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# Acts of Worship

ADULT LEADER'S GUIDE • DECEMBER 2014, JANUARY, FEBRUARY 2015

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## About the Quarter

The study this quarter is primarily from the New Testament. Its three units follow the theme of worship as it pertains to human response to God.

Unit 1, “In Awe of God,” has four sessions. These sessions explore the awesomeness of God in Hebrews, Matthew, and Luke. In Session 3, Luke’s account of the Christmas story recalls the praise and adulation expressed to God by both the angels and the shepherds.

The four sessions of Unit 2, “Learning to Pray,” look at prayer as found in Luke, John, Hebrews, and James. The sessions reflect prayer as taught by Jesus, Jesus’ prayer for his disciples, Jesus as the intercessor for God’s people, and the need to pray for one another.

Unit 3, “Stewardship for Life,” has four sessions. Each lesson examines some aspect of stewardship. These sessions from Matthew, Luke, and Ephesians are concerned with fasting, serving others, reasons for good stewardship in our relationships with others, and how to fortify ourselves for Christian service.

## About the Writer

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### Vol. 27 No. 2

ADULT LEADER’S GUIDE (ISSN 0898-0691) is published quarterly as part of *Judson Bible Journeys for Adults* for \$7.99 by the American Baptist Home Mission Societies, American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A., at 588 North Gulph Road, King of Prussia, PA 19406. Periodicals postage paid at King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Customer Service, ADULT LEADER’S GUIDE, Judson Press, P. O. Box 851, Valley Forge, PA 19482-0851.

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# Worship Christ's Majesty

**SCRIPTURE:** Hebrews 1:1-9

**KEY VERSE:** **He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.** —Hebrews 1:3

**SESSION OBJECTIVES:**

- to explore what we bring to worship, how we experience worship, and what we do during worship; and
- to apply the concept of relationship and awe to our worship experience.

## Introducing the Scripture

Hebrews has always been a mysterious book. No one knows exactly when or where it was written, or even who its author was. On top of that, there are also significant disagreements about its audience and the reason it was written. With that said, Hebrews was likely written toward the end of the first century AD, sometime after the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70 by the Romans in response to a Jewish revolt against their authority. The loss of the temple made it impossible for Jews to continue the daily temple sacrifices. Reeling from the loss of their central religious center, many Jews must have wondered how to maintain their Jewishness without the direct connection to God that the temple had provided.

Over time, because there had been so many groups of Jewish people scattered throughout the world for so long (the Jewish *Diaspora*, a Greek word that means “scattering”), many of them came up with alternate expressions of Jewishness that did not include physically participating in sacrifices at the temple. Many of these expressions can be studied through the remains of their synagogues (literally, “coming together places”) and writings, some of which can be found in the *Pseudepigrapha*, a collection of

Jewish writings from 300 BC to AD 300 that are not considered canonical.

Out of this diversity of expression emerged the Rabbinic tradition, an approach to the Jewish faith that became normative after the first century AD and continues to influence Judaism up to the present day. The Rabbinic tradition is based on the idea that God gave Moses *both* the written law (*Torah*) and an oral interpretation of that law. This oral interpretation was entrusted to the rabbis who in turn taught them to the people. Gradually, these oral interpretations of the law became written

down and were referred to as the *Mishnah*, a word meaning “instruction.” Many of the disputes that Jesus had with some of the rabbis and scribes in his day revolved around these oral interpretations of the law.

The approach of Hebrews may represent another option that was presented to the Jews: as the perfect sacrifice, Jesus fulfilled and supplanted the temple sacrifices, making the physical structure of the temple and the killing of animals unnecessary. Using the traditions and Scriptures of ancient Israel, the author of Hebrews argued for faith in Jesus as one way that faithful Jews could continue to maintain their Jewish identity in a new context.

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in a cave near the Qumran site between 1946 and 1956, as well as the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library in 1945, have

all contributed valuable primary source material for scholars who attempt to reconstruct the immense diversity of Jewish thought. Common themes in many of these writings are sophisticated angel hierarchies and the figures of Moses and Melchizedek. It makes perfect sense, then, that the author of Hebrews was concerned to show how much superior Jesus is to each of these figures.

Jesus  
fulfilled and  
supplanted  
the temple  
sacrifices.

The overall structure of the book suggests that it may originally have been delivered orally (that is, as a sermon), and its audience (and its mysterious author) were likely urban, Greek-speaking Jewish Christians. The Egyptian city of Alexandria is one good possible setting for the composition of Hebrews, but the text itself gives few clues as to its audience's location. While there is some evidence that Hebrews circulated with the Pauline letters in early collections of Christian writings, it is certain that Paul is not the author. The title "To the Hebrews" was a later addition by early Christian scholars, and the closing comments in chapter 13 may also have been added to make this sermon more like the letters that circulated with it.

There are many features and ideas in Hebrews that suggest similarities with other Hellenistic Jewish writings from the period, including philosophical works such as those of Philo of Alexandria (a first-century Jewish philosopher) and apocalyptic and messianic texts such as 1 Enoch. In many of these other texts, messianic figures play central roles in scenarios that bear striking resemblances with Hebrews' thought-world. Consider the following passage from 1 Enoch, written by a Jewish author sometime between 100 BC and AD 100:

And in that hour that son of man was named in the presence of the Lord of Spirits, and his name, before the Head of Days.

Even before the sun and the constellations were created, before the stars of heaven were made, his name was named before the Lord of Spirits.

He will be a staff for the righteous, that they may lean on him and not fall;

And he will be the light of the nations, and he will be a hope for those who grieve in their hearts.

All who dwell on the earth will fall down and worship before him, and they will glorify and bless and sing hymns to the? name of the Lord of Spirits.<sup>1</sup>

Philo understood the *Logos* (Word) of God as an intermediary figure, called "first-born," between God and the created world. In *De Fuga et Inventione* (On Flight and Finding), he stated that "the Word of Him that is is, as has been stated, the bond of all existence, and holds and knits together all the parts, preventing them from being dissolved and separated."<sup>2</sup>

While it isn't possible to prove that the author of Hebrews is directly

responding to Philo or to the writer of 1 Enoch, it is interesting to think about them being in dialogue with each other within a shared context.<sup>3</sup>

The first chapter of Hebrews is written in highly poetic language, with lots of alliteration and rhyming that we lose in the English translations. It may even have been used as an early hymn of the church. This makes it an especially relevant passage as we approach the topic of worship.

## Examining the Scripture

**HEBREWS 1:1-4.** The opening section of Hebrews is full of alliteration and assonance, which has been lost in English translations, but you can get a feeling for some of this by looking at the Greek transliteration: *polymerôs kai polutropôs palai ho theos lalêsas tois patrasin en tois prophêtais*. The "**many**" and "**various**" that are mentioned in **verse 1** are meant to evoke the multiple revelations of God, as well as the various ways that God's revelations came to us. Both are contrasted here with the single and final revelation that we receive through Christ. This pattern of comparing a superior one-time event with inferior multiple events returns later in the book, during the discussion of Christ's sacrifice.

The new revelation comes through "**a Son**" (v. 2), which should not be taken to mean that there are multiple Sons. Instead, the uniqueness of the figure of Christ is being emphasized in distinction to the multitude of prophets. **Verse 3** reads, "**He is the reflection of God's glory.**" *Glory* (*doxa* in Greek) is a word that was used in the Old Testament to describe God's presence among the Israelites. "**The exact imprint of God's very being**" sums up the author's emphasis. Paul made a similar statement to describe Jesus: "**He is the image of the invisible God**" (**Colossians 1:15**).

This Son is superior, because he has the very character of God, which means both that Jesus is divine just as the Father is, and that the Father and Son have lots of family resemblances. One such resemblance is faithfulness, the proof of which is the multiple revelations throughout the history of Israel. Jesus continued this through his own teaching and healing ministry, as well as through his crucifixion and resurrection. Another resemblance is Jesus' care to provide forgiveness of sins for the people of God. This is a major theme

The uniqueness of the figure of Christ is being emphasized.



later in Hebrews, where Jesus' one-time sacrifice is compared to the multiplicity of animal sacrifices. These family resemblances communicate the close relationship between the members of the Trinity and the ways that Jesus reflects the Father in God's revelation to us.

Jesus  
fulfilled  
the Jews'  
messianic  
hopes.

**HEBREWS 1:5-6.** The close relationship between Father and Son is demonstrated in the ways that Jesus is shown to be superior to the angels. The author of Hebrews supported this claim of Jesus' superiority by turning to authoritative sources: the Hebrew Scriptures. Specifically, he made use of quotations from **Psalms 2:7**, **2 Samuel 7:14**, **1 Chronicles 17:13**, and **Deuteronomy 32:43**. The author skillfully wove these passages together to show how Jesus fulfilled the Hebrew Scriptures. Some scholars think that this collection of quotations may have originally been used by early Christians to express their belief in Jesus as their Lord and was being modified or augmented by the author of Hebrews to prove his point.<sup>4</sup>

The author of Hebrews used these Old Testament texts to affirm the divinity of Christ and his superiority to the angels. Jesus is named Son and firstborn, something that an angel could never aspire to. Much of this language is also used in Jewish apocalyptic literature of the period (see especially 1 Enoch), although those writings rarely identify a particular individual with the Son/firstborn. By continuing to use these concepts and showing how Jesus fulfilled them, the author was arguing that Jesus fulfilled the Jews' messianic hopes.

**HEBREWS 1:7-9.** Continuing the theme of the exaltation of Christ over the angels, two quotations from the Psalms (**104:4** and **45:6-7**) really drive home the majesty of Christ, who now sits on the divine throne. To support his argument, the author employed a "royal psalm"—one that was traditionally used to describe the king's enthronement over Israel. (Some other examples of royal psalms are **Psalms 2, 18, 101, 110, and 144**.) The righteousness and justice of the king were given as reasons for anointing him with oil, which marked the choosing of ancient Israel's king.

Here, though, the author brought out the fact that **Psalms 45** could only really be fulfilled by a Messiah-figure, who would sit on God's throne eternally and judge the nations. While not explicit, it is possible that—for

the author—Jesus' baptism marked a new kind of anointing for a new kind of king. In contrast to even the most exalted human ruler, this new Messiah-King will rule eternally over all of creation with perfect justice and righteousness.

## Applying the Scripture

This passage points to several important ideas that can inform our practice together as the people of God. First, from a doctrinal standpoint, it is important to recognize the very close relationship between the Father and Son. This connection is central to the mystery of the Trinity, in which all three members are in constant communion and share one essence without overlap or confusion. While this is difficult to understand, this relationship is important to believers who desire to be more like Christ. Jesus models for us the paradox of complete surrender to God while maintaining our unique individuality, and the closeness and vulnerability that comes with that type of relationship.

Another important discussion point when examining this passage is the awe that our encounter with Christ inspires, and the worship that spontaneously comes from contemplation of Christ's majesty. It is important to highlight the variety of human responses that are appropriate in worship and throughout the rest of our lives, which find their energy in this meditation on divinity. Christ's majesty inspires worship in the hearts, bodies, and minds of the people of God, who—as beings created just "**a little lower than God**" (**Psalms 8:5**)—are moved to respond in a variety of ways.

Finally, the last section of this passage focuses especially on the angels' response to Christ and their responsibilities to us. As messengers between the human and divine realms, angels are themselves awe-inspiring. Often when an angel appears to humans, its first words are "Fear not!" (See, for example, **Luke 1:13** and **Luke 1:30**.) Our recognition of the role of the angels allows us to trust that God is taking care of us as God's people.

## Session Plans

These lesson plans are given as suggestions. The words **AND**, **OR**, or **AND/OR** between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

## GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION

- **Read Hebrews 1:1-9**, and session 1 in *Journeys* and this leader's guide.
- For activities in "Developing the Session," **bring** blank paper, colored pencils, and small strips of paper—enough for each participant. You will also need a metal bowl, rocks, water, and a candle.
- One option for the activity "Even the Angels Worship Him" is to listen to a recording of the song "We Bow Down" (lyrics by Twila Paris). **Find** a recording of the song and **bring** to class a laptop computer or tablet or CD player to play the song. An online search for "We Bow Down" will yield websites with music and lyrics.
- **Have available** Bibles; paper; pens and/or pencils; and either a chalkboard and chalk, a dry-erase board and markers, or newsprint and markers.

## BEGINNING THE SESSION

(10 MINUTES)

- **Welcome** participants and introduce the theme for this advent season, *Worship*. Share information from "Introducing the Scripture," found on page 3.
- **Ask** a class member to read the Key Verse, Hebrews 1:3, printed on page 3 in *Journeys*.
- **Explain** the term *imprint* and, if necessary, **summarize** the illustration in the section called "Imprinting and the Essential Connection" (page 3 in *Journeys*).
- **Invite** participants to respond to the two Questions for Reflection that follow that section:
  - Think of a close, personal relationship that you have been in. What was it that made that relationship special?
  - How did that bond influence your life and help you to become the person God has created you to be?
- **Pray**, inviting Christ's presence into this space. Give thanks for your church community and for each person present today. **Ask** the Holy Spirit to dwell in this space as you grow together. **Thank** God for invoking awe and wonder in us.

## DEVELOPING THE SESSION

(35-40 MINUTES)

### Majesty on High (10-15 min.)

- **Ask** for a volunteer to read **Hebrews 1:1-4** (p. 4 in *Journeys*).
- Using the information about **Hebrews 1:1-4** in "Examining the Scripture," **explain** the passage.

- **Give** everyone a blank piece of paper and a bunch of colored pencils. **Ask** them to draw whatever comes to mind when they hear the word *majestic*. This can be solid colors, a scene, a person, or a group of words.

OR

- **Invite** participants to think of a time when they came face to face with indescribable natural beauty. **Ask**: How did you respond? What does the word *majestic* mean to you?

AND

- **Share** and **discuss** the wide variety of ways and places where we see and experience majesty in our lives.
- **Ask**: What elements of your weekly worship experience help you appreciate and understand the glory of God and majesty of Christ?

AND

### Even the Angels Worship Him (10-15 min.)

- **Ask** a class member to read **Hebrews 1:5-6** (p. 6 in *Journeys*).
- Using the information about **Hebrews 1:5-6** in "Examining the Scripture" **explain** the passage.
- **Explain** that bowing down before Christ suggests a physical movement. In some churches, kneelers are built into the pews to allow for this important form of worship.
- **Discuss** whether or not your worship includes bowing down, and if it doesn't, how it could be incorporated into the flow of worship.
- **Ask**: In some cultures, people bow down when greeting one another. In your culture of origin, how does one person greet another person with respect?

OR

- **Invite** everyone to kneel on the ground and listen to or sing the song "We Bow Down." **Instruct** participants to actually bow down each time they hear or sing the phrase "we bow down." If you have participants who cannot kneel on the ground, they can stand and bow as far forward as comfortable, or they can raise their arms in the air each time they hear "we bow down." Enjoy practicing bowing to the Lord together.

AND

### Making Space for Something New to Grow (10-15 min.)

- **Ask** a class participant to read **Hebrews 1:7-9** (p. 8 in *Journeys*).

- Using the information about **Hebrews 1:7-9** in “Examining the Scripture,” **explain** the passage.
- **Lead** a discussion of the following questions:
  - In the life of our church, what tender, green shoots of new life are hidden under layers of old ways of doing things or “small” ways of thinking?
  - How can our worship experiences on Sunday morning allow opportunities for participants to “let go” of those things that keep us tangled and preoccupied? How might worship help us to truly see God as God is and allow us to love righteousness and transform the world?
- **Invite** everyone to take a small piece of paper and write a word or sentence that represents something they are holding onto that is making them feel tangled or preoccupied. **Invite** them to each, in turn, light their papers on fire and throw them into a metal bowl containing rocks and water, and say, “I invite new life to enter this space.”

## CLOSING THE SESSION

(5-10 MINUTES)

- **Discuss** this aspect of “Applying the Scripture”: Jesus models for us the paradox of complete surrender to God while maintaining our unique individuality, and the closeness and vulnerability that comes with that type of relationship. How do you deal with the paradox of unconditional love while maintaining personal boundaries?
  - **Explain** to participants that today is the second Sunday in the season of Advent. Advent is the first season of the church calendar. The church calendar begins by anticipating the “advent” or “coming” of the Christ-child into the world.
  - **Refer** participants to the Advent litany “Practice Peace,” found on page 9 in *Journeys* and opposite.
  - **Ask** participants to stand, if they are able. Tell them they will respond to the words in the litany by shouting out, “Practice peace!” Now **say**, “Let’s try it. Say it with me. Practice peace!”
- An optional movement can also be added to those words. **Invite** participants to add these movements:
    - On the word *practice* put your left hand over your heart.
    - On the word *peace*, put your right palm out toward someone in a sign of blessing.
  - **Close** the session by reading the Advent litany “Practice Peace.”

## Practice Peace (Second Sunday in Advent)

Litany with voice and movement by Rita Berglund<sup>5</sup>

*Practice peace!*

In non-violent speech.

*Practice peace!*

With acts of reconciliation.

*Practice peace!*

By calming the mind and body.

*Practice peace!*

Inviting stillness and active listening.

*Practice peace!*

By creating beauty.

*Practice peace!*

By detaching from fear.

*Practice peace!*

With an awareness of God’s abiding presence.

*Practice peace!*

## NOTES

1. George W.E. Nicklburg and James C. VanderKam, *1 Enoch: A New Translation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 1 Enoch 48:2-9.

2. F.H. Colson and the Rev. G.H. Whitaker, *Philo*, “On Flight and Finding” (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), lines 111-114.

3. Other Christian writers (John, for example) would take up the *Logos* as a way of talking about Jesus. Also, 1 Enoch was known to other early Christian writers (see Jude 14-15 for a direct quote).

4. Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 50.

5. Brad Berglund, *Reinventing Worship* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2006), 120.

# Make a Joyful Noise

**SCRIPTURE:** Psalm 95:1-7

**KEY VERSE:** **O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!** —Psalm 95:1

**SESSION OBJECTIVES:**

- to explore God as Gift, Helper, King, and Maker;
- to discern that God is truly worthy of praise; and
- to invite good listening to God and to one another.

## Introducing the Scripture

The Psalms are a collection of songs or poems that were used in the liturgical life of Israel throughout its history. The collection is the first of the Writings, one of three major divisions of Hebrew Scripture. (The Torah and the Prophets make up the other two divisions.) The various psalms were written over a period of about five hundred years, and while tradition has ascribed many of them to David, it is impossible to know for sure the exact details of their authors' identities and their contexts.

**Psalm 95** is considered one of three "Festival Psalms." The other two are **Psalms 50** and **81**. Each is a two-part psalm. (See the chart below.) While there are significant differences between each of these psalms, the basic functions of each section are similar. The first section of each psalm serves to connect the second "discourse by God" section into the shared religious practices of Israel. In **Psalm 50**, the theophany ("appearance of God" in Greek) serves as a call to worship, which leads into the "sermon" that God gives in the second section. In **Psalm 81**, the call is directed to the musicians involved in the New Moon festival, which was the first day of each month in Israel's lunar calendar. In **Psalm 95**, this structure is repeated with the call to worship, which leads into the challenge in the second half of the psalm.

### Comparison of Festival Psalms

<b>50:1-6</b> (theophany)	<b>50:7-23</b> (discourse by God)
<b>81:2-6</b> (call to musicians)	<b>81:7-17</b> (discourse by God)
<b>95:1-7a</b> (call to worship)	<b>95:7b-11</b> (discourse by God)

The religious life of Israel was (and still is) incredibly complex, with a calendar punctuated by festivals, ritual sacrifices, and pilgrimages. The Psalms were one way that music and Scripture were embedded into the movements of the everyday religious life of Israel. It seems clear that each of these particular psalms was probably read, recited, or sung before the people during the first part of a significant religious celebration, which would have included feasting.

Biblical scholar J. Clinton McCann Jr. links the Scripture for this week, **Psalm 95**, directly to the Feast of Booths, which occurred every year between late September and late October<sup>1</sup> and commemorated the fragile dwelling places that the Israelites had for the forty-year wandering in the wilderness. During this festival, the Israelites traveled to Jerusalem to live in tents and share meals together. According to McCann, there are three movements in this psalm that would have been directly linked to specific parts of this celebration: "**let us sing**" (v. 1), "**let us come before him**" (v. 2), and "**let us bow down in worship**" (v. 6).<sup>2</sup> Festivals such as these were ways that the people of God shared their lives together and imbued every aspect of their lives with the awareness of God's loving care.

While the Scripture for this week includes only **verses 1-7**, this overall structure is important for understanding the role that this psalm played in the liturgical life of its Israelite audience. Many scholars believe that this psalm was written either in the exilic or post-exilic period, which means that many Israelites would have been far from the land of Israel and there would not have been a reigning Jewish king in the land. Whenever the psalm was composed, it served as a way for diaspora Jews (*diaspora* comes from the Greek for "scattering") to celebrate the kingship of God in the midst of their exile and lack of political self-determination, and as a challenge to continue to remain faithful to God in spite of these hardships.



## Examining the Scripture

**PSALM 95:1-2.** The first section of the psalm is one of celebration and calls the people of God to shout and sing loudly to God. This shout is echoed in **Psalms 47, 81, 98, and 100**. The phrase “**rock of our salvation**” is thick with inter-textual connections, including that of the *ebenezer* (“rock of help” in **1 Samuel 7**), the rock that Moses struck in the desert (**Exodus 17:6**), and even other psalms (see especially **89:27** and **Deuteronomy 32**). The phrase “**let us come into**” (enter) tells us that this psalm was likely sung during the procession toward the temple.

**PSALM 95:3-5.** These verses begin with two significant titles held by God: “**great God**” and “**great King above all gods**.” There are frequent references in the Hebrew Bible to the superiority of God (Yahweh) over various other gods (see **77:13** and **89:7-8**).

**Verse 4** names two opposite realms that are in God’s hand. Then **verse 5** fills in what lies between these two realms with another pair: the sea and the dry land. These two pairs of opposing places are meant to evoke the totality of God’s rule. The powerful image of God’s hand (or “**hands**”) connects God with the act of creation. The “**depths of the earth**” may be a reference to Sheol, the place of the dead in Jewish theology. (See **Genesis 37:35** and **Numbers 16:30**; note that some modern translations replace Sheol with “grave.”)

**PSALM 95:6-7.** This section likely describes the worshipers’ entry into the temple, and the bodily service that is appropriate in the dwelling place of God, the King. The verbs here are literally translated as “bow down to the ground” (translated as “**worship**” in the New Revised Standard Version), “bend the knee,” and “**kneel**.” While these verbs are used synonymously, each is taken from a Hebrew root word related to a part of the body.

God is acknowledged as creator and caretaker of the people of Israel, who are also in God’s hand (see **v. 4**). The two-part covenant formula used here (“**he is our God, we are the people**”) is adapted

This psalm  
was likely  
sung  
during the  
procession  
toward the  
temple.

from one used in **Deuteronomy 26:17-19** and **27:9-10**, with the addition of the flock imagery found elsewhere in the Psalms and in the Prophets (**Jeremiah 23:1-4**, **Micah 2:12-13**, **Ezekiel 34:11-12, 23**).

## Applying the Scripture

The major theme of this psalm is the kingship of God and the response of God’s people to their King. Sing! Shout! Worship!

These responses are appropriate throughout the year, but maybe especially so in the Advent season. As we read and meditate on the coming of Jesus the King, psalms like this one can help us understand some of the longing experienced by characters involved in the Nativity stories, like blind Simeon and the prophetess Anna in **Luke 2**. Living under Roman occupation must have made songs like **Psalm 95** particularly poignant for the people of God, who were looking forward to the freedom and justice that would come from God’s Messiah. We too can experience this longing for a worthy King, who would fulfill Mary’s prayer in **Luke 1:46-55**:

**My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud**

**in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.**

As we wait for the promised King, we can celebrate the ways that God is living as king over the people of God today and find creative ways to actualize that reign in our lives and the lives of those around

The powerful  
image of  
God’s hand  
(or “hands”)  
connects  
God with  
the act of  
creation.

us. This will include the ways that we approach God in our worship together.

Notice the very physical, body-centered modes of worship highlighted in this and other psalms. Prayer and worship can be very cerebral and involve lots of thinking about the right things to say, but it is important to remember that God asks us to worship with the fullness of our embodied selves, which means that prayer and worship need to engage our hands and feet, our backs and our necks. Bowing to the ground, kneeling, entering, singing, and shouting are all ways that we worship God with our bodies.

Another important theme that appears in this Scripture and that we can apply to our own lives is that of God as rock. Rocks represent stability and carry memory in the Hebrew Bible, and no image conveys that better than the heap of stones set up by Joshua after crossing the Jordan river in **Joshua 3** and **4** and the “stone of help” (*ebenezer*) in **1 Samuel 7**. In this particular psalm, however, the “**rock of salvation**” is likely meant to remind the Israelites of when Israel tested God’s (and Moses’) patience at Meribah and Massah (see **Exodus 17** and **Psalms 95:8-9**). The Israelites had been rescued from Egypt and were travelling through the wilderness, but they were quick to forget how God had provided for them in the past. God’s faithfulness to Israel was demonstrated yet again when Moses struck the rock and water flowed from it to quench the people’s thirst. But at the end of **Psalms 95 (vv. 10-11)**, the psalmist reminds us that such testing eventually resulted in forty years of wandering and the death of an entire generation outside of the Promised Land. The metaphor of God as a rock is comforting, as stones remind us of God’s presence and constant help in our lives.

Listening is yet another theme of this psalm. Listening conveys the human response demanded at the end of our reading and preceding the “sermon” from God that comes in **verses 8-11**. Instead of a simple demand for obedience, the psalmist stresses the importance of listening to God, which requires silence.

One Christian group that demonstrates this well is the Religious Society of Friends, or the Quakers. Each week, Quakers meet to spend an hour in expectant silence, waiting for God’s spirit to speak either in the silence or through the words of any participant who feels moved to speak. This spiritual practice of silence builds an openness to what God is saying, as well as the willingness to respond. Caroline Stephen has this to say:

The one cornerstone of belief upon which the Society of Friends is built is the conviction that God does indeed communicate with each one of the spirits He has made, in a direct and living inbreathing of some measure of the breath of His own Life; that He never leaves Himself without a witness in the heart as well as in the surroundings of man; that the measure of light, life, or grace thus given increases by obedience; and that in order clearly to hear the Divine voice speaking within us we need to be still; to be alone with Him, in the secret place of His Presence; that all flesh should keep silence before Him.<sup>3</sup>

It is important that we learn to balance the search for silent listening with the need for loud, exultant singing. There will be periods of silence in our worship, just as there are in our lives, and learning to cultivate these spaces are an important part of learning to live more authentically. There are also times for shouting praise, confessing our frailties, and sharing food and conversation together. While some or one of these may feel more authentic in the moment, all are important elements of our shared worship experiences.

## Session Plans

These lesson plans are given as suggestions. The words **AND**, **OR**, or **AND/OR** between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

### GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION

- **Read Psalms 95:1-7**, and session 2 in *Journeys* and this leader’s guide.
- For “Developing the Session,” **bring** a small stone and a blank sheet of lined paper for each participant.
- **Have available** Bibles; paper; pens and/or pencils; and either a chalkboard and chalk, a dry-erase board and markers, or newsprint and markers.

