

Teen Lesson 6: The Birth of Christ

Covering Luke 1:56—2:40 and Matthew 1:18—2:23

As you study this lesson, be sure to read the highlighted scriptures at the beginning of paragraphs. These are part of the "story flow" and the lesson won't make sense unless you read them first! The other referenced scriptures support the text and you can increase your understanding by reading these as well.

In our last lesson we learned about some of the events leading up to the birth of Christ. We looked at the timing of Elizabeth's pregnancy and discovered that Jesus couldn't have been born in December - the traditional time when His birth is celebrated. In this lesson¹ we'll continue our study of Christ's early life and in the process we'll uncover more information about *when* He was born. You may find this helpful if someone asks you *WHY* you don't celebrate Christmas. Apart from the fact that 1) the Bible doesn't tell us to keep Christmas, 2) the early Christians didn't celebrate it, and 3) the origins of Christmas celebrations (Saturnalia) have nothing to do with the birth of Christ,² another reason we don't celebrate Christmas is because Christ wasn't born then!

We'll begin in **Luke 1:56-66** — Shortly after Mary went back home, Elizabeth's son was born. All Jewish boys were circumcised when they were eight days old, according to the command that God had given to Abraham.³ It was a physical sign to show they were part of the same covenant that God had made with Abraham and that they were God's people (Genesis 17:9-14). But it had also become a Jewish custom for a boy to be given his name at the time of his circumcision and that's what we see happening here.

We read in our last lesson that Zechariah was a righteous man (Luke 1:5-6). Nevertheless, when the angel told him that his wife was going to have a baby, Zechariah found it hard to believe because he and Elizabeth were both "well-advanced in years" and she was barren (verse 7). So he had asked the angel, "How shall I know?" (verse 18), and because of his unbelief, the angel had told him that he would be mute and unable to speak until the baby was named (verses 20, 64). This seems rather drastic, but God allowed it because He wanted to strengthen Zechariah's faith - and it worked! As we've just read, the first thing Zechariah did when he could speak again was praise God!

It was clear to everyone that God's power was now upon Zechariah, and indeed the next verse says that He was filled with the Holy Spirit, through which God inspired Him to prophesy about the coming Saviour and explain that this was the fulfilment of the promise that God had made to Abraham (see Genesis 12:3 and Genesis 22:15-18).

¹ The information in this lesson was collected from a number of sources, including *The Life Application Bible*, the *Jewish New Testament Commentary* and the *Youth Bible, New Century Version*.

² You can find more information about this in the lesson about "[Christmas and Christ's Birth](#)" in the Related Topics section of this website.

³ This was a command for all the tribes of Israel, NOT just the tribe of Judah - and it also included the children of "strangers" (Gentiles) in their households, and any Gentiles living among them who wanted to keep the Passover (see Exodus 12:48-50).

Teen Lesson 6: The Birth of Christ

Covering Luke 1:56—2:40 and Matthew 1:18—2:23

Luke 1:67-80 - Zechariah also prophesied that his son would be called a prophet of God and that he would prepare the way for the coming of the Lord (verses 76-77). We'll learn more about this in Lesson 8.

In the meantime, when Mary left Elizabeth she had gone back home to face Joseph and tell him what had happened to her. As you can imagine, he wasn't very happy when he heard her news.

Matthew 1:18-25 — An engagement (or betrothal) in those days wasn't like an engagement today, where two people decide to get married and announce it to their family and friends. In Christ's time it meant that a certain woman was "set aside" for a certain man. And this "setting aside", or engagement, was as binding as marriage. According to the Mishna (a collection of Jewish traditions), unfaithfulness during this betrothal or engagement period was an even more serious sin than adultery after marriage. The Sanhedrin (which was the supreme council of the Jews) said that the penalty for it was stoning.⁴ The note on this verse in the New Century Youth Bible says, *"For the Jewish people an engagement was a lasting agreement, which could only be broken by a divorce. If a bride was unfaithful, it was considered adultery, and she could be put to death."* But Joseph didn't want Mary to go through this public disgrace - or be put to death (!) - and that's why he was "minded" to divorce her secretly (verse 19).

