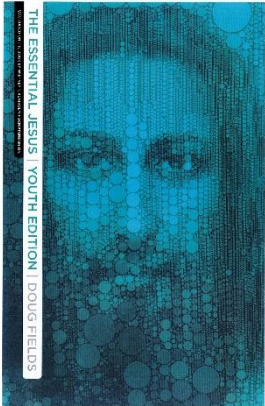


The Essential Jesus

Sept. 10, 2023 – April 21, 2024

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church (Rev. 8.31.23)



Are you ready for the Essential Jesus Challenge? We talk about Jesus every week at worship, but how about going on a trip with the entire congregation, all your spiritual siblings to learn about him together? Martin Luther said, “The Bible is the cradle wherein Christ is laid.” So, let’s check out his cradle and find him on every page. In 100 carefully selected passages from the Bible, you will discover who Jesus is and why he is so significant -- even life transforming. Through both Old and New Testament readings you will discover why God sent Jesus, what Jesus taught, how he treated people, why he did miracles, the meaning of his death, the significance of his resurrection, and what the Bible says about his Second Coming.

The stories are numbered and presented in a thematic order, which means week by week you will experience such topics as “Who Jesus Is,” “The Parables of Jesus,” “The Miracles of Jesus,” “The Hard Sayings of Jesus” and so many other topics.

The passages are arranged in 5 session weekly units. This is a great opportunity to start or strengthen a practice of daily Bible reading. **Each Sunday will preview the upcoming week’s passages.** So, when you come to worship or watch online, you will be hearing an overview of the week to come. **Or** - you may wish to read the stories after that particular Sunday’s sermon.

Another way to assist you in your **Essential Jesus** journey, which will go from September 10, 2023 - April 21, 2024, our Connections to the Cross (CTTC) ministry has purchased “**The Essential Jesus**” for the entire congregation – **FREE!** They will be available on Sunday, Sept. 10! Notice that these are the Youth Edition, which are not just suited to teens, but older adults, too (and is more theologically accessible and visually appealing than the adult edition.) So, make sure to pick up your free print copy on Sept. 10 and then bring it to worship, tuck it in your purse or book bag, keep it near your bed or favorite chair. If you would prefer a digital PDF copy, you may purchase one at [Essential Jesus Youth Edition \(PDF\) - Scripture Union Resources](https://store.scriptureunionresources.com/essential-jesus-youth-edition-pdf/) or if your hyperlink doesn’t work, here is the complete address:

<https://store.scriptureunionresources.com/essential-jesus-youth-edition-pdf/> for \$4.95.

The guide has some great suggestions on how to get the most out of your study. Also, you may want to join a small group or grab a friend or two or some family members and go on a journey to learn more about Jesus with them? Let’s lace up our hiking boots and get started! Below you will find a reading schedule keyed to each Sunday and a brief synopsis of each step of our journey together!

In order to get the most out of what you are reading, try utilizing this simple process **each** time you read:

- **PRAY:** before you read, asking God to help you understand.
- **READ:** the Bible passage for the day, perhaps more than once.
- **REFLECT:** on the passage. It might help to write your thoughts down.
- **APPLY:** what God teaches you from His Word to your life.
- **PRAY:** again, asking God to help you live it out!

Welcome Back – Rally Day – Sept. 10 – Books available - FREE

Who is Jesus? - Sept. 17

1. In the Beginning was...Jesus: John 1:1-18
2. Humble Jesus: Philippians 2:1-11
3. It's All About Jesus: Colossians 1:15-23
4. Look-A-Like: Hebrews 1:1-4
5. The Church: 1 Peter 2:4-10

The Need for a Savior – Sept. 24

6. Sin and Our Need: Genesis 3:1-24
7. Talk about God: Exodus 32:1-33:6
8. It's not just the bad ones: Psalm 14:1-7
9. He's Against It: Isaiah 59:1-21
10. Is it Anger or Love? Amos 5:1-27

October 1 – Quilt Dedication

October 8, 15, 22 – Stewardship

October 29 – Reformation

Previews of a Savior –Nov. 5

11. Lamb, Blood, Passover: Exodus 12:1-30
12. True Bread: Exodus 16:1-35
13. Too Many Snakes: Numbers 21:4-9
14. The New Temple: 1 Kings 8:1-21
15. Running on Empty: Jonah 1:1-4:11

Psalms About A Savior – Nov. 12

16. The Case for Christ: Psalm 2:1-12
17. At the Cross: Psalm 22:1-31
18. "I'm in Deep Water!" Psalm 69:1-36
19. Who's Talking? Psalm 110:1-7
20. The Cornerstone: Psalm 118:1-29

Prophecies About a Savior – Nov. 19

21. Chosen People: Genesis 12:1-9
22. The Good Shepherd: Jeremiah 23:1-9
23. O Little Town of Bethlehem: Micah 5:1-5
24. The Humble King: Zechariah 9:9-17
25. Future Clues: Zechariah 12:1-13:9

Thanksgiving Eve – Nov. 23, 6:15pm

More Prophecies About a Savior – Nov.26

26. God With Us: Isaiah 7:1-25
27. Hope for the Future: Isaiah 9:1-8
28. Chosen Servant: Isaiah 42:1-9
29. Suffering Servant: Isaiah 52:13-53:12
30. Mission Statement: Isaiah 61:1-11

Advent Begins – Sunday schedule only

The Birth of Jesus -

31. Favor With God: Luke 1:26-56 – **Dec. 3**
32. Imagine the Surprise: Matt 1:18-25 – **Dec. 10**
33. Jesus is Good News: Luke 2:1-40 – **Dec. 17**
34. On the Move: Matthew 2:1-23 – **Xmas Eve**
35. His Father's House: Luke 2:41-52 – **Dec. 31**

The Beginning Ministry of Jesus – Jan. 7

36. This is My Son: Matthew 3:1-17
37. Deliver Us From Evil: Luke 4:1-13
38. Who's He Think He Is? Luke 4:14-30
39. Amazing Authority! Luke 4:31-44
40. Worthy of Following: Luke 5:1-11

The Sermons of Jesus – Jan. 14

41. New Day, New Way: Matthew 5:1-48
42. Not for Show: Matthew 6:1-34
43. This is Not Easy! Matthew 7:1-29
44. No More Mr. Nice Guy: Matthew 23:1-39
45. The End: Matthew 24:1-51

The Parables of Jesus.A – Jan. 21

46. Who's Your Neighbor? Luke 10:25-37
47. Rich Toward God: Luke 12:13-21

The Parables of Jesus.B – Jan. 28

48. Let's Party! Luke 14:1-24
49. Lost and Found...and Loved: Luke 15:1-32
50. Pray...Pray...Pray: Luke 18:1-14

More Parables of Jesus.C – Feb. 4

51. It's Like...: Matthew 13:1-58
52. How Generous!: Matt 20:1-16

More Parables of Jesus.D – Feb. 11

53. Get Ready for Jesus 'Return: Matt 25:1-46
54. The Good Shepherd: John 10:1-18
55. I'm a Branch!: John 15:1-17

The Miracles of Jesus.A – Feb. 18

56. New Wine: John 2:1-11
57. No Fear: Mark 4:35-41
58. Miracle Meal: Matthew 14:22-33

The Miracles of Jesus.B – Feb. 25

59. Taking the First Step: Matthew 14:22-33
60. Serious Fruit: Matthew 21:18-2

More Miracles of Jesus.C – March 3

- 61. I Saw the Light: John 9:1-41
- 62. The Power of Friendship: Luke 5:17-26
- 63. God's Enemy: Mark 5:1-20
- 64. Doing What it Takes: Mark 5:21-43
- 65. Resurrection Power: John 11:1-45

The Prayers of Jesus – March 10

- 66. Escaping to Pray: Mark 1:29-39
- 67. Joyful Prayer: Luke 10:1-24
- 68. The School of Prayer: Luke 11:1-13
- 69. A Defining Prayer: John 17:1-26
- 70. Pressure Prayer: Mark 14:32-42

