

Explore the Bible®

LEADER GUIDE

Matthew 14–28

Spring 2017 > CSB

Rodney Woo, General Editor

LifeWay | Adults

LIFE BY DESIGN

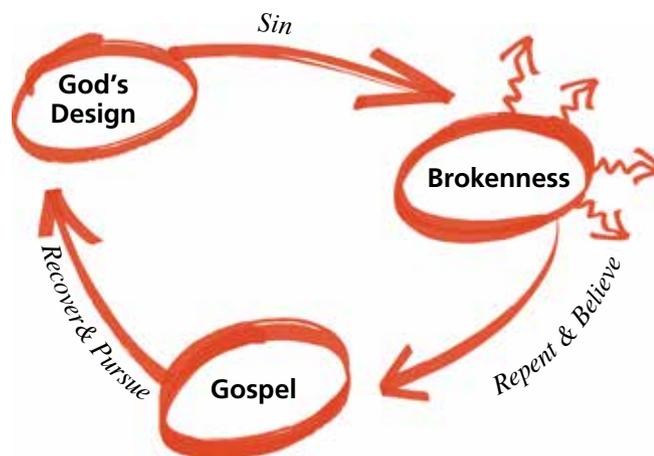
We live in a broken world. This brokenness is seen in suffering, violence, poverty, pain, and death around us. Brokenness leads us to search for a way to make LIFE work.

The Bible tells us that God originally planned a world that worked perfectly—where everything and everyone fit together in harmony. God made each of us with a purpose—to worship Him and walk with Him. (See Genesis 1:31 and Psalm. 19:1.)

Life doesn't work when we ignore God and His original design for our lives. We selfishly insist on doing things our own way. The Bible calls this sin. Sin leads to a place of brokenness. The consequence of our sin is separation from God—in this life and for all of eternity. (See Romans 3:23 and Romans 6:23.)

At this point we need a remedy—some good news. Because of His love, God did not leave us in our brokenness. Jesus, God in human flesh, came to us and lived perfectly according to God's Design. Jesus came to rescue us—to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. He took our sin and shame to the cross, paying the penalty of our sin by His death. Jesus was then raised from the dead—to provide the only way for us to be rescued and restored to a relationship with God. (See John 3:16, Colossians 2:14, and 1 Corinthians 15:3-4.)

We don't have the power to escape this brokenness on our own. We need to be rescued. We must ask God to forgive us—turning from sin to trust in Jesus. This is what it means to repent and believe. Believing, we receive new life through Jesus. God turns our lives in a new direction. (See Mark 1:15, Ephesians 2:8-9, and Romans 10:9.)



When God restores our relationship to Him, we begin to discover meaning and purpose in a broken world. Now we can pursue God's Design in all areas of our lives. God's Spirit empowers us to recover His Design and assures us of His presence in this life and for all of eternity. (See Philippians 2:13 and Ephesians 2:10.)

Now that you have heard this Good News, God wants you to respond to Him. You can talk to Him using words like these: My life is broken—I recognize it's because of my sin. I believe Christ came to live, die, and was raised from the dead—to rescue me from my sin. Forgive me. I turn from my selfish ways and put my trust in You. I know that Jesus is Lord of all, and I will follow Him.

Excerpted from Life on Mission: A Simple Way to Share the Gospel.

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*Easter evangelistic emphasis

» MEET THE WRITERS

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A WORD FROM THE GENERAL EDITOR



This quarter we have the privilege of studying the second half of the Gospel of Matthew. Chapters 14–28 of Matthew offer a unique and challenging perspective into the last six months of Jesus’ earthly ministry. Together, we will discover the true identity of Jesus Christ and the impact He made on the first generation of Christ followers. This study will enable each of us to get into the ears and hearts of the first disciples as they listen to Jesus, walk with Him, and see their Lord crucified.

As important as it is to understand clearly the first-century historical context of the first Gospel in the New Testament, we will also be challenged to hear the teachings of Jesus with our own ears and to follow this Messiah with all our hearts. There will be some uncomfortable and provoking passages in the last part of Matthew’s Gospel, yet one of Matthew’s primary purposes is that each listener will encounter the prophesied Messiah. As the Gospel writer indicates, the condition of our hearts will determine our response to the very clear and simple message that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, offers each believer a place in the family of God.

Rodney Woo



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WORD WISE

Terms listed here are identified in the Bible commentary with a dot (•).

Bethphage [BETH fayj]—a small village on the Mount of Olives near Bethany or near the road between Jerusalem and Jericho; means “house of unripe figs”

Blasphemy—literally means “to speak harm”; an attitude of disrespect directed against the character of God

Caesarea Philippi [SESS uh REE uh-FIL ih pigh]—a city located about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee; place where Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ; likely the place where the transfiguration of Jesus occurred

Elí, Elí, lemá sabachtháni [ee ligh-ee ligh-lah mah-sah BAHK thah nigh]—a cry of Jesus from the cross; Hebrew quotation from Psalm 22:1: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”

Gethsemane [geth SEM uh nih]—a garden outside the city of Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives; the place where Jesus went often for prayer; means “olive press”

Hosanna [hoh ZAN nuh]—Hebrew or Aramaic word meaning “save now”

Mount of Olives—a two-and-a-half mile long ridge of hills east of the city of Jerusalem, heavily covered with olive trees

Nazarene [NAZ uh reen]—a person from the town of Nazareth, located in Galilee; the town did not have a good reputation, likely due to an unpolished dialect and lack of culture

Parable—a story used to teach spiritual insights; the word means “putting alongside for purposes of comparison”

Passover—a Jewish festival commemorating the final plague on Egypt when the firstborn son of the Egyptians died and the Israelites were spared because of the blood smeared on their doorposts

Son of Man—Jesus’ favorite self-designation; emphasizes His identification with humanity, whom He came to save, and also His divine nature as the Messiah; the prophet Daniel prophesied of the coming of the Son of Man in the clouds to rule over an eternal kingdom (Dan. 7:13-14)

Zebedee [ZEB uh dee]—a fisherman from Capernaum in Galilee and the father of James and John, two of Jesus’ disciples

Zion [ZIGH uhn]—originally a fortified hill of pre-Israelite Jerusalem belonging to the Jebusites, but taken by King David who made the city of Jerusalem his capital; also came to denote the people of Israel in general

BIBLE READING PLAN

MARCH

- 1. Matthew 14:1-12
- 2. Matthew 14:13-21
- 3. Matthew 14:22-33
- 4. Matthew 14:34-36
- 5. Matthew 15:1-9
- 6. Matthew 15:10-20
- 7. Matthew 15:21-28
- 8. Matthew 15:29-31
- 9. Matthew 15:32-39
- 10. Matthew 16:1-6
- 11. Matthew 16:7-12
- 12. Matthew 16:13-20
- 13. Matthew 16:21-23
- 14. Matthew 16:24-28
- 15. Matthew 17:1-6
- 16. Matthew 17:7-13
- 17. Matthew 17:14-18
- 18. Matthew 17:19-21
- 19. Matthew 17:22-23
- 20. Matthew 17:24-27
- 21. Matthew 18:1-5
- 22. Matthew 18:6-9
- 23. Matthew 18:10-14
- 24. Matthew 18:15-20
- 25. Matthew 18:21-35
- 26. Matthew 19:1-6
- 27. Matthew 19:7-12
- 28. Matthew 19:13-15
- 29. Matthew 19:16-22
- 30. Matthew 19:23-30
- 31. Matthew 20:1-16

APRIL

- 1. Matthew 20:17-19
- 2. Matthew 20:20-28
- 3. Matthew 20:29-34
- 4. Matthew 21:1-7
- 5. Matthew 21:8-11
- 6. Matthew 21:12-13
- 7. Matthew 21:14-17
- 8. Matthew 21:18-22
- 9. Matthew 21:23-27
- 10. Matthew 21:28-32
- 11. Matthew 21:33-45
- 12. Matthew 22:1-14
- 13. Matthew 22:15-22
- 14. Matthew 22:23-33
- 15. Matthew 22:34-40
- 16. Matthew 22:41-46
- 17. Matthew 23:1-7
- 18. Matthew 23:8-12
- 19. Matthew 23:13-22
- 20. Matthew 23:23-28
- 21. Matthew 23:29-36
- 22. Matthew 23:37-39
- 23. Matthew 24:1-2
- 24. Matthew 24:3-8
- 25. Matthew 24:9-14
- 26. Matthew 24:15-22
- 27. Matthew 24:23-28
- 28. Matthew 24:29-31
- 29. Matthew 24:32-35
- 30. Matthew 24:36-44

MAY

- 1. Matthew 24:45-51
- 2. Matthew 25:1-13
- 3. Matthew 25:14-21
- 4. Matthew 25:22-30
- 5. Matthew 25:31-40
- 6. Matthew 25:41-46
- 7. Matthew 26:1-5
- 8. Matthew 26:6-16
- 9. Matthew 26:17-25
- 10. Matthew 26:26-30
- 11. Matthew 26:31-35
- 12. Matthew 26:36-46
- 13. Matthew 26:47-56
- 14. Matthew 26:57-68
- 15. Matthew 26:69-75
- 16. Matthew 27:1-10
- 17. Matthew 27:11-14
- 18. Matthew 27:15-19
- 19. Matthew 27:20-26
- 20. Matthew 27:27-31
- 21. Matthew 27:32-37
- 22. Matthew 27:38-40
- 23. Matthew 27:41-44
- 24. Matthew 27:45-49
- 25. Matthew 27:50-56
- 26. Matthew 27:57-61
- 27. Matthew 27:62-66
- 28. Matthew 28:1-7
- 29. Matthew 28:8-10
- 30. Matthew 28:11-15
- 31. Matthew 28:16-20



USING THIS GUIDE TO LEAD

» PRIOR TO THE GROUP TIME

1. Study the core passage.

Read Understand the Context to get a clear picture of how the core passage connects to the whole. Use Explore the Text to gain an understanding of the passage. Consult a study Bible like the *HCSB Study Bible* (also available online at MyWSB.com) and a Bible commentary like *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary* (available at LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible in both print and digital formats) to gain additional insight into the passage. Seek to define key words, phrases, places, and actions taken. Record ideas and insights gleaned from your personal study. Write a summary of the truths you discovered using the statement printed under the session title as a starting place.

TIP: Start preparing early. Life happens, and it tends to happen closer to times we are scheduled to lead a Bible study group.

2. Create a group time plan.

- Review First Thoughts for the session to identify a direction for the session and why that session is important to today's adults.
- Review the suggestions included in Lead Group Bible Study, identifying the suggestions you believe will work best with your group.
- Consider ways of incorporating a Bible Skill into the study, either following the suggestion given (see shaded box in each session) or by developing your own idea.
- Consult *QuickSource* (available from LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible) and the Explore the Bible blog (Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras) for additional questions and group time activities.
- Visit the Explore the Bible Ministry Grid page (MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible) for additional ideas and insights.
- Review the *Explore the Bible Leader Pack* items suggested. Determine how to best use the items in your group's setting.

3. Gather your resources.

Use the list in Gather the Following Items on the first page of each session as a starting place. Make sure you have everything you need to lead the group time using the plan you created. Make sure you have additional copies of *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* for anticipated guests.

TIP: If you plan to use the Suggested Music Idea and your small group meets with other groups prior to the study time, consider incorporating the music activity into the large group time.

4. Review and refine.

» DURING THE GROUP TIME

5. Arrive early.

The group time starts when the first person arrives. Make sure you are that person, so that you can set the tone and direction for the group Bible study time. Greet everyone as participants arrive and focus their attention on the Bible study.

6. Lead the group in a time of Bible study.

Use the plan you created to lead the group time. Record notes along the way to help you remember how the group responded. Remember, every group experience takes a few unexpected twists and turns; be flexible.

TIP: You can record your plan on a piece of paper and carry that into the group gathering, open the Leader Guide to the Lead Group Bible Study page and guide with those pages open, or use the DOC file provided on the CD-ROM included in the *Explore the Bible Adult Leader Pack* to create your own custom notes. (The DOC file is also included in the digital bundles and digital Adult Leader Pack. See LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible for more information.)

» AFTER THE GROUP TIME

7. Evaluate and record.

Review Practice for ideas to encourage the group to put into practice the truths discovered. Record prayer requests and other insights you gained about the group and specific participants. Use these notes to help you be a better guide in the future.

8. Start preparing to lead the next group time.



INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW 14–28

Spring is like a deep sigh. After the cold darkness of winter months, it feels as if we can breathe again. We hear the birds singing and watch the trees bud and flowers emerge to the growing warmth. Color fills the landscape—a welcome sight after the gray of winter.

In the middle of the season comes the pinnacle of the Christian year as we celebrate Jesus’ resurrection. We sing the joyous refrain “He is risen!” and shout in reply “He is risen indeed!” The living Christ is more than a historical reality; He is a personal vitality.

I wrote these words last year at Easter while one of my friends was dying. His family and friends prayed and grieved together. During tough times like that, we find strength and peace through the knowledge that Jesus overcame the grave. In Christ, life follows death like spring succeeds winter.

This study involves the final chapters of Matthew’s Gospel. They include accounts of Jesus’ marvelous teaching, His miraculous works, and the moving story of His resurrection. He gave us a message to proclaim to the world: “He is risen!”

» WRITER

Matthew does not identify himself specifically as the author. Internal evidence includes the fact that while all three Synoptic Gospels recount Jesus’ calling of this tax collector, only Matthew refers to himself as “Matthew.” Mark and Luke initially call him “Levi” (Matt. 9:9-13; Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27-29). Like Simon became known as Peter, the publican Levi left behind his old name and his former vocation when he responded to Jesus’ invitation to follow Him.

Information about Matthew is scarce outside of his call and the various lists of apostles. From his Gospel, we observe a man who loved Jesus and wanted other people to know Him. The first thing Matthew did after Jesus’ call was to host a meal at his home so all his friends and colleagues could meet Jesus (Luke 5:29-31).

» DATE

Dates of the book range from the mid-first century A.D. to nearly A.D. 100. However, the time frame can be narrowed by observing what is included in the book and what is not. Obviously, Matthew would have written after the events that he recorded, so it would have been after A.D. 33. Since Matthew does not include the destruction of the temple, he likely wrote before A.D. 70. Like Mark, Matthew’s account ends with the commission of the disciples to carry Christ’s gospel to the world.

» PURPOSE

From Jesus’ genealogy in chapter 1 to Jesus’ commission at the end of chapter 28, Matthew focused on two matters. He recounted Jesus’ words and works, but not merely as a biographer. He had been radically changed by Jesus. Before Jesus’ call, Matthew was Levi, the publican who collected taxes for the Romans. An outcast, his associates were limited to fellow tax collectors and others who were looked down upon by Jewish society as sinners. After meeting Jesus, he received a new identity and purpose. He found acceptance, forgiveness, and friendship. Matthew wanted others, particularly his fellow Jews, to know Jesus as the Messiah—God’s Anointed One.

» OVERVIEW

These chapters begin with events that demonstrate Jesus' divine identity as the Messiah. His mastery over nature prevailed as He walked on water and calmed a storm. By His authority in supernatural realms, He forced demons to leave their hosts and offered forgiveness to sinners. On the mount of transfiguration, God the Father affirmed Jesus as His Son.

In chapter 19, Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler shows the natural implication of Jesus' nature. Since He is the Messiah, He has the right to call people to follow Him. The young man's sad refusal to do so was an example of people who prefer possessions rather than the sacrificial life of a disciple.

The population of Jerusalem soon faced a similar decision as Jesus rode into the city. The people's cries of "Hosanna" voiced belief in Him as the Son of David. However, a week later many of these cheers turned to jeers as the crowd called for His crucifixion. Jesus had warned His followers that He would be rejected and crucified. Yet He encouraged them with the promise to rise from the grave after three days.

Matthew's Gospel includes numerous parables. Jesus often told stories couched in familiar settings to convey spiritual truths. Many of the parables related to the Kingdom motif. Some of the parables carried double applications. For example, Jesus' parable of the wedding not only emphasized God's desire that many people come to the wedding feast of His Son, but it condemned the religious leaders listening to the parable since they refused God's call to repent and obey.

As Jesus taught about the future judgment of those who rejected Him, He wove together the twin themes of the Son of Man and the second coming. The Messiah was not only the Son of God but also was the Son of Man. In His humanity, he identified with the people for whom He would die. The session on the Lord's Supper shows how His death provided a substitutionary atonement for our sins. Jesus' death was not the end, for He was raised and will return in power and judgment.

Our study ends with several sessions dedicated to Jesus' passion in the garden of Gethsemane, followed by His trials, crucifixion, and resurrection. The last session focuses on the unfinished task of taking His good news to the world. Jesus' commission motivates believers to be faithful witnesses.

» KEY THEMES

The Messiah—Matthew demonstrates how Jesus fulfilled messianic prophecies. By His words, deeds, and resurrection, Jesus confirmed His divine identity as God the Son.

The kingdom of God—This section begins in chapter 16 as Jesus gave His disciples the keys to the Kingdom. It ends in chapter 28 when Jesus gave the disciples the commission to carry the gospel to all the nations. Throughout, Jesus taught about the Kingdom through parables and personal example.

The gospel—As the Son of Man, Jesus was rejected and crucified, but as the Son of God He overcame death and rose to offer life to any who would believe. He then entrusted this gospel to His followers to share with people throughout the earth.



OUTLINE OF MATTHEW

- I. Birth and Infancy of Jesus (Matt. 1:1–2:23)
- II. Beginning of Jesus' Ministry in Galilee (Matt. 3:1–4:25)
- III. Discourse One: The Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:1–7:29)
- IV. Jesus' First Miracles (Matt. 8:1–9:34)
- V. Discourse Two: Ministry of Jesus' Disciples (Matt. 9:35–10:42)
- VI. Responses to Jesus' Ministry (Matt. 11:1–12:50)
- VII. Discourse Three: Parables about the Kingdom (Matt. 13:1-58)
- VIII. Close of Jesus' Ministry in Galilee (Matt. 14:1–16:28)
- IX. Preparing for His Death (Matt. 17:1-27)
- X. Discourse Four: Character of Jesus' Disciples (Matt. 18:1-35)
- XI. Jesus' Ministry on the Way to Jerusalem (Matt. 19:1–20:34)
- XII. Jesus' Ministry in Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1–23:39)
- XIII. Discourse Five: Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:1–25:46)
- XIV. Betrayal, Crucifixion, and Burial (Matt. 26:1–27:66)
- XV. Resurrection and Commission (Matt. 28:1-20)

WHO IS JESUS?

Jesus is the Christ to whom all of Scripture points.

MATTHEW 16:13-28

MEMORY VERSE: MATTHEW 16:24

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Matthew 14:1–16:28, First Thoughts (p. 14), and Understand the Context (pp. 14-15). As you read, focus on the question of the day: Who is Jesus? View the video introduction by Rodney Woo at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible or on the Leader Pack CD-ROM.
- **STUDY** Matthew 16:13-28, using Explore the Text on pages 15-19. Review the Introduction (pp. 10-11) to the Book of Matthew to gain insight into the context for this new study.
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 20-21). Tailor the plans for your group using More Ideas (p. 22) and the ideas included online at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible. Plan to have the group use the PSG to supplement their understanding during the session.
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid (MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; A whiteboard or large sheet of paper and markers; Pens and highlighters; and Index cards. **PACK ITEM 1** (*Map: New Testament Jerusalem*); **PACK ITEM 2** (*Outline of Matthew*); **PACK ITEM 3** (*Poster: Spring 2017*); and **PACK ITEM 5** (*Bookmark: Memory Verses*). Prepare to display: **PACK ITEM 7** (*Chart: The Opponents of Jesus*); and **PACK ITEM 11** (*Poster: Matthew 16:24*).



KEY DOCTRINE

God the Son

Christ is the eternal Son of God.

FIRST THOUGHTS

When the word “identity” comes to mind, we tend to think about a picture on a driver’s license or an ID card. We need a picture ID to verify that we are who we say we are. Have you ever faced the difficulty of trying to convince someone of your true identity? You may remember an awkward moment when you were the person who misidentified someone else. Social media can add to our frustration as people whom we have never met contact us. Being correctly identified is vital in business, relationships, and other aspects of life.

(In PSG, p. 13) **Describe an experience when you were misidentified. In what ways can incorrect identification harm reputations and relationships?**

Matthew gives us an account in which Jesus talks with His disciples about His identity. In this account, Jesus shows His disciples then and now the need to identify Him correctly. Everyone seems to have an opinion about who Jesus is and what He came to do. Some of the opinions come close to what the Bible teaches, while others have no basis in truth. Believers share a conviction about Jesus that compels us to declare that He is the Christ. Declaring Him to be the Messiah means something to us, in us, and through us. The account in Matthew encourages us to make our declaration and to live it out each day.

BIBLE SKILL

Review other passages to gain a clearer understanding.

Read Hebrews 4:15; John 1:1,14; and Acts 17:3. Reflect on how only God the Son could maintain both human and divine identities at the same time. How does Jesus’ humanity help us relate to Him? How would you describe the unity and necessity of the human and the divine in the Person of the Messiah?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

MATTHEW 14:1–16:28

Important information travels quickly. News about Jesus’ activities spread rapidly even without the benefit of mass communication. Social media in Israel was strictly from person to person. Yet Jesus’ reputation as a miracle worker grew swiftly. From the most humble peasant to the highest levels of power, people wondered who this itinerant rabbi could be.

Jesus was not concerned about fame, although His reputation followed wherever He went. Even when He traveled to remote places, the crowds sought Him. After one such incident, Jesus walked across water to reach His disciples who had preceded Him by boat. Seeing Him in the midst of a stormy sea frightened them. They wondered what sort of man He could be. They did not yet comprehend His true nature (Matt. 14:13-33).

Herod responded to Jesus with fear. Herod was a political appointee who used violence to secure power. He had executed John the Baptist and was afraid John had returned from the grave. Jesus’ popularity threatened Herod. The king believed Jesus’ supernatural powers could only be explained by someone rising from the dead. Herod did not know how close he was to the truth (14:1-12).

The Pharisees also misconstrued Jesus' identity. Believing they were upholding God's law, they criticized Jesus' disciples for not conforming to the traditions of Jewish elders. Jesus not only corrected the people's understanding of God's commands, He also challenged the position and power of the Pharisees (15:1-20).

One of Matthew's primary purposes was to demonstrate to the Jewish people that Jesus was the Messiah. He showed how each group of people had missed this truth. The masses focused on how Jesus' miracles benefited their physical needs (14:34-36; 15:21-39). The disciples were more concerned with what the implications of Jesus' miraculous deeds meant for them. The religious leaders worried about Jesus' challenge of their tradition and authority. From the king down, people did not understand they were dealing with God's Anointed One.

We do not need to seek after external signs to validate Jesus' divinity. His identity as God the Son has been established not merely by His supernatural acts, but by the sign of the prophet Jonah (16:4). Just as Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days, so too was Jesus in the earthly tomb for three days before rising victoriously. We can understand Jesus properly only through faith in Him as the risen Savior and Lord.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

MISUNDERSTOOD IDENTITY (MATT. 16:13-14)

VERSE 13

Jesus often used questions to bring His listeners along the path of spiritual understanding. This teachable moment occurred after Jesus and His followers left Tyre and Sidon and traveled along the Sea of Galilee before arriving in the region of **Caesarea Philippi**, a town about 20 miles north of Galilee (Matt. 15:21,29). They encountered various groups of people who misunderstood Jesus. In asking who the people thought Him to be, Jesus was preparing the disciples for a more personal question.

Jesus employed a specific phrase—**the Son of Man**. He often adopted this designation in referencing Himself (9:6; 10:23). Jesus used this phrase to identify Himself with the humanity He came to save (8:20). Yet, the emphasis on His being the Son of Man should not be mistaken as a denial of His deity, as we will see in subsequent verses. Both Daniel and John employed "Son of Man" to designate the divine Christ (Dan. 7:13; Rev. 1:13; 14:14).

VERSE 14

Like Herod, many of the people thought Jesus was a resurrected **John the Baptist** (14:2). Other people identified Jesus with powerful prophets like **Elijah** or **Jeremiah**. John the Baptist had been the first prophet since Old Testament days. While he performed no miracles, his powerful preaching attracted people throughout the region. Elijah and Jeremiah were two of the more formidable prophets of Jewish history. The Jews believed Elijah

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Hades: A First-Century Understanding" in the Spring 2017 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

MATTHEW 16:13

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

MATTHEW 16:14

¹⁴ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others, Elijah; still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

would precede the Messiah. Each answer came closer to the truth but fell short of portraying Jesus as the Christ.

Many people today are willing to accept Jesus as a teacher or healer but reject the idea of His divinity. Regardless of what others may think, Jesus is the promised Messiah and the only Son of God.

(In PSG, p. 15) **Think about the people in your life—family, friends, and coworkers. What are some of their opinions about Jesus? Why do they have those opinions?**

TRUE IDENTITY (MATT. 16:15-16)

VERSES 15-16

The words **but you** shifted the focus from the general population to the ones who would carry forth His mission and His message. When Jesus asked, **who do you say that I am?**, He put the disciples on the spot. Regardless of what other people thought, what did they believe? These men had followed Him, lived with Him, listened to Him, observed Him, and suffered danger with Him. They needed to speak up, not for His benefit, but for their own and for the sake of the people who heard their witness. We cannot merely think nice things about Jesus; we must declare our belief in Him as God the Son.

Simon Peter served as the spokesperson for the Twelve when he declared without equivocation that Jesus was **the Messiah**. This title literally means “the Anointed One.” Peter equated Jesus’ being the Messiah with His status as **the Son of the living God**. The Jews understood that to be the Son of God was to be equal with God. In fact, this argument was used by the Jewish leaders who demanded Jesus’ death (John 19:7).

(In PSG, p. 16) **What evidence can you point to in Scripture that affirms Peter’s declaration? How does Peter’s declaration emphasize Jesus’ being both fully human and fully God?**

NEW IDENTITY (MATT. 16:17-20)

VERSE 17

Jesus affirmed Simon Peter’s declaration by speaking to him individually and through him to the disciples collectively. Notice Jesus used the disciple’s birth name and family heritage: **Simon son of Jonah**. In Simon’s first encounter with Christ, Jesus had used this same phrase (John 1:42). Simon did not gain

MATTHEW 16:15-16

¹⁵ “But you,” he asked them, “who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

MATTHEW 16:17

¹⁷ Jesus responded, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven.

this special understanding of Jesus' identity through human understanding. God had revealed the truth to him and the others.

When Jesus referenced God as **my Father in heaven**, He was claiming to be equal with God (John 5:18). God revealed His Son's true nature to Simon and the other disciples. Through His Word and His Spirit, the Father does the same for us today.

VERSE 18

Many people misunderstand this passage. Because of the similarities between Peter's new name and the term **rock**, some readers think Jesus was saying He would build His church on **Peter**. This interpretation cannot be sustained theologically.

Jesus did not base His church on anyone other than Himself. Even Peter quoted the prophet Isaiah in affirming that Christ was the chief cornerstone of the church (1 Pet. 2:7; Isa. 28:16). Paul also referred to Jesus as the rock and cornerstone (Eph. 2:20).

Other writers believe the rock on which the church would be built was Peter's declaration that Jesus was the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:16). Certainly, a person's public confession of Jesus is an integral part of salvation (Rom. 10:9-10). While that profession brings one into the body of Christ, Jesus is the foundation on which the church is built.

These verses do not elevate Peter's authority in the church above that of the other disciples. Peter made the declaration in verse 16 as the representative of the Twelve, and in verses 17-20 Jesus addressed Peter as their representative. Jesus explained He would establish an eternal body of believers (the church), who would share Peter's testimony. The word **church** literally means "called-out ones," but it addresses a group of believers who assemble themselves into a congregation. They are called out and called together.

Because Christ's church is built on Himself, it is powerful. Jesus knew His followers would face persecution. He assured them that even **the gates of Hades** could not overpower the church. Hades was the place of the dead. Jesus would overcome the portals of death as He conquered the grave in His resurrection. At the same time, He defeated the forces of evil that opposed Him. Through Jesus, His church would be victorious over any opposing force.

How do you see your role in the triumphant church of Jesus Christ? In what ways does Jesus' statement give you confidence as part of the church?

VERSES 19-20

Jesus told the disciples He would give them **the keys of the kingdom of heaven**. Just as Jesus owned the keys to death and hell (Rev. 1:18), He possessed the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Given the response Jesus made to Peter's confession, one might reasonably assert that the keys to the kingdom involved the gospel and one's response to Christ as God's Son.

MATTHEW 16:18

¹⁸ And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.

MATTHEW 16:19-20

¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven." ²⁰ Then he gave the disciples orders to tell no one that he was the Messiah.

Jesus empowered the church's use of the keys. Whatever they **bind on earth will have been bound in heaven**. Similarly, whatever the church would **loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven**. Binding and loosing refer to the work of the church. If the church proclaims the gospel, people will respond with repentance and faith in Him, and those individuals are assured of entrance into God's kingdom. If the church fails in its responsibility and does not proclaim the gospel, people's entrance into the kingdom is less likely.

Interestingly, Jesus instructed the disciples not to reveal that He was the Messiah. This restriction was not intended to be a permanent prohibition of their verbal witness to His identity. Indeed, after the resurrection Jesus issued the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) and instructed the disciples to be His witnesses upon receiving the anointing of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). But the time for Jesus' public revelation as the Christ had not yet come (John 7:8).

How does our willingness to share Jesus' good news bind or loose someone in regard to Christ's kingdom?

MATTHEW 16:21-23

²¹ From then on Jesus began to point out to his disciples that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and scribes, be killed, and be raised the third day. ²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, "Oh no, Lord! This will never happen to you!" ²³ Jesus turned and told Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me because you're not thinking about God's concerns but human concerns."

CROSS IDENTITY (MATT. 16:21-28)

VERSES 21-23

Jesus informed the disciples He would **be killed** but would **be raised the third day**. The term **elders** referred to the political leaders, including the Sanhedrin. The **chief priests** and **scribes** were the religious leaders. All three groups should have known what the Scriptures said about the Messiah and recognized Him in the Person of Jesus. Instead, they would cause Him to **suffer many things**. Jesus was well aware of the pain He would face in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, He determined to fulfill God's plan of salvation.

Although Peter had correctly identified Jesus as the Messiah, he did not understand what the Messiah's role would be. Like most Jews, Peter likely thought the Messiah was a hero who would restore the kingdom to Israel (see Acts 1:6). He could not comprehend Jesus' sacrificial death. Peter took Jesus aside and exclaimed that this fate would **never happen** to Him. He meant well, but his protectiveness of Jesus was not in accordance with God's plan.

Using the same language He employed against the devil during His temptation (Matt. 4:10), Jesus said, "**Get behind me, Satan!**" Jesus was not suggesting Peter was actually the devil, but that Peter's objection came from the adversary. To suggest an alternate to His sacrificial death was an offense, and Jesus rejected it totally.

VERSES 24-26

Jesus went further to show the disciples what following Him would cost. The first step required one to **deny himself**. We cannot follow Jesus and maintain our own agenda. Secondly, a Christ follower must **take up his cross**. The cross was an instrument of death. The metaphor means we must die to self and receive Christ as Lord. Third, the believer must **follow** Jesus. To follow Jesus means to accept Him, His will, and His ways as our own.

Many people shy away from Jesus' call because they want to preserve their ways of life. People who take this path will, instead, lose their lives. Those who would surrender their lives for Christ's sake find true life. The word **whoever** in verse 25 is reminiscent of the language in John 3:16.

Jesus asked a rhetorical question to show the fallacy of trying to hold on to one's former life. He placed **the whole world** on one side of the eternal scales and one's **life** on the other. Obviously, one would be foolish to trade eternal life for what this world offers.

In your personal context, what does it mean to take up the cross? Why do many people refuse to follow Jesus merely to maintain their worldly lifestyles?

VERSE 27

Jesus looked beyond the cross to see the day when His suffering would be replaced with the glory of His second coming. Again using His favorite self-reference, **the Son of Man**, Jesus drew the disciples' vision into the future when He would return. Three phrases reiterate Christ's divinity. First, the term **with his angels** notes not only the fact that the angels will accompany His return but also that they are *His* angels. They belong to Him as Creator and God the Son. Second, Jesus again mentions **his Father**. As we've noted before, asserting God as His Father was equal to claiming to be God.

Third, on that day Jesus **will reward each** person. Only God can deliver eternal judgment and reward. This statement should not be misunderstood to promise salvation by works. The phrase **what he has done** should be seen in context of the preceding verses. A person exchanges his or her current life for a life of following Christ. Only through Jesus can one hope for a reward in the day of judgment.

VERSE 28

This verse should not be misunderstood. Jesus was not saying that some of the disciples would not die (**taste death**) until His second return. Rather, Jesus wanted to assure the disciples that they would experience His **kingdom**. Jesus' kingdom included not only heaven and His future reign in glory but also His rule in the hearts of believers who followed the way of His cross. In them, the church, the kingdom of the Son of Man, would spread across the globe, bearing His good news of salvation.

MATTHEW 16:24-26

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.

²⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me will find it. ²⁶ For what will it benefit someone if he gains the whole world yet loses his life? Or what will anyone give in exchange for his life?"

MATTHEW 16:27

²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will reward each according to what he has done.

MATTHEW 16:28

²⁸ Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

INTRODUCE: Greet the group as they arrive and invite them to remove their driver's licenses from their wallets. Ask: *What information is provided on your license? What is the purpose for providing all of this information?* From the PSG (p. 13): *Describe an experience when you were misidentified. In what ways can incorrect identification harm reputations and relationships?*

TRANSITION: *There are people who misidentify Jesus as simply a prophet or a good man and others who consider him a fraud. Jesus' interaction with His disciples in Matthew 16 shows us that Jesus thought it was necessary for His disciples to be able to boldly, and with certainty, proclaim His true identity.*

FOCUS: Call attention to these items that you have displayed in the room and use them to set the context for this unit about the events in Jesus' life leading up to His crucifixion and resurrection: **Pack Item 1** (Map: New Testament Jerusalem); **Pack Item 2** (Outline of Matthew); and **Pack Item 3** (Poster: Spring 2017).

SUMMARIZE: *Beginning in Matthew 14, Jesus brought His ministry in Galilee to a close and began to prepare His disciples for His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. He took the disciples to the city of Caesarea Philippi to spend time teaching them. He began by asking them an important question.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Highlight Matthew 16:13-14 in the PSG. Invite the group to highlight or underline in the PSG the question Jesus asked His disciples as a volunteer reads aloud Matthew 16:13-14.

ASK: *Why might some mistakenly think Jesus was John the Baptist? Elijah? Jeremiah?* From the PSG (p. 15): *Think about the people in your life—family, friends, and coworkers. What are some of their opinions about Jesus? Why do they have those opinions?*

EXPLAIN: Discuss similarities some people might have seen between Jesus and other religious groups in His time. Use **Pack Item 7** (Chart: The Opponents of Jesus) to explore who these other people might have been. Explain that Jesus then reframed His question so that it targeted the disciples exclusively.

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud Matthew 16:15-16.

ASK: *Why was the disciples' personal perspective on this matter of utmost importance? Why should the disciples have been better equipped than others to answer the question correctly?*

EMPHASIZE: *Simon Peter answered as a spokesperson for the whole group. Ask the volunteer who read the verses earlier to again read Peter's answer.*

ASK: *What evidence can you point to in Scripture that affirms Peter's declaration? How does Peter's declaration emphasize Jesus' being both fully human and fully God?* (PSG, p. 16)

GUIDE: *What do you think of this response? Let's see what Jesus thought of it.*

READ: Instruct a volunteer to read Matthew 16:17-20 as the group listens to see how Jesus responded to Peter's answer.

ASK: *What "new identity" did Jesus give to Peter?*

DIRECT: Instruct the group to read silently the information under Verse 18 and Verse 19 in the PSG (p. 17) to determine the significance of the name change and what the importance of the declaration would mean for the future of Jesus' followers. After allowing responses, discuss: *What influences can impact a person's understanding of who Jesus is? How can a person know which influences carry the most weight?* (PSG, p. 18)

ASK: *Why do you think they did or did not comprehend the gravity of what Jesus was telling them? Why did Jesus instruct them not to tell anyone that He was the Messiah?*

EXPLAIN: *The disciples needed time to sort out what they were hearing and to gain more insight. Until then, they were to remain silent about their understanding that Jesus was truly the Messiah.*

READ: Enlist a volunteer to read Matthew 16:21-28 as the group listens for key ideas that Jesus taught.

ASK: *What do you think it was like for the disciples to hear those words for the first time? How did Peter, as spokesperson, respond? Why did Jesus rebuke him so harshly?*

STATE: *Though the disciples must have been totally overwhelmed with all they had heard that day, Jesus wasn't finished. There was more He had to teach them. They needed to know that those who wanted to follow Him must devote themselves to Him alone.*

GUIDE: Point out this week's memory verse using **Pack Item 11** (Poster: Matthew 16:24). Ask: *What did it mean for the disciples to daily follow Christ? How would they be rewarded for their obedience? What does it mean for believers today to follow Christ?* Distribute copies of **Pack Item 5** (Bookmark: Memory Verses). Encourage the group to place the sheet in their Bibles and commit Matthew 16:24 to memory this week.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

READ: Enlist a volunteer to read the three summary statements from In My Context in the PSG (p. 20).

INSTRUCT: Direct the group members to record on an index card their own declarations of who they believe Jesus to be. Encourage them to think of someone with whom they can share that statement as a witness to help him or her better understand who Jesus is. Encourage the group to examine their lives to evaluate whether they are reflecting what they believe about the true identity of Jesus.

DISCUSS: Lead the group through the first question set under In My Context in the PSG (p. 20): *Discuss ways your Bible study group can help others better understand Jesus' identity. Put together a plan for acting on what you discuss.*

PRAY: Lead the group in prayer, thanking God for the identity we have in Jesus Christ.



PRACTICE

- Ask God to empower you to lead the group to truly know Jesus and to develop a desire to demonstrate that knowledge.
- Be sure everyone receives a copy of the new PSG. Visit chronic absentees; present them with a PSG, and invite them to attend the group session next week.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

Display or pass around two or three pictures of identical twins (possibly someone in your church or pictures printed from the Internet). Give the names and discuss whether anyone can tell the twins apart. Ask: *Who do you think could tell them apart?* (Though others might not be able to tell the difference between the two, close family and friends could tell them apart because they know them so well.) Point out that the disciples knew Jesus' true identity because of their close personal relationship with Him. Say: *We can know Him as Savior and Lord for the same reason.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To further support the discussion of Jesus' identity, direct attention to the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 14). Assign the four Bible passages to volunteers in the group. Invite each volunteer to read aloud his or her assigned passage and then respond to the questions: *How does Jesus' humanity help us relate to Him? How would you describe the unity and necessity of the human and the divine in the Person of the Messiah?*
- To supplement discussion of the question Jesus asked in Matthew 16:13, spend time researching what other religions believe about Jesus, such as Judaism, Islam, Mormonism, and so forth. Explain that all of these religions think Jesus was a good man, but they miss the main point that He is Savior of the world.
- To enhance the study of Matthew 16:17-20, discuss Jesus' giving Peter a name that means "rock." Research and share some characteristics of rocks, and discuss how they might apply to Peter.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Provide copies of this list of Scriptures, or write the references on the whiteboard: Luke 2:11; 19:10; John 4:42; Acts 4:12; 13:23; 1 Timothy 1:15; 2 Timothy 1:10; Titus 2:13. Explain that these are some additional verses that emphasize who Jesus really is. Encourage the group to read and reflect on these as a part of their personal worship during the week.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Read the lyrics or lead the group to sing "Jesus Is Lord of All," by LeRoy McClard. Point out that the hymnist demonstrates the importance of having our own personal knowledge of who Jesus is.

IS JESUS FULLY GOD?

As the Son, Jesus reveals God's glory to humanity.

MATTHEW 17:1-13

MEMORY VERSE: MATTHEW 17:5

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Matthew 17:1–18:35, First Thoughts (p. 24), and Understand the Context (pp. 24-25). Highlight the words Scripture uses to characterize Jesus' appearance.
- **STUDY** Matthew 17:1-13, using Explore the Text (pp. 25-29). Use a Bible dictionary to gain a better understanding of what it meant for Jesus to be transfigured.
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 30-31). Consider ways to emphasize the memory verse during this session (Matt. 17:5). Customize your group plans using More Ideas (p. 32) and the ideas included in *QuickSource* and online at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible.
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Group Ministry blog (LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; A whiteboard or a large sheet of paper and a marker; Pens; and Index cards. For More Ideas (p. 32): A dictionary definition of "transfigured." Prepare to display: **PACK ITEM 1** (*Map: New Testament Jerusalem*); **PACK ITEM 2** (*Outline of Matthew*); and **PACK ITEM 3** (*Poster: Spring 2017*).



