

Jesus on the Bench

Discovering the Characters of Christmas

A 4-Week Sermon Preparation Kit

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Week 1: It's All About Mary

1. INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Week 1 of the "Jesus on the Bench" Sermon Prep Kit.

As we begin this Christmas series, we focus on the key participants who had a "front-row seat"—or in our thematic case, a spot on the bench—to the greatest event in human history. This week explores Mary, the mother of Jesus. This comprehensive guide is designed to equip you with deep biblical context, a structured sermon outline, external theological resources, and engaging questions to help your congregation connect deeply with Mary's profound story of surrender, courage, and faith.

2. BIBLICAL HISTORY & CHARACTER DESCRIPTION

Mary's story is woven throughout Scripture, beginning long before her actual birth through prophetic anticipation, and culminating in her presence at the birth of the early Church. By examining these scriptures, we see a young woman of extraordinary faith, marked by obedience and thoughtful reflection.

Old Testament Prophecies

- **The Seed of the Woman (Genesis 3:15):** The first messianic prophecy (the Protoevangelium) speaks of the offspring of the woman who will crush the serpent's head. Mary is the vessel through which this ultimate "seed" enters the world.
- **The Virgin Birth (Isaiah 7:14):** *"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."* This is directly fulfilled in Mary's miraculous conception.
- **The Lineage of David (Jeremiah 23:5, Isaiah 11:1):** Mary, betrothed to Joseph (of the house of David), and likely of Davidic lineage herself (as suggested by genealogies in Luke 3), fulfills the prophecy of the Righteous Branch.

New Testament Narrative

- **The Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38):** Mary, a young virgin betrothed to Joseph in Nazareth, is visited by the angel Gabriel. Despite her initial fear and logical confusion ("How will this be?"), her ultimate response is the pinnacle of human surrender: *"I am the Lord's servant... May your word to me be fulfilled."*
- **The Visitation & Magnificat (Luke 1:39-56):** Mary visits her relative Elizabeth. Upon her arrival, John the Baptist leaps in Elizabeth's womb. Mary responds with the Magnificat, a profound theologically rich song of praise that reflects her deep knowledge of Old Testament scripture.
- **The Birth of Jesus (Luke 2:1-21):** Enduring a grueling journey to Bethlehem while heavily pregnant, Mary gives birth in humble circumstances. When the shepherds arrive with the angelic message, Luke notes a defining characteristic of Mary: she *"treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart"* (Luke 2:19).
- **The Presentation in the Temple (Luke 2:22-38):** Meeting Simeon and Anna, Mary receives a sobering prophecy from Simeon: *"And a sword will pierce your own soul too."* This foreshadows the immense sorrow she will bear as the mother of the suffering Savior.
- **At the Cross (John 19:25-27):** Fulfilling Simeon's prophecy, Mary stands faithfully at the foot of the cross. Jesus, in His dying moments, ensures her care by entrusting her to the Apostle John.

3. SUGGESTED SERMON OUTLINE

Proposed Sermon Title: The Courage to Say "Let It Be"

Primary Text: Luke 1:26-38

I. The Disruption of Grace (Luke 1:26-29)

- **Theme:** God's calling often interrupts our personal plans.

Exegesis: Mary was highly favored, yet deeply troubled. Grace does not always mean an easy life; often, it means a disrupted life. God chose an ordinary, marginalized young woman to carry out the extraordinary.

- **Practical Implication:** We must be willing to let God interrupt our comfortable routines.

II. The Posture of Surrender (Luke 1:30-38)

- **Theme:** Moving from "How can this be?" to "Let it be."

Exegesis: Mary asks a practical question (v.34), not a faithless one (contrast with Zechariah). Once the Holy Spirit's role is explained, she fully submits. She accepts the social stigma, potential loss of her marriage, and extreme danger.

- **Theological Implication:** Human cooperation with divine grace. God uses willing vessels.

III. The Cost of Calling (Luke 2:34-35; John 19:25)

- **Theme:** The privilege of bearing Christ comes with the cross.

