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**PRODUCTION AND
MINISTRY TEAM**
**VICE PRESIDENT, LIFEWAY
RESOURCES:** Eric Geiger
GENERAL EDITOR: Ed Stetzer
MANAGING EDITOR: Trevin Wax
CONTENT EDITOR: Andy McLean
**MANAGER, STUDENT MINISTRY
PUBLISHING:** John Paul Basham
DIRECTOR, STUDENT MINISTRY:
Ben Trueblood

Send questions/comments to:
Content Editor, *The Gospel Project for
Students Leader Guide*,
One LifeWay Plaza
Nashville, TN 37234-0144;
or make comments on the Web at
www.lifeway.com.

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FROM THE EDITOR



Andy McLean

Editor

*The Gospel Project
for Students*

We have reached the halfway mark in our chronological journey through the Bible. The first half of that journey allowed us to spend 18 months in the Old Testament, unpacking the depths and riches there by looking at many of the main characters and events. A big part of that journey involved looking at God's continual promise to send someone who would undo what was lost when our first parents sinned in the garden. We traced the promise mentioned to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15 to the covenants with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, and their descendants. We saw a continual expectation for God to carry out His promises of making all things right and all things new. Along the way, we were able to catch glimpses and signs of the one to come—Jesus.

We now begin to fully see the fulfillment of these promises and expectations with our arrival in the New Testament. What was partial before is now perfectly clear. The God who has always desired to dwell among His people has done so in the most remarkable way possible—by becoming human. In the incarnation, we have the ultimate grounds for believing that God desires to rescue His people, that Immanuel (“God with us”) wants to make all things new—starting with our hearts.

As we journey through this first volume in the New Testament, pay close attention to Jesus' words and character. The One we have been on the lookout for in the Old Testament is right before our eyes in the New. Listen to what He has to say. Observe His life. And be amazed at the transformation that takes place in the hearts of people who encounter Him. It is the same internal transformation that takes place today for those who encounter Him through His Word and believe!

AUTHORS

UNIT 1



MICHAEL CARD (sessions 1-6) has recorded over 37 albums, authored over 25 books, hosted a radio program, and written for a wide range of magazines. He has penned such favorites as “El Shaddai,” “Love Crucified Arose,” and “Emmanuel.” He has sold more than 4 million albums and written over 19 #1 hits, but the popularity of his work seems a stark contrast to his goal in life—to simply and quietly teach the Bible.

UNIT 2



D. A. HORTON (session 7-12) currently serves as a pastor at Reach Fellowship, a church plant in Los Angeles, California, and as the Chief Evangelist for UYWI. He is also working toward his PhD in Applied Theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Elicia, have three children, Izabelle, Lola, and Damon Jr. (aka Duce).



RICHARD R. MELICK JR. (special session) serves as a Distinguished Professor of New Testament, Affiliated Faculty, at Gateway Seminary. He is a consulting editor for The New American Commentary, for which he also contributed the volume Philippians, Colossians, Philemon. He and his wife, Shera, coauthored Teaching That Transforms. They have three children and eight grandchildren.

HOW TO USE

▶ INTRO

The two introductory pages begin with a summary that provides a brief overview of the session, including a list of Scriptures. The main point is also listed here, as well as two introductory options to choose from to begin the session.

▶ HIS STORY

The five His Story pages contain the main teaching material for each session. This section follows the storyline of the Bible, focusing on what God has done in redemptive history throughout the pages of Scripture. The first page restates the main point that is to be emphasized throughout the session and is followed by an overview of the main characters. There is also an introductory plot that serves as a transitional entryway to the main part of the session that begins on the following page.

In addition to these, there are other things to notice throughout the His Story section:

- **Personal Study Guide:** Any time you see a vertical bar in the His Story section, it indicates that the material can also be found in the student's personal study guide.
- **Timeline:** Each session features a timeline of events that corresponds to the timeline located in the student's personal study guide.
- **Going Further With The Story:** Most sessions will include at least one of these. They contain additional material that allows leaders to go deeper into the biblical story. It is up to the leader's discretion whether he or she would like to utilize this material in any way. One can simply bypass this option, however, and not miss anything vital to the session.

01 SESSION ONE

From Abraham to Jesus

THE POINT
Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises to His people.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1
Have one or two read the question, "Who am I?" The question of identity is one of those basic questions that we need to ask again and again to help us grow and mature as we walk through our lives as we are in the world today. This is the message that this book delivers. The story we read and the questions that we ask ourselves are the same.

• **What are some ways that people in our society today show they long to know "who they are" and "where they come from"? Why do these questions matter for human beings?**

As we close the last page of the Old Testament and open the first page of the New Testament, we come to the Gospel of Matthew. This book was written to a community of Jews who believed in Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, but who were still struggling with their own identity. Many of the Jews were still struggling with questions of identity and distinction.

In a time of confusion and unrest, followers of Jesus had opposition from those who followed Jesus. As a result, for a first-century Jewish identity of Jesus the most important question became, "Who am I?" Matthew wrote his Gospel, in part, to help them discover who they were in Jesus. The geography of the Gospel reveals the disciples' identity as Jesus' identity, extending to the rest of the world.

These persecuted followers of Jesus were on the verge of the powerful realization that it was no longer the temple or the synagogue that defined them, but the larger, more inclusive identity of Jesus. They would find their new identity only in the person of Jesus. Matthew told them who they were by revealing who Jesus was.

Option 2
Ask students what they think, when they hear the word "Jew." Ask them to share their words with each other and post them at the front of the room. Allow a few minutes of discussion, and then ask the following:

• **Where do you think most people today find their identity? How do you see Christians being tempted to do the same?**

Like many of the Jews in Jesus' time, we struggle to find our identity, so many of us. We try to find our identity in the school, our church, our career, our group of friends, our spouse or children, or even in our last names. As Jesus' disciples realized, a Hebrew's identity is powerfully wrapped up in Christ.

• **What are some ways you can live out your identity in Christ, even when it's not popular with the surrounding culture?**

© Leader Guide / Session 1

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HIS STORY 15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT
Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises to His people.

CHARACTERS

- **Jesus** - the eternal Son of God, second person of the Trinity
- **Abraham** - biblical patriarch, chosen by God to be the father of many nations.
- **David** - youngest son of Isaac who was appointed to king following David. David is recognized for a number of things, in terms of both his character - he followed God - and his accomplishments - he authored the psalm, etc.

PLOT

Four hundred years passed between the close of the Old Testament and Jesus' birth. As with all of the years since the time of Adam and Eve, God's people continued to await the fulfillment of God's promises of the coming One who would crush the head of the serpent. That time had finally arrived. In this opening drama of redemption, Jesus, the Son of God, entered on the scene to God's amazing story of salvation.

JESUS DESCENDED FROM THE LINE OF ABRAHAM

To answer our identity question, it is always best to go back to the beginning, which is precisely what Matthew did. A more literal translation of his opening phrase might be, "In the book of the origin of Jesus." In a sense of course, it did not describe a wall as a book of records, Jesus is the fulfillment of a promise first spoken to Abraham. All of us come from him, though through Him, Abraham was not just one of the fathers, Jesus would descend from his lineage.

An account of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham: Abraham fathered Isaac, Isaac fathered Jacob, Jacob fathered Judah and his brothers, Judah fathered Perez and Zarah by Tamar, Perez fathered Hezron, Hezron fathered Aram, Aram fathered Aramothah, Aramothah fathered Nahshon, Nahshon fathered Salmon, Salmon fathered Boaz by Rahab, Boaz fathered Obed by Ruth, Obed fathered Jesse... (Matt. 1:1-3)

Jesus' connection to the promises of God as a flesh and blood Jew is His genetic ancestry. This was not simply a list of your name, these were members of Jesus' family! These names were the recipients of God's promises from God. God's love would be the One through whom each promise would be perfectly and completely fulfilled.

Unlike Luke, who tracked his genealogy of Jesus away to Joseph's Matthew traced his genealogy to Jesus' biological father. He was making a point about the significance of Jesus' lineage and identity. From the beginning of the genealogy, Matthew organized Jesus' ancestors into three groups of generations each.

Through the genealogical identity of Jesus and all of His famous ancestors, Matthew made another point: Jesus is the fulfillment of God's covenant promises. Not only that, but Matthew traced his ancestry to understand that even as Jesus had a father, He will also have descendants, citizens of His kingdom. This is the new and permanent identity that belongs to every Jewish follower of Jesus and that can belong to those who follow Him today.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

• This genealogy list begins with the name "Jesus." This is the promise that God would fulfill the nation through His "seed" (Gen. 22:18; Matt. 1:1; Gal. 3:16). The second listed name was David, who was promised to be the Messiah (2 Sam. 7:12-14; Jer. 23:5; Matt. 1:1). Finally, the first listed name was Abraham, but an ancestor of the people of the world (Gen. 12:1-3; Gal. 3:29; Rom. 4:13; Matt. 1:1).

TIMELINE

FROM ABRAHAM TO JESUS
The beginning of the Hebrew Bible.

MARY PREGNES GOD
Mary gives birth to Jesus with God's help.

GOD WITH US
The birth of Jesus.

Remember, these sections are optional and can be skipped if preferred.

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JESUS DESCENDED FROM THE LINE OF DAVID

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would keep the promise He made to the first Hebrew (Abraham) throughout the generations (Gen. 14:18). The second book of our reformed King David.

...and Jesse fathered King David, David fathered Solomon by Bathsheba, Solomon fathered Rehoboam, Rehoboam fathered Abiah, Abiah fathered Asa, Asa fathered Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat fathered Joram, Joram fathered Uzziah, Uzziah fathered Jotham, Jotham fathered Ahaz, Ahaz fathered Hezekiah, Hezekiah fathered Manasseh, Manasseh fathered Amos, Amos fathered Josiah, and Josiah fathered Jehoahaz and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon. (Matt. 1:6-11)

The second book began with David, who was unique in his relationship with the Lord. Not only was he high as all in (2 Sam. 11:26, 30), he the chosen one of the king, David was the standard against whom all other kings were measured. Throughout the Old Testament, the title "our father David" was an phrase addressed only to Solomon, but also to many of his later kings.

The promise that David's throne would endure forever may be the most often repeated promise in the Bible. It was a promise that God intended to be especially concerned with keeping. But David failed to keep the promise to walk faithfully, so did most of his descendants (see Matthew's genealogy).

• **What does this promise of our King in Jesus' genealogy tell us about God's faithfulness to His covenant? (2 Pt. 1:10)**

After David, God's people endured many rulers who refused to walk in His way. Still, God was faithful to His people.

- Solomon built a great temple for his wife.
- Rehoboam was cruel and foolish the law of the Lord (2 Chron. 12:15).
- Abiah killed his wife's brother in the war of the divided kingdom.
- Ahaz took from the temple (2 Kings 16:2; 2 Chron. 28:1).
- Hezekiah, the great warrior, was afraid in the end and kept before the Lord, though he was remembered as a good king (2 Kings 20:1; 2 Chron. 32:20).
- Manasseh seduced his own people to do evil (2 Kings 21:9-20).
- Amos carried to prison pages of Christ's 30:20.
- Josiah, the last ruler before Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and took the people into exile, was remembered as the one of the descendants would ever see on the throne of David (1 Pt. 22:30).

In spite of the broken promises of so many kings, God would remain faithful to His promise concerning the eternal throne of David. In the end, the promise made to David was not about him. Matthew would make us to see that Jesus, David's three descendants, who would perfectly keep the promise to walk in the Lord's way. He would bless all nations, according to the promise made to Abraham. He would establish an eternal kingdom, which is us on David's throne. Jesus would be the son and fulfillment of every promise, every dream, and every hope.

JESUS IS THE MESSIAH WHO DELIVERS US FROM EXILE

Matthew concluded his first genealogy list (14 named of his ancestors) not with a name like Abraham or David, but with an exile. This recognition is a promise to each one of us and to every one of us who are. When a child comes to us, we give us what we can, it is an invitation to pay the same attention. This is the promise that God's people following the Lord's way. He would bless all nations, according to the promise made to Abraham. He would establish an eternal kingdom, which is us on David's throne. Jesus would be the son and fulfillment of every promise, every dream, and every hope.

• **After the exile to Babylon: Jehoshaphat fathered Shalmanezar, Shalmanezar fathered Zedekiah, Zedekiah fathered Abiah, Abiah fathered Uzziah, Uzziah fathered Ahaz, Ahaz fathered Zedekiah, Zedekiah fathered Josiah, Josiah fathered Joseph the husband of Mary, who gave birth to Jesus who is called the Christ. So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David until the exile to Babylon, fourteen generations, and from the exile to Babylon until the Christ, fourteen generations. (Matt. 1:2-17)**

In 597 B.C., as a result of King Zedekiah's refusal to heed the warnings of Jeremiah (Jer. 13:1; 52:10), Jerusalem was taken and destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of the Babylonians empire. In those successive years, the people were called to Babylon. Carrying things often meant people from their native land and reached those nations dispersed as their people intermarried with the foreign population. Israel's determination to remain separate allowed the nation to survive.

In 539 B.C., the Babylonians were destroyed by the Persians, led by Cyrus. These Cyrus allowed the Jews to return and to eventually rebuild the temple. The Jews began to rebuild the temple, but the Babylonians destroyed it (2 Chron. 36:19; 36:19).

The Persian empire was a nation that turned into a mixture of people, just when God's people were severely dispersed and defeated. He had them there. The people were separated from their spiritual land because of unbelief, doubt and refusal to trust in God's promises.

TIMELINE

JESUS EARLY YEARS
Jesus grows up with God's help.

JESUS' BAPTISM
The beginning of Jesus' ministry.

JESUS' OVERCOMES TEMPTATION
The beginning of Jesus' ministry.

Remember, these sections are optional and can be skipped if preferred.

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THIS STUDY

- **Essential Doctrines:** Each session will also contain an essential doctrine that directly relates to the Bible study material. The essential doctrine is also located in the student's personal study guide, though in an abbreviated format.
- **Christ Connection:** Each session will end with a direct look at how the content studied connects with Christ, emphasizing to students how all of Scripture is pointing to Him. The material in the Christ Connection will also be provided in the student's personal study guide.

▶ YOUR STORY

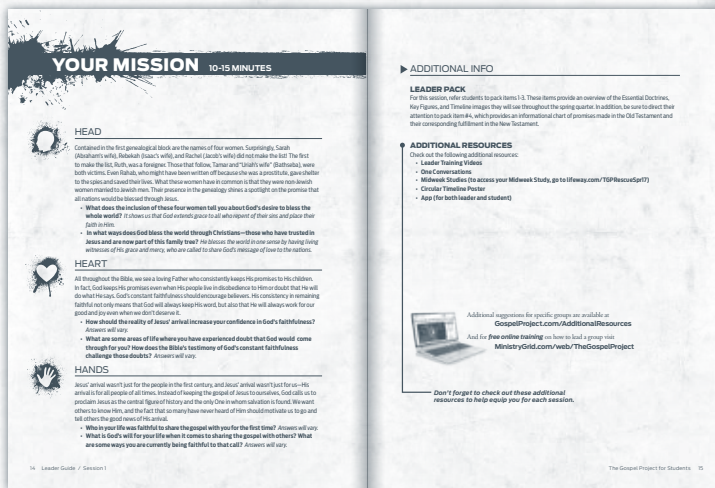
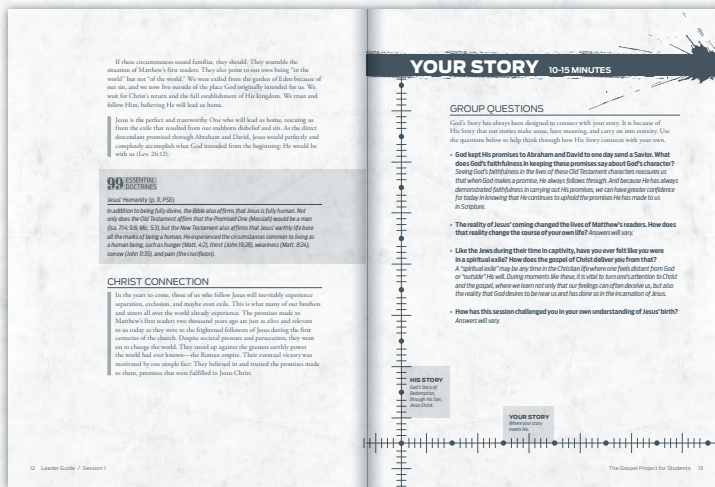
The Your Story section is designed to connect what God has done in the past to students' lives today by introducing group discussion questions that highlight how God's Story connects with their story. There are lead-ins with each question in the Leader Guide to help the leader walk students through each question.

▶ YOUR MISSION

The Your Mission section is designed to show how God's Story is capable of creating lasting transformation into how we think, feel, and live from day to day. By doing so, we emphasize to students that every session goes beyond mere Bible study to a calling to be on mission with God.

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

The final page of each session points leaders to additional resources that can be used in conjunction with each study. The resources listed, such as teaching tips videos and One Conversations, are designed to help leaders prepare for each session. There is also information about the leader pack posters that can be used with each session.





01

SESSION ONE

From Abraham to Jesus

SESSION SUMMARY

This session traces the lineage of Jesus back to Abraham. Jesus' identity is rooted in the fulfillment of the promises that God would bless all the nations through Abraham, establish an eternal kingdom through the line of David, and one day bring them back from their long exile to the land that was promised. Jesus' genealogy is also ours, because we trace our heritage back to Abraham, our forefather in the faith. In this historical line, we discover our truest identity in Christ, the One through whom God fulfilled all His promises.

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 1:1-17

THE POINT

Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promises to His people.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Have you ever struggled with the question, “Who am I?” The question of identity is one of those basic questions that we need to ask again and again to help us grow and mature as the world changes around us and as the world inside us changes. This is the struggle that fuels websites like *ancestry.com* and television shows that reacquaint celebrities with their “roots.”

- **What are some ways that people in our society today show they long to know “who they are” and “where they come from”? Why do these questions matter for human beings?**

As we close the last page of the Old Testament and open the first page of the New Testament, we come to the Gospel of Matthew. This book was written to a community of Jews who believed in Jesus of Nazareth while living in a world undergoing radical, sometimes violent, changes. Many of these Jews wrestled with questions of identity and distinction.

In a time of turbulence and unrest, followers of Jesus faced opposition from their fellow Jews. As a result, for a first-century Jewish follower of Jesus the most important question became “Who am I?” Matthew wrote his Gospel, in part, to help them discover who they were in Jesus. The genealogy that opens his Gospel reveals the disciples’ identity as an ancient identity, extending all the way back to Abraham.

These persecuted followers of Jesus were on the verge of the powerful realization that it was no longer the temple or the synagogue that defined them, and no longer their dedication to ritual obedience. They would find their new identity solely in the person of Jesus. Matthew told them who they were by revealing who Jesus is.

Option 2

Ask students what they think of when they hear the word *identity*. As they respond, jot down key words on a white board or poster board at the front of the room. Allow a few minutes of discussion, and then ask the following:

- **Where do you think most people today find their identity? How do you see Christians being tempted to do the same?**

Like many of the Jews in Jesus’ time struggled to find their identity, so do many of us. We try to find our identity in the schools and churches we attend, our groups of friends, the sports or clubs we’re involved in, or even by our last names. As Jesus’ disciples realized, a believer’s identity is powerfully wrapped up in Christ.

- **What are some ways you can live out your identity in Christ, even when it’s not popular with the surrounding culture?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises to His people.

CHARACTERS

- **Jesus** - the eternal Son of God; second person of the Trinity
- **Abraham** - biblical patriarch; chosen by God to be the father of many nations
- **David** - youngest son of Jesse who was anointed to be king following Saul. David is recognized for a number of things, in terms of both his character—he followed God—and his accomplishments—he defeated Goliath, etc.

PLOT

Four hundred years passed between the close of the Old Testament and Jesus' birth. As with all of the years since the time of Adam and Eve, God's people anxiously awaited the fulfillment of God's promise of the coming One who would crush the head of the serpent. That time had finally arrived. In this ongoing drama of redemption, Jesus, the Son of God, entered as the hero to God's amazing story of salvation.

Remember, every time you see this bar in the leader guide, it indicates the same material is also found in the personal study guide as well.

JESUS DESCENDED FROM THE LINE OF ABRAHAM

To answer any identity question, it is always best to go back to the beginning, which is precisely what Matthew did. A more literal translation of his opening phrase might be “The book of the origins of Jesus...” It is an echo of Genesis 2:4 which also describes itself as a book of records. Jesus is the fulfillment of a promise first spoken to Abraham, that all nations would be blessed through Him. Abraham was not just some hero of the faith, Jesus would descend from his lineage.

¹ The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. ² Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³ and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, ⁴ and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵ and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse... (Matt. 1:1-5)

Jesus’ connection to the promises of God are a flesh and blood link to His genetic ancestors. This was not simply a roll call of great men; these were members of Jesus’ family! These ancestors were the recipients of unique promises from God. Jesus would be the One through whom each promise would be perfectly and completely fulfilled.

Unlike Luke, who tucked his genealogy of Jesus away in chapter 3, Matthew opened his Gospel with a genealogy. He was making a point about the significance of Jesus’ lineage and identity. From the beginning of the genealogy, Matthew organized Jesus’ ancestors into three groups of 14 generations each.

Through this genealogical identity of Jesus and all of His famous ancestors, Matthew made another point: Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s unique promises. Not only that, but Matthew wanted his readers to understand that even as Jesus had ancestors, so He will also have descendants, citizens of His kingdom. That is the new and yet ancient identity that belonged to the first Jewish followers of Jesus and that can belong to those who follow Him today.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY ●

The first generational block began with Abraham, the one who first received the promise that God would bless the nations through his “seed” (Gen. 22:18; Matt. 1:1-5; Gal. 3:16). The second block began with David, who was promised an eternal throne (2 Sam. 7:13; Jer. 23:5; Matt. 1:6-11). Finally, the third block focused not on a person but on an event—the promise of the exiles’ return from captivity (Ezek. 37:24-26; Jer. 31:31-34; Matt. 1:12-17).

TIMELINE

FROM ABRAHAM TO JESUS

The arrival of the Promised One.

MARY PRAISES GOD

God works in the heart and life of Mary.

GOD WITH US

The good news of Jesus’ Incarnation.

Remember, these sections are optional and can be skipped if preferred.

JESUS DESCENDED FROM THE LINE OF DAVID

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would keep the promise He made to the first Hebrew (Abraham) throughout the generations (Gen. 14:13). The second block of names introduced King David.

