



# Christmas



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# How to use this guide

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Review the context and big picture every week – The goal of a book study is not just to learn each individual lesson, but to build understanding of the Bible, how it fits together, and how to study it.

Try not to use this guide as a script. The purpose of this material isn't to give you exactly what to say. Rather it is to give you the content you need to structure and develop your own lessons. Teach as much as you feel is important for your class. Feel free to go off topic if your own study leads you to approach the passage in a slightly different direction.

Don't feel like you have to cover everything. There is a lot of material in each lesson. Some classes like to cover a lot of ground. Other classes like to camp on one point and drill deep. Start by teaching the Main Point, then teach the Main Bullet Points. Use the extra detail and discussion questions as you see fit. The goal is to generate discussion, specifically regarding life-application. So don't worry if you don't get all the way through a lesson.

## Zacharias: Courage to Persevere

### Luke 1:18-24

The world can be a frightening place. Sometimes, we let out fear get the best of us and paralyze us into inactivity. The answer to fear is courage. Courage doesn't mean "not being afraid" but rather "the ability to act in spite of your fears." The Bible is full of exhortation to choose courage.

Probably the most famous one is found the first chapter of Joshua. The people of Israel are camped on the back of the Jordan ready to go into the Promised Land. But Moses is dead and the people in the land look formidable. How will the Israelites face this trial? Three times in Joshua 1, Joshua repeats the phrase, "Be Strong and courageous (v 6, 7, 9)." The final time, he gives the reason for courage: "for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." We do not need to surrender to fear but can choose courage not because we are enough to face the trials ahead, but because God is with us.

This Christmas we will be looking at people in the Christmas Story who had reason for fear but who instead chose courage. Each of them were faced with something different to fear, by looking at how they handled it, we can learn to follow their examples and choose courage in the midst of the hard times in our lives that tempt us to fear and to give up.

Have you ever wished something would change? Hoped it would change? But you secretly expected that everything would remain as it has always been? You spend hours, days, weeks, months, years, and maybe even decades hoping, praying, and expecting only to see the same nothing continue to appear. And as time goes by, the hope turns into longing. The expectation turns to an ache. Your desire is not diminished, but your belief that your desire will be fulfilled dwindles. When that occurs, how we handle it reveals a lot about who we are. Many lash out in anger or selfishness. Others lash inward, blaming and beating themselves up for things they could have done differently. A few keep going. The term for this is perseverance. Just keep putting one foot in front of the other. Maybe, it is a vocation you feel called to but cannot get a foothold in. Maybe, it is a relationship you desire to start or salvage. Maybe, you just long for meaning and fulfillment but wonder how it could be found on the road you are on.

That is the situation Israel was in right before Jesus was born. God had sent them into exile hundreds of years before. They had eventually returned to their homes, but things had never returned to normal. Israel was still dominated and ruled by other nations. Its people were taxed, bullied, and oppressed. Many started to violently resist the foreign oppressors. Some started to insist that what people needed to do was work hard and obey stricter and stricter rules. Some just quietly and humbly kept putting one foot in front of the other faithfully serving God. They were hoping and praying for the promised and long awaited Messiah to come.

That is where the story of Christmas starts. Not in Bethlehem but in the home of Zacharias, one of these faithful seekers. His life serves as a microcosm for the story of Israel, and it is about to be interrupted by God in a huge way.

**An Ordinary Day vv. 5-10** – Zacharias was a priest. He was married to Elizabeth, a daughter of a priest, so they were doubly devout. It says they both were righteous and blameless before God. This does not mean that they were perfect but simply that they served God faithfully. They kept the commandments and followed the law. If anyone should be marked out for special blessings and divine favor, it would be these two, a veritable first century Jewish power couple. But one of the main proofs of God's blessing was missing—it was children. People expected God to bless faithful servants by giving them children. The childless state of Zacharias and Elizabeth was probably perplexing for them to understand. And as the years passed, I am sure everyone became confused.

But Zacharias did not allow his confusion to keep him from serving. He kept going to work. The priests of his day were divided into 24 divisions. Each division was supposed to go up to Jerusalem to serve for one week twice a year and also on the big holidays. But truth be told, no one would have noticed if Zacharias had stayed

home. There were a fair number of priests. In fact, there were more priests than specific jobs to do, so each job was assigned by lot. Basically, it is the equivalent of your name being drawn from a hat. One day, Zacharias was chosen to be the guy who offers incense inside the temple. It was a huge honor and one so big that they could only be chosen once in their lifetime. Many went their entire lives without doing it once.

Perhaps, he thought this was the crowning achievement of his life. Perhaps, he walked in excited and a little sad that day. He was excited to have been blessed with the distinction to be chosen to enter the temple on behalf of the people. Maybe it helped to remove some doubts in his mind as to whether God was mad at him. But he was also probably a little sad. Perhaps this was the sign of God's blessing, not what he and Elizabeth had been hoping for. But that is when his ordinary life gets interrupted.

**An Angelic Encounter vv. 11-17** – While offering incense, an angel showed up. And Zacharias' first response was fear. Fear gripped him. It is funny how we wonder why God does not show up. When He does show up, we are frequently startled out of our minds. The angel tells him literally that his prayers have been answered. Not only will he and Elizabeth have a child, but it will be a son (not that girls are bad, but he would have an heir). What is more, this child will be great. He will bring them and many others joy (v. 14). He will be a great man in the sight of God (v. 15). He will lead his people in a great revival (vv. 16-7). And the revival will not be just any revival, he will "make ready a people prepared for the Lord," a phrase which had Old Testament overtones referring to the long-awaited Messiah. Zacharias goes into the temple wondering if this is the crown of his priestly career. He leaves with the news that he will be the father of a great son who will prepare the way for the Messiah.

What is cool in all of this is that the angel never explicitly states which prayer had been granted. Zacharias, the priest, would be hoping and praying for the Messiah. Zacharias, the husband, wanted a son. The angel, by granting one, also grants the other. Zacharias will have a son and that son will lead the way for the coming of the Messiah. It goes to show that God takes our countless individual requests and factors them in to his grand plan that is coming true.