### BEGINNING THE SESSION

(10 MINUTES)

- **Welcome** participants and open in prayer: **Invite** Christ’s presence into this space. **Thank** God for creation and for the life-giving forces that brought us into this world. **Ask** for Christ’s presence to be with those who find it difficult to rejoice with this worship community or cannot be physically present during this Advent season.

- **Summarize** the information in “Introducing the Scripture.” **Point out** the basic functions of the “Festival Psalms” (Psalms 50, 81, and 95) as well as the overall role of this psalm in Israelite religious life.
- **Ask** someone to read the Key Verse, **Psalm 95:1** (p. 10 in *Journeys*).
- **Ask:** In what ways do you open your heart and voice to express deep joy and aliveness? How can we practice that, even now, as a class or community? (Did someone offer up an active idea? Try it out!)
- **Ask:** How do you express your gratitude to God for the gift of Christ to the world and the gift of grace in our lives?

### DEVELOPING THE SESSION (35-40 MINUTES)

#### The Rock of Our Salvation (8-10 min.)

- **Ask** a participant to read **Psalm 95:1-2** (p. 11 in *Journeys*).
- Using information from “Examining the Scripture,” **summarize** the main points of these verses.
- **Distribute** the stones you brought to participants and **invite** them to examine the stones in their hands.
- **Ask:**
  - How would you describe the way the rock in your hand looks and feels?
  - How do the qualities in the stone remind you of God’s presence and constant help in your life?
  - Have you worshiped and sung in a stone church? How is it different than worship in a wooden church or worshipping outside?
- **Invite** participants to take home the stone as their *Ebenezer*: a reminder that God is their helper.

AND

#### A King above All Others (8-10 min.)

- **Ask** for a volunteer to read **Psalm 95:3-5** (pp. 12-13 in *Journeys*).
- Using information from “Examining the Scripture,” **summarize** the main points of these verses.
- **Discuss** the following questions:
  - What image appears in your mind when you hear the word *king*? Where does that image come from?
  - Verses 3-5 describe God as a King above all gods. How does the psalm writer attempt to help us understand what that means?

- **Distribute** paper to participants and **ask** them to write down their answers to these two questions:
  - What other images are helpful to imagine God’s greatness as beyond our ability to describe?
  - How would you rewrite verses 4 and 5 to help others understand them?
- **Invite** a couple of participants to share what they came up with.

AND

#### Kneeling before Our Maker (8-10 min.)

- **Ask** a class participant to read **Psalm 95:6-7** (p. 14 in *Journeys*).
- Using information from “Examining the Scripture,” **summarize** the main points of these verses.
- **Lead** a discussion using the following questions or ones of your own:
  - When you receive a gift from a friend, what grateful response do you find appropriate?
  - What are the creative ways we can respond in worship to the gift of grace we have freely received from God?
  - Psalm 95:6 asks us to “kneel before God.” How does kneeling in worship create a sense of respect and reverence? Have you practiced kneeling or bowing this week? What has that experience been like?

### CLOSING THE SESSION (5-10 MINUTES)

- **Summarize** the information found in “Applying the Scripture” regarding Quaker listening and **discuss** any questions that come up.
- **Lead** a discussion of the following questions:
  - Have you ever talked to someone and known they weren’t listening to you? How did that make you feel?
  - How does thinking about obedience as listening change the meaning of that word?
  - What is the difference between obedience training and learning to listen effectively?

OR

- **Invite** participants to break up in pairs and think about how the word *obedience* defined as “listening” would have drastically changed an experience or a relationship in their own lives.
- **Invite** a few people to share their responses with the group.

- **Ask:** How can worship help us learn to listen more deeply to the voice of God? How can it help us learn to listen more deeply to the voice of others?

**AND**

- To close the session, **invite** the class to participate in the litany titled “Practice Joy,” found on page 16 in *Journeys* and below.
- **Explain** to participants that today is the third Sunday in the season of Advent. Advent is the first season of the church calendar. The church calendar begins by anticipating the “advent” or “coming” of the Christ-child into the world.
- **Ask** participants to stand, if they are able, to read the litany. **Tell** them they will shout out the words “Practice joy.” You will read the indented lines.
- Optional movements are built into this litany. If you wish, **ask** participants to add these movements.

**An Advent Litany**

**Practice Joy (Third Sunday of Advent)**

Litany with voice and movement by Rita Berglund<sup>4</sup>

**Practice joy!**

In breathing deeply. (*Breathe deeply.*)

**Practice joy!**

By reaching wide to open your heart. (*Open your arms wide.*)

**Practice joy!**

With a stomp affirming the dance of our life stories. (*Stomp your foot.*)

**Practice joy!**

In a clap of blessing. (*Clap.*)

**Practice joy!**

With an “alleluia” of thanksgiving. (*Shout, “Alleluia!”*)

**Practice joy!**

By touching each other in gratitude for community. (*Touch the person next to you.*)

**Practice joy!**

By listening deeply to the aliveness of this now! (*Cup your hand behind your ear to listen.*)

**Practice joy!**

**NOTES**

1. J. Clinton McCann Jr., “The Book of Psalms,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 1061.
2. McCann, 1061.
3. Caroline Stephen, *Quaker Strongholds* (London: E. Hicks, 1891), 26.
4. Adapted from Brad Berglund, *Reinventing Worship* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2006), 121.

**Looking Ahead: SPRING 2015**

The Spring 2015 quarter, “The Spirit Comes,” focuses on God, the Holy Spirit. The three units, based on New Testament Scripture passages, trace God’s work through the Holy Spirit to empower disciples for the Christian faith.

Unit 1 is a five-session study of John’s Gospel with a concluding session from the first two chapters of Acts. These studies focus on Jesus’ teaching about and promise of the Holy Spirit.

Unit 2 is a five-session study for the Easter season. The Scriptures under consideration draw from 1, 2 and 3 John. These letters provide a window into the work of the Holy Spirit in the community of faith.

Unit 3, “Woven Together in Love” is a four-session study of 1 Corinthians. This is a careful study of the final chapters of Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth. These sessions move learners to see the connection between loving one another and living as Christ’s witness in the world.

Ingrid Dvirnak is the writer of the Spring 2015 quarter.



# Glory to God in the Highest

**SCRIPTURE:** Luke 2:1-20

**KEY VERSE:** **The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.** —Luke 2:20

**SESSION OBJECTIVES:**

- to explore the experience of the shepherds surrounding the birth of Jesus;
- to ponder, as Mary did, the meaning of the birth of Jesus; and
- to invite the shepherds' encounter to enhance our own worship experience.

## Introducing the Scripture

The birth of Jesus took place in an incredibly volatile political environment. In the second century BC, Jewish rebels had gained their independence from the Greek Seleucid Empire, forming the first truly independent Jewish kingdom in centuries. After only a century of independence, however, the Hasmonean kingdom was conquered by Pompey of Rome, and a new Roman puppet government was installed in 63 BC. In 40-39 BC, Herod the Great was declared King of the Jews by the Roman Senate and the Herodian family came to power.

Herod was not Jewish by racial background, a fact that his opponents used against him. His family was from an Arab background, but they had converted to Judaism. Herod was awarded the puppet throne because he had backed the winners in the civil war that followed the assassination of Julius Caesar: Octavius, who eventually became Caesar Augustus, and Mark Anthony.

When Herod died, his territory was divided up among his sons. Archelaus, the son who ruled Judea, proved grossly incompetent, and the Roman Emperor Augustus deposed him in AD 6. Then he combined Judea with Idumea and

Samaria to form the Roman province of Judaea and placed the entire region directly under Roman governance.

There were multiple large and small-scale rebellions during this period, culminating in the Great Jewish Revolt of AD 66-70, in which most of Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. The city of Jerusalem was eventually rebuilt as a Roman city, but the temple remained in ruins. Another rebellion, the Bar Kochba Revolt, took place a half century later in AD 135.

Luke wrote his Gospel in this politically charged atmosphere and insisted on including some politically charged rhetoric of his own: the announcement that a new King had arrived. It is easy to read the Gospel and miss this subversive undercurrent, but a close reading of the text while keeping the social and political context in mind reveals a story that still has the capacity to shock and challenge its readers.

Luke was also careful to remind his readers multiple times (three times in this chapter and twice in the previous one) that Jesus was of the house and line of David, the consummate Israelite king, and that all of this happened in David's hometown of Bethlehem.

The choice of shepherds as the first audience for this counter-imperial victory proclamation, then, is highly ironic. Instead of appearing to the existing political powers, the wealthy elite of Jerusalem, or the priesthood in the temple, God chose to announce the deliverance of Israel to poor shepherds. Not only were they poor, but within certain segments of first-century Judaism, shepherds were generally considered unclean sinners. Here, then, is an early fulfillment of Mary's *Magnificat*: **"He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things,**

God chose  
to announce  
the  
deliverance  
of Israel  
to poor  
shepherds.

and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:52-53). These lowly shepherds became the chosen messengers to go out to announce the coming Deliverer of God’s people.

## Examining the Scripture

**Luke 2:1-20** relates the story of the coming of Jesus into the world. The text is composed of three scenes:

1. the birth of Jesus;
2. the announcement of his birth; and
3. the shepherds meeting Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

**LUKE 2:1-7.** Luke was very careful to set this section of the story well historically. The details here, including the mentions of Augustus, the census decree, and who was the governor of Syria at the time, all lend authenticity to the narrative and help set the stage for what will follow.

It is worth mentioning the likely hardship that such a decree would have placed on a family such as Joseph’s, who lived far from the city of his registration (seventy miles directly, but the trip would have been longer traveling by animal on winding mountain roads). For a peasant artisan, the trip would have been taxing physically, emotionally, and financially. To add insult to injury, the town was so overcrowded when they arrived that there was nowhere available to stay at the inn. It was in this setting that Mary’s firstborn son was born, unobtrusively in an animal stable (likely a cave).

**LUKE 2:8-14.** The announcement of the angelic messenger to the shepherds comes as something of a surprise: Luke began chapter 2 with talk of kings and emperors and had just finished an almost abrupt description of the birth of Jesus. Then, suddenly, attention is turned to the shepherds. Why did God choose shepherds out in a nearby field to receive the announcement? It is possible that the shepherds were chosen because of the strong connections between the roles of king (or God) and shepherd in the Hebrew Bible. It is also possible that they were chosen simply because they were there.

Their distance socially, economically, and politically from the political and religious power-center of Jerusalem also points to the purpose of God’s revelation: the message is for the common person, not just the elite. Jesus came to preach good news to the poor and to set the oppressed free (see **Luke 4:18**). Note the emphasis: “**I am bringing you**

**good news of great joy for all the people**” (v. 10, emphasis added).

In this section of Scripture, we read that a group of God’s messengers (Greek *aggeloi*/English *angels*) appeared to announce “good news” (Greek *euangelion*) about a Deliverer (Greek *sōter*/English *savior*) born in the city of King David, who was called Messiah (Greek *christos*/English *Christ*) and Lord (Greek *kurios*). The vocabulary choices here are striking.

First, while *aggeloi* is the word used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible to describe angels, it is also the word used for official messengers of a king. Next, the word that we translate as “good news” or “gospel” is a term that was used to describe the victory proclamation sent back to Rome after a general had made a successful conquest.

The titles given to this newly born child, however, are the most striking: *soter*, *christos*, and *kurios*. *Soter* (“savior” or “deliverer”) was a title for divinities (Heracles and Zeus were both called “savior”) and was used for kings and healers. (It was commonly used for Asclepius, the god of healing, as well as generically for physicians.) Most strikingly, it was used to describe Caesar Augustus, who had brought peace to the Empire by destroying his enemies.

In first-century Judaism, *Christos* (the Greek translation of the Hebrew *Messiah*) was a divine high priest/king figure who was coming to overthrow the nations, sit on God’s throne, and rule with justice and righteousness. (See the description of this figure in session 1 of this unit.) It literally translates as “anointed one,” which is another direct reference to kingship.

*Kurios* (translated here as “Lord”) is another highly political term in the context of Roman-occupied first-century Palestine, since it was a title that Caesar reserved for himself. To call Jesus *kurios* was explicitly to deny the legitimacy of the Roman *kurios*, as supported by later Christian history. The refusal of early Christians to confess Caesar as lord resulted in dispossession, torture, and martyrdom for many and created a legacy of faithfulness to Christ that continues among modern Christians.

The title *kurios* or “Lord” was also used in the Septuagint to translate the divine name of God: YHWH—Yahweh or Jehovah. The use of this title for Jesus had added political implications for the followers of the various Jewish sects in the first century.

The message  
is for the  
common  
person, not  
just the elite.

The two-part “Gloria” in **verse 14** turns our attention back to the instigator of the upheaval of Incarnation and the result of this upheaval: “**Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!**” The angels praised God in heaven for the peace that would now come to people on earth through the Savior who had been born.

**LUKE 2:15-18.** Compared to the vivid imagery of the angelic proclamation, these verses almost seem flat in their lack of detail. It is no surprise that Christian storytellers and songwriters have focused so much on this encounter between shepherds and infant king, but Luke was much more interested in the *meaning* of Jesus’ incarnation as described by the angels than in the particulars of the shepherds’ interactions with the baby. Several things stand out here, however.

Note the simple obedience of the shepherds. They moved quickly from the position of awe and silence into action: “Let us go!” The shepherds were also honored with being the first proclaimers of the gospel message of the coming of the Christ. Their recognition of the significance of the Christ-child and joyful announcement of what they had seen and heard stands as a positive example for us of the movement from reflection to action.

**LUKE 2:19-20.** Mary already knew her infant child as the Davidic Messiah (**1:32-25**) and as “Lord” (**1:43**), and now she heard the shepherds’ words about her child—marvelous things to ponder!

Mary and Joseph did not fully understand the implications of these events at this point in the narrative. Further revelation was coming (**2:33-38**), but twelve years later, Jesus’ parents still did not understand (**2:48-50**).

The word here for “ponder” is the Greek *sumballo*, which more literally translates as “throw/bring together.” This gives us a good image of what must have been going on in Mary’s heart and mind: she had a series of surprising encounters (Gabriel, Elizabeth, and now the shepherds), and she had to find some way of “throwing them together” that would explain what was happening.

It is no surprise that Christian storytellers and songwriters have focused so much on this encounter between shepherds and infant king.

## Applying the Scripture

There are three movements in the experience described in this passage of Scripture that can give us a pattern for our own experience with God: encounter, response, and reflection.

In the first movement, the shepherds had an overwhelming experience filled with shocking new sights and sounds. This is not the only way that individuals in the Gospels encountered the Messiah, however. The Magi in Matthew, for instance, found their way to the infant king by use of their study and intellect. Many people, including the shepherds, encountered Jesus in the course of their everyday work. Others, like Mary and Joseph, encountered Jesus because of their relationships with the people they loved. These are all ways that believers today can experience Jesus as well, either in worship or in our daily lives.

Responding to revelation can be just as flexible and varied. For the shepherds, there was an implied command (or at least an invitation) that they followed (“go and find the baby”), but the nature of their response was left undefined by the angelic announcement. Even with this ambiguity about what was required of them, the shepherds’ spontaneous reaction to the experience with the newborn king turned out to be the first proclamation by humans of the gospel message.

Our responses can be just as spontaneous, or they can take planning and preparation. Session 3 in *Journeys* mentions the Conestoga Huts, which is one way that churches in Oregon have found to respond to the gospel message by making a practical difference in the lives of people who are experiencing homelessness. (See page 20 in *Journeys*.) These kinds of experiments in compassion have a way of then informing our interpretation of Scripture and our encounters with God.

The third aspect of our experience of God is reflection. As we encounter God and respond, we must also take time to reflect on both our experiences and our actions. For Mary, this meant “treasuring” and “pondering” all that had happened to her and discovering its meaning in her life.

Ideally, this happens at the communal level every week in worship, when we come together with other believers

to reflect and share our encounter with God. We can cultivate this time by finding space outside of public worship to reflect as individuals on how God is moving, as well. The more we practice reflection, the easier it will become, and the more thoroughly it can inform the way that we live our lives.

Keeping our momentum going in this threefold movement (encounter, respond, reflect) is important. It is possible to get stuck in one of these three movements or to isolate them from each other. When we have a significant experience of God, we sometimes need to be encouraged to respond in ways that involve our hearts and our bodies. It is also possible to get so caught up in what we are *doing* for God that we don't take time to reflect or to seek new experiences. Think of this threefold movement as a wheel that needs to keep spinning if we are going to keep moving toward our goals of personal transformation and the transformation of the world around us.

## Session Plans

These lesson plans are given as suggestions. The words **AND**, **OR**, or **AND/OR** between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

### GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION

- **Read** **Luke 2:1-20**, and session 3 in *Journeys* and this leader's guide.
- For "Beginning the Session," **create** small signs with individual characters' names from this section of the Christmas story on them: Mary, Joseph, Jesus, the shepherds, the angels, the animals in the stable, and the people that the shepherds tell the good news to. **Hang** these signs up, spaced out, around the room before class.
- For "Developing the Session," **bring** blank and lined paper (up to two sheets of each per participant), colored pencils, and regular lead pencils.
- **Have available** Bibles and either a chalkboard and chalk, a dry-erase board and markers, or newsprint and markers.

### BEGINNING THE SESSION

(10 MINUTES)

- **Welcome** participants and remind them of the theme for this advent season: *worship*.
- **Invite** one of your participants to open this time together with prayer.

- **Give** a summary of the events that are related in **Luke 2:1-7**. **Use** information from "Introducing the Scripture" as necessary to supplement your summary.

**AND**

- **Ask** participants to think about which character they most identify with in the Christmas story. **Invite** them to go stand under the sign with that character's name on it.
- **Invite** participants to discuss why they chose this character.

### DEVELOPING THE SESSION

(35-40 MINUTES)

#### Encountering God (10-15 min.)

- **Ask** a participant to read **Luke 2:8-14** (p. 18 in *Journeys*).
- **Lead** a discussion using the following questions, or use questions of your own.
  - Think about a time when you were afraid. What are the effects of fear in your life? How does fear hold you back from following God's leading in your life?
  - Describe an experience of worship that moved you into God's presence. What was it like? What were the elements of worship that allowed you to sense God's presence?
  - The word *doxology* describes our praise to God. What allows you to offer a doxology, to fully praise God? Singing? Praying? Movement? Other elements of worship?

**AND/OR**

- **Invite** participants to draw a picture or write a paragraph of what they think that night, out in the fields with the shepherds, would have looked like and/or felt like. **Invite** participants to voluntarily share their drawings or writings as well as any insights this process gave them.

**AND**

#### Responding (10-15 min.)

- **Ask** a participant to read **Luke 2:15-18** (p. 19 in *Journeys*).
- **Lead** a discussion using the following questions, or use questions of your own.
  - How does our church congregation become the hands and feet of Jesus when we leave worship each Sunday?



- Are there any creative ministries happening in other congregations that would provide a way to cooperate across denominations? What are those ministries and how could our church become involved?
- How does our church's worship service motivate you to serve and love the world?

**AND/OR**

- **Invite** the participants to think about how they would return to your community after encountering the baby Jesus. What would they tell you? How would they tell you? What would this news mean for you as a poor, shepherding community?
- **Invite** a few participants to leave the room and "go encounter the baby Jesus" (i.e. pretend to be the shepherds and go to Bethlehem). **Give** them a minute to discuss in the hall, then have them come back in pretending to be the shepherds, telling you all about their incredible encounter with the one whom the angels called the Savior.
- **Discuss** as a class how this experience, either firsthand or secondhand, could reshape or change your life. Where would you go from here, after hearing this good news?

**AND****Reflecting (10-15 min.)**

- **Ask** for a volunteer to read **Luke 2:19-20** (p. 21 in *Journeys*).
- **Summarize** the part of "Examining the Scripture" regarding Mary's pondering. **Point out** the fact that she did not have the entire picture of who Jesus was yet.
- **Lead** a discussion using the following questions, or use questions of your own.
  - The word *treasure* is usually used to describe financial resources. Is it possible that our life's deep experiences are treasure as well? How can worship be a place where we mine the gems of meaning that are present in our divine encounters?
  - During the course of a worship service, there are often significant moments of grace and depth. What changes could we make to worship to allow more time for reflection?
  - Are there times when you have treasured something and pondered it in your heart just as Mary did? What was that experience like? What do you still carry from that experience?

- What role have you played in the birth of a child (mother, father, grandparent, friend, visitor, caretaker)? What do you remember from the time following the birth? What made that time special and unique? Did the experience involve praise and worship? If so, how? If not, how could a birth include these things?

**CLOSING THE SESSION****(10 MINUTES)**

- **Invite** participants to continue to practice intentional, reflective silence and to think about significant moments of grace and depth they have experienced.
- **Distribute** paper to participants and **invite** them to draw or write as they reflect on all you have discussed as well as those significant moments. If they wish to simply sit and reflect, invite space for that as well. **Allow** about five minutes of silence for this reflection.

**AND**

- **Close** the session by reading the litany "Practice Love" found on page 23 in *Journeys* and below. **Ask** participants to read the words "Practice love!" You will read the other lines.

**An Advent Litany****Practice Love (Fourth Sunday of Advent)<sup>1</sup>**

Litany by Rita Berglund

*Practice love!*

In thought, action, and emotion.

*Practice love!*

With disciplines that facilitate transformation.

*Practice love!*

With behaviors that heal relationships.

*Practice love!*

With respect for the brokenness of self and others.

*Practice love!*

By nurturing children and cherishing the elderly.

*Practice love!*

By living into truthfulness.

*Practice love!*

By fearlessly being Christ in the world.

*Practice love!***NOTE**

1. Brad Berglund, *Reinventing Worship* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2006), 122.

# In Awe of Christ's Power

**SCRIPTURE:** Matthew 14:22-36

**KEY VERSE:** **When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."** —Matthew 14:32-33

**SESSION OBJECTIVES:**

- to explore solitude, our hearts, faith, trust, and healing; and
- to apply the story of Jesus walking on water to our own lives and worship experiences.

## Introducing the Scripture

Matthew's Gospel is one of the three synoptic Gospels, along with Luke and Mark. (*Synoptic* comes from *syn*, meaning "together," and *optasia*, meaning "vision.") They are so called because they share a great deal of common material, style, and emphases. Many of the similarities between them can be attributed to common sources (whether written or oral), including the so-called Q source (from the German *Quelle*, meaning "source"). Scholars believe that Mark was the first Gospel written, with John and Matthew independently using Mark as the source for their own "walking on the water" story.

The book of Matthew was probably composed sometime between AD 70 and 110 by a relatively well-educated Greek speaker who was very familiar with the Scriptures of Israel. The disciple Matthew was probably not the author, though it may have been someone close to him or heavily influenced by his legacy.

**Matthew 14:22-36** is paralleled in both Mark (6:45-56) and John (6:16-25), though Matthew's account is the longest and includes material that is unique to his Gospel. There is rich symbolism in this passage, as the Lord of creation treads upon the chaotic waters. The fragile boat upon the sea, filled with disciples, may have become a metaphor

for the infant church, seemingly separated from their Lord and going through the tumultuous context of mid-first-century Palestine. For the early church, this story would have been a great encouragement that Jesus was indeed still nearby and concerned with their tumultuous situation.

For a first-century audience infused with Hebrew Bible imagery and mythology, this narrative would have contained a striking and triumphant motif: the Lord of creation treading upon the waves. In the Hebrew Bible (and in much other ancient mythol-

ogy), the sea symbolized the cosmic chaos that threatened the created order (see **Genesis 1:2**). In the creation story related in **Genesis 1:1-10**, God separated and organized the chaotic waters, creating the very possibility of the teeming life to follow. Especially in the Psalms, God is portrayed doing battle with and conquering the sea, sometimes pictured as a sea monster called Leviathan or Rahab (see **Psalms 18:15-16; 69:1-3; 74:13-14; 77:16; 89:9-10; 104:7; 107:23-32; 144:5-8; and Job 9:13**). In the Babylonian creation story, the god Marduk defeated the goddess Tiamat, portrayed as a giant sea serpent. He then divided her body in half, creating the land and the sea. In the stories of ancient Canaan, the great god Baal defeated the sea god Yam, echoing the Babylonian creation story.

The motif of a divine figure walking on water is also present in many other ancient religious traditions, including those of the Ancient Near Eastern and Greek worlds. The gods Horus, Orion, and Hermes are all described as having the ability to walk on water, and there is even a Buddhist legend of a monk who was able to walk on water. In this particular story, the monk walked halfway across a river before he began to lose faith and sink, but he rallied his faith and finished

The sea symbolized the cosmic chaos that threatened the created order.

crossing the river. The Buddha then praised the monk's faith and offered him as an example for others to follow.

By modifying the Ancient Near Eastern and Greek traditions, Matthew (like the writer of Genesis) transvalued these other narratives and ascribed true divinity and sovereignty to only one: Jesus, the Lord and Son of God.

## Examining the Scripture

**MATTHEW 14:22-24.** The boat in which the disciples traveled would have been a shallow-draft boat, much like a modern rowboat, only longer. Archaeologists have recovered just such a first-century boat from the Sea of Galilee, and it is on display today in a climate-controlled glass enclosure by the sea. Such a vessel could easily become swamped by high waves driven by strong winds.

In comparison to the Markan version of this story (compare **Mark 6:45-52**), Jesus' separation from his disciples is emphasized in the Matthew version: while Jesus was "**alone**" in **Mark 6:47**, Matthew emphasizes this fact by reiterating that Jesus is "**by himself**" and "**alone**" (**verse 23**), and the boat is described as "**far from the land**" (**verse 24**) instead of just "**out on the sea**" (**Mark 6:47**). This fits well with the analogy of the embattled church as the disciples in the boat. While Jesus had promised to be with them (see **Matthew 28:20**), the early church must have sometimes felt that their Lord had left them alone.

Jesus going up a mountain to pray is meant to remind us of Moses, who went up Mount Sinai to be alone with God. Presenting Jesus as a "new Moses" is a major theme in Matthew: one of Jesus' most important roles in Matthew is as the great teacher and law-giver, echoing the role of Moses in the Hebrew Bible.

There are several places that this "new Moses" theme shows up in Matthew, including the Sermon on the Mount (**Matthew 5-7**; compare with **Exodus 24:12**) and the Transfiguration (**Matthew 17:2**; compare with **Exodus 34:29, 35**), but there are major similarities in historical context as well. Both Moses and Jesus were presented as deliverers who spent their infancies in Egypt and who were sent to the people of Israel living under foreign domination.

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**MATTHEW 14:25-27.** In many ancient cultures and religious mythologies, walking on water is a sign of divinity. (Gilgamesh, Homer's *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca*, Dio Chrysostom, and Porphyry are some notable examples.) This is true for the Hebrew God as well. (See **Job 9:8; 38:16; Psalm 77:19; Isaiah 43:16**; and

**51:9-10**, for example). In this narrative Jesus' treading upon the sea is emblematic both of his divinity and his triumph over the forces of chaos. (See "Introducing the Scripture" above.)

For the reader thoroughly immersed in the thought-world of the Hebrew Bible, the important point is not that Jesus broke the laws of gravity or buoyancy, but that he overcame the power of chaos by treading upon the sea. Treading on enemies is well established in the Hebrew Bible as a way of showing victory over them. (See especially **Deuteronomy 33:29; Psalm 91:13**; and **Isaiah 41:25**.)

