

Four Lenten Studies Series B

"The Rescue"

by
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Leading the four Lenten Studies

THANK YOU

Thank you for being a small group leader for this Lenten series.

THE GROUP LEADER

The leader should be a facilitator. This means that he/she should make it possible for things to be organised and happen. The leader should not necessarily do everything but should delegate responsibility. It is particularly a good idea for the leader not to be personally responsible for the domestic arrangements but to give this responsibility to an assistant.

PROMOTE DISCUSSION

The leader's main job in the group discussion time is to get people talking. It is not to provide all the answers. A leader's skill is in making people feel at ease, appreciated and in gently drawing people into discussion. Leaders need to treat all questions seriously and with respect so that people will be encouraged to share because no question or opinion is considered too stupid or antagonistic to be appreciated.

The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out. (Proverbs 20:5)

PREPARING THE VENUE

A venue should be comfortable and non-threatening. Chairs should usually be placed in a circle for discussion. Avoid having chairs behind each other if possible as it encourages those sitting in them to be less involved.

Some people also take the phone off the hook or switch them off to avoid distractions.

THE FIRST MEETING

People will come to the first meeting with some apprehension, particularly if they are unfamiliar with Christianity or church. They will also bring with them all sorts of fears and preconceptions of what Christianity and church are about. The first meeting is the ideal time to shatter people's negative preconceptions and put them at their ease. For this reason, ensure the venue is welcoming and looks good. Consider using soft indirect lighting and having background music as people arrive. Surprise people with excellence

and how "normal" things are.

BREAKING THE ICE

Warm up activities at the start of a home group meeting can be anything that will help people relax, smile and get to know each other. It can be as basic as a chat over a cup of coffee.

WHAT SHOULD PEOPLE BRING?

Ask people to bring their Bibles (provide some for those who may not have one).

TIMELINESS

There is no spiritual merit in meetings being long drawn out marathons. People will tire of them if they are. Be disciplined with time and let people go home at a civilised hour.

Before people go home, the meeting should have a definite ending eg. a concluding prayer.

PRAYER

All prayers prayed by leaders before or after a meeting should be simple, sincere, relevant to what has been discussed and short. Such prayers will not intimidate people and will encourage them to believe that they too might soon be able to pray in such a way.

DOING THE STUDIES

Encourage members of the group to take turns in reading the readings out loud to the group (checking with them first privately that they are willing and able to do so).

Be familiar with the teaching sections so that you don't necessarily have to read them verbatim but can paraphrase them easily in your own words.

God bless your ministry
Nick Hawkes

Session 1

Betrayal and Arrest

Welcome people

Introduce people. Break the ice.

Begin with a brief opening prayer.

Introduce by saying:

The battles between nations, within nations, between families and within families remind us that attacks and persecution from enemies is, sadly, expected. However, we do not expect to be betrayed by friends. If they do betray us, they have the power to wound us in much deeper ways than our enemies. Today, we read about one such story of betrayal and its consequences.

Jesus Arrested

Read; Mark 14:43-52

Explain:

Other gospel accounts say it was Peter who struck out with a sword (possibly a long knife (called a *sicarii*, which was popular amongst Zealot extremists who used them to assassinate occupying Romans). Carrying a sword was forbidden by Roman law as the Romans decreed that only they had the right "of the sword", i.e. could kill.

The people who came to arrest Jesus were temple police and some Roman soldiers armed with clubs and swords to ensure that Jesus would not evade capture. It was sizable force ready and equipped to handle trouble.

The fact that the young man (vv.51-52), (thought by some to be John Mark who later accompanied Paul on some of his missionary journeys) had a linen garment rather than wool suggests that his family were fairly well off. The fact that he fled naked suggests that he might have dressed quickly.

Discuss:

- 1) What do you think that Judas' motives might have been in betraying Jesus?
Leader's note: (Money [Mk 14:11; Jn 12:6] i.e. greed? Jesus too radical [Jn 6:60-68] i.e. Judas is deluded as to what is true? Jesus too dangerous [Jn 18:14] i.e. fear?)
- 2) How do these same factors cause the same thing today?
- 3) How does Jesus respond to his betrayal?

