



Walk | Read | Pray | Join | Commit

Good News For All | Week 1 of 2 | Luke 1:26-38

Collect

Here are some questions for everyone in your group to discuss either together or in pairs:

- When was the last time you received unexpected news – good or bad?
- How did you react to it: emotionally? Honestly?

Today's study will focus on Mary's response to Gabriel's message from God, her incredible attitude of service to her Lord.

Context

A staple of Christian artwork and nativity plays, Luke's account of the foretelling of Jesus' birth relies upon a noticeably dramatic set of characters: angels.

Discuss: How would you describe angels? What roles do you see them playing in the Bible?

Throughout the history of God's interaction with His people, angels regularly come to the aid of individuals with a message that stirs faith. Their very name describes what they are in themselves: angel coming from the Greek 'angelos', meaning 'messenger'. Frequently the message they impart is of such significance that it requires a heavenly agent to share it.

Luke's story begins with Gabriel visiting the priest Zechariah to tell him that his elderly wife Elizabeth will bear a son, John the Baptist. It's an account that establishes an important pattern for what is to follow with Mary – that God's kingdom on the move in such a way that angels are required to prep the groundwork.

Rather than announcing the coming of Christ with visions or adding further prophecies, God is sending his special messenger Gabriel, one of the few named angels of scripture, appearing in Daniel (chapters 8 & 9) to pass on explanations of visions God had given Daniel. He's a figure of such power that he can 'stand in the presence of God' (Luke 1:19).

Gabriel's message also begins an important pattern for Luke, of indicating the fulfilment of all prophecies written about Jesus and his Kingdom (concluding in Luke 24:44).

Discuss: Read the following prophecies and discuss how they link to Gabriel's message

- **Isaiah 7:14**
- **Daniel 2:44; 7:13-14**
- **Micah 4:7**

Luke records that angelic messengers are sent not to kings or high priests, but a priest and his wife, a teenage girl promised to be wed to a carpenter and a huddle of shepherds. So significant is the coming of Christ, so exciting and life-changing, that the members of heaven spill forth into God's earth to spread the good news and begin never ending worship.



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Content

Read Luke 1:26-38, either as a group or individually

Mary will most likely be between 12-14 years of old when she is visited by Gabriel. She is pledged to be married to Joseph, a man she may not know at all well.

Discuss: Considering Gabriel's position as someone who 'stands' in the presence of God, and noting Mary's age, does this change how you read the conversation between the two of them? How would you describe Gabriel's tone? What do you think of Mary's reaction?

Mary's response to Gabriel's message (verses 30-33) centre on the practical detail: how can she, a virgin, give birth to a son? Gabriel is focused on the amazing news that we still proclaim today: the Lord Jesus Christ reigns, his Kingdom shall have no end! Mary does not question the truth of this, such is her incredible faith. She just needs some help in understanding how this is going to work out, what part she has been chosen to play.

Gabriel answers Mary's question as fully as he can, finding words to help her understand how vital this baby is to be to the world. He concludes with a beautiful statement: the word of God, that which God's people have known Him by since the beginning of their relationship with Him, that which is now to become flesh amongst them, that word will **never fail**.

Pause for reflection: Has God given you a word that is yet to be fulfilled? Does it still feel impossible that it will ever come true? Let Gabriel's statement encourage you: no word of God will ever fail.

Challenge

"The Lord is with you." - Gabriel's word of echoes beyond Mary's scenario into our lives.

"I am the Lord's servant... may your word to me be fulfilled." - Mary's response to God's word is staggering; she replies with the heart of a servant, with a profound depth of faith, with a characteristic that her son will embody in his life and rule.

Take some time towards the end of your session to **sit and reflect** Gabriel's message and Mary's response. What is God saying to you this Advent? What call is being offered to you?

Connect

During a visit to her cousin Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, Mary bursts into a song of worship so significant that Luke wanted to include it in his gospel (**1:46-55**).

In a time of worship, read the song verse by verse as a group. Once finished, add words of praise, thanks and celebration of your own. Let your hearts glorify and praise God our saviour.



