

STUDY GUIDE

FOUR SESSIONS

WHO NEEDS
CHRISTMAS

ANDY
STANLEY

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ZONDERVAN

Who Needs Christmas Study Guide

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USING THE STUDY GUIDE

BEFORE THE FIRST GROUP MEETING

Read through the Introduction for an overview of the study.

Flip through pages 11–20 to understand the layout of a session.

DURING EACH GROUP MEETING

1. Turn to the Video Notes page and watch the video segment.
2. Use the Discussion Questions to have a conversation about the video content.

AFTER EACH GROUP MEETING

On your own, read the Think About It section.

Review the Before the Next Session section at the end of each session and complete the tasks.

[INTRODUCTION]

The Christmas season is upon us again. And that can be challenging for many reasons.

For most of us, life gets busy during the holidays. There just aren't enough hours to work, take care of our homes, go to our kids' school programs, shop, decorate, and get all of those cards signed, stamped, and sent to our families and friends.

Christmas can also bring the stress of managing difficult family relationships through tense meals and uncomfortable conversations. And it can be a painful reminder of loved ones who are no longer with us.

Whether you think Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year or a month of busyness you hope to put behind you with as little fuss as possible, we hope this study helps you press pause, take a deep breath (or dozens of deep breaths), and connect with your heavenly Father—*really* connect with him.

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That, after all, is what Christmas is truly about. It's our opportunity to remember an event that changed the world. It's a reminder that no matter what life throws at us, God loves us. He loves us so much that he chose to send his one and only Son into this world as a helpless infant, **who would make the ultimate sacrifice for us.**

In a way, the most challenging thing about Christmas isn't the hectic pace, the shopping, the decorating, or even the abrasive, opinionated family members. The most challenging thing about Christmas is the Christmas story. The story of Jesus' birth is so miraculous and amazing that it's hard to believe. It sounds too good to be true.

It's tempting to think, *Jesus' followers came up with this myth about him being born to a virgin in order to give him street cred later on. It didn't really happen. It couldn't have really happened. Virgins don't get pregnant and give birth.* But consider this: During his earthly ministry, Jesus predicted his death and resurrection . . . and then he pulled it off. If he could do that, maybe we shouldn't be all that concerned about the improbability of the circumstances of his birth.

Maybe we should consider that God did something improbable on purpose because he wanted us to know that he was moving in the world in order to change the world—forever.

That's what we'll explore over the next four sessions. And we hope that exploration changes your perspective on the Christmas season.

SESSION ONE

[THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY]

The story of Christmas doesn't begin the way you probably think it does. It doesn't begin with angels announcing the birth of a savior. It doesn't begin with a young couple on an out-of-town trip trying to find a place to stay as the woman goes into labor. It begins all the way back in the beginning, in the book of Genesis.

OVERVIEW

Two thousand years before Jesus was born, God made a promise to a man named Abram, who we would eventually know as Abraham. It wasn't just any promise. It was an unbelievable, incoherent, impossible promise. And yet it set up the events around Christmas.

The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

"I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;

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I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.” Genesis 12:1–3

At this point, Abram was about 75 years old with no children. It’s an understatement to say that it looked impossible that his descendants would ever become a nation, let alone that they would bless all the people on earth. But the author of Genesis tells us that *Abraham believed the unbelievable*. He made a choice that, no matter how improbable God’s promises seemed given his current circumstances, he could trust them.

Then what happened? Abraham eventually had a son named Isaac. Isaac had a son named Jacob, and Jacob had twelve sons. One of them, Joseph, was sold into slavery in Egypt by 10 of his brothers. But he rose to a position of influence with the Pharaoh and saved his family and the Egyptians from famine. Within a few generations, Abraham’s offspring had grown into a nation—but they were a nation of slaves inside Egypt. They didn’t feel blessed. And they certainly didn’t seem to be in a position to bless all the people on earth.

Hundreds of years later, God sent Moses to deliver his people from slavery. By the time Moses was done, no one in Egypt was feeling blessed by Abraham's descendants. God led his people into the Promised Land, but that created conflict with those already living there. Again, few people were feeling blessed by Abraham's descendants.

It can be challenging for us to read about all of the violence and war in the Old Testament. That doesn't seem like something a loving God would allow. But it was commonplace in the ancient world, and it has been commonplace throughout most of human history.

We only find it offensive because we live on the other side of Christmas. We see the world in a completely different way, but this was part of the journey. And that journey produced the kingdom of Israel, ruled most famously by David and his son Solomon. It was a kingdom that had the power and wealth to bless people across the earth . . . but it didn't.

