

Christmas Hardship — Christmas Joy

An Adult Bible Study

by

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Leader's Guide

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Leaders Notes

The world celebrates Christmas with sentimental happiness and secular celebration. This course helps believers celebrate Christmas with a sober sense of reality. It is a time of joy when we thank God for his gift of a Savior. It is also a time of hardship when Satan makes special attempts to dampen our joy and to lead believers away from a true celebration of Christmas.

Four of the five lessons (lessons 1,2,4,5) explain the hardships and joys of the people who were associated with Jesus' birth in Bethlehem.

Lesson 3 is about the Christian Church's hardships and joys because of Jesus' birth. It is based on the symbol of Jesus' birth and Satan's desire to stop God's plan of salvation, found in Revelation 12. Satan's anger was behind all the hardships in the lives of the believers who were associated with Jesus' birth. It is also behind the struggles believers endure today as they worship the Christ Child—even as they celebrate his birth in the Christmas season.

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Blessings on your study,

Pastor Robert Koester

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Christmas Hardship — Christmas Joy

Lesson 1

Mary's Hardship — Mary's Joy

Worship

Read responsively select verses from 1 Samuel 2.

L: My heart rejoices in the LORD because I find joy in your salvation.

G: There is no one holy like the LORD. There is no rock like our God.

L: Do not talk so high and mighty.

G: Do not let proud words come out of your mouth,

L: because the LORD is a God who knows.

G: By him actions are weighed.

L: The bows of powerful warriors are broken.

G: Those who were staggering are now armed with strength.

L: Those who once were full now hire themselves out for bread,

G: but those who were hungry are satisfied.

L: Yes, the childless woman has given birth to seven children,

G: but she who had many children is weak with sorrow.

L: He raises the poor out of the dust.

G: He lifts up the needy from the garbage pile.

L: He will guard the feet of his favored ones,

G: but the wicked will be put to silence in darkness,

L: Those who oppose the LORD will be broken to pieces.

G: He will thunder against them in the heavens.

L: The LORD will judge the ends of the earth.

G: He will give strength to his king. He will raise up the horn of his anointed one.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, you graciously gave us your Son. Today, help us think about the hardships and joys Jesus' mother experienced. Give us your Holy Spirit to help us realize how blessed we are. Even though hardships and persecution often come into our lives because of our faith, we know that in the end we will be blessed, as Mary said, when you humble the proud and raise up the lowly to eternal life.

G: Amen.

The Purpose of This Course

The world celebrates Christmas with sentimental happiness and secular celebration. This course helps believers celebrate Christmas with a sober sense of reality. It is a time of joy when we thank God for his gift of a Savior. It is also a time of hardship when Satan makes special attempts to dampen our joy and to lead believers away from a true celebration of Christmas.

It was not a time of perfect joy for those who took part in the first Christmas. They all endured some degree of hardship as Satan attempted to stop God's plan of salvation. Their hardship did not dampen their overarching joy of the Savior's birth. But it showed them God's power to overcome Satan, and to keep the plan of salvation on track.

Introduction

Mary watched over Jesus, who lay in the manger. It was a peaceful scene. But Mary's life was hardly peaceful in the years surrounding the birth of her child. This lesson will help us think about the hardship she endured and the overarching joy that helped her patiently endure it.

Mary's Hardship—Luke 1:26-35; 2:1-7

1. Why did Mary have reason to doubt Gabriel?

She knew she was a virgin.

2. Put yourself in Mary's place. As blessed as she was, over the next nine months she would endure many hardships. Describe hardships she had to endure because of:

- a. the reaction of her relatives and close friends

In Judea at that time, if an unmarried woman became pregnant, they were assumed to have committed adultery. And for that reason they were looked down on.

- b. if Mary had told the residents of Bethlehem that an angel appeared to her and said that she was giving birth to the promised Savior and would become miraculously pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is likely that only a few, like her cousin Elizabeth, would have believed her. To say that, she would have become a laughing stock to most and would have been despised all the more.

- c. her 90 mile trip to Bethlehem, riding on a donkey, likely when it was late in her pregnancy. (This trip would be similar to a trip between Deadwood and Hot Springs on Hwy 385, but on a path rather than a road.)

The class can think of many difficulties the family would have suffered on such a journey.

- d. giving birth in a stable

We are told there was no room in the local inn. After being turned down there, Mary and Joseph had to find an alternate place to live, which likely was not easy.

Perhaps Mary had a midwife to help her give birth. But we are not told. All we are told is that on the day of his birth, God told some shepherds to visit him. And when they found him, he was lying in a manger (a food trough). It would have been difficult for Mary to give birth under such circumstances, and afterward to find the rest she needed.

- e. Mary's living conditions and finding help after Jesus was born

Mary and Joseph were living in a stable before the child was born. Perhaps it was the location in a home where the animals were kept. So it need not have been a freestanding stable some distance from the people who owned the animals. Nevertheless, Mary had to use a manger as Jesus' first crib. If that was the case, Mary and Joseph likely slept nearby in makeshift beds nearby.

- f. the reception by the people of Bethlehem

The reception of Mary and Joseph might have been similar to that of the people of Nazareth. They likely looked down on this unwed mother.

Mary's Joy—Luke 1:28-32; 36-36; 41-54

3. How did Gabriel describe Mary in 1:28?

She was highly favored. The Lord was with her. She was blessed. She must have remembered these words often during the following difficult months and years.

4. How did Gabriel describe Jesus (Luke 1:32-33)

He would be great. He was the Son of God. He was the promised king who would reign in David's place His kingdom would never end.

5. How did the child in Elizabeth's womb, whose name would be John (the Baptist), react?

John jumped in his mother's womb. He knew he was in the presence of God himself. Elizabeth said that he jumped for joy. Mary would remember this. It could only increase her joy.

