**Group Session**

Small Group Study

**Overview**

*Following Nehemiah and the last writings in the Old Testament, approximately four hundred years have passed. Old Testament prophets like Isaiah, Zechariah, Micah, and Jeremiah recorded a variety of revelations about the coming Messiah. Like Moses, the Messiah would come to free Israel from her oppressors. Despite decades of being warned to turn from their rebellious ways, the Israelites continued to pursue their own ways rather than God’s way. So, God took the next step. He sent the Messiah as a newborn baby whose goal was to establish a spiritual kingdom. Jesus, the Savior of the Jewish people (and indeed the world), arrived on the scene in an unexpected way.*

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**Engage**

No other event in history has marked time like the birth of Jesus. Even the years count forward and backward from this defining moment. The Old Testament shared prophecies of the soon-coming Savior, so many people would have been expecting His arrival. Most expected a human king with a physical kingdom. But God’s ways are often unexpected, and the birth of Jesus was no different. The same thing can happen to us. Our expectations can get in the way of reality.

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| **QUESTION**Describe a time when you were really looking forward to something big (a special gift, dream vacation, new job, etc.) and it didn’t happen the way you had imagined. What was your first reaction? Was the result better or worse in the long run? |

**Watch**

As we watch this video, consider this question:

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| **QUESTION**What is your favorite part of Christmas? |



**Consider**

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| *Ask any athlete if they’d rather play an away game or a home game, and they’ll choose a home game every time. As a player, you get a morale boost when you hear the home crowd cheer, chant your name, and celebrate your victories. Even when your lungs are screaming and your muscles are spent, you can summon the stamina to keep going because the crowd is with you, for you, cheering you on.* *The power of having someone on your side isn’t limited to athletics. From moments of greatest adversity to simply plodding through the mundane, nothing is better than knowing you’ve got someone who’s with you, on your side, in your corner—and nothing worse than feeling like you’re on your own.* *Before the birth of Jesus, the Israelites found themselves in that isolated position to the extreme. Rome had invaded, conquered, and occupied the land of Israel, and the king they installed was a violent, evil man named Herod. The Jewish leaders weren’t much better either. They fought and argued over the law and created a complex set of rules the people couldn’t follow.* *To make matters worse, wars and the threat of more conflict had created financial disaster for many in Judah. Food and money were difficult for some to obtain, and people didn’t have an abundance of ways to provide for themselves. Politically, spiritually, and practically, God’s people needed a miracle—a deliverer.*  |
| **QUESTION**The religious leaders’ extensive knowledge and expectations prevented them from recognizing Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. How can our own knowledge and expectations sometimes get in the way of seeing how God is with us? |

**What the Bible Says**

Prophets like Isaiah had spoken of the day when the Messiah would arrive and liberate God’s people. For more than seven hundred years, the people prayed and waited. They had a promise, but no fulfillment. They had a word from God, but no action from God. Then, one night—a holy, special, wonderful night we now celebrate as Christmas—the miracle came in a way no one expected. In an instant, the Israelites had the Savior they’d been waiting for. God’s Son was born not in a palace to a wealthy family of great power and influence, but to a set of humble, working-class parents. At long last, God had come to live among His people—to be one of us and to be with us.

**Blessed among Women**

Read Luke 1:28–35, 38.

No doubt, Mary was shocked by both the angel and his message. The angel’s greeting, however, offered peace and reassurance: “The Lord is with you.” Certainly, these words had particular meaning for Mary as the woman who would carry and give birth to God incarnate, but their intent in that moment applies to us as well.

Because of Jesus, we have the peace and reassurance that God is *with us.* Mary’s response to the news is powerful. She was fully cognizant of the risk she took as a single, young woman in a culture that shamed, ostracized, and even threatened to put to death women who became pregnant outside of marriage. Yet Mary told the angel: “I am the Lord’s servant. May everything you have said about me come true.”

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| **QUESTION**God often desires to use us in ways that are outside of our imagination. Describe a time when you felt Him prompt you to do or say something that was completely out of your comfort zone. Did you follow through? What happened? |

**Our Savior Is Born**

Read Matthew 1:19–24; Luke 2:1–7.

Joseph obeyed God and took Mary as his wife. Mary was willing to be used by God; Joseph was obedient. As a result, they were entrusted with raising the most significant child in history: Immanuel, which means God with us.

That’s the central message of the birth of Jesus. We are not alone. God is with us. Yes, Jesus is “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” as Isaiah prophesied He would be (Isaiah 9:6). Those names are meaningful because He is all of them to each of us individually. He is *your* Wonderful Counselor, *your* Mighty God, *your* Everlasting Father, *your* Prince of Peace.

So why would Mary and Joseph have anything to fear? The angel’s first instructions to Joseph were, “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” In fact, the angel had the same instruction for Mary: “Don’t be afraid.” So we can infer that fear was an obstacle God knew might prevent them from obedience.

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| **QUESTION**Why do you think fear is such a common obstacle to obeying God? |

**Good News for All People**

Read Luke 2:8–18.