Eventually it became common knowledge that Mary had become pregnant before she married Joseph, but not everyone knew that it was a supernatural event (i.e. brought about by God). Some early rabbis wanted to discredit the claims that Jesus was the Son of God so they established the "tradition" that Jesus was the illegitimate child of Mary and a Roman soldier. That's why Matthew and Luke explain in such detail that Christ's conception was miraculous. They wanted to set the record straight and show that the Old Testament prophecies about Christ's birth had been fulfilled.

The prophecy quoted in this section (verse 23) comes from Isaiah 7:14, which says that the virgin birth was a *sign*. The Hebrew word is *ot*, which means "an extraordinary event that demonstrates and calls attention to God's direct involvement in human affairs."⁵ And that's what happened here. God intervened and made it possible for a virgin to miraculously conceive - *without* the involvement of a human father. Perhaps it's hard for us to understand how God could do this, but because He created the universe and made the laws that control nature, He can transcend them if He wants to. There

⁴ This information about unfaithfulness in the betrothal period was taken from the note on Matthew 1:23 in the *Jewish New Testament Commentary* by David Stern.

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Teen Lesson 6: The Birth of Christ

Covering Luke 1:56—2:40 and Matthew 1:18—2:23

are examples in both the Old and New Testaments which show that God has also done this at other times and in other ways to fulfil His purpose.⁶

Luke 2:1-7 — This tells us that Mary put Jesus in a manger - or feeding trough - when He was born, using it as a crib. But it DOESN'T say that Jesus was born in a stable, which is what most Christmas nativity scenes portray. It might have been a stable but it could also have been a cave as the Jews used both to house their animals.

There's another clue in this passage that Christ wasn't born in December. Usually a census would be taken after the harvest season - in the months that correspond to our September/October - and NOT during the winter when the weather was bad and travelling would be difficult.

Luke 2:8-22 — In most nativity scenes the baby Jesus is pictured with His mother and father, the shepherds AND the wise men (or Magi). But as we've just read, ONLY the shepherds were there with Him right after His birth. The Magi didn't come to see Jesus until much later on.

These verses also tell us that the "shepherds were still in the fields with their flocks at night". It was common practice at that time for shepherds to keep their flocks in the field from April-October. Then in the winter months they would bring them in from the fields and shelter them at home. This information gives us another clue about the time of Christ's birth - if the shepherds were still in the fields on the night he was born, His birth didn't take place in the middle of winter!

So when was Jesus born? Well, when you put together all of the facts we've discovered in these past two lessons, it becomes apparent that Jesus was born sometime in the early autumn (September/October) - probably around the time of the Feast.

Let's just read **Luke 2:13-14** again to remind ourselves that the birth of Jesus Christ was a GLORIOUS event. We don't often read these words because of their popular association with Christmas - but there is nothing wrong with recounting the TRUE story of Christ's birth! After all, His birth was so important that the angels announced it, and the events surrounding His birth have been recorded in the Bible for all time.

When the heavenly host announced Christ's birth, they glorified and praised God because of what had happened. Perhaps that's because they understood the significance of what had just occurred.

⁶ See, for example, Joshua 10:12-13 and 2 Kings 20:8-11.

Teen Lesson 6: The Birth of Christ

Covering Luke 1:56—2:40 and Matthew 1:18—2:23

In Isaiah 9:6-7 we read:

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end. Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this (NKJ).

The birth of Jesus Christ was truly a momentous occasion because it marked that amazing moment in time when the fulfilment of everything that God had planned for mankind through Jesus Christ would begin. No wonder the angels rejoiced!

