



December 20, 2015

Adult Bible Fellowship

## INTRODUCTION

**Discussion:** What are your first thoughts when you hear the word “Christmas”? How does your mind and heart respond? (*food, gifts, shopping, decorations, traffic, busyness, traveling, cold, snow, etc.*)

For many, their first thought has to do with shopping and buying and spending and budgeting! In fact, the average Christmas spending per American adult in 2014 was \$781.

During a time of the year that has been hijacked by our culture in its materialism and secularism, we should make it a priority to think rightly about the Christmas season. And there is perhaps no better teacher than those original nativity characters—Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the wise men. Indeed, by considering their responses on the first Christmas, we learn how God would have us respond this holiday season. **During this Christmas, put yourself in the nativity scene.** [Perhaps bring in a nativity set as an object lesson.]

## MARY — HUMBLE FAITH (Luke 1:26-38)

Luke paints an unmistakable contrast between the response of Zechariah (Luke 1:5-23) and that of Mary (Luke 1:26-38) to the angel, Gabriel. Notice the similar situation: Gabriel appeared to both (vv. 11, 26), which provoked a response of fear (“troubled”: vv. 12, 29); the angel calmed their fear and assured them that God was showing them grace (vv. 13, 30); he then proclaims the glorious revelation from God that He had been sent to communicate, and in both cases, it is a message about a miraculous birth (vv. 13-17; vv. 31-33; notice all the “wills” in these verses—a clear expression of divine promise).

A contrast emerges between Zechariah’s response in vv. 18-22 and vv. 34-38. Both servants ask a question of the angel, essentially inquiring, “How?” (v. 18). And it is at this point that the narrative diverges. On the

one hand, Zechariah betrays an Abraham-like (Genesis 17:15-21) or Gideon-like (Judges 6:36-40) lack of faith in the improbable. In fact, he simply does not believe the Word of God, for he skeptically asks, “How shall I know this?” (v. 18; cf. v. 20b). And this is doubly-indicting, for he was a seasoned servant of the Lord (a priest), “walking blamelessly” and believing and obeying the “commandments and statutes of the Lord” (vv. 5-6), and he had actually been praying for this very thing (a child, v. 13).

Mary, on the other hand, also asks, “How?” (v. 34). But her question doesn’t reflect a disbelief in the improbable, but an attempt to discern the impossible (cf. v. 37). She is seeking to understand the mystery of the incarnation—that she, being a virgin, could bear a child (v. 34).

The contrast between this pious priest and humble girl is further sharpened by the angel’s answer to both. Zechariah is simply told of Gabriel’s position (i.e., he “stands in the presence of God”) and purpose (i.e., “I was sent...to bring you this good news”) and is rebuked “because [he] *did not believe* my words” (vv. 18-20). Mary is given additional revelation, culminating with the simple reality that “nothing will be impossible with God” (vv. 35-37).

Now, Mary faces the same decision as Zechariah: will she believe or doubt? Her response is humble and trusting: “I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me *according to your word*” (v. 38). \Considering the occupational, experiential, and age difference between the two, we would have expected this response from Zechariah. Yet, here is a young girl, who is beginning to understand the frightening implications of an unexplained pre-marriage pregnancy, and she simply humbles herself in trusting faith. And it wasn’t just that she submitted, she really “believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (v. 45). She knew and trusted her God well enough, that she could simply bank on Him, even when He didn’t make sense.

**Application:** The miracle and grace of the incarnation reminds us to respond with humble faith in God’s Word no matter what the confusion and difficulty we may be facing. Believe God’s promises, cling to His Word, have confidence in His truth—“for nothing will be impossible with God”!

**Transition:** The second character in our nativity set is opposite Mary and is her husband. He teaches us to respond with submissive obedience this Christmas.

### JOSEPH — SUBMISSIVE OBEDIENCE (Matthew 1:18-25; 2:13-23)

The first evidence of Joseph's submissive obedience is found in Matthew 1:18-25.

- Verse 19 gives us the Spirit's evaluation of Joseph's heart—he was "a just man and unwilling to put her to shame." In other words, Joseph is righteous and just, equitable and fair, kind and gracious.
- But now, in his integrity, he is understandably also concerned and confused, thoughtful and contemplative (vv. 18-19). This woman that he loves and trusts is now pregnant—he knows that the child is not his, and yet she "swears" that it is no one else's. In fact, if it were not for his honorable fidelity, he would think her crazy, for she is providing an explanation that both shatters fixed natural law and goes against the grain of fantastical imagination, for they were commoners. And so, all things "considered" (v. 20) and all grace extended, Joseph comes up with a solution to "quietly" end the relationship (v. 19).
- However, before he finalizes his decision, the Lord informs him in a dream that Mary's pregnancy is indeed miraculous and pure and prophetic, and he is instructed to marry her (vv. 20-21).
- So, this young lay carpenter, knowing full well the awkward and scandalous implications of marrying an already pregnant woman, simply "did as the angel of the Lord commanded him" (vv. 24-25). He was told to "take" Mary to be his wife and to "call" her son "Jesus." Immediately after waking from sleep, he "took" Mary to be his wife, and when the child was born he "called his name Jesus."
- Perhaps even more compelling in its evidence of his submissive faith is the text's record that "he knew her not until she had given birth to a son." He didn't attempt any kind of human manipulation or "cover up." He simply surrendered his anxiety and control to God in full obedience, which becomes characteristic of his life.

