

December 4

Lesson 1

GOD PROMISES

A SAVIOR

DEVOTIONAL READING: Isaiah 6:1-8

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Luke 1:26-38

LUKE 1:26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail."

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.



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KEY VERSE

You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.—Luke 1:31

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Retell the incident of the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary.
2. Explain how Gabriel's message prepared Mary to accept God's plan to be the mother of the Messiah.
3. Write a prayer of submission to be God's servant in the Christmas season.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. On an Adventure

B. Lesson Background

I. Hearing God's Plan ([Luke 1:26-33](#))

A. Mary Greeted ([vv. 26-28](#))

B. Mary Comforted ([vv. 29-33](#))

II. Trusting God's Plan ([Luke 1:34-38](#))

A. Mary's Question ([v. 34](#))

Unique, but Not Alone

B. Gabriel's Answer ([vv. 35-37](#))

C. Mary's Faith ([v. 38](#))

Favorite Quotes

Conclusion

A. A Change of Plans

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. On an Adventure

I am the kind of person who likes to follow a plan. When our family goes on vacation, I want to know the distance and time between each day's destination. I do my homework about where we will stay and how much it will cost. Realizing that this tendency may not always make a vacation as enjoyable as it should be for others, I have asked my family to plan daily activities once we get to where we're going.

Whether my plans or theirs, sometimes plans need to change. When this happens, my wife will often say, "It just means we're going on an adventure!" It's her way of saying, "Changing our plans isn't a bad thing, because we're facing the unknown together."

In today's lesson Mary learns that God wants her to be a part of his plan to bring salvation. Her part in his plan is one that will change the plans she and Joseph were making for their life together. As each was visited by an angel, they found their plans being adjusted by God's extraordinary plan to put on human flesh. Joseph and Mary were about to begin an adventure unlike anything either of them could have imagined. It was an adventure that changed their lives, and ours, forever.

B. Lesson Background

Today's lesson examines a vital segment in a sequence of bigger stories. On a personal level, it is Mary's story. At the time of Gabriel's visit, she was a virgin and pledged to be married to Joseph (see [Matthew 1:18](#)).

The path modern couples take to marriage can cloud our understanding of Mary's circumstances. In the ancient Near East, couples might become married through a variety of arrangements. These customs involved various levels of freedom and consent on the part of one or both persons to be married. The betrothal custom was one in which a man and woman became legally bound to one another before the actual marriage ceremony. Betrothal was much more binding than today's custom of "being engaged."

The betrothal period usually lasted about a year. A betrothed couple was committed to see each other but did not live together or engage in sexual intimacy. During that time, a couple made preparations to live together as husband and wife. Since a betrothal was legally binding, ending the relationship required a divorce. Indeed, Joseph considered taking such an action ([Matthew 1:18, 19](#)).

The text of today's lesson is part of the larger story of God's relationship with his covenant people. The era in which Gabriel appeared to Mary was a time of subjugation for the Jews. Although Jerusalem and the temple had been rebuilt after the Babylonian exile, the Jewish people remained under the control of various pagan powers over the centuries that followed. The Roman Empire was the occupying power at the time of Jesus' birth. Oppression by those Gentiles fueled hope and expectation that God would send his Messiah to liberate and lead his people.

I. Hearing God's Plan

([LUKE 1:26-33](#))

A. Mary Greeted ([vv. 26-28](#))

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee,

This verse connects Gabriel's visit to Mary with his visit to the priest Zechariah. In the verses just prior to this one, Gabriel told him that his wife, Elizabeth, was to give birth to a son. *The sixth month* refers to the progress of Elizabeth's pregnancy ([Luke 1:36](#)).

HOW TO SAY IT

Cornelius Cor-*neel*-yus.

Davidic Duh-*vid*-ick.

Gabriel Gay-*bree*-ul.

Galilee Gal-*uh*-lee.

Messiah Meh-*sigh*-uh.

messianic mess-*ee-an*-ick.

Nathanael Nuh-*than*-yull (*th* as in *thin*).

Nazareth Naz-*uh*-reth.

Zechariah Zack-*uh-rye*-uh.