For this passage, however, the most striking parallel is found in **Job 9:8**, "[God] **alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the Sea.**" The footnote in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible states that another way of translating this would be "trampled the back of the sea dragon." In the Septuagint (the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek; this is the version of the Bible that Matthew and his audience would have been most familiar with), the word *peripaton* (trampling) is precisely the same as the word used in **Matthew 14:25** for Jesus "**walking**" on the sea. Just as in Job, Matthew portrayed the Lord of creation trampling upon the sea, demonstrating his absolute sovereignty over it. The fear of the disciples is an appropriate response to the way that Jesus reenacted God's victory over the primordial chaos at Creation by triumphing over the stormy sea.

Jesus  
going up a  
mountain to  
pray is meant  
to remind us  
of Moses.

**MATTHEW 14:28-31.** This section of the narrative is unique to the book of Matthew and suggests that it was added to Mark's version. In Matthew's Gospel, Peter represented *all* the disciples of Jesus. He was the model, both good and bad, for the life of faith. Here he expressed the "nothing ventured, nothing gained" mindset when we are at our

best and the “help, Lord, I’m in over my head” cry when we are at our worst. Understanding Peter’s role in Matthew explains both why he wanted to go to Jesus on the water and why he failed. It also clarifies Jesus’ graceful response to Peter.

The word translated here as “doubt” (v.31) is the Greek *distazo*. This word means wavering, not skepticism. This implies that Peter’s failing was not a lack of belief, but instead a momentary loss of trust. Jesus’ question should not be taken as a rebuke, but as a real question with a real answer. The Greek translated here as “**you of little faith**” is really just one word: *oligopiste*. It is a compound word comprised of *oligos* (small, little, short) and *pistos* (faith, belief). One way to translate this single word would be as a diminutive expression of affection: “little faithful one,” which certainly has a different feel to it than “you of little faith.”

**MATTHEW 14:32-33.** Matthew’s ending to the story is also very different from Mark’s. Instead of astonishment, lack of understanding, and hardened hearts, we have here an enthusiastic response to Jesus as Son of God. The stilling of the wind (and waves, presumably) echoes another calming of the weather in **Matthew 8:26**, but instead of asking, “**What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?**” (**Matthew 8:27**), the disciples now knew who they were dealing with: “**Truly you are the Son of God.**” Perhaps they knew this because Jesus had walked on the water or perhaps because he calmed the wind and waves. Or it might have been a little of both!

**MATTHEW 14:34-36.** This brief episode serves as a bridge between the preceding narrative and the narrative in **Matthew 15**, which involves a conflict with the Pharisees and scribes, who came all the way from Jerusalem to confront Jesus. (Gennesaret is sixty miles from Jerusalem, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.) This passage portrays Jesus doing what he does throughout the Gospel: demonstrating his healing power.

### Applying the Scripture

Jesus set an example for believers by intentionally seeking time and space

Peter’s  
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to be alone with God. Matthew’s Jesus was *very* busy teaching and healing, and he had just heard the news of the beheading of John the Baptist (**Matthew 14:1-12**). His attempt to find solitude had been foiled by a large crowd that gathered and needed healing and feeding (**14:13-21**). Instead of giving up, though, Jesus persisted in his quest for solitude and found it only by sending his disciples away in a boat.

This level of aloneness is difficult to find and maintain unless we retreat to the wilderness, but this is not practical

for many believers in our modern world, particularly those of us who live in cities, far from the natural beauty of the mountains or the ocean. Cultivating solitude does not require a wilderness sanctuary, however. Henri Nouwen, an author who has written much about the value of solitude, has this to say on the subject:

It seems more important than ever to stress that solitude is one of the human capacities that can exist, be maintained and developed in the center of a big city, in the middle of a large crowd and in the context of a very active and productive life. A man or woman who has developed this solitude of heart is no longer pulled apart by the most divergent stimuli of the surrounding world but is able to perceive and understand this world from a quiet inner center.<sup>1</sup>

The episode with Peter gives us an example of how to live faithfully even through our doubt. Peter’s desire to act, even when his faith was wavering, is admirable. Jesus told his followers to “**take heart**” (**14:27**), and Peter immediately volunteered to prove that he was willing to obey. Even when he began to sink, his immediate reaction to falling—“**Lord, save me!**” (**14:30**)—is a strong indication that even though he was still growing into the faithful rock that he would become, Peter’s heart was in the right place. Learning to become “little faithful ones” is an important part of following Christ and growing into people who are like him. There is a cycle of faith-building that happens when we cry out to Jesus, we encounter his saving power, and we react in thanksgiving and worship.

The word *salvation* means a lot of different things in Scripture. In the Hebrew Bible, it often referred to divine assistance in battle and God’s leading Israel

“Truly you  
are the Son  
of God.”



out of Egypt. In the Gospels, the word is primarily used to refer to being set free from demonic possession and the healing of diseases. An interesting derivation of our English word *salvation* is the root word *salve*, which is a medical ointment used to treat skin diseases. Thus, salvation can be linked with healing. Many of the early church fathers viewed sin as a hereditary disease that Adam and Eve passed on to their children, and they saw Jesus as the great Healer, come to purge the infection of selfishness, greed, and pride from our lives.

If we learn to approach salvation as a form of healing, we can come to see that our goal is not simply focused on the afterlife, but on the ways that Jesus acts as the Great Physician in our lives and our world right now. This healing, too, causes us to confess our allegiance, gratitude, and praise to Jesus, who heals our sickness and rescues us from drowning in the swirling eddies of our destructive habits.

## Session Plans

These lesson plans are given as suggestions. The words **AND**, **OR**, or **AND/OR** between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

### GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION

- **Read** **Matthew 14:22-36**, and session 4 in *Journeys* and this leader's guide.
- One option for "Beginning the Session" is to view a video portrayal of Jesus walking on water. If you have a laptop computer and a wireless Internet connection available where your class meets, you could consider this option. **Search** [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) for "Jesus walks on water" to find appropriate video clips.
- **Have available** Bibles; paper; pens and/or pencils; and either a chalkboard and chalk, a dry-erase board and markers, or newsprint and markers.

### BEGINNING THE SESSION (10 MINUTES)

- **Open** the session in prayer. **Pray** for God's divine presence to be with those who are traveling this holiday season, for those who are sick or unable to leave their homes to attend church, for those who are lonely or estranged from family, for those who are in need of healing, and for those who are in need of a better balance in their lives (whatever that may mean for them).

**Thank** God for sending us Jesus and for the salvation he brings.

**AND**

- **Introduce** the Scripture passage in a visual way by watching the video clip you selected.

**AND/OR**

- **Summarize** "Introducing the Scripture," highlighting the Lord of creation trampling upon the sea, demonstrating his absolute sovereignty over it.

### DEVELOPING THE SESSION (35-40 MINUTES)

#### Making Solitude a Priority (10-15 min.)

- **Ask** a participant to read **Matthew 14:22-23** (p. 24 in *Journeys*).
- **Lead** a discussion using these questions or questions of your own:
  - What does the word *solitude* mean to you? How is it different than simply being alone?
  - What methods of prayer and spiritual practice have you found to be most helpful in renewing your spiritual life?

**AND/OR**

- **Ask** participants to spread out and find personal space (this can even extend outside your classroom). **Give** them space to be alone and find solitude. They can pray, write, or simply be with God. After five or so minutes, **ask** the class to come back together and discuss how that time felt to each of them. **Ask** them how they can incorporate more of that solitude time into their lives, even for five short minutes a day.

**AND/OR**

- **Read aloud** the quote from Henri Nouwen in "Applying the Scripture" and **discuss** how and why Jesus might seek this kind of solitude.

**AND**

#### Jesus Closes the Gap (10-15 min.)

- **Ask** a participant to read **Matthew 14:24-27** (pp. 25-26 in *Journeys*).
- Using the information in "Examining the Scripture," **highlight** the main points of this passage.
- **Lead** a discussion using these questions or questions of your own:
  - It has been said that the mind is like Times Square on New Year's Eve and the heart is like a quiet cave in the mountains. What does that imagery say to you? Do you agree?

- The word *courage* means “an action of the heart.” How do you see courage as an outcome of Christ’s gift to us—fullness of heart?

**AND/OR**

- **Invite** participants to imagine being a disciple in the boat and seeing Jesus walking toward them on the water.
- **Ask:** How would you “take heart,” as Jesus invites you to do, in that situation?
- **Invite** participants to discuss this as a class, individually journal or write about it, or share with partners; then have a few share with the group.

**AND****A Place for Doubt (10-15 min.)**

- **Ask** a participant to read **Matthew 14:28-31** (p. 27 in *Journeys*).
- Using the information in “Examining the Scripture,” **highlight** the main points of this passage.
- **Lead** a discussion using these questions or questions of your own:
  - Are there characters in the story with whom you identify? Who and why?
  - What is the difference between the word *faith* and the word *trust*—or is there no difference?

**AND/OR**

- **Ask:** Have you ever felt like you were “sinking” like Peter because of doubt? In that situation, how would you have answered these questions if asked: What caused you to doubt? When did you let go of your trust? What do you think happened?
- **Have** participants discuss this as a class, individually journal or write about it, or share with partners, and then have a few share with the group.

**AND****Salvation as Healing (8-10 min.)**

- **Ask** a participant to read **Matthew 14:32-36** (pp. 28-29 in *Journeys*).
- **Lead** a discussion using these questions or questions of your own:
  - Can someone be healed and not cured? Can someone be cured and not healed?
  - How does authenticity relate to authority?

**AND/OR**

- **Discuss** how we can and do incorporate healing into our worship experience. **Ask,** How can we make our

worship experience a more healing one? What exactly is there to heal in our congregation? What would a healing service look like for you?

- **Ask:** As a church community, how do we help each other heal? How are we there for one another when we are needing to touch the healing cloak of Jesus?

**CLOSING THE SESSION****(10 MINUTES)**

- **Invite** participants to design their own worship service based on what you have worked on these past four Sundays. What kind of things would they include? Why would those things be important? If time permits you can create a worship service together as a class, but if time is short, **invite** participants to do this as a spiritual practice individually over the next week. These plans may never come into fruition, but they can still be a meaningful personal practice, inviting participants to think through what truly connects us to God.

**AND**

- **Close** the session using the litany titled “Practice Christmas,” found on page 30 in *Journeys* and below.

**Practice Christmas (during the Twelve Days of Christmas)<sup>2</sup>**

Litany by Rita Berglund

*Practice Christmas!*

By inspiring hope.

*Practice Christmas!*

By working for peace.

*Practice Christmas!*

By making sounds of joy.

*Practice Christmas!*

By reaching out with generous love.

*Practice Christmas!*

By inviting the transformation of your heart.

*Practice Christmas!*

By spreading the good news of Christ.

*Practice Christmas!*

With every aspect of aliveness.

*Practice Christmas!***NOTES**

1. Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group Inc., 1975), 25.

2. Brad Berglund, *Reinventing Worship* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2006), 122-123.

# A Model for Prayer

**SCRIPTURE:** Luke 11:1-13

**KEY VERSE:** “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.” —Luke 11:2

**SESSION OBJECTIVES:**

- to explore the Lord’s Prayer;
- to discuss ways that God answers prayer; and
- to apply the Lord’s Prayer to our lives in real and meaningful ways.

## Introducing the Scripture

Luke’s Gospel is a book explicitly addressed to a Greek-speaking audience that was likely very far-removed in time and space from the original Palestinian Jewish peasant communities among which Jesus lived and taught (see **Luke 1:1-4**). Scholars disagree about when Luke’s Gospel was composed, but it is generally accepted that it appeared sometime between AD 60 and 100, most likely around AD 80–85.

Based on what we know about the transmission of the traditions that make up Luke’s story, however, it is believed that much of the raw material of the story comes from older oral traditions about Jesus. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all make use of at least one common source, called Q (for the German *Quelle* or “source”).

Scholars have speculated about the original composition of Q for many years, but some recent scholarship suggests that it may have been simply a collection of stories passed from person to person and group to group and that it may never have existed in written form.<sup>1</sup> This would explain both the lack of documentary evidence (no manuscripts have been identified as Q) and the Gospel writers’ apparent freedom to alter the tradition. Oral traditions have a tendency to change between tellings, to be adapted to the situations in which speakers find themselves.

Oral traditions have a tendency to change between tellings.

Furthermore, when we approach the Q source as oral tradition rather than as a written text, we begin to notice lots of interesting mnemonic devices (aids to memory) such as alliteration, assonance, and repetition that remain in the written forms of the first three Gospels.<sup>2</sup>

Prayer was very important to Luke’s Jesus: he was frequently going off on his own to pray, and periods of prayer precede several of the central events in Luke’s narrative. It is no surprise, then, that our passage for this week begins in just this way. After observing one of Jesus’ private prayer sessions, his disciples asked their teacher for instructions on how to pray.

This appears to have been a common practice among Jewish teachers and their disciples in the first century. Jesus’ disciples noted that John the Baptist had already taught his disciples to pray (see **Luke 11:1**). Having a set of remembered prayers passed from teacher to disciple, in addition to those recited within the synagogue, would have been a way for a master teacher to assist disciples in their spiritual formation. Just as children recite their alphabet and multiplication tables to learn the basics of reading and arithmetic, such prayers serve to cement important principles in our minds and function as a foundation for further growth.

Jesus responded to his disciples’ request by teaching them the prayer that we call the Lord’s Prayer (or the Our Father in some traditions) in **Luke 11:2-4**. This is followed by a collection of Jesus’ teachings about prayer in **Luke 11:5-13**.

## Examining the Scripture

Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer is remarkably simple compared to the version in **Matthew 6:9-13** or the version found in the *Didache* (a first- or second-century church document). It’s

impossible to know for sure whether Matthew added to Q or Luke omitted sections, or whether their versions of the oral tradition were simply different. It seems logical to assume that because of the oral nature of Q, the simpler structure of Luke may be more original, while some of Matthew's language may be more original.

While the Lord's Prayer has been recited in a wide variety of contexts since Jesus originally spoke its words, its original setting was among poor Palestinian Jewish peasants. By attending to the economic, social, and political context of first-century Palestine, we may begin to understand the prayer's original importance and meaning.

William Herzog notes in his book *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God* that Palestinians in this period lived under a triple layer of taxation.<sup>3</sup> First, the Roman authorities demanded tribute from their subjects, which would have been collected by Herod to send on to Rome. Second, Herod himself collected heavy taxes to pay for his lavish palaces and multiple building projects. And third, the religious elite in Jerusalem demanded tithes and taxes to pay for the sacrifices and the administration of the temple, not to mention the lavish lifestyles of the high priestly entourage. Under this system of exploitation, peasant farmers often had to go into debt simply to survive, creating an endless cycle of destitution and oppression.

If we imagine ourselves hearing the prayer in this context for the first time, the words of the Lord's Prayer are striking: "Father, may your name be sanctified and may your just kingdom come; give us each day enough bread to eat; release us from our debts, as we release others from their debts to us; do not bring us to the time of trial" (author's own translation from the Greek text).

Read this way, the Lord's Prayer is a petition from poor Palestinian Jewish peasants for Israel's God to establish a just kingdom, release them from their indebtedness to a triple layer of taxation, and provide for their needs in a new community of mutuality and forgiveness. The prayer is therefore ultimately both eschatological and imminent. As such, it reflects the character of God's kingdom, which is both already arriving and not yet here.

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**LUKE 11:1-2.** Prayers in worship often addressed God as Father because God was considered the Father of all Israel. Two examples of the use of *Father* for God are found in **Psalms 89:26**, a psalm that describes God's faithfulness to the king of Israel, and **3 Maccabees 6:8**, a prayer to God by a priest on behalf of Israel. When Jesus addressed God as Father, he used the Aramaic term *Abba*, which showed a personal level of familial intimacy. In teaching the disciples to address God as Father, Jesus conferred on them the right to be called children of God.

To hallow something is to set it aside as holy; a synonym would be *sanctify*.

This is associated in the Hebrew Bible with God vindicating God's reputation among the nations by redeeming or rescuing Israel (see **Ezekiel 36:22-28**). It can thus be seen as directly tied to the next petition: "**your kingdom come**."

It is important to note that Jesus did not hold a "two-kingdom" theology; he did not make distinctions between a worldly and a spiritual *basileia*—the Greek word translated as "kingdom" or "reign." When Jesus encouraged his followers to pray for the kingdom to come, he was not talking about going to heaven when they died, but about an earthly kingdom that they could work to bring about. Matthew expands on this idea when he adds "**your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven**" (**Matthew 6:10**).

**LUKE 11:3.** The first-person plural here—"our"—is vital to our understanding of this prayer. The salvation that was coming with the arrival of the kingdom was not simply personal, but it depended on a communal vision of justice and mutual support. While prayer can be a private communication between the individual believer and God, the focus in the Lord's Prayer is on the community of believers who come together to petition God.

The focus on having bread each day reminds us of the manna that God provided Israel in the desert: each day, the manna was gathered and it was enough for that day. If the Israelites tried to stockpile the manna, it spoiled before the next day. Trusting God meant that the Israelites needed to depend on God to provide just enough for each day. Likewise, Jesus was encouraging his followers to ask for just enough to meet their needs.



**LUKE 11:4.** Luke's version of the prayer reads, "**For-give us our sins,**" which likely modifies the more original Matthean "**debts**" (**Matthew 6:12**). An alternate translation could be "Release us from our debts, as we release others from their debts to us."

The term *debt* could refer to financial debts owed to the temple, Herod, and Caesar. For a people oppressed by debt, the request for release from debts would have been a powerful one. The historian Josephus tells us that the first thing the Jewish rebels did when they liberated Jerusalem from the Romans in the revolt of AD 66 was to burn all of the debt records kept in the temple.

The term *debt* could also be used to describe the reality of sin and its consequences as a debt owed to God. Herzog argues that part of what Jesus did in his mission was to present himself as a broker between God and Israel, delegitimizing the debts of the peasants.<sup>4</sup>

Inherent in the coming of the kingdom will be times of trial; hence the request for protection that ends the prayer. Survival was precarious for the poor people in the first-century Roman world, and any kind of upheaval of society would have placed them at even greater risk. It would have been important to Jesus' followers that God was going to protect them.

**LUKE 11:5-13.** Jesus' teaching in **verses 5-13** should be read as continuations of the first part of **chapter 11**, rather than stand-alone teachings on prayer. While it is not clear whether or not this entire section was a single speech given by Jesus on a particular occasion, Luke certainly placed them together in his narrative for a purpose. Rather than vague exhortations to be persistent in prayer and rest assured that we will get whatever we ask from God, **verses 5-13** should be seen as encouragements from Jesus that God will answer the specific prayer that he had just taught his disciples: the reign of God *will* come. In fact, as Luke noted throughout his Gospel, in Jesus Christ the kingdom of God had already come and was now among them.

The parable in **verses 5-8** is likely adapted from Palestinian folk traditions. There are two different ways to interpret this passage, and which is chosen depends on the translation of one Greek word, as well as on which character in the parable we focus.

One common traditional interpretation says that we should focus on the

persistent petitioner as the main character. In this reading, the moral of the parable is that we should be persistent in our prayers, because God will reward that persistence.

This interpretation seems to fit most English translations, but there is some ambiguity about what the passage would then be saying about God. While many commentators have pointed out that the moral of this parable is an exhortation to persistence in prayer, it is unclear why this persistence would be necessary with a God who knows what we need before we ask.

Another interpretive option presents itself when we examine the Greek word translated here as "persistence." *Anadeian* appears only here in the Greek New Testament and is never translated as "persistence" elsewhere in extant Greek literature; the word usually means something like "shamelessness," which does not have the positive connotations of "persistence."

In an honor/shame-based culture such as that of ancient Palestine, it would have been unthinkable to shamelessly disturb a neighbor in the middle of the night because you did not have enough food to offer your guests. This seems to indicate, then, that the petitioner was not being offered up as a positive example of perseverance. Instead, we should note that when the neighbor would eventually help the petitioner, he would be relenting out of irritation at the petitioner's nagging rather than helping immediately out of a willing heart. If we read the passage this way, the focus would not be upon human persistence, but upon the *implied* contrast between a trustworthy and generous God and selfish humans (compare **v. 9-13**).

This parable (like many of Jesus' parables) is an argument from the lesser to the greater, although the "greater" (God) is implied rather than explicitly stated by Jesus. If even a selfish villager will help his neighbor and respond to a midnight request, how much more will God hear our prayers and respond to them? The thrust of the parable, then, is not that repetition is required to receive what we ask from God, but that we are assured that God can be trusted to provide what we need.

The theme that God is trustworthy to answer prayer is continued in **verses 9-13**. As noted above, however, this does not mean that any or every request made of God will be granted. It is much more likely that this guarantee is meant to cover only the petitions in question:

God can be  
trusted to  
provide what  
we need.

the ones found in **verses 1-4**, the Lord's Prayer. This supposition is strengthened by the promise of the Holy Spirit in **verse 13**, which is linked in the Hebrew Bible with prophets and judges involved in delivering Israel from its enemies (see especially **Judges 3:10, 1 Samuel 16:13, Isaiah 59:19, 61:1**).

The snakes and scorpions can be symbols of evil in Scripture, and in this setting Jesus used them to draw a contrast between good and evil. The focus of **verse 13** is upon the contrast between God, who is good, and humans, who are evil, yet who know how to do good when it comes to their children. As in **verses 5-8** above, Jesus' argument is from the lesser to the greater.

## Applying the Scripture

God will deliver on the promise to restore Israel and bring his righteous kingdom, and one of the ways that Jesus' followers can participate in this *parousia*—"coming"—is by asking for it! When we long for God's coming justice and express that longing through prayer, we help to form ourselves into the kinds of disciples who practice the principles of that kingdom.

When we think about applying this section of Scripture, there are several points that present themselves. First, it is important for believers to actively and consistently engage with God through prayer. We build intimate, trust-filled relationships by having open communication with one another. Nurturing a relationship with God requires persistent prayer.

Disciples of Jesus should also focus on opportunities to bring the kingdom to earth in real and practical ways. Echoing one of Matthew's additions to the prayer, we should look for ways to see God's will done on earth as it is in heaven. Encourage your class to think of creative and concrete ways to embody God's kingdom in your corporate and personal lives.

There is an old saying that we should "Live simply, so that others may simply live." As we think about what it means to ask God for daily bread, ask your class about ways that they can simplify their lives to make room for service and greater generosity. Simplicity should become a habit in our lives, and it may be helpful for the class to work to support each other in their efforts.

As you consider the end of the Lord's Prayer and the communal nature of our living faith, encourage your class

Nurturing a  
relationship  
with God  
requires  
persistent  
prayer.

to think of debts that they can forgive, whether literal (financial) or figurative (guilt). As noted above in "Examining the Scripture," Matthew's version of the prayer, which is more likely to be original, uses the term *debts*. We ask God to release us from our debts, but the prayer seems to be saying that others' debts to us are already being forgiven. This means that we ought to be already forgiving others.

We also ask God to protect us from times of trial. How can we take part in this by protecting each other from times of trial and supporting those of us who are going through times of intense suffering?

## Session Plans

These lesson plans are given as suggestions. The words **AND**, **OR**, or **AND/OR** between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

### GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION

- **Read Luke 11:1-13**, and session 5 in *Journeys* and this leader's guide.
- For "Beginning the Session," **make photocopies** of the handout with two creative ways to pray the People's Prayer (see page 29). **Choose** one way to begin the session and another way to close the session.
- For "Developing the Session," **bring** blank paper and pencils and/or crayons.
- **Have available** Bibles and either a chalkboard and chalk, a dry-erase board and markers, or newsprint and markers.

### BEGINNING THE SESSION

(5 MINUTES)

- **Distribute** the handout and **invite** class members to participate in praying the People's Prayer in one of the two creative ways described on the handout.

### DEVELOPING THE SESSION

(45 MINUTES)

#### When You Pray (10 min.)

- **Ask** a participant to read **Luke 11:1-4** (printed on p. 31 in *Journeys*).
- **Use** information from "Examining the Scripture" to explain the passage.

- **Lead** a discussion using these questions or your own questions:
  - What question would you like to ask Jesus?
  - What statement would you make to him?
  - What are some other ways to address God as we begin to pray? Some examples include “O Holy One” or “Creator of all Life” or “Holy Creator.”
  - What other words can you say to honor God’s holiness? Be creative.

**AND/OR**

- **Invite** participants to draw a picture of themselves greeting God. How would they look in front of God? What would they do and/or say? (They can add a dialogue box to their pictures.)
- **Invite** participants to share their drawings and experiences while creating them.

**AND****Your Kingdom Come (8 min.)**

- **Lead** a discussion about what Jesus might have meant by “Your kingdom come” (v. 2).
- **Ask:**
  - Do you think that the kingdom of God is broader than personal salvation and going to heaven? Why or why not?
  - How do you feel called to create God’s reign on earth?

**AND/OR**

- **Discuss** and **plan** a way to collectively or individually bring the kingdom of God to your town this week.

**OR****Give Us Each Day Our Daily Bread (8 min.)**

- **Lead** a discussion about what Jesus might have meant by “Give us each day our daily bread” (v. 3).
- **Ask:**
  - Do you have a routine of acknowledging God’s gifts to you?
  - What is your personal tradition of praying at meal time?
  - In what ways are you expecting from God more than you need?

**AND/OR**

- **Invite** participants to experiment this week with only eating what they feel they need and nothing more (forgoing daily coffee, desserts, second helpings, etc.).

**Discuss** how this invitation feels. **Ask:** Do you feel any hesitations or anxiety when invited to try this? Why?

**OR****Forgive Us Our Sins (10 min.)**

- **Point out** that **verse 4** acknowledges the need for forgiveness.
- **Read verse 4:** “And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.”
- Then **read** the following quote by Frederick Buechner, which describes forgiveness:  
When somebody you’ve wronged forgives you, you’re spared the dull and self-diminishing throb of a guilty conscience. When you forgive somebody who has wronged you, you’re spared the dismal corrosion of bitterness and wounded pride. For both parties, forgiveness means the freedom again to be at peace inside their own skins and to be glad in each other’s presence.<sup>5</sup>
- **Lead** a discussion with these questions or questions of your own:
  - Do you find it difficult to forgive others? Why or why not?
  - Do you find it difficult to accept forgiveness from others? Why or why not?
  - How does giving or accepting forgiveness nurture a relationship?

**OR****Compare with Matthew (10 min.)**

- **Read**, or **ask** someone to read, the Lord’s Prayer as it appears in **Matthew 6:9-13**.
- **Compare** and **contrast** the two versions of the Lord’s Prayer in **Luke 11:2-4** and **Matthew 6:9-13**.
- **Ask:**
  - How can the differences between the two versions be accounted for?
  - What is the core message of this prayer?
  - How is the Lord’s Prayer a model for praying various kinds of prayers?

**AND****Persistence in Prayer (10 min.)**

- **Ask** a participant to read **Luke 11:5-8** (p. 36 in *Journeys*).

- Using information from “Examining the Scripture,” **explain** what it means when the author says that the argument of the parable is from the lesser to the greater.
- **Discuss:**
  - Does this parable open any doors for you? How?
  - Think of a time when you felt defeated. How did you find the strength and courage to go on?
  - In what ways is God inviting you to persevere?

**AND/OR**

- **Discuss** the different ways we can interpret the persistence piece of this Scripture by using information from “Examining the Scripture.” What difference does this make for your group? Is persistence important in prayer?

**AND****Ask, Search, Knock, and Receive (5-10 min.)**

- **Ask** for a volunteer to read **Luke 11:9-13** (p. 36 in *Journeys*).
- **Ask:** What are some ways that God answers prayers of petition?
- **Compare** and **contrast** the ways God answers prayer with the ways parents deal with the petitions of their children.

