***Vol. 5***

*Session 1*

***Birth of Jesus***

*Session 1*

***Birth of Jesus***

Introducing the Study

God left no doubt about what He expected from His people. As a jealous and loving God, He demanded holistic devotion that stemmed from the heart, not the halfhearted attempts of worship that were happening in the days of Malachi. The message of the Book of Malachi reminds us of our inability to love God because of our sin-tainted hearts, but we also hear the echoing promise of God to provide the coming Messiah, who would bring victory—true and lasting freedom—to His people.

**What do you think the four hundred years of silence between the Old and New Testaments was like for God’s people?**

The final words of the Old Testament are a curse, one that still hangs over sinful humanity. This curse cannot be lifted by our efforts. The only solution is a new heart rid of sin, and after four hundred years of silence, God provided the remedy for sin we need through the birth of a child, His Son, Jesus. The God whom humanity had sinned against would provide forgiveness of sin by taking on humanity Himself.

**How does the storyline of Scripture change the way you view the birth of Jesus?**

Setting the Context

The four hundred years between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament is referred to as the intertestamental period and included a lot of political turmoil for the Jews, but the one true God was still present and unchanging.

**What is the difference between God’s silence and God’s inactivity? Why is it important to recognize that difference?**

The Persian Empire was conquered by Alexander the Great of Macedonia, who introduced Greek culture and the Greek language into the conquered territories of his empire. After Alexander’s death, a series of successors ruled Judea. The most notorious, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, tried to destroy the Jewish religion. He forbade observance of the law and sacrificed a pig on the altar in the temple. This act of desecration fueled rebellion in Judea for years, and the result was an independent Jewish state for a time.

Then around 63 BC, the Roman Empire seized control. Two important religious and political groups emerged during this time. The Pharisees were committed to God’s law, as supplemented by their own oral traditions. The Sadducees rejected most of the Old Testament and aligned themselves closely with Rome.

This was the climate in Judea when Jesus was born. In the fullness of time, in the fullness of Scripture, as “Hearing the Old Testament in Jesus’ Birth” (p. 11) shows, God’s Rescuer had come, though not to free His people from Rome but from sin.

**Why is it important to see the birth of Jesus in its context in the storyline of the Bible?**

CHRIST Connection

The birth of Jesus fulfilled several Old Testament promises concerning the coming Messiah. Jesus was born in humble circumstances to be the Suffering Servant who would lay down His life to be our mighty Savior. One day, Jesus will return as our eternal King

Continuing the Discussion

**The Book of Malachi left us wondering if the people of God would be ready for the Messiah. Were they? Why or why not?**

**How should a deeper understanding of the birth of Jesus affect the way we approach and prepare for a Christmas celebration?**

***As a group, read Luke 1:26-33.***

**Why is it important to see Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s promises in the Old Testament?**

**What qualities of God’s character are displayed in His choice of Mary?**

God sent Gabriel to prepare Mary to be the mother of the Messiah. Mary was filled with both fear and awe in Gabriel’s presence. The angel’s message was troubling because of its supernatural nature, but at the same time it was filled with hope. Mary’s Son would be great, He would be called “the Son of the Most High,” and God would give Him the throne of David. The Baby whom Mary would deliver would be the fulfillment of God’s centuries-old promise of a king from David’s family who would establish an eternal kingdom.

***As a group, read Luke 1:51-55.***

**How was Jesus’ birth related to God’s promise to Abraham?**

**What aspects of God’s character and work did Mary highlight in her praise?**

**What examples of these aspects of God have you seen in your life?**

Mary sang of future events with certainty as though they already had occurred, following the example of the Old Testament prophets. Mary described God’s remarkable activity in bringing the Messiah to fulfill God’s kingdom. Through His Messiah, God would humble the powerful and exalt the dispossessed. Mary was a prime example of God’s lifting up a person of humble circumstances. She was symbolic of what God would do for all who would respond positively to His gift of grace.

***As a group, read Luke 2:4-7.***

**Why are the circumstances of Jesus’ birth so surprising?**

**What does the setting of Jesus’ birth tell us about God’s intent in sending Him?**

Luke’s record of Jesus’ birth is simple yet magnificent. Luke frames Jesus’ birth in historical terms while marveling in God’s divine act of invading human history. God worked through the plans of government officials to bring Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem for Jesus’ birth in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. He then used ordinary people to spread the extraordinary message of Christ’s birth.

