

Study Through the Bible

The People of the Nativity

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Click on the study title you'd like to see:

Study 1: THE GENEALOGY OF JESUS

Leader's Guide — Participant's Guide

Study 2: JOSEPH

Leader's Guide — Participant's Guide

Study 3: MARY

Leader's Guide — Participant's Guide

Study 4: THE SHEPHERDS

Leader's Guide — Participant's Guide

Study 5: THE ANGELS

Leader's Guide — Participant's Guide



Study Through the Bible

The People of the Nativity - Study 1

LEADER'S GUIDE

The Genealogy of Jesus

We tend to gloss over the genealogies in Scripture, but there's much about the human condition and about our Savior buried between the lines.

Everybody knows the genealogies are the biggest yawn in the Bible. "Rehoboam begat Abijah, and Abijah begat Ralph." It warms your heart about as much as reading a phone book. What's not often said, but understood, is that it's probably best to skip over "the begats" and not get bogged down in all those funny old names. Yet, at the same time, we pay lip service to 2 Timothy 3:16, which says, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching and reproof." If that's true, it includes the begats.

Scripture:
Matthew 1:1-17

Based on:
The sermon "Levi's Genes" by Vic Pentz, PREACHINGTODAY.COM

PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participant's Guide included at the end of this study.

What's obvious from the prominence given the names at the opening of Matthew's gospel is that what we consider to be the most boring, least interesting part of the Christmas story was of the utmost importance to the original audience. In Jesus' day, one's pedigree was a source of tremendous pride. To own land in Israel, you had to document your genealogy, which gave you the right to a piece of the Holy Land. Privileges were reserved for certain tribes. For example, to be a priest you had to be of the tribe of Levi.

Most of all, they expected the Messiah to come from a certain family, from the house and lineage of David. Even Jesus' bitterest critics never once quarreled with him about his descent from David. It must have been a matter of public record that Jesus was the heir to David and Abraham, and that as such he was the inheritor of the promises to Israel.

Yet, more than telling us simply who Jesus was, these verses tell us about God the Father. What Matthew is doing between the lines is preaching an eloquent message on the nature of God. You get the sense that there's more than meets the eye when you come to verse 17: "Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile in Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Christ."

Think of these three sections as a kind of line graph, sort of like a stock market report, charting the fortunes of Israel in the Old Testament: up, down, up, in the shape of an N. The first section of names begins with Abraham, in verse 2, and it rises up to King David. That line represents the mercy of God. But then from King David, it plummets downward and bottoms out with the Babylonian captivity we find described in the second section. That shows the judgment of God. And then Matthew ends by showing us the faithfulness of God, with Israel rising up from the Babylonian captivity to the birth of Jesus the Christ in the third section.

This genealogy reveals the mercy, judgment, and faithfulness of God.

Discussion Starter:

[Q] Silently read over Matthew 1:1–17. When finished, describe what you noticed. Then discuss the people you recognized in this genealogy. Tell what you know about them.

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: The genealogy from Abraham to David shows the mercy of God.

The most striking thing about that first section is the mention of four women (vv. 2–6). It was very unusual to mention women in a Jewish genealogy, and if one did mention women, it was only for the purpose of enhancing the purity and the nobility of a lineage.

For example, we might expect Matthew to mention some of the grande dames of the Old Testament, such as Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel, the wives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. After



all, their husbands are mentioned here, and they would lend a certain prestige to the lineage of Jesus, much as the Mayflower descendants would to our family tree. Yet, instead of mentioning those three great women, he mentions Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, two of whom aren't Jewish at all. Rahab was a Gentile prostitute, and Ruth was a Moabite woman. Matthew chooses women who do not in any way enhance or bring credibility to the untarnished Jewishness of Jesus. Quite the reverse, he chooses women who show how contaminated Jesus' bloodline was.

Matthew wants us to know that God's love is bigger than the Jewish race, that Jesus is the Savior of all people, that Jesus is the light to the Gentiles, and that he is the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham: "Through you shall all the nations of the world be blessed." God is not a sexist. God is not a racist. Matthew wants us to know that the blood of two Gentile mothers coursed through the blood of the Savior of the world.

Yet that does not begin to compare with Matthew's audacity as he continues on in this section, because not only were two of these women Gentiles, three of them were notorious sinners. With the exception of Ruth, none of these women had morals that were anything to write home about. We do not in our youth groups hold up Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba as role models for our young women. Tamar tricked Judah into having a child by her, and the child from that incestuous relationship became a grandfather of the Messiah. Rahab the harlot plied her trade on the walls of the city of Jericho.

The fourth woman mentioned is so scandalous that Matthew does not even mention her by name. Verse 6 reads, "David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife." And yet Bathsheba was a distant grandmother of our Lord.

It's as though Matthew has scoured the lineage of Jesus for the seediest women he can find. Why? Because he wants us to know that not only is God's love bigger than the Jewish race; God's love is bigger than your sin and my sin. God's love embraces us even within our sinfulness. God uses stained and soiled, but repentant, sinners to bring the Messiah. Even the begats of the Bible drip with the grace, love, and forgiveness of Jesus Christ. We find that he's a friend of sinners. He is the light to the Gentiles.

Suppose you could pick your family tree. Would you have a lot of shady characters and unwed mothers? One baby did pick his own pedigree, and look what he chose: an ordinary human family with scoundrels and saints mixed together. He had holy men like Abraham, wicked kings like Ahab, sweet saintly Ruth, and sexy siren Rahab. Jesus didn't fall out of heaven like a meteor. He was born in the usual way into the real world of a human family.

[Q] How would you define *mercy*?

Leader's Note: One definition is withholding the punishment we deserve.

[Q] What does this section of Scripture tell you about the mercy of God?

[Q] What does it tell you about your own background and mistakes?

[Q] If it gives you hope, explain why.



Teaching point two: The genealogy from David to the Babylonian captivity shows the judgment of God.

Now hang on tight to the mercy of God as we descend into the judgment of God. At the beginning of section two, Israel is riding high, wide, and handsome on the reign of David. They thought they were on the brink of paradise in B.C. 1000, when David was at the height of his reign. But suddenly it all crumbled, and everything was downhill from there.

Why did Israel fall apart and get carried off in chains? They turned their backs on God. They retained some of the outward forms of their religion, but their hearts were far from him. They divorced their religion from their behavior, so that they were as wicked as the nations around them.

Amos the prophet was one of many who warned Israel as to why they would face God's judgment. Read Amos 5:4–27.

- [Q] What was the key to Israel's salvation (v. 4)?
- [Q] Why does God want us to seek him? What would that do for us?
- [Q] What specific sins does Amos mention? Why do you think those things were so offensive to God?
- [Q] What does it look like in our lives if we "hate evil, love good" (v. 15)?
- [Q] Why did God hate Israel's religious behavior (vv. 21–24)?
- [Q] What similar religious behavior might we display that he would despise because of our sin?