Luke 2:22-24 — The "days of her purification", according to the Law of Moses, refer to a 40 day period following the birth of a son, after which the new mother was to be cleansed by a ceremony at the Temple (Leviticus 12:2-8).

Verse 23 - In Exodus 13:1-3 God told Israel that every first-born male was to be consecrated or dedicated to the Lord. This was a ceremony that reminded the people of their redemption (rescue) from slavery in Egypt and the fact that they'd avoided the 10th plague (the killing of the firstborn). So they dedicated the boy and then redeemed him (bought him back) for a certain amount of money (Numbers 18:15-16).⁷

Luke 2:25-40; Matthew 2:1-12 — By the time the Magi arrived to worship Christ, Joseph, Mary and Jesus were living in a house. This is additional proof that the Christmas story of the Magi coming to a stable is incorrect. It is also traditionally taught that there were three Magi (because three gifts were given to Christ), but these verses don't say that. They just say that Magi came. That could be any number! And although these Magi did observe the stars, they weren't just astrologers. They were sages or wise men - often in positions of responsibility - and they were given great respect because of their wisdom.

The reference to the star in this section is intriguing. Was it a real star or was it perhaps an angel? Angels are often symbolised by stars in Scripture (see for example, Job 38:7; Jude 6, 13) and this was a "star" that *moved* - it led the Magi right to the house where Jesus was living! If it *was* an angel that led the Magi to Jesus, then it's in keeping with the rest of the story, because it was an angel who told Mary that she would conceive and give birth to the Son of God; it was an angel who reassured Joseph and explained that Mary's baby had been begotten by the Holy Spirit; and it was an angel who announced Christ's birth and told the shepherds where they would find Him.

⁷ The information about purification and the dedication of the first-born male was taken from the note on Luke 2:22-24 in the *Jewish New Testament Commentary* by David Stern.

Teen Lesson 6: The Birth of Christ

Covering Luke 1:56—2:40 and Matthew 1:18—2:23

Matthew 2:13-18 — It says back in verse 3 that King Herod was disturbed. That's putting it mildly! Herod was apparently paranoid about his power. He'd had all his rivals killed (including those of his wife's family) and he even killed some of his own children! The Magi had called Jesus the "King of the Jews", so Jesus was obviously a threat to his power - so much so that Herod had all boys under two years old killed in an attempt to get rid of Him. This information reveals that Jesus was no longer a baby when the wise men arrived, and could have been up to two years old.

Matthew 2:19-23 — Now that Herod was dead, it was safe for the family to come back to Israel from Egypt, where God had told them to flee. But Joseph was afraid to go to Judea because Herod's son, Archelaus, was now the ruler there - and he was apparently quite violent. The Life Application Bible Notes state that he had killed 3000 people at the beginning of his reign. No wonder Joseph was concerned! But after being given instructions in a dream (this looks like the third time an angel has appeared to him) Joseph set up home in Nazareth. Verse 23 says this was another fulfilment of something spoken by the prophets. And it could mean it was something that was literally *spoken* - something known to them but not written down - because there is no record of this prophecy in the Old Testament. Or it may be referring to Isaiah 11:1 where it talks about Christ as a *Branch*. Apparently the Hebrew word for branch is similar to the Hebrew word for Nazarene.

It doesn't really matter where this prophecy came from because the gospel writers quoted from many other scriptures to prove that Christ was the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah (we've read a number of these in this lesson). But why did the writers do this? Well, it's because the Jews knew these prophecies and they were actively looking for the Messiah. In fact, many men had already claimed to be the Messiah (there have been at least 50 in the last 2000 years!), but none of them met the conditions that were laid down in the Old Testament about him. Only Christ fulfilled all of the prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah. We will read about more of these in future lessons, but in the meantime, do check out the *Extra Study Activity Sheet* that is included with this lesson and read through a few Old Testament prophecies that relate to the birth of the Messiah, and some New Testament scriptures that show how these were fulfilled by Jesus Christ.