

Study Guide for
A Clear View of the Birth of Jesus
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Lecture One
Where Was the Manger and What Was the Inn?

Introduction: The purpose of this lecture is to recover the birth story of Jesus in Luke 2:1-7 from traditional misunderstandings of it.

Questions for Discussion

1. Reflect on the distinction between “The text and our traditional interpretation of it.”
Where do we acquire our “traditional understandings of the story?”
In what ways are Christmas traditions (right or wrong) about the birth of Jesus constantly reinforced in our churches and culture?
2. Are there other “traditional understandings” of the story that we have added to the text? Does the text tell us there were three wise men? Or does it tell us that there were three kinds of gifts? Did the wise men travel on donkeys, horses or camels? We think we know. But does the text tell us?
3. Has Dr. Bailey called the story a myth? Or has he suggested that our traditional understanding of it has added elements that are not there in the text? Is this distinction important?
4. What is the importance of the genealogy of Joseph for the Christmas story?
5. Why doesn't Joseph go to Elizabeth, his wife's relative?
6. Not very many women take three-day donkey rides in the last stages of their pregnancies. How long do you think the holy family was in Bethlehem before the birth? What difference does it make?
7. If we translate “kataluma” (Luke 2:7) as “guest room” how does this change of translation effect our understanding of the story?
8. Why were the shepherds naturally hesitant to visit the holy family? What is the significance of the sign given to them?
9. Why didn't the shepherds move the holy family to their own homes where their women could have taken care of the mother and child?
10. After hearing this lecture, do you think the town of Bethlehem welcomed or rejected the holy family?
11. Does this understanding of the story enrich the text? If so how? If not, why not?

Lecture Two

Three Surprises: His Ancestors, Joseph and Herod

Introduction: The purpose of this lecture is to recover the shock and the significance of the women in the genealogy of Jesus. It is also to see Joseph as a theologian with the courage of a prophetic vision of justice.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why does Biblical truth need to be rescued from familiarity?
Can you think of other texts where your traditional views of a well known story were revised for you in a positive way?
2. How important is it that women appear in the genealogy of Jesus?
Is this the beginning of a new equality between women and men in the Gospel?
What are some of the great stories about Jesus and women? Can you think of parables of Jesus that were created especially for women?
3. What do you think of Tamar? Did she do the right thing? How is she righteous?
4. Rahab had the courage to stand against her society in the name of God. How can we do the same in our day, particularly at Christmas time?
5. What is the significance of the presence of Ruth in the genealogy of Jesus?
What does she represent?
6. What do you think of Bathsheba? Why is she mentioned without her name? Why is she mentioned at all?
7. Describe the costly discipleship of Mary before the birth of Jesus? In what ways is her discipleship a model for us today?
8. Joseph is called a righteous man when he breaks the law of Moses. How can this be?
How might Joseph be compared to Martin Luther King? How is Joseph's obedience to God a model for us today?
9. What is the significance of the "Servant Song" of Isaiah 42:1-6 for a background for understanding Joseph and the decisions he made? What is the definition of justice that Joseph uses for his actions?
10. Herod, Peter and Joseph all "reflect" or "get upset." How would you translate this key word in the stories mentioned and why?
11. Has your mental image of Joseph changed as a result of this study? Can you describe the changes?

Lecture Three

Salvation and the Wise Men

Introduction: The focus of this lecture is on the amazing courage of Jesus and the Gospels where all people are identified as sinners in need of grace, regardless of how much they may have suffered. The oppressed, in their suffering, are not immune to the effects of sin. The promises of glory for the city of Jerusalem (Is 60: 1-22) were fulfilled in the birth of Jesus.

Questions for Discussion

1. Minority communities that suffer usually see themselves as righteous. Why is this?
2. When we reflect on salvation, from what do we want to be saved? Do we see others as the problem? Have you stories to tell of people or communities who usually blamed their problems on others?
3. From whom did Jesus' listeners want to be "saved?"
4. What is amazing about Jesus' response to the question put to him in Luke 13:1-5? How does his answer tie in with Matthew 1:21?
5. What is the significance in the shift from deliverance from "the hand of our enemies" in Luke 1:73 to "the forgiveness of their sins" in v. 77?
6. Where is "the East" for you? From where might the wise men have come?
7. How unpopular is the leader who tells a suffering community that *they* are sinners? Does this tendency help us understand why Jesus was killed?
8. Isaiah 60:1-22 makes great promises for the city of Jerusalem. What are they? Which five of them relate to the birth stories of Jesus?
9. Matthew and Luke selected stories about the birth of Jesus. How might they have been influenced by Isaiah 60?
10. Isaiah 60 tells of gifts of gold and frankincense. What is the significance of the additional gift of murr in Matthew 2:11?
11. Rich and poor, powerful and weak, Gentiles and Jews, wise and ignorant—all are represented at the manger. What is the significance of these contrasts? Are there other contrasts that could be mentioned?
12. Does it upset you to think that the wise men might have been Arabs? Would you prefer them to be Persians? If so, why?

Lecture Four

Herod's Atrocities and Simeon's Welcome

Introduction: This lecture reflects on why the massacre of the innocents is in the text and on various aspects of the presentation of Jesus in the temple along with the visit there by Jesus as a 12-year-old boy.

Questions for Discussion

1. In the middle of the account of the birth of a baby as Emmanuel, God with us, the reader of Matthew is confronted with one of the most brutal, violent accounts in religious history. Why did this happen and why did Matthew record it?
2. The mention of Anna in Luke 2:36-38 seems pointless. Why is she in the text?
3. How many times are men and women balanced in the birth stories and why?
4. In what ways is Mary a more noble example of faith than Zachariah?
5. Why does Jesus tell "double parables" like that of the lost sheep and the lost coin and what does this have to do with the Christmas stories?
6. Mary is told that a sword will pass through her soul "that the thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed." Dr. Bailey suggests two possible understandings of this puzzling phrase. What are they? Can you think of other possible meanings for this affirmation?
7. At the cross we discover the deepest levels of the motivations of key actors around the cross. The lecture reflected briefly on: the disciples, John, Peter, Judas, The High Priest and Judas. What "thoughts out of the hearts" of these people are revealed at the cross? Are these revelations related to what Simeon says to Mary?
8. How does Mary participate in the revealing of the evil that needs to be redeemed?
9. Visiting the temple at age 12 Jesus is first presented as a student. But that student quickly becomes the teacher. Where in the text does that happen? What is its significance?
10. What is the larger significance of the "three days" in which Mary and Joseph seek Jesus and do not find him. How do we participate in this "searching" and "finding"?
11. As you look back over this four lecture series, what aspects of the Christmas story are now richer for you and why?
12. For you, has truth been rescued from familiarity? If so, at what points?