Optional Activity

Purpose: To help us repent of sinful behavior.

Activity: Provide everyone with paper and pen. Ask them to list any of their behavior that matches what God has listed in Amos 5. Give them time to silently confess this and to ask God to help them to act righteously instead.

Teaching point three: The genealogy from the Babylonian captivity to Christ shows the faithfulness of God.

Finally, Matthew celebrates the faithfulness of our God. There was one thing that all of the people in these three sections had in common: they were waiting. The promise first came to Abram: "Through you shall all the nations of the world be blessed." And then it came to David: "Thy seed will I establish forever and build up thy throne for all generations." Meanwhile the people waited, like a sentry scanning the horizon for the first rays of dawn, like a child waiting for Christmas morning. Generation came, and generation went—still no Messiah.

So they waited some more and kept the genealogy straight to keep track of who might come and sit on the throne. They even rushed off and asked John the Baptist if he was the Christ.



We wait, too, and wonder if God is really faithful to his promises. We have to trust that God will move in his own way, in his own time, and in his own will. In Christ's genealogy, we see the faithfulness of our God; when that One came, he was a lineal descendent of King David, which meant that Jesus Christ has a literal right to sit on the throne of Israel. Herod was perfectly correct in his terror of this baby, because Jesus was heir to the throne.

Not only was he a son of David; he was also the Son of God. All the other people in this genealogy are the sons of earthly fathers. In verse 16, it refers to Joseph as Mary's husband. What a startling way to end a genealogy: he's not Joseph's boy; he's God's Son!

- [Q] What do you think it means that God is faithful?
- [Q] Read Galatians 4:4–5. Why is God's timing so different than our own? Why can we trust his timing?
- [Q] Since God has already sent his Messiah, what are we waiting for now?
- [Q] Why do we still feel discontent and impatient?
- [Q] Explain in practical terms what it means to you that God is faithful.

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

What does Jesus' genealogy mean for you and me today? It means that Christ's coming canceled the importance of that bloodline connecting the Jewish people to Abraham. People cannot grandfather their way into the kingdom of God on the coattails of their ancestors. All that matters now is faith in Jesus Christ.

This royal bloodline continues down through the ages and extends to this very day. God's genealogy can now be our genealogy, but blood has been replaced by faith. By faith in Jesus Christ we can become God's own children: "For as many as receive him, to them he gave power to become children of God, who were born not of blood but of God."

We all have earthly genealogies, and yet after a few generations we forget those genealogies. You may remember your grandfather or grandmother, but how many of you remember your great, great grandparents? Someday all of us are simply going to be a memory in the minds of our grandchildren. Then we're going to be a name in a faded family Bible. Finally we'll be forgotten altogether by this world, and all that will matter then is: Are we remembered in the mind of God?

Our descendants are going to forget us; you can count on it. But we can be members of God's family and never be forgotten, because Matthew's genealogy teaches us two things: First, here was a life like other lives, but, second, this life also was the revelation of a new life, a life that has the power to bring us out of darkness into light, out of death into eternal life with God in heaven.

Action Point: Do you find it hardest to believe in God's mercy, judgment, or faithfulness? Why? Discuss how you can begin to overcome your misconceptions about God. Pray for each other in each of these things.



— Study by Vic Pentz, with JoHannah Reardon



Study Through the Bible

The People of the Nativity - Study 1

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

The Genealogy of Jesus

We tend to gloss over the genealogies in Scripture, but there's much about the human condition and about our Savior buried between the lines.

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Scripture:
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Based on:
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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

More than telling us simply who Jesus was, his genealogy tells us about God the Father. What Matthew is doing between the lines is preaching an eloquent message on the nature of God. It reveals the mercy, judgment, and faithfulness of God.

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: The genealogy from Abraham to David shows the mercy of God.

Teaching point two: The genealogy from David to the Babylonian captivity shows the judgment of God.

Teaching point three: The genealogy from the Babylonian captivity to Christ shows the faithfulness of God.

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Apply Your Findings

What does Jesus' genealogy mean for you and me today? It means that Christ's coming canceled the importance of that bloodline connecting the Jewish people to Abraham. People cannot grandfather their way into the kingdom of God on the coattails of their ancestors. All that matters now is faith in Jesus Christ.

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Study Through the Bible

The People of the Nativity - Study 2

LEADER'S GUIDE

Joseph

Joseph was an ordinary man who sometimes believed his doubts and doubted his beliefs, yet he had enough faith to do what God wanted him to do.

Most people know who Joseph was in the Christmas story. But most don't know him very well. He is often treated a bit like the father of the bride in a wedding. Nobody notices him, but he has to pay for the whole affair. Christmas cost Joseph a great deal.

Scripture:
Matthew 1:18-25

Based on:
The sermon "The Neglected Joseph Davidson" by Haddon Robinson, PREACHINGTODAY.COM

PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participant's Guide included at the end of this study.

Joseph's claim to fame is that he happened to be a descendant of David, Israel's greatest king. That really wasn't much to boast about since David lived a thousand years before Joseph was born. By the time he came along, there were hundreds, even thousands, of people who had descended from David. Yet, it was something to be proud of.

Joseph made his living as a carpenter in the hill country near the Lake of Galilee in the town of Nazareth, a hamlet that was so small, it was the butt of jokes. Some from Israel would say, "Could any good thing come out of Nazareth?"

In Nazareth Joseph met Mary. It is believed that she was about 15 when they were betrothed. Betrothal was sort of like an engagement, except that it was much more serious. It lasted a year or more. During that period, families got to know each other. They worked out a dowry and searched the records at the temple in Jerusalem, because it would have been possible in a country as compact as Israel for near relatives to marry and not even know it.

That period of betrothal was when a couple dreamed. They would have thought of building a house and of the children they would have. They would have imagined a secure future.

Discussion Starter:

[Q] What do you know about Joseph? Describe anything you have heard about him.

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Joseph was a loving and righteous man.

Read Matthew 1:18–19. Almost overnight, dreams can turn to nightmares and the best plans can be shattered. Joseph probably noticed a change in Mary. Unknown to him, she'd received some startling news. He may have wondered if he'd done something to offend her, if her family had been displeased with him, or if they had found something at the temple to indicate they could not be married.

When Mary told him that she was pregnant, he must have been shocked. He knew that he was not the father. He probably wondered how it could have happened without him or her parents knowing. He must have wondered why.

When she explained it to him, it must have felt like a slap in the face. He most certainly had trouble believing that an angel had told her, a teenage girl living in a fifth-rate little village, that she was going to be the mother of Israel's Messiah. When she told him that she was still a virgin, that the Spirit of God had come upon her and planted a baby in her womb, he must have been furious.

