

GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes

DISCUSS: Draw attention to the picture on **PSG page 46** and ask **Question #1: What's something you'd love to add to your celebration of Christmas?**

GUIDE: Direct attention to **The Bible Meets Life** on **PSG, page 47** and tell the story of Damien, the priest who ministered to lepers on the island of Molokai in Hawaii.

SAY: "Today we will look at the birth of Jesus and be reminded that He came to be with us. He is Immanuel, God with us (Matt. 1:23; John 1:14)."

Reinforce **The Point** on **PSG page 47: Jesus was born to bring us into a relationship with God.**

PRAY: Begin the Bible study with prayer. Ask God to teach us new things today as we celebrate the birth of Jesus.

SESSION 4 JESUS SAVES



The Point

Jesus was born to bring us into a relationship with God.

The Bible Meets Life

The story of Christmas—the birth of Jesus—is a familiar one to so many. Familiarity may cause many people to lose sight of what God accomplished with that event and

the reason Jesus came. Unfortunately many people leave Jesus in the manger, and fail to look beyond His birth to discover that God came to earth to bring us to Himself

The Passage

Luke 2:4-20

The Setting

Luke began his Gospel account with the angel Gabriel's annunciation of the coming births of both John the Baptist (Luke 1:5-25) and Jesus (vv. 26-38). After recording the events surrounding the birth of John the Baptist, who would be the forerunner of the Messiah (vv. 57-80), Luke wrote of the birth of Jesus Christ, the Messiah (2:1-20).

Luke 2:4-7

4 Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family line of David,
5 to be registered along with Mary, who was engaged to him and was pregnant.
6 While they were there, the time came for her to give birth.
7 Then she gave birth to her firstborn Son, and she wrapped him tightly in cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

KEY WORDS: **To be registered** (v. 5)—Roman emperor Augustus required a mandatory census of all people in the empire (Luke 2:1). Male Jews returned to their ancestral homes to register (v. 4).

1 ▶ Verse 4. Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth begins with a simple man from a simple town. **Joseph** was a manual laborer, a carpenter by trade (Matt. 13:55). **Nazareth** was a humble village tucked away in lower Galilee. Even **Bethlehem**, the **city of David**, to which Joseph had to travel, was little more than a small village a few miles outside of Jerusalem.

But Joseph had one thing that stood out. He was **of the house and family line of David**. Genealogies were important to ancient Israelites. In his Gospel, Matthew provided a detailed genealogy of Joseph’s family lineage through King David and all the way back to the Old Testament patriarch Abraham (Matt. 1:1-16), affirming what Luke recorded about Joseph’s connection to David (Luke 1:27,32-33).

Luke’s focus up to this point was primarily on Mary. Luke’s only previous mention of Joseph appears in the context of Joseph’s relationship with Mary, noting that the angel Gabriel was sent “to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary” (v. 27). Matthew supplied more detail about Joseph’s life and character in his Gospel account (Matt. 1–2). ◀

2 ▶ Verse 5. Joseph and Mary made the trip to Bethlehem so that Joseph could **be registered** for the census decreed by the Roman emperor Augustus (Luke 2:1-3). They made the

STUDY THE BIBLE

Luke 2:4-7



10 minutes

SUMMARIZE: Before reading the passage, set the context by summarizing the information in **The Setting** on page 48.

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read Luke 2:4-7.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 1** to provide background information about where Mary and Joseph were from, where they were going and the family lineage of Joseph.

GUIDE: Use **KEY WORDS (PSG, p. 48)** to provide additional explanation to the phrase *to be registered*.

OPTIONAL ACTIVITY:
As a group, create a birth announcement for baby Jesus, based on the facts of His birth provided in this passage.

GUIDE: Refer group members to **PSG page 49**, to point out some of the challenges that Joseph faced:

- *Joseph was engaged to be married to a girl named Mary, and she was very pregnant.*
- *Having a baby before being married was a good way to become alienated from the community.*
- *Joseph and Mary were not the only ones traveling because of the census.*

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 2** on page 49 and this page for details about the journey and Joseph and Mary's circumstances.

