



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Living in the
Shadow of the Manger
(*Children*, pp. 20-28)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:
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Christian Reflection

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Living in the Shadow of the Manger

What is the significance of God choosing, in becoming human, to take on the fragility of infancy and vulnerability of childhood? When we prayerfully reflect on the suffering of the Christ Child with the same seriousness as that of the Christ Man, we will recognize and serve the needs of children entrusted to our care.

Prayer

God of compassion and understanding,
Help us to unite in a faithful and nurturing community of love and support as we care for the needs of children in our families, in our congregation, and in our world.
In the name of your son, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 2:13-23

Responsive Reading[†]

Lully, lullay, thou little tiny Child,
by, by, lully, lullay.

**O sisters too, how may we do,
for to preserve this day
this poor youngling for whom we sing
by, by, lully, lullay?**

Herod the king, in his raging,
chargèd he hath this day
his men of might, in his own sight,
all young children to slay.

**That woe is me, poor Child for thee!
And ever morn and day
for thy parting neither say nor sing,
by, by, lully, lullay.**

Lully, lullay, thou little tiny Child,
by, by, lully, lullay.

Reflection

When we help others who are suffering or vulnerable, it is often because we experience some connection with their lives and can empathize with their distress. Perhaps from personal love we care for a family member or friend who is hurting, patriotism moves us to help a fellow citizen stranded in a foreign country, or a sense of common humanity motivates us to assist a stranger.

Yet there are even stronger, more mysterious ties binding us together. We are members one of another with other Christians in the body of Christ, such that "if one part suffers, every part suffers with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26). And in each suffering person we may see one *for whom* and *with whom* Christ suffers (Matthew 25:37-40).

How may we strengthen our perception of the suffering of Christ within the suffering and vulnerability of children specifically? Guider suggests that we prayerfully reflect on the suffering of the Infant Christ. "God chose to enter into creation,



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taking on not only our humanity, but the fragility and dependency of the human condition as the Living Christ yet unborn, as the Infant Christ in need of affection and protection, and as the Christ Child impressionable and growing up in a dangerous world." The gospels record Christ's infant poverty, rejection, and danger, as well as his loving acceptance, worship, and care. From the "shadow of the manger," we can especially recognize the Infant Christ suffering *for* and *with* the poverty, rejection, and danger of all children in the world today.

Guider offers ten meditations to "prayerfully reflect from the shadow of the cross, from the shadow of the manger, and on the condition of children today." Several of them draw attention to the violent events recorded in Matthew 2:13-23 and mourned in "Lully, Lullay, Thou Little Tiny Child." Use her meditations to guide your prayer as you seek "discernment of our responsibilities as adult Christians to care for children in our congregations, our immediate communities, and in the larger world."

Study Questions

1. Use "Meditation on Name" (*Children*, p. 23) to guide your prayerful reflection. Is God leading you and your congregation to participate in ensuring that each child has a name, family identity, nationality, and sense of belonging?
2. Use "Meditation on Personal Safety" (*Children*, pp. 23-24) to guide your prayerful reflection. What is God saying to you through this meditation about the Christian commitment to at-risk children locally and globally?
3. Use "Meditation on Protection from Cruelty" (*Children*, p. 25) to guide your prayerful reflection. Does God give you and your congregation opportunities to protect children from cruelty and endangerment?
4. Each day this week, use one of Guider's meditations to guide your prayer (*Children*, pp. 23-25). Share with your study group or a Christian friend when God stirs your conscience and provides direction for your congregation's ministry.

Departing Hymn: "Child in the Manger, Infant of Mary"

Child in the manger, infant of Mary,
outcast and stranger, Lord of all,
child who inherits all our transgressions,
all our demerits on him fall.

Once the most holy child of salvation
gently and lowly lived below.
Now as our glorious mighty redeemer,
see him victorious o'er each foe.
Prophets foretold him, infant of wonder;
angels behold him on his throne.
Worthy our savior of all our praises;
happy forever are his own.

Mary M. Macdonald (1789-1872); translated from Gaelic by Lachlan Macbean in *Songs and Hymns of the Gael* (1888)

Tune: BUNESSAN

† "Lully, Lullay, Thou Little Tiny Child," Renaissance Carol.

