

# **Uncover Luke Seeker Bible Studies Leaders' Notes<sup>1</sup>**

## **Leading Uncover Studies**

Do you have some friends who are interested in finding out about Jesus? Reading the Gospel of Luke together is a great way to help uncover who Jesus is. Luke, the author of this Gospel, set out to carefully investigate Jesus and spoke directly to eyewitness sources to get to the bottom of all that he heard. He then wrote an ordered account of this evidence to enable his friend, Theophilus, to investigate these things for himself. We too can use Luke's account to help our friends explore the evidence. Of course, if we are to do this well, we must, like Luke, first undertake our own careful investigation.

The first thing to do is to put away these notes and the Uncover study guide and pick up the Gospel of Luke and start reading! You may want to set aside an hour to read through the whole of it in one go, or you can just read the section you will be studying each time.

Once you get to the selected study passage, read and reread carefully and prayerfully. Write down any questions that you may have, as well as any that you think your friends might have. How might you answer these questions? It is also a good idea to try and note down the key points you think the passage is about. What does this passage show us about Jesus and the people who met him? What implications might there be for us today? What questions does it leave us with?

Now you are ready to have a go at the questions in the Uncover Seeker Bible Study. Once you've worked through the questions for yourself, think about how your friends might respond to them. Think about which bits of the study you want to really spend time on, and which bits you can skip past more quickly – remember time always goes quicker than you expect! It is also very helpful to prepare some secondary questions or alternative ways of asking the same questions, in case your friends seem stuck or puzzled.

Only after doing all of this, should you read this Leaders' Guide. These notes are designed to help you gain deeper insight and clarity into the passage. Try to resist using these notes as a means to teach the passage. This is an inductive study, meaning it's an approach of self-discovery. We want seekers to grapple with the text for themselves.

In a Seeker Bible Study, we won't be able to dot every 'i' and cross every 't' in terms of theological clarity. Both understanding and faith are things we grow in and our prayer is that, through the power of God's Word and His Spirit, seekers will be drawn to the beauty, power and truth of who Jesus is. And, we trust that, one day they will put their trust in Christ as their Lord and Saviour as a result.

If you are doing the study in a larger group, it is especially important that you and your co-leader (if you have one) meet individually with each group member (for example, for coffee or lunch) during the seven-week study. Try to meet with each person towards the final weeks of the study, in a quiet place. If you have four seekers in your group, then you and your co-leader could separately meet

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<sup>1</sup> These notes accompany the 2016 edition of Uncover Luke Studies.

with two people each. As the conversation develops, ask each friend something along these lines, 'What do you think of the study so far? How does Jesus strike you? What questions do you have?' Test the waters and see if they might be close to giving their life to Christ. If you sense an openness, you could ask, 'Is there anything that would keep you from becoming a Christian right now?' Then be prepared to lead them to Christ if they are ready. If you find it helpful, you could use the simple prayer at the end of study G.

## Study A: All too familiar?

### Luke 1:1–4 and 4:16–30

#### Purpose:

To introduce seekers to:

- 1) Luke's purpose in writing his 'orderly and carefully investigated' account of Jesus
- 2) The remarkable claims Jesus made about himself and what He came to achieve
- 3) The real possibility of preconceptions preventing us from fairly assessing the evidence for these claims.

**Intro:** Encourage people to be as honest and as open as possible about the associations Christianity or Jesus throws up in their minds. It may be helpful to share some of your own preconceptions about Christianity that you had before becoming a Christian.