The Hard Sayings of Jesus – March 17

- 71. So Bizarre! John 6:25-71
- 72. A House Divided: Mark 3:20-35
- 73. Prayer Guarantee: John 14:1-14
- 74. Serious Forgiveness: Matthew 18:15-35
- 75. This is Serious: Mark 8:31-9:1

The Crucifixion of Jesus – Palm – March 24

- 76. The Kiss Matthew 26:47-56
- 77. Crazy Court: Matthew 26:57-68
- 78. Peter & the Rooster: Matthew 26:69-27:10
- 79. Political Pressure: Luke 22:66-23:25
- 80. Remember Me: Luke 23:26-56

The Resurrection of Jesus – Easter – March 31

- 81. The Empty Tomb: Matthew 28:1-20
- 82. That's Some Power! Mark 16:1-20
- 83. The Third Walker: Luke 24:1-49
- 84. Follow Me! John 20:1-21:25
- 85. Where's the Evidence? 1 Cor.15:1-58

The Early Church of Jesus – April 7

- 86. A Vision: Rev 1:1-20
- 87. Your First Love: Revelation 2:1-11
- 88. Hold On—Until I Return: Revelation 2:12-29
- 89. Church – Dead or Alive? Revelation 3:1-13
- 90. Lukewarm for God: Revelation 3:14-22

The Second Coming of Jesus – April 14

- 91. The Greatest Sequel of All Time: Acts 1:1-11
- 92. What Day will Jesus Return? 1 Thess. 4:13-5:11
- 93. Don't Be Alarmed: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12
- 94. While You're Waiting: 2 Peter 3:1-18
- 95. All Things New: Revelation 21:1-22:21

Who is Jesus to You? – April 21 – Ess. Jesus ends

- 96. Can't Earn Your Salvation: Matthew 19:16-30
- 97. Born Again: John 3:1-21
- 98. No More Shame: John 4:1-42
- 99. Life Change: Acts 9:1-19
- 100. I Know Who You Are! Luke 9:18-27

Affirmation of Baptism @ 9:40am – April 28

Reading 1 John 1:1-18

Jesus is God's ultimate self-revelation. Journalists think of their profession as a quest for truth; if they accurately report all the facts of a story then they believe they've told the whole truth. But as John begins his account of the life of Jesus, he realizes the truth goes far beyond mere facts. The man he lived alongside for three years was divine and human at the same time and the source of some incredible gifts.

??? Has God communicated with you? How did you respond?

Reading 2 Philippians 2:1-11

The Apostle Paul was addressing a specific situation in this passage. He wanted the Christians in Philippi to be less selfish and more loving, compassionate, joyful and united. That's good advice for Christians in any place, at any time. But the question was how? Paul's answer was simple: live like Jesus. But first, he explained more about Jesus and how he lived.

??? What is one thing you could do this week to serve someone sacrificially?

Reading 3 Colossians 1:15-23

The book of Colossians was written by the Apostle Paul to counteract the impact some false teachers were having on the new believers in Colossae. To correct the problem, Paul offers a concentrated description of Jesus. His main point is that Jesus is God, and he is woven into the fabric of all creation. Paul then presents two new insights: first, Jesus is the head of the church. Second, Jesus is the key to the Good News.

??? In your opinion, what are "the basics" about Jesus? Are there any claims about Jesus that you've found hard to swallow?

Reading 4 Hebrews 1:1-4

The book of Hebrews covers all kinds of issues that were important to the first Jewish Christians, as well as to us. But it starts with an important fact: God has always wanted people to know who God is, and has been saying so for centuries. But in Jesus, God goes even further. God shows up himself in Jesus and says, "Look! This is who I am."

??? How would you describe what God is like? How could you communicate that to someone this week?

Reading 5 1 Peter 2:4-10

In this passage, the Apostle Peter presents another important truth about Jesus: saying "yes" to him makes one part of his body, the Church. And to describe the Church, Peter uses a picture of bricks and mortar, but gives it a new and much deeper spiritual meaning. It's not a building; it's a people, people with a particular privilege and calling.

??? How are you one of "the living stones" in God's spiritual house?

Reading 6 Genesis 3:1-24

What is sin? We tend to think sin is some obviously evil act, like murdering or stealing, and of course, that's part of it. But the full picture is more subtle and dangerous. In this passage, the serpent simply questions God's authority and contradicts God's word. Honest questions and even doubts can help us grow in our faith.

??? How would you define sin? Why does sin require a Savior?

Reading 7 Exodus 32:1-33:6

All of us, like Moses and Aaron, are spiritual leaders, even if we aren't ordained or aren't particularly religious. Our actions influence the moral decisions of others, for good or for ill. In this passage, we see two contrasting ways that Moses and Aaron influenced the people of Israel. Aaron gave the people what they wanted—an idol to be their god. Moses gave them what they needed—a reminder of their terrible, stupid sin

??? Besides Jesus, who has had the greatest influence on your life?

Reading 8 **Psalm 14:1-7**

Sin doesn't only affect the "bad guys," those who deny God (1) and aggressively pursue an evil agenda. David, the writer of the psalm, says sin affects us all—the "good guys," too. And if sin affects everyone, then it's not healthy to deny it or its hold on us. But although God hates sin, he wants us to have a deep and close relationship with him. For that we need a savior. David prayed for one and God answered centuries later when he sent his son, Jesus, to take away our sin.

??? How do you picture God? What do you want most from God?

Reading 9 **Isaiah 59:1-21**

Isaiah reminds us again that God is against sin. That means we should be too, for several important reasons. First, sin separates us from God. Second, sin leads to a breakdown of fundamental values. Finally, sin causes a rejection of truth. So, it's no surprise that God is against sin. What is surprising is that in spite of our continual rebellion, God has had a plan to save us from it all along. The plan was to send a Redeemer: Jesus —who could restore the broken relationship forever.

??? In what way, either publicly or privately, do you demonstrate that you are against sin?

Reading 10 **Amos 5:1-27**

In this passage, God has pretty strong things to say to folks who go through the motions of worship without acknowledging their sin. God was angry because these highly religious people abused the poor in order to live in luxury and deprived innocent people of justice in the courts. It can be frightening to think of God being so angry. But only when we understand the depth of God's revulsion for sin can we fully appreciate the height of God's love for us in sending us Jesus.

??? Amos encouraged his readers to seek the Lord. How do you do that in your life?

Reading 11 **Exodus 12:1-30**

Our passage contains two poignant connections to Jesus. The first is the reference to a lamb that was sacrificed to avert God's judgment. The New Testament often described Jesus as a lamb. The Passover lamb was one of the first great previews of God's plan of salvation. A second connection is the use of blood. Just as the blood of the Passover lamb became the essential element that saved the Israelites, so the blood of Jesus shed on the Cross was the essential element that secured salvation for all humankind.

??? What does participating in Holy Communion mean to you? Can you recall a time when it was especially meaningful?

Reading 12 **Exodus 16:1-35**

Embedded in this desert travelogue is another sign pointing to the Savior. In the New Testament, when the religious leaders demanded a miracle, Jesus cited this passage in Exodus as his answer. His main point was that just as Moses provided manna to meet the physical need of people, so he, Jesus, was the "true bread" who satisfied the ultimate need of all people—the need for a restored and eternal relationship with God.

??? Where are you today in your journey with Jesus?

Reading 13 **Numbers 21:4-9**

God's main purpose in send this infestation of snakes was to provide a way for people to be saved. When the Israelites looked at the bronze replica, they were saved from the effects of the poison. Jesus referred to this episode early in his ministry as a way of explaining his mission to a religious leader (John 3:14-15). Just as the bronze snake became the vehicle of the Israelites' salvation, so Jesus' death on the Cross would be the vehicle for the salvation of all people who believe in him.

