

LET'S

TALK...

JAN 1-3



DISCUSSION GUIDE

PRAYING THE PSALMS PSALM 2:1-12

Pray Psalm 2 to affirm God's reign over the whole earth, and in your life.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What passage most surprised you?

Which of God's promises stood out to you?

What different methods did God use to call people to action?

Where did you see yourself in these readings?

What did you learn about God?

TALKING POINT

OLD TESTAMENT (GENESIS 1-15)

Adam and Eve sin (GEN 3)

Noah and the Flood (GEN 6-8)

"I am giving you a sign of my covenant with you." (GEN 9:12)

God calls Abram (GEN 12:1-3)

"So the LORD made a covenant with Abram that day" (GEN 15:18)

The Golden Calf (Deut 9)

NEW TESTAMENT (MATTHEW 1-5)

"Look! The virgin will conceive a child!" (MATT 1:23)

John the Baptist and Jesus (MATT 3)

Jesus tempted in the wilderness (MATT 4:1-11)

"Follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!" (MATT 4:19)

The Beatitudes (MATT 5:3-10)

REFLECT

PS 119

A WAY TO SEE

*This is a record of the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah,
a descendant of David and of Abraham.* MATTHEW 1:1

JAN 1-3



DISCUSSION GUIDE

REFLECT

PS 119

A WAY TO SEE

REFLECT ON MATTHEW 1:1-17

In Matthew's genealogy, we meet 46 people whose lifetimes total 2,000 years. All of them were ancestors of Jesus, but they were remarkably diverse in personality, spirituality, and experience. Some were heroes of faith—like Abraham, Isaac, Ruth, and David. Some had shady reputations—like Rahab and Tamar. Many were very ordinary—like Hezron, Ram, Nahshon, and Akim. And others were evil—like Manasseh and Abijah. God's work in history is not dependent on human successes or limited by human failures or sins. He often works through ordinary people. Just as God used all kinds of people to bring his Son into the world, he uses all kinds today to accomplish his will. And God invites you to be a part of his work, blessing people, walking through life with them, and caring for the world he created.

REFLECTION THOUGHT

GOD OFTEN WORKS THROUGH ORDINARY PEOPLE.

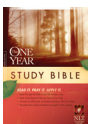
WHAT IS ORIGINAL SIN?

Genesis 3:1-24 describes how human moral innocence collapsed through rebellion. What God declared as "very good" (Genesis 1:31) was no longer completely so. Man and woman ate the fruit that promised knowledge of good and evil and thus broke God's command. Worse, they tried to become like God and thus fell from their sinless state. Alienated from God, one another, and creation, they also became subject to death.

The term "original sin" denotes sin's complete, universal infiltration into individual lives and human society as a result of human rebellion. When the first man and woman ate the fruit in disobedience to God, they forfeited their own innocence and that of their children, the entire human race (Romans 5:12-14; 1 Corinthians 15:21-22). All humans are "fallen," born in sin, predisposed to sin (Genesis 8:21; Psalm 51:5), and awaiting death. As people yield to their inherited predisposition to sin, they become responsible for their own wrongdoing (Ecclesiastes 7:20; Romans 3:23).

The first man, Adam, introduced sin, but the "second Adam," Jesus Christ, is sin's antidote (2 Corinthians 5:21). When Christ died as Redeemer, he made God's salvation from sin available to all (John 3:16; Romans 1:16).

Lined area for reflection notes.



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LET'S TALK...

JAN 4-10



DISCUSSION GUIDE

REFLECT PS 119

A WAY TO SEE

PRAYING THE PSALMS PSALM 10:16-18

Rejoice that God is sensitive to the needs of the least important and powerful enough to answer with justice and comfort.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What passage most surprised you?

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What do you think of some of the people God called to serve him?

.....

Which person in this week's readings did you identify with?

.....

Which of Jesus' teachings did you find most challenging this week?

.....

How is God asking you to trust him?

.....

TALKING POINT

OLD TESTAMENT (GENESIS 16-29)

Hagar and Ishmael (GEN 16)

Abraham pleads on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah (GEN 18:16-33)

The birth of Isaac (GEN 21:1-7)

God tests Abraham's faith (GEN 22)

Jacob steals Esau's blessing (GEN 27)

NEW TESTAMENT (MATTHEW 6-9)

The Lord's Prayer (MATT 6:9-13)

"Can all your worries add a single moment to your life?" (MATT 6:27)

The parable of the wise and foolish builders (MATT 7:24-27)

Jesus calls Matthew (MATT 9:9-13)

"The harvest is great, but the workers are few." (MATT 9:37)

So Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian servant and gave her to Abram as a wife. GENESIS 16:3A

JAN 4-10



DISCUSSION GUIDE

REFLECT

PS 119

A WAY TO SEE

REFLECT ON GENESIS 16:1-3

Sarai was following a common practice of that time when she gave Hagar to Abram as a substitute wife. But at the same time, Sarai took matters into her own hands by doing this.

