

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

Praise You, Lord God for the wonder of Christmas Day! It is the day You became one of us as flesh, body, mind and spirit, and it is the day You became an individual life-filled soul full of love, potential, energy and hope. This is Your glorious plan and the baby born in Bethlehem is Your wonderful provision for our salvation! We worship You, Lord God; we worship You, Lord Jesus Christ; we worship You, powerful Holy Spirit. Bless this Christmas day and every day of our lives: AMEN

### Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: CHRISTMAS

**1. For yourself**

*Pray in thanksgiving for the gift of Christmas day, and everything this means for you*

**2. For your friends and family**

*Pray God's blessing on all your friends and family, especially those you are not able to share this day with*

**3. For the church and its work**

*Pray for those who continue to work this Christmas day in providing food for the homeless and in many other ways*

**4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)**

*Pray that the world will come to know the truth about God's Son, come to Bethlehem, and born as a child to Mary. Pray that the peoples of the world will know*

### Meditation

Jesus, come again to us this Christmas day;  
 Jesus, we greet each other in Your Name;  
 Jesus, You make our worship extra special;  
 Jesus, You are the God's Son, the child of Mary;  
 Jesus, You are the guest at all our festivities;  
 Jesus, You are the reason we give each other gifts;  
 Jesus, You inspire us to be people of generosity;  
 Jesus, be our guest as we feast in Your honour;  
 Jesus, stay with us in all of our fun and merriment;  
 Jesus, bless us this day, and remain with us forever!

## Bible Study

### Bible passage – Luke 2:1-7

<sup>1</sup> So it was that in those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the whole world. <sup>2</sup> This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria, <sup>3</sup> and all went to their home towns for the census.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he belonged to the house and family line of David. <sup>5</sup> He went to be enrolled with Mary, to whom he was pledged in marriage and who was expecting a baby, <sup>6</sup> and while they were there, the time came for her to have the child, <sup>7</sup> and she gave birth to her

*firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloth bands, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*

## **Review**

This is the most well known Scripture about the birth of Jesus. It is a tale which is told with beautiful simplicity and yet with great intensity of feeling. There is much that it does not tell us, but what it does say is extraordinarily powerful, and it makes us feel that we too have been present at the very first Christmas.

Jesus was born into the Roman world of the first Century, which was ruled with authority by the Emperor Augustus. He decided to order a census, primarily for the purpose of making sure that all the citizens and subjects of his massive Empire paid their dues. These taxes were paid by everyone to Rome for the administration of the Empire and the military system which maintained its peace. The taxes also paid for the extraordinary excesses and personal fortunes of the Emperor and other rich Romans, and although they were generally accepted, they were also deeply resented. Joseph was doing what was required of him as the head of his young family to ensure that he would meet his obligations and therefore avoid any potential problems with the Roman authorities.

Would it make any difference if we had any more facts about Jesus' birth? This great story is surely inspirational and designed for our faith. God had planned to change the world since the beginning of time, bringing salvation for all and reconciliation with His people (Genesis 3), and had spoken through His servants the prophets about how this would be done through the Messiah. Now, the time had come for the fulfilment of these prophecies. Firstly, John the Baptist was born (1:57,58) and brought great joy (1:68-79); his work was to 'go ahead' of the Messiah and announce repentance for the forgiveness of sins (1:76,77). Now it was time for the Messiah to come, and He did so as a vulnerable child born to Mary.

It is no simple story, however, and what we read in Luke's Gospel was something of a social scandal in the first century. Mary was not married yet was pregnant, and she was incredibly fortunate that her betrothed husband stood by her during the Roman census when most Jewish men would have disowned a woman who was pregnant and without a clear explanation of how she came to be in that condition. Was this an unspoken reason why the inn-keeper was only willing to give the couple space in his inn where the lowest of servants slept and the animals were kept (2:7)? We can never know, but it is possible. However, with the light of spiritual insight we can see the significance of the birth of Jesus in this place of submission and servitude. He was born as an insignificant 'no-body', perhaps not even making it on to the Roman census (depending upon when this was taken), but God's intention was to show that He was capable of changing the world through this same child, turning the values and presumptions of the world upside down.