It would have been one thing for her to betray him, and another to treat him like a fool by telling him a story that bordered on blasphemy. He wouldn't have been able to believe it. Joseph knew the Old Testament law that said a woman taken in adultery should be stoned. He



was a righteous man who tried to live according to the Scriptures. He had a reputation in the community. As soon as they knew that Mary was pregnant, they would assume he was the father, and his reputation would be destroyed. The normal procedure would be to make it public by going before the elders at the gate, sever this relationship, and explain that he was not responsible.

But he couldn't do that. Even though his trust was shattered, and he felt he could not marry her, he refused to expose her to public shame. He decided that he would handle the situation quietly.

Read Matthew 1:20–24. Joseph had a dream, a message from heaven. He realized that Mary had told the truth. From that time forward, their lives would never be the same. He also realized that this was of God, and he would smooth the way.

- [Q] What do you think Joseph must have thought when Mary told him she was pregnant?
- [Q] What would it have been like to be pregnant out of wedlock in that society?
- [Q] What about this passage shows that Joseph was a loving man?
- [Q] What about this passage shows that Joseph believed and honored God?

Teaching point two: Joseph had to believe God when things got tough.

Read Luke 2:1–20 and Matthew 2. During Mary's ninth month, Caesar Augustus sent out a decree. He wanted a census for the purpose of taxation. That meant all males had to go back to the place of their births. In our day, the census taker comes to us. That never occurred to Caesar Augustus. Joseph had to make the trip from Nazareth back to his family's hometown of Bethlehem.

So they made the trip, which would have been a three day hard journey. Joseph would have counted on relatives in Bethlehem taking them in. He would not have anticipated the crowds that would come because of the census. The relatives had taken in more people than they could handle. The trip caused Mary's labor pains to begin, and Joseph would have searched desperately for lodging. Finally, he found a cave out at the edge of town where a farmer kept his oxen. At least they were out of the elements.

When the baby came, Joseph probably didn't know what to do. They may have been able to find a midwife, or maybe Joseph had to do the best he could. He probably had all kinds of questions. *If this wife of mine was highly favored of God, and if this is something God had planned years ago, how do you explain the cave? How do you explain the dirt, the cattle, and the loneliness? No one came from Jerusalem to celebrate the birth of our son. Nobody even came from Bethlehem, except the shepherds, with the smell of the wineskins about them, saying they had heard an angel choir out on the hillside.*

After all the hubbub of the census had subsided, they stayed in Bethlehem. Perhaps they didn't want to face the gossip in Nazareth. After a year or more, they had some visitors—astrologers—probably from Persia, who said they had seen a star and followed it to Jerusalem.

Joseph must have been astounded when these pagan dignitaries came in and fell down on their knees to worship their toddler. They gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.



They needed those gifts. In a short time, Joseph was warned in another dream to take Mary and the child into Egypt. Had it not been for that gold and expensive perfume, they might not have been able to live in Egypt. They were aliens. He probably saw that gold as a provision from God.

They stayed in Egypt almost two years. After Herod died, they came back. Joseph wanted to settle in Bethlehem, but there was still political unrest. God directed them back to Nazareth. Surely Joseph must have wondered why the Creator of the entire universe sent them back to Nazareth with its gossip, raised eyebrows, and dirty jokes. He must have had all kinds of questions.

- [Q] A dream from an angel is a dramatic sign. Why might that sign have grown dim in the midst of their difficulties?
- [Q] What do you think would have been most difficult for Joseph in this series of events? What would have been most difficult for you?
- [Q] What do you think the shepherds' visit would have meant to him?
- [Q] What about the visit from the Magi?
- [Q] What can we learn from Joseph's example in this account?

Optional Activity

Purpose: To help us believe God when things get tough.

Activity: On a poster board or whiteboard, brainstorm all the ways that we have to believe God when things get tough. These may be personal experiences or trials we've heard others mention. After you've made your list, talk about how God can give us perspective in each one.

Teaching point three: Joseph was entrusted with God's Son.

There must have been times when Joseph wondered if it was possible he had made these dreams up. Jesus probably didn't seem much like a savior of the world. He was probably good and obedient. But when he was an infant, Mary fed him from her breast. He cried. He came to the table along with the other children. He didn't perform any miracles. When he fell in the streets of Nazareth and skinned his knee, it bled. When Joseph told him stories, he fell asleep. He wasn't that different.

Read Luke 2:41–52. How might Joseph have felt when he lost the Son of God? He hadn't even noticed he was missing for an entire day! When they found him, Jesus said, "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"

That sounds good in church, but when you hear that from a 12 year old, it may be hard to take.

And who could Joseph have talked to? Maybe Mary. He certainly couldn't talk to the people in the village. They had much more earthy explanations for Jesus' birth. In fact, he probably never lived it down.

One thing Joseph did have was a passage in the Old Testament. Eight hundred years before he came along, a prophet by the name of Isaiah said that a virgin would conceive and have a son



and would call his name Emmanuel, which meant *God with us*. It was just a sentence, but he must have held onto that scrap of Scripture for dear life. It's really all he had.

But Joseph put his thumbprint on Jesus Christ. He taught him to be a carpenter, which would have defined much of his life. Of course, he was the Savior of the world. He put his thumbprint upon Joseph's soul.

- [Q] Do you think Joseph would have treated Jesus differently than his other children? Why or why not?
- [Q] What do you think sustained Joseph when he grew doubtful about his revelations?
- [Q] What do you think Joseph would have wanted to teach Jesus, knowing he was the Messiah?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Celebrate Christmas and the birth of Jesus. But learn from Joseph's part in it. When God sent his Son to Earth, he put him into the care of this carpenter, who sometimes believed his doubts and doubted his beliefs, but he remained faithful through it all.

Joseph is not the main character of the story. But when you celebrate, you might remember that when God wanted someone to take care of his boy, he chose Joseph, a carpenter who believed the best he could.

Action Point: What can you learn from Joseph? Choose at least one of his good qualities and pray that God will work it into your life.

— Study by Haddon Robinson, with JoHannah Reardon



Study Through the Bible

The People of the Nativity - Study 2

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

Joseph

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Scripture:
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Based on:
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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

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That period of betrothal was a period in which a couple dreamed. They would have thought of building a house and of the children they would have. They would have imagined a secure future.

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Joseph was a loving and righteous man.

Teaching point two: Joseph had to believe God when things got tough.

Teaching point three: Joseph was entrusted with God's Son.

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

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Study Through the Bible

The People of the Nativity - Study 3

LEADER'S GUIDE

Mary

God entered human history through Mary because she was open and obedient to his will.

From one generation to another, Mary has been known as the mother of God. She was the one who gave birth to Jesus Christ, who was fully human and yet fully divine, God's own Son. What was God doing, and why did he choose Mary to do it?

Scripture:
Luke 1:26–38

Based on:
The sermon "A Faith Like Mary's" by Ben Patterson, PREACHINGTODAY.COM

PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participant's Guide included at the end of this study.