6 and Jesse the father of David the king. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, 7 and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, 8 and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, 9 and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, 10 and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, 11 and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon. (Matt. 1:6-11)

The second block began with David, who was unique in his relationship with the Lord. No one ever rose so high or fell so far (2 Sam. 11; Ps. 89). In the chronicles of the kings, David was the standard against whom all other kings were measured. Throughout the Old Testament, the title “your father David” was not a phrase addressed only to Solomon, but also to many of the later kings.

The promise that David’s throne would endure forever may be the most often repeated promise in the Bible. It was a promise the Lord seemed to be especially concerned with keeping. But David failed to keep the requirement to walk faithfully, as did most of his descendants listed in Matthew’s genealogy.

Whenever you see PSG page numbers listed, it indicates that there is a section in the personal study guide for students to interact with.

- **What does this parade of evil kings in Jesus’ genealogy tell us about God’s faithfulness to His covenant?** (p. 11, PSG)

After David, God’s people endured many rulers who refused to walk in His ways. Still, God was faithful to His people.

- Solomon built pagan temples for his wives.
- Rehoboam was cruel and forsook the law of the Lord (2 Chron. 12:1,5).
- Abijah killed half a million Israelites in the war of the divided kingdoms.
- Ahaz stole from the temple (2 Kings 16:7; 2 Chron. 28:1).
- Hezekiah, the great tunneler, was afraid to die and wept before the Lord, though he was remembered overall as a good king (2 Kings 20:3; 2 Chron. 31:20).
- Manasseh seduced his own people to do evil (2 Kings 21:9,20).
- Amon sacrificed to pagan images (2 Chron. 33:20).
- Jechoniah, the last ruler before Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and took the people into exile, received the curse that none of his descendants would ever sit on the throne of David (Jer. 22:28-30).

In spite of the broken promises of so many kings, God would remain faithful to His promise concerning the eternal throne of David. In the end, the promise made to David was not about him. Matthew wanted readers to know it would be Jesus, David's direct descendant, who would perfectly keep the promise to walk in the Lord's ways. He would bless all nations, according to the promise made to Abraham. He would establish an eternal Kingdom, taking His seat on David's throne. Jesus would be the focus and fulfillment of every promise, every dream, and every hope.

JESUS IS THE MESSIAH WHO DELIVERS US FROM EXILE

Matthew concluded the last generational block (14 names) of his genealogy, not with a person like Abraham or David, but with an event. This exception is supposed to catch our attention and force us to ask why. When a biblical author does not give us what we expect, it is an invitation to pay close attention. This exceptional event was the return of God's people following the Babylonian exile.

12 And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, ¹³ and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, ¹⁴ and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, ¹⁵ and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, ¹⁶ and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ. ¹⁷ So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations. (Matt. 1:12-17)

In 597 B.C., as a result of king Zedekiah's refusal to heed the warnings of Jeremiah (Jer. 1:3; 52:10), Jerusalem was taken and destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of the Babylonian empire. In three successive waves, the people were exiled to Babylon. Conquering kings often removed people from their native land and watched those nations disappear as their people intermarried with the foreign population. Israel's determination to remain separate allowed the nation to survive.

In 539 B.C., the Babylonians were destroyed by the Persians, led by Cyrus. Then, Cyrus allowed the Jews to return and was even miraculously inspired by God to help rebuild the temple that the Babylonians destroyed (2 Chron 36:22; Ezra 1:1).

The Persian victory was a disaster that turned into a miraculous provision. Just when God's people were seemingly dispersed and defeated, He led them home. The people were separated from their promised land because of stubborn disbelief and refusal to trust in God's promises.

TIMELINE

JESUS' EARLY YEARS

Jesus grows in favor with God and men.

JESUS' BAPTISM

The meaning of baptism in the life of the believer.

JESUS OVERCOMES TEMPTATION

Where Adam and Eve and the early Israelites failed, Christ succeeded.

If these circumstances sound familiar, they should. They resemble the situation of Matthew's first readers. They also point to our own being "in the world" but not "of the world." We were exiled from the garden of Eden because of our sin, and we now live outside of the place God originally intended for us. We wait for Christ's return and the full establishment of His kingdom. We trust and follow Him, believing He will lead us home.

Jesus is the perfect and trustworthy One who will lead us home, rescuing us from the exile that resulted from our stubborn disbelief and sin. As the direct descendant promised through Abraham and David, Jesus would perfectly and completely accomplish what God intended from the beginning: He would be with us (Lev. 26:12).

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Jesus' Humanity (p. 11, PSG)

In addition to being fully divine, the Bible also affirms that Jesus is fully human. Not only does the Old Testament affirm that the Promised One (Messiah) would be a man (Isa. 7:14; 9:6; Mic. 5:3), but the New Testament also affirms that Jesus' earthly life bore all the marks of being a human. He experienced the circumstances common to living as a human being, such as hunger (Matt. 4:2), thirst (John 19:28), weariness (Matt. 8:24), sorrow (John 11:35), and pain (the crucifixion).

CHRIST CONNECTION

In the years to come, those of us who follow Jesus will inevitably experience separation, exclusion, and maybe even exile. This is what many of our brothers and sisters all over the world already experience. The promises made to Matthew's first readers two thousand years ago are just as alive and relevant to us today as they were to the frightened followers of Jesus during the first centuries of the church. Despite societal pressure and persecution, they went on to change the world. They stood up against the greatest earthly power the world had ever known—the Roman empire. Their eventual victory was motivated by one simple fact: They believed in and trusted the promises made to them, promises that were fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **God kept His promises to Abraham and David to one day send a Savior. What does God's faithfulness in keeping these promises say about God's character?**
Seeing God's faithfulness in the lives of these Old Testament characters reassures us that when God makes a promise, He always follows through. And because He has always demonstrated faithfulness in carrying out His promises, we can have greater confidence for today in knowing that He continues to uphold the promises He has made to us in Scripture.
- **The reality of Jesus' coming changed the lives of Matthew's readers. How does that reality change the course of your own life?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Like the Jews during their time in captivity, have you ever felt like you were in a spiritual exile? How does the gospel of Christ deliver you from that?**
A "spiritual exile" may be any time in the Christian life where one feels distant from God or "outside" His will. During moments like these, it is vital to turn one's attention to Christ and the gospel, where we learn not only that our feelings can often deceive us, but also the reality that God desires to be near us and has done so in the incarnation of Jesus.
- **How has this session challenged you in your own understanding of Jesus' birth?**
Answers will vary.

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

Contained in the first genealogical block are the names of four women. Surprisingly, Sarah (Abraham's wife), Rebekah (Isaac's wife), and Rachel (Jacob's wife) did not make the list! The first to make the list, Ruth, was a foreigner. Those that follow, Tamar and "Uriah's wife" (Bathseba), were both victims. Even Rahab, who might have been written off because she was a prostitute, gave shelter to the spies and saved their lives. What these women have in common is that they were non-Jewish women married to Jewish men. Their presence in the genealogy shines a spotlight on the promise that all nations would be blessed through Jesus.

- **What does the inclusion of these four women tell you about God's desire to bless the whole world?** *It shows us that God extends grace to all who repent of their sins and place their faith in Him.*
- **In what ways does God bless the world through Christians—those who have trusted in Jesus and are now part of this family tree?** *He blesses the world in one sense by having living witnesses of His grace and mercy, who are called to share God's message of love to the nations.*



HEART

All throughout the Bible, we see a loving Father who consistently keeps His promises to His children. In fact, God keeps His promises even when His people live in disobedience to Him or doubt that He will do what He says. God's constant faithfulness should encourage believers. His consistency in remaining faithful not only means that God will always keep His word, but also that He will always work for our good and joy even when we don't deserve it.

- **How should the reality of Jesus' arrival increase your confidence in God's faithfulness?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What are some areas of life where you have experienced doubt that God would come through for you? How does the Bible's testimony of God's constant faithfulness challenge those doubts?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

Jesus' arrival wasn't just for the people in the first century, and Jesus' arrival wasn't just for us—His arrival is for all people of all times. Instead of keeping the gospel of Jesus to ourselves, God calls us to proclaim Jesus as the central figure of history and the only One in whom salvation is found. We want others to know Him, and the fact that so many have never heard of Him should motivate us to go and tell others the good news of His arrival.

- **Who in your life was faithful to share the gospel with you for the first time?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What is God's will for your life when it comes to sharing the gospel with others? What are some ways you are currently being faithful to that call?** *Answers will vary.*

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack items 1-3. These items provide an overview of the Essential Doctrines, Key Figures, and Timeline images they will see throughout the spring quarter. In addition, be sure to direct their attention to pack item #4, which provides an informational chart of promises made in the Old Testament and their corresponding fulfillment in the New Testament.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPRescueSpr17)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



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GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit
MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject

Don't forget to check out these additional resources to help equip you for each session.



02

SESSION TWO

The Angel Visited Mary

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we witness Mary's first experience of God's remarkable call on her life—to be the mother of Jesus, the Messiah. A young woman, probably still in her teens, Mary was confronted by the angel Gabriel with the news that God intended to use her to fulfill the greatest promise of His covenant. Mary's response as the Lord's servant became an example of all Christian obedience. In our own lives, we must recognize that God calls us to obedience, even when it is costly. Like Mary, we magnify the Lord through our obedience as servants of God and followers of Christ.

SCRIPTURE

Luke 1:26-38,46-55

THE POINT

Mary responded in faith to God's call on her life.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

God's call does not usually lead to comfort. As in Mary's life, God's call often leads us to trust in Him to accomplish unbelievable things through us. What God asked of Mary—to be the mother of His own Son—probably seemed impossible. So, Mary asked a good question: “How?”

- **When has God asked you to do something that seemed impossible?**

Instead of reflecting disbelief, Mary's question indicated a desire to know the process of God's plan for her—how would He work this out? In spite of the incredible nature of God's plan for her and responsibility that would come with His call, Mary humbly submitted to God's will, calling herself His servant. Then, she took it a step further, singing a song of praise to her God.

- **How does Mary's response to God's call on her life demonstrate the way we should respond when He calls us to do difficult things for Him?**

Option 2

Place students in groups of three to four. Make sure each group has at least one Bible. Then, tell the students to find at least two examples of people who responded in faith to God's call on their lives. After allowing adequate time for the students to find two examples, ask each group to share with the other groups. Then, ask:

- **What made their faith seem so extraordinary?**
- **How can we learn from their faithful response to God?**

Like many of these examples, Mary was just a normal young person. What God asked Mary to do likely seemed impossible, so she asked how He would bring about this miracle. When the angel told her, Mary responded with humble submission to God's will and praised Him for allowing her such a blessing. Certainly, the path following Mary's “yes” would not be easy. Still, she responded with a humble attitude of faith and praise.

- **When has God called you to a difficult path? In what ways can Mary's response teach us about ours?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Mary responded in faith to God's call on her life.

CHARACTERS

- **Triune God** - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Mary** - Jesus' earthly mother
- **Gabriel** - one of only two angels who are named in the Bible. Mentioned in both the Old Testament and New Testament.

PLOT

After looking at Jesus' genealogy and His connection with Abraham and David, we will zero in on Mary's life and her encounter with the angel Gabriel. How did this young, poor Jewish girl respond to the news that she would miraculously conceive a child, and that this child wouldn't be like every other child? This child would be God Himself, coming to dwell among His people and rescue them from their sins. How did she react to this call on her life? Our journey today answers those very questions.

TIMELINE

MARY PRAISES GOD

God works in the heart and life of Mary.

GOD WITH US
The good news of Jesus' Incarnation.

JESUS' EARLY YEARS
Jesus grows in favor with God and men.

MARY SUBMITTED TO GOD'S DIFFICULT PLAN

It is not surprising to see that Luke, who was a doctor, was interested in the marginalized people of his day. After a brief introduction (vv. 1-4), Luke began the story of Jesus by telling of the miraculous promise of the birth of Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist. Miraculous promises were made to both sets of parents. Elizabeth and Zechariah, though well along in years, would have a son named John. Mary, who was twice described as a virgin, would give birth to Jesus. These were seemingly impossible promises, fulfilled through the poor and the marginalized.

26 In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.²⁸ And the angel came to her and said, "Rejoice, favored woman! The Lord is with you."²⁹ But she was deeply troubled by this statement, wondering what kind of greeting this could be.³⁰ Then the angel told her: Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

31 Now listen: You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will call His name Jesus.³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David.³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.³⁴ Mary asked the angel, "How can this be, since I have not been intimate with a man?"³⁵ The angel replied to her: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the holy One to be born will be called the Son of God.³⁶ And consider your relative Elizabeth—even she has conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called childless.³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God."

38 "I am the Lord's slave," said Mary. "May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel left her. (Luke 1:26-38)

- Gabriel's greeting troubled Mary. What should she have "rejoiced" over? What did the angel mean when he said she was "favored?" (p. 16, PSG)

Gabriel responded, as angels often do, with poetry. The passage began with two Greek words—their most literal translation being "no fear"—often heard from the lips of angels.

The angel's poem addressed Mary's fears. He told her that God would show her favor by giving her a Son, who would be called "Yeshua" (Jesus). He would be the fulfillment of the promise God made to David and his descendants, of whom Mary was one. He would reign over the house of Jacob forever in the kingdom that would never end. From the poverty-stricken Nazareth, an obscure town, would come the King to sit on David's eternal throne.

Mary's question was reasonable. How could she, a virgin, possibly have a child? Gabriel's gentle response was that the spirit of God would "overshadow" her; this is the same word the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament used to describe the spirit of God "hovering" over the face of the waters of creation (Gen. 1:2). In order to build up confidence in the Lord's ability to fulfill this promise, Gabriel revealed to Mary that her relative, the elderly Elizabeth, was already six months pregnant.

Mary responded with faith. She declared herself to be the servant of the Lord, her master. This was her identity. After all, servants have no choices; they surrender themselves to their masters. Even though there was much that Mary did not know, she had a deep-rooted faith and trust, and that is where her submissive spirit came from. She was ready to submit to God's difficult plan for her life.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Angels (p. 18, PSG)

Besides the creation of humanity and animals, the Bible also speaks of other beings that God created—angels, who are also referred to in Scripture as “sons of God,” “holy ones,” “spirits,” “principalities,” and “powers.” In the original languages of the Bible, the word “angel” carries the meaning of a messenger, which indicates one of their primary reasons for existence. Angels carry out a number of other functions throughout Scripture: bringing God glory, carrying out God's plans and purpose, and reminding humanity that the unseen world is real.

MARY MAGNIFIED GOD FOR HIS GOODNESS

One of the beautiful aspects of Luke's gospel is the rebirth of song in the early chapters. Nearly everyone sang, or at least spoke poetry: The angels sang to the shepherds, Gabriel sang to Mary, and Mary sang in response, as did Zechariah just a few verses later.

The birth of Jesus was about more than just a baby being born—it was the birth of a new hope. The only appropriate response (whether you're a poor girl in an impoverished city or a glorious angel sent from heaven) is to sing. Let's take a look at how Mary's song magnified God for His goodness and mercy.

46 And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord,⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,⁴⁸ for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;⁴⁹ for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.⁵⁰ And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.” (Luke 1:46-50)

- **Make a list of things Mary praised God for in verses 46-50. What are the common themes?** (p. 17, PSG)

Beginning with the poem Adam uttered upon first seeing Eve (Gen. 2:23), the natural response to the grace and unexpected mercy of God has often been lyrical. When the Israelites experienced God’s deliverance in the wilderness, they responded in song (Ex. 15:1-18). In the Psalms, David constantly sang about the unexpected mercy God extended to him. And whenever God’s covenant faithfulness seemed absent or distant, the Psalms held onto hope that God would eventually fulfill His promises.

Such songs of hope remained silent in Israel for about 400 years, and then the birth of Jesus became the theme of new songs. The angels, Zechariah, Simeon, and Mary could find no better way to voice their new hope.

Songs often better express the workings of the heart and imagination than prose. Songs evoke memories every time we sing them. The beautiful submission of Mary was on display in her song, which magnified the goodness and mercy of the Lord. Only after we let go of our choices and submit ourselves in obedience to our Master can any of us truly begin to sing. As the slave of the Lord, she was, in fact, free.

MARY TRUSTED GOD TO KEEP HIS PROMISES

Mary’s song concluded with a chorus that celebrates the truth that the world would be turned upside down. This is Luke’s favorite theme of radical reversal, presented in poetic form.

51 “He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; 52 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.” (Luke 1:51-55)

Mary’s language revealed a heart and mind that must have been saturated with the Psalms. For the moment, she became a psalmist herself. And, like David, she understood that the new hope being born into the world was based on an ancient hope.

The God of the Gospels is a God who is always in the process of turning the world upside down. The new hope that was born—the hope that is the subject of so many songs in the Scriptures—was granted to the outsiders, to the poor in spirit. In order to be rich, we learn to let go of our riches. In order to become wise, we embrace the foolishness of the cross. In order to become mature, we become like little children. In order to become truly free, we become slaves. Jesus wins everything by losing everything.

TIMELINE

JESUS’ BAPTISM

The meaning of baptism in the life of the believer.

JESUS OVERCOMES TEMPTATION

Where Adam and Eve and the early Israelites failed, Christ succeeded.

**Special session*

WHO IS HE?

The disciples learn Jesus’ identity and the purpose behind why He came.

CHRIST CONNECTION

It would be difficult to overstate Mary's obscurity. She was a young woman living in a culture that marginalized women. Yet, it was Mary of Nazareth who received God's impossible call to bear His Son. Her immediate and intuitive response to the angel Gabriel exposed the shape of her heart for God. She seemed to instinctively understand that He was her master, and she was His humble servant.

The Gospels don't provide any scenes of her struggling inwardly to come to grips with the demands of becoming the mother of the Messiah, but it is not hard to imagine that she had a definite impact on Jesus' life as He grew to manhood. Did her life of humility and obedience shape His heart and life as well? Was her instinct toward obedience imprinted on Him from an early age? Could His mother's example of complete submission to God's plan for her life have inspired Him as He came to grips with the fact that He had also come as a servant (Phil. 2:6-11)? Such are the beautiful mysteries of the incarnation, God taking on human flesh and entering the world through the womb of a woman!

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Why was Zechariah's question a sign of his weak faith but Mary's question a sign of her strength? What can we learn from the way Mary responded to the angel's message?** *In one sense, we can learn that even though we may not fully understand what God is doing or may have questions, we can still have full assurance and trust in God and believe that He is working for our good and joy.*
- **How does Mary's response—calling herself the Lord's servant and willingly submitting to His will—reveal the posture every faithful Christian should have? What does submitting to God's plan look like in our culture today?** *Since people are prideful and are constantly in pursuit of their own will, making the switch to saying "His will be done" instead of "my will be done" is nothing short of miraculous. Christians are called to live this way in all times and in all places, even though the way that gets lived out may vary from place to place. Help students think through particular ways that pursuing God's will may look like in their context.*
- **Name two or three of your favorite songs that magnify the Lord for His goodness and mercy. Why do these songs resonate with you? What aspects of God's character do they celebrate?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What are some ways that your church can display the "upside-down" nature of Christ's kingdom? How does your life challenge the values of the world with the values of the Kingdom?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

Mercy, by definition, is something we need the most when we deserve it the least. When God, in His mercy, sent His own Son, the natural human response to His over-the-top gift of hope was poetic and lyrical. Though we have no right to expect anything from Him, He gives us everything, including His one and only Son. That is the nature of His lovingkindness. We need mercy the most when we deserve it the least. That's exactly what Jesus' birth would perfectly provide for the world.

- **Why does mercy fail to be mercy when it is something that is deserved?** *By its very definition mercy is something that is not earned. If it is deserved, then it would be a wage or payment, instead of being the free gift of mercy.*
- **Why is it important to always keep in mind that God gives mercy to undeserved sinners like ourselves?** *Keeping this in mind will help us to see others as potential recipients of God's saving mercy and love and keep ourselves humble and free from the belief that we earned salvation.*



HEART

The image of the great angel Gabriel appearing to a marginalized teenager in an insignificant and impoverished village like Nazareth establishes a contrast that Luke maintained throughout his Gospel. Earlier in the story, Gabriel was forced to explain his identity to the unbelieving priest in the holy place (Luke 1:19). Zechariah questioned the truth of Gabriel's words, despite Gabriel's declaration that he stood in the presence of God (Luke 1:18). But Gabriel found a more faithful person in Mary. She also asked how Gabriel's message could be, but hers was more a question of process than disbelief. Luke intended for us to appreciate the contrast between the disbelieving priest in the magnificent temple and the trusting girl in impoverished Nazareth.

- **How does Mary's faith as a young teenager encourage you in your own obedience to God?** *Answers will vary.*
- **If you were to compose your own song of thankfulness to God for His mercy in your life, what themes would you touch on and why?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

The stories of church history reveal that following Jesus cost His disciples everything. With the exception of John, death was the ultimate price of faithfulness for Jesus' closest followers. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German martyr, famously wrote: "When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die."¹ New life in Christ is not intended to be easy. Jesus never promised earthly security—He calls us to be willing to give up everything to follow Him (Matt. 16:24).

- **What is your response to Jesus' command when He says, "Follow Me?"** *Answers will vary.*
- **What are some hindrances in your own life that you need to abandon in order to live faithfully for Jesus?** *Answers will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

SOURCE

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 11.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPRescueSpr17)**
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03

SESSION THREE

Jesus' Birth

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we will focus on the birth of Jesus as it is recorded in the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Matthew. Here, we see the beautiful event in which God took on human flesh and entered our world as a baby. Luke told that Jesus was born in humble circumstances, where the news of his birth was first announced to the marginalized of society. Matthew wrote about how the arrival of the wise men demonstrated God's plan for the gospel to go out to all nations. As followers of Christ, we are to resemble the shepherds and the wise men—responding to Christ's birth with extravagant praise and public testimony.

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 2:1-12; Luke 2:1-20

THE POINT

Jesus' birth story teaches that His kingdom is for all people.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

We often think of Jesus' humiliation in terms of His death, but He was born into humiliating circumstances as well. In Jesus' day the value system was based on the belief that the "good" were rich and the sinners were poor; Jesus was born into poverty—in the form of a slave—according to the apostle Paul (Phil. 2:6-11). Jesus would later remind a potential follower that He had no place to lay His head (Luke 9:58).

Luke's portrayal of Jesus' birth sets the tone for the rest of His life. The Messiah's first bed was a feeding trough, and His first clothes were rags. This is the humility—God becoming man—that we see as a result of God's great love for you and me.

