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Introduction

INVITATION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT is one of a series of studies developed on the model of DISCIPLE Bible study. DISCIPLE is a family of Bible study resources based on the general assumption that people are hungry for God's Word, for fellowship in prayer and study, and for biblically informed guidance in ministry. This series of Short-Term DISCIPLE Bible Studies, like the long-term DISCIPLE series, (1) presents the Bible as the primary text, (2) calls for daily preparation on the part of students, (3) features a weekly meeting based on small group discussion, (4) includes a video component for making available the insights of biblical scholars to set the Scriptures in context, and (5) has as one of its goals the enhancement of Christian discipleship.

INVITATION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT is designed to provide congregations with an in-depth, high-commitment Bible study resource able to be completed in a shorter time frame than the foundational DISCIPLE studies. The shorter time frame, however, does not mean this study has expectations different from those associated with the thirty-four week DISCIPLE: BECOMING DISCIPLES THROUGH BIBLE STUDY. The expectation remains that participants will prepare for the weekly meeting by reading substantial portions of Scripture and taking notes. The expectation remains that group discussion, rather than lecture, will be the preferred learning approach. The expectation remains that biblical scholarship will be part of the group's study together. The expectation remains that persons' encounter with the Bible will call them to more faithful discipleship. Hopefully, in fact, one of the chief benefits of the Short-Term DISCIPLE Bible Studies, will be how well they inspire persons to commit to a long-term DISCIPLE study in the future. While short-term studies of selected Scriptures can be both meaningful and convenient, the deeply transforming experience of reading and studying substantial portions of Scriptures, for a sustained period of time, continues to be the primary aim of DISCIPLE.

Leading This Study

As leaders of INVITATION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT, keep in mind that to have as rich and meaningful a study experience as possible with this type of short-term study, you will need to pay close attention to the timing of the suggested discussion activities and group dynamics. One of the challenges of any short-term, small-group study—especially one based on group discussion—is the time it takes for people in the study to become comfortable sharing with one another. If your group is made up of people who are already acquainted, the challenge may be minimal. However, be prepared to have a group of people who do not know one another well, perhaps some who have never done much substantive Bible study, and others who are graduates of long-term DISCIPLE studies. Make use of the following information as you prepare to lead INVITATION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT:

GROUP ORIENTATION

Plan to schedule an orientation meeting a week prior to the first weekly meeting. Take time then to make introductions, discuss the expectations of the study, distribute and preview the materials, and review the upcoming week's assignment. If necessary, consider discussing the kind of study Bible group members should use and taking time to be sure everyone is familiar with the aids in a study Bible. Have on hand several types of study Bibles for persons to look through. Also, as part of your group's orientation, consider viewing the brief introduction to the study that appears just before Video Segment 1, Part 1.

THE WEEKLY SESSION

The times in parentheses, beneath each section heading in the leader guide planning pages, indicate the suggested number of minutes to allow for a particular activity. The first time is for use with a 60-minute meeting schedule, and the second time is for use with a 90-minute meeting. Keep in mind that it is always possible the discussion questions suggested for use in any one section will be more than enough to take up the allotted time. The leader will need to keep an eye on a clock and decide when and whether to move on. The best way to gauge, in advance, how many questions to use and how long to allow discussion to last is to spend time answering the suggested questions while preparing for the group session. Be sure to do that as well as preview the video, both Part 1 and Part 2, before the weekly session.

Gathering Around God's Word

(15 – 20 minutes)

Welcome

Begin on time by welcoming the group to the study. Ideally, this should be the *second* time the group has been together. During the orientation meeting the previous week, group participants met to preview the materials, discuss expectations of the study, and receive the assignment for the week. In case group participants arrive at this first session who were not present at the orientation meeting, be prepared to summarize as briefly as possible what they can expect from the study and what the study will expect from them.

Invitation to the Table (Optional)

In keeping with the theme of invitation, each week consider setting up a small table somewhere in the meeting room. The table will serve as a focal point for the group. The suggestions in this section include a list of what to place on the table and an opening question for reflection and brief discussion. Both the question and the table items are designed to connect a central theme of the week's study with the participants' own experience. While this is an option for the group, it may well serve to establish a sense of community within the group.

