

PREPARE YOUR HEART FOR EASTER

Longing for a more meaningful celebration of the resurrection? Wish you had a deeper relationship with Jesus?

30 Days To Easter will guide you as walk toward Easter. You'll gather with a small group to study and respond to four invitations from Jesus. Each day, you'll connect with Jesus with thirty days of individual devotions. In your journey toward Easter, you'll move closer to the Savior and build relationships with other like-minded individuals.

PASTOR DALE OQUIST



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www.peopleschurch.org



FOREWORD BY BRETT EASTMAN,
PRESIDENT LIFE TOGETHER

30 DAYS to EASTER

A Journey to Easter Sunday

BY PASTOR DALE OQUIST
LEAD PASTOR OF PEOPLES CHURCH, FRESNO, CA

30 Days to Easter

By Dale Oquist

Peoples Church
Fresno, California

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FOREWORD BY BRETT EASTMAN



HAVE YOU EVER
FOUND YOURSELF
JUST GOING THROUGH
THE MOTIONS IN
LIFE, BUT FEELING
DISCONNECTED?

Have you ever received an invitation in the mail? Depending on who sent it to you, your response might range from total excitement to mild curiosity.

You are holding in your hands an invitation that we think you're going to be very excited about. It will change the way you understand and experience the Easter story, and potentially, the way you experience life.

Jesus, while he lived on earth, invited all people into relationship with God through him. He also made a number of specific invitations. This one-month study looks at four of those invitations:

- Come and Follow
- Take and Eat
- Watch and Pray
- Go and Tell

How you respond to those invitations will shape your faith and your life. But responding to them in the context of community also has the potential to be life-changing. And that's exactly what this study invites you to do.

In this guide, you'll find four small group lessons you can use with your small group to explore these invitations. You'll also find some unique daily devotionals, each written as if it were a personal note from Jesus to you. Each will remind you of his deep love for you, and encourage you to grow closer to him as you prepare your heart for Easter.

Here at LifeTogether, we believe life change happens in small groups. We've created resources that have changed millions of people's lives, and we'd like to invite you to experience something equally profound.

Brett Eastman

President and Founder
LifeTogether Ministries

INTRODUCTION

DALE OQUIST

“LIFE IS EITHER A GREAT ADVENTURE OR NOTHING.” - HELEN KELLER

OUR JOURNEY TOWARD EASTER PROMISES TO BE AN ADVENTURE TOGETHER UNLIKE MANY HAVE EVER EXPERIENCED. OUR HOPE IS THAT THE ADVENTURE BEGINS WITH A SMALL GROUP EXPERIENCE THAT IS BRAND NEW TO YOU. THE DECISION YOU HAVE MADE TO COMMIT TO THESE 30 DAYS OF EASTER HAS ALREADY SET YOU UP FOR AN EASTER LIKE NONE OTHER. I KNOW THAT YOU WILL NEVER BE THE SAME AS A RESULT OF THIS JOURNEY WE TAKE TOGETHER. WELCOME!

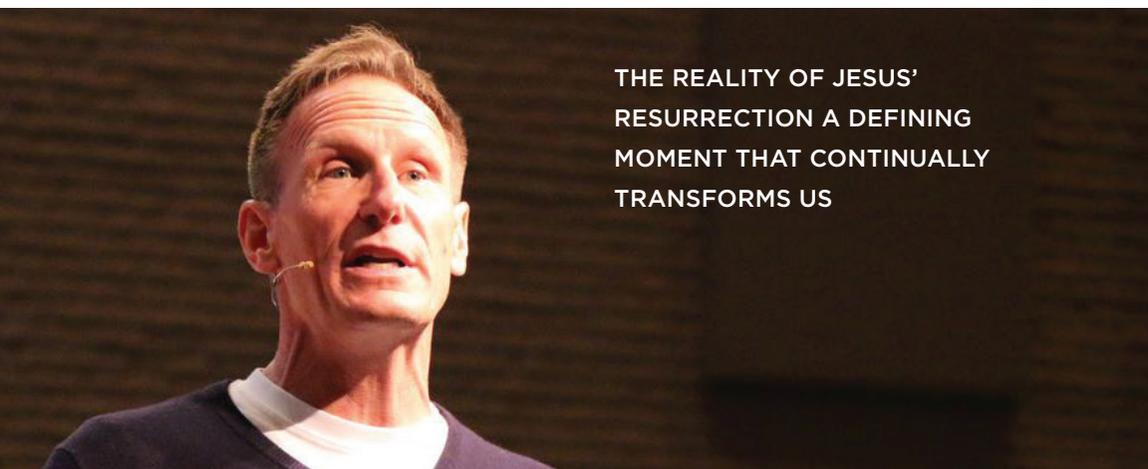
IN OUR CULTURE, EASTER IS AN EVENT THAT TAKES PLACE ON A CERTAIN DAY ON THE CALENDAR. SOME USE IT TO PERPETUATE TRADITIONS OF YEARLY CHURCH ATTENDANCE AND CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES COMPLETE WITH BUNNIES AND EGGS. THIS BOOK AND SERIES IS DESIGNED TO MAKE EASTER AND THE REALITY OF JESUS' RESURRECTION A DEFINING MOMENT THAT CONTINUALLY TRANSFORMS US. THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS IS A PROCESS WE WANT TO EMBRACE, AND NOT JUST AS AN EVENT WE ENJOY CELEBRATING.

THE REASON I AM CONVINCED THAT THIS IS WORTH OUR TIME IS BECAUSE THIS STUDY WILL GUIDE US TOWARD FOLLOWING JESUS IN A PRACTICAL AND DYNAMIC FASHION. IT WILL FOSTER CONVERSATION THAT CHALLENGES US TO MAKE DECISIONS TO INTEGRATE OUR FAITH INTO EVERY ARENA OF OUR LIVES. IT MAY BE UNCOMFORTABLE AT TIMES, BUT IT WILL GROW US TO BE A JESUS COMMUNITY.

I HAVE BEEN ENERGIZED AS I HAVE PREPARED THESE SESSIONS AND I'M LOOKING FORWARD TO SPENDING THE NEXT FEW WEEKS WITH YOU. I WANT TO THANK YOU IN ADVANCE FOR YOUR INVESTMENT OF TIME. I BELIEVE THESE 30 DAYS TO EASTER COULD POTENTIALLY BE AMONG THE MOST TRANSFORMATIVE DAYS YOU'VE EVER EXPERIENCED, MARKING A SIGNIFICANT TURNING POINT IN YOUR LIFE AND THE LIFE OF OUR FAITH FAMILY.

FULL SPEED AHEAD!

DALE



THE REALITY OF JESUS'
RESURRECTION A DEFINING
MOMENT THAT CONTINUALLY
TRANSFORMS US

USING THIS WORKBOOK

TOOLS TO HELP YOU HAVE A
GREAT SMALL GROUP EXPERIENCE!

1. Notice in the Table of Contents there are three sections: (1) Sessions; (2) Appendices; and (3) Small Group Leaders. Familiarize yourself with the Appendices. Some of them will be used in the sessions themselves.
2. If you are facilitating/leading or co-leading a small group, the section Small Group Leaders will give you some hard-learned experiences of others that will encourage you and help you avoid many common obstacles to effective small group leadership.
3. Use this workbook as a guide, not a straightjacket. If the group responds to the lesson in an unexpected but honest way, go with that. If you think of a better question than the next one in the lesson, ask it. Take to heart the insights included in the Frequently Asked Questions pages and the Small Group Leaders section.
4. Enjoy your small group experience.
5. Read the Outline for Each Session so that you understand how the sessions will flow.

SESSION **ONE**

COME AND FOLLOW

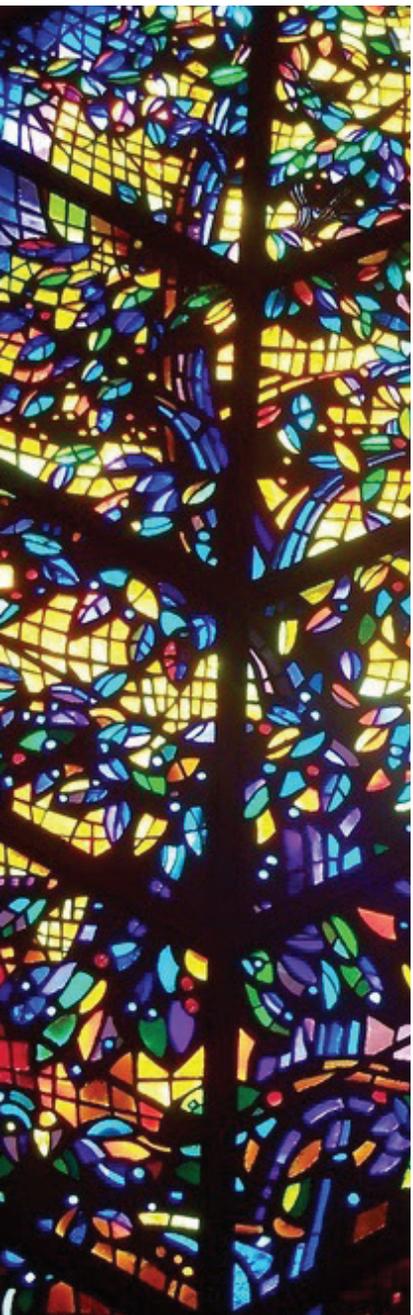
MEMORY VERSE

“COME, FOLLOW ME,” JESUS SAID,
“AND I WILL SEND YOU OUT TO FISH
FOR PEOPLE.” AT ONCE THEY LEFT
THEIR NETS AND FOLLOWED HIM.

[MATTHEW 4:19-20]



WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO FOLLOW?



People will tell you they follow certain sports teams, or follow news of the stock market. You can even follow someone on Twitter.

As a first-century rabbi, Jesus had followers—as did other rabbis and religious leaders. Often, it is the followers who would seek out the relationship, not the rabbi himself. But Jesus is different. He goes looking for followers in unusual places: seashores and tax booths, rather than religious schools or temples.

In the first century, following Jesus meant leaving family and career to become a student, a disciple. It was a full-time, all-in endeavor. What does his invitation mean to us today? Even if we wanted to, we can't roam the countryside listening to Jesus teach, watching him perform miracles, and asking him questions.

