

2

GOD IS WITH US

Birth Narratives

*To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior,
who is the Messiah, the Lord.*

SESSION PREPARATION

Materials for this session available on the Leader Reference CD:

- Bible History Timeline (CHART)
- The Roman Empire (MAP)
- Palestine in Jesus' Time, 6–30 c.e. (MAP)

OVERVIEW

Christmas happens in your group this session. You'll read together the stories of Jesus' birth from Matthew and Luke. If participants know any of the stories of Jesus, most likely they will know these. The challenge then will be to read them afresh, ready for surprises.

Scenes in this Session

A Righteous Daddy (Matthew 1:18-25)

A Heaven-Favored Mama (Luke 1:26-38, 46-55)

The Center Moves (Luke 2:1-20)

Wise Men (Matthew 2:1-12)

STORY KEYS

- Joseph is righteous even before an angel visits him.
- Mary faithfully opens her life to God's ways.
- God summons lowly shepherds to be Jesus' first audience.
- The starry heavens above call wise men to adore Jesus.

What's the Story?

The central fact of the Christmas story is simple. It is an experience all humans share: a baby is born. This birth is made special by the specific anticipation of the baby's parents and common strangers alike; by the lowly delivery room; and by the peculiar attention foreign dignitaries pay to this child.

Angels figure centrally in the anticipation. They alert Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds around Bethlehem to the specialness of the child. Politics matter here too. No less a character than the Emperor Augustus, the king of all this ancient world, moves the action from domestic Nazareth to ancestral Bethlehem, prompting the strange circumstances of a manger birth. Then there are the wise men, who become witnesses to verify the exalted status of the newborn.

This is the stuff of annual pageants. How will you help your group break through familiarity to experience the strangeness?

What's the Message?

The nativity of Jesus opens important issues of faith and theology. Here are a few:

Divine Activity. Absent angels and astronomy, this is simply a family having a baby. Notice, though, how the story gets larger when heavenly beings enter the action. Angels usher the action along, ensuring that father and mother understand their special role and that an appropriate initial audience will attend the birth. Your group may wish to ask whether heaven is involved in their own normal days. What unseen activity makes their stories larger than meets the eye?

Faithfulness. Joseph and Mary consent to the good God intends to do through them. Confused by circumstances and tempted to distrust, Joseph decides to trust Mary at the angel's behest. Astonished by the strange turn of her life, Mary utters famous words: "Let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). This is what faithful people do. What does faithfulness look like when the angels are not obvious? That's a good question for your group.

The Virgin Birth. The great creeds of the Christian faith confess that Jesus was "born of the virgin Mary." According to Matthew's Gospel, "before they [Mary and Joseph] lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:18). In Luke's Gospel, it is the angel Gabriel who announces to Mary that she will conceive and bear a son. When Mary questions, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34), Gabriel says the Holy Spirit and the power of the Most High will overshadow her (1:35). This miracle lies outside our normal human experience. It may be that some in your group will struggle with the virgin birth of Jesus. You won't solve this matter in your group. If pressed, even the most skeptical will allow that God could produce a child the way the story has it. And if pressed, many who believe in the virgin birth will allow that a person can be Christian while wondering greatly about how Jesus could be born of a virgin.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Extra study Bibles
- Participant books
- Computer or DVD player; projector and screen or TV monitor
- Course DVD
- Reference materials
- Creative Corner materials (optional)
- Name tags
- Refreshments (optional)

P R E P A R E

1. Review chapter 2 in the participant book.
2. Review the overview and session plan for session 2 in the leader guide.
3. Watch the DVD segment for session 2.
4. Have equipment for projecting or viewing the DVD set up and ready to go.
5. Consider distributing handouts or projecting images of reference materials (see list on p. 28) in the session. You might want to do this during Telling the Story or while discussing the Background Files.
6. If you are having the class do the Creative Corner activity, gather any materials suggested.
7. Pray for your class members and for God's presence and guidance as you gather in God's Word.

L E A D E R P R A Y E R

God of that Bethlehem birth, draw me newly into the story. Give me eyes that see through the nativity scenes and pageants of my memory and into the harsh, real, astonishing, beautiful nativity of Jesus. Lead me so that I may lead, in Jesus. Amen.

CORE SESSION PLAN

GATHERING (10 MINUTES)

Welcome and check-in

Provide name tags again as you welcome participants to the session. If you are serving refreshments, have them set out ahead of time. Spend a few minutes asking if anyone wants to share any thoughts or insights from their personal “Mark it” reading for the week. You won't be able to spend much time on this, but having two or three people respond will encourage more in the group to make this weekly reading and devotional reflection a part of their routine.

Scripture and prayer

The Christmas story is beautiful and familiar to many. You may wish to begin with the most familiar piece—what became the “Linus Lines” in Charles Schulz's “A Charlie Brown Christmas.” Choose a group member to read Luke 2:10-14. Afterward, invite the group to join you in prayer.

The Core Session Plan is designed for use in one 60-minute period. The Core Session Plan can be extended 45–60 minutes by incorporating the group reflection time called Our Story, found at the end of the Core Session Plan. Suggestions for alternative settings and schedules are provided on page 13 of this guide.

But the angel said to [the shepherds], “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” (Luke 2:10-14)

God of a Bethlehem cattle stall, open the wonder of that first Christmas to us here. Break through any familiarity and fill us with the wonder of new parents and wide-eyed shepherds and impressed wise men. Challenge our lives with the faithfulness of these parents. Draw us back to the divine simplicity of a baby’s birth. Draw us to yourself and to one another through all we do here, in Jesus. Amen.

TELLING THE STORY (15 MINUTES)

You or your designated storyteller should now turn to telling the portion of the story that is highlighted in session 2. You may want to incorporate Background Files (participant book, p. 23), Leader Reference CD material (p. 28), and/or Story Keys (p. 28).

