

Honor and Shame in the Christmas Story

Seven Bible studies about the Christmas story from
the Gospel of Luke, chapters 1 and 2

By Werner Mischke

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5–25), parents of John the Baptist

Part 1: Introduction (Luke 1:5–7) / "The FIRST STORY in the Gospel of Luke"

- Read aloud Luke 1:5–7 slowly in the storytelling style of your people. From verse 5, when does this story take place? Where does this happen? Who is in charge of the land?
- Reread verse 5. What does the story tell us about Zechariah in this verse? What is honorable about Zechariah? What is Zechariah's job? Zechariah possesses what various kinds of honor?
- Reread verse 6. What does this verse tell us about the honor of Zechariah and Elizabeth? What kind of honor is this? What do you imagine their life together looks like in the village?
- Reread verse 7. What do we learn about Zechariah and Elizabeth? How old do you imagine them to be? What are some differences between a young man and wife—and an old man and wife? What do you feel when you hear this verse? Why?

Part 2: A big surprise for Zechariah (Luke 1:8–17)

- Read aloud Luke 1:8–17 slowly in the storytelling style of your people. Where is Zechariah, and what is he doing?
- Reread verse 10. Where are the many people; where is Zechariah?
- Reread verses 11–12. What happens in these two verses? What does Zechariah feel? Why? Whose honor and power is being revealed?
- Reread verses 13–17 again, slowly.
    - Verses 13–14: What good news does the angel give to Zechariah?
    - Verse 15: What kind of person will the son of Zechariah be? What is his name? What will be honorable about him and his way of life?
    - Verses 16–17: What does the angel promise will be the purpose of John, the son of Zechariah?
    - What have we learned about God from the angel's message to Zechariah?

Part 3: Zechariah responds to the angel (Luke 1:18–23)

- Read aloud Luke 1:18–23 slowly in the storytelling style of your people.
- In verse 18, Zechariah speaks to the angel. What does he say? What is he feeling? Why is he saying these words to the angel? Do you notice any shame or honor in Zechariah's words? Explain.
- Reread verses 19–20. The angel responds to Zechariah in what manner? What does the angel seem to feel toward Zechariah? Why is Zechariah punished? How may we see the exchange of honor and shame between Zechariah and the angel Gabriel? Why is unbelief dishonoring to God?
- In verse 21, the people are waiting outside for Zechariah. What do you imagine they are saying?
- Describe what happens in verses 22–23.

Part 4: From shame to honor (Luke 1:24–25)

- In verse 24, what happens? Why does Elizabeth want to remain hidden?
- In verse 25, Elizabeth says what the Lord has done for her. What has happened in the village? What was said of Elizabeth that is no longer said about her? What kinds of new things are being said of Elizabeth by her friends and extended family and villagers that have never been said before? What is Elizabeth feeling? What is Zechariah feeling?
- The first story in Luke (the Gospel of Jesus Christ) is a story about reversing shame to honor in the life of Zechariah and Elizabeth, parents of John the Baptist. . . . *From shame to honor.*
    - Why is it important that the first story in Luke is a shame-to-honor story?
    - Can you think of any other shame-to-honor stories in the Bible?
    - What do we learn about God from this story?
    - What do we learn about ourselves from this story?
- What is the Lord telling you today from this story?
- How will you obey what the Lord has told you?

God sends the angel Gabriel to talk with Mary (Luke 1:26–38)

Part 1: Gabriel has big news for Mary (Luke 1:26–33)

- Luke 1:26–38 — Read this text aloud with emotion and drama.
    - **Or create a short drama.** Choose someone to be Gabriel and a young woman to be Mary. The person who is Gabriel will have to memorize many words. Mary has fewer words to memorize.
- Verse 27: Mary is a virgin "betrothed" to Joseph.[1] Betrothed means she is legally pledged to be married. *Ask:* What is your family custom about how a young woman is to be married; what behavior would be honorable for the man and woman? What would be shameful?
- The world in which Jesus lived had the values of the ancient Greeks. For example, the philosopher Socrates is said to have thanked Fortune for three things: "first, that I am a human and not a beast; second, that I am a man and not a woman; third, that I am a Greek and not a barbarian." What honor-shame values do we see in this?
- In Luke 1:28, Gabriel says to Mary: "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you." What is the magnificent favor? What does this tell us of the honor of the woman?
- Reread slowly Luke 1:32–33 to your people. The angel Gabriel describes to Mary the honor of the Son who will be born to her. Gabriel describes the honor of this Son in at least six ways, fulfilling the prophecy in 2 Samuel 7:12–17. Identify together with your people these six descriptions.
- Be quiet now with your people. *Let's close our eyes.* Ask the Holy Spirit to help you grasp in your hearts the great honor of this Son. Pause. … Imagine together: *What is Mary thinking? What is Mary feeling?* Discuss.

