

International Bible Lessons Commentary

Luke 2:1-24

International Bible Lessons
Sunday, December 22, 2013

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The **[International Bible Lesson](#)** (*Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series*) for **Sunday, December 22, 2013**, is from **Luke 2:1-24**. **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse *International Bible Lesson Commentary* below. **Study Hints for Thinking Further**, a study guide for teachers, discusses the five questions below to help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion; these hints are available on the *International Bible Lesson Commentary* website. The weekly *International Bible Lesson* is posted each Saturday before the lesson is scheduled to be taught and in *The Oklahoman* newspaper.

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Luke 2:1-24

(Luke 2:1) In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.

Luke examined many documents when he wrote his gospel. Still, he may have learned the approximate time of Jesus' birth from Mary herself. Luke does not give us an exact date for Jesus' birth. He said Jesus began His ministry when He was about 30 years old (Luke 3:23). The Bible teaches that the heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will" (Proverbs 21:1). The Lord could have moved the Emperor Augustus to issue his decree so Jesus would be born in Bethlehem in fulfillment of prophecy and His birth firmly dated and established in world history (see Micah 5:2). Because a census could take several years in Roman times, God might have also sent an angel to confirm to Joseph and Mary that it was time to go to Bethlehem, because God works in many ways and the Bible does not tell us everything we might like to know.

(Luke 2:2) This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

By decree of the emperor, King Herod ruled over Judea, but the emperor also sent Roman governors to make certain that his commands were obeyed by all and that Roman rule was not threatened externally or internally. The emperor would use whatever force was necessary to put down a rebellion, and he expected those who lived in occupied Roman territory to pay taxes to Rome. The territory of Syria included

Nazareth in Galilee of Judea. The capital of Syria was Antioch. “It was in Antioch that the disciples were first called ‘Christians’” (Acts 11:26).

(Luke 2:3) All went to their own towns to be registered.

Joseph may or may not have been born in Bethlehem, but he was a distant descendant of King David. Therefore, in order to count everyone, the emperor ordered that everyone go to their ancestral towns to be counted. The religious authorities in Judea and Jerusalem would need to cooperate to make certain this part of the emperor’s decree was truly obeyed. This registration also included tax implications for the conquered people of Israel. Historical circumstances and records indicate that a census could take several years to complete, and administratively could be overseen by a Roman governor to secure and ensure completeness.

(Luke 2:4) Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.

Luke emphasized that Joseph was a descendant from the house of David, and the Messiah was to be a member of the house of David. Jesus was legally of the house of David, because Joseph adopted Jesus as his son. Jesus also said that He was Lord of David and the root and descendant of David in actual fact (Matthew 22:42-46; Revelation 22:16). The prophet Micah declared that Jesus the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, but His origin was “from of old, from ancient days” (Micah 5:2). As the Son of God, Jesus was from of old, from ancient days before He was born in Bethlehem. Bethlehem was about 4 1/2 miles from Jerusalem and about 90 miles from Nazareth.

(Luke 2:5) He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

Mary had returned to her home after her visit with Zechariah and Elizabeth. Because she was only engaged to Joseph, she remained in her home until Joseph came to take her to Bethlehem as his wife, where they knew the Messiah was to be born. We know that Mary was so close to the delivery of her child that the trip would have been difficult.

(Luke 2:6) While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.

The Bible does not tell us how long they were in Bethlehem before Jesus was born, or how long it would take for those going to Bethlehem to actually be counted by those doing the registration. We tend to think that she arrived in Bethlehem at night shortly before the birth of Jesus, but that is from our traditions and nativity plays, not from the Bible.

(Luke 2:7) And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Jesus was Mary's first born son and God's only begotten Son (John 3:16). The New Testament indicates that she and Joseph had other sons (though Roman Catholic tradition says she remained a virgin her entire life and had no more children born to her physically). Consider what Matthew wrote, "Someone told him [Jesus], 'Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you'" (Matthew 12:47). Joseph adopted Jesus, and God the Father has adopted as sons and daughters those who accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Jesus had humble origins and was laid in a manger because of a crowded inn, not because the innkeeper was mean and selfish. Traditions, not the Bible, say the stable was in a cave and there were animals in the stable with Jesus and His parents. Perhaps at that time a stable would have been more private and clean (or could have been made more clean) than a crowded inn for the birth of a baby.