6. Elizabeth could have looked down on this unwed mother. Why didn't she?

The Holy Spirit told Elizabeth that Mary's child was her Lord. Knowing this, she could confess that Mary did not have sinful relations with a man, but that God himself had made her pregnant. Unless Mary and Elizabeth had spoken about it earlier, the fact that Elizabeth knew about God's promise to Mary would have been a miracle performed by the Holy Spirit.

7. Twice Elizabeth used the word "blessed" to describe Mary. Why, according to Elizabeth, was Mary blessed?

Mary was blessed to be the mother of the promised savior, the Son of God. Elizabeth also told Mary that she was blessed because she had believed God's promise to her. Might this have been in reference to her husband, Zechariah's doubt?

8. Read Luke 1:46-49. In 1:48, Mary said she was "blessed" to describe herself. Why was Mary blessed?

As Elizabeth said, she was to be the mother of the promised Savior.

Mary had a truly humble spirit. She knew her lowly position. When she spoke about the role God had given her in his plan of salvation, she could only marvel at God's kindness to her and the rest of the world. In the future, everyone would acknowledge how richly she had been blessed.

9. In this world, the powerful and rich often use their blessings to oppress people. What change would Mary's Son bring about? Describe this change in spiritual terms.

Unbelieving rulers and the influential rich had oppressed God's people—the hungry and the lowly. But God would reverse that by showing mercy to his people. In God's kingdom, the children of the King would prosper over those who had afflicted them.

10. Mary concludes her song with a reference to the promise God had made to Abraham, namely, that in him all nations would be blessed. She was among the true believers who were waiting for the Savior and she understood the reason why Jesus was to be born. What was Mary confessing when she called God "my Savior?"

She knew the reason the Savior was born, namely, to defeat sin and Satan. She was confessing that she was a sinner and the Savior—her own son—would grant her forgiveness. Note: The Catholic church has elevated Mary far higher than she herself would have. They even believe that she was born sinless. In addition, they believe that Mary help her Son redeem the world. By confessing her need for a Savior, Mary was rejecting all of that.

11. We all suffer hardships. Some are just part of life on earth. But some hardships come into our lives because we are believers. Think about Mary's hardships. Which might have been a normal part of her life on earth? Which did she endure because of her special call to the mother of the Savior?

A mother always suffers during the birth of a child. In her case, the Roman government made it difficult for all its citizens by requiring them to return to the place of their birth to fulfill a census.

But because God chose her to be the mother of the Savior. Mary had to endure scorn for being an unwed mother.

Summary

Mary suffered hardships on the first Christmas. She suffered from the false conclusions of her friends and relatives, and this included her husband, Joseph. She suffered from having to travel to Bethlehem during her pregnancy. And her hardships continued in the weeks afterward.

But she had great joy in being the one God chose to give birth to the promised Savior. She understood that God Son would defeat sin and Satan for her and for all people. And she rejoiced that in God's Kingdom believers would no longer be oppressed.

Closing Prayer

L: Savior of the nations, come;

G: Virgin's Son, make here your home.

L: Marvel now, O heav'n and earth,

G: That the Lord chose such a birth.

L: Not by human flesh and blood,

G: By the Spirit of our God

L: Was the Word of God made flesh,

G: Woman's offspring, pure and fresh.

L: From the Father's throne he came

G: And ascended to the same,

L: Captive leading death and hell—

G: High the song of triumph swell!

(CW 2:1)

Christmas Hardship — Christmas Joy

Lesson 2

Joseph's Hardship — Joseph's Joy

Worship

Read responsively the following verses from Psalm 46; Isaiah 7:14; and Isaiah 8:9,10.

L: God is our refuge and strength,

G: a helper who can always be found in times of trouble.

L: That is why we will not fear when the earth dissolves

G: and when the mountains tumble into the heart of the sea.

L: There is a river—its streams bring joy to the city of God,

G: to the holy dwelling of the Most High.

L: God is in her. She will not fall.

G: God will help her at daybreak.

L: The LORD of Armies is with us.

G: The God of Jacob is a fortress for us.

L: “Be still, and know that I am God.

G: I will be exalted among the nations.

L: I will be exalted on the earth.”

G: The LORD of Armies is with us. The God of Jacob is a fortress for us.

L: Therefore the Lord himself will give a sign for all of you.

G: Look! The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and name him Immanuel.

L: Be broken to pieces, you peoples. Be shattered!

G: Listen, all of you from faraway countries.

L: Dress for battle, and be shattered!

G: Dress for battle, and be shattered!

L: Get together, make your plans,

G: but they will not succeed.

L: Speak the word, but it will not stand,

G: for “Immanuel.”

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, we go through many hardships on account of our faith. Sometimes, like Joseph, we don't quite know what to do. But because of our love for others and our love for you, we make the best decisions we can. Guide us like you guided Joseph. Remind us that behind everything in our lives lies your desire to send “Immanuel” into our hearts. Help us realize the depth of our sins so we can better understand the depth of your salvation for us in Jesus, our Savior.

G: Amen.

Introduction

God's gift to Mary brought great joy into her life, but it also became an occasion for suffering. God called Mary's husband, Joseph, to share her joy. But he also called Joseph to share her suffering. God did not send Gabriel to Joseph immediately after he sent him to Mary. This lesson is about how God helped

Joseph through his confusion about Mary's pregnancy and his painful decision to divorce her for unfaithfulness. But the same joy that came into Mary's life would come into his life as well.

Joseph's Hardship—Matthew 1:18-20a

Background:

Some information about Jewish marriage customs will help us understand the difficult situation Joseph was in.