Luke may have in mind readers of non-Jewish background as he makes a transition from Jerusalem (where Gabriel encountered Zechariah) to Nazareth, a town in Galilee. While most such readers have heard of Jerusalem, it is unlikely they know anything about Nazareth (about 64 miles north of Jerusalem as the crow flies, and perhaps 90 miles by road). Nazareth is a small, insignificant village like so many others in the region of Galilee. This seems to have been the way Nathanael thought of Nazareth (see [John 1:46](#)).

^{27.} to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

After Luke tells us the when and where of God's sending Gabriel to announce the Messiah's arrival, he reveals the circumstances and identity of the recipient of Gabriel's visit: a certain *Mary*. The fact that she is *a virgin* (mentioned twice) is consistent with the betrothal stage of her relationship with *Joseph* (see the Lesson Background). Her virginal status is also significant for understanding how she reacts to the angelic message (v. 34, below).

The fact that Joseph is *a descendant of David* is the first suggestion in this Gospel of a messianic significance for what is to happen. The reason this is so is because of the prophecy that the Messiah is to be a descendant of King David (compare [Isaiah 11:1, 10](#); [Jeremiah 23:5](#); [Matthew 22:42](#)).

What Do You Think?

What role should awareness of personal heritage play, if any, in preparing for marriage? Why?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding differing cultural values

Regarding expectations of extended family

Regarding boundaries within the immediate family of origin

Other

^{28.} The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Gabriel initiates the verbal interchange with a greeting that is certainly more than an ordinary "hello"! We may wonder what it is about Mary's character that results in the angel's declaring her to be *highly favored*. The text does not tell us, but elsewhere the Lord's favor is said to be granted to those who seek and find wisdom ([Proverbs 8:1, 35](#)) and who pursue a "good" lifestyle ([12:2](#)).

This raises the question of whether God's favor toward Mary is a result of merit on her part. Some think the case of Noah is a precedent for an affirmative answer in this regard, since the declaration that he "found favor in the eyes of the Lord" is followed by the analysis that "Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time" ([Genesis 6:8, 9](#)).

On the other hand, evidence for a negative answer might be the case of God's favor on the Israelites as a whole. They proved time and time again that they merited no such favor ([Deuteronomy 7:6-8](#); [Nehemiah 9:16-31](#)).

We are safe to assume that Mary's character in some way makes her eligible to receive the great honor of being chosen to give birth to the Messiah ([Luke 1:30, 31](#), below). Even so, there are doubtless many other young Jewish virgins of similar character in Mary's day. Why she receives the honor of being the mother of the Messiah instead of any of them is, in the final analysis, a matter of speculation.

The affirmation *the Lord is with you* mirrors similar statements found elsewhere ([Joshua 1:5](#); [Judges 6:12](#); etc.). His presence is also part of Matthew's account of an angelic visit to Joseph, although stated in a different way ([Matthew 1:20-24](#)).

B. Mary Comforted (vv. 29-33)

^{29, 30}. **Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God.**

Angelic appearances can be disturbing (compare [Matthew 28:5](#); [Luke 1:11, 12](#); [2:8-10](#); [Acts 10:1-4](#)), and that is the case here. Luke doesn't tell us specifically that Mary is afraid, but it is not hard to imagine that she is!

Gabriel calms any fears by repeating that Mary has *found favor with God*. This reaffirmation lets her know that regardless of any uncertainty that arises and regardless of how others might view her circumstances, she doesn't need to be afraid. She has God's approval.

What Do You Think?

How should we react when we recognize God's favor at work in our lives in various ways?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding an opportunity being presented
- Regarding material blessings we already have
- Regarding a change of financial status
- Regarding a change in position of authority
- Other

³¹. **“You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.**

There is no small talk or get-acquainted session here! Rather, Gabriel proceeds immediately to deliver the message that is his task to do. Divine initiative is suggested in the promise that Mary will name her forthcoming son *Jesus*. Unlike today, biblical names are loaded with meaning and significance (compare [Hosea 1:4-9](#)). The Old Testament origin of Jesus' name is found in the name *Joshua*. In turn, that name is derived from a Hebrew verb that means “to save.” When Joseph is told what the name of Mary's baby is to be, the angel leaves no question that the name has prophetic significance ([Matthew 1:21](#)).

