

Blessed Christmas to all

The Circumstances Surrounding Christ's Birth



Before we begin this lesson, Lighthouse Bible Church sends out lots of love and good wishes for you and your families to have a very, very blessed Christmas season.

This is a wonderful celebration when we have the right view...JESUS! His birth was the very start of the most wonderful miracle of all time...our UNEARNED salvation.

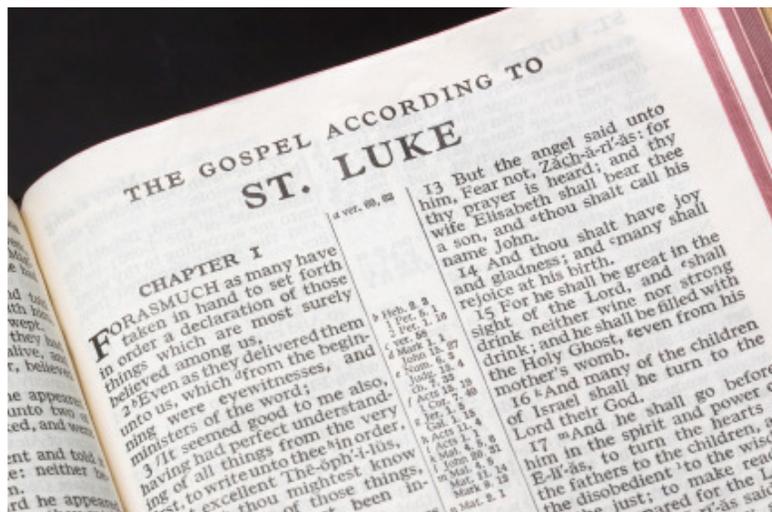
Jesus was BORN in a stable in a feeding trough to a teenage virgin mother and a step-father so that at the age of 33 He could die and pay the penalty for all of our sins as our substitute on the cross. He qualified to be our substitute and sacrifice by living a sinless life. He was destined to suffer the most awful pain...the great loss of being separated from His Father and the Holy Spirit for 3 hours on that cross for ALL for US!!! WHAT'S NOT TO CELEBRATE?!!!! This opened the doors of heaven for all mankind who choose to believe in our wonderful Savior, Jesus.



Most of us have been brought up with the traditional Christmas story...you know...the one about Jesus being born on Christmas day December 25th in a stable in Bethlehem with the shepherds and three wise men looking on as shown in countless manger scenes.

But is that the way it really happened? Most people think so, but a careful look at what the Bible says reveals some surprising differences. Let's look at what the Bible actually does say about what happened at Jesus' birth.

While the Gospel books of **Matthew** and **Luke** describe the true story of Jesus' birth, we'll see that they certainly do *not* describe the Christmas story that's been so popular traditionally at this time of year.



Luke's Important Background

Let's look first at Luke, the Gospel writer who had the detailed mind of a doctor and an historian. He wanted to make sure he gave us all the facts.

You'll see this in what Luke says right in the beginning of his gospel. **Luke 1:1-4** "Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that

have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything **carefully** from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, **so that you may know the truth** concerning the things about which you have been taught."

Luke thoroughly interviewed the Apostles and those who had witnessed or knew the events of Christ's life, and that information was the basis for his Gospel. Look at **1 John 1:1**. "That (Jesus) which was from the beginning, which we (the Apostles) have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched...this we announce concerning the Word of life (Who is Jesus).

After this important introduction, Luke begins the TRUE story leading to Jesus' birth starting with an account of God's actions with Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist in **Luke 1:5**. "There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron (Moses' priest brother), and her name was Elizabeth." Later in the account it tells us she was a cousin of Mary (in verse 36).

Luke 1:6-7, "And they (Zacharias and Elizabeth) were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and rules of the Lord blameless. But they had no child, because Elizabeth wasn't able to have any, and they were both old." Zacharias' priestly assignment or "division" helps us to know and understand the general time frame of Christ's birth. His was "the division of Abijah." But what does this mean? Well about a thousand years earlier, King David had organized the Levitical priesthood into 24 "courses" or "divisions." As explained in **1 Chronicles 24:3, 10 and 19**. There were many priests to serve in the various temple jobs.

