**SMALL GROUP GUIDE: Hope Interrupted**
**WEEK 1 - Everything was good, till it wasn't**

**INTRODUCTION:** The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion between you and the person you're studying with or with your Connect Group. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

**OPEN:** Share one of your favorite "creations" of the holiday season with the group (could be a favorite treat, a decoration, a song, or a family tradition).

**SCRIPTURE READING**
Read together: *Genesis 1:31, 2:15-17, 25, Genesis 3:1-7, 15*

The Christmas story does NOT begin in Luke or any of the gospels, it's roots were laid before the foundations of the world. Then, in a perfect place, the need for God to come to save this world arose the second we rebelled and chose not to trust him.

**HEAD: Explore the Text**

1. Share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts you received just from listening to the text, allowing the Holy Spirit to lead.
2. Put yourself in God's shoes for a moment and imagine how you hoped life would go for this new creation. Share your thoughts and ideas.
3. In this new paradise of God's very good creation, what rules were put in place? What freedoms were given? Why do you think we tend to focus on the rules, as if they are set to limit us, instead of the freedoms?
4. What do you think feeling no shame would be like? Can you even imagine it?
5. God planted and grew all sorts of good things for his children in the garden. What did the devil plant in 3:1 and 4-5?
6. What happens in verse 3:15 and how does it tie into the Christmas story? Do you think God had this plan created before the fall happened, or after? What difference does it make?

**HEART: Personal Reflection**

1. Ever since the fall in the Garden of Eden, we've been trying to cover up our shame. What are modern ways we do this today?
2. How do we experience the release of shame?
3. In this world, the devil's voice can often be very loud. How do we drown out his voice and all his lies, for God's truths and words of healing and hope?
4. Read Genesis 3:21. What did God do for Adam and Eve, and what did he have to do first in order to do that thing? How is this a preview of what he himself will do

for us, and what does it mean to you to have a God willing to go to such lengths to save you?

**HANDS: Practice This Week**
**Spiritual Practice: steal life or give life**
In John 10:10, Jesus said, “The earth’s purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life.”

- Make a list of the things that tend to “steal” your life from you. Maybe that includes external forces, but also internal voices. Anything that robs you have living a full and abundant life.
- Make another list of the things that give you life, make you feel whole, complete. Again, likely this is external things you allow into your life, as well as the voices you chose to listen to throughout the day.
- How can you, this week, lean into the things that give you life, and block out the things that tend to take it from you?
- Journal your insights through this experience as you meditate on these truths this week.

Invite the group to check in next week about their experience.

**CLOSING PRAYER**
*Abba, Father - as we enter this season of Christmas, we ask that you will chase the darkness out of our lives, and pour out your light into our hearts. May the lights of the holiday remind us of your presence, your beauty, and how even the smallest of lights chasing the darkest of nights. As we receive this light this season, may we find ways to share it with others. In the precious name of the One who came to this world, to bring us back to you. Amen.*

**SMALL GROUP GUIDE: Hope Interrupted**
**WEEK 2 - When all hope seemed lost**

**INTRODUCTION:** The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion between you and the person you're studying with or with your Connect Group. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

**OPEN:** Share about a time when you were a child and got in trouble. What did you do and what were the consequences? Assuming you had a punishment, what happened after that punishment was carried out if you remember?

**SCRIPTURE READING**
Read together: Romans 7:21-24, Isaiah 64:6, Isaiah 9:1-2, 6-7, Romans 7:24-25

In Romans, Paul so perfectly spells out the human condition, that on our own, no matter how hard we try, we are lost. Thankfully, God never intended for us to do anything, "on our own." In Isaiah, the Israelites again were facing some dark times and all hopes seemed lost. Then, God chose to remind them that their current circumstances are NOT going to last, forever. Hope was on his way.

