

## *Today's Light* Discussion Questions for April–June 2017

The material here is linked to the April–June issue of *Today's Light*, a quarterly magazine designed to lead God's people as they read through the Bible in two years.

We've tried to include enough discussion starters for about 45 minutes of study. Feel free to duplicate the questions and use them with *Today's Light* readers.

### Suggestions for Using *Today's Light* Discussion Questions

- You could gather a group of *Today's Light* readers during Sunday morning Bible class time.
- You could invite all *Today's Light* readers in your congregation to a midweek home discussion.
- You could make the questions available to all *Today's Light* readers and encourage them to partner with one or two other people over lunch once a week.

To subscribe to *Today's Light*, contact Concordia Publishing House via email at [cphorder@cph.org](mailto:cphorder@cph.org), via phone at 1-800-325-3040.

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*TODAY'S LIGHT* (ISSN 1084-4775) is published quarterly by Concordia Publishing House, 3558 S. Jefferson Avenue, St. Louis, MO 63118-3968. Subscription rate: 1 year, \$27.00; 2 years, \$50.00; single copy, \$7.00. Periodicals postage paid at St. Louis, MO, and additional mailing offices.

## April Week 1

### April 1–2; Daniel 1

1. What is the significance of the information that is revealed about God in Daniel 1:2, 9?

## April Week 2

### April 3–9; Daniel 2–9

1. Daniel reports (Daniel 2) that in his dream, Nebuchadnezzar saw a rock strike a large statue and destroy it. This rock is often interpreted as being the Lord or the Lord's kingdom. What comfort do you receive from picturing our Lord as a rock? Consult Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 18:2; Isaiah 26:4; 28:16; 1 Corinthians 10:4; and 1 Peter 2:4–8 to help you meditate on this picture. Share your observations.
2. Read and summarize Daniel's advice to King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4:27. Luther says confession has two parts: "that we confess our sins" and then that we "receive absolution" (Luther's Small Catechism, "What is confession?"). How are Daniel's advice and Luther's definition related? Why might Daniel have said the king should "break off" his sins "by practicing righteousness"? What is the purpose of repenting (Acts 3:19)? By God's grace, what will be the result of repentance (Matthew 3:8; John 8:11)? Pray for a repentant heart and the blessings of repentance in your own life.
3. What are some aspects of world affairs that make you concerned? List them and tell why they bother you. Then read Daniel 5:21c, the theme of the Book of Daniel. What is the assurance God brings to you in this verse? Share the comfort of God's Word from these additional passages: Psalm 90:1–2; Romans 6:23; 8:28; Psalm 145:15–16; Genesis 50:20; Psalm 103:13.
4. What is a creed? Following his experience with his government's officials and Daniel's night in the lions' den, King Darius issued his creed. Read the creed of King Darius (Daniel 6:25–27) and explain what he believed about God. What points would you include in your own creed?
5. Various interpreters and scholars have tried to figure out the countries and rulers symbolized by the beasts and horns of Daniel 7 and 8 (see notes for Daniel 7–8 in *The Lutheran Study Bible*). Scripture itself gives a rough outline (Daniel 8:19–26), but the details remain a mystery. In our own day, we often struggle to understand what's going on in the world or how to make things better in a world full of strife. One thing is certain. Look at these verses of Scripture and summarize their message to us: Daniel 7:9–10, 13–14, 18, 22, 26–27. When Jesus was dealing with many demons who possessed a man (Mark 5:1–20), they addressed Him as the "Son of the Most High God" (Mark 5:7). What comfort did Jesus bring to this man and his family (Mark 5:19)? Where will we find comfort and peace in our own time? Pray for the peace of Christ.

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6. Daniel's prayer is quite remarkable (Daniel 9:4–19)! Imagine that you had just read Jeremiah 24:5–7 and 25:12–14. What would you pray for? Is this request included in Daniel's prayer? Summarize the basic content of Daniel's prayer. How is the situation of Christians today similar to the situation of the Israelites in exile? How is it different? Pray for the salvation of all people.

