



## Dec 28: God's Gift for Us.

Today, answers for questions people have about the Christmas story.

Luke 2:4–7 (ESV) **4** 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, **5** to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. **6** And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. **7** 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.

### Was Jesus Born on December 25th?

- The quick easy answer is we don't know when Jesus was born.
- Early Christians discouraged the practice of celebrating birthdays
- What the first Christians did celebrate was what we could call death days.
- They believed those who died for their faith in Jesus should be recognized on the date of their martyrdom. The day they died was seen as their real birthday.
- It wasn't until about 200 years into the faith that Christians became interested in when Jesus might have been born.
- The first conjecture was that Jesus was born in the spring. Why? Well, that's the time of year when shepherds would most likely be out in the fields at night watching their flocks. It's the time of year when most of the ewes gave birth to their lambs.
- May the 20th was a popular conclusion for Jesus' birthday.
- It was the historian Sextus Julius Africanus who first proposed that Jesus was born in December.

- Hippolytus was the bishop of Rome in the early 200's, and wrote a commentary on the book of Daniel and recorded the birth of Jesus on December 25th.
- Why was December 25th the popular choice? Two theories:
- One idea is that December 25th is around the time of the winter solstice. Some believe that Christians began to celebrate the same date for Jesus' birth as a counterparty to the pagan party. This theory has its issues and is disputed by some scholars.
- The second thought stems from a belief held at that time that creation and redemption were forever linked. Redemption would have happened at the cross of Jesus. Redemption made it possible to be born again and become a new person.
- Following this line of thought, Tertullian calculated that Jesus died on the cross on March 25th of the Roman solar calendar. His theory is that, because creation and redemption are so closely tied together, Jesus would have been conceived/created on the same day that he died to provide redemption. So March 25th. Go nine months forward from March 25...where do you land? December 25th.
- Pope Julius in the 4th century that cemented December 25th as the official date to celebrate Jesus' birthday.
- Probably the more important question is how to honor his birth, and like the shepherds, acknowledge him as Christ the Lord (Luke 2:11) and like the wise men, give him worship as the one and only King (Matthew 2:11).
- The great thing about December 25th is that everyone agrees on it. We have this great opportunity: to leverage that agreement.
- Colossians 4:5 tells us to *walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time*. What that means at Christmas time, is that we have a whole season we can use.

Matthew 2:1–2 (ESV) 2 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, 2 saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

### What was the star of Bethlehem?

- There's a lot of controversy over the answer.
- The word star in the NT can refer to any kind of natural object in the night sky. The word maybe refers to an actual star, but there's more than enough room for the word to include comets and planets and whatever else is out there that lights up the night sky.
- Astronomers can track where the stars were 200 years ago, and they've done so. They've tried to look for some celestial event that could account for why the Magi saw.
- It's not easy. For one, we don't really know with precision the year Jesus was born.
- Astronomers have uncovered that there was a supernova in 5-4 B.C. that lasted about 70 days. Could that be the star?
- In 7 B.C. there was an unusual planetary conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in the constellation. It would have looked like one big bright new star. Maybe that led the wise men to go to Palestine and look for a new ruler?
- The problem there, is that Matthew talks about the star more than once. The Magi see his star and they go to Jerusalem. But then look after they get there and chat with Herod: 9 *After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had*

*seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.*

- That sure sound like something that happened more that one time, and something that moved. What in the world?
- Sarah Silviander from the University of Texas at Austin is often asked this question.
- First, she says that surely in this case, God employed both the natural and the miraculous so that the star would at the same time compel the right people (the wise men) and also be obscure to the wrong people (Herod). That's why God doesn't use a giant neon sign pointing to a manger...or angels like he did in Luke with the Shepherds.
- So, here, God uses a temporary star.
- And in nature, there is exactly such a thing. It's called a nova. Nova is Latin for new. A nova is a star that temporarily flares up and even in a single day can become bright enough to be visible from the earth.
- This kind of temporary star would have gotten the attention of people looking for it, while also being not overt enough to get everyone's attention. And it would have eventually faded away in the sky over a few days or weeks.
- Galatians 4:4 (ESV) *4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,*
- Using a nova is just like God, right? Something that was there all along, invisible to everyone on the earth until the fulness of time, and then pops out in the sky to proclaim a God who seemed invisible, but now a baby, has made him known.

