

## The Miracle of Christmas

Luke 2:1-7

### Scripture

<sup>1</sup>In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. <sup>2</sup>(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) <sup>3</sup>And everyone went to his own town to register.

<sup>4</sup>So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. <sup>5</sup>He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, <sup>7</sup>and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. Luke 2:1-7 NIV

### Content

It had been a long, hard day on the road, and the two travelers were exhausted. It was a long trip no matter when you traveled, but this time of year the roads were so clogged that it took even longer.

Three days had passed since they left Nazareth. Two more days and they would be in Bethlehem. When they left, it hadn't seemed like such a bad idea. In fact, he liked the notion of a final trip before the baby came. It was almost, well, it was almost romantic. Typical male thinking. Now that he and Mary had spent their third twelve-hour day on the road, all the romance had vanished.

For Mary's part, she just wished it was over. Traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem took 100 miles through some of the most desolate country on earth. She, of course, was pregnant. Anyone could tell by looking at her that the baby wasn't going to wait much longer. She was in that stage where you can't get comfortable no matter what you do. Walking hurts, standing hurts, sitting hurts, lying down hurts, eating is hard and breathing isn't much better. So now in the ninth month, she rides a donkey on the path by the River Jordan.

### Part I: The Census

It had all started not long ago when word came that the government needed some money. That was no big deal. The government always needed money. Only this time the word didn't come down from Herod in Jerusalem. It came from a faraway place called Rome where a man named Caesar Augustus was emperor. Joseph knew his name but that was all. Like all good Jews, he had little use for Rome. But the Romans didn't come often to Nazareth and he was not a political Zealot. No, he was just a carpenter.

But he's on the road because Caesar Augustus decided to take a census. From the census he would get a list of names which would be used to collect taxes. With the money he raised, Augustus would build the mighty Roman empire. It was said of him that when he came to Rome it was a city of brick, but when he left it was a city of marble. He reigned as emperor for 58 years and was the greatest Caesar of them all, greater even than his granduncle, Julius Caesar. He truly deserved the name Augustus, which meant "exalted one."

### **"Welcome to Bethlehem: Home of King David"**

Because of Augustus, all over Israel families were traveling in the dead of winter. Some were going far south to Hebron or Beersheba, some north to Capernaum, many to Jerusalem. Joseph was going to a small village about six miles south of Jerusalem—a place called Bethlehem.

A more out-of-the-way town could hardly be found in Judea. Bethlehem had only one claim to fame. A thousand years earlier David had been born there. David—the greatest king Israel ever had—grew up in Bethlehem. His father Jesse lived there. He had been a shepherd on the hills outside the village. If there had been a Chamber of Commerce, they would have put up a billboard: "Welcome to Bethlehem—Home of King David."

But they didn't have to, because everyone knew. Even the prophets knew. Seven hundred years earlier a prophet named Micah had even predicted that the Messiah would one day be born in Bethlehem.

### **Part II: The Journey**

So here they were—the two of them—trudging through the dust going back home. Well, I should add the three of them. After all, the donkey counts for something. Yes, they brought the donkey along with them. It was a long journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. They couldn't go the short way because that would take them through Samaria and the Jews wouldn't travel through Samaritan territory. So to get from Nazareth in the north to Bethlehem in the south you traveled east to the Jordan River, followed the valley south to Jericho, then west up the Jericho road through the mountains to Jerusalem, then a quick jog south to Bethlehem. They brought the donkey along for Mary to ride because she was, as the saying goes, great with child.

Most of the journey passed through desolate wilderness. You had to go down to Jericho then up, up, up to get to Jerusalem. That part of the journey was particularly difficult and dangerous. Many years later Jesus would tell a story about a man attacked by robbers and left for dead on that very road. Joseph and Mary knew all about the risks.

### **Bandit Territory!**

But they were not alone. The road was crowded with families going all directions for the census. Nobody was very happy—including Joseph and Mary. To be perfectly honest about it, she felt miserable most of the trip. Every time she stood up, she wanted to sit down and every

time she sat down, she wanted to stand up. To make matters worse, the little fellow was evidently about ready to come because he was moving around trying to get comfortable. And Joseph wasn't much help. He was tired, frustrated and discouraged. They had planned to have the baby at home. It would have been easy. He would have waited outside until it was all over. Nice and neat and clean. But now this Caesar has messed things up.

