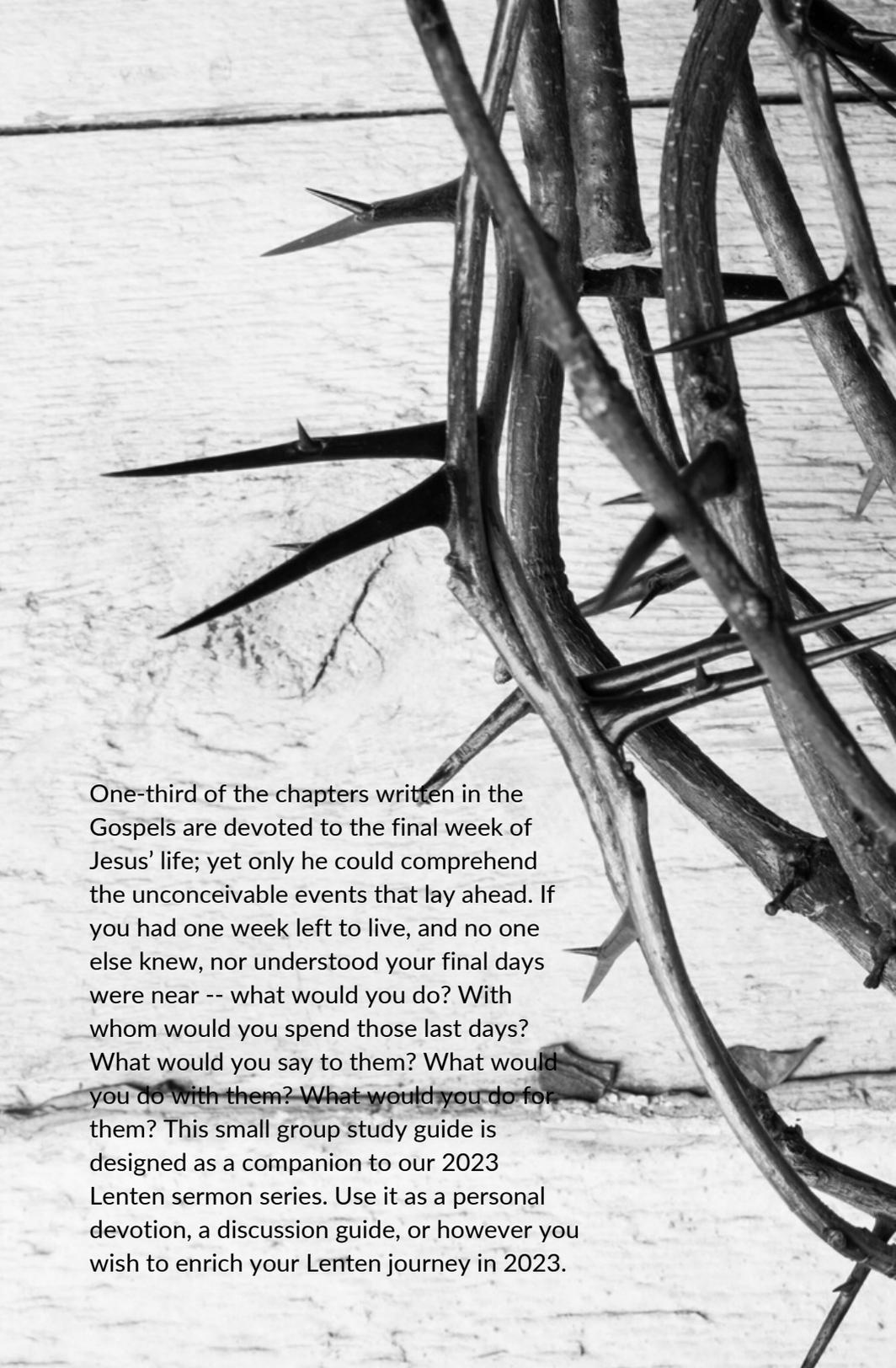




The Last Days of
JESUS

Lent 2023
Small Group Discussion Guide

A black and white photograph of a thorny branch, likely a crown of thorns, set against a light, textured background. The branch is dark and gnarled, with several sharp, pointed thorns extending from it. The background is a light, mottled surface, possibly stone or concrete, with some faint cracks and shadows. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

One-third of the chapters written in the Gospels are devoted to the final week of Jesus' life; yet only he could comprehend the unconceivable events that lay ahead. If you had one week left to live, and no one else knew, nor understood your final days were near -- what would you do? With whom would you spend those last days? What would you say to them? What would you do with them? What would you do for them? This small group study guide is designed as a companion to our 2023 Lenten sermon series. Use it as a personal devotion, a discussion guide, or however you wish to enrich your Lenten journey in 2023.

