

who heard the shepherds' story expressed astonishment, but Mary quietly treasured these things in her heart and often thought about them. Then the shepherds went back again to their fields and flocks, praising God for the visit of the angels, and because they had seen the child, just as the angel had told them.

Shepherds and the Lamb of God—God continued to reveal his Son, but not to those we might expect. Luke wrote that Jesus' birth was announced to shepherds in the fields. These may have been the shepherds who supplied many of the lambs that were sacrificed in the temple for the forgiveness of sin. Here the angels invited these shepherds to greet the Lamb of God (*John 1:36*) who would take away the sins of the whole world forever. Christ offers us more than temporary political or physical changes—he offers us new hearts that will last for eternity. God continues to invite men and women to discover the Savior. Have you found him?

Week 3. Visitors arrive from eastern lands (Matthew 2:1-15)

Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem, in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. At about that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews for we have seen his star in far-off eastern lands and have come to worship him?" King Herod was deeply disturbed by their question, and all Jerusalem was filled with rumors. He called a meeting of the Jewish religious leaders. "Did the prophets tell us where the Messiah would be born?" he asked. "Yes, in Bethlehem," they said, "for this is what the prophet Micah wrote: 'O little town of Bethlehem, you are not just an unimportant Judean village, for a Governor shall rise from you to rule my people Israel.'"

Then Herod sent a private message to the wise men, asking them to come to see him; at this meeting he found out from them the exact time when they first saw the star. Then he told them, "Go to Bethlehem and search for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him too!"

Most Jews expected the Messiah to be a great military and political deliverer like Alexander the Great. Herod's counselors undoubtedly told this to Herod. No wonder this ruthless man took no chances and ordered all the baby boys in Bethlehem killed (*Matthew 2:16*)!

Wise Men—Not much is known about these wise men (also known as astrologers or kings). We don't know where they came from or how many there were. Tradition says they were men of high position from Parthia, near the site of ancient Babylon. How did they know that the star represented the Messiah? (1) They could have been Jews who had remained in Babylon after the exile and knew the Old Testament predictions of the Messiah's coming. (2) They may have been eastern astrologers who studied ancient manuscripts from around the world. Because of the Jewish exile centuries earlier, they would have had copies of the Old Testament in their land. (3) They may have had a special message from God directing them to the Messiah. Some scholars say that each of these astrologers was from a different nation, representing the entire world bowing before Jesus. These men from faraway lands recognized Jesus as the Messiah when most of God's chosen people in Israel did not. Matthew pictures Jesus as king over the whole world, not just Judea. These men traveled thousands of miles to see the king of the Jews. When they finally found him, they responded with joy, worship, and gifts. This is quite different from the approach people often take today. We expect God to come looking for us, to explain himself, prove who he is, and give *us* gifts. But those who are wise still seek and worship Jesus, not for what they can get, but for who he is.

Week 4. John baptizes Jesus (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22)

Then Jesus went from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized there by John. Why did Jesus ask to be baptized? It was not for repentance for sin because Jesus never sinned. He was baptized because (1) he was confessing sin on behalf of the nation, as Nehemiah, Ezra, Moses, and Daniel had done; (2) he was inaugurating his public ministry; and (3) he was identifying with the penitent people of God, not with the critical Pharisees who were only watching.

John didn't want to do it. "This isn't proper," he said. "I am the one who needs to be baptized by you." But Jesus said, "Please do it, for I must do all that is right." So

then John baptized him. After his baptism, as soon as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened



to him and he saw the Spirit of God coming down in the form of a dove. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, and I am wonderfully pleased with him."

Let Go of Ego—Put yourself in John's situation. Your work is going well, people are taking notice, everything is growing. But you know that the purpose of your work is to prepare the people for Jesus (*John 1:35-37*). Then Jesus arrives, and his coming tests your integrity. Will you be able to turn your followers over to him? John passed the test by publicly baptizing Jesus. Soon he would say, "He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less" (*John 3:30*). Can you, like John, make pointing others to Jesus the most important goal of your teaching?

FEBRUARY

Week 1. Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the Temple (Luke 2:22-40)

Anna, a prophetess, was also there in the temple that day. She was the daughter of Phanuel, of the Jewish tribe of Asher, and was very old, for she had been a widow for eighty-four years following seven years of marriage. She never left the temple but stayed there night and day, worshiping God by praying and often fasting. She came along just as Simeon was talking with Mary and Joseph, and she also began thanking God and telling everyone in Jerusalem who had been awaiting the coming of the Savior that the Messiah had finally arrived. When Jesus' parents had fulfilled all the requirements of the law of God, they returned home to Nazareth in Galilee. There the child became a strong, robust, young man and was known for wisdom beyond his years; and God poured out his blessings on him.

Never Too Old—Although Simeon and Anna were very old, they had never lost their hope that they would see the Messiah. Led by the Holy Spirit, they were among the first to bear witness to Jesus. In the Jewish culture, elders were respected, so because of Simeon's and Anna's age, their prophecies carried extra weight. Our society, however, values youthfulness over wisdom, and potential contributions by the elderly are often ignored. As Christians, we should reverse those values whenever we can. Encourage older people to share their wisdom and experience. Listen carefully when they speak.