What Do You Think?

What sequence of steps have you found to be useful when receiving life-changing news?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Concerning positive news (job promotion, news of a birth, etc.)
- Concerning negative news (layoff notice, news of a death, etc.)

^{32a}. **“He will be great**

While most parents think their children are special, Mary has the best reason to think so. Since the Bible refers to God as *great* ([Deuteronomy 10:17](#); [Nehemiah 8:6](#); [9:32](#); [Psalm 95:3](#); [104:1](#)), the statement *he will be great* seems to highlight the forthcoming child's divine status.

^{32b}. **“and will be called the Son of the Most High.**

This title, which Gabriel uses to predict the child's exalted status, is reflected in both Old and New Testaments ([Genesis 14:18-22](#); [Deuteronomy 32:8](#); [Mark 5:7](#); [Acts 16:17](#)). This divine designation conveys the sense of God's authority over all things. God identifies Jesus as his Son at his baptism ([Luke 3:21, 22](#)). Jesus' status as God's Son is also recognized by demons ([Matthew 8:29](#)), by Simon Peter ([Matthew 16:16](#)), etc.

^{32c}. **“The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David,**

This partial verse helps us understand why Luke mentions Joseph's ancestry in [verse 27](#), above. At this point, Mary should be realizing that Gabriel is saying Jesus will be the Messiah (compare [2 Samuel 7:12, 13, 16](#); [Isaiah 9:7](#)).

³³. **“and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”**

Jesus' messianic identity is further confirmed. In the Old Testament, the expression *Jacob's descendants* is synonymous with Israel ([Exodus 19:3](#); [Isaiah 46:3](#); [Jeremiah 2:4](#); [Ezekiel 20:5](#)), the people over whom the Messiah is expected to reign.

But Gabriel reveals that the nature of Jesus' rule will diverge from expectations. If some believe the Messiah's rule will be limited in duration, Gabriel makes clear that it will be eternal. There will be no line of succession as is customary with earthly kings. Neither Jesus' reign nor his kingdom will ever cease to be.

While nothing is said about when Jesus' rule is to begin, Jesus will speak of his kingdom as present while he is on earth ([Luke 17:20, 21](#)). He will speak of it in future terms as well ([22:16, 18](#)). The fact that Jesus describes the kingdom of God in both ways indicates that he doesn't see his messianic role being limited to his time on earth.

II. Trusting God's Plan

(LUKE 1:34-38)

A. Mary's Question (v. 34)

34. **“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”**

It's not hard to imagine that Mary's mind is filled with the normal *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, and *why* questions. But the question she chooses to ask is that of *how*. Her question suggests she is thinking Gabriel's prediction of her conceiving a child will come to pass sooner rather than later. If she is thinking that Gabriel is talking about Joseph and her having a baby after they consummate their marriage, then her virginity (*I am a virgin*) would be a nonissue, and her *how* question would not be on her mind.

Zechariah also questioned Gabriel—questioning that resulted in the skeptical priest's being made mute! But no penalty results from Mary's question. The difference seems to be that Zechariah questioned from a standpoint of doubt. The elderly, experienced priest (Luke 1:5-7) should know of the power of God to make things happen. In the history of God's people, barren wives had indeed become pregnant (Genesis 18:10-14; 21:1-7; Judges 13:2, 3, 24; 1 Samuel 1:1-20).

Mary's question, on the other hand, stems from the fact that virgins do not have babies. There is no Old Testament instance of a virginal conception. If there were, her question could make her guilty of undue skepticism. Her question is reasonable.

What Do You Think?

