

Christmas Lesson

Glory to God in the Highest

MAIN IDEA

Jesus' birth brought peace and is worthy of the highest praise.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

How can we praise Jesus for the peace he brings?

TEACHING AIM

To encourage adults to determine how they can praise Jesus for the peace he brings



Bible Comments

Understanding the Context

The Israelites were subjects in the Roman Empire. Caesar dominated most of the known world. The Romans brought a form of peace in the world—one based on brute force. Such a peace could never last.

Judea hadn't been an independent kingdom for many years. The Israelites longed for God to send the Messiah to remove the Romans from their land and establish his kingdom in the world. From time to time, false Messiahs arose and raised people's hopes. Each time, the Romans dashed those hopes, as these pretenders and their followers came to adverse ends.

An angel of the Lord appeared to the elderly priest Zechariah while he was ministering in the temple in Jerusalem. Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, had been unable to have a child and had no hope of conceiving one in their elderly years. The angel told Zechariah the Lord had heard his petition to have a child. Elizabeth would bear a son, and they were to name him "John." The child would become a great prophet like Elijah and prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah.

Following this, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth to a young virgin named Mary. The angel announced to her that she would conceive, bear a son, and name him "Jesus." He would be the promised Savior who would establish God's kingdom in the world. When Mary asked Gabriel how this could be, since she was a virgin, he said the Holy Spirit could come upon her and conceive the child in her. In this way, the child would be God's unique Son.

Sometime after the angel left, Mary visited Elizabeth. Elizabeth's son leaped in her womb with joy when he heard Mary's voice. Soon, the heavens themselves would reverberate with joy at the birth of Jesus. Angels would proclaim that he brought a peace the Romans could never bring.

Interpreting the Scriptures

Jesus' Birth in Bethlehem (2:1–7)

The Gospel of Luke tells about one of the most momentous events in history with simplicity and economy of words. Luke let the majesty of the events communicate the message.

2:1–3. Augustus Caesar reigned from 27 B.C. to 14 A.D. and was one of the most illustrious Roman emperors. Luke revealed that Caesar decreed a census of the entire Roman Empire to provide a basis for taxation. Luke is known for his historical accuracy, but the references he made in his Gospel are difficult to reconcile with historical records outside the Bible. First, there's no record in Roman history of an empire-wide census taken at this time. Second, it's difficult to place Quirinius as governor at the correct time.

Although there's no historical record of such a census, that doesn't mean it didn't happen. Josephus, a first-century Romano-Jewish scholar and historian, did not mention the census, but he did refer to one conducted by Quirinius in 6 A.D. Luke appears to note that one in Acts 5:37. Some suggest that Luke was confused and put this census in the wrong place in his Gospel. However, it's difficult to accept that he got the reference right in one instance and wrong in another.

We must date any event connected with Jesus' birth before King Herod's death in 4 B.C. Sentius Saturninus (9–6 B.C.) and Quintilius Varus (6–4 B.C.) were the governors of Syria around the time the Gospel of Luke identifies. Quirinius wasn't governor until 6 A.D. However, some evidence suggests Quirinius was an official during the time of Saturninus, and that prominent role may have led Luke to identify him as governor.

21:4–5. 1 Samuel (17:12, 58) identifies Bethlehem as David's birthplace. Bethlehem means *house of bread*. It is located about six miles from Jerusalem. Luke did not connect the place of Jesus' birth to prophecy, although Micah 5:2 identifies it as the city from which a great ruler would come.

Mary was Joseph's betrothed. Apparently, they weren't yet married. But betrothal was stronger than our practice of engagement. It was so binding,

a divorce was necessary to break it (see Matthew 1:19). Mary accompanied Joseph to Bethlehem to register for the census.

2:6–7. The time came for Mary to deliver her baby. Ancient traditions suggest that she delivered him in a cave or grotto, and placed him in an animal feeder. Jesus was born there because there was no room in the inn. A great number of travelers were in Bethlehem to register for the census, causing a shortage of places to stay. The place where Jesus was born could have been connected to the inn.

