

Matchless

The Life and Love of Jesus



angie smith

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STUDY AND TEACHING

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Dedication

For my dad, who left me his pen and told me to use it—everything I write will be because you told me I could, including this.

And for my (other) Audrey, who believed in this enough for both of us and reminded me that even the hardest pages are safe if you know the story has a good ending.



MEET THE AUTHOR

Angie is married to Todd Smith, lead singer of the Dove Award winning group Selah, and mom to Ellie, Abby, Kate, Audrey, and Charlotte. Angie desires to walk with Jesus authentically through the inevitable joys and sorrows of this life in a way that reflects His faithfulness to never leave us and never forsake us and to encourage other believers to do the same. This passion, along with a deep desire to understand and help others understand the Bible, has fueled her writing since 2008. She is the best-selling author of the Bible study *Seamless: Understanding the Bible as One Complete Story* as well as two children books and several books for adults including *Chasing God* and *What Women Fear*. She holds a master's degree in developmental psychology from Vanderbilt University. Angie and Todd live in Nashville with their girls, their dog, Finley, and their cat, Oliver.

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INTRODUCTION

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him [that is, Christ]: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse . . . You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."¹

That's always been one of my favorite quotes by C. S. Lewis, and it's a perfect way to start this study. No matter who you are, you must ultimately decide what you believe to be true of Christ. Was He a real person? Was He the Son of God? The answer to these questions is either *yes* or *no*. There is no in-between. But understand, those are two very different questions.

I believe most people in the world would say Jesus was a real person who took His place among well-documented leaders and historical events. But many of those same people struggle with the fact that Jesus showed up telling folks He was the Promised One, the Messiah, the Savior. That declaration, as you can imagine, is a bit controversial. And perhaps, a bit uncomfortable.

Let me go ahead and set the tone for the rest of the study: there will most certainly be A LOT of information—maps, charts, and facts that can make you a stand-out student. Quite frankly, I would be the first one wearing a smug smile and fanning myself with an A+ paper. I love knowing details, and I'm the consummate academic. That doesn't necessarily mean I'm a scholar—it just means I'm a control freak and can't function without knowing I've fully strangled the mystery out of every possible scenario and topic. In other words, I AM FUN.

If only true faith entailed sitting in a classroom with a highlighter and eighty-seven versions of the Bible while listening to three-point sermons. Ahh. But alas, here is what I've found: that's not how this thing works.

The truth is, knowing about Jesus means nothing if you don't *know* Jesus.

And because I'm ninety-eight percent sure that one-star Janet has already left the room, I'll also confess this: that highlighted statement above makes me uncomfortable because it forces me to confront how many times I'm still prone to write only "correct" answers in blanks.

Here are a few facts:

My father was born on May 21, 1945, and he died on April 3, 2019.

He was brilliant. You would likely know some of his TV marketing campaigns. I can pretty much guarantee it. He liked to smoke good Cuban cigars every so often, and he always sat in the chair on the left side of the dinner table. His feet pointed outward when he walked, and he always dreamed he would be a published author.

When he died, he had been married to my mother for more than forty years. He loved worn-in flannel shirts and making egg sandwiches. He always greeted people with the same quickly raised hand, a tilted chin, and a smile that only showed his top teeth.

He loved when I would put my sleeping bag next to his in the backyard so he could teach me about the night sky. I never understood more than ten percent of what he was saying, but I loved to listen to him.

He pinched his nose and tossed his head back when he was laughing his biggest laughs, and he called me “kid” for my entire life.

Of all the titles I’ve held in my life, “Dane’s kid” was the one I was most proud of.

I could fill pages with this kind of information.

But here’s the truth—you will never smell his cigars or hear his laughter. You can’t know what it’s like to settle into the nook of his chest when you’re crying or smell the old leather seats in the 1957 MGA we restored together. You can listen to me tell you everything you need to know in order to sketch an image, but you would never be able to paint it with all the nuances of color and shade.

When I think of my dad, I don’t recall facts; those are available to everyone. What no one else will ever know is the way it felt to be loved by him for forty-three years. It’s the colors that make the art mine.

And when it comes to Jesus, most of us can’t start there, can we? The facts are familiar but the intimacy is not.

His story has been told and retold for hundreds of years, but I can’t help but wonder if you’ve missed the part that makes it come to life. The part where He tells you what He has known before time began. The beautiful, impossible, unavoidable, life-shaking truth that drips color and life onto black and white pages.

You, kid ...

Yes, you. You aren’t just an observer.

In fact, He has painted the nuanced colors of your life onto the canvas, and I wonder, *Have you seen it there?*

I know. I have a hard time with it too. But a wise man once taught me this simple lesson: I don’t have to understand the way the stars shift in order to love the voice of the teacher.

So join me on this eight-session adventure as we learn the ways and wonders of our matchless Savior. We may not be able to answer all the questions or fill in all the blanks, but we’ll see the colors of His story and, in His story, find our own.

Angie



two

WEEK 2

PREFACE: THE EARLY YEARS

The alternate title for this week was, “I’m sorry about your nativity set.”

And here’s where I tell you that some of what I learned for this study (not just for this week, but throughout) was actually shocking to me. I know, I know. Your confidence level is rising by the moment.

But that’s honestly one thing that makes Scripture so fascinating:

You can never, ever, ever learn everything there is to know. There are always layers and symbolic references and correlations and metaphors and on and on. If you understand all of that and you’re hungry for more, then have no fear: the entire Book of Revelation awaits you.

