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Chasing Hope: How Ordinary People Make Extraordinary Disciples

Introduction to Chasing Hope

These days, we normally think of Christians as people who go to church two or three times a month. Christians are people who serve the poor a few times a year, and donate a small percentage of their income to their church and other charities. Other than this, it can be hard to distinguish most Christians from people of any other religion - or people of no religion at all.

But there was a time when being a Christian meant something more radical. The first Christians left behind their ordinary lives to follow a Jewish rabbi named Jesus. These men and women freely surrendered their status quo for the movement Jesus started, even though it often led them to struggle and suffer for what they believed.

What do the lives of some of Jesus' first disciples teach us about authentic Christianity? What inspiration can we glean from those women and men who gave it all to follow Him? Each week we'll take an up-close, between-the-lines look at some of the everyday people who chose to follow Jesus, and we'll find ourselves in each story.

Session 1 - The Enthusiasts: Peter and Judas

Judas and Peter were both enthusiastic and somewhat impulsive. Their stories demonstrate how enthusiasm can go very right...or very wrong depending upon the motivation that drives the enthusiasm.

Judas – Day 1 and 2

Read Matthew 26:1-25

1. a) Describe what generally took place in verses 6-13.

b) What were the reactions of the disciples?



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c) What was Jesus' motivation for allowing this to take place?

2. Now Read John 12:1-8.

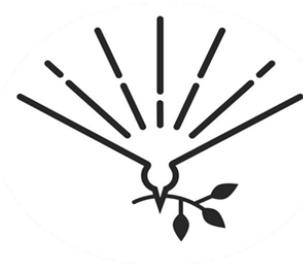
a) What do we learn about of Judas?

b) What do we learn about his motivation?

3. How did the motivation of Jesus and Judas differ in these passages, what were they focused on?

4. Can you give an example of when your motivation for something differed from Jesus' motivation? What were the results?

5. What did Jesus say was going to happen to Him? See also Matt. 20:17-19



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6. What did the chief priests and elders want to do to Jesus?

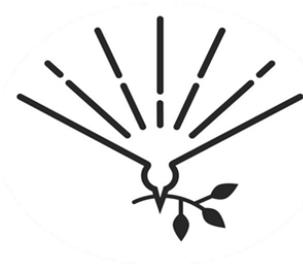
7. What does Judas do in verses 14-16?

8. Why do you think Judas betrayed Jesus?

9. When has your enthusiasm, driven by wrong motivation, led to problems? Can you give an example?

10. When we let our own selfish motivations drive our actions the results can lead to problems, even disaster. Then we feel bad about it. Read Matthew 27:1-10. How did Judas feel about what happened?

11. What did he do with the money?



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12. What ultimately happened to Judas?
Was he able to recover? See also, Acts 1:18-19.

Peter – Day 3, 4 and 5

1. What do we know about Peter from the following verses?

a) John 1:35-42

b) Luke 5:1-11

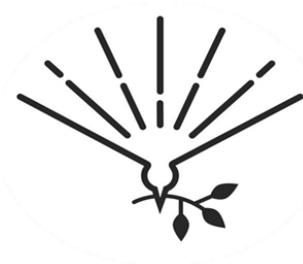
c) John 18:10-11

2. Read Matthew 14:22-33

a) Describe what happens.

b) What does this tell you about Peter?

3. How do all these verses show Peter's enthusiasm for Jesus?



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4. How would you compare your enthusiasm for Jesus to Peter's? If different, why do you think that is the case?

5. Read Matthew 16:13-20

a) Describe what happens.

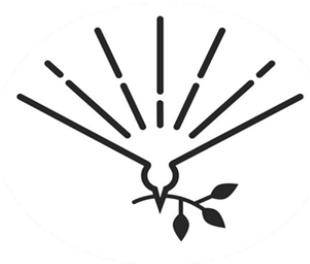
b) How do you think Peter must have felt after Jesus said those words to him?

6. Read Matthew 16:21-23

a) Describe what happens.

b) How do you think Peter must have felt after Jesus said those words to him?

7. This was a total change in direction for Peter, receiving praise and a blessing in one instance to being called Satan. What was the main cause of Jesus' harsh reaction to Peter? See verse 23.



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8. Can you share a time when your improper motivation led you to receive a rebuke from Jesus?

9. Read Matthew 26:31-35 and describe what happens.

10. Read Matthew 26:69-75 and describe what happens.

11. Now, from questions 9 and 10, compare and contrast

a) Peter's enthusiasm

b) Peter's motivation

12. Read John 21:1-17

a) Generally describe the scene.



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b) What does Jesus ask Peter three times?

c) How does Peter respond?

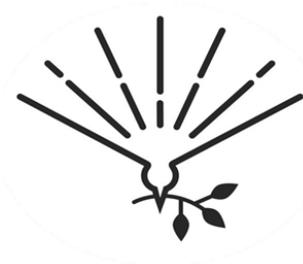
13. How can you ensure that your remorse for your mistakes leads you towards Jesus, like Peter and not away from Jesus, like Judas?

