

discover
EASTER



LEADER GUIDE

discover
EASTER



CoffeeBreak





We thank Barbara Van Gelder for writing the original lesson material for this study (1995). This revised edition incorporates updates and alterations by small group leaders, staff, and other participants.

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To the Leader

Prepare the Lesson

Coffee Break and Bible discovery leaders help people discover together what the Bible says and means. They are not teachers but guides, facilitators, and conversation leaders.

This leader guide is meant to assist you as a small group leader by coming alongside you in your own personal work. Always answer the study guide questions first, using the suggested basic steps of preparation. Then use the leader material to enrich your understanding of the passage.

We encourage you to study ahead of time so that you do not have to rely on the leader guide during your Bible study group meeting. You don't want to give the impression that the leader guide is an answer book. The answers are in the Bible; you are a guide to help your group find the answers in God's Word.

Get Ready to Lead

Learn to think in terms of questions. As you prepare to lead a lesson, ask yourself questions and try to discover the answers yourself. This will prepare you to anticipate group members' questions and thus help others discover truths from God's Word.

The new "Conversation" box in the study guide is for extra questions. The leader guide includes many extra questions that you may use to help build the group's conversation around the text. We also suggest that you write your own questions. You know the interests, personalities, and needs of your group members. You know what they will be curious about or when they will want to dig deeper into a Scripture passage. Put those extra conversation-building questions in the "Conversation" boxes and use them during your group time to help get dialogue started.

Also, encourage group members to put their own questions and discoveries in the "Conversation" boxes. By doing this, they will also be preparing for the group discussion. You might want to start a group discussion by saying, "What is in your 'Conversation' box? What would you like to talk about together?"

If you are able to prepare and pray thoroughly before each group session, you will be able to lead without frequent references to your notes.

This will free you to be more aware of the work of the Holy Spirit during your group discussion time and to focus more effectively on your facilitation and leadership responsibilities. You will also be able to keep better eye contact and listen more carefully.

Lead with Questions

Use questions to direct the group discussion. Draw out positive contributions by asking questions. Break down difficult or unclear questions with smaller, concise ones. Also use questions to respond to wrong or problematic answers. If you learn to lead others into truth by using questions, you will be a good Bible discovery leader. The questions in this study are designed to be used with the New International Version of the Bible, but other translations can also be used.

Help to Apply

Gently help group members discover the meaning of God's message for their own lives. Be careful not to be judgmental of persons who may not yet seem to be applying the truths you encounter together. It's the Holy Spirit's work to apply God's Word to people's hearts. Tactfully let the group know how the Spirit is applying the Word in your own heart and life. Pray faithfully for the Spirit's work in others.

While giving people the time and space to apply biblical truths as the Spirit leads them, simply try to help group members see that there is a relationship between the Bible and life. Questions for reflection at the end of each session invite everyone to take some time for personal reflection and optional sharing. Try to offer at least a few minutes for reflection time toward the end of each lesson, and encourage group members to do additional follow-up reflection at home.

Introduction

As we approach Easter and the spring of the year, it's a wonderful time to discover or rediscover the story of new life in Jesus. In this study we invite you and your small group to follow Jesus' journey to the cross and on through his resurrection. We'll study closely together what happens to Jesus, and along the way we'll look into the lives of some of the other people who witnessed these events.

This study is based mainly on the accounts of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection in the gospel of Matthew. Matthew was one of the twelve disciples chosen and trained by Jesus to carry out his mission here on earth. Matthew was an eyewitness of Jesus' teaching and miracles, and the purpose of his gospel account was to bring the good news of Jesus to his readers, both Jew and Gentile. This study also focuses on a number of Old Testament prophetic passages to help us understand Jesus' role as the promised Messiah in God's plan of salvation for all who believe.

These lessons dig into a lot of biblical content to show the magnitude of God's redeeming love for his people. Throughout your study, try to keep your focus on Jesus as you introduce prophecies, events, and friends and enemies of Jesus. This leader's guide also includes many supplementary questions and Scripture references to help group members dig out the meaning of the text for themselves.

