

# Church Year

BIBLE STUDIES

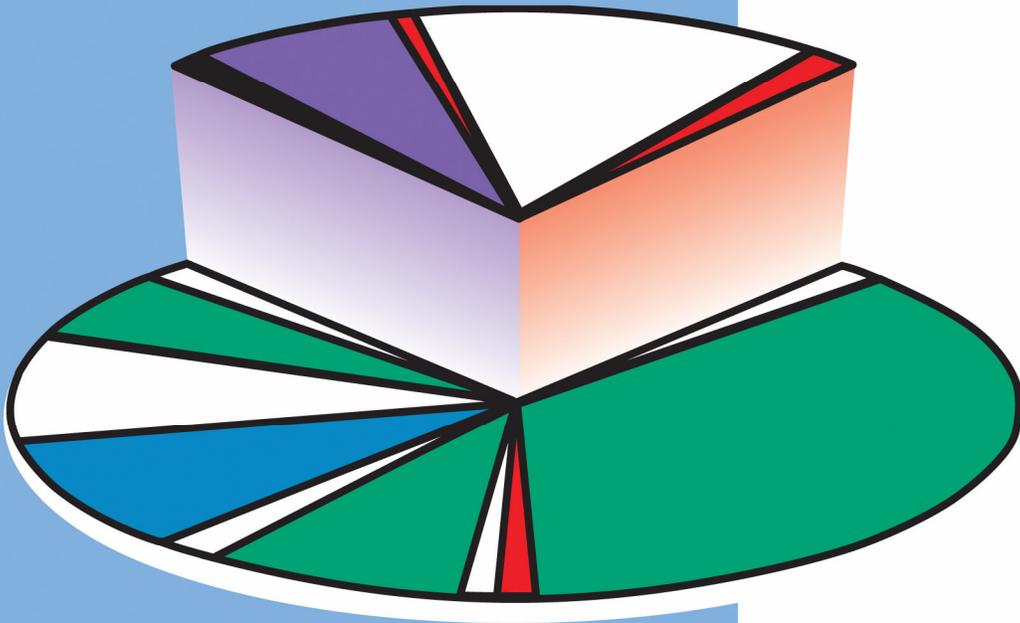
REVISED

SERIES

A

LENT • EASTER

ASCENSION • PENTECOST



# Church Year Bible Studies

## Series A

Lent, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost

By Donald R. Schiemann and William Ney

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Edited by Thomas Doyle

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## Introduction

### **About the Series**

This course is 1 of 12 in the Church Year series. The Bible studies in this series are tied to the 3-year lectionary. These studies explore the Old Testament lesson (or lesson from the Book of Acts during the Easter season), the Epistle lesson, and the Gospel lesson appointed for each Sunday of the church year. Optional studies give participants the opportunity to examine the lessons appointed for festivals that fall on days other than Sunday (i.e., Ascension, Reformation, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Epiphany, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday).

After a brief review and textual study of the Scripture lessons appointed for a Sunday or festival day, each study is designed to help participants draw conclusions about each of the lessons, compare and contrast the lessons, discover a unifying theme in the lessons (if possible), and apply the theme to their lives. At the end of each study, the Scripture lessons for the next Sunday and/or festival day are assigned for participants to read in preparation for the next study. The Leaders Guide for each course provides additional information on appointed lessons, answers to the questions in the Study Guide, a suggested process for teaching the study, and devotional or worship activities tied to the theme.

May the Holy Spirit richly bless you as you study God's Word!

## Session 1—The First Sunday in Lent

Genesis 2:7–9, 15–17, 3:1–7; Romans 5:12–19; Matthew 4:1–11

*Theme:* Tempting, Isn't It?

### Law/Gospel Focus

Each of us has one or more areas where we find ourselves vulnerable to temptation. We struggle to resist, yet we give in more often than we care to admit. Christ resisted temptation, and in His righteousness we find forgiveness, hope, and strength to live as God's people.

### Objectives

As we study the Word today, we pray that God, by His Spirit, will lead us to

- recognize our weaknesses and our vulnerability to Satan's lies and temptations;
- repent for the times we have willingly entered into temptation;
- confess Jesus Christ as the one whom God has sent on our behalf to overcome sin, death, and the devil;
- rejoice that through the obedience of Christ we have been made righteous.

### Introduction

A pastor asked his confirmation class if they could be tempted with things like liver, turnips, squash, spinach, or prunes. A corporate "Ugh!" arose from the class. He then asked about ice-cream sundaes, chocolate-chip cookies, chocolate bars, and the like. The class readily admitted that he had found their weak spots.

Greek mythology tells the story of Achilles, the hero of the Trojan war, who as a child was dipped in the waters of the river Styx. His mother, Thetis, wanted to make him invulnerable. The result of that plunge was that every spot of Achilles' body, except for his heel, was safe against wounds. For many years Achilles escaped unhurt, but at last a poisoned arrow from the bow of the Trojan Paris found the weak spot—Achilles' heel—and inflicted a mortal blow.

So Satan tempts Christians where they are the weakest. He identifies our "Achilles' heel" and works to break down our resistance and our resolve. Money, desire, popularity, and prestige—the devil attacks God's people in moments of weakness and leads them to despair.

1. Think of famous people who fell into disrepute because they surrendered to temptation. How might they have rationalized their behavior? How were they particularly vulnerable?

2. Think of people in the Bible who yielded to temptation (Genesis 3:4 and John 8:44). How were their lives affected? How were their relationships affected?

3. An entire society may have certain weaknesses that lead to a broad acceptance and practice of sin. How have our particular weaknesses affected our North American society?

## Inform

Read the following summaries of the Scripture lessons for the First Sunday in Lent.

Genesis 2:7–9, 15–17; 3:1–7—God the Creator forms Adam and provides everything he needs to live in a perfect world. He also gives Adam the freedom to choose obedience to his loving Creator. Obedience meant life in the presence of God. Disobedience meant separation and death. Satan enters the Garden of Eden and tempts our first parents with the ultimate temptation, “You will be like God.” After giving in to the temptation, Adam and Eve are filled with shame and make coverings for themselves.

Romans 5:12–19—God created humankind in His own image. Adam lost that image when he sinned and could only pass on to his descendants the wages of his sin. God in His grace, however, sent His Son as the second Adam and by His perfect obedience and righteousness, Jesus paid the penalty for our sin. God declares us forgiven and righteous, for Jesus’ sake.

Matthew 4:1–11—As the anointed Savior, at His Baptism, Jesus begins His ministry in the wilderness, tempted by Satan. The King who came to redeem lost and condemned sinners and bring them into His kingdom (Titus 2:14; 1 Peter 2:9) is offered a kingdom without the cross. Standing firm on God’s Word, Jesus resists the devil’s temptations and embarks upon His mission to save the world from sin, death, and destruction.

1. Though Adam and Eve had everything in the Garden of Eden they still sinned. Why was obedience to God so difficult?

2. Adam and Eve knew what was right and wrong from the beginning. God had put His Word in their hearts (Romans 2:14–15) and had set His will before them concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Satan tells Eve, however, that God is holding out on her. “You will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5). Why was this such a temptation to Eve? Is it still a temptation today? Explain.

3. When Eve was first confronted by Satan, how did she resist his temptation? How did Satan respond?

4. Read Genesis 5:1–3 and Romans 5:12. What was the effect of the fall into sin on all people?

5. Sin so permeated humankind that death reigned “even over those who did not sin by breaking a command” (Romans 5:14). Psalm 51:3–5 describes the sin we commit and the sin we inherit. In order to rescue us from the power of sin, what were the necessary qualifications for our Savior?

6. In Matthew 4:1–11, how is Jesus’ human nature described? How did Satan use these things to tempt Jesus?

7. When Jesus was confronted by Satan, how did He withstand temptation? How did Satan respond? What was Jesus’ continued response? What does this teach us about dealing with temptation?

8. Why was it so important for Jesus to resist temptation? Reread Romans 5:17–19.

### Connect

1. In the Lord’s Prayer we pray, “And lead us not into temptation.” Martin Luther wrote the following explanation of this petition: “God tempts no one. We pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice. Although we are attacked by these things, we pray that we may finally overcome them and win -the victory.” According to this explanation, from where do we receive the strength for overcoming temptation?

2. How can we deal effectively with our weaknesses? How does the fact that we have a perfect Savior help us? Read Romans 6:2–3, 11–14.

3. Martin Luther referred to one of the “ancient fathers” when he wrote: “Not the approach of temptations, but our entertaining them and yielding to them we can prevent. You cannot prevent the birds from flying over your head, but you can prevent them from building their nests in your hair.” How? Read 1 Peter 5:8–9.

4. In our struggle with the devil, the world, and our own sinful self we sometimes find ourselves on the losing side. Ultimately, the final victory is ours in Jesus Christ. Read 1 John 2:1–2. Is this passage license or comfort? Why would this passage provide significant comfort to someone who has just given in to temptation?

### Vision

1. Make a list of those areas in your life where you are easily tempted. Seek God's help to avoid places and situations where these temptations are most likely to arise.
2. Write down or memorize passages of Scripture that will be particularly helpful to you when you are confronted with temptation. (E.g., 1 Corinthians 6:19–20; Romans 6:22; and Romans 8:2.)

## Session 2—Second Sunday in Lent

Genesis 12:1–8; Romans 4:1–5, 13–17; John 4:5–26 (27–30, 39–42)

*Theme: Empty, Filled, Spilled*

### Law/Gospel Focus

Apart from God, the lives of all people are spiritually empty. People fool themselves into thinking that they can fill the emptiness with the things of this world. Only God fills that emptiness with the gift of His Son, our Savior.

### Objectives

As we immerse ourselves in the Word today, by the working of the Holy Spirit in the Word, we will

- identify the spiritual emptiness in which we were born;
- confess the tendency to fill our lives with the things of this world to mask our spiritual hunger;
- affirm Jesus as the one who fills that need, and express the purpose, meaning, and value that God gives in a life of service and witness.

### Introduction

People need the Lord. Greg Nelson and Phill McHugh described that need in a song they wrote:

“Ev’ry day they pass me by, I can see it in their eye;  
Empty people filled with care, headed who knows where.  
On they go through private pain, living fear to fear.  
Laughter hides the silent cries only Jesus hears.”

Many people lead what the world tells them are “full” lives. They have wealth, health, and looks. Their friends all share the same pursuit for material things. Yet inside they are empty. They know that they hurt, fear, and need, but they cannot understand why all their accumulations don’t fill the void in their hearts.

At one time or another, most of us have experienced the same sense of hurt, fear, and need. We may have been devastated by a great loss. Maybe we did or said something we immediately regretted, and we realized that there was no going back. At these times, we try to convince ourselves and others that we can “handle it.” And we try to fill the emptiness with something that will enable us to go on.

1. What did all of the following people have in common: Judy Garland, Elvis Presley, John Belushi, Marilyn Monroe, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin? How did people perceive them in life? How were they perceived after their death?

2. Some fill their lives with material things, while others search for spiritual fulfillment. For all the new religious movements in our world today, so many people remain empty and alone. Why?

3. Apart from God, people fill their lives with things that result in hopelessness. What does it mean to be fulfilled? See Romans 15:13.

## Inform

Read the following summaries of the three lessons for this Second Sunday in Lent.

Genesis 12:1–8—God calls Abram to a new life. Abram travels with his family and possessions to the Promised Land. God promises to bless Abram and to bless the whole world through his “offspring,” the Messiah. Abram responds in worship and thanksgiving to his gracious God. The plan of salvation unfolds.

Romans 4:1–5;13–17—Abraham’s life is an example of God’s pure grace. In mercy God called Abraham to be “the father of many nations” (4:18) and Abraham believed God’s Word. Abraham did not work to earn God’s love and forgiveness. Rather, it was a gift from God. Salvation is *never* a reward or payment for our efforts. Like Abraham, we believe God declares us “not guilty” because of His great love in Jesus Christ, the promised offspring and Savior of the world.

John 4:5–42—Jesus welcomes sinners! The woman at the well had three strikes against her: she was Samaritan, she had had five husbands, and she was living in an adulterous relationship. Her life was empty, and she went from relationship to relationship in a vain attempt to find meaning and acceptance. In the eyes of her contemporaries, she was truly a sinner. Yet in Jesus, she finds God’s unconditional love and forgiveness. The Savior promised in the Sacred Scriptures offers her “living water” for life eternal.

The Samaritan woman, whose spiritual life had long ago dried up, was filled with the “springs of water.” Jesus found her and called her to be an heir of the promise. More than that, her faith overflowed to others as she shared the good news about Jesus. Abraham’s faith spilled over into a life of obedience; the Samaritan woman’s faith spilled over into a life of joy and of sharing the good news of the Savior.

1. List the seven promises God makes in His covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:2–3).

2. As God calls Abram to faith, He gives purpose and meaning to life. By the power of God’s grace, Abraham becomes a blessing to others. Describe this “spillover effect.” See Genesis 22:17–18; 26:4; and Acts 3:25.

3. God promises Abraham a life filled with blessings through the coming Savior. These blessings, however, are not only to Abraham, but also to his descendants. Who are these descendants? See Romans 4:16–17.

4. A gas tank filled with water is still, for all practical purposes, an empty tank. The Samaritan woman, whose life was filled with passion and pleasure, was still an empty person. What did Jesus offer to her? What did He mean? See John 4:13–14.

5. What do the following passages say about “water” and God’s purpose?

- Jeremiah 2:13

- John 7:37–39

- Revelation 7:17

6. In what ways is Baptism “living water?” See Romans 6:4 and 1 Peter 3:21.

## Connect

1. Imagine! What would your life look like today if you had never known Jesus Christ?

2. How has Jesus filled your life? What blessings have you experienced through faith in Him?

3. The following passages are examples of the “spillover effect” of our new life in Christ. Describe the effect in each passage.

- Esther 9:22

- John 13:34–35

- 1 Peter 1:22

4. Our Christian faith and life are never “private and confidential.” We live in relation to God, to people, to our congregation, and to the world. List some specific areas where, by word and deed, your life of faith will touch the lives of others.

### Vision

1. Are there any particular “problem sins” that rob you of living your Christian life to the fullest? Ask the Lord’s forgiveness for these sins and, by the power of His grace, seek to live your life to the glory of God.

2. At the beginning of each day this week, write down the name of a person whose life you can touch in some way as you live your “filled life.” Pray that God will give you the opportunity in some way to share Christ’s love with that person.

## Session 3—Third Sunday in Lent

Isaiah 42:14–21; Ephesians 5:8–14; John 9:13–17, 34–39

*Theme: Speak Up!*

Law/Gospel Focus

It is so easy to talk about the doom and gloom we hear and read about in the news. Christians are too often silent in word and deed about the greatest news of their lives and of history. Jesus forgives us our failures and empowers us to speak up.

### Objectives

As we read God's Word, by His Spirit at work in the Word, we will see that

- God has acted in a mighty way to redeem people, and He wants the message to be told;
- By the power of the Gospel, God moves people past their timidity toward bolder witness of the saving message of Jesus;
- God has made us His people so that we may “declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9).

### Introduction

Would you share the Gospel with a crowd of 300 young men in leather jackets?

In 1993, a Canadian youth singing group traveled to Lviv, a city in Ukraine, to share the Gospel through song. They were invited to sing at a veterinary school. When they arrived, they saw that the majority of their audience (over 350 people) was young men in leather jackets. This was certainly a threatening sight by our western standards. Would the men listen as the youth explained the Gospel message of their songs through their translators? Would the crowd make fun of the group? Would this be a “wasted concert?”

1. The black leather jacket is one of the many cultural images that might elicit fear in some. What other images or situations make us reluctant to share our faith?

2. When it comes to sharing our faith, we all have doubts and fears. It seems true that people, by nature, are hostile toward a Christian witness. What reasons can you suggest for those feelings of hostility? What overcame that hostility in you? Read Romans 1:16 and 1 Peter 1:23.

3. God has a heart for the lost. What comfort is that to us as we share our faith? Read Ezekiel 18:21–23.

## Inform

Read through the following summaries of the Scripture lessons for the Third Sunday in Lent.

Isaiah 42:14–21—God cannot keep silent. He has done great things, all of them leading to the fulfillment of the Gospel promise of Genesis 3:15 and other Messianic prophecies. The effect of the fulfillment of these prophecies will be so dramatic that darkness will become light and rough places will become smooth. As wondrous as this message is, there are still those who pay no attention and hear nothing.

Ephesians 5:8–14—Live as children of the light. A life in the light will be markedly different from a life lived in total darkness. Christ has redeemed us and, through faith, we are His own. All facets of life are new and different now. Christ, the light of the world, shines on us with His grace and mercy to enable us to walk and to talk as children of the Light.

John 9:13–17, 34–39—Jesus gives sight to a man born blind, who now confesses, “I see!” On one level, the man refers to Jesus’ miraculous healing. On the spiritual level, the man acknowledges Jesus as Savior. Jesus reveals Himself as the Son of Man—God’s promised Deliverer for His people. With his “eyes” truly opened, the man responds in gratitude and worship: “Lord, I believe.”

1. Isaiah 42:15–16 is a powerful announcement of God’s great activity on earth. The first display (v. 15) is the spectacular events in nature. Why are the things listed in verse 16 of even greater wonder and importance?

2. God’s forgiveness, life, and salvation is offered freely in the Gospel. Through the gift of faith, we receive these wonderful gifts. Our confession of faith speaks of *who* we are and whose we are. Read Acts 4:12; 10:43; and Romans 10:13. What do these verses tell us about our confidence in Christ?

3. What assurance did the blind man receive from Jesus? What did he believe about Jesus?

4. Many people choose their own gods in life. Some say, “It doesn’t matter what god you confess, as long as you are sincere.” Others say that all roads—or all gods—lead to the same place. What does God say in Isaiah 42:17? What does this mean for those who say, “All religions are the same?”

5. Sin, unbelief, hypocrisy, and false religion are as prevalent today as they were in Bible times. What is the Christian’s response to these things according to Ephesians 5:11? What does Paul mean by “Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead” (v. 14)?

6. In last week's study, we read about the Samaritan woman at the well. What did she have in common with the man born blind in today's Gospel? Read John 4:39–42 and 9:27–34.

### Connect

1. What kind of an audience did the Samaritan woman and the man born blind have? Humanly speaking, what audience would have been easier to speak to? Knowing what actually happened, discuss the implications of Ephesians 5:14 for your life.

2. Recall the story of the Canadian youth group and the “leather jacket crowd.” “Humanly speaking,” describe what could have happened.

3. Speaking from a “heavenly perspective,” what could have happened?

4. Listen as the leader reads the account of what actually happened.

5. Think about situations where you failed to speak up about your faith. What *could* have happened if you *had* shared?

6. Botched opportunities, fear of failure or scorn, and bad experiences have often led people to be silent about their Savior. When witnessing and evangelism are discussed, people often feel guilty about their silence and at the same time feel helpless to do anything to change. We need to hear God's Word of grace and power. Read responsively 1 John 2:12–14.

Leader: I write you, dear children,

Participants: because your sins have been forgiven on account of His name.

Leader: I write to you, fathers,

Participants: because you have known Him who is from the beginning.

Leader: I write to you, young men,

Participants: because you have overcome the evil one.

Leader: I write to you, dear children,

Participants: because you have known the Father.

Leader: I write to you, fathers,  
Participants: because you have known Him who is from the beginning.  
Leader: I write to you, young men,  
Participants: because you are strong, and the Word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

### Vision

1. Our family can be a safe place to begin sharing our faith with other Christians. Seek opportunities this week to share with your family what Christ means to you.
2. As you become more comfortable talking about Jesus with other Christians, ask the Lord to provide you with an opportunity to speak to non-Christians.
3. Always commend the results of your witness to our Lord.

## Session 4—Fourth Sunday in Lent

Hosea 5:15–6:2; Romans 8:1–10; Matthew 20:17–28

*Theme: Cross, Crowns, and Servants*

### Law/Gospel Focus

Our sinful nature often seeks self-glorification based on what we think is our own goodness. It is more comfortable to see ourselves deserving a crown than a cross. Jesus went to the cross for us so that we might have the crown of everlasting life. By the power of the message of the cross, we are led to receive our crown as a gift and to find greatness by being God's servants.

### Objectives

By the working of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God, we will be led to

- repent for smug self-righteousness in our dealings with God and with others;
- confide in what God has done for us through His Son Jesus Christ to make things right with Him;
- wear the crown as Christ did—as a servant—so that through our words and actions we might glorify God.

### Introduction

What does it cost to become an Olympic athlete? People see the gold medalists and envision themselves on the podium. They don't take into account the blood, sweat, and tears that are the price for the victory. Parents know this feeling all too well. Who gets the bill for raising a child? If the child becomes famous, do his or her parents become famous as well? Can you name the parents of any of the United States Presidents or the Prime Ministers of Canada? Ultimately, parents get the bill while children get the glory.

1. Read Isaiah 53:4–6 and 2 Corinthians 5:21. "Jesus got the bill, we got the glory." What is meant by this statement?

2. What would move God to enter this kind of an arrangement? Read Deuteronomy 7:7–8.

3. The New Testament speaks of three different kinds of love: physical love, friendship love, and sacrificial love. How would you describe the type of love about which we have just read?

4. A man bought the rusted remains of an old Rolls Royce for \$50. He lovingly restored the vehicle, putting much time, effort, and money into the project. Twenty-five years after he bought the car, in its reconditioned state it was worth \$25,000. Relate this story to what God has done for you. What value do you have?

## Inform

Look at the brief summaries of the Scripture lessons for the Fourth Sunday in Lent.

Hosea 5:15–6:2—In spite of their sin, God does not turn His back on people. He is pictured here waiting patiently for Israel to repent. He has the power to restore repentant sinners so that they might “live in His presence.”

Romans 8:1–10—In Christ, there is no condemnation. He has paid the price for all of our sins, and we are no longer bound by the law of sin and death. Our old sinful self owned nothing but death. The mind controlled by the Spirit is “life and peace.” Having been liberated from the power of sin through faith in Christ Jesus, we are now free to serve the living God.

Matthew 20:17–28—Jesus directs our attention to the cross and the empty tomb. These had to happen that we might be bought back from the power of sin and death. As redeemed people our glory is in serving Him who gave His life as a ransom.

1. What words or phrases in Hosea 6:1–2 indicate what God will do for sinners?

2. With Hosea 6:1–2, we move from the picture of God as the Judge who sentences the guilty to God as the Physician who heals the wounded. It is a transition from justice to mercy and grace. Read again Romans 8:1–2. What or who makes this transition possible?

3. Read Romans 8:1–2 and Matthew 20:18–19. How does Jesus’ death and resurrection lead to “no condemnation” for believers?

4. Read Mark 10:35–37. James and John joined their mother in making a bold request. What did they ask of Jesus? How does their attitude reflect the world’s priorities?

5. Contrast the request of James and John with Paul’s attitude in Galatians 6:14.

6. Read Revelation 2:10. What does it mean to be “faithful”?

## Connect

1. In John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Satan says, “It is better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven.” No one, it seems, prefers humility to honor. From our study today, what are the true joys of serving our Lord. Use personal examples if you wish.