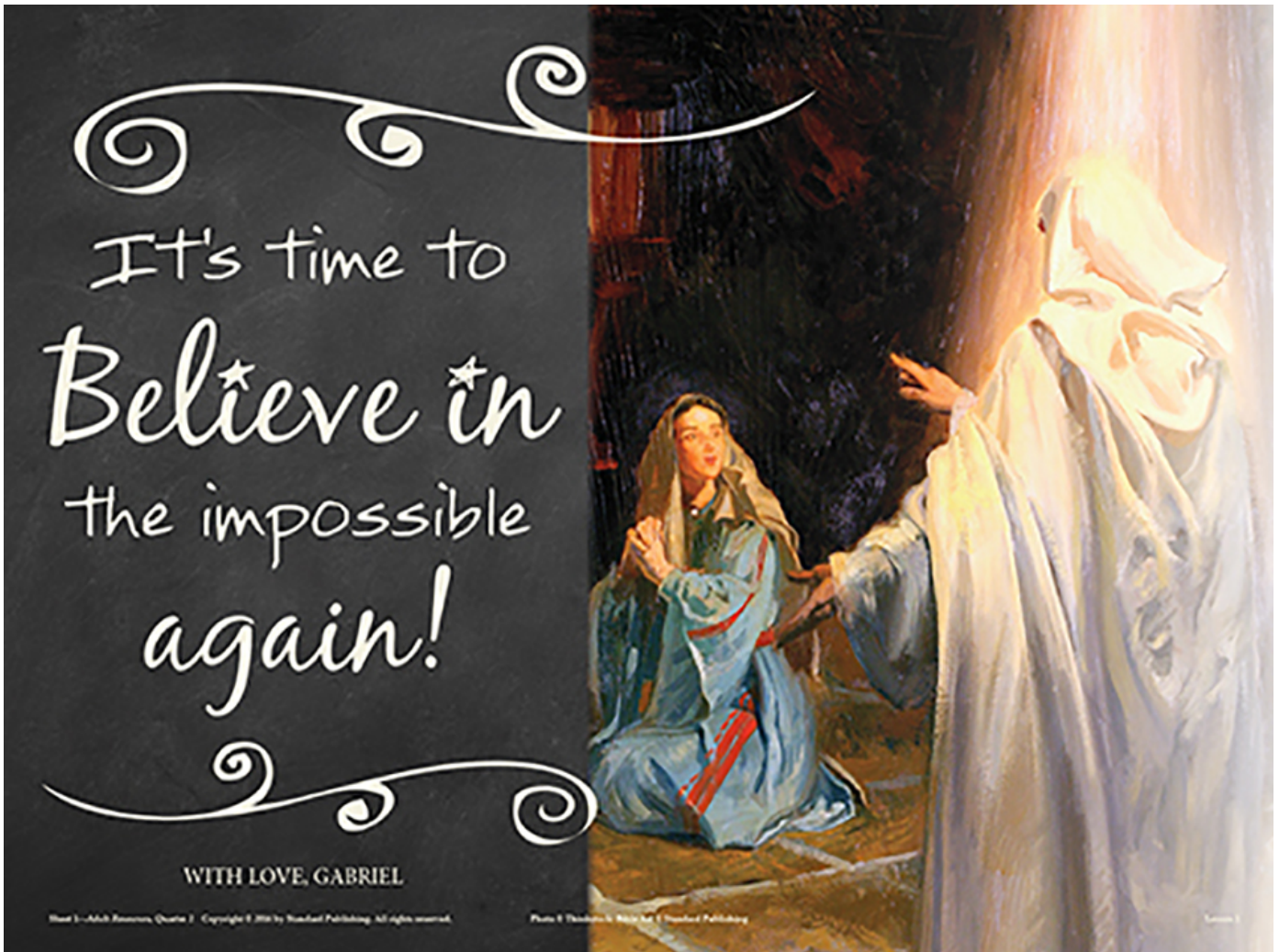
How do we know when questions to God cross the line from being appropriate (as in Luke 1:34) to being inappropriate or even sinful (as in Luke 1:18)?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In times of national distress
- In times of personal distress
- When faced with an opportunity
- Other

UNIQUE, BUT NOT ALONE

When I used to express concern about being able to do something that seemed too difficult, my husband would reply, “How do you think the pioneers did it?” That response always made me realize that life wasn't as hard as it could be. It also made me wonder how I would have fared in an earlier era—that is, until one day when I had an epiphany. None of my ancestors crossed the mighty Mississippi River until after an interstate highway was built across it! My takeaway lesson was clear: not everyone need be a trailblazer.