## April Week 3

### April 10–16; Daniel 10–12; Hosea 1–10

1. Do you live in a world where most of your acquaintances are Christian? That may not last. When Daniel was shown a great vision (Daniel 10:8), what were some of his reactions (Daniel 10:8–10, 15–17)? Daniel may have been so upset that he fasted (Daniel 10:2–3). Why do you think Daniel was so upset? Even though we don't understand all the details of the vision, state the short message of comfort the man in linen left Daniel (Daniel 12:10). This message should comfort you even when it may seem like God's Word, His Savior, and His promises are not cherished by a majority of people. Read Matthew 28:18–20 together.
2. Why might a husband take away his wife's credit cards and car keys? Why might he disconnect the phone and the computer? Hosea essentially did this (Hosea 2:6, 9–12). What was his purpose (Hosea 2:14)? Have you fallen away from the Lord? In this section of Hosea, God graphically says He dearly wants His people back. How do the names of the children in Hosea 1–2 indicate that God wants to have His unfaithful children back in His family? What did God sacrifice to get us, His unfaithful children, back?
3. In Hosea 4, the Lord brings charges against Israel through Hosea. Basically, He accuses them of disobeying the Ten Commandments. Search Hosea 4 and identify the reasons the Lord states why they were so disobedient. Reflect on what we in our own time might do to avoid the errors of the Israelites. Pray for the Lord's mercy in this regard.
4. Hosea 5–6 continues the Lord's charges against Israel. Read Hosea 5:4. Identify several situations in our own times when the deeds of people make it impossible for them to turn things around; they can only continue to commit more sin. What shallow, unrealistic attitude do they hold (Hosea 6:1–3)? Will God condemn people eternally for their sin, or will He in some way save everyone, even the unrepentant (Leviticus 26:18; Ezekiel 18:20; Romans 6:23; Galatians 3:10)? What is our only hope (John 3:36; Colossians 1:13–14; 1 Peter 1:3; Galatians 5:16)?
5. These readings in Hosea are hard words. God's judgments in chapters 7–8 are relentless. Just like Israel, we ourselves have rebelled against God; we worship our own idols (Hosea 8:4). Name some of our modern idols. What can we do? Read Psalm 51. For what can we pray? What is the solution to our sin and unfaithfulness?

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6. Hosea pictures a garden where Israel “is a luxuriant vine” that brings forth fruit; unfortunately, Israel intends the harvest for itself only (Hosea 10:1). Cut off from the Lord in unbelief, it can produce nothing but “thorn and thistle” (Hosea 10:8). In Scripture, God at times pictured the type of garden He wanted; it was often compared to His perfect garden, the Garden of Eden. What are some features of God’s perfect garden? See Genesis 2:8–14; Isaiah 51:3; 58:11; Ezekiel 28:13, 15; 36:35; Hosea 10:12; John 4:10, 14; 15:1–17. How is God’s picture of a garden a comfort to you?

## April Week 4

### April 17–23; Hosea 11–14; Joel 1–3

1. Describe your experiences if you have ever helped a small child learn to walk. What are some of the heartaches and joys of this process? In Hosea 11:3–4, the prophet pictures God teaching His children to walk, to grow up. What are some of the things God did to help His children as they grew? What happened as His children grew up (Hosea 11:7, 12)? How would you describe God's reaction to this development (Hosea 11:8–9)? Close by thanking God for His continuing love in Jesus for us, His children.
2. Advertisers know that gross pictures or statements get more attention. In one sense, God's words in Hosea describing His punishment for the sins of the people present awful pictures. Identify some of these pictures in Hosea 13. Why does God use such horrific images? Did it pay off, in the case of Ephraim? Read Ephesians 2:1–7, 10. Then pray God would open our own hearts to words of His Law so that we can receive by faith the forgiveness and new life in Christ God wants to give.
3. How many words can you think of that mean “repent”? Name some alternatives. Did you include *return*? *Return* has been a major word in Hosea (Hosea 3:5; 5:4; 6:1; 7:10; 11:5; 12:6), and God uses it again in this last chapter (Hosea 14:1–2). To what does God want the people to return? How can that be done (Hosea 14:2)? Describe and rejoice in the Lord's action as Hosea (Hosea 14:4, 5, 8) and Paul (Colossians 1:13) describe it.
4. If a swarm of locusts and drought decimated all of our gardens and farmers' fields, what would you worry about? This happened to Joel. Which of his main concerns is on your list? See Joel 1:9, 13, 15. Where did Joel turn for help (Joel 1:19)? Pray for your church as it is impacted by world events.
5. Of what did the destruction of the locusts and the drought remind Joel (Joel 2:1)? What did he urge the people to do (Joel 2:12–13)? Identify some of the promises in the Lord's reply (Joel 2:19–32). These promises have all been fulfilled for you in Christ.

