



RESOURCES

JESUS IS...



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"The purpose of discipleship is to be with Jesus, to become like Jesus, and to live as Jesus did"

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WEEK 1

JESUS IS...HOPE

Jesus' life is a beacon of hope to those who follow him, yet time and again we approach Jesus expecting him to be a saviour on our terms.

Today's resource focuses on the hope that we find in Jesus, and calls us to declare that hope to others.

ICE-BREAKER

What do we hope for?

Find a large sheet of paper and lay it on the floor. Encourage everyone to write down the things that they hope for. This includes the mundane things as well as the deep and profound.

What do people think about what they, or others, have written?

REFLECT

Read Matthew 12:15-21 aloud.

Be sure to read it slowly and at least twice – there's a lot to take in!

Matthew 12 details a season of intense criticism and opposition towards Jesus from the Pharisees. Ultimately, their disapproval of his ministry and his words has led them to plotting a way to kill Jesus (v 14). It is in response to this disapproval and hostility that Jesus retreats (v 15) at the start of our passage.

Jesus is followed by a great crowd who he ministers to, healing "all who were ill" (v 15). In the parallel passage in Mark 3:7-12 Jesus also casts out demons who identify him as the Son of God (3:11). Despite these remarkable acts, Jesus insists that those present are "not to tell others about him" (v 16). This meekness and apparent caution could be easily attributed to his perilous situation with the Pharisees, but Matthew gives an additional explanation as to why Jesus acted in this way, describing how Jesus' actions fulfil a prophecy from Isaiah 42.

Divide into groups of three to four and reflect on these questions:

- What things stand out about the Isaiah quote used by Matthew here? What words or phrases are you most drawn to?
- Do you think this is a fair representation of Jesus?
- What do you think is the meaning of vs 19-20?

Reeds would often be used by Shepherds to make instruments to play while they were in the field, but a bruised one would be useless for this purpose, likewise a wick that had begun smoldering would have no use other than to simply produce unwanted smoke. Both would be good only for breaking/snuffing - they are useless. Commentators consistently see this as a reference to the poorest and most marginalised in society, those from whom little, materially, can be gained.

The dichotomy here is clear then. The Isaiah passage is talking of someone chosen by God, filled with the Spirit and who will bring justice and victory to the nations, yet someone who is also immensely gentle, caring, quiet and wary of the most vulnerable and insignificant.

- Do you think that this description of the Messiah, the one God has chosen and filled, would be what the disciples and the crowds were hoping for?
- In the context of opposition and criticism, do you think a leader who was gentle and focused more on the insignificant than the significant, would have given the crowds much hope?

Draw together and share your thoughts.

WEEK 1

JESUS IS...HOPE

RESPOND

Jesus was not the Messiah that many Jews were hoping for. They wanted a mix between Nelson Mandela and Arnold Schwarzenegger, an amazing leader and warrior who could unite and excite the people to rise up and take on the oppressive Roman empire.

Any hope that Jesus was the one to bring victory and justice must surely have turned to frank and overwhelming despair as they witnessed Jesus' crucifixion and death. But it was in this act of meek, sacrificial, humiliating, servant-hearted love that Jesus bought our salvation and generated ultimate hope.

We often long for Jesus to be a Messiah on our terms, obeying our agenda, being the kind of God that we want him to be and sorting our lives out in the way that we want, as quickly as we want. But this passage teaches us that just because God doesn't show up in the way we want him to, does not mean that he has not shown up.

In groups of three or four think about these questions:

- Do we ever long for Jesus to be a Messiah on our terms?
- Are there any situations in our lives at the moment where we have lost hope and instead feel despair? Where God seems profoundly absent, or silent?
- What would it look like to have this Jesus hope in these situations? Not just blind optimism but resurrection hope. Optimism is psychological, Hope is theological!

Draw together and share responses if people are comfortable to do so.

- How can we support those who are going through seasons where God feels distant and quiet?

Perhaps there is something that the group needs to commit to in response to those who are in a difficult season. Maybe it is something spiritual, like a regular prayer rota or sharing encouragement via WhatsApp. Or, perhaps, something practical, like cooking meals or babysitting so that they can have some time to themselves.

RECEIVE

The most important thing to do in this moment is to pray for each other, that all might be reminded of the hope that we have in Jesus.

