

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY OF THE GOSPEL OF LUKE – PART THREE

Luke, as usual, set the historical scene carefully for this story which has caught the imagination of the world. Augustus was Emperor in Rome. Quirinius was governor of the Roman province which included Israel. The order was given for everyone not just to complete a census form as would happen today but to return to their home town to be counted in person. No regard was taken of age, health or condition including pregnancy. The bureaucrats of Rome said everyone had to do it. Joseph and Mary, both descended from David, had to return to Bethlehem for census day.(I Sam.16:1) They were engaged; Mary was well on in pregnancy. Having a baby away from home with no family support was hard enough but when her time for delivery came there was not even a bed available in a town crowded with visitors. Joseph presumably did not have the money to buy priority over other strangers so the birth took place in a stable. Jesus was born in poverty as a homeless person. He would always identify first with the most needy, and still does.(2:1-7)

Appropriately, the first to be told of the new baby were a group of shepherds whose role included living night and day with their sheep. They were the lowest of the low in their society. First they heard from a solitary angel the good news of the birth of a baby who would be a Saviour not just for their Jewish people but for the whole world. Then a whole choir of angels appeared singing praise to God. Their message was of peace on earth, a human dream throughout history, still never fulfilled in an external sense. The peace the angels sang of was an inner peace despite outward chaos, and depending on one essential condition, that God was pleased with us. Religious people had been trying to achieve this for centuries by keeping whatever they decided were God's rules, yet peace within had escaped them. The One who had just been born was somehow going to be the secret of making this possible. He was the Christ promised throughout the Old Testament. The shepherds' first reaction was of terror, but then the message of peace and joy sank in. They wanted what they had just heard about and could not wait to see for themselves. How they found the stable we have no idea. Whether it had anything to do with the star mentioned in Matthew 2, we do not know. Clearly however it was God who guided them as He does anyone who seeks Him.(Matt.7:7) They went, saw, believed and shared the great news of their discovery. They became the first New Testament missionaries. Mary must have been greatly encouraged at a needy time in her life by the message they brought. God uses faithful poor people as His witnesses.(2:8-20)

As a believing Jewish couple, Mary and Joseph followed the instructions of Leviticus 12. First Jesus was circumcised on the 8th day. They gave Him the name Jesus, meaning 'the Lord saves', as Joseph had been instructed.(Matt.1:21) Mary's ceremonial purification would have taken another 33 days, after which sacrifice was offered. Another indication of their poverty was the offering of two doves instead of a lamb, a concession allowed to the poor.(2:21-24)

While following the Bible instructions in the temple in Jerusalem, two old people approached the family. First there was Simeon who had been faithfully awaiting the

fulfillment of God's promises to send a Saviour, not only for Jews but for the whole world. He had believed that he would be allowed to see the Christ before he died. His prayer was answered and he was ready now to die. Before he did he testified that this Jesus was indeed the Christ. Anna, a widow of 84, had also been praying and spending her time in the temple for years looking for this great moment in history. She too confirmed her God-given conviction that Jesus was the Redeemer for whom she had been waiting. God uses faithful old people to witness to the truth.(2:25-38)

Some time after this visit to Jerusalem the family returned to Nazareth. Presumably the events of Matt.2:13-23 fit into the story before they do so. Back in Nazareth there were many years of growing up about which the Bible is silent but for the one story of the visit to Jerusalem. The child developed into a man, maturing in all the ways a child should, physically, mentally, socially and spiritually.(2:39,40,52)

The final story in this chapter illustrated how beautifully this process of maturing was progressing, even by the age of 12. Again as faithful Jews, Mary and Joseph made the annual trip back to the temple in Jerusalem for the Passover, little realizing that their son was what the feast had been about for over a thousand years. By 12, He was learning to listen to His heavenly Father before His earthly parents. His God given insight into the scriptures, and His hunger to know more, gave Him penetrating questions which staggered the expert teachers. How could a twelve year old know so much? When His earthly parents came back to Jerusalem and found Him, He explained that He was simply being at home in His heavenly Father's house. This was too much for them to grasp for the moment but all would become clear in time.(2:41-51)

Chapter three returns to the story of John, the first baby to be born.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Who were the key people in power at the time John's ministry began? How would some of them impact on the story? What was the signal for John to start preaching? What was his message? How had Isaiah described John's purpose and his impact on people's lives?(3:1-6)
2. Why did John use such strong language to describe some of his hearers? What warnings was he giving them? What did he mean by 'fruit of repentance'? What was their response to such tough talk? What three examples did John give of fruit of repentance? How would they apply to us today?(3:7-14)
3. How did John contrast himself and Jesus? Why is this so important for a preacher? What did he promise about the future work of Jesus? What two choices did his hearers have?(3:15-17)
4. What was his message for Herod? What was Herod's response? What does this teach us about witnessing to rulers?(3:18-20)
5. Why did Jesus ask to be baptized? What was the response from heaven? Why were God's words so important to Jesus at this moment and throughout His life on earth? Why did the Holy Spirit use the form of a dove? What was the consequence of this event?(Acts 10:38) How does this story apply to our relationship with God? Plan a sermon based on verses 23-38.(3:21-38)