

STUDY GUIDE
GROUPS / INDIVIDUALS

FOUR SESSIONS
FOR ADVENT

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MAX LUCADO



BECAUSE OF
Bethlehem

EVERY DAY A CHRISTMAS
EVERY HEART A MANGER

BECAUSE OF

Bethlehem

BECAUSE OF
Bethlehem

LOVE IS BORN, HOPE IS HERE

STUDY GUIDE
GROUPS / INDIVIDUALS
FOUR SESSIONS

MAX LUCADO

WITH CHRISTINE M. ANDERSON



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Because of Bethlehem Study Guide

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How to Use This Guide

GROUP SIZE

The *Because of Bethlehem* video study is designed to be experienced in a group setting such as a Bible study, Sunday school class, or any small group gathering. To ensure everyone has enough time to participate in discussions, it is recommended that large groups break up into smaller groups of four to six people each.

MATERIALS NEEDED

Each participant should have his or her own study guide, which includes notes for video segments, directions for activities and discussion questions, as well as practices to deepen learning between sessions.

TIMING

The time notations—for example (16 minutes)—indicate the *actual* time of video segments and the *suggested* times for each

activity or discussion. Adhering to the suggested times will enable you to complete each session in about an hour. If you have a longer meeting, you may wish to allow more time for discussion and activities.

PRACTICE

Each session includes an application activity called a practice for group members to complete on their own between meetings. Although the practice is completed outside of group time, it's a good idea to briefly review it before concluding the meeting to clarify any questions and to make sure everyone is on board.

FACILITATION

Each group should appoint a facilitator who is responsible for starting the video and for keeping track of time during discussions and activities. Facilitators may also read questions aloud and monitor discussions, prompting participants to respond and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to participate.



SESSION 1



God Has a Face

The Word became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighborhood.

John 1:14 MSG

The celebration of Advent is possible only to
those who are troubled in soul, who know
themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who
look forward to something greater to come.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer,

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christmas Sermons

WELCOME

Welcome to session 1 of *Because of Bethlehem*. If this is your first time together as a group, take a moment to introduce yourselves to one another before watching the video. Then let's begin!

VIDEO: *GOD HAS A FACE* (16 MINUTES)

Play the video segment for session 1. As you watch, use the outline provided to follow along or to take additional notes on anything that stands out to you.

Notes

Christmas is a season of traditions. To most kids, that jolly old elf is the very face of Christmas—and that face is everywhere this time of year.

Christmas can also be a season of sadness, of lost hope and disappointments.

The story of Mary and Joseph:

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14 NKJV).

Why did God go so far? A chief reason is this: he wants us to know that he gets us.

Through a scandalous pregnancy, an imposed census, an untimely trip, and an overcrowded inn, God triumphed in Mary’s story.

The story of George Harley:

Everything changed when the villagers saw the tears of the missionary. Everything changes for us when we see the face of God.

God became one of us, and because of this, he knows us.

If the King was willing to enter the world of animals and shepherds and swaddling clothes, don't you think he's willing to enter yours?

God took on your face in the hope that you would see his.

GROUP DISCUSSION (39 MINUTES)

Take a few minutes with your group members to discuss what you just watched.

1. What part of the teaching had the most impact on you?

Preparing for Christmas

2. At the beginning of the video, Max acknowledged some of the Christmas traditions he looks forward to each year, such as sleigh bells, carolers, and the holiday classic, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. These are just a few examples of traditions that typically lead up to Christmas Day and help us experience the Christmas spirit. Using the list of categories below as a prompt, briefly describe one or two traditions that help you to enjoy the season and prepare for Christmas each year.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Decorations (decorating home or Christmas tree, going to see the lights, etc.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Gift shopping |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Christmas cards (sending or receiving) | <input type="checkbox"/> Hosting (parties, special events, overnight guests, etc.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Outdoor activities (snow skiing, ice-skating, snowshoeing, etc.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Entertainment (concerts, movies, plays, favorite television shows, etc.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Food (cooking or eating special meals or desserts) | <input type="checkbox"/> Church (weekly services, special events, etc.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Crafting (making decorations or gifts) | <input type="checkbox"/> Cultural or ethnic traditions |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Volunteering (serving others through a church or charitable organization) | <input type="checkbox"/> Visit to Santa |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Family traditions |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Travel |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |

- What do you enjoy most about the tradition you described? How does it contribute to making it feel like Christmas each year?