It would be particularly appropriate to pray for any who are particularly struggling to see hope in situations they are facing, and ask for them to be filled afresh with the Holy Spirit and for God to bring breakthrough and healing. Listen for any words or pictures that God may have for them, and share them if appropriate (otherwise, share it with them in private afterwards).

It would be ideal to finish this study by generating an atmosphere of gratitude, thanking God for all He has done for us through Jesus. This might be by worshipping together or simply by thanking God in prayer for His goodness, calling out specific victories and blessings to Him.

WEEK 2

JESUS IS...GRACE

At the beginning of Jesus' ministry we see, with the blessing of hindsight, that Jesus started just how he finished.

His core message, his DNA, his cultural value, was one of grace. In this session, we will explore the theme of grace and see just how relevant it is today in 2019 London.

ICE-BREAKER

It's been said that justice is getting what you deserve, mercy is not getting what you deserve, and grace is getting what you don't deserve. When was the last time you saw grace in action: In popular culture? In the workplace? In church? In your own life?

How do these instances make you feel? Does it ever feel unfair or unjust? Why do you think we feel like this when it comes to grace?

REFLECT

Read together Matthew 9:9-13

This moment in Jesus' life comes immediately after a healing in which Jesus does something very controversial. Instead of healing the man brought to him from his ailment (paralysis in this case), Jesus forgives his sins which leads to the man regaining the use of his body.

This is difficult for the religious folk of the day to handle: only God can forgive sins and that forgiveness is often preceded by a sacrifice of some kind in a temple, not on the banks of the Sea of Galilee by a Nazarene carpenter. From there, Jesus approaches a tax collector's booth. Tax collector's booths represented a few things: firstly, they represented the occupying forces in the Holy Land, the Romans. Each booth reminded the people they were not truly free. The taxes were spent on a multitude of things from the building of infrastructure (Romans were known for pioneering sanitation, roads, and public buildings), the employment of their military and civic roles, and of course to the emperor and his advocates. The presence of a booth reminded people they were under occupation and whether they liked it or not, they must pay to keep themselves oppressed. Secondly, the tax booth reminded the people they were not spiritually free: you would have to visit a tax booth if you wanted to attend an act of worship, unless it was a Roman act of worship. The Romans prided themselves on civic peace and religious freedom, however this came at a cost. You could worship which ever God you desired, as long as you could pay for the privilege. Thirdly, the Romans always employed nationals to be tax collectors. This was a strategic move so that 1) language or understanding could not be used as an excuse for not paying taxes, 2) they would have local knowledge of spiritual activity and finance and so would be harder to avoid paying taxes and 3) it was a good punishment for someone who needed to pay off debt to the empire but had good fiscal skills.

So, in that one sentence, Jesus approaching a tax booth represented so many unexpected interactions.

It is also worthwhile noting the readiness of Matthew's response to Jesus - it was an immediate response. Only you know how ready you are to be saved, to respond to the call to follow Jesus, or pursue even a glimmer of hope.

Straight away, Matthew has Jesus over for dinner, a gathering that was filled with other tax collectors and 'sinners', a word that has been used terribly throughout history to oppress and shame. 'Sinners' - in Greek, *amartoloi* - literally means 'one who misses the mark'. So Jesus has a dinner party with those who exploit people on behalf of the empire and those who were known by the writer of the gospel to be people 'who miss the mark'. The pharisees find this difficult. 'Are not religious people just meant to hang around with religious people?'

WEEK 2

JESUS IS...GRACE

Jesus' response to this criticism is life-changing. Jesus did not come simply to affirm the goodness in the world, but he came to heal the broken. Then, quoting an Old Testament prophet, we hear that Jesus came for the broken, not those who feel they are perfect.

Discuss the following in groups of two or three:

- Does any of what you have just heard, change how you've interacted with this calling before?
- Can you see the difference in this story between justice, mercy, and grace?
- When Matthew followed Jesus, he left his tax collecting booth, his income, his protection from the Empire and an employee of the state. When you began to follow Jesus, what did you leave behind?

RESPOND

"Jesus declared that we should have one distinguishing mark: not political correctness or moral superiority, but love." - Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace*

It would have been easy for Jesus, before offering the invite to Matthew to become a disciple, to first tell him everything he has ever done and why that would stop him from being a good candidate for leading this spiritual revolution with Jesus.