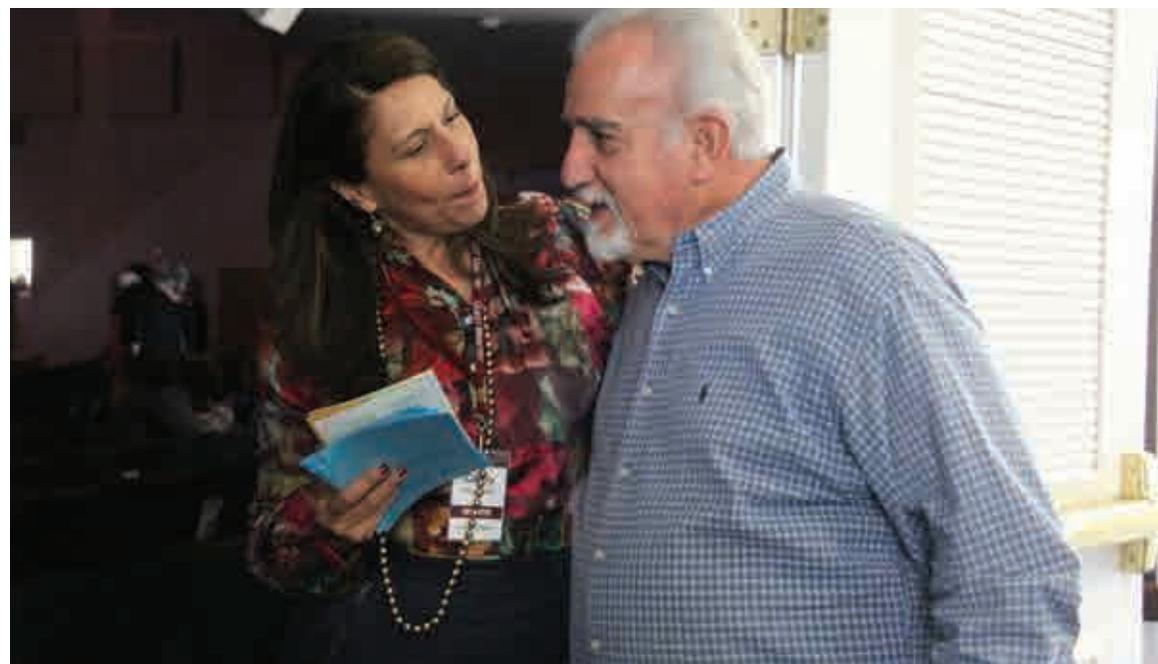
But he still extends an invitation to ordinary men and women today: come and follow. On the journey to Easter, it might just be our first step. What will that look like in your life?

SHARE YOUR STORY

Each of us has a story.

The events of our life—good, bad, challenging or wonderful—have shaped who we are. God knows your story, and he intends to redeem it—to use every struggle and every joy to ultimately bring you to himself. When we tell our stories, sharing them with others, we give others the opportunity to see God at work.

When we share our stories, we realize we are not alone— that we have common experiences and thoughts, and that others can understand what we are going through. Your story can encourage someone else, and telling it can be a path to freedom for you, and for those you share it with.



Open your group with prayer.

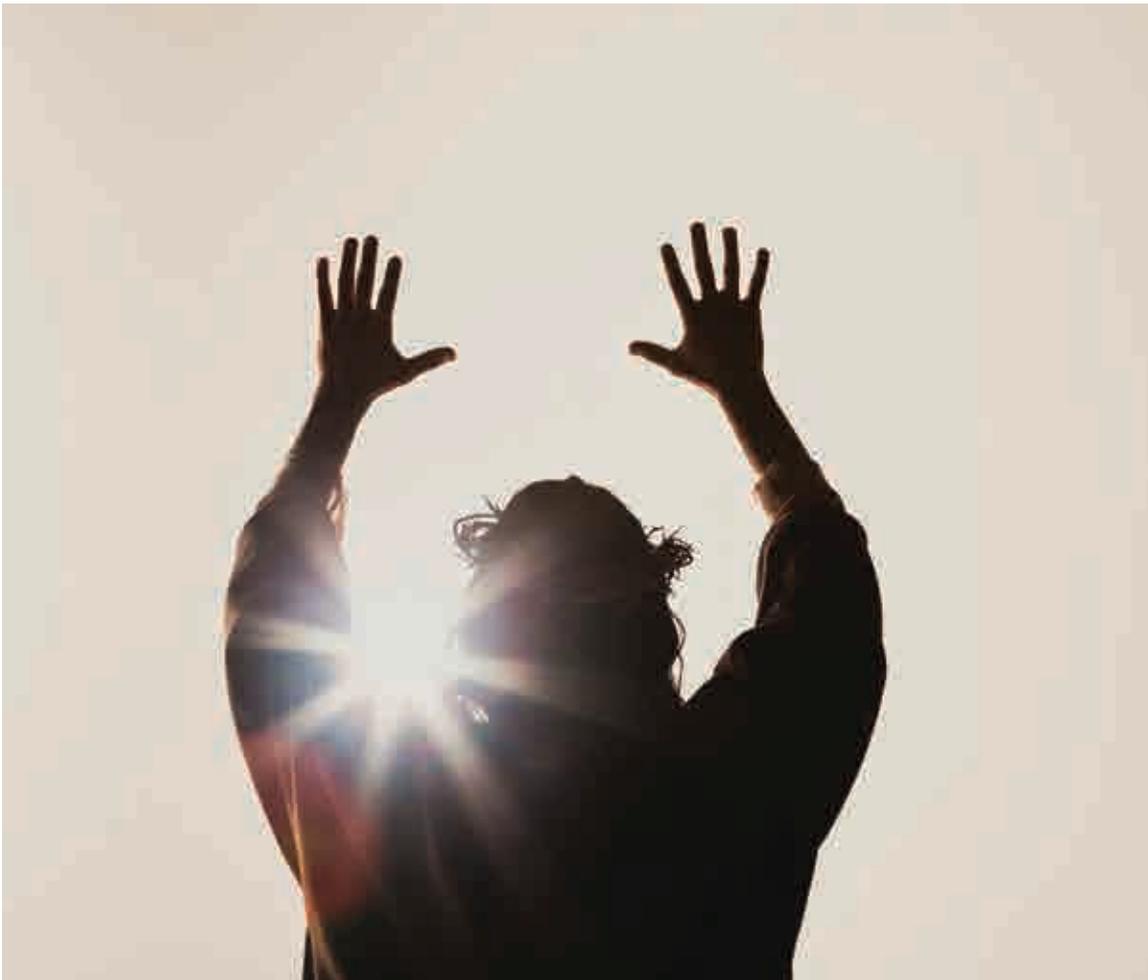
Pray simply and briefly, saving more in-depth requests until the end of the meeting. Ask God to give you insights and wisdom as you study and discuss together.

As you begin at this first meeting, take time to pass around a sheet of paper. Have everyone write down their contact information. Ask someone to make copies or type up a list with everyone's information and email it to the group this week.



Begin your time together by using the following questions and activities to get people talking.

1. What one character trait do you look for in leaders you are willing to follow?
2. What are you hoping to get out of this group?





REFLECT & REVIEW TOGETHER

Whether your group is new or ongoing, it's always important to reflect on and review your values together. On pages 109-110 is a Small Group Agreement with the values we've found most useful in sustaining healthy, balanced groups. We recommend that you choose one or two values—ones you haven't previously focused on or have room to grow in—to emphasize during this study. Choose ones that will take your group to the next stage of intimacy and spiritual health.

If your group is new, welcome newcomers. Introduce everyone—you may even want to have name tags for your first meeting.

We recommend that you rotate host homes on a regular basis and let the hosts lead the meeting. We've come to realize that healthy groups rotate leadership. This helps to develop every member's ability to shepherd a few people in a safe environment. Even Jesus gave others the opportunity to serve alongside him (Mark 6:30-44). Look at the FAQs in the Appendix additional information about hosting or leading the group.



WATCH THE
DVD FOR THIS
SESSION NOW.

HEAR GOD'S STORY

God uses stories to guide us. When we read the true stories of Scripture, we learn what God is like, we see His plan unfolding. And we learn principles for our own lives. How can we become a part of God's story? By aligning our stories with His. But not just understanding what it means to follow Him, but actually doing it—changing our attitudes and actions to live as he would live. Use the following questions to guide your discussion of the teaching and stories you just experienced, and the Bible passage below. You may want to use the study notes on page 21 to guide your reading and discussion.



**READ
MARK
10:17-22**

USE THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR DISCUSSION OF THE TEACHING AND STORIES YOU JUST EXPERIENCED, AND THE BIBLE PASSAGE.

1. We are all familiar with Jesus' invitation to his disciples (see Matthew 4, for example) to come and follow. But in this passage, Jesus asks a man some translators call the Rich Young Ruler to follow him. What's your first impression of this young man?

2. Jesus tells this man that no one except God is truly good. But we often hear people say, "I'm a good person." What do you think Jesus means?

3. In verse 18, Jesus lists several of the Ten Commandments (See Exodus 20:1-17, and Deuteronomy 5:6-21). The young man insists he has kept all of them. Do you think he is telling the truth? Why or why not?

4. If what you "follow" is that which you give the most time and attention to, what would you say this young man was following?

5. Why did Jesus tell the man to sell everything and give all the money to the poor? Is this his direction to all who want to follow Jesus? (See study notes)

6. When you read this passage, what questions come to your mind? What do you wonder about?



STUDY NOTES

Explore the Bible passages related to this session's theme as a group (if there is time) or on your own between sessions.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:17) It's interesting that a rich young man wants to figure out how to get an inheritance of eternal life—as if it were another possession. And Jesus' response is curious: even though he came to set us free from the law, he answers by talking about the Mosaic Law, which was far more than just the 10 Commandments (see, for example, Leviticus 17-21, for a partial list). But Jesus doesn't say that's the way to eternal life—he merely points out what the Law says. The man is blind to his faults and doesn't realize that when he says he has kept the law perfectly, he's lying (and therefore violating the Law).

Although Jesus doesn't mention the first commandment of the ten (“You shall have no other gods before me”). It becomes obvious by the end of the conversation that this young man worships money and has put it before following God—and has thus not kept even the first commandment.

“Jesus looked at him and loved him.” (Mark 10:21) Like this young man, we are all looking for an easy way to get right with God. And also like him, we are blind to our own faults. But the good news is that Jesus loved this young man, and loves us, not because of our “goodness” or rule-keeping. We cannot earn his favor—he loves us not “because of” but “in spite of.” That is what grace is all about.

