

Ministry of Grace Church

The Real Date of Christ's Birth - Sermon Notes

December 21, 2025



Introduction

Isn't it amazing that one of the most important events of the Christian faith, the incarnation of our Savior (Christmas), contains so much misconception and assumed facts that aren't true. We learned several years ago that Jesus was not born in a stable, surrounded by singing angels, shepherds, and wise men. It is more likely that He was born just outside the town of Bethlehem at a place called Migdol Eder, or "Tower of the Flock." This is where lambs were born that were going to be used in the Temple sacrifices. It was there that He was laid in a manger. We also learned that the wise men (Magi) were not there when He was born and didn't show up until about 2 years later.

So, let's start with something that we can all agree on, the date of Jesus' birth. Let me ask you, on what day was Jesus born as a human?

When Was Jesus Born?

I can imagine some of you saying, "That's a dumb question, Pastor! We celebrate Christmas on December 25th, so Jesus was born on December 25th!" Okay, I agree that we celebrate His birthday on December 25th. But, I can also tell you with nearly absolute certainty that Jesus was NOT born on December 25th. So, why do we celebrate the birth of our Lord on December 25th? Well, you might respond by saying, it's because that's what the church has

always done, right? But, if you are a member of the Eastern Orthodox church, you would argue that Christmas is really on January 6th

Again, I can imagine some of you saying, “Look, the Bible doesn’t tell us the date of His birth, so we don’t know. And that’s true, the Bible does not tell us the exact date, but it does give us a lot of clues about when it happened. Over the past couple of weeks, I have read many articles and watched numerous videos made by people who might consider themselves Biblical Experts, or Biblical Scholars. Many of them believe they have identified the exact date of the birth of Jesus. However, few of them agree. Does that surprise you?

So, how does one go about determining the exact date of Jesus human birth based on what the Bible actually says. The most often used method is by determining the birth of his relative, John the Baptist. We know according to Luke’s gospel account that John the Baptist was six months older than Jesus.

And behold, your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren. (Luke 1:36)

So, if we can determine when John the Baptist was born, we can simply add six months and, *voila*, we have the birth date of Jesus. But before we get carried away, notice that Luke only tells us that Elizabeth was in the 6th month of her pregnancy. It could have been 6 months and 1 day or 6 months and 29 days. Now, let’s do a little bit of Bible sleuthing. We start off with, what does the Bible tell us about John the Baptist?

The Bible says that Zechariah (John’s father) was a priest of the family of Abijah

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah, and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. (Luke 1:5)

But why is that important? We know from the Old Testament that the priests were divided into 24 courses, each to serve for 1 week twice a year and John’s father was in the 8th course the seventh for Hakkoz, the eighth for Abijah, (1 Chronicles 24:10)

But if they each served for 1 week, twice a year, that only accounts for 48 weeks in the year and we know that there are approximately 52 weeks in the year. Actually there are 52.143 weeks in a solar year.

So, how do we determine Abijah’s week of service in any given year and why does that help us? There is a calendar of these priestly duties that was discovered along with the Dead Sea Scrolls. But in this priestly calendar each year is not exactly the same. However, it does repeat every few years, and it is consistent. So, if you know for certain which order of priests was serving on a particular date, you can determine the dates that Zechariah (the house of Abijah) was serving.

And there is another Dead Sea scroll which says,

“when the sun displays itself from the East, and shines in the centre of the sky, at the base of the vault, from evening to morning, on the fourth of the week of the sons of Gamul in the first month of the year.”.

This is a reference to the vernal equinox, which can be dated exactly. And, since Abijah was in the eighth course of priests, from that we can count exactly when Zechariah was serving. Since this was on the 4th day of the service of the sons of Gamul, we can compare this with the priestly calendar and determine exactly when Zechariah ended his service. And, most people trying to determine Jesus’ birthday then assume that Elizabeth conceived only days later.

And, as I already alluded to, in Luke’s gospel account we are told about Gabriel’s announcement to Mary.

