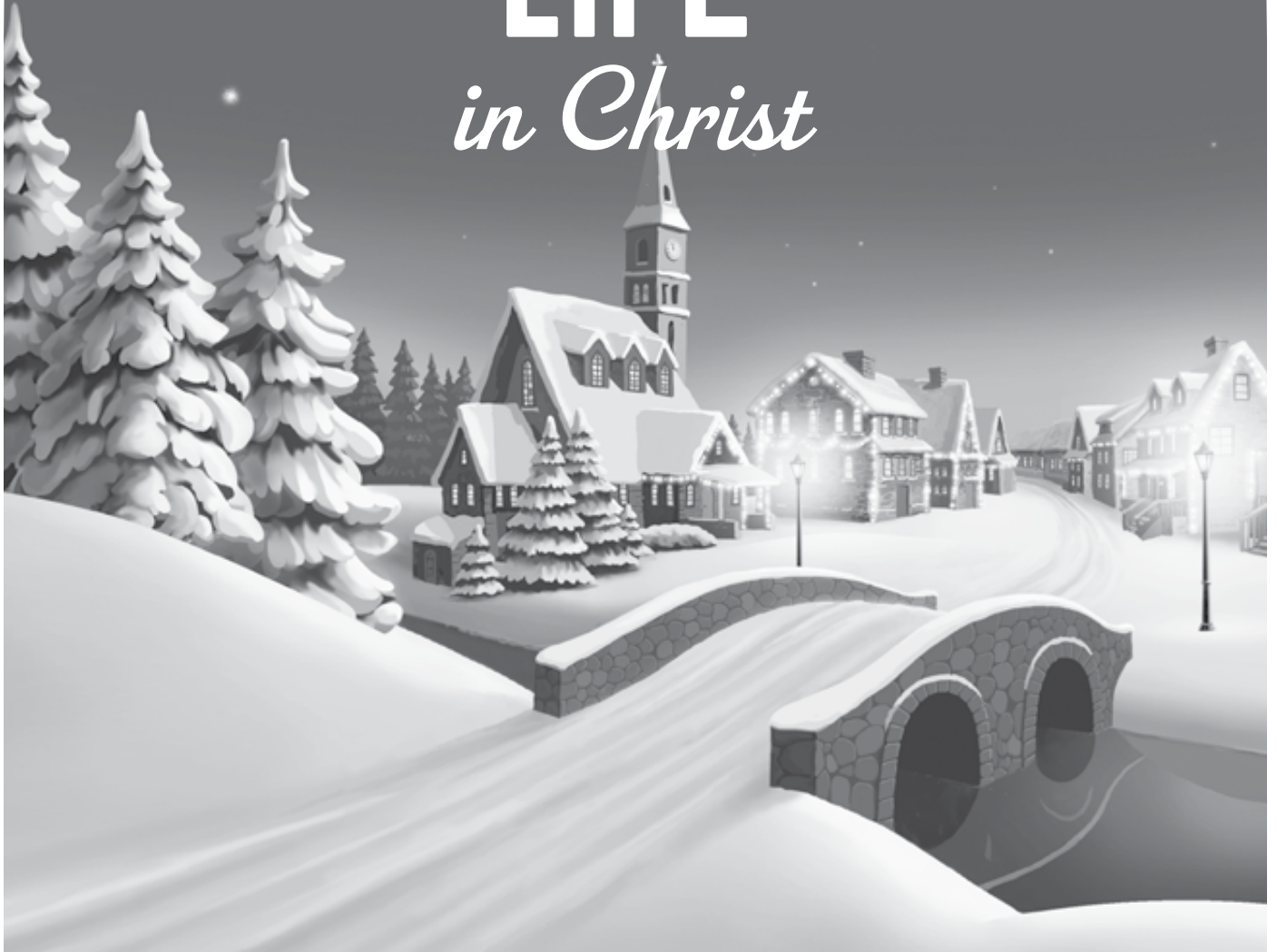


OUR *Greatest* GIFT

A
WONDERFUL
Life
LIFE
in Christ



A 4 SESSION **BIBLE STUDY**
FOR ADVENT

leader's guide

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Introduction

It's a Wonderful Life is a Christmas classic. George Bailey. Mary Hatch. The angel Clarence. ZuZu's petals. We see it time and again every year. Its signature scenes replay over and over in our mind's eye. Its signature lines echo in our ears.

But it didn't start out that way. During its initial theatrical release in 1946, the film didn't come close to recouping its break-even costs. Its mixed reviews caused some to question whether its legendary director Frank Capra could still make a blockbuster movie. It did win one Academy award, but it was for the "technical achievement" of developing a new kind of fake snow.

What changed? In a word: television. Thirty years later, in 1976, *It's a Wonderful Life* was broadcast on TV during the Christmas season in what became an annual ritual. It became one of what is now an ever-growing family of holiday "classics," must-see specials that we watch over and over again every December.