“...you will have treasure in heaven.” (Mark 10:21) Jesus often compares the kingdom of God to treasure. (See for example Matthew 13:44-46) In Matthew 6:19-21, he taught more fully on the idea of storing up treasure in heaven, and reminding his listeners that you can't serve both God and money (Matthew 6:24). Often, storing up heavenly treasures involves letting go of earthly ones. At its heart, Jesus' teachings on money are really about trust: do we trust God enough to give him access to our resources? See also 1 Timothy 6:6-10.

CREATE A NEW STORY

God wants you to be a part of His Kingdom—to weave your story into His. That will mean change—to go His way rather than your own. This won't happen overnight—but it should happen steadily. By small, simple choices, we begin to change our direction. The Holy Spirit helps us along the way: giving us gifts to serve the body, offering us insights into Scripture, challenging us to love not only those around us but those far from God.





In this section, talk about how you will apply the wisdom you've learned from the teaching and Bible study. Then think about practical steps you can take in the coming week to live out what you've learned.

1. If you follow someone, you move in the same direction they do. What area of your life is moving the same direction as Jesus?

2. What area of your life seems to be stuck, or even moving in the opposite direction of Jesus?

3. As you listened to the video teaching, what is one point that really stuck with you? What longings did it stir in you? What is one step you want to take as a result of what you heard?

4. If you had been the young man in the Bible story we read, how would you have responded to Jesus?



5. What is one thing you'd change about the way you're doing things at work in order to follow Jesus while you're there? What would it look like to be the doctor or manager or mom who follows Jesus?

6. Who do you know who might respond to a simple invitation to come and follow Jesus along with you: to come to a church service, to join your small group, or even just to have coffee and talk about spiritual matters. Ask the Holy Spirit to bring people to mind that you can pray for.

7. Jesus served people—if we want to follow him, we'll do as he did. The first step toward doing that is connecting with God, allowing that relationship to energize and strengthen us. This week, how will you nurture that connection? Can you commit to spending time in daily prayer or study of God's Word (use the Daily Devotions section to guide you). Tell the group how you plan to follow Jesus this week, and then, at your next meeting, talk about your progress and challenges.



TO CLOSE

To close your time together, spend some time worshiping God together—praying, singing, reading Scripture.

Have someone use their musical gifts to lead the group in a worship song. Try singing á capela, using a worship CD, or have someone accompany your singing with a musical instrument.

Read a passage of Scripture together, making it a time of praise and worship as the words remind you of all God has done for you. Choose a psalm or other favorite verse.

Ask everyone to share: “How can we pray for you this week?” Be sure to write prayer requests on your Prayer and Praise Report on page 117.

Close your meeting with prayer.



FOR ADDITIONAL STUDY

If you feel God nudging you to go deeper, take some time between now and our next meeting to dig into His word. Explore the Bible passages related to this session's theme on your own, jotting your reflections in a journal or in this study guide. A great way to gain insight on a passage is to read it in several different translations. You may want to use a Bible app or website to compare translations.

Read John 10:25-30

Jesus compares himself to a shepherd, and us to sheep. In order for sheep to follow, what sort of relationship do the sheep need to have with the shepherd?

What does a shepherd do for his sheep? What role does he play in their lives?

According to verse 28, what does Jesus the Shepherd give us, his sheep?

Read Luke 9:23-26

In this passage, Jesus tells his followers that they must take up their cross. As we think about Easter, what do you think this means?

In verse 24, Jesus offers a paradox: to save your life, you must lose it. Have you ever saved something by letting go of it?

As you think about Jesus' journey to the cross, what did he have to "lose" in order to obey God's plan?

Read Hebrews 12:1-3

What is "the race marked out before us"? What does that have to do with following Jesus?

This passage tells us to fix our eyes on Jesus—an essential part of following him. Since we can't see Jesus in the flesh, what are some practical ways we can fix our eyes on him?

What "opposition" did Jesus face? What does this passage teach us about following him?



DAILY DEVOTIONALS

Welcome to a **30-Day experience** that will draw you closer to Jesus. Each day, read the verse given. Take your time.

Imagine that Jesus is sitting with you. Then, imagine him saying the words in the “reflect” section to you—reassuring you with his presence and loving you with his words of comfort and strength. After reflecting on Jesus’ words to you, take some time to journal your response back to him. You can write whatever’s on your heart. Answer the “respond” question only if it’s helpful. You may want to go another direction and that is exactly what you’re free to do.

On the first day, you may want to read over all the verses for the week to get the “big picture” of the passage. But then walk slowly verse by verse, listening to Jesus and responding to him as you meditate on the truths of Scripture and experience his presence.

At any point during each week, you may want to read over all the verses for the week to get the “**big picture**” of the passage. But then walk slowly verse by verse, day by day, listening to Jesus and responding to him as you meditate on the truths of Scripture and experience his presence.

DAY 1: READ: JOHN 3:16-17

REFLECT

My dear one, I was sent—but sent willingly, eagerly—to save you. My love for you, the Father’s love for you, knows no limits. We’d do anything to prove it to you—as you’ll see. I did not come to condemn—in fact, there is no condemnation in a relationship with me. There’s love, and freedom, and joy. I want to give you blessings. I want you to not just know about my love, intellectually, but to live in that love. So come on this journey with me.

RESPOND

As you begin this journey to Easter, think about the love that Jesus has for you, that made him keep walking toward the cross. He knew his loss would ultimately gain your freedom and forgiveness. That alone kept him walking. Spend some time as you begin simply thanking him for loving you so deeply.

DAY 2: READ JOHN 12:25

REFLECT

Do you know what I want to give you? It’s so much better than the things you think are so wonderful.—the shiny things that end up tarnishing so quickly. While I’ve given you blessings in this life, those are not for you to cling to—they’re to remind you of me, of my love for you.

The ambitions, worries, possessions—all the things that clutter up your life—let go of those things. Open your hands, drop all of that, and let me give you the gift of a different sort of life—one that will last forever.

RESPOND

In what ways has following Jesus caused you to shift your priorities? What further shifts is Jesus asking you to make?

DAY 3: READ JOHN 12:25

REFLECT

Don't be afraid, my child. You can't serve me from afar—I'm asking you to come along with me, to walk beside me as we serve together. And when you do, you'll experience my presence.

That will bring me joy, and will bring you great joy as well. Walking with me will be the most fulfilling thing you've ever experienced. And it will empower you to serve in ways you never dreamed possible. Let's do life together, and see where this adventure takes us. My Father loves you, and wants to honor you. Come and serve, and discover the joy of not just honoring God, but being honored by him.

RESPOND

What do you imagine being honored by the Father will be like?

DAY 4: READ JOHN 12:27-28

REFLECT

These hours before the cross were so very hard for me. My soul was indeed troubled. But here's the truth, my dear one: I thought of you, and because I love you so much, I could not turn away.

This was the reason I came—so that you would be able to have a relationship with me. My motivation was my love for you—and nothing could ever make me turn away from that opportunity. If you were the only one I came to save, I would still have gone to the cross—you mean that much to me.

If you follow me, you may also receive some difficult assignments from my Father. But know this: I'll be with you. Together, we'll glorify the Father.

RESPOND

What is troubling your soul today?

What do you need from Jesus to comfort you?

DAY 5: READ: JOHN 3:16-17

REFLECT

Today, try to see with spiritual eyes, my child. The cross, meant by men to be an object of shame, became a way to glorify God—because it showed the extent of his love. It's more than most can comprehend, this love. But it's all for you.

God often speaks, but many people merely hear a rumbling, which they ignore. Can you walk through your day attentive, noticing that God's voice is always near? When you begin to see spiritual realities, the things that seem difficult or painful will bring you joy, and will bring glory to the Father.

RESPOND

What specific situation are you facing right now where God is asking you to obey, and therefore glorify him?

DAY 6: READ: JOHN 12: 30-33

REFLECT

The gift I want to give you is simply this: freedom from sin. So many today mistake their own rebellion for freedom. But of course, bad choices catch up with them, and they're trapped, not free. I want to drive the devil from this world, and from your heart, where he tries to whisper lies of shame: that you are unworthy, or unloved. Not true. Draw near to me and you'll experience the truth, and it will set you free. Free from shame, free from loneliness, free from the pressure of trying to impress others.

RESPOND

How did Jesus' death draw people to himself?

How can your decision to follow him also draw others to him?



MEMORY VERSE

WHILE THEY WERE EATING, JESUS
TOOK BREAD, AND WHEN HE HAD
GIVEN THANKS, HE BROKE IT AND
GAVE IT TO HIS DISCIPLES, SAYING,
“TAKE AND EAT; THIS IS MY BODY.”

[MATTHEW 26:26]

SESSION TWO

TAKE
AND
EAT



Certain meals stand out in our memory. Not the ones eaten in front of the television, or standing over the kitchen sink. We remember holiday meals, or special dinner parties, where the food is not the typical weekday fare. We can recall meals where deep conversations take place, or significant news is revealed.

It is often over a meal that people realize they have found a true friend, or maybe even, that they are falling in love. Eating together is in many ways an act of trust, and intimacy. It binds us together. It's often not about the food as much as it is about the connections we form, the tears or laughter we share.

In Jesus' day, a meal had all of this significance and more. If you

ate with someone, it implied not just acceptance but that you would be willing to defend that person. It was a public declaration of your allegiance to that person.

Around a table, Jesus gathers for a special holiday meal, to celebrate the Passover. Little did his disciples know the events that would unfold in the hours after that meal.

AS WE PREPARE OUR HEARTS FOR EASTER, WE ARE INVITED TO THE TABLE, AND JESUS INVITES US "TAKE AND EAT." WHAT DOES THAT MEAN FOR US TODAY? WHAT IF HE'S INVITING US TO MORE THAN A RITUAL?

SHARE YOUR STORY

As we said last week, when we tell our stories, sharing them with others, we give others the opportunity to see God at work. Your story is being shaped, even in this moment, by being a part of this group. In fact, few things can shape us more than community.

When we share our stories, we can encourage someone else, and learn. We can experience the presence of God as he helps us be brave enough to reveal our thoughts and feelings.

Open your group with prayer.

Open your group with prayer. This should be a brief, simple prayer, in which you invite God to be with you as you meet.

You can pray for specific requests at the end of the meeting, or stop momentarily to pray if a particular situation comes up during your discussion.





Begin your time together by using the following questions and activities to get people talking.

1. What are some positive things that happen when you share a meal with someone? How does being around a table strengthen relationships?
2. Describe a “memorable meal” that you experienced. What made it memorable?

