

The Story – Chapters 22 and 23 – *Jesus' Birth and Early Ministry*

Introduction

Looking at Jesus life, death and resurrection, and then focusing on the early church. We'll first consider Jesus ministry and teachings and then see how this carpenter from Nazareth who was killed as an enemy of Rome, started a movement which changed the world and continues to this day.

This first week, we look at Chapters 22 and 23. Most of us know the Christmas story, but do we know about the beginning of Jesus' ministry 30 years later. If you'd like to go right to the source, you can read Matthew 1-4, and 11; Mark 1-3, Luke 1-2 and 8, and John 1-4. Note how Matthew and Luke each tell us part of the traditional Christmas story, while Mark and John mention nothing about Jesus' birth.

Summary of Chapters 22 and 23 – Jesus' Birth and the Beginning of his Ministry

Heaven had been very quiet for 400 years. No burning bushes. No splitting seas. No visions. No dreams. No prophets. No message from God . . .

Then, in a magnificent yet inauspicious way, a word – but not just a word, The Word came. At the time, the event seemed inconsequential to all but a blue-collar carpenter and his teenage bride. But in fact, God had taken on flesh and blood and was first heard in a baby's cry. His birth was unspectacular, yet His presence dispelled darkness and cast an inescapable ray of light across history, past, present, and still unwritten. God's promises to Abraham and David found fulfillment at long last. Jesus would bless all nations and would take His rightful place on David's throne. It is this event to which everything thus far in The Story has pointed and the climax of God's redemptive plan, which first began in the Garden of Eden. Jesus, God in human flesh, was born.

And then after hearing little of Jesus for about 30 years, he bursts on the scene when he comes to be baptized in the River Jordan, and God himself declares his divine approval. The Spirit then drives Jesus into the wilderness, where like the Israelites so many years ago, he is tempted by Satan and formed by God.

We then see Jesus begin his public ministry as he gathers disciples, and provides his followers and others with little glimpses of who he was and what God's kingdom looks like – a party in which the best wine is saved for last, a new birth which begins an eternal relationship, living water which never leaves one thirsty. Most people knew Jesus was something special – a miracle worker who could heal and make people whole. And although his disciples had an inkling that he was from God, it was only the demons who truly understood that Jesus **was** God, come to live among us. As Jesus traveled the area, taught in the synagogues and healed the people, the crowds following him grew. But so did His critics, as Jesus continually violated Sabbath rules and flouted religious traditions by reinterpreting God's commands in new and challenging ways.

Discussion Questions

As you read, remember there are discussion questions for Chapters 22 and 23 on page 483 of the book and also questions that can be found on *The Story* bookmark (which is also on our website). Also, feel free to consider some of the questions below:

1. A period of approximately 400 years elapsed between the Old and New Testaments. During this period there were no prophets or leaders whose words or lives were recorded in Scripture. These years are sometimes referred to as "the silent years" because people say there was no voice from God. Have you experienced a time in your life when you felt God was silent? As you look back, was God really silent, or was something else going on? If so, what?
2. The beginning verses in the Gospel of John reveal one of our most important Christian beliefs. How does John 1:1-14, 18 (p. 309), help clarify the relationship between God and Jesus? Why is this so important? What does it mean to you that God came to inhabit human flesh in Jesus?
3. Jesus' birth was pretty unusual. The Bible tells us that Mary "*pondered these things in her heart*" (p 313, 316). Surely her understanding of who Jesus was grew and matured over the years. How has your understanding of Jesus grown through this study of *The Story*?
4. When Jesus was twelve, he spent some time in the Jerusalem Temple, talking with the religious leaders. The text tells us "everyone who heard [Jesus] was amazed" (p. 315). What do you suppose it was that surprised them? In what ways has Jesus amazed you this week?
5. Jesus was constantly interacting with different types of people: curious Jews, antagonistic Pharisees, tax collectors, and society's castoffs. What can you learn about the heart of God from Jesus' interactions? What can you learn about how to respond to different types of people from observing Jesus?
6. Two very different people Jesus encountered were Nicodemus and the woman at the well (p. 326-329). Why do they represent such a contrast?
7. John the Baptist and Jesus frequently had conflicts with the religious leaders. What issues characterized these conflicts? What lessons can we draw from these encounters?
8. What sign does Jesus give John's disciples that Jesus is, indeed, the Messiah? What does that mean for the nature of God's Kingdom on earth, and for us?