Week 2. Jesus speaks to the religious teachers (Luke 2:41-52)

When Jesus was twelve years old, he accompanied his parents to Jerusalem for the annual Passover festival, which they attended each year. According to God's law, every male was required to go to Jerusalem three times a year for the great festivals (*Deuteronomy 16:16*). In the spring the Passover was celebrated, followed immediately by the week-long Festival of Unleavened Bread. Passover commemorated the night of the Jews' escape from Egypt when God had killed the Egyptian firstborn but had passed over Israelite homes (*see Exodus 12:21-36*). Passover was the most important of the three annual festivals.

After the celebration was over they started home to Nazareth, but Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents didn't miss him the first day, for they assumed he was with friends among the other travelers. But when he didn't show up that evening, they started to look for him among their relatives and friends; and when they couldn't find him, they went back to Jerusalem to search for him there.

Three days later they finally discovered him. He was in the temple, sitting among the teachers of law, discussing deep questions with them and amazing everyone with his understanding and answers.

His parents didn't know what to think. "Son!" his mother said to him. "Why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been frantic, searching for you everywhere." "But why did you need to search?" he asked.



"Didn't you realize that I would be here at the temple, in my Father's house?" But they didn't understand what he meant.

Letting Go—Mary had to let go of her child and let him become a man. Fearful that she hadn't been careful enough with this God-given child, she searched frantically for him. But she was looking for a boy, not the young man who was in the temple astounding the religious leaders with his questions. It is difficult to let go of people or projects that we have nurtured. It is both sweet and painful to see our children as adults, our stu-

dents as teachers, our subordinates as managers, and our inspirations as institutions. But when the time comes to step back and let go, we must do so in spite of the hurt. Then our protégés can exercise their wings, take flight, and soar to the heights God intended for them.

Week 3. Satan tempts Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:5-7; Luke 4:9-13)

Then Satan took him to Jerusalem to the roof of the temple. The temple was the religious center of the Jewish nation and the place where the people expected the Messiah to arrive (*Malachi 3:1*). The temple was the tallest building in the area, and this “roof” was actually a pinnacle on the corner wall that jutted out of the hillside, overlooking the valley below. From this spot, Jesus could see all of Jerusalem behind him and the country for miles in front of him. “Jump off,” he said, “and prove you are the Son of God; for the Scriptures declare, ‘God will send his angels to keep you from harm, . . . they will prevent you from smashing on the rocks below.’” Jesus retorted, “It also says not to put the Lord your God to a foolish test!”

The Whole Truth—Satan used Scripture to try to convince Jesus to sin! Sometimes friends or associates will present attractive and convincing reasons why you should do something you know is wrong. They may even find Bible verses that *seem* to support their viewpoint. Study the Bible carefully, especially the broader contexts of specific verses, so that you understand God’s principles for living and what he wants for your life. Only if you really understand what the *whole* Bible says will you be able to recognize errors of interpretation when people take verses out of context and twist them to say what they want them to say. Jesus was able to resist all of the devil’s temptations because he not only knew Scripture, he also obeyed it. *Ephesians 6:17* says that God’s Word is a sword to use in spiritual combat. Knowing Bible verses is an important step in helping us resist evil, but we must also obey the Bible. Satan had memorized Scripture, but he failed to submit to it. Knowing and obeying the Bible helps us follow God’s desires rather than the devil’s.

Week 4. The first disciples follow Jesus (John 1:35-42)

The following day as John was standing with two of his disciples, Jesus walked by. John looked at him intently and then declared, “See! There is the Lamb of God!”

Then John’s two disciples turned and followed Jesus. Jesus looked around and saw them following. “What do you want?” he asked them. “Sir,” they replied, “where do you live?” “Come and see,” he said. So they went with him to the place where he was staying and were with him from about four o’clock that afternoon until the evening. (One of these men was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother.) Andrew then went to find his brother and told him, “We have found the Messiah!” And he brought Simon to meet Jesus. Jesus looked intently at him for a moment and then said, “You are Simon, John’s son—but you shall be called Peter, the rock!”

Names of Jesus—These new disciples used several names for Jesus: *Lamb of God (1:36)*, *Messiah (1:41)*, *Son of God (1:49)*, and *king of Israel (1:49)*. As they got to know Jesus, their appreciation for him grew. The more time we spend getting to know Christ, the more we will understand and appreciate who he is. We may be drawn to him for his teaching, but we will come to know him as the Son of God. Although these disciples made this verbal shift in a few days, they would not fully understand Jesus until three years later (*Acts 2*). What they so easily professed had to be worked out in experience. We may find that words of faith come easily, but deep appreciation for Christ comes with living by faith.

WHO DOES THE TALKING? WHO DOES THE LISTENING? WHO DOES THE FAITH GROWING?

Those of us who teach Sunday school are at times overcome by the sound of our own voice. Perhaps we don’t hear too well, especially if we work with younger children. Understandably, we are concerned about teaching the right things and giving them a good foundation. Too readily though, adults don’t take children’s ideas or words seriously. If so, does our attitude inhibit children, or keep them from expressing their thoughts about God? Are we satisfied with only certain kinds of responses? If the idea of receiving faith messages from children is foreign to our way of thinking, could we be limiting our own faith growth?

Answers to the above depend on your definition of faith and your perception of a young child’s faith. That definition in turn will affect how well you listen to and assimilate the faith experiences of the children you teach. If you could believe that children know, understand and