KEY DOCTRINE

God

God is infinite in holiness and all other perfections.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Jesus' Inner Circle" in the Spring 2017 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

BIBLE SKILL

Do a word study to gain insight.

The Greek word translated *transfigured* appears only four times in the New Testament. Review these four passages, looking at how the word is used: Matthew 17:2; Mark 9:2; Romans 12:2; and 2 Corinthians 3:18. How is the word used each time? To whom is the word referring in each passage? What role does God's glory play in each passage?

FIRST THOUGHTS

Most of us would be surprised by the full identity of our neighbors. To you he's the guy that cooks hot dogs on the grill in his backyard every Saturday, but to his high school friends he is the clutch-hitter on the baseball team. Some people may let you know about their past glories, but most have moved on to other things. We only know part of who they are, and that is the part they allow us to see. We do the same thing, only revealing selected things about ourselves.

(In PSG, p. 22) **Which of your past accomplishments do you think would surprise your neighbors the most?**

Although Peter acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah, he did not completely comprehend who Jesus was. Matthew wrote about a mountaintop experience in the region of Caesarea Philippi that made a lasting impression on three of the disciples. Peter's confusion on this mountain shows the danger of thinking Jesus is on an equal plane with historical leaders like Moses or Elijah. As we study the encounter on the mountain, we will come to see for ourselves that Christ alone deserves our reverence and devotion.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

MATTHEW 17:1–18:35

This week's context passage offers several proofs of Jesus' deity. Beginning with the transfiguration, Matthew recorded multiple means by which we can know Jesus is fully God. The voice of God at the transfiguration was the first witness that, while the Moses the lawgiver and Elijah the prophet were notable figures, Jesus was uniquely God the Son (Matt. 17:1-13).

During the days after this important event, Jesus demonstrated His divine power in other ways. He cast out a demon that afflicted a child, showing His supremacy over supernatural beings. Jesus predicted His death and resurrection, the ultimate proof of His power over life and death. He engaged Peter regarding His authority over civil and religious authorities in the matter of the temple tax (17:14-27).

The disciples were no different from us in their desire to be the most important or the best. Jesus explained that in the kingdom of God the person who exhibited humble childlikeness was truly great (18:1-9).

In a parable about one solitary sheep, Jesus highlighted the importance God places on each person. The point was not that the 99 sheep were not valued. Rather, recognizing the safety of the flock did not minimize the effort to which a loving shepherd would go to rescue even one stray lamb. Such is the searching love of God the Son (18:10-14).

The fact that instruction for restoring a wayward brother comes on the heels of Jesus' parable of the sheep suggests that Matthew 18:15-20 is not merely a formula for church discipline. Instead, it indicates the lengths to which we should go to restore a stray brother. Again, the portrait depicts the divinely loving nature of our Lord.

Christ's divinity cannot be made into a caricature of an authoritarian, hostile god like the pantheon of petty deities claimed by the Romans or Greeks. Our God is a loving Savior who seeks to forgive and restore, who is plenteous in mercy and grace. The story of the unforgiving servant emphasizes that whoever follows Jesus should be willing to forgive others as God for Christ's sake has forgiven us (18:21-35).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

PRESENCE (MATT. 17:1-6)

VERSE 1

Although Peter and the disciples affirmed Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus wanted them to understand His unique nature more fully. He **led them up on a high mountain**. Matthew and Mark mention that this event took place **six days** after the confrontation in Caesarea Philippi. Luke includes a period of eight days. The difference can be attributed to diverse approaches in describing the event. Luke may have specified the time from Jesus' discussion with the disciples to the point when they saw Jesus transfigured on the mountain, thus including time spent traveling. Matthew and Mark likely meant the group spent six days in Caesarea Philippi before traveling two days to Jesus' destination on the mountain.

Matthew does not identify the specific mountain on which the transfiguration occurred. He only says it was a *high mountain*. The description indicates a mountain of significant height. Some commentators argue for Mount Hermon, while others make a case for Mount Meron. Both are near Caesarea Philippi, and each exceeds the normal size of the surrounding mountain range. Mount Tabor now hosts the Church of the Transfiguration, offering a third option.

VERSE 2

Luke 9:29 indicates Jesus was praying when the transfiguration occurred. The language of this verse suggests Jesus' transformation occurred suddenly, without warning. The word **transfigured** is the same term from which we get "metamorphosis." Matthew does not suggest Jesus' body took on a different shape. Rather, His face and clothes took on a blinding brightness.

Jesus' **face shone like the sun**. While Moses' face glowed after being in the presence of God on Mount Sinai (Ex. 34:29-30), Jesus' face appeared to produce its own light with an intense brilliance. Matthew's description sounds a lot like John's vision of Jesus in Revelation: the Son of Man's face "was shining like the sun at full strength" (Rev. 1:16). Similarly, Jesus'

MATTHEW 17:1

¹ After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and his brother John and led them up on a high mountain by themselves.

MATTHEW 17:2

² He was transfigured in front of them, and his face shone like the sun; his clothes became as white as the light.

clothes became as white as the light. The phrase *as the light* indicates Jesus' apparel took on a dazzling glow.

MATTHEW 17:3

³ Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with him.

VERSE 3

Without warning, *Moses and Elijah* also appeared before the group. Moses was the great lawgiver, and Elijah was the foremost prophet. Elijah did not die but was taken bodily into heaven (2 Kings 2:11). Now he had returned to meet Jesus on this mountain. The text does not indicate the manner of Moses and Elijah's presence. Luke reports they appeared "in glory" (Luke 9:31). God gave the disciples spiritual insight into the identities of the persons standing before them, since they certainly would not have had images to compare for documentation.

Matthew does not relate the details of the discussion. He merely states the two were talking with Him. Luke 9:31 indicates the conversation centered on Jesus' approaching death at Jerusalem. The crucifixion was only a short time away, perhaps less than a few weeks. Jesus came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 5:17). Moses and Elijah may have discussed how their work would be completed on His cross.

MATTHEW 17:4

⁴ Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it's good for us to be here. I will set up three shelters here: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

VERSE 4

The disciples had witnessed Jesus' power, but nothing prepared them for this experience. When Moses and Elijah appeared alongside Jesus, the disciples were overwhelmed.

Instead of watching and listening, Peter interrupted this holy moment. We should not be surprised that Peter was the one to speak out. He often took the lead, as he had in the previous discussion in Matthew 16. In a gross understatement, Peter acknowledged that it was *good* for them to be there. What a blessing they had received! They had witnessed Jesus in His glory. Theirs was more than merely a *good* experience; they were blessed with a vision of Christ's divine nature. Unfortunately, Peter did not recognize the full significance of what he was seeing.

While Peter addressed Jesus as *Lord*, he gave equal emphasis to the lawgiver and the prophet. By offering to build *three shelters*, one for each of them, Peter was making the same mistake as the people who thought Jesus was merely one of the prophets. Peter placed Jesus, Moses, and Elijah on the same level, with each deserving a shelter.

MATTHEW 17:5

⁵ While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased. Listen to him!"

In any other circumstance, a shelter could have been merely a dwelling place, such as a tent or booth. Given the setting, this interpretation is doubtful. In light of Jesus' transformation and the supernatural appearance of the Old Testament notables, Peter may have been suggesting places of worship. The tabernacle of the Old Testament was a tent of meeting in which the presence of God was manifested to the people of Israel. In any case, Peter perceived Jesus on an equal basis with Moses and Elijah, the same mistake many people make today.

VERSE 5

Peter did not finish his statement before being silenced by the appearance of *a bright cloud*. In the Old Testament, God sometimes appeared to His

people in a cloud. His glory was too grand for human eyes to bear. The Father intervened in the occasion to declare Jesus' unique status. Christ was no equal to Moses and Elijah; He was their superior and their Lord. The emphasis on the word **this** makes a clear distinction between Jesus and the other two figures. Luke's account indicates the cloud actually enveloped the group (Luke 9:34).

God declared that Jesus alone was His **beloved Son**. Jesus enjoyed a relationship with God unlike that of any other. Moses was God's lawgiver and Elijah was His prophet, but Jesus alone was His Son. As evidenced in other passages, the **voice** of God declared Jesus to be His Son, offering divine confirmation of Jesus' deity.

The three aspects of the Father's statement reveal exceptional qualities of Jesus' nature. First, Jesus was God's *beloved*. Repeating His declaration from Jesus' baptism, the Father affirmed His love for Christ (Matt. 3:17). The term has a sense of intensity as in "so beloved" or "well beloved." Second, God reiterated His delight in His *Son*. God's pleasure in the Son is uniquely different than His approval of anyone else. Third, the voice ordered the disciples to **listen to him**. The emphasis of the phrase focuses on *him* as opposed to anyone else. Each statement echoes the Father's affirmation of Jesus as God the Son.

Peter later recalled this event when writing his second epistle. One can hear the awe reverberating in his voice as he described how Jesus received "honor and glory from God the Father" as the "voice came to him from the Majestic Glory" (2 Pet. 1:16-18).

VERSE 6

The disciples responded like you and I would respond upon hearing the voice of God. They fell **facedown**. Prostration was part of worship, but this reaction involved more fear than reverence. They were **terrified**. This word can be translated as "awestruck," but Jesus' response in verse 7 suggests the three men were filled with distress. Suddenly they knew they were in the very presence of God Almighty. As the Son of God, Jesus shares fully in God's glory.

How might the other nine disciples have responded to an account of this experience? What would it take for us to acknowledge the worship due to God's Son?

PURPOSE (MATT. 17:7-9)

VERSE 7

Having fallen to the ground under the power of God's presence, the disciples must have remained prostrate, trembling in fear. They dared not look up or move. With typical compassion, Jesus approached the three and **touched them**. In some cases, Jesus touched people in order to heal them.

MATTHEW 17:6

⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown and were terrified.

MATTHEW 17:7

⁷ Jesus came up, touched them, and said, "Get up; don't be afraid."

Sometimes He laid a hand on individuals to offer comfort and affirmation. In this situation, He may have touched them to get their attention and calm their hearts.

The disciples no longer needed to remain on the ground. Jesus told them to rise and ***don't be afraid***. While believers should respond to God with reverential awe and righteous fear, God does not want His children to be terrified of Him. He wants us to come to Him in faith, not draw back from Him in fright.

MATTHEW 17:8

⁸ When they looked up they saw no one except Jesus alone.

VERSE 8

As the disciples raised their eyes, Moses and Elijah were nowhere to be seen. Matthew's emphasis was to the point: ***they saw no one except Jesus alone***. Moses and Elijah had disappeared from the scene. Even if they had still been present, the three witnesses likely would have ignored both of them in favor of beholding their Lord. At this point they only had eyes for Christ.

Many wonders can attract our attention. We can be amazed at the splendors of nature. We might be awestruck at the acts of God in people's lives. We may revel in worshipful music. Yet, nothing and no one deserves our focus like Jesus.

MATTHEW 17:9

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Don't tell anyone about the vision until the Son of Man is raised from the dead."

VERSE 9

Surely their minds were full of questions about their experience. Maybe they all talked at once, or they might have been walking mutely as the glory of God continued to overwhelm them. Their natural instinct would have been to share what they had witnessed. Perhaps they could hardly wait to see the other disciples and report this extraordinary event.

Jesus, however, had a different plan. He ordered them not to talk about the vision they had experienced until after He rose from the grave. The term ***vision*** does not mean they did not actually see Jesus' glory or the appearance of Moses and Elijah. Rather, this word can also refer to a spectacle or appearance. Jesus wanted this witness to His divine declaration reserved until the final proof was undeniable—His resurrection.

Interestingly, He continued to refer to Himself as ***the Son of Man***. Only in His humanity could He lay down His life. Only in His divinity could He be raised from the dead, not in the same way as Lazarus and others, but in a victorious, glorified body.

Jesus' purpose in the transfiguration was to give the disciples additional evidence as they witnessed for Him after the resurrection. They could explain to everyone that the One whom God had raised was both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). Jesus' mission can only be understood in light of His death, burial, and resurrection.

In what ways can we witness to people about Jesus' divine nature? How can we be part of fulfilling His eternal purpose?

PERSPECTIVE (MATT. 17:10-13)

VERSE 10

In light of what they had just witnessed, the disciples asked why the scribes said Elijah must come first. The scribes taught that Elijah would prepare the way for the Messiah. Malachi described a messenger who would prepare the way for the Lord (Mal. 3:1). The disciples were trying to reconcile their religious instruction with the present reality that the Messiah was walking down the mountainside with them.

VERSES 11-13

Jesus' reply reiterated the accuracy of prophecy and showed He understood the teaching that Elijah would indeed precede the Messiah. Malachi's prophecy included the coming of Elijah before "the great and terrible day of the LORD" (Mal. 4:5). The phrase **restore everything** refers to Malachi's statement that Elijah would turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the children to the fathers (Mal. 4:6). A common reference to repentance, the turning of the children's hearts was evidenced in the preparatory work of John the Baptist.

Jesus had already explained that John the Baptist fulfilled the role of Elijah (Matt. 11:14). Ironically, just as a people who had longed for the Messiah did not recognize Him, neither did they recognize the prophesied Elijah in the person of John. Instead, John had to live in the wild, preach in the desert, baptize in the river, and ultimately experience beheading at the hands of a cruel king.

Jesus went on to explain that people would treat **the Son of Man** in the same way as John. On several occasions over the previous months, Jesus had told the disciples about His impending death. They still did not understand how the Messiah could **suffer at their hands**.

As Jesus concluded His explanation, the disciples understood that Jesus had been describing **John the Baptist**. Like Elijah, John preached repentance. He also called people to prepare the way for the Lord on the same order as Isaiah did (Matt. 3:3; Isa. 40:3). In his prophecy concerning John's birth, the angel said John would go forth in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17). The wording of the angel's statement quotes from Malachi's prophecy and goes on to show how John's work would fulfill Elijah's purpose. John's preaching resulted in the repentance of many people throughout Israel as they turned again to the Lord.

Just as the people responded to John's preaching with the fear of the Lord, so too did the disciples respond to the transfiguration with reverential fear and awe. Reverence and fear are appropriate responses to the reality of God's glory. May we live in the constant awareness of the glory of God in Christ and demonstrate our reverence in our worship and in our lives.

Why was Jesus' determination to go to the cross so puzzling to the disciples? How does His willingness to suffer for us impact our willingness to live for Him?

MATTHEW 17:10

¹⁰ So the disciples asked him, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?"

MATTHEW 17:11-13

¹¹ "Elijah is coming and will restore everything," he replied. ¹² "But I tell you: Elijah has already come, and they didn't recognize him. On the contrary, they did whatever they pleased to him. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands."

¹³ Then the disciples understood that he had spoken to them about John the Baptist.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

INTRODUCE: Distribute a small index card and pen to everyone in the group. Instruct them to write something unique about themselves that most people may not know. Collect the cards and read them aloud; have the group guess to which individual the fact refers. Ask: *Which fact most surprised you? Why?* Point out that no matter how well we think we know others, we never really know everything because of the complexity God has placed within each of us.

TRANSITION: Set the context by referring to **Pack Item 1** (*Map: New Testament Jerusalem*); **Pack Item 2** (*Outline of Matthew*); and **Pack Item 3** (*Poster: Spring 2017*). Remind the group that last week we learned the disciples had come to realize that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God; now there was much more to learn about Him. Invite the group to join you as you learn of Jesus' continued revelation of Himself on the mount of transfiguration.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: As a volunteer reads Matthew 17:1-6, direct the group to put themselves in the shoes of the disciples and to experience this demonstration with them.

ASK: *Why do you suppose Jesus led the disciples onto a mountain for this event? Describe the transformation that took place in Jesus.*

LIST: Invite the group to describe what the color white has represented throughout the ages. Record their responses (for example, innocence, purity, new beginnings, reflection, protection). Guide them to explain the significance of each with regard to Jesus' appearance.

ASK: *Why do you think Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus? What key role did each of these men play in God's plan of redemption? What did their presence confirm about Jesus?*

IDENTIFY: Lead the group to identify two phrases that summarize Peter's response. Ask: *What does Peter's request to build three tabernacles imply about his lack of understanding?*

EMPHASIZE: *Peter did not grasp the priceless value of the experience, nor did he realize that Moses and Elijah were present only to confirm the deity of Jesus Christ.*

POINT OUT: God stepped in to clarify by speaking from a cloud the awe-inspiring words recorded in verse 5.

ASK: *How do we know the disciples then understood the gravity of their experience? From the PSG (p. 26): How does the awareness of God's presence change our understanding or perception of a situation?*

READ: Invite someone to read Matthew 17:7-9 to find Jesus' response to their fear.

ASK: *What does Jesus' response to their fear tell us about His character? What was the significance of the fact that when the disciples got up they saw that Jesus was now alone? What would be the first thing anyone would want to do after the most overwhelming experience of a lifetime? From the PSG (p. 27): How does devoting our attention to Christ alone help us deal with our fears?*

EXPLAIN: *Jesus sensed their plans to tell others of their wonderful experience, but He called an abrupt halt to these plans by telling them not to tell anyone. The time would come to share all they knew, but that time would be after His death and resurrection. Telling it too soon might interfere with the events ahead.*

READ: Direct a volunteer to read Matthew 17:10-13 to see what question the disciples sought to clarify at this point. Ask: *What was that question?*

CLARIFY: Read Malachi 4:5, and then explain: *The scribes had taught, based on this verse, that Elijah would come ahead of the Messiah to lead His people back to a proper relationship with Him and with each other. The disciples were perplexed because they had not seen this happen.*

ASK: *How did the scribes' teachings of what would happen differ from reality once Jesus came to earth? What did the disciples then realize about the identity of "Elijah"? What message did John the Baptist preach? What difference might it have made if God's people had recognized John the Baptist as His messenger and had responded to his message of repentance and preparation for the Messiah's arrival?*

SUMMARIZE: *The discussion about the reception of John the Baptist gave Jesus a teachable moment to share more about Himself. He too was destined to suffer and die. The experiences of that day left the disciples with a stronger confirmation and understanding of Jesus, the Messiah, and the weight of the message they were being commissioned to share with the world.*

DISCUSS: *How did the disciples' perspective on God's plan change as a result of their experience on the mountain? How does Jesus change our perspective of what we have accepted as truth? What attitudes do we need to adopt if we are going to continue to learn from Jesus? (PSG, p. 29)*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

GUIDE: *After the experiences of this day, did the disciples now know Jesus fully? (Consider this: if you're married, would you say you know your spouse fully? Obviously not. No matter how long you have been together, he or she still surprises you from time to time, because people are so very complex.) Our finite minds may never understand Jesus completely, but we, like the disciples, can have glorious experiences walking with Him.*

DIRECT: Read the third question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 30). Create smaller groups and direct each group to discuss the questions and create a list of their answers: *Share with your Bible study group how understanding more about Jesus has strengthened your grasp of God's glory. Discuss ways the group can develop and foster a healthy sense of reverence and fear for God and His glory.*

CHALLENGE: Encourage the group to choose one response from their lists and make a commitment to demonstrate that act as they worship and serve God today.

PRAY: Close in prayer, thanking God that we can know Him through a relationship with His Son, Jesus.



PRACTICE

- Spend some time in prayer and personal worship. Thank God for revealing His glory to the disciples and for times He has revealed His glory to you. Ask Him to help you reflect that glory as you worship and serve.
- Send the group's prayer list to all members by email. Thank them for their presence in the group time and encourage them to be present next week as you tackle the question, "What Is Required?," based on Matthew 19.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To introduce the session, lead a lighthearted discussion about Superman and Clark Kent. Invite the group to share what they know about this fictitious character, to describe him in the role of Kent, and to describe in him the role of Superman. Ask them who knew the true identity of Clark Kent (there have been a few individuals over the years). Relate this to the disciples' coming to know the true identity of Jesus as the Messiah (not just a carpenter, a good man, a prophet, an ordinary citizen, a fraud, etc.). Be careful to explain that Jesus is much more than a superman or other superhero.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To further the discussion of Matthew 17:2, ask the group to define the word "transfigured." Supplement responses by providing a dictionary definition. Relate your findings to the changes the disciples witnessed in Jesus.
- Enhance discussion of Jesus' response to the disciples' fear in Matthew 17:7 by discussing God's kindness to all regarding fear. Share the following verses and/or others regarding the issue, and discuss how God can help us deal with fear in our lives: Isaiah 51:12; Psalms 27:1-3; 56:3-4; 91:5-7; Proverbs 3:24.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Point out that, just as God revealed His glory to the disciples, He reveals His glory to us, His children, in various ways as well. Share a time when He revealed His glory to you, and invite volunteers to share testimonies of times when they too had a personal experience with God's glory.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Read the lyrics or lead the group to sing "How Great Thou Art," by Stuart K. Hine, as an act of worship to our glorious God.

WHAT IS REQUIRED?

Jesus offers the gift of eternal life to those willing to follow Him.

MATTHEW 19:16-26

MEMORY VERSE: MATTHEW 19:26

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Matthew 19:1–20:34, First Thoughts (p. 34), and Understand the Context (pp. 34-35). Record any questions about the Scripture passage you might want to explore as you study.
- **STUDY** Matthew 19:16-26, using Explore the Text (pp. 35-39). Also read these related passages to gain insight into this study: Exodus 20:3-4,12-17; Matthew 22:36-39.
- **PLAN** the group time using the ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 40-41) and More Ideas (p. 42), in *QuickSource*, and online at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible. Brainstorm creative ways to use the Suggested Music Idea (p. 42) that are appropriate for your group.
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid (MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; A whiteboard or large sheet of paper and markers; Pens; and A suitcase; and **PACK ITEM 2** (*Outline of Matthew*). Prepare to display: **PACK ITEM 3** (*Poster: Spring 2017*). Make copies for the group of: **PACK ITEM 4** (*Time Line: Matthew*).



KEY DOCTRINE

Man

Only the grace of God can bring man into His holy fellowship and enable man to fulfill the creative purpose of God.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Jesus' Teaching on the 10 Commandments," available digitally in the Spring 2017 *Biblical Illustrator for Explore the Bible* at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

BIBLE SKILL

Compare related Scripture for synthesis.

Compare James 2:10-11; Galatians 3:10-11; and Hebrews 10:1 with Matthew 19:23-26. How do these passages relate to each other? What similar truths do you see in each passage? How does each passage help you understand the others listed? Record a summary of the main truth or truths discovered in all four passages.

FIRST THOUGHTS

Taking a long trip is less stressful if everything needed has been packed. Filled suitcases and duffel bags give travelers the assurance they have brought along what they need. However, nothing puts a vacation on edge like wondering if the medicine bag or the cell phone charger got into the suitcase. What if it's missing? The travel time to the destination becomes a constant retracing of every step as we packed. Once there, we go through our suitcases making sure that the item we thought we had forgotten is there.

(In PSG, p. 32) **What practices do you follow to make sure everything you need for a trip gets packed?**

Matthew tells us about someone who came to Jesus in search of assurance about eternal life. He was intent on making sure he lived according to religious rules, but he wondered if something was still missing. That's why he turned to Jesus for help. He wanted to know what he needed to do in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. Like people today, he thought that eternal life was something to be earned. Jesus helped him see that He alone gives eternal life to people who are willing to follow Him.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

MATTHEW 19:1–20:34

What is the right way to live, and how do we gain eternal life? These parallel questions summarize the quest in this session's context passage. The narratives included in these two chapters address the basic issues of life and eternity.

When the Pharisees saw the crowds following Jesus, they tried to bait Him into saying something that might alienate the people (Matt. 19:3). Perhaps few matters are more emotionally inflammatory than marriage and divorce. While Jesus' opponents sought to pit Him against Moses' teaching, Jesus turned the tables and used the opportunity to teach the masses about God. God does not want us to use some technicality to get out of our relationships; He wants us to be committed to one another in our relationships.

The disciples recognized the difficulty of a totally committed union. Jesus used their response to show that God's standard, represented by this marital example, is beyond the ability of human achievement. We must depend on God and His enabling grace. Jesus lifted up a little child from the crowd as an object lesson of the simple faith by which anyone can know and follow Him (19:13-14).

The story of the young nobleman furthers this line of teaching (19:16-30). Many people can identify with his success and sincerity. He genuinely wanted to gain something he did not have—eternal life. He would have performed any task to achieve that goal. Unfortunately, he was not willing to make the one sacrifice necessary. Caring more for his lifestyle than for a life of following Christ, he refused the path of surrender and discipleship.

Some people do not like God's economy of grace. They prefer a system of merit in which they can know what they have to do to gain a set reward. Jesus used the parable of the generous employer to explain how God offers the same mercy to everyone (20:1-16).

The cost of such grace is great. As we read Jesus' words that predict His death, we should understand the price He would pay for our salvation. Instead of grasping the enormity of Jesus' revelation, two of His disciples continued their personal ambition for prominence. In contrast, two humble blind men understood they had no claim on Jesus' healing power; they could only ask and receive by His mercy and grace (Matt. 20:17-34).

Such is the way with eternal life. We can only obtain what God gives freely, though with an enormous price to Himself. As a result, we should follow Him throughout our lives into the next one.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

STANDARD DEFINED (MATT. 19:16-20)

VERSE 16

Human reasoning usually arrives at a wrong conclusion because it starts with the wrong question. The young man who approached Jesus appeared to have honorable motives, but he misunderstood the basic issues about himself, Jesus, and eternal life. His errors mirror our own when we consider eternal matters from an earthly perspective.

First, the young man misunderstood the nature of Jesus. Using the respectful term **teacher**, he assumed Jesus was merely an itinerant rabbi. Like many people today, he saw Jesus as someone who could teach about God, but he failed to understand Jesus' true nature as the Son of God. He thought Jesus could tell him the path to God, but he did not comprehend Jesus as the Way.

Second, the inquirer believed he could do something **good**. Most people believe their good works should earn special consideration by God. This man did not understand that the best we humans can do falls vastly short of God's standard. Matthew uses the phrase **just then** to describe the timing of the young man's coming to Jesus, suggesting he may not have been present to hear Jesus' instruction that the kingdom of heaven belongs to people who come to God like little children (Matt. 19:14). Little children cannot perform great tasks or accomplish impressive feats. They come to Christ in simple faith and love.

Third, despite his imperfect spiritual understanding, the young man should be credited at least with desiring a good goal. The text shows he had material success but recognized he needed more. He lacked assurance of

MATTHEW 19:16

¹⁶ Just then someone came up and asked him, "Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?"

eternal life. He was earnest and sincere in his question. He also believed Jesus was someone who could direct him in the right way. He was not trying to trick Jesus, like so many other questioners. He truly wanted to know the way to everlasting life. He was not, however, willing to accept Jesus' answer.

MATTHEW 19:17

¹⁷ “Why do you ask me about what is good?” he said to him. “There is only one who is good. If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.”

VERSE 17

Jesus' initial response followed a pattern typical in His interaction with other inquirers. Instead of a direct statement, He used a question to engage the listener in reevaluating basic assumptions. In this case, Jesus asked why the man asked Him this question. The young man did not understand the true nature of goodness. He believed people and their works could be good.

Jesus corrected this presumption by asserting that **good** can only apply truly to God. Only God is good, not only in a moral sense, but in His essential nature. His holiness and righteousness define goodness. To be good belongs to God alone. Therefore, anything that can be called good must come from God.

Having established the nature of goodness, Jesus allowed the man to consider the path most Jews accepted. Jesus was not saying the man could **keep the commandments** and, by doing so, achieve eternal life. When we consider the commandments, we are forced to recognize we cannot and do not keep all of them all of the time. The law forces us to recognize our shortcomings and sin (Rom. 3:19).

MATTHEW 19:18

¹⁸ “Which ones?” he asked him. Jesus answered: Do not murder; do not commit adultery; do not steal; do not bear false witness;

VERSE 18

Like many of us, the young man thought some commandments were more important than others. When he asked Jesus **which ones**, he admitted his personal failure in following all of them. The tone of the question does not suggest anything other than an eager inquiry. He genuinely wanted Jesus to lay out specific steps he could follow to gain eternal life.

Jesus did not offer a complete list of commandments but gave examples of God's commands. The first five actions match the second part of what we call the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:12-17). Each command relates to human relationships. All of them reflect important aspects of how people should treat one another. Certainly, no one could expect to have a right relationship with God while committing **murder** or **adultery**. The word translated *murder* is different from the typical term for killing. Jesus also used this word when speaking about the murder of Abel in Matthew 23:35. In addition, people cannot **steal** or **bear false witness** without breaking faith with God and one's fellow human beings. Lying is certainly against God's instructions, but this command involves giving false testimony regarding another person (Ex. 20:16).

MATTHEW 19:19

¹⁹ honor your father and your mother; and love your neighbor as yourself.

VERSE 19

The first commandments Jesus mentioned are couched in negative terms, indicating what one should not do. In a positive statement, Jesus affirmed that each person should **honor** one's **father** and **mother**. Filial duty goes beyond merely obeying one's parents, although such is also God's command (Eph. 6:1). To honor means to show respect. It is the first commandment that contained a promise (Ex. 20:12; Eph. 6:2).

The sum of this part of the law can be expressed in the commandment to **love your neighbor as yourself**. Later, Jesus incorporated this statement into His response to a Pharisee who wanted to know the greatest commandment (Matt. 22:37-40). If we love our neighbors as ourselves, we will not sin against them by committing murder, adultery, or any other wrongdoing. We also will go further and do what is best and right for one another.

VERSE 20

The young man must have felt vindicated at this point. He had not murdered, stolen, or lied. He was kind to his parents. He claimed to have **kept all these**. The inclusiveness of his assertion indicates he thought he had achieved compliance with everything necessary according to the law of Moses. Yet the seeker recognized he was missing something.

He asked, **What do I still lack?** This could have been a proud retort. But the fact that Jesus looked on the young man with compassion and affection suggests the tone of the nobleman's question was genuine. He sincerely wanted to know what else he should do. He had not yet arrived at the understanding that he could not keep all of God's law and therefore was a transgressor who was unworthy in his own merit. The Old Testament law points to our inability to gain salvation by our own worth.

What expectations do most people have regarding eternal life? Why do some people feel entitled to God's favor?

IMPOSSIBLE TO KEEP (MATT. 19:21-22)

VERSE 21

In the previous section, Jesus listed commandments associated with the second half of the Ten Commandments. They involved human relationships. Since the young inquirer claimed to have met that standard, Jesus reminded him of the greater matters which related to God Himself. Jesus did not simply enumerate the first four commandments but instead told the young nobleman to take sacrificial action based on a right relationship with God.

Jesus qualified His directions with the premise that the man desired **to be perfect**. This term implies completion as opposed to perfection. In order to achieve eternal life through works, one must completely conform to God's standard. To fail at one point is to transgress the law altogether. Scripture reminds us that "whoever keeps the entire law, and yet stumbles at one point, is guilty of breaking it all" (Jas. 2:10).

Jesus' instruction to **sell his belongings and give** the proceeds **to the poor** related to the first commandment—not serving any other gods. Jesus knew this man's heart. The young nobleman needed to remove everything that had become an idol in his life. Instead of treasure on earth, he needed treasure in heaven. Jesus had addressed this issue in His Sermon on

MATTHEW 19:20

²⁰ "I have kept all these," the young man told him. "What do I still lack?"

MATTHEW 19:21

²¹ "If you want to be perfect," Jesus said to him, "go, sell your belongings and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

the Mount (Matt. 6:19-24). He knew that the man was trying to serve two masters and must now choose whom he would follow.

The ultimate issue regarding eternal life, however, is not merely obeying the commandments or altruistically helping the poor. Each person must decide what to do with Jesus. Jesus knew the only way this young man could devote himself completely to being a disciple was to let go of his former life, including its wealth and self-dependence.

Jesus invited the man: **come, follow me**. His was an invitation to self-denial so that he might gain what the self cannot achieve—that which only Jesus can give—eternal life. He could receive what he most earnestly desired only by surrendering his proud path to righteousness in favor of following Christ. Discipleship involves forsaking everything else in commitment to Jesus. Its rewards in this life and in eternal life are greater than anything this world could ever offer.

MATTHEW 19:22

²² When the young man heard that, he went away grieving, because he had many possessions.

VERSE 22

Jesus' statement was not a suggestion; it was a command. Christ never leaves room for negotiation. Only one option is possible—total surrender. Perhaps this young man's real problem lay in the issue of trust. To give up his possessions and follow Jesus meant leaving the security of wealth. The cost was too great. He was not willing to pay, so **he went away**.

Matthew describes the man's emotional state as **grieving**. He had come to Jesus with great expectations. He already had achieved much as far as the world is concerned. He had wealth. He was ethical and religious. Yet what he wanted most, eternal life, lay out of his grasp because he was not willing to sell everything and follow Jesus. What people depend on for security reveals what they trust for salvation. This man trusted himself and his wealth rather than having faith in Jesus.

(In PSG, p. 37) **What things do people hold on to that keep them from fully trusting Christ? Why do you think those things are so hard to let go?**

MATTHEW 19:23

²³ Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.

VERSE 23

Jesus turned His attention to the **disciples**. They needed to understand the real issues at stake. He began by addressing the matter of money. He remarked how difficult it was for a rich person to enter God's kingdom.

The theme of the **kingdom of heaven** runs throughout Matthew's Gospel. Sometimes we think of God's realm as merely being heaven above or Christ's earthly reign to come. However, the concept of God's kingdom refers to His sovereignty in all areas of life, both now and in the future. Only when we surrender control over our lives and accept Christ's rule do we become part of His heavenly kingdom.

The young man wanted everlasting life. He did not understand that eternal life is merely one benefit of being a citizen of God's kingdom. The problem with the rich nobleman was not his wealth. Riches are not inherently evil. The love of money is the issue (1 Tim. 6:10). The security of his wealth was too great for him to surrender in favor of making Jesus his Lord.

VERSE 24

Jesus employed one of His favorite teaching techniques in the proverb of the **camel** and the **needle**. Some people have claimed the "needle's eye" is actually a short doorway in the wall at Jerusalem that would require a camel to kneel in order to enter. This story is spurious. The wall had no such gate. Jesus was using hyperbole to highlight the difficulty a rich man faced with accepting the kingdom (or reign) of God.

Some readers reach the conclusion from Jesus' statement about the camel that rich people cannot be saved. Such was not Jesus' intention. He was highlighting the difficulty of humble surrender and faith for people who have the means for self-sufficiency.

VERSE 25

The disciples understood exactly what Jesus was saying. They **were utterly astonished**. This phrase forcefully portrays the disciples' response as shocked disbelief. They struggled to reconcile Jesus' message of grace with this strong statement regarding people of wealth. Their question expressed their incredulity. Given such a statement, **who can be saved?**

Instead of applying Jesus' limitation to persons who were self-sufficient, the disciples wondered aloud if anyone at all might be saved. They overlooked the key issue Jesus had introduced to the nobleman—that eternal life involved trusting Jesus and following Him to the exclusion of anything else.

VERSE 26

The phrase **Jesus looked at them** meant more than the mere fact that Jesus spoke to the men while maintaining eye contact. Jesus perceived their hearts. He understood them and commanded their attention as He replied. He corroborated their understanding that salvation was **impossible** if left up to human beings. Jesus quickly added that all things are **possible** for God. What people cannot do in their own abilities, God can do in His grace.

The rich young ruler had only to surrender in faith and follow Jesus to have God perform a work of grace in his life. All he had to do was trust Jesus and yield himself to Christ's hands. Jesus offers salvation as a gift that can only be received by faith. We can never earn it; we may only receive it by God's grace through Christ.

(In PSG, p. 39) **How do Jesus' words serve as a warning for us today? How do His words give us hope today?**

MATTHEW 19:24

²⁴ Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."

MATTHEW 19:25

²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were utterly astonished and asked, "Then who can be saved?"

MATTHEW 19:26

²⁶ Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

ILLUSTRATE: Greet the group as they arrive; direct attention to a suitcase that you have displayed. Guide them to discuss what items they generally pack to prepare for a trip. Invite them to share experiences when they, after leaving home, became concerned they may have forgotten to pack something important. Ask: *How did you respond to this concern while traveling? After arriving? What practices do you follow to make sure everything needed for a trip gets packed?*

TRANSITION: *Matthew 19 tells of a man who was seeking eternal life and trying to fulfill all the requirements, but he was concerned he might be leaving something out. He, like many people today, thought eternal life had to be earned. He turned to Jesus for help; Jesus demonstrated that He alone offers eternal life to those who follow Him.*

REVIEW: Call attention to these items on a focal wall: **Pack Item 2** (*Outline of Matthew*) and **Pack Item 3** (*Poster: Spring 2017*). Distribute copies of **Pack Item 4** (*Time Line: Matthew*). Use these to give a brief description of the context of today's study with regard to the time and the location in the larger series of events recorded in Matthew.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

POINT OUT: *As Jesus and the disciples were traveling to Jerusalem, large crowds followed. Jesus entertained questions from the crowd.*

READ: As a volunteer reads Matthew 19:16-20, instruct the group to identify the two questions asked by the young man.

INSTRUCT: Guide the group to circle the word "good" in verse 16 in their Bible or PSG. Ask: *To what was the man referring as good? What do we as Christians know about acts of goodness with regard to salvation? What did Jesus try to teach the man about goodness in verse 17?*

EXPLAIN: *This statement showed that our good acts could never be sufficient to buy salvation. Goodness was actually a person, Jesus Christ; it is only through Him that we can gain salvation.*

ASK: *Since the man seemingly did not comprehend this lesson, how did Jesus attempt to demonstrate it? (For example, perhaps by hearing the commandments, the man would see his goodness was imperfect and insufficient.)*

LIST: Ask a volunteer to read Old Testament passages from which these commandments are derived: Exodus 20:3-4,12-17. As the person reads, list the commandments on the board. Instruct the group to then read Matthew 19:18-20, noting the commandments omitted.

DISCUSS: *Which two commandments listed on the board did Jesus not name? Why do you think He didn't name these?*

EMPHASIZE: *Jesus was demonstrating the insufficiency of being good by demonstrating the man's imperfection. Obviously, the man didn't get it; he thought, based on these commands, that he was good enough. It then became necessary for Jesus to turn to the "no other gods before me" commandment in order to make the point.*

ASK: *How do people today express the same attitude and beliefs as the young man? How can trying to keep the commandments lead to insecurity? (PSG, p. 35)*

READ: As a volunteer reads Matthew 19:21-22, guide the group to highlight the word “perfect.” Explain this word meant *complete*.

EMPHASIZE: *Jesus demonstrated the man’s shortcomings; he lacked a willingness to give up his earthly possessions.*

ASK: *Based on Jesus’ instructions and the young man’s reaction, what “idol” was he placing before God? How could he have demonstrated he was willing to give up the idol? Would the eternal life he received have been based literally upon this action? Explain.*

DISCUSS: *What things do people hold on to that keep them from fully trusting Christ? Why do you think those things are so hard to let go? (PSG, p. 37)*

EMPHASIZE: Call for the group to determine and share the young man’s reaction to his own failure to comply with Jesus’ instructions, as well as Jesus’ reaction.

READ: Direct someone to read Matthew 19:23-26. Point out that Jesus and the young man were both grieved. Jesus used this as a teachable moment to share with others.

DISCUSS: *What did Jesus teach based on this incident? What do you suppose the disciples thought when they heard it was harder for a camel to go through a needle’s eye than for a rich man to be saved? Does this mean money is inherently evil? Why or why not? Why do you think it might be hard for someone who feels he or she has everything needed to be saved?*

ASK: *How do Jesus’ words serve as a warning for us today? How do His words give us hope today? (PSG, p. 39)*

EXPLAIN: Read Luke 18:27 to emphasize that even things that seem impossible to us are possible with God.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

READ: Direct the group to In My Context in the PSG (p. 40). Read the three bullet points.