**AND/OR**

- **Invite** participants to reflect as you read the following: Throughout today’s Scripture we hear Jesus encouraging us to say what we need and do what we say. In **verses 9-13**, Jesus offers four important actions that we can practice: ask, search, knock, and receive. In the week and months ahead, how will you practice these four actions?
  - asking with humility
  - searching with an open and receptive heart

- knocking with anticipation
- receiving with gratitude

**CLOSING THE SESSION****(5 MINUTES)****The People’s Prayer**

- To close the session, **invite** class members to participate in praying in one of the two creative ways described on the handout (distributed and used in “Beginning the Session”).

**OR****The Prayer in *The Message***

- **Close** the session by reading aloud **Matthew 6:9-13** as it appears in *The Message* by Eugene Peterson:
 

Our Father in heaven,  
 Reveal who you are.  
 Set the world right; Do what’s best—  
     as above, so below.  
 Keep us alive with three square meals.  
 Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.  
 Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.  
 You’re in charge!  
 You can do anything you want!  
 You’re ablaze in beauty!  
 Yes. Yes. Yes.

**NOTES**

1. Richard Horsley, ed., *Oral Performance, Popular Tradition, and Hidden Transcript in Q* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 18-19.
2. Horsley, 18-19.
3. William R. Herzog II, *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 127-128.
4. Herzog, 127-128.
5. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 28.



# Praying the People's Prayer in Two Creative Ways

## OPTION 1

### The People's Prayer with Movement<sup>1</sup>

Time and tradition have proven the profound, abiding meaning of the People's Prayer, also known as the Lord's Prayer, but as with many time-honored traditions, frequent repetition can render even this powerful part of the Christian liturgy dull and hollow of meaning. Stand and enhance your repetition of this prayer by adding movement. Notice how the movement puts the prayer into your body and slows down the words, allowing meditation on its meaning. Try speaking twice as you add the movement, and then the third time, pray the prayer without spoken words and with movement only. (The words to speak appear in bold print; the movement appears in parentheses.)

**Our Father, which art in heaven** (hands rise up over head, like a child reaching to be picked up by a parent)

**Hallowed be thy name** (folded hands come down in front of chest in prayer position)

**Thy kingdom come** (left hand sweeps out in a gathering motion)

**Thy will be done** (right hand sweeps out in a gathering motion)

**On earth** (hands palms down in front sweep in a circle, like smoothing out sand)

**As it is in heaven** (palms turned up, straight out in front, acknowledging heaven's presence here and now)

**Give us this day our daily bread** (cup hands like a bowl, reaching up in request and then coming down to the belly in satisfaction)

**And forgive us our sin** (arms across chest, then left arm moves out toward the left and remains extended)

**As we forgive those who sin against us** (right arm moves out to the right)

**And lead us not into temptation** (wrists come together in front as though handcuffed or chained)

**But deliver us from evil** (wrists fly apart with arms flying open as though you are breaking the chains)

**For thine is the kingdom** (hands in front, palms up as though receiving a tray, as though receiving the presence of the kingdom here and now)

**And the power** (arms at right angles out to each side, palms facing forward, in the ancient icon symbolic gesture of authority and no need of weapons)

**And the glory, forever** (hands, fingers explode out and upward, like fireworks)

**Amen** (hands come together in front of chest in prayer position)

## OPTION 2

### Eternal Spirit<sup>2</sup>

Read this prayer as a litany, with one person reading the lines beginning with "ONE" and everyone reading the lines beginning with "ALL."

ONE: Eternal Spirit,

**ALL: Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,**

ONE: source of all that is and that shall be,

**ALL: Father and Mother of us all,**

ONE: loving God, in whom is heaven:

**ALL: The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!**

ONE: The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world!

**ALL: Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!**

ONE: Your commonwealth of peace and freedom

**ALL: sustain our hope and come on earth!**

ONE: With the bread that we need for today,

**ALL: feed us.**

ONE: In the hurts we pass along to others,

**ALL: forgive us.**

ONE: In times of temptation and testing,

**ALL: strengthen us.**

ONE: From trials too great to endure,

**ALL: spare us.**

ONE: From the grip of all that is evil,

**ALL: free us.**

ONE: For you reign in the glory of the power that is love,

**ALL: now and forever. Amen.**

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## NOTES

1. Adapted from Brad Berglund, *Reinventing Sunday: Breakthrough Ideas for Transforming Worship* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2001), 41-42. Movement scripted by Rita Berglund.

2. Adapted from "Eternal Spirit" by Jim Cotter. Inspired by the Lord's Prayer and Aramaic translations of the New Testament, "Eternal Spirit" appears in Brad Berglund, *Reinventing Worship* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2006), 134-135.

# Jesus Prays for the Disciples

**SCRIPTURE:** John 17:1-26

**KEY VERSE:** **As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.** —John 17:21

**SESSION OBJECTIVES:**

- to explore Jesus' prayer for the disciples; and
- to explore relationship, joy, and unity among Christians.

## Introducing the Scripture

John's Gospel is very different from the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). (The term *synoptic* comes from Greek words that mean "together" and "to see" and reflects the fact that Matthew, Mark, and Luke all share common material and themes.) John's Gospel focuses much more on overarching themes and theological concepts and less on the details of Jesus' life. Jesus' divinity is front and center in John, from the prologue ("**In the beginning was the Word,**" **John 1:1**) to the "I am" statements that harken back to God's revelation to Moses: "**I AM WHO I AM**" (**Exodus 3:14**).

One of the reasons for the differences between John and the other Gospels is temporal distance; John's Gospel was likely not written until the end of the first century AD. This distance created more time for reflection on the events being related and their significance for the continued existence of the church.

In the narrative of this Gospel, **John 17:6-26** comes near the end of Jesus' ministry and just before his death at the hands of the Roman authorities. **Chapters 13–16** are often called the Farewell Discourse, in which Jesus speaks to his disciples about his departure, their ongoing mission, and the coming of the Holy Spirit. The discourse ends with the disciples' affirmation of Jesus' identity and Jesus' confirmation that he had

conquered the world in which they faced trouble and persecution (see **John 16:33**). Following the discourse is Jesus' prayer for his disciples (**17:1-26**).

There is a well-established tradition in Jewish literature of "farewell prayers," including those of Moses (see **Deuteronomy 33:1-29**) and many of the patriarchs in the book of Jubilees.<sup>1</sup> The prayer in John differs from that literary form in a couple of important ways, however. First, this is not the prayer of an elderly patriarch on his

deathbed, but the confident prayer of one who is about to fulfill God's plan by laying down his life willingly. Second, this prayer does not conclude the narrative of John's Gospel, but it comes just before the climax of the story. In a culture very used to the literary form of the "farewell prayer," this odd placement would have been unexpected, as Jesus (different from the important patriarchs of Judaism) would go on to accomplish God's purposes even after his death. This literary device catches the reader by surprise and builds the drama of the upcoming crucifixion and resurrection narrative.

Jesus began his prayer by saying that "**the hour has come**" (**17:1**). This "hour" has played an important role in the story so far. When Jesus' mother tried to get Jesus to perform his first miracle, Jesus said, "**My hour has not yet come**" (**John 2:4**). When speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus promised that "**the**

**hour is coming**" when all true worshippers would worship the Father "**in spirit and in truth**" (**John 4:23**). When questioned about his authority, Jesus said that "**the hour is coming**" when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and come out of their graves (**John 5:28-29**). Significantly, at the beginning of the Farewell Discourse to the disciples, we are told that Jesus knew that "**his hour had come**" (**13:1**). The entire

Jesus' divinity is front and center in John.

Farewell Discourse (**John 13–16**), then, occurred within this liminal space of the “hour.” In each of the previously mentioned instances (and in others), Jesus imbued “the hour” with eschatological meaning, and finally, here in **John 17:1** we are told that “the hour has come.”

## Examining the Scripture

Jesus’ prayer in **John 17** could be seen as a three-part prayer, based on the different objects of the prayer (Jesus, his disciples, future believers). Jesus’ prayer could also be divided based on subject matter. Regardless, the prayer should most certainly be interpreted as a whole, as it sums up many of the themes of the Gospel so far and sets the stage for the coming drama.

**JOHN 17:1-5.** It is noteworthy that the word *pater* (Father) is used to address God six times in this chapter out of a total of twenty-four times in the entire New Testament. This highlights the intimacy with which Jesus’ relationship to God is characterized and drives home the themes of unity and love that Jesus focused on throughout his prayer.

Comparing this final prayer to those found in Matthew and Mark (see **Matthew 26**, **Mark 14**) draws out some striking differences: John’s Jesus is not plagued by doubt or fear, but is confident in his mission and in the accomplishment of God’s purposes. The disciples, likewise, are not scolded for their inattention, but are praised for their faithfulness to Jesus and his mission and encouraged to remain unified and loving.

The reference to Jesus having authority over all flesh is eschatological, as it refers back to prophecies about the submission of the Gentiles to Israel’s God on the “day of the Lord.” (See **Isaiah 2:2-4**; **45:20-23**; and **Micah 4:1-4**.)

The reference to *zoen aionion*—translated by most versions as “eternal life”—is also eschatological, though this quality has been obscured by the English translations. The Greek word *zoen* is straightforward and just means “life,” but *aionion* is derived from the Greek word *aion*, from which we get our word *eon*. In the context of Judaism in the first century AD, with its focus on the coming of a messianic figure

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on the day of the Lord, the phrase could also mean simply the “life of the [Messianic] Age.” The focus, then, is not on the temporal duration of the life (eternity), but on its quality and its relationship to the coming of Jesus. This is why John’s Jesus can equate this kind of life with knowing God and knowing Jesus in **verse 3**.

The word *glorify* (*doxazo*) appears several times in these verses and deserves closer attention. The root of this Greek word can be translated as “honor” or “glory,” though here it is being used in its verbal form, which means “to influence one’s opinion about another so as to enhance the latter’s reputation.”<sup>2</sup>

The preexistence of Jesus is mentioned here, which should draw the reader’s mind back to the prologue (**1:1-18**). In fact, this entire prayer should be read with John’s prologue in mind. There are several themes being developed and/or wrapped up here that began all the way back in chapter 1, including the preexistence of Jesus, the unity of Jesus and God, and Jesus’ role as the Logos (Word) of God.

**JOHN 17:6-8.** In this passage Jesus reflected on one of the ways that he had increased God’s honor: by calling the disciples and teaching them. The disciples’ keeping of God’s word resulted in greater glory for God. “**Have kept**” (Greek, *tetarakan*) can mean to “guard” a prisoner, to preserve someone or something, or to pay attention to someone or something. It is often translated simply as “keep” or “obey.”

There is a word play at work here between Jesus as the Word (**v. 6**) and Jesus’ words (**v. 7**) that come from God. *Word* in **verse 6** is the same *Word* from the prologue of John—*logos*—and refers to Jesus himself. *Words* in **verse 7** comes from the Greek *ramata* and refers to Jesus’ teaching. The disciples’ “keeping of the word” is both

a reference to obeying God’s commands and a reference to believing in Jesus (**v. 8**) as the Logos of God, the eternally existing “reason” behind Creation.

**JOHN 17:9-12.** Jesus now turned to his petition on behalf of the disciples. “I am no longer in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world, and

John’s  
Jesus is not  
plagued by  
doubt or fear.

I come to You” (v. 11, author’s translation). There is a timeless quality to Jesus’ words in this prayer. It’s as if he is speaking from beyond the grave, as though his death and resurrection were already an accomplished fact.

The early church must have found Jesus’ request in **verse 11**—“**protect them in your name that you have given me**”—very encouraging in the midst of their struggles at the end of the first century with all of its upheavals. His plea seems to have come from a place of insecurity about the internal cohesion of the early church and its survival.

Invoking a person’s name in antiquity was a reference to the character of that person, not just his identity. God’s name is being used here (“**in your name that you have given me,**” vv. 11, 12) as a way of cementing the identity of Jesus’ followers in the character of God.

The reference to “**the one destined to be lost**” (the Greek is “son of destruction”) is likely an allusion to Judas, who later betrayed Jesus (see **John 18:2-3**).

**JOHN 17:13-19.** Jesus’ conception of the world was dualistic, but not in the traditional dualism (matter versus spirit) common in certain forms of Greek philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Jesus was committed to the creation narrative of the Hebrew Bible, in which all of creation was named “good” by God. So the dualism of Jesus was life and creation as God intended versus life and creation in rebellion against God’s intention.

As such, “**the world**” (Greek, *kosmos*) in John’s Gospel always stands for a wider realm that is hostile to God, not to Creation or matter itself. It refers to the structures of the world that surrounded his audience, pressuring them to abandon their identity as God’s people and lose cohesion: the Roman government, oppressive poverty, divisive members of their own community.

In the midst of these forces, Jesus prayed that his followers would be “**sanctified**,” which comes from the Latin *sanctus* (holy) and *facere* (to make). As in our common language, to be holy means to be set apart for God, but there is another meaning that is relevant as well. The word *holy* comes from the proto-Germanic *hailaga*, which meant “that must be preserved whole or intact, that cannot be transgressed or violated.”<sup>4</sup> These meanings suggest that Jesus’

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prayer for the sanctification of believers includes a desire for us to be set apart and preserved in wholeness.

**JOHN 17:20-23.** Strong divisions within the prayer should be avoided, as any structuring that separates the sections from each other misses the interconnectedness of Jesus’ petitions. The line

between the present disciples and future followers is blurry throughout the prayer. This is because the times of Jesus’ mission, the present time, and the times of future generations of believers were all being included in the current “hour” of Jesus’ impending sacrifice. **Verse 20** should not be interpreted as a change in focus, but as Jesus’ insistence that future believers had been included in his prayer all along.

The unity of Jesus’ followers with each other, Jesus, and the Father is the proof being presented to the world that Jesus was sent by God and that his manifestation of God’s name was authentic. This means that God’s reputation is being staked on whether or not believers express the unity that Jesus is praying for.

**JOHN 17:24-26.** Jesus’ prayer ends with an expression of the eschatological vision: the perfect unity of the Messiah with believers, leading to God’s love being manifest in their community. Jesus’ desire was that believers would experience the glory that God and the Logos shared before the creation of the world. The Greek *en* at the end of **verse 26** is translated here as “in,” but can also mean “among.”

## Applying the Scripture

There are many ways to apply the insights gleaned from our Scripture for this week. First, encourage your class to focus on the word *unity*. How can we promote unity among believers? Is your church involved in any ecumenical work among different Christian denominations?

What might that look like in your local context?

Also, spend some time reflecting on the different meanings that unity can take. For example, is unity different from conformity? Does it mean agreeing about everything?

Consider the model offered by Jesus in this prayer: “**that they may be one,**

How can  
we promote  
unity among  
believers?



as we are one” (v. 11). The Trinity offers an excellent example of how to model our communities of faith, because each member—Father, Son, Holy Spirit—retains a unique and distinct identity while showcasing unity of purpose and perfect love. This expression of difference without separation and unity without being identical can be instructive in our marriages, within our churches, and even among different churches. For example, how might such meditation on unity play out in the “worship wars” (i.e., disagreements over styles of worship) of the modern American church?

It might also be helpful to focus on the dualism evident in Jesus’ prayer. The traditional Greek dualism between body/matter and soul/spirit has had a great influence on certain strands of Christian theology and deserves to be reexamined. This has led to a primarily negative view of our bodies (they’re vessels for our souls instead of good gifts to be taken care of) and of Creation itself (it’s all going to burn anyway, so why bother?). It is important to note that when Jesus encouraged his disciples not to be “of this world,” he was not encouraging them to think negatively of material existence as such, but to maintain their identity as the people of God in a hostile world (see the note above on **verses 13-19**).

Such an “us versus them” mentality was necessary for a marginalized group situated in the late first-century Roman Empire, but our situation today in North American culture is certainly less hostile. How is this kind of mindset productive? How can it be destructive? How do we guard against the destructive aspects of this kind of language?

## Session Plans

These lesson plans are given as suggestions. The words **AND**, **OR**, or **AND/OR** between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

### GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION

- **Read** **John 17:1-26** (focusing on **verses 6-21**), and session 6 in *Journeys* and this leader’s guide.
- For “Developing the Session,” **bring** enough paper for each participant to be able to journal and/or write a personal prayer.
- **Invite** one of your class members to memorize and/or practice reading **John 17:6-21** so that he or she can open this session with a dramatic reading.

- **Have available** Bibles and either a chalkboard and chalk, a dry-erase board and markers, or newsprint and markers.
- If you choose to close the session by singing the song “One in Christ,” **provide** hymnals containing this hymn or **make photocopies** of the hymn that is printed on page 35 in this Leader’s Guide.

## BEGINNING THE SESSION

(5-10 MINUTES)

- **Point out** that throughout the Gospels, Jesus modeled a life of prayer. He was often seen withdrawing into personal prayer. Last week’s lesson explored his ability to teach others to pray, and today’s session focuses our attention on Jesus’ prayers for others—in this case, his disciples then and now.
- **Introduce** the participant who will be doing a dramatic reading (memorized or not) of **John 17:6-21** and **provide** some background information about this passage from “Introducing the Scripture.”
- **Invite** participants to listen prayerfully as the Scripture is read.

## DEVELOPING THE SESSION

(35-40 MINUTES)

### Who We Are and Whose We Are (10-12 min.)

- **Ask** a participant to read **John 17:6-12** (pp. 39-40 in *Journeys*).
- **Use** information from “Examining the Scripture” to explain the passage.

### AND

- **Ask** participants whether or not they agree (and why) with the following statements by organizational consultant Margaret Wheatley:
  - “Relationships are all there is. Everything in the universe only exists because it is in relationship to everything else. Nothing exists in isolation.”<sup>5</sup>
  - “Relationships are not only primary, but are the only way we can operate.”<sup>6</sup>

### AND/OR

- **Use** insights from “Applying the Scripture” and **encourage** your class to focus on the word *unity*.
- **Discuss** how unity can be promoted among believers. Is your church involved in any ecumenical work among different Christian denominations? What might that look like in your local context?
- **Ask:** How is unity different from conformity? Does it mean agreeing about everything?

## AND

**Joy and Happiness (10 min.)**

- **Ask** a participant to read **John 17:13** (p. 41 in *Journeys*).
- **Ask:**
  - How would you describe joy? How would you describe happiness? In what ways are they the same? In what ways are they different?
  - How does joy find “completion” in us?
- **Ask** another participant to read **John 17:14-19** (p. 42 in *Journeys*).
- **Lead** a discussion using the following questions or your own questions:
  - How can followers of Christ be sanctified—set apart to build the kingdom—and at the same time serve this world that God loves?
  - What does it mean to be “in the world, but not of the world?”
  - Some Christian groups, like the Amish, separate themselves from the world. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this approach to building the kingdom?

## AND/OR

- **Invite** participants to journal their answers to these questions:
  - How can followers of Christ be sanctified—set apart to build the kingdom—and at the same time serve this world that God loves?
  - What is your ideal vision of the Christian community?
- **Invite** one or two participants to share their journal entries.

## AND

**Oneness in Christ (8-10 min.)**

- **Ask** a participant to read **John 17:20-21** (p. 43 in *Journeys*).
- **Ask:** Do you have acquaintances who live out their Christian witness in a Christian community different than your own? What do you know about their culture and beliefs? How could you learn more about who they are? How could this new understanding help create a sense of unity between you?

## AND/OR

- **Point out** that there is a community in Taizé, France, begun by a man named Brother Roger, that is focused

on peace and reconciliation among Christians. **Read** the following quote from their website, a section describing Brother Roger’s path of reconciliation:

If the Church of Christ does not recover its visible unity, how could it open a way of peace for a world always prey to conflicts and divisions? . . . In the Call to reconciliation, Brother Alois invites all Christians to a “vigil of reconciliation” held every one or three months. . . . Only such a communion is able to offer to a world torn apart the promise of a lasting reconciliation.<sup>7</sup>

- **Ask:** What do you think of this? Do you agree? How can this be done? How can our church community become more intentional about creating space for reconciliation among Christians?

**CLOSING THE SESSION****(5-10 MINUTES)**

- **Invite** participants to write personal prayers for relationship, joy, and unity among Christians. **Invite** one, two, or all participants to share their prayers.

## AND/OR

- **Invite** participants to pray for unity as you conclude this session by praying or singing the song “One in Christ,” written by Clara Brooks in 1911. **Distribute** hymnals or photocopies of the hymn.

**NOTES**

1. The book of Jubilees is from the *pseudepigrapha*, a collection of Jewish writings attributed to earlier historical figures. These works are not considered to be a part of the Scriptures by Christianity or Judaism, but they are helpful for studying the period from 150 BC to AD 150.

2. Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

3. “Dualism” refers to two opposing forces or realities. In some Greek philosophy those opposing realities were the spiritual realm and the material realm, with the spiritual considered superior to the material.

4. Definition of *holy*, *Online Etymology Dictionary*, [www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=holy&allowed\\_in\\_frame=0](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=holy&allowed_in_frame=0).

5. Margaret J. Wheatley, *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2002), 19.

6. Margaret J. Wheatley, “Turning to One Another,” Keynote Address: Kansas Health Foundation 2000 (Leadership Institute, Spring 2000), available online at: [www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/turningtooneanother.html](http://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/turningtooneanother.html).

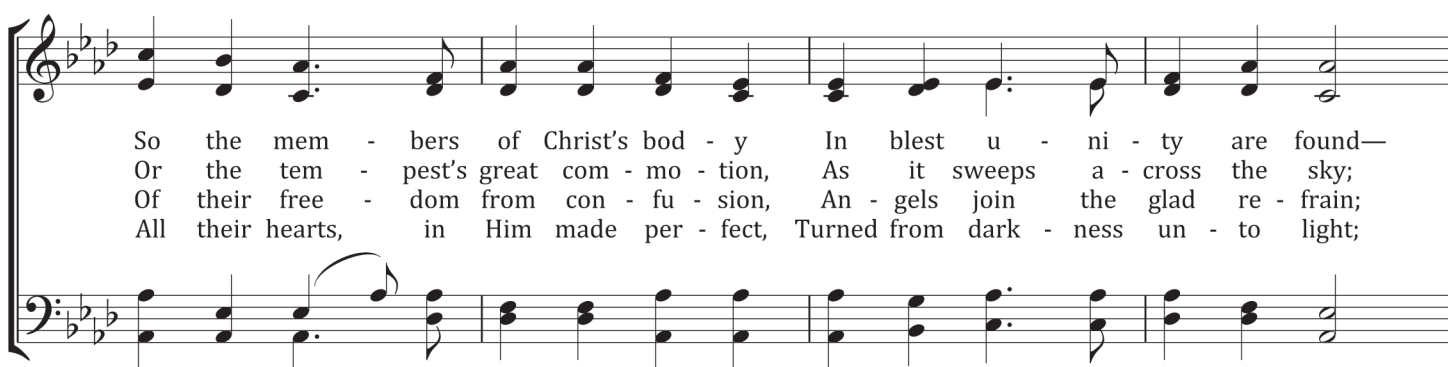
7. “A Path of Reconciliation: Brother Roger,” online at [www.taize.fr/en\\_article7557.html](http://www.taize.fr/en_article7557.html).

# One in Christ


*...Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God,  
unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. Eph. 4:13*



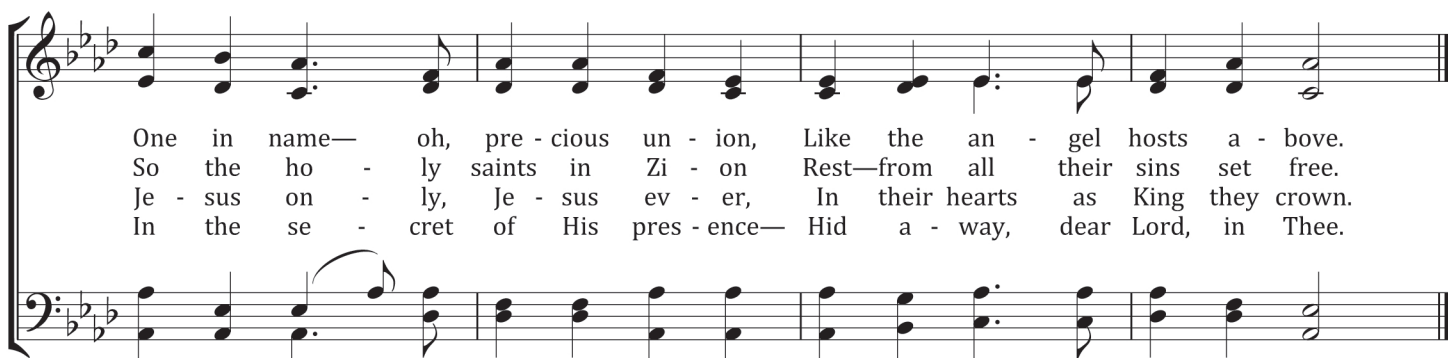
1. As sweet strains of heav'n - ly mu - sic Blend in one har - mo - nious sound,  
2. Not like waves up - on the o - cean, Toss - ing wild - ly, roll - ing high;  
3. Blood-washed pil - grims on the high - way Chant the sweet, me - lo - dious strain  
4. Love, the theme of all their prais - es, Doth in ho - ly bond u - nite



So the mem - bers of Christ's bod - y In blest u - ni - ty are found—  
Or the tem - pest's great com - mo - tion, As it sweeps a - cross the sky;  
Of their free - dom from con - fu - sion, An - gels join the glad re - frain;  
All their hearts, in Him made per - fect, Turned from dark - ness un - to light;



One in mind, and one in spir - it, One in doc - trine, faith, and love;  
But like twi - light, gent - ly steal - ing O'er the ver - dant, shad - y lea,  
One with all the hosts of heav - en, There their names are writ - ten down;  
Thus the saved in Christ to - ge - ther Dwell in sa - cred u - ni - ty,



One in name— oh, pre - cious un - ion, Like the an - gel hosts a - bove.  
So the ho - ly saints in Zi - on Rest—from all their sins set free.  
Je - sus on - ly, Je - sus ev - er, In their hearts as King they crown.  
In the se - cret of His pres - ence— Hid a - way, dear Lord, in Thee.

# Jesus Intercedes for Us

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**SCRIPTURE:** Hebrews 4:14–5:10

**KEY VERSE:** **We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.**

—Hebrews 4:15

**SESSION OBJECTIVES:**

- to understand how Jesus fulfills the role of intercessor with God for God's people;
  - to explore prayer as intercession; and
  - to practice intercession.
- 

## Introducing the Scripture

Hebrews was written at a time of importance for first-century Judaism and the early Christian movement. A crisis situation had been created from the following events:

- the destruction of the Jerusalem temple together with the city of Jerusalem in AD 70.
- the end of the priesthood. The priesthood ended with the destruction of the temple because without a temple there was no need for priests. Without a temple, the priesthood had no power base. Plus, the last high priest, Phannias ben Samuel, had been killed when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70.
- the rescattering of the Jewish people to the four corners of the Roman world. Some people left as they saw the Roman armies approach the city, but most left afterward because much of Jerusalem was uninhabitable after the Roman conquest.

Within a very short period of time, many of the distinctive elements of the faith of Israel, including pilgrimage to Jerusalem, daily sacrifices, and the leadership of the high priest became impossible. The destruction wrought by the Romans was total, and it is a testament to the solidarity and faithfulness of the Jewish people that they were able to adapt and survive.