In our culture, a couple is usually engaged before they are married. Engagement is the promise a man and women make to each other. The promise to marry is followed by the marriage ceremony, at which time they legally become husband and wife. In our culture, the engagement promise is not always viewed as binding, while the vows they make at the wedding ceremony are.

In Jewish culture, being betrothed was not the same as being engaged in our culture. In Jesus' day when a man and a woman decide to marry, they became "betrothed" and began their life together in a public betrothal ceremony. This is when they became husband and wife. For a while, however, they did not live together. When they were ready to do that, the husband came to the bride's home and took her to his home. That is when the "wedding feast" took place and when the marriage was consummated.

So Mary and Joseph were legally married when they travelled to Bethlehem. See Matthew 1:20 and 24. The angel told Joseph to take Mary into his home. Some versions translate "take Mary *as your wife*." Others translate "take Mary *your wife*." The latter translation reflects the original Greek and the customs referred to above. Also, Matthew called Joseph Mary's "husband" when he discovered she was pregnant and planned to "divorce" her (1:19).

1. How does this background help us understand Joseph's struggle when he learned that Mary was pregnant? Use the following questions to evaluate the hardships Joseph had to go through.

a. Why do you think it took some time before Joseph learned that Mary was pregnant?

Likely, Mary was reluctant to tell Joseph that she was pregnant. In light of what happened when Joseph found out, it is not hard to understand why. Or perhaps Mary was simply trusting that God, who had chosen her to bear his Son, would also resolve the inevitable struggle that Joseph would have to go through when it became clear that she was pregnant.

Even so, we can't be completely sure why God did not immediately reveal to Joseph what he had revealed to Mary. Perhaps questions 1c and 3 will suggest an answer.

b. Think about the phrase in verse 20: "as he was considering these things." Pick the best word for what sin Joseph thought Mary had committed: fornication or adultery.

Considering the Jewish marriage customs noted above, Mary would have committed adultery, that is, what a married woman does when she is unfaithful to her husband.

c. If Joseph had given in to his sinful nature, what might he have done when he found out that his wife was pregnant (verse 19)?

He might have exposed her publicly. And he might have insisted that the man with whom she committed adultery be found. Depending on how closely the leaders of Nazareth were keeping Moses' laws about adulterers (Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22-24), both Mary and the man might have been stoned to death. Even if that hadn't happened, Joseph would have caused Mary to be subject to public disgrace. It would have been an act of vengeance.

d. Think about the word "just" ("righteous," NIV) as Matthew uses those words in this section. Joseph would have been just to divorce Mary. He would have been just to discover who had slept with her and had both of them punished (see Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22-24).

But there is another way to understand the word “justice” or “righteousness.” In this context, what do those words refer to?

Under the Law, the words speak of legal justice. But under the Gospel of God’s forgiveness, the two words can refer the act of showing mercy. That’s how Joseph chose to treat Mary. He would be merciful to Mary and tell her privately that the marriage was over.

2. Evaluate this statement in the light of last week’s lesson: Once Joseph understood the truth about Mary’s child, he began taking part in all the hardships Mary had to endure.

By continuing their betrothal, Joseph endured the misconceptions Mary had to suffer from the people of Nazareth. And from that point on, he endured the other hardships she and the baby would be called on to endure.

Joseph’s Joy—Matthew 1:20b-24

3. As we saw, God did not immediately tell Joseph how he was using Mary use Mary in his plan of salvation. That might seem cruel, but because of this struggle, believers are assured of two things:

a. Joseph was not _____.

the father. Matthew tells us plainly: Joseph, out of compassion for Mary, did not expose her to public disgrace. If Joseph had really been the child’s father and was just trying to get out of a sin against Jewish marriage customs, Matthew would have been lying. What’s more, Joseph would have been a complete hypocrite for even thinking about claiming that Mary was adulteress.

b. Joseph knew no other man _____.

was the father. Joseph planned to divorce Mary for unfaithfulness. But his complete about face made it clear that something convinced him that no other man had slept with her.

c. What was the only other option (verse 20)?

The only other option was that an angel had appeared to Joseph and Joseph believed what the angel said: Mary’s child was miraculous. Mary had conceived by the power of God the Holy Spirit. Her Son was both a human being and God himself.

4. In verse 20, the angel addressed Joseph as “son of David.” How was this part of Joseph’s Christmas joy? (Note Jeremiah 23:5.)

This reminded Joseph of the promise God gave regarding King David in the Old Testament. In the future, God would raise up a King who would establish a great kingdom that would never end. Although Joseph was not Jesus’ biological father, God chose to have Jesus’ earthly father come from the line of David. That was Joseph, and what a joy it must have been to him.

5. The angel told Joseph to name their child “Jesus.” How was this part of Joseph and Mary’s Christmas joy?

The fact that his beloved Mary had not been unfaithful to him was certainly a cause of joy for Joseph. But the fact that he, Joseph, was a part of God’s plan of salvation must have been a great joy to him. As Jesus’ father, he was responsible for naming his son. The angel told him to name the child Jesus. His Son would establish God’s kingdom on the basis of the forgiveness he would win for all people—for him too.

6. Jesus’ virgin birth is central to the Christian message. Use the following questions to think about this fact.

a. Why was the virgin birth of Jesus the backbone of Joseph’s Christmas joy? (Reflect on the fact that it is included in that great summary of the Christian faith that we all confess, the Apostolic Creed.)

The virgin birth of the Savior was vital to God's plan of salvation. The Holy Spirit, God himself, caused Mary to become pregnant. The Son of God came to earth as a human being. Only a human being could be under the law to keep it perfectly and only a human being could die in the place of other human beings. God himself had to come to this earth. Only God could offer a sacrifice great enough to save the world.

