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infuse

Christmas

light splits the night



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Christmas

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by Diane Averill
and Amy Brown


FAITH
ALIVE®
Christian Resources

Grand Rapids, Michigan

*“Do not be afraid.
I bring you good news that will
cause great joy for all the people.
Today . . . a Savior has been born to you;
he is the Messiah, the Lord.”*

—Luke 2:10-11

We are grateful for the many comments and helpful suggestions of interested small groups and leaders who contributed to the development of this study.

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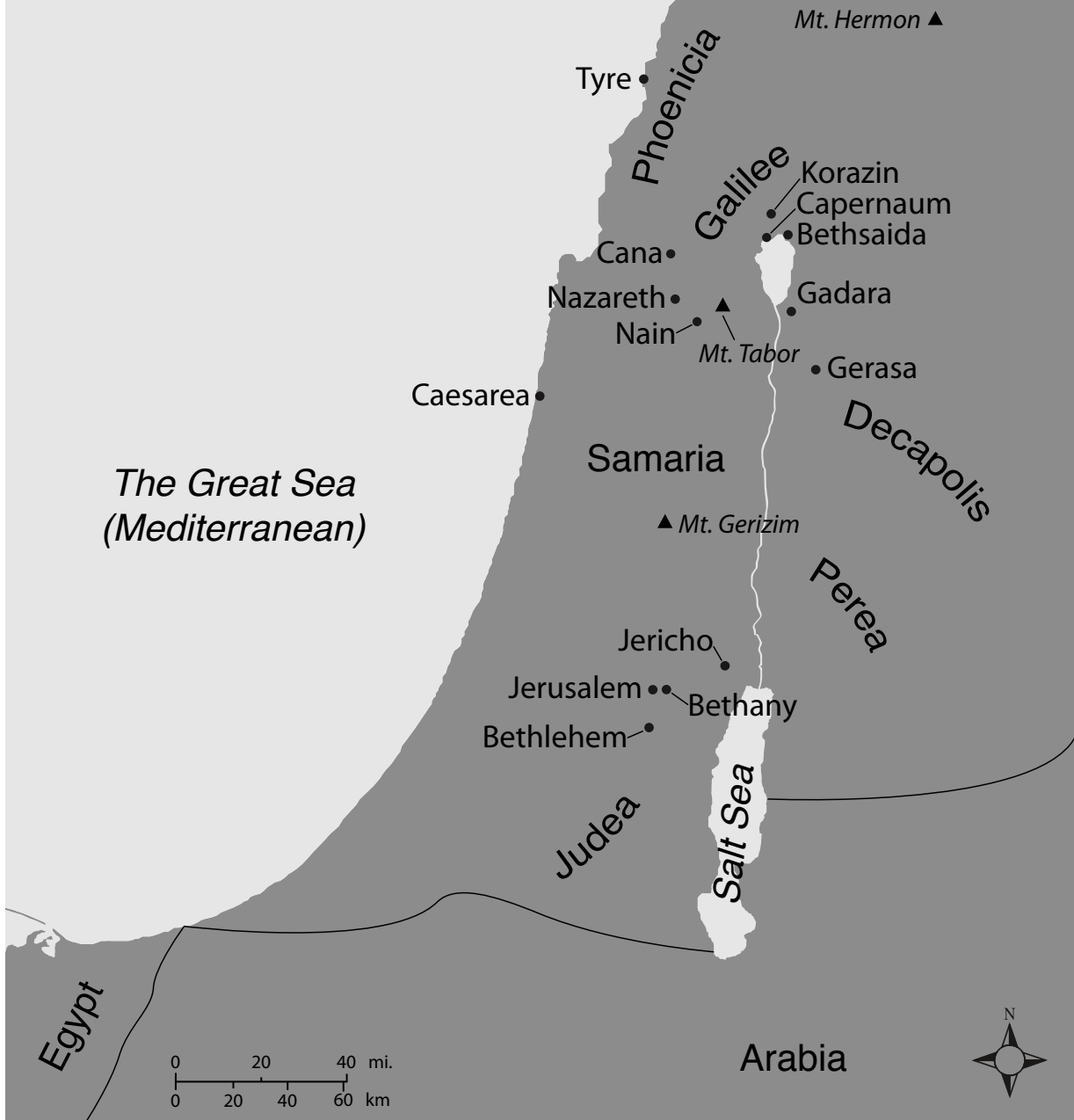
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Judea in Jesus' Day