The angel Gabriel appeared before a young, Jewish peasant girl, probably no more than 16 years of age. He announced to this girl that she was going to be the mother of the Son of God. She blushed and wondered aloud how such a thing could be possible, since she was still a virgin, engaged to be married to a man named Joseph. The angel said, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."

Of course, Mary knew that no matter how it happened, she was going to have to deal with the grave problem of how Joseph would react to the announcement that his fiancée was pregnant. She probably knew he would be skeptical about her explanation that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

According to the law of Moses, adultery was punishable with death by stoning. Even though few adulteresses were actually stoned, all were shamed, as were their children, for the rest of their lives.

But that was God's problem, as far as this exemplary young woman was concerned. All she had to worry about was doing what God told her to do. So she said to Gabriel, "I'm the Lord's servant. Let it be to me as you have said." That was that.

Discussion Starters:

- [Q] What do you know about Mary? Name as many things as you can think of.
- [Q] Are all of those things true according to Scripture?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: God entered human history through human flesh in Jesus Christ.

Read Luke 1:26–38. God entered into human history. The child was to be born of woman—fully human. The child was also to be born of God—fully divine. The mystery of Jesus Christ is present at the moment of his conception. He is the G0d-man.

Too often we get hung up on the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. How could such a thing happen? We don't see that kind of thing in normal human experience, but that misses the real point. The miracle of the Virgin Birth rests on a greater and deeper mystery than that. God enters our plane of existence as an infant.

If we're to carry the logic of that to its limit, we must also affirm that God himself stooped to enter the world at the most basic and primitive human level—an embryo implanted in Mary's uterus.



The miracle of the Virgin Birth rests upon the mystery of the Incarnation. Next to the mystery of the Incarnation, the question of how a virgin could conceive fades into insignificance. That's small stuff. The grand miracle is the mystery that God took on human flesh. When God took on human flesh, he did something that was equivalent to what he did when his Spirit hovered over the watery chaos at the beginning of time and spoke the universe into existence. That was not much different from what he did when his Spirit impregnated a young girl. A new creation was begun.

- [Q] Do you have any trouble believing the Virgin Birth? Why or why not?
- [Q] Do you have any trouble believing in the Incarnation (the fact that God became man)? Why or why not?
- [Q] Read Luke 1:46–55. What about this passage reveals why Mary was able to accept the angel's message?
- [Q] List everything she believed about God according to this passage.

Teaching point two: God chose Mary to carry out his plan because of her receptivity.

God was entering human history. He was beginning a new creation—something without precedent. He was going to save the world. In view of that job description, what kind of person did he need to launch his great program? When God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit decided on the person for the job, what qualities were they looking for? Why did they choose Mary?

Clearly Mary was receptive. It's fascinating that she was not surprised that God was speaking to her or that an angel appeared. It was what he was saying that had her so disturbed.

She wasn't like her Uncle Zechariah, who was terrified at what he saw. Mary seemed able to accept what she saw. Mary was open to be spoken to by God. She was, therefore, also open to bearing God's Son in her young body.

So it must be for those of us who would hear and receive the Word of God. It must be something that happens to us, and all we can do is receive it. The doctrine of the Virgin Birth says that Jesus came from above, not below. He comes, and he came, because of God's will and not our own.

When we want to get something done, it's our habit to say, "Don't just stand there. Do something."

When God wants to get something done in us, he says, "Don't just do something. Stand there." We cannot make God happen in our lives. We cannot bring new life. We can only receive it. Jesus said the Spirit of God is like the wind that blows where and when it wants to. It cannot be controlled or predicted. The best we can do is to keep our sails spread out to catch broadside the wind of the Spirit when it blows.

In George Bernard Shaw's play *Saint Joan*, Joan of Arc hears voices from God, which angers the king. He complains to her, "Oh, your voices! Your voices! Why don't your voices come to me? I'm the king, not you."



"They do come," she replied. "But you do not hear them. You've not sat in the field in the evening listening for them. When the Angelus rings, you cross yourself and have done with it. But if you prayed from your heart and listened to the trilling of the bells in the air after they stopped ringing, you would hear the voices as well as I do."

Nathaniel Hawthorne described happiness as a butterfly, which, when pursued, is always just beyond your grasp, but which, if you sit down quietly, may alight upon you. And it's like that with the Spirit of God. He is not seized. He is received.

How can we become receptive people? By asking God to make us that way. Even receptivity is something we cannot make happen for ourselves. It is a gift from God. If you're willing to let God create that grace in your life, then ask him to do it. If you're not sure you're willing, then ask God to make you willing. The point is, the gift of God's Spirit is not something you and I can make happen. The quality of receptivity is something God's Spirit must create in us.

Secondly, if we're to become receptive people, we need to be interrupted. God will not be scheduled. If your whole life is scheduled, you're going to find yourself waiting a long time before you hear God speak to you. God will not be restricted to Sunday mornings. If he cannot meet you on his own terms and in his own time, then he will not meet you at all.

This gets practical. Jesus said we meet God when we meet our neighbor's needs. Jesus said feeding the hungry and clothing the naked is the same as feeding and clothing him. If you have no time to receive your neighbor, you don't have time to receive God. If little children and the lonely housewife next door cannot interrupt you, the chances are God will not interrupt you either.

Third, receptive people have an attitude of expectancy. You can expect God to make himself known. You cannot control how or when he will do it, but you can trust his promise and wait expectantly for him. One of our Lord's favorite expressions was "If you have ears, then hear." Listen, keep your eyes open, expect. When you come to worship, expect God to meet you.

[Q] What does it mean to be receptive to God?

[Q] How do you listen to God?

[Q] How much do you think our willingness to obey has to do with being able to hear what God is saying to us?

[Q] What is the danger of having every minute of our lives scheduled? How can we practically set aside time for God and others?

Optional Activity

Purpose: To help us learn to listen to God.

Activity: Take 15 minutes of silence. Ask the group to turn to Psalm 19 and to quietly read through it while praying. There should be no agenda with this exercise, just taking time to be quiet and listen to God.

Teaching point three: God chose Mary because of her humility.

Gabriel said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." That's what troubled Mary. It's that exalted salutation. Why should she be spoken to with those words?



Later, when Gabriel explained to her what would happen, how she would conceive a child as a virgin—at the risk of her reputation and perhaps even her life—she could only respond by saying, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.”

With Mary, everything is directed away from herself to what God will do through her and in her. God dwells with the humble and the lowly. Read Psalm 138:6 and Isaiah 57:15.

Medieval artists often portrayed Mary in stained glass windows. Her pane would be the only one with no color in it. Clear glass. All the other windowpanes would filter the light of the sun through their own distinctive designs. Mary was clear, unfiltered. There was nothing of herself to affect the light that came through. She did not advance herself, but advanced the work of God.