- **What are some characteristics of a prideful person? What are some characteristics of a humble person?**

Option 2

Place students in three groups. Assign each group a different topic concerning Jesus' birth. Instruct one group to gather information on each of the following: the circumstances of Jesus' birth, the Angel's announcement to the shepherds, and the wise men's journey to find Jesus. Ask each group to share what they learned in the form of a story or a skit. After each group has performed its skit or story, discuss them as a group.

- **Which of the stories seems most like something people would associate with the birth of a king? Why?**
- **Why do the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth seem unlikely in light of His kingship? Why was His birth different from that of other kings?**

Jesus wasn't a king like His people expected. They expected someone royal and regal, who would come with a sword and a physical throne. In light of that, think about the humility involved in Him coming to earth in the form of a man. But Jesus' humility reached much further than that—He was born in a stable, wrapped in rags, and had a feeding trough for a bed. He did all of this, not for political reasons, but for the love of His Father and His people.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Jesus' birth story teaches that His kingdom is for all people.

CHARACTERS

- **Jesus** - the eternal Son of God; second person of the Trinity
- **Magi** - intellectual and influential individuals who came from the east bearing gifts for Christ; also called wise men
- **Herod** - Roman appointed king over Jerusalem during the birth of Christ; became paranoid over hearing the King of the Jews had been born

PLOT

Our next stop in this chronological journey lands us in one of the most well known accounts in the entire Bible—the birth of Jesus. Even if we may be somewhat forgetful of many of the other figures and events in the Bible, thanks to our celebration of the Christmas season we have a yearly reminder of the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth. In fact, it may be because we seem so familiar with this story that we need to hear it again, opening our minds to the possibility that there are still important things we need to know or hear once more.

TIMELINE

GOD WITH US
*The good news of
Jesus' Incarnation.*

**JESUS' EARLY
YEARS**
*Jesus grows in favor
with God and men.*

JESUS' BAPTISM
*The meaning of
baptism in the life
of the believer.*

JESUS' BIRTH DEMONSTRATED HIS HUMILITY

The humble birth of Jesus prepares us for one of the major themes we see throughout Luke's Gospel. Throughout his portrayal of the life and ministry of Jesus, Luke revealed that those who should understand Jesus' ministry rarely did. The wealthy, the educated, and the most religious missed what was happening. At the same time, those you'd never expect to understand what God was doing (the women, the poor, and the marginalized) intuitively grasped what Jesus' arrival meant.

¹ In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:1-7)

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

The Gospel of Luke provides a unique picture of the nativity of Jesus. In his opening, Luke claimed he received eyewitness testimony. It is possible that Mary was the source for this account of Jesus' birth. Luke's writing focused on the poverty of Jesus' birth, evidenced by the baby being wrapped in rags and laid in a manger. In Luke's account, Jesus was visited by poor shepherds, and in Matthew's account Jesus was adored by wealthy Magi.

Luke recounted the nativity of Jesus in four simple verses. Joseph made the trip from Galilee south to Judea and to Bethlehem, a city that lived in the shadow one of Herod's fortresses. Mary, his pregnant fiancé, was with him because the two of them would be included in the census.

Luke announced Jesus' birth, and told how Jesus was wrapped in strips of cloth, literally in rags (v. 7). Mary placed Him in a feeding trough that would have been located in the cave or basement of the house in Bethlehem. Because the guest room was already filled, the family had to move into the stable. But even in this, we can see the provision of God. It was warm and dry, and their family would be safe for a time. (Matthew told us they would one day run for their lives.)

Too often, the manger scenes and Christmas plays and sermons obscure the context of Jesus' birth. By reading the text and studying a little Jewish background, the reality of the conditions Jesus was born into become clear. Although *inn* is almost certainly a mistranslation, there indeed was no room in the *guest room* or *lodging place*, which would have been a part of any moderately-sized home. The point is not the nature of Jesus' birthplace but that there was no room—the Son of God was not even provided a proper place to be born! The only space left would have been the place where the animals were kept, which was usually a cave underneath the house.

- **Based upon these passages, how does the biblical description of Jesus' birth differ from our modern day understanding?** (*p. 22, PSG*)

This passage shows the reality of God becoming human and being born in a stable—it was the best that Joseph and Mary could provide. This “outsider” appearance would follow Jesus for the rest of His life. The One through whom God made all that was made was born for us into poverty, without a proper place to lay His head.

JESUS' BIRTH IS FOR THE POOR

At the time of Jesus' birth, the first announcement of the Messiah's arrival was carried to some of the poor and marginalized people in society: the shepherds.

⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” ¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:8-20)

A lone angel appeared to the shepherds, accompanied by the God's glory. They responded in terror, and again the angel used the words “no fear.” (Luke did not tell us if the angel was Gabriel.) The angel told the shepherds he had come to proclaim the gospel, the good news that would bring great joy for all people.

The angel gave the shepherds two signs to help them find baby Jesus. First, the baby would be wrapped in strips of cloth. Second, He would be lying in a manger. The nature of a sign is that it represents something out of the ordinary. Everyone swaddled their babies, but this sign indicates it was unusual to find a baby wrapped in rags. Likewise, no one expected to see a newborn sleeping in a feeding trough. So, the One who came for the marginalized was described as an outsider who was unimaginably poor.

As soon as the angels left, the shepherds realized they needed to run to Bethlehem immediately to see if the angel's message could possibly be true. The Bible does not say how long they searched for the baby, but they eventually found everything just as the angel had told them. Their response? To go and proclaim all that the angels had told them. After all, it is good news.

The shepherds left, excited about what they saw, and Luke recorded Mary's response to these happenings. She carefully stored away these memories. She was thinking about them, pondering them in her heart. She must have wondered at the fact that the Mighty One had "done great things" in her, a young girl on the margins of society. She must have questioned the absence of a group of royal officials to greet Jesus at His birth and the presence of a humble bunch of shepherds.

JESUS' BIRTH IS FOR THE NATIONS

We move now from the Gospel of Luke to the Gospel of Matthew, from the stable to the house, from the shepherds to the wise men.

¹ Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, ² "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." ³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ⁶ "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel." ⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." ⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. (Matt. 2:1-12)

TIMELINE

JESUS OVERCOMES TEMPTATION
Where Adam and Eve and the early Israelites failed, Christ succeeded.

**Special session*

WHO IS HE?
The disciples learn Jesus' identity and the purpose behind why He came.

THE CALLING OF THE DISCIPLES
Jesus invites ordinary people to follow Him.

King Herod, a ruler whose paranoia led him to kill his sons and wives, did whatever he could to maintain power in his final days. Not surprisingly, the news from the magi (wise men) concerning the birth of a new king struck Herod's dark imagination.

The magi were an elite political force who had exercised authority since the time of Daniel, who was appointed as one of them (Dan. 2:48; 5:11). They were astrologers as well as astronomers; men who studied the writings of the religions of the ancient world, including the Jewish Scriptures. It makes sense, then, that they followed a star to Jerusalem (Num. 24:17).

By the time the magi arrived, Joseph and Mary lived in a house. The word used to describe Jesus indicates that He was a young boy, approximately two years old. The wise men fell to their knees in worship. Of all their vast knowledge and authority, there was something they still lacked, something that drove them to travel all the way from Persia on a journey that might have taken two years. They found all they longed for in that simple house. They offered Jesus their gifts (these gifts would provide for Jesus' family's escape to Egypt). Then, the magi were warned in a dream, so they returned home a different way.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Virgin Birth (p. 23, PSG)

The Bible affirms that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin (Matt. 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38). The virgin birth affirms the historicity of the incarnation, where the eternal Son of God took on human flesh. The virgin birth is significant in that it serves as a reminder of Old Testament prophecies (Isa. 7) while also affirming both the deity and humanity of Christ.

CHRIST CONNECTION

God made three covenant promises to Abraham—an heir, a place, and a blessing for the nations. Jesus would perfectly fulfill all three. He is the true son of Abraham. He came to establish His kingdom. And, as Simeon sang in the Gospel of Luke, He would be a light to the Gentiles. Through Him, God would bless all people.

The shepherds had worshiped Jesus first. As much as two years later, from far off Persia, the wise men came to worship the King, as well. They were the first representatives of the “nations” that would be blessed by the coming of the One promised to Abraham.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What can we learn about God's character by looking at the conditions surrounding Jesus' birth?** *We can learn that He is all-loving. He came to earth and took on human flesh, in order to rescue His people. We can also learn that He loves all peoples, as seen most clearly when he brought the good news of Jesus birth to the shepherds.*
- **Why do you think our culture tends to value the character quality of pride over that of humility? How is this understanding challenged in the story of Jesus' birth?** *In our culture, pride is viewed as strength and a sign of virtue, where humility is often viewed as a sign of weakness. For whatever reason our culture promotes this belief, it couldn't be further from truth. Seeing the God of all creation—the only One deserving of any pride—willingly humble Himself to become in the likeness of mankind, gives us a clear picture of the value of humility in believers' lives.*
- **What is the significance of God revealing the news of Jesus' birth to shepherds first? How does this scene challenge the way we think of worth and importance?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What are some ways that the church may unintentionally communicate that the gospel is only for certain kinds of people? How can we demonstrate the beauty of God's love for those who are pushed to the side in our society?** *We may unintentionally communicate this by only reaching out to a certain social class (those who are financially stable versus the poor) or even ethnic group, and so on.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

When we picture the magi, we often imagine only three men. This is based on the three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It is more likely that they traveled with a large entourage, including Persian cavalry. There could have been a hundred of them. Their intent was clear—to find and worship the new King. Their worship of Him would represent an endorsement of a new monarch.

- **What are some other misconceptions people often have about Jesus' birth story?**
Answers will vary.
- **How might this information regarding the magi increase our confidence in Jesus' identity?**
Answers will vary.



HEART

The magi were the elite, the educated. They held enormous power at the Persian court. Yet, with all their power and knowledge something was obviously lacking. They hungered for something more, and when they saw the sign of the star they seemed to understand that the star would lead them to the answer they sought. When they bowed before the new King of the Jews, it is as if their far-away kingdoms were bowing, foreshadowing the day every knee and every nation will bow to King Jesus.

- **How does knowing that the magi were well educated affect your own faith?** *Faith is reasonable and supported by evidences. The magi were highly educated members of an elite group in society, which means it was unlikely that they would blindly pursue Jesus without having concluded there were good reasons to find Him. The same is true for Christians today. We have overwhelming support and evidence for our Christian faith, and as we discover further evidence and reasons our faith becomes stronger.*
- **In what ways has Christ satisfied the personal hunger for something more in your own life?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

The shepherds left the manger scene eager to tell others what they had experienced. This is how people responded when they met Jesus and understood who He was. The same response must be true for those of us who meet Christ, as well. Like the shepherds, we will naturally tell of God's goodness to others once we have embraced the good news of what God has done in our own lives. We do not share begrudgingly or out of a sense of duty, but from a heartfelt delight as a result of knowing that our sins have been forgiven.

- **In what ways has your relationship with Jesus changed your own life?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How can our willingness to share Christ with others serve as a sort of spiritual thermometer in our relationship with Him?** *Like a weather barometer communicates conditions in the weather itself, our willingness to share Christ can communicate the spiritual conditions in our own hearts.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack item #5, which contains a map of Jesus' travels during His early years of ministry.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPRescueSpr17)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



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And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit

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04

SESSION FOUR

Jesus Visited the Temple

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we learn about Jesus' zealous love for God's Word. As a young boy visiting the temple, Jesus asked questions and gave answers to the religious leaders. Jesus' parents misunderstood His reason for being there, and Jesus responded by claiming to be involved in His Father's work. Jesus was a fully human boy, yet totally devoted to His Father and submissive to His earthly parents. We join Jesus in being about His Father's work, as we are also called to grow in wisdom and obedience as we showcase His glory.

SCRIPTURE

Luke 2:40-52

THE POINT

Jesus modeled for us love for God's Word and obedience to God's will.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

The Bible gives us just one precious window into the childhood of Jesus. This glimpse came from Luke, who had likely interviewed Jesus' mother, Mary, as he wove together his account of Jesus' life. Luke previously described Mary's thought process and feelings, how she pondered the events of Jesus' birth and treasured them in her heart. Luke only could have received such intimate details from eyewitness testimony.

But why this story? And why does it center on Jesus at the temple? When you consider all of the events Luke could have recounted—including the death of Jesus' father Joseph, Jesus' career as a carpenter, or His relationship with His brothers—we wonder why Luke gave us this story and not others. What is so important about Jesus' boyhood visit to the temple?

- **Is it difficult for you to imagine what Jesus' life was like as a child? Why or why not? What aspects of Jesus' childhood are most intriguing to you?**

Option 2

Have you ever heard the phrase, "The only bad question is the one left unasked"? Questions help us establish facts, get to know people, and explore new possibilities. The Bible's first mention of Jesus speaking said that Jesus asked questions of the religious leaders and teachers in the temple.

- **Why do you think Jesus, as the Son of God, asked questions of these teachers and religious leaders?**

Despite being the Son of God and having intimate knowledge of His Father, Jesus still spent time in the temple (His Father's House), listening to the Scriptures (His Father's Word). He demonstrated a hunger for God's presence and God's Word, even from a young age. We can follow Jesus' example, no matter how old we are, to ask questions, to grow in our knowledge of God and His Word, and to simply spend time in the presence of the Father.

- **What are some questions you want to ask God or some things you want to know about Him?**
- **How can we learn from His Word in new ways? Who do you know that would be willing to discuss some of your questions with you?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Jesus modeled for us love for God's Word and obedience to God's will.

CHARACTERS

- **Jesus** - the eternal Son of God; second person of the Trinity
- **Mary and Joseph** - Jesus' mother and earthly father

PLOT

Today's session is really the only account we have from Jesus' childhood. The Gospels focus their attention on Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection, and rightly so. However, God intended this portion of Jesus' childhood to be included in the Gospel of Luke for a specific reason. It highlights Jesus' humanity and divinity, and gives us an example of what we should prioritize in our own lives.

TIMELINE

JESUS' EARLY YEARS

Jesus grows in favor with God and men.

JESUS' BAPTISM

The meaning of baptism in the life of the believer.

JESUS OVERCOMES TEMPTATION

Where Adam and Eve and the early Israelites failed, Christ succeeded.

JESUS LEARNED GOD'S WORD

Jesus grew up in Galilee, among Jewish people who didn't take the observance of God's law that seriously. In contrast, the Jews in the South (Judea) were more meticulous in their observance of the Law. Even though Jesus' family lived among marginal, nominal Jews, they were faithful to the Law of God. As an example, Luke wrote that Joseph and Mary went to Jerusalem every year for the Passover—a ten-day walk from Galilee.

In this passage, Jesus was twelve years old and growing in wisdom and knowledge. As a child, Jesus would have learned to read in the synagogue. It was a place where children were taught to read, using the alphabetical Psalms to learn their letters. (See Psalm 119.)

40 And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him. 41 Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. 42 And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom. 43 And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, 44 but supposing him to be in the group they went a day's journey, but then they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances, 45 and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him. 46 After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. (Luke 2:40-47)

The custom was for families to travel in groups for safety, with the men separate from the women. Perhaps this explains why the young Jesus was “misplaced.” Maybe Mary assumed He was with the men while Joseph thought He still might be traveling with the women. At twelve years of age, He could have been with either group. Maybe His parents thought He was with another one of the family members.

Mary and Joseph's group left for Galilee and traveled one day before anyone noticed Jesus was gone. Apparently, they then turned around and walked another day back to the city. They spent the third day looking all over for Jesus. Imagine their relief when they returned to the temple court and found the young boy sitting with the teachers, absorbed in listening to their teaching. When He returned as a young rabbi, Jesus would use the same area of the temple court for His own teaching (Matt. 21:14,23; 26:55; Luke 19:45).

If you look closely at the text, you will notice that Jesus was not simply teaching the elders—Luke said Jesus was listening and asking questions. He was of the age where He was expected to interact with adults in matters of the Old Testament. However, those who heard Jesus in the temple were surprised by the understanding Jesus displayed in His answers.

- **Even though He is the Son of God, Jesus listened to and asked questions of the teachers in the temple. What can we learn from His example?** (p. 28, PSG)

JESUS WAS INVOLVED IN GOD’S WORK

When Jesus’ parents found Him, He was surprised by their reaction to His “disappearance.” Why did His parents have to search for Him? He seemed puzzled that they did not know to go straight to the temple. After all, He had to be there, right? Where else would He be? Look at how the story progressed.

48 And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, “Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress.” 49 And he said to them, “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” 50 And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them. (Luke 2:48-50)

Mary’s question is typical of any mother. She sounded like any exasperated mother would after experiencing a missing child. However, Jesus seemed surprised that His parents would be searching for Him.

The question about the way Jesus treated them was not designed for an answer. Mary was making a point. They couldn’t understand why Jesus was gone for three days.

Jesus did not respond to Mary’s question. Instead, He responded to her second statement, “We have been looking for you.” In youthful simplicity, Jesus wondered aloud why they had to search for Him. His answer indicates that He thought it would be clear where He was—in His Father’s house—attending to His father’s business. There was no negligence or inconsiderate behavior here. Jesus acted on His own understanding of who He was.

John’s Gospel often presents the “misunderstood Jesus.” Whenever Jesus said something deeply spiritual, His listeners almost always responded misunderstanding (John 3:9; 4:11). Luke provided a small window into His youthful life and showed that Jesus was misunderstood as a young man, even by those who loved Him the most.

Jesus’ family misunderstood His task, but Jesus did not. In fact, in the temple, Jesus displayed a startling clarity. He knew precisely where He was supposed to be and what He was supposed to be doing—He was supposed to do His Father’s work. He engaged with the text of Scripture, together with a community of men who had come together around God’s Word. He did not appear to be dominating the scene; rather He asked questions right along with everyone else. The ability to formulate a meaningful question was and still is highly regarded among the rabbis. Often there is more learning in the question than in the answer.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Sinlessness of Jesus (p. 29, PSG)

While the Bible affirms the full humanity of Jesus, it also affirms that Jesus was completely sinless throughout His earthly life (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 7:26; 1 Pet. 2:22). Nevertheless, because Jesus was fully human, He experienced real temptation of sin, as seen during His trials in the wilderness (Matt. 4). Yet even though His trials and temptations were real and similar to the rest of humanity's, Hebrews 4:15 confirms that Jesus did not sin.

JESUS GREW IN FAVOR WITH GOD AND OTHERS

For the second time, Luke stopped the action and threw the spotlight on Mary.

51 And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart. 52 And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man. (Luke 2:51-52)

The first time Luke focused on Mary was after the shepherds had come and gone with their news of angelic glory and a remarkable message. At that point the narrative pictured Mary alone, treasuring and pondering all that happened around and in her (Luke 2:19). That was the sort of young woman she was: thoughtful and meditative. Twelve years later, she still stored these images in her heart, as she would no doubt be doing for the rest of her life.

The statement in verse 52 corresponds to the beginning of this story (Luke 2:40). The parallel statements indicate that Jesus grew in wisdom and in favor. The favor Mary first found with God was lavished upon Jesus' life as well (Luke 1:30). The favor Jesus had with people would return in the early years of His ministry, as He would be hounded by the crowds. But as the popularity of His messianic vision began to erode, Jesus would eventually be left alone without anyone's favor as He died on the cross.

So often, we focus on Jesus as a radical outsider and we overlook the fact that Jesus had close relationships throughout His life. Beginning in the temple, where the elders appreciated His first-rate understanding of the Scriptures, Jesus would continue to receive praise from the people who could only notice that Jesus spoke and lived differently.

Jesus' kindness and compassion, as well as the moving words He spoke, drew men and women to Him throughout the brief years of His time on Earth. This is what He had in mind when He encouraged His followers to shine like lights in a darkened world. We are not to hide our lights, just as Jesus did not. Whatever the cost, we must risk gaining favor as Jesus gained favor, by engaging with the Word and the world around us.

TIMELINE

**Special session*

WHO IS HE?

The disciples learn Jesus' identity and the purpose behind why He came.

THE CALLING OF THE DISCIPLES

Jesus invites ordinary people to follow Him.

BORN AGAIN

Nicodemus encounters Jesus and learns about the new birth.

CHRIST CONNECTION

Jesus experienced the confusion all young people feel as they begin to learn that God has a calling on their lives. The Gospels readily portrayed the difficulty Jesus experienced. Jesus was not some sort of superman; He experienced conflict with His family even as a young boy.

As a grown man, Jesus faced conflict with the teachers of the law and with His own disciples. He was frequently misunderstood, yet never lost sight of God's call and purpose for His life. Even when Satan challenged Jesus' identity in the wilderness, Jesus remained faithful and obedient to His Father.

Like Jesus, as we attempt to follow God, we will be misunderstood. Our new identities in Christ will be challenged by those around us, even members of our own families. Still, if we follow Jesus' example, empowered by His grace, we too can remain obedient to the call on our lives.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What are some ways your church cultivates a love of learning when it comes to God's Word?** *Answers will vary.*
- **At this stage of Jesus' life, what do you think it meant for Jesus to say He was involved in His Father's work? How does our involvement in our Father's work grow as we mature physically and spiritually?** *Involvement in God's work will change and grow over the course of a believer's life. A person who trusts Jesus as Savior at a young age will have a different type of involvement than that of an adult Christian who has been walking with God for quite some time. However, regardless of life state or age, every Christian is called to participate in Kingdom work, whether it be faithful commitment to youth group as a sixth grader or taking a semester off of college to travel overseas for a missions project.*
- **What was the connection between Jesus' love for God's Word and His involvement in God's work? In what ways do God's Word and God's work intersect in your own life?** *God's Word will always be the believer's fuel to accomplish God's Work.*
- **Like Jesus, what character qualities should we try to cultivate in our own lives in order to grow in favor with those around us?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

Knowing Jesus was involved in biblical discussions as a young person teaches us that young people should be involved in biblical discussions today, as well. Not only that, but we should also realize that the questions students bring and the answers they offer are beneficial to the discussion. In other words, people shouldn't assume that a young person's contribution will be overly simplistic. The church is a community of believers that is centered on the Word, and all age groups should be a part of the discussion.

