



Pastor J.Rob
Shepherd in a Shed
j.rob@ShepherdInAShed.org

What's so special about Christmas - Part 1

One and Only Virgin Birth

Bible Discussion Guide

Everyone is encouraged to participate in the discussions,
but no one is required to talk or read if they feel uncomfortable doing so.
(^{Superscripted text} in scripture passages are from the version's notes.)

ICE BREAKERS

1. What is one thing that you are very good at? (positive please) How did you get so good at it?
2. What is the best Christmas gift you received as a child? As an adult?

OVERVIEW & OUTLINE

As we approach this Christmas season, I'm converting a sermon I preached in December 2013 into a three-part discussion series. The title of the message was "One Solitary Life." (If you would like to hear the sermon I preached in December 2013 on this topic, the audio is available on my website at www.JimPorterfield.com under the [Media Items](#) menu at [More Than "One Solitary Life"](#).) In that message, I share three things that set Jesus apart from all other humans and made His birth worth celebrating. I will begin the series with a story from my past and then we will answer this question:

- A. What three things about Jesus' life as a man on earth set Him apart from all other humans?
 - a. Virgin birth
 - b. Sinless life
 - c. Resurrection from the dead

In our introduction we discussed the three things that separated Jesus from all other humans who have ever existed. The first item was His virgin birth. During this session, we will discuss why Jesus' virgin birth is important. But first: some common misconceptions about Christmas and the nativity of Jesus.

CHRISTMAS – TRADITIONS AND TRUTH

Why December 25th?

In AD 180, Irenaeus (c. 130–202), who was a hearer of Polycarp (AD 69–155), a disciple of John the Apostle, set out to debunk a heresy which refuted that Jesus was fully God and fully human. Irenaeus used Luke's gospel and the best calendars of his day to determine:

- In Luke, he cited the passage of the Angel Gabriel visiting elderly priest Zechariah, the father of St. John the Baptist, in the temple when throngs were praying to announce the miracle of St. John's conception in the womb of Zechariah's elderly wife, Elizabeth.
- St. Irenaeus set that date as Sept. 25, when throngs would be assembled that year for the Day of Atonement.
- He then found that after Gabriel's Annunciation to Mary, she immediately visited Elizabeth, who was "in her sixth month."
- That would be March 25, the date the [Catholic] church still celebrates as Feast of the Annunciation.
- And exactly nine months after March 25? That would be Dec. 25.¹

¹ Kelly, K. (2014). *Christmas Never Was a Pagan Feast*. Catholic Key. <https://catholickey.org/2014/12/19/christmas-never-was-a-pagan-feast/>

Many have said that the date chosen for Christmas was based on the Roman winter festival, Saturnalia, and that many of our practices are also based on pagan traditions.

The Roman festival, Saturnalia, was a celebration of the Winter Solstice. Saturnalia “was a week-long festival around the Dec. 21 solstice that began on Dec. 17 and ended on Dec. 23 — NOT Dec. 25.”²

Interestingly, in 274 A.D., the emperor Aurelian tried to take over Christmas by declaring December 25 as one of the premier feasts of the birth of the invincible “sun,” the Roman god Sol. But by then, Christians had been celebrating December 25 as the Nativity of Jesus for quite some time, perhaps even as early as the early second century.³

By 350 AD the church had established a feast on December 25th in honor of the birth of Christ. This feast would later include the Lord’s Supper or “Mass”. Christmas would actually become a holiday about around 380 AD. Its proximity to the winter solstice and numerous pagan festivals is coincidental though celebrations borrow from those festivals.

Is Christmas is just a “Christianized” version of pagan festivals?

According to a Britannica.com article entitled “Christmas”⁴, most of the traditions we celebrate today are relatively new. The use of Christmas tree (first decorated with apples) started in about 1605 and candles were added in about 1611. Wreaths were from the 19th or 16th century beginning as an Advent wreath decorated with 24 candles for the 24 days leading up to Christmas. Because 24 candles were too many for a wreath, it was reduced to 4 advent candles, one for each week leading up to Christmas. The Renaissance humanist Sebastian Brant recorded, in *Das Narrenschiff* (1494; *The Ship of Fools*), the custom of placing branches of fir trees in houses. According to tradition, the 24 day advent calendar was “was created in the 19th century by a Munich housewife who tired of having to answer endlessly when Christmas would come.”⁵ And, by the end of the 18th century, gift giving to family members was well established. That practice is based on the gifts given by the wise men as quoted in scripture as well as Jesus being God’s gift given to mankind.

