1717 BIBLE STUDIES

"Your Word Is Truth" (John 17:17)

OVERVIEW

Study: Luke
Theme: Surprise!

Overview: The God of the Bible is a God of surprises. About the time we think we have God figured out, he does a "180" and leaves us with our mouths open. Luke's Gospel of messianic joy holds surprises for soldiers, disciples, shepherds, religious leaders, and others. The ultimate surprise to the crucifixion may well be the resurrection. Buckle up for a study in Luke about a God who surprises.

HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery.**



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

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INTRODUCTION

Author

The Gospel was written by Luke, "the doctor" and traveling companion of Paul (Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11). Luke was not an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry, but he "carefully investigated everything from the beginning" and wrote "an orderly account" based on what eyewitnesses handed down (Luke 1:1-4). He later wrote the book of Acts as a second volume (Acts 1:1).

Audience

Luke addressed his Gospel to "most excellent Theophilus" (Luke 1:3), possibly a Roman official or patron, so that he might "know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (1:4). Luke's attention to Gentiles, women, the poor, and outsiders made his account especially meaningful to a wide, largely Gentile audience.

Date

Luke's Gospel was written before Acts, which ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome (about AD 62). The Gospel was likely completed around AD 60. The events in this study took place during Jesus' public ministry and at his death and resurrection, about AD 30.

Setting

The lessons in this study move from Capernaum, the base of Jesus' Galilean ministry, where a Roman centurion showed surprising faith (Luke 7:1-10), to a high mountain where Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James, and John (9:28-36), back to the fields outside Bethlehem where angels announced his birth to shepherds (2:8-20), and finally to the temple courts in Jerusalem during Jesus' final week, where the Sadducees questioned him about the resurrection (20:27-40).

Theme

God surprises us. In Luke's Gospel of messianic joy, faith shows up in a Roman soldier, glory breaks through on a mountaintop, the first Christmas evangelists are lowly shepherds, and the living God offers hope beyond the grave to "children of the resurrection" (Luke 20:36). Jesus himself "marveled" at the centurion's faith (7:9), and he still turns our expectations upside down.

Why Study Luke?

Luke reminds us that God is always at work in unexpected ways. This study calls believers to let the centurion's faith spur them to trust Jesus, to listen to God's chosen Son, to investigate the Lord's work and respond like the shepherds, and to expect that God has in store something greater than they can imagine.

STUDY CONTENT

WEEK 1: Luke 7:1-10

WEEK 2: Luke 9:28-36

WEEK 3: Luke 2:8-20

WEEK 4: Luke 20:27-40

WEEK ONE

LESSON AIM: **Let the centurion's unexpected faith spur you to make life changes out of trust in Jesus.**

STUDY: Luke

THEME: Surprise!

LESSON TEXT: Luke 7:1-10

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Luke 8:26-39; Philemon 10-21; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Philippians 2:1-9

UNEXPECTED FAITH

BY MARK SCOTT

Faith can come from the most unlikely places. When Jesus told his parable of the two men going up to the temple to pray (Luke 18:9-14), who would have guessed the tax collector would outstrip the Pharisee in his prayer of faith? Or who would have guessed the power of the Roman government would be the place to look for great faith? But surprise, surprise.

The story of the centurion's faith has been a major battleground for scholars due to how the story is told by Matthew (8:5-13) and Luke (7:1-10). Matthew says the centurion came to Jesus and requested the healing of his servant. Luke says the centurion's request was made through Jews who advocated on his behalf. Is this a clear-cut contradiction? Is there a way to harmonize the accounts? Is it an allowable literary device for how stories were told in the ancient world? Or is the difference located in the theological purposes of the writers (Matthew wanting to show Rome bowing to the kingdom of God and Luke wanting to show the unity between Jew and Gentile in the kingdom of God)? We may not know for sure, but we do see that the centurion demonstrated unexpected faith.

Unexpected Candidate

Luke 7:1-6a

After Luke's account of the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17-49), Jesus entered Capernaum. This city is still called "the town of Jesus." It was the base of his ministry operations. Many of his miracles were performed there. It was a beautiful middle-class fishing village on the northern part of the Sea of Galilee.

A centurion was a Roman soldier on the order of a modern-day lieutenant. He oversaw 100 men, as the term implies. Centurions were viewed as the backbone of the Roman army and were given special privileges. So, it was a stunning scene for an oppressor to bow before someone he was oppressing. Surprisingly, centurions are given very good press in the New Testament. They stub their toes only once (Acts 27:11).