#### Leaders' notes:

- 1) Though Luke wasn't an eyewitness himself, his account is based on eyewitness testimony (the term eyewitness is not a legal term here, but simply those with first-hand experience of the facts). His *methods* involved careful and thorough (from the beginning) investigation of this evidence so that he can present an orderly account of Jesus' life. His *motivation* is that his friend, Theophilus, can then investigate these things for himself and so 'know with certainty' the truth of what he has been taught. Christianity is not based on speculation or blind faith.
- 2) Giving an explanation of a passage was a standard part of a Jewish synagogue service. Here, we have a condensed summary giving the gist of Jesus' sermon. Jesus' text is from Isaiah 61:1–2. The figure is a prophet who brings a message of deliverance to exiles. The language recalls the year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:8–17), when debts were cancelled and slaves freed. It is a picture of forgiveness and spiritual liberation.
- 3) While liberation of the oppressed is good news for those who know themselves to be enslaved, guilty and blind, many will not see themselves as being in need of a deliverer and find the offer irrelevant or offensive. Others will see this liberation as a dangerous threat to the status quo.
- 4) Jesus is the one who will bring in this new era of forgiveness and liberation. **Background note:** While the main part of the text about the messenger is from Isaiah 61:1–2, the phrase 'to release the oppressed' is 'pasted in' (from Isaiah 58:6). Jesus is not just the messenger but the liberator himself.
- 5) Focus here on vv22–24. The crowd were impressed by Jesus and His message but scepticism quickly comes to the surface. This is Joseph's son, how can a common man's son make such claims about himself?
- 6) Jesus didn't fit the people's expectation about who God's great deliverer would be. They expected a grand, powerful and elite Messiah, not a poor man's son from down the road. They wanted more proof from Jesus that He was who He said He was.
- 7) Jesus is critical of the crowd's desire for a sign. Though Jesus will repeatedly demonstrate that He is able to bring about what He promises here, these miraculous foretastes will come to those who are open and receptive to Jesus. This is the main point of Jesus pointing to the disastrous time in Israel's history, when Elijah and Elisha were rejected as prophets by God's people (1 Kings 17–18 and 2 Kings 5:1–14). Like then, God's blessing will go elsewhere and these people will miss out.

- 8) The crowd knew their history and got the point Jesus was making: they were somehow less deserving than foreign lepers and widows. The attempt to lynch Jesus seems to indicate they see Him as a false prophet worthy of execution.
- 9) Again and again in Luke's Gospel we will see that it is those who are most aware of their need for forgiveness and deliverance who respond appropriately to Jesus and receive from Him. We will return to this theme again.

Luke wants us to carefully investigate the person of Jesus for ourselves, yet investigations can get derailed by deep-seated preconceptions and beliefs. Consider your friends. What preconceptions might they have about Christianity and who Jesus is? How might you gently bring these hidden beliefs to the surface so that they can be examined in light of the evidence Luke presents in this and future studies?

## Study B: Better than expected

### Luke 15:17–32

**Purpose:** To show seekers how Jesus challenges priorities and expectations through unprecedented authority and grace and how this can be received with joy or rejected as a threat.

**Intro:** We all live in pursuit of goals and ambitions that we hope will make us happy and fulfilled. However, often getting what we long for only briefly satisfies us before we set off in pursuit of something else. Encourage people to talk openly about their hopes and ambitions for themselves and gently encourage questions about the sufficiency of these things to meet our deepest needs.

**Background:** It is worth observing that the Pharisees and teachers of the law had travelled from far and wide to see Jesus. Jesus was developing a reputation and the religious officials were beginning to take notice.

#### Leaders' notes:

- 1) The nature of the friends' action highlights the desperation of the man's situation, their great concern and their high expectations about what Jesus could do.  
**Note:** A Palestinian roof was normally flat and made of beams covered with reeds and a layer of clay with external stairs or a ladder allowing access. Digging through the roof, though a desperate measure, would not have caused irreparable damage. Roofs in those days would be replaced or replenished annually before the seasonal rains.
- 2) The story is powerful in itself but ensure there is time to feel the drama of what is happening here. What are the crowds thinking? What about the paralytic person's friends? The big question is of course: 'What will Jesus do?'
- 3) Presumably confusion, maybe disappointment or relief. Jesus addresses the man as 'friend' and His words are kind. The Pharisees would have seen a very direct link between the man's paralysis and his sin, but Jesus elsewhere criticises this view (John 9:2–3).
- 4) The Pharisees recognised the profound significance of what Jesus was claiming to be able to do for this man, but for them such a claim is blasphemy. Forgiveness is something only God can do.
- 5) The dilemma Jesus presents is tricky. From an onlookers perspective it is easier to say 'your sins are forgiven' because it is something that can't be visually verified. It is harder to do in reality as it requires God's unique authority.
- 6) Jesus resolves the dilemma in v24 by linking the two things together and so proving His authority to do the thing that can't be seen, by doing the thing that can be. For the paralysed man the message is clear: 'not only are you healed, you stand forgiven before God'.
- 7) Jesus' proclamation that the paralysed man's sins were forgiven, reveals the heart of what Jesus came to do: to deliver us from our moral and spiritual paralysis. While most contemporary seekers do not believe in sin, it's important to ponder the hidden assumption that Jesus is challenging: 'If I got my deepest wish then everything would be OK.'
- 8) Though Levi had wealth, it was at the expense of being ostracised by his community. His only friends would have been other tax collectors and outcasts. To be chosen by Jesus would have been a wonderful surprise to Levi – especially since Jesus was under no illusions as to who Levi was (he was at his tax booth at the time Jesus called him)! Levi was both known to Jesus and accepted.

