



2016

Community Discussion Guides

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Advent is a season of both reflection and anticipation.

Reflection. Our lives stand as a testament that through every storm, God is with us. He has proven His faithfulness but, tragically, so often we forget all He has done and all He has promised. Advent is a season where we get to stop, remember, and reflect on Who God is and the good He has done.

Anticipation. Until Christ returns and makes all things new, we as believers are never not waiting. We're waiting for things at work to improve, waiting for the next chapter of life, waiting for anxieties to pass and suffering to end, waiting for those we love to finally trust in Christ, and waiting for Jesus to return.

Advent reminds us of the thousands of years God's people waited and longed for the coming of Jesus. Christ has come and He will come again, only this time He will complete the story He began so long ago.

How to begin

Community Discussion Guides

The three discussion guides that follow are for you and your Missional Community, a group of friends, or your family to open the Word of God through the Christmas season and rejoice together in the truth that our God is with us.

To make the best use of the time, appoint a discussion leader who can read through the guide ahead of time, assign the readings, and help keep the discussion moving.

With each discussion guide our aim is that we might see Immanuel, God with us, in one of three ways:

Immanuel, God was with us yesterday.

Immanuel, God is with us today.

Immanuel, God will be with us tomorrow
and for all eternity.

Use these guides as a springboard to talk about the confounding truth that God redeems sinners like us and promises to be with us:

Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you.
(Joshua 1:5)

Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God.
(Isaiah 41:10)

And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.
(Matthew 28:20)

Immanuel, God with Us Yesterday

Discussion leader read or summarize aloud

Before the discussion gets started, let's all take a few minutes to think to ourselves over this past year. Recall the different seasons and even erratic changes in weather. Picture what you were doing this time last year. How have you changed? Have you changed? Did anything that you would classify as a "major life event" occur? Think about the things that brought you great joy. What were they? How about the things that brought you sorrow?

DISCUSS

1. *What was one of the most significant things that happened in your life this past year?*
2. *Was there anything that surprised you?*

READING 1

Leader read or summarize aloud

In Joshua 3, we find the Israelites at the footsteps of the Promised Land. After being delivered out of slavery in Egypt and led through the desert for 40 years, their new home was nearly within eyesight. Yet here, at the edge of their destination, standing before them was the Jordan River—rushing and swollen from spring rains. All of the excitement and joyful shouts slowly grew silent as people began to ask, "How will we ever cross this river?" God had shown His faithfulness to His people through so much already, but how was He going to do it this time?

So when the people set out from their tents to pass over the Jordan with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, and as soon as those bearing the ark had come as far as the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water (now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest), the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap very far away, at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, and those flowing down toward the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, were completely cut off. And the people passed over opposite Jericho. Now the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firmly on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan, and all Israel was passing over on dry ground until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan. (Joshua 3:14-17)

DISCUSS

1. *Who or what was leading the Israelites' way across the river? Why is this significant?*

READING 2

When all the nation had finished passing over the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua, "Take twelve men from the people, from each tribe a man, and command them, saying, 'Take twelve stones from here out of the midst of the Jordan, from the very place where the priests' feet stood firmly, and bring them over with you and lay them down in the place where you lodge tonight.'" Then Joshua called the twelve men from the people of Israel, whom he had appointed, a man from each tribe. And Joshua said to them, "Pass on before the ark of the LORD your God into the midst of the Jordan, and take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?' then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever." And the people of Israel did just as Joshua commanded and took up twelve stones out of the midst of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, just as the LORD told Joshua. And they carried them over with them to the place where they lodged and laid them down there. And Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the covenant had stood; and they are there to this day. (Joshua 4:1-10)

DISCUSS

1. *Why do you think God commanded the Israelites to build a memorial? What does this say about our tendency to forget even the miraculous deeds of God?*
2. *Like when we started, let's all think again about our lives over the past year and share. What's a way or some ways that God demonstrated His faithfulness to you in the past year? Were there any big prayers that He answered?*
3. *Sometimes, the most significant things that happen to us were significant because of how difficult they were. Does anyone have a story about a time in the past year, or in their life as a whole, where there was a seemingly impossible task and God showed up in a significant way?*

READING 3

Leader read or summarize aloud

The same God that was with Moses at the Red Sea is the same God who was with Joshua at the Jordan River and is the same God who is with us today. For anyone who has been walking with the Lord for any amount of time, there are countless ways that God has proven to us that He indeed is Immanuel, God with us. It is a tragedy that we so often suffer from a spiritual amnesia, forgetting Who God is and what all He has done.



Immanuel, God with Us Today

READING 1

Discussion leader read or summarize aloud

Advent is a yearly reminder of the incarnation, meaning the “in-fleshing” of the eternal God.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

Leader read or explain aloud

Jesus, Who has eternally existed, put on flesh and walked among us.

[Jesus,] though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:6-11)

Leader read or explain aloud

Jesus became like us in every respect.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:15-16)

Leader read or summarize aloud

He was with us and He was like us in every respect and after a lifetime of temptation and suffering, His life climaxed with spectacular abandonment. No one ever deserved it less and no one ever suffered more than Jesus. Think about that. No one has ever suffered with greater intensity than God Himself. He did this—all of this—so that He might be with us.

DISCUSS

Leader read or summarize aloud

If you have been walking with the Lord for some time, you have probably seen that sometimes what God asks you to do is hard. Advent reminds us that God never asks us to walk a path that He didn't first walk Himself. He is with us and intimately knows how it feels to carry a heavy weight.

