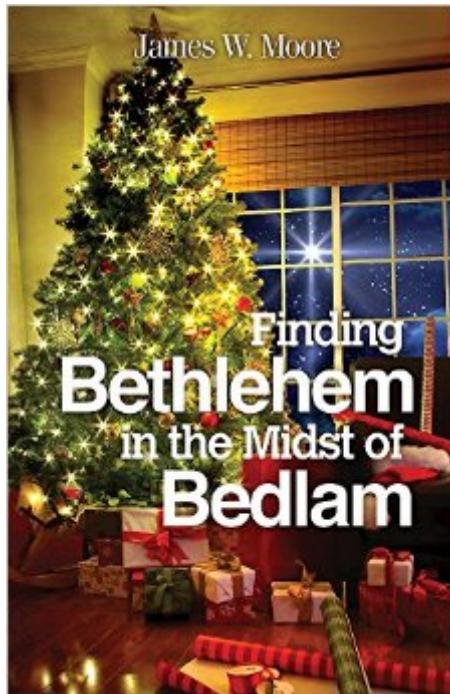


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# Finding Bethlehem In The Midst Of Bedlam: An Advent Study



## **Synopsis**

Christmas or confusion, Bethlehem or bedlam . . . Which will you choose this year? The truth is, we don't have to choose, because Christmas always happens right in the midst of our chaos. God breaks into our noisy disorder and is made known in Jesus Christ. Christmas and confusion are intimately related at the first Christmas when Jesus was born? Sometimes we forget that. That's what this study is about: "how Christ breaks into our chaos and confusion and brings Christmas: "how Bethlehem always happens in the midst of bedlam. This participants book for adults includes a session for each Sunday in Advent, along with one for Christmas Sunday. Each session includes questions for reflection and discussion, a brief prayer, a focus for the week, and six daily Bible readings for personal devotional time during the week. This resources is part of an all-ages Advent Study, which includes these components: Adult Large Print Participant Book, DVD, Leader Guide, Youth Study, and a Children's Reproducible Leader's Guide.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

I've been collecting Advent devotionals for several years now, having only started participating in the Liturgical Calendar about ten years ago. I mention my collection only for the reason of making a point to say, I have a history with devotional writing, and specifically, Advent devotionals. While this particular effort hits all the right notes (the Messianic prophecies, the allusions and symbolism, and the contemporary relevance), it was a bit pedantic and a bit too predictable once past the first few days into the devotional exercises. For the person who is deep into the Liturgical Calendar, this is likely going to be a sleeper, but I do think this is a good option for the person who is new to

practicing devotion through the Season of Advent - Christmas. As I mentioned, it hits all the right notes, but can be a little pedantic and tiring in its guidance for the person who is used to working devotionally through the Advent calendar. The book promotes a DVD and leader guide, which could be used to facilitate a group study, but I have no experience with either. I think, if I were to use a group study for Advent, it would be something a bit more challenging and traditionally faithful.

Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam is a thin book and would be thinner still if the largely blank pages were eliminated. I gather that the book is intended for Sunday school or for discussion groups. On its own, it's not that impressive. The book is divided into five lessons. The first, for instance, is entitled "Bethlehem or Bedlam" and is intended, basically, to convey two main points. The first is that Jesus came to the world amid a scene of general chaos. The second is that we can still find Him there. Each section begins with a short bit of prose, about ten pages or so, that contains brief stories linked by a thread. So in the first section, the author tells of his trip to Bethlehem, where he at first found Bedlam before a child reminded him of the sacred nature of the site. In the second section, whose lesson is that we are to love each other and put others before ourselves, he tells the story of a woman who, seeing children in danger, rushed out to the road they were trying to cross, stopped traffic, and saw the children across the road safely. In the third chapter, the anecdotal evidence is about Muhammad Ali and the fact that fame and glory aren't everything. Following each of these lessons, there are five summaries of Scripture readings and then many mostly blank pages that feature a question at the top (such as "How have you seen God's love at work for you during times of hardship or pain?") and lots and lots of blank lines for writing. All in all, I found that the prose sections were rather simple, bordering on simplistic. That's not to say that there's anything wrong necessarily with that approach, but there didn't seem to be all that much substance compared to other books I've read. Perhaps, since the book seems intended for study groups, that's the point (to allow the group to supply its own wisdom and interpretation and experience).