We know little about what happened to and among the Jews between AD 100 and 400, but we do know that by the end of this time period, Rabbinic Judaism had asserted itself as the dominant voice within Judaism. Rabbinic Judaism replaced many of the place-centered forms of Jewish piety with the study of Torah (the law of Moses), the extension of many of the priestly dietary and purity laws to common Jews, and the life, study, and worship of the local synagogue. To be sure, some of these things had been developing for some time, as Jews had been living in lands all across the Middle East, the Mediterranean world, and North

Africa for centuries before Jesus.

This historical background is relevant to our study of Hebrews because the central themes of Hebrews are precisely those things that were at stake for Jews living during this period: the role of the high priest, sacrifices, and the temple. It is likely that the author of Hebrews presented Jesus as a way out of the problem now facing faithful Jews, a way to continue being good Jews in a world in which there were no temple, no sacrifices, and no high priesthood.

The solution, for the author of Hebrews, is an eternal high priest who cannot be assassinated, a once-for-all sacrifice that cannot be stopped, and a heavenly temple that cannot be razed. Rather than Hebrews being an anti-Judaic book (a common characterization), it should be read as the work of a faithful Jew reconceiving what it means to be Jewish through the life, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. For this faithful Jew, following Jesus was a way to survive the trauma and loss of identity that resulted from the tragedy of AD 70.

## Examining the Scripture

**HEBREWS 4:14.** The high priest was the primary Jewish political leader, the acting king, during the Hasmonean period (142 BC until 37 BC). This era was named



for the ruling descendants of the priestly family who led the Jews to independence from the Seleucids in 165-160 BC. By the time of Christ, the high priest was no longer the political ruler (king), yet he still wielded political power by presiding over the Sanhedrin.

Because the roles of priest and king had not traditionally been connected, there were many Jews who criticized the rule of the Hasmonean dynasty. While some Jewish literature of the first century BC described the Messiah as a priest-king, most Jews did not agree with this. Yet the writer of Hebrews presents Jesus as both Christ (king) and Priest (high priest).

“**Through the heavens**” could refer to Jesus’ ascension. If this is the case, we are probably meant to picture Jesus passing through the heavens just as the high priest passed through the veil into the Holy of Holies. The plural *heavens* is common throughout the New Testament, but interpreters often choose to translate it with the singular *heaven* in English (see **Matthew 5:12** and **5:16** for examples).

The Greek word for “**confession**” literally means “same words” and may refer to a particular confession or creed that the community was meant to “hold fast” or “firmly grasp” (this word is a nautical metaphor). The word “**our**” is supplied from context and is not in the original Greek text. This leaves open the possibility that the audience of Hebrews was not in fact converted Christians, but that the author was proffering Jesus to a Jewish audience as a way to maintain Jewishness after the destruction of the temple.

“**Son of God**” is a common term in Greek for kings, and divine son-ship also appears in the royal psalms of the Old Testament (see **Psalms 2:7; 89:26-27**, for examples). Roman emperors also had the term “son of god” (*divi filius*) applied to themselves.

**HEBREWS 4:15-16.** Eastern Orthodox theologians have interpreted these verses to mean that Jesus was really tempted by sin and in fact could have sinned. Jesus’ sinlessness, then, is a testament to the possibility of human freedom from sin.

Because Jesus can sympathize with our weakness, we are encouraged to “**approach the throne of grace**” with boldness. The image is of the king’s throne, from which petitions are granted. For the writer of Hebrews, our approach to God is not just symbolic, but reflects our

movement toward God throughout our entire lives. Jesus, then, serves as a conduit through which we receive the love, power, and life of God (see **Romans 5:5**).

**HEBREWS 5:1-3.** “**To deal gently**” (v. 2) is the New Revised Standard Version’s translation of the Greek *metriopathein*—literally “to moderate one’s feelings.” A fuller and more accurate translation would be “to control his strong emotions toward the ignorant and those who have gone astray.”

Jesus was “**subject**” to weakness (v. 2). This word is translated from the Greek *perikeitai*, which means “to be surrounded with or by,” and is usually used to refer to the wearing of clothing. While the high priest was traditionally clothed with the robes of his office, the writer of Hebrews notes that he was also clothed with “weakness.” He needed to make offerings on his own behalf as well as those of the people. In the same way, Jesus was subject to weakness in his ability to be tempted to sin.

Not all offerings were for sin. A priest would have made many different kinds of offerings for many different reasons. So the “weakness” referred to here is not simply the temptation to sin, but the mortality of human existence. The writer of Hebrews does contrast Jesus with human high priests later in the book, but that is not the point of this passage. Here, Jesus’ credentials as high priest are being listed, and his humanity is being highlighted as a prerequisite for his role as priest.

**HEBREWS 5:4-6.** In these verses, the writer shows Jesus’ continuity with the traditional role of high priest by focusing on his appointment by God. Just as Aaron was hand picked by God to be priest for the people without asking for it, so too Jesus was named high priest by God without promoting himself as such. The author of Hebrews may have intended this to serve as an explanation of why Jesus never referred to himself as a priest. Indeed, understanding Jesus as a priest is unique to Hebrews.

Jesus’ appointment by God is similar to that of the high priest in Judaism, but it stands in stark contrast to priests in the larger Greco-Roman world, who were chosen by election or by outbidding their competitors.

The figure of Melchizedek is a striking and mysterious one. We first encounter him in the narrative of **Genesis 14**, when Abram meets him after rescuing

Jesus can  
sympathize  
with our  
weakness.

Lot. He is called the King of Salem (an ancient name for Jerusalem) and Priest of *El Elyon*—God Most High, and his name means “king of righteousness.” He was a popular figure within Jewish literature of the first century AD, due to his combination of the roles of priest and king. In some rabbinic traditions, Melchizedek is also identified with Shem, the son of Noah, which would have made him nearly 500 years old when he met Abram. This contributes to the sense of timelessness that surrounds him.

The two quotations from **Psalms 2:7** and **110:4** in **verses 5-6** are from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The quotations make two different points: 1) Jesus is Son of God (making him King), and 2) Jesus is high priest. The kings of Israel came from the line of David in the tribe of Judah, while Israel’s high priests came from the line of Aaron in the tribe of Levi. Therefore, in Hebrew tradition a king could not be a priest, and a priest could not be a king, but in the order of Melchizedek it was possible to be both.

Jesus’ superiority as a “**priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek**” comes from the fact that he is able to intercede for God’s people forever, unlike the mortal Aaronic priesthood, now deposed and unable to perform their duties. Only a high priest in heaven, safe from political scheming and military incursions, can intercede for the people of God, now scattered throughout the world. Jesus has this advantage, but his humanity still allows him to sympathize with us in our weakness.

**HEBREWS 5:7-10.** Here the author draws on the life of Jesus (in particular, his prayers) to offer evidence of his “weakness.” His prayers were directed to the one who “**was able to save him from death**,” which means that the Passion is likely in view here. While God did not deliver Jesus from crucifixion, the resurrection saved him from death.

As part of his humanity, Jesus had to “learn” obedience (**v. 8**), which has caused some translators difficulty. This is because many theologians have focused almost exclusively on Jesus’ divinity and have not adequately dealt with his mortality. Just as Jesus had to learn to walk and talk, he had to learn to obey God. He had to learn these things even though he was the Son of God.

This is important when we get to **verse 9**, where the writer describes Jesus

as “**having been made perfect**.” The Greek word translated as “**perfect**” is *teleiotheis*, which comes from a root word meaning “complete,” “finished,” or “fulfilled.” Jesus’ “imperfection” before he learned obedience was not due to any essential flaw, but to not having fully developed the trajectory of his life’s mission.

As a high priest “**according to the order of Melchizedek**” by God’s own choice (**v. 10**), Jesus is the source of our salvation. His priesthood is eternal, knowing no bounds and having no limits. As a priest like Melchizedek, Jesus also serves as king, having all power and authority to rule over our lives and over all creation, and his kingdom will last forever.

## Applying the Scripture

Just as Jesus’ intercession for us involved a full investment of his body, mind, and heart, so should our intercessions for others. The word *intercede* literally means “a going between” and refers to our putting ourselves in the place of another. Intercessory prayer is not simply asking God for something on behalf of others, but is a way of placing oneself “in the way” and entails action on their behalf.

One of the best images of this kind of intercession is that of the Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) who “get in the way” of violence as a witness for peace. At the invitation of local peace and human rights workers, CPT places “violence-reduction” teams in crisis situations and militarized areas around the world. “CPT embraces the vision of unarmed intervention waged by committed peacemakers ready to risk injury and death in bold attempts to transform lethal conflict through the nonviolent power of God’s truth and love.”<sup>1</sup> These brave groups of believers place themselves between weapons and the people that the weapons are intended to harm, as a witness and as a deterrent to war. They do not just pray for peace and go back to their lives; they pray for peace by risking their lives. Intercession, then, can be a dangerous task!

The writer of Hebrews emphasizes the point that Jesus’ earthly life is significant, not just his death and resurrection. This should be instructive for Christian theologians who focus so much on the crucifixion and resurrection that they neglect Jesus’ living witness of love and compassion. Hebrews (along with the rest of the biblical witness) is clear that Jesus’ significance is not in his escape

In Hebrew tradition a king could not be a priest, and a priest could not be a king.

from physical existence, but in his incarnation as God made flesh. So too Christians must find ways to live out the life of faith in the here-and-now and not just wait for their souls to leave their bodies.

The book of Hebrews represents an attempt to maintain Jewishness through an innovative reinterpretation of significant Jewish figures and ideas. When we read Hebrews, our focus should not be on the disconnections that it represents, but on the strong connections of the Christian faith with Judaism. Hebrews never attacks Judaism, and as Christians, we should be willing to acknowledge our debt to Judaism.<sup>2</sup>

## Session Plans

These lesson plans are given as suggestions. The words **AND**, **OR**, or **AND/OR** between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

### GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION

- **Read Hebrews 4:14–5:10**, and session 7 in *Journeys* and this leader's guide.
- For "Closing the Session," **bring** strips of fabric and fabric pens, or paper or origami paper and ink pens (enough for each participant). Also **bring** tape and/or string for hanging.
- **Have available** Bibles; paper; pens or pencils; and either newsprint and markers, a dry-erase board and markers, or a chalkboard and chalk.

### BEGINNING THE SESSION

(10 MINUTES)

- **Welcome** participants by opening with a prayer for this class time. **Pray** for open minds and hearts as well as compassion and peace within ourselves and our world.
- **Invite** participants to break into groups of two or three and come up with a definition of "intercessory prayer."
- After five minutes, **ask** groups to come back together as a class to share. **Come back** to these definitions later if it fits in with your discussions.

### DEVELOPING THE SESSION

(35-40 MINUTES)

#### A Great High Priest (8-10 min.)

- **Ask** a participant to read **Hebrews 4:14–5:4** (p. 47 in *Journeys*).

- Using information in "Examining the Scripture," **explain** the meaning of the passage.
- **Lead** a discussion with the following questions or your own questions:
  - Do you call your ordained clergy priests or pastors?
  - Is there a difference in those roles? What are the differences? What are the similarities?
  - What other kinds of clergy have you experienced in your life? What did you find enlightening about your experience with them?

#### AND/OR

- **Discuss** the Questions for Reflection on pages 48-49 in *Journeys*.

#### AND

#### The Order of Melchizedek (8-10 min.)

- **Ask** for a volunteer to read **Hebrews 5:5-10** (p. 49 in *Journeys*).
- Using information in "Examining the Scripture," **explain** the meaning of the passage.
- **Point out** that according to the Law, Jesus could not be a priest because he was of the tribe of Judah, not Levi.
- **Ask:**
  - Why do you think the writer of Hebrews wanted to connect Jesus with Melchizedek? Couldn't he have simply said that Jesus was divinely appointed as High Priest? (*His being in the order of Melchizedek means that he can be both priest and king, and God appointed him forever before the Levitical priesthood was established.*)
  - Do you agree with the statement in verse 8 that Jesus "learned obedience"? Why or why not?

#### AND

#### Prayer as Intercession (8-10 min.)

- **Use** information found in "Applying the Scripture" to facilitate a discussion with participants about active intercessory prayer. If necessary, **refer** to the definitions of intercession discussed in "Beginning the Session."
- **Read** the following: "Prayers of intercession should not be offered lightly. When we intercede for someone else, we may be invited by God to become the answer to our own prayer. Intercessory prayer is prayer that is active and engaged."

- **Ask:**
  - Where have you been a witness to this in your life? Have you ever felt called upon by God to “become the answer to your own prayer” for someone else?
  - When is it more appropriate to pray prayers of petition?
  - When is it more appropriate to pray prayers of intercession?

### CLOSING THE SESSION (10 MINUTES)

- **Refer** participants to the second paragraph in the section called “Practicing Intercession” (p. 50 in *Journeys*). **Invite** them to do what the congregation in the story did.
- **Give** participants strips of fabric or paper or origami paper and have them write their intercession using a fabric or ink pen. As a class you can then go outside and hang your fabric or paper from a tree nearby, stay inside and hang them from the ceiling, or take them home to hang as a reminder that we are called to be intercessors. **Use** tape and/or string to hang the strips of fabric or paper.
- **Close** this session by reading the following prayer about interceding for others, written by American Baptist pastor Bruce Greer (also printed on pp. 51-52 in *Journeys*).

#### Prayers of the People<sup>3</sup>

by Bruce Greer

**LEADER:** We thank you, Eternal God, for the ancient and living word handed down to us through the ages from the pages of sacred writings.

**PEOPLE:** **Open our hearts, O God, to your wisdom and inspiration.**

*Silence (30 seconds)*

**LEADER:** We thank you for the challenging words of Jesus—to put first things first in our lives, to place our greatest effort and energy on what is most important.

**PEOPLE:** **Help us, O God, to trust these words of wisdom and inspiration.**

*Silence (30 seconds)*

**LEADER:** We thank you for the admonition of Saint Paul—not to worry about anything, but in everything, through thankful prayers and supplications, to make our requests known to you.

**PEOPLE:** **Help us, O God, to trust in these words of wisdom and inspiration.**

*Silence (30 seconds)*

**LEADER:** We thank you, Eternal God, for those times and places when we have experienced your presence and peace, which surpasses all understanding.

**PEOPLE:** **We thank you, Lord, for your peace, which surpasses our understanding.**

*Silence (30 seconds)*

**LEADER:** Grant us, O God, that same peace this day as we pray...

**PEOPLE:** **For our world, broken with shameless conflict and burdened with needless suffering.**

**For our nation, divided by political self-interest and distracted by selfish needs.**

**For our people, divided by religion, class, ethnicity, and economics. For ourselves, burdened with worry and distracted by lesser priorities.**

*Silence (30 seconds)*

**LEADER:** Grant us, O God, that same peace this day as we pray...

**PEOPLE:** **For our world, united by the good will of so many well-meaning people and encouraged by the sacrifice of so many in selfless service.**

**For our nation, unified by timeless principles and blessed with an abundance of resources for the common good.**

**For our people, unified by higher purposes and ever blessed with endless possibility.**

**For ourselves, strengthened by your grace and assured by your peace.**

*Silence (30 seconds)*

**LEADER:** Receive, O God, the prayers we now offer in silence.

*Silence (2 minutes)*

**LEADER:** May the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard our hearts and our minds, now and forever.

**ALL:** **May it be so in us. And, may we be open to God's guidance in serving others. Amen.**

#### NOTES

1. “Statement of Identity,” Christian Peacemaker Teams, online at [www.cpt.org/about/identity\\_statement](http://www.cpt.org/about/identity_statement).

2. For more on this issue, see Krister Stendahl's article “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” which was originally published in 1963 in *Harvard Theological Review* (Vol. 55, No. 4) and can be found online at [www.dburnett.com/?p=453](http://www.dburnett.com/?p=453).

3. Bruce Greer, “Prayers of the People” (unpublished, written in 2005). Used by permission of the author.



# We Pray for One Another

**SCRIPTURE:** James 5:13-18

**KEY VERSE:** **Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.** —James 5:16

**SESSION OBJECTIVES:**

- explore healing prayer and confession; and
- to apply the practice of prayer to our current lives.

## Introducing the Scripture

The traditional view is that the letter of James was written by James the Just, who died in AD 62. If this James was indeed the author, his letter would have been composed about the same time as were the letters of Paul, and well before the Gospels.

James the Just was called by Clement of Rome the “bishop of bishops,” because he was the bishop of Jerusalem while the church was still headquartered there (before the Jewish revolt of AD 66). He presided over the First Jerusalem Council, which made decisions about the inclusion of Gentiles in the Christian communities (see **Acts 15**), sometime around AD 50.

Some scholars have suggested that the letter as we have it was originally composed in a rough and fragmentary state while James was still alive, and then reworked and polished by a later editor. It is possible that much of the book is composed of things that James said frequently enough to be remembered and that a later disciple of James compiled them and provided some connecting material to fit it all together.

The Letter of James is characterized by very practical teachings, with less focus on the theological issues that dominate Paul’s epistles. In fact, it is so focused on “works” that Martin Luther tried to exclude it from the canon. The passage he took most offense to was

**James 2:14-26**, which claims that faith without works is no good.

The fifth chapter of James is no exception to this focus on practice. It begins with a condemnation of the rich (who exploit workers and live in luxury), moves on to encourage perseverance and offer instructions on prayer, and then closes with an exhortation to rescue wandering believers. Compared with the greetings and benedictions in Paul’s letters, James closes abruptly.

James is notoriously difficult to divide into sections. So many of James’ teachings are stand-alone practical exhortations that it is difficult to construct a wider argument for the letter as a whole. Part of the reason for this may be that the composition of the letter was done in fragments and stages as previously noted.

This is not to suggest that there aren’t recurring themes in the book, however. As previously noted, James is characterized by pragmatic, pithy advice to believers. The book focuses on themes of humility, honesty, simple justice, and endurance. In this way, James could even be loosely characterized as Wisdom Literature, similar to Proverbs or the Wisdom of Sirach, literary works that are also made up of short teachings loosely connected by common themes.

## Examining the Scripture

We begin with some commentary on **James 5:1-12**, the background to the focus Scripture, **James 5:13-18**.

**JAMES 5:1-6.** In this text the writer pronounces an unequivocal and passionate condemnation of the rich. These words may seem shocking to us, but the writer is simply responding to the abuse of wealth in the Roman Empire in the first century AD.

The Letter  
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practical  
teachings.

The vocabulary of this section is very closely tied to the prophetic tradition of ancient Israel. The Greek words for “weep” and “wail,” for example, appear frequently in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) in contexts describing God’s punishment of apostasy. Likewise, the “**miserics**” coming upon the rich are the same “**miserics**” that came upon those who resisted God in the Hebrew Bible. Many of the other vivid images used in these verses are also taken from the prophetic tradition.

In addition to the moth-eaten clothing and rotting riches put forward as witnesses against the rich, James also said that their gold and silver had rusted. This is striking, because these materials are precious partly because of their resistance to corrosion. The rust and decay themselves bore testimony against the rich. The corrosion of their wealth was proof that they did not store up “**treasures in heaven**” as Jesus taught, but had focused on earthly treasures instead (see **Matthew 6:19-20**).

**JAMES 5:7-11.** The change in addressee is sudden here. James was no longer addressing the rich people, but now addressed his “brethren” (“**beloved**” in the NRSV) and shifted his tone to encouragement and exhortation rather than the condemnation of the preceding section. James’ community needed to be patient because of the hardship caused by their rich oppressors. The verb used here for “patience” is *makrothymein*. It refers to the attitude of a superior toward an inferior and has more of the sense of “putting up with” than the word used for “endurance” in **verse 11**.

The *parousia*—“coming”—of the Lord is central to James’ argument here. The word itself primarily means “presence” (literally “being with or near”), but has come to be associated with the return of Christ to judge the world. This certainly seems to be the thrust of its meaning here.

James uses an unusual adjective to modify the word *crop* in **verse 7**, one that is unique in biblical literature. The word for “**precious**”—*timion*—is usually reserved for jewels and crowns. This reference to crops as precious hints at the poverty experienced by believers who received James’ letter.

The verb translated in **verse 8** as “**strengthen**”—*sterizein*—has the meaning of “set firmly” or “establish.” It is often used for strengthening the body with

food. This supports the notion that James wanted his followers to wait actively rather than sitting around until Jesus returned. Specifically, they should work on building solidarity among themselves (“do not complain against one another”) and supporting each other.

**JAMES 5:12.** Oath-taking is a common occurrence in Hebrew Scripture, with even God taking oaths (see **Exodus 13:5**, for example), but this practice seems to have been questioned by some groups within first-century Judaism. The Essenes were known for forbidding all oaths, and some of the rabbis also frowned on the practice. James probably had in mind the Sermon on the Mount, however, in which Jesus himself forbid all oaths (see **Matthew 5:34**).

**JAMES 5:13.** This is the first time in the epistle that James used the verb *pray*, and this becomes the focal point of most of this section. The content of the prayer is ambiguous and may refer to set prayers or a petition for healing and/or endurance (**v. 11**). James warned that instead of complaining, believers should pray as a response to suffering. Believers should sing songs of praise when life is good and they are full of cheer.

**JAMES 5:14-16.** The word for “**sick**” here can mean any weakness of body, not just illness. The elders being summoned would have been leaders in the local church, although we are not given any details about their role beyond the anointing ministry described here by James.

The word for “**oil**” here can mean olive oil in particular or, by extension, any kind of oil. In Scripture, such anointing with oil was symbolic of God’s Spirit. The connection between the anointing with oil and the prayers of the elders in **verse 14** indicates that “anointing” is given for divine healing.

The verb used for “**save**” (**v. 15**)—*sosei*—is the same Greek word that is used throughout the New Testament to describe God’s work in and through Jesus Christ. It

carries a wide range of meanings from deliverance to protection, from provision to preservation, from healing to forgiveness. This wide range of meaning is certainly within James’ purview here. The prayer and anointing might result in healing the sick person; it might also provide patience to endure suffering. It could preserve an injury from becoming

Anointing  
with oil was  
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God’s Spirit.

worse, and it could even “save” in a more religious sense: the forgiveness of sin.

The link between sin and sickness in **verses 15-16** leaves undecided the question of whether there is a causal link between the two. Scripture offers different views on the subject. Paul appeared to connect improper respect for the Lord’s Supper with sickness (see **1 Corinthians 11:29-30**), although it is not clear what his phrase “**discerning the body**” means. Is “the body” the elements of Communion (the bread and cup), or is it the church fellowship (the body of Christ)? Jesus on the other hand, dismissed any such connection (see **John 9:1-3**)!

Among Eastern Orthodox Christians, the connection between sin and sickness is very strong, although in a different sense. They describe sin itself as a disease, while Christ is the Great Healer. Read from this perspective, the entire passage from **verses 14-16a** could be seen as dealing with the healing of sin and its effects.

The verb for “**may be healed**” (**v. 16**) is plural here, which suggests that communal healing will come as a result of mutual confession of sins. It is also striking that healing is here presented as the remedy for sin, while being saved is the remedy for being sick in the previous verse.

**JAMES 5:17-18.** Elijah was a common figure in Jewish tradition, and James was drawing on extra-biblical traditions about him to make his argument. For example, Elijah’s narrative in **1 Kings 17 and 18** does not say that Elijah’s prayers caused the rain to cease or begin or that the period without rain was three-and-a-half years. We do find these details, however, in **4 Ezra 7:109** and **Sirach 48:3**.

James emphasized Elijah’s humanity here as a model for human prayer. The point is that it was “**a human being like us**” who caused the heavens to open and close, and this example should give us hope that God will answer our prayers, too.

## Applying the Scripture

James is an eminently practical book that has much to say about the practices of its original audience. Its words are no less true for modern readers, though some “translation” may need to take place. In your discussion time,

James emphasized Elijah’s humanity here as a model for human prayer.

focus conversation on making real-world connections between the text and things that are going on in your community.

While many contemporary expressions of Christianity focus on salvation primarily as trusting Christ for forgiveness of sins, which results in the knowledge that you’ll go to heaven when you die, the biblical writers would have found this disturbing at best. The Greek word for “salvation”—*soterias*—appears in the Septuagint and in the New Testament as a word that covers political deliverance, bodily healing, the forgiveness of sins, and so much more. James provides one

example of this, as the phrase used in **verse 15** to describe the deliverance of the sick person from his or her illness is “**will save**.” It is important that we understand salvation as the restoration of body, mind, and spirit and approach it as such.

James envisioned believers coming together for prayer, singing, healing each other, and confessing sins to one another. This is a setting in which there is space for the full range of human emotion and experience to find its expression within communal worship. Talk about which of these things your church does well. Encourage your class to think creatively about how your worship might encompass a more holistic approach. Are there ways that you can integrate some of these even into your class time?

We are encouraged here to confess our sins to one another. This can take on a variety of forms, but the important thing is that we learn to be honest with each other about the ways that we fall short. It is important to have good personal boundaries and to protect those who may not be comfortable with this practice, however. Forced vulnerability can be abusive. When you lead the discussion this week, make sure that you create a space in which people feel welcomed into finding expressions of authentic vulnerability and do not feel pressured into overexposure.

## Session Plans

These lesson plans are given as suggestions. The words **AND**, **OR**, or **AND/OR** between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

### GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION

- **Read James 5:1-18**, focusing on **verses 13-18**, and session 8 in *Journeys* and this leader's guide.
- **Have available** Bibles; paper; pens or pencils; and either a chalkboard and chalk, a dry-erase board and markers, or newsprint and markers.

### BEGINNING THE SESSION

(8-10 MINUTES)

- **Welcome** participants by opening in prayer. **Pray** for this class time, the participants, and the individual healing of those here as well as the healing of our world. Feel free to provide a time in your prayer that is open for your participants to add their own prayers.
- **Invite** discussion about praying for healing. **Ask:**
  - What are your current thoughts about praying for healing?
  - What has your personal experience with it been?
  - Do you make a spiritual practice out of praying for healing often?
- **Summarize** "Worship as a Place of Healing" (p. 53 in *Journeys*), or **ask** a participant to read the section, as a way to introduce the theme for today's lesson.

### DEVELOPING THE SESSION

(35-40 MINUTES)

#### Meet James (5-10 min.)

- **Use** information in "Introducing the Scripture" and "Examining the Scripture" to give participants an introduction to the book of James and the first twelve verses of chapter 5.
- **Point out** that the first half of chapter 5 includes a warning against the rich that their wealth will be useless when they suffer for their greed, leading into a section urging the faithful to be patient until Jesus returns and not to cause divisions.

AND

#### Healing Prayer (8-10 min.)

- **Ask** a participant to read **James 5:13-16** (p. 54 in *Journeys*).
- **Use** information from "Examining the Scripture" to explain the passage.
- **Lead** a discussion using the following questions or your own questions:
  - How are forgiveness and healing related?

- How is physical healing connected to spiritual healing?
- In the face of suffering, how can worship be a place of openness and response, lament and forgiveness, anointing and healing?
- Have you had an experience of anointing with oil and praying for someone who is ill? How would you describe it? What was that experience like for you?
- How could weekly worship include an occasional experience of healing prayer? Share some creative ideas.

#### AND/OR

- **Ask:** Is there someone in our class who is currently suffering and could use healing prayer today?
- If someone responds affirmatively and desires prayer, **invite** the class to practice healing prayer by the laying on of hands, anointing, or simply offering up verbal prayers on this person's behalf. If there is not someone who needs that today, have your participants offer up healing prayers for the current hurts of our world (war, refugees, starvation, orphans, religious persecution, gun violence, poverty, etc.).

