

LIFE GROUPS

TEACHING PLAN



Study of ADVENT

NOV. 29 - DEC. 20

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NOVEMBER 29

20

THE BIRTH OF JESUS FORETOLD

LUKE 1:26-38

NOVEMBER 29, 2020

TEACHING PLAN

PREPARATION

- > Spend the week reading through and studying Luke 1:26-38. 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: KNOWING JESUS GIVES US CAUSE TO REJOICE.

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.

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.

INTRODUCTION

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

Notes:

- 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

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

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER 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.

Notes:

- 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.

Notes:

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.

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER 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.

Notes:

- 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.

Notes:

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER 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.

Notes:

- 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

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

- 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.

FOLLOW UP

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

Notes:

- > Questions to consider as they continue to reflect on what they learned this week:
 - Is there a situation in your life that doesn't make sense? How does Mary's story encourage you that God knows what He's doing in that situation?

 - What are some practical ways you can remind yourself that God is working His plan in your life?

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

- > The challenge to memorize Luke 1:38.

- > The text for next week's study, so group members can read it in anticipation of next weekend: Luke 1:39-56.

LUKE 1:26-38

1:26. Six months into Elizabeth's pregnancy, God took the second step in his climatic act in salvation history. The scene of action was far from the nation's religious center where Zechariah sacrificed and met Gabriel, far even from the Judean hill country of Elizabeth. The angel Gabriel was again in action, but this time in Nazareth—an insignificant village known only as the home base for the eighteenth of the twenty-four courses of priests.

Notes:

1:27. The virgin birth is Luke's central emphasis in this section. Having set the scene in verse 26, he begins the narrative with the words to a virgin. He will conclude this narrative section by telling how the virgin birth is God's possible impossibility (vv. 34-37). The epilogue to the narrative (v. 38) shows Mary's willingness to be a part of God's impossible acts.

Mary the virgin was pledged to be married to a man named Joseph. The language comes from Deuteronomy 22:23. It describes an engagement, the result of a public ceremony before witnesses by which a man and woman were legally considered married but did not live or sleep together. At this stage the bride price had already been paid to the woman's family, and the man had legal responsibility for the woman. This engagement could be broken only through divorce. Engagement usually lasted about a year, with the girl living with her parents. Often the girl was only twelve to fourteen years old. In the forerunner's birth, the expectant father occupied center stage. Here it is the expectant mother. The father is mentioned at this point only to introduce his Davidic ancestry.

1:28. Mary is the highly favored one—the recipient of a special blessing from God. She has experienced God's undeserved, unmerited grace in a special way. This does not change who Mary is or give her a status beyond other people. It singles her out as a special instrument whom God chose to use in his gracious plan of salvation. The grace Mary received was God's presence with her.

1:29. The highly favored becomes the greatly troubled. Luke uses *Siata-paxihe*, the only appearance of the word in the New Testament. It describes something thoroughly stirred up,

confused, and perplexed. A divine messenger should be enough to stir up confusion in a young teenager. An angel who promises a special audience with God is even more confusing. So Mary stirred these thoughts around in her mind, trying to find a meaning to them and the steps to take in light of them. She had never received such a greeting! What was she to make of it?

Notes:

1:30. The heavenly messenger understood her troubled mind, so the angel repeated the comforting words Zechariah had heard (v. 13): Do not be afraid. Why should she not be afraid? Mary found favor. The Greek word is *xaris*—unmerited, undeserved grace from God. God’s grace removes all fear.

1:31-33. The angel’s message did not ease Mary’s confused mind immediately—not with a divine birth announcement for a baby named “Yahweh is salvation.” Not with an explanation that this baby would be the new David, king over all Israel, bearing the awesome title, “Son of God” (see Ps. 2:7). But what a kingdom—an eternal rule without end. No other king had such a kingdom! Who could this baby be?

1:34. Confusion reigned. Mary’s questions poured forth. One major obstacle to such a “blessed event” was that she was a virgin. A birth announcement to her was premature, if not nonsense.

1:35. God’s messenger had the answer. The Holy Spirit would work a miracle. This child would be born through a special miracle of God—the creation of God’s Son in a human womb. This Son of God would be different from kings in Jerusalem. He would be the holy one.

1:36-37. Mary’s was not the only divine miracle. Elizabeth the baron would be Elizabeth the rejoicing mother. Her six-month pregnancy verified that God was at work again in mysteriously wonderful ways. He does the impossible. Then and now!

1:38. In humble submission, Mary was now ready to serve God and follow his will. As pregnancy had lifted Elizabeth’s disgrace it would soon bring the virgin Mary disgrace. Both agreed to do what God required (see v. 25). With his mission accomplished, the angel left.

