

LIFE GROUPS

# PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE



*Study of* **ADVENT**

NOV. 29 - DEC. 20

LARGE PRINT

20

LIFE GROUPS

# PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE



*Study of ADVENT*

NOV. 29 | LARGE PRINT

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# THE BIRTH OF JESUS FORETOLD

PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE

LUKE 1:26-38

NOVEMBER 29, 2020

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## HIGHLIGHTS

**TAKEAWAY: KNOWING JESUS GIVES US CAUSE TO REJOICE.**

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**WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: GOD DID THE IMPOSSIBLE, BRINGING THE SON OF GOD TO EARTH IN A VIRGIN WOMB TO BECOME THE SON OF DAVID WHO RULES AN ETERNAL KINGDOM.**

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**GOSPEL CONNECTION: THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF JESUS' BIRTH TO MARY BEGAN THE ACCOUNT OF THE INCARNATION OF JESUS, WHO WOULD PAY FOR THE SINS OF MANKIND.**

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## INTRODUCTION

- 1 What do you know about the circumstances surrounding your birth? Why are these stories that we like to remember and retell?
- 2 If you are a parent, what kind of planning and preparation went into making your heart and your home ready for your child(ren)?

The message of Christmas is less about the infancy of Jesus and more about the deity of Jesus. Jesus left the comfort of heaven and the perfect intimacy of the Father to come to earth, live as a man, and pave the way for us to be reconciled to God. This incarnation is not a footnote in the gospel story but a critical piece of it. The circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth and His baptism, which marked the beginning of His public ministry, give us crucial insight into who Jesus is and what He came to do.

## UNDERSTANDING

> READ LUKE 1:26-33.

The announcement of Jesus' birth carried the authority of God. It came in the sixth month, a reference to the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy with John the Baptist. Luke previously recorded that announcement (see Luke 1:13). Both that message and this one came through God's authorized representative—the angel Gabriel. The truth of this announcement came from the highest source. Although Mary hailed from an insignificant town in Galilee called Nazareth, the message that came to her held great significance.

Jesus' birth came about in a unique way, starting with the fact that Mary, His mother, was a virgin and conceived Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit. At first these things troubled Mary (v. 29), which would be a natural response to the appearance of an angel unfolding the plan of God.

- How do we see the big picture of God's redemptive plan coming together in the circumstances of Jesus' birth?

When angels appear to people in Scripture, the universal response is fear because it is uncommon and unexpected. Mary was a young, engaged woman. In first-century Jewish culture, being betrothed was as good as being married. Had Joseph been a less righteous man, he would have had every right to divorce her for this interruption. Despite the angel's presence and his assurance that she was in God's favor, Mary's initial response to the angel was an honest one: "How will this be?" (v. 34). But as the angel revealed God's plans, Mary came to see God's plans for her life and for the salvation of the world. Like Adam and Eve, Abraham, David, and countless others, God chose to show Mary favor and involve her in this way.

- Describe why it was important for Jesus to be born of a virgin.
- Read Romans 5:12-21. What does Jesus' humanity teach us about the plan of God?

The angelic announcement of Jesus' birth included a description of who this child would be. The angel confirmed beyond any shadow of a doubt that the child in Mary's womb was the promised Messiah the people of Israel had longed and prayed for. This baby was the undeniable proof that God keeps all of His promises. However, for God's plan to unfold, Jesus must have been born of a virgin. The virgin birth means that Jesus did not inherit the sin of Adam with which the rest of humanity is tainted. He alone is qualified to live a perfect life and present the life He lived to God as an acceptable sacrifice for sinners.

- What words and phrases did the angel use to describe Jesus (vv. 31-33)? Take a few minutes to discuss the significance of each of these details about Him.

