

THE CRUX



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THE CRUX

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Chapter I

Who Am I?

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)
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DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)
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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Who am I? What am I made for?

These are some of the most important questions we face in life. And there's one famous story that points us in the right direction. It's a story you might have heard before, perhaps from your childhood. But we invite you, now that you are an adult, to take a closer look at it with more mature eyes. Genesis is a book about beginnings. In fact, the word Genesis means "beginnings." In this first chapter of the Crux, we are going to talk about what the first few chapters of Genesis tell us about God, about us and about our relationship with him.

Made for Relationship (Genesis 1:26)

In its very first chapter, the Bible makes an amazing claim about who we are — one that impacts everything about how we look at the world and live our lives: *we are made in God's image and likeness* (Genesis 1:26).

But what does that actually mean?

As in any piece of literature, the Bible uses reoccurring expressions or idioms. If you're not sure what a certain word means, you should

consider the context, to see how it's used in other settings. So, if we want to understand the meaning of being made in God's image and likeness, we should look to see if the expression is used again. And it is, in Genesis 5:3, where it describes a relationship between a son and his father. Adam has a son named Seth, and Seth is in the image and likeness of his father, Adam. In Scripture, therefore, the idea of image and likeness points to sonship.

When God says in Genesis 1 that man and woman are made in his "image and likeness," what is he saying about us? He is revealing that we are not mere creatures like the sun, moon, stars, birds, fish or animals. We are made for a profound relationship with God *as his children*. The Catholic Church puts it this way: "God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life (CCC 1).

Think about that: God did not have any *need* to create us – he is perfectly blessed in himself. Yet, as the Bible teaches, "God is love" (1 John 4:8), and out of love, he freely chose to bring us into existence and fill us with his life, so that he could share his love with us. This is the first major point we want to take away from the story of Adam and Eve: When the Bible says we were made in God's "image and likeness," it's telling us we were created for a unique relationship with God as his children. And this is where we will find enduring, lasting happiness: living in friendship with God as his sons and daughters.

God's Plan (Genesis 2:15-17)

A second major point this story reveals is that God has a plan for our lives. This is something the Bible often underscores: how God loves us so much that he wants us to be happy and to be united

with him forever: “For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for woe, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). This is why he gives us his law, which includes certain commandments like, “Thou shall not kill” or “Thou shall not steal.” These are not arbitrary rules or a mere testing of obedience. God’s law flows from his love for us. He made us. He knows how we work. He knows that if we do certain things with our lives, we will thrive and be happy; and if we do other things with our lives, we will hurt ourselves and hurt others. And because he loves us, he reveals his plan for our happiness, to guide us on the path of life: “Your Word, O Lord, is a lamp to my feet, a light to my path” (Psalm 118:105).

We can see this also in the two commands God gave Adam in Genesis 2. Consider them carefully. First, God commands Adam to till and *keep* the garden (Genesis 2:15). The original Hebrew word translated “keep” is *shamar*, which literally means “to guard.” The word is used in the Old Testament to describe priests guarding the holy tabernacle from intruders (Numbers 1:53; 3:7-8). Adam is, therefore, being told to guard the garden like a Levitical priest would guard the sanctuary.

Second, God warns Adam not to eat from a particular tree in the garden: “You may freely eat of every tree in the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Genesis 2:16-17). According to these verses, why does God give Adam this command? Is it to control him or restrict him? No. Notice how God emphasizes the tremendous freedom he is giving Adam: “you may *freely* eat of *every tree*...” There’s only one tree that God warns against because he knows that if Adam eats of it, he will be harmed: “For in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17). God gave this command to Adam because he loves him and doesn’t want him to be hurt.¹

The Temptation (Genesis 3:1-7)

Now we come to a third major point Genesis reveals about the human family: our fall.

One of the most famous passages in all of Scripture is the temptation of Adam and Eve. At first glance, it might appear to be a simple story about a serpent (the devil) trying to get them to eat fruit from a forbidden tree. But if we rise above a children’s-book-view of this story and read it with a more educated adult mind, we will see there’s a lot more going on.

Consider the strategy of the devil in his very first words to Eve: “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat of any trees of the garden?’” (Genesis 3:1). Think about it. Why does the devil ask *that* question? Notice how the tone of the question is a bit negative, painting a picture of God as a restrictive God, limiting her freedom, not letting her go to any trees of the garden. But that’s not what God actually said. God’s words emphasized the great freedom he was giving them: “You may *freely* eat of *every* tree in the garden.” That sounds very generous, doesn’t it? God warned them to avoid just the one. But the devil wants Eve to think of God as being too restrictive and limiting her freedom.

¹ What is the meaning of this tree? And why is it so dangerous? The tree symbolizes the limits of the human person, dependent on God and his plan for our lives (CCC 396). God invited our first parents to accept their limitations and trust in Him. To reject our dependence on him and his plan for our lives would be to break our relationship with him as our Father, which is a tragedy worse than physical death. As the Catechism explains, “The ‘tree of knowledge of good and evil’ symbolically evokes the insurmountable limits that man, being a creature, must freely recognize and respect with trust. Man is dependent on his Creator and subject to the laws of creation and to the moral norms that govern the use of freedom” (CCC 396). “Man’s eventual eating from this tree symbolizes his unwillingness to accept this dependence on God. Man instead uses his freedom to try to establish what is good and evil for himself apart from God. He seeks to ‘be like God’ but without God (CCC 398). This leads to tragic consequences for man—separation from God and the introduction of sin and division into the human family. Through the law given in Gen 2:16-17, God wants to protect man from this grave danger” (Edward Sri and Curtis Martin, *The Real Story* (Golden: Epic Publishing, 2012), 148).

Eve replies by saying they can eat from “some” trees, but if they so much as touch the tree in the midst of the garden, they would die (Genesis 3:2-3). But did God actually say that? No. She doesn’t mention the broad freedom God gave them in the garden. Instead, she exaggerates the one restriction in God’s law (“We can’t even touch it!”). We can see that she is starting to buy into the devil’s view of God as an arbitrary law-giver who restricts our freedom.

It’s at this moment that the devil goes in for the kill. He says to her: “You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:4).

Take in what the serpent is really saying here. His stating, “You will not die,” amounts to calling God a liar. According to the serpent, the tree is not harmful after all. In fact, it’s something that will make them like God. The reason God is telling them not to eat of this tree is that he is afraid they will become like him! According to the serpent, God made up this law to keep them in the dark and under his control.

Notice how the devil is not trying to get Eve merely to break a rule. He’s trying to get her to break a relationship. That’s what the first sin is all about: questioning God’s goodness and not trusting his plan. As the Catechism explains, “Man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God’s command. This is what man’s first sin consisted of. All subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and lack of trust in his goodness” (CCC 397).

But where is Adam in all of this? Remember what God commanded Adam to do: guard (*shamar*) the garden. That’s his mission. Adam is to guard (*shamar*) the garden, protecting it from intruders, like a priest in

the Old Testament would guard the sanctuary from any trespassers.

And this is what makes the temptation scene even more tragic. When the serpent shows up in the garden, whose responsibility was it to keep the intruder away? Adam’s. But where is Adam? Is Adam fulfilling his mission? Does he guard the garden? Was he away on business and not aware of the intruder? No. The Bible reveals that Adam is right there by Eve’s side during the temptation scene, that he goes along with the devil and eats of the tree with Eve. What a tragic failure! The one mission given to Adam in the garden was to guard it. The devil enters the garden, and he does nothing. The devil talks to his wife, tempting her, seducing her to break God’s commandment, and Adam who is right by her side does nothing. Nothing to protect her. Nothing to protect the garden. And most of all, nothing to protect his soul from being poisoned by the devil’s lies.

Suffering Hope (Genesis 3:15, 3:17-19; Luke 22:39-44; Acts 5:30; Matthew 27:29)

The fourth major point Genesis reveals about the human family is how sin separates us from God and how God has a plan to restore us to himself.

Sin has devastating consequences for the human family. Right after the fall, the Bible tells how man and woman hide from the presence of God (Genesis 3:10). How tragic: Adam and Eve are now running away from the God who lovingly brought them into existence, has a plan for their lives and wants them to be happy. This points to what sin is ultimately all about: turning away from God.

As a result of this first sin, man and woman lost what can be called

“the four harmonies”: the original harmony they had *with God*, the harmony they had *with all creation*, the harmony *with each other* and the perfect harmony they experienced *within their own souls*. Without the supernatural gift of God’s life dwelling in us, the human family ever since has been wounded, plagued by an inclination to evil and selfishness, which is the result of what Christians call “original sin” (CCC 405). As St. Paul explained, “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Romans 7:15). Most of all, because of the first sin, man and woman not only die physically; the greatest tragedy is that they die spiritually and, unless something dramatic happens to change their tragic situation, they will live eternally separated from God.

This is what makes the end of the story of Adam and Eve so remarkable. It would be just and reasonable if God responded to Adam and Eve’s rebellion by rejecting them. But God still loved them, and he chose to show them mercy, not judgment. Right away he unveils his plan to rescue them: he foretells how the woman will have a descendent who will defeat the devil, crushing the head of the serpent and liberating the human family from his reign of sin and death (Genesis 3:15). The early Church called this passage the “protoevangelium,” that is, the “first Gospel,” because it points toward Christ, who will ultimately defeat the devil (CCC 401).

But God doesn’t just give a prophecy in his words about the future savior. He foreshadows how that savior will redeem the world.

Just as Adam was tested in a garden, so Jesus Christ will be tested in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:39-46). But where Adam failed his test, Jesus will prove to be faithful right where Adam was unfaithful.

Whereas Adam ate from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge of Good

and Evil, Jesus went to the “tree” of the cross (see Acts 5:30). And in his passion, Jesus will take on the curses of Adam. Just as Adam was cursed with the sweat of his brow, thorns and thistles coming from the earth and ultimately facing death (Genesis 3:17-19), so Jesus takes on those curses, sweating drops like blood in the garden (Luke 22:44), wearing a crown of thorns on Good Friday (Matthew 27:29) and ultimately being killed (Luke 23:46).

Indeed, immediately after Adam and Eve’s sin, God is already revealing his plan for redemption.

FOR MORE BACKGROUND: KEY CONCEPTS

Image and Likeness (CCC 356-357):

Of all visible creatures only man is “able to know and love his creator”. He is “the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake”, and he alone is called to share, by knowledge and love, in God’s own life. It was for this end that he was created, and this is the fundamental reason for his dignity...

Being in the image of God the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone. He is capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons. And he is called by grace to a covenant with his Creator, to offer him a response of faith and love that no other creature can give in his stead.

Original Holiness (CCC 374-375):

The first man was not only created good, but was also established in friendship with his Creator and in harmony with himself and with the creation around him, in a state that would be surpassed only by the

glory of the new creation in Christ.

The Church, interpreting the symbolism of biblical language in an authentic way, in the light of the New Testament and Tradition, teaches that our first parents, Adam and Eve, were constituted in an original “state of holiness and justice”. This grace of original holiness was “to share in. . .divine life”.

Original Justice (CCC 376):

By the radiance of this grace all dimensions of man’s life were confirmed. As long as he remained in the divine intimacy, man would not have to suffer or die. The inner harmony of the human person, the harmony between man and woman, and finally the harmony between the first couple and all creation, comprised the state called “original justice”.

The Fall (CCC 397-398):

Man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God’s command. This is what man’s first sin consisted of. All subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and lack of trust in his goodness.

In that sin man preferred himself to God and by that very act scorned him. He chose himself over and against God, against the requirements of his creaturely status and therefore against his own good. Constituted in a state of holiness, man was destined to be fully “divinized” by God in glory. Seduced by the devil, he wanted to “be like God”, but “without God, before God, and not in accordance with God”.

Effects of the Fall (CCC 399-401):

Scripture portrays the tragic consequences of this first disobedience. Adam and Eve immediately lose the grace of original holiness. They

become afraid of the God of whom they have conceived a distorted image - that of a God jealous of his prerogatives.

The harmony in which they had found themselves, thanks to original justice, is now destroyed: the control of the soul’s spiritual faculties over the body is shattered; the union of man and woman becomes subject to tensions, their relations henceforth marked by lust and domination. Harmony with creation is broken: visible creation has become alien and hostile to man. Because of man, creation is now subject “to its bondage to decay”. Finally, the consequence explicitly foretold for this disobedience will come true: man will “return to the ground”, for out of it he was taken. Death makes its entrance into human history...

What Revelation makes known to us is confirmed by our own experience. For when man looks into his own heart he finds that he is drawn towards what is wrong and sunk in many evils which cannot come from his good creator. Often refusing to acknowledge God as his source, man has also upset the relationship which should link him to his last end, and at the same time he has broken the right order that should reign within himself as well as between himself and other men and all creatures.

Original Sin and Concupiscence (CCC 404-405):

How did the sin of Adam become the sin of all his descendants? The whole human race is in Adam “as one body of one man”. By this “unity of the human race” all men are implicated in Adam’s sin, as all are implicated in Christ’s justice. Still, the transmission of original sin is a mystery that we cannot fully understand. But we do know by Revelation that Adam had received original holiness and justice not for himself alone, but for all human nature. By yielding to the tempter, **Adam and Eve committed a personal sin, but this sin affected the**

human nature that they would then transmit in a fallen state. It is a sin which will be transmitted by propagation to all mankind, that is, by **the transmission of a human nature deprived of original holiness and justice.** And that is why original sin is called “sin” only in an analogical sense: it is a sin “contracted” and not “committed” - a state and not an act.

Although it is proper to each individual, original sin does not have the character of a personal fault in any of Adam's descendants. It is a deprivation of original holiness and justice, but human nature has not been totally corrupted: it is wounded in the natural powers proper to it, subject to ignorance, suffering and the dominion of death, and inclined to sin - **an inclination to evil that is called "concupiscence"**. Baptism, by imparting the life of Christ's grace, erases original sin and turns a man back towards God, but the consequences for nature, weakened and inclined to evil, persist in man and summon him to spiritual battle.

The "Protoevangelium" (CCC 410):

After his fall, man was not abandoned by God. On the contrary, God calls him and in a mysterious way heralds the coming victory over evil and his restoration from his fall.³⁰⁴ This passage in Genesis is called the Protoevangelium ("first gospel"): the first announcement of the Messiah and Redeemer, of a battle between the serpent and the Woman, and of the final victory of a descendant of hers.

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Passages: Genesis 1:26, 2:15-17, 3:1-7, 3:15; Luke 22:39-44; Acts 5:30, Matthew 27:29

Introduction

Launching Question: Who am I? What am I made for? What is the purpose of life? These are questions that humanity has been wrestling with for a long time. What are some of the best answers that you have heard to these questions?

Allow the group to discuss.

Made For Relationship

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

These are some of the most important questions we face in life. And there's one famous story in the Bible that points us in the right direction. You may have heard these passages before, perhaps even throughout your childhood, but the invitation in this Bible study is to look at these truths with new, mature eyes. Today we are going to look at the beginning of the Bible, the book of Genesis. Genesis means "beginnings." Let's begin our study by reading Genesis 1:26.

(Read Genesis 1:26)

1. What does this verse tell us about what humanity is made for? What does it mean to be made in the image and likeness of God?

Allow the group to discuss. Don't tell them the full answer just yet.

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

As in any piece of literature, when you come across a word or expression that you're not sure what it means, you consider the context, to see how it's used in other settings. This will be important for interpreting the Bible correctly, too. So, if we want to understand the meaning of being made in God's image and likeness, we should consider the next time the expression is used. The next time the Bible uses the phrase "image and likeness" is Genesis 5:3. Let's see how the phrase is used there.

(Read Genesis 5:3)

2. What does this verse tell us about the phrase "image and likeness"? And what does this mean for us, when the Bible says that we are created in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26)?

