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WHAT'S IN YOUR TEACHING GUIDE

This Teaching Guide has three purposes:

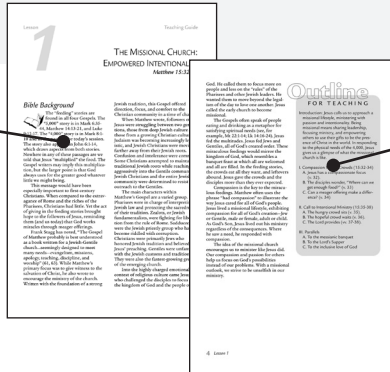
- to give the teacher tools for focusing on the content of the session in the Study Guide.
- to give the teacher additional Bible background information.
- to give the teacher variety and choice in preparation.

The Teaching Guide includes two major components: Teacher Helps and Teacher Options.

Teacher Helps

Bible Background

The Study Guide is your main source of Bible study material. This section helps you more fully understand and interpret the Scripture text.



Teaching Outline

provides you with an outline of the main themes in the Study Guide.

Teacher Options

The next three sections provide a beginning, middle, and end for the session, with focus paragraphs in between.

Focus Paragraphs

are printed in italics at the top of the page because they are the most important part of the Teaching Guide.

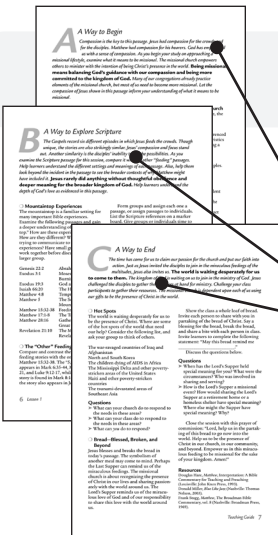
These paragraphs will help you move your class from “what the text meant” to “what the text means.”

You Can Choose!

There is more material in each session than you can use, so choose the options from each section to tailor the session to the needs of your group.

Prepare Before the Session

Read the session for today in the Study Guide. Then read the options in this Teaching Guide, placing checkmarks beside the activities you plan to include. After you have decided which options to use, gather the appropriate materials.



THE
SON*Hebrews 1:1-12***Bible Background****The Book of Hebrews**

Much about the book of Hebrews is unknown. The author, the identity of the recipients, the date of writing—all the things we normally ask about the New Testament books—are shrouded in mystery. Yet a careful examination of the book yields certain clues.

For example, the author was well versed in the Old Testament Scriptures and familiar with Jewish teaching and interpretation. He was also trained in classical rhetoric. It is evident, too, that he was familiar with his audience and wanted to encourage them to hold fast to their faith.

Similarly, we know that the first recipients of this letter were likely second-generation believers rather than eyewitnesses to the resurrection (see Heb 2:3). They had a background in Judaism but were not yet fully mature in their faith. They were also a church in crisis. Some of them had abandoned their regular assemblies. Some may have fallen away from the faith, or were at least considering other options. The church faced persecution, but the degree of mistreatment is open to debate.

The Superiority of Christ

What can you say to a church in turmoil because of both internal and external pressures? The author of Hebrews warns this

church in crisis of the dangers of abandoning the faith, but the book's main concern is to present a correct understanding of Jesus Christ.

Hebrews portrays Jesus in both his humanity and his divinity. In his humanity, Jesus is the fully human, suffering servant who cries out to God in his distress, learns obedience through suffering, and is tempted in every way (yet without sin). In his divinity, the writer portrays Jesus as the eternal High Priest, the heir of King David, and God's divine Son.

Jesus is superior to angels, to Moses, to the law, and to the high priest. Only through Christ do we have forgiveness of sins that is once and for all. Only through his blood can we confidently approach God's throne in our time of need. In the midst of turmoil, the author of Hebrews directs our attention to One whose rule is unchanging and sure: Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The God Who Speaks

Hebrews begins with a prologue that establishes the superiority of God's Son. "Long ago, God spoke," the writer says (Heb 1:1). The coming of Christ was the climax to the Old Testament story of God's self-revelation. From the birth of creation, God was at work making himself known to humanity "in many and various ways." Through dreams, visions, oracles, divine speech, and angelic messengers, God revealed himself to the people, "but in these last days he has

spoken to us by a Son.” Although in the past God spoke in many different ways to many different people, God’s ultimate expression of self-revelation came in the person of Jesus Christ. If we want to know what God is like, we need to look no further than his Son.

The Son

The next seven phrases describe the uniqueness and superiority of God’s Son. First, he is not only Son but also heir. The idea of God’s inheritance is an important biblical theme. Its usage here may echo the idea in Psalm 2 of a messianic king from the line of David. The Son will ultimately inherit all things, and we as children of God will one day share in that inheritance (Heb 6:17; 9:15; 12:28).

Furthermore, God’s Son is not only heir but also the agent through which God created the world he will one day inherit. Even more significant, the Son is the “reflection of God’s glory” and the “exact imprint” of God’s nature. It is difficult to see how God’s Son could carry the “exact imprint” of God’s divine being unless he himself was also divine. Only God could have the power to “sustain all things by his powerful word,” yet Hebrews says God’s Son is the sustaining power behind the universe.

The next phrase describes Jesus’ priestly ministry of making purification for sins. As Hebrews later makes clear, this sacrifice was a once-for-all event that never needs repeating (Heb 10:11-14). When his task was completed, he sat down at the right hand of God. This place indicates that he completed his priestly work of purification and that he holds a place of power and authority (see Ps 110:1).

Christ and the Angels

The prologue concludes by declaring that the Son, Jesus, is superior to the angels. The writer elaborates on this point in the rest of the chapter. He appeals to a series of Old Testament quotations for support. Jewish tradition held that the

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Introduction: Hebrews 1 identifies Jesus as the ultimate expression of God’s self-revelation, superior even to angels because of his role, his mission, and his authority.

