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DISCOVERING JESUS

An Introduction to the Savior

LESSON 1 BIBLE STUDY

*Luke's Gospel:
"The God Who Surprises Us"*

This Bible Study Series Provided By:

Hope for Life

A Ministry of Herald of Truth

PART 1 HEART TUNING

In a moment, we will be asking you to read some selections from Luke's Gospel. That passage (Luke 1-3) tells the story of the birth of Jesus Christ. If you have grown up in a culture that celebrates Christmas, you will have heard parts of this story many times. But your very familiarity with the story presents a danger: it may lead you to overlook the story's very surprising features. If you think there's nothing new here for you, you may actually miss the surprise and the wonder of it all.

Our beginning advice is simple. *Watch closely!* This story is full of interesting details. It is far more interesting than the Christmas pageants you may have seen over the years. Please note: Luke's text tells *two* birth stories, not just one. One point to ponder: Why *two* stories of unexpected births, rather than just one? What do they have to do with each other? Stay alert to the smallest of details. If you are not "on your toes," you may miss a great deal.

Jesus Comes, Ready or Not

In the story you will meet two kinds of people - those who are on their toes and those who are not. Being "on your toes," living on tiptoe, means having a certain attitude of expectancy, being on the lookout for what is about to happen. The people who are ready have certain positive qualities. First, they are hungry for spiritual nourishment. Second, they are open-minded. Their hearts were "open to the Holy Spirit," Luke says. Third, these people are humble, ordinary folks. None is distracted by possessions or power. One is a poor teenage girl; another is an eighty-four-year-old widow; then there are the shepherds who worked the "graveyard shift." In Luke's Gospel, those most ready to welcome the Son of God were the "marginal" people, the folks who lived at the bottom of the social scale. They knew there had to be something better out there for them, and so they were looking for it. They were "seekers" after God, pilgrims on a journey towards God. God honored them with a visit.

Your Reception Index

As you read, consider whether you would have noticed and responded to the story of God's coming into the world if you had been

As a symbol of cleansing and making a fresh start, John would take his followers to the river and baptize them. This message and practice has continued uninterrupted for 2,000 years. It is part of the core message of Christianity to this very day. Luke writes, beginning in chapter 3:3:

He [John] went into the whole country round about the Jordan proclaiming baptism as a mark of a complete change of heart and of the forgiveness of sins...So John used to say to the crowds who came out to be baptized by him..."See that you do something to show that your hearts are really changed!" - *Phillips Translation*

In our second lesson, we will look more fully at the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, as they are revealed in the Gospel According to Matthew.

Use This Space for Study Notes:

like David, and they knew this king would deliver them from bondage. Since the country of the Jews (commonly called Palestine or Israel) was under the complete control of the Romans, it stood to reason that the Messiah would deliver them from Roman rule - and so the popular opinion was that the Messiah would be a great military leader, a general who would violently overthrow the Romans.

When a king is born (or a man destined to become a king), you expect him to come in “royal” fashion - with regal ceremonies, rich robes, precious jewels, and lots of pomp and circumstance. And of course, you expect the birth to occur in a palace in a great city. When Jesus comes into the world, however, he is born to a young peasant girl (very likely a teenager). And the child’s mother can not even locate a decent house for the birth in Bethlehem. And so this Messiah is born in an animal stall, where hardly anyone noticed - certainly not Caesar Augustus and his attendants. This unexpected, little-noticed entry is typical of God’s technique for doing things in his own, original way.

The manner of Jesus’ entry into the world should put us on guard when it comes to looking for God’s activities in our world. God reveals his presence in unexpected ways. Over and over in the gospels, God uses *little* things (like bread and wine, fig trees, mustard seeds, and donkeys) and *little* people (like children, common laborers, and even prostitutes) to perform mighty deeds and reveal divine truths. We must watch out. Spiritual realities lurk where you least expect them.

John the Baptist is a good example of God’s surprising way of revealing divine truth. Who is John the Baptist? If we go back to the Old Testament (the Hebrew Scriptures), and look at the last verses in the Old Testament (Malachi 3:1; 4:5-6), we learn that the Old Testament ended with a prophetic promise. Malachi promised that an Elijah-like prophet would come as the forerunner before the Messiah. John is born to complete this five-hundred-year-old promise. John comes “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17). John is “the Elijah to come” according to Matthew’s Gospel (Matthew 11:10-14; 17:12-13).