Day 6

1. How is ENTHUSIASM a good thing when following Jesus?

2. How can it go wrong?

3. How can God use your enthusiasm to encourage others to trust in Him?



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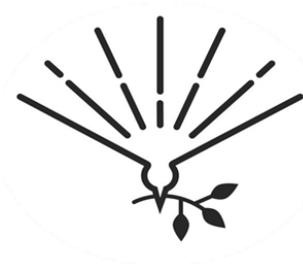
Session 2 - The Legalist: Paul

About Legalism – Day 1

1. What is the definition of legalism?
2. What or who comes to mind when you hear the word “legalist” or “legalism”.
3. Read Colossians 2:20-23. What does this teach us about legalism?
4. What matters are other people generally legalist about?
(discuss salvation vs. non-salvation issues)
5. We all have a tendency to have some things that we are legalist about. In what ways are you a legalist?

All about Paul – Day 2 and 3

1. What do we know about Paul from the following verses?
 - a) Philippians 3:4-6



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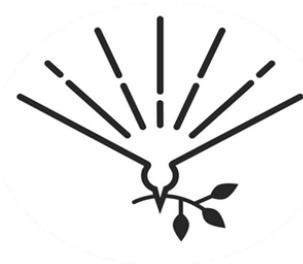
7. How can God use our need for rules and structure to draw us into a closer walk with Him?

Jesus' Response to Legalism – Day 4

1. Read Matthew 22:34-40. What commandments did Jesus leave us with?
2. How does obedience to these commandments look in your life? What drives you to obey these commandments from Jesus?
3. Grace is the opposite of legalism. What do these verses tell us about grace?
 - a. Ephesians 2:8-9
 - b. Titus 3:5-7
4. How does Jesus set us free from legalism?

Paul's Response to Jesus – Day 5

1. Read Acts 26:12-23. What did Jesus tell Paul?



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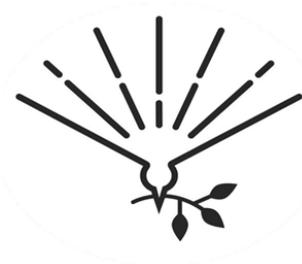
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2. In the same verses, how did Paul respond to Jesus?
3. What qualities or attributes that Paul had before his conversion are now being put to use for God's kingdom?
4. Is there something you need to leave behind or change the direction of in order to be closer to Jesus? What is Jesus telling you right now?
5. How are you responding to Him?

Day 6

1. Can some form of legalism (or even religious zeal) be a good thing when following Jesus?
2. How can it go wrong?
3. Even if they are now pointed in the wrong direction, what qualities do you have that God is using / can use for His kingdom?



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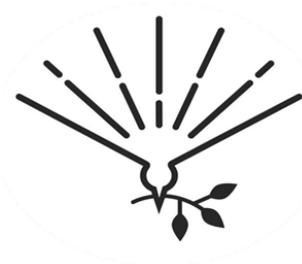


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Session 3 - Privileged: The Sons of Zebedee

About Privilege – Day 1

1. This week we're going to be talking about the sense of privilege and entitlement that shows up in the accounts of two of Jesus' disciples: James and John. We'll see that privilege is not a bad thing when it is directed away from selfish gain and toward the love of God and neighbor. What (or who) comes to mind when you think of privilege?
2. Consider these words of Jesus in Luke 12:48: "*From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.*" What does this teach us about privilege?
3. How is the biblical understanding of privilege different from the ways privilege is discussed in our culture?
4. In what ways do you consider yourself "privileged" and how are you using your privilege to be a blessing to God and to the people around you?



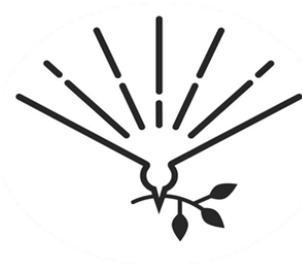
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The Requests of James and John, and Jesus' Response – Day 4

1. Let's look at Mark 10:35-40 and Matthew 20:20-23. Describe what happened in these two accounts, and identify the similarities and differences between them.
2. What do you think was so wrong about the requests that James and John made in Mark 10 and their mother, Salome, made in Matthew 20?
3. Look at Mark 10:41 and Matthew 20:24. How did the other disciples respond to their requests, and why? What does this tell you about the impact that mishandled privilege and a sense of entitlement can have on relationships?
4. How did Jesus respond to their requests, and to the anger felt by the other disciples? Read Mark 10:42-45.
5. The privileges and benefits James and John enjoyed were God-given, as are all the privileges we enjoy today. According to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, whether you're rich or poor, male or female, American or not - you're the undeserving recipient of all the benefits of God - the gifts of life, love, and His forgiveness. How have you benefited directly from the privileges of being a child of God, and what are you doing with the gifts He has given you?



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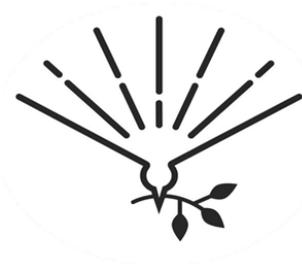


How James and John Responded to Jesus - Day 6

1. We know a lot less about “Big James” than we do about his little brother, John. That’s probably because, while John lived a long life (he was the only apostle *not* to be martyred), James was the first of the 12 to be executed for his faith. Read Acts 12:1-2. These events likely took place after the year 41 AD, about eleven years *after* the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. What does this tell you about James’ commitment to Jesus?

