



A 4-Week
Study Guide

The Original



CHRISTMAS

Carols



Village Bible Church



Originally published as
Study Through the Bible: The Songs of Advent
Christianity Today International

© 2008

Limited duplication permission purchased by Village Bible Church.

Additional duplication or distribution is prohibited.

Visit villagebible.org/carols for more information on the Village Bible Church sermon series.



The Original CHRISTMAS Carols

ZECHARIAH: A SONG OF FAITH

LUKE 1:67-79



Even in silence, God is at work.

Devotional

As familiar as we are with the songs of Christmas, there are four songs recorded in the Bible to celebrate the birth of Jesus that most of us aren't familiar with. The angels sang a song to the shepherds (we know part of their song: "And on earth peace and goodwill toward men"). Mary sang a song to God after she had time to get over the shocking news that she was going to be the mother of the Savior. Simeon also had a song. Then there's Zechariah's song. Zechariah was an elderly priest who sang after being visited by an angel.

This wasn't like a Broadway musical—these people didn't suddenly burst into song. But the ancient church captured their words and created songs known as canticles.

The Old Testament ends with this mysterious phrase in Malachi 4:5–6, written four centuries before the birth of Christ: "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse." Just like that, the

Old Testament comes to a close. It's confusing, cryptic, and disturbing. It's not really the way you want to end a book—unless you're planning to write a sequel.

Elijah was probably the most famous of the Old Testament prophets. He was relentless in calling God's people to turn away from their sin and back to the one true God. He often stood up to evil rulers, and never tried to sugarcoat his words. Elijah had died hundreds of years before this passage was written. Many in Jesus' day believed that this Scripture implied Elijah would come back from the dead. God's people were left hanging, wondering, and waiting. And when the waiting was done, they broke into song.

OPEN IT

- 1. What is your favorite Christmas song, and why?**

- 2. Do you feel differently about Christmas songs than about other Christian songs and hymns? If so, why?**

GET IT

GOD WAS SILENT

After the prophet Malachi penned these words, there were no prophets and no written revelations from God for 400 years. That's how much time elapsed between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament. Four hundred years. That's longer than the United States has been a country.

Many of us are uncomfortable with silence. Have you ever been in a small group praying, and there were 30 seconds of silence? It feels like an eternity. Have you ever prayed and prayed about a struggle in your life, and as best you could tell, God was silent? I think most of us have experienced that, and at the time it seemed like we would never hear from God. But for God to be silent for 400 years? Generations went by without a fresh word from God. True, Israel had the law of Moses and the words of the prophets, but only a few gave themselves to understanding the

words and promises of God; only a few were willing to wait their entire lives if necessary to hear from God.

3. If you are with others and there is silence, is it comfortable or uncomfortable for you? Why?

4. What if you are by yourself? Do you prefer silence or noise around you? Why?

5. What is the longest period of time that you felt God was silent in your life? Describe it for us.

6. Why do you think God is sometimes silent?

It's helpful to try and envision things from God's perspective. God was silent from a human perspective, but that doesn't mean he had stopped working on behalf of humankind.

7. Read Galatians 4:4–5. What do these verses tell us about God's timing? What was he waiting for?

From 356–323 B.C., God brought to power a man known as Alexander the Great. As Alexander took his army around the Mediterranean region, he set up cities and libraries for the sole purpose of spreading the Greek culture and language. By the time Rome came to power, Greek was the language of commerce and education. This influence led to the translation of the Old Testament into Greek—what scholars today call the Septuagint. Gentiles were then able to become acquainted with the principles of Judaism. Later, when the biographies of Jesus and letters of instruction for the early churches were written, they were written in Greek. Alexander the Great believed he was on a divine mission, although he personally did not know the one true God. In the silence, God was preparing for Christmas.

When Rome came to power, one of the lasting legacies was a system of roads going to every part of the Empire, hence the saying, “all roads lead to Rome.” With this unified empire came unprecedented freedom to move from one Roman province to another. In the silence, God was preparing for Christmas.

It’s amazing what a change of perspective can bring. To the Jewish nation, it looked like God had abandoned them. But we can see from our perspective that he was very much at work, preparing the world and setting the stage for his greatest work—the coming of his Son.

