

LIFE GROUPS

# TEACHING PLAN



*Study of ADVENT*

DECEMBER 20

20

# THE BIRTH OF JESUS

LUKE 2:1-21

DECEMBER 20, 2020

TEACHING PLAN

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## PREPARATION

- > Spend the week reading through and studying Luke 2:1-21. Consult the commentary provided and any additional study tools (such as a concordance or Bible dictionary) to enhance your preparation.
- > Determine which discussion points and questions will work best with your group.
- > Pray for your pastors, the upcoming group meeting, your teaching, your group members, and their receptivity to the study.

## HIGHLIGHTS

TAKEAWAY: WE DECLARE JESUS' UNIQUENESS THROUGH OUR PRAISE TO GOD.

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WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: GOD WORKS THROUGH HISTORY-MAKING GOVERNMENTS AND ANONYMOUS PEOPLE LIKE SHEPHERDS TO ACCOMPLISH HIS SAVING PURPOSES.

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GOSPEL CONNECTION: THE ENTIRETY OF OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH REVOLVES AROUND JESUS WHO CAME INTO THE WORLD AS A BABY.

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## INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to help get the conversation going.

### Notes:

- 1 What is the most interesting or special gift you have ever been given?
- 2 What do you consider to be the best gift you have ever given to someone else?

We all like to give someone we love a special and distinctive gift. Among the many blessings of Christmas is the ability to share gifts with family and friends. Maybe your shopping has been done for weeks or months, or maybe all your shopping still lies ahead of you. Most of us look forward to this time spent with those we love the most sharing the gift we have in and for each other. In sending Jesus as the Savior, God gave the world a unique and irreplaceable gift—His one and only Son. As today's text reminds us, our response to this gift should be one of gratitude and praise.

## UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ LUKE 2:1-7.

A registration occurred in the Roman empire during the reign of Caesar Augustus. While modern historians have found no documentary evidence outside the Bible for an empire-wide registration at the time, Luke reported that it covered “all the world” and listed the name of the governor of Syria as additional evidence. Everyone returned to his own town to be counted. The registration probably included the gathering of names, occupations, and property ownership data. A return to one's own town might refer either to the person's place of birth

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or to the tribal region of the person's forefathers. Possibly it required a return to the place where a person owned property.

- How did Mary and Joseph demonstrate faithfulness to God in these verses? How did God demonstrate His faithfulness?
  
- How can we demonstrate our faithfulness to God through our obedience? What are some specific, common obstacles that keep you from everyday obedience?

**Notes:**

Joseph brought Mary on the three-day journey. Although the text here describes them as engaged, Matthew's Gospel indicates that Joseph had married Mary by this time. However, the couple had not consummated their relationship sexually (see Matt. 1:25). Mary traveled in spite of being pregnant. Why did she undergo this strenuous trip? Possibly Joseph intended to make a permanent relocation to Bethlehem. More likely, though, he refused to leave Mary alone in Nazareth. Her situation might stir scandalous talk. To his credit, Joseph refused to hide Mary's pregnancy. He knew the unique circumstances of the pregnancy and the Child to be born. The couple's willingness to go about their normal lives publicly demonstrated their faithfulness to God.

Joseph lived in Nazareth in Galilee. However, he had to go to Bethlehem to register. Joseph's trip took him and Mary to the city of David because he came from the house and family line of David. Luke intentionally emphasized that Joseph went to register in the city of King David's birth (see 1 Sam. 17:12). Bethlehem was located about five miles south of Jerusalem. The town played a major role in Old Testament expectations about the birth of the Messiah. Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth, a village located about ninety miles to the north. The timing of the registration and the requirement for Joseph and Mary to travel to Bethlehem set Jesus' birth in a definite historical context. God used that context to fulfill the prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (see Mic. 5:2).

- How does living faithfully for the Lord demonstrate praise to Him?

- How do you typically respond when you know God is at work but you're not sure what He's doing? Explain. What helps us follow the Lord in obedience even when we don't know the details?

**Notes:**

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ LUKE 2:8-14.

- How did the shepherds respond at the appearance of the angel and the heavenly host? Why might they have been afraid?

