

# FINDING THE MESSIAH

group leader's guide

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This study guide is to be used in conjunction with *Finding the Messiah: From Darkness to Dawn—the Birth of Our Savior* by Jane Rubietta (Indianapolis: WPH, 2014).

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# CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Week 1. Days 1–7	6
Week 2. Days 8–14	8
Week 3. Days 15–21	9
Week 4. Days 22–28	11

# INTRODUCTION

*Finding the Messiah: From Darkness to Dawn—the Birth of Our Savior* contains several application tools at the end of each day's reading. Sometimes, though, it helps to have additional questions and suggestions to deepen the journey, both to enrich personal study and application, and to make leading or facilitating a small group, book club, or study easier.

The daily readings have been combined by weeks to form a four-week study guide. There will be ample material to use during your meeting time. The questions below work well in combination with the application elements at the close of each reading, which can be implemented with the suggestions in the Small Group Guide in the book itself.

To get started, each group member should have a personal copy of *Finding the Messiah*. It is helpful if they read the current week's selections in advance of the meeting.

Individual group sessions are divided into two parts: "Just Looking" and "Opening the Gifts." "Just Looking" contains icebreaker questions, non-threatening openings that invite people into relationship, story, and memories. "Opening the Gifts" takes a more in-depth look at elements in the book's chapters, related Scriptures, and application.

For more group ideas and resources, please visit [www.JaneRubietta.com](http://www.JaneRubietta.com). If your group is interested in a video conference call with the author, during or toward the end of your study together, please contact her at [info@JaneRubietta.com](mailto:info@JaneRubietta.com).

## GENERAL QUESTIONS TO ASK AT EACH SESSION

1. What stood out for you in these readings?
2. What Scriptures spoke to you? In what ways?
3. Where did you sense God tugging, or an "ah-ha" moment?
4. What emotional responses did you experience?
5. What will be different today? Tomorrow?

## CLOSING

Close by reading the Benediction aloud, either as a group, or to one another, so it is intimate for each person.

Read the Prayer in unison.

Close with an Advent hymn, such as “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

**Note:** At the beginning of each session, you might want to remind people that silence is uncomfortable but good, and allows people time to process. Also, to honor confidentiality and to create a safe environment, adapt the motto, “What we say here, stays here.”

You might want to consider the Deeper Devotion book, *Finding Life: From Eden to Gethsemane—the Garden Restored* for your next group study. Forty readings lead you into resurrection, through Lent or any season of the year.

# WEEK 1

*Days 1–7*

## JUST LOOKING

1. What's the worst Christmas gift you've ever received? And what's the best one, the one you hoped against all hope you might find on Christmas morning? How old were you, and how has your list changed over the years?
2. When do you realize, "I'm missing Christmas this year"?
3. What hope does Christmas bring for you? Or, in what ways have you turned down the hope button because it all feels pretty flat these days?
4. How do you identify with Zechariah? When have you experienced or experimented with silence as a tool for Advent?

## OPENING THE GIFTS

1. In what ways is Advent risky? On God's part? On yours? Why?
2. Read Isaiah 8:22—9:7. What about the darkness, the deep darkness, of your days and nights? When do you long for light, for relief, and how do you find it? Don't over-spiritualize your answer. We seek light and relief in all sorts of non-spiritual but not necessarily bad ways: a phone call, a jog, a bag of chips, some chocolate. And some real substitute ways, that hurt us or people we love. Don't be afraid to list those too.
3. Herod proves to be the enemy of Christmas in the Advent story. Who are some modern-day enemies of Christmas? These enemies can be personal, economic, social, etc.
4. Even though Zechariah would get just one once-in-a-lifetime chance to enter the Holy Place, he never quit praying. It would be easy to quit showing up for "work," the work of prayer, of worship, of service, after all those years of non-answers and the non-glory of the low-profile daily-ness of life. How do you keep showing up? When do you call in sick? What keeps you faithful even with the non-answers?
5. Talk about the longing for the One described in Isaiah 9:6–7. It's a familiar passage, so it is easy to glance over it and move on. Wait with the names for Messiah for a bit: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. What response do you sense in your soul?