Visual for Lesson 1. Use this visual to start a discussion that contrasts Mary's reaction to "impossible" news ([Luke 1:34, 38](#)) with that of Zechariah ([1:18](#)).

At one level, God's plans are the same for every Christian: we are to "live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God" ([Colossians 1:10](#)). Above and beyond that, it seems that God reserves specific plans for relatively few people. All of us are to travel "a highway ... the Way of Holiness" in a general sense ([Isaiah 35:8](#)), while relatively few are called specifically to go to foreign countries as missionaries with the Word of God in hand as the spiritual machete for hacking a trail.

Mary's call was unique to her, never to be repeated. She had neither podcast sermons nor Christian books to help prepare her for all that the call entailed. Even so, God met her needs—usually, it seems, through interactions with other people ([Matthew 2:11](#); [Luke 1:39-45, 56](#); [2:16-19, 22-38](#); [John 19:25-27](#); [Acts 1:14](#)).

We need not fear what God's plans entail. He has unlimited resources. He is able to provide comfort in any situation. He is faithful to help us succeed in what he entrusts to us. "Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness" ([2 Corinthians 9:10](#)). Expect it!—V. E.

B. Gabriel's Answer ([vv. 35-37](#))

35. The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

The nature of Gabriel's words may leave modern readers with the impression that he is using euphemisms to describe how Mary will become pregnant. On the contrary, Gabriel's descriptions rule out the type of divine-human mating found in some pagan religions. His language describing *the Holy Spirit* at work is similar to what Jesus will later say in [Acts 1:8](#) to prepare the disciples for Pentecost. Gabriel's description of God's overshadowing of Mary is similar to how God is said to be present to protect his people ([Psalm 91:4](#)).

36, 37. “Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.”

Even though Mary doesn’t ask for confirmation of Gabriel’s words, it is given nonetheless. The confirmation is the startling pregnancy of Elizabeth, a relative of Mary. Mary seems not to know about Elizabeth’s pregnancy before Gabriel mentions it, since Elizabeth has hidden it (Luke 1:24).

Gabriel’s words are reminiscent of the Lord’s words to Abraham in Genesis 18:13, 14. Elizabeth’s pregnancy serves as an example to Mary that things that are humanly impossible are not impossible for God. The conceptions of John the Baptist and Jesus are manifestations of this truth.

Luke 1:56 says that Mary stays with Elizabeth “about three months.” Since $6 + 3 = 9$, some students think Mary is with Elizabeth when John the Baptist is born. However, Luke 1:57 indicates that Mary’s departure occurs just prior to John’s birth.

C. Mary’s Faith (v. 38)

38. “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.

There is nothing in Gabriel’s words to suggest God’s plan is contingent on Mary’s agreement. Even so, her statement of submission is important. In describing herself as *servant*, Mary uses a term that refers to slaves. By doing so she expresses her immediate and forthcoming obedience—she is God’s, and he is the Lord.

While no details are given as to when Mary becomes pregnant, Elizabeth realizes that her younger relative is with child when the two meet (Luke 1:41-45). This suggests Mary becomes pregnant shortly after Gabriel’s visit, since she “hurried” to visit Elizabeth (1:39, 40).

What Do You Think?

Which Bible passages help you most to distinguish between the Lord’s leading and your own personal desires?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding Bible commands intended for all
- Regarding successes and failings of Bible characters
- Other

FAVORITE QUOTES

It seems to be somewhat chic to be called a *nerd* these days. I’m glad, because I suspect I am one. Not the science- or genius-type, mind you. I’m more of a word-nerd in that I love to collect quotes. Consider these treasures from my personal trove:

I have a point of view. You have a point of view. God has view.

—Madeleine L’Engle

Time sneaks up on you like a windshield on a bug.

—John Lithgow

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.

—A. W. Tozer

Many of my favorites are verses from the Bible. These favorites pierce the dullness of doubt and my own “analysis paralysis,” inspiring me to (quoting Nike®) “Just do it.”

Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts.—David (1 Samuel 17:45)

Here am I; send me.—Isaiah (Isaiah 6:8)

And at the top of my list is the terse, no-nonsense affirmation by a young lady with no literary credentials: “May your word to me be fulfilled” (Luke 1:38). May we too be open to his leading.—V. E.

