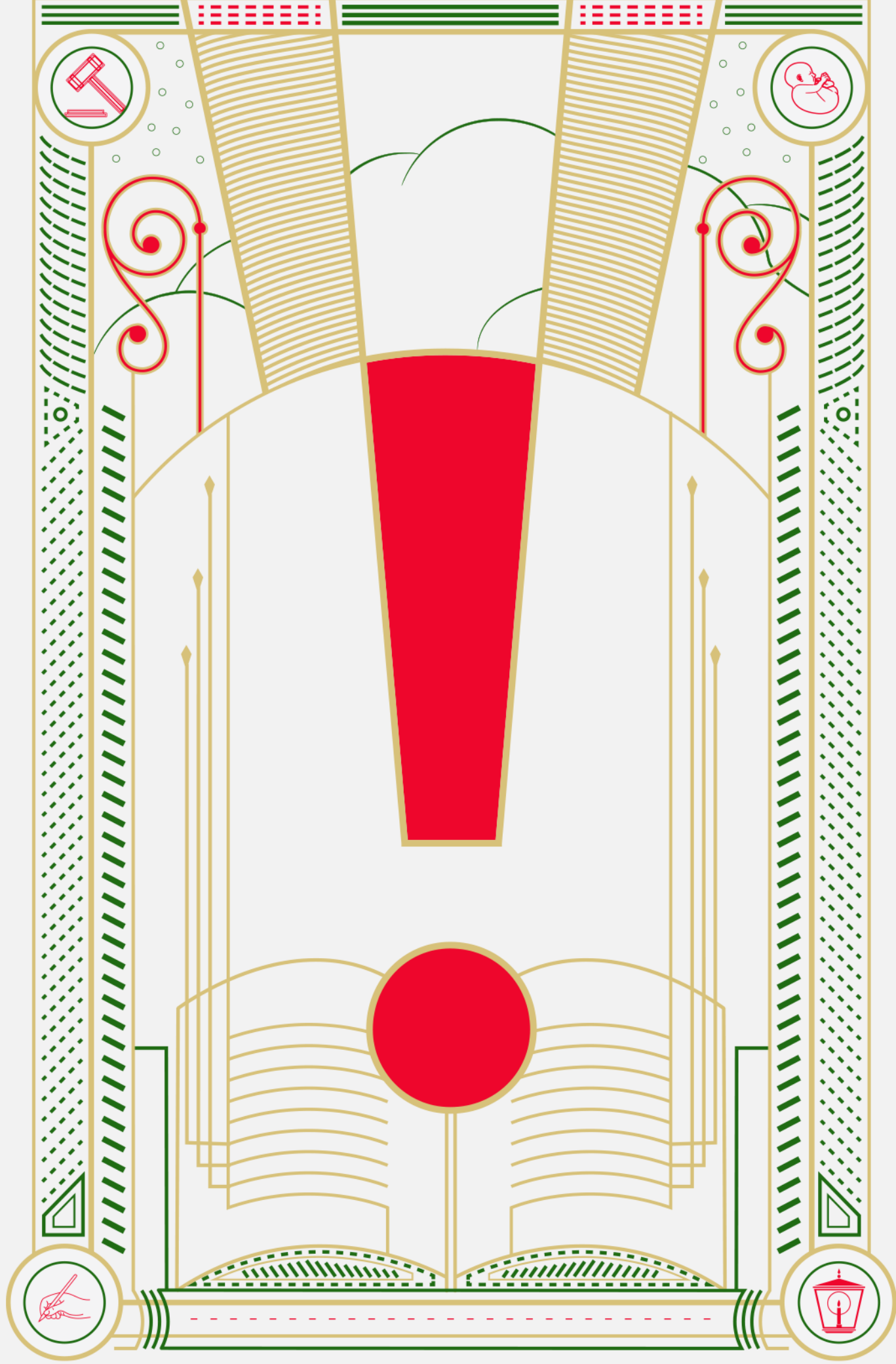


# Unbelievable Christmas DISCIPLESHIP GUIDE



## ADVENT 2020: UNBELIEVABLE CHRISTMAS

Imagine that you had Jesus over for dinner, and you casually invited Him to offer some information about Himself: "Tell me about yourself," you say, "I bet those scars come with a great story."

What follows is astonishing, incredible, unexpected, surprising, uncommon, staggering, rare, shocking...*unbelievable*.

