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# **Study Guide for *Were You There?***

**by Erik Kolbell**

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## **Introduction**

### **Preparing to Use This Study Guide**

Since a book about the passion of Jesus is a logical selection for the church season of Lent, this study guide offers an introductory session, five sessions on individual chapters, and a session on the conclusion that provides an opportunity to reflect on learnings and insights from the study. Every chapter deals with a particular character. Rather than deal with three different characters and parts of the passion story in one session, a plan that would mean none of them receive adequate attention, it instead offers a specific session plan on chapters 1, 4, 7, 10, and 13. Since the chapters are presented chronologically, selecting every third session makes it possible to cover the breadth of the story. In this manner, a group leader can also consider using the book for three years in a row, reading chapters 2, 5, 8, 11, and 14 in year two, and chapters 3, 6, 9, 12, and 15 in year three.

You may want to select your own characters and chapters. In that case, a generic session plan is offered to guide your exploration of the chapters not specifically presented. Each session plan uses a slightly different approach to exploring the character and story in that chapter. The models and activity ideas used could be adapted to other chapters as well. One option is to invite participants to select the characters/chapters during the introductory session. This idea might be particularly useful if group members are taking turns leading the sessions. They may want to select a character of particular interest to them. If so, make the generic session plan available to them as a guide, but encourage them to use their own creativity in planning

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their approach to that character. If you have a group that has time to read more, invite them to read three chapters each week, but focus more on the one chosen for group use.

### **Participant Preparation and Engagement**

This guide assumes participants have read the chapter for each session. It intends to engage them in analysis, reflection, and application of the insights to their own lives as individuals and as part of a faith community. The suggestions are intended to help the leader involve everyone in the discussion, not to make the leader the expert. If at all possible, arrange your chairs in a circle so you can see one another as you speak, and select a meeting space that allows for conversation in the whole group and in small groups at times.

### **Making the Most of Your Time**

The suggestions will work best when accompanied by silence for thinking, encouragement of lots of ways of responding to and talking about ideas, and attentive, open listening to each other. A study like this is not the time to criticize others' beliefs and ideas. It is a time to try to better understand the different ways we live out our faith, and the variety of ways we express it.

Many questions are offered for your use. In a small group, the questions can be addressed to the whole group. In a larger group, you will help more people participate—and even improve the quality of responses—by dividing into smaller groups to answer questions, and by inviting different small groups to respond to fewer questions in more depth and then offer their best thoughts to the whole group. Small-group time need not be long, but small groups provide opportunities for more people to express their ideas, and for insights to build upon each other.

The questions offered are a guide. If you want to direct the conversation toward these explicit ends, follow them closely and keep participants on track. If you know participants well, select the questions that will be most fruitful for them. If the conversation goes off on a tangent, decide whether it is a useful tangent to follow or whether you want to bring it back to the train of thought developed here. Many more questions are made available here than you can use in a fifty-minute session. As you prepare, select the ones that will be most useful to your group in your context.

Write down your own questions as you read. You may find you have questions more suited to your group, more in touch with your community, and more fruitful for going in directions that will be useful for your context.

### **Organization of the Session Plans**

Each session specifies the chapter to be read. Then it has a stated *Theme*, an *Opening* activity to engage interest and quickly get people involved in the topic, a section called *Developing the Session* that contains discussion questions and activities to explore the ideas presented in the chapter, and a *Closing* activity to help participants reflect on what this session means to them personally, including a closing prayer.

You know your group and the need to provide ways for them to get acquainted with each other during the first session, and possibly in subsequent sessions as well. Plan to do that as needed, and open each session with a prayer for wisdom and insight in reflecting on these stories of characters involved in the passion of Jesus.

All quotes from the Bible are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

# 1

## Session One

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### In Preparation (10 minutes)

Read the Introduction, pages 1–7.

### Theme

“We deepen our understanding of the story [of the passion] if we find our own lives paralleled in the lives of those who were there” (p. 3).