2. Read Hosea 5:15–6:2 and 1 John 1:9 again. What can we do about past failures? How can we “shake loose” from selfish attitudes and habits?

3. In the list below, check which relationships in your life could be changed for the better through the power of the cross.

- Relationship with spouse
- Relationship with employer
- Relationship with parents
- Relationship with children
- Relationship with neighbors
- Relationship with church
- Relationship with friends
- Relationship with teacher
- Others:

4. In the Lord’s Prayer, we are reminded that as forgiven people, we will forgive others (“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”). In this light, how might the relationships in question 3 change as Christ is brought into the situation?

## Vision

1. As a servant of Jesus, pray that the Lord can use you in a way that will bring Him special honor this week.

2. If a relationship with a friend or family member has been strained, bring Christ into that situation and, if possible, share the outcome with the class next week.

3. Think about servant activities you or the class can do.

## Session 5—Fifth Sunday in Lent

Ezekiel 37:1–3, (4–10), 11–14; Romans 8:11–19; John 11:47–53

### *Theme:* **One Nation under God**

#### Law/Gospel Focus

Our world is separated from God and made up of people who are separated from one another. In Christ, we are united in one nation—His church—where He gives us a new identity. We are His people. We belong to Him and, as Christians, we belong to each other.

#### Objectives

That by God is at work in His Word. As we study His Word, the Holy Spirit will lead us to

- see how sin drives us apart from God and each other;
- repent for our self-serving sin, which has built walls between us and God and others;
- depend upon Jesus alone to restore us;
- rejoice in our membership in the family of God;
- serve our Lord in work and witness to bring others to Christ that they, too, might know the joy of belonging to Him.

#### Introduction

Following World War II, hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children wandered throughout Europe looking for lost friends and families. The political restructuring of Europe combined with the ravages of war left many without home or citizenship. These refugees belonged to no one.

As we draw near to the end of this century, there are more refugees now than at any other time in history. From Cambodia, Vietnam, Cuba, Haiti, Central America, and Eastern Europe, their story is pretty much the same. They have no homes. They belong to no one.

1. In your own words, describe a “spiritual refugee.”

2. North America is undergoing a “spiritual revival.” People are seeking a spiritual home. They want a sense of spiritual belonging. The New Age religions instruct people on how to search for belonging. They talk about the “journey.” Contrast this with Philippians 3:20.

#### Inform

Read the following brief summaries of the Scripture lessons for the Fifth Sunday in Lent.

Ezekiel 37:1–14—“Can these bones live?” The whitewashed bones symbolized the community of exiles in Babylon. Their hope was completely dead. They were God’s people, the bearers of the

Messianic promise. They had wandered far from Him, however, and God allowed the Babylonians to conquer their nation and take them into exile. As far as they were concerned, there was no hope. God's Word and promise is so powerful, however, that, as we see in this passage, it can even bring dead bones to life. He can and will restore His people (vv. 12–14).

Romans 8:11–19—The Spirit, who raised Jesus from the dead, dwells also in us. We are counted among the living. As those who are alive in Christ, we belong to God. We are His children and heirs of eternal life in heaven. By His grace, He calls us “sons of God.” He claims us as His own. We belong to Him.

John 11:47–53—“The Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” This was Caiaphas' fear. He had established himself in that which would eventually pass away. Struggling to protect it, he plots the death of Jesus. In the death of Jesus, however, God establishes His kingdom “not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one.”

1. How is humankind's separation from God manifested in the world? How has this affected you? Have you observed sin and its effects in your nation? In your life? Share some examples.

2. Scan the three texts. What three things does God give to His church to give and sustain life in a dying world? Describe their power.

3. In the Ezekiel passage, the bones are described as being “very dry” (v. 2). Why are they described in this manner?

4. The power of God's Word is depicted in Ezekiel 37:4–6. What is that Word capable of doing?

5. Ezekiel 37:12 points us to the Resurrection. What does Romans 8:11 tell us about the Resurrection?

6. Romans 8:18 speak of our “present sufferings” as being nothing compared to what God has in store for us. As “co-heirs of Christ,” to what can we look forward?

7. Caiaphas became an unwitting prophet. The man who seeks the death of Jesus ends up speaking words of life. What words did Caiaphas speak which are special words of comfort to a Christian?

### Connect

All of the kingdoms, empires, and nations of history experience a recurring cycle of birth, life, and death. Even the mightiest nation with the greatest resources of people, technology, and military might will one day crumble into the dust of history.

The kingdom of God, however, endures forever. The wonderful thing about this nation is that it is not some kind of exclusive club. On the contrary, it is especially for those who are the least worthy (1 Timothy 1:15).

1. In the hymn “Amazing Grace,” John Newton writes, “I once was lost, but now am found.” People who have been Christians since their baptism as infants can be thankful for this wonderful gift. Try and describe, however, what it might be like to have a sense of “lostness.” If there is someone in the group who became a Christian recently perhaps they may be willing to share what it means to them to belong to Christ.

2. As a child of God and co-heir with Christ, the Word, Spirit, and Son are at work constantly in your life. Share briefly how they have been at work this past week.

3. During the height of the refugee crisis, groups and individuals were encouraged to sponsor refugees. What would it mean to “sponsor” a spiritual refugee?

4. Trinity Lutheran Church in Republic, Washington, an LCMS congregation, and Christ Lutheran Church in Grand Forks, British Columbia, a congregation of the Lutheran Church—Canada, formed an international dual parish. At a recent joint meeting of the congregations, the comment was made, “Some of us are proud to say ‘I’m an American.’ Others are proud to say ‘I’m a Canadian.’ All of us rejoice to confess ‘Our citizenship is in heaven!’” List some of the privileges of your heavenly citizenship.

5. For an American to move to Canada, there is a long and involved process to acquire “Landed Immigrant Status.” For a Canadian to move to the United States, there is a similar process. Describe the process required to become a citizen of heaven. See Ephesians 2:8–10.

### Vision

1. Identify a “spiritual refugee” and seek to sponsor that refugee into the kingdom of God.
2. Develop a strategy for sponsoring spiritual refugees into the kingdom in your congregation.
3. Write down the blessings and privileges of citizenship in the kingdom of God and seek ways of sharing this list with others.

## Session 6—Palm Sunday, Sunday of the Passion

Isaiah 50:4–9b; Philippians 2:5–11; Matthew 27:11–54

*Theme:* **Who for Us and for Our Salvation**

### Law/Gospel Focus

In sinful arrogance, we are tempted to “go it alone” in dealing with problems, trying to change sinful habits or attempting to deal with guilt. Invariably, we will find ourselves in greater need than ever. God recognized our greatest need and in His Son did for us what we could never do. He has supplied our greatest needs with the richest measure of His grace.

### Objectives

As we study His Word today, God grant that we will

- see how our sin renders us so helpless;
- be drawn to the one who completely supplies what we need;
- believe in and live under His all-sufficient grace;
- rejoice in the new life we receive from our all-sufficient Savior.

### Introduction

Modern songs played on the radio often declare the latest life-philosophy. One song declares, “You can do magic; you can do anything your heart desires.” Some pop philosophers even suggest that we can become gods. Certainly God has provided each of us with gifts and abilities which should be developed to their fullest and to His glory. This is a far cry, however, from becoming gods.

It’s one thing for a car to be fine-tuned so it can deliver the performance for which it was designed. It’s another thing to suggest that the car can become the driver. What happens when the car breaks down? Or when its performance begins to lag? What happens when it simply needs gas or an oil change? It is helpless without the owner.

1. Briefly list some basic things for which we are completely dependent upon God.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Almost from the beginning Satan has tempted people with the notion that we can be like gods (Genesis 3:5). Ultimately, what happens to those who buy into this outwardly appealing philosophy (Proverbs 14:12)?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. Sin is a condition that permeates our very nature. It is both inherited disobedience and actual disobedience. It is the root cause of all imperfect and fractured relationships. David’s sin of adultery with

Bathsheba deeply injured his relationship with others around him. How did it affect his relationship with God? See Psalm 51:3–6.

4. “Empowerment” is a popular buzz-word today. The effect of sin is the very opposite of empowerment. It leaves us powerless. Can you think of a particular instance when a certain sin consumed an individual? Read Psalm 9:15.

5. Sin leaves people paralyzed and powerless. It affects us spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically. The message of the Gospel, however, is liberating and life-giving. Contrast all we have said about sin and its effects with the words of Romans 5:6 and 8:3. What—or, rather, who—makes the difference? You or ...?

## Inform

Read the following summaries of the Scripture lessons for the Sixth Sunday in Lent.

Isaiah 50:4–9—These are the words of the Servant, the Promised Messiah. He comes to sustain the weary. The Servant looks ahead to what He must bear for the weary. He will be mocked and condemned. Yet He does not draw back. In fact, His resolve is such that He sets His face like flint and assumes the role of servant who would atone for the sin of the world.

Philippians 2:5–11—St. Paul shows us Jesus as servant. He became one of us and was obedient to the task His Father had given Him. And such a task! It meant death on the cross. By that death on the cross, however, the dividing wall of sin is broken down. God’s will is that, at the name of Jesus, all will proclaim Him Lord.

Matthew 27:11–54—The Gospel Lesson is an account of the trial of Jesus, the release of Barabbas, the crucifixion of Jesus, and His death. The Gospel of Matthew was written for a Jewish audience. This Gospel account, however, shows that Christ died for all: a centurion and others guarding Jesus confess that He truly was the Son of God.

1. The Servant speaks of “the word that sustains the weary.” Who are the weary? What makes them weary? Read Psalm 63:1; 119:28; and Jeremiah 9:5.

2. What is the “word that sustains the weary?” Read Matthew 11:28

3. Philippians 2:5–11 sets forth Jesus as the example of the perfect servant. It says that our attitude should be like His. Is that possible? How would you have felt if God had caused Paul to write no further than verse 5? What is there in verses 6–11 that is so vital to a proper understanding of verse 5?

4. What kind of obedience is required to deserve eternal life? See Matthew 19:17. Why could that be bad news for us? What alternative does God provide? See Philippians 2:8.

5. Compare the Gospel Lesson with the Old Testament Lesson. Look for the New Testament fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy.

6. Sin separates us from God. In Matthew 27:46, we read that Jesus experienced that separation. Pilate and his wife declared Jesus innocent (Matthew 27:19; John 19:4). The Bible tells us that Jesus was without sin (Hebrews 4:15). Yet God forsakes His own Son because of sin. Whose sin? Read 1 John 2:1–2.

7. What is our connection with the events recorded in the Gospel Lesson? Read Romans 6:2–3.

### Connect

1. Have you ever had to carry a large suitcase or other heavy burden for a great distance? What a relief it is to put it down. What an even greater relief for someone to offer to carry it for you. What a welcome servant that person would be! People often carry the oppressive burden of guilt because of sin. Take a moment and think of the things that you have done in your life that perhaps still bother you. They are like a heavy burden that wears us. - -What words from the Servant and about the Servant set us free from that burden?

2. Discuss last Sunday's worship service. Note the times when the Pastor spoke burden-lifting words.

3. In the Nicene Creed, we confess, “Who for us men and for our salvation.” All the religions of the world talk about what man must do for God to earn salvation. Christianity teaches what God has done for us to earn our salvation. What verses from the lessons this week highlighted this scriptural truth for you?

4. Jesus clearly took our place at the cross. This isn’t some sugar-coated religious myth with a moral teaching intended to improve our behavior. It is a real historical event. It shows the ugly, horrible consequence for sin and, at the same time, gives comfort and certainty about eternity because He did it “for you.” Whom do you know that is carrying a heavy burden of sin and really needs to hear this message?

### Vision

1. Be sensitive and aware of people who are on a “guilt trip” and look for opportunities to share the good news of the Savior with them.

2. Is there a sin from your past that continues to bother you? It’s time to let go! Read the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus and remember that this was done for you to relieve you of your guilt. Perhaps you may wish to speak privately to the pastor and receive a personal word of absolution.

3. Many people not only live under the burden of guilt, they also live under the burden of self-righteousness. They try and make themselves acceptable to God through their own good deeds. Good deeds are turned into a “have to” instead of a “want to.” The New Age movement tells us that we should strive with our own abilities to be gods. Christ sets us free to live to the glory of God. During the week, try an “attitude check.” Ask yourself why you are doing certain things and seek to do things in response to the power of God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

## Session 7—Maundy Thursday

Exodus 12:1–14; 1 Corinthians 11:17–32; John 13:1–17, 34

**Theme: Eat, Drink, Be Served ... And Serve**

### Law/Gospel Focus

People by nature seek personal advantage. Our world seems to be in a mad rush to control others—even God—in order to gain that advantage. Jesus, however, comes to us as Servant and Redeemer. He gives Himself to us in the Lord's Supper. We receive through this Holy Meal the forgiveness, life, salvation, and the power and motivation to serve Him and others.

### Objectives

By the working of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God, we will be led to

- confess our own self-centeredness and our attempts to gain personal advantage over others;
- rejoice in the service that Christ renders to us as He feeds us with His body and blood in the Lord's Supper;
- serve others in selfless love as Christ has served us.

### Introduction

Have you ever noticed how people try to control others to gain personal advantage?

Three young girls were walking home in the late afternoon of a warm summer day. One of them invited the other two to come over to her place after supper for movies and a “sleep over.” One responded, “I'd love to, but I know my mother won't let me. She says I'm too young. Wait a minute. You know how I can make myself cry. When she says ‘no’ I'll turn on the tears—I mean *really* turn them on. She'll feel so bad that she will finally give in.”

A young man suggests to his girlfriend that, since his parents are gone for the weekend, they could spend the night together at his house. She hesitates. And then he drops the manipulative bomb: “If you really love me, you will ...”

An office manager says to the accountant, “I've put some personal things on my expense account this month. If you want to keep your job, play with the figures so no one will find out.”

1. Have you ever been the object of manipulating people? Have you ever manipulated people to serve your own interests?

2. The greatest villains of history are those who tried to gain control over others, who sought to be served rather than to serve. Think of individuals in this century who fit this description. Did this approach benefit others? Ultimately did this approach benefit the villains? Read Luke 12:20–21.

3. It is said that the earliest English missionaries to Africa forwarded their belongings in a coffin. They knew they would never return. They would lose their lives in the service of the Gospel. According to worldly standards, they were losers. Check out God's standard, however, in Daniel 12:3.

4. What was the purpose of Jesus' ministry? See Mark 10:45.

## Inform

Look at the brief summaries of the Scripture lessons for Maundy Thursday.

Exodus 12:1–14 tells us of the last of the plagues against Egypt. The Egyptians sought to control Israel and keep the people as slaves. God's purpose was that they should be His people and that the Savior would come from them. This last plague is the death of the firstborn in Egypt. The blood of a lamb was to mark the doorframes of the houses of the Israelites so that the angel of death would pass over them and not slay their firstborn.

In 1 Corinthians 11:17–32, the church in Corinth is chastised for its abuse of the Lord's Supper. Some were viewing this sacred meal as an opportunity to eat and get drunk. They would charge ahead of others so that there was nothing left for those who came later. Through St. Paul, the Lord's Apostle, we have set before us the teaching on the Lord's Supper. Here we see that He who is truly Lord comes to us in the bread and the wine and gives us His own body and blood. In this precious gift, we receive forgiveness of all our sins. This is His "new covenant" for us. The Lord's Supper was instituted by Christ for no other reason than that He loves us.

John 13:1–17 and verse 34 tell of foot washing. While none of the disciples would offer to serve by performing the customary foot washing, Jesus assumed the role of their servant and washed their feet. He sets for them the example of servant and in that role encourages them to serve and love others as He did, enabled by the cross.

1. In order to save the lives of the Israelites, lambs were slaughtered and their blood painted on the doorframes of the Israelite's homes. Of what does the lamb remind you?

2. "And when I see the blood, I will pass over you." Read Romans 5:8–10. In what way does God "pass over" us?

3. In the Lord's Supper, Jesus gives "My body, which is for you ... this cup [as] the new covenant in My blood." For what purpose do we receive the body and blood of Jesus? See Matthew 26:26–27.

4. What do we proclaim whenever we eat the bread and drink the cup? (See 1 Corinthians 11:26.)
  
5. Why did none of the disciples want to wash the others' feet? See Luke 9:46; 22:24.
  
6. In John 13:16, Jesus says that no servant is greater than his master. What are the implications of this for the first disciples and for us?
  
7. In John 13:34, Jesus tells us that we are to love one another as He has loved us. Can we be servants like Jesus? How is this possible? Read again 1 Corinthians 11:26.

### Connect

In Palestine there are two great seas. Both are fed by the River Jordan. Both are located within the same mountain range. Yet they differ greatly. The Sea of Galilee has fresh water teeming with fish and fowl. Trees and flowers grow along its banks. The Dead Sea's barren shores support no living creatures. Birds flying overhead have been killed by the fumes from the poisonous waters.

The one reason for the great differences is that the first "gets to give" and the second "gets to keep." The Sea of Galilee receives the fresh waters from the northern part of the River Jordan and passes them on to the southern part of the Jordan at the lower end. The Dead Sea also receives the fresh waters from the Jordan, but it has no outlet, and therefore its waters are stagnant and deadly.

1. What is the life-giving water that we get in order that we may give?
  
2. What outlets are there for us in our church and community for Christian service (foot washing)?
  
3. Why is the Lord's Supper so important in our life of Christian service?

4. What do the following passages teach us about Christian service?

- James 1:27

- Luke 12:35

- 2 Corinthians 9:13

5. For the world, greatness is measured in fame, fortune, and power. The secret to greatness is really found in Matthew 23:11.

6. When you serve others, who are you ultimately serving? See Matthew 25:40.

## Vision

1. Ask the pastor if there are people he is aware of who have special needs and whom you can assist.

2. Attend the Maundy Thursday service and receive the Lord's Supper for the forgiveness of sins and for the strengthening of your faith that the Holy Spirit might enable you to serve God.

3. Look for opportunities to help those in need, and do it in such a way that people see Christ. See Matthew 5:15.

## Session 8—Good Friday

Isaiah 52:13–53:12; Hebrews 4:14–16; 5:7–9; John 18:1–19:42

### *Theme: Six-Point-O*

#### Law/Gospel Focus

God demands perfect obedience from us. As much as we try, no matter what we do, we fail. On account of Jesus' perfect obedience and His atoning sacrifice for our failures, God declares us righteous.

#### Objectives

God is at work in His Word. As we study His Word the Holy Spirit will lead us to

- recognize our inability to live as God requires;
- come to grips with the uselessness of trying to play “catch-up” with the Law in order to cover up past sin;
- in faith, look to the life and death of Jesus as our only and certain hope
- live not as people who are dead in sin, but as people who have been made alive to God in Christ Jesus.

#### Introduction

The life of a figure skater is hard and arduous. For those who set their sights on world championships, it means long hours of strenuous practice every day. Every competition means the skater will be under the close scrutiny of audience and judges. Each stage of the competition—the compulsory figures, the short program, and the long program—presents formidable challenges. It is almost impossible to score a perfect 6.0 in any of these events. It is unheard of to attain a perfect score in all of them. The crowd continues to moan and sigh with each slip of the blade and unexpected trip on the ice. Only the best attain the coveted prize, and even at that, it is without a perfect program.

What would it be like to live constantly with expectations that can never be met? And we do live under the expectations of others. Parents, employers, teachers, spouse, family, even self, all have expectations of us. God also has expectations of us—high expectations. Jesus says “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

1. What is it like to know that your life is always less than a perfect “six-point-O?” What happens to people when they strive for but never achieve the perfection that is demanded of them?

2. Has anyone ever lived up to God's expectations? Read Romans 3:10.

3. Is it possible to “turn over a new leaf,” to change one's life, and begin living according to God's Law in a way that will make us right with Him?

4. How serious is it when we fail to meet the demands of God's Law? Read Romans 6:23.

## Inform

Read the following summaries of the Scripture lessons for Good Friday.

In Isaiah 52:13–53:12 God speaks through His prophet Isaiah and presents a picture of the Messiah. The purpose of His mission was not to win an earthly kingdom by virtue of “beauty or majesty.” Rather, He came to pay for the sins and failures of all people. It was not a pretty picture. Yet it is “by His wounds [that] we are healed.”

Hebrews 4:14–16 and 5:7–9 presents us with the sinless Son of God—the only one who could live a “six-point-O life.” This perfect Savior is the source of eternal salvation. Through His obedience, we receive through faith, grace and forgiveness and are set free from the taskmaster of the Law. We are motivated and empowered by His grace to live to His glory.

John 18:1–19:42 is the account of the arrest, trial, crucifixion, death, and burial of Jesus. Although the death of Jesus was plotted to thwart His work, God's plan of salvation is carried out. With His dying breath, Jesus declares, “It is finished.” The work of atonement is complete. All sin is paid for. Unaware of the scope of what has really transpired and what will soon take place, the world continues its business and Jesus is laid in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

1. A great world leader has many distinctive attributes which make his leadership appealing to those who follow him. Would Jesus fit the bill? How does the Old Testament Lesson describe Him?

2. What are some pictures in the Old Testament Lesson that remind you of Jesus and the crucifixion?

3. What comfort is there in knowing that Jesus was tempted in every way, as we are, yet did not sin?

4. What is the difference between living under the Law and attempting to obey it, and living in obedience to Christ our Savior?

5. Make a list of all the people mentioned in the Gospel Lesson. Of all the people mentioned, which of them appeared to need Christ's forgiveness the most?

6. As you identified those who appeared to need forgiveness the most, what does that say about the measure of Christ's love for them? Does this surprise you?

## Connect

Syndicated columnist Dave Barry writes,

It was also a good year, spiritually, for us aging baby boomers; after too many years of being obsessively and selfishly absorbed with our own lives, we are finally starting to reach the point where we become obsessively and selfishly absorbed with our own deaths. This has led to a number of inspirational best-selling books about the afterlife—*Embraced by the Light*, *Saved by the Light*, *Garfield Sees the Light*, and *The Susan Powter Post-Mortem Workout*. (From *The Edmonton Journal*, 2 January 1995.)

How people try and search and struggle and strive! In fact, every religion in the world is an attempt to get closer to God. People change their lifestyle, pray more, seek spiritual experiences, and strive for a liberating spiritual enlightenment.

As we grow older, we become more aware of our mortality and our need to be “right with God.” Looking at our sinfulness and then considering eternity can be a frightening experience. Fear, however, does not make us right with God.

Our problem is sin. It is the trash of our lives. There is no sense looking for treasure in it. The Christ of Calvary took our sin upon Himself and, at the cross, eliminated it. Jesus is the Way to the Father. The treasure, the new life, the “six-point-O” is found in Him.

1. The message of the cross is a liberating one. The Law demands a “six-point-O” life. The cross presents us with a “six-point-O” payment for our failures. Read Romans 8:1–4. What does this message do for the legalist and the libertarian?

