

THE GOSPEL
ACCORDING
TO
JOHN



ENCOUNTERS
WITH
JESUS

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men
by Steven P. Eason

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO Encounters with Jesus JOHN

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men

Author

Steven P. Eason

Editor

Curtis A. Miller

Designer

Peg Coots Alexander

Scripture quotations in this publication are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission.

Every effort has been made to trace copyrights on the materials included in this book. If any copyrighted material has nevertheless been included without permission and due acknowledgment, proper credit will be inserted in future printings after notice has been received.

© 1997 Christian Education Program Area, Congregational Ministries Division, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Louisville, KY. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or manual, including photocopying, recording, or by any other information retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America.

This book is part of the Men's Bible Study Series produced through the Office for Men's Ministries of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).



Curriculum Publishing
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
100 Witherspoon Street
Louisville, KY 40202-1396
1-800-524-2612
Orders: Ext. 1, Option 1
Curriculum Helpline: Ext. 3
FAX: 502-569-8263
World Wide Web address: <http://www.pcusa.org/pcusa/currpub>

John

CONTENTS

Introduction to the Men's Bible Study	4
Introduction to the Gospel According to John	6
<i>session one</i>	
<i>Nicodemus</i>	8
<i>Introduction</i>	
* <i>Reading the Script</i>	
<i>The Cast</i>	
<i>The Plot</i>	
<i>The Analysis</i>	
<i>The Final Curtain</i>	
<i>session two</i>	
<i>A Sick Man</i>	12
<i>Introduction</i>	
* <i>Reading the Script</i>	
<i>The Cast</i>	
<i>The Plot</i>	
<i>The Analysis</i>	
<i>The Final Curtain</i>	
<i>session three</i>	
<i>Feeding the 5000</i>	16
<i>Introduction</i>	
* <i>Reading the Script</i>	
<i>The Cast</i>	
<i>The Plot</i>	
<i>The Analysis</i>	
<i>The Final Curtain</i>	
<i>session four</i>	
<i>An Adulteress</i>	19
<i>Introduction</i>	
* <i>Reading the Script</i>	
<i>The Cast</i>	
<i>The Plot</i>	
<i>The Analysis</i>	
<i>The Final Curtain</i>	

<i>session five</i>	<i>The Disciples</i>	22
	<i>Introduction</i>	
	<i>* Reading the Script</i>	
	<i>The Cast</i>	
	<i>The Plot</i>	
	<i>The Analysis</i>	
	<i>The Final Curtain</i>	
<i>session six</i>	<i>Pontius Pilate</i>	26
	<i>Introduction</i>	
	<i>* Reading the Script</i>	
	<i>The Cast</i>	
	<i>The Plot</i>	
	<i>The Analysis</i>	
	<i>The Final Curtain</i>	
<i>session seven</i>	<i>Mary Magdalene</i>	29
	<i>Introduction</i>	
	<i>*Reading the Script</i>	
	<i>The Cast</i>	
	<i>The Plot</i>	
	<i>The Analysis</i>	
	<i>The Final Curtain</i>	
<i>the writer</i>	<i>Biography</i>	32
<i>order information</i>	32

introduction

Men's

BIBLE

Study

The Reason for This Study

*We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life . . .
The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture.*

These words from "A Brief Statement of Faith," adopted officially by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1991, state a primary conviction of Presbyterians. Presbyterians believe that God's Spirit actually speaks to us through the inspired books of the Bible, "the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal, and God's Word" (*Book of Order*, PC(USA), G 14.0516) to each of us.

Recent studies, however, have shown that many men know very little of what the Bible says; yet many do express a desire to learn. To help meet that need, this Bible study guide has been prepared at the request and with the cooperation of the National Council of Presbyterian Men of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The Suggested Pattern of Study

Men may use this guide in a variety of weekly settings: men's breakfasts, lunches in a downtown setting, evening study groups in homes, and many more. The material provides guidance for seven one-hour sessions. To facilitate open discussion it assumes a small group of men, no more than twelve, one or preferably two of whom might be designated as leaders. Each session is a Bible study; there must be a Bible for each man. The Bible, not this study guide, is the textbook.

The men are not required to do study outside the group sessions, though suggestions are given for such study. To be enrolled in this study, however, each man is expected to commit himself to make every effort to attend and participate fully in all seven sessions.

The pattern of study is to be open discussion. Agreement by all to follow seven rules will make such study most effective:

1. We will treat no question as stupid. Some men will have more experience in Bible study than others, but each man must feel free to say what he thinks without fear of being ridiculed.

2. We will stick to the Scripture in this study.

The men in the group have gathered for Bible study, not to pool their own ideas on other matters, however good those ideas may be.

3. We will regard the leader(s) as "first among equals." Leaders in these studies are guides for group discussion, not authorities to tell the group what the Bible means. But following their study suggestions will facilitate learning.

4. We will remember that we are here to hear God speak. Presbyterians believe that the Spirit, which spoke to the biblical writers, now speaks to us through their words. We do not come simply to learn about the Bible, but with minds and hearts expecting to receive a message from God.

5. We will listen for "the question behind the question." Sometimes a man's gestures and tone of voice may tell us more of what he is feeling than his words do. We will listen with sympathy and concern.

6. We will agree to disagree in love. Open discussion is an adventure full of danger. Men will differ. None of us will know the whole truth or be right all the time. We will respect and love and try to learn from each other even when we think the other person is wrong.

7. We will make every effort to attend and participate faithfully in all seven sessions of this study. Participation will involve making notes in the spaces provided for your own answers to questions relating to the study and, from time to time, sharing with others your answers, even when you worry that they are not the "right" answers.

Some Suggestions for the Leader

Those who lead groups in this study should be especially aware of these seven "rules."

Though two leaders are not required, having a team of leaders often helps to open up the group for freer discussion by all its members. One leader might be responsible for introducing the study at a given session and for summarizing other parts of the study where such summaries are suggested. The other leader might take more responsibility for guiding the discussion, helping to see that each man who wishes has a chance to speak, helping to keep the study centered on the Scripture, and moving the group along to the next subject when one has been dealt with sufficiently. Or the leaders might alternate in their responsibilities or share them equally.

This material is a guide for study within the group. The study material for each session is to be distributed at the time of that session. The study guide for each session is in the form of a worksheet. Each man should have a pencil or a pen. Spaces are provided for each student to make brief notes for his answers to questions on the passages to be studied. A good deal of the time may be spent as the men quietly, individually, decide on and note their own answers to these questions. Some are designed simply to guide the students in looking at key passages. Others are intended to help the student think about what these passages mean to us today. The real basis of this study should be the ideas that come in the times when the men are quietly studying their Bibles and deciding individually on their answers to these questions. When a man has made a note on his sheet concerning his answer to a question, he has had to do some thinking about it. And he is more likely to be willing to tell the group his answer.

There should also be time, of course, for the group to share and compare answers to these questions. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit seems most often to be manifest within a group. God speaks to us authoritatively through Scripture, but often what God says to us in Scripture becomes clearest when voiced by a Christian friend. We learn through each other.

Each session ends with an Afterword. During the session the leader may call attention to things in the Afterword when they seem appropriate.

Among the many characteristics of a good discussion leader are these: (1) He tries to give everyone who wishes a chance to speak, without pressuring anyone to speak who does not want to. (2) He does not monopolize the discussion himself and tries tactfully to prevent anyone else from doing so unduly. (3) He is a good listener, helping those who speak to feel that they have been heard. (4) He helps to keep the group focused on the Scripture. (5) He tries to watch for signs that show that the group is or is not ready to move on to the next question.

This kind of study can generally be carried on much more effectively with the participants sitting informally in a circle or around a table rather than in straight rows with the leader up front. Frequently, especially in a large group, you may want to divide into groups of three or four, or simply let each man compare his answers with those of the man sitting next to him.