### Opening

Draw a line down the middle of a piece of newsprint. On top of one side, write “Characters,” and on top of the other side, write “Events.” Say, “Between them, the four Gospels provide us with thirteen chapters of stories of the passion. Let’s see what we can remember collectively.” Invite participants to name items for either list and write them in the appropriate column. Don’t evaluate or reject ideas; simply add them to the list. This exercise will give you a sense of which stories they know and how many, and also provide an entrée into a list of stories and characters in chronological order, as they are presented in *Were You There? Finding Ourselves at the Foot of the Cross*.

Ask participants to turn to the book’s Contents page. Ask if this chapter listing suggests any characters or stories the group missed. Add additional names now to the newsprint list if necessary.

If the group named stories that are not here, note that this book includes most, but not all, of the stories; for example, the story of the Passover with the disciples is not included.

### Developing the Session (30 minutes)

1. Turn with the participants to the Introduction. Refer to the author’s intent in pages 1–3 to describe how this book will explore

the story of the passion—as a story that intersects our own stories. Turn to the last paragraph on page 3 and read it aloud. Ask, “What does this suggest to you about what we will look for as we explore these stories together?”

Look back at the list of characters. What did some of these characters experience that you can imagine Christians identifying with today?

(If you have decided to use the five chapters this study guide explores, tell participants they will look particularly at the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet, Peter, the mob, Jesus’ mother Mary, and Joseph of Arimathea. If you are instead planning to invite the group to select the stories, do that now, using the Table of Contents as your guide.)

2. Review information from “There and Then” (pp. 4–5) to help participants better understand the setting for all these events. In particular, highlight the different religious responses, expectations about a messiah, and realities and practices that contributed to the environment in the time of Jesus.

3. Provide a handout with the following quotes from chapter 1 about the intersection of God’s story and intention with our lives. If you have a large group, divide participants into groups of three or four and ask them to select one quote as their focus. Tell them they have 10 minutes to discuss the questions under their quote. Page numbers are provided in case they want to refer to the context of the quote.

*“The divine intention does not work itself out in a vacuum; God’s work is truly our own” (p. 5).*

To what extent do you believe God’s work is our work? What are some ways you see your community of faith taking on God’s work as its own? What are some ways you see yourself doing God’s work?

*“There is no work we do that, if done in God’s name, is inconsequential” (p. 5).*

Do you ever think of your work as inconsequential? Why or why not? Relate an example either of work that seemed inconsequential or of consequence.

What hints does the paragraph that contains this quote suggest to you about how to make your work of more consequence?

*“In all of the decisions we make, whether they appear to be momentous or mundane, we are always somehow either reflecting God’s will or resisting it” (p. 6).*

What are some ways we might know if we are reflecting or resisting God’s will? Recall situations from your own lives that exemplify either reflecting or resisting God’s will, as you see them in hindsight.

*“We are people of faith not only sometimes, but everywhere and at all times. But whether we act as a people of faith is another matter altogether” (p. 6).*

What are some of the challenges we face as we attempt to act as a people of faith? Name some situations in which you find it particularly hard to act as a person of faith. Why are those challenging for you?

*“Living out our faith in a world so often hostile to it is both enormously difficult and eminently worthwhile” (p. 7).*

Describe a situation you have experienced in which living out your faith seemed (or seems) enormously difficult. Then recall and relate an experience in which living out your faith seemed eminently worthwhile.

4. In the whole group, invite participants to briefly relate something they heard in their small group that helped them think in a new way about the intersection of God’s story and intention with their own lives.

After hearing some reflections, invite them to watch these stories and characters in the coming weeks for more ways they might live more faithfully because of what they discover about God and God’s purpose for them.

## **Closing (5 minutes)**

Say, “Living out our faith in a world so often hostile to it is both enormously difficult and eminently worthwhile” (p. 7). Invite the group to participate in a closing prayer by naming in the pause something “difficult” and something they rejoice over as “worthwhile”:

*Closing Prayer:* God of the passion, and of our lives, we name before you the difficult things that challenge us as we attempt to live out

our faith: [pause]. And we name before you those things which make us know that serving you is our greatest joy and lasting hope: [pause]. In the name of the one who knew both sorrow and joy, who gave himself up that we might have life, and have it more abundantly, Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

# 2

## Session Two

### In Preparation

Read chapter 1, “She Anointed His Feet,” as well as Mark 14:3–9 and John 12:1–8. You will need enough Bibles for participants to read the selected verses.