AND

#### Confession (8-10 min.)

- **Ask** someone to read today's Key Verse, **James 5:16** (p. 53 in *Journeys*).
- **Summarize** the section in *Journeys* called "Confession" (pp. 55-57). Be sure to explain the meaning of the "priesthood of all believers."
- **Ask:**
  - How might the practice of confession fit into worship?
  - What would our life together as the body of Christ look like if we were truly priests to each other?
  - A priest is bound by vows to keep confidential that which is shared in the confessional. This creates trust and prevents gossip. In the Protestant tradition, how could vows of trust become part of being priests to each other?

#### AND/OR

- **Invite** participants to write a confession about something that has been weighing on them onto a piece of paper. **Encourage** them to share their confession with someone they feel safe with, someone who they feel can act as a priest to them, this week.



OR

**Journey toward Healing (8-10 min.)**

- **Summarize** the section in *Journeys* called “Journey toward Healing” (pp. 57-58).
- **Ask:**
  - Does your church have a regular service of healing prayer?
  - The season of Lent and the season of Advent provide a context for a service of healing prayer. What might that kind of experience look like in your church? What components of worship are important to include?

AND/OR

- **Write** the words “the process of healing” on the board or newsprint.
- **Invite** participants to brainstorm some other words or phrases they associate with the process of healing.
- As they share, **create** a collage with their words on the board or newsprint.
- After the class is done sharing, **step back** and have everyone observe the collage.
- **Ask:** Do you see anything that surprises you? Do you see anything that you would like to incorporate more into your own personal life (as a spiritual practice, maybe)? How many of these things have to do with us as individuals? How many have to do with us in community?

OR

**The Elephant in the Room (5-10 min.)**

- **Point out** that the writer of James taught that the prayer of faith brings healing. With prayers for healing, invariably the question arises: “But why wasn’t so-and-so healed?”
- **Invite** participants to discuss possible reasons why someone was not healed or died in spite of an entire congregation praying for healing. To “prime the pump,” you could ask, “Do you think their faith wasn’t strong enough? Why or why not?”
- **Discuss** how we can interpret **verses 15-16** considering that people sometimes do not recover from sickness even when many people pray for them.

AND

**Elijah’s Life of Prayer (5-10 min.)**

- **Ask** a participant to read **James 5:17-18** (p. 58 in *Journeys*).

- **Summarize** the life and work of the prophet Elijah.
- **Discuss** the statement that Elijah “**was a human being like us.**” Could we do the things he did? Why or why not?

OR

- **Invite** participants to write down a personal prayer on a piece of paper. Have them take it home and encourage them to post it somewhere they frequent as a reminder to pray that prayer in repetition or to establish a different practice of prayer.

**CLOSING THE SESSION****(10 MINUTES)**

- **Invite** participants to pray aloud together and freely as a class. Practice together the discipline of prayer.
- **Close** the session by praying together the litany printed below and on page 59 in *Journeys*.

**We Are All Disabled by John Pipe<sup>1</sup>**

LEADER: We are all disabled by sin and sickness, by despair and sadness, by hate and prejudice.

**PEOPLE: Heal us of our disabilities, O God.**

LEADER: Some of our bodies are disabled by accidents of nature and accidents from just being human; we have conditions that handicap us: we are blind, deaf, and unable to talk, to walk, to enjoy simple pleasures.

**PEOPLE: Heal us of our physical disabilities, O God.**

LEADER: Most of us have disabilities that make us blind to the hurting people, the people who are disabled because of fear, poverty, race, or greed, whom we fail to see or understand or just ignore.

**PEOPLE: Heal us of the disabilities that keep us from seeing poverty, racism, and sexism.**

LEADER: We are all disabled by sins that keep us from seeing our own mistakes, shortcomings, anger, biases, and weaknesses.

**ALL: God, we come before you acknowledging our disabilities and asking for your grace and mercy as we try to be open and aware of others and to see ourselves for who we are and can be through the power of your Holy Spirit.**

**NOTE**

1. Brad Berglund, *Reinventing Worship* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2006), 79.

# The Discipline of Fasting

**SCRIPTURE:** Daniel 1:3-5, 8-17; Matthew 6:16-18; 9:14-17

**KEY VERSE:** **When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.** —Matthew 6:17-18

**SESSION OBJECTIVES:**

- to explore feasting and fasting with food and behavior;
- to understand what Jesus said about fasting and those who fast; and
- to practice a regular discipline of seeking God by fasting.

## Introducing the Scripture

The events narrated in the book of Daniel took place at a critical and complicated time in the history of the people of Israel: the time of the conquest of Jerusalem and the exile of its survivors in Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, invaded the kingdom of Judah twice with his armies. The first time that he did so (598 BC), Jehoiachin, the king of Judah, surrendered when the Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar took the king and much of the aristocracy back to Babylon to reeducate them in the culture of the Babylonian ruling class (see **2 Kings 24:1-17**).

Daniel and his friends would have been taken to Babylon at this time, and the events narrated in **Daniel 1** would have occurred during the next couple of years. Nebuchadnezzar's plan may have been to eventually have these young men go back to Jerusalem and be administrators in his puppet government there, or he might have intended for them to stay in the capital long-term to serve the needs of his empire. Either way, the capture of these men would have crippled the already weakened government in Judah and rendered it harmless to the Babylonian Empire.

The Israelites' loyalty to their religious traditions was severely tried.

Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah for the second time in 587 BC), when the government leader that he had placed in charge of the province, Zedekiah, rebelled against him. This time the armies of Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the city of Jerusalem and executed Zedekiah and the members of his family and his government. Those people who survived this onslaught were taken back to Babylon as captives.

The opening verses of Daniel suggest to the informed reader that the story was not meant to be taken as a strictly accurate historical record. We know that Nebuchadnezzar did not campaign against Judah before 598

BC, while this narrative states that it began in the third year of Jehoiakim, which was 606 BC (eight years earlier). However, the dating in **Daniel 1:1** may be a misreading of the account in **2 Kings 24:1** in which Jehoiakim became a vassal of the Babylonians after Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Egyptians in 605 BC **“for three years; then he turned and rebelled against him.”** The name Shinar (**Daniel 1:2**) was an archaic name for Babylon that was likely meant to remind us of the Tower of Babel and the hubris that characterized it (see **Genesis 11**). It is likely that the author of the apocryphal Book of Judith employed similar subterfuge when writing that narrative, as similar historical inaccuracies show up there.

While the date for the composition of Daniel is uncertain, many biblical scholars think it was written during the second century BC, several centuries after the happening of the events that it narrates. The story in **Daniel 1** does seem to reflect the concerns with Israelite purity that became vital during the post-exilic period sometime in the third or second centuries BC.

During this period, there were multiple periods of “testing,” in which the

Israelites' loyalty to their religious traditions was severely tried. The most famous example would be from the reign of the Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes, during which many Jews were offered the choice between renouncing their faith (living) and fidelity to their faith (dying). The books of the Maccabees also reflect the turmoil of this period and the zealotry of many Jewish people for the God of Israel. While the book of Daniel relates stories that happened during the sixth century BC, it is likely that the author retold these stories to encourage Jews in his day to resist the "pollution" of foreign religions, customs, and foods.

We can admire the faithfulness of Daniel in maintaining the cultural uniqueness of Israel, but by the time of Jesus, this faithfulness had begun to turn into something else. Two passages from Matthew (**Matthew 6:16-18** and **Matthew 9:14-17**, included in the Scripture for this session) are concerned with fasting in different contexts from the ones of the sixth and second centuries BC. At this period in time, purity laws were being enforced on the poor, who were often not able to afford the complex restrictions that had grown out of the original concern for survival in the exilic and post-exilic period. New Testament professor William Herzog argues that the Pharisees in the time of Jesus had become representatives of Jerusalem's religious elite, sent out to police many of the poor villages in Galilee.<sup>1</sup> Jesus' conflicts with them often arose out of their obsession with observing the letter of the purity laws while ignoring the "weightier matters" of faith, mercy, and justice (**Matthew 23:23**).

## Examining the Scripture

**DANIEL 1:3-4.** These verses introduce Ashpenaz, which means literally "inn-keeper," and may refer either to the steward's role or his name (more likely both). His title ("palace master" in the NRSV) can also be translated as "head of his eunuchs," and persons with this position often served as high officials in the Chaldean (or Babylonian) court. Ashpenaz, then, was a highly trusted and very powerful official in the Babylonian bureaucracy, who likely oversaw the education of the children of the royal family. It was appropriate, then, for him to be charged with the care and education of the Israelite captives as well.

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The characteristics of the captives listed in **verse 4** tell us that they were likely from the aristocracy of Jewish society. Nebuchadnezzar may have chosen them as a way of showcasing the superiority of Chaldea over Judah. What better way of demonstrating this than to teach the very best and brightest Jews to prefer the culture of the imperial court to that of Jerusalem?

**DANIEL 1:5.** This verse, together with **verses 3-4**, fulfills a prophecy made by Isaiah to King Hezekiah that some of his descendants would become palace servants (*sarisim*) in Babylon (see **Isaiah 39:7**). *Sarisim* is the same word used here to denote Daniel's and his friends' new position.

The three years of training mentioned in **verse 5** fits Persian practices more than Babylonian, and this may be another clue that the story is not strictly historical and that the book of Daniel was written much later.<sup>2</sup> It is also worthy of note that this three-year period was the prescribed period of training for religious education.

There is some evidence that the writer of Daniel is dependent on **2 Kings 25** and **Jeremiah 52** (detailing the capture and treatment of King Jehoiachin) for part of his reconstruction of events here. The Hebrew phrase for "daily portion" used in **Daniel 1:5**, **2 Kings 25:30**, and **Jeremiah 52:34** is an unusual one. In all three places, a "daily portion" of the king's menu is given to the exiled noble. This menu would probably have consisted of very rich foods that had already been offered to a deity, since the king himself was also seen as a god.

**DANIEL 1:8-17.** We are told that Daniel's primary concern with the king's food was that it would defile him, but it is not clear why. The meat had been offered to the Babylonian gods, but offerings of vegetable and grain, which Daniel did eat, were prevalent as well, so it may not have been simply that the food previously had been offered to the gods. It is possible that Daniel's concern was that meat and wine were often associated with celebration and feasting and would have been highly inappropriate for exiles mourning the loss of their homeland. In his commentary on Daniel, Daniel Smith-Christopher notes that such foods were often associated

with the wealthy and would have been violently taken as spoils and/or tribute from subjugated peoples.<sup>3</sup>

Anthropologist Mary Douglas, author of *Purity and Danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*, argues that one of the things purity laws do is serve to maintain social cohesion among groups.<sup>4</sup> This is especially true for groups whose social ties are being tested by persecution, as the Judeans of this time period were. By following the Jewish purity laws, Daniel was struggling to maintain his Jewish identity in the face of forced assimilation by the Babylonian Empire.

Daniel's chosen diet may strike the casual reader as nutritionally deficient (carrots and water, anyone?), but the word translated as "vegetables" here really means any food grown from a seed. This would have included grains, legumes, and a variety of other different plants, so it is certainly conceivable that after ten days, Daniel and his companions would have been healthier than those gorging themselves on the king's meat and wine.

God rewarded the young men's faithfulness by ensuring that they received favor from Ashpenaz and the guard and allowing them to excel at the educational regimen set out by the king. There are strong echoes here of the story of Joseph, another captive who was taken far from home (see **Genesis 39:21–41:57**). Daniel's ability to interpret dreams is another way that God blessed him for his faithfulness, and it is yet another connection to the Joseph story.

**MATTHEW 6:16-18.** This short section from **Matthew 6** is set within the Sermon on the Mount, which contains multiple short ethical teachings. It follows directly after Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer (see session 5 for a discussion of this prayer and its meaning), which is a plea for the coming of God's just kingdom. The three verses that make up this passage are a short, barbed attack against the hypocritical religious elites whose primary concern was making sure people recognized their greater holiness.

There was only one obligatory community fast established in the Hebrew Bible, on the Day of Atonement (see **Leviticus 16**), but periodic voluntary fasts were certainly part of the faith traditions of Israel. A fast could be a sign

Daniel was struggling to maintain his Jewish identity.

of mourning or repentance, or just a way of dedicating oneself to prayer.

Because of the close connection between fasting and grieving, some of the customs of the latter (wearing sackcloth, disheveled hair, using ashes, etc.) became affiliated with the former. But instead of appearing as those who "grieve," Jesus urged his followers to appear "normal." To "put oil on your head" and "wash your face" (**Matthew 6:17**) meant to en-

gage in typical daily acts of cleanliness.

In this passage, Jesus attacked those who made a big show of fasting so that others would see them. There is a word play in the Greek here that is lost in English translations: "they make their faces *disappear* so that they may *appear* to other people to fast." Jesus' diatribe stands in good company with the prophetic tradition—see especially **Isaiah 58**.

**MATTHEW 9:14-17.** The disciples of John the Baptist questioned Jesus about fasting. They and the Pharisees demonstrated their piety by fasting as a religious exercise. Why didn't Jesus and his disciples do likewise? Jesus explained that his disciples were like guests at a wedding. It was a time for celebration. Jesus said that his followers didn't mourn or fast because they still had the bridegroom (Jesus) with them. However, a time would come when the bridegroom would no longer be there—a reference to the coming crucifixion. At that time, Jesus' friends would want to fast.

Jesus turned the expectations of those present on their heads. Instead of commanding his disciples to fast, Jesus focused on the joy of sharing a meal with those he loved. When we read this story alongside the focus passage in **Matthew 6**, we once again see Jesus' focus on a generosity of spirit and compassion toward others, rather than on finding ways to prove how holy we are to other people. He was reminding us that there is a right time for both feasting and fasting.

There is a right time for both feasting and fasting.

### Applying the Scripture

As economically and socially comfortable American Christians, our danger in trying to identify with Daniel is that we miss the intense fear, sorrow, and insecurity that threatened to overwhelm him. While many who read the story of Daniel



can identify with his struggle to maintain his fidelity to God, it may also be enlightening to focus with your class on the figure of Ashpenaz.

The practice of fasting is ancient and well-established in Scripture and was done for a variety of reasons, including mourning, preparation for a task, repentance, protest, and as a way of focusing on prayer and contemplation. As an embodied practice, it focuses our hearts, minds, and bodies in an engagement with God and with others (if others are fasting with you).

Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* has some excellent guidance on fasting that your class might find useful. He closes his discussion of fasting with this quote: "It should go without saying that you should follow Jesus' counsel to refrain from calling attention to what you are doing. The only ones who should know you are fasting are those who have to know. If you call attention to your fasting, people will be impressed, and as Jesus said, that will be your reward. Although the physical aspects of fasting intrigue us, we must never forget that the major work of scriptural fasting is in the realm of the spirit. What goes on spiritually is of much more consequence than what is happening bodily."<sup>5</sup>

Any worship or devotional practice can be a liberating experience when we allow ourselves to be fully and authentically present with God and our fellow human beings. It is possible, however, to appear before God in worship and bring almost nothing of our true selves with us. Throughout **Matthew 6:1-18**, Jesus encourages us to avoid this kind of falsehood (or role-playing/hypocrisy) and instead to embrace integrity. *Integrity* comes from an old Latin word that means "wholeness," "completeness," or "soundness." This is what we achieve when we "integrate" the parts of ourselves into an authentic whole in life and in worship.

## Session Plans

These lesson plans are given as suggestions. The words **AND**, **OR**, or **AND/OR** between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

### GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION

- **Read** Daniel 1:3-5, 8-17; Matthew 6:16-18; 9:14-17, and session 9 in *Journeys* and this leader's guide.
- For "Beginning the Session," **bring** paper for each participant and markers or crayons for drawing.
- **Have available** Bibles; paper; pens or pencils; and either a chalkboard and chalk, a dry-erase board and markers, or newsprint and markers.
- You may want to suggest that participants take on the "Daniel Fast" (a twenty-one-day fasting and devotional program that mirrors the diet of Daniel and his friends) as a challenge over the next three weeks, and as a way to practice communal fasting. If you think this would be of interest to your class members, **photocopy** the handout on page 52 for class participants and **follow** the instructions in the activity "The Daniel Fast." **Plan** to check in on your experiences of this spiritual practice as a group at the end of the twenty-one-day period.

### BEGINNING THE SESSION

(10 MINUTES)

- **Welcome** participants and invite a participant to open today's class with prayer. **Reflect** with your participants on last week's discussion about the practice of prayer and **ask** if their prayer practice was different in the last week.
- **Introduce** the topic of today's session: feasting and fasting.
- **Lead** a discussion using the following questions or questions of your own:
  - Thinking of food as your friend, how would you describe your relationship to food? Is it a good relationship? Does it provide what you need? Are you a responsible friend? Is it painful? Is it enjoyable?
  - How would you feel about being asked to forgo your favorite foods for a few days? For a few weeks?
  - Have you ever given up food as a spiritual practice? If so, what has been your experience?

### AND/OR

- **Ask:** Other than a food fast, what other kind of fasting or letting-go have you tried? For example, "fast[ing] from judging others." What was your experience?
- **Distribute** paper and markers or crayons. **Invite** participants to draw pictures of non-food things that they want to fast from (examples: anger, complaining). **Instruct** participants to draw a large X through each picture as a visual reminder.
- Now **invite** participants to draw pictures of non-food things they want to feast on (examples: generosity, love, kindness, listening, gift-giving, reading, resting, yoga, walking, exercise, praying, etc.).

- **Invite** participants to take their drawings home to hang up on their wall as a personal reminder or **ask** for volunteers to give you their drawings to hang up in your classroom as a reminder for everyone.

## DEVELOPING THE SESSION

(35-40 MINUTES)

### What Jesus Said about Fasting (10-15 min.)

- **Ask** a participant to read **Matthew 6:16-18** (p. 62 in *Journeys*).
- **Point out** that today fasting is intended as a way to get closer to God. Within first-century Judaism fasting was considered one of the three principle ways that an individual demonstrated faithfulness to God. (The other two were almsgiving and prayer.)
- **Ask:** Why did Jesus call the people hypocrites? (*They were trying to impress others with their devotion to God.*)
- **Inform** participants that **Matthew 9:14-17** tells us more about the practice of fasting.
- **Ask** for a volunteer to read **Matthew 9:14-17** aloud from his or her Bible.
- **Use** information from “Examining the Scripture” to explain how the passage from **Matthew 9** relates to the passage from **Matthew 6**.
- **Lead** a discussion about the relevance (or lack thereof) of fasting today.

AND

### Refusing the Royal Treatment (8-10 min.)

- Using the information in “Introducing the Scripture,” **provide** the background for the Scripture from the book of Daniel.
- **Ask** for a volunteer to read **Daniel 1:3-5, 8-17** (p. 64 in *Journeys*).
- **Ask:** Why did Daniel and his friends refuse to eat the royal rations provided for him? What were the consequences of their actions?
- **Encourage** participants to imagine themselves as the court guard, who sympathized with those who chose to resist, and allowed them to change their diet.
- **Ask:**
  - How can you express solidarity with people resisting our culture’s dehumanization of those who are effectively exiled from the centers of power?
  - How can we identify with those who are actually being dehumanized?

AND/OR

- **Lead** a discussion about the circumstances under which believers should refuse to do what their leaders command versus what they feel that God wants them to do.

AND

### The Daniel Fast (5-10 min.)

- **Describe** the Daniel Fast. **Read** the following:  
The Daniel Fast is a biblically-based twenty-one-day partial fast. It is a method of fasting that men, women, and young people all over the world are using as they enter into the spiritual discipline of prayer and fasting.  
There are two anchoring Scriptures for the Daniel Fast: Daniel 1 and Daniel 10. In Daniel 1 the prophet ate only vegetables (that would have included fruits) and drank only water. Then in Daniel 10 we read that the prophet ate no meat nor any precious breads or foods and he drank no wine for twenty-one days. So from these Scriptures, we get three guidelines:
  - only fruits and vegetables
  - only water for a beverage
  - no sweeteners and no breads
 Another important guideline is drawn from Jewish fasting principles, in which no leaven is used during the fast. Therefore yeast, baking powder, and the like are not allowed on the Daniel Fast.  
In addition to the above guidelines, no artificial or processed foods or any chemical additives are allowed on the Daniel Fast.
- **Distribute** the handout (photocopied from page 52) and **go over** the main points of what foods are included in the fast and what foods must be avoided.
- **Invite** class members to participate in the Daniel Fast, but stress that participation is optional. **Remind** participants to contact their doctors for advice if they have any health issues that might be exacerbated by the fast.
- **Tell** participants to be prepared to check in on their experiences of this spiritual practice as a group at the end of the twenty-one-day period.

OR

### Dare to Be Different (10-15 min.)

- **Divide** the class into groups of three or four.

- **Give** each person paper and pen or pencil.
- **Instruct** participants to divide their papers into two columns titled “Similarities” and “Differences.”
- **Invite** each group to list those ways that they are similar to everyone else. **Allow** five minutes for this.
- Then, **encourage** each group to identify and list ways that they are different from some people because they are followers of Christ. **Allow** five minutes for this also.
- **Ask** each group to share one or two of their differences with the rest of the class.

## CLOSING THE SESSION

(5 MINUTES)

- **Invite** participants to join you in reading aloud the closing litany printed below and on pages 65-66 in *Journeys*.

### A Litany of Fasting and Feasting<sup>6</sup>

Fast from judging others;

Feast on Christ dwelling in them.

Fast from emphasis on differences;

Feast on unity.

Fast from thoughts of illness;

Feast on the gifts of healing.

Fast from discontent;

Feast on gratitude.

Fast from anger and bitterness;

Feast on forgiveness.

Fast from complaining;

Feast on expressing appreciation.

Fast from problems that overwhelm;

Feast on prayer that sustains.

Fast from seeking to control life;

Feast on creative collaboration.

Fast from fear of pain;

Feast on compassion for self and others.

Fast from lethargy and numbness;

Feast on relational engagement.

Fast from fear and fearful thinking;

Feast on trust and vulnerability.

Fast from meaningless distractions;

Feast on awareness and mindfulness.

Fast from idle speech;

Feast on intentional listening.

Fast from cluttering noises;

Feast on purposeful silence.

Fast from neglecting others;

Feast on giving others the gift of your time.

## NOTES

1. William Herzog, *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God: A Ministry of Liberation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 127-128.

2. See discussion in Anchor Bible Commentary on Daniel 1:5. Louis F. Hartman, Alexander A. Di Lella O.F.M., *The Book of Daniel*, The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 128-129.

3. Daniel Smith-Christopher, “The Book of Daniel,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 40.

4. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2006), 3.

5. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1978), 52.

6. This litany is attributed to William Arthur Ward (American author, teacher, and pastor, 1921–1994). Adapted by Brad Berglund.

## Guidelines for the Daniel Fast

The Daniel Fast is a biblically based, twenty-one-day partial fast. Daniel 1 and 10 give us the following guidelines:

- Eat only fruits and vegetables.
- Drink only water for a beverage.
- Eat no sweeteners and no breads.

In addition, no leavening agents (yeast, baking powder), artificial or processed foods, or chemical additives are allowed in your diet during the Daniel Fast.

### FOODS TO INCLUDE

**All fruits.** These can be fresh, frozen, dried, juiced, or canned. Fruits include but are not limited to apples, apricots, bananas, blackberries, blueberries, boysenberries, cantaloupe, cherries, cranberries, figs, grapefruit, grapes, guava, honeydew melon, kiwi, lemons, limes, mangoes, nectarines, oranges, papayas, peaches, pears, pineapples, plums, prunes, raisins, raspberries, strawberries, tangelos, tangerines, and watermelon.

**All vegetables.** These can be fresh, frozen, dried, juiced, or canned. Vegetables include but are not limited to artichokes, asparagus, beets, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, celery, chili peppers, collard greens, corn, cucumbers, eggplant, garlic, ginger root, kale, leeks, lettuce, mushrooms, mustard greens, okra, onions, parsley, potatoes, radishes, rutabagas, scallions, spinach, sprouts, squashes, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, turnips, watercress, yams, and zucchini. Veggie burgers are an option if you are not allergic to soy.

**All whole grains.** These include but are not limited to whole wheat, brown rice, millet, quinoa, oats, barley, grits, whole wheat pasta, whole wheat tortillas, rice cakes, and popcorn.

**All nuts and seeds.** These include but are not limited to sunflower seeds, cashews, peanuts, and sesame, as well as nut butters, including peanut butter.

**All legumes.** These can be canned or dried. Legumes include but are not limited to dried beans, pinto beans, split peas, lentils, black-eyed peas, kidney beans, black beans, cannellini beans, and white beans.

**All quality oils.** These include but are not limited to olive, canola, grape seed, peanut, and sesame.

**Water.** This includes spring water, distilled water, or other pure waters.

**Other.** Tofu, soy products, vinegar, seasonings, salt, herbs, and spices may also be consumed.

### FOODS TO AVOID

**All meat and animal products.** These include but are not limited to beef, lamb, pork, poultry, and fish.

**All dairy products.** These include but are not limited to milk, cheese, cream, butter, and eggs.

**All sweeteners.** These include but are not limited to sugar, raw sugar, honey, syrups, molasses, and cane juice.

**All leavened bread.** This includes Ezekiel Bread (it contains yeast and honey) and baked goods.

**All refined and processed food products.** These include but are not limited to artificial flavorings, chemical additives, white rice, white flour, and foods that contain artificial preservatives.

**All deep fried foods.** These include but are not limited to potato chips, French fries, and corn chips.

**All solid fats.** These include shortening, margarine, lard, and foods high in fat.

**Beverages other than water.** These include but are not limited to coffee, tea, herbal teas, carbonated beverages, energy drinks, and alcohol.

**Note:** If you have health issues, please be sure to contact your health professional for advice before committing to any fast, including the Daniel Fast. If you would like a list of the foods included and excluded in the Daniel Fast to show your doctor, just copy the contents of this page.

Please make sure to READ THE LABEL when purchasing packaged, canned, or bottled foods. They should be sugar-free as well as free of chemical additives.

The information on this handout was found at [danielfast.wordpress.com/daniel-fast-food-list/](http://danielfast.wordpress.com/daniel-fast-food-list/) and [www.daniel-fast.com/](http://www.daniel-fast.com/). For more information or to receive the food list and guidelines and a Daniel Fast Weekly Meal Planning Worksheet, visit: [www.daniel-fast.com/](http://www.daniel-fast.com/).



# Serving Neighbors, Serving God

**SCRIPTURE:** Luke 10:25-37

**KEY VERSE:** “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” —Luke 10:36-37

**SESSION OBJECTIVES:**

- to explore the story of the Good Samaritan; and
- to evaluate where and when we practice love, including inside our worship experiences.

## Introducing the Scripture

The Gospel of Luke differs from the other synoptic Gospels (Matthew and Mark) in some significant ways. First, a second volume is attached to the Gospel, the Acts of the Apostles. Second, Luke had a historical focus, so he set the story of Jesus within the broad parameters of world history. Third, the Gospel has a universal scope: Jesus is presented as the Savior of the whole world. And finally, Luke makes excellent use of the Greek language, the writing in this Gospel being among the finest in the New Testament.

