



**The Other Side
of
Christmas**

*We see a wooden manger:
God sees a wooden Cross*

by

Dennis G. Bennett

Vickie M. Poole

Morgan W. Jones

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DEDICATION

My (Dennis') Christian life matured under the ministry of Morgan Jones (who went to be with the Lord in 1999). I learned more sitting at his feet than in seminary. Morgan was a very gifted and unique teacher. Besides pastoring our church in upstate New York, he also taught as many as 16 Bible studies a week on a variety of subjects in four different counties. For each of these studies, he produced a page of notes (with freehand drawings done on a mimeograph machine!). I have been collecting thousands of his notes over the years and have continued to learn from them and also teach from them. It has also been my desire to see others benefit from these notes. So, with the permission of his son, Morgan, Jr., Vickie and I have attempted to put together an expanded version of Morgan's notes so you might benefit also.

Contents

Instructions to Class Leader	6
Chart - The First Century at a Glance	7
Chart - Timeline showing the events of the Christmas Story	8
Chart - The Four Gospels in Parallel	9
Map - Israel in the time of Jesus	10
Christmas Pretest	11
Background to Our Study	15
Lesson One	19
Lesson Two	25
Lesson Three	35
Lesson Four	43
Lesson Five	51
Lesson Six	61
Lesson Seven	73
Christmas Post-test	76
Appendix A – The Other Side of Christmas	79
Appendix B – The Holy Spirit in the Christmas Story	80
Appendix C – Angels in the Christmas Story	81
Appendix D – Betrothal	84
Appendix E – Redemption of the First-Born Son	91
Bibliography	95

***A Leader's Guide is available free at our website. Go to
<https://www.pcabookstore.com/samples/11320LG.pdf>.***

AUTHORS

Dennis G. Bennett is the coordinator of resources for Christian Education and Publications. He has been with CEP since 1986 except for nine years which were spent in South Africa as professor and academic dean at the Bible Institute of South Africa. He is also the president of the Metro Atlanta Seminary. He received his M.Div. from Covenant Seminary and doctorate from Trinity Theological Seminary.

Vickie M. Poole was saved at the young age of nine, and her love affair with Jesus and His word began. She has been a life-long, in-depth student of the Bible. She has also taught others how to study the Bible for over 20 years. Vickie is currently employed by the PCA's Retirement and Benefits office in Ministerial Relief.

Morgan W. Jones graduated from Columbia International University (then CBC), Faith Theological Seminary, and the Wycliffe Institute of Linguistics. He served for more than 45 years as a pastor, teacher, missionary, and Bible translator. He felt called to missions while a pastorate at Bible Presbyterian Church in Camden, NJ. He then served the Trio Indians in the interior of Suriname, South America, and the Inuit People of Alaska before moving to upstate New York where he pastored for 20 years. Morgan was among the founding group that eventually became the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, which joined the PCA in 1982. He served as a translator in Surinam and also taught at the Alaska Bible College.

Instructions to Class Leader

This study may be accomplished in as few as four sessions or as many as needed. To teach fewer than the seven lessons contained here, simply mark off which questions you want to cover in each lesson. The students will still answer all the questions on their own, but you do not need to cover every one. There is more material in the appendix section to keep you going past the seven lessons.

Translations: We have chosen to use the ESV translation throughout this study, but we suggest you have students also examine what other translations say. Few who go through this study will be fluent in Greek or Hebrew, so by comparing different translations you should be able to come as close as possible to the original meaning.

Powerpoint: To add color and visual interest to your presentations, consider using *The Christmas Story* PowerPoint by Rose Publishing. The story of Jesus' birth and the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies are illustrated in a beautiful presentation that uses traditional wording from the gospels of Luke and Matthew. You can freely add and edit slides to fit your presentation. Order this from the CEP bookstore: www.ppacep.org.

DVD: If you have watched any of the Focus on the Family videos by Ray Vander Laan, you know how good they are as he takes you to the actual sites in the Holy Land and does a superb job explaining the Scripture in its original setting. The video runs a lengthy 62 minutes and may be used in a variety of settings over the Christmas season. It is also available through the CEP bookstore.

Learning Styles: The tendency of any teacher is to teach according to his or her own preferred learning style. If you are very analytic, then you will thrive on giving lots of facts, but this will not satisfy three-fourths of your class who do not share your learning style. The best approach for any leader to take is to understand that students learn and remember best when *they* discover the answers themselves. So, give them time to work through all the questions and *guide* them to find the right answers instead of giving them the right answers. This way they will remember these truths many years from now.

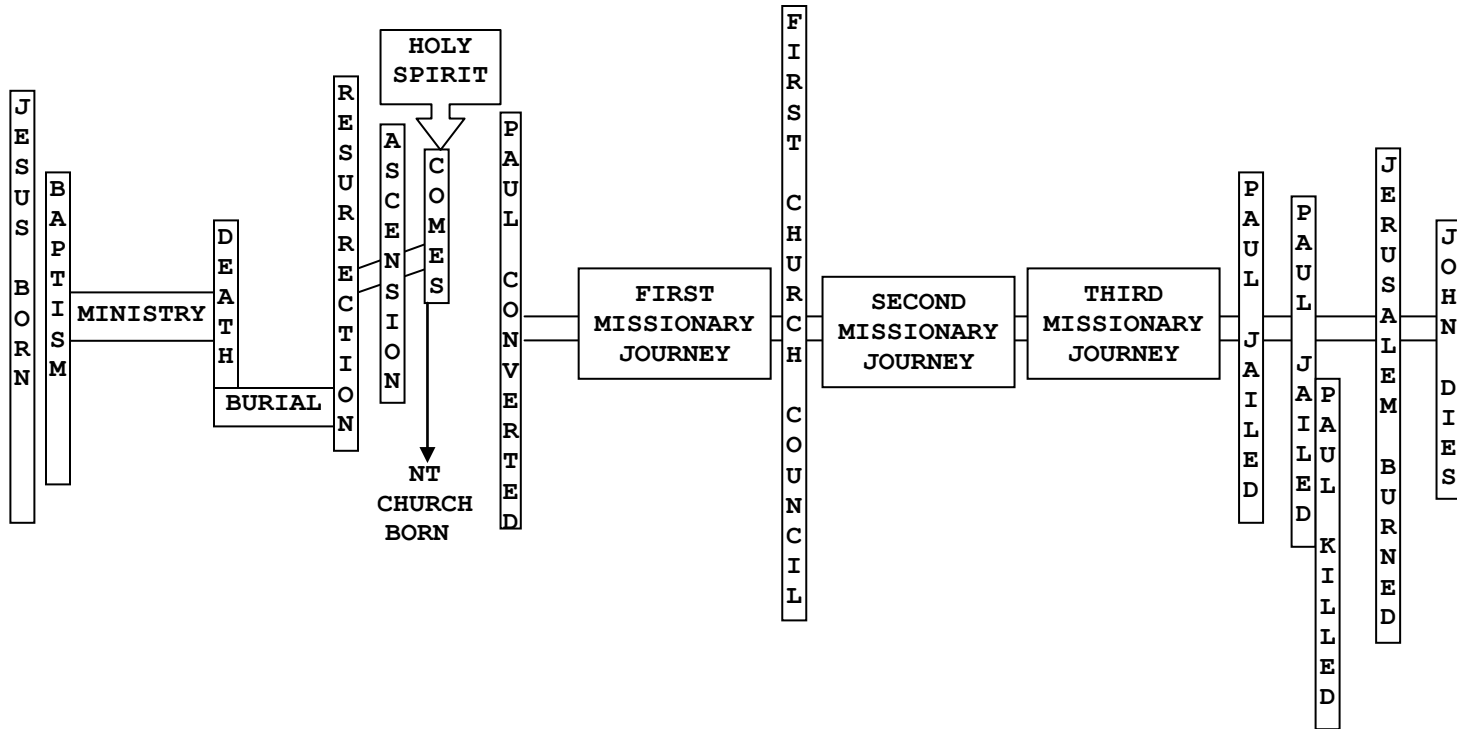
Application: One of the greatest weaknesses in the church today is our lack of knowing how to apply what is taught. There are two types of application. The first enables a student to move past the facts and be able to see new ways this information can be used. But this is only the first level of application. The goal of real application is life-change. This level of application seeks to move the student immediately to put what is being taught into practice. Remember this: Never let the students walk out of the room not knowing what they are to do with what has been taught! We have tried to help with this in the last two sections of each lesson, called: "Now, what do I do with all of this?" and, "How does this make me more like Jesus?" Whatever you do, please do not neglect these life-changing sections.

We have not tried to fill in every blank because in some cases there are different possible answers that may be given. Do your best, be creative, and allow the students to use their creative thinking abilities. However, if you really get stuck, we will be glad to help. Email us your questions and we will do our best to help in every way we can. Email your questions to: dbennett@pcanet.org or vpooles@pcanet.org.

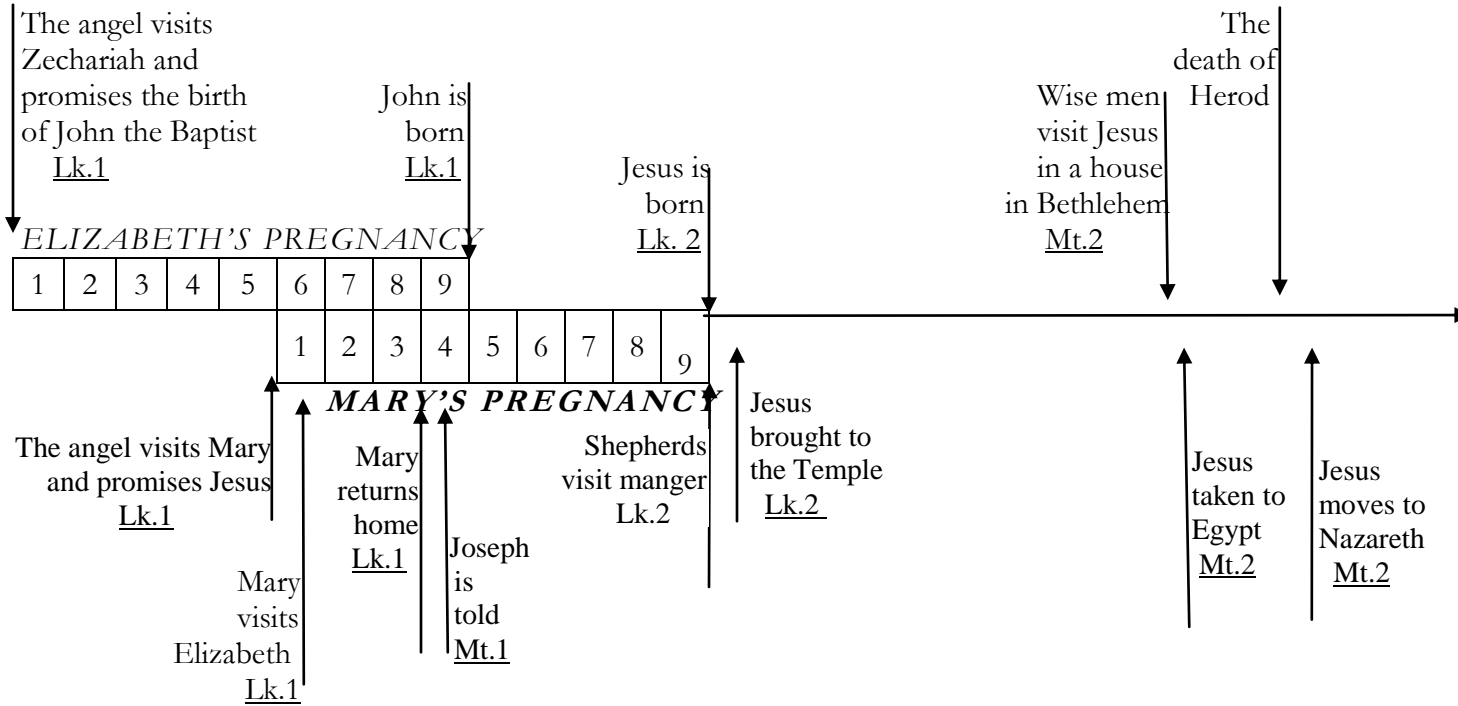
Lastly, do all to the glory of God. Study to His glory and teach to His glory. If you do, you cannot go wrong.

For Christ's Crown and Kingdom,
Dennis and Vickie

THE NEW TESTAMENT AT A GLANCE



THE CHRISTMAS STORY OUTLINED



THE FOUR GOSPELS

HISTORICAL LIFE OF CHRIST

INTERPRETED LIFE OF CHRIST

MATTHEW

Written to **JEW**S
showing Christ as
KING of Israel

- Many quotations from OT
- 28 chapters
- Much on Jesus' rejection by the Jews
- 2 chapters on Jesus' birth
- 1/3 of the book on Passion Week

MARK

Written to **ROMANS**
showing Christ as
SERVANT GOD

- Brief and simple
- 16 chapters
- Vivid details
- Much on Jesus' public life
- No mention of Jesus' birth
- 1/3 of the book on Passion Week

LUKE

Written to **GREEKS**
showing Christ as
PERFECT MAN

- Humanity of Jesus emphasized
- 24 chapters
- Much on Jesus' public life
- 2 chapters on Jesus' birth
- 1/4 of the book on Passion Week

JOHN

Written to **WORLD**
showing Christ as
God

- Jesus' teaching emphasized
- 21 chapters
- More than half of this book is not found elsewhere
- No mention of Jesus' birth
- 1/2 of the book on Passion Week

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called "SYNOPTIC" Gospels (meaning "to see together") because they view Christ's life from the same basic viewpoint.



This map shows the roads most traveled at the time of Jesus' birth.

Origin: http://www.bible-history.com/npalestine_nt_times.html

How Much Do You Know About the Christmas Story?

The following is a pre-test to see just how much you currently know about the Christmas story. Each question will be covered in the study. After the last lesson you will be given the chance to do the test again to see how much you have learned.

Lesson One Questions

Which Gospel(s) tell us about Jesus' birth?

- a. Matthew
- b. Mark
- c. Luke
- d. John

What angel is mentioned by name in the Christmas story?

- a. Gabriel
- b. Michael
- c. Satan
- d. Larry

Who was the child born to Zechariah and Elizabeth?

- a. Matthew
- b. Mark
- c. Luke
- d. John

How many chapters cover the Christmas story?

- a. 4
- b. 10
- c. 15

Lesson Two Questions

Joseph was the biological father of Jesus.

- a. True
- b. False

Joseph was happy about Mary's pregnancy.

- a. True
- b. False

Mary was to remain a virgin all her life.

- a. True
- b. False

What does the name Jesus mean?

- a. Friend
- b. Savior
- c. God with us

Lesson Three Questions

What prompted Joseph to take a very pregnant Mary to Bethlehem?

- a. A census
- b. An angel
- c. They followed a star

The manger was

- a. A stall
- b. A feeding trough
- c. Part of a cave

Jesus' birth place was somewhat crowded with animals.

- a. True
- b. False

The wise men were present at Jesus' birth.

- a. True
- b. False

Lesson Four Questions

The shepherds followed an angel to Jesus.

- a. True
- b. False

What sign were the shepherds told to look for by the angel?

- a. a lion and a sheep together in peace
- b. a tree with a star on top
- c. a star over Bethlehem
- d. newborn baby lying in a manger

Who were the first evangelists after the birth of Jesus?