- 9) Though Jesus cared deeply about whether or not people put their faith in Him, He wasn't ruled by people's assessments. Jesus came to seek and save the lost – the disapproval of the religious authorities saddened Jesus, but it would not put Him off from His mission.
- 10) Jesus is frank about the spiritual and moral health of Levi and others – He is under no illusions about who they are and what they have done. In fact, Jesus says it is precisely for such spiritually sick people that He has come. The call to repentance is a call to come back to God. It is a welcome home (as we will see in future weeks) and an invitation to live God's way with His help and presence. In Levi's case, this meant packing up his profession and following Jesus.

Jesus gives and forgives more than we would ever think to ask for. This is the discovery that the paralysed man and Levi made about Jesus when they encountered Him, and when Christians like Muggidge decide to follow Him today. Using open questions, encourage your friends to reflect on what they've seen of Jesus so far. Are they able to make sense of the various responses – positive and negative, ancient and contemporary – to the Jesus that they have come across? What about Jesus still remains mysterious or strange to them?

## Study C: You are Welcome

### Luke 7:36–50

**Purpose:** To show Jesus' tremendous love and acceptance of sinners. Jesus welcomes all who come to Him – no matter who they are or what they've done. No one is too lost, undesirable, insignificant or immoral to be welcomed by Jesus.

**Intro:** A major concern about Christianity that is held by people in today's world is the apparent exclusivity of its claims. Give your friends the opportunity to articulate their concerns in this regard. Why might claims of uniqueness and exclusivity lead to intolerance or oppression? What is the attraction of pluralism or a more inclusive religious stance? Why does living a good life seem more authentic than believing the right things?

**Background:** The story assumes that even before the story begins, the woman had heard Jesus proclaiming His message of grace for sinners. The account makes no sense without this assumption for she was coming to express thanks for forgiveness received. It is important to know that the tense of the verb in Luke 7:48 is 'perfect'. The verse is not saying: 'your sins are now (at this moment) forgiven'; but 'your sins have been (at some time in the past, however recently) forgiven.' She is attending the dinner to make her thanks visible to Christ and to confirm forgiveness for her sins.

Jesus and the invited guests would be seated around a broad U-shaped dining couch (or couches), as was the custom at formal dinners. They would recline on their left arm, as the Romans did, with their heads towards the table and their bodies stretched away from it. As Jesus was a well-known figure, the meal was open to the public so that interested people could stand at the side to listen in. The woman would have been permitted to be there but she was expected to stay at the sidelines.

### Leaders' notes:

- 1) Brainstorm possibilities on the basis of what you've seen of the Pharisees in the previous studies.

**Background note:** As we continue through the study, we will see that Simon's invitation to Jesus and the generally respectful way with which he speaks to Him suggests that, unlike many of his peers, he is interested in Jesus and open to the possibility that Jesus may be a prophet of sorts (Luke 7:16). On the other hand, he is also clearly cautious. We find out that Simon failed to wash Jesus' feet, anoint Him with olive oil and greet Him with a kiss. Though this was probably not considered rude, his welcome of Jesus was casual and rather half-hearted. Simon was certainly not going all out in treating Jesus as an honoured guest. Simon was testing the water.

- 2) Luke deliberately accentuates each action while describing it as a continuous act – 'weeping', 'wetting', 'wiping', 'kissing', 'anointing'. The effect is tender, even intimate. We're not sure whether to be moved by the tenderness of the act or feel awkward because of the intimacy.
- 3) Her behaviour is extravagant, over the top and attests to deep emotions of love, devotion, even worship.