2. Because John lived a longer life, during which he wrote five New Testament books and cared for Mary after Jesus’ death (John 19:26-27), we know much more about his response to Jesus’ teachings. Read 1 John 4:7-21. John wrote these words in his old age. What difference do you think Jesus made in his life to turn him from being the self-seeking opportunist we see in Mark 10:35-40 to being the man who coined the phrase, “God is love”?

3. What difference has Jesus made in your life so far? How are your priorities and your character being reshaped by his Truth?



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Session 4 - The Scoundrel: Matthew and Zacchaeus

Scoundrels – Day 1

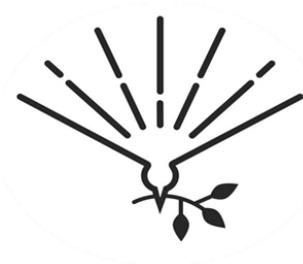
1. This week we'll be learning about how and why two men who were leading unsavory lives decided to follow Jesus. Because of their chosen profession (tax collectors), Matthew and Zacchaeus were among the most-hated men in their country, but that didn't stop Jesus from extending them an invitation. People were shocked to see Jesus hanging out with the likes of Matthew and Zacchaeus. Who do you think are the modern-day "tax collectors" - the people who are believed to be the least holy, least desirable people in our culture? Complete the following sentence: These days, I think most people would be surprised to see Jesus Christ hanging out with...

2. Throughout the entire Bible, God had a soft spot in His heart for scoundrels of all kinds. Read the following passage, and write a brief explanation of what happened in each passage:
 - a. Genesis 12:10-16

 - b. Exodus 2:11-15

 - c. Acts 7:54-8:1 (Remember, Saul = Apostle Paul)

3. Can you think of any other unlikely or unsavory characters who God called to serve Him in the Bible?



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4. What do you think God saw in scoundrels like these?

Introducing Matthew – Day 2

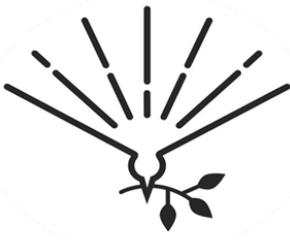
There are some good reasons why Hebrew tax collectors were so despised by other Hebrew people. They were working on behalf of the Roman government to keep take money from Jewish families and send it along to Rome. Read this excerpt from a Bible commentary about how tax collectors were perceived in first century Judea:

Poll and land taxes were collected by imperial officers. But the authority to collect taxes on exports, imports and goods taken through a country by merchants was purchased at public auction. The right to collect such taxes went to the highest bidders. When they collected taxes, they made a profit from tax receipts that exceeded the amount of their bid. These men, known as publicani, farmed out to subcontractors the right to collect taxes in certain portions of their territory. The subcontractors, in turn, were in charge of other men who personally collected the taxes.

Matthew and Zacchaeus were both “publicani”, greedy sell-outs who made life miserable for everyone. Socially speaking, they were on par with prostitutes. But that didn’t stop Jesus from going after Matthew.

1. Read Matthew 9:9. Because Matthew was the tax collector (“publicani”, see the quote above) of Capernaum, the town where Jesus lived, it’s very likely and Matthew and Jesus knew each other well. **What surprises you most about this passage - that Jesus called Matthew, or that Matthew responded and followed him? Why?**

2. Read Matthew 9:10-11. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house, a bunch of tax collectors and other sinners showed up. **Why do you think they stopped by?**



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3. In Jewish culture, sharing a table and a meal with someone implied deep friendship and acceptance. That could be why the Pharisees (i.e., religious leaders) were so triggered when they saw Jesus hanging out with a houseful of heathens. **Who are the types of people today with whom “good Christians” are not permitted to break bread in the public eye?**
4. Read Matthew 9:12-13. **What was Jesus’ response to the Pharisees’ criticism? What does this passage tell you about Jesus’ mission on earth, and what does that mean for Christians today?**

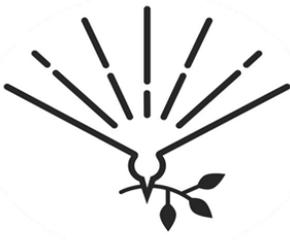
Introducing Zacchaeus - Day - 3

If you’re like most Christians, your knowledge about Zacchaeus extends no farther than the classic song we all sang at Vacation Bible School:

*Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he,
So he climbed up in a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see
And when the Savior passed that way, he looked up in the tree,
And said, “Zacchaeus, you come down!
For I’m going to your house today, for I’m going to your house today!”*

Some of you are gonna have that song stuck in your head all day now. Sorry about that. It’s important that we understand this fascinating encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus, which took place in Jericho, where Jesus was passing through on his way to Jerusalem, where he would soon be crucified.