??? What do you complain about the most? How can you tell the difference between "just complaining" and being angry with God?

Reading 14 **1 Kings 8:1-21**

This passage describes the “ribbon cutting ceremony” for a magnificent new Temple King Solomon built in Jerusalem. Over the years that followed, the Temple was destroyed and rebuilt, and by the time of Jesus it had become commercialized and more like a strip mall than a place of worship. That’s why Jesus angrily cleaned house in the Temple (John 2:12-17), causing the religious leaders to demand proof of his authority. In so doing he demonstrated how this important Old Testament building had been pointing to him all along.

??? When do you feel God’s presence the most?

Reading 15 **Jonah 1:1-4:11**

When the skeptical religious leaders of his day asked for miraculous proof of his authenticity, Jesus referred to this Old Testament book. In essence he was saying the story of Jonah provided all the proof they needed. How? First, Jesus came to die. Just as Jonah was entombed in the great fish for three days, so Jesus would be in the tomb three days after his crucifixion. And second, Jesus would rise again. Just as the great fish gave up Jonah, so the grave would give up Jesus. He is the true Savior!

??? Is there any area of your life in which you are running from God? How would it feel to know that God is one of love and grace and not vengeance and judgment?

Reading 16 **Psalms 2:1-12**

From the perspective of the New Testament, several phrases in this psalm that point to Jesus. The Psalm’s description of a Father’s approval of his Son echoes what God would later say to Jesus. Also, Messiah, the name given to Jesus, means Anointed One, the very phrase used in this Psalm. And when the Apostles Peter and John were being persecuted for speaking about Jesus after his resurrection and ascension, they quoted this Psalm (Acts 4:23-31). So, centuries before Jesus appeared, the Holy Spirit was already developing a case for Christ.

??? How is God part of the political process?

Reading 17 **Psalms 22:1-31**

This psalm of David describes the feelings of a man in big, big trouble. One of David’s strengths was his ability to communicate his feelings. Another was his reflex for turning to God first when the chips were down. He did this by forcing himself to remember what God had done in the past. That gave him hope and enabled him to trust. He also praised and worshipped God in the middle of the crisis. And we find many details of Jesus’ death nearly 1,000 years later echoed in this psalm.

??? How do you react when the bottom drops out of your world? How has God come to you aid in times of trouble?

Reading 18 **Psalms 69:1-36**

In this Psalm, David is in “deep waters” and is calling out for God’s help. Note how David responded to his overwhelming problem. First, he honestly described the situation to God. Next, he examined his own heart first instead of pointing fingers at others. Finally, David makes his request known to God and takes time to praise God. This Psalm was especially meaningful to Jesus, also. He quoted it when explaining why the world hated him and his followers (John 15:25).

??? What is the biggest challenge you face at the moment? Where do you see God in it?

Reading 19 **Psalms 110:1-7**

The New Testament refers to this Psalm more than any other. Why? Although the psalm is built around two statements from God; followed by David’s commentary on what God has said, the most significant thing about this psalm is the way it points to the coming Messiah. Jesus affirmed this when he quoted these verses to challenge the religious leaders who doubted he was the Son of God (Matt. 22:41-45). He applied all of the psalm’s symbolism to himself. He was saying, in effect, that he was the Messiah, the human/divine Savior of the world.

??? For you, what are the most convincing proofs that Jesus was who he said he was: the Son of God and Savior of the world?

Reading 20 Psalm 118:1-29

Originally the psalm commemorated an unspecified victory in Israel's history that produced this unrestrained expression of joy and praise. In the middle of this celebration of God's past deliverance, however, are two references to an even greater deliverance he planned in the future. "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone...." and "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord". Both point to the greater deliverance whereby God would save the world from sin and offer people a way to have a relationship with him through the Cross.

??? Have you ever faced a back-against-the-wall situation from which God delivered you?
How does that help you praise God today?

Reading 21 Genesis 12:1-9

When he told Abram to "leave" everything and "go" to an unknown land, God was putting in motion a plan to reverse the effects of sin and allow humans to have close fellowship with him again. The plan had two components. The first was to create "a great nation" from Abram's family who would eventually become the Israelites. The second was to bless "all the peoples on earth" through these Chosen People. It would take thousands of years and much pain and suffering, but the great blessing was Jesus Christ, the savior of the world.

??? Where do you see God's grace at work in Abram's and Sarah's life and upcoming journey? Where is God active in your faith journey?

Reading 22 Jeremiah 23:1-9

Jeremiah was sent to denounce Israel's sin and turn them back to God. The religious leaders ("shepherds") especially felt the heat of Jeremiah's prophecy. They were involved in idolatry, injustice and immorality instead of truly caring for the people. But the tragic impact of these bad shepherds highlighted the need for a savior, the Good Shepherd (John 10:11-18). Jeremiah also tells us that the Savior God was preparing to send would not only be a descendent of David but also a righteous Branch and "The Lord Our Righteousness."

??? Has there ever been a situation in your life when you felt a "nudge" from God? How did you respond?

Reading 23 Micah 5:1-5

In just these few verses from Micah's book we learn important details about the coming Savior, all of which were fulfilled by Jesus. 1) His origins. The Savior would come from the little town of Bethlehem 2) His character. Micah says that the Savior's strength and majesty won't be based on human ability but on "the name of the Lord his God." And the Savior won't just achieve a time of peace, "he will be their peace." Micah's prophecy was surely about Jesus Christ who made peace with God by his death on the Cross.

??? Describe a time when you particularly felt God's peace?

Reading 24 Zechariah 9:9-17

In chapters 1-8, Zechariah encourages the people to continue rebuilding the Temple and to avoid the sins of the past. In chapters 9-14, he looks forward to the coming of a very special king. This king would be humble, not proud or arrogant. He would establish genuine peace throughout the world, not just the protection of Israel. And finally, he would institute a new kind of freedom, one based on "the blood of my covenant with you" (11). It's not hard to see how these prophecies were later fulfilled in Jesus.

??? Have you ever tried to get revenge on someone who wronged you? What did you learn?
How does the humility that Jesus described bring peace to you?

Reading 25 Zechariah 12:1 – 13:9

The prophetic books often contain clues or references to significant events in the future. This passage contains several of those “future clues.” One is Zechariah’s reference to “the one they have pierced” (13:10). In his gospel account, John linked this verse to Jesus’ death on the Cross. Another “future clue” is found in the poem about the shepherd and the sheep, a familiar biblical theme as we’ve seen. Jesus quoted this very passage to predict how Peter and the rest of the disciples would desert him at his arrest.

??? Is pride always bad? What makes it destructive and pulls us away from God?

Reading 26 Isaiah 7:1-25

This passage contains one of the most well-known prophecies about the coming Messiah in the entire Old Testament. Isaiah says that a virgin will give birth to a son who will be called Immanuel, which literally means “God with us.” This prophecy was a sign to King Ahaz that God would deliver Judah from her enemies. But it also predicted God’s greatest deliverance in sending his son, Jesus, to deliver all people from sin. The great miracle is that because Jesus came, God is with us forever.

??? How does knowing that God was with the people in Isaiah’s time, during Roman time and now help you today?

Reading 27 Isaiah 9:1-8

In spite of Judah’s sin and all her troubles, God was planning a future that would be wonderful in at least three ways: Light. God would turn the darkness into light by their eventual deliverance from the Assyrian invasion. Joy. This deliverance would lead to unrestrained joy. The Coming Messiah. This future would culminate in the birth of one who would become a unique leader (6-7), the promised Messiah. This prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus Christ who delivered us from the darkness of sin and established an everlasting kingdom for those who trust him.

??? How do the circumstances and challenges of your life draw you to and away from God?

Reading 28 Isaiah 42:1-9

This is the first of four “Servant Songs” in the book of Isaiah. His prophesy no doubt concerned the nation of Israel, but God used it to also communicate about the coming Messiah. He has been chosen by God. Isaiah prophesied that one day a Savior would come who would be uniquely chosen by God. He is God’s instrument of salvation. Isaiah says that the servant would be filled with the Spirit of God and would establish justice for all, including the weak and downtrodden. Jesus said that he was the fulfillment of this passage.