This centurion *valued highly* (esteemed someone as dear) his servant. The servant was sick and about to die. Matthew's account says the servant was paralyzed and suffering terribly (Matthew 8:6). Jesus was well known by this time, so the centurion sent some elders of the Jews to him. Normally this would have brought disdain from the Jews. But they made an exception in his case because the centurion loved the people he oppressed. He might even have used some of his own money to build their synagogue. (This is an impressive synagogue to this day—the fourth-century one perhaps sits atop the one the centurion built.) So, the Jews *pleaded earnestly* for Jesus to come. And Jesus, ever putting himself at the disposal of people evidencing faith, got up and went.

Unexpected Response

Luke 7:6b-8

As Jesus made his way to the centurion, the soldier was overwhelmed by Jesus' graciousness. He didn't wish for Jesus to *trouble* (to harass or make weary) himself with coming. He acknowledged through his friends that he did not *deserve* for Jesus to come to him. This not only was surprising faith, it was true humility. He did not consider himself *worthy* (sufficient) for Jesus to come. He pleaded for Jesus to just *say the word* (i.e., let the Living Word speak the spoken word). He believed Jesus could heal from long distance. Perhaps he had heard of such things (cf. John 4:46-54).

This centurion understood how authority works. He answered to people, and people answered to him. By making such a statement, the centurion clearly acknowledged Jesus' authority, which was the reaction to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:28-29). For a Roman to make such a statement about a Jew was remarkable and most unexpected.

A Marveling Messiah

Luke 7:9-10

God can surprise us, but can God be surprised? In the Gospel record, Jesus was surprised—well, he marveled—twice. Both times had to do with faith—its lack (Mark 6:6) and its abundance (Luke 7:9). Jesus was *amazed* with this centurion's faith; it was off the charts when compared to the average Israelite's faith. Matthew expanded on this response; he quoted Jesus as saying this kind of faith ensured such people would be present at the messianic table (Matthew 8:11-12). Not all miracles demand faith as a prerequisite, but this centurion's request was granted in conjunction with his faith. The men went home and found the servant well. Surprised? Not really—when Jesus is in the equation.

Mark Scott serves as preaching minister with Park Plaza Christian Church in Joplin, Mo. For 35 years, until 2021, he served as professor of preaching and New Testament with Ozark Christian College in Joplin.

LEARNING FROM THE FAITH OF AN ANCIENT SOLDIER

BY DAVID FAUST

Roman centurions were rugged warriors. Much of their work was routine (organizing camps). At times it was dangerous (leading troops into battle). And sometimes it put them into ugly and disturbing situations, like presiding at crucifixions. They were trained to fight, and they were accustomed to being in charge.

Luke 7 introduces us to a centurion who demonstrated such outstanding faith that Jesus remarked, "I have not found such great faith even in Israel" (Luke 7:9). What was so unusual about the centurion's faith? And what can this ancient soldier teach us about fighting the good fight of faith?

Faith should humble us. The Roman army imposed its will on occupied countries. In first-century Israel, soldiers could force a Jewish passerby to carry a load for a mile. This centurion, however, didn't throw his weight around. He didn't flaunt his military authority and demand that Jesus comply. He felt unworthy even to have the Lord come to his home. Do we approach the Lord with humble requests or with demands and an attitude of entitlement?

Faith should move us to rely on God's goodness. Instead of blaming the Lord for his servant's illness, the centurion sought the Lord's assistance. The Bible doesn't say whether the centurion ever met Jesus face-to-face, but evidently he had heard enough about Jesus' character and miracles that he believed in the Lord's ability to heal his servant. Do we trust that the Lord has our best interests at heart?

Faith should make us generous. Most Jews resented the Roman troops who occupied their land, but in this case some Jewish elders came to Jesus pleading for him to help the centurion. "This man deserves for you to do this," they insisted, "because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue" (Luke 7:5). Evidently the centurion donated money for the project when a new synagogue was built in Capernaum, or perhaps he ordered the men under his command to assist with the construction. (The Romans were skilled builders, and during peaceful times the army sometimes engaged in construction projects, building roads and public structures.) Are we generous with our money and our influence?

Faith should cause us to respect what the Lord says. The centurion was confident Jesus could perform a miracle simply by deciding to intervene—even without being physically present. Just "say the word," the centurion begged, "and my servant will be healed" (Luke 7:7). Are we convinced that words spoken by the Lord are "alive and active" (Hebrews 4:12)?