Can anyone know better than a mother what it means to stop advancing yourself? A mother’s entire body adjusts itself to the necessities of childbearing. From the moment of conception, her body is no longer her own. There’s a letting go of personal sovereignty in the bearing of children that is analogous to the life of God in our lives. It means stepping back and playing second fiddle.

- [Q] What does it mean to be humble and lowly? Give practical examples.
- [Q] How can we test our hearts to see if we are humble? Give several suggestions.
- [Q] Why is pride so destructive? What would it have done to Mary’s willingness to receive God’s message?

Teaching point four: God chose Mary because she was a servant.

Mary said, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.” Her body, her reputation, and her future were not her own. Read Psalm 123, a reflection of her attitude.

Even though she would not have planned any of this for herself, she had received from God the awesome task of bearing in her body his own Son, and she would do it obediently. If you and I are to receive the life of God in our lives, we must obey, even though it may seem the worst thing possible.

Everett Koop, former surgeon general of the United States and a vocal opponent of abortion on demand, tells of a family whose severely handicapped child he delivered and helped to keep alive after birth. He writes, “I asked the child’s mother, ‘What’s the worst thing that ever happened to you?’

“She said, ‘Having our son Paul born with defects that required 37 operations to correct.’

“Then I asked, ‘What’s the best thing that ever happened to you?’

“She said, ‘Having our son Paul born with defects that required 37 operations to correct.’”

Koop goes on to explain: “I know what she means. It’s been terribly hard on them, but, through the experience, they’ve grown enormously as a family. They’ve had a remarkable spiritual reawakening. One of their sons is now in law school planning to defend the rights of the handicapped. Paul has now had 55 operations, with one more scheduled. Despite the hardships, it’s been an overwhelmingly positive experience for them.”



To receive God's gift of new life may very well mean that we accept from his hand, as a servant receives a task from his master, something that at first may seem unthinkable. The worst thing we could imagine may turn out to be the best thing that ever happened to us.

[Q] Share an experience that you thought was awful at the time but that turned out to be for your good.

[Q] How can we develop an attitude of being God's servant?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Don't worry about God telling you what he wants you to do. God wants us to know his will more than we want to know it. Worry instead about whether you will do it when he shows it.

It's our readiness to do as we're told that will make it possible for us to see what it is God wants us to do. It was the servant in Mary that set her apart in the eyes of God and made it possible for him to speak to her as he did. It's the servant in each one of us that will be able to hear the voice of God.

The course of all human history was determined by the choice, the decision, the answer Mary gave. Frederick Buechner wrote about the angel Gabriel as he encountered Mary: "She struck him as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child. But he had been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it ... 'You mustn't be afraid, Mary,' he said. As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great golden wings, he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of Creation hung on the answer of a girl."

Jesus said that the angels of heaven rejoice when a sinner comes to repentance. That suggests the inhabitants of heaven are keeping a close watch on us, the inhabitants of earth. We are a race under surveillance. All of heaven is standing on its tiptoes to see what you and I will say in response to the call of God on our lives.

The whole future of the world may not hinge on our answers, but who knows? Certainly our own futures hinge on them. May you have the grace to say, "I am the servant of the Lord. May it be to me as you have said."

Action Point: What can you learn from Mary? Choose at least one of her good qualities and pray that God will work it into your life.

— Study by Ben Patterson, with JoHannah Reardon



Study Through the Bible

The People of the Nativity - Study 3

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

Mary

God entered human history through Mary because she was open and obedient to his will.

From one generation to another, Mary has been known as the mother of God. She was the one who gave birth to Jesus Christ, who was fully human and yet fully divine, God's own Son. What was God doing, and why did he choose Mary to do it?

Scripture:
Luke 1:26–38

Based on:
The sermon "A Faith Like Mary's" by Ben Patterson, PREACHINGTODAY.COM

PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

The angel Gabriel appeared before a young, Jewish peasant girl, probably no more than 16 years of age. He announced to this girl that she was going to be the mother of the Son of God. She blushed and wondered aloud how such a thing could be possible, since she was still a virgin, engaged to be married to a man named Joseph. The angel said, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."

According to the law of Moses, adultery was punishable with death by stoning. Even though few adulteresses were actually stoned, all were shamed, as were their children, for the rest of their lives.

But that was God's problem, as far as this exemplary young woman was concerned. All she had to worry about was doing what God told her to do. So she said to Gabriel, "I'm the Lord's servant. Let it be to me as you have said." That was that.

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: God entered human history through human flesh in Jesus Christ.

Teaching point two: God chose Mary to carry out his plan because of her receptivity.

Teaching point three: God chose Mary because of her humility.

Teaching point four: God chose Mary because she was a servant.

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Don't worry about God telling you what he wants you to do. God wants us to know his will more than we want to know it. Worry instead about whether you will do it when he shows it.

It's our readiness to do as we're told that will make it possible for us to see what it is God wants us to do. It was the servant in Mary that set her apart in the eyes of God and made it possible for him to speak to her as he did. It's the servant in each one of us that will be able to hear the voice of God.

—Study by Ben Patterson, with JoHannah Reardon



Study Through the Bible

The People of the Nativity - Study 4

LEADER'S GUIDE

The Shepherds

God sent his son Jesus Christ as Savior, especially for unclean people.

Shepherds were on the lowest rung of society. They commanded little respect and had no wealth or prestige. But in their tasks, they exemplified how the Savior of the world would treat his people.

Scripture:
Luke 2:1-20

Based on:
The sermon "A Wonderful Night" by Bryan Wilkerson, PREACHINGTODAY.COM

PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participant's Guide included at the end of this study.

Shepherds in Jesus' day must have spent a lot of time looking at the stars. Jewish shepherds were probably aware of David's words, "Lord, when I consider the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you should visit him?"

When you spend time looking at the stars, you know there's a God who created them and holds all things in place. But could it be that the same God who created all this could know and care about us, too, about human beings, about shepherds?

Townsfolk had a dim view of shepherds. They were low on the totem pole of jobs. They were seen as dirty, living out in the open all year long, in all kinds of weather, wandering from place to place but never really getting anywhere. No home. No family. No roots. Just sheep all day, all night, all year.

But on one night, it was a great privilege to be a shepherd.

Discussion Starters:

- [Q] If you have ever spent a night looking at the stars, tell us what that experience was like.
- [Q] Do you know anything about shepherds? If so, tell us what you know.

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Sheep and people both need a shepherd.

Sheep are not the most noble of beasts. They aren't beautiful like Arabian stallions. They can't pull their own weight like oxen. They're not the smartest of creatures either, always wandering off, getting lost and in trouble. Witnesses have seen a whole flock of sheep follow each other right off the edge of a cliff. They'll eat themselves sick if you let them stay in one place too long. They can be ornery, too, when they don't want to do something. And sheep put off quite an odor.