- a. Herald
- b. The shepherds
- c. The wise men
- d. The Little Drummer Boy

Lesson Five Questions

At what age was a child to be circumcised?

- a. At birth
- b. 8 days
- c. After making a profession of faith

The Bible says that Jesus was born in December.

- a. True
- b. False

Who decided on Jesus' name?

- a. Mary
- b. Joseph
- c. Gabriel
- d. God

The Holy Spirit is not mentioned in the Christmas Story.

- a. True
- b. False

Lesson Six Questions

How many wise men were there?

- a. Three
- b. Four
- c. Unknown

Magi are mentioned in the

- a. OT
- b. NT
- c. Both

The wise men were

- a. Jews
- b. Gentiles
- c. Other

Did the wise men see the shepherds?

- a. True
- b. False

The star led the wise men

- a. To Jerusalem
- b. To Jesus
- c. Back home

The star traveled

- a. Eastward
- b. Westward
- c. Southward

Lesson Seven Questions

An angel told Joseph to leave Bethlehem.

- a. True
- b. False

Where did God send Mary and Joseph to protect Jesus from Herod?

- a. Bethlehem
- b. Nazareth
- c. Egypt

Jesus grew up in

- a. Bethlehem
- b. Jerusalem
- c. Nazareth

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Page was skipped to match page numbers in Student Book

Background to the Christmas Story

You are about to embark on a study of what is the very heart of God – His restoration of His people to Himself.

Keep in mind at all times that the Gospel is not about us, it is about God. We are the recipients of that Gospel love. The Bible is God's message first and foremost about Him. He wants us to know Him – Who He is and what He has done, which enables us to love Him more. The Bible is not a book about people, places, and events. Rather, it is about what God has done THROUGH people, places, and events. God's philosophy of history is found in Psalm 110.1: *The Lord says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool."* Our Lord knows His plan for the entire future, and He will carry it out according to His will. Jesus came, not at the last minute, or as a whim, but at an appointed time – appointed and known by God from all eternity.

The Christmas story is all about God. The apostle Paul puts it this way: ***But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons*** (Gal.4.4-5).

The story doesn't begin with Jesus' birth; it begins in eternity past. Long before God created anything, He already knew what He would do for man in spite of man's personally offending God by his sin in the garden.

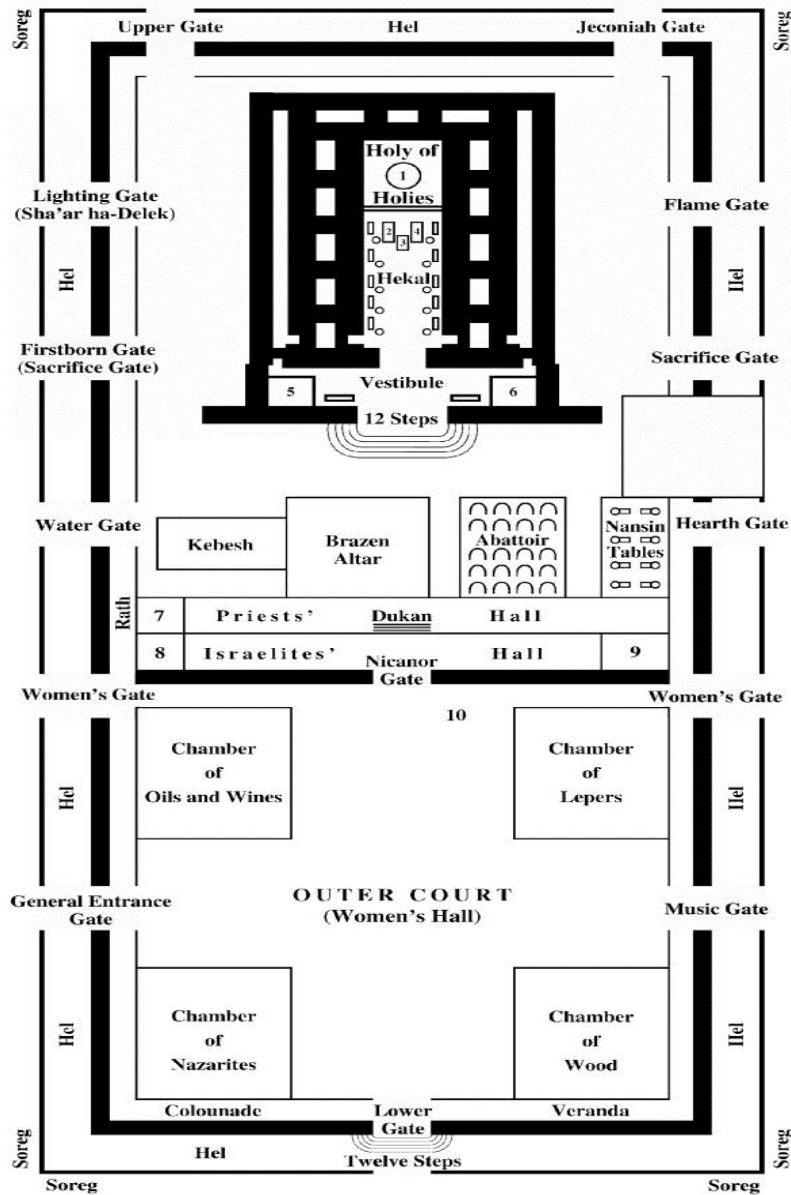
When this event occurred, God's plan was announced to man telling him there would be One Who would come in the future to restore the broken relationship between God and His people (Gen.3.15).

Throughout the Old Testament, God revealed more and more about this plan. A plan well-crafted, detail after detail was revealed to His people in such places as the Tabernacle and in the sacrifices. This began in the 15th century BC.

In the 9th century BC, God revealed to Isaiah more specific details about the coming Messiah. He told about the virgin birth (7.14) and the names He would be called (9.6).

In the 4th century BC, God spoke for the last time. He told Malachi: ***Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to the fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.*** (Mal.4.5-6)

The next word heard from God came through the angel Gabriel to the priest Zechariah.



Layout of the Temple built by Herod the Great showing the gates and one of the courts.

This specific layout may or may not be accurate in every detail of the surrounding chambers as accounts differ.

Here is the key to this one from www.jewishencyclopedia.com.

1. The Holy of Holies (Eben Shetiyyah)
2. The Golden Candlesticks (which lined the north and south walls)
3. The Altar of Incense (standing in front of the vale between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies)
4. The Table of Showbread (which would be along the north wall)
- 5&6. The Chambers of Knives (for the sacrifices)
7. The Attic of Abtinas
8. Chamber of Breadmakers
9. Chamber of Phinehas the Vestment Keeper
10. 15 semicircular steps
11. Chamber of the Lambs
12. Bath Chamber
13. Chamber of Showbread
14. Chamber of Stones of Defiled Altar

Lesson One

I. Getting Started

In studying history, we usually ask about people, places, and dates. However, studying the Bible requires us to ask a different question:

What is God teaching us about Himself...

- ...as He worked through the angel Gabriel?
- ...as He worked through Zechariah and Elizabeth?
- ...as He worked through Mary and Joseph?
- ...as He worked through the shepherds?
- ...as He worked through Herod?
- ...as He worked through the wise men?

These are some of the questions we will be answering throughout this study.

As you begin this study, what is it **you** would like to learn about this story that would help you in your walk with Jesus?

II. Discovering Christmas

ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH (Luke 1.5-25)

1. It had been 400 years since Malachi put down his pen. God had been “silent” since that time. That is, He had not spoken through any prophets with any message for His people, but that was about to change.

2. How many facts about Elizabeth and Zechariah can we learn from Luke 1.5-7?

Elizabeth	Zechariah
Wife of Zechariah	Priest
Daughter of Aaron	Division of Abijah
Righteous before God	Righteous before God
She was barren	Husband of Elizabeth
Advanced in years	Advanced in years

3. A cross reference on *the division of Abijah* (1.5) takes us to 1 Chron.24.10.

Who fixed these *divisions*? **King David**

How many were there? **24 groupings or divisions of people**

How often would ZECHARIAH serve?

Zechariah was among those 24 divisions of priests. By the time of the NT, there were about 18,000 priests, so an individual priest would serve only two weeks per year around, but not inside the Temple. It was during Zechariah's week that lots were drawn to see who would have the privilege of bringing the incense offering. This time, by God's controlling hand, the lot fell to Zechariah to offer the sacrifice on the altar, which signified the prayers of the people of Israel going up to the ear of God.

While he was performing his duty, people gathered outside the Temple to pray. The priest, as their mediator, would be offering to God the prayers of all Israel.

As a priest, Zechariah would pray for the Redeemer of Israel to come, and as a father, he also prayed for a child. We will soon see his prayers were about to be answered.

GABRIEL (Luke 1.5-25)

1. In 1.9, suppose this lot had not fallen to ZECHARIAH at this time – would he have missed Gabriel?

This would be the only time in Zechariah's life he would serve inside the Temple in this way. This was all accomplished by the sovereignty of God, which means God is free to do whatever He pleases, whenever He pleases. But, keep in mind, He is perfect, and He is incapable of doing anything that is not the very best that needs to be done. In this case, He was bringing about everything needed in order to prepare for the coming of the Son of Man.

From early Jewish writings, we learn the priest and the people would pray, "May the merciful God enter the Holy Place and accept with favor the prayers of His people."

2. Where does Gabriel stand when he appears? Mark on the diagram of the Temple (the page before Lesson One) where he stood. Give your reasoning.

It says the “right side of the altar,” but this is from God’s view from inside the Holy of Holies. As the priest walked into the temple, Gabriel would have been to his left, between the Candle Stand and the Altar of Incense. The significance of this is found by understanding that the High Priest (which Zechariah was not), once a year on the Day of Atonement, would enter the Holy of Holies through the left side of the curtain (God’s right side). He would bring the prayers of all the people of Israel once a year. Here Gabriel stands between the priest, Zechariah, and God, bringing to Zechariah the answers to both his prayers.

3. How personal was Gabriel's message (1.13-14)? Listen carefully. What does he say?

Do not be afraid.

Your prayer has been heard.

Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son.

You shall call his name John.

You will have joy and gladness.

And many will rejoice at his birth....

When exactly was his prayer heard? Why did God wait so long to answer? See Gal.4.4.

They were probably praying for a child through most of their married life up to the time Elizabeth could no longer conceive. So, at this point they knew having a child was humanly impossible.

Therefore, it might have been a long time since they had uttered this prayer.

Ask the students what other times they can think of where this type of incident happened in the Bible.

4. In Gabriel’s message to Zechariah in 1.13-17, what can you learn about John?

His lifestyle

- a. He must refrain from drinking wine or strong drink (1.15).

And he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.

- b. What connection is there between not drinking and being filled with the Holy Spirit? (See Eph.5.18.)

Why would it have been important for John to refrain from wine and strong drink?
God wanted there to be no confusion about what John was doing for Him. By his not drinking, there could be no accusations about John being controlled by alcohol rather than by the Holy Spirit. God wanted to make sure there was a clear connection between the character of His messenger and the mission.

Being filled with the Spirit is often not clearly understood. There are two works of the Spirit of God often confused in the Church today. The first is the work of the Spirit regarding salvation, and the other is His empowering work. The saving work of the Spirit **does not change from the OT to the NT!** This MUST be clearly understood. What does change is His empowering. In the OT He comes and goes on people. David says, “Take not thy Holy Spirit from me” in Ps.51.11. He does not mean, “Take not thy salvation from me,” but “Do not take the divine empowering from me so I cannot do this job as king as you have anointed me.” The Spirit comes and goes in this way in the OT upon certain prophets, priests, and kings. In the NT, this empowering comes and stays in every believer.

c. In what ways might John be referred to as a reformer (1.16-17)?

Have someone look up the word “reformer” in a dictionary, and see how it applies.

What does Mal.3.1a tell us about this?

John will be that messenger, sent by God, to prepare the people for the coming of the long awaited Messiah.

His mission

d. John’s mission will accomplish what three things?

- 1) He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God (1.16).
- 2) He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just (1.17).
- 3) He will go before him (1.17).

In your own words, what is God's mission for John?

2 Cor.5.18 says: *All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.*

This ministry of reconciliation was John's ministry, and is the ministry of the Church today.

Reconciliation takes place in five areas: spiritual (how I relate to God), psychological (how I relate to myself), sociological (how I relate to others), ecologically (how I relate to the creation God gave us dominion over), and physiologically (how I care for my body). John pointed people to Christ. When a person comes to Christ, reconciliation begins to take place in all five of these areas.

5. In light of what Gabriel tells Zechariah about John, why do you think Zechariah was punished (or dealt with harshly) for his question (1.18-20)?

Zechariah was a priest and had been praying consistently for this for years. Even though he may have ceased asking for a child a long time ago (since they were no longer physically capable of having a child – humanly speaking), God was still going to answer, but in His own time.

Names of people in the OT were significant as to their meaning.

Elizabeth meant "God is my oath".

Zechariah meant "Jehovah remembers" – Does this help you understand why he was punished?

6. From your understanding of the way God works, why do you think Elizabeth was barren in the first place?

God, in the timing of His plan, answered, but not in the way, or time, expected. (See Gal.4.4, and Isa.14.24.)

In the Jewish culture barrenness was considered to be caused by sin. Some of the rejoicing would have come from this exciting change in Elizabeth's stigma.

III. What do I do with all of this?

God had not spoken for 400 years. During that time people prayed for the coming of the Messiah.

Zechariah and Elizabeth spent their entire married life wanting a child. However, apparently they had stopped praying, thinking God was withholding their heart's desire. What do you think that did to their view of God?

We have a tendency to think silence equals God's not answering.

God did answer, but only in His time.

Have you been longing and praying for something God has seemingly ignored?

IV. How does this make me more like Jesus?

If you answered "yes" to the above question, how is that altering your view of who God is and how He treats us as His children?

How will a proper understanding of God, sovereignly working in and through *you*, change your heart about Him?

Lesson 2

I. Getting Started

Can you recall a time in your life when you have made plans and had every detail in place only to be thrown a curve, forcing you to rethink what you had planned? Did you change your direction? Why? What did you do, and how did you feel?

II. Discovering Christmas

Our tendency is to see Mary and Joseph as more than the ordinary people they were. Joseph was a simple carpenter and Mary a young girl probably no more than 14. Joseph was probably older, but not by much.

MARY, a virgin betrothed (Luke 1.26-56)

Engagement or betrothal - Before witnesses, the couple either (1) exchanged promises formally, pledging a piece of money as token of mutual care, or (2) signed a written statement involving the same promises. The prayer followed, then a cup of wine tasted by both. "From that moment Mary was the betrothed wife of Joseph; their relationship seen as sacred, as if they had already been wedded. Any breach of it would be treated as adultery; nor could the band be dissolved except, as after marriage, by regular divorce. Yet months might intervene between the betrothal and the marriage." (*Life and Times of Jesus The Messiah*, Edersheim. See an expanded explanation of *betrothal* in Appendix D.)

Putting aside what you already know about Mary, what do the following verses tell us about her?

1.27 – an **unmarried virgin**

1.32 – of the tribe of **Judah**

1.36 – a **relative/cousin** of Elizabeth

As Mary was going about her normal life, the angel Gabriel appears. What did he say to Mary (1.30-31)?