 - What might be gained and what might be lost if you experienced none of these traditions before the day itself? In other words, no holiday decorations, no cards, no special meals or entertainment until Christmas Day. Would you feel more or less prepared to celebrate and enjoy Christmas? Why?
3. For centuries, Christians throughout the world have used the season of Advent to prepare themselves spiritually for Christmas. The word *advent* comes from the Latin word *adventus* and simply means “coming” or “arrival.” Beginning each year on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, Advent commemorates the First Advent—Jesus’ birth—and also anticipates the Second Advent—Christ’s return. Although we tend to think of Advent as a season of celebration, it was originally conceived primarily as a season of preparation—a time for prayer and self-reflection.

- How would you characterize your experience of Advent over the years? For example, is it a tradition you grew up with or is it new to you?

- What, if anything, changes in your perspective when you think of Advent primarily as a season of preparation rather than celebration? Overall, would you say it makes Advent more or less appealing to you? Share the reasons for your response.

God with Us

4. Advent is a season of preparation because it is also a season of *anticipation*—a glorious gift is coming soon and we want to be ready to receive it! In the prologue to his gospel, the apostle John proclaims the miraculous truth of the incarnation, the gift of God with us in human form:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. . . . No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known (John 1:14, 18 NRSV).

Because God became human, we can see and know God in the person of Jesus. We can also rely on the fact that God knows us. He understands how we feel because he has faced what we face, including weakness, testing, and suffering. Author C. S. Lewis elaborates on the vital importance of this truth:

God could, had he pleased, have been incarnate in a man of iron nerves, the Stoic sort who lets no sigh escape him. Of his great humility he chose to be incarnate in a man of delicate sensibilities who wept at the grave of Lazarus and sweated blood in Gethsemane. . . . He has faced all that the weakest of us face, has shared not only the strength of our nature but every weakness of it except sin. If he had been incarnate in a man of immense natural courage, that would have been for many of us almost the same as his not being incarnate at all.¹

- Lewis contrasts two options for the kind of man Jesus could have chosen to become—an invincible man of iron nerves, or a vulnerable man of delicate sensibilities. Had Jesus chosen to be the invincible man, how do you imagine it might have undermined the miracle of the incarnation or diminished its power?

- Briefly recall a recent or past experience of weakness, testing, or suffering. As you were going through it, which aspect of Christ's nature would you say you were most aware of and drawn to—his divinity (power) or his humanity (vulnerability)? For example, did you find yourself praying more that Jesus would intervene and change your situation, or that Jesus would be with you and comfort you?
5. Max described the Christmas story as one that actually has particular relevance for those who find themselves in a season of sadness, lost hope, or disappointment. We see this especially in Mary's experience. Although she eagerly anticipated the arrival of her child, nothing leading up to the birth of Jesus would have met Mary's hopes and expectations. She hoped for a joyous celebration with family, but her unwelcome reality was a scandalous pregnancy, an imposed census, an untimely trip, and lowly accommodations with sheep and cattle.
- As you anticipate these weeks leading up to Christmas, what hopes and expectations are you aware of?

- Words that describe Mary's unwelcome reality include *scandalous*, *imposed*, *untimely*, and *lowly*. What words would you use to describe any unwelcome realities you may be facing this holiday season? Or, in what ways, if any, might this be a difficult time for you?

- In spite of, and out of, Mary's chaos and hardships, Christ came. The season leading up to the first Christmas wasn't what she hoped for, but it was a miracle in the making. At the most unexpected time and place, Mary saw the face of God. Describing how God triumphed in Mary's story Max writes, "The manger dares us to believe the best is yet to be. And it could all begin today." As you consider both your hopes and the unwelcome realities you face, how do you respond to the idea that, like Mary, your circumstances could be a miracle in the making, an occasion in which you may soon see the face of God? What might the manger be daring you to believe?

Walking Together through Advent

6. In addition to studying together, it's also important to walk together through Advent—to share your lives with one another and to be aware of how God is at work among you. In each session, there will be many opportunities to speak life-giving—and life-challenging—words, and to listen to one another deeply.

As you anticipate the next few weeks of learning and walking together, what request would you like to make of the group? For example, how do you hope other members will challenge you or encourage you? Use one or more of the sentence starters below, or your own statement, to help the group understand the best way to be a good friend to you throughout this study. As each person responds, use the two-page chart that follows to briefly note what is important to that person and how you can be a good friend to him or her during your discussions and times together.

You can help me to take Advent seriously this year by . . .

I'd like you to consistently challenge me about . . .