1. Read Luke 19:1-10. **What subtle details in this story stand out to you and why?**



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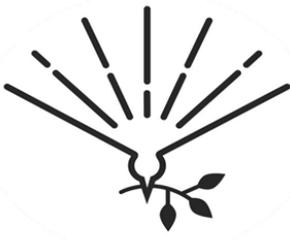


2. Like Matthew, Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector (*publicani*) and was very wealthy, since he was in charge of hiring and overseeing a host of other tax collectors. **Given his profession and the level of his success, what do you think his reputation was around Jericho?**

3. The passage describes Zacchaeus as being too short to see over the crowd, but he wanted so badly to see Jesus that he climbed a tree just to get a look at him. **What does that tell you about Zacchaeus?**

4. After their initial (and pretty hilarious) exchange, Jesus invited himself over to Zacchaeus' house. He did the same thing with Matthew, if you recall. **Knowing who these guys were, and what people thought of them, what does it tell you about Jesus that he pursued them so aggressively?**

5. Something to consider: Jesus and his 12 disciples (not to mention the unknown number of other followers) needed a place to rest in Jericho before completing their journey to Jerusalem, which was 17 uphill miles away. Not many people in Jericho would have had the means or the square footage to accommodate Jesus and his followers. **What does that tell you about people of means and the Kingdom of God?**



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“To Seek and Save the Lost” - Day 4

Both of these men represent “the sick” Jesus came to heal (Matthew 9:12) and “the lost” he came to save (Luke 19:10). Let’s take a closer look at this critical component of Jesus’ mission.

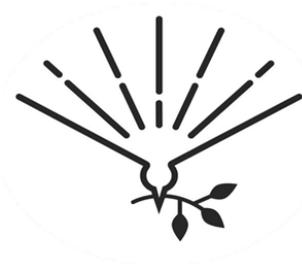
In Luke 15, Jesus tells three stories that illustrate the various states of the lostness of humankind and his unstoppable passion to find those who are lost, no matter how they got there.

Read Luke 15:1-7. Again, in verse 2, the religious leaders were complaining about how much time he’s spending with irreligious people. As a response to their grumbling, he told a story about a shepherd who has a hundred sheep, but lost one. **How does a sheep get lost? Be as specific as you can.**

Read Luke 15:8-10. Next, Jesus told a story about a lost coin. Basically the same story, right? Look closer to distinguish the first story from the second. **How does a coin get lost?**

Read Luke 15:11-24. Finally, Jesus told a third story along the same lines - this one slightly more elaborate than the other two. **Contrasted with how a sheep or a coin, how might a son (or daughter) get lost?**

In each of these stories, the response of the Shepherd, the Woman, and the Father was the same. **Who do these figures represent, and how would you summarize their efforts to find the lost sheep, coin, and son?**



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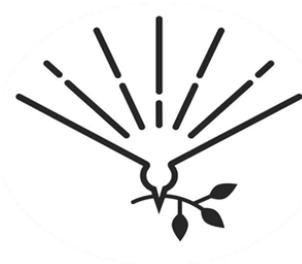


At the end of the third story, Jesus added a postscript about the lost son's older brother, who felt angry and dejected about his father's kindness toward his no-good brother (Luke 15:25-32).

What was Jesus saying with this conclusion to the Prodigal story, and to whom?

The Beauty of Brokenness - Day 5

- 1. Why do you think God called so many "scoundrels" not only to believe in Him, but to be leaders, kings, Bible authors, evangelists, and church-planters?**
- 2. Have you ever been defined or branded by something negative - a pattern of behavior, a string of broken relationships, or some other kind of sin? What was it, and how did it affect you to be branded as such?**
- 3. How have you seen God take your past and turn it around for His glory?**
- 4. How have the sins of your past set you up for extraordinary service to Jesus? Just like Jesus used Matthew's and Zacchaeus's connection to draw even more tax collectors and sinners to himself, who might Jesus bring to salvation by way of your influence with others?**
- 5. Is there still some part of your life - past or present - that casts a shadow over the light of Christ in you? Keeping in mind Jesus' interactions with Matthew and Zacchaeus, what do you think Jesus wants you to do about it?**



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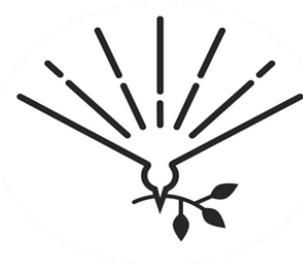


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Session 5 - The Women: Mary, Mary of Bethany, Mary Magdalene, and Others Who Followed Jesus

Day 1 - Women in the World of Jesus

1. Jewish women in the first century were always under a man's authority and protection. According to custom, once a Jewish girl got married (typically around 13-14 years old), her guardianship would pass from her father to her husband. If something happened to her husband, her father (or in the absence of her father, another male relative) would take charge of her again. A woman's primary role in society was in the home, where she nurtured and nourished her family. What do you imagine the life of a young Jewish woman was like in the first century? (Be sure to share both the good and the bad.)
2. Read Proverbs 31:10-31. This was a popular vision of ideal womanhood that Jewish girls were taught in the first century. What virtues are lifted up in this proverb?
3. Jewish girls in the first century also grew up hearing about Deborah, a woman called by God to lead the Israelites in the Old Testament book of Judges. Read Judges 4:1-10. How do you think Deborah's story might have inspired generations of Jewish girls and women?
4. We know from the four gospels that many women became disciples of Jesus. What specific challenges do you think they faced when making the decision to follow him?



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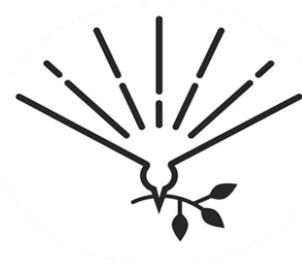
Day 3 - Mary of Bethany

1. Mary of Bethany was the sister of Martha and Lazarus (the man Jesus raised from the dead), and she appears to have been a very close friend and confidant of Jesus. What does it say about Jesus that he had close, platonic female friends at a time and place when such relationships were not allowed?