Often, more questions have been given than some groups are likely to cover in one hour. If you don't answer them all, don't worry. Pick the ones that seem most interesting and let the rest go.

The questions in this study guide are phrased in various ways and come in different orders, but basically they are intended to help the participants think through three things: (1) What does this passage say? (2) What does it mean? And (3) What does it mean now to you? It is our conviction as Presbyterians that when believers study together God's word in an atmosphere of prayerful expectancy, God will speak to them.

Throughout each study there are Scripture quotations. These are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. While this version is used throughout this study guide, it may prove beneficial for each participant to use the version with which he feels most comfortable.

Testing has shown that the discussion that arises in each study may cause the session to last longer than the intended sixty minutes. A clock figure has been placed in each session to suggest where a study might be divided into two sessions. Discussion is at the heart of these studies and should not be sacrificed for the sake of presenting the lesson exactly as suggested in this study guide.

In the letter inviting the writers of these studies to attempt this work, Dr. Marvin Simmers, having recognized some difficulties, added, "Remember, we are not alone!" The leader also may take courage from that assurance.

The Gospel According to John

INTRODUCTION

When I told a few of my clergy friends that I was writing a study for men on John, the general response was, “You’re going to cover John in seven lessons? Good luck!”

John is the “red-headed stepchild” of the four Gospels. John is not “synoptic,” for heaven’s sake! John doesn’t present the story of Jesus in the same fashion as does Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John is more philosophical than historical in his presentation of the Gospel. John is different!

The scope of our study does not afford us an opportunity to plunder the depths of the scholastic oceans of the unsynoptic John. (We’d probably get lost at sea, never to return!) Even so, we do need to get a little wet. We do need a sense of the context in which John was written. *Context* helps us understand *content*.

Let’s deal with just a few of the significant differences between John and the other three Gospels. How is John different?

1. Most scholars agree that John was the last of the Gospels to be written (c. 70–100 A.D.). This late date provides a picture of a community of faith that is likely “second-generation Christians.” Most of the eyewitnesses who were with Jesus had died. The need to keep faith alive became crucial.

2. John uses none of the parables included in the Synoptic Gospels; instead, John records long discourses of Jesus’ sayings. Perhaps more interpretation or explanation was needed for a community several steps away from the event.

3. The Synoptics place an emphasis on Jesus’ bodily return while John places emphasis on the coming of the Holy Spirit. After several decades had passed, the expectation for the return of Jesus may have faded. It became imperative to know that God was present with us through the Holy Spirit.

4. The Jesus in John is much more public and open about who he is. John’s readers needed to grasp a clear picture of the fading, historical Jesus. There’s no place for secrets in John’s Gospel.

The author of John states the purpose of *his* Gospel in John 20:30–31:

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to *believe* that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may *have life* in his name” (italics added).

It is crucial that John’s community of faith “believe.” According to scholar William Ramsay, the word *believe* occurs nearly a hundred times in John.¹

The further away the church moved from the historical event of Christ, the more crucial belief became. How will this community know Christ? How will they meet Christ? How will they encounter Christ? And, if they fail to do so, how will they *have life*?

John writes with a passion for belief—for knowing God through Jesus Christ. It is a matter of life and death. John’s readers must know that Jesus was more than just another human teacher. “Jesus was God . . . let’s not forget!” says John. This urgency, this crisis of *knowing*, colors all of John’s writing. The context (the need of the reader) determines the way the content is presented in John. John puts a spin on the Jesus story to respond to his readers’ need for personal faith—for an encounter with Christ.

This is not to say that John is not true or accurate. All of the Gospels put a spin on the story for their readers. Just compare all four accounts of the resurrection of Christ. They’re all different, yet they are the same. The essence of the truth is consistent in all four Gospels, including the red-headed stepchild, John.

How will we read John over the next seven weeks? It helps to remember that we, too, are far removed from the eyewitnesses of Jesus’ day. It’s been a long time. The same questions belong to us. How shall we know him? How will we meet Christ? How will we encounter him? How will he encounter us?

The seven units of this study will focus on Encounters with Jesus. It was crucial for John’s readers to encounter the living Jesus Christ; it remains crucial for the modern church. Without that encounter we are but a mere

1. William M. Ramsay, *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 525.

organization. Without that encounter we have no head of the church, as defined in the Presbyterian *Book of Order*, G-1.0100a. Without a head of the church, we are left to our own power, our own direction, a majority vote, a mere human effort.

As Presbyterians, we are a church governed by *presbyters* (elders). When we call elders to office, we examine them. When we examine elders, we examine them “as to their personal faith . . .” (G-14.0205). We list that first. It is crucial that our leadership have personal faith—a life that has been and continues to be encountered by the risen Jesus Christ. Without that, we’re on our own.

Our guides for this study will be Nicodemus and a man who had been ill for 38 years, 5,000 hungry people and a woman caught in the act of adultery, the eleven disciples, Pontius Pilate, and Mary Magdalene. Quite a host of characters!

I would suggest that each man in the group read the entire Gospel through in one sitting (approximately one-and-a-half hours). Look at the following outline, which is taken from *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible*:

The Gospel According to John² The Spiritual Gospel <i>“I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (14:6)</i>				
1:1 Introduction Prologue, 1:1–18 The witness of John the Baptizer and his disciples, 1:19–51	2:1 Seven Signs 1. Water changed to wine, 2:1–11 2. A son healed, 3. and a lame man healed on the day of rest, 4:46–5:9 4. Five thousand fed bread, and 5. Christ walks on water, 6:1–21 6. Christ heals a blind man, 9:1–41 7. Christ raises Lazarus, 11	and Their Meanings Christ transforms, changing the Temple (2:12–25), giving new birth (3:1–21); transforming “water” (3:22–4:54), Christ is the Son of God, carrying on his Father’s work, 5:10–47 Christ is the bread of life, 6:22–71 Christ is the light of the world, 7–10 Christ is the resurrection and the life, 11	12:1 Last Entry, Last Supper Entry into Jerusalem and coming of the Greeks to Christ, 12 Jesus washes his disciples’ feet, 13 He promises to return but also to send the Spirit, 14 The vine and the branches, 15 The Spirit will guide, 16 Christ’s high-priestly prayer, 17	18:1 The Cross and the Resurrection Arrest and trials, 18 Crucifixion, 19 Resurrection, 20 Epilogue, 21

Author: Unnamed (traditionally the apostle John, more likely disciples of John)
Recipients: Unnamed, apparently all seeking greater faith
Date: Probably A.D. 90–100

Occasion: No special occasion is stated. Probably some conflicts between church and synagogue are reflected.
Purpose: “That you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and . . . have life” (20:31)

2. Ramsay, p. 521.

session

NICODEMUS

John 3:1–21

To the leader(s): If this is the first time the group has met together, you may want to prepare name tags in advance. Even if you know each other, spend a few minutes getting to know each other better. You may have each man respond to one of the following: (1) Who was the best Bible teacher you've ever had and why? (2) Why did you choose to be in this particular study? (3) What do you hope does not happen in this study? What do you hope will happen?

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

Here's an old word for you—*testimony*. The church bushwhacked its way across the American frontier by way of testimony, defined by Webster's as "a public profession of religious experience." There was obviously power in the telling of one's conversion story. Something happened in that person's life that brought about change.

Over the years most of us have become somewhat suspicious of testimonies. William Willimon writes, "American Protestantism often impresses observers as a highly individualized, privatized, psychological affair, more interested in being successful or emotional than in being faithful."¹

Conversion experiences have been criticized as being too emotional and too focused upon the self. Some Christians seem to view conversions as the end rather than the means. It can be a status symbol in some churches to have a conversion experience. Others say, "I don't have a Damascus Road experience. I was raised in a Christian home." Which one is the more effective?

