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An Invitation to this Study

The study you are about to begin is one in a series of short-term, in-depth, small group Bible studies based on the design of DISCIPLE Bible Study. Like the series of long-term DISCIPLE studies, this study has been developed with these underlying assumptions:

- the Bible is the primary text of study
- preparation on the part of participants is expected
- the study leader acts as a facilitator rather than as a lecturer
- a weekly group session features small group discussion
- video presentations by scholars set the Scriptures in context
- encouraging and enhancing Christian discipleship is the goal of study

This participant book is your guide to the study and preparation you will do prior to the weekly group meeting. To establish a disciplined pattern of study, first choose a time and a place where you can read, take notes, reflect, and pray. Then choose a good study Bible.

CHOOSING AND USING A STUDY BIBLE

Again, keep in mind the Bible is *the* text for all short-term DISCIPLE Bible studies, not the participant book; the function of the participant book is to help persons read and listen to the Bible. So because the Bible is the key to this study, consider a couple of recommendations in choosing a good study version of the Bible.

First: The Translation

The recommended translation is the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). It is recommended for two reasons: (1) It is a reliable, accurate translation, and (2) it is used in the preparation of all DISCIPLE study manuals.

However, any reliable translation can be used. In fact, having available several different translations is a good practice. Some of them include the NIV, NJB, REB, RSV, NKJV, NAB. To compare the many English translations of the Bible before choosing, consider consulting the book *Choosing a Bible: A Guide to Modern English Translations and Editions* by Steven Sheeley and Robert Nash, Jr.

Keep in mind that the *Living Bible* and *The Message*, while popular versions of the Bible, are not considered translations. They are paraphrases.

Second: The Study Features

The recommended Bible to use in any study is, of course, a study Bible, that is, a Bible containing notes, introductions to each book, charts, maps, and other helps designed to deepen and enrich the study of the biblical text. Because there are so many study Bibles available today, be sure to choose one based on some basic criteria:

- The introductory articles to each book or groups of books are helpful to you in summarizing the main features of those books.
- The notes *illuminate* the text of Scripture by defining words, making cross-references to similar passages, and providing cultural or historical background. Keep in mind that mere volume of notes is not necessarily an indication of their value.
- The maps, charts and other illustrations display important biblical/historical data in a form that is accurate and accessible.
- Any glossaries, dictionaries, concordances or indexes in the Bible are easily located and understood.

All study Bibles attempt, in greater or lesser degree, to strike a balance between *interpreting* for the reader what the text means and *helping* the reader understand what the text says. Study Bible notes are conveyed through the interpretive lens of those who prepare the notes. Regardless of what study Bible you choose to use, though, always be mindful of which part of the page is Scripture and which part is not.

GETTING THE MOST FROM READING THE BIBLE

Read the Bible with curiosity. Ask the questions, *who? what? where? when? how?* and *why?* as you read.

Learn as much as you can about the passage you are studying. Try to discover what the writer was saying for the time in which the passage was written. Be familiar with the surrounding verses and chapters to establish a passage's setting or situation.

Pay attention to the form of a passage of Scripture. How you read and understand poetry or parable will differ from how you read and understand historical narrative.

Above all, let Scripture speak for itself, even if the apparent meaning is troubling or unclear. Question Scripture, but also seek answers to your questions in Scripture itself. Often the biblical text will solve some of the problems that arise in certain passages. Consult additional reference resources when needed. And remember to trust the Holy Spirit to guide you in your study.

MAKING USE OF ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Though you will need only the Bible and this participant book to have a meaningful experience, these basic reference books may help you go deeper in to your study of Scripture.

- *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by David Noel Freedman (William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2000).
- *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, edited by Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 2000).
- *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, edited by James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson (William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2003).

- *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods, and Ministry Formation*, by David A. deSilva (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 2004).
- *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1995–2002)

MAKING USE OF THE PARTICIPANT BOOK

The participant book serves two purposes. First, it is your study guide: use it to structure your daily reading of the assigned Scripture passages, and to prompt your reflection on what you read. Second, it is your note-taking journal: use it to write down any insights, comments, and questions you want to recall and perhaps make use of in your group's discussions.

As you will see, the daily reading assignments for each session call for reading the Scripture passages *before* reading the commentary by the study writers. This is intentional. The commentary is full of references to the assigned readings from the Bible and was prepared by writers who assumed that their readers would be knowledgeable of the week's Scriptures before coming to the commentary. So the recommended approach to this study is to let the biblical writers have their say first.