Faith should cause us to recognize God's presence and power in our real-life world of home and work. Do you ever struggle to see how faith relates to your everyday life? The centurion saw a connection between the Lord's power and his work as a soldier. He understood the chain of command. If he told a soldier under his authority to "Come" or "Go," the soldier obeyed; and if his own superior officer gave him an order, the centurion would obey. He reasoned that in the spiritual realm, Jesus is the highest-ranking officer. Do we respect the Lord's authority in all areas of life?

This ancient centurion had a faith worth fighting for. We need his kind of courageous faith in Jesus Christ to win the spiritual battles we face today.

Personal Challenge:

Do you think the Lord is amazed by the strength of your faith or disappointed by the shallowness of it? How does your faith impact your daily decisions? What will you do this week that you would not do if you did not believe in the power, presence, and goodness of the Lord?

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Last week, how did you show faith that was pleasing to God?
2. During the past week, what Bible figure or story most inspired you to live by faith?

Ask two people to read aloud **Luke 7:1-10** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to summarize the events of the passage in a minute or less.

3. For fun, we will repeat a question from last week's Discovery: "From this passage, describe what real, biblical faith looks like."
4. Let's dig deeper:
   - How does the centurion model faith?
   - How does the centurion model respect?
   - How does the centurion model humility?
   - What do you learn about servanthood and leadership from this passage?
   - In Roman-occupied Israel, this centurion had authority over all the people. Yet somehow this centurion recognized the authority structure of God's upside-down kingdom. What does this demonstrate about him?
   - How does the centurion's intercession for his servant and the Jewish leaders' intercession for the centurion reflect, in a way, Jesus' intercession for us?
5. What do you learn about God from this passage?
6. What do you learn about humans?
7. What connections do you see between authority and living in obedience to God?
8. What is one specific way you will emulate the centurion's "great faith" this week, perhaps in his humility, surrender, or generosity?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."
10. Put yourself in the position of the centurion's servant. What healing do you seek from Jesus, and how can we intercede with you?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Luke 9:28-36** as we continue a four-week study in the book of Luke with the theme, "Surprise!" You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK TWO

LESSON AIM: **Let God's unexpected transfiguration of Jesus move you to listen to Jesus.**

STUDY: Luke

THEME: Surprise!

LESSON TEXT: Luke 9:28-36

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Luke 3:21-22; Revelation 1:10-18; 5:6-14; James 1:19, 22-25

UNEXPECTED GLORY

BY MARK SCOTT

God spoke audibly from heaven only three times during Jesus' earthly ministry—after his baptism (Luke 3:22), at his transfiguration (this text), and during the week of his crucifixion (John 12:28). For a God who is used to speaking (cf. Psalm 29), these times are incredibly rare. Perhaps their rarity underlines their importance.

A short time after the third Passover during Jesus' ministry (which he missed due to having his own meal in the wilderness, Luke 9:10-17), Jesus questioned his disciples about his identity (Luke 9:18-21). Peter voiced the correct answer, "You are God's Messiah." Jesus immediately gave the first of three "clear" predictions about the cross and then taught them what cross-bearing was all about. About eight days later (Matthew and Mark say "after six days") Jesus experienced his transfiguration. This took place on a high mountain (Mount Tabor, Mount Meron, and Mount Hermon have been suggested).

Witnessing Glory

Luke 9:28-29

Israelites were not unaccustomed to seeing the glory of God (Genesis 28:10-17; Exodus 40:34-38; 1 Kings 8:10-11; 2 Kings 2:11-12; Isaiah 6:1-4). But this event astonished Peter, James, and John. Luke said the purpose of going to this mountain was to pray. Luke is ever the Gospel of prayer so we should not be surprised (Luke 5:16).

During this prayer, Jesus was *transfigured* (Matthew 17:2 and Mark 9:2 used this word from which we get the English word *metamorphosis*—i.e., a change in form). Luke did not use this word, but he described what happened. Jesus' face and clothing experienced a dramatic change. Matthew said "his face shone like the sun" (17:2). His clothes in particular became as bright as a flash of lightning. Mark said no one on earth could bleach them this white (9:3). The three disciples concluded they were experiencing some kind of theophany (i.e., God encounter) though they seemed clueless about what it meant.

Eclipsed Glory

Luke 9:30-33

There is glory, and then there is glory. Moses had witnessed glory (Exodus 3:1-6; 33:7-11; 2 Corinthians 3:7-11). Elijah was taken up in glory (2 Kings 2:9-12). But Jesus was the embodiment of the glory of God (John 1:14). His glory eclipsed that of the great lawgiver and of the great prophet. Moses' life and Elijah's life paralleled Jesus' life and ministry in many ways (not the least of which were experiences on mountains and with miracles —Exodus 19:16-28; 1 Kings 18:20-40).