The thing about sheep is they need a shepherd. As long as they've got a shepherd to watch over them, to lead them, keep them out of trouble, and show them where to go, they're okay. A good shepherd would count his sheep every night to make sure not one of them was missing. He would also know every one of them by name.

People are a lot like sheep—always wandering off, following each other, getting into trouble. Sometimes we feel like sheep, longing to have someone watching over us. Read Psalm 23.

- [Q] What comfort is there in knowing that our Shepherd will take care of our needs (v. 1)?
- [Q] To what extent does he meet those needs according to verse 2?



[Q] How does the Good Shepherd restore your soul (v. 3)?

[Q] How does God protect us (vv. 4–5)?

Teaching point two: The shepherds of the Nativity story would have seen themselves as unworthy.

Shepherds would have felt more at home with sheep than with townspeople. They would have gone to town once in a while to pick up some supplies and deliver some sheep, but they wouldn't have stayed long. If you live with sheep all year, carry them on your shoulder, and sleep with them, pretty soon you start smelling like them.

They also were probably seen as nomads and thieves. If something went missing from a farm, the shepherds would be suspected. Most of all, they would have been seen as religiously unclean. The Jewish laws would have included strict interpretations of Scripture that frowned on watching your sheep on the Sabbath or despised a failure to wash your hands three times a day. Because of that, they may have even been denied entrance to the temple.

Read Psalm 25:1–9.

[Q] What would the shepherds have found comforting about this passage?

[Q] What character traits mentioned in these verses might the shepherds have had that made them receptive to God's message?

[Q] Why do you think God chose them to hear his message, rather than someone more important in society?

Teaching point three: The shepherds were privileged enough to be told about the birth of the Messiah.

Read Luke 2:1–20. Shepherds took turns watching the sheep at night, making sure no predators stole them. When Christ was born, the census was going on. Everybody had to go to their hometown to register. People were traveling. Roads were full and crowded. Shepherds probably went farther back into the hills to stay out of the way.

When the angel appeared, the excitement must have been overwhelming. Perhaps at first, the sheep began to stir, waking up the rest of the shepherds. They would have been terrified. Nothing in their experience could have prepared them for this. Having been excluded and mistreated by the religious community, they probably could hardly take in the honor of being told such magnificent news in such an awesome way.

Of course, they wanted to go see this child the angel had announced. They would have taken their sheep with them. It must have mystified them that they were the only ones who seemed to know of this incredible event.

[Q] Put yourself in the shepherds' place. What would have most astounded you about the angel's announcement?

[Q] What do you think would have been Mary and Joseph's response to this band of people and animals visiting their son?



[Q] What kind of response do you think they got when they told their story?

[Q] How do you think the experience changed their lives?

Optional Activity

Purpose: To help us realize the impact of the shepherd's experience.

Activity: Ask for two volunteers to act out a meeting in the street. One is a shepherd who heard the angel's announcement and went to see Jesus. The other is a friend he is telling. Ask each to use their imagination to expand on what they think may have happened.

Teaching point four: The nature of the Messiah is seen in the fact that humble shepherds heralded his birth.

When the shepherds found the baby, they discovered his name was Jesus, which means "one who saves." The sheep would have been welcome there, since the baby was residing among the animals already. They must have wondered if this was the right place. Why would God's Messiah be born in a place like this? Where was everybody? Where were the angels and the priests?

They spread their story, which probably sounded kind of crazy in the telling, but people actually believed it. The Scripture says they were amazed.

You have to wonder what the shepherds talked about as they headed back into the hills. They probably realized they had been given an honor that even the priests hadn't had. They must have felt that God was giving them more than one message. Perhaps they couldn't keep the strict Jewish laws, but God had visited them anyway.

Perhaps they realized, too, that God was offering to be a shepherd to them. Surely they must have felt they needed a savior, someone to watch over them and save them from evil, someone to show them how to live and where to go.

[Q] What does the announcement to the shepherds tell you about God's nature and what he values?

[Q] What does it tell you about your own relationship with God?

[Q] What has Jesus saved you from? Name as many things as you can think of.



PART 3

Apply Your Findings

David, who was also a shepherd, wrote in Psalm 139:

- 1 O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.
- 2 You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.
- 3 You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.

Such a God came in the flesh for you.

Action Point: David said that the Lord was his Shepherd. Ask God to be your shepherd. If you need forgiveness, guidance, protection, or victory, he wants to provide it. Tell the group what you need and pray for each other. Trust him to be all he came to be.

—Study by Bryan Wilkerson, with JoHannah Reardon



Study Through the Bible

The People of the Nativity - Study 4

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

The Shepherds

God sent his son Jesus Christ as Savior, especially for unclean people.

Shepherds were on the lowest rung of society. They commanded little respect and had no wealth or prestige. But in their tasks, they exemplified how the Savior of the world would treat his people.

Scripture:
Luke 2:1-20

Based on:
The sermon "A Wonderful Night" by Bryan Wilkerson, PREACHINGTODAY.COM

PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Shepherds in Jesus' day must have spent a lot of time looking at the stars. Jewish shepherds were probably aware of David's words, "Lord, when I consider the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you should visit him?"

Townsfolk had a dim view of shepherds. They were low on the totem pole of jobs. They were seen as dirty, living out in the open all year long, in all kinds of weather, wandering from place to place but never really getting anywhere. No home. No family. No roots. Just sheep all day, all night, all year.

But on one night, it was a great privilege to be a shepherd.

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Sheep and people both need a shepherd.

Teaching point two: The shepherds of the Nativity story would have seen themselves as unworthy.

Teaching point three: The shepherds were privileged enough to be told about the birth of the Messiah.

Teaching point four: The nature of the Messiah is seen in the fact that humble shepherds heralded his birth.

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

David, who was also a shepherd, wrote in Psalm 139:

- 1 O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.
- 2 You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.
- 3 You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.

Such a God came in the flesh for you.

Study by Bryan Wilkerson, with JoHannah Reardon



Study Through the Bible

The People of the Nativity - Study 5

LEADER'S GUIDE The Angels

Looking at the Nativity from the angels' perspective.

The early Christian believers sang the first Christmas carol. It's found in 1 Timothy 3:16 and says, "He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory." In this study, we will look at what the angels saw.

Scripture:
1 Timothy 3:16

Based on:
The sermon "Christmas As the Angels Saw It" by Colin Smith, PREACHINGTODAY.COM

PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participant's Guide included at the end of this study.

Rarely do we give much thought as to what the Nativity meant to the angels. The phrase "was seen by angels" in 1 Timothy 3:16 invites us to view the whole of the Christmas story from the perspective of the angels. He appeared in a body. He was seen by angels.

