



You Will Find

Jesus is the promised Messiah who came to save His people.

LUKE 2:1-15

The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is the oldest church in the world. Justin Martyr, an early church father, wrote in about AD 160 that Christians were visiting the site to honor where Jesus was born. In 325, Emperor Constantine ordered a church be built over the site. After the original structure was destroyed by fire, Emperor Justinian constructed a larger church, which is still in use today. Steps near the altar lead down to the spot Christians have visited for centuries.

What images come to mind when you envision the place where Jesus was born?

Photo: Grotto of the Nativity, fourteen-point silver star under the main altar marking the traditional spot of Jesus's birth.

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

LUKE 1-2

Luke began his account of Jesus's birth with the phrase, "In those days" (2:1). Those days began when Mary's father entered the contractual agreement with Joseph's father for Mary and Joseph to be married. The families had gone through the legally binding betrothal ceremony and, according to social customs of the day, the two were waiting several months to wed.

Seemingly unrelated at the time, Zechariah, a priest in the temple, was chosen by lot to burn incense in the sanctuary. While Zechariah was there, the angel Gabriel appeared and explained that his wife, Elizabeth, was going to have a son. Gabriel also appeared to Mary and explained that the Lord had chosen her to be mother of the Messiah. This Son would be supernaturally conceived by the Holy Spirit.

One must imagine that sometime after Gabriel's visit Mary had an exciting yet difficult conversation, telling Joseph she was pregnant. Surely she explained the angel's visit, that she had not been with a man, and that the conception was a miracle of the Holy Spirit. Joseph found this explanation difficult to believe. He decided to divorce her as privately as possible.

An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and explained that Mary had told the truth. The child she was carrying was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Further, the angel instructed Joseph to name the child "Jesus," the Greek rendering of the Hebrew name "Joshua," which translates as "Yahweh saves" (see Matt. 1:21).

Mary left Nazareth to visit Elizabeth. She stayed for three months. After Mary left, Elizabeth had a son, whom Zechariah named "John," according to Gabriel's instructions.

Joseph received notice he had to go to Bethlehem. The Roman government was requiring all men to return to their ancestral home in order to be counted for the census and taxed accordingly.

As you read through Luke 2:1-15, underline events and details that occurred just as they had been foretold. What do these specifics reveal about God's reliability?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE BIRTH (LUKE 2:1-7)

¹ In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole empire should be registered. 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 in Galilee, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family line of David, ⁵ to be registered along with Mary, who was engaged 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 available for them.

VERSES 1-3

After decisively defeating Antony and Cleopatra in 31 BC, Octavian (*Caesar*) became ruler over the Roman Empire. Four years later, the Roman Senate gave him the title *Augustus*, meaning “majestic” or “holy.” Roman mythology declared Caesar Augustus to be the son of a god (Zeus), a god himself, and the people’s savior. One ancient inscription states the “birth of the god Augustus was the beginning of good news for the world.” Thus, Luke’s mentioning *Caesar Augustus* in the birth sets up a stark contrast between the ruler of the massive Roman Empire and the Savior whose humble birth was the beginning of good news for the world.

A *registration*, essentially a census, occurred when *Quirinius* was governor of Syria, a position he held twice (6-4 BC and AD 6-9). Roman law did not require people to go to the town of their birth in order to be counted. Herod the Great, however, may have made this a requirement for the Jews.

VERSES 4-5

Although Joseph lived in *Nazareth*, he traveled to *Bethlehem* because he and/or his family had come from there. Luke called it *the city of David*, but then added the qualifier, *which is called Bethlehem*, to distinguish it from Jerusalem, which was commonly called the City

of David (2 Sam. 5:7; Neh. 3:15). The distance between Nazareth and Bethlehem was 70-100 miles, depending on the route. The two likely walked; the journey would have taken three days.

Jewish wedding celebrations lasted a week. The festivities began when the wedding party brought the bride to the groom's home the evening before the wedding. She and her friends stayed in a special room the groom had prepared. The next day's celebrations included music, games, and a lavish evening meal. At the end of the meal, the couple would retire to a private room and consummate their union. Mary and Joseph were not yet intimate (see Matt. 1:25)—hence they were **engaged** rather than married.

How do the details point to God's plan for salvation being established since the creation?

VERSES 6-7

Luke's Gospel offers scant details about the Messiah's birth. What do we know for sure? First, the birth occurred while Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem. How long they had been there before the birth is unclear. Second, this was Mary's **firstborn son**. The New Testament later referred to brothers and sisters of Jesus (Luke 8:19-21; Mark 6:3; Acts 1:14). Third, Mary **wrapped** her newborn Son **in cloth**. This type of wrapping dates back centuries (Ezek. 16:4) and is practiced today by some Middle Eastern people groups. Mary placed her Son in a **manger**.

Many first-century houses had a room for guests called a *kataluma* in Greek. The upper room where Jesus and the disciples shared their final Passover was a *kataluma*. In the story of the nativity, *kataluma* is translated as **guest room** or "inn" in some translations. Evidently, the *kataluma* in the home where Joseph and Mary had planned to stay was full by the time the couple arrived.

At the other end of the house would have been a room a couple of steps lower than the main level. This room had a door that opened to the outside through which animals were brought in for the night. The room would have had a stone trough or **manger** for feeding the

animals. Although most nativity sets portray a different scene, it does fit well with Luke's description of where Jesus was born.

KEY DOCTRINE: *God the Son*

In His incarnation as Jesus Christ He was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. (See Luke 1:35; John 1:14.)

THE ANNOUNCEMENT (LUKE 2:8-12)

⁸ In the same region, shepherds were staying out in the fields 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: 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: You will find a baby wrapped tightly in cloth and lying in a manger.”

