

Prayer

Praise You, Lord God for all the wonderful things You have done through Jesus Christ our Lord! You have become one of us as flesh, body, mind and spirit, and You are a life-filled soul full of love, potential, energy and hope. We worship You, Lord God; we worship You, Lord Jesus Christ; we worship You, powerful Holy Spirit. Bless us as we enter this New Year You have given us: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Give thanks to God for the many good things you have enjoyed about the Christmas and new year season

On-going prayers

- **Pray for Christian families.** *Pray for Christian families who find it hard to decide whether or not to have their children baptised*
- *Pray for those affected by severe cold on the Indian sub-continent*
- *Pray for US and western nationals under threat in Yemen*

Meditation

Hope has been placed within our hearts
To look ahead and think what could be
To delight in what can be accomplished
When Jesus comes to help us see the truth.

Hope is sight beyond all knowledge
Insight into deeper spiritual realms
Faith that God will conquer everything
As Jesus comes with God's own help to save.

Hope is certainty found in faith,
A daring leap of candid integrity
To question the world's ideals of doubt
for Jesus has given us liberty to believe.

Hope is found in Christ alone,
In living the faith we freely profess
A better hope than the world can give,
For Jesus has come, the One in whom we live.

Bible passage – Luke 2:1-7

¹ So it was that in those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the whole world. ² This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria, ³ and all went to their home towns for the census.

⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he belonged to the house and family line of David. ⁵ He went to be enrolled with Mary, to whom he was pledged in marriage and who was expecting a baby. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to have the child, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloth bands, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Thought for the Day

Text

Thought

Bible Study

Review

This is the most well known story of the birth of Jesus, and the tale is told with beautiful simplicity and with great intensity of feeling. There is much that we are not told, but what it does say is extraordinarily powerful, and it makes us feel that we too have been present at the birth of Jesus. The previous chapter of Luke tells a joyful story about the conception of Jesus by the power of God in Mary's womb, but chapter 2 begins with the cold reality of life in the Roman world and a three day journey undertaken by the heavily pregnant Mary. Nothing prepares us for this harshness reality however we glamorise the manger and the swaddling bands in our own versions of the story. Mary and Joseph were rejected in their hour of need, and Jesus was born where cattle lived and fed (2:7). There is much joy to come in Luke's story, but the details he shared would have initially shocked those who first read them.

Mary and Joseph came to Bethlehem because of Emperor Augustus' census (2:1). However, there is some confusion about the date of this and Luke's quote, that '*Quirinius was the governor of Syria*' (2:2). Scholars have studied this intensely and struggled to find any date when Augustus was Emperor (27BC to 14AD), Quirinius was governor of Syria (6 to 12 AD), Herod was ruler of Israel (37BC to 4BC), and a census was taken of Israel (we will look at this later)! Nevertheless, although we cannot easily unpick these dates today, Luke states them as well known facts, and we must accept that when the Gospel was first read, people may well have said 'oh yes, I remember that year!' Luke was concerned that we who want to know about the life of Jesus begin with facts and not fairy tales, so according to the knowledge available to him, he located the birth of Jesus in real time.

Mystery also surrounds Luke's report that Mary travelled south from Nazareth to Bethlehem with Joseph. Why would a heavily pregnant woman travel under such circumstances? From all we know, only men were required to register and lineage was established through the male line, so Joseph alone was required, not Mary! There are some good reasons why Mary might have travelled, however. Firstly, in chapter 1, Mary had travelled down to Judea (where Bethlehem was situated) to meet her relative Elizabeth for the last months of her pregnancy (1:39,56). Mary may well have wished to give birth surrounded by her own wider family, including Elizabeth. Secondly, women could sometimes hold property in Israel (see Numbers 27:1f.); and if Mary held property she would have been required to register. Thirdly, the scandal of Mary's 'virgin' pregnancy (1:5) may well have created a tight bond between Mary and Joseph (see also Matthew 1:18-25), and the two had become inseparable. Their pledge of marriage was indeed blessed by God, and we are entitled to imagine that any of these reasons lay behind Mary's difficult journey to Bethlehem.

Whilst so many nativity plays have given us a variety of mental pictures of what happened next, it is best to stick to the simple words of scripture. Luke tells us that the time came for Mary '*to have her child*' (1:6). Even today, when a mother goes into labour, most people will sacrifice time and effort, and offer every possible form of help to the mother and child at what has always been a 'life and death' moment. We therefore cannot over-emphasise the extraordinary nature of the rejection suffered by the family of Jesus at the moment of his birth. We have no right to try and suggest that this scene of the baby in the stable is somehow a beautiful depiction of a perfect birth. Jesus was born and clothed, probably with traditional cloths brought by Mary for the purpose, and laid in the hay-trough normally used by the cattle who occupied a part of any normal house or 'dwelling' not otherwise used by people, because '*there was no room for them in the inn*' (2:7).