1. Don't be **afraid**.

2. You have found **favor/grace** with God.

The word **favor** is the Greek word *grace*. What, then, might Gabriel mean when he tells Mary she has found *favor with God*?

Mary was an ordinary girl. She is said to have been **righteous**, but that does not mean she was above any other righteous person. She was, however, selected by God in the same way Abraham was selected to leave his home to become the first Hebrew. This is the doctrine of election – to be chosen from among many.

3. You will **conceive** and bear a **son**.

4. You shall call his name **Jesus**.

What is this *favor with God* that Gabriel speaks of in 1.30?

What did the angel tell Mary about Jesus (1.31-33)?

He will be great.

He will be called the Son of the Most High.

And the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David.

He will reign over the house of Jacob forever.

And of his kingdom there will be no end.

Mary responds to Gabriel's message

1. What was Mary really questioning, and what is her second response after receiving her answer?
 - a. Mary knew she was a virgin and knew enough about life to know that what was going to happen to her was not normal.
 - b. Her second response proves her faith in the God of Israel, a faith very deep for such a young girl. Unlike Zechariah, Mary accepted by faith immediately what God was asking her to do.

2. Why is this birth by a virgin *so* important?

This is one of the most critical doctrines of the Christian Church. If Joseph had been Jesus' father, Jesus would have been a mere human with human sin and, therefore, would not have been capable of dying for the sins of anyone else. A sinner cannot pay for his or her own sin, let alone anyone else's.

3. In this story, how many indications can you find that show the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ was real?

Mary is called a virgin twice before the angel even shows up.

Mary questions the angel because she knows she is a virgin.

The angel tells Mary she will have a Son through God's special intervention.

Then she is told this child will be conceived by the work of God's Holy Spirit.

The angel adds to this a reminder to Mary that nothing is too hard for God to do, not even this.

What do the following verses add to this understanding?

Matt. 1.21-22 – ***"...She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet...."***

This is a very theological answer, but one that is critical for Joseph and all people who will later read this to understand. Man has sinned. This was a personal offense to God and needed to be punished. Only God could accomplish this, and He would do it by becoming a man – the second Adam – living a perfect life in order to die the perfect death, satisfying God's anger against man's sin.

Isa.7.14 – ***"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel."***

This verse adds that God has been telling Israel about this coming event for centuries. They may not have seen it clearly, but it has been there all along.

4. In Matt.1.20, ***conceived*** is the Greek word for *born* or *begotten*. The Holy Spirit placed within Mary's child the *DIVINE* nature of Jesus. His *HUMAN* nature would have come naturally from Mary. Therefore, Mary should never be referred to as the *mother of "God"*! After this conception, the rest of this pregnancy was like any other, that is, she carried Jesus a full nine months, and the birth was a normal delivery. However, on Mary's part, one additional note is given. What is it? (See Matt.1.25.)

Mary will remain a virgin until the birth of Jesus. This was an enormous commitment on the part of BOTH Mary and Joseph. This tells us a great deal about the faith of both these people.

5. Mary questions Gabriel, just like Zechariah did (1.34), but isn't punished! Why?

Zechariah had prayed for a child for a long time, and when God finally said "yes," he, a righteous priest, failed to believe. Mary was not in the same situation. Never had she asked for

such a thing to happen to her; therefore, her question was met with a soft answer.

6. Why do you suppose Gabriel told Mary about Elizabeth (1.36)? Does 1.37 help...?

Here was a way of confirming for Mary just how great God's power can be. Mary would have known Elizabeth was barren, and by now would have known about the very unexpected joy to come. This same power over normal physiological circumstances was now at work in Mary as well.

7. Why do you suppose it was Luke who wrote about the *Virgin* Birth of Jesus?

Luke was a doctor, and he especially would know, this, from a human perspective, was not normal.

8. In 1.40-43, what are the four responses in Elizabeth's recognition of Mary's new position?

a. She heard Mary's greeting.

b. The baby John responded while yet unborn.

- c. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit...
- d. Enabling her to make four pronouncements about Mary:
 - 1) “blessed [eulogized] are you among women
 - 2) blessed [eulogized] is the fruit of your womb!
 - 3) [she, Mary is] the mother of my Lord”
 - 4) “blessed is [Mary] who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” [This is the same word found in the Sermon on the Mount meaning “to be in a state of being privileged.”]

9. In Mary's song, what does she call God (1.47)?
 “my savior”

Is this important?

The implication of this is enormous. Here, Mary is admitting she is a sinner, just like the rest of us. And, just like the rest of us, she is in need of being saved from the punishment of sin – Hell.

10. Do you think the angel's words (1.30) and Mary's words (1.48b) have a connection?
 Out of all the women in the world, God chose Mary to be the special person to carry His seed.

All generations shall call me blessed. Mary said these words in Lk.1.48. At that time, all women dreamed of being the mother of the Messiah. This event is the fulfillment of Gen.3.15 – Jesus is *the seed - the offspring of the woman*. Later in Jesus’ life, we see the first generation calling her blessed in Lk.11.27-28.

11. Why do you think Mary spent three months with Elizabeth? And what do you suppose happened when Mary returned home after three months (1.56)?

To answer this is to ponder the imponderable. But it is an intriguing question the students will have a good time thinking about. And they should think about it, since God asks all of us to do things that seem strange from where we stand. They need to see this for the truth that lies ahead for anyone willing to do what God tells them to do. The consequences of following God are not easy, but He will always provide the strength and power to do what He calls us to do.

It is impossible for us to imagine what Mary went through trying to explain her pregnancy. How would you explain this to your parents (she was only about 14)? How would you ever find the words to tell Joseph? We may say we don't really care what the neighbors think, but we really do. The easiest part of this story for Mary was her getting pregnant. The rest would be a true test of her willingness to be His servant.

JOSEPH, a man who made hard decisions (Matthew 1.18-25)

1. Mary already knew what would happen to her. Now it was time for others to be brought in on God's plan, but not everyone would respond with the same degree of acceptance as did Mary. In Matt.1.18, what does the word **found** tell you?

Here is a chance to get the class really thinking about what happened. Mary was blessed by the angel telling her *before*, while Joseph only found out after much wrestling through the situation. Ask them a few pointed questions. How would you have felt if you were in Joseph's sandals? Would you feel betrayed? How did their families respond? Joseph did marry Mary as instructed, but we are not even told if they were given a proper wedding.

2. It is impossible to see how this virgin birth could have occurred without embarrassment to someone. So, how does Matthew show in 1.18 this was not a problem?

Jewish women all hoped they would give birth to the long-awaited Messiah. They were not anticipating the Holy Spirit as the Father, being outside of marriage, nor the embarrassment that would result from the disbelief that would follow. She would have encountered the whispers, the judgmental looks, and the shunning of friends and probably family members.

The answer has two sides. From God's viewpoint, He has planned this and Mary has accepted His plan, knowing that in the future, and in His will, all generations would call her blessed (Lk.1.48b).

Right away, Matthew brings in the fact, this pregnancy is the result of the Holy Spirit's work and not the result of sin on Mary's part. This work, from beginning to end, is God's doing! The difficulty comes in living out this plan with most people rejecting the truth.

3. What was Joseph's intention at first (1.19)?

Divorcing Mary would allow Joseph justifiably to get out of the betrothal. However, he loved Mary enough to do this quietly so Mary would not be put to shame.

4. Why would he do this?

We are told Joseph was a **just** man (the same word as *righteous*, the word used to describe believers in the Bible). As a righteous man, he would have found this situation very difficult to believe and to deal with realistically. A righteous man would also be inclined to follow the law of Moses in such situations, which, in this case would mean having Mary stoned to death for adultery after a humiliating public trial (since she was considered his wife at this time). The granting of the divorce would at least clear his good name.

5. In the midst of Joseph's internal struggle, an angel appears to him in a dream. Why did the angel tell Joseph first **what** happened, and then secondly **why** it happened (1.20-21)?

Joseph first needed to know Mary was telling him the truth. The rest of this information would be more palatable once he knew the whole story for himself.

6. God is always revealing Himself in His Word. Therefore, what do you learn about Him from these two verses?

He reveals to us His very personal care for us in the way He handles such an intimate situation. He personally delivers (through Gabriel) to Mary the intimate details of the conception. Then he goes to Joseph, personally again through an angel, and reveals not only the intimate details, but also how He wants Joseph to treat Mary.

God also revealed His plan for His-story, and how these two individuals would play a part in this momentous plan.

In case there was still a question in Joseph's mind about what the angel was saying, God confirmed that was the event prophesied back in the OT ([Is.7.14](#)).

7. How does God reveal evidence of Christ's two natures (**human** and **divine**) in 1.23?

- a. The child will be born of a human being – even a sexual being – male (unlike God or the angels who are non-sexual beings). (See [Heb.4.15](#) to see how Jesus was tempted in all the same ways we are.)
- b. The name Immanuel (also spelled Emmanuel) tells us outright this child will be God dwelling among us.

The name **Jesus** specifies what Jesus will do (“God saves”).

The name **Immanuel** specifies Who and where He is (“God with us”).

Matthew begins his apologetic regarding Jesus by saying the Messiah is “God with us.” He ends his work by quoting Jesus: “I will be with you always” ([28.20](#)).

8. The angel tells Joseph this child will come in this extraordinary way for one purpose. What is it? (1.21) Hint: It starts with His name and then explains this name.

His name, Jesus, says it all. Jesus is the NT rendering of the OT name Joshua, which means, *Jehovah saves*.

9. Who will be saved by this One named Jesus?

Let the class wrestle through the implications of this before you take them to the box.

Notice the angel does not say *all people*, he says ***his people***. If you were a Jew reading this book from Matthew you would automatically assume he was referring to Israel as ***his people***. But from the very beginning of Israel, God intended for them to be a light for Gentiles to find their way to Him. They were not supposed to keep the Gospel to themselves, which they did. The Gospel was always to be offered freely to the whole world. All who would come to the light would be ***his people*** and not just Israel.

Saved – the word in the Greek and Hebrew is used in a number of ways. A person could be saved from, or delivered out of, physical danger, illness, or even death. This is why the angel was specific in telling Joseph that Jesus' mission was to be one that would deliver His people from their sins, which separated them from their God.

1. She is still a virgin.
2. She will remain his wife.
3. She shall remain a virgin until the birth of Jesus.

It is hard to know the correct chronology of events here. Did Mary spend her first three months of pregnancy with Elizabeth before telling Joseph? Or did they have this discussion first, followed by an argument to allow Mary to stay with Elizabeth for those three months while Joseph finished preparing their new home? This would have also helped them to keep Mary a virgin without the temptation that would have come from beginning their new married lives together.

Matthew never tries to prove the virgin birth; he simply states it as fact!

One thing the angel did not tell Mary

Glance at the message of the angel to Joseph ([Matt.1.21](#)), and to the shepherds ([Lk.2.11](#)), and then to Mary ([Lk.1.31-33](#)). If you read carefully, you'll notice one fact about Jesus which wasn't told to Mary. What was it, and why did Gabriel not tell her?

Gabriel never told her He would be the Savior. The idea of one being a savior, in any sense, gives the impression of a person putting themselves in a perilous situation.

Four examples of righteousness in action

We have seen four people so far: Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and Joseph, whom God called righteous, which refers to their position in Christ. When each was told something very supernatural was going to happen, they all did as they were told. True, Zechariah did question at first, but he went home and accomplished what the angel told him. But what if Zechariah had chosen not to obey; would he have lost his righteous standing before God? No! Our standing never changes, but our fellowship with God does. Peter tells us, ***Repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord*** ([Acts 3.19](#)).

Our response to God's commands in the Bible should always be obedience. When God tells us we should be doing something, we should do it out of love for the God Who loved us enough to send Jesus to die for us.

III. What do I do with all of this?

In this part of the story, God dramatically *interrupted* the lives of these two people. Think about all they gave up by accepting what God was directing. They lost their reputations, potentially their marriage (Joseph was going to divorce her), home, livelihood, future plans, family, comfortable place to have the baby, security, etc.

If you are a male, what would you have done if you were Joseph?

If you are a female, what would you have done if you were Mary?

Has God ever called you to such a change in your life's direction?

IV. How does this make me more like Jesus?

As you go through this week, keep track of any time you are required to make a decision that is going to interrupt your life if you do what God is directing you to do. Report this back to the class next week (see Ps.40.8).

Lesson 3

I. Getting Started

God has a plan for all of history, and it is going to be played out using every one of us. We may never see ourselves written about in the pages of any book, but in God's book He has a plan to use you.

What role do you see yourself playing in history? (or His-story?) Write out a short autobiography of your legacy, i.e., your part in God's story. What impact will you have made? You cannot say "none," as every one of us leaves something behind because God uses us to bring about His story.

II. Discovering Christmas

ZECHARIAH AND THE BIRTH OF JOHN (Luke 1.57-80)

In 1.11-23, the angel Gabriel prophesied several bits of information to and about Zechariah. How many were fulfilled in 1.57-66?

1. John was born in 1.57. Note the crowded house (1.58-59), and their surprise at the naming of John (1.59-63).

The birth of John was celebrated by family and friends, while Jesus' birth was solitary and lonely except for the lowly shepherds and some animals. John was only the forerunner while Jesus was God's focal point of the whole event.

2. How would you describe Zechariah's response to the miracle that happened to him in v.64?
3. While Zechariah was praising God (v.64), he was filled with the Spirit (v.67). What are the details and what do you learn from the prophecy given through Zechariah in 1.68-79?
Prophecies concerning the Messiah of Israel
 - a. God has visited and redeemed His people.
 - b. God has raised up a horn of salvation for us.
 - c. He has done this within the family of David.
 - d. This was prophesied from of old.
 - e. Salvation is from our enemies and all who hate us.
 - f. God showed mercy to their forefathers.
 - g. He remembered the covenant He swore to give them by His oath
 - h. that we might always serve Him in holiness and righteousness.

Put yourself into the sandals of Zechariah and the people watching and listening. What do you think their understanding was of this salvation?

What does this prophecy teach us about the God of the Covenant?

List the details of the prophecy concerning John

- a. John was to be called a prophet of the Most High.
- b. John would prepare the way for Jesus.
- c. John would give the knowledge of salvation and forgiveness of sins to his people
- d. because of God's tender mercy
- e. to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death
- f. and guide our feet into the way of peace.

4. Why is John such an important character in this story?

God used angels to make the announcement of Jesus' birth. Then He used a man to call all of those in Israel to come and see the One Whom God had chosen to take away the sins of the world.

5. Why was it important for Zechariah to be filled with the Holy Spirit right now (1.67)?

In 1 Peter 1.20-21, we are told a prophet does not speak his own words or will. When God has something He wants to communicate, he does not depend on any individual to get it right, He does it Himself. This is how we get a Bible that was written without error.

6. In Zechariah's prophecy, what does he mean when he speaks of the Messiah's work in these two ways?

- a. **Future** (1.68-75) – This section speaks of the long awaited plan to be fulfilled by the coming Messiah.
- b. **Present** (1.76-79) – This is the role John will play in preparing the people to accept the Messiah.

7. Do you think Zechariah understood what he mentioned *second* would come *first*?
Give them time to think about this question. Then lead them through the following paragraph.

If you and I had lived in that day, and if we had been scholars who were well-versed in the Scriptures, and we knew every verse that talked about the coming Messiah, we still would have missed Him. It is the same today. If you spend your whole life studying Bible prophecy, when Jesus returns, you will look back on your research and wonder, “How in the world did I not see those signs?” The same was true for the OT saints. As much as they thought they knew what to look for, there was much that was hidden from them until the Christ was revealed.