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Good News For All | Week 2 of 2 | Matthew 1:18-25

Collect

A question for everyone in your group to discuss either together or in pairs:

- Do you know the 'story' of your own birth? Have people told you about how it happened – was it dramatic or did it all go smoothly? Was it in the middle of the night or did it cause a disruption to best laid plans?

Today's study will focus on Joseph's response to a message he receives from an angel in a dream, a message we too are invited to respond to.

Context

The New Testament gives the story of Jesus' birth in an amazing two-part drama: last week we focused on Luke's account of Mary's story – of her visit from Gabriel and her incredible response of faith to what she was told. Matthew's account focuses on Joseph. There is no attempt by the Gospel authors to overlap their accounts or merge the detail: we have two stories, two sets of emotions and reactions, adding to the depth of this incredible moment.

Discuss: What moments or events in your life have you heard recounted from more than one viewpoint? How did these multiple accounts add to your memory of the event?

Immediately before this story, Matthew starts his gospel with a genealogy of Jesus, a list of 14 names split into three groupings. It might feel like a slog to read through, but to a Jewish reader (Matthew's original audience) it carries a deep significance: it declares that Jesus is rare amongst the Jewish nation, a person who can trace his family lineage all the way back through exile, through David, through to Abraham himself – a list full of reminders of the incredible, unlikely ways in which God has worked through His people.

Matthew establishes a theme with this list that will echo throughout his gospel; Jesus isn't just one member of an ongoing family, but the goal of the whole list. It's he who the nation of Israel has been waiting for, he who is the fulfilment of countless promises and prophecies. The long-awaited Messiah is here.

Discuss: Has God given you a promise that you're still waiting to see fulfilled? Look over the genealogy of Jesus in the opening of Matthew's gospel. Notice how God is in the detail of every step of the story, every name, every part of this history. How does it make you feel toward the promise you're waiting on?

Content

Read Matthew 1:18-25, either as a group or individually

Joseph finds himself in a tricky position. Mary, who is pledged to be married to him, is apparently pregnant 'through the Holy Spirit' – a miraculous, vague process that even Gabriel struggles to unpack for Mary (Luke 1:35).



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We get no insight into whether he believes her story or not, but rather that he is faithful to the law; a law which this child is set to fulfil. He feels compelled to remain true to his faith and the law that it is marked out by – but he doesn't wish to bring shame upon Mary.

Discuss: How do you imagine Mary and Joseph will have been feeling during these moments? How do you think Mary felt when sharing the news? How do you think Joseph will have responded?

While Mary is visited by Gabriel in person, Joseph is visited by a messenger in a dream – an interaction that will be repeated when the young family must flee to Egypt (Matthew 2:13). One strand common to Mary and Joseph's angelic meetings are the words 'do not be afraid'.

The angel doesn't deliver this message as a command, but with a voice of reassurance: yes, these are incredible events, yes, this is all sudden and a challenge to his understanding of the law and what he might have planned – but he should move beyond fear to knowing this is God's plan.

Discuss: Has God ever given you a word or changed your plans that caused your first response to be one of fear? How did you move on from that reaction?

As with the genealogy, Matthew is eager to tie these events to Israel's history, which in turn point forward to God's future plans: Mary, the virgin, will conceive a son who is named **Jesus**, 'the Lord saves' – and as people come to know him and his identity through his words and actions, he shall be called **Immanuel**, 'God with us'.

Challenge

After the dream, Joseph needs no further convincing. He is faithful to the message, to the extent that he wishes there to be no doubt in God's promise: rather than consummating the marriage, they remain abstinent, to ensure that no one can claim that Jesus' conception is anything other than the work of the Holy Spirit.

Discuss: Have you ever tried to 'second guess' a promise of God, or put it on your own time table rather than allow God to remain in control? Are you 'hurrying' any promises God has given you? What does the faith and response of Mary and Joseph cause you to feel?

Connect

Christmas is time to reflect upon the incredible nature of the incarnation, of God giving Himself to the world as vulnerable flesh laid in a cradle. Take some time to think on the response of Joseph, Mary and all who hear this news in the Christmas story. Ask God to help you share this joy to those around you this Christmas, to invite them to the celebration.