



leader's notes for

Christmas

light splits the night

by Diane Averill
and Amy Brown
and staff



Grand Rapids, Michigan

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As You Prepare to Lead

Whether you are the main leader for this Bible study or your group's leadership is often shared among members, you are called to an important task. So be in prayer for your group members and for newcomers whom God may lead to join you during this study.

This study material is designed to be mainly self-led—that is, groups will be able to work through the material mainly on their own. For some parts of the lessons, however, it can help to include some leader's tips, so we hope you become familiar with this material for leaders, using it as you prepare to lead.

The group's main purpose is to gather to grow closer to God and to each other, being built up in faith so that everyone may also grow to be witnesses for the Lord (Acts 1:8), sharing God's love and good news with others.

Some General Discussion Tips and Ground Rules for Leaders

- In this study all questions related to the topic are acceptable. This style of study aims for Bible discovery and invites people to develop a style of asking questions about the text as they learn about and grow closer to God.
- No previous experience at studying the Bible is needed. If some or all members of your group are completely new to the Bible, you may want to take additional time to work with them so they don't feel left out or unable to participate. This may mean restructuring your lesson time a bit, or simply using more meetings to work through the material together. Most important for newcomers is that in the small group experience they are encouraged, listened to, nurtured, and given ample opportunity to grow spiritually. If necessary, share these concerns with members who are already familiar with the Bible, and encourage everyone to work together to help newcomers grow in faith.
- As you get to know group members, you'll also gain a sense of how much to press questions that ask for personal examples or responses. Be open to the Spirit's guidance on whether to touch on some questions lightly or perhaps to skip them altogether, particularly if you know of a sensitive issue in someone's background (such as abortion, abuse, spousal infidelity, and so on) that could bring up painful memories if discussed. If painful matters do come up, emphasize God's mercy, forgiveness, and desire to restore and give everyone new life, possible in Christ.
- Everyone should respect the confidentiality of the group. Personal information shared within the group should stay within the group.
- This study does not require homework or outside activities. But group members may certainly read more of the Bible at home and search out answers to questions by way of other resources for follow-up discussions, especially on tough questions that are hard to answer.
- As leader, you do not have all the answers, and together with your group you may find there is no known answer to some questions. Note that the Bible does not answer all of our questions but does give us sufficient information to know who God is and why God wants a healthy relationship with us.
- You're all here to see what the Bible has to say, not to argue right or wrong. Some questions may not have an absolute right answer, and experts will often disagree on the interpretation of a passage that is difficult to understand. Remember that conveying the main ideas and concepts is most important.
- Avoid letting discussions get off track or divisive. Get to know your group members and how they interact together. Keep an eye out for questions (especially in *What Does This Mean to Me?* sections) or topics that some group members might use to push a political agenda or controversial

issue. If divisive comments come up, encourage everyone to respect each other's input and to look to the Spirit of God for guidance together. It may be best to move on from there to the next question or Scripture passage to help everyone stay focused on the lesson. If necessary, meet later with group members who may have strong opinions, and gently encourage them to keep the Scriptures and group study in focus during discussion times.

- Many of the questions (especially in What Does This Mean to Me?) are meant to help participants apply the passage personally. Bible study is not simply an intellectual exercise in which we marvel at fascinating biblical information; it's an opportunity for God to teach and speak to us individually and as a community through the power of the Holy Spirit. In other words, we are not simply to be informed but changed. The ultimate goal of Bible study is to help people grow in relationship with God, with one another, with others in the world, and with the world God created.

Additional Helps for Leading Lessons

We hope you find the resources on the following pages helpful as you lead this Bible study. You have permission to distribute these among your group, as needed, for the benefit of everyone's small group study experience.

- Ground Rules for Small Group Bible Study
- Lesson Notes
- "Reading the Bible Well," by Amina Al-Attas Bradford and Mary Hulst, reprinted with permission from *The Banner* (Jan. 2010).

Ground Rules for Small Group Bible Study

We agree to . . .