2. Read John 3:16. God gave His Son so that all who believe in Him will have eternal life. We have received a “six-point-O” life from Jesus. The world may continue to send difficulties and hardships our way but nothing can rob us of what Christ has done for us. What even greater treasures can we look forward to from our Redeemer? Read Romans 8:18; Revelation 21:1–7; and 22:1–5.

## Vision

1. Attend Good Friday worship services with a friend. Recall your failures and ask for forgiveness in the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

2. Reevaluate your motivations. Have you been doing things out of fear of punishment or hope for reward? Start living a “six-point-O” life in the mercy and grace which come from Jesus.

## Session 9—The Resurrection of Our Lord

Acts 10:34–43; Colossians 3:1–4; John 20:1–9 (10–18)

**Theme: Razed to Be Raised!**

### Law/Gospel Focus

Death without hope leads people to despair. Fear of death leads them to denial. But Jesus has conquered death by paying for sin and has declared us not guilty by reason of His grace and our God-given faith and given us life! Therefore His judgment of those who repent of their sins and believe in Him is “You have been raised!”

### Objectives

That by the power of the Holy Spirit working in us through God’s Word we might

- realize that sin and death have the power to raze us spiritually;
- recognize God’s great love and grace toward us in Jesus Christ, who has raised us from sin and death by His own resurrection from the dead;
- rejoice in our salvation and, motivated by God’s love for us, seek every opportunity to share this good news with others.

### Introduction

1. Define the word *raze*.

2. Define the word *raise*.

3. How was Jesus razed? What significance does this have for your life?

4. Jesus was raised three days after being razed. What significance does this have for your life?

5. How are we razed with Christ so that we are raised for eternity?

## Inform

The mood of the followers of Jesus early Easter morning was one of sadness and despair as they struggled with the reality of His death. His body had been razed—destroyed—and His life ended, they thought. But, beginning with Mary in the Garden of Gethsemane, all that changed. The mood became one of joyous celebration as she related that she had seen the Master and that He was indeed alive! As promised, God had raised Him from the dead, and they knew that victory over death, over sin, and over the devil had been won!

They knew that He had been razed by death, so to speak, so that one day they might be raised to eternal life.

Review the three Scripture lessons for Easter.

In the ancient world, when one nation conquered another and took its inhabitants into captivity it was also common for the victor to destroy the city in which its enemies lived. The conquering army would strip the city and its people of all their valuables and then systematically raze every building to the ground.

When, for example, the Romans finally conquered the people of Carthage after a long and costly war, so strong was their desire to remove the remembrance of these people from the face of the earth that they not only razed the city of Carthage but they sowed the land with salt so that no one might ever build a city again in that location.

With this picture in mind, consider the following questions.

1. How might the story of the razing of Carthage by the Romans serve as an allegory for the Roman treatment of Jesus? See Acts 10:39; John 19:17, 33–34; and Matthew 27:62–66.

2. Although Jesus' body was razed temporarily by death, who was it that was really razed by this event and Jesus' subsequent resurrection? See Genesis 3:15; 1 John 3:8; and Romans 16:20.

3. Describe the great assurance that we now have because Jesus razed Satan. Read 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 and 12–23.

a. According to Paul, who was moved by the Holy Spirit to write this, how reliable is the teaching of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (vv. 3–8)?

b. If Christ were not raised from the dead, what would that ultimately mean for Christians (vv. 13–19)?

c. What does it mean to you when Paul writes: “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep”?

4. In Colossians 3:1–4, what is it that St. Paul indicates has already happened to us? How has this happened? See Romans 6:3.

5. God reveals to us that the resurrection of Jesus also means a change of life for His people. How is that change of life described in our Epistle Lesson (Colossians 3:1–4)? See also Romans 6:2 and 11–18 and Galatians 5:13–14, 16–26.

6. Paraphrase the last verse of the Epistle Lesson. What do you think St. Paul is talking about when he writes: “When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory”? See also Matthew 24:30–31 and 1 Corinthians 15:51–57.

## Connect

Because of our human nature and because God never intended human beings to die, there is a natural, built-in fear of death in each and every one of us. Read the following common fears that some people have shared and put a checkmark beside those that have affected you in the past.

1. I am afraid of *how* I will die.
2. I am afraid I will die alone.
3. I am afraid I will lose my faith.
4. I am afraid I will die in great pain and agony.
5. I am afraid that God will change His mind about me.
6. I am afraid that my doubting mind will overwhelm me.
7. I am afraid of dying on the operating table.
8. I am afraid of dying of AIDS.
9. I am afraid of what lies ahead after death.
10. I am afraid of the thought of my body lying in a grave.
11. Other:
12. Other:

These are but a few of the common fears that people express when contemplating their own death. If time allows, discuss those that people have checked. Then match the following Bible passages that offer hope and strength to a particular fear.

- Romans 8:38–39

- Matthew 28:20
- Joshua 1:5
- Jeremiah 1:8
- 1 Corinthians 15:42–49
- Ephesians 2:8–9
- Romans 5:3; 1 Peter 4:12–13, 19
- 1 Corinthians 2:5

God, through His revealed Word, removes from us the great fear of death. In the same way that Jesus returned to show Himself alive to His followers immediately after His resurrection from the dead, so today He comes to us through His Spirit-inspired Word and in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. In this way Jesus continues to give Himself to us today and fulfill His promise to be with us always. The fact is, we have a *living* Savior and that makes all the difference for us as we live our lives, slowly and surely moving toward physical death. Yes, physical death is a reality for us all, but thanks be to God who gives us the victory over death through our living Savior. Jesus alone removes the permanence of death from our life experience and impresses upon us forever, the reality of eternal life in heaven—by God’s grace through faith in Him!

Take a few minutes, as time allows, to discuss in small groups or with another person the impact of the following Bible passages on you.

- 2 Timothy 1:10

- Colossians 1:21–23

- 1 Peter 3:18

- Romans 4:25–5:11

## Vision

1. When you get home, review this lesson and read any Bible passages that we could not cover in class. Then on a calendar, mark those opportunities that God gives you this week to share your joy and confidence in Christ’s resurrection with friends or family members or even strangers. Remember, you need to be constantly aware of the opportunities that God will lay before you. Then be prepared next week to share any witnessing opportunities that may have come your way.

2. If you know of someone who has recently lost a loved one, write a letter of encouragement, perhaps utilizing some of the Bible passages that we shared here today. Be sure to point to Jesus, His cross, and His resurrection so that the grieving person may be uplifted and strengthened by the Word of God and your care.

## Session 10—Second Sunday of Easter

Acts 2:14a, 22–32; 1 Peter 1:3–9; John 20:19–31

### *Theme:* **Restored Sight**

#### Law/Gospel Focus

By nature people are blind to the reality of God's revelation of Christ Jesus as risen Savior and Lord. But it is precisely the risen Lord who opens blind eyes and who, through the gift of faith, restores spiritual sight to those for whom He died.

#### Objectives

That by the power of the Holy Spirit working in us through God's Word we might

- recognize our inability to see and understand the resurrection of Jesus Christ by ourselves;
- receive by faith the truth of Scripture's revelation that Jesus Christ is our risen Savior;
- proclaim the resurrection of Jesus Christ and His offer of salvation by grace through faith to others
- live a life that reflects our sure and certain hope of salvation in Christ alone.

#### Introduction

Sometimes human beings need help to see and sometimes no matter how hard they try to see, they just cannot. The obvious example is that of a person born blind. No matter how much that person may wish to see and may try to see, he or she simply cannot do so by sheer force of will. If, however, a qualified eye surgeon has determined that through an operation the person may receive his or her sight, and if that surgeon performs the needed surgery successfully, then the person's sight is restored. The point is, however, that an outside source is necessary for this to take place, and it will most likely cost the individual or a health-care system dearly.

It is often true also that there are things that a seeing person just cannot see by himself or herself. For instance, have you ever tried to see the picture contained in stereograms or 3-D art prints that have flooded bookstores across the country? Some people see the images immediately, others take a little longer, and some simply cannot see them at all. Whether it's birds on a canyon edge or dolphins in the sea, they cannot be seen at first glance but rather one must look "into" the picture. Then almost miraculously they appear so dramatically and realistically that a person feels that he or she can reach out and actually touch them.

In the same way, profound truths of God's Word often cannot be seen on the surface through ordinary eyes. The Holy Spirit working through God's Word and the Sacraments, reveals those truths to hearts and eyes that only He can open. Without the work of the Holy Spirit, you and I could never see or believe the reality of Jesus' resurrection, which is the key to understanding every other teaching in the Bible. But when the Holy Spirit does His work, the cross of Jesus, the empty tomb, and the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ Himself stand out in bold relief before the Christian's eyes—they become so real that one could almost touch them.

1. Have you seen the 3-D art mentioned above? If so, did you see the 3-D image easily or only after some difficulty? Did anyone have to help you?

2. Have you ever known anyone who was blind from birth or because of cataracts, whose sight was restored by surgery? What was their reaction to receiving their sight?

The truth is that all of us from our birth are spiritually blind, and unless God Himself opens our spiritual eyes, they will remain forever closed to the truth of His love and forgiveness in Christ Jesus our Lord. Yet spiritual “eye surgery” is free for all people. The surgeon is the Holy Spirit, and His scalpel is the Gospel. That is how eyes blinded by sin are enabled to see once again!

### Inform

Read the following summaries of the Scripture lessons for the Second Sunday of Easter.

Acts 2:14a, 22–32—The apostle Peter declares the persecution and death of Jesus took place according to God’s plan. He delivers to his Jewish audience a scathing denunciation of their plot to join wicked people in their plan to kill God’s Messiah, Jesus. Then Peter speaks a powerful proclamation of the reality of Jesus’ resurrection and His fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecy concerning the Messiah who would come to redeem Israel.

1 Peter 1:3–9—Peter talks to Christians about their “new birth” through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. He emphasizes that our inheritance in heaven has been made certain by Jesus’ resurrection. He also declares that even though we will experience hardships and trials in this life, our future in heaven has been secured through Jesus’ resurrection.

John 20:19–31—John records the appearance of Jesus to His 11 disciples in the upper room shortly after His resurrection from the dead. Jesus offers them His “peace,” gives them the Holy Spirit, and institutes the Office of Keys, that is, the power to forgive or retain sins. John also includes an account of Thomas’ failure to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead and Jesus’ subsequent appearance to Thomas and His offer to allow Thomas to touch His wounds. Most important are Jesus’ words: “Because you have seen Me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

1. What does it mean that Jesus was “accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs”? See John 2:1–11; John 6:1–20; and John 11:38–44.

2. What does Acts 2:24 reveal about the manner by which Jesus was raised from the dead?

3. According to Acts 2:32, how sure was Peter that Jesus had actually risen from the dead?

4. According to 1 Peter 1:3, we are told that we have been given a “new birth into a living hope” because of the resurrection of Jesus.

a. What is this “new birth” that Peter speaks of? See 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 4:24; and John 3:3–8.

b. Have you received the “new birth” that Peter speaks of here? If so, when did it occur for you?

c. If a person has not yet received the “new birth into a living hope,” how could you be God’s instrument to enable that to happen?

5. According to 1 Peter 1:5, what reassurance do we have that the “new birth” or faith in Jesus will endure the trials of our lifetime?

6. What is the purpose, according to 1 Peter 1:6, for the trials and temptations that come our way in life?

7. What verse(s) really connects 1 Peter 1 with our Gospel Lesson? Why?

8. Describe what can be learned from John’s account of Jesus’ appearance to His disciples, and especially to Thomas.

## Connect

1. Has there ever been a time in your life when you felt a little like “doubting Thomas”? If so, describe what it felt like to doubt. What helped you deal with the doubts?

2. In today’s scientific world—a world in which people demand empirical proof when someone makes a claim regarding something extraordinary—what does the Christian have to defend his or her belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ? See Acts 1:8, Matthew 28:19, and 1 Corinthians 15:6.

3. Why do some people, despite the evidence, refuse to believe in Jesus Christ and His resurrection and even try to publicly discredit this truth? See Romans 1:18–24; 3:10–18, 23; and Ephesians 2:1–3.

4. Why is the resurrection of Jesus so important to us? What would life be like without it? How does it affect the daily life of every Christian? See 1 Corinthians 15:12–28.

### Vision

1. Each day read a portion of 1 Corinthians 15. Meditate on the promise of the Resurrection and all that it means to you.

2. Write a prayer that thanks God for raising Jesus from the dead, proclaiming victory for us over sin, death, and the devil, and for granting you faith in Him.

## Session 11—Third Sunday of Easter

Acts 2:14a, 36–47; 1 Peter 1:17–21; Luke 24:13–35

**Theme: Changed by Grace ... Excited by Faith**

### Law/Gospel Focus

The Christian life is seen by some as boring and lacking in joy and excitement because it does not conform to the paradigms of the world. Christ injects great joy into the Christian's life as He reveals Himself to us and empowers us to respond in exciting Gospel outreach and service to God and people.

### Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, we will

- understand the importance of keeping oneself separate from the world's philosophies and beliefs, which eventually lead to misery, pain, doubt and despair;
- affirm the importance of being devoted to Christ, to regular worship, and to the truth revealed by God in His holy Word;
- be propelled by the Holy Spirit beyond the joy of believing to the excitement of serving God and others with the Gospel in response to our God-implanted faith;
- live joy-filled lives in love and service to God and understand this lifestyle as a response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

### Introduction

Ever since the Fall, people's lives have been characterized by hard work and often drudgery. And since that time people have sought ways in which to escape the work and drudgery of making a living, providing for their physical needs, and saving for a time when they will no longer be able to work.

When I was a young man, one of the temporary jobs that I had during the summer and other vacation times was piling wood in the sawmill at the Kroehler Furniture Company in Stratford, Ontario. My job was simple. I was to pick up two or three different lengths of wood that had been cut by the man on the swing-saw across from me, pile it on three-wheeled carts, and keep count. The work was terribly boring, and because of the noise of the saws and planers in the mill, you could not even chat with anyone as you worked. After a few days of piling wood in this way, I really did not want to do this any longer. But because I was attending college and soon the seminary, I had no choice—I needed the money, and so despite the boredom, I did the job.

There are many people today who are in the same position. They are working at jobs that give them little or no satisfaction, and so life often seems inconsequential and meaningless to them. They look for meaning and fulfillment and joy and excitement and hope for the future in other pursuits. And the world has lots to offer—the lights of Las Vegas, the films of Hollywood, the stages of Broadway, the glitter of Disney, and the lure of boats and snowmobiles. These all offer ways for human beings to escape the emptiness of life on this earth amidst billions of other people equally unhappy and searching for the one answer that will change everything.

But the answer to the tedium of life, the answer to living a full and productive and meaningful life can never be found in the philosophies, physical activities, or lifestyles of people, but only in the revelation of the Creator of it all.

When God reveals His plan for human beings, a plan that is all wrapped up in Christ, then we can really begin to enjoy life, for we can only experience joy-filled living in Jesus Christ. Jesus directs us to meaningful works of service in the world and excitement beyond description. As faith in Jesus' love and forgiveness grows, it produces caring acts of love and grace toward our fellow human beings that will often result in their coming to faith and abandoning the emptiness of the unbelieving world.

## Inform

Read the summaries of the Scripture lessons for the Third Sunday of Easter.

Acts 2:14a, 36–47—At the end of Peter's account of the people's sin of crucifying the Lord of life, the Messiah, the Holy Spirit moves them to repent. They ask, "What shall we do now?" Peter tells them to be baptized for the forgiveness of all their sins and to separate themselves from the corrupt people who surround them. They engaged in regular fellowship, worship, and sharing of food and the Lord's Supper. Significantly, Luke ends with the words, "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

1 Peter 1:17–21—Peter calls upon the believers to reject the thinking and the ways of the world and to, in effect, live as strangers in the world. He points out that they were redeemed by the blood of Jesus from the empty life characterized by conformity with the world. Because the believers have been brought to faith by the power of God who raised their Savior, Jesus, from the dead, their faith in God is solid and secure.

Luke 24:13–35—Two disciples of Jesus are on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus after the crucifixion of Jesus. As they discuss the events of the passion and crucifixion, without knowledge of His resurrection, Jesus suddenly appears and begins to walk down the road with them. They do not recognize Him but allow Him to join in the conversation. Jesus explains to them His fulfillment of the prophecies of old regarding the death and resurrection of the Messiah, and then after eating a meal with them and opening their eyes to see who He really was, He suddenly disappears from view. These disciples returned immediately to Jerusalem, found the 11 disciples and those with them, and shared their experience with the risen Lord.

1. Immediately following the crucifixion of Jesus how do you think the disciples and other followers of Jesus felt? What uncertainties did they face?

2. If Jesus had not risen from the dead but stayed in the grave what would that have meant to the lives of those who believed? What would that have meant for us and our world today?

3. But in fact Jesus was alive. To whom did He reveal Himself alive? See Luke 24.

4. What was the response by the two disciples on the road to Emmaus when they realized they had been talking to Jesus? How did others respond as they encountered the risen Christ?

5. How do we respond as the living Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is revealed to us through Scripture?

6. As Peter shared the truth of a living Savior, a resurrected Savior, with the people in Jerusalem in Acts 2, how did they respond?

7. Remembering that Peter is writing to Jewish Christians, what do you think Peter means when he writes in his epistle that we have been “redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers?”

### Connect

All of these lessons focus on Jesus as the resurrected Lord. Through His resurrection people come to realize that He is alive! Knowing that one has a real and living God and Savior, not one made of innate wood and stone or of the imagination of a person’s mind, makes a difference in how we look at life. How can a life that has as its foundation a sure and certain hope of eternal life in heaven, that has as its focus a real and living God and Savior, ever lack meaning and purpose, joy and direction? No, in Christ Jesus resurrected from the dead lies the purpose and direction for the meaningless existence of people who do not know why they are here and where they are going.

1. How does the reality of Jesus’ resurrection affect your daily life?

2. The early Christians devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, spent time in Christian fellowship, celebrated the Lord’s Supper, worshiped together, and shared their resources so that they could proclaim the Gospel to others. Read Acts 11:19–26 and 13:1–3. Discuss together how your congregation still carries on with these activities of fellowship and mission. Are there areas where you need improvement?

3. By coming back again and again to Jesus and meeting Him in the Word and Sacraments, the early Christians were filled with excitement to share the Gospel and thus their lives were filled with meaning and great joy! Share ways in which your life is enriched by the Word and Sacraments and by your connection with fellow believers.

4. People all around us despair because their lives have not been touched by the love of God in Christ Jesus. Read Acts 1:7–8; 2:1–4; Romans 6:11–14; 8:1–4; and 10:14–15.

a. Name some ways you and your fellow members have been reaching out to those without Christ in your community and in the world.

b. List ways and means by which you could do more and encourage one another in faithful service to personally and collectively share the Gospel.

When heat is applied to water in a glass container we can watch as bubbles begin to form and excitedly rise to the top. They eventually become steam and enter the atmosphere. Likewise when Jesus our Savior is added to our lives, the excitement of faith produces bubbles of joy in His service—joy that rises to the surface and flows out of our lives into the atmosphere that surrounds us. Thus we affect others with the joy of salvation and become God’s instruments to bring meaning and joy and hope to many.

### Vision

Pray daily for God to move you to hear faithfully the Word, remember your Baptism, receive the Lord’s Supper regularly, and then to be ready to share your hope in Christ with others as He gives you the opportunity.

## Session 12—Fourth Sunday of Easter

Acts 6:1–9; 7:2a, 51–60; 1 Peter 2:19–25; John 10:1–10

*Theme:* Faith in Difficult Times

### Law/Gospel Focus

The world offers life, but in reality it provides only death. Only Jesus Christ, by His death, provides life—abundant life here on earth and eternal life with Him in heaven.

### Objectives

That by the power of the Holy Spirit working in us through God’s Word we might

- understand that all worldly philosophies and knowledge lead human beings to an eternal dead end;
- be empowered by the Gospel to meet the challenges and seductions of the world’s promises;
- confess the promises of God in Christ Jesus wherever the circumstances allow—even if it means suffering for Jesus’ sake.

### Introduction

Generally speaking, a basic operating principle of the world around us is “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die.” Such a shallow philosophy results in bumper stickers such as the one that reads He Who Dies with the Most Toys Wins! More sobering is the bumper sticker which reads He Who Dies ... DIES.

For the Christian, neither bumper sticker is fully true. The inescapable truth for all of us, Christian and non-Christian alike is that we will all die. This is true. It is borne out by experience and can be proven scientifically. Everyone, someday, dies. There is no escape. Death is inevitable.

This truth has been the source of fear for people of all ages and times. Though we may seek ways to postpone it or even to deny it, eventually all must face death. In its mad efforts to deny sin, death, and the devil—and the reality of eternal death and hell—the world promises life. It speaks through popular movies and songwriters, through popular singers and actors. It tries mightily with all the power of the media today to deny Christ, the reality of God, and the consequence of sin—death!

The world says: “If you really want to live a productive, happy, fulfilling life just believe that you are a god and then live your life centering everything on yourself.” This message of the New Age Movement is really nothing more than the old heresies of Gnosticism and spiritism wedded and covered in new clothing. Whatever gives people pleasure, whatever makes them feel good—even at the expense of others—is the world’s recipe for a great life.

The Word of God suggests that the opposite is true. Godly people have sought to counteract the world’s views since the very beginning. History and experience alone tell us that life lived for oneself, life based on the false notion that we are “gods,” life on one’s own without God or Jesus Christ, leads not to life, but most certainly to death.

1. What are the differences and/or similarities between the phrases “living to die” and “dying to live?”

Christians are well aware that death looms in their future and could occur at any moment. But death is not the end for the Christian. Death is merely the last event we experience at the end of this earthly life as we prepare to enter the heavenly mansions prepared for those who believe in Jesus Christ alone for forgiveness and eternal life.

2. How do people today demonstrate they are dying to live? Living to die?
  
3. Use some or all of the following words to describe the life of Jesus: *living, live, dying, die*.
  
4. Use some or all of the following words to describe the life of a Christian: *living, live, dying, die*.
  
5. What other words or phrases might you use to describe the life of a Christian?

Today, we will discover how through faith in Christ Jesus the life of a Christian could be described as one who is dying to live.

### Inform

The following are the summaries of the Scripture lessons appointed for the Fourth Sunday of Easter.

Acts 6:1–9; 7:2a, 51–60—Because the Greek Christians were concerned about the lack of care being provided for their widows and believed that they should have the same care as the Jewish Christian widows, the disciples decided to appoint men full of the spirit and wisdom to oversee the distribution of food to all the needy widows. Among them were Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a convert from Antioch.

As the Word of God spread, the number of believers increased dramatically in Jerusalem. A large number of priests were also converting from Judaism to Christianity.

Stephen not only served by assisting with the distribution of food but he also performed miracles and proclaimed the Word of God. Great opposition arose from a group called “the Synagogue of the Freedmen” who were Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria, Cilicia and Asia. Stephen responded to them by pointing out that Jesus was the Messiah. He then stirred the pot of their anger as he accused his hearers of killing the Messiah by crucifying Him on Calvary.