- **When was the last time you had a meaningful conversation about the Bible with someone in a different age group within your church?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why is it important for churches to learn from the Scriptures together?** *Learning together is important for application—other people will help you to apply God's Word to various parts of your life.*



HEART

All young people arrive at a time in life when they must choose whether or not they want to make their parents' faith their own. Even though this account is unique to Jesus, the divine Son of God, we can nevertheless draw application from it for our own lives. Even if we have Christian parents and siblings or go to church on a regular basis, we have to reach a point in our lives where we take personal ownership of our faith.

- **Why is it important to emphasize that borrowed faith isn't real faith? What's the difference between the two?** *Borrowed faith is something you simply adopt because your parents or surrounding culture believe it. Having parents who pass down the Christian worldview isn't a bad thing. However, there comes a time when more is needed. To truly be a follower of Christ people need to own the faith for themselves.*
- **Have you grown up in a home with other Christians? If so, in what ways has that influence encouraged you to take ownership of your own faith?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

Being both fully human and fully divine, Jesus knew well what it was like to be a part of an earthly family. He was fully obedient in honoring His father and mother, and thus able to fulfill this law for us in our place. The fact He was obedient even when misunderstood reminds us that the authority God places over us is not dependent on our own feelings. In obedience to God's Word, we must honor those God has placed in authority over our lives.

- **How is our honor for those in authority a demonstration of our honor toward God?** *When we honor those in authority, we recognize that God is sovereign and good, and He has placed these individuals in our lives for a reason. As we honor those in authority, we honor God as well.*
- **When is it difficult for you to show honor to those in authority? How can Jesus' example encourage you during those times of difficulty?** *Answers will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack item #6, which contains an informational graph highlighting the biblical teaching concerning Jesus' full humanity and full divinity.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPRescueSpr17)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
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05

SESSION FIVE

Jesus' Baptism

SESSION SUMMARY

This session introduces John the Baptist—the prophet who prepared the way for Jesus' earthly ministry. John prepared the way by preaching a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and by baptizing people as a sign of their allegiance to God. Jesus chose to be baptized, even though He was sinless, in order to identify with His sinful people and provide an example of righteousness. Baptism symbolizes our union with Christ in His death and resurrection and marks us as God's people.

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 3:1-17

THE POINT

Jesus' baptism foreshadowed His death and resurrection.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

The word *baptism* can often bring confusion. In the church, maybe you've seen baptisms performed by a pastor, who says something like, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Buried with Him in baptism, raised to walk in new life." But what does this mean, and why are baptisms an important part of a believer's life?

- **Describe a typical baptism at your church. What typically goes through your mind as you watch the pastor baptize someone?**

When we're baptized, we identify with the life of Jesus. First of all, Jesus was baptized before He began His ministry, so we follow His example. Second, baptism by immersion is a symbolic demonstration of a believer's identification with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. Baptism is not salvation, but is a believer's public acknowledgment of a decision to live for Christ. In Jesus' case, His baptism identified Him as the Son of God.

Option 2

When you hear the name John the Baptist, what comes to mind? A wilderness man, dressed in clothes of camel's hair and eating locusts? Jesus' relative, who leapt in his mother's (Elizabeth) womb when Jesus' mother, Mary, came to visit? The man who preached repentance to the Jews before Jesus' ministry began? The one who baptized Jesus?

- **What is your response to hearing the different descriptions of John the Baptist?**

Maybe the most important description of John the Baptist is the title *forerunner*. As it sounds, a *forerunner* is one who comes before someone else and prepares the way for that person. In John's case, the call was to prepare the way for Jesus, the Messiah (Isa. 40:3). Can you imagine what it would be like as the one tasked with preparing the way for Jesus? No wonder John hesitated to baptize Jesus, instead exclaiming that it should be Jesus who baptized him. However, for righteousness' sake and for Jesus to identify with His people, John had to baptize Jesus—not the other way around.

- **What surprises you about the fact that John baptized Jesus? Why do you think this was so surprising to John and to us?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Jesus' baptism foreshadowed His death and resurrection.

CHARACTERS

- **Jesus** - the eternal Son of God; second person of the Trinity
- **John the Baptist** - the forerunner to the Messiah; prepared the way for Jesus' earthly ministry

PLOT

Today's session introduces us one the *ordinances* of the church, baptism. An *ordinance* is *something that we are commanded to do by Jesus as we go about the task of making disciples*. Jesus chose to be baptized, even though He was sinless, in order to identify with His sinful people and provide an example of righteousness. Baptism symbolizes our union with Christ in His death and resurrection, and identifies us as God's people.

JOHN THE BAPTIST LED THE WAY

Jesus' ministry began when He encountered John the Baptist. In the Book of Matthew, John the Baptist was introduced as the forerunner to the Messiah, who constantly insisted that he was not the Messiah. John was the messenger who prepared the way for Jesus.

¹ In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ² "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." ³ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'" ⁴ Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. (Matt. 3:1-6)

The prophet Isaiah spoke about John the Baptist as the one crying out, telling people to prepare the way for the Lord (Isa. 40:3). How did John prepare people to receive Jesus, the Messiah? John, as the forerunner, made them aware of their need for the forgiveness that only Jesus can provide. He challenged them to repent.

John preached in the wilderness, so His lifestyle might seem strange. He dressed in camel hair and consumed a diet was locusts and honey. These are the hallmarks of a person who lived in the wilderness. However, the most important feature of John the Baptist's ministry was not his strange clothing or diet, but his preoccupation with the message of repentance. John came from Elijah's place with Elijah's message (2 Kings 1:8). He was the prophet tasked with preparing the way for the Lord.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Baptism (p. 34, PSG)

Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer's faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Savior, the believer's death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to the believer's faith in the final resurrection of the dead. Being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord's Supper.

TIMELINE

JESUS' BAPTISM

The meaning of baptism in the life of the believer.

JESUS OVERCOMES TEMPTATION

Where Adam and Eve and the early Israelites failed, Christ succeeded.

**Special session*

WHO IS HE?

The disciples learn Jesus' identity and the purpose behind why He came.

The people's response to John's message was tremendous (vv. 5-6). They flocked to John from Jerusalem and the whole region of Judea. Andrew was also one of John the Baptist's disciples, which means his influence had reached all the way north to Galilee.

JOHN THE BAPTIST PREACHED REPENTANCE

What did John, the forerunner, say as he prepared the way for the Messiah? Take a look at this conversation between John and the religious and political leaders—the Pharisees and Sadducees:

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” (Matt. 3:7-12)

A group of Pharisees and Sadducees were there beside the Jordan where John baptized. The Gospel of John indicated that these religious leaders were sent from Jerusalem to investigate John and ask him who he thought he was. Seeing them, John poured out a stream of prophetic words. He called them a “brood of vipers.” This was a phrase that Jesus, John's cousin, would also use to describe the Pharisees (Matt. 12:34; 23:33).

John also attacked their confidence in Abraham, just as Jesus would later do (Matt. 8:11; Luke 13:28; John 8:39). John longed to see the fruit of repentance in their lives. If they failed to repent, their “trees” would be cut down and thrown into the fire (v. 10). In other words, judgment would even come to the religious leaders if they did not repent and believe.

- **Why wasn't it enough for the Pharisees to rely upon the faith of their fathers when it came to their own lives?** (*p. 35, PSG*)

John's sermon eventually shifted to the future and to Jesus (v. 11). At first, he compared the two of them—John baptized with water, and Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.

In Judaism, ritual immersion was mandated before a person entered the temple area and on various other occasions. Baptism was an external symbol of an internal reality and was also used to initiate Gentiles into the Jewish community. Once other conditions were met, immersion symbolized being born into the Jewish community; one was said to be “born again.”

John's baptism embraced all these images and more, but the fact that John baptized Jews was a sign that more was going on than initiation here. John was concerned about the heart of the person. A baptism of repentance was a unique innovation of John the Baptist.

JESUS IDENTIFIED WITH HIS PEOPLE IN BAPTISM

Jesus had come from Galilee to the place where John baptized. In the Gospels, Jesus often surprises us—saying what we don't expect and doing what we wouldn't imagine. This moment is no exception. Jesus asked John to baptize Him.

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15 But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." 16 Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; 17 and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Matt. 3:13-17)

John had just spoken about his inferiority to Jesus, so he protested baptizing Jesus. It should be the other way around, right? Jesus should have baptized John. Once more Jesus was misunderstood.

Jesus' first words in the Gospel of Matthew are in verse 15. A character's first words are significant in any book, and these words are no exception. Jesus told John that it was necessary for Jesus to be baptized for the purpose of fulfilling righteousness. What did Jesus mean? How did His submitting to a baptism of repentance fulfill righteousness? What did Jesus ever do wrong that He needed to repent?

In submitting to John's baptism, Jesus was not repenting. He took His place alongside those of us who do need to repent. He radically identified with His sinful people. In essence, He said, "I will take my place alongside sinners, I will identify with them even to the point of dying on the cross so that they might eventually be set free from their sins."

As Jesus came up out of the water, He saw heaven opened and God's Spirit descending on Him in the form of a dove. This same Spirit would soon drive Jesus into the wilderness to be tested (Mark 1:12).

Jesus took the calling of His Father upon Himself, a calling which would ultimately lead Him to the cross. The moment of baptism represented Jesus' acceptance of His calling, and it represented God's acceptance of His perfect Son. Jesus could have exercised His moral superiority over John the Baptist, instead He humbly submitted to His Father and was baptized, although He had never sinned.

TIMELINE

THE CALLING OF THE DISCIPLES

Jesus invites ordinary people to follow Him.

BORN AGAIN

Nicodemus encounters Jesus and learns about the new birth.

THE ECLIPSE OF JOHN'S MINISTRY

John the Baptist points others to Jesus.

In response, God spoke the words all children long to hear from their fathers. These were words Jesus needed to hear as He looked up and saw the wilderness He was about to enter. In essence, the Father said, “I love you” and “I am delighted in you.” He confirmed Jesus’s identity as His Son. His identity as God’s Son was also the identity that Satan would immediately seek to attack and destroy in the wilderness, only a few miles away from the Jordan River.

CHRIST CONNECTION

The process of identifying with Christ doesn’t begin and end with baptism. Being baptized is only the first step. Baptism ushers us into a radical commitment and identification with Christ’s body, the Church.

Jesus’ radical identification with sinners through His baptism and crucifixion is a model for His followers. We are called to follow His example. We are to stand with the poor. We are to be lights to the world, even as He was the Light of the world. We are to take up our crosses, as Jesus took up His. As Jesus identified with us, so we identify with Him. In doing so, we gain a greater sense of unity with Jesus’ body, the church. Though we had no right to expect anything from Him, Jesus gave us everything. Though the world has no right to expect anything from us, for His sake we are to offer everything, including our very lives.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **How would you explain to someone the significance of baptism based upon this session?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why do you think John the Baptist emphasized the need for personal repentance? Why should Christians stress the importance of personal repentance today?** *Repentance is of central importance in the Christian life. Through repentance, we not only agree that a different course of action is needed, but we also take the next step and turn away from our sin and toward Christ. Repentance is something that we not only do at the start of the Christian life, but something we also do daily in our fight against any remaining sin in our lives.*
- **What does it mean to you to know that Jesus identifies with sinners?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How has this session strengthened your own understanding of baptism?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

John's message of repentance hit a nerve. He was the first prophetic voice to speak to God's people in generations. Even Peter, whose brother Andrew was a disciple of John the Baptist, was affected by John's message. His heart softened at John's exhortation to repent, shown in the way Peter fell to his knees and confessed to Jesus that he was a sinful man.

- **How does repentance make us ready to hear from God's Word?** *This is partially because we agree with God that something needs to change within our lives.*
- **Why is it important to recognize our need to repent continually in our walk with Christ?** *Growing to become more like Christ will involve continual repentance within one's life.*



HEART

Maybe it seems that John was harsh with the Pharisees, but he was also incredibly humble. He claimed that he was not worthy to loosen the Messiah's sandals. John not only preached a message of repentance, but he also demonstrated the humility that must accompany such repentance. His example teaches us that until we are humble, we will never see our need for repentance.

- **Why is it important for our actions to match our words?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How might cultivating a humble heart prevent us from being like the Pharisees?** *Pride tends to distort reality. It blinds us to the truth of our own hearts and deceives us into thinking only of ourselves. Unlike pride, humility does quite the opposite. A humble heart and spirit sees reality clearer each day, recognizing the need for God's forgiveness and help in the fight against sin.*



HANDS

In our own time, the "way" is still being prepared. This time, the prophet John isn't the one preparing the way. Instead, the Holy Spirit is the one who convicts us of sin and softens our hearts as He leads us to repentance. The way prepared for sinners is a path to repentance, demonstrated through baptism. And baptism is the call for all who repent and turn to Jesus.

- **How does baptism provide a picture of salvation through Christ?** *Answer to this can be found in the session content.*
- **In what areas of your life has the Holy Spirit been convicting you lately? How will you respond to His conviction?** *Answers will vary.*

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPRescueSpr17)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at

GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit

MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject



06

SESSION SIX

Jesus' Temptation

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we witness Jesus' faithfulness in the wilderness of temptation. Unlike Adam and Eve in the garden and the children of Israel in the wilderness, Jesus refused to gratify His desires apart from God's will or to test God and His promises. Instead of taking the path of earthly exaltation, Jesus fixed His eyes on the cross and triumphed over the temptations of the Evil One. As Christians, we can resist temptation by trusting in the Savior who overcame temptation in our place.

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 4:1-11

THE POINT

Jesus overcame temptation through the power of God's Word.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

The spiritual life can be understood as a wilderness, as a journey through the desert. However, many Christians are surprised when their temptations seem to grow in intensity, even after they commit to Jesus. The story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness teaches us that struggle always follows commitment. Even more, struggle is the test of faithfulness.

When the first disciples dropped their fishing nets to follow Jesus, they probably never anticipated the struggles that would follow. Tradition says that all but one of the disciples would be martyred. Saying "yes" to God came with a cost, and the same is true of us today. Experiencing temptation and overcoming the Evil One is one of the ways we become stronger—able to continue saying "yes" to the great cost and great reward of following Christ.

- **What are some common temptations Christians struggle with today? Why are these temptations so common?**

Option 2

Create a list of options, such as "Would you rather eat ice cream or fruit?" Create enough questions for four rounds, making the decisions more difficult with each round. For example, maybe the last round's question would be something like, "If it was a given that you would be successful at whatever you tried, would you rather establish your own business or solve a major world problem?"

Ask four to five students to volunteer to answer these questions. After you have made it through all four rounds of options, explain that some choices are easy and some temptations seem easier to avoid. However, as time goes on, we often face more and more difficult choices and greater temptation to choose what seems best to us or will bring us the most recognition. When faced with some difficult decisions, Jesus made the right choice every time. He battled temptation by using the Word of God, and we can follow His example when faced with temptations and difficult choices in our own lives.

- **Think of your own school, church, or group of friends. List some difficult decisions young people often face today.**
- **How can we stand strong against temptation, especially in the face of difficult decisions?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Jesus overcame temptation through the power of God's Word.

CHARACTERS

- **Jesus** - the eternal Son of God; second person of the Trinity
- **Satan** - the Devil, the Accuser, the father of lies who's only desire is to kill, steal, and destroy

PLOT

Immediately after His baptism, Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tempted. One of the things we see in this account is that, unlike Adam and Eve in the Garden and unlike the children of Israel in the wilderness, Jesus refused to gratify His desires apart from God's will or to test God and His promises. Instead of taking the path of earthly exaltation, Jesus fixed His eyes on the cross and triumphed over the temptations of the Evil One. As Christians, we can resist temptation by trusting in the Savior who overcame temptation in our place.

TIMELINE

JESUS OVERCOMES TEMPTATION

Where Adam and Eve and the early Israelites failed, Christ succeeded.

**Special session*

WHO IS HE?

The disciples learn Jesus' identity and the purpose behind why He came.

THE CALLING OF THE DISCIPLES

Jesus invites ordinary people to follow Him.

JESUS WAS TEMPTED TO SATISFY HIS DESIRES APART FROM GOD'S WILL

Many of us approach our reading of the Bible as if it were medicine we should take in small doses. We read a few verses, or perhaps even a paragraph, in the morning or at night.

There is nothing wrong with reading the Bible in this way, but if we only read the Bible in small blocks, we might miss some of the elegant connections between the stories. It is easier to see the connections when you read larger portions of Scripture in one sitting.

A great example is the story of Jesus' baptism, which we studied in the previous session, and Jesus' temptation. We must read one to understand the other. At the Jesus' baptism, the Father affirmed Jesus' identity as His beloved Son, and the Spirit descended upon Him like a dove. The same Spirit who descended upon Jesus at His baptism led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. Not surprisingly, the first temptation had to do with Jesus' identity as the Son of God—a question of the affirmation He just heard at His baptism.

Keeping these two stories together the way the Gospel writers did, we notice the straight line from the Jordan River to the desert. The baptism represents the door to the wilderness.

¹ Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴ But he answered, "It is written, "'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" (Matt. 4:1-4)

Satan's intent was revealed in the opening words of his first assault: He questioned Jesus' identity as the Son of God. In order to understand the strategy Satan used against Jesus, we must understand how his opening move was intended to lead Jesus to doubt His identity and to indulge an earthly appetite.

Jesus fasted for forty days, so Satan attacked Him at His weakest moment. Behind the temptation to turn the stones into bread was the assumption that physical food is the most important nourishment we need, but Jesus' response said otherwise. In each of the three temptations, Jesus quoted from the book of Deuteronomy. His reference here, to Deuteronomy 8:3, noted the Word of God as the most needed nourishment.

Bread is one of the sustaining foods for physical life. However, more important than bread is the life of the Spirit. Our spiritual lives are sustained by the Word of God. Jesus understood that although His body was starving, He had feasted on God's Word, spoken over Him at the Jordan River. Jesus knew He was the Son of God—not a starving beggar in the wilderness, but a Son who delighted in the Word of His Father.

- **In what way did the Word of God sustain Jesus when the Devil tempted Him? How did this relate to Jesus' identity?** (*p. 40, PSG*)

JESUS WAS TEMPTED TO TEST GOD AND DOUBT HIS PROMISES

With his second temptation, Satan escalated his assault on Jesus. The Son of God stood firm in the area of His physical desires, so Satan's strategy shifted. He wanted Jesus to doubt God's promises.

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple ⁶ and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you," and "On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone." ⁷ Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (Matt. 4:5-7)

Satan transported Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple. Herod's temple was a marvel. One rabbi said, "He who has not seen Herod's Temple has not seen beauty."¹ The 35-acre complex was surrounded by a colonnade. In the center of the splendor was the temple itself, fashioned from glistening white marble and also crowned with gold leaf. It is said that when the sun shone directly on the temple, one had to look away because of its brilliance.²

Satan took Jesus to the top of this magnificent building, and he altered his attack by adopting Jesus' method of warfare. Here, Satan also quoted the Bible—Psalm 91:11-12—which refers to God's tender provision of protection to the ones He loves.

Satan intended for Jesus to understand these two verses in isolation, apart from the larger context of the Psalm. But Psalm 91 speaks of a person who rests in faith and trusts in the Almighty. The psalmist wrote about why he was not afraid and why he had made the Lord his refuge. In short, the song is from someone who placed his total trust in God.

Trust in God? That is not how Satan wanted the verses to be understood. Lifted from its context of trust, the verses Satan quoted were mangled into an invitation to distrust God. For Jesus to throw Himself from the temple roof would be to test His Father. This would mean that Jesus was demanding a sign regarding His identity as God's Son, that the Father's affirmation at the baptism was not enough, and that God would have to prove the truth of His earlier statement. Again, Jesus turned to Deuteronomy in response, telling Satan that He would not test the Lord.

Jesus' experience helps us understand our own struggle against temptation in our personal wilderness. God's Word provides the basis of our confidence. Our faith and trust in His Word provides the strength to resist Satan's continual lies. If Jesus had to rely on the Word of God, how much more should we?

Satan (the "accuser") always seeks to plant doubts in our minds—doubts that say God is not trustworthy. Jesus' life and obedience is a constant reminder that the Father can be trusted in every situation. Satan sows seeds of condemnation and confusion, but God's Word is rich in encouragement and clarity. Satan knows that if he can introduce the smallest doubt, he will have his foot in the door. But, if we continue in fellowship with God and walk with Jesus in the light of His Word, Satan is already defeated.

JESUS WAS TEMPTED TO EXALT HIMSELF APART FROM THE CROSS

With the final temptation, Satan offered a shortcut for Jesus to arrive at exaltation—through bowing down and worshiping him instead of choosing to fulfill His calling as the Messiah.

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. 9 And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 10 Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve." 11 Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him. (Matt. 4:8-11)

Jesus was taken to a high mountain. Mysteriously, here Jesus had a glimpse of all the kingdoms of the world at once. Satan's goal was for Jesus to worship him in order to receive power.

Jesus had been in the wilderness for forty days and nights. Here, Satan abandoned his tactic of quoting Scripture. He had used the Scripture as a ploy, not because God's Word was a source of life.

However, Jesus knew who He was. He knew that His kingdom would be centered on a cross. He knew that His kingdom would be based on His self-sacrifice, not His self-exaltation. He knew that His glory would flow from His identity as the Son of God. And so, once again, He quoted Deuteronomy, saying that only God was deserving of His worship and service.

Jesus' sonship had been declared at His baptism and was demonstrated in the wilderness. In the desert, the Son of God displayed the ultimate worth of God the Father. In the desert, the Son trusted in God and fed on His Word. After being defeated, the devil left Jesus. Luke added that Satan's departure was until another time (4:13).

TIMELINE

BORN AGAIN
Nicodemus encounters Jesus and learns about the new birth.

THE ECLIPSE OF JOHN'S MINISTRY
John the Baptist points others to Jesus.

THE WOMAN AT THE WELL
Jesus reaches out to the outcasts of society.

The battle was over for the moment. Angels came and served Jesus. At Jesus' birth, the angels praised God for His goodness. In this passage, the angels did not fight for Jesus, but fed Him and ministered to Him.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Temptation and Sin (p. 42, PSG)

Temptation is not the equivalent of sin. Temptation can refer to natural and good desires that are twisted and directed toward pleasing of self rather than giving glory to God. Jesus was tempted like we are (Matt. 4), and yet He never sinned but faithfully resisted temptation and followed the will of His Father. Knowing our weakness, we are to be on guard against temptation that may lead us to sin (Matt. 26:41), and we pray for God to deliver us from evil (Matt. 6:13).

CHRIST CONNECTION

Jesus' triumph over the temptation to turn stones into bread brings to mind two other biblical scenes. First, Adam and Eve were placed in a Garden filled with all the food they would ever need. Yet, even in that paradise, the serpent drew them to the one tree that was forbidden. In seeing that the tree's fruit was good to eat, they disobeyed God and were exiled from the garden into the wilderness.