Glossary

Abraham—father of the Jewish people (Israel), renowned for his faith in God’s promises (Gen. 12:1-7; 15:6; Heb. 11:8-16). Also called “the father of all who believe” in Christ (Rom. 4:11).

angel(s)—supernatural beings created by God to be messengers, to carry out God’s will in this world, and to serve and care for all who belong to God (Ps. 91:11-12).

angel of the Lord—This figure appears at times to God’s people (often as a man) to make announcements or judgments in God’s name (see Gen. 16:7; 22:11-18; Josh. 5:13-15; Judg. 6:11-12; 13:2-23). Sometimes this angel is also referred to as “the LORD” (for example, see Gen. 16:13; Judg. 6:14), and the *NIV Study Bible* explains that “as the LORD’s personal messenger who represented him and bore his credentials, the angel could speak on behalf of (and so be identified with) the One who sent him.” (See also Ex. 23:20-23.)

Babylon—main capital of the Babylonian Empire (614-539 B.C.), which ranged from the Persian Gulf to Egypt and north into part of Asia Minor (modern Turkey). The Jews became subject to Babylon in 605 B.C., and Jewish royalty and influential families were exiled. Another deportation took place in 597 B.C. in which about 10,000 soldiers, smiths, and officials were exiled. Babylon conquered and destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and scattered more of the Jews around the empire. After another depor-

tation in 582 B.C. the estimated total of Jewish exiles was about 70,000. (See 2 Kings 24-25; 2 Chron. 36; Esther 2:5-7; Dan. 1:1-5.)

Caesar Augustus—ruler of the Roman Empire at the time of Christ’s birth. Augustus was the first caesar to rule over Judea (31 B.C.-A.D. 14), and he conducted his first census when Jesus was born (Luke 2:1).

Christ—see **Jesus Christ, Messiah**.

David—Israel’s greatest king in the Old Testament. The Lord promised that one of David’s descendants would rule faithfully on his throne forever (2 Sam. 7). As Matthew 1 shows, Jesus Christ is that “Son of David.”

disciple—a follower; one who is taught. This term refers commonly to followers to Jesus.

exile—The people of Israel were exiled because of their sin against God. After King David’s son Solomon died, the nation split into a northern kingdom (ten tribes) and a southern kingdom (two tribes). The northern kingdom was conquered and exiled by the Assyrian Empire in 722 B.C. (2 Kings 17). The southern kingdom was overtaken by the Babylonian Empire and exiled in several deportations (2 Kings 24-25; 2 Chron. 36). See also **Babylon**.

faith—defined in Hebrews 11:1 as “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” Can be defined in simple terms as “belief and trust.” True saving faith is a gift that

consists of knowledge and confidence—a sure knowledge by which we accept as true all that God has revealed in his Word, and confidence that all our sins are forgiven in Jesus’ name through his death on the cross as our Savior.

the Father—the first person of the Trinity. The other two persons are God the Son (Jesus Christ) and God the Holy Spirit. They are three persons in one being.

favor—God’s merciful grace to us. See **grace**, **mercy**.

Galilee—the Roman province in northern Palestine where Jesus grew up.

Gentiles—all people who are not Jews.

good news—see **gospel**.

gospel—literally means “good news” and refers to the message of God’s salvation from sin and the promise of eternal life through Christ.

grace—God’s undeserved favor and forgiving love. Jesus is the full expression of God’s grace for the salvation of all who believe in him as Lord and Savior (Eph. 2:8-10).

holy—pure; set apart to bring glory to God.

Holy Spirit—the third person of the Trinity. The other two persons are God the Father and God the Son (Jesus Christ). They are three persons in one being. The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, works true faith in our hearts, and empowers us to live holy lives. The Spirit’s presence in our hearts guarantees that we will receive God’s promises (John 16:7-15; Rom. 8:11; Eph. 1:13-14).

hope—in combination with faith this means looking ahead in solid trust to the fulfillment of all God’s promises (see Heb. 7:19; 11:1).

