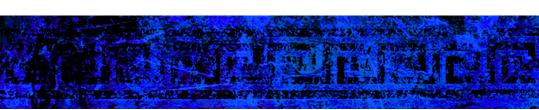


Moments of Peace in the Christmas Story



A COMPANION BIBLE STUDY

# Jenna van Mourik



## DAY 1: CHAPTERS 1-4

Suggested scripture readings: Psalm 23, Isaiah 7:14, Isaiah 9:6,

Isaiah 40:11, Luke 1, Matthew 1:1-17

# And there were in the same country shepherds...

The first few chapters of *Bethlehem's Daughter* set the stage for the fictional story that is about to unfold. In the same way, the assigned scripture readings for this section set the tone and give context for the what most of us refer to as "the Christmas story" in Luke 2. The truth is, God set the miracle of Christ's birth in motion thousands of years before Mary, Joseph, the wisemen, and even the shepherds knew that they would have a part to play.

But what was daily life like in the years leading up to Jesus' birth? *Bethlehem's Daughter* makes reference to a few key themes, such as the tumultuous reign of King Herod, the political climate throughout the region then known as Judea, and the construction on the Temple Mount. Did you know that King Herod's expansion project took over forty years to complete? With new walls, gates, and spaces for merchants and money-changers, the Herodian Temple became a central landmark during this time, but the building costs caused heavy taxes for the people in the area.

If you'd lived in this time, you may have been weary of all the political talk and taxation brought about during King Herod the Great's reign. You might have sought an escape, hoped for a Messiah, or prayed for change. You may even feel this way today,

but do you know what is so incredible about the Christmas story? The message of hope and peace in Jesus Christ still rings true. As it says in Hebrews 13:8, "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever" (KJV). Some problems may be unique to the first century, but certain struggles have existed throughout time. Thankfully, so has God!

From the very beginning, He has been writing a love story in His word, showing His unfailing love and grace in all of His ways; this includes His plan to make a way for our redemption, that we might all have the opportunity to spend eternity in His presence. These chapters and readings not only give us the beginnings of Hodiyah and Eliyahu's romantic relationship; they also remind us of the greatest love story of all.

The Messiah is coming!

### Questions for Discussion Based on Eliyahu and Hodiyah's Story and the Bible...

Were there any struggles faced by the characters in these chapters that you could relate to, either on an emotional or situational level? How did the characters respond? How would you respond? Can you think of any Bible passages that might apply?

We tend to think of the Christmas story as something that happened thousands of years ago, but in fact, it is still happening today. People everywhere are still hearing the news for the first time that the Messiah has come! In what ways is our world different from the Biblical one? In what ways is it the same?

Because he is a shepherd and his work often makes him unclean, Eliyahu is not often welcome in public places. Despite this, he is still a man of faith and spends a great deal of his time praying in the fields and relying on his brother to share what they read in synagogue. Were there any references to Biblical passages that stood out to you? What did you think of the way the characters reacted to or referenced Scripture?



"We may be a chosen people, but it is hard not to be dismayed when Rome's oppression seems to grow more severe by the day," said Zevulun.

"Careful, son," said Yaakov. "The Lord keeps His promises to His people."

"I am only saying that if ever there was a time for the Messiah to come, it would be now. Herod's taxes for his expansion of the Temple are draining our resources completely. They were talking today in the village about even more taxes to come, with no end in sight to Herod's madness! The time for a leader to raise up an army and overthrow Rome is now."

"Our needs are always met," argued Yaakov. "Let Herod do what Herod does from his royal seat, and let us carry on with the crops in our fields."

His brother's and father's tone reminded Eliyahu why he kept to the fields so much. Whatever went on in palaces and among kings was none of his business, and as the family's shepherd, his opinions were seldom welcome on such subjects. Though he fulfilled a vital role in caring for the family's livestock, it was Zevulun who sowed and harvested the crops alongside their father. The two of them were far more respectable members of society than Eliyahu would ever be, welcome in public meetings, places of trade, and in synagogue. Talk of Messiahs and rebellions was over Eliyahu's head.

## DAY 2: CHAPTERS 5-8

Suggested scripture readings: Psalm 23, Psalm 27:1, John 1:1-5, Matthew 1:18-24, Luke 2:1-3, John 16:33, 2 Timothy 1:7

# And they were sore afraid...

There was a lot to be afraid of in the first century. Tyrant emperors and mad kings, unnamed illnesses with unknown cures, famine, plague, persecution, as well as everyday worries... Many of these things still exist today, in one form or another. What is something that you are afraid of? Whatever it may be, there is an answer: God.