### Theme

In the woman who anointed Jesus, we see adoration at work, expressing love. We too seek reverence for God, and ways to express it in acts of service and love.

### Opening (10 minutes)

Assign half of the group Mark 14:3–9 and the other half John 12:1–8. Ask them to find the answers to the following questions:

1. In what town is the dinner held? In whose home?
2. Who is named as present at the dinner?
3. Who anoints Jesus?
4. Precisely what did the woman do?
5. Who complained about what the woman did, and why?
6. What does Jesus say in response?
7. How does Jesus connect this act to his burial?

Create a two-column chart on newsprint to record the answers from each group. The differences will be obvious, yet they will puzzle those who have not encountered these two stories side by side. Note that although the author focuses primarily on the story from Mark, in which the unnamed woman anoints the head of Jesus, he takes his chapter title from the John story, in which Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, anoints Jesus’ feet. Both stories, however, relate an act of pure adoration, and this adoration is the focus of today’s reflection.

## Developing the Session

Select some of these questions/activities to focus your discussion:

*“To know ‘the work’ of love is to know what it means to pour yourself out for another. From birth to death it is the work of presence, of being unconditionally present to another’s needs” (pp. 9–10).*

What might this woman want to express to Jesus by being present to his needs in this way? What are the challenges of being unconditionally present to another’s needs?

*The author sees this woman’s act as “an act of pure adoration” (p. 11).*

What do you imagine the woman adores about Jesus to act in this way? Do you agree with this characterization of her action? Invite participants to take a moment to think of an example of pure adoration from their own experience. If you have time, ask them to share their story briefly in pairs or threes.

*“And when [Jesus] then adds, ‘You always have the poor with you, and whenever you will, you can do good to them,’ he is further reminding them that the ecstasy of adoration does not obviate the responsibility of service; both, in their own way, constitute the work of love” (p. 13).*

In what way does adoration constitute the work of love? In what way does service constitute the work of love? What connection does the author see between them? What are some examples of one leading to the other for you? for your community of faith?

*“A reverence for God and for the truly good in life is there for the one who is patient enough to believe in it and persistent enough to look for it” (p. 14).*

What are some ways we as Christians look for “reverence for God and the truly good in life”? The author suggests art, music, poetry, prayer, and so on as prompts to reverence and inspiration. What prompts you to reverence and inspiration?

*“But it is not yet enough to be so inspired, because the real challenge is to find a way to make that inspiration endure, coax it forth as we would a shy child, and get it to take root and stay with us despite all the diversions that threaten to chase it away. The challenge is to see the world as I believe that woman who anointed Jesus saw it, transformed” (p. 15).*

In small groups of four, make a list of the challenges to making inspiration endure. Then list your visions of a world transformed by Jesus. Then imagine your part in working for transformation. List some things that are possible for you.

*“Love requires so much work, and the quickened pulse we feel from the moment adoration impinges upon us must be nurtured against the intrusions of a culture not naturally disposed to nurturing that moment itself” (p. 16).*

Recall a time you felt inspired or moved to worship, to adore, to live more faithfully. What intrusions of culture affect you the most? What helps you continue to do the work of love in the face of those intrusions? How could we be of help to each other in the work of love?

## Closing (10 minutes)

Invite participants to be aware this week of what most intrudes on their adoration of God, and of what helps keep them focused on doing the work of love.

Read together Romans 12:2a, provided in the shaded box on page 15 of the text. Close with a prayer for transformation to do the work of love and gratitude for these companions who participate in the renewal of minds for each other.

## Preparation for the Next Session

Give participants the list you will find in the next session of selected stories that contain Peter. Assign each participant one or two each, and ask them to watch for how they would describe Peter’s character from their stories.

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## Session Three

### In Preparation

Read chapter 4, “The Riddle of Peter,” and the biblical passages noted below that mention Peter.

### Theme

The disciple Peter epitomizes both great insight and faith, and the humanness to doubt and deny when faced with personal danger. We also see in him someone who can accept forgiveness and go on to live out his call. Our humanness reflects Peter’s, and our despair at failing mirrors his. However, we are called to accept forgiveness and continue to attempt to live faithfully, despite our failures.

### Opening (20 minutes)

Two alternatives are suggested for the opening of session 3.

