



Alive! Bible Study Series

SCRIPTURE READINGS FOR SESSION SEVEN

LUKE 1:26-56 (NIV)

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

²⁶In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

²⁹Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³²He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.

³⁴"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"³⁵The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called^[a] the Son of God. ³⁶Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷For no word from God will ever fail."³⁸"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

JOHN 3:16-21 (NIV)

For God so Loved the World...

¹⁶For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. ¹⁹This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. ²¹But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

The ALIVE! Bible Study Series
STUDY AND REFLECTION GUIDE FOR SESSION 7
“Birth and New Birth/Love and Peace”
Luke 1:26-38 and John 3:16-21

OBJECTIVES:

- To explore the incarnation of Jesus and what that means for you today
- To gain an understanding of why love and peace are good for your health – body, mind and spirit
- To consider how God’s light in you can inspire others to work toward better health

INTRODUCTION:

It’s Christmas time! Thoughts of a manger scene with shepherds and wise men, angels and donkeys and sheep and the star in the east bring memories of the Christ Child born on Christmas day. There are trees to put up and decorate, presents to wrap, Kwanza celebrations to prepare for, and hopes of keeping **the real reason for the joy, hope, love, and peace alive** in the midst of it all.

“Birth and New Birth/Love and Peace” are the themes for this session’s Bible study and reflection. **In Session 6** you learned the meaning of the **“adventus/coming”** of the Messiah, the Christ Child, the Light of the World, the Word of God Made Flesh. **Now in the first half of Session 7** you will have a chance to reflect on the announcement of the coming of the incarnation of God’s love and connection with humanity. Further, it is centered on the announcement to the young virgin, Mary, that she was to be the mother of the Messiah. **May you also explore and reflect for yourself not only the importance of the birth of Jesus, but the significance of your own new birth into health and wholeness.**

In the second half of this lesson you will have a chance to consider and reflect on why **“...God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”** (John 3:16) Jesus is the Light of the World and through his birth and witness to us, we are made lights as well for those in darkness (Matthew 5:14-16).

You might ask: “What do these scriptures have to do with my participation in the ALIVE! Congregational Health Initiative?” Hopefully by the time you complete this lesson, you will have a better understanding of these scriptures from Sessions 6 and 7 that are foundational to the faith, hope, peace, and joy themes, not only for this holiday season of Christmas, but for your life and for your strengthening health – body, mind, and spirit.

BACKGROUND OF LUKE 1:26-38

Luke begins the birth narrative of Jesus with the Annunciation that includes an in-depth look at Mary, rather than with Joseph, as is done in the Gospel of Matthew. This scripture tells the story of God's overwhelming love for the world and how a young peasant girl with no social stature was singled out by God to be the vessel for the coming of the Savior, the Messiah for all of humanity. She was a young girl of strong faith who willingly surrendered all of who she was to be available to God for this great expression and manifestation of God's love for you and all of humanity. May you be blessed with the renewed realization that no one is insignificant in the eyes and heart of God and that everyone is called by God for some specific purpose of love and dominion on this earthly realm. To God be the glory.

LUKE 1:26-38 FOR STUDY AND REFLECTION:

- **Luke 1:28-28** -- It is estimated that Mary was 14 years old when the angel, Gabriel, appeared to her.
- **Luke 1:20-33** – When Mary got over the shock of the angel's appearance, he told her that she was not to be afraid for she had found favor with God. He told her that she was to "be with child" and give birth to a son and he was to be named *Jesus, Son of the Most High*.
- **Luke 1:34-37** -- Mary questioned how it could possibly be, because she was a virgin. Gabriel explained that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and she would be overshadowed by the power of the Most High. He told her further that her cousin, Elizabeth, who had been barren all her life and now in old age, was also pregnant. Gabriel declared to Mary the very powerful statement, "*For nothing is impossible with God.*" (NRSV) **Have you ever had an experience that let you know that God can make a way out of no way?**
- **Luke 1:38** -- *Mary made a very bold faith statement to Gabriel when she said, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."* This indeed was a statement full courage and of faith in the God of her creation. For, in her culture, any woman found to be pregnant without benefit of marriage were stoned to death or banned from her community forever without support of any kind.

PARTICIPANTS' REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION:

1. "**Nothing is impossible with God**" are words of encouragement for Mary and a wonderful reminder for you that God still does great things.
2. Now that you have been participating in the ALIVE initiative for about three months, how has your attitude changed about yourself as someone **uniquely created** by God? Has your sense of responsibility for your self-care of God's temple changed?

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BACKGROUND FOR JOHN 3: 16-21 “FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD...

The second half of Session 7 lesson comes from Book of John. This Book is written differently than the other three gospels. **The writer of the Fourth Gospel (believed by most biblical scholars to be John, son of Zebedee) wrote for a people who “understood themselves to be a persecuted religious minority, expelled from the synagogue, their religious home, because of their faith in Jesus. The pain of the intra-Jewish struggle is fresh and real for the Fourth Evangelist; many of Jesus’ words in the Farewell Discourse can be read as intended to uphold this community in its struggles (15:18-16:3)”**¹ **The “I AM” sayings of Jesus’ teachings are to uplift and reassure these people of new faith of Jesus’ connection to the God of the universe and to their struggles, as well. These “I AM” statements are, therefore, central to the Gospel of John (that will be included at the end of your Reflection and Study Guide for this session).** The Gospel of John also contains the **incarnational language** – e.g., “... *and the Word became flesh and lived among us*” that proclaims **God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, along with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. (Incarnation – God putting part of God’s self into human form as Jesus Christ)**

The deeper meaning of the celebration of the birth of the Savior, Christ the King, is expressed in the first chapter of John 1:1-5, 14 (NIV), and 18 (NRSV)

¹“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning. ³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of men. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it... ¹⁴The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.”