Jesus and John were cousins, but their similarity is greater than family heritage. Both births come through the miraculous intervention by God and are announced by an angel. Both their deaths are violent and unjust. Furthermore, Jesus and John preached a very similar message - that people must change their ways, “repent” and turn to God.

there. Do you open your eyes to spiritual realities, or are you desensitized or distracted? Here’s a test to prepare you for your reading. (You can answer these questions just for yourself.)

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| 1. Am I a receptive listener? | YES | NO |
| 2. Can I read the story of Jesus with an open mind and a sincere heart? | YES | NO |
| 3. Can I freely admit that I still have a lot to learn? | YES | NO |
| 4. Am I open to new understandings about Jesus? | YES | NO |
| 5. Am I willing to change my heart and mind about something when I have been proven wrong? | YES | NO |

If you have said “yes” to any of the questions above, then you are primed for a reading of the gospel story. If you answered “no” to one or more of these questions, you may want to spend some time meditating on your need to grow. Consider these verses:

“For this is what the high and lofty One says - he who lives forever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to receive the heart of the contrite...’”

- Isaiah 57:15

“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.”

- 1 Peter 5:5-6

Consider also praying for humility and openness to truth. Here is one possible prayer:

Heavenly Master,

Thank you for the privilege of reading the story of Jesus Christ. As I read from Luke’s Gospel, please open my heart to the Holy Spirit, grant me the full readiness to submit to your will. Give me a humble and contrite heart. Like Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, and Anna, make me sensitive to your presence and your power in my life. Holy Lord, help me to hear, really hear, the message you have for me. Give me new understanding about Jesus and allow me to experience a growing relationship with your Son Jesus. Through him I pray, Amen.

PART 2

LISTENING TO THE GOSPEL

Read the following passage over closely, slowly, thoughtfully. As you read, try to picture each scene in your mind. Think about each of the major characters - Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, and so forth. Imagine what they saw and heard. And note their many different *feelings* - agitation, awe, fear, wonder, joy, terror, and amazement. Try to imagine what it would be like to meet an angel or to hear thousands of angels singing in the night sky, for example. With these emotions in mind, enter into the hearts of the characters and try to understand their thoughts and actions.

Additionally, as you read ask yourself *how you would have reacted* to these dramatic events if you had lived in Palestine in that time. Would you have been looking with expectation for God's intervention in history, or would you have been elsewhere? (How can you answer this question fairly? Just look inwardly at where you are *today*. The direction of your life today is a clue to where you would have been in first-century Palestine.)

Finally, as you read, prepare to be surprised at the way God works in his world. Even the people who look for him with the greatest anticipation are surprised at the unexpected ways in which God reveals himself and carries out his plans.

TEXT:

Luke 1:5-3:20 (New International Version)

Luke 1:5 In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. 6 Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. 7 But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

living open, expectant lives before God. They are looking for a more godly world, a more significant life, and a more hopeful future. All of them are humble in their attitudes about life. And they live simple lives. They are willing to drop their own personal ideas and preferences when God, or his angelic messenger Gabriel, comes with surprising news or directions. Mary's humble words to the angel illustrate the spiritual quality that made her such a fitting mother for Jesus: "I belong to the Lord, body and soul. Let it happen as you say." *Phillips Translation*

Is this a statement you can make sincerely to God? A central theme of the Bible is that we belong to God, not to ourselves. (See 1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Further, Mary displays a remarkable willingness to bend her will to the will of God: "Let it happen as you say." Mary's spirit of submission and obedience is the hallmark of faithful believers in God.

The people who seem to be most open to Jesus throughout Luke's Gospel have traits much like Mary's. With few exceptions, the people who respond favorably to God's message are "little people." The poor, the lame, the maimed, the blind seem to be consistently open to Jesus (Luke 14:13, 21). By contrast, the "big people" of Luke's world - the aristocrats, the religious leaders, and the rulers (the economic, social, and religious elite) - usually ignore the Messiah's claims.

When the Son of God enters the domain of the VIPs, he is often "invisible" to them. When they do finally notice Jesus or John the Baptist, they resist these teachers because their message disturbs and threatens their comfortable, self-satisfied lives. Already, at the end of the reading in today's lesson (Luke 3:18-20), Herod is plotting against John the Baptist. Soon, the wrath against John will be turned against Jesus himself.

