

SMALL GROUP STUDY GUIDE

COFFEEHOUSE FIVE CHURCH
CHRISTMAS STORY TIME
AN ANGEL VISITS JOSEPH
MATTHEW 1:18-25
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MAIN POINT

The Christmas story is a call to public faith, to laying down our lives, and to following Christ.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

The Christmas story is full of God's use of the unexpected to change our world, beginning with the fact that He came to us. To get today's discussion started, ask group members to discuss the following questions.

What's your favorite "unexpected" detail in the Christmas story?

What's one unexpected way God has worked in your life lately?

Why did the Son of God have to come to earth?

That Christmas is now a long-standing tradition can make it difficult to remember all that is unusual or surprising about it. Yet when we take time to explore the story in more detail, there are many surprising features, the primary one being that God became man. How this miraculous event unfolded is the focus of our study today, along with its implications for our lives.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 1:18-21.

Joseph, a man of faith and familiar with the works of God, was busy planning to marry when his plans began to unravel. Mary's pregnancy forced Joseph to make a new plan. He decided to cause Mary as little humiliation as possible, even though he initially believed she had been unfaithful to him. Then he had the dream. The expectation of a Messiah was an integral part of Joseph's faith as a Jew. This dream confirmed the baby Mary was carrying would be that very Messiah.

What catches your attention most in this very familiar account of the birth of Jesus? What do you learn about Joseph from these verses?

Matthew identified Joseph as Mary's husband because during the period of betrothal he was considered to be her husband. When he became aware of Mary's pregnancy, he made a natural assumption: Mary had been unfaithful to him. As a righteous man, he was not perfect but sought to keep the law. He was upright and strove to live by God's

requirements. He also knew that under the law, Mary could be stoned to death for adultery. He must have loved Mary deeply, for he combined compassion with his determination to do the right thing. He felt he could not go through with the marriage, but he did not choose to be harsh with Mary. He would do what was right but in a way that would protect Mary.

Why was it important that Joseph continue as the earthly father for Jesus?

According to verses 20-21, what two responsibilities did God give Joseph?

God asked Joseph to do two crucial things. First, He cleared the way for Joseph to go ahead and marry, assuring him Mary was still a virgin, and this baby was a miracle of God. Second, God gave Joseph the responsibility of naming the child “Jesus.” It was Jewish custom for naming a child to be the father’s job. The fact that God chose Jesus’ name authenticated the baby’s miraculous origin to Joseph: Mary’s pregnancy was a work of the Holy Spirit. Joseph embraced his role as trainer for the child and example of fatherly love to Him.

How does Joseph’s story encourage you to cooperate with God even when He wants you to do something very difficult?

Verse 21 contains the most important part of the angel’s revelation—Jesus’ name revealed His purpose. Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua, which means “Yahweh saves.” God Himself was coming to earth with the goal of saving people, rescuing sinners from the punishment they deserve. This declaration of Jesus’ name tied together every prophecy Joseph had heard about the Messiah. Yahweh had demonstrated the power to save many times before—the merciful rescue of Noah and his family, the deliverance from slavery in Egypt, rescue and restoration after the ruthless rule of Assyria, and many others. But this was different: “He will save His people from their sins.”

Who do you know who needs Christ’s salvation? How might you share the good news of Jesus with that person?

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 1:22-23.

Jesus could have appeared to people in any way He chose to. Have someone read Hebrews 4:14-15. How is Jesus’ identity as Immanuel, God With Us, confirmed in these verses?

Why was it important for Him to become like us and be born as a baby? In theological terms, why is the incarnation crucial to the gospel message?

The fact that God Himself came to Earth in full humanity means we don’t worship or pray to a God who has no understanding of our struggles. For 33 years, Jesus lived with the temptations, restrictions, and limitations we all face in a world marred by sin and constrained to time. Not only is He merciful and all-knowing, but we have the assurance He is empathetic as well.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MATTHEW 1:24-25.

What can you surmise about the faith of Joseph from Matthew 1:18-25? What does this tell you about His relationship with God?

In verses 24-25, we read that Joseph obeyed everything God asked Him to do, with his whole heart, right then. He didn’t just follow instructions; rather he honored everything God was doing to the best of his ability. Joseph yielded his fear of others’ criticism, his husbandly desires, and the right to name the child to the Lord. In his obedience, Joseph revealed that God’s unfolding plan was worth more to him than anything else. He adjusted every aspect of his life to follow. He modeled for us the obedience that should characterize Jesus’ disciples.

How does your faith compare/contrast with Joseph's?

In what ways can you be more confident in God and His plan for your life?

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR ME

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

How does Joseph's story encourage you that God knows what He's doing even if you don't understand?

Is there something God has asked you to do that you haven't followed through on? How could you take steps toward obedience this week?

