



GROW.PRAY.STUDY

Weekly Study Guide



Unexpected Journey: An Unexpected Announcement

December 2, 2018

Scripture:

Luke 1:26-38 (Good News Translation)

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy God sent the angel Gabriel to a town in Galilee named Nazareth. He had a message for a young woman promised in marriage to a man named Joseph, who was a descendant of King David. Her name was Mary. The angel came to her and said, "Peace be with you! The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you!" Mary was deeply troubled by the angel's message, and she wondered what his words meant. The angel said to her, "Don't be afraid, Mary; God has been gracious to you. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king, as his ancestor David was, and he will be the king of the descendants of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end!" Mary said to the angel...How, then, can this be?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and God's power will rest upon you. For this reason the holy child will be called the Son of God. Remember your relative Elizabeth. It is said that she cannot have children, but she herself is now six months pregnant, even though she is very old. For there is nothing that God cannot do." "I am the Lord's servant," said Mary; "may it happen to me as you have said." And the angel left her.

Introduction to the Study

In this Advent Series, we are considering a very important journey: the journey to Bethlehem and our celebration of the birth of a savior. We will take this journey alongside the key players: Mary, Joseph, and Elizabeth, and hopefully learn more about the historical and theological meanings behind this event. Our hope is that, during this season that has become so busy and commercialized, we will refocus our energies toward the reason we celebrate: the coming of Christ, the Son of God, into this world.

Prayer: As we enter the Christmas season, O God, we thank you for coming to us, for saving us from our sins and for transforming the

world. We thank you for Mary, who bore the Christ child. May your spirit, the spirit of this season, fill us with all the love that you intended and may our many blessings be shared with those less fortunate. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

Daily Study Guides

MONDAY 12/3/18 “Can Anything Good Come From Nazareth?”

Read Luke 1:26-38

Picture the smallest, least important backwater town you've ever seen. Nazareth was that kind of place at the time of this story. Mary was probably no older than fourteen, given what we know of Israel's marriage customs then. We read this story with a sense of anticipation (“it's Christmas!”). But Mary had no reason at all to expect Gabriel's astounding news.

- The angel said to Mary, “Greetings, you who are highly favored!” But that didn't mean tinsel and bright lights, much less luxury and comfort. Mary's “favored” life brought her great challenges—starting with explaining her pregnancy to her fiancé and (probably) her parents. Do you sometimes wish God's favor toward you meant only happiness and ease? How does Mary's life show the sacrifices God's favor calls for?
- What would you look for if you had to choose the Messiah's mother? Why would God choose Mary? One major sign lies in her reply to the angel: “I am the Lord's servant.... May your word to me be fulfilled.” How can you respond to God as she did?

Prayer: Gracious God, help me respond to your call in my life by saying “yes” to you. Help me say, like Mary, “Lord, I am your servant, use me as you will. Amen.”

TUESDAY 12/4/18 “Is God's Promise True?” Read 2 Samuel 7:4-17

Gabriel told Mary her son would receive “the throne of his father David” (Luke 1:32). For a devout Hebrew like Mary, that phrase brimmed with meaning. God had promised David that his house and kingdom would “endure forever.” To human eyes, that wasn't happening—Rome ruled Israel. But the hope still lived. The Messiah, Israel believed, would be the promised “son of David.”

- No doubt David, Nathan the prophet, and most Israelites thought God's pledge applied to Solomon, David's heir as king of Israel. Only later events forced people to ask: is the promise true? If so, how? Have you ever found that God takes a longer-range view of your life than you do? How do you develop patience and trust in God's promises?
- In verse 8, God reminded David that he was as unlikely a person as Mary would later be. “I took you from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel.” Are you open to the likelihood that God wants to work through you?

Prayer: Holy Lord, give us the courage to be open to you working through us to bring about your Realm here on earth. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WEDNESDAY 12/5/18 “Prophecy Fulfilled?” Read Jeremiah 23:1-6

By Jeremiah's day, David's kingdom was no more. The leaders had failed. The Assyrian Empire destroyed the breakaway northern tribes. The southern kingdom, Jeremiah's home, would soon be overrun by Babylon's army. The prophet said God would raise up “a branch” (a descendant) of David. He would be a Savior, a good shepherd to God's scattered people.