(Luke 2:8) In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

King David was a humble shepherd before he became king over Israel. God cares for the humble and the poor, and the Bible says that God's children must care for widows and orphans: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27). No one is so needy or underprivileged that God does not care for them, and God expects His followers to care for them too. The shepherds may have been the neediest and most despised people at that time, and Jesus came to bless all people, the rich and the poor.

(Luke 2:9) Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

One angel appeared and terrified them. The heavenly host (a multitude of angels) only appeared after the shepherds no longer feared the consequences of an angelic visitation. The angel did not tell his name, but Gabriel, as an angel of the Lord, appeared to Zechariah and Mary; therefore, the angel might have been the angel Gabriel. He appeared with heavenly glory, so no wonder the shepherds were afraid. They may have felt guilty before the angel and have thought "What have we done!"

(Luke 2:10) But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:

The angel told them not to be afraid because he was not bringing the judgment of God upon them. Instead, he was bringing them good news – not just good news, but joy filled good news for all people and that included the shepherds. They were not the last to hear the good news because of their poor or low station in life. Rather, they were the first to

hear God's good news and God's good news would travel from the lowly to the proud and those in high society.

(Luke 2:11) to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

The good news or gospel keeps the focus on Jesus from the beginning. The good news was specifically for the shepherds, who heard it first outside of Mary's family. The good news included the shepherds and was for all people. The shepherds' home was the city of David and the angel emphasized that Jesus was born to be their Savior, the Messiah, and their Lord. The title "the Lord" emphasized the divine nature of Jesus beyond His being the expected Messiah. He was beyond all human expectations or thoughts. The shepherds had to ponder the meaning of these three titles: Savior, Messiah, and Lord. They may have thought more in military terms than in moral and spiritual terms.

(Luke 2:12) This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

The angel told the shepherds how they would find the newborn Messiah and how they could distinguish Him from all of the other newborns in the city of David. Jesus would be in a manger in a stable (where mangers were usually kept), a place that shepherds could easily visit and enter; whereas a palace would have been beyond their social status, their reach, and intimidating to shepherds. Jesus was so new born he was wrapped in swaddling clothes.

(Luke 2:13) And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

After the angel of the Lord had prepared them by telling them good news, a multitude of angels appeared praising God. The heavenly host might be thought of best as an angelic choir or an angelic army that belongs to the Lord. Though probably not in battle array, the host of angels would affirm to the shepherds that they had not experienced a deception but had learned the truth about God and His Messiah from many witnesses.

(Luke 2:14) "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, deserve all praise, honor, glory, and our total devotion to their service. The good news included a message of peace. God will favor with peace those who believe the good news that the angels proclaimed to the shepherds. The Book of Revelation teaches that Jesus the Messiah will someday bring peace through military means and conquer all the enemies of God and His people. God favored the shepherds with His peace when He sent the angels to them to tell them the good news about Jesus' birth. God wanted them to tell others that He was sending Jesus

into the world as the Way of peace and not as a military conqueror of the Roman Empire. When He returns, He will bring peace to the entire world.

(Luke 2:15) When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.”

The angel told the shepherds how to find the Messiah. The angel did not command them to go and find Him; he left them with a choice to make. They believed the report of the angel and the confirmation of the good news by a multitude of angels. They knew God favored them by sending a message of peace and goodwill to them; so, they went into the city of David from the fields to find the Messiah as the angel said they would find Him. When they found the Messiah as the angel said they would, their experience confirmed for them the truth of the angel’s message.

(Luke 2:16) So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

At that time, Bethlehem was not a large city and the shepherds would have known the location of every sheepfold and stable inside or outside the city. The Holy Spirit may have guided them to the exact stable, so they would not need to search for very long to find Jesus. The first people they met making a temporary home in a stable was Mary and Joseph. They knew to look in a manger, and there they met Jesus the Messiah.