MISSIONAL Application

Record at least one way you will apply the truth of Scripture as one who believes in and follows after our humble Savior and King.

Personal Study 1

**Jesus was born to be the promised eternal King.**

***Read Luke 1:26-33.***

Luke addressed his Gospel to Theophilus. Though we are not certain who Theophilus was and why Luke wrote to him, we do know something about the author. Luke was a faithful companion of the apostle Paul. At the end of Paul’s life, as he was facing the prospect of death under the Roman emperor Nero, only Luke had the courage to remain beside him (2 Tim. 4:11). This reveals much about the character of the writer of this Gospel.

We also know that Luke was a doctor, because Paul referred to him as one in Colossians 4:14. Luke was most likely a slave as well. Most professionals including doctors in the first century were slaves. It’s not surprising then that Luke was interested in the most marginalized people of his day. Throughout his Gospel, Luke noted that women were often the first ones to understand what Jesus was doing. At the beginning of the Gospel, Zechariah, a religious man, didn’t understand what God was going to do (though he should have). But Mary, a simple girl, intuitively understood what God was going to do (though we wouldn’t expect her to).

Mary, who is twice described as a virgin, will give birth to Jesus. (The promise to Joseph is described in Matt. 1:18-25.) This poor, young, pregnant girl was the epitome of the marginalized.

Mary’s promised child would be named Jesus. Traditionally, a father named his child, and in this case, God as the heavenly Father claimed that right over Joseph. The name Jesus means “deliverer” or “savior.” Its Old Testament equivalent Hebrew name was Joshua. Just as Joshua, Moses’ successor, delivered God’s people by bringing them out of the wilderness and into the promised land, so would this new Joshua deliver God’s people. Though this time, deliverance would not be from a place, but instead from sin and death and into eternal life with God.

Then the angel further clarified who Mary’s son would be. Jesus would be the “Son of the Most High,” affirming His divine identity. As a descendant of King David, Jesus would occupy the great king’s throne to carry on the just and righteous reign of God on earth (see Isa. 9:7; Dan. 7:14). God was at long last making good on His promises.

He would be the One to crush the head of the serpent God promised Adam and Eve. He would be the blessing to all nations that God promised Abraham. He would be the bearer of the new covenant God promised through Jeremiah. And He would be the Messiah-King who would occupy the throne that God promised David.

All these promises and more are fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus is not only the promised eternal King; Jesus is the evidence that God keeps every one of His promises, both now and forever.

**Why is it important that we recognize that Jesus is not only the king, but the promised king?**

**What are some of the practical implications for your life today in calling Jesus “King”?**

Personal Study 2

**Jesus was born to be the promised mighty Savior.**

***Read Luke 1:51-55.***

How would Mary respond to the angel’s dramatic pronouncement? With faith. Mary declared herself to be the slave of the Lord, her Master. This was her identity. After all, slaves have no choices; they are fully surrendered to their masters. Even though there was so much she did not know, Mary had a deep-rooted faith and trust in God. That was where her submissive spirit came from. She was ready to submit to God even if His plan for her life would be difficult.

Then Mary praised the greatness of God in the song that has become known as the “Magnificat.” Mary’s song concluded with a refrain that celebrates the truth that the world is being turned upside down—or more accurately, right side up. Radical reversal is Luke’s favorite theme, and Mary presents it here in poetic form.

Mary’s language reveals a heart and mind that must have been saturated with the psalms and songs of the Old Testament. For the moment, she has become a psalmist herself. And like David, she understood that the new hope being born into the world was based on an ancient hope.

Some of the psalms are referred to as “psalms of remembrance.” When a psalmist lamented his current despair, he frequently looked back to the gracious acts of mercy God had performed in the past. Miriam, the sister of Moses (Mary’s namesake), remembered in this way and, with a timbral in her hand, sang a song of new hope recorded in Exodus 15. Miriam celebrated the Lord God defeating Israel’s enemies, that the horse and rider had been thrown into the sea. Mary’s song in Luke might even be a refrain from Miriam’s ancient poem.

