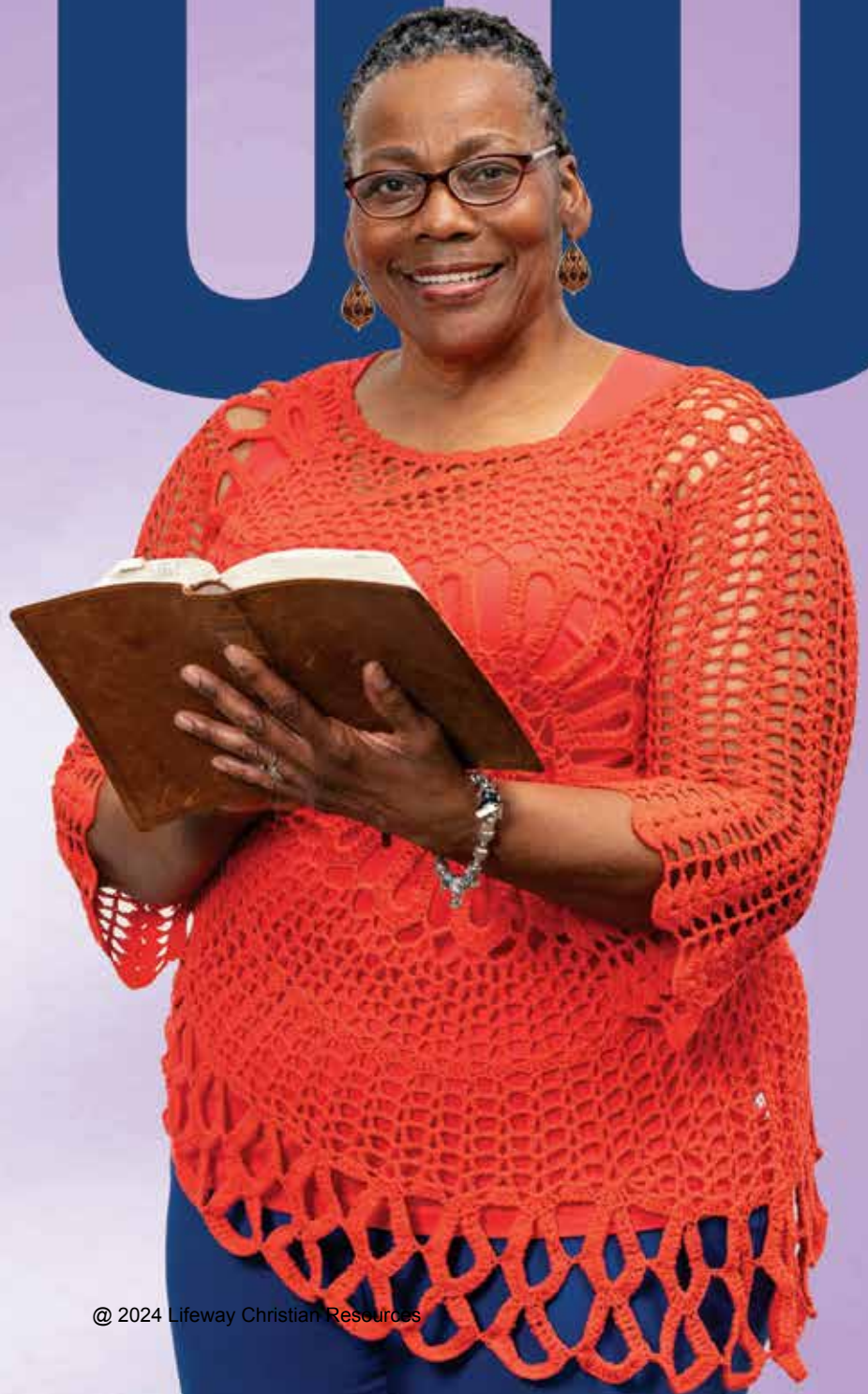


WINTER 2024-25

YOU



**LOOKING
FORWARD TO
CHRISTMAS**

+ + +

**THE HEART
OF WORSHIP**



A STUDY ABOUT A SEASON OF HOPE FOUND IN CHRIST

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The Latin root of Advent means “coming.” The phrase “the advent of our Lord,” refers to the time before Christmas set aside to prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. The earliest practice of advent traces back to the late fourth century. Advent included fasting and sermons highlighted the Incarnation of Christ. Later in the Middle Ages, Advent was celebrated the four Sundays leading into Christmas.¹