To help Mary (and us) understand the significance of Jesus' birth, the angel gave her more insight into who this child would be. The name Jesus (v. 31) means "Deliverer" or "Savior," confirming Jesus' identity as the Messiah, one who would save God's people from sin. "Son of the Most High" establishes Jesus as the Son of God, and one with God Himself. Jesus' rulership over the throne of David connected Jesus to the promise God made to David in 2 Samuel 7:12-13, that his heir would rule over God's kingdom forever. His reign over Jacob's descendants also placed Jesus in the lineage of Abraham, fulfilling God's covenant promises to him as well (Gen. 12; 15). Every detail of Jesus' birth is a necessary and important piece of the salvation story.

> READ LUKE 1:34-35.

When Mary questioned Gabriel, she got answers. When Zechariah did the same thing (Luke 1:5-24), he lost the ability to speak as a consequence of his unbelief. What was the difference? Zechariah, being skeptical, wanted a sign as proof of the angel's promise. And he got his sign—the loss of speech. Mary, though, sought understanding. She recognized that the angel's announcement would involve a virgin birth, and wondered how that was to be accomplished.

- What did Mary want to know? What additional information did the angel give her? Do you think his response answered all her questions? Explain.

Mary took in the angel's comments about the Child to come. Her question, however, set up the further explanation offered in verse 35. "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" She questioned how a virgin could conceive and give birth. Mary still thought in natural, physical terms. God, however, operates on a supernatural level. The angel responded to Mary's query by saying, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you." The Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Godhead, is God present in His power. He acted to make the conception happen apart from the normal biological process. Mary's human abilities played no part in this process. She simply made herself available to God.

- Based on the angel's message, what can believers today understand about Jesus' identity?

The term "Most High" emphasized God's part in this. He acted directly to overshadow Mary. God took over. And when God takes over, miraculous things happen. Our human minds want to think Jesus' conception happened like that of any baby, but God does what He can do in any way that He chooses. He miraculously caused Mary to conceive Jesus. Luke identified the Child as the holy One. Only God makes things holy. Holiness indicates something or someone set aside by God to be used to accomplish His purpose. Conceived of the Holy Spirit, Jesus came as the Son of God. The angel clarified Jesus' identity as of divine origin. Who Jesus is outweighs even the miracle of how He came to be conceived in Mary!

- What is the difference between asking God questions and questioning God?
- How does God respond when we question Him? When we don't hear an answer from God, how should we deal with our unanswered questions?

God welcomes our doubts and questions as long as we are honest and open to hearing the truth. We should not use our questions as excuses for not believing. Many answers may be found by studying the Scriptures, but God is not obligated to answer our every question. Do questions by believers signal a lack of faith? Not necessarily. God can answer any question asked of Him. Sincere questions do not offend Him. On the contrary, they represent one method by which Christians grow spiritually. In His answers, God provides assurance to those who seek His wisdom.

> READ LUKE 1:36-38.

- How do you think the news about Mary's relative Elizabeth helped Mary trust the Lord in regard to His plan for her life?

- Why did Mary refer to herself as a slave? What did this reveal about her willingness to obey?

The angel urged Mary to consider the case of her relative Elizabeth. He offered further evidence of God's power to assure Mary. Because of their family relationship, Mary probably knew about Elizabeth's pregnancy. She had conceived even in old age. Now Elizabeth was six months along. Under normal conditions, her advanced age prohibited childbearing. Her pregnancy, however, illustrated God's ability to do what He pleases.

- How should we respond to the truth of who Jesus is—the Messiah, the incarnate Son of God who took away the sins of the world?
- What does the statement “nothing will be impossible with God” (v. 37) mean in the context of this Scripture passage? What does it mean for us today?

The angel stated, “For nothing will be impossible with God.” The verse can be translated literally as, “for shall not be powerless any word from God.” In other words, when God speaks something into action, anything He desires can happen. God enabled a childless woman to give birth and a virgin to be pregnant. Mary submitted to God's desires, saying, “I am the servant of the Lord.” Did she understand it all? Even if she did not, she made herself available for God to work through her. She accepted slave status, which meant total submission and obedience. Nothing indicates that she hesitated even for a moment over possible social consequences for her and Joseph.