And behold, your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren. (Luke 1:36)

If we assume that Elizabeth conceived 1 week after Zechariah’s week of service (we actually don’t know how long until she conceived), that the angel visited Mary exactly 6 months later, and assuming Mary conceived immediately and gave birth to Jesus exactly 40 weeks after that, doing the calculation, this works out to a total of 47 weeks or 329 days from the end of Zechariah’s service until the birth of Jesus. So, from the information given in the Dead Sea scrolls, we can work work forward to the exact date (or week, at least) that Jesus was born.

But, that’s not all -- There is also a writing in the Talmud (the writings of the Ancient Rabbis) that describes the date of the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, and it also names the course of priests who were ministering at that time. So, using the same priestly calendar we can work backwards to the date of Zechariah’s service.

Now, here’s an amazing fact. When we work backwards from the Talmud and work forward from the Dead Sea Scrolls, the two produce the same exact date for the end of Zechariah’s service. Adding 329 days to this date produces the date of March 20, 6 BC which on the Hebrew calendar is the first day of the first month (Nisan) in 6 BC. And – according to Exodus 12:1-2 this is the first day of the Jewish year.

However:

Based on what we know so far, Zechariah could have been serving either in late May or late November. So, let’s look at these two options.

Late May

He would have finished serving the 1st week of June. We assume that he returned home and Elizabeth conceived in the 2nd week of June. That would put the birth of John in the 2nd week of March. Six months after Elizabeth conceived, Gabriel visited Mary (possibly, the 2nd week of December) We assume that Mary conceived immediately,

which would put the birth of Jesus around the 2nd week of September. This would be during the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot). This is an 8-day feast. If Jesus was born on the 1st day of the feast (a high holy day), he would have been circumcised on the 8th day (also a high holy day). See how perfectly God works out the details? However, the problem with this is that during the Feast of Tabernacles, all males were required to be in Jerusalem, so Joseph couldn't have been in Bethlehem with his wife.

But, if his service was in late November:

Zechariah—would have finished serving the 1st week of December. We assume he returned home and Elizabeth conceived in the 2nd week of December. That would put the birth of John in the 2nd week of September. Approximately six months after Elizabeth conceived, Gabriel visited Mary (2nd week of June) We assume that Mary conceived immediately, which would put the birth of Jesus around the 2nd week of March.

Now, add to this what Luke tells us in his gospel account:

And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guest room. In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. (Luke 2:7-8)

The Rabbis argue that the shepherds are only out in their fields at night during lambing season which always occurred in the Springtime, in the month of Nisan.

The Passover occurred in the first part of Nisan (springtime) and they were to take a 1 year old lamb and observe it until the 10th of Nisan. So, the Passover lamb had to have been born a year earlier. Since the lambs were all born at the same time of the year, the Passover lamb had to have been born in the spring.

“Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying, ‘On the tenth of this month they are each one to take a lamb for themselves, according to their fathers’ households, a lamb for each household. (Exodus 12:3)

Here's another fascinating fact. In the Hebrew translation of **Exodus 12:3** it says that they were to “accept the lamb” or “receive the lamb” on the tenth of the month. As we know, Jesus was crucified on the Passover as the Lamb of God slain for the sins of the world. But the original instructions for the Passover included an invitation to accept the lamb just as we accept the Lamb of God as our Lord and Savior.

So, what's our conclusion from all of this Biblical sleuthing? We really don't know the exact date of Jesus' birth. Then, why is Christmas on December 25th?

Why we celebrate Christmas on December 25th

Some people claim that the date of December 25th was chosen to coincide with a pagan holiday. The two most often mentioned are Saturnalia and Sol Invictus. This theory

assumes that early Christians had no idea when Christ was born. So, they simply assimilated the pagan solstice festival for their own purposes, claiming it as the time of the Messiah's birth and celebrating it accordingly. They may have done this to co-opt some of the pagan's festivities to either attract new adherents or supplant the pagan religions altogether. Alternatively, Christians may have done so to help them blend in as they celebrated their Savior, while also avoiding detection during times of persecution.