The Gospel of John begins with the cosmic, heaven-centered story of Jesus’ coming. The emphasis is on of the divinity of Jesus. It is the powerful and empowering story of God taking a part of God’s creative, molding, compassionate, loving Self and inserting this part of Self into human form, coming to earth to inspire, teach, heal and to show the “way, truth, and life” that will bring healing and wholeness to humanity. It is with the introduction of these beautiful and sometimes hard-to-fathom scriptures from John 1 that this session’s study and reflection of John 3:15-21 begins.

JOHN 3:16-21 STUDY AND REFLECTION:

- **John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”** It was not only God’s will but God’s

¹ The New Interpreter’s Bible, Abington Press, Nashville, 1995. Volume IX, O’Day, Gail R, “The Gospel of John,” P.105

love that caused Him to send Jesus to walk amongst us and to demonstrate and teach the ways of eternal life. What feelings are evoked in you when you read **John 3:16**?

In this context regarding “eternal life” Jesus is not referring to life after death but of living right now in the ever-presence of God (Remember Psalm 139). John is attempting to give the persecuted minority, the believers in Jesus Christ, an assurance of God with them. Gail O’Day from Emory University writes: *“To have eternal life is to live life no longer defined by blood or by the will of the flesh or by human will, but by God (e.g., 1:13).*

Eternal life comes with new life in the spirit of who you are and it means that, because of the ending presence of God, you have access to the spiritual realm of God. It means that God’s spirit in you can connect with the Spirit of God in new and definitive ways that empower you for the work God has purpose in your life. This eternal life helps you to appreciate that this access to the spiritual realm is the realm of good, love, peace, joy, and courage when you surrender your being to God in all circumstances.

So, how does this “eternal life” of good, love, peace, joy, and courage influence your health? If you are a person of faith, then you know that there is a God who is ever-present with you and loves you so that you can overcome or deal with any of life’s circumstances. **When you trust that God will heal you or will keep you through a health issue or concern, you relax better, have more fight in you against the illness, and respond better to treatment.** When you know that there is a Force of God greater than you that is ever available to you, you may gain the strength and courage to face what you must do in order to bring your body, mind, and spirit back into balance. **It is not *hocus pocus*; it is a reality that can sustain and maintain you and ultimately give you the peace that God intended for you.**

You may have gone through some very horrific experiences, yet you stand. You may have watched someone go through deep, ugly, hurtful valley experiences and wondered why this could happen to a good person. **On this earthly plain, there may be no understanding of the “why.” But when you come to understand and accept that “Now FAITH is the substance of things hoped for and evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1, KJV), or “Now FAITH is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1, NIV), then your hope and peace may again be possible.**

- If “eternal life” does not refer only to life after death but rather also means “here and now living in the unending presence of God” then to believe what is said in John 3:16 means to share in Jesus’ experience of God in the here and now existence. Does that shift anything in your thinking about who and where you are?
- **John 3:17-21** -- God sent Jesus to save the world by bringing humanity into the light of true understanding about living an eternal life right now. Many condemn themselves to a life of

mere existence or a life full of chaos because they do not see the value of putting God above all other wants and needs, nor do they see the value of love, compassion, forgiveness, and sharing what they have for the good of all. They sit in darkness no matter where they are because they cannot embrace the loving, generous life offered by Christ Jesus.

All who believe in the “Light of the World” continue to be works in process, ever growing and stretching in spirit and truth. It is important to be mindful, therefore, of what it means for you to inherit eternal life now and to practice the disciplines to help you grow in spirit, truth, and health.

As you move forward into the New Year, consider your new birth into vitality and improved stamina. Others will see this new birth in you – your radiance and new, brighter attitude and may want to follow your “light” to better health behaviors. You and your seeking abundant life will be a light for others!

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. How does Gail O’Day’s definition of “eternal life” bump up against what you thought it meant? What does this have to do with how you handle your ALIVE! goals?
2. For whom would you like to be a light? Why?
3. How will you celebrate the hope, joy, love, and peace of God as you continue to practice the behaviors you are learning in the ALIVE! Initiative in your church?
4. Which of the “**I AM**” names for Jesus written below gives you strength for the journey?

THE “I AM” STATEMENTS OF JESUS

The Messiah, Jn. 4:26

The Bread of Life, Jn. 6:35

From Above, Jn. 8:23

The Eternal One, Jn. 8:58

The Light of the World, Jn. 9:5

The Door, or Gate, Jn. 10:7

The Son of God, Jn. 10:36

The Resurrection and Life, Jn. 11:25

The Lord and Master, Jn. 13:13

The Way, Truth, and Life, Jn. 14:6

The True Vine, Jn. 15:1

Alpha and Omega, Rev. 1:8

The First and the Last, Rev. 1:17

The Living One, Rev. 1:18

PLENARY SESSION TO DISCUSS SMALL GROUP FINDINGS

CLOSING REMARKS AND PRAYER