1. Note that Peter is the disciple we know the most about from the Gospels and from the Acts of the Apostles. Ask, “How would you describe Peter’s character from your recollections of him?” If they need prompting, display the list provided below to jog their memories of Peter. Keep the group focused on the characteristics they see in Peter in these stories. After the characteristics are named, ask participants to turn to a neighbor and tell one characteristic they share with Peter.

OR

2. Collect some pictures of stories in which Peter is involved, using the list below as a guide. A collection of Sunday school art is a good place to begin, if your church has such resources available. You might also try art books of biblical stories, and a search of religious art sites on the Internet, from which you could create a series of art pictures to put on a CD to show the group. Before you display the pictures or the slide show, tell participants to watch for a story about

Peter in which they find themselves in some way—that is, a story for which they might say, “Sometimes I’m like that,” or “I’ve acted like that.” As you show each picture, ask participants to relate in one or two sentences Peter’s part in the story. When you have shown all the pictures, ask them to turn to a partner and identify the connection they made from Peter’s story to their own.

Selected stories that include Peter:

Matthew 4:18–22	Jesus calls Peter, the first disciple
Matthew 14:22–33	Peter tries to walk on water
Matthew 16:13–23	Peter declares Jesus is the Messiah
Matthew 17:1–18	Peter sees Jesus transfigured
Matthew 18:21–22	Peter questions Jesus about forgiveness
Matthew 26:31–35	Peter’s denial foretold by Jesus
Matthew 26:36–46	Peter sleeps in Gethsemane
Matthew 26:69–75	Peter denies he knows Jesus
Luke 24:1–12	Peter sees the empty tomb
John 13:1–9	Jesus washes Peter’s feet
John 18:1–11	Peter defends Jesus at his arrest
John 21:15–19	Jesus tells Peter, “Feed my sheep”
Acts 1:12–26	Peter organizes the selection of a new disciple
Acts 2:14–42	Peter preaches on Pentecost
Acts 3:1–10	Peter heals a crippled beggar
Acts 12:1–17	Peter is freed from prison

## Developing the Session (20 minutes)

Invite participants to select one of these chapter sections to discuss in groups of three or four, using the questions provided, *or* select one or two that you believe will be stimulating for a whole-group discussion:

*Toward Denial and Doubt (pp. 41–42)*

The author makes the case that it had to be Peter who denies Jesus because he is the least likely of the disciples. Review his argument; then discuss whether you agree or disagree with his assessment.

“Peter is all of us, is each of us, is any of us. The rock is also the reminder that as the fellowship of believers we are an imperfect lot.” In what circumstances have you denied Jesus or been tempted to do so? What situations most challenge our desire to express our faith today?

*The Allure of the Unknown* (pp. 42–47)

“Believe those who are seeking the truth; doubt those who find it.” Of what situations does this quote from André Gide ring true for you? Would you say you are seeking the truth, or have found it? Why?

Recall the story of Frank’s confession. Read aloud the third paragraph on page 45. Name some examples of “a faith that bends itself to our will.” Name some examples of “a will that bends itself to our faith.” What are some difficult and sometimes dangerous choices that you, or people you know, have been called to make?

*The Church in All Her Imperfect Glory* (pp. 47–48)

The author proposes that Peter finds the conviction to fulfill his call because he understands that Jesus forgives him completely for his denial, even for the sins he will undoubtedly commit down the road. What part does forgiveness play in your ability to respond to God’s call to you?

“Like Peter we will both embrace and deny the awesome presence of God in our lives and the response it is meant to compel.” In what ways has this been true for you?

If you have time, invite the small groups to share one or two insights from their conversation that they believe might be useful to the whole group.

## **Closing (5 minutes)**

Ask participants to write down their own one-sentence response to the question from Jesus, “Who do *you* say that I am?” Offer this introduction to a closing prayer, and invite participants to read their statement during the pause:

*Closing Prayer:* “Great God, we thank you for your gift to us, Jesus Christ, the Messiah, son of the living God. Hear our confessions of who he is for each one of us. Accept these expressions of faith, of doubt, of understanding, of incomplete understanding, as our attempt to say what we believe, and to believe more completely. [Pause] “Lord, we believe, help our unbelief.” Amen.