God bless and guide you as you lead your group closer to Jesus Christ, our living King!

Glossary of Terms

Aaron—God appointed him to be the first high priest of Israel. Aaron was Moses' older brother.

Abraham (also called Abram)—the father of the Jewish people (Israel), who were set apart to be God's holy nation. Abraham is also called the father of all believers (see Gen. 11:26-25:10; Rom. 4:11-17; Gal. 3:6-14, 29).

atonement—comes from the Hebrew word meaning “to cover over,” implying a sacrifice to make amends for wrongdoing. In Old Testament times an animal was sacrificed to atone for sin (Lev. 16). Christ's death was the final sacrifice, providing atonement for all who believe in him.

baptism—the ritual act of immersing a person in or sprinkling with water. In the Christian faith, baptism is an outward sign of an inward washing or cleansing. It is a symbol of our inclusion into God's people through the cleansing from sin that Jesus accomplishes in us through his sacrifice on the cross and the gift of his Spirit.

blasphemy—claiming to be God; also scoffing or reviling the name of God, speaking irreverently of God.

bles—to show favor and kindness.

covenant—an agreement (promise) between two parties. Early in Israel's history, God promised to be the one God of the Israelites. The Israelites were to obey and worship God. Part of the covenant between God and Israel included sacrifices; whenever the Israelites sinned, an animal was to be killed in place of the guilty party. In this way the covenant could continue. Jesus came to offer himself as the final sacrifice to reconcile God and people forever, a better covenant than the old one (see Luke 22:20; Rom. 5:8-11; Heb. 9:11-15).

disciples—followers of Jesus (as in John 8:31). The twelve disciples (Matt. 10:1-4) were followers Jesus selected at the beginning of his ministry to travel with him and to learn from him.

eternal life—the state of being forgiven and loved by God. Eternal life begins when one receives Jesus Christ by faith as Savior and Lord. Having eternal life does not mean believers will never suffer physical death but that they will enjoy fellowship with God both in this life and in the perfect, never-ending life we will have when God raises us from the dead.

faith—“confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (Heb. 11:1). True, saving faith consists of knowledge and confidence: a sure knowledge by which one accepts as true all that

God has revealed in the Bible, and a confidence that all one's sins are forgiven for Christ's sake.

Feast of Unleavened Bread—a Jewish feast that celebrates the Lord's deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt. This feast takes place for seven days after the celebration of Passover.

forgiveness—pardoning, giving up the desire to punish.

Gentiles—any people who are not Jewish.

high priest—in Jesus' day, the political head and leader of the Sanhedrin. Also the head of all the priests in Old Testament Israel. This priest represented Israel before God; the high priest offered sacrifices for the sins of the people.

Holy Spirit—the third person of the Trinity, one with the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit convicts of sin, works true faith in believers' hearts, and empowers them to live holy lives. The Spirit's presence in believers' hearts guarantees that they will receive all of God's promises (John 16:5-15).

holy—separated for service to God; perfect and blameless.

hosanna—an expression of praise that means "Save!"

intercede (intercession)—to plead on behalf of someone in trouble, to try to settle differences between two parties, or to act as a mediator. Jesus and the Holy Spirit intercede for believers before the Father in heaven (Rom. 8:27, 34).

Israel—God's chosen people, later known as the Jews.

Jerusalem—Israel's capital city, where God's temple is located. It was the spiritual center for the nation of Israel.

Jews—descendants of Abraham through his son Isaac; God's chosen Old Testament nation (also called Israelites, Hebrews).

justify (justification)—to make right with God. Jesus' sacrifice for our sake pays for our sin so that we can be justified before God through faith in Jesus as our Savior.

manna—"bread from heaven" provided by God and eaten by the Israelites during their years of wandering in the desert before they entered the promised land (Ex. 16:4, 13-35).

Mary Magdalene—a follower of Jesus whom he had cured of demon possession (Luke 8:2), also one of the first to see Jesus after his resurrection.

Messiah—the promised deliverer of God's people who would come to rule in peace, justice, and righteousness forever. Jesus, the Son of God, came to be this deliverer. He fulfilled all the Old Testament promises about the Messiah, which even included suffering for all God's people to save them from sin.