??? Who are the weak and downtrodden – “the bruised reeds” and “smoldering wicks” in your world? What is the message of God’s grace you can share with them?

Reading 29 Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Here, Isaiah introduces us to the “suffering servant” and gives us a detailed picture of what Jesus would experience on the Cross. The first and most obvious detail is that he would have to suffer (53:3, 7, 10). The second is that the servant’s suffering would pay for the sins of others (53:5-6, 12b). That’s exactly what Jesus did on the Cross. Finally, Isaiah predicts that the suffering servant would eventually be restored and glorified (53:11-12a), which is what happened when God brought Jesus back to life in his resurrection.

??? Why do you think God chooses the weak and lowly to do his work?

Reading 30 Isaiah 61:1-11

This passage underscores two aspects of God character. First, God is a God of hope. Regardless of what messes we make of our lives, with God we can have a fresh start and a new future. God is always at work for our good (Romans 8:28, Jeremiah 29:11-13) as God was for the Israelites. A second aspect of God’s character is that God passionately loves justice and hates sin. Note that this passage had special significance for Jesus; he used it as the mission statement for his life on earth.

??? This passage gives a type of Mission Statement for Jesus’ life. What would you say is your Mission Statement?

Reading 31 **Luke 1:26-56**

Mary is one of the great heroes of the Bible. But how, can we, like her, find favor with God? First, notice that she is confident in her relationship to God. She sees herself simply as “the Lord’s servant”. Second, notice her willingness to live by faith (38, 45). Finally, notice her heart for God (46-55). Mary’s song (often called the Magnificat) is filled with Old Testament imagery and indicates that she was a young woman who had spent time reflecting on the Scriptures.

??? If you would sing a song to God about how you have been blessed, what would you sing?

Reading 32 **Matthew 1:18-25**

Matthew began his gospel with a genealogy (1:1-17), not exactly a page-turner. But we shouldn’t dismiss Matthew’s perspective for its lack of dramatic flair. That’s because he understood the most important thing: Jesus was born to save people from their sins (21). Another fact people struggle with today is the idea of the virgin birth. Even Mary and Joseph had trouble grasping what was happening (Luke 1:34; 19). But perhaps the biggest fact that emerges from Matthew’s report is that the birth of Jesus was no accident. It was all God’s doing.

??? What are the most important facts about Jesus? Are there any with which you struggle?

Reading 33 **Luke 2:1-40**

The most overlooked characters in this passage are the lowly shepherds. But it’s how they responded to the good news that’s instructive to us today. Note that the shepherds weren’t too busy to investigate the claims about Jesus (15); they instinctively realized that finding Jesus was important, so they made it a priority (16). Next, they didn’t consider the truth about Jesus “a private thing.” Instead, they immediately began telling others what they had discovered (17) and were unashamed to enthusiastically worship God (20). Those are the marks of faith.

??? Which character in the story of Jesus’ birth do you identify with the most? Why?

Reading 34 **Mark 2:1-23**

One feature of this passage is the odyssey of Joseph and Mary. Their boy was the promised Messiah. So, it would be natural for them to think that life would be safe and secure. But they became refugees. Yet despite the danger, they found protection and were able to show God’s love and purpose.

??? How have you seen God’s protection in your life, even when you are travelling a hard road?

Reading 35 **Luke 2:41-52**

As we see in this passage, Jesus possessed wisdom far beyond his years (47). And notice how Jesus reacts to Mary’s reference to “your father” (48). He responds, “Didn’t you know that I had to be in my Father’s house?” Jesus already understood that he was the divine Son of God. The interchange between Mary and Jesus also introduces us to a tension that builds throughout the Gospels. As people would experience Jesus, some were confused by what he said, others clearly understood him and became angry or rejected him for it.

??? We get a rare glimpse of Jesus’ parents in this passage. What challenges did they face in raising the Son of God? If you were advising them, what would you say?

Reading 36 **Matthew 3:1-17**

John the Baptist was a weird dresser and had strange ideas about food (4). But he had a unique twofold message that people were hungry to hear. Repent! John told people they were sinners, and he told them what to do about it (8). You wouldn’t think that would be such a popular theme. But to people weighed down by sin, a call to repentance is a blessing. The kingdom of God is near! The second part of John’s message had to do with Jesus; that’s what he meant by saying “the kingdom of God is near.”

??? Which part of John the Baptist’s message applies the most to you now? To repent? Or that Jesus is near? Why?

Reading 37 **Luke 4:1-13**

In this passage, the devil attempts to destroy Jesus in three ways: The promise of granting physical desires. The devil was trying to use Jesus' hunger to make him forget who he really was. The promise of worldly power. "If you worship me, it will all be yours." The promise of spiritual power. The devil returns to his original taunt (3, 9) but attaches it to a quote from Psalm 92. Perhaps spiritual temptations are the most subtle and dangerous. In each case Jesus used his knowledge of the Scriptures to repel the devil's attack.

??? – How did Jesus' understanding of scripture protect him? How does our understanding protect us?

Reading 38 **Luke 4:14-30**

When Jesus read from the book of Isaiah, he was indicating at least two important things about himself. The first was that he had a specific mission: "to preach good news to the poor..." (17-19). Second, by saying this scripture had been fulfilled (21), Jesus was claiming he was that promised Messiah. Ever since, people have been divided about Jesus. Some accept him (22) while others are infuriated by him (28). A person who said what Jesus said and did what Jesus did demands a response.

??? If you heard Jesus saying this, how would you have responded?

Reading 39 **Luke 4:31-44**

This passage shows Jesus going public with his ministry. He's starting to travel and attract crowds (31, 43-44). And as he does, the distinctive feature that is evident to all is his authority. We see it both in his preaching (32) and in his healing (36). Our passage gives us one other clue about the source of Jesus' authority, "At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place" (42). In the hustle and bustle of his ministry, Jesus made time to be alone with God in prayer. That's a source of strength that's still available to us today

??? How is Jesus the authority in your life today?

Reading 40 **Luke 5:1-11**

In this passage, we see how the world's greatest leader recruited followers. The first thing we notice is that the crowds were attracted to Jesus not because he was a showman, but rather because he was sharing "the word of God" (1). The next thing we notice is how Jesus recruited followers one at a time as Peter's experience shows us (4-11). It's interesting that his first thought was of his sin. A real encounter with God reveals the distance between God's holiness and our corruption. Even so, we have nothing to fear (10).

??? Why do you think Peter would immediately turn the miracle of the fish into a confession?

Reading 41 **Matthew 5:1-48**

A careful look at the Sermon on the Mount reveals that Jesus preached about a large and challenging topic: the Kingdom of Heaven. What exactly is it? It will involve two realities. First, those who belong to the Kingdom of Heaven have a heart that is committed to the values that are important to God (3-10). Second, note how Jesus repeats the phrase, "You have heard that it was said..." (21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). In essence he's saying, "It's not good enough to do the right thing; you need to do it for the right reason."

??? Is there a Beatitude that speaks directly to you today? Which one and why?

Reading 42 **Matthew 6:1-34**

In this passage, Jesus discusses three spiritual disciplines that you would expect him to cover. About giving (1-4) he says it shouldn't be done for PR value; rather, we should keep a low profile. About prayer (5-15), he says the focus should be spending time alone with God. And about fasting (16-18) he says we shouldn't act like holier-than-thou martyrs. Jesus concludes with two unexpected topics: money (19-24) and worry (25-34). Finally, he points to the greatest spiritual discipline of all: seek first his kingdom and his righteousness (33). That puts everything else into its proper perspective.

??? These passages can be read as law and perceived as a burden. They are meant to be Good News for us. How are they Good News to you today?