The second evidence of Joseph's submissive obedience is found in Matthew 2:13-23.

- In Matthew 2:13, the verbs of command given by God to Joseph are "rise," "take," "flee," and "remain." Joseph's obedience is point for point in verse 14: he "rose," "took," "departed," and "remained." Again, in verses 20-21, he is commanded to "rise," "take," and "go," and he follows in complete, step-by-step obedience.

**Application:** Two applications can be fleshed out at this point:

- First, there is little doubt in my mind that Mary's humble faith and Joseph's submissive obedience fueled each other. This godly couple teaches us that our complete obedience will be in proportion to our faith in God's revelation, specifically the gracious "Good News" of His Son Jesus.

As we grow in our understanding of and reliance upon God's Gospel revelation, our obedience will follow suit. We must, then, be in our Bibles—learning God's precepts, mining His wisdom, rehearsing His gospel—so that our lives might be characterized by the obedience that glorifies God, assures our own souls, and "adorns the doctrine of God our Savior" (Titus 2:10).

- Second, we can't help but wonder at the impact that Joseph's submissive obedience had on his children. While we know that Jesus was God and did not sin (and, I believe, was not able to sin), the Scripture still speaks of His "learning" obedience (Hebrews 5:8) and "becoming" obedient (Philippians 2:5-8). Undoubtedly, He learned obedience, in part, by watching His dad.

We often muse while observing a child, "Like father, like son." This was the case in Joseph's home. While his life may not have been long (many Bible scholars believe he died during Jesus' childhood), his inscripturated legacy is lasting—he submissively obeyed God! In fact, according to Matthew 1-2, Joseph obeyed God in the same way we teach our children to obey—quickly, sweetly, and completely. Indeed, his walk talked loudly in his home, and I think his children heard it and learned obedience.

Therefore, it is no wonder when he had a major moment of disconnect with his son, Jesus, in Luke 2:48-50 (a moment in which many 12-year-olds would complain, “My parents don’t get me! They don’t ever understand! They’re so old and outdated!”), that Jesus understood his position and “went down with [His parents]...and was submissive [lit. subject; cf. Luke 10:17, 20] to them” (Luke 2:51; a response that led to growth, v. 52). Indeed, “like father, like son.”

Is this true in your home?

This Christmas, let the gospel empower you afresh to submissively obey God, even when it is shameful, confusing, or difficult. Joseph obeyed God, knowing that this baby would save him from his disobedience (Matthew 1:21); so may we also obey, rejoicing that Christ does the same for ours!

**Transition:** As we look back at our nativity set, we cannot overlook a pair of simple characters with shepherd’s crooks, one carrying a sheep, the other gently bending near the child. In the face of these characters, we are reminded to respond this Christmas with enthusiastic evangelism.

### **SHEPHERDS — ENTHUSIASTIC EVANGELISM (Luke 2:8-20)**

The shepherds first heard the gospel in an extraordinary way in Luke 2:8-14—glorious angels appeared in the night sky to triumph God’s joy and peace and salvation, all wrapped up in a tiny baby who had recently been born nearby.

What a scene! How did the shepherds respond? How should we respond this Christmas? The shepherds reacted with enthusiastic evangelism that expressed itself in four ways:

#### **1. They personalized the gospel (vv. 15-16).**

Having heard this angelic message, the shepherds first had to determine what they were going to do with it personally. They could deny it or doubt it. They could postpone it and forget about it. Or they could believe and investigate it.

The passage testifies that they did the later, “hastily” (v. 16) following the instructions of the angels to “see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us” (v. 15).

**Application:** What have you done with the Christmas story? What is your perspective on this “good news of a great joy”? Have you investigated the gospel for yourself? Do you understand that “Christ [i.e., the Rescuer God promised to fix this world and save us from our sin, when we rebelled at the Fall (cf. Genesis 3:15)] died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3b-4). It is of “first importance” (1 Corinthians 15:3a) that you personalize this message and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior!

#### **2. They prioritized evangelism (vv. 17-18).**

They were in middle of their work, “keeping watch over their flock” (v. 8), but they quickly left their responsibilities to search for the child of promise (v. 16) and then to tell others (vv. 17-18). These angels knew what we often forget—nothing is more important than the gospel! They were not going to let temporal matters rob them (or others) from eternal joy.