Angels Announce Jesus' Birth to Shepherds (2:8–14)

2:8. Shepherd is the occupation most often mentioned in the Bible. Shepherds were important because their work provided food, milk, wool, clothing, and tent coverings. Some of the Bible's greatest heroes were shepherds, including Abel, Abraham, Moses, David, and Amos. Nonetheless, the Jews put shepherds in the category of *people of the land* and labeled them religiously unrespectable. Their work and lifestyle made it impossible for them to keep all the requirements of the Jewish law.

These shepherds were working in shifts, watching over their flock during the night. They had to watch the sheep all the time, even if they were in a fold or pen. Sheep were vulnerable to attack by wild predators and thieves.

Shepherds were in the field from March to November. This makes it unlikely Jesus was born in December. The church didn't attach his birth to December 25 until the fourth century. We can make a guess at a general time frame for his birth, but we don't know the precise date.

2:9–12. In the Scriptures, brightness is a sign of God's glory (Exodus 16:7, 10; 24:17; 40:34). Today's text suggests the angel stood by the shepherds. The Greek text says the shepherds "feared a great fear." They had no idea what the divine appearance meant!

The angel first sought to calm and reassure the shepherds. They were to stop being afraid because he brought them good news. The word he used for "good news" is the root for our word *evangelism*. In Greek, the text says the angel brought good news of *mega* joy. Joy rings throughout the Gospel of Luke, often in response to fear. The word "joy" appears more in this book

than in any other in the New Testament. It begins with Zechariah (1:14), continues when Mary visits Elizabeth (1:44), and ends with the disciples rejoicing in the temple after Jesus' resurrection (24:52).

Verse 11 notes the first time in the New Testament the word "Savior" is applied to Christ. The Romans applied it to Caesar. Early Christians took it and applied it to Christ. It's an unusual title for Christ in the Gospels. To proclaim Jesus as a Savior in those times was to say he was the universal deliverer for whom people longed. The fact that this Savior was born "in the city of David" suggested that he was the King of Israel promised by the prophets.

The Greek text identifies this Savior as *Christos Kurios*. This title is unique in the New Testament, and while we don't know its precise meaning, it interprets as *Christ Lord*. It could also mean *Messiah*, *Lord* or the *Messiah*, *the Lord*, *Anointed Lord*, or *an Anointed One*, *a Lord*. The sign the angel gave was to show that his announcement was true. Finding a baby wrapped in cloths wouldn't have been unusual; finding one lying in a manger would be.

2:13–14. "Host" is a military term for a group of soldiers. God's army appeared and announced peace. The first phrase of their proclamation is easy to translate. The second isn't. That's why we find so many variations among English translations.

The first phrase says simply, "Glory to God in the highest." The best translations of the second phrase seem to be *and on earth peace among people with whom God is pleased or to men whom God has favored*.

2:15–16. The shepherds excitedly said to each other, "Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us." They hurried to Bethlehem and located Mary, Joseph, and the baby. They found the child in a manger, just as the angel had said.

2:17–18. The shepherds told Joseph and Mary what they had seen and heard in their field, and they also told the other inhabitants of Bethlehem the story of the angels and Jesus. They became the first proclaimers of the good news of Christ to the world.

2:19–20. The literal Greek reading is that *Mary kept on keeping all of these things in her heart*. This means she cherished them like a treasure. The

shepherds returned to their flocks in the field, glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard on that incredible night!

Focusing on the Meaning

Luke's account of Jesus' birth showcases God doing extraordinary things through ordinary and outcast people. Joseph and Mary were ordinary people. The Gospel account suggests they were people of humble means who were doing things ordinary people did. Yet God chose Mary to be the mother of the Savior, and Joseph as his earthly father.

When the time came for Jesus' birth, God didn't announce it to the rich and powerful. He didn't announce it to Caesar and the senators in Rome. He didn't announce it to the royalty and priesthood in Jerusalem. Instead, he announced it to a humble group of shepherds in the field as they watched over their flocks. By this, he revealed that Jesus was going to be a special kind of Messiah, one for the poor and those outside the bounds of respectable society. He would bring them God's peace.

At Christmas, we celebrate the peace God brought through Christ. The Greek word for "peace" used in this text was often used to translate the Hebrew word *shalom*. The angels came to pronounce *shalom* on those whom God had favored. *Shalom* is more than the absence of conflict; it's enjoying a rich and full life under God's blessing. In the context of this text, God favored the poor and the outcast. The *shalom* God brought through Christ was a special blessing for them.

