

INCARNATION

GOD IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD BIBLE STUDIES



Featuring
THEMESSAGE
translation

8 Lessons on How God Meets Us

DEREK VREELAND

The most sublime mystery in the Christian faith is the incarnation of God in Christ. “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14), as Eugene Peterson’s memorable translation puts it. Now Derek Vreeland has adapted *The Message* translation to lead us in a biblical exploration of this sublime mystery. *Incarnation* introduces the Advent Scripture texts in a fresh way for small groups and individuals alike.

BRIAN ZAHND, author of *The Wood Between the Worlds*

There’s no idea more scandalous, more upending, more essential to understanding God and our own life than the incarnation. Vreeland artfully guides us into Scripture’s wild country, where we see with fresh eyes the wonder of the human God.

WINN COLLIER, pastor, director of the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination, and author of *A Burning in My Bones: The Authorized Biography of Eugene H. Peterson* and *Love Big, Be Well*

No doctrine or creed is as dear to my soul as the doctrine of the incarnation. It is in God coming to us in the flesh, in Jesus Christ, that we can know “God’s neighboring presence.” In this fine book, Derek Vreeland walks us through Scripture to help us discover what all this means for our lives. As I read each page, answering the questions and reflecting, I grew deeper in knowing the God who meets us in our lives, and I hope you will too.

DAVID FITCH, Lindner Chair of Evangelical Theology at Northern Seminary and author of *Faithful Presence*

Incarnation is a rich, accessible, and Spirit-attuned resource that invites readers to see and celebrate the nearness of God in the real neighborhoods of our lives. With theological depth and pastoral warmth, Derek Vreeland leads us into Scripture using the down-to-earth beauty of *The Message* translation to reveal the wonder of God made flesh. What I love most about this study is how it keeps our eyes on Jesus—God with us—and at the same time helps us imagine how that truth reshapes how we live with and for our neighbors. This is not a sentimental Advent

study. It is prophetic and hopeful, grounded and transformative. I wholeheartedly commend it to individuals and communities seeking to live out the incarnation with authenticity, justice, and joy.

JULIET LIU, pastor of Life on the Vine Christian Community

I can remember my neighbor coming to my door when I was a young boy. “Can you come out and play?” This book brought back memories of this invitation. This is not a study designed to help us think about the mystery of incarnation. This is an invitation to come and fully participate with the Christ. This isn’t just about understanding the incarnation in a historical moment—it is about seeing the incarnation in our own lives today.

MARTY SOLOMON, author of *Asking Better Questions of the Bible* and creator of *The BEMA Podcast*

The mystery and beauty of the incarnation are truly worth exploring, and Derek Vreeland serves as a thoughtful guide in this excellent Bible study. I especially appreciate the way each lesson is structured in four sections, offering space for journaling and prayer. It’s a rich resource—perfect for personal reflection as well as group study.

TIM WILDSMITH, pastor, professor, YouTuber, and author of *Bible Translations for Everyone* and *Daily Scripture Guidebook*

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NavPress 

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Incarnation: 8 Lessons on How God Meets Us

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AS WE BEGIN

An Introduction to Incarnation

I find it interesting that while he is the primary character of the story the Bible is telling, Jesus isn't named until we are three-quarters of the way through, when we turn the page from the Old Testament to the New Testament and read, "The family tree of Jesus Christ, David's son, Abraham's son" (Matthew 1:1). And yet Jesus is the central figure the Old Testament has been preparing us for. Speaking of the Old Testament law, Paul writes, "The earlier revelation was intended simply to get us ready for the Messiah" (Romans 10:4).

The Gospel writers, particularly John, announce that Jesus is the Word who "became flesh and blood, / and moved into the neighborhood" (John 1:14). The Word who has always been present to God, the Word who was *and is* God, is the one and only Son of God, sent by the Father to reveal the Father's heart for the world. Though John makes the bold declaration that no one at any time has ever seen God (John 1:18), John also proclaims remarkable news: The Word who moved into the neighborhood, "who exists at the very heart of the Father, / has made him plain as day" (John 1:18).