# 4

## Session Four

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### In Preparation

Read chapter 7, “The Mob Calls for Jesus’ Crucifixion.”

### Theme

Going along with the crowd is much easier than standing up for our deepest convictions when we feel we may stand alone. Standing alone, however, is to be faithful to the one who was crucified for standing alone when he claimed to be God’s son.

### Opening (5 minutes)

Ask participants to call out words or phrases that describe “mob mentality.” Then ask, “What are some ways people act when they are part of a mob?”

AND/OR

In groups of four, identify the closest you have personally been to a situation of “mob mentality.” Name the situation and say one thing about what it felt like to you.

### Developing the Session (35 minutes)

Two alternatives are available for this section:

1. Allow about 5 minutes for participants to skim from paragraph one on page 70 to the end of paragraph one on page 71, looking for information about what it was like for Jews in Jerusalem at this time. They should note the political and economic situation, religious climate, power dynamics, living conditions, and so forth. Say, “Pretend you are talking to someone who wants to move to Jerusalem. You want to give a clear and honest assessment of what it might be like to live in the city. What do you say to them?” After clarifying the situation and conditions in Jerusalem, ask, “Both from

the author's description and our own perception of the situation, what motivations might people have for perceiving Jesus as a threat, and for going along with the crowd?"

To cover this groundwork more quickly, summarize this section for the group and offer your own list of motivations that might have been operative. Invite them to add any they think might also be a factor here.

2. (Option A) Say, "This chapter highlights for us the power of groups to define us. Let's take some time individually to reflect on where our loyalties and energies lie." Hand out copies of Appendix A: "What Do My Group Associations Reflect: A Personal Inventory." (Put the appendix on one page, back and front if necessary, with spaces for their responses.) Tell participants they have about 15 minutes to complete this reflective exercise, after which time they will have an opportunity to talk with others regarding something they care about passionately.

In groups of three, tell each other something that you want to make a difference about, and one way you might begin to act on that desire.

2. (Option B) Make a quick list on newsprint as participants respond to the question, "What dissenters does the author highlight?" Then ask:

- Who are some dissenters you know? What have they done that you admire or value?
- When you reflect on your own beliefs and passions, what are some issues you either have dissented about or would like to give more attention to?
- If you could direct your faith community to dissent as a group on one issue, what would it be?
- What are some steps we could take to gain courage for dissent?
- What are some things we could do to take a first step toward dissent?
- What are some things we could do to find partners with us in our dissent?

### **Closing (5 minutes)**

Invite participants to be prepared to name one thing they might hope to "dissent" about. Offer this closing prayer, and allow time at

the pause for participants to name their issue. (The quote in the prayer is from p. 78 of the text.)

*Closing Prayer:* Crucified and Risen Lord, “It is hard to be heard over the voices calling for crucifixions great or small, or choruses that champion sameness for sameness’s sake. But there is comfort to be found in the company of our convictions, in refusing to hide behind mob morality, in being willing to state our beliefs, live our beliefs, and accept the consequences of our beliefs.” Give us courage to express and advocate for our convictions about [pause]. . . . May we be wise in choosing what to do, and when, and how, guided by your call to act justly on behalf of others. Amen.

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# Appendix A

## What Do My Group Associations Reflect: A Personal Inventory

1. List groups to which you belong.

What do these associations say about who you are and what you care about?

Which of them intersect with your faith/call/vocation? In what ways?

2. List the groups/institutions to which you contribute financial support.

List the magazines you subscribe to.

List the memberships you have.

List the meetings you attend regularly.

What are some things your responses say about where you exercise your beliefs, values, convictions, and identity?

3. Identify a group situation in which you have gone along with the group without necessarily agreeing with its decision or action.
  
4. List groups you participate in that no longer seem to align with your beliefs/convictions.
  
5. Identify the group that most represents your deepest convictions.
  
6. If you could create your own group to support your advocacy on a single issue you care about, or a dissent you want to make public in order to effect change, what would it be?

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## Session Five

### In Preparation

Read chapter 10, “Mary, the Mother of Jesus.”

### Theme

Mary accepted both the gift and the responsibility of being the mother of Jesus. Like Mary, we are called to faithfulness in all aspects of our relationships with those given into our care.