See the storytelling tips on p. 10 of this guide.

Use one or a combination of the following three options for telling the story, or devise your own.

1. Summarize and comment on the story as provided in the participant book.
2. Retell the story in your own words.
3. In advance, locate an image for each scene in the story. (For two excellent resources for visual images, visit www.textweek.com and www.heqigallery.com.) Project these images as you tell the story.

Story Theme Activity

In addition to or in place of the storytelling options above, consider using the following activity to introduce the key themes of the story.

The story of Jesus’ birth brings together a fascinating cast of characters: Caesar, the ruler of the Roman world; Joseph and Mary, an impoverished couple from a Nowhere place; Quirinius, the governor of Syria and in whose territory Nowhere lies; the anonymous keeper of a small-town inn; a handful of rough shepherds from the fields outside that small town; some exotic men of wisdom from somewhere in the east; Gabriel and a host of scary and holy angels;

and, finally, a baby boy. Write these names down the left side of a whiteboard or sheet of chart paper. As a group, cast this Christmas pageant with famous people. Use all actors, if so inclined, or open your casting call to political figures and other celebrities—or even people from your church or town. Give reasons for your choices.

PICTURING THE STORY (20 MINUTES)

Briefly introduce the reflection questions listed in this section in the participant book (p. 23). Then play the segment called *God Is with Us* (session 2) on the course DVD. Encourage the participants to watch the story unfold as artist Joe Castillo depicts the scenes of the story. Participants may be invited to write down their own questions.

When the segment is done, address the questions together as a large group, or ask the participants to discuss in smaller teams. Invite participants to share their own questions or observations. What difference did it make to see the story in this way?

SINGING AND PRAYING THE STORY (10 MINUTES)

We experience the familiar words of “O Little Town of Bethlehem” (Phillips Brooks, 1835–1893) differently after looking closely at the birth stories of Matthew and Luke. Worship swells when we dig deeper into the texts. Enjoy this musical gift even more consciously as you sing two of the verses together.

LOOKING AHEAD (5 MINUTES)

Mark it

Encourage participants to read and mark one or more of the passages listed in this section during the week ahead. Let the group know that at the start of next week’s session you will ask volunteers to share any insights they have from this exercise.

You are encouraged to do the “Mark it” exercise.

Next time

The child born in unusual circumstances has grown up as the next chapter of the story begins. The words of an unusual man and the voice of God point to who he is.

You and your group are encouraged to use the suggested readings listed in the participant book to prepare for session 3 and to review session 2. Also consider following the optional Gospels Reading Plan to read one entire Gospel or all four Gospels during this study.

You may find it helpful to take some notes or highlight items in the readings to share next week as part of Telling the Story.

OUR STORY

WELCOME

Whether done consecutively along with the Core Session Plan or planned for a separate time or location, consider providing hospitality in the form of refreshments.

Ideas for optional settings and schedules for this time are provided in the introduction on p. 13 of this leader guide.

- Arrange the room comfortably for small-group discussion.
- Introduce newcomers in the group.
- Begin with prayer, using the session prayer on p. 31 or another prayer of your choice. Ask volunteers to provide prayers, if they feel comfortable doing so.
- You may wish to begin by asking if anyone has a particular question or thought to share from the large-group session. As an alternative to discussing those questions, simply note them or write them down on chart paper or a whiteboard. Small groups may decide to discuss further.

CONVERSATION

The reflection questions are intended to help participants connect their own stories to the key themes of the greatest story. These questions do not require a certain amount of prior knowledge in order to respond. They can be used for personal reflection while reading or used to guide group discussion. It is unlikely a group could discuss all the questions in one discussion period. Don't be concerned about this. Here are some options for approaching the questions:

See the tips for leading and participating in small-group discussion on page 17 of this guide. Make available to all participants copies of the reproducible Guidelines for Small Group Discussion.

1. As leader, you may choose to focus on certain questions from the list.
2. Ask participants to suggest questions to discuss.
3. Divide the groups into smaller teams, assign the teams a designated

number of questions to discuss, and then have each group report back to the large group.

4. If you have a group that has the time and interest, you could assign each participant a question or two to think about and prepare a response during the week. These responses could be shared as discussion starters when the group meets for Our Story discussion time.

Note that responses to many questions will vary according to individual insights and context. Even so, a few guiding thoughts are provided below for some of the questions.

Questions and Responses

- *Has God ever led your life in an unexpected direction? How did you recognize that the prompt came from God?*
- *To what sort of “Mary moment” may God be calling you?*
- *We all wonder what kind of people God uses. What do you learn about faithful living from Joseph and Mary?*
- *How would you say that Jesus’ birth has re-centered the universe? How has Jesus’ birth “rocked your world”?*
- *The Greek word translated angel also means “messenger.” Who or what are God’s angels in your life?*
This question may produce answers from the mundane to the supernatural. Focus on bringing out the variety of responses within the group and on hearing one another well.
- *What do you think it means that those outside Jesus’ own people recognize he was born to be king?*
This last question has the potential to take you out of the classroom or living room and into the world. What are the boundaries when it comes to knowing God? This may open a conversation on Christian denominations or on world religions. Be ready.

Creative Corner

Depending on how your schedule is organized, you may wish to assign this activity for individuals or small groups.

Your group already may be fairly familiar with the Christmas story. You may wish to work with this familiarity by having people team up to draw a nativity scene—even before you read and study together. Then the rest of the time becomes a way of clarifying the story and deepening what the group knows.

As a group, draw a nativity scene on a big piece of chart paper. Distribute colored markers and have participants decide who or what should be included.

Provide colored markers, chart paper, or other materials that may be used to complete this creative assignment.