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6. God's blessings come in many forms. Joel reverses a well-known saying from Isaiah (see Isaiah 2:4 and Joel 3:10) to highlight opposite poles of God's blessings. What is the message of each saying? These complementary blessings are pictured later. What is the blessing for God's people described in Joel 3:12–16a? What is the blessing for God's people described in Joel 3:16b–21?



## April Week 5

### April 24–30; Amos 1–9

1. Identify some of the specific sins of the various nations Amos names in chapters 1 and 2. How are Amos's times like our own? He even names sins of God's own people. What sins do church people commit today? There is only Law here. What are your favorite promises of God to remember when your sin has been so starkly exposed?
2. "It's inevitable!" You've heard people say that about a variety of things. Name some things that you think of as inevitable. In Amos 3, the Lord told Amos that certain things were inevitable (Amos 3:3–6). What were they? What is the Lord's point (Amos 3:2, 10–11, 14–15)? A hint at other inevitabilities can be found in Amos 3:12. What else is inevitable? Look at these Scripture passages: John 3:16; 1 John 1:7; 2 Timothy 4:18; John 14:19; Hebrews 9:28; Philippians 1:6. Praise God for His faithful love toward us in Christ Jesus, our Lord.
3. We often describe God by listing His attributes. Review them for a moment. Did you list "frustrated" as an attribute of God? What statements in Amos 4 show God to be a frustrated God? Put God's frustration in your own words. "Frustrated" is not an attribute of God because it is not an essential or intrinsic aspect of God's nature. What attributes of God counter His frustrations with His creatures (Psalm 145:9; Titus 3:5; Exodus 34:6–7; 1 John 4:8)? Review Amos 5:21–27. Identify the "Good News" phrases that offer God's promise of deliverance for the faithful.
4. After you have read Amos 6, list acts and attitudes God criticizes. Create some statements Amos might write if he were living now in our own time. How should Christians respond to these criticisms? Look at these Scripture passages for some ideas: James 5:16; Matthew 9:2; Psalm 51:13; Galatians 5:13, 22–23; Ephesians 2:10; Acts 2:42; 1 Peter 2:12. Pray for God's help to live a life pleasing to Him and of help to your neighbor.
5. The Lord is a God of determination. Do you like it that God is so determined? How does Amos 7 show God to be determined? As a sinner, I am not *at all* happy to know God is determined in the way He's pictured in Amos 7. I *am* glad God is determined in another way. Look at these Scripture passages to see another side of God's determination: Matthew 1:21; Galatians 4:4–5; 1 Thessalonians 4:3; 1 John 4:9, 11; Psalm 118:1. Then thank God for His determination in this respect.

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6. If God were silent (the famine of not hearing God's words of Amos 8:11), what would you not hear? There are several places in Scripture indicating the dire consequences of God's silence (e.g., 1 Samuel 28:6; 2 Chronicles 15:3; Ezekiel 7:26; Micah 3:4, 7), but what would you miss if God were silent? Look at these sections of Scripture to stimulate your thinking and your thanks for God's words of grace: Psalm 23; Isaiah 9:6–7; Luke 2:1–20; John 3:16; John 20:19–23; Ephesians 2:4–10; Romans 8:35–39. Share your own section of God's Word and tell why you would miss that Word if God were silent. Then thank God for His Word.
  
7. "Finally, after all of that!" When might such a statement be made? Why might the reader of Amos be inclined to say "Finally, after all of that!"? Look especially at Amos 9:8, 11, 13–15. Rejoice with the people of God by saying or singing the words of "Praise the Almighty" (*LSB* 797).