GOD BROKE THE SILENCE AND SPOKE TO ZECHARIAH

Finally, after 400 years of silence, when everything was ready, God spoke again through an angel. The word angel means messenger. When the angel Gabriel spoke, he picked up right where Malachi left off. Read Luke 1:5–25.

8. Put yourself in Zechariah’s place. What would you have thought and felt?

Zechariah and his wife were going to have a baby—John—and that baby was the very one that Malachi promised would come—a powerful, influential prophet who would be like Elijah. In fact, if you read further in the story about John as a man, he even dressed like Elijah, with a camel hair coat and a leather belt around his waist. Like Elijah, he called people to repentance; he called people back to God. Like Elijah, he didn’t mince words, calling the religious leaders of his day “a brood of vipers.” As a priest, Zechariah was probably one of the few people left in that day who understood the Old Testament Scriptures well enough to make the connection between John and Elijah.

9. Why would God want John to be identified with the prophet Elijah? What purpose might that have served in the Jewish people's minds?

Despite Zechariah's awareness that God was at work, the news that he and his wife were going to have a baby at their age was pretty heavy. As some say, Zechariah had one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel.

There are a couple instances in the Bible of God granting children to people past childbearing years—Abraham and Sarah, for example. We really can't blame Zechariah for questioning the angel in verse 18. As a result, Zechariah lost the power of speech.

Was Zechariah being punished? Maybe not. Maybe in the silence, God was preparing Zechariah for Christmas.

10. How might this silence have prepared Zechariah for the coming Messiah and John's role in introducing him?

Zechariah must have pored over the Scriptures, trying to understand what was happening. He must have spent long hours in prayer, trying to understand what the angel had said and what the role of his son would be. Why name him John? Well, the name means "gift of God."

John would be the one Malachi had predicted, but was that all? Just another prophet? Another prophet to be mostly ignored like all the rest? No, the more Zechariah was silent, the more he thought about the last thing the angel said: "And he will ... make ready a people prepared for the Lord." The Lord. Was the angel talking about the Messiah? The Chosen One? The Savior?

11. Why do you think there needed to be a forerunner to the Messiah? What do you think John's purpose was?

ZECHARIAH SINGS A SONG OF FAITH

At some point, it all came into focus for Zechariah. In the silence, God had prepared him to understand the bigger picture—more than just a miraculous birth to an elderly couple. Read Luke 1:67–79.

Zechariah sang, but it wasn't a lullaby. It was a song of faith. Zechariah sang, not about his own son, but about another baby who would soon be born to a distant relative of his wife. It's not until verse 76 that he addresses his own son and the role he would play in this event we call Christmas. Little baby John would grow up to be a herald, to prepare people for the coming King.

After 400 years without a prophet, people had to be awakened from their spiritual slumber. They had to hear the old, old stories. They had to remember the promises of God. They had to become aware of their sin and the barrier that it was to God. Through John's life work and eventual death, God served notice that his eternal plan for the redemption of people was finally at hand.

12. In this beautiful song, Zechariah gave several pictures symbolizing the salvation we have in Jesus Christ. Name all the Savior would bring according to this song.

This was the first song of the first Christmas. And the lesson for us is this: Even in apparent silence, God is preparing you and me for Christmas. He's not preparing us for the holiday of Christmas, but for the reality of Christmas: "God with us."

13. As you prepare for this holiday season, what keeps the purpose of it central in your mind? How do you keep perspective on what it is really about?



APPLY IT

When you find yourself in silence, it helps to read of others who have gone before you. It helps to remember that although God did not make himself evident for 400 years, he was at work the whole time preparing the way.

God will redeem the silence in your life. Whether you've been crying out for the salvation of someone you love, the restoration of health for yourself or someone else, for an end to the financial hardship you've been under, or for the stress and mental strain of life to ease up—God is still working, even when you cannot see evidence of it.

This is the essence of faith according to Hebrews 11:1—being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This Christmas, in spite of the silence, sing a song of faith, a song like Zechariah's.

14. What kind of song would you sing this Christmas? What words and works of old would you remember? Write out a song to God. If you'd like, share your song with the group. Keep it somewhere as a reminder of how Christmas can encourage and grow your faith.

The Original CHRISTMAS Carols



ANGELS: A SONG OF PEACE

LUKE 2:13-14



This is a peace that passes our understanding.