Isaac—Abraham and Sarah’s son, who inherited all the promises God made with Abraham.

Isaiah—a Hebrew prophet from around 700 B.C. who foretold the coming of Christ (Messiah) and described his service and suffering.

Jacob—Isaac’s son whom God renamed Israel (Gen. 32:28) and who became the patriarch of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Jerusalem—Israel’s historic capital city. As the location for God’s temple, it became the center for the Jewish religion and the spiritual headquarters of the nation of Israel.

Jesus Christ—the sinless Son of God, who gave his life as the payment for our sin. *Jesus* means “Savior,” and *Christ (Messiah)* means “Anointed One.” He is the second person of the Trinity. The other two persons are God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. They are three persons in one being. See also **Messiah**.

Jews—the people of Israel, descendants of Abraham; God’s special people chosen to be a blessing to all other nations (Gen. 12:2-3).

Jordan—a river running through Palestine from the Sea of Galilee to the Salt Sea (Dead Sea).

Joseph—a carpenter from Nazareth in Galilee whom God chose to be the husband of Mary and the adoptive father of Jesus.

kingdom of God—God’s rule over all things, especially evident in the lives of his people, who follow Jesus and believe in him as Savior.

Mary—a young virgin whom God chose to be the mother of Jesus, conceived through the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:18-20; Luke 1:26-38).

mercy—God’s free and undeserved compassion. To be more precise, it refers to showing leniency by holding back punishment even if justice calls for it (see Mic. 7:18-19).

Messiah—the promised deliverer of God’s people. Both the Hebrew word *Messiah* and the Greek word *Christ* mean “Anointed One.” Through the prophets God promised to send the Messiah, the Savior-King, to deliver his people from oppressors and to rule in righteousness forever. The people misunderstood those promises, however, and looked for a Messiah who would be a political ruler and gather an army to rout all physical enemies (see John 6:15; Acts 1:6). But as Jesus revealed through his work and teaching, the Messiah came to save God’s people from the oppression of sin and death and to give them new life forever with God. He rules today in heaven at the right hand of the Father, and when he comes again at the end of time, he will fully establish God’s everlasting kingdom of righteousness on earth. (See Matt. 26:63-64; John 16:5-16; 1 Cor. 15; Rev. 21:1-5; 22:1-5.)

Naphtali—with Zebulun (Isa. 9:1), one of the northern tribes of ancient Israel that were first to be conquered and exiled by the Assyrian Empire in 722 B.C. (See 2 Kings 17.) See also **exile**.

Nazareth—a small town in the province of Galilee where Jesus grew up.

peace—a result of salvation through Jesus Christ (reconciliation with God) that yields an assurance of well-being and freedom (guided by the Spirit) to live wholly in relationship with God

and others. (See John 14:26-27; Rom. 5:1-11; Eph. 2:13-22; Phil. 4:4-9.)

prophet—someone who speaks God’s message (see Deut. 18:17-19); generally a person who preached God’s Word and (in some cases) foretold the future as revealed by the Lord.

righteous—considered right with God; sometimes this term is used to describe a person of upright character who strives to honor God (Matt. 1:19; see Gen. 6:9; 15:6; Job 1:1). As God’s people, we are called to be righteous and are credited with Christ’s righteousness: we are made right with God through Jesus’ death and given the ability to live in right relationships with others through the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 3:21-26).

salvation—deliverance from oppressors; ultimately, salvation in the Bible refers to deliverance from our slavery to sin. Jesus came to save all who believe in him as Savior from the curse of sin and death, so that we can be reconciled with God, given the righteousness of Christ, and have new life forever with God. (See John 3:16; 8:34-36; Rom. 3-8.)

sin—disobedience to God; refers to breaking God’s law (1 John 3:4).

Spirit (Holy Spirit)—see **Holy Spirit**.

Zebulun—see **Naphtali**.

Zion—another name for the city of Jerusalem (ancient Jebus), conquered by David, which later became the center of worship for God’s people Israel. In David’s day, it was known as the fortress of Zion (the meaning of the name is unknown). (See Judg. 19:10; 2 Sam. 5:6-7; Ps. 2:6; 9:11.)

