

# God's Plan

# Session 1: Unfolding the Master Plan

## **We need a plan.**

In business, we sometimes quote from Scripture, *Without a vision, the people perish* (Proverbs 29:18), as if only vision and plan were needed for success. Our American culture believes success depends on planning our work and working our plan. Supposedly, we need to be in control, always with a clear vision of what we'll do, how we'll do it, and how we'll handle obstacles.

## **Some plans aren't good enough.**

Each year, millions of businesses and individuals go bankrupt, which wasn't according to anyone's plan. People ask, "What went wrong?" and the obvious conclusion is, "My plan wasn't good enough. With a better plan, success would have been guaranteed."

Because common sense tells us that every failed plan wasn't good enough, the better question is, "How can we *know* when we have a good plan?"

While people are working their best strategies, they keep searching for solutions, desperately hoping for success. Some believe in their plans so much, they invest their life savings. They're fully committed, yet their plans can still fail. What did they learn from their failures? Perhaps no more than the obvious: *The plan wasn't good enough.*

## **Our best plans can be disappointing.**

We can be like dogs chasing cars, believing the chase is taking us where we want to go. But if the dog catches the car, the satisfaction isn't what he expected. As long as we are in the chase, we can hold great visions of success, but in the end, when we catch what we're after, we're often disappointed.

For example, we might think winning millions of dollars in the lottery would fix all our problems. Is that true? Those who already have millions will tell you that having lots of money didn't bring the satisfaction they anticipated. After signing multi-million-dollar contracts, some athletes aren't satisfied with their lives. Evidently, they're still searching for the perfect plan.

## **Some plans are destined for failure.**

The psalmist wisely wrote, *Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build it* (Psalm 127:1)—a metaphor that seems to say that we can do as we please, but our effort has no value if it's not part of God's plan.

Maybe the “best way to fail” is to pursue a goal other than what God wants. Or could our perceived failures actually be part of the divine plan, steering us more perfectly toward God's way?

## **Does God's plan come with any guarantees?**

The apostle Paul encouraged the Christians in Rome by saying, *All things work for good for those who love God and are working to fulfill his purpose* (Romans 8:28). These words were important to those who were in the midst of persecution, struggling to see how God's plan was working.

As long as we're willing, God has the knowledge and power to make good on his guarantee. *The Lord says, "I have fully drawn up the plans I have for your lives. The details are laid out to complete something very good, not to harm you at all, but to give you hope for what comes in the end"* (Jeremiah 29:11).

People naturally want to map their journey from beginning to end, but is that God's plan? Maybe he wants us to follow him one step at a time. *Men want to map their entire journey, but God shows them only the next step* (Proverbs 16:9).

## **How perfect is God's plan?**

Our God, the Creator, cannot be fooled by one of his creations. The devil is merely one of God's created spiritual beings, acting with limited power, able to do only what God allows him to do. Human beings, with all their intellect and careful planning, cannot produce a circumstance in which God might say, "Oops! I didn't see that coming."

How can we compare our limited perception and short-sighted plans to what God has in mind? Our insights are like the light of a candle, unable to compete with his wisdom, which is greater than the brilliance of the sun. *The Lord says, "I don't think the way you think, and my methods are different from yours. As the stars are so distant from Earth, so are my thoughts and methods far above yours"* (Isaiah 55:8–9).

We can only consider *possibilities* and try to figure out what might work. Before God implements his plans, he has perfect vision of the results, so he knows what will work. He says, *"From the beginning, I told you what the end would be. What hasn't happened yet will surely happen, and I will accomplish my purpose"* (Isaiah 46:10).

Joseph offered a great perspective on the problems in our lives when he told his brothers, *"You meant it for evil, but*

*God meant it for good*” (Genesis 50:20).

Satan is the thief of our faith, wanting to kill and destroy (John 10:10). He’s the “roaring lion,” seeking whoever he can devour (1 Peter 5:8). He has a message that appeals to multitudes, because it says people can be successful with their own self-serving plans.

Giving up our goals for something worse would be foolish. But it would be wise to give up our self-centered visions and pursue God’s Master Plan, because in doing so, we guarantee our success.

Jesus said, *“If you try to save your life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you lose your life for my sake and for spreading the good news, you will find it* (Luke 9:24).

