

STUDY GUIDE

FOUR SESSIONS

THE CASE FOR
Christmas

—
*Evidence for the
Identity of Jesus*



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STROBEL

WITH BILL BUTTERWORTH

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The Case for Christmas Study Guide

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How to Use This Guide

Do you have questions about the first Christmas? Then you are in the right place. During the next four weeks, you and your group will look at the story surrounding the birth of Jesus—and how you can know that the events recorded in the Bible are true.

The Case for Christmas video study is designed to be experienced in a group setting such as a Bible study, Sunday school class, or any small group gathering. Each session begins with a brief introduction and opening questions to get you and your group thinking about the topic. You will then watch a video with Lee Strobel and jump into some directed small-group discussion. You will close each session with a time of prayer.

Each person in the group should have his or her own study guide, which includes video teaching notes, group discussion questions, and between-sessions personal studies to help you reflect on the material during the week. You are also encouraged to have a copy of *The Case for Christmas* book, as reading it alongside the curriculum will provide you with deeper insights and make the journey more meaningful.

To get the most out of your group experience, keep the following points in mind. First, the real growth in this study will happen during your small-group time. This is where you will process the

content of Lee's message, ask questions, and learn from others as you hear what God is doing in their lives. For this reason, it is important for you to be fully committed to the group and attend each session so you can build trust and rapport with the other members. If you choose to only "go through the motions," or if you refrain from participating, there is a lesser chance you will find what you're looking for during this study.

Second, the goal of your small group is to serve as a place where you can share, learn about God, and build intimacy and friendship with others. For this reason, seek to make your group a "safe place." This means being honest about your thoughts and feelings and listening carefully to everyone else's opinion. Resist the temptation to "fix" someone's problem or correct his or her theology, as that's not the purpose of your small-group time. Also, keep everything your group shares confidential. This will foster a rewarding sense of community in your group and create a place where people can heal, be challenged, and grow spiritually.

In between your group times, you can maximize the impact of the curriculum by completing the personal study activities. This individual study will help you reflect and actively respond to the lesson. You may wish to complete the personal study in one sitting or spread it over a few days (for example, working on it a half hour per day on four different days that week). Note that if you are unable to finish (or even start!) your between-sessions personal study, you should still attend the group study video session. You are still wanted and welcome at the group even if you don't have your "homework" done.

Keep in mind that the videos, discussions, and activities are simply meant to kick-start your imagination, so you will be open to what God wants you to hear through this study. The goal is for you to see the Christmas story in a whole new light and know with

confidence that the Gospel accounts of Jesus' birth are accurate and true. This will hopefully prove to be a journey that will stimulate your mind, warm your heart, and satisfy your soul.

Sound good? Then let's get started.

Note: If you are a group leader, there are additional resources provided in the back of this guide to help you lead your group members through the study.

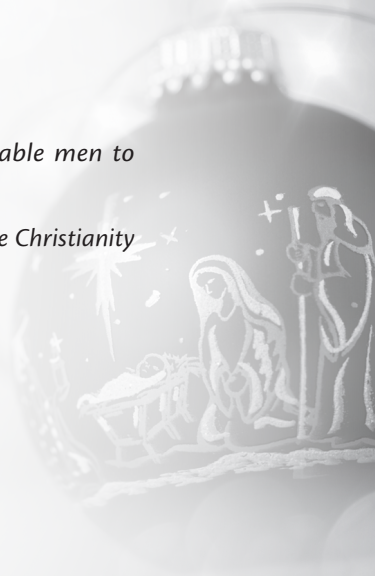
SESSION 1

Setting the Record Straight

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*The Son of God became a man to enable men to
become sons of God.*

—C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*



Introduction

Holidays just bring out the best in us. Whether it's roses and chocolates for Valentine's Day, or baskets of candy for Easter, or flags and fireworks for the Fourth of July, we love the celebratory focus a holiday brings to our lives.

Of course, there's little debate over the best of all holidays. It has to be Christmas. When you close your eyes, you can almost see the forest as you hike to cut down your very own Christmas tree. The scent of fresh pine permeates the air on the way back to the car—and once home, there's the smell of those Christmas cookies in the oven that the kids and grandkids created in the shapes of angels, shepherds, and Christmas trees.

The sounds of Christmas fill the house with the music of the season. You've already lost track of how many times you've heard Bing Crosby sing "White Christmas" or Elvis sing "Blue Christmas" or Mariah Carey sing "All I Want for Christmas Is You." The lights on the newly decorated tree bring a warm glow to the whole house.

