

Exactly What We Need

Small Group Study based on "My Son, My Savior"

This three-session study is intended for small group Bible studies, especially those led by a spiritually mature, though not necessarily theologically-trained, Christian. It is designed to evoke heartfelt discussion in a safe environment where participants are assured of God's forgiveness for past failures. The interaction also evokes meaningful encouragement to strive to live for God out of grateful love for the love he first showed us through his Son.

The goals of the three sessions are:

- To help each of us see, as Mary came to see, that Jesus is exactly what we need.
- To help us treasure that truth, even if we have known it for many years.
- To give us encouragement for helping others also see that Jesus is exactly what they need.
- To share ideas for sharing Jesus with others.

Notes to leaders:

The length of the sessions was assumed to be approximately 60 minutes. You may have to vary the amount of material covered according to the length of time available. Prioritize activities you feel will be most meaningful. If your group is larger than five, resist the urge to do all the activities as one group. It takes too much time and people don't participate as much (and therefore don't retain as much). You'll have better results by dividing your group up into smaller subgroups of three or four people and assigning different activities to the various subgroups, giving them a relatively short time (<5 min) to do each of them. Each subgroup should nominate a spokesperson to share with the larger group what they learned. By having to "teach" others what you learn, you learn it better yourself. Instruct the subgroups that are listening to the results of the work of others to see if they can find anything to add to what they hear.

Many of the learning activities are subjective in nature. While suggestions for possible responses are given, there may be numerous other responses that are correct. Also, if learners get stuck and aren't sure which direction to go, one of the suggested responses may be used as a helpful example.

Session 1 - Jesus Fills Our Biggest Need

Introduction: Watch the movie

Watch entire movie (unless all participants have recently viewed it)

Discussion

My need for Jesus

1. List reasons Mary may have been tempted to believe she did not need a savior from sin.

She was given a blessing from God unique to her among all people and may have thought she was "special;" Elizabeth calls her "the mother of my Lord;" she endured great suffering watching her son die and could have thought God owed her; none of us like to admit we are sinful; etc.

2. Read Luke 1:46-47. Although a full understanding took time, Mary acknowledged her need for a savior before Christ was born. Recall scenes from the movie that portrayed Mary's growing understanding of her need and how Jesus met it.

As a child, the questions she asks of her father regarding Passover; the prophecy of Simeon about a sword piercing her soul; the fact she pondered events in her heart; the suffering and death of her son at Passover; the closing scene where she counted the blessing of calling Jesus her Savior, etc.

3. Each of us, even longtime Christians, can be tempted to overlook our need for a savior. These verses contain God's answer to some of these temptations. For each verse, try to identify a way Satan tries to get you to rationalize or minimize your sin and need for a savior. Then explain God's answer.

- Psalm 51:5 *Satan gets many people to think children are innocent and our guilt is only the bad things we do later on, but this verse makes it clear we are sinful from the very beginning. We inherit sin.*
- Ephesians 2:1 *Satan gets many people to believe they have some good along with the bad, and if they do enough good, they can perhaps earn God's favor. But this verse makes it clear that by nature we are dead in sin and unable to do anything to help ourselves.*
- James 2:10 *We like to think our sins are not as bad as the sins of others, but this verse makes it clear that any sin destroys the perfection which God requires.*

4. Though we fall short of God's perfect standards, Jesus gives us the good news that he has met those standards for us and forgives our failures. When we confess our sins (either regularly in worship services or privately to a person we've offended), describe the impact on our hearts and minds by the assurance that our sins are forgiven? How will that impact affect the way we conduct our life?

Words that describe the impact of forgiveness are: peace, relief, joy, thankfulness, confidence, etc. Every time we leave our burden of sin at the cross, we experience Jesus' love and have even more reason to thank him with our lives of obedience. Personal confession has the added benefit of the accountability to another person helping to keep our sinful nature more in check.

Other's need for a Savior

5. So many in our world ignore or reject their need for a savior. Compare the rejection by Jesus' critics in his day depicted in the movie with the rejection of Jesus' by critics in our day. List similarities and differences.