## **Four stories reveal some of God’s plan and how people were learning to follow him.**

“The Beginning” shows God’s method and purpose in creating people with their vulnerabilities, able to either choose to follow his voice or go their own way.

“Unanswered Prayer” gives the priest Zechariah’s experience when the angel Gabriel appears to him in the Temple.

“Quiet time” describes Zechariah’s frustration when he tries to communicate with his wife, Elizabeth, without the ability to speak. From the reference to hand gestures in Luke 1:62, we also know he lacked the ability to hear.

“Anticipation” reveals what may have been going on in Elizabeth’s mind while she struggled to verify whether everything about Zechariah’s story was true.

Now let’s unlock our imaginations and explore possibilities that will bring the biblical stories to life.

## Story 1: The Beginning

*In a formless void, God wants relationships with beings like himself. By giving people power to choose right or wrong, will they love him and depend on him, or will they want to go their own way?*

Before time or light or physical substance existed, God was. He had always been and always would be, an eternal and unchanging Spirit, knowing and seeing all things—past, present, and future. He called himself “I AM,” because no amount of names by themselves could adequately define the magnitude of his power, wisdom, and love.

Much of his greatness was known in the spiritual realm, but he had something more in mind—a physical realm in time and space. He wanted human beings to love him as much as he would love them, which would have to be a free-will choice.

He would give people power to choose independence from him. At the same time, he would give them a need to depend on him, but that need could not be so obvious and compelling that they could never consider going their own way.

For the choice to be real, a deceptive reason to disobey must exist. If the people were always obedient, then all the evidence would say they had been created without free will—that their choice for him must have been coerced. They would have to disobey. But if they chose to disobey, what force could turn their hearts and bring them back to him? He needed to make a second choice available, this

time a choice for life instead of death.

Time began when God exploded the universe into existence from a single point, which took billions of years from the human perspective, in the earth's measurement of days. But from his perspective—in the expansion of time to create all matter out of nothing but his energy—galaxies, solar systems, and planets were formed in only a few days.

At first, Earth was a barren waste, but God moved upon the surface, and his Spirit brought life through his Word. When he said, "Let there be light," the brightness burst forth, and the darkness couldn't constrain it. Each time he said, "Let there be..." the power of his presence worked through his Word to make it so.

Nothing existed that his Word didn't make. Life itself came from the Word, and his breath of life brought awareness and instinct to his creatures.

Then God said, "Let's make man in our image." This required more than simply creating living flesh from the dust. He gave people free will—the ability to say yes or no, to believe or disbelieve, to obey or disobey. Would they recognize his value and love him enough to sacrifice their right to be independent, or would they go their own self-serving ways?

In his infinite foreknowledge, he saw what Adam and Eve would do. For his plan to work, he would have to take upon himself the punishment for their sins. Then a second life-changing free-will choice would allow people to follow either the narrow path of righteousness or the broad road to destruction.

Had there been a better way, he would have chosen it.

In the midst of the garden where Adam and Eve were, he planted the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Of all the other trees, you may eat," he said, "but stay away

from this one. The fruit is poisonous. The day you eat of it, you will surely die.”

He could have built a fence to keep them out, but that would take away their choice.

He still had a problem. With all the other trees filled with good fruit, no good reason existed for them to disobey. For their choice to be real, he needed some kind of enticement, someone who would argue the benefit of disobedience. This was not something he could do himself, for it was not in his nature to tempt anyone to do evil.

Satan had already deceived a third of the heavenly host, so he was the perfect candidate to present his message on Earth. Could God allow Satan to encourage Eve to do what she had been told not to do? Yes, but only if God made a choice available for something better in the end, including forgiveness, healing, and eternal life.

Satan, the father of lies and the master of deception, knew how to twist the truth and make evil look good. He also knew how to pick the most vulnerable target. Not Adam and Eve together, because they would support each other with the truth. No, his best chance would be to slip in like a snake when Eve was alone.

When the opportunity came, Satan questioned God’s motives and showed Eve how good the fruit was.

God knew Eve faced a dilemma, but he dared not interfere. Doing so would have voided his gift of free will. She would have to make her own decision, apart from God and without Adam’s advice. What would she do?

The safe choice was to obey God, refusing the fruit. She considered what would be lost if she refused to listen to Satan. She would never know what the fruit tasted like. She would be stuck forever, being the secondary person she had always been. Where was the opportunity to grow, to



become someone great?