8. The people saw the miracle that happened to Zechariah and heard what God said through him. How did they respond in v.65? Why such a response?

And fear came on all their neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea, and all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, “What then will this child be?” For the hand of the Lord was with him.

Just like today, people don’t often see actual miracles happen right in front of them. The first response is fear of the unknown. Then, the more they thought about what happened, the more they talked about it, wondering what God had in mind for this child in the future.

9. How does this compare to the response of the people the night of Jesus’ birth? How many were at each event? What was the result of what the people saw and heard in each event? (Lk.2.1-7)

The only ones recorded to be at Jesus’ birth, besides His parents, were the shepherds. Their fear came from the angel suddenly appearing. They did, like those at John’s party, go about talking about what they had seen, heard, and experienced.

THE BIRTH OF JESUS (Luke 2.1-21)

Influential characters God used in the Christmas story

Caesar Augustus – (formerly known as Octavius) is on the throne of the Roman Empire. He came to power after co-reigning with Julius Caesar and Brutus. After a series of battles, Caesar Augustus (a title given to him at this time) reigns alone from 31 BC to AD 14. This period and a number of years beyond, were characterized as the longest period of peace in Rome's history.

Quirinius – b. 63BC, d. AD21. The actual dates he began to serve as governor, which he did at two different times, are uncertain. He left this post in AD 12.

1. God could have simply told Joseph, in another vision or dream, to go to Bethlehem, but He didn't. What does Prov. 21.1 teach about another way God leads?



[From *The Christmas Story*. A PowerPoint presentation from Rose Publishing, Torrance, Cal.]

Bethlehem means House of Bread. Jesus called Himself the Bread of Life. (Jn.6.35)

2. What things happened (biblically) in Bethlehem?
 - a. They went there to register.
 - b. They found no place to stay.
 - c. Mary gave birth to Jesus. (Notice it never actually says it was in a stable – it might possibly have been in a cave. Wherever it was there must have been animals around because they placed Jesus in a feeding trough.)
 - d. Shepherds came to see the child they had been told about by the angel(s).
 - e. On the eighth day, Jesus was taken to Jerusalem to be circumcised and given His name.

How many miles did they travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem? 90 when they traveled around Samaria.

At what time of day does the text say Jesus was born? In reality, the text doesn't tell us. We deduce it was at night, but we get this from the shepherds "watching over their flocks by night." Just how long before this Jesus was born, we do not know.

3. From Lk.2.7, what would you say the attitude was of the people in Bethlehem towards the coming Messiah?

Jesus later warns we should always be prepared for His Second Coming. Here, at His first coming, no one was prepared.

4. Almost no details are given about this wonderful birth in Lk.2.6-7. **ONE** unusual thing is mentioned, however. Can you find it? (Does Micah 5.2 help?)

In the perfect timing of God, all His plans, predicted as early as Gen.3.15, culminated in Jesus being born exactly when and where God said He would (Gal.4.4). Nothing could stand in God's way as He prepared for this momentous event.

5. Humanly speaking, how many "**risks**" did God take in bringing Christ's birth about in the way He did in Lk.2.1-7?

Sending a nine-month pregnant woman on a 90 mile journey on foot or on the back of a donkey might have caused her to give birth before they arrived.

They faced the dangers of robbers along the way.

Mary delivered the baby in such an unsterile and uncomfortable place around animals and their mess.

Both parents would be dirty from the travel.

No midwife was said to be present to assist the delivery.

Jesus was born in a tiny town, in a stable, with a crib made from a manger, with an announcement made to shepherds. Did any religious people dignify this event with their presence? No! Do they today? YES! But only at Christmas (and maybe Easter).

The long-awaited moment for the arrival of the Messiah had finally come, and the nation of Israel was to be the channel through which God would bring Him into the world...and His birth would create a worldwide observance year by year that will probably continue on throughout history...but from time to time there would arise those whose hearts desired to go just a bit deeper into the details and the message of the story...those who saw unusual things in the narrative and wondered about them...those who hungered for the meanings in the carols and danced their way onto the world's commercial stage of tradition and gift-giving.

III. What do I do with all of this?

Larry Crabb, in his book *Inside Out*, says, at the core of our very being is the longing for two things: having a strong and deep relationship with one or more people and making an impact (leaving something behind – your legacy).¹

The Westminster Shorter Catechism teaches us our chief purpose in life is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

Zechariah and Elizabeth would have been unknown to history had they not been the parents of John the Baptist. They had those same two longings you have. As far as we know, they had a good relationship with each other and with God; but their longing, even into old age, kept them from leaving what they saw as their legacy. God saw the bigger picture of His-story than they did. For God to be most glorified by their lives meant their suffering the “shame” of barrenness – at least until now.

¹ Larry Crabb, *Inside Out*. NavPress, 1988.

How do you see your life and legacy? Are you looking at it from only your view, or have you learned to be faithful to God where He has you today in His story?

Imagine how difficult a time Zechariah and Elizabeth must have had knowing they had prayed for years to have a child. Now, only in the latter years, does God grant them the desire of their hearts. However, the part they played in God's story was for them to be barren *until* this point in history. They had to wait for God and His timing. Any couple felt they were left out of God's plan if they had no children.

What legacy do you want to leave behind and how far are you willing to go to make it happen? (Hint: remember what happened to Abraham when he went too far trying to help God along. Also, remember children are *not* our only legacy.)

IV. How does this make me more like Jesus?

At the beginning of this lesson you were asked to write out your autobiography (your life to this point). Reread what you wrote.

John Piper paraphrases the first question of catechism this way: "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him."² Zechariah doubted God because He had not fulfilled what he wanted out of life.

This week, set aside some time to examine what you want most out of life in your relationships and legacy. Ask yourself, "Am I fighting or doubting God, or am I satisfied in Him?" Your honest answer will tell you whether you are satisfied (that is, content) in Him.

² John Piper, *When I Don't Desire God*. Crossway, 2004.

Lesson 4

I. Getting Started

Who are you? How do you see yourself? How do you see yourself in comparison to others? How do you see your position in society or the church? Do you see yourself at the top? Or at the bottom?

How do you see yourself in God's plan for building His Kingdom?

Psychology tries to get us to see ourselves as adequate in ourselves. God wants us to see ourselves as adequate in Him.

The shepherds were considered among the lowest class of that society, yet God chose them to be the recipients of this glorious appearance and message. What made the difference was what they did as a result of the information they received.

II. Discovering Christmas

The Announcement to the Shepherds (Luke 2.8-20)

In the midst of the wonderful story of the coming of Christ, there is an unusual note of the strange and seemingly unfair manner, by the world's standard, in which God carried out the entrance of the world's Redeemer into history.

The shepherds: these were men on the lower end of the social scale. They were looked down upon by the religious establishment as being ceremonially unclean because they could not wash as required, and because their job made them "violate" the Sabbath commandment as they interpreted it.

These men were in charge of lambs used for sacrifices in the Temple. Now they are the recipients of the announcement of the final sacrificial Lamb Who has just arrived.

The Means, Message, and the Reaction of this announcement

1. The **MEANS** used to bring the message was an Angel (2.9) who appeared to shepherds.
2. The **MESSAGE** showed the Redeemer as the Savior -- the Messiah, who was God come in the flesh. (2.11)
3. The **REACTION** was one of fear (2.9-10) which was quieted (2.10).

The MEANS

1. In this announcement, how many angels were involved? (Lk.2.9-10)

One

Why were the shepherds afraid?

Have the class think through this. The shepherds are quietly out in the field at night, just like always. All of a sudden an angel shows up. On top of that, a bright light shines all around them making it seem like daytime. Is this not enough to make anyone panic?

When was the last time the *glory of the Lord* was seen?

The *glory of the Lord* has not been seen since He removed His presence from Ezekiel's temple back in the 6th century.

Matthew began his apologetic regarding Jesus by saying the Messiah is "God with us." He ended his work by quoting Jesus saying "I will be with you always" (28.20).

Where was this angel standing?

It doesn't say. We generally see pictures of this angel hovering in the sky, but we are not told this.

Where was the angel when he met with Zechariah (1.11)? With Mary (1.26-28)?
He was standing with Zechariah in the Temple. In Mary's case, it only says the angel showed up. We are not even told where they were at the time.

When the rest of the angels appear, where are they standing?
Again we are not told. V.15 says they *went away from them into heaven*, but this doesn't mean they were hovering in the air this whole time or at all.

2. Do you know of any other time in Scripture when angels recited the praises of God as they did here in Lk.2.13-14?

Take them to such references as [Rev.4.8](#); [15.3-4](#); [16.5-7](#).

3. Can you think of any reason why the Lord would make this announcement **after** rather than before the birth of the Lord Jesus? (Lk.2.9ff)

Israel had been waiting FOR the coming of the Messiah for centuries. To hear again He is coming would be nothing new, except for hearing it from these supernatural messengers. What was special was hearing He was now here!

The MESSAGE

1. This **message** is said to be one of *good news of great joy* (2.10). This *good news* is the word **gospel** used so often in the NT ([Acts 20.24](#)). The verb form is the word **preach** ([Acts 16.10](#)).

This announcement is the first given to anyone of the fulfillment of [Gal.4.4](#). This is the ONLY such heavenly announcement! And it is given to the "*pure in heart, for they shall see God*" ([Mat.5.8](#)).

2. In this announcement, how many facts can you find about the **GOSPEL**? ([Lk.2.10-12](#))

It is good news of great joy.

It is for all the people.

It is about a savior who is Christ the Lord (the Messiah).

There was a sign given to them to verify what they had been told was true - the Baby is the Gospel.

The significance of the three titles

Savior – Names were significant and important in their meaning. *Savior* tells us His name, as well as what He would do. *Jesus* is the Greek form of the Hebrew name *Joshua*. Both mean *Savior*.

Christ – Until the Middle Ages, people had no last names. *Christ* is the Greek form of the Hebrew *Messiah* - the *Anointed One*, the one all Israel had longed for.

Lord – This is Jesus' connection with the Godhead. It was well understood by the Jewish mind that the *Lord* was the Sovereign God.

3. How would the **sign** mentioned in 2.12 ever afford the shepherds with sufficient proof the baby they found was REALLY the Messiah? What was the sign?

Bethlehem was a very small town, and it would have been unlikely more than one, maybe two, other births would have taken place this same night. How would these shepherds have found them? We don't know, but we can speculate they might have gone around the town asking, thereby making others interested in what this was all about. Have the class think through the implications of what these shepherds would have asked people. Many people had animals at their house, so there would have been many mangers. They were not told Mary and Joseph came from out of town. They might have assumed they were locals and went from house to house. This might have been God's way of getting the announcement out to more people.

4. What is God telling us about His intention(s) in Lk.2.14?

1st - As this message of a Savior was accepted by those for whom it was intended, it would bring **Glory to God in the highest** (Heaven), and

2nd - the reception of this Gospel message would produce **peace** among men who have been recipients of God's pleasure.

5. The message was to be for whom? all the people (2.10)

Although coming through the Jewish nation, the Gospel was for every nation of peoples. (See Matt.18.19.) The Good News was not to be one among many world religions, but the ONE ALL the people of the world would need!

6. Can you find in 2.11 the when, where, and what of the message?

When – today

Where – the city of David

What – a Savior, who is Christ the Lord

7. What was the very first title of the Baby? Savior

It is this emphasis that makes the story of Christmas joyful! This is **the** answer to the sin problem, both here and also in eternity. This tiny newborn was the Savior of the world! The Baby who was born to die.

8. In the beginning of 2.11, who does this verse say the message is for? You (plural)

This message is personal, and it is for common sinners like you and me. How does Jesus say it in Mark 2.17?

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous but sinners.”

9. Notice this Baby in 2.11 is CHRIST (the long-awaited Messiah) THE LORD (the Eternal God of the Bible). Jesus was BORN THAT WAY! He didn't have to 'become' God. Note the angel's word **is**, -- not **will be**. This Baby is 100% MAN and 100% God. He is God in the flesh. How is this explained in...

Isa.9.6 – “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Isa.7.14 – “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”

Micah 5.2 – “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth from me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.”

The REACTIONS and RESPONSES

1. 2.9 tells us what the shepherds experienced; they were **filled with fear**. (The Greek says they were “filled with fear – greatly feared.”). Zechariah was said to have been “troubled and fear fell upon him” (1.12), and Mary was “greatly troubled” (1.26), not by the angel’s showing up, but by what he said. What was there about this happening that would have made the shepherds so terrified? **It is not clear, but two things are apparent; the angel showed up out of the blue, and then there was a great light that must have made their night into daylight all around them.**

This angel in Luke 2.10 spoke of a great joy. How much joy does salvation produce according to Luke 15.10 “...there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Acts 8.5-8 “...there was much joy in that city.”

Acts 8.35-39 ...he “went on his way rejoicing.”

2. What was the first response of the shepherds to the message?
They went right away to check these things out.
3. Who do the shepherds believe gave them this revelation according to v.15? Read it very carefully!
“...which **the Lord has made known to us.”**
4. From 2.17-18, how do you suppose the shepherd’s testimony was received?
We are told they were struck with astonishment. The shepherds could not keep it to themselves. They became the first evangelists after the birth of the Savior.
5. What difference do you see between the attitude of Mary in 2.19 and that of the townspeople in 2.18?
They tried to put all the pieces together, but Mary collected, and treasured, every new piece of information that was given to her. Remember, for Mary this was all very personal.

6. What did the shepherds do after they left?

It was time to go back to their normal way of life, but they went back changed people for having seen their Salvation with their own eyes.

7. What is the **first** thing these shepherds praised God for in 2.20?

God places what they heard ahead of what they had seen. The information conveyed to them was more important than the visual confirmation. Read what Jesus told Thomas in Jn.20.29: *Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*

8. What was the **second** thing?

What they saw would solidify in their minds all that was told to them.

III. What do I do with all of this?

The job these men did was tending the sheep heading to be sacrificed for the sins of others. Now they are going to see the One Who will be the final lamb to be sacrificed. After the Cross, these shepherds would be out of a job.

When the shepherds decided to go, someone would have to stay behind to take care of the sheep. If you knew this would mean you would lose your job, would you have gone, or stayed behind? Why?

How do you see what you are doing with your life? Do you see it as advancing God's Kingdom? If not, what changes do you need to make?

IV. How does this make me more like Jesus?

God has called you to follow Him right where you are, doing just what you are doing.

This week, take time to sit down and write out a mission statement for your life. It should include what role you are playing in advancing the Kingdom. I.e., what spiritual gift(s) has God given you? Are you using them? What difference are you making in the life of someone outside your family, such as at work? Remember, God has made you adequate for any task He gives you.

Lesson 5

I. Getting Started

Up till this point, Mary and Joseph have had their lives totally disrupted by this pregnancy. They have likely been rejected by their families, lost their homes, and now had to leave the area for a seemingly senseless census. In all this, they were consistently obedient to follow through on God's "disruptive" plan for their lives.

When it comes to obeying God, how far are you willing to go?

II. Discovering Christmas

JESUS' CIRCUMCISION AND NAMING (Luke 2.21)

Just like His cousin John, on the eighth day of His life, Jesus was required by Scripture to be circumcised. And, according to tradition, on this same day He would be given His name.