- I. God Spoke (1:1-2)
 - A. Throughout history, God has spoken in many ways to many people. God has always taken the initiative in the process of self-revelation. (v. 1)
 - B. Now God has spoken one final word. God’s ultimate self-revelation was in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (v. 2)
- II. God’s Son, Jesus Christ (1:3-4)
 - A. God created the world through Jesus. Jesus is the one who holds all of creation together and the one who will eventually inherit all things. (v. 3)
 - B. Jesus is a precise portrait of God’s glory and being. (v. 3)
 - C. Jesus completed his mission of making purification for sins. He is now seated at God’s right hand in the position of power and authority that is rightfully his. (v. 4)
- III. No Possible Substitute (1:5-12)
 - A. Jesus is superior to angels because he is the Son and heir of God. (v. 5)
 - B. Jesus is superior to angels because God has commanded the angels to worship him. (v. 6)
 - C. Jesus has an eternal throne, but angels are mere servants. Angels are only winds and flames compared to Jesus’ permanence. (vv. 7-9)
 - D. One day creation will wear out only to be replaced and renewed. Jesus, however, will not change, and his kingdom will endure forever. (vv. 10-12)

law was given to Moses on Mount Sinai through angelic messengers. It is possible that the author of Hebrews wanted to establish Jesus as superior to the angels in order to encourage Jewish believers who were under pressure to abandon Christ and return to the law. It is also possible that he was reacting to those who questioned how a suffering and dying Messiah could be superior to angels.

The chain of quotations establishes that the Son is superior to the angels by virtue of divine decree (v. 5). Additionally, the angels are commanded to worship God's first-born son (v. 6). The remaining quotations emphasize the Son's eternal reign in contrast to the time-bound and changeable nature of angels, as well as creation itself, which will one day be renewed.

The author begins his letter to a church in crisis by assuring them they made the right choice. Jesus, God's Son, has no comparison and no substitute. Where else could they turn but to Jesus, the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (Heb 12:2)? Where else can *we* turn? If we fix our faith on anything but Jesus, we place it on a cheap and worthless substitute. Only Jesus is worthy to be the center of our faith and devotion.

A A Way to Begin

Hebrews was written to a church in crisis. The author begins his encouraging letter with a reminder that our faith is not built on something that will crumble or fade away, but on the certain foundation of Jesus Christ, Son of God. The author also reminds us that nothing, not even angels, can take the place of Jesus. Only Jesus deserves to be at the center of our faith.

○ Getting to Know You

Collect items such as photographs, a journal, a portrait, a biography, a letter, etc. These might be your own, those of an ancestor, or those of a historical figure. Display the items for the class. Discuss what one might be able to learn about a person from each item.

Questions

- How would you introduce a person to someone he or she has never met?
- What would be the best way for someone to learn about that person?

We can learn about people from various sources, but the best way to learn what they are like is to meet face to face. In the same way, God spoke in many ways throughout history, but Jesus is a personal revelation of God who helps us meet God face to face.

○ Under Pressure

The first readers of Hebrews were church members who faced external and internal pressure. Some had been thrown in prison; others had their property taken away from them. There are hints in the book that some members considered abandoning their faith and returning to Judaism.

Discuss the different kinds of pressures Christians face today. Consider the situations of believers both locally and in other countries.

Question

- If you were writing a letter to encourage a church facing persecution, what would you say? Where would you begin?

B A Way to Explore Scripture

One of the main themes of Hebrews is the supremacy of Christ. The author makes clear that Jesus has no comparison. Compared to Jesus, any possible substitute—the Old Testament law, the temple sacrifices, the created order, even angels—is only a shadow of the ultimate reality. This theme begins in the opening verses of Hebrews as the prologue introduces Jesus, God’s Son.

○ **No Substitutes**

Discuss food allergies and intolerances and how people, especially children, learn to live with them. Note that sometimes a substitute can be found (soy milk instead of dairy milk, for example), but the substitute is not always satisfying. Someone who has tasted both the “real thing” and the substitute can usually tell the difference.

As a class, name things people might substitute for Jesus. Consider substitutions both believers and nonbelievers might make. List these substitutions on one side of the board. On the other side, list ways Jesus is superior to each substitute.

Questions

- What are some reasons people might base their faith on something other than Jesus?
- How does it comfort you to know that Jesus is superior to any substitute, even angels?
- How can we know if we have based our faith on something other than Jesus?
- How can we be assured that Jesus is the center of our faith?

○ **A Firm Foundation**

In a rain forest, trees tend not to develop thick roots. Unfortunately, this shallow root system means strong winds can easily blow down what appears to be a large, healthy tree.

Times of stress reveal the basis for our lives. The prologue to Hebrews reminds us that Jesus is the only sure foundation for our faith.

Slowly read through Hebrews 1:1-4. Consider the different ways the author describes Jesus. In groups of two or three, write a letter to someone in which you tell them why Jesus should be central to their faith. What qualities would you include?

Questions

- What is the significance of Jesus being identified both as creator and sustainer of the universe?
- What does it mean to you that Jesus is the “exact imprint of God’s being”?
- What are some of the consequences of having something other than Jesus as the center of one’s faith?

○ **Angels**



Distribute copies of the resource page “Angels.” Ask the provided discussion questions.

C A Way to End

Theology matters. What we believe affects what we do, especially in times of crisis. Our beliefs about Jesus affect our evangelism and our worship. If other things can take Jesus' place, is there any point in telling people about him?

We do well to consider the foundation of our faith.

○ The Solid Rock

Provide the words and music for the hymn “The Solid Rock” (found in most hymnals). Explain that this hymn tells of the sure hope we have in Christ compared to the “sinking sand” of any other alternative. One Sunday the songwriter, Edward Mote, was visiting the home of a friend whose wife was very sick. The friend asked to sing a hymn. Mote happened to have a copy of the newly written hymn in his pocket, and it was sung for the first time at the sick woman’s bedside.

Lead your group in a time of worship, either reading the words to “The Solid Rock” reflectively or singing the song together.

Questions

- How do you think these words would comfort and strengthen someone dealing with illness or some other difficulty?
- How do the words comfort and strengthen you?

○ A Time of Commitment

No one ever plans to abandon his or her faith in Christ. Even so, sometimes it happens through neglect or a series of small compromises. Take a moment to reflect on whether Jesus is truly at the center of our faith. Ask the following questions for private reflection.

Questions

- Do I trust only in God and his word, or do I also seek spiritual input from sources that conflict with biblical teaching?
- Do I spend more time doing things for God than I do pursuing a relationship with God?
- What issues are so important to me that I would let them affect my relationship with another believer? Are those things really central to the gospel?

Lead a prayer of commitment, thanking God for taking the initiative in our relationship and committing to make Jesus alone the center of our faith.

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2

THE
PROMISE*2 Peter 3:8-15a***Bible Background****Introduction to 2 Peter**

Second Peter was written to encourage believers to grow in their knowledge of Christ and to warn them about the false teachers that had infiltrated the churches in their region. We cannot precisely identify the false teachers. Some have suggested that they may have been part of an early Gnostic group. Gnostics rejected the physical world as irredeemably evil in contrast to the pure world of the spirit. Some Gnostics may have concluded that what a person did in the body was irrelevant to the condition of the soul. Such a teaching might explain the immoral lifestyle Peter so strongly rebukes in 2:10-19.