On the other hand, if she was willing to take the risk and ignore what God had said, she could have what she longed for.

Independence. Self-reliance.

To be individually successful, being like God, knowing good and evil.

Could she trust the serpent's word that she wouldn't really die? Yes, she believed so. But would Adam approve? It didn't matter. The fruit looked delicious.

With the first bite, she noticed a small change in how she felt—disobedient and alone, no longer in agreement with Adam or with God. She felt embarrassment, as if her former glory had somehow departed. Was this the knowing of evil as well as good? On the other hand, she felt stronger, more independent, with greater self-confidence. Evidently, the serpent had spoken the truth. She wasn't dead, was she? So she ate the rest of the fruit.

When Adam arrived, she felt like she was seeing a different man. She forced a smile as if nothing had changed and picked another fruit. "You should try this," she said. "It's very good."

Adam recognized the tree and knew what Eve had done. She was part of him, bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh, but the spiritual intimacy wasn't the same. What could he do?

She couldn't walk with him, but he could walk with her, couldn't he? Yes, if he ate the fruit, he would die, just as God had said. He was sure of that. But what value was life without his beloved Eve? Without her, he was as good as dead anyway.

His hope was for God to have a plan that would bring them both back to him. Why else would he allow them to disobey? Somehow God would have to intervene and give

them a second choice for life. While this seemed impossible, he knew God well enough to know he could do such a miracle. So he accepted the fruit from Eve's hand.

Afterward, God looked for them in the garden. "Adam," he said, as if he didn't already know where they were. He waited for them to come out of hiding.

"We were naked," Adam said, "so we hid." Their fig-leaf garments were not enough to cover their guilt and shame.

They needed better clothes.

God slew a lamb and made garments to cover their nakedness, but that would not be enough to cover their emotional and spiritual needs.

One day, he would send a different lamb, his Son, Jesus, who would choose to die so they could have eternal life. He would bear their punishment so they could be free from condemnation and live with him.

But there was a problem. People might love their independence and seek greatness on their own. Without a reason, they might never repent. They needed to experience life without him, enjoying the pleasures of sin for a season. After doing what seemed right in their own eyes, they might feel the consequence for their self-serving, unloving actions and turn back to him.

To make them aware of their wrongdoing, they needed rules—commandments set in stone. But the Law would not be enough to bring true repentance and cause them to do right. No, Jesus would have to enter their lives. Then they could experience a change of heart and understand the greater blessing of giving above receiving.

God then gave prophets, priests, and kings to lead his people under the Law. Many followed no more than the religious form, making sacrifices but still doing what they wanted. God didn't care about their animal sacrifices. He

wanted his people to experience a change of heart.

Through the lips of his prophet Isaiah, God said, *People who walk in darkness will see a bright light. Upon those who live under dark shadows of death, the light will shine.* One day, a true savior would come, a prophet greater than any other, one who would save the world from sin. But after so many generations of hope in false messiahs, few Jews believed they would see God's promise fulfilled in their lifetime.

Before the ministry of his Son could begin, God needed a prophet to speak in the spirit and power of Elijah—stirring the hearts of the people, challenging them to repent, bringing fresh expectation of the Messiah's arrival.

Then Jesus, the perfect expression of God, would be born in human flesh. He would be so completely filled with God's Spirit that seeing him would be the same as seeing God himself in action.

Although he had made the world, most people in the world wouldn't recognize Jesus for who he was. Some would love their self-serving ways so much, they would call their darkness "light" and their light "darkness." They would say Jesus' words were deceptive and his work was evil, claiming that his actions were under the authority of Beelzebub, prince of demons.

However, some would see the light and recognize the darkness in themselves. By being born again, not physically out of human desire but spiritually by the new choice God made available to everyone, those who believed and accepted Jesus could become a part of God's family.

Exactly when, where, and how this would happen—only God knew. The people waited, doubting whether that day would ever come.

But God was ready to reveal himself and show the way to eternal life.