Moses—the great leader of God’s people when God freed the people from slavery in Egypt. Moses received the Ten Commandments and recorded all the laws given by God for the people to live by.

Passover—the annual religious festival celebrated by the Israelites to commemorate their deliverance from slavery in Egypt (Ex. 12).

Pharisees—the religious leaders and teachers of the Jews. They exercised great political influence. This elite group emphasized precise obedience to scriptural and traditional law. They hated Jesus and wanted him killed because he saw through their self-righteousness and challenged and threatened their authority.

(Pontius) Pilate—Roman governor of Judea who sentenced Jesus to be crucified.

prophet—one who speaks God’s message; a term generally used to refer to Old Testament preachers of God’s Word to the nation of Israel, many of whom foretold the future as revealed to them by God’s Spirit.

redeem—to buy something back; to save it from destruction by offering something valuable in exchange. Jesus redeemed us by offering his life as payment for all our sins.

resurrection—in reference to Christ, this refers to his return to life after being crucified, dying, and being buried.

righteous—being declared guiltless by God through faith in Christ for his finished work on the cross.

Sanhedrin—the Jewish high court (or council), made up of Sadducees, Pharisees, elders, and teachers of the law. The high priest presided over the Sanhedrin, which had authority in religious matters pertaining to Jewish law.

scapegoat—a goat used in the Old Testament ritual of atonement (Lev. 16); after another goat was killed for the sin offering, this live goat was symbolically burdened with all the people’s sin and sent away into the wilderness, representing the removal of sin from the community. Both of these animals served as symbols of Jesus’ sacrifice for our sake. His shed blood provides us with forgiveness of sins, and all our sins are transferred to him as the scapegoat sent out from God’s people and abandoned to die. (Jesus died outside the city of God’s people, Jerusalem, bearing the weight and curse of all our sins—see Ps. 46:4; Gal. 3:13.)

Son of Man—a title Jesus often used in reference to himself. This term was also well known as a reference to the Messiah (see Dan. 7:13-14).

1 Matthew 20:17-19; Luke 18:31-34 Matthew 21:1-11; 26:1-5, 14-35 Up to Jerusalem

Getting Started

Our study begins with the last few weeks of Jesus' life here on earth. For almost three years, Jesus has had an active ministry of teaching and healing while also training his twelve disciples. At this point, according to Matthew 19:1, Jesus has left Galilee and is in the region of Judea, where large crowds have followed him.

In this first lesson we see Jesus focusing his ministry more and more toward his coming crucifixion than he has done before. He prepares his disciples for the difficult events that lie ahead.

Optional Share Question

Note: The optional share question in each lesson may serve well at the beginning of your session, or it may fit better at some other time during your discussion. Use or adapt each share question in a way that works best for your group.

Suppose you were asked to spend about three years with a dozen of your peers for travel and educational purposes. What might you learn from that experience? What kind of person would you hope to have leading such a group?

What Does It Say?

1. Matthew 20:17-19; Luke 18:31-34

a. *What does Jesus share with the twelve disciples?*

Because this is your first lesson together, make sure your group members know who Jesus' twelve disciples are. (Matt. 10:2-4 provides a list of their names.) It's not necessary to memorize the disciples' (or apostles') names, but it can be helpful to be familiar with them when some are mentioned in later episodes. Ask group members if they can name some of the twelve disciples, if it seems appropriate, but be careful not to make anyone feel they have to know this information in order to participate.

As you begin your discussion, it may be helpful to supply group members with a little background information. Jesus knows the end is near, and he calls the twelve disciples aside with a message just for them. This is not the first time Jesus has shared this news with them. In Matthew 16:21 and 17:22-23 we find that he gives them this same information with lesser detail while teaching in the northern part of Galilee.

- **Why do you think Jesus shares this particular message only with his twelve disciples?**

We can't know for sure, but this information might really have confused the crowds following him. Even Jesus' own disciples, who were his closest colleagues, did not fully comprehend his ministry.

b. Why do you think Jesus mentions the connection between the upcoming events and “everything that is written by the prophets” (Luke 18:31)?