John Bergland, my preaching professor at Duke, used the comparison of two ways to tame a wild horse. One way is to go out to the pasture with a cube of sugar every day for several days. With much patience, the day may come when the wild horse works its way over to get the sugar. This process continues until one day you put a blanket on the horse's back. Days later, you put on a saddle. Months later, you mount the horse for the first time. It's a slow process.

The second method to tame a wild horse is to walk out to the corral, climb into the stall, mount the confined beast, then let it rip! The horse will either be tamed or one of you will die! Which horse is the more tame?

Obviously, there are many ways to come to the Christian faith. Some are instantaneous, while others are a slow process. What John's Gospel reminds us of is the reality that we all do need to come to it! We all need an encounter with Christ. Encounters with Christ do/will change our lives.

Today's lesson begins with Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus.



READING THE SCRIPT

Hopefully, you have already read the entire Gospel According to John. There are only twenty-one chapters, which take less than one-and-a-half hours to read.

Our focus today is on John 3:1–21. Select a narrator. We need someone to read the part of Jesus and another to read Nicodemus. Read aloud John 3:1–21 in play fashion. Read it how you think they said it.

Use the chart on the following page to become familiar with the story.

1. William H. Willimon, *What's Right with the Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 15.

Chapter chart for John 3:1–21

Characters

Main Point

Difficulties or Questions

The stage is set. Show time!

THE CAST

To the leader(s): Allow the group time to record their responses. Bring them together to share their thoughts.

Who is this who came to Jesus that night? What kind of man is this?

Nicodemus is “a leader of the Jews” (3:1b), a “teacher of Israel” (3:10). Write down ten traits you think might belong to “a leader/teacher of the Jews” in Nicodemus’ day.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Key Verse

Summary of Action

Key Words and Phrases

Application

4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Share your thoughts with the group.
Based on this conversation with Nicodemus, what is your impression of Jesus? How would you describe him?

THE PLOT

To the leader(s): Allow the group time to record their responses. Have them share their thoughts.

1. What would you identify as the main point of this encounter? (Refer back to your chart under "Reading the Script.") Write one sentence to summarize the message of this encounter. _____

2. Why did Nicodemus come to Jesus? What do you think he wanted? _____

3. Did Jesus give him what he wanted? If not, why not? _____

4. What did Jesus offer to Nicodemus? How do you understand it? _____

5. What was Nicodemus' reaction? List each of Nicodemus' questions. _____

6. Why was this encounter remembered and recorded? Why does the Gospel writer want his readers to have the Nicodemus story? _____

THE ANALYSIS

How do we apply this story to us? What truths are in this story that remain truths today?

To the leader(s):
Have each person rotate to a different person to share their responses to each question in section A.

A. Questions

1. Nicodemus was a religious person. However, Jesus insinuates that Nicodemus lacks something. What do you think Jesus means when he says that "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above" (3:3)? (Rotate)

2. What, if anything, do you think we as modern Christians lack in our relationship with God? (Rotate)

3. What do you think you lack in your relationship with God? Pretend that you are Nicodemus. What would Jesus say to you?

To the leader(s): Bring the group back together for section B. Give the group a few minutes to answer the following. Then share your responses and explain your position.

B. True/False

_____ "Good" people (like Nicodemus) do not need Christ.

_____ Everyone must be "born again." Everyone!

_____ A person will know when they have been "born again."

_____ People who do not believe in Christ are "condemned" (3:18-21).

_____ It is impossible for us to encounter Jesus Christ as Nicodemus did.

_____ People who are "born again" are self-righteous.

_____ Church members who are not "born again" are not Christians.

_____ If the modern church were Nicodemus, Jesus would tell us that we need to be "born from above."

THE FINAL CURTAIN

To the leader(s): Begin with the oldest man in the group and move to the youngest in sharing your response to the following. Give each person some time to record his thoughts.

Does the Nicodemus story apply to me/us? What do I/we carry away from the encounter? _____

It will be our custom to close each session with prayer. We'll practice new ways to pray each week. For this session, let's pray the following prayer in unison:

Eternal God, who was and is in Christ, meet us here as we gather in Your name. Teach us Your Word. Reveal Yourself to us. Help us to encounter, in new and fresh ways, the risen Christ. Help us to become men who know You, who follow You, who love You. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Afterword

A drunk was looking for something on the sidewalk one night under a street light. He groped along the ground, feeling the cement, occasionally grabbing the pole for support. A passerby asked what he was looking for. "Lost my wallet," the drunk replied. The passerby offered to help him look, but with no success.

"Are you sure you lost it here?" he asked the drunk.

"Course I didn't!" the drunk replied. "It was half a block back there."

"Then why aren't you looking back there?"

"Because," answered the drunk with baffling logic, "there ain't no street lights back there."

Searching is important, but it doesn't do any good unless we search in the right places.²

Total Depravity

Sin permeates and corrupts our entire being and burdens us more and more with fear, hostility, guilt and misery. Sin operates not only within individuals but also within society as a deceptive and oppressive power, so that even men of good will are unconsciously and unwillingly involved in the sins of society. Man cannot destroy the tyranny of sin in himself or in his world; his only hope is to be delivered from it by God.³

2. Billy Graham, *How to Be Born Again* (Carmel, NY: Guideposts, 1977), p. 28.

3. "A Brief Statement of Faith," from *The Book of Confessions*, © 1983 The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), xiv.

Preview

Please read through the entire Gospel According to John at least once. Next week we will focus on Jesus' encounter with a man who had been ill for thirty-eight years. (Read John 5:1–47.)

session *two*

A Sick MAN

John 5:1–47

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

“Men are reaching out in increasing numbers for help, beset by changing expectations. . . . Men are presumed to have power and privilege, yet confess to ministers their exhaustion, isolation, failure, or lack of power.”¹

Today’s lesson is about the healing of a sick man—a man who had been sick for a long, long time. Could it be that that man is you or me or all of us?

What are the “illnesses” of modern man? Who are the “invalids” among us? Philip Culbertson also writes, “Men (as opposed to women) have much higher rates of suicide, alcoholism, homelessness, and crime; men of color show even higher rates . . . , suggesting cultural more than biological mechanisms at work.”²

Males constitute the majority of inmates in our nation’s prisons. Someone said that every man in prison has a “father problem.” We’ve been sick for a long, long time.

The majority of abusers are males. It’s men who are beating their wives and children. Most sexual molesters are men. We’ve been sick for a long, long time.

Bill McCartney, former head football coach at the University of Colorado and the founder of Promise Keepers, a Christian men’s movement, said, “In America the divided church is the reason we have been incapable of leading this nation from immorality and divisions. We have been in bondage to two giants: racial and denominational division.”³ We’ve been sick for a long, long time.

What is the illness of modern man? Those who study men have concluded that we deal with a host of illnesses: racism, sexism, careerism, materialism, pride/ego, lack of intimacy, poor parenting, extreme competitiveness, stress, and violence, just to name a few. What a bleak picture!

Well, let’s not throw the man out with the bathwater just yet. Remember that man and woman were created “good” by God. Look how strenuous God has been in seeking us out!

That’s precisely what today’s lesson is about—God seeking us out. John wants his readers to know that Jesus Christ has the power to change life! He wants us to *believe*.

A sick man is healed by Jesus. Everything changes! Bring your “illness” and let’s get into this story. We, too, might “stand up, take [our] mat and walk” (5:8).



READING THE SCRIPT

Read John 5:1–47. We need someone to read the part of Jesus. We need someone to be the sick man. The rest of the group can read in unison the part of the Jews. Finally, we need a narrator. Read the passage as a play. Then very quickly chart the story.

1. Philip L. Culbertson, *Counseling Men* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 9.

2. Culbertson, p. 11.

3. “A Pastor Meets the Promise Keepers,” by Stephen Knox, in *The Disciple* (vol. 134, No. 6, June 1996), p. 9.

