



JESUS *the* STRANGER

SMALL GROUP GUIDE

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What Is Lent?

Lent is a forty-day season of penitence and preparation for the observance of Easter. It begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Holy Saturday before Easter. Traditionally, the Lord's Day (Sunday) is always a feast day, hence Sundays are excluded from the forty-day period. Some daily readers, such as the one this is based on (*Jesus the Stranger: A Daily Lenten Reader* by Kenneth Collins; available for purchase at seedbed.com), may include bonus entries to carry devotees through to Easter and beyond. Admittedly, it is difficult to journey through a season of strict penitence knowing the world-altering Resurrection Sunday is just around the corner!

How to Use This Resource

This small group reflection guide is intended to help churches journey toward Lent together. The sermon on Sunday is themed around Jesus's suffering, alienation, and rejection, and will have some connections to the video teaching intended for the group reflections. For the highest use of this resource, we recommend having the daily reader, though this is not required.

The central purpose of Christian teaching is to reveal God as he truly is. Sometimes this bids us leave behind our misconceptions so that we can freshly wrestle with his person and plans as revealed in Scripture. In doing so, we will learn more about ourselves and the demands of authentic discipleship on our lives. The questions contained herein challenge small groups to rehearse Jesus's story accurately while also probing with questions about the implications for our lives.

Here is a suggested outline of a meeting:

- Open with a prayer
- Watch the video (approximately 25–30 minutes)
- Ask someone to read the suggested Scripture passage from their Bible
- Work through the questions
- End with a prayer

Session One

Beginnings

Luke 2:25–35

1. Share anything from this past week's sermon, devotional readings, or the video presentation that encouraged, challenged, or perplexed you.
2. Have you ever had the experience of family members putting you in a box because of something that happened when you were young and, in their minds at least, you can never get beyond this image? Have you ever had to face the question, "Who do you think you are?" What did Jesus do when his community treated him with contempt?
3. Why does John's gospel use the metaphor of light to describe Jesus? What does this reveal about the person and character of Jesus?
4. What is the problem or temptation we face with slotting God among other things in lists such as, "faith, family, football"? Why won't God settle for a slot of your time? What Scripture passages suggest that God won't allow himself to be among a list of other priorities in your life, even if first or at the top of that list? What does holiness have to do with it?
5. What happened in the lives of the earliest of Jesus's followers in the Gospels, or the earliest of Christian converts when they encountered the good news in the book of Acts?
6. Contrast familiarity with genuine knowledge. What examples can you think of in your life? What is the difference between knowing about something and knowing something from experience? Is there a difference between knowing someone and knowing someone intimately? What kind of knowledge does God have of you? What kind does he desire for you of him?

Session Two

A Disciple Confesses

Luke 7:36–50

1. Share anything from this past week's sermon, devotional readings, or the video presentation that encouraged, challenged, or perplexed you.
2. Consider the experience of alienation and separation. What role do these play in the identity of your community? What place do boundaries play in forming your faith community? What is the principal caution when practicing holiness as a community?
3. Cultural radicals—perhaps on both traditional left and right—have struggled with faithfully loving neighbors as themselves. What might Jesus's words be to radical individualists? How about radical collectivists?
4. How would your neighbors describe the reach and depth of your love? What would it take to move from passive to generous love in your life? Do you desire this?
5. Does “your” Jesus ever make people uncomfortable? Has he ever made you uncomfortable? Discuss this in relation to the speaker's claim in the video that peace at all costs is no virtue. How does truth chasten our intentions?
6. What is so good about suffering? Anything? What do you run to in order to avoid suffering? How does this relate to Jesus's claim that his disciples will experience suffering in the world (John 16:33)?

Session Three

Deadly Designs Against Jesus

John 11:35–53

1. Share anything from this past week's sermon, devotional readings, or the video presentation that encouraged, challenged, or perplexed you.
2. What do you make of the human tendency to align ourselves against the good when it poses a threat to a status quo from which we are the benefactors? Discuss the difficulty of holy living when it does not serve our interests.
3. The Gospels testify that Jesus can foster division, even among family. He cautions, with hyperbolic flare, that one must "hate" their family in comparison to the love they have for him (Luke 14:26). Have you ever experienced alienation or division on account of your faith? What was that like?
4. Take a moment to reflect on and rank your values in life (family, leisure, possessions, work, friendship, hobbies, etc.). How would people describe you if they had an insider's view of your calendar? How tightly do you hold onto your own lifestyle and schedule? Have you ever had to give up something significant for the sake of the kingdom of God?
5. The religious leaders and the crowd were sometimes closely aligned and other times opposed. Jesus had to navigate the reception of his ministry with wisdom and courage. In the twenty-first century, what serves as your compass for guiding your decisions, practices, and beliefs? Have you experienced much continuity or discontinuity in your faith life's trajectory? What led to this?
6. The religious leaders effectively told Jesus, "We don't need you. We have everything in control." Discuss the irony of their treatment of God incarnate at that point in Israel's story. Have you ever been tempted to utter the same thing to Jesus? Discuss either a success or a failure in your own journey.