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The date of Jesus' birth
- The significance of Bethlehem
- The birth of Jesus, 'laid in a manger'

Notes on the text and translation

Important words

V5 'pledged in marriage'

The phrase '*pledged in marriage*' translates the Greek word 'mnesteuo', which is a formal pre-marriage relationship in which the man and woman to be married get to know each other before the actual wedding ceremony and consummation of the marriage. In days when marriages were arranged by the heads of families, the betrothal period gave human dignity to the whole concept of arranged marriages.

V7 'firstborn son'

The phrase '*firstborn son*' seems straightforward here, and it suggests that Mary did indeed have later children. However, the Greek word used here, 'protokos', is also used in a number of places in the New Testament in a more theological manner. For example, it is found in Colossians 1:15 to speak of Jesus as God's 'firstborn' who is pre-existent in creation, and consequently to be the first to be raised from the dead (Col 1:18 – see also Romans 8:29 and Hebrews 1:6, 11:28).

V7 'inn'

The word 'inn' conjures up different images according to where you live! In England today, for example, people might think of something between a 'pub' and a small hostel. In other countries, the word is used more to describe a guest house, or somewhere rented out for various purposes. This second use is probably more like the 'inn' described here in Luke 2:7. The Greek word 'kataluma' could mean 'room, guest room, or inn' (according to a standard Biblical Greek dictionary).

Going Deeper

The date of Jesus' birth

The beginning of Luke 2 and Matthew 2 appear to be so straightforward, but when we put together the dates of all the character involved, then finding a time when a census took place which overlaps all the named officials has defeated scholars for centuries! And this is the reason why people are uncertain about the birth of Jesus. The one thing most people agree upon today is that the monks of later centuries who calculated the birth of Christ as '0AD' did not get it right, because by their dating, Herod (the king mentioned in Matthew) died four years previously, around 4BC!

Now, if we reckon that Jesus was in fact born during the last year or so of the reign of Herod the Great, this means he was born around 5 BC. This would place the birth within the reign of Augustus (27BC to 14AD), but not the governorship of Quirinius in Syria (6-12AD)! There is, however, one possible way to reconcile all these confusing dates. Roman records tell us that Quirinius was a notable servant of Rome in the region of Syria for many years before he was the formal 'Governor', so it is possible that Quirinius was a known contact between Herod and the greater province of Syria for many years before he held the governorship.

In addition, the governorship of Syria was the title of a high ranking Roman, and entitled the occupant to sit on the Senate in Rome. Moreover, the province of Syria covered the regions of Israel and Palestine partly occupied by Jews in the days of Jesus, and Herod the Great ruled the Jewish regions of Israel and Palestine within the province of Syria. If you have read the studies in this series on the first few verses of Luke's Gospel, you may now realise that it may have been in Luke's interests to 'name-drop' both the Emperor and also the governor of Syria. By referring to these Roman figures at the time of Jesus' birth, Luke connected with those who read his Gospel in Rome, in the later years of the first century.

Lastly, we must look at the matter of the date of the census. There was no recorded official Roman census in Israel around the time quoted by Luke, but this does not mean that none was taken. There are suggestions in ancient records that Herod was responsible for a at least one census towards the end of his reign, and after his death, when his 'kingdom' was split up between his three eligible sons, censuses were required to establish the tax status of the three regions of Judea, Galilee and the Decapolis ruled by each son. There is no clear answer to when the census took place, but it seems that it was an accepted part of life in that part of the Roman Empire due to the complex politics of the region.

The significance of Bethlehem

Bethlehem was the home town of David, and all those who owned land in that region of Judah, just south of Jerusalem, would have been required to register themselves there, for tax purposes. There may be some

confusion in our minds here between the taxes required of citizens of Israel during the Roman occupation. The religious authorities exacted a 'Temple tax' from all Israelites for the sake of the upkeep of the Temple, Herod the Great taxed the people in order to pay for the building of the Temple in Jerusalem, his long term project to ingratiate himself to the Jews. Lastly, the Romans exacted various taxes largely on the movement of goods, especially agricultural taxes on the movement of food around the Empire. This last tax required a reasonably accurate census to establish land ownership rights, and it is this form of census that seems to be referred to here in Luke 2 (because of the reference to the Emperor).

Bethlehem is stated as the birthplace of the Messiah by Micah (Micah 5:2), probably because this was the birthplace of David (1 Sam 16). Bethlehem is a place name meaning 'house of bread', and its origins go back further than David into Israelite history. It is first mentioned in the Bible as the burial place of Rachel (Gen 35:19), the favoured wife of Jacob, the father of the twelve sons and 'tribes' of Israel (see Gen 49). Bethlehem was also the home town of Naomi, who returned there with Ruth after the death of her sons, establishing a new ancestral line through the marriage of Ruth and Boaz, who were the great grandparents of David.

All in all, Bethlehem was the focus of Davidic lineage and also of hope for the Messiah (2:4), and it was right that Jesus was born there, of parents who returned there not just by chance, but on official business to declare their ancestry. In this way, Luke again confirmed the lineage of Jesus and His right to be called the Messiah. We will look at why Jesus was brought up in Nazareth at a later point in Luke's Gospel when this become relevant to the story Luke tells.

