

The First Christmas

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

The birth of a child brings with it joy and hope for the future—and work. You bring your child home from the hospital, and love, care, provide for, teach, and so forth. And when he or she calls to you, runs to you, gives you a hug, asks for your help or advice—it is wonderful and all is worth the efforts made.

Watching your child grow to know and serve Christ brings immense joy. However, many Christian parents also struggle with prodigal children who do not embrace Christ as Savior. The only hope is that at some point in the future these prodigals will repent of their sins and come to faith in Jesus Christ, whose birth we celebrate in this session. Truth be told, we were all once prodigal children separated from God by our sins. Jesus did not come to eternally be a baby in a manger. He came to die on the cross, rise from the dead, give eternal life to His disciples, and rule the nations. Jesus is the Savior of humanity—He is the One our prodigal children need.

The term *advent* is defined as “the arrival of a notable person or event.” The “Advent season” is when many Christians prepare for the celebration of the birth of Christ at His first coming. It starts on the fourth Sunday before Christmas. In the first century BC, faithful Jews were awaiting the advent (arrival) of the Messiah. Today, Advent is a season observed as a time of expectant waiting and preparation for both the celebration of the nativity of Christ at Christmas as well as the return of Christ at His second coming. The first Christmas occurred because God had a redemptive plan, and there are a great many prophecies concerning how God would redeem mankind from their lostness and restore man’s dominion over creation.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

Luke 1-2

The opening chapters of the Gospel of Luke record how God fulfilled His promises to send the Messiah in the birth of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God. Chapter 1 details how through His angel Gabriel God foretold the births of the forerunner to the Messiah, John the Baptist, and the Messiah Himself. The angel Gabriel announced to the priest Zechariah that he and his wife, Elizabeth, would have a child who would grow up to be the forerunner of God's Messiah (1:5-20). The same angel announced to the young woman Mary that she would be the mother of God's Messiah (vv. 26-38). After describing Mary's visit to Elizabeth (vv. 39-56), Luke detailed the birth and naming of John (vv. 57-80), and concluded the chapter by noting that as John grew he became strong in spirit and lived in the wilderness until the time for the start of his ministry (v. 80).

Luke 2 details the events surrounding the birth of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Luke recorded how Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem to be registered in a census conducted by the Roman Empire. While in Bethlehem, Mary gave birth to her son (2:1-7). That her child was the Messiah was attested to by heavenly witnesses and earthly witnesses. An angel of the Lord and the heavenly host told the shepherds of the birth of the Messiah (vv. 8-14). The shepherds attested to the fulfillment of the sign that the baby would be found in a manger wrapped in swaddling clothes (vv. 12,15-20). Joseph and Mary also attested to their child being Messiah by fulfilling the rituals of Judaism related to the birth of a child and naming the boy with the name given by the angel—Jesus (1:31; 2:21-24).

Two elderly prophets, Simeon and Anna, also attested that the baby Jesus was God's Messiah. God had promised Simeon that he would not die before he saw the Lord's Messiah, whom God now revealed to him was the baby Jesus (2:25-35). Anna saw the baby Jesus and recognized Him as being the One through whom God would bring about redemption for His people (vv. 36-38). Both these prophets testified that in the baby Jesus God was fulfilling His promise of redemption. In relation to these two prophets, Luke used wording similar to that of the prophet Isaiah's words about the Messiah. In the future, by sending the Messiah, God would "comforted his people" (Isa. 52:9; "Israel's consolation," Luke 2:25) and would "redeemed Jerusalem" (Isa. 52:9; "the redemption of Jerusalem," Luke 2:38). Luke ended chapter 2 by noting that Joseph and Mary returned to their hometown of Nazareth in Galilee, where

Jesus “grew up and became strong, filled with wisdom, and God’s grace was on him” (vv. 39-40).

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

The Location (Luke 2:1-5)

Luke explained that Joseph and Mary traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem in response to a census decreed by the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus. Luke also noted that Quirinius was governor of Syria 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.

VERSES 1-3

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole empire should be registered. This first registration took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So everyone went to be registered, each to his own town.

