



LEADER'S GUIDE

FROM THE EDITOR

The team at Good Faith Media is deeply grateful for your continued participation in Good Faith Bible Studies. From the decades of faithful service provided by Tony Cartledge to the 2025 studies written by Kathy and Nathan Maxwell, we remain committed to providing insightful explorations of Scripture. Our aim is to guide readers in engaging the Bible—not solely to satisfy intellectual curiosity, but to nurture and strengthen the faith of those who follow in the way of Jesus.



While the lessons published in *Good Faith Magazine* can easily be studied individually, Scripture is best explored within the context of community. This is, after all, how the sacred texts were first shared and received. Because of this, we want to offer as much support as possible to those leading small groups each week. This Leader's Guide is designed to help orient group leaders and inspire meaningful, transformative conversations about every lesson.

Each week's guide follows a consistent pattern. It includes an introduction to the passage and the curriculum writer's lesson, a note about the lesson's placement within the lectionary and Good Faith Bible Studies, and a series of discussion questions for small groups. When available, we also include sermons from the passage recorded for A Sermon for Every Sunday, Good Faith Media's resource for our "Preaching to Inspire" initiative.

We hope you find this guide helpful. As always, please feel free to reach out with any questions or suggestions. You can email me directly at craig@goodfaithmedia.org.

Sincerely,
Craig Nash
Senior Editor



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A Note about the Lectionary

Depending on your background with church, you may or may not be aware of the term lectionary. The word comes from the Latin *lectio*, which means reading. The Latin *lectionarium* means a book of readings. Different church traditions utilize different lectionaries, but they all have the same purpose — to provide a broad reading of the Bible over a set period of time. The most common lectionary for Protestant Christians is the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), which runs on a three year cycle. The RCL was compiled by scholars and representatives from numerous Christian denominations, including the Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, American Baptist Churches USA, and United Methodist Church, just to name a few.

As we note throughout this leader's guide, *Good Faith Bible Studies* stays close to the lectionary during the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter. At other times throughout the year, we seek for our studies to be informed by the lectionary, but not bound by it. In the January-March 2026 installment, all but four of the studies come directly from the RCL readings.

Matthew 2:1–12*The Visit of the Magi:**Matthew's Brilliant Birth Story*

Lesson written by Jennifer Garcia Bashaw

For Matthew, as with the other Gospel writers who concern themselves with telling the story of Jesus' earthly beginnings, this passage is the final section of the birth narrative of Jesus. Jennifer Garcia Bashaw notes in this week's lesson, however, that Matthew's description is the "most deliberately designed, both thematically and theologically." From a teaching standpoint, this gives Bible study leaders a special opportunity to help groups analyze the structure of the story and discuss what Matthew wants his readers to take away from how he told it.

This Lesson's Placement Within the Lectionary and Good Faith Bible Studies

Within the liturgical calendar, today is the second Sunday in the Christmas season. It may be helpful to remind your group that while our culture races toward Christmas and then washes its hands clean of it after December 25, the Church operates on a different timeline. Also, even though the celebration of Epiphany isn't for two more days, most churches that don't gather during the week for high holy days consider this "Epiphany Sunday," as it is the closest Sunday to the celebration.

Looking ahead, next week (the Baptism of Jesus) will be the last week until mid-February that Good Faith Bible Studies will follow the lectionary Gospel passage. Because of this, pay special attention to how these first two January lessons follow the life of Jesus. After that, there will be a three-week introduction to 1 Corinthians (also from the lectionary), which will focus on issues related to unity within the church. A good "bridge" conversation to those lessons may be to talk about how the visit of the Magi — strangers from a strange land — speaks to ideas of unity and togetherness.

Listen to this week's episode of the Good Faith Bible Studies Podcast wherever you enjoy podcasts AND scan the QR code to hear related sermons on this topic.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Consider the following questions to help guide your group through this passage. Depending on the amount of time you have, you may not be able to get to all of them. Pick those you feel will be most helpful for your group:

1. Bashaw describes Matthew's birth narrative as "the most deliberately designed, both thematically and theologically." What do you notice about the structure of Matthew's telling of Jesus' birth, and how might that structure shape our understanding of who Jesus is?
2. Matthew's genealogy highlights women like Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba — figures often viewed as outsiders. What do you think Matthew wants his readers to learn about God's work in and through unexpected people?
3. The Magi — foreign astrologers—are the first to seek and honor Jesus. How does their presence challenge traditional boundaries of who "belongs" in God's story? How might this speak to the church's calling today?
4. Herod responds to news of the Messiah with fear and deception. Why do you think power often reacts defensively to the arrival of God's kingdom? Where do we see this tension between power and humility in our world?
5. The Magi are "overwhelmed with joy" when they encounter Jesus. What might that kind of joy look like in our faith communities today? What practices or postures help us cultivate it?
6. The Magi offer their finest treasures to a child born in poverty. What "gifts"— tangible or intangible — can we offer to Christ and to the world in his name? How might those gifts challenge worldly values of wealth or success?
7. After meeting Jesus, the Magi return home "by another road." What might that detail symbolize for us as people who encounter Christ? How have encounters with God changed the direction of your own life or community?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

If you have time, watch one or more of the sermons from this week's passage from A Sermon for Every Sunday. (<https://asermonforeverysunday.com/scripture/matthew-21-12/>)

Matthew 3:13-17

Beloved Before You Begin: The Baptism of Jesus

Lesson written by Jason Edwards

In his study of the Baptism of Jesus, Jason Edwards walks readers through the details of the event that would mark the beginning of Jesus' ministry. But he also tapped into elements of the story that went beyond the typical questions related to the ritual of baptism. These elements centered around Jesus' *identity and relationship* with God, and explored what the passage says about how God saw Jesus, and how God sees us. Although Jason includes some interesting historical interpretations of the passage, the lesson culminates in a devotional tone. This would be a good approach to preparing for this lesson — less scholarship, more reflection.