LIFE GROUPS

TEACHING PLAN



Study of ADVENT

DECEMBER 6

20

MARY'S SONG

LUKE 1:39-56

DECEMBER 6, 2020

TEACHING PLAN

PREPARATION

- > Spend the week reading through and studying Luke 1:39-56. 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: GOD PROVIDES CONFIRMATION FOR THE PROMISES HE GIVES.

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.

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

INTRODUCTION

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

Notes:

- 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

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

Notes:

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER 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.

Notes:

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).

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER 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?

Notes:

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?

Notes:

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

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

- 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, giving group members the opportunity to voice prayers of thanksgiving and praise for who Jesus is and what He has done for us. Then ask who we might share that joy with.

FOLLOW UP

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

Notes:

- > Questions to consider as they continue to reflect on what they learned this week:
 - Read Luke 1:51 again. One of the things Mary praised God for was His power. How does God exert strength in the power of His arm over the world?
 - How have you seen His power at work through our church recently? Through your life?

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

- > The challenge to memorize Luke 1:46-47.

- > The text for next week's study, so group members can read it in anticipation of next weekend: Luke 1:57-80.

LUKE 1:39-56

1:39-41. Ready to serve but also anxious to see evidence of God's other miracle, Mary headed for the hill country to visit relatives. First words of greeting brought encouraging confirmation in two ways: the baby jumped in the womb and the Spirit spoke.

Notes:

1:42-45. Spirit-inspired words from Elizabeth rained blessing on Mary. They distinguished Mary from all other women. She had God's grace and presence (v. 28) in unique measure, but not in measure that lifted her up for eternal praise and worship. Mary's blessing came not from who she was or would become. Mary's blessing came from the holy baby whom she carried in her womb. This blessed child placed Mary in the position of blessing. God had turned his eyes to Elizabeth (v. 25) but had set his Savior in Mary. Just to stand in such presence awed Elizabeth. How did she deserve the opportunity to stand in the presence of the mother of her Lord? Even before his birth, Jesus was recognized as Lord, the Messiah of God. Such recognition came from humble priestly folks in the Judean hill country, not royal people in the nation's capital. The same humility characterized Mary. Now we see why she was blessed. She believed God's promise. She expected God to accomplish what he said he would do. Faith brings blessing.

1:46-49. Mary's faith displayed itself in praise. In a song resembling Hannah's in 1 Samuel 2, Mary praised God for his great acts for her. Her praise included two actions: giving glory to God and rejoicing in the presence and actions of God. The Lord had looked down on Mary with loving care. He saw the low economic and social state in which she lived. Such a state would be short-lived. God had placed her in a state of blessing. Because of her son, humiliation would disappear. From now on throughout all history people would recognize who she was and the state of blessing she occupied. She did nothing to earn or deserve this. The almighty God had caused it with his mighty acts. So praise him. Call him holy. See him as the

transcendent God so uniquely pure and separated from sinful humans.

1:50-53. This holy one is not totally separated. He reaches down in mercy, finding in each generation people who worship him. He attacks the proud, removing them from political power and position. He pays careful, loving attention to the humble, raising them up to new positions of importance. The poor find food from him, while the rich are given nothing. No wonder the young virgin praised God.

1:54-55. Such praise reflected historical reality. The history of Israel tells the story of God's mercy. Start with Genesis 12 and read onwards. Each page recalls tender, loving salvation for an undeserving people. Yes, God does what he promises (cf. v. 45).

1:56. Mary stayed until Elizabeth was ready to give birth to John (see v. 36), then she returned to her people. What a surprise for Nazareth! An unmarried local girl comes down from the hills at least three months pregnant. It made no difference to Mary. God had confirmed his word for her. A baby leaped. The Spirit moved. Elizabeth blessed. God gave her a song of praise. Let the people say what they would. Mary was willing to bear the disgrace in order to become God's instrument of grace.

Notes:

LIFE GROUPS

TEACHING PLAN



Study of ADVENT

DECEMBER 13

20

ZECHARIAH'S PROPHECY

LUKE 1:57-80

DECEMBER 13, 2020

TEACHING PLAN

PREPARATION

- > Spend the week reading through and studying Luke 1:57-80. 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 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.

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

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.

INTRODUCTION

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

Notes:

- 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

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

Notes:

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.

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER 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.

Notes:

- 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?

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER 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?

Notes:

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 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?

Notes:

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

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

Notes:

- 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.