Luke 2:1–5 (ESV) **2** In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. **2** This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. **3** And all went to be registered, each to his own town. **4** 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, **5** to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

### Was Luke wrong about the Census?

- Luke writes that Mary and Jospheh were required by the order of a census to return to Joseph's home town of Bethlehem.
- Problems here:
- First, there's no surviving record anywhere of a Roman census that would coincide with Jesus' birth.
- Second, it's implausible for everyone to return to his own hometown for a census.
- Third, Luke says the census happened while Herod the Great was alive and Quirinius was governor. But Herod died in 4 B.C. and Quirinius didn't become governor until 6 A.D.
- Ok...what can we say about all those barbs?
- 1) Actually, there's plenty of reason to believe there was a census even if it wasn't written about. At the end of his life, Herod was ill. This is 8 or 7 B.C. And he was in great conflict with the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus. I would have been a most opportune time for Augustus to have a census taken so that he could assess the situation before Herod died.

- 2) Historical documents have been found that actually confirm the practice of everyone returning to his hometown. A papyrus from 104 AD has the lines, *“It is necessary that all persons who are not resident at home for one reason or another at this time return to their home places in order to undergo the usual registration formalities and to attend to the cultivation of the land which is their concern.”*
- Joseph is living in Nazareth, maybe only temporarily. He is originally from Betlehem. He probably has a family plot there as one of David’s descendants.
- Joseph and Mary returning to Joseph’s hometown is entirely plausible.
- 3) Quirinius wasn’t governor until after Herod died. What about that?
- It is true. Herod died in 4 B.C. and Quirinius became Governor in 6 A.D. Quirinius is known to have conducted a census the same year he assumed his role of Governor. And it became quite well known, because it sparked a great rebellion among Jewish residents.
- Did Luke get it wrong?
- One thought is that this is just a translation problem. Even in the footnotes of the ESV, it says that the line could be translated *“this was the registration before Quirinius was governor.”* That alone would solve the problem. But let’s go further.
- A professor of ancient history wrote a book in 2019 and points out the Justin Martyr, and early church father, calls Quirinius a **procurator** in Judea at the time of the census that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. A procurator was subordinate to the governor. Among a procurator’s chief duties was administering a census.
- Does that change things? Yes. *“This was the first registration taken under the procurator Quirinius from Syria.”* And who would have been the governor at the time of this first census? Records say Sentius Saturninus.
- That makes us ask, why is Luke mentioning Quirinius at all? Because, he did become governor in 6AD, and order the more talked about census that set off all the protests.
- Luke knew that his audience would be familiar with Quirinius and the second census, and sets it apart from the earlier one. It’s why he writes that it was the first census associated with Quirinius.
- Luke is not wrong. There were two censuses. One when Jesus was born, sometime before 4 B.C. when Quirinius was serving his role as procurator. And the second happened around 6 A.D. when Quirinius was elevated to governor.
- All of that is so nerdy. Why go through this? I need you to know that we can trust Luke with what he writes.
- If what he writes about a Roman census being taken is true and we can trust him in that... then we can trust him even more when we get to the things that seem unbelievable about Jesus.
- One of Jesus’ closest friends, Peter, wrote this: 2 Peter 1:16 (ESV) 16 *For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.*
- Another of Jesus’ closest friends, John, wrote this: 1 John 1:1–2 (NIV) 1 *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.*
- The reports of Jesus birth, his teaching, his miracles, his death, his resurrection...they are unique because they appear in the context of history. They are based on eyewitness

accounts that were recorded almost immediately after Jesus' life. They bear the marks of authenticity.

- When we come to Christmas, we can be confident we're celebrating the truth.
- Christmas time is a great time to ground yourself once more in the truth of the Bible. Anchor yourself to the greatest reality ever: that God sent his son into the world to seek and to save all who are spiritually lost.

Jesus was born of a virgin, so we could be born of God.

Jesus took our flesh, so he could give us his Spirit.

Jesus lay in the manger, so we could lie in paradise.

*God, thank you once again for your indescribable gift to us of Jesus. We don't know what we would do without him. We fall at his feet once again today, and declare that he is the Christ, the Son of God, the Savior of the World, and our needed friend. In that, we have hope and joy. In the name of Immanuel, God with us, we give thanks. Amen*