- listen to one another and give each person time to speak.
- respect each other's input, build one another up, and look to the Spirit of God for guidance together.
- be open to learning from one another.
- share openly from our own experiences, as we feel comfortable doing so, while respecting each other's right to be silent (or private).
- avoid side conversations and unnecessary interruptions.
- avoid letting discussions get off-track or divisive.
- respect the confidentiality of the group. (What we say in the group stays in the group.)

We recognize that . . .

- no one has all the answers, and some questions may have no satisfying answer. Still, the Bible gives us enough information to know who God is and why God wants a healthy relationship with us.
- we're all here to see what the Bible has to say. Our goal is to learn the main ideas and concepts so that we can apply them in our lives and grow in knowing God. We want to ask ourselves, *What's the main thing God is teaching us here, and what does that mean for our everyday living?*

Lesson Notes

Advent and Christmas

This Christmas-themed study is intended for use during the four to five weeks preceding Christmas, often referred to as Advent on the Christian church calendar. In light of a longstanding tradition of Advent celebrations, we've included optional "Advent Wreath" readings and candle-lighting suggestions on the first page of each lesson in the study guide. See also the Introduction in the study guide for an explanation of Advent and some ideas for cultivating a celebrative spirit that lasts from week to week throughout this study.

Celebrate! If you'd like to include a Christmas celebration at the end of this study, you'll find some party suggestions on the first page of lesson 5 in the study guide. If your group has time for only four lessons before taking a Christmas break, you may wish to incorporate a party/celebration with your study of lesson 4.

Lesson 1

A Bible study leader is not just someone who seeks to impart knowledge to others. It is important for the leader to keep one ear listening to what the Bible says and one ear listening to the group members. This first lesson may be somewhat difficult for group members who are new to the Bible. They may find some aspects of the prophecies in Isaiah to be confusing. The big idea that you want to communicate is that Jesus' birth was promised centuries before he was born. Watch the body language of the participants and listen carefully to their questions to see if they are confused. As you get to know your group, tailor your questions to the individuals who come. As a leader, you may come up with other questions that will help your particular group members understand the lesson.

Some of the references are from Israel's history and may not be known to some of your group members. It will be helpful to refer to informative sidebars and

the glossary. It is important not to overwhelm the members of your group, particularly if the historical references are new. Use information sparingly and as needed to move the discussion forward.

For example, a statement like "Every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning" may not be clear. The explanation in the sidebar comes from writers who have studied the history and the original languages of the Bible. We can ask questions and come up with our own thoughts, but we can then weigh our understanding with others who have written materials on a particular passage. It is important always to treat group members' questions and answers with respect. Even if we feel an answer is insufficient, we can always say that what they have stated or asked is "interesting." Be careful not to act like the "answer giver" and the only authority. Even commentators disagree on interpretations.

Lesson 2

It will be important in this lesson on genealogies to focus on the main ideas rather than minor details. The fact that Jesus had a human ancestry and that he was from the promised royal line of David are the important considerations. This gives the reader the knowledge that Jesus identified with our humanness and that the Word of God is reliable, showing that the prophecies came true.

It might be tempting to spend extra time discussing David and Abraham or some other ancestors, but remember that as you study, you should only give your group a "taste" of the material. Encourage them to want to study the Bible on their own. The lessons are designed to give them material that will help their understanding, particularly if they are new to the Bible, but one of your primary goals as a leader is to help them learn to study the Bible themselves.

Refrain from the temptation to discuss genealogies in general. Be sensitive to questions, but be careful to stay on track. Also, be careful to speak respectfully when discussing other faith expressions. Should other members of the group begin to speak disrespectfully, it is important for you as leader to move the discussion in another direction and model this to the group.

Again, refrain from the temptation of “teaching” and being the “answer person.” Help group members to see that they can “dig out” the answers themselves. Try to stay on track as much as possible, and always consider whether or not the direction of the discussion is helpful for understanding the passage.

Questions about the virgin birth may come up during this lesson. It is not your job to convince anyone of the truthfulness of a particular teaching. That’s the job of the Holy Spirit. Still, it is important for you to know the reason why, for example, belief in the virgin birth is important.