Prayer

Establish a particular ritual of praying together at the start of the study. Keep in mind that the text of this study, the Bible, is a rich source of mean-

ingful prayers. Many of the New Testament letters the group will study contain a hymn or a prayer. Make use of appropriate texts from the Psalms or some of the words spoken by Jesus in the Gospels. When appropriate, make use of other Bible translations when praying the Scriptures. A suggestion of both a New Testament text and a psalm text will appear in this section each week; but feel free to choose another. Be sure to include group members in this process by inviting those participants who are willing to lead in prayer.

Viewing the Video: Session 1, Part 1

The video component in the series has two parts and both parts are central to the group's study. Part 1 is a ten-minute presentation by one of the writers of the participant book commentary on some topic related to the Scriptures and themes in the week's readings. The purpose of this video is to provide a common base of information about or interpretation of the Scriptures for the group to discuss. A brief summary of this video appears in the leader guide plan for each session.

Encountering God's Word in the Text

(20 – 25 minutes)

In this section, group discussion centers on some of the Scripture passages read during the week.

Examining God's Word in Context

(15 – 20 minutes)

Viewing the Video: Session 1, Part 2

The focus in this section is on viewing Part 2 of the video. This video features an informal, unscripted, roundtable conversation between the two writers of the study and a guest scholar. Like Part 1, this conversation pertains to some theme that emerges from the week's readings and is designed to stimulate further discussion. The first question for group discussion appears on screen at the conclusion of the segment. That same question appears first, in *italics*, in the leader guide plan for each session, along with additional questions for further discussion. **Note:** An intentional characteristic of Part 2 is its informality. As a result, on occasion the presenters may stumble over a word or jumble a phrase. Be aware of that. Sometimes retaining the flow of a conversation was more advisable than trying to excise a verbal miscue.

Going Forth with God's Word: An Invitation to Discipleship

(10 – 15 minutes)

Consideration of the implications of the week's readings on the call of Christian discipleship is the point of this section. The discussion questions in the leader guide plan for each session come from questions raised in the commentary and the "For Reflection" sections of the participant book. Be alert to additional questions that come to mind and might be useful at this time in the group meeting.

Closing and Prayer

Turn to the next session and review the focus of the lesson and the assignments for the week ahead. Establish a pattern of inviting prayer concerns and praying together at this time.

GROUP DYNAMICS

The effectiveness of the group's study together depends heavily upon the way you, as the leader, manage individual participation. Plan for the majority of the weekly discussion to take place in smaller groups of three or four or in pairs. Smaller groupings will give everyone more opportunity to talk and is the best way for people to get to know one another quickly. Smaller groupings will reduce the possibility that a couple of people will dominate the conversation or that some will not contribute at all. Smaller groupings communicate that preparation is expected and essential for fruitful discussion.

Also key to the effectiveness of the group's study together is how you manage your role as the leader. Remember: your primary role is to facilitate the process, not to provide the information. To that end, follow these basic guidelines as you lead the study:

- Prepare exactly as participant's prepare; see yourself as a learner among learners.
- Know where the discussion is heading from the outset; this will minimize the chances of getting sidetracked along the way.
- Set ground rules for group participation and maintenance early on; doing so will encourage the whole group to take responsibility for monitoring itself.
- Be a good listener; don't be afraid of silence—allow time for people to think before responding.

JESUS CALLS US INTO GOD'S REDEMPTION STORY

SESSION

1

Gathering Around God's Word

(15 – 20 minutes)

Welcome

Begin on time by welcoming the group to the study. Ideally this should be the *second* time the group has been together. During the orientation meeting the previous week, group participants met to preview the materials, discuss expectations of the study, and receive the assignment for the week. In case group participants who were not present at the orientation meeting arrive at this first session be prepared to summarize as briefly as possible what they can expect from the study and what the study will expect from them.

Invitation to the Table (Optional)

In keeping with the theme of invitation, each week set up a small table somewhere in the meeting room. The table will serve as a thematic focal point for the group. The suggestions in this section include a list of what to place on the table and an opening question for reflection and brief discussion. Both the question and the table items are designed to connect a central theme of the week's study with the participants' own experience.