Today, Advent continues to be an annual invitation to reflect on the gift of salvation. The beautiful thing about the Bible is that it is the living Word for everyone. The Bible brings the message of hope to the young and the old, the rich and the poor, the saved, the sinner, and the seeker.

As we begin this unit, commit to study and reflect on the birth of our Savior. Set aside time to study the Scriptures deeply and prayerfully. Pray that God will lead your Sunday school class or

discipleship group as you do this study together. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal new insights from Scripture and challenge yourself to share what you have learned with others. Identify ways God is trying to speak to your heart. Remember why Jesus had to come—our need for a Savior.

It can be easy for us to go through the Advent season on autopilot. Resist the temptation to skim over Scripture thinking, “Yeah, I remember this story.” In the Old Testament, annual festivals and sacrifices served as regular reminders of our deep need for a relationship with God. As communities stopped their regular routines to remember how God had delivered them, they grew together in the faith. As individuals made sacrifices and atoned for sin, individuals drew close to God. Embrace the hope, peace, joy, and love found in Scripture. Take time to worship God, look forward to Christmas and anticipate Christ’s return.

SESSION 1

LOOKING FORWARD WITH HOPE

Leader pages on pp. 102-105

THE POINT:
WE HAVE A SURE HOPE
BECAUSE JESUS CAME
TO US.

ISAIAH 40:1-5,9-11

MEMORY VERSE

¹ “Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God.

² “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and announce to her that her time of hard service is over, her iniquity has been pardoned, and she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.”

.....
³ A voice of one crying out: Prepare the way of the LORD in the wilderness; make a straight highway for our God in the desert.

⁴ Every valley will be lifted up, and every mountain and hill will be leveled; the uneven ground will become smooth and the rough places, a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the LORD will appear, and all humanity together will see it, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

.....
⁹ Zion, herald of good news, go up on a high mountain. Jerusalem, herald of good news, raise your voice loudly. Raise it, do not be afraid! Say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!”

¹⁰ See, the LORD God comes with strength, and his power establishes his rule. His wages are with him, and his reward accompanies him.

¹¹ He protects his flock like a shepherd; he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them in the fold of his garment. He gently leads those that are nursing.

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KEYWORDS

Comfort (v. 1)—The word comfort (*nacham*) means to console in the sense of having pity or compassion for someone.

Double . . . her sins (v. 2)—The punishment of God’s people’s had been double for their sins, meaning it had been exceptionally severe.

Mouth of the Lord (v. 5)—The authority behind the words spoken by the voice (v. 3) is God Himself. The words of Isaiah the prophet come from God and have His authority behind them.

Fold of his garment (v. 11)—A shepherd often had a pouch-like fold in his robes where he could carry a lamb close to his chest.



HOW DOES JESUS EMBODY HOPE FOR US?

Hope can take many forms. For children, hope might center on what they'll open on Christmas Day. As we get older, hope can shift from excitement to expectation and from surprises to survival.

Army Air Forces Sergeant Lloyd Ponder knew that kind of hope. In a Japanese POW camp during World War II, Ponder had an undying hope for freedom. "I remember thinking, 'If anyone is going to get out of this alive, it's going to be me.'" Ponder reflected, "Determination is the attitude you had to have, knowing you could survive whatever!" What kept him focused on surviving? "Hope makes a difference," Ponder concluded. "If you don't have hope, you're gone. Having hope can get you through anything."²

Hope keeps us going, and hope is what Advent is all about. It is not a hope for presents but hope for a Presence. Before the coming of Jesus, God's people leaned in on hope as they waited for the coming of a savior.

As we make this sacred journey to Bethlehem, we can reflect on the hope that was fulfilled and celebrated in the wonder of salvation.