What opportunities could you create for some personal worship time this week? How would you describe the daily impact of "God With Us" in your life?

PRAY

Close today's meeting with a time of prayer for the faith journeys of the people in your group. Without mentioning names or specific details, pray for the people who are struggling with God, those who have disobeyed and are trying to correct their mistakes, those afraid of the future and how their circumstances will unfold, and those who have chosen obedience but don't yet know what that will look like.

COMMENTARY

MATTHEW 1:18-25

1:18. As Matthew launched the account of Jesus' birth, note that he was careful to highlight the title "Christ"—the title he used in the preceding passage that demonstrated Jesus had the right to claim deity. Watch for Matthew's use of this title throughout his Gospel. His purpose in writing was to make the case for Jesus as the promised King.

To understand the significance of some statements in this passage, it is necessary to understand the Jewish marriage customs of the day. The bride and groom went through a period of betrothal or engagement. In that culture and time, betrothal was virtually as binding as marriage. In this waiting period, Mary was found to be pregnant. Matthew was careful to protect the virtue of Mary and the supernatural origin of Christ.

Why is it so important that the Christ, the promised king, be born to a virgin? The virgin birth is more than a miracle to draw attention to the unique nature of this child. Because Mary was a virgin, only God could have been the father of Jesus, making Jesus the one and only God-Man in all the universe. God's plan would have been impossible if Jesus had been anything less.

1:19. A betrothed couple was as good as married, and breaking off the relationship was seen as divorce, even though the couple had not yet been married. It also helps us gain a better perspective of the emotional state of Mary and Joseph when we realize that she was probably in her teens at the time of these events. The minimum marriageable age in Israel was twelve for women and thirteen for men. To remain unmarried as late as one's twenties may have been cause for social embarrassment.

1:20-21. Mary, initially fearful of being an unwed mother, accepted God's revealed intentions for her. And Joseph, initially not all that sure himself about the "virgin birth," was originally thinking divorce, albeit quietly and with no public scandal. But when Joseph was approached by God through the angel, he accepted his role and did precisely as he was instructed by God. He kept Mary a virgin until after Jesus was born, after which their normal marital relations

produced other children who were the half-brothers of Jesus. And Joseph, as the legal heir to the throne, named their son “Jesus” as he was told. Mary and Joseph learned that the only way to follow God was to “trust and obey” His word. The character of these two young adults reminds us that God fulfills His purposes by using people of strong character and unquestioning obedience.

The name “Jesus” chosen by God for His Son (1:21) was, in that day and for centuries before, a common name with special meaning. Jesus is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew “Joshua,” meaning “Yahweh is salvation.” Jewish boys for centuries had been given this name Jesus with the frequency of today’s John or Mike. This reflects, in part, the hope of Jewish parents for God’s salvation from centuries of oppression under a succession of world powers. God’s choice of such a common name, when He could have chosen something unique, also emphasized that Jesus came in a way that identified with “the average Joe.” He came in love to become one of us, that we might be drawn to Him and become one of His. Jesus was approachable and touchable. He was one of us. “We do not have a high Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses” (Heb. 4:15). Jesus did everything to build bridges to us.

Yet, while the name Jesus was common, only this child was qualified as the God-Man to save His people from their sins (1:21). Jesus came at the strategically appointed time to seal the eternal salvation of all whom the Father had chosen.

1:22-23. In these verses Matthew provided the first of many direct quotes from the Old Testament, and the first of many Old Testament prophecies fulfilled by the earthly life of Jesus. These Old Testament quotes and prophecies show, in part, the linkage and unity between the Old and New Testaments, helping us understand how God was preparing the way for the Christ from centuries past. They also validate the identity of Jesus as the promised Messiah, strengthening our faith in Him. And their perfect fulfillment in Jesus gives us confidence that God is faithful and mighty to keep His word to us today.

Matthew is quick to support the doctrine of the virgin birth, and his quote in 1:23 is from Isaiah 7:14, originally written by the prophet Isaiah over seven hundred years before Jesus’ birth. This verse in its original Old Testament context seems to be referring to a child who was to be born in that setting of Isaiah’s day, rather than centuries later. However, Matthew’s inspired revelation fills the original statement out to its full intention. God is never so clearly present with His people as He is through His virgin-born Son, the Messiah of Israel. Jesus is Immanuel! The linguistic components of the name Immanuel and their individual translations—Im = “with,” anu = “us,” and el = “God”—make it clear that Isaiah’s original prophecy could refer in its fullest sense only to the promised Messiah. This name of Jesus is a strong argument for His deity.

1:24-25. The dream that had begun for Joseph in verse 20 ends in these verses with him waking and choosing to obey everything the angel had told him to do. This fine man had learned to “trust and obey.”