Exegesis: Simeon's prophecy of the "pierced soul." To love Jesus and be part of His redemptive work means we will share in His sufferings. Mary watched her son die, remaining faithful to the end.

- **Practical Implication:** Following Jesus is costly, but the resurrection makes it eternally worthwhile.

4. COMPREHENSIVE EXTERNAL STUDY REFERENCES

- **Commentaries:**
 - *The Gospel According to Luke (The Pillar New Testament Commentary)* by James R. Edwards.

- *Luke (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)* by David E. Garland.

- **Theological Works:**

- *Mary, Mother of God* by Carl E. Braaten & Robert W. Jenson.

5. SUGGESTED CALL TO ACTION

Challenge the congregation to identify one area of their life where they have been resisting God's disruption. Ask them to adopt Mary's posture of profound surrender. Invite them to come forward during ministry time, or take a moment of silent prayer in the pews, to explicitly pray Mary's prayer over their finances, their career, their family, or their fears: "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled." Challenge them to leave the "how" to the Holy Spirit and simply offer their "yes."

6. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (Q&A)

Equip yourself for small groups or post-sermon conversations with these common questions about Mary.

Q: How old was Mary when she gave birth to Jesus?

A: While the Bible does not state her exact age, Jewish historical and cultural customs of the first century suggest that betrothals typically occurred shortly after a girl reached childbearing age. Most historians and biblical scholars estimate Mary was likely between 13 and 16 years old. This makes her profound faith and profound theological song (The Magnificat) even more remarkable.

Q: Did Mary have other children after Jesus?

A: From a strictly biblical perspective, yes. Matthew 13:55-56 and Mark 6:3 explicitly mention Jesus' brothers (James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon) and unnamed sisters. The most straightforward reading of the biblical text indicates Mary and Joseph had children together after the birth of Jesus.

Week 2: It's All About Joseph

1. INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Week 2 of the "Jesus on the Bench" Sermon Prep Kit.

This week explores Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus. This comprehensive guide is designed to equip you with deep biblical context, a structured sermon outline, external theological resources, and engaging questions to help your congregation connect deeply with Joseph's profound story of silent obedience, protective strength, and unwavering integrity.

2. BIBLICAL HISTORY & CHARACTER DESCRIPTION

Joseph's story is one of action rather than words. He does not have a single recorded quote in the entire Bible, yet his immediate, unquestioning obedience to God's disruptive commands shaped the early life of the Messiah. Through the scriptures, we see a man of exceptional character and justice.

Old Testament Prophecies

- **The Throne of David (2 Samuel 7:12-16, Jeremiah 23:5):** The Messiah was prophesied to be a descendant of King David who would reign eternally. Although Jesus was miraculously conceived, it was Joseph—a direct descendant of David—who adopted Jesus, legally giving Him the royal lineage and the right to the Davidic throne.

New Testament Narrative

- **The Dilemma of Righteousness (Matthew 1:18-19):** Discovering Mary was pregnant before they came together, Joseph faced a devastating choice. Because he was a "righteous man" and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, he decided to

divorce her quietly. This shows his profound balance of devotion to God's law and compassionate mercy.

- **The Dream and Obedience (Matthew 1:20-25):** An angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream, confirming the child is from the Holy Spirit and instructing him to name the child Jesus. Joseph awakens and immediately obeys.
- **The Journey to Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-7):** Joseph leads his heavily pregnant wife on a grueling 90-mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register for the census, fulfilling the prophecy of Micah 5:2.
- **The Flight to Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15):** Warned in another dream of King Herod's murderous plot, Joseph wakes in the middle of the night and instantly flees to a foreign land with his family. He embodies the role of the diligent, sacrificial protector.

3. SUGGESTED SERMON OUTLINE

Proposed Sermon Title: The Silent Strength of Obedience

Primary Text: Matthew 1:18-25

I. The Crisis of Character (Matthew 1:18-19)

- **Theme:** True righteousness balances justice with profound mercy.