Note that the virgin birth was at the heart of the angel's appearance to both Mary and to Joseph.

b. How did Joseph protect Mary's virginity until she had given birth to Jesus?

He immediately brought Mary, his betrothed, into his home. But we are specifically told that he had no union with her until Jesus was born. There was to be no doubt that Jesus was the Son of God.

7. (If there is time, continue with questions 7-9.) In the Old Testament, Ahaz and the southern kingdom of Judah were being seriously threatened by the northern kingdom of Israel and by the nation of Syria. But God wanted to assure Ahaz that he would deliver Judah. God gave Ahaz a sign, a promise of his unfailing love. He said to Ahaz: "The Lord himself will give a sign for all of you. Look! The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and name him Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). How would this sign assure Ahaz that God is merciful and faithful to his promises.

This sign would take place in the future. God always fulfills all his promises. God would someday bless his people by personally coming to save them. This promise was fulfilled when God himself was born of a virgin.

8. Explore the theme of God's judgement on sin in Isaiah 8:5-8, and of his never-ending mercy in 8:9,10.

The word Immanuel is used two additional times, in verses 8 and 10. In Hebrew, the last word of verse 10 is "Immanuel." Verse 10 can be translated like this: "A foreign power, Assyria, will soon sweep through your land, O Immanuel. But they will not be victorious, because Immanuel.

Turn these thoughts into a simple statement of Christmas joy:

God has also given us a sign, which is _____. God will _____ the sin and unbelief of the world, but we need not fear, because _____ is _____ to forgive and deliver us.

God has also given us a sign, who is God with us. God will punish the sin and unbelief of the world, but we need not fear, because God is with us to forgive and deliver us.

9. Some people argue that in Isaiah 7:14 the Hebrew word *almah* can mean "young woman" and not necessarily "virgin." This gives them justification for denying the virgin birth. How does the section of Matthew we are studying settle the meaning of the word as used in Isaiah 7:14?

It was necessary that the angel Gabriel explain to both Mary and Joseph that Mary's child was miraculous—that the Holy Spirit had caused Mary to become pregnant. He underlined the fact that Mary was a virgin. Regardless of how some want to translate Isaiah 7:14, Gabriel taught that the word Isaiah used meant "virgin." That was God's sign to Ahaz.

Summary

Joseph endured a great internal struggle before the angels told him the truth about Mary. He was confused about Mary. Would she sleep with another man he wondered. I don't want to divorce her, but how can I take her as my wife. Wrestling with this was a great hardship. After the angel appeared to him, he began to share in all the hardships Mary would endure.

But now he knew for a fact that Mary's child was God's son, the Savior of the world. He was "God with us."

Closing Prayer

L: Oh, come, oh, come, Emmanuel,

G: And ransom captive Israel

L: That mourns in lonely exile here

G: Until the Son of God appear.

L: Oh, come, O Root of Jesse,

G: free Your own from Satan's tyranny;

L: From depths of hell your people save,

G: And bring them vict'ry o'er the grave.

L: Oh, come, O Key of David, come,

G: And open wide our heav'nly home.

L: Make safe the way that leads on high,

G: And close the path to misery.

L: Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel

G: Shall come to you, O Israel!

(CW 23:1,2,4)

Christmas Hardship — Christmas Joy

Lesson 3

The Church's Hardship — The Church's Joy

Worship

Read responsively the following verses from Psalm 103.

L: The LORD is compassionate and gracious,

G: slow to anger, abounding in mercy.

L: He will not always accuse.

G: He will not keep his anger forever.

L: He does not treat us as our sins deserve.

G: He does not repay us according to our guilty deeds.

L: Yes, as high as the heavens are above the earth,

G: so powerful is his mercy toward those who fear him.

L: As distant as the east is from the west,

G: so far has he removed our rebellious acts from us.

L: As a father has compassion on his children,

G: so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.

L: For he knows how we were formed. He remembers that we are dust.

G: The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his royal power rules over all.

L: Bless the LORD, you his angels,

G: you strong warriors who obey his word by listening to what he says.

L: Bless the LORD, all his armies,

G: you who minister to him, you who do whatever pleases him.

L: Bless the LORD, everything he has made

G: in all places where he rules. Bless the LORD, O my soul.

Prayer

Dear heavenly Father, the Devil in the form of a serpent tempted Adam and Eve, and they fell into sin. But you promised to send a Savior to deliver them from the Devil's power. In our lesson today, we see the Devil in the form of a powerful dragon, intent on destroying Jesus and his followers. Give us comfort in the reminder that the final victory over sin and Satan's power belongs to Christ and his people.

G: Amen.

Introduction

Our lesson today takes us to the manger in Bethlehem. Today we look behind the scenes to what Satan was doing on the first Christmas and to what he is still doing today. We also see how God protected Jesus and continues to protect the Church. Once again, we will see both Christmas hardship and Christmas joy.

The Church's Hardship—Revelation 12:1-4; 13

1. Jesus' birth is symbolized in verses 1 and 2. Some interpret the woman as Mary. But it is a much larger group, of which Mary was a member. Can you guess who the woman is? Hint: Think about the twelve stars on her crown.

In the book of Revelation, the number 12 is always associated with the Christian church. Think about the twelve apostles and the twelve tribes of Israel. The woman is not a symbol of Mary. Rather, she is a symbol of the Christian church. Jesus was born from one of the many believers whom God created and preserved from the time of Adam and Eve to the time of Joseph and Mary.

2. She is “clothed with the sun,” the moon is “under her feet,” and she has a “crown” on her head? What do these symbols say about the woman?