Answer: Adam has a son named Seth, and Seth is in the image and likeness of his father Adam. In Scripture, therefore, the idea of image and likeness points to sonship. When Scripture states that we are created in the image and likeness of God, it is telling us that we are God's children, his sons and daughters. Unlike anything else in all creation, God made us to share in his life, to live in friendship with him as his children.

God's Plan (Genesis 2:15-17)

3. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* picks up this same idea, and describes God's great plan for us like this: "God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life" (CCC 1). What does this tell us about what we are created for? How does this build on the idea that we are created in God's image and likeness?

Answer: God did not have any need to create us – he is perfectly blessed in himself. Yet, as the Bible teaches, "God is love" (1 John 4:8), and out of love, he freely chose to bring us into existence and fill us with his life, so that he could share his love with us. This is where we find enduring, lasting happiness: in friendship with God as his sons and daughters. We are God's children and he loves us. We did nothing to earn this love. It is freely given. We didn't have to exist. God, out of sheer love, freely chose to bring us into existence in order to share his love with us.

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

The account of Adam and Eve reveals the great love we are made for – but it also tragically reveals how we have rejected that love. Adam and Eve, our first parents, were created in God's image and likeness, but chose to deny what they were made for and separate themselves from God's love. Let's pick up the story in Genesis 2.

(Read Genesis 2: 15-17)

4. What two commands does God give Adam?

Answer: The first command God gives Adam in these verses is to till and keep the garden (Genesis 2:15). The original Hebrew word

translated "keep" is shamar, which literally means "to guard." The word is used in the Old Testament to describe priests guarding the holy tabernacle from intruders (Numbers 1:53; 3:7-8). Adam is, therefore, being told to guard the garden like a Levitical priest would guard the sanctuary.

The second command God gives Adam is "You may freely eat of every tree in the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Genesis 2:16-17).

5. According to these verses, why did God give this command to avoid eating from this one tree? Is he just trying to control or restrict Adam and Eve?

Answer: Allow the group to discuss. Notice how God emphasizes the tremendous freedom he is giving Adam: "you may freely eat of every tree..." There's only one tree that God warns against because he knows that if Adam eats of it, he will be harmed: "For in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:17). God gave this command to Adam because he loves him and doesn't want him to be hurt.² See also Jeremiah 29:11 for reference to God's good plans for us.

² What is the meaning of this tree? And why is it so dangerous? The tree symbolizes the limits of the human person, dependent on God and his plan for our lives (CCC 396). God invited our first parents to accept their limitations and trust in Him. To reject our dependence on him and his plan for our lives would be to break our relationship with him as our Father, which is a tragedy worse than physical death. As the Catechism explains, "The 'tree of knowledge of good and evil' symbolically evokes the insurmountable limits that man, being a creature, must freely recognize and respect with trust. Man is dependent on his Creator and subject to the laws of creation and to the moral norms that govern the use of freedom" (CCC 396). "Man's eventual eating from this tree symbolizes his unwillingness to accept this dependence on God. Man instead uses his freedom to try to establish what is good and evil for himself apart from God. He seeks to 'be like God' but without God (CCC 398). This leads to tragic consequences for man—separation from God and the introduction of sin and division into the human family. Through the law given in Gen 2:16-17, God wants to protect man from this grave danger" (Edward Sri and Curtis Martin, *The Real Story* (Golden: Epic Publishing, 2012), 148).

The Temptation (Genesis 3:1-7)

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

Now we come to a next major point Genesis reveals about the human family: our fall. One of the most famous passages in all of Scripture is the temptation of Adam and Eve.

(Read Genesis 3:1-7)

6. Consider the strategy of the devil in his very first words to Eve: "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any trees of the garden?'" (Genesis 3:1). Why does the devil ask *that* question? How does it contrast with God's actual command to Adam and Eve?

*Answer: Remember what God actually said in Genesis 2:16: "You may **freely** eat of **every** tree in the garden." He gave them great freedom! God warned them to avoid just the one tree because he knew it was harm them. But the devil wants Eve to think of God as giving this command because he is too restrictive and limiting her freedom.*

7. Now let's look at Eve's response. How does Eve's response also contrast with God's actual command?

Answer: Eve replies by saying they can eat from "some" trees, but of the tree in the midst of the garden, even if they touch it, they would die (Genesis 3:2-3). But did God say that? No. She doesn't mention the broad freedom God gave them in the garden. Instead, she exaggerates the one restriction in God's law ("We can't even touch it!"). We can see that she is starting to buy in to the devil's view of God as an arbitrary law-giver who restricts our freedom.

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

Next, the devil goes in for the kill. He says to Eve: "You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:4).

8. When the serpent says, "You will not die," what is he claiming? Is he just making a simple clarification, or is there something more sinister in his words? And what is the devil saying about God in this passage?

Answer: Stating, "You will not die," amounts to calling God a liar. According to the serpent, the tree is not harmful after all. In fact, it's something that will make them like God. The reason God is telling them not to eat of this tree is that he is afraid they will become like him! According to the serpent, God made up this law to keep them in the dark and under his control.

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

Notice how the devil is not trying to get Eve merely to break a rule. He's trying to get her to break a relationship. That's what the first sin is all about: questioning God's goodness and not trusting his plan. As the Catechism explains, "Man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God's command. This is what man's first sin consisted of. All subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and lack of trust in his goodness" (CCC 397).

9. In what ways might you experience the temptation to doubt God's goodness and his plan for your life? How might you be tempted to view his plan, his teachings or his moral law as restrictive? What

does this passage teach us about the temptations we face today?

Allow the group to discuss.

10. We've looked a little bit at Eve's response to the devil, but let's go back and look at Adam's response also. In Genesis 2, Adam was given the job to guard ("shamar") the garden. In this moment, is Adam doing his job? What should Adam have been doing? How is Adam also responsible for the first sin?

Answer: The Bible reveals that Adam is right there by Eve's side during the temptation scene and goes along with the devil and eats of the tree with Eve. The devil enters the garden, talks to his wife, and tempts her to break God's commandment, and Adam does nothing. Adam fails in his one mission to protect the Garden and Eve.

Suffering Hope (Genesis 3:15, 3:17-19; Luke 22:39-44; Acts 5:30; Matthew 27:29)

11. As a result of this first sin, man and woman lost what can be called "the four harmonies" — the original harmony they had (1) with God, (2) with all creation, (3) with each other, and (4) within their own souls. They become plagued by an inclination to evil and selfishness which is the result of what Christians call "original sin" (CCC 405). St. Paul describes the effects of original sin like this: "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Romans 7:15). How have you experienced what St. Paul is describing in your own life?

Allow the group to discuss.

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

Adam and Eve's response to their sin is to hide from the presence of God (Genesis 3: 8-10). It would have been just if God responded to Adam and Eve's rebellion by rejecting them. But instead, he immediately unveils his plan to rescue them. Let's read the promise that God makes in Genesis 3:15.

(Read Genesis 3:15)

12. In this verse, God speaks about the conflict between the serpent and the woman and her seed. Why is this so important at this point in the story? Does this verse remind you of anything that will happen later in the Bible?

Answer: Right away God unveils his plan to rescue Adam and Eve: he foretells how the woman will have a descendent who will defeat the devil, crushing the head of the serpent and liberating the human family from his reign of sin and death (Genesis 3:15). The early Church called this passage the "protoevangelium," that is, the "first Gospel," because it points to Jesus and Mary, who will defeat the devil.

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

But God doesn't only promise a savior, he also foreshadows how that savior will redeem the world. But where Adam failed his test, Jesus will prove to be faithful right where Adam was unfaithful. And in his passion, Jesus will take on the curses of Adam. Consider the following curses Adam experienced:

(Read Genesis 3:17-19)

Note to the leader: Please read aloud. Consider having three different people in your group look up and read the following passages.

Now consider what Jesus experiences in his passion:

(Read Luke 22:39-44)

(Read Acts 5:30)

(Read Matthew 27:29)

13. How does Jesus in his passion take on the curses of Adam?

Answer: Just as Adam was tested in a garden, so Jesus Christ will be tested in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:39-46). But where Adam failed his test, Jesus will prove to be faithful right where Adam was unfaithful. Adam ate from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil; Jesus went to the “tree” of the cross (see Acts 5:30). And in his passion, Jesus will take on the curses of Adam. Just as Adam was cursed with the sweat of his brow, thorns and thistles coming from the earth and ultimately facing death, so Jesus takes on those curses, sweating drops like blood in the garden (Luke 22:44), wearing a crown of thorns on Good Friday (Matthew 27:29) and ultimately being killed (Luke 23:46).

14. Why is it important to recognize that God immediately responds to Adam and Eve’s sin with a plan for redemption? What does this tell us about God? And what might it mean for our lives?

Answer: Allow the group to discuss. In particular, emphasize how this reveals God’s love and mercy and His desire to provide us with a way to be free from the sins that enslave us and the fullness of God’s plan in Jesus Christ. It would be just and reasonable if God responded

to Adam and Eve’s rebellion by rejecting them. But God still loved them, and he chose to show them mercy, not judgment. Right away he unveils his plan to rescue them.

NOTES



Chapter II

Who Do You Say that I Am?

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

Pages 28 - 37

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

Pages 38 - 50

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Who do you say that I am? (Matthew 16:13-17)

That's the question Jesus posed to his disciples some 2,000 years ago (Matthew 16:15). And it's a question he asks each of us today. Who do you say that Jesus is? Is he a prophet? One of the world's great religious leaders? A good moral teacher? A wise sage? An inspiring revolutionary? How we answer this question impacts everything about our lives.

Jesus is Unique: He Makes Himself the Central Issue (John 14:6)

In most other religions, the founding leader claims to be a messenger of God, a teacher with an important lesson on how to live life or a prophet sent with a revelation from a deity. But Jesus was different. He made *himself* the central message. He said, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father but by me" (John 14:6). Notice how Jesus didn't merely offer a way to God; he claimed to be *the* Way. He didn't just come to offer the world truth about God. He claimed to be that Truth. And he didn't just come to offer a way of life. He claimed to be the life. In sum, Jesus didn't merely summon people to believe in God; he called them to believe *in him* (John 6:36; 11:26).

The only reason Jesus said these things is that he viewed himself not just as some religious messenger from God, but God himself. And this brings us the very heart of what makes Christianity different from every other religion in the world.

Jesus' Actions: Jesus Does What God Does (Psalm 107:28-30, Matthew 8:23-27, 9:2-7)

In his words and in his actions, Jesus asserted an equality with God that would have been shocking to his first-century Jewish audience. He, for example, calmed the storms and made the seas quiet, which was something only the God of the Old Testament could do (Psalm 107:28-30; Matthew 8:23-27). As Biblical scholar Dr. Brant Pitre explains, "Should there be any doubt about the implications of Jesus's actions [in calming the storm], we need only turn to the reaction of Jesus's Jewish disciples: *'Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?'*" (Mark 4:41). In this context, this question implies that Jesus has not merely performed a remarkable miracle. Even more, he has displayed a power that the Old Testament repeatedly attributes to God alone."¹

Jesus also claimed to be able to forgive people of all their sins — another divine quality (Matthew 9:2-7). It's one thing to forgive someone who has personally wronged you: "I forgive you for what you did to me." It's another thing to claim to be able to forgive every sin someone has ever committed against God and others. Especially in the first-century Jewish world, that's something only God could do. Yet, Jesus told people, "Your sins are forgiven," and the Jewish leaders were abhorred by this and accuse him of blasphemy (Matthew 9:2-3).

¹ Brandt Pitre, *The Case for Jesus* (New York: Image Publishing, 2016), 125.

Jesus's Words: Jesus Speaks about Himself as Equal to God (John 10:30, John 8:58)

Jesus also made remarkable statements about his unique relationship with the Father. On one occasion, he said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). With these words, he put himself on par with God. His claim to be divine was so clear that the Jewish leaders picked up stones to stone him to death. They accused him of blasphemy, saying, "It is not for a good work that we stone you but for blasphemy; because you, being a man, make yourself God" (John 10:33).

On another occasion, Jesus said to the leaders in Jerusalem, "Before Abraham was, I AM" (John 8:58). This also astonished his listeners, because in this statement he not only claims to have existed long before Abraham, who died about 2,000 years before Christ, he also applies to himself the holy name of God, "I AM" (or in Hebrew, *Yahweh*), which was the name God revealed to Moses (Exodus 3:13). So holy was God's name that no Jew would ever dare to speak it. That's why it was so shocking for Jesus' audience to hear him say, "Before Abraham was, I AM." They would be hearing Jesus speak the unutterable name of God and apply it to himself! That's why many Jews, who were strict monotheists, were ready to stone him to death for blasphemy (John 8:58-59).

What Does This Mean for Me?

How do we respond to a man who speaks and acts in the Person of God? For some people in the modern world, the idea of Jesus claiming to be divine might be uncomfortable because of what that will mean for their life. If Jesus is not just a religious teacher but really is God, then he has authority over my life. What he teaches matters. I have to

follow him and all that he says. And that might involve me having to make changes in how I live. That's why many people prefer to think of Jesus merely as a good moral teacher, someone who perhaps points us to God, who offers a good example and who inspires us to be better people. We can contain that kind of Jesus. We can keep him at a distance. We can pick and choose what we want to accept about his teachings and set aside other points that challenge us to change and grow.

"But the real Jesus won't let us do that," Edward Sri explains. "The real Jesus challenges us to make a choice like no other religious leader does. Unlike Buddha, Muhammad, Confucius, or other religious founders, Jesus repeatedly acted and spoke as God. So, he either is who he claimed to be, or he's a very bad man, a liar who deceived millions of people throughout the world into thinking he was God. Or at best, he was a very confused man — someone who sincerely thought he was God but was not. We can accept Jesus as Lord, we can accuse him of being a liar, or we can feel sorry for him as a deluded extremist or crazy man. But, as C.S. Lewis pointed out, it does not make any sense to say Jesus was merely a good man, a wise moral teacher, and a spiritual guide. Jesus doesn't give us that option."²

What C.S. Lewis points to is called the "trilemma" — three options for answering Jesus' personal question to each of us: "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus either is Lord, a Liar or a Lunatic. As Curtis Martin explains, "Jesus claimed to be God, so either he is God or he is not. If he's not God, then we are left with two options: he either knows that he is not God and is a liar, or he mistakenly thinks he is God and is a lunatic. The one thing he most certainly is not is merely a good man."³

² Edward Sri, *Love Unveiled: The Catholic Faith Explained* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015), 66-67.

³ Curtis Martin, *Made for More* (Kentucky: Beacon Publishing, 2008), 22.

In other words, Jesus either was who he claimed to be — the Lord God — and we need to welcome him as Lord over our entire lives. Or he was a wicked liar, deceiving millions of people and someone we should fight against. Or he was a pathetic lunatic, someone who sincerely thought he was God but wasn't — someone for whom we might feel sorry, but not someone we'd admire and take life lessons from. The one answer, however, that doesn't make sense at all is to claim he was merely a good man, a good moral teacher. Jesus challenges us to make a choice about him: *Who do you say that I am?*

Finally, there is one more claim about Jesus that has come to the fore in recent years: some argue that Jesus didn't actually claim to be God, but his followers made up this claim after his death, adding it to their writings about Jesus and turning him into a legend. Over time, the story of Jesus was exaggerated, and the early Christians turned Jesus into something that he never was in real life.

When we look at this claim that Jesus was simply a legend, we have to try to understand why an early Christian leader, like one of the apostles, would exaggerate the story of Jesus. What would they have to gain? Peter Kreeft, a distinguished professor of philosophy at Boston College, explains what Christians had to gain if they did exaggerate claims about Jesus: "Here is what they got out of their hoax. Their friends and families scorned them. Their social standing, possessions, and political privileges were stolen from them by both Jews and Romans. They were persecuted, imprisoned, whipped, tortured, exiled, crucified, eaten by lions, and cut to pieces by gladiators."⁴

Indeed, all the original disciples of Jesus were persecuted for the faith.