The Gospel of Luke also demonstrates the passion of Jesus for people who lived on the fringe of society—Jewish society, Roman society, any society. The poor, widows, children, Samaritans, tax collectors, lepers, all found a place in Jesus’ kingdom. The Jesus that Luke portrays defined his ministry in terms of outreach to the outcasts (see **Luke 4:16-21; 5:27-32; 6:20-21; 7:1-9, 18-23; 17:11-19; and 19:1-10**). Such is the case in the text for this session.

The story in **Luke 10:25-37** is unique to Luke’s Gospel, although the first section (**vv. 25-28**) does appear in both Matthew and Mark, but slightly modified

(**Matthew 19:16-22; Mark 10:17-22**).

In both of those Gospels, the dialogue between Jesus and a man seeking eternal life is placed in an entirely different context.

In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus had just finished sending out the seventy (some of his disciples) and heard their report back. He then thanked God and blessed his disciples, in the midst of which he contrasted the wise and intelligent with the seventy (who he calls infants) and made one of his strongest claims of authority (see **Luke 10:21-22**).

Following quickly after this, we see a wise and intelligent expert in the law (a scribe)

challenge the authority that Jesus had just claimed for himself. What follows is a brilliant exchange in which Jesus continually turned each challenge back on his interlocutor (in what scholars call an honor-shame riposte), validating his claim to authority.

The structure of the first part of this narrative is that of a challenge to Jesus’ authority (**v. 25**), a counter-challenge to the lawyer’s authority—“Isn’t it in the Law, Law expert? How do you read it?” (**v. 26**), the lawyer’s response (**v. 27**), and finally, Jesus’ dismissal (**v. 28**).

The second section begins with another challenge (**v. 29**), then goes into an extended response by Jesus that shames the challenger (**vv. 30-35**), followed quickly by another counter-challenge (**v. 36**), the lawyer’s chastened response (**v. 37a**), and Jesus’ final dismissal (**v. 37b**).

This episode is part of the travel narrative in Luke’s Gospel (**Luke 9:51-19:27**). This portion of the Gospel revolves around the journey of Jesus and his disciples from Galilee to the city of Jerusalem. Luke uses this travel device to present his understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. Weaving together an assortment of stories about and

The Jesus that Luke portrays defined his ministry in terms of outreach to the outcasts.

teachings by Jesus, much of it unique to his Gospel, Luke describes the way of Christian discipleship.

## Examining the Scripture

**LUKE 10:25-26.** The Greek for “put him to the test” is *ekpeirazein*, which can mean “tempt” or “entrap.” The second meaning is preferable here, as the lawyer set out to challenge Jesus’ authority. This verb makes it clear that this is a hostile encounter and sets up the antagonism of the lawyer’s questioning.

The term *lawyer* refers to a scribe, a person trained to interpret the Jewish law. Originally, the scribes were copyists of the sacred Scriptures, but they eventually inherited the task of interpreting these Scriptures for ever-changing social conditions. All of the major groups within first century Judaism—Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes—had their own scribes. But Luke does not identify this man’s “party.”

The question as posed may refer to a debate within first-century Judaism concerning the interpretation of **Daniel 12:2** and its reference to “everlasting” (or eternal) life: “**Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.**” This is the only use of the phrase “everlasting life” in the Hebrew Bible. The Sadducees did not believe in eternal life (see **Luke 20:27**), but the Pharisees did. Both groups argued with the other about the meaning of the phrase in **Daniel 12:2**.

In **Matthew 22:34-40** and **Mark 12:28-34**, the question asked by the lawyer was about “the greatest commandment in the law.” This may mean that Luke was referring to a different situation in the ministry of Jesus, or else he modified the question for his Greek audience.

**LUKE 10:27.** The version of the Greatest Commandment given here is taken from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (**Deuteronomy 6:5** and **Leviticus 19:18**), with some minor differences. One difference is the addition of the phrase “**and with all your mind,**” which is also found in **Mark 12:30**—but there it is in the third position in the sequence as opposed to the last position in Luke.

Both Luke and Mark also replace the Greek word *dynamis* (from the Septuagint) with *ischys*. Both words can be translated as “strength.” While *dynamis* refers to

The lawyer  
set out to  
challenge  
Jesus’  
authority.

“potential for functioning in some way” or “ability to carry out something,” *ischys* means the “capability to function effectively” or even “good health.” Whatever the reason for the change, the difference in meaning is negligible.

**LUKE 10:28-30.** The question “**Who is my neighbor?**” (v. 29) reflects a desire to establish boundaries around who we are to love as ourselves. The preceding

quotes from the Pentateuch establish that love is for God and the neighbor, but what does that mean? Are we only to love others of our group or those who live near us? **Leviticus 19:34** already says to “**love the alien as yourself,**” but likely there were some who claimed that this merely referred to “aliens in your midst,” and not those outside of Israel or those who weren’t fastidious enough in their religious duties.

The phrase “**wanting to justify himself**” (v. 29) refers to a desire for vindication. Most likely, the scribe wanted to demonstrate the correctness of his (or his party’s) interpretation concerning this obligation to love others (see **Leviticus 19:18**).

**LUKE 10:31-32.** Jerusalem was the Holy City, the location of the temple, the centerpiece of the Levitical priesthood. The priests were the upper class of the tribe of Levi. These “high-class” priests were supported by thousands of other Levites. Jobs like keeping the altar fire going, burning and maintaining incense, singing for temple ceremonies, and playing musical instruments kept the lower-level workers busy. When they were off duty, many of these temple workers and priests lived in the city of Jericho, with its exotic location and subtropical climate. They often traveled back and forth on the road described in Jesus’ parable.

It is unclear why the priest and the Levite left the man on the side of the road. It is possible they didn’t want to be inconvenienced by caring for a wounded man, but it seems more likely that they thought he was dead. Encounter with a corpse made any Israelite unclean and required a seven-day period of purification (see **Numbers 19:11-22**). It was worse for a priest or Levite: any contact with a corpse other than that of an immediate family member rendered them perpetually unclean and was strictly forbidden by the law (see **Leviticus 21:1-4**). For persons who worked inside the temple complex, this

was a significant deterrent. They would not have been allowed to enter any area considered holy.

**LUKE 10:33-34.** The Samaritan is a surprise character: from priest to Levite to common Israelite would have been the expected order. In one sense, the responsibility of the Samaritan to care for someone wounded (or to bury a corpse) is the same as that placed on Israelites, and so it doesn't affect the overall structure of the story. But the introduction of the Samaritan is a barb intended to catch the lawyer, who would have immediately gone from thinking about the uncleanness of the man in the ditch to the uncleanness of the Samaritan. (See the explanation in the student book *Journeys*, page 70, for why the Jews and the Samaritans hated each other.)

The alcohol in the wine would have cleansed the wound, and the oil would have kept it from drying out before it could be treated and bandaged. By using his own animal as transportation for the man, the Samaritan would have had to walk the rest of the road to Jericho. The details about the Samaritan's continued provision for the man drive home how he went above and beyond to care for the man. Such details also would have made the lawyer more and more uncomfortable, as the layers of impurity would have built in his mind as Jesus talked.

**LUKE 10:35-37.** Jesus did not tell this parable in order to answer the lawyer's question "**Who is my neighbor?**" Instead, he used the story to pose a new question altogether: "**Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?**"

The lawyer was so scandalized by the introduction of the Samaritan into the story that he couldn't even bring himself to identify him as a Samaritan. Lamely, he responded to Jesus' question: "**the one who showed him mercy**" (v. 37). Since the lawyer didn't seem capable of loving his neighbor, the Samaritan, Jesus shamed him by challenging him to at least live up to the example that was set by that Samaritan. As he dismissed the lawyer, Jesus told him to "**go and do likewise**" (do what the Samaritan did).

## Applying the Scripture

The parts of the human self that are named in **verse 27** encompass the entirety of a person in the Hebrew mind.

The  
Samaritan  
is a surprise  
character.

From the *Anchor Bible Commentary* on this passage: "*kardia*, 'heart,' as denoting the more responsive and emotional reactions of a human being; *psyche*, 'soul,' the vitality and consciousness of a person; *ischys*, 'might,' the powerful and instinctive drive; and *dianoia*, 'mind,' the intelligent and planning qualities. As a

group, they sum up the totality of personal life."<sup>1</sup> Each is important if we are to fully submit ourselves to love of God and neighbor. Help your class to think of creative ways to express each center of their being in their love for God and each other.

We are told here to love God with all of our minds. The word for "mind" here refers both to our planning abilities and to our ability to reason and study. This applies to all aspects of our lives, as our love for God and neighbor should always be expressed in ways that employ our best planning and thoughtfulness.

This also applies to our common worship time. Careful planning and forethought go into making worship services places where people experience God in meaningful ways. Whether a pastor is carefully crafting a sermon, a music leader is choosing songs, or musicians and readers are practicing, attention to detail and active minds are at work. In addition to these, scholars study and work for years to translate and interpret the Scriptures so that believers can read and understand them. While spontaneity and the movement of the Spirit are vital parts of worship, there is a great deal of thinking that goes into creating the framework that makes us free. Genuine freedom requires structure. Where there is no structure, the result is not freedom but anarchy.

In Clarence Jordan's *Cotton Patch Version of Luke*, written in Georgia in the 1960s, the characters of the Good Samaritan story have been changed to re-contextualize the story to address the issues being faced by Southern churches at that time. The lawyer becomes a white Sunday School teacher, the priest is a white preacher, the Levite is a white Gospel song leader, and the traveling Samaritan is a black man. In this version of the story, the racial tensions at work in the narrative are highlighted: while the preacher and song leader would not help the man who had been mugged (also a white man), the black man was moved to tears, bound his wounds, and took him to a hospital.

The effect that this would have had on Jordan's original readers must have been similar to the reaction of the

lawyer upon hearing Jesus' challenging story. What modern contexts suggest themselves as other potential analogies for this story?

What exactly does it mean to love our neighbor as ourselves? The Greek word *plesion* is actually a substantive form of an adjective meaning "nearby, near, close." It is used in some contexts to describe crops planted near each other. Literally, then, the word would mean "the nearby one." As Jesus insists, this does not mean only those geographically near to us, but includes especially those we would rather exclude.

In her book *Hind's Feet on High Places*, Hannah Hurst describes love this way: "Once you go high (with the Lord) you will want to go low to do all the painful work of self giving and then go high again to be rejuvenated. Only in the High Places of Love can we receive power to pour ourselves down in utter abandonment to give to others. (Like water coming down and falling from the high mountains to give drink to those below)."<sup>2</sup> Like water that always seeks to run downhill, our love should seek out the "low places," which may be people or situations that present a challenge to us.

This love is not just kind words and pleasant feelings, either. In the First Letter of John, we read the following about love:

**We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So we also ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters. If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion—how can God's love be in that person? Dear children, let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions.**

—1 John 3:16-18 (NLT)

Love for our neighbor, then, means both that we must love even those we would rather exclude and that we must engage our hands and feet.

## Session Plans

These lesson plans are given as suggestions. The words **AND**, **OR**, or **AND/OR** between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

### GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION

- **Read Luke 10:25-37**, and session 10 in *Journeys* and this leader's guide.

- For the activity "Jesus and Modern Brain Research," **make photocopies** of the handout found on page 58.
- **Have available** Bibles; paper; pens and/or pencils; and either a chalkboard and chalk, a dry-erase board and markers, or newsprint and markers.

### BEGINNING THE SESSION

(10 MINUTES)

- **Welcome** participants and introduce the topic of today's session: the Good Samaritan.
- **Ask:**
  - Who are you more likely to help—a friend or a stranger? Why?
  - Have you been in situations where you needed help and people ignored you? How did that make you feel?
- **Point out** that in today's session you will learn how Jesus answered the question "Who is my neighbor?"

### DEVELOPING THE SESSION

(35-40 MINUTES)

#### Do a Dramatic Reading (5-10 min.)

- **Ask** for three volunteers to perform a dramatic reading of **Luke 10:25-37**. **Assign** the roles of a narrator, the lawyer, and Jesus.
- If you wish, also **ask** for four volunteers to act out the story as it is read. **Assign** the roles of a wounded person, a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan.
- **Invite** readers to read the Scripture as printed in *Journeys* (pages 67 and 69).

AND

#### Loving God with Heart, Mind, Strength, and Soul (5-10 min.)

- Using information in "Examining the Scripture," **explain** the main points of **Luke 10:25-28**.
- **Lead** a discussion with the following questions or questions of your own:
  - Why was the lawyer trying to test Jesus?
  - How would you describe the type of love affirmed in these two commandments?
  - How do you currently fulfill these commandments in your life? Or who do you witness who lives in accordance with these commandments? Do you feel that living this way has contributed to a valuable and meaningful life? How?



## AND

**Loving God with All Our Minds (5-10 min.)**

- Using information from “Applying the Scripture,” **share** what the word *mind* refers to.
- **Ask:** How can we love God with all our “planning”? How do you personally do that?

## OR

**Jesus and Modern Brain Research (10-15 min.)**

- **Distribute** the handout and **ask** a participant to read it aloud, or **allow** a few minutes for participants to read it silently.
- **Discuss** the questions on the handout.

## AND/OR

- **Draw** a picture of a person (a simple stick figure is fine) on the board or newsprint.
- **Ask** participants to name words associated with thought. **Write** those words around the head of the person.
- Then **ask** the class for words associated with the heart; **write** those words around the person’s heart.
- Lastly, **ask** participants to name words they associate with doing, the body, or the gut. **Write** those words around the legs of the person.
- **Step back** from your class creation and **have** a discussion about the similarities/differences that you see.
- **Ask:** How can we use these words to talk about a connection with God? How can we connect with God in these ways?

## AND

**The Good Samaritan (10-15 min.)**

- **Refer** participants to page 69 in *Journeys*, where Luke 10:29-37 is printed.
- Using information from “Examining the Scripture,” **explain** the main points of this passage.
- **Ask:**
  - How can we as followers of Jesus come together in all our cultural and racial richness to worship God together each week?
  - Have you ever participated in multicultural worship experiences? What was it like?
  - Knowing that it’s difficult for any of us to see ourselves objectively within our own cultures, how would you describe your cultural preferences when it comes to worship?

## AND/OR

- Using the information from “Applying the Scripture,” **share** about Clarence Jordan’s *Cotton Patch Version* of the Good Samaritan story. **Discuss** it by asking: What modern contexts suggest themselves as other potential analogies for this story?

**CLOSING THE SESSION****(5 MINUTES)**

- **Close** the session with a benediction.
- **Read** the following description of a benediction: The word *benediction* means “good speech” or “good word.” A benediction sends the congregation into the world to love and serve the least, to encourage and inspire the lonely, to awaken those who are spiritually asleep, and to impact and transform oppressive social structures. The benediction motivates and celebrates. It creates energy and promotes courage. When you offer a benediction, look people in the eye, raise your hands in a sign of blessing, and speak with strength and compassion.<sup>3</sup>
- **Refer** participants to page 73 in *Journeys*, on which the closing benediction is printed.
- **Instruct** participants to raise their hands to each other and offer these words from Mahatma Gandhi, adapted here as a benediction.<sup>4</sup>  
VOICE 1: God demands nothing less than our complete self-surrender as the price of the only real freedom worth having.  
**ALL: I surrender all.**  
VOICE 2: When we lose ourselves, we immediately find ourselves in the service of all that lives.  
**ALL: Lost in wonder, love and grace,**  
VOICE 3: Service becomes our joy and re-creation. We are a new person, never weary of spending ourselves in the service of God’s creation.  
**ALL: Make me a blessing. Out of my life, may Jesus shine!**

**NOTES**

1. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV, Anchor Bible Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 80.
2. Hannah Hurnard, *Hind’s Feet on High Places* (Living Books, 1979), 60.
3. Brad Berglund, *Reinventing Worship* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2006), 103.
4. Adapted from a quote by Mahatma Gandhi, found online at [www.mkgandhi.org/momgandhi/chap45.htm](http://www.mkgandhi.org/momgandhi/chap45.htm), under the heading “The Gospel of Sarvodaya.”

## Jesus and Modern Brain Research

According to a breakthrough in understanding brain biology in the 1960s by Dr. Paul MacLean at the National Institute for Mental Health, the threefold human capacity for love offered by Jesus in the great commandment, that of heart, mind, and strength, is an accurate description of the natural divisions of the human brain. The fourth capacity of “soul” is realized when the other three are brought into balance. In other words, when we live and love with the energy and capacity of each center, we become a “big-souled” person.

The three centers of the brain are these: the “strength” or brain stem, the “heart” or limbic system, and the “mind” or neo-cortex. The brain stem or instinctual-doing center, shared by all animal life forms, is the fight-or-flight brain and controls our basic functions, including breathing and non-voluntary movement. It is the body center and experiences itself in the lower abdomen.

The limbic system or relational-feeling center is found between the brain stem and the neo-cortex. It is the brain shared by all mammals. This part of the brain allows us to connect to others through positive and negative feelings and perceives itself in the chest.

The third realm of the brain is the neo-cortex or conceptual-thinking center. This is the aspect of the brain that humans share with all primates. This third part of the brain handles short-term memory, creates judgments, and develops abstract thinking. This part of the brain perceives itself in the head.

In addition to modern brain research, there are many contemporary illustrations affirming the ancient wisdom described by Jesus. One of the most obvious is the story of *The Wizard of Oz*. The three characters who accompany Dorothy on her adventure to find the “great and powerful Oz” represent the three centers of the human brain. Dorothy’s friends can be seen as aspects of her life that she is slowly discovering, through a perilous journey (the journey of life). The aspect of “self” missing in the tin man is the heart or “feeling” center, the aspect of “self” missing in the lion is the strength or “doing” center, and the aspect of “self” missing in the scarecrow is the mind or “thinking” center. When all three are realized, Dorothy goes “home.”

Another contemporary illustration confirming the ancient wisdom of Jesus is a program called 4-H. Popular in agricultural communities, 4-H teaches young people four priorities in life: to live with Head (thinking center), Heart (feeling center) and Hands (doing center). When those three aspects of self are balanced, that young person has a credible claim on the fourth aspect, which is Health.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Jesus asks us to love God with our whole being. As weekly worshipers, how can we do what Jesus asks of us?
- What would worship look like if we truly loved God with all aspects of self: mind, heart, and strength?
- What would worship look like if we had a balance of thinking, feeling, and doing?
- Thinking creatively, how can we connect deeply with God and others in worship? How could we move our bodies meaningfully as a total act of worship?
- In worship, we have the opportunity to love God using the threefold capacities described by Jesus in the Great Commandment. What would worship look like if we took Jesus seriously by helping our congregation love God in this multifaceted way?
- What are some ways to worship Christ throughout your week using your minds, hearts, and bodies? Are there things we can do together, as a class, using all three of these in our community?

# Serving the Least

**SCRIPTURE:** Matthew 25:31-46

**KEYVERSE:** Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.

—Matthew 25:40

**SESSION OBJECTIVES:**

- to explore service inside and outside the act of worship;
- to consider participation in serving the needs of others; and
- to experience how God's love for all inspires us to meet the needs of others.

## Introducing the Scripture

**Matthew 24–25** is often called the Olivet Discourse because it is set on the Mount of Olives (see **Matthew 24:3**). This section of Matthew is also referred to as the “Little Apocalypse,” because it deals heavily with descriptions of the end times. Scholars disagree, however, on whether these chapters describe past, present, or future events, or even all of the above. Some of the details of Jesus’ predictions match things that happened leading up to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70, but others do not. Matthew was written between AD 70 and 110, with most scholars dating it between AD 80 and 90.

**Matthew 25:31–46** closes the Olivet Discourse and is followed immediately by the plot to kill Jesus, the betrayal by Judas, and the Last Supper (see **Matthew 26:1–30**).

The Parable of the Talents (see **Matthew 25:14–30**) immediately precedes our passage for this week, and it is relevant to how we interpret it. Many interpreters have read the Parable of the Talents as a morality tale about how to invest our abilities in service to God, but this kind of interpretation misses two important clues. First, the master of this story is not a virtuous man; he is

described as “a harsh man, reaping where [he] did not sow, and gathering where [he] did not scatter seed” (v. 24). Second, the master condemned his servant for not investing his money and earning interest, yet gaining interest was strictly forbidden in several places in the Hebrew Bible (see **Exodus 22:25**, **Leviticus 25:36–37**, and **Deuteronomy 23:19–20**).

Instead of identifying the master with God as some interpreters have done, it seems clear that in this story the master is an exploitive owner who stockpiles wealth (one talent was fifteen years’ wages of a common laborer) and abuses his workers, like many wealthy landowners of the time. While his is not the central role in the parable, his behavior does serve as a foil for the judgment of the Son of Man in the next parable. Consequently, the Parable of the Talents sets the stage for our passage, the Parable of the Sheep and Goats, with its stress upon the need for generosity and compassion and its condemnation of those who mistreat those in need.

It’s important to note that in **Matthew 25:31–46**, Jesus is not making a prophecy about the coming of the Son of Man. Instead, he is assuming that his audience knows these prophecies already: “**When the Son of Man comes in his glory.**” There are two places that we know of in Jewish literature from before the time of Jesus in which the Son of Man takes on apocalyptic significance, and both may be in view here. They are **Daniel 7** and the Book of Enoch (sometimes called 1 Enoch), a Jewish non-canonical writing. In Daniel’s prophecy, he said that he saw “**one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven**” (**Daniel 7:13**, NIV) who was given total dominion forever over all people.

The Parable of the Talents sets the stage for our passage, the Parable of the Sheep and Goats.

While Daniel is slightly ambiguous about whether this is a messianic figure (it can also be translated “one like a human being”), Enoch has no such ambiguity.<sup>1</sup> In Enoch, the Son of Man is chosen by the Ancient of Days to “**raise up the kings and the mighty from their seats and the strong from their thrones, and ... loosen the reins of the strong and break the teeth of the sinners**” (1 Enoch 46:4). He is described as existing before creation, as the light of the Gentiles, and as Messiah. Some scholars have speculated that Enoch took the Daniel prophecy and expanded and reworked it, but it is also possible that they were drawing on a common tradition.

It is possible that in **Matthew 25** Jesus was drawing on Enoch, as there are multiple and striking similarities between **Matthew 25:31-46** and **1 Enoch 62-63**. But it is also possible that they were merely drawing on common traditions about the Son of Man. We do know, however, that at least some of the New Testament writers were familiar with Enoch, because **verses 14-15** in Jude contain a direct quote from **Enoch 1:9**. It seems likely then that Jesus expected his listeners to be familiar with his reference to the Son of Man through those previous writings.

## Examining the Scripture

**MATTHEW 25:31-33.** The image of the Son of Man sitting on a “throne of glory” is unique to Matthew and Enoch. In extant Jewish literature, the Son of Man figure in 1 Enoch is the only one allowed to sit on God’s throne to judge the nations.

Angels are often presented as warriors in God’s armies, and their presence fits well with the scene. They also play a large role in Enoch.

The gathering of the *ethne* (translated as “**nations**” in v. 32) for judgment was a common theme in apocalyptic literature and was integrally related to Israel’s essential monotheism. (If there is only one God, what about the Gentiles?) The way that many Jewish people dealt with this problem (the universality of God and the particularity of Israel) was to hope for a future when all people would worship Israel’s God.

The sheep and goats imagery here seems to be an innovation from the existing traditions, though it would be possible to make connections to those traditions. For instance, Enoch does have an extended “Animal

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Apocalypse” that uses animals to stand in for groups of people. Sheep are even used to stand in for God’s people, but goats are nowhere to be found. (Instead, we have bulls, oxen, camels, elephants, and donkeys.)

More likely, Jesus was drawing on the common task of shepherds gathering the scattered flocks of sheep and goats together at nightfall. After gathering the animals, the goats were separated from the sheep and herded into enclosures for warmth during the night. The sheep remained in the open fields under the protection of the shepherds. In a similar way, “**when the Son of Man comes in his glory**” (v. 31), he will gather all the people of the world together and then separate them, an image of divine judgment.

**MATTHEW 25:34-36.** Matthew here switches from “**Son of Man**” to “**the king**,” but given that the Son sits on the throne judging the nations, there is no discontinuity between the two, and they should be seen as synonymous titles for the same person, Jesus.

The list of services offered by the sheep covers all of the basic needs of a people living under layers of oppression in occupied territory: food, water, hospitality, clothing, and care for the sick and imprisoned. More to the point, the list of services rendered corresponds with lists of righteous actions found in the Old Testament (see **Isaiah 58:6-7**; **Ezekiel 18:5-9**).

**MATTHEW 25:37-40.** The surprise of the righteous is part of the reason they are declared righteous. They helped because they saw a need, not in anticipation of any reward. This surprise is echoed by the wicked as well, but theirs is a defensive reaction. Neither group had thought to associate those in need with the great King on the throne.

Some scholars have suggested that the “**least of these**” (v. 40) refers specifically to Christian missionaries, but this stretches the passage too much. There is nothing in the context of the preceding or following passages that would suggest this identification, and the only thing within the passage that points to this is Jesus’ identification of the least of these as his brothers and sisters (“**members of my family**”).

Just as the phrase the “**least of these**” does not have the restrictive meaning of Christian missionaries, the phrase “**members of my family**” cannot be confined to



Christians (cf. 5:22-24, 47 and 7:3-5). The phrase as used here refers to any person in need. Some interpreters have pointed to the similarity between “**these little ones**” of **Matthew 10:42** and “**the least of these**” of **25:40**, but the Greek phrases—*mikron touton* and *ton elachiston*—are unrelated to each other.

**MATTHEW 25:41-46.** The negative side of this judgment story almost exactly mirrors the preceding section, with a couple of small differences. First, while the King’s list of condemnations is just as detailed as his praise in **verses 35-36**, the response from “**the accursed**” is curtailed. While the shortened defense is likely a time or space saver, it does provide an intriguing working definition for the Greek *diakoneo*, the root word from which we get our English word *deacon*. All of the individual questions asked by the righteous (**vv. 37-39**) are lumped together into one question by the accursed, using the verb “take care of,” a translation of the Greek verb *diakonamen* (**v. 44**). While the noun form of this word is often translated as “servant” or “deacon” or “assistant,” in its essence the term means “one who cares for another.”

Jesus promised “**eternal punishment**” for those who failed to live up to their responsibilities to persons in need. While judgment is a constant theme in Matthew (and throughout the Scriptures), it’s important to realize that Jesus did not tell this parable to teach or warn us about hell, but to encourage us to serve others as if each person were Christ himself.

## Applying the Scripture

This week’s Scripture has to do with believers’ service to those in need. We live in a world wracked by war, poverty, greed, and indifference. What would it look like if Christians committed themselves to serving the poor as though we really believed Jesus’ words that our service to them is in fact service to our Lord? Two quotes from Mother Teresa offer encouragement to Christians to take this responsibility seriously:

When a poor person dies of hunger, it has not happened because God did not take care of him or her. It has happened because neither you nor I wanted to give that person what he or she needed.

You and I, we are the Church, no? We have to share with our people.

We live in  
a world  
wracked by  
war, poverty,  
greed, and  
indifference.

Suffering today is because people are hoarding, not giving, not sharing. Jesus made it very clear. Whatever you do to the least of my brethren, you do it to me. Give a glass of water, you give it to me. Receive a little child, you receive me.”<sup>2</sup>

Integrating an active faith that includes generosity, compassion, solidarity, and hospitality into a Sunday morning worship service can be a challenge for some churches. Some churches have taken on this challenge with periodic service days that replace a Sunday worship time or follow it. (One such church is profiled in *Journeys*, page 78.) This allows believers to put their love for God into practice by loving those in need and is an effective answer to Jesus’ challenge to love the “**least of these**.”