- 4) Aabaster jars of perfume were expensive and so the immediate financial sacrifice this woman was making by breaking this jar was considerable. However, for this socially marginalised (probably single) woman there are further implications. Such perfume was a key component of her desirability and attractiveness. This act meant sacrificing one of the only sources of capital and leverage available to her.
- 5) The effect on the guests would have been extreme awkwardness at what was a shockingly inappropriate act. Given the socially conservative context and the woman's reputation as a prostitute, her actions would probably have been perceived as overtly erotic.
- 6) Unlike the woman, it was thought that Jesus should have known better. Even if her actions were viewed simply as an expression of love and gratitude, they bordered on worship and should have been publicly renounced by Jesus as completely excessive.
- 7) Even if Jesus is given the benefit of the doubt and assumed to be ignorant of the woman's reputation (and naïve about the implications of her behaviour!) this would undermine any claim Jesus had to being a prophet.
- 8) While Simon looks at the woman and sees only her sins, Jesus (as we learn from the parable in vv41–42) looks at her and sees her response to God's grace and forgiveness. Jesus says the woman loves Him because He has (already) forgiven her sins. She has now sought Jesus out to express her gratitude. At the end of the dialogue, Jesus reassures her (and the community) of that forgiveness (Luke 7:48).
- 9) Jesus refuses to shame the woman to save His own reputation before Simon and his friends. Instead He opens himself up to the scorn of these influential people by accepting and affirming the woman's love and gratefulness to Him.
- 10) Jesus wants Simon to see this woman not as a sinner but as one who loves extravagantly. Such extravagant love is entirely appropriate and in actual fact it is Simon himself who, through his lukewarm welcome of Jesus into his home, has acted deeply inappropriately. Simon should not be embarrassed about the woman, but embarrassed about himself. At the heart of Simon's mistake is his failure to appreciate his need for forgiveness and Jesus' authority (v48) and His willingness to grant it.
- 11) The woman has cast herself on Jesus' mercy and acceptance, based on a prior realisation of Jesus' forgiveness of her. By throwing herself at His feet, she banked on Jesus not shunning her in front of the dinner party. By pouring out her perfume she placed her future security in Jesus' hands. These are all expressions of her faith in Jesus. Jesus affirms the woman in her actions and assures her again of her forgiveness and peace with God.
- 12) By forgiving the woman her sins and accepting her faith, love and worship Jesus is putting himself in the place of God. 'Who is this?' is the right question to ask.

Jesus is both remarkably 'self-centred' in His claims – He calls for people to put their faith in Him and accepts their love and worship – and yet is also incredibly 'other-centred' in His apparently inexhaustible love and acceptance of even the least deserving and desirable. Discovering this for oneself, provides a powerful motivation for welcoming and accepting others – we love because God first loved us.

Consider: Why might experiencing undeserved love make someone more willing to love others? Why might a belief in oneself as a morally deserving person, lead someone to be more ready to criticise or exclude others?



## Study D: All is forgiven

### Luke 15:1-3 & 11-32

**Purpose:** To show God's longing for us to return to Him whether we are rebellious younger brothers or self-righteous elder brothers.

**Intro:** Hemingway's joke is about the popularity of the name Paco in Madrid. But it also assumes the basic human experience of seeking forgiveness. The broad appeal of the father's message, speaks both of the importance of relationships to us and the inevitability of broken relationships due to human failure.

Encourage people to reflect on times when they have sought forgiveness. These are likely to be very personal experiences but you could discuss in general terms what it feels like to want someone's forgiveness. Why can this need feel so intense? What exactly are we lacking when we don't have someone's forgiveness? What are some of the barriers to being forgiven? You may want to ask if anyone has ever sought forgiveness from God?

**Background:** Jesus is speaking to a divided audience of separatist, self-righteous Pharisees and teachers of the law, as well as to outcasts and sinners. The Pharisees regarded the sinners as ceremonially unclean, which meant the sinners could contaminate them. The Pharisees were alarmed by Jesus' frequent association with sinners (Luke 5:30-31), this is important context for this parable in which there is a sinful younger brother and a self-righteous older brother.

#### Leaders notes:

- 1) This question provides an opportunity to recap on a key theme of the previous studies. Encourage reflection on each previous study as to how this theme emerges in each case.
- 2) A first-century audience would know exactly what the son was saying; he was tired of waiting for his father to die and wished for his death so he could get his share of the inheritance! The request was deeply offensive and hurtful. He was breaking all ties, all relationships with his father, his family and his village – something that was unheard of in Eastern life and thought.
- 3) The crowd would have expected a Middle Eastern father to have refused and punished his son severely for making such an outrageous and insulting request.
- 4) The father grants his son's request and allows him to go – intimating that God, with sorrow, grants us freedom when we insist on rejecting His love. As well as losing his son, it would have likely meant selling up land and property and entailed a loss of future security as well as status in the community. The father would have likely been seen as indulgent to the point of negligence and therefore also suffered a loss of respect from those around him – including, as we will see, from his eldest son.
- 5) There could be many factors that led the younger son to return home, the obvious being that, after foolishly squandering his entire inheritance and experiencing a severe famine, he was clearly starving! For any Jewish boy to be associated with pigs would be shocking and revolting to Jewish listeners, because pigs were considered unclean animals, not to be raised or eaten.
- 6) The son decides to return home and place himself at his father's mercy, asserting no rights and making no claims. He asks nothing from his father but the lowest position in the household where at least he will receive food.