Part 2: Mary responds to Gabriel's big news (Luke 1:34–38)

- In Luke 1:34, Mary asks Gabriel a good question. Gabriel answers in verse 35. How does this show Jesus is to be fully God and fully human?
- Mary giving birth to the Son of God seems impossible. So Gabriel encourages Mary by using Elizabeth as an example. How so? (Luke 1:36–37)
- Because Mary gives birth to Jesus, she is completely unique. But in Luke 1:38, Mary is also an example to all of us. How so?
- What does this story teach us about humanity?
- What does this story teach us about God?

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[1] Joseph was already considered Mary's husband although they had not yet had sexual relations.

Mary visits Elizabeth / Mary sings praise to God (Luke 1:39–56)

Part 1: Mary visits Elizabeth (Luke 1:39–45)

- Read aloud Luke 1:39–45 slowly in the storytelling style of your people. From verse 39, when does this story take place? How do Mary and Elizabeth know each other (verse 36)? What do you imagine their age difference is?

- In verse 41, what happens? Suggestion: Create a small drama to act out this story. Choose from your group one elderly woman and one young woman (age 15?). They will act out the story. The elderly woman, as Elizabeth, must look like she is with child. She will show great surprise at Mary's appearance. She will memorize the main ideas of what Elizabeth speaks to Mary, and boldly speak Elizabeth's words.

- After the drama, ask: What have we learned about Mary? What have we learned about Elizabeth? What have we learned about the Lord?

Part 2: Mary's song of praise (Luke 1:46–56)

- Read aloud Luke 1:46–56 slowly in the storytelling style of your people. Where is Mary when she gives this song of praise to God? How long will Mary be with Elizabeth in her home (verse 56)?

- How do verses 46–47 describe the relationship of Mary to the Lord God?

- Reread verses 48–49. This is about Mary. What honors does Mary tell about herself? What does Mary say is happening to her in the language of honor and shame? What does this teach us about God?

- Reread verses 51–53. In Mary's song of praise to God, she envisions reversals happening in the world. What reversals? What is happening in the language of honor and shame? What does this teach us about God?

- Reread verses 54–55. Mary speaks of a very important ancestor. Who is he? Why is he important to Mary's story? What does this teach us about God?

- Why might this ancestor be important to our own story?
(Genesis 12:1–3; Galatians 3:28–29)

At last, Zechariah is a father (Luke 1:57–66)

Part 1: Elizabeth bears a son (Luke 1:57–58)

- Read aloud Luke 1:57–66 slowly in the storytelling style of your people. Recall and read verses 24–25. Then reread verses 57–58. What has the Lord done for Elizabeth?

- Read verse 58. Let us put Elizabeth's neighbors and relatives into our mind's eye. What honor have they seen with their eyes? What blessing have they heard with their ears? What do you imagine them saying and doing?

- In verse 59, Zechariah and Elizabeth's family follow the covenant God gave to Abraham (Genesis 17:9–14) and the law given to Moses (Leviticus 12:1–3). It appears that the infant boy is given a name on the eighth day, the day of circumcision. What is the tradition in your family or people? How much time passes after birth before a baby is named? What other honor traditions are part of your people?

Part 2: Elizabeth and Zechariah ignore a family tradition (Luke 1:59–66)

- According to Luke 1:59–61, a heated discussion breaks out among Elizabeth and Zechariah's neighbors and relatives. This is about family honor. What name does Elizabeth want to give to her baby boy? Why is there now a big argument in the community?

- Elizabeth wants to name him "John." This name is of Hebrew origin, derived from "Yohanan," meaning "God is gracious." What does this mean for God's big story?