6. The NET Bible translates these words from the Hebrew as, “For a child has been born to us, a son has been given to us. He shoulders responsibility and is called: Extraordinary Strategist, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6). The Scriptures present a picture of a Savior, establishing and strengthening David’s kingdom “by promoting justice and fairness, from this time forward and forevermore. The Lord’s intense devotion to his people will accomplish this” (Isa. 9:7 NET). Compare the reign of the coming One to our current celebration of Christmas. What challenges you about Christ’s mission? Where do you see yourself, your church, seeking to fulfill it?

# WEEK 2

*Days 8–14*

## JUST LOOKING

1. In what ways has Advent already gotten away from you, now that we're on week two of the season?
2. What's on your to-do list? Your calendar of commitments, all the celebrations? How ho-ho-ho are you feeling?
3. Where have you experienced Advent, Christ's coming, in these first seven days? Talk about some of the Christ-encounters, whatever shape those assumed. How are you seeking Advent on a daily basis? Or are you? What gets in the way of your seeking?
4. When do you keep praying, like Zechariah, even though there are no answers? How do you stay faithful? When have you quit, chucked it all, walked away?
5. What do you *really* think about that silence business, the angel striking Zechariah mute because he asked, "How can I be sure of this?" (Luke 1:18).

## OPENING THE GIFTS

1. It's comforting—and challenging—to read of Elizabeth's faithfulness during her years of infertility. She never turned her back on God. But what if God never answered? Do you think she would remain faithful? Would you?
2. How do you live with disappointment, with "barrenness" (whether literally or figuratively speaking) like Zechariah and Elizabeth? What is your version of barrenness, the places where you grieve a lack of fruit or unanswered prayer?
3. Talk about the angel's hello to Mary, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28). Imagine her teenage innocence, and the journey of favor in her life. Where do you find this encouraging? Heartbreaking?
4. Knowing what we do now about Mary's baby, and the route of favor for her, would you have said yes to the angel? Why or why not? What if you take resurrection off the horizon, and stop at the burial at the end of Jesus' earthly life?
5. When has God put a difficult path before you, and you have answered, "I am the Lord's servant. . . . May your word to me be fulfilled" (Luke 1:38)? What do you prefer to keep under your own control? When can you say, "May it be done to me according to your word"?

# WEEK 3

*Days 22–28*

## JUST LOOKING

1. Talk about where you've experienced Advent this past week. Where have you seen the Christ, where have you embodied him? How are you remaining conscious of Advent?
2. Where are you leaping for joy? How do you show that to others?
3. When does the good news feel like good news, and when doesn't it?
4. What correlation do you think exists between John leaping at Mary's voice and John's words about listening for the Bridegroom's voice (John 3:28–31)? How do you best listen?
5. Mary's experience with Elizabeth and her mentorship and friendship during a very unusual and likely extremely difficult time was a huge grace—favor. Who has mentored you along the way? Who have you mentored? How do you see the grace of that?

## OPENING THE GIFTS

1. Read Luke 1:46–55, called “Mary's Song” in some headers. This is the famous passage known as the Magnificat. What elements and subjects impact you in these verses? What “great things” has the Mighty One done for you in particular? Where do you experience mercy, or do you? Work your way through the passage, verse by verse, asking questions and considering application.
2. In numerous instances, the coming of the Messiah is intended to bring social reform and justice. This isn't just a liberal view of “religion”; it is entirely scriptural. Where do you struggle with this? Embrace it? How?
3. For added study, read Luke 1:67–79, Zechariah's words of wonder and blessing and prophecy at the naming of his son. The priest finally received his voice back, and hear what spilled from him. The silence of those months filled his soul with praise and the river flowed its banks. As with Mary's Song, work your way through these verses, looking for themes. Where do you see them being fulfilled? And by whom? Similarities between Mary's words, the angel's, and Zechariah's?
4. Would the story line have changed if Joseph hadn't listened to the angel? And how might our world change, if we view every pregnant unmarried woman with a sketchy story as someone sent by God? Chosen by God?