Others have suggested that the false teachers might have been Epicureans. These followers of the Greek philosopher Epicurus were known for their denial of the afterlife and divine judgment. This approach seems similar to that of the false teachers who scoffed at the concept of Christ's return in chapter 3.

Scoffers

False teachers mocked the apparent delay of Christ's return and questioned if Jesus would ever return at all (2 Pet 3:4). This was the problem the readers of 2 Peter faced. The false teachers' logic seems to have been something like this: God's delay of judgment means judgment will

not come at all. If God cannot or will not judge, we may live as we please. Peter describes these teachers as "scoffers" who come "indulging their own lusts" (3:3).

The error in these scoffers' thinking—an error Peter wants his audience to avoid—is mistaking God's delay of judgment for powerlessness when it is actually an expression of patient grace (3:8). Peter quotes Psalm 90:4 for support, but with a twist. In Psalm 90, the phrase "one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years are like one day" contrasts God's eternal nature with our brief lifespan. In 2 Peter, the quotation reminds us of our impatient expectations as contrasted with God's purposeful and infinite patience. The delay of Christ's return is not an expression of "slowness" (3:9) but of divine self-restraint. God waits, showing patience, desiring all to come to repentance. "All" includes even those scoffers who mock the idea of Christ's return.

The day of the Lord will come "like a thief" (3:10). The image of a thief is used elsewhere in the New Testament to describe the day of the Lord. Paul uses the same image in 1 Thessalonians 5:2, and Jesus uses it in Matthew 24:42-43. The day of the Lord will certainly come, but it will come without warning. Believers are called to live in a state of expectation, constantly on alert. Now is the time to repent. On the day of Christ's return, all decisions will have been made. There will be no more second chances.

A Renewed Creation

The day of the Lord will mean both destruction and renewal. Peter describes a day on which the “heavens will pass away with a loud noise,” “the elements will be dissolved with fire,” and “the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed” (3:10, 12). On that day, all our deeds and secret sins will be laid bare, plainly visible to God.

Peter’s main concern, however, is not destruction but transformation. The day of the Lord will be a day of judgment, but it will also be a day of renewal and purification. In Romans, Paul describes creation as a woman in labor, groaning to be set free from bondage to decay (Rom 8:20-23). Peter seems to have a similar idea in view. On the day of the Lord, creation will pass through the flames and emerge as “a new heavens and new earth, where righteousness is at home” (2 Pet 3:13). The new creation will be a place where God can dwell with a redeemed and glorified people. God’s ultimate goal is redemption. The new creation will be the fulfillment of the promise of Revelation 21:3: “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.”

Living in the Meantime

How should we live while we wait for the coming fulfillment of God’s promise? Peter says we should lead “lives of holiness and godliness” and “strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish” (2 Pet 3:11, 14). What we believe about the end of time affects how we live in the meantime. On the day of Christ’s return, we should be found living as citizens of the new creation, at peace both with God and with others. We are called to reflect the character of our holy and righteous God, living in light of Christ’s certain coming. When we live today as those who have already been transformed by God’s grace, we do not fear the Lord’s coming but anticipate it with joy.

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Introduction: Second Peter reminds us that our waiting times are not wasted time, but seasons of preparation.

I. Remember While We Wait

- A. In seasons of waiting, remember that God does not see time as we see it. (3:8)
- B. Remember that God has a purpose for seasons of waiting. God delays judgment to give everyone a chance to repent. (3:9)
- C. Remember that God’s patience is an opportunity for salvation. (3:15)

II. Remember What We Wait For

- A. Christ will surely return. He will come suddenly and without warning. (3:10)
- B. On the day of the Lord, God will usher in a new creation. (3:10, 12)
- C. We will dwell with God in the new earth “where righteousness is at home.” (3:13)

III. Remember How We Should Wait

- A. We are to live holy and godly lives. (3:11)
- B. We both anticipate and hasten Christ’s coming by our obedience. (3:12)
- C. We strive to be found pure in God’s sight, at peace with God and with others on the day of Christ’s return. (3:14)

What does it mean to “hasten the coming of the day of God” (2 Pet 3:12)? There was a rabbinical saying that “If Israel kept the law perfectly for one day Messiah would come” (Hillyer, 219). Another possible reference is Matthew 24:14, which could imply that our evangelistic efforts play a role in hastening the day of Christ’s return. It seems likely, however, that Peter had a larger view of kingdom living in mind. In Scripture

there is always a tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. God knows the day of Christ's return, but it also seems that if we live obediently today, we both prepare ourselves for and hasten that day.

Our perspective, then, is radically opposed to that of the scoffers who see the delay of Christ's return as proof of God's ability to judge. God's patience is not a sign of weakness but of salvation (3:15). We live now as those redeemed and transformed by God's grace. We make the most of every opportunity to invite others to join God's kingdom.

A Way to Begin

The early church took literally Jesus' promise to return soon. The more time passed without a sign of Christ's return, however, the more the church struggled to believe in this promise. The author of 2 Peter is only one of the New Testament writers who deal with this issue and remind us that "not yet" does not mean "never." How do we feel when God's promises seem to be delayed? How do we cope with seasons of longing?

○ **While You Wait**

Bring a selection of newspapers and magazines to class. Ask participants to scan these resources looking for stories of people who are waiting for something. Discuss what they are waiting for and the different ways people cope while they wait.

Questions

- What sorts of things do people wait for?
- Are there things we wait for as part of a group that are different from the things we may wait for as individuals? Explain.
- When have you had to wait a long time before what you were waiting for finally arrived? How did you cope with the uncertainty of waiting?
- How did you respond when the waiting was over?
- Are there things you are still waiting for?
- What do you imagine God is doing while you wait?

The church addressed in 2 Peter waited for Christ's return while facing persecution and false teachers. Waiting

was part of their normal Christian experience.

○ **Living with Longing**

Ask participants to discuss these questions.

Questions

- How often do you think about Christ's return?
- When you think about Jesus coming back, how do you feel? Excited? Guilty? Overjoyed? Frightened?
- Are there times when you wish Jesus would return immediately? Are there times when you hope he will not return in your lifetime?
- Have you ever known people who focused on Christ's return rather than the present moment? Have you ever known people who focused on the present moment and gave no thought to Christ's return? Which do you think is the better outlook? Is it possible to live in balance between the two?
- As Christians live with longing to be with Jesus, what do you think we are to do in the meantime?