Instead, Israel was split in two. Eventually, the Assyrians overran the Southern Kingdom, and the Babylonians took the Northern Kingdom into exile. Hundreds of years went by and the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham seemed more impossible than ever.

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There was no reason for the people of Israel to believe God's promises. But here's what God said to the nation during this difficult time through the prophet Malachi:

"My name will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets." Malachi 1:11

To the people of Israel, this must have seemed ridiculous. God's name was being mocked among the nations. His name was a joke. No one from the surrounding nations was looking at the fate of Israel and thinking, *I want to worship their God*. Israel couldn't feed or protect itself. It looked like a nation on its last legs.

Then, in 63 BC, Rome sent Pompey the Great to the area of Judah in Galilee. He conquered town after town until he was outside the walls of Jerusalem, the capital of Israel. And so began the Roman occupation of what came to be called the Holy Land. For 400 years, God's promises to Abraham seemed to be null and void.

But then an extraordinary thing happened. Looking back on it years later, trying to put the whole story together, the apostle Paul wrote:

"But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law . . ." Galatians 4:4

When nobody was expecting it, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David.

The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." Luke 1:27–33

It turns out the Jewish people *would* be a blessing to the people of earth. And the thing that makes the Christmas story so believable is the fact that the story—the whole story—is so remarkable. No one would have made it up. No one *could* have made it up. It stretched over so many years that the thread wasn't always evident. People lost track. People lost sight.

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But God was working behind the scenes, setting the stage. The Christmas story began 2,000 years before the first Christmas. And it continues to unfold 2,000 years later.

So, who needs Christmas? God decided the world needed Christmas.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you feel heading into this Christmas season? Is it a positive or negative time for you?
2. Do you find it difficult to believe the details of the Christmas story? Why or why not?
3. Talk about a time when God seemed silent or distant in your life. What happened? What did that experience do for your faith?
4. Read Genesis 12:1-3. In what ways does God's promise to Abraham change your view of the Christmas story?
5. Read Isaiah 49:6. What does this verse tell you about God's character?
6. What can you do this season to focus on the meaning of the Christmas story in our culture and in your life? How can this group help you?

THINK ABOUT IT

Christmas reminds us in the most remarkable way that God is active even when he feels distant or absent. Even when God is silent, he is not still. Through this remarkable story, we are reminded on a personal level that God cares about us. He doesn't just think in terms of nations; he knows us as individuals.

God didn't just send his Son to be the Savior of the world. He sent Jesus to be your Savior in your world.

The Christmas story means that despite challenging circumstances, we can trust God. Even when it seems like God can't possibly care about us, he is present, he is listening, and he keeps his promises.

Why Christmas?

Because the world needed Christmas.

The world needed hope.

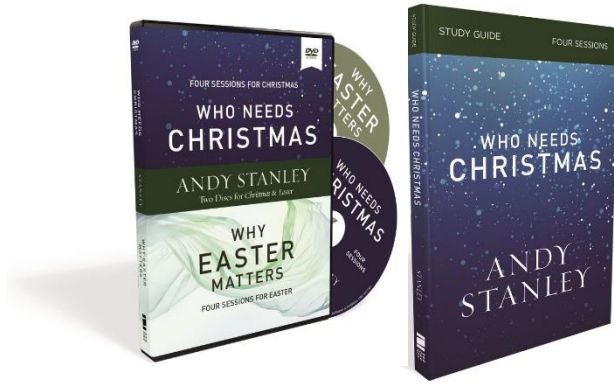
The world needed the Light of the World.

BEFORE THE NEXT SESSION

To prepare for your next session, read the Overview for Session Two.

Feel free to also look through the Discussion Questions.

During the week, spend some time each day reading the following passages in your Bible: Matthew 1:18–25, Romans 5:1–11.



WHO NEEDS CHRISTMAS

by ANDY STANLEY

Rediscover the improbable story of Christmas.

Four thousand years ago, God promised he would do something through the bloodline of Abraham. Two thousand years later, Jesus was born. And two thousand years after that, we're still talking about it. Why?

The story of Jesus' birth was not what anyone expected: a baby . . . born in the armpit of the Mediterranean . . . to save us from sins that no one thought we needed saving from.

This Christmas season, join Andy Stanley as he unpacks why the improbability of the Christmas story is what makes it so believable. No one could have or would have made it up.

Designed for use with the *Who Needs Christmas / Why Easter Matters* Video Study (9780310121121), sold separately. Streaming video also available.

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