- **Opening question:** What establishes your identity?
- **Items for the table:** birth certificate, driver's license, passport, scrapbook, family picture, family Bible

Prayer

Establish a particular ritual of praying together at the start of the study. Keep in mind that the text of this study, the Bible, is a rich source of mean-

ingful prayers. Many of the New Testament letters the group will study contain a hymn or a prayer. Make use of appropriate texts from the Psalms or some of the words spoken by Jesus in the Gospels. When appropriate, make use for other Bible translations when praying the Scriptures. A suggestion for both a New Testament text and a psalm text will appear in this section each week; but feel free to choose another. Be sure to include group members in this process by inviting those participants who are willing to lead in prayer.

- *Hebrews 1:1-3 or Psalm 91:14-16*

Viewing the Video: Session 1, Part 1

Prepare to View Video

Listen for the part the New Testament plays in the Bible's story about God.

Summary of Video Content:

The themes from Matthew's story of Jesus determine the conversation topics for our study. The daily reading assignments move between Gospel passages and related New Testament passages. The video segments present an interpretation of some theme or topic raised by the readings via presentation by a single scholar and also a roundtable discussion by several scholars.

At the heart of this study is Jesus. The coming of Jesus – his life, actions, mission, death, and resurrection—was the fundamental element for all writers of the New Testament.

The Christian Bible contains both an “old” and “new” testament, both of which are part of the same continuous story. It is a story about God from beginning to end. In the New Testament, God's mission becomes embodied in the person of Jesus the Galilean. The New Testament writers wrestled with the Hebrew Scriptures in order to interpret the importance of God's mission in the world and the role of the people of God in it.

Discuss After Viewing Video:

What part does the New Testament play in telling the Bible's story of God's mission in the world? How does thinking of Jesus' coming as the lens through which the New Testament writers read the story of God affect how we read that story?

Encountering God's Word in the Text

(20 – 25 minutes)

The emphasis in this lesson is on the claims made about Jesus' identity and, because of these claims, how Jesus calls us into God's redemption story. Form four small groups and make the following assignments: Group 1: Matthew 1–4 (Day 1 readings); Group 2: Luke 1–4 (Day 2 readings); Group 3: Acts 2:22-39; 3:13-26; Galatians 3 (Day 3 readings); Group 4: John 1; Hebrews 1–2 (Day 4 readings). Instruct the groups to discuss their Scripture assignment, using their daily notes, in relation to these questions: What claims are being made about Jesus' identity? What impact do these claims about Jesus have on our relationship with God? How do the responses of the people who encounter the Jesus in these passages support these claims?

When encountering Jesus, how we identify him often determines how we will respond to him. In new groups of three or four read John 6:22-71 and discuss these questions: What factors contribute to how a person responds to an encounter with Jesus? Since Jesus calls each of us into God's redemption story, "what must we do to perform the works of God?"

Examining God's Word in Context

(15 – 20 minutes)

The Gospel of Matthew opens the New Testament by pointing out that Jesus is deeply rooted in the story of Israel. In order for us to fully understand the call of Jesus into God's redemption story, we must pay attention to how the New Testament writers use the Old Testament as a frame of reference for understanding who Jesus is and how he fits into the whole biblical story.

Viewing the Video: Session 1, Part 2

Prepare to View Video:

Listen for what is said about the various ways Matthew and the New Testament writers read the Old Testament.

Discuss After Viewing Video:

How is reading the Old Testament on its own terms important for understanding the New Testament? "The New Testament writers are reading the

Old Testament and they're seeing that what God wants for people, what God expects of the obedient one, has taken on flesh in Jesus." What does this statement mean? What does this statement say about the connection between the Old Testament and the New Testament? How does this statement challenge the practice of reading the Old Testament "simply as a witness to what happens in Jesus"?

Going Forth with God's Word: An Invitation to Discipleship

(10 – 15 minutes)

Like the earliest believers, when we encounter Jesus, we are confronted with various claims concerning his identity and significance. Our response may vary, but how we respond is important. In pairs, discuss the following questions: How do you respond to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" How does what you believe about Jesus inform how you follow him in discipleship?

Conclude the group's discussion by calling attention to the "For Reflection" section on page 22 in the participant book. Ask the group to form pairs and share responses to one or more of the questions at the end of that section.

Closing and Prayer

Turn to Session 2, Review the focus of the lesson and the assignments for the week ahead. Establish a pattern of inviting prayer concerns and praying together at this time.