In these simple acts of circumcision and giving Jesus His name, we again see the faithfulness of both Mary and Joseph. Remember how the crowd questioned Elizabeth when she gave John his name? That same question would likely have been raised here. We are not told anyone questioned Mary or Joseph. They simply followed the instructions given to each by the angel: To Joseph in Mat.1.21, and Mary in Lk.1.31.

During the intervening days between His birth and circumcision, where do you suppose the family stayed?

We will learn from the following event the family did not have much money; therefore, we can only speculate they either found a family member who was open to their staying with them, or they were able to rent a room. There would not have been enough time for them to return to Nazareth and return again to make their presentation in the Temple as stated in the following event.

THE PRESENTATION, SIMEON AND ANNA (Luke 2.22-38)

1. Lk.2.21-22, when did the family come to the Temple? (Lev. 12)
Mary was not allowed to enter the Temple area before the time of her purification was completed. This would be 40 days after Jesus was born (7 days until the circumcision and naming, then 33 more days for purification).
2. Again the question needs to be asked, where did they stay during these weeks.
It is probably safe to say that Joseph, a carpenter, found work during this time in order to support his family as they remained in Bethlehem.
3. Mary's offering is mentioned in 2.24. What two types of offerings did the Law require, and what did Mary bring? (Lev.12.6-8) **Make SURE the students read this reference.**
 - a. A one-year-old lamb should have been given for a burnt offering. Instead, they offered a turtledove or a pigeon.

Why were the people required to bring this sacrifice, according to Lev.1?
This offering was the propitiation for general sin, demonstrating dedication.

Where was it done, and who did it all?

At the time of Jesus' birth, He would have been presented to the priest at the First-Born Gate. See the diagram of the Temple on pg. 3.

In today's traditional ceremony, the father brings the child to the priest and recites a formula, or responds to ritual questions, indicating this is the Israelite mother's firstborn son and he has come to redeem him as commanded in the Torah. The priest asks the father which he would rather have, the child or the five silver shekels which he must pay. The father states he prefers the child to the money, then he recites a blessing and hands over five silver coins (or an equivalent amount of total silver). The priest holds the coins over the child and declares the redemption price is received and accepted in place of the child. He then blesses the child and returns him to the custody of his family.

- b. The other offering would have been a turtledove or a pigeon for a sin offering.

Why were the people required to bring this sacrifice, according to Lev.4?
This offering applied to situations where purification was needed.

4. What does this passage tell us Mary brought for her offering, and what does this tell us about Mary and Joseph's financial condition?

The offering tells us they were at least able to offer the “poor man’s sacrifice.”

5. How does this help you understand Mary's words about the Lord in Luke 1.48?

For he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. God, through His OT prophets, had a uniting theme: Israel was neglecting their poor, widowed, and orphaned. The world saw her as being poor, yet God looked on her as rich by being the human mother of His Son. The character of our Lord is revealed in His providing the “poor man’s sacrifice” hundreds of years earlier.

6. What do we learn about Simeon in Lk.25-27?

- a. He was righteous.
- b. He was devout.
- c. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel.
- d. The Holy Spirit was upon him.
- e. He received a revelation from the Holy Spirit that he would not die before seeing God’s Christ (Hebrew Anointed).
- f. He was led by the Spirit into the temple.
- g. He must have been old and ready to die.

Simeon’s name means “God has heard.”

7. What tells you in the text this is not the first time the Spirit has revealed something to Simeon?

Sometime in the past the Spirit revealed to Simeon that God would not let him die before this event took place.

As Jesus is brought to God in dedication, God testifies about Jesus through Simeon in the very place where all Israel expected to meet with God.

8. How many times is the Holy Spirit mentioned here, and what is He doing? Answer this by working through Appendix B.

9. Until now, Mary had information given to her by Gabriel (1.31-35), and the words of the shepherds (2.17). Now Simeon speaks, and his words amaze both Joseph and Mary. List the details Simeon states in 2.30-35:

Simeon himself got to see Israel's Salvation (Jesus).

Salvation has been prepared in the presence of all peoples.

This salvation is a light for revelation to the Gentiles.

This salvation is for the glory to your people Israel.

This salvation is appointed (laid down, as in a foundation) for the fall and rising of many in Israel.

This salvation is a sign that is opposed.

Mary, a sword, will pierce through your own soul.

And the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.

10. How does the **all** in 2.31 compare with the **all** in 2.10?

In 2.10 we are told this Salvation will bring joy to all the people (singular in the Greek), whereas 2.31 says God has prepared this Salvation in the presence of all peoples (plural). The singular reference is speaking about the people of God – true believers who will experience this joy. The second statement is telling us salvation is there standing face-to-face (the literal Greek for *presence*) with all people, whether they accept Him or not.

11. What does Simeon say the Christ child will be to the Gentiles (2.32)?

He will be **a light for revelation to the Gentiles**. This is an OT statement made to Abraham about his offspring. The gospel was never meant just for the Jews, it was always intended that Israel would live as a light of revelation so that the Gentiles would all see God and want what He had given Israel. God told Abram He would make him into a **father of a multitude of nations** (Gen.17.5).

12. This Salvation is said to result in two things, one for each recipient. What are they, and what do they mean?

a. **Light** – Jesus (Who is Salvation) is called **the light of the world** (Jn.8.12). The opposite of light is not darkness. Rather, darkness is the absence of light. When this Light shines, it will remove all darkness in the world. For the Light is salvation for the Gentiles. Jesus, as God Himself, is the true revelation of the knowledge of God, His holiness, love, and His joy as never before experienced.

b. **Glory** – This is the OT counterpart of the *shekinah* glory observed by Israel every day in the wilderness as it shined from the Tabernacle and later in the Temple. This represented God's very presence with His people. Israel had the only experience of all the nations to be given the honor of being chosen by God to be the light to the Gentiles. Basically, what God told them was if they would live before Him and do all He gave them to do, He would pour out so many blessings on them they would almost have to stop the Gentiles from coming and wanting to share in what God was doing.

13. And what will He become (or should He have been) to Israel (2.32)?

All along, it was Jesus Who was the Glory of Israel. They thought it was they who were special – it was all about them. Rather, Israel was God's vehicle of working through a nation to reach the world.

14. Is the phrase **fall and rise** the normal way we would say this (2.34)? Why the difference?

When we think about books like *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, we read about it coming to power and then its decline. This phrase in 2.24 reads the opposite.

Jesus came to the house of Israel, as they were the ones entrusted with the Scriptures. It would be they who would first experience their Salvation right before their eyes. Many would reject Him, thus **fall**. Then there would be those who would accept Him, and thus **rise**. When people are confronted with Salvation, they first come to see their sinfulness (**fall**) and are then raised by Christ to newness of life.

Does your Bible have any note on the word *rise*?

It means to stand someone on their feet; or to be resurrected.

15. Christ's purpose on earth is mirrored in *the fall and rise of many in Israel*. What does Matt.21.44 say in connection with this phrase?

It speaks of Christ as the Cornerstone: **and the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.**

How about Jn.12.24?

This would follow the second interpretation of #14, showing the falling and rising of the same individual.

16. What does it mean when it says Jesus was **a sign to be opposed**?

A sign is something that points to something else. Throughout Jesus' ministry, He pointed people to God, meaning all the Members of the Trinity. We see over and over in the Gospels when Jesus pointed people to God by pointing out Who **He** was, they not only rejected Him, but finally killed Him.

17. Mary was unlikely prepared for the message from Simeon directed just to her (2.34-35).

What is Simeon really telling Mary when he says...

a. *a Sword will pierce through your own soul?* -

"This was a large broad sword, the symbol of intense pain, of frightful and piercing anguish. For the fulfillment see John 19:25-27."³

b. *the thoughts from many hearts may be revealed?* -

"By means of their attitude to Jesus, men would be constantly revealing the thoughts or deliberations of their hearts. They would show whether they were "for" or "against" him.

Neutrality would be forever impossible (Luke 11:23; cf. Matt. 12:30)."⁴

How do you think the conversation Mary might have had with Joseph that night would have gone? Keep in mind the personalities of Mary and Joseph we have seen so far.

Have the class speculate on this. Have them think through this whole Christmas story and all Mary and Joseph have gone through. Pregnant and out-of-wedlock; probably rejected by friends and family; having to travel 90 miles to a place where they would not find a place to lay their heads; etc. Some of this they might not have wanted to talk about at all. This information, added to what was told before, would add more than they might have otherwise wanted to know.

18. Why do you suppose the Lord includes the testimony of Simeon in the Christmas story?

Think about this: Joseph was a "nobody"; the same was true of Mary; now Simeon, also a "nobody" is led by the Lord to be there at that exact time, and makes this pronouncement. God

³ William Hendriksen *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke*, New Testament Commentary. Baker Book House, 1953-2001, p.170.

⁴ *Ibid.*

didn't use the high priest, or any priest – He chose to work through the common people of the day to bring about the most momentous historical event to date.

This is the last pronouncement given to Mary about Who this Baby really is, until Jesus makes His own statement when He is twelve. This is the only statement that contains any “negative” information in what he tells Mary.

19. What details are we given about Anna in 2.36-38?

She was a prophetess (Israel had not seen any prophet since the end of the OT, which means until now God had not asked her to prophesy anything).

Her name is Anna (which is the Greek for Hannah, which means Grace).

She is the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher (no one else's tribe is mentioned).

She was advanced in years.

She married young and was widowed after 7 years .

She has remained unmarried and is now 84 (or perhaps as much as 104 depending on how this is actually figured).

She somehow “lived” at the Temple, where she worshipped, fasted and prayed constantly.

She was at the Temple at the same time as Jesus.

She began by giving thanks to God,

and speaking to all the others that were there waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

20. This old prophetess, Anna – why is she here? Who might be influenced by her presence? She has been living at the Temple, being watchful and waiting for this - the consolation of Israel. All the others who were there who were waiting for this same consolation would have had much to talk about after this.

Picture this scenario: Mary and Joseph have come to the Temple simply to perform that which was required in the Law. As they complete this, they are met by a man who takes Jesus in his arms, raises Him up to bless God for what He has given. When Simeon is done, Anna joins the group adding her prayer of thanksgiving and then turns to the others who are standing near waiting for this long-awaited Messiah.

21. How did she learn the wonderful news about the Christ child?

We are told she was a prophetess. God has not spoken through a prophet in over 400 years. Simeon was said to have been spoken to directly by the Holy Spirit. Anna must have received her information in the same way God spoke to prophets throughout the Bible.

Simeon and Anna hung around the Temple, and were said to be righteous, devout, and given much to prayer. They might have been part of the group outside praying as Zechariah was performing the prayer offering on the altar of incense. If so, they might have heard his testimony and been waiting for this very day.

Aftermath: Since Simeon and Anna were at the Temple so much, they must have been well known to many there. Some, at least, would have known what they were looking for. You cannot help but wonder what the reaction and response of these people might have been.

III. What do I do with all of this?

What do **you** do while you wait? Waiting is hard, especially today when everything is so instantaneous in the Western world.

Think back to an event in your life in which you longed for something over a long period of time. Describe the waiting, and then describe the feelings you had when the waiting was over.

IV. How does this make me more like Jesus?

How much do you long for Heaven? Be honest.

As you begin this new week, look over your schedule and determine what has eternal significance.

If you knew for a fact Jesus was coming back tomorrow, what would you change about your present life and habits? What might you eliminate from your schedule?

What year was Jesus born?

In AD 525, an attempt was made to figure out when Jesus was born and to start a new calendar system from that date. There would be no year 0, so the calendar would go from Dec. 31, 1BC to AD Jan. 1, 1.

A mistake was found later. It was discovered that this calendar was at least four years off. It is now understood Herod died in March or April 4 BC. Since this crazed man ordered the death of all infants 2 and under, it is accepted that Jesus could not have been born more than two years earlier than Herod's death. Therefore, Jesus must have been born between 4-5 BC.

Nazareth or Bethlehem? There can be some real confusion regarding where the family stayed after these events in Jerusalem. [Lk.2.39](#) has them returning to Nazareth, but Matthew has them still in Bethlehem when the wise men arrive and find them in a house.

The simple answer can be found when you remember, after Mary was “found” to be with child, they might have been rejected by many, including their families. Now that they are in a safe place, Bethlehem, they take up residence there until Joseph is warned and told to move to Egypt for the Child’s safety.

It is only after they return from Egypt that they are told not to return to Bethlehem, where they are headed, but instead, to move back to Nazareth.

Herodian Rulers

Herod the Great – 37-4BC

Archelaus in Judea, Idumea & Samaria – 4BC-AD6 ([Matt.2.22](#))

Herod Antipas in Galilee & Perea – 4BC-AD39 ([Lk.3.1](#))

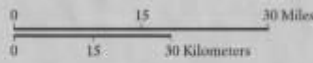
Herod Philip – tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis – 4BC-AD34 ([Lk.3.1](#))

Herod Agrippa I in Judea, Perea & Galilee – AD37-44 ([Acts 12.20-25](#))

Herod Agrippa II in Galilee & Perea – AD50-93 ([Acts 25.13-27](#))

KINGDOM OF HEROD THE GREAT

- City
- Site of Herodian fortress
- ⊙ Decapolis city
- ⊙ Cities Salome gave to his sister
- ▬ Boundary of Herod the Great's Kingdom
- ▬ Boundary of domain given to Archelaus, son of Herod, by Augustus Caesar in (4 BC), when Herod died
- ▬ Boundary of domain given to Herod Antipas, son of Herod, by Augustus Caesar in (4 BC), when Herod died
- ▬ Boundary of domain given to Herod Philip, son of Herod, by Augustus Caesar in (4 BC), when Herod died
- ▬ Semi-independent municipality
- ▬ Syrian Province



Lesson 6

I. Getting Started

How far would *you* go?

The world today has become smaller. Distances can be reduced to a matter of nanoseconds. Travel, which not long ago took months, now can be done in hours. Technology has shrunk our world!

One starry, starry night, a group of astrologers were searching the sky and found the announcement about a new king born to the nation of Israel. They made arrangements to travel hundreds of miles on uncomfortable camels to worship this King.

Now, how far would *you* go?

II. Discovering Christmas

THE WISE MEN (Matthew 2)

1. Both Matthew and Luke give details about the very early life of Jesus. Compare what Matt. 2 and Luke 2 tell us, and don't tell us.

<u>Matthew</u>	<u>Luke</u>
In the days of Herod	Herod is not mentioned except a brief mention in <u>1.5</u>
Wise men are talked about	No wise men are mentioned
No shepherds visit Jesus	Shepherds are in the story
Men are led visually by a star	Shepherds led verbally by an angel
Star led directly to Jesus	Shepherds had to find Him on their own
Jesus is found in a house	Jesus is found in a manger
Joseph is missing	Joseph is present
No circumcision or sacrifice	No flight to Egypt
No prophecies or Temple visit	No mention of Herod's death

2. What would you say was Matthew's purpose in presenting the Christmas story from the angle he does?

Take the class to “The Four Gospels” chart at the beginning of the book. Note the purpose of the writing of each gospel. Matthew writes with the intention of proving Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah – the King of the Jews. Here, right at the beginning of his gospel, he sets out to show the Gentiles recognized what even the Jewish leaders failed to accept.

All we know about these men who visited the Child is contained in 2.1-12. Herodotus, an ancient historian, uses this term (wise men) to designate some Medes in the Persian empire who were priests of a specific tribe.

