



# *The Greatest Gift*

UNWRAPPING THE FULL  
LOVE STORY OF CHRISTMAS



ANN VOSKAMP

*New York Times* Bestselling Author

*4-Session Group Study*

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LOVE STORY OF CHRISTMAS

*DVD Curriculum*  
*Discussion Guide*

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The Greatest Gift DVD Curriculum Discussion Guide

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|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| 20 | 19 | 18 | 17 | 16 | 15 | 14 |
| 7  | 6  | 5  | 4  | 3  | 2  | 1  |

# *Contents*

Welcome *v*

Ideas for Group Discussion *vii*

SESSION 1 Look . . . for Hope *1*

SESSION 2 Linger . . . for Peace *5*

SESSION 3 Laugh . . . for Joy *9*

SESSION 4 Love . . . for Always *13*



# Welcome

Welcome to the exhale you've only hoped would be possible during a season that's often jam-packed with obligations and distractions. Gifts to buy, decorations to hang, parties to host and attend, family photos to snap, Christmas cards to sign and send—where, then, is the room for peace, for contemplation, for consideration of the true intent of Advent? When do we stop and sit and wonder and wait? When do we wait on all that's to come?

Advent—literally, “to come.” We wait here in Advent—wait for the arrival of our King. We wait with open hands and open hearts, knowing this coming will be grand. It will be worth the wait.

And so, *The Greatest Gift* discussion guide. Your guide, I pray, into that waiting. Into the looking and lingering, the laughter and love that is this season. Yes, beneath all the preparation and orchestration, the busyness and business of “the holidays,” lies the tiny Baby in the crèche, divinity wrapped in humanity, reminding us that He has come, He will come again, He is coming for us, through us, with us—every moment of every day. Will we stop and look? Will we linger over this truth, this Advent? Will we let our shoulders drop and exhale in honor of Him?

Breathe. Breathe easy of the best present of all: the presence of Him. Gather with your friends or your neighbors or your family, and during these four weeks of Advent, may you simply breathe Him in. Prepare your Jesse Tree, if you so desire (for instructions, see pages xiii-xiv in *The Greatest Gift*), put four meetings on your collective calendar, come with soulful expectation, and see what God will do.

Come and see.

Come and hear.

Come and participate.

Come and partake.

This Advent, *come*.

*Ann Voskamp*



# *Ideas for Group Discussion*

This discussion guide is organized into four sessions, in correlation with the four weeks of Advent. To this end, you'll find prompts suggesting that participants read six or seven devotional entries in *The Greatest Gift* each week. If you need to adjust this rhythm, it is recommended that you adjust the reading schedule so that no devotional entries are missed. (For example, if your group meets twice a week for two weeks only, you could have participants read two entries per day.) The content of this discussion guide hinges on the book's content; thus, you'll want to read each entry to experience the full impact.

To get the most from your group experience, consider the suggestions aimed at various groups below.

## *Church-Based Small Groups*

Consider taking a break from your typical small-group study during the Christmas season in order to implement this curriculum. Be sure all group members have a copy of the devotional book so they can complete the readings prior to the sessions. You might rotate leadership of the material so a different person can lead the discussion each week. If you have additional members who want to be involved, you might invite them to oversee the prayer, read Scripture, or facilitate the icebreaker questions at the beginning of your time together.



## *Families*

If your family wishes to discuss *The Greatest Gift* together, decide how many copies of the devotional book will be necessary in order for each member of your family to review the week's content prior to your discussion. For younger children, you might select portions of the devotional readings most pertinent to their life stages and adapt the verbiage accordingly. Alternatively, you might consider purchasing the family edition (*Unwrapping the Greatest Gift*), which is suitable for children of all ages. To engage active children, consider allowing them to oversee the Jesse Tree experience each week.

## *Women's Groups*

Many churches offer women's group meetings throughout the week, and *The Greatest Gift* is a fitting complement to that menu. Be sure each participant has her own copy of the devotional book, and consider assigning one person to lead the rest of the group in an opening prayer and to transition between the video and the small-group discussion time. Consider purchasing a small artificial Christmas tree for each table so group members have the opportunity to participate in the Jesse Tree experience together.

## *Neighbors and Work Associates*

To implement *The Greatest Gift* with neighbors, consider inviting those in your building, on your street, or in your place of employment who have expressed spiritual interest in the past. Let them know that this study includes four small-group discussions about the love story known as Christmas. Be sensitive to the fact that some participants may not agree with concepts such as the authority of God or the preeminent position of Christ presented in this curriculum. Instead of letting disagreements splinter the group, use them as opportunities for honest discussion, heartfelt prayer, and a chance to see life through lenses other than your own.