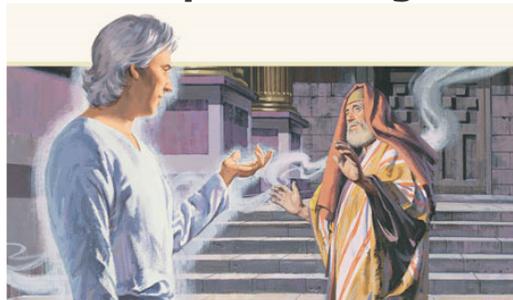
Not wanting any of the priests to be left out of serving, David's solution was to divide them into 24 divisions. Each priest would then serve for a specified week-long term twice during the year, plus the three festival seasons (**Deuteronomy 16:16**) when all the priests would serve.

The question is: Do we know at what times of the year the course of Abijah served at the temple? Yes, we do. We can figure this out by combining the information in **1 Chronicles 24** with a study into the traditions of Jewish law about when the temple divisions were carried out during the year.

The evidence points to Zacharias' week of service described by Luke being around Pentecost, which generally falls in late May to mid-June on our calendar. Although they fall at specific times on God's sacred calendar, the dates of His annual Holy Days and festivals vary up to several weeks on the Roman calendar we use today.

So, it seems we can figure out the time of year when Zacharias was serving in the temple. One way is through *The Companion Bible* which calculates it to the week of June 13-19 in the determined year (1974, Appendix 179, p. 200).

An Unexpected Angelic Appearance



Luke's account continues in **Luke 1:8-9**. "So, it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, according to the custom of the priesthood, his job was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord."

What happened next would have been really frightening to anyone. **Luke 1:11-13**, "Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him...and when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him,

'Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.'

Then the angel explained the mission God had for Zacharias' son-to-be, John the Baptist in Luke 1:15-17. "He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb...He will also go before Him (Jesus Christ, the coming Messiah) in the Spirit and power of Elijah...to make ready a people (the Jewish people) prepared for the Lord." In other words, there son, John would announce the coming Messiah, Jesus to His people the Jews and that they need to get ready for this.

Even though he was a righteous man, in this instance Zacharias was all too human and showed a lack of faith in the angel Gabriel's message. Because of his unbelief, he would not be able to speak again until his son John was born. (verses 18-20).

Timing of Elizabeth's and Mary's Conceptions (when they got pregnant)

Luke 1:23-24, "So it was, as soon as the days of his (Zacharias') service were completed, that he went to his own house. Now after those days his wife Elizabeth got pregnant; and she hid herself five months." Since Zacharias' temple course was in mid-June, and we can maybe say she became pregnant within a couple of weeks, five months would put this time period mid to late November.

Now the scene then moves to the Jesus the Messiah's birth: "Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed (engaged) to a man whose name was Joseph. The angel said to her, 'Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women.'" (verses 26-28).



This account clearly shows that Mary was an outstanding young woman of faith. Gabriel said to her, "And behold you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son and you shall call His name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Highest. And He will rule over the house of Jacob (Israel) forever" (verses 31-33).

Mary, since she was a virgin, then asked the obvious question...how can this be since I am not married? The answer came back from the angel Gabriel: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you" (verse 35).

Gabriel emphasized God's miracle-working power in Luke 1:36-37. "Now indeed, Elizabeth, your relative (cousin) has also gotten pregnant with a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren (physically couldn't have children). For with God nothing will be impossible."

Mary and Elizabeth

So now a little more time has elapsed. It is now Elizabeth's sixth month, maybe late December or a little beyond. "Now Mary got up in those days (the same basic time frame) and quickly went into the hill country to a city of Judah and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth." (verses 39-40).

Elizabeth at this time was in her sixth month of pregnancy with John the Baptist. It would not be hard to understand from the above passage that Mary was now also pregnant with Jesus. Elizabeth even speaks of Mary as though she knows Mary is an expectant mother: "But why is this given to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears the baby leaped in my womb for joy" (verses 43-44).



Verse 56 says, "And Mary remained with her *about three months*, and returned to her house."

Timewise it was now late March. Mary stayed with Elizabeth right to the birth of John the Baptist.

"Now Elizabeth's full time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son" (verse 57).

We see, then, that Mary was probably three months pregnant when John was born. John was probably born in late March or early April. So, when was Jesus Christ born? Six months later would be late September or early October...in the *autumn* of the year, not in the winter, as so many mistakenly believe today.

The evidence of the Roman census

Can we find other biblical evidence that Jesus was born in the autumn rather than in winter? Yes, we can.

Continuing in Luke's account: "And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the entire world should be registered" (Luke 2:1). "The entire world" in here in this passage would mean all the areas under Roman rule. "This census took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So, all went to be registered everyone to his own city" (verses 2-3).