Second, the children of Israel wandered in a literal wilderness. Even there, God's provision was everywhere. They were given manna from heaven and quail to eat. They had water to drink, miraculously provided from a rock in the desert. When their enemies threatened, God intervened to protect His people. Even with all this provision and protection, the Israelites grumbled against God and were forced to remain in the desert instead of entering the promised land flowing with milk and honey.

Like Adam and Eve and the children of Israel, we must also recognize our tendency to be faithless in spite of all God has given us. The temptation of Jesus shows us the One who remained steadfast and committed to trusting in the provision of God. We benefit from His victory and walk in His steps.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Why is knowing who you are in Christ so important in the fight against sin?** *People tend to live and act in accordance with what they believe to be true about themselves. When people come to a deeper understanding of who they are in Christ and of the Spirit who now lives in them, they will take the war against sin more seriously.*
- **What are some ways Christians attempt to battle temptation and sin and fail? What was Jesus' approach?** *Often times people only address the physical act of sinning and not the source of the sin, namely the heart. Sure, Christians should be smart and intentional about avoiding situations where they know they will be tempted. However, it is vital to remember that the battleground for sin is in the heart, and if people are committed to hiding God's Word in their hearts, then they will be more successful overall in the battle against sin.*
- **Satan tried to manipulate the true meaning of God's Word in his attack on Jesus. What does this teach us about our need to properly understand God's Word?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Do you hunger for God's Word just as much as you hunger for food? Why or why not? What are some ways you can begin to increase your appetite for God's Word in your life?** *Some people don't recognize they are malnourished until they begin to live a life of healthy eating and exercise. Likewise, our hunger for God's Word will increase not only when we begin to taste it for the first time, but also as we continue to feast from it daily.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

The wilderness is the place God uses to establish our identity as His sons and daughters. In the Old Testament, God called His people to the wilderness so they could learn His worth and learn to truly worship Him. Pharaoh was told to let the people go to the wilderness to worship God. In the wilderness, Israel learned the words of God. The same can be said of the wilderness temptation of Jesus. Jesus' sonship was declared by the Father at the Jordan River, and His relationship with the Father was strengthened by His obedience in the wilderness. There Jesus demonstrated what it truly means to be a child of God.

- **When have you had a “wilderness” experience in your life spiritually? Did it seem like a test? Why or why not?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How does this account change the way you view difficult times in your life? What are some important lessons we can learn through times like these?** *Answers will vary.*



HEART

Jesus' struggle in the wilderness is our struggle, and His victory there can become ours, too. As we study the Scriptures, we come to realize that the hunger of temptation in the wilderness can only be truly satisfied by trusting in the promises of God's Word. The identity we have received from God, as His sons and daughters, must be stronger than the false identities that Satan and the world may offer us.

- **When have you been tempted to “put God to the test”—to see if He would keep His promise to you?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How does Jesus' victory over temptation give you confidence when you are in the wilderness?** *We can gain confidence by knowing our Savior understands us because He experienced temptation like we do, and He has the same source to fight against sin that we have today—God's Word.*



HANDS

When talking about the armor of God in Ephesians 6, the apostle Paul mentioned only one offensive weapon—the sword of the Spirit—and identified it as the Word of God. Jesus' wilderness experience clearly illustrated Paul's point. When looking at how Jesus countered the temptations of the Devil, we see a perfectly good example of what it looks like to use Scripture in the fight of faith. Thus, instead of trying to overcome temptation or fight sin through self-strength or clever tactics, Christians are to unsheathe the Word of God by believing God's promises in the fight for faith.

- **Why would it have been wrong for Jesus to turn the stones into bread? What does Jesus' answer teach us about the importance of God's Word?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How might you become equipped to use the power of God's Word in your own fight against sin? How equipped are you?** *Answers will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack item # 7, which contains an artistic quote poster related to the session.

SOURCES

1. Paul Barnett, *Jesus & the Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 76.
2. Nancy M. Tischler, *All Things in the Bible: An Encyclopedia of the Biblical World, vol. 2, M-Z* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006), 607.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
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SPECIAL SESSION

“Who Do You Say That I Am?”

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we take a closer look at the central confession of the Christian faith—that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. When Jesus asked His disciples about His identity, He challenged their understanding of the Messiah and pointed forward to His death and resurrection. As Christians, we confess that Jesus is the Son of God who died for us and rose again. By faith, we are united with Jesus our Messiah, and we are called to take up our cross and follow Him, no matter the cost.

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 16:13-28

THE POINT

The call to follow Jesus includes a call to self-denial.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Jim Elliott was athletic, smart, winsome, a man who “had everything.” He could have been anything he wanted. Yet early in life he chose to follow Jesus. That decision led him to the mission field and ultimately to martyrdom trying to reach the Auca Indians of Ecuador.

Why would Jim and his friends give up everything, including their own lives, for these tribal peoples? While Jim was still in college he penned words that have pierced the hearts of millions, he said, “He is no fool to give what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” These words came from one who echoed the great confession of Peter: Jesus is the Savior, the Messiah, the Son of the living God who suffered, died, and rose again.

- **How does Jim’s decision to give up everything to tell the Auca about Jesus contrast the materialistic nature of our culture today?**

Option 2

Have you ever seen a message pop up on a computer screen saying, “access denied”? This usually happens after an incorrect password has been entered several times. Maybe you’ve seen a basketball player block a shot and heard that the shot was “denied!” Or maybe your teacher denied your request for an extension on an assignment. Being *denied* means *something is not allowed to happen or continue on a desired path*. The denial’s listed here are all external, meaning others denied something we wanted. But how do we deny ourselves?

When Jesus asked His disciples to deny themselves and follow Him, He was essentially asking them to change directions, not to allow themselves to continue down the path they had previously wanted. Instead, He asked them to form their desires to His will, their plans to His plans. Jesus asks the same of His followers today.

- **Consider the world around you. How do you think most people would respond to Jesus’ command to deny themselves and follow Him?**
- **What are some obstacles that might keep young people from denying themselves to follow Jesus?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

The call to follow Jesus includes a call to self-denial.

CHARACTERS

- **Jesus** - the eternal Son of God; second person of the Trinity
- **The Disciples** - the group of individuals Jesus invited to follow Him and be a part of ushering in the kingdom of God

PLOT

In this session, we'll take a closer look at the central confession of the Christian faith—that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. When Jesus asked His disciples about His identity, He challenged their understanding of the Messiah and pointed forward to His death and resurrection. As Christians, we confess that Jesus is the Son of God who died for us and rose again. By faith, we are united with Jesus our Messiah. Therefore, we are called to take up our cross and follow Him, no matter the cost.

TIMELINE

**Special session*

WHO IS HE?

The disciples learn Jesus' identity and the purpose behind why He came.

THE CALLING OF THE DISCIPLES

Jesus invites ordinary people to follow Him.

BORN AGAIN

Nicodemus encounters Jesus and learns about the new birth.

THE DISCIPLES AFFIRMED JESUS AS MESSIAH

The events of Matthew 16 were a turning point in Jesus' ministry and in the disciples' understanding of who Jesus was and what He had come to do. The events in this chapter took place in Caesarea Philippi which was located 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, at the headwaters of the Jordan River, in Gentile territory. Jesus went to this lush, beautiful place for a retreat with His disciples. And then, He asked the question that prompted Peter's confession of faith.

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matt. 16:13-16)

Meeting or being acquainted with people does not mean we know them well. Many people were acquainted with Jesus. He was popular with the crowds, but they had an insufficient view of His identity.

The general population put Jesus in good religious company. Some saw Him as a "revived John the Baptist" because Jesus' message and ministry resembled John's. Others saw Him as a prophet like Jeremiah, who ministered during the Babylonian captivity and spoke often of Israel's future. John the Baptist and Jeremiah were heroes to the Jews in the first century, and it was seen as a compliment to Jesus that the crowds would put Him in such company.

However, the disciples knew Jesus was more than a "religious hero." Notice how Jesus' question changed. When He asked about the crowd's opinions, He wanted to know who people said the Son of Man was. *Son of Man* was a messianic title from the Old Testament Book of Daniel, and it was the most common way Jesus referred to Himself (27 times throughout Matthew). But when Jesus asked His disciples about His identity, Jesus phrased the question in a more personal way: "Who do you say that I am?"

Peter spoke up and identified Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. The title *Messiah* or *Christ* comes from the Hebrew word for *anointed*. This title referred to God's Servant who would deliver the people from their oppressors and bring about a golden age for Israel in fulfillment of Old Testament promises.

17 And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” 20 Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ. (Matt. 16:17-20)

How did Peter understand what others did not? According to Jesus, God Himself who revealed this information to Peter. It wasn't possible for “flesh and blood” (humans unaided by God's Spirit) to arrive at this conclusion. In other words, even Peter did not have the spiritual resources to grasp this truth on his own.

Yet, when Peter followed Jesus He saw more than others. When Peter heard Jesus, he heard more than others. Others saw mighty and compassionate works; Peter saw God in action. Others heard unique explanations of Scripture and life; Peter heard God speaking. As the disciples followed Jesus, they grew in their understanding day by day, by observing Jesus and considering His words. Peter comprehended more than most. Still, Peter had more to learn about Jesus' identity.

JESUS CHALLENGED THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF THE MESSIAH

Peter stated the foundational confession of faith in Jesus' identity: He is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Peter got the title right, but his understanding of what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah was incomplete. Take a look at what happened next.

21 From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” 23 But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” (Matt. 16:21-23)

Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah was a major moment in the life and ministry of Jesus. According to Matthew, Jesus spoke about His coming death from that point on. Jesus' thoughts and actions turned toward the cross. From our perspective in history, we understand the reality and significance of Jesus' death; however, from their perspective beforehand, the disciples could hardly imagine the Messiah dying.

Peter's strong reaction to Jesus' teaching revealed the tension in his thinking about a Messiah who would die. Peter spoke boldly based on his understanding of what God revealed to him (Jesus as the Messiah), but Peter spoke wrongly because of his faulty understanding of what that title represented. The idea of a Messiah who would suffer and die was not on Peter's radar (even if there were Old Testament texts that taught this truth, such as Isaiah 53).

Jesus rightly rebuked Peter. A little earlier Jesus commended Peter for listening to God as He revealed truth to Peter. Later, Peter acted as an agent of Satan, meaning he spoke only from human wisdom in that moment. This does not mean that Peter was somehow demon-possessed; it only means that as Peter stood in opposition to God's plan of redemption through suffering, he momentarily sided with Satan and his agenda. He sounded like the Tempter who Jesus had overcome in the wilderness. Peter did not realize that he repeated the same temptation—exaltation apart from the cross—Jesus had faced in the wilderness.

JESUS CHALLENGED THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF PERSONAL JOY

Understanding the identity of Jesus as the Messiah who died and rose again is not just an exercise in knowledge. For those of us who are Christ's disciples, there are practical implications to knowing Jesus as the Messiah. We follow in His steps.

Disciples must learn how to live as Jesus did if we are to be part of His messianic kingdom. Entering God's kingdom is a matter of faith in Jesus' provision—His suffering, death, and resurrection. Here Jesus emphasized the fact that Kingdom living requires self-denial.

24 Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? 27 For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. 28 Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." (Matt. 16:24-28)

Deny yourself? Take up your cross? Lose your life? You may read this passage and wonder: Does Jesus want us only to focus on what's negative? Not quite.

Jesus' emphasis on self-denial isn't just about what we lose, but what we gain when we give up our lives to Him. Deny yourself in order to be filled. Die today in order to rise tomorrow. Instead of focusing solely on what we should deny or the command to follow, we should focus instead on the One we follow—Jesus!

TIMELINE

THE ECLIPSE OF JOHN'S MINISTRY

John the Baptist points others to Jesus.

THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

Jesus reaches out to the outcasts of society.

HOMETOWN OPPOSITION

Jesus makes plain His identity and is rejected in His hometown.

- **What happens when we focus on the action of following apart from Jesus, the One we are called to follow?** (p. 48 PSG)

Discipleship is not a constant act of depriving yourself of happiness, but a glorious exchange for true and abundant life. Those who decide to “lose their lives” for Jesus find life. They begin to experience the glorious joy of the Kingdom. Following Jesus on earth may bring sacrifice and even suffering, but suffering brings glory—the glory of the crucified and resurrected Messiah in a Kingdom that will never end.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Union with Christ (p. 47, PSG)

At the heart of our salvation is our union with Christ. The Bible describes salvation as entering into a covenant relationship with God and also describes the church (which is made up of believers) as the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:23-32). Christians believe that Christ dwells in our hearts through faith (Christ in us) and that we are simultaneously dwelling in Him (Eph. 3:17; Col. 1:27; 3:1-4). This union is indissoluble; it will last for all eternity.

CHRIST CONNECTION

Jesus knows that our natural inclination will always be to preserve our lives. We do that instinctively, and we make choices each day under the belief that these choices will bring our lives more joy than not. However, as is often the case, Jesus challenges our thinking and even turns it upside down. He knows we want to save our lives, but He also knows we won't succeed unless we do it His way. If we want to save our lives, then we are called to lay them down for His sake and the sake of the gospel. When we do this, Jesus knows that the joy we all seek will ultimately come from doing things His way, and not through the misguided ways of the world.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What are some answers people might give to the question: "Who do you say Jesus is?" What answers are good, but insufficient?** *Many will say He was a great moral teacher, a cultural revolutionary, or even a prophet of God.*
- **What was missing in Peter's understanding of Jesus as the Messiah? What important aspects of Jesus' identity are missing in the way most people think of Him today?** *Peter misunderstood the suffering Servant aspect of the Messiah—the reason for Jesus' coming.*
- **In what ways do you notice people "saving their lives" instead of "losing their lives" for Jesus' sake?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What does self-denial look like? How can self-denial lead to greater personal joy?** *Self-denial recognizes that worldly possessions, earthly status, and the pursuit of one's passions are not of supreme value—only Jesus is. Not only does self-denial recognize that Jesus is of supreme value, but it also demonstrates the reality that more happiness and joy come from following Christ than in pursuing the things of this world.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

As is often the case in the Bible, an encounter with God can often result in a name change for the individual. Peter's name wasn't the first to be changed (Abram to Abraham), nor would it be the last (Saul to Paul). In this account, Jesus gave Simon a new name (Peter). In Greek, *Peter* means *stone*. His name was a play on the words found in verse 18 about building the church on the rock of confessing Jesus as Lord. Consistent with his new identity, Peter would be a spiritual rock, and his confession would become the foundation of the church.

- **How has your identity changed as a result of following Christ?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why is it important that we understand ourselves based upon what God says regardless of what others say about us or what we believe about ourselves?** *Answers will vary.*



HEART

Jesus corrected the disciples' misunderstanding regarding what it meant to follow Him. They assumed knowing the Messiah meant they would experience earthly comforts and ease in a matter of time—just as soon as Jesus overturned the established government. However, Jesus taught them that the ultimate comfort and ease they sought wouldn't be found that way. Worldly possessions, personal status, and achievements won't satisfy in the end. Only following Jesus satisfies.

- **In your own words, summarize Jesus' first question in Matthew 16:26.** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why is Jesus more satisfying than any comfort the world has to offer?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

We make choices every day as disciples of Christ. The biggest choice for each of us is the daily decision to follow Jesus and live like He lived. Like Jesus, we are to avoid hanging on to the earthly things and treating them as though they are all we have. Like Jesus, we are to put others before ourselves. Like Jesus, we should be willing to even suffer for the sake of the gospel, knowing there is a greater joy that awaits those who do. All of this is part of what it means to follow Him. It is a costly thing to follow, but the cost quickly fades when we focus on the One we get to follow—Jesus.

- **How can we avoid following Jesus as if it is only a task to accomplish? How can we willingly, wholeheartedly follow instead?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How does following Christ in your own life demonstrate to others the joy of following Him?** *We find joy in the treasures of our hearts. The people around us see where we place the treasures of our hearts, whether that be in a relationship with a person, a hobby, or a sport. If they see us finding our ultimate treasure in Jesus, then they will know where we find our ultimate source of joy.*

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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07

SESSION SEVEN

Jesus Called the First Disciples

SESSION SUMMARY

In today's session, Jesus' called people to repentance. Jesus extended this call to unlikely and unexpected people. Instead of ignoring the call, the first disciples abandoned their old ways of life and received Christ's invitation to follow Him. Now, as believers in Christ, we have the privilege of answering God's call to discipleship and extending the same call to others who need to repent and believe.

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 4:17-22; 9:9-13

THE POINT

Discipleship means faithfully following Jesus as Savior and Lord.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Imagine that you are sitting at your desk, in your room, taking a walk outside, or playing volleyball with your friends at the beach. Now, someone walks by and says, “Come follow me.” Maybe you’ve seen this person do and heard him say some amazing things, or maybe you have no idea who he is. What would you do? Would you drop everything to follow this person? You would probably want more information, right?

When Jesus called His disciples, they were engaged in everyday activities—Matthew was collecting taxes; Peter, Andrew, James, and John were fishing. Maybe one of the most surprising things about this call isn’t the way that Jesus asked these men to be His disciples, rather it is the way the men responded to His call. They immediately stopped what they were doing and did exactly what Jesus said—they followed Him.

- **If you were in the same situation as Andrew, Peter, James, John, or Matthew, how would you respond?**
- **Why do you think people have a tendency to want more information before they follow Jesus instead of immediately responding to His call?**

Option 2

In the history of schools, churches, governments, and humanity in general, people groupings have always existed. People have been divided by social class, beliefs, sport and club participation, level of intelligence and much more. Labels and people just seem to go together.

- **What are some common groups you see in your church, school, or community? Describe the people who seem to disregard these social groupings.**

Jesus’ society was divided much like our own, particularly between the Gentiles and the Jews, the religious elite and those they deemed unworthy. However, Jesus came to rescue all people, regardless of what “group” they were a part of. Viewed through the eyes of the religious elite, those Jesus chose as His first disciples were surprising choices. These men weren’t educated like them, and some of them were even tax collectors. Jesus was often accused of hanging out with the “wrong” people. But Jesus saw all people as those who desperately needed healing from their sins. As Jesus went to all people, we are also called to go to all people—regardless of what “group” they’re in.

- **Knowing how Jesus treated the outcasts and those society considered unimportant, how will you treat people around you who are mistreated and forgotten?**
- **Think of a few people you know who are “on the outside.” Pray that God would give you the opportunity to share His love with them this week.**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Discipleship means faithfully following Jesus as Savior and Lord.

CHARACTERS

- **Jesus** - the eternal Son of God; second person of the Trinity
- **The Disciples** - the group of individuals Jesus invited to follow Him and be a part of ushering in the kingdom of God

PLOT

As we continue our journey, we see Jesus call His first disciples—a call to not only follow Jesus, but also a call to repentance. These first disciples abandoned their old way of life and received Christ's invitation to follow Him.

TIMELINE

THE CALLING OF THE DISCIPLES

Jesus invites ordinary people to follow Him.

BORN AGAIN

Nicodemus encounters Jesus and learns about the new birth.

THE ECLIPSE OF JOHN'S MINISTRY

John the Baptist points others to Jesus.

JESUS CALLS FOR REPENTANCE

The gospel storyline moves us from the scene of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness to the launch of His earthly ministry.

17 From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matt. 4:17)

When Jesus began His earthly ministry, He called for repentance as the prerequisite for discipleship. To *repent* means *to change one's mind, to turn around in a way that leads to a change of life*. Jesus did not merely make a suggestion, but issued a command. The person who hears the command should make a conscious decision, and then live accordingly. Repenting means leaving your former way of life to follow Jesus and is demonstrated through faithfully following Him.

But does God call people to repent? And what are we supposed to repent of? Jesus gave a reason the people needed to repent. The announcement that the kingdom of heaven was near laid the foundation for repentance. Jesus expressed the truth that God's kingdom—His rule and reign—would come to earth through Jesus and His work. God kept His promise to bring salvation to sinful humanity and restoration to a broken, fallen world. He kept His promise to send the Messiah to make everything right. Because God acted, Jesus said the people needed to repent—to get on board with what God was doing.

As far as what we are to repent from, look back to the beginning of the Bible where Adam and Eve fell into sin. From Adam, we inherited a sinful nature (Ps. 51:5) and have become slaves to sin (John 8:34). When we repent, we admit our need for God's power to save us and our desire to be involved in His kingdom agenda, not our own.

The gospel message proclaims Jesus' perfect life, His death in our place, and His resurrection, and it tells us that Jesus is the only qualified Savior for sinners. We put our faith in Him, and we renounce our sin and self-righteous attempts at earning salvation. We turn away from our selfishness and sin in order to follow Jesus, the One who brings God's kingdom to earth.

- **Out of all the things Matthew could focus on, why do you think he summed up Jesus' preaching ministry with the call to repent? What does Matthew's summary say about the significance of repentance for the Christian life? (p. 54, PSG)**

JESUS CALLS UNLIKELY PEOPLE TO FOLLOW HIM

Jesus demonstrated that the prerequisite for discipleship is repentance. Jesus also called people from different walks of life to repent, to turn from their own agendas and join the mission of His kingdom. In this passage, Jesus called His first disciples. These first followers were fishermen, probably not the kind of occupation or position in society you'd expect a Messiah to choose when bringing together men who would change the world. Take a look:

¹⁸ While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. (Matt. 4:18-22)

Jesus didn't choose celebrities with money and influence. He didn't choose politicians with connections or CEO's of Fortune 500 companies with excellent leadership and managerial traits. Instead, He chose two sets of brothers who were both fishermen. The first set (Peter and Andrew) were everyday, blue-collar workers. The second set (James and John) worked for their father.

In His call, Jesus used a play on words when He took their occupation (fishermen) and turned it around, saying He would make them fishers of people. What's amazing is that both sets of brothers immediately followed Jesus when He called them. They didn't have all the details, they didn't have a destination in mind, but still they obeyed Jesus' call to follow. Like Abraham who left his country to go to a place promised by God, and like Samuel who was eager to hear the instruction of God, the disciples followed in the footsteps of their faithful ancestors and heeded God's call.

JESUS CALLS UNPOPULAR PEOPLE TO FOLLOW HIM

Jesus didn't only call fishermen to follow Him; He also called people with despised occupations. Matthew, for example, was a tax-collector.