John's announcement comes in fulfillment of God's message given to Judah through the prophet Zechariah:

"Shout and celebrate, Daughter of Zion!

I'm on my way. I'm moving into your neighborhood!"

GOD's Decree.

Many godless nations will be linked up with GOD at that time. (“They will become my family! I’ll live in their homes!”)

ZECHARIAH 2:1-10

God long ago promised to be with the ancient people of God. God promised a sign that exile would come to an end. The promise of God’s presence wasn’t only for ancient Judah and Israel but for many nations! All nations would be invited into God’s family. Gentile nations didn’t know the God of Israel, but Jesus has made God known to them—and to us. Like ancient Israel, we desire God’s presence, for the Creator-God to live with us in our neighborhoods. When God is with us, we have the assurance that everything is going to be okay. When God is with us, we have peace in the present and hope for the future. But before Jesus came, we Gentiles didn’t know who God was.

If we want to know what God is like, we look to Jesus, who is fully God, the full and definitive revelation of God. When Philip, one of the twelve apostles, asked Jesus to show them the Father, Jesus replied, “To see me is to see the Father” (John 14:9). Jesus gives God a face. Jesus shows us that the God of creation, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of the Hebrew prophets, is *for* us and *with* us. God saw the plight of the human condition, and God came to us. The Word moved into our neighborhood, and Jesus, the Word made flesh and blood, is here to stay.

The following eight lessons are organized around the themes of Advent and the incarnation, preparing for and celebrating the birth of Jesus and all it signifies. We begin in the Psalms, with Psalm 97, which celebrates God coming to meet us as King and planting “joy-seeds” in our hearts (Psalm 97:11).

The next four lessons lead us through key sections from the Old Testament, including Isaiah 2:1-5; Isaiah 5:1-23; and Isaiah 7:13-17; and culminating in Isaiah 9:1-7. These passages forecast the coming of Jesus, the Messiah, who will lead the nations to the mountain of God and establish peace and justice. Importantly, they describe Jesus as the son born of a virgin, the one coming to “rule from the historic David throne” (Isaiah 9:7).

Lesson 6 leads us into the New Testament, to the account of the birth of Jesus in Luke 2. Lesson 7 explores the beginning of John’s Gospel, where we encounter

the Word, who “became flesh and blood, / and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14). We conclude in Matthew’s Gospel with Jesus, who is God-With-Us, teaching us how to live “freely and lightly” in God’s “unforced rhythms of grace” (Matthew 11:29-30). Lesson by lesson we are drawn into the story of God, humanity’s undoing of God’s good world through sin, and God’s desire to come to us in order to rescue us.

This Bible study series uses the beauty and sacredness of ordinary language found in *The Message*, a contemporary and imaginative translation of the Bible, to lead you on a journey through the Scriptures to encounter Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection. The series is broken into three parts:

Book 1, *Incarnation*, dives deep into the mystery of the incarnation, where God meets us, joining us in life.

Book 2, *Crucifixion*, reflects on Jesus’ execution, where God joins us in death, and in doing so, saves us.

Book 3, *Resurrection*, leads us on an Easter journey, where God joins us in life anew to restore us to what we were created to be: image bearers of the God of love.

When we realize that God is with us in life, we *come alive*. When we understand that God is with us in death, we *believe*. When we experience God-With-Us in new life, we *participate*. These studies are designed to bring you into “God’s neighboring presence,” a phrase I picked up from Eugene Peterson.¹ The coming of Jesus marks God moving into our neighborhood, and he is present with us as personally as any of our neighbors.

How to Use This Bible Study

Lessons in these Bible studies are designed for either individual reflection or group study in small groups, Sunday school classes, or home groups. You are invited to use these Bible studies for your own personal growth and spiritual formation. Lessons are made up of four parts—“The Approach,” “The Word,” “The Neighborhood,” and “The Prayer.” Here is how each lesson is structured.

The Approach: Setting the Scene

We begin with an introduction to the Scripture passage from *The Message* we will cover in each lesson. “The Approach” ends with starter questions to get you thinking (if you are reading on your own) or to help your group begin sharing with one another.