5. The Greek version of the birth of Jesus is far less dramatic than we've made it out to be. The mass crowding in the streets translated to mass crowding in all available lodging, and rather than unkindness. The drama and irony are found in the humble birthplace and the king-child who came from heaven into that straw-filled bed. Talk about that. What is fresh about the birth this year for you? What are you anticipating?

6. The shepherds were the lowest and lowliest of people on the social ladder. They suffered ill health from exposure to the elements, they probably smelled, and were extremely poor. The idea of peaceful nights for shepherds is probably romantic and unrealistic, because their livelihoods depended on protecting the sheep. Who are the shepherds in our world today? How do we extend the peace the angels sang about? And when do you throw aside your day job and your reputation and go to find the Christ child? What challenges you about the shepherds' response? How do you care for the shepherds in our society?

# WEEK 4

*Days 22–28*

## JUST LOOKING

1. One week until Christmas Day. Where have you experienced the Messiah so far? Where have you missed him, or forgotten? How in these remaining days will you refocus?
2. What were you afraid of when you were a child? How—or did you—overcome that fear? How did others handle you and your fear?
3. The Scriptures show a wonderful picture of angels knowing our thoughts and feelings—“Do not be afraid,” they said. Where else have the angels addressed fear?
4. Simeon’s words over Jesus, “A light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel” (Luke 2:32) are in some ways old news for us. We know Jesus came for us. But in that era, Jewish leaders expected the Messiah to come for Jews. They were expected to be a set-apart nation, a called out people. They had protected their identities, under God’s orders, since the time of Abraham. How do you find the middle point between being set-apart and being part of the world enough to share the “light of revelation”? Where are you challenged?
5. Anna’s name means “grace.” Where else have we seen that word in these Advent narratives? Grace and favor are concepts that have become trite in our culture. When have you really experienced grace or favor? Given it?

## OPENING THE GIFTS

1. Simeon, “one who listens, obeys,” waited for the consolation of Israel. What does that mean for you? In what ways do you find consolation, apart from God? With God? And how good are you at waiting in God’s presence for consolation?
2. Simeon and Anna, waited faithfully, patiently, certain they would recognize the Messiah, knowing God kept them alive for the Advent of heaven, the long-awaited One who would deliver their people from bondage. How do you watch for the Messiah, the Anointed One? When have you recognized him in surprising ways? Bring in Jesus’ words in Matthew 26:40. Who are you, in these two intersections?
3. Read Matthew 2:1–8. Herod was desperate and threatened over the birth of this baby, who was predicted to take over Herod’s throne. Jesus was such a threat to the hierarchy, from religious

to social to political to economical, that he would divide nations and incur such wrath that he would be murdered. There are of course some hotbed areas in our world today where Jesus is so controversial as to bring hatred and violence. But who are they really hating? And how does people's reaction to Jesus then, and in certain places today, challenge you in your daily life? How controversial are you when it comes to living distinctly different lives from the world around you? What does that look like?

4. How do we know Jesus' parents were poor? The displaced family with the baby who slept in the feed trough tests our complacency. There is nothing status quo about Christ being born in that place. What does it take, to move from passivity to passion? Where do you see this in your life? And how do your schedule, the demands on your life, your fear inhibit your involvement with others, your bringing Christ into the lives of displaced people? Who are those people?

5. Consider the reactions of various people in these narratives: Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the angels, the magi, Simeon, Anna, Herod, the priests, and the scribes. Where do you find yourself in that lineup?

6. As the official season of Advent draws to a close with its fulfillment on Christmas Day, what response do you hope for in your life? What has changed within you during this mission to find the Messiah? Have you found him? And what will be different as you journey forward?

As you close this Advent season, perhaps a reminder that when we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus," we are inviting God's presence into our lives. We are also inviting Christ to return, in the final Advent, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done." May we pray those words and invite Christ to come into the world through us, daily, in these coming days.

And so, with the company of the saints, we say,

Come, Lord Jesus.  
In us,  
Through us,  
For us,  
For the world.  
Hasten your final coming  
And keep us faithful  
To come to you  
For you have  
Come for us.  
Come,  
Lord Jesus.