Devotional

This song was sung to shepherds—men who herded livestock for a living, who were at the very bottom of the social structure. You’ve heard people say, “She cusses like a sailor.” In those days there was a saying, “He lies like a shepherd.” Fairly or unfairly, the character of shepherds was not highly regarded. Shepherds tended to be socially inept, hygienically challenged, and culturally reviled. The work was dirty and dangerous; shepherds were exposed to all the elements in all seasons. Men who shepherded usually had no other work options.

It’s worth noting that these angels did not bring the wonderful message of Christ’s birth to those who had influence. They did not appear to the wealthy or to political or religious leaders. Instead they came to the least significant, least respected, least likely people in the community. When God’s messenger said he came to bring good news to all people, he demonstrated it by starting at the bottom.

First there was one angel, and then he was joined by “a great company” of angels. That phrase means “more than could be counted.” If you think one angel is scary, how’d you like to see angels from here to infinity?

The first angel brought the news of Jesus’ birth. He gave specific instructions about when and where this Messiah was to be born. The great company of angels brought the song, which has inspired composers for two thousand years. Often called the “Gloria” after its first word in the Latin translation, it is the basis of modern choral works, traditional Christmas carols, and ancient liturgical chants. It is composed of two parts. The first phrase is about what this good news means for God. The second phrase is about what it means for all of us.

OPEN IT

1. **Share with us the most awesome experience you’ve ever had—something that made your heart thump and overwhelmed you emotionally. It may have been singing with thousands of people, standing on the top of a mountain, or seeing a royal procession.**

2. **Why do you think the shepherds were given such an overwhelming display to hear about Jesus’ birth?**

READ LUKE 2:8-20

GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST

In verse 14, the angel’s song focuses on the One who set these events in motion: the One who controls all events on Earth, the One who dwells in the highest place. Because of what is about to happen—because of who this baby is—people who respond to this message will respond with praise. They will say things like, “My life was a mess, and you gave me purpose. I used to glorify myself, but now, the glory is yours, God.” “I was wandering, lost and alone. I’d been rejected by everyone I once loved and trusted. And you found me. You are glorious, Lord!” “I was living my life in fear—fearful of those around me, fearful of the future. And then, because of the Son you sent, I found release from my fear. God, you are magnificent!”

GET IT

If we could just once grasp the love of God that exists behind these familiar stories, every one of us would shout out loud, “Glory to God in the highest!”

3. What most causes you to want to shout, “God, you are magnificent”?

4. Play a recording of a song, poem, Scripture passage, or short story about God that you feel is powerful. How does it make you feel?

AND ON EARTH PEACE TO MEN ON WHOM HIS FAVOR RESTS

Peace means different things to different people.

What does peace mean to a soldier? To the mother of a colicky infant? To a child whose parents won't stop fighting? It usually means the end of something—the end of a war; the end of non-stop crying; the end of a heart-wrenching dispute.

5. So what kind of peace are the angels referring to? Is there a promise here of any of the above?

All those are at best temporary forms of peace. Wars will break out again. Babies will cry again. Relationships will get strained again. The peace that only the Messiah can bring is a personal, permanent kind of peace—peace between self-absorbed, willful, sinful people like you and me, and the holy God. Those whom God favors are those who embrace this truth.

6. Read Romans 12:18. What does this verse have to do with Luke 2:14?

We all know people who seem to thrive on conflict. If they don't have any, they can create some on the spot. Then there are people and groups of people who are so filled with selfish interests and hate that they think nothing of taking for themselves what belongs to another. It is wishful thinking to believe that because of Jesus we will never experience interpersonal conflict or be free from conflict between nations and people.

But in Christ, we have the ability to not be that kind of person or that kind of group. If we are at peace with God and at peace with ourselves, it is remarkable how much that will improve our ability to be at peace with others. In other words, our level of internal peace affects our ability to experience relational peace.

7. Give an example of when your lack of peace affected those around you, or of how finding internal peace improved your relationships with others.

Sometimes we put too much emphasis on receiving the good news of Jesus just so we can spend eternity with God. That's a fantastic truth, but it's only part of the truth. The whole truth is that in this song, we are being told of the opportunity for God to affect our past, present, and future.