Chapter chart for John 5:1-47

Characters (List)

Main Point

Difficulties or Questions

Key Verse

Summary of Action

Key Words and Phrases

Application

THE CAST

The folks in this story are sick. In order to understand their life situation we need to get in touch with what it's like to be sick, helpless, and disenfranchised. They are gathered at "the Sheep Pool," which is located at the northeast corner of Jerusalem. It is not far from the Temple.

It was believed that an angel stirred the waters in the pool and the first person to enter would be healed. So, we have "many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed" (5:3) lying by the pool.

Who do you know who has been sick for "a long time"? It could be a physical illness or an addiction or a mental illness. It could be a financial problem or an unethical lifestyle. It could be grief or some form of abuse. Who do you know who has carried the burden of "sickness" for a long, long time?

Without using names, briefly share that person's situation with the group. Each member of the group should be able to think of at least one situation. Be brief. _____

Where do you find modern people looking for healing in the wrong places? _____

Narrow your focus. Where do you find modern men looking for healing in the wrong places? _____

Can you be more specific? Where have you looked for healing in the wrong places? Have you ever felt some of the sick man's desperation? _____

THE PLOT

What happens in this encounter? A man who has been sick for a long time is healed. That should raise a few issues for modern men.

Discuss as a group:

1. Why did Jesus single out just one man among so many invalids? Why wouldn't Jesus heal everybody who was at the pool? Is God selective? _____

2. There is no evidence that the sick man had faith (reread 5:6-8). Is faith required in order to be healed? Explain your answer. _____

3. Many men today feel helpless, like the sick man did in this story. As Christians, do we believe that God continues to heal the helpless? If so, how? If not, why not? _____

4. Do you think that modern men deny their need for Christ today? Explain your answer. _____

5. Does it take a crisis for most people to understand their need of God? Explain. _____

6. Why do you think God allows illness and suffering to exist in the first place? _____

THE ANALYSIS

Choose a partner to work on the following:

Jesus asked the man, "Do you want to be made well?" (5:6b). Doesn't that seem to be an odd question to ask someone who has been sick for 38 years and has been sitting by a pool hoping to get healed one day? That question could be asked in a host of various arenas.

"Do you want to be made well?" Share why you would or would not ask that question to the following:

Government _____

Family _____

Schools _____

PC(USA) _____

Men _____

Youth _____

Women _____

Yourself _____

To the leader(s): You can either discuss the following as a group or do a role play. For example, have one person in the group play the role of a non-Christian. The rest of the group needs to convey this story and its modern message to them. Have people switch roles and do the role play again.

Does John's story of the healing of a sick man have a modern message? How would you relay this story to the following:

To someone who is not a Christian? _____

To a person who has been ill for a long time? _____

To the caregiver of a sick person? _____

To a skeptic? _____

To a medical doctor? _____

THE FINAL CURTAIN

Our goal is not to leave this story but to take it with us. Before you end this session, check in with everybody. Have each person share one new insight that they gained from today's lesson.

Closing Prayer

Let's use a "bidding prayer" to bring closure to this lesson. A bidding prayer is when someone in the group "bids" a prayer (e.g., "for the people of Zaire") and the rest of the group responds, "Lord, hear our prayer." Then someone else in the group bids a prayer, and so forth.

Remember to pray specifically for those who have been going through difficult situations for a long time. The leader may offer the final "Amen."

Afterword

"Do you want to get well?" That is the question Jesus asked the man by the pool, and it is a question that can be—and must be—addressed to the Presbyterian Church. . . .

At this point we cannot alter the past twenty-five years of our church's history, but we can and must be shapers of the future. How will we do that? How will we become "well"?⁴

—W. Frank Harrington, pastor of Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia, in an address to the Montreat Conference on Evangelism

THE VISITATION OF THE SICK. Since men are never exposed to more grievous temptations than when they are harassed by infirmities, are sick and are weakened by diseases of both soul and body, surely it is never more fitting for pastors of churches to watch more carefully for the welfare of their flocks than in such diseases and infirmities. Therefore let them visit the sick soon, and let them be called in good time by the sick, if the circumstance itself would have required it. Let them comfort and confirm them in the true faith, and then arm them against the dangerous suggestions of Satan. They should also hold prayer for the sick in the home and, if need be, prayers should also be made for the sick in the public meeting; and they should see that they happily depart this life.⁵

Preview

Next week's session is on the story of the feeding of the five thousand (6:1–14). Look ahead to the section "Reading the Script" in next week's lesson. You will find all four of the Gospel accounts of this story.

Take a pen or pencil and underline everything that is found in all four accounts. Underline it in each passage so you can see the common ground. Notice what each Gospel adds to the story. Be prepared to share your findings with the group next week.

4. W. Frank Harrington, *Do We Want To Get Well? A Challenge to Presbyterians* (Decatur, GA: CTS Press, 1989), pp. 4, 25.

5. "The Second Helvetic Confession," from *The Book of Confessions*, 5.234.

session *three*

Feeding THE 5000

John 6:1–14

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

Sometimes we encounter the grace of God in very private, individual experiences. Other times we encounter the grace of God in community with others. Today's story is a community encounter. The story of the feeding of the five thousand is a group story. Sometimes that's where we encounter Christ.

This is a fascinating story that is filled with the dynamics of knowing Christ. It's much more than a story about Jesus' power to multiply a little into a lot. In fact, that may be the least impressive thing about the story.

Since this story appears in all of the Gospels, we'll do a bit of comparison. By looking at all four Gospels we will get a more comprehensive picture of this wonderful story. This story was a big event—it made all four Gospels! That's huge!

Remember that John, like the other Gospel writers, is writing with a purpose. He wants us to "believe." He wants us to encounter the risen Christ for ourselves. There is no lasting value in simply learning the historical details of an old faded miracle. That's nice for them—but what about us?

Hang onto that question as we open the curtain on "The Feeding of the Five Thousand."



READING THE SCRIPT

After last week's lesson you were asked to look ahead to today's lesson and do some comparison work on these texts. Underline those things that are found in all four Gospels. Then note what each Gospel adds to the story. Share your findings with the group.

Matthew 14:13–21

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and healed their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Mark 6:30–44

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in a boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

Luke 9:10–17

On their return the apostles told Jesus all they had done. He took them with him and withdrew privately to a city called Bethsaida. When the crowds found out about it, they followed him; and he welcomed them, and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed to be cured. The day was drawing to a close, and the twelve came to him and said, “Send the crowd away, so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside to lodge and get provisions; for we are here in a deserted place.” But he said to them, “You give them something to eat.” They said, “We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people.” For there were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, “Make them sit down in groups of about fifty each.” They did so and made them all sit down. And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. And all ate and were filled. What was left over was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces.

John 6:1–14

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”

THE CAST

Using John’s Gospel, make a list of who the characters are in this encounter with Jesus. _____

Have the group rank the characters above as to their importance in the story, with 1 being most significant. Who is the most significant player? Who would be next? Then who? Discuss your choices. Why do you say so? How do you agree/disagree? _____

THE PLOT

Jesus is at center stage during this story. Notice how all the other characters are attached to him. The plot thickens through the various relationships in the story.

To the leader(s): Divide the group into three parts. Assign each group one of the following relationships. The task of each group is to study the story and learn all they can about their assigned relationship. They can also refer to the other Gospels. Each group will report its findings to the others.

1. Jesus and his disciples (the church)
2. Jesus and the crowd (the world)
3. The disciples (the church) and the crowd (the world)

THE ANALYSIS

How do you personally relate to the following characters in their responses to this situation? Explain your answers.

To the leader(s): Allow each man to choose the character he most relates to and share why.

The large crowd

Philip

Andrew

The boy

The disciples

Jesus

THE FINAL CURTAIN

Notice in the story that after all was said and done, the disciples picked up twelve baskets of leftovers! That's a basket for each disciple. Compare that to how the story began.