As you may have gathered, we’re going to meet Jesus this week. Before we get started, I’m going to ask you to take a few minutes and think through what you understand about Mary’s pregnancy and Jesus’ birth—if this doesn’t make for TV ratings, I don’t know what does.

Hey, Joseph. How was work? Did you like the lunch I packed? Did you talk to your boss about taking next Tuesday off so we can go donkey shopping? Also, I found out I’m going to deliver the Son of God.

I joke, but the reality is that the details we rarely consider are actually what allow us to step into the story. Picture Mary and the baby Jesus. I’m going to go out on a limb and say you didn’t picture Him screaming while Mary tells Joseph she has tried everything and He won’t stop. She has run her fingers along His gums, and there aren’t any teeth breaking through. *He’s probably just overtired, she thinks. He does feel pretty warm, but He isn’t listless. Should I take Him somewhere? Bathe Him?*

She is exhausted. It’s the third night in a row that He’s been inconsolable, and it’s always when she lays Him down for bed. Finally it hits her: ear infection.

So she sits upright and rocks Him until He sighs and she feels His full weight press onto her. She doesn’t move for hours, knowing it’s the only way to keep Him asleep. As she pats His back over and over, she decides she’ll go three houses down in the morning; Beth will make one of her concoctions, and it’ll only be a few hours until He’s back to His normal, happy self.

Motherhood isn’t for the faint of heart.

Especially when you’re raising the Messiah.

GROUP SESSION GUIDE

SESSION 2: REVIEW WEEK 1 HOMEWORK

- * What new truths did you learn from your homework this week?*

- * Day 1: Think for a moment about Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden and the lie they believed. In what areas of your life right now do you wonder if God is really for you and if He has your best in mind?*

- * Day 2: This day of study covered a lot of history for the people of God. How does seeing God's intentionality and presence in each of these circumstances make you feel? What might it say about His character, even in the hard seasons of life?*

- * Day 3: Explain the story of the first Passover. Do you see threads of that story in other Bible passages? If you're just learning of the story, what about it stuck out to you?*

- * Day 4: What's one of the best things that the law does for us? What about what it did for the people of Israel back in the day? How does that explain a bit of the culture that Jesus was born into?*

- * Day 5: Did you learn anything new about Jesus' family tree and the history of Israel today? How does understanding Jesus' ancestry help you see Jesus in a new light?*

DAY 1

THE CULTURAL CLIMATE

Welcome, welcome. I hope you had a great trip. Four hundred years have passed and things are going to look a little different around here. Let me give you a quick tour.

*Location
of Israel*

world map

Palestine

Israel is also referred to as Palestine, a name the Greeks applied to the entire southeastern Mediterranean region.



There's a running joke in my family that I'll never be able to deny: maps scare me and my sense of direction is terrifyingly bad. Like, way worse than what you're picturing. I get lost on roads that are less than ten miles from my house. If I should take a wrong turn anywhere within those ten miles, I have no clue how to find my way. But I'm determined not to be afraid of these maps because, God bless them, they've been all alone in the back of the Bible for so long.

I confess, I'm reporting the following information based on the assessment of both my brilliant husband and my friend "The Google®."

So if you fall in the directionally-challenged camp, I'm with you. I'm for you.

Speaking of my husband, I must tell you the story of the day I decided that a one-thousand-piece puzzle would be a fun bonding experience for us as newlyweds. (I know, some of you are already shaking your heads.) I ended up realizing I had married a psychopath. You guys, he started with random pieces. WITH NO BORDERS. This kind of madness can only be dealt with by prayer and constant monitoring.

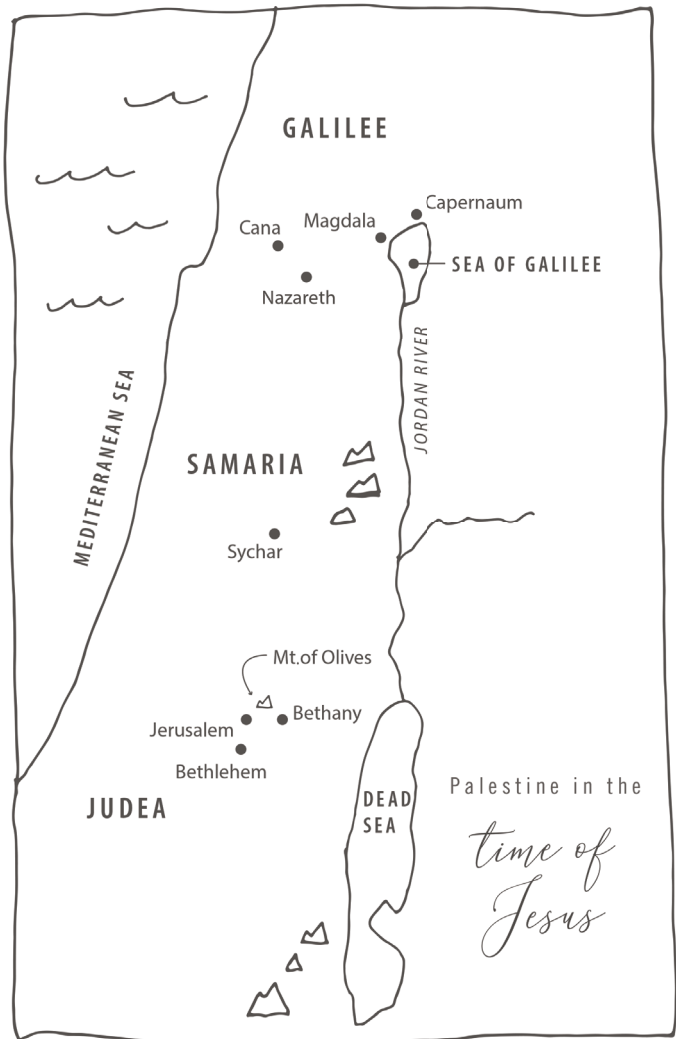
I mean, come on, everyone knows you have to get the shape and size of the puzzle before you start randomly piecing together people's heads and words (which, frankly, is also a cop-out from doing the hard work of sorting sixty-eight shades of blue sky) because they just won't make as much sense if they aren't in context.

