

A dirt road winding through a forest of tall evergreen trees. The road is reddish-brown and leads into the distance, flanked by green grass and ferns. The trees are dense and reach towards a clear sky.

INVITATION

to a

Journey

STUDY GUIDE

INVITATION TO A JOURNEY

Introduction

This series takes place during the season of Lent—the time in the Christian year when we remember Jesus' intentional and courageous journey to Jerusalem and the cross that awaited Him there.

While the Pharisees, Sadducees, and teachers of the law all plotted against Jesus—while Judas would eventually betray Jesus—while the Sanhedrin (the Jewish supreme court) would condemn Jesus—and the Romans would crucify Jesus—none of it would have happened unless Jesus allowed it to happen.

Jesus, the Prince of Heaven and Creator of the Universe, only had to speak the word—and legions of angels would have intervened on His behalf. But Jesus remained obedient to the purpose of His coming (see Philippians 2:6-8). In a plan born in the heart of God out of love for His lost and broken creation, Jesus had lived a perfect and sinless life—but He needed to die a sacrificial death on a cross for the sins of the world in order to redeem creation.

During this series, we invite you to follow Jesus on the journey to the cross. Christians always respond to the invitation of Jesus—who says “Follow me...”

*“As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ‘Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will send you out to fish for people.’ At once they left their nets and followed him”
(Matthew 4:18-20).*

Jesus called His earliest disciples using two simple words—follow me. And follow they did. They left boats and nets—a tax collector's booth—and several other livelihoods to follow after Jesus. They weren't alone. Others joined them. Soon the original twelve disciples were accompanied by several women—and eventually, Jesus sent out at least 70 followers to do the same things He was doing—preaching, healing, and casting out demons—all in His name.

Their rabbi Jesus was unlike the Pharisees and other teachers of the law—Jesus spoke with authority that was heaven-sent. He explained the meaning of the law—not in terms of superficial religion, but as an invitation to a life-changing relationship. Jesus acted with compassion toward the poor—healed the broken—touched the leper—ate with sinners—hung out with those whom the religious people had long decided were that way because of the “sins” they committed—and He forgave them!

As Jesus' reputation grew, so did the crowds—from handfuls to dozens—from dozens to hundreds—from hundreds to thousands—all of them wanting to have some of the grace they'd heard Jesus embodied to drip on them. He healed people. He fed thousands. He loved the outcast. He forgave sins. He explained and reset the commandments. His message and methods were counter to the rules and regulations of the religious establishment. Jesus became so popular, the religious establishment was threatened. Jesus had to go—so they set things in motion.

At a crucial time, just after His closest followers came to know He was the Christ—the Messiah—Jesus set His face toward Jerusalem. And as He did, the crowds of fans and miracle seekers began to slip away—until only His true followers remained. Early in the process, just after He was announced as the Christ, Jesus told His closest followers He was heading to Jerusalem—where He would be arrested, beaten, tried, and killed. Simon Peter objected, but it’s doubtful he was alone. Jesus rebuked Peter, and then He said the words that show us what we’re promised when we follow Him:

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it”
(Matthew 16:24, 25).

What is it that Jesus first offers those who would follow Him? A cross. He invites us to die. Die to sin. Die to destructive habits. Die to religion. Die so that we can live. Live to righteousness. Live a holy life. Live to share Jesus with anyone and everyone. Jesus said, “What does it profit a man if he were to gain the whole world, but lose their soul?” (Matthew 16:26).

During this series, we’re following the journey of Jesus to the cross and grace by walking through some significant passages in the Gospel of Matthew.

WEEK ONE – FEBRUARY 18

TURNING POINT



Begin by praying—asking the Holy Spirit to guide and direct your time together, to open God’s Word to you, to grow you in your walk with the Lord and with each other, and to show you how you might apply what you learn in your daily discipleship.

THEME: This scripture passage details the turning point of Jesus’ ministry. After Peter’s declaration that He is the Christ, Jesus set His face toward Jerusalem—knowing that the cross awaited Him there. The chapters that follow each contain important teaching that shapes how the disciples viewed Jesus.

