

A Miraculous Place in Bethlehem

1. Matthew 13:55,56 — Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren, James, and Joses [Joseph], and Simon, and Judas [Jude]? And his sisters, are they not all with us?....
2. Acts 16:31 — And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.
3. Luke 2:19 — But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.

The Real Purpose of Christmas

We've heard or read the Christmas story how Jesus was born to Mary and Joseph in the little town of Bethlehem, but how much of the detail do we really know about what happened that holy night?

If our understanding is based on greeting-card illustrations, chances are there are many details about Christ's birth and the events surrounding it we don't know about.

So, let's take a deep drive in this journey to discover - The Rest of the Story.

The emphasis of this lesson:

The place of Jesus' birth was not a wooden barn, but a stone cave in the city of Bethlehem.

Today, the Church of the Nativity memorializes this sacred space, and it has been receiving worshipers for over 1,500 years.



Actually, if it wasn't for the Catholic church and the Orthodox, the site would have been lost through the many disruptions of Jerusalem.

Mary kept a meticulous record of the events surrounding Christ's birth and served as the primary source for all the gospel writers.

Jesus Was Born in a Cave - Not in a Wooden Barn

In the ancient city of Bethlehem, you will discover the historic Church of the Nativity. It draws visitors from all around the world and marks the site where Mary gave birth to Jesus, the Son of God. Now, at first glance, you would see that the site looks nothing like the traditional barn seen on typical artwork.

To the surprise of many, this place where the angels directed the shepherds — and where they came to worship Jesus that glorious night — is a small cave in which animals were once kept.

How do we know that this is the authentic site of Christ's birth?

The earliest record confirming the location was written by Justin Martyr, the great Christian apologist who was born in 100 AD and raised about 30 miles from Bethlehem. Interestingly, throughout his growing years, he had heard stories from local residents about the place where Jesus was born. Consequently, in 150 AD, he wrote:

“When the child [Christ] was born in Bethlehem, since Joseph could not find a lodging in that village, he took up his quarters in a certain cave near the village; and while they were there Mary brought forth the Christ and placed Him in a manger...”

In addition to these words from Justin Martyr, we also have the words of the early Greek theologian and scholar Origen who in 248 AD wrote:

“...There is shown at Bethlehem the cave where He [Christ] was born, and the manger in the cave where He was wrapped in swaddling-clothes. And this sight is greatly talked of in surrounding places...”

Most have been raised to believe that Jesus was born in a wooden barn and placed in a wooden manger, that is not the case.

If that were true, a wooden manger would not have lasted 250 years. It would have been broken down by the elements, fallen into shambles, and been discarded.

The fact is all around the city of Bethlehem there are caves, and many of them were once used as barns. In that region where wood is scarce, caves were perfectly adapted for barns. History reveals that shepherds would take a piece of rock — usually a part of the cave itself — and they would hollow it out and use it for a feeding trough, or manger. This explains why 250 years after Jesus' birth Origen documented that people were still coming to the cave in Bethlehem to see the “manger” where Christ was laid.

Furthermore, if you study the writings of Josephus, probably the greatest Jewish historian to ever live, you will see he wrote that there were many caves around the city of Bethlehem that shepherds used as barns. And not only did shepherds use them, but also travelers when the local inns were so full that there was nowhere else for them to sleep. These caves were great for staying warm, dry, and sleeping through the night.

The Church of the Nativity

Under Emperor Constantine, who reigned from 306 to 337 AD, Christianity became widely accepted and the persecution of Christians greatly diminished. Constantine's mother — Helena — converted to Christ

and became a dedicated follower of Jesus throughout her lifetime. With the blessing of her son and the financial backing of the empire, Helena traveled to the land of Israel, which was then called Palestine, and began conducting interviews with many people who had descended from First Century believers. Her mission was to identify and preserve the historic sites pertinent to the life of Jesus and then build a memorial on each location to safeguard it for future generations. In addition to documenting the places where Jesus was baptized and buried, Helena also determined the actual site of His birth. Indeed, the cave beneath the Church of the Nativity was determined to be the actual place where Christ was born over 2,000 years ago.