Similarities: both motivated by self-interest (not wanting to change lifestyles); both see Jesus as a threat to earthly happiness; both want to call their own shots...that is, be their own gods; etc. Differences: The Jewish leaders saw the miracles and heard Jesus teach first hand, whereas today people reject (and question the validity of) God's record of the events in the Bible, etc.

6. Brainstorm ways you might be able to lead someone you know with limited knowledge of Jesus to at least consider his claims to be their Savior. Share your ideas.

Possibilities may include: Ask people what their expectation is for life after death and pray that you, after hearing their ideas, get an opportunity to introduce them to Jesus as your confidence; find solid teaching about Christ (from a pastor's sermon or other source) on the internet, then ask others to look at it and give you their reaction; at Christmastime, ask people what they know about Christ, then ask if you could fill in some of their gaps in knowledge or show them the real Jesus from God's Word rather than the world's caricature or stereotype. * refer to: www.WhatAboutJesus.com*

Closing Prayer

Dear Jesus:

Thank you for being Mary's son, my brother, and the world's Savior. Help us to trust and treasure this knowledge always. May your love for us move us to look for opportunities to share you with others and give us courage to speak or act when those opportunities arise. Amen.

(At each session, individuals in the group may pray for the opportunity to share Jesus with specific individuals in their lives, or offer those names to the leader beforehand for the leader to include in the prayer.)

Session 2 - We Need Jesus to be God and Man

Introduction

During the events surrounding Jesus' birth and childhood, Mary encounters her initial struggles to understand the full implications of the fact that her son is also God's Son. He is God and man in one person. In this session, we will turn to God's Word to help us understand the blessings we have because Jesus is both God and man. Then we will seek ways to share this Jesus with others.

Watch first half of movie (through scene of 12-year Jesus at the Temple)

Discussion

Jesus is God

1. Most of Jesus' demonstrations of his power as God come later in his life. Yet even as a 12-year old, Jesus would not let Mary and Joseph think that he was just their human son. Try to recall at least three pieces of evidence from the events surrounding Jesus' birth and childhood that indicated to Mary and Joseph that Jesus was indeed God.

God's Word about the virgin birth (and its fulfillment) immediately comes to mind, as does the report of the angels' announcement that Mary and Joseph heard from the shepherds). The prophecy by Simeon, the visit of the Magi, and God's miraculous protection from Herod are additional possibilities.

2. For each reference below list the blessings that you have because Jesus is God and describe the encouragement you receive as a result.

- Ephesians 1:18-23 *God gave Jesus the power to rule all things for the church, which is us. Because of this, we can know that even when it looks like evil is "winning" in this world, Jesus is still in charge and nothing will happen apart from his will; he will accomplish everything according to his good and gracious will.*
- Colossians 2:9-12 *Paul says that Jesus is fully God in bodily form and describes several blessings: fullness in Christ, removal of the sinful nature (using circumcision as a picture of that removal), burial in baptism of the sinful nature, and raised to new life through faith in Christ's resurrection from the dead. We can be encouraged that, though we still struggle with sin in this world, it no longer defines or controls us. Jesus has given us a new life with a new nature that will last forever.*
- Hebrews 4:14-16 *Jesus is our heavenly high priest, who because he is God was able to live a sinless life in our place. He gives us credit for his perfect obedience, and because of that, we can be encouraged to approach God's throne of grace in prayer with confidence.*

3. Perhaps many people you know do not acknowledge that Jesus is God. List some of the substitutes for Jesus that people worship in their lives (as their “gods”) and give reasons people choose these “gods.”

Possibilities include: themselves, wealth, sports, travel, physical health, nature, their idea of God, Allah, Mary, etc. There are many different reasons. Some were led astray by false teachings of other religions (such as Allah or Mary as coredemptrix); others worship self because they don't want to be accountable to God but want to decide right and wrong for themselves; some worship pleasure in its various forms because they think this world is all there is.

