



SMALL GROUP OUTLINES



PURPOSE AND PROMISE

These Small Group Outlines are produced by the Youth and Children's Ministry Unit in collaboration with Kay Moorby (soulwithaview). They are available every month from our website.

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SESSION ONE:

I WILL BE WITH YOU

After spending three and a half years closely watching Jesus, experiencing his miracles and seeing him teach, the disciples had to say a difficult goodbye. Before Jesus left this earth, he gave them a clear purpose and made a promise that he would always be with them. In today's session we will explore what that purpose and promise mean for us as disciples today.

SESSION TWO:

BE STRONG AND COURAGEOUS

Joshua was called to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. This clear purpose was accompanied by a promise that God would be with Joshua and the people of Israel. Joshua had to keep trusting God to lead the people into the future that he had planned for them. Reflecting on the purpose and promise God gave to Joshua, we will consider what it means to be strong and brave as a 21st-century believer.

SESSION THREE:

I HAVE PLANS FOR YOU

We often turn to the words of Jeremiah 29:11 when we need to hear God's promise that the future will be OK ... but is that really what this verse has to say? In today's session, we'll explore the context of this well-known verse and discover how it is applicable to us as believers today.

SESSION FOUR:

GOD WITH US

In today's session we explore a familiar story and delve into the faith and strength shown by two of its main characters. Mary and Joseph take centre stage in the Nativity scene, but what was it like for them to live through the experience of giving their future hopes and dreams to God? How did the promise of God's presence help them to go on this amazing journey with Jesus?

Any text in italics represents notes for the leader. It gives more context around the Scripture/activity. You may choose to share verbatim, summarise or not share at all.

I WILL BE WITH YOU

After spending three and a half years closely watching Jesus, experiencing his miracles and seeing him teach, the disciples had to say a difficult goodbye. Before Jesus left this earth, he gave them a clear purpose and made a promise that he would always be with them. In today's session we will explore what that purpose and promise mean for us as disciples today.

WELCOME

- What are you like at goodbyes?
- Do you prefer to get them over and done with as quickly as possible or are you the kind of person who drags out the goodbye for ages?

We're going to watch a clip where we see a very special goodbye.

Watch: Toy Story 3 – So Long Partner (3:17)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xq4zWbtgbN8>

Ask the group to share how they relate to the different aspects of saying goodbye shown in the clip. As they get older, what have they had to say goodbye to? What do they have no intention of saying goodbye to?

In today's session we'll be thinking about the moment Jesus said goodbye to his disciples. It was time for them to continue his ministry, but they wouldn't be left totally alone.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

- Which of the toys in the *Toy Story* film would you find it most difficult to say goodbye to? Explain your answer.

WORD

In our first Scripture reading today, we find the disciples gathered around Jesus. Still reeling from his death and resurrection, they must have been relieved that he was back with them and hoping that it would stay that way.

Read:

¹⁶ Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'

— (MATTHEW 28:16-20)

- Look at verse 17. How do the disciples' reactions to the resurrected Jesus vary? In what way do you understand or relate to their response to Jesus?
- In what way does Jesus deal with their doubts and establish his authority?
- What command and clear purpose does Jesus give his disciples?
- What promise does Jesus make to his disciples?

When hearing the promise 'I am with you always, to the very end of the age', it's likely that some of the disciples thought Jesus meant this in a physical sense. He had only just risen from the dead; surely he would stay with them as they carried out his purpose in their lives. In Acts 1:1-11 we read of Jesus' ascension to Heaven. To bring that scene to life we're going to watch a film adaptation of the moment Jesus said goodbye to the disciples.

 **Watch: Risen (2016) – Jesus Ascends to Heaven Scene (10/10) Movieclips**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJACLNbjlMM>


In Acts 1 Jesus is saying goodbye to his disciples. For three and a half years they've been together, through good times and bad. Jesus had changed their lives. They'd never be the same because of the time they had spent with him.

 **Read:**

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked Him repeatedly, 'Lord, are You at this time reestablishing the kingdom and restoring it to Israel?' ⁷ He said to them, 'It is not for you to know the times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power and ability when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be My witnesses [to tell people about Me] both in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth.'

— (ACTS 1:6-8 AMP)


 What purpose did Jesus give the disciples?


 What promise did he make to them?