VERSES 8-9

News of the Messiah's birth was proclaimed to the least likely—***shepherds***. Although shepherding had been an honorable occupation in the days of Abraham and David, by the New Testament time people considered shepherds untrustworthy. Shepherds spent long periods of time tending to other people's sheep. The nomadic nature of the job erased almost all accountability. Thus, a shepherd could have lamb chops for supper and tell the owner of the flock the next week that a wolf had devoured the animal. So firmly established was this reputation that shepherds could not be witnesses in legal proceedings.

The shepherds mentioned in the birth narrative were ***keeping watch*** over their flock. The Greek literally reads that the shepherds were keeping watches, meaning they were sleeping in shifts, with each one taking his turn to guard the sheep from predators.

These shepherds were watching their flock ***in the same region***, near Bethlehem. The location is significant. People within a certain distance from Jerusalem raised livestock with the understanding their animals were to be sacrificed at the temple. The outer distance of

that perimeter was a location known as Migdal Eder, which translates from Hebrew as “Tower of the Flock.” Migdal Eder is located just outside of Bethlehem (see Gen. 35:16-21). Thus, the shepherds were tending sheep that were likely to be offered as sacrifices. The scene foreshadowed the sacrificial death of “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

Luke earlier used the phrase **angel of the Lord** to describe Gabriel, who had appeared to Zechariah (1:11). This angel who appeared to the shepherds, though, did not give his name. Absence of a name places the focus on the message rather than the messenger. When Zechariah saw Gabriel, he was terrified; when the angel stood before the shepherds, they too **were terrified**.

When the angel appeared, God’s glory **shone around them**. Paul later used the same term to describe his conversion: “King Agrippa, while on the road at midday, I saw a light from heaven brighter than the sun, shining around me and those traveling with me” (Acts 26:13). In the Old Testament, God’s **glory** was the manifestation of His presence (Ex. 16:10; 24:17; Ps. 63:2).

BIBLE SKILL: Read a Bible dictionary article to gain insight

Read an article about angels in a Bible dictionary. Note the different nature and functions identified. Review Bible passages included in the article, especially passages that point to the Angel of the Lord. What relationship do angels have to Christ? What powers and limits exist for angels? How does the appearance of angels in Luke illustrate the purpose, powers, and limits?

VERSES 10-12

Echoing what Gabriel had said to Zechariah (Luke 1:13), the angel said to the shepherds, **Don’t be afraid**. This was a common word of assurance offered by a heavenly visitor. (See Luke 1:30; Gen. 15:1; Judg. 6:22-23; Dan. 10:12,19.)

The angel's purpose was to bring **good news**. The good news was **for all the people**. Luke had earlier spoken of the *people* to refer to the Jews (1:17,68,77). Later in his writing, though, Luke used the word to include the Gentiles (Acts 15:12-14; 18:5-10). The good news is that Jesus came for all; none are excluded.

The angel began his good news by emphasizing the when: **today**. In Luke's Gospel, this word almost always signaled a message of salvation and deliverance. For instance, Jesus began His sermon at the synagogue in Nazareth by saying, "Today, . . . this Scripture has been fulfilled" (4:21). Jesus told Zacchaeus, "Today salvation has come to this house" (19:9). When Jesus hung on the cross, His final promise was, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (23:43).

The angel used three titles for Jesus: **Savior, Messiah, and Lord**. This is the only time in his Gospel that Luke referred to Jesus as *Savior*. The Old Testament referred to God as the Savior (Isa. 43:11; Jer. 3:23). Mary reflected this Jewish understanding; she responded to Gabriel's message with, "my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:47). The angel told Joseph to name the child "Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21).

Messiah, from the Greek word *Christos*, means "anointed." The Jews, who in the first century were under Roman rule, were expecting an anointed king from the line of David who would rescue them from their oppressors. Although *Christos*, which was Anglicized as "Christ," was a title, by the time Luke wrote his Gospel it had essentially become an accepted part of the Nazarene's name—Jesus Christ.

Lord referred to the supreme authority, master, or ruler. Romans called their emperor "lord." Jews referred to God as Lord. Seeing the resurrected Jesus, Thomas declared, "My Lord and my God," (John 20:28). It was not the resurrection, though, that earned Him this status; He was, as "Silent Night" says, "Jesus Lord at Thy birth."

The sign was not that the baby was wrapped in cloth. Any infant would have been this way. The sign was that the newborn was in a manger, a feed-trough. That would be unexpected.

What is the significance of the titles used by the angel when referencing Jesus?

THE SONG (LUKE 2:13-15)

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.”

VERSES 13-15

The word **host** referred to a military unit. This was likely the same type of unit that had protected Elisha when the Arameans opposed him. After Elisha’s frightened servant explained how massive the Aramean army was, “Then Elisha prayed, ‘LORD, please open his eyes and let him see.’ So, the LORD opened the servant’s eyes, and he saw that the mountain was covered with horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha” (2 Kings 6:17). John, while on Patmos, saw a vast multitude in heaven that lifted their voices in praise to God (Rev. 19:1-8).

The angelic pronouncement came because God’s salvation had now been revealed. This called for His **glory** to be proclaimed **in the highest heaven** and **peace on earth to people he favors**. The word **favors** refers to God’s saving pleasure. The **peace** of God comes to those who have been saved (Rom. 5:1). One of the Old Testament titles for the anticipated Messiah was the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6).

Just as unexpectedly as they had arrived, the angels left. Although the angel had said the baby had been born in the city of David, the shepherds knew where to go—to Bethlehem. And although the angel had delivered the message, the shepherds knew the source of that message—the Lord had made it known to them.

One must wonder, as the shepherds made their way to Bethlehem, did they talk excitedly or were they silent and in awe because of what they had seen and heard? How would you have been?

How does Jesus bring peace in our world?