Peace from our Past

The angels' song also gives us the hope of peace from our past. If there is anything in your past that still causes you shame, embarrassment, or guilt, this song promises you can be at peace. If there is anything in your past that brings you sadness, grief, or loneliness, this song promises you can be at peace. If there is anything in your past that brings you regret over things done or said that hurt people you love, this song promises you can be at peace.

Read Psalm 103:11–12 and Isaiah 1:18.

The slate is wiped clean with God. All things are new with him.

8. Take a moment to think about or jot down one regret or shame you have from your past. Dwell on what the message of Psalm 103:11–12 and Isaiah 1:18 means for your past.

Peace in the Present

Read what the baby in the Christmas story said to his followers at the end of his life, in John 14:27.

9. What kind of peace does the world give?

We are bombarded with advertisements that promise we'll know peace if we just purchase the right products. Every drug, both legal and illegal, lies by suggesting that using it is the only way to find peace. Many of us believe that real peace would come if we just had financial security. Still others try to convince us that peace is found only in independence, never being committed to anyone or anything. We are so bombarded by the peace that the world offers, all of which is temporary at best and fatal at worst, that we fail to believe the peace proclaimed by the angels and promised by Jesus himself.

10. We often think of peace as being without trials and troubles—the absence of pain, suffering, and heartache. Why is it impossible to sustain that kind of peace?

11. How is the peace that Jesus gives different from the peace the world gives? How does it transcend circumstances?

Jesus Christ and the truth in Scripture allow us to rise above the urgency of the immediate. We can have a clear head and a peaceful heart in the midst of the chaos that defines contemporary life, because we know that this life is not all there is.

Peace for the Future

Finally, the angels' song gives us the hope of peace for the future. Anxiety about the future will always rob the peace and tranquility of today. Listen and see if these thoughts sound familiar: What if my child dies? What if my company goes under? What if I lose my health? What if my spouse leaves me? What if an unspeakable tragedy happens? The truth is that any of those things could happen to us. However, dwelling on our worst fears does nothing to prevent them. It robs us of our sleep, our health, our joy, and our peace of mind today.

12. Give an example of when your anxiety for the future has destroyed your peace in the present.

Finally, the angels' song gives us the hope of peace for the future. Anxiety about the future will always rob the peace and tranquility of today.

13. What tragedies occurred in the New Testament after the angels' promise in Luke 2:14?

History shows that from the time of Jesus until today, there has never been a single day on this planet that there was not a war raging someplace. Human cruelty and lack of regard for the sanctity of life has always been with us. It's not any better or worse today than at any other time in history. Human nature does not change. There are still today, in the 21st century, places on this planet so overwhelmed with poverty and injustice that it defies description. There are still dictators and evil regimes that will stop at nothing to accumulate power and wealth. So it has been and so it will be.

14. How can we be realistic about the future without giving in to panic?

15. How can we have peace, knowing that our future on Earth is uncertain?

Read John 16:33.

Tragedy has, does, and will come to us. But one thing will not change. The Savior the angels sang about is still alive and involved in this world. This song is still being sung. The angels didn't sing a chorus and then get back to polishing their halos.

If we could get a glimpse of heaven today, we would hear them singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." Hundreds of years before Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah proclaimed peace with a song of his own: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).

Peace can be found no matter what the circumstances. The most real part about you is your soul, and when your soul is at peace with God, you have the capacity to endure any crisis, any tragedy, any misfortune.

16. Take time to think about what robs you of peace. Is it regret from your past, anxiety in the present, or fear of the future? Look up the Scriptures we examined in this study and think about how they apply to your fears.



APPLY IT

The Original CHRISTMAS Carols



MARY: A SONG OF TRUST

LUKE 1:46-55



Like Mary, we can move from anxiety to adoration.

A lot of people travel at Christmas. During this time of the year, many of us would like to be with family to celebrate, so we load up the car with kids, dogs, and presents, and make the journey to wherever it is we call home.

OPEN IT

1. **Do you usually travel for Christmas? If so, where do you go?**

Part of the Christmas story we love so well is about a journey. Joseph and Mary had to travel from their home in Nazareth to their ancestral home in Bethlehem to register for a Roman

census. That's what brought them to the little town where the Scriptures had prophesied the Messiah would be born.