 **Read:**

⁹⁻¹¹ These were his last words. As they watched, he was taken up and disappeared in a cloud. They stood there, staring into the empty sky. Suddenly two men appeared – in white robes! They said, 'You Galileans! – why do you just stand here looking up at an empty sky? This very Jesus who was taken up from among you to heaven will come as certainly – and mysteriously – as he left.'

— (ACTS 1:9-11 MSG)

 Imagine yourself in the position of the disciples. How long do you think you would have remained staring at the sky?


 What do you think was going through their minds at that moment?

These disciples had been utterly dependent on Jesus during his earthly life, and yet he expected them to take the gospel to the rest of the world. It makes sense that they stared up after him, probably with confusion and concern on their faces, needing angels to finally tell them to stop straining their necks to see him. How could they possibly do this monumental task to which he had commissioned them on their own? Jesus had promised he wouldn't leave them alone as they carried out his purpose.

 **Read:**

1-4 When the Feast of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force – no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building. Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them.

— (ACTS 2:1-4 MSG)

 How did Jesus fulfil his promise to help the disciples carry out their purpose?

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

If the group would like to learn more about the events recorded in Acts 1-7, then watch the clip. It gives context to the events and Scriptures they have discussed in this session.

 **Watch: What Happened at Pentecost and Why It's Important (6:21)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQhkWmFJKnA>

WITNESS

Every follower of Jesus has a clear purpose to make disciples in this world and is promised the guidance and support of the Holy Spirit. The disciples were able to achieve amazing things for God through his power.

Split the group into smaller groups or pairs. Give each pair one or two of the disciples' names and ask them to research – in Scripture – and online if possible – what the disciples went on to do.

Ask them to consider the following questions:

- 🗨️ How did they live after Jesus had left them?
- 🗨️ How did they fulfil the Great Commission? Did they achieve all that Jesus had set out for them to do?
- 🗨️ Did they keep following?

The link below lists the disciples and key Scriptures that tell their story.

🔗 <https://raychoi.org/2012/06/01/what-happened-to-the-12-disciples-after-the-resurrection-and-ascension/>

Feed back together what the young people have discovered.

- 🗨️ As you have listened to what others have discovered, which disciple would you most like to have a conversation with? Explain your answer.
- 🗨️ In what way do you feel inspired by the disciples / early Church to keep following Jesus?

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

- 🗨️ What is your response to the following quote? How does it link in with our theme for today?

“ ‘When the church becomes an end in itself, it ends. When Sunday school, as great as it is, becomes an end in itself, it ends. When small groups ministry becomes an end in itself, it ends. When the worship service becomes an end in itself, it ends. What we need is for discipleship to become the goal, and then the process never ends. The process is fluid. It is moving. It is active. It is a living thing. It must continue to go on. Every disciple must make disciples.’

— ROBBY GALLATY, *GROWING UP: HOW TO BE A DISCIPLE WHO MAKES DISCIPLES*

WORSHIP

- 🗨️ Do you consider yourself to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? If so, what does that mean for you? If not, how would you like that to change?

These questions will form the basis of a discussion that will depend very much on your group. If there are those who have not given their lives to Jesus yet or are in the very early stages of their faith, then you can direct the discussion in a way that supports their understanding of what it means to be a disciple and make disciples. Encourage them to think about their own discipleship journey.

- 🗨️ In what way do you feel called to the same purpose as the first disciples?
- 🗨️ What promise did Jesus make to the disciples and how was it fulfilled?
- 🗨️ In what way is this promise available for you as a disciple of Christ?

We can often get so distracted by our own dreams, plans and desires that we forget that we already have a clear purpose as Jesus' disciples.

- 🗨️ In what areas do you need to claim the Holy Spirit's guidance and power to make disciples?

As the music plays, ask each member of the group to write a prayer that they can come back to throughout the week. Encourage them to ask God to help them fulfil their calling to make disciples and to claim the promise that he will always be with them. A link is provided below for music to listen to. It's not necessary to watch the clip; the music can be used as background to support the reflection time.

 **Listen: 'Let My Life Be Worship' – Bethel Music, Jenn Johnson, feat. Michaela Gentile (8:19)**

Fade and stop the clip around 5:14.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wN1XZDqZ9Co>

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

The following prayer is adapted from the lyrics of 'Let My Life Be Worship' and can be used to bring the session to a close if required.