One intriguing example of a group of churches working together to offer material assistance to those in need is the Interfaith Hospitality Network. This is a network of churches that offer space, childcare, food, and clothing on a rotating basis to families experiencing homelessness. This is a particularly important need, because some estimate that 40% of the homeless population consists of families, and one in four homeless individuals are children. This ministry often puts to use space inside churches that would otherwise be unused throughout the week and offers a living witness to Christ through practical service.

It is easy for relatively comfortable Christians to look down on those they are serving as needy and powerless. Sometimes, when entering an economically impoverished context, it can be hard for American believers to resist the temptation to be condescending or think of themselves as valiant saviors on a mission to deliver the poor from their misery. Jesus’ words in **Matthew 25** directly contradict this kind of paternalism by challenging us to think of those we serve as Jesus himself. If those who offer economic assistance to those suffering from poverty can maintain humility and an open heart, they often come to realize that they have much to learn about generosity, love, compassion, and faith from the people they came to “save.”

In this way, our work on behalf of those in need can truly become service to Christ himself, and we can genuinely understand the difference between “charity” to those who have less than us and generous solidarity with those in need. Focusing on solidarity rather

than charity is a paradigm shift and may call into question many of the attitudes and practices that we engage in that may not respect the dignity of those we interact with (such as requiring people to sit through sermons before receiving help, passing out tattered clothing, being offended when they are not as grateful as we think they should be).

## Session Plans

These lesson plans are given as suggestions. The words **AND**, **OR**, or **AND/OR** between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

### GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION

- **Read Matthew 25:31-46**, and session 11 in *Journeys* and this leader's guide.
- For "Developing the Session," **bring** a variety of greeting cards.
- **Have available** Bibles; paper; pens or pencils; and either chalkboard and chalk, dry-erase board and markers, or newsprint and markers.

### BEGINNING THE SESSION (10 MINUTES)

#### Ways to Serve Christ

- **Distribute** paper and pens or pencils and **invite** participants to create lists of ways to serve Christ.
- **Allow** participants four to five minutes to work, and then **ask** them to share and discuss their lists either in partners or as a whole group.

OR

#### Exemplary Servants

- **Invite** participants to tell stories about persons who are (or were) exemplary servants. These servants could be persons they know or persons in the news or in the Bible.
- **Discuss** what makes them outstanding and notable.

### DEVELOPING THE SESSION (35-40 MINUTES)

#### Gathering for Worship and Service (8-10 min.)

- **Refer** participants to page 74 in *Journeys*. **Summarize** the section called "Gathering for Worship and Service" or **ask** someone to read it.

- **Ask and discuss** the following questions:
  - In what ways does worship give you (personally) opportunities to offer your life to God as an act of service?
  - In what ways do you think the act of worship motivates the church, as the body of Christ, to serve the world?
  - Is there a difference between serving God in worship and serving the world like Christ? If so, what is the difference?

#### AND/OR

- **Invite** participants to come up with ways that your church community can be more serving to the larger community around it. Are there things that you can start doing this week? Could your class volunteer at a local service center that is already set up (soup kitchen, homeless shelter, orphanage, impoverished school, etc.)?

AND

#### The Least of These (8-10 min.)

- **Ask** a participant to read **Matthew 25:31-46** (pp. 75-76 in *Journeys*).
- Using information from "Examining the Scripture," **explain** the main points of this passage.
- **Discuss** the following questions or questions of your own:
  - In what ways could our church reduce its expenses and re-channel money to those in need?
  - Jesus described how serving the "least of these" will be part of the final judgment with sobering clarity. Who are the "least of these"?
  - Using himself as an example, Jesus offered a specific list of ways to serve the "least of these." Keeping this list in mind, in what ways are you serving Jesus? In what ways is our church serving Jesus? What other creative opportunities might there be to serve in the ways Jesus described?
  - How can we "love others, expecting the very best"?
  - Where would this make the most difference in your life?
  - In what ways do you already do this? How does it feel to be a channel of God's love to those in need? How does it benefit you?
  - How could this kind of attitude change or help our church and/or worship service?

#### AND/OR

- **Invite** participants to each write a greeting card to someone in their life or someone in your church who could use some encouragement, love, respect, and/or an invitation to join your church community.

AND

### Words from Mother Teresa (5-10 min.)

- **Read** the following quotes from Mother Teresa, which offer encouragement to Christians to take this responsibility seriously:  
When a poor person dies of hunger, it has not happened because God did not take care of him or her. It has happened because neither you nor I wanted to give that person what he or she needed.  
You and I, we are the Church, no? We have to share with our people. Suffering today is because people are hoarding, not giving, not sharing. Jesus made it very clear. Whatever you do to the least of my brethren, you do it to me. Give a glass of water, you give it to me. Receive a little child, you receive me.
- **Ask:** How does Mother Teresa make you feel? Has she ever inspired you before?

AND/OR

### Respecting Dignity (5-10 min.)

- Using information from “Applying the Scripture,” **discuss** the dignity piece of helping others. **Read** the following:  
Focusing on solidarity rather than charity is a paradigm shift and may call into question many of the attitudes and practices that we engage in that may not respect the dignity of those we interact with (such as requiring people to sit through sermons before receiving help, passing out tattered clothing, being offended when they are not as grateful as we think they should be).
- **Ask:** What do you think about this point? Is this a difficult shift? Why or why not? Do you believe that the poor have anything to teach us?

## CLOSING THE SESSION

(10 MINUTES)

### Benediction Litany

- **Refer** participants to page 80 in *Journeys* and **invite** them to read the following benediction<sup>3</sup> together.

LEADER: May the spirit of the Lord be present among you as you leave this place.

**PEOPLE: Lord, help us remember what you have done for us.**

LEADER: May you be a light in this world.

**PEOPLE: Lord, help us bring smiles to people's faces.**

LEADER: May you have humble hearts and open minds.

**PEOPLE: Lord, help us to share your love for us with others.**

LEADER: May you be slow to anger and judge.

**PEOPLE: Lord, help us to follow your example.**

**ALL: May we work together as a community of faith to spread God's love to others. We go with joy! Amen.**

OR

### Benediction Offered to One Another <sup>4</sup>

by Brad Berglund

(based on Matthew 5:14,16)

- **Tell** the class participants they are going to offer the benediction to one another today. **Ask** them to gather in groups of three or four people. **Tell** them to join hands, look each other in the eye, and offer this benediction. They should repeat the words of the leader.  
LEADER: You are the light of the world.  
**PEOPLE: You are the light of the world.**  
LEADER: Let your light shine  
**PEOPLE: Let your light shine**  
LEADER: so that others may see your good works  
**PEOPLE: so that others may see your good works**  
LEADER: and glorify God in heaven.  
**PEOPLE: and glorify God in heaven.**  
LEADER: Go in peace!  
**PEOPLE: Go in peace!**  
LEADER: Amen!

### NOTES

1. You can find a translation online at [www.ccel.org/c/charles/otpseudepig/enoch/ENOCH\\_2.HTM](http://www.ccel.org/c/charles/otpseudepig/enoch/ENOCH_2.HTM).

2. “Words by Mother Teresa,” online at [www.ewtn.com/motherteresa/words.htm](http://www.ewtn.com/motherteresa/words.htm).

3. Julie Hodge Milcoff, “Benediction Litany,” printed in Brad Berglund, *Reinventing Worship* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2006), 109.

4. Brad Berglund, *Reinventing Worship* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2006), 104.

# Clothed and Ready

**SCRIPTURE:** Ephesians 6:10-20

**KEY VERSE:** Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

—Ephesians 6:11

**SESSION OBJECTIVES:**

- to examine the “whole armor of God” metaphor;
- to explore what constitutes worship; and
- to learn about prayer partnerships.

## Introducing the Scripture

Ephesus was the largest city in the Roman province of Asia (the western part of present-day Turkey). It was a “free” city—one that was self-governing—and it was a thriving seaport. Three highways converged in the city, and trade from throughout the Mediterranean world passed through the city on its way to other places in the Roman Empire.

Ephesus was also the center of worship for the goddess Artemis (called Diana in Latin), one of the most popular deities of the ancient world. The great temple of Artemis was four times larger than the Parthenon in Athens, and it was identified as one of the seven wonders of the world.

The area around Ephesus has had people living in it since at least 6000 BC, but the construction of the city as a Greek colony did not occur until about the tenth century BC. In the Greek and Roman periods, the city saw its share of conflict and war, but it became the center of government and commerce for the region when Augustus came to power in 27 BC. This began a period of prosperity and relative security for the city that lasted until the Goths sacked the city in AD 263.

The apostle Paul passed through the city of Ephesus on his second missionary

journey (see **Acts 18:19-21**). He returned to the city on his third missionary trip and stayed for two years (see **Acts 19:1-10**). The church in Ephesus thrived under his leadership despite opposition from local artisans and civic leaders.

Biblical scholars have debated who wrote the letter to the Ephesians for centuries. Church tradition attributes the letter to the apostle Paul. Those scholars who support this view argue that Paul wrote this letter while under house arrest in Rome about AD 61–62.

Other scholars take issue with this view. For a variety of reasons, they think that the epistle was written by a follower (or perhaps a group of followers) of Paul, but not by the apostle himself. As such, the letter to the Ephesians was written pseudepigraphically, a word that comes from two Greek words that literally mean “false inscription.” This means that the author wrote in honor of Paul, attempting to give expression to what he or she thought Paul would have said, and doing so in a Pauline style.

This phenomenon was relatively common in antiquity and did not create the same problems that would be created today if someone published a book purporting to be written by J.K. Rowling and using characters from her books. (Copyright laws did not exist in the same way in antiquity.) Writing a book in this way not only gave respect to the person named, in this case the apostle Paul, but it was a way of continuing the tradition of that person, rather than a deceitful attempt at forgery.

It is difficult to know exactly what situation the letter to the Ephesians was written to address, since there is little information in it about the churches in that city. This has convinced some

Biblical scholars have debated who wrote the letter to the Ephesians for centuries.



scholars that Ephesians is an “encyclical” letter, one addressed not to a specific congregation but to all of the churches in the city and surrounding area.

Some of the overarching themes of the letter include maintaining unity in the midst of diversity, living up to the believer’s calling in Christ, and the reality of Christ’s triumph over the powers in the present age. In the broadest possible way, these themes suggest that the letter was written to a mixed audience of Jewish and Gentile believers, with all of the conflicts that arose from such a mixed cultural and religious heritage.

The text for this session, **Ephesians 6:10-20**, brings these major themes together into a common focus on the place of believers in the struggle to live a Christian life, maintain unity in the church, and share in Christ’s triumph over the powers of evil at work in the world. The essence of the focus described in the text is that the triumph of Christ over the powers has already been completed and that believers need only to stand firm a little longer, while the final skirmishes are fought.

## Examining the Scripture

**EPHESIANS 6:10-11.** The word “finally” (v. 10) translates the Greek *loipou*, which usually means “pertaining to that which remains over.” It is better translated, therefore, as “in the time that remains,” and refers back to **5:16**: “making the most of the time, because the days are evil.” Eschatology, the study of “last things” or “the end of time,” does not play a large role in Ephesians, but its presence at the beginning of this section gives special urgency to the following exhortations.

The exhortation to “**be strong**” calls the opening section of Joshua to mind: “**Be strong and courageous!**” (**Joshua 1:6**). As in Joshua, this strength comes from an external source (from God) and bears the promise of victory. As in Joshua, the exhortation also bears repetition (see **Joshua 1:7**). The parallel phrases “**be strong in the Lord**” and “**in the strength of his power**” use three different words that can be translated as “strength.” The effect of this repetition is to fortify the listeners and to encourage them to focus on God’s might rather than their own.

The repetition of words like *stand*, *withstand*, *quench*, and *persevere* serve to drive home the primarily defensive (though not passive!) nature of the battle Paul is

Most of the armor listed has a purely defensive purpose.

envisioning. Indeed, most of the armor listed has a purely defensive purpose, with the exception of the sword.

**EPHESIANS 6:12-13.** The Greek word for “struggle”—*pale*—denotes a hand-to-hand fight, usually in an athletic context rather than a military one.

“**Blood and flesh**” (v. 12) is an ambiguous phrase that could have at least two main meanings. First, Paul could

be saying that the battle is not against individual people, but against systems of power that constrain and attack believers. If this is the case, the larger battle is about the survival of the vulnerable Christian community in Ephesus. The other major possibility is that “**blood and flesh**” refers to the human condition, in all its frailty and impermanence. If this is the case, the author is clarifying Paul’s “battle” against the flesh in Romans and other epistles by exhorting his followers to not focus on their bodies as the enemies,<sup>1</sup> but instead to focus on the real enemy. Both meanings are possible, and the author may not have intended for one to take precedence over the other.

**EPHESIANS 6:14.** The belt of truth and breastplate of righteousness. The Greek for “fasten the belt of truth around your waist” is *perizosamenoi ten osphun en aletheia*, which is actually the Greek form of the Hebrew Bible phrase “gird your loins” (see **2 Kings 4:29; 9:1; Job 38:3; 40:7; Jeremiah 1:17; Nahum 2:1**). This meant to gather loose clothing and tie it to your waist so that it would not hinder your movement. Girding “in truth” may mean that the truth frees up our movements by minimizing entanglements, or the Greek *en aletheia* (“in truth”) could be used in an adverbial sense to describe the manner of girding, as in “truly gird your loins.”

The word for “breastplate” is *thorax*, which could refer to any kind of protection for the chest and abdomen. Since the chest was the location of the heart, and the abdomen the location of the bowels, righteousness/justice (*dikaioisune*) is the appropriate protection for this area. Unlike our modern concept of the heart as the seat of the emotions, the ancient Hebrews understood the heart to be the seat of the will, the place where choices were made. Likewise, human emotions, those feelings that so often influence the decisions humans make, were understood to come from the bowels or the “gut,” as we might

say today. The breastplate of God's righteousness protects both areas.

**EPHESIANS 6:15. The shoes on our feet.** The Greek for **verse 15** is difficult to translate directly into English, as it contains a word that is found nowhere else in the New Testament: *hetoimasia*, translated as “will make you ready” in the NRSV or as “readiness” in the NIV. The root of the word comes from a verb that means “to prepare,” but in the Septuagint, it is used to translate the Hebrew *kun*, which means “firm, established.”

An alternate translation is offered in the Anchor Bible Commentary on Ephesians that helps to convey this meaning and has the bonus of fitting better into the context: “[being] steadfast because the gospel of peace is strapped under your feet.”<sup>2</sup> The idea is that the gospel of peace provides traction and firm footing with which to stand firm. The New English Bible translates this verse precisely in this manner: “Let the shoes on your feet be the gospel of peace, to give you firm footing.”

The transition from military imagery to the “gospel of peace” may seem odd, but this is because our use of the word *gospel* is often disconnected from its original meaning. The Greek word *euangelion* (translated “gospel”) was often used in military contexts as the “announcement of victory” that a general sent back to the capital city or homeland. This means that believers are being encouraged again to rest secure in the knowledge that even though they are still in the midst of battle, the greater victory has already been won.

**EPHESIANS 6:16. The shield of faith.** The Greek word for “shield” here is *thyreas*, which comes from *thyra*, which was the word for “door.” The *thyreas* was a very large, door-shaped shield used to defend against arrows, as opposed to the small, round shield used in close-quarters combat. This kind of shield was usually soaked in water prior to a battle so that it would extinguish flaming arrows. The word translated here as “**faith**” is *pisteos*, which does not carry the sense of belief as much as it does faithfulness, loyalty, and trust. “Faith” refers both to the individual

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believer's trust in God and to God's faithfulness in protecting believers.

**EPHESIANS 6:17. The helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit.** The helmet is another defensive weapon, one that protected the wearer's head in battle. The word *salvation* reminds believers that Christ has already achieved victory over the enemy and will protect us to the end.

With the sword of the Spirit, we come to our first offensive weapon, but here it does not refer to the long *rhompaia* used in offensive campaigns. Here the sword refers to the Roman *machairon*, a short

sword used in close combat and “peace-keeping.” It is the sword that would have been carried most often by soldiers acting as police in Roman cities. Its use here denotes again the active defensive position of the believer.

This sword is given by the Spirit and is identified with the word of God. The Greek word here is *rhema*, which means “word, saying, expression, or statement.” It does not have the same range of meaning as *logos* and probably refers to the “**gospel of peace**” mentioned earlier in **verse 15**.

**EPHESIANS 6:18-20.** The repetition of the words *all* and *every* in **verse 18** drives home the nature of the prayer being exhorted: at all times, in *every* prayer and supplication, *always* persevere in supplication, for all the saints. “**Keep alert**” is literally “stay awake,” and refers to the constant readiness expected of a soldier in an active defensive posture.

By asking for prayers “**also for me**” (v. 19), Paul reminds the Ephesians that he is engaged in the same battle that they are. Paul considers himself to be an “**ambassador in chains**” (v. 20), whose diplomatic immunity has been compromised and who must still boldly announce the message of Christ's victory even though he has been captured by the enemy.

Paul's mission as an ambassador for Christ is “**to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel**” (v. 19). The word *mystery* refers back to the opening of the letter, in which Paul described God's hidden purpose now being

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revealed and accomplished through Christ this way: “to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Ephesians 1:10; compare 3:5-6).

## Applying the Scripture

It is difficult for North American Christians to catch the full meaning of these verses, because our context is so different from that of the threatened Ephesian church and the apostle living in Roman custody. If we tried to update the armor into a modern context, we would be tempted to use the equipment of a US soldier, but this analogy would miss the emotions and associations that would have existed for the first hearers of these words. Remember that Paul spent time imprisoned by the Romans and was eventually executed by someone wearing a uniform very similar to the one described in Ephesians.

To get closer to what it meant for the author to use this imagery based upon the modern equipment of a US soldier, we might have to imagine ourselves as prisoners of US forces somewhere such as the prison at Guantanamo. What does it mean for someone imprisoned there to imagine putting on the “helmet of salvation”? What about “take the flak jacket of faith, with which you will be able to block the armor-piercing rounds of the enemy”? We are not meant to glorify the armor as a means of harm or injustice toward others, but rather to feel the protection it provides when we are in danger.

While the battle imagery employed in this passage is primarily defensive, that does not mean that it is passive. In fact, most of the exhortations are extremely active and require a great deal of energy and positive action. Because of the already established victory that is ours in Christ, we can practice our faith in ways that live out the reality of the gospel and its power to change lives and society.

## Session Plans

These lesson plans are given as suggestions. The words **AND**, **OR**, or **AND/OR** between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

### GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION

- **Read** Ephesians 6:10-20, and session 12 in *Journeys* and this leader’s guide.
- **Have available** Bibles; paper; pens or pencils; and either chalkboard and chalk, dry-erase board and markers, or newsprint and markers.

- For “Developing the Session,” **bring** at least two pieces of paper and enough pencils/crayons for each participant.
- For the activity “Stand Firm,” **make photocopies** of the handout on page 69.

## BEGINNING THE SESSION

(10 MINUTES)

- **Welcome** participants with prayer and a reminder that this is our last session in this worship series.
- Below are five either-or questions referring to one’s perceptions of the Christian life.<sup>3</sup> **Ask** class members to choose one or the other of the alternatives in each case. There are no right or wrong answers.
- **Read** one question at a time. **Choose** one of the following ways for class members to respond, and **instruct** them accordingly.
  - Make your choice and then discuss your choice with the person next to you.
  - Indicate your choice by raising your hand. (If you choose this option, allow a short time for discussion after each question so people can tell why they chose as they did.)
  - Stand up and move to the left side of the room if you would choose the first option, or move to the right side of the room if you would choose the second option. Once you have moved to one side of the room, discuss your choice with the others who feel as you do.

### Questions

1. Is faith in God more like *action* or *surrender*?
2. Is following Christ *costly* or *free*?
3. Is Christ our *shepherd* or our *commander*?
4. Is a *soft answer* or the *sword of the Spirit* a better way to overcome evil?
5. Is walking with Jesus a *constant struggle* for survival or a *peaceful stroll* in life’s garden?

## DEVELOPING THE SESSION

(35-40 MINUTES)

### Strong in the Lord (5-10 min.)

- **Ask** a participant to read Ephesians 6:10-12 (p. 81 in *Journeys*).
- **Lead** a discussion using these questions or questions of your own:
  - What does it mean to be “strong in the Lord”?
  - If Paul faces a cosmic foe, why then does he encourage the imagery of a Roman warrior and his

weapons? How can this be helpful if the enemy is beyond such weapons?

- How then do we stand “strong in the Lord” against spiritual forces?
- How can the act of corporate worship equip us for spiritual realities of this magnitude?
- What happens when Christians get caught up in fighting human enemies, those “**enemies of blood and flesh**” (v. 12)?

## AND

### Stand Firm (8-10 min.)

- **Ask** for a volunteer to read **Ephesians 6:13-17** (pp. 82-83 in *Journeys*).
- **Distribute** the handout show the Roman soldier’s armor.
- Using the information in “Examining the Scripture,” **explain** the individual pieces of the “armor of God”:
  - belt of truth
  - breastplate of righteousness
  - shoes for your feet
  - shield of faith
  - helmet of salvation
  - sword of the Spirit
- **Ask:** If we put on God’s armor, what can we expect?
- **Ask:** Do you feel that the imagery of a modern-day US soldier is helpful to understand this Scripture? Why or why not? What imagery would be more helpful?

## AND/OR

- **Invite** participants to draw the image that they find most helpful when reading this Scripture. **Invite** them to share their drawings in partners or as a group.

## AND

### Meaningful Worship (5-10 min.)

- **Discuss** the following questions:
  - How can worship become a place of meaning, authenticity, and growth as we become practitioners of the gospel?
  - In what ways is your current order of worship too small for the longings of your soul?
  - How does “good worship” create an unwanted controlled environment that keeps us from fully encountering God’s presence?

- What would “great worship” look like in your congregation?

## AND/OR

- **Invite** your participants to create the worship service that they personally need today. Would it include a time for lament? What would that look like? Would it include singing? Would it include a time for sharing? Prayer? Litany? Ritual? Musical performances? Silence? Scripture? Movement/dance? If they want, and have time, they could also design the worship space that would be most fitting to their type of service. Give them five minutes to come up with an outline and then have them share in partners or as a group.

## CLOSING THE SESSION

### (5-10 MINUTES)

- **Ask** a participant to read **Ephesians 6:18-20** (p. 86 in *Journeys*).
- **Ask:** What does “pray all the time” mean to you? In what ways can that be accomplished?
- **Point out** that Paul seems to be asking us to create partnerships of prayer.
- **Invite** participants to become prayer partners for each other right now, to close this class time. Have them pair up and pray for one another, representing Christ to each other.

## OR

- **Offer** the following prayer to your participants. You may want to hold up a hand in blessing as you pray. The Spirit of the Lord is on you, and has anointed you to speak good news of love and redemption to the poor. The Lord sends you now to proclaim freedom to those who are trapped and imprisoned by this world. The Lord has given you the power to restore sight to the blind and release the oppressed. Go, now, acting in love and proclaiming with great joy that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Amen.<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

1. It was a common theme in some streams of Greek philosophy (see Plato, for example) that the soul is imprisoned in the body.

2. Markus Barth, *Ephesians 4-6*, The Anchor Bible Series, vol. 34A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 770.

3. Adapted from an activity in the summer 1993 Adult Leader’s Guide.

4. Prayer written by Russell Rathbun. Used by permission of the author.





# Expanding Your Vision for Worship

For a local congregation, worship is the one time and place during the week when church members gather together for the sole purpose of offering their individual lives and church life to God. Churches schedule many other meetings, dinners, educational opportunities, service projects and programs. However, congregational worship is unique in its purpose. It is intended to be the opening ceremony, the foundational act that gives birth and meaning to all our other agendas. If we want to revitalize worship in our local church, we need to recognize what it really is: opening our hearts and offering our lives to God. Then worship will become the centerpiece of congregational life.

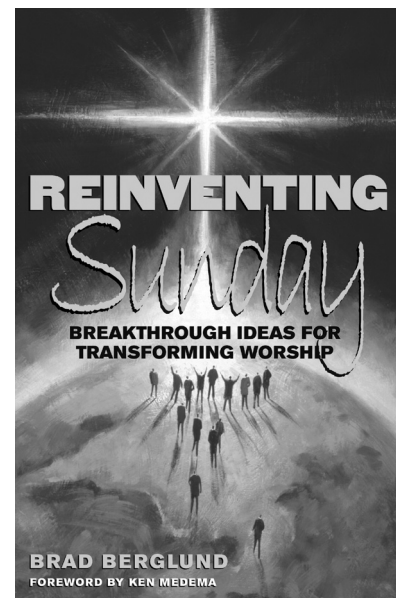
Ultimately, it is the responsibility of worshipers in the pew to open their hearts and offer their lives to God. No one can do that for them. Having said that, it is equally true that the prompters of worship, the leaders on the platform, have a responsibility to offer effective and varied avenues of worship so participants can respond in fresh ways.

Think of those avenues of participation—singing, praying, Scripture reading and so on—as a window in a cabin on a lake. In an attempt to see the sky—to experience God—worshipers look through that window and see, let’s say, one goose flying by. If that window is small, the experience is small—one goose on a spot of blue sky and a few leaves on the branch of a nearby tree. By expanding the possibilities for participation in worship, leaders have the opportunity to transform a small portal into a large bay window where worshipers realize that the sky is filled with geese, the cabin is next to a beautiful forest of trees, and the blue sky is dotted with white puffs of clouds. Their view of reality has just taken an enormous shift.

Creativity in worship isn’t about making change for change’s sake. Rather, we realize that, like a dark cabin with a window that is too small, our current resources for worship may be stale, dark, and undersized for the longings of our souls. For some worshipers, our liturgy may be a tiny porthole with one small fish swimming by. The worship leader’s task is to throw open the windows of eternity and allow the congregation to put their heads through and be transformed by an expansive view of God.

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Excerpted from Brad Berglund, *Reinventing Sunday: Breakthrough Ideas for Transforming Worship* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2001), 5-6.



# Evaluation Form

Judson Bible Journeys for Adults

**JOURNEYS LEADER'S GUIDE • WINTER 2014–2015**

At the end of this quarter, please take a few minutes to complete this form and return it to:

Marcia Jessen, Judson Press, ABCUSA, P.O. Box 851, Valley Forge, PA 19482-0851

If you wish, you may send your comments by e-mail to [marcia.jessen@abhms.org](mailto:marcia.jessen@abhms.org), fax this form to 610-768-2441, or complete the evaluation online at [www.judsonpress.com/judson\\_journeys\\_evaluation.cfm](http://www.judsonpress.com/judson_journeys_evaluation.cfm).

**1.** The leader's guide helped me to understand and relate to the text in the following ways:

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**2.** The leader's guide could be improved by:

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**3.** Some participants' comments/evaluative remarks that would be helpful for you to know include:

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**4.** Other comments/suggestions:

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**5.** Please list other resources your church uses for Sunday school:

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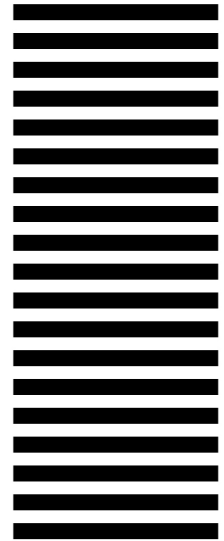
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