The term *wise men* (or *magoi* in the Greek) also appears in the Babylonian records. In fact, at one point in their history, Daniel is said to have been their head (Dan.2.48). What does Daniel say about them in 2.27?

Daniel answered and said to the king, “No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or astrologers can show to the king the mystery that the king has asked....”

What can we learn about these strange men from the text?

What we can say about these men is that they knew the stars, and were therefore probably astrologers. They knew the Jewish religion well enough to recognize something great had come to the Jews through this event. And, they had enough wealth to afford to give very expensive gifts to this boy-king as well as afford to travel such a distance.

3. ***Magi***

Were they Jews?

No, but they must have known enough Jews, many of whom still lived in Persia, having never returned to Israel after the Captivity.

Where were they from?

Matthew seems to give us another view of these *wise men*. He gives us the idea they were astrologers from the east (probably Persia (modern day Iran), but it might have been Babylon or even Arabia).

Does God guide people like these?

He certainly did in this case! These men would show greater obedience than would the religious leaders who would hear the testimony of these men.

How many were there?

History will later say there were three, but this is only because there were three gifts. From the plural, we can say for sure there were more than one.

Does it say these men “followed the star”? (Compare vs.1-3 with 9-10)

Here the answer is yes and no. The typical way we see the Christmas story portrayed is with the wise men following yonder star. But only Matthew says they saw His star. However, this star appears a second time to these wise men, but this time the text indicates it went before them and stood over the house where they found Jesus.

Somehow history has told us these men were kings. What do we learn from the following verses that might lead us to that conclusion?

Psm.72.10-11 – *May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands render him tribute; may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts! May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him!*

Isa.49.7 – *Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the servant of rulers: “Kings shall see and arise; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves: because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”*

Isa.60.1-3,6 – *Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.*

Legend records their names and races AND that they represent Noah’s sons AND their skulls lie in a casket in the cathedral in Cologne, France. Do you remember the names given to these “three Wise Men?”

Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar.

The same word for magi (Greek *magoi*) appears in the following verses. What does your translation call them in...

Acts 8.9,11 – **magic (ESV); sorcery (NIV & KJV);**

Acts 13.6,8 – **magician (ESV); wizard (Message)**

What kind of conclusion are you putting together about these men?

4. God announces the arrival of His son.
 - a. The **means** of the announcement was a star (2.1-2) that appeared in the skies.
 - b. The **message** showed the arrival of the King of the Jews (2.2).
 - c. The **reaction** is not all that clear, except to record the intense desire to worship this king (2.2,10-11).

THE STAR

Only mentioned in one Gospel (which ___Matthew___?). Here are some questions to which we want to find answers. If the Wise Men saw it in the East, and followed it, how is it they traveled West? Was the Star a miracle or not? Why did the Star lead the Wise Men to Jerusalem instead of Bethlehem? Is it mentioned in the Old Testament?

5. How does your Bible say "*star in the East*" (2.2)?

Many of the translations say: *We saw his star at its rising.* This is saying the same thing since all stars rise in the east. However, the fact is also inferred that the wise men themselves were in the east when they saw the star. The best answer to this is they are both correct.

What can we learn of this star from:

2.2 – It was called "*His star.*"

2.7 – Herod wanted to know how long ago it appeared.

2.9 – It reappears and leads them to their destination .

2.10 – Its reappearing brought even greater rejoicing to the wise men as it confirmed for them what they had seen sometime in the past.

Was this star natural? Supernatural?

This "star" could have been 2 or more planets coming so close together they looked like one. This did occur in 7 BC, when Saturn and Jupiter aligned so closely it looked like one giant star. It then reappeared two years later. This could explain the two appearances to the wise men. But these dates are too early. Herod died in 4 BC. He ordered the death of all the children 2 years and younger. If Jesus was born as early as 7 BC he would have been older than 2.

God many times uses the natural world to bring about His desired ends. He could have done exactly that here.

However, the text in Mat.2.9-10 raises a problem for a naturalistic solution. The pattern for the movement of stars is from east to west. Bethlehem is five miles to the *south* of Jerusalem. This star leads them in a direction natural stars do not move. Also, it says it *came to rest over the place where the child was.* Stars don't stop!

Matt.2 is the only NT reference to this star. Was it prophesied in the OT? Could this star have been some kind of fulfillment of Num.24.17?

*I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near:
A star shall come out of Jacob,
And a scepter shall rise out of Israel;
It shall crush the forehead of Moab
And break down all the sons of Sheth.*

Considering where these men came from, how must these men have done their traveling? Take the class to a map. Show them where Babylon is, and where Persia is. No one would have crossed straight from the east across the desert. Instead, the normal caravan route would have been north along the Fertile Crescent. That would have made the journey much longer. This route was very dangerous, as robbers were known to be all over these areas, and they were carrying great treasures that needed protecting. Therefore, very few would ever travel in small caravans. A normal caravan would have consisted of upwards of 60-120 people.

How long might it have taken them to get there? When you take into consideration the preparation for such a journey, and then finding, or putting together enough people and camels, the journey might have taken as little as six months, or as many as two years to complete.



[<http://www.bing.com/images/search?q=free+images+of+wise+men&view=detail&id=368F9FA707E9F4563679F669A9BC55EDDA5E7A2B&first=0&qpvt=free+images+of+wise+men&FORM=IDFRIR>]

THE INQUIRY (Matthew 2.4-12)

The Herod mentioned here, known as Herod the Great (born c.74 BC), was an Idumean (an area south of Judea). In 40 BC, Herod and the Romans captured Jerusalem and he took the role as sole ruler of Judea, bestowing on himself the title *King of the Jews*. He ruled for 37 years. Herod later began to go insane, executing several members of his own family, including his wife Mariamne. He was so concerned no one would mourn his death, he commanded a large group of distinguished men to come to Jericho. He gave an order they should be killed at the time of his death so the displays of grief he craved would take place. Fortunately for these men, Herod's son Archilaus did not carry out his wish. After Herod's death, his kingdom was divided among three of his sons. Archilaus became ethnarch of Judea, Herod Antipas became tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea, and Philip became tetrarch of territories east of the Jordan. Herod died while the Child Jesus was in Egypt (Matt.2.15,19) in 4 BC.

1. These wise men traveled a long distance to find this special child. If they were “following yonder star,” why did they not go to Bethlehem instead of Jerusalem?

They were looking for a King. So, the most natural thing to do was to look for a king in the palace, which was in Jerusalem.

These men do NOT ask: Where is the one born *to be* king, but the one *born king!* Matthew has already set this out in the lineage section of chapter one by tracing Jesus' lineage back to King David.

2. Why was Herod troubled (2.3)?

Herod was known as a mean-tempered, jealous man. He would not be at all tolerant of a rival king, even if he was a baby

Why was all of Jerusalem troubled as well?

Picture this: These wise men with their caravan and perhaps as many as 60 or more people arrive in Jerusalem. They are rather well-to-do financially, and perhaps politically influential. They come looking for the King of the Jews. Herod is paranoid as it is. Word quickly spreads throughout the city. People are not sure how their crazed king will respond. From experience, they were worried!



Did you notice the magi never bow to Herod? Typically, guests like this would also bring gifts for the present king, but not for Herod.

3. In 2.4-6, Herod calls together the entire Sanhedrin (Jewish leaders made up of Pharisees, Sadducees, elders, and scribes). What one fact did Herod want to find out?

The only question he asked them was where the Child was to be born. He does not want to alert them to his plan to get rid of any and all who would challenge his power.

4. Shouldn't it have been dangerous to ask Jewish leaders about such a birth, if they were waiting for it?

Some of these leaders (the Pharisees, elders and scribes) believed He was coming, but the Sadducees, who made up most of the priesthood, did not. However, Herod wasn't concerned about anyone but himself and his self-preservation. These leaders must have heard the rumors going around about these foreigners looking for the newborn King of the Jews, but they didn't seem interested enough to check it out.

How quickly were they able to answer Herod's question?

Notice they did not need to go off and search the Scripture for the answer. They knew the answer right away.

What does this tell you about their knowledge of the Scripture?

These religious leaders knew their Bible. They knew exactly where the Messiah was to be born. They knew it, but didn't believe it. How much this is like us today, knowing Jesus will return, but not living in that expectation!

5. The Wise Men asked for a king; Herod asked about the Christ (Messiah) (2.4). What does Herod's question show you?

Herod was not a Jew, but he was married to one and grew up in an area very influenced by the Jewish religion. He led the Jewish nation for 37 years and knew well their customs and beliefs.

6. The gathering called in 2.7 was secret. Had the Magi been in on the meeting in 2.4?

There is no indication Herod met with the Magi before calling in the Jewish leaders. He is already setting his plan before meeting with anyone!

Were the Jewish leaders in on this second meeting of 2.7?

There is no way Herod wanted the Jewish leaders to know what he was up to. If any of them did care this might indeed be the long awaited Messiah-king, then there was no way he would let them know what he was plotting!

Would Herod's words in 2.8 possibly help us understand this?

The Jewish leaders would have known Herod had no intention of offering anything to a rival king except death. They might have made every effort to foil Herod's plot.

7. In route to Bethlehem, the same star the wise men had seen sometime previously in the East reappeared. Read 2.10 carefully! What, exactly, about this star caused such surprise and rejoicing?

There is no indication they had seen this star since it first rose some or many months ago. To see it again only confirmed this was a major event and they were indeed on the right path.

It is very likely God led these men directly to the child in that it would not take Herod very long to learn they were not returning to him as planned. Unknown to them, these men were in a life and death situation and needed to find the child quickly.

8. What does this star now do that it did not do before or any other time in history?

It travels SOUTH. Stars travel only east to west. This was no ordinary star. These men were astrologers and they knew the difference between a star and a comet or "shooting star." In addition, the star led them to Jesus' whereabouts and then stopped.

9. Look very carefully! Where did these wise men find the Christ child? (2.11)?

He was in a house, not a stable, cave, or manger.

This event took place between six months and perhaps as long as two years after Jesus was born. If we conclude these men were traveling from as close as Babylon it would have been a 900 mile journey. All the “manger scenes” set up at Christmas that contain the wise men with the shepherds are incorrect. Perhaps we need to put the wise men over on the mantle showing them beginning their long journey to find the Christ child.

10. Is the order of "**child**" & "**mother**" important (2.13-14)?

One would normally think of Mary and the baby, but Matthew deliberately reverses the order. The passage does not state Joseph was present, but it does not mean he was not. He has been a prominent character for Matthew, but after this chapter he does not appear any more.

Why is this order important?

Right from the beginning of this Gospel, Jesus is the preeminent character.

11. What did the wise men do as soon as they found Jesus?

The text says they fell on their knees, and probably on their faces. This was a typical response before a king. We do not know *for sure* if these men were believers when they first saw the star. However, Matthew is writing to show how Israel rejected what the Gentiles accepted. It is hard to imagine these men walking away from this without a change of heart.

Notice these wise men worship Jesus and not Mary!

Compare the reactions of the wise men to that of the shepherds when they each were confronted with the Child, Who was so much more than anyone really understood.
(Compare Lk.2.15-20 with Mt.2.11.)

12. These men open treasure chests. What are the gifts that were offered?

- a. Gold
- b. Frankincense
- c. Myrrh

What *might* each of these have symbolically represented about Jesus' life?

- a. Gold represented Jesus as King.
- b. Frankincense - represented a deity. It is a white resinous gum, obtained from trees in Arabia. It was used for both medicinal and cult purposes. See Ex.30.34-38.
- c. Myrrh is a resinous gum (in solid or liquid forms – Ex.30.23) of the bush *balsamodendron myrrha*. It is one of the main ingredients used for healing and for burial. This might have represented Jesus acting as a Priest in offering Himself as the final sacrifice.

Why did God give these gifts to the family at this time?

We saw when Mary offered her sacrifice in Lk.2, it was the sacrifice of a poor person. Now the family is going to be in need of money to travel and live in Egypt for an indeterminate amount of time.

It would only be speculation, but might it have been possible that the wise men left them a camel or two since they would no longer need them for carrying these gifts? This too would have been very needed by the family for a quick escape, even though they would not know this until Joseph received his warning dream.

13. What warning do these wise men receive?

They were told NOT to return to Herod as God alone knew he was really planning to kill this rival King.

How was this warning given and who gave it to them? Note this: The text literally says, *they* (plural) *were warned in a dream* (singular).

This is an interesting statement. In all the other passages an angel gives information or warnings. Here God is preserving the lives of these men by giving each of them the same dream. When they woke up and realized they had all dreamed the same warning, they responded quickly by doing what the dream said. Get moving, and do it immediately!

14. Where do the wise men go next?

We do not know what direction they went, but we do know they didn't return by way of Jerusalem.

Why?

The warning must have told them the reputation of Herod was real, and he was not telling them the truth about what he intended to do to this child.

15. Did Herod foresee the Wise Men's escape? (2.16b-17)

As paranoid as he was, he knew better than to send any soldiers with the wise men, even under the guise of protection. He could not afford to reveal his actual plan, so he trusted them, perhaps thinking they did not know him well enough to mistrust him.

III. What do I do with all of this?

The wise men are sent by Herod to find Jesus and report back so Herod could *worship* Him also. Once they get there and encounter the newborn King, they are put in a quandary – which king

will they serve?

Tell about a time in your life when you made a commitment to do something only to find out later this would not be the right thing to do. Which King/king do you choose to serve? Why?

IV. How does this make me more like Jesus?

What is your motivation for serving Jesus? Is it out of a sense of duty? If so, you miss the whole point of what He came to do for us. Serving and obedience must be done out of a loving relationship you have with the King who loves His subjects.

This week, keep a journal of the decisions you are called on to make in which you have a choice about which king you choose to follow. This should not be anything long, but enough so you can begin to see patterns in your decision-making.

Lesson 7

If you have only six weeks for this entire study, you can combine this lesson with lesson 6.
If the content of this lesson is too short, you can take them into any of the Appendix work.

I. Getting Started

Shortly after the wise men departed, Joseph received another dream (perhaps by the same angel of the Lord as before, Matt.1.20), warning him to take the family and leave immediately. (Note again the word order, *the child and his mother*.) This journey would take them 80 miles south-west to the Egyptian border. They would most likely have settled in Alexandria on the coast, where a very large Jewish community existed.

II. Discovering Christmas

THE FLIGHT (Matthew 2.13-18)

1. An important principle of interpreting prophecy is found by comparing Matt.2.15 with Hosea 11.1.
When you read the context of this verse in Hosea, before and after, you quickly wonder what this has to do with what Matthew is saying. This is typical of much of prophecy. God took an historical event and only now has Matthew interpreted Hosea in a way different than Hosea understood. (This is called analogical correspondence.) When it comes to interpreting prophecy involving the Second Coming, we need to realize many passages in Scripture will be revealed later that we only thought we understood today. (This is called predictive prophecy.)
2. The same principle is true of 2.17-18. Here Matthew is referencing a historical event from Jeremiah's day in which Israel is being dragged away into captivity. Rachel, the grandmother of the 12 tribes of Israel, is seen weeping for her children going into captivity. Matthew now sees Rachel weeping again for the loss of these infants in Bethlehem at the hand of Herod.

3. Bethlehem was a very small town of possibly 5,000 people. The estimates are this would have affected a maximum of 12 babies and their families – not that this makes it right or easier, but it tells us it was not hundreds of babies like we see in movies.