What kind of people were the Romans when it came to order and efficiency? They built bridges, roads and buildings that in some cases are still in use today, 2,000 years later. Their roads were the result of great engineering. They built great waterworks and sewage systems. Even today, our city planning owes a great deal to the Romans. Even much of modern government and military organization is copied from the Romans. They were masters of organization and structure.

God's plan is perfect and He provided all that would be necessary in this period of history when His Son would live upon earth.



Would the Romans, then, have ordered a census in winter? Of course not! This would have defeated the whole purpose of getting everyone to their hometowns to register! In winter, temperatures drop below freezing around Jerusalem, and the roads would have been muddy and wet with cold rains and occasional snow. It would've been a terrible time to travel, especially for a wife nearing her delivery.

No rational Roman official would have scheduled a census in winter. Being an agricultural society such as that of first-century Judea, a census in the autumn, when the crops would've been safely harvested, would have made much more sense.

Why wasn't there Room in Bethlehem?

Picking up our story in Luke again, we find other proof from the Bible for the true timing of Jesus Christ's birth. "Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth...because he was of the house and line of David, to be registered with Mary, his engaged wife, who was pregnant. So, it was that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered" (verses 4-6).

We don't know how far ahead of time they traveled or how long they were there for the census. The essential point is that the most important human birth in all history took place under these circumstances.



"And she brought forth her firstborn Son and wrapped Him in death cloths and laid Him in a manger (*feed trough*) because there was no room for them in the inn" (verse 7). But why was there no room for Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem? We learn this because there's a great deal of information from the culture of the time in the Bible.

So, now we've seen and calculated when John was born and then Jesus' birth three months later. But that doesn't explain the crowded conditions in Bethlehem when Jesus was born. Can we learn that from the Bible?

Yes, we can. In late September and early October there's the autumn festival season on God's calendar of feasts, one of the three times in the year when families would travel to Jerusalem to observe God's Holy Days (Feast of Unleavened Bread) (Feast of Weeks) (Feast of Booths) (see [Deuteronomy 16:16](#)). With the Jews of Israel still obeying this command, even today it is difficult to find a hotel room in Jerusalem at this time of year!

The population of Jerusalem would have grown to overflowing at this time of year. This affected nearby towns such as Bethlehem, a few miles south of Jerusalem. Because of this huge gathering of people, every house was filled. Joseph and Mary did finally find a place in what was normally used to shelter animals. It certainly wasn't first class because Jesus was born in a humble lowly family...NOT in a palace! You can believe that they were thankful to have even had a stable for the birth.

The Shepherds and Their Flocks

Continuing in Luke's account, we find further proof that Jesus wasn't born in winter. [Verse 8](#) tells us, "Now there were in the same country shepherds



living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night."

This also shows that the birth of Jesus did not take place in winter. The common practice of shepherds was

to keep their flocks in the open fields from April to October, but in the cold and wet winter months they took their flocks back home and sheltered them in covered pens.

Again, the evidence in Luke points to a late September birth.

The Shepherds Come to See Jesus

Continuing the story in [Luke 2:10-17](#),
 “Then the angel said to them (the shepherds in the field), ‘Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David (Bethlehem) a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Baby wrapped in death cloths, lying in a manger.’”



Time out! You’re probably wondering why Mary and Joseph wrapped baby Jesus in “death clothes”!!! It sounds awful but you remember the reason why God sent us His only Son, right? Jesus was born a man (He’s now the God/Man) so he can be our substitute to pay the penalty for all our sins! The death clothes Jesus is wrapped in shows His destiny as our Savior who had to die on the cross. Now that makes more sense, right? Even Jesus’ clothes show the most important reason for His birth!

“... and they (the shepherds) hurried and found Mary and Joseph, and the Baby lying in a manger. Now when they had seen Him, they told everyone about this Child.”

We might notice that only the shepherds arrive in time to see Jesus in the manger. The wise men, as we will see, didn't arrive on the scene until much later...

But first: “And when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, His name was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb. Now when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be called holy to the Lord'), and to offer a sacrifice...a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons” (Luke 2:21-24; compare Exodus 13:2).



This was called “redeeming the firstborn.” **Leviticus 12:2-3, 6** tells us that this ceremony occurred 40 days after the birth of a son. So, if Christ was born in late September, we are now into mid-November.

The wise Men and Herod



We'll now continue the story in **Matthew 2:1-3**: “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.' When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.” Why did this news disturb Herod and all of

Jerusalem? Other historical accounts show Herod's fear that he would be overthrown as King. The news that a new king of the Jews had been born threatened his position. It also threatened the Pharisees and Jews. They feared not being able to worship under a new king.