B A Way to Explore Scripture

It is easy to lose heart in seasons of waiting. In those times, we can find encouragement in remembering ways God's promises have been fulfilled in the past and knowing all God's promises will be fulfilled in the future. Peter also reminds us to use our time well, preparing for the day of the Lord that God has promised will surely come.

○ Precious Promises

Read 2 Peter 3:8-15a. Earlier in chapter 3, Peter reminds his readers that the false teachers fail to understand that God intervened in history many times in the past and will do so again. God's character does not change. Remembering God's faithfulness in the past can help us when we face times of waiting in the present.



Distribute copies of the resource page "Precious Promises." In groups of three or four, ask participants to look up the listed passages and identify which promises God has already fulfilled and which ones are yet to be fulfilled in the future.

Questions

- How does remembering God's faithfulness in the past give us hope for the future?
- What should we keep in mind as we wait for God's promises to be fulfilled in our lives?
- What are some of the blessings of knowing that God can be purposefully patient?

○ Seeing through Different Eyes

The concept of time is vague to young children. "Tomorrow" or "next week" may seem near to us, but they can seem like an eternity away to a young child. Teaching small children that some things are worth waiting for is a valuable lesson.

Sometimes we relate to God with the perspective of a young child. God says, "Wait," but we want what we want—and want it now! Explore with the class the difference it makes when we try to see life from an eternal perspective.

Questions

- What difference does it make to you to know that God views time differently than we do?
- In 2 Peter 3:9, the writer says God delays the day of Christ's return to allow time for all to repent. What other reasons might God have for causing us to wait?
- Our passage speaks about the day of the Lord as a time of both judgment and restoration. Are there things we wait for that have both positive and negative components? Explain.
- What emotions does this passage stir in you as you think about Jesus' return?
- What can we do to be ready for Christ's return?

C A Way to End

Knowledge of the future should influence the way we live in the present. We should live differently because we know that Christ will one day return and usher in a new heaven and new earth where we will be home with God. Explore how the future orientation of this passage can make a positive difference in the lives of Christians today.

○ A Time of Reflection

Ask the following questions for silent reflection.

Questions

- One of the reasons Christ delays his return is to allow time for people to repent. Whom do you know that needs to take advantage of God's patience? How could God use you to bring this person to repentance?
- If Christ returned today, would he find you "at peace, without spot or blemish"? What would you need to change to be found ready?
- Are you in a season of waiting? Based on the reading from 2 Peter, how can you use your time productively as you wait for the fulfillment of God's promise?

○ Waiting Time, not Wasted Time

We spend much of our lives waiting—waiting in line, waiting in traffic, waiting at the doctor's or dentist's office. Usually we consider that time "wasted." But do we also consider our time "wasted" when we are waiting on the fulfillment of God's promises?

Challenge participants to live intentionally each day this week, remembering that God's patience has a purpose, and we are to spend our lives in preparation for Christ's coming.

Resources

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THE FORERUNNER

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Bible Background



In the Beginning

The Gospel of John is unique among the four Gospels in terms of vocabulary, style, and imagery. John seems to use a different set of sources than Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The book claims to convey the testimony of an eyewitness and close companion of Jesus (19:35; 21:24). Tradition identifies this companion, known in the Gospel only as “the disciple Jesus loved,” as the apostle John. Whoever the writer was, his purpose is to reveal Jesus as the promised Savior and Messiah. The Fourth Gospel requires the reader to make a decision. The writer uses many contrasts: light and darkness, life and death, faith and unbelief. In John there is no middle ground. We either accept Christ or reject him. Tradition places the book’s writing at Ephesus sometime between AD 80 and 90.

Like all the Gospels, John tells the story of the life and ministry of Jesus. But where Mark begins with the ministry of John the Baptist and Matthew and Luke begin with the story of Jesus’ birth, John goes back even farther. John begins in a time before time, when Jesus existed eternally with the Father. John shows the reality of the incarnation: the Word became flesh.

In this prologue, the Gospel introduces Jesus’ forerunner, John the Baptist.

John was a close relative of Jesus. He played the role of one sent to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah (see Lk 1:13-17). It is possible that at the time of the Gospel’s writing a group had emerged that focused their devotion toward John rather than Jesus. This might explain the Gospel’s emphasis that John was only a witness, not the promised Messiah. While the Word (that is, Jesus) “was with God” and “was God,” John was merely “sent from God” (1:1, 6). “All things came into being” through Jesus, but John was a mere man (1:3, 6). Jesus eternally existed with God, but John appeared at a specific point in time (1:7). Jesus was the light, but John was a witness to the light, that all might believe in Jesus (1:8).

John’s Denials

The prologue agrees with John’s testimony about himself. John never calls himself anything more than a witness to a greater truth. We know from the other Gospels that John began his ministry by preaching and baptizing in the area around the Jordan (Lk 3:1-17; Mk 1:1-8; Mt 3:1-12). Under the Roman occupation of first-century Judea, messianic expectations reached a fever pitch. Some looked for a military conqueror who would throw out the Romans, and some looked for one who would come and purify the Jewish faith, but they all expected someone. When John burst on the scene, he

drew large crowds and much speculation.

Little wonder, then, that the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem sent a group to find out exactly who this man was (1:19). John “confessed and did not deny” (1:20). This vocabulary is often used of believers who hold fast to their faith under pressure. Here, however, John makes a “negative” confession: he is *not* the Messiah.

John’s interrogators ask him several questions: Are you the Messiah? Are you Elijah? Are you the Prophet? John denies them all. The Messiah was the expected deliverer and savior from the line of David, a promise ultimately fulfilled in Jesus. Elijah and “the prophet” were both figures expected to return before the end of time.

Elijah’s ministry is recorded in 1–2 Kings. Elijah did not die, but was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kgs 2:11). Malachi 4:5 prophesied that Elijah would return “before the great and terrible day of the LORD” Interpreters had different expectations of exactly what Elijah was supposed to do. Some thought he would settle rabbinic disputes. Others thought he would perform miracles and restore all things. Still others expected he would anoint the Messiah, thus revealing the Messiah’s identity both to the Messiah himself and to all Israel. Perhaps this last expectation prompted John’s denial, or perhaps John meant that he was not Elijah returned from the dead. Elsewhere in the Gospels John is revealed as the fulfillment of an Elijah-type figure in his preparatory role for the coming of the Messiah (Lk 1:17; Mt 11:13-14).