With resources provided by her son, Emperor Constantine, Helena authorized the construction of the first official Church of the Nativity in 326 AD, erecting it right on top of the renowned cave in Bethlehem where Christ was born. This first establishment was a small wooden church decorated with marble and other precious ornaments. Years later, Emperor Justinian decided to improve the memorial by building a more substantial structure. Upon its completion in 520 AD, the second Church of the Nativity was officially consecrated, and it is the cathedral that is still there today.

Remarkably, more than 1,500 years later, the Church of the Nativity still stands in Bethlehem, and people have been worshiping there ever since its opening! In fact, it's the longest continuous site of worship in the history of Christianity. Although the church and the cave have undergone numerous modifications and embellishments over the years, Jesus' birthplace can still be reached today by a flight of stairs that leads from the cathedral's main floor to the cave below. The traditional spot of His nativity is marked by a bronze star on the marble pavement. In that very spot, Mary gave birth to the Son of God so many years ago.

The Bible Documents at Least Fourteen Members of Jesus' Family-

In addition to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, there is a treasure trove of information from Early Church writers on Jesus, His mother Mary, and His relatives. In fact, some of these facts are repeated so frequently that we know these things confidently. For example, we know Jesus' grandfather on Joseph's side was Jacob -see Matthew 1:16, and His grandparents on Mary's side were Joachim and Anna — Mary's father and mother.

What do we know from Scripture about Jesus' family?

We know about Jesus' cousins — on Mary's side of the family — named Zacharias and Elizabeth. They had a son named John, who came to be known as John the Baptist; he too was Jesus' cousin - Luke 1.

As far as Jesus' siblings, the Bible reveals that He had four brothers and at least two sisters. Matthew 13:55 and 56 says, "Is not this the carpenter's son? is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren, James, and Joses [Joseph], and Simon, and Judas [Jude]? And his sisters, are they not all with us?...."

So according to this passage, Jesus was the firstborn, and after His virgin birth, Mary and Joseph had at least six more children — four boys and at least two girls. In this amazing family, not only do we find Jesus, the Savior of the world, but also James who became the leader of the church in Jerusalem and wrote the book of James, and Jude who became an apostle and wrote the book of Jude. After God called Mary to be the mother of Jesus and Joseph to be His foster father, he raised up other children to bring Him glory. History reveals that the other two boys — Joseph and Simon — were involved in ministry, and Jesus' sisters were married to people in ministry. This demonstrates how God calls entire families into His service.

God Calls Whole Families

God delights in saving entire families and then partnering with them to see others saved. For example, if you look at the Old Testament, you will find that God called Noah, Noah's wife, their sons, and their sons' wives to build an ark to preserve mankind as well as a sampling of all the animals and plant life on earth.

- God called Abraham and Sarah to be the father and mother of His people, eventually giving birth to the Hebrew nation. Isaac, their son, the child God promised, was also called. He married Rebecca, who gave birth to Jacob, whose name God changed to Israel. Jacob fathered 12 sons, all of whom were called by God.

Then there was Moses and his brother Aaron and their sister Miriam. God used this trio — imperfect as they were — to change the course of history, bringing deliverance to His people and establishing them as a nation. When we come to the New Testament, we see the example of Mary and Joseph and their entire family, which were called by God to do something very special. Similarly, Jesus' cousins — Zachariah, Elizabeth, and John the Baptist, their son — were all chosen by God to fulfill His purposes.

- James and John the sons of Zebedee: These two brothers were selected by Jesus to be disciples right alongside Peter and Andrew — two more brothers called into ministry.
- The list of examples continues with the apostle Paul and his family. The New Testament records Andronicus and Junia were his "kinsmen"

who served as apostles in the ministry - Romans 16:7.

- Then we have Barnabas, whose name means son of encouragement, along with his sister Mary and her son, John Mark (Barnabas' nephew).

Mary was a follower of Christ who owned a huge apartment in the city of Jerusalem that she opened and made available to Jesus and His disciples. This was the "upper room" where Jesus had the last supper and celebrated the first communion with His disciples. It was also the place where believers received the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.

Mary's son was John Mark whom we read about in Acts 15:37-41. Although initially immature, he went on to become the secretary to the apostle Peter and penned Peter's gospel, which is known today as the gospel of Mark.

Realize that household salvation must begin with someone, so why not you?

If you'll believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, eventually, all your house will be saved, and God will extend His call to your entire family.