We Receive Pardon // Isaiah 40:1-2

The book of Isaiah turns on a dime in Chapter 40. The previous chapters carried the burden of divine judgment meted out on Judah, Israel, and the surrounding nations, but suddenly, after a barrage of shrewd declarations, there is finally hope. It's hard to miss the change in tenor from judgment to sweet relief. "Comfort, comfort" . . . Said twice. It's the only time we find that word in the Old Testament books of prophecy. As we navigate through the prophetic writings, we are confronted with rebukes, warnings, laments, and just plain old gloom. However, Isaiah spoke the Word of God to a wayward people, and he said, "Comfort."

In the midst of conflict, idolatry, and apostasy, Isaiah received this message from the Father: Comfort them with the good news that the ugly stain of sin will be lifted by a glorious, everlasting era of grace. Just over the horizon there will be a Hero that brings comfort. It was not cheap grace. It wasn't a measured improvement of circumstance. It wouldn't arrive on the scene because a nation got its act together. On the contrary, this good news of comfort would be initiated by God. This comfort entered a broken world as a sacrificial, revolutionary cleansing.

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When we express the goodness of God through forgiveness, we understand the backstory of Advent. We offer hope and a second chance at life. We discover that after repentance, tenderness ensues. There is a status change ahead for God's people. We become recipients of hope and mercy despite all our wrong turns and boneheaded choices. There's mercy amidst the mess we've manufactured. There's hope amidst the havoc we've created.

During this season of Advent, we must realize that the world still quakes under the weight of injustice and rebellion. It's everywhere. But in Bethlehem, God delivered comfort and tenderness. The fulfillment of this prophecy weaves its way through time to the compassionate Christ who invites us, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt.11:28). That's some good news right there. He didn't say, "I will give you some hoops to jump through." He didn't say, "I'll give you 2,500 new rules to follow."

The hope of Advent is that when Jesus came, He came to the overburdened, strung-out, defeated, exhausted world with relentless tenderness and glorious hope. He didn't come sneaking behind us, suddenly shouting condemnations. He speaks tenderly. "Speak tenderly" literally means "speaking to the heart." The good news Isaiah articulates is that war is over, the service is completed, and all is forgiven.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN ABOUT THE CHARACTER AND NATURE OF GOD FROM THIS PASSAGE?

It's hard for us to really wrap our minds around this until we realize that among the Jews, a debt was typically forgiven after six years of slavery. Six years must have seemed hopeless, and yet Isaiah made this declaration that the hard service was over.

We see God's Power // Isaiah 40:3-5

The wilderness in Scripture represents desolation, chaos, barrenness, and separation far greater than a lack of cell service. We can feel disconnected from God. Being in the wilderness is solitude and scarcity. It's when we feel like we are on the outside looking in. We say to ourselves, "Apparently God is at work in everyone else's life, but not mine." It is a place of hardship and emptiness, where people may experience a sense of abandonment or spiritual dryness.

But the amazing thing about the wilderness is that this is where God does His best work. The wilderness is where we can best hear the voice of God. We often find hope in our wilderness. Moses discovered a burning bush, fresh water, and even a bride in the wilderness. Elijah heard the still, small voice of God in the



DIGGING DEEPER ZION

We have heard the word Zion sung in songs, read in Scripture, and preached on Sunday morning. It is interesting to note that the word is used frequently in and in different ways. The word Zion appears in the Old Testament over 150 times.

- 2 Samuel 5:7, "Yet David did capture the stronghold of Zion, that is, the city of David." Here, Zion is a location conquered by David and renamed the City of David.
- Psalm 51:18, "In your good pleasure, cause Zion to prosper; build the walls of Jerusalem." Zion is also used as a general reference to Jerusalem.
- Isaiah 51:16, "I have put my words in your mouth, and covered you in the shadow of my hand, in order to plant[a] the heavens, to found the earth, and to say to Zion, "You are my people." In this instance, Zion is used as a metaphor for the people of God.

What will you think of the next time you hear the word Zion?



wilderness. The angels ministered to Jesus in the wilderness. And the ultimate story of hope begins with a voice crying out in the wilderness.