**HEAD: Explore the Text**

1. Share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts you received just from listening to the text, allowing the Holy Spirit to lead.
2. How can you love God's law with all your heart, and yet still not obey it? What is our problem, our diagnosis?
3. What do you think the prophet Isaiah meant by saying that even our righteous deeds, or our best acts, are nothing but filthy rags? If they are filthy rags, how are we supposed to get clean clothes to wear?
4. If you just read Isaiah 9:1-2, as an Israelite, how do you think they would have read this passage? What would the light have been?
5. Describe the hope of Isaiah 9:6-7, not just for the Israelites, but for us all?
6. How could an Israelite read this prophecy and still expected a military Messiah?
7. If the answer to our sin problem is Jesus Christ our Lord, what does that mean, practically, on a daily basis?

**HEART: Personal Reflection**

1. What events in our current world can, at times, make you feel like the darkness and despair will go on forever?
2. When you are struggling with hope, feeling down, are there things you do to help turn your heart back to God, remind yourself of who he is and what he has done for you?

3. What has helped you more to win any victory of sin in your life; focusing on the sin itself and trying to rid yourself of it, or focusing on the One who saves you from sin? Explain.
4. If you have surrendered your life to Jesus through baptism, share with the group what led you to that decision, and what his gift meant to you on that day? How has your perception of that gift grown over time?

**HANDS: Practice This Week**
**Spiritual Practice: confession and forgiveness**

- Write out a list of all the things that you think are keeping you from communion with Jesus. This might be specific sins and struggles, it might be worry, it might be fear, it might be … Just write them all out, don't rush, take your time.
- Close your eyes and imagine that Jesus is standing before you, or sitting next to you. Talk over that list with him, ask him for his help that you may let those things go to receive more of him.
- When you're ready, still with your eyes closed and imagining Jesus near you, tear up your list and drop it at the feet of Jesus. Ask him to help you receive his forgiveness and then put your hands out, and your palms up, in a posture to receive.
- Journal your insights through this experience as you meditate on these truths this week.

Invite the group to check in next week about their experience.

**WORDS TO LIVE BY (memorize)**
*1 So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. 2 And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death. (Romans 8:1-2, NLT)*

**SMALL GROUP GUIDE: Hope Interrupted**
**WEEK 3 - A promise kept**

**INTRODUCTION:** The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion between you and the person you're studying with or with your Connect Group. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

**OPEN:** Think about one of the best gifts you've ever received, or ever given. What made it special and how did it make you feel to receive, or to give?

**SCRIPTURE READING**
Read together: *Galatians 4:4-5, Luke 1:26-38*

After 100's of years of waiting for the promise to be fulfilled, a young woman from a small town was not only given the news, she would carry that news inside her. It was a lot to take in, and yet, God reminded her that he never abandons his people and he never fails to keep a promise.

**HEAD: Explore the Text**

1. Share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts you received just from listening to the text, allowing the Holy Spirit to lead.
2. Why do you think God chose the time he did, to fulfill his promise? Why not sooner? Why not later? Why was the time of Mary, "the fullness of time"?
3. Take a moment to think through all the thoughts that may have been going through Mary's head at the appearance of the angel, at the greeting the angel gave her, and even at the announcement of her coming pregnancy to the Sun of the Most High. Share your thoughts that you think this young girl, living in these times, may have had.
4. Why do you think Mary's question/comment back to the angel had to do with stating the obvious?
5. Aside from the fulfillment of prophecy, why do you think God came to these two women specifically? One too old, one too young. Relatives.
6. Do you think that after Mary responded to the angel the final time, in verse 38, that she understood everything that was going to happen, or even everything the angel said? What does this tell you about her comment and what do you think her journey was like, for her, over the next 9 months?
7. We have more of Joseph's response to the annunciation in Matthew 1. What do you think life was like for these two Israelites, after accepting the angel's words and choosing to be faithful to God's call?

**HEART: Personal Reflection**

1. It had been 100's of years since the prophecy of Isaiah. How do you think people held on to hope of God fulfilling his promise to save them, after all those years? Do you think there were those who gave up hope? What would giving up hope have looked like in their time?
2. Throughout Scripture, when God calls someone to do something, it is VERY common for those people to give God a list of reasons why they are the wrong choice. Can you name some?
3. Have you ever felt the call of God in your life, and if so, did that call ever scare you or cause you to doubt? Explain.

