



SOUTHSIDE  
**Advent**

# WAITING IN THE DARK

## A Four-Week Small Group Study for Advent

### Overview

This four-week study is designed for small groups who want to journey through Advent together.

Each week includes:

- **Opening Activity** (5-10 minutes)
- **Scripture Reading** (5 minutes)
- **Discussion Questions** (30-40 minutes)
- **Reflection & Practice** (10 minutes)
- **Closing Prayer** (5 minutes)

**Total Time:** 60-75 minutes per session

Groups can meet weekly throughout Advent, creating space for honest conversation, spiritual formation, and community as you prepare your hearts for Christmas together.

### How to Use This Guide

#### For Group Leaders:

- Read through the entire week's material before your gathering
- Prepare by reflecting on the questions yourself first
- Create a welcoming environment (candles, Advent wreath if possible)
- Don't feel pressure to cover every question—go deep rather than wide
- Leave space for silence and reflection
- Close on time to honor people's schedules

#### For Group Members:

- Come with an open heart and mind
- Be willing to share honestly about your own journey
- Listen well to others without trying to "fix" their struggles

- Respect confidentiality—what's shared in the group stays in the group
- Engage with the weekly practice between gatherings

**Optional Enhancements:**

- Have group members sign up for the **Daily Email Devotional** to stay connected to themes throughout the week
- Try the **Bread for the Waiting** recipes and share bread at your gatherings
- Use portions of the **Deep Dive Devotional** for personal preparation between meetings

# WEEK 1: HOPE

## Hope Begins in the Dark

### Opening Activity (5-10 min)

Light one candle on your Advent wreath (or a single candle).

Sit in silence for 60 seconds, watching the flame. Then invite each person to complete this sentence: *"Right now, I'm hoping for..."*

No commentary, no fixing—just listen.

### Scripture Reading (5 min)

Read aloud together:

*"The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine." — Isaiah 9:2 (NLT)*

*"For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." — Isaiah 9:6 (NLT)*

*"I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope. I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning." — Psalm 130:5-6 (NIV)*

### Discussion Questions (30-40 min)

1. **The Long Wait:** Israel waited for centuries for the Messiah. What does it feel like to wait for something for a long time? How does waiting change us?
2. **Hope vs. Wishful Thinking:** What's the difference between hope and wishful thinking? How would you define biblical hope?
3. **Dark Seasons:** When have you experienced a "dark season" where God felt silent or distant? Looking back, what (if anything) was God doing during that time that you couldn't see then?

4. **Unmet Expectations:** God often answers prayers in unexpected ways. When has God surprised you by doing something different than what you asked for? Was it better, harder, or just... different?
5. **Hope in the Waiting:** The psalmist says his soul waits for the Lord "more than watchmen wait for the morning." What does that kind of longing look like in your life right now?
6. **Current Darkness:** Where in your life (or in the world) does it feel like you're "walking in darkness" right now? What would it look like to bring that darkness into Advent instead of hiding it?

### **Reflection & Practice (10 min)**

**Personal Reflection:** Take 3-5 minutes of silence. Ask yourself:

- What am I waiting for right now?
- Where do I need hope to grow in me?
- What would it look like to trust God's timing this Advent?

**Weekly Practice:** This week, create a simple **Hope Ritual**:

- Each morning or evening, light a candle
- Name one thing you're hoping for
- Pray: *"Lord, even here in the dark, I trust You are at work"*
- Sit with the lit candle for one minute before blowing it out

Share with the group: Will you commit to trying this practice this week?

### **Closing Prayer (5 min)**

**Leader prays:** *"Lord, we come to You in our waiting. Some of us have been waiting a long time. Some of us are tired. Some of us are struggling to hope. Meet us here, in this honest place. Remind us that You see us, You hear us, and You are at work even when we can't see it. Let hope grow in us this Advent, slowly and surely, like light breaking over a long night. Amen."*

**Invite anyone who wants to pray aloud to add a one-sentence prayer.**

**Close together:** *"Even here, in the dark, the Light is coming."*

## WEEK 2: PEACE

### A Peace That Comes Before the Circumstances Change

#### Opening Activity (5-10 min)

Light two candles on your Advent wreath.