DISCUSS: Share with the group how to tell people who have placed their security in something other than Him about the good news of Christ. Ask: *How could you use the passage studied today to share with a person who seems to have everything?* Then lead in a discussion of the second question set under In My Context in the PSG (p. 40): *Discuss with your Bible study group how to share the good news of Christ with people who have placed their security in something other than Him.*

REFLECT: Ask group members to close by praying silently that God would reveal the things they have trusted for their security other than Christ. *What steps do you need to take to express full dependence upon Him?*



PRACTICE

- Examine your heart and identify one thing that is most tempting for you to put before Christ. Pray God would give you strength to keep it in proper perspective or to remove it from your life.
- Use your group time prayer list to guide your personal prayer time. Pray for the specific needs of each group member. Ask God to help you lead by being a servant and helping to meet their needs as opportunities arise.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

Relay this story: *A mother asked her 11-year-old daughter to make a lime pie for the family dinner, while she was cooking the main meal. There was no written recipe, so the mother would tell the daughter step-by-step how to make it. She would assign a step and then go about her cooking until the daughter indicated she was ready for the next step. And so it went until the daughter had finished. Both mother and daughter were proud of the beautiful masterpiece. The mom decided to try a small taste before serving the meal. She immediately displayed a horrified expression and spit out the bite. Something very important had been left out—the sugar. The pie looked great but was of no use for the purpose for which it was designed. By definition, a dessert must have sugar!*

Explain that today's study is about a young man who attempts to attain eternal life by adding all the right ingredients (works) to his life, but Jesus taught him that, though he seemed to be a very good person, his attempts were futile. He was missing the most important ingredient; he wasn't placing his faith in Jesus for salvation.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement the study of Matthew 19:21-22, direct the group to the Bible Skill in the PSG (p. 37): *Compare James 2:10-11; Galatians 3:10-11; and Hebrews 10:1 with Matthew 19:23-26. How do these passages relate to each other? What similar truths do you see in each passage? How does each passage help you understand the others listed? Record a summary of the main truth or truths discovered in all four passages.*
- To enhance the study of Matthew 19:23-26, discuss that by refusing Jesus' instruction, the young man not only broke the commandment about idolatry, but he also broke the two greatest commandments (Matt. 22:36-39).

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Allow time for the group to quietly reflect on the third question set under In My Context in the PSG (p. 40): *Reflect on God's gracious gift of salvation through faith in Jesus alone. Thank Him for His gift and the assurance that comes with it. Record your prayer and your thoughts.*

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Read the words or lead the group in singing "In Christ Alone (My Hope Is Found)," by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend. These words answer the title of today's study, written in question form: "What Is Required?"

MORE THAN A PROPHET?

Jesus fulfilled the prophecies associated with Israel's long-awaited King.

MATTHEW 21:1-11

MEMORY VERSE: MATTHEW 21:9

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Matthew 21:1-17, First Thoughts (p. 44), and Understand the Context (pp. 44-45). Note the anticipation of the crowd as they awaited Jesus' arrival.
- **STUDY** Matthew 21:1-11, using Explore the Text (pp. 45-49). Read the Old Testament passages that were fulfilled by these events: Psalm 118:25-26; Isaiah 62:11; and Zechariah 9:9. Refer to a Bible dictionary to gain understanding of words and phrases.
- **PLAN** the group time using the ideas under Lead Group Bible Study on pages 50-51, More Ideas on page 52, *QuickSource*, and ideas online at *MinistryGrid.com/ExploreTheBible*. Add variety to the plans for your group by using at least one suggestion from More Ideas on page 52.
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Group Ministry blog (*LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry*).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; A whiteboard or large sheet of paper and a marker; and A news story about a time when a political leader made an appearance at an event. Prepare to display: **PACK ITEM 1** (*Map: New Testament Jerusalem*); **PACK ITEM 2** (*Outline of Matthew*); **PACK ITEM 3** (*Poster: Spring 2017*); and **PACK ITEM 8** (*Poster: Time Line of Jesus' Last Week*).



KEY DOCTRINE

God

To God we owe the highest love, reverence, and obedience.

BIBLE SKILL

Examine how a specific writer uses a word or phrase.

Matthew used the term "Son of David" more than any other Gospel writer. Review the different places the title is used by Matthew: 1:1,20; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30-31; and 21:9,15. What significance does this title play in each passage? What does Matthew's use of the term reveal about his understanding of who Jesus is? Read Matthew 22:41-46. How did Jesus use the scribes' teaching about the Messiah's being the Son of David to challenge them about His own identity?

FIRST THOUGHTS

Word had gotten out that the nation's president would make an appearance at the festival. The crowd filled the large stadium. Thousands of people filled the stands. Hundreds more paraded on the field in colorful costumes.

When the president came into the arena, riding in an open convertible limousine, the music reached a crescendo as the people on the field danced in unison. Everyone in the stadium rose when the president stood and did not sit until the president sat. The celebration continued for hours, but no one left until well after the president departed the stadium.

(In PSG, p. 42) **What is the appeal of seeing a world leader in person? What would your community do to prepare for a visit by a world or national leader?**

Matthew described what happened to a huge crowd of people as they anticipated the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah. The Passover festival brought them to Jerusalem, and the anticipation of the long-awaited Messiah stirred their excitement. They directed their enthusiasm toward Jesus as He made His entry into Jerusalem. Bursting into joyful celebration, they participated in a gigantic parade that centered on Him. Although they rejoiced at His presence, they still did not comprehend that He was the King for whom Israel had been waiting for centuries.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

MATTHEW 21:1-17

Jesus had visited Jerusalem many times before without fanfare. Sometimes He came in quietly, without alerting even His immediate family (John 7:1-10). On one occasion, Jesus walked into the northeastern gate and paused in anonymity at the pool of Bethesda long enough to heal a single man (John 5:1-9). This time was different. Although Jesus did not make a public announcement of His arrival, large crowds gathered to greet Him. The masses swelled as word spread that the prophet from Galilee was approaching.

Even in their praise, the people failed to understand Jesus' nature or His purpose. They thought he was a great prophet but did not recognize Him as the Son of God. They were enamored with His miracles, grateful for His healing, and amazed by His teaching, but none of them were prepared for what would happen over the coming week. Their cheers would degenerate into jeers as He not only upended the moneychangers' tables in the temple but turned their world upside down through the cross.

John recorded an early visit by Jesus in which He cleansed the temple near the beginning of His ministry (John 2:13-17). Assuming the account

by Matthew and the other Synoptic Gospel writers is a different event, the worldly pollution on the temple grounds had returned in the intervening years. Many celebrities would have merely enjoyed the crowd's adulation, but Jesus was more concerned with preparing the place of holy sacrifice for its ultimate offering—Himself.

While children presented perfect praise as they delighted in Jesus' presence, the Jewish leaders responded with indignation. They had been challenged not only by Jesus' rebuke over their prostituting the temple grounds for profit but also by His popularity with the people. These religious charlatans scoffed at Jesus' authenticity and conspired to remove Him one way or another. His open rebuke of them and their authority was the last straw, yet they could neither refute His miraculous power nor withstand a popularity fanned by His healing of the sick. As Jesus departed to spend the night in Bethany, probably with his friend Lazarus, the Jewish leaders began their final conspiracy against Him.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Jesus' Enacted Parables" and "Nazareth in the First Century" in the Spring 2017 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE KING'S PREROGATIVE (MATT. 21:1-5)

VERSE 1

On His way to Jerusalem, Jesus had set His face with determination as He traveled toward the holy city one last time (Luke 9:51). He knew the cross lay before Him. His time was at hand, and nothing would deter Him from fulfilling His singular purpose. Coming from Jericho, Jesus approached Jerusalem from the northeast, likely traveling between the Mount of Olives and the city.

The **Mount of Olives** lay directly east of Jerusalem. Consider its historic significance. Here, Ezekiel saw the glory of God (Ezek. 11:23), and David grieved over the betrayal of Absalom (2 Sam. 15:30). As Jesus approached Jerusalem from the mount, He wept over the city (Luke 19:41). Jesus often resorted to this hillside for prayer (Luke 21:37). Not long after this day, He would sit on the mount and answer the disciples' questions about the events surrounding His second coming (Matt. 24:3). As He prayed in the garden of Gethsemane on this mountain, He would be betrayed and arrested (Matt. 26:36-46). From this mountain, Jesus would ascend into heaven (Acts 1:11-12), and there He will return in power and glory (Zech. 14:4).

Several small towns and villages were scattered around Israel's capital, including Bethphage and Bethany, which lay further southeast from Jerusalem. Bethphage is a compound word referring to a house of unripened figs. On the next day, Jesus would return to Jerusalem from Bethany. He likely passed near Bethphage again as He encountered the barren fig tree (Matt. 21:18-20).

Jesus paused at this point and **sent two disciples** on a special errand. Matthew does not tell us their identities. It might be interesting if Jesus chose the sons of Zebedee to perform this task since their mother had asked Jesus to give them places of prominence in His kingdom (Matt. 20:20-28). Retrieving a donkey might be the kind of object lesson Jesus would use to teach them about servanthood.

MATTHEW 21:1

¹ When they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage at the Mount of Olives, Jesus then sent two disciples,

MATTHEW 21:2

² telling them, “Go into the village ahead of you. At once you will find a donkey tied there with her foal. Untie them and bring them to me.”

MATTHEW 21:3

³ If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them at once.”

MATTHEW 21:4-5

⁴ This took place so that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled: ⁵ Tell Daughter Zion, “See, your King is coming to you, gentle, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

VERSE 2

The village to which the disciples were sent is not specified but likely would be Bethphage, since it is mentioned in this context (v. 1). Some writers think Jesus’ knowledge of the *donkey* and its *foal* was due to His divine omniscience. Others believe He had previously arranged for the loan of the animals. His directions were very specific so that the disciples could not mistakenly appropriate the wrong beasts. He would not have known the location of this particular pair of animals on this specific day unless He possessed the kind of supernatural insight belonging to God the Son.

The donkey and its colt were not penned in a corral but were secured with halters or ropes. Do you wonder what the two disciples thought when Jesus told them to *untie them and bring them* to Him? These men probably did not know the animals’ owner. Yet they did not balk at carrying out Jesus’ instructions. Such was the commanding nature of their King.

VERSE 3

Jesus was sensitive to the disciples’ unspoken thoughts about how they would answer someone who challenged them. He simply told them to say *the Lord needs them*. The phrase likely indicates the animals’ owner not only knew Jesus but also was committed to Him. The unknown benefactor must have encountered Jesus during one of His previous visits to this town. In any case, this was someone who accepted Jesus as Lord.

Notice, too, the connotation of the word *Lord*. Jesus did not employ the term *rabbi*, which was commonly used to describe Him. Nor was Jesus identified as a prophet, which is how the crowds would greet Him in Jerusalem. *Lord* implies authority. The owner of the donkey and colt would have considered himself only a steward of whatever he had.

The fact that Jesus needed something would be sufficient. The owner would immediately release the animals for his Lord’s use. Anyone who counts Jesus as Lord and King does not hold anything back. Everything, even life itself, belongs to Christ.

VERSES 4-5

Nothing in Jesus’ life happened by chance. Everything was purposeful and deliberate. Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on a donkey was part of the Heavenly Father’s deliberate plan. Other kings entered capital cities in a variety of ways, depending on whether they came in peace or at war. Jesus’ approach fulfilled the words of a prophet regarding the King of Zion. The prophet mentioned in this passage was Zechariah, who spoke 550 years earlier of the Messiah (see Zech. 9:9). The specific details of his prophecy include several important aspects of God’s intention toward His people.

First, note the tenderness with which God loved His people. God saw Jerusalem not merely as the capital city of the nation, but as *Daughter Zion*. Zion was one of the hills once belonging to the Jebusites but taken by King David, who made the city of Jerusalem his capital (2 Sam. 5:7). Thus, Jerusalem, or Zion, was called the city of David (1 Kings 8:1). Zion also came to denote the people of Israel in general. In 2 Kings 19:21, God refers to His people as “Virgin Daughter Zion” and “Daughter Jerusalem.”

Second, consider the nature of Zion's King. The Messiah would not charge into the city mounted on a powerful steed but on **the foal of a donkey**. The imagery emphasized that, unlike the warlike conquerors who had forced their way into Jerusalem, Jesus was gentle. He continues to invite people to come and learn His ways, for He is gentle and humble of heart (Matt. 11:29). The term translated **gentle** implies meekness. Neither concept suggests a hint of weakness, for no one could endure what Jesus did without strength of body and character. Rather, Jesus was strong enough to be gentle and courageous enough to be meek.

Some commentators have struggled to explain how Jesus could be mounted on both the donkey and the colt. A few believe He rode the two animals alternatively. Others think Jesus may have ridden one followed closely by the other. In this fashion, the word translated **and** could also mean "accompanied by." In this case, while Jesus had the disciples bring the donkey and its colt, He rode only the colt. This interpretation is consistent with the witness of the other Gospel writers.

Neither explanation is necessary to understand the primary point: the King of Israel was coming to His city. This King offered genuine deliverance, but in an unprecedented way—by dying for His people.

How does Jesus' gentle entrance into Jerusalem correspond to His entry into the lives of people who receive Him as Savior and Lord?

THE KING'S CELEBRATION (MATT. 21:6-9)

VERSES 6-7

Obedience is never optional when responding to the instructions of a king. In America, we are accustomed to having part in decisions that affect us. However, the disciples viewed Jesus as their King. They fulfilled their role by doing exactly as Jesus directed them.

If these two men saw themselves merely as followers of an itinerant rabbi, they likely would have questions or concerns. After all, taking someone else's property could jeopardize their liberty. Yet they proved themselves to be faithful followers of their king.

Even so, if we are to be proper disciples of King Jesus, we must yield our personal rights and submit in loving obedience to His direction. In His omniscience and love, He knows and wants what is good and best for us. We can trust Him, and thus we can obey Him wholeheartedly.

Matthew does not mention the length of time involved in the task. He simply reports the two disciples **brought the donkey and its foal**. They did not concern themselves with why Jesus wanted both animals. They might have reasoned that Jesus only needed the larger one, but they simply carried out His directions. Partial obedience is total disobedience. They did as He commanded. If they had followed human reasoning and brought

MATTHEW 21:6-7

⁶ The disciples went and did just as Jesus directed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and its foal; then they laid their clothes on them, and he sat on them.

only one of the animals, they would have disobeyed Jesus' orders and failed at the task.

While the donkey and the colt likely had halters, neither bore a saddle. The disciples had no appropriate saddle or blanket, so they used **their clothes**. This term referred to their outer cloaks. Notice they laid the garments on both animals, allowing for the idea that Jesus rode both the donkey and the colt along the way. However, Mark and Luke assert that Jesus rode a colt which had never been ridden (Mark 11:2; Luke 19:30). Regardless, the primary issue was the King was coming!

MATTHEW 21:8-9

⁸ A very large crowd spread their clothes on the road; others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them on the road.

⁹ Then the crowds who went ahead of him and those who followed shouted: Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!

VERSES 8-9

Jesus and the disciples likely entered the city through the entrance on the eastern wall of Jerusalem, just north of the temple complex. This path would not only be the most direct coming from Bethany, Bethphage, and the Mount of Olives, it would have brought Jesus close to His destination—the temple.

In this vicinity, many people would be gathering on their way to Jerusalem for the Passover. On hearing Jesus was coming, it was natural for **a very large crowd** to assemble. After all, Jesus' fame preceded Him. Unlike in previous visits to the city, the people celebrated His arrival by spreading their outer robes on the road to the city. Others used **branches** cut from trees along the way. Luke's Gospel suggests the nucleus of the crowd was the larger group of disciples (Luke 19:37). Jesus' followers included not only the Twelve, but also scores of others who had believed in Him. As they rejoiced over His arrival, crowds of other people joined in the festivity.

The people responded by referencing Psalm 118:25-26. The word **hosanna** was a cry of exaltation. It literally was a plea for salvation but could have morphed into praise for a savior. However, these people did not realize what they needed salvation from—not from the Romans, but from their sin—nor did they understand the kind of Savior Jesus intended to be.

The crowd affirmed Jesus as **the Son of David** but failed to recognize Him as the sacrificial Son of Abraham. They were seeking a political and military king, not a Suffering Savior. The phrase *Son of David* was a messianic reference, and the people recognized Jesus as **blessed**. Christological references appear throughout Matthew's account as he emphasized those aspects of his Gospel that pointed to Jesus' true nature as the Messiah.

Yet, while the crowd saw Jesus as coming **in the name of the Lord**, they did not acknowledge Him as Lord. Like so many people today, they were willing to accept Jesus as the representative of God, or even as the Son of God, but not as God the Son.

The people cheered now, but many would jeer later. The fickleness of the mob characterized the love/hate attitude of the citizenry of Jerusalem toward the Son of Man. Their celebration of His coming was mixed with misunderstanding of His true identity.

They cried **hosanna in the highest heaven**. The word *heaven* is implied, not stated, in the original text. The word translated *highest* refers to the Supreme One and, thus, to heaven. Yet the people did not realize Christ had come from heaven to earth in order to provide the way for believers to go to heaven through Him.

If you had been in that crowd on this occasion, how would you have celebrated Jesus' arrival? How can we announce His coming among our friends and family today?

THE PEOPLE'S CONFUSION (MATT. 21:10-11)

VERSE 10

On coming into *Jerusalem*, Jesus was greeted with mixed reactions. News of His arrival spread throughout the whole city. The capital of Israel was a large place with thousands of residents. The point of Matthew's statement about *the whole city* did not mean that every single person heard about Jesus' arrival but that news spread throughout every quarter of Jerusalem.

The entrance of Jesus and the accompanying clamor dramatically affected everyone. The populace questioned who it was that could make such an impact. They were accustomed to having political parades create this kind of excitement, but no religious figure had caused such a stir. They were naturally curious about the identity of the person at the head of the procession.

VERSE 11

Whenever news travels from one person to another in a random fashion, it often becomes warped in transmission. Unlike Jesus' disciples who acclaimed Him as the Son of David, the crowds merely repeated what they could understand. Most would not have accepted Jesus as the blessed One, the Messiah, or even as the Son of David. They only saw Him as *the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee*. Each word in this phrase distanced Jesus from His true identity. To call Him a *prophet* merely acknowledged His ability to speak for God in an unusually powerful way. Referencing Him as being *from Nazareth in Galilee* further removed Him from prominence, since the popular proverb was that nothing really good came from Nazareth (John 1:46).

Mass opinion will rarely capture the true nature of Christ. Many people will accept Him as a prophet, teacher, or even miracle worker, but they resist acknowledging Jesus as Messiah. Jesus deserves acclaim, but true praise must embrace who He really is—the Lord.

How can you respond to people who do not understand Jesus' true identity as God the Son? In what ways can people's confusion about Jesus impact their response to Him as Savior?

MATTHEW 21:10

¹⁰ When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in an uproar, saying, "Who is this?"

MATTHEW 21:11

¹¹ The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

INTRODUCE: Tell the story from First Thoughts (p. 44; PSG, pp. 42-43) about a visit from a president. Ask: *What is the appeal of seeing a world leader in person?*

CONNECT: *Today's Scripture tells of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem during the Passover festival and the joyful response of the crowd. This event marks the beginning of Jesus' final week here on earth. Emphasize its significance as you point it out on **Pack Item 8** (Poster: Time Line of Jesus' Last Week). Also, point out the context of today's events using **Pack Item 2** (Outline of Matthew) and **Pack Item 3** (Poster: Spring 2017).*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Invite the group to listen as a volunteer reads Matthew 21:1-5 and to highlight in the PSG (p. 44) the village and location where Jesus and His disciples stopped to prepare for their entry into Jerusalem.

CLARIFY: *Bethphage was located on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. Locate the Mount of Olives and its relation to Jerusalem on **Pack Item 1** (Map: New Testament Jerusalem) and in the PSG, page 147.*

EXPLAIN: *The Mount of Olives was significant because it affirmed Jesus' fulfillment of the prophecy about the coming Messiah in Zechariah 14:4. Read this verse.*

ASK: *What specific instructions did Jesus give to two disciples in Matthew 21:2? What did Jesus' knowledge about the animals reveal about Him? What were the disciples to say if someone inquired about their actions?*

WRITE: On the whiteboard, write "Lord" in large letters. Ask: *What is the literal meaning of "Lord"? Explain that it means "Master." Ask: To whom does "the Lord" refer in Christian vernacular? Point out that the statement would still be accurate whichever definition the residents understood the word to mean.*

EMPHASIZE: *Jesus again goes on to teach the disciples that all of these events were done in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy concerning the Messiah. Point out these Old Testament references that you have written on the board: Isaiah 62:11 and Zechariah 9:9. Direct volunteers to read them aloud.*

ASK: *What assurances about God's plan can be drawn from the precise details about the Messiah found in Isaiah 62:11 and Zechariah 9:9? (PSG, p. 45)*

HIGHLIGHT: Instruct the group to circle "Daughter Zion" in verse 5 of the PSG (p. 44). Then explain: *Zion sometimes referred to Jerusalem, so Daughter Zion provided a word picture to describe the people of Jerusalem. Next, have them highlight the word "King."*

ASK: *What do you suppose people in Jesus' day thought of when they heard of a king? How did this prophecy indicate that Jesus was a very different kind of king than any they had experienced?*

READ: Read Matthew 21:6-8, directing the group to note how the disciples treated Jesus.

EXPLAIN: *The disciples followed Jesus' directions by bringing the donkey and colt. Then verse 7 tells us they laid their robes on them before Jesus mounted. Verse 8 tells us that the crowd removed their own robes and spread them on the road; they spread branches on the road and began to shout.*

ASK: *What was the meaning of all this fanfare? Explain that these actions resembled the response of God's people in the Old Testament when they found themselves in the presence of a king. Invite the group to listen as you read 2 Kings 9:13 and compare the response to that of the Israelites to Jehu when he became king.*

READ: Instruct a volunteer to read Matthew 21:9, pointing out that this is the memory verse for this week. Call attention to the words the crowds shouted in verse 9.

ASK: *What is the meaning of the word "Hosanna"? (Ironically, it literally means "God save us.") What did the name "Son of David" indicate? (Possibly they thought He would become an earthly king who would save His people through political and military success.) What do we understand about Jesus' kingship that those people did not?*

DISCUSS: *How do people today celebrate the presence of Christ in their lives? In their churches? How do the demonstrations today compare to the reception Jesus received as He entered Jerusalem? (PSG, p. 48)*

READ: Direct the group to listen as a volunteer reads aloud Matthew 21:10-11 to indicate the two responses that people gave concerning the excitement they were experiencing.

ASK: *What do you suppose the people felt and experienced as the city shook? With all the excitement and fanfare, why would the people then be asking, "Who is this?" What word in verse 11 tells us that their understanding of Jesus was very limited?*

EXPLAIN: *Apparently the crowd was excited about having a potential king in their midst. However, by asking "Who is this?" and by calling Jesus a prophet, they indicated they had no idea of the true majesty of Jesus or the gravity of this event and the ones to follow. They mentioned only that He came from Nazareth; apparently they didn't realize he was born in Bethlehem to a virgin according to prophecy.*

DISCUSS: *In what ways do people in our time express a misunderstanding about Jesus as the Messiah, the long-awaited King? (PSG, p. 49)*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

DIRECT: Instruct the group to silently read the summary statements under In My Context in the PSG (p. 50). Lead them to choose the one that has the most relevance to them and to share which they chose and why.

CHALLENGE: Read the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 50): *What specific directive has Jesus given you to fulfill? What actions are you taking to complete the assigned task?* Challenge the group to reflect on these questions and make a commitment to better complete the assigned task.

PRAY: Close in prayer that the group will show through Jesus' work in their lives that He is the long-awaited Messiah.



PRACTICE

- Visit someone who is a prospective member of your group. Tell them about your group, answer any questions they might have, and invite them warmly to attend. Also, let them know of other small group options and encourage them to become a part of a group.
- Pray for anyone in your group who might not totally grasp the majesty and Lordship of Jesus. Look for opportunities to help them better understand.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

Search the Internet for a news story about a time when a political leader made an appearance at an event. Tell the story, emphasizing the response of the crowd. Point out that some in the crowd might not have approved of this person's leadership or political agenda, yet they were thrilled by the opportunity to be in the presence of a leader of this magnitude. Explain that today's study focuses on Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and the overwhelming response of the crowd, despite the fact that most did not totally understand who Jesus was or the ramifications of this earth-shaking event.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- Supplement discussion of Matthew 21:9 by reading Psalm 118:25 and pointing out the continued fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.
- Direct attention to the Bible Skill in the PSG (p. 47), and lead the group to complete the activity: *Matthew used the term "Son of David" more than any other Gospel writer. Review the different places the title is used by Matthew: 1:1,20; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30-31; and 21:9,15. What significance does this title play in each passage? What does Matthew's use of the term reveal about his understanding of who Jesus is? Read Matthew 22:41-46. How did Jesus use the scribes' teaching about the Messiah's being the Son of David to challenge them about His own identity?*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Encourage the group to think about the time when they first accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior. Ask: *With what type of fanfare did you welcome Him into your heart? Are you still excited about being a part of His kingdom, or do the cares of the world sometimes override the joy?* Challenge the group to experience that joy afresh and anew as they reflect on the message of this study.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Use the lyrics (and possibly the music) to "Crown Him King of Kings," by Sharon Damazio, to celebrate the everlasting reign of King Jesus.

IF I REJECT JESUS?

Jesus is central in God's plan of redemption.

MATTHEW 21:33-45

MEMORY VERSE: MATTHEW 21:42

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Matthew 21:18-46, First Thoughts (p. 54), and Understand the Context (pp. 54-55). Also read the supporting passages: Psalms 80:6-16; 118:22-23; and Isaiah 5:1-7.
- **STUDY** Matthew 21:33-45, using Explore the Text (pp. 55-59). Pay attention to how clearly the parable demonstrates the rejection of Jesus.
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 60-61) and More Ideas (p. 62), ideas in *QuickSource*, and ideas online at *Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible*. Look for ways to incorporate the Key Doctrine (The Kingdom) into the session (PSG, p. 53).
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid (*MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible*).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; whiteboard or large sheet of paper and markers; **PACK ITEM 2** (*Outline of Matthew*). For More Ideas (p. 62), locate: A recent news story about people who ignored a warning of an imminent natural disaster; and Enough gospel tracts for each person in the group. Prepare to display the following: **PACK ITEM 3** (*Poster: Spring 2017*); **PACK ITEM 7** (*Chart: The Opponents of Jesus*); **PACK ITEM 8** (*Poster: Time Line of Jesus' Last Week*); and **PACK ITEM 12** (*Poster: Matthew 21:42*).



KEY DOCTRINE

The Kingdom

The Kingdom is the realm of salvation into which men enter by trustful, childlike commitment to Jesus Christ.

BIBLE SKILL

Study the context of a quoted passage to gain a deeper understanding.

Jesus quoted Psalm 118:22-23. Read Psalm 118 looking for other words or phrases that point to Christ. How were the things foreshadowed in Psalm 118 seen in Jesus? How could the context of the quoted passage impact how the hearers may have understood Jesus' words? How does knowing the context help you better understand the reaction of the religious leaders Jesus addressed?

FIRST THOUGHTS

Turning hearts takes much more effort than turning heads. We can turn someone's head with a shocking comment, a loud noise, or a bizarre costume. But turning a person's heart requires more than well-chosen sights and sounds. It requires believing. We turn someone's heart only when we help him or her to grasp new insights and to take hold of new convictions. A well-prepared TV commercial will turn our heads. However, the item being advertised in the commercial still has a long way to go before it turns our hearts.

(In PSG, p. 52) **Identify a commercial or ad that caught your attention but failed to convince you to purchase the item being advertised. What factors contributed to your decision not to purchase the item?**

For some time, Jesus had been turning heads. Throughout His ministry, He also turned hearts to believe that He was the Messiah. People everywhere followed Him. However, the hearts of Jewish religious leaders were still cold toward Him. In a confrontation with some of them, He shared the parable of the landowner. The message of the parable could not have been any clearer. Anyone who refused to turn his or her heart toward Christ would face destruction.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

MATTHEW 21:18-46

Jesus' actions and teaching continually challenged the spiritual hypocrisy of the religious leaders. The Pharisees opposed Him because many of His miracles took place on the Sabbath and His popularity challenged their power. Time after time, they used debates and accusations in attempts at discrediting Him. Finally, they determined to destroy Him. The parable in this week's lesson is sandwiched between two such encounters. In Matthew 21:12-16, Jesus cleansed the temple of moneychangers and others who desecrated the outer courts, infuriating the religious establishment.

Jesus wanted His disciples to understand the nature of this conflict and its inevitable outcome. After spending the night in Bethany, Jesus used a fruitless fig tree to teach the disciples a double lesson. Not finding figs on the plant, He pronounced judgment on it. As the group returned, they found the tree withered. Through this incident, Jesus not only taught the disciples about faith but provided an object lesson regarding Israel (vv. 18-22).

Jesus' parable of the two sons (vv. 28-32) and the story of the faithless tenant farmers (vv. 33-44) furthered His judgment on a people who owed God their very existence yet provided no spiritual fruit and rejected Him

by denying His Son. The Pharisees and chief priests understood Jesus was talking about their failure to respond to God in faith and justice.

Of all people, these groups should have recognized the rightness of Jesus' teaching. The Pharisees supposedly represented the desire to obey God and His law. The chief priests were educated in a sacrificial system established to demonstrate the high cost of sin and the need for repentance. However, instead of humbly accepting personal responsibility and returning to God, they grew increasingly hostile toward Jesus (vv. 45-46).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE SON SENT (MATT. 21:33-37)

Jesus' parable was a portrait of Israel's history. God was long-suffering toward His people. He loved Israel, even though the people continually rejected Him. They replaced righteousness with ritual and chose sin over service. Their worship practices had fallen into superficial formalism that lacked love for the Lord. God sent prophets to rebuke the nation and call them to repentance, but they refused to respond. Finally, in the fullness of time, God sent His Son (Gal. 4:4).

VERSE 33

As the religious leaders of Jerusalem confronted Jesus again, He offered **another parable**. In the previous verses, Matthew shared Jesus' previous parable about two sons—one who was faithful to his father and the other who was disloyal (vv. 28-32). The Pharisees and chief priests responded indignantly when told that despised tax collectors and prostitutes would enter the kingdom before them. In response, Jesus gave them a second parable.

The word **listen** carried the idea of paying attention. Jesus wanted these people to respond with acceptance and action, even though He knew they would ultimately reject both the message and the Messenger.

Jesus' story described **a landowner** who made an excellent vineyard and then **leased it** before going on a journey. Notice the elements of the narrative. The man not only owned the land but took the initiative to develop it. Each of the four actions related to the vineyard demonstrates the landowner's care and diligence.

He **planted** the vineyard and then took measures to protect it by building **a fence** to keep out animals and **a watchtower** to guard it against thieves and vandals. Further, he **dug a winepress** on the premises, enabling the grapes to be processed on the location. Each action showed his care for the vineyard and his intention to profit from his investment.

These actions parallel God's interaction with Israel. God planted Israel. It did not exist before God's calling of Abraham and His dealings with the patriarchs. God not only established the nation, but He also protected it through the Mosaic law (represented by the fence) and the prophets (symbolized by the watchtower). The winepress demonstrated God's expectation that His people would produce faithful results.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "The Kingdom of God in the Gospel of Matthew" in the Spring 2017 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

MATTHEW 21:33

³³ "Listen to another parable: There was a landowner, who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a winepress in it, and built a watchtower. He leased it to tenant farmers and went away.

The tenant farmers signify the Jewish leaders tasked with caring for God's people. The fact that the vineyard was leased meant the farmers did not have the same rights as the owner but were stewards, caring for the vineyard on his behalf. Similarly, the Jewish leaders were accountable for their stewardship of God's Word and God's people.

MATTHEW 21:34-35

³⁴ When the time came to harvest fruit, he sent his servants to the farmers to collect his fruit. ³⁵ The farmers took his servants, beat one, killed another, and stoned a third.

VERSES 34-35

One plants a crop with the expectation of a harvest. The landowner did not go away and forget his vineyard. He knew the season when the fruit would be ripe and ready for gathering. He could have required the farmers to send the proceeds of the produce at their own expense. Instead, he sent servants to **collect his fruit**.

Notice the parable refers to the produce as *his* fruit. Even though the tenant farmers had tended the crop, the fruit belonged to the landowner. Similarly, God remained the master of Israel. He had the right to expect His people to yield the results of righteousness and faithfulness to Him.

Greed is an insidious invader of the heart. The tenant farmers were not satisfied with the grace shown by the landowner in giving them the opportunity to profit from his vineyard. They wanted everything. Perhaps they thought the labor they provided gave them a larger claim on the harvest. They forgot they were mere stewards of another man's land. These greedy workers rejected the owner's demands and conspired to keep the profit of the vineyard for themselves.

Verse 35 and 36 indicate the landowner's servants came in a group. The fact that the tenant farmers **beat one** servant, **killed another, and stoned a third** suggests the group included three workers, although more may have been involved but not injured. The point of the parable is not the number of servants sent by the landowner but the cruel treatment they received at the hands of the farmers. This part of the narrative parallels the way Israel mistreated the prophets God sent throughout their history. (See 1 Kings 18; Neh. 9:26; and Matt. 23:37.)

VERSES 36-37

The landowner's patience went beyond any expectations. Most observers would agree he should have directed authorities to arrest the farmers who had committed such atrocities. Instead, he sent more servants. The fact that he sent **more than the first group** suggests the owner believed a larger company would command greater respect from the farmers. The stewards attacked this group just as they had before.

God is long-suffering by nature (Ex. 34:6). He did not stop loving His people even when they rejected Him. Like the landowner, the Lord sent additional servants to call Israel to repentance. God's tolerance has often been ill-rewarded as the people have scorned the message and mistreated the messengers.

Readers might be amazed at the incredible restraint of the landowner. Instead of seeking retribution against his tenants, he sends his son, thinking they will respect him. However, the issue had not been that the farmers did not respect the servants of the landowner. Rather, they did not respect the master himself.

MATTHEW 21:36-37

³⁶ Again, he sent other servants, more than the first group, and they did the same to them. ³⁷ Finally, he sent his son to them. "They will respect my son," he said.

The son in the parable represented Jesus. The author of Hebrews declared that God, who had spoken through prophets at various times in history, finally brought His Word through His Son, Jesus (Heb. 1:1-2).

What reactions do people have to God's ongoing call to repentance through His prophets, His Word, and His Son?

THE SON REJECTED (MATT. 21:38-39)

VERSE 38

The tenant farmers must have seen the owner's son coming from a distance since they had time to talk among themselves. They did not stop to consider the incredible forbearance shown by their master. Instead, they only thought about how they might profit by the son's death.

Conspiracy to commit murder requires hearts hardened by previous sin and encouraged by others of like minds. The farmers had succeeded in physically attacking and even killing the landowner's servants. Since they saw no retribution forthcoming, perhaps they believed the owner to be weak. Maybe they thought he would not retaliate if they escalated their crimes by murdering the son.

One can almost listen in on their conversation as each conspirator urged the others on to reckless action. They could not have realistically expected to get the inheritance by killing the heir. For the farmers to think they could obtain the son's inheritance by force demonstrates the irrationality of the wicked heart.

VERSE 39

The son must have been alone as he entered the vineyard. The parable does not suggest the owner sent guards for protection. The son knew the fate of the previous messengers, yet he followed his father's instructions. He came boldly to reclaim what belonged to the father. Similarly, Jesus came unto His own people at the Father's command, but His own did not receive Him (John 1:11; 5:30).

As Jesus finished the parable, He must have envisioned His own destiny. Like the son in the story, He would be seized by cruel hands, taken outside Jerusalem (represented by the vineyard), and killed. Jesus' crucifixion was imminent.

In what ways do the hearts of these tenant farmers reflect the response many people have toward Christ?

MATTHEW 21:38

³⁸ But when the tenant farmers saw the son, they said to each other, "This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance."

MATTHEW 21:39

³⁹ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

THE SON VINDICATED (MATT. 21:40-45)

MATTHEW 21:40-41

⁴⁰ Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those farmers?”

⁴¹ “He will completely destroy those terrible men,” they told him, “and lease his vineyard to other farmers who will give him his fruit at the harvest.”

VERSES 40-41

Jesus asked the Jewish religious leaders what should be done with the evil farmers. The father would not allow the death of his son to go unanswered. He would return to the vineyard. Did the farmers expect that he would remain in the far country and not respond to the murder of his son?

Jesus’ death was part of the Heavenly Father’s gracious plan for our salvation. Yet, a day of accountability will come in which every person who has rejected His Son will suffer ultimate punishment. Some people think this approach is harsh. Perhaps we should ask them, as Jesus asked, *What do you think should be done?*

Given the facts of the case, Jesus’ audience could give no other response. Anyone with a sense of justice would be infuriated by the cruelty of the farmers. The Jewish leaders pronounced these men as **terrible**. This term literally means “worthless.” Their character and conduct were worthy of only one response—destruction. As the prophet Nathan lured David into pronouncing judgment on himself in the affair of Bathsheba and Uriah (2 Sam. 12:6-7), Jesus maneuvered these leaders into describing what should happen to them.

The owner would not only take action against the murderers of his son, but he would also move to ensure his vineyard would have trustworthy stewards for the future. He would not give up on his investment. Worthy tenants would return the yield to him at harvest time.

VERSE 42

Jesus was speaking to men who were lifelong students of the Scriptures. Yet, they continually misinterpreted or overlooked those messianic passages that were fulfilled in Jesus. In this verse, Jesus was not merely challenging the leaders regarding their lack of biblical knowledge. He used Psalm 118:22 to explain God’s plan. Jesus Himself was the stone rejected by the builders, referring to the Jewish leaders. He was the cornerstone of faith and salvation, the foundation of real relationship with God.

Nearly 800 years earlier, Isaiah had declared the Lord’s intention. Speaking through the ancient prophet, God said, “Look, I have laid a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation; the one who believes will be unshakable” (Isa. 28:16).

What an amazing God! In spite of people’s rejection, He continues to reach out to humanity. Truly, such love is wonderful in our eyes.

VERSES 43-45

A key component of Jewish identity was their belief that, as God’s chosen people, they were superior to other nations. They did not understand that God’s covenant not only related to God’s favor to the people but also included the requirement that people be faithful to Him (1 Kings 9). Jesus was delivering God’s judgment that Israel had been faithless, rejecting Him and His entreaties. As a result, the kingdom of God would **be taken**

MATTHEW 21:42

⁴² Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is what the Lord has done and it is wonderful in our eyes?”

away from them **and given to a people** who would produce suitable fruit for the Master.

The concept of **the kingdom of God** included many meanings, depending on the context. In this case, Jesus likely addressed the special relationship Israel had enjoyed with God. Jesus had in mind the people who would accept Him and live in faith. Salvation includes submitting to Jesus' rule in our lives.

God always maintained His divine prerogative to determine who should rule His people. In 1 Samuel 13:13-14, He took the kingdom of Israel from Saul because of Saul's presumptuous sin. God also removed a large portion of the kingdom from the lineage of Solomon and gave it to Jeroboam (1 Kings 11:31). Jesus' declaration to the chief priests and Pharisees should have reminded them of the many times in their history when God replaced leaders of His people with others who would be faithful to Him.

Again referring to Himself as **this stone**, Jesus offered a proverbial metaphor to describe the dividing line of personal destiny. People have two choices—to accept Him or reject Him as Savior and Lord. One understanding of the word picture applies both parts to people who refuse God's offer of salvation through His Son. They will be **broken to pieces** and shattered.

Another view of Jesus' statement sees the first half relating to people who fall on Him in humble brokenness, while the second part describes the disaster falling on unrepentant rebels who rebuff Him. In either case, the point is clear. The stone that is Christ will be the basis by which God's judgment will fall on whoever rejects Him. Rejection of Jesus leads to sure destruction.

This encounter with **the chief priests and the Pharisees** took place as Jesus was teaching in the temple on the day following His cleansing of the temple (21:23). They and the people whom Jesus had been teaching were present throughout the confrontation. Yet these religious leaders had no doubt as to His intent.

The Pharisees and chief priests had not only accosted Him regarding His authority to cast out the money changers and animal sellers, but they also challenged His basis for teaching. In their minds, He had usurped what they considered to be their rightful place.

Jesus' parables were clearly directed toward these "blind guides" (Matt. 15:14). As seen in the following verse (21:46), the leaders wanted to take Jesus into custody and kill Him. However, they could see the mass of people who had gathered for Jesus' teaching. Fearing the reaction from the crowd, they waited and plotted Jesus' destruction.

People today make the same mistake, thinking they can reject God's chosen One and substitute their own path to eternity. Jesus' judgment on all who reject Him serves as an impetus for believers to share His offer of salvation with everyone.

Should anyone reasonably expect God to overlook rejection of His Son when we stand before His judgment seat? Why or why not?

MATTHEW 21:43-45

⁴³ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruit. ⁴⁴ Whoever falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will shatter him." ⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they knew he was speaking about them.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

INTRODUCE: Explain the differences between turning heads and turning hearts by summarizing the first paragraph of First Thoughts in the PSG (p. 52).

DISCUSS: *Identify a commercial or ad that caught your attention but failed to convince you to purchase the item being advertised. What factors contributed to your decision not to purchase the item?* (PSG, p. 52)

TRANSITION: *Jesus had been turning heads throughout His ministry and had turned many hearts as well. However, the Jewish religious leaders were cold and unreceptive. On the day after Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, He returned to the city and shared two parables. He made it clear that, by refusing to turn their hearts toward Christ, these religious leaders were choosing destruction. Today, we will focus on the second of those parables. Identify the setting for this event using **Pack Item 2** (Outline of Matthew); **Pack Item 3** (Poster: Spring 2017); and **Pack Item 8** (Poster: Time Line of Jesus' Last Week).*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Invite the group to listen as a volunteer reads Matthew 21:33-37. Lead the group to analyze what the actions of the vineyard owner (who represents God) reveal about the character of God.

