

*A Gift To*

---

*From*

---

# The Glory of Bethlehem

LUKE 2

## The Setting

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

***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. (Luke 2:1-4)***

What do you think of when you hear the word *Christmas*? Many Americans probably think of the secular customs that are now attached to the Christmas holiday season. A Christmas tree lit with lights and adorned with beautiful decorations, vivid colors of red and green blending with falling snow, and a sumptuous feast—these things virtually cry out, “It’s Christmas!” Certain songs and tunes heard in malls and stores are readily recognized as Christmas music. But does that music really flow from the true meaning of Christmas? Or is it just produced in the interests of commercialism?

As a pastor, I find that Christmas services are attended by more people than any other service. We decorate our churches with trees and lights. There is almost a hustle-and-bustle feeling in our buildings as children, choirs, and musicians prepare for the festival worship services. Is that what you think of when you hear the word *Christmas*?

The setting of our Savior's birth was rather different than that to which most Americans are accustomed today. Let's try to picture what it was like for Joseph and Mary long ago. We cannot be certain about some of the details. Was Jesus born on December 25? Was it wintry weather? Did Joseph walk as Mary rode on a donkey? We do not know.

Joseph and Mary must have traveled for several days from Nazareth to Bethlehem. In obedience to the government, Joseph went to the town of his family to be counted in a census, probably for taxation purposes. Both Joseph and Mary were descendants of King David, and Bethlehem was David's hometown.

God had made many promises to send a Savior from sin. Immediately after Adam and Eve had committed the first sin, God had promised that a Redeemer would be born of a woman and would crush the power of Satan, opening to all the door to heaven (Genesis 3:15).

Through the prophet Micah, God had foretold our Savior's birthplace: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from days of eternity" (5:2—using the translation suggested by the NIV footnote). This states that the Savior would come from eternity, but he would be born in Bethlehem. (Actually, there were two towns with this name, one in the north and one in the south. The Messiah would be born in the Bethlehem in the south—that's what "Ephrathah" tells us.)

Each year we sing the well-known Christmas hymn "O Little Town of Bethlehem" (*Christian Worship* [CW] 65) and recall how our Savior was born in that lowly place and in the humble circumstances that place afforded him. When Joseph and Mary entered Bethlehem, the world hardly noticed at all. In fact, most didn't notice. Who would have suspected that the eternal Son of God would be born in that place and in that way?

God doesn't always do things as we might expect. This was one of those times. The setting of our Savior's birth reminds us that God does not overlook humble people in lowly places.

Whether we spend Christmas with family and

friends in a familiar place or apart from them in an unfamiliar place, the Lord is still with us as we remember in faith our Savior's birth. Whether we worship with a large congregation in wintry weather or with a small congregation in a warmer climate, Christmas comes just the same. Many Christmas memories cannot be duplicated, but the real meaning of Christmas always remains. Wherever we are and in whatever circumstances, the important part of Christmas is worshiping God's Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

## The Virgin

***He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. (Luke 2:5)***

It was probably good for Mary to escape the situation in Nazareth. Just imagine what people would have said about a virgin who had become pregnant. Her reputation must have suffered.

While she was still in Nazareth, Mary was "pledged to be married" to Joseph (*betrothal*). At that time, a betrothal included vows as binding as today's marriage ceremony. No extra vows were needed for them to be married. At the appointed time, the husband could take his wife home. Joseph and Mary were married, and Mary was "his wife" already in Nazareth,

months before they arrived in Bethlehem. But Joseph “had no union with her until she gave birth to a son” (Matthew 1:25). In this unique situation, although Mary was Joseph’s wife, she was still a virgin when she arrived in Bethlehem and gave birth to our Savior.

The fact that Jesus was conceived and born of a virgin fulfilled another prophecy of the Old Testament Scriptures. Isaiah prophesied: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” (7:14). Mary was “the virgin” who had been “with child” and had given “birth to a son.” There has been no other time when a virgin has conceived and has given birth. Mary is the only fulfillment of Isaiah’s words. Through the prophet Isaiah, God directly foretold of the virgin birth of Christ.

And yes, virgin means that she had never had sexual relations with a man. Each time this Hebrew term occurs in Scripture it refers to a woman who is still a virgin. Some Bible versions translate the word in Isaiah 7:14 as “young woman” instead of “virgin.” Perhaps this is due to a bias of the translators. However, even if the Hebrew term could mean “young woman” and not necessarily “virgin,” the Holy Spirit left no doubt how we are to understand it in Isaiah’s passage. Matthew 1:22,23 plainly declares, “All this