#### Guided Breathing Exercise:

- Everyone sit comfortably, feet on the ground
- Take three slow breaths together
- Inhale (count to 4): *"Be still"*
- Exhale (count to 4): *"and know that I am God"*
- After three breaths, invite someone to read Psalm 46:10 aloud

Then ask: *"What's one thing that's been stealing your peace lately?"*

#### Scripture Reading (5 min)

Read aloud together:

*"You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, all whose thoughts are fixed on you!"* — Isaiah 26:3 (NLT)

*"I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid."* — John 14:27 (NLT)

*"Because of God's tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us—to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace."* — Luke 1:78-79 (NLT)

#### Discussion Questions (30-40 min)

1. **Two Kinds of Peace:** How is the peace Jesus offers different from the peace the world offers? What does "worldly peace" depend on?

2. **Joseph's Disruption:** Read Matthew 1:18-25. Joseph had a plan, and it got completely upended. When has your life been disrupted in a way you didn't choose? How did you respond?
3. **Mary's "Let It Be":** Read Luke 1:26-38. Mary said "yes" to God even though it would cost her reputation, comfort, and safety. What does it look like to surrender our need for control and say "let it be" to God?
4. **Peace in Chaos:** Isaiah says God keeps us in "perfect peace" when our minds are fixed on Him—not when life is easy. How do we "fix our minds" on God in the middle of chaos?
5. **What Steals Peace:** What are the things that most quickly rob you of peace? (Comparison, hurry, worry, distraction, etc.) Why do those things have so much power?
6. **Peace as Presence:** The Bible often links peace to God's presence, not to our circumstances. What helps you become aware of God's presence in your daily life?

### **Reflection & Practice (10 min)**

**Personal Reflection:** Take 3-5 minutes of silence. Reflect on these questions:

- Where am I trying to control outcomes instead of trusting God?
- What would it look like to release that this week?
- Where do I need God's peace right now?

**Weekly Practice:** This week, try a **Release Ritual**:

- Find a small stone (or use a piece of paper)
- Hold it and name something you're trying to control
- Pray: *"God, I release this to You. I trust Your presence more than I trust my control."*
- Either place the stone somewhere visible as a reminder, or (if using paper) tear it up as a symbol of letting go

Will you try this practice this week?

### **Closing Prayer (5 min)**

**Leader prays:** *"God, our lives feel disrupted. Our plans don't always work out. We carry worries we can't seem to release. Yet You promise a peace that doesn't depend on everything being*

*okay. Settle our hearts. Quiet the noise. Help us to release what we cannot hold and trust the One who holds us. Guide our feet into the way of peace. Amen."*

**Invite anyone to add a one-sentence prayer.**

**Close together:** *"Even here, in the dark, the Light is coming."*



# WEEK 3: JOY

## Joy That Grows Slowly, Even Here

### Opening Activity (5-10 min)

Light three candles on your Advent wreath.

**Gratitude Round:** Go around the circle. Each person shares: *"One small thing that brought me joy this week was..."*

Encourage people to name small, ordinary things (a conversation, a warm drink, a moment of quiet, a kind text, etc.)

### Scripture Reading (5 min)

Read aloud together:

*"Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David!"* — Luke 2:10-11 (NLT)

*"Don't be dejected and sad, for the joy of the LORD is your strength!"* — Nehemiah 8:10 (NLT)

*"Even the wilderness and desert will be glad in those days. The wasteland will rejoice and blossom with spring crocuses. Yes, there will be an abundance of flowers and singing and joy!"* — Isaiah 35:1-2 (NLT)

### Discussion Questions (30-40 min)

1. **Joy vs. Happiness:** How is joy different from happiness? Can you have joy even when you're not happy? What does that look like?
2. **Joy for the Shepherds:** The angels brought "good news of great joy" to shepherds—ordinary, overlooked people working the night shift. Why do you think God chose them first? What does that tell us about who joy is for?

