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LUKE 1:26-56; 2:1-19
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MAIN POINT

We must be willing to humbly follow God's plans, even when they don't match ours.

INTRODUCTION

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

When was a time you made plans and then God changed them for you? How did you respond?

In the Christmas story, we see God's use of the unexpected. In everything from the young virgin mother, to the birthplace in a stable, to revelations via dreams and angelic choirs, no detail about Jesus' entrance into the world was expected. Mary's humble willingness to accept, follow, and even celebrate God through the changes these unexpected events brought to her life is a lesson for us all.

UNDERSTANDING

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

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ LUKE 1:26-38.

From verse 27, what plans and dreams do you imagine Mary had?

How might you have reacted in Mary's position? Compare Mary's initial response to God's "interruption" in her life with the way you typically respond when God brings or allows unexpected changes into your life.

Mary was betrothed to Joseph, which made them legally husband and wife even though the marriage wasn't finalized. According to religious law, Joseph had the right to divorce Mary publicly or privately for her apparent adultery. In an instant, Mary's plans for her life were shattered. The quiet life she'd no doubt imagined with her future husband was suddenly and dramatically derailed. In the moment, it was probably difficult for her to see that God had swapped her ordinary existence for an extraordinary one. Despite the angel's presence and his assurance that she was in God's favor, Mary's initial response to the angel was an honest one: "How can this be?"

What is the difference between questioning God and asking questions of Him?

What do you think are some reasons Mary was able to face her troubling fears?

In Luke 1:38, we read that Mary showed resolve to obedience. She wholeheartedly accepted her new role and mission even though she didn't see the whole picture. No doubt, she wondered what her obedience would cost her—she didn't even know

what Joseph's reaction would be—but she trusted in the One who called her.

What circumstance in your life right now are you resisting taking on the attitude that you are the Lord's slave?

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ LUKE 1:39-56.

What is the significance of each statement in Elizabeth's greeting to Mary (vv. 42-45)? How did Mary respond?

Elizabeth named Mary as the most blessed of women. Additionally, Elizabeth acknowledged the unique nature of the Child whom Mary would bear. Elizabeth expressed her sense of unworthiness to receive Mary as a guest. Although God worked in a miraculous way to provide a son for Elizabeth, she proclaimed the superiority of the One Mary was carrying. In response, Mary burst out in a song of praise (1:46-55).

What reason did Mary give for her joy in Luke 1:48?

Why did God choose to bless Mary? Why would God choose to bless you and I?

The joy Mary knew at that moment came through her realization that God was her Savior. Mary rejoiced that God came near to her and rescued her from her lowly state. He bestowed on her a unique privilege. She experienced the freedom to serve the One who showered His grace on her. Later, she would realize that God's salvation in the Child she was carrying went far beyond earthly status and human privilege.

In verses 49-50, Mary rejoiced in God's attributes. What specific attributes of God does Mary draw attention to in these two verses?

How does reflecting on God's attributes affect the way you respond to Him when unexpected things happen?

What works of God does Mary mention?

How can you find joy in the reliability of God despite your circumstances? How can you rely upon Him in the face of delay, defeat, or even death?

Mary glorified God for three specific attributes—His power, holiness, and mercy. She also reflected on the “great things” God had done for her. When we reflect on God's character and activity in our lives, we become ready and willing to follow His plans, even when they do not match ours.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ LUKE 2:1-19.

The emperor Caesar Augustus reigned over the Roman Empire more than 40 years. During his long reign, Caesar Augustus provided a period of calm and a permanent organization of his empire that later facilitated the spread of Christianity. Caesar Augustus decreed that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

How do you think Mary and Joseph felt about the timing of the census?

After Mary and Joseph's arrival in Bethlehem, the time came for the baby to be born. Mary laid her newborn Child in a manger, an animal's feeding trough, because there was no room in the inn.

What are some ways God showed Mary His comfort, plans, and presence even in a Bethlehem manger?

What is the difference between analyzing God's actions and pondering them in your heart? Which one is a reflection of someone who willingly follows God in unexpected turns of life? Which one is the better reflection of you? Why?