- 7) No doubt the son was steeling himself for harsh treatment. The son's only hope was a grovelling plea for a position as a slave. In striking contrast, every aspect of his father's response reveals warmth and love (Luke 15:20): the exuberant dash to meet him, the warm embrace, the kiss and so on. The robe was a ceremonial one such as a guest of honour would have been given. The ring is most likely a signet ring, revealing his identity as a son and heir. The sandals would be a symbol of his new rank as a free man (slaves didn't wear shoes) having been restored to his place as a son. The son's approach was to grovel and offer penance, the father's approach was to offer unmerited extravagant grace. It would be overwhelming to experience his father's dramatic, public and lavish demonstration of love. And hard to receive because it was so freely given.
- 8) God's attitude to us is seen in the response of the father to this lost son. The father longs to keep the son as a member of the family but will not force him to stay. The father's response to the son's return makes clear ('while he was still a long way off') that he was pining for his son throughout his long absence. His eager embrace shows the constancy of his love and the reality of his pain. His forgiveness is immediate and absolute, there are no grudges or conditions and he honours his rebellious son in front of the community, regardless of the disapproval that would inevitably result. Similarly, God is more gracious than we'd ever dreamed.
- 9) The older son deliberately seeks to embarrass his father by refusing to go into the party and forcing his father to come out and plead with him. He speaks aggressively ('look!') and accuses his father ('you', 'you', 'you'). He disowns his brother ('this son of yours') and characterises his relationship with his father as slavery on his part and stinginess on his father's.
- 10) The older son asks about justice and fairness – his brother is reckless and disgraceful whereas, in his own eyes at least, he is honourable and responsible. Presumably the older son will be all too aware that this welcome and reinstatement of his younger brother will now be at the expense of his own share in his father's inheritance.
- 11) Like the younger brother, the older son cares more about his father's possessions than the father himself. Both sons see their relationship with their father as hired servants who have to earn their way. Both sons rebel and disgrace their father. Both sons break their father's heart by separating themselves from him.
- 12) Jesus wants the Pharisees to see that, like the older son, they too have rejected God and need His forgiveness. While some rebel against God by running away, others, like the Pharisees, though seemingly upright and respectable, are just as resentful towards God but seek to get what they want by keeping the rules. It is these who now find themselves out of the party and full of resentment. But the father is still pleading with them to come home. The question is – how will they respond?

People remain distant from God for many reasons. Some seek fulfilment in other things that promise more immediately tangible satisfaction. Others fear judgement or condemnation from Him. Some feel resentment towards God for unanswered prayers or violations of justice. Still others see God as a moral task master they have to prove themselves to or as a distant father who has little interest in them. These, and other aversions, can often lie deep below the surface. Use the story to encourage reflection on these reactions against God. Which character resonates with your friends the most? Why do they think this is? How have both brothers misunderstood what God is really like? Do you recognise such misconceptions about God in yourself? How has this effected how you relate to Him?

## Study E: Losing my religion

### Luke 18:9–27

**Purpose:** To show how self-righteousness and self-justification fail before God who invites us to come to Him, as we are – helpless sinners in need of His grace.

**Intro:** Madonna's candid confession is not just the drive of a high achiever but is a basic aspect of being human. We all feel a need to lead lives that make a difference or mean something more than merely existing. All of us seem to need to prove our value and worth to someone. Encourage reflection on why this is. What do we mean by phrases such as 'proving myself' or 'fulfilling my potential' or 'doing myself justice'? Why does failure in these things cut so deep? Why is the relief of success so fleeting?

**Background:** These three stories that follow each other in Luke's account, address the question of what it takes to be accepted before God and welcomed into His kingdom. It starts with a parable Jesus told to those who 'were confident in their own righteous' (or, as depicted in the NRSV translation, 'trusted in themselves that they were righteous'). This was also the problem of the rich young ruler in the third episode. Being accepted by God involves coming as helpless as a child, or like the tax collector, with nothing to hold up but our helplessness and sin.

Note: The phrases 'kingdom of God' (v16, 17, 24, 25), 'eternal life' (v18), 'heaven' (v22) and 'being saved' (v26) can be understood here as different ways of speaking of the Christian hope of a life lived with God for eternity.