ASK: *How did the landowner exhibit exceptional devotion to his vineyard? Why did he build a fence around it? Why did he dig a winepress in the center? What was the purpose of the watchtower?*

EXPLAIN: *When the harvest began, the owner sent servants twice to collect his share of the harvest. Lead the group to underline three verbs that describe how the tenants responded. How would you expect the landowner to respond to these brutal crimes? How did he actually respond?*

ASK: *How would you describe God (the landowner) based on this parable?* (PSG, p. 55)

DISPLAY: On a whiteboard, write the word "Patience." Explain: *The landowner's response reflected God's patience with His people when they turned their backs on Him time after time.*

READ: Read aloud Matthew 21:38-39, urging the group to look for how the tenants responded when this patient landowner decided to send his son to collect the fruit he was owed.

INSTRUCT: Direct the group to underline in their PSG the verb in verse 37, which indicates what the landowner expected of the tenants with regard to his son. Then guide them to underline the verbs in verses 38-39 that indicate their actual actions.

ASK: *What did the tenants hope to accomplish by this brutality? From the PSG (p. 57): What attitudes displayed by the tenant farmers do you see displayed in our world today? How do those attitudes get in the way of accepting the Son?*

CONNECT: Encourage the group to compare the events in verses 38-39 to what would soon happen to Jesus. Explain that, like the tenant farmers, Jesus' opponents considered Him to be an obstacle they needed to remove.

GUIDE: Use **Pack Item 7** (*Chart: The Opponents of Jesus*) to review who Jesus' opponents were and what they believed about Him.

READ: Invite someone to read aloud Matthew 21:40-45 as the group listens for how the religious leaders condemned themselves with their own words.

INVITE: Ask a volunteer to identify the question that Jesus asked concerning the fate of the tenant farmers. Ask another person to identify the response to this question.

EMPHASIZE: *With this question, Jesus gave the religious leaders a chance to look at their rejection of God's Son, Jesus, through the eyes of God. Their answer described the judgment that would be rendered to them.*

GUIDE: Explain that Jesus clarified His point about the leaders' rejection of Him by quoting Psalm 118:22-23 concerning the rejection of a stone. Then direct group members to work with a partner to list characteristics and uses for stones. Invite them to share their results with the group.

ASK: *Which of these characteristics would you consider to be positive? Negative? For what reasons might a builder reject a stone? Why did the Jewish leaders reject Jesus? How did Jesus use the grinding ability of a stone to demonstrate the fate of those who rejected Him?*

EMPHASIZE: Ask volunteers to read Isaiah 8:14-15 and Daniel 2:35. Direct the group to observe the prophets' descriptions, which were very similar to Jesus' description (Luke 20:18) of people stumbling over the stone and falling or being ground into powder. Ask: *How does Jesus serve as both a cornerstone and a stumbling block at the same time?* (PSG, p. 59)

POINT OUT: *Today's passage began with the leaders' confronting Jesus, but Jesus turned the tables and confronted them instead.* Direct attention to **Pack Item 12** (*Poster: Matthew 21:42*). Challenge the group to commit the verse to memory, reminding them that hiding God's Word in our hearts helps us avoid the temptation to sin.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

DISPLAY: Write on a whiteboard or somewhere prominent in the room:

- God sends His servants to direct His people's hearts _____.
- Rejection of Jesus leads to sure _____.
- Jesus' judgment on all who reject Him should cause Christians to want to _____.

Read the statements, inviting the group to respond, and fill in the blanks with their responses. Call for the group to choose which statement most relates to them right now.

DIRECT: To close the session, direct the group examine the first question set under In My Context in the PSG (p. 60): *Discuss as a group ways you can help others understand the peril of rejecting Jesus. How can the group be welcoming to unbelievers without compromising the truths of the gospel? Identify steps the group may need to take in light of this discussion.*

PRAY: Close in prayer that the group would use their lives to direct other people's hearts toward God.



PRACTICE

- If you have group members who have not accepted Jesus as Savior, visit them this week, share with them how they can make that commitment, and give them an opportunity to do so.
- Send an email encouraging all the group members to help someone they know to understand what it means to accept or reject Jesus. Pray for the group as they fulfill that commitment, and be available to aid them in fulfilling this mission if you are called upon.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

Ask: *What highway signs have you seen that indicate a violation and its penalty? Example: "Absolutely no littering. Violators will be fined \$500."* Explain: *In today's Scripture passage, Jesus gives a clear warning against rejecting Him as Savior. He goes further and describes the unquestionable penalty for violators.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement the study of Matthew 21:40-45, lead in a discussion of what it meant that God compared Israel to a vineyard that He had to destroy.
- To enhance the study of Matthew 21:40-45, complete the Bible Skill in the PSG (p. 58): *Jesus quoted Psalm 118:22-23. Read Psalm 118 looking for other words or phrases that point to Christ. How were the things foreshadowed in Psalm 118 seen in Jesus? How could the context of the quoted passage impact how the hearers may have understood Jesus' words? How does knowing the context help you better understand the reaction of the religious leaders Jesus addressed?*
- Share a recent news story about people who ignored a warning of an imminent natural disaster (weather alert, wildfire spreading, etc.) and experienced great loss as a result. Explain that, in today's study, Jesus was sounding an alarm. There is danger of disaster! People must heed the warning and enter the shelter of Jesus' mighty arms, or they will surely meet with destruction.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Provide copies of a gospel tract, which those who choose can use to share with someone else concerning how they can accept Christ as Savior. Demonstrate how to use the tract. Challenge members to take copies and look for opportunities to share. Make yourself available to answer questions that may arise if needed.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Lead the group in singing or read the lyrics to "Let Jesus Come into Your Heart," by Leila Naylor Morris.

OFFERED TO ALL?

Though all are invited to join Jesus in God's kingdom, only those who respond to Him in obedient faith will be accepted.

MATTHEW 22:1-14

MEMORY VERSE: ROMANS 10:13

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Matthew 22:1–23:39; Romans 10:13, First Thoughts (p. 64), and Understand the Context (pp. 64–65). Make notes about words and phrases that may require additional explanation during the group Bible study session.
- **STUDY** Matthew 22:1–14, using Explore the Text (pp. 65–69). Pay attention to the Key Doctrine (Hell) as it portrays the urgency of the message in these verses.
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 70–71). Modify your group plans using More Ideas (p. 72) and ideas online at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible. Consider how to bring new meaning to this session's memory verse (Rom. 10:13).
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Group Ministry blog (LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; A whiteboard or large sheet of paper and a marker; and A wedding invitation. For More Ideas (p. 72): Special offer mailings from local businesses. Prepare to display: **PACK ITEM 1** (*Map: New Testament Jerusalem*); **PACK ITEM 3** (*Poster: Spring 2017*); and **PACK ITEM 8** (*Poster: Time Line of Jesus' Last Week*).



KEY DOCTRINE

Hell

The unrighteous will be consigned to Hell, the place of everlasting punishment.

BIBLE SKILL

Look at other passages on the same subject.

Jesus taught a lot about a place we call hell. Look at the following passages: Matthew 5:29-30; 10:28; 22:13; 23:33; Mark 9:47-48; Luke 16:23-24; and John 3:16-18. What do these passages teach us about hell? How would you summarize in one sentence what these verses say about hell? How should the portrait of hell painted by Jesus serve as a motivator for believers?

FIRST THOUGHTS

An invitation to a wedding can be a unique privilege. For that reason, it shouldn't be taken lightly. The bride and groom, along with their families and other members of the wedding party, usually go to a great deal of trouble to make sure that everything is just right. They have to decide where the wedding will take place, who will participate, and how to decorate. Then there's the small mound of details related to the reception. All of the preparation for the wedding comes to mind when the invitation arrives. No wonder the invitation compels the invited guests to give consideration to what they should wear to the wedding. They'll want to dress appropriately for such a momentous occasion.

(In PSG, p. 63) **Reflect on the last time you attended a wedding. What preparations did you make before going?**

Jesus shared a parable about a wedding banquet with the religious leaders who confronted Him at the temple. They wanted to know about His authority. He responded by directing their attention to their refusal to acknowledge Him as the Messiah. In His response, He shared a parable about a king who hosted a wedding banquet and invited people to come when everything was ready. The parable provided Jesus with an opportunity to teach a valuable lesson about being a citizen of God's kingdom. It affirms that God invites everyone to a personal relationship with Him. However, only people who respond with obedient faith will be accepted.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

MATTHEW 22:1–23:39

The religious leaders' confrontation with Jesus began long before the cleansing of the temple in Matthew 21, but it certainly became more forceful afterward. In response, Jesus gave a series of parables, including the parable of the wedding in this session. Each story rebuked the people who should have been spiritual leaders but who, in fact, were not personally following the Scripture they purportedly defended.

Following the parable of the wedding feast, the various parties of Jewish leadership took the offensive. Each group tried to discredit Jesus in front of the people. Following the temple cleansing, they wanted to arrest Jesus but were afraid of the crowds who strongly supported Him. Perhaps they could trick Jesus into saying something that would cost Him the favor of the masses.

The Pharisees' disciples and the Herodians (a political party associated with the various rulers known as Herod) first used flattery before trying to catch Jesus in an unwinnable question regarding taxation. If Jesus validated the Roman right to tax the Jewish people, He would alienate the people. If he challenged the taxation, He risked the wrath of Rome. Probably they knew that one of Jesus' disciples, Matthew, had been a tax collector.

The Sadducees thought they could use a trick question to challenge the doctrine of the resurrection. This religious party opposed the Pharisees and denied the resurrection. Again, Jesus' wisdom and use of Scripture was so strong that they could not refute Him.

Seeing the Sadducees' failure, the Pharisees employed a religious lawyer (an expert in Jewish law) to test Jesus' understanding of the Mosaic law. Jesus' response demonstrated His command not only of the letter of the Law but also of its intent.

Jesus was more concerned that the disciples and the general populace listening to these exchanges understood the spiritual dynamics behind His opponents' attacks. His parables and teachings clearly supported the foundation of Scripture while at the same time denouncing the failure of the Pharisees and other leaders to follow the God of the Scriptures.

Jesus was grieved by the spiritual poverty of Jerusalem and its history of opposition to the messengers God had sent to call the people to revival. Holding them accountable for their failure of stewardship, Jesus pronounced eight "woes" or judgments on the religious leaders whose insincerity threatened the welfare of the people. Like the invited in Matthew 22:1-7, these leaders failed in their duty to the King.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE INVITED (MATT. 22:1-7)

VERSES 1-2

Jesus responded to His critics by telling a series of **parables**. This parable compared **the kingdom of heaven** to **a wedding banquet**. A marriage usually overflowed with joy for a family. The wedding of the king's son should have been a cause for national celebration. Jewish weddings often involved extensive festivities lasting several days. A royal wedding banquet would have been elaborately planned. Happy for his son, the king wanted his people to share in his joy.

In the same way, the Bible describes the marriage feast of the Lamb of God (Rev. 19:7-9). It represents the culmination of God's plan of salvation with the heavenly celebration of Christ and His Bride, the church (all people who have received Jesus as Savior and Lord).

VERSES 3-4

Modern families typically send wedding invitations by mail. In the days of the parable, a king issued personal summons to his invited guests.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "First-Century Jewish Weddings," an archived *Biblical Illustrator* article provided on the CD-ROM in the Spring 2017 *Explore the Bible: Leader Pack*.

MATTHEW 22:1-2

¹ Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables:

² "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.

MATTHEW 22:3-4

³ He sent his servants to summon those invited to the banquet, but they didn't want to come. ⁴ Again, he sent out other servants and said, "Tell those who are invited: See, I've prepared my dinner; my oxen and fattened cattle have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet."

Customarily, honored invitees would have received a written note, possibly bearing the king's official seal. However, this king sent his servants to summon guests to the banquet.

An imperial summons was more than an invitation. When the king bid people to attend this royal event, he expected his subjects to respond promptly and positively. Those who received an invitation to the wedding banquet should have felt privileged. They ought to have been excited by the honor of attending the festivities. Instead, they refused without excuse or explanation.

The invited guests were not inherently special, other than the fact that they had been called to the wedding feast. In the same way, we have nothing by which to lay claim to God's gracious invitation to be saved. The only basis for our call to salvation is His mercy and grace.

The servants in the parable parallel prophets and preachers sent by God to urge people to receive His Son, Jesus. Throughout history, God has called people to come to Him in faith and obedience. His entreaties demonstrated His love and compassion. The Lord's messengers have consistently implored people to respond, yet, like the invited guests of the parable, most have ignored God's summons.

The king could have taken the initial refusal as an insult and executed immediate judgment on the ungracious guests. After all, he was the king, and they were his subjects. To refuse the king was tantamount to rebellion. Instead, in patient restraint, he sent additional servants to reason with the invited guests. Again, notice the king's forbearance. He did not command their attendance or force them to come at spearpoint. The king's message appealed to common courtesy.

By the time the second group of messengers made the rounds of invitations, the dinner had already been prepared. The **oxen and fattened cattle** were special animals that had been prepared for months in anticipation of this lavish banquet. Usually, these cattle had been grain-fed. They had already been slaughtered. The event could not be postponed.

The king's summons became an entreaty: **Come**. In the same way, Jesus urges people to come to Him. Jesus called for the weary and burdened to come to Him and find rest (Matt. 11:28). He invited an astonished Peter to come and join Him in a faith walk on the water (Matt. 14:29). Jesus urged the rich, young ruler to give away his wealth so he could come and follow Him (Matt. 19:21). At the end of days, the Judge of the universe will gaze on those faithful who accepted Him and say, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 25:34).

MATTHEW 22:5-6

⁵ But they paid no attention and went away, one to his own farm, another to his business, ⁶ while the rest seized his servants, mistreated them, and killed them.

VERSES 5-6

What could be more important than a summons from the king? The reactions of his invited guests showed disdain not merely of the king's son and his wedding feast but of the king himself. To pay no attention to the persistent call of their sovereign demonstrated the lack of respect these people had toward him. They merely ignored him and went about their own lives. The farmer went to his field, while the merchant tended to his business.

Such is the reaction of many people to God's call to salvation through Christ. Whatever is their focus of the moment carries more weight than

the message of the Lord. Jobs, family, entertainment, and other temporal concerns are given more weight than that which is eternal.

Contempt for the king and his invitation pushed others past the point of reason. Their actions toward the king's servants bore the marks of malice toward their master. Taking hold of the servants, they treated them outrageously. The term *mistreated* carries the concept of using violence to show spite. It also has the idea of shamefulness, indicating that the servants' mistreatment was not only physically egregious but also imposed shame. Finally, the rebels killed the king's messengers.

VERSE 7

Could these people genuinely believe the king would not respond? Most sinners do not consider the consequences of their iniquity. Living only for themselves, they disregard both God and His messengers.

As mentioned previously, the king's servants portrayed the prophets and preachers sent with the Lord's message. Jesus had already used one parable to illustrate the mistreatment God's servants had received and the destruction they brought on themselves (Matt. 21:33-44). Employing this second parable underscored the fate awaiting people who have such violent disregard for the King.

Unlike the previous parable, Jesus did not ask the listeners to describe the likely reaction of the king to the murder of his servants. He declared how *the king was enraged*. The term *enraged* comes from the same root as the word translated "anger" in Hebrews 3:11. It connects to an Old Testament passage referring to God's wrath (Ps. 95:11).

No longer tolerating these murderers, the king took action to destroy them and their city. In one sentence, Jesus described the total devastation due to people who rebel against the king. The destruction of the wicked is not a popular topic in today's postmodern age. Some people find it difficult to imagine God as portrayed by the king in the parable. If they believe in God at all, they want Him to overlook human sin like a doting grandfather might excuse mischievous children. Jesus' parable makes clear the righteous judgment facing people who continue to refuse the Lord's appeals. God will hold all people accountable for their response to Jesus.

(In PSG, p. 65) **How does the response of the invited guests in the parable reflect the way people respond to God's offer of salvation today? What causes people to respond in this way?**

THE GATHERED (MATT. 22:8-10)

VERSES 8-9

The king still had a banquet that was ready to be enjoyed, but he had no guests. The original invitees *were not worthy*, as evidenced by their

MATTHEW 22:7

⁷ The king was enraged, and he sent out his troops, killed those murderers, and burned down their city.

MATTHEW 22:8-9

⁸ Then he told his servants, 'The banquet is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. ⁹ Go then to where the roads exit the city and invite everyone you find to the banquet.'

response to the king's summons. In reality, no one is worthy of the King and His Son. Each of us receives His call solely on the basis of His grace. The first group was deemed unworthy because of their refusal of the king's summons and their antagonism toward him.

The king's directions to his servants offer three principles for believers today as we receive orders from our King. First, he gave them a mandate, telling them to **go**. He calls us to leave our comfort zone and go to others.

Second, he gave the servants a strategy, instructing them to go where they would naturally find people. The place **where the roads exit the city** would be filled with many people.

Third, he gave them an all-inclusive summons to share with **everyone**. God's call to salvation goes out to everyone. We cannot pick and choose those with whom we will share the gospel of Christ. The Lord's banquet table is large enough to accommodate whoever will come.

MATTHEW 22:10

¹⁰ So those servants went out on the roads and gathered everyone they found, both evil and good. The wedding banquet was filled with guests.

MATTHEW 22:11-12

¹¹ When the king came in to see the guests, he saw a man there who was not dressed for a wedding. ¹² So he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless.

VERSE 10

At the king's command, the servants sought people for the wedding in the roads. They did not shy away from approaching strangers, for they bore the king's edict. Similarly, believers in every generation have orders from our King to seek and summon everyone for Christ. Our prospect list has no restriction, for we bear the mandate to share Christ's good news.

Notice this group of invitees included both evil and good. The Greek term translated as **good** refers to the general character of a person. It does not infer spiritual righteousness attributable only to God (Matt. 19:17). On the other hand, the word **evil** is not the term generally used to describe character but refers to one who behaves wickedly.

God invites all types of people to the banquet of His Son. No one is inherently worthy of such mercy, but in His grace God calls all people to salvation regardless of their past. Everyone, even the good, needs to be saved. Anyone, even the evil, can be saved.

As a result of the servants' obedience and the guests' responsiveness, the wedding banquet was filled. The parable highlights God's delight in having many people come to Christ. God offers salvation to all people, regardless of their past, race, or social station.

In what ways can we faithfully execute our King's command to go into world and bring people to Christ?

THE UNPREPARED (MATT. 22:11-14)

VERSES 11-12

The king discovered a man who had not dressed appropriately. Even people invited at the last minute were expected to prepare themselves suitably for the wedding. Often, the host would provide special robes for people

who arrived unexpectedly. This character represents people who say they are believers but have never repented of sin and accepted Jesus as Savior. They want the benefits of God's kingdom without any of the responsibilities.

At first, the king's approach was not hostile or confrontational. He refers to the man as **friend**. He gave the guest an opportunity to explain why he came to the banquet without wedding clothes. Not only had the man not brought his wedding clothes, he must have also refused the garments offered to him. In this culture, the man's behavior was an insult to the king.

Just as this wedding crasher was **speechless** before the king, so too will many people have no answer or excuse when standing before the heavenly judgment seat without having received Christ as Savior.

VERSES 13-14

At this point, the story moves toward its eternal application. An earthly king might expel an unacceptable guest, or even have him imprisoned. Indeed, the man was tied up but then was thrown **into the outer darkness**.

Darkness symbolizes the opposite of God, in whom is light (1 John 1:5). Judgment for those people without Christ involves eternal exclusion from the presence of God. The phrase **weeping and gnashing of teeth** represents the excruciating anguish suffered by everyone who disdains God's Son and refuses His offer of salvation. Jesus used this same description in Matthew 8:12, referring to those people who see others entering God's kingdom while they themselves are cast out. The phrase is also found in other parables to describe the judgment of the wicked (Matt. 13:42,50).

Be careful not to misinterpret this verse. The point is not that God chooses only certain people for salvation. Keep in mind the nature of the parable. The phrase **many are invited** refers to the fact that the king invited everyone to his banquet. Even the man who was cast out had been invited. However, this individual wanted to come on his own terms rather than according to those on the invitation. Others, represented by the first group, did not come at all. Yet all were invited. Similarly, God wants all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4). He calls everyone to repent (Acts 17:30).

Unfortunately, not every person will be saved. Like the people in this parable, many people refuse God's offer of salvation outright, while others want to go to heaven but reject Christ, who makes salvation possible. The statement **few are chosen** refers to those who receive Jesus as Savior and Lord. Only people who come to God on His terms, placing their trust in Jesus alone, will escape eternal wrath. Because response to God's call affects people's eternal destiny, we should use every effort to bring them to Christ.

How does the fate of this unprepared guest motivate us to share the gospel with clarity and urgency?

MATTHEW 22:13-14

¹³ Then the king told the attendants, "Tie him up hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

¹⁴ For many are invited, but few are chosen."

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

DISCUSS: Display or pass around a wedding invitation. Discuss the importance of weddings to couples and their families. Emphasize the importance of preparing the guest list and making sure to invite the people they care about.

ASK: *What wedding invitation did you last receive? How did you feel about being invited? If you found it necessary to decline attending, how did you explain that news to the bride and groom? If you attended, how did you choose what clothes to wear?*

TRANSITION: Set the context by referring to these items displayed on the wall: **Pack Item 1** (Map: New Testament Jerusalem); **Pack Item 3** (Poster: Spring 2017); and **Pack Item 8** (Poster: Time Line of Jesus' Last Week). Remind the group: *Jesus had come to Jerusalem for the Passover. When the Jewish religious leaders confronted Him there about His authority, Jesus shared a series of parables. The last one involved a king who hosted a wedding banquet.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Invite the group to listen as a volunteer reads Matthew 22:1-7. Guide them to underline the characters they find in Jesus' parable.

DIRECT: Call attention to the whiteboard where you have written "Characters in the Parable" and "People Invited to the Wedding." Invite the group to name the characters found in these verses as you list them on the board in the proper columns: king, son, servants, and invitees who rejected the invitation. Lead them to determine whom each character(s) represents as you write their answers beside the previous responses: God; Jesus; servants of God (including prophets, apostles, disciples, etc.); and Jewish people (especially religious leaders).

MINI-LECTURE: *The wedding feast would have reminded the Jewish leaders of the feast with the Messiah, which they were looking forward to when the Messiah arrived some day. In those days, an invitation did not designate a specific day and time; rather, the feast was prepared and guests were summoned to stop whatever they were doing and to come immediately. They should have wanted to make this sacrifice to enjoy a joyous feast with the king.*

ASK: *Why did the potential guests refuse the invitation? How did some even act cruelly toward the king's messengers? What other times in the Bible can you recall when God's messengers were treated with cruelty?*

EMPHASIZE: *Just as the king shows patience in verse 3, God shows His patience as He draws people to accept His invitation into an eternal relationship with Him through His Son.*

ASK: *How does the response of the invited guests in the parable reflect the way people respond to God's offer of salvation today? What causes people to respond in this way? (PSG, p. 65)*

READ: As a volunteer reads Matthew 22:8-10, lead the group to identify additional characters who enter the story. In the proper column on the board, write "guests who accepted the invitation."

ASK: According to verse 10, what kinds of people were included? What does that say to us about the nature of God?

READ: Call on a volunteer to read the comments under Verse 10 in the PSG (pp. 66-67) for clarification.

ASK: How does the Lord remind you that He invites all people to a relationship with Him? How should you respond in light of this? (PSG, p. 67)

READ: Instruct the group to identify one last character in the story as a volunteer reads Matthew 21:11-14. Add “guest who was not properly dressed” to the correct column.

EXPLAIN: During that time, it was common for a king to provide wedding garments as a gift for those who attended. Likely, the king provided these new, spotless garments to the guests. There was no reason for someone to show up in his old street clothes, other than overt rebellion.

EMPHASIZE: Display the word “Salvation” on the whiteboard or on a sheet of paper. Point out: *God offers salvation as a free gift to everyone as we are invited to become a part of His kingdom. We must accept this gift and “put it on.” There is no other way we can be admitted!*

DISCUSS: What is the significance of the king addressing the man as “friend”? What consequences did he suffer due to his careless decision? From the PSG (p. 69): *What false assumptions or beliefs do you think contribute to people’s belief that they will gain access to heaven without faith in Christ? How should the doom of this unprepared guest motivate believers to share the gospel with clarity and urgency?*

STUDY: To bring further clarity to the discussion, lead the group to complete the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 69): *Jesus taught a lot about a place we call hell. Look at the following passages: Matthew 5:29-30; 10:28; 22:13; 23:33; Mark 9:47-48; Luke 16:23-24; and John 3:16-18. What do these passages teach us about hell? How would you summarize in one sentence what these verses say about hell? How should the portrait of hell painted by Jesus serve as a motivator for believers?*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

READ: Direct the group to In My Context in the PSG (p. 70). Read the summary statements. Point out that the final statement summarizes the path and the importance of our acceptance of the salvation provided to us through Jesus.

CHALLENGE: Guide the group to examine the third question set under In My Context on page 70 of the PSG: *Discuss with your Bible study group ways in which the parable encourages you to share God’s invitation to be saved with others. Determine ways you can hold each other accountable for sharing Jesus with greater regularity.*

PRAY: Encourage each member to reflect on his or her own salvation and give thanks to God for this wonderful gift. Entreat group members to identify someone in their own lives who has not accepted this gift. Direct them to pray for those people this week and seek ways to help them understand that God will hold them accountable for their acceptance or rejection of His Son.



PRACTICE

- Share your faith with someone in your life. Help them to understand the urgency and accountability we face as we accept or reject God’s salvation.
- Plan a spring fellowship to help strengthen relationships among your group members.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

Point out that we all frequently receive “special offers” from businesses. They come in the mail, in the newspapers, by phone, by text, by email, and so forth. Display or read a few that you have received. Explain that the offers only apply if we choose to follow the proper steps to accept them. Invite members to discuss offers they might accept and ones they are likely to reject. Explain: *Today’s study is about a parable in which a king (who represents God) makes an unbelievable offer. Some accept the offer with joy; unfortunately, many reject the offer and reap consequences.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To enhance the discussion of Matthew 22:8-10, name the three categories of guests invited to the wedding (those who rejected the invitation, those who accepted, and one who tried to get in without the proper garment). Direct the group to consider into which category they fall with regard to the kingdom of God. If they have not properly accepted the invitation, urge them to do so today. Emphasize the memory verse for today (Rom. 10:13).
- Point out that the guest described in Matthew 22:11-12 chose to wear his own garment rather than the wedding clothes required. That’s similar to people trying to come to God through their own goodness rather than becoming clean and spotless through the blood of Jesus Christ. Read Isaiah 64:6 and lead the group to explain what it means that Scripture says our goodness is like filthy rags.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Guide the group to ponder God’s goodness. Read the second question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 70) and allow time for quiet contemplation: *Reflect on God’s offering you salvation in spite of your past. Thank Him for inviting you to enjoy a personal relationship with Him through Christ. Record your thoughts.* Then offer to share your story or pre-enlist a volunteer to share how he or she came to Christ.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Lead the group in singing “Rescue the Perishing,” by Fanny J. Crosby. Point out that the parable in today’s session shows us the urgency of leading people to accept Jesus before it is too late.

WHERE IS JESUS?

Jesus was resurrected to reign forever as the King.

MATTHEW 28:1-15

MEMORY VERSE: MATTHEW 28:6

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Matthew 28:1-15, First Thoughts (p. 74), and Understand the Context (pp. 74-75). Focus on the truth of the resurrection account.
- **STUDY** Matthew 28:1-15, using Explore the Text (pp. 75-79). Also read Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-18; and 1 Corinthians 15:1-18 to provide further clarity about the resurrection.
- **PLAN** the group time using the ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 80-81) and More Ideas (p. 82), in *QuickSource*, and online at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible. Focus on ways to lead group members to celebrate and worship by brainstorming creative ways to use the Suggested Music Idea (p. 82).
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid (MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; A whiteboard or large sheet of paper and markers; Several cards containing words or phrases from the memory verse; **PACK ITEM 4** (*Time Line: Matthew*); and **PACK ITEM 5** (*Bookmark: Memory Verses*). For More Ideas (p. 82): A news story about someone who was or is missing. Prepare to display: **PACK ITEM 7** (*Chart: The Opponents of Jesus*); and **PACK ITEM 10** (*Poster: Witnesses of Jesus' Resurrection*).



KEY DOCTRINE

Jesus

He was raised from the dead with a glorified body and appeared to His disciples as the person who was with them before His crucifixion.

BIBLE SKILL

Gain a clearer understanding by reading other passages.

Paul had a great deal to say about the resurrection of Jesus. Read the following passages, noting key ideas: Romans 6:4; 8:11; 10:9; 1 Corinthians 15:14-17; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17. What do these passages reveal about Paul's understanding of the resurrection of Jesus? What key truths are conveyed in these passages? How do these truths relate to each other?

FIRST THOUGHTS

Joy and gratitude in our hearts prompt us to celebrate. Our celebrations may focus on significant people who have made a huge difference to us. Or we may celebrate events that have changed the direction of our lives in a constructive way. Celebration gives us an opportunity to relive transformative moments so we won't forget them. It can also allow us to express our gratitude for the mentors who shaped our lives.

(In PSG, p. 73) **Recall the last time you participated in a celebration. What were you commemorating? Why was it important for you to be a part of that celebration?**

On Resurrection Sunday, Christians celebrate Jesus' victory over death. The reason we celebrate becomes clearer the longer we walk with Christ. His resurrection serves as the centerpiece of our relationship with Him. He's alive, and He lives in us the moment we welcome Him into our lives. Because Christ's resurrection has made an eternal difference to us, Matthew's account of Jesus' resurrection deserves our attention. His account provides the details related to the world-changing moment when Jesus was raised from the grave. As we study it, we're prompted to join followers around the world who worship the living Lord. The account also reminds us that the truth of Christ's resurrection needs to be shared with everyone everywhere.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

MATTHEW 28:1-15

In the previous chapter, Matthew described the excruciating details of Jesus' crucifixion. Soldiers sadistically scourged Jesus, using whips tipped with metal to tear His flesh. After repeated beatings, Jesus was crowned with thorns, mocked, and nailed to the cross.

Crucifixion was a particularly cruel manner of execution. The victim was impaled on the cross by nails through the wrists or hands and through the feet. He had to push upward to exhale, creating shooting pain throughout the body. After long hours of suffering, Jesus died.

The Romans made sure Jesus was dead by thrusting a spear into His side, creating a wound out of which poured blood and water (John 19:32-34). Christian physicians suggest that the membrane surrounding His heart had been pierced and that the heart or, more likely, a coronary artery had burst. Neither the Romans nor the Jewish leaders would have released Jesus' body to Joseph of Arimathea without confirmation He was dead.

Joseph and Nicodemus buried Jesus in a tomb that Joseph had prepared for himself, carved from rock on a hillside. Security of the site began with rolling a large stone across the doorway. The Jewish leaders insisted the Roman governor seal the stone and assign a group of soldiers to guard it against anyone who might take the body away.

These details are vital in understanding the reality of the resurrection. Jewish leaders were scared. Romans were scornful. Followers of Jesus were saddened beyond heartache. Then, dawn broke on the first day of the week, revealing the tremendous truth that the grave was empty and Jesus was alive!

The women who followed Jesus from Galilee witnessed His death, watched His burial, and came that morning to pay last respects with ointments suitable for a burial. They fully expected to see a dead body. The Roman soldiers standing guard over the tomb were hardened troops whose lives would have been forfeit had they slept on duty or abandoned their posts. They had nothing to gain and everything to lose if anything happened to Jesus' body. Nothing about this scene suggested Jesus could have merely swooned and revived. No reasonable investigation could forensically demonstrate any other conclusion than the truth: Jesus had died and had been resurrected. He is alive today and reigns forevermore.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE GRAVE OPENED (MATT. 28:1-4)

VERSE 1

Who were these women? Luke merely called them the women who accompanied Jesus from Galilee (Luke 23:55). Matthew specifically mentioned two—**Mary Magdalene and the other Mary**. The first Mary was called Magdalene because she came from the village of Magdala on the west coast of the Sea of Galilee. During Jesus' early ministry in Galilee, He had cast seven demons out of this woman (Luke 8:2; Mark 16:9). She and other women accompanied the disciples as Jesus went from place to place (Luke 8:1-3).

Mary Magdalene had witnessed the crucifixion from a distance. She and the other Mary also watched as Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus placed Jesus' body in a tomb owned by Joseph. Mark identified the other Mary as the mother of Joses (or Joseph), James, and Salome (Mark 15:40). With Mary Magdalene, she saw the burial of Jesus (Mark 15:47). They must have grimaced as the large stone was rolled in front of the cave-like tomb, sealing away the body of their Lord (Matt. 27:57-61). They waited long hours for the opportunity to come back.

Matthew simply noted that they went to view the tomb. Luke said they prepared spices for Jesus' body before resting during the Sabbath (Luke 23:55-56). On the morning of **the first day of the week**, they returned to the tomb with their spices (Mark 16:1).

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Women as Eyewitnesses," an archived *Biblical Illustrator* article provided on the CD-ROM in the Spring 2017 *Explore the Bible: Leader Pack*.

MATTHEW 28:1

¹ After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to view the tomb.

MATTHEW 28:2-3

² There was a violent earthquake, because an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and approached the tomb. He rolled back the stone and was sitting on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing was as white as snow.

MATTHEW 28:4

⁴ The guards were so shaken by fear of him that they became like dead men.

MATTHEW 28:5

⁵ The angel told the women, “Don’t be afraid, because I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified.

MATTHEW 28:6

⁶ He is not here. For he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.

VERSES 2-3

Mark recorded part of the women’s discussion as they traveled to the tomb. They wondered how they would get past the stone that blocked the entrance to the grave (Mark 16:3). However, they need not have worried.

Matthew described **a violent earthquake** that occurred as an angel moved the stone. Note the description of this angel. His origin was **heaven**. Imagine the wonder of the women and the guards as the angel came down and approached the tomb. The power of a single angel was more than sufficient to handle the large stone that had sealed the tomb. He merely **rolled back** the barrier. When the women drew near, they saw the angel simply **sitting** on the stone, waiting for them.

The appearance of this angel was so bright and powerful that looking at him was like seeing **lightning**. The phrase **his appearance** could refer to the angel’s face or to his overall manifestation. The angel wore a robe that was **white as snow**, which was commonly associated with purity and holiness (Dan. 7:9; Mark 9:3).

VERSE 4

The Jewish leaders were concerned Jesus’ disciples might take away his body and claim He had risen from the dead. At their insistence, the Roman governor assigned soldiers to secure the tomb. Roman guards were well-trained troops. They would not have been frightened away by the few fishermen who followed Jesus.

The angel’s awe-inspiring appearance, combined with the earthquake and his ability to roll away the stone single-handedly, overwhelmed the guards. Their reaction of fear was understandable. The soldiers became **like** dead men, suggesting they collapsed into unconsciousness.

THE RISEN KING ANNOUNCED (MATT. 28:5-10)

VERSE 5

The women initially reacted in fear but were quickly reassured by the angel. Other appearances by angels prompted similar reactions. The shepherds who received the announcement of Jesus’ birth also responded to the angel with alarm before being assured they had nothing to dread (Luke 2:9).

The angel knew the women were **looking for Jesus**. Their love for the Master gave them courage in spite of their anxiety. The angel’s admonition not to be afraid relieved their distress.

The women sought Jesus **who was crucified**. This phrase could also be rendered “Jesus the crucified One.” Jesus’ identity would forever be linked with the fact that He was crucified for the sin of humankind. The women did not risk uncertainty and danger just to visit the tomb of Jesus the Teacher or Jesus the Healer. Jesus the Crucified brought these faithful followers early that Sunday morning.

VERSE 6

No greater news has ever been reported than that which the angel spoke: **He is not here**. These women had watched as Jesus’ body was laid in the

tomb just three days earlier. If He was not here, had someone taken Him before they arrived? No. The announcement continued, creating hope and joy. Jesus had been resurrected, just as He had said.

This sentence contains several important spiritual truths. Jesus had **risen** from the dead, yet not in the same way as Lazarus and others. Jesus was resurrected by the power of the Heavenly Father, never to die again.

Jesus' resurrection occurred **just as he said**. On several occasions, Jesus told the disciples He would be betrayed and killed in Jerusalem (John 13:21; Matt. 16:21). He also promised He would be raised again from the dead (Matt. 20:19). The angel's statement must have reminded the women of Jesus' promise, now fulfilled.

The angel invited them to **see the place where he lay**. Many writers have observed that the stone was moved not to allow Jesus to escape but to permit the witnesses to see the empty tomb for themselves. Not only these women but also Peter and John would view the vacant grave (John 20:3-8).

VERSES 7-8

The women not only were blessed to be the first witnesses of the empty tomb, but they also were tasked with the announcement of Jesus' resurrection. Doubtless, they had many questions. However, the disciples needed to know that Jesus had been raised from the dead. The news would not wait. The women were to **go quickly** and share this vital message.

The disciples were to meet Jesus in **Galilee**. This northern region of Israel had been their home. Jesus had already told His followers He would go there after He was resurrected (Matt. 26:32). Yet He appeared to the disciples twice in Jerusalem before they finally traveled to Galilee as He instructed. They had remained behind locked doors out of fear of the Jews (John 20:19), but they fully believed after seeing not only an empty tomb but also a living Lord (John 20:20).

The term **listen** is a strong interjection sometimes translated "behold." The point was that the women had heard the wonderful good news and should hurry to share it with the disciples.

Notwithstanding the angel's injunction for them not to fear, the women left the tomb with a mixture of **fear and great joy**. They were still somewhat anxious because of their encounter with the angel but felt great joy about the message they bore. They wasted no time, leaving **quickly**. They did not walk home but **ran** to tell the disciples. The term **disciples** likely included not only the Eleven (the apostles minus Judas, who betrayed Jesus and committed suicide) but also other followers of Jesus. This larger group had gathered to comfort one another in the days following the crucifixion.

We also have a commission to tell others the good news of Jesus' resurrection. May we sense a similar urgency to share our encounter with the risen Lord.

VERSES 9-10

The women were on their way back to Jerusalem when **Jesus met them**. He deliberately intercepted them as they hurried to tell the disciples about the empty tomb. If the group included other women (as indicated

MATTHEW 28:7-8

⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has risen from the dead and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; you will see him there.' Listen, I have told you."

⁸ So, departing quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, they ran to tell his disciples the news.

MATTHEW 28:9-10

⁹ Just then Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" They came up, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him.

¹⁰ Then Jesus told them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to leave for Galilee, and they will see me there."

in Luke 23:55), Jesus' encounter with Mary (recounted in John 20:14-18) would have already occurred.

Imagine their delight as they rushed up to Him, kneeling and grasping His feet. This eastern form of acknowledging authority also intimates affection. The fact that they **worshiped him** is important. Some cultists, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, teach that Jesus was not fully God but was an archangel. They ignore the fact that no angel accepted the worship of human beings. For Jesus to accept the worship of these women meant He received something reserved only for God (Matt. 4:10). As the resurrected King, Jesus is worthy of our worship.

Jesus' response to the women was to reiterate what they had heard from the angel. He encouraged them: **do not be afraid**. Even as they worshiped Jesus, their amazed hearts must have felt some element of alarm. Also, they were already in a heightened state of excitement and anxiety because of their earlier experience.

Jesus also repeated the instructions for them to **go and tell** the disciples to proceed to Galilee, where they would see Him. Jesus referred to the disciples as **my brothers**. Earlier, at the Passover event, He had changed their designation from servants to friends (John 15:15). Here, they were further elevated to brothers.

(In PSG, p. 78) **How does Jesus' designation of His disciples (who had earlier abandoned Him) as "brothers" encourage you?**

THE COVER-UP CONCOCTED (MATT. 28:11-15)

VERSE 11

The evidence of Jesus' resurrection was overwhelming. Eyewitnesses included not only the women and two of the disciples (John 20:3-9), but also the Roman guards. They had felt the earthquake and saw the angel. On awakening from their faint, they had seen the open tomb and doubtless discovered that Jesus' body was gone. Still, they were mere soldiers with obligations to their superiors. Having failed in their task of keeping the sealed tomb intact, they faced the unenviable duty of reporting the situation.

As the women were on their way to report to the disciples what they had seen and heard, the guards went to the chief priests who had stationed them at the grave under orders from Pilate. Notice that only **some of the guards** fulfilled this task. Perhaps the others ran away and tried to escape the fate of failure. Perhaps they remained at the tomb, protecting it from further incursion. All we can know for sure is that some of the soldiers reported **everything that had happened**.

