

Savior's Birth

Mommy, is that Jesus' birthday cake in the oven?" Gabrielle's six-year-old daughter, Yasmine, asked. "I want to help decorate it!"

"Of course, you can," said Gabrielle as her daughter turned to leave, probably in search of her twin.

"It sure smells good," said Danica, Gabrielle's friend from work, as she sat comfortably in the kitchen nook. "Smells like lemon."

Gabrielle had invited Danica, who had no family in the area, to celebrate the holidays over coffee and pastries. The two women also wanted to exchange gifts before Christmas.

"You're right," Gabrielle said. "This year, we decided on lemon for Jesus' birthday cake. Corey and I like to stress the celebration of Christ's birth at Christmastime. We have a birthday cake every year and read Luke 2:1–18 over the course of the days leading up to Christmas."

"I love that idea," Danica said. "I must say, I'm guilty of pushing Christ into the background during the holidays. I've been preoccupied with the hustle and bustle of it all and am honestly still upset that I couldn't afford to fly home."

"Well, you're more than welcome to spend Christmas Eve with us," Gabrielle said. "We want the girls to observe what is most important as we celebrate—Christ."

1. *Do you think of the birth of Jesus as more of a fulfillment or more of a surprise?*

2. *Have you ever struggled to celebrate the birth of Jesus in this season? If so, why?*

3. *What is your favorite Christmas tradition?*

The Birth of the Christ Child

Luke 2:1-7 KJV

1 And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.

2 (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)

3 And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)

5 To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

6 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

7 And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

Luke 2:1-7 NIV

¹In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ²(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³And everyone went to their own town to register.

⁴So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Luke says this was the first registration when Quirinius was military governor of the Roman province of Syria. Caesar relied upon high-level administrators like Quirinius to ensure that inhabitants throughout the empire journeyed to their hometowns to be registered (v. 3).

At the time, Joseph was living in Nazareth, a town situated in lower Galilee. To comply with the census, Joseph had to travel about ninety miles—at least a three-day journey—from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the town of his ancestors (v. 5).

When Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem, Mary entered into labor (v. 6). The town might have been crowded with travelers who had also come to register at their ancestral hometown. Joseph and Mary struggled to find suitable accommodation. The “inn” that had no place for them (v. 7 KJV), could also be the “guest room” (NIV) in a private home of Joseph’s extended family. In those days, animals and feeding troughs could be in the same house with people. One part of the house was for people and the other for the household animals—and that was the only place left for Mary and Joseph.

The newborn son would have been washed in a mixture of water and olive oil, rubbed with salt, and then wrapped in strips of linen. These would be placed around the infant’s arms and legs to protect his limbs. Once Jesus had been swaddled, Mary laid her child in the feeding trough, which would have been about the right size.

4. *How did the Roman census disrupt Joseph and Mary’s lives?*

5. *What significance do you draw from the humble circumstances of Jesus’ birth?*

The Announcement of the Messiah’s Birth

Luke 2:8–16 KJV

8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round

Luke 2:8–16 NIV

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and

about them: and they were sore afraid.

10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

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, good will toward men.

15 And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

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

they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

Outside Bethlehem, shepherds were watching their sheep that same night when an angel of the Lord appeared near the shepherds, and the radiance of God's glory surrounded

them (v. 9). The sight terrified the shepherds, but the angel reassured them with wonderful “news” (v. 10). Israel’s Savior would be born, and these shepherds are the ones who receive the announcement from God. They were not wealthy lords or scholars of Israel’s Scriptures. They were working people with below-average social standing.

The gospel announcement is “good news” (v. 10) that results in tremendous “joy” for everyone who receives it, by faith. Perhaps this is why the angel encouraged the shepherds to find Christ lying in a manger, wrapped snugly in strips of cloth (v. 12). This would be a sign from the Father, validating the birth of His Son.

Then the night sky exploded with sounds of the “heavenly host” (v. 13). This was an enormous group of angels who offered a hymn of praise to God. They glorified Him, proclaiming that peace has come.