As a result the angry Jews stoned Stephen to death. As he was dying God opened the heavens for him and he saw Jesus in all His kingly splendor, ruling over the universe. As he gave his spirit up into the hands of Jesus in death he said, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

1 Peter 2:19–25—Peter points out that there is no honor in suffering for the wrongs that one has done. However if one suffers for the sake of Christ, for doing and saying what is right, there is great honor and even commendation from God. Peter suggests that we should not be surprised at having to

suffer for the sake of Jesus, because in so doing we are merely walking in the steps of Him who first suffered for us.

Peter reminds us that when Jesus suffered for us He did not complain, and when insulted He did not respond in kind. In so doing He sets the example or pattern for us to follow when we suffer for the sake of the Gospel. He closes by reminding us that it is only by Jesus' wounds that we are healed and like sheep who have gone astray we have now been led back to "the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls."

John 10:1–10—Jesus here teaches us that He Himself is the only gate into the sheepfold of God. All others that came before Him and who come after Him claiming to be the Savior are robbers who come only to steal and kill and destroy the sheep. He ends by telling us that He has come so that we might have life to the full.

1. As you consider John 10:1ff., give examples of the kind of "thieves" or "robbers" that Jesus speaks about. Who were the "thieves" in the Acts lesson? What thieves lurk to rob us of our faith today?

2. What makes Jesus the "gate"? To what is Jesus the gate?

3. Compare what Stephen says in Acts 7:51–53 with Exodus 32:9, 33:3–5, and Jeremiah 10:25. Explain what God means when He calls the Israelites "uncircumcised in heart." See also Nehemiah 9:16.

4. Why did Stephen's comments enrage the Jews to whom he was talking?

5. Stephen sacrificed his life as God's prophet. This was nothing new. See Nehemiah 9:26 and Luke 11:47–48. According to the Epistle Lesson (1 Peter 2:19–25) was Stephen's death "commendable?" Why or why not?

6. Jesus reveals that He is the gate into the kingdom of God and that anybody who tries to enter by another means is nothing more than a "thief" or "robber." What does Jesus say will happen to those who enter through "the gate?"

7. What do you think Jesus meant when He said that He had come so that we might have “abundant” life?

### Connect

1. List some ways people today suffer for the sake of Christ and the Gospel.
2. What are some of the things that the world offers us which would *keep* us from suffering for the sake of the Gospel and make life easy?
3. What are some of the messages that Christians proclaim to the world today that will not be popular?
4. The world holds out before our eyes a picture of what life should be like. Describe that picture as you see it. Where does such living eventually lead?
5. Jesus offers a very different picture of life. Describe the picture of “abundant” life as God reveals it to us in His Word.

### Vision

1. Take note of the offers of the “good life” being made in the media. Write what advertisers, talk-show guests, and television shows promote in order for your life to be full and complete.
2. Share your findings with your family. Discuss them during family devotions in the light of the three Bible readings for today.
3. Put your saying that describes your life in Christ on Post-It notes. Place them in conspicuous spots where you can review them often.

## Session 13—Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 17:1–15; 1 Peter 2:4–10; John 14:1–12

*Theme:* **Christ the Cornerstone**

### Law/Gospel Focus

By nature and apart from God we build our lives on foundations that have no cornerstone to give them strength and durability. But God provides the needed cornerstone for our lives in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

### Objectives

That by the power of the Holy Spirit working in us through God's Word we might

- survey the foundation and cornerstone upon which we have been building our lives;
- recognize that the only foundation that will allow Christ to be the cornerstone is the foundation of the prophets and apostles as revealed by God in His Word;
- confess Jesus Christ alone to be the Cornerstone of our lives and build everything upon Him.

### Introduction

Recently a pastor moved from Langely, British Columbia, to Stony Plain, Alberta, Canada. He received and accepted a call to a dual parish in the area of Stony Plain and began searching for a home. A beautiful, relatively new home in a new subdivision was on the market, and he and his wife decided to buy it. There was great joy when they moved into their beautiful new home, and for many weeks they enjoyed living in it.

However, when a particularly heavy rain fell one day, the family noticed water seeping through the foundation. Soon they discovered that there was a large crack in the foundation of their new home. Immediately they knew they could waste no time in having it repaired, because the fate of the entire house rested upon the strength of that foundation to withstand the rains and minus 40-degree weather in winter.

That pastor had trusted those selling the home and was ripped off because the former owners failed to reveal the structural defect.

In the world today there are many who are intent upon ripping us off spiritually. If we fall prey to them, we lose not just a house, but we lose the eternal life which God has prepared for those who believe His message of salvation in Jesus Christ alone.

1. What today could cause us to lose or to rob us of our faith?

In our spiritual lives we can build on a worldly foundation of the thoughts and musings of humans or we can build upon the foundation of the teachings of the prophets and apostles of God. That foundation does have a cornerstone and that is the chief cornerstone, Jesus Christ. Without Him nothing can stand. Nothing can destroy that which has been built on Him.

2. What supports a faith that is firmly grounded in Christ Jesus?

### Inform

The following are the summaries of the Scripture lessons appointed for the Fifth Sunday of Easter.

Acts 17:1–15—At Thessalonica the apostle Paul began to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the synagogue, and many Greeks and Jews came to faith. But the Jews who refused to believe that Jesus was the Messiah stirred the people of Thessalonica up against Paul and Silas. When they could not find Paul and Silas they dragged Jason, their host and some others before the city officials and made them post bond. The Jews accused Paul and Silas of defying the decrees of Caesar.

Paul and Silas traveled to Berea sharing the Gospel there, and once again many conversions occurred. The Bereans also checked out what Paul was preaching with the Scriptures and found it to be in complete agreement. Paul and Silas, having been harassed by the Jews from Thessalonica once again, departed and went to Athens.

1 Peter 2:4–10—Peter calls Jesus the “living stone” and declares that as we come to Him in faith, we, too, become like living stones being built up into a spiritual priesthood. By quoting the Old Testament Peter shows how Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament promises and prophecy regarding God’s promise to lay a cornerstone in Zion. He says that the builders rejected the cornerstone, and it has become a stumbling-block to them. He then calls those who do believe “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.” Through faith we can truly praise our God who has taken us out of the darkness of unbelief and into the light of faith.

John 14:1–12—Jesus promises to prepare a place for us and all believers in the mansions of heaven. He clearly says that He alone is the Way to those mansions. He is the way, the truth, and the life. He is also the physical manifestation of God the Father among the disciples. Jesus explains that they have seen the Father when they look at Him because He and the Father are one. Jesus ends this section of Scripture with the promise that His hearers would do greater things than He did after He returns to the Father.

1. What do you think Peter means when he talks about a “living” stone? To what or to whom does this refer?

2. Peter calls believers living stones also. How does one become a “living” stone?

3. The priesthood described here by Peter is the fulfillment of God’s Old Testament prophecy. Read Exodus 19:6 and Isaiah 61:6. How was the prophecy fulfilled?

4. As living stones we are being built into a holy priesthood that offers “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God.” What are these “spiritual sacrifices” to which Peter refers? See Hebrews 13:15–16; and Hosea 6:6.

5. For whom has the “Cornerstone” become a stone that causes people to stumble?

6. According to 1 Peter 2:9, what is our status as Christians? What is our God-given task?

7. In the Acts 17 passage who are

a. those for whom Jesus the Messiah became a stumbling block?

b. the royal priesthood ... the holy nation ... the people of God?

8. Describe how Jesus reveals Himself as the “chief cornerstone” in John 14. What makes Jesus the one upon whom everything else depends?

## Connect

1. Does it still hold true that Jesus Christ is a “stone of stumbling” for people today? Why or why not?

2. What does it mean to you that Jesus is *your* chief cornerstone? How does Jesus make the difference in your faith and life?

3. Since God has made us who believe in Jesus as Savior His “royal priests,” a “holy nation,” and “a people belonging to God,” how will we live and what will we do with our lives? See 1 Peter 2:9b; Ephesians 2:10; Ephesians 4:24; Romans 6; and Acts 1:8.

4. As the royal priests of God through faith in Jesus, should we expect that our lives will be easy? What does Acts 17:1–15 tell us to expect if we faithfully proclaim the risen Christ to the world?

5. In the following Bible passages, God makes promises regarding what we can expect from Him if we are about His business. Fill in the blank at the right with His promise.

*Bible Passage*

*Promise*

Matthew 28:20

Luke 12:11–12

Romans 8:38–39

Luke 21:12–13

## Vision

1. Give yourself a spiritual checkup by answering these questions:

a. -What things in your life are so important to you that if you lost them your life would fall apart?

b. -What is truly the “cornerstone” of your life?

c. -How does the time you spend on activities in your life reflect your spiritual priorities?

d. -How do you serve God and others in response to God’s love for you in Christ? Include family, friends, and others currently outside your circle of acquaintances.

e. -How does your life reflect your belief that God will be with you and bless you in all that you do as His servant?

2. After you honestly answer the questions get together with another member of the class or a close friend and ask them to discuss these questions with you. How accurately do you see yourself and your Christian life? How do others see you? How can you improve?

## Session 14—Sixth Sunday of Easter

Acts 17:22–31; 1 Peter 3:15–22; John 14:15–21

*Theme:* **Living on Purpose**

### Law/Gospel Focus

Without Christ in our lives we drift like a ship without a rudder, for we have no purpose. Christ forgives us for our disobedience and disregard for His direction in our lives. Through faith, He becomes our rudder in life, provides us with a purpose for living, and gives us our direction.

### Objectives

That by the power of the Holy Spirit working in us through God's Word we might

- see clearly the reason why the world around us seems to change constantly and fails to provide the positive, in-depth direction for life that human beings need;
- compare and contrast the meaninglessness that results from faith in the world's teachings and the meaningful life that results from faith in Christ;
- share with the unbelieving world around us the hope in Christ that gives our lives meaning and purpose.

### Introduction

The world is full of people who have absolutely no idea why they are here. They have no sense of purpose. They believe that life is something that you just pass through, during which you try to experience as many good times as possible, and then die. These people inhabit every walk of life, every profession, and every economic level in society.

1. What do all of these people have in common?

2. How are all these people like ships without rudders?

3. Is this a totally foreign experience to the person who has been a lifelong Christian, who believes in and follows Jesus? How might the Christian be caught in a rudderless trap?

4. What assurance do Christians have even when at times their lives seem to lack purpose? See 1 John 1:9.

Through Christ we “live on purpose.” Our lives are not an aimless drift. The mysteries of the world do not occupy our minds because the greatest mystery, that of the purpose of human beings and the provision God has made for eternal life in Christ, has been revealed by God Himself.

## Inform

The following are the summaries of the Scripture lessons appointed for the Sixth Sunday of Easter.

Acts 17:22–31—St. Paul is in Athens, the seat of ancient philosophers. At the Areopagus, Paul speaks to the men who have gathered to discuss the great questions of the day. He compliments them on their religiosity and notes the statue to an “unknown god” at the Areopagus. Paul uses this statue to reveal the true God to the men of Athens. He explains that this God cannot be seen or represented by statues and that He is the Creator of all things. He concludes by telling the men that this God calls them to repent because there will come a time when He will come and judge the earth.

1 Peter 3:15–22—Peter encourages us to set apart Christ in our hearts and to be prepared to give an answer to any who asks about the hope that we have as Christians. He tells us to share our hope with gentleness and respect. He reminds us that Christ, the Righteous One, was put to death in our place and made alive by the Spirit. Then he compares the waters of the Flood to the waters of Baptism, reminding us that Baptism has the power to save us as it connects us with the resurrection of Jesus.

John 14:15–21—Jesus tells us that if we love Him we will keep His commands. He tells us that because He lives we too will live. The world cannot accept the Holy Spirit because it does not know of Him, but we know Him because He lives in us.

1. The Areopagus was a public gathering place where the great philosophies of the day were discussed in the city of Athens. Surrounding the Areopagus were statues of every known god in the Greek and Roman world. To be sure that no god was overlooked there was even a statue dedicated to the “unknown god”—just to be safe. It was into this place of thinkers and debaters that Paul came to share the Gospel. How does St. Paul use what the people in the Areopagus are familiar with in order to get their attention? How might we use Paul’s approach to share the good news of Jesus Christ with unbelievers?

2. What is Paul’s purpose in coming to this place?

3. In Acts 17:29 what new insight does Paul share with his audience?

4. How were the men in the Areopagus “adrift” in the world and lacking direction for their lives?
  
5. Peter reminds us in 1 Peter 3:15–22 that we are to be ready to give the reason for our hope. How does he urge us to share the reason for our hope? Read Romans 10:14–15.
  
6. To what does Peter compare the waters of the Flood? Why is this comparison important to us?
  
7. Much of our hope comes from our baptism. According to Peter, what is the reason for that hope?
  
8. Because we love Jesus, what does He say in our Gospel Lesson that we will do? What are some things that we do or refuse to do in our everyday lives as we are moved to demonstrate our love to Jesus because of what He has done for us?

### Connect

1. Make a list of some of the ways in which we are tempted by the world to build our lives on foundations and cornerstones other than Jesus Christ.
  
2. Paul’s reminder that God is a God of judgment would have struck a certain amount of fear into the hearts of the men of the Areopagus. Does it do the same to us? Why or why not?
  
3. Can you think of an instance when you had the opportunity to tell someone about Jesus, to express your faith in Him, but did not? Is this a common occurrence in our lives? What is God’s response

when we do not witness when given the opportunity? See Psalm 103:12; Romans 4:7; and Ephesians 2:4–5.

4. As Noah passed through the waters of the Flood and was saved by the grace of God, so too we pass through the waters of Baptism and are saved by the grace of God. What are we connected to by Baptism that gives us absolute assurance that we are saved for all eternity? See 1 Peter 3:21.

5. Discuss together how we can daily live “on purpose” rather than just let life happen.

### Vision

1. When temptations or trials come this week remind yourself of 1 Peter 3:21–22.
2. Take some notes on the pastor’s sermon, especially if he chooses - -one of the appointed readings for his text. During the week reread your notes on his sermon and the Scripture passages we have studied.
3. Talk with your family or friends this week in devotion time about your direction in life and theirs. Direct one another to Jesus and allow Him to strengthen you and uplift you and help you to live your life on purpose.

## Session 15—The Ascension of Our Lord

Acts 1:1–11; Ephesians 1:16–23; Luke 24:44–53

**Theme: Whom You Know! What You Know!**

### Law/Gospel Focus

People often live by the motto “It’s not what you know, but whom you know that enables you to get ahead.” This notion is sinful when it blindly ignores or forgets Him who will ultimately enable you to get that which will lead to eternity. By God’s grace through faith in the one whom God has made known to us—Jesus Christ—we receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life with Him in heaven. The Holy Spirit enables us to confess, “It’s not only what you know, but whom you know—the work and person of Jesus—that will enable you to know who you are and what you are to be about.”

### Objectives

That by the power of the Holy Spirit working in us through God’s Word we might

- identify the forces and factors that cause people to seek getting ahead as the highest goal of their lives;
- recognize that improving one’s lot in life is not wrong unless it overshadows or ignores the one who is able to provide eternal blessings;
- reaffirm that Christ provides the best that life can offer—eternal life in heaven.

### Introduction

“It’s not *what* you know but *whom* you know that is important.”

A Lutheran high school band and choir from Saginaw, Michigan, were trying to get across the border into Canada. The border guards demanded thousands of dollars from the director “to insure that they would not sell the instruments in Canada.” No matter how hard the director pleaded, the border officials would not listen. He appealed to their common sense, indicating that if band members sold their instruments, they would be unable to play in the concert.

A chaperon traveling with the band had assisted a local Presbyterian pastor in his campaign to become a member of Parliament. The pastor-turned-politician was now Secretary of State and his assistance was requested by the chaperon. Within 10 minutes the band and the choir were given permission to enter Canada with no deposit on their instruments. Sometimes *who* you know makes a big difference!

1. What situations have caused you or someone you know to exclaim, “It’s not what you know but who you know that is important?”

2. How does the phrase, “It’s not *what* you know but *whom* you know,” relate to your faith life?

3. Would the phrase, “It’s not only *what* you know but *who* you know,” more accurately reflect your faith life? Why or why not?

## Inform

Read the following summaries of the Scripture lessons appointed for Ascension Sunday.

Acts 1:1–11—Luke recounts the resurrection appearances of Jesus and His promise to send the Holy Spirit upon them. Jesus also states clearly that the disciples will be His witnesses after they receive the gift of the Spirit. They will witness to Him in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. After speaking to them, He suddenly is taken up before their eyes into the heavens until a cloud hides Him from their sight. An angel then appears and reassures them that Jesus will one day return in the same way they saw Him leave.

Ephesians 1:16–23—St. Paul prays for the spiritual strengthening of the people at Ephesus. He assures the people that God is using the same power that He used to raise Jesus from the dead in order to give them spiritual strength. He reveals here that Jesus is indeed in the heavenly places with His Father and that He is now ruling over all creation because God has placed all things under His feet.

Luke 24:44–53—In this Gospel Lesson Jesus opens the eyes of the disciples to understand the prophecies regarding how the Messiah would suffer and die and rise again on the third day. He explains that they are now the witnesses of these things which have occurred before their own eyes. He promises to send the Holy Spirit who will cloth them with power. Then, as in the Acts account Jesus is taken up into heaven before their eyes. They responded by worshipping Jesus and then returned to Jerusalem and praised God in the temple.

1. How long, according to the Acts lesson, did Jesus appear to people and continue to speak to them about the kingdom of God? What is significant about this length of time? See Genesis 7:4, 12; Exodus 16:35; Exodus 24:18; and Matthew 4:2.

2. Describe what the disciples experienced on the mount at the ascension of our Lord into heaven. Use both the Acts reading and the Gospel Lesson as your guide.

3. Why do you think that God provided angels immediately after Jesus’ ascension to speak to the disciples? See also Luke 1:28–38; Luke 2:9–14; Matthew 1:20–23; Matthew 2:13; and Matthew 4:11.

4. What does it mean when Luke writes that Jesus “opened their minds” (v. 45)? Why could they not understand these things before?

5. What do you think is significant about Paul's statement to the Ephesians that God "seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms?"

6. After the appearance of the angels and the disappearance of Jesus, what was the reaction of the disciples?

### Connect

1. Why is it imperative that we know both *the who* and *the what* about Jesus?

2. We have been "clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). For many of us that occurred as the Holy Spirit brought us to faith at our Baptism. Others were "clothed with power" as the Holy Spirit brought them to faith as they heard God's Word proclaimed. Because we have received this power from on high, what do we learn from these three lessons about who we are and what we are to be about?

- Acts 1:8

- Ephesians 1:17

- Ephesians 1:18–19

- Luke 24:48

- Luke 24:49

- Luke 24:52–53

3. Jesus ascended into heaven and took His place at the right hand of the Father. How does this fact affect *who* you are and *what* you know and do?

4. What assurance does God provide when we are tempted to forget *who* we know and *what* we know about Him or when we forget *who* we are through faith and *what* we are to be about?

### Vision

1. Read Revelation 21 and 22. Meditate on the message of salvation contained therein and picture in your mind's eye the beauty of what God has prepared for you in heaven through faith in Christ Jesus.

2. Share your insights regarding *who* you are and *what* you are empowered to do because of *who* you know—Jesus Christ—and *what* you know about Him with a person who needs strengthening of their faith. Pray for that person.

## Session 16—Seventh Sunday of Easter

Acts 1:(1–7), 8–14; 1 Peter 4:12–17; 5:6–11; John 17:1–11

### *Theme: Suffering for the Sake of the Gospel*

#### Law/Gospel Focus

Because of our sinful nature, and because of the power of our spiritual enemies, we will at times suffer for the sake of the Gospel. God in Christ Jesus promises to protect us so that we can remain strong, firm, and steadfast until we receive the crown of eternal life.

#### Objectives

That by the power of the Holy Spirit working in us through God's Word we might

- identify the sufferings that we, as Christians, may have to undergo for the sake of the Gospel;
- identify the enemies of the Gospel that may seek to bring suffering into our lives because we are children of God through faith in Jesus Christ;
- reaffirm discover from the Scriptures the means that God has chosen to keep us firm in the faith even in the midst of suffering.

#### Introduction

Suffering occurs for many different reasons. Sometimes circumstances totally outside of our control bring us suffering. We may be driving carefully and within the speed limit down a familiar street when suddenly, out of nowhere a car comes crashing into us. Bones are broken and lives may be lost even though we had done nothing wrong.

But sometimes we bring suffering upon ourselves when we do things which are directly opposite to God's will for us revealed in the Bible. God's will for marriage is that one man and one woman make a commitment to each other for life. But many, including Christians, forsake their vows and give their love to another, bringing much heartache to themselves, their children, their families and their original partner.

Sometimes the devil uses the lure of money or sex or power to seduce men and women into living lives that are an affront to God and a danger to society. And so people suffer.

1. What suffering do people face because of sin in this world?

2. What suffering do people face because of their sins?

3. How can and/or does suffering affect our faith in Jesus?

The good news is that God has the prescription for lives that are filled with suffering, whether of our own making or as the result of other factors. And the main ingredient in that prescription is Jesus.

## Inform

Read the summary of each of the Bible lessons appointed for the Seventh Sunday of Easter.

Acts 1:8–14—Jesus gave the promise of the power of the Holy Spirit and the command to be His witnesses everywhere. He then ascended into heaven, and the angels assured the disciples that He would one day return in the very same way that He had just left them.

The disciples returned to Jerusalem. Matthias is chosen as the disciple who will replace Judas. The disciples, the women, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, remain together in constant prayer as they await the promise of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

1 Peter 4:12–17; 5:6–11—Peter gives us a stark reminder of the cost of discipleship. Christians will be insulted on account of the name of Jesus and will face persecution and much suffering. But at the same time he promises that God will support us in our suffering and enable us to go through it without losing our faith. The key, Peter says, is to cast all our worries, cares and anxieties on God, and He will uplift us. He ends with a warning to be self-controlled and alert as the devil, like a roaring lion, prowls around seeking Christians to devour. Finally Peter gives us the words of assurance that God will in time restore us when suffering has run its course.

John 17:1–11—John records the words of Jesus as He prays for those He came to save. Jesus asks His Father to glorify Him now that the work of redemption might be complete. Jesus also prays for those He leaves behind as He prepares to leave this world and return to His Father in heaven.

1. Consider the life of the early Christian church. What are some of the sufferings that Christians endured for the sake of the Gospel?

2. Read 2 Corinthians 11:22–29. Write in the space below a list of the things that the apostle Paul suffered for the sake of the - -Gospel. Remember that this is only a partial listing. What astonishing words did Paul confess even after he reflected on the suffering he had endured? See 2 Corinthians 12:7–10, especially verse 10. What enabled Paul to confess these words? See 2 Corinthians 12:9.

3. In 1 Peter 4:15–16, what does Peter say we are not to suffer for? Of what kind of suffering do we not need to be ashamed?