THE RETURN (Matthew 2.19-23)

1. Look back over Matt. 1 & 2. How many times in the Christmas story did angels appear in dreams to Joseph, and what happened each time? (See chart Appendix C.)

Have the class work on filling in Appendix C. This will help them answer this question.

Why is that important?

These events show how God was in charge of every detail of the Christmas story. These happenings were not left to man to accomplish; God was at work in everything. It was too important to do otherwise.

We also can see from above how God superintends every event of **our** lives not necessarily by the same means, but in every detail.

2. What does the timing of the warning in 2.22 show you about the way in which God guides His own?

His timing is always perfect and worked out in **every** detail!

3. Final warning. Before his death, Herod made the decision to divide his territory among his remaining sons. In 2.22, Joseph grew concerned as he approached Bethlehem, when he learned Herod's murderous son Archelaus was now on the throne. A "better" son (the one who beheaded John the Baptist), Herod Agrippa, is on the throne in Galilee. God gives Joseph his last set of directions and sends the family back where they started – Nazareth. (See the map on page ? showing the territories of Herod and how it was divided.)

4. Look very carefully at v.23. Who does the **he** refer to?

When you read the rest of the verse, it is clear this is Jesus and not Joseph, which you would not pick up from what went before. The end of the verse states **...that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled: He shall be called a Nazarene**. This could not be referring to Joseph.

5. Matthew, in 2.23, makes it sound like the city of Nazareth was a new experience to Joseph and Mary. Does Luke's story help put this all together?

Take the class back to Lk.2.2 and 2.39. The family started out there, and after MANY twists and turns, they are guided to return there.

6. In Isaiah 11.1, **branch** is the Hebrew word **NATZAE**. The word **NAZARENE** (2.23) would mean, *the man of Nazareth, the town of the Branch*. Once again Matthew brings us back to the OT tying Jesus to being the fulfillment of all the OT expected.

Keep reminding them this is God showing the Jewish nation they have missed the meaning of the OT, and its ONE theme – the Messiah - Jesus!

III. What do I do with all of this?

What does Jesus think of how you spend your time and money at Christmas?

Do you worship at His throne or that of commercialism? (Think of it this way. If you are a female, do you get caught up in: Is your house clean? What are you going to cook? Is all the shopping done, and presents wrapped? Are all the decorations up? If you are a male, are you more concerned about the football games than Jesus' birthday celebration? Are you more concerned about spending enough on every person? Do you review your list of giving for the year? Have you checked with any people in need in your church?)

IV. How does this make me more like Jesus?

What will you do differently (in your heart and in your practice) this Christmas season to celebrate Jesus more and secular Christianity less?

What are **YOU** planning to give Jesus for His birthday this year?

What will it cost you?

What did it cost the Father?

How Much Do You NOW Know About Christmas?

The following is a post-test to see just how much you have learned about the Christmas story.

Lesson One Questions

Which Gospel(s) tell us about Jesus' birth?

- a. **Matthew**
- b. Mark
- c. **Luke**
- d. John

What angel is mentioned by name in the Christmas story?

- a. **Gabriel**
- b. Michael
- c. Satan
- d. Larry

Who was the child born to Zechariah and Elizabeth?

- a. Matthew
- b. Mark
- c. Luke
- d. **John**

How many chapters cover the Christmas story?

- a. **4**
- b. 10
- c. 15

Lesson Two Questions

Joseph was the biological father of Jesus.

- a. True
- b. **False**

Joseph was happy about Mary's pregnancy.

- a. True
- b. **False**

Mary was to remain a virgin all her life.

- a. True
- b. **False**

What does the name Jesus mean?

- a. Friend
- b. **Savior**
- c. God with us

Lesson Three Questions

What prompted Joseph to take a very pregnant Mary to Bethlehem?

- a. **A census**
- b. An angel
- c. They followed a star

The manger was

- a. A stall
- b. **A feeding trough**
- c. Part of a cave

Jesus' birth place was somewhat crowded with animals.

- a. **True**
- b. False

The wise men were present at Jesus' birth.

- a. True
- b. **False**

Lesson Four Questions

The shepherds followed an angel to Jesus.

- a. True
- b. **False**

What sign were the shepherds told to look for by the angel?

- a. a lion and a sheep together in peace
- b. a tree with a star on top
- c. a star over Bethlehem
- d. **newborn baby lying in a manger**

Who were the first evangelists after the birth of Jesus?

- a. Herald
- b. **The shepherds**
- c. The wise men
- d. The Little Drummer Boy

Lesson Five Questions

At what age was a child to be circumcised?

- a. At birth
- b. 8 days
- c. After making a profession of faith

The Bible says that Jesus was born in December.

- a. True
- b. False

Who decided on Jesus' name?

- a. Mary
- b. Joseph
- c. Gabriel
- d. God

The Holy Spirit is not mentioned in the Christmas Story.

- a. True
- b. False

Lesson Six Questions

How many wise men were there?

- a. Three
- b. Four
- c. Unknown

Magi are mentioned in the

- a. OT
- b. NT
- c. Both

The wise men were

- a. Jews
- b. Gentiles
- c. Other

The wise men saw the shepherds.

- a. True
- b. False

The star led the wise men

- a. To Jerusalem
- b. To Jesus
- c. Back home

The star traveled

- a. Eastward
- b. Westward
- c. Southward

Lesson Seven Questions

An angel told Joseph to leave Bethlehem.

- a. True
- b. False

Where did God send Mary and Joseph to protect Jesus from Herod?

- a. Bethlehem
- b. Nazareth
- c. Egypt

Jesus grew up in

- a. Bethlehem
- b. Jerusalem
- c. Nazareth

Appendix A

THE OTHER SIDE OF CHRISTMAS

If you have been observant, you have realized only four chapters in two Gospels deal with the birth narrative of Jesus. If you have been even more observant, you have come to see that only two verses cover the actual birth of Jesus.

Look at the chart that describes the differences between the four Gospels at the beginning of this study. Compare the amount of Scripture God uses to cover the Christmas story in comparison to the many chapters He uses to cover Jesus' final week.

The rules of interpreting Scripture tell us we should put as much emphasis on a subject as God does. Now answer this question: Does your church put more time and emphasis on Christmas, or Easter? Which should be the time of the year we celebrate the most?

CHRISTMAS	EASTER
She gave birth to her <i>firstborn</i> Son, Lk.2.7	Jesus Christ...the <i>firstborn</i> of the dead, Rev.1.5
She <i>wrapped</i> Him in cloths, Lk.2.7	He took Him down and <i>wrapped</i> Him in a linen cloth, Lk.23.53
She <i>laid Him</i> in a manger, Lk.2.7	He <i>laid Him</i> in a tomb...in the rock, Mark 15.46
The angel said to shepherds, " <i>do not be afraid!</i> " Lk.2.10	The angel said to the women, " <i>do not be afraid...</i> " Matt.28.5
You will find a Baby <i>wrapped in cloths</i> ...lying in a manger, Lk.2.12	He saw the <i>linen wrappings</i> lying there, John 20.5
They <i>made known the statement</i> ... about the Child, Lk.2.17	They departed quickly...and ran to <i>report it</i> , Matt.28.8
They fell down and <i>worshipped Him</i> , Matt.2.10	They took hold of His feet and <i>worshipped Him</i> , Matt.28.9
They rejoiced exceedingly <i>with great joy</i> , Matt.2.10	They returned to Jerusalem <i>with great joy</i> , Lk.24.52

Appendix B

THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE CHRISTMAS STORY

He is perhaps the most completely ignored part of the entire Christmas Story! Look up each of the following Scripture references and see what you find!

Verse	Person Involved	Work Done by the Holy Spirit	
Luke 1.15	John	Fills John from womb	
Luke 1.35	Mary	Comes on Mary Power overshadows her	Therefore, He can be holy
Luke 1.41	Elizabeth	Fills Elizabeth while pregnant	
Luke 1.67	Zechariah	Fills Zechariah & makes him prophesy	
Luke 2.25-27	Simeon	"upon" Simeon – past revelation – led by HS	
Matt. 1.18	Mary	Impregnated by Holy Spirit	
Matt. 1.20	"Joseph" & Mary	Impregnation verified to Joseph by angel	

Now, can you make a statement concerning the connection of the Holy Spirit with the Christmas Story?

Appendix C

ANGELS IN THE CHRISTMAS STORY

The word angel means *messenger*. Many times in the Bible they are sent by God to deliver very special information.

Angels appear in the Christmas Story at least seven times! To whom did they appear? To whom did they appear most often?

Have you given any thought to just how much information was given through the angels in this story? Go through all of the references and list all the details they give.

Verses	Characters Involved	Information given by an angel or angels
Luke 1.11ff	Zechariah & Gabriel	Gives Zechariah the answer to his prayer
Luke 1.26ff	Mary & Gabriel	Brings Mary her news & Elizabeth's news
Luke 2.9	Shepherds & AN angel	Appears and gives the pronouncement
Luke 2.13	Shepherds & many angels	Appear and praise God
Matt. 1.20	Joseph & AN angel	Appears in dream to give explanation
Matt. 2.13	Joseph & AN angel	Appears in dream to give direction
Matt. 2.19	Joseph & AN angel	Appears in dream to give direction
Matt. 2.22	Joseph, although the angel isn't specifically mentioned	Giving direction

Luke 1.11ff: John is filled with the Holy Spirit while still in the womb.
We are told John's calling and purpose – to prepare the people of Israel for the coming of their Messiah.

Luke 1.26ff:
Mary is a favored one of God.
She will be pregnant and have a Son Who will be called Jesus.
He will be the Son of the Most High.
He will be King in the promised line of David.
He will reign forever.
The Holy Spirit will be the instrument of conception.
He will be called holy – the Son of God.
Elizabeth is pregnant in her old age.
Nothing is impossible for God.

Luke 2.9:
Angel brings good news for all people.
A Savior is born that very day in the city of David.
They will be able to find Him.

Luke 2.13:
This event brings glory to God and peace to His people.

Matt. 1.20:
Joseph is told to follow through with his marriage to Mary.
Her conception is God-ordained and God-caused.
Her Son is to be called Jesus (meaning God Saves) because He will save His people from their sins.

Matt. 2.13:
Here a warning is given to Joseph telling him to leave for Egypt to protect the Child's life.

Matt. 2.19:
Now Joseph is given the word it is safe for them to return to Israel.

Matt. 2.22:
This is further warning not to return to Bethlehem, but to return to their original home in Nazareth.

Now, without this list of details, what would we have known about Jesus and His purpose at this point in His life?

Now, can you make a statement concerning the connection of the angels with the Christmas story?

Can you come up with anything by comparing both sets of appearances of the Holy Spirit and angels with each other...?

Do you find overlapping in the work of the angels and of the Holy Spirit?

Appendix D

BETROTHAL⁵

Some further details, gathered almost at random, will give glimpses of Jewish home life and of current views. It was by a not uncommon, though irreverent, mode of witticism, that two forms of the same verb, sounding almost alike, were made to express opposite experiences of marriage. It was common to ask a newly-married husband: “*Maʿza* or *Moʿze?*”—“findeth” or “found;” the first expression occurring in Prov. 18:22, the second in Eccles. 7:26. A different sentiment is the following from the Talmud (*Yeb.* 62 *b*; *Sanh.* 76 *b*), the similarity of which to Eph. 5:28 will be immediately recognised: “He that loveth his wife as his own body, honoureth her more than his own body, brings up his children in the right way, and leads them in it to full age—of him the Scripture saith: ‘Thou shalt know that thy tabernacle shall be in peace’” (Job 5:24). Of all qualities, those most desired in woman were meekness, modesty, and shamefacedness. Indeed, brawling, gossip in the streets, and immodest behaviour in public were sufficient grounds for divorce. Of course, Jewish women would never have attempted “teaching” in the synagogue, where they occupied a place separate from the men—for Rabbinical study, however valued for the male sex, was disapproved of in the case of women. Yet this direction of St. Paul (1 Tim. 2:12): “I suffer not a woman to usurp authority over the man” finds some kind of parallel in the Rabbinical saying: “Whoever allows himself to be ruled by his wife, shall call out, and no one will make answer to him.”

It is on similar grounds that the Rabbis argue, that man must seek after woman, and not a woman after a man; only the reason which they assign for it sounds strange. Man, they say, was formed from the ground—woman from man’s rib; hence, in trying to find a wife man only looks after what he has lost! This formation of man from soft clay, and of woman from a hard bone, also illustrated why man was so much more easily reconcilable than woman. Similarly, it was observed, that God had not formed woman out of the head, lest she should become proud; nor out of the eye, lest she should lust; nor out of the ear, lest she should be curious; nor out of the mouth, lest she should be talkative; nor out of the heart, lest she should be jealous; nor out of the hand, lest she should be covetous; nor out of the foot, lest she should be a busybody; but out of the rib, which was always covered. Modesty was, therefore, a prime quality. It was no doubt chiefly in jealous regard for this, that women were interdicted engaging in Rabbinical studies; and a story is related to show how even the wisest of women, Beruria, was thereby brought to the brink of extreme danger. It is not so easy to explain why women were dispensed from all positive obligations (commands, but not prohibitions) that were not general in their bearing (*Kidd.* 1. 7, 8), but fixed to certain periods of time (such as wearing the phylacteries, etc.), and from that of certain prayers, unless it be that woman was considered not her own mistress but subject to others, or else that husband and wife were regarded as one, so that his merits and prayers applied to her as well. Indeed, this view, at least so far as the meritorious nature of a man’s engagement with the law is concerned, is expressly brought forward, and women are accordingly admonished to encourage their husbands in all such studies.

We can understand how, before the coming of the Messiah, marriage should have been looked upon as of religious obligation. Many passages of Scripture were at least *quoted* in support of this idea. Ordinarily, a young man was expected to enter the wedded state (according to Maimonides) at the age of sixteen or seventeen, while the age of twenty may be regarded as the utmost limit conceded, unless study so absorbed time and attention as to leave no leisure for the duties of

⁵Entire text taken from: Edersheim, Alfred: *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ*. Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2003, S. 145.

married life. Still, it was thought better even to neglect study than to remain single. Yet money cares on account of wife and children were dreaded. The same comparison is used in reference to them, which our Lord applies to quite a different “offence,” that against the “little ones” (Luke 17:2). Such cares are called by the Rabbis, “a millstone round the neck” (*Kidd.* 29 *b*). In fact, the expression seems to have become proverbial, like so many others which are employed in the New Testament.

