



Taking a Second Look at Christmas

OMEGA

Session One:

What are we preparing for?

Omega – Session 1

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Aims: To have a fun and positive start to the course; explore what Christmas has become about in our culture, and sometimes our churches; and to examine how we can focus more of our preparations on Jesus.

Leader's prep

In advance:

- **Gather together** everything you need from the list below.
- **Read through** the session, the Bible passage, and the Leader's notes provided.

Equipment needed:

- Bibles
- flip chart or large sheet of paper and suitable pens
- pens and paper for all participants
- craft materials for making simple decorations (e.g. coloured paper, string, scissors, stickers etc)
- an artificial Christmas tree decorated with some tinsel.

1.1 Season's greetings! (5 mins)

- 1.1.1 Provide a brief overview of the course and introduce this session's theme.
- 1.1.2 Point out the Christmas tree and say that it's there to get you in the mood, and that it will be used later.
- 1.1.3 Encourage each person to introduce themselves. You could use an ice-breaker such as getting them to share their favourite and least favourite thing about getting ready for Christmas.

1.2 Begin by making a list... (10 mins)

- 1.2.1 Encourage everyone to sit round in a circle and invite them to play a form of word association game. (If you have quite a large group you might want to split up into smaller groups to do this exercise.)
- 1.2.2 Each person must take it in turns to say a word or thing they associate with Christmas – no word can be repeated.
- 1.2.3 Keep going round the circle, as fast as possible. If people can't think of a word, they drop out. Keep going until there's only one person left or no-one can think of any more new words.
- 1.2.4 Ensure one person – which could be you, or another volunteer – doesn't participate and is instead focused on capturing as many of the words as they can by writing them up onto the flip chart.
- 1.2.5 Invite the group to look at the words on the flip chart and to group them together into themes. How do they feel when they think about these different themes?

1.3 Then decorate the tree (10 mins)

- 1.3.1 Invite each person to make a simple Christmas tree decoration to represent in some way how they feel about Christmas; what they most enjoy; or to reflect on the themes that came up in the last exercise.
- 1.3.2 After seven or eight minutes, encourage them to attach their decorations to the tree.



- 1.3.3** Say a short prayer to dedicate the rest of the session, and to reflect on what has been discussed so far, or use the one provided:

Lord Jesus, we thank you for the joy of Christmas.

For good gifts given and received;

For laughter and quality time with friends and family;

For feasting and festivities and fun.

But we ask you to come now and remind us why you came

And how we can prepare for you to come still more

To transform our hearts, our lives and our world.

We would turn down the noise and dim the sparkling lights

To hear and see you more clearly as you are Lord Jesus – Christ our King.

For we would build your Christ-with-us kingdom

And so we need you to prepare the way again.

Amen.

1.4 Preparing for the day or for the Christ? (25 mins)

- 1.4.1** Read Isaiah 40:1-11 as a group. Use whichever one of the following methods you prefer:

- a) Invite one person to read the passage aloud to everyone in the group.
- b) Invite two or three different people to read it out from different Bible versions.
- c) Divide the group into pairs or threes and ask each one to read the passage together, try to memorise the key messages and then report it back to the group in their own words.

- 1.4.2** Use the questions below to encourage discussion on the passage and the issues raised. (See the Leader's notes at the end of this study, which provide background on the passage and the issues behind these questions.):

- a) How do you feel when you read this passage?
- b) Why do you think it is often chosen as an Advent reading?
- c) Read it again, just by yourself this time. Does anything strike you that you may have missed first time round?
- d) How, if at all, might this passage influence your Advent and Christmas preparations?

- 1.4.3** Read out the facts provided in the "Christmas spending facts" box provided below and then gather reactions to them. (At a suitable point, add up the group's total expenditure for last year as indicated.)

- a) How do these 'spending facts' fit with your own experience? Individually, jot down a quick estimate of your own expenditure during last year's Christmas season, and give it (anonymously) to the group leader, who will add them all up and announce the grand total for the group.
- b) How does all this fit with the passage we've just read?
- c) Might the passage from Isaiah make you think about doing anything differently?

- 1.4.4** Use the flip chart again, and divide it into two vertical columns:

- a) Write *Preparing for Christmas* on the top left hand side, and invite people to list the main activities they engage with in the lead up to Christmas.
- b) When this list is complete, write *Preparing for Christ's kingdom to come* on the top right hand side and together place a tick next to any of the activities listed in the left column which they think help with this preparation as well. Ask them what the central messages of our main pre-Christmas activities actually are – who or what do we seem to be preparing for?
- c) Now use a fresh piece of flip chart paper. Again write *Preparing for Christ's kingdom to come* at the top, and this time invite the group to suggest what activities and preparations were missed off the previous list, but they think are important to help us better prepare for this.