## May Week 1

### May 1–7; Obadiah; Jonah 1–4; Micah 1–5

1. What does the expression “tie up the loose ends” mean? In one sense, Obadiah is a book in which the Lord ties up the loose ends. In the previous prophetic books, what was the Lord’s purpose? See Amos 2:4–5 or Jeremiah 3:11–13, for example. Through Obadiah, whom does the Lord call to account, and for what (Obadiah 8–12)? Describe a time when you rejoiced at the misfortune of someone who was having a hard time or rejoiced when someone was punished for doing wrong. What was the Lord’s response to such behavior (Obadiah 12–15)? What “loose ends” does the Lord tie up in Obadiah? What connection exists between the message of Obadiah and the story of the Good Samaritan (see Obadiah 12 and Luke 10:29–37)? Where is there forgiveness for these sins (Obadiah 17; Romans 11:26–27; Hebrews 12:22–24)?
2. Identify the confessions of faith that Jonah made (see Jonah 1–2). What doctrines in the creeds did Jonah confess? In spite of the doctrinal knowledge and the faith that he had, Jonah did not carry out the mission God gave him. Why? What warning for us is in this reading? What comfort and strength is given in this reading when we fail like Jonah?
3. Throughout the Book of Jonah, what evidence argues that the prophet wanted Nineveh to be destroyed rather than receive God’s gracious forgiveness (Jonah 1:3; 4:1–3, 9)? Why didn’t Jonah want the Ninevites to hear God’s call to repentance (Jonah 3:4, 9) and His message of grace (Jonah 4:2)? What idol was he still worshiping (Jonah 2:8)? What idols that we worship keep us from proclaiming the Gospel to others? What grace is ours (Ephesians 2:4–5, 8–9)?
4. List Israel’s sins as they are identified in Micah 1–2. How do they compare with the sins of our own time? How will God stop the sinning (Micah 1:15; 2:3–4)? Why will God save a remnant (Micah 2:12–13; Isaiah 11:1, 10; Romans 10:9–12)? Praise God for His remnant (you included), using the words of the second stanza of “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name” (*LSB* 549).
5. What are some significant things that have happened in the last fifty years or so? What significant things do you anticipate will happen in the next fifty years? The people of Micah’s time could look back and see many significant events in the not-too-distant past and see significant changes in the offing. Speaking with the confidence of one who knows the ascended Lord, what was Micah’s conviction about the future (Micah 4:5, 10)? Speaking as one who knows the Lord in Jesus Christ, what are your convictions about the future? See Ephesians 1:3–8.

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6. How would you characterize some of the rulers of our day? What words would you use to describe them? Did you use the word *shepherd* in any of your descriptions? Micah described the new “ruler over Israel” as a shepherd (Micah 5:4). What are some characteristics of a good shepherd (Psalm 23; 78:71–72; 95:7; Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 3:15; Ezekiel 34:11–16)? The promise of a shepherd Micah brought was ultimately fulfilled in God’s perfect Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. How does Jesus care for us, His flock (John 10:11, 14; Hebrews 13:20–21; 1 Peter 5:4; Revelation 7:17)? Praise God for His Good Shepherd in the words of the hymn “The King of Love My Shepherd Is” (*LSB* 709).

## May Week 2

May 8–14; Micah 6–7; Nahum 1–3; Habakkuk 1–3; Zephaniah 1–2

1. “What have I done to you? How have I wearied you?” That’s what the Lord asked Israel (Micah 6:3). What are some things people blame on God? Have you blamed God for anything lately? An illness or accident? A damaging storm? A death in the family? God told Israel to remember several good things He had done to justify the sentence He was about to mete out to them—exile in Babylon. What were these good things (Micah 6:4–5; Numbers 22:16–18; 24:10–11, 17)? What good things has God done for you? Praise and thank Him for His love in word and deed.
2. How would you describe what God in Christ Jesus has done to our sins? State a few descriptions of your own. Now read Micah’s and Isaiah’s descriptions: Micah 7:19; Isaiah 30:13–14; 43:25; 44:22. How did Paul describe what Christ did to our sins (Galatians 5:24)? Find several other Bible passages that remind you Christ destroyed the power of sin and the devil. When our sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake, they are gone forever. Rejoice together, using the words of the hymn “O Bless the Lord, My Soul” (*LSB* 814).
3. If you are pushed around by the local bully, if you are suffering from a terrorist attack, if you are falsely accused, if you are the one whose leaders have been blinded or imprisoned or killed by a brutal enemy—the words of the prophet Nahum (whose name means “comfort”) bring joy. Read some of these words together: Nahum 1:2–3, 9. All of us want the activities and regimes of cruel and brutal bullies put to an end. Nahum and other inspired writers assure us that God acts to put an end to the activities of those who bully and oppress His people; remember, too, the biggest bully is the devil. Read together several of these statements and note how God takes care of these problems: Nahum 1:3, 7–8; 2:2; Romans 6:17–18; 8:31–39; 2 Thessalonians 1:6–10; 1 Peter 5:6–10. Then in prayer, praise God for His mercy and His justice.
4. There is a saying: “Be careful what you wish for.” How might that saying apply to Habakkuk? What, in effect, was he asking God to do (Habakkuk 1:3)? What was God’s answer (Habakkuk 1:6)? What was Habakkuk’s second question (Habakkuk 1:13)? Does God tolerate evil? Explain your thinking. What does Habakkuk say God’s people should do in the face of evil (Habakkuk 2:4, 20)? How does this fit with what other biblical writers have said (Psalm 91:9–10; Romans 6:23; 8:28; 2 Thessalonians 3:3; 2 Timothy 4:18)? Pray the prayer of the hymn “Fight the Good Fight” (*LSB* 664) at the conclusion of your discussion.

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5. Do you know when to stop asking questions of God? In our age of science and education, we want to know the answers. When did Habakkuk stop asking God questions? See Habakkuk 2:4, 20. Then what did Habakkuk do? See Habakkuk 3:1, 2–15, 16, and 17–19 for four things he did.
  
6. When you think of “sweeping away” something, what sort of picture do you see? What is the Lord going to “sweep away” (Zephaniah 1:1–3)? God expressed the same idea in other places in Scripture (see Genesis 6:7; Exodus 32:9–10; Ezekiel 7:10–12)? Why is God going to do this (see Zephaniah 1:5–6, 17)? What is the message for us (Psalm 32:3–5; 1 John 1:8–10)? How did God “sweep away” our sin and guilt (Psalm 51:1–2; 1 Corinthians 6:11; 1 John 1:7; 2:1–2)? In your prayers, praise God that He has cleansed you from all sin.

## May Week 3

### May 15–21; Zephaniah 3; Haggai 1–2; Zechariah 1–5

1. What connections do you see between the thoughts in Zephaniah 3 and the events and message of Pentecost (Acts 2)?
2. Review the two chapters of Haggai. When God gives reasons why His people should do some work, these same reasons often become the Lord's promises to help His people complete the work as well. Identify the reasons and promises God gave to His people that they should complete the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Apply these reasons and promises of God to the work He has given us to do to proclaim His Word to everyone.
3. After reading Zechariah 1–2, summarize the messages of each of the three visions. Overall, is the message one of despair or one of hope? To what situations today might this message apply?
4. Zechariah's fourth vision (Zechariah 3), a vision of the high priest Joshua receiving a clean set of priestly garments to replace his filthy ones, is a wonderful picture of God covering us with Jesus' righteousness. Explain God's plan using this image. Explore how these passages relate to this picture: Isaiah 64:6; Jeremiah 2:22; Matthew 22:11; 1 John 1:7; Ephesians 5:25; Psalm 51:1–2. Confess your faith together in the words of the hymn "Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness" (*LSB* 563).
5. What are the small things, in our eyes, with which God does His work (Zechariah 4:10)? A plumb line is a small thing. What do you do with it? Why is it important? Olive oil might be considered a small thing. Of what importance is it? On the other hand, what might we consider a big thing? How about power? What does the Lord tell Zechariah about power (Zechariah 4:6)? What is the message of Zechariah's fifth vision (Zechariah 4)?
6. Describe the two visions in Zechariah 5. The two visions seem to have a common message. What is it? How does God accomplish this task?