THINK ABOUT...

What kind of king is Jesus? The kind who seeks sinners, Samaritans and misfits to be his followers and one who has compassion for the sick and second-class and poor. What kind of kingdom does he lead? Not a kingdom of the sword, nor one that claims this geographic location or that. His kingdom is one of the heart and his subjects are any who choose to follow him as their king. What does he expect of his subjects? That they live humbly, love God, love others, care for the poor, and live their lives in such a way that those sheep who've wandered from God are drawn back to his fold.

DISCUSSION...

Read Luke 9:43-62 - We find that as Jesus set out to go to Jerusalem, he sent messengers ahead to prepare the way for him. What will you do during the Lenten season to prepare your heart to receive Jesus more fully? How can you be a messenger helping to prepare others to receive Jesus?

Read John 11:6-16, 45-53 - The disciples tried to talk Jesus out of going to Jerusalem. What reason did they give for their concern? How, if at all, does it alter your view of Jesus that he went to Jerusalem on purpose, knowing what to expect, rather than as a hapless, unsuspecting victim?

Read Luke 13:22-35 - Jesus describes his feelings toward Jerusalem with the simple, tender image of a hen gathering her chicks under her wings. What does that image tell you about God's feeling toward you? Does this reinforce or challenge the way(s) that you most often think of God?

Read Luke 17:11-19 -We read that when one healed man returned to give thanks, Jesus asked, “Where are the other nine?” The text doesn’t tell us. Where do you think they might have been? If you had been one of the ten, which is more likely: that you’d have returned to give thanks, or gone about your business? What is one intentional way you can give God thanks and praise this week that you might overlook if you don’t specifically plan to do it?

Read Luke 18:31-43 - Jesus asked the blind man, “What do you want me to do for you?” How would you answer that question if Jesus asked it of you? If you are able, share that with your group members (if not, it’s okay to pass), and support one another in prayer in talking with Jesus about the needs you feel in your lives.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you went to Jerusalem by design and on purpose. You were not a helpless victim—you knew what awaited you, but you went anyway. You did that for us, because you knew that without your saving work we’d have had no hope. As we relive your journey, give us insights and courage for our own journeys with you. Amen.

THINK ABOUT...

There are two courses in life. One path seems to make sense. The Jews of Jesus' day chose it, but so do most people in every generation. It is the way of vengeance and violence; it values riches, power and glory. Jesus said it is broad and wide. It is the way we choose when we forget what it means to be human. Jesus offered another way—a narrow way—the way of God's Kingdom. Jesus taught that you defeat your enemies by loving them. You pray for those who persecute you. You demonstrate gentleness, compassion, and mercy. You humble yourself and play the part of a servant. You put the needs of others first. You pursue holiness, righteousness and justice. This is the way that leads to peace.

DISCUSSION...

Read Luke 19:28-40 - What clues do you see that suggest that Jesus pre-arranged the use of the animal on which he rode into Jerusalem? How did this arrival connect Jesus with the history of David's family and Israel's kingly tradition? Jesus said, "If [my followers] keep quiet, the stones will cry out." Down deep inside, do you believe Jesus is your savior and king? If so, how are you choosing to allow Jesus to transform you—and through you, the world? How, if at all, do you live your faith boldly rather than being silent? What steps, if any, will you take to lessen your life's silence about Jesus? How can your group support you in those steps?

Read Zechariah 9:9-17 -How does knowing Jesus deepen your insight into a phrase like "prisoners of hope"? How does your love for Jesus shape your response to the words "God will save his people...as a shepherd saves his flock"?

Read Isaiah 56:1-8 - Isaiah challenged the human inclination to shut out everyone who is not “one of us.” How does this passage connect acting justly with the way we treat those who are outsiders? What kinds of attitudes and actions can you take individually to live out this ideal? How can you as a group live into this together?