4. In 1 Peter 5:6–9 what five commands does Peter give us?

5. Who or what are some of the enemies that contemporary Christians must face today? Make a list.

6. What promises does God provide to us in 1 Peter 5:10; John 17:10–11; and 2 Corinthians 12:9? How do these promises enable you to face suffering with hope and confidence?

### Connect

1. Read Romans 6:1–14 and Galatians 5:16–26. Like Peter, St. Paul urges us Christians to live in the spirit of God not following the ways of the world. Now look up Ephesians 6:10–20. What does God provide for us to keep us strong in the faith even as we face suffering and hardships?

2. Can you think of a time in your life when suffering weighed you down? Share with the class, if you feel comfortable, the suffering that came into your life (physical, spiritual, and/or emotional) and how God enabled you to cope and to come through the suffering victorious and stronger in faith.

### Vision

1. Talk with family and friends about the enemies of God that seek to bring suffering that will cause us to turn away from God. Share the power that we have by faith in Christ to overcome all suffering.

2. Talk with your pastor. Ask if there is anyone for whom you can pray this week who is currently going through suffering in their life. Pray for that person.

## Session 17—The Day of Pentecost

Joel 2:28–29; Acts 2:1–21; John 16:5–11

*Theme: The Sound of the Spirit*

### Law/Gospel Focus

People often hear the Word of God but refuse to listen. They miss out on the power of the Holy Spirit working through that Word to create saving faith. Despite this sinful inclination of our human nature to reject God, the Holy Spirit persistently endeavors to open the ears and hearts of people to Christ by implanting faith in hearts and minds through God's Word.

### Objectives

That by the power of the Holy Spirit working in us through God's Word we might

- hear the sounds of the Spirit speaking to us in the Scripture lessons appointed for the Day of Pentecost;
- filter out the sounds of the world that would drown out God's Word to us and diminish the power of the Spirit working through that Word;
- be empowered by the same Spirit who empowered the disciples on Pentecost so that we might fearlessly and faithfully speak the truth of the Gospel;
- be enabled to see the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in us and in others and to praise God from whom all such blessings flow for His marvelous grace.

### Introduction

Technology today has enabled us to experience sound as never before. Many homes today are fully equipped with “surround sound” systems that make people feel “on location” as they watch a movie. Compact discs reproduce sound so faithfully that we are made to feel that we are in the concert hall.

Technology has also enabled us to filter out sounds that we do not want to hear. Our automobiles are now well-insulated for the quiet ride that is mandatory as we play our music in solitude. Laser technology has enabled us to filter out the background noises so common with records and early tapes.

Human beings also can filter out the sounds that we do not wish to hear. We have learned how to ignore them. We no longer listen to commercials on television. Children often choose to tune out their parents.

How sad it is, however, when people decide to tune out the Holy Spirit, who speaks today through God's Word, and refuse to believe what the Spirit says about Jesus as Savior. And how sad when Christians who have been redeemed by Christ and know it, refuse to listen to the prompting of the Spirit of God and listen instead to the sound and fury of the world.

1. What causes people to tune out the Word of God and, in so doing, the Holy Spirit's faith-creating and -strengthening power?

2. What might we do to eliminate those things that may cause us to tune out the Word of God? others to tune out the Word of God?

## Inform

Read the summary of the lessons for the Day of Pentecost.

Joel 2:28–29—God promises through the prophet Joel that one day He will pour out His Spirit upon all His people. Then people will prophecy and dream dreams and see visions. God promises to pour out His Spirit upon men and women, young and old, who are His servants.

Acts 2:1–21—The disciples were all gathered together in one place and suddenly a sound like a violent wind swept through the house and what seemed to be tongues of fire appeared on the heads of the disciples. They began to speak in different languages. People from all over the world had gathered together in Jerusalem, and every person heard the disciples speaking in their own language, declaring the wonders of God. Peter explained to the crowd that they were witnessing the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy that God would pour out His Spirit upon His people.

John 16:5–11—Jesus tells the disciples that He is leaving them and that the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, would come in fulfillment of God’s prophecy. The task of the Holy Spirit, according to Jesus, is to expose the guilt of people in regard to sin, righteousness, and judgment.

1. Describe in your own words the scene described in Acts 2:1–4.

2. What did Jesus promise in our Gospel Lesson?

3. The “Sounds of the Past”: What had God, through the prophet Joel, promised hundreds of years before the Pentecost event?

4. “The Sounds of Pentecost”: How do you think the disciples reacted when they heard the roaring of wind but felt no wind? saw the tongues of fire on their heads? spoke languages they had never learned?

5. What change was immediately evident in the disciples?

6. According to Acts 2:15 what did the people who witnessed this outpouring of the Holy Spirit think?

7. What is Peter's explanation for all of this?

8. Reread the Gospel Lesson. Then read the words that follow—John 16:12–15. Why does Jesus call the Holy Spirit, “the Counselor”?

### Connect

1. Pentecost was the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. The Holy Spirit was poured out upon His servants and wonderful things happened. How do we today receive the gift of the Holy Spirit? See Acts 2:38–39; and 10:44–48.

2. Next to each of the following Bible passages write the particular task or function of the Holy Spirit indicated.

a. 1 Corinthians 6:11

b. 1 Corinthians 12:3

c. 2 Thessalonians 2:14

d. John 3:5–6

e. 1 Peter 1:23

f. Romans 8:9

g. Galatians 5:22–23

h. Philippians 1:6

3. According to Acts 7:51, why don't some people believe in Jesus as their Savior?

4. The Holy Spirit speaks today through the sounds of Baptism, the sounds of God's Word proclaimed and read, and the sounds of the Lord's Supper. Why is it important for you as a child of God by faith to be in God's Word regularly, remember daily your Baptism, and receive often the Sacrament of the Altar?

5. How has the Holy Spirit, working through God's Word and Sacrament, enabled you to filter out the sounds of the world that might distract you or you lead you away from hearing God and His desire for your life?

### Vision

1. Find your Baptism certificate. Place it in a conspicuous place and every morning when you arise, look at it and say a prayer of thanks to God that He gave you the Holy Spirit and faith through Holy Baptism.

2. If you have children, sit down with them, show them their Baptism certificates. Share with them the importance of their baptism and how the Holy Spirit brought them to faith.

3. Write a prayer of thanks to the Holy Spirit for bringing you to faith and for continuing to strengthen you and keep you in your faith in Jesus.

## Leader Notes

Leaders, please note the different abilities of your class members. Some will easily find the Bible passages listed in this study. Others will need assistance. To make participation easier, team up members of the class. For example, if a question asks you to look up several passages, assign one passage to one group, the second to another, and so forth. Divide up the work! Let participants present the different answers that they discover.

Each session divides into four easy-to-use sections:

**Introduction** introduces key concepts that will be discovered.

**Inform** guides the participants into Scripture.

**Connect** enables participants to apply that which is learned in Scripture to their lives.

**Vision** provides participants with practical suggestions for extending the theme of the lesson out of the classroom and into the world.

## Session 1—First Sunday in Lent: Tempting Isn't It?

Genesis 2:7–9, 15–17; 3:1–3; Romans 5:12–19; Matthew 4:1–11

### Introduction

Ask for a volunteer to read aloud the opening paragraphs. Have the participants break into groups of two or three to consider the questions. Allow time for the groups to come together and share with the class.

1. A number of answers will be shared. You may offer some of your own, such as “It’s just this once” or “Nobody will find out” or “It’s not hurting anybody.”

2. Invariably, sin always has a destructive effect on people’s lives. In the case of Adam and Eve, for example, they were cast out of the Garden, death was the wages of their sin, and they were set at odds with one another and with God. As other examples are suggested, continue to explore the effects of giving in to temptation and the lies of Satan.

3. Answers again may vary. To “get the ball rolling,” you may want to suggest greed, self-indulgence, lust, pride, tolerance of immorality, etc.

### Inform

Hopefully the participants will have read the assigned Scripture lessons in preparation for this class. If not, you may need to read them aloud at this time. Have volunteers read the summaries of the lessons provided in the Study Guide.

The Old Testament Lesson, Gen. 2:7–9, 15–17; 3:1–7, gives an account of the fall into sin. This passage details the events but does not provide the answers to other questions often asked (e.g., the origin of evil). If these questions arise, it is best to stress that the Bible tells us what we *need* to know but not always what we *want* to know.

In the Epistle Lesson, Rom. 5:12–19, we are presented with the divine solution to the human dilemma. The first man disobeyed, made us all sinners, and put us under the sentence of death. God became one of us in the person of Jesus Christ and by His obedience brought life to sinners.

Matt. 4:1–11 is the account of the temptation of Jesus. It is easy to fall into the trap of moralizing and delivering a set of how-to instructions about resisting temptation. Of course, Jesus’ reliance on the power of the Word to resist temptation must be highlighted. At the same time, however, the emphasis here is that Jesus resisted temptation and, as the sinless Son of God and Son of Man, won for us our salvation.

1. There was an abundance of food, and Adam and Eve were created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27). Obedience would have come naturally. Disobedience was unnatural. Satan tempted the created by questioning the authority, power, and motives of the Creator.

2. The ultimate temptation is to live apart from God—to believe that this is superior to living in a right relationship with Him. Eve began to believe that God was, indeed, holding out on her.

3. Initially, Eve responded to the temptation by quoting God. Satan responded by undermining her faith in what God had said.

4. Adam had lost the image of God in which he was created and could only pass on to his son—and to all future generations—his own sinful, fallen image. With the sin that is inherited by all comes death. By nature, death reigns over all.

5. To offer His life as the perfect, atoning sacrifice for sin, the Savior had to be born without sin and live a life without sin. This was possible because He was both son of man and son of God.

6. Satan knew that Jesus would be hungry and weak after fasting for 40 days. Thus, the first temptation was “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”

7. Jesus responded with God’s Word. Satan’s comeback was a distorted, out-of-context use of the Word. Jesus remained firm, however, in His reliance on the word and promises of His heavenly Father. Likewise, our best defense against the temptations we face is firm reliance on and conviction in God’s word and promise.

8. It is only through the “*obedience* of the one man [that] the many will be made righteous.”

### Connect

1. Our strength does not come from any natural inner quality of human character that we can draw on. To pray this petition means to rely completely on the strength of our gracious God. For further study, see 1 Peter 5:6–11.

2. We have been baptized into our perfect Savior. His victory over sin and death is our victory. We are no longer slaves to sin. We have been set free from its power. Before we could do nothing but sin; now, under grace, we can live to the glory of God.

3. Rather than entertain the temptations of Satan, we are to be self-controlled and resist him. We are to stand firm in the faith which was delivered to us.

4. While the ultimate victory is ours in Jesus Christ, we still lose battles in our struggles with temptation. Some despair because we sin daily, even to the very end of our lives. God promises, however, that His grace is sufficient for all. Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, pleads on our behalf and, for the sake of His Son, God forgives us and counts us as righteous. This grace is as valid after the millionth sin as it is after the first sin. While this grace is limitless, it is not license to “sin that grace may abound” (Rom. 6:1 RSV). It empowers us, rather, to live to the praise and glory of our Savior.

### Vision

Briefly discuss the suggested activities. Encourage participants to follow through with them.

## Session 2—Second Sunday in Lent: Empty, Filled, Spilled

Genesis 12:1–8; Romans 4:1–5, 13–17; John 4:5–26 (27–30, 39–42)

### Introduction

Read aloud the opening paragraphs. If it is available and time permits, find and play a recording of the song “People Need the Lord.” Discuss together the questions that follow.

1. All of the people listed were individuals who won fame and fortune by the use of their talents. Each also died because of a drug overdose and, in most cases, in an act of self-destruction. Before their deaths, the world perceived them as happy, successful, and fulfilled. After their deaths, they were viewed as tragic figures who lived unfulfilled lives, despite all they had and all they had accomplished.

2. The cults (e.g., Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons), other religions (e.g., Islam, and Hinduism), and other popular philosophies (e.g. humanism and New Age) all point inward into one’s self to find meaning and purpose for life. Man, however, is spiritually dead. In the midst of our deepest spiritual yearnings, there are no answers to be found within us; in the midst of guilt and brokenness, there is nothing we can do to atone for our wrongs.

3. Read aloud Romans 15:13. God fills us with hope and peace as we trust in Him, in order that we overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Notice that God fills to overflowing.

### Inform

The participants should have read the lessons before class. For the sake of visitors or new class members, it would be wise to read the lessons aloud. In any case, a brief summary is provided for each lesson.

Genesis 12:1–8—It was part of God’s great plan of salvation that He called Abram and established a covenant with him. Through this covenant God continued to work in history to bring about the first promise recorded in Gen. 3:15. We see God’s grace at work in His dealings with Abram. We see in Abram a man who stood in need of a Savior (Joshua 24:2), and God called Him to faith and a new life (Acts 7:2).

Romans 4:1–5;13–17—Although Abraham is honored as one of the great patriarchs, his relationship with God is based on the greatness of God’s grace, not the greatness of Abraham’s works. Those who are of the faith of Abraham are descendants of Abraham and share in the blessings of salvation.

John 4:5–42—Was the Samaritan woman a “daughter of Abraham”? Many in Jesus’ day would have argued that she was not. Many Jews held that Samaritans were unclean and could not share in the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant. She was also an adulteress and, by reason of sin, was considered undeserving of God’s love. In the Gospel Lesson, Jesus shatters both notions by revealing Himself to her as the Savior. It is a common notion today that when you change your life, then God will accept you. Here, Jesus accepts her as she is and her life is changed.

1. The answers are as follows:
  - a. “I will make you into a great nation”;
  - b. “I will bless you”;
  - c. “I will make your name great”;
  - d. “You will be a blessing”;
  - e. “I will bless those who bless you”;

- f. “Whoever curses you I will curse”;
  - g. “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”
2. Abram’s descendants would be as “numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore” (Genesis 22:17). From His descendants would come the Savior of the world (Genesis 22:18; 26:4; Acts 3:25).
  3. All those who share in the faith of Abraham and trust in the Savior.
  4. Water that will become in Him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.
  5. Our own broken cisterns cannot hold water. Water flows out of us, and our lives are dry and parched. Jesus our Shepherd leads us to springs of living water.
  6. Holy Baptism gives us a clear conscience, saves us, puts to death our sinful nature, and gives us a new life in Christ.

### Connect

1. Responses will vary. This can be a powerful study of the sinful nature and the destruction it can cause in an individual’s life. Participants may especially come to grips with recognizing a particular weakness with which they are struggling. If it were not for the grace of God, this sin could easily have wreaked havoc in their lives.
2. This question is particularly important as a reminder of the grace of God. We often speak of grace in the abstract sense. Here is where we can see it at work in real ways.
3. Esther 9:22—Sorrow and mourning are turned to joy and celebration. Those who live by faith give food to one another and gifts to the poor. John 13:34–35—Discipleship is made evident by our love for one another. 1 Peter 1:22—The love of God in Christ motivates us to demonstrate sincere, deep love from the heart, for one another.
4. Often, there is a tendency to give generalized answers (e.g., witnessing, love). Encourage participants to be specific.

### Vision

Read aloud the activities suggested for the coming week. Take time to explain them further if necessary and encourage participants to follow through with these assignments.

## Session 3—Third Sunday in Lent: Speak Up!

Isaiah 42:14–21; Ephesians 5:8–14; John 9:13–17, 34–39

### Introduction

Read the story aloud and then have the participants break into small groups to discuss the questions that follow. Allow time for the groups to share with the entire class.

1. We can be intimidated by fear of not knowing the answers to questions people will ask, fear of being labeled a “fanatic,” fear of broken relationships, etc.
2. The Word of God has the power to change people’s hearts and minds. A well-known example of this is when Saul was converted on the road to Damascus.
3. God seeks to bring people to repentance. He rejoices when people receive His forgiveness through faith. He takes pleasure in people whose lives have been changed and now live to the praise of their heavenly Father. As we share the Good News of Jesus Christ, God works through us to win the lost.

### Inform

Read aloud each of the Scripture lessons. After each lesson is read, have one of the participants read the appropriate lesson summary in the Study Guide.

Isaiah 42 begins with the first of four “servant songs” found in Isaiah. This song, like the others, points forward to God’s Servant who would deliver the world from sin. For the “bruised reed” and the “smoldering wick”—those who have been burdened by guilt and failure—this is good news. In our Old Testament Lesson, Isaiah quotes the Lord, who can no longer keep silent about what He will do. “I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth.”

The Epistle Lesson exhorts us to “visible living.” The light of the Gospel has changed our very natures so that we might live as children of the light, not of the darkness. While it is “shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret,” the light makes us stand out as God’s children. In that sense, all that we say and do speaks loudly to the world of the great things God has done for us and for the world.

In the Gospel Lesson, Jesus had just healed a man who had been blind from birth. The Pharisees say of Jesus, “This man is not from God, for He does not keep the Sabbath.” Others ask, “How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?” Indeed, the very purpose of this miracle, as with others, is to show Jesus as the promised Savior, the Servant spoken of in Isaiah 42. The blind man speaks of what Jesus had done for him. In the simple confession of faith he makes in verse 38, he speaks of what is now in his heart: “Lord, I believe.”

Have the participants work individually through the questions in their Study Guide. If time is short, assign specific questions to specific people and then ask them to share their answers with the group.

1. The things that God will do according to verse 15 relate to His creation. Yet these things, according to verse 16, are for the sake of the crowning glory of His creation, humankind. In spite of sin, God will not forsake us. By His grace, He will turn darkness into light and lead us along unfamiliar paths, into the way of truth (cf., John 14:6).
2. There is only one in whom there is salvation. The Scriptures (prophets) point to Jesus. They *promise* that “everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness” and “will be saved.”
3. Yes, he had this certainty. He freely confessed Jesus as his Savior (John 9:38) and worshiped Him.

4. It says that those who confess “other gods” will be “turned back in utter shame.” Syncretism—the mixing of religions—was often in vogue in ancient Israel. Other gods were worshiped along with the true God. Syncretism is also in vogue today, and the response from Isaiah 42:17 is as relevant in our day and age as it was in the 8th century B.C., Isaiah’s time.

5. As Christ’s redeemed people, we are to live as children of light. Although we live in a world enshrouded by the darkness of sin, the light of the Gospel is powerful enough to overcome the darkness.

6. Both the Samaritan woman and the man born blind spoke freely to others about Jesus and in their testimony pointed to Jesus as the Savior.

## Connect

As a group, discuss the questions in the Study Guide.

1. While the Samaritan woman was among her own people, she was also an adulteress. People would have, at the minimum, shunned her. The man born blind was asked to speak to people who had already rejected Jesus as the Messiah. Humanly speaking, it would have been safer and more comfortable to have kept silent. According to Ephesians 5:14, however, we are awakened from human things. We are raised from the dead and the light of Christ shines on us. See also Romans 6:4.

2. Humanly speaking, the crowd could have become hostile. The youth could have declined to sing. Their fear might have prevented them from sharing the Gospel. This experience might have so soured them on witnessing that they would never attempt it again.

3. The youth could have been strengthened by the promises of God’s Word and their witness could have led many to the Savior.

4. Read the following account to the class:

The concert began. During the sharing of the Good News before every song, the crowd was attentive. As the youth sang, the people responded enthusiastically, shouting for encores. At the end of the concert, the youth were moved to add a song that they had recently learned but never yet performed—“Let There Be Praise.” Following a thunderous ovation, the director of the school presented each singer with flowers and said, “This is the first time this Good News has been heard in this building, and I hope it will not be the last.” Many young men stayed afterward to talk to the youth about Jesus. (Note: This story is true. The author of this Bible study was the director for the youth choir and was present when this happened.)

5. Responses will vary.

6. Read responsively 1 John 2:12–14 as printed in the Study Guide.

## Vision

Discuss this week’s proposed activities with the class. Encourage them to follow through with them, one step at a time.

## Session 4—Fourth Sunday in Lent: Cross, Crowns, and Servants

Hosea 5:15–6:2; Romans 8:1–10; Matthew 20:17–28

### Introduction

Ask for a volunteer to read the opening paragraphs. Then break into smaller groups to discuss the questions.

1. Jesus lived a perfect life in our place. He then took “the wages of sin” upon Himself so that we might be acceptable to God. “By His wounds we are healed.”

2. God’s love for all people moved Him to send His only Son. People did nothing to deserve or to earn God’s favor.

3. Sacrificial love. God was willing to sacrifice His Son for even the worst of sinners.

4. Participants may wish to speak in general terms of what God has done for them. This may also become a time when they share their own story. In any case, the purpose here is to help them realize that at great cost to Himself—His only Son’s death on the cross—God has endowed each of them with immeasurable worth.

5. Paul gloried not in power and position, but in the cross of Christ. It was in the cross that he found eternal life.

6. From all the verses we’ve read thus far it is evident that “faithful” does not imply following a set of rules and regulations. From the context of this verse and from other passages, it means “clinging in faith to the one who gave His life to save us.” Here again we see how the crown proceeds from Christ’s cross

### Inform

Read the lessons aloud. To help provide a better focus for the study, ask for a volunteer to read the summaries of the lessons that are provided in the Study Guide.

Chapters 4 and 5 of Hosea are reminiscent of a courtroom scene. In chapter 4, God sets forth His charges against Israel and warns Judah. In chapter 5, He passes judgment. He will be like a great lion who tears them to pieces. There will be no one to rescue them, not even the Assyrians, to whom Israel was turning for help. At the same time, according to the appointed lesson for the day, His great desire and longing is that they will confess their sins and repent of them. He pictures an Israel that is so confident of His grace and mercy that they will turn to Him, and He will bind up their wounds, and they will live in His presence.

Romans 8 is one of the great “promise chapters” of the Bible, and the first verse is one of the great promises of the Bible. Christ was a sin offering to satisfy the demands of God’s Law. He met the righteous requirements of the Law on our behalf. Those who are in Christ are set free from condemnation. The sinful nature has been put to death, and now Christ lives in us. These 10 verses set forth the wondrous crown of life that we have been given. At the same time, it does not hide the tremendous price that was paid by God’s own Son.

In the Gospel Lesson, Jesus tells His disciples that He will do the great work of atonement. Thus on this basis the disciples could expect heavenly wages. In verses 20–28 the mother of James and John asks Jesus to grant her sons places of honor. Jesus tells all of the disciples that there is no greatness without servanthood. His example was His own life. He, as the Son of Man, served and gave His life as a ransom for many.

Have the participants discuss the questions in small groups.

1. God is pictured here as a physician. The phrases that are used are: “He will heal us ... He will bind up our wounds ... He will revive us ... He will restore us.”
2. The transition is made possible by Christ. Although we confess we are guilty of sin, in Jesus there is no condemnation. We have been pardoned and set free.
3. There is no condemnation (the crown) because Jesus was condemned (the cross).
4. They asked for Jesus to do whatever they wanted. Also, they asked to sit at His right hand and left hand in glory.

## Connect

Discuss the questions that follow with the entire class.

