

UNDERSTANDING JESUS

CULTURAL INSIGHTS INTO THE WORDS AND DEEDS OF CHRIST

STUDY GUIDE

FIRST CENTURY FOUNDATIONS

MILTON, ONTARIO

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INTRODUCTION

One day in 2002 during a trip to Israel, Joe Amaral, the author of *Understanding Jesus* was standing looking down at the city of Jerusalem. Here is how he describes what he saw and happened at that moment:

As you look to the right you can see the ancient Jewish burial sites and the tombs of some of Israel's greatest kings and Old Testament legends. In the centre, your eyes fall upon the Old City of David and the Kidron Valley where Jesus and His disciples walked numerous times. To the far and upper right you can see the Mount of Olives where Jesus will set foot when He returns, and you can see where the Temple used to stand. To the upper left you see the splendor of the Old City of Jerusalem with its massive walls. What a breathtaking sight! As I stood there, I felt as though I could have lived in that moment forever.

Then I turned to a friend who was near me and told Him that I had just made a remarkable discovery. By the look on my face and the size of my eyes, he knew that whatever it was, it was big. No doubt he was wondering what incredible thought or unbelievable revelation I had received that would change our lives and our world. I said to him, "Jesus was a Jew!" As soon as I said it, I grabbed my mouth and covered it. I couldn't believe what I had just said. He gave me a look of mock bewilderment and said, "You mean He wasn't from Montana?"

Only moments later did I realize the full impact that statement had on me. Jesus wasn't from Montana, nor was He a Canadian—He was a Jew living in first century Israel, living a first century lifestyle.

That realization has forever impacted the way I see Jesus and the way in which I now perceive the Gospels. . . . Out of that realization also came a deep desire from within my spirit—I would make it my purpose in life to discover the historical Jesus who lived and taught in the Land of Israel. What were people like in the time of Jesus? What were their thoughts? What was going on in the world around them? How did it affect Israel? and What kind of Messiah were they expecting?

As I began to ask the questions I also began to seek out some answers. I read books; I researched on the internet; I sat under the teaching of rabbis and messianic Jewish believers; and I pleaded with them to tell me who Jesus really was. The pages that follow are the product of my ongoing quest to find the answers to these and other similar questions.¹

¹ Understanding Jesus, pp. 9-11.

The book *Understanding Jesus* is designed to enhance your ability to interpret the Bible by applying the powerful insights that arise from the knowledge of first century Jewish culture. The Bible, after all, is a thoroughly Jewish writing, with only two of its 66 books written by a Gentile (Luke and Acts by Doctor Luke). Unfortunately most people think of the Old Testament as a Jewish book and the New Testament as a Christian book. While this is true in one sense, we also need to recognize that all of the earliest Christ followers were Jews who had received Jesus as their Messiah. In fact, it was over a decade before the Early Church realized that God intended to save Gentiles simply by faith in Jesus without requiring them first to be circumcised and keep the Law like good Jews.

This Study Guide will take you through eight specific events in the life of Jesus as explained in *Understanding Jesus, Cultural Insights into the Words and Deeds of Christ* by Joe Amaral. It has been prepared for use by individuals or small groups who want to know more about what Jesus said and did and how it applies to their walk with God.

You will need a copy of *Understanding Jesus* to read along with this Study Guide.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

This Study Guide will take you or your small group through eight selected segments of *Understanding Jesus*. It is designed to be used over the course of eight personal study sessions or small group gatherings. Since many of the discussion questions in the Guide are based upon *Understanding Jesus*, you will benefit from reading the section of the book covered in each lesson before you meet together.

Each week's lesson has six components:

Introduction

This section gives you a sense of where the study is going as it sets out key learning objectives for the week.

Input

Here you read relevant scriptures as well as a selected portion of *Understanding Jesus*. This gives you the background information you will need to respond to the discussion questions in the next section.