Luke explained that Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem (Luke 2:4-5) in response to a census (**registration**) decreed by the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus (ruled 31 BC–AD 14). A **decree** was an imperial edict. A census required every person to travel to the city of their family origins to register there. This census would have been related to taxes. There is debate about the year of this census. While it is clear that **Quirinius** was governor of Syria in AD 6–7 and undertook a census for tax purposes, Luke’s mention that Jesus was born during the **first registration** of Quirinius, as well as it being necessary that Jesus be born before Herod the Great’s death (4 BC), suggest that Quirinius may have been governor of Syria twice. If Herod’s murder of the innocents (Matt. 2:16-18) took place just prior to his death, then Jesus was born some time between 6–4 BC.

VERSES 4-5

Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family line of David, to be registered along with Mary, who was engaged to him and was pregnant.

Joseph and a pregnant **Mary** traveled from **Nazareth** in Galilee to **Bethlehem** in Judea because Joseph was a descendant of King David—and Bethlehem was the city of David. Joseph’s lineage was from Abraham to David, Solomon, on down through Jeconiah (also known as Jehoiachin), then through his grandson Zerubbabel on down to Joseph (Matt. 1:1-17). Since Joseph was Jesus’s legal, earthly father, Jesus held the legal right to ascend the throne of David. Luke did not provide the reason for Mary’s presence on this trip. Women were not normally required to register. However, as Stein notes, “Luke did not tell us the immediate reason for this, but ultimately he would say that it was due to God’s providence, for God’s Son had to be born in David’s city.”¹

Mary was **engaged** to Joseph. In Jewish marriages of the time, the father of the groom negotiated a marriage contract with the father of a potential bride for his son. They brought the two to meet. If the young woman agreed to the match, then the contract was made and read aloud for all to hear, the bride-price (dowry) paid, the groom and bride exchanged gifts, and the two were “betrothed.” This meant they were more than engaged; they were legally married (Gen. 19:14; Deut. 22:23-24). However the wedding celebration and consummation would not take place for up to a year after the betrothal.

Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, but they had not yet had their wedding celebration—she was still a virgin, since they were not yet living together as husband and wife. The angel Gabriel visited Mary during this betrothal period to announce to her that she would have a child by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:26-38). Once he learned of her pregnancy, Joseph had planned to quietly divorce Mary. However, he chose not to do so after an angel revealed to him that Mary’s pregnancy was an act of God (Matt. 1:18-25).

In her pregnant condition, travel—either by donkey or by cart—would have been a hardship for Mary. They likely traveled straight south from Nazareth through Samaria into Judea, then past Jerusalem to Bethlehem. This would have been the most direct route and would have avoided the necessity of crossing the Jordan River twice. The trip by this route would have been between eighty-five to ninety miles. Luke noted that Joseph and Mary **went up** from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Nazareth is 1,830 feet above sea level while Bethlehem is 2,564 feet above sea level.

Explore Further

Read the articles “Census” on page 272 and “David” on pages 391–393 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*.

Why was it important for Luke to include the details about the rulers and the couple’s travel? How does God demonstrate His authority through fulfilled prophecy?

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 tightly in cloth and placed Him in a manger because the couple could find no other accommodations.

VERSES 6-7

While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 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 available for them.

The time came for Mary to give birth to her child, whom she and Joseph named Jesus (Matt. 1:25; Luke 2:21). The incarnate Son of God, descendant of David, who fulfilled all the Old Testament prophecies of the coming Messiah, was born. His birth fulfilled the words of the prophet Isaiah which he uttered in the seventh century BC: “See, the virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will name him Immanuel, which is translated ‘God is with us’” (Matt. 1:23; see Isa. 7:14). Furthermore, the Jewish religious leaders knew that the prophet Micah had prophesied the birth of a davidic king in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:1-6; see Mic. 5:2). This placed Jesus’s birth in Bethlehem as the fulfillment of Micah’s prophecy and directly connected Him to King David.

Jesus was Mary’s **firstborn son**, indicating that Joseph and Mary afterwards had other children. At the time of Jesus’s birth, Mary and Joseph had not yet consummated their marriage; Mary remained a virgin until after Jesus’s birth. Matthew’s Gospel explicitly states that Joseph “did not have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son” (Matt. 1:25). Matthew’s statement also indicates that Joseph and Mary had a normal marriage after Jesus’s birth. We know that Jesus had

brothers and at least two unnamed sisters. His brothers were James, Joseph (“Joses,” KJV), Simon, and Judas (Matt. 13:55-56; Luke 8:19-21).