Reading 43 Matthew 7:1-29

Jesus broke all the rules for effective communicators. The Sermon on the Mount was long (way more than the average attention span of 15 minutes), delivered outside (without a sound system) and included no jokes (or even a funny story). After teaching about the dangers of judging others, the need to proactively seek God, and to watch out for false prophets, Jesus wraps up the world's greatest sermon with a straightforward analogy about houses built on sand and rock. The point? Build your life on the rock-solid words of Jesus.

??? How has your life been supported by building on the firm foundation of Jesus?

Reading 44 Matthew 23:1-39

In this passage, Jesus is clearly "ticked off." What did it? It all boils down to a single word: hypocrisy. The teachers of the Law and Pharisees weren't practicing what they preached (3). They thought they were holy, but true holiness doesn't come from a fancy religious title or from "acting like a saint." There are many things we can do to appear holy, but that's all it is, appearances. True holiness requires a complete harmony between God's priorities and our actions (23).

??? How is your life in harmony with God's intentions? How does knowing God loves us unconditionally help us?

Reading 45 Matthew 24:1-51

One of the things Jesus does in this passage is predict the end of the world (15-51). He says it will be a time of great stress and worldwide tumult; some say it has begun to happen today. But the followers of Christ have nothing to fear because regardless of what happens or when it does, the most important thing is that Jesus will one day return. Jesus was saying that we should be ready, watching and waiting for that day (44).

??? There is a purpose behind every warning. How does this warning help or hinder us?

Reading 46 Luke 10:25-37

Jesus' goal in this parable was to show us what God is like and how to please him. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Levite and the priest failed to do what the Scriptures taught or what God wanted. On the other hand, the Samaritan, the mixed-race outcast of that time, obeyed the Scriptures and pleased God. The point is that if you want to know God you need to be like God, who was willing to go out of his way at a significant cost to help us when we were helpless in our sin.

??? Who do we most identify with in this passage? What did it cost Jesus to be our neighbor?

Reading 47 Luke 12:13-21

This man had the guts to interrupt Jesus with a complaint about his estate plan (13). So, what did Jesus say to this man about money and possession? Jesus puts his finger on the root problem: greed (15). Jesus reminds us that life is more than possessions (15) and Jesus illustrates his point with a story about a rich fool (20), which could be summarized like this: he who dies with the most toys...still dies. Our goal in life should not be to amass great wealth for ourselves. Rather, we should focus on becoming "rich toward God" (21).

??? What are some practical ways you can live a life that is "rich toward God?"

Reading 48 Luke 14:1-24

What does Jesus teach about the kingdom of God from this parable? First, God's intent is for all people to get in; the banquet host goes to extraordinary lengths to make it possible for everyone to attend (17, 21, 23). Second, God's kingdom is not just for the wealthy and talented; the banquet host makes a special effort to include the down and outers, "the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" (21). Finally, it is possible to reject God's invitation (18-20, 24). These excuses may sound silly, but it happens.

??? Why would someone reject God's invitation?

Reading 49 **Luke 15:1-32**

All of us are sinners (Rom. 3:23). That's a tough nut for anyone to swallow, so Jesus told three parables to explain what he meant. The first two, about a lost coin and a lost sheep (3-10), are fairly straightforward. The third parable, about the prodigal (wasteful) son (11-32), is more personal and adds a plot twist: sin. The theme that unites the three parables is joy (6-7, 9, 23); God rejoices when sinners repent (7, 10). But to experience that joyful reunion with God, you've got to come to grips with your own sin and separation from God.

??? What do these parables tell us about God's love?

Reading 50 **Luke 18:1-14**

In the parable about the persistent widow (1-8), Jesus holds her up as his model prayer warrior. Effective prayer often involves insisting, pleading and begging with God. It's important to note, however, that the woman's cause is consistent with God's priorities; she's praying for justice (3), not a new Cadillac. In the parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector (9-14), the obvious point is that God responds to the prayers of humility, not pride. Prayers based on our own goodness don't get too far with God. Prayers based on our need for him get a much better reception.

??? How has God answered your prayers? Are there some you are still waiting on a response for?

Reading 51 **Matthew 13:1-58**

Taken together, these parables help us see a more complete picture of the kingdom of heaven. It starts small (like seeds) and has a unique power to grow (like a mustard seed or yeast). It's worth everything you have to obtain (like hidden treasure or a pearl) and eventually will include many, many people (like a net). Unfortunately, there are some who will reject God's invitation and whose lives will suffer.

??? Why is God so extravagant and wasteful? How are our hearts at times like all four soils?

Reading 52 **Matthew 20:1-16**

The parable seems easy to understand workers are hired at different points throughout the day with the promise of fair wages at the end. But those who worked 12 hours are paid the same as those who worked 1 hour. Jesus is using this seeming unfairness to make his point. The kingdom of heaven cannot be earned; it's a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8-9). Jesus was saying our salvation is dependent on God's generosity not on our good works. And the truth is, God wants everyone to enjoy the benefits of his kingdom.

??? From what perspective does God's generosity seem fair or unfair? What does that tell us about God and about us?

Reading 53 **Matthew 25:1-46**

Earlier, Jesus made the point that God invites everyone into his kingdom. Now he says some won't accept that invitation; some will be left out and it won't be God's fault. The ten virgins all had an opportunity to get ready for the bridegroom; five used it wisely and five squandered it (1-13). All three of the servants received an investment from the wealthy man; two made the most of it and one didn't (14-30). The last parable envisions a day of reckoning when Jesus will determine who will enter the kingdom of heaven and who will not.

??? Does God sentence people to hell or is it because of their own actions or inactions?

Reading 54 **John 10:1-18**

In this reading, Jesus uses two "figures of speech" to teach about himself—a gate to a sheep pen and a good shepherd. The point of the gate analogy is straightforward: Jesus is the entry point into God's kingdom (9). Calling himself The Good Shepherd, Jesus emphasizes two details. The first is the shepherd's voice. Jesus' followers can enjoy a close relationship with him (14); they will recognize his voice (4-5). He knows your name (3); he cares about you like a shepherd cares for his sheep. The second detail is the shepherd's willingness to sacrifice himself (11, 15).

??? This scripture can be read as restrictive, as law. How do you think this is Good News for all?

Reading 55 John 15:1-17

In this passage Jesus says he's the vine (1), his followers are the branches (5) and God is the gardener (1). Then, Jesus goes on to emphasize two other specific points. The main job of the branches was to bear fruit, that is, for Jesus' followers to do the things he's instructed them to do (7-8). His second point relates to love. He commanded them to love one another (17). That's tough work especially since he set the ultimate standard (13). True love involves both obedience to God's commands and sacrifice for the good of others.

??? How is God's grace bearing fruit in you?

Reading 56 John 2:1-11

So, what's the significance of Jesus' first miracle (11)? Jesus performed miracles first of all because they "revealed his glory," that is, they were evidence of his divine nature. Second, they helped people, in this case his disciples, "put their faith in him." Jesus' mission was to help people believe that he was the Son of God. Jesus was signaling that he came to establish a new way for people to have a relationship with God, a way based not on keeping the Law of Moses but rather on having faith in him.

??? What things in your spiritual life are "old" and need to be "made new?" How can God do that?

Reading 57 Mark 4:35-41

This miracle reveals another aspect of Jesus' glory: he has power over the forces of nature. Anyone who's ever been out on a boat in a big storm (or even a rough sea) knows the feeling of powerlessness and fear that comes from being out of control. Everyone struggles with fear at some point. But that's the point behind Jesus' seemingly unfair questions (40): things are never out of control when we are with him. Jesus has the power to change not only the wind and the waves, but also every force at work in.

??? What are your biggest fears? What do you worry about the most?