- What does it look like for believers today to submit to the truth about Jesus? How are our lives different when we surrender ourselves to serve Him, as Mary did?

## APPLICATION

- What biblical claims about God, Christ, or humanity do you find hard to understand or accept? How will you keep an open mind to search for and listen to the truth?
- What questions have you brought to God lately? What results did you get from those questions?
- How do you accept and acknowledge God when His plans require you to change your plans? How are you addressing this submission in your life today?

## PRAY

Pray that as you listen to the truth of God's Word, all your doubts and questions would be answered. Give your life in surrender to Jesus and the relationship with God that He makes possible.

LIFE GROUPS

# PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE



*Study of ADVENT*

DEC 6 | LARGE PRINT

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# MARY'S SONG

## PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE

LUKE 1:39-56

DECEMBER 6, 2020

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### HIGHLIGHTS

**TAKEAWAY: GOD PROVIDES CONFIRMATION FOR THE PROMISES HE GIVES.**

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**WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: MARY WAS SO EXCITED ABOUT THE NEWS CONCERNING JESUS THAT SHE RAN TO TELL HER COUSIN ELIZABETH, THEN SHE CELEBRATED THE LORD'S GREATNESS IN A SONG TO HIM.**

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**GOSPEL CONNECTION: THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT JESUS IS WORTH CELEBRATING.**

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## INTRODUCTION

- 1 How would you define authentic joy? How is it different than happiness?
- 2 Can you share about a time when you were genuinely joyful? How do you typically express your joy?

Jesus' identity as our Savior is the ultimate demonstration of God's grace. We did nothing to deserve a Savior, but through God's Son, a way was made for us to experience redemption, the atonement for our sins and eternity with God. The truth of God's grace should be a source of immeasurable joy for us, as it was for Mary. Today, we will see the joy of Christmas that Mary shared with her cousin Elizabeth.

Historically, dancing, like leaping, was an expression of joy. Jewish people recognized that the fetus was able to sense and respond to stimuli. (Indeed, while occasionally suggesting that the fetus's gender could be changed by prayer up until birth, some later rabbinic tradition also affirmed that infants could sin, sing, and so forth in the womb.) Some pagan stories also told of babies dancing in their mother's wombs or speaking in infancy, but pagans generally regarded these events as evil omens. In today's passage, John's activity was instead a result of his prenatal sensitivity to the prophetic Spirit.

## UNDERSTANDING

> READ LUKE 1:39-45.

Mary set out for the region of Judea to visit Elizabeth. Because of Elizabeth's unique situation, Mary knew they shared a common bond. Elizabeth understood Mary's situation like no one else. Upon Mary's arrival, Elizabeth exclaimed with a loud cry. This showed her excitement at the opportunity to visit with Mary. It could also be an indication that God inspired Elizabeth's blessing that followed.

- Describe the setting of these verses and what you think this experience meant to both women.
- What is the significance of each statement in Elizabeth's greeting to Mary (vv. 42-45)? How did Mary respond to her greeting?
- Do you think Mary hurried to visit Elizabeth because she wanted to see if the angel's information was correct, or because she believed the angel's information was correct? Explain.
- Why did Elizabeth respond as she did when Mary visited her? What did the Holy Spirit reveal to Elizabeth about Mary's child?

Elizabeth referred to Mary as the most blessed of women. The superlative "most" emphasized Mary's status as blessed above all others. God chose her for a high purpose. Additionally, Elizabeth stated, "Blessed is the fruit of your womb!"

She acknowledged the unique nature of the Child that Mary would bear. Elizabeth humbly wondered, "Why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?", expressing her sense of unworthiness to receive Mary as a guest. Note, however, that the emphasis in this comment rests on the Child. Although God worked in a miraculous way to provide a son for Elizabeth, she proclaimed the superiority of the One Mary was carrying.