The maps give us shape and size—context. So take a look at the maps; gaze at them. Now, make them your friends. (There's a giant map on the inside back cover of your Bible study book, too.)

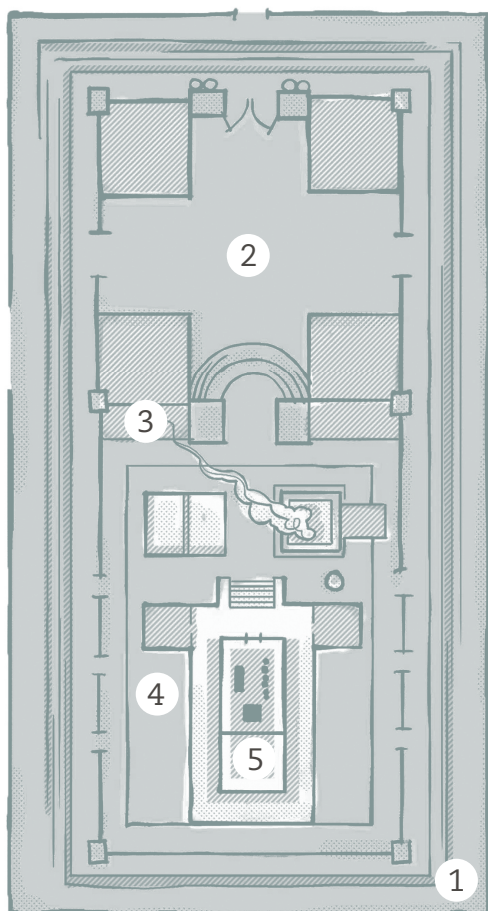
Especially note the Palestine map because we'll be traveling around this area a lot. Mark this page because you'll be looking back when it's time to track our travels.

While we're looking around, let's remember that the temple was in Jerusalem.

**What do you remember about it from earlier in our study?
This is a free-for-all, so just go for whatever comes to mind.*



- | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| #1 Court of the Gentiles | #4 Court of Priests |
| #2 Court of Women | #5 The Holy of Holies |
| #3 Court of Israel | |



Now, let's take a closer look. And keep in mind this is the second temple. Not as spectacular as the original. There are a couple places I want you to notice: the court of the Gentiles, the court of women, and the holy of holies.

So you've memorized the layout of the temple and considered tattooing it on your person, yes? No. Well, that might not be the best choice.

And now for a wee bit of history. You're going to be really impressed with yourself at the end of today's work, so hang in there.

At the time of Jesus, the **Romans** were ruling over Israel. They allowed Israel to run its own little area, but only to a certain extent. The Jews were permitted to make decisions regarding their religious issues, but if it was a civil matter, the Romans handled it. The Romans weren't super fond of the Jews, but they needed to keep up a good relationship because their land was important for trade.

Tiberius was the emperor of Rome (which means he was the big guy) during the ministry of Christ. To make sure the Israelites weren't causing any trouble, the Romans sent down a representative to keep an eye on things and report back to Tiberius. The guy appointed for this fun job was **Pontius Pilate**, the governor of Judea.

**So let's make sure we've got this straight: Is Pontius Pilate a Roman or an Israelite?*

Perfect.

Rome also allowed a local guy there to rule over the people (he was considered their king), and his name was **Herod the Great**.

We're going to talk about him a little later, but for now, let's meet a few other people who are going to be on our radar for the next few months.

The first one is **Caiaphus**. He was the high priest. He's the top dog for the Jewish people, and he's basically

considered the holiest guy around. What's funny is that the Jews didn't necessarily love the high priest because he was often in cahoots with the Romans.

**Was Caiaphus a Jew or a Roman?*

Let's keep trucking.

Underneath Caiaphus were a couple different groups of Jewish people. The first group was called the **Pharisees**. They were completely obsessed with making sure that everyone was obeying ALL of the laws, and they found great joy in correcting people who weren't. They were considered (especially by themselves) to be much holier than the "average" people because they were very well-educated about the Old Testament. They also liked to make up laws at their own leisure, which definitely made them a good hang.

Another religious group at the time was called the **Sadducees**. They were similar to the Pharisees, but unlike the Pharisees, they only accepted the written law (from the Torah) and not the oral tradition that had developed over time.

Another difference between the two is that most of the Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection or life after death. They didn't really want to deal with all the spiritual stuff—they preferred to live very opulent lives with a big focus on pleasure and wealth. I guess if you're only going to have this life, you want to whoop it up while you can.

**Write down your favorite food.*

Sorry—this stuff is dense and doesn't leave a whole lot of room for interaction. I really do care about you being involved.

OK, so these are the two big groups of religious sects. Now let's break it down some more:

The **scribes** were people who studied and interpreted the Law and taught others about it. They spent hours and hours copying the words of the Law with incredible precision (which is why we have such wonderful copies of the Old Testament). They could also draw up legal documents if needed. That fact will come in handy for them later in this story.