MATTHEW 28:11

¹¹ As they were on their way, some of the guards came into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened.

VERSES 12-14

The chief priests must have been simultaneously astonished and frightened. Their greatest fear stood before them in the form of witnesses to the empty tomb. They were unwilling to take sole responsibility for deciding a course of action. The natural group to make the decision would be **the elders**. This term generally referred to the Sanhedrin, a group of political and religious leaders. Having assembled the larger group, they debated their options and **agreed on a plan**.

Conspiracy would be the better word for what they did. Bribery was preferable to allowing the general populace to believe Jesus had actually been resurrected. Corrupting Roman troops would not be easy, for their lives could be at risk. Offering **a large sum of money**, the Jewish leaders followed their pattern of using money to subvert justice. They had successfully employed this strategy with Judas in his betrayal and with the false witnesses at Jesus' trial (Matt. 26:14-16, 59-61).

The elders' false explanation of the empty tomb focused on blaming Jesus' disciples for stealing His body during the night. Their instructions for the soldiers were absurd. No reasonable person of that day could believe the handful of fishermen and other followers of Jesus could overcome a detail of trained troops. For a Roman soldier to be found sleeping on duty would have resulted in severe punishment, even execution. Yet the Jewish leaders thought this big lie would be more believable to the general public than the idea that Jesus had risen from the grave.

The elders knew the danger would be Pilate, the Roman governor. They had already intimidated him into agreeing to Jesus' crucifixion. Pilate tried several times to release Jesus, but the Jewish leaders induced the crowd to call for Jesus' crucifixion. They also threatened to tell Caesar that Pilate was disloyal if he did not accede to their demands (Luke 23:13-24; John 19:12). They promised the guards they would keep them out of trouble if news of their supposed sleeping on duty reached Pilate's ears.

VERSE 15

The conspiracy reached an agreement as the guards accepted the bribe and followed the elders' orders. Having purchased the Romans' lie, the Jewish leaders had little trouble spreading the story among the people. The phrase **to this day** referred to the time of Matthew's penning his Gospel. Yet, it also applies to the larger frame of history as many people—Jewish and others—prefer to believe the lie that Jesus did not rise from the grave. Even when faced with the undeniable facts of Jesus' resurrection, people refuse to believe in Him. After all, to accept the truth of Jesus' resurrection demands accepting Him for who He was—Christ the Lord.

In what ways can you share your belief in the risen Christ to overcome the doubt of people who reject the reality of Jesus' resurrection?

MATTHEW 28:12-14

¹² After the priests had assembled with the elders and agreed on a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money ¹³ and told them, "Say this, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him while we were sleeping.' ¹⁴ If this reaches the governor's ears, we will deal with him and keep you out of trouble."

MATTHEW 28:15

¹⁵ They took the money and did as they were instructed, and this story has been spread among Jewish people to this day.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

INTRODUCE: Direct attention to the word “Celebrate” written on a whiteboard. Point out that most everyone loves celebrations—holidays, birthdays, successes, promotions, and major events. Instruct the group to chat with someone sitting next to them and to name things they personally celebrate. Afterward, invite them to share some of their responses, especially ones that are unique.

TRANSITION: *Easter is a day when Christians all over the world celebrate Jesus’ victory over death! Because of this, our lives have undergone the most drastic, important, and wonderful transformation that could ever occur!* Direct the group to Matthew’s account of Jesus’ resurrection in Matthew 28. Explain the setting of these events using Understand the Context (pp. 74-75; PSG, pp. 73-74) and **Pack Item 4** (*Time Line: Matthew*).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Invite the group to listen as a volunteer reads Matthew 28:1-4 and to identify the characters in this story. Refer to **Pack Item 10** (*Poster: Witnesses of Jesus’ Resurrection*). Discuss the number of people who saw Jesus after His resurrection and how many times these encounters were recorded in Scripture. As they share responses, make three columns on a whiteboard labeled “Mary Magdalene/Mary,” “The Angel,” “The Priests and Elders,” and “The Guards.”

EXAMINE: Invite the group to help you determine who these characters were and how they responded on that day. Ask someone to read Matthew 27:56 and Luke 8:2 to learn more about the two women. As they share what these verses reveal, write their responses in the column labeled “Mary Magdalene/Mary.”

ASK: *What do verses 3-4 tell us about the angel and about his actions?* Record responses in the appropriate column. *What is the significance of the angel’s sitting on the stone? What do his appearance “like lightning” and his robe “white as snow” indicate about him?* Explain that his majesty and heavenly purity blended together perfectly in his brilliant display of glory. *What do we learn about the guards in verse 4?* Record responses under the correct column on the board.

EMPHASIZE: *The guards were trained soldiers who had been in battle and undoubtedly had faced horrifying circumstances, yet they were unprepared for an encounter with an angel of God. Fear gripped them so that they lost consciousness and even appeared to be dead.*

DISCUSS: *How would you explain the contrast between the women and the soldiers? How were their experiences similar? How were their experiences different?* (PSG, p. 76)

READ: Direct a volunteer to read aloud Matthew 28:5-10 as the group listens to determine how the women’s fear differed from that of the guards. Invite responses and write them in the correct columns on the board.

EXPLAIN: Besides the comfort the women received from the angel, the women could likely take comfort by recalling that Jesus had already revealed to them multiple times that He would be raised from the dead. Direct volunteers to read aloud these accounts: Matthew 16:21; 17:23; 20:19.

ASK: Describe the assignment given to the women by the angel. How did he underscore the importance of the assignment? What does verse 8 indicate to us about the fear the women felt as opposed to the fear the guards had felt? (Write responses on the board in the proper columns.)

DECLARE: Next, the women's morning of surprises was punctuated with the biggest surprise of all. They saw Jesus! Jesus repeated the assignment the angel had given.

ASK: What did their act of worship indicate about the women? Write responses in the proper column. How does Jesus' designation of His disciples (who had earlier abandoned Him) as "brothers" encourage you? (PSG, p. 78)

READ: Matthew 28:11-15 shows us the lengths some will go to in an effort to cover up the truth. Read those verses.

ASK: Describe the conspiracy that was hatched between the guards and the chief priests. Look together at **Pack Item 7** (Chart: *The Opponents of Jesus*) to see who these people were and what they believed. What were the motives of the priests and elders? Of the guards? Record responses on the whiteboard in the appropriate columns.

DISCUSS: Summarize the story the priests concocted (see p. 79 for more details). How do people try to explain away the truth of Jesus' resurrection? What are some of the problems with their explanations? (PSG, p. 79)

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

SUMMARIZE: Enlist a volunteer to read aloud the first bulleted statement under In My Context (PSG, p. 80): *Jesus conquered death, affirming His identity and giving all believers hope.* Then ask: *What evidence causes you to believe and place your hope in the resurrection?* Enlist a volunteer to read the third statement: *Even when faced with the undeniable facts of Jesus' resurrection, some will refuse to believe in Him.* Ask: *What actions do you need to take to share the truth with those who have yet to accept Jesus and the truth of His resurrection?*

DIRECT: Lead the group to discuss their responses to the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 80): *Discuss as a group how Jesus' resurrection gives hope to the group members. Record insights gained from the discussion. How did the discussion encourage you in your own spiritual walk?*

PRAY: Close in prayer, asking God to help group members place their hope in Jesus alone.



PRACTICE

- Make any necessary adjustments to your Resurrection Day plans to be sure they include sincere worship and celebration of Jesus' resurrection.
- Spend time this week praying for individual needs of your group members. Include spiritual as well as physical needs. Look for ways you can include your group in ministering to these needs.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

Share a news story about someone who is (or was) missing. Describe the responses and possible feelings of the person's loved ones. Ask: *What conflicting stories arose about his or her possible whereabouts and cause of disappearance?* Point out that today's story is about Jesus' body disappearing on the third day after His crucifixion. Invite the group to explore the people and circumstances involved and the explanations that followed.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement the biblical evidence of Jesus' literal resurrection, explain: *In addition to Matthew's account of the resurrection, the Bible also gives us accounts in Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; and John 20:1-18. In addition, Peter talked of the resurrection at Pentecost (Acts 2:22-36). Paul explained that the resurrection was to be included in the proclamation of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:1-18). John spoke of the resurrected Christ when he described his vision of the slaughtered lamb (Rev. 5).* Summarize these verses and discuss additional information they provide that confirms and inspires us as Christians to embrace and celebrate the resurrection.
- Focus on this session's memory verse (Matt. 28:6). Distribute cards to volunteers on which you have written words or phrases from the verse. Ask the volunteers to come to the front and work together to place the cards in the correct order. Then have them hold their cards facing the group so that everyone can read the verse aloud together. Distribute copies of **Pack Item 5** (*Bookmark: Memory Verses*) and instruct the group to place them in their Bibles as a reminder to read the memory verse each day this week.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Lead the group to discuss the second question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 80): *Review your plans for celebrating Jesus' resurrection this Easter. What plans reflect worship of Him? What adjustments do you need to make to be more involved in worshipping Jesus?* Invite the group to describe the hope they have because of the faith they place upon salvation through Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Invite the group to worship and celebrate as you read the lyrics or lead them to sing "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today," by Charles Wesley.

WHAT ABOUT THE FUTURE?

Jesus will return at the end of time, so preparations must be made.

MATTHEW 24:36-51

MEMORY VERSE: MATTHEW 24:42

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Matthew 24:1–25:46, First Thoughts (p. 84), and Understand the Context (pp. 84-85). As you read, focus on what Jesus told His followers about how to prepare for His return.
- **STUDY** Matthew 24:36-51, using Explore the Text (pp. 85-89). Read these parallel passages that compare Jesus to a thief in the night: 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10; and Revelation 3:3.
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 90-91) and ideas in *QuickSource*. Reference *Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible* for ideas to customize your session. Add variety to the plans for your group this session by using at least one suggestion from More Ideas on page 92. Prepare to help the group to define and distinguish between the subtitles for this session: Be Reminded, Be Alert, Be Faithful, and Be Warned.
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Group Ministry blog (*LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry*).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; A whiteboard or large sheet of paper and a marker; Pens and highlighters; **PACK ITEM 2** (*Outline of Matthew*). Prepare to display: **PACK ITEM 3** (*Poster: Spring 2017*); and **PACK ITEM 8** (*Poster: Time Line of Jesus' Last Week*).



KEY DOCTRINE

God the Son

Jesus will return in power and glory to judge the world and to consummate His redemptive mission.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Slavery in the First Century," "'The Son of Man' in Matthew," "It Happened on the Mount of Olives," and "The Kingdom of Heaven" in the Spring 2017 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

BIBLE SKILL

Memorize Scripture.

Memorize Matthew 24:42. Read it aloud. Write it on a sheet of paper. Read it aloud again, emphasizing the verbs in the verse. Read it aloud again, emphasizing the nouns in the verse. Write the verse a second time, diagramming the sentence. What insights did you gain by diagramming the verse? How does interacting with the verse help you memorize the verse?

FIRST THOUGHTS

Forecasting the future is big business. Investors spend millions of dollars for analyses, hoping to know where the stock market is heading. A wrong decision can result in huge losses, but correct calculations can reap significant profits. Television stations hire meteorologists to predict the weather. When they are accurate, viewers can be prepared for rain or shine, sleet or snow.

Futurists offer their ideas about developments in everything from technology to social patterns. Many inventions we use daily began in the imagination of someone thinking about the future. On the more gullible side, people at the county fair line up outside the fortune teller's tent, waiting to pay for worthless predictions of their future.

(In PSG, p. 83) **How much value do you place on predictions about the future? If you knew the future, would you feel more prepared or less prepared? Explain.**

Jesus' disciples were eager to know when events regarding Jesus' future reign would occur. After His resurrection, they hoped the time had come for Israel to rise from servitude with Jesus as king (Acts 1:6). Jesus not only wanted the Twelve to understand what would come in the end of days, He also desires us to comprehend the serious challenges facing His followers in the future. We cannot know the hour of Jesus' coming, and idle speculation about such events is of little worth. However, Jesus' teachings can motivate us to live each day in a state of readiness for His return.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

MATTHEW 24:1–25:46

In Matthew 23, Jesus warned the religious rulers about God's judgment because of their hypocrisy. In the context passage for this week, Jesus shifted His teaching to His disciples and, through them, to believers of every generation. Seated on the Mount of Olives with a panoramic view of Jerusalem, Jesus discussed future events. Some scholars believe part of Jesus' statements referred to the Roman destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, while others see clear indications of end times. In either case, His instructions can be summarized in several principles.

First, people should not be deceived either by trauma or trickery. Cataclysmic circumstances happen throughout history. Jesus mentioned natural occurrences, such as earthquakes, and human conflicts, such as wars. During these difficulties, people desire Christ's intervention to relieve their suffering, but His return will not be determined by these

kinds of problems. Also, many charlatans arise during crises with claims that they are Christ, deceiving people for their own purposes.

Second, persecution and proclamation will precede these times. Jesus cautioned His disciples about the difficulties of following Him. A world that rejected Him would hate them also (John 15:18-20). Even family members would be divided because of Him (Matt. 10:34-36). In hard times, believers should faithfully carry Christ's gospel to the world. Jesus promised that every nation (*ethnos*, or people group) will have access to the gospel before the end.

Third, Jesus taught that prior to His second coming the world would experience severe tribulation unlike anything in history. He referenced Daniel's prophecy as an indication that the tribulation would be near (Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11). Nature itself will be affected as darkness covers the skies. These conditions will be so terrible that without God's intervention, all humanity would perish.

Jesus emphasized that believers should be prepared by being faithful to God every day of their lives. Since we do not know when He will come, we should live in a constant state of readiness. Jesus warned the disciples that these events would happen suddenly and without warning. The parables of Matthew 25 stress Jesus' advice for believers to be watchful and prepared because of the judgment that will follow His return.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

BE REMINDED (MATT. 24:36-41)

VERSE 36

Since the days of Christ, people have wanted to know when He would return to earth. Many predictions have been made about the date of His second coming, but those have only proven to be false. Jesus said **no one** other than the Father knows that day and hour.

Interestingly, Jesus included both ***the angels of heaven*** and Himself, ***the Son***, as not knowing the time of His coming. Angels are created beings that, while very powerful, are not omniscient. The Father has not revealed to them His plans for Christ's return. Yet how can the Son, who is God, not know specifics about His return? The answer lies in Jesus' human nature. He was fully God but also fully man. Paul's letter to the Philippians reminds us that although Jesus was completely God, He had taken on human nature. Jesus humbled himself and acted within His humanity (Phil. 2:6-8). While Jesus was able to prophesy concerning those events surrounding His return, He refused to predict a specific date.

VERSES 37-39

Jesus reminded the disciples of what happened during ***the days of Noah*** (see Gen. 6-8). The specific days Jesus referenced likely included the years from God's command to build the ark until the actual flood that engulfed the earth, about 100 years.

MATTHEW 24:36

³⁶ “Now concerning that day and hour no one knows—neither the angels of heaven nor the Son—except the Father alone.

MATTHEW 24:37-39

³⁷ As the days of Noah were, so the coming of the Son of Man will be. ³⁸ For in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah boarded the ark. ³⁹ They didn't know until the flood came and swept them all away. This is the way the coming of the Son of Man will be.

Jesus likened this period of time with the day of His return. The similarity between the two periods lay not in the condition of the earth but in the condition of the hearts and habits of the earth's population. Jesus expanded His analogy by describing the normality of daily life prior to the flood. As Noah built the ark, he also preached, calling people to repentance and righteousness (2 Pet. 2:5). His faith in God and fear of God contrasted with the people around him who disregarded his message (Heb. 11:7).

Jesus pointed out how the people went about their daily lives, ***eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage***. They did not believe Noah's warnings about the coming flood. Peter described these people as "ungodly" (2 Pet. 2:5). The Book of Hebrews says their unrighteousness was condemned by Noah's words and actions (Heb. 11:7).

Noah's neighbors ignored the danger right up to the day Noah boarded the ark. At that point they may have started wondering about the words of the strange prophet.

Even as God shut the door of the ark, the people did not fully understand the situation. Only as the flood came and the waters rose did the people begin to worry. Having rejected God's repeated warnings about their sin, the people perished as the flood swept them all away.

The phrase ***this is the way*** draws a parallel between the attitudes of these people and those of the world when Jesus returns. The cultures are different, but the conditions will be the same. Unrepentant people will continue to refuse God's call to repentance. They will go about their daily routines without concern until it is too late.

VERSES 40-41

These two verses form a type of Hebrew parallelism. Jewish writers often used two similar statements to emphasize their point. In this case, Jesus mentions ***two men*** in verse 40 and ***two women*** in verse 41. This suggests that people will not be judged based on gender.

Notice that the people in Jesus' prophecy are at work. The men are laboring in a ***field***, while the women are ***grinding grain***. Jesus used these examples to demonstrate that people will be going about their regular activities, including working at their daily jobs.

Jesus warned that ***one will be taken and one left***. In verse 31, Jesus described the gathering of "his elect" from throughout the earth. The term "elect" is used for people who have been saved through faith in Jesus.

(In PSG, p. 85) **Why might it be important to be reminded of Jesus' promised return? How should Jesus' assurance about His return impact our actions?**

MATTHEW 24:40-41

⁴⁰ Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left.

⁴¹ Two women will be grinding grain with a hand mill; one will be taken and one left.

BE ALERT (MATT. 24:42-44)

VERSES 42-43

The introductory word *therefore* ties what has been said previously with what comes next. Because Jesus' return will occur while people are going about their normal activities, as in Noah's day, Christ's followers should *be alert*. The word translated *alert* means both to wake up and to watch out. Paul used this same term in describing his warnings to the church of his day (Acts 20:31).

Believers can be lulled into complacency as Jesus' return is delayed. Peter wrote that God is giving people the opportunity to repent. However, God will not delay forever (2 Pet. 3:9). The day of judgment will arrive. The only question is when it will happen.

Jesus used another metaphor to portray the unexpected nature of His return. This word picture describes how a *homeowner* does not know when a *thief* might break into his house. Otherwise, *he would have stayed alert* and prevented the robbery.

Peter also used this illustration of the thief to describe the suddenness of the Day of the Lord (2 Pet. 3:10). In John's Revelation, Jesus warned people to be alert because He will return like a thief, suddenly and unpredictably (Rev. 3:3; 16:15). Jesus was not referring to Himself as a thief, but rather taught that His coming would be unexpected.

VERSE 44

Christians through the intervening centuries have seized on these words to motivate them to be ready. We cannot be lethargic or complacent because Christ will come at an hour that we *do not expect*.

Again, Jesus used *the Son of Man* title (see vv. 37,39) to assert the messianic promise related to His return. He often adopted this designation in referencing Himself (9:6; 10:23). Both Daniel and John employed "Son of Man" to designate the divine Christ (Dan. 7:13; Rev. 1:13; 14:14). Believers should be ready to receive their Savior who returns in power and majesty.

What can you do now to ensure you will be alert and ready when Christ returns?

BE FAITHFUL (MATT. 24:45-47)

VERSE 45

Tucked into the opening phrase of this verse is the little word *then*. Like the word *therefore*, this term ties what comes after with what Jesus said before. In other words, in light of the certainty of Christ's return, how should people behave? Jesus shifted metaphors from the unpredictable break-in by a thief. In this new parable, He described a *master* who has gone away, putting a *servant ... in charge of his household*.

MATTHEW 24:42-43

⁴² Therefore be alert, since you don't know what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But know this: If the homeowner had known what time the thief was coming, he would have stayed alert and not let his house be broken into.

MATTHEW 24:44

⁴⁴ This is why you are also to be ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

MATTHEW 24:45

⁴⁵ Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give them food at the proper time?

In this story, Jesus asked about the responsible action of a servant who is **faithful and wise**. These adjectives refer to the servant's trustworthiness and wisdom. The master was able to entrust his household into the servant's care. The servant showed his faithfulness by giving the members of the household **food at the proper time**. So too should wise servants of Christ demonstrate their trustworthiness as they await His return.

MATTHEW 24:46-47

⁴⁶ Blessed is that servant whom the master finds doing his job when he comes. ⁴⁷ Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions.

VERSES 46-47

Servants served without anticipation of reward. They lived to obey their masters' commands. The servant in this story was simply doing what was expected of him. Although the servant had no right to expect compensation for his work, the master was delighted to find the servant working when he returned. As a result, he rewarded the servant.

So too will our Lord reward believers who faithfully await His return. He has given us a stewardship. Like the servant who provided for the master's household, we are to care for the people God has put into our spheres of influence. By sharing His Word, by ministering to people's needs, and by living rightly, we can be found faithful by our Master at His return.

The servant's reward was neither material wealth nor freedom. Rather, the master compensated the servant's stewardship by giving him greater responsibilities. The idea of putting him **in charge of all his possessions** is similar to Joseph's experience in the Old Testament (Gen. 41:41-42).

We do not serve God in order to gain possessions, but out of love for our Lord. Our reward is fulfilled when He says to us, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (Matt. 25:21). Jesus used another parable in the subsequent chapter to reiterate the principle stated in this verse. The faithful stewards were put in charge of "many things." The time of the Lord's absence is to be marked by unflinching service.

MATTHEW 24:48-50

⁴⁸ But if that wicked servant says in his heart, 'My master is delayed,' ⁴⁹ and starts to beat his fellow servants, and eats and drinks with drunkards, ⁵⁰ that servant's master will come on a day he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know.

What are some ways God expects believers to be faithful as we await Christ's return?

BE WARNED (MATT. 24:48-51)

VERSES 48-50

Jesus contrasted the faithful servant with a **wicked servant**. The word translated *wicked* refers to someone who is evil in character. It can also mean a worthless person. This kind of servant does not seek to honor the master or to fulfill his role. Notice the phrase **says in his heart**. The heart was considered the seat of the soul, one's true nature. He conspired with his own heart to fulfill his evil desires.

This wicked person thought that because the master was delayed he could do as he pleased. He obviously thought he would not be held accountable for his actions.

An evil heart shows itself in relationship to other people. Instead of serving the household, like the faithful servant, this servant used his position to mistreat his fellow servants. He considered himself superior to others, although he was a servant like them. Like the unforgiving debtor of Matthew 18, this servant did not appreciate his master's benevolence but demonstrated disdain for his peers.

In addition, the evil servant began associating with people who affirmed his behavior: he ***eats and drinks with drunkards***. He was self-indulgent and sought the company of others like him.

The day of accountability is inevitable. While the wicked servant thought he could act with impunity, his master returned unexpectedly. This image mirrors Christ's coming, since it will be on a day and at an hour that no one knows. Note the definite statement ***will come***. The master's return was certain. Even so, Christ will definitely return in power and judgment.

VERSE 51

The wicked servant's fate serves as a warning to anyone who disregards God's call to repentance and faithfulness. In the parable, the master saw how the evil servant misused his trust and executed judgment on him. Observe the three aspects of the punishment exacted by the master. First, he ***cut him to pieces***, portraying the death penalty which is the fate of all sinners who do not accept Christ: "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23).

Second, he placed him ***with the hypocrites***. This statement is reminiscent of Jesus' warning to the hypocrites who could discern weather patterns but remained ignorant of the signs of the times and God's judgment (Luke 12:56). In the previous chapter (Matt. 23), Jesus proclaimed a series of "woes" to the Pharisees because of their hypocrisy.

Third, the wicked servant would be consigned to a place of punishment. Obviously, this reference would not be possible for an earthly master, but represents God's judgment of sinners who die without Christ. The place is described as somewhere the person would experience ***weeping and gnashing of teeth***, representing utter anguish.

In our context passage, the unprofitable servant is cast into "outer darkness," where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 25:30). This picture obviously refers to hell, which is a real place of suffering and punishment to which people go who do not trust Jesus. People who reject Christ and continue to do evil will discover too late that they should have corrected their sinful ways.

Jesus told this story not with delight in the judgment of sinners, but with the desire that people would heed His warning, repent of their sins, and be saved by receiving Him as Savior.

(In PSG, p. 89) **What does this parable reveal about different attitudes people may have about Jesus' return? How are these attitudes seen or expressed today?**

MATTHEW 24:51

⁵¹ He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

DISCUSS: Invite the group to name some ways people predict possible future events. Supplement responses by including some of the following: analysts study of the stock market; meteorologists predict weather; futurists offer ideas for inventions based on speculation of future needs; fortune tellers use cards, crystal balls, and so forth. Ask: *How much value do you place on predictions about the future? If you knew the future, would you feel more prepared or less prepared? Explain.* (PSG, p. 83)

TRANSITION: *Jesus' disciples were eager to know about future events concerning Jesus' reign as king. Jesus had plenty He needed to teach them before the time came for Him to depart this world.* Bring the setting for this event to light using **Pack Item 2** (*Outline of Matthew*); **Pack Item 3** (*Poster: Spring 2017*); and **Pack Item 8** (*Poster: Time Line of Jesus' Last Week*). Invite the group to delve into today's Scripture passage to find some of the lessons He taught them.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

DIRECT ATTENTION: Point out on a whiteboard a large box, which you have drawn and divided into four quadrants. At the tops of the quadrants, write: "Be Reminded," "Be Alert," "Be Faithful," and "Be Warned." Explain: *In today's text, Jesus urged the disciples (and His future followers) to do each of these with regard to His future return.* Differentiate between the four by asking: *What does it mean to be reminded? To be alert? To be faithful? To be warned?*

READ: As a volunteer reads Matthew 24:36-41, direct the group to determine what Jesus told the disciples.

ASK: *What did Jesus' revelation that only the Father knows when Jesus will return teach us about Jesus?* Point out that, though Jesus was fully God, He became fully man to carry out His mission here.

SUMMARIZE: Invite someone to summarize in one sentence the reminder Jesus gave. Write that sentence in the box under the column labeled, "Be Reminded."

ASK: *How was the flood in Noah's day similar to the return of Christ?* (From the PSG, p. 85): *Why might it be important to be reminded of Jesus' promised return? How should Jesus' assurance about His return impact our actions?*

READ: Request that the group listen as a volunteer reads aloud Matthew 24:42-44 to discover why Jesus said His followers should be alert.

ASK: *What might prompt someone to fail to stay alert concerning a possible upcoming event?* Examples may include an uncertainty that it was really going to happen, weariness of waiting, and so forth. *Have any of you ever had your home burglarized? What would you have done differently if you had known that it was going to happen?*

EMPHASIZE: *Unlike the person whose home was burglarized, we know that Jesus is coming! The hour will be a surprise, so we must expect the unexpected!*

ASK: *What characteristics describe a person who is living in anticipation of Jesus' return? What would you do differently if you knew the Lord was returning today?* (PSG, p. 86)

SUMMARIZE: Invite someone to summarize in one sentence what Jesus said about being alert. Write that sentence in the box on the whiteboard labeled "Be Alert."

READ: Instruct the group to listen as a volunteer reads aloud Matthew 24:45-47 to find how Jesus tells His followers to be faithful.

ASK: Create two teams. Assign one team to the master and one team to the servant. Direct teams to review the passage, looking for the qualities and the motivations of their assigned character. Call for volunteers to share their findings.

SUMMARIZE: Invite someone to summarize in one sentence what Jesus taught about faithful service. Write that sentence in the box on the whiteboard labeled "Be Faithful."

ASK: *What characterizes the way a person tries to serve Christ if he or she is not motivated by love?* (PSG, p. 88)

READ: As a volunteer reads Matthew 24:48-51, invite the group to determine what Jesus had to say about being warned.

STUDY: *What does verse 48 indicate about the servant's heart? Point out that this indicates that his actions were much more than an oversight or a mistake. This man also erred by his failure to be alert to his master's return, even though he knew it would happen one day.* Lead the group to use the information under Verses 48-49 (PSG, p. 88) for clarification.

ASK: *What does this parable reveal about different attitudes people may have about Jesus' return? How are these attitudes seen or expressed today?* (PSG, p. 89)

SUMMARIZE: Invite someone to summarize in one sentence the warning Jesus gave His followers. Write that sentence in the box on the whiteboard labeled "Be Warned."

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

DIRECT: Call attention to In My Context in PSG (p. 90). Read the first bulleted statement, and ask volunteers to share: *What tasks have been assigned to you?* Read the second statement, and ask: *What other characteristics are required besides perseverance and consistency?* Read the third statement, and ask: *What pitfalls might cause you to allow your service to falter?* Read the fourth statement, and guide the group members to silently reflect on their answer to the following question: *In light of your knowledge that Jesus will return, what steps do you need to take to act on the tasks God has given you and to purify your heart?*

CHALLENGE: Encourage the group to discuss the third question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 90): *Discuss with your Bible study group insights gained from today's study that could be shared with someone who is an unbeliever or who is taking his or her commitment to Christ lightly. Record notes from the discussion. Pray for opportunities to talk with others about the certainty of Jesus' return and their need to prepare for it.* Call for volunteers to share their responses.



PRACTICE

- Evaluate your heart as you meditate on the final question of the study: in light of your knowledge that Jesus will return, what steps do you need to take to act on the tasks God has given you and to purify your heart? Commit those actions to God.
- Ask others in the group to contact missing group members and urge them to be present for next week's group time: How Do We Remember?

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

Display a weather radio. Discuss its purposes. Point out the main topics of the session, which you have written on the board: Be Reminded, Be Alert, Be Faithful, Be Warned. Ask: *How does the radio help you to be reminded? To be alert? To be prepared? To be warned?* Invite the group to share experiences when weather radios have helped them to avoid disasters or possible disasters. Explain that today's Scripture tells us how Jesus prepared the disciples and future followers for a wonderful reward as opposed to total destruction.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To highlight memorizing Matthew 24:42, break into small teams and have each team complete the Bible Skill in the PSG on page 85.
- To supplement discussion of Matthew 24:43, point out that Jesus was compared to a thief who came unexpectedly. Read and discuss these verses, which also use that analogy: 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10; and Revelation 3:3.
- To supplement discussion of the wicked servant in Matthew 24:42-45, ask: *Have you ever had a coworker who seemed to work diligently when his or her supervisor was present, but became a "slacker" when the supervisor was absent? Without giving names, describe this situation. What consequences did these actions bring about for this person? For his or her coworkers?*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Ask: *What have you learned today about preparing for the return of Christ?* Challenge the group to reflect on the In My Context section (PSG, p. 90) throughout the coming week.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Read the lyrics or sing together "Jesus Is Coming Again," by John W. Peterson. Comment that Jesus' coming is going to be a great celebration for those who are faithful and prepared!

How Do We Remember?

Jesus' sacrifice is to be reverently remembered through the observing of the Lord's Supper.

MATTHEW 26:17-30

MEMORY VERSE: LUKE 22:19

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Matthew 26:1-35, First Thoughts (p. 94), and Understand the Context (pp. 94-95).
- **STUDY** Matthew 26:17-30, using Explore the Text (pp. 95-99). Consult the *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary* (available in print and digital format from *LifeWay.com*) for additional insight. Refer to a Bible dictionary to learn the purpose and symbolism of the Passover celebration.
- **PLAN** the group time using the ideas in Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 100-101) and More Ideas (p. 102). Focus on how the Passover celebration compares to the Lord's Supper and how the new covenant Jesus provided fulfills the old covenant. Recruit a volunteer from the group to research and share background information on Passover during the session.
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid (*MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible*).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; A whiteboard or large sheet of paper and a marker; An anniversary or wedding invitation; Index cards; **PACK ITEM 5** (*Bookmark: Memory Verses*). Prepare to display: **PACK ITEM 8** (*Poster: Time Line of Jesus' Last Week*).



KEY DOCTRINE

Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is a symbolic act of obedience whereby members of the church, through partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine, memorialize the death of the Redeemer and anticipate His second coming.

BIBLE SKILL

Use a Bible dictionary to learn more about Passover and its relationship to the Lord's Supper.

Look up "Passover" in a Bible dictionary. Review Scripture passages listed in the entry. Look for connections between the Passover and Jesus' death and resurrection. What are the primary differences between the Passover feast and the Lord's Supper?

FIRST THOUGHTS

When a man and woman meet at the altar and exchange vows to become husband and wife, the anniversary of that day is one of the first things added to their calendars. Every year on that date, they usually give serious attention to remembering and celebrating the day they devoted themselves to each other in marriage. Each year, they find more reasons to honor the moment they pledged their devotion to each other. Their wedding anniversary draws them together and gives them hope as they embrace another year of life together.

(In PSG, p. 93) **What special days do you celebrate? How do you celebrate them? How does your celebration enable you to look forward to the future?**

In a way, the Lord's Supper serves the same purpose as an anniversary celebration. It's a time of reverent remembrance. When we observe the Lord's Supper, we remember Jesus' sacrifice for us. When we take the bread, we recall His body that was broken so we could be made whole. The cup brings to our minds His blood that He shed for us so we could have eternal life. Every time we observe the Lord's Supper, we remember something else; we recall that we've given our lives to Him. Also, we have the opportunity to renew our pledge of loyalty to Him. Equally important, the Lord's Supper encourages us to look forward to the day when He will come again.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

MATTHEW 26:1-35

This chapter picks up the action midway through the final week before Jesus' death. The religious leaders colluded to kill Jesus even as He was preparing His disciples for coming events. No less a person than Caiaphas, the high priest, hosted an elite group of conspirators. About this same time, Jesus traveled to Bethany, which was home to Jesus' friends Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. Jesus often stayed in their home while ministering in Jerusalem. On this occasion, Jesus visited the home of Simon, who had been a leper. Simon was not still suffering from the disease; otherwise, he could not have hosted the meal. Likely the man had been healed by Jesus and wanted to honor Him by hosting this dinner.

Dinner was interrupted by a woman who anointed Jesus' head with fragrant oil. The group recognized it as an expensive gesture, but instead of admiring her love for Jesus they criticized the extravagance. Someone even suggested the perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Jesus, however, appreciated not only the extravagant love the woman demonstrated but also the symbolism that even she might

not have understood. Soon, Jesus would be killed and buried. In a time without embalming procedures, bodies were often anointed with oils and spices. Jesus accepted the woman's act as preparation for His burial.

Another notable event of the dinner was the abrupt departure of Judas. As he left the gathering, no one appeared to ask his purpose. Matthew did not explain why Judas chose this time to approach the chief priests to negotiate a fee for the betrayal of Jesus.

This week's focal passage depicts what happened as Jesus and the disciples gathered two days later for the Passover feast. The Lord further demonstrated His servanthood and described His upcoming sacrifice. The Passover reminded the Jewish people of God's covenant and their salvation from servitude in Egypt. Like other aspects of the sacrificial system, the Passover found its culmination in Jesus' death and resurrection. Our lesson about the Lord's Supper helps us gain a deeper appreciation for the new covenant with God made possible through Jesus' shed blood and broken body.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

PREPARATION (MATT. 26:17-19)

VERSE 17

Passover was associated with the festival of **Unleavened Bread** (Ex. 23:15). This celebration lasted seven days and reflected God's deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt (Ex. 12:15-17). During the preparation for the exodus, the people were forbidden to use yeast in making their bread. Their use of unleavened bread related to their readiness for the call to leave their homes on the exodus journey. Yeast, or leaven, also symbolized any mixture of worldliness or sin. Consequently, not only was the bread baked without leaven, the people could not have leavened in their homes during this festival (Ex. 12:19).

The first day of the observance originally included a holy convocation (Lev. 23:4-8). As the people gathered in contemplation of God's salvation, they prepared for the Passover supper. While they were prohibited from doing any kind of servile work on this day, they were permitted to make appropriate arrangements for the meal.

The disciples asked Jesus where they should prepare for the Passover. Jerusalem was not their home. They were primarily Galileans. They would need a house large enough to share the hospitality of this special feast. Interestingly, the disciples asked Jesus about the place specifically so He might eat the meal. Certainly, they all would partake of the meal, but Jesus' teaching about His upcoming sacrifice may have suggested His eating the Passover had unique significance.

VERSE 18

A few days earlier, Jesus had sent the disciples into a nearby town to borrow a donkey for His triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1-2). In the current passage, Jesus directed the disciples to **go into the city**, meaning Jerusalem,

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Judas, the Betrayer" and "They Were Reclining: First-Century Dining Practices" in the Spring 2017 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

MATTHEW 26:17

¹⁷ On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?"

MATTHEW 26:18

¹⁸ "Go into the city to a certain man," he said, "and tell him, 'The Teacher says: My time is near; I am celebrating the Passover at your place with my disciples.'"

where they would find **a certain man**. Matthew did not indicate how Jesus knew this particular man or how the disciples would identify him. The homeowner may have been acquainted with Jesus. Jesus' reference to Himself as **the Teacher** lends credence to this interpretation. This family possibly was included in the larger group of Jesus' followers. Another possibility involves Jesus' divine omniscience, in which He had supernatural knowledge of the man and his willingness to serve Jesus and His disciples.

Jesus often referred to **my time**. He was fully aware of His ultimate destiny at the cross. Previously, He reminded various people that His time had not yet arrived. As this Passover approached, Jesus' time was **near**. Jesus' instructions to the disciples to include this statement to the homeowner further indicated that he was familiar with Jesus and His teachings.

MATTHEW 26:19

¹⁹ So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover.

VERSE 19

Unquestioned obedience is the mark of a faithful disciple. Having seen the results of Jesus' directions about the donkey earlier in the week, the disciples did not argue or ask for further explanation. They **did as Jesus had directed them**. As followers of Christ, our role is simple and our task is precise. We do what Jesus directs. Our faith in Him results in obeying His Word.

As the Twelve prepared the Passover, they not only had to locate the right place, but they also had to gather all the elements for the meal. The Passover supper involved specific components. Unleavened bread was sopped, or dipped, as it was eaten (John 13:26). The wine used for the meal probably was not fermented or alcoholic since no yeast was permitted in the Passover meal. The meat of a lamb was accompanied by bitter herbs, representing the bitterness of Israel's years in Egypt (Ex. 12:8). We recognize that the meat also pointed to the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. Just as God provided for the needs of this celebration, believers can recognize God's provisions for us and be thankful for what He provides.

(In PSG, p. 96) **What actions should a person take when preparing to participate in a Lord's Supper observance?**

MATTHEW 26:20-21

²⁰ When evening came, he was reclining at the table with the Twelve.

²¹ While they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me."

BETRAYAL (MATT. 26:20-25)

VERSES 20-21

Preparations were completed and the time arrived for Jesus and the disciples to eat the meal. The participants would be **reclining**, leaning forward on one elbow either on pillows or low couches around a short table. Given the intense nature of what was about to occur in His arrest and crucifixion, Jesus' apparent relaxed posture causes us to marvel at His inner calm.

The number of Jesus' disciples included scores of people who followed His itinerant travels. This occasion, however, included only **the Twelve**. Amazingly, among the Twelve was Judas Iscariot, who would betray Jesus.

While the atmosphere appeared relaxed, the participants would have been serious—especially since Jesus had been talking about His impending death. At this point, Jesus stunned the Twelve by revealing **one of you will betray me**. They fully expected that His opposition would include the Pharisees, scribes, and chief priests, since these groups had consistently attacked Jesus. But they would have been unprepared for the finger of accusation to point toward one of Jesus’ closest followers.

VERSES 22-23

To describe the disciples’ reaction as **deeply distressed** might have been an understatement. The phrase suggests an excessive response, much like someone becoming violently ill. The term for *distressed* involves sorrow and emotional heaviness. They surely were perplexed and alarmed that one of their companions would betray their Master.

Matthew recalled the situation with firsthand knowledge as his voice joined the cacophony of confusion. Each one probably began speaking at once, expressing shock and dismay. All of them denied they would do such a terrible thing. The phrase **“Surely not I, Lord?”** notes that they did not indict one another but focused on declaring their personal innocence. They referred to Jesus as *Lord*. This word was not the typical term often used for a rabbi or teacher but rather unequivocally acknowledged Jesus’ authority.

John recalled that Peter urged him to ask Jesus the identity of the betrayer (John 13:22-25). Matthew only related Jesus’ response. The betrayer would be someone **who dipped his hand** with Jesus **in the bowl**. John went further and noted that Jesus actually dipped a piece of bread and handed it to Judas (John 13:26).

Jesus’ use of the shared bowl portrayed the familiar nature of the betrayer. The perpetrator would not be a stranger or even a known enemy. Rather, he would be a member of Christ’s inner circle, someone who shared His friendship and ate at His table.

VERSE 24

Jesus’ death would occur not merely because of the betrayer but in fulfillment of Scripture. Again, Jesus referred to Himself as **the Son of Man** to reemphasize His role as Messiah. Numerous passages had been written about Him, specifically detailing His betrayal, suffering, and death (Ps. 22; Isa. 53). Before the world began, God the Father had determined the sacrifice necessary for our salvation (Rev. 13:8; Acts 2:23). Still, Jesus acknowledged the severe consequence of God’s judgment of the person by whom He would be betrayed. To say **it would have been better** for that man **if he had not been born** declares the dreadful verdict awaiting him.