*...and sa, a man of the priest the ordi-  
... Elijah named Zechariah and his wife  
Elizabeth, a woman of the priest the ordi-  
... brought in the child, and called his name John.*

# **My Thoughts About the Story**

*...a leader, a man of the priestly order  
...Elijah named Zechariah and his wife  
...Elizabeth, and they were, all  
...right: they were in the*

## **Related Experiences From My Own Life**

## Story 2: Unanswered Prayer

*The aging priest Zechariah has given up hope for a son, but how can he retire in peace when he and his wife must bear the curse of being childless?*

In the chill of the early morning darkness, Zechariah climbed the stairs toward the Temple gate. A rooster crowed in the distance. Nothing had changed—except Zechariah was a half-year older, and the pain in his knees made the ascent more difficult. As always, he would join the other priests and swing open the massive gate to welcome the people.

He could soon retire in peace and leave the priesthood to younger, able-bodied men. This was his last year, and his responsibility would be passed on to his son—except he didn't have a son.

When he entered the court of God's house, he didn't fall to his knees and whisper his usual, fervent prayer. He headed toward the gathering of priests near the columns on the far side.

His worn-out prayers were faint echoes in his mind. *Lord, lift the curse upon our home. Let this be the year Elizabeth will bear our child.* He had prayed those words beyond their usefulness. His wife was old enough to be a grandmother. Circumstances had delivered God's answer. They would die childless.

Each day, from the Temple's Holy Place, the sweet smell of burning incense rose toward Heaven, bearing the

prayers of Israel. Some people came in desperation, seeking help, believing God was listening. Many were thankful for what they had received. But sometimes, a man's curse makes it difficult to count his blessings.

What had he done wrong? His prayers had fallen upon deaf ears. He had followed Torah, offering sacrifices, giving tithes, doing all that God commanded. Either God wasn't listening or God didn't care.

"Shalom." He embraced the priest nearest him.

When the lots were offered to determine the day's assignments and he saw what he had drawn, his legs went weak, and he stiffened to steady himself, afraid he might faint. He swallowed hard, holding his mouth firm until his burst of joy faded to his earlier feeling of despair.

Only once in a lifetime was a priest allowed the honor of entering the Holy Place to offer incense. How was it that he should be chosen during his last days? After more than thirty years, he had assumed he would be among those who never drew the opportunity. He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled, finding it hard to believe the lot had fallen upon him, yet the blessing was a poor substitute for the curse of being childless.

Three long blasts from the silver trumpets awakened the city to the gray of dawn. Purple streaks of thin clouds were acquiring just a hint of pink. When Zechariah stood with the other priests as they pushed open the heavy gates, his mind went to the preparations needed for offering incense.

The Temple was ready to be filled with people. Before the altar, he would stir the glowing coals into flame.

As soon as the crowd had gathered to pray, he entered the Holy Place and stood before the golden Altar of Incense. Another deep breath. This was a special moment, unlike anything he could have imagined.

The red coals overcame the chill in the air. The veil of the Holy of Holies hung before him. His hand trembled as he held the golden censer, which gleamed from the light of the seven-branched lamp on his left.

A movement drew his glance to the right. He stared for a moment, but nothing was there. Only a shadow cast from the Table of Showbread.

Focused upon the altar, he strained to hear the precise moment when the people, bowed to the floor, made an end of their prayers.

Silence.

It was time. People were waiting to see the smoke rise, a symbol of their prayers ascending to God's throne.

The incense crackled as it hit the coals. Caught by the flame, a cloudy stream of fragrance pushed high into the sky. As soon as the cloud became visible, people would feel God's presence and know he had heard their cries.

Zechariah bowed in worship, trying to absorb the magnificence of the moment. Before his knee touched the floor, he fell back.

A column of brilliant light filled the air in front of the showbread, like a doorway to Heaven had been thrown open. Out of the brightness stepped a man.

The stranger's countenance was like lightning, his garment white as snow. "Don't be afraid, Zechariah," he said. "Your prayer has been heard. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give birth to a son. You must name him John. He will bring you great joy, and many will rejoice at his birth. God will recognize him as a great man."

His tone was gentle but had the power of a trumpet. "He must never drink wine or other fermented beverages. Even before birth, he will be filled with the Spirit. He will turn many Israelites back to the Lord their God. In the spirit and



power of Elijah, he will soften the hearts of fathers toward their children and cause the rebellious to accept godly wisdom. He will prepare the people for the Lord's coming."

"How can this be?" Zechariah pushed himself to his feet. "This is impossible. My wife and I are too old, far past the days for having children."

"I am Gabriel, sent from God to bring you this good news." His look went from joyous to judgmental. "Because you have not believed me, you will be unable to speak a word until the day of your son's birth. All I have said will be fulfilled in due time."