This Lesson's Placement Within the Lectionary and Good Faith Bible Studies

The Baptism of Jesus, which always falls on the Sunday after Epiphany, is considered in most liturgical traditions to be the first Sunday of Ordinary Time following the Christmas season. The term "Ordinary" carries a dual meaning: it can suggest something "regular" or "routine," but it also refers to the use of "ordinal" numbers, or counting. There are two seasons of Ordinary Time—the first between the Christmas and Lenten seasons, and the second between the Easter season and Advent.

It has been suggested that Ordinary Time is that season when we answer the following question: "How do the claims we make during the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter affect our daily lives?" In more pedestrian terms, Ordinary Time is where the "rubber meets the road." Consider this as you explore how Jesus' baptism matters with your small group.

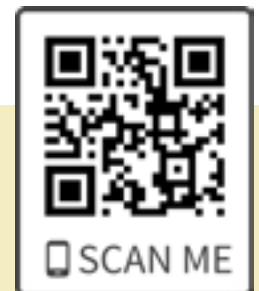
As mentioned last week, this will also be the last "Jesus story" in Good Faith Bible Studies until mid-February.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Jason Edwards notes that Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of his ministry. Why do you think Jesus chose to begin this way? What might his willingness to enter the same muddy water as everyone else teach us about God's approach to power and humility?
2. John hesitates to baptize Jesus, saying, "I need to be baptized by you." What does this exchange reveal about our human understanding of righteousness and status? How does Jesus redefine righteousness in this moment?
3. The voice from heaven names Jesus "Beloved" before he performs a single miracle or teaches a single lesson. What does this tell us about where our worth and identity come from? How might this challenge the way we measure value—in ourselves and in others?
4. Edwards writes that baptism isn't a culmination but a launching point. How might this understanding shape the way we think about baptism or other "milestone moments" in the life of faith?
5. The story suggests that the divine voice still speaks, reminding us who we are. When and how have you heard or sensed that affirming voice in your own life? What helps or hinders you from hearing it?
6. Being named "beloved" is not just private comfort but a public calling to see that same belovedness in others. What might it look like for our church or small group to live out this truth in our relationships and community?
7. The lesson closes with the phrase "You are beloved before you begin." What does that mean for the way we approach our work, our service, or even our spiritual practices this week?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Watch one or more of the sermons from this week's passage from A Sermon for Every Sunday. (<https://asermonforeversunday.com/scripture/matthew-313-17/>)



You can listen to this week's episode of the Good Faith Bible Studies Podcast hosted by Craig Nash and Hayoung Park. Available on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and more. PLUS! Scan the QR code to enjoy related sermons on this topic.

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Called to be Saints

Lesson written by Joy Martinez-Marshall

Readers won't learn until several verses into 1 Corinthians that the reason for Paul's letter to the church in Corinth was to address divisions within the congregation. Joy Martinez-Marshall, in her lesson this week on the passage, gives readers a sneak peek into this situation. But she then situates Paul's introduction within the larger context of the book with a statement about identity — the believers in Corinth were saints. Allow this to shape how you approach the lesson with your group this week. As you prepare, remember that you are teaching and encouraging a gathered group of saints to study holy scriptures.

This Lesson's Placement Within the Lectionary and Good Faith Bible Studies

This is the first Sunday in Ordinary Time that isn't set aside as a special celebration or commemoration. (Last Sunday was the first Ordinary Time Sunday, but it is devoted each year to remembering the baptism of Jesus.) In practice, this means that preachers and Bible study writers who follow the lectionary closely now have a more difficult time choosing which of the multiple weekly passages to choose from. They always have a choice, but during "high holy seasons," they usually go with whatever passage most directly addresses the season.

For the epistle reading, this year's lectionary devotes four weeks to introducing 1 Corinthians. We have chosen to stay in 1 Corinthians for just three weeks to cover the entire first chapter. If members of your group ever gather outside your typical meeting time, consider encouraging them to use these three weeks as a springboard to a deeper study in 1 Corinthians. Use these introductory lessons as a way to pique their interest in the book.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Paul begins his letter by calling the Corinthians "sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints." What do you think Paul means by "saints"? How might that definition reshape how we see ourselves and one another within the church today?

2. Joy Martinez-Marshall notes that the church in Corinth was marked by division and competing personalities. What modern parallels do you see in our own congregations or denominations? What can we learn from Paul's approach to addressing division through affirmation and thanksgiving rather than condemnation?
3. The lesson mentions that too many voices today try to define who is and isn't "holy." How have you seen this play out in the church or in public discourse? What might it look like to resist those definitions and live instead from the identity of being "called to be saints"?
4. Joy writes that expressing gratitude, even amid conflict, "links God's ongoing activity to our own story." How might practicing thanksgiving help bridge divides or renew relationships in your own community of faith?
5. Paul gives thanks for the Corinthians' spiritual gifts, even though those same gifts later become sources of tension. What does that teach us about how to hold the gifts of others—and our own—with humility? How can we keep Christ, rather than our abilities, at the center of the church's life?
6. In verse 8, Paul assures the Corinthians that God "will strengthen you to the end." How does this promise shape our understanding of spiritual maturity and perseverance? Where do you see evidence of God's sustaining work in your own life or community?
7. Joy concludes that we are "called to embrace our identity as saints even when others insist we are mistaken." What are some practical ways your group or congregation could embody this calling—especially in a culture that often misunderstands or misrepresents faith?