The church is the light of the world and reflects the glory of God. God works out all things for the church’s good, making the church the group that dictates everything that happens in creation. God has brought the members of the Church into his kingdom, where they, along with him, rule over all things.

3. The scene immediately shifts. What is the woman, so closely associated with God’s power and glory, doing in verse 2? How is this a fitting description of what God’s people went through in the days leading up to the Messiah’s birth?

The woman was in pain and agony as she was about to give birth to the Savior. This agony symbolizes the hardship endured by Mary, Joseph, and the others who were closely associated with the Savior’s birth.

4. What was Satan’s ultimate goal for God’s Son (verse 4)?

Note: The dragon is Satan. This is clear from the symbols used to describe him (which have been associated with him in Revelation before this).

In the days surrounding Jesus’ birth, Satan tried to stop God’s plan of salvation. He wanted to kill Jesus as soon as he was born.

5. God protected his Son by taking him up to heaven and restoring him to where he was before he came to earth (verse 5). The church, however, must remain on earth (verse 6). Satan was furious for being ejected from heaven. What did Satan set out to do to the woman, who had to remain on earth (verse 12b)?

He was furious, so he pursued the woman and tried to kill her. Note the ominous warning we hear in verse 12b: “Woe to the earth and the sea, for the Devil has gone down to you. He is full of rage, because he knows that his time is short.” The church’s hardships will continue until Jesus takes us to heaven.

The Church’s Joy—Revelation 12:5-12a

6. Verses 7-12a describe the joy of Christmas. Uncover this joy by thinking through the following questions:

a. What had Satan and his angels been doing on earth?

The Devil is the leader of the angels who rebelled against God at the time of creation. “Satan” means accuser. Satan does, in fact, have the right to stand before God in heaven and argue that God should punish people because of their sins.

Satan had been leading the world astray, that is, leading them to reject God and his promise of a Savior and keeping them under bondage to sin.

b. These verses depict God’s victory over Satan. We are told that “Michael” fought against Satan. Michael means “who is like God?” He is evidently a powerful angel who led his fellow angels in the war against Satan. What does it mean that he won the war against Satan?

Michael and his forces cast Satan out of heaven.

c. Some think this section of Revelation is about Satan's being cast out of heaven when he rebelled against God at creation. But the context shows that these verses are talking about a different time. When did the event of verses 9 and 10 take place?

Satan was cast out of heaven when Jesus overcame the guilt of sin through his suffering and death. Because the guilt of our sin has been removed by Jesus' victory on the cross, Satan has lost the right to stand before God in heaven and accuse people of being sinners, worthy of God's wrath and punishment. This is the heart of our Christmas joy. Because this good news has gone out into the world, Satan is no longer able to lead the whole world astray.

d. Michael is the head of the forces of heaven who have cast Satan out. But the victory is also won by the believers on earth, which includes us. According to verse 11, what are the weapons we use to defeat Satan and cast him out of heaven?

We overcome Satan by the blood of Jesus, the lamb, and by testifying to his sacrificial victory over sin. This message leads people to believe that Christ's victory over sin is personally theirs. Now Satan can no longer accuse them before God. Because Christ has authority over all things, we can also tell people that his kingdom of grace and power has come.

e. Does verse 12a apply to you? If in doubt, read Colossians 3:1-3.

Right now, even though we are on earth and enduring the hardship's Satan throws at us, we are also living with God in heaven. Through faith in Christ, we are shielded from his power.

7. Verses 6,12b-17 contain the rest of the story. The church will continue to endure hardships After Satan was thrown out of heaven, he went to earth to destroy the church like he had wanted to kill Jesus. But the church cannot be overcome. In verse 6 we are told that God prepared a place for her where he would "feed" her, that is, where he would take care of her out of Satan's reach. Verses 12b-17 refer to the many ways Satan tries to destroy the church, but they tell us that God will use the events of the world to save her from them.

Compare this vision with what Paul said in Romans 8:28: "We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose."

Although our Christmas hardships will continue until Jesus returns and destroys Satan once and for all, we have the Christmas joy of Jesus' continual protection. Satan's attacks will be relentless, but he has been cast out of the place where someday we ourselves will live permanently. He continues to oppress the church on earth. But nothing can take away our Christmas Joy. God promises to cause all things on this earth to work together so that Satan's schemes and attacks are nullified.

Summary

Because of Christ's sacrifice for sin, Satan can no longer accuse us. That is, he can no longer rightfully demand that God punish us for our sins. This is the heart of our Christmas joy.

Satan will stop at nothing to rob us of our Christmas Joy. But even though Satan sends hardships into our lives to lead us away from Christ, God will protect us from him and make all things work for our spiritual good.

Closing Prayer

L: Lo, on those who dwelt in darkness,

G: Dark as night and deep as death,

L: Broke the light of thy salvation,

G: Breathed thine own life-giving breath.

L: Thy strong Word bespeaks us righteous;

G: Bright with thine own holiness,

L: Glorious now, we press toward glory,

G: And our lives our hope confess.

L: From the cross thy wisdom shining

G: Breaketh forth in conqu'ring might;

L: From the cross forever beameth

G: All thy bright redeeming light.

L: Give us lips to sing thy glory,

G: Tongues thy mercy to proclaim,

L: Throats to shout the hope that fills us,

G: Mouths to speak thy holy name.

L: Alleluia! Alleluia! May the light which thou dost send

G: Fill our songs with alleluias, Alleluias without end!

(CW 280:2-5)

Christmas Hardship — Christmas Joy

Lesson 4

The Wise Men's Hardship — The Wise Men's Joy

Worship

Read responsively Isaiah 55:1-5.

L: Hey, all of you who are thirsty, come to the water,

G: even if you have no money! Come, buy and eat!

L: Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

G: Why do you spend money on something that is not bread?