Interaction

This is where you can answer the questions by yourself for personal study or use them to guide your discussion in a small group. In a group setting you will also have an opportunity to share progress reports on your *Invest* goals from the previous week (see below).

Infuse

Psalm 119:11 says, "*I have taken your words to heart so I would not sin against you.*" This section suggests relevant verses you can memorize or place into your PDA to help you walk out what you learn each week.

Insight

This is a journaling place where you can record personal insights as you study on your own or with others.

Invest

In this section you can do some personal planning on how you are going to invest your life into following the Lord in the light of what you learn each week.

NOTE: The *Introduction*, *Input* and *Interaction* segments are for use during a small group meeting. The remaining sections are for your personal study.

WEEK 1 - THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

Introduction

Jesus Christ was a first century Jew. What could be more obvious! Yet down through the centuries the Church usually has read the Bible as if it was written for Gentile readers. Jesus has become the generic Saviour of humankind, instead of the Jewish Messiah who fulfilled God's ancient promises to His chosen people in dozens of specific details. We begin our study of Jesus in the context of His Jewish roots with a look at the start of His ministry at His baptism.

This week we will reflect on the significance of this event as it pertains to the ministry of Jesus and explore the meaning and importance of baptism for our own lives as well.

Input

Read pages 38-40 in *Understanding Jesus* on *The Baptism of Jesus*.

Now look at Matthew's account of this event in Matthew 3:13-17:

(13) Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. (14) But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (15) Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. (16) As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. (17) And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Interaction

Use the following questions to explore this powerful event in the life of Jesus.

1. Based upon Matthew 3:1-12, what was the baptism of John the Baptist all about? What did it signify?

2. What further insight into the purpose of John's baptism do we get from John 1:19-34? What did John's work have to do with Jesus?

3. Look closely at Matthew 3:13-15. What is going on here? Why would John think it inappropriate to baptize Jesus?

4. What did Jesus mean when He said, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness"? See also Philippians 2:5-8 and Hebrews 2:14-18.

5. Imagine you are a CNN correspondent stationed in Jerusalem. How would you report on what took place at the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:16, 17)? Why did those looking on not react to the voice from heaven that spoke to Jesus?

6. Matthew 3:17 in the New Living Translation reads, *“and a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.’”* What would it mean to hear God say this to you?

7. What does the Bible teach concerning the baptism of believers (Matthew 28:19, 20; Acts 2:37-41; Colossians 2:12)?

8. Have you been baptized in water since you committed your life to Christ? If so, describe your experience. If not, what are your thoughts about being baptized?

Infuse

Matthew 3:16-17 describe the baptism of Jesus in a nutshell. As you memorize and meditate on this verse this week, recognize that you too are a “dearly loved” son or daughter of God. Think about how you can bring “great joy” to the Father’s heart.

(16) “After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him. (17) And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.’ ” (NLT)

Insight

Spend some time journaling on what you learned in this week's study. Reflect upon your baptism or upon a time when you sensed God was speaking to you personally and affirming His love for you. How has this prepared you for ministering to others as Jesus began to do following His baptism?

Invest

As you reflect upon the baptism of Jesus, write down two or three specific things you want to do to put what you learned in this lesson into practice.

If you have yet to confess your faith in Christ publicly through water baptism, what steps should you take to do this? Perhaps there is an area of ministry God has spoken to you about, but you have not taken any action on it.

Use this space to formulate some concrete steps or commitments you want to make.

WEEK 2 - THE TZITZIT (PRAYER SHAWL)

PROPHECY

Introduction

Jesus was in the middle of a busy day of ministry. The day before He had delivered a demoniac of a legion of demons on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. He is approached by the ruler of the local synagogue with the news that his little daughter is at death's door and could Jesus come and heal her. No pressure!

In the midst of this request, a sick woman squeezes through the crowd straining to touch the hem of His cloak. When she does, her affliction of over a decade is instantly gone! But the story does not end there. Jesus wants to use this miracle to teach us something about faith.