Jesus before the High Priest

Read: Mark 14:53-65

Introduction:

When John tells the story of Jesus' arrest, he records that Jesus is first taken to Annas by the temple police who were escorted by Roman soldiers. After Jesus was safely arrested, the soldiers would have returned to the Antonia barracks (outside the north-western corner of the temple) and left Jesus in the custody of the temple police. Annas was a past high priest who still held great power. He was a patriarch of the office of High Priest. No less than five of his sons became High Priest. On the occasion when Jesus was arrested, Caiaphas (Annas' son-in-law) was high priest. Mark's account begins with Jesus being brought before Caiaphas.

It is interesting to note that much of what the chief priests, elders and teachers of the law did the night Jesus was arrested was illegal according to their own custom and laws (as recorded in the tractate Sanhedrin of the Mishnah). The anomalies included:

- ☒ Jesus being arrested at night during the start of a religious festival (not a time when good Jews should have engaged in violence and legal issues).
- ☒ It is unlikely that a full quorum of the Sanhedrin (71 people) would have been able to assemble at that time of night.
- ☒ The accusers and those in judgment failed to call witnesses for the defense.
- ☒ They failed to note that the claim to messiahship was not, in itself, blasphemy.
- ☒ They couldn't get any two accusers to agree on an accusation (essential to Jewish law) (vv.56,59)
- ☒ They were not allowed to condemn anyone to death (v.64) under the constraints of the prevailing Roman law.

Mark's account makes it plain that evil and abuse was displayed in all its rawness (see vv.48-49; 61-62)

Discuss:

- 1) Jesus withholds his true identity throughout his ministry but now reveals who he is. Why do you think he does so now?
- 2) The accusations against Jesus are either lies (vv.56,59) or distortions (v.58). In what form do these still exist today?
- 3) Jesus, the master of debate, says nothing (vv.60-61). Why do you think Jesus said nothing?

Peter disowns Jesus

Read: Mark 14:66-72

Introduction:

Peter's actions reflect our own wavering loyalties. Peter was in the vicinity of Jesus but was not willing to confess he was one of Jesus followers despite earlier assuring Jesus he was willing to die in order to defend him (Mk 14:27-31). A servant girl had recognised

Peter and also noted his Galilean accent which helped indicate that he was one of the many Galilean disciples of Jesus. The charge against Peter was not a great one. It was simply that he had been with Jesus, yet it could have led to serious repercussions during those uncertain times. Peter opted to play it safe. One lie led to another until he had perjured himself completely.

Discuss:

- 1) What pressures in your life test your loyalty to Jesus Christ?
- 2) What helps you remain strong?

Close in prayer

Session 2

The Trial

Welcome people

Ask how people are. Break the ice.

Begin with a brief opening prayer.

Read: John 18:28 - 19:16

Explain:

This passage is a powerful story of power plays, clashing values and extraordinary dignity and faith. It is the story of Jesus' trial, a story that can serve as an enormous encouragement to us when we are faced with injustice or persecution for our faith.

John gives a very full account of the trial of Jesus before Pilate. For John, this is *the* real trial of Jesus. His accusers are the Jewish religious rulers and the judge, paradoxically, is a non spiritual gentile, the representative of the Roman State.

Rome classified the lands it ruled as being either peaceful (requiring no troops) or troublesome (requiring troops). Peaceful land was ruled by the Roman senate but the troublesome lands came under the direct rule of the Emperor. If the land being ruled by the Emperor was large, he sent a proconsul or legate to rule it. If the land was small, the Emperor sent a procurator. Palestine was considered to be a troublesome land and, because it was small, it had a procurator Pontius Pilate.

Unfortunately, Pilate displayed a complete lack of understanding of the Jews whom he held in some contempt. He had already made two bad mistakes. The first of these occurred on his initial visit to Jerusalem. Despite the Jews begging him not parade a bust of the Emperor (as a god) on their standards in Jerusalem (for the Jews celebrated the one true God), Pilate refused. After the Jews dogged Pilate with this request for five days, Pilate told them to talk with him in the amphitheater. Once there, he threatened to kill the lot of them. The Jews called his bluff and bared their necks daring him to do it. Pilate backed down - but the damage was done.

His second big mistake was to take money given at the Jewish temple in order to build an aqueduct for Jerusalem (as the city had a chronic water shortage.) Predictably, the Jews rioted in the streets in response to this outrageous liberty. Pilate responded by ordering his soldiers to mingle amongst the rioters in plain clothes and then when the order was given, to lash out with clubs and swords at those who were rioting. Many were killed and wounded which resulted in an an adverse report about Pilate going back to the emperor.

Pilate's track record to date had therefore been poor and, at this politically sensitive time, Jesus is presented to him on an occasion which could easily get out of hand and cause another riot. The Jews knew this and their warning to Pilate that if he let Jesus go he would be "*no friend of Caesar*" (v.12) was a very real threat.

Jesus Before Pilate

Read: John 28-40

Clarify:

Pilate saying "*You take him and judge him*" (v.31) indicates that his accusers were prominent members of the Sanhedrin, (the Jewish religious ruling council).

Explain and ask:

- 1) The Jewish deputation refuse to enter the procurator's residence to avoid being defiled and disqualify themselves from sharing the religious ceremonial passover meal (v.28). (The dwellings of non-Jews were considered to be spiritually "unclean"). What does the irony of religious leaders worrying about ceremonial law whilst seeking the execution of their Messiah teach you about authentic faith?

Ask: Are we guilty of doing a similar thing in our own time?

- 2) If the Jews had been given special (and unlikely) permission to put Jesus to death by their own law, he would have been stoned to death (killed by having stones thrown at him). However, the Jewish leaders wanted Jesus to die a more degrading death at the hands of the Romans because their mode of execution incurred the curse of the Jewish law: "*anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse*" (Deuteronomy 21:23). Not content with killing Jesus, they wanted to discredit his name spiritually.

Ask: How is Jesus' name besmirched today?

- 3) Pilate's first words to Jesus, "*are you the king of the Jews*" (v.33) are recorded in all the gospel accounts. This is the very question that everyone who hears of Jesus needs to answer. Jesus asks Pilate whether he is simply echoing the Jewish accusations (which concerned whether or not he was a Messiah) or whether he had the Roman concern of whether or not he was a rebel ie. a political threat (vv.33-34).

Ask: Can Christianity ever be just a spiritual thing and not have political overtones?

- 4) Pilate's statement, "*what is truth*" (v.38) is relevant today.

Ask: Who do you hear asking this question today in our society and what sorts of things would you say in reply?

Jesus Sentenced to be Crucified

Read: John 19:1-16

Discuss:

- 1) **Ask:** In what ways are we tempted to compromise like Pilate (19:6,12,16)?
- 2) Pilate tried to outfox the Jewish leaders and give them a choice between saving Jesus

(who had no substantial evidence of guilt against him) or Barabbas (who was obviously very guilty of insurrection and murder). Pilate probably expected them to choose Jesus, which would give Pilate the chance to execute Barabbas without causing a riot amongst the Jews for they had, in effect, voted for his death themselves. However, the Jews were not to be outwitted and chose to save Barabbas. Barabbas was arguably the first person Jesus saved by his death.

Ask: In what ways was this a parable of Jesus' ministry on earth?

Close in prayer

Session 3 The Crucifixion

Welcome people

Ask how people are. Break the ice.

Begin with a brief opening prayer.

The Soldiers Mock Jesus

Read: Matthew 27:27-31

Explain:

People who live in a world of violence can too easily become brutalised and desensitised to things like honour, nobility and compassion. The soldiers, probably a detachment of the Second Italian Cohort who were stationed in Palestine at the time, had needed to cope with continual uprisings and threats of uprisings from the troublesome Jews for whom the soldiers had little patience. So when a Jewish troublemaker who claims to be king (when they acknowledged no king but Caesar) is in their hands, they express their frustration, ignorance and brutality with shocking cruelty. The crown of thorns was a parody of the victor's laurel wreath, the "scarlet" robe meant to symbolise royalty was in all probability the red cloak of a soldier.