1. Answers may vary. At the heart of this, however, is that it is and always will be a wondrous and joyous thing to serve a Lord whose love for us is unconditional and sacrificial.
2. The forgiveness won for us at Calvary’s cross wipes our slate clean and gives us a fresh start. Old sinful habits die daily in our Baptism, in which we have forgiveness, life, and salvation.
3. Answers will vary. Share some of the “other relationships” that people may have mentioned. Point out that God’s love for us in Christ motivates us to love others.
4. Forgiveness overcomes bitterness and grudges. Encourage the participants to share specific ways in which relationships can change.

## Vision

Encourage the class members to work on the suggested activities.

## Session 5—Fifth Sunday in Lent: One Nation under God

Ezekiel 37:1–3, (4–10), 11–14; Romans 8:11–19; John 11:47–53

### Introduction

Ask for a volunteer to read the opening paragraphs. Discuss the questions that follow.

1. Refugees are those who have fled their own country. It may be because of political reasons. It may be that war has ravaged their country, and they are now homeless and seeking safety. A refugee has no place to call home. Spiritual refugees likewise have no place to call home. Separated from God by sin, they seek refuge in other religions, in the comforts of this world (if they are available), or in self-righteousness. Cain experienced the consequence of his sin and compared it to being a refugee or a “restless wanderer.” See Genesis 4:12–14.

2. While many talk of their journey, they are uncertain of the destination. Philippians 3:20 speaks of the confidence we have of our final destination in Christ. Our journey as Christians is not one of a lost and wandering people.

### Inform

Read the lessons aloud. Then read the summaries provided in the Study Guide.

Ezekiel 37:1–14—The Word here reminds us that God restores people who are dead in sin. Through the Gospel, the Holy Spirit imparts life. He makes us alive in Christ and calls us “my people.” See Romans 9:25–26.

Romans 8:11–19—In the Epistle Lesson we are presented with the picture of belonging. We have been made alive with Christ in our Baptism, and God declares us His sons. We are graced with the blessing of being co-heirs with Christ. As the Spirit works faith in us and moves us to call God “*Abba*, Father,” we are assured that we belong to Him. See also Galatians 4:4–7.

John 11:47–53—Through the high priest Caiaphas, God tells of the lengths to which He is willing to go for Israel and “also for the scattered children of God.” In order to “bring them together and make them one,” He is willing to offer His own Son to pay the price for this to happen. Indeed, one man would die for the people. That one man was the sinless Son of God. He died that we might not perish eternally.

Have participants break into small groups to discuss the questions that follow. After 10 minutes invite small groups to report to the larger group.

1. Answers may vary according to the experiences of the participants. A common thread, however, will be the destructive nature and power of sin, particularly as it destroys human relationships.

2. God gives to His Church the Word, His Spirit, and His Son. In the Old Testament Lesson, the power of the Word is portrayed as life-giving. In the Epistle Lesson, the Spirit dwells in us and produces faith and Christian life. In the Gospel Lesson, the Son gives His life that we may live with God.

3. The words “very dry” indicated that they had been there a long time. Death had been so long present that there was absolutely no hope of life. Thus, humanly speaking, there was no possibility of life among these bones.

4. The Word is capable of giving life even to “*dry* bones.”

5. The Word, which brought life to dry bones brings life to us. The Spirit comes to us in the Word and gives life to our mortal bodies, just as the Spirit raised Christ from the dead. This continues a theme developed in Romans 6:1–14. Pause here and offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God for our Baptism, for it is in Baptism that the miracle of the dry bones takes place in us. Brought to life, we are brought to the

family of God. Because of the life we have in Christ, we are also assured that He will raise us from the dead to live with Him forever.

6. In the Bible, we are given but a glimpse of the glories of heaven. Yet even that glimpse of what we shall inherit calls forth eager anticipation. Revelation 21:1–7 and 22:1–7 present us with a sampling of the “glory which shall be revealed.”

7. Caiaphas said, “It is better for you that one Man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.

## Connect

Discuss the questions that follow with the entire class.

1. Answers will vary. In introducing this question, however, point out that John Newton does not say “I found Jesus,” but rather “Jesus found me.”

2. Again, answers will vary. Emphasize, however, that it is God who is at work in them. See Romans 8:28 and 1 Corinthians 12:6.

3. Sponsoring a refugee meant to take personal responsibility to bring a refugee to our country. It meant also that you were responsible to provide for his or her basic needs and to ensure that the process of adjustment and integration took place. Similarly, we may also seek to be responsible for sharing the Word with an individual. While the Holy Spirit alone is responsible for conversion, He works through the Word which we share. New Christians also need mature Christians to help establish them in the faith and community of the Christian church.

4. As “citizens of heaven,” we have peace with God, forgiveness, the privilege of prayer, the fellowship of other Christians, removal of guilt, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the certain hope of eternal life in heaven. This list is by no means exhaustive, and students may add others to this list.

5. The process took place at the cross. Christ earned eternal life for us by substituting Himself for us and thereby taking the punishment for sin that really belonged to us. In the Gospel the forgiveness won for us is proclaimed. The Holy Spirit creates faith in our hearts that we may respond to the Gospel invitation, receive that forgiveness, and become citizens of heaven.

## Vision

Encourage class members to work on the suggested activities. Suggest that, if possible, they may wish to work with another participant on these activities.

## Session 6—Palm Sunday (Sunday of the Passion): Who for Us and for Our Salvation

Isaiah 50:4–9b; Philippians 2:5–11; Matthew 27:11–54

### Introduction

Read the opening paragraphs. In preparation, look for newspaper or magazine articles on the New Age movement and its emphasis on becoming gods. In addition, encourage the participants to share what they may have heard or read along this line. Because of the popularity and prevalence of New Age philosophy, it is a timely subject for discussion and provides a stark backdrop for the theme of this study.

1. Answers will vary according to what the participants view as being of greater importance in their lives. Our Lord's greatest provision for us is not material, but spiritual. He gives us forgiveness, life, and salvation.

2. Satan is the father of lies (John 8:44). The lies he tells today echo -his lying past, as when he spoke to Eve in the Garden. His lies are fully intended to lead people away from God and to view themselves as "master of my own fate ... captain of my soul" (from *Invictus*, by William Ernest Henley). No matter what the appeal, however, the end is always destruction.

3. Read aloud Psalm 51:3–6. Talk about the effects of sin in David's life. Encourage participants to think of other biblical examples of how sin affected a person's relationships with others and with God (e.g., Judas and his sin of greed).

4. Read Psalm 9:15 to illustrate the question. Answers will vary.

5. Read Romans 5:6 and 8:3. The message here is plain. While we were completely powerless to do anything about our spiritual condition, Christ acted on our behalf, rescuing us from the consequences of our sin.

### Inform

Read the following summaries of the Scripture lessons.

Isaiah 50:4–9; 42:1; and 49:6 identify the speaker as the Servant. He is the same Servant who offers rest to the weak and heavy laden (Matthew 11:28). Verse 6 finds its fulfillment in Matthew 26:67; 27:28–31, 39–44. The innocent Servant offers Himself for the guilty that they might find rest from their sin.

Philippians 2:5–11—Jesus again is portrayed as the Servant. "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). The way of servanthood in order to procure our salvation is nothing less than the cross. The magnitude of His servanthood is provided by contrasting it with His nature and glory—"Who, being in very nature God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant."

Matthew 27:11–54—This is one of the longer Gospel readings in the church year. The events, however, are of such eternal significance that it would seem to treat them as inconsequential were we to abridge the account. The details of the trial, the mockery, the pain of crucifixion, and the agony of bearing a world's guilt are intended to show us the completeness and sufficiency of our Lord's work of salvation for us.

1. Those who are spiritually exhausted or spiritually hungry are called "weary." Also, according to Jeremiah, those who "weary themselves with sinning." Contrast these with the psalmist, who writes, "The LORD is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation" (Psalm 118:14).

2. The “word that sustains the weary” is the promise of the Savior’s gracious presence, support in time of trouble, and supply of all our real needs. This word of promise is based on our relationship with our heavenly Father through Jesus Christ, our Redeemer.

3. Holding up Jesus as another moral example misses the whole message of the Gospel. Jesus is, indeed, the perfect example of obedience to the Father. In that obedience, however, is our salvation, and it is in that salvation that we are reborn, transformed, and renewed to the glory of God. Only in the Gospel does God provide us life—abundant life on earth and the promise of eternal life in heaven.

4. To the rich young man, Jesus says that one must obey the commandments to enter life. That kind of perfect obedience from sinful people is not possible. Jesus, the Son of God, offered His perfect obedience to His heavenly Father on our behalf.

5. See the notes above on the Old Testament lesson.

6. Jesus was the atoning sacrifice for our sin and the sin of the whole world. God “laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6).

7. Our Baptism connects us to the events of the cross. In Romans 6, Paul tells of how, in our Baptism, we were baptized into his death. “We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”

## Connect

1. Responses will vary. Stress that no matter how great or small the sin that causes guilt, it is dealt with at the cross.

2. “Burden-lifting words” are spoken whenever the Gospel is proclaimed. There is so much opportunity to hear the Gospel in a worship service. We hear it in the Absolution, the Scripture readings, the Lord’s Supper, the preaching of the Word, and the Benediction.

3. Answers will vary. Allow time for thought, discussion, and sharing.

4. Answers will vary.

## Vision

Encourage participants to follow through with the suggested activities.

## Session 7—Maundy Thursday: Eat, Drink, Be Served ... And Serve

Exodus 12:1–14; 1 Corinthians 11:17–32; John 13:1–17, 34

### Introduction

Read aloud the opening paragraphs. Discuss the questions with the entire class or in small groups. If the discussion takes place in small groups, allow some time for sharing in the larger group.

1. Because of the sinful world in which we live and because of our own sinful nature, we have all undoubtedly been both perpetrators and victims of manipulation. The purpose of this question is to make people aware of their own sin in this area. It is too easy to talk about the sins of others and to ignore “the beam” in our own eye.

2. Responses will vary. People like Hitler, Lenin, Stalin, and others sought to gain control by force. While they may have achieved their goals, the victory is always short-lived. In the parable of the rich farmer, he had achieved his financial goals. One night, however, his soul was required of him, and all the things for which he had struggled so hard were gone.

3. God values faithfulness and service. That which is precious to Him is not what passes away, but that which endures forever, leading many to righteousness.

4. The purpose of His ministry was to serve and to lay down His life as a ransom that we might live forever in heaven.

### Inform

If the participants have not read the lessons prior to the class session, read the lessons aloud at this time. A brief summary of the lessons is provided in the Study Guide to help focus attention on the important messages of the texts.

Exodus 12:1–14—So significant is the event of this first Passover that the Lord instructs the Israelites to mark this as the beginning of their new year. The Israelites would be spared the death of the firstborn so long as the blood of a sacrificed lamb appeared on the lintel and doorposts of the home. The rites to be observed symbolized what the Israelites would need in the final night of history. Unrighteousness would need to be removed by a vicarious sacrifice. The lamb without defect—Christ—would shed His blood for our forgiveness.

1 Corinthians 11:17–32—To combat the abuse of the Lord’s Supper, Paul sets before the Corinthians its proper use. There are to be no divisions among those who partake of the Supper. Those who receive it must do so in faith, believing in the real presence of our Lord in this Sacrament. To do anything less is to do “more harm than good”; and what a tragedy that would be, for the Lord’s Supper is intended for the forgiveness of our sins.

The Gospel Lesson, John 13:1–17, 34, ties together the Old Testament and Epistle Lessons. Jesus offers Himself as servant. Indeed, He would offer His own life as the sacrificial Passover lamb of God. He continues to serve us as He comes to us in the bread and the wine with His body and blood. In this Sacrament we receive all that is necessary for the “final night”—forgiveness, life, and salvation. As people who have been rescued from the slavery of sin, we are free to serve and to love as He has served and loved us.

1. The lamb of the Passover is a type of Jesus who would lay down His life as the sacrificial Lamb of God.

2. Christ shed His blood to atone for sinners.

3. The purpose of receiving the body and blood of Jesus is for the forgiveness of our sins.
4. We proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. This, of course, is far more than just restating a historical fact about a single incident. Even the Jehovah's Witnesses could proclaim that Jesus died. What we proclaim is the entire message of the cross. It is the complete story of our salvation.
5. In their minds, it would be demeaning to wash the feet of the other disciples. It would acknowledge that another is greater. The disciples occasionally argued about which of them was the greatest.
6. Jesus, who was perfect, was not "too good" to obey and to serve. Certainly, then, we who follow and serve Him are not above such tasks.
7. In and of ourselves, Jesus' command to love one another as He loves us is entirely impossible. That command, however, must be viewed in the cross, where we receive forgiveness for our failure and strength to live as He has commanded. This forgiveness we receive in the Lord's Supper.

### Connect

Ask for a volunteer to read the opening paragraphs and then discuss the questions that follow.

1. We receive God's life-transforming grace. "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18).
2. Responses will vary, depending on the community and the congregation.
3. Through the Lord's Supper we receive the grace that is so vital for our day-to-day walk as children of God.
4. James 1:27—The religion that is pleasing to God expresses itself in service to others. Luke 12:35—We are to be prepared for constant service. For Christians, service is not a volunteering of available time and resources, but a way of life. 2 Corinthians 9:13—When our service is done in the context of our Christian confession, people will praise God.
5. "The greatest among you will be your servant."
6. When we serve others, we are ultimately rendering service to our Lord.

### Vision

Review the suggested activities and encourage the participants to follow through with them.

## Session 8—Good Friday: Six-Point-O

Isaiah 52:13–53:12; Hebrews 4:14–16; 5:7–9; John 18:1–19:42

### Introduction

Ask a volunteer to read the opening paragraphs. Invite the participants to discuss the questions that follow in small groups. Allow groups the opportunity to share with the entire class.

1. When people live under the constant, unending demands of the Law, they will either become legalists or libertarians. A legalist, like the Pharisees of old, added even more laws and served as interpreters of these laws. As such they could always judge their actions as meeting the letter of the Law. They were *self-righteous*. A libertarian is one who rightly recognizes the futility of trying to live up to God's Law. He wrongly concludes, however, that it is the Law that is wrong and not himself. He rejects any law and lives with nothing to guide him except his sin-plagued desires.

2. According to this passage of Scripture, no one can be declared righteous in God's eyes.

3. Every New Year, people resolve to improve their life. Even if we were, at some point, able to live in perfect obedience to God's Law, nothing can change the sin which we have committed in the past or the sin we have inherited. There is no way out!

4. When confronted by the demands of the Law some people respond that their failures and sins are not as bad as those of others. Surely the "little white lie"; the extra change that was kept at the cash register; the brief feelings of hatred or lust; these can't be bad enough to condemn us. Scripture, however, makes no such distinction. It simply says, "The wages of sin is death."

### Inform

The lessons for this study are quite lengthy. To get as much from them as possible, it would be helpful to read all of the lessons aloud, even though the participants may have already read them in preparation for the class. A summary of the lesson provided in the Study Guide should be read after each reading to help focus the participants' attention.

Isaiah 52:13–53:12—This is the last of the four "servant songs" in Isaiah. One cannot help but find himself standing at the foot of the cross as this passage is read. In prophetic detail, Isaiah describes the substitutionary death of Jesus. In His griefs, sorrows, and wounds divine justice is satisfied. The payment is not for His sin, however, for He is the sinless Son of God. The payment is for the sin of the world. "The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all."

Hebrews 4:14–16; 5:7–9—The Old Testament Lesson presents us with the picture of the Suffering Servant. This lesson presents us with Jesus as the Great High Priest. He who became one of us knows our every weakness. Without succumbing to these weaknesses or to sin, He is able to provide the mercy and grace we need. He is the source of eternal salvation.

John 18:1–19:42—This is the account of the arrest, trial, crucifixion, death, and burial of Jesus. In this account, we see many people involved: disciples, religious leaders, political leaders, soldiers, family, friends, etc. In the words "It is finished" we find the fulfillment of the prophecy of the Old Testament Lesson. In the people who are involved, we see those for whom He died. "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:22–24).

1. Jesus is described as disfigured, with no beauty or majesty, despised, rejected by men, and a man of sorrows. People are appalled at Him. There was nothing about Him, humanly speaking, that

attracted people to Him. He is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a likely candidate to become prime minister, president, or king.

2. Isaiah 53:3 details the mockery Jesus experienced at the hands of the religious leaders and the soldiers (Mark 14:65); verse 53:4 tells us of His being forsaken by God (Matthew 27:46); verse 53:5 depicts the crucifixion (“pierced ... wounds”); verse 53:6 speaks of the atoning nature of His crucifixion (1 John 2:2); verse 53:7 tells how He remained silent in spite of this injustice (Matthew 26:63); verse 53:8 tells of His death (John 19:30); verse 53:9—He would be buried in the tomb of a rich man (John 19:38–42).

3. The life He offers to God on our behalf is a perfect life, completely acceptable to God.

4. The Law only accuses and condemns. It does not bring life. Rather, it only confirms people in their sins and spiritual deadness. Living in obedience to Christ our Savior is to live under His forgiveness and in the power of His transforming and renewing grace.

5. Answers will vary. Some might say that those who were instrumental in choreographing the death of Jesus were most in need of His forgiveness.

6. It would appear that it took a supreme act of selfless, unconditional love to redeem those who crucified Him. By human standards, we would judge that such a love would have had to have been greater for these than for those who loved Him and followed Him. All of us, however, are objects of His perfect love. None of us has earned it. If there is any surprise it is that sense of awe and wonder expressed in 1 John 3:1.

## Connect

Ask for someone to read aloud the opening paragraphs of this section. Then discuss the questions that follow.

1. The message of the cross frees the legalist from trying to justify himself through whatever laws and standards he may have set for himself. The same message also sets the libertarian free from a life lived entirely unto himself and apart from God. It brings both to God by satisfying on their behalf all of the demands of the Law.

2. Through Christ’s substitutionary death and His victorious resurrection, all Christians have the sure hope of an eternity in heaven with God. The passages from Revelation give us a glimpse of the glory that awaits us. Indeed, the best is yet to come.

## Vision

Urge participants to follow through with the suggested activities.

## Session 9—The Resurrection of Our Lord: Razed to Be Raised!

I Acts 10:34–43; Colossians 3:1–4; John 20:1–9 (10–18)

### Introduction

1–2. Write the words *razed* and *raised* on a large sheet of newsprint or the chalkboard. First, invite a participant to pronounce both of the words. Then ask for volunteers to define the two words. Write participants' definitions on the newsprint or chalkboard. Then tell participants that although these words sound very much alike, their meanings are really antonyms or opposites. If I say, "We *razed* the building" (point to the word *razed*) it means we tore it down or destroyed it. If I say, "We *raised* the building" it means we built it or brought it to life.

3. Jesus was *razed* (destroyed) on the cross for our sins. He received the punishment we deserved because of our sin. Through His death we receive forgiveness of sins.

4. Jesus proclaimed victory over death when He was *raised* from the dead. His resurrection provides us assurance of our victory over death.

5. The old sinful self has been razed with Christ through Baptism so that we are raised with Him to life for eternity.

### Inform

Read aloud the introductory paragraphs. Read aloud the three lessons appointed for the resurrection of our Lord. Prepare a brief summary of the three Scripture lessons. Or ask volunteers to summarize key ideas or events of the lessons. Write participants' ideas on the chalkboard or newsprint. Then share the information concerning Carthage.

1. Compare the razing of Jesus, that is the tearing down or destruction of His body on the cross and particularly His death, to the overwhelming good news of God the Father raising Him to life again. The city of Carthage never again existed as it had in Roman times because the power that destroyed it was too strong. However, Jesus came to life again because the power that tried to utterly destroy Him and us was not strong enough. The power of our creating and redeeming God was so superior that there really was not even a contest. Jesus' resurrection shows us the power of God to fulfill His promises and to save us.

2. The one razed by the resurrection of Jesus was the devil. In Genesis 3:15, God gave humankind the promise of salvation and the promise of destruction of Satan by the Savior. 1 John 3:8 stresses the victory of Jesus over the devil. Romans 16:20 refers to the ultimate victory of Jesus over Satan and Satan's final doom.

3. This touches upon the heart and core of the Christian faith, namely the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. In 1 Corinthians 15, God, through the pen of Paul, gives us the absolute assurance of Jesus' resurrection, our resurrection, and Christ's victory on our behalf over sin, death, and Satan.

a. According to verses 3–8 Paul stresses that he has passed on to the believers only that which he has received. He is not going on hearsay or rumor but on what he personally received from other Christians and knew to be true. He recounts the important events surrounding the crucifixion and resurrection, stressing that all of this was "according to the Scriptures." He makes a point that Jesus fulfilled that which God had earlier promised through His prophets. He emphasizes that the resurrection in particular was witnessed by many people. For after Jesus arose from the dead He showed Himself to

many people, eating and drinking with them and showing the wounds of His flesh. The last great appearance of Jesus to human beings was when He appeared to Paul on the Damascus road. Thus Paul, too, was an eyewitness to His resurrection.

b. Verses 13–19 remind us of the futility of the Christian faith without the resurrection of Jesus. The raising from death to life according to prophecy and prediction is that which separates Christianity from all other religions in the world and proves them false.

You may wish to share the following information as time permits. Muhammad is regarded by the adherents of Islam as a great prophet of God and equal to Jesus. However, not only did Muhammad never claim to be the son of God and never did a miracle, but when he died he stayed dead. In fact you can visit his gravesite yet today in Medina. Not so Jesus. There is no grave because He lives! Had Jesus not risen from the dead then our faith would be useless. If Christ had not risen, then all hope of a life after death would be dashed to pieces on the hearth of false doctrine. We would be a pitiful lot indeed, believing in something that would not have taken place and exhibiting a misplaced loyalty.

c. The fact that Jesus *has risen* from the dead means absolutely everything to human beings. It means that Christ has paid for sin and has paid the price that a perfect God demands in order for people to be saved for all eternity. It means that hope is restored for fallen humankind and that His resurrection (firstfruits) is just the beginning for us. The clear message is this: He rose first and we who believe and trust in Him alone for our salvation will also one day rise with Him unless He returns in judgment first. If that occurs, then His resurrection gives us the assurance that sin and Satan cannot raze us but that His judgment of us will be this: “You have been raised.” Eternal life with God in Paradise is ours!

4. Colossians 3:1–4 indicates also that we have already been raised with Christ. Through Holy Baptism (Romans 6:3ff) God razed us, buried us with Christ and raised us as new people. At our Baptism the Holy Spirit recreated each of us spiritually into a new person in Jesus Christ. The old person, condemned by the Law on account of sin, is no longer alive. We are new creations in Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:17).

5. The “change of life” that occurs when we are recreated in Christ Jesus through Baptism is a change of heart that seeks the good of God and the good of our neighbor. Once the Holy Spirit brings people to faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord, then His will for our life becomes paramount, and He empowers us to subjugate our will to His. Paul says that we can now “set [our] minds on things above, not earthly things.” Thus God’s will for our daily living in love with others, and His will that all come to the knowledge of their Savior, becomes the motivating factor for us. So that others might know the love of God for them in Jesus, we seek with God’s help to live lives that give glory and honor to Him and that are reflections of His love. Without complaint we serve as Christ served. Without a hint of jealousy we rejoice with those who rejoice and with great empathy we weep with those who weep.