This week we will examine this powerful episode in order to understand something of the faith of this unnamed woman and how she found healing in the Messiah. We will reflect upon our own faith and how we approach God with our impossible situations.

Input

Read pages 54-60 on *The Tzitzit (Prayer Shawl) Prophecy* in *Understanding Jesus*.

Now look at Luke 8:42b-48

(42b) "As Jesus was on his way, the crowds almost crushed him. (43) And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, but no one could heal her. (44) She came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped. (45) 'Who touched me?' Jesus asked. When they all denied it, Peter said, 'Master, the people are crowding and pressing against you.' (46) But Jesus said, 'Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me.' (47) Then the woman, seeing that she could not go unnoticed, came trembling and fell at his feet. In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed. (48) Then he said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.'"

Interaction

Begin by sharing some of your steps or commitments from last week's *Invest* section. What progress have you made? How can the group pray for you about these steps?

Here are some questions to help you uncover some great insights from this story.

1. Have you ever heard a sermon about this story? How were the actions of the woman explained? What was the lesson drawn from the story?

2. According to Numbers 15:37-41 and Deuteronomy 22:12, what was every Jew supposed to wear on the corners of his garment? What did this signify?

3. What were these tassels called and how are they connected with the idea of healing and the Messiah (*Understanding Jesus*, pp. 56-58; Malachi 4:2)?

4. According to Mark 5:27, 28, why did the woman reach out to touch Jesus' garment (Luke 8:44 tells us it was the "edge of his cloak")?

5. Why do you think Jesus insisted on knowing who had touched His clothes (Luke 8:45-48)? What brought about the woman's healing?

6. How does the story in Mark 6:53-55 reinforce the lesson Mark wants us to take from this account of the woman? (Notice that in Mark's original account, he says she "touched his cloak" whereas a little later he notes that the sick touched "the edge of his cloak")?

7. Have you ever faced a situation where you were in desperate need of God's help? What did you do?

8. What problem or issue in your life are you believing God for right now? How could this story help you deal with this problem or issue?

Infuse

Look at Psalm 91:1-4 this week. Why not write it on a card to carry with you each day or put it into your PDA or cell phone. Take a few moments to read it over slowly out loud. Make it a personal confession of your faith in Messiah Jesus and the healing and shelter you can find under His “wings.”

(1) Those who live in the shelter of the Most High will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty. (2) This I declare about the Lord: He alone is my refuge, my place of safety; he is my God, and I trust him. (3) For he will rescue you from every trap and protect you from deadly disease. (4) He will cover you with his feathers. He will shelter you with his wings. His faithful promises are your armor and protection. (NLT)

Insight

In your journal this week, reflect on a problem or need you or someone close to you is facing. How have you expressed your faith in God about this thing up to this point? How has the story of the woman who touched the “wings” of Jesus’ garment changed how you look at this situation?

Invest

What sorts of steps would you like to take to find an answer to the need or problem you may be facing? How could you increase your faith to believe for God's help in the future if you are not facing an issue right now?

Write down one or two ideas that will help you become more the like this woman of faith.

WEEK 3 - THE FEAST OF TRUMPETS

Introduction

Israel's public acts of worship and national celebrations of what God had done on her behalf were inseparably connected to the Feasts of the Lord that occurred primarily in the Spring (Passover, Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits and Pentecost) and the Fall (Trumpets, Atonement and Tabernacles). The Feasts of the Lord were often related to something in Israel's past (such as Passover), however, they also pointed toward both the first and second coming of the Messiah. In this regard they have much to teach us about Jesus.

This week we will examine the meaning of the Feast of Trumpets and look at its prophetic significance regarding the Rapture of the Church, the Bride of Christ. We will also learn how Jesus repeatedly used Jewish wedding practices in His teaching and how these relate to our own walk with the Lord in the light of His return.