The revamped Good Faith Bible Studies podcast is free and available on all podcast streaming apps—Spotify, Apple Podcasts Google Podcasts, or you can visit us at goodfaithmedia.org. Listen to an in-depth discussion of this week's Scriptures with Craig Nash and Hayoung Park, a 2025 GFM Intern.



1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Same Mind, Same Purpose

Lesson written by Joy Martinez-Marshall

In the second section of the first chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul reveals why he's writing to the church in Corinth — quarrels and divisions within the congregation caused by differing factions attaching themselves to the leadership of various figures, rather than to the headship of Christ. Sadly, this is a bit too familiar for many of the congregations whose Sunday School classes and small groups read Good Faith Bible Studies, especially given that our most significant readership comes from those in Baptist churches. Joy Martinez-Marshall names this in the introduction to her lesson, and it is important to be mindful of those particular landmines while studying this passage in a group.

This Lesson's Placement Within the Lectionary and Good Faith Bible Studies

As stated above, this is the second in a three-part series on 1 Corinthians 1, and falls on the third Sunday in Ordinary Time. One interesting note is that the gospel passage for the lectionary today is from Matthew 4:12-23, which recounts the scene, after John the Baptist had been arrested, when Jesus travels throughout Galilee and begins to gather his disciples. It provides an interesting background to be aware of, as two of the disciples named in that gospel passage (Peter and James) would eventually meet with Paul after his conversion (Galatians 1:18-18). This may be an interesting connection to make with your group.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Joy Martinez-Marshall opens by naming how church splits and divisions leave “wounded people, fragmented relationships, and a community struggling to remember who they are together.” How have you seen or experienced this kind of spiritual wounding? What can congregations do to heal from it?
- In Corinth, believers rallied around favorite teachers, much as people today align with certain pastors, influencers, or movements. How can admiration for gifted leaders become unhealthy? What helps us keep Christ, rather than personalities, at the center of our faith?
- Paul urges the Corinthians to be “knit together in the same mind and the same purpose.” How would you describe the difference between unity and uniformity? How can a church preserve diversity of thought and practice while maintaining true unity?
- Joy uses the image of mending—of patiently repairing what's torn—to describe the work of reconciliation. What might “mending” look like in your congregation or relationships? What makes restoration so difficult, and what makes it holy?
- Paul reminds the church that “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the partnership of his Son.” How does remembering God's faithfulness help us stay committed to community even when relationships are strained?
- Paul contrasts the “eloquent wisdom” of human leaders with the power of the cross. What does that contrast teach us about how we measure success or effectiveness in ministry? How can the “foolishness” of the gospel still speak powerfully in our current culture?
- In practical terms, what might it look like for your group or congregation to embody Paul's call to the “same mind and the same purpose”? How can your community become a sign of Christ's mending work in a divided world?

In addition to the Good Faith Bible Studies podcast, Good Faith Media also offers the 12-volume *Nurturing Faith Commentary* bundle by Tony W. Cartledge for **\$300**.

Nurturing Faith Commentary is a Bible study resource that covers every text for every Sunday in the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary. Visit <https://goodfaithmedia.org/product/nurturing-faith-bible-study-commentary-full-set/> to learn more and place an order. Individual volumes are also available in print and digital formats.



1 Corinthians 1:18-31**Good Foolishness**

Lesson written by Joy Martinez-Marshall

After giving a sneak-peek into the issues of division within the church in Corinth, Paul sets the “wisdom of the cross” up against the “wisdom of this age.” As Joy Martinez-Marshall writes in this final lesson in the first chapter of 1 Corinthians, “The church had forgotten that what seemed foolish was, in fact, Jesus’ grand reversal of human understanding of wisdom and strength.” Some of these ideas can, ironically, be a little heady and seemingly out of reach for both lay and seasoned readers of the Bible. In the Good Faith Bible Studies podcast this week, we suggest having group members talk through symbols of strength and vitality in our culture, such as the Nike swoosh and Gold’s Gym logo, and comparing them with the cross, a symbol of weakness that has become the defining symbol of Christianity. Consider mentioning this image to your group before you begin.