People will be more open to what you say if you speak to them with respect, if you know what you believe, and if you refrain from arguing. Sometimes those who are closest to believing are the most argumentative. If you always answer kindly without compromising what you believe, you will find people willing to listen. A DVD by Tim Keller, based on his book *The Reason for God*, is a helpful resource for showing how to talk to people who do not believe in the truthfulness of the Bible. His small group discussions show how over time various members begin to look at the truthfulness of Christianity more positively because the atmosphere of the group is respectful.

The following reasons for the virgin birth may be helpful for you as you think about the subject.

- Jesus was both human and divine, so the virgin birth allowed him to receive his human nature from his human mother and to retain his divine nature as God (Son of God, second person of the Trinity).

- The entire tenor of the stories of his nativity in Matthew and Luke speaks to an unquestionable virgin birth. Joseph had to be convinced that Mary was a virgin, and he was convinced by the angel (Matt. 1:20).
- Isaiah 7:14 strongly suggests that the Messiah would be born of a virgin. Theologians have debated this text, and many have found clear evidence that a virgin would be the person who gave birth to the Messiah.

Finally, as you lead this lesson, avoid the temptation to get into tangential discussions about Mary, the mother of Jesus, and various churches’ teachings about her. Again, different faith traditions will hold to different beliefs. It is important always to encourage the group to look at what the Bible says in the passage you are studying and not get sidetracked by the teachings of specific religions or denominations.

Lesson 3

The passage you will look at in this lesson, the story of the first Christmas, contains some of the more familiar verses in the Bible. This may make it both easier and harder to lead the lesson with your group members. It will be easier because many members will have some basic knowledge of the material. But that can make it harder because group members will tend to look at the passages with “familiar eyes” rather than “fresh eyes.” Suggest that people who are already familiar with the passage try to look at it as if they were reading it for the first time.

Again, various views about Mary may come up in your discussion. Help the members of the group look at the text and how Mary presented herself as well as what others thought of her. If questions arise, you might suggest that anyone with questions read the first two chapters of both Luke and Matthew in order to read what the Bible says about her.

Lesson 4

This lesson zeroes in on the message of the angels and their part in the Christmas story. There is much speculation, superstition, and misinformation about angels today. A common misconception is that

children and adults become angels when they die. The Bible clearly teaches that God created angels and humans as distinct beings. Similar to the passages on Mary, it will be important to model that what we know about angels is found in Scripture. As in the previous lesson, encourage participants who might be familiar with the Bible to try to look at this passage as if they have not read it before. Encourage them to ask questions focused on the who, what, where, when, and why of the passage.

Be careful not to argue about angels and what they do, but if discussion gets sidetracked, bring group members back to the questions in the lesson. Indicate that even though the questions that are being asked or statements that are being made are interesting, group members might wish to look up some of the passages listed below on their own. If they have questions, they can discuss them with you at another time.

In the early chapters of Hebrews, an elaborate description of the function and purpose of angels is given. For example, they are described as ministering

spirits (Heb. 1:14). Angels in the Bible either bring messages from God to humans or they serve God and humans. Another example is found in Mark, when they ministered to Jesus after the temptation (Mark 1:12-13). See also the glossary in the study guide.

Lesson 5

This final lesson presents the opportunity for a special Christmas celebration (or, if there's not enough time before your Christmas break, you may choose to celebrate during your study of lesson 4).

It would also be helpful if you as a leader or the director (if your church program has a director) could explain when the next study will begin after the Christmas holiday. In that case, you'll want to have samples of the material you will be studying and perhaps a schedule of when you will be meeting. This will help people to know what is ahead and perhaps to commit to join with you in the new year. If possible, ask people to fill out a sign-up sheet and provide you with contact information so that you can follow-up with them.

Reading the Bible Well

by Amina Al-Attas Bradford and Mary Hulst

Last week a colleague walked into one of our offices and asked, “Just how important is reading the Bible?” The response: “That all depends on just how much you hope to be transformed!”