The Word: Diving into Scripture

Following our introduction and opening questions, we turn our attention to a particular passage of Scripture and dig in, looking at the uniqueness of the language of *The Message*. In his translation, Eugene Peterson sought to break down the dividing wall between so-called secular and so-called sacred language. For Peterson, *all* language is sacred because it is all a gift from God.² Questions are provided here, as well, to encourage you to enter the text more fully.

The Neighborhood: Living It Out

We will wrap up each lesson by looking outward toward our own neighborhoods, asking how the passage of Scripture calls us to live in the way of Jesus while we are among our real flesh-and-blood neighbors. Following Jesus is not merely gaining knowledge and categorizing God facts. Following Jesus is a way of living shaped by the Holy Spirit around the death and resurrection of Jesus so that our lives look like dying to self and rising to reflect the life of Jesus. Reflection questions guide this outward focus on how we live in our neighborhoods filled with real people who may or may not identify as Christians.

The Prayer: Drawing Near to God

Each lesson concludes with a prayer drawn from the specific Bible passage used in that lesson.

There are companion videos available on my website here:



Before You Start

If you are using these Bible studies on your own, find a quiet and comfortable place to read. Before you start a lesson, take a deep breath, exhale slowly, and offer a brief prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to work with Holy Scripture to show you the ways of Jesus. As you are reading, feel free to jot down responses to the questions throughout each lesson.

If you are using these Bible studies in a group, take turns introducing yourself to the group; perhaps you could each share why you are in this Bible study or what you hope to get out of it. Open with prayer, asking Jesus to pour out the Holy Spirit on your group so that the Holy Spirit will be your teacher and guide. Identify a group leader to guide the conversation. Give people a few moments to reflect on the questions through the study, and then invite them to share with the group their thoughts and answers to the questions. Don't rush people to answer. Trust and learn from silence.

Whether you're doing this study on your own or in community, if you are able, read all Scripture passages out loud and pray the prayer at the end of each lesson aloud.

I love Jesus. I've loved Jesus since I was fifteen years old, and after all these years, I *still* love Jesus, because he never ceases to amaze and surprise me. And I love leading Bible studies, because when we take time to study Holy Scripture, God always surprises me with new details that make me ponder. My prayer is that you will grow in gratitude through these Bible studies and see with greater clarity what God has done for us in and through Jesus. I pray you will grow in your knowledge of the ways of Jesus and feel the nudging of the Holy Spirit to live out what you believe.

Derek Vreeland
Advent 2024



LESSON 1

GOD RULES

The Approach

I have come to see that we live in a God-saturated world.

All creation participates in the life of God. This participation includes human beings—regular people like you and me—who bear God’s image. We all live our day-to-day lives surrounded by God’s presence, whether we are aware of it or not. And to be honest, many of us are not aware.

It’s not as if God pops into our world now and again, does something amazing, and then leaves. Rather, God is always here, blanketing us with an unseen presence. God isn’t hiding out in suburban churches, back-alley chapels, and ancient cathedrals (though God can certainly be found in those places). The Creator-God, who has been revealed in Jesus and by the Holy Spirit, is present everywhere, meaning God is knowable, findable, and contactable. Even in our loneliest moments of isolation, God is there. We are all participating, with everything else God has made, in the presence of God.

Preaching at the Areopagus in Athens, the apostle Paul proclaimed about God,

“Starting from scratch, he made the entire human race and made the earth hospitable, with plenty of time and space for living so we could seek after God, and not just grope around in the dark but actually *find* him. He doesn’t play hide-and-seek with us. He’s not remote; he’s *near*. We live and move in him, can’t get away from him! One of your poets said it well: ‘We’re the God-created.’ Well, if we are the God-created, it doesn’t make a lot of sense to think we could hire a sculptor to chisel a god out of stone for *us*, does it?”

ACTS 17:26-29

We live in the world God made.

We move about our days in a world filled with the presence of God.

We can’t quite find a place where we cannot encounter God. King David poetically poses the questions “Is there anyplace I can go to avoid your Spirit? / to be out of your sight? / If I climb to the sky, you’re there! / If I go underground, you’re there!” (Psalm 139:7-8). The Creator-God can be accessed from all places in creation, even desecrated ones.

