

# “THE CHRISTMAS STORY”

## Luke 1:26-38; Luke 2:1-20

There is no other story like the Christmas Story! It comes to us principally in the Gospels of Matthew (chapters 1-2) and Luke (chapters 1-2). I say “principally,” because it is also alluded to in several Old Testament prophets (Isaiah, Micah), in the opening lines of John’s gospel, and even in the book of Revelation.

Matthew was a tax-collector when the Jesus of Christmas broke into his life and called him into the adventure of discipleship. Luke, a medical doctor (who knows a thing or two about how babies are born!), was a traveling companion of the Apostle Paul, who used his scientific training to research the facts to tell the Story as faithfully as is possible (Luke 1:1-4).

### Some Observations About the Story

#### ***The Story Takes Place in Objective History***

**Luke 1:5...** In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

**Luke 2:1...** Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth.

The Story does not begin, “*Once upon a time.*” That’s the way fairy tales and myths begin. But not Christmas! This Story takes place in real, historical places, involving real, historical people, in real, historical time.

#### ***The Story Is the Fulfillment of the Promise***

Matthew begins his story with these words...

**Matthew 1:1...** The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

### ***The Story Involves Angelic Activity***

Four times an angel appears. Two times he is identified as Gabriel (Luke 1:19; 1:26). I think the other two times it is also Gabriel (Matthew 1:20; Luke 2:9). Angelic hosts fill the heavens and declare the glory of the Lord (Luke 2:13-14).

### ***The Story's Lead Actor Is the Holy Spirit***

Christmas is a truly human story, but the chief actor is God the Spirit. He filled Elizabeth when she heard Mary's greeting (Luke 1:41). He filled Zacharias (1:67). He plants the seed of the Messiah in Mary's womb. He prepared Simeon for the Messiah's presentation in the temple (Luke 2:25-27).

### ***The Story Is All About the Lord Jesus Christ***

The spotlight is on him through the whole of the drama. That makes this the story of all stories! It has significance for everyone on this planet because on this day He was born ***God's Son became a human being***. Take your Bible and turn to Luke's gospel. That's where we're going to spend our time tonight.

Luke, a Gentile physician, travelled with Paul during his missionary journeys. You might say he was his personal doctor, but he was much more than that. He was a follower of Jesus Christ. Because of his background, he knew how to do serious research. After digging into the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, Luke wrote a two-volume work and addressed it to Theophilus (Luke 1:3, Acts 1:1).

Who is this *Theophilus*? Evidently, he was a high ranking Roman official who had become fascinated by the Christian faith. At some point he and Luke made a connection there in Rome and they began to discuss Jesus and the gospel.

Luke unpacked the story of Jesus from His birth, to His ministry, to His death, to His burial, to His resurrection, to His ascension, and to the amazing expansion of the church. His main message was that Jesus is the Savior of the world!

**Luke 19:10...** "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

To properly understand the significance of Christmas we must look at it through the eyes of Theophilus as he read Luke's material for the first time. With that perspective in mind, let's unpack the story of Christmas.

**Luke 1:26–27...** Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, **27** to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

Gabriel flew with lightning speed past the Seven Hills of Rome, past Jerusalem and the temple, until he zeroed in on a little town about 70 miles northeast of Jerusalem—a town in Galilee called *Nazareth*.

God chose an insignificant place and an insignificant young couple for a blessing that had enormous eternal implications. We shouldn't be surprised by this because this is God's standard mode of operation. He chose...

- **A stuttering shepherd in Moses**
- **A young shepherd boy in David**
- **A frightened Jew by the name of Gideon.**

Notice, ***“she was engaged to be married.”*** Engagement involved a formal agreement initiated by a father seeking a wife for his son. The betrothal period took place immediately after a girl went through puberty. The relationship was legally binding but sexual relations were not allowed until the actual marriage took place. Only divorce or death could sever a betrothal.

**Luke 1:28–29...** And coming in, he said to her, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord *is* with you.” **29** But she was very perplexed at *this* statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was.

Having been born into Adam's race, this teenage girl was a sinner by nature and by choice. However, she was a godly and righteous young lady because she loved the Lord and sought to obey Him. Mary is highly favored because she received God's grace (See Ephesians 1:6)!

The issue here is God's gracious choice. Let's hit the pause button for just a moment. What must Theophilus have been thinking as he read these words? He must have been saying to himself...

**This is one awesome God. He is not impressed by our pedigree or by what we can bring to the table. He is most glorified when He chooses to use common people for extraordinary purposes. Why He even commands supernatural beings to carry His message to the people He is going to use. Could God grant me the same grace He granted to Mary? What an amazing God this is!**

How quickly we forget just how significant Christmas is. God could have chosen a young girl from a rich and influential family to be the one who would bear the Son of God, but He didn't. He chose a young lady from a poor, disconnected family. Anybody is a candidate for God's grace and His purpose and that makes Christmas significant for everybody.