Reading 58 Matthew 14:13-21

Jesus already knows he can feed the 5,000 men plus many women and children (21). But he challenges the disciples to solve the problem on their own (16). Their first instinct was to look at their own resources (17), They concluded that they didn't have enough to solve the problem. But Jesus was probing whether or not his disciples would look to him first to solve the problem. Note that he says, "Bring them here to me" (18). And "They all ate and were satisfied" (20). Jesus has resources far greater than we can ever imagine (Psa. 50:10).

??? What is the single biggest problem you face now? What would it mean for you to "look to Jesus first?" What is easy or difficult about this?

Reading 59 Matthew 14:22-33

Peter had never seen a man walking on water; it might have been a mirage or even a ghost. Still, he stepped out of the boat. That's the essence of faith, the willingness to move forward trusting God even when the way is unclear. I wonder what Peter felt in that moment when he realized he was sinking into the raging waters; embarrassment, panic, fear? Now imagine Peter's emotions when he felt the strong grip of Jesus on his arm. Peter learned an important lesson that day: calling out to Jesus is the best way to overcome fear.

??? In what areas of your life do you need to move forward in faith even though the way seems unclear? What help do you need from Jesus?

Reading 60 Matthew 21:18-22

The point of Jesus' sharp words and miraculous withering of the fig tree was about bearing fruit. He wanted his followers to know that bearing fruit is serious business and there's no time to waste. Producing fruit involves at least two things: faith and prayer. This means faith built on a deep relationship with our Heavenly Father and transforming prayer that enables us to understand and submit to his will—which may be radically different from our request. Our challenge is developing a prayer life built on an unwavering trust that God will accomplish his purposes, his way.

??? Jesus has promised us "mountain moving faith." How have you seen that in your life and/or others?

Reading 61 **John 9:1-41**

Why is it so difficult for some to accept the fact the Jesus heals people? When told about Jesus healing the blind man, the Pharisees condemned it on a technicality (16). The blind man was the only one who saw the light (5). Instead of questioning or challenging Jesus, he simply obeyed (7). Next, he honestly shared his experience with others (11, 25), even defending it in spite of the pressure tactics used against him (24- 34). Finally, after taking time to think it through, he put his faith in Jesus (38).

??? Why do you think some people are still blind about Jesus’s love for them?

Reading 62 **Luke 5:17-26**

I can imagine the hard work it took to lug a paralyzed man across town. It took four men to lift him. But they did it for at least two reasons. First, they loved their friend and showed it by sacrificial work. And second, they believed Jesus could make a difference. It also took faith, as Jesus pointed out (20). It’s significant that Jesus healed the man because of “their faith.” Sometimes God intervenes in the lives of people based on the faith of those around them.

??? How has the other’s faith brought parts of you back to life? How are you doing that for others?

Reading 63 **Mark 5:1-20**

The Bible teaches throughout that the devil is real. The devil had been at work in this poor man’s life for a long time. He’d tortured his mind and body and alienated the man from himself and society. But Jesus wasn’t about to let that happen. First, Jesus took control of the situation and of the demons (6-8). Next, Jesus dealt with the demons once and for all (11-13), something the townspeople had never been able to do (4). And finally, Jesus restored the man and gave him a renewed purpose in life (18-20).

??? What surprises are there in this passage for you?

Reading 64 **Mark 5:21-43**

This passage weaves together the accounts of two miracles of Jesus. An unnamed woman in the crowd had suffered from uncontrollable bleeding for twelve years (25) Her friends may have criticized her desperate scheme (28). But Jesus said, “Your faith has healed you” (34). Sometimes faith requires us to take desperate measures. Next, the daughter of Jairus, a man who would have been aligned with the group opposing Jesus, was sick. His colleagues may have criticized Jairus for being a turncoat. But Jesus said, “Don’t be afraid; just believe” (36). Sometimes faith requires us to ignore what others think.

??? – How does desperation lead us to God? When we go there, how does Jesus meet us?

Reading 65 **John 11:1-45**

Jesus claimed he was the resurrection and the life (25-26). Instead of seeing this as a threat, his followers both then and now understand what a wonderful promise it is: believing in Jesus is the way to eternal life (John 14:6). The Bible teaches that the resurrection of Jesus was the ultimate validation of his divine nature and mission (1 Corinthians 15:1-34). This miraculous raising of Lazarus as well as the raising of Jairus’ daughter, were early signs of the greatest resurrection that was soon to come, when God raised his own Son, Jesus Christ, from the dead.

??? Jesus weeps over the death of his friend Lazarus. God weeps over our losses too. What comfort does that give us?

Reading 66 **Mark 1:29-39**

In this passage, we gain some unique insights into the prayer life of Jesus. He prayed early. Jesus got up “while it was still dark” to pray. Prayer was the first thing on his mind for the day. He prayed without distraction. Jesus went to a “solitary place” to pray. He prayed no matter what. Jesus prayed in spite of the well-meaning pressure from his disciples (37). We’ll always feel the pressure to get busy, but without prayer, we are relying on our own strength, which can easily fail.

??? How could you make prayer less of an activity and more of a lifestyle?

Reading 67 **Luke 10:1-24**

But in the middle of this victory celebration, Jesus took time for an impromptu prayer meeting (21). The first thing we notice is the emphasis on joy (21) because he saw that Satan was being defeated (18) and God's self-revelation was becoming clearer and more understandable—even to the most unlikely persons (21). Another thing we notice is Jesus' confidence in God's plan: "Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure" (21). This was as God had foretold through the prophets.

??? What things about God make you feel most joyful?

Reading 68 **Luke 11:1-13**

Effective prayer involves two perspectives. First, in prayer we must look beyond ourselves to God, his nature, holiness, kingdom and will (2). And second, we should not be hesitant to focus on our day-to-day needs—food, forgiveness, and strength to avoid temptation (3, 4). Jesus also encourages boldness (5-10). The boldness is related to the intensity and persistence of the requestor (9, 10), as well as the conviction that God is able to meet any genuine need. Jesus assures us that faith in our loving Heavenly Father, combined with a bold persistence in prayer will get incredible results (Matt. 17:20-21).

??? Reflect on how God has answered your prayers. What one thing in your life right now needs persistent, bold prayer?

Reading 69 **John 17:1-26**

This is often referred to as Jesus' "high priestly prayer," because in it he interceded for his disciples and all believers. Jesus begins by praying for himself (1-5) because "the time has come" (1) for him to complete his mission. Jesus then prays for his disciples (6-19) and asks for three things. First, they'll need God's protection (11, 15). Second, he prays that the disciples would have "my joy" (13). Jesus finishes by praying for the unity of all who would believe in him as a result of the disciples' message (20-26).

??? If you were leaving earth tomorrow, what would you pray for?

Reading 70 **Mark 14:32-42**

How did Jesus pray when he was under pressure? The answer is packed into a single verse (36). He starts by calling out to his Father. The word "Abba" literally means "daddy." Next, he affirms what he knows to be true; all things are possible for God. Jesus then makes his request; "take this cup from me," in other words, "if there's another way to accomplish your plan of salvation without sacrificing me, please do it!" Jesus concludes by accepting God's will, whatever it may be. That's the same principle Jesus included in his model prayer (Matt. 6:10).

??? – Can you think of a time when you were under pressure? What happened to your prayer life during that time?

Reading 71 **John 6:25-71**

"Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life..." (54). No wonder the disciples were confused and offended (60-61). And no wonder the religious leaders are outraged; in addition to the disgusting image of eating human flesh, the Law of Moses contained specific regulations about not consuming blood or even meat with blood in it (Leviticus 17:13-14). But Jesus wasn't talking about physically consuming his flesh and blood. Rather, he's talking about the spiritual union that he has with his followers. Those who truly put their faith and trust in him are united with God (57) and have eternal life (40).

??? What thoughts go through your mind as you prepare to receive Communion?