How to Use This Study

This Bible study aims to help people engage in lively discussion and learning without having studied the text before doing each lesson together.

Map, Glossary

Near the front of this booklet are a map and glossary that can be useful for locating places and the meanings of terms mentioned in the Scriptures for this study.

Questions for Discussion

The main questions for discussion are numbered and are in bold print. Along with these questions you'll find points "to think about as you discuss" to help spark ideas for responding to each main question. In addition, you'll often see questions that help to connect the story to everyday life under the subheading "What does this mean to me?"

Please do not feel you have to answer every question in the lesson material. Our goal is to help make Bible study a creative, flexible, exploratory exercise in which you engage with your group and grow to know God and each other better.

Follow-up Ideas

At the end of each lesson are Explore! ideas that you might like to use for follow-up. These include activities that can help you learn more about items of interest related to the lesson and apply your learning to everyday life. There are also music and video suggestions.

Break Away (at-home readings)

After the study material for each lesson you'll find readings for use at home. Take a break with God and do some thinking about the lesson material and how the Lord can use it to shape your life. If you like, clip these pages out and set them in places around your home or at work where they can remind you to spend time with God. You might also like to memorize some of the Scriptures used in these pieces.

An Invitation and Prayer of Commitment

If you're searching for a relationship with God, or studying with a friend who is searching, see An Invitation (to believe and commit to God) and a Prayer of Commitment provided on the next page of this booklet. These can be helpful in talking one-to-one with God or with someone who is ready to make a faith commitment to God.

Leader's Notes

At the Faith Alive website page featuring this Bible study—visit www.FaithAliveResources.org, search for "Infuse Christmas," and click on the link to "Leader's Notes"—you'll find tips for leading this small group study.

We wish you God's blessing as you participate in Bible study together. Have fun as you learn and grow closer to God and one another!

The following invitation and prayer tools may be helpful to you in approaching God or in helping someone else do so.

An Invitation

Listen now to what God is saying to you. Maybe you are aware of things in your life that keep you from coming near to God. Maybe you have thought of God as someone who is unsympathetic, angry, and punishing. You may feel as if you don't know how to pray or how to come near to God.

“But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved” (Eph. 2:4-5). Jesus, God's Son, died on the cross to save us from our sins. It doesn't matter where you come from, what you've done in the past, or what your heritage is. God has been watching over you and caring for you, drawing you closer. “You also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation” (Eph. 1:13). Do you want to follow Jesus? It's as simple as A-B-C:

- **A**dmit that you have sinned and you need God's forgiveness.
- **B**elieve that God loves you and that Jesus has already paid the price for your sins.
- **C**ommit your life to God, asking the Lord to forgive your sins, nurture you as his child, and fill you with the Holy Spirit.

Prayer of Commitment

Here is a prayer of commitment recognizing Jesus as Savior. If you want to be in a loving relationship with Jesus Christ, pray this prayer. If you have already committed your life to Jesus, use this prayer for renewal and praise.

Dear God, I'm sorry for the wrong and sinful things that I've done. I need your forgiveness. I know I need Jesus as my Savior, and I know you listen to sinners who are truthful to you. Please forgive me and help me to live in a right relationship with you.

Thank you, Jesus, for dying on the cross to pay the price for my sins. Father, please take away the guilt that I feel because of my sin, and bring me into your presence. Thank you, Lord, for loving me and saving me.

Holy Spirit of God, help me to pray, and teach me to live by your Word. Help me to follow you faithfully. Make me more like Jesus each day, and help me to share your love and good news with others everywhere. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Introduction

What comes to mind when you think of Christmas? Gifts and mistletoe? Family parties and high-calorie treats? Decorated stores and Santa Claus? It can seem odd that the origin of such a glittering holiday is in the birth of a child long ago, whose arrival had none of the comforts and pleasures we connect with Christmas today. That baby boy was born in a cattle stall over two thousand years ago, and his first bed was the animals' feed trough (a manger).

Of the countless babies born in this world, what was so special about this one? Several hundreds of years before his birth, prophets had foretold that a child would be born who would deliver God's people and rule the nations of the earth with justice. This baby would become a king, but not just any king—this baby was actually the Son of God himself in human form: King of kings, Lord of lords, Savior of the world.