The main role of the **HIGH PRIEST** was to be in charge of the temple worship. Aaron was the first high priest, and his descendants were to continue to fill this role. Usually the high priest served for life. By Jesus' day, the office had lost its hereditary tie to Aaron. Herod the Great started appointing and dismissing the high priest as he saw fit. The Romans continued this practice, offering it to political favorites.

ORAL TRADITION

(also known as oral law or tradition of the elders), was a body of laws that were added to the written Law of Moses. They were only in oral form until written down in the Mishnah in the second century.¹ They were intended to help people know God's will in specific situations but instead ended up becoming burdensome and more overbearing than the law itself.²

Keep in mind that the general population at this time was illiterate, so they were dependent on those who could read in order to hear and understand Scripture.

And then there were the **zealots**. The zealots were men obsessed with the nation of Israel being independent, and they were SUPER into political stuff. As the name indicates, they were, umm, passionate.

And now to the **rabbis**. They were the religious heads of the synagogues, but they didn't really hold any power; they were more like educated spiritual and religious leaders.³

And now, the moment you have been waiting for ... drumroll please.

The **Sanhedrin**. I know, I know. It's exciting(ish).

This one's going to be easy for you, though. The Sanhedrin is the highest Jewish council in the time of Jesus. It consists of seventy-one men (Sadducees and Pharisees) and the high priest was "the president" (you remember who that was, right?). These guys are called the elders.

Now listen. We're going to end with a quiz. If you want to cheat, just remember that God is watching you.

** What nation was ruling the Israelites?*

** What is the high priest's name?*

** Who is the emperor of Rome during Jesus' ministry?*

** What was Pontius Pilate sent to do in Judea?*

** Who was the local leader considered to be the Israelites' king?*

** What two groups made up the Sanhedrin?*

I've never been more proud of you. And I pinky promise this is the only day of study that has this much stuff that seems irrelevant. I'm well aware that you're going to either thank me or hate me later.

DAY 2

BEFORE THE BIRTH

So here we are. One day away from meeting the Messiah.

I just want to reiterate this: you've done a lot of work to get here. My prayer is that because of that fact, you're going to see Jesus in a new way.

**Before we get into the story, let's think back to the person who was considered the king of Judea. Do you remember his name? Clue: it ends with, "the Great."*

**Read Luke 1:5 and high five yourself for reading it and understanding the context instead of skipping over it.*

**Now read Luke 1:26-38 and try to put yourself in the story, imagining the details of the interaction.*

Most Christians can give a version of this story that hits the important details, but now we're going to commit to being curious about every word. That's my natural bent; I want to dig down deep because that's where the treasure is. So keep that in mind for this next activity.

**Read that same section of Scripture again, and write down anything you didn't see the first time or something you're curious about.*

Good job. Unless it's empty. You're going to at least want to put a sentence in there in case other people think you are blowing off your homework.

I think we can probably agree this is a pretty jarring interaction for several reasons, not the least of which is that Mary's only about fifteen years old and is being told that she will be the mother of the Son of

God. After Gabriel tells her not to be afraid, he explains what is going to happen next.

Over and over, the angel uses definitive terms: “You have found favor with God ... you will conceive in your womb ... you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High ... God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:30-33).

Jacob, David—we know those names!

If you don’t remember who they were, skip on back and read your notes. One of the prophets we’ll be hanging out with today is Isaiah. And in case you forgot, prophets were chosen to warn the people and prophesy about what was to come even though they knew they would be rejected, hated, and possibly put to death.

How was your day at work, Isaiah? For dinner we’re going to have chicken and sadness.

This icon indicates when a passage about Jesus’ life points back to an Old Testament passage or prophecy.

OT

**Let’s read what he wrote in Isaiah 7:14. Beautiful, isn’t it?*

Behold, the virgin shall conceive ...

Immanuel, “God with us.”

And just in case you wondered if Mary and Joseph took liberties with their Son’s name, they didn’t. Immanuel isn’t a name—it’s a description of the coming Child.

The Child we’ve been waiting for.

Mary doesn’t question whether or not it’s going to happen; she just wants to know how it will happen. I’ll be honest, I’m not one hundred percent sure Gabriel’s explanation would really make me feel confident about the whole thing.

Then Gabriel mentions that Mary’s barren cousin, Elizabeth, is pregnant. It’s a lot to take in, yes?

The only other words we hear her utter in the entire interaction are: “Behold I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). She submits herself completely, bowing her heart to the will of God. Beautiful. Also dinner with Joseph is going to be awkward.

After Joseph learns of the pregnancy, he decides to divorce Mary quietly. (Did you catch that? Divorce his fiancée? How do you divorce someone you aren't married to? Turns out that in this time period, being engaged was a legal matter). Fortunately, an angel comes to him in a dream and clarifies that indeed, his fiancée will soon be carrying the Savior of the world. Aah. Got it. Makes sense now.

Interesting fact about Joseph? He never utters a single word in Scripture.

While we're on the subject of not speaking ...

Mary's cousin Elizabeth is married to a guy named Zechariah, and it turns out that Gabriel had also visited him to give him good news.

**Read Luke 1:11-23 and summarize what happens.*

BETROTHAL

Similar to an engagement to be married. However, in the first century, betrothal was as binding as marriage. It could only be broken through a divorce.⁴

On the surface it seems to be the exact same situation as Mary's, but in reality, Zechariah was expressing doubt, which is why God made him temporarily mute.