**An Odd Response vv. 18-25** – What reaction would you expect from a guy in Zacharias' shoes? Bewilderment and surprise, obviously. Some honest questions, definitely. But flat out refusal to believe and demanding proof—did not see that coming. He literally just saw an ANGEL in the temple, and he is unwilling to believe what the dude tells him. Others ask questions. Mary will famously ask the angel in the next chapter, "How can these things be since..." But Zacharias wants definitive proof. Some Bible translations even use the phrase, "know for certain." You might respond that the angel could say, "Hey Zach, go home. See your wife and wait nine months. Let me know what happens." Zacharias is questioning the pregnancy, sure. But he is also questioning the whole truckload of prophecies. He wants guarantees that all the angel told him will come true. That is hard heartedness on display. Maybe it is explained by years of fruitless and frustrated hoping but hard heartedness nonetheless.

The angel's response borders on the comedic. He first says to him, "Come on. I am angel, Gabriel to be specific, one of the important ones. Do you know what that means? Before I was here, I was in the actual presence of God. Still refuse to believe me, fine..." As a way of both proof and punishment, the angel strikes him dumb. He will not be able to speak until the day his son is born. As verse 62 suggests, he was not just made mute but also deaf. He could not hear or speak. He had spoken rash words in the presence of God, and he had refused to listen. Both were taken from him for a time. This provides the additional frustration of having seen and heard a word from a messenger of God and being unable to tell anyone.

Elizabeth becomes pregnant. But before the baby is born, the story shifts to the angel visiting Mary. It might feel like this portion of the story is incomplete, and it is. It will be resumed at the end of the chapter with the birth of John. The first part gives us a window into how to handle when God interrupts our lives. How God treats Zacharias is a miniature version of how He treated Israel and how He treats us. We cannot always know the plan of God. But we can know the character of God. How God deals with His people is consistent. Here are four specific lessons from this story that reveal the heart of God even when we cannot see His hand.

## **Application: Courage to Persevere**

**God Plans Big and Small** – Some people are good at creating big, strategic, interconnected, far reaching plans. Others are good at developing intricately detailed and specific plans. Some people want to work with CEO's, presidents, generals and kings. Others focus on the ordinary people for their work because there seems to be a lot more of them. Whatever kind you are, when you are feeling good, you probably think God is like that too. When you feel down about things, you probably think God is the opposite. If you are a big picture planner, you probably emphasize that side of God until you do not see his plan. You start thinking maybe God is so focused on the poor that He has no grand strategy. Conversely, if you are a detailed focused person, when times are tough, you might feel like God is a great visionary but does not seem to care about the individual, like a general who wins wars at the expense of common soldiers who do all the fighting and dying.

The truth is that God is both. In ways it is hard to comprehend, God has a grand plan for his creation and it includes us and our concerns. Zacharias is proof of this. God fulfills his promises to Israel and blesses Zacharias with a son in the same moment. John the Baptist is both the forerunner of the Messiah, and the only child of a faithful couple who waited and prayed for him for years.

**God Rewards Faithfulness** – God's plans are both for His glory and our good. They are intricate with lots of moving parts. That means we often will end up doing a lot of what appears to us as waiting. In that time, God calls us to be faithful, to persevere, and to keep going on the path He put us on. There is a military command principle that says in the absence of new orders, we are to follow the last orders we were given. Something similar applies to us. We might not know specifically what God wants to do with our lives, but He has made it clear what He wants for us all. Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4:3, "this is the will of God, your sanctification." God has given us commands to obey. We have enough to get started and keep going. This is what Zacharias does. He is faithful and obedient. He seeks righteousness and perseveres. This puts him in a place to be able to meet God and to have his life interrupted in ways he was not expecting. The sad thing is that when we do not know what we are supposed to be doing, we frequently get distracted or in trouble. We need to learn to be like Zacharias. In the absence of clearly being led in a specific direction, we need to learn to be faithful in the places God has already put us.

**God Trains Us To Trust** – Sometimes, we think that faith is an on-off switch. We either have it or do not. But this is not true. Most of us are like the father in Mark 9:24 who cries out to Jesus, "I do believe; help my unbelief." We are a mixture of both. The good news is that faith is not a switch, it is a muscle. The more we use it, the stronger it gets. We use it by believing God, trusting him, and obeying. The more you obey, the more faith you will have. The more faith you have, the more you will be able to obey. Like the old hymn says, "Trust and obey, for there is no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey."

But there is more good news. Not only is faith a muscle, but God is our own personal faith trainer. The term that is sometimes used for spiritual training is discipline. Sadly, many people equate discipline with punishment. But discipline simply means "to teach." A disciple is someone who learns not someone who is punished. God puts us through trials to discipline us, train us, and strengthen our spiritual muscle to be able to trust him more. The writer of Hebrews describes it this way in Hebrews 12:7, 11: "It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?" "All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness."

This is what is happening with Zacharias and the silent treatment. God is giving Zacharias time to sit and think on some things. He is also giving him the chance to sit on the sidelines and watch God act. God is not punishing Zacharias. He is putting him in a place where he can increase in faith so that he can be of greater effectiveness in the kingdom. This we will see when his speech finally comes back.

This is where the Christmas story starts. It is with a faithful but frustrated man getting his life interrupted. God's big plan comes rushing in, fulfilling all the desires and dreams Zacharias had dreamed for himself, his family, and his nation. Maybe that is you. Maybe you feel frustrated by the path your life has taken. You are wondering whether it is worth it or what could possibly come of it all. Zacharias was too old. Maybe you are too old, too

young, too broke, too tired, or too overwhelmed. Maybe, you need to be encouraged and be reminded that God has a big plan that is coming true in our midst. It is a plan that is for his glory and our good. It is what we were made for. We do not need to worry. We do not need to quit. We, like Zacharias, need to keep being faithful and learning to trust. God is up to something even if we cannot see it.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Why does persevering require courage? What other options do we have?
2. Have you ever felt like Zacharias? Have you been confused at the path God had you on?
3. How hard do you think it was for Zacharias to stay faithful in the midst of disappointment?
4. Why do you think it was so hard for Zacharias to believe that God had answered his prayer?
5. What makes this a Christmas story? What part of this message is especially important this time of year?