⁴ Peter Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith: Essays in Christian Apologetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 62.

And all but one of the apostles died as martyrs. Is it likely that they made up the stories of Jesus, exaggerated what he said and did and turned him into someone who claimed to be divine? If they wanted to save their lives, all they needed to do was deny Jesus and admit they made it all up. But not a single one did that. They all independently went to their deaths in different parts of the world to die for their belief in Jesus as the Son of God, who died for our sins and rose again on the third day. Would every single one, on their own, in their own place and in their own time, die for a lie? Not likely. If these early Christian leaders made up the stories of Jesus and turned him into a pious legend, we have to ask ourselves, "Why would so many people, independently, in their own place and at their own time, die for a lie?" (See sidebar for more information on this topic.)

SIDEBAR

Are the Gospel Accounts of Jesus Reliable?

Some might argue that Jesus was just a legend — that the stories in the Gospels don't give an accurate account of what Jesus really said and did in history, that the Gospel writers exaggerated Jesus' claims about himself. The problem with this theory is that there is significant evidence that the Gospels are historical, reliable biographies of Jesus.

First, the Gospels were written by disciples of the Lord and their disciples — not random people with just a vague, incidental recollection of Jesus' life, but trained disciples who possessed what scholars call "skilled memories" or "trained memories." Rabbis would train their disciples to remember, rehearse and pass on their teachings to others. It was a rigorous training of memorizing, practicing and getting feedback from peers and the rabbi himself

on how well the teaching was being expressed. As New Testament scholar David Allison explains, the disciples likely would have started “rehearsing” the teachings of Christ even during his lifetime, especially when they were sent on mission (Matthew 10:1-23).⁵ Frequently bringing the core teaching to mind helps reinforce and retain one’s memory of the message accurately. As Biblical scholar Brandt Pitre, explains, “anyone who is a teacher knows this to be true. I might not be able to tell you what I did last week, but I could give you a three-hour lecture about Jesus and the Jewish roots of the Last Supper with zero preparation because I have been talking about it all the time for the last ten years.”⁶

Moreover, the Gospels exhibit many of the key features of other ancient biographies in the Greco-Roman world, such as a focus on a single individual’s childhood, public life and death; an average length between 10,000 and 20,000 words; beginning the work with the ancestry of the person; and a literary style that does not report everything about a person or follow a strict chronological order. Ancient biographies claimed to be recording the truth about the person, and so do the Gospels. There is much more to say about this topic. For the fuller background, read Brandt Pitre’s excellent work, *The Case for Jesus*. In the meantime, consider his summary conclusion:

“If you are going to hold to the theory that Jesus never claimed to be God, *you had better be committed to eliminating a lot of historical evidence...*you have to eliminate all of the manuscript evidence for the titles of the Gospels; eliminate the external evidence from ancient Christians and their pagan opponents; eliminate the literary parallels between the Gospels and ancient biographies; eliminate the

passages in which the Gospels themselves insist that they are telling you what Jesus actually did and said; and eliminate the internal and external evidence that the Gospels were written within the lifetime of the apostles.

Likewise, in order to hang on to the theory that Jesus never claimed to be divine, you have to eliminate the entire Gospel of John and what it tells us about who Jesus claimed to be; eliminate the passages in the Synoptic Gospels in which Jesus take the divine name ‘I am’ and speaks as if he is the divine Son of Man; eliminate all the miracles in which Jesus does what only the God of the Old Testament can do; and eliminate all the evidence that Jesus was both repeatedly accused of blasphemy and condemned to death for blasphemy because of who he claimed to be...In other words, in order for the theory that Jesus never claimed to be God to be correct, you have to keep eliminating all of the evidence that doesn’t fit the theory.

Now, of course, there’s nothing to stop a person from trying to make all of this evidence disappear. Lots of people do it. Some of them are scholars. But I for one can’t. It just isn’t good history. It makes far more historical sense to me to conclude that the reason the idea that Jesus never claimed to be divine has to eliminate so much evidence for the theory to work is that the theory is wrong.”⁷

⁵ Dale Allison, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 25-26.

⁶ Brandt Pitre, *The Case for Jesus* (New York: Image Publishing, 2016), 88.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 193-194.

FOR MORE BACKGROUND: KEY CONCEPTS

The Name of Jesus (CCC 430):

Jesus means in Hebrew: “God saves.” At the annunciation, the angel Gabriel gave him the name Jesus as his proper name, which expresses both his identity and his mission. Since God alone can forgive sins, it is God who, in Jesus his eternal Son made man, “will save his people from their sins”. In Jesus, God recapitulates all of his history of salvation on behalf of men.

I AM (CCC 213):

The revelation of the ineffable name “I AM WHO AM” contains then the truth that God alone IS. The Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, and following it the Church’s Tradition, understood the divine name in this sense: God is the fullness of Being and of every perfection, without origin and without end. All creatures receive all that they are and have from him; but he alone is his very being, and he is of himself everything that he is.

Christ (CCC 436):

The word “Christ” comes from the Greek translation of the Hebrew Messiah, which means “anointed”. It became the name proper to Jesus only because he accomplished perfectly the divine mission that “Christ” signifies. In effect, in Israel those consecrated to God for a mission that he gave were anointed in his name. This was the case for kings, for priests and, in rare instances, for prophets. This had to be the case all the more so for the Messiah whom God would send to inaugurate his kingdom definitively. It was necessary that the Messiah be anointed by the Spirit of the Lord at once as king and priest, and also as prophet. Jesus fulfilled the messianic hope of Israel in his threefold office of priest, prophet and king.

“True God from True God” (CCC 242):

Following this apostolic tradition, the Church confessed at the first ecumenical council at Nicaea (325) that the Son is “consubstantial” with the Father, that is, one only God with him. The second ecumenical council, held at Constantinople in, kept this expression in its formulation of the Nicene Creed and confessed “the only-begotten Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father”.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Passages: Matthew 16:13-17, 8:23-27, 9:2-7; Psalm 107:28-30; John 8:58, 10:30, 14:6

Introduction

1. Launching Question: When was the last time you found yourself in a period of waiting? What were you waiting for? What did you experience as you waited?

Allow the group to discuss.

Who do you say that I am? (Matthew 16:13-17)

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

In Jesus' time, the people of Israel were waiting. They had been in a season of waiting for over 2,000 years. What were they waiting for? For the promised Messiah, who would liberate them from their oppressors and restore the Kingdom of God. Into this time steps a man who begins exhibiting many signs of the Kingdom of God: healing the sick, blind, lame and mute, preaching with authority on the Kingdom of Heaven, performing countless miracles, and drawing thousands

of people to follow him. From those that followed, he chose twelve to be his closest followers, and they spent every moment of many years together with him, getting an even closer look at the signs and teachings of this incredible man. Did they know whether or not he was the one they were waiting for? Let's begin our study by reading Matthew 16:13-15.

(Read Matthew 16:13-15)

2. Before we hear how the disciples respond, put yourself in the scene: Imagine Jesus coming to you at your home, at your workplace, at your school, and he asks you about what people in the world *today* think about him: "*Who do people say that I am?*" What would you say? What do people today say about Jesus? Who do they think he is?

Answer: Allow the group to discuss. Possible answers might include: One of the world's great religious leaders, a good moral teacher, a wise sage, or an inspiring revolutionary. Yet others make the claim that he was and is God.

3. In this passage, Jesus then asks his disciples a second question, "But, who do you say that I am?" Why do you think Jesus asked them this question? Why might it be important for the disciples to answer Jesus' question *personally*?

Allow the group to discuss.

Jesus is Unique: He Makes Himself the Central Issue (John 14:6)

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

As we investigate Jesus' identity, let's look at a few ways that Jesus is unique among religious leaders. In John 14:6, he claims: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." In this verse, he is not just claiming to be a messenger of God or a teacher with lessons on how to live life – he is making himself the central message, the way to God.

4. How might Jesus' view about himself in this statement be different from how other religious leaders in history viewed themselves?

Answer: In most other religions, the founding leader claims to be a messenger of God, a teacher with an important lesson on how to live life or a prophet sent with a revelation from a deity. Muhmmmed claimed to be the prophet Allah. Buddha taught principles on how to find a tranquil state of life. Confucius offered proverbial sayings on how to live wisely. But Jesus was different. He didn't just come to offer the world truth about God. He claimed to be that Truth. And he didn't just come to offer a way of life. He claimed to be the way and the life. In sum, Jesus didn't merely summon people to believe in God; he called them believe in him (John 6:36; 11:26).

Jesus' Actions: Jesus Does What God Does (Psalm 107:28-30, Matthew 8:23-27, 9:2-7)

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

Next, let's see what it would have been like for the Jews of Jesus' time to witness the things Jesus was doing and saying. Many of his words and works corresponded to Jewish prophecies, and to truly understand who Jesus is, we have to consider his words and actions against the Jewish backdrop of his time. Jesus is revealing something

very important about his identity through his miracles. Let's look at some examples of this in Scripture.

(Read Matthew 9:2-7)

5. The Jews understood that only God can forgive sins (see Mark 2:7). So, with that background in mind, why would Jesus's statement in verse 2 be so shocking? What is Jesus saying about himself by claiming to be able to forgive sins?

Answer: Forgiving sins was a divine quality, something only God could do. Here, Jesus is asserting his equality with God by saying he can forgive sins. It's one thing to forgive someone who has personally wronged you. "I forgive you for what you did to me". It's another thing to claim to be able to forgive every sin someone has ever committed against God and others. Especially in the first-century Jewish world, that's something only God could do (see Mark 2:7). Yet, Jesus told people, "Your sins are forgiven," and the Jewish leaders were abhorred by this and accuse him of blasphemy (Matthew 9:2-3).

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

To see another example of Jesus' actions revealing his identity, let's compare Psalm 107 and Matthew 8. (Note to leader: have two members of your group look up each of these verses and read them aloud.)

(Read Psalm 107:28-30)

(Read Matthew 8:23-27)

6. What correlation do you see between these two passages? What does this tell us about Jesus?

Answer: In the Old Testament, God is the creator, the only one with power over the wind and the sea. Indeed, though many miracles occur in the Old Testament, power over the wind and the sea was reserved for God alone. By calming the storm on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus is revealing that he is more than just a miracle worker; he is God. As Brant Pitre explains, "Should there be any doubt about the implications of Jesus's actions, we need only turn to the reaction of Jesus's Jewish disciples: 'Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?' (Mark 4:41). In this context, this question implies that Jesus has not merely performed a remarkable miracle. Even more, he has displayed a power that the Old Testament repeatedly attributes to God alone."⁸

Jesus's Words: Jesus Speaks about Himself as Equal to God (John 10:30, John 8:58)

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

We've looked at Jesus's actions – performing incredible signs that fulfill Jewish prophecy and claiming to forgive sins. Now, let's turn to his words as well. What does Jesus say about himself? He makes some remarkable statements about his unique relationship with God. Let's look at a couple passages. (Note to leader: have two members of your group look up each of these verses and read them aloud.)

(Read John 10:30)

⁸ Brandt Pitre, *The Case for Jesus* (New York: Image Publishing, 2016), 125.

(Read John 8:58)

7. What is Jesus claiming in these verses? And how do you think the Jews of the day would have responded to such bold statements?

Answer: In these verses, we see clearly that Jesus is claiming to be God. When he said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30), Jesus put himself on par with God. His claim to be divine was so clear that the Jewish leaders picked up stones to stone him to death. They accused him of blasphemy, saying, "It is not for a good work that we stone you but for blasphemy; because you, being a man, make yourself God" (John 10:33).

In John 8:58, Jesus astonished his listeners, not only because he claims to have existed long before Abraham who died about 2,000 years before Christ; he also applies to himself the holy name of God "I AM" (or in Hebrew, Yahweh), which was the name God revealed to Moses (Exodus 3:13). So holy was God's name that no Jew would ever dare to speak it. That's why it was so shocking for Jesus' audience to hear him say, "Before Abraham was, I AM." They would be hearing Jesus speak the unutterable name of God and apply it to himself! The Jews respond just a few verses later: "We are not stoning you for a good work but for blasphemy. You, a man, are making yourself God." (v. 33). He is claiming to be God.

The Trilemma

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

So who is Jesus, really? Jesus comes proclaiming a kingdom, performing signs, claiming to forgive sins, and even claiming a unique

relationship with God, and this is just a small sampling of what Jesus said and did. Jesus was not just starting a movement, leading people or helping those who were suffering. He certainly did all that, too. But through his many powerful words and supernatural works, Jesus was making a most unique claim about himself: he was claiming to be God. Many people today, however, are not comfortable with Jesus' claim to be divine. They prefer to think of Jesus merely as a good moral teacher, someone who perhaps points us to God, who offers a good example and who inspires us to be a better people: Jesus was good man — someone we can learn from and be inspired by — but not God.

8. Why might people today prefer to think of Jesus as “just a good man” — a good example, a good prophet, a good teacher? Why might they be hesitant to say he is God? If Jesus is really who he claimed to be, what impact would that have on our lives — on how we live?

Answer: For some people in the modern world, the idea of Jesus claiming to be divine might be uncomfortable because of what that would mean for their life. If Jesus is not just a religious teacher but really is God, then he has authority over my life. What he teaches matters. I have to follow him and all that he says. And that might involve me having to make changes in how I live. That's why many people prefer to think of Jesus merely as a good moral teacher, someone who perhaps points us to God, who offers a good example and who inspires us to be better people. We can contain that kind of Jesus. We can keep him at a distance. We can pick and choose what we want to accept about his teachings and set aside other points that challenge us to change and grow.

Note to the leader: Please read aloud:

But C.S. Lewis, the great 20th century Christian writer, and many others have noted that the popular belief in Jesus as merely a good man does not make any sense. As Curtis Martin explains, “Jesus claimed to be God, so either he is God or he is not. If he's not God, then we are left with two options: he either knows that he is not God and is a liar, or he mistakenly thinks he is God and is a lunatic. The one thing he most certainly is not is merely a good man.”⁹ This idea has often been referred to as the “Trilemma.” Jesus is either who he said he was (Lord), or he is a very bad man who wickedly deceived millions of people into believing he was divine (Liar), or he was a pathetic crazy man who sincerely thought he was God but was not (Lunatic).

9. What do you think of these three possibilities? Is Jesus Lord, Liar, or Lunatic?

Answer: Allow the group to discuss. Use the following points to help drive the discussion:

- a. *If Jesus was a liar, then we have to ask ourselves, why would He lie? What did he gain? If he was merely looking for popularity and mustering many followers, why did he reject the opportunity to be made a king (John 6:15)? And if his claim to be divine is in large part what leads him to be condemned to death, why would he die for a lie?*
- b. *If Jesus was a lunatic, then we have to ask ourselves how he was able to preach some of the greatest ethical teachings of all time, like the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). And why did others perceive such unique real authority in his teaching (Matthew 7:29)? Do the teachings about loving*

⁹ Made for More, 22.

your enemy, praying for those who persecute you, and being merciful sound like the words of lunatic? (Matthew 5:7, 5:44).

c. *If Jesus is Lord, what does that mean for us?*

Note to the leader: The following section is optional information if this point comes up in your discussion.

Option to Address the Question: "Was Jesus Just a Legend?"

So, of these three options (Lord, Liar or Lunatic,) it is most reasonable to believe that Jesus is who he said he was: Lord. But there may be one more objection people might make about all this. Some people might say, but Jesus is just a legend. He didn't really claim that he was God. According to this view, the Biblical accounts of Jesus' life are not history; they're just legends, exaggerated stories that made the simple human Jesus out to be more than he ever really was in history. Jesus never claimed to be God; his followers just made up the stories about his various claims to divinity.