2. Read Luke 10:38-42. In this story, Jesus showed up to the home of Mary and Martha, and we can presume that all of his disciples and their families were coming over, too. Because hospitality was so important in her culture, Martha felt tremendous pressure to prepare their home to receive their guests. But Mary just sat there, listening to Jesus. What does this story tell you about Mary's personality and priorities?

3. Now read John 11:17-37. Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, was very sick when his sisters sent word to Jesus. They wanted the Lord to come to Bethany in time to heal their brother, but Lazarus died before Jesus arrived. Verse 19 says "many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother." So once again, their home is full of guests. Then someone announced that Jesus was outside, and this time, instead of tending to her guests, it was Martha who went to Jesus. And instead of going to be with Jesus, it was Mary who stayed back so that Martha could go first.
 - a. What does this detail suggest about Mary's character?

 - b. What stands out to you about Mary's interaction with Jesus in vv. 28-35, and why?



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3. Matthew 27:55 says, "Many women were there, watching [the crucifixion of Jesus] from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs." Does this fact surprise you? Why or why not?

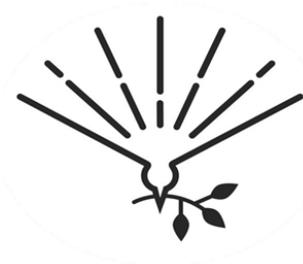
4. In Luke 8:1-3 we're introduced to Joana, whose husband, Chuza, was the steward over King Herod's household. Given that Herod was obsessed with finding and eliminating Jesus and, in fact, had already beheaded Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, what do you imagine Joana gave up in order to follow Jesus? What does that tell you about her?

Day 5 - The Samaritan Woman at the Well

1. Read John 4:1-15. Why was it inappropriate for Jesus to initiate a conversation with this woman? What was he trying to tell her, and why?

2. Read 4:16-26. How did Jesus speak to her about her past and present sin, and how did she respond?

3. This woman knew her stuff. She was well versed in Samaritan (and Jewish) scripture and theology. What points did she make, and how did Jesus respond to those points?



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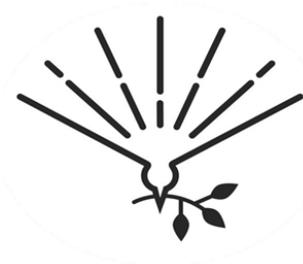


4. Read 4:39-42. What happened when the woman went back to her town after meeting Jesus? Why is this significant, especially given her status as a woman with a past?

5. What does it mean to you that Jesus not only initiated contact with this frice-married Samaritan woman who was shacking up with her boyfriend, but that he also inspired her to share the gospel with her entire town?

Day 6 - Personal Reflection

Write your reflections about the discipleship of the women you've studied this week. How has their faith inspired you along your path of Christian discipleship?



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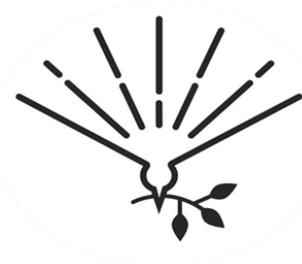
Session 6 - The Skeptic: Thomas and the Unbelieving Father

Day 1 - Faith and Doubt

1. “A faith without some doubts is like a human body without any antibodies in it. People who blithely go through life too busy or indifferent to ask hard questions about why they believe as they do will find themselves defenseless against either the experience of tragedy or the probing questions of a smart skeptic. A person's faith can collapse almost overnight if she has failed over the years to listen patiently to her own doubts, which should only be discarded after long reflection. Believers should acknowledge and wrestle with doubts — not only their own but their friends' and neighbors'. It is no longer sufficient to hold beliefs just because you inherited them. Only if you struggle long and hard with objections to your faith will you be able to provide the grounds for your beliefs to skeptics, including yourself, that are plausible rather than ridiculous or offensive. And, just as important for our current situation, such a process will lead you, even after you come to a position of strong faith, to respect and understand those who doubt.” - Tim Keller.

What stands out to you about Keller's quote?

2. What do you think about the intersection of faith and doubt? Is doubt the enemy of faith or is it the beginning of deeper faith?
3. The opposite of faith isn't doubt, but unbelief. Doubt is a subcategory of faith, and it's a companion on the ride. How do you juxtapose faith and doubt in your life? Are you a person of faith that has been haunted by doubts, or are you a skeptic at heart that has been haunted by faith?



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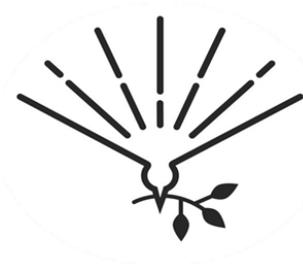
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4. “If a man will **begin with certainties**, he shall end in doubts, but **if he** will be content to **begin** with doubts, **he** shall end in **certainties**.” - Francis Bacon
This quote about the scientific method can also help us with our faith. How can we take this method and use it to deepen our faith?