REFLECT & REVIEW TOGETHER

Pair up with someone in your group. (We suggest that men partner with men and women with women.) This person will be your spiritual partner for the rest of this study. He or she doesn't have to be your best friend, but will simply encourage you to complete the goals you set for yourself during this study.

Following through on a resolution is tough when you're on your own, it makes all the difference to have a partner cheering you on.





WATCH THE
DVD FOR THIS
SESSION NOW.

HEAR GOD'S STORY

How can we become a part of God's story? By aligning our stories with His. By understanding what it means to follow Him. Use the following questions to guide your discussion of the teaching and stories you just experienced, and the Bible passage below.

By the time they have this meal, Jesus and his disciples have been together for three years, which means they would have celebrated Passover before—but this meal was different. It quickly becomes clear that there's more than just another holiday meal unfolding. As you read, try to imagine yourself in the room, as one of the disciples, watching and listening to Jesus, eating with him.

READ
MATTHEW
26:17-30

USE THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR DISCUSSION OF THE TEACHING AND STORIES YOU JUST EXPERIENCED, AND THE BIBLE PASSAGE.

1. Jesus' disciples expected to have a meal to celebrate Passover—just as we might plan to have a special meal for Thanksgiving. Imagine yourself in the disciples' place as they knock on the door of a stranger to invite themselves to eat at his home. What do you think they were thinking and feeling? What would you have done if you'd been given the assignment Jesus gave them?

2. The conversation at the dinner table gets a bit awkward—Jesus not only predicts that one of them will betray him, but reveals that it is Judas. What does this conversation tell you about Jesus? Based on this scene, how would you describe him? How do you think he felt as he ate this meal?

3. Judas has been known through the ages as a traitor, because he betrayed Jesus. But do we, perhaps in smaller ways, sometimes betray him? Can you think of a time when you betrayed him—with things you said or did, or perhaps left unsaid, or undone?

4. Jesus invites his disciples to “take and eat” some bread, which he says is his body. What do you think he meant by that?

5. If we “take and eat” bread, what does it give us, from a physical standpoint? Why do you think Jesus chose to use this metaphor?

6. Jesus’ conversation with Judas contrasts strongly with his invitation to eat the bread and drink the cup, which are symbols of forgiveness. Do you think that Jesus forgave Judas? Why or why not?

7. Jesus’ words about a covenant in blood seem strange to us, but God’s covenant with Israel was also sealed with blood—of animal sacrifices. What was Jesus trying to communicate to his disciples? How would you have felt if you were sitting at the table and heard him talk about drinking blood, and a sacrificial covenant? What questions would you have asked Jesus in that moment?



STUDY NOTES

Explore the Bible passages related to this session's theme as a group (if there is time) or on your own between sessions.

Passover meal. (Matthew 26:17-19) The Passover meal, or Seder, was celebrated to remember God's miraculous deliverance of the children of Israel, freeing them from bondage in Egypt. (See Exodus 12). The angel of death was sent to kill the firstborn of every family in Egypt, except those who had the blood of a lamb on the door post. The Passover meal consisted of lamb, which recalled the lambs that were slaughtered and Jesus' impending sacrificial death; bitter herbs which symbolized the bitterness of slavery and of Jesus' betrayal; unleavened bread because the Israelites did not have time to let bread rise before fleeing, and which Jesus said was his body; and wine, which symbolized God's promise of redemption (see Exodus 6:6-8), which was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus death and resurrection.

Take and eat. (Matthew 26:26) Jesus is not suggesting we become cannibals, but is speaking symbolically. The invitation to take and eat is an invitation to make Jesus a part of who we are, to have him live within us and nourish our souls. We don't just observe Jesus, or simply admire him from a distance. He becomes a part of who we are, strengthening us to do the things he's called us to do.

The blood of the covenant. (Matthew 6:28) Some translations say "the new covenant," which of course implies there was an old covenant. The Jews were God's chosen people, and a covenanted people. A covenant is an agreement between two people, it has the implications of a contract—not something to be taken lightly or broken. God had made agreements or covenants with Abraham (see Genesis 15 and 17) and with Moses (see Exodus 24) which was also sealed with blood. The new covenant is one in which we are saved not by works or the law but by grace. Romans 5:9 says that according to this new covenant, we are "justified by his blood."

CREATE

A NEW STORY

In this section, talk about how you will apply the wisdom you've learned from the teaching and Bible study. Then think about practical steps you can take in the coming week to live out what you've learned.



Answer the following questions.

1. This meal kicks off, in many ways, the suffering Jesus endures on Good Friday. When he invites us to “take and eat,” what is he asking us to share with him?

2. Why do you think Jesus chose to use the metaphor of eating his body and drinking his blood?

3. How would you describe your connection with Jesus: are you acquaintances, is he someone you admire, or is the relationship an intimate one, which influences all that you do? Which of these is Jesus inviting us to with the words “take and eat”?

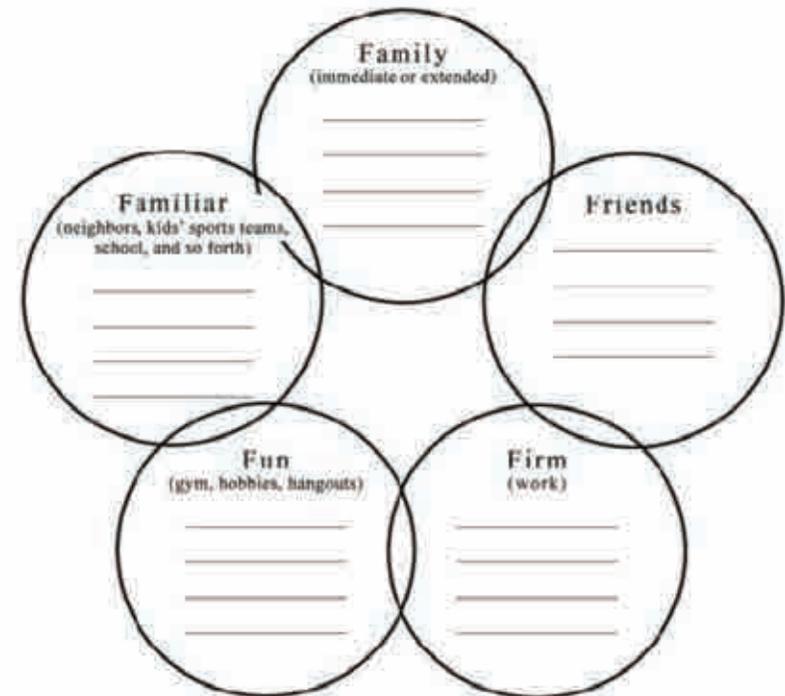
4. What is your next step toward greater intimacy with Jesus? How are obedience and intimacy connected?

5. Have you ever gone through a difficult situation with someone—where you both endured something challenging together? How did that impact your relationship?



Spend some time praying about those you know who might respond to a simple invitation: to come to a church service, to join your small group, or even just to have coffee and talk about spiritual matters. Ask the Holy Spirit to bring people to mind that you can pray for.

6. Take a look at the Circles of Life diagram below and write the names of two or three people you know who need to know Christ. Commit to praying for God’s guidance and an opportunity to share with each of them. Share your lists with the group so that you can all be praying for the people you’ve identified.





TO CLOSE

To close your time together, spend some time worshiping God together—praying, singing, reading Scripture.

Have someone use their musical gifts to lead the group in a worship song. Try singing á capela, using a worship CD, or have someone accompany your singing with a musical instrument.

Read a passage of Scripture together, making it a time of praise and worship as the words remind you of all God has done for you. Choose a psalm or other favorite verse.

Ask everyone to share: “How can we pray for you this week?” Be sure to write prayer requests on your Prayer and Praise Report on page 117.

Close your meeting with prayer.

Developing our ability to serve according to the leading of the Holy Spirit takes time and persistence in getting to know our Lord. So the first step toward serving others is, paradoxically, spending time alone with God: in prayer, in studying and reflecting on God’s Word. Here are some simple ways to connect with God. Tell the group which one you plan to try this week, and then, at your next meeting, talk about your progress and challenges.

Prayer. Commit to personal prayer and daily connection with God. You may find it helpful to write your prayers in a journal.

Daily Devotions. The Daily Devotions provided in each session offer an opportunity for reading a short Bible passage five days a week during the course of this study. In our hurry-up world, we often move too quickly through everything—even reading God’s word! Slow down. Don’t just skim, but take time to read carefully and reflect on God’s word. Write down your insights on what you read each day. Copy a portion of Scripture on a card and tape it somewhere in your line of sight, such as your car’s dashboard or the kitchen table. Or text it to yourself! Think about it when you sit at red lights, or while you’re eating a meal. Reflect on what God is saying to you through these words. On the sixth day summarize what God has shown you throughout the week.



FOR ADDITIONAL STUDY

If you feel God nudging you to go deeper, take some time between now and our next meeting to dig into His word. Explore the Bible passages related to this session's theme on your own, jotting your reflections in a journal or in this study guide. Want to go deeper? Select a few verses and try paraphrasing them: writing them in your own words. If you like, share them with the group the next time you meet.



Read 1 Corinthians 11:20-29

What specific problem was Paul addressing in his letter to the Corinthian church?

While we may not be doing what the Corinthians did, we have all had times where we have been selfish or taken more than our fair share.

What do you think it means to take communion (eat the bread and drink the cup) in an “unworthy manner”?

What does it mean to “examine yourself”? What does that have to do with Jesus’ invitation to “take and eat”?

Read Mark 10:35-45

What do James and John ask Jesus?

What incorrect assumptions are they making about Jesus and his kingdom?

When Jesus asks them if they can drink the cup he drinks, what is he really asking them?

DAILY DEVOTIONALS



Continue on your **30-Day journey** toward Easter. Each day, read the verse given. Take your time. Imagine that Jesus is sitting with you. Then, imagine him saying the words in the “reflect” section to you—reassuring you with his presence and loving you with his words of comfort and strength.

After reflecting on Jesus’ words to you, take some time to journal your response back to him. You can write whatever’s on your heart. Answer the “respond” question only if it’s helpful. You may want to go another direction and that is exactly what you’re free to do.

On the first day, you may want to read over all the verses for the week to get the “big picture” of the passage. But then walk slowly verse by verse, listening to Jesus and responding to him as you meditate on the truths of Scripture and experience his presence. *(This week’s devotions are taken from The Message Bible.)*

DAY 9: READ: JOHN 15: 4 (MSG)

REFLECT

Just as I invite you to take and eat my body, I remind you to live in me. What I’m trying to do is paint pictures of intimacy, because I want our relationship to be closer than any other in your life.