But does this theory hold up to scrutiny? Peter Kreeft, a distinguished professor of philosophy at Boston College who has been studying Jesus and the Christian faith on an academic level for more than 50 years, asks what would have been the motive---what did Christians have to gain if they did exaggerated claims about Jesus? "Here is what they got out of their hoax. Their friends and families scorned them. Their social standing, possessions, and political privileges were stolen from them by both Jews and Romans. They were persecuted, imprisoned, whipped, tortured, exiled, crucified, eaten by lions, and cut to pieces by gladiators."¹⁰

¹⁰ Peter Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith: Essays in Christian Apologetics*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 62.

Also, all the original disciples of Jesus were persecuted for the faith. And all but one of the apostles died as martyrs. Is it likely that they made up the stories of Jesus, exaggerated what he said and did and turned him into someone who claimed to be divine? If they wanted to save their lives, all they each needed to do was deny Jesus and admit they made it all up. But not a single one did that.

End of Optional section.

The Disciples' Response

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

Now, let's consider the option that Jesus is Lord a bit more closely. And to do so, let's go back to the passage from the beginning of this study. Jesus asked his disciples, "But who do you say that I am?"

(Read Matthew 16:16-17)

10. How does Peter respond? Who does he say Jesus is?

Answer: Peter states, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God."

11. Peter accepts that Jesus is God. What about you? Who do you think Jesus is? Is Jesus Lord?

Allow the group to discuss.

12. In considering who Jesus is, ponder his words in Luke 6:46: "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?" What does

it mean for us if we call Jesus Lord? How should that fact that Jesus is Lord affect our lives? According to this verse, what is Jesus concerned about?

Answer: Allow the group to discuss. There's a saying: "Jesus either is Lord of all, or he is not Lord at all." In other words, Jesus is really who he says he is — Lord of all, Lord over all the Universe — or he's not Lord at all. But if he is the Lord of all, then I should welcome him as Lord over my life. And that means I can't just call him "Lord" or agree on a quiz that "Jesus is Lord." I need to do what he says. I need to follow his commandments. I need to surrender my life to him and his plan for my life. In sum, if Jesus is not just a religious teacher but really is God, then he has authority over my life. What he teaches matters. I have to follow him and all that he says. And that involves making changes in how I live.

13. How would your life be different, if you really followed Jesus as Lord? If you gave your life even more to Jesus' Lordship now, what in your life would change?

Allow the group to discuss. Note to Leader: Perhaps share from your own experience how following Jesus as Lord of your life has changed your life.

NOTES

NOTES



Chapter III

The Cross

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)
Pages 52 - 61

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)
Pages 62 - 74

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

The Cross (1 Peter 3:18, Romans 5:8)

Christians are very familiar with the cross. They have crosses in their churches. Crosses in their homes. Some wear crosses as jewelry around their neck. Others sing Christian songs about how powerful the cross is. Catholics regularly make the sign of the cross. The average Christian has heard the basic idea that “Jesus died on the cross for our sins.” *But do they understand what it really means and what it’s all about?* The Cross is at the very center of the Christian faith, and yet few Christians can adequately articulate this most foundational belief.

How about you? If you had to talk to someone else about how the cross works — how Jesus’ death on the cross solves the problem of humanity’s sin — how confident would you be in explaining it?

One popular Christian interpretation of the cross stresses that Jesus is the innocent victim taking on our punishment. Because we are sinners, we deserve God’s punishment and death. God is a God of justice, and we will be forever separated from him unless sin is dealt with. But God is also a God of mercy. So, God sent his only Son to die for our sins. Jesus volunteers to step in and receive the punishment

we deserved. He lovingly takes on the full brunt of God’s wrath so we don’t have to. That’s how much God loves us! He sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to endure the punishment that we deserved so that we can enter the kingdom of heaven!

But let’s think about that for a moment. Does that explanation of the cross make sense? Imagine two sons in a family: one has done something seriously wrong, and the other is innocent. What would you think of a father who is getting ready to pour out his wrath and punish his guilty son, but instead, at the last minute, lets it all out on the innocent one? What if the innocent son volunteered to take on the wrath of the father so that the guilty son didn’t have to? In this scenario, the father doesn’t care who receives the punishment, as long as punishment is given.

How does that possibly solve the problem? A father who punishes the innocent instead of the guilty is neither a father of justice nor of mercy. He’s just randomly meting out punishment; and as long as the punishment gets delivered, he is somehow satisfied. *Is this the correct view of God?*

This is certainly not the Catholic view of the Cross. At the center of the Catholic understanding of the Cross is not divine wrath and punishment, but love. Pope St. John Paul II once explained that what gives the cross its redemptive value is “not the material fact that an innocent person has suffered the chastisement deserved by the guilty and that justice has thus been in some way satisfied.” Rather, the saving power of the cross “comes from the fact that the innocent Jesus, out of pure love, entered into solidarity with the guilty and transformed their situation from within.”¹ It’s not the fact that punishment has been unleashed on an innocent person and that God’s anger has somehow been appeased. Rather, it’s Christ’s unique

¹ John Paul II, General Audience, Wednesday, 26 October 1988.

and total gift of himself in love that gives the Cross its redemptive value. As the Catechism explains, “It is love ‘to the end’ (John 13:1) that confers on Christ’s sacrifice its value as redemption and reparation, as atonement and satisfaction” (CCC 616, see 1 Peter 3:18 and Romans 5:8).

In this chapter, we will take a deeper look at this central mystery of the Christian faith: Christ’s death on the cross.

The Bridge (Romans 3:23, 6:23)

The medieval mystic St. Catherine of Siena described Jesus Christ as the bridge between us and God. Using this image, let’s consider how Jesus’ death on the cross bridges the gap between sinful humanity and the all-holy, all-loving God.

First, sin radically ruptures our relationship with God. We must feel the weight of how devastating the consequences of sin are. As Curtis Martin explains,

You are not who you were meant to be. Sin wounded you and separated you from God. Our problem is actually far worse than we might have imagined. At first glance, we may think that, with some effort toward self-improvement, we could close the gap between who we are and who we ought to be. It is simply not the case.

When we fell: The fall was *universal* — “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Rom 3:23).

The fall was *severe* — “For the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23).

The fall created a chasm so great that no human could bridge it even with the best of efforts. Through Saint Catherine of Siena, we are reminded that “...the road was broken by the sin and disobedience of Adam in such a way that no one could arrive at Eternal Life.” (The Dialogue of St. Catherine of Siena)²

Second, there is nothing we can do on our own to solve the problem of sin. Sin causes an infinite gap between us and God and we are finite human beings — there is no finite act of love, sacrifice or sorrow that we can perform to overcome this infinite gap.³ As the Catechism explains, “No man, not even the holiest, was ever able to take on himself the sins of all men and offer himself as a sacrifice for all” (CCC 614).

Think of what happens in other relationships we have. When we hurt someone, we have a sense that we should do something — offer a gift of love, a sacrifice, an expression of our sorrow and desire to set things right — in order to bridge the gap of the relationship. The same is true in our relationship with God. But with God, the gift of love, the bridge, must be so much greater, infinitely greater. As Edward Sri explains,

In a marriage, for example, if a husband has hurt his wife, and he wants to repair the relationship, he will do something to make amends, to bring about reconciliation, to make up for his lack of love. He, of course, will say, “I’m sorry.” But he senses he should do something more. He might give her an

² Curtis Martin, *Making Missionary Disciples* (N.p.: Fellowship of Catholic University Students, 2018), 46-47.

³ The great medieval theologian St. Anselm explained that God’s glory and honor are infinite. To sin against his infinite honor incurs an infinite debt. We, however, are finite creatures, incapable of offering an infinite act of love to overcome that infinite gap. Moreover, Anselm also points out that we already owe God our entire lives. What could we possibly give to God that we don’t owe him already? See Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo*.

embrace, buy her flowers, or take her out to dinner... some meaningful act of love that overshadows the lack of love he showed her. And the magnitude of that gift of love will correspond to the seriousness of the hurt he has inflicted on the relationship.

The same is true in our relationship with God. Our sin entails withholding our love for the God who so completely loves us. We, therefore, should offer God a gift of love that corresponds to the infinite gravity of sin committed against him. But no human being can do that. Not even the most saintly person could offer a gift of love that would atone for the sins of all humanity. Only a divine person could do that.⁴

And this leads to the third point: the God-man solution. As God and man, only Jesus Christ can bridge the infinite gap between us and God. As fully human, Jesus can represent us. He can offer an act of love on behalf of the entire human family. But because he is also fully divine, his act of love far surpasses anything a mere human could ever offer. Because of who Jesus is, fully human and fully divine, his total, self-giving love on the cross takes on infinite value. It is an infinite gift of love, offered on our behalf, that restores us to right relationship with the Father. Jesus is the bridge between sinful humanity and the all-holy God.

The Catholic Gospel: Transformation & Divine Sonship (2 Corinthians 3:18, 1 John 3:1-2, 2 Peter 1:4)

Now we have a better sense of the Cross. But Jesus came to do a lot more than die on the cross for our sins. If all Jesus did was die on the

cross, humanity would have made amends with God. Things would be repaired and a right relationship with the Father would be restored. But God loves us so much that he wants so much more than merely a repaired, just, peaceful coexisting relationship with us. He wants our hearts. He wants to be fully united with us and share his blessed life with us forever. In fact, if all Jesus did was die on the cross for our sins, we wouldn't have eternal life with him in heaven.

Here's the key: Jesus didn't come simply to die for our sins. He rose from the dead to give us new life. And he sent his Spirit into our hearts so that we could be transformed in Him and become God's sons and daughters, sharing in his very divine life and love forever.

Curtis Martin explains an image that the Church Fathers gave us for the profound transformation in Christ that God wants to work in our lives:

Imagine a cold steel bar and a hot burning fire. They have almost nothing in common. If you place the cold rod in the hot fire, though, something amazing begins to happen: the rod begins to take on the properties of the fire. It grows warm, it begins to glow — and if you were to take the rod out of the fire and touch it to some straw, it could actually start a fire itself. Now image that the fire is God and we are the steel rod. When we are living in Christ... we begin to take on the properties of God.”⁵

This is so much more than merely being forgiven of our sins! Indeed, as Christ fills us with his life, we begin to think like Christ, serve like Christ, sacrifice like Christ. We take on the qualities of Christ: we become more patient, honest, generous, pure, and courageous

⁴ Edward Sri, *Love Unveiled: The Catholic Faith Explained* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015), 97.

⁵ Curtis Martin, *Making Missionary Disciples*, 13.

like Christ. As St. Paul explains, we are being changed into Christ's likeness from one degree of glory to another (2 Corinthians 3:18). Jesus doesn't just want to pardon us like a judge. He wants to heal us like a physician. He doesn't just want to forgive us; he wants to transform us. He doesn't just want to save us from sin. He wants to save us *for something* — he wants to save us for sonship.

And this brings us to one of the most beautiful and crucial aspects of the Catholic Faith: how profoundly *real* our divine sonship is. When the Bible describes how God is our Father, we are God's children, and we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, these are not pious metaphors. Through baptism, we really share in Christ's divine life — the life of the Eternal Son of God, Jesus Christ, dwells within us. And that life of Christ within us is like the hot fire of his love changing the metal rod of our fallen human nature. Indeed, St. Peter explicitly states that we become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4) — we begin taking on the character of Christ. The very divine life of the Son of God fills us and makes us God's children. We become "sons in the Son." St. John speaks in awe over this amazing gift: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; *and so we are...* Beloved, we are God's children now" (1 John 3:1-2).

Note how St. John doesn't say we are merely *called* God's children. We are called children of God because that is what we really become! Because Christ's Spirit, the divine life of the Son of God himself dwells in our hearts, we are truly sons and daughters, and we can truly call God Father!

Finally, consider how the profound reality of this gift is expressed whenever we pray the Lord's Prayer. We say, "Our Father..." Two important points are made with these two opening words of the Lord's

Prayer. First, consider the word "Father:" We call God Father because he truly has become Father. As St. Paul explains, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Galatians 4:6). Second, consider the word "Our:" God is not merely *my* Father or *your* Father...he is truly *Our* Father because we are truly brothers and sisters in Christ, sons and daughters of the same heavenly Father. This is not a Christian figure of speech. The supernatural bond we share in Jesus Christ makes us truly brothers and sisters in Christ. Indeed, Christians share a brother and sisterhood that is more profound than the natural bonds we might share with siblings back home, for these are bonds that last forever. We are all part of one covenant family of God.

Thus, we can see that, when God sent his Son Jesus to die on the cross, he didn't do so merely to save us from sin. He sent his Son because he wants to fill us with his divine life and adopt us as his children. And he doesn't just want to forgive us. He wants to transform us—to heal our wounded human nature, perfect it and elevate it to share in his total, infinite, supernatural love, so that we take on the character of Christ. He doesn't want to restore us to Eden, a mere earthly paradise; he wants to invite us to the everlasting perfect paradise of heaven. Moreover, he didn't die to save us each individually, isolated from each other. He died to save us all together so that we can live as his children, sharing in his blessed life as true brothers and sisters in the one covenant family of God. This calling is far more than any invitation to get along and tolerate each other. This is an invitation to live in what Christians call "the beatific vision," the very life of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All this is part of the amazing gift Jesus offers us through his death and resurrection: "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

MORE BACKGROUND: KEY CONCEPTS

Atonement (CCC 616):

It is love “to the end” that confers on Christ’s sacrifice its value as redemption and reparation, as atonement and satisfaction. He knew and loved us all when he offered his life. Now “the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died.” No man, not even the holiest, was ever able to take on himself the sins of all men and offer himself as a sacrifice for all. The existence in Christ of the divine person of the Son, who at once surpasses and embraces all human persons, and constitutes himself as the Head of all mankind, makes possible his redemptive sacrifice for all.

Sonship/Partakers of the Divine Nature (CCC 2009, 460):

Filial adoption, in making us partakers by grace in the divine nature, can bestow true merit on us as a result of God’s gratuitous justice. This is our right by grace, the full right of love, making us “co-heirs” with Christ and worthy of obtaining “the promised inheritance of eternal life.” The merits of our good works are gifts of the divine goodness. “Grace has gone before us; now we are given what is due. . . . Our merits are God’s gifts.”

The Word became flesh to make us “partakers of the divine nature”: “For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God.” “For the Son of God became man so that we might become God.” “The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods.”

Sanctifying Grace (CCC 2000):

Sanctifying grace is an habitual gift, a stable and supernatural

disposition that perfects the soul itself to enable it to live with God, to act by his love. Habitual grace, the permanent disposition to live and act in keeping with God’s call, is distinguished from actual graces which refer to God’s interventions, whether at the beginning of conversion or in the course of the work of sanctification.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Passages: 1 Peter 3:18; Romans 3:23, 5:8, 6:23, 2 Corinthians 3:18, 1 John 3:1-2, 2 Peter 1:4

Introduction

1. Launching Question: The cross is a very common symbol in Christianity. Christians have crosses in their churches, in their homes. Some wear crosses as jewelry around their neck. Others sing Christian songs about how powerful the cross is. Catholics regularly make the sign of the cross. What does the cross mean to you? What does it make you think of?

Allow the group to discuss.

The Cross (1 Peter 3:18, Romans 5:8)

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

Many of us know that Jesus' death on the cross is a foundational aspect of the Christian faith. But how confident would you be explaining to others what the cross really is all about? How confident would you be explaining how the death of an innocent man solves the problem of our sin? Does the death of the Son of God on the Cross really make sense?

(Read 1 Peter 3:18)

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

A common interpretation of this passage and others like it, goes something like this:

God is a God of justice. Because we are sinners, we deserve God's punishment and death. Unless sin is dealt with, we will be forever separated from him. But God is also a God of mercy, so God sent his only Son to die for our sins. Jesus volunteers to step in and receive the horrific punishment we deserved. He takes on the full brunt of God's wrath so we don't have to. That's how much God loves us!

2. What do you think of this popular explanation of the Cross in some Christian circles? Does this make sense? Is it helpful? ... Does anything sound off to you? Is there anything missing from this explanation?