**HANDS: Practice This Week**

**Spiritual Practice: Jesus in us, the hope of glory**

Just as God gave Mary, Jesus, who came to life in her, He gives us the Holy Spirit. As the Spirit grows inside us, we become more like Jesus and produce lasting fruit that serves as a blessing to the world around us.

- BREATH PRAYER - Take some time to sit and be still, taking some deep breaths, in through your nose, and out through your mouth. When you're ready, take three minutes to pray the following breath prayer, from the words of John the Baptist…
  - Breathe In - Jesus, may you become greater
  - Breathe Out - As I become less
- Journal your insights through this experience as you meditate on these truths this week.

Invite the group to check in next week about their experience.

**WORDS TO LIVE BY (memorize)**

*22 But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness. 23 gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! (Galatians 5;22-23, NLT)*

**SMALL GROUP GUIDE: Hope Interrupted**
**WEEK 4 - The day that changed everything**

**INTRODUCTION:** The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion between you and the person you're studying with or with your Connect Group. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

**OPEN:** What is one of your favorite Christmas traditions and why? What is one of your favorite Christmas carols, and why?

**SCRIPTURE READING**
Read together: *Luke 2:1-19*

Finally, the promise of God from the fall of man, comes to fruition, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Focus on the star, follow it to the manger, behold the little Lord Jesus…God in human flesh. And rejoice!

**HEAD: Explore the Text**

1. Share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts you received just from listening to the text, allowing the Holy Spirit to lead.
2. Despite the traditions, do you think that Joseph, a descendent of David, would not have been known by his own family when he came back to Nazareth? How do you think the family would have received him? Why?
3. Why do you think the angels went to shepherds to announce the birth of their new king, as opposed to the cities, to the well trained and highly educated?
4. Do you think the angels were simply ordered by God to announce the birth of Jesus, or were they excited at the privilege? Explain your answer.
5. Imagine what this moment looked like if you were one of the shepherds. Share with the group what you see, hear, feel?
6. Had the angels told the shepherds to go and tell others about the birth of Jesus? Why did they?
7. Why do you think Mary thought about "these things" often?

**HEART: Personal Reflection**

1. The religious elite missed the birth of Jesus because he came in a way they weren't expecting. How do we miss Jesus today? What keeps us from hearing his voice, seeing his beauty, heeding his call in our lives? How can we practice being more in-tune with him and his ways, than with the world's distractions?
2. The shepherds couldn't help but to share the good news of Jesus. This is the difference between doing an evangelistic program, and living evangelistically (look

to and what the woman at the well did, in John 4, after Jesus told her who he really was). Which of these two approaches are you more drawn to and why?
3. What kinds of things, about Jesus, should you and I be treasuring up in our hearts for all of our good, and our bad, days?

**HANDS: Practice This Week**
**Spiritual Practice: Treasuring Jesus in your heart**
It is one thing to celebrate Jesus during the Christmas season, but how do we keep him in our hearts and treasure his incredible gift and sacrifices, year round? To do that, we must practice treasuring him in our hearts. Here's what practice to try…

- Make a list of some of your favorite quotes of Jesus, or sayings about Jesus. Mine include some obvious ones, like John 1:1-5 & 14, 3:16-17, 13:34-35 and 14:1-4, Mark 3:14-15, Luke 10:41-42, Colossians 1:15-20, and maybe some less obvious ones like Mark 5:34, John 11:35, 2 Corinthians 1:20. Make your list.
- Each day this week, meditate on one or two of your Jesus verses.
- Journal your insights through this experience as you meditate on these truths this week.

Invite the group to check in next week about their experience.

**REFLECT ON THE WORDS OF THIS CHRISTMAS CAROL**
Think on these words this week, knowing that the Little Lord Jesus, was and is, God. The God who became little, so that we may one day be with him forever.
*Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,*
*the little Lord Jesus laid down His sweet head;*
*the stars in the heavens looked down where He lay,*
*the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay.*
*The cattle are lowing, the Baby awakes,*
*but little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes.*
*I love Thee, Lord Jesus, look down from the sky*
*and stay by my side until morning is nigh.*
*Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask Thee to stay*
*close by me forever, and love me, I pray.*
*Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care,*
*and fit us for heaven, to live with Thee there.*