4. For the various false gods in #3 above, give at least one reason that Jesus is a better true God.

Jesus is better than false religions because he backs up his claim to be God by his miracles and rising from the dead. He also gives us eternal life as a gift rather than something we earn. Jesus is better than worshipping self because eventually people will realize (likely after it is too late) that they cannot call their own shots when it comes to eternity. Jesus is better than worshipping pleasure because pleasures in this world and our ability to enjoy them eventually fade and we all must face death. Jesus offers true joy for eternity without any sorrow or pain.

Jesus is man

5. The story of Jesus' birth is powerful evidence of his humanity. He is indeed “Emmanuel”, God with us. Read Philippians 2:5-8. Explain how Jesus’ willingness to submit humbly to his Father’s plan gives us motivation to submit to God’s will for our lives.

When we consider what Jesus gave up for a time to come to earth to live, suffer, and die, we are amazed that he would do this willingly. It is the magnitude of his sacrifice that demonstrates the strength of his love for us. Such love motivates a loving, thankful response. That is what enables us to submit to God’s will for our own lives, no matter what struggles and challenges that entails.

6. For each reference below identify blessings we have because Jesus was willing to become one of us and describe the encouragement you receive as a result.

- Matthew 4:2; 8:24; John 11:35; John 19:28 *Jesus got hungry, tired, sorrowful, and thirsty...in other words, he really was human. We can relate better to a Savior who has experienced exactly what we do.*
- Galatians 4:4-7 *Jesus came to keep God’s law because we could not. Because Jesus has redeemed us, through faith in him we are now his brothers and sisters in God’s family with full rights as heirs. Eternal life is our inheritance.*
- Hebrews 4:14-15 *Yes this is the same passage that we looked at to see the blessings we have because Jesus is God. In this case, because Jesus is human, his temptations were exactly the same temptations we face. We are encouraged that he did not succumb to them, but as our substitute he kept God’s law perfectly.*

Sharing Jesus

7. Using your responses to #2 and #4 above, take a few minutes to privately formulate a positive response to someone who says: "I don't understand why Jesus is such a big deal to you. I seem to be doing just fine without him." After a few minutes, share your answers.

There is no single "right" way to share Jesus; he asks us to trust him and to speak. So there are many ways to respond. One possibility could be: "Well I'm happy for you that things are going so well, but what's the longest that can last?" Everyone has difficulties eventually. You may escape cancer, marriage problems, or financial trouble in this life, but eventually everyone has to face death. That's why Jesus is so important to me. Because of what he has done, I'm completely confident about my eternal destiny, and it also gives me strength to deal with my challenges here and now."

8. Together with the others in your group strategize how you might interest a friend that has mistaken ideas about Jesus to watch "My Son, My Savior." Include as part of your strategy your plan for follow-up questions afterward to assess whether your friend has a better idea who Jesus really is.

This may require "outside the box" thinking. Possibilities include giving someone a DVD to watch or offering to view it with them. Letting people watch it on their own schedules is less threatening, but you also have less assurance that they will do so. Whether a person will agree to watch it either way will depend on where that person is spiritually. Some may simply not be ready for this step, but an event down the road (death of a loved one, children asking spiritual questions, etc.) may make them willing; so be listening for those future opportunities to try again. Also, people from other cultures and possibly new to the United States might be willing to watch as a way of getting better acquainted with you and your views. Questions to ask would be open ended ones (not yes or no) that will give you information about what they watched and their reaction. This could include: "In what way did the movie's portrayal of Mary or Jesus differ from or confirm what you already knew?" "From your point of view, what was Jesus' purpose in coming to this earth?" "Describe Mary's perception of her Son and how that changed over time."

9. 20th Century British author C.S.Lewis is known for challenging people to consider the claims of Jesus. According to Lewis, Jesus is either Lord (God and man and our Savior), or a liar, or a lunatic (a crazy person claiming to be God). Jesus does not allow us the option of thinking that he is just a good person or famous teacher. No other human prophet made or backs up claims (Matthew 26:62-65) as Jesus did. Describe witnessing situations where a discussion along these lines (Lord, liar or lunatic) may be fruitful (or not).