And when you’re joined with me, you’ll bear fruit—in other words, you’ll be able to feed others spiritually. Fruit like love, joy, peace and patience will be abundant in your life. But it begins with being close to me, so that my love can flow through you, like sap through a branch.

RESPOND

Read also Galatians 5:23. What is one specific action you want to take this week to make your home in Jesus?

DAY 10: READ: JOHN 15:5

REFLECT

My child, cling to me, like a branch to a vine. You’re not the vine—the source of your strength. What you do flows from me, not your own power or resourcefulness. Connected to me, you’ll have the power to love, to serve, to experience God; but don’t unplug.

Your job is to simply hold on to me, and trust that I’m holding on to you. Our connection will feed you, nourish you, and enable you to do amazing things that you could never do on your own.

RESPOND

Take some times to just be in Jesus’ presence, enjoying his love in an intimate and organic way.

DAY 11: READ: JOHN 15:6

REFLECT

My love, you need me. Without me, you'll be like a branch that has fallen from the tree. This is not a threat, it's just a fact—branches that separate from the tree can't produce fruit. And what incredible fruit you can produce if you trust me enough to stay connected.

So hang on to me, and know that I am hanging on to you, strengthening and feeding you because I want you to be a conduit for my love.

RESPOND

Where are you striving and trying to produce results apart from Jesus and his strength and power?

DAY 12: READ: JOHN 15:7

REFLECT

When we are at home together, we can talk. I'll listen to you, and you can listen to me. We can hang out, have a relaxed, unrushed conversation. Together, we can accomplish amazing things.

My Father has exciting things for us to do together, things that will stretch you, challenge you, grow you into a stronger, more loving person. It brings me joy to think of them. But first—I just want to be with you.

RESPOND

What are you asking God for these days?
Bring those requests before him now.

DAY 13: READ: JOHN 15:8

REFLECT

You were made to grow, to become mature and complete. That's my vision for you, and I'm here to help you move toward that vision. Can you see it—the preferred future I have for you? Is your goal to become mature?

My disciples are those who not only follow, but take me into themselves, living as I would live. I hope that's your desire—to live as I would in your place, to feed others as I've fed you.

RESPOND

What's your next step toward spiritual maturity?

DAY 14: READ: JOHN 15:9

REFLECT

Here's something you need to know: you don't have to earn my love. I give it to you freely, lavishly. Not out of obligation, but because I simply can't help it—I love you the way the Father loves me.

So kick off your shoes, relax, and just let my abundant love flow into your heart. You don't have to earn it, simply receive it. It's not a question of being worthy or earning it—it's a free gift. Make yourself at home.

RESPOND

How can you make yourself at home in Jesus' love?

SESSION **THREE**

WATCH AND PRAY

MEMORY VERSE

“WATCH AND PRAY SO THAT YOU
WILL NOT FALL INTO TEMPTATION.
THE SPIRIT IS WILLING, BUT THE
FLESH IS WEAK.”

[MATTHEW 26:41]



ACCORDING TO THE GOSPELS, JESUS SPENT A LOT OF HIS TIME PRAYING.

His disciples had watched him pray, they'd heard him pray for them, they'd seen him head up to the hills early in the morning to pray alone with his Father. They asked him to teach them how to pray.

As his followers, we don't just walk behind Jesus, going where he leads. We do what he does—which means we pray. We seek out times of solitude—where we focus on talking to and listening to God.

Try to imagine a friendship in which you rarely communicate with the other person. If you claimed that such a friendship was intimate, close or even a friendship at all, no one would believe you. In order to be friends with someone, you have to talk to them, do things with them, be with them. So if we claim to be a friend of Jesus, if we want to have a relationship with him, the way to strengthen that relationship is by communicating with him.

Prayer is not something we do to earn his favor, it's simply a conversation with Jesus.

We're not checking off a spiritual to do list by spending time in prayer—we're connecting with the one who loves us.

STILL, THERE ARE TIMES WHEN PRAYER IS DIFFICULT, WHEN IT REQUIRES DISCIPLINE. HOW WILL YOU RESPOND TO JESUS' INVITATION TO WATCH AND PRAY, EVEN WHEN YOU'RE FEELING WEAK?

SHARE YOUR STORY



Open your group with prayer.

This should be a brief, simple prayer, in which you invite God to be with you as you meet. You can pray for specific requests at the end of the meeting, or stop momentarily to pray if a particular situation comes up during your discussion.

Telling our personal stories builds deeper connections among group members. Begin your time together by using the following questions and activities to get people talking.



-
1. Who is someone whose prayer life you admire? What, in your opinion, do people who are strong in prayer do?

2. Sit with your spiritual partner. If your partner is absent or if you are new to the group, join with another pair or someone who doesn't yet have a partner. If you haven't established your spiritual partnership yet, do it now. (See Share Your Story in Session Two.)



WATCH THE
DVD FOR THIS
SESSION NOW.



HEAR GOD'S STORY

READ
MATTHEW
26:36-46

USE THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR DISCUSSION OF THE TEACHING AND STORIES YOU JUST EXPERIENCED, AND THE BIBLE PASSAGE.

1. In this passage, we find Jesus and his disciples in Gethsemane, a garden just outside the city. How is Jesus feeling? Why do you think Jesus took the disciples with him? What did he want to receive from them?

2. What do the disciples do? Imagine yourself in their place. Why do you think they had so much trouble staying awake?

3. Do you ever struggle to stay focused when you're praying?

4. How does Jesus pray? What can we learn about prayer from his example?



STUDY NOTES

Explore the Bible passages related to this session's theme as a group (if there is time) or on your own between sessions.

Peter and the two sons of Zebedee (Matthew 26:37) These three disciples, Peter, James and John, were Jesus' closest companions. They were the first disciples that he invited to follow him (see Matthew 4:18-22). It was these three that accompanied him on the mount of transfiguration. (See Matthew 17:1-13). They were the only ones allowed into the room where Jesus raised Jairus' daughter from the dead (see Mark 5:35-43). Presumably, they were his "inner circle." Because of that privilege, he gave them the responsibility to pray with him, to support him in his hour of struggle. Like Peter, James and John, we have been given the gift of intimacy with Jesus. What will we do with that privilege, and that responsibility?

"...not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39) This prayer, oft quoted, was difficult for Jesus to pray, and is even harder for us to pray. Jesus agonized as he faced the cross—see the parallel passage in Luke 22 where it says he sweated drops of blood in his anxiety and stress. But in this phrase, Jesus modeled for us what it means to watch and pray: we're not just asking for things, we're trusting God. To pray for God's will, even as we face trials, is to affirm our trust in him.

"The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Matthew 26:41) This is the central conflict of the Christian life, and indeed of human existence. Paul writes about the battle between his flesh and his spirit in Romans 7:14-25, and exhorts us to live by the Spirit in Galatians 5:16-26. With our trust in God comes a promise of transformation, that we would be changed into people who can live by the spirit, rather than by our earthly desires. (See Romans 8, Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 3:18). Changing ourselves by mere willpower or resolve won't work—it is when we submit to the rule and reign of Christ in our hearts that God is able to change us. Admitting our weakness is often the first step toward that transformation.

CREATE A NEW STORY

God wants you to be a part of His Kingdom—to weave your story into His. That will mean change—to go His way rather than your own. This won't happen overnight—but it should happen steadily. By small, simple choices, we begin to change our direction. The Holy Spirit helps us along the way: giving us gifts to serve the body, offering us insights into Scripture, challenging us to love not only those around us but those far from God.



Developing our ability to serve according to the leading of the Holy Spirit takes time and persistence in getting to know our Lord. So the first step toward serving others is, paradoxically, spending time alone with God: in prayer, in studying and reflecting on God's Word. So what specific steps will you take this week. **If you've focused on prayer in past weeks, maybe you'll want to direct your attention to Scripture this week.** If you've been reading God's word consistently, perhaps you'll want to take it deeper and try memorizing a verse. Tell the group which one you plan to try this week, and then, at your next meeting, talk about your progress and challenges.

In the last session we asked you to write some names in the Circles of Life diagram.

Who did you identify as the people in your life who need to meet Jesus?

Go back to the Circles of Life diagram to help you think of the various people you come in contact with on a regular basis who need to know Jesus more deeply. Consider the following ideas for action and make a plan to follow through on one of them this week.

This is a wonderful time to welcome a few friends into your group.

Which of the people you listed could you invite? It's possible that you may need to help your friend overcome obstacles to coming to a place where he or she can encounter Jesus. Does your friend need a ride to the group? Help with childcare?

Consider inviting a friend to attend a weekend service with you and possibly plan to enjoy a meal together afterward. This can be a great opportunity to talk with someone about your faith in Jesus.

Is there someone whom you wouldn't invite to your group but who still needs a connection? Would you be willing to have lunch or coffee with that person, catch up on life, and share something you've learned from this study? Jesus doesn't call all of us to lead small groups, but he does call every disciple to spiritually multiply his or her life over time.

TO CLOSE

To close your time together, spend some time worshiping God together—praying, singing, reading Scripture.

Have someone use their musical gifts to lead

the group in a worship song. Try singing á capela, using a worship CD, or have someone accompany your singing with a musical instrument.

Read a passage of Scripture together,

making it a time of praise and worship as the words remind you of all God has done for you. Choose a psalm or other favorite verse.

Ask everyone to share: "How can we pray for you this week?"

Be sure to write prayer requests on your Prayer and Praise Report on page 117.

Close your meeting with prayer.



FOR ADDITIONAL STUDY

Take some time between now and our next meeting to dig into God's word. Explore the Bible passages related to this session's theme on your own, jotting your reflections in a journal or in this study guide. You may even want to use a Bible website or app to look up commentary on these passages. If you like, share what you learn with the group the next time you meet.

READ MARK 1:21-39

The first few verses in this passage describe a very busy day of ministry. What is Jesus' response to that busyness?

When you get busy, what typically happens to your prayer life?

When Jesus goes off on his own to pray, he eventually gets interrupted. Have you ever had your prayer time interrupted? How do you react? How does Jesus react?

Why do you think Jesus got up early and spent time in solitude? What does he teach us about prayer by his example?

READ PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7

This brief passage walks us through many key aspects of prayer: rejoicing, thankfulness, presence, trust, petition, and worship. Which of these do you typically focus on during your prayer times?

What happens to us when we begin our prayers with rejoicing (even when we are going through difficulties)?

