



03

SESSION THREE

Jesus' Birth

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we will focus on the birth of Jesus as it is recorded in the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Matthew. Here, we see the beautiful event in which God took on human flesh and entered our world as a baby. Luke told that Jesus was born in humble circumstances, where the news of his birth was first announced to the marginalized of society. Matthew wrote about how the arrival of the wise men demonstrated God's plan for the gospel to go out to all nations. As followers of Christ, we are to resemble the shepherds and the wise men—responding to Christ's birth with extravagant praise and public testimony.

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 2:1-12; Luke 2:1-20

THE POINT

Jesus' birth story teaches that His kingdom is for all people.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

We often think of Jesus' humiliation in terms of His death, but He was born into humiliating circumstances as well. In Jesus' day the value system was based on the belief that the "good" were rich and the sinners were poor; Jesus was born into poverty—in the form of a slave—according to the apostle Paul (Phil. 2:6-11). Jesus would later remind a potential follower that He had no place to lay His head (Luke 9:58).

Luke's portrayal of Jesus' birth sets the tone for the rest of His life. The Messiah's first bed was a feeding trough, and His first clothes were rags. This is the humility—God becoming man—that we see as a result of God's great love for you and me.

- **What are some characteristics of a prideful person? What are some characteristics of a humble person?**

Option 2

Place students in three groups. Assign each group a different topic concerning Jesus' birth. Instruct one group to gather information on each of the following: the circumstances of Jesus' birth, the Angel's announcement to the shepherds, and the wise men's journey to find Jesus. Ask each group to share what they learned in the form of a story or a skit. After each group has performed its skit or story, discuss them as a group.

- **Which of the stories seems most like something people would associate with the birth of a king? Why?**
- **Why do the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth seem unlikely in light of His kingship? Why was His birth different from that of other kings?**

Jesus wasn't a king like His people expected. They expected someone royal and regal, who would come with a sword and a physical throne. In light of that, think about the humility involved in Him coming to earth in the form of a man. But Jesus' humility reached much further than that—He was born in a stable, wrapped in rags, and had a feeding trough for a bed. He did all of this, not for political reasons, but for the love of His Father and His people.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Jesus' birth story teaches that His kingdom is for all people.

CHARACTERS

- **Jesus** - the eternal Son of God; second person of the Trinity
- **Magi** - intellectual and influential individuals who came from the east bearing gifts for Christ; also called wise men
- **Herod** - Roman appointed king over Jerusalem during the birth of Christ; became paranoid over hearing the King of the Jews had been born

PLOT

Our next stop in this chronological journey lands us in one of the most well known accounts in the entire Bible—the birth of Jesus. Even if we may be somewhat forgetful of many of the other figures and events in the Bible, thanks to our celebration of the Christmas season we have a yearly reminder of the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth. In fact, it may be because we seem so familiar with this story that we need to hear it again, opening our minds to the possibility that there are still important things we need to know or hear once more.

TIMELINE

GOD WITH US
The good news of Jesus' Incarnation.

JESUS' EARLY YEARS
Jesus grows in favor with God and men.

JESUS' BAPTISM
The meaning of baptism in the life of the believer.

JESUS' BIRTH DEMONSTRATED HIS HUMILITY

The humble birth of Jesus prepares us for one of the major themes we see throughout Luke's Gospel. Throughout his portrayal of the life and ministry of Jesus, Luke revealed that those who should understand Jesus' ministry rarely did. The wealthy, the educated, and the most religious missed what was happening. At the same time, those you'd never expect to understand what God was doing (the women, the poor, and the marginalized) intuitively grasped what Jesus' arrival meant.

¹ In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:1-7)

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

The Gospel of Luke provides a unique picture of the nativity of Jesus. In his opening, Luke claimed he received eyewitness testimony. It is possible that Mary was the source for this account of Jesus' birth. Luke's writing focused on the poverty of Jesus' birth, evidenced by the baby being wrapped in rags and laid in a manger. In Luke's account, Jesus was visited by poor shepherds, and in Matthew's account Jesus was adored by wealthy Magi.

Luke recounted the nativity of Jesus in four simple verses. Joseph made the trip from Galilee south to Judea and to Bethlehem, a city that lived in the shadow one of Herod's fortresses. Mary, his pregnant fiancé, was with him because the two of them would be included in the census.