This Lesson’s Placement Within the Lectionary and Good Faith Bible Studie

This is the final installment of the three-week peek into 1 Corinthians. It is the fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time. One interesting note is that in some Christian traditions, tomorrow (February 2) is the Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord, or “Candlemas.” It is observed on the 40th day after Christmas and commemorates Jesus being presented at the temple. The text for that feast day is Luke 2:22-40. It tells of Jesus being presented to a devout man named Simeon and a prophet named Anna. The end of the passage reads, “When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.” This idea of Jesus becoming strong and “filled with wisdom” may be an interesting element to add to Paul’s conversation about God’s wisdom.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Paul contrasts “the wisdom of the world” with “the foolishness of the cross.” What do you think makes the message of the cross seem foolish to the world today? How might that same “foolishness” reveal the true wisdom and power of God?
2. In the Good Faith Bible Studies podcast, strength and vitality are compared through cultural symbols like the Nike swoosh or the Gold’s Gym logo versus the cross. What do each of these symbols communicate about power, identity, or success? What does the cross communicate differently?
3. Joy points out that we often prefer distant voices—preachers, podcasters, or influencers—over those in our own community. How has technology changed the way we experience wisdom and authority in faith? How might Paul’s words challenge us to listen differently?
4. Paul writes that “God chose what is low and despised in the world” to reveal divine strength. How does that upside-down value system shape the way we view leadership, success, or worth in the church? Who are the “nobodies” in our world today who might be the very ones God uses?
5. Paul says that “God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” How does that paradox challenge your understanding of God’s nature or how God works in the world? Can you recall a time when what seemed weak or foolish ended up revealing unexpected strength?
6. The lesson warns that when we “listen to stereotypes instead of stories,” we lose our ability to discern God’s wisdom. What are some ways your group or congregation can practice deeper listening and resist the echo chambers that divide communities of faith?
7. Joy closes with a Benedictine blessing: “May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really can make a difference in this world.” What might “holy foolishness” look like in your daily life, your church, or your community this week?



MEET YOUR HOST: *Hayoung Park is a master’s student of social work in the Diana R. Garland School of Social Work at Baylor University. She is pursuing a dual degree and has already completed her M.Div. coursework for Truett Seminary. She was born in South Korea and moved to the United States as a child.*

Psalm 112*A Call to Praise and Practice*

Lesson written by Dr. Stephen Reid

In this week's Good Faith Bible Study podcast, Craig Nash and Hayoung Park discuss some of the challenges with studying the Psalms. Many of us grew up with a certain view of reading scripture that was all about learning and memorizing — but not necessarily for transformation or discipleship. It was, instead, to be able to teach and persuade others (or, sometimes, ourselves) about our sacred texts. But the Psalms serve a slightly different purpose. They include songs and poetry that are intended to be communal and liturgical. This doesn't mean that they don't have "first-person" concerns. But they were received and utilized in a particular setting.

Studying the Psalms can help us make sense of some of the language and setting of the communities that first received them. However, the purpose of this particular genre isn't to transfer information, but to spark transformation, both in our personal lives and in our faith communities. Dr. Stephen Reid has done an excellent job of giving us a few bits of knowledge mixed with practical concerns for how Psalm 112 can shape our lives of faith.

This Lesson's Placement Within the Lectionary and Good Faith Bible Studies

Because of some of the concerns mentioned above, the Psalms don't often get prime billing in Bible studies. And of the various lectionary offerings, they are arguably the least utilized among pastors in sermon planning. If a church is informed by the lectionary, the Psalms will usually be "whispering" in the background — through the selection of songs and prayers and readings. This makes perfect sense, but we want to occasionally include them so that groups and individuals studying scripture can be exposed to the riches for personal devotion the Psalms provide. Psalm 112 is today's lectionary Psalm. In the April-June studies, there will be a three-week series in the Psalms.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following sermon from A Sermon for Every Sunday touches on Psalm 112. (<https://asermonforeversunday.com/scripture/psalm-112/>)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Psalm 112 opens and closes with "Praise the Lord" — Hallelujah. Dr. Reid notes that this isn't simply an exclamation but "a call to respond with heart, mind, and soul." What does it mean to you to treat praise not as a feeling but as a spiritual discipline or way of life?
2. The psalm describes those who "fear the Lord" and "delight in his commandments." In our culture, "fear" often carries negative connotations. How do reverence, humility, and awe help us understand this phrase more deeply? What might "fearing the Lord" look like in everyday faith practice?
3. Verse 4 describes the righteous as "a light in the darkness." Where do you see that light shining in the world today — in individuals, communities, or movements? How can your group or congregation embody this light more fully?
4. Dr. Reid writes that "the righteous show favor, lend generously, and act justly." How does generosity reveal our trust in God's abundance rather than our fear of scarcity? What are some creative ways the church can model this "different kind of economy"?
5. The psalm says, "Their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the Lord." What practices or habits help you cultivate a steadfast heart, especially in uncertain times? How does trust in God's justice shape the way we respond to anxiety or fear?
6. Psalm 112 draws a clear contrast between the stability of the righteous and the frustration of the wicked. How does this poetic tension challenge modern assumptions about success, happiness, or blessing? What might it mean to redefine "prosperity" in light of this psalm?
7. Dr. Reid concludes that praise "is not a feeling but a way of being — a life oriented toward God's purposes." How might your worship, work, or relationships change if you viewed praise as a daily practice rather than a Sunday activity?



To hear more about Psalm 112, you can scan the QR code or click the hyperlink on the bottom left of this page. In this featured ASFES sermon, Rev. Dr. Matthew Vandagriff reflects on Jesus' comments about places of honor at a banquet table.

Matthew 17:1-9*The Transfiguration of Jesus*

Lesson written by Mike Smith

Scan the QR code to explore our playlist of ASFES sermons about Transfiguration Sunday.



In this week's lesson, Mike Smith suggests that the best place to begin when studying the Transfiguration in Matthew's gospel is to look at its impact on Peter, James, and John — the disciples who were on the mountaintop with Jesus. He also notes that the account comes after a conversation (Matthew 16:21-28) about how future glory will only occur after suffering, an idea that set Peter off in disbelief. And yet the Transfiguration is a moment of glory that precedes the suffering Jesus is marching to in Jerusalem. Mike says that, "The Transfiguration serves as a foretaste of that coming reality, functioning as both an anchor and a signpost for disciples who follow Jesus on the way of suffering." In preparing for this lesson, consider how the story of Jesus' experience on the mountain (which, as Mike notes, carries hints of Moses on Sinai) can be a core memory we return to as we approach the Lenten season.