The angels’ news was simple. They gave “glory to God” (v. 14) and said His “peace” remained on those who were the objects of His “favor.” Later the apostle Paul would write that the Father’s mercy rests on those who experience peace through faith in the Son (Rom. 5:1).

After the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds were curious about the message (Luke 2:15). The angel had told the shepherds the location and situation of the birth. The shepherds decided to travel to Bethlehem and see for themselves what the angel had declared to them.

The shepherds “hurried off” and found Mary and Joseph. They saw the baby resting peacefully on a bed of hay (v. 16). The shepherds told the couple about the angels and the message they had received.

- 6.** *What was the symbolic importance of the angel’s appearance to the shepherds (v. 9)?*
- 7.** *Why did the angel encourage the shepherds not to be afraid (v. 10)?*
- 8.** *How did the shepherds respond to the angel’s message (vv. 15–16)?*

Celebration!

During Christmas, the nativity scene appears across North America. We see Jesus presented as a baby in a manger with His earthly parents and others present: shepherds, the wise men from the East, and sometimes even animals. We see such a scene in front yards, on living room tables and shelves, and in store malls. Unlike so many other places that either forbid such sacred demonstration or are indifferent to the Christian faith, God has blessed us with the freedom to express our adoration for the birth of Christ.

Despite the frequent sighting of nativity scenes, however, how often do we take the time to ponder the significance of Jesus' birth? Moreover, how often does the knowledge that Jesus came in human form stir our hearts with joy and gratitude? For most of us, not nearly enough!

The celebration of Jesus' birth should awaken our faith in the Lord and overcome our hearts with rapture and gratitude. "Rejoice," stated Jan Hus, the distinguished Czech theologian of the fourteenth and fifteenth century, "that the immortal God is born, so that mortal men may live in eternity." Yes, let us join together to praise God and celebrate His marvelous gift to us!

For centuries, the people of God fervently prayed for the coming of the Messiah. Even the heavenly host might have wondered how God would redeem humankind. As Christians living in our present age, we are truly blessed to know the whole story. We do not have to await God's fulfillment of His promise; His promise is already fulfilled.

Therefore, let us fall to our knees and raise our hands and celebrate the birth of Jesus, for the Lord is gracious and worthy to be glorified!

9. *How is your church or Christian fellowship preparing for the celebration of Jesus' birth?*

10. *How do you plan to spend Christmas Day?*

11. *How is Jesus integral to Christmas Day for you?*

A Letter of Praise and Gratitude

When the shepherds first gazed upon the baby Jesus, they must have been struck with awe at being in the presence of this extraordinary sight—a sight greater even than the heavenly host. You may write a prayer letter that expresses your jubilation as you comprehend the humble majesty of Jesus' birth.

► *Acknowledge the advent of the Messiah and His identity as the Son of God, who became human so that you may be redeemed and restored as a child of the heavenly Father. Humbly convey your gratitude for the birth of Christ.*

KEY VERSE

And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. —Luke 2:15 KJV

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

—Luke 2:15 NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of December 16 through December 22

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

- Mon.** Isaiah 11:1–9—The Coming King of Peace.
- Tue.** Isaiah 43:14–21—God Is Doing a New Thing.
- Wed.** Isaiah 64—We Are the Clay; God Is the Potter.
- Thu.** Micah 5:1–9—A Great and Peaceful King.
- Fri.** John 1:1–5, 9–14, 16–18—The Word Became Flesh.
- Sat.** Hebrews 1—The Son Is King! Worship Him!
- Sun.** Luke 2:1–20—Christ Is Born! Glorify Him!

GOD'S KINGDOM HAS NO END

Each person in Jesus' lineage is a testament to God's faithfulness and His redemptive plan for His creation. Since the very beginning, God had in mind to rescue His people and establish an everlasting kingdom. It wouldn't be someone else who would show up to save His people; it would be God in the flesh. With the benefit of looking back on all of Scripture and Israel's history, we see that God's reign as king is a consistent expectation and hope. Even in times of struggle and exile, God's people could look forward to a future when evil and injustice would come to an end.

