

The Birth of Jesus — What Do I Need To Know About God's Love?

December 24, 2014

Welcome to CrossWinds Church on Christmas Eve as we celebrate the birth of our God and savior Jesus Christ.

In a moment we will look at Luke 2:1-14, but before we do, I want to answer one of the great trivia questions the kids always ask. Is December 25 Jesus' actual birthday? What do you think?

The truth is, we don't know the exact day or even the exact year of Jesus' birth. We are close but nobody is 100 percent sure. Since we don't know when Christ was born, that surfaces another question. If we don't know when Jesus was born, why do we celebrate Christmas on December 25?

In ancient Rome there was a popular week-long holiday called Saturnalia. It honored the deity Saturn. It was a completely pagan festival. As the church grew, Christians wanted to celebrate something worth celebrating during the Saturnalia holiday since they were not worshipping Saturn. Something that is worth celebrating is the birth of Jesus. The growth of the church and the celebration of the birth of Christ eventually eclipsed the entire Saturnalia holiday. For the last 1,600 years, we have celebrated something worth celebrating on December 25, something that actually happened, something that is such a big deal it divided history in half into B.C and A.D. — the birth of Jesus.

While we don't know exactly when Jesus was born, it is very appropriate to celebrate the birth of Jesus and reflect on what Jesus did when he came. Jesus went from creating the entire universe at his father's will and being

worshipped non-stop in heaven, to voluntarily humbling himself. He fused himself with human flesh in the womb of Mary, not temporarily but permanently and irrevocably. Jesus added humanity to himself forever so he could, out of love, die for our sins to save us from the hell we deserve and adopt us so we are transformed into the most blessed beings in all of God's creation. That is why we celebrate the birth of Jesus. Jesus' coming was a great thing.

As we look at the birth of Christ from Luke 2, I want us to focus in on one big concept, *God's incredible love for all of us*. I don't care if you are wealthy or poor. I don't care if you are young or old. The message of Luke 2 is that the same God who created the entire universe loves us more than we can imagine. It doesn't matter how forgotten or insignificant you feel this evening. God passionately loves you. That is the message of Christmas.

Let's get to the story and see how we discover God's incredible love.

God loves those who feel forgotten.

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. Luke 2:1–7 (ESV)

Let me introduce you to some of the important people and places in these verses.

Caesar Augustus

The first guy we meet is Caesar Augustus. Caesar was the ruler of the Roman empire. He ruled from 27 B.C. to 14 A.D. He was the grand nephew of Julius Caesar. He was brutal in his rise to power but once he ascended to the throne, he mellowed. He was much better than Herod, the king of Judea. Herod ruled the little area the Jews lived that was the equivalent of a small state in the Roman empire. Caesar Augustus ruled the entire Roman empire. Caesar Augustus' original name was Octavian. When he took over rulership of Rome, the Roman senate gave him the title of Augustus, which means *the majestic one*.

He was responsible for what is known as the *pax Romana*, or the peace of Rome that ruled the day. What you need to remember about Caesar Augustus is that he was the most powerful man on the planet. That is important to remember.

Quirinius

Quirinius worked for Caesar. He was the governor in charge of Syria and was responsible for tax collection. The reason for the census was to make sure Quirinius counted you and collected enough money from you. Caesar Augustus didn't want anyone getting away with tax evasion. This was not the only census for taxes. Caesar Augustus had a tax census approximately every 14 years. That is why it says this was the *first census* when Quirinius was governor. It certainly wasn't the last.

As part of this census, everyone needed to travel to his or her hometown to register. Why did Caesar insist on everyone traveling to his or her hometown? We will find out in a moment.

Bethlehem

Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem. Bethlehem was the town where King David grew up. It was the town where the story of Ruth and Boaz took place in the Old Testament. It was 5 miles south of the big city of Jerusalem. In 2 Chronicles 11 we learn it was once built up and fortified to serve as a guard city to help defend Jerusalem. By the time of the New Testament, it had fallen into disrepair. It was a small sleepy town. 1 Samuel 20 hints that the citizens of Bethlehem were a small group that wanted to keep their identity as Bethlehemites intact, so they had a yearly family reunion. Many of the young Bethlehemites moved out of town for a job, but the annual Bethlehem family reunion was the way you stayed in touch with your distant relatives. We don't know for sure but it is possible that the yearly Bethlehemites family reunion was still occurring while Mary and Joseph were alive. If so, they were familiar with the long and dangerous trip to Bethlehem since they had traveled it for those reunions.

Another interesting historical tidbit is that when the Jews returned from exile in Babylon, extra-biblical history tell us a group of Bethlehemites tried to start another town 70 miles north of Bethlehem. Do you want to take a guess at the name of the town? Nazareth. Nazareth is Hebrew for branch.

Joseph and Mary were part of this northern Bethlehem branch office that was started in Nazareth.