Do we open our Bibles and hear the Lord's amazing story as if it were delivered straight from His own lips? Do we let ourselves feel the weight of Scripture's story? Do we notice the distressing, sharp edges of God's overwhelming judgment throughout the Bible? Do we feel the raw tension as God tells Mary just who will be in her womb? Can we feel the ache in our own heels as we contemplate Joseph's urgent search for a somewhat safer place to have his wife give birth to the Messiah? If we try to place ourselves in what the Bible actually presents to us, we may once again find it as unbelievable as it actually is, even as we are fully convinced of its truth.

In fact, the Bible is here in part because God anticipated the unbelievable nature of His story, yet He did not want any doubts about it:

"It seemed like a good idea for me to write about all of this," records Luke, "so that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught."<sup>1</sup>

The Advent season is about two things: remembering the first coming of Jesus and looking ahead with anticipation to the second coming of Jesus. What happened on Christmas stands as God's open invitation to not only observe all that He is, all that He has done, and all that He has promised, but to believe it. So why do we consider Christmas unbelievable? Why do we look at the plain language of God's revealed promises and still struggle to bank everything on them? Join us as we explore some of the unbelievable elements of Advent: judgment, election, virgin birth, salvation, and epiphany.

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<sup>1</sup> Paraphrase of Luke 1:3-4.

## THE ART OF UNBELIEVABLE

The focal point for Advent art is an exclamation mark. When an author or advertiser wants to bring emphasis, attention, excitement, or warning, they often utilize an exclamation mark (think of dangerous chemicals, shocking statements, an exciting text, or an astounding headline).

Most people would not normally associate an exclamation mark with Christmas, but we should, because what God has done in Jesus is more deserving of attention, emphasis, excitement, and warning than anything else in human history!

What makes Christmas unbelievable? The reality is that Christianity is built upon history, eyewitness record and testimony, and the active work of God the Holy Spirit. Christianity, in fact, presents the only completely logical and cohesive worldview. Christmas, then, is not unbelievable because there's a lack of evidence and data; Christmas is unbelievable because the revelation of both God's holiness and God's grace are entirely "otherworldly"; there is nothing else in our experience that accurately mirrors what God has done and promised.

God is a holy Judge who joyfully gives grace to sinners, so much of the symbolism in the art connects directly to this reality:

- The clouds in the background are a visual stand-in for Heaven.
- The actual exclamation mark doubles as a part of light rays - light rays that both extend up but also draw the eyes down.
- If you follow the shape of the exclamation point from the top down, you'll get a feel for the journey of Jesus - He came from Heaven all the way to the womb, and eventually to the tomb.
- In the four corners are symbols - the top left is a gavel for judgment, the top right is a baby in a womb, the bottom right is a lamp representing the revelation of Jesus's power and identity (what is commonly called "epiphany"), and in the bottom left is a hand with a pen, signifying God's election of His people by His writing of their names in His book of eternal life.
- There is a book at the bottom of the art, with lines protruding upwards (again, representing Heaven) - this represents the salvation God secures through Jesus - these lines are the names of God's elect, written before the creation of the world.
- Shepherd's staffs round out the art, representing the security of Jesus's flock as He leads them with all power and authority.

# THE YEAR END GIFT



The world has never been more aware of the need for proper hygiene than in 2020. We have come face to face with the reality that we are incredibly vulnerable, even to the most microscopic organisms. In this way, the modern world has joined the developing world: we are now globally united by our need for clean water, proper sanitation, and good hygiene.

But imagine what it is like to live through a global pandemic with no awareness of proper sanitation and hygiene, or access to something as simple as a sink where you can wash your hands.

This is where Living Water International's strategy for helping people shines. When Living Water partners with a local community, they are not simply drilling and installing a new well or providing repairs to an existing well, they are equipping an entire community with life-saving, life-preserving education, techniques, and tools for proper sanitation and hygiene, all in the name of Jesus. When we give to Living Water, we are giving water, sanitation, and life.

Living Stones Churches have partnered with Living Water for the last 11 years, raising over \$1,000,000 through our Year End Gift. This year's Year End Gift will be collected Sunday, December 20th. 50% of any gift given to the Year End Gift is given to Living Water International, 50% is given to the local mission of Living Stones Church.