What does the voice say? "Prepare the way of the LORD." The voice calls us to action. This gets to the heart of Advent as we celebrate the coming of Jesus to Bethlehem. The roads in the wilderness weren't interstates or even farm roads. In those days, the way up to Jerusalem was a crooked path often strewn with debris that would impede caravans and travelers. The name of the voice crying in the wilderness was John the Baptist.

As we reflect on Christ's coming throughout Christmas, His call remains. We have a responsibility to prepare the way for Christ in our hearts, to remove the obstacles that would keep us from experiencing the fullness of Jesus.

We also have a promise and a hope. This broken world with all its imperfect paths and surprising turns will ultimately become smooth and straight. What's more, like the shepherds on the outskirts of Bethlehem, we will experience the glory of the Lord. And Isaiah is clear about it. All flesh will see it together. Right now, we live in a broken world, from the streets of Gaza to the hidden anguish of North Korea and, yes, the darkness of our own country. Everywhere we go we see struggle and desperation, but with the presence of Jesus we will all see glory.

WHERE DO YOU SEE GOD'S GLORY REFLECTED IN OUR WORLD TODAY?

We Share God's Good News //

Isaiah 40:9-11

This prophetic poem rises in joy, beginning in verse 9. From "Go Tell it on the Mountain" to Handel's "Messiah," worshipers have celebrated the lyrical prophecies of Isaiah. It's in our bones. It's the grand fanfare of the messianic prelude. His strength is sovereign. His coming shatters the status quo. This entire passage shouts of newness, change, revelation, and reward. Yes, rewards. He's got that, too. But in verse 11, we get a glimpse of the nature of Jesus. It's all in the verbs:

- **He protects.** We see the Messiah not as One who brings danger. He is the One who eliminates danger. We don't have to worry because He will be a Good Shepherd.
- **He gathers.** The Good Shepherd is the One who brings us all together. It's His nature to unify us through the strength of His arms.
- **He carries.** There will be those times when we can't take another step. The current of the water rises and the terrain is daunting. In those moments, He'll carry us.
- **He leads.** The Good Shepherd doesn't drive us with a stick, playing on our fears of retribution. The gospel is so much better than that. We'll know His voice and we'll follow.

WHEN HAVE YOU CLEARLY SEEN GOD'S CARE FOR HIS SHEEP ON DISPLAY?

From the first day to the last, the season of Advent is a season of hope because we know that our waiting will end and we'll experience Emmanuel, God with us. There's something in the human heart that comes alive when we are surprised. I suppose that's why we love to see those moments when the six-year-old sees his Army dad come to his school unexpectedly sooner than he thought, or when we see the Hail Mary pass caught in the end zone of our team's rivalry game. We long for those moments! Those are the moments we wait for.

The mosaic of prophecy weaves together an unusual combination of certainty and surprise. We relish the chance to see our loved one's face as they're opening an unexpected gift at Christmas.

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It's even more special if it's a gift they didn't think possible—like a sold-out gaming system or a hard-to-find baby doll.

We remember the surprise of Mary, who found out she would be the mother of the King, the surprise of Joseph when the script is flipped and he would foster the life of a Savior, and the surprise of shepherds, kings, and innkeepers. We remember these points in the story because they become personal to us. In the third chapter of John, when we read that God loved everyone so much that He sent His Son, we are amazed that He would love us that much, and even more so that He would shed His own blood for our sins, conquer death, and would be coming back some day.

The whole point of the gospel is that we are players in the story. He lives in us and one day we will all be together—those we've mourned, those we love, and those we miss. We'll be together, dumbstruck in the realms of glory with the One who brought us all together. We will worship for sure, and I think we'll probably whisper to each other, "It's all true! It's all true!"

He is the King worthy of our worship. He is the Shepherd worthy of our loyalty. He is the Lord worthy of our service. And, yes, He is the Promise worthy of our hope.

DID YOU KNOW?