John also denied that he was the “Prophet.” The Prophet was an expected “prophet like Moses,” the great leader of the exodus and giver of the Jewish law. In Deuteronomy, Moses told the people that God would raise up a “prophet like me” from among them and that they were to listen to him (Deut 18:15-19). Jews expected “the Prophet” to come at the end

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Introduction: John demonstrated by his words and actions that he understood his role was to be a witness to Jesus. What do my words and actions say about Jesus?

- I. One Who Was Sent
 - A. God sent John to testify about Jesus. (1:6-8)
 - B. John preached and baptized so that all might believe in Jesus. (1:7)
- II. Who He Was and Who He Was Not
 - A. John denied that he was anyone worthy of attention. He was not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet. (1:19-21)
 - B. John saw his role only as a herald or messenger. He called people to get ready for the Messiah’s coming. (1:22-23)
- III. One Who Is Greater
 - A. John baptized with water as a symbol of repentance, but Jesus would baptize with the Spirit. (1:25-26, 33)
 - B. John saw himself as less than the lowest slave compared to Jesus. Jesus was the one worthy of worship and devotion. (1:27)

of time. John emphatically denied that he was this Prophet.

John’s Confession

The investigators demanded to know what John claimed about himself. He responded by quoting Isaiah 40:3. Isaiah, like several other Old Testament prophets, points to a future day when there will be a second exodus: a day when God will once again gather and restore a repentant Israel. The “crying voice” is an image of a herald running before the royal chariot, calling out to prepare the way for the king’s coming. This is how John sees

himself. He is merely a messenger or herald calling the people to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

Not satisfied with his answer, John's inquisitors asked by what authority John baptized people (1:24). Early Judaism had several forms of ritual washing, but the most common was done when Gentiles converted to Judaism. The idea of baptizing *Jews* as a symbol of repentance would likely have made the authorities uncomfortable.

John's answer was basically this: I baptize with water, but One greater than me is coming. John testified that the Messiah was already present, though not yet revealed. John baptized with water, but the Messiah would baptize with the Spirit (Jn 1:33). In comparison to the coming Messiah, John was "not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal" (1:27). Taking care of the master's feet was a menial task reserved for the lowest slave. Jewish disciples were expected to serve their teacher in all things except for removing his shoes. As a prophet and servant of God, John would have been considered worthy of a position of honor—yet John said the coming Messiah was so much greater than him that John was not worthy of serving the Messiah with even the most menial task. Who could be so much greater than John?

A Way to Begin

*Some Christians may get nervous about the word "witness" because it sounds like it might lead to "evangelism"—a word that has earned negative connotations in some people's minds. **But everyone who has experienced the love of Christ has a story to tell.** Begin the lesson by helping participants reflect on their story of faith. What have they learned about who Jesus is? What is their "testimony" about him?*

○ **Reflecting the Light of Another**

Bring a mirror and a flashlight. Shine the light into the mirror and ask, "Which is more important as a source of light—the mirror or the flashlight?" Mirrors only reflect what is in front of them. In a dark room, you don't look for the mirror—you reach for the light! But by reflecting light, mirrors can make a dark room brighter.

As witnesses to Christ, we don't shine our own light—we reflect his. We are not the light; we are the mirrors. In our lesson today, we'll see that John the Baptist understood this well. His goal was always to direct people to Jesus.

○ **Sharing Testimonies**

Early in the week, ask two or three class members to prepare to share their testimonies. After they share during Bible study, discuss what their testimonies reveal about Jesus. All of us who know

Christ have a story to tell about how God has changed our lives.

○ **Good Witnesses**

Ask participants to think of people who are or have been good witnesses. Encourage them to think of both historical figures and people alive today, even people they know personally.

Questions

- What qualities make someone a good witness?
- What do others learn from watching and listening to such a person?

B A Way to Explore Scripture

*Books on communication or the art of conversation often encourage readers to begin a dialogue by asking people to talk about themselves. Most of us are comfortable with the subject of ourselves. That is why asking people about their families, jobs, and hobbies is a good strategy to begin a conversation. **By contrast, witnesses are people who talk about something other than themselves**—something they have observed or an area of knowledge in which they have expertise. As we do the work of evangelism, it's important to share our stories, but we need to keep the focus on the author of our stories—Jesus Christ.*

○ **John's Message**

Divide the class into three groups. Assign each group one of the following passages: John 1:19-28; John 1:29-34; and Luke 3:1-15.

Ask each group to make two lists describing what they learned from the passage: (1) what they learned about Jesus and (2) what they learned about John. Have each group share their findings with the whole class.

Questions

- Whom do we learn more about in these passages? John or Jesus?
- What was John's message about Jesus?
- How did John see himself in comparison to Jesus?
- What made John an effective witness?
- How can we demonstrate those qualities as we share about Jesus?

○ **Not about Me**

In John's time, many people eagerly awaited the Messiah's coming. John drew large crowds and lots of attention, but he resisted the temptation to make things all about him. His message was simple: "I am not important! He is!"

Read John 1:6-8, 9-28. As you read, have participants listen for three things:

- (1) Who John said he was not.
- (2) Who John said he was.
- (3) Who John said Jesus was.

Questions

- Why was John so focused on drawing attention to Jesus rather than to himself?
- Are we ever guilty of focusing on the messenger rather than the message? How so?
- How can we make sure we are pointing people toward Jesus rather than toward ourselves?

○ **Ponder**

Is there a difference between pointing people to Jesus and pointing people to our church or its ministries? Explain.

C A Way to End

One thing that stands out about John's ministry is his repeated emphasis on who he was not. John wanted everyone to understand that his role was only to prepare the people for the Messiah's coming. Our role is similar. Only Jesus can change hearts and lives, but our testimony can help prepare the way.

○ My Story



Distribute copies of the resource page "My Story." Ask participants to compose a brief story of their spiritual pilgrimage using the suggested questions as a guide.

After several minutes, ask two or three volunteers to share their stories with the group. (Or you may want to ask participants to share in groups of two or three.)

Encourage everyone to share their story with another person during the coming week.

○ What Kind of Witness?

Lead the group in a time of silent reflection. Ask participants to consider their various spheres of influence: work, school, home, church, clubs or community organizations.

Have them consider what their lives tell people in each of those spheres about Jesus.

How could they be better witnesses in each of those areas?

Close by singing a song of commitment such as "Take My Life and Let It Be" or "Shine, Jesus, Shine." Encourage participants to sing the song as a prayer to God.