Herod obviously knew of the traditions and the prophecies about the Messiah. “And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. So, they said to him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea'” (verses 4-5).



King Herod carefully concealed his hateful plan. “Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also'” (verses 7-8).

Notice that now Herod referred to Jesus not as a *baby*, but as “the young Child.” He realized how long their travels would have taken the wise men...possibly from as far away as Parthia or the region around Babylon, where the

Israelites and Jews had been exiled as slaves centuries before. Herod knew from when the star had appeared that he was not seeking a newborn baby, but a boy by now a lot older.

What a horrible awful man Herod was. He had to remove any threat to his position so, Herod **“put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men” (verse 16)**. Herod, covering all of his bases in protecting his throne, ordered the horrible murders of those children two years old and under. Absolutely of the devil!!!

It Wasn't the Common Nativity Scene

The wise men were miraculously guided to the Christ child by the star (**verses 9-10**). **“And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother” (verse 11)**.



The typical nativity scene completely falls apart at this point. There is no mention of a manger here. Rather Jesus was in a house. And Jesus was no longer an infant, He was a young child. The wise men obviously visited Jesus long after the shepherds had come and gone...perhaps a year or more later! We are not told why they remained in Bethlehem for that long a time or why they lived in a house there.

Now the typical manger scene includes three wise men but the Bible, however, never says how many wise men there were. It does say, however, that they presented *three* kinds of gifts to Him: gold, frankincense and myrrh.



Why these three particular gifts? Their symbolism is really amazing when we understand it. Let's look at each one of them carefully.

Gold was a gift for royalty...in this case Jesus is the chosen King of the Jews and ultimately the "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" who will rule over the entire earth (**Revelation 19:16**).

Frankincense was an incense intimately connected with the priesthood and temple sacrifices, showing a future fact that Jesus Christ would serve as our High Priest and give Himself as the perfect sacrifice to pay the penalty for the sins of all mankind (**Hebrews 4:14-15; 9:11-14; 1 Peter 1:18-19**).

Myrrh had a much sadder meaning. When a person died, myrrh, which had a perfume to it was wrapped with the body to help cover up the smell of death. Jesus' own body would be wrapped in linen with myrrh and aloes (**John 19:39-40**).

We Should Celebrate Knowing the True Facts about Christmas

Matthew and Luke reveal the true story of the birth of Jesus Christ and the general timing of when it really occurred. John the Baptist was born in the spring. His cousin Jesus was born six months later...probably in late September, possibly early October. The shepherds visited immediately; the wise men...their number unknown...arrived much later.



It's sad that the true story should have become so badly changed by human traditions. It's also sad that people ignore the Bible's clear instructions and change it to make it into their own beliefs instead.

Jesus Himself firmly condemned religious leaders of His day who were **"making the Word of God of no effect through your tradition"** (Mark 7:13). God commanded the Jews in Deuteronomy 12:31-32, **"You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way (the traditions of men); for every abomination to the LORD which He hates have they done to their gods...whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it (God's Word...the Bible), nor take away from it."**



Have you ever wondered why two of the Gospel writers describe the events surrounding Jesus' birth but the other two Gospels don't even mention His birth? Also, Matthew and Luke which do teach about His birth, don't give the date of it.

Has it puzzled you that the Bible never once mentions "Christmas"? And that none of the biblical writers says

anything about celebrating His birth?

We do have, however, a clear command from Jesus Himself to remember Him and His *sacrifice, death on the cross, and Resurrection* on our behalf in



Luke 22:19-20.
"And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me. (20) In the same way, after the supper He took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my

blood, which is poured out for you.'"

Really, kids, this lesson was done to give you interesting facts in the Bible about timing of the birth of Jesus. But it doesn't really matter what time of year Jesus was born, does it? No! It only matters that we know Him, love him, and worship Him and be very happy that God the Father sent Him to save us!!!

It's just good to know the true facts surrounding His birth. The fact is what is most important is what Jesus did for us that counts not when He did it!

Christmas IS the time we celebrate Jesus because He is our GREATEST GIFT!

Let's always celebrate our Lord and Savior. Let's always remember Him and thank Him for His so great salvation in the communion celebration. You should be doing this in your local church regularly.

If you don't have a local church and you study in your home with your parents, be sure to obey Jesus' command to remember Him.

"And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in

remembrance of me. (20) And likewise, the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."

Paul also taught this in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took bread, (24) and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, 'This is my body which is for you. **Do this in remembrance of me.** (25) In the same way also He took the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, **in remembrance of me.**'"

Close in Prayer