#### Leaders' notes:

- 1) The Pharisee is (by his own account) an extremely religious and upright person. To fast twice a week and give a tenth of everything was beyond what was required by the standard interpretations of his day. The Jews would recognise this Pharisee as being exceptionally observant in his religion. And yet, he is also proud and focussed on himself and his own moral standing.
- 2) His acceptance by God is based on his religious observance especially in comparison to others who he considers himself superior to.
- 3) Tax collectors were associated with corruption, greed and betrayal of their race and religion by siding with the Romans. Deeply aware of his moral bankruptcy, this man comes to God without anything to claim for himself or offer to God. He throws himself on God's mercy.
- 4) It is tempting to see the story as simply a warning against pride. AN Wilson recognised that Jesus' point was much more radical than that. It undermines a very basic religious conviction that our acceptance by God and acceptance into heaven is (and should be) based on living a good and upright life.
- 5) Their reaction suggests that children were not considered sufficiently important to have access to Jesus.

**Background note:** We tend to associate childhood with qualities such as innocence or trusting or openness, but these associations would not have sprung to the mind of those in Jesus' day. Children were viewed simply as 'not adults' who had little or no intrinsic value as human beings (infanticide rates were high in the Greek and Roman world). The disciple's reaction to those bringing children to Jesus is a reflection of this attitude. Time with Jesus must be reserved for adults who could learn and respond or contribute something.

- 6) This is not about innocence or trusting etc. (see above), but about helplessness. To receive like a child is to receive something as a gift of mercy in complete emptiness and utter dependency.
- 7) Unlike many who ask questions to catch Jesus out, the ruler is courteous towards Jesus (v18) and sincere in his question (e.g. see how he responds to Jesus' unwelcome answer in v23). He appears devout in his religion and yet is lacking peace (v21).
- 8) If you need to be good to go to heaven and yet only God is good, then who gets to go to heaven?
- 9) On the one hand the ruler is confident that he has observed the law carefully all his life, and yet perhaps he also lacks assurance that obeying these rules is sufficient. It is this need for reassurance that seems to lie behind his question.
- 10) Jesus teaches that God's laws are summed up in the command to love God with everything and love others as we love ourselves (e.g. Luke 10:25, where he is asked the same question 'what must I do' by someone else). Jesus spells out for this man the kind of radical obedience such a command entails. In doing so, He puts His finger on what stood in the way of this man loving God with everything. Jesus exposes both how high a standard God's commands call the man to and how far short of this standard he falls.
- 11) The man goes away sad as it dawns on him that he doesn't in fact have what it takes to gain eternal life. And yet now, as a direct result of this devastating realisation, the man has become very much more like the kind of people – the tax collector, the helpless infants – who Jesus says are in a position to receive God's mercy and justification. In Mark's Gospel, we are told that the moment Jesus exposes this man to his spiritual bankruptcy; He looked at him and loved him (Mark 10:21). Jesus was telling this man exactly what he most needed to hear.

Jesus offers rest from the unending quest to justify ourselves. Different people seek justification in different ways – some through virtue or religious observance, others through achievements or fame. How we respond to Jesus' invitation to come to Him for rest will depend a lot on how successful we think our efforts at self-justification have been and how secure we feel in our achievements, i.e. whether we 'trust in our own righteousness' (Luke 18:9). We often seek such self-approval and security by comparing ourselves with others. Jesus undermines this approach, first by pointing out how such attempts appear from God's perspective (as in the case of the Pharisee in the first story) and second by showing how willing God is to accept us as we are, no matter how well or poorly we compare with others.

## Study F: Love hurts

### Luke 22:47–53, 66–71 & 23:13–25, 32–49

**Purpose:** To reveal Jesus as the righteous and suffering servant who died to bear our sins so we could be counted righteous and accepted by God.

**Intro:** Human beings are painful to love. Because of our frailty, we inevitably need and lean heavily on those who love us – asking them to sacrifice things for us. Because of our mortality, we will eventually leave those who love us – causing them to mourn for us. Because of our perpetual self-centeredness and sin, we often abuse those who love us – causing them to hurt because of us. Encourage a degree of openness if appropriate (best done by modelling it oneself) about how you have variously experienced pain in human relationships.

**Background:** In the events of Jesus' arrest, trial, crucifixion and death, Luke makes it clear that in no way is Jesus a helpless victim at the hands of greater powers. Jesus is voluntarily going to the cross. He doesn't lash out to protect himself during His arrest. He doesn't speak out to defend Himself during His trial. He doesn't cry out to God to save Him as He dies. Nor is Jesus in any way guilty of the charges thrown at Him. Pilate and Herod recognise this, as does the thief and the centurion. Jesus is the righteous servant who voluntarily bears our sins as sacrifice to make many righteous.