An angel of the Lord, representing the presence of God, interrupted the quiet setting. The glory of the Lord shone around the unsuspecting shepherds. God's glory represented the full weight of His awesome presence in their midst. The brightness, enhanced by the night sky, symbolized the essence of God as He made Himself known to the shepherds. The shepherds responded to the visitation as we might expect. They were terrified. An extraordinary experience like this likely would elicit fear from anyone. Immediately, however, the angel calmed them by saying, "Fear not." The angel's first words offered confidence that dispelled the shepherds' fear.

- What did the angel reveal to the shepherds? Why was this "good news of great joy"?
- Why is it significant that this news is for "all people"? How does the fact that this news was revealed to shepherds highlight that reality?

The reason the shepherds did not need to fear was what the angel announced next: “I bring you good news of great joy.” God wanted the shepherds to know the good news about Jesus’ work of salvation. This good news was a reason to rejoice, not a cause to be afraid. Believers today likewise experience a sense of contentment, peace, and joy when God makes His presence known. This contentment, or joy, abides in spite of outward circumstances (see Rom. 5:3; Phil. 4:4; Jas. 1:2). Who benefits from the good news of Jesus’ coming? It comes for all the people, not simply a select few.

**Notes:**

Then the angel announced the content of the good news. It arrived today, which signaled a new era in how God relates to sinful humanity. The angel heralded the Savior. In that culture, people usually thought of “saviors” as those who claimed to heal or to rescue from danger. Jesus would infuse the title with a much deeper meaning. He had come to save people from their sins (see Matt. 1:21).

- Why did the angel tell the shepherds about the “sign” (v. 12)? Did the angel tell the shepherds to go search for the child? Explain.

The angel offered confirmation of the message’s authenticity through a sign. The shepherds would know it was true when they found the Christ Child wrapped snugly in cloth and lying in a feeding trough. Evidently the angel expected them to go and look for the sign. They would know they discovered the right baby when they found His feeding-trough crib.

- The angel host proclaimed, “Glory to God.” What does that mean? How do we give glory to God?
- How do we express praise today for the gift of the Messiah? How often do you find yourself doing this?

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The host proclaimed, “Glory to God in the highest.” They praised the One God who revealed Himself in all His sovereign greatness to lowly, sinful human beings. Jesus’ arrival attested to who God is to all who wish to know. Peace on earth burst on the scene in the form of a newborn Baby. Jesus enables earthly sinners to unite by faith with a sinless, sovereign God to bring peace in their hearts. Conflict may rage around us, but people redeemed by God know inner peace. God makes His peace available to people He favors. God favors those who belong to Him. The emphasis in this verse rests on God’s work of salvation, not on the people He saves. God favors any who come to Him in faith, even the “nobodies” of society.

**Notes:**

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ LUKE 2:15-21.

After the words and songs of praise by the angels, they returned to heaven and to God’s immediate presence. The shepherds lingered momentarily in a state of wonder in the fields. Then they determined to go straight to Bethlehem. What the shepherds saw and heard from the angels spurred them into action. Their encounter with God’s presence demanded not only a response of praise and awe but also of obedience.

- How did the shepherds encourage Joseph and Mary? Who is a source of encouragement for you in your faith?
- Why was it important for Mary to treasure these experiences and to meditate on them?

After the shepherds’ visit, Mary was treasuring up all these things in her heart. The events surrounding Jesus’ birth gave Mary plenty to think about. The full revelation of who Jesus was, however, remained unsettled in her mind. She spent time meditating on it all. The shepherds experienced Jesus’ uniqueness and told people about it. Mary, too, knew this Child’s unique nature. She expressed her praise in her own, private way.

The verb treasure means “to take great care of, value highly, or deeply appreciate.” For Mary to be “pondering them in her heart” (v. 19) meant she recognized the moment as meaningful and wanted to take it all in. This was not the first time Mary had heard the message that her baby was special (see Luke 1:26-35). Still, the shepherds’ report of the angel’s message affirmed Jesus’ identity and God’s plan.

**Notes:**

Meanwhile, the shepherds returned to their outpost. Daily responsibilities continued, but they were not the same. They spent time glorifying and praising God. The language of verse 20 indicates this practice continued as a way of life for them. Is this not God’s intention for all who meet His unique Son? The ongoing praise and worship of God by His creation pleases Him.

- Reflect on the first time you grasped the magnitude of Jesus’ birth. How has your life been changed by that glorious event?

## APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

- Consider a matter in which God is calling you to obey. If you choose faithfulness, what will it cost you in time, money, and reputation? In this same matter, what will it cost you if you choose not to be faithful to the Lord?
- Do you believe that the news of Christmas is good news for “all people”? Does the way you live reflect that belief? How has this challenged you to share the gospel?
- Shepherds were not well regarded and had little social standing. Who, on the margins of our community, can you take the gospel message to in word and in deed this season?

## PRAY

Express thanks and praise to God for sending the Messiah to save us. Ask God to help group members appreciate and respond to this good news, and to share the message of Christ with others as an overflow of their praise.

**Notes:**

## FOLLOW UP

Midway through this week, send a follow-up email to your group with some or all of the following information:

> Questions to consider as they continue to reflect on what they learned this week:

- What can you read or do this week that might lead you to a posture of worship that you are not accustomed to?

- What are some ways to keep Jesus' sacrificial work—which began with His birth—central to your thinking as you go about your week?

> A note of encouragement, following up on any specific prayer requests mentioned during your group gathering.

> The challenge to memorize Luke 2:11.

> The text for next week's study, so group members can read it in anticipation of next weekend: Luke 2:22-40.

## LUKE 2:1-21

2:1–3. Luke changes the scene quickly and radically. We go from the isolated Jordan wilderness to the senate in Rome, from a young man waiting for his chance to perform to the Roman Emperor seeking taxes.

**Notes:**

Luke shows his historical concerns by setting Jesus' birth in a world history framework. The problem lies in the ability of modern historians to recreate his historical framework. We can list governors of Syria around the time of Jesus' birth:

- M. Titius - 10 b.c.
- C. Sentius Saturnius - 9–6 b.c.
- P. Quintilius Varus - 6–4 b.c.
- P. Sulpicius Quirinius - a.d. 6–7

Jesus was born at least by 4 b.c. How could Quirinius have been responsible for the census? Also, Luke claims the entire world participated. No other records show such an extensive Roman census. Records do show Augustus sought to reorganize the financial policies and procedures of the empire. The census was one means he used to gain financial resources. Records also show Quirinius carried out an important census (referred to obliquely in Acts 5:37) but a decade after Jesus' birth. Without further records, we cannot solve this historical problem. Such solving is not necessary, however, to maintain confidence in God's Word. It would answer human questions but would not provide new theological insights or new directions from God for life.

2:4–7. Joseph, barely introduced in 1:27, enters center stage. Taxation followed his lineage, so he obediently traveled the ninety miles to Bethlehem, David's home, where the Scriptures said Messiah would be born (Mic. 5:2). Finally, we see Joseph, too, can trace his family tree to David. Joseph did not make the trip alone. Mary, still only engaged, not married but pregnant, joined him. Perhaps, she, too, like Syrian women over age 12, had to register for the census and pay taxes. Luke surprises us with his next statement, just as the event must have surprised Mary and Joseph. Jesus' appearance time had come. Simply, Luke reports, she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.

Following the practice of her day, Mary wrapped the baby in strips of cloth to keep his arms and legs straight. Jesus' first crib had usually served as a dining table for animals. Where they had eaten, he now slept. Why? Because all normal lodging places were full. Or perhaps because Joseph found a small one-room house with just enough room for him and his wife. The only available space for the child was in the animal trough attached to the wall that their room shared with the animals' quarters. The promised king came to his people but did not have enough power to secure a resting place for his birth. The descendants of David descended to a stable to find a place to lay the head of the King of kings. This is how God used earth's lowest to bring salvation from heaven's highest.

## Notes:

2:8–12. Luke quickly shifts scenes from the king lying where animals eat to burly men protecting animals in their natural homes. Shepherding had changed from a family business as in David's time (1 Sam. 16:11) to a despised occupation. Many shepherds were accused of robbery and using land they had no rights to. Shepherding was also a lonely occupation, particularly at night, as a shepherd stood his watch, making sure sleeping sheep did not wake up and wander and that prowling predators did not attack and devour the sheep. Only God would visit those in such a low occupation and raise them to witness to his salvation. Yet, shepherds had a tender side, counting the sheep constantly (Jer. 33:12–13), lifting the weak on their shoulders (see Isa. 40:11), and creating crude pens where the sheep could sleep (John 10:1).