**Application:** Too often, our problem is that we are more like Jonah than these shepherds. They both had the same message to tell—the shepherds literally couldn’t wait; Jonah did all he could to avoid it. Jonah didn’t prioritize evangelism, because he simply loved plants more than people (Jonah 4). The shepherds couldn’t get over the wonder of it all, and so, as they had lavishly received grace, they shared it.

Are you prioritizing evangelism, especially at this time of the year when people may be more open? Or, are you distracted by your “plants”—your job (“sheep”), your reputation, your toys, your agenda, your calendar, your entertainment, your traditions, etc.? The shepherds teach us to use the Christmas holiday to verbally share the good news.

### 3. They praised God (v. 20).

The shepherd scene ends this way: “And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” For these shepherds, evangelism was natural (or supernatural), not contrived; it was a delight, not a duty; it was overflow, not “pulling teeth.” Why? Because it was the byproduct of worship!

John Piper has suggested, “Missions exists because worship doesn’t.” Too often, we aren’t good witnesses, because we aren’t good worshippers. We don’t tell others about the gospel, because we aren’t telling it to ourselves.

**Application:** If there is ever a helpful time in the calendar year to stoke the fuel of our praise, it is Christmas! Allow the riches of this spiritual season—its focus on the incarnation, which made possible Jesus’s substitution in life and in death, which resulted in the resurrection, and which guarantees our glorification—to lose your lips to declare God’s praises, and when you do, “many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord” (Psalm 40:3).

### 4. They pushed through the shame (v. 8).

Shepherds were largely avoided or rejected by society. They were humble commoners whose place was looked down upon. That didn’t stop these transformed nomads at all! Nor did the fact that it was the middle of the night. Like this child that had changed them, they “despised [i.e., “to count lightly or as insignificant] the shame” (Hebrews 12:2) and boldly declared good news.

**Application:** Let us not be silenced! Yes, let us be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16); yet, let us be gracious and kind; yes, let us be discerning and prudent—but let us not be ashamed! In America, we still have so little to fear in our freedom to witness, and yet we do fear. That spirit is not from God (2 Timothy 1:7), so let’s pray for boldness instead (Acts 4:23-31; Ephesians 6:18b-20; Colossians 4:2-4; 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2).

And even if cultural shame increases and we find ourselves oppressed, let us remember the hope of the gospel! We “are from God and have overcome them, for He who is in [us] is greater than

he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). They may hate us, they may despise us, they may reject us, they may persecute us...but they can only kill us (Matthew 10:28)! In the very message we bear, “shame is shamed, and fear has fled” (C. Anderson, “Every Knee Shall Bow”!

**Transition:** The final group of characters in the nativity—the wise men—teach us to respond this Christmastime with a spirit of lavish worship.

#### WISE MEN — LAVISH WORSHIP (Matthew 2:1-12)

Many months after Jesus was born (perhaps up to two years; cf. “house” and “child” in Matthew 2:11), wise men from the East arrive in Jerusalem, inquiring about the one “who has been born king of the Jews” (v. 2). Herod’s counselors direct them to Bethlehem, quoting Micah 5:2, which prophecies that little town as the birth of a promised “Shepherd Ruler” (v. 6).

When the wise men arrived in Bethlehem and found Jesus, they immediately “fell down and worshipped Him” and “offered Him gifts” (Matthew 2:11). He was only a toddler, but that did not hinder their belief that He was also their King. Through eyes of humble faith, they clearly and correctly saw their God, their King, their Savior!

We’ll let a song that our choir ministered last Christmas (12/7/14) reveal to us the significance of their gifts:

*Gold, a King is born today;*

*Incense, God is with us;*

*Myrrh, His death will make a way*

*And by His blood...He’ll win us.*

**Application:** This Christmas, let’s make sure that we don’t underestimate the babe in the manger. Let’s not allow His “safer” side—His love, grace, mercy, gentleness, patience, etc.—to lull us into a complacent forgetfulness of His power, authority, rule, and grandeur. On that first Christmas morning, He looked like a baby, but He was Lord of all! May wise men in our generation knowingly, humbly, actively, sacrificially, and lavishly worship Him as such this holiday season.

## CONCLUSION

So, what do you think about Christmas? In the midst of all its tradition and busyness, how do you respond?

Don't forget the reason for the season. The centerpiece of the nativity is Christ, and may He be your focus, too. And as you consider each nativity character in turn, and see how they are gazing upon Him, respond like them—with the humble faith of Mary, the submissive obedience of Joseph, the enthusiastic evangelism of the shepherds, and the lavish worship of the wise men. Yes, **this Christmas, put yourself in the nativity scene.**