What "basket" are you taking away from today's story? Let each man share a significant learning.

Closing Prayer

Spend a few moments in silence. Reflect/write on the following:

Lord, I am most empty in my life in . . .

Lord, who around me is hungry and needy for the gospel?

Lord, what am I offering You right now? What are my five loaves and two fish?

Lord, do I want to serve You and my neighbor? Will I? Why or why not?

After sufficient time, the leader may lead the group in praying the Lord's Prayer together.

Afterword

The Church need not worry about whether to be in the world. The Church's only concern is *how* to be in the world, in what form, for what purpose.¹

The reconciliation of man through Jesus Christ makes it plain that enslaving poverty in a world of abundance is an intolerable violation of God's good creation. Because Jesus identified himself with the needy and exploited, the cause of the world's poor is the cause of his disciples. The church cannot condone poverty, whether it is the product of unjust social structures, exploitation of the defenseless, lack of national resources, absence of technological understanding, or rapid expansion of populations. The church calls every man to use his abilities, his possessions, and the fruits of technology as gifts entrusted to him by God for the maintenance of his family and the advancement of the common welfare. It encourages those forces in human society that raise men's hopes for better conditions and provide them with opportunity for a decent living. A church that is indifferent to poverty, or evades responsibility in economic affairs, or is open to one social class only, or expects gratitude for its beneficence makes a mockery of reconciliation and offers no acceptable worship to God.²

Preview

Next week's lesson is on the woman caught in adultery (John 8:2–11). Now would be a good time to reread John 1–8. It helps to see how and where the stories are placed in relation to the bigger picture.

1. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 43.

2. "The Confession of 1967," in *The Book of Confessions*, 9.46.

session *four*

An ADULTERESS

John 8:1–11

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

This is a story I want read at my funeral! This story is it! This is the gospel. When you hear and feel the message of this story, you've got it. Everything you ever wanted to know is right here!

Interestingly enough, this story just about didn't make it (most good things don't!). John Sanford writes,

Scholars tell us that the story of the woman who committed adultery, found in the first part of later manuscripts of John's Gospel, was not part of the original text. There are good reasons for this belief. First is the fact that not all the ancient manuscripts contain this story. Second is the fact that the story breaks the continuity of narrative and discussion that begins with John 7:52 and then resumes again with John 8:12 (eliminate John 8:1–11 and there is a more or less continual flow). Third is the fact that the language sounds more like that of the synoptic Gospels than like the language of John's Gospel.¹

This story is too rich not to be here. It's an excellent story for a group of men to study. It's about a guilty woman! At least that's what we *think* it's about.

We have no name for this woman. We know she was "caught in the very act of committing adultery" (8:4). How degrading. It's one thing to be wrong. It's another thing to be "caught" being wrong.

The rules were clear. It's right there in Leviticus 20:10: "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death."

It's interesting that we have no guilty man. Where is he? If she was "caught in the very act," then he had to be there. Where is he now? The law was crystal clear—the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death. I believe that means the infamous "he" should be there.

I'm using *biblical imagination* here. My guess is that somebody let ol' Charlie off the hook. You know, "We'll turn our head while you slip out the back door!"

So they bring the woman to Jesus early one morning. We'll call her "Margaret" so she can become real to us. They bring Margaret to Jesus early one morning while he is teaching outside the temple.

Pick up your stones and come on into the story. We all belong in this one!



READING THE SCRIPT

Let's read this one in play fashion. We need:

Jesus	a Pharisee
the Woman	a Narrator

Jot down any questions or need for clarification you may have after the initial reading of the story. _____

THE CAST

What's a Pharisee? *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* gives us this picture of a Pharisee:

The seeds of historical Pharisaiism were sown during the Exile. . . . During the Exile it was the law which became the center of Jewish religion . . . and it was to remain ever afterward the soul of Judaism. . . .

The main characteristic of the Pharisees was their legalism or legalistic rigorism. . . .

The Pharisees strove to achieve a perfectionism of purity and purification by the meticulous observance of the ritual requirements of the Levitical code. . . .²

1. John A. Sanford, *Mystical Christianity: A Psychological Commentary on the Gospel of John* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1994), p. 168.

2. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, George A. Buttrick, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), pp. 775–76.

Who was the “woman caught in adultery”?

Use your biblical imagination. What do you think her story is? Just for fun, start on one side of the room and let that person begin a story about “Margaret.” Make it up (i.e., “Margaret was married to Bob for 20 years. They had two children. . . ,” and so forth). Let each man in turn add a little bit to the story until you reach the last person. That’s Margaret’s story . . . as we imagine it.

What’s important is to realize that she was a real person with a real story with a real need. Watch how Jesus relates to her.

THE PLOT

We have already established that Margaret is guilty. We already noted the absence of the guilty man. It’s early one morning, maybe Saturday around 8 A.M., and Jesus is teaching in the temple courtyard. They caught Margaret last night, Friday evening. They’ve waited until morning. He’s interrupted by all the commotion as they bring Margaret to him. “Look what we’ve caught!” they say. But who catches whom?

Let’s first understand that this episode is a trap. They quote the law of Moses and then they ask Jesus the test question, “Now what do you say?”

Discuss the dilemma Jesus is in at this point. How is this a trap? _____

Jesus appeals to a higher law. Read Deuteronomy 17:7. How do you interpret Jesus’ response, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her”?

THE ANALYSIS

Now comes the turning point in the story.

“When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him” (John 8:9).

Who’s guilty now? Who can stand in the circle of perfection? They had to think about it, “one by one,” but they all came to the same conclusion—“Not me. I can’t stone her. I’m guilty, too!”

To the leader(s): Put the oldest man with the youngest man and so forth. Have the pairs push their chairs away from the others for this next exercise.

You now have the oldest paired with the youngest. Can you talk together of a time when you “dropped your stone” against someone? Who was that? How did that make you feel? _____

Reverse the direction. Can you recall a time when someone “dropped their stone” against you? How did that make you feel? _____

THE FINAL CURTAIN

Go around the group and check in with each other. What one significant learning did each man get out of today’s lesson? _____

Closing Prayer

Remember the prayer of the Pharisee?

“God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income” (Luke 18:11–12).

That’s a dangerous prayer. That’s a dangerous way to attempt to encounter Christ.

To the leader(s): Give each man a 3 x 5 card and a pencil.

Write down an area in which you need forgiveness. Your cards will not be collected or read. After you’ve written down your need for forgiveness, tear up the card into small pieces. Pass a basket around and collect the pieces. In silence, pray prayers of gratitude that Christ also stands with you in your shame.

The leader may close with a brief prayer.

Afterword

Some people think that large churches are great churches. Some people think that the more members a church has, the greater that church is. Pastors are frequently heard to speak of a given church as being one of the greatest churches in the country; more often than not, they're describing essentially a large church. But the great churches in Christendom are those that have learned the art of accepting "unacceptable persons."³

Q. 33 What is justification?

A. Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.

Q. 35 What is sanctification?

A. Sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin and live unto righteousness.⁴

Preview

Next week's lesson focuses upon Jesus' relationship with his disciples. Read John 13:1—17:26 and 20—21 before next week's session.

3. Kennon L. Callahan, *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 3.

4. "The Shorter Catechism," *The Book of Confessions*, 7.033, 7.035.

session *five*

The DISCIPLES **John 13:1—17:26; 20—21**

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

You would think that the Son of God could do whatever he has to do without any help. Who needs twelve disciples? True enough, Jesus doesn't need twelve disciples—they need him.

Jesus very intentionally selected twelve men to train and equip as leaders. It was a part of God's strategy. God's plan was to involve us, to pull us into the inner circle, to empower us. The twelve disciples tell us a lot about how God thinks. God thinks collaboratively! God chooses to include us!

John 13:1—17:26 is considered a unit devoted to Jesus' farewell meal with his disciples before his arrest (18:1–12).