- Suggestion: For Luke 1:59–64, create a drama with at least 10 people involved.
  - *Scene 1) Luke 1:59–62.* Elizabeth is with her infant son. Brothers and sisters, cousins, friends, neighbors—they all want the infant son named Zechariah. They stand and argue with Elizabeth. It is loud and emotional. And Zechariah sits silently beside Elizabeth, mute for the last 9 months.
  - *Scene 2) Luke 1:63–64.* Zechariah asks for a writing tablet. "His name is John," he writes. Suddenly, Zechariah can speak and blesses God. The neighbors and relatives are shocked, fearing God, full of wonder.

- Reread verses 65–66 slowly. Zechariah and Elizabeth's neighbors and relatives have seen miracles and surprises. What are those miracles? What are they feeling? What are they doing? What are they wondering?

- What does this story tell us about God? About family honor and traditions? Can you think of another story in the Bible where God does something that goes against family honor and tradition?

Zechariah Praises God and Prophesies (Luke 1:67–80)

Part 1: Review

Review highlights of what has happened in Luke 1. Ask your hearers what they remember from prior lessons. Let them answer the questions if possible.

- The surprising parents—Zechariah and Elizabeth. Why their reversal of shame to honor? (1:25)
- What is the angel Gabriel doing in Luke 1:11–20? What is Gabriel doing in Luke 1:26–38? Why Gabriel? What honor does this signify?
- What is the relationship between Elizabeth and Mary? (Luke 1:39–46)
- How do we see honor and shame in Mary's song of praise? (Luke 1:52–53)
- Summarize the naming controversy about John the Baptist (Luke 1:57–66). Why were the neighbors of Zechariah and Elizabeth amazed? (verses 64–65)

Part 2: Zechariah's prophecy (Luke 1:67–80)

- Read out loud the entire prophecy of the old man Zechariah, who is filled with the Holy Spirit (1:68–79). It should be read slowly with passion and drama. Imagine you are Zechariah; you are 60 years old; you have had no children for maybe 40 years, and now by God's miracle, you and your wife Elizabeth finally have a son! Zechariah praises God and prophesies!
- Reread verses 68–75. Have the people listen carefully for anything about ancestors. What do they hear in Zechariah's prophecy? What ancient promises is God fulfilling?
- In verse 73, Abraham is the ancient "father" of Zechariah and God's people Israel. Describe God's covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15:1–21). Abraham had also been an old man without offspring (Genesis 15:2–3). Why is this significant to Zechariah?
- In verses 71–75, what will God do about Israel's enemies?
- Reread verses 76–79. Here, Zechariah prophesies about the special ministry God has planned for Zechariah's son John. Describe.
- What shall John be called (1:76)? How high is this level of honor?
- What will be the very honorable work that God has given John to do (1:76–77)? Be sure everyone sees the connection to the coming birth of Jesus.
- What else do we learn about John (1:80)?
- What do we learn about God from this old man, this new father—Zechariah?

The birth of Jesus in the time of Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1–7)

Part 1: The political moment when Jesus was born (Luke 2:1–3)

- Read aloud Luke 2:1–7. Instruct the people gathered in church or for Bible study to listen for six people named in the story. Ask the group: What do you imagine is the level of social honor and power that each person has? Begin with Caesar Augustus.
    - Caesar Augustus (63 BC–AD 14) — see "Who was Caesar Augustus?" on the next page. Describe to the people gathered who Caesar is. Ask: *What kind of man was Caesar Augustus?*
    - Quirinius
    - Joseph
    - Mary
    - David
    - Jesus, Mary's firstborn son
- Israel was under the rule of the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus's birth, "when Quirinius was governor of Syria." Tell your people about Quirinius: see "Who was Quirinius?" on the next page.
- Read aloud God's covenant with David (2 Samuel 7:12–17). Why is it important that Joseph is in David's lineage? What is Luke trying to tell us about Jesus?
- In Luke 1:51–53, Mary's song of praise says God "has brought down the mighty from their thrones." Whose "thrones" are here in Luke 2:1–7? (Caesar, David, baby Jesus)
- Caesar Augustus possessed mighty honor and power as emperor of the great Roman Empire. He led the feared Roman army. All people feared Caesar. But Jesus was born at the time of this emperor. What might this tell us about God?

Part 2: The good man Joseph (Luke 2:4–7; Matthew 1:18–22)

- From Luke 2:4–5, what do we learn about Joseph? See also Matthew 1:18–22. What does this tell us about the heart and character of Joseph?
- In Matthew 1:19, Joseph faces questions about his honor and shame in the community. Imagine what people are saying. What is happening? What kind of man is Joseph?