With Caesar's census, everyone from out of town returned to Bethlehem. Tiny Bethlehem, the town so many had left for a fresh start, was ultra packed. Picture RVs and pop up trailers everywhere. Camels were double and even triple parked on the roads. The grocery store shelves were stripped bare. It was wall to wall people.

The Inn

Most of our translations say Jesus was laid in a manger because there was *no room in the inn*. We picture Mary and Joseph standing outside the local Super 8 Motel with a flashing no vacancy sign. That is probably not the way it happened. The inns of the day would have been occupied by the Roman census takers. Since everyone was returning to his or her hometown, Mary and Joseph, along with the rest of the homecoming travelers, would have stayed with relatives. Some of you have a footnote in your Bible on the word *inn*. You will see the Greek word for *inn* could also be translated *guest room*. In Luke 22:11, it is this same Greek word that is translated as *guest room* where Jesus had the Passover with his disciples. This means Mary and Joseph couldn't find room with their relatives because extra rooms in the house were packed with people. Apparently Mary and Joseph, with Mary's pregnancy, were some of the last to arrive.

If there was no room in the guest room, where did Mary and Joseph stay? If you visit the town of Bethlehem today, you discover it has a number of caves.

Traditionally, these caves were used for holding livestock during the night. Most likely what happened is there was no room in the guest room of their relative's home. Mary and Joseph headed to the barn-cave where the family animals were kept. There, on the manure laden dirt floor, Mary, as a 12- to 14-year-old girl, gave birth to Jesus after her walk 70 to 100 miles from Nazareth. Talk about a humble birth, that one takes the cake.

Shortly after Jesus' life, Christians began flocking to one particular cave in Bethlehem where many believed Jesus was born. When Christianity was



legalized by the Roman emperor Constantine in 300 A.D., Constantine's mother oversaw the construction of a church at the site of the cave where many Christians believed Jesus was born.

The church in Bethlehem continues to exist today.

It is called *The Church of the Nativity*. Christians have met there for worship since 300 A.D. In that church there are steps that descend into the cave and the spot that is traditionally believed to be the location of Jesus' birth is marked with a star.

We don't know for sure if this is the way things unfolded or if that is the cave where Jesus was born but that is likely what happened.



While we don't know exactly when Jesus was born or where Jesus was born we do know why he came. What I want to point out theologically is the incredible evidence of how God is carefully watching over those who feel

forgotten in the crowd. Put yourselves in the shoes of Mary and Joseph. Mary was pregnant. She was poor. She was rejected by everyone except Joseph and Elizabeth. Nobody believed her pregnant virgin story. She felt alone, rejected and shamed.

At what looked like the absolute worst time of her life, when she was nine months pregnant and about ready to burst, she and Joseph were forced to take a 70- to 100-mile hike through treacherous country to Bethlehem. When my wife was nine months pregnant I couldn't even drive over the railroad tracks without her wincing in pain. Mary walked 70 to 100 miles.

Mary and Joseph arrived in town and her contractions were getting closer. They tried the houses of relatives and they were all packed wall-to-wall with people. Nobody, even of their family, gave them room. You would think somebody would have given up their bed for the pregnant teenage girl about to give birth. Nobody did. The only thing left to shelter them from the elements was the manure-filled cave. Mary gave birth apart from family on the filthy cave floor with nobody, except Joseph, who was only a boy himself, for comfort and help. She felt alone. She felt forgotten by God and lost in this world. Gabriel said her child would be God in the flesh. He said she was giving birth to the son of God. At that moment, it felt like God forgot about his child.

Do you ever feel that way? God told you he loved you but right now in your life it feels like he forgot you? That is the way Mary felt. I think we can all relate.

There is an important verse in the book of Micah. Mary probably wasn't thinking of this verse when she gave birth but I am sure that as she grew older someone pointed it out to her.

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. Micah 5:2 (ESV)

God prophetically spoke through Micah 700 years before Jesus was born that the one who was from of old, the one who existed before time began, that is Jesus, must be born in Bethlehem.

Mary and Joseph thought God forgot about them. The truth is God put it into the heart of the most powerful person on the planet, Caesar Augustus, to have a empire-wide census at the time Mary was to give birth and to insist that everyone go to their home town at just the right time to move Mary to Bethlehem so Jesus would be born in Bethlehem.

God hadn't forgotten them. God was moving the heart of the most powerful person on the planet to get an obscure and overlooked Mary to Bethlehem at just the right time for Jesus to be born and fulfill prophecy. Nothing was out of control. God was watching over every one of her steps and he was moving the heart of the most powerful person on the planet to get her to just the right place at just the right time.