That's how Jesus Christ, the Savior-Messiah, came to us—a tiny baby who grew into a person like no other in history. It is his birth we celebrate on December 25. His birth inspired decorations in the shapes of stars and angels, and it prompted much of the music we hear only at this time of year. Each Christmas season, with its parties and decorations and singing, gives us an opening to remember the strange and wonderful time when light split the night and God became one of us.

Advent—Participating in Christ's Coming

Advent is the season of preparation in which Christians around the world ready their hearts and homes for the celebration of Christ's birth. It begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas and ends on Christmas Eve. When Christmas Eve falls on a Sunday, it is considered to be the fourth Sunday in Advent, with Christmas Eve itself beginning at sundown.

Many churches and families count down the weeks of Advent by using an Advent wreath. This circular wreath (often made with evergreens) sits on a table and holds five candles—four in a circular pattern, and a fifth, called the Christ Candle (usually white), at the center. Each week a candle is lit (one the first week, two the second, and so on), and on Christmas Eve all

In churches of the Western tradition, begun in Rome, **Advent** marks the beginning of the new church year and is celebrated with the use of an Advent wreath (below).



of the candles are lit, including the Christ Candle. Candles of any color that reminds people of Christmas may be used. Some traditions call for four red or blue candles surrounding a white one. Many Advent candle sets come with three purple candles, one pink candle, and a white candle for the center. The purple can represent preparation as well as Christ's royalty or his passion (suffering on the cross); the pink can represent joy; and the white usually represents purity and light. If you decide to use these colors, the order often used is purple for weeks one and two; pink for week three; purple for week four; and white for Christmas Eve—and then, optionally, all candles lit again on Christmas Day.

In addition to the colors of the candles, there is a theme for each week. Again, this may vary with different traditions. In this study the themes we will be using are hope, love, joy, and peace, and then the last candle symbolizes the celebration of Christ's birth.

This study follows the traditional four weeks of Advent as a guide for developing greater joy and anticipation for the wonder-filled Christmas season. The fifth lesson then includes a celebration of Christ that looks ahead to his second coming, so you may want to plan a party (see p. 54)!

Optional ideas to consider before you begin:

- Make or buy an Advent wreath for your group. Each week, begin your session by having someone in the group lead the Advent Wreath exercise, reading aloud the brief Advent Scripture and Advent reading, lighting the candle(s), and leading the group prayer. The group may also wish to sing the suggested Christmas carol.
- To create anticipation for your Christmas study, send out holiday-themed invitations. These can be made easily and inexpensively on a computer or with craft paper and are a wonderful way to invite someone new.
- Christmas cookies, cocoa, mulled cider, or other traditional holiday treats are a delicious part of the Advent season. Plan ahead and ask group members to take turns bringing in their favorites each week. On the final week you'll want several people to participate with the celebration! (See p. 54.)
- Some lessons include optional craft projects in the Explore! section that follows the discussion questions. With a little preparation, these can make for a fun addition to your Bible study!

Lesson 1

A Light in Deep Darkness

Isaiah 9:1-7



Advent Wreath (Optional)

Week One—Hope

Read: Isaiah 7:14

We light this first candle of Advent remembering the **hope** the prophets and the people had that someday a special child would be born.

Group prayer: Thank you, God, that you fulfilled the hopes of your people when you sent your Son into the world as a baby. Thank you that because he came, we can have hope as well. Amen.

Christmas carol: “Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus”

From the prophecy of Isaiah we learn of a special child to be born. This child would be like no other; his life and death would change all of history. As we read, some of the places and historical references may be unfamiliar, but the emotions and experiences are timeless. Consider how these verses speak to us today as we recognize the hope we have received in Christ.

Opener (optional)

Many people have conflicting emotions about the Christmas season. Describe some of the emotions you experience during this holiday.

Isaiah 9:1-2

Isaiah was a prophet (740-681 B.C.) who wrote about the present and the future. He challenged and advised the kings of Israel that ruled during his lifetime. To those who had turned away from God, he offered a voice of judgment; to God’s faithful people, who were living in uncertain times, he offered a voice of hope and comfort. In this passage Isaiah prophesied about an eternal kingdom to be ushered in by the birth of a special child.