Abram was also acting in line with the custom of the day, but his action showed a lack of faith that God would fulfill his promise.

When we take over God's role, we don't give faith the chance to grow. Waiting on God can take a long time. In Abram and Sarai's case, time was the greatest test of their faith and willingness to let God work in their lives on his schedule. Sometimes we too must simply wait. When we ask God for something and have to wait, we can be tempted to take matters into our own hands and interfere with God's purposes. Like Abram and Sarai, we might fail along the way too. But God is patient with us like he was with Abram and Sarai.

What situation have you been trying to take control of? How can you wait for God's timing? "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done" (Philippians 4:6).

REFLECTION THOUGHT

SOMETIMES WE TOO MUST SIMPLY WAIT.

WHY DID JESUS CALL HIMSELF THE SON OF MAN?

"Son of Man" was Jesus' favorite way to refer to himself. The phrase is just as odd in Greek as in English: It translates the Hebrew phrase ben 'adam, an idiom that means "human being" or "person" (see Ezekiel 2:1-8). One reason Jesus preferred this name was that it was not an inflammatory title such as "Christ" or "Messiah." The term is used in three ways in the Gospels:

(1) The background to Jesus' use of the title is Daniel 7:13-14, where an exalted messianic figure "like a son of man" (that is, having human form) comes with the clouds of heaven and is given great glory and power. Jesus understood himself as that one who would return to earth in the clouds of heaven (Mark 13:26). Sometimes Jesus used "Son of Man" in this sense, to refer to his role as judge, deliverer, savior, and vindicator (Matthew 19:28; 24:30).

(2) Often Jesus used "Son of Man" to describe himself as a suffering redeemer (Matthew 17:12). This sense is rooted in Isaiah 52:13-53:12.

(3) At times, Jesus apparently used "Son of Man" to refer to himself as the representative of humanity (Matthew 12:8). The book of Ezekiel uses "son of man" in a similar sense.

Jesus did not use "Son of Man" to distinguish his humanity from his deity ("Son of God"). By using "Son of Man," Jesus could define himself as Messiah on his own terms. He used "Son of Man" to describe his total identity and as a veiled suggestion that those who watched and heard him should pay attention to who he is.



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LET'S

TALK...

JAN 11-17



DISCUSSION GUIDE

REFLECT

PS 119

A WAY TO SEE

PRAYING THE PSALMS PSALM 13:1-6

Resolve, by praying through Psalm 13, to trust God to respond at the right time.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What passage most surprised you?

Have you ever experienced doubts about God?

Do you find Jesus' parables helpful for understanding his teachings?

Were any verses or ideas especially confusing to you?

How would you summarize the effect this week's readings had on you?

TALKING POINT

OLD TESTAMENT (GENESIS 30:1–42:17)

Jacob wrestles with God (GEN 32:22-32)

“From now on your name will be Israel.” (GEN 35:10)

Joseph and his brothers (GEN 37)

Joseph and Potiphar's wife (GEN 39)

Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams (GEN 41)

NEW TESTAMENT (MATTHEW 10:1–13:46)

Jesus gives his twelve disciples spiritual authority and power (MATT 10)

John the Baptist has doubts about Jesus (MATT 11:2-6)

“What sorrow awaits you, Korazin and Bethsaida!” (MATT 11:21)

The parable of the farmer sowing seeds (MATT 13:3-23)

“The Kingdom of Heaven is like . . .” (MATT 13:24-46)

“Your name is Jacob, but you will not be called Jacob any longer. From now on your name will be Israel.” So God renamed him Israel.

GENESIS 35:10

JAN 11-17



DISCUSSION GUIDE

REFLECT

PS 119

A WAY TO SEE

REFLECT ON GENESIS 35:10

God reminded Jacob of his new name, Israel, which means “one who struggles with God” (see Genesis 32:22-32). Jacob’s life was littered with difficulties and trials, but his new name reflected his desire to stay close to God despite life’s disappointments.

Many people believe that Jesus promises a problem-free life. Consequently, as life gets tough, they are disappointed and retreat from faith in God. Has God failed?