## Joseph: Courage to Serve

### Matthew 1:18-25; 2:13-15, 19-23

Do you know which day many European countries celebrate Father's Day? On the feast day of St. Joseph.

Joseph is seen as the paragon of fatherhood. But he almost wasn't. He was called by God to do a difficult thing. Even before his marriage had begun, he discovers that his future wife is pregnant, and the baby isn't his. He is asked to love a woman pregnant with someone else's baby. It takes courage to serve in such circumstances. Joseph rises to the challenge and shows that fatherhood is more about the courage to serve than it is about biology.

Joseph shows, in the way he responds to this situation, that he has some key attributes of a person that God can work with. He reveals the attributes of a man worth imitating.

**An Unexpected Detour vv. 18-19** – The story starts with a simple man in a small town getting ready for a wedding. But before the wedding, it is discovered that Mary is pregnant. So Joseph plans on divorcing Mary quietly so as not to cause her (or him) any embarrassment. It might sound weird that Joseph was planning on divorcing her. In fact, your Bible might say that he was going to “send her away.” This was the colloquial term for divorce. In our day, we would consider an engagement semiserious, but wouldn't think of someone breaking an engagement in the same way that we think of someone getting divorced. In the Ancient world, once a betrothal occurred, the two parties were basically legally bound together. The gap between engagement and marriage was simply the time necessary for the groom to get both the ceremony and the home set up.

**An Unexpected Dream vv. 20-23** – Joseph has all these things on his mind when his plans take an unexpected detour. He decides what to do. He is going to quietly break things off with Mary. Then he goes to sleep and has an unexpected dream. An angel appears to him and tells him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, because she hasn't been unfaithful but is participating in God's plan. The child she is carrying is going to be the fulfillment of prophecies. He is going to save the people from their sins.

**An Unexpected Decision vv. 24-25** – Joseph wakes up from the dream and does exactly the opposite of what he decided to do the night before. He does exactly what the angel instructed him to do. He took her as his wife and he kept her a virgin until she gave birth.

#### The Attributes of a Courageous Man

##### **A Righteous Heart: Joseph Cared About Righteousness.**

The first thing worth noticing about Joseph is that he cared about righteousness. He discovered his fiancé was pregnant. He knew this didn't just happen. The most logical explanation is that she had been unfaithful. So he decides to take the difficult step of ending the relationship. He cared about doing the right thing.

We live in an age where we sometimes focus exclusively on God's grace and forgiveness. It seems like the only Bible verse people know anymore is “Judge not lest you be judged.” We use this as a reason to excuse all manner of behavior. Most people treat God like some sort of heavenly uncle who is content to let everyone just



go and be happy however they want. But God's forgiveness and grace mean nothing without His righteousness. Without his righteousness, there is nothing to forgive. God cares about right behavior. He does so not out of a sense of Pharisaical rule keeping, but because righteousness produces life. The wages of sin is death. Sin produces death in our lives. God desires us to have life, so He desires us to be righteous.

Joseph wasn't being cruel or mean when he decided to break off his engagement to Mary. He was being like God. He was caring about righteousness. We would do well to follow his example.

### **A Compassionate Heart: Joseph Cared About Mary.**

Joseph was righteous. He desired to live rightly. He desired others to live rightly. But in addition to this, he was compassionate. He was going to break his engagement to Mary, but he decided to do it privately so as to cause as little embarrassment and shame to Mary as possible. He had compassion on her. He wasn't looking to vent his anger, frustration, or humiliation at her. He wanted to do the right thing as kindly as possible.

This is a lesson we need to learn. We need to learn to balance righteousness and compassion. Some people think the two don't go together. Some think that to be righteous, you have to be hard on people who behave unrighteously. Others think that to be compassionate means to excuse anything a person does.

We need to be like Joseph who understood that compassion and righteousness go together. We can care about right and wrong and care about people as well.

### **A Soft Heart: Joseph Was Able to Change.**

For some reason, we associate changing our minds with being wishy-washy. We use words like "resolute" and "determined" and "unwavering" to describe those who never change their mind. But maintaining our course of action isn't always a good thing. Sometimes, it can reveal an arrogant spirit or a hard heart. We think we know what is best, and we are determined to keep heading our direction no matter what the cost. We make a bad decision but don't want to admit it, so we never turn around. We realize we are wrong but refuse to admit it to others or change our mind.

But Joseph wasn't like that. He had a soft heart. He went to bed having made a tough decision. It was righteous and compassionate. It must have been hard to come to that decision. I wonder what he was thinking as he drifted off to sleep that night. Whatever he was thinking, in the middle of the night God interrupted his plans. The angel gave him some news and asked him to change his plans and adopt an equally challenging course of action. It was a new plan that might expose him to shame and ridicule. He was being asked to care for a woman pregnant with a child that wasn't his and to raise that child.

And Joseph did it. He woke up and went about the new plan. He was soft-hearted. He was able to be molded into a new shape by God. He was able to be transformed into what God wanted him to be.

We need to learn this attribute. Too many of us are committed to saving face or maintaining the course. We are hardheartedly devoted to our own plans, ideas, and answers. We need to be able to admit we made a mistake or took a wrong turn. We need to be open to God calling us to something else. We need to be moldable in God's hands. We need soft hearts.

### **A Trusting Heart: Joseph Believed God.**

Admit it, when you hear the word "trusting," you think naive. You think it means someone who is gullible and easily taken advantage of. But that just shows our own hardheartedness.

Joseph received a hard message from a reliable source, and he accepted it. He believed God. Trust requires humility, another attribute we sometimes look down upon, which is why we associate trust with naivety.

We need to be like Joseph. We need to trust that God is wiser than us, more powerful than us, and that He loves us. We can trust that His plan is for His glory and our good, and it's better than what we can come up with. Sometimes, we treat God like an advisor instead of a lord. We take his commands as good advice which we will take into consideration.