It really helps me to engage in a group when . . .

I tend to withdraw or feel anxious when . . .

In our discussions, the best thing you could do for me is . . .

Name	The Best Way I Can Be a Good Friend to This Person Is . . .

Name	The Best Way I Can Be a Good Friend to This Person Is . . .

INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY:
WHAT I WANT TO REMEMBER
(2 MINUTES)

Complete this activity on your own.

1. Briefly review the outline and any notes you took.
2. In the space below, write down the most significant thing you gained in this session—from the teaching, activities, or discussions.

What I want to remember from this session . . .



Advent Practice

Each session in the *Because of Bethlehem* study includes an Advent practice for you to complete between sessions. Although the practice is completed on your own and outside of group time, it's a good idea to briefly preview the practice description before concluding your meeting each week. As an intentional act of preparing our hearts for Christmas, the Advent practices throughout the study require setting aside a brief amount of time each day to complete. To get the most out of the practice, it's important not to hurry or try to complete activities at the last minute.

In addition to the Advent practice, session 1 also includes an optional Advent reflection. This brief exercise is designed to help you begin Advent by considering how the weeks leading up to Christmas typically impact you. It's not necessary to read through the reflection as a group, but before concluding, do review together the session 1 Advent practice, which follows the reflection.



CLOSING PRAYER

Close your time together with prayer.

SESSION 1

Advent Reflection and Practice

ADVENT REFLECTION: PREPARE HIM ROOM

“Let every heart prepare him room,” writes Isaac Watts in the beloved Christmas hymn “Joy to the World.” And that is what Advent is intended to help us do. It is a season of preparation and anticipation, a time to ready our hearts and lives for the arrival of the King. But too often, the time and attention required for spiritual preparation gets lost in the busyness and pressures of the holiday season. Author Ronald Rolheiser writes:

Our time of preparation is generally more of a time to prepare our houses than a time to prepare our souls, more of a time of shopping than of prayer, and more of a time of already feasting than a time of fasting as a preparation for a feast. Today, Advent is perhaps more about already

celebrating Christmas than it is about preparing for it. And the end result is that, like the biblical innkeepers who had no room for Mary and Joseph at the first Christmas, we generally arrive at Christmas with “no room at the inn,” no space in our lives for a spiritual rebirth.²

If we want to arrive at Christmas with a heart wide open for the Christ child, we need to be intentional about making room for him now. The question Advent invites us to consider is this: *How ready am I for the arrival of the King?* Before engaging the Advent practice for this week, take a few moments to reflect on what the weeks ahead might be like for you.

1. Use the statements that follow to briefly assess how these weeks leading up to Christmas typically impact you. For each statement, circle the number on the continuum that best describes your response.

Physical: During the weeks leading up to Christmas, I am consistently able to meet my body’s needs for rest, exercise, nutrition, hygiene, medical care, etc.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not true at all of me				Moderately true of me			Completely true of me		

Relational: During the weeks leading up to Christmas, I am consistently able to give and receive love, maintain healthy boundaries, be attentive to the needs and concerns of others, and to allow others to care for and listen to me.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not true at all of me				Moderately true of me			Completely true of me		

Emotional: During the weeks leading up to Christmas, I am consistently able to express feelings, manage stress, and maintain perspective when things don't go my way.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not true at all of me				Moderately true of me			Completely true of me		

Pace of life: During the weeks leading up to Christmas, I am consistently able to maintain a reasonable pace of life. I have adequate time to accomplish tasks, sufficient margins to be flexible with changing demands, and time to enjoy people and activities that give me life.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not true at all of me				Moderately true of me			Completely true of me		

Financial: During the weeks leading up to Christmas, I am consistently able to avoid debt, be intentional with spending, generous in giving, and wise in saving.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not true at all of me				Moderately true of me			Completely true of me		

Spiritual: During the weeks leading up to Christmas, I am consistently able to rest in God, spend time with him, respond to his leading, trust him with unknowns, grow in my love for him, receive love from him, etc.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not true at all of me				Moderately true of me			Completely true of me		

- Which of the six areas of life, if any, tend to suffer or be diminished during the weeks leading up to Christmas? Which, if any, tend to thrive or be strengthened?
- Consider the impact these weeks typically have on your ability to prepare yourself spiritually for Christmas. In what ways is this season your *ally*, a partner that helps you to draw closer to God and others?
- In what ways is this season your *adversary*, an opponent that makes it harder for you to draw closer to God and others?