3. **Joy in Hard Seasons:** Nehemiah told weeping, exhausted people, "The joy of the LORD is your strength." How can joy be strength when life is hard? Have you experienced this?
4. **Joy in the Wilderness:** Isaiah says even the wilderness will bloom with joy. What "wilderness place" in your life feels barren or stuck right now? What would it look like for joy to grow there?
5. **What Steals Joy:** What are the joy-killers in your life? (Comparison, hurry, distraction, cynicism, etc.) Why do those things drain us?
6. **Small Sparks:** Joy often hides in small, ordinary moments. What helps you notice those moments instead of rushing past them?

### **Reflection & Practice (10 min)**

**Personal Reflection:** Take 3-5 minutes of silence. Consider:

- Where has joy been hiding in my life lately?
- What small grace from God has strengthened me this week?
- What's one joy-killer I need to release?

**Weekly Practice:** Create a **Joy Jar** (or Joy List):

- Find a jar or start a note on your phone
- Each day this week, write down one thing (even something small) that brought you joy or reminded you of God's goodness
- On Christmas Eve, read through what you collected

Will you commit to this practice?

### **Closing Prayer (5 min)**

**Leader prays:** *"Father, teach us to notice joy. Not the loud, flashy kind, but the quiet kind that grows in hidden places. Help us see the small graces You scatter through our days. Strengthen us with Your joy, even in seasons that feel barren. Let gratitude rise in us like a slow dawn. Open our eyes to the good things You are doing, even now. Amen."*

**Invite anyone to pray aloud.**

**Close together:** *"Even here, in the dark, the Light is coming."*

# WEEK 4: LOVE

## Love That Comes Close

### Opening Activity (5-10 min)

Light all four candles on your Advent wreath.

Notice how much brighter the room is with all four candles lit.

**Reflection Question:** *"Who in your life has shown you what God's love looks like? How did they do that?"*

Go around and let each person share briefly.

### Scripture Reading (5 min)

Read aloud together:

*"So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son." — John 1:14 (NLT)*

*"Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross." — Philippians 2:6-8 (NLT)*

*"The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it." — John 1:4-5 (NLT)*

### Discussion Questions (30-40 min)

1. **Love That Came Close:** John says Jesus "made his home among us" (literally "moved into the neighborhood"). What does it mean that God didn't love us from a distance but came close enough to touch, hear, and weep with us?

2. **Love That Stoops Low:** Philippians says Jesus "took the humble position of a slave" and "humbled himself." Why is this shocking? What does this tell us about God's character?
3. **No Place Too Low:** If God's love came close enough to be born in a manger and die on a cross, what does that mean about the places in our lives we think are "too messy" or "too broken" for God to enter?
4. **The Incarnation Changes Everything:** How does the fact that God became human change the way we understand suffering, weakness, or vulnerability?
5. **Love in Action:** Jesus didn't just talk about love—He embodied it. How has God's love toward you changed the way you love others? Where do you struggle to love the way Christ loved?
6. **Carrying the Light:** We've spent four weeks preparing for Christmas. How can we carry this light—this hope, peace, joy, and love—into the world around us?

### **Reflection & Practice (10 min)**

**Personal Reflection:** Take 3-5 minutes of silence. Ask yourself:

- Where in my life do I most need to know that God has come close?
- How is God inviting me to carry His love to someone else this week?
- What has shifted in me during these four weeks of Advent?

### **Weekly Practice: Pass the Light:**

- This week, choose one tangible way to show God's love to someone else
- It could be: a note of encouragement, a meal, a listening ear, an act of service, a phone call, forgiveness extended
- Pray: *"Jesus, let Your love flow through me to [person's name]."*

Share with the group: Who is God bringing to mind?

### **Closing Prayer (5 min)**

**Leader prays:** *"Jesus, You didn't stay far away. You came close. Close enough to be born. Close enough to touch. Close enough to suffer, die, and rise for us. Thank You for love that stoops low, that enters our darkness, that kneels beside what we thought was unredeemable. As we prepare to celebrate Your birth, help us carry Your light into the world. Let hope, peace,*

*joy, and love overflow from us to everyone we meet. The Light has come. And we are forever changed. Amen."*

**Invite anyone to pray.**

**Close together:** *"Even here, in the dark, the Light has come."*