2. What do you think would have been physically difficult about Mary's journey?

But in this study we will look at another journey Mary made, an internal journey that involved a significant change of heart for this teenage girl who was about to give birth to the Chosen One. It's a journey of trust. It's about the emotional distance she traveled after finding out that her life's plan was about to be forever changed.

Her journey is also our journey, because many of us have found out that the life we had planned to live is not the life we are living.

3. Name one thing in your life that is different from the life you once thought you would be living right now.



GET IT

MARY FELT ANXIETY ABOUT THE UNKNOWN

READ LUKE 1:26–56

When Mary first encountered the angel, the Scripture says she was “greatly troubled.” Let's call the starting place in her journey Anxiety. We often lose sight of the reality behind this story. In that culture, an unmarried woman who found herself pregnant ran the risk of death by stoning from her father and the other men in the village.

All she wanted was a nice, normal life. She was already engaged, or betrothed. This news was going to deeply hurt the people she loved the most. Her fiancé would have no reason to believe her story. Her parents would be emotionally crushed and scandalized.

Most people are afraid of the unknown. Those things we have never seen or experienced can seem overwhelming. On old maps, back before the world was understood in modern terms,

cartographers would put down what they knew, but at the edges of the map, beyond which they had no knowledge or understanding, they would often write, “Here there be dragons.”

Mary was in dragon territory. There was nothing about the angel’s news that fit into her hopes and dreams for life. So her first reaction was understandable.

Some of us know what it’s like to be “greatly troubled.” Your story may not involve an angel, but you’ve experienced something you did not expect, want, or plan for, and your first reactions included shock, anger, fear, and a sense of loss.

In fact, very few people experience a life that even slightly resembles the plans they made when they were young. Most of us didn’t plan for a life that includes financial hardship, kids with special needs, grief and loss, divorce, moving away from family and friends—the list goes on and on.

Does this journey sound at all familiar to you? Your dreams died. God brought a new reality into your life—one which you neither anticipated nor were prepared for. For you as well as for Mary, the journey began at Anxiety.

But is this where you want to stay? It may be worth asking how Mary progressed from Anxiety to Acceptance. If we examine her words it comes down to one thing—trust. Mary was willing to take the step she was called to take. You might not be.

Trust is a huge step to take, especially if you’ve never trusted God before.

4. We often struggle emotionally to trust God with our lives, especially when it seems like he is taking something away rather than giving us something that is valuable beyond our imagining. How have you been able to get past this emotional struggle?

5. We may struggle intellectually, trying hard to believe that a circumstance anyone in his or her right mind would call a curse is really, in some way, a blessing. How have you gotten through this intellectual struggle?

6. We all struggle spiritually because we desperately want control of our lives and have a difficult time saying to God, “May it be to me as you have said.” How have you had victory in this spiritual struggle?

7. Read Isaiah 28:16 and John 14:1. How might these verses help with these struggles?

MARY ACCEPTED GOD’S CALL ON HER LIFE.

Although Mary started the journey at a place called Anxiety, she didn’t stay there. In verse 38, after more dialogue with the angel, she says, “May it be to me as you have said.” That next destination in her journey is Acceptance.

Acceptance is not joyous. It is not accompanied by wild enthusiasm. It is simply saying, “Okay, God. Have it your way.”

God desires our obedience. He is honored when we acknowledge his right to direct our lives. Still, acceptance is not all God hopes for from his children. We are often reluctant followers. Like the prophet Jonah, we eventually obey, but our hearts aren’t in it.

For Mary, the angel showed her that her willingness to carry a baby that was not conceived with her husband Joseph was part of God’s greatest plan ever. She would give birth to the Savior of the world. Mary was willing to go along with God’s plan, but it doesn’t seem from her response that her heart was really in it.

Scripture doesn’t record the conversations that followed her decision—conversations with her fiancé and with her parents. We can all sort of figure out how those conversations probably went. You know the kinds of names people call girls who get pregnant before marriage. We’d probably all have the same general reaction to a young pregnant girl telling stories about an angelic visitation. It’s likely that more than once Mary moved out of Acceptance back into Anxiety.

8. Describe a time that you moved from Anxiety to Acceptance.

9. Why do we sometimes move back into Anxiety after we've already moved to Acceptance?

MARY MOVED BEYOND ANXIETY AND ACCEPTANCE TO ADORATION

Mary went to visit Elizabeth, and there was a supernatural connection between the two women, both of whom were miraculously pregnant. And sometime after Acceptance, after a number of painful discussions with people she loved who didn't understand, after months of wondering if she was out of her mind, this visit with Elizabeth put everything into focus for her.