Exegesis: Joseph's world was shattered. Betrothal in ancient Jewish culture was legally binding. Joseph's character shines in the dark: he chose the path of quiet mercy over public vindication, prioritizing Mary's life over his own reputation.

- **Practical Implication:** How we handle betrayal, disappointment, and hurt reveals our true character. Godly people seek to protect others, even when they themselves are in pain.

II. The Clarity of the Call (Matthew 1:20-23)

- **Theme:** Hearing God requires a receptive heart in the midst of turmoil.

Exegesis: While Joseph considered his options, God intervened. The angel addresses him as "Joseph son of David," reminding him of his prophetic destiny. God's call completely rewrote Joseph's life plan.

- **Practical Implication:** God often speaks when we have exhausted our own understanding. We must be open to God redirecting our paths, even when His instructions defy human logic.

III. The Courage to Comply (Matthew 1:24-25)

- **Theme:** Radical obedience requires immediate action, not just agreement.

Exegesis: Joseph didn't negotiate, ask for a sign, or wait for public opinion to shift. He simply woke up and did exactly what the Lord commanded. He took Mary as his wife and kept her a virgin until Jesus was born.

- **Practical Implication:** Delayed obedience is often disobedience. When God gives a clear directive, the only faithful response is immediate compliance.

4. COMPREHENSIVE EXTERNAL STUDY REFERENCES

- **Commentaries:**

- *The Gospel According to Matthew (The Pillar New Testament Commentary)* by Leon Morris.
- *Matthew (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)* by Grant R. Osborne.

- **Historical Context:**

- *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times* by Ralph Gower - Provides critical background on the absolute binding nature of Jewish betrothal.

5. SUGGESTED CALL TO ACTION

Challenge the congregation to examine their own response to God's disruptive commands. Ask them to consider Joseph's silent, immediate obedience. Invite them to a time of reflection or altar ministry to lay down their need to perfectly understand or control their circumstances. Challenge them to commit to being protectors of the vulnerable, extenders of mercy, and people whose faith is defined by what they do, not just what they say.

6. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (Q&A)

Q: Did Joseph ever say anything in the Bible?

A: No. There is not a single recorded word spoken by Joseph in all of Scripture. His entire legacy is built on his actions. Every time God spoke to him, Joseph woke up and immediately obeyed.

Q: Why does Joseph disappear from the biblical narrative after Jesus is twelve?

A: The Scriptures do not explicitly state what happened to Joseph. However, the overwhelming consensus among biblical scholars is that Joseph passed away before Jesus began His ministry. This would have left Jesus as the "man of the house," explaining why Jesus, on the cross, entrusted the care of His mother to the Apostle John.

Week 3: It's All About the Shepherds

1. INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Week 3 of the "Jesus on the Bench" Sermon Prep Kit.

This week, we move to the hillside outside of Bethlehem to focus on the Shepherds. In the ancient social hierarchy, these men were often marginalized, yet they were the very first to receive the announcement of the Messiah's birth. This guide provides the historical context and homiletical structure to help your congregation understand the profound grace extended to the outcasts and the joy of becoming the first evangelists of the newborn King.

2. BIBLICAL HISTORY & CHARACTER DESCRIPTION

The shepherds of first-century Judea were generally poor, uneducated, and often considered ceremonially unclean due to the nature of their work and their inability to strictly observe the Torah. Yet, God bypassed the religious elite of Jerusalem to deliver the greatest news in history to these rugged workers.

Old Testament Context

- **The Shepherd Motif:** Throughout the Old Testament, God identifies Himself as the Shepherd of Israel (Psalm 23, Ezekiel 34). Great leaders like Abraham, Moses, and David were all shepherds before they were called to lead nations. By announcing Jesus to shepherds, God brings the story full circle.
- **Migdal Eder (The Tower of the Flock):** Prophesied in Micah 4:8, Jewish tradition held that the Messiah would be revealed at Migdal Eder, a place near Bethlehem where special flocks destined for temple sacrifice were kept. These shepherds may have been watching over the very lambs used for Passover.