2. Author Ronald Rolheiser says we often arrive at Christmas unprepared, “with ‘no room in the inn,’ no space in our lives for spiritual rebirth.” As you reflect on your responses to question 1, what kinds of things would you say have the greatest potential to crowd your heart and life in the weeks ahead? Specifically, what might you have to let go of in order to make space for Christ, to prepare him room?

Expectations—of myself and others—I might have to let go of . . .

Plans/commitments I might have to let go of . . .

Tasks I might have to let go of . . .

Spending I might have to let go of . . .

Hurts I might have to let go of . . .

Habits I might have to let go of . . .

Other things I might have to let go of . . .

3. What comes to mind when you consider the Advent question:
How ready am I for *the arrival of the King*?

ADVENT PRACTICE: PREPARE HIM ROOM

The practice for this week is to increase your awareness of the ways you might be making or not making room for Christ in your everyday choices. To be aware of something is to be attentive to it—to listen, watch, and observe. Awareness also requires being respectful and gracious, which means observing without making judgments and without guilt trips. The invitation of this practice is to set aside time to simply notice and then to reflect on what you see.

1. Set aside fifteen minutes at the beginning or end of five days this week to do a “room” review—to notice the ways you are or are not making room for Christ. Just as a coach and athletes sometimes watch game-day videos to see what worked and what needs more practice, imagine you and Jesus together are watching a video replay of the previous twenty-four hours.
2. Divide your day into three parts: morning, afternoon, and evening. As you reflect on each part of the day, prayerfully consider two questions:

Lord, in what ways did I make room for you in my life or in my heart?

Lord, in what ways did I fail to make room for you in my life or in my heart?

We make room for Christ when we choose him and welcome him into every moment, no matter how small. We fail to make room for Christ when we choose something else over him, or when he is not made welcome in any way. Here are some examples of small ways we might welcome or not welcome Christ into our lives and into our hearts:

- We can choose to limit commitments in order to get adequate sleep and avoid feeling frantic or run down, or choose not to limit commitments.
 - We can choose to set aside the to-do list in order to be with and enjoy another person, or choose not to set aside the to-do list.
 - We can choose to believe the best when we could dwell instead on the worst, or choose not to believe the best.
 - We can choose to trust God and surrender rather than manipulate and control, or choose not to trust God and surrender.
3. As you and Jesus together reflect on the day, use the space provided below or a journal to write down at least two or three observations about what you notice. (If you find it challenging to make these observations after the fact, consider keeping a pad of paper with you and writing down your observations as they happen throughout the day.) Then prayerfully surrender what you've written, inviting Jesus to help you make room for him and welcome him in the day ahead.
 4. At the end of the week, review your daily observations. What stands out most to you about the ways in which you routinely make room or fail to make room for Christ? Write your observations in the space provided or in a journal.
 5. Bring your notes to the next group gathering. You'll have a chance to talk about your experiences and observations at the beginning of the session 2 discussion.

Day 1 Room Review

Day 2 Room Review

Day 3 Room Review

Day 4 Room Review

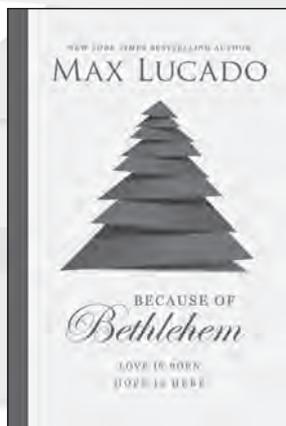
Day 5 Room Review

Week in Review

Briefly review your daily observations. What stands out most to you about the ways in which you routinely make room or fail to make room for Christ?

Also available by Max Lucado

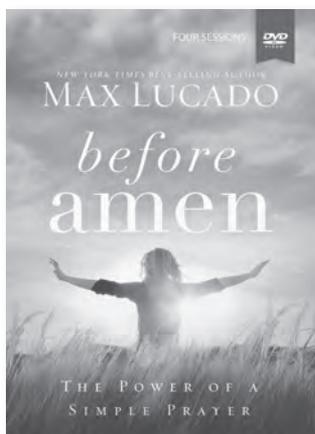
BECAUSE OF BETHLEHEM



No one expected God to come to this earth the way he did. The One who made everything made himself nothing. He experienced hunger and thirst. He went through the normal stages of human development. He was taught to walk, stand, and wash his face. He was genuinely human. In the midst of your hectic Christmas season, Max Lucado urges you to remember these truths and rekindle your connection to the Christ of Christmas. To lay down your Christmas to do list and receive what Jesus has already done. And to heal your heartache by embracing the God who is always near you, always for you, and always in you.