Instead of condemnation, instead of name calling, instead of heaping more shame and guilt on Mary's head, Elizabeth said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!"

All of a sudden, Mary got it. She began to sing:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever. (Luke 1:46–55 ESV)

All of a sudden, she had a new perspective—a new understanding. The long journey that began at a place called Anxiety, then continued to a place called Acceptance, was changing once again! Mary was at a place called Adoration, singing praises to God for this thing that had once seemed like an unbearable burden. What had once been an unthinkable tragedy eventually became a burden she was willing to bear. But now, finally, this thing God had called her to do had become a reason for joy and thanksgiving!

10. Share a time that you felt true adoration for God as you understood what he was doing.



APPLY IT

Ed Rowell shares:

"I struggled to move beyond Acceptance in my call as a pastor. For me it wasn't a once-and-for-all journey that took me to Adoration. It has been more like a journey up and down the same old road.

Everything I feared about being a pastor has come true. But what I didn't understand at the time was what incredible joy and satisfaction would come on the journey. I had no idea how fulfilling it would be to see people's lives changed forever on a regular basis. I've had a front row seat watching God perform miracles. I've seen angry, bitter people discover the healing power of forgiveness; I've seen hopeless marriages restored; I've seen the wealthy young rulers of this day discover more joy from giving away their money than they had in making it; I've seen people healed of diseases; and I've seen people with the same diseases discover the joy of the Lord in the midst of dying. As a fellow traveler, I want to tell you that the next leg of the journey is better than the last. Someday you can be singing the same song of wonder that Mary sang.

When God interrupts our lives, it's more important to watch for what he is doing through us than what God is doing to us."

11. Are you willing to travel further? Are you willing to take yet another step of faith, believing that this thing that you have accepted but never embraced might actually be a key part of God's bigger plan?

The Original

CHRISTMAS

Carols



SIMEON: A SONG OF HOPE

LUKE 2:29-32



The reward is worth the wait.

In the 1960s, psychologist Walter Mischel conducted a famous experiment that has come to be known as “The Marshmallow Test.” Groups of 4-year-olds were given one marshmallow each and told that if they waited 20 minutes before eating it, they would receive another. If they ate it without waiting, they would not get any more marshmallows.

Some kids could wait and others could not. The researchers then followed the progress of each child into adolescence and demonstrated that those with the ability to wait were better adjusted and more dependable (as determined by surveys of their parents and teachers), and scored an average of 210 points higher on their SATs.

Some of us would not only have eaten our own marshmallow right away, but would have taken the other kids’ marshmallows as well. Most of us are not great at waiting for things. We get cranky when we have to wait in line at the store or at a traffic light, which means we’re cranky a lot. Waiting is stressful.

OPEN IT

1. **How would you have done on the marshmallow test? Are you willing to wait for things, or do you want your marshmallow right now? Give us an example.**
2. **Why do you think waiting is so hard for most of us?**

GET IT

SIMEON WAS A MASTER AT WAITING

Simeon is a relatively obscure character in the Christmas story.

READ LUKE 2:21–35.

3. **What do you notice about Simeon from this passage?**

The Bible says that Simeon was a good man who tried hard to follow God's law. He has some things to teach us about waiting, as he had been waiting for something important for a long, long time. Although he was very old, he hung in there for one reason: he believed that God had told him he would not die before he had seen the Savior—the Messiah of Israel!

It was a dark time in Israel. There had been no new revelation from God through his prophets in over 400 years. Not exactly the context for optimism. But although Simeon's body was failing, his spirit grew stronger, because the hope that was in him was greater than the hopelessness around him.

4. **What do you think was the basis for Simeon's hope? How can we have the same kind of hope he had?**

Day after day, month after month, year after year, Simeon watched and waited. He must have known the prophecies—known what to look for. He would go to the temple whenever couples brought their sons to be dedicated, and he would watch and pray: “Is it this one, Lord? Is it that one?” He was waiting for Christmas every day, for years.