The angels’ appearance to the shepherds is a key part of the story. The first people to hear the good news of Jesus’ birth were not the religious or political leaders of the day, nor were they the wealthy or prestigious members of society. Instead, the miracle was announced to some of the lowest people in Jewish society—the shepherds. What’s more, the angels weren’t just making a birth announcement, they were announcing important theology. They proclaimed the good news was for “all people.” This is one of the first moments we find out Jesus is for *everyone*—not just the Jews. He is Immanuel, God with *all of* us.

Of all Jesus’ habits and traits that caught the Jews off guard (and there were many), the fact that He came for everyone was perhaps the most shocking. The Jews weren’t prepared to share their Savior with people who weren’t like them, yet that is precisely what He asked them—and all of us—to do.

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| **QUESTION**Do you feel that the Church does a good job of modeling the truth that Jesus is for everyone? Explain. |

**Simeon’s Prophecy**

Read Luke 2:25–32.

One of the most tender moments of the Christmas story is a part that usually isn’t told. When Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple for the first time, an old man named Simeon was there. God had promised Simeon that he would not die until he had seen the Christ. The people of Israel looked forward to their Savior’s birth for centuries, but because He arrived in a way few anticipated, the religious scholars and experts of the day—the people most qualified to recognize Him—didn’t.

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| **QUESTION**What traits in Luke’s description of Simeon indicate he might readily spot his Savior? |

**Visitors from Afar**

Read Matthew 2:1–2, 9–11.

Travel during the time of Jesus was remarkably difficult. We think it’s inconvenient when we have a lengthy layover or when we have to stop for gas, but imagine having to stop because your method of transportation needed to eat or was simply tired of walking!

That the Magi, also known as Wise Men, set out on the journey to begin with indicates how special Jesus’ arrival was. Furthermore, the Bible says the Wise Men were “filled with joy” at the very sight of the star marking where to find Him. How could the Wise Men be so happy at the end of a tough journey? Joy is different from happiness. It comes from knowing we are not alone, that even in difficult circumstances—or, *especially* in difficult circumstances—God is with us.

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| **QUESTION**Just as He placed the star in the sky for the Wise Men to follow, God persistently points people in the direction of His Son. What was your “star”? What led you to discover Jesus as your Savior? Maybe your journey required a series of stars. Share about it with your group. |

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| **QUESTION**Who are some of the most joyful people you personally know? Avoid talking about celebrities, but focus instead on people whose lives you see up close. What evidence shows their joy comes from the Lord? |

**Reflect**

When we read the account of Jesus’ birth, we have the benefit of knowing how His story ends. From our view, all the pieces fit together perfectly, and the end result is a baby who grows up to save the world. *What a story!* But Mary and Joseph didn’t have that vantage point. They took God at His word and trusted that His character would remain constant.

Throughout the Old Testament, God had consistently moved toward His people in pursuit of authentic relationship. Not content to be the God *of* Israel, Father God sent God the Son to earth and gave Him the name *Immanuel*, God *with* us—*all* of us.

**Listen to God**

The goal of ***Listen*** is not only to gain an understanding of God’s Word, but also to pause and listen to what God our Creator might want to say to us about what we have read and shared. Be silent for a few moments and reflect on the following questions. Choose the one that most resonates with what God is saying to you now. Then complete the others during Day 1 of your devotion time this week.

**Personal Reflection Questions**

*Record your answers to the following questions in the space provided or in your personal journal.*

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| **QUESTION**How does the understanding that God is with you help you to personally experience joy even when times aren’t necessarily happy? |

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| **QUESTION**In Mary’s time, a great deal of shame was placed not only upon the unwed mother, but also upon the child born to her. How does God’s willingness to enter the world in such a low position affect your view of His love for you? |

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| **QUESTION**Earlier, we evaluated how well the Church demonstrates to the world that Jesus is for everyone. Now, turn the lens on yourself. How do you make a point to demonstrate this truth in your daily life? |

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| **QUESTION**Simeon was a very old man by the time he met Jesus and saw God’s promise fulfilled. What promises from God are you waiting on? Is there anything you believe He’s spoken to you—either through His Word or impressed on your heart—that hasn’t yet been fulfilled? List those promises below, then prayerfully recommit your confidence in the Lord to be faithful to His Word. |

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| **QUESTION**Brainstorm a list of ways you can show the people around you that Jesus is for them. Then, choose two of those ideas and put them into action this week. Report back to your group how it went. |

**Prayer Requests**

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| Note any requests from the group and remember to pray for them during the week. |

Before next time, continue to listen with the personal devotions.

**Did You Know?**

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| *While tradition has Joseph and Mary being turned away by an innkeeper, the word translated as “inn” (*kataluma*) was really an upper living area or guest room in someone’s home. So the Bible really says there was no room for them in the guest room or upper living area.**From history and archaeology, we know that Jesus was not born in a barn. Some may assume He was because Mary placed Him in a manger, and they were surrounded by animals. But most likely they were in a cave home (*kataluma*), which was common in Bethlehem. This cave home would have had space reserved for animals near the front. The upper living area would have provided space to sleep, but not enough room to allow Mary to be surrounded by helpers while giving birth.**So Jesus was born into a loving family, surrounded by helpers in a cave home. What a wonderfully common occurrence! However, we know there was nothing common about the birth of this baby.* |