Discuss in your groups:

- Why doesn't Jesus do that?
- What is powerful about how Matthew would have changed?
- What can we learn as a community from this kind of interaction?

So many of the things that challenge Jesus' critics are around who he has dinner with. Why are mealtimes controversial? What is Jesus saying by who he eats with? How could our own culture be challenged by the company we keep? Does our group need to hear any challenge from Jesus' example?

RECEIVE

"Whenever faith seems an entitlement, or a measuring rod, we cast our lots with the Pharisees and grace softly slips away." — Philip Yancey

We can be gracious because we first receive grace from grace personified. We need to remember often that it is from a place of grace we operate, not from a place of entitlement.

Spend some time writing down what you have been saved from, and into what God has called you. In pairs, share some of the things that this exercise challenges you to be thankful for. Pray for one another that you are filled with the Spirit, a gift of grace.

WEEK 3

JESUS IS...PURPOSE

What Jesus said and did continues to have an impact upon the world and us, his followers. Today's study will look at that how Jesus' identity still forms our purpose; for those of us who feel like lost sheep and for those of us asking what Jesus has in store for us, he has so much in store.

ICE-BREAKER

Break into groups of twos and threes. Take it in turns to talk about a topic you feel strongly about that needs additional investment, help and support. It could be an institution, like the NHS, or an aspect of arts and entertainment that you think needs more funding. What would it look like if more people got involved with that topic?

This ice-breaker will hopefully introduce us to some passion points each of us hold, while also helping us think over the theme of what it would be like if people shared a united purpose.

REFLECT

Matthew establishes Jesus' purpose, his identity, right at the start of his gospel. It's a story that we often save for telling at Christmas, but that is worth refreshing ourselves with as we look to today's topic of 'purpose'. Read Matthew 1:18-25 in groups of two or three and reflect on these questions:

- What is your first response to this story? Why do you think Matthew records it?
- How does the phrase 'God with us' make you feel?

When an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph, Matthew grounds Jesus' identity in the words of prophecy, Isaiah 7:14; Jesus is the son of a virgin, he is Immanuel, 'God with us'.

Throughout Matthew's story of Jesus' life, we witness how this 'God with us' figure lives and loves. These allusions to what God has said to His people through prophets and promises are rekindled by Matthew throughout his gospel, they act as a sign post to what's going on.

With this in mind, read Matthew 9:35-38 and reflect on these questions in groups of two or three:

- What is your first response to this story? Why do you think Matthew records it?
- Who do you associate yourself with more, the crowds that feel harassed and helpless, or the disciples who are to pray for workers to be sent out?
- How would you describe Jesus' purpose in this story, and in turn, the disciples' purpose?

When Matthew writes that Jesus has compassion on the crowds, describing them as 'sheep without a shepherd', he is invoking a familiar aspect of how the Old Testament describes Israel when it lacked a prophet or king (Numbers 27:17, Ezekiel 34:5).

Jesus, 'God with us', has his purpose with these people. He has come to lead them, to show them the kingdom of God, a kingdom that the people of Israel were desperate to witness. These crowds were eager for the good news of the kingdom, they were ready for the presence of God with them – they were like a ripe field, ready to be harvested.

By asking his disciples to pray in this way, he establishes within his disciples (and within us) that same call to compassion: 'Look at these crowds, look how ready they are for the good news I've been discipling you in.'

WEEK 3

JESUS IS...PURPOSE

RESPOND

Notice what Jesus does immediately after this story – read Matthew 10:1 as a group.

Jesus sends out his disciples into the fields, giving them 'authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and illness' – the Lord of the harvest is sending out his workers.

The disciples have been following Jesus as a rabbi, a teacher who shapes them with teaching and examples. Their formation and purpose is found in the words and works of their rabbi, in following his ways.

We will each have a unique purpose within the plans that Jesus has for us – but they will all point to the same kingdom, to the same king and saviour. Jesus is the source and Lord of our purpose. Our purpose is a following of Christ – it is the journey we are already on, not a distant destination.

Take a moment to think on your response to Matthew 9:35-38.