## SESSION 1

# *Look . . . for Hope*

*The heart that makes time and space for Him to come will be a glorious place. A place of sheer, radiant defiance in the face of a world careening mad and stressed. Because each day of Advent, we will actively wait. We will wait knowing that the remaking of everything has already begun.*

### THE GREATEST GIFT

#### *Beforehand*

In preparation for Session 1, read the devotional entries for December 1–6, found on pages 1–54 in *The Greatest Gift*.

#### *Beginning*

Select one of the following questions to help center your group prior to viewing this session's video. You might think through your responses ahead of time, in case you choose to kick off the conversation yourself.

1. What is your family's favorite Christmas tradition? How did it begin?
2. What does Advent—the word, the season, the observances—mean to you? What personal experiences have shaped your understanding of Advent?

This week's video focuses on the single greatest priority for our lives—from God's perspective, anyway. It's the priority of lineage, of our being grafted into His family tree.

## *Video*

View video, Session 1 [run time 15 minutes].

At the conclusion of the video, say a brief prayer, asking God to direct your conversation and shed His light on the parts of your life needing illumination.

## *Questions for Discussion*

Work through the questions below that seem most pertinent to the group's needs and desires.

1. What word, phrase, promise, or refrain stood out to you most in the video? Why?
2. Read Isaiah 11:1-2, 10 and then respond to the idea presented in the video that “the mattering part is never the chopped-off stump.” If this is true, then why do we so often define ourselves and even describe ourselves to others in terms that reflect that chopped-off stump—that failure, that fear, that foible, that fallacy? Why do we seem to relate more to the “stump” than to the shoot, the new fruit-bearing Branch, Jesus Christ?
3. The essence of hope is ultimately presence—namely, God’s presence. And yet Christmastime has a way of revealing to us the “other things” we hope in—goods and glitter, trinkets and lighted trees. What tends to distract you during this season of Advent from training your eyes—and your hope—on Christ alone?
4. Do you agree or disagree with the notion that “we only find out where we are when we find out where [God] is”? How would you describe “where you are” these days? Are you satisfied with where you are?
5. This session’s title is “Look.” What are you really, truly, wholeheartedly looking for this Christmas?

If time permits, turn to page 44 in *The Greatest Gift* and answer the questions you find there.

## *Ending*

Read aloud the devotional entry from December 1 in *The Greatest Gift*, found on pages 4–5. Then name the “unfurled grace” you would most like to see this Advent season. Perhaps “unfurled grace” would look like a

prodigal child returning home or a few moments of stillness at the start of each December day. Or it may look like release from a troubling addiction or a life-giving conversation with a combative colleague. Maybe it would look like a deep breath or a fresh appreciation for snowfall on tree limbs or ears to hear—really hear—the words of the wondrous carols. Maybe it would look like eyes to see the Word of God in new and personal ways. Maybe it would look like true rest.

After everyone who wishes to share has spoken, close your discussion time in prayer. Sample prayer points are provided below, which can be adapted for your group. Or you are also free to pray along different lines based on the needs of your group.

- Thanksgiving for this life—stumps and all—and for the greatest imaginable Gift—the Shoot, Jesus Christ
- Intercession for the needs expressed during group discussion
- Determination to seek after what really matters this Christmas

### *Until Next Time*

Prior to your next meeting, be sure to read the entries for December 7–12 found on pages 55–120 in *The Greatest Gift*. To seal this session's core concept in your mind and heart, ponder these two questions between now and Session 2:

1. **The stump.** As you enter this Christmas season, what “stump” troubles you most? A flagging relationship? Financial strain? An emotional valley? A moral dilemma? A general sense of purposeless, hopelessness, or pain?
2. **The shoot.** Even if your life seems devoid of brazen miracles, what little things—events, circumstances, or other small but significant signs of new life—are coming together for you this Advent season in a way that indicates God is behind them?



## SESSION 2

# *Linger . . . for Peace*

*When you are wrung out, that is the sign you've been reaching for rungs. The work at the very heart of salvation is the work of the very heart of Christmas: simply rest.*

### THE GREATEST GIFT

#### *Beforehand*

In preparation for Session 2, read the devotional entries for December 7–12, found on pages 55–120 in *The Greatest Gift*.

#### *Beginning*

Select one of the following questions to help center your group prior to viewing this session's video. You might think through your responses ahead of time, in case you choose to kick off the conversation yourself.

