

DAY 1-TRUTH: JESUS CAME AS GOD PROMISED

Jesus Was Born (Isaiah 7:14; Micah 5:2; Matthew 1:18–2:6)

When my husband and I attended Bible college, we were blessed to travel to Israel with a few of our professors and classmates. I'll never forget the daily experience of "THIS IS REAL" that saturated that trip. Seeing the water lap at my toes along the Sea of Galilee, standing on the Mount of Olives, walking along the pavement in Jerusalem—the Bible came alive for me. Decades later, those experiences are just as profound. Sadly, we cannot whisk everyone to Israel for the day. However, this year's biblical content is deliberately and carefully crafted to help people of all ages experience the "THIS IS REAL" truth from God's Word.

You will notice that each day's Scripture passage includes both Old and New Testament sections. We want kids to discover that there is a solid connection between what God promised in the Old Testament, what Jesus fulfilled in the New Testament, and what we can see today as evidence that it is all true. It really happened! I want to challenge you to stop right now, open your Bible, and read the passages listed for today (if you haven't already). Did you notice that the Matthew passage quotes the exact Isaiah and Micah verses that are part of the passages for today? In the very first chapter of the New Testament, God shows us the connection of the words written by the prophets hundreds of years before to events as they were happening. When Jesus was born it was on God's timetable and everything happened just as He promised.

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. Jewish betrothals (or engagements) were as binding as marriage vows, though the couple did not engage in marital relations. They used that time to prepare their household. Joseph was committed to Mary and planned to marry her. It still boggles my mind to think that Joseph accepted the miraculous announcement by the angel. I can only think that when God delivers the unbelievable, He also provides the ability to believe it. Joseph did what the angel told him. He married Mary and took care of her. A government mandated census prompted Joseph to travel with Mary to Bethlehem, which put them in the exact place prophesied by Micah. In Bethlehem, Jesus was born.

Later, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem. They had seen the star that heralded His birth and came looking for this promised King. King Herod was not happy to hear of a potential threat to his throne. He asked the Jewish chief priests and scribes where the baby would be born. "In Bethlehem," they replied, because they knew what the prophets had said.

This week, may we approach the Bible study with excited and expectant hearts like the wise men. As we connect the dots from the Old Testament to the New Testament that reveal God's amazing truth, may we share that excitement with the ones we teach. This is not just "another Christmas story," it is the moment when Jesus came down from heaven, entered the world as a human baby, and began His mission of being God with Us, our Savior.

Facts and Artifacts

In addition to connecting Old Testament prophecies with New Testament fulfillments, this week of VBS links each day to real archaeological finds that further emphasize the reality of what we read in the Bible.

Today's artifact: Qumran Jar

In the late 1940s a shepherd made an exciting discovery, a cave containing what appeared to be ancient scrolls. Others soon began to explore the caves located amid the limestone cliffs along the northwestern rim of the Dead Sea. This amazing collection, known as the "Dead Sea Scrolls," not only includes a few near-complete scrolls, but also tens of thousands of scroll fragments from every book of the Old Testament except for the book of Esther. The collection includes more than 900 different texts in various languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek).

Think About It

What are some "THIS IS REAL" moments you have had as you studied God's Word?

DAY 2-TRUTH: JESUS DEMONSTRATED GOD'S POWER

Jesus Healed a Blind Man (Psalm 146:8; Isaiah 35:5-6a; John 9:1-41)

A few years ago I received that wonderful letter in the mail— jury duty. My name was drawn for a trial and I found myself in the jury box as evidence was presented. We had to sort through compelling arguments and focus on facts and truth. Now, as I look at the chain of evidence God has provided, it amazes me that some still fail to see the truth and believe. God has provided more than a compelling argument. We can trace the facts and find the truth.

Several Old Testament passages reveal the types of ministry the Messiah would perform. Some of those verses are in today's Scripture passages. Psalm 146:8 points out our Lord's compassion for the most vulnerable. Isaiah 35:5-6a lists specific acts of mercy. The blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will leap like deer, and the mute tongue will sing for joy. These are descriptions of not only healing, but transformation!

Today's New Testament section describes one of those healings. The disciples' question represented their current Jewish culture that assumed bad things were God's punishment for sin. Jesus' answer must have surprised them. First, Jesus said this happened for God's glory, not as the result of sin. Then He said, "I am the light of the world." Standing before a man who had never experienced light, Jesus declared Himself the LIGHT. People often asked Jesus for healing, but this time Jesus initiated the contact. Jesus spat on the ground, made mud, and spread the mud on the man's eyes. Then, Jesus told the man to go wash in the Pool of Siloam. The easy thing to miss here is that the man had heard Jesus' voice and felt Jesus' hands on his eyes, but he had never seen Jesus.

When the man came back seeing, those who knew him weren't sure it was the same man. Apparently they had not witnessed Jesus' mud-making scene, nor helped the man to the pool. All they could do was chatter among themselves about whether he was the man they knew or someone who looked like him. The man kept saying, "I'm the one." They brought the man before the Pharisees who asked what had happened. Rather than celebrating an obvious miracle, the Pharisees focused on the fact that this healing had happened on the Sabbath.

