



THE GOSPEL OF
Luke

SESSION OBJECTIVE: LUKE 2:1-7

To understand how the birth of Jesus happened.

A Jolly Old Elf

Every year, starting in December, the world begins to prepare for the Christmas season. Trees go up, lights illuminate houses, and decorations adorn living rooms around the world. The traditional Santa Claus colors of red and white are all over the place, even in department stores, grocery stores, and pretty much anywhere else you can spend money. One of the most famous poems is often also read during this time: “Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.” What’s interesting is, if you read the poem all the way through, you get a radically different depiction of Santa: “He had a broad face and a little round belly that shook when he laughed, like a bowlful of jelly.” So far, nothing too controversial. But look at the next line: “He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old *elf*, and I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself.” Santa... an elf? It makes sense actually. Ever wonder how he supposedly gets up and down the chimney? Or why his transportation is described as, “a miniature sleigh, and eight tiny reindeer?” He doesn’t even wear red and white in the poem: “He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot, and his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot.” As it turns out, Santa isn’t depicted as a grandfather in a red and white costume until Coca Cola used him to market their product in 1931. And yet, how many times do people read this poem and not even notice the differences?

That same question could be asked of the Bible. How often is the Bible read with radically different details than what we’ve always been told, only for everyone to seemingly not notice any of it? Nothing can better

illustrate this than the birth of Jesus. What the Bible says and how it is often portrayed are usually very different. Get ready to read it a little differently, perhaps for the very first time.

Setting the Stage

Verse 1 begins with, “In those days.” It’s an important reminder that the birth story of Jesus didn’t happen “once upon a time” but in a real moment in human history: “when Quirinius was governor of Syria” (Lk. 2:2). Apparently a census was happening which required all people to return to their family home to be registered according to their family name (Lk. 2:3). This required Joseph to return to Bethlehem: “And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.” There is a lot in this passage that is important. Joseph’s family descends from the house and lineage of David, which means that his Son will as well. Mary is at this point quite pregnant, and has traveled a slow journey back to Bethlehem where they like any other traveler will stay with their family in their family’s home. This will make for crowded accommodations. This brings up a significant point.

The “Inn”

While they were there, “the time came for her to give birth” (Lk. 2:6). At this point in the story, usually we imagine Joseph frantically trying to find that pesky old inn so that they can have some privacy for Mary to deliver their baby. And usually we imagine that coldhearted innkeeper telling them that there is no vacancy, and in a last ditch effort they find an old, abandoned barn and set up shop there. Sound familiar? None of that is in the Scripture.

“But, I thought verse 7 at least talked about an inn?” Let’s take a deeper look: “And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” Aha! An inn! Admittedly, we need to take a look at the Greek, and know a little something about ancient near eastern architecture to get the most out of this passage.

A TYPICAL HOME

Homes in this time period were often, believe it or not, two-story. The main living space was on the second floor, leaving the first floor open as a stable of sorts for any livestock the homeowner possessed. To avoid bandits or bad weather, the homeowner could bring in his livestock into the bottom floor of the home for protection. The second story had the main living space, as well as a guest room.

A GUEST ROOM

The word for “Guest Room” in the Greek language is the word κατάλυμα (kataluma), and it’s translated in most modern Bibles as... you guessed it; “inn.” When verse 7 says there was no room in the inn, it more literally means there was no room in the guest room of the house of Joseph’s family. Why? Because all of the family was in town for the census! Mary didn’t have sufficient room to give birth with privacy in the guest room because it was a full house! So, being the savvy problem solvers that they were, they went down to the bottom floor of the home where the livestock were usually kept and she gave birth there, wrapping Jesus in swaddling clothes and putting him in the manger, or feeding trough, as a makeshift cradle. Inns were not commonplace in small, off the beaten path towns like Bethlehem. They were usually only erected in places where a lot of traffic would occur.

AN ACTUAL INN

To add force to this argument, consider a later story in Luke's Gospel in Luke 10. Jesus tells the Parable of the Good Samaritan, where a man is beaten and left for dead in a ditch. Two religious leaders pass him by and avoid coming close to him. It's the lowly Samaritan that does the right thing. Verse 34 says: "He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him." He takes him to an inn, and even pays an innkeeper for his room for a few days (Lk. 10:35). The word here for "inn," unlike Luke 2, is the Greek word πανδοχείον (pandocheion), and this word *does* mean a traditional inn.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

So, let's put it all together. Joseph and Mary traveled from Galilee to Judea, to the city of David also known as Bethlehem, because a census had been called, and that required them to return to Joseph's family home to be registered there with the rest of his family. When they arrived, they all stayed in the family home. However, Mary went into labor, and given the crowded nature of the house, the guest room (or the "inn") was full. As a result of that, they had to go down to the bottom floor of the family home where livestock were usually kept so that she could give birth with a little more privacy. After giving birth, she used a feeding trough (or a "manger") as a makeshift crib for baby Jesus. There was no actual inn, or innkeeper. Jesus' birth does not need to be over exaggerated to be unique or special; His birth is already the most unique and special event in human history regardless of where He was born. The bottom floor of a home is still not an ideal place to give birth, but it's certainly an upgrade from the way it's usually depicted. Knowing the details, however, makes the story make more sense.

What About Now?

The one big takeaway for this passage is the acceptance of how real the details actually are. When you rightly understand how the story actually went down, it makes the story all the more believable actually. It seems strange to imagine an innkeeper turning away a pregnant woman in labor. It makes way more sense that the house was full because of the census, which required them to think on their feet a little and move down to the bottom floor. Stories like this only add validity to the Scripture when they are understood correctly.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Luke 2:1. What does "in those days" indicate? What did Caesar Augustus require?

2. Read Luke 2:2. Who was governor of Syria during this time?

Day Two

1. Read Luke 2:3. Who all went to be registered? Where did they have to go to do this?

2. Read Luke 2:4. Where did Joseph come from? Where did he go to?

Day Three

1. Read Luke 2:4. What house and lineage was Joseph from? Why is this significant?

2. Read Luke 2:5. Who was with him? What was his relationship to her?

Day Four

1. Read Luke 2:6. What happened to Mary when she was there in Bethlehem?

2. Read Luke 2:7. In your own words with the notes above in mind, describe the events in verse 7.

Week 6 Discussion: Observe, observe, observe!

The way these Bible studies are written, particularly with reference to the four days of individual study, are highly oriented towards the practice of observation. So often, students of the Word blow right past observation and straight into interpretation, and miss key details as a result. The way this story is understood is all right in the text, but it requires a careful examination of it. Talk as a group about the importance and difficulty of slowing down and simply observing the text.

1. Icebreaker: How often do you slow down and read carefully every word in a passage you are studying?
2. How much of this week's study guide was new information to you?
3. Why do you think people struggle to slow down and carefully read the Bible?
4. Have you ever had a vastly different understanding of another story of the Bible? If so, which one?
5. Do you think this trend of misunderstanding the details takes place in other books other than the Bible?
6. How can the church continue to equip believers to grow in their observation skills?

Takeaways:

1. Joseph and Mary return to Joseph's family home in Bethlehem because of a census.
2. While they were there, Mary gave birth to Jesus in the lower level of the home.