I can't help but notice random parts of the Bible that seem like they don't really have any real information. Like Luke 1:23. Basically he finished his day at work and went home. Why is that even recorded?

Well, if you think about it, the Gospels are being written and passed down based on eyewitnesses who were recording what they were seeing and experiencing. And here's something else I want you to keep in mind: these were ordinary people who were writing down a story based on true experiences.

They weren't writing "the Gospels." They were writing accounts of Jesus' story to tell people about what had happened. In no way did they imagine their work would eventually be combined and included in a book that would withstand thousands of years of scrutiny.

And now back to our story ... soon after Mary finds out she's pregnant, she travels to Judah, where her cousin Elizabeth is living, no doubt to see whether Elizabeth is pregnant. Keep in mind this trip isn't a walk across town. Elizabeth lived about eighty miles away. I'm not sure I would drive that far. And in the first months of pregnancy? That's going to be a no, Janet.

**Read Luke 1:39-45. What was the baby's reaction? What did Elizabeth proclaim?*

**Now read Luke 1:67-75. Who was Zechariah talking about here? How do you know?*

God had a special purpose for Elizabeth and Zechariah's baby boy. (We'll get to the rest of his story in a few days.) But isn't it interesting that this little family was the first to confirm what Gabriel had told Mary—the Child inside of her was the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

**Read Luke 1:46-55. How does Mary respond to Elizabeth's proclamation?*

Mary's praise in Luke 1:46-55 is often referred to as the Magnificat. This is Latin for the word *magnify*, which is the opening verb in her hymn.⁵

**Summarize what Mary says about God.*

**And how do her words point us back to the Old Testament?*

Mary offers a song of praise to God for what He had done and would do to fulfill what He had started hundreds of years before.

In a matter of days, this young woman and her humble carpenter husband would become a part of the greatest story of all time.

It will begin with what seems like an ordinary sentence:

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

LUKE 2:1

DAY 3

THE BIRTH OF JESUS

And here we are. The place you probably thought the study was going to start. Today is the day we're going to meet our Messiah and learn more about His birth.

Here's the plan: as we go through the rest of Jesus' story, I'm going to ask you to look back in the Old Testament (a lot). You'll understand why I made you spend so much time back there. Don't worry, I'll have mercy and put some of the Scripture in your Bible study book.

** Quiz question (because we're going to be visiting them often): What was the job of the prophets?*

** One more: How much time has passed since the end of the Old Testament?*

We mainly started hearing from the prophets when the kingdom split, which was like eight hundred years before the time of Christ.

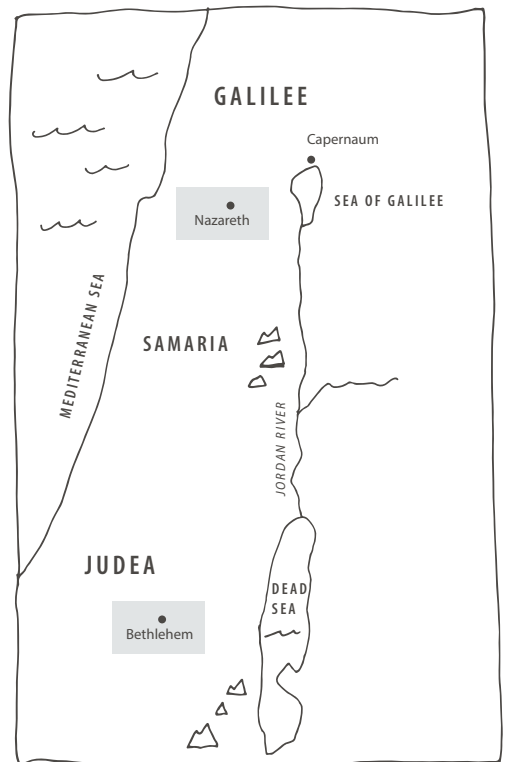
So they are way dead. And the people after them are way dead.

Great.

Here we are in Nazareth, where Mary and Joseph live. While Mary was pregnant, there was a census taken—the Census of Quirinius if you're curious—that ordered everyone to return to their hometowns in order to be "recorded." These head counts could take years because of the huge number of people and logistics of travel.

** Read Luke 2:1-5. Where were Mary and Joseph living at the time of the census?*

*Nazareth &
Bethlehem*



** Where did they have to travel?*

BETHLEHEM

Means “house of bread”

Joseph’s family line is traced back to King David (remember him?), whose ancestral home was Bethlehem. So even though Joseph and Mary are living in Nazareth, they have to travel back to Bethlehem to register. When they arrive, there’s no room for them “in the inn” (likely because of the census), so Mary gives birth to Jesus in an unexpected location. We don’t have a single detail of the actual birth, only the fact that after He was born He is swaddled up and placed in what may have been an animal’s feeding trough.

You have a visual of all of this, no doubt. I’m going to apologize before I go any further because if you spent good money on your nativity set, you’re going to be disappointed, and also you’re likely not going to get a refund.

** Read Luke 2:7. Where does it say He was born in a manger? Whoops. It doesn’t. It says He was laid in a manger, not that He was necessarily born in one.*

Some believe that it’s more likely He was born in a cave.⁶ Really—a cave.

** Let’s rewind for a second. Do you remember when the Jewish people were going through the cycles of sin? What kind of Savior do you think they were expecting?*

I’ll award you one point for “not an infant” and two for “a military leader.” The Jewish people had been waiting for their coming King. And by “King” they meant a political powerhouse who would swoop in and rescue them from oppression. Someone wielding a sword and an agenda. Someone who would show up like a lightning bolt and defend them from their enemies.