Shift the spotlight once more from earth's lowly shepherds enduring a dark night to heaven's most glorious messenger. With the angel came God's glory, his shining majesty, the side of God humans can see and to which they can respond in confession, worship, and praise (see Isa. 60:1–3). As with Zechariah (1:12–13) and Mary (1:29–30), gazing at God's glorious angel terrified the shepherds and brought quick reassurance: Do not be afraid. Gospel is coming, good news. Gospel elicits joy, not fear. Joy is the inward feeling of happiness and contentment that bursts forth in rejoicing and praise. Joy comes not just to lowly shepherds or isolated parents far from home. Joy comes to all people. In the most unlikely place amid the most unlikely

spectators, God brushed aside the world's fears and provided the world reason for joy (cf. Isa. 9:3).

Joy centers not in something you earn or possess. Joy comes from God's gift, a tiny baby in a feed trough. But what a baby! Born in David's town, the child clasps heaven's greatest titles in his small fist. Savior, God's title (1:47), becomes the baby's (cf. 1:69). He will follow in the biblical tradition of deliverers (Judg. 3:9, 15; Neh. 9:27; Isa. 19:20; cf. Acts 5:31; 13:23). A troubled, powerless people will find a hero able to overcome the enemy. Christ or Messiah, the promised Anointed One, the king who would sit on David's throne and deliver oppressed Israel. The birthplace of the king who first united the nation now births the king who offers unity to the world. The Lord is the title Luke uses most often for Jesus. This title refers to the holy, unspeakable personal name of God himself. This baby in the manger was God himself (cf. 1:32, 35), with all power and all authority under heaven. Bow in obedience to the baby of Bethlehem. You will easily find him, the only baby wrapped up like an infant but lying in the trough where animals eat.

2:13–14. An angelic chorus burst on the scene, confirming the original angel's message and singing heavenly praise to God. God revealed his glory in brilliance that shepherds could recognize. Angels recognize the worth and weight of God's presence and praise him for it. God gains glory. People get peace. God is in heaven; people, on earth. All this happens because God's favor, his good will, his choice rests on people.

2:15–16. Angelic presence does not last forever. Angels leave. People must respond. How would shepherds respond—these tough men whose theological education came from the heavens and meadows rather than the synagogue and its rabbis? No quibbling or quarreling! Rather, they made an immediate decision—to go to Bethlehem to see what God had reported to them. They wanted to be part of the work God was doing in his world. They saw God's work in the face of a baby lying in a manger. What audacity that God would use society's lowest occupations and its most meager resources to begin his awesome work of salvation.

## Notes:

2:17–20. Seeing the baby Jesus was not enough for the shepherds. They had to share the story. Everyone they met heard from them about angelic visits, angelic songs of praise, and a trip to a manger to find the baby of God’s glory. Most important, they shared what had been told them about this child. The fact of the child was news. The function of the child was gospel. Shepherds found in a manger the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord himself. They let everyone in hearing distance know.

**Notes:**

One word characterized their audience: amazed. Shepherds became Jesus’ first evangelists. Surprise, astonishment greeted the first testimonies about Jesus. Surprise soon gave way to wonder and marvel at what God had done. Everyone in Bethlehem began talking about God’s mysterious surprise—a surprise made known firsthand only to a couple from Nazareth and unappreciated shepherds carrying out their lonely nighttime tasks. The mother responded differently. She had incubated amazement for nine months. Now she incubated experiences in her mind, experiences that gradually became treasured memories, each showing something new and different about her son, each confirming Gabriel’s promise of greatness for this Son of David and Son of the Most High. Surely nothing was impossible with God (1:30–37).

Shepherds came. They saw what God told them to expect. They proclaimed their findings to all who would listen. They turned back toward their jobs, a new song of praise in their hearts. What God had said, God had done. They returned to the sheep, never to be heard of again, but never to be forgotten.

The Son of God had to endure the rituals of a Jewish son. Obediently, Mary and Joseph performed the operation that dedicated the baby to the covenant faith of the Jews—a covenant faith initiated long ago as Abraham performed the first circumcision rites on his people (Gen. 17). Then the high moment came; they could officially announce his name. He would be called Jesus, just as the angel instructed (1:31). God’s Savior was here.