**This moment is holy and we hear you calling.
We turn our face towards you and our heart is open.
You're always pursuing and our lives are surrendered;
You have our affection.
So let our lives be worship
And let our hearts stay true.
May our love never grow cold,
May it burn for evermore.
May our lives be worship to you.**

BE STRONG AND COURAGEOUS



Joshua was called to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. This clear purpose was accompanied by a promise that God would be with Joshua and the people of Israel. Joshua had to keep trusting God to lead the people into the future that he had planned for them. Reflecting on the purpose and promise God gave to Joshua, we will consider what it means to be strong and brave as a 21st-century believer.

WELCOME


Prior to the session, search for a selection of Disney characters. Either print them out or display them on a screen and ask the group to arrange or number them in order of strength. Then ask the group to arrange or number them in order of bravery.

What do they notice? Is being strong and being brave the same thing? Encourage the group to explain their answers.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

-  If you could add a Disney character not included in these pictures, then who would it be?
-  Where would you place them on the strength or bravery scale?

WORD

-  What comes to mind when you think of the Bible character Joshua?

To give context to the purpose and promise God gave to Joshua, we're going to turn to Scripture.

Read:



¹ After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' assistant: ² 'Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them – to the Israelites. ³ I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. ⁴ Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates – all the Hittite country – to the Mediterranean Sea in the west. ⁵ No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. ⁶ Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors to give them.

⁷ 'Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go.

⁸ Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. ⁹ Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.'

¹⁰ So Joshua ordered the officers of the people: ¹¹ 'Go through the camp and tell the people, "Get your provisions ready. Three days from now you will cross the Jordan here to go in and take possession of the land the Lord your God is giving you for your own.'"

— (JOSHUA 1:1-11)

-  What purpose does God give Joshua and the people of Israel?
-  As you listened to the Scripture was there a particular verse that you recognised? If so, which one and why is it familiar?

⁹ 'Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.'

— (JOSHUA 1:9)

 What promise is made in Joshua 1:9?


This verse is often quoted and can be found on Christian merchandise and screensavers across the globe. Although it is an inspiring Scripture, it needs to be placed in its context and understood from that perspective. We're going to watch a clip that helps us to understand where these famous words sit within Scripture.


 **Watch: Joshua 1 – Be Strong and Courageous – Bible Study (3:55)**


<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xnJnGweZfOw>

Watch the clip from 0:00 to 1:40 and discuss the questions below.

 Why did the Israelites wander in the wilderness for 40 years?


 What gift did God promise to Joshua and the people of Israel?


 In what way did the new generation of Israel need to act differently from the old one? What would it take?

 God makes the same command four times. What was it and what impact do you think it had on the people?

Watch the clip from 1:41 to 3:55 and discuss the questions below.

 In what way do we need to be strong and courageous as 21st-century believers?

 What do you think the clip means when it says: 'God is looking for people who will give their cowardice to him'?

 What battles might we have to face and win in our own lives to keep following Jesus?

 How is our relationship with God different from the one Joshua had? Who makes the difference?

Joshua 1:9 is a useful Scripture to turn to when we need encouragement and a reminder of God's presence in the face of challenging circumstances. We just need to remember its context and that it was written **to** Joshua rather than written for **us**.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

The clip we just watched mentioned that Joshua 'barely had to lift his sword', but any Canaanites hearing that may have strongly disagreed. In her book *Love Story*, Nichole Nordeman makes the following comments about the more challenging aspects of this story.

Read the extract to the group and discuss their response to Nichole Nordeman's comments. Do they grapple with the same issues that she does? If so, how?

'I'll just pause here for an awkward moment of silence to acknowledge that I still have no idea what to do with all the Old Testament violence at God's direction. I think of a nice Canaanite family gathered around their hearth for supper. Did they know they were living under a holy curse? That their very existence prevented God's chosen people from occupying their own promised homeland? Or were they just observing the ritual of evening family time? Children. Stories. Bread and warm milk. Until the front door flies open and bloody massacre is wreaked on every household courtesy of Joshua and his God.

Huh? Is this the same God to whom I'm teaching my children to take every small playground-bully / dentist / math-test fear in prayer?

I'll pause here for another moment of awkward silence for my inability to segue out of that last paragraph and into a bigger, wider illuminating truth that makes us all feel better.