### Opening (20 minutes)

Tell the group that in preparation for examining Mary’s role in the passion, it will be helpful to look at the Scripture passages where she is mentioned. Then divide the group into three smaller groups and ask participants to skim their assigned Scripture passages, looking for how Mary, the mother of Jesus, is portrayed. If you have access to a variety of pictures of Mary from art books, add a fourth group to look at them and report how they see Mary depicted in art. If you have hymns, an additional group might skim the texts of Advent and Christmas hymns, looking for how Mary is portrayed there. Ask the groups to be prepared to present a brief summary of their findings to the whole group, and hear their reports. For the sake of time, be clear in inviting a description of the portrayal of Mary, not a summary of the stories they read.

#### *Group 1*

Matthew 1:18–25

Luke 2:41–52

John 2:1–12

John 19:25b–27

*Group 2*

Luke 1:26–56

Mark 3:31–35

Acts 1:12–14

*Group 3*

Luke 2:1–20

Luke 2:21–40

**Developing the Session (20 minutes)**

From suggestions offered here, either select questions for a whole group discussion, or allow participants to select one section of the chapter for their focus. Invite them to meet in small groups with others who have chosen that same section. As long as the groups are no larger than six persons, it doesn't matter if they are different sizes.

*Skim “Ordinary Enough” (pp. 98–100), and discuss the following questions. The author claims, “It is the ordinariness itself that made her [Mary] such a logical choice to give birth to a king ‘of [whose] kingdom there will be no end,’ because this would be a kingdom like no other” (p. 98).*

What is “ordinary” about Mary, and about her situation?

What are some things that happened to Mary that she might have experienced as “extraordinary,” as you reflect on her experience in hindsight?

What impact do you imagine this “ordinary” mother and upbringing having on Jesus and his understanding of his ministry?

How do your own circumstances compare to those of Mary and Jesus during his upbringing? What do you see as ordinary about yourself? In what way does a sense of being ordinary (or not) affect your understanding of what God calls you to do?

*Skim “Mother Mary” (pp. 100–103), and discuss the following questions.*

It's unusual to think about Mary's effect on Jesus through her parenting, but the author refers to Jesus as “the product of her efforts” (p. 101). In what ways do you imagine Mary's parenting shaping the character and ministry of Jesus?

Read aloud the first full paragraph on page 101. In what ways do the author's statements ring true to your experience as a child or as a parent? What is difficult about that reality for you?

The words of Jesus to his mother at Cana, and during his ministry (see the last paragraph on p. 102), seem harsh when we hear them from Mary's perspective. How might they have felt to her? What might she have come to understand from them later when she saw the ministry of Jesus unfold?

What do they say to us about Jesus when we know the whole story through the end?

*Skim "Woman, Behold Your Son" (pp. 103–5), and discuss the following questions.*

Read aloud John 18:15–16. When asked who went to the courtyard of the high priest with Jesus, most will answer, "Peter." Few notice this unnamed disciple and his presence with Jesus. Had you noticed him and wondered how the high priest knows him and why his presence is accepted, unlike Peter's presence? To what do you attribute the lack of attention to him? What might his presence have meant to Jesus?

Read aloud John 19:25b–27. What do you imagine it means to Mary that Jesus assigns her and this disciple to one another? The author suggests they will need one another. Why might Mary need the disciple? Why might the disciple need Mary?

"Jesus and Mary were more alike than either may have ever imagined" (p. 104). Discuss the similarities the author suggests, describing evidence of each for both persons (for example, What was Jesus' divine calling? What was Mary's divine calling? and so forth).

In what ways can you identify with the mother and the son—their feelings toward one another, their reaction to what is happening to one another?

## **Closing (5 minutes)**

Convene the whole group and invite participants to tell one new insight they have into Mary and her relationship with Jesus, or into Mary's character as a mother. Invite them to name one connection they see between themselves and Mary.

Close with this prayer or another one of your choosing:

*Closing Prayer:* Gracious God, give us wisdom and insight in our relationships with those in our care: children, parents, friends in need. May all we do and say empower them to be faithful disciples of Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life. Amen.

# 6

## Session Six

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### In Preparation

Read chapter 13, “Joseph of Arimathea.”