Did you know that Christmas is a great time to share your faith? Most people that wish you Merry Christmas this season are not Christians. While most Americans celebrate Christmas, many of them are not Christians. A Lifeway research study found that nine out of ten Americans responded that they celebrate Christmas. However, "75% of those practice non-Christian faiths."³ This means that most people we encounter during Christmas are not celebrating the birth of Jesus as the Savior of the world. Think about it. Your family, friends, co-workers, and people you pass at the local coffee shop need you to share your faith.

Biblical Truth: Jesus is Immanuel, "God with us." Our joy and hope are centered in Him.

Can you explain why you celebrate Christmas?

LIVE IT

How does the hope of Christ impact the way we live?

The promise of a coming Messiah gave hope to the nation of Israel, like a candle in the darkness. We, too, can rest in the hope of Jesus. Through the Bible we can rest assured that our hope is fulfilled in Jesus. We can wait in hopeful expectation.

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- **Pray:** Our hope in Christ must be cultivated. Ask God to reawaken the hopes that have been dormant recently. Enter a life of holy expectation as you journey through this sacred season.
- **Write:** Is there someone in your life who is struggling to remain hopeful because of circumstance, disappointment, or fear? Write and send them an encouraging note to let them know you are praying for them and underscore that hope is never lost in Christ.
- **Serve:** Our hope is activated through service. This week, express your hope by serving someone in need. It may be as simple as helping someone decorate for the Christmas season or reaching out to a stranger to offer radical generosity and help.

DAILY READINGS

1. PROOF OF HOPE // ROMANS 15:13

"Hope" is a word of mystery. It's invisible, it's intangible, and it has no substance. Many people equate hope with faith because of the Bible verse, "Now faith is the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen" (Heb. 11:1). But there is a difference; faith is "reality," while "hope" is "proof." Yet proof of hope will not stand up in a court of law. It would be considered ineffable or inexpressible. Strange that a word described as such is used to describe God. Romans 15:13 says that God is a "God of hope." Hope's attachment to God gives it weight and strength.

If you need proof of hope, just connect it to our loving Father. He brings every word that describes Him to life.

2. LIVING HOPE // 1 PETER 1:3

We are God's children. His thoughts toward us are for good and not for evil. He recognized our hopeless state and our eternal destination because of sin. But God had a better way. His plans for us are not of hopelessness or destruction, rather they are plans for life. He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to be our living hope. Not only did Jesus die on the cross so that we would not experience God's wrath, but each day we can rest in the truth that Jesus is intimately involved with every aspect of our earthly lives. Who else can we turn to in our time of need? As Paul declared, Jesus "has given us new birth into a living hope."

The Son of God will be there for us in times of trouble. He is our living hope.

3. COMFORTED BY HOPE // 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3

The phrase "hope springs eternal" sounds positive and encouraging. It has been used in times past to lift the spirit of one who has been brought low. However, the dictionary defines this phrase as "hoping for the best." We hope for the best when the best is not likely to occur. That means we have used our last recourse to resolve an adverse issue. Therefore, hope springs eternal or hoping for the best offers no comfort. The comfort of hope rests

in Jesus. When He comforts us, it doesn't mean our troubles will go away. However, it gives us hope in God's love and care. Hoping in the comfort of Christ provides the strength we need to deal with our troubles.

Hope in the Lord, and He will lift you up. God will forever be by your side.

4. THE POWER OF PEACE // JOHN 14:27

Jesus lived on earth as a man for approximately thirty-three years. While He was here, He endured everything that humans endured. He hungered, He thirsted, He needed rest, He angered, and He faced religious opposition and unbelief. If the average person had gone through what Jesus experienced, the odds are good that person would not have made it. Jesus recognized this. So, when He was getting ready to return to His Father, He left His followers with a powerful weapon. He gave us peace. Peace will calm our hearts when it seems all hope is gone. There's power in standing firm with an attitude of peace. This attitude stems from the knowledge that Jesus is on our side, and we can rest in that.

Let peace rule in your mind and your heart when facing turmoil. It is a powerful gift from Jesus to help us be overcomers.

5. PRAY FOR PEACE // 1 TIMOTHY 2:1-2

Many wars have been waged throughout the history of this world. Recently, the Russian/Ukraine and the Israel/Hamas wars have erupted across their lands. But war does not occur only on the battlefield. There are battles in our streets because of crime. There are battles in our homes between husbands and wives. There are battles between politicians and many other battles in our culture. As believers, we should not lose heart because of these battles around us. We have the most important responsibility of all; we should pray. This is God's way of using us to impact the world.

We have a Father who is greater than the greatest wars. Let us, therefore, pray that the peace of God will reign in the world, especially pray for peace in the foreign lands.

BEFORE YOU TEACH

Meditate on Luke 3:1-14

Luke cites Isaiah 40:3-5 to explain John the Baptist's ministry in Luke 3:1-6. Luke then explains how John the Baptist engages with three different groups that need to repent. The crowds need to share more (3:10-11), the tax collectors need to be fair (3:12-13), and the soldiers need to avoid using their position for their own advantage (3:14). Identify where you might also need to repent so that you might see Christ more clearly.

Pray for Financial Wisdom

Christmas can be associated with materialism. Many people feel they cannot celebrate Christmas without spending a lot of money. According to an article in Forbes, there has been an increase in the number of African Americans who use buy now pay later services during the holiday season. Pray that the learners in your group will use wisdom to avoid unnecessary debt and not allow materialism to become an idol in their lives.

LOOK BACK

Have learners list some things they remember about the last study. Once they have done this, encourage them to reflect on how these things should affect their conduct during the Christmas season. If learners are unable to make a list, have some reminders ready.

ASK: Will your participation in Christmas events help you share the gospel? In other words, will people want to hear your message of hope when they see your actions?

TEACHING PLAN

INTRODUCTION

DO: Encourage learners to share their best and worst Christmas experiences. Allow them to spend several minutes sharing, even if you have

to wade through awkward silence. As the learners are sharing, jot down any religious references. This can range from the mention of a prayer to a story involving a church service.

READ: Once learners have finished sharing, read this sentence from the introduction to Session 1: "Advent included fasting and sermons highlighted the Incarnation of Christ" (p. 10).

PACK ITEM: Use **Pack Item 1: "Looking Forward to Christmas"** poster to introduce the study.

TRANSITION: Read **The Point: "We have a sure hope because Jesus came to us,"** and the **Session Question:** "How does Jesus embody hope for us?"

DIG INTO THE TEXT

We Receive Pardon // Isaiah 40:1-2

READ: Read Isaiah 40:1 aloud for the group.

HIGHLIGHT: Highlight that it is very rare for an Old Testament prophecy to focus on providing consolation to someone. Explain the definition of the term 'comfort' (nacham) as found in the commentary for Isaiah 40:1. While the term is used twice in this passage to emphasize a sense of urgency, suggest to the learners that they should also make another connection.

EXPLAIN: Explain to learners that the term translated as "double" (mishneh) can also be translated as "repetition." Jeremiah prophesied and called for God to give destruction on repeat because of Israel's sins. In contrast, Isaiah and Zechariah saw a time when God would repeatedly provide grace ("grace upon grace," John 1:16). The repetition of the word "comfort" (nacham) is God's way of emphasizing that he will provide continuous mercy and grace to His people through the literary design of the text.

READ: Ask for a learner to read Isaiah 40:2.

DO: Have the learners read through Genesis 50:15-21 and Ruth 2:5-13. Ask them to make a comparison between Joseph and Boaz, as both of these godly men engage with those who are

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their servants.

ASK: How should we view God’s statement in Isaiah 40:2 in comparison to the actions of Joseph and Boaz?

READ: Read through the section of the learner pages that begins, “When we express the goodness of God through forgiveness . . .” (p. 13), until you get to the line that ends, “world still quakes under the weight of injustice and rebellion.”

We See God’s Power // Isaiah 40:3–5

READ: Enlist a learner to read Isaiah 40:3-5.

DISCUSS: Ask them when they have heard these verses before (i.e., in a church service, in a lesson about prophecy, etc.).

GUIDE: Explain that this prophecy is fulfilled in John the Baptist’s ministry and that John the Baptist applied the theology of this passage to three different groups in his day in Luke 3:9-14.