Evidence of Jesus' special character came to Elizabeth when her baby leaped for joy inside her. She interpreted the movement of her baby as confirmation of the supernatural nature of Mary's child. The joy of Elizabeth's child resulted from his awareness of Jesus' divine nature. John, though unborn, acted in a way that showed joy.

Even in this unsettling circumstance, Mary experienced a blessed state or happy assurance because she believed and trusted God. Her faith anticipated that what was spoken to her by the Lord would be fulfilled! What a contrast to Elizabeth's husband Zechariah. When introduced to the concept of a miracle birth for his own son, Zechariah had doubted God (see Luke 1:18).

> READ LUKE 1:46-56.

Mary burst out in a song of praise (1:46-55). This passage has been called the Magnificat, the first word in the Latin translation. The song verbalized Mary's gratitude that God selected her. She said, "My soul magnifies the Lord." The reference to "soul" and "spirit" (see 1:47) meant that Mary praised God with all her being. Her first words exclaimed God's greatness. She also understood the eternal impact of what God was doing through her.

- What is the central theme of Mary's song? What can this teach us about the themes in our worship songs?
- In Mary's culture, it was a disgrace to be unmarried and pregnant. Why, then, did Mary rejoice over God's actions toward her?

Mary reflected on God's greatness shown in His actions toward her. Only God displays that kind of ability. The tense of the verb *proclaims* indicates that Mary "kept on proclaiming." Her confident assurance lasted beyond this one ecstatic moment. Mary continued, "And my spirit has rejoiced." From the depths of her being, Mary conveyed a holy joy. Here the tense of the verb *rejoiced* reflects one significant expression of joy.

Mary's joy came from her realization that God was her Savior. Mary rejoiced that God came near to her and rescued her from her lowly state. He bestowed on her a unique privilege. She experienced the freedom to serve the One who showered His grace on her. Later, she would realize that God's salvation in the Child she was carrying went far beyond earthly status and human privilege.

- What aspects of your relationship with the Lord bring you joy?
- What does a joyful life look like? Why should joy be a characteristic of a believer?

Mary acknowledged that God looked on her with favor. This divine act of kindness served as the basis for her praise. God saw the humble condition of His slave. A young girl from an obscure town meant little to people in that society. Mary grasped the lowly situation in which she existed. In her mind she deserved no rescue. God chose to use her anyway. As a result of God's selection, Mary realized that coming generations would call her blessed. Believers in the future would acknowledge the mighty work God did in her. This served not for her praise but for God's. Jesus' birth took place because of God's work. Similarly, Mary's blessing came through what God did in her. He enabled her to serve Him in ways that called attention to God's greatness.

- Do you struggle with feelings of inadequacy when it comes to serving God? How does Mary's story encourage or inspire you?

Some believers feel as though their gifts fall short of being God-worthy. The humility demonstrated by Mary provides us a good example. She possessed no obvious resources for quality service, but with God's help and support she proved to be the servant God needed at the time.

## APPLICATION

- Mary sang her joy and shared her joy. How do worship and evangelism relate to one another? How are you investing in both?
- How can we make time in this group not only to share prayer requests but to share the joy that we have found in following our Savior?
- Who in your life most needs to hear about the joy of Christmas? Would they be open to having a conversation? How could you use this time of year as a jumping off point?

## PRAY

Close in prayer, voicing prayers of thanksgiving and praise for who Jesus is and what He has done for us.  
Who might you share that joy with?

LIFE GROUPS

# PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE



*Study of ADVENT*

DEC 13 | LARGE PRINT

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# ZECHARIAH'S PROPHECY

## PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE

LUKE 1:57-80

DECEMBER 13, 2020

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### HIGHLIGHTS

TAKEAWAY: WE ALL STRUGGLE WITH BELIEVING GOD'S GOOD PROMISES. SOMETIMES, THEY JUST SEEM TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE. AT TIMES, GOD DISCIPLINES US FOR OUR LACK OF FAITH. BUT HE INTENDS FOR THAT DISCIPLINE TO LEAD US TO GREATER ACTS OF FAITH SO THAT WE CAN EXPERIENCE MORE OF HIS BLESSINGS.