We also told our colleague that for transformation to happen, she would need to read the Bible *well*. The idea of “reading the Bible well” led to a longer conversation about biblical interpretation and the Reformed approach to it.

Our colleague, however, came with an inherent mistrust of the idea that Scripture needed interpretation. “I don’t need to work to interpret the Bible,” she said. “I just read it literally and do what it says.”

The conversation then turned to the wisdom of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Data, one of the show’s characters, is a product of artificial intelligence who has no emotions. Data never laughs at any of the jokes told on the Starship Enterprise because he can only interpret literally. Because of his literal approach to everything, Data doesn’t understand humor, he can’t pick up on innuendo or idioms, and he often misses the point of an encounter altogether. Sometimes, we pointed out, a literal interpretation actually leads to the wrong interpretation, or away from the truth.

Having convinced our colleague that good interpretation of the Bible is indeed necessary, our conversation then turned to how to read the Bible well. We noted two realities: first, the books of the Bible were written in particular times and places, and second, those books represent a variety of literary genres.

Bridging the Historical Gap

The books in the Bible are from particular times and places, and some of those times were more than 3,500 years ago. This does not mean the Bible isn’t relevant. The Bible reveals truth entirely relevant to our lives today. But that truth comes to us embodied in historical and cultural situations.

God used human words in human history to give us eternal truths. So if we want to know what a text means today, we first have to do our best to figure out what it meant for readers then.

Think about Paul’s warning to women against wearing braided hair (1 Tim. 2:9). Was his point to forbid braids, pigtails, and dreadlocks for millennia to come? No. His point was that in that specific time and place, braids signified a wealthy status that should not be paraded in church. The timeless truth that Christians shouldn’t flaunt their wealth during worship is embodied in a historical particularity. Figuring out what Paul’s words meant for first century Christians helps us figure out what it means for us now.

Bridging this historical gap between the Bible then and now means asking good questions about the historical and cultural context of the passage in question. Questions like these:

- When was it written?
- What was going on in the world then?
- Who was doing the writing?
- To whom were they writing?

The easiest way to get at this kind of information is to find a good study Bible that includes it at the start of each book. Investing in a good “Introduction to the Bible” textbook or Bible dictionary and referring to

it as you read can also help you find the answers to these questions.

Answering historical context questions gets you closer to knowing what the text might have meant to its earliest audience and thus what it means for us today.

As we read, it's helpful to remember that the Scriptures are perfect in every way God needs them to be. So while some of the historical particularities might forever be lost on modern readers, we can take heart that God in his sovereignty chose to reveal his story to us this way. The fact that mystery and questions are forever part of reading the Bible is not the result of Yahweh goofing up.

That may be what Gregory of Nyssa was getting at when he wrote, "Concepts create idols, only wonder understands." The Bible is less concerned with giving us airtight arguments than with provoking worship and transformation through our reading. It's true that without addressing a bit of the Bible's historical context, you are unlikely to interpret it well. But at the same time remember that any mystery you're left with is not a mistake but an invitation.

Pick a Genre

Beyond the matter of historical context, we also need to read the Bible in light of the fact that it is a collection of books written in many different genres. If the Bible were written only in propositional statements, literal interpretation would serve just fine. But God brings us his truth through any number of genres such as poetry, song, law, letters, and narrative—which means we have to learn how to interpret according to what kind of literature we are reading.

A proverb, for example, is different from a promise. "Train up children in the way they should go, and when they are old they will not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6) is a guide, not a guarantee. A poem stating that God "shakes the earth from its place and makes its pillars tremble" (Job 9:6) isn't meant for a geological textbook. And reading an epistle is reading someone

else's mail without having the full set of back-and-forth correspondence in front of you— "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord" (Phil. 4:2). Remembering to ask yourself "What genre am I reading?" lays the groundwork for good interpretation.

Reading in Light of the Whole

As important as it is to remember that the Bible is a collection of many distinct books, good interpretation also requires attending to the Bible as one whole book.