Look at how one commentator explains the role of a tax-collector and how Matthew would have been viewed in his day: "These collectors were hated and despised by the Jews, both because they served the Roman oppressors and thus lacked all patriotism, and because of their greedy exactions, for they usually demanded all they could get in order to enrich themselves. Naturally, only men of lower types of character took positions of this kind."¹

Jewish tax-collectors had a terrible reputation. They were seen as traitors. And yet, Jesus extended His call of discipleship to someone who had this occupation, even when He knew there would be criticism from others.

⁹ As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him. ¹⁰ And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. ¹¹ And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹² But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matt. 9:9-13)

After Matthew obeyed Jesus and followed Him, Matthew quickly saw his worlds collide. His old world of relationships with tax-collectors and sinners now mixed with his new world of Jesus and the other disciples. Put those two worlds together and, not surprisingly, the tension led to a confrontation. The Pharisees saw who was at the party and they questioned Jesus' faithfulness because of the company He was keeping.

Jesus heard their questions, and He answered them by saying the sick need a doctor. He came for the sinners. It was Jesus' heart to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). Jesus is the great physician seeking to heal those who are spiritually sick, infected by the disease of sin (Ps. 103:3).

TIMELINE

THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

Jesus reaches out to the outcasts of society.

HOMETOWN OPPOSITION

Jesus makes plain His identity and is rejected in His hometown.

ZACCHAEUS AND THE SYCAMORE

Jesus has come to seek and save the lost.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Discipleship (p. 55, PSG)

Discipleship is a process that takes place both formally and informally to effect spiritual maturity as people follow Jesus. Informal discipleship, as passages like Deuteronomy 6:4-9 suggest, happens everywhere, in every arena of life. Growing in our faith and deepening our walk with Christ is something that requires our whole life, not just the mind. Formal discipleship refers to periods of instruction. We make disciples through our words and actions, providing verbal instruction from God's Word and non-verbal examples through our lives (Acts 20:17-24).

CHRIST CONNECTION

When people respond to the call to repentance, they place their faith in what Jesus accomplished perfectly on behalf of sinners. God commands and compels His children to share the good news of the gospel with people everywhere, from all walks of life. God's compassion on sinners is witnessed when we, the body of Christ, testify about His plan of redemption found in Jesus. We must fight any tendency to profile people and assume they're not redeemable or attractive enough to be ministered to.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Once again Jesus talked about repentance. What is the role of urgency in the call for people to repent?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What strikes you the most in this account of Jesus calling the disciples?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why do you think the Pharisees felt offended by the people at the dinner? How does Jesus' response impact the way we think about ministering to those in our schools, on the athletic fields, or within our homes?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What kinds of people should we minister to? Why is it sometimes difficult to minister to all people?** *As implied in the second question, Christians should minister to all people.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

Throughout the story of Jesus' earthy ministry, He called, ministered to, and forgave of the sins of various people. He healed an official's son (John 4:46-54), cleansed the Leper (Matt. 8:2-4), healed the Paralytic and forgave his sins (Matt. 9:1-8), healed the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5:25-34), fed the multitudes (Matt. 15:32-38; John 6:1-14), and raised the dead (Luke 7:11-17; 8:41-56; John 11:1-44). Because Jesus calls everyone to repent, there is no specific "profile" that describes followers of Jesus. The only qualification is repentant faith.

- **What does Jesus' ministry to all types of people communicate about His character?**
His compassion and mercy extend beyond any social statuses or physical differences.
- **As followers of Jesus, how can we model His actions to those around us who are in need?**
Answers will vary.



HEART

Today, Jesus calls people from every walk of life to leave their selfish pursuits and follow Him. That call may or may not require you to sell all your belongings or commit to living overseas as a missionary, but at the very least it will definitely require you to give up the idea that you command your own destiny. It will mean you give up any trace of selfish ambition that affects your life decisions. God's kingdom must be first, which is why we ask God to remove the remaining selfishness in our hearts and replace our desires with His heart for the world and His plan for our lives (Ps. 37:4).

- **What are some things you must leave behind in order to follow Christ?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What are the advantages of setting aside selfish pursuits to follow after Christ?**
Some advantages will include an increase in personal joy and fulfillment by doing what God has created and call you to do.



HANDS

The beauty of God's call to repentance is that He brings together people from various backgrounds and groups, in order to highlight His glorious work of redemption. He calls people you'd least expect. He does things you would never predict. He doesn't just call "the cream of the crop" to be His spokespeople, but unlikely people whose changed lives will demonstrate the glory of His work. And since we are commanded to imitate Christ (Eph. 5:1), we have the privilege of taking the gospel to those who might be viewed as undeserving, neglected, and overlooked in our society.

- **If you were picking a team of people to help you change the world, what types of people would you want? Why?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why is it both comforting and empowering for believers to know and understand that God calls ordinary people to proclaim His extraordinary gospel?** *Answers will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack item #8, containing biographical information about the 12 disciples.

SOURCE

I. R. C. H. Lenski (1961). *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel, 1-14* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing), 362.

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- **One Conversations**
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- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



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08

SESSION EIGHT

Nicodemus and the New Birth

SESSION SUMMARY

This session depicts a conversation in which Jesus taught a religious leader, Nicodemus, about the mystery of regeneration—what He described as “being born again.” Christians have been born again by the Spirit of God, through faith in God’s Son. The new birth is the basis of our confidence that God is at work transforming us and all who believe in the gospel.

SCRIPTURE

John 3:1-21

THE POINT

Regeneration is God’s supernatural transformation of believers.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Toy commercials are usually filled with action. They show kids having fun as they play with whatever product is being promoted. They highlight the gadget’s best features in a way that appeals to a child’s sense of imagination. But at the end, a narrator usually comes on and makes a disclaimer: “Batteries not included.”

Most likely, there were numerous occasions when well-meaning parents or guardians purchased a toy their child wanted without realizing there were no batteries in the box—unbearable disappointment in the eyes of a child! The kid feels duped, the parent is embarrassed, and the moment of bliss fades away because the toy can’t function.

- **When have you been disappointed by something not functioning as you thought it would? What was the reason for the item’s inability to function?**

As Christians, we believe salvation is a gift. God our Father has shown us grace in giving us salvation. But unlike those disappointing toy commercials, this gift doesn’t need a disclaimer that says “batteries are not included.”

The good news about God’s gift is that, alongside forgiveness of sins, we receive the Holy Spirit. He is the One who empowers us to live according to God’s Word. The spiritual batteries of the Christian life are included, because the Holy Spirit takes up residence in us and gives us strength to walk rightly before God and others (Rom. 8:9-13).

Option 2

The storyline of *Transformers* follows the Autobots (the “good” robots)—who transform into cars, trucks, helicopters, and other machines—as they try to keep the world safe from the Decepticons (the “bad” robots, who also transform into different machines as needed). These robotic characters are featured in books, TV shows, movies, and comics, and they are frequently introduced as, “*Transformers: More than Meets the Eye*.”¹

- **What comes to mind when you hear the word *Transformers*? What do you know about the movies, TV shows, books, or comics?**

As with the Transformers, there’s “more than meets the eye” with our spiritual transformation. Though we do not physically transform when we’re “born again” into God’s family, our hearts and lives are transformed as a result of His grace and love for us. This new birth is a spiritual renewal that occurs on the inside and displays itself in our words and actions.

- **In what ways has your life changed since you trusted Jesus as your Savior?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Regeneration is God's supernatural transformation of believers.

CHARACTERS

- **Jesus** - the eternal Son of God; second person of the Trinity
- **Nicodemus** - a ruler from the Pharisees; Nicodemus was known for seeking Jesus at night to ask questions about salvation.

PLOT

Today's session takes us to a private conversation between Jesus and a religious leader named Nicodemus. Jesus taught this religious leader about the mystery of regeneration, what He described as "being born again," and how new birth was necessary to be in a right relationship with God.

TIMELINE

BORN AGAIN

Nicodemus encounters Jesus and learns about the new birth.

THE ECLIPSE OF JOHN'S MINISTRY

John the Baptist points others to Jesus.

THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

Jesus reaches out to the outcasts of society.

NICODEMUS LEARNS OF THE NEW BIRTH

In John 3, the writer of the Gospel introduced an interesting man who came to see Jesus at night. He was a Pharisee, and his name was Nicodemus.

¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." ³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:1-3)

Nicodemus met with Jesus at night, maybe so his meeting wouldn't be noticed by other Pharisees, or maybe because this was the best time for this kind of conversation. Whatever his motivations, Nicodemus sought out Jesus and met with Him.

As their conversation began, Nicodemus affirmed Jesus' ministry of teaching and healing. He recognized that Jesus had the blessing of God on His ministry and complimented Jesus for the signs He performed. That's as far as Nicodemus went in attributing any special role to Jesus. It's clear that he saw Jesus as a good teacher, a moral person, and perhaps even a model of how people should live.

Jesus' response was abrupt. He didn't accept the compliments Nicodemus gave. Instead, He simply said no one would see the kingdom of God without being born again. In other words, unless you are reborn and made new, you will not see God's salvation.

Nicodemus didn't understand what Jesus' reply meant. So, he followed up with a question.

⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" (John 3:4-10)

Nicodemus' question was sincere. Because he did not understand what Jesus taught, he asked Him to clarify. Jesus did indeed clarify His initial statement. He revealed to Nicodemus that “new birth” is essential for entering into and experiencing the kingdom of God. People don't come into this new relationship with God by simply being spiritual but by yielding to the Holy Spirit. Jesus connected the reality of being “born again” to the necessity of being born of the Spirit. Nicodemus didn't need inside knowledge from Jesus; he needed new birth from the Spirit.

THE NEW BIRTH COMES THROUGH FAITH

The conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus continued, but now Jesus took the lead and began to explain further the “new birth” and its significance. This new and everlasting life comes through faith in Jesus. Take a look:

¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” (John 3:11-15)

Until that point the religious leaders had rejected Jesus' testimony, which raised an important question: How could the religious leaders compliment Jesus for His teaching on any matter if they rejected His testimony about Himself?

Jesus didn't wait for an answer. Instead, He claimed to be the One who had descended to earth from heaven. Jesus is the Son of God who took on human flesh in order to reveal the character of God to the world.

That's when this conversation took a surprising turn. Jesus reminded Nicodemus of a story in the Old Testament, found in Numbers 21:4-9. The Israelites were grumbling about their circumstances, after God had brought them out of Egypt. They hated the food God gave them in the wilderness. They accused God of having bad intentions and claimed that God took them out there to die.

The Lord grew angry with the Israelites and punished them by sending serpents into the camp. The plague of serpents was fierce, and the people began to repent. To save the people from the effects of their sin, God told Moses to put a bronze snake on a pole. Anyone who looked at the snake—who gazed upon that symbol of evil—would be healed.

Jesus compared Himself (the Son of Man) to that snake. He pointed forward to the moment when He would take upon Himself the weight of our sin, guilt, and shame. The cross would be the symbol of just how evil our sin is, and it would be the source of our salvation.

- **What did Jesus mean when He said He would be “lifted up”? Why is it important that He was “lifted up”? (p. 61, PSG)**

THE NEW BIRTH IS THE RESULT OF GOD'S LOVE FOR HUMANITY

We've seen how Jesus instructed Nicodemus concerning eternal life and the need for new birth. Then, Jesus spoke some of the most famous words in the Bible, words that sum up the good news of God's love for the world. Take a moment to consider all that we have covered up until this point, and then read the verses after John 3:16 so you can see the verse in context.

16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. 21 But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.” (John 3:16-21)

The focus here is on how God loved the world, and the love described here is self-sacrificing. Romans 5:8 tells us that God demonstrated His love for us by sending His Son, Jesus, to seek and save the lost by dying for us—while we were still in sin, separated from Him. John 3:16 reminds us that God gave Himself, in the person of His Son, to take the place of sinners like you and me.

John claims that those who reject Jesus already stand condemned before God. It's similar to a criminal who has been arrested for murder, pled not guilty, went to trial and was found guilty, received sentencing, and is now living on death row awaiting the execution sentence that's been delivered. That time from the convicting and sentencing until the time that the execution takes place is similar to the state of nonbelieving humanity. We've been condemned by our sin; all we wait for now is our execution.

The good news is that Christ came to be executed in our place. When we trust in Jesus, we are accepting God's plea bargain, which expresses the truth that Jesus has already taken the execution sentence in our place. By grace through faith, we can be set free from the prison of sin and be given a new life in Christ because the sentence has been carried out.

TIMELINE

HOMETOWN OPPOSITION

Jesus makes plain His identity and is rejected in His hometown.

ZACCHAEUS AND THE SYCAMORE

Jesus has come to seek and save the lost.

**Beginning Summer 2017*

THE SOWER AND THE SOILS

Jesus teaches on people's responses when hearing the Word.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Regeneration (p. 61, PSG)

Regeneration takes place at the beginning of the Christian life and is the miraculous transformation, or the new birth, that takes place within an individual through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit (John 3:3-8; Titus 3:5). It is the divine side of conversion (a person turning to Christ in repentance and faith), being the work of God within a person's life that causes him or her to be born again, a work that human effort is unable to produce.

CHRIST CONNECTION

In Moses' day, there was no cure apart from God's instruction. The people could have tried their homemade remedies to save themselves from the serpents' bites, but none of those remedies would have had any effect. There was only way to be healed, and it was through gazing upon the bronze snake lifted high on the pole. In a similar way, Jesus explained that He too would be lifted up. The only way for people to receive eternal life—healing from the sickness of sin and pardon from the penalty of death—would be to gaze upon Him in faith.

Earlier in the Gospel, the apostle John made it clear that God is the sole supplier of salvation. John 1:12-13 says that those who receive Christ also receive the right to be God's children. Only those who hear the gospel and look to Jesus alone as their sole means of salvation, believe in His teachings, perfect life, substitute death, and resurrection will be born again.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What is the connection between a person's identity and the value of their testimony?** *If people demonstrate a track record of honesty and integrity, then the value of his or her testimony increases. On the other hand, if people have a history of deceit and dishonesty, then their testimony will naturally be called into question.*
- **How would you respond to someone who says they consult Jesus as a good moral guide, but they do not recognize Him as the Son of God?** *One could point out the inconsistency of affirming Jesus as a great moral leader but denying His claims to be the divine Son of God, through whom salvation is found. If He isn't who He claimed to be, then He can't be very moral in making the claim. However, since He is moral by all accounts, the people should take His claims as the Son of God to be true.*
- **How would you explain the words "faith" and "believe" from a biblical perspective?** *Having faith is another way of saying one believes that Jesus is who He says He is, and that by trusting in Him one can have forgiveness of sin.*
- **What similar words would you use? How does this passage illustrate the meaning of faith?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

Nicodemus wasn't all that different from many religious people today. Maybe he assumed that since he was a religious leader, he automatically had a right standing with God or already knew God's plan for bringing His kingdom. Maybe he assumed that his religious observance gave him a better position from which to interpret and experience God's mighty works. Like him, it's easy for people who have been raised in church, or who have some sort of faith in God, to believe that they have an inside track to God and His ways. But if this account teaches us anything, it teaches us about the necessity of coming to God on His terms, and not our own.

- **What was missing in the life of Nicodemus?** *He had religion, but he knew something was still missing, namely, a right relationship with God.*
- **How does Jesus' interaction with Nicodemus provide a model for how we engage with those who are religious but not committed to Christ?** *Answers will vary.*



HEART

Unfortunately, as this passage shows us, humans naturally love darkness (the sinful deeds and lifestyle we're born into) rather than the light, Jesus Christ. We live in a society where people entertain the false understanding that one can have Jesus plus their sin, or have Jesus as their light even while they pursue the deeds of darkness. But this passage shows us the reality of what life looks like for those who have embraced Jesus. Those who come to Jesus want His light to expose all of their lives so that He can continue His work of renovating us from the inside out.

- **In what areas of your life does it feel uncomfortable for the light of Christ to shine?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How does God's gift of salvation impact these areas of your life?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

The work of regeneration is a supernatural work of God, not the natural work of man. Yet the responsibility of getting the message of the gospel out is the work God has called every believer to participate in. We should never assume that because people are familiar with church, Christianity, or even religion, that they know Jesus as their Savior. God has called every believer to trust in His power as we are transformed by the Holy Spirit.

- **How encouraging is it to know that salvation is not dependent upon how persuasive you are or how much you know, but is instead the work of God in a person's heart?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Even though salvation is God's work, why do you think the Bible stresses our role in sharing the gospel with others?** *Because faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God (Rom. 10:17).*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

SOURCE

1. James Roberts, *Transformers: More Than Meets The Eye, Vol. 1*, (San Diego: IDW, 2012).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

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09

SESSION NINE

Jesus and John the Baptist

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we will see how John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus by pointing to Him and His kingdom, finding his greatest joy in Jesus' exaltation, warning others, and witnessing to the love and power of God. Because John recognized his purpose and his identity, he offered his heart with joyful gladness to the Messiah who was coming. From John, we learn how to find our identity in Christ and how our mission goes forward as people who "decrease" in order that Christ may receive all the glory.

SCRIPTURE

John 3:22-36

THE POINT

Humility is finding joy in Christ's significance, not our own.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Glow sticks. No matter how old you get there is always something mesmerizing about glow sticks. Whether as a kid outside on a summer's evening or walking through the night time streets of Disney World®, glow sticks have a way of adding excitement to any occasion.

Of course, one of the most interesting things about glow sticks is how to get them to work. Instead of an “on and off” switch or running on batteries, glow sticks need to be cracked before they come to life. They need to be broken. Once broken, glow sticks can fulfill the purpose for which they were created.

Glow sticks are much like followers of Christ—all throughout the Bible God used broken people to further His purposes. Brokenness—the bending of our will and the humbling of our hearts—is a prerequisite to being used by God. We won't glow with love for God until we're broken and humbled by God's love for us.

The Gospels teach us about one of the greatest men who ever lived—a man who was so humble that he knew he paled in comparison to the Man he was called to point to. This man was John the Baptist. John was the forerunner to the Messiah, and he humbly ran in his own lane, fulfilling his own call. He decreased so that the reputation and ministry of Jesus could increase. That's humility. And John provided an example for us of what it looks like to make less of ourselves so we can make more of Jesus.

- **Why is it necessary for people to be broken and humbled in order for God to work through them? Why must humility be present if we are to faithfully follow Jesus?**

Option 2

The 2016 Summer Olympics took place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Over 200 countries competed, and 42 different athletic disciplines were represented, throughout 306 events that took place during a 19 day span.¹ Many people cheered on Michael Phelps as he won more Olympic gold, or Katie Ledecky as she set new world records. However, fewer people probably recognize the names David Boudia and Steele Johnson. These American men won the silver medal in the synchronized 10m platform dive, when they earned a 95.04 from the judges with their final dive.² When asked how the pressure of this dive affected them, these men pointed back to Christ, noting that their identity rested in Him no matter what results their dives yielded.³ They humbly acknowledged that their achievement wasn't as important as representing Christ well.

- **When have you been tempted to let your work, even your ministry, define you?**

As John the Baptist and these divers demonstrated, any significance we have is rooted in Christ, who we are in Him, and what purpose He gives our lives. We can humbly submit to God's will for our lives, knowing that our mission, and our joy, is all about Him and the significance of what Christ did for us.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Humility is finding joy in Christ's significance, not our own.

CHARACTERS

- **Jesus** - the eternal Son of God; second person of the Trinity
- **John the Baptist** - the forerunner to the Messiah; prepared the way for Jesus' earthly ministry

PLOT

An earlier session introduced the person and ministry of John the Baptist. John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus by pointing others to Him and His kingdom. But what would happen when John's ministry began to diminish in comparison to Jesus' ministry? Would he become bitter? Would he become jealous for the ministry recognition? No, it was quite the opposite. John gained joy in Jesus' exaltation, by warning others, and through witnessing about the love and power of God.

TIMELINE

THE ECLIPSE OF JOHN'S MINISTRY

John the Baptist points others to Jesus.

THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

Jesus reaches out to the outcasts of society.

HOMETOWN OPPOSITION

Jesus makes plain His identity and is rejected in His hometown.

JOHN'S MISSION WAS TO POINT TO JESUS

At this point in the Gospel storyline, John the Baptist's vibrant ministry was beginning to wane, and Jesus' ministry was just getting started. During this period of transition from John the Baptist to Jesus, there could have been major disputes, a falling out, or some sort of conflict between Jesus and John. Instead, John the Baptist handled his declining popularity and Jesus' rise with the kind of humility and confidence that is characteristic of someone who knew his mission.

22 After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. 23 John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized 24 (for John had not yet been put in prison). 25 Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. 26 And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him." 27 John answered, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. 28 You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.'" (John 3:22-28)

Some of John's followers approached him with a problem on their minds. More and more people were going to see Jesus and His disciples to be baptized. Who was this man? Why were people going to Him and not John? Did Jesus' ministry mean that John's work was no longer effective? Perhaps John's disciples felt like Jesus' rising popularity was a threat to their own work. Whatever their motivations, they went to John with questions.

John the Baptist's response was seasoned with humility. He attributed the growth of Jesus' ministry to God and nothing else. John recognized that Jesus' ministry was always designed to replace his own. That's why John reminded his followers that he was not the Messiah and that the Messiah's work would be greater than his. The remarkable thing about John's response is how content he seemed to be with those developments. He could be humble and confident because he knew his role—to point people to the Messiah!

JOHN DEMONSTRATED HUMILITY IN HIS MISSION

In the continuation of John the Baptist's response to his disciples, John revealed his own character and his joy at Jesus' arrival. Don't miss the connection between John's humility (v. 30) and joy (v. 29).

29 The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease.” (John 3:29-30)

- **How does the idea that decreasing leads to an increase in joy apply to us today?** (*p. 67, PSG*)
- **What are some areas where you could decrease to make more of Jesus in your own life? Why will this increase your joy?** (*p. 67, PSG*)

As John the Baptist explained his reasons for being joyful, he turned to a common illustration of a wedding. John's analogy went something like this: "I am like the best man at a wedding feast, and Jesus is like the groom. As the groom's friend, I find great joy in the groom marrying His bride."

Like other friends of the groom, John was saying that his role was to prepare things for the wedding, to assist the Groom whenever possible, and to serve the Groom well. At a wedding, it is the groom's day to be in the spotlight, not the groomsmen.

John the Baptist found complete joy in his subordinate role to Jesus. He recognized Jesus was the groom, the center of attention, the long-awaited Messiah. John understood that his role was to make sure that the groom would be exalted and that no distractions would hinder him.