This book by James W. Moore, popular speaker and preacher, is a five session group study and discussion series written for use during the four Sundays prior to Christmas and a final one on Christmas day. The title of the book pretty much lets the reader know what the book is about: Finding the authentic Christ in the midst of the secular bedlam we call Christmas. And in case one misses his play on words, Moore provides a more detailed synopsis on the back of the book and on

the third page of chapter one, so there is little mystery here. Moore's original edition of this book was published in 2013. This revised edition was published this year (2015) and includes an added letter from Moore and a three-page Afterward. There is just enough Scripture texts and referenced material inserted into each chapter I suppose to legitimize this book as a Bible study. However, most of the chapters consist primarily of anecdotal stories to convey the author's points. Here is one such story: "I remember a Peanuts cartoon I once saw. Charlie Brown and Linus are watching television. Snoopy, the dog, is standing on top of the TV set with his ears stuck up in a V shape. He is serving as the antenna. The Charlie Brown says to Linus, 'I don't understand it either. All I know is that he gives us a better picture.' That could be said about Jesus, couldn't it? I am quick to confess that I don't understand everything about the coming of the Christ Child. All I know is that Jesus gives us a better picture. He sharpens the image. He clears up the confusion a bit and shows us not only what God is like but also what God wants us to be like. Jesus shows us dramatically that the best way to show our love for God is to love God's children." At the end of each of the five chapters there are Questions for Reflection and Discussion, a short prayer, and something from each chapter to focus on during the remainder of the week. The substantial part of these chapter add-ons are daily devotional readings for each of the following six days, with space added for personal thoughts and comments. As part of each devotional there is a question or two that relates to the central Scripture used in the devotional. Most, if not all of the questions are in the following form: "How does \_\_\_\_\_ speak to you." or "How do you feel about \_\_\_\_\_?" The questions for the Questions for Discussion and Reflection segment are not all that much different or more profound from the devotional questions. Two examples would be the following: "How might you find Bethlehem within and outside the safe places in your life?" and "Do you ever have trouble remembering things? "What do you do to help you remember?" This material at the end of each chapter was provided by Pamela Dilmore from Ministry Matters and development editor of adult teaching and learning resources at Abingdon Press. She has served as a local church pastor and a small-group leader in her church in Nashville. The title page inside this book calls this book "An Advent Study for Adults." Among other things, I would disagree with Moore concerning who the focus group is or should be for this book. After finishing it, I would say it is more suited for a youth group or junior high/middle school Sunday School class. Its lack of biblical substance and reliance on Moore's own personal stories make it, in my opinion, well below the interest level of the adults he is trying to reach. Of course, I could be wrong. It is my understanding that there are also separate editions of this book for youth and children. Moore's primary translation of choice for this book is the New Revised Standard

Version of the Bible (1989), a Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Also, one of a number of his unusual cited references was material from the enigmatic Universalist and Scottish scholar, William Barclay. Considering all of the sources that could have been cited, using William Barclay was a complete surprise. I thought this book might take a fresh look at the incarnation juxtaposed to the tinsel-laden commercialized Christmas so prevalent today. I was wrong. This is primarily a study that tugs at the reader's heartstrings; a feel good/feel bad kind of book. Does it challenge the reader to discover Christ Jesus afresh in the scriptural account of Christmas? Not even close. It uses fictitious material like "The Parable of the Locksmith," which, I suppose from the chapter footnote, came from one of Moore's sermons to stimulate his audience instead of using an actual parable from the Bible. If you are interested in a book with a relaxed, easy reading style and one that tugs at the heart strings, this is another one in a host of other books by James W. Moore, all written along the same genre.

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