### **An Obedient Heart: Joseph Was Eager to Obey.**

After all that Joseph was asked to do, he woke up and did it. We aren't told the time frame in which the story unfolds, but it must be pretty quick. Maybe just a few hours. He heard, decided, dreamed, woke, and obeyed. He woke up and acted. We aren't told he took time "to process" it. We don't see Joseph dragging his feet or moping around. He woke up and did what God asked him to do. It is almost like he hit the ground running after waking up and immediately set his feet to the new course of action God had called him to.

How different would our lives and relationships be if we obeyed like Joseph? Obedience isn't just what you do, but how and when. Obedience is doing what you are told to do, when you are told to do it, with a happy heart. Joseph does exactly that.

Many people ask God for direction and guidance. I wonder if God would make his will known more readily if we were going to do more than just take his words under advisement. How would our prayer lives and our daily lives be if we stood ready, waiting on God, and eager to obey Him, whatever He called us to? Joseph did just that. And look where it got him.

This is a necessary component to trusting. You haven't really trusted if you aren't willing to obey. As the old hymn says: "Trust and obey, for there is no other way to be happy in Jesus. But to trust and obey."

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Why does serving take courage? What was Joseph risking by marrying Mary?
2. What are ways that we can balance pursuing righteousness with being compassionate?
3. How do you diagnose a hard heart? How do you soften your heart?
4. What does it mean to trust God? What is the basis of that trust? How can we grow in our trust of God?
5. What are reasons we don't obey? How can we grow in our ability and desire to obey God more?

## Mary: Courage to Submit

### Luke 1:26-38

Christmas is not about having the perfect celebration. Christmas is about God interrupting our plans. God shows up and overturns many of the plans we have made. He does so for His glory and our good. He has a grander plan that is coming true and He is inviting us to be participants in it. Embracing God's call on our lives requires courage...courage to submit.

No greater example of this can be found than in the person of Mary. She goes from being a young girl from a small town who is getting ready to be married to be invited into a much larger plan, a plan which will "ruin" many plans that she has made. She went from planning a wedding and preparing for a family to being the one who would bear the son of God. It sounds unbelievable, and jarring.

I am sure you have had your plans interrupted too. Interrupted by crisis or catastrophe. The loss of a job, the unexpected diagnosis, the unanticipated accident. Something you didn't see coming which makes you wonder what is going on and whether God is in control. Watch how Mary handles it. As we go through the story, notice how Mary reveals important clues on how to have courage to submit when God interrupts and changes the plans we have made for ourselves.

**An Unexpected Visitor vv. 26-29** – Mary is a young woman living in a small, insignificant town, in a far corner of the Roman Empire. She is probably in her late teens and engaged to be married to a man named Joseph. Everything about this screams ordinary. This is the way things are supposed to go. One day she is sitting in her house, minding her own business, maybe thumbing through bridal magazines, planning her wedding, and thinking about her new life that is about to begin. The next thing she knows, a stranger is standing in her living room. One thing I have always found intriguing: it says that the angel Gabriel was sent to Nazareth and that he "came in." For some reasons, I guess I always assumed that angels appeared. They show up or materialize. They don't walk up. But Gabriel did, He walks in on Mary and greets her.

**An Unexpected Plan vv. 30-35** – The angel tells Mary that she has found favor with God and that she is going to be used by God to bring the Messiah in the world. She has gone from a nobody woman in a nobody town to a central player in God's plan. The child she will bear will sit on David's throne and rule over the house of Jacob. On the one hand, this is a huge blessing and opportunity. On the other hand, this is going to cause numerous headaches. She is engaged to Joseph. Now she will become pregnant with a child that isn't his.

**An Unexpected Proof vv. 36-38** – Mary is obviously bewildered and has questions. The angel offers proof that what he says will happen by pointing to another instance of God at work doing the impossible. Her relative Elizabeth was barren and thought to be too old to bear children. She is pregnant and in her sixth month.

### **Application: Developing Courage to Submit**

If you look at the things Mary did in this encounter, her actions can serve as a model of how to respond when God interrupts our plans. She is a perfect example of what human obedience to God's plan looks like. Here are some things this story shows us about how to develop the courage we need to submit ourselves fully to God.

### **1. It's okay to be confused. "But she was very perplexed..." v. 29**

Sometimes, when the unexpected happens, many people feel like the "Christian" thing to do is to be excited about what is happening. We feel like we have to have it all figured out and see how God is using what has happened. But that is not the case. Mary shows us that it is okay to be confused. An angel walks into her house and starts changing all the plans she had made for herself. Mary had an appropriate human response. She was confused, perplexed. She didn't understand.

*It's okay to be confused...*

*Because when we are confused, we realize we don't know, and we realize our smallness.*

Being confused is humbling. It reveals we don't have all the answers. It shows we don't have everything figured out. And that is a good thing. God puts us into places where we are confused to show us that we are very small and need to learn we aren't as big as we think we are.

Paul says it this way in 2 Corinthians 4:7-9:

<sup>7</sup> But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; <sup>8</sup> we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed...

Notice what Paul says specifically in v8: "perplexed, but not despairing." God sometimes puts us in positions of confusion so that we realize that we don't have it figured out and that we are weak and that we don't know what we are doing. He doesn't do this to abandon us. He does it to show us that He is wise, He is strong, and He has it all figured out. As Paul says in v7 above "we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves."

### **2. It's okay to wrestle with it. "She kept pondering..." v. 29**

Sometimes, when the unexpected happens, we give ourselves time to be confused but think that what we are supposed to do next is simply shrug our shoulders, mumble something about how God knows best, then just keep plugging along. That is not the case at all. We are not only allowed to wrestle with what God is doing in our lives, I think we are supposed to.

By wrestling with it, I mean trying to figure it out, analyzing why you are upset, considering how it could be a good thing, voicing your bewilderment, and chewing on it over and over. I am not talking about stewing on something, or anxiously trying to figure out a way out, but thoughtfully mulling over what is going on and how this can be the work of a good God

*It's okay to wrestle with it...*

*Because when we wrestle, God can change us.*

Wrestling means engaging with God and using our whole selves. When we wrestle with the thing, or ourselves, or with God, we are putting ourselves in motion, and it gives God opportunity to move us, change us, direct us down the path He has for us and wants us to see.