Most of us aren't among the poor and the outcast. Still, God brings the good news of great joy that brings peace to each of us. Luke's Christmas story calls us to reflect on that good news and peace, and to join with the heavenly host in praising God for it. It calls us to make room in our hearts for the newborn King. Isaac Watts captured this wonderfully when he wrote in the familiar Christmas hymn "Joy to the World."

*Joy to the World; The Lord is come;
Let earth receive her king;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing.*

Teaching Plans

DISCOVERY PLAN

Connect with Life

1. Before class time, draw a four by four grid on a large piece of paper. In the corner of each square, write one of the numbers between 1–16. (A copy of this game grid is available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org).
2. Say, *Today’s Christmas Bible study will be a game-show format, featuring Bible trivia.* Divide the class into four teams.
3. Give teams five minutes to select a spokesperson and prepare for the Christmas trivia game. They may read Luke 2 and Matthew 2, or whatever Scripture they think might be useful. Then instruct class members to close their Bibles.

Guide Bible Study

4. Game Instructions: (A copy of these instructions is available in “Teaching Resource Items” for this study at www.baptistwaypress.org).
 - Announce that the game is similar to Tic-Tac-Toe, with sixteen squares. The winning team will be the team with four squares in a row, or if no team achieves four, then the team with the most squares in a row.
 - Each square has a secret question which will be revealed when the square is selected. A square is earned with a correct answer. Partial answers are not accepted.
 - The team captain will choose each square and give the team’s official answer.
 - After each question is asked, the team will have up to one minute to discuss an answer. If the question is answered correctly, the team gets to put their mark in the square.
 - If not answered correctly, the square is left blank, and it is the next team’s turn to call a square. (The next team may choose the

same square, or a different square. The difference is, they know the question for the previous square.)

5. Questions with answers in parentheses. (Provide additional information from commentary after correct answers are given.)

- Who told Joseph what to name the baby? (Angel–Matthew 1:21) Say, *Although the Bible does not specify Gabriel as the angel, scholars assume he was specifically mentioned as the messenger to Mary and Zechariah in Luke 1.*
- Who instigated Mary and Joseph’s journey to Bethlehem? (Caesar Augustus). Say, *Caesar Augustus ordered the people to return to the city of their forefathers to register for the census. Joseph’s family was from Bethlehem (Luke 2:1).*
- Which Old Testament prophet said the Messiah would have to suffer? (Isaiah–Isaiah 50:6; 53)
- List five descriptive names of the coming Messiah found in the Old Testament. (Wonderful, Counselor, King of Kings, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, Emmanuel– Isaiah 7:14; 9:6)
- What does “Bethlehem” mean? (House of Bread; Beth=house; lehem=bread)
- What does the word *Messiah* mean? (Anointed One–Psalm 2:2; Daniel 9:25–26)
- Which two of the four Gospels give accounts of the birth of Jesus? (Matthew and Luke)
- What is the name of the priest who was promised he would not die until he saw the Messiah? (Simeon–Luke 2:25–26)
- Where did the wise men find Jesus? (a house in Bethlehem–Matt. 2:8; 2:11)
- What was the sign the shepherds were told to look for to identify the Savior? (The babe wrapped in swaddling cloth and lying in a manger–Luke 2:12)
- What animals does the Bible say were present at the birth of Jesus? (none specifically. Accept the answer shepherds watching flocks out in the field–Luke 2:8.)
- What does the word *Immanuel* mean? (God with Us–Matt. 1:23)
- Did the angels sing to the shepherds? (No. Scripture reveals they said, “Glory to God in the Highest and on earth, peace, good will to men” Luke 2:14.)

- In Matthew, to whom does the word “Magi” refer? (wise men or stargazers—Matt. 2:1–2)
 - Why did the wise men stop in Jerusalem? (to discover where the king of the Jews was to be born—Matt. 2:2)
 - What was the reaction of the people who heard the shepherd’s story? (They were amazed—Luke 2:18)
6. Two-part tie-breaker question. If a group answers correctly, move to the second question:
- How many wise men came to see Jesus? (Officially: we don’t know. Most people assume three.)
 - What gifts did they bring to Jesus? (They brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, Matt. 2:11)

Encourage Application

7. Say, *The purpose of today’s game was to have fun looking at the details of the Christmas story. We often assume or add things to the Christmas story because of tradition.*
8. Conclude and celebrate by singing acapella “Joy to the World.”