- **How does Jesus know these things will happen to him?**

- **If Jesus knows these horrible things will happen when he goes to Jerusalem, why is he going?**

Being the Son of God, Jesus knows these things will happen to him as “the Son of Man,” the Messiah who will deliver God's people from their sin. This is the reason Jesus came from heaven—“to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). The prophecies about him in Scripture show that his work is grounded in God's will and purpose. We'll explore some prophecies about these events in lesson 4.

- **What events does Jesus say will occur?**

He will be handed over to the Gentiles to be mocked, insulted, spit on, flogged, and killed. And on the third day he will be raised again.

- **If the disciples do not understand what Jesus is saying and “its meaning [is] hidden from them,” why do you think Jesus bothers to tell them?**

John 13:19 and 12:16 tell us that Jesus wants to prepare the disciples and strengthen their faith for the time when they will fully understand. (See also John 16:4, 12-13.) Jesus mentions the teaching of the prophets to show his purpose in fulfilling his Father's will, to reveal that he is the promised Messiah, and to indicate his deliberate submission in giving up his life as a ransom for many.

2. Matthew 21:1-11

a. *What does Jesus send two of his disciples to do? Why?*

In this passage Matthew quotes the prophet Zechariah, who proclaims the coming of Zion's king and describes how he will appear (Zech. 9:9). A new king or conqueror would customarily ride a magnificent stallion into the capital city, but God has planned for the chosen King, the promised Messiah, to enter Jerusalem on a donkey.

● **What image is Jesus creating in this event?**

Some interpreters tend to see only the gentle, humble Jesus here, but a note on Zechariah 9:9 in the *NIV Study Bible* explains that riding a donkey is “a suitable choice, since the donkey was a lowly animal of peace (contrast the warhorse of v. 10) as well as a princely mount (Judg. 10:4; 12:14; 2 Sam. 16:2) before the horse came into common use [in Palestine]. The royal mount used by David and his sons was the mule” (see 2 Sam. 18:9; 1 Kings 1:33). So even while riding this lowly animal, Jesus is publicly announcing his role as a peaceful king in the line of David. In this way Jesus shows that he is indeed the Messiah, the promised deliverer of God's people. Jesus has come to win the hearts of men and women with the truth, not with force.

● **How does this compare with the event of Jesus' birth?**

Jesus has been the Messiah-King since the moment of his birth, which was announced by God's angels to lowly shepherds and celebrated by sages from distant lands but not recognized by the leaders and scholars of God's own people in their holy city, Jerusalem. Jesus has visited Jerusalem before, but he has never entered the city in this way.

● **Why is he entering the city this way now?**

During his ministry, Jesus has always tried not to give the religious leaders cause to take action against him prematurely. According to God's plan, the time is now right for Jesus to complete his purpose as Messiah-King. (See John 7:1-8.)

b. *How does the crowd respond to Jesus' riding into Jerusalem on a donkey?*

c. *What might the people be expecting now?*

- **Why does the crowd call Jesus “the Son of David”?**

For a few days at least, the people believe Jesus is their Messiah-King in fulfillment of God’s ancient promise to David (see 2 Sam. 7:16). Even so, they do not fully understand the purpose of his mission.

- **What does “hosanna” mean?**

The glossary near the front of this guide states that “hosanna” is a Hebrew expression of praise meaning “Save!” (You may want to note that group members can look up unfamiliar terms in the glossary provided in their study guides.) The people are quoting from the Psalms as they join in the procession with Jesus (see Ps. 118:25-27). They are looking for the Messiah-King to save them, to free them to live at peace in their own land again.

- **What else does the crowd call Jesus, and what does this tell us?**

They call him “the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee” (Matt. 21:11). The people do not have a full picture of who Jesus really is. They recognize that he is a prophet and teacher. While they also acknowledge his kingship, they don’t understand what kind of king he is. It’s clear that they also do not comprehend his role as priest (mediator between the people and God) or anticipate his sacrificial death.