Input

Read the material on *The Feast of Trumpets* found on pages 81-102 in *Understanding Jesus*.

In Leviticus 23:23-25 we read about the Feast of Trumpets:

(23) The LORD said to Moses, (24) "Say to the Israelites: 'On the first day of the seventh month you are to have a day of rest, a sacred assembly commemorated with trumpet blasts. (25) Do no regular work, but present an offering made to the LORD by fire.'"

In Matthew 24:42-44 we read about the return of Christ, which will also be heralded by a trumpet:

(42) "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. (43) But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. (44) So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."

Interaction

Start your discussion with a look at your commitments from last week's *Invest* segment. Feel free to pray for each other over the things that are shared.

The following questions will help you to explore the Feast of Trumpets and what it can teach us about the return of Christ.

1. What did the Feast of Trumpets signify for the Jewish people? What was the traditional meaning of blowing trumpets on the first day of the new year (see *Understanding Jesus* pp. 81-87)?

2. How is the Feast of Trumpets connected to the return of Christ (see *Understanding Jesus* pp. 88-91; Matthew 24:36)?

3. What was the significance of the words of Jesus at the Last Supper concerning the new covenant He was going to inaugurate based upon the shedding of His blood? How was this related to the cup of wine He asked the disciples to drink (see *Understanding Jesus* pp. 92-95; Matthew 26:26-29)?

4. Why did the bride always have to be ready to go with the groom? Why didn't he let her know when he was coming (see *Understanding Jesus* pp. 96-98)?

5. In Matthew 25:1-13 Jesus told the Parable of the Ten Virgins. In the light of what you have learned about Jewish wedding customs, what is this parable saying to us (see *Understanding Jesus* pp. 97-98; Matthew 25:13)?

6. What does it mean to "be ready all the time, for the Son of Man will come when least expected" (Matthew 24:44, NLT)?

Infuse

The words of Jesus in Mark 13:32-33 caution us to be ready, like a first-century Jewish bride, for the time when her groom will come for her. Carry them with you for review over the next week. Let them remind you that Jesus *will* come for us at an hour when we least expect it. We need to "be on guard!"

*(32) "However, no one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows.
(33) And since you don't know when that time will come, be on guard! Stay alert!"*

Insight

Make some personal notes on your relationship with Jesus. How would you characterize it? Is it like a bride waiting with great anticipation for the moment when her beloved will appear to take her away? Or perhaps it's more like a child watching TV who dreads being taken away from what he's doing by his mother's call for supper?

Has your sense of expectancy over Christ's return changed over the years? Has it grown stronger or diminished? Why?

Invest

Think about the return of Christ at any moment. How could this truth motivate you to consider rearranging some of your priorities in life? How might it affect your schedule, your spending habits or your commitments? Make some notes on anything you would like to rearrange about how you want to live your life in the light of Christ's return.

WEEK 4 - THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES

Introduction

The Feast of Tabernacles is the third of the fall feasts of the Lord. It is celebrated following Trumpets and the Day of Atonement. Tabernacles focuses upon the 40 years Israel spent wandering in the wilderness en route to the Promised Land.

This week we will explore what it means to be God's people on the move. We will look at our relationship to this world and the importance of remembering what God has done for us in the past as well as opening our hearts to where He wants to take us in the future.

Input

Study pages 109 to 117 in *Understanding Jesus*.

This feast was instituted in Deuteronomy 16:13-15:

(13) "Celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days after you have gathered the produce of your threshing floor and your winepress. (14) Be joyful at your Feast—you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites, the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns. (15) For seven days celebrate the Feast to the Lord your God at the place the Lord will choose. For the Lord your God will bless you in all your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete."

Next read Exodus 13:21:

(21) "By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night."