I got nothin’

— LOVE STORY – THE HAND THAT HOLDS US FROM THE GARDEN TO THE GATES, NICHOLE NORDEMAN, PP76-77


WORSHIP

The following clip brings to life the story of Joshua and links it to the purpose and promise God gave to his people. Watch the clip together and discuss how Joshua 1:9 applies to the purpose of Christians today. What kind of garden are we called to create and who goes with us to create it? What part do the young people feel they have to play in creating God’s Kingdom here on earth?

After the discussion, spend time as a group praying around the themes of Joshua 1:9.

 **Watch: Joshua: The Bible Explained (stop at 7:38)**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TtgQDsPO2G4>

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

 How, if at all, has your understanding of Joshua 1:9 changed during this session?

WITNESS

Today we explored a verse that is very well known but often misquoted or applied out of context. Working in small groups, your Witness task for this week is to create a short devotional piece that explains to people the context, purpose and promise outlined in Joshua 1:9. This devotional piece can take any form you like, and you may spend your time today simply planning out your idea. It could take the form of memes, social media posts, written devotionals, or poems. It’s up to you and your group!

Give the group time to discuss and plan their ideas together. They can either complete the activity within the session or work on it together another time. You may want to share their work on the church social media pages, website or as part of collective worship.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

For a bit of fun, finish with this song based on Joshua 1:9.




 **Watch: Joshua 1:9 (2:55)**
<https://youtu.be/BqkiQ7PQgFc?si=j85GZumT9P62Jxli>

I HAVE PLANS FOR YOU

We often turn to the words of Jeremiah 29:11 when we need to hear God's promise that the future will be OK ... but is that really what this verse has to say? In today's session we'll explore the context of this well-known verse and discover how it is applicable to us as believers today.

WELCOME

 **Watch: Little Voices: What would you like to be when you grow up? (1:32)**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mctzdzVjBMk>

-  As children we often get asked the question, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' How did you answer that question when you were a child?
-  What dreams do you have for the future?
-  What do you think God's dreams are for your future?

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

Just for a bit of fun join in with this kids' song based on our Scripture for today. You could even have a go at the dance moves!

 **Watch: 'Motions' (Jeremiah 19:11) Saddleback Kids**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YgNrQ1o1Wts>

WORD

 **Read:**

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."



— (JEREMIAH 29:11)

-  What do you think this Scripture verse is trying to communicate?

 **Watch: Why you should stop quoting Jeremiah 29:11 – 'For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord.' (11:52)**





<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cKgZWY9fm1>

WATCH 0:00-5:23


-  Who was this Scripture specifically written for and what situation were they facing?
-  How would you feel if you were in their position? What would you find challenging?

If there are members of your group who have experienced circumstances like these, then adjust your questions accordingly.


WATCH 5:24-6:57

-  Who is the word 'you' referring to in Jeremiah 29:11?
-  In what ways do you recognise the 'sense of individualism' mentioned by Brandon Robbins?
-  How did the culture of the Israelites, and Jesus, differ from ours?
-  How does this understanding change how you view Jeremiah 29:11, if at all?

WATCH 6:58-11:10

 What is your response to hearing that this verse means that you are part of something greater than you?

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

 The title of the clip is 'Why you should stop quoting Jeremiah 29:11'. Do you think it's necessary to stop quoting this verse? If so, why? If not, why not?

WITNESS

 Read:

'Each of you has been blessed with one of God's many wonderful gifts to be used in the service of others. So use your gift well.'

— (1 PETER 4:10 CEV)

We are all different, and, in line with God's plan for our lives, he has given each of us different talents and abilities. You may already know the main thing that you excel at and enjoy doing – but if you don't, that's OK! Now is the time to experience lots of different things, to see which ones excite you and make you happy. You can discover what you feel passionate about or where you can make a difference. You see, God has given us gifts and abilities so we can serve others, as well as give ourselves back to him. When we are talking about discovering God's plan for our life and following him into the future, the unique gifts and abilities he has given us form an essential part of the plan.

Give each group member a print-out of the attached sheets with six pieces of 'bunting' and some string (you could use coloured paper). Ask each person to cut out their bunting, then to reflect on the statement/question and to note down their thoughts.

After they have done this, they can use mini wooden clothes pegs to attach their bunting triangles to string. Encourage them to hang their bunting somewhere in their home to remind them about their future dreams, their commitment to God and all the good plans God has for them!