Conclusion

A. A Change of Plans

Mary’s life was already changing by the time of Gabriel’s visit: she was betrothed to Joseph, legally committed to becoming his wife. But

when God chose her to be the earthly mother of the Messiah, his plan changed her plans. Even given Gabriel’s answer to her question, “How will this be?” there was still much she didn’t understand about God’s plan. Yet Joseph and Mary didn’t need to understand everything about that plan to be part of it. What they needed to do—and did do—was trust God.

Before Jesus was born, both Joseph and Mary understood at some level that he would be the promised Messiah. Both Joseph and Mary accepted the “adventure” of the divine plan, even though it meant changing their own plans. At different times, we all need to trust God’s promises and plan. When such times come our way, there will be some things we understand and there will be some things we don’t. The challenge is to trust when our understanding is incomplete.

When we do so, we change forever. When we agree to be part of God’s “adventure,” we won’t be taking the journey alone. He will be with us every step of the way!

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, grant us the wisdom to know your will for our lives as you strengthen our faith in your promises. May we realize that your Word has your plan: we are to bear fruit for your kingdom. Grant that we may say *yes* to every chance to do so. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Trust that depends on full understanding—isn’t.

VISUALS FOR THESE LESSONS

The visual pictured in each lesson (example: [page 126](#)) is a small reproduction of a large, full-color poster included in the *Adult Resources* packet for the Winter Quarter. That packet also contains the very useful *Presentation Tools* CD for teacher use. Order No. 2629117 from your supplier.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

Before class, write each of the following phrases on separate index cards: *cross my heart, pinky swear, scout’s honor, hand to God, you have my word.*

Start class with a quick game of charades. Hand the cards to volunteers. One at a time, ask the volunteers to communicate their phrase without using words.

Discuss the activity briefly by noting that all the phrases deal with making promises. Ask students to identify the most important promises they have ever made or have been given.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Presidential Promises” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students work individually or in pairs.

After either activity, lead into the Bible study saying, “Promises are important. Those making a promise want us to give them our trust that they plan to make good on the pledge they have given. Today we will look at a very specific promise God gave more than 2,000 years ago.”

Into the Word

Before class, make a copy of the lesson text and cut it apart, verse by verse.

Take four envelopes, write one of the following phrases on each envelope, and insert the corresponding verses into the envelope:

Envelope 1—Promises about Mary ([vv. 28-30](#))

Envelope 2—Promises about Jesus ([vv. 31-33](#))

Envelope 3—How the promise would be fulfilled ([vv. 27, 34, 35, 37](#))

Envelope 4—Evidence that the promise would be fulfilled ([vv. 26, 36](#))

(Note that the final verse of the lesson text will be dealt with at the end of the lesson.)

Tell the class that you have cut the lesson text apart, and it will be their job to put it back together. Divide the class into four groups, giving each an envelope. Ask the groups to read their verses and to be prepared to report as to how the verses relate to the phrase on the outside of their envelope.

When groups have completed the activity, allow time for each group to share. Comment on each report, referring to relevant portions of the commentary as necessary.

Into Life

Have a volunteer read [verse 38](#) aloud. Help the class come up with questions that may have been in Mary's mind after Gabriel's visit. These may include:

Is Elizabeth really going to have a baby?

Am I really going to have a child?

How is all this possible?

What will Joseph think?

How can I explain this to others?

Then instruct the class to list reasons Mary accepted the message and submitted herself to the Lord. These may include:

God has promised to save his people.

Great heroes of the past have trusted God in impossible situations.

God has always been faithful to me and my family.

Discuss as a class what it means to be a servant of the Lord today. As a class, list how God's people could be more obedient to his plan.

Encourage the class to consider not only how individuals might submit to God's desires, but also how the class or church together could follow the example of Mary in becoming a servant of the Lord.

Option. Distribute copies of "A Servant's Prayer" from the reproducible page. Ask students to write a prayer of submission to be God's servant. Have volunteers share their prayers as time allows.

Close with a prayer thanking God for the promises fulfilled in Christ.