The birth of Jesus, 'laid in a manger'

Although Luke tells us a simple story, Mary's pregnancy and the birth of Jesus was also something of a social scandal. Today, we can imagine almost any number of scenarios which might suggest why Mary and Joseph travelled together to Bethlehem and had their child in what appears to be the back of some house or inn. Mary was not married yet was pregnant, and she was incredibly fortunate that her betrothed husband stood by her during the Roman census when most Jewish men would have disowned a woman who was pregnant. Was this an unspoken reason why the inn-keeper was only willing to give the couple space in his inn where the lowest of servants slept and the animals were kept (2:7)? We can never know, but it is possible.

If you research the nature of dwellings built in those days, you will find that it was entirely common for 'houses' build of stone and mud to have space for people and space for some small domestic animals under one roof (probably goats, calves or sheep). Such a design would be similar for small dwelling as well as larger ones such as those described as an 'inn' here in this passage. If you read the notes above, you will realise that what was denied Mary and Joseph was the common hospitality of a place for guests. There is no explanation of this, merely the cold fact of this rejection, and the fact that the baby was born without the care and attention of the community. The text strongly implies that Mary and Joseph dealt with the birth themselves, and as much as the birth of any child is a miracle, the birth of Jesus in these circumstances was more so.

Luke specifically records that Mary wrapped Jesus in the 'bands', often called 'swaddling bands', thought in those days to keep a child's limbs straight in the early days of its life. We may now regard such wrapping of a child as inappropriate, but it seems clear that Luke intends us to see that the only comforts given the infant Jesus were prepared by his mother and father, together with the warmth of a makeshift cradle from a hay box made for cattle. The picture may be highly romantic for us today, but we cannot ignore the sense of awe with which Luke records both the awfulness of Jesus' rejection by his fellow Jews at birth, countered by the warmth of his parents and the manger.

Application

Would it make any difference if we had any more facts about Jesus' birth? This great story is surely inspirational and designed for our faith. God had planned to change the world since the beginning of time, bringing salvation for all and reconciliation with His people (Genesis 3), and had spoken through His servants the prophets about how this would be done through the Messiah. Now, the time had come for the fulfilment of these prophecies. Firstly, John the Baptist was born (1:57,58) and brought great joy (1:68-79); his work was to 'go ahead' of the Messiah and announce repentance for the forgiveness of sins (1:76,77). Now it was time for the Messiah to come, and He did so as a vulnerable child born to Mary.

It is easy to read the story of Jesus' birth and add to it all kinds of myths and legends, which fill out the story so that we can enjoy it even more. We can imagine the difficulties of a pregnant woman riding on a donkey for the entire journey from Galilee to Bethlehem; we can imagine the scene at the inn, the animals, the 'ox and ass' standing by, with copious quantities of hay for clean bedding and a baby neatly wrapped in pure white linen strips of cloth. We forget the scandal and stress, the trials of childbirth in the grubby back room of

an inn, the lack of clean facilities or friendly attention, having to stay in an unknown setting, and the difficult question of where to go next. Luke does not give us the luxury of time to dwell on such matters. He assumes our interest is primarily spiritual not physical, and the facts he records point not so much to the details of what happened as to the significance of the birth and what lay ahead. His story tells us something more important than any facts we may want, because it informs us that God's plan of salvation for the whole world, prophesied in the Old Testament and signalled at His conception (1:31-33), had begun.

In this story here, everything Jesus grew up to do lay ahead of him; but at the point of Jesus birth, God was present in the lowest and most deprived of human circumstances, and capable of transforming it for His glory. This tells us that human life is precious to God beyond any value we can place upon it, and just as God loves His own Son Jesus, He love us and waits for our response to Him just as a father or mother loves the child they have created. Moreover, He can create great glory out of the most meagre of circumstances.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group the mental picture you have about what happened when Jesus was born, and compare it to this story.
2. Why was it important that Jesus should be born as one who was poor and disadvantaged? Why is it important for us today to know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem?
3. What have you learned from reading this passage of scripture today, and what does it tell you about your faith?

Topics covered by this text

- *The birth of Jesus*
- *The historicity of Jesus' birth*
- *God's use of the poor and underprivileged to achieve His greatest purposes*

Personal comments by author

God did a wonderful thing in Bethlehem two thousand years ago. It seems a very long time ago, but in the history of the world it is not very long at all. Also, when we read the story, it is so well known to us that we can almost imagine ourselves there. I have found it helpful to try and focus on the story as it is told, and rid my mind of the many pictures I have from nativity plays in the past. In my opinion, the bare story appeals far more than any extended play, and spending time with it helps me appreciate what Mary and Joseph did so that Jesus could be born, for me.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *By all means, dwell on the story, but ask the Lord to help you see beyond the words of the story to the spiritual truths which lie deeper. Salvation is a wondrous mystery, and people throughout the centuries have discovered that their path of salvation has been blessed by reflecting upon the birth of Jesus.*
 - *In what ways can this story change the world as well as the church? Now that it is after Christmas, ask some others about this and see if you can agree an answer.*
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Final Prayer

Praise You, Lord Jesus Christ! You came as a baby, and although You could not speak to us at that time, Your very presence was the most wonderful gift the world could receive! Come again into our hearts right now, we pray: AMEN