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THE ANNUNCIATION

Luke 1:26-38

Bible Background



Contrasts and Ironies

In many ways the story of Jesus' birth in the Gospel of Luke is a study in irony. Of all the places the Son of the Most High God could have been born, God chose a stable in a little backwater village. Of all the women in the world who could have been the Messiah's mother, God chose a simple peasant girl. Many have proposed various reasons why Mary was chosen. Luke never clearly explains it, but he presents Mary as a model disciple. She was a woman of simple, obedient faith.

The angel Gabriel came to Mary in Nazareth during the sixth month of her cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy. Nazareth was such a small community that Luke most likely mentioned the region of Galilee to aid readers who were unfamiliar with the area. There are striking contrasts with the story of John's birth in 1:5-25. Instead of the splendor and majesty of the Jerusalem temple, a simple village is the setting for the annunciation. Instead of a priest, an unknown peasant girl receives the angel's message. The simple setting and character match the tone of Jesus' ministry. God gives the great gift of salvation in an unassuming package to make it accessible to all.

Betrothal

Luke identifies Mary simply as a "virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David." The Jewish custom of betrothal was more formal than a modern engagement. Marriages took place in two stages: the betrothal and then the wedding proper when the groom "claimed" the bride at her father's house. The betrothal was a formal witnessed agreement after which the woman legally "belonged" to the groom and was called his wife. The actual wedding took place about a year later when the groom came to claim his bride and take her home. The betrothal was a binding contract. It required a divorce to dissolve. Mary's age is not mentioned, but women could be betrothed as young as twelve. She was almost certainly in her teens.

Joseph, Mary's betrothed, was of the house of David. There is some debate as to Mary's lineage. Since Elizabeth was her cousin, it is possible that Mary's family had ties to the priestly line. The majority opinion, however, is that both Mary and Joseph were descendants of David. According to Jewish law, any child born within a man's household would be considered of his line if he claimed responsibility for the child. Jesus would have been considered of the line of David regardless of Mary's heritage.

The Angel Gabriel

The angel Gabriel greeted Mary as one who had found favor with God. In the Old Testament, those who find favor with God are those God has chosen and intends to use in a special way. No wonder Mary was “perplexed” and pondered “what sort of greeting this might be”! What exactly did this angel want with her? The angel responded with a simple command. Literally, Gabriel told her to “stop fearing” because she had found favor with God. Mary is a picture of all who receive God’s undeserved favor. Like all believers, she was a recipient of God’s grace.

Gabriel told Mary that she would conceive and bear a child who would be like no other. The angel commanded her to name him Jesus, meaning “Yahweh saves.” He identified Jesus as “Son of the Most High” and told Mary her son would inherit the throne of David and that his kingdom would not end.

There could be no doubt in Mary’s mind that God had chosen her to give birth to Israel’s long-awaited ruler and redeemer. It is unlikely, however, that she fully grasped the entire scope of Jesus’ ministry. But Gabriel told her enough: Jesus would be the Son of God, Israel’s Redeemer and King.

Mary responded with a simple question: “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” (Lk 1:34). Zechariah asked a similar question and was struck mute because of his lack of faith (1:18-20). Gabriel however, simply answered Mary’s question. Perhaps Luke is suggesting that Mary’s question was not prompted by lack of faith but by a simple desire for clarity.

Gabriel explained that Jesus’ conception would be entirely an act of God. The language he used, “the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (1:35), evokes other biblical pictures of the presence of God. Pentecost (Acts 1:8) is the best-known time when the Holy Spirit “came upon” believers. The idea of “overshadowing” is similar to

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Introduction: When it was time to choose the mother of God’s own Son, God turned to a young woman whose most outstanding characteristic was her willing obedience.

I. Greetings (Lk 1:26-33)

- A. The angel Gabriel visits an ordinary young woman in a small village and gives her an extraordinary message. (1:26-27)
- B. Mary has found favor with God and is assured of God’s presence with her. (1:28-30)
- C. God has chosen Mary to be the mother of Jesus, Son of the Most High God. (1:31-33)

II. How Can this Be? (Lk 1:34-37)

- A. Mary’s question is not an expression of doubt but a request for clarity. (1:34)
- B. Jesus will be conceived through a miracle of the Holy Spirit, marking him as holy.
- C. Jesus will be the Son of God. (1:35)
- D. Nothing is impossible with God. (1:37)

III. As a servant of God, Mary humbly accepts the Lord’s will. (Lk 1:38)

the disciples’ experience on the Mount of Transfiguration (Lk 9:34). It may also reflect the image of God’s glory filling the desert tabernacle (Exod 40:35).

Mary must have had a personal encounter with God. Yet Luke is careful to use only non-sexual language. Luke’s audience would have been familiar with stories from Greek mythology of half-human, half-divine heroes conceived through affairs between gods and mortal women. Jesus’ birth was different. The emphasis is entirely on God and God’s action. As believers would one day be filled with the Spirit on the Day of

Pentecost, Mary would conceive a child through the filling of the Holy Spirit as a sign of God's power and grace.

"Nothing Is Impossible with God"

Mary did not ask for a sign, but God granted her one anyway. Elizabeth's pregnancy was both a confirmation of Gabriel's message and an encouragement to Mary. Both Mary's and Elizabeth's pregnancies were works of God. "For nothing is impossible with God" (1:37).

Mary's response completes Luke's picture of her as a model disciple. Accepting her role as mother of the Messiah was not without personal risk on her part. Her reputation, her relationship with Joseph, and her future security were all at stake. Despite the risks, however, Mary willingly accepted the task before her as "the servant of the Lord" (1:38). Her response implies both submission and obedience. She spoke as one who recognized her master's superior position and was willing to be commanded. Her response is exemplary and serves as a model for all believers who consider themselves servants of the Lord.

A *A Way to Begin*

God delights in using ordinary people to do extraordinary tasks. Moses was a murderer turned shepherd when God chose him to free Israel from slavery.

Gideon was a timid farmer when God chose him to become a mighty warrior.

David was a shepherd boy God chose to become king. The disciples were ordinary laborers and fishermen, but Jesus called them to join him on a mission to change the world. Mary was an ordinary girl, but God chose her to become the mother of the Messiah. What do they all have in common? Radical obedience.

○ A Life that Demands Explanation

In July 2010, a terrorist bombing in Uganda killed seventy-four people. One of those killed was Nate Henn, an American aid worker who worked among the child soldiers of Uganda. His eulogy read, in part,

Nate lived a life that demanded explanation. He sacrificed his comfort to live in the humble service of God and of a better world, and his is a life to be emulated. ("In loving memory")

Questions

- What does it mean to lead "a life that demands explanation"?
- From what we know of Mary, did she lead that kind of life?