Luke announced Jesus' birth, and told how Jesus was wrapped in strips of cloth, literally in rags (v. 7). Mary placed Him in a feeding trough that would have been located in the cave or basement of the house in Bethlehem. Because the guest room was already filled, the family had to move into the stable. But even in this, we can see the provision of God. It was warm and dry, and their family would be safe for a time. (Matthew told us they would one day run for their lives.)

Too often, the manger scenes and Christmas plays and sermons obscure the context of Jesus' birth. By reading the text and studying a little Jewish background, the reality of the conditions Jesus was born into become clear. Although *inn* is almost certainly a mistranslation, there indeed was no room in the *guest room* or *lodging place*, which would have been a part of any moderately-sized home. The point is not the nature of Jesus' birthplace but that there was no room—the Son of God was not even provided a proper place to be born! The only space left would have been the place where the animals were kept, which was usually a cave underneath the house.

- **Based upon these passages, how does the biblical description of Jesus' birth differ from our modern day understanding?** (*p. 22, PSG*)

This passage shows the reality of God becoming human and being born in a stable—it was the best that Joseph and Mary could provide. This “outsider” appearance would follow Jesus for the rest of His life. The One through whom God made all that was made was born for us into poverty, without a proper place to lay His head.

JESUS' BIRTH IS FOR THE POOR

At the time of Jesus' birth, the first announcement of the Messiah's arrival was carried to some of the poor and marginalized people in society: the shepherds.

⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” ¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:8-20)

A lone angel appeared to the shepherds, accompanied by the God's glory. They responded in terror, and again the angel used the words “no fear.” (Luke did not tell us if the angel was Gabriel.) The angel told the shepherds he had come to proclaim the gospel, the good news that would bring great joy for all people.

The angel gave the shepherds two signs to help them find baby Jesus. First, the baby would be wrapped in strips of cloth. Second, He would be lying in a manger. The nature of a sign is that it represents something out of the ordinary. Everyone swaddled their babies, but this sign indicates it was unusual to find a baby wrapped in rags. Likewise, no one expected to see a newborn sleeping in a feeding trough. So, the One who came for the marginalized was described as an outsider who was unimaginably poor.

As soon as the angels left, the shepherds realized they needed to run to Bethlehem immediately to see if the angel's message could possibly be true. The Bible does not say how long they searched for the baby, but they eventually found everything just as the angel had told them. Their response? To go and proclaim all that the angels had told them. After all, it is good news.

The shepherds left, excited about what they saw, and Luke recorded Mary's response to these happenings. She carefully stored away these memories. She was thinking about them, pondering them in her heart. She must have wondered at the fact that the Mighty One had "done great things" in her, a young girl on the margins of society. She must have questioned the absence of a group of royal officials to greet Jesus at His birth and the presence of a humble bunch of shepherds.

JESUS' BIRTH IS FOR THE NATIONS

We move now from the Gospel of Luke to the Gospel of Matthew, from the stable to the house, from the shepherds to the wise men.

¹ Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, ² "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." ³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ⁶ "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel." ⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." ⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. (Matt. 2:1-12)

TIMELINE

JESUS OVERCOMES TEMPTATION

Where Adam and Eve and the early Israelites failed, Christ succeeded.

**Special session*

WHO IS HE?

The disciples learn Jesus' identity and the purpose behind why He came.

THE CALLING OF THE DISCIPLES

Jesus invites ordinary people to follow Him.

King Herod, a ruler whose paranoia led him to kill his sons and wives, did whatever he could to maintain power in his final days. Not surprisingly, the news from the magi (wise men) concerning the birth of a new king struck Herod's dark imagination.

The magi were an elite political force who had exercised authority since the time of Daniel, who was appointed as one of them (Dan. 2:48; 5:11). They were astrologers as well as astronomers; men who studied the writings of the religions of the ancient world, including the Jewish Scriptures. It makes sense, then, that they followed a star to Jerusalem (Num. 24:17).