READ: Ask for a volunteer to read through the section of the learner’s pages that begins, “We have a responsibility to prepare the way for Christ in our hearts . . .” (p. 14). Have the volunteer read this together with the next paragraph.

ASK: How should we encourage people who feel their situation is beyond God’s power?

EXPLAIN: In Scripture, a wilderness is a desperate place. Read through the commentary for Isaiah 40:3. Highlight for learners that the hope of the Gospel can be applied to all people in all situations. This is one of the reasons that the proclamation of God’s coming in Isaiah 40:3-5 begins in the wilderness. God could have come from a palace or the heavens. Instead, God comes out of the wilderness to make all men understand that they are equal before him.

READ: Ask a learner to read from the section of the learner pages that begins, “We have a responsibility to prepare the way for Christ in our hearts . . .” Have them read the next paragraph as well.

DIGGING DEEPER: Invite a learner to read the “Digging Deeper” section from the learner pages (p. 13), and ask the question that follows.

We Share God’s Good News //

Isaiah 40:9–11

DISCUSS: Facilitate a short conversation about the mountains in Isaiah 40:4 and 9. In verse 4, the mountains are made low because a view from such a height would hinder one’s view of God. In verse 9, the messenger is called to go up a mountain because, from there, the message of God can be heard by everyone.

DO: Have learners read through verses 10 through 11 and make a list of everything that God has or does in these verses. Some of these can be found in the learner pages for this section. There are five things that they should find:

- 1) God has wages
- 2) He feeds His flock
- 3) He gathers
- 4) He carries
- 5) He leads.

ASK: How do these five things help us live out Isaiah 40:9? How do they help us proclaim the Good News?

EXPLAIN: Encourage learners to remember that the Good News is summed up in Jesus because Jesus clearly represents that God has come to be with us. Thus, when one proclaims, “Behold your God,” they proclaim that God has presented himself to us. Highlight that God’s most important aspects can be seen and known by us. These five things motivate us to share and live out God’s truth. This table might be helpful to display:



PACK ITEM 1



OBJECT LESSON

DO: Display two pictures: one of a mountain and another of a valley.

ASK: Which would you prefer, to be on the top of a mountain or in a valley? Why?

EXPLAIN: After listening to several answers, remind learners of Isaiah 40:3-5. Highlight that “the way of the Lord” brings everyone to the same height. Jesus coming to Earth as a man equalizes life for all people. We might still have our preferences. Some might be wealthier (i.e., on a mountain) or poorer (i.e., in a valley) than others. These things should not lead us to pride or arrogance. Instead, we should focus on the fact that all need to repent so they can either be humbled or be exalted so that they might see Christ as Lord.

CLOSING THE SESSION

LIVE IT: Close this session by pointing learners to the “Live It” section for this session. Have learners commit to reporting back next week on one of the three options listed: Pray, Write, Serve. Encourage learners to select the option they believe will be the most difficult for them to do that week. Highlight the reality of Christian discipleship. While God is a good shepherd who will protect and provide for us, he also expects us to grow in godly obedience.

PRAY: God help us to use this Christmas season to grow in our faith, witness to others, and to work toward shaping this Earth into your kingdom. All men are equal and fail to comprehend the fullness of your glory. Help us to humble ourselves. Amen.

COMMENTARY

ISAIAH 40:1-2

Connection to The Point. Comfort would come to God’s people through the pardoning of iniquity, a pardon that was delivered through Jesus.

Verse 1. The word comfort (*nacham*) means to console in the sense of having pity or compassion for someone. The repetition of the term both emphasizes the urgent nature of the command and the deep love God has for His people. *My people . . . your God*. These terms echo God’s covenant relationship with His people and emphasize that in spite of the people’s sins they remained His people and He their God.

Verse 2. Speak tenderly. This phrase is literally “speak to the heart.” It emphasizes the depth of God’s love for His people. The term Jerusalem is often used in the Old Testament as another word for the people of Israel and/or Judah. The exact nature of the hard service is not stated. However, there would be a future time of peace when there will be no war and therefore no need for armies (Isa. 2:1-4). God’s judgment had come upon His people because of their iniquity.