How the disciples knew the figures with Jesus were Moses and Elijah was not shared. Were introductions made? Name tags? But we do know the content of the conversation. They spoke about his *departure* (exodus), which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. We might assume from this that Moses and Elijah admitted the reality of the cross but also encouraged Jesus with regard to the resurrection and his exaltation to the Father's right hand.

This was all so overwhelming to the disciples. Their sleep deprivation was noted. Few of us make much sense when we are sleepy, and Peter was no exception. As Moses and Elijah began to leave, Peter acknowledged the moment (*it is good for us to be here*) and then suggested they build three *shelters* (tents or booths) to extend the visionary experience. Maybe having seen Moses and Elijah caused Peter to think of the wilderness (after all, both men knew something about living in the wilderness) and he fast-forwarded to the Feast of Tabernacles, which lay in the distant future. Luke parenthetically added, *He did not know what he was saying*. The disciples had to learn what we need to learn—i.e., Jesus' glory will not be eclipsed by anyone else's glory, even that of Moses and Elijah.

Concealed Glory

Luke 9:34-36

Jesus put the glory of God back in a box for the present. The *cloud* (mentioned three times) concealed the glory for the time being. Jesus and the disciples would come off the mountain of glory and head back into the valley of despair. As Warren Wiersbe said, "Another father needed Jesus now."

God, who used mountains and clouds in Scripture as means of revelation, spoke words of endearment (*my Son*), words of election (*whom I have chosen*), and words of admonition (*listen to him*). The word *listen* makes one think of God calling Israel to worship (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). This was a preview of coming attractions (resurrection, ascension, and exaltation). Some thought God's voice thundered the next time it was heard from heaven (John 12:29). Hear that same voice on this, the third Sunday of Advent.

Mark Scott serves as preaching minister with Park Plaza Christian Church in Joplin, Mo. For 35 years, until 2021, he served as professor of preaching and New Testament with Ozark Christian College in Joplin.

FIGURING OUT THE TRANSFIGURATION

BY DAVID FAUST

During a trip to Israel, I stood on Mount Tabor and took in the panoramic view. In a place like this, God pulled back the curtain and gave Peter, John, and James a private glimpse of Christ's radiant glory. Matthew 17:2 says Jesus' face "shone like the sun," Mark 9:3 says his clothes looked "whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them," and Luke 9:29 says it was like beholding "a flash of lightning."

Like me, maybe you find it difficult to completely figure out the transfiguration, and you wonder how this incident applies to us today. Here are some practical points to consider.

The transfiguration reminds us to make prayer a priority. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark tell about the transfiguration, but only Luke specifically mentions that on this occasion Jesus went up on the mountain to pray. Jesus' appearance was transformed "as he was praying" (Luke 9:29). This wasn't the first time Jesus headed to the mountains for prayer. He "often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Luke 5:16), and before selecting the 12 apostles he spent the night praying on a mountainside (Luke 6:12). We can pray anywhere, but there is something inspirational about praying outdoors. Nature's beauty can open our hearts to worship the Creator.

The transfiguration also provides tantalizing hints about the afterlife. Moses and Elijah had departed from earth centuries before, but they both appeared on the mountaintop, alive and well and conversing with Jesus. They were recognizable, identifiable, and able to communicate. I won't press the point too far, but this incident provides biblical evidence suggesting that individuals retain their identity after death. If you ever wonder if we will know each other in Heaven, this is a helpful Scripture to consider.

The transfiguration reveals the surpassing glory of Jesus Christ. Moses was the great lawgiver and Elijah was an outstanding prophet, but a greater God-revealer had arrived on the scene. The heavenly Father said of Jesus, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him" (Luke 9:35). Jesus' three disciples watched and listened in awe while the Lord discussed with Moses and Elijah his upcoming "departure" (his death, burial, and resurrection), which would fulfill the Law and the Prophets. After God's voice spoke from Heaven, the disciples "found that Jesus was alone" (Luke 9:36). Jesus truly stands alone, surpassing any other religious leader.

The transfiguration reminds us to hold our tongues and respond with humility and awe when we confront the mysteries of God. Peter was overwhelmed with fear and amazement. Luke 9:33 says, "He did not know what he was saying" . . . but that didn't stop him from saying something! Impulsive and action-oriented, he blurted out an idea: Why not build three shelters that Jesus, Moses, and Elijah could use for their mountaintop retreat? We chuckle about Peter's clumsy suggestion, but we all have spoken poorly considered words. When things happen that we don't fully understand, it's wise to remain silent and let God speak for himself.