Were Joseph and Mary wealthy or poor?

I’ve heard both. Some have said that carpentry was a middle to upper-middle class occupation in the 1st century. Others have said that Joseph was poor. What can Scripture tell us about that?

Luke 2:21-24 (HCSB) Presentation of baby Jesus in the temple.

When the eight days were completed for His circumcision, He was named Jesus—the name given by the angel before He was conceived. And when the days of their purification according to the law of Moses were finished, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (just as it is written in the law of the Lord: Every firstborn male will be dedicated to the Lord and to offer a sacrifice (according to what is stated in the law of the Lord: a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons)). [Leviticus 12:6-8]

This passage talks about two or three different events, the circumcision of the male child, the presentation/redemption of the firstborn son, and the purification of the birth mother. The son’s circumcision happened on the 8th day after the child’s birth [Genesis 17:1-14]. The child was unclean for the first 7 days and circumcised the 8th. The presentation of the firstborn son happened after the 30th day

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hillerbrand, J. J. (2022). *Christmas*. Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christmas>

⁵ Ibid.

and an offering of 5 shekels was given to the priest ^[Numbers 18:15-16] (a little less than \$5 in today's money.) The mother's purification occurred on the 40th day after delivering a son (7 days for the birth process + 33 days for the issue of blood), and the 80th day after delivering a daughter (14 days for the birth process + 66 days for the issue of blood).

Leviticus 12:6-8 (HCSB) Purification after childbirth

"When her days of purification are complete, whether for a son or daughter, she is to bring to the priest at the entrance to the tent of meeting a year-old male lamb for a burnt offering, and a young pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering. He will present them before the Lord and make atonement on her behalf; she will be clean from her discharge of blood. This is the law for a woman giving birth, whether to a male or female. But if she doesn't have sufficient means for a sheep, she may take two turtledoves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. Then the priest will make atonement on her behalf, and she will be clean."

3. If Joseph had been sufficiently wealthy, what is the offering that would have been given at Mary's purification? What does the offering of two turtledoves or two young pigeons say about their financial status?

Numbers 18:8, 15-16 [HCSB] Support for the Priests and Levites

⁸ *Then the Lord spoke to Aaron, "Look, I have put you in charge of the contributions brought to Me. As for all the holy offerings of the Israelites, I have given them to you and your sons as a portion and a permanent statute.*

¹⁵⁻¹⁶ *The firstborn of every living thing, man or animal, presented to the Lord belongs to you. But you must certainly redeem the firstborn of man, and redeem the firstborn of an unclean animal. You will pay the redemption price for a month-old male according to your assessment: five shekels of silver by the standard sanctuary shekel, which is 20 gerahs.*

4. How much did Joseph have to pay to redeem Jesus? How much did Jesus have to pay to redeem Joseph? Who got the best deal?

How old was Joseph when he was engaged to Mary?

Joseph was over 20 or he would not have had to go to Bethlehem to pay taxes. The Eastern Orthodox church holds that Joseph was a widower and had children (at least 6) by another wife named Salome. This is how they allow Mary to continue being a virgin. There is no biblical or 1st or 2nd century evidence of this. If this is true, Joseph was likely in his 30's to early 40's when he was engaged to Mary.

The last scriptural or 1st century reference to Joseph is when Jesus is taken to the temple at 12 years of age (Luke 2). He is assumed gone well before the wedding at Cana, the first major event of Jesus' public ministry at 30 years of age.

How old was Mary when the Angel visited her?

Mary was most likely between 12–14 years of age by Jewish tradition. It was not uncommon at all, and considered optimal, for a 12–14 year-old woman to marry a much older man.

Mary and Joseph were "engaged," but not officially married at the time of the angel's announcement. Though it was severely frowned upon in Jewish culture, having sexual intercourse with your fiancé before the official marriage was not considered a sin and didn't make the child illegitimate. Sex during the engagement caused people to look down upon the man as it showed lack of discipline on his part.

THE VIRGIN BIRTH

Now on to the main point. What does scripture say about the importance of the virgin birth?

Isaiah 7:14 [HCSB]

"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."