If the group feels comfortable they can share some of the information they have noted on the bunting. Other members of the group may have suggestions to add to the abilities and talents bunting. This could be a great opportunity for the group to encourage each other.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

Ask the group to imagine the bunting of every member of the church hung for everyone to see. What picture does it create in their mind? How does God use our gifts and talents collectively to build his kingdom?

WORSHIP

If the group is happy to display their bunting, you could lay them out on the floor, or hang them, and encourage all group members to walk around, read the bunting and quietly pray for the person.

Use the following song as part of your prayer time.

 **Watch: Rend Collective – 'Plans' (Lyric Video) (3:41)**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASoVKTUBDj0>

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

Use this prayer to bring the session to a close.

God, please fill our hearts with the same dreams and desires for our lives as you have for us. Continue to guide us so that they come true in just the way you have planned.

Amen

MY ABILITIES AND TALENTS:

THE THINGS I FEEL PASSIONATE ABOUT:

WHAT GOD HAS ALREADY SAID TO ME ABOUT
MY FUTURE:

HOW I SEE THE GIFTS AND ABILITIES THAT GOD HAS GIVEN ME BEING USED IN HIS PLAN FOR MY LIFE:

HOW DOES WHAT I WOULD LIKE TO DO IN THE FUTURE IMPACT WHAT I DO TODAY?

DO I NEED TO MAKE ANY CHANGES IN MY LIFE TO ENSURE THAT I STAY ON TRACK WITH GOD AND KEEP FOLLOWING?

GOD WITH US

In today's session we explore a familiar story and delve into the faith and strength shown by two of its main characters. Mary and Joseph take centre stage in the Nativity scene, but what was it like for them to live through the experience of giving their future hopes and dreams to God? How did the promise of God's presence help them to go on this amazing journey with Jesus?

WELCOME

 Have you bought any Christmas presents yet? If so, who for?

 Do you send Christmas cards? If so, who to?


Give each member of the group a piece of paper and ask them to design their perfect Christmas card. Only give the group two minutes to complete the task and then ask them to share their creations.

Prepare each of your group members a personally written Christmas card with a picture of Mary and Joseph on the front. Along with a Christmas greeting, write the words 'Immanuel – God with us' (Matthew 1:23). Give out the cards and ask the group members to open them.

Direct them to look at the picture on the front of the card. Explain to the group that rather than give them a Christmas card with snowmen or robins or Father Christmas etc, you have especially chosen a picture of Mary and Joseph. Discuss with the group what the image of Mary and Joseph at the manger means to them.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

 How is Mary and Joseph's appearance and character usually represented?

 Do you think it is in line with the reality of who they were? If so, how?

WORD

If we're not careful, then the familiarity of the Christmas story can dumb down the power of its message and the strength of faith demonstrated by two of its central characters. Both were asked to stand firm against social norms and live out their purpose for God. Let's turn to Luke 1:26-38 to discover more about Mary.

Give each member of the group the Scripture handout.

Allocate members of the group to take each part and read the Scripture together.

Narrator: ²⁶ Six months later in Nazareth, a city in the rural province of Galilee, the heavenly messenger Gabriel made another appearance. This time the messenger was sent by God ²⁷ to meet with a virgin named Mary, who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David himself. ²⁸ The messenger entered her home.

Messenger: Greetings! You are favoured, and the Lord is with you! [Among all women on the earth, you have been blessed.]

Narrator: ²⁹ The heavenly messenger's words baffled Mary, and she wondered what type of greeting this was.

Messenger: ³⁰ Mary, don't be afraid. You have found favour with God. ³¹ Listen, you are going to become pregnant. You will have a son, and you must name Him "Saviour," or Jesus. ³² Jesus will become the greatest among men. He will be known as the Son of the Highest God. God will give Him the throne of His ancestor David, ³³ and He will reign over the covenant family of Jacob for ever.

Mary: ³⁴ But I have never been with a man. How can this be possible?

Messenger: ³⁵ The Holy Spirit will come upon you. The Most High will overshadow you. That's why this holy child will be known, as not just your son, but also as the Son of God. ³⁶ It sounds impossible, but listen – you know your

relative Elizabeth has been unable to bear children and is now far too old to be a mother. Yet she has become pregnant, as God willed it. Yes, in three months, she will have a son.³⁷ So the impossible is possible with God.

