

The Surprising Truth About God Christmas Lesson

Focal Text: Luke 2:1-20

Background: Psalm 24:1; John 3:16-17; Romans 5:8

Teaching Aim: To lead members to see the sovereign hand of God at work through all the incidents related to the birth of Jesus.

Connect with Life: Remind members of a question often used to determine a person's view toward life and its circumstances which is, "Is the glass half full or half empty?" In other words, does a person primarily view life in a negative or a positive way? Some people are difficult to be around because they are so negative about everything while others are a delight to be with because they are so positive. Ask members which of these best describes them? Share with members that this same division in attitude can be applied to the birth of Jesus. While much of what accompanied His birth can be considered negative, the overall positive view takes over when we look for the sovereign hand of God at work. Let's look at Jesus' birth from both sides of the picture in an effort to more clearly see God at work.

Guide Bible Study: Begin by reading Matthew 1:18-25. Ask members to list the apparent negative aspects of this story. For example: Mary's pregnancy presented a huge problem for her and for Joseph. It almost ended their relationship. This was not the normal way for things to go between a man and a woman. A quiet divorce was the plan. Then ask members to name the positive aspects of this experience that revealed the hand of God at work. For example: The angel's visit to Joseph. God revealed to Joseph that Mary would give birth to a son who would become the savior of the world. They were to name him Jesus. These occurrences were not by chance. They became the fulfillment of prophecy. This was all in keeping with God's plan for Mary, Joseph, and the world. Joseph was obedient and took special care of his special wife to be.

Then ask members to examine each part of the birth story of Jesus as recorded in Luke 2 looking for the negative (or how things might look through human eyes) and positive way (or looking for the hand of God at work) to look at each of these incidents. Their findings should include the following:

1. Caesar Augustus orders a census (Luke 2:1-3). Looking through human eyes at these aspects we might see the following:
 - a. This census was ordered by an immoral Roman leader. He forced his Pax Romana (Roman peace) on the world. He declared himself as a Lord. Caesar Augustus brutally murdered any perceived enemies. He achieved peace in the empire by suppressing human rights and liberties. Everyone was forced to submit to totalitarian rule.
 - b. Joseph and Mary were among the conquered peoples of the empire. They were not free citizens and this enforced tax reminded them of their enforced subjection.
 - c. Mary and Joseph were forced to make a difficult, 90-mile journey from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem. What a terrible experience for a pregnant woman as she rode a donkey for three days over a very difficult terrain. They climbed over 100 feet during their trip.

2. Looking for God at work will reveal the following:
 - a. Even though it appears that Caesar Augustus was in control of this situation, we can clearly see the hand of God at work. Centuries earlier, Samuel had journeyed to Bethlehem to anoint the shepherd boy David to be king of Israel, even while Saul remained in power. Now in this city of David, a child is born to inherit the throne of his ancestor David, even while Herod, Quirinius, and Augustus ostensibly remain in power.
 - b. Caesar Augustus unknowingly made it possible for an Old Testament prophecy regarding the birth of Jesus to be fulfilled regarding his place of birth. Since Luke was writing to Gentiles, he did not include this prophecy from an Old Testament with which they would not be familiar.
 - c. Luke included the mention of Caesar Augustus because he knew that his sponsor, Theophilus, would have been interested in this historical fact. This also helped to verify the historical roots of the Christian faith.

3. The birth of Jesus (Luke 2:4-7). Looking through human eyes:
 - a. The difficult journey they had to take has been previously mentioned. It had to be especially difficult for Mary. Nazareth was located in Galilee, to the north of Judea. Mary and Joseph were forced to be away from their family at a very special time in their lives.
 - b. Joseph and Mary were very ordinary people in the eyes of their peers. There was nothing special about them that would cause people to think that they could be the parents of the Messiah.
 - c. Mary and Joseph could find no place to stay on the night that Jesus was born. They were forced to seek shelter in a cave or a cattle stall. Certainly, this was no place fit for a king to be born.
 - d. Jesus was wrapped in common strips of cloth and placed in a feeding trough. Mary could surely have used the assistance of her mother or some other relative with the birth process.

4. Looking for God at work will reveal the following:
 - a. Mary and Joseph may have felt alone but they were most certainly not alone. They had the very presence of God and his angels in their midst. The heavenly host was very much a part of this birth.
 - b. Mary and Joseph were very special people in the eyes of God. They were chosen for this most important event in the history of mankind. God considered them to be very special people that could be trusted with the most important responsibility that was ever given to a human being.
 - c. This humble dwelling actually became one of the ways for the shepherds to locate Jesus. The birth and life of Jesus reflected the greatest act of humility ever witnessed by mankind. It is only appropriate for his life to begin in such a humble place.
 - d. As with the stable, the swaddling clothes became one of the signs for the shepherds as they searched for Jesus. There were other babies born in Bethlehem during those days and the shepherds needed help in finding Jesus.