Introduction

Jesus stood at the center of the early church's understanding of itself and of the movement of God into church members' lives. Early Christians may have entertained a great deal of diversity regarding the significance of the person of Jesus and the implications of following this Jesus, but they could agree that Jesus was definitive for their experience of, and response to, God. The reader of the New Testament quickly discovers this to be true as well for the early Christian leaders who left us this rich legacy of sacred texts. Jesus reveals the character and purposes of God. Jesus becomes the focal lens through which Christians understand and connect with their Jewish heritage. Jesus provides the model for living in line with God's purposes, especially when that means overstepping deeply entrenched boundaries between people, persevering in the face of hostility, or embodying a new set of values that elevates servanthood above self-promotion. Looking to Jesus, Christian disciples locate themselves in sacred time, looking back upon his death and resurrection and forward to his coming again, as the compass points by which they must navigate their course through this life.

This invitation to the New Testament therefore takes the story of Jesus—the story that is paradigmatic for the church's own identity, mission, and theology—as its starting point. In particular, this invitation to explore the New Testament begins with the Gospel according to Matthew as the starting point for each session. Matthew's portrait of Jesus was chosen not simply because this Gospel opens the New Testament. Rather, Matthew's Gospel was chosen because of its intentional arrangement as a resource for understanding Jesus' teachings and applying them to life together as the church. Early Christian leaders recognized this and consistently turned to Matthew as the choice for catechesis, the instruction of new converts in the way of discipleship. From this starting point, participants are then invited into dialogue with the ways other New Testament writers wrestled

with the issues and implications of the story of Jesus for the formation of disciples and communities of faith, working out his story in their own stories.

Why call this study an invitation to the New Testament? First, it is an invitation simply to read portions of the New Testament itself. Readings for the first five days of each week invite you to immerse yourself in Matthew's Gospel and in other texts that are thematically related to the issues raised in Matthew.

Second, it is an invitation to conversation *about* the New Testament, especially about how to understand the various texts "in context," on their *own* terms, rather than on *our* terms. The reading for the sixth day (the "commentary") begins this process, which is further supplemented by the video segments presented in the class session. The model of "conversation" has been woven in throughout this process of writing and developing this study. Not only were we in constant conversation with one another throughout the process, but we also divided the tasks of writing the commentary material for the participant book and the video commentary in such a way as to enhance this sense of dialogue. For example, the Part 1 video segment for each session features the commentator who did *not* take the lead in writing the participant's guide for that session, so that the participants can hear a second voice each week. The Part 2 video segment invites the participant into a conversation with the writers of the study and a guest scholar who will bring yet another perspective on the issues raised by the texts.

Finally, this study will serve as an invitation to ongoing study of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. For it is, finally, in conversation with these sacred texts that we discover anew our identity in God, our community with one another, and our calling to serve God's vision for the world.

Jesus Calls Us into God's Redemption Story

SESSION

1

INTRODUCTION



Who do you say that I am?" Since Jesus first confronted his disciples with this question (Matt 16:15), the way we answer the question has direct consequences for how we will relate to God and respond to the invitation to new life found in the New Testament. In this week's readings, we explore anew why early Christians called Jesus the "Son of Abraham," "Son of David," and "Son of God," and what such faith statements tell us about how encountering Jesus involves us in God's larger work of redeeming a people for God.

DAILY ASSIGNMENTS

As you read this week's assignments, observe carefully (1) what claims are being made about Jesus' identity, (2) what significance these claims are said to have for us in terms of our connection with God, and (3) what responses are reflected or promoted in each text as people encounter this Jesus.

DAY ONE: Matthew 1–4

Throughout Matthew we find a special interest in developing connections between Jesus' life and teaching and the revelation of God in the Hebrew Scriptures. Pay attention to the ways in which Matthew roots Jesus in the story of God's people, Israel, and the specific connections he makes with that story.

DAY TWO: Luke 1–4

The opening of Luke reads like many passages about God's redemptive activity in the Old Testament, even as it redirects the hope of the Old Testament away from the "Jewish nation" to a more inclusive "people of God." Pay special attention to the statements about how God's promises find their fruition in Jesus, and how the early Christians' understanding of those promises is being transformed.