Years later, when Peter looked back at the transfiguration, he viewed it as further confirmation of the truth of the gospel. He wrote, "For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Peter 1:16).

Personal Challenge:

What stands out most to you when you read about the transfiguration of Jesus? Today, spend some time in prayer outdoors. Thank the Lord for the ways he has revealed his power and glory to you.

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How did you emulate the centurion's "great faith" last week—in his humility, surrender, or generosity?

2. During the past week, how have you seen Jesus bring healing to you?

Ask two people to read aloud **Luke 9:28-36** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the events of the passage.

3. If you had been one of Jesus' three disciples present with him on the mountain, what would have been most surprising to you?

4. Let's dig deeper:
   - In your own words, describe Jesus' appearance as he was transfigured.
   - Moses represented the Old Testament Law. Elijah represented the Old Testament prophets. There are many reasons these two men may have been chosen, but how does their meeting help explain Jesus' self-declared mission: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17)?
   - What do you make of Peter's idea?
   - What is significant about God calling Jesus (1) his Son and (2) the one he chose?
   - What is significant about God saying, "Listen to him"?

5. What do you learn about God from this passage?

6. What do you learn about people?

7. Of course, listening to Jesus is critical for his followers. James 1:22 says, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." How will you focus on both listening and doing this week?

8. Spiritual mountaintop experiences can bolster our faith. But it's been said we must return from the mountain to the valleys, to be able to minister to others. How can your time with God provide you with what you need to serve others well?

9. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."

10. What encouragement do you need for this upcoming week?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Luke 2:5-20** as we continue a four-week study in the book of Luke with the theme, "Surprise!" You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK THREE

LESSON AIM: **Let the angels' unexpected message challenge you to investigate the Lord's work and respond.**

STUDY: Luke

THEME: Surprise!

LESSON TEXT: Luke 2:8-20

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 1:18-25; Acts 9:1-6, 17-20; 10:1-23; 16:6-10

UNEXPECTED RESPONSE

BY MARK SCOTT

In an area just southeast of Bethlehem, in a community known as Beit Sahur in the West Bank of Palestine, lies a site known as Shepherd's Field. Archeologists have found caves and a fifth-century monastery there. This is probably where Ruth gleaned in Boaz's field (Ruth 2:2), but even more significant, it likely is where the angels appeared to the shepherds to announce the birth of Jesus. The Franciscans keep it beautiful to this day.

Unconventional Visitors

Luke 2:8-14

Following the prologue (1:1-4) and the birth announcements of John the Baptist and Jesus (1:5-38), Luke recorded what might be called songs of the coming Messiah. There is Elizabeth's song (1:39-45), Mary's song (1:46-56), and after the birth of John the Baptist, Zechariah's song (1:67-80). Next was the Christmas story. Caesar's decree caused Mary and Joseph to journey to Bethlehem, where Jesus was born (2:1-7).

Shepherds were the first people to hear this good news, which came from a very unconventional visitor. The Bible has a love/hate relationship with shepherds. On the one hand, shepherding was a noble occupation. These shepherds may well have been watching sheep that would be used in temple sacrifice. David the great king of Israel was a shepherd, and spiritually speaking, the Lord is our shepherd (Psalm 23:1). On the other hand, shepherds were despised (Genesis 46:34), and they were not allowed in the temple in Jesus' day.

But while they were *keeping watch* (guarding) over their flocks at night, an *angel of the Lord* appeared to them. The phrase "angel of the Lord" appears 11 times in the New Testament, most often in the birth narratives of Jesus and deliverances from prison in Acts (chapters 5 and 12). With the angel came the *glory of the Lord*. This glory was so brilliant that the shepherds were terrified.

This unconventional visitor told them to stop being afraid and receive the *good news* (literally, "be evangelized") and experience great joy. For if this universal Messiah was for all the people, that would include the shepherds. They were told to go to Bethlehem (the town of David) and were given a sign so they could find the Savior-Messiah. The word *sign* is often associated with miracles. Here it is used in the sense of what it would point to. Every baby was wrapped in swaddling clothes, but not every baby was placed in a cow-feeding trough. That was unusual, and that was the sign.

The unconventional visitor was then joined by a heavenly host of visitors. This angelic choir spoke the praises of God. The glory shone around the shepherds, but all the glory went to God. The *highest heaven* indicated his supreme authority. Heaven's peace would come to those whom God would favor which, in this case, were the ragamuffins known as shepherds—a key to Luke's inclusiveness in his Gospel.