### Theme

Joseph’s lifetime of seeking points us in the direction of finding out what we can know of this Jesus, and doing what we can do to stand with him in his sacrifice of himself for the whole world.

### Opening (15 minutes)

Hand out a copy of Appendix B, which contains the four Gospel versions of Joseph of Arimathea’s part in the passion. Assign one-fourth of the group the Matthew version, one-fourth the Mark version, one-fourth the Luke version, and one-fourth the John version. Give them a couple of minutes to read their version, then tell them you want to make a list of all the details that can be found in all four versions. Write “What We Know about Joseph of Arimathea” on top of a sheet of newsprint. Ask participants to call out details from their story until you have the complete list. To make sure you haven’t missed any, ask them to look at their own version again to be sure everything contained in their story is included here.

Do not at this time explore differences in the versions and possible reasons for them. The purpose of this exercise is simply to make all the details we know about Joseph available for the conversation to follow.

As an alternative, if you do not want to take time to have the group find these details, prepare the summary list yourself using the four versions and the author’s description in the first section of the chapter.

## Developing the Session (25 minutes)

1. Say, “The author suggests that ‘Joseph lived the life of a seeker’” (p. 128). In exploring why Joseph might have used his tomb for the body of Jesus, the author offers the possibility that Joseph “came to see something of himself in Jesus” (p. 130).

Ask someone to read aloud paragraph one and the first sentence of paragraph two from the chapter section “Love Your Enemy” (p. 130). As they read, list on newsprint the similarities between Jesus and Joseph, as follows, or invite members of the group to underline the similarities in their books as they listen. Both Jesus and Joseph:

- were pilgrims
- took contrary positions
- performed kindnesses
- had influence and wisdom
- were pious
- were spiritually restless

Take one similarity at a time and ask for examples of it from what we know of Joseph, and from what we know of Jesus. This exercise will be easier if the list created at the outset is displayed where they can see it. For example, as you go through the list, ask:

- “How is Joseph of Arimathea a pilgrim?”
- “What are some ways you see Jesus as a pilgrim?”
- “What contrary position did Joseph of Arimathea take?”
- “What are some contrary positions Jesus took?”

Expect one example for Joseph, but many examples from the life of Jesus. Take your time during examples from Jesus’ life, allowing enough time for participants to come up with a number of examples, and go deeper than the obvious ones offered quickly.

2. After hearing examples for the whole list, ask participants to turn to someone near them and describe one or two ways their own lives connect with, or seem similar to, Joseph’s life. For example, ask, “What can you see of yourself in Joseph?”

3. Select some of the following comments and questions for discussion, as appropriate for your group and your time frame:

*The author wonders if Joseph may have taken responsibility for the body of Jesus because “no one else seems to have stepped forward to do it” (p. 131).*

When might that be a good enough reason to engage in ministry to another?

*“In seeing Jesus as he did, he [Joseph] saw perhaps a partial and idealized reflection of himself and understood that a good life is lived as though what we seek is close at hand and well worth the effort” (p. 131).*

What difference might it make to live this way? What might it mean to *you* to live “as though what [you] seek is close at hand and well worth the effort”?

When have you experienced “a holy impatience with hairsplitting legalisms”? What were the legalisms, and what did you do about it?

*Consider the statement, “Our God is whatever is primary in our life, whatever means more than anything else” (p. 132).*

What competes with God for that place? When you consider the way you live your life, what seems to concern you ultimately?

*The author lists a number of biblical images of restless seeking, including the exodus, the journey to the manger, and the journey to go and tell after the resurrection.*

What other biblical images come to mind? In what ways does your own journey compare with the image of “restless seeking”?

## Closing (10 minutes)

Read aloud the third full paragraph on page 133, the story of the father who asks at every evening meal, “And what did you do for someone today?” Tell the group that it suggests the importance of examining our daily lives for concrete acts of faithfulness. Ask them to reflect quietly on what they might do that would accomplish these three things:

1. invite them to think of bettering the world
2. be a constant reminder of thinking of others’ needs
3. be concrete and manageable

If you have time, invite those who are willing to tell their idea for them. Close with this prayer or another of your choosing:

*Closing Prayer*

*God of love, make us like Joseph of Arimathea in  
our seeking of your kingdom,  
our steadfastness of conviction in the face of decisions we do not  
believe serve you,  
our desire to do kindness to those overlooked, and  
our daily attempts to practice our devotion in modest ways that  
may be known only to you. Amen.*

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## **Appendix B**

# **What We Know about Joseph of Arimathea**

### **Matthew 27:57–60**

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away.