Mary (deciding in her heart):³⁸ Here I am, the Lord's humble servant. As you have said, let it be done to me.

— (LUKE 1:26-38 VOICE)

DISCUSS:

- 🗨️ What is the message that the angel brings to Mary?
- 🗨️ Which part of the message does Mary question? Why do you think that was?

As Mary processed the angel's words, she must have wondered how this would work practically. How would she get pregnant? What would this do to her wedding plans with Joseph? Notice that she never questioned God's calling on her life.

- 🗨️ How does the angel reassure Mary?
- 🗨️ What is Mary's response?
- 🗨️ If you were in her position, how would you respond?

Despite facing a situation that could potentially make her a social outcast, Mary knew what she needed to do. What about her future husband? How would he respond?

Allocate members of the group to take each part and read the Scripture together.

Narrator 1:¹⁸ So here, finally, is the story of the birth of Jesus the Anointed (it is quite a remarkable story):

Mary was engaged to marry Joseph, son of David. They hadn't married. And yet, some time well before their wedding date, Mary learned that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ Joseph, because he was kind and upstanding and honourable, wanted to spare Mary shame. He did not wish to cause her more embarrassment than necessary.

Narrator 2: This is remarkable, because Mary has never had sex. She and Joseph have not even spent very much time alone, but they are pledged to each other and their wedding feast has been planned.

She has never even kissed a man. She is a virgin, yet she is pregnant. Miraculous! On the other hand, Joseph suspects that Mary has cheated on him and had sex with another man. He knows he will have to break their engagement, but he decides to do this quietly. Mary understands that it is God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, who has made her pregnant.

Narrator 1:²⁰ Now when Joseph had decided to act on his instincts, a messenger of the Lord came to him in a dream.

Messenger of the Lord: Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to wed Mary and bring her into your home and family as your wife. She did not sneak off and sleep with someone else – rather, she conceived the baby she now carries through the miraculous wonderworking of the Holy Spirit.²¹ She will have a son, and you will name Him Jesus, which means 'the Lord saves', because this Jesus is the person who will save all of His people from sin.

Narrator 1:²⁴ Joseph woke up from his dream and did exactly what the messenger had told him to do: he married Mary and brought her into his home as his wife²⁵ (though he did not consummate their marriage until after her son was born). And when the baby was born, Joseph named Him Jesus, Saviour.

Narrator 2:²² Years and years ago, Isaiah, a prophet of Israel, foretold the story of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus:

²³ A virgin will conceive and bear a Son,
and His name will be Immanuel
(which is a Hebrew name that means 'God with us').

— (MATTHEW 1:18-23 THE VOICE INCLUDING NOTES)

DISCUSS:

- What was the culturally appropriate thing for Joseph to do?
- What does it tell us about Joseph's character that he chose to break off the engagement quietly?
- What message did the angel have for Joseph?
- What level of faith do you think it required for Joseph to trust God and marry Mary?
- How is the promise 'God with us' lived out in both these stories?


ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

The birth of Jesus was foretold way back in the book of Isaiah where we read these words:

14 'Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.'

— (ISAIAH 7:14)

Watch the clip together and then discuss the perspective it gives on the words of Isaiah and their impact on Joseph's story.

 **Watch: God with Us – Isaiah 7:14 – Our Daily Bread Video Devotional (2:17)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6o5dVK4mjf0>

WITNESS

- After following the journey of Mary and Joseph as they discovered their purpose and trusted God's promise, what fresh understanding do you have of the message of Christmas?

Keeping these thoughts in mind, and the Scriptures you have explored today, design a new Christmas card. This time, try and convey the true message of Christmas through your choice of words and images.

Give the group a range of materials to create their Christmas card. When they have completed it, encourage them to share the reasons behind their choice of word or image.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

Which Christmas card does the group think would be the most popular in a Christian shop? Encourage the group to explain their choices.

WORSHIP

When asked to give her future plans and dreams to God, Mary said these words:

38 'Here I am, the Lord's humble servant. As you have said, let it be done to me.'

— (LUKE 1:38 VOICE)

Ask the group to reflect on the following questions:

- Has there been a point in your life where you have given your future and all its dreams to God to handle as he pleases? Share your experience.
- Do you need to make or reconfirm that decision?