Verse 6 tells us not to be anxious about anything. That can be hard to do. What makes you feel anxious or worried?

What promise does God give us in verse 7? How have you experienced the fulfillment of this promise?



DAILY DEVOTIONALS

Each day, read the verse given. **Take your time.** Imagine that Jesus is sitting with you. Then, imagine him saying the words in the “reflect” section to you—reassuring you with his presence and loving you with his words of comfort and strength.



After reflecting on Jesus’ words to you, take some time to journal your response back to him. You can write whatever’s on your heart. Answer the “respond” question only if it’s helpful. You may want to go another direction and that is exactly what you’re free to do.

On the first day, you may want to read over all the verses for the week to get the “big picture” of the passage. But then walk slowly verse by verse, listening to Jesus and responding to him as you meditate on the truths of Scripture and experience his presence.

DAY 16: READ MATTHEW 6:5

REFLECT

I love you and want to hear from you—but there’s no need to put on a show. It’s fine to pray aloud, but keep it simple, humble. Don’t perform your prayers, just talk to me and allow others to listen in once in a while. Most of the time, I’d like our conversations to be private—and I’d like you to listen to me, not just talk. There is so much I want to tell you, so much wisdom, guidance, and just pure love I want to pour on you.

And oh—if you tell someone you’ll pray for them—really do it. Don’t just talk to them about praying. Instead, talk to me about them. Keep your word when you promise to pray.

RESPOND

Do you ever tell people “I’ll pray for you” but not follow through? What is your desire, when it comes to prayer? What do you want your prayer life to look like?

DAY 17: READ: MATTHEW 6:6

REFLECT

Intimacy is built through time together, and sometimes, through shared secrets. Think of how close we’ll be, sharing the deepest concerns of your heart—and hearing mine.

Could you, today, pray for someone but not tell them? Who is on your heart? Who needs my blessing? Talk to me about that person—and then let’s keep it our little secret. Sit back and watch me work in their life—and we’ll share a secret smile.

RESPOND

When you spend time alone with someone you love, what happens to the relationship?

DAY 18: READ: MATTHEW 6:7

REFLECT

You know, I love to hear from you—but I don't need a long speech. I'd rather have you just sit with me and listen to me say I love you. I love to hear from you, but formality just creates distance.

I'd rather just hear what's on your heart, then have some time of comfortable, companionable silence—which either of us can interrupt if we have something to say. Talk to me, listen to me, just hang out with me. No need to ramble on.

RESPOND

Do you ever get long-winded or ramble when you pray?
What drives that?

DAY 19: READ: MATTHEW 6:8

REFLECT

My Father knows you—he created you, not just your physical self but your personality, your strengths. He sees your struggles and cares deeply for you. It's not always easy, but what I'm asking you to do is trust.

Come to the Father like a little child—honestly and simply stating what you need—not because it's a surprise to him, but because he loves to hear from you. Just conversing brings us closer. And then, trust that all shall be well.

RESPOND

What happens to any close relationship when you spend time in conversation?

DAY 20: READ: MATTHEW 6:9

REFLECT

Prayer is not about you. I love you, I want the best for you—which is why I want you to pray focused on God, and his power, strength and holiness. Lift your eyes up, and off your problems, and focus instead on God's amazing capabilities.

My Father deserves honor, because he's perfect in power and in love. Starting prayer with honoring God puts everything else in perspective, and launches you in the right direction. It aligns your heart with mine, and draws us closer.

RESPOND

Spend some time just praising God, "hallowing" his name by giving him reverence and respect.

DAY 21: READ: MATTHEW 6:10

REFLECT

I'm so excited to be partnering with you in bringing God's kingdom. Are you willing to pray that the kingdom would come, right now? That God's will would be done? Even if God's will doesn't fit with your preference?

Praying that way takes more than words—it takes a willingness to respond to my promptings so that you can help it to happen. Together, we can welcome in the kingdom. Just trust me—I'll give you everything you need, one day at a time.

RESPOND

What does it mean to trust God for daily provision?



SESSION **FOUR**

GO
AND
TELL

MEMORY VERSE

THEN JESUS SAID TO THEM, "DO NOT BE AFRAID. GO AND TELL MY BROTHERS TO GO TO GALILEE; THERE THEY WILL SEE ME."

[MATTHEW 28:10]



SHARE YOUR STORY

Have you ever experienced something so amazing, so unbelievable, that you just had to tell someone? Have you ever received really good news—so great that you couldn't keep it to yourself?

On that first Easter morning, the women who had followed Jesus, who had shared meals, including that last supper, with him, who had prayed desperately as he hung on the cross, walked to the tomb, feeling dejected and desperately sad. But when they arrived, and quickly learned that he had risen from the dead, their sorrow turned to joy. Both the angel and Jesus himself tell them, “Go and tell...” But did they really have to be told twice to share this amazing news?

It was so astonishing, so amazing, that they couldn't keep quiet about it if they tried. Do you feel that way about the good news that Jesus loves you? That he died for your sins and lives again?

THE MESSAGE OF EASTER IS GOOD NEWS INDEED. WHO ARE YOU GOING TO SHARE IT WITH?

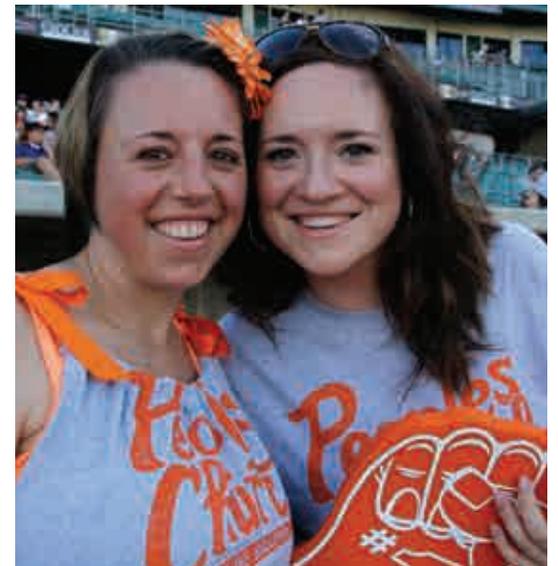
As we have said in previous lessons, sharing our personal stories builds deeper connections among group members.

Your story may be exactly what another person needs to hear to encourage or strengthen them. And your listening to others' stories is an act of love and kindness to them—and could very well help them to grow spiritually.

Open your group with prayer.

This should be a brief, simple prayer, in which you invite God to be with you as you meet.

You can pray for specific requests at the end of the meeting, or stop momentarily to pray if a particular situation comes up during your discussion.





Begin your time together by using the following questions and activities to get people talking.

1. When you think about telling other people about Jesus, do you feel: a. really nervous; b. slightly guilty that I don't do it more; c. enthusiastic and excited?
2. Tell about a time when you got some really good news and couldn't wait to share it. What happened?

REFLECT & REVIEW TOGETHER

Take time in this final session to connect with your spiritual partner. What has God been showing you through these sessions? Check in with each other about the progress you have made in your spiritual growth during this study. Make plans about whether you will continue in your mentoring relationship outside your Bible study group.

Take some time for each person to share about how they've done with inviting the people on the Circles of Life to church or your small group. What specific conversations are you praying about for the weeks to come?



4. What two things does the angel instruct the women to do?
(verses 6 and 7)

5. Imagine yourself in the women's place as they go along the road and suddenly meet Jesus. When he says "go and tell" would you feel any hesitation or uncertainty, or would you be anxious to tell others what you'd seen and experienced?

6. Jesus told the women he'd meet the disciples in Galilee. Read Matthew 28:16. Did he keep his word? What does this tell you about Jesus?



STUDY NOTES

Explore the Bible passages related to this session's theme as a group (if there is time) or on your own between sessions.

“After the Sabbath...” (Matthew 28:1) In the Jewish culture of Jesus day, the Sabbath began at sundown on the sixth day of the week—the day Jesus was crucified. On the Sabbath, the women could not go to the tomb without violating the Sabbath, so they waited—but went as quickly as possible at sunrise. If they had ignored the Sabbath rules and visited his tomb on the seventh day of the week, they would not have been witnesses to his resurrection—he still would have been in the tomb. Sometimes, waiting and obeying God's ways brings us unexpected blessings.

“He has risen, just as he said.” (Matthew 28:6) Before he died, Jesus predicted his resurrection several times. Further, several Old Testament stories preview Jesus' time in the tomb. Take a look at Jonah 1:17, for example, a story Jesus himself cites in Matthew 12:39-41. See also Matthew 16:21, 17:22, 23; Mark 8:31, 9:31, and 10:33, 34; Luke 9:22, and John 2:19-21. Jesus knew he would suffer a violent and painful death, but he also knew that he had the power over death to be raised again. It is this power over death that gives us the hope of eternal life, but also of “crucifying” our sinful nature to live as God's people. As it says in Galatians 5:24, “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.” (See also 1 Corinthians 1:23.)

“So the women...ran to tell the disciples...” (Matthew 28:8) Unlike many of his other disciples, the women who followed Jesus remained faithful and did not leave when he was crucified. God honors their faithfulness by entrusting them to be the first witnesses of the resurrection. In a society that gave women few rights and little power, Jesus offers incredible privilege. His heart is always for those who are marginalized and humble, his goal is always to lift them up.

CREATE A NEW STORY

How has God changed your story during this four-week study? What new things is He asking you to do? What truth has transformed your heart?

As you walk forward in your relationship with God, what will you do differently as a result of what you've experienced in this group?



Answer the following questions.

1. Easter is a celebration not of Jesus' death, but of his resurrection. Why is the fact that Jesus is alive such good news?

2. What good news is Jesus inviting you to "go and tell"? Who is someone in your life who needs to hear this news?

3. What barriers get in the way of your telling others about Jesus and your experiences of him?

4. Twice in this passage, we see the three words, "do not be afraid." When it comes to your faith, what are you afraid of? What specific situation in your life right now causes you to feel fear?

5. Jesus' invitation to "go and tell" is an invitation to evangelism. What experiences, positive or negative, have you had with evangelism?

6. Who is someone you need to "go and tell" about Jesus?





TO CLOSE

To close your time together, spend some time worshiping God together—praying, singing, reading Scripture.

Close by praying for your prayer requests.

Take a couple of minutes to review the praises you have recorded over the past five weeks on the Prayer and Praise Report on page 117.

Spend some time just worshipping God.

Thanking Him for all He's done in your group during this study.

LAST MEETING.