L: Why do you waste your labor on something that does not satisfy?

G: Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good.

L: Satisfy your appetite with rich food.

G: Turn your ear toward me, and come to me. Listen, so that you may continue to live.

L: Yes, I will make an everlasting covenant with you,

G: the faithful mercies promised to David.

L: Look, I appointed him as a witness for peoples,

G: a leader and commander of peoples.

L: Look, you will call out to a nation you do not know,

G: and a nation that does not know you will run to you, on account of the LORD your God,

L: because of the Holy One of Israel,

G: for he has glorified you.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, you want all people to know and believe in your Son. Even before the church started expanding into the Gentile world, you called non-Jews who lived far away from Bethlehem to come and worship the Savior. In our lesson today, renew our confidence that your grace is meant for all people. Thank you for bringing us also to faith in your Son, our Savior.

G: Amen.

Introduction

In some way, shrouded in mystery, God led some learned men from the East (Babylon or Persia) to faith in the Savior. Like many scholars of the day, these men studied the stars. God prepared a miraculous star to lead them to the King of the Jews. The star seems to have had the ability to adjust itself to the direction the men needed to go. It led them to Judea. At one point the star disappeared. Later, however, it once again became visible and led the men directly to Jesus' home in Bethlehem. God used the behavior of this star to give these men the joy of Christmas. And in the process, it also made them partakers in the hardships associated with Jesus' birth.

The Wise Men's Hardship—Matthew 2:1-8, 12

The Wise Men arrived in Judah looking for the King of the Jews, whom they wanted to worship. The star ceased giving them directions. So they naturally went to Jerusalem to the court of King Herod, whom the Romans had appointed to administer the province of Judea. He was he was the logical one to help. By

doing this, the Wise Men put themselves on a perilous path. To help us realize the danger the wise men were in, here is some background on King Herod.

The ancient historian Josephus said that Herod was capable, crafty, and cruel. He was paranoid and swiftly did away with any hint of opposition. Once, an attempt to assassinate him failed. The ten conspirators were tortured and executed. Herod was a non-Jew. In order to win the favor of the Jews, he married Mariamne, a member of a well-known powerful Jewish family. Later, out of jealousy for her popularity and afraid her family might get him removed from office, he murdered her (at age 25), her mother, and two of the five sons he had by her. He once executed several Pharisees who had announced that the birth of the Messiah would mean the end of Herod's rule. Another time a group of students smashed a Roman symbol over the main entrance of Herod's Temple. He had 40 of them, along with two of their professors, burned alive. Five days before his death he killed another of his sons.

He knew he was unpopular. He didn't want the people rejoicing when he died. So he rounded up a number of respected Jewish elders and leaders and put them in prison. He ordered that when he died all these Jewish men be killed so there would be mourning throughout Judea. Evidently his order was not carried out.

1. Considering this background, why was "he alarmed" when the wise men arrived in Jerusalem? Why do you think "all Jerusalem" was alarmed as well?

Herod was hearing about a contender for this throne.

Considering all the brutal things Herod had done in the past, the people of Jerusalem didn't know what horrible things Herod would do to find the child.

2. Herod knew immediately whom the Wise Men were looking for. They were looking for the King promised in the Old Testament, David's Son.

Based on what the Old Testament says about the future King of the Jews, why *should* Herod have been afraid of him? Why *shouldn't* Herod have feared this King?

The King of the Jews was to be a successor to David, the greatest king Israel every had. David was a military leader, who expanded Israel's boundaries to their greatest extent. No other king could stand before him. If Jesus was a successor to King David, Herod would lose all his power.

Jesus was not a military leader. He was not an earthly governor. Herod had nothing to fear. Herod could continue his rule over Judeah.

Jesus would rule over the forces of evil. The Devil is the only one who had to be afraid of him.

3. Why do you think Herod called in the wise men for a secret meeting?

The Wise Men had come to Herod, which meant they didn't suspect that he would do anything wicked. Herod wanted to keep it that way. He wanted to use them to find the King of the Jews and report back to him. Who knows what he would have done the Wise Men considering the fact that they intended to worship him.

4. In light of the above information about Herod, why do you think Herod wanted to know exactly when the star appeared?

He wanted to know when the child was born. Such information would come in handy. If the wise men reported back that they had found the child, Herod would at least know the age of the rival king. If he knew that, it would be easier to find him and kill him.

5. Based on what the Lord later told the wise men in a dream, what danger were they in if they returned to Jerusalem to report back to Herod? How is this a fulfillment of what we learned last week in Revelation 12?

If the Wise Men found Jesus and reported back to Herod, their lives would likely have been in danger. Perhaps they would learn that the last thing Herod wanted was to worship the new king. Herod would not want anyone to warn Mary and Joseph about his jealousy. And the Wise Men could have warned Mary and Joseph quicker than Herod could have found them.

The wise men were part of the church on earth, whom Satan wanted to destroy. We can also look at the account as an example of Satan waiting for the Savior to be born so he could kill him.

The Wise Men's Joy—Matthew 2:10-11

6. What gave “exceedingly great” joy to the wise men after they left Herod and travelled to Bethlehem?

The star reappeared and directed the Wise Men to Jesus.

It is interesting why the Lord made the star disappear for a while. Clearly, the Lord wanted the Wise Men to go to Jerusalem. Through that visit, the Lord revealed to the people of Jerusalem that their king had come. It was also a testimony to the religious leaders, who provided Herod with the name of the town where the coming King was to be born.

Was anyone curious enough to join the Wise Men on their trip to worship their King. It doesn't seem so. They were likely afraid of Herod. Only Herod seemed to be interested in the King, and for the wrong reasons.