#### Leaders' notes:

- 1) Jesus clearly could have resisted arrest. Not only were His disciples armed and ready to defend Him (Luke 22:50) but, as we saw in study A (Luke 4:30), Jesus was more than able to escape should He have wished to.
- 2) Though clearly hurt by the fact and manner of Judas' betrayal, Jesus does not appear surprised by these events and seems resolved to go with the arrest party to face trial. Far from lashing out in self-defence, He rebukes a disciple who does, and heals one of the people who came to harm him.
- 3) The issue of Jesus' identity relates to His authority to say the things He's been saying about God, Himself and the Jewish leadership. But perhaps more to the point – if Jesus claims to be Christ, the Jewish leadership will have a political basis to accuse Jesus as being a revolutionary before the Romans.
- 4) Jesus speaks of Himself in this passage as the one who sits at God's right hand as judge of the world. The Jews think they are judging Jesus, but, by shifting the focus onto what they think and say about Him, Jesus is implying that it is really they who are on trial.
- 5) The impression is that Pilate is succumbing to popular pressure. Matthew fills out Pilate's motives more fully in Matthew 27:24: "When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!"
- 6) Jesus is ridiculed as one who claimed to be God's Messiah and able to save people but now can't even save Himself. The very fact that Jesus is hanging there dying is proof to the onlookers that He was a fraud. A crucified Messiah is no Messiah at all.
- 7) The second criminal criticises the hypocrisy of the first criminal. They definitely deserve to be there and Jesus definitely doesn't – how dare he mock Him! While it is Jesus' innocence that seems to particularly impress the second criminal, he goes beyond this to recognise that Jesus will one day have great power – how he came to see this we can only speculate.

- 8) The second criminal asks that Jesus remembers him when He comes into His power. He seems to anticipate this possibility sometime in the future. Jesus goes far beyond this request to tell the criminal that his request will be granted today. Paradise in Judaism refers to the place of the righteous. Jesus is saying that from this day the criminal will share the future of the righteous with Him. Jesus does indeed save others – even as He is hanging there on the cross.
- 9) As Jesus dies, He cries out to God a prayer of faith. The words are from Psalm 31:5 – a prayer of a righteous sufferer who entrusts himself into God’s hands. This cry is presumably the second cry that Matthew and Mark note but don’t detail in their accounts.
- 10) Like Pilate, Herod and the thief, the centurion recognises once again that Jesus – not those executing Him – stands righteous before God. This is the seventh confession of Jesus’ innocence (Luke 23:4, v14, v15 (x2), v22, v41, v47) and is the key interpretation of what’s happened. Jesus is a (or ‘the’, cf. Luke 22:37 and Isaiah 53:12) righteous sufferer.
- 11) There are many points of resonance here – if appropriate you may want to read the whole of Isaiah 52:13–53:12, though the abridged version in the study brings out the main points. The key insight that the prophecy brings is that Jesus is suffering not for His own sins but for ours, so that we can be healed and made whole.

The cross shows me that my problem is much worse than I’d ever imagined. Even though I may acknowledge that I am sometimes difficult to love – I would never have thought that loving me was this hard! And yet, the moment I accept this devastating conclusion about myself – seeing, like the criminal next to Jesus, that such a terrible sentence is in fact what I deserve – I also see that God has loved me to such an extent and depth. God’s love for me is greater than I could have ever dreamed – God in Christ took the punishment that should have been mine to give me the righteousness that was only His!

## Study G: Not the end

### Luke 24:1–49

**Purpose:** To help participants consider the evidence for Jesus' resurrection for themselves by seeing how the disillusioned and sceptical disciples were confronted with evidence so powerful that it not only changed their minds but transformed their lives.

**Intro:** We live in a world of scoundrels and liars. Many of us have been deceived before, and growing up often means becoming more and more sceptical and suspicious. We learn to be alert against 'being taken for a ride' and can become highly tuned to signs of inauthenticity or deception. Encourage reflection on how our experiences can cause us to become increasingly sceptical or suspicious – perhaps about God and religion or about love and relationships. Kierkegaard suggests that being sceptical or suspicious might make you good at spotting lies but bad at recognising when something or someone is true. Do you agree that this is a possibility? Which danger (being too sceptical or being too gullible) do you find yourself more wary of? Why do you think this is?