As this is the last meeting in this study, take some time to celebrate the work God has done in the lives of group members. Have each person in the group share some step of growth that they have noticed in another member. (In other words, no one will talk about themselves, but affirm others in the group). Make sure that each person gets affirmed and noticed and celebrated—whether the steps they've made are large or small.

DECISIONS.

If your group still needs to make decisions about continuing to meet after this session, have that discussion now. Talk about what you will study, who will lead, and where and when you will meet.



DAILY DEVOTIONALS



Continue on your **30-Day journey** toward Easter. Each day, read the verse given. Take your time. Imagine that Jesus is sitting with you. Then, imagine him saying the words in the “reflect” section to you—reassuring you with his presence and loving you with his words of comfort and strength.

After reflecting on Jesus’ words to you, take some time to journal your response back to him. You can write whatever’s on your heart. Answer the “respond” question only if it’s helpful. You may want to go another direction and that is exactly what you’re free to do.

On the first day, you may want to read over all the verses for the week to get the “big picture” of the passage. But then walk slowly verse by verse, listening to Jesus and responding to him as you meditate on the truths of Scripture and experience his presence.

DAY 23: READ ACTS 4:1-2

REFLECT

If the message of my life, death and resurrection isn’t disconcerting to people, it simply means they don’t understand it. It is indeed an outrageous story—but it is truth you can stake your life on, my dear one.

If you truly understand it, as Peter and John did, you’ll be filled with that same boldness and power that they were. Don’t be afraid to tell the truth about me to everyone you meet.

RESPOND

Why were the religious leaders “disturbed” about what Peter and John were preaching? What would it look like for you to proclaim resurrection?

DAY 24: READ: ACTS 4:3-4

REFLECT

Truth transforms people—especially the truth about me. Be bold, my precious one. I’m standing beside you, helping you to face any persecution or scorn, so that you can tell others about me. I claim you as my own—I hope you’d claim me as yours.

Expect to see people respond to the truth of my resurrection if you’re willing to boldly proclaim it

RESPOND

Do you expect people to respond to the truth of Jesus’ message? What keeps you from sharing it with others?

DAY 25: READ: ACTS 4:8-10

REFLECT

My child, I have given a gift—my Holy Spirit within you. He will empower you, make you bold and courageous, fill you with strength and wisdom so that you can respond to any challenge.

It is the Holy Spirit, and my name, that provide healing and power and everything you need. Don't be afraid. And don't let people bully you into refusing to show kindness to those who need a touch of grace. Love boldly.

RESPOND

Who is someone who needs the healing power of grace? What can you do this week to reach out to that person?

DAY 26: READ: ACTS 4:11

REFLECT

Many reject me. And many will reject you because you are mine—but be courageous and strong—because even though I was rejected, I ultimately became the very foundation of God's work in the world.

So when people ridicule your faith, don't listen to them. You know the whole story—they only see a little bit, and don't really understand. Just keep looking to me. I'm a rock you can build your life on, a foundation that is firm and sure.

RESPOND

Look up Psalm 118:22. How does knowing that Jesus' death, rejection and resurrection was predicted centuries before impact your faith?

DAY 27: READ: ACTS 4:12

REFLECT

Many people will tell you that all roads lead to salvation, but that's not true. I'm the Way. Now, many people take different wandering trails to find me, but it is me that they must find.

The good news is, like a shepherd searching for lost sheep, I'm out looking for them while they're out looking for truth. Join me, won't you? Point others to what you've found in me. Introduce your friends to me, guide them toward me—the Way, the Truth and the Life.

RESPOND

Look up John 14:6. Why is this verse unpopular in our culture? How can you share this truth (and the words from today's reading) with others?

DAY 28: READ ACTS 4:13

REFLECT

Peter and John—I love those two. So brave—not because of intellect or degrees, but because they'd been changed. Their sole credential was that they had been with me, and it turned them from ordinary fishermen into bold leaders.

My child, spend time with me, and you'll be similarly transformed. You'll love boldly, forgive radically, bring healing into every relationship. My presence brings out your potential.

RESPOND

What gave John and Peter the courage to speak so boldly? How has "being with Jesus" changed you?

APPENDICES

GREAT RESOURCES

TO HELP MAKE YOUR

SMALL GROUP EXPERIENCE EVEN BETTER!



FAQ

WHAT DO WE DO ON THE FIRST NIGHT OF OUR GROUP?

Like all fun things in life—have a party! A “get to know you” coffee, dinner, or dessert is a great way to launch a new study. You may want to review the Group Agreement (pages 109-110) and share the names of a few friends you can invite to join you. But most importantly, have fun before your study time begins.

WHERE DO WE FIND NEW MEMBERS FOR OUR GROUP?

This can be troubling, especially for new groups that have only a few people or for existing groups that lose a few people along the way. We encourage you to pray with your group and then brainstorm a list of people from work, church, your neighborhood, your children’s school, family, the gym, and so forth. Then have each group member invite several of the people on his or her list.

No matter how you find members, it’s vital that you stay on the lookout for new people to join your group. All groups tend to go through healthy attrition—the result of moves, releasing new leaders, ministry opportunities, and so forth—and if the group gets too small, it could be at risk of shutting

down. If you and your group stay open, you’ll be amazed at the people God sends your way. The next person just might become a friend for life. You never know!

HOW LONG WILL THIS GROUP MEET?

It’s totally up to the group—once you come to the end of this 6-week study. Most groups meet weekly for at least their first 6 weeks, but every other week can work as well. We strongly recommend that the group meet for the first six months on a weekly basis if at all possible. This allows for continuity, and if people miss a meeting they aren’t gone for a whole month.

At the end of this study, each group member may decide if he or she wants to continue on for another 6-week study. Some groups launch relationships for years to come, and others are stepping-stones into another group experience. Either way, enjoy the journey.

CAN WE DO THIS STUDY ON OUR OWN?

Absolutely! This may sound crazy but one of the best ways to do this study is not with a full house but with a few friends. You may choose to gather with one other couple who would enjoy going out or having a quiet dinner and then walking through this study. Jesus will be with you even if there are only two of you (Matthew 18:20).

WHAT IF THIS GROUP IS NOT WORKING FOR US?

You’re not alone! This could be the result of a personality conflict, life stage difference, geographical distance, level of spiritual maturity, or any number of things. Relax. Pray for God’s direction, and at the end of this 6-week study, decide whether to continue with this group or find another. You don’t buy the first car you look at or marry the first person you date, and the same goes with a group. Don’t bail out before the 6 weeks are up—God might have something to teach you. Also, don’t run from conflict or prejudge people before you have given them a chance. God is still working in you too!

WHO IS THE LEADER?

Most groups have an official leader. But ideally, the group will mature and members will rotate the leadership of meetings. We have discovered that healthy groups rotate hosts/leaders and homes on a regular basis. This model ensures that all members grow, give their unique contribution, and develop their gifts. This study guide and the Holy Spirit can keep things on track even when you rotate leaders. Christ has promised to be in your midst as you gather. Ultimately, God is your leader each step of the way.

HOW DO WE HANDLE THE CHILD CARE NEEDS IN OUR GROUP?

Very carefully. Seriously, this can be a sensitive issue. We suggest that you empower the group to openly brainstorm solutions. You may try one option that works for a while and then adjust over time. Our favorite approach is for adults to meet in the living room or dining room, and to share the cost of a babysitter (or two) who can be with the kids in a different part of the house. In this way, parents don’t have to be away from their children all evening when their children are too young to be left at home. A second option is to use one home for the kids and a second home (close by or a phone call away) for the adults. A third idea is to rotate the responsibility of providing a lesson or care for the children either in the same home or in another home nearby. This can be an incredible blessing for kids. Finally, the most common idea is to decide that you need to have a night to invest in your spiritual lives individually or as a couple, and to make your own arrangements for childcare. No matter what decision the group makes, the best approach is to dialogue openly about both the problem and the solution.

OUR PURPOSE

To provide a predictable environment where participants experience authentic community and spiritual growth.



OUR VALUES

GROUP ATTENDANCE

To give priority to the group meeting. We will call or email if we will be late or absent. (Completing the Group Calendar on page 114 will minimize this issue.)

SAVE ENVIRONMENT

To help create a safe place where people can be heard and feel loved. Please, no quick answers, snap judgments, or simple fixes.

RESPECT DIFFERENCES

To be gentle and gracious to people with different spiritual maturity, personal opinions, temperaments, or “imperfections” in fellow group members. We are all works in progress.

CONFIDENTIALITY

To keep anything that is shared strictly confidential and within the group, and to avoid sharing improper information about those outside the group.

ENCOURAGEMENT FOR GROWTH

To be not just takers but givers of life. We want to spiritually multiply our life by serving others with our God-given gifts.

SHARED OWNERSHIP

To remember that every member is a minister and to ensure that each attender will share a small team role or responsibility over time (See the Team Roles on pages 111-112.)

ROTATING HOSTS/ LEADERS AND HOMES

To encourage different people to host the group in their homes, and to rotate the responsibility of facilitating each meeting. (See the Group Calendar on page 114.)

TEAM ROLES

The Bible makes clear that every member, not just the small group leader, is a minister in the body of Christ. In a healthy small group, every member takes on some small role or responsibility. It's more fun and effective if you team up on these roles.

Review the team roles and responsibilities below, and have each member volunteer for a role or participate on a team. If someone doesn't know where to serve or is holding back, have the group suggest a team or role. It's best to have one or two people on each team so you have each of the five purposes covered. Serving in even a small capacity will not only help your leader but also will make the group more fun for everyone. Don't hold back. Join a team!

The opportunities below are broken down by the five functions and then by a crawl (beginning step), walk (intermediate step), or run (advanced step). Try to cover at least the crawl and walk roles, and select a role that matches your group, your gifts, and your maturity. If you can't find a good step or just want to see other ideas, go to www.lifetogether.com and see what other groups are choosing.

TEAM ROLES	TEAM PLAYERS
CONNECT TEAM (Fellowship and Community Building)	
CRAWL: Host a social event or group activity in the first week or two.	
WALK: Create a list of uncommitted members and then invite them to an open house or group social.	
RUN: Plan a twenty-four-hour retreat or weekend getaway for the group. Lead the Connecting time each week for the group.	

TEAM ROLES	TEAM PLAYERS
GROW TEAM (Discipleship and Spiritual Growth)	
CRAWL: Coordinate the spiritual partners for the group. Facilitate a three- or four-person discussion circle during the Bible study portion of your meeting. Coordinate the discussion circles.	
WALK: Tabulate the Personal Health Assessments and Health Plans in a summary to let people know how you're doing as a group. Encourage personal devotions through group discussions and pairing up with spiritual (accountability) partners.	
RUN: Take the group on a prayer walk, or plan a day of solitude, fasting, or personal retreat.	