The God of the Gospels is a God who is always in the process of turning the world upside down. The new hope that was being born, the hope that is the subject of so many songs in the Scriptures, was granted to everyone—even the outsiders, the poor in spirit. To be rich, we learn to let go of earthly treasures. To be wise, we embrace the foolishness of the cross. To be mature, we become like little children. To be free, we become slaves to God. All of this happens through Jesus who, though born in lowly circumstances, was the exalted mighty Savior.

Jesus won everything by losing everything. Paul said He was crucified in weakness (2 Cor. 13:4). Yet in the mysterious ways of God, the cross has granted endless strength to those who have suffered and are suffering still.

This is the radical reversal, the “upside-down-ness” of the kingdom that the church easily forgets. Every time she has pursued worldly power, forsaking worldly weakness, the church has parted company with Jesus. God is not magnified in that way. He is magnified by the pierced soul of His people, emulating the pierced hands and feet of their Savior. God is glorified when the church treasures Christ above all else and lives with meekness, even if that leads to suffering. Because suffering—that which Christ endured on the cross—is what brought about the ultimate reversal of sin and death giving way to forgiveness and eternal life for those who trust in the One Mary sang of.

**Compare Mary’s song with Miriam’s song in Exodus 15 and Hannah’s song in 1 Samuel 2. How does Mary’s song build on these older songs?**

**How does your life challenge the values of the world with the values of the kingdom?**

Personal Study 3

Jesus was born to be the promised humble Servant.

***Read Luke 2:4-7.***

The birth of the promised King and the mighty Savior was inauspicious to say the least. But Luke does not sidestep the surprising circumstances of Jesus’ birth in his Gospel; he focuses on them. The humble birth of Jesus advances the major theme of radical reversal.

Throughout his portrayal of the life and ministry of Jesus, Luke reveals that those who should have understood Jesus’ ministry rarely did. The wealthy, the educated, and the most religious missed what was happening. At the same time, those whom you’d never expect to understand what God was doing—the women, the poor, the marginalized—intuitively grasp what Jesus’ coming meant.

Jesus was born during the reign of Augustus. Julius Caesar had adopted Augustus as a son, making him his heir. But there is more to the story than a simple transfer of power. Upon his death, Caesar was declared to be divine. A comet appeared shortly afterward that supposedly affirmed his deity.

Luke’s first readers would have been reminded that the emperor was considered to be the son of the divine, that is, “a son of God.” But meanwhile, in the obscure Judean town of Bethlehem, a baby was about to be born who would literally challenge the most powerful empire in the world and inaugurate a kingdom that would eclipse Rome’s.

Jesus was born into a world that was turning upside down. A clue to this shift is seen in the order of a census. In the process of taking power and transforming the empire, Augustus wanted to know the numbers, the value of property, and the distribution of the population. Quirinius was willing to oblige.

Luke recounts the nativity of Jesus in four simple verses. Joseph made the trip from Galilee south to Bethlehem, a town in the shadow of one of Herod’s fortresses. Mary, his pregnant fiancée, was there with him. The two made the journey in obedience to the order to be counted in their hometown.

While there, Jesus is born and Mary wrapped Him in strips of cloth, or rags. Mary then placed her child in a feeding trough that would have been located in a cave or basement of a house in Bethlehem. Because the guest room was already filled, the family had to move into the stable. But even in this, we see the provision of God. It is warm and dry there. For the time being, the three of them will be safe. (Matthew tells us they later would flee for their lives.)

So, here we are struck with God not just becoming human, but that He was also born in a stable. The One through whom God made all that was made was born for us in poverty, without a proper place to lay His head. This “outsider” aura would follow Jesus the rest of His life. Jesus would fulfill His role as the humble Servant. He was born as a humble Servant, he would live as a humble Servant, and He would die as a humble Servant—all in full obedience to His Father.

But that humble Servant reigns as King of kings and Lord of lords. In Jesus, we see that the last shall be first, and the least shall be the greatest.

**What do we learn from the way Luke contrasted the power and authority of Caesar Augustus with the birth of Jesus?**

**What do the humble circumstances of Jesus’ birth teach us about God’s authority and power?**