And Nehemiah 9:20, 21:

(20) "You gave your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and you gave them water for their thirst. (21) For forty years you sustained them in the desert; they lacked nothing, their clothes did not wear out nor did their feet become swollen."

Interaction

Spend a few minutes discussing your *Invest* commitments from last week. Share progress reports, encourage each other and pray for one another.

Now let's explore some of the wonderful truths depicted in the Feast of Tabernacles.

1. Based upon your reading in *Understanding Jesus* and the Scriptures, list the key realities this feast depicts.

2. What does the New Testament have to say about our status in this world as pilgrims or strangers on a journey (Philippians 3:20, 21; Hebrews 11:8-16; 1 Peter 1:17-19; 2:11)? How should this affect our priorities?

3. How do you react to this biblical picture of the Christian life? How does it relate to your personal expectations for your life and your future?

4. The Israelites lived in temporary shelters for a week during the feast to remind them of how God provided for them in the wilderness and to help them remember that their lives depend upon God's blessing and provision. What did Jesus have to say about this truth in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:25-34)?

5. How should we respond to the natural concerns we all have about how our basic needs in life will be met according to Matthew 6? How does this work for you? What do you feel when you think about doing this?

6. Throughout their wilderness journey, how did Israel experience God's leading (Exodus 13: 20-22)? How have you experienced God's leading in your life? What ways of receiving guidance do we have that the Israelites did not have?

Infuse

Spend a few minutes committing John 8:12 to memory or else put it into your cell phone or PDA. During the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus promised that those who follow Him would have "the light of life." What does that mean for your life?

(12) "When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'"

Insight

In your journaling this week reflect upon what it means to follow Jesus, who is the light of the world (John 8:12). Explore how the light of His sinless life shows us our own areas of darkness. How does His example of servanthood point the way forward for us?

Invest

The Feast of Tabernacles emphasizes the fact that we are pilgrims who are on a journey toward something better. The Israelites lived for seven days in temporary shelters to remind themselves that God was more important than their homes or possessions. We too are called to be pilgrims on a journey following our Master.

What steps could you take to simplify your lifestyle? Perhaps there are pursuits, possessions, commitments or pastimes that are holding you back on the journey (Heb. 12:1)? Make some notes on what you might like to change in your life.

WEEK 5 - THE FEAST OF DEDICATION

Introduction

This week we focus upon another of the feasts that Jesus attended. The Feast of Dedication arose from a miraculous provision God made for His people during the time of the Maccabean Revolt against the Syrians who had conquered Palestine in 165 BC. Although this feast is not one of those instituted by God in Scripture, it points to a powerful biblical truth that is relevant to each one of us today.

Have you ever faced a situation where your resources were insufficient? Have you ever thought that you did not have what it takes to make a difference for God in the Kingdom? This lesson will explore these dilemmas.

Input

Read pages 125 to 128 in *Understanding Jesus* on *The Feast of Dedication*.

Read John 10:22:

(22) "It was now winter, and Jesus was in Jerusalem at the time of Hanukkah, the Festival of Dedication." (NLT)

The miracle associated with this Feast is recorded in the Talmud, the Jewish oral law and commentary on the Torah (Genesis to Deuteronomy).

"When the Greeks entered the Sanctuary, they contaminated all of its oil. When the royal Hasmonean family overpowered and was victorious over them, they searched and found only a single cruse of pure oil that was sealed with the seal of the Kohen Gadol (High Priest), enough to light the menorah for a single day. A miracle occurred, and they lit the menorah with this oil for eight days. The following year, they established these [eight days] as days of festivity and praise and thanksgiving to God."

Talmud, Book 1, Tract Sabbath, Chapter II

Also read John 6:5-13:

(5) "When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, 'Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?' (6) He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do."

(7) Philip answered him, 'Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!'

(8) Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, (9) 'Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?'

(10) Jesus said, 'Have the people sit down.' There was plenty of grass in that place, and the men sat down, about five thousand of them. (11) Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

(12) When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, 'Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.' (13) So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten."