**Background:** The disciples had all but lost their faith in Jesus. Though Jesus had warned them about His death, and even told them about His resurrection, the trauma of the crucifixion and the humiliating defeat it represented left the disciples without hope. As we saw previously, for the Romans, crucifixion was the final display of weakness and failure, for the Jews it was the ultimate sign of being rejected by God. We know of a dozen or so would-be messianic movements during these unsettled times that ended under similar circumstances. For the followers of these movements, the death of their leader meant unequivocally that their revolution had failed and that it was time to live a quiet life. As we have heard before, a dead messiah is no messiah at all. These movements fizzled out and were quickly forgotten. It must have seemed, to all concerned, that Jesus's movement was going to do the same.

### Leaders' notes:

- 1) As soon as they could, the women went to the tomb with spices to embalm Jesus' corpse, which would have already begun to decompose. As per custom, the corpse would have been wrapped and anointed with spices and left in the sealed tomb until the flesh had rotted away. About a year later the skeletal remains would have been recovered and transferred to a second burial place.
- 2) Luke tells us that they wondered about this. From John's account (John 20:13) we hear of Mary's considerable distress at finding the body gone, assuming some intervention from some authority somewhere, or maybe even fearing grave robbers. One final insult to the memory of Jesus.
- 3) However compelling a vision may be for those who experience it first-hand they are too easily explained away for those only hearing about it to find compelling. Grief, tiredness, confusion could all account for this vision. What is more, in that time and place, women were not viewed as reliable witnesses. It is unlikely the disciples were immune to such prejudices. The question of the empty tomb still remained however and was sufficient cause for Peter to go and see for himself.
- 4) The strips of linen complicate the matter of why the tomb is empty. If it was grave robbers or if the corpse was moved by the authorities, why would they unwrap it before taking it away? Peter leaves scratching his head.

- 5 & 6) We are told the disciples are downcast and their description of what had taken place is one of disappointment, even disillusionment. 'We had hoped that he was the one that was going to redeem Israel' they said. Their hopes have been dashed.
- 7) It is clear that the disciples were in no way predisposed to Jesus rising, despite Jesus' predictions about rising on the third day and despite the news, on this, the third day, of the empty tomb (despite, indeed, that it is the risen Jesus that they are in fact speaking to as they walk along!). The resurrection is clearly *not* something that a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jew found it easy to believe in. Like us, they are well aware that dead people do not tend to rise from the dead. Additionally they are also deeply affected by the crucifixion and the humiliating defeat it represented.
- 8) Two things seem to combine to allow the disciples to recognise Jesus. First Jesus explains to them, from their scriptures, *why* the Messiah had to suffer and die. He helped them begin to make sense of the events and understand how such a terrible thing as the crucifixion could possibly fit within God's plan. Second, they recognise Jesus in a deeply familiar act, the breaking of bread and giving thanks for a meal, an act they had seen Jesus perform only days before. Whatever it was that had kept them from recognising Jesus, in this moment the spell was broken.
- 9) When, now for the third time, Jesus appears alive before them, their fearful reaction again shows how impossible the resurrection seemed to the disciples. They are more ready to believe they are seeing a ghost than believe that Jesus is actually alive and standing there before them.
- 10) The fact that Jesus appeared suddenly in a locked room will have also contributed to the conclusion that Jesus is a ghost. Jesus dispels this fear by showing the disciples the scars of the crucifixion in His hands and feet and then by eating some fish in front of them. The same Jesus who three days earlier had died on a cross was there physically with them, speaking, eating and leaving dirty crockery and fish bones behind Him.
- 11) Again, we are told that even after this dramatic demonstration the disciples 'could not believe for joy'. As with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Jesus takes the time to help them understand the meaning of these events from the scriptures. A massive intellectual upheaval is needed before the disciples can accept the implication of what they are seeing and hearing. Jesus the Messiah is alive having died for the forgiveness of sins.

What would it take for you to believe that Jesus has risen from the dead? Most of us would answer: 'A lot!!' Such an extraordinary claim requires extraordinary evidence. Luke shows us that the disciples were no different, yet the evidence they were confronted with compelled them to reconsider what they thought they knew. ***Whatever it would take to change your mind must have happened to these disciples, because they were just as sceptical.***

Importantly, it wasn't just enough for the disciples to simply see the evidence, their understanding of Jesus had to change before they could accept what the evidence pointed to. What do you make of the testimony Luke presents us with? What would have to change in your understanding of Jesus for this to be true? **Do you still have sufficient reason to be sceptical?**