The formerly blind man proved to be a faithful witness. He was unshaken by their efforts and asked, "You don't want to become His disciples too, do you?" The man reminded the temple leaders that throughout history there had been no record of a person being able to see who had been born blind. This is true. There are no Old Testament biblical nor extra-biblical sources that cite such a miracle. God had indeed orchestrated this miracle for His glory.

The angry temple officials threw the man out of the temple. Jesus heard what had happened, found the man, and asked if the man believed in the Son of God. "Who is He, that I may believe?" the man replied. Jesus said, "You have seen Him." What a powerful pronouncement. The man saw Jesus, the Light of the World, with his own eyes.

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Today's artifact: Pool of Siloam Steps

In June 2004, the steps leading to the Pool of Siloam were found! Workmen doing repair to a large water pipe south of Jerusalem's Temple Mount discovered two ancient stone steps. After further excavation, it was determined that the steps were part of a pool from the Second Temple, the Pool of Siloam. The structure was 225 feet long.

Think About It

How has God used a difficulty in your life to show you something about Himself?

DAY 3-TRUTH: JESUS WAS BETRAYED AND REJECTED

Jesus Experienced Betrayal and Rejection (Psalm 41:9; Isaiah 53:3,7; John 13; 18:1–19:16)

As Bible study teachers, we often prefer nice, neat Bible passages with limited verses that contain an easy-to-tell story. However, sometimes we miss the amazing connections God has provided in His Word when we try to keep things short and sweet. Today's passages cover a lot, but when we sift through all those details, there are treasures to be found. Begin by reading all of the verses referenced, then we can focus on a few truths we discover.

The specifics of prophecy are amazing when you think about it. God spoke through prophets that His Promised One would experience a close friend (the meaning of "one who takes or eats bread with me") who would turn against Him. Also, when He was brought before His accusers there would come a time when the Messiah would not open His mouth in His own defense. (Fulfilled in John 19:9.)

In the John passage, Jesus sat at the table with His twelve handpicked disciples. All the elements of the Passover meal were before them. The group dynamics were typical of a close-knit group. There had been evidence of internal competition, of groups within the group, and of moments of complete obedience. They had witnessed miracles and signs and heard Kingdom truths from the lips of the King of Kings. They had learned much but failed to understand much more. Within that group, Judas was apparently trusted so much that he was the keeper of the group's treasury.

Jesus took what was before them and instituted a new ordinance, the Lord's Supper. He knew they did not understand now, but they would soon understand. He also demonstrated true servant leadership by washing the disciples' feet. These two monumental demonstrations were some of the final instructions Jesus knew He was leaving with His followers.

Jesus and His disciples left the table and traveled to the Garden of Gethsemane. Judas had already departed for reasons unknown to the other disciples.

Many of us have experienced a season when we felt rejected and mistreated. However, can any of it compare to the long night of trials and rejection Jesus experienced? While in the garden, three of His closest followers could not stay awake and pray with Him because they failed to realize the gravity of the moment. One from His select circle of twelve opted to collect 30 pieces of silver in exchange for betraying Him. Jesus was first led before Annas (the former high priest) then before Caiaphas (the current high priest), yet neither one of the Jewish religious leaders was willing to see the truth. Finally after standing before two Jewish courts, Jesus was taken before Pilate (the Roman court). Jew and Gentile alike played a part in the rejection and execution of the Messiah.

The overwhelming truth of today's Bible study is that Jesus knew everything that would take place and He still followed God's plan. All of the places are real. All of the people really existed. And, most importantly, all of the events actually happened. Jesus, God's Son, came to earth, and was betrayed and rejected for our sins. He fulfilled the Father's promises. Jesus became the ransom for us.

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Today's artifact: Steps to Caiaphas' House

A path of stone steps at one time descended from Mount Zion to the Kidron Valley. Jesus and His disciples would have most likely followed this path to Gethsemane and, later, back up to Caiaphas' house.

Think About It

Have you ever pondered the long night of trials and struggle Jesus experienced? Does this impact your feelings about Jesus' sacrificial death for our sins?

DAY 4-TRUTH: JESUS DIED AND ROSE AGAIN

Jesus Is Alive (Isaiah 53:5,9-11; John 19:17-20:18)

Was it hard to pause at the end of yesterday's Bible study? How thankful we are that the story did not end there! God's prophets foretold specific details of this amazing saga hundreds of years before they happened. Many verses in Isaiah 53 point to the things the Messiah would experience. They are not just prophecies of death and punishment; they are also promises of restoration and restitution.