Through the angel Gabriel, God discloses the eternal plan of redemption to a young, Jewish virgin. Here is a theological summit that would convince Theophilus and any person who takes the time to study these words that the story of Christmas is radically superior to every other story.

**Luke 1:30–33...** The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. **31** "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. **32** "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; **33** and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end."

**"JESUS" WAS A COMMON NAME.** I wonder, did Mary's heart and mind grasp its true importance?

A few years ago the Jews for Jesus took out a full page add in the USA Today with a Christmas message—**"THE MESSIAH HAS COME AND HIS NAME IS YESHUA."** It means God saves! God saves because we can't save ourselves.

**HE WILL BE GREAT.** The Greek word here is "mega." Mary came from a faith-oriented family. She must have known that the Old Testament prophets had put out the word

that God was about to send a *larger-than-life-King* who would one day rule the world. Jesus would surpass every potential rival. No one would ever compare with Him. The stupendous claims the angel made about Jesus must have staggered both Mary and Theophilus. John Piper wrote this about Jesus...

**Jesus is ten million times greater in every respect than the greatest men and women history has produced. If you took all the greatest thinkers of every country and every century and put them in a room with Jesus, they would shut their mouths and listen to the greatness of His wisdom....There is nothing that Jesus cannot do a thousand times better than the person you admire most in any area of human endeavor under the sun.**

**HE WILL BE CALLED THE SON OF THE MOST HIGH.** This means that the baby Mary would give birth to would be “*the unique, only-begotten Son of God.*” Jesus’ messiahship should be interpreted in terms of His sonship.

**THE LORD GOD WILL GIVE HIM THE THRONE OF HIS FATHER DAVID.** This child will inherit the promises of the Davidic covenant (Read 2 Samuel 7:12-16).

**HE WILL REIGN OVER THE HOUSE OF JACOB FOREVER.** This description depicts Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. Thus, like David, He is the King of Israel. Unlike the other kings in the Davidic line, this King would never fail morally or spiritually. Furthermore, He will assume His position and keep it eternally!

**HIS KINGDOM WILL HAVE NO END.** The kingdom of God that is realized in the coming of Jesus and is to be consummated at the second coming will continue forever. (Daniel 7:13-14)

What a stunning announcement for this young Jewish virgin to take in! Theophilus’s head must have been spinning at this point. Listen, knowing who Jesus is vitally important for every person. Gabriel, with a clear and compelling message from God, nailed it as far as the identity of Jesus was concerned. Let’s clarify something that seems to be an issue today.

**You can’t honor God without honoring Jesus (John 5:20-24).**

I wonder if Theophilus humbled himself before the Lord and placed his faith in Jesus at this point when he was reading the gospel of Luke? Here's a better question. Will you?

Mary is perplexed. It's like one shock piled upon another—a *visit from an angel, the identity of her son, and the fact that she was a virgin*. Her question accents the fact that the girl who would give birth to the Messiah had never been with a man. In her mind, all of this was impossible. She believes alright, but she does not understand.

**Luke 1:34–38**... Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” **35** The angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God. **36** “And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. **37** “For nothing will be impossible with God.” **38** And Mary said, “Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

**Gabriel answers the biological question.** He uses language that reminds us of the creation account (Genesis 1:2). This would be a decisive moment in the history of God's redemption of the human race.

**Gabriel answers the theological question.** The holy child would be called the Son of God. This answers the question—*how could Jesus avoid inheriting a sin nature?* He was the Son of God!

Elizabeth's late life conception of John the Baptist revealed God's miraculous power and confirmed the angelic message to Mary. God, who created the universe and all it contains out of nothing, has the power to plant the seed of His Son in the womb of young virgin girl. God is not limited by the conventional laws He created in the first place.

Mary's response was remarkable. She believed God's Word and submitted herself to the Lord's plan for her life. In Matthew's gospel, we learn that Joseph did not believe Mary's story. In fact, he thought she had cheated on him, and he was prepared to follow through with a private divorce. That's when Gabriel paid a visit to him also. Once the angel confirmed the supernatural conception in the womb of his betrothed wife, he

believed her and he believed God. You know the rest of the story. They were married and together they raised the Son of God *along with their other children*.

Despite our best efforts to keep him out, God keeps intruding into our lives just like He did with Mary and Theophilus in order that He might reinforce the significance of Christmas.

**The life of Jesus is bracketed by two impossibilities—a virgin's womb and an empty tomb. Jesus entered our world through a door marked "No Entrance" and left through a door marked "No Exit." His is the story of a Savior who became a man in order that He might save us from our sins.**

Several years ago, ABC News produced a documentary entitled, *The Search for Jesus*. It began with a voice-over from Peter Jennings. He was reading the Christmas story out of Luke's gospel while a Middle Eastern man was carving the face of Jesus into a block of wood. Jennings introduced the documentary with these opening lines...