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WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: IT OFTEN TAKES TIME FOR SOMEONE TO RESPOND TO THE WORK GOD IS DOING IN THEIR HEART.

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GOSPEL CONNECTION: ZECHARIAH KNEW HE WAS PART OF SOMETHING BIG THAT GOD WAS DOING. IN HIS PROPHECY RECORDED IN LUKE 1:67-79, HE REJOICED THAT GOD WAS ABOUT TO SEND THE MESSIAH, AND HE CELEBRATED THE FACT THAT HIS OWN SON WOULD PREPARE THE WAY FOR THE LORD.

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## INTRODUCTION

- 1 What are some promises from the Bible that seem “too good to be true”?
- 2 Why do we sometimes struggle to believe God’s promises?

“Junk mail” used to be something that would come from the post office. These days, “junk mail” usually refers to the billions of unsolicited emails we receive each year. Because of the unsavory nature of many of these emails, they have been nicknamed “spam.” Most of the time these emails are easy to spot, so we ignore them or delete them and move through the rest of our day without giving them another thought.

Unfortunately, “too good to be true” is often how we react at times to messages from God. For example, 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Yet, we may doubt that God will forgive us for a particular sin we have stumbled into (again!). The descriptions of heaven and the promise that we will one day enjoy God’s presence are hard to believe because they are so amazingly grand!

The father of John the Baptist, a priest named Zechariah, was no different than us. He and his wife were elderly and had waited years to have a child. When an angel announced to Zechariah that he would finally have a son and that his son would be the forerunner of the Messiah, Zechariah did not believe it at first. Consequently, God disciplined Zechariah for his unbelief. Today, we will look at Zechariah’s story to learn from his mistake and hopefully avoid similar discipline from the Lord.

## UNDERSTANDING

In Luke 1, the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah with a message from God: Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth would have a son they would name John, who would prepare the nation for the coming of the Messiah. Although he had hoped that this day would come, Zechariah's initial reaction was doubt, so God disciplined him by removing his ability to speak until his son was born. Once God restored Zechariah's ability to speak, Zechariah was able to express all that he had been thinking about for the last nine months: a song of praise to the Lord who had kept His promises.

> READ LUKE 1:5-23.

The Gospel of Luke gives us the story of the earliest event in the New Testament period. Before an angel appeared to Mary or Joseph, before the wise men left their homes to follow the star, and before Caesar decreed that all the world should be registered, the angel Gabriel was sent to a priest named Zechariah. Gabriel's comment, "Your prayer has been heard" (v. 13) indicates that Zechariah had prayed for a son. Although he probably had prayed about that for years, it seems that he had lost hope of his prayer being answered since he and his wife were both elderly.

- What is one thing you have been praying about for years? Do you still have hope that God will answer that prayer, or have you lost hope?

God was answering Zechariah's prayer in a way far beyond what Zechariah had imagined. Gabriel told Zechariah that he would have a son, but not just any son. This son would be the fulfillment of one of the last prophecies given in the Old Testament (see Mal. 4:5-6). Not only would Zechariah and Elizabeth have a child in their old age (like Abraham and Sarah), but also that child would play a key role in paving the way for the arrival of the Messiah. This seemed too good to be true!

So Zechariah's response is understandable: "How shall I know this?" (v. 18). Zechariah's faith was tested, but he failed the test. And yet, God was not done with Zechariah. Stumbling momentarily in our faith does

not permanently disqualify us from serving the Lord. God disciplined Zechariah by removing his ability to speak so that he would learn from his mistake and grow spiritually.

- Based on what happened to Zechariah, what should our attitude be toward those requests we have been praying about for years and years? Should we ever lose hope that God will answer that prayer?