APPLICATION

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

Is there a situation in your life that doesn't make sense? How does Mary's story encourage you that God knows what He's doing in that situation?

Name something God has asked you to sacrifice in order to follow His plan for your life.

What are some practical ways you can remind yourself that God is working His plan in your life?

PRAY

Thank God for His sovereignty and presence even when life doesn't make sense to you. Ask Him to give you a pondering heart, willing to accept and follow His plans as His humble servant.

COMMENTARY

LUKE 1:26-56

1:26-27. The announcement of Jesus' birth carried the authority of God. It came in the sixth month, a reference to the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy with John the Baptist. The term virgin emphasized the purity associated with a young, unmarried woman. Although engaged to a man named Joseph, Mary did not yet live with Joseph. In first-century Jewish culture, engagement (or betrothal) bound them together legally as husband and wife. The wedding and consummation of the marriage, however, followed at a later time. Luke identified Mary's husband, Joseph, as a member of the house of David. The Jews knew from the Scriptures that the future Messiah would be a descendant of the great King David. This fact supported the identification of Jesus as King. The Child to be born, then, would be identified with the lineage through which the Messiah had been promised (see Isa. 9:6-7; 11:1-5).

1:28-30. Mary was favored because the Lord set His undeserved grace upon her, not because she had earned good standing. Understandably, she was deeply troubled (Gk diatarasso; "confused, perplexed") by Gabriel's visit and greeting, wondering how she had come to receive such an honor. Gabriel's admonishment that Mary not be afraid was the same thing he said to Zechariah (v. 13).

1:31-33. Mary's conception would be miraculous because she was still a virgin (v. 34). The name Jesus is equivalent to the Hebrew Yeshua (Joshua), meaning "the Lord is salvation." In Genesis 14:18, God is referred to as "God Most High." Humanly speaking, Jesus' lineage would be traced legitimately through the royal family of David because Joseph, Jesus' adoptive father, was a descendant of David. This made Jesus heir to David's throne according to God's eternal covenant (see 2 Sam. 7:13,16).

1:34-35. The difference between Mary's response (how can this be) and Zechariah's (v. 18) is that Mary asked her question not from unbelief but from puzzlement (v. 38; see note at v. 20). The answer to Mary's question about how she could get pregnant without being intimate with a man is that the Holy Spirit would overshadow her and cause her to conceive. Because the Holy Spirit was the agent of conception, the child (the holy One; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15) would be the Son of God.

1:36-38. If ever Mary was tempted to doubt God's promise to her, she could recall Gabriel's words that nothing will be impossible with God, as had been shown in the lives of Abraham and Sarah (see Gen. 18:14). Mary's response is a classic model of humble commitment (I am the Lord's slave) and willing obedience (may it be done to me according to your word).

1:41-45 The baby (John) being filled with the Holy Spirit (v. 15) fulfilled Gabriel's prediction to Zechariah. But Elizabeth was filled with the Spirit also (v. 41), and the Spirit's revelations to her were apparently the source of her knowledge about the blessed roles and identities of Mary and her unborn child. When baby John leaped inside Elizabeth, she understood that he

had experienced great joy at Mary's presence.

1:46-55 Mary's hymn of praise is known as the "Magnificat," so named for the Latin term rendered as proclaims the greatness (Gk megaluno). It is similar in tone to the song of Hannah (1Sam 2:1-10).

1:46-49 There is a beautiful balance in Mary's hymn of praise. She expressed humble recognition of the greatness and holy nature of God and His grace (favor) on His voluntary slave, but also an awareness that God's unique calling on her life would result in all future generations calling her blessed. She viewed herself as both humbled and exalted.

1:50-53 These verses recall the descriptions of God's justice found throughout the Psalms (e.g., Ps 100:5; 103:11). Those who fear Him is an OT expression that is equivalent to the NT idea of faith. Fear of God is faith in God. His arm is figurative for God's power. God is a Spirit being (Jn 4:24) and does not have a physical body, but bodily metaphors are effective in communicating some of God's attributes and actions. God is against the proud... the mighty, and the rich, who imagine themselves self-sufficient. By contrast, He champions the cause of the lowly and the hungry, for they acknowledge their need for Him.