Unlikely Evangelists

Luke 2:15-20

To some extent, the credibility of a message is impacted by the ones who bring that message. You expect a lawyer to bring a legal message. You expect a teacher to bring a lecture. You expect a doctor to bring a diagnosis. But would shepherds bring the greatest news the planet has ever heard? God thought these shepherds would make the best evangelists—though many would think of them as unlikely messengers.

When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds resolved to go to Bethlehem and see *this thing that has happened*. The word *thing* is significant. The same word is translated "word" in verse 17 and "things" in verse 19. It is the Greek word *rhema*. It is the other word besides *logos* that is usually translated "word" in the New Testament. Often it distinguishes itself from *logos* as referring to a "spoken word." While Jesus himself is called the Word—the content of God (John 1:1, 14), his message is often called *rhema* (Romans 10:17).

These evangelistic shepherds were on the run. They *hurried off*. Their search was successful. They found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, just as the angels had told them, i.e., *lying in a manger*. We do not know how long they stayed, but evidently it was long enough to be filled with joy so as to spread this good news.

Four reactions attended these unlikely evangelists. The shepherds *spread the word*. The people were *amazed* (caused to marvel). Mary *treasured* and *pondered* the events. And the shepherds joined the angelic choir by *glorifying and praising God*. Shepherds were the first Christmas evangelists, and their message is worth investigating.

Mark Scott serves as preaching minister with Park Plaza Christian Church in Joplin, Mo. For 35 years, until 2021, he served as professor of preaching and New Testament with Ozark Christian College in Joplin.

WHEN FEAR GIVES WAY TO GLORY

BY DAVID FAUST

It started with fear, and it ended in glory.

Many things start and end that way. A young mother fears the pain of childbirth, but she rejoices after the baby is born. A football player faces possible injury as he sprints onto the field, but the thrill of competition and the possibility of victory motivate him to take the risk. Stage fright plagues a jittery public speaker, but he feels relieved when listeners smile and nod. A young physician steadies her grip on the scalpel as she begins her first solo surgery, but later she quietly rejoices when the patient recovers. Good things often start with fear and end in glory.

Good News Ambassadors

On a visit to Bethlehem a couple of years ago, I saw a shepherd at work. He didn't look like the robed shepherds depicted on Christmas cards. This modern shepherd wore sneakers, jeans, and a T-shirt, and he was talking on a cell phone; but he had full command of his flock. He whacked his staff on a rock, and the sheep listened and followed. Supervising the flock looked like routine work for him.

When a group of first-century shepherds began their night shift near Bethlehem, they didn't anticipate anything unusual, scary, or wonderful would happen. Tending sheep was routine work for them. They didn't expect to see God's glory shining around them . . . or to hear a concert by an angel choir . . . or to have a personal encounter with the Messiah.

The shepherds had no idea they were role-players in an unfolding drama that would forever change the world. They didn't realize that centuries later, people would sing carols about them or portray them in holiday pageants. If the shepherds had been forewarned that something terrifying would happen that evening, they might have called in sick. But if they hadn't gone out to serve in the field, they would have missed the glory.

The angels sang about peace on earth, and the terrified shepherds needed some peace themselves. Intense fear soon gave way to overwhelming joy. These unsuspecting shepherds became eyewitnesses of the Prince of Peace . . . the Lamb of God . . . a baby King swaddled not in a royal robe but in plain strips of cloth, with a manger for his throne. Now it was time for the shepherds themselves to become God's good news ambassadors.

The night started with fear and ended in glory. "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told" (Luke 2:20).

'Grace My Fears Relieved'

What are you afraid of right now? What makes you shudder with worry and dread? The song "Amazing Grace" contains this thought-provoking line: "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved." Fear is a natural response to the unknown—to danger and uncertainty. And faith is the right response to fear. When darkness descends, faith ascends. God can be trusted even in scary situations. His grace teaches our hearts to fear, and then it brings relief.

The Christmas story starts with fear and ends with glory, and faith is the deciding factor. If we don't risk facing danger—if we never venture out to the dark field where unexpected things can happen—we might miss the glory.

Personal Challenge:

On a piece of paper or in your personal journal, write a list of concerns that scare or worry you. In prayer, lift these fears up to God, knowing that he cares for you (1 Peter 5:7). Ask the Prince of Peace to put your heart at rest.

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How did you focus on listening to and obeying God last week?
2. What encouragement did you receive last week?