In Luke 19:41-48 - Jesus rebuked the Temple trade, which exploited pilgrims who came from far away. How did that trade defy Jeremiah’s words about justice, which Jesus quoted? How did it limit the vision of a house of prayer for all people? How did the Temple rulers, who profited from that trade, respond to Jesus’ rebuke? Jesus wept because, he said, the people in Jerusalem did not know what would bring them peace. How good are you at listening to God’s voice in your life? Is there something that would bring you peace that you are resisting or denying? Will you open yourself to that?

Prayer: Dear Jesus, what joy it must have been to wave palm branches and dream of how good life would be when you were king! Yet some of the “religious” people didn’t feel that joy—you threatened their comfort, their status and their profits. Help us to be like those who waved palm branches and sang your praises, Lord! Amen.

THINK ABOUT...

On Monday the chief priests questioned Jesus about his authority. His authority came from being God's beloved son. Those who make him their king look to him as the highest authority in their lives....The Pharisees asked him about paying taxes. His answer spoke a depth of truth - "Who's image is on the coin?" Caesar's. But whose image is placed upon you? God's. Your entire life is meant to be surrendered-given over to God....The Sadducees asked a foolish question about a woman in seven tragic marriages-who will she belong to in heaven? She's God's child-she will belong to God. God's heavenly kingdom will be a place where all are free, all belong to God, and all are able to love without limit.

DISCUSSION...

Read Matthew 12:1-14 - Jesus doesn't just say the Pharisees' rules are mistaken. He claims his kingly authority-"the son of man is Lord of the Sabbath." Are there rules (from your childhood, old habits) that are holding your spiritual life hostage? What would it mean for you to accept Jesus as Lord over those rules?

Read John 8:48-59 - The religious leaders asked Jesus, "Who do you think you are?" Who do you believe Jesus is? What difference does your answer make in how you live your life? Jesus said he was not interested in getting glory or honor for himself. What light does that cast on the kind of Kingdom Jesus was establishing? In what ways, if any, does that challenge you to look more deeply at your motives for serving Jesus?

Read Matthew 19:3-12 - In entrapment stories like these, Jesus' enemies are not searching for the truth. For them, the subject is incidental—what matters is that it causes conflict. Have you ever known (or been) a person like that? How can you discern the difference between conflict for its own sake and a desire to learn and grow?

Read Luke 20:20-40 - Jesus faced the question of whether paying taxes to Caesar meant betraying God. The question assumed it did; Jesus said no. Does Christian faithfulness ever call us to defy human laws (1940's Germany, South African period of apartheid)? If so, how can we discern when to “pay taxes to Caesar” and when to refuse to obey evil laws?

Read Matthew 21:23-39 - Jesus told the religious leaders that tax collectors and prostitutes (the people they most despised) were entering the Kingdom before them. 2000 years later, it's easy to look down on those religious leaders. But how do Jesus' words speak to you? How are you responding to, or resisting, Jesus' call on your life?

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for our minds, for our ability to ask questions and to discuss ideas in this group. But give us the courage to engage with you honestly. Help us to avoid using questions as a way to distance ourselves from you, as so many of the first-century religious leaders did. Let us always ask our questions so that we can be open to you, and learn from you. Amen.

THINK ABOUT...

Here are three important questions that we are meant to ask ourselves after reading Jesus' words in Matthew. First, can we recognize the places where we are like the Pharisees? It does us little good just to look back and think badly of them. We need to understand the ways that our hearts, too, are drawn toward pride and self-righteousness. Second, are we ready to meet Jesus whenever he returns? His ultimate return may not happen in our lifetime—but he will still come for us, and call us to account for our life. And third, do we know what it means to be ready? It means trusting in Jesus as our Savior, but not in words only. We're called to live our lives in response to his love, to serve him by serving others.

DISCUSSION...

Read Matthew 24:1-31 -Jesus said that the majesty of the Temple would prove unreliable. Tallying “signs,” or hunting around for a new Messiah, would let you down. He said, “Stand firm to the end.” What does it mean for you to stand firm in your faith, even in difficult times? In whom does your hope for the future center?

Read Matthew 24:32-51 -Jesus spoke the words we find in Matthew 24 just before his crucifixion. About 40 years later, the Roman army smashed Jerusalem and the Temple. It was an awful time—but the world didn't end. Some of Jesus' words applied mainly to Jerusalem's fall, while others reached to the end of the age. Note which parts of Jesus' teaching seem more local, and which more cosmic.

Read Matthew 25:1-13 -What spiritual lesson(s) do you learn from looking at the difference between the “wise” and the “foolish” characters in this story? With which group do you identify more? How are you deepening your personal bond with Jesus so that you know him, and he knows you?

