



WELCOME CHRISTMAS

Week One

Opening Prayer

God, we thank you for this season and for the gift of your son! Lead us as we reflect on both the good and the painful parts of *Welcoming Christmas* in today's world. Help us to spot you at work in each other's lives as we share. Amen.

Talk It Over

In this series we are taking a look at the Christmas Story through unique lenses, each pointing to hope that applies to our lives today. This week we backed things up quite a bit before the well known Jesus in the manger scene to the story of Ruth. In this story, we see how God is not just present in our times of goodness but how he meets us in our pain, in our suffering, and in our loss. In this life, we are not always given the things we desire and sometimes we are given things we feel we can't bear, but what we are always given are the promises of Jesus' presence during the good and the painful times of our lives.

- Have you ever been disappointed in a gift you were given? If you can't recall a time in your own life, tell a story of a friend or child who experienced a disappointing gift.
- If you have not shared yet, what is the funniest gift-giving story you can share?
- Reflect on some of the more major things in life. Are there things you thought you would have by now that you still don't have? Things you thought you would have been healed from by now but aren't? Markers in life you would have reached by this point but haven't? If you feel comfortable, share a disappointment with the group. *As a reminder, be mindful not to rush in and point out the good in one another's life to try and ease the tension as they share, but compassionately listen to one another as gaps or losses are shared.*

Read Ruth 1:14-17 (NIV) and Ruth 1:20-21 (NIV)

Ruth and Naomi head back to Naomi's hometown Bethlehem. It is here where we get our first clue as to why this story is important to the Christmas Story. As they arrive in Bethlehem the pain is still very much alive. Naomi may have questions and doubts. She may be asking why God allowed this to happen. When she is back in her hometown people must be recognizing her. They are probably remembering her by the meaning of her name which is "pleasant & sweet", but Naomi's instructions are to call her bitter instead.

- Can you think of a painful time in life when you felt like God had inflicted pain on you? Where you felt like he was somehow punishing you? Tell us about that experience.
- Now let's take a moment to recall what you know to be true about God's love. When you view this story of Ruth and your own personal story through the lens of God's love, does that change things? How?
- If you are a parent, can you recall a time where your child did not see the circumstances of the present impacting life in the future? Were they discouraged but you could see a bigger picture or a larger work at play in their development? Share about that experience.

As we connect the story of Ruth and her pain to our modern-day pain, we took a look at three ways we can choose to respond to pain:

(Content continued on the next page.)

1. Choose to use our pain to draw closer to God.

Read Psalm 34:18 (ERV)

This idea of choosing to draw closer to God is not a dismissal of pain but an acknowledgment that he is present in our pain. From the scripture in Psalms, we see that there may even be a special closeness felt during those seasons if we choose to lean in.

- In what ways have you encountered God in your pain?
- In what ways has God felt far in your pain? How have you responded to that distance?

2. Chose to use our pain to draw closer to others.

Read Ruth 1:16-17, Galatians 6:2, and Ruth 2:3 (NIV)

In addition to God being close to us in our pain, we often find special closeness from those in our community. We see this in the story of Ruth and Naomi. Not every person chooses to stay present to you in this way during times of pain but we often find uniquely gifted ones who do. They can surface from places we might not have expected and, in that opportunity, we have a choice: do we push them away or receive that support.

- Can you think of someone you are close with today because of a painful time in life? Perhaps someone in the past who stepped up in unique ways. Describe how that person drew close during your time of pain and how you let them in.
- Have you felt God whisper to you to move in close to someone experiencing pain? What was that like?

3. Choose to use our pain to help others.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:4-5, Ruth 4:13, and Ruth 4:17 (NIV)

What we are talking about here has more to do with restoration. When we are open to our lives being made new, to rising out of the rubble, to seeking God and his plan for our life, this is when we begin the healing journey. God often uses our healing to help others who are also seeking healing. We see how this grace-filled walking through a painful story for both Ruth and Naomi ultimately led to the lineage of Jesus.

- Have you been able to experience redemption or restoration from a particular painful experience? Or are you still working through the healing of that story? If so, what are you noticing about the process, about yourself, or about God?
- Have you seen the fruit of healing in a way that has led you to help others? If not yet, that is completely okay. We are all on a journey and this is not the litmus test for healing, but if you see some spark of potential good coming from this difficult time, share that with us.

Closing Prayer

God, you are our refuge. We tuck ourselves into the care of your wings. We ask that you protect us and comfort us. We pray we would feel your presence close to us during this season and always. Help us to encounter you and your love. Amen.

Group Logistics [A Reminder for New Groups]

As your group heads to a close for the holidays, be sure everyone is on the same page regarding expectations. Is this a break? Are you going to restart with the next group launch? Consider ending your season with some sort of fun celebration.

How To Use this Discussion Guide

The guide is meant to serve you and your group as you intentionally create space to grow in friendship and faith. Use the guide as a tool to help your unique group.

With that in mind, consider reviewing the guide before your group to see if some content or questions might resonate more or less with your group. Don't feel pressured to read all the content or to hit all the questions.

The guide is not meant to be something you power through for the sake of completing. Pick the content from the guide you feel will help foster friendship and faith in your specific group.

In addition, spend some time praying for your group each week, preparing your heart, and asking God for wisdom and guidance as you lead.