As Hodiyah and Eliyahu come to learn in the story, God is *Jehovah-Raah*. He is the Lord, our Shepherd! When we trust in Him, we want for nothing. As it says in Psalm 23:4, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me" (KJV). Like a shepherd tends his flock, ensuring they are always safe, comfortable, fed, and thriving, God cares for us. He cared enough to send His son to earth to die and be raised to life again, so that all of us might find life in Him too.

It is understandable that we would face fear. Jesus said it Himself in John 16:33, "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (KJV). Trouble is sure to come our way, but we are not called to live in fear. We are called to live in *light*.

As a shepherd keeps watch over his flock, keep watch for His light in your life. When you seek Him, you will surely find Him, just as one finds a brilliant star shining bright in the night and illuminating the way before them. God illuminates our steps, enabling us to walk forward without any fear. Only faith.



"I have always been shy and not good with words. I feared I would disappoint any woman I approached, since I was not as smooth-speaking as my brother. When Zevulun's betrothal to Ofra became official, my father told me that I had until the end of that summer to name a bride for myself, or he would choose one for me ... I knew I wanted you, but I was too afraid of rejection. It was only when I saw you walking with another man that I realized I could not let you go. I hurried home to tell my father that I made my choice, but he stopped me, saying he'd grown impatient and had already spoken to someone on my behalf."

"Really?" Her eyes widened.

"Yes. Your father."

Both of them gave way to laughter then, and it was some minutes before they collected their wits. The laughter felt good. It seemed to melt away some of the tension in the room.



#### Questions for Discussion Based on Eliyahu and Hodiyah's Story and the Bible

Can you think of a time where you had to face a fear? Did you rely on God? In what ways?

Read Psalm 23, verse by verse, thinking about the identity and work of a shepherd. In what ways is God your shepherd? How does He lead you? Do you trust Him to lead you through difficult things, as a sheep follows their shepherd to green pastures?

Both Eliyahu and Hodiyah had feelings for each other, but did not immediately act on those feelings. Hodiyah feared that Eliyahu would never inquire about a betrothal, and Eliyahu feared that she would reject a betrothal offer if he made one. In the end, their marriage was arranged by their parents and all parties were happy. Have you ever experienced a situation where God brought about a positive outcome from a situation beyond your control? Write it down.

John 1:4-5 says, "In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not" (KJV). The light of God drives away darkness and fear. How can you look for the light in your life? What are some practical ways you can keep your mind focused on Him, rather than on the troubles of this world?

## DAY 3: CHAPTERS 9-11

Suggested scripture readings: Psalm 23, Luke 2:4-21, John 1:6-18, John 3:16, Isaiah 12

# And the angel said unto them...

Fear not! Behold, Jesus is here! The Messiah has come and for Eliyahu and the other shepherds, the joy of knowing Him changes everything. Though at first they find themselves "sore afraid," that quickly changes to the utmost joy. A joy they can hardly contain! Luke 2:16 tells us, "And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger" (KJV). The shepherds didn't just hear the news and go about their business. There was no returning to "normal life" for them. They were transformed by the Messiah, and became some of His first witnesses to the world, telling anyone who would listen about Jesus Christ.

Can you imagine how you would have felt, receiving this news for the *very first* time? How might you have responded? You see, just as the shepherds had a part to play in the Christmas story, you and I still have a part to play in God's plan for the world. We are each a shepherd, an innkeeper, a seeker, a witness. When we encounter Jesus, whether at church, in a classroom, at home or on the road, He should change our lives. After all, he gives us new life! So what will you do with your testimony?

Will you tell it on the mountain, over the hills, and everywhere? Make haste! Jesus Christ has come, and He will come again!



"The Lord! The Lord has made this thing known to us," Zakkai kept repeating over and over. "Can you believe it?"

"I believe it!" said Eliyahu. "I believe!" Whatever strange circumstances had brought them to this point did not matter. Though they had gathered together to sing humble songs of worship and Eliyahu had prayed in his heart that a Saviour for their people would come soon, it was clear that God's plan had been in motion much longer than their hearts had been yearning.

"Quickly," said Uzzi, flapping his arms about like a bird.