VERSE 25

Earlier, Matthew’s narrative suggested that all of the disciples were denying their involvement. At this point, however, Judas specifically asked, **“Surely not I, Rabbi?”** Significantly, he used a different term from the other disciples as recorded in verse 22. While they called Jesus *Lord*, Judas referred to Him as *Rabbi*. For Judas, Jesus was not Master, but Teacher.

MATTHEW 26:22-23

²² Deeply distressed, each one began to say to him, “Surely not I, Lord?” ²³ He replied, “The one who dipped his hand with me in the bowl—he will betray me.

MATTHEW 26:24

²⁴ The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for him if he had not been born.”

MATTHEW 26:25

²⁵ Judas, his betrayer, replied, “Surely not I, Rabbi?” “You have said it,” he told him.

Note Matthew's identification of Judas as Jesus' **betray**er. From that night on, Judas would bear the singular association as the one who betrayed Christ. Jesus did not make a public denunciation of Judas before the other disciples but merely responded to Judas's question by saying, "**You have said it.**" In His divine omniscience, Jesus had known all along that Judas would betray Him. He included the betrayer in the group of apostles and made him the treasurer, a post Judas abused by stealing from the moneybag (John 12:6). At this point, Jesus made it clear to Judas that He knew his plans.

As we react to Judas's betrayal, we should recognize that none of us are beyond betraying Christ in one way or another. We must always be diligent in our loyalty to Jesus.

(In PSG, p. 97) **What was the difference in Judas's betrayal and Peter's denial? In what ways do some modern believers betray or deny Christ?**

REMEMBRANCE (MATT. 26:26-30)

VERSE 26

The phrase **as they were eating** indicates Jesus incorporated what we know as the Lord's Supper into the celebration of the Passover feast. John's Gospel places it toward the end of the meal (John 13:2). The group also sang a psalm and left afterward (Matt. 26:30), supporting the placement of the Lord's Supper at the conclusion. Jesus' sacrifice completed the picture of atonement found in the Passover.

The **bread** Jesus used was not ordinary bread but was special unleavened bread prepared without yeast. Notice the deliberateness with which Jesus employed the bread. He **took** it, reaching in such a way that caught the attention of the disciples. He **blessed** it. Prayers already had been said at the beginning and throughout the meal, but Jesus offered a further blessing since this particular bread represented His body that would be broken. Imagine His emotions as He **broke** the bread. Finally, Jesus **gave** the bread to the disciples. Earlier, He reminded them that He came to give His life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28). While Roman and Jewish authorities were culpable in Jesus' death, Jesus declared that no one took His life from Him but that He laid it down of His own volition (John 10:18).

As Jesus instructed the disciples to eat the bread, He said it was His **body**. Jesus used the bread to symbolize His body as a sacrifice for human sin. Luke's Gospel includes the phrase "given for you," indicating the atoning nature of His death (Luke 22:19).

VERSES 27-28

After the disciples ate the bread, Jesus **took a cup**. Passover services involve four cups, or servings. Again, Jesus offered thanks before giving the cup to the disciples. Imagine the love Jesus has for us! Knowing the

MATTHEW 26:26

²⁶ As they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take and eat it; this is my body."

MATTHEW 26:27-28

²⁷ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks, he gave it to them and said, "Drink from it, all of you. ²⁸ For this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

cup represented the blood He was about to shed, He thanked the Father. Instructing all the disciples to drink, Jesus passed the cup to them. John's account specifies that Judas had already left the supper (John 13:26-30).

The Old Testament described several covenants God established with various individuals, including Abraham, Jacob, and David. However, none had the nature or cost as **the covenant** Jesus would establish with His **blood**. The shedding of blood was unique and necessary. Blood represented life. When animals were sacrificed in Jewish worship, God appointed the life blood sprinkled on the altar to be atonement for people's sins (Lev. 17:11). Since the penalty for sin is death (Rom. 6:23), only death can atone for sin. The writer of Hebrews reminds us that without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sin (Heb. 9:22).

The cup represented Jesus' blood that would be shed **for many**. Jesus did not die for a select few but to make the forgiveness of sins possible for everyone (John 3:16). While not everyone will be saved, Jesus' blood provided for the salvation of anyone who repents and receives Him as Savior.

VERSE 29

Jesus' concluding statement provokes many different opinions. He told the disciples He would not drink of this fruit of the vine again until a future time. Some writers interpret the phrase **my Father's kingdom** as the millennial age when Jesus will reign on the earth. Others believe it points to the time following Jesus' resurrection.

The term **new** indicates that whenever He joins them in a future meal, it will be different than what they had experienced up to that point. Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection made the celebration no longer about the Jewish exodus but a remembrance of His death, while at the same time anticipating His return (1 Cor. 11:23-26).

VERSE 30

A typical part of the Passover service included singing psalms. Psalms 115-118 likely were the praise songs shared during the conclusion of the meal. Although Jesus would experience intense prayer later that evening, He offered a song of praise as the group prepared to leave for the Mount of Olives. Jesus often went there to pray in the garden of Gethsemane. In just a few hours, Jesus would experience betrayal, arrest, torture, and crucifixion. Yet, in these quiet evening moments, He raised His voice in praise to the Heavenly Father, who directed these events. Let us always be mindful of Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf and live in such a way as honors our Savior and Lord.

(In PSG, p. 99) **What do Jesus' actions in this passage reveal about His mission and purpose? In what ways does the Lord's Supper motivate you to live differently in light of Christ's death and resurrection?**

MATTHEW 26:29

²⁹ But I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

MATTHEW 26:30

³⁰ After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

ILLUSTRATE: Display an anniversary or wedding invitation. Point out the date of the event; emphasize that it is, or will be, one of the most important dates of the couple's lives. If you are married, share your wedding date, what it means to you, and some things you and your spouse have done to celebrate. Ask: *What special days do you celebrate? How do you celebrate them? How does your celebration enable you to look forward to the future?* (PSG, p. 93)

TRANSITION: *Today's Scripture passage is about an important event for Jesus' followers. Jesus explained the meanings of each of the elements of this event. Though the disciples didn't understand everything they were told, the meaning would soon become much clearer. Jesus' followers have commemorated this event ever since.* Invite the group to join you in reading about what came to be known as the Lord's Supper.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

INTRODUCE: Display **Pack Item 8** (*Poster: Time Line of Jesus' Last Week*) and explain that the occasion was Thursday, the day before Jesus would be crucified. Point out that the poster's image is a common representation of the Last Supper. Lead the group to reflect on what emotions the image invokes in them.

READ: Direct a volunteer to read aloud Matthew 26:17-19, as the group listens for what celebration was being observed and what preparation needed to take place.

EXPOUND: After group members share their observations, add the following: *Jewish people crowded into Jerusalem yearly for the Passover. They secured places to eat the Passover meal as families. Jesus and His disciples had become a family, and they needed an appropriate room. Jesus gave them directions as to where they could find such a room.*

ASK: *How do you think Jesus knew the specific man and where he could be found? What preparations had to be made for the feast?*

EXPLAIN: *The lamb had to be taken to the temple to be slaughtered. The blood was poured on the altar. Then it was returned to the house and roasted. It had to be ready by sunset.*

CLARIFY: *The purpose of the Passover celebration was to commemorate the time when the death angel passed over the homes of the Hebrews who had put blood on their doorposts.* Lead the group to read the comments under Verse 19 (PSG, pp. 95-96) to help them understand the preparation that took place before the Passover meal. Then allow the volunteer who researched Passover to share what he or she learned.

GUIDE: *Jesus was about to fulfill and reveal a new meaning for the annual Passover feast. The purpose of the Lord's Supper would be to remember the new covenant including Jesus' death, burial, resurrection, and promise of salvation.*

ASK: *What actions should a person take when preparing to participate in a Lord's Supper observance?* (PSG, p. 96)

READ: Invite the group to read Matthew 26:20-25 to see what shocking announcement Jesus made during the meal.

ASK: Describe the setting for the meal: *They reclined on the floor next to a low table, propped on one elbow, and ate with the other hand.* Highlight Jesus' announcement. Ask: *What reactions are identified in this passage?*

EXPLAIN: *The bread was dipped into a bowl of bitter herbs.* Ask: *What did the bitter herbs represent in the Passover? (The bitterness of the slavery the Israelites endured.) What did they come to represent in the Lord's Supper? (The bitterness of Jesus' suffering.)*

ASK: *What was the difference in Judas's betrayal and Peter's denial? In what ways do some modern believers betray or deny Christ? (PSG, p. 97)*

READ: Invite the group to listen as you read aloud Matthew 26:26-30 to see what new meaning Jesus gave concerning the bread and the cup.

ASK: *What did the unleavened bread represent in the Passover? What new symbolism did Jesus place upon the broken bread? What did the cup represent in the Passover? Point the group to the PSG (p. 98) for assistance.*

CLARIFY: *There were four cups representing four promises God made concerning deliverance: I will bring you out; I will deliver you; I will redeem you; I will take you as my people.* Ask: *How does Jesus provide these four things?*

EXPLAIN: *Jesus had made the Lord's Supper a time of remembrance of His sacrifice, His broken body, and His shed blood. In verse 29, He shares something else to be remembered: that one day we will celebrate with Jesus in heaven. This is a wonderful promise for Christians to celebrate, anticipate, and remember as the Lord's Supper is observed!*

ASK: *What do Jesus' actions in this passage reveal about His mission and purpose? In what ways does the Lord's Supper motivate you to live differently in light of Christ's death and resurrection? (PSG, p. 99)*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

DIRECT: Call attention to In My Context in the PSG (p. 100). Guide the group to review the summary statements and choose one they would like to focus on the next time they participate in the Lord's Supper. Lead them to write it on an index card, place it in their Bibles at Matthew 26, and resolve to meditate upon it to make their next observance of the Lord's Supper more meaningful.

CHALLENGE: Encourage the group to think about their responses to the questions under In My Context (PSG, p. 100). Focus attention on the second question set: *Discuss with the group commitments made by believers today. Compare the intentions of these commitments with the commitments made by the disciples to remain loyal to Jesus. How can the group hold each other accountable for keeping commitments made to Jesus? Call for responses. Challenge the group to commit to remain faithful to Jesus' demands for believers' lives.*

PRAY: Close in prayer, thanking God for His provision of salvation through Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the cross.



PRACTICE

- Evaluate your observance of the Lord's Supper. What does it mean to you? What element has today's study brought to light that can make your celebration even more meaningful?
- Send notes of encouragement to group members this week. Thank them for their faithfulness to God, challenge them to persevere, and pledge to pray for them and be available for them as they grow.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

Invite the group to share what events in their lives are the most memorable and why. Ask: *Why is it important for you to remember these events, whether they were positive or negative in nature?* Explain the importance of remembering the Lord's Supper and what it has to teach us as Christians.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To further enhance the comparison between the Passover feast and the Lord's Supper, lead the group to read 1 Corinthians 11:20 and then complete the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 99).
- To supplement discussion of the cup's representing Jesus' shed blood in Matthew 26:27-28, research and share about the significance of blood (representing life) in that time. Emphasize that the shedding of blood meant He gave His life and His all. Use information from your study on page 98 to guide the discussion.
- Distribute copies of **Pack Item 5** (*Bookmark: Memory Verses*). Work on committing Luke 22:19 to memory as a group. Discuss what this verse means to you when you hear the words as you take the Lord's Supper.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

At the beginning of the group time, invite group members to record what the Lord's Supper represents and specifically what it means to them. After the study, ask them to review what they wrote and to add anything new that was revealed to them through the study. Invite volunteers to share what they learned. Challenge the group to use these findings to enhance their experiences as they observe the Lord's Supper and to enhance their lives as they remember daily their salvation and the promise of heaven through Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Sing together or read the lyrics of "The Communion Hymn," by Keith Getty, Kristyn Getty, and Stuart Townend. Point out that the hymn celebrates the significance of the Lamb, the Lord's body, and the blood in observing the Lord's Supper.

DO I HAVE THE STRENGTH?

Jesus willingly submitted to the Father's redemptive plan.

MATTHEW 26:36-46

MEMORY VERSE: MATTHEW 26:39

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Matthew 26:36-46, First Thoughts (p. 104), and Understand the Context (pp. 104-105).
- **STUDY** Matthew 26:36-46, using Explore the Text (pp. 105-109). Focus on the contrast between Jesus' preparation for His crucifixion and the lack of preparation by the disciples.
- **PLAN** the group time using the ideas in Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 110-111), More Ideas (p. 112), ideas included in *QuickSource*, and online at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible. If needed, refresh your memory of a Venn diagram and how it works.
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Group Ministry blog (LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; A whiteboard or large sheet of paper and a marker; Pens; Index cards; and copies of **PACK ITEM 5** (*Bookmark: Memory Verses*). Prepare to display: **PACK ITEM 1** (*Map: New Testament Jerusalem*); **PACK ITEM 8** (*Poster: Time Line of Jesus' Last Week*); and **PACK ITEM 13** (*Poster: Matthew 26:39*).



KEY DOCTRINE

Son of God

Jesus honored the divine law by His personal obedience.

FIRST THOUGHTS

Prayer changes things. For some people, that statement may not be much more than a cliché. But for growing Christians, it's a dynamic life principle. Mature believers have learned to turn to the Lord in prayer when the sun rises and especially when a crisis arises. Spending time with Him in prayer gives us direction and resolve to face whatever challenge we see coming toward us.

(In PSG, p. 102) **Describe a recent crisis in your life in which you went to God in prayer. What impact did prayer have on you and on the crisis you encountered?**

Our study this week focuses on Jesus' prayer in the hours leading up to His betrayal and arrest. Knowing His crucifixion was near, Jesus sought the ear of His Father. We may have difficulty reconciling Jesus' divinity with His desire to pray. As we study this passage, remember that Jesus was fully human as well as fully God. His experience not only revealed His humanity, but it also gives us an example to follow in our times of crisis. As He submitted His will to the Father, so can we find strength for difficulty by yielding ourselves to the Father's plan. Like Jesus, we may pray passionately, but in the end we find peace as we embrace God's will.

BIBLE SKILL

Read, reflect on, and react emotionally to a Bible verse.

Reflect on Matthew 26:39. Evaluate your emotional response to this verse. Read the verse aloud. Then read the verse slowly, calling out synonyms for each word as you read it. How does this verse speak to our prayer practices? Record your thoughts.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

MATTHEW 26:36-46

Jesus' time had arrived (John 17:1). Soon His betrayer would lead armed men to arrest Him. False charges would be levied in multiple religious and political trials. He would be beaten, mocked, scourged, and finally crucified. Ultimately, He knew the resurrection was just over the horizon, but between this evening and that morning lay a terrible trail.

The Lamb of God led the disciples from the place of the Passover Supper. He had instituted a new memorial at the last supper, but they still did not fully comprehend what was about to take place. Peter declared he would die before letting Jesus be taken (Luke 22:33). Thomas expressed a lack of understanding as to where Jesus was going and how they could follow (John 14:5). Philip asked Jesus to show him the Father (John 14:8). None of them were ready. Walking out of the northeastern gate of the city, they talked further about these matters (Matt. 26:30-35).

The group crossed the brook that ran through the Kidron Valley and climbed the slope of the Mount of Olives before arriving at a garden overlooking the city. Here Jesus prayed. His closest disciples were nearby, but they failed in their prayers just as they failed in their pledges of loyalty.

Before the night was over, they all would flee into the darkness, and Jesus would be left to the designs of His enemies. Behind the scene smiled the more sinister enemy who had sought from the days of another garden to destroy any hope for God's creation (Gen. 2:15; 3:1).

Jesus' prayers displayed the humanity of the Son of Man. The occasions when He felt tired, hungry, and thirsty were mere preludes to His prayer of submission to the Father's will. His temptation in the wilderness was minor compared to the test He faced as the cup of His passion drew near. He knew His Father's design that was set into motion before the creation of the world (Rev. 13:8; Acts 2:23). With intense deliberation, Jesus willingly submitted to the Father's redemptive plan.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

COMMITTED TO THE TASK (MATT. 26:36-39)

VERSE 36

Jesus had favorite places to pray. In Galilee, He went up onto a nearby mountain, often spending the entire night in prayer. At other times, He departed into the wilderness to find a solitary place and be alone with the Heavenly Father. Near Jerusalem, the garden of **Gethsemane** was Jesus' usual refuge for intense prayer (Luke 22:39).

The word *Gethsemane* refers to a mechanism for making olive oil. As the olives were pressed, the oil would be harvested. On this night, so too would Jesus be pressed between His human nature and His divine purpose.

Unlike other occasions when Jesus prayed alone, He took the disciples with Him. Jesus instructed them to **sit here**, indicating a place perhaps near the entrance of the garden. He then went a bit farther to pray. Luke noted that Jesus also told them to pray. Incredibly, He did not instruct them to pray for Him but to pray for themselves that they might resist temptation (Luke 22:40). Matthew reports that Jesus repeated this admonition later when He found Peter asleep.

Jesus indicated while they sat *here*, He would **go over there and pray**. Sometimes prayer is a corporate activity that benefits from having several participants. However, in our most challenging moments, we often need the solitary focus of being alone with God. Jesus separated Himself a bit from His closest friends so He could share His heart with the Father.

VERSES 37-38

As Jesus went deeper into the garden, He was accompanied by **Peter and the two sons of Zebedee**, James and John. As He did at the mount of transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-2), Jesus took them with Him while leaving the others behind. Since these three would later become pillars of the church (Gal. 2:9), Jesus prepared them for leadership by letting them see Him engage in this powerful period of prayer. In the years to come, they would need to understand how to seek the face of God during desperate days.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Jesus' Inner Circle" in the Spring 2017 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

MATTHEW 26:36

³⁶ Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he told the disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray."

MATTHEW 26:37-38

³⁷ Taking along Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled.

³⁸ He said to them, "I am deeply grieved to the point of death. Remain here and stay awake with me."

Jesus' emotions are on display as we read this verse. Readers may find it difficult to think of Jesus as **sorrowful and troubled**. His disciples had witnessed Him grieve over Jerusalem's unbelief and weep at the tomb of Lazarus (Matt. 23:37; John 11:35). They saw His righteous anger at the defilement of the temple by money changers and sellers of animals (Matt. 21:12). Yet this scene revealed a side of Jesus' human nature they had not previously experienced.

The word translated *sorrowful* refers to the natural expression of grief. The idea behind being *troubled* conveys a feeling of heaviness. Indeed, as Jesus was about to bear the sin of the world on the cross, the weight of this reality must have crushed down upon Him.

Jesus was nearing the hour when the One who knew no sin would be made to be sin for us and die a horrible, painful death in our place (2 Cor. 5:21). He shared the depth of His sorrow with the three who came with Him. To say He was **deeply grieved to the point of death** related the force of His emotional pain.

Jesus' sorrow foreshadowed the destiny that awaited Him on another hillside. On the Mount of Olives, He was thinking of Mount Calvary. Gethsemane was a prelude to Golgotha. He knew the resurrection would come. He had the power to lay down His life and the authority to take it up again (John 10:18). Only a divine being could make such a statement. Yet, in His humanity, the reality of suffering and dying was overshadowed only by the larger pain of taking our sin debt on Himself (1 Pet. 2:24).

By this time, it was late into the night. The entire group was tired. Jesus tried to impress on the disciples the importance of their watchfulness, but their bodies craved sleep. Jesus told the three to **remain** a little distance from His destination and to **stay awake** with Him. On a human level, He wanted not only for them to watch with Him but also for them to be alert for their own benefit as well.

MATTHEW 26:39

³⁹ Going a little farther, he fell facedown and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

VERSE 39

Some people have made much of the phrase **going a little farther**. Certainly, Jesus went farther than His followers in many ways. In this case, however, Matthew simply meant that Jesus left the disciples and moved into the garden to be with the Father. He was not so far away that they could not hear or see Him.

Jesus' prayer reveals vital truths. First, His bodily position reflected His attitude of prayer. Jesus **fell facedown** as He prayed. Although He was truly God incarnate, He humbled Himself before the Father. The awful sorrow weighing down on Him drove Him not merely to His knees, as portrayed in many artists' paintings, but to the ground. Luke described His prayer as being so intense that His sweat was like great drops of blood (Luke 22:44).

Second, Jesus addressed God as **My Father**. He knew the Father loved Him (John 15:9) and He could trust the Father completely. Throughout His earthly life, Jesus constantly declared His oneness with the Father (John 10:30). In the garden, Jesus based His prayer on the fatherhood of God.

A third truth involves Jesus' incredible request. Jesus taught His disciples that submission to the Father's will was absolutely necessary for entering the kingdom of God (Matt. 7:21). He knew He had come to earth for this destiny and understood the futility of asking the Father to save Him from this hour (John 12:27). Nevertheless, Jesus was excruciatingly honest in His prayer. If it were possible that people could be saved without this sacrifice, Jesus asked that **this cup** might **pass from** Him.

Ultimately, Jesus knew the Father's will and yielded to it. Perhaps one of the most amazing statements in Scripture is **not as I will, but as you will**. Is it possible that the will of God the Son and that of God the Father can differ? The answer lies in Jesus' incarnation. His humanity withdrew from the painful path that lay ahead. Yet, even as He prayed that the cup might pass, He reached out and embraced it, being obedient even to the cross (Phil. 2:8). As believers, we also willingly accept God's direction and will in our lives.

(In PSG, p. 106) **What does Jesus' willingness to follow God's direction reveal to us about His trust in the Father? How did that trust foster courage in Jesus?**

ASLEEP ON THE JOB (MATT. 26:40-43)

VERSES 40-41

The intensity of Jesus' prayer should have caused the disciples to listen with amazement and intercede for Him. However, when Jesus ended His first of three prayer sessions, He **found them sleeping**. The disciples in this reference likely were Peter, James, and John, since they had accompanied Jesus farther into the garden.

Significantly, Jesus addressed His remarks specifically to **Peter**. Jesus' comment was likely intended for all the disciples, but He singled out Peter. Earlier in the evening, Jesus warned Peter that, despite his protestations, the fisherman would deny Jesus three times before the night was over (Matt. 26:34). In the garden, before danger drew near, Peter had not been able to **stay awake** in watchful prayer for even **one hour**.

Notice Jesus used the phrase **with me**. Jesus brought the disciples with Him not only for their sake but also to support Him. Certainly, Jesus could have endured the events alone. He also knew His followers would scatter after His arrest. Yet, on a human level, He wanted these closest friends to be with Him as He prayed.

Jesus knew the disciples' hearts. They meant well, and they truly loved their Lord. Jesus understood that Peter's **spirit** was **willing**. Peter and the others wanted to do rightly, but their **flesh** was **weak**. Scripture uses the word *flesh* in several ways. It can relate to the carnal or sinful nature of humankind (as in Rom. 7), but in this context it refers merely

MATTHEW 26:40-41

⁴⁰ Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. He asked Peter, "So, couldn't you stay awake with me one hour? ⁴¹ Stay awake and pray, so that you won't enter into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

to the human body. The disciples were physically weary. They had eaten a substantial meal and had been sitting in the quiet garden late at night.

Jesus reminded the three of the need to **stay awake and pray**. Notice He did not ask them to pray for Him but for themselves. Instead of requesting intercession for the danger He faced, Jesus warned them to pray to avoid **temptation**. This word can apply to the trials of life or the temptation to sin. In this case, they needed prayer to avoid both.

MATTHEW 26:42-43

⁴² Again, a second time, he went away and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” ⁴³ And he came again and found them sleeping, because they could not keep their eyes open.

VERSES 42-43

Jesus did not stay with the disciples to see if they would follow His command. For a second time, He left them and prayed alone. He wanted more time with the Father. People can be weak and faithless, but we can depend on God to be present and attentive in our time of deepest need.

During His initial prayer, Jesus had already requested that this task might pass but then yielded Himself to the Father’s will. This time, He acknowledged that **this**—meaning the cross—could not pass without His drinking from the cup of sorrow and sacrifice. Jesus had used the metaphor of the cup before, not only in His initial prayer, but in a previous conversation with James and John He referred to “my cup,” although they did not understand at the time (Matt. 20:22-23). To drink this cup meant to embrace the cross and death for our sin.

Again, Jesus prayed, indicating the personal relationship of a son. You can almost hear the tenderness of His voice as He prayed **My Father**. God was not merely *the* Father, but He was *my* Father. Because Jesus completely trusted His Father, He could submit to the Father’s plan. Praying **your will be done** had the ring of finality to it. The struggle was nearly over; only the cross remained.

After this second round of prayer, Jesus **came again** to speak to the disciples. Jesus’ first prayer lasted an hour. This second prayer may have lasted even longer, for He found them **sleeping** again. Modern readers may find this situation incredible. How could these men sleep while their Master endured such passionate prayer just a short distance away? If we are honest, we confess our own weakness when it comes to extended prayer.

The weary disciples **could not keep their eyes open**. Matthew’s wording suggests they tried to remain awake and watch prayerfully, but their bodies betrayed them. Drifting into sleep, they could not watch for enemies, intercede for Jesus, or seek strength for themselves. They had one task, to watch and pray, but yielded to sleep instead. When God tasks us with spiritual endeavors, how many times do we find ourselves asleep on the job instead of remaining faithful? We need to stay alert, depending on the Father to help us remain faithful to our assigned task.

What are the consequences when Christians fall asleep on the job? What can we do to avoid spiritual exhaustion and failure?

REALIZING THE MOMENT (MATT. 26:44-46)

VERSES 44-45

After finding the disciples asleep the second time, Jesus left them and **went away again**. He had taught about persistence in prayer on several occasions (Matt. 15:22-28; Luke 11:8). Now, He demonstrated personal commitment to communion with the Father by praying a **third time**. Jesus spoke to the Father **the same thing** as He had prayed before.

God does not become weary even if we pray the same thing over and over. This kind of prayer is not the vain repetition Jesus warned against (Matt. 6:7), nor is it an attempt to convince God to change His mind. Instead, passionate prayer involves yielding ourselves to the Father's will.

As the time for His arrest drew near, Jesus ended His prayer and returned to the disciples again. Raising them from slumber, He warned them this was no time for sleeping and resting. Danger was at hand. He could hear the sounds of soldiers' feet tramping through the garden. Perhaps they could see the torches of the mob as it approached. He had alerted them earlier about how He would be betrayed. Now it was happening, and the disciples were about to sleep through it.

Notice the phrase **into the hands of sinners**. Throughout His ministry, Jesus was accused of consorting with sinners. He ate with them and ministered to them. In this instance, Jesus did not use the term *sinners* like the Pharisees had in their indictments. The hands that would grasp Him were not tarnished by sin like the adulteress or the tax collectors. This sin involved rejecting God to the point of conspiring to use false accusations to kill the Son of Man.

VERSE 46

Urgency surged through Jesus' voice as He told the disciples, **Get up**. The phrase suggests they were still reclined, trying to break out from the fog of deep sleep. Jesus' call, **let's go**, was not intended to warn them to flee. Jesus did not seek escape but went toward the oncoming mob. Jesus did not focus on the soldiers with their spears or the priests with their torches but on the betrayer who drew near with the kiss of treachery. Strengthened with the resolve of prayer, Jesus was ready for what lay ahead.

Jesus came to earth for the sole purpose of laying down His life as a sacrifice. He would not turn away from that task. As the betrayer approached, Jesus went forward to fulfill His destiny.

How should we pray so we can be ready when God's divine appointments arrive in our lives?

MATTHEW 26:44-45

⁴⁴ After leaving them, he went away again and prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more. ⁴⁵ Then he came to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? See, the time is near. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners."

MATTHEW 26:46

⁴⁶ Get up; let's go. See, my betrayer is near."

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

INTRODUCE: *Children who have good relationships with their parents love to spend time with them, talk with them, learn from them, be encouraged by them, share their accomplishments with them, and so forth. When a child experiences a crisis such as a skinned knee or a broken heart, he or she immediately goes running into the loving arms of a mother or father. That person has the power to provide the strength and comfort that no one else can provide.*

CONNECT: Through prayer we have direct access to our Heavenly Father. Ask: *Describe a recent crisis in your life in which you went to God in prayer. What impact did prayer have on you and on the crisis you encountered?* (PSG, p. 102)

TRANSITION: *Jesus had a wonderful Heavenly Father. Though Jesus doubtless spent time with His Father daily, He knew the time was near for suffering and sorrow. He did what any child would do; He ran for strength and comfort into the loving arms of His Father.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

REVIEW: Remind the group that last week's study covered the Passover celebration on Thursday evening of Jesus' last week. Display **Pack Item 8** (Poster: *Time Line of Jesus' Last Week*) and point out that the events of today's study take place later on that same night, the night before Jesus' crucifixion. Display **Pack Item 1** (Map: *New Testament Jerusalem*) and point out that Jesus led His disciples to the Mount of Olives, then He made His way to Gethsemane. After reaching Gethsemane, Jesus instructed eight of the disciples to stay behind while He went ahead to pray.

READ: Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 26:36-39 as the group listens for the emotions Jesus expressed.

GUIDE: Explain that the passage tells of Jesus' actions and emotions at Gethsemane and the actions of the three disciples who were there. Invite the group to compare and contrast the two. Draw two large overlapping circles on the board in the form of a Venn diagram. Label one circle "Jesus" and the other "Disciples." Ask: *What did Jesus and the disciples have in common at this point?* Record answers in the overlapping section of the diagram, making sure to include that they were facing the worst crisis imaginable, their human flesh was weak, and God was available to help them.

ASK: *What were Jesus' actions in verses 36-39?* Record the group's responses in the "Jesus" circle of the Venn diagram.

STUDY: Lead the group to complete the Bible Skill activity on page 105 of the PSG: *Reflect on Matthew 26:39. Evaluate your emotional response to this verse. Read the verse aloud. Then read the verse slowly, calling out synonyms for each word as you read it. How does this verse speak to our prayer practices? Record your thoughts.*

MEMORIZE: Direct attention to **Pack Item 13** (Poster: Matthew 26:39). Urge the group to reflect on the words of Matthew 26:39 and commit them to memory this week. Point out that verse 39 paints an agonizing, yet beautiful picture of what Jesus was doing and feeling on this fateful night.

ASK: *What does Jesus' willingness to follow God's direction reveal to us about His trust in the Father? How did that trust foster courage in Jesus?* (PSG, p. 106)

READ: Direct the group to continue focusing on the actions of both the disciples and Jesus as you read aloud Matthew 26:40-43.

DISCUSS: *What did Jesus do? What did the disciples do?* Record answers in the proper circles on the Venn diagram. *How did Jesus indicate that prayer would benefit Peter? What did Jesus mean by "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" in Matthew 26:41?* Lead the group to use the information under Verses 40-41 in the PSG (p. 106) for further explanation.

ASK: *How was Jesus' second prayer time different from the first?* Explain from the PSG: "As Jesus faced the misery that awaited Him now, He demonstrated His own submission to the Father's will without regard for what it would cost Him" (p. 107). *What did the disciples do during this second prayer session?* Record response in the Venn diagram.

ASK: *How does our physical weakness stand in the way of our willingness to serve Christ? What can be done to overcome our physical limits when it comes to serving God?* (PSG, p. 108)

READ: Call for a volunteer to read Matthew 26:44-46 as the group identifies the actions of Jesus and the disciples in these verses. Then record responses in the Venn diagram.

ASK: *How was this a defining moment for Jesus? What role did Jesus' understanding of His purpose play in this defining moment?* (PSG, p. 109)

EMPHASIZE: *With the cross in view, the kingdom of heaven came near in the sacrifice Jesus was about to make for us.*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

DIRECT: Read the second summary statement under In My Context (PSG, p. 110). Ask: *What obstacles sometimes prevent believers from accomplishing this? How can we overcome these obstacles so that we can face the challenges that come with living for Him?*

DIRECT: Encourage the group to discuss their responses to the second question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 110): *Discuss with your Bible study group how Jesus helps believers stay alert so they can face the challenges that come with living for Him. Include insights gained from today's study. Record insights gained from the group.*

PRAY: Challenge the group to reflect on Jesus' prayers at Gethsemane and to thank Him for willingly paying for our sins on the cross. Distribute index cards and ask everyone to write a prayer of thanksgiving, expressing gratitude to Jesus for providing salvation.



PRACTICE

- Reflect on the words and commit to memory Matthew 26:39. Allow it to deepen your love for Jesus because of His sacrifice for us.
- Send your group's prayer request list to group members through email or mail. Urge them to pray for the needs and praises. Also, remind them to follow Jesus' example by praying for strength, comfort, and guidance as they face struggles this week.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

As the group arrives, ask them to share a saying about facing hard situations (for example: when the going gets tough, the tough get going; you miss 100 percent of the shots you don't take; tough times never last, tough people do). Point out that these quotes emphasize personal resolve. Ask: *What can a person draw from when facing a difficult situation that feeds his or her resolve?* Challenge the group to look for what Jesus drew from that fed His resolve to submit to the Father.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- Read and compare other accounts and references to the events in today's Scripture passage: Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:40-46; Hebrews 5:7. Be prepared to enhance discussion by what you learn.
- To enhance the study of Matthew 26:46, lead the group in a study of the word "near." Use your study from page 109 to guide the discussion. From the PSG (p. 109): *Notice that Jesus said that His betrayer was "near." He used the same word "near" in the previous verse. Throughout His ministry, He had used the word "near" to describe the coming kingdom of God (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:7). With the cross in view, the kingdom of God came near in the sacrifice He was about to make for us.* Ask: *What does it mean to you to be near Jesus daily?*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Ask: *Where do you go to pray when crises arise?* Invite volunteers to share about a time in their lives when they turned to God in prayer and how God answered their prayers. Discuss the fact that God answers in different ways. Sometimes He delivers us from painful situations; other times He gives us the strength, comfort, and guidance we need to endure.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Lead the group in singing or listening to the words of the hymn, "Tell It to Jesus," by Jeremiah E. Rankin. Point out that the words demonstrate our need to take our cares and sorrows to God in prayer.

LOYAL?

Following Jesus demands loyalty in the face of risk.

MATTHEW 26:63-75

MEMORY VERSE: MATTHEW 26:64

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Matthew 26:47–27:32, *First Thoughts* (p. 114), and *Understand the Context* (pp. 114-115). Keep in mind the time line of these events. See **PACK ITEM 8** (*Poster: Time Line of Jesus' Last Week*).
- **STUDY** Matthew 26:63-75, using *Explore the Text* on pages 115-119. Also read and study these related passages: *Leviticus 24:10-23*; *Psalm 110:1-4*; and *Daniel 7:13*.
- **PLAN** the group time using the ideas under *Lead Group Bible Study* on pages 120-121 and *More Ideas* on page 122. Refer to the resources at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible for more ideas. Consider using the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* to enhance your understanding of the words and setting in Matthew 26.
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the *Ministry Grid* (MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible).
- **GATHER** the following items: *Personal Study Guides*; A whiteboard or large sheet of paper and a marker; and Pens. Prepare to display: **PACK ITEM 1** (*Map: New Testament Jerusalem*); **PACK ITEM 3** (*Poster: Spring 2017*); **PACK ITEM 6** (*Poster: Titles of Jesus in Matthew*); **PACK ITEM 7** (*Chart: The Opponents of Jesus*); and **PACK ITEM 8** (*Poster: Time Line of Jesus' Last Week*).



KEY DOCTRINE

God the Son

Jesus ascended into heaven and is now exalted at the right hand of God where He is the One Mediator, fully God, fully man, in whose Person is effected the reconciliation between God and man.

FIRST THOUGHTS

Loyalty can fall on hard times. When everything is going well, being loyal is not difficult. But when our circumstances change, so can our loyalties. For example, most of us have a favorite restaurant. But one bad meal or one testy waiter can cause us to find another favorite place to eat. The same observation can be made about our loyalty to other businesses, institutions, brands, or even to the church.

(In PSG, p. 113) **What factors can cause a person to switch his or her loyalties to a brand, restaurant, or institution? How important do you think it is for you to stick with a brand, restaurant, or institution even when it is facing a trying or difficult time?**

If we ever lose sight of what unwavering loyalty looks like, we can always get a fresh vision of it when we take a long look at Jesus. In Him we observe unbending loyalty to our Father's plan of salvation. The account of Jesus before the high priest and the other Jewish leaders brings home the need for disciples to be loyal to Him no matter what. Following Him may be easy at times; however, at other times being loyal to Him may put us at risk. That's when our loyalty to Him will be put to the test. Our highest priority is to remain loyal to Him no matter what the risk.

BIBLE SKILL

Use additional Scripture to understand a phrase.

Read Hebrews 1:3,13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; Psalm 110:1; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; and Romans 8:34. Notice how each verse links Jesus' deity with some form of the phrase "right hand of power." What does each verse reveal about the importance of Jesus' being positioned at the right hand of God?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

MATTHEW 26:47–27:32

To understand the disciples' vacillation between loyalty and unfaithfulness, look back on their night of sleeping rather than praying in Gethsemane. The disciples' lack of prayer left them spiritually unprepared when an armed mob arrived with Judas. Peter responded by drawing a sword and striking a servant of the high priest (Matt. 26:51; John 18:10). Interestingly, he attacked a servant rather than a soldier. Jesus healed the man (Luke 22:51) and commanded His followers to cease violence. If Jesus wanted to be rescued, He could command an army of angels. If one angel could destroy 185,000 in a night (see 2 Kings 19:35), imagine what 12 legions of angels (over 72,000) could do!

Frightened, the disciples fled. Unwilling to stay with Jesus in prayer, they were also unable to stand by Him in peril. Two of the disciples, John and Peter, followed from a distance and entered the courtyard of the high priest's palace (John 18:15). However, confronted by people in the courtyard, Peter's courage melted and he denied even knowing Jesus.

Jesus was accused of blasphemy. The conspirators could not accuse Him of normal crimes. One reason they arrested Jesus at night was to

avoid the crowds who had witnessed His miraculous good works. Blasphemy was the greatest offense these religious hypocrites could imagine.

Unable by law to execute capital punishment, the Jewish leaders sent Jesus under armed guard to Pilate, the Roman governor, and demanded His death. While Rome allowed the Jews a certain degree of self-rule, the empire held close command over civil order. Jesus calmly reminded Pilate he would have no authority unless the Heavenly Father permitted it. Pilate sought to release Jesus. Even Pilate's wife tried to intervene.

The governor customarily released a prisoner during the Passover festival. Offered a choice between Jesus and Barabbas, a violent insurgent, the Jewish leaders demanded that Barabbas be released and Jesus be crucified.

Jesus embraced the Father's plan. The people He loved had abandoned and betrayed Him, but He remained loyal to those who showed no loyalty in return. Yes, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

AFFIRMED BY SCRIPTURE (MATT. 26:63-64)

VERSE 63

Hundreds of years earlier, Isaiah had prophesied the scene that played out on this dark night in Jerusalem: "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth. Like a lamb led to the slaughter and like a sheep silent before her shearers, he did not open his mouth" (Isa. 53:7). As false witnesses accused Him and religious leaders mocked him, He **kept silent**.

Jesus did not need to defend Himself. The lies of those who sat in judgment did not deserve a response. His mute manner revealed His dignity in the face of indignant opposition and fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy.

The high priest was Caiaphas. This illegal trial was held at his palace in front of religious and political allies who had conspired to destroy Jesus. Finally, Caiaphas demanded that Jesus say whether or not He was **the Messiah, the Son of God**. Caiaphas understood the divine nature of the Messiah. To be the Anointed One was to be equal with God. Caiaphas also knew that to be the Son of God was to be divine. To these leaders, no greater crime was conceivable than the blasphemy of claiming to be the Messiah.

Note the high priest's oath: **by the living God**. Caiaphas invoked the name of God to give weight to his ultimatum for a response. Jesus had taught that no one should swear by anything related to the Most High (Matt. 5:34-35). The high priest tried to use God's authority to put Jesus under oath. Witnesses in a trial are typically placed under oaths to tell the truth. In this instance, Caiaphas was frustrated with Jesus' silence. He demanded that Jesus declare whether He claimed to be the Messiah.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Judas, the Betrayer," "Slavery in the First Century," "The Kingdom of Heaven," and "Nazareth in the First Century" in the Spring 2017 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

MATTHEW 26:63

⁶³ But Jesus kept silent. The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God."

MATTHEW 26:64

⁶⁴ “You have said it,” Jesus told him. “But I tell you, in the future you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

MATTHEW 26:65

⁶⁵ Then the high priest tore his robes and said, “He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? See, now you’ve heard the blasphemy.”

MATTHEW 26:66-68

⁶⁶ What is your decision?” They answered, “He deserves death!” ⁶⁷ Then they spat in his face and beat him; others slapped him ⁶⁸ and said, “Prophecy to us, Messiah! Who was it that hit you?”