- Focus on the actions and qualities the prophet described in verses 5-6. In what ways do you believe Jesus fulfilled these words in the course of his earthly life? Are there parts of this passage that you see as awaiting fulfillment in the future, when God's reign is fully established over the earth?
- Verses 1-2 remind us that God cares deeply how we use our influence (whether over one person or thousands). What do you do, in whatever sphere you have influence, to be a “shepherd” who builds people up, rather than destroying and scattering them? How do you want God to help you grow so you can be the kind of shepherd God blesses?

Prayer: Blessed savior, teach us to be the kind of shepherd you call us to be. Help us to see the needs of the world so we, too, will be conduits of your love. Amen.

THURSDAY 12/6/18 “Angels Among Us?” Read Daniel 8:15-18, 9:20-23

God, Luke reported matter-of-factly, entrusted the angel Gabriel with the crucial message to Mary. (Luke first named Gabriel in Luke 1:19, which we'll read in two weeks.) But who was this divine messenger? Israelites knew. They'd become familiar with his name in the visions of the Old Testament book of Daniel, where he also brought messages from God.

- What's your mental image of an “angel”? (If it's a plump infant with short wings, you're not alone. But that image is from medieval art, not the Bible.) What do these verses hint about the kind of being Gabriel is? Hebrews 1:14 asked, “Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?” How can you keep your heart and perceptions open to any angel messengers God may send you along your journey?
- Daniel says he met Gabriel while “watching the vision” and in prayer. Mary, as far as we know, was just going about her daily business when she met the angel. In what settings have you had your most vivid encounters with God's presence?

Prayer: Lord, sometimes we see angels in our lives and don't even know it. Help us be aware of the angels in our lives, whether they are heavenly angels or angels here on earth. Amen.

FRIDAY 12/7/18 “Light and Peace” Read Isaiah 9:2-7

“To us,” said Isaiah’s prophecy, “a child is born, to us a son is given.” His words echoed through the centuries. “Wonderful counselor, Mighty God....He will reign on David’s throne, forever.” Imagine Mary’s feelings as it dawned on her that the “us” in that famous prophecy now meant her. She was the one who would bear the long-promised child.

- “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.” Yet even after meeting Jesus, Paul would write, “Now we see a dim reflection” (1 Corinthians 13:12). In what ways has Jesus already lit up your dark world? In what ways are you waiting for the full glory of God’s light?
- We sometimes miss verse 5 of Isaiah’s message: “Every warrior’s boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning.” The child to be born, he said, would be called “Prince of Peace.” How can you more fully follow the Prince of Peace, and resolve conflicts in his way, in your day-to-day dealings with others?

Prayer: Gracious God, as we wait to celebrate the birth of your son, help us not only to look forward to his coming, but inspire us to do the work the Prince of Peace calls upon us to do. In his name we pray, Amen.

SATURDAY 12/8/18 “Quietly Changing the World”

Read Isaiah 42:1-4

Isaiah said God’s servant would do big things in quiet ways that might at first seem small to us. After Jesus grew up, his home town’s reputation led Nathanael to ask, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” (John 1:46). Yet in that tiny town, God found a teenager with no husband and no social status. Through her, God entered decisively into human history. God didn’t “shout”—but Jesus quietly changed the world in big, big ways.

- “He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.” Does the way God goes about changing our broken world ever feel too slow or weak to you? Do you wonder at times why God doesn’t simply write the divine laws in the clouds, or send a plague to wipe out all human traffickers or predatory loan sharks? In what quiet, loving, and effective ways can you join in God’s movement to transform our world for the better?

Prayer: Lord God, you chose such an “unlikely” mother for Jesus. Mary was very young, poor, with no social “connections” or status. I wonder what you saw in her. But sometimes I wonder what you see in me, yet you call me to be your physical presence for my family, my neighbors and co-workers, and others who cross my path. Help me see past my own

limits, as you do. Help me say, with Mary's humility, "I am the Lord's servant," and live my life for you as she did. Amen.

SOMETHING EXTRA: A Family Activity

Working as a family, learn more about Mary this week. Enlist younger children to help make a list of friends and family members whose name is Mary.

Older children can look into the origins of the name (hint: check out Moses' sister Miriam), and dig up facts and traditions about the young woman God chose to be Jesus' mother.

Plan a fun family time during the Christmas season to share what you have learned with one another. Say a prayer of thanks for Mary, who was willing to humbly make herself available for God's purposes.

Discuss how each of you can live into the spirit of service that this remarkable young woman showed.