John the Baptist's words here give us a model for how we should find our joy. It should be our goal, drive, and practice to see Jesus lifted up and exalted above every one and everything. Our joy should come from the fact that Jesus is being made known. When God breaks us of the callous pride we have in our hearts, we are then able to find joy in humility. And we assume a humble posture that seeks to make much of Jesus, while making ourselves of no reputation.

JOHN'S MESSAGE WAS ONE OF WARNING AND GRACE

Next, we dig into John the Baptist's relation to Jesus. As the passage continues, we see how John the Baptist was a witness to Jesus—a witness who testified that Jesus was sent by the Father and warned that rejecting Jesus meant rejecting eternal life. Take a look:

³¹ He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. ³² He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. ³³ Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. ³⁴ For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. ³⁵ The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. ³⁶ Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him. (John 3:31-36)

John the Baptist saw Jesus as superior, in where He came from and in what He taught. John's witness to Christ focused first on Jesus' origin. Jesus is the Messiah who comes from heaven, while John was a witness from the earth. The point here is that John the Baptist was under Jesus' authority because Jesus came from heaven.

This passage also shows that Jesus' teaching is superior to John the Baptist's. Everything Jesus taught was and is true. Everything Jesus said about Himself being the Messiah, the promised One, was and is true. The point here is that John was a witness to Jesus, while Jesus spoke the very words of God. Not only that, but Jesus also had the power to give the Spirit to those who believed and accepted His testimony.

What we have here is a great summary of how John the Baptist pointed to Jesus' supremacy: Jesus is from heaven, while John was from earth. Jesus spoke the words of God, while John spoke about Jesus. Jesus gives the Spirit and life, while John affirmed Jesus' testimony.

However, John the Baptist not only witnessed to others about Jesus' identity; he also warned people of the consequences of rejecting Jesus. John taught that the wrath of God was the opposite of eternal life. Those who do not believe in Jesus or accept His testimony about Himself are under the wrath of God—God's good and righteous judgment against sin. Whether they realize it or not, they are on the road to destruction.

God is truthful when He declares that the day will come when those who persist in sin will face His just judgment. John the Baptist's witness was not merely about the glory of Christ; it was also about being saved from the wrath of God. We are saved for Jesus from the punishment our sin deserves. Faithful witnessing to the love of God means we call people to be saved from God's wrath.

TIMELINE

ZACCHAEUS AND THE SYCAMORE

Jesus has come to seek and save the lost.

**Beginning Summer 2017*

THE SOWER AND THE SOILS

Jesus teaches on people's responses when hearing the Word.

THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT

Jesus teaches on forgiveness.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Evangelism (p. 67, PSG)

It is the duty and privilege of every Christian and of every church of the Lord Jesus Christ to make disciples of all nations. The new birth of man's spirit by God's Holy Spirit means the birth of love for others. Missionary effort on the part of all thus rests upon a spiritual necessity of the regenerate life and is expressly and repeatedly commanded in the teachings of Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ has commanded the preaching of the gospel to all nations. It is the duty of every child of God to seek constantly to win the lost to Christ by verbal witness undergirded by a Christian lifestyle.

CHRIST CONNECTION

John the Baptist was a firsthand witness of the ministry of Jesus. Because of his humility, he was able to take joy in the fact that Jesus was becoming known, even more well known than he was at the time. John coupled his joyful expression with a timely warning that it wasn't enough to just acknowledge Jesus, or to crowd around Him while He was ministering. Rather, what God wanted was for the people to listen to Jesus' testimony and embrace Him as their Lord and Savior.

God is calling us to do work like John the Baptist. In God's hands, our brokenness can be used to humble us so we can be lights for His glory in the darkness of this world. The goal is to then turn people's attention and affection toward Jesus as we make Him known. Nothing should bring more joy and satisfaction to our hearts than to see people know and embrace Jesus as their Savior.

We must take on the humble posture of John the Baptist and see ourselves as a friend to the groom, pointing away from ourselves and to Jesus Christ—the One and only. We shine the spotlight on Him, not ourselves.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **When have you felt like another person's success was a threat to you personally or a signal that you were inadequate? How did you respond? How do you think John's disciples expected him to respond to their questions?** *Answers will vary.*
- **In what ways does our mission today resemble that of John the Baptist? What are some differences between John's role and ours?** *Like John, we also call people to repentance and faith in Christ. John tried to draw the spotlight away from himself and toward Christ, and we do the same.*
- **When have you found great joy in helping someone who was in the spotlight or center of attention? What was that experience like?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What are some truths about Jesus that should be part of sharing the gospel? What do these truths communicate about Jesus?** *Central truths would involve who Jesus is—the divine Son of God who became flesh to save sinners and what He accomplished—He died a substitutionary death in our place so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

The words of John the Baptist remind us of the sobering reality that even though God already knows all of our sin, He is still gracious and patient, offering us the gift of eternal life and calling us away from a life of wayward living. Like a gracious Father who cares for His children, it is God's desire that all would repent and turn to Him for forgiveness.

- **What role does speaking of God's judgment have in our witness to Jesus?** *It is difficult to speak of God's salvation without also saying something about God's righteous judgment against sin. The bad news of our condition apart from Jesus must come prior to the good news of His salvation.*
- **What happens when we minimize or neglect this part of our message?** *One thing that will happen from leaving out God's judgment against sin is that people will fail to grasp the weight of God's love and sacrifice to save them. If people know they owe a debt they can never repay, and then receive a call from the bank saying the debt has been cancelled, they will appreciate the mercy of the bank more than the person who never knew about the debt to begin with.*



HEART

Whenever our pride leads us to seek glory for ourselves, we fall into the trap of making ourselves more attractive in order to gain more followers. Then, instead of celebrating Jesus, we begin to compete with each other. Our zeal is no longer for the gospel and God's glory, but for the building of our own kingdoms. John the Baptist's ministry challenges us to find our ultimate purpose in bringing glory to Christ.

- **Why does pride and seeking glory for oneself eventually lead to a lack of joy in the end?** *Because the source of the pride, whatever it may be, will always fail in the end.*
- **How would you explain to someone that more joy comes from seeking God's glory rather than seeking it for ourselves?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

Like John, we are called to point people to Jesus and away from ourselves. However, fulfilling our mission of pointing others to Christ is impossible unless we intentionally leverage the gifts God has given us for His glory, not as a distraction that brings attention to ourselves. Our mission is to point people to Jesus. We should do everything we can not to get in the way.

- **How have you been tempted to showcase your gifts and talents more for yourself and reputation rather than for God and His glory?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What are some intentional ways you can use your God-given talents and gifts this week to draw attention to the Giver, instead of to the gifts themselves?** *Answers will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack item #9, which contains an artistic quote poster of one of John the Baptist's sayings.

SOURCES

1. "Sports," *Rio 2016*, accessed August 25, 2016, <https://www.rio2016.com/en/sports>.
2. "David Boudia, Steele Johnson clinch silver with final dive," *NBC Video*, 1:37, August 8, 2016, <http://www.nbcolympics.com/video/david-boudia-steele-johnson-clinch-silver-final-dive>.
3. Jonah Hicap, "US diving duo David Boudia and Steele Johnson proclaim Christ on TV after bagging Olympic silver," *Christianity Today*, August 9, 2016, <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/us.diving.duo.david.boudia.and.steele.johnson.proclaim.christ.on.tv.after.bagging.olympic.silver/92711.htm>.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPRescueSpr17)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



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And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit

MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject



10

SESSION TEN

Jesus and the Samaritan Woman

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we read about a conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman, whom He met at Jacob's well. In their discussion, Jesus claimed to have the living water that would satisfy the soul, and He revealed that God seeks people to worship Him in spirit and truth. As Jesus' followers, we resemble the Samaritan woman—we exalt Jesus for who He is, and then tell others about the living water He offers.

SCRIPTURE

John 4:1-42

THE POINT

God seeks true worshipers who worship Him in spirit and truth.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Consider a time when you experienced a feeling of accomplishment, maybe after finishing a marathon, hiking more miles than you dreamed possible, making an A in your toughest class, or finally hitting all the right notes in a song you practiced every day—the list is endless.

- **When have you experienced the sense of excitement that comes from a job well done?**

After major achievements, people often say things like “soak it all up” or “drink it in”—in other words, enjoy this experience fully. Let the joy from this time, this accomplishment, seep into your bones. So, we drink up the waters of experience and enjoy the wonderful taste that comes with it.

When Jesus offered the Samaritan woman a drink from the well of living water, He extended an invitation to experience a taste far different from any she’d ever known. He offered her a taste of eternal, living water. He called her to “taste and see” that He was good, He was the Messiah, and that even she—an outcast of society who was loathed by the Jews—was invited to “drink it in” and experience the wonderful taste of life with Jesus. We are invited to this same experience—to “taste and see” that He is good and to drink in the living water. And we are called to respond in the same way as the woman at the well, taking this message to those we encounter along the way.

Option 2

Some people really get into celebrating certain holidays. They place elaborate decorations throughout their houses, they have seasonal music playing through their cars’ stereo systems, and sometimes they even place those large, inflatable holiday icons on their lawns. The point is: When their favorite holiday comes around, these people will no doubt let you know what time of year it is. They are all in and their “holiday spirit” is often infectious to those nearby.

- **Who do you know who enjoys “going all out” to celebrate a specific holiday? What are some of the ways they decorate and celebrate?**

Maybe you’re constantly in the “holiday spirit” once that season rolls around. More important than being in the spirit of the holidays is the realization that we are filled with God’s Holy Spirit and He calls us to worship Him in Spirit and truth. He offers to us life and living water that can be found nowhere else. And just like the woman at the well, our spirit should be infectious. We should be “all in” when it comes to celebrating what Jesus has done for us. Those who are “all in” will go “all out” to tell others the good news of Jesus, just like the woman at the well.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God seeks true worshipers who worship Him in spirit and truth.

CHARACTERS

- **Jesus** - the eternal Son of God; second person of the Trinity
- **Samaritans** - a socially despised group during the first century. Jesus broke down social distinctions by reaching out to this group of society's outcasts.

PLOT

In previous sessions, we learned about Jesus' ministry—how He met with Nicodemus (a religious man) at night to answer his questions and the way Jesus' ministry intersected with that of John the Baptist. Throughout the Scripture in this session, John revealed more of Jesus' interactions with the people He met during His ministry. This particular interaction demonstrated Jesus' love for all people—even a woman whose ethnicity and past would have made her seem “beyond the reach” of God's grace.

TIMELINE

THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

Jesus reaches out to the outcasts of society.

HOMETOWN OPPOSITION

Jesus makes plain His identity and is rejected in His hometown.

ZACCHAEUS AND THE SYCAMORE

Jesus has come to seek and save the lost.

JESUS ENCOUNTERED THE SAMARITAN WOMAN

The story of Jesus' interaction with the woman at the well began with a couple of geographical details. These details are essential to understanding the dynamics of the conversation about to take place.

¹ Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John ² (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), ³ he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. ⁴ And he had to pass through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour. (John 4:1-6)

The route Jesus selected to travel from Judea to Galilee was quick, but not common. It took Him through Samaria, an area that most Jews would avoid. The Samaritans were considered “half-breeds” whose forefathers were Jewish but had intermarried with Assyrians. A result of their history, they were despised by many Jews.

Jesus rejected the culturally acceptable route that went around the Samaritans. Instead, He took the direct route, and this decision placed Him at Jacob's well around noontime, when the social outcasts came to draw water.

⁷ A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” ⁸ (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” ¹¹ The woman said to him, “Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.” ¹³ Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” ¹⁵ The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.” (John 4:7-15)

This dialogue occurred between Jesus and a woman who was likely considered a social outcast. Jesus initiated the conversation when He asked for a drink of water. In Jesus' day, this conversation was taboo. A teacher of the law or a Rabbi would avoid talking to a woman, especially one from this ethnic background and with this social history.

The woman's response included an element of surprise. Don't you realize I'm a Samaritan? She saw herself as "out of bounds" and "cast out" by the Jews, and perhaps devalued because of her ethnicity.

But Jesus advanced the conversation in a way that implied this conversation was God's gift to her. He steered their discussion about water to the need for living water only God can offer—the gift of salvation, the gift of God Himself through the work of Jesus the Son and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. To a woman whose soul longed for satisfaction, Jesus spoke of living water that would quench spiritual thirst.

JESUS EXPLAINED TO HER THE MEANING OF TRUE WORSHIP

As the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman continued, we see a shift toward the woman's personal situation. Take a look:

16 Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." 17 The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true." 19 The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. 20 Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." 21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. 22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4:16-24)

It is interesting to note how Jesus took the conversation into a personal direction after having engaged this woman on friendly terms. The discussion about water prompted the truth about spiritual thirst that only God can quench. Then, the discussion about the woman's marital history led to a demonstration of Jesus' ability to know the hearts of people. "You are a prophet," the woman said, and she was right.

The way Jesus engaged in conversation revealed His heart. He did not just talk. He also listened. He did not condemn the woman for her past; He continued having a meaningful conversation.

Even when the woman tried to redirect the topic away from her marital history and toward the location of worship, Jesus kept the focus on her heart. He claimed that God sought worshipers in spirit and truth. Don't miss what He implied: This woman was one of the people God sought.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

Jesus informed the Samaritan woman that worship would no longer be bound by geographic location. God called people everywhere to pursue Him, to worship Him the right way. As Kevin Vanhoozer wrote: “Focusing on the right object is everything in worship. Ignorant worship fails to invigorate or to quench our spiritual thirst. Ignorant worship is a liturgy of death, not life. In Jeremiah God says: ‘My people have committed two sins: they have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water’ (Jer 2:13). Through our own efforts we can attain neither a right knowledge nor a right worship of God... Right worship proceeds from right knowledge of God.”¹

THE SAMARITAN WOMAN RESPONDED TO JESUS BY TELLING OTHERS ABOUT HIM

Through this conversation Jesus taught that He offers living water that satisfies spiritual thirst forever. Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman also showed that Jesus is the prophet who reveals the truth that the Father seeks those who will worship in spirit and truth. Reading further, take note of the disciples’ response when they noticed Jesus talked with this woman, and the woman’s response to this conversation.

25 The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.” **26 Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am he.”** **27 Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you seek?” or, “Why are you talking with her?”** **28 So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people,** **29 “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?”** **30 They went out of the town and were coming to him.** **31 Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, saying, “Rabbi, eat.”** **32 But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.”** **33 So the disciples said to one another, “Has anyone brought him something to eat?”** **34 Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.** **35 Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, then comes the harvest’? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest.** **36 Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.** **37 For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’** **38 I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”** **39 Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me all that I ever did.”** **40 So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days.** **41 And**

TIMELINE

**Beginning Summer 2017*

THE SOWER AND THE SOILS

Jesus teaches on people’s responses when hearing the Word.

THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT

Jesus teaches on forgiveness.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Jesus teaches on how to love one’s neighbor.

many more believed because of his word.⁴² They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.” (John 4:25-42)

This passage is all about mission! First, the woman made a comment about the Messiah coming to make things right; this was an attempt to put off any decision or claim that Jesus (as a prophet) might make on her. But Jesus instantly revealed to her that He was the Messiah she spoke about!

Then, the disciples arrived at the pivotal moment of Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman, after having ventured into town to find food. They wondered about His motives for breaking cultural protocol, for ignoring ethical and cultural barriers. While they were questioning in their hearts what Jesus was doing, the Samaritan woman left her water jar and ran back into town. As soon as she understood that Jesus was the Messiah, she dropped everything and told others about Him.

- **When was the last time you broke “social protocol” to minister to someone? Why is it important that Christians be seen as breaking cultural barriers instead of creating them?** (p. 74, PSG)

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

God is Infinite (p. 73, PSG)

God's infinity means that there are no boundaries on His qualities and existence (Job 11:7-9; Ps. 147:5). For instance, God is infinite when it comes to space and time, meaning He is not confined by material space nor is He restricted by time since He is timeless (Ps. 90:1-2). God's infinity also extends to His knowledge of things as well as His power to do all things according to His will.

CHRIST CONNECTION

Through the ministry of Jesus, worshiping God is no longer bound by geographic location, gender, or ethnicity. Salvation is open and available for sinners from every imaginable background (Gal. 3:26-28). Jesus told His disciples that the harvest was great, meaning that there were many people who needed to hear about Him. For us, the same is true. There are still many people who need to hear the truth of the gospel message. We need God to open our eyes to see those people around us and open our mouths to speak His truth and lead them to Christ. And like the Samaritan woman, we say, “Come and see!”

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **How does the gospel speak to the forms of segregation our society has created? What do we learn from Jesus' model of breaking down cultural barriers in His search for the lost?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What are some examples of "earthly" water that people drink from in order to quench their spiritual thirst? How do we know that these other sources of water do not satisfy?** *Answers may include things like relationships, praise from others, talents and abilities, hobbies, sports, social influence, and so on.*
- **Jesus taught that worship isn't tied to a place, but is something first and foremost of the heart. Why is this important in our daily lives?** *One of the reasons this is important is because it reminds us that worship isn't something that just takes place on a Sunday morning or Wednesday night, but rather something that involves all of life. Whatever we find ourselves doing on any day of the week, we are to do it to the glory of God.*
- **How does the Samaritan woman's response challenge us when it comes to pointing those within our own lives to Jesus?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

We see in this account that God desires people to worship Him rightly, and to worship Him rightly means to worship Him in Spirit and in truth. To worship in spirit and truth means we must be born again—of the Spirit—and be satisfied with all God is in the person of His Son, Jesus. Our worship must be saturated in the Scriptures and must focus our attention on Jesus—God in flesh.

- **Why does God emphasize the importance of worshiping in both spirit and truth?**
Because worship involves both components.
- **What happens when only one of these is present?** *Genuine worship of God requires an accurate understanding of who God is and what He has done for us, which is why truth is essential. Likewise, knowing the truth of God without being born again wouldn't amount to genuine worship, which is why both components are essential.*



HEART

There's something about that incredible passion at work in the Samaritan woman. She had just met Jesus, and she was ready for everyone else to meet Him, too. Some of the greatest and most passionate evangelists are people who have recently embraced Jesus. They are filled with excitement to tell others about the good news of what God has done. Unfortunately, it's easy to lose that initial awe and wonder at God's salvation. And with that loss of passion, we share the gospel less and less. For this reason, it's vital that we see people like the Samaritan woman and ask God to rekindle our hearts and refresh us with a desire to share His love with the world.

- **Why is it easy for us to lose our passion for sharing the good news of Jesus with the lost?**
Answers will vary.
- **What are some things we can do to counteract this loss of passion?** *One thing to do is to tell others about Christ, believing that greater joy will be found in talking to others about Him than remaining silent.*



HANDS

Through the ministry of the Samaritan woman, God brought many in that city to trust in Jesus. The woman's words piqued their curiosity, but when they encountered Jesus the Messiah, they believed. This is the model for evangelism. The contents of our conversations with nonbelievers should make them curious about Jesus. Then it is our responsibility to unpack the glorious riches of the gospel to them in ways they can understand. As we walk them through the Scriptures, they encounter the God who gives us living water.

- **How did the Samaritans respond to the woman's testimony?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What can we learn from this account regarding what aspects of a personal testimony are compelling to people? How can that knowledge equip us to share with others?**
Answers will vary.

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack item #10, containing an artistic quote poster of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman.

SOURCE

1. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition: Scenes of the Church's Worship, Witness and Wisdom* (Downer's Grove: Innervarsity Press, 2016), 114-115.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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11

SESSION ELEVEN

Jesus Faced Opposition

SESSION SUMMARY

This session shows Jesus speaking in the synagogue in His hometown of Nazareth. After He read the words of Scripture, Jesus claimed to be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy and that His mission was to free people held by various types of bondage and sin. The people in Jesus' town rejected Him as a prophet and rejected His message of liberation. As followers of Jesus, we should expect to face opposition and experience hostility because of the gospel, but we can also depend on the Spirit's power to help us endure.

SCRIPTURE

Luke 4:14-30

THE POINT

Jesus' followers often experience rejection and opposition.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

There is something about stories of people who overcame seasons of failure or moments of rejection before they discovered success.

- R. H. Macy failed in several business startups before hitting it big with his clothing store in New York City. We know it today as Macy's.¹
- When he was just 22, Walt Disney was fired from the newspaper he worked for because he was not creative enough to deliver good ideas. Of course, Disney later went on to create one of the world's best-known and most-beloved cartoon characters, as well as build an entertainment empire based on imagination.²
- Albert Einstein was one of the greatest scientific minds humanity has ever known. Yet, he began talking late, was described as “dull,” many believed he had dyslexia, and he did not do well academically throughout his early years.³

In addition to inspiring stories like these, Christians throughout the centuries have overcome various forms of opposition through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who demonstrates Jesus' glory through believers' suffering. Because of their courage and confidence, Christians from all over the world have been able to overcome some of the most severe forms of persecution on account of the power of the Holy Spirit at work within them—the same Spirit who was at work in the life of Jesus Himself when He experienced rejection and opposition.

- **When have you felt rejected by someone? How did you respond? What was the outcome?**

Option 2

Being set against another is called *opposition*. One can also oppose ideas, decisions, or tasks. Ask students to create a list of opponents. Tell them the list can be comprised of famous team rivals, friends playing a board game, or titles such as *lawyers*, *athletes*, and *debate competitors*. After students have generated a pretty good list, ask them to discuss the ways these people oppose one another. Then, ask the following:

- **How do Christians sometimes face opposition?**
- **When have you faced opposition or been rejected by someone in your own life?**

People often oppose what they don't understand, what they don't like, or what they've been raised to reject. Many of Jesus' own people, the Jews, rejected and opposed Him, despite knowing the Messiah would one day come. Jesus faced opposition with courage and confidence, and we can do the same through the power of the Holy Spirit.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Jesus' followers often experience rejection and opposition.

CHARACTERS

- **Jesus** - the eternal Son of God; second person of the Trinity

PLOT

In this session, Jesus spoke in the synagogue in His hometown of Nazareth. After reading a passage of Scripture, Jesus claimed to be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy; He claimed that His mission was to free people held by various types of bondage and sin. The people in Jesus' town rejected Him as a prophet and rejected His message of salvation.

JESUS CLAIMED TO BE THE SPIRIT-FILLED MESSIAH

Luke 4:14-28 places Jesus' ministry in the region of Galilee. Through His teaching and miracles, Jesus demonstrated the power of the Holy Spirit. The news about His ministry spread, and people began to praise Him for the good work He did. But the scene shifted as Luke showed the contrast between Jesus' reception in Galilee and His rejection in Nazareth, the place where He grew up.