Jesus actually warned his followers that they would face hard times: “Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows.” But Jesus offered them hope too: “Take heart, because I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Instead of hoping for a problem-free life, followers of Jesus should hold on to God through life’s struggles. Problems and difficulties are painful but inevitable. Perhaps, like Jacob’s, they are actually struggles with God. These can be opportunities for growth. Troubles give us a chance to trust God. They are opportunities for faith. They are opportunities for God to work in your life.

REFLECTION THOUGHT:

TROUBLES GIVE US A CHANCE TO TRUST GOD.

WHY DID JESUS HAVE COMPASSION ON THE MULTITUDES?

Jesus is frequently described as one who “had compassion.” This expression is used of Jesus in complex situations where (1) distress is expressed and Jesus remedies the distress (Matthew 20:29-34), (2) Jesus shows deep emotion (Matthew 14:14; 15:32), or (3) there is a contrast with those who are not compassionate (Matthew 18:27-30; 20:31-34). The phrase “had compassion” refers only to Jesus, except when used in parables where it refers either to God the Father or to Jesus (Matthew 18:27; Luke 10:33; 15:20).

In the Old Testament, the term “compassion” is used for God’s –covenant love for Israel. God withdrew his compassion to judge Israel’s obstinate unfaithfulness (Isaiah 27:11). God restored his compassion when Israel repented (Deuteronomy 30:3; Proverbs 28:13; Isaiah 55:7). The Old Testament often describes the messianic age as a time of God’s compassion (Isaiah 49:13; Jeremiah 12:15; Micah 7:19; Zechariah 10:6). The resurgence of this term in the Gospels reflects this, as the messianic age has dawned and God’s covenant love is once again active in Israel.

Series of horizontal dashed lines for reflection notes.



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LET'S

TALK...

JAN 18-24



DISCUSSION GUIDE

REFLECT

PS 119

A WAY TO SEE

PRAYING THE PSALMS PSALM 19:1-14

Let creation inspire your prayer. Let God's Word inform your prayer. Open your heart to the work of God's Spirit.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What passage most surprised you?

Were there any teachings in these readings that struck you as especially applicable to your own life?

When have you seen God working through your suffering?

Have you ever witnessed a miracle?

What does it mean to have "great faith" or "little faith"?

TALKING POINT

OLD TESTAMENT (GENESIS 42:18–EXODUS 5:21)

Joseph's silver cup (GEN 44)

Jacob and Joseph reunited in Egypt (GEN 46:28-34)

"'You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good.'" (GEN 50:20)

Moses commits murder and flees Egypt (EXOD 2:11-25)

The burning bush (EXOD 3–4)

NEW TESTAMENT (MATTHEW 13:47–18:20)

Herod executes John the Baptist (MATT 14:1-12)

The feeding of the four thousand (MATT 15:32-39)

"Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah.'" (MATT 16:16)

Jesus' transfiguration (MATT 17:1-13)

"'If your eye causes you to sin . . .'" (MATT 18:9)

But the famine continued to ravage the land of Canaan.

GENESIS 43:1

JAN 18-24



DISCUSSION GUIDE

REFLECT

PS 119

A WAY TO SEE

REFLECT ON GENESIS 43:1

Jacob and his sons had no relief from the famine. God's overall plan included sending them to Egypt, reuniting them with Joseph, and eating from Egypt's storehouses. But this bigger picture wasn't apparent to them.

Suffering and hardship never end quickly enough. Waiting for God to intervene can test us to the breaking point. But remaining faithful to God is an opportunity to learn greater trust and dependence. In other words, we build a deeper, closer relationship with God. Suffering also puts God's goodness in question, but faithfulness is the path we must travel to uncover God's goodness.

This was what Jacob and his sons discovered. God had been working for good throughout the famine. If you are facing suffering or hardship and God is not bringing relief as quickly as you would like, he may be working for good in the meantime.

Faithfulness is a seed planted in the soil of suffering. It is perseverance that sprouts from the ground (see James 1:2-3). Echo the words of Psalm 119:81, and ask God for the strength to remain faithful.

REFLECTION THOUGHT: GOD HAD BEEN WORKING FOR GOOD THROUGHOUT THE FAMINE.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HAVE "LITTLE FAITH"?