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Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan	Dual Session (#1)	Dual Session (#2)
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Luke 2:1-20
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (review all)
Questions 1, 2, or 3	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, or 3	Question 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To reflect on the significance of God choosing, in becoming human, to take on the fragility of infancy and vulnerability of childhood.
2. To understand the motivations that Christians have to care for the suffering and vulnerability of children.
3. To prayerfully reflect through guided meditations from the shadow of the cross, from the shadow of the manger, and on the condition of children today.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Children (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. You may download the PDF file for the *Children* issue to make extra copies of Guider's meditations on pp. 23-25. For the departing hymn "Child in the Manger, Infant of Mary," locate the tune BUNNESAN in your church's hymnal. This lovely Gaelic tune is often paired with the hymn "Morning Has Broken."

Begin with a Story

Shannon Sedgwick, a former attorney for International Justice Mission, recounts the story of IJM's rescue of thirty-seven young Cambodian girls from child prostitution. Before IJM arrived, "purchasing" (that is, raping) children in Cambodia, for the sexual pleasure of grown, primarily Western men, was as simple as buying a bag of rice, perhaps easier.

In the sexually abused bodies of five-year-old girls, Shannon Sedgwick has surely seen hell. But she has a different take on it: "Nom, Lan, and thirty-five others are free," she reports. "It was the closest I have ever come to seeing my God as I played with their beautiful smiling faces. I can only imagine what heaven looks like, but I did get a glimpse in Cambodia of all places. I am certain of that" (*Children*, p. 83).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude with a prayer that God's suffering as the Infant Christ will be a window through which we can clearly see Christ suffering with and for children today.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 2:13-23 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

The lesson explores one key motivation that Christians have for caring for the suffering and vulnerability of others, even when they are strangers. We may say about the one who is in distress, "This is someone for whom Christ suffered and died," "In the person's suffering I can recognize again the suffering of

Jesus,” or “I know that, even now, Christ shares the suffering of this person.” Of course, seeing our Savior’s suffering exhibited through other people’s distress is not our only motivation to help them; but what a powerful connection it is that binds us to one another!

Guider invites us to deepen and extend this regard for others, especially children, by considering how God endures suffering, danger, and vulnerability as an Infant Child, and not only as the Crucified One. She provides ten meditations to guide us to reflect prayerfully from the shadow of the cross, from the shadow of the manger, and on the condition of children today (see *Children*, pp. 23-25).

The U.N. *Declaration on the Rights of the Child* (1959) provides an outline for the conditions addressed in the meditations. Without endorsing all of “the ideological motivations and political agendas associated with the United Nations,” Guider believes “some gospel value is witnessed by our upholding the aspects of *Rights of the Child* that can be supported and strengthened by Christian churches and church-based non-governmental organizations. When it comes to taking seriously the *Rights of the Child*, throwing the metaphorical baby out with the bath water is not an acceptable strategy for Christians whose vested interest in following Jesus requires pursuing all that is truly in the best interests of children.”

Guide group members through at least one of the meditations suggested in the study questions: “Meditation on Name,” “Meditation on Personal Safety,” or “Meditation on Protection from Cruelty.” Encourage members to use other meditations in personal devotion. Or, you may plan a second session in order to share some of these meditations as a group.

Study Questions

1. A selected reader might read each part of the meditation and provide members a few minutes to reflect silently on that part. Or, members might be given printed copies of the meditation to read and reflect on several minutes individually. In either case, offer members a chance to share their memories, images, emotions, and ideas with one another.

For example, when members recall Christ’s identification as “King of the Jews” and how this naming shaped the course of his life and ultimately cost him his life, what biblical events and images do they remember? What emotions do they experience? After reflecting on how Christ’s being identified as the infant king of the Jews, not only threatens his life, but endangers the lives of other children as well, what images, ideas, or feelings have they experienced that they would share with the group? Do they have a suggestion how they or your congregation might be called, either locally or globally, to ensure that children have a name, family identity, nationality, and sense of belonging? Encourage them to mention individual children they care for, as well as projects or programs of ministry that are available to them.

2. Use the meditation as described above in question 1. Give members an opportunity to share their reflections from the shadow of the cross, from the shadow of the manger, and about the condition of children today.
3. Use the meditation as described above in question 1. Give members an opportunity to share their reflections from the shadow of the cross, from the shadow of the manger, and about the condition of children today.
4. Encourage members to write short journal notes on each meditation and to share some of these in a follow-up group session. They might record biblical passages or events that they thought about, as well as personal memories, images, emotions, or ideas that occurred to them. Ask them to notice in their news sources this week any relevant information about the condition of children in the world. How do these stories relate to their prayerful meditation?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.