VERSE 64

Jesus did not respond directly but used the phrase *you have said it*. In modern colloquialism, this term might read, “You said it, not me.” However, Mark recorded an additional statement: “I am” (Mark 14:62). Jesus was not trying to evade the question but quietly claimed His rightful role.

Jesus affirmed both His identity and His ultimate victory. He referred to Himself as *the Son of Man*, a term He often used to relate both to His humanity and His divine nature. Jesus was referring to Daniel’s prophecy of the coming of the Son of Man in the clouds of heaven (Dan. 7:13). At Jesus’ ascension following the resurrection, an angel would encourage the disciples with the promise that they would see Jesus return from heaven (Acts 1:11).

Caiaphas and the other leaders thought it incredible that a man standing in shackles could claim a victorious future. Caiaphas believed Jesus’ destruction was at hand, but Jesus was looking beyond the immediate situation. While these men were in the position of authority at this trial, Jesus would one day be seated at the right hand of Power. The One being judged would become the One with all power to judge the world (Acts 10:42; 2 Tim. 4:1; Rev. 11:18). Jesus is the promised Messiah who will reign eternally.

How does Jesus’ fulfillment of Scripture encourage you to remain loyal to Him even in difficult circumstances?

DENIED BY HIS OPPONENTS (MATT. 26:65-68)

VERSE 65

The reaction of Caiaphas makes it clear he understood Jesus’ statement to be a declaration of divinity. He considered Jesus to have *blasphemed*. Blasphemy involved either speaking evil of the things of God or claiming to possess the qualities of God. According to Caiaphas, Jesus stood condemned by His own words.

This mockery of a trial needed no more witnesses. It did not matter that Caiaphas and the others knew the two witnesses had lied. The high priest *tore his robes*, an action typically associated in Hebrew culture with expressing extreme anguish and distress. His hypocrisy played out before the crowd as if choreographed.

VERSES 66-68

The drama had been staged to arrive at a predetermined conclusion. The high priest demanded a decision by the people gathered to create legitimacy for his plan. Included were scribes, chief priests, and other religious leaders who often found themselves convicted by Jesus’ teaching. Now they had the opportunity to reverse the tables and convict Him.

Also present were the elders, members of the Sanhedrin who were tasked with administrative governance. They answered with one voice:

He deserves death. Jesus' ministry of teaching, healing, and other good works meant nothing. They were determined He would die. Moses had commanded that anyone guilty of blasphemy should be put to death (Lev. 24:16). The charge of blasphemy was enough to justify their condemnation of Christ.

Immediately, Jesus' opponents attacked Him physically. Instead of maintaining even a semblance of a legitimate court, they humiliated and assaulted Jesus. These religious and political figures cast aside their own dignity as they spat in His face. Jesus had predicted this indignity in preparing His disciples for what was to come (Mark 10:34).

We cringe at the image of the Savior as the crowd converged on Him. They **beat him**, perhaps with fists and clubs. Others **slapped him**, an additional degradation. He did not fight back or defend Himself. He did not speak up or cry out. He demonstrated true strength, physically and spiritually, to endure every act of humiliation these hypocritical judges imposed on Him.

Mark's Gospel adds that Jesus was blindfolded at one point during the assault (Mark 14:65). Mocking Him, the attackers demanded that Jesus prophesy by telling who it was that hit Him.

The crowd's actions revealed several problems. First, religious leaders should have known and upheld the teachings of Scripture, but instead they set aside the Word of God to achieve their own desires. Second, they misapplied the nature of prophecy. Third, they disbelieved Jesus' nature as Messiah, using His words to mock Him.

People today may doubt Jesus' claims, dishonor His name, and detest His mission. Yet one's denial of Jesus' identity does not change the fact of who He is.

How is one's spiritual condition revealed by one's attitudes and actions related to Jesus?

ABANDONED BY HIS FRIENDS (MATT. 26:69-75)

VERSES 69-70

John had accompanied Jesus further into the courtyard of the high priest's palace while Peter remained near the door (John 18:15-16). As the trial proceeded, Peter sat outside in the courtyard. Matthew did not describe John's actions but focused on Peter, who was not sitting with John but alone.

None of the Gospel accounts share Peter's thoughts as he waited to see what would happen to Jesus. He and John should be commended for going this far, since all the other disciples had fled. Peter had come this far despite his fear. He had assaulted the servant of the high priest. Now he sat in the high priest's courtyard, surrounded by soldiers and servants who were enemies of Jesus.

As Peter waited, **a servant girl approached him**. John reported that this person was a servant girl who was the doorkeeper (John 18:16-17).

MATTHEW 26:69-70

⁶⁹ Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant girl approached him and said, "You were with Jesus the Galilean too." ⁷⁰ But he denied it in front of everyone: "I don't know what you're talking about."

John had spoken to her as Peter had waited outside the door. She had allowed Peter to enter the courtyard but must have wondered why he was there.

Mark records that Peter sat near a fire, warming himself (Mark 14:67). While he waited, the girl connected Peter with John, whom she knew was a follower of Jesus. Her statement indicated she assumed Peter was also a companion of Christ. Notice her identification of Jesus as **the Galilean**, referring to the region where He was raised and had lived.

The servant girl was not unusually accusatory or inflammatory. However, in Peter's emotional state, he responded strongly. The fact that he **denied** her assertion **in front of everyone** means the entire group of servants and soldiers were nearby. Perhaps he was not as fearful of the girl as he was concerned about the other people.

Peter's disavowal was not only public, it was profound. The force of his reply was direct as he tried to deflect attention from himself. He denied knowing what she was talking about.

VERSES 71-72

Peter rose from where he was sitting and went back out to the gateway. He likely wanted to be near a means of escape. In any case, Peter moved away from the people in the courtyard and further from the place where Jesus was being held.

Peter could not avoid the glares of the company as **another woman saw him**. While the first servant's statement was made directly to Peter, this woman **told those who were there**, meaning the soldiers, servants, and other people gathered in the courtyard. Her comment was not a question but an accusation that brought the attention of the crowd to bear on Peter.

The woman identified Jesus as **the Nazarene**. The people could not imagine a prophet, much less the Messiah, coming from Nazareth (John 1:46). Everyone knew Jesus had been arrested and was, at that moment, on trial inside the palace. The atmosphere was charged with tension as all awaited a verdict. To be with Jesus meant to be associated with someone who had been brought in by armed guards. Peter risked being arrested.

Peter's response elevated emotionally as every eye was on him. He denied the statement **with an oath**. Jesus had taught the disciples not to swear by anything in heaven or earth, but to let their words be straightforward and true (Matt. 5:34-36). Peter's mind was not focused on Jesus' teaching but on the immediate danger. Peter merely referred to Jesus as **the man**, refusing even to say His name. Each statement further distanced him from his Master.

VERSES 73-75

The vehemence of Peter's response may have bought Peter some time, for Matthew relates that **after a little while** a third accusation was made. We do not know what went through Peter's thoughts as he waited near the doorway. However, the crowd must have been focused increasingly on this stranger who lingered in the courtyard.

Notice the increasingly direct charges made toward Peter. The first was a statement by the servant girl to Peter. The second was a declaration about

MATTHEW 26:71-72

⁷¹ When he had gone out to the gateway, another woman saw him and told those who were there, "This man was with Jesus the Nazarene!"

⁷² And again he denied it with an oath: "I don't know the man!"

Peter to the people nearby. This third indictment was made by **those standing there**. John records that one of these accusers was a relative of the servant who lost an ear to Peter's sword (John 18:25-27). The group had made up their mind. Peter was definitely **one of them**, meaning one of the followers of Jesus.

They recognized Peter's speech as that of a Galilean. Remember, both of the earlier accusations involved identifying Jesus as the Galilean and the Nazarene. Just as people from different parts of the United States have recognizable accents, Peter's accent gave him away as being one of Jesus' companions.

As the charges became more direct and personal, Peter's denials intensified. The first time, he tried to deflect the girl's observation. The second time, he used an oath to deny the woman's remark. Finally, Peter began **to curse and to swear**. These two terms have different meanings from modern use. The word *curse* is one of the strongest expressions possible in Jewish culture. Peter's curse was accompanied by swearing **with an oath**. The phrase *swear with an oath* translates a single word. Peter used an expletive followed by calling on God to condemn him if he lied.

As soon as Peter denied knowing Jesus a third time, **a rooster crowed**. Peter remembered Jesus' words earlier that night. In response to Peter's bold declaration of loyalty, Jesus had warned that Peter would deny Him three times before the rooster crowed. Peter bragged that he would die for Jesus, but in the past few hours he had failed to watch with Jesus in an hour of prayer, he had fled in fear at Jesus' arrest, and he had fearfully denied even knowing Jesus. After the first and second denial, Peter should have recognized what was happening. But only after the rooster crowed did Jesus' words come back to haunt him.

At this point, Jesus looked at Peter (Luke 22:61). Perhaps the trial was being conducted in an open area of the palace overlooking the courtyard, or maybe Jesus was being taken to Pilate's court. In any case, Master and disciple had a moment in which Jesus' eyes met Peter's.

The guilt of failure fell on Peter, and **he went outside and wept bitterly**. Perhaps he wanted to escape from the gaze of His Lord as much as from the potential danger of the crowd. Peter knew he had failed Jesus. His weeping suggests he repented with deep regret. Nevertheless, Peter did not return to stand with Jesus. Instead he fled again into the darkness. After the resurrection Peter would be restored, but this night was one of shame and remorse.

Through the centuries since that evening, believers have endured persecution and death for their dedication to Christ. Today, Christians in many countries risk the loss of property and life because they follow Jesus. Remembering the temporary failure of Peter and the other disciples, we must remain loyal to Christ regardless of the potential cost.

(In PSG, p. 119) **What pressures could cause a person to hide his or her Christian beliefs? How are those pressures seen in Peter's circumstances in this passage?**

MATTHEW 26:73-75

⁷³ After a little while those standing there approached and said to Peter, "You really are one of them, since even your accent gives you away."⁷⁴ Then he started to curse and to swear with an oath, "I don't know the man!" Immediately a rooster crowed,⁷⁵ and Peter remembered the words Jesus had spoken, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

INTRODUCE: As the group arrives, direct them to tell about a business or product brand that they once used but no longer use because of some experience that left them with a negative perception. After most have arrived, point out that it is easy to be loyal when everything is going well, but when circumstances change, so can our loyalties. *The change of heart concerning a product or business may well be merited, because businesses are certainly not perfect, and we as consumers may sometimes realize our loyalties have been misplaced. But loyalty to our Father is never misplaced, nor is loyalty to His Son, Jesus Christ!*

GUIDE: *Today we will learn of unwavering loyalty as we observe Jesus' loyalty to our Father's plan of salvation. Following Him is easy at times, but under some circumstances it is much more difficult. In today's Scripture passage, Peter is given the opportunity to exercise loyalty under difficult circumstances, but he fails the test.*

TRANSITION: Display **Pack Item 1** (Map: New Testament Jerusalem), **Pack Item 3** (Poster: Spring 2017), and **Pack Item 8** (Poster: Time Line of Jesus' Last Week). Use them to explain the context of today's Scripture.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

EXPLAIN: *Jesus was being questioned by Caiaphas, the high priest who ruled the Sanhedrin, the council that reigned over Jewish people. Display **Pack Item 7** (Chart: The Opponents of Jesus) and point out that Caiaphas was a Sadducee. (Review more information about Caiaphas on p. 114 of the PSG.)*

READ: Display **Pack Item 6** (Poster: Titles of Jesus in Matthew). Invite the group to locate and underline the titles of Jesus as a volunteer reads aloud Matthew 26:63-64.

ASK: *What are the meanings of the two titles Caiaphas used: "Messiah" and "Son of God"? From the PSG (p. 115): What was the significance of Jesus' pointing to Scripture in response to questions addressed to Him? How does Scripture continue to serve as the authority on Jesus' identity?*

READ: Read aloud Daniel 7:13. Point out that "Son of Man" came from this passage, depicting a ruler who would come from heaven and rule over an eternal kingdom as opposed to an earthly kingdom, as many had expected.

READ: Invite the group to listen for the response of the Jewish leaders to Jesus' revelation that He was indeed the Messiah. Read Matthew 26:65-68.

ASK: *What did the tearing of one's robe signify? Why did the high priest claim blasphemy? Direct the group to the information under Verse 65 and Verse 66 in the PSG (p. 116) for further clarification.*

EXPLAIN: *These brutal men were religious leaders who believed in God. They should have worshiped and submitted to Jesus; instead they insulted and brutally assaulted Him.*

DISCUSS: *What kinds of misconceptions do people today have about Christ? How do those misconceptions compare to the misconceptions Jesus faced during His trial? (PSG, p. 117)*

READ: Call for a volunteer to read Matthew 26:69-75 as the group again finds and underlines the titles of Jesus.

EMPHASIZE: *The scene shifted to Peter, who was given the opportunity to follow Jesus' example of ultimate loyalty by demonstrating loyalty to Jesus.*

EXPLAIN: Highlight the titles used by the first two women. Point out that the titles were basically the same, because Nazareth was located in the Galilean region, which was miles from Jerusalem.

ASK: *What evidence did the people nearby give for identifying Peter as a disciple of Jesus? Note that, as is the case today, people from different regions had different accents.*

GUIDE: In large letters on the board, write the words "loyalty" and "denial." Say: *Peter chose to deny Christ. Circle the word "denial," and mark a line through the word "loyalty."* Ask: *What pressures could cause a person to hide his or her Christian beliefs? How are those pressures seen in Peter's circumstances in this passage?* (PSG, p. 119)

CONCLUDE: *Imagine the grief Peter must have felt when he realized the tragedy of his poor choice! Yet this was not the end of Peter's story. Jesus didn't turn His back on Peter or give up on him. Instead, He restored Peter. Summarize John 21:15-19. As a result, Peter devoted the rest of his life to Christ.*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

DIRECT: Invite the group to locate In My Context in the PSG (p. 120). Ask them to reflect on the meaning of each of the summary statements as you read them aloud.

DISCUSS: *Which of these means the most to you in light of today's study? What other principles would you add to the list?*

DIRECT: Guide the group to consider their responses to the third question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 120): *Discuss with your Bible study group how to encourage each other as you face risks while being loyal to Christ. Identify specific ways to remain faithful to Him no matter what.* Encourage the group to share their responses.

PRAY: Close in prayer, asking God to strengthen everyone present to remain loyal to Him, no matter what circumstances arise.



PRACTICE

- Prayerfully reflect on the questions listed under In My Context in the PSG (p. 120). Allow them to strengthen your walk with Christ and your loyalty to Him.
- By visiting or through a phone call, contact a group member who is struggling with a lack of faithfulness. Listen to this person, encouraging and praying for him or her.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

Invite the group to brainstorm definitions and/or synonyms of the word “loyal.” Write responses on a whiteboard. Point out that the word is the title of today’s study and that all the definitions spell out how we should respond to Jesus, our Savior.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To enhance understanding of Matthew 26:63-64, use the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* to research and share the significance of an oath in the context of the Bible. Emphasize the necessity of complete and unwavering truth as one’s words are witnessed by the ultimate witness, God.
- To further the study of Matthew 26:64, read and discuss Psalm 110:1-4. Explain: *These verses make clear that Jesus’ kingdom is a heavenly one, not an earthly one as many Jews expected.*
- Research and discuss the connotation of “blasphemy,” of which Jesus was accused in Matthew 26:65. Point to Leviticus 24:10-23, which reveals that the penalty for blasphemy was death.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Point to the session statement on page 111 of the PSG (*Following Jesus demands loyalty in the face of risk*). Lead the group to discuss how they see the truth of this statement in today’s passage from Matthew. Lead them to consider how the truth of this statement is seen in today’s world. Challenge them to ask God for the courage to be loyal to Jesus.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Read the lyrics or the lead the group in singing “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” by Thomas O. Chisholm. Point out God’s faithfulness to us and our need to be faithful to Him as well.

CRUCIFIED

Jesus willingly sacrificed His life to pay the price for all of humanity's sin.

MATTHEW 27:41-52

MEMORY VERSE: MATTHEW 27:54

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Matthew 27:33-66, First Thoughts (p. 124), and Understand the Context (pp. 124-125).
- **STUDY** Matthew 27:41-52, using Explore the Text on pages 125-129. Read Psalm 22 to gain insight into the scene of the cross.
- **PLAN** the group time using the ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 130-131), More Ideas (p. 132), ideas included in *QuickSource*, and ideas online at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible to customize the plans according to the needs of your group. Consider ways to get everyone in the group involved in the study.
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Group Ministry blog (LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; A story about someone who lost his or her life while saving another person; and A whiteboard or large sheet of paper and a marker. Prepare to display: **PACK ITEM 1** (*Map: New Testament Jerusalem*); **PACK ITEM 7** (*Chart: The Opponents of Jesus*); **PACK ITEM 8** (*Poster: Time Line of Jesus' Last Week*); and **PACK ITEM 9** (*Poster: The Trials of Jesus*).



KEY DOCTRINE

Son of God

In His substitutionary death on the cross, Jesus made provision for the redemption of men from sin.

FIRST THOUGHTS

We honor people who voluntarily place their lives in harm's way for others. Military personnel who serve our country receive our respectful appreciation for their willingness to sacrifice their lives for the cause of liberty. Police officers protect and serve their neighborhoods, but not because someone forced them to do it. They willingly choose to go on patrol each day, even though they know that doing so may place them in danger. Firefighters and other first responders live with the same risk of losing their lives in the line of duty. Yet they are willing to take the risk. For that reason, we appreciate them.

(In PSG, p. 122) **How do you respond to others who serve your community and country? How does their willingness to serve in this way affect the way you feel about them?**

When we think about Jesus and what He has done for us, our thoughts go immediately to the cross. His crucifixion demonstrates that He intended to sacrifice His life once and for all so we could be saved. His death paid the price for our sin. When we study Matthew's account of His sacrifice on the cross for us, we are led to worship Him with sincere gratitude. Also, we are prompted to serve Him with complete devotion.

BIBLE SKILL

Study New Testament passages that include Old Testament quotations.

Compare Psalm 22 and Matthew 27. What elements of Psalm 22 are included in Matthew 27? What does the inclusion by Matthew tell us about the significance of Psalm 22? What does the comparison reveal about the nature of Scripture and God's redemptive plan?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

MATTHEW 27:33-66

Stoning was the typical manner of capital punishment among the Jews. The Romans brought the cruelty of crucifixion into Judea. Since Jesus' death sentence was pronounced by the Roman governor, He would die according to Roman methods. Jesus had warned His followers He would suffer this agonizing form of execution (Matt. 20:19; 26:2).

After brutal beatings and sadistic scourging, Jesus was forced to carry His cross toward the place of execution (John 19:16-17). Criminals typically bore their crosses. The two criminals crucified with Jesus also walked in this procession (Luke 23:32). Isaiah had prophesied that the Messiah would be counted among the transgressors (Isa. 53:12).

Weakened by beatings and blood loss, Jesus fell. The soldiers forced a man named Simon, a Cyrenian, to carry the cross the rest of the way. Cyrene was a town in what corresponds to modern Libya. This man was just coming in to Jerusalem, so he may have been unaware of what had been happening. Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus (Mark 15:21), a fact that would only have been important if these sons later became believers (Rom. 16:13).

Their destination was Golgotha, literally “the skull,” also known as Calvary. Watching from a distance were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of James and John. John also mentions the grieving mother of Jesus (John 19:25).

As Jesus died on the cross, several extraordinary events occurred. In addition to the darkness, the temple curtain was torn from top to bottom. Earthquakes shook the land, graves were opened, and dead saints were restored to life. In response, even the hardened Roman centurion exclaimed that this man must have been the Son of God.

Joseph of Arimathea, accompanied by Nicodemus, obtained Jesus’ body from Pilate (John 19:36-39). They prepared it and laid it in a tomb Joseph had made for himself. Little did Joseph know that Jesus would need it only for three days!

Pilate also agreed to the Jewish leaders’ request for a guard at the tomb. They feared Jesus’ followers would take His body and claim He had been resurrected. In just three days, all would discover the futility of their efforts.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

MOCKED (MATT. 27:41-44)

VERSES 41-42

A week earlier, crowds lined the streets outside of Jerusalem to welcome Jesus as the Son of David who came in the name of the Lord (Matt. 21:9). One wonders how many of those people were part of the mob that passed by Golgotha. They jeered at Jesus, mockingly urging Him to save Himself.

They were not alone. The phrase **in the same way** suggests the crowds were joined by, if not incited by, the chief priests, scribes, and elders. Hebrew **scribes** were more than copiers of Scripture. They were the teachers of the Law. They should have known more about God’s promises concerning the Messiah than anyone. These experts of law and prophecy should have recognized the fulfillment of Scripture in Jesus. Instead, they joined the mob and mocked Him.

Also participating in this shameful sarcasm were the **elders**. This term does not merely refer to someone of advanced age. This word described members of the Sanhedrin. These men sat in council as the supreme court and chief administrative body of Israel. Rome gave the Jews limited self-rule. Within the oversight of the Roman governor, the Sanhedrin guided the domestic affairs of the nation. They should have been men of integrity and dignity. Instead, they participated in the illegal trials of Jesus and became mere faces in the crowd of mockers on Golgotha’s hill.

This part of Jesus’ passion was not happenstance but fulfilled a prophetic psalm written centuries before: “He relies on the LORD; let him save him; let the LORD rescue him, since he takes pleasure in him” (Ps. 22:8). The bloodthirsty people in the crowd could not hear or recognize God’s word as it was fulfilled in their own voices.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “Expressing Contempt in the First Century” in the Spring 2017 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

MATTHEW 27:41-42

⁴¹ In the same way the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him and said, ⁴² “He saved others, but he cannot save himself! He is the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.”

Above Jesus' head was a sign written in Greek, Hebrew, and Latin. It included Jesus' name and the title King of the Jews (John 19:19-20). Pilate had the words printed in all three common languages of the day. Normally, the placard on a cross declared the accusation against the one being crucified. In Jesus' case, the Jewish leaders had represented to Pilate that Jesus claimed to be **the King of Israel**, a direct affront to the authority of Rome. These same leaders hurled the title at Jesus in derision.

If Jesus were the King of Israel, the Messiah, He should have had the power to **come down** from the cross. The people understood the Messiah would be the Son of God, with all power in heaven and earth. Surely if Jesus was the Anointed One, He should possess the ability to break loose from His bonds and the nails that impaled Him to the cross. What they did not understand was that Jesus did have such power but chose not to use it. He willingly endured the pain and humiliation of the cross to make salvation possible.

Ironically, this fact was employed against Him as the scribes and elders continued their taunts. Jesus had indeed **saved others**, a probable reference to the people He had healed and those who had been raised from the dead (like Lazarus). The crowd laughingly thought Jesus could not **save himself**. The truth was He gave Himself voluntarily to save even the ones who mocked Him. Who knows whether some of these people may have become believers after the resurrection?

As they ridiculed Jesus, the crowd said they might **believe in him** if He were to descend from the cross. Yet Jesus once told a parable about people who rejected the Scriptures and thus would not believe even if someone were to rise from the dead (Luke 16:31).

MATTHEW 27:43

⁴³ He trusts in God; let God rescue him now—if he takes pleasure in him! For he said, 'I am the Son of God.'"

MATTHEW 27:44

⁴⁴ In the same way even the criminals who were crucified with him taunted him.

VERSE 43

A second point of their scorn focused on Jesus' assertion of being God's Son. It was utterly unbelievable to these religious leaders that the Son of God would submit to such suffering and shame as what Jesus was experiencing. The people mocked Jesus' trust in God. Perhaps drawing on His teaching in the temple, they threw His words back at Him. Surely someone who had genuine faith in the Father could expect God to rescue Him.

The addition of the phrase **if he takes pleasure in him** laughingly suggested that even God would not want someone in Jesus' condition. Pilate had his soldiers scourge Jesus before parading Him in front of the crowds. When the governor said "Here is your king," the people were appalled at the bloody sight of the man many of them had believed would be the one to break the yoke of Roman rule (John 19:14-15). They did not want this man to be their king, and their jeers at the cross implied that God would not want Him either.

VERSE 44

Even the criminals being crucified with Jesus joined in the taunting. We are familiar with Luke's account of the prisoner on Jesus' right hand. He spoke up for Jesus and rebuked the other convict (Luke 23:39-41). However, Matthew records that both of them participated in the scorn being heaped on the occupant of that center cross. Somewhere during the day, the one on Jesus' right hand saw the way Jesus dealt with His pain and approaching death.

He recognized that no one could say and do what Jesus did under the excruciating pain of crucifixion unless He was, indeed, the Messiah.

How do you respond when people ridicule Christ? What do you do when they mock you for your trust in Jesus?

FORSAKEN (MATT. 27:45-49)

VERSE 45

During Jesus' final hours, nature itself reacted to its Creator being crucified (Rom. 8:22). The brightness of midday faded as **darkness** flooded **the whole land**. Skeptics have tried to explain this phenomenon as a solar eclipse, a volcanic eruption, or simply literary fiction. They ignore the fact that no solar eclipse can last more than a few minutes, much less the three hours reported by Matthew. Also, no eruption was recorded in any historical account of the period. As for literary fiction, the Gospel writers gave their lives for the resurrected Christ. They had no motivation for inventing the account of widespread darkness.

The only reasonable deduction is that the event was a supernatural reaction to Christ's crucifixion. As the world was engulfed in the darkness of sin, the light of the sun was hidden when the sin of humanity came upon Christ as He died for us all (2 Cor. 5:21). All of creation testifies that Jesus is the Messiah.

VERSE 46

Matthew only records one of the seven sayings of Jesus from the cross (Mark 15:34; Luke 23:34,43,46; John 19:26,28,30). However, this cry was perhaps the most significant as Jesus called out to the Father in agony. People debate as to whether God turned His face away from the Son as the sin of the world came upon Him. Could Jesus truly believe the Father had forsaken Him and then commit His spirit into the Father's hands? Many scholars believe Jesus was quoting the first lines of Psalm 22, which ends in victory, not defeat.

Jesus had been suffering on the cross for about six hours. The final moments came around **three in the afternoon**. By this time, the mysterious darkness had covered the land for three hours. Jesus' pain must have been excruciating from the scourging, the nails in His hands and feet, the crown of thorns on His brow, and constantly pushing Himself up to breathe. At this point He cried out with a loud voice. His ability to do so argues against the theory that He suffocated to death in the crucifixion position.

Jesus quoted the opening verse of Psalm 22: "**Elí, Elí, lemá sabachtháni.**" These words are translated, "**My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?**" Jesus had been forsaken by His disciples, by the people He had healed and taught, and now, it seemed, by God Himself.

MATTHEW 27:45

⁴⁵ From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over the whole land.

MATTHEW 27:46

⁴⁶ About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "**Elí, Elí, lemá sabachtháni?**" that is, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

Early heretics, such as the Docetics and Gnostics, claimed that the divine nature of Christ separated from the humanity of Jesus at this point. However, the vast body of Scripture argues for the unity of Jesus' human and divine natures without division between them.

Sin causes separation from the holy God. Many Christians believe God the Father turned away as the sin of the world came upon Jesus so He could pay the penalty for our sin. Another explanation is that Jesus not only quoted the first verse of Psalm 22, which begins with a cry of anguish, but the entire Psalm, which ends in vindication and victory.

MATTHEW 27:47-49

⁴⁷ When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling for Elijah."

⁴⁸ Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and offered him a drink. ⁴⁹ But the rest said, "Let's see if Elijah comes to save him."

VERSES 47-49

Jesus' cry has not only been debated by critics and believers through the years, it was also misunderstood by some of the people standing there. They were present, but in the chaotic confusion of the crucifixion, some thought Jesus was calling for Elijah. The words *Eli, Eli*, literally mean "My God, my God," but could have been misconstrued as the name of **Elijah**, which means "Jehovah is God."

John's Gospel records Jesus also quietly saying, "I'm thirsty" (John 19:28-30). Again, Jesus' humanity is on display. His condition prompted someone to get a **sponge**, fill it with **sour wine**, and put it on **a stick**, since there was no other way to get liquid up to someone on a cross. In the midst of an unruly and rude crowd, this one person, perhaps a soldier, tried to show some measure of kindness by offering Jesus something to drink. Centuries before, Scripture described this scene (Ps. 69:21). The kindness of this single individual should be remembered.

The rest of the crowd was not so sympathetic. Their comments were not based on genuine concern that Elijah might show up and save Jesus. They merely were continuing their crude jesting at Jesus' expense. Their statements included some degree of Jewish lore. Elijah did not die but was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11). The Jews believed Elijah would return before the Day of the Lord, the ultimate judgment of the earth. They watched and laughed at the idea that Elijah would return from heaven to rescue Jesus.

Have you ever felt forsaken in the midst of some terrible trial? What renewed your faith that God will never leave you or forsake you? (See Deut. 31:6; Heb. 13:5.)

MATTHEW 27:50

⁵⁰ But Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and gave up his spirit.

SACRIFICED (MATT. 27:50-52)

VERSE 50

Theories about the immediate cause of Jesus' death abound. Some people attribute it to blood loss or suffocation, which might seem reasonable under the circumstances, since Jesus had endured not only crucifixion but scourging. The wounds inflicted by scourging would have caused

widespread bleeding, as each lash caused tongs tipped with metal or bone to rip through His body. Then, from His position on the cross, Jesus would have had to push Himself up by pressing on the spike through His feet in order to exhale. The other men being crucified with Jesus had not been scourged, and the soldiers had to break their legs to hasten their deaths (John 19:31-32).

Jesus, however, was in sovereign control over His life and His death. If Jesus had died of blood loss or suffocation, He could have not shouted a final time with a loud voice. He would have been too weak. Whatever the physical implications, Jesus ***gave up his spirit***. He died voluntarily. He yielded His spirit into the hands of His Father with the finality of having accomplished that which He came to do—to provide atonement for our sins (Luke 23:46).

VERSES 51-52

Extraordinary occurrences followed Jesus' death. The curtain of the sanctuary was split in two. This thick drape separated the holy place from the holy of holies in the temple at Jerusalem. Some scholars have described this veil as being four inches thick, 60 feet wide, and 30 feet tall. No one but the high priest could pass the curtain and enter the holy of holies, and even he could enter only once a year to make atonement for the sins of the nation. The fact that it was torn ***from top to bottom*** is significant. It was as if God declared the separation between humankind and Himself was ripped apart through the rent body of Christ (Heb. 10:20).

At the same time, ***the earth quaked***. The power of this tremor caused large rocks to be split. Creation itself rebelled as the Creator yielded His life to redeem humankind from the curse that had affected even the earth itself (Gen. 3:17; Rom. 8:22).

At the same time, many tombs were opened. Perhaps the earthquake caused graves to be exposed. The bodies of deceased saints were brought to life and showed themselves in the city, reminiscent of Ezekiel's prophecy (Ezek. 37:12). The term ***fallen asleep*** did not mean literal sleep but was commonly used to describe death (John 11:12-14).

As He told Martha when He approached Lazarus's tomb to raise him up, Jesus is the resurrection and the life. He has the power of life in Himself and the power to raise to life anyone who believes in Him (John 5:26; 11:25; 17:2). Jesus' death removed the chasm between God and sinful humanity, making it possible for us to have an eternal relationship with God through faith in Jesus.

In what ways does Jesus' willing sacrifice for your sins motivate you to live for Him today?

MATTHEW 27:51-52

⁵¹ Suddenly, the curtain of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom, the earth quaked, and the rocks were split. ⁵² The tombs were also opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

INTRODUCE: After greeting the group, relay a story about someone who lost his or her life while saving another person. This can be a story of which you have personal knowledge, or you can use a news story. (You can find countless news stories on this subject by doing an Internet search for “news giving life to save others.”) Be sure to also share ways in which this person was honored for his or her bravery and sacrifice.

TRANSITION: *Today’s study is about Jesus’ paying the ultimate sacrifice when He gave His life to save sinners for all eternity. When we study and reflect on His actions, we are led to worship Him, thank Him, and serve Him.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

DESCRIBE: Display **Pack Item 1** (Map: New Testament Jerusalem); **Pack Item 7** (Chart: The Opponents of Jesus); and **Pack Item 8** (Poster: Time Line of Jesus’ Last Week). Use these to describe the context of today’s study: *On the day we know as Good Friday, Pilate gave the order to crucify Jesus, and the soldiers led Him to Golgotha. They nailed Him to a cross and placed Him between two criminals. People who passed by ridiculed Him, and so did the religious leaders.*

DISCUSS: Invite the group to recall and name the many physical abuses Jesus had endured during this ordeal that began immediately following His prayer in Gethsemane. Explain that today’s Scripture passage begins with a description of the verbal abuses Jesus endured as He was mocked and taunted while on the cross.

READ: Direct a volunteer to read aloud Matthew 27:41-44 as the group underlines in their copy of the PSG the painful words that were used to mock Jesus.

GUIDE: Call for volunteers to share what they underlined, recording responses on a whiteboard. Point out the identity of those making these statements. Ask: *What did the mockers say in regard to Jesus’ relationship with God?*

DISCUSS: *What different types of pain and suffering did Jesus face?* (PSG, p. 126) Review **Pack Item 9** (Poster: The Trials of Jesus) to see all the different trials Jesus had experienced during His time on earth. Lead the group to reflect on and discuss what Jesus went through to bring about God’s will.

ASK: *Of these types of pain, which do you think weighed the most? Explain.* (PSG, p. 126)

EMPHASIZE: *These taunts concerning Jesus’ relationship with God were perhaps the cruelest of all. When suggesting that God didn’t want Jesus (v. 43), the mockers may have had Psalm 22:8 in mind. Read this verse. They implied that God would not rescue His servants if they had failed to please Him. They insisted that God refused to take pleasure in Jesus because He claimed to be God’s Son.*

READ: Explain that these events took place between when Jesus was placed on the cross and noon. Invite the group to listen as a volunteer reads Matthew 27:45-49 to see what took place between noon and three in the afternoon.

ASK: *What do the three hours of darkness teach us about the nature of sin and the magnitude of its consequences? How is the darkness of sin expressed today?* (PSG, p. 127)

EXPLAIN: *The words Jesus cried out in torment at three in the afternoon were prophesied in Psalm 22:1. Imagine being in so much agony that you feel God has forsaken you!*

ASK: *How did the crowd misunderstand Jesus' words? What do you think were the motives of the one who offered Jesus a drink? What were the motives of those who wanted to see Elijah appear?*

READ: Urge the group to listen as a volunteer reads aloud Matthew 27:50-52.

GUIDE: Invite volunteers to highlight key words and ideas found in these verses. Clarify as needed.

SHARE: *Jesus' death occurred at three o'clock, the time of the afternoon sacrifices at the temple. The priests would have been there to witness the curtain being ripped apart from top to bottom. This curtain, which separated the holy of holies from other areas, could only be entered once a year for a priest to make atonement. The days of the high priests' interceding for God's people was over!*

ASK: *What else happened at the moment of Jesus' death? List these on a whiteboard. What conclusions can be drawn from what happened immediately after Jesus died? How does the impact of what happened continue to be experienced today?* (PSG, p. 129)

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

READ: Urge the group to listen and reflect as you read the third bullet point from the PSG under In My Context (p. 130): *Jesus' death removed the chasm between God and sinful humanity, making it possible for humans to have an eternal relationship with God through faith in Jesus.*

DIRECT: Direct attention to the second question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 130): *Take time to reflect on your life when you were separated from God. What image from the crucifixion best illustrates your life at that time? What actions should you take as a result of remembering what it is like to be separated from God?*

GUIDE: *Have you taken advantage of the wonderful relationship Jesus offers? If not, let's talk after the group time so I can show you how to do that. If you have, spend time praising and thanking God for this wonderful gift! Close in prayer.*



PRACTICE

- Reflect on what Jesus' crucifixion has meant in your life. Ask God to always remind you to be thankful and to help you grow in your relationship with Him.
- If you have a group member of whose salvation you are uncertain, create an opportunity to share the gospel with him or her this week.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

Write on the board: "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." (This old adage is reported to have appeared in *The Christian Recorder* in 1862.) Ask: *Do you agree with the adage? Why or why not?* Encourage the group to recall a time when they were hurt by words. Ask: *Do you think that words may sometimes be more painful than physical pain?*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To enhance the study of Matthew 27:45-49, research the word "darkness" in a Bible commentary or dictionary. Discuss the connotations it holds. Ask: *How is the darkness of sin expressed today?*
- Point out that the Book of Matthew doesn't tell us what Jesus shouted as He gave up His life (v. 50). Read together Luke 23:46 and John 19:30 to see what other Gospels tell us about this.
- Discuss the earthquake in more detail. Explain: *Just as the curtain was "split," the rocks were also "split."* Ask: *What connotation might this hold for us? How does Jesus' death impact all of creation?*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Distribute copies of the following statements, adapted from the PSG (p. 130). Direct group members to privately evaluate themselves on each, using a number from 1 (doesn't apply to me) to 10 (greatly applies to me):

___ My life testifies to Jesus' being the Messiah.

___ Sin caused me to be separated from the holy God.

___ Jesus' death removed the chasm between God and sinful humanity, making it possible for me to have an eternal relationship with God through faith in Jesus.

Encourage members to commit to being more faithful in one of these areas.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Read the lyrics or lead the group in singing "At the Cross," by Isaac Watts and Ralph E. Hudson. Ask them to think of Jesus' suffering for us and to pay attention to verse 4, which reveals what He expects of us in return.

WHAT DO WE DO NOW?

Jesus expects His followers to seek to be disciple-makers of all people.

MATTHEW 28:16-20

MEMORY VERSE: MATTHEW 28:19-20

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Matthew 28:16-20, *First Thoughts* (p. 134), and *Understand the Context* (pp. 134-135).
- **STUDY** Matthew 28:16-20, using *Explore the Text* on pages 135-139. Consider ways you can make the Great Commission become more meaningful for your group members.
- **PLAN** the group time using suggestions under *Lead Group Bible Study* (pp. 140-141). Also refer to *QuickSource* and *Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible* for other ideas. Look for ways to creatively call attention to this session's memory verse (Matt. 28:19-20).
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid (*MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploreTheBible*).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; and A whiteboard or large sheet of paper and a marker. Prepare to display: **PACK ITEM 8** (*Poster: Time Line of Jesus' Last Week*); **PACK ITEM 10** (*Poster: Witnesses of Jesus' Resurrection*); and **PACK ITEM 14** (*Poster: Matthew 28:20*).



KEY DOCTRINE

Evangelism and Missions

It is the duty and privilege of every follower of Christ and of every church of the Lord Jesus Christ to endeavor to make disciples of all nations.

BIBLE SKILL

Use multiple Scripture passages to understand a doctrine or concept.

Review the following verses about baptism: Matthew 3:13-17; Acts 2:41; 8:35-39; 16:30-33; Romans 6:3-5; and Colossians 2:12. What similarities did you find? What requirements for baptism did you discover? What symbolism is involved in the act of baptism?

FIRST THOUGHTS

The Ural Mountains separate Europe and Asia. Near a pass through this mountain range sits a small town with a tiny congregation. With only 12 members, this church has a powerful testimony. They meet in a private residence due to governmental restrictions and local persecution. Not only have these believers persevered despite opposition, they take Christ's commission seriously. They have started other churches in remote locations further into the mountains. Each week, they make the difficult trek to preach and teach about Jesus. Their love for Christ and for their people motivates them to overcome incredible obstacles to make disciples wherever possible.

This story is not an isolated example of dedicated believers fulfilling the Great Commission. Around the world, faithful Christians are taking the good news to people who need Jesus.

(In PSG, p. 132) **To what lengths have you seen people go for the purpose of sharing Jesus with others? What do you think motivates people to take these actions?**

Too often we see the Great Commission merely as something we are supposed to do—a task to check off on our to-do list. Christ's commission is not about duty but delight, not about a project but a Person. This week's study helps us see the focus is not merely on the activity of making disciples but on the Person of Jesus. We are not just disciples; we are *Jesus'* disciples. Our joy is to introduce people to Jesus, who can save them and transform their lives with purpose and power.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

MATTHEW 28:16-20

Jesus died on the cross, was buried, and rose on the third day. This simple statement declares the heart of the gospel (1 Cor. 15:3-4). The passion of Christ as He endured the cross surpasses the most eloquent proclamation. The silence of the tomb gave way after three days to the power of God in Christ's resurrection (Rom. 1:4). Still, this was just the beginning of the story.

At His resurrection, Jesus gave instructions for the disciples to return to Galilee where He would meet them (Mark 16:7; Matt. 28:16). When they delayed in Jerusalem, hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jews, Jesus appeared to them (John 20:19). However, He had a purpose in going back to Galilee where their sojourn with Him started.