While followers of Jesus have always worshiped God and participated in the life of God, you and I have been born into a world structured in such a way that we forget that God is near. We live in a secular age where the signposts and reminders of God’s presence continue to diminish. Remnants of the God made famous by Jesus linger on in fragments in our culture, but they end up being collected and stowed away as relics of a bygone age. Images of God have been shifted to the periphery of society. Slowly and subtly, the God who created us for connectivity seems more and more out of reach.

Jesus moved into the neighborhood not only so we could see what God is like but also to reveal that the God of creation is *with us* and *for us*. We can find the root of this God-given revelation in the worship of the ancient people of God recorded in the Psalms. This collection of psalms is the original hymnal and prayer book of the church, and it provides us with the basic vocabulary for Christian prayer. The book

also helps us get a sense of the story of ancient Israel with the themes of creation, covenant, worship, monarchy, and justice.

The entire collection of psalms resounds with praise for God, the King of Israel. The presence of God among God's people was—and is—a ruling and guiding presence: God is among us as *King*. The ancient people of God had the audacity to proclaim through their worship that their God, the God of Israel, was not only King of Israel but also King of the world! Throughout the Psalms, the God of Israel is celebrated as the King who is near.

Before we look at a particular psalm, take a moment to reflect on these questions.

1. Where did you grow up? How did that region influence how you understand life? God? Family? Relationships?

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2. Where do you most often experience God's presence? In the beauty of creation? In worship with your church? Alone in prayer? During some other activity?

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3. What signposts in our culture still point people to the reality of God’s presence with us?

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The Word

Imagine Jewish families traveling to Jerusalem for one of their many festivals, chanting and singing songs praising the absolute sovereignty of their God over all the gods of their pagan neighbors. Every tribe surrounding ancient Israel had their gods who ruled over their territory. But the children of Abraham had the unbashful boldness—the chutzpah—to declare that *their* God was the one true King ruling all of it. They believed that God, as Creator of all the peoples of the earth, ruled as King and Lord over all:

Sing songs to God, sing out!
Sing to our King, sing praise!
He’s *Lord over earth*,
so sing your best songs to God.
God is Lord of godless nations—
sovereign, he’s King of the mountain.

PSALM 47:6-8 (EMPHASIS ADDED)

The idea of God as King is essential to understanding why the coming of Jesus as the Word is such good news. God comes to be with us in Jesus, who through his

sacrificial death and subsequent resurrection is the King of all kings and Lord of all lords. We see the theme of the kingly nature of God repeatedly in the Psalms:

GOD is King, robed and ruling,
 GOD is robed and surging with strength.
 PSALM 93:1

GOD is the best,
 High King over all the gods.
 PSALM 95:3

Fill the air with praises to King GOD.
 PSALM 98:6

GOD has set his throne in heaven;
 he rules over us all. He's the King!
 PSALM 103:19

Psalm 97 opens in similar fashion—proclaiming that God rules. I love this psalm because it echoes the language of God as King, an important theme of the gospel. Theologian and author Matthew Bates addresses why we need the gospel. The answer he gives is simple: “We need a king.”¹ And like many of the psalms, Psalm 97 is packed with imagery that enlivens our imaginations for seeing God’s neighboring presence with us.

Let’s look at this psalm one section at a time.

GOD rules: *there’s* something to shout over!
 On the double, mainlands and islands—celebrate!
 PSALM 97:1

While some modern English translations, like the NRSV and NLT, open with “The LORD is king,” *The Message* begins Psalm 97 in a more traditional, although slightly nuanced, way: “GOD rules.” As an opening statement of worship, “GOD rules” evokes the dynamic and active nature of God’s Kingdom. The God who rules and reigns is the Lord, Yahweh, the God of Israel. He does indeed reign as King.

Bright clouds and storm clouds circle ’round him;
Right and justice anchor his rule.