14 And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country. 15 And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all. 16 And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. 17 And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, 18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." 20 And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." 22 And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" (Luke 4:14-22)

It was customary for the Jewish people in Jesus' day to spend time in the synagogue where leaders would read and comment on the ancient Scriptures. When Jesus went into the synagogue, as was the custom, He stood up to read a passage of Scripture. The reading for that day was part of a prophecy from Isaiah that spoke of the coming Messiah.

In a dramatic moment that likely shocked the people in the synagogue, Jesus read a passage that described the ministry of the Messiah, and then He sat down. "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing," He said. The moment was shocking for a couple of reasons. First, Jesus implied that He Himself was the Messiah upon whom the Spirit rested. He was saying, in effect, "I'm the guy Isaiah was talking about."

TIMELINE

HOMETOWN OPPOSITION

Jesus makes plain His identity and is rejected in His hometown.

ZACCHAEUS AND THE SYCAMORE

Jesus has come to seek and save the lost.

**Beginning Summer 2017*

THE SOWER AND THE SOILS

Jesus teaches on people's responses when hearing the Word.

Secondly, Jesus' words were shocking because of what He didn't read. He stopped reading the text at the line where Isaiah spoke of the year of Jubilee and freedom for the captives. The next line spoke about the God's judgment coming upon people. Jesus deliberately ended the reading at the declaration of grace, not judgment. Why? Because the Day of Judgment was to come later. In that particular moment, Jesus declared freedom and grace.

Jesus boldly declared that right there, before the eyes of the people in the synagogue, Isaiah's prophecy had been fulfilled. The people were taken aback by the claim. Maybe they were amazed at His eloquence, but they couldn't believe that a carpenter's son could be so special.

JESUS FACED REJECTION FROM HIS PEOPLE

After Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah, He saw the unbelief in the hearts of the people and anticipated their rejection of Him, just as God's people had often rejected the prophets.

23 And he said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself.' What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well." 24 And he said, "Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. 25 But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, 26 and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. 27 And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." (Luke 4:23-27)

Have you ever heard the saying, "A prophet is without honor in his hometown?" It comes from what Jesus said and is similar to a more common phrase that is used today: "Familiarity breeds contempt."

The idea behind the phrase is that the people in Jesus' hometown did not see Him as special or unique; they saw Him as ordinary. What's more, they didn't care for His message, even though they wanted to see His miracles.

Sometimes, it's difficult to notice the growth of people who are closest to us. You know what it's like. You don't see the day-to-day growth of your siblings or everyday friends, but you notice immediately when you visit friends or family you haven't seen in awhile. Distance gives us perspective on people.

In a similar way, the people in Nazareth saw Jesus grow up before their eyes. But they could not reconcile the presence of this prophet who was before them with the young boy who had grown up in their midst. They would not accept the truth of Jesus' words as He read the scroll of Isaiah.

Jesus confronted the unbelief of the people in Nazareth by referring them to two Old Testament stories, one with Elijah and one with Elisha (both of whom were mighty prophets of God). In both accounts, God did something miraculous for people who were not part of the official "people of God." God sent these prophets into Gentile territory because Israel would not receive the Word of God through their ministry.

The telling of these two stories took on new meaning in Jesus' time. He put Himself in the line of prophets who had been rejected by God's people, and put the people of Nazareth in line of ancient Israelites who rejected the prophets of old. No wonder they were offended at His message! In hearing this word from Jesus, their hearts grew callous.

- **How difficult do you think it was for Jesus, who came to rescue His people, to experience rejection?** (p. 79, PSG)

JESUS CONTINUED HIS MINISTRY DESPITE HIS PEOPLE'S REJECTION

The people of Nazareth reacted first with amazement, and then with anger. Watch how they responded to Jesus' message:

28 When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. 29 And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. 30 But passing through their midst, he went away. (John 4:28-30)

The people were so enraged at Jesus's words that they wanted to throw him off a cliff so that He would fall to His death. Although Jesus' mission included His substitutionary death, this was not the appointed time for Him to die. We don't know exactly how Jesus passed through the crowd and avoided death in this moment. Some commentators think Jesus' escape was miraculous. Others believe He simply managed to get away. Either way, it is clear that the situation in Nazareth was dire.

Jesus' own people rejected them, just as Isaiah predicted 700 years before. Despite the rejection from the people in His own hometown, Jesus pressed on to fulfill the ministry God called Him to.

TIMELINE

THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT

Jesus teaches on forgiveness.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Jesus teaches on how to love one's neighbor.

TWO LOST SONS

Jesus teaches on God's grace to both the prodigal and self-righteous brother.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Christ as Prophet (p. 79, PSG)

As one of His offices, Jesus fulfills the role of prophet: He alone is the ultimate teacher and has the words of eternal life (John 6:68). Jesus is also God's ultimate revelation of Himself.

CHRIST CONNECTION

What a Savior we have in Jesus! Although He faced rejection and opposition, the ministry of the Holy Spirit empowered Him to remain steady in order to complete the mission to seek and save those who were lost. It's comforting to know that God had not abandoned Israel—that hundreds of years before Jesus was even born, God gave the prophet Isaiah the message that freedom from sin would come. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise to redeem people out of the captivity to sin.

Now, we can find the hope we need to endure when we face rejection and persecution. No matter if it comes from a friend we've share the gospel with, or even a family member who rejects us for our stance for Jesus. May we rally among other believers to encourage them and remind them of Jesus who endured opposition for our sake! May we reengage with those who have rejected us with the refreshing truths of the gospel of Jesus, who seeks to rescue them from captivity.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What are some ways people try to discredit the uniqueness of Jesus today?**
Answers will vary.
- **What do you think about Jesus' decision not to perform miracles in Nazareth? Why did Jesus respond to the Nazarenes' rejection in this way?** *Answers will vary.*
- **When have you faced rejection because of your faith?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What encouraging words would you offer to a young believer facing rejection because of belief in Jesus?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

The rejection of Jesus goes back to the sinfulness of the human heart. John 3:19 reminds us: “And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.” As people rejected Jesus in His day, sadly they still reject Him today. People react harshly to the truth of the gospel because it exposes the darkness of our hearts.

- **When have you seen people reject Jesus because He demands they live a certain way?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How does the truth of John 3:19 warn us when it comes to our own hesitations in trusting Jesus as Savior?** *Answers will vary.*



HEART

As God’s people endure persecution and suffering, they can rejoice to be counted among believers who faced rejection just like Jesus. In times of rejection, we remember the words of the apostle Paul: As God comforted us during times of suffering and affliction, we are then able to walk alongside and comfort other believers who are suffering through various trials (2 Cor. 1:3-7). This is the tangible expression of God the Spirit’s ministry through our lives, benefiting those inside the body of Christ.

- **What do you think happens when unbelievers see Christians rejoicing in times of suffering rather than complaining?** *Answers will vary.*
- **In what ways does our endurance in the midst of rejection or opposition strengthen our witness and mission?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

According to Isaiah, the ministry of the Messiah would answer both spiritual and physical needs. For this reason, the church has always focused on both kinds of needs—spiritual and material. The church proclaims the work of Jesus for the salvation of the world, while simultaneously working alongside others in bringing physical and temporal relief to suffering. Believers should take these two attributes seriously: the pursuit of holiness and the expression of love and mercy to people in need (Jas. 1:27).

- **Jesus redeemed us from spiritual captivity. How does His redemption lead us to meet physical and temporal needs of people around us?** *As with Jesus’ own earthly ministry, we should seek to meet the physical and tangible needs of others. Doing so doesn’t detract from the belief that people’s greatest need is their spiritual need to be made right with God. It only demonstrates our desire to show compassion in the same way we see it shown in the life of Christ.*
- **Why is it problematic for Christians to focus only on spiritual problems and fail to meet physical needs?** *Answers will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack item #11, which contains an informational chart that highlights biblical examples of the costs of following Jesus. Use this to discuss current idols we are called to abandon today in as we follow Christ, especially noting the similarities between our own idols and those of the individuals listed in the chart.

SOURCES

1. "Macy's: A History," *Macy's Inc*, accessed August 28, 2016, <https://www.macysinc.com/press-room/macysinc-history/macys-a-history/default.aspx>.
2. Rachel Gillett, "How Walt Disney, Oprah Winfrey, and 19 Other Successful People Rebounded After Getting Fired," *Inc.*, accessed August 28, 2016, <http://www.inc.com/business-insider/21-successful-people-who-rebounded-after-getting-fired.html>
3. Barbara Woff and Hananya Goodman, "The Legend of the Dull-Witted Child Who Grew Up to Be a Genius," *The Albert Einstein Archives*, accessed August 28, 2016, http://www.albert-einstein.org/article_handicap.html.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPRescueSpr17)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



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12

SESSION TWELVE

Jesus and Zacchaeus

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we read about Zacchaeus, a man whose example shows us what overflowing gratitude looks like in the heart of a sinner who encounters the love of Jesus. Zacchaeus overcame obstacles to see Jesus, obeyed Jesus' command and welcomed Him into his home, and then showed incredible generosity as a result of his transformation. Understanding Jesus' desire to seek and save the lost, we see ourselves in the story of Zacchaeus and are called to walk in repentance and give generously to advance the gospel.

SCRIPTURE

Luke 19:1-10

THE POINT

Jesus came to seek and save the lost.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Do you know what it means to “write someone off”? Basically, writing off other people means that you have given up on them, want nothing to do with them, or have decided that they no longer have any use for you. In other words, you believe they are unsuitable for you to associate with.

- **When have you been tempted to “write someone off”? What caused you to respond this way?**

Essentially, because of his profession, disloyalty, and dishonesty, the rest of the Jews wrote off Zacchaeus. They wanted nothing to do with this sinful man, and they couldn’t understand why anyone else would either. Jesus not only called Zacchaeus by name, but also went to his house and spent time with him.

- **Why do you think it’s sometimes easy to consider yourself as less sinful than other people?**

Despite others’ opinions, Jesus reached out to the outcast and welcomed him into his own family. Jesus did not hesitate to extend a second chance, the gift of forgiveness, to Zacchaeus; neither should we hesitate to reach out to the outcasts, the ones who may seem beyond God’s reach, and lead them to Him, to a second chance, to repentance.

Option 2

Two of the most recent *Avengers* movies follow Captain America (Steve Rogers) as he attempts to track down and help his childhood friend, Bucky (aka. *The Winter Soldier*), return to the man he was. Bucky and Steve were best friends, they enlisted in the Army together and served on a special team to shut down the enemy, Hydra. During their mission, Bucky fell and everyone assumed he died. Years later, he emerged as a super-soldier brainwashed by Hydra. He created a lot of destruction, leaving only Steve to believe Bucky could be “good” again. Despite the odds and the adamant protests of his colleagues, Captain America refused to give up on his friend.¹

- **Have you ever wanted to give someone the benefit of the doubt when no one else believed in that person? Describe the situation.**

Just as the Avengers couldn’t understand Captain America’s need to reach out to someone who seemed beyond hope, neither could the Jews understand why Jesus reached out to Zacchaeus, the tax collector. In their eyes, he was beyond redemption. But to Jesus, Zacchaeus was lost, a soul in need of grace and salvation only Jesus could offer.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Jesus came to seek and save the lost.

CHARACTERS

- **Jesus** - the eternal Son of God; second person of the Trinity
- **Zacchaeus** - a tax collector known for dishonest practices. He was short in stature, so he climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus

PLOT

In previous sessions, we examined Jesus' interactions with different kinds of people He met and ministered to. We looked at His calling of disciples, His conversation with Nicodemus, His meeting a woman at the well, and His relationship with John the Baptist. In our passage today, Jesus traveled to the home of a tax collector named Zacchaeus.

ZACCHAEUS OVERCAME OBSTACLES IN ORDER TO SEE JESUS

The story of Zacchaeus is recorded in Luke 19, as Jesus entered Jericho on His way to Jerusalem. Take a look:

¹ He entered Jericho and was passing through. ² And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³ And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. ⁴ So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. (Luke 19:1-4)

Did you notice the characteristics Luke used to describe Zacchaeus? He mentioned two facts: Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector, and he was rich. In Jesus' day, the Jewish people despised tax collectors. Why? Because tax collectors were Jews, too, but they collaborated with the Roman officials who oppressed God's people. What's more, it was common practice for Jewish tax collectors to extort money above the Roman tax, and then they would use the extra money to pad their pockets and live in luxury.

Consider this analogy. If you've ever traveled to Orlando, you're probably familiar with their tollbooths. Every few miles or so, you go through a tollbooth and pay a fee so you can remain on that stretch of highway. Imagine if you knew the toll was \$3, but the collector asked for \$10. Wouldn't you be frustrated? You'd want to report the collector to the government officials.

The tax collectors overcharged, but the people had no other options—no one to turn to in order to report these practices. Furthermore, the people saw how these tax collectors lived. Like the description says, "he was rich." Here we have a man who would have been viewed as a traitor—a man whose earned his wealth through sin and oppression.

What's interesting about Zacchaeus is that he actually wanted to see Jesus. Unfortunately, he wasn't very tall. Perhaps the people who hated tax collectors purposefully blocked Zacchaeus so that he wouldn't be able to get through, maybe as a way of getting back at him for his extortion. Whatever the case, Zacchaeus was determined to see Jesus, and so he climbed up into a tree.

Zacchaeus' decision to climb up into a tree was unheard of in that day. Men didn't climb trees. It was not "dignified" for a man with his clout to do such a thing. But Zacchaeus didn't care. He may have been short, and the crowd may have been in the way, but with childlike enthusiasm he did what he had to do. He positioned himself in a way that would allow him to see Jesus.

TIMELINE

ZACCHAEUS AND THE SYCAMORE

Jesus has come to seek and save the lost.

**Beginning Summer 2017*

THE SOWER AND THE SOILS

Jesus teaches on people's responses when hearing the Word.

THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT

Jesus teaches on forgiveness.

JESUS REACHED OUT TO ZACCHAEUS

The crowds made it difficult for Zacchaeus to see Jesus, but Jesus looked over the heads of the crowd and saw Zacchaeus.

5 And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.”⁶ So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully.⁷ And when they saw it, they all grumbled, “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” (Luke 19:5-7)

Jesus took notice of this man, acknowledged him, and then expressed the desire to spend time in this traitor’s home.

Not surprisingly, the people that saw this interaction were appalled. To be a guest in someone’s home meant you were “in fellowship” with them. It was like having an outstretched arm of love and acceptance or giving a warm embrace. In the onlookers’ eyes, Jesus spent time with one of the “bad guys”—someone who had done terrible and selfish things as part of his career. Why would a righteous teacher, someone who claimed to be the Messiah, want to spend time in fellowship with a man known for his wickedness?

The crowd’s complaints demonstrated their assumption that Zacchaeus was beyond redemption, and so they were puzzled when Jesus wanted to spend time with such a person. They had written off any possibility that God would or could accept him.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

God is Gracious (p. 85, PSG)

God's nature is to delight in giving unmerited favor to those who are undeserving (Eph. 2:8-9). His grace toward sinners is found most clearly in the salvation He has provided through Christ. Because of sin, humanity is undeserving of salvation—all of us have turned our backs on God, and as a result, we deserve death (Rom. 6:23). However, instead of leaving people in their sins, God has demonstrated His graciousness by providing atonement and forgiveness for our sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus (2 Cor. 5:21).

ZACCHAEUS DEMONSTRATED REPENTANCE AND FAITH IN JESUS

Zacchaeus' response to Jesus involved conviction, confession, and repentance.

8 And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." 9 And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (Luke 19:8-10)

Zacchaeus quickly came down from the tree to welcome Jesus, but maybe he heard the crowd, got convicted, and froze in fear. He stopped walking and just stood there. I can't imagine what went through his mind. Perhaps it was the fact that he knew that the crowd complained correctly: He was guilty of extortion!

Immediately, without being prompted directly by anyone else, Zacchaeus told Jesus he would give half of his possessions to the poor. If he had exhorted anything from anyone, he would pay back four times as much as he took. Zacchaeus was convicted of his wrongdoing—to the point he willingly confessed his extortion and demonstrated his repentance by vowing to make full restoration to those he had victimized.

Jesus responded by saying that salvation had come to Zacchaeus' house. Jesus spoke about the tax collector's salvation. This moment is extraordinary because Jesus saw this man as a "son of Abraham"—meaning he had a covenant connection to the forefathers of Israel. But Jesus claimed the man's salvation was based on his response to Jesus, not his ancestry going back to Abraham. What's more, saving faith expresses itself in a changed life, which is exactly what happened to Zacchaeus.

As Rey De Armas wrote: "Using Zacchaeus as an example, we can see how stinginess is a sign that we do not know the grace of God. Grace is not fairness. Grace is not a karmic state that allows us to repay God for the wonderful acts that He has done for us. Grace is receiving something that we could never deserve... Because we have been shown generosity by Christ, we understand what it means to have someone be spiritually generous to us in our state of poverty. Zacchaeus was relationally and spiritually poor. Jesus was generous to Him and because of His generosity, Zacchaeus was no longer lost but found."²

- **Read 2 Corinthians 7:9-11, and describe the qualities of biblical repentance. In the brief encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus, did Zacchaeus possess some of the qualities Paul listed in the passage you just read? (p. 86, PSG)**

TIMELINE

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Jesus teaches on how to love one's neighbor.

TWO LOST SONS

Jesus teaches on God's grace to both the prodigal and self-righteous brother.

PHARISEE AND TAX COLLECTOR

Jesus teaches on the dangers of self-righteousness.

CHRIST CONNECTION

God demonstrated His love by sending Jesus to seek and save the lost. While we were dead in our sins, Jesus came to die in our place (Rom. 5:8). His substitutionary death, burial, and resurrection fulfilled His mission. God rejoices when sinners hear the gospel and are moved to admit their guilt, confess their sinfulness, and trust in the finished work of Jesus in order to be saved. Never should we believe that people have gone so far that they cannot be reached by the grace of God.

We who have embraced Jesus know this firsthand. And because of our encounter with Jesus, we can express our gratitude to our Savior by sharing His story to those whom we come in contact with and by sharing our resources with those who are in need.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **The crowds got in the way of Zacchaeus seeing Jesus. How do people sometimes get in the way of others seeing Jesus today?** *Sometimes we can get in the way with our attitude over certain things, or even with our actions that may, even though permissible, cause others to stumble.*
- **What are some categories of people we may be inclined to think of as "unreachable" by God's grace? How do we biblically challenge this way of thinking?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why do you think Zacchaeus thought it was important to repay the people he extorted money from? What does this decision express about his heart?** *It demonstrates that his heart underwent a drastic change from loving money and the things he could acquire with money, to one of generosity on account of having an encounter with Jesus.*
- **How does the gospel influence our level of generosity toward others?** *The more we realize how much we have been given through the love and grace of God, the more we will extend His generosity to those around us.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

Before we judge the crowds too quickly, we should stop ask ourselves if our judgment is hypocritical because we do similar things. What about the times we hold grudges because of other people's sinful actions against us? Or we have written people off as unreachable because they hurt us in some way? Or what about people who pursue addictions, engage in sinful exploits, express hostility or rage toward Christians—have we ever considered them beyond redemption?

- **How should our own salvation help us to understand the salvation of all sinners?** *Stories like this one show us a Savior who pursues all kinds of sinners. We, too, were selfishly pursuing our own dreams at the expense of others, while neglecting the grace of God. Yet, Jesus called us by name and welcomed us into His family.*
- **When we rightly understand God's grace to all sinners, what actions should follow?** *Reconciliation and forgiveness to those who may have sinned against us, compassion toward them knowing that their hearts may still be hardened toward God and His love, and so forth.*



HEART

We learn from this account what happens when people meet Jesus and are transformed by His grace in their lives. Zacchaeus loved riches and the lifestyle that came from being rich. However, when he met Jesus, something drastically changed. Jesus' grace and mercy toward him transformed the desires of his heart to the point that he was willing to let go of his riches and his former way of life in response to Christ. This is they type of heart change that happens inside of each person who comes to know the grace and mercy of Christ.

- **How has Christ transformed your life? How have the desires of your heart changed from knowing Him?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why is a transformed heart and life a good indicator that someone has Jesus as Lord over his life?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

We must treat every person we meet as someone who might embrace Jesus as Savior. God often calls us to pursue people we may believe are beyond His saving grace; He calls us to show them the way to salvation in Jesus. We may face opposition for building friendships with lost people, but we can learn from the model of Paul's ministry, as he shared both the gospel and himself with the people he encountered (1 Thess. 2:8).

- **What is the significance of Jesus ignoring His opposition in order to spend time with Zacchaeus?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What does this say about Jesus' heart for the lost? What implications does this have for the way believers are supposed to live?** *Answers will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

SOURCES

1. *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, directed by Joe Russo and Anthony Russo, (2014; Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2014), DVD.
2. Rey de Armas, "Do Not Steal," *The Gospel Project: Students*, Summer 2014, 111.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

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- **App (for both leader and student)**



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STUDY PLAN

YEAR 1

Fall 2015

God the Creator (Genesis 1-11)
God the Covenant-Maker
(Genesis 12-50)

Winter 2016

God the Redeemer
(Exodus)
God the Lawgiver
(Exodus, Leviticus,
Deuteronomy)

Spring 2016

God the Savior
(Numbers, Joshua)
God the Judge (Judges,
Ruth, 1 Samuel)

Summer 2016

God the King (1-2 Samuel)
God All Wise (1 Kings, Job,
Ecclesiastes, Psalms, Proverbs)

YEAR 2

Fall 2016

God the Revealer
(1-2 Kings, Isaiah)
God the Pursuer (Major
and Minor Prophets,
1-2 Chronicles)

Winter 2017

God the Sustainer
(Daniel, Ezra)
God the Provider (Esther,
Nehemiah, Malachi)

Spring 2017

God the Son (Gospels)
God Among Us (Gospels)

Summer 2017

Jesus the Storyteller
(Synoptic Gospels)
Jesus the Miracle-Worker
(Gospels)

YEAR 3

Fall 2017

Jesus the Savior (Gospels)
Jesus the Risen King
(Gospels, Acts)

Winter 2018

The Spirit Who
Empowers (Acts)
The God Who Sends (Acts)

Spring 2018

The God Who Directs His
People (Epistles)
The God Who Changes
Us (Epistles)

Summer 2018

God's Prisoner (Acts, Epistles)
The God Who Makes All
Things New (Epistles,
Revelation)