

the questions push us to explore the passage more thoroughly.

When possible, link what you say to the comments of others. Also, be affirming whenever you can. This will encourage some of the more hesitant members of the group to participate.

5. Be careful not to dominate the discussion. We are sometimes so eager to express our thoughts that we leave too little opportunity for others to respond. By all means participate! But allow others to also.

6. Expect God to teach you through the passage being discussed and through the other members of the group. Pray that you will have an enjoyable and profitable time together, but also that as a result of the study you will find ways that you can take action individually and/or as a group.

7. Remember that anything said in the group is considered confidential and should not be discussed outside the group unless specific permission is given to do so.

8. If you are the group leader, you will find additional suggestions at the back of the guide.

1

To Us a Child Is Born

Isaiah's Prophecy

Isaiah 9:1-7

Christmas is heralded as a time of joy, friendship and celebration. But the reality is that it is not always a happy season. As I write, this Advent a dear friend sits at the side of his forty-five-year-old wife who just this week has learned she has terminal cancer. Christmas can remind us of past losses, the family we wish we had or our economic stress.

GROUP DISCUSSION. How are you approaching this season this year? Do you feel pressure to put on a false face or do you feel ready to dive in?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. Talk with God about how you are feeling as you approach Christmas. If you are feeling frustration or disappointment, express your feelings. Allow yourself to sit in his presence for a few moments and listen for his response.

As we turn to this beautiful passage of Isaiah, memorably recorded in Handel's *Messiah*, we encounter the people of Israel and Judah in a terrible state. King Ahaz has turned away from the sign God offered him, but now Isaiah prophesies of a greater King who is coming to put things right. *Read Isaiah 9:1-7.*

1. With the help of the map find the regions of Zebulun, Naphtali and Galilee and the road called "the Way of the Sea." This road marked the western limits of Palestine and the Jordan marked the eastern limits.



2. Describe a time when you have been overwhelmed with the reality of the darkness and evil which is present in our world.

3. The light dawns in verses 2-5. What specific changes does Isaiah predict?

4. Look at Isaiah 8:19-22. What do you learn about the state of mind of the people from these verses?

5. What do you think it would have been like for the people to hear Isaiah's words in 9:2-5?

6. How has the Lord brought light into your dark corner of the world?

7. Verses 2-5 are the trumpet fanfare announcing the arrival of the new ruler. Verse 4 refers to the military hero Gideon defeating Midian. But what is this new ruler like according to verses 6-7?

8. Reflect on the names in verse 6. What significance does each one have?

9. In what ways is the coming of the kingdom of justice and righteousness mentioned in verse 7 good news for the poor, the needy and the oppressed?

10. Which of these titles—"Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace"—particularly describes God as you have known him during a time of difficulty?

11. As you approach Advent, which of these aspects would you particularly like to experience and why?

12. What would you like to do in the approaching weeks of Advent to focus your mind and heart on Christ? (See "Getting the Most Out of *Advent of the Savior*" for a list of ideas.)

Ask God to prepare your heart for the coming of Christ.

Now or Later

In the next studies we will see many responses of worship both to the announcement of Jesus and to his birth. In the book of Revelation, worshiping the Lamb on the throne is the central activity of heaven. Revelation completes the story of Jesus coming to earth. Read Revelation 4—5 for a beautiful picture of eternal worship.