Max Lucado writes, "When a man knows the end is near—only the important surfaces. Impending death distills the vital. The trivial is bypassed. The unnecessary is overlooked. That which is vital remains. So, if you would know Christ, ponder his final days."¹

The final days of Jesus are crucial in all four Gospels. The Gospels do not agree on the sequence of the events but they do agree on the events.

A significant amount of material in John is devoted to Jesus' relationship with his disciples—his students. We would do well to pay attention to that relationship, especially in those final days. We'll also look at chapters 20 and 21 in which the resurrected Jesus appears to the eleven disciples.



READING THE SCRIPT

John does not record the calling of all twelve of the disciples. Go back and read John 1:35–51 in which you will find the calling of Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael. For whatever reason, we are told nothing about the other eight disciples' calling in John's Gospel.

(For a look at all twelve disciples, read Matthew 4:18–22; 9:9–13; 10:2–4; Mark 1:16–20; 2:13–17; 3:13–19; Luke 5:9–11; 5:27–28; 6:12–16.)

Today's text is fairly lengthy (John 13:1—17:26). Hopefully you read ahead from last week's Preview. If not, briefly scan this section of John. Write down the key events (e.g., "Jesus washes the disciples' feet").

Quickly go over your list with the group. Fill in anything you missed as others read their lists.

THE CAST

To the leader(s): Give the group a few minutes to complete the following.

Can you name the 12 disciples? Try it!

We'll have to go to another Gospel to check our list. Look up Luke 6:13–16. Fill in the ones you missed.

What do you already know about these twelve men? Take a few minutes as a group and go one by one through the names of the Twelve. Say what you know about each disciple. (For example, "Peter—I know he was impulsive. He was the first one to step out and walk on water with Jesus.") Be prepared. There will be some disciples you know nothing about. That's because nothing was ever written about them as individuals.

1. Max Lucado, *The Final Week of Jesus* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Books, 1994), p. 8.

THE PLOT

Jesus has come to Jerusalem during the great feast of the Passover, knowing that there will be a confrontation with the Jewish leaders. He has had a very productive year or two. He has turned water into wine, healed an official's son, healed a sick man by the pool of Bethzatha, fed the 5000, walked on water, healed a man born blind, and raised Lazarus from the dead. What a ministry! (Note: The items listed are considered the "seven signs" of John's Gospel.)

Read John 11:45-57 aloud. This will help you get a feel for the tension that has developed around Jesus. It is in that atmosphere that he addresses his disciples. The following four exercises focus on Jesus' relationship with his disciples.

To the leader(s): Because of time constraints, the group will need to choose one of the following exercises. If there is time, do more.

Foot Washing (13:1-38)

The group could choose to actually do a foot washing service! Why not? This would need to be discussed ahead of time. The Scripture should be read before the foot-washing ritual. Afterwards, have a discussion about what happened. Why did Jesus tell us, "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (13:14-15). How does this saying apply to us? If we are disciples of Christ, how are we to go about foot washing?

Jesus' Farewell Discourse (14:1-16:33)

To the leader(s): Break up into smaller groups of three. Provide paper and pencils for each group.

Your mission (if you choose to accept it!) is to scan this section of Scripture and make a list of any verses you think should be memorized in case we were to lose the privilege of having our Bibles.

Choose a "scribe" and have that person write out the verse (you may have to take turns being the scribe). You won't get far without finding some jewels, e.g., "Do not let your hearts be troubled" (14:1). This discourse is packed with great passages of Scripture for all disciples to remember. Take notice of how much energy Jesus exerts in shoring up his disciples in this time of crisis.

Jesus' Prayer (17:1-26)

Let's hear this prayer out loud. Have each man read aloud one verse of the prayer. Keep going around the group until the prayer is finished. Read it in the spirit of prayer.

Discuss the following:

1. *What do you sense was on Jesus' heart?* _____

2. *What does Jesus want for his disciples?* _____

3. *If this prayer were answered, what would be the end result?* _____

4. *If Jesus were praying this prayer for you, how would the fulfillment of this prayer possibly change your life?* _____

Resurrection Appearances (20:19-29; 21:1-25)

After the final meal, the arrest, the trial, and the crucifixion, the disciples were scared. Who wouldn't be? John tells us, "When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews . . ." (20:19a).

To the leader(s): Give the individuals time to record their responses.

Rotate around the group. Change partners for each question. Share your responses and then move on to your next partner and question.

1. *List all the actions of Jesus (20:19-29).* _____

2. *What is Jesus' intent? Why is he doing all this?* _____

3. *The Holy Spirit is a crucial piece of John's Gospel. Why does Jesus breathe on them (20:22)? Do you think they could actually feel the Holy Spirit? How does one "receive the Holy Spirit?"* _____

4. *Thomas needed proof (20:26–29). Many people today need proof. What proof do we have today that Christ is risen?* _____

To the leader(s): Have someone read aloud the following:

THE ANALYSIS

What we have seen in Jesus is a tremendous amount of love and concern for his disciples. There is a key verse that summarizes this concern in John 14:18a: “I will not leave you orphaned.”

That promise is crucial for John’s readers who are years away from the real Jesus. Has he left us orphaned? John says no.

Gail R. O’Day writes,

When Jesus’ disciples follow his own model of love, then, it is possible for relationship with Jesus to extend beyond the first generation of believers. Relationship with Jesus does not depend on physical presence, but on the presence of the love of God in the life of the community.²

What do we say? Has Christ left us orphaned? How does he reveal himself to us? As a group, discuss how you have (or have not) encountered Jesus in the following. (Be open and be specific. Give an example for each one.) There are twelve—one for each disciple!

In worship _____

In a Sunday School class _____

In a small group Bible study _____

Through nature _____

In a crisis _____

Through an act of generosity _____

In prayer _____

At work _____

In your home _____

Through someone less fortunate _____

On a mission trip _____

Through an act of forgiveness _____

Can you add to the list? _____

Has Christ left us orphaned? _____

THE FINAL CURTAIN

There was a lot to take in from today’s lesson. Each person may want to continue the study at home to catch up on what we didn’t have time to cover in the session.

Let’s make sure we all take something home with us. Let each man share one new insight gained from today’s lesson.

Closing Prayer

Today’s lesson shows us a Jesus who works overtime to care for us, to comfort us, to shore us up so that we do not feel abandoned.

Perhaps it is appropriate to have “sentence prayers” today. Let each man pray for someone close to his heart who may feel abandoned by God in this hour. Feel free to mention that person by name or to be more general (“I pray for a young woman who is going through a painful divorce.”). After each prayer, the group may respond with, “Lord, have mercy.” When everyone seems finished, pray the Lord’s Prayer together.

2. Gail R. O’Day, “The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible, vol. IX* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 749.

Afterword

E. Stanley Ott, Senior Pastor of the Pleasant Hills Community Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, writes:

If someone comes up to me when I am ready to retire and asks me, “Well, Stan, what did you do with your life?” will I have to answer, “I ran five programs,” or “I had a large college group and a great evangelism ministry, and I attended more than 400 couples’ fellowship meetings!”

Is this what Jesus meant when He said to “go and make disciples”? I did not think so. As I struggled and prayed over this concern, God guided me to realize that my focus was wrong. Even though all of those programs involved many people, and even though they were good in themselves, I realized that I was not making disciples, I was making programs. What I had to do was find out how the Bible describes a maturing Christian and how I could go about building that person.³ Read this from the “Westminster Confession of Faith”:

Of the Perseverance of the Saints

1. They whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace: but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.

2. This perseverance of the saints depends, not upon their own free-will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ; the abiding of the Spirit and of the seed of God within them; and the nature of the covenant of grace; from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof.