Discuss:

- 1) The supremacy of evil must have seemed total when Jesus was mocked and beaten by the soldiers (24:27-31). The scourging suffered by Jesus (v.26) was designed to punish, humiliate and weaken the victim. It was inflicted by a whip of four or five strands with pieces of lead and bone along their length. (Some see this prophesied in Psalm 129:3: "*Ploughmen have ploughed my back and made their furrows long.*") If Is 50:6 and 52:14 are prophecies about Jesus, it would suggest that Jesus was so disfigured by this abuse as to cause people to turn their heads away in revulsion. When in your history (or the history of your society) has evil seemed to be in total ascendancy?
- 2) Many a true thing is said in ignorance and jest. The irony of Jesus pretending to be given homage "*Hail, King of the Jews!*" (v.29) is obvious. How is Jesus treated disdainfully today?

The Crucifixion

Read: Matthew 27:32-44

Explain:

- 1) The soldiers brutalised Jesus so much that he was too weak to carry the crossbeam he was soon to be impaled upon to the place of execution. As such, they pulled a man from the crowd to carry it. His name was Simon from the town of Cyrene on the

coast of Libya in North Africa. He was probably a devout Jew who had journeyed back to Jerusalem so he could attend the religious feast of the Passover. One moment Simon was just a spectator, not involved, the next he is compelled to take part. What in your life compelled you to participate with Christ rather than just to observe Christ from a distance?

- 2) The soldiers then nail Jesus to a cross. Six inch nails driven into his forearms just above the wrist. His knees were twisted sideways so that the ankles could be nailed between the tibia and the Achilles' tendon. The cross was then lifted and dropped into a socket in the ground. Crucifixion was a dreadful form of execution which the Romans reserved for slaves and foreigners. They would rarely let any of their own citizens be executed in this way. Cicero called it, "the most cruel and the most horrible torture." Jesus is naked, humiliated and in agony. Below him the soldiers share out Jesus' clothes. A Jew typically wore five articles of clothing: shoes, a turban, a girdle, an inner garment and an outer cloak. The first four garments were of equal value but the cloak was more valuable so they drew lots to see who would get it. The soldiers who were simply doing their job, were preoccupied with personal possessions and missed the truth of Jesus.

Ask: How is this still true today?

- 3) Even as Jesus was dying on the cross, the Jewish leaders and the robbers who were crucified with Jesus mock and insult Jesus. There is no support for Jesus anywhere in Matthew's account. The heart-rending cry of Jesus "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me*" (v.46) compounds Jesus' isolation. Even God has turned his back on Jesus.

Ask: Why was it necessary for Jesus to feel that God had forsaken him?

- 4) The curtain that was ripped apart was the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the inner court of the temple. The Holy of Holies symbolised the very presence of God and only the High Priest was allowed to go once a year on the day of atonement to sprinkle the blood of a lamb there to atone for the sins of the Jewish people.

Ask: What did the tearing of the curtain symbolise?

Close in prayer

Session 4

The Resurrection

Welcome people

Ask how people are. Break the ice.

Begin with a brief opening prayer.

Explain:

When the Apostle Paul talked about the resurrection of Jesus to the Philosophers in Athens, some believed, some wanted to know more ...but many sneered (Acts 17). Such a thing could never happen. And yet, the resurrection which galvanised the hope and ministry of Jesus' disciples remains at the heart of the Christian gospel. Evidence of Jesus' resurrection is quite compelling. Let's look at the following explanations of the resurrection:

1) Maybe Jesus was a ghost.

However, Jesus ate fish with his disciples and invited them to touch him to prove he wasn't a ghost (Luke 24:36-43).

2) Jesus didn't die but was in a coma from which he later recovered.