GUIDE: Refer group members to **PSG page 49**, to the paragraph about timing. Invite a volunteer to read Galatians 4:4-5.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 3** to give further explanation to the concept of timing in the Scripture.

trip under less than ideal conditions. Mary was well along in her pregnancy, and the journey covered approximately 85-90 miles. Their journey would have been uphill since Bethlehem sat at a higher elevation than Nazareth. On foot, the journey would have taken several days to complete. Despite these challenges, the couple had no choice but to make the journey since the census was mandatory.

The trip took place sometime after God spoke to Joseph in a dream and told him to move forward with his plans to take Mary as his wife—even though she was pregnant (Matt. 1:20-25). First-century Jewish marriages consisted of two stages. The first stage was a betrothal (often when the female was about 13 years old), after which the couple was considered legally married. About a year later, the woman and man began to actually live together as husband and wife and were permitted to engage in sexual relations. Regarding Luke's words—**Mary, who was engaged to him and was pregnant**—one commentator notes: “Luke may have been suggesting here what Matt 1:25 states explicitly, that the marriage had not yet been consummated, although Mary was living as a wife with Joseph (as her going to Bethlehem with him suggests).”¹ Since women were not usually required to register in a census, it is not immediately clear why Mary made the trip. Whatever the physical reason, as will be detailed below, the spiritual purpose of God's providence at work behind the scenes is apparent.² ◀

3 ▶ Verse 6. Timing is an important concept in Scripture. It often represents the fulfillment of a promise—especially a divine promise. In this case, **the time came for [Mary] to give birth** to Jesus during Mary and Joseph's stay in Bethlehem. The timing was no coincidence.

From a prophetic perspective, the location of Bethlehem as the place for Jesus' birth was imperative. Micah had predicted that the Savior would be born there (Mic. 5:2), a fact known by those who studied the Old Testament Scriptures at that time (Matt. 2:3-8). So, the timing of the census and Joseph and Mary's journey were both part of the fulfillment of this prophecy. Paul recognized the significance of the timing of Jesus' birth, that it occurred at the appointed time according to God's plan (Gal. 4:4-5). ◀

4 ▶ Verse 7. Mary **gave birth to her firstborn Son.** As was common with newborn babies in the first century, Mary wrapped Jesus tightly in strips of cloth (a practice also

known as swaddling). This was done to restrict the movement of the newborn child's arms and legs, keeping them straight. A **manger** (feeding trough) served as a cradle. Scripture does not identify the location of this manger, noting only that **there was no guest room available** for Joseph, Mary, and their newborn baby. Suggestions as to the location of the manger vary. It may have been in a cave used to house animals or in a public caravansary (the town's lodging area for traveling caravans). Another suggestion is that Joseph and Mary were staying in a private house, but because of the lack of space they were lodged in the animal stall connected to the main room of house. In any case, it's hard to escape the irony of the situation, as the turning point in human history took place in the most humble of settings. ◀

Luke 2:8-14

8 In the same region, shepherds were staying out in the fields and keeping watch at night over their flock.

9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

10 But the angel said to them, "Don't be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people:

11 Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

12 This will be the sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped tightly in cloth and lying in a manger."

13 Suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying:

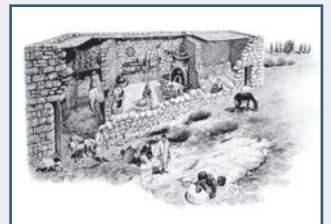
14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people he favors!"

KEY WORD: Messiah (v. 11)—Transliteration of the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek term *christos*, meaning "anointed one." It refers generally to anyone set apart for God's service; it refers specifically to God's Messiah, Jesus Christ.

DISCUSS: Question #2
(PSG, p. 50): **When have you experienced God's perfect timing?**

(Alternate: When has God worked in less than perfect circumstances in your life?)

LEADER PACK: Display Item 5: First-Century Home. Ask group members to share what they've been taught about the place where Jesus was born—the structure where Mary and Joseph were given shelter. This is an artist's rendition of a house around the time when Jesus was born.



SUMMARIZE: Use Bible Commentary 4 on page 50 and this page to provide more details regarding the biblical manger scene.

TRANSITION: "Next we will learn about the announcement of the birth of Jesus to an unlikely audience."

STUDY THE BIBLE

Luke 2:8-14



10 minutes

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read Luke 2:8-14.