Jesus is the promise of God fulfilled here on earth. The Christmas story reminds us that as we dedicate our lives to the purpose of God, we are given the promise that God is with us.

Read the following lyrics from this traditional hymn:

What can I give him,
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd,
I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man,
I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give him –
Give my heart.

— CHRISTINA ROSSETTI (SASB 110)

Note the careful meaning of the last two lines: it is not a question ('What can I...?') but a commitment: 'I give what I can'. Different versions of the song 'In the Bleak Midwinter' are shown below and can be used as a backdrop to this time of reflection. Ask the group to prayerfully consider what they can offer of themselves back to Jesus this Christmas. Encourage the group to spend some time talking to God (privately, or in pairs, or as a whole group) and committing/recommitting their lives to him. The group can use the Christmas card they have made to write a prayer of recommitment inside.



'In the Bleak Midwinter' - Andrea Corr

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LuPkFAmfp1Q>

SCRIPTURE HANDOUT 1

NARRATOR: ²⁶ Six months later in Nazareth, a city in the rural province of Galilee, the heavenly messenger Gabriel made another appearance. This time the messenger was sent by God ²⁷ to meet with a virgin named Mary, who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David himself. ²⁸ The messenger entered her home.

MESSENGER: Greetings! You are favoured, and the Lord is with you! [Among all women on the earth, you have been blessed.]

NARRATOR: ²⁹ The heavenly messenger's words baffled Mary, and she wondered what type of greeting this was.

MESSENGER: ³⁰ Mary, don't be afraid. You have found favour with God. ³¹ Listen, you are going to become pregnant. You will have a son, and you must name Him "Saviour," or Jesus. ³² Jesus will become the greatest among men. He will be known as the Son of the Highest God. God will give Him the throne of His ancestor David, ³³ and He will reign over the covenant family of Jacob for ever.

MARY: ³⁴ But I have never been with a man. How can this be possible?

MESSENGER: ³⁵ The Holy Spirit will come upon you. The Most High will overshadow you. That's why this holy child will be known, as not just your son, but also as the Son of God. ³⁶ It sounds impossible, but listen – you know your relative Elizabeth has been unable to bear children and is now far too old to be a mother. Yet she has become pregnant, as God willed it. Yes, in three months, she will have a son. ³⁷ So the impossible is possible with God.

MARY (DECIDING IN HER HEART): ³⁸ Here I am, the Lord's humble servant. As you have said, let it be done to me.

(Luke 1:26-38 Voice)

SCRIPTURE HANDOUT 2

NARRATOR 1:

¹⁸ So here, finally, is the story of the birth of Jesus the Anointed (it is quite a remarkable story):

Mary was engaged to marry Joseph, son of David. They hadn't married. And yet, some time well before their wedding date, Mary learned that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Joseph, because he was kind and upstanding and honourable, wanted to spare Mary shame. He did not wish to cause her more embarrassment than necessary.

NARRATOR 2:

This is remarkable, because Mary has never had sex. She and Joseph have not even spent very much time alone, but they are pledged to each other and their wedding feast has been planned.

She has never even kissed a man. She is a virgin, yet she is pregnant. Miraculous! On the other hand, Joseph suspects that Mary has cheated on him and had sex with another man. He knows he will have to break their engagement, but he decides to do this quietly. Mary understands that it is God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, who has made her pregnant.

NARRATOR 1:

²⁰ Now when Joseph had decided to act on his instincts, a messenger of the Lord came to him in a dream.

MESSENGER OF THE LORD:

Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to wed Mary and bring her into your home and family as your wife. She did not sneak off and sleep with someone else – rather, she conceived the baby she now carries through the miraculous wonderworking of the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will have a son, and you will name Him Jesus, which means 'the Lord saves', because this Jesus is the person who will save all of His people from sin.

NARRATOR 1:

²⁴ Joseph woke up from his dream and did exactly what the messenger had told him to do: he married Mary and brought her into his home as his wife ²⁵ (though he did not consummate their marriage until after her son was born). And when the baby was born, Joseph named Him Jesus, Saviour.

NARRATOR 2:

²² Years and years ago, Isaiah, a prophet of Israel, foretold the story of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus:

²³ A virgin will conceive and bear a Son,
and His name will be Immanuel
(which is a Hebrew name that means 'God with us').

(Matthew 1:18-23 *The Voice* including notes)