Interaction

Begin by reviewing your notes from last week's *Invest* section. Share any progress you have made toward your goals.

The following questions examine the Feast of Dedication and the spiritual truth it celebrates.

1. What was the historical situation that gave rise to the Feast of Dedication? What caused the problem and how did God intervene in the situation?

2. What spiritual lesson can we learn from this story?

3. Can you describe a time when you felt that the gifts you had to give to God seemed completely inadequate? What did you do? What did God do?

4. Read Exodus 3:10-12; 4:1-5, 10-17 where God calls Moses to deliver Israel from Egypt. How did Moses respond when God called him? What did God ask him (see 4:2)?

5. What eventually became of the rod or staff of Moses? What was he able to do with it (Exodus 14:13-16)?

6. One day Jesus taught a large crowd some distance away from the nearest village. Knowing they were hungry, He told the disciples to feed them. What happened next (John 6:5-13)?

7. What can we learn from this story about God’s ability to take what we have and make something much greater with it?

8. How could you apply this truth to your life right now?

Infuse

1 Peter 4:10 encourages us to give what we have to God so He can use it as a vehicle to bring His grace to other people. 1 Corinthians 4:4-5 encourages us to realize that God can take whatever we give Him and make it powerful for His purposes. As you meditate on these verses throughout the week, think about the gifts that you can offer to God.

1 Peter 4:10:

(10) “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.”

1 Corinthians 4:4-5:

(4) “We are confident of all this because of our great trust in God through Christ. (5) It is not that we think we are qualified to do anything on our own. Our qualification comes from God.”

Insight

Think of a time when you held back from attempting something you felt God wanted you to do. What kept you back? How did you feel about not moving ahead?

Next describe an occasion when you took a risk and stepped out by faith to do something you knew was beyond you. What was the result?

Invest

What would you attempt for God if you knew you could not fail? What ministry would you get involved in, who would you reach out to, where would you go, if fear or a sense of inadequacy was not holding you back?

Write down one to three personal goals that will stretch you, things where God will have to step in to make it work.

WEEK 6 - THE RAISING OF LAZARUS

Introduction

As *Understanding Jesus* explains, there were four specific miracles that first century Jews believed only the Messiah could perform (see pp. 15-17). The fourth of these was the raising of someone from the dead after four days.

This week's study will look at the times when we need to trust God with our impossibilities, our heartaches and our moments of despair. We will examine what it means to trust God even when all hope is gone.

Input

Read pages 134-140 in *Understanding Jesus*.

Read John 1:1-44 (some verses have been excluded):

(1) "Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ... (3) So the sisters sent word to Jesus, 'Lord, the one you love is sick.' ... (5) Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. (6) Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. (7) Then he said to his disciples, 'Let us go back to Judea.'...

(17) "On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ... (20) When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. (21) 'Lord,' Martha said to Jesus, 'if you had been here, my brother would not have died. (22) But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.' (23) Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' (24) Martha answered, 'I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.' (25) Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; (26) and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' (27) 'Yes, Lord,' she told him, 'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.'

(32) "When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' (34) 'Where have you laid him?' he asked. 'Come and see, Lord,' they replied. ...

(38) "Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. (39) 'Take away the stone,' he said. 'But,

Lord,' said Martha, the sister of the dead man, 'by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.' (40) Then Jesus said, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' ... (43) When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' (44) The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, 'Take off the grave clothes and let him go.' "

Interaction

Begin your group discussion by reviewing the *Invest* goals you created last week. Share progress reports, encourage one another and pray for each other.

Let's turn to this powerful story to see what it has to say to us today.

1. Why did Jesus deliberately wait for two more days before He went to see Lazarus (John 11:3-6)? How do you think the disciples reacted to His approach?

2. How does the conversation Jesus had with His disciples in John 11:7-15 give us an insight into what He was thinking about the death of Lazarus?