GUIDE: Ask group members scan **PSG pages 50-51** to discover information about shepherds and why they were the least likely people to receive an angelic visitation with the announcement of the birth of the Messiah.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 5** to provide additional information about the announcement to the shepherds:

- *Shepherds were social outcasts.*
- *The glory of the Lord shone around them.*
- *They were terrified.*

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 6** to explain the significance of the phrase, “good news of great joy that will be for all the people.”

5 ▶ **Verse 8.** In the fields outside Bethlehem, **shepherds** were **keeping watch** over their sheep. The main responsibility of a shepherd in the field would have been to protect the flock from danger. It was the practice that several shepherds would bring their flocks together for pasturing in the same area. Shepherds usually spent their nights in the fields with their flocks from early spring until the middle of fall (approximately March through November).

While the sheep were considered valuable, the shepherds were among the lowest members of Jewish society. Many were known to be dishonest, and they were unclean in respect to the Jewish ceremonial law. The fact that the shepherds played such a large role in the nativity account indicates how Jesus came to restore those who were “sinners” and social outcasts—the least of these.³

Verse 9. The shepherds were visited by **an angel of the Lord and the glory of the Lord shone around them.** The angel brought a message from God (see Luke 1:11-20,26-38). The “glory of the Lord” describes the manifestation of God’s presence (Ex. 16:7,10; 24:17; 40:34), the One who had both sent the angel and brought the events to pass.

The reaction of the shepherds to this angelic visitation is understandable: they were **terrified**. This was a common response to the appearance of an angel (Luke 1:12,29). The shepherds had seen nothing like this before—and the message they were about to receive was also unlike anything they could ever have imagined. ◀

6 ▶ **Verse 10.** In an effort to calm the shepherds, the angel addressed them, “**Don’t be afraid**” (see Luke 1:13,30). The angel brought them **good news of great joy**. The Greek word *euaggelizomai* (to proclaim good news) is connected to the English word “gospel.” What’s more, this good news would be **for all the people**. Ultimately Jesus’ birth (and subsequent life, death, and resurrection) would be good news of great joy for the people of every nation and culture. After His resurrection, Jesus commanded His disciples to take this good news of salvation to the end of the earth (Matt. 28:18-20; Luke 24:46-48; Acts 1:8; 15:1-29). ◀

7 ▶ **Verse 11.** **Today** indicates the dawn of a new era, inaugurated by the birth of the Messiah. The angel located this good news of great joy in **the city of David**, Bethlehem. That Jesus’ birth occurred in Bethlehem, the foretold

birthplace of the Messiah, emphasized Jesus' role as the promised Messiah. The angel identified the baby Jesus by three titles. First, He is the **Savior**. Joseph had been commanded by an angel of the Lord to name his and Mary's son "Jesus" ("God saves") because "he will save his people from their sins" (1:21). The angel also said Jesus was the **Messiah** ("anointed One"), the king from the line of David promised by God who would deliver His people. Finally, the angel called Jesus the **Lord**. This title highlights Jesus' divine authority. Elsewhere, Luke used the term "Lord" to describe Jesus (Luke 1:43,76) and in reference to the sovereignty of God the Father (vv. 16,46,68).

Verse 12. The angel gave a specific **sign** as to where in Bethlehem the shepherds could find this baby. "**You will find a baby wrapped tightly in cloth and lying in a manger.**" The angel's words again touched on the irony of the situation. While Jesus is Savior, Messiah, and Lord, the shepherds would not find Him in a palace among the rich and powerful—or even in the nicest home Bethlehem had to offer. Instead, He would be wrapped up in cloth and found lying in a feeding trough.

Verses 13-14. The Greek term translated **suddenly** is often used in the New Testament to describe events related to the spiritual realm (Mark 13:36; Luke 9:39; Acts 9:3; 22:6). The exact number of the **multitude of the heavenly host** that appeared before the shepherds is not given, but the number of angels suddenly present must have been staggering. The appearance of the angels to the shepherds indicated that something miraculous and life-changing had happened, something the shepherds needed to investigate further.