Another day passed and they were in Jericho. Mary was even more tired than before. The worst of the journey lay just ahead. Up they went into the mountains with a group of travelers. It was 22 miles from Jericho to Jerusalem. The road made its twisting, winding way through a wild desolation of heights, cliffs, valleys and creekbeds. This was the land of the prophets.

As they walked along, the group sang the songs of Zion, the ancient pilgrim choruses. So they walked and sang—Mary barely speaking, Joseph praying she won't have the baby right here in the middle of nowhere.

### **Part III: The Birth**

That night in Jerusalem, she said, "It's not long now." He said, "How do you know?" She said, "I just know."

If he had any consolation, it was this: They were almost there. The next morning they started out on the last leg of the journey. Six miles and they would be in Bethlehem. The road was good, it would be an easy walk. As they got near the village, they saw flocks of sheep and the shepherds with them—mostly teenage boys. Here and there you could see the dusty olive trees clinging with gnarled roots to the rocky hillsides.

Just over the next hill and he would be back in his hometown. And then, there it was. He paused for a few moments to take it in, a smile playing across his lips. Even if the trip was a bother, it was good to be coming back home.

As he entered the village with her riding the donkey, an odd feeling of fear and excitement swept over him. Excitement because he was back where he had grown up and fear that he would forget people and they would forget him.

It didn't take long to see that things hadn't changed much. It was just a small town, really, one of dozens of small towns in the region. But still it was home to Joseph and he was back again.

### **"It's Time."**

His mind jerked back to reality when Mary called out to him, "Honey, let's find someplace to stay for the night. I'm really tired." When he looked at her, pregnant and all, he felt so proud. Even tired and carrying the baby, she was beautiful.

"Just a few minutes and we'll find a place to stay." "Honey, I really need to stop now." Something in that last word made him turn and look at her. "Is it time?" She nodded silently, her face drawn, her hands rubbing her stomach.

It's always a strange feeling when you go back to your hometown after you've been away a long time. It's home but it's not the same. Most of the people you used to know are gone and you aren't sure who's still in town. That's the way Joseph felt. If he had time, he could rustle up a place to stay. But it had been years since he lived there and his family had all moved away.

### **No Room in the Inn**

He thought for moment, snapped his fingers, and said, "Sure, we'll go to the village inn. They always have an extra bed." Off they went, he leading the way, she resting uncomfortably on the donkey, the baby sending out insistent signals that he was coming soon, ready or not.

The inn was a two-story square building built around an inner courtyard. Guests were kept on the second story, the first being reserved for animals, servants and supplies. The inn did a brisk business with folks traveling to and from Jerusalem. But it was hardly ever full.

The man inside was new on the job, he didn't know Joseph, and besides this was an extra-busy season what with everyone coming back to town for the census. "Sorry, I have no room." "But I'm from Bethlehem. We've traveled five days to get here and my wife is outside about to have a baby. Can't you do something?" "Sorry."

She waited. He had been inside a long time. When he came out, his head was bowed. There was no room in the inn.

From the perspective of 2000 years, many people find it easy to criticize the innkeeper for turning Mary and Joseph away. But he was not being mean or hardhearted. He was nothing more than a small town businessman who had run out of rooms to rent. **But if he had known ... That's the whole point. He didn't know. Nobody in Bethlehem knew what was about to happen.**

Now they were outside. The sun had fallen and the chilly night breeze cut through their robes. They were tired, hungry and a long way from home. He was frustrated and she was in labor. They had to go somewhere. They couldn't stay here.

There was one place they could go. The innkeeper did have some stables. "If you want to," he said with a shrug, "you can stay there. There is no charge. It's all I have left."

So they went to the stable. Actually, it was a little cave cut into the hillside behind the inn. They brought the horses and donkeys back there to get them out of the open. There were rocks piled in rows with dirt, straw and manure all mixed together. The place reeked of donkey dung. But at least there was room to lie down, room to deliver the baby.