5. The angels visit the shepherds (Luke 2:8-14). Looking through human eyes we might see the following:

- a. The shepherds were not highly thought of, to say the least. Why shepherds? They were among the lowliest of the emperor's subjects. In the first century shepherds were not considered desirable company. They were poor, illiterate, and thought to be dishonorable. They were also considered thieves because they grazed their flocks on other people's property. They were despised people.
 - b. These shepherds were probably tending the sheep that would be used in the sacrificial system at the temple. There should have been nothing special about these particular shepherds that would qualify them to receive an angelic visit such as described in these verses.
6. If we look for the hand of God at work here, however, we will see the following:
- a. These particular shepherds most likely were godly men who were looking for the Messiah. These were the type of people that God usually spoke to in such special ways. Otherwise, they would not have considered this to be "good news of great joy." Also consider the haste with which they left to go to Jerusalem. They were excited!
 - b. Jesus is identified with shepherds. Jesus was the sacrificial "Lamb of God" and the "Good Shepherd." This is a beautiful picture of our Lord's humiliation and identification with men, even the most humble of men, rejected and despised men.
 - c. The news of Jesus' birth is for all people. Not just the powerful and elite. These shepherds become the first to be able to see the savior and to tell others about the birth of the Messiah.
7. The shepherds go to Bethlehem and give testimony to others about what they witnessed (Luke 2:15-20). Looking through human eyes, we see:
- a. Once again, the absolute humility of the conditions surrounding the birth of Jesus and the type of people who were Christ's first visitors. Shouldn't he have been born in a place of royalty and been visited by the rulers and leaders of that day?
 - b. Would anyone have really believed the report of the shepherds? They were not even allowed to bear testimony in court because of their unreliability.
 - c. Did Mary really believe what she was hearing from the shepherds? It was some time before she totally accepted that Jesus was the Messiah.
8. What about the hand of God?
- a. The shepherds believed what they had heard from the angels. They were obviously very ready to verify all that they had heard as they went with haste to Bethlehem. Once again, we have to believe that they were looking for a savior.
 - b. The shepherds were the first to have the opportunity to witness to others about the birth of our savior. This they did freely and quickly after their visit to the stable.
 - c. The shepherds glorified and praised God for all that they had heard and seen. They were committed believers who impacted all who heard their witness and Mary as well. They could no longer be ignored or placed in a category of worthless people.
 - d. It was the arrival of the shepherds which finally brought all the inconvenience and unpleasant circumstances of the birth of Jesus into its true spiritual light. What had once appeared to be only a sequence of unfortunate events, now is revealed to be the hand of God working through history to accomplish God's will. If Jesus came to bring salvation and deliverance to the poor, the oppressed, and the despised of this world, why not

announce it by means of the despised and rejected? The apostles of our Lord were just such men (Acts 4:13).

Encourage Application: Then ask members to share some principles that they can use in other areas of their life to help them always look for the hand of God at work. These principles can help them know that they are in God's hands rather than victims of life's circumstances.

Suggested principles include the following:

1. We are not helpless subjects of a government that seems to always be looking for ways to take more of our money and make life as difficult for us as possible. God is in control of our lives, not any government or government agency.
2. Sometimes we have to do things that appear not to be the best for us. For example, a forced relocation in order to keep a job. We are never at the mercy of any human being or organization. God is in complete control of our work lives as well as where we live.
3. Many times, we are forced to deal with life's circumstances that appear to be less than the best. For example, a negative report from the doctor. We are never to feel that we are victims of life's circumstances, no matter how bad they appear to be. God is in complete control of our life, even our death, and nothing happens to us that He does not direct.
4. At times we may struggle with the value of our life. We may not have achieved enough to be considered a success as the world measures success. It is in times like this that we need to remember that God has always chosen to use ordinary people to do extraordinary things for Him. God is looking for humble people to do His work.
5. We may not feel that we can be effective witnesses because we have such a simple testimony. We need to be reminded that God expects us to bear witness to what has happened in our lives, regardless of how routine it may sound. We are not expected to save people with our testimony. We are expected to point people to Jesus with our lives and words.
6. Sometimes we may feel that our worship is ineffective. When we live our lives in constant search for the hand of God at work, this will not be the case. We will always find reasons to "glorify and praise God for all the things we have heard and seen."

Close with prayer and a challenge for members to apply these principles to their lives this week.