7. Why would the behavior of the star have been such a source of joy to the wise men?

They knew that God had provided the star. Although God had removed the star from their sight, they now were reassured that God was with them, guiding them to the end of their journey.

8. What do you think the house in which Jesus was living looked like? What does this tell us about the wise men's Christmas joy?

We are not told what the house looked like, or if Mary and Joseph had moved since they arrived at Bethlehem. We are told that a manger was Jesus' first bed. But that doesn't necessarily mean that Jesus was born in a free-standing stable. Even today in some countries a family might keep their animals in their own home, perhaps downstairs or in a barn near the house. Perhaps Mary and Joseph soon began living in the home itself. Perhaps they found another home to live in. We are not sure where they were living, other than that the Wise Men visited them in a “house” (Matthew 2:11).

One thing is certain, however. Bethlehem was a small, insignificant town (see Micah 5:2). It would not have had rich homes like one would find in Jerusalem. Therefore, it is safe to say that the house was a common, ordinary one, where an average family would live. Hardly the home of a king. We know Mary and Joseph were a poor couple. When they took Jesus to the temple 40 days after he was born, they offered the sacrifice of birds a poor couple was allowed to make instead of the normal sheep or goat.

Jesus' humble quarters did not put the Wise Men off. They realized the true nature of his kingdom. They were overjoyed to find the one who would give them peace with the true God. This was their Christmas joy.

9. The wise men gave Jesus their best. The three gifts given to Jesus were some of the most expensive commodities available. In what way does this express the joy they had in the Savior?

They were overjoyed to find Jesus. They gave the world's most costly gifts to a child born of humble parents living in an average home. They saw past the King's humble circumstances and treated him as the great ruler he was.

10. In the next lesson we will hear about Jesus and his family's flight from Herod. How did God use the wise men to keep Satan from killing his Son?

Think again about the description of God's protection of his Son and of his care for the church in Revelation 12. The world swallowed up Satan's plans. The Wise Men's gifts gave the family the money they needed to journey to Egypt on the spur of the moment and temporarily settle there.

11. How did God protect the believing Wise Men like he promised to do in Revelation 12.

He warned the Wise Men about Herod's plans and told them how to escape.

Summary

Wise Men from the East had learned about the birth of the King God would send to bless all people. God provided a miraculous star to guide the Wise Men to their King.

God removed the star so the Wise Men had to go to Jerusalem to locate the King. Naturally, they first went to wick King Herod. This set in motion a series of events that caused hardship for many believers.

However, the Wise Men experienced the joy of worshiping their Savior. God also made them an example of how he protects his Church.

Closing Prayer

L: O Lord, how shall I meet you, how welcome you aright?

G: Your people long to greet you, my Hope, my heart's Delight.

L: O Jesus, let your Word be—a lamp to light my way,

G: To show me how to please you, to guide me ev'ry day.

L: Love caused your incarnation; love brought you down to me.

G: Your thirst for my salvation procured my liberty.

L: Oh, love beyond all telling that led you to embrace

G: In love, all love excelling, our lost and fallen race!

L: Sin's debt, that fearful burden, let not your souls distress;

G: Your guilt the Lord will pardon and cover by his grace.

L: He comes, for you procuring the peace of sin forgiv'n,

G: His children thus securing a heritage in heav'n.

(CW 18:1,2,4)

Christmas Hardship — Christmas Joy

Lesson 5

Jesus' Hardship — Jesus' Joy

Worship

Read responsively Hebrews 12:1-3; 22-24; 28.

L: Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us get rid of every burden and the sin that so easily ensnares us, and let us run with patient endurance the race that is laid out for us. Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who is the author of our faith and the one who brings it to its goal.

G: In view of the joy set before him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of God's throne. Carefully consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinful people, so that you do not grow weary and lose heart.

L: Instead, you have come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God; to the heavenly Jerusalem; to tens of thousands of angels in joyful assembly; to the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven;

G: to God, who is the judge of all; to the spirits of righteous people who have been made perfect; to Jesus, the mediator of a new testament; and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better message than the blood of Abel.

L: Therefore, since we are going to receive an unshakeable kingdom, let us be thankful.

G: This is how we serve God in an acceptable way, with reverence and awe.

Prayer

Dear Lord, the people of this world suffer hardships. But as your people, we know Satan is bringing additional hardships into our lives, using every way he can to rob us of our faith. You have promised to protect us. As you have promised, protect our faith. At all times, help us keep in mind the joy we have in Christ: the forgiveness of sins and the hope of eternal life with you.

G: Amen.

Introduction

The final episode in the Christmas story contains more hardships than all the others put together. It illustrates the full wrath of the devil, who wanted to devour the woman's child as soon as it was born (Revelation 12). Yet during all these events, the joy of God's loving care shone through. And because God kept his Son from Satan's evil intentions, we know he will also keep us safe for eternal life.

Jesus' Hardship—Matthew 2:13-18

1. God no sooner delivered the wise men from certain death at Herod's hands than he delivered Mary, Joseph, and Jesus from certain death.

How quickly did the family have to leave (verse 14)?

We are told that the Wise Men left. Since the angels appeared to Joseph in a dream, he had likely gone to bed that evening. The family left during the night. It may have been that very night or within a day or two. Joseph and Mary would have wanted to act quickly because Herod was

about to search for Jesus to kill him. Satan was certainly standing before the woman to kill her Son as soon as he was born.

2. From Bethlehem to the border of Egypt is about 40 miles. We don't know what town Mary and Joseph lived in during their time in Egypt, but there were large Jewish communities in some Egyptian towns. Perhaps Mary and Joseph had friends or relatives in one of those towns. There are various traditions about their time in Egypt, but Scripture gives us no additional information.