DISCUSSION PLAN

Connect with Life

1. Christians annually celebrate two major historical events: The birth of Jesus (Christmas), and the death and resurrection of Jesus (Easter).
2. Divide the class into two groups, assigning one group Jesus’ birth and the other Jesus’ death. Instruct groups to make a case that the assigned event was the most difficult for Jesus. List reasons in columns on the markerboard. Possible answers:

Jesus' Birth

Had to leave heaven
Gave up the privileges of being deity
Had to start as an infant
Knew he would have to suffer one day
Knew he would be rejected

Jesus' Death

Gruesome suffering
Agony of the cross
Humiliation of death on a cross
Knew not everyone would accept his sacrifice
Was rejected and killed

3. Say, *Both events are reasons to thank Jesus. Both were necessary for a relationship with God.* Read aloud Philippians 2:5–11.
4. Ask, *How was Jesus' birth one of a kind?* (virgin birth, God became human, announced by angels)
5. Say, *Some people view Jesus' birth as fiction.* Ask, *What could cause them to change their minds and believe Jesus is God's son?*

Guide Bible Study

6. Read Luke 2:1–5 aloud. Give a lecture, including the following points:
 - Luke was a physician and a historian. He wanted others to believe in Jesus. He gave historical details of Jesus' birth.
 - Historical documents indicate both the Romans and Egyptians took censuses.
 - People returned to their ancestral home, indicating property ownership.
 - Caesar Augustus was the first Roman Emperor. Born in 63 B.C. as Gaius Octavius, the title of Augustus was proclaimed by the Roman Senate in 22 B.C. to honor his defeat of Egypt.
 - Caesar was ruthless.
 - Caesar led the Roman empire from 22 B.C. to 14 A.D. He ushered in the *Pax Romana*, (Roman Peace) that lasted 250 years.
 - The Romans were in control, they claimed everything as their own.
 - God was the one who was indeed in control. Hundreds of years earlier, through the prophet Micah, God revealed where the Messiah would be born. Read Micah 5:2 aloud.

7. Read Luke 2:6–7 aloud. The word “inn” refers to any space available to lend or rent. The passage does not mention an innkeeper. We logically read this detail into the text. We also read a stable into the text because Jesus was placed in a manger. Jesus’ birthplace is not explicitly described.
8. Ask, *Who typically attends a birth today?* (doctor; nurse; anesthesiologist; husband, mom, relatives, mid-wife).
9. Read Luke 2:8–14 aloud. Ask, *Why would God announce the Messiah’s birth to shepherds?*

Possible answers:

- They were awake.
 - They were common people, and that’s who God came to save.
 - God embraces the poor and the outcasts of society.
 - The shepherds of Bethlehem possibly raised lambs for use as sacrifices in temple.
 - Shepherds were considered “unclean” ceremonially. They couldn’t enter the temple without a ritual and physical cleansing. Jesus came to save those who are unclean because of sin.
 - Jesus would identify himself as the Good Shepherd.
10. Recruit a volunteer to read aloud Luke 2:15–20. Ask, *How did this experience impact the Shepherds?* (v. 17) *How did this experience impact Mary?* (v. 19)

Encourage Application

11. Ask, *How does Jesus’ birth impact us?* Discuss. *When you received Jesus as your Savior, what did you feel?* Discuss. *Whom did you tell?* Discuss.
12. *Euaggalion* is the Greek word for “good news.” We transliterate it into English word *evangelism*. Evangelism means telling the good news, which is what the shepherds did the night of Jesus’ birth. When we experience good things, we tell others. It’s natural to share good news. Ask, *What are the ways we can share God’s good news with others, especially at Christmas?* Brainstorm answers.

13. Say, *We began class time by contrasting Jesus' birth and death. Ask, What do those two events have in common?*
- Mary was present at both.
 - God was present at both.
 - God used secular Romans in both (census and crucifixion).
 - Both were for "common people."
 - Both happened in the same region.
 - Lambs were present at both.
 - Both were good news
 - The Savior was present.
14. Close by asking volunteers to voice sentence prayers of praise for the peace Jesus brings to our lives.