God’s people to the Lord’s hand. This anthropomorphic phrase (attributing human characteristics to God to explain or emphasize something about God; God does not have literal hands) usually signifies God’s omnipotent power and righteous judgment. The Lord’s judgment was due to Judah’s disobedience to God and eventually came primarily through the Babylonians’ defeating Judah militarily and taking them into exile in Babylon.

The punishment of God’s people had been double for their sins, meaning it had been exceptionally severe (Jer. 16:18). Though they had suffered harshly for their sins, there would be a future time when God would pardon their iniquity and they would receive a double portion of God’s blessings (Isa. 61:7).

ISAIAH 40:3-5

Connection to The Point. God called for His people to prepare for the coming and appearance of the glory of God.

Verse 3. A voice of one crying out. In response to the Lord's command to give comfort and speak tenderly to God's people, a voice cried out. The speaker is not identified, but the words come from the mouth of the Lord Himself (v. 5). Matthew quoted this verse from the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament and applied it to John the Baptist (Matt. 3:3). In John's Gospel, John the Baptist applied it to himself (John 1:23). The unnamed voice instructs the people to prepare the way. The term prepare (*panah*) means to make clear in the sense of being free from all obstacles. John the Baptist's ministry prepared the way for the Messiah, Jesus (Matt. 3:1-12; Luke 3:1-18).

Verse 4. Lifted up . . . leveled. These terms would have resonated with people who were familiar with the difficulties of travel in the ancient world. The construction of a road, both in that time and today, requires that areas of low elevation be filled in while those of higher elevation be flattened down to a reasonable grade so that people can travel on the road.

Verse 5. The term for glory (*kabod*) refers to something heavy or weighty. In this context it describes the shining majesty of God's presence. One of the most powerful displays of God's glory was at Mount Sinai (Deut. 5:24-25). People are to acknowledge God's glory (His presence, honor, power) in their reverence and worship of Him. The ultimate manifestation of God's glory in this world is His revelation of Himself through Jesus Christ, the Messiah (John 1:18).

The mouth of the Lord. The authority behind the words spoken by the voice (v. 3) is God Himself. The words of Isaiah the prophet come from God and have His authority behind them. The promised return of the glory of the Lord is sure to come to pass because Almighty God has spoken, and He is faithful in keeping His word and fulfilling His promises (Ps. 145:13).

ISAIAH 40:9-11

Connection to The Point. God would come to establish His kingdom and shepherd His people.

Verse 9. The herald is commanded to climb to an elevated location to proclaim the good news to all the cities and towns around him. Just as from a high vantage point a speaker could proclaim his message to all the people, so too God's message is to be heard by all people in the cities of Judah. *Raise it, do not be afraid!* The herald of God's good news is commanded to proclaim the message boldly and fearlessly. He can do so because he is speaking in the name and with the authority of Almighty God.

Verse 10. See. The Hebrew word *hinneh* is usually rendered a little more emphatically as "Behold!" or "Surely!" Zion's message accentuates how God's people not only will hear of the Lord's coming audibly, they also will experience it visibly. They need to keep their eyes wide open!

Like a victorious king who takes the spoils of war from his defeated enemy, the Lord has His wages and reward with Him. The terms refer to the salvific work the Lord would accomplish through His Messiah. Through Jesus Christ, God has accomplished salvation for His people and blesses them with all its benefits.

Verse 11. A shepherd tending his flock would have been a familiar sight in ancient Israel. Sheep, shepherds, and shepherding are some of the most commonly used images in the Scriptures. The picture of God as a shepherd gently holding lambs in His arms is a dramatic illustration of His love and care for His people. God's infinitely strong and powerful arms reach out to save and preserve His people (Isa. 51:5-6; John 10:28-29). A shepherd often had a pouch-like fold in his robes where he could carry a lamb close to his chest. It gave the little sheep a sense of security and warmth. Similarly, God holds His people close to Him, providing for and protecting them in His infinite love and through His omnipotent power.

Note: Additional commentary can be found at you.lifeway.com.