- d) Discuss as a group how more time, energy, and resources might be put into this second list of preparations.
- e) Explain that Matthew 6:21 says “where your treasure is, there is your heart” – how we spend our time and money, and the focus of our preparations, says a lot about what we’re really worshipping – we know that new parents are excited about their baby because they get everything ready for it... what do our preparations reveal about what we’re excited by?
- f) Our preparations for a new baby would normally anticipate life with that baby *after* its birth, as much as – if not more than – the expectation beforehand. To what extent do our preparations for Christmas focus on the day itself rather than its actual meaning for our lives beyond it?

Christmas spending facts from 2013 (Source: *Money Advice* survey)

In 2012, total Christmas spending nationwide in the UK was estimated at a minimum of £22bn, a 10% increase from the previous year.

In December 2013, those questioned were planning to spend an average of £822 per adult, as follows:

£599 on presents
 £180 on food and drink
 £ 43 on cards, decorations, and trees

As in previous years, the Christmas period 2013 was predicted to account for around 30% of total annual retail sales in the UK. The percentage is similar in the USA.

1.5 More than merriment (10 mins)

- 1.5.1 Ask the group to look again at the tree you decorated at the beginning of the session. If it is to be decorated with things celebrating Christ’s kingdom, is there anything on it that’s getting in the way?
- 1.5.2 Take off anything from the tree that doesn’t symbolise attributes of Jesus’ kingdom.
- 1.5.3 Invite the group to make a second set of decorations for the tree which somehow purposefully celebrate Advent and Christmas as being a season of preparing for Christ’s kingdom to come.
- 1.5.4 After seven or eight minutes, lead a short prayer to bring together what’s been explored in the session, or use the following:

*Lord Jesus, thank you for coming
 And for preparing our hearts for you to come again.
 We ask you good shepherd to keep leading us,
 Speaking softly and tenderly to areas where we need comfort
 And making it very clear where we need to listen again,
 Know your voice, and follow you more closely.
 We recognise that we have a King who brings a new kingdom –
 And it’s totally different to what our UK high-streets promote.
 So we give you permission to raise our plains and make our mountains smooth
 Until the way we build is a highway for you
 And our lives reflect your sacrificial love once more.
 And the world sees that it is indeed Christ-with-us.
 Amen.*

Leader's notes

Isaiah 40: 1-11 is undoubtedly one of the best known passages in the entire book, perhaps partly because it has been immortalised and popularised over the years by Handel's *Messiah*. This famous oratorio opens with the aria "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people" and is immediately followed by the chorus "And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed". The passage creates a feeling of comfort and confidence in a future with God that sets the tone for our own seasonal expectations.

However, a closer look at this and other well known passages commonly associated with Advent, such as Isaiah 9: 2-7 and Isaiah 11: 1-10, indicates that they are not only foretelling Jesus' birth. For they all look forward to a time when the glory of the Lord will be revealed to **all** people (Isaiah 40: 5), and that will be at the end of time as we know it, when 'the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea' (Isaiah 11:9).

The passage here, like others in Isaiah, is foretelling **two** future events. One is the birth of Christ (Isaiah 9:6; 11:1), which at the time of writing was still seven centuries away. The other is the **second** coming, when he will return in glory and in might. The birth of Christ is envisioned by Isaiah as the beginning of a revolution that would one day lead to the social order as we know it being turned upside down: as symbolised by valleys being exalted, mountains being laid low, crooked paths made straight and rough places smooth. It is a revolution that Christ would start by being born in human form (Isaiah 11:6), and that he would exhort us to continue until he returns. It would be a work in progress, not one that would be completed in his lifetime – though through his death and resurrection, he set in motion everything required for its completion.

This passage, therefore, reinforces the idea introduced in earlier chapters of Isaiah that the first coming of Christ would be the precursor to a second. It is an idea taken up, for example, in Matthew 25: 31-46 and in Revelation 1: 1-8. It was the reason for the introduction of the season of Advent in the early Church as a period of preparation for that **second** coming. Perhaps our own preparations for Christmas – when we celebrate Christ's appearance in human, mortal and vulnerable form – should therefore also reflect our preparations for the second, when his appearance as the Messiah and as our "sovereign Lord" will be unmistakable. It will be in glory, "and all mankind will see it together" (Isaiah 40: 5).

So how should we prepare for our own encounter with Christ, whether in this world or in the world to come? Jesus made it very clear that our focus should be on loving God and loving others – and there are many examples throughout the Bible of this truth being lived out by his followers. For today's purposes, two passages in the Gospels give us some specific help with this question; and although the words are spoken by different individuals in different contexts, their meaning is exactly the same. In Luke 3: 11, John the Baptist urges his followers to prepare for their future encounters with Jesus, in their own lifetimes, by sharing their clothing and their food with those who have none. And in Matthew 25: 35-36, Jesus admonishes his disciples to prepare for his coming again by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and those in prison – because "whatever you have done for the least of these [my people], you have done for me" (v. 40). In other words, our preparations for Jesus' coming should perhaps be governed by the principle of sharing our material wealth with those less fortunate than ourselves.

How might this be reflected in our own Christmas planning? In the light of the statistics discussed in this session, what difference might it make to our own "Christmas spending facts" and to the wider world?