3. Have you ever felt that God has abandoned you in your hour of greatest need? Describe the situation. What did you think God was doing? What did you say to Him about His lack of response?

4. Read Psalm 42 together. How did the writer describe his predicament? What sorts of emotions was he experiencing?

5. How do you account for verses 5 and 11 in this Psalm in the midst of all this doom and gloom? What do you think is going on? Have you ever felt this way? What spiritual lesson can we take from this?

6. What do you think Jesus was trying to accomplish in His conversation with Martha (John 11:20-27)? Has the Lord ever had a “conversation” like this with you in a time of great trouble?

7. Why did Jesus pray audibly at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:41-42)?

8. Considering this story as a whole, what does it tell us about those times in our lives when God seems to have abandoned us when we needed Him the most? What was His purpose? Can you see how He worked something good out of your situation in the end?

Infuse

Paul knew what it meant to despair. He understood how it feels for things to be so bad, that you lose all hope. He also realized, however, that God has a powerful lesson for us to learn in such hopeless situations.

Meditate on 2 Corinthians 1:8-9 this week. Let it remind you that no matter how hard things get, even if we feel like we have received a "sentence of death," we trust in a God who literally raises the dead!

(8) "For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; (9) indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead."

Insight

Spend some time reflecting this week on a situation that required nothing short of a miracle. It could be something from your past or something you are facing right now. Recall how you felt, how you prayed, what sorts of thoughts kept pulsing through your brain. Describe the details of the problem. Then write about what God did or what you are looking to God to do for you as you face that sealed tomb, like Mary and Martha did.

Invest

If you or someone you love is facing an impossible situation, what would it look like for you to place your trust in the One who raises the dead? Are there any actions you need to take? People you need to talk to? Places you should go or things you need to sort out with God? Make a list of possible action steps.

WEEK 7 - THE FEAST OF PASSOVER

Introduction

The Feast of Passover was the most important celebration in the year for Israel because it commemorated their deliverance from Egypt and the start of their covenant relationship with God as a nation. The corresponding reality for the Christian is the remembrance of Christ's death in the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

This week we will delve into the spiritual significance of the Passover for us as believers personally as well as for our families.

Input

Read pages 150-160 in *Understanding Jesus*.

Read Exodus 12:1-11:

(1) "The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, (2) 'This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. (3) Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. (4) If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbor, having taken into account the number of people there are. You are to determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat. (5) The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. (6) Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the people of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. (7) Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs. (8) That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast. (9) Do not eat the meat raw or cooked in water, but roast it over the fire—head, legs and inner parts. (10) Do not leave any of it till morning; if some is left till morning, you must burn it. (11) This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the LORD's Passover. (12) On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn—both men and animals—and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. (13) The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.'"

Interaction

Before you begin your discussion, share some of your goals from the *Invest* segment from last week and pray for each other.

Now let's look at the Passover feast to see what we can learn from it.

1. Describe the circumstances surrounding the first Passover. What was God planning to do? How were the Israelites to respond? What would happen if they ignored His instructions (see *Understanding Jesus* pp. 150-156)?

2. Why did God instruct His people to celebrate this feast year after year (Exodus 13:5-10)?

3. What was the symbolic significance of the way they were to apply the blood of the lamb to their homes? How could this apply to our own lives and families (see *Understanding Jesus* pp. 157)?

4. Describe some of the other parallels between the death of Jesus and the Passover that are discussed in *Understanding Jesus* (see pages 157-160, 167-170).

5. What was the meaning of the command to the Israelites to clean out all the leaven or yeast from their homes (Exodus 12:14-20)? What does leaven signify in the Scriptures (Luke 12:1; 1 Corinthians 5:8)? How does this connect with what each individual must do to receive life through the blood of Jesus (Mark 1:15; Acts 2:38)?

6. Have you personally received God's forgiveness through faith in the death of Christ for your sins? What difference has this decision made in your life? If you have yet to do this, what are your thoughts on this commitment in the light of the Passover imagery?