As a Christian community working for God's mission together, it is vital that we know each other and bare one another's burdens.

1. *What are some of the significant things happening in your life right now that feel heavy to you? How could you include others God has put in your life to help you?*
2. *Remembering that Jesus intimately knows what it feels like to carry a heavy weight, how is His perfect life a model for you in your specific situation?*
3. *What in Scripture do you cling to when life feels tough?*

READING 2

Leader read or summarize aloud

We know that God is with us, but often feel like it would be so much better if we could see Jesus face-to-face right now. The thing is Jesus knew that we would feel this way and so He tells us in Scripture why it is to our advantage that He would go away.

"I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me, and none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged. "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:4-15)

DISCUSS

1. *Since we do not see Jesus in the flesh right now, what does it look like for God to still be Immanuel, God with us, today?*
2. *Who is the Helper and what are some of the specific ways that He helps us?*

READING 3

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:3-9)

DISCUSS

- 1. What is the inheritance being kept in heaven for us?*
- 2. What does it say that our trials result in? Is that sometimes difficult to believe? Why?*
- 3. How does a hope in future glory inform how we ought to live today?*

PRAY

Leader read or summarize aloud

Read verses 8 and 9 again. Meditate on the fact that in this exact moment, our holy and perfect God is with you and He is orchestrating all things in your life so that your faith may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus.

Spend some time as a group praying for one another and the significant heavy things that each person identified earlier. Pray that each person would be comforted by the Holy Spirit as He reminds us of the perfect life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and what that means for us today.

Use the space below to record your group’s prayer requests and any thoughts or questions from the discussion you’d like to revisit.



Immanuel, God with Us Tomorrow & into Eternity

PRAY

Discussion leader read or summarize aloud

When you look around during the Christmas season, everything is decorated with red and green and little white lights line the houses you're used to seeing dark. All of these things, even Christmas music, the first notes of which might have begun just a little too early for some of us, remind us of this: Christmas is now only days away!

It may be easy for our minds to be distracted in this moment, but let's take a minute and ask that God would quiet our minds and open our hearts to His Word. Pray that we would gain a greater understanding of His faithfulness and steadfast love. Pray that we would be reminded and changed by the fact that He is Immanuel, God with us.

READING 1

Leader read or summarize aloud

Scripture is bursting at the seams with the promises of God. These are our hope because if God makes a promise—then He will do it. His promises are not like ours, because even in our most sincere moments, we cannot guarantee that we will deliver on them.

*Fear not,
for I am with you; be not dismayed, for
I am your God;
I will strengthen you,
I will help you,
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Isaiah 41:10 ESV)*

*I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and
I will accomplish all my purpose,' calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, and
I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and
I will do it. (Isaiah 46:9-11)*

DISCUSS

- 1. *From Isaiah 41:10, what emotional response should we have in light of what God promises us?*
- 2. *From Isaiah 46:9-11, what can we observe about the purposes of God? What can we observe about the power of God to accomplish His will? What does this tell us about the sovereignty of God?*
- 3. *How do the promises of God practically equip us to face each day?*

READING 2

Leader read or summarize aloud

The meaning of the word hope may get lost in its modern English usage because we often distinguish it from the meaning of certainty. We might say “I’m not certain what is going to happen, but I hope it happens.” However, when we read the word hope in the Bible, it is not merely wishful thinking.

*“Set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”
(1 Peter 1:13)*

Leader read or explain aloud

The biblical understanding of hope is that when God promises that He will do something, we put the full weight of our trust in that promise.

DISCUSS

- 1. *How would you describe your feelings and thoughts about the future?*

- Hopeful and confident*
- Worried and anxious*
- Indifferent / I try not to think about the future too much*
- The feelings change depending on what season of life I am in*
- In a different way? Feel free to explain*

- 2. *What are some specific barriers that you can identify that may inhibit you from putting the full weight of your trust in the promises of God?*
- 3. *When you feel a sense of anxiety for the days ahead, what do you think are some of the underlying reasons for you personally?*
- 4. *What does Scripture say about our future?*
- 5. *How would our lives look different if we lived in a way that put the full weight of our trust in the promises of God?*

READING 3

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (Colossians 3:1-4)

Leader read or explain aloud

Verse 4 is a real event that is really going to happen. When Christ returns, we will be with Him.

DISCUSS

- 1. What is the difference between setting our minds on things above and setting our minds on things on earth? How does this play out in our lives?*
- 2. What does it mean that “Christ is our life?”*
- 3. Why should it encourage us that Christ is coming again?*

PRAY

Leader read or summarize aloud

God never left us alone in our sin—He was there, taking our sin upon Himself.

God has not left us alone to face our current struggles—He is with us and intimately knows the weight of what we carry because He Himself carried it and He even now is carrying us.

God will never leave us—He has sealed us with His Spirit for all eternity and promises we will be with Him in ever-increasing joy for all eternity.

He is with us. The one, true God is with us. Don't merely know that as true information, but meditate on it. Pray that God would let it bring you joy that overflows in such a way that you can't help but tell others about it. Pray that He would comfort your restless heart with His promises. Pray that He would remind you that through every storm and vicious trial, He is with you and He will never leave you. Christ has come and He will come again, only this time He will complete the story that He began.

Use the space below to record your group's prayer requests and any thoughts or questions from the discussion you'd like to revisit.



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