What is it about this story? On the surface, I think it satisfies a primal fascination: what would the world be like if I was never born? It satisfies this fascination by presenting us with an "everyman" whose life, by most measures of success, has been a series of sacrifices met with disappointment and tragedy. Which brings us to the deeper level: by seeing the widespread disasters that would have happened had George Bailey never lived, it shows us how every seemingly insignificant life is intertwined with every other, that the common good can mean so much more than one individual's independence, and that (as Clarence writes in a last little proverb to George) "no man is a failure who has friends."

But amid the ringing bells and “Auld Lang Syne,” we often lose sight that this aspect of the story is rooted in a midnight-dark realism. For this reason, some have even called the film “terrifying” or “pessimistic.” For one, the arc of George’s life seems to bend on one vanquished dream after another. For another, we forget that, in the end, the villainous Mr. Potter essentially gets away with stealing all the year-end profits of his only competitor, the Bailey Building and Loan. This dark side of a “wonderful life” is summed up in one shot. It happens in the alternate-reality sequence when George finds his hardened, widowed mother who doesn’t recognize him. George runs from her house and toward us until he is face-to-face with the camera, and we see the face of actor Jimmy Stewart up close and personal: all shadows, cold sweat, and stubble. His eyes are wide-open with panic and dread, and the camera frame won’t let us look at anything else other than George Bailey’s terror. The shot lasts a few seconds, but it feels like an hour. It’s almost as if Alfred Hitchcock snuck in and spliced a shot of horror into Frank Capra’s feel-good picture.

I bring it up because, beneath the garland and the tinsel, this realism is what Advent is all about. Advent finds its hope in the tension between the common good and the unrealized justice, between the friendship and the failure. This is what makes our Advent hope real. The first advent of Jesus Christ came to a Bethlehem that wasn’t all that much different than Bedford Falls. And the second advent of Jesus Christ—a return for which, 2,000 years later, we still hope and pray for—leaves us in the “already–not yet” tension of life lived in a present world that is often messy and disappointing.

And yet, this hope never lets us go.

NOTE: In general, the questions and references in each session are meant as discussion prompts, where I assume the discussion can lead in any number of directions. So I have not intended that each and every question needs to be adequately discussed during the time you've allotted to meet with each other. Hopefully, you will know the participants well enough to have a sense of which questions might lead to meaningful conversation and which might not. Plan accordingly...always leaving open, of course, the possibility of the never-planned working of the Holy Spirit wherever two or three (or more) gather together in the name of Christ.

You will also notice that the overall structure of this study follows the progression of the candles we light on the Advent wreath each week leading to Christmas (assuming your church home uses an Advent wreath). The symbolism of these four candles is as follows:

Candle 1: the prophet's (a.k.a. hope) candle

Candle 2: the Bethlehem (a.k.a. love) candle

Candle 3: the shepherd's (a.k.a. joy) candle

Candle 4: the angel's (a.k.a. peace) candle

This study weaves these two storylines together, the theatrical and the biblical. I hope it provides for reflection and conversation that can be both light-hearted and honest. I will assume you are familiar with the story of *It's a Wonderful Life*, so I should alert you (if you are one of the three people left on Earth who hasn't seen the movie) that there are spoilers ahead. I encourage you to watch the full movie before, during, or after the study.

Because, admit it, you were going to watch it anyway, right?

Leader's Guide For Session 1

BEFORE CLASS:

Read through this session yourself. Examine the Bible readings listed and become acquainted with them.

READ: Have someone read the Opening Prayer or read the prayer in unison.

READ: Read or have someone read the Setting the Scene section.

SESSION 1



The Prophets Pray

*Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains might quake at your presence.*

ISAIAH 64:1

SETTING THE SCENE

The movie has paged through the opening credits and fades to black, only to open again to the snow-covered sign “You Are Now in Bedford Falls.” We then get a tour of the town—street corners, businesses, restaurants, homes—and we hear a chorus of voices. They are each praying for a man named George Bailey, each in turn praying for their friend, son, brother, husband, father. “I love him. Dear Lord, watch over him tonight.” The scene then fades into a

READ: Read or have someone read this paragraph.

NOTE: The Hebrew prophets often invoke God to come to judge or to avenge an injustice (law) or to rescue or restore (gospel), sometimes both. Here it is important to note how God's thundering presence can overwhelm even the natural world ("the mountains would quake").

1. Isaiah prays on behalf of a people under the threat of exile, which is made all the more terrifying by the fact that God appears hidden from the scene. The plea for God's presence is thus both for the sake of communal restoration, but also for personal reconciliation ("because you hid yourself, we transgressed").

starry sky, and the galaxies begin to speak to each other. The stars are angels, and the story has begun....

It can be easy to overlook how uniquely *It's a Wonderful Life* begins. We begin, to use the theatrical term, *in medias res*, "in the middle of things," with the chorus of prayers for a person who is in some sort of crisis. We do not know yet who he is or why we should be praying for him. And then, after the dialogue of starry angels, the majority of the rest of the movie is one long, extended flashback, until we get back to the movie's present moment.

Advent works in the same way. It begins in the middle of things and in prayer. "Stir up your power, O Lord, and come." This is what prophets do. They pray to God—often on behalf of others, sometimes for themselves—in pleading, praise, and lament. This is what prophets do.