By the time the magi arrived, Joseph and Mary lived in a house. The word used to describe Jesus indicates that He was a young boy, approximately two years old. The wise men fell to their knees in worship. Of all their vast knowledge and authority, there was something they still lacked, something that drove them to travel all the way from Persia on a journey that might have taken two years. They found all they longed for in that simple house. They offered Jesus their gifts (these gifts would provide for Jesus' family's escape to Egypt). Then, the magi were warned in a dream, so they returned home a different way.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Virgin Birth (p. 23, PSG)

The Bible affirms that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin (Matt. 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38). The virgin birth affirms the historicity of the incarnation, where the eternal Son of God took on human flesh. The virgin birth is significant in that it serves as a reminder of Old Testament prophecies (Isa. 7) while also affirming both the deity and humanity of Christ.

CHRIST CONNECTION

God made three covenant promises to Abraham—an heir, a place, and a blessing for the nations. Jesus would perfectly fulfill all three. He is the true son of Abraham. He came to establish His kingdom. And, as Simeon sang in the Gospel of Luke, He would be a light to the Gentiles. Through Him, God would bless all people.

The shepherds had worshiped Jesus first. As much as two years later, from far off Persia, the wise men came to worship the King, as well. They were the first representatives of the “nations” that would be blessed by the coming of the One promised to Abraham.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What can we learn about God's character by looking at the conditions surrounding Jesus' birth?** *We can learn that He is all-loving. He came to earth and took on human flesh, in order to rescue His people. We can also learn that He loves all peoples, as seen most clearly when he brought the good news of Jesus birth to the shepherds.*
- **Why do you think our culture tends to value the character quality of pride over that of humility? How is this understanding challenged in the story of Jesus' birth?** *In our culture, pride is viewed as strength and a sign of virtue, where humility is often viewed as a sign of weakness. For whatever reason our culture promotes this belief, it couldn't be further from truth. Seeing the God of all creation—the only One deserving of any pride—willingly humble Himself to become in the likeness of mankind, gives us a clear picture of the value of humility in believers' lives.*
- **What is the significance of God revealing the news of Jesus' birth to shepherds first? How does this scene challenge the way we think of worth and importance?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What are some ways that the church may unintentionally communicate that the gospel is only for certain kinds of people? How can we demonstrate the beauty of God's love for those who are pushed to the side in our society?** *We may unintentionally communicate this by only reaching out to a certain social class (those who are financially stable versus the poor) or even ethnic group, and so on.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

When we picture the magi, we often imagine only three men. This is based on the three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It is more likely that they traveled with a large entourage, including Persian cavalry. There could have been a hundred of them. Their intent was clear—to find and worship the new King. Their worship of Him would represent an endorsement of a new monarch.

- **What are some other misconceptions people often have about Jesus' birth story?**
Answers will vary.
- **How might this information regarding the magi increase our confidence in Jesus' identity?**
Answers will vary.



HEART

The magi were the elite, the educated. They held enormous power at the Persian court. Yet, with all their power and knowledge something was obviously lacking. They hungered for something more, and when they saw the sign of the star they seemed to understand that the star would lead them to the answer they sought. When they bowed before the new King of the Jews, it is as if their far-away kingdoms were bowing, foreshadowing the day every knee and every nation will bow to King Jesus.

- **How does knowing that the magi were well educated affect your own faith?** *Faith is reasonable and supported by evidences. The magi were highly educated members of an elite group in society, which means it was unlikely that they would blindly pursue Jesus without having concluded there were good reasons to find Him. The same is true for Christians today. We have overwhelming support and evidence for our Christian faith, and as we discover further evidence and reasons our faith becomes stronger.*
- **In what ways has Christ satisfied the personal hunger for something more in your own life?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

The shepherds left the manger scene eager to tell others what they had experienced. This is how people responded when they met Jesus and understood who He was. The same response must be true for those of us who meet Christ, as well. Like the shepherds, we will naturally tell of God's goodness to others once we have embraced the good news of what God has done in our own lives. We do not share begrudgingly or out of a sense of duty, but from a heartfelt delight as a result of knowing that our sins have been forgiven.

- **In what ways has your relationship with Jesus changed your own life?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How can our willingness to share Christ with others serve as a sort of spiritual thermometer in our relationship with Him?** *Like a weather barometer communicates conditions in the weather itself, our willingness to share Christ can communicate the spiritual conditions in our own hearts.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack item #5, which contains a map of Jesus' travels during His early years of ministry.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPRescueSpr17)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at

GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit

MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject