Lord was not born on the 25th of December, when no flocks were out in the fields; nor could He have been born later than September, as the flocks were still in the fields by night. On this very ground the nativity in December should be given up" (Adam Clarke's *Commentary*, note on Luke 2:8).

"These humble pastoral folk are out in the field at night with their flock—a feature of the story which would argue against the birth (of Christ) occurring on Dec. 25 since the weather would not have permitted it" (*The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary*, note on Luke 2:4-7).

According to *Celebrations: The Complete Book of American Holidays*, Luke's account "suggests that Jesus may have been born in summer or early fall. Since December is cold and rainy in Judea, it is likely the shepherds would have sought shelter for their flocks at night" (p. 309).

The Roman census "could hardly have been at that season (December 25), however, for such a time would surely not have been chosen by the authorities for a public enrollment, which necessitated the population's traveling from all parts to their natal districts, storms and rain making journeys both unsafe and unpleasant in winter, except in specially favorable years" ("Christmas at Bethlehem," *Holy-Days and Holidays*, Cunningham Geikie).

So when the Son of God is born in the flesh, who does God choose to tell about this wondrous event? Not the rich and powerful of the nation, not the rulers, not the priests, but rather the **humble shepherds who were nearby tending their sheep** at night. Shepherds were not respected at all in those days. Some rabbis even considered them "unclean" because, after all, what did sheep do? They ran around all over the place eating whatever grass they could find, regardless of who owned it or whose property it was, and since the shepherds couldn't make restitution for what their wandering sheep ate, they saw shepherding as an unclean profession. They were social outcasts. But God clearly doesn't see it that way.

**9 And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid.**

Here again we see the same reaction that Zechariah and Mary had. They were afraid because of this supernatural event, and the angel reassures them and tells them not to be afraid.

**10 Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.**

**11 “For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.**

**12 “And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.”**

We talked about those circumstances earlier.

**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, goodwill toward men!”**

Or, as it should be translated, **“peace among men of good will.”**

This is quite a remarkable story. These shepherds are out minding their own business, when out of nowhere an angel appears to them. And not only that, a heavenly host of angels starts singing to them. Initially they’re petrified with fear, and then the angels disappear into the sky.

**15 So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, “Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.”**

**16 And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.**

**17 Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child.**

**18 And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds.**

And notice this parenthetical thought included in Luke’s account.

**19 But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.**

How would Luke know this? Again, I think he talked with Mary and Mary is the source for all of this information. Luke is writing about 50 years later, and the other who were there are long gone. Did Mary really and fully comprehend what it was that had happened? I don’t know. She knew something incredibly special had happened as she pondered these things.

**20 Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.**

A few thoughts in conclusion. **What does this tell us about God the Father and our Savior?**

One of the study questions I asked was in what way or ways do the circumstances of Christ’s birth parallel those of His death? First of all, how did He die? He died in the most humiliating way possible at that time. He died as a common criminal, executed by the state, mocked, ridiculed, falsely accused, deserted, abandoned, but never saying a word to protest what was happening, going instead as a lamb to the slaughter. He died a shameful death.

What about the circumstances of His birth? Where were rulers and kings born? In places like Herod’s great palaces. Those were the kind of places kings and rulers were born in that day. Was the King of kings born in a palace? No, He was born in very humble circumstances. Not even in His own house, but probably in the home of some kindly relatives who let them stay there. Even there it seems He wasn’t born in the main part of the house, or even in the guest room, but in what you might call the basement where the animals were kept. What were people saying about His birth? They were saying shameful things about Him—that He was born as a result of fornication by his mother for sure, and perhaps by His father as well.

You might say His life was bookended by shame. He was born under shameful circumstances, and He died under shameful circumstances. And what did He do in His ministry? He lifted up those who were living in shame in that society and culture—the lepers, the man with a withered hand, the woman with the issue of blood, the tax collectors—all of whom were viewed by others as unclean—but not by God. **He is a Savior who lifts people out of shame** and reconciles them to God. He can identify with those who have lived in shame. He’s been there. And He lifts them out.

What about whom God chose to reveal the birth of the Son of God to? God didn’t tell the priests, the Levites, the royalty, the nobility. He told a bunch of despised shepherds out tending their sheep in the middle of the night. Does this remind you of what God says about our calling?

**1 Corinthians 1:26—For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called.**

**27 But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty, 28 and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, 29 that no flesh should glory in His presence.**

**It’s not about us. It’s about God.** It’s about what he can do through us when we surrender ourselves to Him and let Him work in us.

**God is more than willing to do whatever it takes,** including giving His beloved Son, to restore a relationship with those whom He created, His children.

**God is surprising and unpredictable** in how He carries out His purpose. For 4,000 years prior to this He had promised to send a Savior. Who would’ve ever imagined it would happen like it did in the story we covered today! This is why God says through Isaiah:

**Isaiah 55:8—“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,” says the LORD.**

**9 “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts.”**

**We also learn that being in God’s plan,** even in the center of God’s plan as Mary was, doesn’t make for an easy life.

**Being a disciple of Christ isn’t about self,** it’s about *self-sacrifice* to follow Him. Mary and Joseph had to give up a great deal to be used by God.

**The self-righteous define those God** values as unworthy. Don’t make the same mistake. Think about the shepherds. People considered them unclean. But God chose them to be the first to whom he would announce the birth of His Son.

**God’s plan is centered in the person** and power of Jesus Christ. He is at the heart of that plan, as we see reflected each year in the Holy Days.

**The real story of Jesus Christ’s birth** is far greater than the counterfeit foisted off on the world. It’s a much deeper story. A much more meaningful story. A story that tells us much more about the Father and Jesus Christ our Savior.