### **3. It's okay to ask questions. "How can this be?" v. 34**

For some reason, a lot of people get a faulty notion from church that they aren't allowed to ask questions. Again, it's the grin-and-bear-it mentality. Many people think that when God changes our plans, our job is to

stoically accept whatever He sends down the pike. Nothing could be further from the truth. Scripture is filled with people asking God questions, being confused by what God is up to, and even bargaining with God. (I wouldn't recommend this unless you happen to have the word "prophet" in your job description). God desires to interact with us. We pay lip service to this with phrases like "having a relationship with God" but functionally our lives look more like we believe our job is to receive orders from God and do what we are told.

There is a common scene that repeats itself over and over. A person makes an appointment with a trusted friend, mentor, or pastor. After a few minutes of hemming and hawing, they finally say what is on their mind. "I think I am losing my faith," they say. "Why?" the interlocutor responds. "Because..." and what follows is a serious question to an important issue that this person has. And this person feels like it's wrong to think it, much less ask it. They feel guilty that the question occurred to them. By the way, the question that normally follows is usually along the lines of "Sometimes, I look at all the evil in the world and wonder if God really exists." If you have ever had this question or other hard questions, be encouraged by a couple of things. First, that is a great question, and you are allowed to ask it. Second, take courage that there are answers out there. In a culture where questions aren't encouraged, we sometimes don't realize how deep and strong the foundations of Christianity are. Third, you aren't losing your faith; you are gaining it. Don't run from the areas where you have doubts or questions or uncertainty. Those are the areas where God is trying to mature your understanding and show you more of who He is.

*It's okay to ask questions...*

*Because when we ask questions, God can answer.*

We say God is personal and wants a relationship with us. But we live functionally like we don't expect it. Wrestling with hard things is a good way to interact with God. To voice questions, mull things over, and ask God for answers. Asking questions puts the ball back in God's court. Ask, keep asking, and see if God doesn't answer. The Bible is full of promises that if we call to God, He will answer. When we ask questions, we give Him the chance to do so.

#### **4. It's important to surrender. "Behold the bondservant of the Lord..." v. 38**

It's ok to be confused. It's okay to wrestle with it. It's okay to ask questions. By the way, that is a good description of what it means to seek after God. If you ever wondered what it means to "seek God," these three words provide a pretty decent starting point. Something happens and you need answers so you seek God. You go looking for Him. Being confused, wrestling, and asking questions are all signs of going to God and wanting to know what He is up to.

Beyond these, though, is an attribute of Mary that is important to include. Mary didn't just do the first three. She also surrendered to the will of God. Verse 38 might be one of the most important verses in Scripture. "Behold the bondservant of the Lord, may it be done to me according to your word." Beyond all of her questions and confusions and perplexity, there was a desire to humbly submit to what the Lord had called her to.

Without this last attribute, we are liable to become arrogant or bitter when approaching God. God wants us to seek Him. But He wants to show us He is a good God that can be trusted with our lives, that He has a good plan for His glory and our good. It is not always going to make sense or be able to be explained in a way as to answer all questions. So we need to be able to trust and submit. Without this, we will always be waiting for surety to decide for ourselves. Or we will be waiting for all the answers before we decide to lay down our objections or our hurt or our bitterness. God calls us to realize that He is bigger than us, wiser than us, and loves us. Therefore, He can be trusted even when we can't understand what He is up to.

There is another scene in scripture that reveals a similar attitude. A few chapters later in Luke 5:5, Peter (called Simon at the time) meets Jesus who tells him after a hard night of fruitless fishing to try again in the place He says. Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

"But because you say so." What Jesus asked Peter to do didn't make sense. Peter was the professional fisherman. He knew how to fish and he had been doing it all night. But like Mary, he chose this simple act of trust. "Because you say so." That is the most important attribute Mary show us in how to respond when God upsets our plans and hands us the unexpected. To trust and surrender, even when it doesn't make sense or we are scared, bewildered, or confused. Because we serve a Good God who loves us and is at work to bring all things to their appointed end.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. How do you deal with being confused with what God is doing?
2. What are ways we wrestle with God and with what He is doing?
3. Do you ever feel like there are certain questions you aren't allowed to ask? Where do you go to find answers?
4. What are some reasons we don't always surrender to the unexpected things that God sends our way? Why does it take courage to surrender?
5. What are some ways we can develop an attitude of trusting, loving submission to God's plan over our own?

## Simeon and Anna: Courage to Wait

### Luke 2:21-38

We live in an instant culture. No one likes to wait for anything, even when it doesn't do us any good. I heard a comedian make this observation: "I made instant oatmeal then felt like a bum, because I didn't do anything for the next hour...I could have made the regular kind of oatmeal and felt productive." We are always in search of whatever will shorten wait time or help us deal with it.

"Waiting," to quote an American singer/songwriter/philosopher, "is the hardest part." Why is it so hard? Waiting is an act of surrender, admitting that you don't have everything you need to take the next step. It's a feeling of powerlessness. You need someone else to do something or you need something else to happen. Waiting is also a type of silence. There is an emptiness of activity or communication that we are unable to cross. The problem is that we all fill these voids and silences with our own insecurities. We worry whether we are alone, or whether others will keep their word, or if something will happen or not. We all continually find ourselves in situations where waiting is both required and feels unendurable. Learning to wait well means developing the courage to face our fears.

Christmas is about the reason for waiting being fulfilled. The People of God were waiting for God to do something. As the old Christmas carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" says, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight." In order to fully appreciate the fulfillment, we need to look at who was waiting and how. The Christmas Story is full of examples of people waiting, longing, hoping for God to act. We meet two such people when Joseph and Mary take Jesus to the temple to dedicate him. Their names are Simeon and Anna. They are two people who have been waiting a long time, who meet the newborn king, and who leave praising God because He has done all things well. By looking at their stories, perhaps we too can learn how to have the courage to wait on God.