The God of Surprises

Even the most receptive people in Luke's story have problems when God comes into their lives. God's way of doing things is so topsy turvy, so deeply surprising, that even the most faithful struggle to understand God's ways. For centuries the Jews had been looking for the Messiah, God's special agent, a descendant of the great Jewish king David (who had ruled about 1,000 years before the coming of Jesus Christ). The Jewish people knew their Messiah would be a great king

The stories of the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus are the most detailed in the New Testament. Luke, the author, was a physician, a man who had been trained to distinguish between fable and fact. Luke wrote his account of Jesus' life for his friend Theophilus (whose name means "Friend of God") in order to give him reliable information about what happened. Luke was not writing a "once-upon-a-time" legend, but an historical event for which there were hundreds of eye witnesses. Note how Luke ties the events to specific locations (Nazareth, Bethlehem, Jerusalem) and to specific, verifiable historical events (such as the reign of Caesar Augustus). Luke wants his readers to understand that these events *really happened* during a specific historical time in Palestine.

Destined to Rise or Fall

Luke's goal is to "set the record straight" about Jesus - to record the great facts about this most amazing teacher and prophet called Jesus Christ. But the writer also wants to lead his readers to a *moment of decision* about their own lives. Once you learn about Jesus, something remarkable happens. Luke wrote two books in the New Testament - "The Gospel of Luke" and a sequel called "Acts of the Apostles." In both books, when people meet Jesus or hear powerful preaching about him - either they respond as believers or they reject him. They hardly ever remain neutral.

Jesus' life and words make demands of us in the same way. They make a claim on us that must be answered. Either he is a true prophet and savior, or he is not. Yes or no. Either we follow him or we do not. Neutrality about Jesus is not logically possible. Simeon, a wise man who met Jesus at the temple when the baby was only eight days old, remarked: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel..." (Luke 2:34). We can say that Simeon's words are also true for us too. When we learn about Jesus, we fall before him in humility and rise in faith. Or, in our pride, we can refuse to humble ourselves, ensuring our own ultimate fall.

Big People, Little People

Luke's story concerns ordinary human beings and how they respond to God's message and messengers. How do they respond? Most of them - Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, the shepherds, and Simeon, for example - respond with awe and amazement. These people are

11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 13 But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. 16 Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous - to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

18 Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

19 The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. 20 And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."

21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. 22 When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

23 When his time of service was completed, he returned home. 24 After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. 25 "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown this favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

26 In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be

afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. 31 You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.

34 “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

35 The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. 37 For nothing is impossible with God.”

38 “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

39 At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, 40 where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! 43 But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!”

46 And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me - holy is his name. 50 His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. 51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. 52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. 53 He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful 55 to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.”

7 John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 9 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

10 “What should we do then?” the crowd asked.

11 John answered, “The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.”

12 Tax collectors also came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?”

13 “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them.

14 Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?” He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely - be content with your pay.”

15 The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. 16 John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” 18 And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.

19 But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and all the other evil things he had done, 20 Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.

PART 3 BACKGROUND AND COMMENTARY

Theme Verse:

“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered.
“May it be to me as you have said.”

40 And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.

41 Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. 42 When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. 43 After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. 44 Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. 45 When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. 46 After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48 When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." 49 "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" 50 But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

51 Then he went down in Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. 52 And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

Luke 3:1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar - when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Tracoonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene - 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. 3 He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 4 As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

"A voice of one calling in the desert,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.
5 Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.
The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.
6 And all mankind will see God's salvation.'"

56 Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

57 When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. 58 Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, 60 but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John."

61 They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name."

62 Then they made sign to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. 63 He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." 64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. 65 The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. 66 Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.

67 His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

68 "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. 69 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David 70 (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), 71 salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us - 72 to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, 73 the oath he swore to our father Abraham: 74 to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear 75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. 76 And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, 77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, 78 because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven 79 to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

80 And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel.

Luke 2:1 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to his own town to register.

4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

14 “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

21 On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived.

22 When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”), 24 and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. 27 Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

29 “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. 30 For my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the sight of all people, 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

33 The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, 35 so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

36 There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. 38 Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

39 When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth.