

discover
**THE GIFT OF
CHRISTMAS**



LEADER GUIDE

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**THE GIFT OF
CHRISTMAS**



CoffeeBreak





We thank Deb Fennema for writing the original lesson material (1996) on which this revision of *Discover the Gift of Christmas* is based. We also thank Diane Averill for her contributions to this revised edition.

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To the Leader

Prepare the Lesson

Coffee Break and Bible discovery leaders help people discover together what the Bible says and means. They are not teachers but guides, facilitators, and conversation leaders.

This leader guide is meant to assist you as a small group leader by coming alongside you in your own personal work. Always answer the study guide questions first, using the suggested basic steps of preparation. Then use the leader material to enrich your understanding of the passage.

We encourage you to study ahead of time so that you do not have to rely on the leader guide during your Bible study group meeting. You don't want to give the impression that the leader guide is an answer book. The answers are in the Bible; you are a guide to help your group find the answers in God's Word.

Get Ready to Lead

Learn to think in terms of questions. As you prepare to lead a lesson, ask yourself questions and try to discover the answers yourself. This will prepare you to anticipate group members' questions and thus help others discover truths from God's Word.

The new "Conversation" box in the study guide is for extra questions. The leader guide includes many extra questions that you may use to help build the group's conversation around the text. We also suggest that you write your own questions. You know the interests, personalities, and needs of your group members. You know what they will be curious about or when they will want to dig deeper into a Scripture passage. Put those extra conversation-building questions in the "Conversation" boxes and use them during your group time to help get dialogue started.

Also, encourage group members to put their own questions and discoveries in the "Conversation" boxes. By doing this, they will also be preparing for the group discussion. You might want to start a group discussion by saying, "What is in your 'Conversation' box? What would you like to talk about together?"

If you are able to prepare and pray thoroughly before each group session, you will be able to lead without frequent references to your notes.

This will free you to be more aware of the work of the Holy Spirit during your group discussion time and to focus more effectively on your facilitation and leadership responsibilities. You will also be able to keep better eye contact and listen more carefully.

Lead with Questions

Use questions to direct the group discussion. Draw out positive contributions by asking questions. Break down difficult or unclear questions with smaller, concise ones. Also use questions to respond to wrong or problematic answers. If you learn to lead others into truth by using questions, you will be a good Bible discovery leader. The questions in this study are designed to be used with the New International Version of the Bible, but other translations can also be used.

Help to Apply

Gently help group members discover the meaning of God's message for their own lives. Be careful not to be judgmental of persons who may not yet seem to be applying the truths you encounter together. It's the Holy Spirit's work to apply God's Word to people's hearts. Tactfully let the group know how the Spirit is applying the Word in your own heart and life. Pray faithfully for the Spirit's work in others.

While giving people the time and space to apply biblical truths as the Spirit leads them, simply try to help group members see that there is a relationship between the Bible and life. Questions for reflection at the end of each session invite everyone to take some time for personal reflection and optional sharing. Try to offer at least a few minutes for reflection time toward the end of each lesson, and encourage group members to do additional follow-up reflection at home.

Introduction

The Christmas story may be the most familiar story in the Bible. We see angels, stars, and wise men on Christmas cards and Christmas trees. We sing Christmas carols and display nativity scenes. And in a rare quiet moment we ponder the real meaning of it all.

This short Bible study offers you and your group an opportunity to discover the real meaning of the Christmas story. Though this story may be familiar to you and many of your group members, you may be surprised at what you'll learn. A careful look at the details may challenge some of your assumptions. Some of the facts may be unfamiliar to you. As a result, you may well find this an exciting adventure in Bible discovery.

The point of this study, though, is to come face to face with the Christ of Christmas. As you prepare for each lesson, keep this primary goal in mind. Pray that God's Word reveals the Lord to each person in your group. Some need to meet Jesus for the first time; others need to be reminded of their commitment to Christ. Be sensitive to the needs, questions, and doubts of each person. Allow the Spirit time to work. Be available to talk with group members. Ask God to work a Christmas miracle in the life of each member during this beautiful time of year.

The Christmas story is a poignant and powerful story of God's love—for you as a study leader and for every member of your group.

A note about prophecy: You will encounter prophecy several times in this study. Prophecy is commonly thought of as predicting future events. While that does occur in some cases, prophecy is primarily a matter of bringing God's Word to his people in their time and place. Sometimes a message from God includes a promise or the mention of a future event. That may be fulfilled in part soon after people hear it, and it may also be fulfilled more completely in later history. It is helpful to remember that while the history presented in the Bible can be trusted as accurate, the Bible is not primarily a history book. The Bible is a gradual revelation of who God is and how he deals with people. In this sense, some events in the Old Testament have significance beyond the events themselves, and most of those point to the coming of Christ and are ultimately fulfilled in Christ. The New Testament writers had a fuller understanding of the Old Testament than the Old Testament writers did. And you, having access to the entire New Testament, will be able to understand even more. So don't let prophecies intimidate you. They are God's words to his people in every age.

Glossary of Terms

- Aaron**—the first person appointed by God to serve as priest for the people of Israel in the Old Testament. Only his descendants could be priests.
- Abijah**—one of the heads of the priestly families during the time of King David, centuries before Zechariah’s time. The people of Israel kept careful records of their ancestry, especially those families chosen to serve as priests in the temple.
- Abraham**—father of the Jewish nation, which was set apart as God’s people.
- angel**—messenger sent by God to earth to deliver God’s messages to people chosen for special tasks.
- atonement**—from the Hebrew word meaning “to cover over.” The atoning death of Jesus on the cross covers over human sin and brings believers into a right relationship with God.
- blessed**—receiving approval and favor from God.
- Caesar Augustus**—emperor of the Roman empire at the time of Jesus’ birth. He was the first emperor to unify the entire Mediterranean world and to inaugurate an era of peace.
- Christ**—Greek word for the Hebrew word *Messiah*, which means “Anointed One.”
- circumcise**—to remove the foreskin of the penis. All male Jews were required to be circumcised as a sign of belonging to God’s people. This sign was first given by God to Abraham and his sons.
- covenant**—a mutually binding agreement between two parties, similar to a contract. The covenant referred to most frequently in the Bible is the one made by God with Abraham, which included God’s promise to be the God of Abraham’s descendants (Gen. 17:7).
- David**—Israel’s greatest Old Testament king, a man greatly loved by God. God promised that one of David’s sons would occupy the throne of Israel forever.
- Elijah**—one of the greatest Old Testament prophets. He lived in the ninth century B.C. and spoke God’s words powerfully to Israel at that time.
- fear (of the Lord)**—awe of God’s power and holiness, combined with love for God and an obedience to his will.
- frankincense**—a costly and sweet-smelling resin from the bark of several trees that was mixed with oil and burned during certain Old Testament offerings.

Gabriel—one of only two angels identified by name in the Bible. Gabriel also is mentioned in the Old Testament (Dan. 8:16; 9:21).

Galilee—the Roman province in northern Palestine where Jesus grew up, in the town of Nazareth.

Gentiles—any persons not included in the nation of Israel.

glorify (glorifies)—to praise and honor.

glory (of God)—God’s brilliance, splendor, and majesty; God’s essence.

Herod (the Great)—the king of Palestine at the time of Jesus’ birth due to his friendship with the Roman government. He was a gifted builder and architect but a cruel and jealous man. The Jews benefited from his rebuilding of their temple, but they hated him for his cruelty.

holy (holiness)—pure, perfect in goodness and righteousness, morally blameless. Only God is perfectly holy. People, though sinful, may be said to be holy when they are devoted to God and bring him glory.

Holy Spirit—the third person of the Trinity, equal to and one with the Father and the Son.

horn—a symbol of strength often used in Old Testament poetry.

Isaiah—one of Israel’s greatest prophets. His writings are recorded in the Old Testament book bearing his name. Isaiah lived centuries before Christ but prophesied the Messiah’s virgin birth; his suffering, death, and resurrection; and the salvation that would come to all people through Christ.

Israel—the descendants of Jacob; they were God’s chosen nation in the Old Testament and the people from whom the Savior would come; also called “the Jews.”

Jacob—grandson of Abraham, father of the Jewish nation. Jacob was renamed Israel, and his twelve sons became the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Jerusalem—Israel’s capital city, the location of God’s temple. It was the center of Jewish religion and spiritual headquarters for the nation of Israel.

Joseph—the husband of Mary, mother of Jesus.

Magi—Gentile astrologers (either star studiers or practitioners of magical arts), also called wise men, from Persia or southern Arabia, east of Palestine.

manger—a feeding trough for animals.

mercy—free and undeserved compassion.

Most High—an ancient name for God, the Creator of heaven and earth.

myrrh—a costly spice and perfume obtained from the cistus rose tree and used as a beauty treatment or pain reliever.

priest—one set apart by God to perform the rites of Old Testament worship, such as working in the temple, supervising the sacrifices, and doing other religious duties (Num. 3:5-10).

prophet—one who receives a special revelation from God and communicates it to others.

Rachel—Jacob's wife who died giving birth to Benjamin, father of one of the tribes of Israel. Jacob buried her by a roadside in the area of Bethlehem (see Gen. 48:7).

Ramah—a town near Bethlehem. In the Old Testament the Jewish exiles were gathered at Ramah for their deportation into captivity in Babylon (Jer. 31:15; 40:1).

righteousness—freedom from guilt or sin. God regards believers as righteous through Christ, a gift received by faith.

sin—missing the mark in actions and in attitudes of the heart; deliberately turning away from God to follow one's own desires.

Son of the Most High (Son of God)—titles given in the Old Testament to the Messiah for whom the Jews (the people of Israel) waited.

1 Luke 1:5-38

Birth Announcements

Getting Started

This is the story of two unusual birth announcements. In our culture new parents often send announcements to family and friends after their baby is born. Even before birth, a child's parents often share ultrasound scans of their baby in utero. The birth announcements described in Luke 1 were brought by an angel to the parents even before their babies were conceived. In both cases, conception involved God's intervention. As you look at this first chapter of the book of Luke, enjoy discovering how the people in the story were told they would become parents and how they reacted.

Optional Share Questions

The optional share questions in each lesson may serve well at the beginning of your session or at some other time during your discussion. Use or adapt share questions in a way that works best for your group.

Share an interesting way you or someone you know announced a pregnancy.

or

Describe an unusual birth announcement you received.

As you ask the opening share questions, be sensitive to members of your group who may be having difficulty getting pregnant or who may have had a recent miscarriage.

Though much of this lesson will be about supernatural conceptions, the main point will be how God used ordinary people to bring about his plan of salvation for the world.

Even though the Christmas story is perhaps the most well-known story in the Bible, some in your group may be learning the details of this story for the first time. Encourage everyone to consult the glossary for terms that may be unfamiliar.

What Does It Say?

1. Luke 1:5-10

a. *Describe Zechariah and Elizabeth.*

b. *What was Zechariah chosen to do?*

- **What picture does Luke present of these two people?**
- **Why might the phrase “in the sight of God” (v. 6) be included?**
- **Why is their age mentioned?**
- **How was Zechariah chosen for his duty?**

Zechariah “belonged to the priestly division of Abijah.” This means he was a descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses; only Aaron’s descendants could serve as priests among God’s people (Ex. 40:12-15; Lev. 1-9). Elizabeth “was also a descendant of Aaron.” The Bible teaches that no one is sinless, so their being “righteous in the sight of God” does not mean they were without sin. Rather it means that they served God sincerely, with all their heart. God is able to look into everyone’s hearts. He knew they were sincere, godly individuals.

To be childless in their culture was more difficult than in ours. It brought sadness and shame, particularly to women. It also caused people to question whether God was withholding his blessing. Jewish couples hoped that they might be chosen to be the parents of the promised Messiah. Zechariah and Elizabeth’s age is mentioned to indicate the impossibility of Elizabeth being able to conceive.

The priestly divisions followed a rotating service schedule. Each group was responsible to serve one week at a time and in sequence during six major Jewish holidays. The schedule gave each division at least two turns per year. The priestly duty of burning incense was a great privilege, and a priest was allowed to do this only once in his lifetime. In fact, some never had the opportunity, so this surely was an important highlight in Zechariah’s service as a priest. The lot was used to indicate the leading of the Lord in the choice being made, so here we see a sign of God’s intervention as the lot falls to Zechariah.

While Zechariah went into the temple alone to offer the incense, the other worshipers stood outside praying and waiting for the smoke of the incense to rise before the Lord. Incense symbolized the prayers of

the people ascending to God. After the incense burning, the priest would emerge and pronounce a blessing on the worshipping people.

2. Luke 1:11-17

a. *What good news did Zechariah receive, and who brought this news?*

b. *What would be unusual about John?*

c. *Describe John's role.*

- **How did Zechariah react to the sudden appearance of the angel?**
- **Why might the angel mention Zechariah's prayer?**
- **How would John be received?**
- **What does the phrase "in the spirit and power of Elijah" mean?**

First startled, then "gripped with fear," Zechariah responded the way most people would if they met an angel unexpectedly. John would be an answer to his father's prayer and would be received with joy and delight by his parents and many others. God himself would deem John "great." He would be filled with the Holy Spirit even before birth, and that was God's way of choosing him for a very special task. In addition, John would abstain from wine and other fermented drink. That would prevent him from ever being controlled by alcohol; rather, he would be filled with the Spirit and understand God's will (see Eph. 5:17-19).