Luke noted that Mary laid the baby Jesus **in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them**. There may have been no regular room accommodations due to the increased number of travelers in Bethlehem during the census. The mention of a *manger* indicates they were staying where animals were kept. A *manger* was a feeding trough in which animals’ hay/feed was placed. Suggestions for the location where Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus were staying range from a cave used by shepherds as a sheepfold to a room in someone’s house floored with cobblestones that was dedicated for the housing of animals.

Explore Further

How does Luke’s account affirm the humble arrival of Messiah?
Why does God often demonstrate His authority and plans through the use of people of humble station and means?

The Declaration (Luke 2:8-15)

Luke wrote of shepherds who were watching their flock at night near Bethlehem when they were visited by an angel. After the angel calmed the shepherds’ fears, he declared to them the joyous good news of the birth of the promised Savior. The angel told the shepherds to look for the sign of the Messiah’s birth: a baby wrapped tightly in cloth lying in a manger. A vast assembly of angels then appeared before the shepherds singing praises to God. After the angels departed, the shepherds went into Bethlehem in search of the child.

VERSE 8

In the same region, shepherds were staying out in the fields and keeping watch at night over their flock.

The **shepherds** and their flock were in the fields near Bethlehem at night. In general, shepherds were viewed negatively in first-century Jewish society. According to Jewish law they were seen as being dishonest and unclean.

The shepherds **were staying out in the fields and keeping watch at night over their flock.** To protect their flocks, shepherds would typically put their sheep in an enclosure known as a sheepfold. This could be one the shepherd constructed using rocks to create walls around the sheep; sometimes they would use a cave. The enclosure had one entrance—where the shepherd would sleep, acting as a gate (John 10:7-9).

A March or September birth date for Jesus can be deduced from the presence of the shepherds in the field at night with their sheep. While sheep were usually kept out in the fields at night from spring to autumn, the sheep were usually watched over by an older child or teenager. The only time adults were with the sheep was during the season of the birthing of lambs to assist with the births, drying off the newborn lambs and keeping them warm. Most lambs are born in the spring. Furthermore, it is too wet and cold in late December for shepherding in the fields and December is not the time when sheep give birth. How appropriate that these shepherds were watching for the birth of lambs when the Lamb of God was born. How amazing that God would announce the birth of the Messiah to those viewed by society as outcasts and sinners, the very people to whom the Messiah would minister.

Either a March-April or September-October date can also correlate with the timing of the birth of John the Baptist. John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, was from the priestly order of Abijah (1 Chron. 24:1-19; Luke 1:5), which served at the temple two times a year, in the fall and spring close to Passover. If Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, conceived soon after Zechariah returned home from his encounter with the angel at the temple (Luke 1:8-23), then Mary's pregnancy with Jesus—beginning in Elizabeth's sixth month (v. 36)—correlates to a birth for Jesus six months after John the Baptist. Therefore, Jesus's birth would have fallen within these fall/spring windows.

VERSES 9-10

Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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:”

An angel of the Lord appeared before the shepherds. This angel should not be confused with the “Angel of the LORD” who appears in the Old Testament and is a manifestation of Yahweh God Himself (Ex. 3; Zech. 3). The angel making the announcement to the shepherds was simply one of God's messenger angels. Angels act in a variety of capacities as they

serve God in both the Old and New Testaments (Gen. 19; Dan. 8:15-16; Matt. 4:11; 28:2-7; Acts 12:6-10; Revelation).

The glory of the Lord shone around the shepherds. God is unchanging (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29), thus this glory is the same glory which: descended upon Mount Sinai (Ex. 24:16); filled the tabernacle (40:34); appeared to all Israel (Lev. 9:23; Num. 14:10; 16:19); filled Solomon's temple (1 Kings 8:10-11); arose and left Solomon's temple and Jerusalem before God gave them over to be destroyed (Ezek. 10:4,18-19). This is the "glory of God" which fills the heavenly temple in God's throne room (Rev. 15:8) and which will emanate from the Lamb of God (Christ) to illuminate the heavenly city of the new Jerusalem in eternity (21:23-24).

The shepherds were **terrified** at the appearance of the angel. Fear is a common response when humans encounter God and God's angelic messengers or when they see those who reflect God's glory (Ex. 34:29-35; Judg. 6:22-23; Luke 1:11-12,26-29; 24:4-5). Angels typically respond to people's terror with words such as "Do not be afraid" (Luke 1:13,30).

In this case, the angel was bringing to the shepherds **good news of great joy**. The Savior had been born that very day! The Savior's birth was the fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah's words concerning the coming divine, messianic, davidic Ruler: "For a child will be born for us, a son will be given to us, and the government will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. The dominion will be vast, and its prosperity will never end. He will reign on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish and sustain it with justice and righteousness from now on and forever" (Isa. 9:6-7; see Dan. 7:13-14). The Messiah—who would shepherd His people Israel (Isa. 40:9-11) and be a light to the nations (49:6)—would usher in the kingdom of God (Mark 1:14-15) and accomplish salvation for God's people (John 3:16-18; 10:11-18). The news of the birth of the Savior is *great joy* because through Him would come forgiveness of sin and salvation. That this joy would be **for all the people** indicates the scope of the Messiah's work: salvation would be available to all people, both Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 1:16).

VERSE 11

Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

The city of David in this context is Bethlehem. (Jerusalem is also known as "the city of David," 2 Kings 14:20.) Angels had told both Mary and Joseph that their child would be conceived by the Holy Spirit and

He was to be named “Jesus” (Matt. 1:20-23; Luke 1:26-33). “Jesus” is the Greek form of the Hebrew name *Yehoshua* (the shortened form of the name is *Yeshua*; both meaning “Yahweh saves”). Jesus is the Messiah and Savior because He would “save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). **Messiah** is the transliteration of the Hebrew term for the “anointed one” who will rule. The Greek form of this word is *Christos* (“Christ,” John 1:41). He is also **the Lord**, the incarnate Son of God (vv. 1-3,14).

VERSE 12

“This will be the sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped tightly in cloth and lying in a manger.”

The angel gave the shepherds a **sign** by which they could locate the newborn Savior. The term *sign* here refers to evidence that validates the truth of something else. They would find **the baby wrapped tightly in cloth and lying in a manger**. As finding a baby wrapped tightly in cloth laying in a manger was not an everyday event, when the shepherds found this newborn infant his location and clothing would confirm that this child was the newborn Savior to which the angel was referring. As noted above, a manger is a feeding trough for animals. *Wrapped tightly in cloth* is literally translated “swaddled him.” The practice of swaddling a baby in tight cloth calms the baby and helps the child to sleep.

VERSES 13-14

Suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people he favors!”

A multitude of the heavenly host suddenly appeared standing with the angel. The term *host* was often used in reference to armies; *heavenly host* refers to the angelic armies of heaven who serve God. One of the purposes of the heavenly host is to praise God (Ps. 148:2; Isa. 6:2-3). The angels sang and shouted for joy when God created the earth (Job 38:4-7).

The angels praised God proclaiming, **“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to the people he favors!”** Jesus Christ the Messiah made peace between God and humans by reconciling sinful people who were under God’s wrath for their sins (Rom. 3; Eph. 2:1-10) through His atoning death on the cross (Rom. 5:1,11; 2 Cor. 5:18-21; Col. 1:20). God *favors* those who put their faith in His chosen Messiah, Jesus Christ (John 14:6).

VERSE 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.”

The glory of God and the host of angels had lit up the quiet night. For a time the fields, the flock of sheep, and the shepherds were lit up like daylight. Suddenly the angelic host was gone; the darkness and quiet of night resumed. That the angels **returned to heaven** indicates both their place of origin and the origin and source of the message they delivered to the shepherds—God Himself.

The shepherds immediately spoke to each other. In light of the unusual events that had just transpired, they determined to **go straight to Bethlehem** to see for themselves the Savior of God’s people. The shepherds recognized that this announcement was from God. **The Lord** had made it known to them through the angels, His emissaries.

The shepherds left their flock in the fields and entered Bethlehem, where they found Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus (Luke 2:16). Unable to keep this good news to themselves, the shepherds then told the message of the birth of the Savior to others (vv. 17-18). The shepherds returned to their flock, like the angels “glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard, which were just as they had been told” (v. 20).

Explore Further

Read the articles “Angel” on pages 66–67 and “Messiah” on pages 1087–1092 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How is the description of the birth of the Savior given by the angel related to Jesus’s mission? Like the shepherds, God expects His people to proclaim the good news of salvation through His Messiah Jesus Christ. Pray, asking God for opportunities to tell others about Jesus Christ and the good news of His work on the cross that has made salvation possible through repentance and faith in Him.

1. Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 107.