+

The first candle on the Advent wreath is often called the "prophet's candle." During this season of Advent, we hear many readings from the prophet Isaiah, perhaps the most famous of the Hebrew prophets. Read Isaiah 64:1-9. In this text, Isaiah prays to God. The prayer begins in invocation, inviting God to "come down" (vv. 1-2). How does the prophet describe this coming?

1. Why would he ask God to "come down" in this way?

2. Different images will strike people in different ways, which can make for rich conversation. But generally speaking, notice how the passage progresses from the large and cosmic to the small and intimate.

3. This is an opportunity for personal reflection and mutual encouragement. Answers will vary.

4. This is an opportunity for personal reflection and mutual encouragement. Answers will vary.

2. Seeing this passage as a whole, how would you track the way Isaiah describes God's presence? What images does he use? How does he describe how God acts in the world?

3. This passage from Isaiah climaxes in a call to repentance (vv. 6-9). When have you experienced God "hiding" his face from you? What was the result?

4. What comfort can we take from Isaiah's beautiful image that "we are the clay" and God is "our potter" (v. 8)? How have you seen God molding and shaping your life?

5. The book of Isaiah is sometimes referred to as the “fifth gospel” (aside from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). Passages like this are the reason why. This is a marvelous proclamation of good news that opens with one of the great themes of Advent (“Comfort, O comfort my people...”). You may want to consider reading some or all of the passage aloud. The images and the poetry of this passage will hopefully lead to meaningful sharing and application.

6. God’s promises to act, to rescue, to save, and to restore resound throughout the Scriptures, and the power of God’s promise manifests in the reality that when God speaks a word, it happens. As such, this is an opportunity for personal reflection and mutual encouragement. Answers will vary.

5. In *It’s a Wonderful Life*, we see the disastrous results of life in Bedford Falls without George Bailey. In Isaiah 64, we see the even more disastrous results of life when God “hides” from us. But God never hides forever. Read Isaiah 40:1-11, another great Advent word from the prophets. In a sense, we can read Isaiah 40 as one way God answers the prayer to “come down.” We might expect God to return in anger or vengeance. But how would you describe God’s return here? Where in your life right now do you need to hear this word of comfort?

6. List the promises God makes in this passage. Which of these promises speak directly to your life right now?

7. Their old age. Elizabeth's barrenness (which echoes Hebrew matriarchs like Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah). Zechariah's silence. The way John was named. Etc, etc. Answers will vary.

8. Prayer isn't just about our speaking to God. The silence in our praying opens up the possibilities for reflection, to listen to God speaking to us in his Word through the power of the Holy Spirit.

7. Christians see in Isaiah 40:3 the foretelling of another prophet who would come much later. Read Luke 1:5-25 and 1:57-66. This is the story of the birth of John the Baptist. What details strike you about Zechariah, Elizabeth, and the way John the Baptist was born?

8. Imagine what it would be like to not be able to speak for nine months. What is the value of silence? How is it also like a prayer?

9. This is an opportunity for personal reflection and mutual encouragement, not only upon how God has worked in our lives but also in the lives of others. Answers will vary.

10. Answers will vary. The season of Advent is a time to focus on the “already–not yet” tension of the Christian life. We have witnessed God at work in the past and hear his promise for the future. This makes it a time for hope, which we will continue to ponder throughout this study.

9. In first-century Jewish culture, Elizabeth’s barrenness would have been seen as a sign of disfavor or disgrace. Can you describe a time in your life when you or someone you love might have experienced the same sense of relief and joy when God “looked favorably” upon that situation?

10. The hope of *It’s a Wonderful Life* lies in how we are able to see the past of George’s life (and our own lives) in a new way. Luke 1:66, though, expresses a hope that lies in how we can now view the future in light of God’s promise: “What then will this child become?” We can read what became of John the Baptist. What is your hope today for who you might become in light of God’s promise? (Perhaps reference the list of promises above as you answer.)

READ: Read responsively the verses of this psalm.

PSALM 5:1-8

L *Give ear to my words, O Lord; consider my groaning.*

C Give attention to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to you do I pray.

L *O Lord, in the morning you bear my voice; in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch.*

C For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you.

L *The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers.*

C You destroy those who speak lies; the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.

L *But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house. I will bow down toward your holy temple in the fear of you.*

C Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before me.

READ: Have someone read the Closing Prayer or read the prayer in unison.

SING: Sing (or speak) this hymn.

CLOSING PRAYER

We pray to you, dear Lord, that you would watch over each one of us as we await the arrival of your Son Jesus, to our towns and into our hearts. Let his presence be a welcome blessing to us all, and may we grow to love him more and more as we live our lives and work for him to his glory. Amen.

HYMN

Before the Lord we bow,
The God who reigns above,
And rules the world below,
Boundless in pow'r and love;
Our thanks we bring
In joy and praise,
Our hearts we raise
To heav'n's high King.

May ev'ry mountain height,
Each vale and forest green,
Shine in thy word's pure light,
And its rich fruits be seen!
May ev'ry tongue
Be tuned to praise,
And join to raise
A grateful song.