Ask two people to read aloud **Luke 2:5-20** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly retell the narrative in their own words.

3. This is a familiar story for many of us. What new detail or understanding do you notice today?
4. Let's dig deeper:
   - How would you describe the circumstances of the shepherds?
   - How is the angel of the Lord and the company of the heavenly host described?
   - In what ways do the angel and the heavenly host proclaim aspects of the gospel message?
   - What different emotions did the shepherds feel throughout this story?
   - How did different people respond to the good news of Jesus' birth?
5. What do you learn about God and the heavenly realm from this passage?
6. What do you learn about people?
7. What do you learn about obeying God from this passage?
8. Through the rest of the Christmas season, how will you follow the shepherds' example of spreading "the word concerning what had been told them about this child"?
   - The shepherds returned to their work, "glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen" regarding Jesus. How will you seek to have this same attitude in your workplace, school, or another place?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."
10. In what way do you need great joy or peace this week?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Luke 20:27-40** as we wrap up a four-week study in the book of Luke. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK FOUR

LESSON AIM: **Expect that God has in store for you something greater than you can imagine.**

STUDY: Luke

THEME: Surprise!

LESSON TEXT: Luke 20:27-40

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: 1 Corinthians 15:20, 42-44, 51-58; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Revelation 2:7, 10-11; 7:9-17; 22:14

UNEXPECTED HOPE

BY MARK SCOTT

Hopes are dashed when the new year begins the same way the old year ended. We long for a new year that breathes expectation and hope into our life. Jesus is a polar opposite of an Eeyore and a Debbie Downer. We find unexpected hope in him even in the midst of the questions over his authority.

We move from the joy of the shepherds spreading the good tidings of Christmas (last week's lesson) to the Sadducees asking Jesus about the future (this week's lesson). Jesus rode into the city of Jerusalem like he owned the place. It was quite a parade. Then he cursed a fig tree and cleansed the temple. These three events made the religion police ask about his authority. Jesus said he would not answer their question, but then he did, through parables (Matthew 21:28–22:14). After sharing the parables, Jesus answered several questions—a political one about paying taxes, a doctrinal one dealing with the future, and an interpretative one dealing with the greatest commandment. This lesson deals with the doctrinal question.

Hypothetical Question

Luke 20:27-33

This second question on the "Day of Questions" (Tuesday of Jesus' final week) came from the Sadducees. They were the priestly aristocracy. They were the temple power brokers. The high priest was chosen from among their group. Politically they were liberal, but theologically they were conservative. In their view, if Moses did not write it, then it was not Bible. Annas, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander were all Sadducees (Acts 4:6).

The Sadducees' presuppositions caused them to ask this hypothetical question. They did not believe in the reality of resurrection and future life. Neither did they believe in angels or spirits (Acts 23:8). Keep in mind, they were more interested in trapping Jesus than in finding truth. Thus, the hypothetical question.

Their question went back to Deuteronomy 25:5 to what was called Levirate marriage. God placed a provision in the Law to protect the heritage of families and property. When a man died and left no heirs, the brother-in-law had responsibilities to father children through the dead man's wife. The law seems strange to us. But the Messiah would have to come to earth to a specific location. The land of Israel was that spot (where East meets West—the literal center of the earth). This law perpetuated that family and land.

So the Sadducees posed this hypothetical question about seven brothers and a woman. They each married her one after the other. In the resurrected life, which they did not accept, whose wife would she be? It's likely they were proud of themselves and their question.

Heavenly Answer

Luke 20:34-40

Luke recorded Jesus' answer in a rather kind and gentle manner. Matthew recorded Jesus attacking the Sadducees for their lack of knowledge of the Scriptures and their lack of faith in the power of God (22:29). Mark's account added, "You are badly mistaken!" (12:27).

The only one who can tell us about the world beyond us is one who came from there. Jesus began speaking about what life in that world is like. The institution of marriage will not be necessary in the resurrected world because everyone will love everyone equally. (Sidebar: Jesus did not say we would not know our mates as our mates.) Life in the resurrected world will be so much greater than even the closest of all earthly relationships (i.e., marriage). The resurrected world is a world of perfect, unselfish love.

Jesus also taught that in the resurrected world there would be no need to worry about the dead man or his brothers dying. In fact, people will be like the angels. There is no promise of wings, but it probably suggests that, like the angels, we will constantly be in the presence of God. Our best label is *children of the resurrection*. That is the best identity.