Folks, the same is true for each of us. I don't know what life is like for you tonight. Some of us are filled with gladness. Some of us are filled with sadness. Many of us feel like life is spinning out of control. Some of us feel like Mary and Joseph felt in that cave. "God, where are you? God, my life is spinning of

control.” Let me encourage you. God has not forgotten you. He is shaping the events of history to have you just where he wants you to be fulfill his plan for your life. That includes you being here tonight to hear this story and be encouraged by it. You are not forgotten by God.

God’s love for those who feel insignificant.

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. Luke 2:8–20 (ESV)

Let’s look at the important characters in this part of the story, the shepherds.

Shepherds

You need to know a little about shepherds. Shepherding at this time in history was not a popular job. You didn’t go to college for shepherding. It was a job you did because you couldn’t get a job doing anything else. Your days and night were spent watching sheep, which was about as exciting as watching grass grow. Shepherds usually didn’t attend the temple or religious holidays because their job kept them in the fields. That made them appear pagan and irreligious.

Shepherds lived outdoors and didn't bathe. They were stinky, smelly and uneducated. If you were walking through town and you saw one, you pulled your children a little closer so they weren't contaminated. Shepherds had a reputation as thieves. They were not allowed to testify in court because it was assumed they would lie. When you think of shepherds in this society, you think of the bottom rung on the social ladder.

Put yourselves in Mary and Joseph's place that first Christmas. Mary had a successful delivery but was exhausted. She and Joseph were alone in the cave. There was no way to share the joy of that moment with family and friends. They couldn't text or post on Facebook. Joseph didn't want to leave Mary and Jesus because they were weak and vulnerable. The young family sat alone in the night in the cave with pent up excitement but no one to tell.

Since they couldn't tell people that were important to them, God told some people that were important to him, the shepherds. The shepherds got a special angelic announcement and a window into the incredible celebration taking place among the angels. The shepherds walk the mile or two into town. There weren't many babies in mangers so Mary, Joseph and Jesus were easy to find. When the shepherds found them, they celebrated with them.

The Bible tells us Mary was putting this together in her heart. Of all the people to tell about this moment amazing moment, why did God tell shepherds? The shepherd were like the flu, you tried to avoid them.

Here is the simple message. I don't care how far you think you are from God. I don't care how low you are on the totem pole of society. I don't care how

insignificant you feel, God loves you more than you can imagine. Jesus came for you. He loves the shepherds of this world so much that he told them first about his son's birth.

So far we learned two things. God has not forgotten us no matter how small of a cog we are in wheel of this world. The second thing we learned is God loves us no matter how unlovely we think we are in the eyes of society. Perhaps most importantly is this last message. Jesus died for us.

God's love for sinners.

The message of Jesus' birth, that God came to be with us, is only part of the story. The rest of the story is that Jesus lived a perfect life. He died on the cross, one of the most agonizing deaths known to man. In that death, God laid on his own son all of our sins. God the Father poured on his own son an eternity of punishment that we deserved to endure. Jesus died in our places for our sins. When they laid Jesus in a tomb, his death was eerily similar to his birth. When Jesus was born he was wrapped in strips of cloth and laid in a stone manger carved into a cave wall. When Jesus died, he was wrapped in strips of cloth and laid on a stone table carved into a cave wall. Jesus was born to die for our sin.

Jesus didn't just die in our places for our sin, but three days later he rose from the grave, meaning he didn't just pay for our sin but he conquered the power of Satan, sin and death. Right now he is seated at the right hand of God. Whoever confesses their sins to God and trusts in Jesus' death to pay for their sin will never be put to shame. They will be completely forgiven of their sin and the Holy Spirit promises to make them into a new person from the inside out.

This is all because Jesus has not forgotten you. Jesus loves you. Jesus died for you.

Tonight, when you go home there will be presents under your tree that you will give and receive with those you love. Tonight God offers you the ultimate gift, the present of ultimate worth, his own son's death for our sin. We unwrap the present of Jesus by repenting of our sin in prayer to God and trusting in what Jesus has done to save us from the wrath of God the Father that we deserve. When that happens, God makes us into a new person from the inside out.

Before you leave tonight, if you haven't already, will you unwrap the present God offers you of his own son? It is the most important gift of Christmas. In our closing moments, I will give you a few moments of silence to confess your sin to God in silent prayer and to trust in Jesus.

If you have already unwrapped the present of Jesus, in these closing moments of silence, take time to worship Jesus in prayer.

- Thank him for not forgetting about you no matter how forgotten you feel in this world.
- Thank him for loving you no matter how insignificant and unlovely you feel.
- Thank him for dying for you when you don't deserve it.

Let's take a few moments of silence to respond to God in prayer. After a few minutes, I will close with a prayer of simple trust in Christ that those of you who are unwrapping the gift of Jesus for the first time in your heart can pray alone with me in your heart. It is not that the prayer is special but that it is a

verbal expression of the desires of your heart. Let's respond to God in silent prayer.



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