Everything Jesus grew up to do lay ahead of him, and we have the privilege of reading about it in the Gospels; but at the point of Jesus birth, God was present in the lowest and most deprived of human circumstances, but was capable of transforming it for His glory. This tells us that human life is precious to God beyond any value we can place upon it, and just as God loves His own Son Jesus, He love us and waits for our response to Him just as a father or mother loves the child they have created.

It is so easy to read the story of Jesus' birth and add to it all kinds of myths and legends which fill out the story so that we can enjoy it even more; we can imagine the difficult journey of a pregnant woman riding on a donkey for the entire journey from Galilee to Bethlehem in the south of the country; we can imagine the scene at the inn; the animals, the 'ox and ass' standing by; copious quantities of hay for clean bedding and a baby neatly wrapped in pure white linen strips of cloth. We forget the scandal and stress, the trials of childbirth in the grubby back room of an inn, the lack of clean facilities or friendly attention, being miles away from home, and the difficult question of where to go next. Luke does not give us the luxury of time to dwell on such matters. He assumes our interest is primarily spiritual not physical, and the facts he records point not so much to the facts of what happened as to the significance of it and what lay ahead. It tells us something more important than any facts we may want, because it informs us that God's plan of salvation for the whole world, prophesied in the Old Testament and signalled at His conception (1:31-33), had begun.

## **Going Deeper**

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- The date of Jesus' birth
- The significance of Bethlehem
- The birth of Jesus, 'laid in a manger'

### ***Notes on the translation of the passage***

#### **V5 'pledged in marriage'**

The phrase '*pledged in marriage*' translates the Greek word 'mnesteuo', which is a formal pre-marriage relationship in which the man and woman to be married get to know each other before the actual wedding ceremony and consummation of the marriage. In days when marriages were arranged by the heads of families, the betrothal period gave human dignity to the whole concept of arranged marriages.

#### **V7 'firstborn son'**

The phrase '*firstborn son*' seems straightforward here, and it suggests that Mary did indeed have later children. However, the Greek word used here, 'prototokos', is also used in a number of places in the New Testament in a more theological manner. For example, it is found in Colossians 1:15 to speak of Jesus as God's 'firstborn' who is pre-existent in creation, and consequently to be the first to be raised from the dead (Col 1:18 – see also Romans 8:29 and Hebrews 1:6, 11:28).

#### **V7 'inn'**

The word 'inn' conjures up different images according to where you live! In England today, for example, people might think of something between a 'pub' and a small hostel. In other countries, the word is used more to describe a guest house, or somewhere rented out for various purposes. This second use is probably more like the 'inn' described here in Luke 2:7. The Greek word 'kataluma' could mean 'room, guest room, or inn' (according to a standard Biblical Greek dictionary).

#### **The date of Jesus' birth**

The beginning of Luke 2 and Matthew 2 appear to be so straightforward, but when we put together the dates of all the character involved, then finding a time when a census took place which overlaps all the named officials has defeated scholars for centuries! And this is the reason why people are uncertain about the birth of Jesus. The one thing most people agree upon today is that the monks of later centuries who calculated the birth of Christ as '0AD' did not get it right, because by their dating, Herod (the king mentioned in Matthew) died four years previously, around 4BC!

Now, if we reckon that Jesus was in fact born during the last year or so of the reign of Herod the Great, this means he was born around 5 BC. This would place the birth within the reign of Augustus (27BC to 14AD), but not the governorship of Quirinius in Syria (6-12AD)! There is, however, one possible way to reconcile all these confusing dates. Roman records tell us that Quirinius was a notable servant of Rome in the region of Syria for many years before he was the formal 'Governor', so it is possible that Quirinius was a known contact between Herod and the greater province of Syria for many years before he held the governorship.