The angel's words echoed in Zechariah's mind like thunder across the valley. He bowed, not knowing what to say. When he looked up, the angel was gone.

The Holy Place seemed intensely quiet. Shaken and confused, Zechariah tried to regain his composure. How much time had passed? The people must be waiting for him to give the benediction.

As he rushed to his place at the top of the porch steps, everyone was staring at him. He moved his mouth, but no words came out. Frantically, he made signs with his hands. He pointed toward Heaven, touched his mouth, and then covered it with his hand.

Confusion showed on people's faces. Obviously, they didn't understand what he was trying to say.

One priest stepped up and whispered in his ear, but Zechariah couldn't hear a sound.

Another priest grabbed his arm and pulled him away and through the crowd. His lips seemed to be asking if he was sick. What were the words after that? The priest's expression made the meaning clear.

Unable to speak, he was now among God's cursed and must leave.

*...and sa, a man of the priest the ordi-  
... Elijah named Zechariah and his wife  
Elizabeth, a woman of the priest the ordi-  
... brought in the child, and called his name John*

# **My Thoughts About the Story**

*...a leader, ... man of the priestly order  
... Elijah named Zechariah and his wife  
... Elizabeth, ... man, ...  
... night ...*

## **Related Experiences From My Own Life**

## The Next Step

### **Build on a biblical foundation.**

Because the truth hurts at times, stories often slant their perspectives away from what actually happened, making heroes look miraculously heroic and portraying villains as intensely evil. If biblical authors had done that, Peter's stories would never have him failing in his walk on the water or denying the Lord.

We can trust Scripture to be true, because the eyewitnesses saw a need to accurately report the events, revealing the truth about the vulnerability of human nature and our desperate need for God.

Jesus said, *"Everyone who not only hears my words but also puts them into practice is like a wise man who dug deep and laid the foundation of his house on solid rock"* (Matthew 7:24).

The words of Jesus are very important to us, because our lives depend on our hearing, understanding, and doing.

*"I am the way, the truth, and the life,"* Jesus said. *"Everyone who reaches the Father goes through me"* (John 14:6).

### **Consider the unwritten stories.**

*If all that Jesus did were told, the whole world could not contain all the books that should be written* (John 21:25).

Considering the billions of lives Jesus has touched in the last two thousand years, we are sure to have hundreds of billions of stories that should be written, so many that we might wonder if we have enough data capacity to store all the text in e-book form.

In just one event, like the times Jesus fed a multitude with a few loaves and fish, thousands of people could have been changed by what they saw and heard. We have no way to know what those stories were, because the Bible doesn't record them. Even so, to get a clear understanding of what actually happened, we need to consider the possibilities.

### **Imagine the impact upon the eyewitnesses.**

The impact of the life-of-Christ story isn't about Jesus, because he is the one person who remained constant, never changing. From the beginning, he remained without sin, never wavering from his commitment to the Father and his purpose on Earth.

The impact is found when we look at the events through the eyes of eyewitnesses and see how their lives were changed.

### **Put yourself in the place of an eyewitness.**

When Jesus asked Peter to pick up the drying nets and try fishing from the other side of the boat (Luke 5:1–11), who was affected by the miraculous catch? James and John left their nets to follow Jesus. If they were with us today, they would each have a unique story to tell us.

Who else was there? Perhaps several people who had heard Jesus' message and weren't ready to leave. Pharisees, tax collectors, or fishermen might have been watching.

What new insight came to Peter, which caused him to fall at Jesus' feet, saying, "I am a sinful man"?

As we imagine people's lives changing because of what Jesus did, we bring greater realism to the event, creating mental images that can make us feel like we were part of that crowd.

## **Follow the emotional journey.**

When lives are changed, we have people leaving their stories in a much different condition from where they were at the beginning. What was their background? How great were their struggles and afflictions? Where had they come from, and where were they going before they met Jesus? If we consider each character's emotional roller-coaster, the stories will mean more to us.

The Bible gives a brief summary—only a few important details—without saying much about tears filling people's eyes or people so much in awe that they could hardly breathe. Imagine what people must have done when they returned to their homes after they had been healed.

Resentment and anger must have run deep in the hearts of those who sought to kill Jesus, but the Bible didn't have space to include the emotional details. If we can imagine what those details might be, the stories can become as real for us as they were for the eyewitnesses who were there.