Because the church of Christ believes that God is the author of Scripture and that the Holy Spirit guided the process of canonization (choosing the books of the Bible), we find truth not only in each distinct biblical book, but also in the canon as a whole.

There is, after all, an overarching message or narrative that weaves its way through the Scriptures. It begins with Creation and the Fall and moves to Redemption and Consummation, the fulfillment of God's plan.

The message of the Bible is found in the story of God creating and saving and finally revealing his kingdom on earth. It is found in the promise of Yahweh moving in history through the person of Jesus to take all that is broken and make it whole. Our interpretation should never be in conflict with the grand story of the Bible. Healthy Bible reading involves checking our interpretation against it. In other words, let the Bible interpret the Bible.

It's Not About You

Reading the Bible well is not merely an external exercise. First we take into account the nature of the biblical text, interpreting each passage based on its historical context and genre.

But second we must take into account what we are like. This is the difference between reading for information and reading for transformation.

Too often we ask the Bible to be something it is not. We go to it looking for tips for sustaining a Christian marriage. We ask it to be a parenting manual or ask it to tell us how to pick the right job, the right college, or the right house. If we want to interpret the Bible well, however, we have to ask it the questions it is meant to answer.

For example, consider the creation account in Genesis 1. Christians have long used that text to argue over *when* and *how* the world was created. But that text was never intended to answer those questions. The historical and cultural context of the book of Genesis suggests that the creation story was written to help Israel (and now us) address the questions of *who* created the world and *why*.

Essentially, we must read both the black and the white of the text. We read what is printed in black letters, but we also read the empty white space on the page, taking stock of what is *not* written in the biblical text and letting the text be silent where it will.

Just as we need to be aware that the Bible is not a Magic 8-Ball we can simply shake and ask for the answers, Augustine reminds us also to consider our own posture and inclinations as we read.

Augustine compared the Bible to a very large room with a very low door. As big and brilliant and impressive as the Scriptures are, we must be willing to humble ourselves, to get low to the ground, if we want to enter into the wisdom of the text.

That means we allow the Scriptures to surprise us—we go in humbly, without the answers ready. In preaching, this manifests itself in a preacher who lets the text guide the sermon, rather than allowing his or her preconceived ideas to force the text to say something that it doesn't (topical sermons too often fall into this category). Just as we want preachers who let the text speak, we want to practice such humility as we read the Scriptures for ourselves.

One of the ways to know whether you're reading the Scriptures openly and in humility is to watch and see if God is realigning your view of who God is and who we are. If the Scriptures are actually "lenses of faith" the way John Calvin said they were, then they should change the way we see the world. When you put on a pair of glasses, you know they are doing their job when they change what you see. If you are reading the Scriptures and they aren't impacting how you see all manner of things—like health care, sexuality, marriage, money, how you spend your time, sin, grace—then that's a sign that your lens (your Bible reading) isn't having the kind of impact or authority that it should.

Reading with humility means not going to the Scriptures to confirm our own thoughts about God, but instead asking God to form our thoughts through his Word. Consider asking God to use Scripture to change your mind about one thing this year.

Read with Others

Before believers each had their own personal copies of the Bible, the Scriptures were only ever heard in community. This remains an excellent way to hear God's Word afresh.

We tend to hear things differently when we read with others, and a brother or sister can alert you to something in the text that you missed.

Better still, if you really want to make sure you aren't just interpreting in such a way that you reaffirm everything you already believe, read the Bible with people who are different from you. Find people older or younger, richer or poorer, more urban or country than you. Find people of a different ethnicity or from a different political party or a different denomination and read the Scriptures with them!

Pray First

We end with the most important thing: pray first. As you sit to read—in the morning with your oatmeal, around the dinner table with family, in the quiet of your office, with friends over coffee—invite God’s Holy Spirit to guide you. Pray that you will hear what the Lord is saying, that the Spirit will weed out thoughts that are not from God and replace them with the vibrancy of the living Word. Pray for insight, for counsel, for comfort, for truth, but pray most of all to be transformed.

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