

August 31, 2025

**Group Study: The Birth of Jesus (Matthew 2:1–12; Luke 2:1–20)**

1. Both Matthew and Luke take pains to place Jesus' birth in the context of Roman imperial rule. Why is it significant that the Savior is born as a subject of an oppressive empire rather than in a position of political power? How does this subvert common messianic expectations then and now?
2. Why do the gospel writers include marginalized characters like shepherds and magi?
3. The angels' announcement to the shepherds evokes imperial language ("good news," "savior," "peace") but applies it to a baby in a manger. How does the way of Jesus redefine these loaded terms? What are the implications for discipleship and witness in a world still dominated by earthly powers? How is Jesus' birth a challenge to empire and a comfort to the powerless?
4. Mary and Joseph's obedience to the census decree leads to hardship and inconvenience (a long journey while pregnant, no room in the inn). When have you experienced God's purposes being worked out through difficult or even oppressive circumstances? What does faithfulness look like in those situations?
5. What does it mean to "choose your savior" in a world full of competing claims to authority?
6. The lesson contrasts Jesus, the vulnerable Savior who brings joy and peace through sacrificial love, with Caesar, the militaristic "savior" who rules through coercive power. Where do you see these two versions of "salvation" still competing for allegiance in our world? In the church? In your own life?
7. Where do you see echoes of Bethlehem today—in ordinary people and overlooked places?
8. How might celebrating the birth of Jesus outside of Christmas season change our perspective?
9. What does it mean for us to follow the Prince of Peace in our current cultural moment?

## Good Faith Bible Study

Kathy and Nathan Maxwell

August 31, 2025

"The Birth of Jesus"

Focal Texts: Matthew 2:1-12; Luke 2:1-20

<https://goodfaithmedia.org/bible-studies>

If I say the words “heavenly host,” what pops into your mind?

If you’re like me, it’s probably a Christmas card scene—a holy starry night, soft light, a group of robed angels standing in perfect rows, singing in harmony. It’s sweet, it’s peaceful, and it’s beautiful.

But here’s the thing: In the first-century world, the phrase “heavenly host” didn’t sound like a choir. It sounded like a military regiment—God’s army.

In Hebrew, the term “hosts” (*tsaba’ōt*) retains the meaning of an army, imagining God as a Commander of heaven’s forces. The title “LORD of Hosts” (*YHWH Sabaot*) emphasizes God’s rule over both earthly and heavenly armies.

This idea carries over into the Greek language of the gospels. The Greek term used in Luke 2:13 typically means “army” or “company of soldiers,” not a choir of angels. The term underscores the divine power and weight behind the announcement of Jesus’ birth.

So, when we picture the “heavenly hosts,” we should imagine boots on the ground, weapons at the ready ... except in this army, the battle plan is not destruction, but peace. The weapon isn’t violence, but love.

This week’s lesson opens by naming how strange it is to talk about Jesus’ birth at the end of August. The idea of God’s “heavenly host” is another point of dissonance—one that reminds us that while we use human images to talk about the things of God, God’s ways are often much different than ours.

The heavenly host—the heavenly army—announces “peace on earth.”

And here’s the paradox: God’s decisive battle isn’t fought with swords or spears. It’s fought with sacrifice and vulnerability. The great campaign to overthrow sin and death begins with a newborn in an animal’s feeding trough.

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This “commander,” Jesus, will lead with self-giving love, not force. His victory will come not by killing enemies, but by dying for them.

Take a moment now to consider this question: What does it mean for us, in our daily lives, to follow a commander whose primary weapon is love? How does that shape the way that we approach conflict, whether it’s personal, political or global?

As you study the lesson this week, keep this heavenly host image in mind. We shouldn’t picture an angelic night of caroling, but a divine military announcement declaring the arrival of God’s Prince of True Peace.

Now, the angels’ announcement of course doesn’t happen in a historical vacuum. At the time, the Roman Emperor Augustus was more than just a head of state. He was considered son of god, savior, bringer of peace. And those titles weren’t just religious. They were political propaganda. They were carved into monuments and stamped on coins, woven into the empire’s identity.

And then Luke dares to take those same words—Savior, peace, good news—and apply them, not to Caesar, but to a baby wrapped in cloth, lying in a manger.

That’s not a sentimental move on Luke’s part. This is political. It’s a political and theological act of defiance. Luke is proclaiming that Rome does not define salvation. God does. Rome doesn’t bring peace. Christ does.

As you study this week’s lesson, either by yourself or with your group, consider this question. What modern slogans or political titles or marketing messages promise “peace” or “salvation” today? Maybe it’s a politician’s campaign slogan. Or maybe it’s an ad for the latest gadget that will “change your life.”

How does the gospel’s vision of peace and salvation challenge those claims? And do we live into those claims ... or do we tend to live like the political or marketing slogans are gospel truth?

It’s a challenge for God’s people today, just like it was for people in the first century—including these shepherds. So why do the angels—or the heavenly army—go to shepherds first? Now, shepherds weren’t social outcasts in the first century (we mentioned that in the lesson as well), but they also weren’t high up the ladder. They were ordinary working people. They were essential to the community, yes, but they were far from political power.

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God bypasses the palace, bypasses the temple, and sends this angelic announcement to people pulling the night shift in the fields. The kingdom doesn't start with power brokers—it begins at the edges.

There are people like the shepherds in our own society, too—folks who keep the world running but rarely get a microphone, rarely get their picture on the website. Take a moment to reflect: Who are these people in your world—people who are likely to be overlooked by society's leaders, but who are noticed by God? What difference would it make if these were the first people to hear the good news today? And in what ways can we listen carefully to the ways that they then share the good news?

Now before we leave this singing army, there's one more thing the angels say that's easy to miss: “I bring you good news of great joy for all the people.”

In a world divided between Roman citizen and subject, Jew and Gentile, men and women, insider and outsider, “all the people” is a pretty radical claim. The announcement is not for one tribe, one nation, one political party—it's for everyone.

And yet it starts out so small. In one town, with a handful of ordinary people. That's how God's kingdom works, isn't it? Small beginnings. Quiet faithfulness. And before long, it changes the world.

This week, think about a time when something small happened in your own life that ended up having a bigger ripple effect than you ever imagined. And when you have a chance, share this memory with your Bible study group.

God's “army” still advances through small, faithful acts—acts that might look insignificant at first, but that carry the power of God's Spirit.

So, maybe this is the question that Luke leaves us with: Whose “army” will we join?

In Luke's day, there was Rome's way of peace—through power, control, intimidation. The *pax Romana* was peace at the point of a sword. And then there was Christ's way of peace—through love and service and vulnerability.

Today, we may not exactly face Caesar's census or Herod's paranoia, but we still face competing visions of peace. Some promise security if we'll just hand over our loyalty. Others promise belonging if we will just exclude the right people.

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What “hosts” or movements are you tempted to give your allegiance to before Christ? And what would it look like, practically, to align yourself fully with this heavenly host that fights only with love?

The angels invite us to make a different choice: to join God’s subversive army of peace.

And so perhaps the question for us is not simply, Which army will we join? Perhaps a better question is, Whose peace will we trust, and whose way will we walk in?

As we leave this story now, may we live as citizens of that beloved community, carrying the peace of Christ into every conversation, every decision, and every place we go this week.