#### Jesus Presented in the Temple vv. 21-24

In verse 21, we are told that eight days after Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary took the baby to the temple to be named and circumcised according to the law and in obedience to the word given to them by the angel. Verse 22 tells the story of a separate presentation of Jesus in the temple. It was done not 8 days after but later—probably around 40 days. This second presentation involved a purification ceremony of the mother who had given birth, as well as a sacrifice thanking God for the first born son. However, this sacrifice didn't require the presence of the son in the temple. The fact that they brought Jesus with them perhaps suggests that they were presenting him to the Lord for service like Hannah had done with Samuel in 1 Samuel 1-2. They were doing more than thanking God for this blessing, they were acknowledging and dedicating Jesus to the Messianic ministry that He came for.

#### Jesus Praised by Simeon vv. 25-35

- The Personality of Simeon v. 25 – While in the temple, they meet a man named Simeon. The first things we learn about Simeon are four qualities of his character.
  - o **Righteous** – Righteous doesn't mean he was perfect or that he was better than others. It was a description of his character that he sought to live out the commandment to love God with his whole self, and to love his neighbor as himself.



- o **Devout** – He is also described as devout. It might sound like just another way to say righteous, but it is slightly different. Devout has to do with his habits. He didn't just think about being righteous. He developed a habit or routine of performing righteous acts. This is important. We live in a society that values spontaneity. Because of this, anything that smacks of routine gets labeled as dry, dull, or in serious cases, hypocritical. We wrongly think that if our hearts aren't in something, we shouldn't bother doing it. The truth is that often doing the right thing is precisely what is required to change our hearts. Yes, it is possible to go through the motions and have your heart set somewhere else. That is bad. But it is also possible to go through the motions and, in the process, have your heart and mind restored, refreshed, and redirected.
  - o **Looking for the Consolation of Israel** – Simeon lived a life of righteousness and obedience. He also live a life of expectation. He was looking for God to do something, to bring consolation to Israel. Consolation means comfort, hope, restoration. Simeon wasn't living in a fantasy world. He knew the world was broken and he was looking forward to God doing something about it. He trusted that God was good and that He was up to something.
  - o **Holy Spirit was upon him** – This last attribute of Simeon causes confusion for some who think that the Holy Spirit didn't show up until Pentecost. This is not true. The Holy Spirit was poured out on all mankind in a miraculous way, but it is present in the Old Testament and in the life of Jesus. Here is an example: Simeon has it. Why? The Spirit is the manifest presence of God. Perhaps the Spirit is upon him because he was righteous, devout, and looking for the consolation of Israel. He was living for and longing for God. He was seeking God with all his heart. And he found what he was looking for.
- The Promise to Simeon v. 26 – We learn here that the Spirit revealed to Simeon that he would live to see the Messiah. We aren't told how this happened, only that it did. It is from this information that something is extrapolated from incomplete data. Many people assume Simeon is old. Perhaps because Anna who is about to be discussed is old. Perhaps because he is waiting to die. But it doesn't say anywhere that he is actually old. We assume. Perhaps correctly, perhaps not. A later church tradition has his age as 113. But we don't have any clues in the text to go by.
  - The Prompting of Simeon v. 27 – Not only was Simeon promised, but he was prompted. He was walking in the fellowship of the Spirit living out his life of righteousness and devotion, and the Spirit led him to go to the temple. We aren't told whether he did this often, like Anna. Perhaps this was rare for him. Perhaps the only reason he went was because the urgent need to go was impressed upon him by the Holy Spirit.
  - The Praise of Simeon vv. 28-32 – Simeon isn't a priest, though he is frequently represented that way in pictures and felt board cut outs. He is a pious saint who comes to the temple at the Spirit's prompting. So it might come as a shock when he reaches out and picks the baby up. Hopefully he gave the parents some warning. What follows is the Song of Simeon, sometimes referred as the Nunc Dimittis, which comes from the first two words of the song in Latin. It's a hymn of praise that God has fulfilled His promises personally to Simeon but also to Israel and to the Gentiles. Simeon recognizes the birth of Jesus as the presence of God's salvation. He calls it a revelation to the Gentiles and glory for Israel. The praise of Simeon reveals that God keeps his promises and that God's plan encompasses both big and small, nations and individuals.



- The Prophecy of Simeon vv. 33-36 – While the parents are marveling at these words, Simeon turns and speaks a word of prophesy to them as well. Though Jesus comes for salvation and as consolation, not all will welcome Him. He will cause some to rise, others to fall. He will be opposed by many. His life will bring revelation, but that revelation will sometimes feel like a sword thrust into your heart.

### **Jesus Preached by Anna vv. 36-38**

- Anna’s Story – On the heels of the encounter with Simeon, the parents of Jesus meet Anna. She is described as a prophetess. A brief description is given of her past. She was a widow. She had been married for 7 years, and then widowed until now, when she was 84 years old. Given that women often married in their late teens in Jesus’s day, she was probably widowed around age 24, and had been a widow for 60 years. She had spent that time serving in the temple, exercising her spiritual gifts.
- Anna’s Preaching – A prophetess was something like a teacher or preacher. Verse 38 says “at that moment.” She evidently heard the words of Simeon and began to expound on them. Simeon’s words were directed at Mary and Joseph. Anna’s words were directed to a wider audience both in the moment and later. This evidently became her continual sermon. Verse 38 says she “continued to speak of Him.” From that day forward, God showed her what He wanted her to talk about. She told the story of Jesus to any temple visitor who was looking for God to fully redeem his people.

### **Application:**

#### **Waiting Well Requires Focusing Your Heart**

Both Simeon and Anna are described as people who are seeking God and serving others. In the midst of confusing times, they chose not to dwell on difficulties, or even justify their own sin or selfishness by choosing to focus on what they didn’t like about their current circumstances. In short, they were pursuing righteousness. They were focused not on their desires or even their frustrations; they were focused on becoming like God.

Often in our waiting, we become consumed with what we are waiting for or consumed with wonder about why it’s not here yet. Waiting well requires us to shift our focus not away from what we are waiting for but rather beyond it. What we focus on becomes the object of our desire. Psalm 37:4 says, “Delight yourself in the Lord; And He will give you the desires of your heart.” Simeon and Anna looked for the consolation of Israel, but their hearts were focused on God who would bring it about. They were seeking Him above all.