- What would have to change for you lead a life that demands explanation?

○ Excuses



Many people in the Bible first offered excuses when God asked for their obedience. Distribute copies of the resource page "Excuses." Have participants match the biblical characters with the excuses they offered. Discuss some of the excuses people offer today to keep from serving God.

Question

- What keeps us from saying yes to God?

B A Way to Explore Scripture

If you could be remembered for only one thing, what would it be? A special achievement? Your family? Your faith? We don't know much about Mary. Luke gives almost no information about her family or childhood. When Mary first enters the story, Luke emphasizes her willingness to obey God. Unlike many people in the Bible who offered God excuses, Mary simply accepted the task God set before her. In the face of what must have been an overwhelming task, Mary regarded herself only as the servant of the Lord.

○ **Outstanding Faith**

We don't know how old Mary was when Gabriel appeared to her, but since Jewish girls could be betrothed as early as the age of twelve, it's likely that she was in her teens. Luke doesn't tell us much about Mary. Her willing obedience to God stands out the most.

Divide the class into two groups. Ask both groups to read Luke 1:26-38. The first group is to list everything they learn about Mary. The second group is to list everything they learn about God. After a suitable time, bring both groups together to share their findings. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- Who is the main character in this story?
- What seems to be more important—who Mary is or the fact that God has chosen her?
- What does Mary's response tell us about her faith in God?
- What do our responses to God say about our faith?

○ **Risks and Blessings**

Invite participants to respond to the observation, "What we risk reveals what we value." How has this been true in their lives or in the lives of people they know?

Read Luke 1:26-38. In being the mother of the Messiah, Mary faced certain risks. Her willingness to accept those risks also revealed that she valued something greater: the opportunity to be used by God. As Jesus' mother, she would experience the blessing of serving God in a unique and personal way. She also faced certain risks that accompanied her obedience. The assurance of God's presence and power with her made her willing to embrace the risks for the chance of something more valuable.

Questions

- What were some of the risks Mary faced by saying yes to God?
- What might have been some of the blessings of her obedience?
- What do you think helped Mary say yes in spite of the risks?
- What risks of obeying God do people face today?
- What can help us be obedient despite the risk?

C A Way to End

Through her obedience, Mary got to experience God's presence and power. God asked for her service but also promised to be with her. God's presence was the basis for Mary's willingness to obey. **We can also be assured of God's presence and power when we obey.** We can't know what all the consequences would have been if Mary had said no, but we do know that she would have missed out on the incredible privilege of raising God's Son. What is God asking us to do today? What holds us back from obedience? What might we miss if we refuse to obey?

○ A Time of Prayer

Divide the class into groups of three or four. In these small groups, invite participants to share one area in which God might be calling them to serve in a special way. Ask the groups to pray for one another for encouragement and willingness to obey.

○ A Time of Reflection

Ask the class to reflect quietly on the following questions.

Questions

- What is God asking me to do today?
- What are some of the risks of my obedience?
- What blessings could I miss if I choose not to obey?

Close in prayer, thanking God for choosing us to be part of God's story of salvation. Ask for grace to remember God's promised presence and power when we are asked to obey.

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5

THE
NATIVITY*Luke 2:1-20***Bible Background****The Powers that Be**

Mary's song of praise includes the line, "[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly" (Lk 1:52). This theme runs throughout the narratives of Jesus' birth. In bringing Jesus into the world, God established a new order in which humility is more important than power and the faithful poor have more status than the rich and proud. This theme is especially apparent in today's text.

Luke begins by listing those who were in power at the time of Jesus' birth. The Roman Empire was under the rule of Caesar Augustus. Contemporary inscriptions celebrated Augustus as "son of a god" and "divine savior." This first emperor of Rome was credited with inaugurating the *Pax Romana*, an age of world peace guaranteed by the power of the Roman military. Luke also mentions Quirinius, "governor of Syria." Quirinius's name would have reminded Luke's first readers of Rome's harsh colonial occupation.

Caesar demonstrates his power by ordering that "all the world" be counted in a census. Censuses were fairly common in the Roman world for the purposes of taxation and registration for military service. To Luke's first readers, the census would have been a reminder of Rome's

unwelcome ability to intrude into the lives of the Jewish people.

No Room in the Inn

Luke quickly changes focus from the scope of the empire to one particular family: Mary and Joseph. God used Caesar's census as a tool to get Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem in fulfillment of prophecy (see Mic 5:2). Luke describes Joseph's journey as going "up...to Judea, to the city of David" (Lk 2:4). Normally, describing a journey "up to the city of David" would have referred to a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the location of the temple and the center of Jewish religious and political power. Luke turns his readers' expectations upside down, however, by identifying Joseph and Mary's destination not as Jerusalem but as the tiny village of Bethlehem. The unexpected reversal is one more indication that Jesus' birth would forever change the old establishments of power.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Since there was no room for them in the "inn," Mary wrapped the newborn baby in strips of cloth and laid him in a feeding trough.

Opinions differ as to the true nature of this "inn." We can be sure, however, that it was not an overcrowded hotel with a gruff innkeeper. Bethlehem was not located on a major highway and probably welcomed too few travelers to support a true commercial inn. One alternative is that Joseph and Mary's "inn" was a public

pavilion set up as a shelter for travelers, in which Mary and Joseph slept among the animals because of overcrowding. The “inn” could also refer to a guest room in the home of family or friends. Often families kept their livestock under their roof on a level below the common room where family slept. Perhaps Joseph intended to stay with relatives in his hometown, but found the common room full of other guests and was forced to take refuge on the lower level with the animals.

A Celebrated Birth

In the Roman world, the birth of a ruler was often celebrated with a proclamation of the benefits of his birth. Jesus’ birth was no exception. His birth was not announced to Caesar in Rome or to the High Priest in Jerusalem, but to a group of lowly shepherds out on the hills surrounding Bethlehem. The shepherds represent humble people who gladly receive the good news. They also serve as a sign that God’s presence is now available to all people. God’s presence was supposed to dwell in the Jerusalem temple—not in the middle of a darkened field! That this site was chosen for a revelation of God’s glory is another indication of new access to a relationship with God.

Naturally, the shepherds were terrified. But the angels told them to trade their fear for joy. Here is another hint that Jesus’ mission is for “all people.” The angels identified Jesus with three titles: Savior, Messiah, and Lord. Jesus is Savior, one who delivers and rescues in both a physical and spiritual sense. He is Messiah, or Christ, the promised descendant of David who would restore Israel. And he is Lord. He wields absolute sovereignty and divine authority. Caesar was hailed as divine savior and bringer of peace, but Jesus brings about true peace by reconciling God and humanity. Jesus brings peace to those whom God favors—all who draw near to God through Jesus’ death and resurrection.