You can give now until December 31st at [lschurches.com/yearendgift](https://lschurches.com/yearendgift)



# COMMUNITY GROUP LEADER GUIDE

## WEEK 1

### UNBELIEVABLE: JUDGMENT

MATTHEW 25:31-46

### ADVENT CANDLE: HOPE

#### A NOTE FOR STUDENTS OF THE BIBLE

Here are 6 questions you should ask of any passage in the Bible:

- What is the context of the original audience?
- Why did it matter to the original audience?
- How can we relate to the original audience? How might the text matter to us?
- What is the text calling us to be, do, or know?
- What does this passage say about God?
- Where is the gospel, Jesus, or grace found in this text?

#### PASSAGE SUMMARY

This passage takes place within what has been called the Olivet Discourse, a sermon that Jesus delivered on the Mount of Olives which was an area that directly overlooked the temple in Jerusalem. Within the Olivet Discourse, Jesus teaches His disciples about two critically important events: (1) the forthcoming judgment upon the nation of Israel that would take place 40 years after Jesus's ministry (in 70 A.D. the Roman army destroyed Jerusalem, including the temple) and (2) the return of Jesus at the end of history.

In this passage Jesus promises that there is coming a final judgment, a day when He will come in his glory with his angels to judge everyone who has ever lived. For those who are God's sheep there is a guarantee of eternal life. For those who have rejected God there is only eternal punishment.

#### CALL TO WORSHIP

For the last 11 years we have partnered with Living Water International to provide clean water, sanitation & hygiene, and the gospel to people all over the world through our annual Year End Gift. How does seeking to provide clean water and hygiene education honor Jesus? How can we help one another be generous like Jesus when giving to the Year End Gift?

For more information on Living Water and the Year End Gift, visit [lschurches.com/yearendgift](https://lschurches.com/yearendgift)

#### TEXT

1. Who is the Son of Man and what is the significance of him sitting on a throne? Why does this matter for our every-day lives?
2. What do we know about the final judgment from this passage? Why is God's judgment necessary and good?
3. Who are the "least of these" in verse 40? Why are these people so significant to Jesus?

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4. As Protestants, we believe that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone, not by the good things that we do. How do we reconcile what Jesus says in verses 35-40 with the truth that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone? What role does doing good things play in the life of the Christian?

### APPLICATION

1. Jesus so closely aligns Himself with His brothers and sisters that He considers their neglect and suffering His own. If you are a Christian, do you have this same heart for those in the church who are impoverished, struggling, or otherwise suffering? Why or why not? How has this kind of heart shown up in your life?
2. In his book *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem lists four ways God's judgment can influence Christians:
  1. Final judgment satisfies our inward sense of a need for justice.
  2. Final judgment enables us to forgive others freely.
  3. Final judgment provides a motive for righteous living.
  4. Final judgment provides a great motive for evangelism.

Which of the above mentioned truths currently impacts you the most? Why?

3. In your own experience, why have you or those around you found God's judgment unbelievable or hard to believe? What are some ways we can help people understand the necessity and goodness of God's judgment?
4. Make a plan to help individuals in our church right now who need financial help, prayer, or a word of encouragement.

### PRAYER

Pray for those who have not been reconciled to God through faith in Jesus, asking God to save them and connect them to a gospel-centered church.

Pray for the Spirit to give you profound love for brothers and sisters in the church who are struggling and hurting. Ask Him to show you specific people you can help right now.

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<sup>2</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, pages 1147-48.

## WEEK 2

### UNBELIEVABLE: ELECTION

JOHN 1:9-13

ADVENT CANDLE: PEACE

#### A NOTE FOR STUDENTS OF THE BIBLE

Here are 6 questions you should ask of any passage in the Bible:

- What is the context of the original audience?
- Why did it matter to the original audience?
- How can we relate to the original audience? How might the text matter to us?
- What is the text calling us to be, do, or know?
- What does this passage say about God?
- Where is the gospel, Jesus, or grace found in this text?