Read Matthew 25:14-30 - In Matthew 24:3 the disciples asked “WHEN will this happen?” How did Jesus use this story in Matthew 25 to show that “when” is not the critical question? What qualities do the faithful servants show that allow them to be unconcerned with exactly when the master will return? The question for us is: what resources has God placed in your life? How are you using those resources to serve the Kingdom of God and bless others? Are there any resources you have “buried in a hole in the ground,” so to speak? If so, how can you begin to use them actively for God’s purposes?

Read Matthew 25:31-46 -When did you recently see someone in need—a family member, neighbor, co-worker or even a casual contact—and act to fill that need? When have you been unwilling to respond to a need you could have met? Ask God to make you more aware of needs around you, and more willing to respond.

Prayer: Dear God, to your first-century disciples, and to us, you offer a reminder that so much about the future is unknown. Help us learn to live in the present with you. Meet us in the “sacred space” we create with you in our group, and in each of our hearts. Teach us to lay aside our need for power and control over how the future will unfold. We trust the future to you as we walk toward it together with you. Amen.

THINK ABOUT...

What to take away from the story of Jesus praying in the garden? First, the Lord understands your fears, your sorrow and your anxiety in the face of death, suffering or hardship. He knows, and with compassion he walks with us through our own gardens of agony. Second, God's path is sometimes difficult. It can be costly to do God's will. It may be frightening. Finally, Jesus' prayer in the garden is meant to be the prayer of his followers as well. (In November I visited the Basilica of the Agony at the foot of the Mount of Olives and knelt at the rock at the front of the church - - I couldn't help but repeat those words, "Not my will, but thine be done." It is a place of complete surrender to the will of God.)

DISCUSSION...

Read Luke 22:7-34 - Jesus said he eagerly desired to eat the Passover with his disciples. With how much eagerness, or lack of it, do you take part in the Lord's Supper? What experiences or beliefs lead you to feel the way you do? How can you take in Jesus' love and restoring power more fully, and receive him through this meal? At the Last Supper the disciples argued about which of them would be greatest. Jesus said, "I am among you as one who serves." In which relationships is it hardest for you to be a servant? How do you sense spiritual growth in your view of yourself when you give up power so that you can serve another person?

Read John 15:1-8 - Jesus used the image of a vine and its branches to illustrate how we relate to him. What spiritual practices have helped you most to live into Jesus' invitation to stay constantly linked with him? In what ways has your connection with Christ led you to bear fruit for God's Kingdom?

Read John 14:16-18 - In several places the Gospel of John uses the Greek word *paraklētōs* for the Holy Spirit. The word meant “one who walks with,” and could apply to anyone from “defense attorney” to “friend.” How does this scripture show that the Holy Spirit does not replace Jesus, but rather, in a way beyond our full understanding, is Jesus’ presence with us?

Read John 17:1-26 - Jesus says, a bit surprisingly, that his followers are “not of the world” any more than he is. In what ways are you most interested in, and attentive to, this world? In what areas, if any, do you sense your energy and focus shifting beyond this world to God’s Kingdom?

Read Luke 22:39-54 - Sooner or later we all face a situation in life that seems unbearable. What does Jesus’ time in the Garden teach us about the value of honestly facing and expressing our feelings in those times of anguish? To what extent have you learned to say, “Not my will but yours be done”?

Prayer: Dear Jesus, we seem to be in a challenging time with an uncertain future. Thank you for the wonderful promises you made in the shadow of the cross! You promised room for each of us in our Heavenly Father’s house, your presence constantly with us through the Holy Spirit, and even in the hardest times, your peace filling our hearts. Help us to live our lives, not consumed by fears, but energized by your promises! Amen.

THINK ABOUT...

Of course, what matters most about the crucifixion of Jesus is not how it was done, but why it happened. As we learned earlier, Jesus set his face decisively towards Jerusalem. He clearly knew he would die, and believed this was part of God's plan. The question is 'why?' Or more completely stated, 'What is the meaning of Jesus' death?'...The cross is God's truth to us - God's most powerful word. It reminds us of our brokenness. It tells us of God's character and God's forgiving grace, offered to all. And it invites us to follow the crucified messiah in showing sacrificial love. Because only in this kind of sacrificial love can the world be restored to what God intended it to be.

DISCUSSION...