However, this is unrealistic because he was flogged so severely, he couldn't carry the crossbeam he was later to be impaled upon. He was crucified by the Romans, who were experts at the business, speared in the side to make sure he was dead, his body was totally wrapped in a burial bandage, and he was placed in a tomb with an entrance covered by a very heavy rock. Jesus could not have survived all that to unwrap himself, move the stone and run into hiding.

3) The disciples stole the body.

However: the disciples were scared and many had gone home or gone fishing. Yet after seeing the resurrected Jesus, they spread the gospel boldly and were willing to be martyred for it. They would not have done this for a lie.

4) Maybe the authorities stole the body.

However, all they had to do was to produce the body to stop the movement begun by Jesus from flourishing. They didn't and they couldn't.

5) Perhaps Jesus did die and the people who saw Jesus were all hallucinating.

However: the fact that hundreds of people in many different places should have all had hallucinations or visions over a six week period makes this highly unlikely.

6) Finally, maybe the resurrection story was simply a poetic myth designed to express the disciples sudden insight as to the identity and significance of Jesus.

No, this is unlikely as it was precisely the resurrection that gives Jesus most of his significance. It was this event that galvanised his disciples into missionary zeal. It was to this historical event that the apostle Paul appealed in order to validate his message, as recorded in the book of Acts. Christ rose not in the minds of the disciples but in history.

Discuss:

What do you think about the resurrection?

The Empty Tomb

Read Luke 24: 1-12

Explain:

The actual accounts of Jesus resurrection in each of the four gospels are broadly similar but there are also differences (depending on the theological emphasis of the writer and their access to different accounts of the resurrection story). What is common to all is:

1. The empty tomb
2. A woman, Mary Magdalene, first discovers the empty tomb.
3. An angel tells Mary that Jesus has risen.
4. The disciples initial response is one of doubt and disbelief.
5. Jesus appears to the eleven disciples and it was these appearances rather than the empty tomb that was decisive of the disciples faith.
6. He appeared only to those who were already followers (Acts 10:40-42).
7. Jesus' body was physical. Jesus ate and his body could be felt so he wasn't a ghost (Luke 24:39-43, John 20:20,27). However, Jesus body had also changed in that it seemed to be able to transcend the limitations of normal bodies (John 20:19,26).

Discuss:

- 1) Why do you think woman are first to report the empty tomb (vv.1-10) when the testimony of women was not considered to be credible in first century Palestine?
- 2) What was the reaction of the disciples to their testimony about the empty tomb?

Jesus Appears to the Disciples

Read Luke 24:36-47

Discuss:

- 1) What did Jesus do to assure the disciples that he really had been raised from the dead?
- 2) Why was it important for Jesus to give the disciples understanding about all the things written about him in the Old Testament? (vv.44-47)
- 3) Think wider than this text for a moment and share the reasons why you think God the Father raised Christ from the dead?

Leader's notes:

1. The fact that God the Father raised Jesus from the dead showed that the power of sin and death had been broken. It showed that evil and injustice will not triumph but that God will have the last word. (Acts 17:31)
2. It vindicated Jesus' ministry, showing it to be of God. (Acts 2:22-24)
3. The resurrection was also to show us that if we follow Jesus, we too will enjoy life everlasting with God. (2 Corinthians 4:14)

In conclusion:

Read:

"The resurrection is to be seen not merely in the closing chapters of the gospels; it is to be seen above all in the faith which prompted the very composition of the gospels".

(The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Vol.4, s.v. Resurrection in the N.T. [Abingdon, 1962])

Bishop John Robinson said:

"Before Jesus died, the line was drawn between those who were dead and those who were alive. After Jesus' resurrection, the line was drawn between those who were 'in Christ' and those who were not. That was the only thing now that mattered for eternity."

Ask: Which side of the line are you?

Close with prayer: Mention everyone by name as you pray God's blessing on them.

The next step: Invite your group members to take the next step that is available for them, e.g. being part of a continuing home fellowship group.