## **What if we ask what-if questions?**

Sadly, adults often lose the childlike quality of constantly asking what-if questions. Perhaps this is why Jesus said, *"I tell you for sure, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven"* (Matthew 18:3).

Like children, we need a prevailing desire to know and understand the truth, never allowing ourselves to be embarrassed by questions that might reveal our ignorance.

## **Are our life-changing stories important?**

All Christians have had struggles that led to an insight that changed their lives. When your audience follows your

emotional journey from fear to faith, from tragedy to triumph, they have the opportunity to share your experiences and insights. This can bring a change in their lives, much like yours, but at less cost.

Scripture describes the powerful arrival of the Kingdom of God and the casting down of Satan by people who overcame by *the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony* (Revelation 12:11).

## **Practice telling your stories.**

According to some surveys, if we lead only one person to the Lord in our lifetime, we are above average. There must be a good reason why most Christians do so little to help others know Christ. What is it? Maybe we have the wrong idea about what we need to do.

Some people may have a special calling to knock on people's doors and ask, "Do you know Jesus?" But most of us, if we tried that, would get the door slammed in our face. We'll not make friends by telling people what they should do. We'll make enemies by telling people they are wrong. But a well-told story is something that can interest everyone.

We don't need a seminary degree to learn enough to tell about what Jesus has done for us. As an "eyewitness" of what God has done in our lives, we are fully qualified to tell our stories—how Christ has made a difference in our lives, just as he did in the first century.

Society today is not inclined to respect the Bible as a source of absolute truth. But if you tell your personal stories that *show* the truth, your audience will share your experience, making the truth obvious. Then they'll be inclined to believe the scriptures that support their new faith.

## Biblical Scenes

### Session 1: Eyewitnesses begin their amazing testimony.

*Genesis 1:1–3; Isaiah 9:2; Malachi 3:1; Mark 1:1; Luke 1:1–4; John 1:1–18; 2 Peter 1:16; 1 John 1:1; Revelation 13:8*

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was a formless void covered by darkness when the Spirit of God began to move over the surface.

The Word already existed. He was with God, and he was God, in the beginning. Everything was created by him.

Nothing existed that he did not make. Life itself came from him, and this life gave light to everyone. When God said, “Let there be light,” the light shone in the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome it.

The prophet Isaiah wrote: People who walk in darkness will see a bright light. Upon those who live under dark shadows of death, the light will shine.

Here begins the wonderful news about Jesus the Messiah, the Lamb who has been slain since the founding of the world. God sent John the Baptizer to spread the news about the light so people might believe. John was not the light, but he came to testify that the true light would come into the world to shine on everyone. He pointed out Jesus, then shouted to the crowds, “This is the one I was talking about when I said, ‘Someone is coming who is far greater than I am, because he existed long before I did.’”

No one has ever seen God. However, his son, Jesus,



who came from him, has revealed him to us. Although the Word made the world, people in the world did not recognize him when he came.

The Word became human and lived among his own people. Despite his unending love and faithfulness, most people did not accept him. But he gave those who believed and accepted him the right to become God's children.

Moses gave us the Law, but Jesus Christ gave us grace and truth. By being born again, not physically out of human desire but spiritually by the will of God, all believers can benefit from his rich grace by which he has blessed us repeatedly.

The eyewitnesses have seen the majestic splendor of Jesus Christ, the Word of Life, with their own eyes, touched him with their own hands, and heard him with their own ears. He is the Father's only son, who existed from the beginning.

Many people have written about what God has done in fulfillment of his promises. These are not clever, fictional stories from our imagination. People have carefully investigated all these accounts, so you may be certain that this record is accurate.

## **Session 1: The ancestry of Jesus is recorded.**

*Matthew 1:1–17; Luke 3:23b–38*

Matthew reports the ancestors of Jesus starting with Abraham, his son Isaac, and Isaac's son Jacob. After that, there were Judah and his son Perez (whose mother was Tamar). Perez's descendents were Hezron, Ram, Amminadab, Nahshon, Salmon, and Boaz (whose mother was Rahab). Boaz's descendants were Obed (whose mother was Ruth), Jesse, David, and Solomon (whose mother was Bath-

sheba, the widow of Uriah). Solomon's descendents were Rehoboam, Abijah, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Jehoram, Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Manasseh, Amos, Josiah, and Jehoiachin, who was born when the Jews were exiled to Babylon. Jehoiachin's descendents were Shealtiel, Zerubbabel, Abiud, Eliakim, Azor, Zadok, Akim, Eliud, Eleazar, Matthan, and Jacob. Joseph was Jacob's son and the husband of Mary, the mother of Jesus the Messiah. Fourteen generations are listed from Abraham to King David, fourteen from David's time to the Babylonian exile, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.