CONTEXT: Chapter 16 begins with the Pharisees and Sadducees demanding that Jesus perform a sign—and Jesus warning the disciples about the “yeast” (false teaching) of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

SUMMARY: This account takes place in Caesarea Philippi—a place of pagan worship named after Caesar Augustus and Herod’s son, Philip, the tetrarch of that region. This is the furthest point Jesus traveled from Jerusalem during his three-year, public ministry. To this point, every time Jesus showed up, a crowd showed up. He healed—and the crowds chased Him. He fed 5,000 with five barley loaves and 4,000 with seven loaves—and the crowds chased Him. He taught with authority—and the crowds chased Him. But as soon as Jesus started talking about the cross, the crowds suddenly disappeared—especially when He explained that following Him would mean picking up their own cross—literally for some and figuratively for others.

The journey from profession of faith to the cross often thins the crowd. That’s why it’s so important for our relationship with Jesus to be rooted in who He is—in addition to the things He does. We’re offered a relationship with the Creator of the Universe—a relationship with eternity in mind.

READ: Matthew 16:13-26

TEACHING POINTS:

- IT DOESN’T MATTER WHAT ANYONE ELSE THINKS ABOUT JESUS (Matthew 16:13, 14)
- WHAT MATTERS MOST IS WHO JESUS IS TO YOU (Matthew 16:15, 16)
- GOD IS THE ONE WHO OPENS OUR HEARTS TO JESUS (Matthew 16:17)
- WHEN WE PROFESS JESUS AS MESSIAH, HE CHANGES US (Matthew 16:18-20)
- WE DON’T GET TO DICTATE THE TERMS OF THE RELATIONSHIP (Matthew 16:21-23)
- FOLLOWING JESUS LEADS TO A CROSS (Matthew 16:24-26)

RESPOND & DISCUSS:

- Who do people say Jesus is today?
- Who do you say Jesus is?
- Have you ever tried to dictate the terms of the relationship with Jesus?
- How did that work for you?
- What does it mean to you to take up the cross of Jesus?
- What needs to happen for you to do so?
- Do you think we understand we need to take up the cross of Jesus daily?
- What is the cross of obedience you bear?
- How is Jesus inviting you to die?
- What's your "I will..." statement as you consider this week's teaching?
- Who do you need to tell?
- How can the group help?

WEEK TWO – FEBRUARY 25

TRANSFIGURED



Begin by praying—asking the Holy Spirit to guide and direct your time together, to open God’s Word to you, to grow you in your walk with the Lord and with each other, and to show you how you might apply what you learn in your daily discipleship.

How did you do with your “I will…” statement this past week?

THEME: Their encounter on the top of Mt. Tabor gave Peter, James, and John the opportunity to see Jesus as He had always been—and would be again.

CONTEXT: This mountaintop experience comes six days after the encounter on the road to Caesarea Philippi—and gives the disciples a glimpse of the fullness of whom Jesus was. Life was about to get complicated. The disciples would get a front-row seat, as people would try to trap Jesus—and Jesus would get increasingly direct in His teaching—while continually repeating He was on a journey to the cross.

SUMMARY: A Russian Orthodox priest was talking to an American minister about this scripture passage and said something like this, “You guys are missing the miracle.” It would be easy to see the miracle in this story as the Transfiguration of Jesus. Jesus becomes bright white, Elijah and Moses join Him, and the voice of God calls down from heaven—that’s a miracle. This priest suggested there was a more important, more profound miracle here—that the disciples saw Jesus as He had always been.

Jesus has always been holy. He’s always been divine. He’s always been the Son of God. And for perhaps the first time, Peter, James, and John were able to see Jesus in the fullness of who He had always been.

When we come to understand and follow Jesus in all the fullness of who He was and what He did in living a perfect life and dying a perfect sacrificial death—and for who He had always been—it changes us.