#### **Waiting Well Requires Focusing Your Habits**

Both Simeon and Anna were evidently creatures of habit. Simeon is described as devout, which means he had the habits of spiritual routine. Anna served in the temple so much that she is described as never leaving (which is a bit of an exaggeration; there were no places to sleep or eat in the temple). The point is clear. They didn’t just have a heart for God; they had habits designed to draw them closer to God.

Our intentions are meaningless if they don’t lead to action. New actions that go contrary to our nature are difficult. Habit is a means of reinforcing an action so that it becomes natural and even desirable. We all have habits. The question is whether our habits are positive or negative. Breaking habits is difficult. If it’s a bad habit, that’s a problem. If it’s a good habit, it can be a source of security.

We need to cultivate positive habits that strengthen our mind and soul in the activities that draw us closer to

God. Taking our body to the places it should be (like church, fellowship, etc) and doing the things it should doing (serving, worshiping, giving, etc) is a way to make sure our lives are pointed in the right direction. It's amazing how having good habits can end up transforming our heart.

### **Waiting Well Requires Focusing Your Hope**

Waiting on God has a clarifying effect on our soul. It gives us a window into our hopes and desires. Waiting can reveal our fears, our inadequacies, our motivations.

Simeon and Anna focused on the hope they had in God. Who knows the process God led them through to bring them to that place of hope and trust. What we do see is people who are hoping completely in God. In verse 29, Simeon calls himself a "bondservant" of God. He surrendered himself to whatever God wanted for his life. He knew that God was in ultimate control. Such surrender wasn't out of fear but of joy. When he saw Jesus, he blessed God. His confident trust in the path God had him on was rewarded. The same with Anna. She spent 60 years serving God, waiting for Him to do something. The moment she saw Jesus she didn't throw up her hands in exasperation saying, "Well, it's about time." Verse 38 says she immediately began "giving thanks to God."

While waiting on God, we need to learn to fix our hope on God, and not on the thing we need Him to do, not on the timeline, not on what we are worried about if it doesn't happen. Perhaps as we wrestle with these things, God will demonstrate to us in small ways that He is up to something, that He is at work in your life, that He has a big plan for His glory and for our good, and that when we see it we will be glad, bless Him, and give Him thanks.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What does it mean to wait on God? Why does God make us wait? What are some good and bad ways that we wait?
2. What is the distinction between being righteous and being devout? How can good habits help when our hearts aren't in the right place?
3. What does the story of Simeon show us about trusting God's timing?
4. What does Anna show us about trusting God's plan instead of our own?
5. How does waiting on God reveal the true nature of what we are hoping in?

## Magi: Courage to Seek

### Matthew 2:1-12

Few things are likely to create controversy in the fall than a discussion of when it is permissible to start decorating for Christmas. Some people wait until it gets cool. Others follow a progression: Halloween, Thanksgiving, then Christmas. One thing few people even discuss is when the Christmas season ends. It seems like the same people who are determined to put their Christmas stuff up in September are also determined to put everything away on December 26th.

The truth is, though, that the Christmas season doesn't end on December 25th. That's when it used to start. Traditionally, Christmas started on December 25th and ran until Epiphany, a holiday which most Americans know little about including the date, which is January 6th. Remember that tedious Christmas carol, "The Twelve Days of Christmas"? Well, it didn't end on Christmas; it started then. Add 12 days to December 25th and you end up on January 6th. People used to put their Christmas trees up on December 24th and celebrate through the Twelve Day holiday.

Why don't Americans normally celebrate Christmas this way? Well, sadly and cynically, Christmas has been overly commercialized. It's a holiday that involves giving presents and is conveniently located at the end of the tax year. Companies have a chance to close out the year in the black and avoid inventory tax. That is why the day after Thanksgiving is called Black Friday. Many companies haven't made any profit the whole year until then. There is no business incentive to stretching Christmas into the new year.

The purpose of this introduction is not to rant about the negative impact of business on the Christmas holiday, but to provide an opening to talk about Epiphany. Epiphany is the day in which we celebrate the coming of the Magi to visit baby Jesus. It is a story of wealthy, powerful, wise men who traveled a great distance to worship and honor a baby in a barn. They had the courage to seek. If we look closely at their story, perhaps we can learn to be just as courageous.

#### **An Unexpected Arrival vv. 1-3**

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem, some visitors arrived who were looking for him. They are described as Magi from the East, and they seem to be astrologers because they are observing the stars. In addition, it is assumed that they are rich because of the gifts they brought. What is interesting is that nowhere does it say that they are "kings" or that there are three of them. The position is assumed from the wealth. The number is assumed from the three gifts that were given.

- Magi from the East – People disagree about who the Magi were because by Jesus's day the word "magi" could be used for any magician or even just a deceiver or swindler. But the likely meaning is that these were actual Magi, members of the priestly class of a religion from Persia called Zoroastrianism. Why on earth would priests from a different religion come to worship the King of the Jews? Well, it seems like Zoroastrianism originally emerged in Persia during the time of the Jewish Exile in Babylon. Whatever the religion later turned into, it seems like it was strongly influenced by and borrowed heavily from Judaism. That was probably why these members of the priestly class knew about the Jewish expectation of the Messiah and were looking for him as well.

- We saw His star in the East. – What exactly did they see? Sometimes, we imagine a star leading them like a guide. But the truth is, we are not quite sure what exactly they saw. They saw some sort of astronomical phenomenon that signaled to them that a Jewish King had been born. But it evidently didn't tell them much else beyond that. They didn't know exactly where to go, so they headed to Israel and naturally went to the capital city, Jerusalem, to inquire about the royal birth at the palace.
- He was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. – The response to the Magi was alarm. Why was Herod upset at their arrival. First, he evidently hadn't had a son born to him recently. This meant that the Magi were looking for a potential rival to his power. Also, they said they were looking for "He who has been born king of the Jews." You see, Herod hadn't been born a king. He had been appointed king by the authority of Rome. He wasn't even Jewish, but rather an Edomite. He was not the real king of the Jews and everyone knew it. But he held onto power because of his alliance with the Romans. Now the Magi come saying that a new king has been born. No wonder he was worried and all Jerusalem with him. What turmoil would this new rival cause?