DAY THREE: Acts 2:22-39; 3:13-26; Galatians 3

These three passages examine the significance of Jesus within the larger plan of God from several different angles. Note carefully again how Jesus connects with God's long-standing plans and promises, and what God makes available to people in Jesus.

DAY FOUR: John 1; Hebrews 1–2

Today's readings make some of the loftiest claims about Jesus to be found anywhere in the New Testament. Reflect as you read on what these texts have to say about the relationship between encountering Jesus and knowing God.

DAY FIVE: John 6:22-71; Acts 9:1-31

These two stories bring into sharp focus the strong reactions people have as they encounter Jesus and claims made regarding Jesus' identity and significance. As you read, observe what factors contribute to making an encounter with Jesus positively life-changing, and what factors contribute to rejection of Jesus.

DAY SIX: Read the commentary in the participant book.

PUTTING DOWN ROOTS

Tracing a family tree is a strange beginning for a book by modern standards, hardly an attention-grabber. But for Matthew and his first readers, a genealogy was an important statement about a person's significance. It located a person in a particular family with a particular story and thereby located a person in the world. Where we might start by highlighting individual achievement, "identity" for Matthew starts with a person's community and ancestry.

The first thing Matthew wants to say about Jesus is that he is deeply rooted in the story of Israel and, indeed, is the natural outworking and culmination of that story. Israel's story is a story about God's promises to bring

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peace and wholeness to humankind through God's chosen means. God promised Abraham a sea of descendants, through whom all nations would be blessed: "I will bless those who bless you . . . and in you all the families of the earth

shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3; see also Gen 22:18). Similarly, God promised David a descendant whose throne God would "establish forever" and with whom God would relate as Father to child: "I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me" (2 Sam 7:14; see also Ps 2:7). Matthew shows from the opening paragraph how Jesus, as descendant of Abraham and David, is an appropriate person through whom God's promises to Abraham and David would find their fulfillment and their stories find a climax.

Matthew's genealogy is not just a list of names. It is a theological statement about Jesus. He arranges this genealogy so that there are exactly fourteen generations between the significant points in Israel's story: God's selection of Abraham as the vehicle for blessing; God's selection of David as the vehicle for God's rule; the apparent collapse of the promises in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Exile; the birth of Jesus, in whom all God's promises are renewed and Israel's fortunes restored (Matt 1:17-18). By doing so, Matthew subtly hints that God's divine plan is thus working itself out in a measured and orderly way, leading through the history of Israel to the coming of Jesus. It is all the more apparent that Matthew's genealogy is crafted to make certain points rather than simply supply a list of ancestors as with Luke's genealogy (Luke 3:23-38).

Both the Matthean and Lucan genealogies, however, push beyond the traditional lines within community. Matthew includes four women, three of whom (Rahab, Ruth, and “the wife of Uriah”) are non-Jews and three of whom (Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth) highlight “anomalous” conceptions in some way, underscoring the place of both women and Gentiles in the community of God. Luke presses further, tracing Jesus’ genealogy past Abraham all the way back to Adam and to God. Since Abraham is known primarily as the ancestor of the Jewish nation, tracing Jesus’ lineage back to Adam and to God brings out the universal scope of God’s action on behalf of humanity both in creation and in the sending of Jesus not only for the benefit of the Jewish people but also for the benefit of all people, bringing together into one body the one humanity God originally created us to be.

DIG DEEPER

Learn more about the four women in Matthew’s genealogy:

- Tamar (Gen. 38:11-30)
- Rahab (Josh 2; 6:22-25)
- Ruth (Book of Ruth)
- Bathsheba (2 Sam 11; 12:24)

What qualities do they add to Jesus’ human heritage? What does their inclusion in Jesus’ family tree teach about God’s purposes?

G O D R E M E M B E R S G O D ’ S P R O M I S E S

Luke’s story of the annunciation and birth of Jesus resonates deeply with Matthew’s desire to connect Jesus with Abraham and David. The angel’s announcement and the songs of Mary and Zechariah all proclaim that, in Jesus’ birth, God “makes good” on the promises God gave to Abraham and David (Luke 1:32-33, 54-55, 68-73). Jesus’ coming is the fruit of God “remembering” God’s mercy to help Israel and “remembering” God’s covenant with Israel (Luke 1:54, 72). The point is that the first place to look for clues about Jesus’ significance is to the faith and hope of Israel.