READ: Matthew 17:1-21

TEACHING POINTS:

- JESUS INVITES US TO BE ALONE WITH HIM (Matthew 17:1)
- DON’T MISS THE MIRACLE (Matthew 17:2, 3)
- DON’T BE SELFISH WITH YOUR EXPERIENCE OF JESUS (Matthew 17:4-8)
- DON’T CONFUSE RELATIONSHIP WITH RELIGION (Matthew 17:9-13)
- NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF JESUS TO CHANGE US (Matthew 17:14-18)
- ALLOW JESUS TO GROW YOUR FAITH IN ACTION (Matthew 17:19, 20)

RESPOND & DISCUSS:

- When's the last time you spent time alone with Jesus?
- Have you ever been guilty of wanting to stay on the mountaintop?
- When's the last time you shared your experience of Jesus with someone else?
- How do you guard your relationship with Jesus from becoming hollow religion?
- What does mustard-seed-sized faith look like?
- What's your "I will..." statement as you consider this week's teaching?
- Who do you need to tell?
- How can the group help?

WEEK THREE – MARCH 3

SIN AND FORGIVENESS



Begin by praying—asking the Holy Spirit to guide and direct your time together, to open God’s Word to you, to grow you in your walk with the Lord and with each other, and to show you how you might apply what you learn in your daily discipleship.

How did you do with your “I will...” statement this past week?

THEME: One of the most important lessons a follower of Jesus needs to learn is how to name sin, announce grace, and offer forgiveness—within themselves and in relationship to others. The closing parable in this scripture passage is a haunting indictment on anyone who claims to follow Jesus—yet is unwilling to forgive someone else.

CONTEXT: From the time Jesus came down the mountain following His transfiguration, the Pharisees and Sadducees ratcheted up their opposition by trying to trap Jesus in religious controversy—the first being the payment of taxes. The closer to Jerusalem they came, the more the religious people pressed Jesus. But Jesus also had some issues He needed to address with His disciples—which could divide and derail the movement—for example, the issue of how to handle power when it comes their way. Jesus reminds His followers that God is like a shepherd who will leave 99 sheep in the fold to seek and find the one that’s lost. If we’re going to partner with Jesus to seek and save the lost, we need to learn how to receive and offer forgiveness.

SUMMARY: A Christian leader once said, “The church wouldn’t be that bad—if it wasn’t for the people.” Church can be messy. People are sinful. Mistakes get made. But we’re called to forgive. The same can be said of families! All families are dysfunctional. Words can hurt. Trust can be betrayed. Relationships can be devastating. But we’re called to forgive. If we’re ever going to have a chance to be all Jesus died and redeemed us to be, we must learn how to name sin, announce grace, and be willing to forgive.

READ: Matthew 18:15-35

TEACHING POINTS:

- BE SURE TO ADDRESS SIN REDEMPTIVELY (Matthew 18:15-17)
- THE ABILITY TO FORGIVE HAS ETERNAL CONSEQUENCES (Matthew 18:18-20)
- WE WANT TO KNOW IF THERE’S A LIMIT TO GRACE (Matthew 18:21)
- JESUS SAID THERE’S NO LIMIT TO HOW MANY TIMES WE SHOULD OFFER FORGIVENESS (Matthew 18:22)
- THOSE WHO ARE FORGIVEN MUST FORGIVE (Matthew 18:23-35)

RESPOND & DISCUSS:

- Can you name a time when you've seen sin handled with redemption in church?
- Do you think we tend to put a limit on the number of times we'll extend forgiveness?
- What's more difficult for you—naming sin, announcing grace, or forgiving? Or asking for forgiveness?
- Who are some of the most difficult people for you to forgive?
- How can we pray for each other to be able to forgive?
- What's your "I will..." statement as you consider this week's teaching?
- Who do you need to tell?
- How can the group help?

WEEK FOUR – MARCH 10

ETERNAL LIFE PROMISED



Begin by praying—asking the Holy Spirit to guide and direct your time together, to open God’s Word to you, to grow you in your walk with the Lord and with each other, and to show you how you might apply what you learn in your daily discipleship.

How did you do with your “I will…” statement this past week?