Day 2 - Intro to Thomas

1. What comes to mind when you hear about the disciple (doubting) Thomas? Do you have a negative or positive view of doubt?
2. Read John 11: 14-16. What was Thomas' Greek name that he was also known as? What does this mean?
3. In verse 16, Thomas reflects not on doubt, but raw devotion and courage. How does this change what you've already heard or known about Thomas?
4. Read John 14: 1-7. Jesus answers Thomas' question with one of the most well known sayings in the Bible. Even though Thomas doesn't understand what Jesus spelled out earlier, he asks a sincere question. What does this tell you about bringing sincere questions to Jesus? Write down some questions about Jesus that you're wrestling with right now.



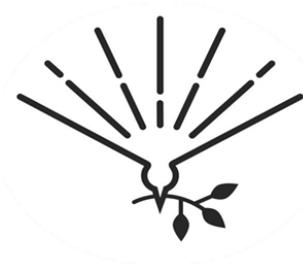
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Day 3 - Thomas continued and The Others Who Doubted

1. Read John 20:19-29. In your own words describe what is happening in this scene.
2. Verse 24 states that Thomas was not with the disciples when Jesus came. How can isolation, especially in times of deep doubt, be so dangerous?
3. Thomas is often pictured as reaching out and touching Jesus' wounds, but we see this isn't the case. What does Thomas exclaim and confess and why is this significant?
4. Read Matthew 28:17. This could also be translated to "they worshiped, but they doubted." What does this tell us about the other disciples?
5. Read Mark 9: 21-24. After questioning Jesus, the boy's father immediately exclaims that he believes, but he needs help to overcome his unbelief. How has experiencing Jesus helped your faith? What areas do you still need help in overcoming unbelief?



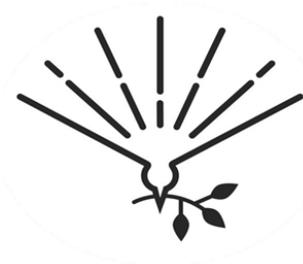
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Day 4 - Reasons to Believe

1. Re-Read John 20:29. How can you believe you in something you haven't seen? What questions naturally arise from what some people call "blind faith?"
2. Hank Hanegraaf is quoted as saying, "Instead of being crushed by a gigantic snowball of questions, let your questions increase your awe for God. If we could figure God out, he'd be a pretty small god." How does that quote resonate with you? How can your questions lead to an increased awe for God?
3. Thomas went from asking sincere questions to making cynical statements. Are you asking questions wanting to draw closer to God, or are you asking questions so you can move away from God? What's the difference?
4. We're not alone in your questions and your doubts. Some of the most prominent men and women in the Bible had questions and doubts; Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Job, Habakkuk, John the Baptist, Thomas, Peter, Paul... How does being in a community of doubters help you overcome unbelief, questions, and doubt?
5. The hope is that our questions and doubt lead to a deeper defense of our faith. How are you actively defending your faith? And what are you defending your faith from?



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Day 5 - Sharing Faith Even When You Doubt

1. Read 1 Peter 3:15. How is it possible to give “an answer to everyone” if you haven’t asked yourself the same questions?
2. Read Matthew 22: 34-37. What does the command mean to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and **MIND**? How can you love God with your mind?
3. We saw earlier that the disciples worshiped Jesus while they doubted. Read Matthew 28:16-20 again. Jesus sends out the disciples to “go and make disciples” and to teach others while they still doubted. How does this encourage you to share your faith and make disciples of all nations?
4. As we’ve read this week, sometimes the greatest doubters become the greatest people of faith. It wasn’t in spite of their doubt, it was because of their doubt. How can you lean into your questions and your doubt in order to follow Jesus and inspire others to do the same?



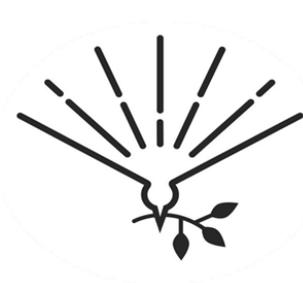
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Day 6 - Personal Reflection

1. Write your reflections on how faith and doubt intersect in your life. How have you seen doubt and questions help you understand more clearly who you are in Christ?



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Chasing Hope: How Ordinary People Make Extraordinary Disciples

Session 7 - The Centurions

Day 1 - Roman Soldiers and Centurions in the World of Jesus

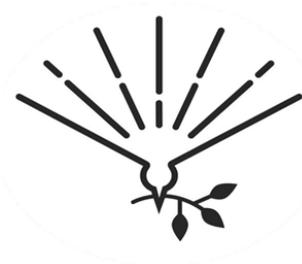
1. Centurions were officers in the Roman military who were responsible for leading 80-100 elite Roman soldiers (legionnaires). Men who sought to become Roman soldiers had to meet strength and height requirements before enduring an intense basic training regimen. They had to be able to walk twenty miles a day in full armor while carrying all their gear. Legionaries signed up for at least 25 years' service, but if they survived their time, they were rewarded with a gift of land they could farm upon retirement.

Imagine what sort of men signed up for, and survived, the life of a Roman soldier? What characteristics, physical or otherwise, do you imagine most of these soldiers possessed?