1. What are some of the contrasting images in these two verses?

Why do you think Isaiah used them?

To think about as you discuss . . .

- to whom Isaiah was speaking
- what his words would have meant to them

See the glossary

for information on the place names in this passage of Isaiah.

FLASHBACK

A fulfilled prophecy (Isa. 9:1–2)—here Isaiah speaks to the most northern of Israel’s tribal groups, Zebulun and Naphtali, who were the first to fall in the Assyrian invasions of the eighth century B.C. Through the prophet, God promises that these territories, now “walking in darkness,” will be the first to see “a great light.” Matthew 4:13–17 shows that Jesus fulfilled this prophecy as he began his teaching and healing ministry in Galilee.

In John 8:12 Jesus declares, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

2. What kind of emotional atmosphere do the people of Israel seem to be living under?

To think about as you discuss . . .

- words in the passage that communicate emotion
- changes that would take place

3. What hope does this passage offer to people in Isaiah’s day? How about in our day?

To think about as you discuss . . .

- why hope is important
- how this hope will come, and what it looks like

What does this mean to me?

- How can this light and the hope it brings make an impact in your Christmas celebrations this year?

hope—in combination with faith this means looking ahead in solid trust to the fulfillment of all God’s promises (see Heb. 7:19; 11:1).



Isaiah 9:3-5

4. What are the feelings expressed in these verses, and what are the reasons for these feelings?

To think about as you discuss . . .

- how God's promises bring us hope
- what freedom and peace look like
- implications of the burning of warriors' boots and battle garments

5. What are some events or experiences that would cause you to express yourself in the way the Israelites did?

To think about as you discuss . . .

- how God has taken care of you
- a time of blessing in your life (perhaps a joyful Christmas memory)

What does this mean to me?

- If you knew there would be no more war, how would your life be different?

6. What are some kinds of "yokes" people put on themselves?

To think about as you discuss . . .

- how the Christmas season can become a burden
- expectations we put on ourselves
- expectations others put on us

Midian's defeat?

The defeat of Midian mentioned in Isaiah 9:4 was an important event in Israel's history. Gideon, a reluctant warrior, with only three hundred untrained men, routed their oppressors, the Midianites, with the help of God's amazing power. The story is in Judges 6-7.

The Reformation Study Bible explains the

burning of battle garments as follows: "The debris left from battle can be removed and burned when fighting stops. God will bring an end to war."



The word **advent** means “coming” or “arrival,” especially in reference to something important. During this season we anticipate with joy the past arrival of the infant Jesus, who came to save us from our sins (Matt. 1:21). We also look forward to Christ’s Second Advent, when he will come again at the end of time.

Isaiah 9:6

7. From the statement here, how would you describe the child to be born?

8. What comes to mind as you reflect on the titles for this child?

Use the following Scriptures to expand your thoughts:

- Wonderful Counselor (Rom. 11:33-34)
- Mighty God, Everlasting Father (John 1:1-3)
- Prince of Peace (Rom. 5:1-11; Eph. 2:13-22)

If there’s time, see also Isaiah 11:1-9 and note similarities you find . . .

Isaiah 9:7

9. What type of government is described here?

To think about as you discuss . . .

- words and phrases that show this government is different from others
- the positive results of this government
- who and what brings it about

A Son Called Father?

Though Jesus, as the Son of God, is not to be confused with God the Father, scholars note that in his role as our provider and protector in saving us from sin, the Son born to us is rightly called Everlasting Father. Just as “God so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son” (John 3:16), so the Son loves us so much that he came to save us (see Phil. 2:6-8).

For a helpful reference about “**David’s throne**,” see Luke 1:26-33, where we read of an angel speaking to Mary about the birth of Jesus. Other information comes from the genealogies of Jesus in Matthew 1 and Luke 3, which we’ll cover in lesson 2.

10. Picture a place where justice and righteousness are established forever. What would it be like in this place?

To think about as you discuss . . .

- how it would be to live in complete safety
- what it would be like with no injustice or prejudice
- how people would treat one another

As you think about these possibilities, you may want to **reflect on Revelation 21:1-7**.

What does this mean to me?

- How does this picture of life give us hope as we celebrate the Christmas season?