The disciples may have thought their roles had ended. Peter and some others returned to the fishing boats on the Sea of Galilee (John 21:3). Perhaps they did not anticipate His giving them a new, larger task.

Jesus replicated the scene of Peter's original call (Luke 5:1-11; John 21). The disciples needed to understand that their purpose in life had not changed. Jesus wanted Peter especially to know that his temporary weakness and denial of Christ did not disqualify him. Jesus still wanted Peter to be a fisher of men and a shepherd of the Lord's flock (John 21:17). Jesus then extended His commission to all the disciples.

Jesus finished His task on earth and committed the good news of salvation to His disciples—and through them to us today. As He prepared to return to heaven (Acts 1:9), Jesus commissioned His followers to carry the gospel to all the people of the earth, making disciples wherever they went (Matt. 28:18-20).

Our mission to the world takes place in the context of Jesus' majesty. Witnessing and making disciples are not ends in themselves; they involve glorifying Christ. In this week's Scripture passage, we observe aspects of Jesus' worthiness demonstrated in the Great Commission.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "To Make Disciples," available digitally in the Spring 2017 *Biblical Illustrator for Explore the Bible* at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

WORSHIP (MATT. 28:16-17)

VERSE 16

The last time Jesus' disciples made the 70-mile journey to Galilee, they numbered twelve. Now there were **eleven**. Judas had betrayed Jesus and, in despair, took his own life. Additional believers went along with Jesus from time to time, but He had chosen this inner circle to have a unique role as apostles.

Jesus had directed the disciples to meet Him in **Galilee** immediately after the resurrection (Matt. 28:7). However, they remained in Jerusalem where they huddled behind closed doors (John 20:19). Full of grief and anxiety, they mourned for three days after the crucifixion (Mark 16:10). They seemed to have forgotten His promise that He would rise from the grave. Instead of believing and obeying, they let their fear paralyze them into inaction. Only after Jesus appeared to them in Jerusalem did they obey His command.

The group that made the journey to Galilee was different from the frightened men who hid after Jesus' death. They had heard reports about the empty tomb, but finally they had seen the risen Christ (John 20:20). Jesus broke through their fear and restored joy to their troubled hearts. As they traveled northward, they must have been laughing, sharing old stories of their travels with Jesus, and discussing what might happen next.

The disciples were not confused about which **mountain** was the one where Jesus would meet them. Among the numerous mountains in northern Galilee, Jesus directed them to a familiar place. On other occasions, Matthew simply refers to "a mountain" (Matt. 4:8; 14:23; 15:29; 17:1), but here he specified *the mountain*. It may have been the same mountain where Jesus prayed all night before choosing them to be His apostles (Luke 6:12-13).

MATTHEW 28:16

¹⁶ The eleven disciples traveled to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had directed them.

This location was near the Sea of Galilee. The fact that Peter and several others of the group decided to go fishing as they waited on Jesus (John 21:3) means they likely were near the place where his father's boats were located. This seashore could have been where Peter, Andrew, James, and John had worked as professional fishermen when Jesus called them (Matt. 4:18-22).

MATTHEW 28:17

¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped, but some doubted.

VERSE 17

At Jesus' appearance to them in Jerusalem, they understood He truly was the Messiah. He had risen from the dead and stood before them. When He met them in Galilee, they recognized His identity as the Son of God and **worshiped** Him.

As an infant, Jesus was worshiped by wise men who traveled from the east to see Him (2:11). When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water, they worshiped Him (14:33). The women who saw the resurrected Christ near the garden tomb grasped His feet and worshiped Him (28:9). This fact is significant because only God is worthy of worship (4:10). Even angels refused to accept worship (Rev. 22:8-9). Since Jesus received worship, He clearly was God the Son, not merely a prophet, teacher, or healer.

Incredibly, even as they worshiped Jesus, **some doubted**. Days before, in the upper room, Jesus had rebuked the Eleven because of their unbelief at the report of those who had seen Him after His resurrection (Mark 16:14). The situation in Galilee apparently proposes that some of the disciples maintained a level of doubt. How could any of them hesitate after all they had experienced?

The word translated *doubted* comes from a term used only twice in the New Testament. It suggests hesitation or wavering in one's opinion. If this verse described the unsettled minds of some of the Eleven, the word implies they did not fully understand Christ's nature or their purpose. However, Jesus also had many other disciples, some of whom may have joined the Eleven in Galilee. Since He appeared to over 500 of His followers during the days between His resurrection and ascension (1 Cor. 15:6), Matthew's reference may apply to some of them rather than to the Eleven. Still, Jesus can be worshiped even when we have doubts.

As you consider the risen Christ, are you still tempted to doubt, or do you respond in faith by worshiping Him?

MATTHEW 28:18

¹⁸ Jesus came near and said to them, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth.

POWER (MATT. 28:18)

VERSE 18

Jesus **came near** the disciples as He spoke to them. Jesus is not a remote authoritarian, directing people's lives from a distance. He referred to the disciples as friends (John 15:15). As He prepared to commission them with His gospel, He came closer. His nearness conveyed both the urgency of the message and the affection He had for the ones who would be His messengers.

Jesus began by assuring the disciples of His power to accomplish the mission He was entrusting into their hands. They would not depend on their abilities but on His authority. As God the Son, Jesus possessed **all authority ... in heaven and on earth**. The word translated *authority* carries the idea of having not only the right of rule, but also the power to exercise that right. Daniel had a vision of the Son of Man who had authority to reign over every people, nation, and language with a kingdom that was everlasting (Dan. 7:14). In His high priestly prayer prior to the crucifixion, Jesus acknowledged that the Father had given Him power over all flesh (John 17:2).

The phrase **has been given** should not confuse us concerning the nature of Christ or His relationship to the Father. Both before and after the resurrection, Jesus was One with the Father (John 10:30). Jesus possessed both human and divine natures before and after the resurrection, although after the resurrection He had a new glorified body.

Paul declared that Jesus had every right to claim equality with God, but in His humanity He humbled Himself and became obedient all the way to the cross. As a result, the Father raised Jesus from the dead and gave Him a name above every name, that at Jesus' name every knee should bow in heaven and in earth. The time is coming when every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2:9-11).

Jesus' power and authority gives Him the right to commission His followers to carry the gospel to all people. Equally important, He lives in us through His Spirit, enabling us to fulfill His commission.

How does the vastness of Christ's power encourage you to participate in fulfilling His Great Commission?

MISSION (MATT. 28:19-20a)

VERSE 19

Jesus' mission did not end with the cross, the resurrection, or the ascension. While His work of atoning redemption was finished at the cross, the task of spreading the good news of salvation continued after He returned to heaven. Before He left, He entrusted His followers with His Great Commission.

The word **therefore** links verses 19 and 20 with what was said in verse 18. Because Jesus had all power in heaven and earth, His disciples could go into all the world and make disciples in His name. We too go forward in His authority and with His power.

Jesus wanted His followers not merely to make disciples as they went about their daily lives, although that aspect is important. He wanted the Eleven—and He wants us—to leave the comfort zone and engage every person with His good news.

Many commentators point out that verses 19 and 20 have only one imperative verb: **make disciples**. The word translated **go** is a participle, like

MATTHEW 28:19

19 Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

the words **baptizing** and teaching. However, the syntax of the sentence does not lessen the importance Jesus gave to the going. He wanted His disciples to go into the entire world. Certainly, they were to make disciples in the normal course of life, but they also were to go intentionally to all nations.

The term **nations** is the same word from which we get “ethnic,” referring to the various people groups that make up the nations. The disciples were mainly concerned with their own people—Israel. Even at the ascension, they asked if Jesus was going to restore the kingdom to their nation. Jesus certainly came to be the Savior of the Jews first but also of the Gentiles (Rom. 1:16). The term *Gentiles* included everyone who was not a Jew. Jesus wanted His followers to bring the gospel to every part of the world.

Jesus’ command to make disciples can be misunderstood. In our programmed church culture, we think of disciple making as an organized activity you do with people who are already Christians. Helping believers grow in Christlikeness remains a key aspect of Jesus’ command, but the idea of teaching is a separate part of the commission (v. 20). The imperative statement, *make disciples*, involves sharing Christ with unsaved people in such a way that they become followers of Jesus. Evangelism is the beginning of disciple making.

This idea finds support in Jesus’ follow-up statement. Once people receive Christ as Savior and Lord, they need to be baptized. Part of disciple making is baptizing them. Baptism is not required for salvation. Still, baptism is important as believers identify with Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection through the act of immersion (Rom. 6:4-5).

Jesus emphasized the Trinity as He commanded baptism to be done in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Some churches immerse new believers three times, once in each of the names. However, Jesus did not say to baptize in the names, but ***in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit***. Human minds cannot comprehend how God can be three distinct Persons and at the same time be one God, not three gods. Yet Jesus’ command clearly teaches this vital doctrine. As the church carries out this ordinance, it proclaims our identification with the triune God.

To baptize *in the name of* means baptism is not performed in the power or authority of any individual, but on behalf of God. A new believer is baptized under the authority of Christ through the church in the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

VERSE 20a

Making disciples begins with evangelism, followed by baptism, and continues with helping new believers grow in Christlikeness. The first half of verse 20 contains three aspects of how we can help new Christians mature as disciples.

First, the phrase ***teaching them*** means much more than simply taking someone through a class. Knowledge of God’s Word is vital to our spiritual growth, but Jesus’ commission cannot be limited to Christian education in group formats. The idea of teaching includes getting involved with helping people know the Scriptures. Mentoring, both in formal and informal settings, adds a personal level of effectiveness and accountability. Mature believers need to model Christ’s life for new Christians and help mold them into His image (Gal. 4:19).

MATTHEW 28:20a

^{20a} teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you.

Second, the goal of disciple making is not merely to increase the amount of information new believers learn but to help them observe everything Christ **commanded**. Jesus does not want us merely to know what He has commanded; He wants us to obey His Word.

A third aspect of Jesus' instructions involves their completeness. Followers of Jesus cannot pick and choose among Jesus' teachings as if the Bible were a buffet dinner. He wants us to learn and obey **everything** that He taught. Jesus commanded the disciples in every aspect of life. These matters are not optional but are necessary parts of a healthy Christian life. As we go throughout the world, believers are to make disciples for Christ.

How did someone help you to become a disciple of Jesus? What does your church do to help you grow to be more like Christ?

PRESENCE (MATT. 28:20b)

VERSE 20b

Jesus assured His disciples they would not be alone as they went forth to make disciples. He would be with them. He encouraged them to remember this promise of His presence. The second half of verse 20 suggests three important aspects of Jesus' promise.

First, notice the Person in the promise. Jesus did not say, "I will be with you," but **I am with you**. In numerous places, Jesus used the phrase "I am." The term is more than a mere statement of fact; it is a declaration of identity. Just as God identified Himself to Moses as "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex. 3:14), Jesus used this term to distinguish Himself as God (John 8:58). The disciples might stand before judges, but they had the Judge of the universe among them. They would be brought into the presence of kings, but they had the King of kings with them. No power, no authority, no danger, no opportunity that they encountered would be greater than the One who walked with them.

Second, observe the persistence of the promise. Although Jesus would be with them physically for only a little while longer, His presence through the Holy Spirit would be with them and in them **always**. Jesus would be continually with them. Jesus promised never to leave or forsake us (Heb. 13:5). As we fulfill His commission, He goes with us into every situation.

Finally, look at the endurance of the promise. Christ's presence would not be limited to the disciples who heard His voice that day on the mountain. Jesus promised to be present with everyone who follows Him—even **to the end of the age**. The word *end* means the consummation or completion of something. The entire phrase refers not merely to the time of the apostles. Rather, it continues until all of history finds fulfillment in Christ's return. At that point, the need for evangelism and missions will cease as Jesus establishes His eternal reign. Everyone who receives Him as Savior and Lord will enjoy His presence forever.

MATTHEW 28:20b

20b And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

RELAY: Tell the story from the first paragraph of First Thoughts in the PSG (p. 132). Ask volunteers to share stories of people they know who are overcoming obstacles to make disciples.

EMPHASIZE: *These people are fulfilling the Great Commission that Jesus gave to the disciples in Matthew 28:19-20.*

ASK: *How do you define “commission”? Why do you think we use the adjective “great” to describe this order to carry out a mission? Invite the group to join you in studying the text where the Great Commission is found.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

REVIEW: Using **Pack Item 8** (Poster: Time Line of Jesus’ Last Week) and **Pack Item 10** (Poster: Witnesses of Jesus’ Resurrection) as a backdrop, review events that led up to today’s passage, from the perspective of the disciples. Include these points:

- One disciple, Judas, betrayed Jesus and became so engulfed in regret that he took his own life.
- The disciples learned that Jesus had been raised from the dead.
- The disciples were reminded that they were to meet Jesus in Galilee after His resurrection.

READ: As a volunteer reads aloud Matthew 28:16-17, invite the group to follow along and to underline all the verbs in the passage.

DISPLAY: Make three columns on a whiteboard for listing actions (verbs) in the passage. Label them “Disciples,” “Jesus,” and “Jesus’ Commands.” Invite the group to share their findings and list them in the proper columns.

DISCUSS: Point out the two identified actions of the disciples. Ask: *What might have motivated them to worship? What might have caused them to doubt?* Emphasize that the range of emotions they must have experienced over the past days were too much to digest at once. *They were probably overjoyed but still somewhat bewildered.*

ASK: *How are different areas of a person’s life impacted by the reality of Jesus’ resurrection? Name one area of your life that has been transformed by the reality of the resurrection.* (PSG, p. 135)

READ: Invite the group to underline the actions (verbs) of Jesus as you read aloud Matthew 28:18. Record responses on a whiteboard.

EXPLAIN: *When the disciples saw Jesus and stopped to worship Him, He could have ordered them to come closer, or He could have reprimanded them because of their doubt. Instead, He took the initiative to close the gap Himself.*

EMPHASIZE: *Just as a law enforcement officer might show his badge to demonstrate that authority had been given to him, Jesus began His instruction by proclaiming that authority had been given to Him.*

ASK: *Why would it have been important for the disciples to understand the magnitude of Jesus' authority? Why is it important for believers today?* (PSG, p. 136)

READ: As a volunteer reads aloud Matthew 28:19-20a, encourage the group again to underline the actions (verbs) that describe what Jesus commissioned the disciples to do and also what Jesus did. Record responses on a whiteboard. Clarify as needed.

EMPHASIZE: *The disciples were to share the gospel, but also they were to nurture the new converts as they grew into maturity.*

DISCUSS: *Why is baptism important after one has accepted Christ?*

CLARIFY: *Baptism in itself doesn't save; rather, it is a believer's public declaration of faith in Jesus, and it calls attention to the spiritual transformation that has taken place through the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.*

ASK: *How do the directives given by Jesus in this passage serve as a blueprint for what a church and a Christian should be doing? How do you see these things being carried out today?* (PSG, p. 138)

READ: Switch from a discussion of the disciples to a focus on Jesus. Read Matthew 28:20b.

HIGHLIGHT: *Jesus had commanded and taught the disciples for years. Now it was time for them to take the baton and continue His ministry. Call attention to **Pack Item 14** (Poster: Matthew 28:20). Lead the group to reflect on what it means that Jesus is with us. Work on committing the passage to memory as a group.*

ASK: *How does Jesus' promised presence serve as an encouragement to believers? (PSG, p. 139) What does it mean to you that Jesus will be with us always? At what times do you find this most strengthening and comforting?*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

DIRECT: Look together at the second question set under In My Context in the PSG (p. 140): *What are you doing this week to carry out the Great Commission in your neighborhood? Create a list using the categories of going, telling, and teaching.* Invite volunteers to share what they are doing to carry out the Great Commission.

CHALLENGE: Brainstorm actions group members might take to better fulfill this commandment. Encourage them to prayerfully commit to incorporating one of these actions into their ministry.

PRAY: Close in prayer that all group members will make living out the Great Commission a priority in their everyday lives.



PRACTICE

- List times and ways that Jesus has kept His promise to be with you as you fulfill your mission to go and tell. Thank Him for keeping that promise in your past and in your future. Consider sharing your list with your group by email and encouraging them to create a similar list.
- If someone in your group needs extra discipling, meet with him or her and share insights and answer questions about growing in the Christian faith.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

Point out that many people have experienced a major, life-changing event, which divided their lives forever into two parts. *From that day forward everything in their life is referred to as “before the event” or “after the event.” It can be a positive or negative experience.* Invite a few to share about such an event in their lives. Then ask: *If you were to win a sweepstakes, you would be happy to know that your life was going to change for the better, but you would not yet understand the ramifications of the event. It would take quite a while to see what your new existence would be like.* Explain that the disciples had just experienced such an event: *Their Lord and Savior had arisen! They were no doubt happy, but it was time to start learning what it would mean for their future.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To further the study of baptism in Matthew 28:19, lead the group to complete the Bible Skill activity in the PSG (p. 137): *Review the following verses about baptism: Matthew 3:13-17; Acts 2:41; 8:35-39; 16:30-33; Romans 6:3-5; and Colossians 2:12. What similarities did you find? What requirements for baptism did you discover? What symbolism is involved in the act of baptism?*
- To enhance the study of Matthew 28:20b, focus on Jesus’ words, “I am.” Highlight that this points to His deity as God revealed that He is the great I AM. Read and discuss Exodus 3:14; 6:2; and John 8:24.
- Research and discuss what Jesus meant by “end of the age” (see comments under Explore the Text on p. 139). Enhance by referring to Matthew 13:39-40; 24:3.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Conclude by reading the final paragraph under First Thoughts (p. 134; PSG, p. 132) beginning “Too often ...” Then discuss the third question set under In My Context in the PSG (p. 140): *Ask your Bible study group to share testimonies about how Jesus has kept His promise to be with them as they take His mission seriously. Record insights gleaned from the testimonies shared.*

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

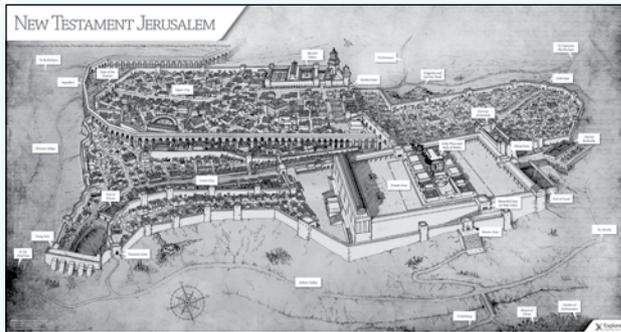
Read the lyrics or lead the group in singing “We’ve a Story to Tell,” by H. Ernest Nichol.

LEADER PACK IDEAS

»» PACK ITEM 1

Map: New Testament Jerusalem
Sessions 1-13

Locate a map in a Bible atlas that shows Jerusalem during the time of Jesus.



Pack Item 1 example from *Explore the Bible Leader Pack* (The Pack is available for purchase at LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible.)

»» PACK ITEM 2

Outline of Matthew
Sessions 1-13

Refer to the outline printed on page 12.

»» PACK ITEM 3

Poster: Spring 2017
Sessions 1-13

Create a sign to post on the door where your group meets to welcome them to the study of Matthew 14–28.

»» PACK ITEM 4

Time Line: Matthew
Sessions 1-13

Locate a study Bible with a time line of the major people and events in Matthew (from 2,200 B.C. to A.D. 33). Use it as a reference during this study.

From Abraham to David		From David to the Babylonian Exile		From the Exile to the Messiah		Messiah
2200-1000 B.C.	1526-1000 B.C.	1000-586 B.C.	586-53 B.C.	5 B.C.-A.D. 33		
2166-1991 Abraham	1526-1406 Moses	1000?-970 David	586-528 Babylonian Exile	Winter 5 B.C. Jesus' birth		
2006-1886 Isaac	1406 Solomon	990?-931 Solomon	536 Temple completed	4 B.C. Jesus' death		
2006-1889 Jacob	1406?-1380? Judah	971?-913 Isaiah	479 Greek conquest	A.D. 29 Jesus' baptism		
1818-1805 Joseph	1406 Destruction of Jericho	971-909 Isaiah	479 Jesus' baptism	A.D. 29 Jesus' baptism		
	1380?-1406? Judah	722 Fall of the Northern Kingdom	445 Jerusalem walls completed	A.D. 29 Jesus' baptism		
	1175?-1125? Isaac	586 Fall of the Southern Kingdom	334 Alexander the Great invades Persia	March 28 Jesus' first week		
	1105?-1025? Samuel	586 Fall of the Southern Kingdom	323-327 Greek control of Palestine	April 5, A.D. 33 Jesus' resurrection		
	1000?-1010 Isaac		323-327 Greek control of Palestine	May 14, A.D. 33 Jesus' ascension		
			167-63 Roman dominance	May 24, A.D. 33 Jesus' resurrection		
			63 Roman dominance begins			

Pack Item 4 example from *Explore the Bible Leader Pack* (The Pack is available for purchase at LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible.)

»» **PACK ITEM 5**

Bookmark: Memory Verses
Sessions 1-13

Make a list of these suggested memory verses to distribute to your group:

- Matthew 16:24
- Matthew 17:5
- Matthew 19:26
- Matthew 21:9
- Matthew 21:42
- Romans 10:13
- Matthew 28:6
- Matthew 24:42
- Luke 22:19
- Matthew 26:39
- Matthew 26:64
- Matthew 27:54
- Matthew 28:19-20

»» **PACK ITEM 6**

Poster: Titles of Jesus in Matthew
Session 11

Create and display the following list of these titles of Jesus, as recorded in Matthew:

Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:1,18); The Son of David (Matt. 1:1; 15:22); The Son of Abraham (Matt. 1:1); The Christ (Matt. 1:16); Immanuel (Matt. 1:23); King of the Jews (Matt. 2:2; 27:11); Ruler (Matt. 2:6); Shepherd (Matt. 2:6); A Nazarene (Matt. 2:23; 26:71); The Lord (Matt. 3:3; 14:28); God's beloved Son (Matt. 3:17; 17:5); The Son of God (Matt. 4:3; 14:33; 27:40); Teacher (Matt. 8:19; 19:16); The Son of Man (Matt. 8:20; 20:28); Lord of the Sabbath (Matt. 12:8); God's servant (Matt. 12:18); God's beloved (Matt. 12:18); The Messiah

(Matt. 16:16; 24:5; 26:63); The Son of the living God (Matt. 16:16; 26:63); Rabbi (Matt. 26:25,49)

»» **PACK ITEM 7**

Chart: The Opponents of Jesus
Sessions 1,7,11,12

Use a Bible dictionary to learn about the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, and the Herodians. Take note of what they believed and how their actions affected Jesus' time on the earth.

»» **PACK ITEM 8**

Poster: Time Line of Jesus' Last Week
Sessions 4-6,8-13

Create a poster of the major events of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection:

Sunday

Triumphal Entry (Matt. 21:1-10; Mark 11:1-10); At the Temple Complex (Matt. 21:14-16; Mark 11:11a); Return to Bethany (Matt. 21:17; Mark 11:11b)



Pack Item 6 example from *Explore the Bible Leader Pack* (The Pack is available for purchase at LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible.)

Monday

Barren Fig Tree Cursed (Matt. 21:18-19); Temple Cleansed of Moneychangers (Matt. 21:12-13; Mark 11:12-19); Greeks Seek Jesus (John 12:20-26)

Tuesday

Debates with Opponents at the Temple (Matt. 21:23–23:39; Mark 11:27–12:40); End-Time Discourse at the Mount of Olives (Matt. 24:1–25:46; Mark 13)

Wednesday

Anointing of Jesus at Bethany (Matt. 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; John 12:3-8)

Thursday

Passover Celebrated; Lord's Supper Inaugurated (Matt. 26:17-30); Jesus' Farewell Discourses (John 14–16); Jesus' Intercessory Prayer (John 17); Prayer of Agony in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42); Jesus' Betrayal and Arrest (Matt. 26:47-56; Mark 14:43-50)

Friday

Jesus' Trials in Jerusalem (Matt. 26:57-68; 27:1-2,11-26); Jesus' Crucifixion and Burial (Matt. 27:27-61; John 19:16-42)

Saturday

Jesus in the Tomb (Matt. 27:62-66; Luke 23:56b)

Sunday

Jesus' Resurrection and Appearances (Matt. 28:1-10,16-20; John 20–21)

➤➤ PACK ITEM 9

Poster: *The Trials of Jesus*
Session 12

Use a Bible dictionary to create a poster of the religious trials, civil trials, and sequence of events at Calvary, as recorded in the Gospels.

➤➤ PACK ITEM 10

Poster: *Witnesses of Jesus' Resurrection*
Sessions 7,13

Use a Bible dictionary or commentary to create a list of the people who witnessed Jesus after His resurrection.

➤➤ PACK ITEM 11

Poster: *Matthew 16:24*
Session 1

Display Matthew 16:24 on a whiteboard or large sheet of paper.

➤➤ PACK ITEM 12

Poster: *Matthew 21:42*
Session 5

Display Matthew 21:42 on a whiteboard or large sheet of paper.

➤➤ PACK ITEM 13

Poster: *Matthew 26:39*
Session 10

Display Matthew 26:39 on a whiteboard or large sheet of paper.

➤➤ PACK ITEM 14

Poster: *Matthew 28:20*
Session 13

Display Matthew 28:20 on a whiteboard or large sheet of paper.



THE PRACTICE OF ROMAN CRUCIFIXION

By R. D. Fowler



“What should I do then with Jesus, who is called Christ?’ They all answered, ‘Crucify him!’ Then he [Pilate] said, ‘Why? What has he done wrong?’ But they kept shouting all the more, ‘Crucify him!’” (Matt. 27:22-23).

When I read or hear those words, I get emotional. Watching a reenactment brings tears to my eyes. Yet what I hear or envision does not sufficiently reflect the horror of what really happened. What I hear, and what you likely hear as well, is an angry crowd yelling, “Put Him to death!” When we consider that Jesus was not a criminal and that Pilate admitted he could not find Him guilty of any crime, we conclude the act was a travesty.

Crucifixion was the most cruel, abominable, inhumane form of execution man ever conceived. By design, crucifixion inflicted on the condemned person the harshest and greatest amount of suffering imaginable—prior to his death. It also exposed the person to the greatest possible degree of indignity after his death.

HISTORY

The precursor to crucifixion was impalement. The Greek word translated “cross” in the New Testament, *stauros*, originally referred to a pointed wooden stake or pole firmly fixed in the ground. Walls of these stakes formed protective palisade fortifications around settlements. Eastern countries, particularly Assyria, developed the practice of publicly displaying the corpses or heads of criminals, traitors, and enemies on these walls as a means of humiliation and intimidation. This practice led to people using the stakes themselves as a means of torture and execution—by impaling offenders on the stake and leaving them to die.

History does not indicate when impalement ceased and crucifixion began, but historians generally agree that crucifixion began among the Persians. The Romans likely adopted it from the Carthaginians. Many ancient texts refer to both impalement and crucifixion but often fail to distinguish between the two and provide little descriptive detail of crucifixion.

The Greeks and Romans used crucifixion well before the time of Christ. Alexander the Great used it in the fourth century B.C. As early as 250 B.C., the Romans were crucifying those they considered deserving. The ancient Romans generally thought of crucifixion as “the slave’s punishment.” Over time, however, the Romans used it for slaves, thieves, insurgents, and enemies of the empire in general.

People never considered crucifixion to be a Jewish form of punishment, yet Alexander Jannaeus, a Jewish high priest and king who crucified 800 Pharisees in one day, used it in the first century B.C. as an act of revenge for the Pharisees’ rebellion against him. By the first century A.D., Rome used crucifixion extensively in the pacification of Judea. Romans also used it throughout the empire as a means of maintaining order and suppressing insurrection. While crucifixion was primarily limited to non-citizens, Roman citizens were not totally free from its terrible shadow. In certain cases, particularly treason, Caesar would issue an edict allowing authorities to crucify even Roman citizens.

Crucifixion took place in public areas outside the city walls—where the bodies were clearly visible. Crucifixion thus punished offenders and intimidated one’s enemies. Bodies on crosses were a common sight in the first century A.D. The number of people crucified reached into the thousands. This excessive usage along with its barbaric nature and the religious idea of being cursed made crucifixion particularly offensive to the Jews (see Deut. 21:22-23).



METHOD

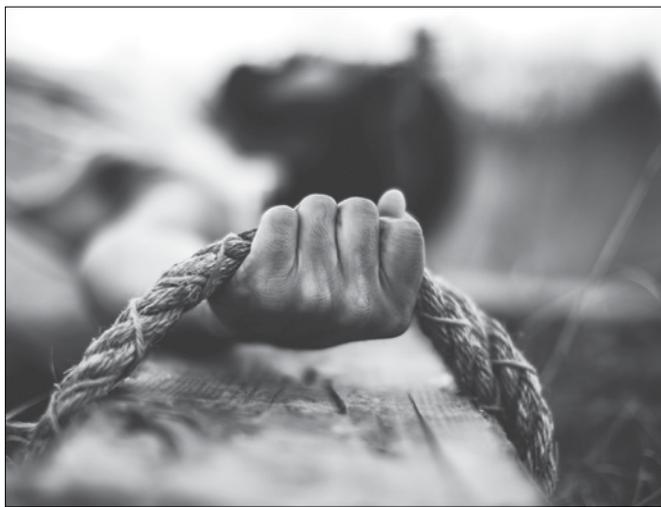
Scourging was the first brutal act related to crucifixion. The condemned person was stripped of clothing, tied to a post, and beaten with the dreaded Roman flagellum, a whip consisting of leather straps embedded with metal, bone, or rock. Scourging was designed to shred flesh, in some cases exposing both bones and internal organs. Roman law, unlike Jewish law, set no limits on the number of lashes a person could receive. The severity of the scourging was completely at

the discretion of the person administering it. In some cases, the scourging caused death; in others, it expedited death. In most cases, though, the scourging merely increased the agony the condemned person experienced on the cross.

Following scourging, the condemned person was clothed and then forced to carry the horizontal beam (Latin, *patibulum*) to the crucifixion site. Typically the Romans hung a sign around the criminal’s neck, specifying his offense. At the crucifixion site the person was again stripped of their clothing and placed on the cross. The sign was then placed on the cross. Scripture does not mention Jesus wearing the sign Pilate made; however, custom dictated that He likely did.



Upon arrival at the site, the authorities would secure the person to the cross using ropes, nails, or both. We know Jesus was nailed to His cross; not discounting the theological significance, nothing suggests otherwise. At this point in the process, details vary about how the actual crucifixion took place. Some believe the person was secured to



the cross as it lay on the ground; the entire cross was then lifted up and dropped into a hole prepared for it. Others suggest the vertical beam (the *stipes*) was already in the ground; soldiers attached the person to the horizontal beam (the *patibulum*) and hoisted both up the vertical beam.

Although the Romans had no standard form for the crosses they used, at least four variations were prominent. The Latin cross, likely the form on which Jesus died, had a cross beam that attached a little

below the top of the vertical beam. The second form, a St. Anthony's cross, looked like a capital T. The third design, the Greek cross, had equal beams and looked like a plus sign. The fourth configuration, the St. Andrew's cross, looked like the letter X. The variation in crosses, the possibility that crosses could be reused, and the absence of specific details mean that the method of crucifixion could vary—depending on the circumstances and the type of cross. The Latin, the St. Anthony's, and the Greek cross each had a small wooden block or seat. This supported the body and prolonged death. Later, after the first century, a footrest was added. After death, bodies were, as a rule, left on the cross to be exposed to the elements and to decay. We know from Scripture this was not the case with Jesus.

My belief is that soldiers nailed Jesus to the horizontal beam (the *patibulum*) and then pulled Him and the *patibulum* up the vertical beam, the *stipes*, forming a Latin cross. There, He died.

This barbaric punishment method continued until the fourth century. Emperor Constantine, who had converted to Christianity, abolished crucifixion during the later years of his reign. While many details are unclear, one detail is indisputable: crucifixion brought extreme suffering. The tremendous loss of blood, the excruciating pain from the nails, the stretched position, and the exposure to the elements all contributed to extreme suffering prior to death.

This article first appeared in the Spring 2015 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. R. D. Fowler is pastor of Bethel Baptist Church, Lincoln, Nebraska.

PREPARING FOR PASSOVER

By Argile Smith

On the day before His crucifixion, Jesus instructed Peter and John to go to Jerusalem and prepare for Passover (Luke 22:8). He told them about the house with an upper room in which they would gather that evening and instructed them on how they would find it. They followed His instruction and located the upper room. Then they turned their attention to preparing the meal in keeping with the customs of Jewish people in the first century.

What were the customs associated with preparing for Passover in Jesus' day? Of course, the answer to that important question can help us to gain a better understanding of the Lord's Supper. It can enrich our appreciation for the bread and the cup. It can also instill



within us a deeper sense of wonder at God's remarkable way of passing along the story of His redemptive work from one generation to the next.

PREPARING THE PLACE

In Jesus' day, Jewish people celebrated Passover according to the Lord's instruction in the Old Testament. That's why they ate the Passover meal on the fourteenth day of the first month (Lev. 23:5).

The first month, which the Jews called Nisan, covers mid-March–April on our calendar. The fourteenth day had extreme significance for Jewish people. The Lord commanded Moses to lead God's people to celebrate the first Passover meal on that exact day (Ex. 12:6).

The name of the meal forged a powerful connection between the people of Israel and the night when the Lord passed over His people in Egypt and spared the firstborn males in their houses (v. 29). In order to help His people remember what He had done to deliver Israel from Egypt, the Lord commanded His people to observe Passover each year. He also ordered them to eat unleavened bread for seven days after Passover, which He referred to as the Feast of Unleavened Bread (vv. 14-20).

At the time of their exodus from Egypt, the people of Israel observed Passover in their homes (v. 7). Once Solomon constructed the temple, however, Jerusalem became the central location for Passover. Passover became a pilgrimage festival. By the time of Jesus' ministry, Jewish people from everywhere made their way to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover and the Week of Unleavened Bread. Consequently, bulging crowds squeezed into Jerusalem every year for the celebration. Many historians have speculated that up to 200,000 Israelites made the pilgrimage to the holy city each year for Passover. However, one ancient historian estimated that as many as 2.7 million Jewish people streamed into Jerusalem for the festival.

Imagine the difficulty associated with trying to find a house or a room in which one could observe Passover. Extended families used every bit of available space when gathering for the meal. Accordingly, the upper room of a house would have provided Jesus and His disciples the space they needed for the Passover meal.



PREPARING THE FOOD

Once the disciples secured the room in Jerusalem for Passover, they had to handle preparations for the meal itself. The most important details included making sure the lamb had been slaughtered properly and roasted. They also gave attention to preparing the other dishes associated with the meal.

The lamb served as the centerpiece of Passover. Israelite families who made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem would have to purchase their lamb by the tenth day of the first month, four days before Passover. The lamb had to be unblemished and not more than one year old.

In addition to securing the lamb, families worked to remove all of the leaven from the house, a task to be completed on the night before the meal itself. Early in the morning of the day of Passover, the leaven had to be taken away and burned.

Later that day, starting about three in the afternoon and continuing until dusk, fathers or other family leaders would take the family's lamb to the temple. Under the supervision of the priests, the family representative would slaughter the lamb and catch the blood in a basin. The priest then tossed the blood at the base of the altar. Then the family representative would skin the lamb and remove the fat and kidneys so they could be placed on the altar and burned. At that point he would wrap the lamb in the skin, place it over his shoulder, and carry it to the place where the family would share the meal together. There, the lamb would be roasted outside over an open fire until it was ready to eat.

Preparation also included attention to other details. Items such as jars of water, bitter herbs, unleavened bread, a fruit-and-nut paste, and a raw vegetable dipped in tart dressing had to be gathered and prepared. Also, wine had to be secured. In addition, the room had to be arranged with floor cushions so everyone could recline at the table.

Timing was critical in the preparation of the Passover meal. The roasted lamb and all of the items had to be prepared by six p.m. That's when the family would recline at the table and the meal would begin.

THE STORY OF REDEMPTION

Passover was an opportunity to remember the story of God's redemption. The Passover lamb reminded them of the faith of their ancestors, who painted their doorposts with the blood of sacrificial lambs, thus sparing them the visit of the death angel. The bitter herbs helped them to remember the bitterness of their slavery in Egypt, and the unleavened bread brought to mind their hasty departure from Egypt. The nut-and-fruit paste helped them to recollect the clay their ancestors used to make bricks for Pharaoh in Egypt, and the cups of wine reminded them of God's promises in Exodus 6:6-8.

At a pivotal juncture in the long meal, the father or other family leader would begin to reflect on the night of Passover. Someone at the table, usually the youngest son, would be prepared to ask about the significance of that night. The leader would reply by retelling the story of the exodus of God's people from slavery in Egypt to freedom in Israel.

Preparing for Passover in Jesus' day required Jewish people to attend to a number of critical details. All of these assorted details blended together well to retell the story of God's redemptive plan for His people.

This article is adapted from an article that appeared in the Spring 2013 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Argile Smith is pastor of Parkway Baptist Church in Biloxi, Mississippi.

THREE WAYS TO LEAD A DEEPER BIBLE STUDY

By Mike Livingstone



I've never met a Bible study leader who said, "I want to lead a shallow Bible study." Neither have I met anyone who attended a weekly Bible study with the hopes of being bored by pointless superficialities.

Regardless of our group members' level of biblical knowledge or spiritual maturity, depth is what we aim for as Bible study leaders—a depth that informs the mind as it also cuts to the heart (see Acts 2:37).

Consider these three ways we can add depth to our Bible teaching:

1. LEAD A DEEPER BIBLE STUDY BY EXPLORING THE BIBLICAL TEXT IN ITS CONTEXT.

Teaching that uses the biblical text as a jumping off point for our own objectives is not Bible teaching; it is proof texting. D. A. Carson has been quoted as saying, "A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text." You might be a proof-texter if you are not examining the biblical text in light of its historical and literary context.

To lead a deeper Bible study means we allow the biblical passage in its context to set the agenda for lesson and to speak for itself. Put simply, we say what the Bible says. Let's be Bible teachers, not proof-texters.



2. LEAD A DEEPER BIBLE STUDY BY AIMING AT THE HEART OF THE GROUP MEMBER.

Various opinions exist regarding what constitutes deep Bible teaching. For some, going deep means telling people something they didn't already know (explaining the meaning of Greek and Hebrew words, for example). Deep may involve that, but deep goes beyond imparting new knowledge.

We can parse Greek verbs all day and yet never move out of the shallows of a text. We can impress group members with our knowledge of Bible culture and history yet still be superficial in our teaching of a passage. Why? Because the depth of teaching is measured not simply by the amount of biblical knowledge imparted; it is measured by how deeply the truth of the biblical text penetrates the heart.

We can mark the depth of our teaching at the point where the truth of God's Word intersects where the group members live. If you want to go deeper in your Bible teaching, be intentional about connecting biblical truth to where people are. In other words, aim not at their heads, but at their hearts in the biblical sense of the word "heart"—the totality of the mind, the will, and the emotions.

3. LEAD A DEEPER BIBLE STUDY BY TEACHING FROM YOUR HEART.

Tim Keller wrote a book titled *Preaching*, most of which applies equally well to small group Bible teaching. In it, he said: "If you want to preach to the heart, you need to preach from the heart. It's got to be clear that your own heart has been reached by the truth of the text."¹

His point is obvious: Leading a deeper Bible study involves more than preparing the right words to say about a passage; it involves the preparation of the teacher. We teach by who we are, not just by what we say. Consequently, a deeper Bible study is, to some degree, the overflow of what God is doing in the depths of the leader's heart. That's a very different proposition than merely going through the lesson material and presenting what's in the book.

Your *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* and other lesson helps will help you add depth to the content of your teaching. Building relationships with your group members will help you connect God's Word to where they live. Your personal study of a biblical text in deep pursuit of God—and not just in search of lesson material—will take your teaching to another level.

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1. Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking, 2015), 166.

...the resurrection of the dead, and eternal life. ³ And we will do this if God permits, for it is impossible to renew to repentance those who were once enlightened, who received the heavenly gift, became companions with the Holy Spirit, ⁵ tasted God's good word and the power of the coming age, ⁶ and who have fallen away, because, ^b to their own harm, they have denied the Son of God and holding Him in contempt. ⁷ For ground that has drunk the seed that has often fallen on it, and that produces no crop, is useless, and that produces a crop is useful to those it is cultivated in, and is a blessing from God. ⁸ But if it produces thistles and thistles, it is worthless and will be burned, and will be burned at the end of the age. Even though we are speaking this way, in your case we are confident of things connected with salvation. ¹⁰ For God is just; He will not forget your work. ¹¹ Now we want each of you to show the same diligence for the final reward, ¹² so that you won't become like those who inherit the punishment through faith and perseverance.



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