In addition, the governorship of Syria was the title of a high ranking Roman, and entitled the occupant to sit on the Senate in Rome. Moreover, the province of Syria covered the regions of Israel and Palestine partly occupied by Jews in the days of Jesus, and Herod the Great ruled the Jewish regions of Israel and Palestine within the province of Syria. If you have read the studies in this series on the first few verses of Luke's Gospel, you may now realise that it may have been in Luke's interests to 'name-drop' both the Emperor and also the governor of Syria. By referring to these Roman figures at the time of Jesus' birth, Luke connected with those who read his Gospel in Rome, in the later years of the first century.

Lastly, we must look at the matter of the date of the census. There was no recorded official Roman census in Israel around the time quoted by Luke, but this does not mean that none was taken. There are suggestions in ancient records that Herod was responsible for a at least one census towards the end of his reign, and after his death, when his 'kingdom' was split up between his three eligible sons, censuses were required to establish the tax status of the three regions of Judea, Galilee and the Decapolis ruled by each son. There is no clear answer to when the census took place, but it seems that it was an accepted part of life in that part of the Roman Empire due to the complex politics of the region.

#### **The significance of Bethlehem**

Bethlehem was the home town of David, and all those who owned land in that region of Judah, just south of Jerusalem, would have been required to register themselves there, for tax purposes. There may be some confusion in our minds here between the taxes required of citizens of Israel during the Roman occupation. The religious authorities exacted a 'Temple tax' from all Israelites for the sake of the upkeep of the Temple, Herod the Great taxed the people in order to pay for the building of the Temple in Jerusalem, his long term project to ingratiate himself to the Jews. Lastly, the Romans exacted various taxes largely on the movement of goods, especially agricultural taxes on the movement of food around the Empire. This last tax required a reasonably accurate census to establish land ownership rights, and it is this form of census that seems to be referred to here in Luke 2 (because of the reference to the Emperor).

Bethlehem is stated as the birthplace of the Messiah by Micah (Micah 5:2), probably because this was the birthplace of David (1 Sam 16). Bethlehem is a place name meaning 'house of bread', and its origins go back further than David into Israelite history. It is first mentioned in the Bible as the burial place of Rachel (Gen 35:19), the favoured wife of Jacob, the father of the twelve sons and 'tribes' of Israel (see Gen 49). Bethlehem was also the home town of Naomi, who returned there with Ruth after the death of her sons, establishing a new ancestral line through the marriage of Ruth and Boaz, who were the great grandparents of David.

All in all, Bethlehem was the focus of Davidic lineage and also of hope for the Messiah (2:4), and it was right that Jesus was born there, of parents who returned there not just by chance, but on official business to declare their ancestry. In this way, Luke again confirmed the lineage of Jesus and His right to be called the Messiah. We will look at why Jesus was brought up in Nazareth at a later point in Luke's Gospel when this became relevant to the story Luke tells.

### ***The birth of Jesus, 'laid in a manger'***

Although Luke tells us a simple story, Mary's pregnancy and the birth of Jesus was also something of a social scandal. Today, we can imagine almost any number of scenarios which might suggest why Mary and Joseph travelled together to Bethlehem and had their child in what appears to be the back of some house or inn. Mary was not married yet was pregnant, and she was incredibly fortunate that her betrothed husband stood by her during the Roman census when most Jewish men would have disowned a woman who was pregnant. Was this an unspoken reason why the inn-keeper was only willing to give the couple space in his inn where the lowest of servants slept and the animals were kept (2:7)? We can never know, but it is possible.