So, if you want your family to be saved and used by the Lord to further His Kingdom, throw up your hands in prayer and say, "Lord, here I am. You saved me, and in Your mercy, I ask You to save my family. Save my parents and my siblings, and save my children and my grandchildren, that You may receive glory, honor, and great joy. In Jesus' name. Amen!"

Mary Is the Primary Source For the Events of Jesus' Birth-

Turning our attention back to the birth of Jesus, we see that Mary experienced many events that were quite extraordinary. From Gabriel's appearance announcing Christ's birth to the prophetic words spoken over Him by Simeon and Anna to the visit of the Magi with all their lavish gifts, the Bible says, "...Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19).

Many people just read right over that verse and miss its deeper meaning. Basically, this passage tells us that the primary source in the New Testament for the story of Jesus is Mary herself.

The word "**kept**" in the original Greek means to keep within oneself in order to closely guard or to accurately and carefully preserve.

The word "**ponder**" means to lay in order like a person who carefully and meticulously chronicles a story.

Mary was so impacted by the events she saw happening all around her regarding the baby boy she had just given birth to that she recorded every bit of it, chronicling it carefully and meticulously in her heart. In fact,

she kept the story in such perfect order that when she was visited and interviewed by apostles and gospel writers in the latter part of her life, she was able to recall all that had taken place. They in turn wrote down the information accurately and precisely as she had chronicled and journaled it inside her heart.

This brings us to an important question:

Are you keeping in your memory the things that God has done for you?

The truth is Jesus has done so many wonderful things in your life, and it is up to you to chronicle His miracles and faithfulness in your life so that you can share them and pass them on to others. The record of His interaction in your life will let others know what He wants to do in their life and build their faith.

What if Mary had not carefully chronicled and preserved these events?

We and the rest of the world would have missed out on the amazing details surrounding Jesus' birth.

Her efforts are the reason we have all the aspects of Jesus' life in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Each Gospel Provides a Unique Perspective-

What's interesting about the gospel accounts is that they each provide certain elements that are unique to that account. For instance, when we look at the gospel of Luke, he is the only writer that tells us about Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem for the census and the delivery of baby Jesus in the cave. Likewise, only Luke includes the vivid description of the angels appearing in the night sky, giving praise and glory to God, and announcing Jesus' birth to the shepherds who then traveled to Bethlehem to worship Him.

If we only had the gospel of Luke, we would have no record of the Magi from the east who followed the brilliant star that led them to Jesus so they could worship Him and present Him with their lavish gifts.

Only Matthew tells us about the Magi, and only he tells us about the series of dreams God gave Joseph that directed him to relocate to Egypt in order to protect Jesus from the murderous intentions of King Herod. Luke's account of Jesus' birth concludes with Mary, Joseph, and Jesus returning to their home in Nazareth after His dedication day and Mary's purification at the Temple. Matthew's gospel picks up when Jesus is about two years old. That's when the Magi showed up in Jerusalem, "Saying, Where is He that is born King of the Jews?" for we've seen His star in the

east, and are come to worship Him” Matthew 2:2.

To get the whole story, you have to read what both Luke and Matthew wrote — not to mention John’s contribution, who is the only writer who wrote of Jesus’ pre-existence and distinguishes Him as “the Word made flesh.” All the details recorded in these gospels are right from the mouth of Mary herself, who kept all these things and pondered, or journaled, them in her heart.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.

— James 1:22

1. Mary — the sister of Barnabas — was a believer who owned a huge apartment with an upper room in the city of Jerusalem. She opened it and made it available to Jesus and His disciples, and history was made in her home. What do you have that you could open and make available to Jesus?
What resources might you offer Him to help others come to know Him better?
2. Do you have family members who aren’t saved? You can claim their salvation in prayer! Acts 16:31 says, “...Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and [all] thy house.” Who in your family doesn’t know Jesus? Begin to pray for their salvation regularly, calling out their names to God. Ask Him to remove the spiritual blindness from their eyes (see 2 Corinthians 4:3-6); flood their hearts with the light of truth (see Ephesians 1:17,18); and give them the measure of faith to believe and receive Jesus as their Lord and Savior (see Romans 12:3).
3. Mary chronicled or journaled in her heart all the wonderful things she experienced with Jesus. How about you? Are you making note of the things that God has done for you? Begin to take the time to journal the many wonderful ways He has provided for you, protected you, healed you, and answered your prayers. Remembering His blessings will create an attitude of gratefulness.