Part 3: Mary gives birth to her firstborn son (Luke 2:6–7)

- Two miracles are recorded in Luke 2:6–7. The first is the miracle of a new child brought to life: *Mary and Joseph have a son!* According to Philippians 2:5–7, what is the second miracle?
- What kind of social honor is traditionally given to the firstborn son?
- Mary gives birth to Jesus. How does *this miracle* speak about the honor of women?
- What does this story tell us about human beings? What does *the birth of Mary's firstborn son* tell us about God?

Who was Caesar Augustus?

- Caesar Augustus was born Gaius Octavius. Julius Caesar adopted him in his will (44 BC), and historians call him Octavian from that point. On January 1, 42 BC, Octavian had the Roman Senate declare his adoptive father, Julius Caesar, a god, allowing Octavian to declare himself the son of a god. A law was passed to build a temple and institute the worship of Julius Caesar.
- Four years later, in 38 BC, Octavian was acclaimed by his troops as imperator, or victorious general. He now became known as "the victorious general Caesar, son of a god."
- Caesar Augustus was emperor when Jesus was born. He was the first emperor of the Roman Empire and is often regarded as the greatest.

Who was Quirinius?

- Publius Sulpicius Quirinius was a well-known Roman official who lived from about 51 BC to AD 21. Numerous ancient authors mention him, including Josephus, Pliny the Elder, Tacitus, and Caesar Augustus himself.
- Quirinius is described as a man of great dignity and extremely rich.
- Quirinius held several roles in the Roman Empire, including senator, magistrate, consul, and legate. He rose to fame as a military commander under Caesar Augustus after conquering the Homonadenses, a mountain people in the Pisidia region.
- Quirinius was married twice, first to Appia Claudia, and later to Aemilia Lepida, both of whom he divorced. He accused Aemilia Lepida of trying to poison him.

Lowly Shepherds and Highest Angels in Jesus's Story (Luke 2:8–20)

Part 1: *Imagine*—WE are the shepherds (Luke 2:8)

- **Read aloud Luke 2:8.** We will focus our attention on the shepherds. Let's imagine we are all shepherds in this story.
- **Break up into six groups.** *Each group:* 1) Answer only your questions. 2) All of these imaginings are BEFORE the angels appear. 3) Identify a spokesperson who will present the thoughts of your group. *The goal:* Imagine many details so we can see and feel ourselves as these shepherds in the night in Luke 2.
  - **Group 1:** *How many are we? Any women or children among us? Where are we? What are we doing? What are we talking about?*
  - **Group 2:** *What do we see above, below, in the distance? What do we hear?*
  - **Group 3:** *What do we smell? What do we feel on our hands, our feet, our faces?*
  - **Group 4:** *What is our education? What is our social status? Are we all in good health? How do the people in the city think about us?*
  - **Group 5:** *What are we wearing? What are we carrying? What are our tools?*
  - **Group 6:** *How many sheep are there? Are the sheep far away? Close by? What are the sheep doing? How do we know our sheep? (John 10:27)*
- A spokesperson from each group takes 1 or 2 minutes to report their imaginings.

Part 2: One angel appears and gives news (Luke 2:9–12)

- In Luke 2:9, who and what appear to the shepherds? How do the shepherds react?
- In Luke 2:10–12, what does the angel report to the shepherds?
- Verse 11 describes a Savior. What does it mean he is from "the city of David"? What does it mean he is "Christ"? What does it mean he is "Lord"?

Part 3: A multitude of the heavenly host praising God (Luke 2:13–14)

- Verse 13 begins, "And suddenly"; what does this mean? *Do you see it, hear it, feel it?*
- What is the message of the multitude? What do you like best about the message?
- They praised, *"Glory to God in the highest!"* What does this tell us about God? This was sung to lowly shepherds. What else does this tell us about God?

Part 4: The shepherds find Jesus and gain honor (Luke 2:15–20)

- Read Luke 2:15–20 aloud. Why do the shepherds want to go? Where do they go? Whom do they find in Bethlehem?
- Verse 18 says all the people were amazed when they heard the shepherds' report. Why did God honor the shepherds? Why did God not choose the high-status, wealthy, powerful people? Rather, God chose to give the shepherds the great announcement from the angels and the multitude of the heavenly host. Why?