**Hello, I'm Peter Jennings, and we have been searching for Jesus—as reporters, that is, because it's an irresistible story. And whatever your faith or religion, there's simply no denying the extraordinary influence that Jesus has had—that he does have—in people's lives.** The Search for Jesus with Peter Jennings (©ABC News Productions, Inc., 2000)

Let's pick up the story of Christmas in Luke 2. Mary and Joseph were living in Nazareth. In chapter 1 of Luke's gospel account, he explained the unusual circumstances surrounding this couple's relationship. She was betrothed to Joseph when she became pregnant. He was devastated. This certainly required some explanation. In fact, God sent an angel to do the explaining.

Bottom line—Mary was pregnant with the Jewish Messiah. God's eternal Son was reduced to the size of an embryo in the virgin womb of a poor Jewish teenager. Joseph was convinced and he had the most to gain or lose. **Do you believe?**

**Luke 2:1–7**...Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. **2** This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. **3** And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. **4** Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, **5** in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. **6** While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. **7** And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Caesar Augustus, the leader of the Roman Empire, issued a ruling that all Jews should go to their original home to enroll in a census. Luke stressed the political situation to explain why Jesus' birth took place at this particular time and in this particular place. Nothing about this turn of events was arbitrary. In fact, the Bible states...

**Galatians 4:4**...But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law.

This was the perfect time for God's Son to be born. The Roman system of roads and the almost universal language of Greek provided the perfect setting for the rapid spread of the gospel. In addition, the world was about to experience an explosion of population growth.

Knowing that a learned man like Theophilus and even the world at large would need solid proof that Jesus was the Messiah, the Savior of the world, God ordained that Bethlehem would be the place of His birth. This was a direct fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy that was hundreds of years old...

**Micah 5:2**...“But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, *Too* little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity.”

Jesus was born in a filthy stable that was designed for animals. The pungent aroma of animals and hay must have permeated the place. A simple feeding trough was fashioned into a bed for the Son of God. What a humble birth it was.

Are you searching for the truth about Jesus? Luke's gospel account would detail His miracles, His teaching, His spotless integrity, His death on the cross, His resurrection from the dead, His ascension to heaven's throne, and His second coming. If you really want to know the truth about Jesus, you can find it in Luke's gospel and it begins with story of Christmas.

**Luke 2:8–14**...In the same region there were *some* shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. **9** And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. **10** But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; **11** for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. **12** "This *will be* a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." **13** And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, **14** "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."

Picture the shepherds huddled around a campfire as they tried to keep warm. Suddenly an angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord drenched them in unapproachable light. Those guys were scared to death!

Have you ever wondered why God would send His angel to announce the birth of Messiah to a group of shepherds and not the religious and political leaders who were living in Jerusalem? Shepherds were considered to be low-life's. Their work kept them away from the temple for weeks at a time. They were considered to be ceremonially unclean. Isn't it amazing that God choose to announce the birth of His Son to these hardworking men!

The angel's message to them was thrilling to say the least. It was the best news the shepherds and the entire human race could ever hope to hear. The message contained three important details about the baby that Mary had given birth to...

**"Savior"** —This baby would be the one and only Savior of the human race. Only He could provide forgiveness for our sins and only He could reconcile us to God.

**"Christ"** —This term means "*The Anointed One*" and it refers to the long-awaited Jewish Messiah that had been promised to Adam and Eve, to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and to the prophets.

**“Lord”** —In the Old Testament, this term was used repeatedly to refer to Jehovah. The tiny baby, wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a feed trough, was God in the flesh. He alone was blessed with supreme power and authority.

If that were not enough to get the attention of the shepherds, suddenly the sky was filled with angels praising God...

## **“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.”**

The light must have been comparable to a thousand full moons. For that moment, the shepherds seemed to be standing with one foot in time and the other foot in eternity!

Finally, the Jewish Messiah had come. The world had the Savior and Lord it desperately needed. God’s Son in human flesh could identify with the pain we feel when a loved one dies and He could identify with human injustice, greed, disease, and the power of evil. He could provide victory over every predicament we will ever face!

The story of Christmas did not stop with the angelic presence, the angelic proclamation, or the angelic praise. The response of the shepherds to all of this was astonishing...

**Luke 2:15–20**...When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds *began* saying to one another, “Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.” **16** So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. **17** When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. **18** And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. **19** But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. **20** The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

These shepherds had the faith to believe that Jesus was exactly who the angels said He was. There were no long discussions and there were no delays. They didn't check their calendars to look for a more advantageous time. They didn't decide to sleep on it. They just figured that the message from God was true.

Immediately they made a beeline to Bethlehem to see for themselves this One who was the Savior, the Christ, and the Lord. That's faith and without it no one can please God.

***After receiving the good news of the Savior's birth, these shepherds responded to the good news by sharing the message with others!***