- Do you identify as part of the crowd, harassed and helpless? How do you to respond to Jesus, knowing he has come to be your shepherd?
- Do you identify as a disciple, asked by Jesus to pray that the Lord of the harvest send out workers?
- We have each been placed into a specific part of this city with a specific calling – what field are you standing in? What prayer is Jesus asking you to pray, to take part in the harvest? What ripe needs are there he wants you to engage with?

RECEIVE

Make sure you have time at the end of the session for a time of prayer: if our purposes and prayers aren't rooted in God, we'll soon find ourselves feeling harassed, helpless, wandering like lost sheep. It's vital that we seek his presence.

The Lord of the Harvest doesn't send out the workers alone, Jesus doesn't send his disciples in isolation. Jesus is always with us, to the very end of the age.

Read Matthew 28:18-20 to lead the group into a time of prayer and reflection. You might wish to repeat the final line three or four times with a minute's silence in between each reading:

'Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'" "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

WEEK 4

JESUS IS...TRUTH

This session we are going to explore what it means for Jesus to be truth and how this declaration relates to our everyday lives.

ICE-BREAKER

It's a youth group classic but a good one! Two Truths, One Lie. Everyone in the group thinks of two true facts about themselves and one lie, the more obscure the truths the harder the game is. Then taking it in turn each person names the 3 statements (make sure to mix up where the lie is when making the statements) and the group then have to guess which the lie is. Take it in turns going round the group to make your 3 statements.

Note to leaders: It might be helpful to name the type of statements that you can have to get the game going: e.g. played football for... have a sister who lives in... never eaten tomatoes...

REFLECT

Read John 8:25 – 32

Just a few verses before today's reading, in verse 23, John records a dispute around who Jesus is. It's understandable, since he claimed to not be of this world. Therefore, the obvious question for those hearing him was to ask, "Who are you?"

It's not a silly or a simple question, as we see in these few verses as Jesus attempts to articulate something of his humanity and something of his divinity by explaining his connection to his Father.

- Break into small groups and discuss together, who Jesus is? How would you explain to a friend who Jesus is in light of the fact that in these verses Jesus tries to say something about both his human nature and his divine nature.

This passage falls in the middle of a conversation between Jesus and a group of people including the Pharisees, his Disciples, and those interested in hearing his teaching. Within this chapter, John records a series of Jesus' interactions with others in which he continually articulates himself as the Son of God, which causes many disputes. The dispute in these verses is around whether Jesus' claim can be true, and what that means if it is.

Break into small groups and discuss the following:

- It's often said within our society, "That might be true for you but it's not true for me." Is there such a thing as universal truth?
- If Jesus is truth, what does that mean?
- What are the implications of the statement Jesus is truth?

The claim in the final verses of this passage is: "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Holding to Jesus' teaching is to direct our lives by it. In this passage we see how some hearing him speak began to believe in him – a conversion moment. However, discipleship is something continuous and requires an ongoing 'holding'.

- Why do you think it is important that Jesus makes a distinction between the moment of believing in him and discipleship?
- What should holding on to Jesus' teaching look like?

WEEK 4

JESUS IS...TRUTH

RESPOND

Jesus extends to us an invitation to discipleship, to hold to all that he has said and done. We are invited to follow Jesus and discover the truth that brings freedom, not just in a single encounter but in an ongoing relationship.

The reality of our response is that we can often turn to a new truth to hold to, one that stems from ourselves or from something the world is offering us.

Take some time to reflect individually on the areas of our lives which are not submitted to Jesus' teaching or where we are putting our own 'truth' first.

Split into twos or threes and look at these questions together:

- What areas of your life is Jesus inviting you to submit to him and his teaching?
- What's the next thing you need to do to give that area of your life to Him?
- When/Where/How are you going to do it?
- What question do you want to be asked next time we meet that will help you be accountable?

Note to leader:

These questions are to help people be accountable in their discipleship and work best when people are willing to share and build depth of relationship. It's worth encouraging depth and accounting for new members of the group by giving them space to share only what they feel comfortable with. It is also worth giving time to allow these conversations to take place.

RECEIVE

Leave some time at the end of your meeting to pray together to declare out loud some simple truths of who God is.

If you have a shy group where praying out loud is tricky, ask one or two people to declare truths about God in prayer, e.g. Thank you that you are the way, truth and light. Thank you that you are good.

Alternative, read aloud a preferred Psalm, such as Psalm 100.