1:54-55 In sending Jesus to be born to Mary, God mercifully helped... Israel, in keeping with promises He had made centuries earlier to Abraham and his descendants (see Gen 12:1-3; 22:15-18).

1:56-57 Mary visited Elizabeth shortly after hearing she was "in the sixth month" of her pregnancy (vv. 36,39-40) and stayed with her about three months. Mary may have returned to Nazareth either shortly before or after the birth of Elizabeth's son, John. Given their spiritual bond and the great roles their sons would play in God's plan, it seems likely that Mary stayed for John's birth.

LUKE 2:1-19

2:1-6 Augustus (meaning "Exalted," a title approved by the Roman Senate in 27 b.c.) was the Roman Caesar from 31 b.c. to a.d. 14. This decree was a census for the purposes of taxation and military service. It is thought that Quirinius served two terms as Roman governor of Syria: from 6-4 b.c., and then a.d. 6-9. Jesus was born during the period of the first registration. There was also a census registration in Quirinius's second term (Ac 5:37). His own town refers to the town of Joseph's ancestral roots (Bethlehem in Judea), which was called the city of David because King David grew up there (1Sam 16:1). Joseph was descended from David (1:27). The trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem would have taken three days and covered roughly 90 miles. As months before in 1:27, Mary at this time was still only engaged to Joseph because they had not yet consummated their marriage via intercourse. Nevertheless, she was pregnant and ready to give birth.

2:7 The words her firstborn Son naturally implies that Mary later had other children (Mt 13:55-56). In that day, a newborn was wrapped... snugly in cloth to keep its arms and legs straight. That baby Jesus was laid... in a feeding trough indicates that the family was forced to stay in a stable, or perhaps a cave that served as a stable, because there was no other room available in Bethlehem.

2:8 The sheep used for temple sacrifices in Jerusalem were kept in fields outside Bethlehem. The work of shepherds was more important at night because of the threats from thieves and predators.

2:9-10 Though not named in the present passage, the angel of the Lord was Gabriel (1:11-20). The glory of the Lord was a bright light (in the midst of the darkness of night), indicating God's glorious presence. It is only natural to be terrified at the sight of an angel, not to mention a sudden, overwhelming light from the sky. The angel spoke to calm the shepherds and refocus their attention on the proclamation of the gospel (good news). All the people could refer to Israel, but given Luke's emphasis on the gospel spreading to the Gentiles, it probably means "all nations."

2:11-12 Savior (Gk soter) means "deliverer, redeemer." Messiah (Gk christos, equivalent to the Hb meshiach) means "anointed one," especially focusing on being anointed as king. Lord (Gk kurios) was used of secular rulers, but it is also the standard translation of the primary name of God in Hebrew, Yahweh. The shepherds would have been shocked to hear that a divine messianic ruler had been born, but to be told He was lying in a feeding trough and born to a man and woman of humble means would have seemed preposterous.

2:13-14 The hymn sung by the choir of angels (heavenly host) is well-known today as the "Gloria in Excelsis Deo," from the first words of verse 14 in the Latin Vulgate (glory to God in the highest). To give "glory to God" does not give Him something He otherwise lacks. Rather, it is a confession of the wondrous glory He forever possesses. The peace to be found on earth was not the Pax Romana (the "universal peace" of the Roman Empire), but peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ (Rm 5:1; see note at Lk 1:78-79). The people whom God favors are those who have found God's undeserved favor, or grace, through Christ.

2:18 All who heard it included anyone in or around Bethlehem with whom the shepherds had the opportunity to share their story (vv. 8-14).

2:19 It is possible that Luke gained much of his knowledge about what happened in chapters 1 and 2 from talking to Mary,

who recalled the things she had “treasured” (Gk *suntereo*; “to treasure, keep in mind”) in her heart. period, especially for those who were convicted of insurrection (Herodotus 3:125). Moreover, the display of Haman’s sons on the gallows would serve as a powerful deterrent to any who might contemplate further attacks against the Jewish people. Again, as in verses 10 and 16, the text emphasizes that the Jews were not out to pillage and enrich themselves, but only to defend their lives.