We know that when God created the heavens and the earth, he created man and woman as the pinnacle of his earthly creatures. That is why human life is of inestimable value and worth. But God not only created earth and human life. God also created the heavens, and just as man and woman are the pinnacle of the earthly creation, so the angels are the pinnacle of God's creation in heaven. It's important for us to remember that the angels are not God, but the angels were created by God. In fact, the whole of the first chapter of the Book of Hebrews is written to remind us of the great difference between angels and God, or more particularly between angels and the Son of God.

Angels, for example, do not know all things. Only God does. There's a fascinating verse in 1 Peter 1:12, where Peter is writing about our salvation: "Even angels long to look into these things." They don't know everything. Only God does.

They are not present everywhere. Only God is. Angels are sent to specific places at specific times for specific tasks.

They are not all powerful. Only God is. Angels are servants of God with power to execute the will of God.

The Bible indicates that some angels joined in the great genesis of evil by participating in the rebellion of Satan, and the result was that they lost their position in heaven. But our focus is on the angels of God, the multitude of God's created beings and servants in heaven, whose only experience has been the joy of serving God and participating in his plans to bring about blessing on earth. And if angels are the pinnacle of God's creation in heaven, then it should not surprise us that when heaven and earth touch and meet, angels will be there.

Discussion Starters:

- [Q] What do you know about angels? Where did you get those ideas? Are those ideas found in Scripture?
- [Q] How does popular art portray angels? Why are angels so misrepresented in our society?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: The angels saw Christ in heaven.

It's important to remember that although the Lord Jesus Christ was born in a manger, that was not the beginning of his existence. This is one of the ways in which he is absolutely unique and different from us. None of us existed before we were in our mother's womb. That was the



beginning of your existence. But for Jesus Christ it was different. Before he was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary, the Bible tells us his glory filled the heavens. "In the beginning was the Word [a name for Jesus], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Since before the creation, before the beginning of time as we know it, God has always been God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Christ was with God and he was God.

Read Colossians 1:15–20. The Bible says all things were created by him and for him, so that includes the angels. They were created for and by Christ. The creation of angels is not something we're told much about, but we can be sure of this—that the first moments of created consciousness for the angels would have been moments when they were aware of the presence and glory of the Son of God who created them. He brought them into being by the word of his power, and as he called them into existence their first sight would have been of his glory.

Isaiah the prophet says that he saw the Lord, seated on a throne. John, in the Book of Revelation, tells us that this was Jesus. Isaiah described the angelic activity around the throne as they cried out to one another, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."

So, before the Son of God ever entered our world, he was the center of the adoration and worship of angels. Jesus spoke about the glory that he shared with the Father before the world began and the angels saw him in heaven.

- [Q] What is the difference between the relationship angels have with Jesus and the relationship we have with him?
- [Q] In what ways is Jesus the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15)?
- [Q] How is he the firstborn of all creation, since he wasn't born onto Earth until later (v. 15)?
- [Q] What does it mean that Jesus is "before all things, and in him all things hold together" (v. 17)?

Teaching point two: The angels saw Christ in the manger.

This Christ, whom Isaiah saw seated on his throne in heaven, left his throne and disappeared from view. To the utter amazement of the angels, the eternal Son of God, who was God and was with God, was found conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary, taking human flesh from her, and then was born as a baby. They saw him lying in a manger.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us for a little while. One of the hymn writers put it, "Our God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man." In Christ we see the glory of God and our human flesh united in such a way that the two become one. He assumes what is ours, that we may inherit what is his.

Read Luke 2:8–15. On the night of Jesus' birth, as heaven and earth touched in Christ, the angels appeared in a multitude and praised God and said, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." It was as if they were saying to the shepherds and to all of us human beings: Do you realize who has come to you? Do you realize the gift you've been given? We've been worshiping him in the glory of heaven, and he's now taken your flesh. Glory to God in the highest! Do you realize the favor of God that rests upon you in the coming of his Son?



- [Q] How does knowing the angels' perspective give more power to their words in Luke 2:14?
- [Q] The apostle John refers to Christ as "the Word made flesh." How would that have been especially true from the angels' perspective?

Teaching point three: The angels saw Christ in the desert.

As the Son of God grew into manhood, the question was whether he would really face life as a man, or resort to using his power as God to make the experience of human life easier. It was along these lines that the devil first came to him. Read Matthew 4:1–11.

The Bible tells us the Spirit drove Jesus into the desert where he fasted 40 days and 40 nights. The devil came to him, and the thrust of that first temptation was this: *You are the Son of God, aren't you? So why should you bother with being hungry? I mean, you've taken this human flesh, and human beings are hungry when they go without food, but why should you go without food? You've got the power to turn stones into bread. So why don't you do it? Why be so serious about this incarnation thing? You don't have to experience all that they experience. Turn the stones into bread.*

The Scriptures go on to narrate the temptations of Jesus that seem to come in wave after wave. It would be easy for us to underestimate the power of the temptations. We read of how Jesus resisted the devil through Scripture, but we are not to imagine that this was some kind of walk in the park for him; we know that the times of most acute temptation are never like that. Temptation at its greatest is a desperate and exhausting struggle, and Jesus was tempted at every point as we are, yet was without sin.

Jesus encountered the full force of all that the enemy could throw at him and emerged the victor. But at the end of it, he was exhausted, so the angels attended to him. How could it be that this Son of God, who can overthrow all evil by the breath of his mouth—as he will in the Second Coming—should limit himself to facing evil as a man, that he should be reduced to an exhausting struggle? Angels came and ministered to him.

Of course they had seen the story from the beginning. They had seen Adam and Eve in the Garden, where human flesh first encountered temptation. And what a miserable failure it was. Then they had seen, through the generations of history, how time and again when human flesh came against temptation the failure was repeated. But now they saw the triumph of Jesus Christ in the battle.

- [Q] How do you think the angels felt as they were forced to simply watch Satan tempt Jesus? How do you think they felt when Jesus won?
- [Q] What do you think the angels did when they attended to Jesus afterwards?

Leader's Note: Both of these questions are pure speculation, since we can't know how angels feel, but they're interesting to think about and discuss.



Optional Activity

Purpose: To help us imagine what it must have been like for the angels.

Activity: Give everyone time to create a dialogue between two angels as they are watching Jesus' temptation by Satan. Encourage them to be creative. Ask for a volunteer or two to read what they've written.

Teaching point four: The angels saw Christ in the garden.

Read Luke 22:39–43. The next time we read about an appearance of angels in the life of our Lord Jesus was at the Mount of Olives. Here Jesus struggled as he anticipated the impending crucifixion that he would endure as a man. The flesh that had been born of Mary was to be torn, and his own knowledge of the Father's love that went back before the beginning of time was now to be eclipsed as he would be plunged into the abyss as our sin bearer. Christian art has portrayed Jesus Christ in the posture of being draped full length over a large rock as he poured out his soul in agony: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."