1. Which concept describes what's capturing your attention this Advent season: *pace* or *peace*?
2. What rituals or rhythms generally help you and your loved ones stay focused on what really matters during the busy and sometimes stressful days leading up to Christmas?

This week's video focuses on the real purpose of Advent—making space for Christ.

## *Video*

View video, Session 2 [run time 20 minutes].

At the conclusion of the video, say a brief prayer, asking God to direct your conversation and shed His light on the parts of life needing illumination.

## *Questions for Discussion*

Work through the questions below that seem most pertinent to the group's needs and desires.

1. What word, phrase, promise, or refrain stood out to you most in the video? Why?
2. When we focus more on getting than giving—on receiving the gift of God's grace instead of pouring endless energy into climbing and striving and doing more, more, more, we feel sure we'll be exposed as the needy and "less than" people we fear we really are. What thoughts come to mind as you consider the idea that we're not to be performers but rather dwelling places for God?
3. Review the story of Abraham's willingness to offer up his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God, found in Genesis 22:1-19. As you assess your life through the rearview mirror, what are a few of the "rams in the thicket" you've hoped for along the way? How did God provide for your needs?
4. When have you experienced firsthand the promise that "God always sees, and He will always see to the matter"?

If time permits, turn to page 63 in *The Greatest Gift* and answer the first and third questions you find there.

## *Ending*

Read aloud the devotional entry from December 8 in *The Greatest Gift*, found on pages 68–70. Then name an area of life where you feel like Jacob these days. Are you a debtor? A deluder? A desperado? One who is just plain dog tired? Where do you feel weary, as though you're trying and striving but failing every time? Where are you most in need of peace?

After everyone who wishes to share has spoken, close your discussion time in prayer, either by using the prayer points that follow or by coming up with your own.

- Acknowledgment of those person-specific places in life that are most in need of peace
- Praise for God's willingness to provide custom-fit peace for his children
- Resolution to trust in God's provision instead of fretting over hypotheticals and eventualities, realizing that at its core, "worry is belief gone wrong"

### *Until Next Time*

Prior to your next meeting, read the entries for December 13–18 found on pages 121–184 in *The Greatest Gift*. To seal this session's core concept in your mind and heart, reflect on the following thoughts and questions between now and Session 3:

1. A hurried pace often keeps us distracted from the fact that we're actually rushing away from God. Advent invites us to be courageous enough to slow our stride, to really see the One we're desperate for, to still our souls long enough to linger for the sake of peace. So take some time today to stop. Sit in God's presence. Place your trembling hand in his. *This* is the purpose of Advent—to receive the provision that He alone can provide.
2. The refrain echoes throughout the whisper-thin pages of Scripture: "I am yours." The implied question is clear: *Will you be Mine?* What does your pace this Advent reveal about your answer to that heartfelt probe?





## SESSION 3

# *Laugh ... for Joy*

*The unexpected Bethlehem King is the once and coming King, the King of the first and still coming second Advent, the King coming again to rule the earth and make all the sad things untrue.*

### THE GREATEST GIFT

#### *Beforehand*

In preparation for Session 3, read the devotional entries for December 13–18, found on pages 121–184 in *The Greatest Gift*.

#### *Beginning*

Select one of the following questions to help center your group prior to viewing this session's video. You might think through your responses ahead of time, in case you choose to kick off the conversation yourself.

1. What aspect of the holiday season never fails to put a smile on your face?
2. What practices help you stay joyful during the busyness of Christmastime?

This week's video focuses on the fact that lovers of God, regardless of how messy and burdensome our circumstances are, can never be undone.

Thanks to Christ's arrival on our scene, we can experience deep and abiding joy.

## *Video*

View video, Session 3 [run time 19 minutes].

At the conclusion of the video, ask God to direct your conversation and shed His light on the parts of life needing illumination.

## *Questions for Discussion*

Work through the questions below that seem most pertinent to the group's needs and desires.

1. What word, phrase, promise, or refrain stood out to you most in the video? Why?
2. Respond to this idea: "When our lives are enlarged by Christ, our lives will birth joy."
3. Describe a time when laughter has seemed like an irresponsible or even irreverent response to your circumstances. How would you describe the difference between grasping the gravity of one's situation and grasping the gravity of God's grace?
4. When have you been most keenly aware that God is "never absent, never impotent, never distant"? How does His divine presence relate to your ability to experience joy?
5. Respond to the assertion that "the opposite of joy is not unhappiness; the opposite of joy is unbelief."
6. The book of Hebrews says that Jesus went to the Cross for "the joy set before him" (Hebrews 12:2, NIV). What painful thing are you walking toward today? What might it look like to journey with joy?