6. “When Christ, in whom and through whom I have life eternal, returns, then I will be raised with Him to the glory of eternity” might be one possible rewrite of the verse. Let people share their rendering of the words. Lead them into a discussion of the return of Jesus to judge the world based upon the Bible passages suggested and others you may wish to add. Remember to stress that for us the Day of Judgment will be grand and glorious. For on that day the reality of death and resurrection through faith in Jesus will be fully realized. The perishable will have put on the imperishable.

## Connect

Allow the students time to check those fears that have applied to them in the past. It may be that some of them are dealing with some of these fears right now. It will be important to discuss those fears, not being judgmental, but realizing that for that person the fear is very real. Just as important will be your discussion of the appropriate Bible passages and how they relate to a particular fear. Once again if there are other passages you wish to add to the list, please feel free to do so. Below is a listing of the Bible passages with the numbers of some of the fears to which they are related.

- Romans 8:38–39 (5)

- Matthew 28:20 (7, 8, 9)
- Joshua 1:5 (2, 5, 7, 8, 9)
- Jeremiah 1:8 (1, 2, 7, 8,9)
- 1Corinthians 15:42–49 (9, 10)
- Ephesians 2:8–9 (3, 6)
- Romans 5:3; 1 Peter 4:12–13, 19 (4)
- 1 Corinthians 2:5 (3)

Allow time now for the participants to discuss the Bible passages. All deal with the promises of God and the assurance of resurrection.

### Vision

1. Encourage the participants to be aware this week of the opportunities to share the good news of the resurrection and eternal life God provides in Christ Jesus. Also encourage them to keep a short record of the opportunity and whether a Christian witness was possible. Assure the participants that next week only those who wish to share their experiences will be asked to do so.

2. This activity is designed to give members of the class an opportunity to share the love of God in Christ Jesus with an acquaintance by letter. Since many people feel they do not have the verbal skills to speak publicly about God's salvation in Christ, this is an opportunity to do so through written communication. Stress the importance of zeroing in on the love and acceptance of God in Christ to all who believe and repent, and to assure the recipient of their letter of God's continuing love and presence with them. Encourage participants to also express their willingness to help the person, if they are willing to do so.

## Session 10—Second Sunday of Easter: Restored Sight

Acts 2:14a, 22–32; 1 Peter 1:3–9; John 20:19–31

### Introduction

Invite volunteers to read aloud the Introduction.

In order to get some discussion going in the class, ask if there is anyone who has known someone who had lost their sight and then, through an operation, regained it. Emphasize that *there needed to be an outside power* in order for the person to regain his or her sight. No amount of *trying* would change the condition. Since many people have suffered from cataracts and had them surgically removed it is likely that someone in your class will have experienced this. If this is the case, ask the person how they felt once they could see clearly again.

If you can, provide copies of 3-D pictures, also known as stereograms, for the members of your class. Give every person a copy of the same stereogram or pass one around and observe the reactions. No doubt some will see the 3-D picture immediately and some will take more time. Some may simply not be able to see it at all. Try to help those who cannot see the 3-D picture by having them hold it close to their nose, stare at it for 10 seconds, and then pull it away to reading level. Do not spend too much time doing this, but if possible, try to help someone who cannot see the picture, to see it.

These introductory activities and discussions prepare for later discussion of the reality of mankind's spiritual blindness and God's cure for it—faith in Jesus Christ.

Thus, it is also true that only an outside power and source, the Holy Spirit working through Word and Sacrament, can open blind eyes to be able to see and acknowledge the spiritual truth of mankind's salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

1. If you have brought a 3-D stereogram to class, share it during this discussion time.
2. Do not spend a lot of time on discussion. Read the final paragraph in the Introduction.

### Inform

Select three individuals to quickly read aloud the Scripture lessons for the day. Then read the brief summaries in the Study Guide to help focus participants' attention.

1. It is important to note as you begin to lead your class through these lessons that “miracles, wonders, and signs” done by Jesus were not done to impress people or to show off. Rather, it was through these miraculous activities of Jesus that God the Father authenticated the messianic ministry of Jesus and His messianic person before the eyes of the common people. When the leaders of the people demanded a miracle there were none forthcoming.

It is obvious from the Scripture passages cited that the miracles could only be done by God. From the creation of wine from water to the raising of Lazarus from the dead, all of these miracles shouted out to the people, “This is your Messiah! This is your God who is now with you in human form! This is your Savior!”

2. Acts 2:24 reveals to us that God the Father raised Jesus from the dead. This is repeated again by Luke in Acts 2:32 and again in Acts 13:30. Thus it was God the Father in His love for all people and His deep love for His only-begotten Son who raised Jesus from dead. This is God the Father carrying through with His promises made over the centuries from Adam to Christ, that He would provide a *living* Savior.

3. Peter clearly proclaims that they were eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection. He uses the pronoun "we" not just "I," indicating multiple witnesses. Read Acts 13:31. Here, once again, St. Paul declares the absolute truth of Jesus' resurrection by telling the people in Psidian Antioch that "for many days He was seen by those who had traveled with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now His witnesses to our people."

It is important for people to understand that the resurrection was not questioned by the Christian community for some 1,900 centuries because there were so many witnesses to it. Only in relatively recent days have liberal theologians, using the historical-critical methodology of the late 19th century, begun to question the resurrection as well as other miracles recorded in the Bible.

4. The resurrection of Jesus undergirds our "living hope."

a. Clearly the "new birth" spoken of by the Scriptures refers to a new spiritual birth brought about by the activity of the Holy Spirit. Working through the Word of God and the Sacraments, God changes sinful hearts and minds and opens the eyes of sinful people. He enables them to see the reality of their sinfulness (and its terrible depth) and the reality of God's love and grace and forgiveness in Jesus Christ our Savior.

Birth brings with it sin and death. The *new birth* brings with it forgiveness of sin and eternal life. Birth brings hopelessness and emptiness. The *new birth* brings a certain hope of acceptance and reconnection with God through faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord.

b. Ask the question of your class. Some will have experienced the *new birth* at their Baptism. Some may have been brought to faith later in life through the sharing of the Gospel. They may be able to point to a specific time and place when the Holy Spirit created faith in their hearts, and they were enabled to respond, "I believe." The important point to stress is that one's faith is a gift of a loving and gracious God, not earned or deserved (Ephesians 2:8–9).

c. This is an important question to answer. Despite the fact that many Christians know that faith is a gift and not a result of works—struggling, praying, working at being religious—many will try to argue a person into the kingdom of God. This will not work because faith is a gift and cannot be received in any other way than through the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore, if a person has not yet received the "new birth into a living hope" it is not helpful to tell him or her to believe. We cannot prove to him or her the reliability of the Bible. Don't argue fine points of doctrine with him or her. Simply *share the good news of Jesus Christ and what He has done for you*. Romans 1:16 tells us that it is the Gospel alone that is the "power of God for salvation." Share what Jesus has done for you and for all people through His perfect life, death on the cross, and powerful resurrection.

5. Peter tells us that God Himself protects us. We are "shielded by God's power," a power that is greater than any power on earth or any spirit power in the heavenly places.

6. Through trials and temptations our faith is refined like gold. Gold is usually embedded in rock and even other metals. In order for gold to be purified and become usable and saleable, it must pass through great heat so that the dross that surrounds it might be melted away and the beauty and usefulness of the gold be revealed.

So it is with our faith. It is through the trials and temptations and tribulations of life that the dross of sin and unbelief and weakness is removed. Eventually, by the power of God's protecting and strengthening hand, our faith shines like gold and is the most precious possession that we have and can share with others.

7. Although answers will vary, "though you have not seen Him, you love Him," (1 Peter 1:8) connects with the Gospel lesson. In the story of Jesus' dealing with doubting Thomas, He clearly makes the point that those who believe, even though they do not see, are much blessed. Verse 8 of the epistle is proof of that statement. What greater blessing could we imagine than that of being able to love the Savior who first loved us?

8. Lead the class in a discussion of Jesus' appearance to the disciples without Thomas present and then His appearance to Thomas. Note that Jesus does not berate Thomas but lovingly holds out His hands and offers Thomas the opportunity to place his fingers into the wounds of the nails and spear.

When we deal with unbelievers, those who will not believe unless they see with their physical eyes, we need to be just as loving and caring. Like Jesus, we can point them to His wounds and His overwhelming love for them. The Holy Spirit working through the Gospel will work in their hearts.

## Connect

1. Discuss this question with the class. Most people, at some time in their lives, have had at least some doubt as to the authenticity of the biblical account of our salvation. It is only natural for sinful people to question God's revelation from time to time. You may wish to begin this section by sharing a time in your life when you doubted. Use the following questions to guide the discussion.

- a. Why did you doubt?
- b. What or who relieved your doubts?
- c. Who is the author of all doubting? (Satan)
- d. Who will restore a person's faith? (God)
- e. How is faith restored? (By the Holy Spirit working through God's Word and through people who know the Word and are willing to share it lovingly in their lives. Also through the strengthening power of the Lord's Supper.)

2. The Christian has both the historical proclamation of the Christian church for centuries and, more important, the Scriptures themselves. In a sense the Scriptures and their message of the salvation of mankind need no empirical proof. It is the Holy Spirit who changes stubborn minds and hearts as that Word of God is shared.

The Scripture passages remind us that Jesus only asks us to be His witnesses wherever we may be and to whomever we may be led by God to share. Argument and forceful efforts are neither helpful nor necessary.

3. Simply stated, we are not puppets who are forced to believe. Rather, we retain the ability (actually, because of our sinful nature) to rebel and to refuse to believe. The Bible references all point to the inner depravity of mankind. But when people refuse to believe despite the proclamation of the truth, they then face a terrible future. They put themselves in a league with the devil and with his prompting may seek to discredit the Gospel and bring many others into their miserable, faithless existence. To coin a phrase—misery loves company.

4. It might be a good idea at this point to have some newsprint and tape available. Divide the class into groups of three or four. Ask them to list on the newsprint as many responses to the question as they can in five minutes.

If Jesus did not rise from the dead: (a) We are still in our sins; (b) heaven is impossible for us to reach; (c) life is a useless and hopeless drift; (d) nothing has any meaning; and (e) we are liars, as were our forefathers and mothers.

Stress that Jesus *did* rise from the dead, as attested to by hundreds of witnesses and by faithful Christian people throughout the centuries since His resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus is important to us because it is the absolute proof of God's faithfulness to His promises to save humanity from sin, death, and the power of Satan. It is the one truth of the Scriptures that gives us absolute hope and a future. It gives meaning and purpose to otherwise meaningless lives.

## Vision

Encourage the members of your class to set aside some quality time to engage in the activities suggested. Perhaps people might be willing to share their prayers with the group next week.

## Session 11—Third Sunday of Easter: Changed by Grace ... Excited by Faith

Acts 2:14a, 36–47; 1 Peter 1:17–21; Luke 24:13–35

### Introduction

Read together the introduction in the Study Guide. Each member of the class may read a paragraph, or you may wish to have one or two members of the class do all the reading.

Discuss the following question: Do you agree or disagree with the author's contention that the answer to living a full, productive, and meaningful life can never be found in the philosophies, physical activities, or lifestyles of people but only in the revelation of the Creator of it all? Why?

In the discussion you may wish to point out that trying to find the secret to living a meaningful life is a major preoccupation of mankind. People seek happiness and fulfillment in their professions or in extramarital sexual encounters. Still unfulfilled, they marry, and remarry again and again—seeking fulfillment in others. Many never reach the level of fulfillment and joy that God has designed for people because they live outside of His design for those whom He created. The life God desires us to have begins with faith in Jesus. The acts of love and service to others flow from faith that is strengthened by the Spirit working through Word and Sacrament.

Allow the class 3–5 minutes to discuss this section and then lead them into the “Inform” section.

### Inform

If participants have not read the lessons for this Sunday you may wish to do so at this time. Either allow the class five minutes to read the Scripture summaries alone or ask three volunteers to read.

1. Ask your class what the disciples may have been thinking as they watched Jesus die in agony on the cross. Surely they were saddened and disheartened. They may have been asking themselves if the three years they had spent with Jesus were worth it. Was it just a waste of time? They may have felt nauseated and fearful for their own lives now that He was dead. Apparently they were not sure about Jesus' promises of His own resurrection. They may have been devastated, thinking all along that He would use the miraculous powers that they had witnessed so many times before to free Himself and declare His rule on earth. Instead, He died.

2. If Jesus had not risen from the dead (See 1 Corinthians 15) then all people, including Christians, would live without hope. As Romans 1 and 3 clearly show, all people have a natural knowledge of God and of sin built into them from birth and therefore cannot escape the condemnation of the Law. The only way of escape is through faith in Jesus Christ as the risen Savior.

Without the power of the risen Christ people would only live for themselves, indulging in every sort of physical activity and mental gymnastic that would bring them temporary pleasure. They would drown their fears in lives filled to the brim with work and pleasurable activities in order to drown their crying need for assurance that they are more than merely blips on the landscape of humanity. Without a living Lord, society itself would disintegrate into a hoard seeking its own temporary pleasure by means that would only bring heartache and destruction.

We witness this already among those who have chosen to abandon the truth of Christ for a lie. The New Age movement tries to convince weak human beings that they themselves are “gods.” Sexual promiscuity produces babies by the millions who are then killed through abortion. People demand their own rights and forget about their responsibility to “defend, speak well of, and put the best construction on everything” and “assist the neighbor in protecting and keeping what is his.”

In short, all the hope of all people who have ever or will ever live hangs on Jesus' resurrection. The future of our society and the welfare of mankind depends upon the resurrection of Jesus.

3. Jesus revealed Himself alive to the women at the tomb, to some of the disciples at the grave, to all of the disciples in the upper room, and to two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

4. There was great excitement when the disciples on the road to Emmaus realized that they were talking with the risen Christ. Their first response was that they had to tell others about what God had done in raising Jesus from the dead as He had promised. That it was Jesus and not just some kind of apparition or ghost is evident from the fact that He ate with them before suddenly departing. As the risen Jesus reveals Himself, people respond with great joy and then go to tell others. The inexpressible joy in knowing that Jesus is alive and because He lives we too will live motivates us to tell others of His love for us.

5. Joy and excitement fill our hearts as we confess that because Jesus has been raised from the dead we too will one day be raised from the dead. This life is not the end, but rather, only that which precedes our real life with God in heaven some day. That is why even in the midst of our sorrow when a loved one dies in Christ there is still hope, and we do not sorrow or mourn as those who have no hope. Because we worship a living Savior, Jesus Christ, we have the assurance that all of His promises ("Surely I am with you always," Matthew 28:20) are true, and we can trust in Him implicitly.

6. As the Holy Spirit created faith in their hearts, their lives changed dramatically. Verses 42–47 describe how they now lived their faith in joyful love and service. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship activities, to the Lord's Supper, and to prayer. They also shared their earthly possessions so that none would go hungry. Their focus was on the heavenly, but they did not neglect the earthly needs of their brothers and sisters in Christ. This change was so evident to all that even the worldly people around them said, "See how they love one another."

7. The empty way of life is always that which seeks its meaning fulfillment, and eternal destiny in slavish devotion to rules and regulations—the laws of God and the laws of man.

The Jews for the most part had lost the promises of the Gospel or at least had relegated it to a minor position. Sometimes the promises of God had been misinterpreted so that instead of a Savior from sin, the Jews looked for a Savior from the Romans. Instead of clearly understanding the messianic promises of Isaiah (Isaiah 7:14; 53:1–12) they ignored them and concentrated on obedience to the laws of God.

Believers in Jesus as their Savior focused their lives on the crucified and risen Savior, not on the laws of God, as the means of their eternal salvation. Keeping the laws of God as best they could was not abandoned, but was done as a result of their faith in Jesus. Their good works would flow from their God-given faith.

## Connect

Read, or have a volunteer read, the opening paragraph.

1. Allow the participants time to share the difference that Jesus makes in their daily lives. You may wish to ask, "How would your life today be different if you did *not* believe in Jesus?"

2. As the participants discuss this question, they may identify areas of concern or need in the congregation. You may wish to note these and share them with the pastor. If you are the pastor, you might want to discuss these observations with your elders, council, or mission outreach board. Often the discussion will focus on those who are already on the membership roster of the parish, but who rarely, if ever, attend. If time permits, ask your class members to suggest ways to invite and welcome inactive members back into regular fellowship and worship in your congregation. Focus participants' attention on possible solutions rather than the problems.

3. This question is open-ended. There are no right or wrong answers. Encourage your class to talk about the importance of the Word of God, the Sacraments, and fellowship with other Christians in their

lives. Since you will have prepared in advance, begin this particular discussion by sharing your feelings on the subject.

4. Many will be challenged by the discussion.

a. Have the class identify as many ways as they can think of that they and the congregation reach out to the world with the Gospel. Some examples might be through mission offerings, by inviting friends and neighbors to accompany them to worship services, or through other programs of outreach.

b. Brainstorm additional ways and means to bring the Gospel to people in your community and/or around the world.

Read or have a volunteer read the closing paragraph.

## Vision

1. Suggest that the class do the activity described and have an example prepared ahead of time for you to share with them and stimulate interest.

2. Encourage your class members to pray daily as directed in this activity. Remind them that if they do seriously ask God to open up the opportunities for sharing His Gospel with people, He will do it. And not only that, but He will also enable each person to share the love of Jesus in word and deed, in the appropriate way. If necessary, according to Luke 12:11–12, the Holy Spirit will even give them the very words to speak.

## Session 12—Fourth Sunday of Easter: Dying to Live

Acts 6:1–9; 7:2a, 51–60; 1 Peter 2:19–25; John 10:1–10

### Introduction

The world is “dying to live” but in the process of seeking ways in which to fill their lives with meaning, people find only that which is meaningless, temporary, and shallow. They end up dying inside before they die physically.

Ask, “Why is life meaningful? How is it productive for the Christian?” Life is different because its meaning is not dependent upon us. Jesus provides us meaning in life—in serving Him as we help and love others in response to God’s love for us. Life for the Christian is not dependent upon how much money he has or what kind of influence and power she wields but rather on what can be done by the power of God through us. Life is just a series of seconds, minutes, days, months, and years being used up on the way to a certain end. For the Christian that “end” is eternal life in heaven. The way in which the Christian’s time is spent should be different from that which the world promotes. Ungodly people use their time on earth to possess, control, and pursue activities that do nothing more than bring a momentary high. The Christian is involved in activities that bring eternal pleasure and joy forever. Loving and caring for others, serving others, reaching out to people with the love of God in Christ Jesus—these bring joy that will continue into the heavenly places.

Christians too, are dying to live. Through the power of Christ, they follow the example of their Lord and Savior and die to themselves, living for God and others.

1. Answers will vary.
2. Answers will vary. People today demonstrate they are dying to live by their enthusiastic pursuit of things that provide pleasure. They also seek sinful pleasures to provide them happiness. People demonstrate that they are living to die. Because of their sin they will ultimately face death. The Christians’ life can also be described as dying to live because through our Baptism the Holy Spirit has drown the sinful self, providing us the promise of eternal life.
3. Answers will vary. One possible response is “Jesus was living to die for us that through His dying we might live forever.”
4. Sample responses: Through faith the sinful self dies so that we might live. By Jesus’ dying on the cross we receive life. We live because Jesus died.
5. Answers will vary. Invite volunteers to share their responses.

### Inform

Read, or have a volunteer read, the lessons if time allows. Then read the summaries and discuss the questions.

1. The “thieves” and “robbers” that Jesus describes are the false prophets and false teachers of the world who offer other ways to God. In the Acts lesson the “society of freedmen” are the “thieves” who offer obedience to the Law of God as the way to eternal life. Any teaching or belief that leads us away from Jesus is a thief who would rob us of our faith. Other answers will vary.
2. Jesus’ resurrection makes Him the Gate to eternal life. He is the gate into heaven—into eternal life with God forever. Paul about Jesus being the “firstfruits” of those who have fallen asleep. Through faith in Jesus we are connected with Him forever. So, even as He rose from the dead victorious over sin, death and the devil, we too who believe in Him are already victorious over sin, death, and the devil.

3. Read the Old Testament references and note the similarity of language. When God calls the Israelites “uncircumcised in heart” He is talking about a stubborn refusal on their part to trust in Him and follow His laws. Although the Israelites worship God with their mouths and religious activities, their hearts—their love and devotion to God and His will—are cold. Those who ignore God’s Laws and God’s promise of salvation through Jesus Christ, though they outwardly appear to be religious, are only fooling themselves. God calls them “uncircumcised in heart.”

4. Stephen’s comments enraged the Jews because the truth which he so fearlessly spoke forced them to see the evil that they had perpetrated against God’s Messiah. The Law cut them to the heart, but they, in stubborn unbelief, refused to acknowledge Jesus as their Savior. It was probably inconceivable to them that they could have killed the very one sent to save them.

5. Read the Nehemiah and Luke passages. You will discover that when the chosen people of God drifted far from Him and then heard the damning words of God’s prophets, such as Nehemiah and Jesus, they rose up and sought to kill the messenger. Stephen’s death was commendable before God because he was killed for doing right. There is no greater honor for the Christian than to share the good news of God’s love and salvation through Jesus Christ.

6. Those who enter through the gate (that is, through Jesus) will be saved. This is a sure and certain promise.

7. Unlike the world, Jesus does not offer a comfortable life filled with the riches of the world. He offers a meaningful life filled with the riches of heaven. Our lives, in order to be “abundant” lives, must be grounded in Christ and His promises. Read Matthew 20:20–28. Here Jesus shows clearly how God’s way of thinking and doing things, God’s perceptions, are totally contrary to the way in which we human beings think. To the world, being a servant could never mean being the greatest. But to God servanthood means everything.

## Connect

1. Today young people and people in the workplace are mocked and made fun of for their faith. In Communist and Islamic countries Christians are persecuted and held in subordinate positions in society and in business because of their faith. In the Western world non-Christians laugh at the simple faith of Christians. When Christians refuse to back down on their opposition to abortion and homosexuality, they are called “bigots” and worse. Laws are enacted to keep Christians from legally opposing ungodly activity in society, and when they protest, Christians are arrested and sometimes fined.

2. The world offers us “safe sex” and elevates meaningless sexual encounters. The world says, “Don’t worry about others—if it’s right for you, then it’s right!” The world offers us a depersonalized god to substitute for the Triune God and tells us that we are all a part of that god if we would only look deep inside ourselves. The world tells us that humankind already has all the answers to the questions of life and eternal life. In other words, the world constantly asks us to look to ourselves for all that we need to get through this life and safely into the next. But the truth is that none of this works.

Accepting the world’s teachings may be the easy route and save us from embarrassment out there among the teeming masses. In the end, the price we pay is anxiety in this life and eternal punishment in the next.