Imagine some of the hardships they must have endured during the trip.

It would have been hard for the family to set out at night. They had to walk (or ride) through the southern desert region of Judah. Northern Egypt was also desert. Their intended destination might not have worked out, in which case they would have had to search for another place to live. This would have taken time and effort.

Without doubt they put themselves in the Lord's hands for protection and guidance. During this time, they could sell off, as needed, the Wise Men's gifts.

3. From what happened in Bethlehem, it becomes clear why Herod had asked the wise men when they first start the star. Why did Herod ask them that question?

Herod wanted to know as much about the child as he could. His age was important.

4. Herod's *two-year window* is sometimes used to estimate Jesus's birth when he fled to Egypt. Evaluate that idea.

The Wise Men may have seen the star two years before they arrived in Jerusalem. Studying the star, preparing for the trip, and making the journey would have taken considerable time. We are told that Herod used this to decide whom he would kill. He determined it using "the exact time he had learned from the Wise Men" (2:16).

This would not rule out his padding the age a bit—adding half a year just to be safe. Note that he wanted to be safe on the lower end also, killing all the children younger than two years old. He also wanted to be safe in the amount of territory he covered and extended his brutality beyond the town Bethlehem.

5. In Revelation 12 we heard that Satan wanted to kill Jesus as soon as he was born. We also heard that the Church would suffer at his hands.

There was no greater hardship at the first Christmas than what happened in Bethlehem and in the surrounding area. Matthew says that that was a fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:15. Read that passage and imagine the hardship and suffering of the people who lost children. We will explore this passage further when we talk about the joy of Christmas.

Matthew used only a few lines to describe this account. But we should not pass over the Christmas hardship the families, their relatives, and the people in the entire region suffered at Herod's hands. In fact, they suffered at Satan's hands in his attempt to kill Jesus and oppress his followers.

Jesus' Joy—Matthew 2:15-23

6. On the surface there is not much Christmas joy in this part of Jesus' life. But it is there, lying under the surface in the two Old Testament passages Matthew quotes.

Two Old Testament events found their fulfillment in this account. The first is "Out of Egypt I called my son" (Hosea 11:1). Hosea was referring to the time when God delivered Israel from captivity in Egypt. But Matthew quotes these words not when Jesus' family *left Egypt*, but when they *went into Egypt*.

By doing this, Matthew was telling us to think about more than when Jesus' family left Egypt to return to Judea. He had in mind the entire episode and all the protection and blessings God gave them there. Think

about the Israelite's joy during their deliverance from Egypt and reflect on the joy Jesus' family experienced there.

To get started, fill in the blanks:

God called his people, Israel, out of Egypt to enable them to flee a _____ king, who suppressed the Israelites by killing their _____.

God led Jesus' family into Egypt to free him from a _____ king, who tried to destroy the Savior by killing _____.

God called his people, Israel, out of Egypt to enable them to flee a wicked king, who suppressed the Israelites by killing their baby boys.

God led Jesus' family into Egypt to free him from a wicked king, who tried to destroy the Savior by killing all the babies in Bethlehem.

Think of other parallels between the Israelites and Jesus' family.

God brought the Israelites down to Egypt and saved them from starvation in a famine. God brought Jesus' family to Egypt to save Jesus from being killed by Herod. God blessed the Israelites in Egypt by promoting their brother, Joseph, to a high position in the Egyptian government. We don't know how God blessed Mary and Joseph during their time in Egypt, but there are many ways he could have done so—a good place to live, friends and neighbors, and especially a community of Jewish people who were looking forward to the birth of the Savior. God miraculously used plagues on the Egyptians to take Israel from oppression in Egypt. God miraculously appeared to Joseph and told them that Herod was dead and that it was safe to return to Israel. All these miracles of protecting grace must have filled Mary, Joseph, and Jesus with joy.

7. Look at Matthew's second quotation, Jeremiah 31:15. This passage is talking about the time when the young men of Judah were carried into captivity in Babylon. Their mothers were left behind and are weeping as they watched them leave. Matthew applies this to the women of Bethlehem, who were forced to watch their children taken away from them in death.

However, look at the whole section, Jeremiah 31:10-17. Discuss these two statements: The women of Judah in Jeremiah's day would see their children again. The women of Bethlehem would see their children again.

The women wept when they saw their children led into captivity in Babylon. But someday they would see their children return. As Jeremiah says, they "will return to their own borders" (verse 17). In 70 years some might return to Judea. But many would become residents of the New Jerusalem, the final home of all God's people. There the women who saw their sons taken into captivity would live with them forever.

The women of Bethlehem lost their young children. But they would live with them forever in heaven. This was their Christmas joy even as they were being persecuted for Christ's sake.

Summary

Satan was intent on destroying Jesus and putting a stop to his work. But God delivered Jesus from Satan's plans by taking him back to heaven. Even as a little boy, Jesus endured the difficulties his parents had to endure. But Jesus must have listened to his parent marvel at God's protection. In the process, he would have shared their Christmas joy.

The Church must remain on earth, but God will guard it against Satan's desire to destroy it. This is our Christmas joy.

Closing Prayer

L: Hark! A thrilling voice is sounding;

G: “Christ is near,” we hear it say.

L: “Cast away the works of darkness;

G: You are children of the day.”

L: Lo, the Lamb, so long-expected,

G: Comes with pardon down from heav’n.

L: Let us haste, with tears of sorrow,

G: One and all, to be forgiv’n,

L: That, when next he comes with glory

G: And the world is wrapped in fear,

L: He may shield us with his mercy

G: And with words of love draw near.

L: Honor, glory, might, dominion

G: To the Father and the Son

L: With the everlasting Spirit

G: While eternal ages run!

(CW 15:1-4)