The pains were now coming faster and sharper. She lost all track of time, concentrating only on delivering her baby. He was like any expectant father suddenly pressed into service. He was scared, nervous and excited. Not much help, really. She seemed to know just what to do. He mostly held her hand and wiped her forehead and waited.

All in all, this was not the way he had planned their first child. But no matter, from the very first this pregnancy had been quite different.

### **Away in a Manger**

The hours passed in the lonely stable. Finally the pains seemed to be as one. The moment had arrived. She cried out, straining with all her might, and fell back onto the blanket. Nothing. Then a tiny sound, a whimper, then a loud cry. It was a boy, a beautiful, healthy, brand-spanking-new baby boy.

He held up the baby for her to see. “Let me hold him,” she said. And she did. There she lay for a moment. Now the sleep she had fought for hours came to her eyes, the stress of the long trip finally catching up with her. More than anything in all the world, she wanted to go to sleep. But before she did, she picked up some rough pieces of cloth and wrapped the baby tightly.

Then she looked for a place to put him. The only place she could find was a feeding trough—old, creaky, rough-hewn, with bits of food stuck to the bottom. It was perfect. She laid him in the feeding-trough and then lay down to go to sleep. It had been a long, long day. As she drifted off to sleep, she wondered where they would go in the morning.

He didn’t sleep just yet. Too much to think about. What a lucky man he was. He looked first at his wife—so tired and yet so beautiful—and then at the baby boy—surely the most beautiful baby ever born.

How strange, yet how fitting that it should all end like this. It had happened just as the angel said it would. He didn’t worry about naming the baby. The angel had taken care of that. **“He shall be called Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins.”**

How strange that it should happen to him—Joseph—just an ordinary carpenter. And to Mary—an innocent teenage girl. Who could figure it all out? **Immanuel, the angel said, God with us.** Mary, who had never known Joseph, now delivering her first child. “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and shall bear a son.”

That’s the way it was that first Christmas night 2000 years ago. **Baby sleeping, mother dreaming, father thinking, and God watching over it all.**

### **Part IV: The Choice**

These days we tend to take Christmas for granted. More damaging to the religious foundations of Christmas are those who have subtly shifted the emphasis without ever making a public statement or going to court. They simply stopped using the word “Christmas” in any reference to this time of year. Instead, the word for today is “holiday.” We now have a holiday season, holiday decorations and a holiday tree. Christmas has become the “C” word, a name we all know but feel uncomfortable mentioning in mixed company.

America has become a nation of people who don't want to offend anyone. And references to the holidays instead of Christmas are aimed at being more acceptable to those who are not Christians." One year, we had Christmas. The next year, we had a holiday season."

### **It Really Happened**

Now more than ever we need to reaffirm our basic faith that it really happened:

- There really was a Caesar Augustus who issued a call for a census.
- The journey from Nazareth was indeed long and difficult and dangerous.
- The Virgin Mary truly was pregnant.
- Joseph really was going home for Christmas.
- Bethlehem was in fact a small village 6 miles south of Jerusalem.
- The inn really was full.
- Jesus was born in a stable and took his first nap in a feeding-trough.

These things are not legends or myths or holiday fairy tales. This is how it really happened. When God entered our world, he took a most unusual route. **Born in poverty, to Jewish parents, in a forgotten village, in a stable. Unexpected and mostly unnoticed, the Son of God came from heaven.**

Because it really happened, our faith does not rest on speculation. Let there be not the slightest doubt among us today. "Joy to the world, the Lord is come, let earth receive her King." It is true not because we sing it or because we say it or because we believe it. It is true not because our parents told us the story. It is true because it really happened.

### **This is the miracle of Christmas!**

Let us take the message and tell it to our children this year. Let us tell them the truth: "It really happened."

### **Let us tell them of the miracle of Christmas!**

### **What Will You Do With Jesus?**

There is left to each of us a choice. What will you do with the Christ-child this Christmas? Will you run to meet him and make him welcome in your heart?

Will you sing with the angels or will you be too busy to go to worship and honor Him? Will you open your heart and your home to Jesus? Will you take him in with open arms?

**Jesus – The one who saves his people from their sins.**

### **Let us experience the miracle of Christmas!**