THEME: We don’t receive eternal life because of the religious things we do—or the commandments we keep—or by meeting some kind of minimum standard. To inherit eternal life, we need to invite Jesus into the place of primary importance in our lives.

CONTEXT: The Pharisees and Sadducees were still trying to trap Jesus by asking him a tricky question about divorce. Well, it was tricky to them—but not for Jesus. Crisis averted. The disciples tried to protect Jesus’ time from being interrupted by parents bringing their children to Him to be blessed. Jesus made it clear—there was always room and time for the children. Then this guy asks a simple question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

SUMMARY: Deep inside the human heart is a God-shaped hole that needs to be filled for us to receive eternal life. We’ll spend our lives trying to fill it with all kinds of things—people, places, possessions, positions, and placebos—in our effort to fill the place where God belongs. Even when we decide God deserves to be in the place of greatest importance, we still try to fill with religion what was meant for relationship. While God offers us salvation by grace through faith, salvation by works is our default mode. We try to determine what we must “do” to earn what is not earnable—to purchase what is not purchasable—to barter for what is unattainable apart from the grace of God. The man in the story is a faithful Jew—he’s followed all the rules, but he’s still missing it. Jesus quickly finds the area in his life that he loves more than God—and He tells him to sell it, give the proceeds to the poor, and follow Him.

READ: Matthew 19:16-30

TEACHING POINTS:

- ETERNAL LIFE ISN’T SOMETHING WE EARN, BUT RATHER SOMETHING WE TRY (Matthew 19:16)
- WE WANT TO KNOW THE MINIMUM STANDARD (Matthew 19:17, 18a)
- ELIMINATE ANYTHING THAT COMPETES—AND FOLLOW JESUS (Matthew 19:18b-21)
- WHAT WE VALUE MORE THAN JESUS CAN COST US JESUS (Matthew 19:22-24)
- WE CAN’T SAVE OURSELVES—GOD DOES (Matthew 19:25, 26)
- ETERNAL LIFE IS THE GIFT OF GRACE TO THE OBEDIENT (Matthew 19:27-30)

RESPOND & DISCUSS:

- Why do you think people fall into the trap of trying to earn salvation?
- What have you tried to do in order to earn salvation?
- What area of your life gets in the way of following Jesus?
- Do you believe God will save you—not because of anything you’ve done, but because of what He’s done?
- Have you come to understand the freedom of being saved by grace?
- What’s your “I will...” statement as you consider this week’s teaching?
- Who do you need to tell?
- How can the group help?

WEEK FIVE – MARCH 17

A LESSON ON SERVANTHOOD



Begin by praying—asking the Holy Spirit to guide and direct your time together, to open God’s Word to you, to grow you in your walk with the Lord and with each other, and to show you how you might apply what you learn in your daily discipleship.

How did you do with your “I will…” statement this past week?

THEME: In a world where people are searching for significance, we can often be duped into thinking that power is the pathway to what we seek. This scripture passage reminds us the message of Jesus and the Kingdom is that servanthood is the pathway to significance.

SUMMARY: After the parable of the vineyard workers—where we’re reminded that no matter when someone comes into the Kingdom—we all get the same reward (payment). Jesus reminds the disciples of what awaits Him in Jerusalem—a cross. What follows is a case study in human behavior. The mother of James and John comes with them to see Jesus. Apparently, she’s not gotten the memo about what’s awaiting Jesus in Jerusalem. She has stars in her eyes about the power of the future Kingdom—especially since her sons were now a part of Jesus’ inner circle. She’s making her play for their future positions in the Kingdom and all that accompanies that power. What follows is a powerful lesson in exactly what power and influence are to be used for in the Kingdom.

Power can be a seductive thing. Many who seem to crave it aren’t able to handle it. The old adage is true: power corrupts and absolutely power corrupts absolutely. Momma Zebedee is after power and positions for her boys. While God knew what awaited the disciples: 10 of the remaining eleven would die brutal deaths. Peter was crucified upside down in the Roman Circus—James was beheaded—Thomas was speared while preaching in India—Andrew was crucified in Greece—Matthew was stabbed to death in Ethiopia—James the Less was stoned to death—Simon the Zealot was sawed in two—Bartholomew was skinned alive—Paul was beheaded—only John died of old age. The power often offered to the followers of Jesus is the kind of power that dies to self and is magnified when used to serve others.