PSALM 97:2

How does God rule? What values mark God’s administration? God’s rule is anchored by “right and justice.” The image of an anchor, like that of a foundation, implies the steady, unmoving nature of God’s Kingdom. While human leaders rule by popular opinion or hubris, God rules according to righteousness and justice. The *rightness* and *justness* of God are not on the periphery of the Kingdom of God; they anchor it.

Fire blazes out before him,
Flaming high up the craggy mountains.

His lightnings light up the world;
Earth, wide-eyed, trembles in fear.

The mountains take one look at GOD
And melt, melt like wax before earth’s Lord.

PSALM 97:3-5

In the ancient world, and in the world today, fire dazzles the imagination. The metaphorical flames dancing around God’s throne rise “high up the craggy mountains” that surround God in an intimidating posture, but these are the same mountains that

“melt like wax” before the Lord. Mountains adversarial to the Kingdom of God can seem insurmountable to humans, but God is King of the whole earth, and ultimately, they are defeated by the fire of God’s roaring love.

The heavens announce that he’ll set everything right,
And everyone will see it happen—glorious!

PSALM 97:6

And now we hear the heavens speaking, making an announcement as the mountains melt. The heavens announce the righteousness of God, which *The Message* translates here as God’s work to “set everything right.” God has moved into our neighborhood to set right a neighborhood gone wrong. In this psalm, the righteousness implied is not God’s own moral rightness but God’s desire to set right that which has gone wrong.

All who serve handcrafted gods will be sorry—
And they were so proud of their ragamuffin gods!

On your knees, all you gods—worship him!
And Zion, you listen and take heart!

Daughters of Zion, sing your hearts out:
GOD has done it all, has set everything right.

PSALM 97:7-8

Everything we worship in place of God is an idol, a “handcrafted god,” an image of the divine we cobble together from our own desires and tastes. These shabby “ragamuffin gods” never offer us the life we were created to live, yet we continue to esteem them. Judgment lies in wait when we worship these handcrafted gods. But the good—and somewhat unexpected—news is that God’s judgment is not merely

punitive but restorative. In God's judgment, God seeks to be *with us* to make things right with us and the world.

You, GOD, are High God of the cosmos,
Far, far higher than any of the gods.

GOD loves all who hate evil,
And those who love him he keeps safe,
Snatches them from the grip of the wicked.

PSALM 97:9-10

God is simultaneously *transcendent* and *immanent*, something we only find in the God made famous by Jesus. God is both high and lifted up and intimately connected to the world God loves.

Praise is the proper response to God's acts of *rightness* and *justness* in the world. God bends his love toward those who cast down their idols and cast off the evil associated with those fake gods. Through our acts of worship and repentance, we experience the presence of Emmanuel ("God-With-Us") to rescue us and keep us safe.

Light-seeds are planted in the souls of God's people,
Joy-seeds are planted in good heart-soil.

So, God's people, shout praise to GOD,
Give thanks to our Holy God!

PSALM 97:11-12

Most English translations open verse 11 with the mildly prosaic line "Light is sown for the righteous" (Psalm 97:11, ESV). *The Message* greets us with "Light-seeds are planted in the souls of God's people." As the people of God, we are the righteous,

and the light that emanates from God's rule and reign gets planted in our hearts, that it might bear the fruit of righteousness and justice. For that, we give God thanks.

Take some time to reflect on these questions.

- 4. When you hear the word *king*, what is the first thought or image that comes to mind?

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- 5. What are the differences between interpreting God's righteousness as God's moral purity and interpreting it as God's desire to set things right?

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INCARNATION

6. An idol is any person, idea, thing, pursuit, or agenda we put in the place of God. What are some popular “handcrafted” and “ragamuffin” gods you see people worshiping in your neighborhood and community?

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7. In what ways do the false gods worshiped as idols cause damage in our world?

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8. What “light-seeds” has the Holy Spirit planted in your heart?

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The Neighborhood

Jesus comes as the Word of God moving into our neighborhood to rule, but he doesn't rule like other earthly kings. He comes to rule with healing in his hands and the message of mercy on his lips. He doesn't come to take over so much as to *make over* this world God loves. Our response to God's work in our neighborhood is participation through acts of worship and justice.

9. How does the kingly presence of God-With-Us inspire you to worship?

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