These angels were **praising God**. They gave **glory to God**, *glory* being another word for praise offered to God. The **highest heaven** is the heavenly realm where God and the angels reside. The heavenly host gave God praises for both who He is and what He has done. The angels also focused their words on humanity, the recipients of God's gracious act in sending the Messiah. While humanity would enjoy the benefits of God's actions, He deserves all glory and praise for what He has done through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. **Peace** "refers here to the fullness of blessing which the Savior/Christ/Lord brings and is essentially a synonym for salvation (cf. Acts 10:36)."⁴ The recipients of this peace are those who respond in faith to the good news of salvation found in God's Messiah, Jesus Christ. ◀

GUIDE: Use **KEY WORD** on page 51 (PSG, p. 50) to provide additional explanation to the term *Messiah*.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary Z** on page 52 and this page to provide explanation to the terms:

- *Savior*
- *Messiah/Christ*
- *Lord*
- *Peace*

DISCUSS: Question #3 (PSG, p. 52): **What steps can we take to experience peace in the Christmas season?**

(Alternate: What do these verses teach us about the purpose of Jesus' birth?)

TRANSITION: "After the shepherds heard this glorious announcement they determined to go and see what the angels had told them."

STUDY THE BIBLE

Luke 2:15-20



15 minutes

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read Luke 2:15-20

GUIDE: Refer group members to the author's example on **PSG page 52** of people who witness extraordinary events and how they tell about their experiences. Ask group members to recall eye witness events in their lives.

SAY: "Sometimes we just have to tell others about what we have seen and heard."

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 8** to show the shepherds' immediate obedience. They wanted to see for themselves what "the Lord has made known." They found the scene exactly as the angels had told them it would be.

Luke 2:15-20

15 When the angels had left them and returned to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go straight to Bethlehem and see what has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."

16 They hurried off and found both Mary and Joseph, and the baby who was lying in the manger.

17 After seeing them, they reported the message they were told about this child,

18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

19 But Mary was treasuring up all these things in her heart and meditating on them.

20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had seen and heard, which were just as they had been told.

8 ▶ **Verse 15.** Having been given specific directions from the angel, the shepherds decided to go to Bethlehem. Luke noted the shepherds' immediate obedience—"Let's go straight to Bethlehem and see what has happened." Obedience is a quality that should be developed in all believers when God speaks. The shepherds recognized that the news announced by the angels, it was a message directly from God—"which the Lord has made known to us."

Verse 16. The shepherds **hurried off** to Bethlehem and **found** everything exactly as the angel had told them. Mary and Joseph were there with the baby Jesus, who was wrapped in cloth and lying in a feeding trough. The accuracy of the angel's words served to confirm both the truth and the importance of the event in the minds of the shepherds. ◀

9 ▶ **Verses 17-18.** After finding Mary, Joseph, and the child just as the angel had told them, the shepherds **reported the**

message they were told about this child. They told others about what they had experienced. **All who heard it** likely referred to the residents of Bethlehem and others the shepherds encountered along the way back to their fields.

The reaction of those who heard the shepherds' report is understandable. They **were amazed** at the shepherds' story. Amazement at Jesus and His works is a common theme in Luke's writing. The Greek term for "amazed" (*thaumazo*) appears thirteen times in his Gospel and five more times in the Book of Acts. Despite the negative reputation of shepherds, the passage does not indicate any skepticism on the part of those who heard the report of these shepherds.

Verse 19. Luke painted a contrast between the joyful enthusiasm of the shepherds and the quiet contemplation of Mary, who **was treasuring up all these things in her heart and meditating on them.** The words Luke used indicate that she wanted to remember the events she was experiencing. The Greek term translated **was treasuring up** (*suntereo*) has the meaning of keeping something close to one's heart or purposefully preserving events in one's memory. It suggests Mary meditated or deeply reflected on the events in an effort to better understand their significance. This verse may also serve as an indication that Luke relied on Mary for eyewitness testimony for his Gospel.⁵ She certainly would have had information about the shepherds' visit that others would not have had.

Verse 20. The shepherds **returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had seen and heard.** The veracity of the events is indicated by Luke noting what the shepherds had seen and experienced was **just as they had been told** by the angel. As they made their way back to their flocks, the shepherds continued talking about the good news, **glorifying and praising God.** Luke noted that these humble shepherds shared what **they had seen and heard** (see v. 17).