As evening falls and the dinner dishes are cleared, it's time for another Christmas tradition—watching those classic Christmas movies. There's a long list of family favorites: *A Christmas Carol*, *Holiday Inn*, *A Christmas Story*, *Miracle on 34th Street*, *Home Alone*, *Elf*, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, and *Christmas Vacation* . . . just to name a few.

And let's not forget what many consider the finest Christmas movie ever made—Frank Capra's *It's A Wonderful Life*. You remember that one, don't you? The movie centers on George Bailey,

who lives with his wife and children in Bedford Falls. The drama begins when George's Uncle Billy is supposed to deposit \$8,000 of George's business receipts into the bank, but Billy loses the money. The town villain, Mr. Potter, finds the cash and realizes it is exactly what he needs to put George out of business. In doing so, he can then take over the town.

George is despondent when he hears about the loss and doesn't know what to do. He believes his life insurance policy could cover the loss, and he concludes that he's worth more to his family dead than alive. As he contemplates suicide, he meets an angel named Clarence, who helps him sort out his issues. Clarence shows George what the world would be like without him in it. George discards the plan for suicide. A happy ending ensues.

There are so many memorable lines in the movie, but one stands out for our purposes. It's a tantalizing theological morsel uttered by the Baileys' little daughter, Zuzu:

Every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings.

You don't have to be a learned theologian to sniff out the theological weakness of Zuzu's statement. The connection between bells and angel wings seems flimsy at best. But did you know there are more traditional statements about Christmas—the first Christmas—that are equally suspect? We will look at a few of those in this opening session.

Before You Watch

Pair up with another group member, ideally someone you don't know that well, and briefly talk about the following questions:

- What's your favorite Christmas movie? How about a favorite character? Is there a favorite memory you can share of a time when you watched this movie with your family or friends?
- What is your family's tradition as it relates to the opening of presents? Does your family open their gifts on Christmas Eve or on Christmas morning?
- Do you have a nativity scene that you display during this time of year? What would that scene look like without the stable or the wise men? (It would make the scene look a bit different and less familiar, wouldn't you agree?)

Video Teaching

Play the video segment for session one. As you watch, use the following outline to record any thoughts or concepts that stand out to you.

Notes

It would have been unthinkable in the first century for anyone to turn away a pregnant Jewish woman seeking shelter. The person who turned her away would be ostracized.

Luke specifically chose the Greek word *katalyma* in the account of Jesus' birth, which is best translated as "guest room." In fact, the *New International Version* translates Luke 2:7 as saying Mary placed Jesus in a manger "because there was no *guest room* available for them."

Luke says the time for Jesus to be born came "*while they were there*" in Bethlehem. Luke doesn't portray this as an emergency situation that arose as they approached the village.

What about the idea that Mary gave birth in a cave? Actually, the Gospels don't mention a cave at all. In fact, the idea of a cave can be traced back to Christian apologist Justin Martyr, who was writing much later—during the middle of the second century.

It's a legitimate question to ask whether we can trust the Gospel accounts. How do we know they are reliable? Can we be sure they are trustworthy when they describe the birth, the teachings, the death, and—ultimately—the resurrection of Jesus? Yes, for two reasons:

First, they were written a lot closer to the events they describe than some critics claim.

Second, archaeology has consistently affirmed the biblical record—to the point where Luke has been described by scholars as a first-rate historian.

We need to take seriously the historical record of the birth of Jesus. Because it's true, Christmas cannot be ignored. In the end, the child in the manger deserves our allegiance and our worship.

3. What are your thoughts about the reliability of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John? Do you view their Gospel accounts as trustworthy, or do you have some questions and/or doubts? (It's okay if you do, because that's one of the reasons why you're meeting together this Christmas season. Share your answers honestly with your group.)

4. What other questions have you had about the reliability of Jesus' birth story as told in the Bible? How did this week's teaching help address these concerns? What other questions do you still have at this point that you want to express to the group?

Closing Prayer

Conclude your group discussion time with a few minutes for prayer. Nothing will bring your group together quicker than knowing you have brothers and sisters who care enough about issues you raise to bring them before the Lord for his answers and his direction.

SESSION 1

Between-Sessions Personal Study

Reflect on the content you've covered this week by engaging in any or all of the following between-sessions personal study. The time you invest will be well spent, so let God use it to draw you closer to him. At your next meeting, share with your group any key points or insights that stood out to you as you spent this time with the Lord.

Study God's Word

To investigate the true story of the first Christmas, it will be worth your time to dig deeper into the original accounts, found in Matthew and Luke. For your study this week, concentrate on Matthew's version. Read the following story of the birth of Jesus:

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the

Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Matthew 1:18–2:12

As you review what the group covered together during the teaching time, what stands out in this passage that you didn't notice previously?