The expression "little faith" and related Greek terms are used five times in Matthew and only once elsewhere (Matthew 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20; Luke 12:28). The term refers to a specific event rather than to ongoing and permanent failure. In Matthew, this is due either to lack of knowledge on the part of Jesus' disciples or to acting without faith in a particular incident. If someone always lacks faith, it would be described as "unbelief." As examples of "little faith," the disciples in Matthew 6:30 did not understand their value or God's providential protection; in Matthew 8:26 and Matthew 14:31 they did not understand God's protection in the midst of physical danger; in Matthew 16:8 they did not understand Jesus' saying regarding yeast; and in Matthew 17:20 they were not able to exorcise a demon. These are instances of failure to be consistent with a calling rather than of having no faith whatsoever.

The term faith reflects at least two ideas: trust (personal reliance upon the Lord) and belief (affirmation of truths). Matthew's concern with "little faith" is about lack of trust by a follower of Jesus in a specific situation, rather than a failure to have basic belief in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Jesus wants his -followers not only to believe in him but also to trust, love, and obey him.



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LET'S TALK...

JAN 25-31



DISCUSSION GUIDE

REFLECT

PS 119

A WAY TO SEE

PRAYING THE PSALMS PSALM 24:1-10

Commit the whole earth and everything happening here to the Lord. Pray for the Lord's presence—his blessing—in every place and people.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What passage most surprised you?

What does it mean for a person's heart to be hardened?

What does it mean to "forgive your brothers and sisters" (Matthew 18:35)?

Have you ever thought that God was being unfair?

What did you learn about yourself in this week's readings?

TALKING POINTS

OLD TESTAMENT (EXODUS 5:22–19:15)

The Ten Plagues (EXOD 7–11)

The Israelites leave Egypt (EXOD 12:31-42)

The crossing of the Red Sea (EXOD 14)

God provides food from heaven (EXOD 16)

Jethro's advice to Moses (EXOD 18:13-26)

NEW TESTAMENT (MATTHEW 18:21–23:12)

The parable of the unforgiving servant (MATT 18:21-35)

The parable of the vineyard workers (MATT 20:1-16)

Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem (MATT 21:1-11)

Taxes for Caesar (MATT 22:15-22)

The greatest commandment (MATT 22:34-40)

If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense.

MATTHEW 18:15A

JAN 25-31



DISCUSSION GUIDE

REFLECT

PS 119

A WAY TO SEE

REFLECT ON MATTHEW 18:15-17

Jesus lays out clear guidelines for dealing with fellow believers who sin against us. These guidelines were meant for Christians, not unbelievers. They address sins committed against you and not others. The conflict that occurs is to be resolved in the context of the church, not the community at large.

Jesus' words do not give us the freedom to attack any person who hurts or insults us. They are not a license to gossip or to call for church intervention. They are designed to reconcile believers who disagree so that the church can live in harmony.

When someone wrongs us, our impulse is to do the opposite of what Jesus recommends here. We are tempted to turn away in hatred or resentment, seek revenge, or engage in gossip. By contrast, we should go directly to that person first, as difficult as that may be. Then we should forgive that person as often as he or she needs it (Matthew 18:21-22). This will create a much better chance of restoring the relationship and living together in peace. This is a chance to see the Kingdom breaking through.

REFLECTION THOUGHT: OUR IMPULSE IS TO DO THE OPPOSITE OF WHAT JESUS RECOMMENDS.

WHY WOULD GOD'S PEOPLE HAVE TO SUFFER HARDSHIP IF GOD WAS ON THEIR SIDE?

Sometimes people are urged to accept Christ because "he will solve your problems." But Christ did not promise to solve all problems a believer will face. In fact, he repeatedly warned people to consider what it would cost them to follow him, and he pointed out the hardships that would come into their lives as a result of choosing to follow him (Mark 8:34; Luke 14:28).

Exodus 5 gives us a case study: Pharaoh's earlier enslavement and per-secution of the Hebrews was purely strategic. In chapter 1, he worried that this growing sector of the population would cause trouble for him. In chapter 5, the situation is different. Moses and Aaron had rallied the people's hopes that their God would soon rescue them. During their initial encounter with Pharaoh, Moses and Aaron confronted him with the reality of God's -sovereign rule. Not surprisingly, Pharaoh considered this an offense to his own sovereignty and reacted strongly against the Israelites. When God's Kingdom clashes with God's enemies, there is often conflict and hardship for God's people.

We should not be surprised, therefore, when hardships come our way. Believers have changed allegiance from the realm of darkness to the realm of light (Colossians 1:12-13), and those who rule in the realm of darkness will certainly not let us leave their power without a fight. We, like the ancient Hebrews, must stand firm in our faith, knowing that God will secure the final victory on our behalf (Exodus 6:1-8; John 16:33; Romans 16:20).

Series of horizontal dashed lines for reflection notes.



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