Session Four

Shouts of Praise and a Very Special Supper

John 6:25–57

1. Share anything from this past week's sermon, devotional readings, or the video presentation that encouraged, challenged, or perplexed you.
2. Jesus used the image of bread and wine to teach his disciples about the Christian life and insisted that one must eat of his flesh and blood too. It is one of the reasons so many considered his teaching strange and offensive. What do you make of this teaching? What does it have to do with sacraments? Why do Christians partake in sacraments?
3. The video presenter discussed the difference between nominal and authentic disciples of Jesus. What do you make of these categories? How would you define a disciple of Jesus? What are some of the current cultural enticements the church faces? How about you?
4. How often do you hear about repentance or holiness in your church? How would you summarize the Bible's teaching on these essential Christian doctrines? Where these are missing in church life, what often takes their place?
5. One of the things that competes with the good news of Jesus is opposing stories or narratives. How would you briefly describe the story of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation? Who is the main character? What is the conflict, climax, and resolution? How about some of the leading stories that surround the church? How do they compare and contrast with the biblical story?
6. How would you define "abiding in" Jesus (see John 15:4–10)? What does abiding in Jesus have to do with the gospel? How congruent is your life with Jesus's words here? Does abiding in Jesus resonate with you?

Session Five

Satan Has His Day

Matthew 27:11–26

1. Share anything from this past week's sermon, devotional readings, or the video presentation that encouraged, challenged, or perplexed you.
2. It is common in the West to speak of Jesus assuming our guilt and penalty for sin. Guilt is related to innocence, while shame is related to honor. What do you make of Jesus experiencing the shame of sin in our place? Is shame a feeling you ever experience? What does this have to do with identity?
3. Note how social pressure turned Jesus, a familiar miracle-worker, into a stranger to God's people. What is so spiritually and morally dangerous about crowds? What lies about God or his salvation story have been aimed at you in the past? Do you recognize their attempt to make Jesus a stranger to you, or you to him?
4. At least two of Jesus's disciples doubted and ultimately denied him: Judas and Peter. The difference is that one despaired, while the other was reconciled. Both seemed to stumble at the element of a suffering Messiah in the plan of God. Has God ever defied your own expectations?
5. The religious leaders conspired to turn the charge of blasphemy—a religious matter—into a charge of political treason that finally drew the attention of their Roman overlords. Do theological and political claims mix? Is the Christian faith ever threatening? How and to whom?
6. Jesus came to testify to the truth. As such, Christians trust his witness, which was supported by his compassion and sinless life, his miracles, and ultimately, his resurrection. How might you frame Jesus and the Bible's authority to reveal God? What unique claims does the Bible make about God? People? Our world? The future?

Session Six

The Cross Reveals the Light Eternal

Mark 15:33–41

1. Share anything from this past week's sermon, devotional readings, or the video presentation that encouraged, challenged, or perplexed you.
2. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea seem to have been in some sense disciples of Jesus, whom—at least one of which—boldly rose to the occasion at his death. Is it possible to be a secret disciple of Jesus? Why or why not? What assumptions might be lurking in your answer?
3. With a familiarity of Roman punishment as well as a prophetic anticipation of the means of his own death, Jesus instructed his followers to be ready to take up the cross. This central teaching is largely absent from modern Christianity. Why is this easy to overlook in our day and age? What does it signify about our own faithfulness to Jesus and his gospel?
4. If someone asked you, “What is the kingdom of God like?” or, “Where is it?” how would you respond? What do you make of the profile of a “blessed person” in the Beatitudes of Matthew 5? How would you score the church on her aligning to God's kingdom values?
5. The cross is a demonstration of God's holy love for humanity. What do you make of the popular belief that the relationship between the Father and Son was broken on the cross, as Jesus stood in our place? See all of Psalm 22, which Jesus was quoting in Mark 15:34, for a fuller context.
6. In the resurrection of his Son Jesus, God is making a claim on his good creation. In the end, he has not abandoned either Jesus or his creation. New creation is a theme that runs throughout the New Testament. How has God remade you? Is your hope in heaven, or a renewed creation, of which your body and soul are a part?