Look back through the text and circle the words you consider to be key. (Limit the number of these key words to twenty.) Write these words in the left-hand column in the table on page 22. In the center column, write down a brief answer to the question, *Why do I consider this word to be key to the text?* Then take those key words and do your best at defining them in the right-hand column. Use a different word than what was recorded in the text.

Put It into Practice

Take some time this week to think about how the material you are covering with your group can make a difference in the way you live your life. In the New Testament book of James, the author implores us to be *doers* of the God's Word and not *hearers* only. The real test of what is important to us is how well we integrate it into our lives.

You can trust the accuracy of the Gospel accounts—thus you can trust the accuracy of the Bible. What difference does that make in the way you live your life?

How does trusting the Bible affect your home life? How does it affect your work life?

How about your friendships? What does it mean in your personal life?

What is the biggest truth you learned this week? Write it down.

What are two more concepts that emerged from your study this week?

How has your time with the group changed the way you view the story of the first Christmas?

How did you think about it before? How do you think about it now?

Make contact with the partner you selected at the meeting either through a text or, better yet, a phone call. Check in to see how he or she is doing:

- Is the person enjoying the study? Why or why not?
- Is there any frustration or confusion that he or she can verbalize?
- How does trusting the Bible make a difference in the way that person is living his or her life?
- Is there anything you can do to be of help to them between now and the next time the entire group gets together?

Talk to your partner about the answers to the previous questions—the big truths you’ve come away with as a result of the study and how the group experience has made an impact on you thus far.

CLOSING REFLECTION

The *Chicago Tribune* newsroom was eerily quiet on the day before Christmas. As I sat at my desk with little to do, my mind kept wandering back to a family I had encountered a month earlier while I was working on a series of articles about Chicago’s neediest people.

The Delgados—sixty-year-old Perfecta and her granddaughters Lydia and Jenny—had been burned out of their roach-infested tenement and were now living in a tiny two-room apartment on the West Side. As I walked in, I couldn’t believe how empty it was. There was no furniture, no rugs,

nothing on the walls—only a small kitchen table and a handful of rice. That’s it. They were virtually devoid of possessions.

In fact, eleven-year-old Lydia and thirteen-year-old Jenny owned only one short-sleeved dress each, plus one thin, gray sweater between them. When they walked the half-mile to school through the biting cold, Lydia would wear the sweater for part of the distance and then hand it to her shivering sister, who would wear it the rest of the way.

But despite their poverty and the painful arthritis that kept Perfecta from working, she still talked confidently about her faith in Jesus. She was convinced he had not abandoned them. I never sensed despair or self-pity in her home; instead, there was a gentle feeling of hope and peace.

I wrote an article about the Delgados and then quickly moved on to more exciting assignments. But as I sat at my desk on Christmas Eve, I continued to wrestle with the irony of the situation: here was a family that had nothing but faith and yet seemed happy, while I had everything I needed materially but lacked faith—and inside I felt as empty and barren as their apartment.

I walked over to the city desk to sign out a car. It was a slow news day with nothing of consequence going on. My boss could call me if something were to happen. In the meantime, I decided to drive over to West Homer Street and see how the Delgados were doing.

When Jenny opened the door, I could not believe my eyes. *Tribune* readers had responded to my article by showering the Delgados with a treasure trove of gifts—roomfuls of furniture, appliances, and rugs; a lavish Christmas tree with piles of presents underneath; carton upon bulging carton of food;

and a dazzling selection of clothing, including dozens of warm winter coats, scarves, and gloves. On top of that, they donated thousands of dollars in cash.

But as surprised as I was by this outpouring, I was even more astonished by what my visit was interrupting; Perfecta and her granddaughters were getting ready to give away much of their newfound wealth. When I asked Perfecta why, she replied in halting English: “Our neighbors are still in need. We cannot have plenty when they have nothing. This is what Jesus would want us to do.”

That blew me away! If I had been in their position at that time in my life, I would have been hoarding everything. I asked Perfecta what she thought about the generosity of the people who had sent all these goodies, and again her response amazed me.

“This is wonderful; this is very good,” she said, gesturing towards the largess. “We did nothing to deserve this—it’s a gift from God. But,” she added, “it is not his greatest gift. No, we celebrate that tomorrow. That is Jesus.”

To her, this child in the manger was the undeserved gift that meant everything—more than material possessions, more than comfort, more than security. And at that moment, something inside of me wanted desperately to know this Jesus—because, in a sense, I saw him in Perfecta and her granddaughters.

I am hoping and praying you are going to see Jesus over the next four weeks. He won’t force himself into your life, but he will definitely make himself available to you. There is no better Christmas gift than the gift of life offered to you by that little baby in the manger.

—Lee Strobel, *from The Case for Christmas*