If time permits, turn to page 152 in *The Greatest Gift* and answer the questions you find there.

## *Ending*

Read aloud the devotional entry from December 16 in *The Greatest Gift*, found on pages 159–161. Then respond to the idea that you aren't equipped for life until you realize you aren't equipped for life.

After everyone who wishes to share has spoken, close your discussion

time in prayer—based either on the prayer points below or on topics that are suitable for your group.

- Gratitude for the gift of joy, the distinctive of the Christian life
- Acknowledgment of the aspects of this earthly existence that threaten to rob us of joy
- Affirmation that regardless of our circumstances, we never can be undone

### *Until Next Time*

Prior to your next meeting, read the entries for December 19–25 found on pages 185–259 in *The Greatest Gift*. To seal this session's core concept in your mind and heart, consider the following thoughts and question between now and Session 4:

1. **Give thanks; get joy.** We tend to believe that joy comes circumstantially—that happy hearts come from happy times, that true rest requires easy days, easy hills, easy lives. Of course, our thinking is all wrong here. Joy doesn't enter our lives from the outside in but rather from the inside out. It seeps into our thinking, into our rhythms, into our lifeblood when we train our eyes and our hearts on the lavish provision that's already been made for us. A loving God has seen to it that we have all we need—for success, for abundance, for now. Joy comes when we cease our search for ease and instead insist on saying thanks. What does your current level of joy reveal to you about the role gratitude plays in your day-by-day existence?



## SESSION 4

# *Love . . . for Always*

*Relationship is the only reality; there is nothing else.  
The way He is with us and in us; the way we make  
space for Christ to grow us, unfold Love in us; the way  
the life of Christ stirs amazing grace within.*

### THE GREATEST GIFT

#### *Beforehand*

In preparation for Session 4, read the devotional entries for December 19–25, found on pages 185–259 in *The Greatest Gift*.

#### *Beginning*

Select one of the following questions to help center your group prior to viewing this session's video. You might think through your responses ahead of time, in case you choose to kick off the conversation yourself.

1. When do you feel most loving as a person? What dynamics tend to fuel a sense of lovingkindness in you?
2. In what ways is the concept of love expressed in your family? How was it expressed in the home you grew up in?

This week's video focuses on the idea that we are loved in order to love.

## *Video*

View video, Session 4 [run time 17 minutes].

At the conclusion of the video, say a brief prayer, asking God to direct your conversation and shed His light on the parts of life needing illumination.

## *Questions for Discussion*

Work through the questions below.

1. What word, phrase, promise, or refrain stood out to you most in the video? Why?
2. Respond to the idea that “everyone everywhere is really only saying one thing: I want you to love me.” Why don’t we always read people’s actions and reactions as pleas for love?
3. How does your own craving to be loved manifest itself in your life—in your thoughts, assumptions, behavior, and words?
4. Does your life experience seem to validate or invalidate the notion that “we can have as much of Jesus as we want . . . as much love, even, as we want”? Explain your answer.
5. How does our willingness to be loved facilitate our ability to love others? What does all this have to do with Christmas?

If time permits, turn to page 204 in *The Greatest Gift* and answer the questions you find there.

## *Ending*

Read aloud the devotional entry from December 19 in *The Greatest Gift*, found on pages 188–190. Then respond to this question: Even in your imperfect state—with a blossomless fig tree or two (or twenty?)—what do you have to offer a world in great need?

After everyone who wishes to share has spoken, close your discussion time in prayer. Suggested prayer points follow.

- Awareness of God’s great love—the love that has been coming for us since the beginning of time
- Gratitude for the ability to love others because we ourselves have been well loved

- Boldness to offer up the resources we have been given to a world so desperately in need

### *A Parting Thought*

As a way to conclude this study, consider your response to the following passage:

**Formed by love, for love.** In a society that seems to prize possessions over people and performance over presence, it's easy to become swept up in the belief that love is for lightweights, that leaning in and loving well are outdated, useless ideas. And yet how good it feels when someone leans in. And loves us well. In those moments we come face-to-face with our deepest need—our need to be loved. And if we need to be loved, then what can we assume about everyone else? Of course, they crave love too. The answer, God says, is a simple (yet astounding!) process: *Let Me love you so that you can love them well.* He fills our lives to overflowing and then places us in situations where the spilling-out will help most. If, that is, we allow His profound process to unfold. Are you allowing God's love to form you? To shape the way you live and move and breathe? And are you seeing that love spill out onto lives that are parched for love? Who can be quenched by your love this Advent? Will you be courageous enough to extend it now?