Read John 18:12 - 19:16 - Pilate avoided a riot, kept local rulers happy, upheld Roman power—and all it took was crucifying one sinless peasant preacher. Rome was surely pleased. Is there some area in which you are having to choose between pleasing a human power (even social or family pressure) and doing what's right? How can your group support you in doing right?

Read John 19:7-11 again - How does Jesus dialogue with Pilate show the difference between external power and inner moral strength? How did Jesus nurture and build up the inner strength that sustained him in this dialogue? How are you facing life's trials with God day by day, as a means to grow your inner moral strength?

Read Mark 15:16-41 - Here we find the names of Simon of Cyrene's sons. This probably means Simon and his sons were known to Christians years later, when Mark wrote this gospel. (See other likely mentions in Acts 13:1, Romans 16:13.) What do you think Simon, carrying Jesus' cross, and the Roman centurion, supervising the execution, saw that changed their lives?

Read Luke 23:26-49 - We often speak of the "thief" on the cross. More precisely, the words the Bible writers use mean "bandits," "criminals," or "violent offenders." What do you think stirred inside this violent man to lead him to ask Jesus to remember him? What does Jesus' response tell you about the Savior's heart toward you? Towards the violent offenders today?

Read John 19:19-37 - The religious leaders actually asked Pilate to brutally hurry people's deaths so they could keep a worship day "pure." Have routine or frustration ever blinded you to the real purpose of your service to God? How can you open your heart to make God's steadfast love the source of all you do for God and others?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, it's painful to read about the cruelty you faced. Anyone who handled a prisoner today as they handled you would be arrested and tried themselves, and rightly so. Through it all, you kept forgiving and loving. You knew the only way to repair the human condition was from the inside out, and you lived and died as one of us. Help us to treasure your gift of life in proportion to what it cost you. Amen.

THINK ABOUT...

Do you really believe these stories of stones rolled away and Jesus being raised from the dead? When I look around at the universe that God has made – how he called light from darkness, how the entire cosmos emerged in a split second out of nothing, how DNA and the first life emerged from the primordial soup – when I think about how atoms function or the speed of light, or a host of other things from the natural world that I find absolutely amazing and unbelievable, it seems a small thing for God to reconstitute and reanimate the atoms that formed the physical body of Jesus Christ. Yes... I believe.

DISCUSSION...

Read Matthew 27:57-66 - We read about the fear that Jesus' disciples, and his enemies, felt while Jesus lay in the tomb. But we know Jesus rose from the dead, and that puts their fears in a very different light. What struggles or fears in your life look different in the light of Easter? How can God-given hope alter your view of even the most tragic situations?

Read Mark 16:7 - Mark's resurrection story matches Matthew's (Matthew 28:1-15)—with one vital extra detail. In Mark the angel says, "But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee.'" Peter, even after denying Jesus, was included. What does this tell you about Jesus' grace toward Peter? Toward you when you fail?

Read Luke 24:29 - Cleopas and the other disciple strongly urged their companion to stay with them. If they hadn't, they'd have missed that joyous moment of recognizing him as Jesus. What are you doing to invite Jesus into your life? How can you better recognize his presence in the midst of everyday life?

Read Luke 24:36-49 - Jesus greets his followers with the characteristic words, "Peace be with you." What choices and disciplines have you found that allow you to claim Jesus' peace for yourself? How can you extend that peace to the areas of life where fear and anxiety are ongoing struggles for you? Choose one specific step you will take to engage with Jesus during the rest of 2023, to experience his presence, peace and love for you more fully. In verse 45 Luke uses the great phrase, "He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures." When, if ever, have you experienced this kind of "opening" in your Bible reading? How can you create inner and outer spaces in which Jesus can open your mind to a fuller understanding of him?

Read John 20:1-23 - Exodus 25:17-22 and Numbers 7:89 placed God's presence between two angels, carved at each end of the Ark's cover. John uses that symbol in placing one angel at each end of the place where Jesus' body lay. What does it mean to you that the risen Jesus was not just human, but God's very presence with us?

Prayer: God of life, it might have seemed that Easter changed nothing. Pilate was still in charge; the high priests kept profiting from the trade at the Temple. But Easter changed everything, and we praise you, Lord, for that miracle! Through your love and awesome power, you transformed fear and despair into hope and joy! Help us to go forward, as Easter people, keeping the resurrection message in our hearts. Alleluia! Amen.