More to Think About

- In all of your hopes for the Christmas season this year, how can you focus more intently on the hope described in Isaiah 9:1-7?

- Consider these words from Ephesians 2:12-14: “Remember that . . . you were separate from Christ . . . without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace . . .” What emotions does this passage evoke in you? Why?

- Has the Christmas season been a burden to you in the past? Make a list of your expectations (can you think of ten or more?), and then read through them, taking a few moments to think about each one. How many are truly necessary for a peaceful and hope-filled Christmas?



Explore!

(optional activities to do with your group or on your own)

- As a follow-up to this lesson, listen to Handel's *Messiah*, a musical feast in the Christmas season. The refrain known as "For Unto Us a Child Is Born" is based on verses from Isaiah 9:1-7. (Find it on www.youtube.com by searching "Messiah For unto us a child.")
- Consider getting involved in a cause that looks ahead in hope to the coming of God's kingdom in its fullness. Check with health, welfare, political action, denominational, and environmental agencies for ideas and help in getting started. Be creative! Follow the Lord's leading to do something that can make an impact for Christ in your community and beyond.
- **Craft idea!** The Christmas star is often used as a symbol of hope. A beautiful ornament can be made by constructing a Moravian (or German) star out of simple strips of paper. Websites with detailed instructions can be found online. Just type "how to make paper German star" in your Internet browser search area. Hang your completed star in a place where you can see it often—and pause to think about the hope that Christ offers you this Christmas season.



Break Away (at-home readings)

God Keeps His Promises

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

—Matthew 1:22-23

The "prophet" whom Matthew is referring to is Isaiah, who wrote about the coming of Immanuel ("God with us") about seven hundred years before his birth (see Isa. 7:14). This was a promise pointing to the Messiah of God's people (see glossary), and those centuries made for a long, hard wait for the people of Israel.

Often it seems as if God waits a long time to answer our prayers, and we might wonder if he even hears them. Is there something in your life that

you have been praying about for a long time? Are there prayers you have stopped asking, because you've given up hope of receiving an answer? (Don't give up. God always hears us, and he is faithful. But he is also God; he doesn't always answer in the way we might want or expect. See Isa. 55:6-7; Matt. 6:5-15; Acts 2:21; James 1:5; 4:3; 5:16; 1 John 4:14-15.)

Christmas is a season of hope. Matthew 1:22-23 points to the reason why. God's people prayed for a very long time, keeping their faith alive in the hope that God heard them and would answer. When he did answer, it was in a far greater way than his people imagined (see Eph. 3:20-21). Instead of coming to save only them, the Lord came as a tiny baby with the power and desire to save all people who would call out to him. His answer included us!

Take a few minutes to think about some prayers God has answered in your life. If you are using a journal, write them down. Thank the Lord for the work he has been doing in your life.

Where in your life do you need hope? Ask God for help with that, and ask him to build your faith by rekindling your hope.

Longing for Righteousness

“At that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Savior.”

—Jeremiah 33:15-16

Righteousness is the condition of being right with God, and it connects closely with justice being done in all kinds of relationships. In this broken world, sadly, unrighteousness seems to flourish more than righteousness does. But wherever the Lord is at work in us and in this world, we can find evidence of righteousness, justice, peace, and goodwill.

During the Christmas season people often do many things to try to lift the burdens of those who suffer because of the unrighteousness of others— gifts are given to children of prison inmates, money is sent to women's shelters, cards are sent to soldiers overseas. There is a longing, a hope, within each of us for a world that is completely just and righteous.





That desire comes from God. We have been born into a broken world, and we ourselves are so broken that, on our own, it is impossible to please God by what we do. Our hope can only be in “The Lord Our Righteous Savior,” who can transform us from being part of the problem to part of the solution.

Meditate on these words from 1 Corinthians 13:4-8:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. . . .

Ask yourself, are you loving toward others? Toward your family? Toward the person in the checkout line? Toward the person who cuts you off in traffic? Toward the person begging for change on the street corner? Toward your new or annoying next-door neighbor? Do you even know your neighbors? Righteousness and justice start in our hearts, changing the world around us, wherever we are.

Ask God for the strength and desire to bring his kingdom into the communities in which you live. This Christmas season, what is *one* thing you can do to bring God’s righteousness and love to people around you?