New Testament Narrative

- **The Angelic Announcement (Luke 2:8-14):** The shepherds were keeping watch at night. Suddenly, the glory of the Lord shines around them, causing great fear. The angel tells them not to be afraid, announcing the birth of a Savior, Christ the Lord.
- **The Investigation (Luke 2:15-16):** Upon hearing the heavenly host, the shepherds do not doubt or hesitate. They say, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened." They hurry off and find Mary, Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger, exactly as told.
- **The First Evangelists (Luke 2:17-20):** Once they have seen the Christ child, they cannot keep the news to themselves. They spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child. They return to their fields, glorifying and praising God.

3. SUGGESTED SERMON OUTLINE

Proposed Sermon Title: The Invitation to the Outcast

Primary Text: Luke 2:8-20

I. The Interruption of the Ordinary (Luke 2:8-9)

- **Theme:** God's glory often breaks into the mundane routines of life.

Exegesis: The shepherds were just doing their job on a dark, ordinary night. They weren't seeking a spiritual experience, but God sought them. The "glory of the Lord" shone around men who were considered the lowest of society, proving that God's grace is not reserved for the elite.

- **Practical Implication:** God wants to meet us in the middle of our daily grind. We don't have to clean ourselves up to be found by His grace.

II. The Investigation of Faith (Luke 2:15-16)

- **Theme:** Hearing the word must lead to seeking the Word.

Exegesis: The shepherds didn't debate the theological merits of the angel's message; they acted. "Let's go see" is the pure, simple response of faith. They hurried to find Jesus.

- **Practical Implication:** We are invited to encounter Jesus personally. Faith requires movement; we must investigate the claims of Christ for ourselves.

III. The Proclamation of Joy (Luke 2:17-20)

- **Theme:** A genuine encounter with Jesus turns ordinary people into passionate witnesses.

Exegesis: The shepherds were the first evangelists. They didn't have theology degrees, they simply shared what they had experienced. They then returned to their sheep—their circumstances didn't change, but their perspective was transformed by praise.

- **Practical Implication:** Evangelism isn't complicated; it's just telling others what Jesus has done for you. True worship changes how we go back to our everyday jobs.

4. COMPREHENSIVE EXTERNAL STUDY REFERENCES

- **Commentaries:**

- *Luke (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)* by Darrell L. Bock.

- **Historical Context:**

- *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* by Alfred Edersheim - Detailed insight into the societal status of shepherds and the significance of Migdal Eder.

5. SUGGESTED CALL TO ACTION

Remind the congregation that no one is too far, too broken, or too ordinary to receive the good news of Jesus. Challenge them to embrace the simple faith of the shepherds: to come and see Jesus, and then to go and tell others. Invite them to

write down the name of one person they can share the joy of Christ with this week, turning their everyday workplace into a field of praise.

6. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (Q&A)

Q: Why were shepherds considered outcasts or unclean?

A: Because their work kept them out in the fields away from the temple and synagogue, they could not easily maintain ceremonial washings or observe all the Rabbinic traditions. Their testimony was often not even allowed in a court of law. Yet, God made them the first witnesses to His Son.

Q: Were they raising the Passover lambs?

A: Many scholars believe so. The proximity of these fields to Bethlehem and Jerusalem suggests these flocks were destined for temple sacrifices. There is a profound theological poetry in the shepherds who guarded the sacrificial lambs being the first to greet the ultimate Lamb of God.

Week 4: It's All About the Wisemen

1. INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Week 4 of the "Jesus on the Bench" Sermon Prep Kit.

We conclude our series with the Wisemen (the Magi). Unlike the shepherds who were local, Jewish, and poor, the Magi were foreign, Gentile, and wealthy. Their inclusion in the Christmas narrative proves that the gospel is a global invitation. This guide will help your congregation explore the relentless pursuit of truth, the contrast of kingships, and the nature of extravagant worship.

