Walk | Read | Pray | Join | Commit
Matthew's Gospel Connect Group Resources: **Jesus – A Life**
Matthew Chapters 26-28

The aim of this session is to explore how we respond to Jesus' death and ask the question 'How do you respond when you've done something wrong?'

COLLECT
Describe the worst time you have been lost? What happened? How did you find your way again?

CHALLENGE
Over these last few chapters of Matthew's gospel an abundance of characters come into the story of Jesus: the woman with the alabaster jar, Judas, Peter, James and John (the sons of Zebedee), the arresting crowd, Caiaphas (the high priest), the chief priests, Pilate, Pilate's wife, the crowd, the soldiers, Simon from Cyrene, the two condemned robbers, those who passed by, the centurion, the women and each of them had to decide how they would respond to Jesus. Matthew focuses on how each of them responds to Jesus in some way: they worship him, they betray him, they let him down, they wrongly sentence him, they deny him, they mock and ridicule him, they insult him, they kill him.

We're going to look at three characters; Judas, Pilate and Peter, each one in their own way betrayed Jesus.

In three groups, read the passage relating to one of the characters: Judas (26:14 – 16, 27:1 – 10), Pilate (27:11 – 26) and Peter (26:31 – 35, 26:69 – 75 and also look at John 21:1-7) and answer the questions: **How do each of these characters betray Jesus? What makes their sin particularly poignant? Compare how each of them respond to their guilt? (i.e. Judas: self-hatred caused him to turn inwards; Pilate: denial and blame caused him to turn outwards; Peter: repentance caused him to turn Godward) In what ways do we respond?**

CONNECT
In pairs, discuss how you behave when you become aware you're doing something wrong? How does Jesus' cross and resurrection invite us to respond to our sin? Is there anything that you need to confess (in pairs or privately in prayer) and receive the complete and liberating forgiveness of Jesus for? Pray for one another.

CONTEXT
Background notes on Judas, Peter and Pilate:
Tom Wright, in his commentary on Matthew's gospel, makes a comparison between the remorse that Judas felt and genuine repentance that Peter showed. He describes the difference between the two "like drops of rain falling near a mountain top, they may start quite close together, but depending which side of the line they fall they will make their way to one side of the country or the other. Remorse and repentance both begin with looking at something you've done and realising it was wrong. But the first goes down the hill of anger, recrimination, self-hatred... the second goes down the route Peter took, of tears, shame and a way back to life."

The Jewish authorities want Jesus killed, but they can't condemn him. Pilate, as the ruling Roman representative, is the only one who has the power to sentence Jesus to death. Pilate rightly discerns that Jesus is innocent (27:23), that it was only out of self-interest that the chief priests had handed Jesus over (27:18), his wife even declared that he was innocent and had seemingly been warned in a dream (27:19). And yet, instead of using his power to execute justice he bows to the will of the people and sentences Jesus to death.

Pilate washes his hands in front of the crowd; “I am innocent of this man’s blood”, he said, “It is your responsibility!” Pilate, the one person who had the power to kill or release Jesus, redirects the blame onto the people. It *was* his responsibility. But on a deeper level, it was his responsibility alongside the crowd *and* the rest of humanity. For Jesus suffered on the cross for each of us that we might not need to.

Context for the passage:

Here we stand with the clear view of the brutality of the crucifixion in front of us. The time of teaching, of healings, or miracles has passed for Jesus’ earthly ministry and now he turns his attention fully to the climax of his purpose: his death and resurrection. These last chapters of Matthew’s gospel cover from when Judas agrees to betray Jesus, Gethsemane, Jesus being arrested, his multiple trials, his crucifixion, right to Jesus’ resurrection and the great commission.

Throughout his gospel, Matthew is seeking to make clear to his predominantly Jewish audience that Jesus’ death is not a failure but a fulfilment of the promise of God to Israel. That it is not a tragic end but an expectant beginning. Tom Smail in his book, *Windows on the Cross*, likens it to looking through the inner facing windows of a building surrounding a central courtyard where the cross stands. Each window reveals another theological viewpoint on Jesus’ death. First and foremostly, the cross is the ultimate display of love. “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Rom 5:8

A number of other viewpoints are referred to in these chapters:

In the second verse of chapter 26, Jesus says, “As you know the Passover is two days away – and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.” Jesus makes plain his death is not a surprise, it is a deliberate wilful act. Here, as he does at the Last Supper, he is making a link between the Passover – the celebration of the Israelites rescue from slavery in the Exodus – and his own death – where the whole world was rescued from slavery to sin and death. During the original Exodus, God asked the Israelites to sacrifice a lamb and place the blood around their doorframes so the judgement of God would *pass over* their house. This last act in the Exodus narrative led the Israelites to freedom from Egypt, their liberation from slavery into becoming a nation – the people of God.

“The Jews had believed for some time that the original Exodus pointed on to a new one, in which God would do at last what he had long promised: he would forgive the sins of Israel and the world, once and for all. Sin, a far greater slave master than Egypt had ever been, would be defeated in the way God defeated not only Egypt, but also the Red Sea.” (Tom Wright) And now Jesus was saying this is the moment. Through my blood, the blood of the Lamb of God, liberation, life and freedom is won for those who will trust in him.

At a crucial point, Pilate gives the people a choice, would they like him to release ‘Jesus who is called the Messiah’ or a political criminal and murderer, Barabbus. One will die, one will be free. The people choose Barabbus. With the death of Jesus, the guilty go free. What was true for Barabbus, is true also for us.

At the point of Jesus’ death, the temple curtain at the entrance to the Holy of Holies was torn in two (Matt 27:51). The Holy of Holies was innermost part of the temple, the place where God’s presence dwelt. Only the High Priest could enter this special place, once a year, and only after sacrificial cleansing. The curtain signified that God could not be approached by sinful people. But when the curtain tore in two, the way into the presence of God was made open. That we could now freely enter his presence.

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Heb 4:16 “Let us then *approach God’s throne of grace with confidence*, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” Eph 3:12 “In him and through faith in him *we may approach God with freedom and confidence*”

Let’s remind ourselves again of the mercy of God that we would not fall into patterns of denying our sin or blaming others or allowing self-hatred to take root, but instead quickly turn to Jesus, the place of mercy, freedom and life.

'The reason salvation is so easy to obtain is that it cost God so much. The Cross was the place where God and sinful man merged with a tremendous collision and where the way to life was opened. But all the cost and pain of the collision was absorbed by the heart of God.' (from My Utmost for His Highest)