3. Matthew 26:1-5, 14-16

a. What does Jesus again predict? On what timetable?

Since the time of his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus has been teaching his disciples and others by telling them parables (Matt. 21:28-25:46). He now brings their attention back to events that are soon to unfold, noting that the Passover is just two days away.

- **What is the Passover?**

We’ll discuss the Passover more fully in lesson 4 as we look into Old Testament passages that point to Jesus as the promised Messiah. Some group members may already know about the significance of the Passover in connection with Jesus. But let people know it’s OK if they aren’t familiar with the Passover story, and mention that the glossary has a helpful definition. Note too that Jesus again tells his disciples that he will be crucified (Matt. 26:2).

- **According to Jesus, when will he be handed over?**

Jesus here is not only telling his disciples of his approaching death; he is also telling them when the process will begin. Calling himself the Son of Man, he explains that he will be handed over during the Passover to the chief priests and elders, the religious leaders who are plotting to arrest and kill him. (About the term “Son of Man,” see Dan. 7:13-14; Jesus often quoted parts of this text when teaching about his heavenly origin, earthly mission, and second coming; see Matt. 16:13-28; 24:30; 25:31; 26:64.)

- **Why do the Jewish religious leaders want to kill Jesus?**

Jesus is truly good and righteous. He heals people of their diseases, teaches with amazing wisdom from God, and preaches about the kingdom of God coming to establish justice, blessing, and peace in this world. But the religious leaders don't like it that Jesus also forgives sins and has made Messiah-like claims about himself. (See Luke 4:14-21; 5:17-26; John 5:16-18; 8:16, 54; 10:30, 37-38.) They especially dislike the fact that Jesus preaches against them, saying they are not good and righteous, even though they are the religious leaders of God's people. They live by the letter of the law—or so they claim—and hold the people in bondage to the law. Jesus' preaching and teaching bring them face-to-face with their own sin, so they want to do away with him. If group members would like more background on this matter, point out Matthew 23, where Jesus issues a scathing attack on the moral character of the religious elite. No wonder they hate him so much!

- **Why do the religious leaders not want to arrest Jesus “during the Feast”?**

The religious leaders are concerned that if they arrest Jesus during the Passover Feast, the many followers of Jesus who are in town for the festivities may start a riot. Jesus' triumphal entry about two days earlier has shown that he is popular among the people, and many thousands of them have crowded into Jerusalem for the annual Passover. The Jewish leaders are probably figuring it would be better to wait until the feast is over and most people have left the city.

b. Which disciple plays a crucial role in handing Jesus over? What appears to be his motivation?

Judas Iscariot is one of Jesus' handpicked disciples. He has been a follower of Jesus for almost three years.

- **Why do you think Judas has decided to turn against Jesus?**
- **What can we learn from Judas about our own vulnerability to the lure of sin?**

In John 13:2 the Bible explains that Satan has prompted Judas to betray Jesus (see also Luke 22:3), and in John 12:6 we learn that Judas is a thief. It can be hard to understand how someone could be so close to Jesus and yet turn completely from him, as Judas does. But when we look at our own lives and how easily we can be tempted to sin, we begin to see that we are vulnerable to Satan’s attacks as well. Without God’s constant protection, we are easy game for the devil and his schemes. In Luke 22:31-32 Jesus explains that he’s been praying for the disciples so that their faith won’t fail, for Satan has wanted to tempt them and to manipulate them as much as he can (the word “you” in 22:31 is plural, referring to all the disciples). (See also Job 1-2.)

- **What do Jesus’ goodness and righteousness reveal to us about ourselves?**
- **How does God want us to respond to what we see in ourselves?**

Psalm 51 gives us a picture of the kind of attitude God desires. We need to confess our sins and ask God to cleanse and renew us, restoring us to the joy of salvation.

4. Matthew 26:17-30

a. What is Jesus preparing to do?

Jesus is God incarnate (“in the flesh”), the fulfillment of the Passover. He is about to sacrifice his life for the sins of the world. The book of Hebrews tells us Jesus is greater than the angels, greater than Moses and the prophets, greater than the priests and the old sacrificial system that pointed to the forgiveness of sins. Jesus himself is preparing to fulfill the Passover by giving himself as the ultimate sacrifice for sin—once for all (Heb. 10:10-12).

b. What does Jesus say will happen to him? How do the disciples respond?