Not a Baby being born next to livestock.

He could have done anything He wanted, but He came to earth as a wriggly, screaming, hungry, defenseless infant. He blinked, no doubt, as His newborn eyes tried to adjust to the light of the world around Him. And His mother held Him as she would any other child.

Within a few hours of His entrance into the world, the first birth announcement went out.

**Read Luke 2:8-20. What was the wording of the announcement, and who received it?*

The glory of the Lord shone around a field of never-named shepherds while they watched their flock during the night. (Basically they kept an eye on the sheep so that none escaped or got attacked by another animal.)

The first shepherd in the Bible was Adam and Eve's son Abel (Gen. 4:2).

**Here's an interesting fact about shepherds. Look up Genesis 46:34. What does it say?*

In the version of the Bible I'm reading right now, it sounds a bit confusing. In case yours is that way too, let me break it down: shepherds were considered unclean.⁷ They're touching animals and dead things, and they don't wash properly. They are essentially outcasts who aren't allowed to associate with regular people. In general, the reputation of your average shepherd was not stellar.

So maybe don't toss the shepherds from your manger scene, but it would be a nice touch to scuff them up a little next Christmas and keep them away from the other people.

After the angel tells them not to be afraid (which is a pattern in Scripture for somewhat obvious reasons), he speaks words that have always existed but had never been uttered:

The Bible talks about shepherds or shepherding more than two hundred times.⁸

Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.

LUKE 2:10b-12

Who on earth is David, and why is he even in this story? We know nothing of this man.

Or do we ...

** What do you remember about our friend King David?*

Right. So why does the angel say “city of David?” Well, turns out he was born in Bethlehem, where Christ had just been born.

I’m guessing that the Jews were also not expecting the first announcement of His birth to be to a bunch of nasty shepherds.

But here’s the part we want to take with us as we go; there is nothing in Scripture that doesn’t mean something. The shepherds don’t really seem that interesting, but they do seem unlikely.

Except ...

Some scholars believe those shepherds were keeping watch over a very specific type of sheep, one considered more precious than others.

These lambs were to be used for sacrifice in the temple, and in order for them to be an appropriate offering, they had to be perfect—without blemish.⁹

You’ll never guess how they were protected after they were born: They were wrapped in swaddling cloths.

The spotless Lamb who will be sacrificed on our behalf, inviting the shepherds to be the first to see Him.

It seems like a strange way to do it, doesn’t it?

And herein lies the beauty of the life and love of Christ.

Everyone assumed that Jesus would reveal Himself to those whom the world knew and recognized.

What the world never expected was that He would instead reveal Himself as King to lowly, obscure shepherds.

What He knew, of course, was that they were the ones who would recognize Him.

DAY 4

AFTER JESUS' BIRTH

When last we chatted, the shepherds were meeting the Messiah in Bethlehem after an angel told them that their Savior had come. I might as well go ahead and tell you He wasn't born on December 25, nor was it likely He was born in winter.

Remember from our study yesterday that after the shepherds saw the baby Jesus, they started telling anyone who would listen that Jesus had been born (Luke 2:17-18). Here's what's interesting: shepherds (as a whole) "were considered unreliable and were not allowed to give testimony in the law courts."¹⁰

So let's summarize: the first people who saw the Lord were lower-class, unclean, insignificant, unreliable, and powerless people.

In other words, the people He came to save.

** Before we move on, let's write down where Jesus was born.*

Now keep in mind that Mary and Joseph weren't from that town. They had only gone there because of the census decree.

** Find Micah 5 and read verses 2-5a. How does this passage speak to the coming of Jesus?*



Hmm. The Savior will be born in Bethlehem, will be a ruler in Israel, his brothers will return to the people of Israel, he will shepherd them ... sounds like Jesus, doesn't it?

We know very little about the days after Christ's birth, but we do know a few important facts.

** Read Luke 2:21. What happened on the eighth day of His life?*

PURIFICATION PERIOD

“A woman who bore a son was ceremonially unclean for 40 days (twice that if she bore a daughter).”¹¹

That feels like a lot of information. Not exactly the kind of thing I would make sure to include in the very limited amount of detail we’re offered about Him, but I didn’t write it. So why is this so important?

**Hop on over to Leviticus 12:2-3. What’s commanded?*

Jesus was circumcised in accordance with Jewish law. It showed His connection to God’s people and was a sign of His humanity. He was “born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law” (Gal. 4:4-5).

**Continue reading in Leviticus 12 until you finish verse 8.*

There was a lot going on for these ladies for a few weeks, huh?

Alright, let’s skip past those pleasantries and write down some details.

**When her purification period was over, what was she to do? (See Lev. 12:6.)*

She shall bring to the _____ and offer a _____ for a burnt offering, and a _____ or _____ for a sin offering.

**Although this was the law, there is a stipulation for those who are too poor to offer an unblemished lamb. Read Leviticus 12:8 again, paying close attention to what it says. What’s the stipulation?*

**Now let’s skip back over to Luke 2 and read verses 23-24. What does this tell us about Mary and Joseph?*

So now we’re really off-track from what the Jews were expecting in a Messiah. Let’s add “poor” to the ever-growing list of reasons this couldn’t be their guy.

**You remember the temple, right? Who wanted to build the first temple?*

**Who actually built it?*

**What happened to that first temple?*

**When the Jews were in exile, what were they permitted to do?*

**How did it compare to the original?*

Good.