2. Centurions were “alpha dog” leaders of men. They were expected to lead by example and to display the greatest courage on the battlefield. This is what the Encyclopedia of Ancient History said about the lives of centurions in the first century:

Centurions often wore a helmet with a distinctive transverse crest, which was typically silver with a feather plume, typically ostrich or peacock feathers. His armour included greaves, which usually had engraved decoration, and a bronze cuirass chest plate, either belly-shaped or sculpted to replicate muscles or incorporating scaled armour. Chest (and back) armour could also have shoulder guards and protective hanging strips for the upper arms and groin and even a neck protector at the back. In the 1st century a short-sleeved ring-mail armour vest was also common amongst centurions. A tunic was worn under the armour, which for centurions was either white, off-white, or various shades of red. A centurion also carried a 90 cm vine-stick cudgel as a measure of his rank. On top of all this, centurions also wore the awards they had received for valour, which could include heavy necklaces, bracelets, and medallions which were worn attached to a leather chest harness.

In addition to the general traits of Roman soldiers you listed above, what kind of men do you imagine rose to the rank of centurion?



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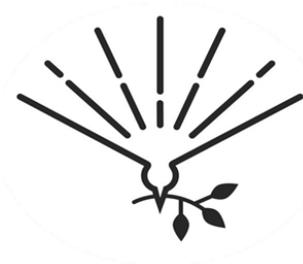
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3. This week we'll be learning about the centurions who chose to follow Jesus. In addition to the gospel accounts of centurions' conversions, there is a wealth of historical evidence that centurions and other Roman soldiers who followed Jesus, built churches, and shared the gospel with their fellow soldiers. What does it say to you about Jesus and his gospel that, within two centuries following his crucifixion, thousands of Roman soldiers had become committed disciples of his?

Day 2 - The Faithful Centurion and His Servant

1. Read Luke 7:1-5. What details about this part of the story stand out to you and why?
2. Why did the centurion approach the Jewish leaders? How did the Jewish leaders respond to his request? What did they tell Jesus about the centurion?
3. Read Luke 7:6-8. How would you describe the centurion's approach and attitude toward Jesus in this exchange?
4. What was the centurion suggesting when he compared his authority over his troops to Jesus' authority? What does that suggest to you about the centurion's understanding of Jesus' identity?



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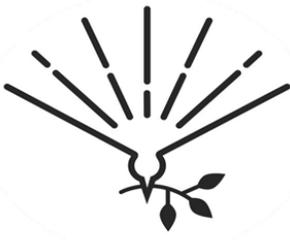
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5. Read Luke 7:9-10. What message was Jesus sending about the relationship between salvation and religious identity? What does this mean for Christians today?

Day 3 - Cornelius

1. Read Acts 10:1-2. The Book of Acts records the events that took place immediately following the death and resurrection of Jesus. Cornelius was a Gentile (non-Jewish) who, along with his entire family, believed in the Jewish God. He was also a centurion in the military force occupying the land of Israel. He likely faced pressure from his Roman colleagues for worshipping a foreign God, as well as some side-eye looks from Jews who despised the likes of him. Has your faith in God ever put you in between a proverbial rock and a hard place? What happened, and what were the pressure points?
2. Read Acts 10:3-8. Describe what happened. Who did Cornelius see, how did he see him, and what was his response?
3. Have you ever received a vision from God that gave some you specific direction or instructions for your life? If so, what happened?



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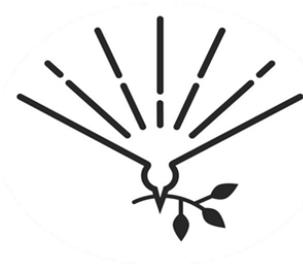


4. Read Acts 10:9-16. Up to this point in his life, Peter, who was Jesus' lead disciple, had been hesitant to include Gentiles (non-Jews) in the Jesus movement unless they converted to Judaism first. In this passage, God gives Peter a vision suggesting that it's time to include Gentiles who believe in Jesus whether or not they become Jews first. The vision had to do with clean and unclean foods as prescribed in Leviticus 11. Peter, who claimed to never have eaten unclean foods, was initially appalled by the vision. Has God ever challenged you to rethink your assumptions, to go outside of your comfort zone, or to reach out to unexpected people on His behalf?

5. The voice said to Peter, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." What (or who) was that in reference to, and were the implications for Peter and other Jewish Christians?

6. Read Acts 10:17-35. This passage ends with Peter saying, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism 35 but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right." This represented a total 180 for Peter. Has God ever changed your mind on something that you once felt so strongly about? What happened?

7. Read Acts 10:47-48. Cornelius, his family, and others who worked for him were the first Gentiles to be baptized by any of the apostles. After these events, the number of Gentiles who became Christians exploded and Jesus' movement began to take the world by storm. It's another reminder of how God blesses faithful obedience. How have you chosen to be faithfully obedient to God? What has it cost you, and how has it blessed you?



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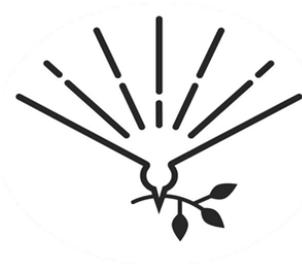
Day 4 - The Centurion at the Cross

1. Whenever the Roman government ordered the crucifixion of a convicted criminal, a centurion was appointed to see the execution through to its awful end. The same was true for Jesus' crucifixion in Jerusalem. Before we take a closer look at this centurion, let's think more broadly about the crucifixion of Jesus.