One situation in which this approach may be fruitful is with people who grew up in or currently attend nominally Christian churches but don't recognize Jesus as the only way to heaven. We speak the truth in love and show them that Jesus claims to be God and

the ONLY way to God (John 14:6). To say there are other ways to glory would mean Jesus was a liar. Perhaps this discussion would also be useful with people (especially Latin American Roman Catholics) who elevate Mary to god-like status. Unlike her son, Mary never claims to be a savior; in fact, she acknowledges her son to be her Savior. However, this approach likely will not make a difference to a person that rejects Jesus and his claims outright.

Closing Prayer

Dear Jesus,

Thank you for giving up your throne in heaven to become one us, yet without sin. Help us to take comfort in your personal knowledge and experience in struggling with our day-to-day challenges. Give us renewed trust in your strength as God and Lord to provide for our needs. Encourage us to find and seize the openings to sharing you as Lord. Amen.

Session 3 We Need Jesus to Live, Die and Rise

Introduction

The first thirty years of Jesus' life story is mostly unknown except for the few glimpses of events recorded by Matthew and Luke. But the gospels are full of events from his three ministry years, with special attention given the last week before his death and resurrection. Mary was witness to much of this, during which a sword "pierced her own soul." Yet, in spite of her pain, through her son's suffering God was carrying out his plan for eternal joy for all of us.

Watch second half of movie (starting: John the Baptist – Chapter 3 on DVD)

Christ's first purpose - obey perfectly in action

1. Last session we considered Jesus' willingness to submit to his heavenly Father's will (Philippians 2:5-8). Part of that plan was living as part of the human family that did not fully understand God's plan until after he completed it. Recall scenes from the movie where Mary or other family members struggled with what Jesus was doing (or not doing).

Mary and Joseph struggled to understand why 12-year old Jesus stayed at the temple (previous session). Mary was premature in asking for Jesus' help at the wedding at Cana. Mary and Jesus' brothers thought he was not caring for himself properly and possibly even not in his right mind. Mary had understandable gut-wrenching sorrow watching her son suffer and die.

2. Identify how God's Word describes our impossible-to-meet need in the first two passages and how only Jesus meets this need in the second two.

- Matthew 5:48; 1 Peter 1:15-16 *God demands absolute perfection, that is, holiness.*

Romans 5:19; 2 Corinthians 5:21 *God credits us with the perfect obedience of Jesus. In Christ, God sees us as righteous.*

3. Describe how Jesus' words and actions at the temple as a boy (viewed in the previous session) and at the wedding at Cana show his obedience to his earthly parents AND his obedience to his heavenly Father.

Jesus' primary goal was to do his heavenly Father's will. So he did that perfectly. On occasion, because his earthly parents did not understand God the Father's will completely, Jesus did not do what they expected. This was not sinful disobedience, but rather loving instruction from their son.

4. Part of Jesus' obedience involved pointing out the self-righteousness and hypocrisy of those who thought they did not need Jesus. In his culture this involved "violating" man-made Sabbath laws and showing love and giving aid to sinners and outcasts. Make two lists, one of the self-righteous people we may be called to oppose and a second list of the outcasts we may be called to embrace (without embracing their sin) in our culture.

Self-righteous people: In our culture, this includes: those that see no need for God and want to decide right and wrong for themselves; those that think they can live God-pleasing lives, or that God should accept them the way they are.

Outcasts: Any sinner who repents, no matter what the sin (substance abuse, sexual abuse, porn addiction, prostitution, murder, whatever); victims of the previously listed criminals who do not feel like God can love them; mentally ill and homeless people; etc.

Christ's second purpose - obey perfectly in inaction (passively)

5. John the Baptist pointed out to the people where the life of his cousin, Jesus, ultimately would lead. Yet he needed reassurance that Jesus was the Lamb of God. List doubts and concerns Mary may have had as opposition to her Son began to peak.