This Lesson's Placement Within the Lectionary and Good Faith Bible Studie

In most Protestant traditions that follow the lectionary, "Transfiguration Sunday" is the last Sunday in Ordinary Time, just before Ash Wednesday leads the church into Lent. Since the account of the Transfiguration occurs in each of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), the lectionary rotates between each reading every year. One interesting note from a lectionary standpoint: Consider how the Transfiguration, the last Sunday in this Ordinary Time, mirrors the themes of the final Sunday in the second Ordinary Time that closes out the church year — "Christ is King" (or "Reign of Christ") Sunday. There are some interesting parallels between the ideas of glory in the Transfiguration and the thoughts of dominion in Christ the King Sunday.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Mike Smith describes the Transfiguration as both an anchor and a signpost for disciples who will soon walk with Jesus toward suffering. How might mountaintop experiences of faith serve as "anchors" for you? What moments in your life have functioned as spiritual signposts?
2. Matthew draws strong parallels between Jesus and Moses, yet the voice from the cloud singles out Jesus alone: "This is my Son... listen to him." How does this moment reshape our understanding of who Jesus is? What does it mean for us to "listen to him" today?
3. The disciples fall to the ground in fear when they hear the divine voice — but Jesus immediately touches them and says, "Do not be afraid." What does this scene teach us about the relationship between awe and reassurance in the life of faith?
4. The Transfiguration reveals Jesus's glory *before* his suffering. How does this reversal challenge our assumptions about power, success, or what it means for God to be at work? How might this story shape our approach to the Lenten season?
5. After the vision faded, the disciples "saw no one except Jesus alone." What significance do you see in that detail? In your own faith life, what voices or influences compete with Christ for your attention and trust?
6. Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets, and Jesus is shown as the fulfillment of both. How does understanding Jesus as the completion of Israel's story help you read Scripture more faithfully or more deeply?
7. Jesus instructs the disciples not to tell anyone about the Transfiguration until after the resurrection. Why do you think he imposes this silence? Are there insights or experiences in our own faith that require time, patience, or deeper understanding before we can share them well?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A Sermon for Every Sunday contains three separate sermons from this passage. (<https://asermonforeverysunday.com/scripture/matthew-171-9/>)

Exodus 12:29-42*The Exodus: Troubling Contradictions*

Lesson written by Mary Alice Birdwhistell

Understanding Exodus is crucial to understanding the people of God in the Old Testament. It forever shaped Jewish identity and revealed a central characteristic of God — God is a God who *delivers*. And yet, as Mary Alice Birdwhistell reminds us in this introductory lesson to a five-week study of Exodus, we cannot escape some of the more problematic aspects of the story. Mary Alice asks the questions that must be at the forefront of our minds over the coming weeks: “What do we do with a story where the freedom of one people comes at the expense of another? What do we do with a story in which innocent children are killed in the middle of the night?” Too often, we ignore these aspects of the story to our detriment. But there is another danger of fixating on these aspects and dismissing this core story as “just a story that helped certain people make sense of the world.” The challenge in leading a group study of the Exodus is acknowledging these tensions, but also recognizing how oppressed communities have leaned on this story for hope throughout the centuries. Also, don’t ignore the ways the story can speak to our personal need for deliverance as well, whether you call that “sin” or conditions of humanity that keep us from flourishing in relationship to God.

This Lesson’s Placement Within the Lectionary and Good Faith Bible Studies

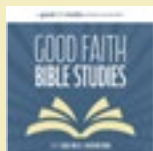
Today is the first Sunday in Lent, the 40 days — minus Sundays — leading up to Easter. (Sundays remain “feast days” during Lent.) Lent usually draws on several themes to assist us in our extended preparation for Holy Week, such as sacrifice and penance. The Exodus story is another key theme because of how it mirrors Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness. However, in this year’s lectionary, an Exodus reading is only found on the third Sunday of Lent. Still, we decided to step out of the lectionary for this year’s Lenten readings so that groups and individuals can spend an extended period of time with this pivotal story.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

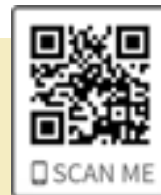
1. Mary Alice Birdwhistell writes that Exodus is both a story of profound deliverance *and* “deeply troubling contradictions.” Which emotions does this passage stir in you? How do you hold the tension between celebrating liberation and acknowledging the immense suffering in the story?
2. The freedom of the Hebrews comes at the devastating cost of Egyptian lives, including innocent children. How should people of faith grapple with a story in which liberation for one group causes harm to another? What helps you approach this story with honesty rather than avoidance?
3. Terence Fretheim says it feels “almost blasphemous” that God is described as the one who “drops the bomb.” How do you interpret God’s agency in this story? What are some faithful ways to wrestle with a text in which divine action raises moral and theological questions?
4. The lesson traces how oppressed communities — especially the Black church — have long drawn hope from Exodus. How have you seen the Exodus story used as a source of courage, resistance, or hope in contemporary movements for justice?
5. The lesson invites readers to imagine themselves as Hebrews, Moses, Egyptians, or even Pharaoh. In this season of your life, which role resonates most with you, and why? How does that perspective shape how you read the passage?
6. Exodus 12:38 notes that a “mixed crowd” left Egypt with the Israelites. How might this detail challenge narrow ideas of who belongs among God’s people? What might it look like for our churches to embody the vision that “God’s redemption is not for the chosen few...but for the world”?
7. Brueggemann writes that remembering both the pain *and* the hope of Exodus is essential for faithful living. What does this story teach us about the nature of hope — especially for people and communities who are still waiting for liberation?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