So even though it's hundreds of years later, this is the same temple we learned about earlier. When Herod the Great (who was an infamously well-known and respected builder) came to power, he decided he would go one step further in his "Let's just get along" plan. He began MASSIVE renovations of the temple that took several years to finish. This temple was the temple of Jesus' day.

While Joseph and Mary are in the temple, they meet a few special people who God had appointed to be a part of Jesus' life.

The first is Simeon, who was told by God that he wouldn't die before he had laid eyes on the Messiah. We aren't told how old he was, only that he came to the temple under the direction of the Holy Spirit, took the Baby into his arms, and praised God.

**Read Luke 2:29-35. In verse 32, what does it say Jesus will be?*

OK, next one up to bat is a sweet lady by the name of Anna, who, God bless, (literally) had been living in the temple for years. Although that's the language used, it's very likely that she didn't actually live there but had made it her highest priority to spend her time there. We know that she's old and that she's a widow, and we know that she spent all of her days and nights worshiping, fasting, and praying for the Savior of the world. Well, lo and behold, she finally sees Him and recognizes Him immediately. She gives thanks to God and tells everyone who has been waiting for the One who will bring their redemption that He's come.

Who have we forgotten to mention? Ah—the three wise men who came to see Jesus. All I know is that frankincense was involved, and I would only endure the smell because sweet baby Jesus was there.

** What did they bring? (I helped you out a bit.)*

_____, _____,
and _____ (Matt. 2:11).

Actually, sweet Baby Jesus wasn't much of a Baby by the time the wise men brought their gifts. He was a toddler by then probably, and we can only hope that He has avoided frankincense for the last few years.

I know, I know. It's crazy but true. As a matter of fact, one of my dear friends (who is a pastor) puts the wise men on the other side of the room from the manger.

And while we're talking about our crumbling nativity sets, there weren't just three wise men.

I know there are three wise men in that gorgeous display you have, but alas, there were probably more of them. Maybe even WAY more. I think the three gifts thing throws us off. We assume three gifts, three people. But nowhere in Scripture mentions there were only three magi.

It's just that there isn't room in the shaped Styrofoam® packaging to fit all of these folks.

Incidentally, both of our nativity goats lost two legs this year, and a new figurine featuring a man with a bagpipe showed up in the box—and none of us know where he came from. But we felt bad for him so we just set him in the back. I don't think we've gone a single year without a missing limb or accessory.

If you're keeping track, the baby shower has now included a young virgin mother and her husband, some dirty shepherds, and a random man and woman who had been praying for the coming of the Messiah. There may or may not have been bagpipes.

I'm going to go out on a limb and say none of them brought monogrammed onesies or cakes made of diapers.

What must Mary and Joseph have been thinking? Just a dirt poor couple trying to follow the law. So poor that they couldn't afford to bring a spotless lamb to the temple to be killed as a sacrifice.

It would be years before they knew the truth—that they had, in fact, done exactly that.



DAY 5

JESUS' CHILDHOOD

After Jesus has been presented at the temple in Jerusalem, a little bit of a wild goose chase ensues.

**Read Matthew 2:1-12. Why did the wise men show up in Jerusalem?*

**Summarize Herod's reactions to the news that a new King had been born.*

Ah, Herod the Great. (Remember him? You're basically his best friend right now. Which isn't exactly amazing because someone once said it was better to be his pig than his son.)

As you may recall, the man likes power. The Savior of the world coming would certainly put a kink in his plans for world domination.

**Do you remember what Pharaoh did back in Exodus when he thought the Israelites were multiplying too quickly?*

Herod has a similar plan. He tells the wise men to track the Baby down and report back, but they don't obey him. He is NOT PLEASED about this development and orders all the boys in Bethlehem under the age of two to be killed.



**Read Matthew 2:16-18. Which prophecy did this event fulfill?*

**Read Matthew 2:13-15,19-23. How do you see God protecting Jesus and unfolding the plan of redemption?*

All right, so fortunately, God likes to talk to Joseph while he's sleeping. He warns Joseph to get out of Bethlehem and go to Egypt. They stay in Egypt until after Herod the Great dies. Then God uses another dream to give Joseph the next step.

**Where was Joseph supposed to take his family (v. 20)?*

**How did this move from Egypt back to Israel also fulfill prophecy (v. 15)?*



Sounds reasonable, right? Let's pack it up and head back to Israel.

**So Joseph obeys, and then God gives him further instructions (you'll never guess how) in a dream, warning Joseph not to go to Judea. Why not (v. 22)?*

Herod just won't leave us alone, will he? Now it's his son Archelaus who's the problem.

**Where did Joseph then take his family? It's a district of Galilee ...*

**What was fulfilled by this happening (v. 23)?*

ARCHELAUS

When Herod the Great died, his kingdom was split among his sons. Archelaus was the oldest and ruled in Judea. He was known for his cruelty, so Mary and Joseph moved on to live in Galilee.¹²

I mean, you have to admit that the odds of all of this just happening coincidentally are pretty insurmountable. And don't worry, it's going to get even better.

We don't know much about the childhood of Jesus outside of a few events.

**Here's what we do know: hop on over to Luke 2:39-40.
What does it say?*

Jesus _____ and became _____, filled with _____ . And the _____ of _____ was upon Him.

Here come the biggest questions of all: When did Jesus know that He was the Son of God? Was He the perfect Child? Did He ever talk back or get in trouble?

I will not pretend to be an expert on any of this—quite frankly because there are too many gaps to make any conclusive statements about His childhood.