## **Session 1: An angel meets Zechariah in the Temple.**

*Numbers 6:3; Malachi 4:5–6; Luke 1:5–25*

During the reign of Herod the Great over Judea, a man of the priestly order of Abijah named Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, a descendant of Aaron, were upright in God's sight, blameless in following the commandments and regulations of the Law. Despite their righteousness, they had lived beyond the age of childbearing and were still childless.

Zechariah was chosen by lot to fulfill his priestly duties. He entered the Holy Place to burn incense to God. While the people gathered outside to pray, he stood before the altar. Suddenly, an angel appeared, and Zechariah was paralyzed with fear.

“Do not be afraid, Zechariah,” the angel said. “God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give birth to a son. You must name him John. He will bring you great joy, and many will rejoice at his birth. God will recognize him as a great man. He must never drink wine or other fermented

beverages. Even before birth, he will be filled with the Holy Spirit.

“He will turn many Israelites back to the Lord their God. In the spirit and power of Elijah, he will soften the hearts of fathers toward their children and cause the rebellious to accept godly wisdom. He will prepare the people for the Lord’s coming.”

“How can this be?” Zechariah said. “This is impossible. I am an old man, and my wife is also too old.”

“I am Gabriel, sent from God to bring you this good news. Because you have not believed me, you will be unable to speak a word until the day of your son’s birth. All I have said will be fulfilled in due time.”

Outside, the people waited and wondered why the priest had stayed so long in the Holy Place. When he came out and could not speak, but kept making signs with his hands, they were sure he had seen a vision.

After completing his time of service in the Temple, Zechariah returned home. His wife, Elizabeth, became pregnant and went off by herself for five months. “This is the Lord’s doing,” she said. “In these last days, he has shown his favor and has taken away my disgrace.”

## **Session 2: A child is miraculously conceived.**

*Psalm 132:11; Isaiah 7:14; 9:7; Matthew 1:18–25; Luke 1:26–38*

In the Galilean town of Nazareth, the angel Gabriel appeared to a virgin named Mary, who was engaged to marry Joseph, a descendent of Israel’s King David. “Greetings, favored woman!” the angel said. “God is with you.”

Mary was deeply shaken. She trembled at what the

*...a man of the priestly order  
...Elijah named Zechariah and his wife  
Elizabeth, both of whom were  
...right in God's sight, blameless in law*

## **Discussion Guide**

# Session 1: Unfolding the Master Plan

## The Beginning

1. Scientific evidence measures the age of the universe in billions of years. The Genesis account gives creation in six days. Is it possible for both to be true? How do you reconcile the difference?
2. Astronauts have been awed by the magnificence of the universe. Research scientists who study the structure and functions of the brain are equally in awe. What will help us gain a better understanding of the power and wisdom of our Creator?
3. We often hear that God is all-knowing, all-caring, and all-powerful. If an unbeliever were to ask, “If God is real and cares about us, why does he allow evil?” how would you answer?
4. Jesus said he hadn’t come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). If we love others as much as ourselves, even our enemies, how does the change in our desires make our laws less important?

5. If we can't know everything about God's plan, how will knowing him better help our confidence that we can trust him with our lives?

## **Unanswered Prayer**

6. Zechariah didn't expect to serve in the Holy Place, let alone see an angel. When we attend church, how can our expectations make a difference in what we experience?
7. Even though he was talking to an angel, Zechariah didn't believe God's message. What stood in his way, keeping him from believing?
8. If you could counsel Zechariah on how he should have responded to Gabriel, what would your advice be?
9. Zechariah had to deal with the social stigma that came from being childless. How do you deal with difficult situations in which God seems to be saying, "no," "not now," or "I have a different plan"?
10. Because the Law would not allow him to serve with an affliction, Zechariah wasn't eligible for his next time of service at the Temple. He may never have returned. In what ways can our past problems change our desires or make it impossible to serve at church?