#### **An Unexpected Opportunity vv. 4-8**

- He asked where the Messiah was to be born. – Herod assembles his own wise men, no doubt mad that they had missed this and wondering what was going on. He wants to know where the Messiah was to be born. These students of the word tell him that Micah 5:2 prophesies birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem, a city about 7 miles south of Jerusalem. Sometimes, we skip over the actual prophecy because we know the meaning. But God promises to send not just someone to exert power over the nation. He promises a shepherd, someone who will live out Psalm 23 for the people.
- Go and Search – After Herod find out where, he goes back to the Magi and asks when they saw the star. He then sends them to Bethlehem to find the baby. He pretends that he wants to worship the baby too. But if that were so, why on earth doesn't Herod go with them? The Magi have been journeying probably for two years. They have traveled several hundred miles in land that was treacherous and among people who might be dangerous. Herod is seven miles from Bethlehem. Why doesn't he go? Probably because he wants to plan on what to do if they find a baby. Of all the people who heard about the Magi, no one seems to go with them. They knew where the Messiah was to be born. They knew what the Messiah was supposed to be. Now they had word that the Messiah was here, and no one could be bothered to take an afternoon walk to see if it was true. They don't take the opportunity, because they don't want it. They want to stay in power. They want to be the ruler and the shepherd. They refuse to be led; they refuse to bend the knee, so they don't go.

#### **An Unexpected Discovery vv. 9-11**

- The star went on before them. – Again, we aren't sure what they saw. Stars don't move. So it can't be that the star changed location. There have been some interesting suggestions about what it could have been. One is that they might have seen planets moving. Ancient astronomers didn't know that planets and stars were different things. The only difference they noticed was that stars were fixed in relationship to all the other stars but that planets moved. In fact, the name "planet" comes from the Greek word "planetes," which means wanderer. To the ancients, planets were just wandering stars. Perhaps they saw planets moving in a way that was meaningful to them. Another suggestion is that perhaps they saw a comet. Whatever they saw, they recognized it as divine guidance and it filled them with tremendous joy.

- Coming into the house...they worshipped. – The reference to the house indicates that the Magi didn't arrive on Christmas night. The shepherds found Jesus in a stable. The Magi find Jesus in a house. Even then, it was probably small and modest. One wonders how crowded the room was. It must have been an odd sight. Great and powerful men, no doubt with an entourage come to a small house in a poor town. They enter and fall on the floor before a mother and her baby. This is more than kneeling. This was more than a sign of respect. This was the sign of submission before a king. They also presented Him three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These three gifts also represent how they viewed Jesus. Some even consider the gifts prophetic. Gold is a gift for a king. Frankincense is used in worshiping a deity. Myrrh was a spice used in burial. These three gifts symbolize the three roles that Christ revealed himself to be: King, God, Sacrifice.

### **An Unexpected Detour v. 12**

After seeing Jesus, they had evidently planned on going back to Herod, because the route back to their own country went north from Bethlehem back through Jerusalem. But they are warned in a dream not to return to Herod. So they went home by another route. We aren't told what route they went, or even what happened when they got there. But it is important to realize that God led them to Jesus by means of the star. But that wasn't the end. He kept leading them even as they headed home. This time He guided them by means of a dream instead of a star. Who knows how their lives changed based on what they experienced. What we do know is that they came following divine guidance, and they left under the same guidance.

#### Application: The Courage to Seek

**Seeking Requires Longing** – It might sound like something not worth noting, but the first thing the wise men did was look. They saw a star because they were looking. They knew they were missing something, and they were searching for it. The same is true with us. We all have a sense that something is missing in our lives. We have a hole inside us. St. Augustine said it is a God-shaped hole. Nothing else will fit it. So God calls us to seek Him. In fact, He created us to seek Him. Act 17:27 says that God made us so that we “would seek God.” Jesus promised in Matthew 7:8 that “he who seeks finds.” The one condition is that we must be wholehearted in our search. In Jeremiah 29:13, God says, “you will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.” The wise men were searching for God with their whole hearts. The proof is found in what they did when they saw the sign.

**Seeking Requires Risking** – When the wise men saw the sign, they took a long journey. In modern times, long distances can be covered with relative ease and amazing speed. Within a single day, we could travel to almost any place in the world. But this is an incredibly recent occurrence. For most people in human history, travel was slow, dangerous, and expensive. Most people stayed close to home. These wise men set out on a journey of almost a thousand miles. It probably took them two years, and that's just one way. Who knows how much it cost them. All along the way, they were easy prey for robbers. But they took the risk. Why? Because when you see the star that you have been searching and longing for, you risk everything to find the fulfillment. Jesus says we are supposed to seek His kingdom this way. In Matthew 13:44, He says, “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” Joy over finding what you were looking for, finding what satisfies your soul will make you risk everything and sell everything in the hopes of obtaining that one thing.

**Seeking Requires Submitting** – Real searching is a sign of humility. It shows that you realize you lack something that someone else has. The culmination of humility is worship. That is what the wise men do when they find Jesus. These were the richest, smartest, most important people in the world. They came to a little town in a backwater province at the end of an empire. They go into a tiny house and lay down before a baby. They aren't just honoring Him. They fell down before Him on the ground and worshiped him. They showed that they realized He was everything and they were nothing. Their worship overflowed with giving gifts. They opened their treasures and gave Him what they had brought. Real worship gives. Real worship sacrifices. It does so willingly because of the incalculable worth of the joy received. Willingness or eagerness to give is a chief attribute of sincere worship. Giving isn't something demanded by the one worshipped. It is offered willingly by a person who acknowledges that what he has received is more valuable than what he has given.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. How do the Magi compare with Herod? How are they similar? How are they different?
2. How does seeking start in longing? What do we long for? Where do we seek fulfillment for those longings?
3. How is seeking risky? What did the Magi risk? What are we called to risk?
4. Why does seeking require humility? How do worship and giving relate to this?
5. How are the three gifts the Magi give to Jesus symbolic and prophetic? What do they mean?