This was spoken by God to evil king Ahaz through Isaiah the prophet when Ahaz refused to ask God for a sign. So God told Ahaz that the virgin birth would be His chosen sign.

5. What kind of God would it take to make a virgin birth happen – what would it say about His abilities?

Luke 1:26-38 (HCSB)

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And [the angel] came to her and said, "Rejoice, favored woman! The Lord is with you." But she was deeply troubled by this statement, wondering what kind of greeting this could be. Then the angel told her: Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Now listen: You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will call His name JESUS. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.

Mary asked the angel, "How can this be, since I have not been intimate with a man?"

The angel replied to her: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the holy One to be born will be called the Son of God."

And consider your relative Elizabeth—even she has conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called childless. For nothing will be impossible with God."

"I am the Lord's slave," said Mary. "May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel left her.

6. If you were 12-14 year-old Mary, what problems might you have with this visit from the angel?
7. In Luke 1, the Angel tells Mary that she will conceive when "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the holy One to be born will be called the Son of God."
- Did God need Joseph's help (or any man's help) for the conception of Jesus? Why or why not?
 - The virgin birth is the only way _____ could become _____.
 - Because Jesus' father was God and His mother was Mary, Jesus was born both _____ and _____.

I read a web page this week that said that Mary contributed nothing physical to the birth of Jesus—she was only a surrogate. God created Jesus from scratch inside her. The author used Luke 1 to support his statement.

8. In what way does Luke confirm or contradict that statement? If true, what problems with our beliefs might the surrogacy concept cause?

Matthew 1:18-25 [HCSB]

The birth of Jesus Christ came about this way: After His mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, it was discovered before they came together that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. So her husband

Joseph, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her publicly, decided to divorce her secretly.

But after he had considered these things, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to name Him Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins.”

Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

See, the virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will name Him Immanuel, which is translated “God is with us.”

When Joseph got up from sleeping, he did as the Lord’s angel had commanded him. He married her but did not know her intimately until she gave birth to a son. And he named Him Jesus.

Whereas Luke seems to focus on the story from Mary’s perspective, Matthew gives us more of Joseph’s perspective.

9. When does Joseph find out about Mary’s pregnancy? What is his response? What kind of a Man was Joseph and how do we know?
10. How does God respond to Joseph’s dilemma? How does Joseph respond to God?
11. The virgin birth was foretold by God through Isaiah in the 8th century BC.
 - a. Why does Matthew say this was both foretold and came to pass?
 - b. What does this say about God and His promises?

Philippians 2:5-11 [HCSB]

Make your own attitude that of Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be used for His own advantage.

Instead He emptied Himself by assuming the form of a slave, taking on the likeness of men.

And when He had come as a man in His external form,

He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death— even to death on a cross.

For this reason God highly exalted Him and gave Him the name that is above every name,

so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow—

of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth—

and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

12. The virgin birth was the path through which Jesus took on “the likeness of men.” Once Jesus took on the likeness of men, a number of significant things happened according to Paul in Philippians 2:5-11. What are they?

Genesis 3:14-15 [HCSB]

Then the Lord God said to the serpent:

Because you have done this, you are cursed more than any livestock and more than any wild animal.

You will move on your belly and eat dust all the days of your life. I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.

1 Corinthians 15:45 [HCSB]

So it is written: The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam became a life-giving Spirit.

In Genesis 3, God refers to Jesus as the seed of woman, not man. In 1 Corinthians 5, Jesus is referred to as the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. Though there are detractors, many believe that sin passes down through the father's seed and that the virgin birth bypassed that problem.

13. If that is true, what would the virgin birth make possible for Jesus? A _____ life.

14. According to these passages, what is important about the virgin birth?

- a. It shows that God keeps His _____.
- b. It made Jesus both _____ and _____.
- c. It proved that Jesus is _____ (set apart).
- d. It demonstrated that God is _____ – He can do what seems impossible
- e. It confirmed that God is _____ – He knows what is *going to* happen.
- f. It showed that God is self-_____ – He doesn't need our help.
- g. God showed that He has a _____ for our _____.

Did Mary remain a virgin forever?

The Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches both have “deified” Jesus’ mother Mary claiming that she remained a virgin and never had sex with Joseph – ever. The churches call it the “veneration of Mary” or the “exaltation of Mary.” The belief is that Mary was “deified” at the moment of conception. This constitutes *Mariolatry* according to some. What do the scriptures say? Remember our passage from Matthew 1.

Matthew 1:24-25 [HCSB]

When Joseph got up from sleeping, he did as the Lord's angel had commanded him. He married her but did not know her intimately until she gave birth to a son. And he named Him Jesus.

Note that this passage says that Joseph “did not know her intimately *until* she gave birth to her firstborn son.” This assumes that he DID know her intimately *after* Jesus was born.

Matthew 13:54-56 [HCSB]

He went to His hometown and began to teach them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished and said, “How did this wisdom and these miracles come to Him? Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't His mother called Mary, and His brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas? And His sisters, aren't they all with us? So where does He get all these things?”

Mark 3:31-32 [HCSB]

Then His mother and His brothers came, and standing outside, they sent word to Him and called Him. A crowd was sitting around Him and told Him, “Look, Your mother, Your brothers, and Your sisters are outside asking for You.”

The scriptures say that Jesus had 4 brothers, James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas, and multiple sisters, and they are always grouped with Mary as mother. In the Jewish world, “brother” and “sister” could also mean “step-brother,” “half-sister,” “cousin,” etc.

15. If Mary was deified at Jesus’ conception, from where would Jesus have gotten his humanity? How could he be both God and Man if Mary was also a God?

Why two different genealogies of Jesus? ([Matt 1](#) & [Luke 3](#))

In both the Jewish and the Greek cultures, genealogies were very important. Who your ancestors were could determine your place in society and give or take away Credence to what you said and affect who you became. The genealogies in Matthew 1 and Luke 3 are the same from Adam through King David. From there, Matthew follows a genealogy through the David's son Solomon and down through the Davidic kings. Luke's genealogy takes over from David with his son Nathan.

There are a number of possibilities:

- Because Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience, he gave the *legal* and *royal* genealogy of Jesus from Abraham through 39 generations to Joseph making Jesus the 40th generation. His point is to show Joseph as a descendant of King David. Note that he ends his list with “*Jacob fathered Joseph the husband of Mary, who gave birth to Jesus who is called the Messiah.*” He does NOT say that Jacob “fathered” Jesus as he did with everyone else in the list.
- Because Luke was a doctor and was writing to a Greek audience, he gave Jesus' physical genealogy through Mary. He starts with God and gives 76 generations from Adam to Jesus, and 56 generations from Abraham to Jesus, 17 more than Matthew gives.
- Having two different genealogies is not possible if you have one father. By Jewish law, Joseph *could have had two fathers*.
 - First, some suggest that Mary had no brothers to carry on her father's name at her marriage, so Heli (Joseph's father according to Luke) adopted Joseph as his own son. This would then give Joseph two genealogies—his own genealogy and Mary's genealogy.
 - If Mary's dad, Heli—Joseph's father according to Luke's genealogy—and Jacob—Joseph's father according to Matthew's genealogy—were either brothers or half-brothers. When one died, the other married his widow, producing Joseph and his offspring. This would leave Joseph with two fathers—both Heli and Jacob—one a natural father, and the other a legal father.⁶

The Heli-adopts-Joseph-at-marriage scenario is viable.

If the two-dad scenario was the case, it would have made Mary and Joseph half-siblings with one common physical parent. Marriages between physical siblings and half-siblings were prohibited by Jewish law. They would have been half-siblings, that is, unless Heli had multiple marriages, Mary born from the 1st wife, 1st dies, Heli marries a 2nd, then he dies still without son, brother Jacob takes Heli's 2nd wife, Jacob and 2nd give birth to Joseph who is credited as being Heli's legal son, but now Joseph is significantly younger than 14 year old Mary, which is not supported by scripture!

⁶ (2016). *Why Are Jesus' Genealogies in Matthew and Luke Different?* Zondervan Academic.
<https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/why-are-jesus-genealogies-in-matthew-and-luke-different>

Generations from God to God's Son

#	LUKE	MATTHEW	#
God.			
Adam to Abraham			
1	Adam		1
2	Seth		2
3	Enos		3
4	Cainan		4
5	Mahalaleel		5
6	Jared		6
7	Enoch		7
8	Methuselah		8
9	Lamech		9
10	Noah		10
11	Shem		11
12	Arphaxad		12
13	Cainan		13
14	Shelah		14
15	Eber		15
16	Peleg		16
17	Reu		17
18	Serug		18
19	Nahor		19
20	Terah		20
Abraham to David			
21	Abraham	Abraham fathered Isaac	21
22	Isaac	Isaac fathered Jacob	22
23	Jacob	Jacob fathered Judah and his brothers	23
24	Judah	Judah fathered Perez and Zerah by Tamar	24
25	Perez	Perez fathered Hezron	25
26	Ram	Hezron fathered Aram	26
27	Hezron	Aram fathered Amminadab	27
28	Amminadab	Amminadab fathered Nahshon	28
29	Nahshon	Nahshon fathered Salmon	29
30	Salmon	Salmon fathered Boaz by Rahab	30
31	Boaz	Boaz fathered Obed by Ruth	31
32	Obed	Obed fathered Jesse	32
33	Jesse	Jesse fathered King David.	33
David to the Exile			
34	David	David fathered Solomon by Uriah's wife	34
35	Nathan	Solomon fathered Rehoboam	35
36	Mattatha	Rehoboam fathered Abijah	36
37	Menna	Abijah fathered Asa [Asaph]	37
38	Melea	Asa fathered Jehoshaphat	38
39	Eliakim	Jehoshaphat fathered Joram [Jehoram]	39
40	Jonam	Joram fathered Uzziah	40
41	Joseph	Uzziah fathered Jotham	41
42	Judah	Jotham fathered Ahaz	42
43	Simeon	Ahaz fathered Hezekiah	43
44	Levi	Hezekiah fathered Manasseh	44
45	Matthat	Manasseh fathered Amon [Amos]	45
46	Jorim	Amon/Amos fathered Josiah	46
Exile to Jesus			
47	Eliezer	Josiah fathered Jechoniah and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon.	47
48	Joshua	Jechoniah fathered Shealtiel	48
49	Er	Shealtiel fathered Zerubbabel	49

50	Elmadam	Zerubbabel fathered Abiud	50
51	Cosam	Abiud fathered Eliakim	51
52	Addi	Eliakim fathered Azor	52
53	Melchi	Azor fathered Zadok	53
54	Neri	Zadok fathered Achim	54
55	Shealtiel	Achim fathered Eliud	55
56	Zerubbabel	Eliud fathered Eleazar	56
57	Rhesa	Eleazar fathered Matthan	57
58	Joanan	Matthan fathered Jacob	58
59	Joda	Jacob fathered Joseph the husband of Mary	59
60	Josech	Mary gave birth to Jesus who is called the Messiah.	60
61	Semein	Jesus	61
62	Mattathias		
63	Maath		
64	Naggai		
65	Esli		
66	Nahum		
67	Amos		
68	Mattathias		
69	Joseph		
70	Jannai		
71	Melchi		
72	Levi		
73	Matthat		
74	Heli		
75	Joseph		
76	Jesus		

PASTORAL BLESSING

[Isaiah 9:2-7](#) [HCSB]

*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;
a light has dawned on those living in the land of darkness.*

You have enlarged the nation and increased its joy.

The people have rejoiced before You as they rejoice at harvest time and as they rejoice when dividing spoils.

*For You have shattered their oppressive yoke and the rod on their shoulders,
the staff of their oppressor, just as You did on the day of Midian.*

For the trampling boot of battle and the bloodied garments of war will be burned as fuel for the fire.

For a child will be born for us, a son will be given to us, and the government will be on His shoulders.

He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.

The dominion will be vast, and its prosperity will never end.

He will reign on the throne of David and over his kingdom,

to establish and sustain it with justice and righteousness from now on and forever.

The zeal of the Lord of Hosts will accomplish this.

May God's light shine on, through, and around you both now and forever, Amen.

Pastor J.Rob

FOR YOUR PERSONAL QUIET TIME

Look again at the pastoral blessing/benediction above quoted from [Isaiah 9:2-7](#).

1. What is the purpose of light? What kind of light does this passage indicate the people would see? What kind of light do you need? What kind of light does our world need?
2. Who do you know who is oppressed, burdened, or weighted down? What does God, through Jesus Christ, say He will do to the oppressors?
3. This child who was born to us, this Jesus, is attributed as having several names and attributes. In what ways in your life could you use or do you need Him to be your Wonderful Counselor? Your Might God? Your Eternal Father? Your Prince of Peace?
4. Perhaps you could ask Him to be those things for you or for someone who you know needs His power in their life.

God's blessings on you,