#### PASSAGE SUMMARY

This passage is part of the Apostle John's introduction to the identity and mission of Jesus, and the reality that even as Jesus came directly to His own people - the nation of Israel - with powerful signs, profound teaching, and tremendous grace, He was rejected by them. Yet there were those, even amongst the Jewish people, who trusted in Jesus, and they were given the ultimate privilege of being God's children. This would have been a somewhat shocking statement for some of John's readers; John is stating that belonging to God is not the result of being a certain ethnicity or doing good things, but is instead the result of God causing them to become His children. Election, then, is personal and relational - Jesus doesn't just have disciples, He has brothers and sisters. As Wayne Grudem writes, "[Election is] an act of God before creation in which he chooses some people to be saved, not on account of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of his sovereign good pleasure."<sup>3</sup>

#### CALL TO WORSHIP

In 2019, Living Stones was able to help provide one well in Honduras , 29 new wells in India, and 2 well rehabs in Zambia. Let's praise God for this and ask Him to powerfully work in all of our hearts so that we can go above and beyond with generosity.

#### TEXT

1. How does this passage describe Jesus? Why is this?
2. What does it mean to "receive Jesus" and "believe in his name"?
3. What are some of the benefits or privileges of being one of God's children?
4. Why is God's causing someone to become His child unbelievable or hard to believe?

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<sup>3</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, page 1241.



## APPLICATION

1. If you're a Christian, what causes or has caused you to doubt God's election?
2. How is the Bible's assertion that God independently makes sinners His children different from other religions or philosophies?
3. What emotions do you feel when you consider the fact that God freely chose you to be in His family?



## PRAYER

Praise God for His gracious election. Ask God to use the truth of election to give you courage in evangelism.



## WEEK 3

### UNBELIEVABLE: VIRGIN BIRTH

MATTHEW 1:18-25; ROMANS 5:12-14

ADVENT CANDLE: JOY

#### A NOTE FOR STUDENTS OF THE BIBLE

Here are 6 questions you should ask of any passage in the Bible:

- What is the context of the original audience?
- Why did it matter to the original audience?
- How can we relate to the original audience? How might the text matter to us?
- What is the text calling us to be, do, or know?
- What does this passage say about God?
- Where is the gospel, Jesus, or grace found in this text?

#### PASSAGE SUMMARY

One of the most important doctrines in Christianity is the doctrine of the virgin birth of Jesus. In Matthew 1:18 we get a very clear description of just how Jesus was conceived: "Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, *before they came together* she was found to be with child *from the Holy Spirit*." Jesus does not, nor did he ever have, a human father. All the way back in Genesis 3:15, God had promised that He would send a deliverer through the "seed" of the woman. But this deliverer had to be born without an inherited sin nature. In Romans 5:12-14 we read that sin and death have spread to all of humanity through humanity's first representative, Adam.

Since Jesus was not born of a man but was conceived by the Holy Spirit, he came into the world as truly human and truly God, yet without the true, legal guilt and sinful corruption of humanity. Jesus, then, is the new humanity's representative, born completely holy. This makes the salvation Jesus accomplished all the more amazing: he truly never did deserve death, yet he subjected himself to it on behalf of his people.

#### CALL TO WORSHIP


The danger of microscopic germs and viruses has been before us for most of 2020, yet this danger has continually confronted people in the developing world for decades. When we give to the Year End Gift, we are opening up the opportunity for Living Water to bring life-saving sanitation and hygiene education all over the world as they partner with and train local pastors.

Take some time to pray for India, where Living Water has been able to make an impact with new wells. Pray specifically for pastor Arjuna Chiguluri who leads a church-planting organization in India, and ask God to help our church members give more than what they spend this Christmas season.

#### TEXT

1. Read Romans 5:11-14. What words or phrases stick out to you? Why?
2. How does Romans 5:11-14 explain the need for the virgin birth?

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3. Read Matthew 1:18-25. What do we learn about Jesus in this passage?
  4. How is Jesus without sin even though he was born to a sinner (Mary)?
  5. If someone were to ask why the virgin birth matters how would you respond using Matthew 1:18-25 and Romans 5:11-14?



### APPLICATION

1. How is your joy strengthened and increased by the truth of these passages?
2. In these two passages, what specific characteristics of God give you the greatest hope? Why?
3. Romans 5:14 states that Adam was a "type" of Jesus, meaning God had planned to send Jesus even before he created Adam. How can this reality be an encouragement to you?
4. What are some ways to discuss the virgin birth with those who do not yet trust Jesus?



### PRAYER

Thank God for the salvation he provides through Jesus.

Thank God that you will one day be given a new, sinless body.

Ask the Lord to give you opportunities to talk about Jesus during Christmas celebrations.