We cannot know her thoughts, but she may have questioned God's plan, especially as his suffering and death unfolded. Did it have to be this way? Jesus had done nothing wrong, ever. His trial and execution were a farce of justice. How could God allow this?

6. Find specific phrases from the following passages in Scripture that show that Jesus went to his excruciating death willingly of his own accord.

- Matthew 26:36-56 (especially 42, 53-54) *Your will be done; [the Father could] at once put at [Jesus'] disposal more than twelve legions of angels.*
- Mark 10:42-45 *The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*
- John 10:17-18 *I lay down my life...I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down...*

7. Jesus claimed gentleness, but not weakness (Matthew 21:5). He came as our king and promises to return (John 14:2,3). Explain the difference between gentleness (or meekness) and weakness, and the importance of this difference to those who place their trust in Jesus.

Weakness indicates a lack of power or ability. Gentleness or meekness indicates one has strength or power but chooses not to use it in certain situations. In Jesus' case, he set aside his power as God and allowed himself to be falsely accused, beaten, flogged,

sentenced, and crucified even though he could have prevented or stopped it at any moment. He endured it willingly as our substitute.

Sharing Jesus

8. Our sinful pride makes it difficult to admit we need a Savior. Take 90 seconds privately to formulate a possible response to someone who says to you: "I don't need or want help from some guy who died on a cross 2000 years ago. That's just a crutch for weak people." (Possible hint: Recall Jesus' power as God and his willingness to set that aside for us.) Share your answers.

A person who speaks this way does not appear to have a heart that is ready for the gospel. It will likely take some hardship or difficulty before he or she begins to realize there are situations that cannot be handled with (false) bravado. Perhaps it is possible to plant a seed that may sprout later on with a response such as: "Well I can see why you might feel that way, but the cross is not the end of the story. Jesus did not stay dead. Anyone who can rise from the dead and offers that to us is worth looking into from my point of view. Maybe someday you'll want to consider that, and I'd love to help you if you do."

9. Many people who reject belief in God the Father or his Son do so because they perceive God either causes evil in this world, or at least passively allows it to occur rather than prevent it. Put yourself in Mary's place and imagine the emotional pain she endured during her son's suffering and death. Consider also her final realization of God's plan after Jesus rose. After a minute, together as a group discuss what her perspective on God's use of evil might be. Then outline a response to the difficulties people have with God's responsibility for evil in the world. Base your ideas on the solution to all evil that God provided in his Son.

As aged Simeon said, a soul pierced Mary's soul. She saw firsthand the brutality inflicted on her son, and knew firsthand he did nothing to warrant it. As difficult as that was to watch and sort through, in the end she understood that the innocent Lamb of God HAD to suffer and die, just as the prophets said. She saw that God used horrible evil to accomplish the greatest good ever for the whole world. She also likely came to realize how God was with her and cared for her through this very difficult period. Though he was dying in agony, Jesus gave her an "adopted" son, John, to take his place. She likely grieved with John as the rest of Good Friday unfolded and then rejoiced with him as the events of Easter Sunday became known.

God still allows and uses evil, and it is still beyond our ability to fully understand. As people wrestle with evil when it touches their lives, we need to remind them that in spite of the trouble, God has already demonstrated his unfathomable love for us in sending Jesus. He rescues us from the worst evil of all, eternal separation from God. He asks us to trust his almighty power and knowledge and acknowledge that he knows what he is doing, even when the evil seems senseless. An outbreak of evil is not the time to blame God; rather it is the time to draw closer to him for strength and comfort.

Closing Prayer

Dear Jesus,

Thank you for your perfect obedience in our place and giving us credit for your perfection. Thank you for being willing to endure the curse of God for the sin of the world so that we will never have to fear that curse. Help us to more fully understand your love for us so that we may better reflect that love to others, especially those in our lives who yet do not trust in all that you have done. Amen.