As he reached resolution and submitted to the will of the Father, an angel from heaven appeared to strengthen him. How astonishing. As God he needed no strength of angels; angels worshiped him. But now in these moments of his agony, he is glad to be strengthened by the ministry of an angel. If we may push the boundaries of imagination, what must it have been like for that angel to hear the voice of God say, "Go, strengthen my Son," and then for that angel to gaze into the eyes of the one he had worshiped back in eternity and to see in those eyes the agony of Gethsemane?

- [Q] Why did Jesus need to pray at this time, when he knew this was his purpose for being on Earth?
- [Q] Why would he need an angel to strengthen him?
- [Q] How does this passage demonstrate both the humanity and the deity of Jesus?

Teaching point five: The angels saw Christ on the cross, at the resurrection, and at his ascension.

Read Matthew 26:47–54. When he was arrested, Jesus said, "Do you not think that I could call on my Father, and at once he will put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?"

What must the angels have thought as they witnessed his death on the cross? What must they have thought as they heard him be accused? And what must they have thought when they who had worshiped him in heaven saw the mocking worship of the people who put a crown of thorns on his head and said, "Hail, king of the Jews"? What must the angels have thought of our human race when they saw the Son of God nailed to a cross? We crucified the Lord of glory. The angels of heaven surely must have been straining at the parapet of heaven to intervene, but permission was never given.

The purpose of Father and Son together was that the Lord Jesus Christ should die, that the Lamb of God should take away the sin of the world: that he should be wounded for your transgressions, that he should be bruised for my iniquity, and that the punishment that will



bring all of us peace should be upon him. That is why he came into the world. He appeared in a body, and he was seen by angels.

Then the Scripture tells us that they took down the body of Jesus and laid it in a tomb. The angels were the first witnesses when the Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead. They had a better view of it than anybody else.

We're told in Matthew 28 that there was a violent earthquake. "For an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it." That is a picture of defiant victory. The angel is saying, as it were: *Look what just happened to death. This stone that made death like a sealed tomb is now an open door. This Christ has come to you. This Christ has defeated death for you, and through faith in this Christ you, men and women of this human race, will defeat death also and rise.*

Forty days after the Resurrection, Christ ascended back into heaven from where he had come. And again angels appeared, because heaven and earth were touching. They said to the apostles, "Why are you gazing up into heaven in this way? This Jesus will come back in the same way in which you have seen him go."

The Bible tells us that when he does return it will be with all his holy angels. We are given a glimpse into the scene in heaven where Christ is seated on his throne. In the Book of Revelation, John describes what he saw in his vision. He says, "I looked and I heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne. And with a loud voice they sang, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive honor and power and wisdom and strength and glory and praise.'"

[Q] What must have Christ's death, burial, and resurrection looked like from the angels' point of view?

[Q] What will we have in common with angels when we finally get to fellowship with them?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

We are to tell the nations what the angels have seen. Christ appeared in a body. He was seen by angels. This is the job of the church. We're to tell the nations about this Christ of glory, who was born in a manger, faced temptation for us, agonized in the garden, went to the cross, died, and rose again. We're to tell the nations about this Christ, who ascended into heaven and reigns until his coming again in glory. We're to tell the nations about the love of God, shown by his unspeakable gift. We're to tell the nations that the risen Christ, who came for us and triumphed over death, stands ready to receive all who will come to him in repentance and faith. We're to tell them that God is Immanuel. He's with us. We're to tell them the name *Jesus*. He will save his people from their sins.

Even angels long to look into these things. And their sense of awe at the mystery is the source of their highest worship. That is how it should always be for us.

The angels have one advantage over us—they see the face of Christ; but we have something over them, too. For angels have never known what it's like for a sinner to receive the grace and forgiveness of God. Angels long to look into what it must mean for a human being to be redeemed by Christ, for Christ did not come for angels. He did not assume the form of an angel.



His blood was not shed for angels. All this was for us. It was for you. The writer to the Hebrews, describing the one who is the adoration of angels, puts it this way, "For a little while he became lower than the angels, so that he might taste death for everyone. But now he is crowned with glory and honor."

And the most marvelous thing is that by assuming our humanity, Christ lifts our humanity higher than the angels. The Christian believer will be exalted with Jesus Christ.

Oh, come let us adore him, for he is Christ and he is Lord.

Action Point: Turn to Hebrews 1. Read this passage, then close praising God for all the truths contained in these verses. Adore Christ together.

—Study by Colin Smith, with JoHannah Reardon



Study Through the Bible

The People of the Nativity - Study 5

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

The Angels

Looking at the Nativity from the angels' perspective.

The early Christian believers sang the first Christmas carol. It's found in 1 Timothy 3:16 and says, "He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory." In this study, we will look at what the angels saw.

Scripture:
1 Timothy 3:16

Based on:
The sermon "Christmas As the Angels Saw It" by Colin Smith, PREACHINGTODAY.COM

PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Rarely do we give much thought as to what the Nativity meant to the angels. The phrase "was seen by angels" in 1 Timothy 3:16 invites us to view the whole of the Christmas story from the perspective of the angels. He appeared in a body. He was seen by angels.

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: The angels saw Christ in heaven.

Teaching point two: The angels saw Christ in the manger.

Teaching point three: The angels saw Christ in the desert.

Teaching point four: The angels saw Christ in the garden.

Teaching point five: The angels saw Christ on the cross, at the resurrection, and at his ascension.

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

We are to tell the nations what the angels have seen. Christ appeared in a body. He was seen by angels. This is the job of the church. We're to tell the nations about this Christ of glory, who was born in a manger, faced temptation for us, agonized in the garden, went to the cross, died, and rose again. We're to tell the nations about this Christ, who ascended into heaven and reigns until his coming again in glory. We're to tell the nations about the love of God, shown by his unspeakable gift. We're to tell the nations that the risen Christ, who came for us and triumphed over death, stands ready to receive all who will come to him in repentance and faith. We're to tell them that God is Immanuel. He's with us. We're to tell them the name *Jesus*. He will save his people from their sins.

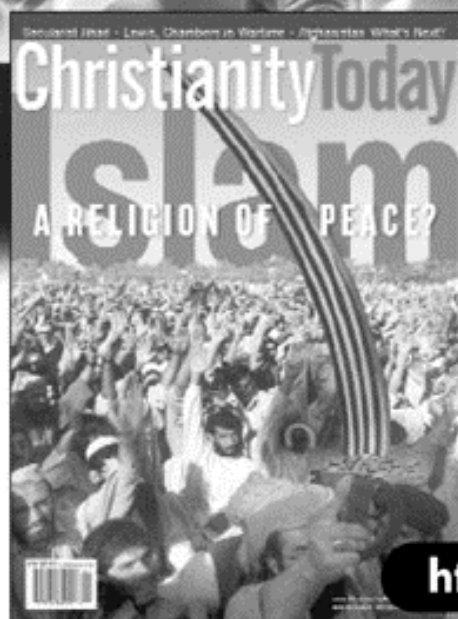
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