### **Mark 15:42–46**

When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb.

### **Luke 23:50–54**

Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where

no one had ever been laid. It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning.

### **John 19:38–42**

After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

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# Final Session

## In Preparation

Read “Conclusion: Who He Was, Who We Are.”

## Theme

“We deepen our understanding of the story [of the passion] if we find our own lives paralleled in the lives of those who were there” (p. 3).

## Opening (5 minutes)

Say, “As we bring our study to a close, it is important to reflect on what we have explored that will shape our lives and ministry in the days ahead. I invite you to immerse yourselves in your memory of these stories and characters in order to draw inspiration and insight for your journey of faith (and for the journey we take as a community).”

Ask participants to simply say aloud the name of a character they learned something new about, or from, in this study.

## Developing the Session (30 minutes)

1. Turn to page 153 and read aloud the last five lines of paragraph one, beginning with “In the eyes of many, he [Jesus] was . . .,” followed by the whole of the section, “We Cannot Speak of God, but We Can Speak of Love.” Ask, “In these stories from the Passion, what are some qualities of the divine you encountered in Jesus?”

2. The author lists many actions people take that would seem to warrant rejection by God, yet God still loves them. Ask participants in twos or threes to skim page 155, looking for one example of something that strikes a chord for them personally. Name it as something to confess or something they would like to change.

3. In the section “Death Be Not Proud,” the author claims that neither sin nor death can keep us from God.” Ask, “What signs of

hope did you find in these stories from the passion?” and “What one character might you look to as a model to emulate, or as the teacher of a lesson you want to heed?”

4. In the section “They Are All Still Here; They Are All of Us,” the author asserts that these characters at the passion are all of us. From among the characters we explored, or among all those present in the passion whose stories you know, which one are you most like at times and why?

### **Closing (10 minutes)**

Read aloud “To Live into Salvation.” Ask the following questions:

- What part of the passion stories that we explored stand out to you in the unfolding of salvation history?
- How do you see yourself as an extension of this unfolding of salvation history?
- What part, by God’s grace, would you like to play in this unfolding of salvation history?

Close with this prayer, or one of your choosing. (The quote in the prayer is Luke 2:29–30.)

*Closing Prayer:* “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” Guide our minds and hearts as we reflect on what we have learned from the stories of the passion of Jesus, the Christ. Draw us nearer to you, and to the world you give us to serve. Amen.

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# A Generic Session Plan for Use with Any Chapter

## Opening

Begin by reading the Scripture passage aloud and reviewing what we know about the character. If that character appears at other places in Scripture, note those for additional insight.

## Developing the Session

Here are four alternative approaches to each session. Use one of the four.

1. Look at each section of the chapter for highlights to discuss. Write two or three questions per section that will help participants explore the content of the section, and identify insights from the story and about the character. Then have the participants examine their own lives in relationship to the character's place in the passion narrative.
2. Look for quotes in the chapter that will stimulate conversation for your group. Select the most appealing and invite conversation about agreement or disagreement, what they might mean to us, and what the implications are for ministry.
3. Select the most interesting sections of the chapter and assign each of those to a small group. Ask them to come back with one insight to discuss and one question to help the group talk about it.
4. Plan to discuss this character's relationship with Jesus—what it was like, what it might have meant to both of them, and how the character showed faithfulness to Jesus.

## Closing

Pick one of the following three alternatives for the closing:

1. Invite participants to express their response to this character and/or to Jesus.
2. Help participants make a commitment in response to key elements of the story.
3. Create a way for participants to identify commonalities with this character.

Pray for continuing insight into ways we might use these characters and stories to guide us in following Jesus.

No matter what you choose to do and how you choose to do it, may you be blessed by the stories of these people who knew Jesus at his most vulnerable and who were, without a doubt, never the same again. Pray that all the participants who experience the passion anew through this study are similarly transformed.