Ruth lived during the era of the judges, when "Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit" (Judg. 21:25). Without God-honoring rulers, the people were suffering in a time of famine. Naomi's family experienced more hardship than most, and she lost almost everything. But her widowed daughter-in-law made the countercultural decision to stand by Naomi. Ruth was a Moabite woman, but people marveled at her loyalty to her mother-in-law, calling her "better . . . than seven sons" (Ruth 4:15). God showed faithfulness to this family and blessed them with a child, Obed, who became the grandfather of Israel's King David.

God's people had suffered under the wrong sort of king, one named Saul. Even though Saul had some success as a military leader, it wasn't Saul who stood up to a Philistine army and a giant who mocked the living God. God chose the shepherd boy, David, to be His future king—one after His own heart (1 Sam. 13:14). God's chosen king wasn't perfect, still God promised that His "love will never be taken away" from David's descendant, that David's "house and [his] kingdom will endure forever" (2 Sam. 7:15–16).

The poetry and hymns of God's people find comfort and trust in God's reign: "the LORD is king forever and ever" (Ps. 10:16). God cares for people who are hurting by "[considering] their grief and [taking] it in hand" (Ps. 10:14). He topples the schemes of the wicked and enacts justice against evil, even those deeds "that would not otherwise be found out" (Ps. 10:15). He is the eternal and all-powerful king, one who is "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love" (Ps. 103:8). God's people can praise His righteous name, for His "mighty acts" are worthy to be shared (Ps. 145:10–13).

After years of waiting, when the son of Zechariah was born, Zechariah echoed these psalms and praises for God's salvation: the God who protects and rescues "has come to his people and redeemed them" (Luke 1:68). John would become the "prophet of the Most High" and "give his people the knowledge of salvation" (Luke 1:76–77). John wasn't himself the king, but he would prepare the people of God for something big: an arrival of a king who could bring freedom and redemption of sin.

God's arrival as king came in the most unexpected way. While ordinary shepherds cared for their sheep at night, an angel appeared. This announcing angel and the armies of heaven shared of a newborn king, a Savior who was to be found—not in a palace—but in a manger beside Mary and Joseph. The rightful ruler of heaven and earth was born in David's town of Bethlehem, but the coming of the Messiah was humbler than anyone had imagined. Only God could rescue His people, and only God would arrive like this.

When Jesus was a man and was walking to the city of Jericho, it was a person who was blind who really "saw" Him for who He was, the Son of David—God's Messiah (Luke 18:38). In that moment, the king of creation showed compassion on a man who was poor, and Jesus healed his eyesight. In doing this, Christ showed His power and authority. The kingdom of God means good news for all, but it is especially good news for the downtrodden and those eager to be healed.



The road connecting Jerusalem and Jericho, where Jesus was stopped by a man who was blind (Luke 18:35), was well-trodden around festival celebrations.

אליעזר שוורץ, ירושלים



This photo shows kestrel chicks—birds of the desert of Negev—being fed. Psalm 145:15 says that God "gives [all living things] their food at the proper time."

MinoZig



Zechariah calls Jesus a "horn of salvation" (Luke 1:69). Animal horns show power and strength, and the one in this photo has been turned into an instrument.

Zachi Evenor



Modern-day Nazareth is no longer the rural town like in Jesus' youth. In John 1:46, Nathaniel remarks, "Can anything good come from there?"

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The distance of heaven above earth is mentioned in Psalm 103:11, and this is how far the love and mercy of God reaches "for those who fear him."

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An eleventh-century painting from a church in France depicts God's defense of the vulnerable when He drowned Pharaoh's attacking army in the Red Sea.

vioandronico2013 (San Gimignano)



This photo shows a field of barley, like the one that Ruth was allowed to glean. There she met her future husband, Boaz. They became the great-grandparents of David.

Gerda Arendt



This photo shows one of the great cedars of Lebanon, whose wood was imported and used to construct David's palace and later, Solomon's temple.

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Psalm 93:3 mentions the "voice" of flooding waves as they pound the shore. The sea is an image of immense power, and God is mightier still.

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