

Leader's Life Group Homework Guide

For the week of December 9, 2018

(This guide is designed to give helpful hints in preparing & leading your group in discussion)

DIGGING DEEPER (Don't feel like you have to cover all the questions or thoughts. Be sensitive to the needs of the group and where the Holy Spirit may be directing you as you walk through the material)

Main Idea: Faith is not a negotiation but a surrender.

Key Questions:

- Have you had any experiences where God has taught you to be a willing servant? Share your story with the group.
- Read Luke 1:27-38. What stands out to you from reading this passage?
- What do you think Mary's life would have been like raised in a small village, engaged to be married at 12-13 years old?
 - According to Roman law the minimum age for girls to be engaged and married was twelve. For boys, whom we all know develop slower, it was fourteen.
 - The Jewish practice basically followed that. Girls were usually engaged around 12 or 13 and married after the engagement or the betrothal was over. And the reason they did that was because they therefore would guarantee their virginity. As soon as they had reached puberty they would be engaged and then soon married.
 - Sounds like a good plan – right dads with daughters – arranged marriages that guaranteed no fooling around with boys. lol
 - Betrothal was a binding, legal relationship and it was arranged by parents
 - There was no sexual relationship during the period of betrothal which usually lasted a year. The couple did not live together, but only death or divorce could sever the contract. And if the man died before the wedding, the betrothed girl would be considered a widow.
 - And during that year the girl would prove her faithfulness by not giving herself to anyone else. She would prove her faithfulness. She would prove her purity. And during that same year the boy would prepare a home for her, a place for her, usually with an addition to his father's house.
- Read Luke 1:5-22. What are the similarities and major differences between Zechariah's encounter with Gabriel and Mary's? What was different about Mary's "How?" question (1:34) to the angel from Zechariah's "How?" question (1:18)? Why was Mary rewarded and Zechariah disciplined?
 - **Major similarities:**
 - Both are visited by the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:19; 1:26-27)
 - Both are promised the miraculous birth of a son (Luke 1:13; 1:31)
 - Both are equally unfit to have a child: Zechariah's wife is barren, and Mary is a virgin (Luke 1:7; Luke 1:27)
 - Both respond with equal perplexity—"How?" (Luke 1:18; 1:34)
 - **Two major contrasts** exist between Zechariah and Mary:
 - Zechariah is a law-abiding, married old man and temple priest (Luke 1:5-7) Mary is a young and obscure single woman (Luke 1:26-27)
 - Zechariah is struck dumb (literally!) for his response to Gabriel (Luke 1:19-20) Gabriel answers Mary graciously (Luke 1:35)
 - Zechariah doubts and the response, the angel says that he will not be able to speak until his son John is born.
 - Mary expresses doubts, but there is no hint of divine disapproval.
 - **What's the difference?** What we see is that the Bible's view of doubt is wonderfully nuanced.
 - To some skepticism and doubt are considered an absolute, unmitigated good.
 - To some traditional religious circles, any and all questioning or doubting is thought to be bad.
 - What you have in the Bible is neither view.
 - There is a kind of doubt that is the sign of a closed mind

- there is a kind of doubt that is the sign of an open mind.

Doubts of Mary and Zech

- There are people like Mary who are open to the truth and are willing to relinquish sovereignty over their lives if they can be shown that the truth is other than what they thought.
 - And there are those like Zechariah who use doubts as a way of staying in control of their lives and keeping their minds closed.
- How do you think you would react if you “knew” you were talking with an angel? The angel said to ‘not be afraid’ is that even humanly possible?
 - “Do not be afraid” - Gabriel counters with the words "Do not be afraid, Mary," using the word phobeo, "to be in an apprehensive state, be afraid, become frightened,"- (from which we get our English word "phobia").
 - Was Mary afraid? Whenever we meet something new and strange, we get confused with little alarms go off in our head. That's the way God made us to respond to change; it's a kind of built-in to us it is our defense mechanism.
 - But while this alarm system that Mary felt is normal and healthy, there is a dangerous -- and sinful -- kind of fear that can grip and control us.
 - People often live in fear of death, fear of a spouse leaving, fear of sickness, fear they won't be able to pay their bills.
 - When fear lives in us, as opposed to being a momentary reaction to something new, we become warped.
 - We respond to situations out of fear rather than out of faith and make pretty poor disciples.
 - Mary accepted the angel's "Fear not" at face value.
 - Secular people often make fun of the virgin birth. Does this passage actually teach that Jesus was born of a virgin? If so, why is this important to our understanding of who Jesus was and is?
 - “Most high will over shadow you”. This delicate expression rules out crude ideas of a ‘mating’ of the Holy Spirit with Mary. Gabriel makes it clear that the conception will be the result of a divine activity. Because of this the child to be born would be holy, the Son of God.
 - From these passages, it is certainly clear that Jesus’ birth was the result of the Holy Spirit working within Mary’s body. The immaterial (the Spirit) and the material (Mary’s womb) were both involved. Mary, of course, could not impregnate herself, and in that sense she was simply a “vessel.” Only God could perform the miracle of the Incarnation.
 - However, denying a physical connection between Mary and Jesus would imply that Jesus was not truly human. Scripture teaches that Jesus was fully human, with a physical body like ours. This He received from Mary. At the same time, Jesus was fully God, with an eternal, sinless nature (John 1:14; 1 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 2:14-17.)
 - Jesus was not born in sin; that is, He had no sin nature (Hebrews 7:26). It would seem that the sin nature is passed down from generation to generation through the father (Romans 5:12, 17, 19). The Virgin Birth circumvented the transmission of the sin nature and allowed the eternal God to become a perfect man.
 - Why is it so hard for us to accept being a servant? Why do we have such trouble being submissive to God?
 - “I am the Lord’s servant”. Handmaid (doulē) means ‘slave-girl’; it expresses complete obedience.
 - The slave-girl could not but do the will of her Master. This is reinforced with let it be to me according to your word. We are apt to take this as the most natural thing and accordingly we miss Mary’s quiet heroism.
 - Here is a teenager facing misunderstanding and rejection from her family, her betrothed, and her townspeople. And yet she agrees. Mary affirms the bedrock truth that undergirds our discipleship: "I am the Lord's servant."
 - Mary could not be sure that she would not have to suffer, perhaps even die. But she recognized the will of God and accepted it.

NEXT STEPS:

- Reflect on how you can make this Christmas Season special for you & your family. What can you do this year that you have always wanted to do to share the Christmas Story with those around you?

PRAYER REQUESTS