It would be John's role to bring the people back to the Lord. He would be the Lord's spokesperson, a prophet "in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous." In that day, many people had turned away from the Lord, parents and children were divided, and disobedience was rampant. Elijah had been a fearless Old Testament prophet who had spent time in the wilderness and had spoken pointedly, even to kings, in calling for repentance (see 1 Kings 17-19).

If you have a group that likes to dig deeper, note that the angel's announcement in Luke 1 actually points to a fulfillment of the last words of prophecy given in the Old Testament (see Mal. 4:5-6). As Jesus taught

later, John was the fulfillment of that prophecy about a messenger like Elijah being sent to God's people to prepare the way for him (see Mal. 3:1; Matt. 11:7-15; see also 2 Kings 1:8; Matt. 3:4).

In addition, if you are leading a group familiar with Old Testament worship, you might wish to ask,

- **What is the significance of this announcement being made in the context of the temple?**

The announcement of John's birth, and the news that he would be a special prophet, broke four hundred years of silence since God had spoken through the last Old Testament prophet. This links the coming of Christ with the Old Testament worship of God, for it was in the temple that God met with his people and received their worship (see Mal. 3:1). Note together also that the appearance and announcement of the angel at this time provided a vivid answer to the prayers of God's people.

3. Luke 1:18-20

a. What was Zechariah's response to the angel's message?

b. How did the angel respond to that?

- **Why wasn't the appearance of the angel enough to convince Zechariah?**
- **Why was Zechariah made unable to speak?**
- **What might that suggest about Zechariah's response to the angel's message?**

Zechariah and his wife were well beyond childbearing age, so Zechariah asked how he could be sure of this announcement. The angel revealed his name and told Zechariah that God had sent him to bring this good news. Gabriel was a leading angel in the courts of heaven. Only one other angel, Michael, is named in the Bible. Gabriel's name means "God is my hero" or "mighty man of God." Gabriel is also identified in Daniel 8:16 and 9:21 and later in Luke 1 when he appears to Mary.

It might seem a normal reaction for Zechariah to ask, "How can I be sure of this?" But the reaction of Gabriel suggests that Zechariah should have trusted him in bringing a direct message from God. Because Zechariah

doubted the message, Gabriel declared him unable to speak until the words of the message proved true.

4. Luke 1:21-25

a. *Describe the situation outside the temple and what the people were thinking.*

b. *What happened to Elizabeth, and how did she react?*

- **How did the people react to Zechariah's inability to speak?**
- **What might Elizabeth have pondered for the five months she was in seclusion?**
- **Whom did Elizabeth credit for her ability to become pregnant?**

Meanwhile the people waited outside the temple, and they wondered why Zechariah was taking so long. When he came out and could not say the expected blessing, the people knew something unusual had happened. They assumed he had seen a vision while burning the incense.

The angel's message began its fulfillment with the miraculous conception of a child. We aren't told why Elizabeth remained in seclusion. She certainly had to deal with some major changes, however, being pregnant at an advanced age and needing to prepare for the birth of her child. She may also have spent time meditating on the miraculous events taking place in her life. Elizabeth knew that God had given her and her husband an unusual blessing. She expressed thankfulness for finally being able to bear a child, saying that her "disgrace among the people" was removed. The disgrace had not been from God, but rather from people who misunderstood childlessness as a withholding of God's blessing.

A group that wants to grow deeper might look at the responses of other childless women in Scripture whom God later blessed with children: Sarah (Gen. 18:10-15; 21:1-7); Rachel (Gen. 30:22-23); Hannah (1 Sam. 1:1-20).

5. Luke 1:26-33

a. *Describe the setting and time of the announcement made here.*

b. *Who received this announcement, and what do we learn about her?*

c. *What did the angel say about her child?*

- **What does the angel's greeting tell us about Mary?**
- **What does it mean that she was "highly favored"?**
- **Why might she have responded in the way she did?**
- **What is the significance of the baby's name and his lineage? (It may be helpful to consult the glossary.)**
- **Who is the "Most High"?**
- **Who is the "Son of the Most High," and how is his rule described?**

Again the angel Gabriel is sent to bring good news. Mary is described as "a virgin pledged to be married" to "Joseph, a descendant of David." In that time a pledge to be married, or betrothal, was legally binding. Only divorce or death could break it off. Girls usually became betrothed soon after puberty, so Mary was probably in her early teens. Mary lived in Nazareth, a village about seventy miles northeast of Jerusalem in the hill country of Galilee.

From Gabriel's greeting, we learn that God considered Mary "highly favored." The original Greek text for this phrase allows for two possible interpretations, referring either to Mary's character or to God's work of grace through her. In either case, God chose Mary for a very special task; she was to be the human mother of the Son of God. Frightened and perplexed by this greeting, Mary showed humility as she received Gabriel's announcement.