(Luke 2:17) When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child;

They saw Jesus exactly as they had been told about Him by the angels. They had an experience that served as a witness for them and others that the angels’ appearance was real. Joseph and Mary may not have expected that God would have His only Son born in a stable. They may have looked forward to God providing the most luxurious place in Bethlehem as the best place for Jesus’ birth. So, the angels’ message to the shepherds which they conveyed to Joseph and Mary that Jesus was their Savior, Messiah, and Lord would meet His parents possible need for reassurance and the knowledge that God was still with them, even in a stable.

(Luke 2:18) and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

After the shepherds experienced the angels’ visit, heard their good news for all people, and also found Jesus as the angels described Him, they could not keep their experience quietly to themselves. They were so overjoyed at the good news about the Messiah and having actually seen Him and His parents as the angels had described that they had to tell everyone they knew.

(Luke 2:19) But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

Mary treasured all the words she heard about Jesus and all the experiences surrounding His birth; so, she was able to tell Luke or those who wrote the documents that Luke used in writing his gospel about all of these events. These words and her experiences were so treasured that we can trust their accuracy. At the same time, Mary had learned truths about Jesus worth thinking about; especially as the mother of the Savior, the Messiah and the Lord.

(Luke 2:20) The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke concluded his report of the shepherds visit to Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus by saying that they too glorified and praised God just as the angels had done when they appeared to them. They had confirmed the angels' words by their experience, and they made the response that Jesus deserves when one hears the truth about Him.

(Luke 2:21) After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Joseph and Mary moved into a house after Jesus' birth. The shepherds saw Jesus the day He was born, and the wise men saw Him in a house at some later date (Matthew 2:11). Joseph and Mary obeyed the law of God, and Joseph or Mary most probably circumcised Jesus as was the custom of the day in order to obey God's law. They gave Jesus His name as the angel Gabriel told them to do. The name Jesus means "God is Savior" or "God is Salvation."

(Luke 2:22) When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord

In Jesus' day, the circumcision of a baby boy would be at home and usually be performed by the head of the family on the eighth day. The rite of purification was done by a priest forty days after the birth of a male child, according to Leviticus 12: 1-8. Jesus would have been taken to the temple 32 days after His circumcision when Mary could legally enter the sanctuary for the priest to make atonement for her. Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem to be seen by a priest for the ceremony. In everything, they obeyed the law of Moses. To present Jesus to the Lord was to present Him to God, His heavenly Father, which the law required of all firstborn males (see Exodus 13). Knowing Jesus was the Son of God, Mary had much more to ponder as she took part in the ceremony.

(Luke 2:23) (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”),

Each firstborn male was set apart for service to the Lord, for service to God as “holy to the Lord.” Firstborn animals were often sacrificed to the Lord. According to the law of Moses, firstborn male Israelites were redeemed and not sacrificed. Human beings were never to be sacrificed (killed). Paganism often required human sacrifice or child sacrifice, but this was always forbidden by God. In the Promised Land, some Israelites adopted pagan practices, disobeyed God, and sacrificed their children to idols.

(Luke 2:24) and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

Joseph labored as a skilled carpenter, so he could provide for his family financially probably wherever they lived. The fact that Joseph and Mary offered a sacrifice that the poor were permitted to offer instead of a lamb indicates that Jesus was born into a family of humble means that obeyed God according to His requirements. Jesus knows how people in poor families live and how they need to depend on God for their daily bread; because that is the way He lived growing up from being a child to being a man. Though poor, Jesus and His family obeyed the law of God. The Lord’s Prayer was very real to Jesus in His experience of total reliance on His Father and “Our Father which art in heaven.”

Five Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. Why do you think God used the decree of Emperor Augustus so Joseph and Mary had to go to Bethlehem instead of just sending the angel Gabriel to tell them what to do?
2. What might Mary have expected when she went to Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus? Do you think she left Nazareth expecting the King of kings to be born in a stable? Give a reason for your answers.
3. If Mary had concerns or questions about the humble location of Jesus’ birth and what that might mean, how do you think God helped her answer her questions?
4. What three titles did the angel give Jesus? What do these three titles mean to you?
5. What kind of peace does Jesus give to those who trust in Him?

Begin or close your class by reading the short weekly *International Bible Lesson*.

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