5. Why would it have been important for Simeon to know the prophecies?

The other key people in this story were Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus. It was time for them to go to the temple in Jerusalem, where Mary would participate in a purification rite that all women went through after childbirth, and Jesus would be consecrated to God, as were all firstborn Jewish sons. As they entered the temple to fulfill their vows, a stranger approached them, the old man Simeon. He reached out his arms for the baby.

Have you ever been there as a parent? You are out with your new, incredibly cute baby and complete strangers stop you to “ooh and ahh” over him or her. Mary and Joseph may have wondered whether or not to hand over their precious baby boy to an old man they had never seen before. But something must have eased their minds because they handed over baby Jesus to Simeon.

Simeon held him and thanked God for allowing him to see the child that would reveal God’s true nature to his people. Simeon’s attitude was, “I’m ready to die. You can take me home now. It’s been worth the wait.”

6. What did Simeon recognize right away that others would take a long time to understand, according to verse 32?

7. Simeon made some prophetic statements, both good news and bad, in verses 34–35. What are they, and how were they fulfilled then? How are they still being fulfilled now?

These were strange words from a strange old man. But the Bible says that Joseph and Mary “marveled at what was said.”

SIMEON (AND WE) FOUND IT’S WORTH THE WAIT

We all have things we want so badly we can hardly stand it—things like healthy relationships, the end of pain and suffering, a restoration of normal—whatever that is for you. The waiting seems like torture. And the question we all ask is, Is it worth the wait?

We fail to comprehend how much faithfulness, hope, perseverance, and responsiveness to the Holy Spirit count with God. You may not have a lot of knowledge about theology or the Bible; you may not always let other drivers merge; you may not always recycle your trash or get thank-you notes written on time; you may not always have the right thing to say when someone you love is hurting. But if you have hope that God is at work, in spite of the circumstances, God will reward you, and it will be worth the wait. The question is, then, what will you do while you’re waiting?

On November 18, 1995, Israeli violinist Itzhak Perlman came out on stage at New York’s Lincoln Center. If you’ve ever seen Perlman in action, you know that just getting on stage is no small matter for him. Stricken with polio as a child, Perlman wears braces on both legs and walks with two crutches. To see him come across the stage is a sight you don’t forget. He moves painfully, but with dignity, until he gets to his chair. He sits down slowly, lays his crutches aside, undoes the clasps on his braces, tucks one foot back and stretches the other forward. Then he reaches down, picks up his violin, notches it under his chin, nods to the maestro, and begins to play.

On this particular occasion, however, something went wrong. Just as he finished the first stanza, a string on Perlman’s violin broke. You could hear it snap, going off like gunfire across the room. There was no mistaking what that sound meant or what Perlman had to do. People who were there that night later said: “We figured that he would have to redo his braces put on the clasps again, pick up the crutches, and limp his way off stage ... or else wait for someone to bring him another [string or violin].”

But Perlman didn’t do any of that. Instead, he paused for a moment, closed his eyes, and then signaled the conductor to begin again. The orchestra recommenced, and he joined them where he’d left off. He played with a passion, power, and purity like the audience had never heard before. Of course, all of them knew that it was impossible to play a symphonic work with just three strings. But that night, that player refused to know that. “You could see him modulating, changing, recomposing the piece in his head,” someone said. “At one point, it sounded like he was de-tuning the strings to get new sounds from them they had never made before.”

The author who recounts this tale closes it like this: “When [Perlman] finished, there was an awesome silence in the room.” And then, suddenly, the audience exploded to their feet. “We were all ... screaming and cheering, doing everything we could to show how much we appreciated what he had done.” Perlman “smiled, wiped the sweat from his brow, raised his bow to quiet us, and then said, not boastfully, but in a quiet, pensive, reverent tone: ‘You know, sometimes it is the artist’s task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left.’”

8. Why do you think our faithfulness, hope, perseverance, and responsiveness to the Holy Spirit matter to God?

9. If there is one thing you feel you are waiting for in life, what is it? Thinking about this study, what should your attitude be as you’re waiting?

Keep watching and waiting. The wait will be worth it!

10. While you are waiting for whatever it is your heart longs for, what kind of music will your life make with what you have left?

11. Will you refuse to let pessimism rob you of today’s joys? Will you find ways to encourage others who are also waiting? Will you continue to watch and wait, knowing that for the follower of Christ, Christmas comes every day?



APPLY IT