Answer: Allow the group to discuss. Consider letting the group discuss the first two questions for a bit before introducing the second two questions. Help your group raise questions about whether or not this interpretation portrays God as a good Father.

3. Let's look a little closer at that interpretation. Imagine two sons in a family: one has done something seriously wrong and the other is innocent. What would you think of a father who is getting ready to pour out his wrath and punish his guilty son, but instead, at the last minute, lets it all out on the innocent one? What kind of father would this be?

Answer: A father who punishes the innocent to spare the guilty is

neither a God of justice nor a God of mercy. This would not be a good or loving father, but a cruel tyrant, who doesn't care who receives the punishment just as long as punishment is given.

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

This is not the Catholic view of the Cross. Rather than a view of simply punishment and justice, the Catholic view of the Cross is all about love. Pope St. John Paul II once explained that the saving power of the Cross “comes from the fact that the innocent Jesus, out of pure love, entered into solidarity with the guilty and transformed their situation from within.” As the Catechism explains, “It is love ‘to the end’ (John 13:1) that confers on Christ’s sacrifice its value as redemption and reparation, as atonement and satisfaction (CCC 616).⁶

(Read Romans 5:8)

4. This passage states that Christ’s death on the cross is an act of love. As we discuss the cross today, why is it important to begin with the understanding that the cross is primarily as an act of love, and not merely a meting out of divine punishment?

Allow the group to discuss. Emphasize that if we don’t view the cross as an act of love, we end up with a distorted view of God, a God who simply needs to exact the proper amount of punishment, rather than a loving Father.

⁶ See Edward Sri, *Love Unveiled: The Catholic Faith Explained*, p. 89.

The Bridge (Romans 3:23, 6:23)

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

To understand the deeper meaning of the cross, we are going to use Scripture and an image from one of the great saints of the Catholic Church, St. Catherine of Siena. St. Catherine of Siena described Jesus Christ as the bridge between us and God. Using this image, let’s consider how Jesus’ death on the cross bridges the gap between sinful humanity and the all-holy, all-loving God. To understand this image, we will consider three basic points about the cross, based on the writings of great Catholic thinkers such as St. Catherine of Siena, St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Anselm:

1. *The Chasm:* Sin radically ruptures our relationship with God, causing a great chasm, an infinite gap, between us and God.
2. *The Dilemma:* There is nothing we can do to bridge that gap.
3. *“The Bridge:” (The God-Man Solution):* Only someone who is both God and man can restore us to the Father.

Let’s now take a look at these three basic points.

I. The Chasm

First, we must feel the weight of just how devastating sin really is. Let’s take a look at a couple passages from Scripture. (*Note to leader: Have two members of your group look up one of these verses and read it aloud.*)

(Read Romans 3:23)

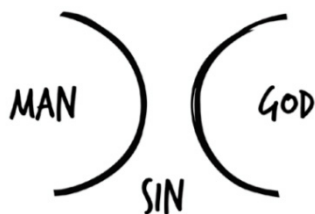
(Read Romans 6:23)

5. What do these passages tell us about sin?

Answer: Sin was universal; we have all sinned (Romans 3:23). The consequences of the fall were devastating and lead to death (Romans 6:23).

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

The fall was universal, and it was devastating. In fact, “our problem is actually far worse than we might have imagined. At first glance, we may think that, with some effort toward self-improvement, we could close the gap between who we are and who we ought to be. It is simply not the case.”⁷ We would be eternally separated from God and living forever in death if the problem of sin was not dealt with. This is why St. Catherine was presented with an image of a great chasm separating God and man. (*Note to Leader: on a sheet of paper, draw the first part of the Bridge Diagram: man on one side and God on the other, separated by sin.*)



6. How have you experienced sin in your life? Have you tried to overcome a fault of your own and failed? What was that experience like?

⁷ Martin, *Making Missionary Disciples*, 46-47.

Allow the group to discuss.

II. The Dilemma: Nothing We Can Do to Bridge the Chasm

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

Second, there is nothing we can do to repair our relationship with God. There is nothing we can do to bridge the chasm between us and God. There is no infinite gift of love we finite human beings can offer God to make up for our lack of love and bridge the chasm. It's great for us to try to amend our relationships when we hurt others, but we run into a problem when we try to do this in our relationship with God. As Edward Sri explains:

Our sin entails withholding our love for the God who so completely loves us. We, therefore, should offer God a gift of love that corresponds to the infinite gravity of sin committed against him. But no human being can do that. Not even the most saintly person could offer a gift of love that would atone for the sins of all humanity. Only a divine person could do that.⁸

7. Now take a moment and think about other relationships in your life. When you hurt someone you love, what are some things you do to try to repair the relationship? How have you experienced something like this in your relationship with God? Have you ever felt the need to “get right with God?”

Allow the group to discuss. Emphasize that when we hurt someone, we have a sense that we should do something — say “sorry,” offer

⁸ Sri, *Love Unveiled*, 91.

a gift of love, a sacrifice, an expression of our sorrow and desire to set things right — in order to make amends, to bridge the gap in the relationship.

III. “The Bridge:” The God-Man Solution

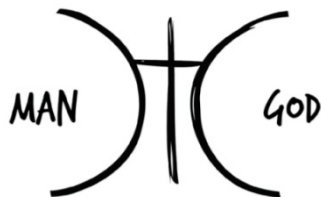
Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

Third, this leads us to the God-man solution. As God and man, only Jesus Christ can bridge the infinite gap between us and God.

- As *fully human*, Jesus can represent us. He can offer an act of love on behalf of the entire human family.
- But because he is also *fully divine*, Jesus’ act of love far surpasses anything a mere human could ever offer. Because of who Jesus is, fully human and fully divine, his total, self-giving love on the cross takes on infinite value.

As the God-man, Jesus offers on our behalf an infinite gift of love that restores us to right relationship with the Father. Jesus is the bridge between sinful humanity and the all-holy God.

Note to Leader: on a sheet of paper, draw the second part of the bridge diagram: Jesus Christ and his cross as a bridge that crosses the chasm between us and God



8. How might this Catholic understanding of the Cross be different from other explanations you have heard? Why is it important to have this understanding of the cross?

Allow the group to discuss.

The Catholic Gospel: Transformation & Divine Sonship (2 Corinthians 3:18, 1 John 3:1-2, 2 Peter 1:4)

We now have a better sense of the Cross. But Jesus came to do a lot more than die on the cross for our sins. If all Jesus did was die on the cross, humanity would have made amends with God. Things would be repaired and a right relationship with the Father would be restored. But God loves us so much, he wants so much more than merely a repaired, just, peaceful coexisting relationship with us. Let’s read more of what Scripture tells us.

(Read 2 Corinthians 3:18)

9. How does this passage give us a deeper understanding of what God is offering us in Christ?

Answer: Christ doesn’t only want to save us from sin; he wants to transform us, make us like him, and change us “into his likeness”.

Curtis Martin explains how the early Church spoke about this transformation:

Imagine a cold steel bar and a hot burning fire. They have almost nothing in common. If you place the cold rod in the

hot fire, though, something amazing begins to happen: The rod begins to take on the properties of the fire. It grows warm, it begins to glow—and if you were to take the rod out of the fire and touch it to some straw, it could actually start a fire itself. Now image that the fire is God and we are the steel rod. When we are living in Christ...we begin to take on the properties of God.”⁹

10. What does it mean that we can “begin to take on the properties of God?”

Answer: As Christ fills us with his life, we begin to think like Christ, serve like Christ, sacrifice like Christ. We take on the qualities of Christ: we become more patient, honest, generous, pure, and courageous like Christ. We can begin to say with St. Paul, “It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20).

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

This transformation in Christ is truly amazing! But, there’s still *even more* to what Christ offers us. Let’s read a couple more passages. (Note to leader: Have two members of your group each look up a passage and read it aloud.)

(Read 1 John 3:1-2)

(Read 2 Peter 1:4)

⁹ Martin, *Making Missionary Disciples*, 13.

11. What do these passages tell us about what Christ offers?

Answer: For 1 John 3:1-2: Note how St. John doesn’t say we are merely called God’s children. We are called children of God because that is what we really become! Because Christ’s Spirit, the divine life of the Son of God himself dwells in our hearts, we are truly sons and daughters, and we can truly call God Father! In fact, when the Bible describes how God is our Father, we are God’s children, and we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, these are not pious metaphors. Through baptism, we really share in Christ’s divine life—the life of the Eternal Son of God, Jesus Christ, dwells within us.

For 2 Peter 1:4: St. Peter explicitly states that we become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4) — we begin taking on the character of Christ. The very divine life of the Son of God fills us and makes us God’s children. We become “sons in the Son.” And that life of Christ within us is like the hot fire of his love changing the metal rod of our fallen human nature.

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

From these passages, we can see that, *when God sent his Son Jesus to die on the cross, he didn’t do so merely to save us from sin. He sent his Son because he wants to fill us with his divine life and adopt us as his children. And he doesn’t just want to forgive us. He wants to transform us — to heal our wounded human nature, perfect it and elevate it to share in his total, infinite, supernatural love, so that we take on the character of Christ (Philippians 3:21, Romans 12). He doesn’t want to restore us to Eden, a mere earthly paradise, he wants to invite us to the everlasting perfect paradise of heaven. Moreover, he didn’t die to save us each individually, isolated from each other. He died to save us all together*

so that we can live as his children, sharing in his blessed life as true brothers and sisters in the one covenant family of God.

12. After discussing Christ's death on the cross and all that he offers, what stands out to you the most? And what does all of this mean for you personally?

Allow the group to discuss.

NOTES

NOTES



Chapter IV

The Covenant Family of God

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)
Pages 76 - 89

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)
Pages 90 - 104

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

One Key Word

The night before he died, Jesus had one last meal with his disciples. At this “Last Supper,” he took a chalice, and giving thanks, he said the blessing and gave the chalice to his disciples, saying:

Take this, all of you, and drink from it,
For this is the chalice of my blood,
The blood of the new and eternal covenant,
Which will be poured out for you and for many for the
forgiveness of sins.
Do this in memory of me.

These words are especially familiar to Catholics, who hear them spoken by the priest at every Mass. But what if you had never heard these words before? What if you were one of Jesus’ disciples who were hearing these words spoken by Jesus for the very first time — what would they have meant to you?

One key word that likely would have stood out to you the most was the word “covenant.” Covenant is one of the most important concepts in the Bible. It serves as a central theme which unites the whole story

of God’s plan of salvation, for it describes the profound union God establishes with his people. God doesn’t just have a general friendship with his people; he has a covenant union with them. This is what makes Jesus’ move to wait until the Last Supper to use this crucial word so surprising. Indeed, this key Biblical word, used over 250 times in the Jewish Scriptures, is astonishingly never used by Jesus in his public ministry. He uses this word only once, and he waits for the climactic moment the night before he’s crucified, right here at the Last Supper. That tells us he must have something very important in mind when he speaks about his imminent death and his blood being shed as “the blood of the new and everlasting covenant.”

To appreciate what Jesus is doing in his Last Supper, Passion and Death, we must first make sure we understand what a covenant is.

What is a Covenant?

The English word “covenant” is derived from the Latin word *convenire*, which means to come together, unite or agree. At a most basic level, a Biblical covenant is a solemn pact between two or more parties, but it’s much more profound than a mere contract. A modern contract involves an exchange of goods and services, whereas a Biblical covenant is an exchange of persons. In a contract, two parties might say, “I’ll do this for you if you do this for me.” But in a covenant, like in the covenant of marriage, the two people say, “I am yours and you are mine... I give myself to you and I accept you completely, unconditionally.”

A contract is temporary and conditional: if one side breaks the contract, the other side can terminate the relationship. A covenant, however, is permanent, lasting for the rest of one’s life — as is

expressed in a wedding ceremony: “I will love you and honor you *all the days of my life*.” While a contract is a 50/50 relationship — “I’ll do this for you as long as you do this for me” — a covenant is 100/100; and if one person does not fulfill their end of the relationship, the other person makes up for what the other lacks.

Covenants Form Family Bonds

One of the most important aspects of Biblical covenants is that they *forge family bonds*. When covenants are made between former enemies, they call themselves brothers (Amos 1:9; 1 Kings 9:13; cf. Genesis 26:31). When God makes a covenant with his people, he calls them his “firstborn son” (Exodus 4:22) and even his bride (Ephesians 5:21-33, Isaiah 62:5, Hosea 11:1). The family language highlights how much God wants to be united to his people. He adopts us as his children and invites us to share in his very life in his one covenant family.

So when Jesus says at the Last Supper that his death on the cross — the pouring out of his blood on Calvary — will bring about a new and everlasting covenant, he’s saying a lot. He’s announcing that there’s a new covenant bond being established between God and humanity, one that’s forged with his bloody sacrifice on the Cross.

What Kind of Family?

Since Jesus is establishing a new covenant with humanity, and covenants form family bonds, it’s no surprise that Jesus uses family language to describe his disciples (e.g. Matthew 13:55). Jesus, the Eternal, All-Holy Son of God, calls his followers his brothers and

sisters. People who were great sinners are now brothers and sisters with the Son of God. Amazing! Moreover, Jesus summons them to call His Heavenly Father their own Father. When he teaches them to pray, he tells them to address God as “Our Father.” As we saw in the last chapter, Jesus is gathering a supernatural family of disciples who share in his very life.

But what kind of family is Jesus establishing? In his preaching, Jesus makes clear it is a *royal* family. Jesus announces the Kingdom of God, which for the Jews in the first century was not something up in the clouds or merely in some distant afterlife. For the Jews in Jesus’ day, the Kingdom of God was expected to come in the here and now. It had been entrusted in the hands of men, first in one of their great heroes King David and then passed on to his royal heirs to the throne throughout the centuries (2 Chronicles 13:8).

To appreciate the Kingdom that Jesus proclaims, we need to understand a bit about the hopes surrounding the Davidic kingdom of old that Jesus is bringing to fulfillment in his ministry. Let’s, therefore, step back for a moment and briefly consider three key features of the Davidic kingdom which began about 1,000 years before Christ (2 Samuel 7:11-16).

- *Prime Minister*: The Davidic Kings had a steward, or in Hebrew, an *'al habbayit* (literally, the one “over the house”) who was in charge of the day-to-day affairs of the kingdom and who ruled the kingdom whenever the king was away. He was not the king, but the *'al habbayit* was given authority from the king to manage the kingdom on his behalf (Isaiah 22:20-21). The *'al habbayit* was described as a father to the citizens of the kingdom (Isaiah 22:21), and a sign of his authority was the keys of the kingdom given to him by the king (Isaiah 22:22).

- *Queen Mother:* The Davidic kings also had a Queen Mother assisting in their reign. While the kings in the ancient near-eastern world each often had many wives, each king had only one mother; so the queenship was given to her. In the Davidic kingdom, the Queen Mother held an official position of authority in the kingdom (2 Kings 24), shared in the king's shepherding of the people (Jeremiah 13:18), served as a counselor to her royal son (Proverbs 31), and most of all, was a powerful intercessor for the people, bringing petitions from the citizens of the kingdom to her royal son (1 Kings 2:13-20).
- *A New Liturgy and a Reorganized Priesthood:* Long before David's time, the ancient Israelites had had a priesthood consisting of members from the tribe of Levi. But when David establishes Jerusalem as his capital, he makes it the center for worship by bringing the most sacred vessel in all of Israel — the Ark of the Covenant — to the city. There, David reorganizes the priesthood around a new liturgy that involves the Levites invoking, thanking and praising the Lord before God's holy presence over the Ark of the Covenant (1 Chronicles 16:4-7). They sing hymns known as the Psalms, many of which were written by David himself (1 Chronicles 16:8-36). And they continually offer worship to God before the Ark every morning and evening — which was the first Biblical form of perpetual adoration (1 Chronicles 16:37, 40-41). David also reorganizes the priesthood for these new duties of perpetual adoration. He organizes them into 24 different groups, each taking turns to do different duties for serving in worship (1 Chronicles 24:1-18). Which priest did which duty was determined by *casting lots* (1 Chronicles 24:5, 31). For the pagans, casting lots was simply a random game of chance (as we see with the Roman soldiers casting

lots for Jesus' garments at Calvary – see John 19:24). But for the Jews, the practice of casting lots was different. It was sacred. Casting lots was a way to discern God's will, *especially as it related to priestly duties*. The Jews believed that casting lots revealed God's choice for which priest should perform which role in worship each day (1 Chronicles 24:31; Luke 1:8-9). That's why lots were cast in the presence of the king to determine which priest would do which duty for worship in the Jerusalem sanctuary.