John 19 describes the events of Jesus' final sentence and crucifixion. As Isaiah had prophesied, Jesus died in the company of those who had done wicked (unlawful things), even though He had done no wrong. When Jesus said, "It is finished," He knew that the debt of sin had been paid. Further fulfilling the Isaiah prophecy, Jesus' body was placed in the tomb of a rich man. Joseph of Arimathea had been a follower of Jesus, but he had kept his discipleship secret because he feared the Jews. Now, Joseph stepped forward to ask Pilate for Jesus' body. Joseph and Nicodemus (a Pharisee who also followed Jesus' teachings) took Jesus' body from the cross and wrapped it in linen cloths with the appropriate burial spices. They placed Jesus' body in a newly excavated tomb. Only the wealthy were able to afford the luxury of a personal tomb. Because of the limited descriptions of burial in the New Testament, many of us may have assumed everyone was buried in a cave-like structure with a large round stone over the opening. The truth is this type of tomb spoke of wealth. Many tombs of the less wealthy had only a rock slab to block the entrance.

Jesus had often told His followers what would happen, but they could not grasp the fact that Jesus would die and then come back to life on the third day. So, on the first day of the week, after the Sabbath was ended, Mary Magdalene approached the tomb to help finalize the burial rites for the body. What a shock! The stone was removed and Jesus was not there! Mary quickly ran to tell the disciples. Peter and John rushed back to the tomb to see for themselves. The tomb was empty! The Scripture says they believed but still did not understand.

As Mary stood crying by the empty tomb, she was aware of someone nearby but assumed it was the gardener. When the man asked why she was crying and whom she was looking for, Mary begged him to tell her where they had taken the body of Jesus. Then Jesus said, "Mary." At once Mary realized that it was Jesus who spoke to her. Jesus' words, "Don't cling to me," indicate His physical resurrection. Mary's relief and joy surely had her holding on to her Lord. In a time period and culture that often devalued women, Jesus first appeared to a woman and gave her the job of reporting His appearance to His followers. Mary had the joyous privilege of announcing the good news to the disciples. "I have seen the Lord!" Jesus is alive!

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Today's artifact: Rolling Tomb Stone

During Jesus' lifetime, the poor or lower class utilized nearby caves for burial. Only the wealthy could purchase a tomb cut out of the rock, and only the wealthy could afford a rolling stone for the opening. In fact, very few exist. The vast majority of people would simply place a square block stone against the cave entrance.

Think About It

Have you ever had a time when you felt utterly defeated and then ... God revealed Himself in a very real way? Did you excitedly run to tell friends about it?

DAY 5-TRUTH: THE BIBLE IS TRUE

Philip Told the Good News (Isaiah 53:7-8; Acts 8:26-40)

Our VBS Bible studies have connected Old Testament prophecies to their fulfillment in the New Testament. We sometimes hear people talk as if the Old Testament is irrelevant and unimportant. However, God gave us the entire Bible to help us see the entire message of the gospel. Today's Old Testament connection is right in the middle of a Bible story found in Acts. The Ethiopian was reading from the scroll of Isaiah as he traveled home in his chariot. We know this portion as Isaiah 53:7-8.

The Ethiopian was reading aloud as he returned from worshiping in Jerusalem. Reading aloud was common, especially if the writing was not in a person's native language. The scroll was mostly likely written in Greek. As the chariot rumbled along the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, the Ethiopian was apparently focused on what he was reading and struggling to understand.

Meanwhile, Philip (one of the original men chosen as deacons; Acts 6:5) had been preaching in Samaria with great success. Many were hearing his message and responding to the gospel. Things were going great! It is not uncommon for God to ask His followers to stop what they are doing and go somewhere else just when things seem to be going really well.

Based on the Scripture, it appears Philip did not question or hesitate. He simply "got up and went." When Philip saw the chariot, the Spirit told him to go and join the chariot. Philip ran to catch up and heard the Ethiopian reading. "Do you understand what you're reading?" Philip asked. The Ethiopian expressed his desire to have someone explain it to him and invited Philip to join him in the chariot.

The passage the Ethiopian was reading is from a section of Isaiah often called the "Suffering Servant" passage, which prophesied about the coming Savior. Philip had no problem beginning with that passage and proceeding to explain the good news about Jesus to the Ethiopian.

While they were traveling, they came to some water and the Ethiopian asked to be baptized. He understood the gospel and wanted to follow Jesus. The Ethiopian went on his way rejoicing and Philip was whisked away by the Spirit to Azotus, where Philip continued to preach the gospel.

Today's Bible study helps us know that we can use God's Word to tell others about Jesus. Philip was able to begin with the Ethiopian's question and show him Jesus. We, too, can follow the prompting of the Holy Spirit. We can begin at any point with someone's question and share with him or her about Jesus. We are not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Romans 1:16).

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Today's artifact: The Great Isaiah Scroll (Dead Sea Scrolls)

Isn't it amazing that today's artifact is the same portion of Scripture the Ethiopian was reading? In fact, "The Great Isaiah Scroll" is one of the original seven Dead Sea Scrolls found. It is the largest and best preserved biblical scroll and dates to about 125 BC.

Think About It

Based on your study this week, what truths are more real to you than ever before?