Reading 72 **Mark 3:20-35**

The religious leaders were frustrated with Jesus; he'd been teaching, healing and attracting big crowds (20). That's why they wanted to discredit him in the eyes of the public by accusing him of demon possession (22). In response Jesus tells a parable that easily repels the false accusation (23-27). His point about eternal sin was that by equating the work of the Holy Spirit with demon possession, the religious leaders were turning away from God. While they persisted in that, they could not be forgiven. The "unforgivable sin" is an on-going unwillingness to repent that prevents us from being forgiven.

??? Does it ever seem to you that God is playing hard to get? What does this passage tell us about God's love?

Reading 73 **John 14:1-14**

Our passage today is part of a final coaching session Jesus had with his disciples (John 14-16). The key to unlocking the mystery of Jesus' "prayer guarantee" lies in two phrases that are easy to overlook. The first is "in my name." When we pray, we should ask for things that are consistent with what Jesus taught and did. The second is "bring glory to the Father." When we pray, our focus should be on things that help more people understand who God really is. Those are prayers that put us in alignment with God.

??? Prayer changes things – and people. How has prayer changed you?

Reading 74 **Matthew 18:15-35**

Jesus begins by explaining a very practical method for resolving conflict (15-20). First, talk to the person...privately. Then go with others and then involve the church. As a last resort, the relationship must be put on hold. Then, Peter asks a question about when he can stop forgiving (21). But when we really understand how much God has forgiven us, we know we must forgive others. That all that sets up one of the most challenging statements Jesus ever made (35). The point of the parable (23-34) is that God is serious about forgiveness, and we must be, too.

??? How does not forgiving others block us from experiencing life as God intended ?

Reading 75 **Mark 8:31-9:1**

For Jesus, taking up his cross was a symbol of all-out obedience to his Father's will. It would mean giving up his rights as the Son of God (Philippians 2:5-8) and dying on the Cross for the sins of the world (John 19:17-18). For us it will mean that the focus of our lives will be drawing closer to Jesus and becoming more single-minded about sharing him with others, by our words and by our actions (35). We must "die" to our own agenda and live for Jesus'. In the end, that's the only thing worth living for (35-36).

??? In what ways have you taken up your cross to follow Jesus? What has it cost you? What have you gained?

Reading 76 **Mark 26:47-56**

We don't really know what motivated Judas to betray Jesus. But we know that his act was intentional. Judas planned exactly how he would do it (48-49). How incredible then that Jesus still called Judas his "friend" (50). But perhaps the most striking thing about this passage is the confidence of Jesus. Even though he could have stopped Judas and his posse dead in their tracks (53), Jesus allows himself to be arrested without a fight (56). That's because his highest priority wasn't to save his own skin; it was to fulfill the mission God had given him.

??? How do you feel when people betray you? Is it challenging to forgive?

Reading 77 **Matthew 26:57-68**

Jesus was at the mercy of this Sanhedrin court. Caiaphas and his cronies were breaking all the rules of due process. First, the trial took place at night instead of during the day. Second, the charges were based on false evidence (59) and false witnesses (60). And the judge and jury had already made up their minds to execute Jesus (59). Jesus claimed to be the Son of God (63-65); Caiaphas rightly identified that as the central issue, but he was unwilling to accept Jesus on that basis.

??? What does it mean to you that Jesus accepted the penalty for our sins himself?

Reading 78 Matthew 26:69-27:10

Peter's first denial is that of a double agent (26:70), perhaps he said it to stay inside the enemy's camp. Then, in the face of mounting pressure, he denies Jesus with greater emphasis (26:72). When Peter is forced to declare where he stands with Jesus, he gives a final, angry denial (26:74). However, Jesus used this episode to strengthen Peter's faith for a future of productive ministry (John 21:15-19). If we're willing to repent of the ways we deny Jesus, nothing is so great that it can separate us from God. (Rom. 8:28-39).

??? What are some ways you have stood up for Jesus and his values? What did it cost you?

Reading 79 Luke 22:66-23:25

In this reading, political concerns have overwhelmed true religion. Notice the spin the religious leaders put on their accusations of Jesus, "He's undercutting our national security, he opposes your tax policy and he's planning a political takeover" (my paraphrase of 23:2).

??? What did the religious leaders have to lose if Jesus was allowed to live? What do we lose?

Reading 80 Luke 23:26-56

In the midst of his ordeal, Jesus was more concerned about others than himself. To the women mourning for him, Jesus offers a prophetic warning (27-31). To those who mocked him, Jesus offered forgiveness (34). To the angry thief Jesus offers silence (39); he doesn't try to retaliate. And to the repentant thief, Jesus promises paradise (43). This passage offers us the defining picture of Jesus. Because of our sin, we're all condemned to die; we're either one thief or the other. The real question is how will we respond, with insults (39) or with a heartfelt "remember me" (42)?

??? If you were at the foot of the cross, what do you think you would have thought and felt?

Reading 81 Matthew 28:1-20

The facts: the earthquake was violent (2); no wonder the guards were scared stiff (4). The angel had a dazzling appearance (3). The two Marys (8-10) were overwhelmed with fear and joy (8). Even so, the angel gives them a threefold command—don't be afraid (5), come and see (6), go and tell (7). For the two Mary's it led to a life-changing encounter with Christ (9). Meanwhile, the religious leaders pay the guards to lie about what happened. Then comes the great commission, a vision of worldwide evangelism and the promise that Jesus will be with us forever (20).

??? What does the resurrection mean to you?

Reading 82 Mark 16:1-20

This reading gives us two unique insights into this event. There are consequences to our choices about the gospel (15-16). Jesus' words are not just motivational, "Go into all the world..." (15). Here, he links them to another of his "hard sayings"; our response to the Good News determines whether we're "saved" or "condemned" (16). There is power in the message of the gospel (17-18). We shouldn't sensationalize these verses or attempt dangerous things without clear direction from the Lord. But the fact remains Jesus said we would do "even greater things" after his death and resurrection (John 14:12).

??? For you, what is the most powerful thing about the resurrection of Jesus? How does that change your life every day?

Reading 83 Luke 24:1-49

We can easily imagine the shock and discouragement these men were feeling (17b). The problem was they didn't understand who Jesus really was; they thought he was a prophet destined to become Israel's political savior (19-21). Jesus wasn't the leader of a political movement; he was "the Christ," the one God had anointed and promised to send in order to save humankind from sin (26). And the way he would accomplish that is through suffering, death and resurrection. Discover for yourself "what was said in all the Scriptures" (27) about the essential Jesus.

??? What misconceptions about Jesus do people seem to have today?

Reading 84 John 20:1-21:25

John describes how different people reacted to the resurrection. Mary Magdalene had been cured of demon-possession by Jesus (Mark 16:9, Luke 8:2). She was the first one to the tomb. Others had questions about Jesus' resurrection (20:9), but Thomas was the only one with the guts to admit them...and publicly change his mind when presented with the truth (20:28). Peter had failed Jesus and must re-affirm his love for him. It's clear John has developed a special relationship with Jesus and a firm belief in the truth of his resurrection (20:8). The two go hand in hand.

??? Which of the 4 characters in this passage do you identify with the most? Why?

Reading 85 1 Corinthians 15:1-58

Several years after Jesus lived people were beginning to ask tough questions about the resurrection. Paul answers by asserting the historical fact of the resurrection (12-34). Jesus was actually raised from the dead (20) and there were lots of eyewitnesses (5-8). Then, he addresses the personal impact of the resurrection (35-58). Paul does his best to describe our resurrection bodies (37-49). We won't really know what it will be like, but we do know that our spiritual bodies will be imperishable, glorious and powerful (42-44). That gives us a lot of hope—based on the fact of the resurrection (1 Pet. 1:3).

??? For you, what facts make the strongest case for the resurrection of Jesus?

Reading 86 Revelation 1:1-20

The Book of Revelation is all about Jesus. Jesus is called "the first born from the dead" (5; Col. 1:15, 18); he has freed us from sin "by his blood" (5b; Rom. 5:9; Eph. 1:7); his followers are "a kingdom and priests" (6; 1 Peter 2:9); and someday Jesus will come again and "every eye will see him" (7; Phil. 2:9-11) His is a majestic appearance and powerful voice (12-15). He is eternal, he is alive. Jesus has something to say about the church of the First Century, too (11).