> READ LUKE 1:57-66.

After recording some events in the lives of Mary and Elizabeth, Luke turned his focus back to Zechariah. By the time the baby was born, Zechariah had been mute for at least nine months. That's a long time to think about what you did wrong! Eight days after the birth, Zechariah once again had the opportunity to exercise his faith. Through His angel, God had commanded Zechariah, "You shall call his name John" (v. 13). Most likely, Zechariah had communicated this to Elizabeth (probably through writing), which led her to tell their friends and neighbors that the baby's name would be John. But when they objected, "None of your relatives is called by this name" (v. 61), all eyes turned to Zechariah.

- Describe a time when you had to step out in faith and obey the Lord, even when others discouraged you from doing so.
- How did God prepare you for that moment? How did God use that act of obedience in your own life and in the lives of others?

This time, Zechariah passed the test. Although still mute, he found a way to obey: "He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, 'His name is John'" (v. 63). Zechariah took a step of faith and God blessed him for it, along with those around him. Because of his act of obedience, God restored his ability to speak. Yet more significantly, the people around Zechariah were affected: "Fear came on all their neighbors and all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea" and

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people started asking, “What then will this child be?” (v. 65). Zechariah’s obedience contributed to the ministry of John the Baptist. Within the first few weeks of life, John was already “making ready for the Lord a people prepared” (Luke 1:17).

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ LUKE 1:67-80.

A momentary lapse in faith does not disqualify us from doing great things for God. This is clear from the ending of Zechariah’s story. He had nine months to ponder what God was doing through his family. As a priest and a devout follower of God (v. 6), he would have been familiar with the Old Testament promises about the Messiah and His forerunner. When Zechariah finally was able to speak again, he “was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied” (v. 67).

Similar to the Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, Zechariah’s poem is written in the style of Hebrew poetry: parallel lines full of vivid imagery which explore truth from various angles. The poem can be divided into two parts: verses 68-75 describe the work God would accomplish through the coming Messiah, and verses 76-79 describe the work God would do through John, the forerunner. There are numerous Old Testament references in the poem, including an allusion to Malachi 3:1 in verse 76: “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me” (Mal. 3:1); “you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways” (Luke 1:76). Recalling that Gabriel also had described the work of John in terms of preparation, verse 76 is further evidence that Zechariah had learned his lesson. He was embracing the promises God had given him through the angel.

- What words would you use to describe Zechariah’s character at the beginning of this chapter? What words would you use to describe Zechariah’s character at the end of this chapter?
- Describe a time when God gave you a second chance to obey Him. Did you step out in faith the second time?

There are things in life that are indeed “too good to be true.” However, a promise from God is not one of them. In the temple, Zechariah had a lack of faith and experienced God’s discipline. After his son’s birth, Zechariah took a step of faith and experienced God’s blessing. And as Luke’s Gospel closes on the life of Zechariah, we hear Zechariah’s praise and see that in the end, he had a heart of faith. Although God’s promise to him seemed too good to be true, it was the truth. May we all learn from Zechariah’s experience and respond in faith the first time God gives us a promise.

## APPLICATION

- Is there any area in your life where you recently failed to obey the Lord? Is God currently disciplining you for anything?
- Is there something on the horizon that you are going to need to trust God about? How do you think God is preparing you for that event now?
- Do you feel defeated in your life because of a recent failure of faith? How can the story of Zechariah encourage you to press on?

## PRAY

Pray and thank God for His promises to His people. Thank Him that there is no promise of His that is actually too good to be true. Pray for further faith in Him and a deepened desire to trust Him in all of life.

LIFE GROUPS

# PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE



*Study of ADVENT*

DEC 20 | LARGE PRINT

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# THE BIRTH OF JESUS

## PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE

LUKE 2:1-21

DECEMBER 20, 2020

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### 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

- 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

> 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 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?

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?

> 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.

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?

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.

> 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.

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

- 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.