God’s Eternal Tenderness

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations. . . . A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. . . . In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”
—Isaiah 42:1-4

This sketch of Jesus (also used in Matt. 12:18-21) is not usually what we picture when we think of someone who has the authority to “bring justice to the nations.” Why do you think God chose to send the world this kind of deliverer?

God’s kindness, says Romans 2:4, is intended to lead us to repentance. He is patient with us, “not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to

repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). How do these descriptions of God contrast with the ways people often view God?

How do your thoughts and behaviors portray Christ to others? If you were the only picture of Christ that someone ever saw, what would they think God thought of them?

“God is *love*,” says the apostle John in 1 John 4:8. Meditating again on 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, we can read the passage this way, substituting *love* with *God*, whose identity is *love*:

God is patient, God is kind. He does not envy, he does not boast, he is not proud. God does not dishonor others, he is not self-seeking, he is not easily angered, he keeps no record of wrongs. God does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. God always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. God never fails

Serving this God gives us hope. Ask the Spirit of God to give you a clearer picture of his tenderness and love toward you and toward the people around you.

Humble Beginnings

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

—Micah 5:2

Bethlehem, a tiny, unimportant town in Israel, became the center of the world on the night Christ was born. No worldly king would have chosen such an ignoble place for his son.

Why do you think God seems to love humble, unworthy things? What is it about humble, unnoticeable people that makes them attractive to God?

Take a few minutes to meditate on the humility of Christ’s birth—the tiny town, the teenage mother, the barn or stable in which he was born (see Luke 2:7—his mother “placed him in a manger,” a feed trough for livestock). Contrast this with the expectations placed on Christmas in our culture





today. What is one way you can bring some of this humility back into your Christmas celebration?

Meditate on the power of God that used such a humble beginning to change the world's history. Are there any places in your life where you feel small, weak, or defeated? Ask God to empower you by his Spirit to turn them into places where you can see his hand at work in your life.

Living an Examined Life

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” —John 10:10

The season of Advent (anticipating Christmas) is a good time to take stock of your life. A good place to start is by asking God to examine your life. According to Richard Foster in his book *Prayer*, there are two things to reflect on when we do this. The first is to become aware of how God has been present to us during our day and how we have responded to him. The second is to allow God to bring to our attention those areas that need his cleansing, purifying, and healing.

Today, as you rest in God's presence, invite the Holy Spirit to examine your heart. Pray as David did in Psalm 139:23-24: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

Christ came not so that we would feel condemned for our many shortcomings (see John 3:17). He came so that we can have life to the full. When you think of a full life, what do you see? How do you think a full life brings glory to God? Why is it important to be aware of how you are living your life?

The message the prophets spoke was a song of hope. Christ is that hope. Meditate on the work he is doing right now in your life. Thank him for the things he is doing, and ask him to do more!

What comes to mind when you think of Christmas? Gifts and decorations? Family parties and high-calorie treats? Santa Claus? It can seem odd that the origin of such a glittering holiday is in the birth of a child long ago, whose arrival had none of the comforts and pleasures we connect with Christmas today. That child was born in a cattle stall over two thousand years ago, and his first bed was the animals' feed trough (a manger).

That's how Jesus Christ, the Savior-Messiah and King of kings, came to us—and grew into a person like no other in history. Each Christmas season with all its fanfare gives us an opening to remember the strange and wonderful time when light split the night and God became one of us.

Please note: This study is designed for 4 to 5 sessions to be used during the weeks leading up to Christmas (the season of Advent). (Optional Advent activities are included.) If your group doesn't have time for all five sessions, you can omit lesson 5 (or do it after Christmas). Either way, be sure to include a celebration (details inside)!



Infuse Bible Studies aim to help people discover where faith and life meet. With these studies you can engage in lively discussion and learning without having studied the Bible before doing each lesson, and you can use these effectively for small group or personal study.

The approach to Bible study in this series emphasizes discovery (the reader discovers what the Bible has to say by asking questions and seeking answers from the passage studied). Additional insights from history and other sources help to fill in details that connect this story to the larger story of God's love and care for us all.

We hope this study stirs your heart to fully know God and the abundant life the Lord intends for us.