- **What does it mean to betray?**

One definition of *betray* is “to deliver to the enemy under the guise of friendship.”

- **What does Jesus say about the one who will betray him?**

Notice that Jesus speaks in a way that prompts each of the disciples to question his own weaknesses and wonder if he might betray Jesus—perhaps even accidentally. At the same time, Jesus is letting Judas know that he knows of his betrayal. (See also John 13:18-30.) If group members aren’t familiar with the rest of Judas’s story, you may want to summarize it or suggest that they read about it in Matthew 27:3-5.

c. What does Jesus say about the bread? About the wine?

In the midst of an old celebration, Jesus creates a new celebration picturing his sacrifice to pay for our sin.

- **Why do we need to eat the bread? What does eating the bread symbolize?**

Jesus says, “The bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6:33). We need to receive Jesus, take him into our lives, and let his Spirit permeate our being.

- **What does Jesus mean when he says his blood is “poured out”?**

Jesus’ blood has been shed for us. John 19:34 tells us that on the cross Jesus was pierced with a sword, “bringing a sudden flow of blood.” His blood was shed to “cleanse our consciences . . . so that we may serve the living God” (Heb. 9:14). Jesus died to set people free from the tyranny of sin (Rom. 6:17-18).

5. Matthew 26:31-35

a. What do these verses tell us about the relationship Jesus has built with his disciples?

Jesus is careful to prepare his disciples for the harsh realities that are coming. Perhaps he wants them to remember, after these events have taken place, that he loves them even though he knows they will disown him. The disciples’ actions fulfill Old Testament prophecy (Zech. 13:7). But does this justify their desertion of Jesus?

- **What is the good-news promise Jesus leaves with his disciples?**

Jesus again promises that he will rise from death after he has been killed.

b. What do these verses tell us about Peter and the other disciples?

Peter's bold personality comes through strongly in this scene. He will not fall away, he declares. But soon we see Peter doing just that. If some group members are unfamiliar with Peter's denial of Jesus, you might summarize it or suggest that they read about it in Matthew 26:69-75.

- **How might it be possible for a believer to deny Jesus?**
- **How might this happen in crisis situations? In everyday life?**
- **Why might Jesus allow Peter to deny him three times? Wouldn't once be enough?**

In 1 Corinthians 10:12 we read, "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" Some of us are so convinced of our own strength, as Peter often is, that we have to fail several times before admitting our utter weakness. Fortunately God is there even in our weakest moments. The Lord always provides a way out when our temptations seem unbearable (1 Cor. 10:13).

Taking It Home

- a. Prior to the events of this lesson, Jesus has focused his ministry on teaching and healing and on training his disciples. What is becoming his emphasis now? What might this shift mean?*
- b. How is Jesus showing great care and concern for his disciples at this time?*

The gospel writer Luke puts it this way: "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). Everything Jesus says and does from this point is focused on the cross.

Help your group see how Jesus is careful to prepare his disciples by telling them what will happen to him—in specific detail—and how they will respond to the upcoming events. The time has come for Jesus to reveal himself as the people's Messiah-King.

There's more to Easter than bunny rabbits and colored eggs. In fact, the real story of Easter is the world's most amazing love story. God loves us so much that he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to set things right again in this broken world. This story tells of Jesus, the promised Messiah of God's people, suffering unspeakable cruelties and dying on a cross. But it also tells of hope, because Jesus did not remain in the grave. He rose again on the first Easter to conquer the power of sin and death for all who believe!

Discover Easter is a six-lesson study of the events surrounding Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. It also includes a brief study of Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming Messiah. This material is intended for small group Bible study, but it can also be used profitably for personal study. Guides for leaders and group members are available.

The approach to Bible study in this series emphasizes discovery (the reader discovers what the Bible has to say by asking questions and seeking answers from the passage studied). This is an effective and enjoyable way to study God's Word.

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