This background will be important for understanding the kingdom Jesus announces and invites us to in his public ministry.

The Return of the King

The Jews in Jesus' day had been longing for the restoration of the Davidic Kingdom. For centuries, no Davidic king had sat on the throne as God's people had been oppressed by one foreign nation after another. Rome was the latest empire to rule over them, and the Jews were longing to be liberated from harsh Roman taxes and domination. The ancient Jewish prophets had foretold that, one day, God would rescue his people. He would send a new royal son of David to be anointed as king. This king would be called the *messiah*, the Hebrew word meaning "anointed one". The messiah-king would drive the enemies off the land, restore the Davidic Kingdom to its former glory and extend its reign to the ends of the earth.

So when Jesus comes onto the stage as the new "son of David," the rightful heir to the throne (Matthew 1:1-17) and begins his public ministry announcing that the Kingdom of God is at hand, it's no wonder that such excitement grew around Jesus' movement, and large crowds

come from all over to hear what he has to say (Matthew 4:23-25). The new Davidic kingdom which they had been longing for centuries was now coming to fulfillment in Jesus!

The 'al habbayit

Just like the Davidic kings of old, Jesus has close associates who participate in his mission. If Jesus is announcing a kingdom, we should expect that he would have a steward, a right-hand man, vested with his authority, an *'al habbayit*, like they did. That's what we should expect if we understand Jesus within the Biblical lens of the ancient Jews. And, indeed, that's exactly what we find. In a dramatic turning point in his ministry, Jesus tells his apostle Peter he will give him "the keys of the kingdom" (Matthew 16:19) — which we have seen is the Biblical symbol for the office of the *'al habbayit* (Isaiah 22:22). In giving Peter "the keys of the kingdom" Jesus is establishing Peter as the steward of his kingdom, the one in charge of the day-to-day affairs of the kingdom, especially when the King, Jesus, goes away — when he rises from the dead and ascends into heaven. It will be Peter who will be the rock of the Church Jesus is building (Matthew 16:18). Just as the *'al habbayit* of old held an office, with successors who have real authority, so Peter is given this office of leadership in Christ's kingdom, and he is the first of many successors, all the way down to the current person holding this office, the pope today. And just as the *'al habbayit* was called a "father" to the citizens of the kingdom, so we call Peter's successor "Pope," which means "papa." Indeed, the Pope is rightly called "Holy Father" by Catholics, because the Pope is our spiritual father representing Christ the King to us today.

Queen Mother

And just as the Davidic kings of old had their mothers reign as Queen Mother, so Jesus' mother, Mary, serves in that role. Again, this is just following the basic Biblical logic: if Jesus is the King and Mary is Jesus'

mother, then Mary should be seen as the Queen Mother. That's why Elizabeth, inspired by the Holy Spirit, describes Mary with the royal title "Mother of My Lord" — a reference to Mary as the mother of the king, i.e., the Queen Mother (Luke 1:43). And that's why Mary appears in the Book of Revelation, in chapter 12, as the mother of the king (Revelation 12:5) who is decked in royal splendor, including a crown of 12 stars on her head — symbolizing the twelve Apostles upon which Christ's Church is built (Revelation 12:1-2). And since the queen mothers of old served as advocates for the people, it's fitting that Mary, our Queen Mother, plays the same role. She is our advocate. Just as the citizens of the kingdom brought their petitions to the queen mother, and the Queen Mother presented those petitions to her royal son, so Mary intercedes for us, lovingly praying for all our needs. And the prayers of her mother's heart are powerful. When she intercedes, it's as if Jesus says to her what the King said to the Queen Mother Bathsheba: "Make your request, my mother; for I will not refuse you" (1 Kings 2:20).

Priesthood for a New Liturgy

Now we return to the Last Supper. Just like David established a new worship, centered on singing hymns of praise and thanksgiving to God, so Jesus establishes a new worship centered on him. At this meal he offers his body and blood like a lamb being offered up in sacrifice. He says, "this is my body which is offered up for you.... this is my blood, which is poured out for the forgiveness of sins." Jesus uses technical language from the sacrificial system in the Jerusalem temple to describe the animal's body being offered up in sacrifice and its blood being poured out on the altar for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus clearly views his body and blood as some kind of new sacrifice — it will be his body offered up on the cross and his blood being poured out on Calvary that will be the center of the new worship. And he invites us to enter this perfect, sacrificial love of Christ every

time we partake of his body and blood in the Eucharist. Indeed, the Eucharist that Jesus instituted at the Last Supper is the center of Christian worship, and we partake in this every time we go to Mass.

Similar to David, Jesus organizes a new priesthood to serve this new liturgy of the Eucharist. At the Last Supper, he establishes the twelve Apostles as priests, commanding them to continue celebrating the Eucharist, making present the gift of his body and blood for generations to come. He says to them, “Do this as a memorial of me.” Priests offer sacrifice, and that’s what Jesus commands the Apostles to do: make present the sacrifice of his body and blood so that all peoples might enter into this perfect gift of his love on the Cross. But it’s not just at the Last Supper that we see the Apostles being called to serve as priests. After Jesus ascends into heaven, the Apostles had to decide how to replace Judas, the one who betrayed Christ and then killed himself. The Apostles knew they had a responsibility to find a successor to step into this office, which was meant to be passed on from one person to the next throughout the ages. And the way they decided who would fill this spot of Judas was to *cast lots* (Acts 1:21-26). Remember, for the Jews, casting lots was not a game of chance. It was a way to discern God’s will about priestly duties. The fact that the Apostles cast lots points to how they understood the important office they were needing to fill: the office of the new priesthood.

Conclusion: All in the Family

The Kingdom. The Son of David. The *‘al habbayit*. The Queen Mother. The New Liturgy and the New Priesthood. These are just some of the essential parts of the royal covenant family Jesus is inviting us all to enter. And remember, this kingdom is not just for the Jewish people; it’s for all humanity. Indeed, as we saw in chapter 3, Jesus doesn’t come to save us individually, isolated from each other. He comes to unite

us together, to heal the broken, divided human family and reunite us in the one, royal covenant family of God, the Catholic Church. In the Church, you and I are not just friends. We are truly brothers and sisters in Christ. And because of the life of Christ dwelling in all of us, we can truly call God our Father, Mary our mother and our *‘al habbayit* (the pope) Holy Father. True followers of Jesus gather together to worship God in the new liturgy of the Eucharist, led by the members of the new priesthood who make Christ’s gift of his body and blood in the Eucharist present for us to be united with Our Lord in Holy Communion at Mass. Saying “Yes” to Jesus involves saying “Yes” to all that he reveals to us and offers us through his Church. We can’t love the King but reject his Kingdom. We can’t fully accept Christ but reject His Church.

MORE BACKGROUND: KEY CONCEPTS

Church (CCC 763-766):

It was the Son’s task to accomplish the Father’s plan of salvation in the fullness of time. Its accomplishment was the reason for his being sent. “The Lord Jesus inaugurated his Church by preaching the Good News, that is, the coming of the Reign of God, promised over the ages in the scriptures.” To fulfill the Father’s will, Christ ushered in the Kingdom of heaven on earth. The Church “is the Reign of Christ already present in mystery.”

“This Kingdom shines out before men in the word, in the works and in the presence of Christ.” To welcome Jesus’ word is to welcome “the Kingdom itself.” The seed and beginning of the Kingdom are the “little flock” of those whom Jesus came to gather around him, the flock whose shepherd he is. They form Jesus’ true family. To those whom

he thus gathered around him, he taught a new “way of acting” and a prayer of their own.

The Lord Jesus endowed his community with a structure that will remain until the Kingdom is fully achieved. Before all else there is the choice of the Twelve with Peter as their head. Representing the twelve tribes of Israel, they are the foundation stones of the new Jerusalem. The Twelve and the other disciples share in Christ’s mission and his power, but also in his lot. By all his actions, Christ prepares and builds his Church.

The Church is born primarily of Christ’s total self-giving for our salvation, anticipated in the institution of the Eucharist and fulfilled on the cross. “The origin and growth of the Church are symbolized by the blood and water which flowed from the open side of the crucified Jesus.” “For it was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth the ‘wondrous sacrament of the whole Church.’” As Eve was formed from the sleeping Adam’s side, so the Church was born from the pierced heart of Christ hanging dead on the cross.

The Pope (CCC 881-882):

The Lord made Simon alone, whom he named Peter, the “rock” of his Church. He gave him the keys of his Church and instituted him shepherd of the whole flock. “The office of binding and loosing which was given to Peter was also assigned to the college of apostles united to its head.” This pastoral office of Peter and the other apostles belongs to the Church’s very foundation and is continued by the bishops under the primacy of the Pope.

The Pope, Bishop of Rome and Peter’s successor, “is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful.” “For the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered.”

Mary (CCC 495):

Called in the Gospels “the mother of Jesus”, Mary is acclaimed by Elizabeth, at the prompting of the Spirit and even before the birth of her son, as “the mother of my Lord”. In fact, the One whom she conceived as man by the Holy Spirit, who truly became her Son according to the flesh, was none other than the Father’s eternal Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity. Hence the Church confesses that Mary is truly “Mother of God” (Theotokos).

Eucharist (CCC 1324-27):

The Eucharist is “the source and summit of the Christian life.” “The other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it. For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch.”

“The Eucharist is the efficacious sign and sublime cause of that communion in the divine life and that unity of the People of God by which the Church is kept in being. It is the culmination both of God’s action sanctifying the world in Christ and of the worship men offer to Christ and through him to the Father in the Holy Spirit.”

Finally, by the Eucharistic celebration we already unite ourselves with the heavenly liturgy and anticipate eternal life, when God will be all in all.

In brief, the Eucharist is the sum and summary of our faith: "Our way of thinking is attuned to the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn confirms our way of thinking."

Priesthood (CCC 1562-1563, 1566):

"Christ, whom the Father hallowed and sent into the world, has, through his apostles, made their successors, the bishops namely, sharers in his consecration and mission; and these, in their turn, duly entrusted in varying degrees various members of the Church with the office of their ministry." "The function of the bishops' ministry was handed over in a subordinate degree to priests so that they might be appointed in the order of the priesthood and be co-workers of the episcopal order for the proper fulfillment of the apostolic mission that had been entrusted to it by Christ."

"Because it is joined with the episcopal order the office of priests shares in the authority by which Christ himself builds up and sanctifies and rules his Body. Hence the priesthood of priests, while presupposing the sacraments of initiation, is nevertheless conferred by its own particular sacrament. Through that sacrament priests by the anointing of the Holy Spirit are signed with a special character and so are configured to Christ the priest in such a way that they are able to act in the person of Christ the head."

"It is in the Eucharistic cult or in the Eucharistic assembly of the faithful (synaxis) that they exercise in a supreme degree their sacred office; there, acting in the person of Christ and proclaiming his mystery, they unite the votive offerings of the faithful to the sacrifice of Christ their head, and in the sacrifice of the Mass they make present again and apply, until the coming of the Lord, the unique sacrifice of the New Testament, that namely of Christ offering himself once for all a

spotless victim to the Father." From this unique sacrifice their whole priestly ministry draws its strength.

Liturgy (CCC 1069-1070):

The word "liturgy" originally meant a "public work" or a "service in the name of/on behalf of the people." In Christian tradition it means the participation of the People of God in "the work of God." Through the liturgy Christ, our redeemer and high priest, continues the work of our redemption in, with, and through his Church.

In the New Testament the word "liturgy" refers not only to the celebration of divine worship but also to the proclamation of the Gospel and to active charity. In all of these situations it is a question of the service of God and neighbor. In a liturgical celebration the Church is servant in the image of her Lord, the one "leitourgos"; she shares in Christ's priesthood (worship), which is both prophetic (proclamation) and kingly (service of charity):

The liturgy then is rightly seen as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. It involves the presentation of man's sanctification under the guise of signs perceptible by the senses and its accomplishment in ways appropriate to each of these signs. In its full public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and his members. From this it follows that every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the priest and of his Body which is the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others. No other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Passages: Luke 22:19-20, Isaiah 22:21-24, Matthew 16:17-19, 1 Kings 2:13-20, Revelation 12:1-2, 1 Chronicles 24:1-5, 1 Chronicles 24:31, Acts 1:21-26

Introduction

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

The night before he died, Jesus had one last meal with his disciples. At this “Last Supper,” he took a chalice, and giving thanks, he said the blessing, and gave the chalice to his disciples, saying:

Take this, all of you, and drink from it,
For this is the chalice of my blood,
The blood of the new and eternal covenant,
Which will be poured out for you and for many for the
forgiveness of sins.
Do this in memory of me.

These words are especially familiar to Catholics, who hear them spoken by the priest at every Mass. But what if you had never heard these words before? What if you were one of Jesus’ disciples who were hearing these words spoken for the very first time—what would

they have meant to you?

1. Launching Question: Which one of these words do you think stood out the most to the apostles at the Last Supper?

Allow the group to discuss. Answer: The words chalice, blood and forgiveness of sins would bring to mind sacrifices in the temple. But the key word that would have stood out the most was the word “covenant.” Covenant is one of the most important concepts in the Bible, used over 250 times in the Jewish Scriptures, and serving as a central theme uniting the whole story of God’s plan of salvation.

2. What comes to mind when you hear the word “covenant”? What do you think it means? How might a covenant be similar or different to a modern-day contract?

Allow the group to discuss. Answer: The word covenant is derived from the Latin word convenire, which means to come together, unite or agree. At a most basic level, a Biblical covenant is a solemn pact between two or more parties, but it’s much more profound than a mere contract. A modern contract involves an exchange of goods and services; whereas a Biblical covenant is an exchange of persons. In a contract, two parties might say, “I’ll do this for you if you do this for me.” But in a covenant, like in the covenant of marriage, the two people say, “I am yours and you are mine...I give myself to you and I accept you completely, unconditionally.”

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

There is one very important additional aspect that we need to know about covenants, and that is that covenants form family bonds. In the

ancient Biblical world, when two families, nations or individuals made a covenant together, they often used family imagery to describe the new relationship: brother/sister, father/son, or husband/wife. Similarly, when God makes a covenant with his people Israel, he calls them his son (Exodus 4:22), his brothers and sisters (Matthew 12:50) and even his bride (Ephesians 5:21-33, Isaiah 62:5, Hosea 11:1)

So when Jesus at the Last Supper announces that he is establishing “a new and eternal covenant” with his people, he is saying a lot. He is uniting himself to us in a most profound relationship in which we become part of his family.

3. Have you ever thought of being a part of God’s family? What impact does this have on the way we view our relationship with God?

Allow the group to discuss.

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

But what kind of family is this? In his preaching, Jesus makes clear it is a *royal* family. Jesus announces the Kingdom of God, which for the Jews in the first century would bring to mind the Kingdom God entrusted into to one of their great heroes, King David, and then passed on to his royal heirs throughout the centuries (2 Chronicles 13:8).

To appreciate the Kingdom that Jesus proclaims, let’s, therefore, step back for a moment and briefly consider the Kingdom of David that Jesus brought to fulfillment. There were three key positions in the Davidic kingdom that served the King: The Steward, the Queen Mother and the Priesthood.

The Steward (Isaiah 22:21-24, Matthew 16:17-19)

Let’s turn to Isaiah 22:21-24, which tells about a man named Eliakim who will be assuming the important role as the king’s right-hand man, the steward.