Paul also does this to an extraordinary degree. Even while he is arguing that following Jesus means that the Jewish law is no longer the binding rule on the community, he anchors faith in Jesus in God’s promise to Abraham. Looking closely at the actual wording of the promise, Paul notices that the text of Genesis 12:7 and 22:17-18 actually says that the promise is given to Abraham “and to his seed” (Gal 3:16). Of course, “seed” might more naturally refer to all Abraham’s offspring; but Paul uses a familiar Jewish tech-

nique of biblical interpretation—looking at the literal sense of the Scripture. Paul therefore identifies Jesus as the “seed” of Abraham through whom the promised blessing would come to all the nations, namely that “we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal 3:14).

Another way that New Testament writers root Jesus in the distinctive hope and theology of the Hebrew Scriptures is by seeing the details of his life and the lives of those around him (like John the Baptizer) reflected in the prophecies and psalms of the Old Testament. This is the role of what are called the “prophecy and fulfillment” formulas in Matthew 1:22-23; 2:6, 15, 18; 3:15-16: “All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet...” By means of these side comments, Matthew invites us to see some facet of Old Testament promise becoming reality in the life of Jesus. On one hand, we could criticize Matthew for not reading those Old Testament texts in the context of early Israelite history. On the other hand, we could appreciate the way Matthew sees the whole history of Israel from its Exodus (Matt 2:15) to its Exile (Matt 2:18) to its hope for renewal (Matt 1:22-23; 2:6; 3:15-16) taking on flesh and fulfillment in the life of Jesus.

SON OF DAVID, SON OF GOD

In his most mature statement of his gospel, Paul speaks of Jesus as “Son of David,” in terms of his human lineage, and “Son of God,” by virtue of his resurrection (Rom 1:3-4). Both of these titles are closely related in the New Testament since the royal ideology of ancient Israel depicted the Davidic monarch as God’s Son. When God promises David a descendant to rule after him, God says: “I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me” (2 Sam 7:14). Likewise, at religious festivals celebrating the enthronement of the Davidic king, singers would intone the words of Psalm 2 on behalf of the king: “I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me: ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you’” (Ps 2:7).

This background helps us see that it was not so far a leap for early Christians to talk about Jesus’ relationship to God in terms of Father and Son (as in Hebrews 1:1-6; Acts 2:34-35, which explicitly quote the royal psalms and other psalms connected with David), once they identified him as the promised heir to the throne of David. The fact that God would “give to him the throne of his ancestor David” naturally meant that he would also “be called the Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:32). Here, as in Paul’s understanding of Abraham’s singular “seed,” Jesus is also understood not as

one heir among many, but *the* heir to David's throne and as God's Son. The narratives that identify the Holy Spirit as the begetter of Jesus (Matt 1:18, 20; Luke 1:35) also give clear witness to the conviction of the early church: Jesus is God's Son and, as heir of David, epitomizes how God provides leadership for God's people. As Matthew will make clear, this is the leadership of a servant, a redeemer who gives his life for the deliverance of his people.

The New Testament writers do not stop with traditions about David and his heir, however. They also look to Jewish traditions about "Wisdom" to talk about who Jesus is. Wisdom is a rather abstract idea about the divine ordering of the cosmos and about how we must perceive that order to live intelligently. Jewish writers, however, began to personify Wisdom, presenting her as a female spirit-being who stood as mediator between God and creation, and between God and humanity, connecting people to God as they walked in accordance with Wisdom. She was created at the very beginning of God's creative activity (Prov 8:22) and worked alongside God in the creation of heaven and earth and in the ongoing maintenance of the world (Prov 8:27-31; Wis 8:1; 9:9). The Wisdom of Solomon, a Jewish text from the turn of the era found in the Apocrypha, goes even further, depicting Wisdom as "a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty . . . a reflection of eternal light . . . and an image of his goodness" (Wis 7:25-26), who enters human souls and "makes them friends of God" (Wis 7:27).

The New Testament writers root Jesus in the distinctive hope and theology of the Hebrew Scriptures by seeing the details of his life and the lives of those around him (like John the Baptizer) reflected in the prophecies and psalms of the Old Testament.

The clear stamp of these traditions can be seen in the attributes of the "Son" as "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being" in Hebrews 1:2-3, as "image of the invisible God" in Colossians 1:15-17, and in the activity of the Word in creation in John 1:1-18. Early Christians discovered the new face of Wisdom in the face of Jesus. In Jesus we see how God interacts with creation in life-giving, life-sustaining, order-creating ways. John goes even further. Because the Son is the clear reflection of the Father, just as Wisdom was the "shine" (better than "reflection") produced by God's "light," Jesus is the "exegesis"—the studied explanation and "unpacking"—of the very character of God (John 1:18).