The name *Jesus* was not unusual in that day. *Jesus* is the Greek form of the Hebrew name *Joshua*, meaning "The Lord saves." Gabriel said the child would also be called "Son of the Most High." "Most High" was an ancient title for God, the "Creator of heaven and earth" (Gen. 14:19), so as "Son of the Most High" this child would be the son of God the Father.

This child would be a king in the royal line of David (see 2 Samuel 7:12-16; Ps. 89:29). But the throne of Mary's son would not be an earthly one. As the promised Messiah of God's people Israel (the descendants of Jacob), Jesus would reign supreme, his kingdom lasting forever.

6. Luke 1:34-38

a. *What did Mary want to know?*

b. *What explanation did the angel give her? What proof?*

c. *How did Mary respond?*

- **How would you describe Mary's attitude?**
- **Compare her and Zechariah's reactions to Gabriel.**
- **What might Mary have to face during her unusual pregnancy?**
- **What does it mean that "no word from God will ever fail" (v. 37)?**

Mary wanted to know how this would happen, since she had not had sexual relations with a man. Though Zechariah doubted the angel's announcement about John, Mary accepted this message. For a group that wants to go deeper, you may wish to look up the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 (see Matt. 1:23). Perhaps Gabriel's announcement brought this prophecy to Mary's mind. Like all Jewish young people, Mary would have known the Old Testament Scriptures well. Her song, later in the chapter, reveals a wealth of Old Testament knowledge. She also had faith to take God at his word.

The conception is described in reverent terms. The expression "will overshadow you" indicates the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit, not sexual activity. Groups wanting to go deeper may be interested to know that Scripture describes two other "overshadowing" events—the cloud that settled on the tabernacle when it was filled with the glory of God (Ex. 40:34-35), and the cloud that appeared at Jesus' transfiguration (Luke 9:34-35).

The angel adds that "the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." Note with your group that this passage does not say the child will become the "Son of God" but that he "will be called the Son of God." Some may think this is the story of the beginning of the Son of God, but the Bible teaches that he existed before the creation of the world (see Mic. 5:2; John 1:1-3; Col. 1:15-20). This is the beginning of his becoming human to live among us in order to become our Savior from sin and death (see John 1:14; Phil. 2:5-11; Heb. 2:17-18; 4:15-16). As the "holy one," he is described as being without sin (see also Heb. 4:15).

Gabriel also mentions Elizabeth's unlikely pregnancy as evidence of God's work at this time. Mary accepts what is asked of her, saying, "I am the Lord's servant." Things would surely get difficult for Mary as her pregnancy began to show. As a young woman betrothed to one man but pregnant by someone else (God himself), Mary would have been subject to much gossip and even a death penalty (Deut. 22:23-27), although that was not commonly carried out. Nonetheless she would be disdained and ridiculed and possibly banished from the community. In spite of all this, Mary accepts what is asked of her—she serves as a beautiful example of submission to God's plans.

The angel concludes by saying, "No word from God will ever fail." In other words, God can do anything that is consistent with his character. The statement is used here to show Mary that if God could enable Elizabeth to conceive a baby in her old age, he can enable Mary to become pregnant through supernatural means and give birth to the promised deliverer of God's people.

Taking It Home

What can we learn from Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary? Consider why they were chosen and how they responded to the announcements they received.

Use this question to summarize together the teachings of this lesson. God used godly but ordinary people to bring about his plan for the world. Though unusual and even difficult things were asked of them, they followed God's leading.

You may want to point out that although Jesus, the Son of God, had no beginning in his essential existence, these passages mark a historical turning point, the beginning of his humanity, his coming to live among us "in the flesh." Some people in your group may have doubts about the miraculous events covered in this lesson. It may help to point out that the writer of the book of Luke was both a historian as well as a physician. Even so, you do not have to convince people of the truth of the Bible. Simply present Scripture as it is and trust the Holy Spirit to work in people's hearts, in his time.

Come face to face with the Christ of Christmas and discover the real meaning of the Christmas story. This study offers an exciting adventure in Bible discovery, not only as you learn facts that may be unfamiliar and may challenge some assumptions, but also as you grow together in understanding why Jesus came.

Discover the Gift of Christmas features four lessons on the birth of Jesus Christ and why he came to live among us. This material is intended for small group Bible study, but it can also be used profitably for personal study. Guides for leaders and group members are available.

The approach to Bible study in this series emphasizes discovery (the reader discovers what the Bible has to say by asking questions and seeking answers from the passage studied). This is an effective and enjoyable way to study God's Word.

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