The most often referenced pagan holiday as the source of December 25 is Saturnalia, which the Roman poet Catullus called "the best of times." This holiday celebrated the god Saturn, and during the festival, Romans ate and drank to excess; slaves sat at the masters' tables and were served by their owners; and the Romans exchanged small gifts. The problem with this is that Saturnalia lasted from December 17 to December 23, so it was over by the 25th.

The other most often cited pagan holiday as the source of December 25 is Sol Invictus, the "Unconquered Sun God." It was celebrated on the Winter Solstice, which we've already pointed out occurred on December 23.

The first celebration of Christmas observed by the Roman church is believed to have occurred around 336 AD, more than 60 years after Emperor Aurelian declared Sol Invictus as a festival day (in 274). However, there is some evidence that some Christians recognized December 25 as Christmas in the mid 200's AD. So, it is possible that a December 25 Christmas may have pre-dated Aurelian's Sol Invictus.

Calendar Problems

Even with all the assumptions made (Elizabeth conceiving immediately upon Zechariah's coming home, Elizabeth being exactly 6 months along in her pregnancy when Mary conceived, the exact length of Mary's gestation, etc.), we still have a few problems with exactly dating the birth of our Savior.

Both the modern Hebrew calendar and the old Roman calendar were taken from the moon-based Persian calendar which had 12 months of 30 days each, equaling 360 days instead of 365. So, every 6th year they added a "leap month." To make matters even more confusing, in 46 BC, Julius Caesar was advised by his counselors that the Roman calendar was three months ahead of the solar calendar, so Caesar moved all of Rome to the Egyptian calendar, which is a solar calendar and became known as the Julian calendar. But this required him to add 85 days to the year 46 BC. Therefore, the year 46 BC contained 445 days. And – because of misunderstandings the final Julian calendar was not established in smooth operation throughout Rome until the 1st century AD.

But, that's not all! The Roman calculation of the length of the solar year was off by 11 minutes and 14 seconds. As a result, by the mid 1500s the cumulative effect of this error had shifted the dates of the seasons by about 10 days from Caesar's time. So, in 1582 Pope Gregory XIII changed the calendar to what is now known as the Gregorian calendar. To do so, he decreed on October 5th, that the next day was not going to be October 6th, but October

16th. However, this changed Christmas Day from December 25th to January 6th. The Western Catholic church was quick to make the change, however nearly all Eastern Orthodox churches continue to use the Julian calendar for determining fixed liturgical dates and protestant churches held on to what they called “Old Christmas.” This remained a thorn in the flesh for protestant churches until the middle 1700’s. Incidentally, the discrepancy between the Julian and Gregorian calendars is currently 13 days and it will become 14 days in 2100.

So What?

Given the number of assumptions that we’ve mentioned, and the fact that there are assumptions as part of every single calculation of the exact date of Jesus’ birth, plus the number of changes the calendar has experienced, I can say with absolute certainty that no one but God knows the exact date of Jesus’ birth.

But, again I say, “So what?” Does it really matter that we don’t know the exact date of Jesus’ birth? Not really. Does it really matter that we celebrate Christmas on December 25, or January 6th, or any other day of the year, in fact. Does it really matter that the world has changed our celebration of the incarnation into a commercial, “all about me,” Santa Claus believing occasion - where it’s more important to receive and unwrap presents, than it is to humble ourselves before the Creator God, showing love to all (even those who hate us and what we believe in)? Does it really matter?

No, it does not!

What really matters is that we know, and believe, that He (the Son of God, the second person of the trinity)

who, although existing in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a slave, by being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which 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 that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is LORD, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:6-11)

And, what really matters is that we share the glorious truth of salvation by faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ with those around us and that we live our lives in a manner that glorifies God!

Let’s pray.