To see him is to see the unseen God and thus to come to understand the holiness of God in terms of the love, mercy, and restorative compassion shown and taught by Jesus.

WHERE THIS STORY IS HEADING

The language about Jesus as the Son of God does not emphasize the distance between Jesus and us. Rather, this title shows how fully Jesus as God's Son became human and entered flesh so as to bring us close to himself and to God: "since . . . the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things" (Heb 2:14; see also 2:10-18). Both Matthew and Luke underscore Jesus' identity as "Son of God" not just in the birth stories, but also in the stories of Jesus' baptism and temptation. In the stories of his baptism, Jesus identifies himself so closely with humanity's need to respond to God with repentant heart that he is declared by God's own voice to be "my Son, the Beloved" (Matt 3:17; Luke 3:22). As Son of God, Jesus shows us that our journey back to God begins in the waters of baptism and in the change of heart and life that this signifies. In the accounts of his temptation, Satan tests Jesus' identity as "God's Son" (Matt 4:3, 6; Luke 4:3, 9) and what it means to act as God's Son in the world. Here we find a window into how Jesus learned to be a "sympathetic high priest" who knows what it means to be tested by life's trials and enticements, so we can rely on him for the help we need, following him as the children of God (Heb 2:17-18; see also 4:14-15). It is also here that we see how Jesus entered into single combat with Satan on our behalf to "free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death" (Heb 2:15). This combat was not complete until Jesus embraced death in obedience to God, winning the struggle that all of the many sons and daughters would face as they, too, would be assailed by both threats and enticements to give up the pursuit of life with God.

Jesus' identity as "Son of God" is ultimately, then, about his opening up of a way for us to be reborn as "children of God," to be saved from our sins (Matt 1:21), and to live a life "with God" made possible by "Emmanuel. . . God is with us" (Matt 1:23). We see the first steps of that path here in the renunciation of the self-serving life of sin through baptism and through the ongoing contest against the Enemy of our souls. As the story unfolds, we will see in Jesus' teachings an example of what it means to follow *this* Son to glory.

INVITATION TO DISCIPLESHIP

When people encounter Jesus and are confronted with the claims concerning his identity and significance, they can respond in several different ways. How we respond is of decisive importance.

Confronted with Jesus' own claim to embody the work of the Servant of God described by Isaiah (Isa 61:1-2; Luke 4:18-21) and with Jesus' explanation that this Servant comes not to serve the national and ethnic interests of Judeans but the renewal of all people (observed in Luke 4:25-27 and in the inclusiveness of Matthew's genealogy), Jesus' own townspeople respond with violent rejection. Do we have room in our lives for a Jesus who challenges our dearly held boundaries and invites us into a larger vision for the community of faith?

Confronted by their neighbors' hostile response to their faith in Jesus, and by marginalization in society, some of the Christians addressed by the Letter to the Hebrews begin to seek a way back into their former, comfortable lives. By "neglecting to meet together" (Heb 10:24-25), they also stand in danger of neglecting the Word God speaks to them in the Son (Heb 2:1-4) and are challenged to keep responding fully and appropriately to the Son's invitation. Do we place the priority on responding to Jesus' invitation in a way appropriate to his value as the Son of God, or do our priorities show a dangerous neglect of his word?

Confronted with the need to repent and return to God (Matt 3:1-10; Luke 3:1-14; Acts 2:37-39; 3:19-21), to change the entire direction of their lives (Acts 9), many allow themselves to be "cut to the heart" and begin again. Do we have the humility before God to acknowledge the distance between our lives and God's desires and the courage to start in a new direction?

Challenged with Jesus' invitation to leave behind the trade, the village, and the life they knew so well, two sets of brothers set out into the unknown future of following wherever Jesus leads (Matt 4:18-22). Do we so understand the surpassing value of walking with Jesus that we, too, would rather journey with him than stay in our areas of comfort and familiarity? "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

FOR REFLECTION

- How has Jesus challenged some of your “dearly held” boundaries?
- How does the way you respond to Jesus’ claim on your life reflect your priorities?
- When have you acknowledged the need to return to God? What did it take to move in God’s direction?
- How has Jesus enlarged your vision of what constitutes the community of faith?