This news—this wondrous news—made fools of them all, but what did that matter? Eliyahu recalled the stories of King David who leapt and danced for joy before the ark of the covenant, saying he would become even more undignified to humble himself before the Lord. Eliyahu would never mind appearing as a fool. Not now that the angels of the Lord appeared to him with a message to change the world!

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### Questions for Discussion Based on Eliyahu and Hodiyah's Story and the Bible

When the angels told the shepherds not to be afraid, it was most likely because their appearance would have been frightening. But think about the message they brought; not only was there no reason to fear the angels, but there was no reason to fear! The Messiah had come to bring peace, a kind of peace which, according to Philippians 4:7, "passeth all understanding" (KJV). How can we apply that message today, knowing that the Messiah has come, died for our sins, and been raised again so that we all might have new life in Him? How can you "fear not?"

After encountering the angels, the narration states, "This news—this wondrous news—made fools of them all, but what did that matter? ... Eliyahu would never mind appearing as a fool. Not now that the angels of the Lord appeared to him with a message that would change the world!" Sometimes people struggle to share their faith because they are worried about what others will think, or maybe they do not know how. Have you ever struggled with something like this? How can you challenge yourself to live out your faith boldly for others to see?

The Bible tells us in Luke 2:18 KJV, "And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds." In this fictionalized version of the story, some wonder with rejoicing, while others with skepticism. This represents how different people respond to the Gospel message even today. What kinds of things can be stumbling blocks for non-believers, and how can we prepare a defense of the Gospel and minister to those different areas with truth and love?

# DAY 4: CHAPTERS 12-14

Suggested scripture readings: Psalm 23, Isaiah 26:3, Matthew 2, Luke 2:22-51, John 10:11-18

# And on earth peace...

When Jesus was born, there was political turmoil, threatening kings, and dangers throughout the land, but the people involved in this story—this beautiful love story between God and all of us—did what God called them to do. The shepherds spread the good news of Christ's birth. The wisemen worshipped Him. Mary and Joseph raised Him, and when God called Joseph to take them into Egypt for a time, Joseph obeyed. Might they have faced persecution, public scorn, or even the threat of death at any point? Yes, they might have, but through God, every person in this incredibly true story could have peace in all things.

We can experience peace on earth and good will toward men too, because Jesus and relationship with Him is the ultimate Christmas gift that will ever be given. He may have had His birth proclaimed by shepherds, but He is the Good Shepherd. He lays down His life for us, His flock, and leads us to green pastures—to Him.

What a beautiful reminder the Christmas story is, of peace on earth, joy to the world, and salvation for you and me. As it says in Psalm 23:6, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever" (KJV).



"There are so many uncertainties we will have to face, even once we have established ourselves in Jerusalem." Eliyahu felt Hodiyah yawn as she rested her head against his chest, tired from that day's climb. He decided then that they would stay in this spot for a few days with the sheep and give everyone a chance to rest.

"You only need to focus on one thing at a time," she said sleepily.

"I do?" he asked.

"The very next thing."

"And what is that?" He pulled her gently so that they were both lying down for sleep. With his free hand, he reached for the blanket and threw it over them both.

"Our sons," Hodiyah whispered. "Your faith is strong, Eliyahu. Share it with them so that they, too, will be able to cling to it in times of trouble. Then they will be able to pass it on to their children, and their children's children for generations. Nothing else will ever be as important."

Hodiyah was right. What was coming next would be the fullness of things long prayed for and prophesied. It began that night with the angels, humbly in Bethlehem and with lowly shepherds, but full of so much glory. He prayed that they would continue to serve the Lord well, as Hodiyah said, and wait expectantly for His splendor and majesty to bring joy to the world.

The whole world.



## Questions for Discussion Based on Eliyahu and Hodiyah's Story and the Bible:

Have you experienced the joy of receiving the gift of salvation for yourself? Write that story down and reflect on that experience.

How can you pass on that gift to others? Can you think of someone you know that you could witness to, mentor, teach, or encourage?

Christmas is a time for celebrating and reflecting on the night when Jesus was born and when He came into the world. For Eliyahu and Hodiyah, this was only the beginning. They had to wait for Jesus to return again as a grown man to fulfill what was written about Him and conquer death on the cross. This story still continues! As modern-day Christians, Christmas should also be an opportunity to reflect on the promise that He is coming again. We cling to the same hope of the shepherds: that the Messiah is coming to bring peace on earth. Revelation 22:7 states, "Behold, I come quickly: blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book" (KJV). How will you live with a heart expectant of Christ's return?



# Notes