Jesus then assured that God is a living God and his people will be resurrected by taking the Sadducees on their own turf. He referenced the call of Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3–4). God identified himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus spoke about these patriarchs as if they were currently alive. Throw out the hypothetical question as all are alive to God.

The teachers of the law, who were Pharisees, commended Jesus' answer. They did not want the Sadducees to use this fine point of theology against them (cf. Acts 23:9-10). While there would be one more question—the one about the greatest commandment—Luke's account reads, "And no one dared to ask him any more questions" (20:40). In the resurrected world, all of our questions melt into unexpected hope.

Mark Scott serves as preaching minister with Park Plaza Christian Church in Joplin, Mo. For 35 years, until 2021, he served as professor of preaching and New Testament with Ozark Christian College in Joplin.

THERE WILL BE A LAST TIME

BY DAVID FAUST

My son and I painted the outside of his house last summer. When the job was over, I told Matt, "This is the last time we'll do that together. Years from now when the house needs to be painted again, I will be too old to climb a ladder."

I remember the day my grandfather handed his car keys to my dad. Grandpa was a capable and independent man, but he was wise enough to recognize his limitations. That was the last time he ever drove a car.

The "last time" can sneak up on us. One morning a healthy-looking young father led his family in a prayer of thanksgiving before his kids left for school. His heart gave out while they were gone, and a few days later I conducted his funeral.

On this fallen, faltering earth, there will be a last time for all kinds of things. In the future, the house I live in now will belong to someone else. One day my clothes will be donated to a thrift store or tossed into the trash. Someone else will drive my car, and eventually it will rust in a junkyard. Someday my savings will be distributed to my next of kin.

There will be a last time I pet my dog and mow my lawn. There will be a last time I eat my favorite meal and watch a ballgame on TV. There will be a last time I kiss my wife and hug my kids and grandkids. There will be a last time I watch the sun rise, enjoy a mountain view, and hear a bird sing. Some Sunday will mark the last church service I attend and the last time I share in the Lord's Supper. Someone has said that preachers should approach every sermon as if it's the last time they will ever preach the Word of God. Someday that will, in fact, be the case.

There will be a last time. There will be final words to say and a final breath to take.

But . . . the story doesn't end with our last heartbeat. Yes, "the world and its desires pass away," but the rest of the verse says, "whoever does the will of God lives forever" (1 John 2:17). For all who have been saved by God's grace, what we call the end is actually the beginning.

There will be a first time!

After death I will open my eyes to a never-ending day. In my new resurrected body, I will begin to examine a safe and spacious land where tears never flow but the river of life always flows. There will be a first time I embrace friends who arrived ahead of me. There will be a first time I walk on golden streets and hear the angels sing their melodies of praise around the throne of God. There will be unlimited time to explore a glorious place no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and "no human mind has conceived" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

The first time I glimpse the Holy City that shines with the unfiltered glory of God, I won't worry about the last time my back ached or tears filled my eyes.

And the first time I see the Savior's face, I won't miss anything I left behind.

Personal Challenge:

Begin assembling a "When I Die" box. It should include your will, financial information for your family and executor, instructions about your funeral preferences, and encouraging notes you want to share with your family and friends. Make sure it also includes a list of your favorite Scriptures and a written or videotaped personal testimony about your faith in the Lord.

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Over the last week, how were you able to "spread the word" about the good news of Jesus' birth?

2. In what way did you find great joy and/or peace last week?

Ask two people to read aloud **Luke 20:27-40** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to retell the narrative in their own words in a minute or less.

3. How does Jesus' response provide hope for Christ followers?

4. Let's dig deeper:
   - The Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead, and yet they asked Jesus about what would happen at the resurrection. What was their motive for their question?
   - The Sadducees' view of life was very limited: we live, we die, that's it. How do you think that kind of viewpoint would affect a person's life?
   - What points did Jesus make in his response to their question?
   - What Old Testament evidence did Jesus use to prove the resurrection of the dead?
   - How would you summarize Jesus' main point in his response?

5. What do you learn about our eternal God from this passage?

6. What do you learn about people?

7. Since we are God's children, what does that teach you about obeying God our Father?

8. Consider how you could retell this story to someone who does not believe fully in Jesus. What would you tell them about the eternal hope you have that Jesus provided when he died on the cross?

9. Based on our study and discussion, complete this sentence: "This week, I will . . ."

10. In what area of your life do you need hope this week?

For Next Week: This week's lesson brings this unit of study to a conclusion. Look for additional "1717: Your Word Is Truth" studies, for use with your Sunday School classes, small groups, or personal studies, at ChristianStandard.com.