3. Nevertheless they may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins; and for a time continue therein: whereby they incur God’s displeasure, and grieve his Holy Spirit; come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts; have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves.⁴

Preview

Next week’s lesson will focus on the encounter between Pontius Pilate and Jesus. Please read John 18–19 before next week’s session.

3. E. Stanley Ott, *The Vibrant Church: A People-Building Plan for Congregational Health* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1989), p. 10.

4. “The Westminster Confession of Faith,” in *The Book of Confessions*, 6.094–6.096.

session

SIX

Pontius PILATE

John 18—19

Introduction

May be summarized by leader or read individually by the group.

What a moment in history that was when Pontius Pilate encountered Jesus Christ! The Gospel writers are clear that Pilate had no real power over Jesus. Pilate didn't take Jesus' life. Pilate wanted no part of that decision. Pilate wanted to offer Jesus every opportunity to "prove" himself innocent in the eyes of Rome. Jesus, however, could not deny his purpose on earth, so Jesus laid down his life rather than betray his mission.

This is the work that the Christ was sent to accomplish. His task was to give his life as a substitutional death for all deaths. His task was to pay the debt, bridge the gap, cancel the sin, clear the note. He stood in our place. He died our death. He paid the penalty for our sin. He restored us to God!

This was the work that the Christ was sent to accomplish. Fully human, fully God—Jesus met the demands of justice (the penalty of sin is death) and he met the demands of mercy ("God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. . ."). No one else could accomplish such a unique work.

Pilate's encounter with Christ is universal. It's not just one man's encounter—it's every person's encounter. What will we do with Christ? What is our verdict?

But there is another dimension to this encounter. It is not solely a matter of what we do with the Christ. It is what Christ is doing with us. He is not passive. He is not a victim. He is not waiting for us to say who he is before he can be who he is. He *is* who he is! Pilate doesn't determine Christ's fate. Neither do you or I. He determines ours!

The defeat in this encounter is not the defeat of Christ, nor is it the defeat of Pilate. The defeat is that of sin and evil when confronted by the grace of God. Pilate is but a representative player in that battle. Pilate stands there for us all . . . but so does Jesus!

You will not find a more powerful encounter in all of history. It has never been forgotten. It never will be. Let's go to Pilate's headquarters and listen in. . . .



READING THE SCRIPT

We have to read this one in play fashion. The drama is too thick! We'll need the following readers:

Jesus

Pilate

the Jews (your entire group)

Narrator

Soldiers, chief priests, and police
(your entire group)

Now read John 18:28—19:16

THE CAST

To the leaders: Ask someone to read the following:

The Sanhedren—the Jewish court. The Jews were a subset of the Roman empire. Their power had diminished and they feared Roman intervention. The Sanhedren was comprised of 71 members. Their authority was limited to religious matters. They did not have the authority to sentence one to death.

Pontius Pilate—the Roman governor of Judea (A.D. 26–36), who served as the judge in the trial of Jesus. We know very little about Pilate's personality. He is most noted for sentencing Jesus Christ to death by crucifixion.

Look over John 18:1—19:16. Let's play "Who's Who?"

1. *Who arrested Jesus, the Sanhedren or Rome?* _____

2. *To whom did they first take Jesus after his arrest?* _____

3. What day and time was it when the Sanhedren questioned Jesus? Who's house was it? _____

4. To whom did they take Jesus next? _____

5. Who took Jesus to Pilate? _____

6. Who was Barabbas? _____

THE PLOT

To the leader(s): Let the group work on this individually and then pull them together to briefly compare notes.

Take a few minutes to chart the story. There's a lot of action here. Make note of when the action changes (e.g., they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate). Note when Pilate comes in to address Jesus and when he goes out. This will help you get a feel for the movement of the story. Limit your reading to John 18:28—19:16.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Let's pretend your group is a jury. You are the jury for the Jesus trial. You are now behind closed doors in deliberation. You have to consider all the evidence, the facts, the presentations of all the witnesses, etc.

You're the jury. Work through the following logic as you discuss this case.

1. Why did the Sanhedren want Jesus crucified? List the reasons. (See 18:12–24; you may refer to other Gospels.)

2. Did Jesus receive a fair trial with the Sanhedren? Explain your answer. _____

3. Why did the Sanhedren bring Jesus to Pilate? _____

4. What was Pilate's initial reaction to the Jews? Please quote Pilate. _____

5. What was Pilate's initial reaction to Jesus? Please quote Pilate. _____

6. What was Pilate's secondary reaction to the Jews? Please quote. _____

7. What was Pilate's secondary reaction to Jesus? Please quote. _____

8. What was Pilate's third reaction to the Jews? Please quote. _____

9. What was Pilate's third reaction to Jesus? Please quote.

10. What was Pilate's fourth reaction to the Jews? Please quote.

11. What was Pilate's final reaction to Jesus?

12. Was this a fair trial? Explain.

13. What is your verdict? Explain.

THE ANALYSIS

To the leader(s): Divide the group into pairs. Have each man link up to a person they know the least.

Share with your partner your overall reaction to Pilate. What do you think of him?

Where have you played the role of Pilate in your relationship with Christ? What have you done with Christ?

THE FINAL CURTAIN

Allow each man to share one insight gleaned from today's lesson.

Closing Prayer

Is Jesus Christ the Lord of my life? Is he who he says he is? How have I sentenced him? How have I washed my hands of him?

In light of today's lesson, it is most fitting for us to pray prayers of confession. Trust one another. Pray together. Support one another.

Give one another the opportunity to pray aloud in confessing how you have played the role of Pilate with Jesus. These could be powerful prayers. The leader may close.

Afterword

Max Lucado has written a devotional book titled *The Final Week of Jesus*. A section of the book is devoted to Pilate.

Perhaps you, like Pilate, are curious about this one called Jesus. You, like Pilate, are puzzled by his claims and stirred by his passions. You have heard the stories. . . . You, like Pilate, have heard the others speak; now you would like for him to speak. . . .

Pilate's question is yours. "What will I do with this man Jesus?"

You have two choices.

You can reject him . . . Or you can accept him. . . .

Had Pilate chosen to respond to this bruised Messiah, his story would have been different.¹

J. B. Phillips wrote the classic *When God Was Man*. His final chapter is titled "Our Reactions to Him." The following is an excerpt from that chapter:

If we could look at this with detachment, we would see that this blindness, this unwillingness to change, this failure to see who Christ was and what he was trying to do, is the measure of the infection, both collective and individual, of human sinfulness. . . . How else can you explain the rejection of truth, the unwillingness to believe, and the refusal to follow the new highroad which would lead out of human frustrations and miseries into lives worthy of God the Father?²

The following quote is taken from "The Scots Confession":

CHAPTER IX

Christ's Death, Passion, and Burial

That our Lord Jesus offered himself a voluntary sacrifice unto his Father for us, that he suffered contradiction of sinners, that he was wounded and plagued for our transgressions, that he, the clean innocent Lamb of God, was condemned in the presence of an earthly judge, that we should be absolved before the judgment seat of our God; that he suffered not only the cruel death of the cross, which was accursed by the sentence of God; but also that he suffered for a season the wrath of his Father which sinners had deserved. But yet we avow that he remained the only, well beloved, and blessed Son of his Father even in the midst of his anguish and torment which he suffered in body and soul to make full atonement for the sins of his people. From this we confess and avow that there remains no other sacrifice for sin; if any affirm so, we do not hesitate to say that they are blasphemers against Christ's death and the everlasting atonement thereby purchased for us.³

Preview

Next week is our last session! Read the entire section on Jesus' death and resurrection (19:17— 21:24). Mary Magdalene will be our guide in encountering Christ next week.

1. Lucado, pp. 104–105.

2. J. B. Phillips, *When God Was Man* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1955), pp. 56–7.

3. "The Scots Confession," in *The Book of Confessions*, 3.09.

session

seven

Mary MAGDALENE

John 19:17—21:24

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

We have, perhaps, more in common with Mary Magdalene than with all the others who encountered Jesus. We, too, meet Jesus outside of the tomb. We encounter the resurrected Christ. We meet Jesus after his death and resurrection.