If you have time, check out A Sermon for Every Sunday to further explore this passage. (<https://asermonforeverySunday.com/scripture/exodus-12/>)



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Exodus 14:10-31

Through the Waters

Lesson written by Mary Alice Birdwhistell

The opening verse of today's passage tells of the Israelites looking up, seeing Pharaoh's army approaching them, and being "terrified" before crying out to the Lord. God's people then do what many of us do when we are afraid — look for someone to blame for our situation. And yet Moses didn't respond to the people's complaints with shame or self-defense. Instead, he told them one of the most prominent lessons throughout the Old and New Testaments: Don't be afraid. In her lesson, Mary Alice Birdwhistell listed several of the numerous instances throughout scripture when these words were spoken. If you have time while preparing for this study, spend some time reading those passages. Compare the situations in those verses with the fear the Israelites were facing as they were being chased by the Egyptian warriors. What is similar? What is different?

Also, lean into the idea of *fear* when thinking about leading this class discussion. Consider how many among us are driven by fear. And consider this: From a purely evolutionary standpoint, fear is an emotion and a response that can keep us safe and alive. With that in mind, what do we make of a God who is continually telling us, "Do not be afraid"?

This Lesson's Placement Within the Lectionary and Good Faith Bible Studie

This is the second in our five-week Lenten series on the Exodus. Today's passage is not in the lectionary. However, the two Old Testament lectionary passages are excellent complementary readings to the story of the Israelites passing through the water. The first — Genesis 12:1-4 — tells of God first initiating a relationship with Abraham. This passage contains the promise that God will make Abraham into a "great nation." How might this inform how you read today's lesson?

The reading from Psalm 121 is the comforting "I lift my eyes to the hills, from where is my help to come?..." passage. These words from the psalmist were written many centuries after the Exodus, and yet they provide a "soundtrack" to this story. Consider having your group read this full Psalm as a prayer before and after studying the passage and lesson.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The Israelites can imagine only two options—slavery or death. Can you recall a time when fear narrowed your imagination in a similar way? How might Moses' words ("Do not be afraid; stand firm; see what God will do") invite us to expand our vision beyond the immediate crisis?
2. Scripture frequently pairs God's call ("Do not be afraid") with moments where something unexpected is about to happen. In this passage, what do you think God is preparing the Israelites for? When has God's invitation to "fear not" felt less like comfort and more like a challenge?
3. God tells the Israelites both to stand still and then to go forward. What do you make of this tension between waiting and acting? How do you discern the difference in your own life or community: when to pause and trust, and when to take the next brave step?
4. Mary Alice cites Terence Fretheim's idea that "God does not work alone." In what ways do you see divine action and human courage working together in this story? Where might your faith community be called to take a first step before the waters part?
5. Harriet Tubman trusted God without seeing the path ahead and acted boldly on that trust. How does her story illuminate or expand your understanding of Exodus 14? Where do you see modern-day examples of "stepping into the water" before the way is clear?
6. Many in your group may be "stuck between the army and the sea" in their own lives — facing no good options or feeling trapped. What does this story offer to people still waiting for deliverance? How can the church accompany people whose waters have not yet parted?
7. This passage repeats the word "see." How does the story challenge the Israelites — and us — to see differently? What fears, assumptions, or "either/or" thinking might God be inviting us to let go of so that we can perceive new possibilities?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

In A Sermon for Every Sunday, Raquel St. Clair Lettsome preaches "Nowhere to Go but Forward" on this passage. (<https://asermonforevery sunday.com/scripture/exodus-14/>)

Exodus 16:1-30

Bread from Heaven

Lesson written by Mary Alice Birdwhistell

The story of the Exodus highlights one of the prevalent tendencies of humans who are in close relationship with God — we complain. A lot. If you’ve spent much time in study groups or listening to sermons, you’ve likely heard a teacher or preacher make remarks about this phenomenon with derision or shame pointed at God’s people. In her lesson on the story of God providing manna from heaven for God’s people, Mary Alice Birdwhistell takes a different tact. She situates the idea of complaint within a relationship of trust. God’s response to the people’s complaints weren’t, “How dare you!” It was one of hearing and responding with concrete, physical provision. As you prepare for this lesson, consider how leaders, in their frustration with the people who complain, can sometimes become as guilty of the very thing they are frustrated about.

Also, in reflecting on the idea of miracles that Mary Alice writes about, consider the various understandings of what constitutes a miracle among those in your group. This might be a good opportunity to have a class discussion about the nature of miracles.

This Lesson’s Placement Within the Lectionary and Good Faith Bible Studies

This is the third in a five-week series on the Exodus. Note that this is not a lectionary passage, however, Exodus 17:1-7 is. Because of this, if you are going through these lessons in a Sunday School setting, it is possible that you’ll be studying today’s passage from Exodus 16 and hearing a sermon from your pastor on Exodus 17, which will be next week’s Bible study lesson. This confusion — along with the extended time spent in Exodus — may provoke some weariness. Allow that to be a topic of discussion in your group.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Complaint as Faith:

1. Mary Alice notes that the Israelites’ complaints are actually a form of turning toward God, not away. How does this perspective challenge the way we’ve been taught to think about complaining to God? When have you brought an honest complaint to God, and what happened?

2. The Israelites idealized their life in Egypt (“pots of meat” and plenty of bread). Why do you think fear and hunger distort their memory of the past? What are some “idealized Egypts” we cling to when the present feels uncertain?
3. The Israelites call the mysterious food man-hu — “What is it?” What experiences, relationships, or unexpected circumstances in your own life have turned out to be “manna” only in hindsight?
4. The lesson challenges traditional notions of miracles. Do miracles have to defy natural explanation? How do our expectations about what a miracle should look like shape the way we recognize (or miss) God’s provision?
5. The Israelites were asked to gather “just enough for that day.” What makes daily trust so difficult for us? Where do you notice tendencies to hoard, overprepare, or grasp for control “just in case”?
6. Mary Alice and Brueggemann describe Sabbath as an act of resistance against Pharaoh’s relentless economy. In what ways do you feel shaped by “Pharaoh’s world” of constant productivity? What would a genuinely restorative Sabbath rhythm look like for you or your community?
7. The Israelites learn to trust God *through* hunger, uncertainty, and frustration. How have wilderness seasons in your own life reshaped your understanding of God’s care? What “manna” sustained you when you couldn’t see a way forward?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A Sermon for Every Sunday has multiple sermons covering this passage. (<https://asermonforeversunday.com/scripture/exodus-162-4-and-9-15/>)



To hear more about this week’s topic, scan the QR code or click the hyperlink above. These featured ASFES sermons are by Rev. Jason Micheli and Rev. Dr. Eunjoo Mary Kim.

Exodus 17:1-7

Water from the Rock

Lesson written by Mary Alice Birdwhistell

In an earlier lesson, we noted how Moses responded to the people's fears with grace and patience. Today, we see his patience wearing thin. That earlier response was near the beginning of the Israelites' journey away from Pharaoh. Today's response has come after a long time wandering, with no end in sight. Mary Alice writes about the "liminal space" God's people find themselves in. In preparing for this lesson, think about how we often read the story of the Exodus with a narrow time frame in view, but the actual events occurred over the course of 40 years. Still, scholars believe that Exodus 17 would have occurred in Year 1! That's a lot of time to go, and Moses is already beginning to lose his cool.

Still, as Mary Alice notes, the answer for Moses is simply to do "the next right thing," which, in this case, is figuring out what to do about their water situation. As you prepare for this lesson and think about your role as a leader, spend some time in prayer asking what "the next right thing" may be for you and your group.

This Lesson's Placement Within the Lectionary and Good Faith Bible Studie

This is the fourth in our five-week Lenten series on the Exodus. As noted last week, today's passage actually appeared as one of last week's lectionary readings. If your pastor preached on this passage last week, allow that sermon to shape how you approach this week's study. Today's lectionary Psalm is Psalm 23, which could serve again (as it did a couple of weeks ago) as an excellent opening and closing prayer for the group as they dive into this passage.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

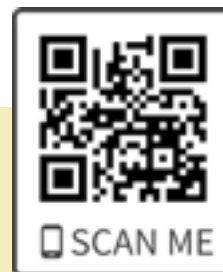
Pastor Ryan Ahlgrim offers a reflection on this passage at A Sermon for Every Sunday. (<https://asermonforeverySunday.com/scripture/exodus-171-7/>)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The Israelites' question is painfully honest. When have you found yourself asking a similar question? What circumstances tend to make you wonder about God's presence?
2. Mary Alice describes the Israelites as living in "liminal space" — no longer enslaved but not yet free. What liminal spaces have you experienced (or are experiencing now)? How have those "in-between" seasons shaped your faith, your expectations, or your understanding of God?
3. Moses, who had shown patience earlier, loses his calm here. What differences do you notice between Moses' response in Exodus 14 and his response in Exodus 17? How do long seasons of uncertainty affect our ability to lead, serve, or trust?
4. God doesn't give Moses a long-term plan — just the next step. How do you personally discern the "next right thing" when the big picture is unclear? What helps you take the next faithful step even when you feel stuck or overwhelmed?
5. The Israelites' complaints are presented not as rebellion but as vulnerability — as turning toward God. How does this reframe the way you think about expressing frustration, doubt, or anger in prayer? What would healthy, honest lament look like in your community?
6. In this story, God provides the water, but Moses must bring the staff, gather the elders, and strike the rock. Where do you see the interplay of divine action and human responsibility in your own life or congregation? What "rock" might God be inviting you to strike right now?
7. Even with water pouring out of the rock, the people still question God's nearness. Why do you think it is sometimes difficult to recognize God's presence even after receiving help or provision? How might we train ourselves (and our communities) to notice God's presence in wilderness seasons?



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Exodus 19:1-20*Meeting God at the Mountain*

Lesson written by Mary Alice Birdwhistell

As Mary Alice Birdwhistell notes in this week's lesson, the "action" is minimal. Most of what is narrated in Exodus 19:1-20 are ritual instructions for God's people in preparation for Moses to ascend to the mountain of God. If all this sounds familiar, it should. Although not a part of this series in Exodus, Moses has been to this mountain before, in Exodus 3. Go back and read that passage for some context. Note how in that story, Moses encountered God in a burning bush. In this story, the entire mountain is on fire. In the earlier encounter, Moses was instructed to remove his sandals, because the ground he was standing on was holy. Now, it's almost as if the entire mountain has become holy. Consider what this may mean symbolically for how the story is progressing.