TEAM ROLES	TEAM PLAYERS
SERVE TEAM (Discovering Your God-Given Design for Ministry)	
CRAWL: Ensure that every member finds a group role or team he or she enjoys.	
WALK: Have every member take a gift test in this study guide and determine your group's gifts. Plan a ministry project together.	
RUN: Help each member decide on a way to use his or her unique gifts somewhere in the church.	

SPIRITUAL PARTNERS

CHECK-IN PAGE

Briefly check in each week and write down your personal plans and progress for the next week (or even for the next few weeks). This could be done (before or after the meeting) on the phone, through an e-mail message, or even in person from time to time.

MY NAME:

SPIRITUAL PARTNER'S NAME:

	OUR PLANS	OUR PROGRESS
WEEK 1		
WEEK 2		
WEEK 3		
WEEK 4		

MEMORY VERSES

SESSION 1

“Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” At once they left their nets and followed him. (Matthew 4:19-20)

SESSION 2

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.” (Matthew 26:26)

SESSION 3

“Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (Matthew 26:41)

SESSION 4

“Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” (Matthew 28:10)

LEADING FOR THE FIRST TIME

TEN COMMON LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES.
WELCOME TO LIFE OUT IN FRONT!

- 1** Sweaty palms are a healthy sign. The Bible says God is gracious to the humble. Remember who is in control; the time to worry is when you're not worried. Those who are soft in heart (and sweaty palmed) are those whom God is sure to speak through.
- 2** Seek support. Ask your leader, co-leader, or close friend to pray for you and prepare with you before the session. Walking through the study will help you anticipate potentially difficult questions and discussion topics.
- 3** Bring your uniqueness to the study. Lean into who you are and how God wants you to uniquely lead the study.
- 4** Prepare. Prepare. Prepare. Go through the session several times. If you are using the DVD, listen to the teaching segment and Leadership Lifter. Consider writing in a journal or fasting for a day to prepare yourself for what God wants to do.
- 5** Don't wait until the last minute to prepare.
- 6** Ask for feedback so you can grow. Perhaps in an email or on cards handed out at the study, have everyone write down three things you did well and one thing you could improve on. Don't get defensive, but show an openness to learn and grow.
- 7** Use online resources. There are many notable small group leader blogs and resources available.
- 8** Prayerfully consider launching a new group. This doesn't need to happen overnight, but God's heart is for this to happen over time. Not all Christians are called to be leaders or teachers, but we are all called to be "shepherds" of a few someday.
- 9** Share with your group what God is doing in your heart. God is searching for those whose hearts are fully his. Share your trials and victories. We promise that people will relate.
- 10** Prayerfully consider whom you would like to pass the baton to next week. It's only fair. God is ready for the next member of your group to go on the faith journey you just traveled. Make it fun, and expect God to do the rest.

LEADERSHIP TRAINING 101

TOP SIX IDEAS FOR NEW LEADERS

Congratulations! You have responded to the call to help shepherd Jesus' flock. There are a few other tasks in the family of God that surpass the contribution you will be making. As you prepare to lead, whether it is one session or the entire series, here are a few thoughts to keep in mind. We encourage you to read these and review them with each new discussion leader before he or she leads.

- 1** Remember that you are not alone. God knows everything about you, and He knew that you would be asked to lead your group. Remember that it is common for all good leaders to feel that they are not ready to lead. Moses, Solomon, Jeremiah and Timothy - they all were reluctant to lead. God promises, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). Whether you are leading for one evening, for several weeks, or for a lifetime, you will be blessed as you serve.
- 2** Don't try to do it alone. Pray right now for God to help you build a healthy leadership team. If you can enlist a co-leader to help you lead the group, you will find your experience to be much richer. This is your chance to involve as many people as you can in building a healthy group. All you have to do is call and ask people to help, you'll be surprised at the response.

- 3** Just be yourself. If you won't be you, who will? God wants you to use your unique gifts and temperament. Don't try to do things exactly like another leader; do them in a way that fits you! Just admit it when you don't have an answer, and apologize when you make a mistake. Your group will love you for it, and you'll sleep better at night!
- 4** Prepare for your meeting ahead of time. Review the session and the leader's notes, and write down your responses to each question. Pay special attention to exercises that ask group members to do something other than engage in discussion.

These exercises will help your group live what the Bible teaches, not just talk about it. Be sure you understand how an exercise works, and bring any necessary supplies (such as paper and pens) to your meeting. If the exercise employs one of the items in the Appendices, be sure to look over that item so you'll know how it works. Finally, review "Outline for Each Session" so you'll remember the purpose of each section in the study.

- 5** Pray for your group members by name. Before you begin your session, go around the room in your mind and pray for each member by name. You may want to review the prayer list at least once a week. Ask God to use your time together to touch the heart of every person uniquely. Expect God to lead you to whomever He wants you to encourage or challenge in a special way. If you listen, God will surely lead!
- 6** When you ask a question, be patient. Someone will eventually respond. Sometimes people need a moment or two of silence to think about the question, and if silence doesn't bother you, it won't bother anyone else. After someone responds, affirm the response with a simple "thanks" or "good job." Then ask, "How about somebody else?" or "Would someone who hasn't shared like to add anything?" Be sensitive to new people or reluctant members who aren't ready to say, pray or do anything. If you give them a safe setting, they will blossom over time.

BUILD COMMUNITY THROUGH COMMUNION

Looking for a wonderful means of worshiping as a group? Why not lead your group in sharing the Lord's Supper? If you've never done this before, the idea certainly seems daunting, but here is a simple form by which your small group can share this ordinance of the church. Of course, churches vary in their treatment of Communion so you may need to adapt these suggestions to your church's beliefs.

Steps in Serving Communion

- 1** Out of the context of your own experience, say something brief about God's love, forgiveness, grace, mercy, commitment, tenderheartedness or faithfulness. Connect your words with the personal stories of the group. For example, "These past few weeks I've experienced God's mercy in the way He untangled the situation with my son. And I've seen God show mercy to others of us here too, especially to Jean and Roger." If you prefer, you can write down ahead of time what you want to say.
- 2** Read 1 Corinthians 11:23-26*: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Here are some other good Communion passages:
Matthew 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25, Luke 22:14-20,
1 Corinthians 10:16-21 or 1 Corinthians 11:17-34.

- 3** Pray silently, and pass the bread around the circle. While the bread is being passed, you may want to reflect quietly, sing a simple praise song, or listen to a worship tape.
- 4** When everyone has received the bread, remind them that this represents Jesus' broken body on their behalf. Simply state, "Jesus said, 'Do this in remembrance of me.' Let us eat together," and eat the bread as a group.
- 5** Pray silently, and serve the cup. You may pass a small tray, serve people individually, or have them pick up a cup from the table.
- 6** When everyone has been served, remind them that the cup represents Jesus' blood shed for them. Simply state, "The cup of the new covenant is Jesus Christ's blood shed for you. Jesus said, 'Do this in remembrance of me.' Let us drink together." Then drink the juice in a group.
- 7** Provide transitions between questions. When guiding the discussion, always read aloud the transitional paragraphs and the questions. Ask the group if anyone would like to read the paragraph or Bible passage. Don't call on anyone, but ask for a volunteer, and then be patient until someone begins. Be sure to thank the person who reads aloud.
- 8** Break up into small groups each week, or they won't stay. If your group has more than seven people, we strongly encourage you to have the group gather sometimes in discussion circles of three or four people during the SERVE or GO sections of the study.

With a greater opportunity to talk in a small circle, people will connect more with the study, apply more quickly what they're learning and ultimately get more out of it. A small circle also encourages a quiet person to participate and tends to minimize the effects of a more vocal or dominant member. It can also help people feel more loved in your group. When you gather again at the end of the section, you can have one person summarize the highlights from each circle. Small circles are also helpful during prayer time. People who are unaccustomed to praying aloud will feel more comfortable trying it with just two or three others. Also, prayer requests won't take as much time, so circles will have more time to actually pray. When you gather back with the whole group, you can have one person from each circle briefly update everyone on the prayer requests. People are more willing to pray in small circles if they know that the whole group will hear all the prayer requests.

9 Rotate facilitators weekly. At the end of each meeting, ask the group who should lead the following week. Let the group help select your weekly facilitator. You may be perfectly capable of leading each time, but you will help others grow in their faith and gifts if you give them opportunities to lead. You can use the Small Group Calendar to fill in the names of all meeting leaders at once if you prefer.

10 One final challenge (for new or first time leaders):

Before your first opportunity to lead, look up each of the five passages listed below. Read each one as a devotional exercise to help equip yourself with a shepherd's heart. Trust us on this one. If you do this, you will be more than ready for your first meeting.

MATTHEW 9:36

PSALM 23

1 THESSALONIANS 2:7-8, 11-12

1 PETER 5:2-4

EZEKIEL 34:11-16

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dale Oquist was born and raised in Brookfield, Wisconsin (a suburb of Milwaukee), where his father was a small business owner of a heavy excavation company. He has an older sister and a twin sister. His older sister and her husband pastor in Wisconsin, and his twin sister is a private school principal in Oceanside, California.

Dale's dad and mom are both first generation believers who raised their children in a Christian home with strong values. They were at church every week for every service. His dad was deeply involved in Light for the Lost (national missions organization) through their local church and eventually became the district head of LFTL and also served on their national leadership team. This allowed Dale to get to know some great missionaries and pastors, including Bernard Johnson, Glen Cole, and Sam Cochran.

As a high school student, Dale's "call" to the ministry was very distinct and dynamic. He graduated from North Central University in Minneapolis in 1983 and has completed his Master's Degree in Missional Leadership at Northwest University in 2012.

Dale married Joni Wilkerson on August 1, 1986, in Fort Worth, Texas. Joni grew up in a pastor's home, and two of her three siblings are in vocational ministry today. Dale held youth pastor positions in Minnesota, Utah, and Oregon. Before he and Joni took their first lead pastor position, they had a college and career position in Phoenix, Arizona, under the leadership of Tommy Barnett.

The Oquists have led two churches into revitalization: Stevens Point, Wisconsin, and Olympia, Washington. Dale is currently the Lead pastor of Peoples Church, Fresno, CA

Dale and Joni have three children: Lauren, D.J., and Dawson.