FOLLOW UP

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

Notes:

- > Questions to consider as they continue to reflect on what they learned this week:
 - When have you been overwhelmed by God's faithfulness and power? Did it lead you to praise?
 - Many people heard of God's faithfulness from Zechariah and Elizabeth's testimony of this experience. How have you seen God work recently? Who would benefit from hearing about that experience?
- > A note of encouragement, following up on any specific prayer requests mentioned during your group gathering.
- > The challenge to memorize Luke 1:66.
- > The text for next week's study, so group members can read it in anticipation of next weekend: Luke 2:1-21.

LUKE 1:57-80

1:56-57. Mary visited Elizabeth shortly after hearing she was “in the sixth month” of her pregnancy (vv. 36,39-40) and stayed with her about three months. Mary may have returned to Nazareth either shortly before or after the birth of Elizabeth’s son, John. Given their spiritual bond and the great roles their sons would play in God’s plan, it seems likely that Mary stayed for John’s birth.

Notes:

1:58. Since Elizabeth remained secluded for the early months of her pregnancy, it is possible that many of her neighbors and relatives first learned of God’s great mercy toward her at or near the time of John’s birth. The birth of a son was seen as favor from God.

1:59-63. In the OT, a child’s name was more often given at birth. Perhaps Zechariah’s inability to speak at John’s birth caused the delay. Because Luke was writing for a Gentile audience that was unfamiliar with Jewish rites, he explained that Mosaic law (Lv 12:3) required parents to circumcise a male child (i.e., cut off the foreskin of his sex organ) on the eighth day. It was customary to name a boy baby after his father, in this case Zechariah, or his grandfather. Elizabeth had apparently already learned from Zechariah in writing that God wished for them to name the baby John. That neighbors and relatives motioned to Zechariah (rather than spoke) may imply that he was temporarily deaf as well as mute (vv. 20,22). A writing tablet was a small wooden board covered with wax. A wooden stylus was used to etch words into the wax.

1:64. That Zechariah was again able to speak fulfilled Gabriel’s prediction.

1:65-66. The overall outcome of the preceding episode is that it was clear that the Lord’s hand was with the newborn John in a remarkable way and that everyone living in the region continued to ponder (took...to heart) the question, What...will this child become?

1:67. On the meaning of filled with the Holy Spirit, see Eph 5:18. It is ironic that Zechariah, being a priest (v. 5) and having prophesied, set the stage for the ministry of his son, John the Baptist. Though John hailed from a priestly family, he was called to serve as a prophet of the Most High (v. 76).

1:68-79. Zechariah's prophecy is traditionally called the "Benedictus," from the first word (praise) of verse 68 in the Latin Vulgate Bible.

1:68-70. The births of John the Baptist, the forerunner (v. 17; Isa 40:1-5; Mal 4:5-6), and Jesus, the Messiah, marked the initiation of the final stages of God's plan of salvation for His people. This salvation would require a payment of redemption on the cross by Jesus. An animal's horn symbolized strength or power (Dt 33:17). Jesus was from the house of... David (see v. 27; 3:30).

Notes:

1:71-75. The ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus fulfilled God's covenant with David (v. 69; 2Sam 7:12-16) and the oath that He swore to... Abraham (see Gen 12:1-3). As a result, in the Messiah's future reign, Israel would have full salvation from their enemies and would serve God in holiness and righteousness.

1:76. John was to be the prophet of the Most High who would go before Jesus, "the Son of the Most High" to prepare His ways (see Isa 40:3; Mal 3:1).

1:77. To give knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins was the emphasis of John the Baptist's preaching.

1:78-79. Dawn from on high speaks of the coming of Messiah (Mal 4:2). The Lord's visitation began with John's birth. The next part of that visit would be Jesus' birth (2:1-20). The phrase those who live in darkness and the shadow of death probably echoes Isa 9:1-2, which is cited in Mt 4:16. The way of peace with God is through faith in Christ (Rm 5:1).

1:80. This verse about John's upbringing is parallel to Lk 2:51-52, which is about Jesus' upbringing. Because Zechariah and Elizabeth were already quite old when John was born, they probably died while he was fairly young, which may explain why he grew up...in the wilderness of Judea, between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea. The day of his public appearance is recounted in 3:1-3. Since ministry for a Levite (which John was) began at 30 years old (Num 4:46-47), this is probably when he launched his ministry, as did Jesus (3:23).

LIFE GROUPS

TEACHING PLAN



Study of ADVENT

DECEMBER 20

20

THE BIRTH OF JESUS

LUKE 2:1-21

DECEMBER 20, 2020

TEACHING PLAN

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.

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

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

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

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?

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.