3. Christians proclaim to the world that (a) There is only one true Triune God and one Savior, Jesus Christ. Outside of Him there is no salvation for anyone. (b) Abortion is murder and must be stopped except in the case where a mother’s life is threatened. (c) Homosexual activity is a sin against God and man. It is one of the basest of human activities and leads to the destruction of the person and his or her relationship with God. (d) We have an obligation to care for our planet but not to worship it as a god.

4. Have the class members discuss the question. Some ideas are identified in number 3 above. Basically the world believes that perfection and happiness can be achieved through human endeavors alone. So the television portrays happy couples and happy families who are quite devoid of any spiritual

roots in Christ. Reality is that jealousy and fights and quarrels are the characteristics of such families not peace and harmony.

In “Imagine,” one of the last songs written by John Lennon, he suggests no war, no fighting, no politics, no anger, and no religion. The clear message of his song is that heaven on earth is possible if we human beings would just rid ourselves of those things that cause so much pain and suffering in the world. He lumps religion in with those things and is partially correct. Religion itself has nothing to offer. Unfortunately, he misses Christianity. Jesus Christ, not any false hope held out to us by the world, is the answer to the world’s fears.

5. Answers will vary. Invite participants to share how Jesus has provided them with an abundant life. Ask, “How does the gift of eternal life provide you with abundant life now?”

## Vision

Encourage participants to complete one or more of the suggested activities.

## Session 13—Fifth Sunday of Easter: Christ the Cornerstone

Acts 17:1–15; 1 Peter 2:4–10; John 14:1–12

### Introduction

Assign members of the class to read the Introduction paragraph by paragraph.

1. Many religious cults and non-Christian religions promote teachings contrary to God's Word. If we believe that which is contrary to the teachings of Scripture we jeopardize our faith.

2. God's gifts of the teachings of Scripture alone, the Sacraments, regular worship, and Christian fellowship and care all work to support our faith in Christ.

### Inform

If participants have not read the lessons appointed for this day, do so at this time. Then choose three class members to read the summaries of the lessons.

1. Peter's reference to a "living" stone is no accident. He refers to Jesus, the risen and living Savior.

2. One becomes a living stone by the power of the Holy Spirit, who gives us faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. According to Ephesians 2:8–9 we become children of God, believers, when by His grace God grants us that faith that enables us to confess Jesus as Lord. God is the builder, and we are the living stones. By virtue of our faith connection with the living Stone, Jesus, we become the building materials, the stones, from which God, the builder, creates the church.

3. God gave promises and prophecies in the Old Testament to His people and now fulfills them in Christ. Long before Peter, the prophets, moved by the Holy Spirit, spoke of the people of God being made "a royal priesthood."

4. The spiritual sacrifice is a heart changed through faith in Christ Jesus. It is characterized by "mercy," a life filled with "praise" for God, and works of goodness toward others. Unlike the priesthood of the Old Testament, New Testament priests offer no blood sacrifices but rather the sacrifice of a contrite heart and a life of service on behalf of Christ to others.

5. The "Cornerstone," Jesus Christ, has become a stone of stumbling for the Jews. Having lost sight of God's promise of a spiritual Deliverer or Messiah, many Jews and especially their leaders cannot acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah. They still wait for a political deliverer and the restoration of the earthly throne and kingdom of David. By extension, Jesus is a stumbling block to all who do not see Him with eyes of faith.

6. According to verse 9 of the Epistle Lesson, we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people belonging to God.

Our task is to show forth the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness into His wonderful light. In other words, we are to be the proclaimers and those who live the Gospel in our everyday lives.

7. (a) Jesus was the stumbling block for the Jews and is today the stumbling block for anyone who refuses to believe that Jesus has paid for the sins of the world. (b) All believers are the royal priesthood, including many Jewish converts in Thessalonica and Berea.

8. Jesus speaks clearly about His close connection—His oneness—with the Father. As such He is the cornerstone of all of God's creation and the cornerstone of God's redemption of the world. Everything rests on Jesus—His perfect life, His death on the cross, His resurrection and His ascension—because in

all of this God is working out His promise of forgiveness of sins and eternal life for all people. Everything in heaven and on earth hinges on Christ for time and for eternity.

## Connect

1. Yes, it is still true. Invite participants to share some examples. Some possible responses are as follows:

- The New Age movement wants to make Jesus a mere human being with great spiritual powers. Proponents of this heresy say that all human beings are endowed with the kind of spiritualism that Jesus demonstrated. We are all “gods” according to their false beliefs.

- Many today try to replace Jesus with angels. Books and articles abound that deny Jesus His unique status as the Son of God and only Savior of the world.

- Some religious leaders today seek to control large numbers of people for the purpose of personal financial gain. In so doing, they deny the very person and teachings of Jesus.

- Science and humanism seem to have replaced Jesus as mankind’s hope for the future in the minds and hearts of millions of unbelievers around the world.

- The Eastern mystic religions such as Hinduism, Taoism, and Buddhism have presented an alluring picture of false spirituality and have removed Jesus from the scene. Because of our new and growing technological advances and the dehumanizing of the inhabitants of our planet, the mystic religions are gaining a great foothold. Some find it easier and more acceptable today to look to themselves as saviors than to acknowledge the One who, alone, truly saves.

2. Allow the members of your class to discuss this at length. Encourage them to share the difficulties that they face and how their living Savior uplifts and strengthens them daily. Ask how they build upon Jesus as the Cornerstone of their lives.

3. 1 Peter 2:9b—We can now declare God’s praises to the world. Ephesians 2:10—We have been created (or re-created) in Christ Jesus to do good works—the works which God has already, in advance, ordained for us to do. Ephesians 4:24—We put on the “new self.” That is, the “self” made new through faith in Jesus that looks to Him alone for salvation, communicates His salvation for all people eagerly, and seeks to live a life of obedience, love, and service to God and others. Romans 6—We are now dead to sin and alive to Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit working in us. Acts 1:8—Jesus calls us to confess His person and work as the Way, the Truth, and the Life wherever He may lead us in life.

4. Our lives may be difficult. We will face challenges to our faith and lifestyle from every quarter. Life as a believer and disciple of Jesus may be a rough road, not an easy street. Yet, in all difficulties we have the assurance that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39).

5. Suggested responses:

- Matthew 28:20—Jesus will be with us.

- Luke 12:11–12—God the Holy Spirit will give us the words to speak when we have opportunity to be His witnesses.

- Romans 8:38–39—Nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

- Luke 21:12–13—We do not have to worry because God will give us the words and the wisdom to defend ourselves when witnessing for Christ.

## Vision

Encourage participants to complete the suggested activity. Take time in class for self-examination and sharing in pairs.

## Session 14—Sixth Sunday of Easter: Living on Purpose

Acts 17:22–31; 1 Peter 3:15–22; John 14:15–21

### Introduction

Read aloud the introductory paragraph. Then discuss the questions that follow.

1–2. Although they come from diverse backgrounds and socioeconomic status, they do have a couple of things in common. They do not know Jesus Christ as their Savior. Thus they rely on no one but themselves in order to get through life. Like ships without rudders they drift aimlessly through life, pushed about by each new “wave” that they believe will provide their lives with meaning and purpose.

3. No. Christians can be caught in a rudderless trap. They lose sight of that which is most important in life—faith in Jesus Christ—and put things above God. The world, Satan, and our sinful self constantly tempt us to break the First Commandment, “You shall have no other gods.” When the pursuit of material things, our job, or other relationships become focal point of our lives, our lives lose purpose.

4. Jesus offers full and complete forgiveness to all repentant sinners. Through Word and Sacrament the Holy Spirit works to strengthen our faith so that Christ is number one in our lives.

Read aloud the closing paragraph of this section.

### Inform

Invite volunteers to read aloud the lessons appointed for this day. Then read aloud the summaries.

1. The apostle Paul uses what he sees in the surroundings to catch the attention of the men of the Areopagus. When he notices all the statues to the false gods surrounding the Areopagus, he zeros in on the statue to “the unknown god.” Since these men are pagans, St. Paul sets the stage to share the true God with them.

Likewise, we can use that which is familiar to people to share the good news of salvation in Christ Jesus with them. Our missionaries do this all the time. The story is told of a missionary to New Guinea who was working with a particular pagan tribe. When he explained that Jesus died for the sins of the world, they saw that as weakness and would not believe in one who let others kill him.

Then, one day, there was a battle between this tribe and a neighboring tribe. After a number of deaths the chiefs made peace by exchanging their baby sons. The missionary used this event to explain that Jesus was the “peace” child that God sent to earth as the Savior of all people. This the tribesmen could understand, and many came to faith.

We might use the “token” Bible in someone’s living room to remind them of their spiritual search, or their obvious wealth to remind them of God’s blessings and His true riches, or their interest in sports to talk about pastimes with more eternal significance.

2. His purpose is to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ so that the Holy Spirit could work faith in the hearts of the people of Athens.

3. The new insight is the true God of creation is not a god of gold or silver or stone. He is not a creation of man but rather He is the one who is the Author of all creation.

4. The men of the Areopagus were philosophers who loved to discuss the popular philosophies and thinking of the day. They were adrift because there was no one teaching that they could all agree upon, for every teaching was of equal value unless it could be proven false. Not knowing the true God, they knew nothing about the way to salvation and eternal life. They might have had some vague hope of

an afterlife, but they could never know the wonders of heaven that the true God has prepared for all who believe in His Son Jesus as their Savior.

5. In Romans 10:14–15, God makes clear through Paul that if people are to be saved they must first hear the Gospel. If people are to hear the Gospel then there must be people to share it and proclaim it to them. That is why, as Peter says, we must be always ready to share with people the reason for our joy and hope and the peace in life that we experience in Christ.

How are we to do it? The only way we can readily give an account of our hope is to study the Bible, worship regularly, and receive the Lord's Supper. Luke 12:11–12, for instance, clearly tells us that God will, through the Holy Spirit, give us the very words to share.

6. The waters of the Flood are compared to the waters of Baptism. The same flood that destroyed many sinful people floated Noah and his family to safety. Had God not sent a flood of this magnitude to destroy the earth and all its inhabitants, the promise of a Savior would soon have been lost altogether. Thus the promise was preserved and Noah and his family saved through the Flood. Likewise, through the waters of Baptism God continues to fulfill His promise of salvation and literally bestows faith and salvation on us through them. Like Noah we are saved through water and the Word—the promises of God.

7. Baptism saves us as it connects us with the resurrection of Jesus.

8. Those who know God's love in Jesus the Savior respond with love as an outgrowth of faith. That same faith motivates and empowers us to carry out His commands. Since we want to obey His commands we will (a) avoid sinful temptations, (b) avoid bad language, (c) avoid sexual impurity, (d) willingly study God's Word and worship, (e) constantly seek ways to help others and share the love of God in Christ Jesus with them, and (f) pray without ceasing.

There are undoubtedly many other things that we will seek to avoid and, on the other hand, seek to do as disciples of Jesus—those who have experienced the magnitude of His love as demonstrated by His death on the cross.

## Connect

1. Ask your class to form pairs and make a list of the world's temptations that they face daily. Allow a few minutes for this activity and then have each pair share their list.

Ask, "Now that we have listed the many temptations that we face, how is it possible for us to overcome them?" God alone enables us to face and overcome every temptation as the Holy Spirit works through the study of God's Word and the Lord's Supper to strengthen faith.

2. Paul's mention of the judgment of God holds no fear for us because by faith in Christ we have already been judged and declared righteous and forgiven for Jesus' sake. Read Romans 8:1–4.

3. God gives us many opportunities to share Jesus with others, but because of our sinful nature, we often neglect to do so. Often Christians feel bad about this, and sometimes the devil uses the remembrance of these times of unfaithfulness to make us feel guilty. Assure participants that Jesus' death and resurrection has paid for those mistakes no less than any others. God's forgiveness and help are always available for repentant sinners. So when we fail to witness as we should and repent, God not only forgives us, but He empowers us and strengthens us to do better the next time.

4. We are connected with the resurrection of Jesus. Read aloud Romans 6:4–10. Here Paul clearly explains what Peter means regarding our connection with Jesus' resurrection.

5. Through faith Jesus gives us our purpose as we seek to serve Him and others in all we do and say. Daily devotions, reading the Bible, Bible study, worship, and receiving the Lord's Supper are all means through which the Holy Spirit works to strengthen our faith so that we might live on purpose.

## Vision

Ask the members of your class to complete the suggested activities. Challenge them to memorize 1 Peter 3:21–22. Speak with your pastor before you lead your class through this lesson and let him know that your class will be taking notes on his sermon. Find out if he is preaching on one of the pericopes appointed for this week.

## Session 15—The Ascension of Our Lord: Whom You Know! What You Know!

Acts 1:1–11; Ephesians 1:16–23; Luke 24:44–53

### Introduction

Ask for volunteers in the class to read the Introduction. Discuss each question briefly.

1. Answers will vary.
2. Although answers will vary, it is true that *who* you know makes all the difference in your faith-life. Knowing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior makes all the difference in where you will spend eternity.
3. Actually, this statement might more accurately reflect our faith relationship since it would be impossible to know *who*—Jesus Christ—without knowing *what*—His person and work on our behalf.

### Inform

Read aloud the appointed Scripture lessons. Then ask for volunteers to read the summary of each of the lessons appointed for Ascension.

1. Jesus appeared for 40 days after His resurrection, speaking with many people and preaching to crowds. The length of time often characterizes a critical period in redemptive history—40 days of rain, 40 years or days in the wilderness, etc. You may wish to point out that we still observe 40 days between the celebration of Easter and the observance of Ascension.

2. Lead the class through a discussion of the events that occurred on the mount at the Ascension. Some of the main points are (a) Jesus blessed the disciples; (b) Jesus taught the disciples, opening their minds to understand Him as the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies; (c) Jesus promises them power to be His witnesses when the Holy Spirit is poured out on them later; (d) the angels appear to the disciples and encourage them with the message that Jesus will return again.

3. Ask the class to share their ideas. There is no one right answer. Perhaps God wanted to assure them that even though Jesus had left them, they were not alone. As evident from the additional passages, angels are present at many significant events as God's plan of salvation unfolds. God uses angels to bring people His message and provide assurance of His presence.

4. Jesus literally gave the disciples the ability to understand and put together in their minds everything that they had seen since they had joined Him. They would now recognize Him as the complete fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy regarding the promised Messiah. Jesus opened their minds so that His miracles, His life, His death, His resurrection, and His ascension would all make sense to the disciples. Point out to the participants that for the disciples it was *now* not only *who* they knew, but also *what* they knew about Him to be true.

5. “The right hand” was the position of power and authority in the minds of those living in the ancient world. Paul shares Jesus' position so that they can understand that Jesus is King and Ruler of all. His life and death and resurrection are true. His ascension puts Him where the Father was leading Him all along. Jesus has received the ultimate exaltation.

6. It is noteworthy that they did not fear. They did not run and hide but openly praised God for what He had done in the person and through the work of Jesus. In a small way, even before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they began to be Jesus' witnesses.

## Connect

1. God provides salvation to people only in and through the person and work of Jesus. The Holy Spirit works to create and to strengthen saving faith through the who and what of Jesus revealed in God's Word.

2. We learn the following things about *who* we are and *what* we are to be about in the readings appointed for this day: we are witnesses (Acts 1:8; Luke 24:48); the Holy Spirit working through God's Word will give us wisdom to know Jesus better (Ephesians 1:17); the Holy Spirit gives us power (Ephesians 1:18–19); since we have received power we no longer have to “stay”, but instead can go into the world to proclaim His love for us (Luke 24:49); and we worship Him with great joy (Luke 24:52–53).

3. Jesus rules the heavens and the earth and promises to be with us always. By the Spirit's power He will continue to strengthen our faith, assuring us of who we are and empowering us to serve Him in what we do and say.

4. God assures us of His forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ when we fail and gives us the power to withstand temptation so that we can do what He desires. Through God's Word and Sacraments the Holy Spirit strengthens our faith so that our lives reflect who we are in Christ Jesus.

## Vision

Urge participants to complete one or both of the suggested activities.

## Session 16—Seventh Sunday of Easter: Suffering for the Sake of the Gospel

Acts 1:(1–7) 8–14; 1 Peter 4:12–17; 5:6–11; John 17:1–11

### Introduction

Invite participants to read the Introduction. Briefly discuss the questions.

1. Answers will vary.
2. Answers will vary.
3. Suffering can lead people to Jesus, the only true and lasting comfort for those who are burdened. Suffering can also cause people to reject the love of God in Christ as they question how God could let bad things happen and look for relief apart from God. Point out that only by God's grace through faith can people find hope and comfort in the midst of suffering. Ask, "What does this fact say about people who choose to suffer without Jesus?" (Their suffering may be unnecessarily prolonged.)

### Inform

Invite volunteers to read aloud the Scripture lessons appointed for the Seventh Sunday of Easter. Then read the summaries of the lessons provided in the Study Guide.

1. Christians suffered the anger and displeasure of their families when they would leave their Jewish or pagan religion and commit their lives to believing in and serving Jesus.

Christians suffered physically as they were thrown to the lions, tortured, and crucified. All but one of the apostles, according to history and legend, died a violent death for the sake of the Gospel.

Christians also suffered from the temptation of the devil. The world and its temptation to sexual sins with temple prostitutes and its temptation to get ahead by lying, stealing, or cheating all brought much pressure to bear on Christians to conform to their society and forget about following Jesus.

2. The following is a list of the things that St. Paul suffered: (a) imprisoned, (b) flogged, (c) exposed to death, (d) 40 lashes—5 times, (e) beaten with rods 3 times, (f) stoned, (g) shipwrecked 3 times, (h) a night and day in the open sea, (i) constantly on the move, (j) in danger from rivers, (k) in danger from thieves, (l) in danger from Jews, (m) in danger from Greeks, (n) in danger in the city, (o) in danger in the country, (p) in danger on the sea, (q) in danger from false brothers, (r) gone without food/rest, (s) been cold/naked, (t) concern for churches. Paul confessed, "I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties." He embraced through faith the words of Jesus, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness."

3. Peter says that Christians should not suffer for being a murder or thief or meddler. If, however, we suffer for the sake of Christ, because we are Christian, then we do not need to be ashamed.

4. The five commands are (1) humble yourselves; (2) cast our anxiety on God; (3) be self-controlled; (4) be alert; and (5) resist the devil.

5. Ask the class to list the enemies of the Christian and the Christian church today. Responses will vary.

6. God promises to restore us, to make us strong, firm, and steadfast, and to protect us. Answers will vary.

### Connect

1. The armor of God enables us to withstand any suffering that the devil, the world, or our own sinful flesh may throw at us. The following list will help you to identify the specific pieces of God's

armor. (a) The belt of truth—remember Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” (b) The breastplate of righteousness—remember that St. Paul is talking about Jesus’ righteousness that is ours by faith. (c) Feet fitted with the Gospel of peace—remember the words of Isaiah, “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news” (Isaiah 52:7). (d) The shield of faith—remember that this comes as a gift of God (Ephesians 2:8–9). (e) The helmet of salvation—remember that this too is the gift of God to protect you when you are tempted to think that you are lost because of your sins. (f) The sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God—remember that this is your only offensive weapon through which you can defeat sinful desires and the temptation of the devil and the world.

Summarize these verses by pointing out that the Holy Spirit works through God’s Word and Sacraments to keep us strong in the faith. All of the metaphors point to God’s Word as the source of power.

2. If there is time, have a volunteer or two share with the class a time of suffering that they may have gone through. Be sure that they also share how God strengthened them and enabled them to bear the suffering.

## Vision

Encourage the members of your class to do the suggested activities.

## Session 17—The Day of Pentecost: The Sound of the Spirit

Joel 2:28–29; Acts 2:1–21; John 16:5–11

### Introduction

Ask volunteers to each read aloud a paragraph of the Introduction. Discuss the questions. Do not spend too much time on these questions, since the answers will be explored in the depth throughout this session.

### Inform

Invite volunteers to read aloud the lessons. Then ask three volunteers to read the lesson summaries in the Study Guide.

1. Ask a few people in your class to describe the scene revealed in Acts 2:1–4. Some might see pandemonium, surprise, and confusion; some might see joy and excitement. The sound of the wind without any physical evidence of wind would have been a little frightening at first but the appearance of the tongues of fire above the heads of the disciples might have changed the fear to wonder.

2. Jesus had promised to send the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, after He had ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of His Father.

3. Joel had prophesied the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

4. The disciples were probably filled with wonder at what had happened and at their new ability to speak in languages they had never learned.

5. The fear and indecision and lack of direction that seemed to be a part of their lives now that Jesus had left them dissipated like mist in the morning sun. They were now bold proclaimers of the whole counsel of God, centering in on the person and work of Jesus Christ, the risen Savior.

6. At first the people thought that the disciples were drunk. This was likely because of the mixing of sounds as each disciple spoke to the people in a different language, and perhaps the loud tones of their preaching.

7. Peter quickly tells the people that they are not drunk—it was too early in the day to be drunk—but that this is the fulfilling of Joel’s prophecy of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit.

8. The Holy Spirit is the one who leads people to Jesus and in so doing becomes the best “Counselor” that anyone could ever have. He guides us into all truth as John 16:13 clearly indicates. In addition, the Spirit also keeps us in the faith and strengthens us for service to God and mankind.

### Connect

1. Today we receive the Holy Spirit through Baptism (sometimes called the visible Gospel) as Acts 2:38–39 clearly shows and through the spoken Gospel, as Acts 10:44–48 shows. See also Romans 1:16.

2. The Holy Spirit (a) justifies by bringing people to faith in Jesus; (b) enables a person to confess “Jesus is Lord;” (c) calls people to faith through the Gospel; (d) causes people to be born again through Baptism; (e) causes people to be born again through the Word of God; (f) controls the lives of believers keeping them from sin; (g) gives the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control; (h) keeps us in the true faith.

3. Some do not come to faith because they stubbornly refuse to believe and so are lost by their own fault. In other words, they refuse to listen to the Spirit’s prompting through God’s Word.

4. We do not wrestle with mere human beings but against the hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, it is vitally important that we Christians avail ourselves of the power of the Holy Spirit in maintaining a strong faith in and commitment to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Since the Bible makes it clear that the Holy Spirit works through the Word of God and the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, it is vital to our remaining steadfast in the faith to hear the Word and live the Word, to receive regularly the Sacrament of the Altar, and to remember daily our Baptism.

5. Have your class brainstorm together the many things that lure people away from Jesus and to destruction of their faith today. Some examples might be the New Age movement and especially the new emphasis on angels, the Eastern mystic religions like Hinduism and Buddhism, modern non-Christian music, Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons, money, and the accumulation of material wealth. To filter out the sounds of the world, we need to put on the earphones of the Word and Sacraments and listen to the Holy Spirit as He points our hearts and our lives to Jesus, our only Savior and Lord. Answers will vary. Encourage participants to share.

### Vision

Encourage the participants to search for their Baptism certificate and to think about what God has done for them in their baptism. This is a good time also to share with their children the great work of conversion and sanctification that the Holy Spirit has effected in them through Holy Baptism. Tell the class that you will ask for volunteers to pray next week in class using the prayer that they wrote during the week.