(Read Isaiah 22:21-24)

4. What do these verses tell us about Eliakim’s role?

Answer: He will be given a robe symbolizing his authority. He will be a father to the citizens of Judah. He will receive the key to the house of David as a symbol of his authority. He will be a peg in a sure place — a source of strength, stability and unity for the kingdom.

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

The Davidic Kings had a steward, or in Hebrew, an *’al habbayit* (literally the one “over the house”) who was in charge of the day-to-day affairs of the kingdom and who ruled the kingdom whenever the king was away. He was not the king, but the steward was given authority from the king to manage the kingdom on his behalf (Isaiah 22:20-21). We see in this passage that the *’al habbayit* was described as a father to the citizens of the kingdom (Isaiah 22:21), and a sign of his authority was the keys of the kingdom (Isaiah 22:22).

Just like the Davidic kings of old, Jesus has close associates who participate in his mission. If Jesus is announcing a kingdom, we should expect that he would have a steward, a right-hand man, vested with his authority, an *’al habbayit*, like they did.

(Read Matthew 16:17-19)

5. In this passage, Jesus tells Peter he will give him the “keys of the kingdom.” What did the keys of the kingdom of David symbolize in Isaiah 22:22? In light of that background, what do you think this means for Peter?

Answer: In a dramatic turning point in his ministry, Jesus tells his Apostle Peter he will give him “the keys of the kingdom” (Matthew 16:19) — which we have seen is the Biblical symbol for the office of the ‘al habbayit (Isaiah 22:22). In giving Peter “the keys of the kingdom” Jesus is establishing Peter as the steward of his kingdom, the one in charge of the day-to-day affairs of the kingdom, especially when the King, Jesus, goes away — when he rises from the dead and ascends into heaven. It will be Peter who is the rock of the Church Jesus is building (Matthew 16:18).

6. What do you think this might tell us about the role of Peter’s successor in the Kingdom Christ is announcing?

Answer: Just as the steward of old (the ‘al habbayit) held an office, with successors who have real authority, so Peter is given this office of leadership in Christ’s kingdom, and he is the first of many successors, all the way down to the current person holding this office, the pope today. And just as the ‘al habbayit, was called a “father” to the citizens of the kingdom, so we call Peter’s successor “Pope,” which means “papa.” Indeed, the Pope is rightly called “Holy Father” by Catholics, because the Pope is our spiritual father representing Christ the King to us today.

The Queen Mother (1 Kings 2:13-20, Revelation 12:1-2)

Now let’s consider a second important leadership position in the Davidic Kingdom: the Queen Mother. It was common in the ancient near eastern world to bestow the queenship on the king’s mother. While the kings of old often had many wives, they each had only one mother, so the queenship was given to her.

The same is true in the Davidic Kingdom, where the Queen Mother held an official position of authority in the kingdom (2 Kings 24:11, 14), shared in the king’s shepherding of the people (Jeremiah 13:18), served as a counselor to her royal son (Proverbs 31:1-31), and most of all, was a powerful intercessor for the people, bringing petitions from the citizens of the kingdom to her royal son (1 Kings 2:13-20).

Could someone please read 1 Kings 2:13-20, which tells about how Bathsheba is treated when her son Solomon becomes king?

(Read 1 Kings 2:13-20)

7. What does this passage tell us about the important role of the Queen Mother? How did the Queen Mother exert her influence in the kingdom?

Answer: We see this Queen Mother, Bathsheba, is viewed as a powerful advocate, a powerful intercessor for the people. Shortly after she becomes Queen Mother, a man named Adonijah brings a petition to Bathsheba for her to present to her son, King Solomon. Adonijah is so confident in her intercessory role that he says, “Ask King Solomon — he will not refuse you.” King Solomon greets the Queen Mother by bowing down before her and honors her by having a throne brought in for her to sit at his right hand, the position of

authority. Solomon expresses how much he values her intercessory role as the Queen Mother, saying: “Make your request, my mother; for I will not refuse you.”¹

8. How do you think this background of the Queen Mother sheds light on the mother of Jesus in the New Testament?

Answer: Just as the Davidic kings of old had their mothers reign as Queen Mother, so Jesus’ mother, Mary, serves in that role. Again, this is just following the basic Biblical logic: if Jesus is the King and Mary is Jesus’ mother, then Mary would be seen, from a Biblical perspective, as the Queen Mother.

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

Now, let’s turn to another passage that helps us further understand the role of the Queen Mother. Could someone please read Revelation 12:1-2, a passage that offers a vision of the mother of the messiah in heaven?

(Read Revelation 12:1-2)

¹ As Edward Sri explains, “Though in this instance, the request is refused, this does not deny the Queen Mother’s intercessory role. “The fact that Solomon denies the request in no way discredits the influence of the [g]ebirah. Adonijah wanted Abishag the Shunammite for the treacherous purpose of taking over the kingdom from Solomon.” Gray, ‘God’s Word and Mary’s Royal Office,’ 381, n. 16. Taking the king’s concubine was a sign of usurping the throne in the ancient Near East. For example, see how Absalom (Adonijah’s older brother), in his attempt to take the throne from David, took his concubines (2 Sm 16:20-23). Gray continues, ‘Thus the wickedness of Adonijah’s intention is the reason for denial, which in no way reflects negatively upon the [g]ebirah’s power to intercede. The narrative bears out the fact that the king normally accepted the [g]ebirah’s request, thus Solomon says, “Ask, I will not refuse you.” To say then that this illustrates the weakness of the [g]ebirah’s ability to intercede would be to miss the whole point of the narrative, which tells how Adonijah uses the queen mother’s position in an attempt to become king.’ Gray, ‘God’s Word and Mary’s Royal Office,’ 381, n. 16, emphasis added” (Edward Sri, *Rethinking Mary in the New Testament* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2018) p. 266.)

9. How is Jesus’ mother depicted in this heavenly vision?

Answer: Mary appears as a queen. First, this “woman clothed with the sun” in Revelation 12 is revealed to be the mother of the one who is caught up to God’s throne and rules all nations with a rod of iron (Revelation 12:5; Psalm 2:9) — in other words, she is the mother of the messiah king. Moreover, the mother of the messiah is decked in royal splendor, like a queen, wearing a crown of 12 stars on her head — symbolizing the twelve apostles upon which Christ’s Church is built (Revelation 12:1-2). The Bible makes clear her royal office as Queen Mother.

10. We saw that the Queen Mothers in the Davidic Kingdom exercised their authority by serving as powerful intercessors. How might this background shed light on Mary’s role in Christ’s Kingdom?

Answer: Since the Queen Mothers of old served as advocates for the people, it’s fitting that Mary, our Queen Mother, plays the same role. She is our advocate. Just as the citizens of the kingdom brought their petitions to the Queen Mother, and the Queen Mother presented those petitions to her royal son, so Mary intercedes for us, lovingly praying for all our needs. And the prayers of her mother’s heart are powerful. When she intercedes, it’s as if Jesus says to her what the King said to the Queen Mother Bathsheba: “Make your request, my mother; for I will not refuse you” (1 Kings 2:20).

Priesthood for a New Liturgy (1 Chronicles 24:1-5, 24:31; Acts 1:21-26)

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

Now, let's consider a third important leadership role in David's kingdom: the priests.

After David becomes king, he reorganizes the ancient Levitical priesthood around a new liturgy that involves the Levites invoking, thanking and praising the Lord before God's holy presence over the Ark of the Covenant, which has been brought into David's capital city of Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 16:4-7). They sing hymns known as the Psalms, many of which were written by David himself (1 Chronicles 16:8-36). And they continually offer worship to God before the Ark every morning and evening — which was the first Biblical form of perpetual adoration (1 Chronicles 16:37, 40). Let's read about how David assigned these priestly duties.

(Read 1 Chronicles 24:1-5 and 24:31)

11. There are a lot of names in these verses, but we want to investigate one important thing: According to these verses, how did David organize the priestly duties? In other words, what method did David use to assign which priest to which duty for worship?

Answer: David organizes the Levites into 24 different groups, each taking turns to do different duties for serving in worship (1 Chronicles 24:1-18). Which priest did which duty was determined by casting lots (1 Chronicles 24:5, 31). For the pagans, casting lots was simply a random game of chance (as we see with the Roman soldiers casting lots for Jesus' garments at Calvary – see John 19:24). But for the Jews, the practice of casting lots was different. It was sacred. Casting lots was a way to discern God's will, especially as it related to priestly duties. The Jews believed that casting lots revealed God's choice for which priest should perform which role in worship each day (1 Chronicles 24:31; Luke 1:8-9). That's why lots were cast in the

presence of the king to determine which priest would do which duty for worship in the Jerusalem sanctuary.

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

Similar to David, Jesus organizes a new priesthood to serve the new liturgy of the Eucharist. At the Last Supper, he establishes the twelve apostles as priests, commanding them to continue celebrating the Eucharist, making present the gift of his body and blood for generations to come. He says to them, "Do this as a memorial of me." Priests offer sacrifice and that's what Jesus commands the apostles to do: make present the sacrifice of his body and blood so that all peoples might enter into the perfect gift of his love on the Cross.

But it's not just at the Last Supper that we see the Apostles being called to serve as priests. Let's consider what happens after Jesus ascends into heaven. The Apostles must decide how to replace Judas, the one who betrayed Christ and then killed himself. Could someone please read Acts 1:21-26?

(Read Acts 1:21-26)

12. How did the Apostles determine who would replace Judas' office?

Answer: Casting Lots

13. What was casting lots associated with for the ancient Jews?

Answer: Casting lots was a way for determining priestly duties, as we saw with David in 1 Chronicles 24:5 and 24:31.

14. So, what does this scene tell us about the role of the Apostles and their successors?

Answer: The Apostles knew they had a responsibility to find a successor to step into this office, which was meant to be passed on from one person to the next throughout the ages. And the way they decided who would fill this spot of Judas was to cast lots (Acts 1:21-26). Remember, for the Jews, casting lots was not a game of chance. It was a way to discern God's will about priestly duties. The fact that the Apostles cast lots points to how they understood the important office they were needing to fill — an official position in Christ's kingdom that was so important it would have successors throughout the generations — the office of the new priesthood.

Conclusion: All in the Family

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

The Kingdom. The Son of David. The 'al habbayit. The Queen Mother. The New Priesthood for a New Liturgy. These are just some of the essential parts of the royal covenant family Jesus is inviting us all to enter. And remember, this kingdom is not just for the Jewish people; it's for all humanity. Indeed, as we saw in chapter 3 of this study, Jesus doesn't come to save us individually, isolated from each other. He comes to unite us together, to heal the broken, divided human family and reunite us in the one, royal covenant family of God, the Catholic Church. In the Church, you and I are not just friends or members of the same religious club. We are truly brothers and sisters in Christ. And because of the life of Christ dwelling in all of us, we can truly call God our Father, Mary our mother and our 'al habbayit (the pope) Holy Father. True followers of Jesus gather together to worship God in the

new liturgy of the Eucharist, led by the members of the new priesthood who make Christ's gift of his body and blood in the Eucharist present for us to be united with Our Lord in Holy Communion at Mass.

15. Looking at these aspects of the family of God, the Church, we can see that Jesus had a very specific plan for his family. How has this study helped you understand the Church more fully?

Allow the group to discuss.

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

What we learned today also challenges us personally. Saying "Yes" to Jesus involves saying "Yes" to all that he reveals to us and offers us through his Church. Though it's trendy today for people to say, "I'm OK with Jesus, but I don't need a Church" or "I can be spiritual, but I'm not religious," that's not what Jesus himself actually taught. The Bible reveals there's a close connection between the King and His Kingdom, between Christ and His Church, between Jesus and his prime minister, queen mother, and priests. He said to his apostles, "Whoever receives you, receives me. Whoever rejects you, rejects me" (Luke 10:16). We can't love the King but reject his Kingdom. We can't fully accept Christ but reject His Church.

16. Why do you think people say they are "spiritual but not religious?" What about you? Do you accept the Church as God's covenant family, or do you struggle to accept the Church and her teaching? Why or why not?

Allow the group to discuss. God has revealed himself in a specific way through Jesus Christ and has given us the Church as the key avenue for sharing in his life. To say that we are "spiritual but not religious"

is to say we want to know God, but not in the way that he has given us to know him — through his grace in the sacraments and his truth through Church teaching. This leads to a danger, where instead of pursuing God as he has invited us, we simply live according to our own preference and claim it is “spiritual.” As Edward Sri explains, “One danger, however, of seeking God all on our own, apart from the Church, is that we make God in our own image and likeness; it’s too easy to tailor a spirituality and morality that suits our own comforts, lifestyles, and interests. After all, being ‘spiritual but not religious’ would be a very appealing option for someone who still wants to have some sense of God in his life — someone whose conscience is uneasy about rejecting God entirely — but who wants to keep God at arm’s reach and still do his own thing.”²

² Edward Sri, *Love Unveiled: The Catholic Faith Explained* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015), 134.

NOTES

NOTES



Chapter V

The Prodigal Son

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

Pages 106 - 115

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

Pages 116 - 127



UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Introduction

We've seen the big picture of the Christian faith — the heart of the Gospel. We've seen how God created us out of sheer love, to share his love with us as his children and how we broke our relationship with God through sin (chapter 1). We've also seen how even though we were sinners, God loved us so much he became man in Jesus Christ (chapter 2) and offered his life as a gift of love on the cross in order not only to restore our relationship with the Father and but also to send his Spirit into our hearts to transform us with his very divine life (chapter 3). We've also seen how this new life in Christ is lived in God's covenant family, the Catholic Church (chapter 4).

Now we will consider what all this means for us personally. To do that, we will turn to a famous story Jesus told; but we will look at it with new eyes, the eyes of a first-century Jew hearing this story for the very first time. The story is known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Turning Away from the Father (v. 11-16)

¹¹ And he said, "There was a man who had two sons; ¹² and the

younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. ¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. ¹⁵ So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. ¹⁶ And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything.

This story is absolutely shocking. In the first-century Jewish context, a son asking for his share of the inheritance — the family property — is in effect saying to his father, "I wish you were dead. I value this property more than my relationship with you." To make matters worse, the son sells off his portion of the property, which is not his right to do. The family land is not his own. He is just a trustee, called to care for his portion of the land during his lifetime so that future generations could benefit from it, just as his ancestors had done for him. To sell the family land is to break covenant with his many generation of grandparents who came before him and his many generation of grandchildren who will come after him. To top it off, he goes to a distant land and spends the money on loose living and prostitutes (Luke 15:13, 31).

The consequences of his decisions are devastating. He loses everything and becomes poor and hungry. He finds himself separated from his loving father, far from home, working as a slave for a foreign master. All of us can relate to this story at some level. We've all had moments or seasons in our lives when we rejected the Father's love, when we turned away from God and turned to other things to find happiness and fulfillment in life.

The Return of the Son (v. 17-24)

17 But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants."' "

Finally, at this low point, the son remembers his father and how much better his life would be if he were back in his father's house. He regrets what he has done. He acknowledges that he has sinned. Ashamed of his horrific actions, he plans to tell his father that he is not worthy to be called his son. He views himself as no better than one of the hired servants.

This is a good first step of repentance. Indeed, the word "repent" literally means "to turn, to turn back." And the son does this: he turns away from sin and humbly recognizes how he severely hurt his relationship with his father. Though the younger son takes this first step, the father has something even more amazing in store for him.

20 And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; 23 and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; 24 for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry.

Perhaps more shocking than the son's sinfulness is the father's generous, merciful love. After all the father had to endure, we might understand if the father rejected the son and disowned him. We might understand if the father treated the son like a hired servant and make him work his way back into the family. But the one thing we would never expect is for the father welcome the son back with such wholehearted, lavish love. The father is described as seeing the son coming *in the distance* — meaning the father was already on the lookout for his son, longing for him to return. As soon as the father catches the first glimpse of his son returning, he *runs* out to meet him. This too is surprising, for an older man in first-century Jewish culture was expected to walk deliberately with honor. But moved with such joy, the father casts aside all human decorum and rushes out to embrace his son.