## WEEK 4

### UNBELIEVABLE: GOD SAVING SINNERS

#### 1 TIMOTHY 1:15

#### ADVENT CANDLE: LOVE

God sent Jesus into the world, and Jesus joyfully came into the world to save sinners. To save us. To save you. And the Holy Spirit is at work all over the globe to bring people into the beautiful and eternity-altering relationship with God that happens through faith in Jesus. The saying is completely and entirely trustworthy, even if it is at times unbelievable: Jesus came into the world to save sinners!

May the Lord give you full assurance that the truth of 1 Timothy 1:15 is, and always will be, an actual reality, a truth that will never go away, and a profound assurance that there is nothing in this world - or in your life - that can undo what God has done in Jesus.

Enjoy the following poem, written by one of Living Stones's deacons, Renelle Piñero, as you thank God for Jesus:

#### JUDGMENT

*There is a longing in our hearts,  
a desire in our soul  
When evil rips our hope apart  
We look to the one who makes it whole.  
He is the Alpha, the Omega  
Holy, Righteous, and Divine,  
Who will bring His judgement upon us all  
And slam down His gavel as a final sign.*

#### ELECTION

*Before He made the Heavens and the Earth  
God chose you as His own.  
He commands the winds and waves.  
Yet it is you He wants before His throne.  
We cannot work our way to earn His love,  
Our path to salvation is nothing we can claim.  
But when He returns to make all things new,  
In His Book of Life, He has written your name.*

#### VIRGIN BIRTH

*Jesus is the Second Adam, free from sin  
Born only by the will of God  
To a Virgin conceived by the Holy Spirit  
Humble, perfect, and unflawed.  
How could it be, God incarnate in this child?*

*It was prophesied, "Immanuel, God with us."  
This baby in a manger will save his people  
from their sins.  
Behold, this infant King, our Savior, Lord  
Jesus.*

#### EPIPHANY

*We see Him in the Word and in creation  
His mighty power is being revealed.  
He opens eyes and lights the darkness  
Good News is preached, sick souls are healed  
In the man Jesus, we know the grace of God,  
Gentle, lowly, and filled with grace.  
A father and brother rich in mercy  
We see the love of God when we look upon  
His face.*

#### SALVATION

*In the glory of this mystery,  
We often wonder, "How could it be?  
That the hands that hold the universe  
Were nailed to save a sinner like me?"  
We've been running to avoid his wrath  
But escape is unachievable.  
God made His dwelling place here with us.  
Makes the gift of salvation, truly unbelievable!*

## WEEK 5

### UNBELIEVABLE: EPIPHANY

#### JOHN 1:14

#### ADVENT CANDLE: CHRIST

#### A NOTE FOR STUDENTS OF THE BIBLE

*Here are 6 questions you should ask of any passage in the Bible:*

- What is the context of the original audience?
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- What is the text calling us to be, do, or know?
- What does this passage say about God?
- Where is the gospel, Jesus, or grace found in this text?

#### PASSAGE SUMMARY

Epiphany refers to the celebration of Jesus being revealed in the fullness of His identity and mission, first to the wise men who traveled from the East, and then throughout His ministry. In order for us to truly know Jesus, we must have our hearts enlightened by the Holy Spirit, indeed, as Jesus himself says, "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." In this verse, John packs serious theological, Biblical, and even philosophical depth as he asserts that Jesus - the eternally holy and all-powerful God of the universe - became flesh. God became a human being. And in doing so, God fully and finally "tabernacled" amongst his people. All of the Old Testament promises about God being with his people come to fruition in Jesus. And Jesus completely and totally revealed (and continues to reveal) the glory of the triune God. In Jesus, we find both grace and truth.

#### TEXT

1. What does John mean when he calls Jesus the Word?
2. What is the significance of Jesus becoming flesh and dwelling among us? What Old Testament promises does this fulfill?
3. How did the people in Jesus's time "see" his glory? What did they witness? What did they hear? How do we in the 21st century "see" the glory of God?

#### APPLICATION

1. When did you last "see" the glory of God? What was it like?
2. How does the fact that Jesus is full of both grace and truth challenge and comfort you?
3. Do you lean more into Jesus's grace or his truth? How can you find balance in what you cherish about Jesus?

#### PRAYER

Praise God for revealing himself through Jesus, and ask that he reveals himself to those who do not yet trust him.