We read in the Gospel that, when the Virgin-mother “was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily” (Matt. 1:18, 19). The narrative implies a distinction between *betrothal* and *marriage*—Joseph being at the time betrothed, but not actually married to the Virgin-mother. Even in the Old Testament, a distinction is made between *betrothal* and *marriage*. The former was marked by a bridal present (or *Mohar*, Gen. 34:12; Ex. 22:17; 1 Sam. 18:25), with which the father, however, would in certain circumstances dispense. From the moment of her betrothal a woman was treated as if she were actually married. The Union could not be dissolved, except by regular divorce; breach of faithfulness was regarded as adultery; and the property of the woman became virtually that of her betrothed, unless he had expressly renounced it (*Kidd.* 9. 1). But even in that case, he was her natural heir. It is impossible here to enter into the various legal details, as, for example, about property or money which might come to a woman after betrothal or marriage. The law adjudicated this to the husband, yet with many restrictions, and with infinite delicacy towards the woman, as if reluctant to put in force the rights of the stronger (*Kidd.* 8. 1, etc.). From the Mishnah (*Bab. B.* 10. 4), we also learn that there were regular *Shitre Erusin*, or writings of betrothal, drawn up by the authorities (the costs being paid by the bridegroom). These stipulated the mutual obligations, the dowry, and all other points on which the parties had agreed. The *Shitre Erusin* were different from the regular *Chethubab* (literally, *writing*), or marriage contract, without which the Rabbis regarded a marriage as merely legalised concubinage (*Cheth.* 5. 1). The *Chethubab* provided a settlement of at least two hundred denars for a maiden, and one hundred denars for a widow, while the priestly council at Jerusalem fixed four hundred denars for a priest’s daughter. Of course these sums indicate only the legal *minimum*, and might be increased indefinitely at pleasure, though opinions differ whether any larger sums might be legally exacted, if matters did not go beyond betrothal. The form at present in use among the Jews sets forth that the bridegroom weds his bride “according to the law of Moses and of Israel;” that he promises “to please, to honour, to nourish, and to care for her, as is the manner of the men of Israel,” adding thereto the woman’s consent, the document being signed by two witnesses. In all probability this was substantially the form in olden times. In Jerusalem and in Galilee—where it was said that men in their choice had regard to “a fair degree,” while in the rest of Judæa they looked a good deal after money—widows had the right of residence in their husband’s house secured to them.

On the other hand, a father was bound to provide a dowry (*nedan, nedanjah*) for his daughter conformable to her station in life; and a second daughter could claim a portion equal to that of her elder sister, or else one-tenth of all immovable property. In case of the father’s death, the sons, who, according to Jewish law, were his sole heirs, were bound to maintain their sisters, even though this would have thrown them upon public charity, and to endow each with a tenth part of what had been left. The dowry, whether in money, property, or jewelry, was entered into the marriage contract, and really belonged to the wife, the husband being obliged to add to it one-half more, if it consisted of money or money’s value; and if of jewelry, etc., to assign to her four-fifths of its value. In case of separation (not divorce), he was bound to allow her a proper aliment, and to re-admit her to his table and house on the Sabbath-eve. A wife was entitled to one-tenth of her dowry for pin-money. If a father gave away his daughter without any distinct statement about her dowry, he was bound to

allow her at least fifty *sus*; and if it had been expressly stipulated that she was to have no dowry at all, it was delicately enjoined that the bridegroom should, *before marriage*, give her sufficient for the necessary outfit. An orphan was to receive a dowry of at least fifty *sus* from the parochial authorities. A husband could not oblige his wife to leave the Holy Land nor the city of Jerusalem, nor yet to change a town for a country residence, or *vice versâ*, nor a good for a bad house. These are only a few of the provisions which show how carefully the law protected the interests of women. To enter into further details would lead beyond our present object. All this was substantially settled at the betrothal, which, in Judæa at least, seems to have been celebrated by a feast. Only a *bonâ fide* breach of these arrangements, or willful fraud, was deemed valid ground for dissolving the bond once formed. Otherwise, as already noted, a regular divorce was necessary.

According to Rabbinical law, certain formalities were requisite to make a betrothal legally valid. These consisted either in handing to a woman, directly or through messengers, a piece of money however small, or else a letter,¹ provided it were in each case expressly stated before witnesses, that the man thereby intended to espouse the woman as his wife. The marriage followed after a longer or shorter interval, the limits of which, however, were fixed by law. The ceremony itself consisted in leading the bride into the house of the bridegroom, with certain formalities, mostly dating from very ancient times. Marriage with a maiden was commonly celebrated on a Wednesday afternoon, which allowed the first days of the week for preparation, and enabled the husband, if he had a charge to prefer against the previous chastity of his bride, to make immediate complaint before the local Sanhedrim, which sat every Thursday. On the other hand, the marriage of a widow was celebrated on Thursday afternoon, which left three days of the week for “rejoicing with her.” This circumstance enables us, with some certainty, to arrange the date of the events which preceded the marriage in Cana. Inferring from the accompanying festivities that it was the marriage of a maiden, and therefore took place on a Wednesday, we have the following succession of events:—On *Thursday* (beginning as every Jewish day with the previous evening), testimony of the Baptist to the Sanhedrim-deputation from Jerusalem. On *Friday* (John 1:29), “John seeth Jesus coming unto him,” and significantly preaches the first sermon about “the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world.” On *Saturday* (ver. 35), John’s second sermon on the same text; the consequent conversion of St. John and St. Andrew, and the calling of St. Peter. On *Sunday* (ver. 43), our Lord Himself preaches His first Messianic sermon, and calls Philip and Nathanael. On “the third day” after it, that is, on *Wednesday*, was the marriage in Cana of Galilee. The significance of these dates, when compared with those in the week of our Lord’s Passion, will be sufficiently evident.

But this is not all that may be learned from the account of the marriage in Cana. Of course, there was a “marriage-feast,” as on all these occasions. For this reason, marriages were not celebrated either on the Sabbath, or on the day before or after it, lest the Sabbath-rest should be endangered. Nor was it lawful to wed on any of the three annual festivals, in order, as the Rabbis put it, “not to mingle one joy (that of the marriage) with another (that of the festival).” As it was deemed a religious duty to give pleasure to the newly-married couple, the merriment at times became greater than the more strict Rabbis approved. Accordingly, it is said of one, that to produce gravity he broke a vase worth about £25; of another, that at his son’s wedding he broke a costly glass; and of a third, that being asked to sing, he exclaimed, “Woe to us, for we must all die!” For, as it is added (*Ber. 31 a*): “It is forbidden to man, that his mouth be filled with laughter in this world (dispensation), as it is written, ‘Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing.’ When is that to be? At the time when ‘they shall sing among the heathen, The Lord hath done great things for them.’”

¹ There was also a third mode of espousal—simply by cohabitation, but this was very strongly disapproved by the Rabbis.

It deserves notice that at the marriage in Cana there is no mention of “the friends of the bridegroom,” or, as we would call them, the groomsmen. This was in strict accordance with Jewish custom, for groomsmen were customary in *Judæa*, but not in Galilee (*Cheth. 25 a*). This also casts light upon the locality where John 3:29 was spoken, in which “the friend of the bridegroom” is mentioned. But this expression is quite different from that of “children of the bridechamber,” which occurs in Matt. 9:15, where the scene is once more laid in Galilee. The term “children of the bridechamber” is simply a translation of the Rabbinical “*bene Chuppah*,” and means the guests invited to the bridal. In *Judæa* there were at every marriage *two* groomsmen or “friends of the bridegroom”—one for the bridegroom, the other for his bride. Before marriage, they acted as intermediaries between the couple; at the wedding they offered gifts, waited upon the bride and bridegroom, and attended them to the bridal chamber, being also, as it were, the guarantors of the bride’s virgin chastity. Hence, when St. Paul tells the Corinthians (2 Cor. 11:2): “I am jealous over you with godly jealousy; for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ,” he speaks, as it were, in the character of groomsman or “bridegroom’s friend,” who had acted as such at the spiritual union of Christ with the Corinthian Church. And we know that it was specially the duty of the “friend of the bridegroom” so to present to him his bride. Similarly it was his also, after marriage, to maintain proper terms between the couple, and more particularly to defend the good fame of the bride against all imputations. It may interest some to know that this custom also was traced up to highest authority. Thus, in the spiritual union of Israel with their God, Moses is spoken of as “the friend of the bridegroom” who leads out the bride (Ex. 19:17); while Jehovah, as the bridegroom, meets His Church at Sinai (Ps. 68:7; *Pirke di R. El. 41*). Nay, in some mystic writings God is described as acting “the friend of the bridegroom,” when our first parents met in Eden. There is a touch of poetry in the application of Ezek. 28:13 to that scene, when angels led the choir, and decked and watched the bridal-bed (*Ab. de R. Nathan 4. and 12.*). According to another ancient Rabbinical commentary (*Ber. R. 8.*), God Almighty Himself took the cup of blessing and spoke the benediction, while Michael and Gabriel acted the “bridegroom’s friends” to our first parents when they wedded in Paradise.

With such a “benediction,” preceded by a brief formula, with which the bride was handed over to her husband (Tobit 7:13), the wedding festivities commenced.¹ And so the pair were led toward the bridal chamber (*Cheder*) and the bridal bed (*Chuppah*).² The bride went with her hair unloosed. Ordinarily, it was most strictly enjoined upon women to have their head and hair carefully covered. This may throw some light upon the difficult passage, 1 Cor. 11:1–10. We must bear in mind that the apostle there argues with Jews, and that *on their own ground*, convincing them by a reference to their own views, customs, and legends of the propriety of the practice which he enjoins. From that point of view the propriety of a woman having her head “covered” could not be called in question. The opposite would, to a Jew, have indicated immodesty. Indeed, it was the custom in the case of a woman accused of adultery to have her hair “shorn or shaven,” at the same time using this formula: “Because thou hast departed from the manner of the daughters of Israel, who go with their head covered; ... therefore, that has befallen thee which thou hast chosen.” This so far explains verses 5 and 6. The expression “power,” as applied in verse 10 to the head of woman, seems to refer to this covering, indicating, as it did, that she was under the power of her husband, while the very difficult addition, “because of the angels,” may either allude to the presence of the angels and to the well-known Jewish view (based, no doubt, on truth) that those angels may be grieved or Offended by our

¹ It is, to say the least, doubtful whether the Rabbinical form of this benediction and of that at betrothal dates from earliest times. However beautiful, it seems far too elaborate for that.

² The distinction is marked in Joel 2:16; the *Chuppah* is also mentioned in Ps. 19:5.

conduct, and bear the sad tidings before the throne of God, or it may possibly refer to the very ancient Jewish belief, that the evil spirits gained power over a woman who went with her head bare.

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Appendix E

The Redemption of the First-Born Son

By Burt Kagan

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From the January 2002 Edition of the Jewish Magazine

One of the more pleasant occasions we Jews have is the "pidyon ha-ben", (also called by some "pig in a ben" -- un-kosher as it may sound!) the redemption of the first-born son. This is a very joyous event that is performed after the birth of the first-born son.

This tradition is based on the divine command to redeem the first-born. The source of this is in the Torah in Numbers 18:15, which states "all that open the womb of the flesh that be offered to God, be it an animal or man, shall be yours; however, the first-born of man you shall redeem and the first-born of unclean beasts you shall redeem. The redemption shall be from a month old according to the valuation of five shekels of silver, according to the shekel used in the Temple, twenty gerahs of value."

It should be noted, that earlier in the Torah, in Exodus 13:2, we are told, "every first-born of the mother of the children of Israel and of the beast shall be mine." Originally God had in mind that the first-born would be sanctified to serve in the Temple, but after the sin of the golden calf, the service was taken away from the first-born of every tribe and given to the tribe of Levi, and to the descendants of Aaron the high priest (known as Kohains). Therefore, first-born sons of Kohains or Levites, or those whose mothers' father is Kohain or Levite, are exempt from this obligation, since the Temple work was incumbent upon them.

Therefore, the original holiness that rested upon the first-born sons had to be redeemed to permit them not to work in the Temple. This was not a mere permission not to work in the Temple, but an obligation that was incumbent upon the father, to release his son from this bond.

Even though the Temple has not yet been rebuilt and the service has not yet been renewed, this redemption is still a required action on the part of the father. If the father fails to redeem his son, then when the son grows up, he must redeem himself. The mother has no obligation to redeem the son.

How does the redemption work?

The new-born son must be the first-born of a Jewish mother and to a Jewish father. If the mother had a daughter first, then the son born does not require redemption. If the wife had an abortion or a miscarriage, then a Rabbi must be consulted. If the mother or father is or was the daughter or son of a father who is a Kohain or Levite, then there is no need to redeem the child (as explained above).

The custom is to gather together friends and relatives for a festive meal. This may not take place during the first thirty days after birth. The meal is made on the thirty-first day in the daytime. If the thirty-first day is Shabbat or one of the Yom Tov's, (such as Passover, Shavout, etc) when work and handling money is forbidden, the redemption, together with the meal, is pushed off until the night after the festival.

A Kohain, (a descendant on the father's side from Aaron, the high priest) is invited to attend to be the recipient of the redemption. Once the father has invited one Kohain to officiate, it is considered poor taste to select a different Kohain. The Kohain need not be a Rabbi, but he must have known

his father and father's father were Kohains and they had performed functions as Kohains.

The redemption starts in the middle of the festive meal. All begin to eat, and during the meal the baby is brought to the father and the Kohain. Some have the custom to decorate the baby with jewels and sugar cubes, (the sugar cubes are given to the children afterwards, the jewels returned to the owners), some put garlic gloves to ward off the evil eye and many have special coverings and garments made for the baby.

Some have the custom of bringing gifts for the baby. Gifts are always appreciated.

The father must bring five silver coins or objects that have the intrinsic value of five silver coins, such as a real gold watch. Paper money, which has no intrinsic value, meaning the paper itself has no worth, its worth being the promise that the government and institutions honor it as if it were real silver, can not be used. The same is true of today's "silver" dollars, which are copper that are silver plated. Many Kohains have real silver money for this purpose. Since this is a very important part of the redemption, the silver money should be arranged prior to the meal. Generally, a Kohain will sell the silver coins to the father. A real sale must take place and the coins must belong to the father. Then the father can give these coins to Kohain as required.

The father then brings the baby to the Kohain and informs him this is his first-born child from his Jewish wife (not from a father who is a Kohain or Levite). Both the Kohain and the father rise.

The father says: "This is my first-born son, the first-born of his mother. God has commanded me to redeem him as it is said: 'The redemption price for each first-born son at the age of one month is five silver shekels'. It is also written: 'Consecrate every first-born to Me, whatever is first-born in Israel, of man or beast, since it belongs to Me.'"

The Kohain then asks: "What do you prefer? To give me your first-born son, the first-born of his mother? Or would you rather redeem him for five shekels as required by the Torah?" (Note: the father can't tell the Kohain to keep him, he prefers to hold onto the money since the Kohain can only redeem him from the service in the soon-to-be-built Temple, but the Kohain can not acquire the baby, sorry.)

The father then replies: "I prefer to redeem my son. Here is the redemption price as required by the Torah." As the father gives the money to the Kohain, the father recites the following two blessings:

"Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us regarding redemption of the first-born."

"Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe, who has granted us life, and has sustained us, and permitted us to reach this time."

The Kohain, holding the money over the child, says the following: "This instead of that, this in exchange for that, this forgives that, may this child grow up healthy, learning the Holy Torah and have the fear of heaven upon him. May he be brought to the marriage canopy and have a life of good deeds. Amen."

The Kohain then places his hands upon the child's head and gives him additional blessings. "May the Lord make you like Ephraim and like Manasseh." The Kohain continues with the traditional priestly blessing: "May the Lord bless you and watch you. May the Lord's countenance be with you and give you favor. May the Lord turn his face to you and give you peace." Additional blessings may be made and are most appropriate.

At this point the Kohain customarily takes a full glass of wine, and makes the blessing: "Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe, who has created the fruit of the vine." Then all the assembled take wine also and wish the father and mother a hearty "mazel tov". The meal then continues to its natural joyful conclusion.

Although there are many different customs that are followed, the above is the basis for the redemption ceremony.





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