Tools for Your Church and Small Group

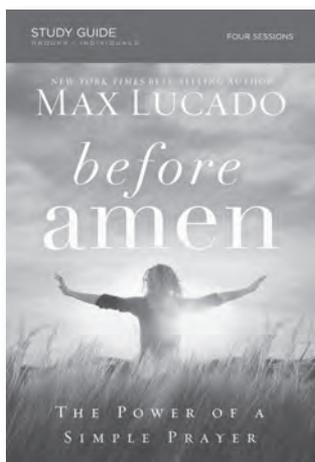
Before Amen: A DVD Study



ISBN 978-0-529-12342-8

Max Lucado leads this four-session study through his discovery of a simple tool for connecting with God each day. This study will help small group participants build their prayer life, calm the chaos of their world, and grow in Christ.

Before Amen Study Guide

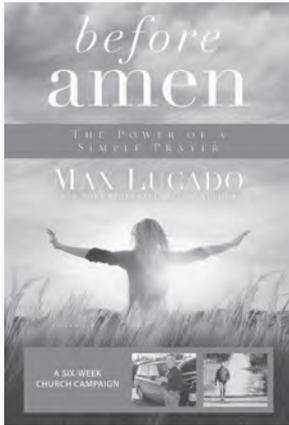


ISBN 978-0-529-12334-3

This guide is filled with Scripture study, discussion questions, and practical ideas designed to help small-group members understand Jesus' teaching on prayer and how they can build prayer. An integral part of the *Before Amen* small-group study, it will help group members build prayer into their everyday lives.

More Tools for Your Church and Small Group

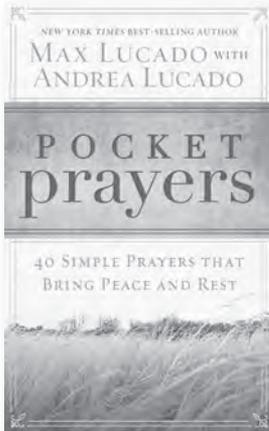
Before Amen Church Campaign Kit



ISBN 978-0-529-12369-5

The church campaign kit includes a four-session DVD study by Max Lucado; a study guide with discussion questions and video notes; the *Before Amen* trade book; a getting started guide; and access to a website with all the sermon resources churches need to launch and sustain a four-week *Before Amen* campaign.

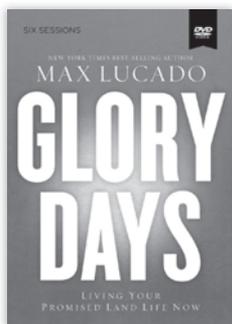
Pocket Prayers: 40 Simple Prayers that Bring Peace and Rest



ISBN 978-0-7180-1404-9

Includes forty pocket-sized prayers written specifically for times of uncertainty and turmoil. It's ideal for churches and ministries to use as an outreach tool.

Tools for your Church and Small Group



Glory Days: A DVD Study

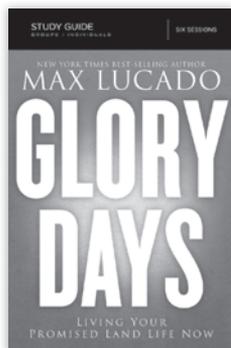
ISBN: 978-0-7180-3603-4

Max Lucado leads this six-session study of the book of Joshua and helps modern-day Christians live their Promised Land lives. This study will help small group participants leave fear and worry behind, overcome rejection, and deal with doubt through God's Word.

Glory Days Study Guide

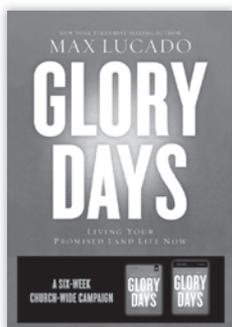
ISBN: 978-0-7180-3597-6

This guide is filled with Scripture study, discussion questions, and practical tools to help small-group members begin living their Promised Land lives now.



Glory Days: Church Campaign Kit

ISBN: 978-0-7180-3598-3



The *Glory Days* Church Campaign Kit includes the six-session DVD study by Max Lucado; a study guide with discussion questions and video notes; the *Glory Days* trade book; a getting started guide; and access to all the resources a church needs to launch and sustain this six-week campaign.