The shepherds were told they would find this newborn king wrapped in strips

of cloth and lying in a manger. Acting on faith, the shepherds went into Bethlehem to see this thing “which the Lord has made known to us” (Lk 2:15). They went “with haste” and found the baby just as they were told. These humble shepherds then became the first evangelists. They went away praising God and telling everyone what they had seen and heard.

Responding to Christmas

Luke records three different responses to these events. First, the crowds who hear

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Introduction: In the birth of Jesus, God announced good news for all people—even those often thought insignificant .

- I. Setting the Stage (Lk 2:1-7)
 - A. Caesar exercises his power over the world by ordering a census. (2:1-2)
 - B. God uses Caesar as a tool to get Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem in fulfillment of prophecy. (2:3-7)
- II. Announcement (Lk 2:8-16)
 - A. Angels declare the good news of Jesus’ birth to people of low status—shepherds. (2:8-9)
 - B. In contrast to Caesar, this baby in a manger is proclaimed Savior, Messiah, Lord, and bringer of peace. (2:10-14)
 - C. The shepherds hurry to search for the baby the angels have proclaimed. (2:15-16)
- III. Response (Lk 2:18-20)
 - A. The crowds are amazed but do not seem to embrace the message. (2:18)
 - B. Mary ponders all these events in a search for deeper meaning. (2:19)
 - C. The shepherds tell the good news of what they have seen and heard and return to their sheep, “glorifying and praising God.” (2:17, 20)

the shepherds' story were "amazed." "Amazement" indicates surprise, but not necessarily faith or understanding.

Second, Mary "treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." Mary may not have understood in these early days all that Jesus' ministry would mean, but she responded thoughtfully to the unfolding events, seeking to understand and reflect on the deeper meaning.

Finally, the shepherds responded in two ways. They shared the story of what God had told them and what they had seen, and they worshiped God for all they heard and saw.

The story of Jesus' birth reveals important truths about Jesus' mission. Jesus came that God might be glorified and that "all people" might experience the good news of peace with God. His mission was not restricted to the rich and powerful or to the religious elite. Jesus gave all people access to a relationship with God. He inaugurated a new kingdom not of flesh and blood but of spirit. The rulers of this new kingdom are not the powerful and proud, but the humble and lowly—those willing to bow their knee to a baby lying in a manger.

A Way to Begin

The nativity story is a study in contrasts: Caesar in his palace versus Jesus in a stable, an announcement of a king's birth brought by angels to lowly shepherds. God could have chosen any number of ways to bring Jesus into the world, but God chose to use simple, ordinary, humble people. Instead of the mighty emperor and the power of Roman military might, God chose a quiet village and an ordinary girl. As we study this passage, consider what it teaches us about how God views power and humility.

○ Pictures of Power

Before class, search magazines, articles, or the Internet for pictures of people who have power or influence. Display the pictures for the class and ask for their comments about the kinds of power or influence these people have.

Discuss how these types of power compare to the power Jesus demonstrated in his life and ministry.

Questions

- What does the nativity story tell us about God's power?
- What does it say about how we should view power and humility?

○ Power versus Humility

Discuss the qualities that make someone "powerful." Consider traditional types of power such as holding a political office or leading a large corporation. Think as well of people like actors, musicians, or athletes who have the power to influence opinions because of their celebrity status or their artistic abilities.

Questions

- What qualities make people willing to follow someone with "power" (however we define it)?
- Can a powerful person also be humble? Why or why not?

In Jesus' life and ministry we find a picture of a different kind of power—a power gained through humility and sacrifice. The nativity story gives us a glimpse of the kind of power God values and uses.

B A Way to Explore Scripture

The world often fails to appreciate that power can be demonstrated through humility and sacrifice. Those who willingly take on the role of servant often have a far greater influence than those who exert the authority of a dictatorial leader.

One day Jesus will return as exalted king, but in the incarnation Jesus came as a servant of all. The nativity story gives us a portrait of the humility and power of servanthood that Jesus exercised in his earthly ministry.

○ Divine Caesar?



Distribute copies of the resource page “Divine Caesar?” Discuss how the Roman world viewed Caesar

and the kinds of power he had. Point out the irony that as Caesar reigned in Rome, a far greater king was born in the little town of Bethlehem.

Read Luke 2:1-20. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- What does the nativity story tell us about the kind of ministry Jesus would have?
- How do the titles the angels use for Jesus compare with the titles Caesar held?
- What do these titles say about the kind of power Jesus would wield?
- What does it mean that Jesus came for “all people”?
- How do we see this “good news for all people” reflected in the nativity story?

○ The Birth of a King

Read Luke 2:1-20. The nativity story is not what most people would expect for the birth of a king. God could have sent Jesus into the world any number of ways, but God chose for Jesus to be born in a seemingly insignificant place, surrounded by seemingly insignificant people.

Questions

- If you were to plan a setting appropriate for the birth of a king, what would you choose?
- How would it look similar or different to the setting for the nativity story?
- Consider how humbling it must have been for Jesus to confine himself to the small package of a human infant. What does that say about Jesus’ willingness to sacrifice for us?
- How should we follow his example of humility?

Discuss the contrasts between the powerful people mentioned in Luke 2:1-2 and the people who play important roles in the rest of the story.

Questions

- Why might God have chosen for Jesus to be born as he was?
- What does Jesus’ birth tell us about what is important to God?

C A Way to End

The world often values power won through wealth, celebrity, or authority. The nativity story reflects a different kind of power: a power quietly earned through humble service and willingness to sacrifice. We come to God not through the force of our own efforts, but by humbly admitting that we are powerless and must rely on Christ's power to save us. In the kingdom of God, humility always precedes glory.

○ A Time of Reflection

Ask your group to consider the different areas in which they have power or influence. Ask the following questions for silent reflection.

Questions

- How am I using my power?
- How could I reflect Christ in my spheres of influence by using the power of humility and service?

Allow a few moments for reflection and then close in prayer.

○ A Time of Response

Remind your group of the different responses we see to the nativity story: the crowd's amazement, Mary's thoughtful pondering, and the shepherds' worship and witness.

Challenge participants to find a few moments alone this week to read and reflect on the Christmas story. Ask them to worship God by singing to God or writing a letter of praise. Challenge them to share with one person this week what the good news of Jesus' birth means to them.

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