Infuse

Focus throughout the week on John 1:29. Write it on a card or input it into your PDA. Think about what this means for you personally. Imagine yourself standing at the foot of the cross looking up at the Saviour. Take a few moments each day to remember what He has done for you, and what your life might have been like without Him. Give God thanks that you can look forward to life both now and in heaven because of the blood of Jesus on your door.

(29) "The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'"

Insight

Reflect on how you came to a personal relationship with Jesus. What were the circumstances that led to you receiving Christ? What sort of a difference has knowing God's forgiveness made in your life? How has it affected your pathway, your relationships and your character? If you have not made this step, what are your reasons for not doing it?

Invest

Think about the members of your family who have not received Christ as Lord and Saviour. These ones need to paint the blood of the Lamb of God over the doorposts of their lives and their families.

What steps would you desire to take to bring them to a personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ? Make a list of names and action steps.

WEEK 8 - THE FEAST OF PENTECOST

Introduction

We have come to our last week of study. It is fitting that we conclude with the event that signaled the start of the Church through the fulfillment of the promise of Jesus to send the Holy Spirit to be “another comforter” who would not take His place, but actually be His presence in our hearts and in our midst following His return to the right hand of the Father (John 14:16, 17; Acts 1:4, 5).

The week we will look at how the Holy Spirit fulfills the promise that one day God would write His truth into our hearts and give us the power to obey it.

Input

Begin by reading pages 185-194 in *Understanding Jesus*.

Read Acts 2:1-12:

(1) “When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. (2) Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. (3) They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. (4) All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”

(5) “Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. (6) When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. (7) Utterly amazed, they asked: ‘Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? (8) Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? (9) Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, (10) Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (11) (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!’ (12) Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, ‘What does this mean?’ “

Interaction

Before you begin your discussion, review the names and action steps from last week's *Invest* section. Spend some time praying for those on the list who need to receive Christ.

Let's look at the Feast of Pentecost to see what it has to say to us.

1. What did Jesus promise would happen after He had left the disciples (John 16:5-15; Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4-8)?

2. Briefly summarize what transpired on the Day of Pentecost as described in Acts ch. 2.

3. Rabbinic tradition helps us to understand what was in the minds of those who were present at the Feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem ten days after Jesus ascended into heaven. Describe some of the unusual events that took place on the first Feast of Pentecost at Mount Sinai according to these traditions (see *Understanding Jesus*, pp. 187-189).

4. How do these beliefs about the first Day of Pentecost help us to understand why the crowds were astonished at what took place in Acts 2:1-4 (see *Understanding Jesus* pp. 190-192)?

5. What significant contrast do we find between the outcome of the events following the first Feast of Pentecost and the one in Acts Chapter 2 (Exodus 32:28; Acts 2:41)? What does this mean?

6. Read the passage from Jeremiah 31:31-33 that the Jews would have heard in the Temple on the last day of the Feast of Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit came. What is Jeremiah talking about (also see Ezekiel 36:24-27)?

7. What does it mean to have God's law written in our hearts? What is the result?

8. How do you find the Holy Spirit works in your life? How does He help you to walk in obedience to God's Word?

Infuse

Spend some time this week meditating on Romans 8:1-2 that speaks of the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit to free us from the pull of sin.

- (1) *"So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus.*
- (2) *And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death."* (NLT)

Insight

In your final journal entry, reflect on the work of the Holy Spirit in your life. How has He changed you? How has He come to your aid when you faced discouragement or temptation? How has He empowered you to do great things for God?

Invest

Review all the *Invest* goals you have created during this study and write down a thanksgiving list of all the things you have achieved or at least attempted as you have sought to align your life more fully with the ways of the Master over the last number of weeks. God bless you for your faithfulness and the courage to allow Him to transform you more and more each day into His image (Romans 8:28, 29).