2. BIBLICAL HISTORY & CHARACTER DESCRIPTION

The Magi were a caste of wise men specializing in astronomy, astrology, and natural science, likely from the Parthian Empire (modern-day Iran/Iraq). They represent the intellectual and wealthy elites of the Gentile world bowing to the Jewish Messiah.

Old Testament Prophecies

- **Balaam's Oracle (Numbers 24:17):** *"A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel."* As Eastern scholars, the Magi were likely familiar with the Hebrew scriptures left behind in Babylon by exiles like Daniel, prompting them to connect the celestial anomaly with the birth of a Jewish King.
- **The Gathering of Nations (Isaiah 60:3, 6):** *"Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn... bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord."*

New Testament Narrative

- **The Arrival in Jerusalem (Matthew 2:1-3):** The Magi arrive looking for the one born "king of the Jews." Their arrival disturbs King Herod and all of Jerusalem. Herod represents worldly, threatened power, violently opposed to the true King.
- **The Discovery in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:9-11):** The star guides them to the exact house where Jesus is. Upon seeing the child with Mary, they fall down and worship Him, offering immensely valuable gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.
- **The Warning and Departure (Matthew 2:12):** Warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they return to their country by another route, signifying how encountering Christ always changes our direction.

3. SUGGESTED SERMON OUTLINE

Proposed Sermon Title: The Journey of True Worship

Primary Text: Matthew 2:1-12

I. The Pursuit of Truth (Matthew 2:1-2)

- **Theme:** Genuine seekers will go to great lengths to find Jesus.

Exegesis: The Magi traveled hundreds of miles over dangerous terrain, driven by a desire to find the truth. In contrast, the religious leaders in Jerusalem knew the prophecies (Micah 5:2) but wouldn't travel five miles to Bethlehem to see the Messiah.

- **Practical Implication:** Are we relentlessly seeking Jesus, or have we become complacent with our religious knowledge?

II. The Contrast of Kings (Matthew 2:3-8)

- **Theme:** We must choose who will sit on the throne of our lives.

Exegesis: Herod was disturbed because a new king meant a threat to his autonomy and power. We all have a little bit of "Herod" in us—we want to rule our own lives and resist surrendering control to Jesus.

- **Practical Implication:** You cannot truly worship Jesus if you are secretly trying to rule yourself.

III. The Offering of Surrender (Matthew 2:9-11)

- **Theme:** True worship involves yielding our greatest treasures.

Exegesis: The Magi bowed down—an act of total submission from powerful men. They offered gold (for a king), frankincense (for a priest), and myrrh (used for embalming, pointing to His sacrificial death).

- **Practical Implication:** Worship is more than singing; it is laying our time, talents, and treasures at the feet of Jesus.

4. COMPREHENSIVE EXTERNAL STUDY REFERENCES

- **Commentaries:**

- *The Gospel According to Matthew (The Pillar New Testament Commentary)* by Leon Morris.

- **Theological Works:**

- *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels (IVP)* - See the article on "Magi" for historical context on their origins and practices.

5. SUGGESTED CALL TO ACTION

Challenge the congregation to evaluate their worship. Are they offering Jesus their leftovers, or their "gold, frankincense, and myrrh"? Invite them to make a tangible commitment—whether financial, time-based, or relational—laying their

best at the feet of the King. Encourage those who are seeking truth to step out in faith and bow to Christ today.

6. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (Q&A)

Q: Were there exactly three Wisemen?

A: The Bible does not state how many Magi there were. Tradition assumes three because of the three specific gifts mentioned (gold, frankincense, and myrrh), but they likely traveled in a much larger caravan for safety across the desert.

Q: Were they kings?

A: No, they were not kings in the political sense. The carol "We Three Kings" popularized this idea, rooted in interpretations of Psalm 72 and Isaiah 60. Historically, they were scholars, priests, and advisors to royalty in the East.

Q: Did they arrive on the night Jesus was born?

A: No. Matthew specifies that they came to a "house" and found the "child" (paidion in Greek, meaning young child or toddler). Based on Herod's order to kill boys two years old and under, Jesus may have been anywhere from a few months to two years old when the Magi finally arrived.