If you research the nature of dwellings built in those days, you will find that it was entirely common for 'houses' built of stone and mud to have space for people and space for some small domestic animals under one roof (probably goats, calves or sheep). Such a design would be similar for small dwelling as well as larger ones such as those described as an 'inn' here in this passage. If you read the notes above, you will realise that what was denied Mary and Joseph was the common hospitality of a place for guests. There is no explanation of this, merely the cold fact of this rejection, and the fact that the baby was born without the care and attention of the community. The text strongly implies that Mary and Joseph dealt with the birth themselves, and as much as the birth of any child is a miracle, the birth of Jesus in these circumstances was more so.

Luke specifically records that Mary wrapped Jesus in the 'bands', often called 'swaddling bands', thought in those days to keep a child's limbs straight in the early days of its life. We may now regard such wrapping of a child as inappropriate, but it seems clear that Luke intends us to see that the only comforts given the infant Jesus were prepared by his mother and father, together with the warmth of a makeshift cradle from a hay box made for cattle. The picture may be highly romantic for us today, but we cannot ignore the sense of awe with which Luke records both the awfulness of Jesus' rejection by his fellow Jews at birth, countered by the warmth of his parents and the manger.

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## **Discipleship**

### **Application**

Would it make any difference if we had any more facts about Jesus' birth? This great story is surely inspirational and designed for our faith. God had planned to change the world since the beginning of time, bringing salvation for all and reconciliation with His people (Genesis 3), and had spoken through His servants the prophets about how this would be done through the Messiah. Now, the time had come for the fulfilment of these prophecies. Firstly, John the Baptist was born (1:57,58) and brought great joy (1:68-79); his work was to 'go ahead' of the Messiah and announce repentance for the forgiveness of sins (1:76,77). Now it was time for the Messiah to come, and He did so as a vulnerable child born to Mary.

It is easy to read the story of Jesus' birth and add to it all kinds of myths and legends, which fill out the story so that we can enjoy it even more. We can imagine the difficulties of a pregnant woman riding on a donkey for the entire journey from Galilee to Bethlehem; we can imagine the scene at the inn, the animals, the 'ox and ass' standing by, with copious quantities of hay for clean bedding and a baby neatly wrapped in pure white linen strips of cloth. We forget the scandal and stress, the trials of childbirth in the grubby back room of an inn, the lack of clean facilities or friendly attention, having to stay in an unknown setting, and the difficult question of where to go next. Luke does not give us the luxury of time to dwell on such matters. He assumes our interest is primarily spiritual not physical, and the facts he records point not so much to the details of what happened as to the significance of the birth and what lay ahead. His story tells us something

more important than any facts we may want, because it informs us that God's plan of salvation for the whole world, prophesied in the Old Testament and signalled at His conception (1:31-33), had begun.

In this story here, everything Jesus grew up to do lay ahead of him; but at the point of Jesus birth, God was present in the lowest and most deprived of human circumstances, and capable of transforming it for His glory. This tells us that human life is precious to God beyond any value we can place upon it, and just as God loves His own Son Jesus, He love us and waits for our response to Him just as a father or mother loves the child they have created. Moreover, He can create great glory out of the most meagre of circumstances.

## Questions for groups

1. Discuss in your group the mental picture you have about what happened when Jesus was born, and compare it to this story.
2. Why was it important that Jesus should be born as one who was poor and disadvantaged? Why is it important for us today to know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem?
3. What have you learned from reading this passage of scripture today, and what does it tell you about your faith?

## Discipleship challenges

- *By all means, dwell on the story, but ask the Lord to help you see beyond the words of the story to the spiritual truths which lie deeper. Salvation is a wondrous mystery, and people throughout the centuries have discovered that their path of salvation has been blessed by reflecting upon the birth of Jesus.*
- *In what ways can this story change the world as well as the church? Now that it is after Christmas, ask some others about this and see if you can agree an answer.*

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## Final Prayer

Praise You, Lord Jesus Christ! You came as a baby, and although You could not speak to us at that time, Your very presence was the most wonderful gift the world could receive! Come again into our hearts right now, we pray: AMEN

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