Most significant is what the father does when the son tries to say, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son..." At this, the father immediately cuts him off. He will have none of it. The father surprisingly offers the son an amazing feast to welcome him home. He will not let his son view himself as a hired servant, as someone who has to earn the father's love and approval. No, the father's love is freely given, and the son is always the son no matter what he has done. The son who was dead is alive again; he was lost but is now found.

The Older Son (v. 25-32)

25 "Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. 27 And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' 28 But

he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹ but he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!' ³¹ And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

The older brother is angry because the younger brother has returned home to such a warm reception. "Why does the sinful younger brother, who has so shamed the family and disgraced himself with prostitutes, get such a big party?" he wonders.

Notice how the older brother views his relationship with the father: he sees himself as a servant, someone who for many years he served the father and never disobeyed the father's command. He complains that after so many years of faithful service, he never got such a feast as his reward. He views himself as a servant who should receive the father's love because of his faithfulness.

Which Son Do You Relate to More?

Both sons have the same fundamental problem: they think they have to *earn* the father's love. We can do the same today. In our modern age especially, we are taught that we have to earn love — from our parents, teachers, coaches, friends and followers on social media. It's not surprising, then, that we apply this same notion to God. On one hand, we can be like the older brother and think that we earn God's love through fulfilling our obligations, checking all the right Catholic

boxes, our orthodoxy, our Rosary devotions, doing the right things, saying the right things and believing the right things.

On the other hand, some of us feel like the younger brother. Maybe we've turned away from God. Maybe we've done some bad things, or some bad things have happened to us and we cannot comprehend that God would want to love us. We are not lovable. We are unworthy of God's love. We may think, "After all I've done, how could I possibly be beloved by the Father?"

But here's the key: It doesn't matter which son we identify with more. Whether we're like the older brother, trying to be faithful, checking all the right boxes, or we're more like the younger brother who has sinned and wandered far from home, both sons — all of us — need to know the Father's love.

Your Decision

Do you know the Father's love? Indeed, do you know God in the Biblical sense of "knowing"? In Scripture, the Hebrew word for "to know" (*yada*) means more than just intellectual head knowledge, like knowing a fact ("I know Rome is the capital of Italy;" "I know that 2+2=4").

Yada, in Scripture, means to know the person, to be in deep, covenant friendship with the person. In the Book of Genesis, for example, "to know" (*yada*) can even describe the profound union of a husband and wife: "When Adam knew his wife Eve, she bore him a son, Seth" (Genesis 4:26).

The difference between the modern notion of knowing (head

knowledge) and the Biblical notion of *yada* (to know in a deep, covenant friendship) is like the difference between textbook knowledge and a marriage proposal. It's one thing to know God in the modern sense — to know God exists, to know many facts about him and the Catholic faith; to believe God is real and true. That's head knowledge. It's another thing to know God in the sense of committing your entire life to him and abiding in a deep covenant friendship with him.

We must pose the personal question: How well do you know Jesus in the Biblical sense of *yada*? He is calling us to follow him, to surrender our lives to him, to be his disciples. When we say yes to Christ's call and give him everything, he doesn't take away anything that makes life good:

If we let Christ enter fully into our lives, if we open ourselves totally to him, are we not afraid that He might take something away from us? Are we not perhaps afraid to give up something significant, something unique, something that makes life so beautiful? ... No! If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. ... Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ – and you will find true life.¹

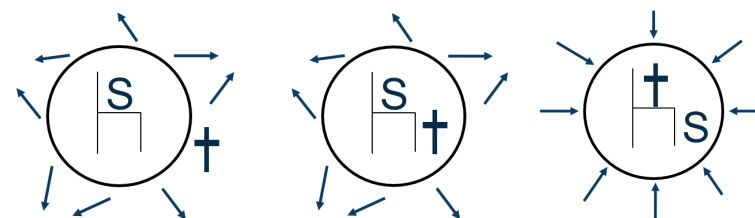
Now, let's pause for just a minute, and recognize that this is the climax of the Bible study. At this point in the study, we want you to personally invite your Bible study participants to make Jesus Christ the center of their lives.

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Mass, Imposition of The Pallium and Conferral of The Fisherman's Ring For The Beginning of The Petrine Ministry of The Bishop Of Rome, Homily Of His Holiness Benedict XVI, St. Peter's Square, Sunday, 24 April 2005, accessed at http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050424_inizio-pontificato.html March 13, 2020.

You are going to do some of this at the end of your Bible study this week. That said, it is also essential that you take time to meet with each of your Bible study participants individually and allow them to make a decision about Jesus Christ. However, this point in the study is a critical moment, so here is some guidance for the end of your Bible study.

First, as you consider making this invitation to your Bible study, one way to present a relationship with God is in three simple stages: 1) God is not a part of my life. I rule over my life myself. 2) God is a part of my life, but not the center. He's important and I involve him in my decisions sometimes, but I still rule over my life myself. 3) God is the very center of my life. I surrender my life, my plans, my dreams all in his hands and seek to do his will and not my own. He is the Lord of my life. He is sitting on the throne of my heart.

To help you explain this, see the images below.



(Note, the lines refer to different aspects of our lives: family, friends, finances, reputation, success, etc.)

Next, you can ask the following questions to the members of your study:

Looking at these three images, where would you place yourself? Why?

Right now, will you make the decision to place Jesus Christ at the center of your life? Will you give your life to him and choose to follow him?

If they are unwilling to make this commitment, ask them:

What is preventing you from committing your life to Jesus as a disciple?

Or, if they are willing to make this commitment, take a moment and pray with them. Ask them:

Can we take a minute right now to express your desire to invite Christ more deeply into your life?

Then, you can pray together in your own way, or you can pray the following prayer or one of your choosing:

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (CCC 435).

MORE BACKGROUND: KEY CONCEPTS

Conversion (CCC 1426):

Conversion to Christ, the new birth of Baptism, the gift of the Holy Spirit and the Body and Blood of Christ received as food have made us "holy and without blemish," just as the Church herself, the Bride

of Christ, is "holy and without blemish." Nevertheless the new life received in Christian initiation has not abolished the frailty and weakness of human nature, nor the inclination to sin that tradition calls concupiscence, which remains in the baptized such that with the help of the grace of Christ they may prove themselves in the struggle of Christian life. This is the struggle of conversion directed toward holiness and eternal life to which the Lord never ceases to call us.

Repentance (CCC 1430):

Jesus' call to conversion and penance, like that of the prophets before him, does not aim first at outward works, "sackcloth and ashes," fasting and mortification, but at the conversion of the heart, interior conversion. Without this, such penances remain sterile and false; however, interior conversion urges expression in visible signs, gestures and works of penance.

Interior repentance is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end of sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed. At the same time it entails the desire and resolution to change one's life, with hope in God's mercy and trust in the help of his grace. This conversion of heart is accompanied by a salutary pain and sadness which the Fathers called *animi cruciatus* (affliction of spirit) and *compunctio cordis* (repentance of heart).

Mercy and Forgiveness (CCC 1847):

"God created us without us: but he did not will to save us without us." To receive his mercy, we must admit our faults. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Passage: Luke 15:11-32

Introduction

1. Launching Question: Think of a time when you've had to make a significant apology. How did you feel about it beforehand? What were your feelings afterwards?

Allow the group to discuss.

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

We've seen the big picture of the Christian faith – the heart of the Gospel. We've seen how God created us of sheer love, to share his love with us as his children and how we broke our relationship with God through sin (chapter 1). We've also seen how even though we were sinners, God loved us so much he became man in Jesus Christ (chapter 2) and offered his life as a gift of love on the Cross not only to restore our relationship with the Father and but also to send his Spirit into our hearts to transform us with his very divine life (chapter 3). And we've seen how Jesus is inviting us to experience this new life in him not as isolated individuals, but all together in the one covenant family of God, the fulfillment of God's plan for the kingdom, the Catholic Church (chapter 4).

Now we will consider what all this means for us personally. To do that, we will turn to a famous story Jesus told, but we will listen to it with new ears the ears of a first-century Jew hearing this story for the very first time. The story is known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Turning Away from the Father (v. 11-16)

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

Let's turn to the beginning of the story.

(Read Luke 15:11-16)

2. There are many reasons why this story would be shocking to a first-century Jewish audience. What reasons can you think of?

Answer: Allow the group to discuss. After the group shares some ideas, share with them the following (if not already discussed):

A son asking for his share of the inheritance — the family property — is in effect saying to his father, "I wish you were dead...I value this property more than my relationship with you."

To make matters worse, the son sells off his portion of the property, which is not his right to do. The family land is not his own. He is just a trustee, called to care for his portion of the land during his lifetime so that future generations could benefit from it, just as his ancestors had done for him. To sell the family land is to break covenant with his many generation of grandparents who came before him and his many generation of grandchildren who will come after him.

To top it off, he goes to a distant land (a gentile land filled with non-believers) and spends the money on loose living and prostitutes (Luke 15:13, 31).

3. What are some of the consequences of the younger son's decision?

Answer: The consequences of his decisions are devastating. He loses everything and becomes poor and hungry. He finds himself separated from his loving father, far from home, working as a slave for a foreign master.

4. All of us can relate to this story at some level. We've all had moments or seasons in our lives when we rejected the Father's love, when we turned away from God and turned to other things to find happiness and fulfillment in life. Can anyone share a time when God or your Christian faith was not the top priority in your life? When you valued other things — things like wealth, possessions, honors, being liked, career, sex, comfort, pleasure — more than you valued God? How did that go for you? What was your life like?

Allow the group to discuss.

The Return of the Son (v. 17-24)

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

Let's continue the story.

(Read Luke 15:17-19)

5. What do you think has changed in the son's heart? How does he view himself in relationship to his father?

Answer: Finally, at this low point, the son remembers his father and how much better his life would be if he were back in his father's house. He regrets what he has done. He acknowledges that he has sinned. Ashamed of his horrific actions, he plans to tell his father he is not worthy to be called his son. He views himself as no better than one of the hired servants.

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

This is a good first step of repentance. Indeed, the word "repent" literally means "to turn, to turn back." And the son does this. He turns away from sin and humbly recognizes how he severely hurt his relationship with his father. But that's not the end of his story. Let's keep reading:

(Read Luke 15:20-24)

6. What is surprising about the Father's response?

Allow the group to discuss. After the group shares some ideas, share with them the following (if not already discussed):

After all the father had to endure, we might understand if the father rejected the son and disowned him. We might understand if the father treated the son like a hired servant and make him work his way back into the family.

But the one thing we would never expect is for the father to welcome the son back with such wholehearted, lavish love.

The father is described as seeing the son coming in the distance—meaning the father was always on the lookout for his son, longing for him to return.

As soon as the father catches the first glimpse of his son returning, he runs out to meet him. This too is surprising, for an older man in first-century Jewish culture was expected to walk deliberately with honor. But moved with such joy, the father casts aside all human decorum and rushes out to embrace his son.

7. How is the Father's view of his son different from the son's view of himself?

Answer: What the father does when the son tries to say "I am no longer worthy to be called your son..." is most significant. At this, the father immediately cuts him off. He will have none of it. The father surprisingly offers the son an amazing feast to welcome him home. He will not let his son view himself as a hired servant, as someone who has to earn the father's love and approval. No, the father's love is freely given, and the son is always the son no matter what he has done. The son who was dead is alive again, he was lost but is now found.

The Older Son (v. 25-32)

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

There is another character in this story, the older brother. Let's read his part in the story.

(Read Luke 15:25-32)

8. Why is the older son so upset? How does he view his relationship with the father?

Answer: The older brother is angry because the younger brother has returned home to such a warm reception. He views himself as a servant who should receive the father's love because of his faithfulness.

9. Now that we've heard the story of both sons, which son do you relate to more? Why?

Allow the group to discuss.

Your Decision

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

Interestingly, both sons actually have the same fundamental problem: they think they have to *earn* the Father's love. We can do the same today. In our modern age especially, we are taught that we have to earn love — from our parents, teachers, coaches, friends and followers on social media. We have to earn other people's love by how we look, how we perform, how much money we make, etc. It's not surprising, then, that we apply this same notion to God.

On one hand, we can be like the older brother and think that we earn God's love through fulfilling our obligations, checking all the right Catholic boxes, our orthodoxy, our rosary devotions, doing the right things, saying the right things and believing the right things. On the other hand, some of us feel like the younger brother. Maybe we've turned away from God. Maybe we've done some bad things, or maybe

some bad things have happened to us and we cannot comprehend that God would want to love us. We are not lovable. We are unworthy of God's love.

10. What about you? Do you ever feel like you are trying to earn God's love or are running away from him because you think you don't deserve love?

Allow the group to discuss.

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

In Scripture, the Hebrew word for "to know" (*yada*) means more than just intellectual head knowledge, like knowing a fact ("I know Rome is the capital of Italy;" "I know that 2+2=4"). *Yada*, in Scripture means to know the person, to be in deep, covenant friendship with the person. In the Book of Genesis, for example, "to know" (*yada*) can even describe the profound union of a husband and wife: "When Adam knew his wife Eve, she bore him a son, Seth" (Genesis 4:26).

It's one thing to know God in the modern sense — to know God exists, to know many facts about him and the Catholic faith; to believe God is real and true. That's head knowledge. It's another thing to know God in the sense of committing your entire life to him and abiding in a deep covenant friendship with him.

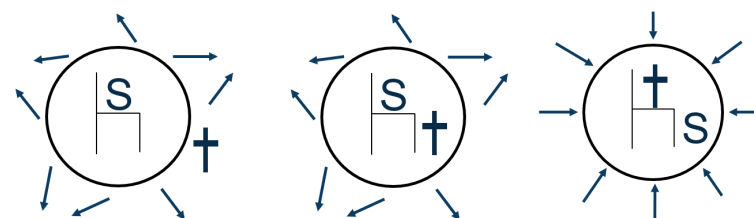
11. As we near the close of this chapter, we have to ask ourselves the question: "In which way do I "know" God?" Do you just know *about* him, or do you *know* him?

Allow the group to discuss.

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

Finally, Jesus offers us an incredible invitation know God deeply and personally. As we consider this invitation, it can be helpful to look at our relationship with God in three simple stages:

1. God is not a part of my life. I rule over my life myself.
2. God is a part of my life, but not the center. He's important and I involve him in my decisions sometimes, but I am still the one in control, pursuing my will and not His. I still rule over my life myself.
3. God is the very center of my life. I surrender my life, my plans, my dreams all in his hands and seek to do his will and not my own. He is the Lord of my life. He is sitting on the throne of my heart. See the images below.



12. Looking at these three images, where would you place yourself? Why?

Allow the group to discuss.

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

Right now, I want to invite you to make a decision to place Jesus Christ at the center of your life. This is a very personal question, and I want to talk about it with each of you individually. So, in the next week or so, I'd like to meet with you to discuss your relationship with Jesus, who he is in your life, and what next you can take to grow closer to him.

Let me leave you with this quote:

If we let Christ enter fully into our lives, if we open ourselves totally to him, are we not afraid that He might take something away from us? Are we not perhaps afraid to give up something significant, something unique, something that makes life so beautiful? ... No! If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. ... Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ – and you will find true life.²

² Pope Benedict XVI, Mass, Imposition of The Pallium and Conferral of The Fisherman's Ring For The Beginning of The Petrine Ministry of The Bishop Of Rome, Homily Of His Holiness Benedict XVI, St. Peter's Square, Sunday, 24 April 2005, accessed March 13, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050424_inizio-pontificato.html.

NOTES

FOCUS Equip

'FOCUS Equip' is based on Ephesians 4:12 "for the equipment of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ."

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We would love to hear your feedback at: focusequip@focus.org

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