??? How would this passage be comforting to Christians who were living under the power of the oppressive Roman Empire? How is this comforting to us today?

Reading 87 Revelation 2:1-11

Here, we read Jesus' assessment of the churches in the First Century. The first one was in the city of Ephesus (1-7). The good news is that they were activists; they were willing to work hard (2). The bad news was they'd forsaken their first love, Jesus (4). The way to rekindle dying love is to repent and start over again (5). The second church, Smyrna (8-11), was one of two that were singled out for commendation only (the other is in Philadelphia, 3:7-14). They were poor, were being criticized, and their members were about to suffer persecution and imprisonment (8-10).

??? Why do you think the early Christians were having difficulty "staying in love with Jesus?" How do we keep our love for Jesus vibrant and growing?

Reading 88 Revelation 2:12-29

The two churches in this reading had the same problem. The church at Pergamum (12- 17) had remained true to Jesus during unusual stress and persecution (13). But that spiritual victory was long past; now they were being enticed by false teaching (14-15). The church in Thyatira was also tolerating false teaching (20). And it led to immoral behavior (20). So how do we live with the fact that there's no perfect church? Jesus says, "Hold on to what you have until I come" (25). In other words, remain faithful to God's Word and eagerly look forward to Jesus' return.

??? Are there any false teachings the Church may be guilty of today?

Reading 89 Revelation 3:1-13

The church in Sardis (1-6) had “a reputation of being alive” (1). Though it had everything going for it, Jesus considered it dead (1b) because its members weren’t fully obeying the basic teachings of the gospel (2-3). Without that, Jesus says to them, “you are not completely obeying God” (2, CEV). The church in Philadelphia, on the other hand, received only kudos (7-13). Like the church at Smyrna, it didn’t look successful; they were weak and facing opposition (8-9). But they got the main things right; Jesus says, “You obeyed my word and did not deny me” (8, NLT).

??? What parts of Prince of Peace are dead or dying and need resurrection? How can you be a part of that resurrection?

Reading 90 Revelation 3:14-22

No one would ever accuse the church in Laodicea (14-22) of being religious extremists; they were lukewarm for God, and that really bothered Jesus (15-16). Their wealth had dulled their passion for the things of God (17). It’s impossible to love both God and money (Matt. 6:24). There are two other ideas in this passage worth pondering. The first is the connection between discipline and love (19). God’s discipline is often a way to get us to repent, as Jesus makes clear (19b). The second is a word picture that communicates how much Jesus wants to be with us (20).

??? If a friend’s relationship with Jesus is “lukewarm,” how would you encourage them to recover their passion for Jesus? What part of this message do you relate to?

Reading 91 Acts 1:1-11

After all the “convincing proofs” (3) the disciples witnessed, they still hadn’t grasped the truth about Jesus. They still assumed he was Israel’s national hero (6). One of the best ways to get a true picture of Jesus is to read what the Bible says about him. Another is to rely on the Holy Spirit. Jesus taught that the Holy Spirit would help his disciples understand the truth of the gospel after his death, resurrection and ascension (John 16:13). And two angels announce the great sequel. Jesus “will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (11).

??? If you knew Jesus was returning within a month, what difference would it make for your plans?

Reading 92 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11

Paul gives the Thessalonians two practical teachings to help them maintain a balanced understanding of the Second Coming. First, they shouldn’t spend time trying to nail down the exact “times and dates” (5:1); only God knows when it will happen (Matt. 24:36). If we’re not prepared, Jesus’ return will take us by surprise (5:2). The second thing Paul teaches is that they should spend time trying to live for God in the present (5:4-8). We’ll always be curious about the Second Coming. But Paul reminds us that the most important thing to know is that we are ready for it.

??? What is your answer to the question, “What will happen to me after I die?”

Reading 93 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Some people were sensationalizing the Second Coming, or simply spreading misinformation about it (2). As a result, many believers worried they had been left behind (2b). Paul says, “don’t let anyone deceive you” (3), and reminds them that when Jesus returns, his followers will be with him (1). And Paul gives us some new information; the trigger events will be some kind of “rebellion” and the appearance of “the man of lawlessness” (3). But we shouldn’t become “unsettled or alarmed” (2). God will let things get worse before he steps in to fix it once and for all.

??? How does your understanding of the second coming of Jesus affect the way you live and react to the world news today?

Reading 94 **2 Peter 3:1-18**

First Century Christians were waiting for the Second Coming, but nothing was happening. Skeptics were becoming more vocal with their taunts (4). Peter points to the words of the prophets and the words of Jesus himself (2). He reminds his readers that when God speaks, things happen. And since God's Word says the Second Coming will happen, we can be sure it will (7). Second, God is outside of time (8); he doesn't sit around marking his calendar like we do. What seems like a long delay is actually an opportunity for more people to come to know him (15)

??? How could Jesus' delay be an opportunity for grace?

Reading 95 **Revelation 21:1-22:21**

In these last two chapters we discover that God intends to establish "a new heaven and a new earth" (21:1). Satan will be defeated (20:7-10), the curse of sin will be broken (22:3) and God the Father and God the Son will be present with us. "God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them" (21:3, NLT). For those who belong to Christ, the end of the world is only the beginning of eternal life (Romans 6:23). That's the heart of the essential Jesus story.

??? The end has already been decided, the war is over. Does this change how we live today?

Reading 96 **Matthew 19:16-30**

How do I get to heaven? This man thought he had it all figured out: do good things (16, 20). But Jesus challenges what it means to be "good" (17). He then shows that just being good isn't good enough; to earn your salvation you must be perfect (21). By the end of the conversation Jesus made it clear there were two things preventing this man from gaining eternal life: his attachment to wealth and his belief that salvation could be earned through good works. Jesus affirmed that following him is the way to heaven. "Follow me" (21, 28).

??? Is knowing we can't save ourselves comforting or not? Why or why not?

Reading 97 **John 3:1-21**

In spite of his high position (1) and religious knowledge (10), Nicodemus was outside of God's Kingdom (3, 5). But what exactly does it mean to be "born again" or "born anew" or "born from above"? Jesus defined it as believing that he was the Son of God who died on the Cross to save humankind from sin (14-18) There's no evidence here that Nicodemus accepted Jesus' message. But later Nicodemus defended Jesus (John 7:50-51) and publicly identified himself as a follower of Christ (John 19:38-42).

??? Nicodemus was on a journey of discovering who Jesus was. How you are similar or different?

Reading 98 **John 4:1-42**

This woman was burdened with sin and shame. First, she was a Samaritan, a group of people who were ostracized by the Jews (9). Next, she was a woman; many at that time, including even the disciples, would have considered her a second-class citizen (27). Finally, her life had produced a series of broken relationships (17-18). Then, Jesus changed her life forever. First, he revealed that he was the source of "living water" (10, 13-14). Next, he told her that soon, all people could have a relationship with God (23-24) because God's promised Messiah had arrived.

??? Jesus knows all your deep dark secrets. How does that you feel? Does this lead to a sense of gratitude or grace?

Reading 99 **Acts 9:1-19**

Paul was an angry young man (Acts 7:58). He hated Christians (1) and tracked them down to throw them into prison (2). But Paul's vendetta raises an interesting question: Why does Jesus make some people so mad? For some it has to do with their unwillingness to give up a particular lifestyle. Others feel they've been betrayed by a Christian loved one. Still others can't accept Jesus' claim to be the only way to God (John 14:6). But when Paul literally "saw the light" it burned off all his anger.

??? Why do you think Paul was so angry? How does Jesus refocus that anger?

Reading 100 **Luke 9:18-27**

??? How has this journey changed you? What questions do you still have?
How have you seen God's love more clearly?