Mary Alice also asks us to consider an essential question. It is a variation on a theme she has returned to a couple of times throughout this series: How do we

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make sense of our sacred text telling a story about one people becoming "God's people," with other people being "outsiders"? For help in thinking through this, return to the earlier verses in Genesis 12 for some guidance.

This Lesson's Placement Within the Lectionary and Good Faith Bible Studies

This is the final installment in Mary Alice Birdwhistell's series on Exodus. Although next Sunday — Palm Sunday — is still technically part of Lent, this week marks the beginning of the end of the journey toward Good Friday and Easter. The hearts and minds of the people in your group are likely preparing for holy week (and, let's be honest, Easter lunch). Invite them to not rush into next week just yet, but instead to reflect on the journey of the Exodus they (and the Israelites) have been on. How might this journey inform the ways they approach Holy Week?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Exodus 19 brings Moses and the Israelites back to the same mountain where Moses first encountered God in Exodus 3. How do "full circle" moments function in your own spiritual life? When have you returned to a place — literal or symbolic — and realized God had been faithful to an earlier promise?
2. The people spend three days consecrating and preparing themselves to hear from God.
3. What practices, rhythms, or boundaries help you prepare to encounter God?
4. What preparation practices have you lost that you might need to reclaim?
5. God calls Israel a "treasured possession...a priestly kingdom...and a holy nation" (vv. 5–6). How do we honor the particularity of Israel's calling without turning it into a theology of exclusion — then or now? What does it mean to be chosen *for a purpose* rather than chosen for *privilege*?
6. Mary Alice raises the hard theological question of whether God chooses some people over others. How have you interpreted "chosen people" language in your own faith tradition? How does your understanding help—or hinder—your view of God's love for all nations?
7. Exodus 19 contains no miracles or dramatic signs (aside from what goes on with the mountain)—only preparation, waiting, and quiet faithfulness. Why do you think spiritual transformation often happens in the "uneventful" stretches of life? Where might God be at work in ways that are easy to overlook?
8. Dr. Gloer's prayer—"hear what God wants us to hear...do what God wants us to do...become who God wants us to be"—mirrors the progression in Exodus 19. What is one area of your life where you sense God inviting you to "become" something new? What small step of listening or obedience might help you move in that direction?

Matthew 21:1-11

Palm Sunday

Lesson written by Craig Nash

We have arrived at Palm Sunday, when Christians around the world remember, and reenact, the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem at the beginning of what would become the most consequential week of human history. Matthew's telling of the story differs slightly from how the other gospel writers tell it. A helpful way to approach this week's lesson would be to compare each installment of the story — Mark 11:1-11, John 12:12-16, and Luke 19:28-40 — with Matthew's account. Write out a side-by-side chart and notice the light deviation in details, as well as what each writer chooses to emphasize. Ask your group to read today's passage and notice how a lifetime of hearing this story (assuming your group has been Christians for a while) can actually confuse how we receive it, because of all the details that get conflated.

As is noted in the lesson, there is also an opportunity to look into the Old Testament prophecies that are dripping from Matthew's account. The lesson only touches on a handful of them. Ask your group beforehand to read through some of those prophecies and let it inform how they approach the text.

This Lesson's Placement Within the Lectionary and Good Faith Bible Studie

With Palm Sunday being the first day in what is known as "Holy Week," we are back in the lectionary after spending time with the Israelites wandering through the desert. Consider how that study (and the story of Jesus in the wilderness — Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, and Luke 4:1-13) dovetails with the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

The lectionary Psalm for today — Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 — also provides a perfect companion for this story. Find ways to incorporate this in your lesson, like creating a call-and-response version for your group to recite together.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A sermon for Every Sunday has reflections from several preachers on this Palm Sunday passage. (<https://asermonforeverysunday.com/scripture/matthew-211-11/>)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Matthew frames Jesus' entry as both a fulfillment of prophecy and a challenge to traditional ideas of power. How does this passage invite us to rethink what "kingdom" means? How do you personally respond to the "kin-dom" language mentioned in the lesson?
2. The two stories immediately preceding this passage — the request of James and John's mother, and the healing of the two blind men — emphasize seeing rightly. In what ways does spiritual "sight" shape how we understand what is happening on Palm Sunday? What keeps us from seeing Jesus clearly today?
3. Matthew floods this short passage with echoes of Zechariah, Isaiah, the Psalms, and other texts. Why do you think Matthew wants his readers to connect these prophecies with Jesus' actions? How might these Old Testament images challenge or confirm the expectations of the crowd?
4. The crowd calls Jesus both "Son of David" and "the prophet from Nazareth." What does this mixture of titles reveal about their hopes, potential misunderstandings, or projections? How do we, as modern believers, still project our own expectations onto Jesus?
5. Jesus deliberately enters the city not on a war-horse but on a donkey — an image of peace and humility. What does this reveal about the kind of power Jesus embodies? Where do you see examples of "strength through humility" in Christian life or leadership today?
6. Matthew notes that the whole city was "in turmoil" asking, "Who is this?" What emotions or disruptions does Jesus' presence stir up in people? What might it look like for Jesus to cause "holy turmoil" in our own lives or communities?
7. "Hosanna" means "Save us!" — an ancient cry for deliverance. If our communities were to cry "Hosanna" today, what would we be asking Jesus to save us from? How does this connect to Palm Sunday's invitation to examine our assumptions about salvation, freedom, and justice?



To hear more about Palm Sunday, you can scan the QR code or click the hyperlink on the bottom left of this page.