During the Christmas season, believers have a great opportunity to share the story of Jesus and why He came to earth. By making Jesus the focal point of our holiday celebrations, we proclaim Him to a world that needs to hear—and respond to—His message of salvation. ◀

1. Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 107.

2. *Ibid.*, 106-107

3. Bruce Barton et al., *Life Application New Testament Commentary* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2001), 248; Stein, *Luke*, 108.

4. Stein, *Luke*, 109.

5. *Ibid.*, 110.

SUMMARIZE: Use Bible

Commentary 9 on page 54 and this page to expound on these points:

- *The shepherds reported what they had been told about Jesus.*
- *Those who heard were amazed at the shepherds' story.*
- *Mary meditated on these words and treasured them in her heart.*
- *The shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for what they had seen and heard.*

DISCUSS: Question #4

(PSG, p. 53): What steps can we take to glorify God during the Christmas season?

DISCUSS: Question #5

(PSG, p. 54): What things can we do to make Jesus the central focus of the Christmas season?

(Alternate: How can we proclaim the good news of Jesus through our Christmas celebrations?)

DO: Encourage group

members to take a few minutes to complete the activity "**The 'Perfect' Christmas**" on PSG page 54.

LIVE IT OUT**5 minutes**

GUIDE: Emphasize **The Point:** **Jesus was born to bring us into a relationship with God.**

REVIEW: Review **Live It Out (PSG, p. 55)**; (see text to the right). Encourage each group member to follow through this week with at least one of the applications.

WRAP IT UP

GUIDE: The celebration of Christmas is our opportunity to tell others about what we have experienced as followers of Jesus. Encourage group members to do so with family and friends who may need to hear these words.

PRAY: "Father, thank you so much for sending your Son Jesus into our world at just the right time so that we could experience your salvation."

LIVE IT OUT

In your celebration of Jesus birth, consider doing the following:

- ▶ **Treasure.** Think on the things you've seen or heard that have confirmed God's reality and power to you. Treasure these things in your heart so you can recall them and share them with others.
- ▶ **Write.** Write out your testimony—what Jesus has done in your life—and pray about finding one person you can share it with this week.
- ▶ **Celebrate.** Determine one or more ways you can turn the celebration of Christmas into a proclamation of what Christ has done for you. How can you, like the shepherds, leave those you speak with astonished at what they've heard about Jesus?



BIBLICAL
ILLUSTRATOR



Partial ruins of a Roman road at Pompeii. The Greek word for “road” is *hodos*. The word is also used figuratively to mean “way.”

The New Testament mentions several roads. Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan tells of the road from Jerusalem to Jericho (Luke 10:30). After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to two of His followers on the road to Emmaus (24:13,32). God called Philip to leave a successful work in Samaria and go to “the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza” (Acts 8:26). Saul of Tarsus encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus (9:1-9).

Canaan lay at the crossroads in the ancient world. Maps showing the

routes of major highways through the region reveal several north-south roads and some east-west roads. The three major highways were (1) the coastal road from Damascus to Egypt, (2) the Sinai road from Egypt through Jerusalem to Sidon, (3) and the Red Sea road from the Gulf of Aqaba through the Transjordan to Damascus. Trade and travel from the civilizations to the north and east to Egypt flowed through Israel. Armies also traveled these same roads.

Road builders had to overcome great obstacles in accomplishing their mission. The area’s rugged terrain made their job difficult. Prior to the Roman period (before 37 BC), roads in Palestine had no firm foundations. The Romans, however, built roads with deep foundations of large blocks of flat stone. The remains of these roads are still seen in many places in the Middle East and in Europe.

The excerpt above is from the article “Roads and Travel in the First Century” (Winter 2006-07), which relates to this session. More *Biblical Illustrator* articles are available that relate to this session. See page 7 about *Biblical Illustrator*.

SHARING THE GOOD NEWS

Jesus came to earth with the mission of bringing us into a right relationship with God. We begin that relationship when we trust Christ as Savior and Lord.

Each week, make yourself available either before or after the session to speak privately with anyone in your group who wants to know more about becoming a Christian. See the article, “Leading Someone to the Greatest Decision of All,” on page 2 for guidance in leading a person to Christ.

Remind group members that **page 2** in the **PSG** offers guidance in how to become a Christian. Encourage believers to consider using this article as they have opportunities to lead others to Christ.