Most people are aware that, before he died on the cross, Jesus famously cried out with a loud voice: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Few people are aware, however, that Jesus wasn't just expressing his own loneliness and despair; he was quoting Psalm 22. Why? He was sending messages to his enemies and his followers. For example, we know that there were many Pharisees and priests who despised Jesus who were present as he died. These guys knew the Psalms by heart, so when Jesus quoted Psalm 22, they were no doubt reminded of the rest of that psalm, part of which says:

All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. "He trusts in the Lord," they say, "let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him." Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help. Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me. Roaring lions that tear their prey open their mouths wide against me. Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce my hands and my feet. All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.

What was the message Jesus was sending to his enemies when he quoted Psalm 22?



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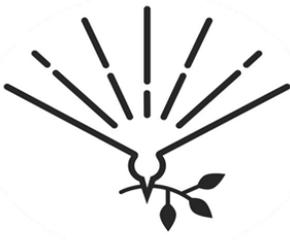


2. But that's probably not the only message Jesus was sending by quoting that particular Psalm; he also signaled the expansion of his movement beyond Israel to include the whole earth. Psalm 22 also reads:

*I will declare your name to my people; in the assembly I will praise you.
You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!
Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!
All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord,
and all the families of the nation will bow down before him,
for dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations.*

How does this Psalm speak to the inclusion of Gentiles in the movement of Jesus?

3. Read Mark 15:33-39. What do you think the centurion saw or heard from Jesus that would lead him to make such an unexpected profession of faith?
4. What were some of the personal and professional implications of this centurion's newfound faith in Jesus? Have you ever faced any personal or professional backlash because you follow Jesus?



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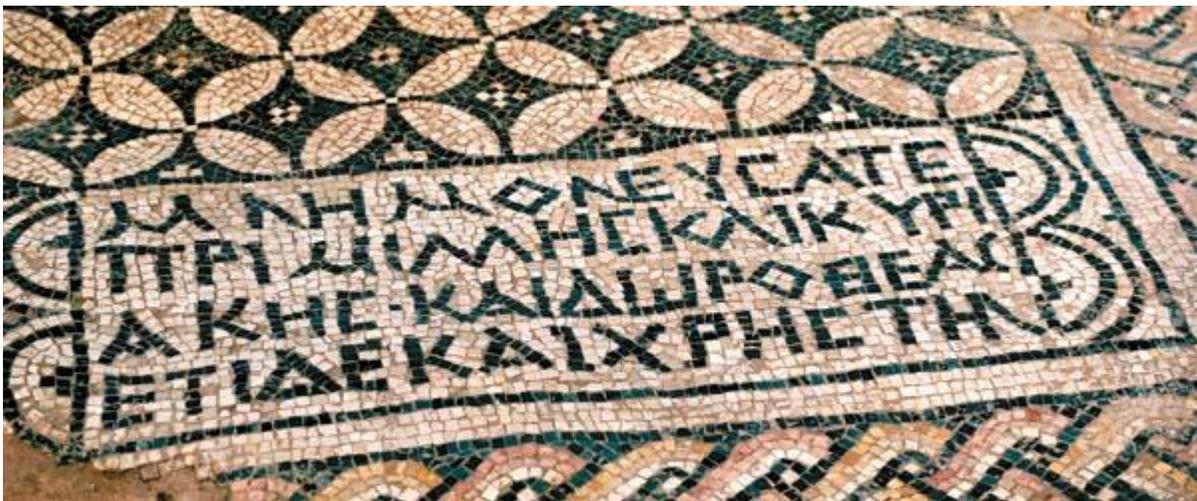
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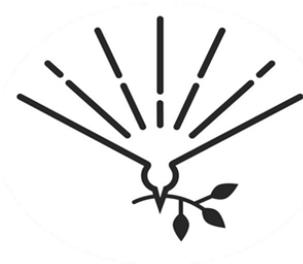
5. This centurion was probably the last person anyone could have expected to become a believer in Jesus Christ. Is there someone you know who fits that bill as well - a friend, family member, or colleague who no one would ever mistake for a “Christian” - with whom you could share the grace and truth of Jesus in some way? Think of one person. Spend five minutes in prayer about them. Then write any thoughts you’re having about how God might be using you to reach them.

Day 5 - Other Centurions and Soldiers Who Followed Jesus

1. We have irrefutable evidence that some of the earliest Christians were Roman soldiers and, in some cases, centurions. For example, in the 1990s, archaeologists uncovered an ancient church (3rd century) near Megiddo, and among the ruins were a mosaic table and floor with inscriptions that gave credit to the benefactors who paid for the church’s construction. Both major donors were Roman soldiers - Akeptous and Gaianus, who was also a centurion. This is one of the mosaic inscriptions:



“The God-loving Akeptous has offered the table to God Jesus Christ as a memorial.”



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The inscription identifying Gaianus reads: “Gaianus, also called Porphyrius, a centurion (leader of 100 men in the Roman army), our brother, has made the pavement at his own expense as an act of liberality. Brutius carried out the work.”

What is the significance of so many Roman soldiers becoming outspoken Christians as early as the first, second, and third centuries?

2. What does it say about Jesus that Roman soldiers and centurions are as welcome as anyone else in his Kingdom?
3. Read Romans 3:21-26, especially verse 23. Why was this such good news for the Roman soldiers who decided to follow Jesus?

Why is this such good news for you?

Day 6 - Personal Reflection

Write your reflections about the discipleship of the centurions you've studied this week. How has their faith inspired you along your path of Christian discipleship?