So what was He like? Here is what we do know:

Jesus was born sinless, and Scripture says that although He was tempted, He did not sin. Now, was He capable of sin? That deep theological question has been around for centuries, with solid scholarship on both sides of the issue. I believe Jesus couldn't sin because of the nature of God. He could be tempted, but it would be against His character to sin.

So what's sin with regard to an infant or child? My remedial definition would be anything that's willful disobedience.

For example, Jesus may have accidentally run into another child while they were playing or broken a dish, but He never actually sinned.

It's a hard concept, isn't it? I mean, if He was God, then He was born with all of the knowledge of God. True. But He was also fully man. In my head, I imagine it to be a situation where God chose to limit the knowledge His Son had in order to allow Him to experience life the way that any other little boy would have.

If so, Jesus probably didn't know that He was the Son of God for a good bit of His early years. When Scripture says He "grew" in the previous verse, and later that he "increased in wisdom and in stature" (Luke 2:40,52), I believe it's an indication that He continued to learn how to be strong and wise—all the while with the favor of God resting on Him.

According to Luke 2:52, Jesus was a well-rounded kid. He grew mentally (wisdom), physically (stature), spiritually (favor with God), and socially (favor with people.)

But, at the age of twelve, we see a shift in His development that marks the first time we hear Him hint at His deity.

**Let's start with reading Luke 2:41-48. You will surely be blessed. Write down a summary of what you read.*

YOU GUYS, THEY LOST THE MESSIAH.

Let's just break this down for a hot second. Not only did they lose Him, it wasn't an "I swear he was just in the shoe section, and now I'm panicked for three minutes in Target®" kind of thing.

As a sidebar: I definitely lost one of my identical twin daughters in a bookstore once, and in my desperation I ran from aisle to aisle with the other one on my hip. I looked up and saw Tim McGraw (because Nashville), and he just started looking around until we both saw her. It was fairly obvious that she belonged to me, given that I was holding her clone.

I also lost Kate at Disney World® once too. I found her in the "lost and found" coloring a picture of Goofy with all the other kids who had slacker parents.

Next up for me is a parenting book. Stay tuned.

But listen, each of those incidents (while they felt like an eternity) lasted no more than a few minutes.

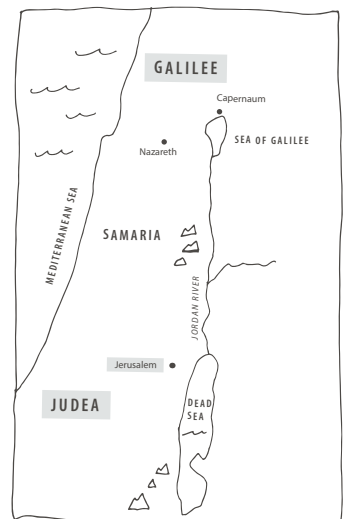
They didn't realize for an entire day that Jesus wasn't with them. Where's Brad Paisley when you need him?

In Mary and Joseph's defense, there was a huge group of family members traveling together, and I guess she just thought Jesus was somewhere in the herd. But when they stopped for the night, they realized He wasn't with them.

Am I the only one who imagines Mary looking up all *Home Alone* style and shouting, "JESUS!"?

Anyway, they retrace their steps back to Jerusalem (which took another day, so they must have been out of their minds with worry). When they finally find him in the temple, they see Jesus finishing up a masterpiece of Minnie Mouse® while all of the other kids are annoyed because He stayed in the lines. You know He stayed in the lines.

Actually, no. They find Him in the temple having intellectual conversations with the rabbis, while people around Him were amazed



at His knowledge. And in this moment He began to reveal that He wasn't, in fact, a typical twelve-year-old. Even His parents were astonished, which seems to infer that this was the first time they had seen Him in this light.

**Of course, you must read the rest of verse 48 again and then keep going until you finish through verse 52. Did Mary react like a normal parent? Explain.*

**What did Jesus mean by His response?*

Mary reprimanded Jesus in a way not so dissimilar to the way we might react to our children. But Jesus responded with what I'm sure to Mary seemed like cryptic words that essentially put the wheels of His ministry in motion.

**What were those words?*

The first words we hear from Jesus—and they're in the form of a question:

Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?

LUKE 2:49

I know that Jesus is a young boy here. But I realized that for some reason when I imagine this story—when Jesus tells Mary and Joseph that they should have known He would be in His Father's house—I've always pictured Him as a man and not a twelve-year-old.

It feels different to imagine a boy looking into His parents' eyes and telling them in so many words that this was the beginning of what they always knew would come.

Because to them Jesus was the baby who took His first steps while they clapped.

He was the toddler who ran around barefoot in the grass and learned to put His head underwater.

He was the three-year-old who laughed until His stomach hurt and loved being thrown in the air.

He was the five-year-old who begged for bedtime stories and forehead kisses.

He was the seven-year-old who ran to His father when he came home from work and woke up before the sun.

He was the nine-year-old who was brave enough to walk to a friend's house but looked back at His mother the whole way as she smiled and waved Him on.

He was the ten-year-old who decided He was too old for bedtime stories and public hugs and never knew that His mother cried because it meant He wasn't a baby anymore.

It's how it is for all of us; we can't keep them small.

But imagine Mary—beautiful, young, devout Mary, her eyes shining and heart pounding as her Son reminded her He is someone else's Son.

Yes, He is the Great I am. But what mother can forget who He was?

Son of Mary, sent to be born.

Son of Man, sent to take on flesh.

Son of Sorrow, sent to die.

Son of God, sent to be risen to save us all.

Mary, your hands have been loosed; you have raised Him.