READ: Matthew 20:17-28

TEACHING POINTS:

- REMEMBER—THE JOURNEY ENDS AT A CROSS (Matthew 20:17-19)
- WE WANT TO HAVE THE BEST SEATS (Matthew 20:20, 21)
- WE CAN’T SEE ALL THAT GOD SEES (Matthew 20:22, 23)
- AMBITION CAN BE TOXIC TO RELATIONSHIPS (Matthew 20:24)
- SERVANTHOOD IS THE PATHWAY TO SIGNIFIGANCE IN THE KINGDOM (Matthew 20:25-28)

RESPOND & DISCUSS:

- How is Jesus calling you to a cross this Lent?
- Has power and ambition ever blinded you to God's will?
- Have you ever missed out on something—only to later realize God protected you?
- Has jealousy ever robbed your joy?
- Where or how is God calling you to serve?
- What's your "I will..." statement as you consider this week's teaching?
- Who do you need to tell?
- How can the group help?

WEEK SIX – MARCH 24

A KING WHO CLEANS HOUSE



Begin by praying—asking the Holy Spirit to guide and direct your time together, to open God’s Word to you, to grow you in your walk with the Lord and with each other, and to show you how you might apply what you learn in your daily discipleship.

How did you do with your “I will…” statement this past week?

THEME: Jesus arrives in Jerusalem in a way that fulfills the ancient prophecies of the coming Messiah—much like a conquering king riding down the face of the Mount of Olives to the Golden Gate. His arrival was perfect—that is until He went into the Temple and picked a fight with those who wanted Him dead. It’s a reminder Jesus isn’t always the King we expect Him to be—and He takes the time to clean His house (whether the Temple in Jerusalem—or our hearts).

SUMMARY: Jesus had been staying in Bethany at the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. Bethany is on the backside of the Mount of Olives—at the top of the pilgrim road from Jericho up to Jerusalem. Bethpage is just to the west on the crest of the hill. The Palm Sunday Road (as it is known) is really the road every defeated king used to run from Jerusalem—which was followed by the conquering king riding down the same road and into the city.

This scene was a fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9—and the crowd’s reaction was similar to a crowd welcoming a conquering king. What must have been intoxicating to the disciples and exciting to the crowds was viewed very different by the Pharisees. They were afraid this would raise the ire of Rome and cause them to cancel the Passover festival. The Romans were also watching—because the Jewish festivals brought out all the crazies. No sooner did the parade end than Jesus walked into the Temple—overturning tables (disrupting the money-making machine of the Chief Priests) as well as healing the blind and the lame—which brought even more shouts of praise to the son of David. As far as they were concerned, Jesus had to go—now!

READ: Matthew 21:1-15

TEACHING POINTS:

- JESUS ALWAYS PREPARES AHEAD (Matthew 21:1-3)
- GOD PREPARED MUCH LONGER (Matthew 21:4, 5)
- JESUS NEEDS HIS FOLLOWERS TO DO THEIR PART (Matthew 21:6, 7)
- PEOPLE ALWAYS RESPOND TO JESUS (Matthew 21:8-11)
- JESUS CLEANS THE TEMPLE—THEN AND NOW (Matthew 21:12-14)
- EMPTY RELIGION IS THREATENED BY JESUS (Matthew 21:15)

RESPOND & DISCUSS:

- What's your favorite part of the Palm Sunday story?
- With which crowd can you most identify?
- Can you see the way the Lord has prepared the way for you to receive Him?
- Your heart is the temple of the Holy Spirit—what does Jesus need to clean out to make room for Him?
- How has this journey through Lent prepared you for Easter?
- What's your "I will..." statement as you consider this week's teaching?
- Who do you need to tell?
- How can the group help?