Mary of Magdala was the first person to arrive at the tomb of Christ. She loved Jesus. He changed her life. She went to the tomb in the early hours of the morning, “while it was still dark” (20:1). She must have been up all night in agony and grief. Life had been good with Jesus—it was miserable without him.

Why does anyone visit a grave? I suppose it’s because we just want to be near the person we feel that we have lost. We want to reconnect. We want just one more conversation, one more memory, one more touch. We go because there’s no place else to go. We go and return from the grave with a sense of emptiness.

Perhaps that’s why Mary went to the tomb that morning. Maybe there was no place else to go. Maybe she just wanted to be close to him, to reconnect with him, to see him just one more time. In that moment, Mary represented all of humanity without Christ. There we stand in the dark outside the tomb of death with no hope. There’s no place else to go.

If that’s all there is to the story, we wouldn’t be reading it. It would have been long forgotten. Millions of people have stood in the dark outside the grave. There’s nothing new in that.

It’s what happens next that puts this story in the books. Let’s go with Mary. Let’s see what she sees. Let’s hear what she hears. Let’s encounter what she encounters. . . .

THE CAST

Mary Magdalene. Her name has been remembered for over 2,000 years. Who was she?

Mary of Magdala (look on a Bible map). Magdala, on the west bank of the Sea of Galilee, was “an important agricultural, fishing, fish-curing, shipbuilding, and trading center, a city of considerable wealth. The population was predominately Gentile. . . . Rabbis later attributed the fall of the city to licentiousness, so bad was its reputation.

“We do not know when or where Jesus met Mary of Magdala. . . . Neither do we understand Mary’s condition when she first met Jesus. It is said that seven demons had gone out of her (Luke 8:2). . . .

“Mary Magdalene’s devotion to Jesus and his cause is clearly underscored by her practical service.”¹

As a group, look up each of the following passages about Mary and get a feel for her relationship with Jesus:

- Luke 8:1–3
- Luke 24:1–11
- Mark 15:40–41
- John 20:11–18
- Mark 16:1



READING THE SCRIPT

Have one person read aloud John 20:1–18. Have another person read Matthew 28:1–10. What’s different? Now have someone read Mark 16:1–11. Anything new? Read Luke 23:54–24:12. What do you make of all this? Take notes:

1. *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, pp. 288–89.

Note that Mary Magdalene was present for the crucifixion and the resurrection, which was in Jerusalem. She had obviously left Magdala and been traveling with Jesus' group. (Jerusalem is some 70 miles south of Magdala.)

THE PLOT

To the leader(s): Allow the group a few minutes to complete the following:

Chart the action. Let's get a firm grasp of what happened in John 20:1–18.

1. *Mary runs to the tomb (20:1)* _____
2. *The stone had been removed* _____
3. *Mary runs to Peter and the other disciples (20:2)* _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____

Be detectives. Cover this story for the facts. As a group, discuss the details of the story. Put it under a magnifying glass. Take notice of every little detail. The Gospel writers carefully chose each word and detail.

1. *Why don't you think Jesus appeared to Peter and "the other disciple" when they first arrived at the tomb? They returned home without seeing Jesus. Why?* _____

2. *Why would Jesus appear only to Mary Magdalene?* _____

3. *Did you notice that Mary leaves the tomb twice to tell the disciples? Explain the difference between her two trips.* _____

4. *What do you make of Jesus looking like a "gardener"? Why wouldn't he look like himself?* _____

5. *Mary recognizes Jesus' voice. What do you make of that?* _____

6. *Why can't Mary "hold" Jesus? What do you think (imagine) his body was like?* _____

7. *Read John 20:19–23. Notice that the next appearance by Jesus is that evening. A full day passes without him showing up. What do you make of that? Where was he? Why did he wait? What kind of day was that for the disciples? (Use your biblical imagination!)* _____

8. *Read John 20:26–29. Notice that the next appearance is "a week later." A whole week passes before they encounter Jesus again. What do you make of that? Can you imagine what that week was like?* _____

9. *What else do you see in this story?* _____

THE ANALYSIS

How can we relate to Mary's story? Is there anything there that remains true today? Are there principles at work in her encounter with Jesus that would continue to be at work in our encounters with Christ?

To the leader(s): Divide the group into threes.

As a threesome, your task is to brainstorm the application of this story to our day. Make a list of the connecting points between Mary's story and our story. Be prepared to share your insights with the larger group. (Discuss as a group.)

1. *Do you think we encounter the resurrected Christ today? Explain.* _____

2. *What is the role of the Holy Spirit in our encounters with Christ?* _____

3. *Mary Magdalene said, "I have seen the Lord" (20:18). Do you think/know that you have ever encountered Christ? Can you give an example?* _____

4. *Do you think the modern church may be confusing Jesus with "the gardener"? Are we missing him? How will we recognize him?* _____

5. *Mary's encounter with Jesus completely changed her life. How would such an encounter change you?* _____

THE FINAL CURTAIN

This is our last session. It's a good time to think over the entire study. What happened to you in this study? Let each person relay their experiences.

Closing Prayer

Today is a prayer of thanksgiving! Perhaps the group would like to stand in a circle and hold hands as a sign of unity. Offer prayers of thanksgiving for what God has given you through this study and fellowship. Thank God for ways in which God has revealed himself to you. The leader may have the final prayer. Amen.

Afterword

John writes with a *passion* for belief—for knowing God through Christ. It is a matter of life and death.

How shall we know him? How will we meet Christ? How will we encounter him? How will he encounter us?

I'm not sure. What I am sure of is that we are to be in community. We encounter Christ in one another. What I am sure of is that we will encounter Christ where people are in need. He is there, whether it's a prison or a bad marriage. What I am sure of is that whoever these biblical characters encountered, that's who you and I encounter.

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8).

I'm not sure how or when or where or why we encounter Christ. What I am sure of is that we do. What I am sure of is that, ". . . in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us" (2 Corinthians 5:19).

What do you know? More important, *who* do you know? Have you had an *Encounter with Christ*? John writes with a passion for belief—for knowing God through Christ.

We'll end with John:

"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30–31).

So may it be! Amen.

THE WRITER

Steven P. Eason is the senior pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Morganton, North Carolina. He is a graduate of East Carolina University and Duke Divinity School, and received his Doctor of Ministry degree from Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. Steve is also a member of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors.

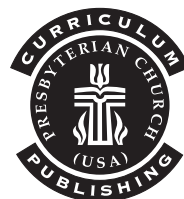
Born in 1954, Steve belongs to the so-called "Baby-Boomer Generation," and has taught classes for members of this generation during the past seventeen years. Steve is married to Catherine Smoot Eason, and they have three children, Phillip, Leigh, and Sarah Catherine.

ORDER INFORMATION

Developed from a male perspective in a style that is comfortable and nonthreatening, this new series of workbook-type Bible studies is appropriate for all men. These thought-provoking studies assume no prior biblical knowledge. Each study has seven 60-minute sessions.

Series Studies are:

Job	#087000
Matthew	#087001
Jeremiah	#087002
Acts	#087003
Deuteronomy	#087004
First Thessalonians	#087005
Genesis	#087006
A Brief Statement of Faith	#087007
First Peter	#087008
Exodus	#087009
Revelation	#087010
Ecclesiastes	#087011
John	#087012
First Samuel	#087013
Galatians	#087014
Hosea	#087015



Curriculum Publishing
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
100 Witherspoon Street
Louisville, KY 40202-1396
1-800-524-2612
Orders: Option 1
Curriculum Helpline: Option 3
FAX: 502-569-8263

087012

ISBN 1-57153-912-3



9 781571 539120