## May Week 4

### May 22–28; Zechariah 6–13

1. As you consider Zechariah 6, think about what happened on Pentecost (Acts 2)—through the work of the Holy Spirit, many believed and more were added to the fellowship of believers each day. What evidence do you see in both of these portions of Scripture to suggest that God is eager to get His message of salvation through Jesus out to the world? What is the thought regarding spreading the Gospel that is implicit in Zechariah 6:5, 7, 12, 15? What might be done to increase your own efforts to “build the temple of the LORD” (Zechariah 6:13)?
2. What question did the people of Bethel want to ask the Lord (Zechariah 7:3)? Does the Lord answer their question directly (Zechariah 7:5–6)? What seems to be His answer? What do the directions given in Zechariah 7:10 have to do with answering the question the people had? How does this discussion in Zechariah apply to our lives as Christians, especially as we worship, receive the Sacrament, and go about our daily tasks? Consult these Scripture references as you discuss your ideas: 1 Timothy 4:8; 2 Corinthians 7:10–11; Hebrews 10:19–25.
3. Identify and explain some of the sad and somber occasions we observe. Then read Zechariah 8:19. How has God turned our sad and somber occasions into “seasons of joy and gladness and cheerful feasts” (Psalm 30:11; Habakkuk 3:18; John 3:16; Philippians 4:4; 1 Peter 4:13)? Give several examples. Praise God in the words of “In Thee Is Gladness” (*LSB* 818).
4. The Lord will care for His people. Search chapters 9 and 10 of Zechariah and find the many ways God expresses this truth to us, His people. Describe the nuances of each different expression of God’s care for us. What other Scripture passages do you know that express this same truth? Discuss them with your group. Now are you convinced? The Lord cares for His people.
5. Have you ever wanted to be strong? Give some examples of ways you would want to be strong. Probably all of us want to be strong in one way or another. What do people do to become strong? What have you done to become strong? Where would the people of Jerusalem, God’s people, find strength (Zechariah 12:5)? How do we become strong in the Lord (see 1 Corinthians 1:8; 15:54–57; 16:13; Ephesians 6:10; 2 Timothy 1:8–10; 2:1; 1 Peter 5:10)? Thank the Lord for His strength.



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6. In Zechariah 13, the prophet uses two metaphors to picture God as He sustains and saves His people. The first picture is that of a fountain (Zechariah 13:1), and the second picture is that of a shepherd (Zechariah 13:7). In your group, discuss first the blessings we receive from God, our Fountain; consult these Scripture passages for help: Psalm 36:9; Isaiah 55:1; Jeremiah 2:13; 17:13; John 4:10, 14; 7:37–38; Revelation 21:6. Then encourage one another by reviewing the blessings we receive from Christ, our Good Shepherd; consult these Bible verses for ideas: Isaiah 40:10–11; John 10:11, 14–18; Hebrews 13:20–21; 1 Peter 2:24–25. Thank our Lord Jesus for being both a Fountain and a Shepherd for you.

## May Week 5

### May 29–31; Zechariah 14; Malachi 1–4

1. Do all people of every religion worship the same God? Check out these passages: Exodus 20:1–7; 1 Corinthians 8:4; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Ephesians 4:3–13; Hebrews 1:1–2; Colossians 2:9; Acts 4:12. Someday, everyone will know who the true God is (Zechariah 14:9). What day is that? What should believers in Christ do now (Matthew 28:19)?
2. The story has been told that Luther once was upset with his people. He entered the pulpit, opened the Bible, announced, “There is no Gospel for you today,” turned, and left the pulpit. Why did God, through Malachi, say essentially the same thing (Malachi 1:10; see also Malachi 1:6–7, 12–13; 2:11, 16)? How might we bring defiled offerings to the Lord? God directs Malachi to identify these sins because He wants the covenant with Levi to continue. What was the covenant with Levi (Numbers 25:10–13)? How has God continued a covenant of peace with us (Hebrews 8:6, 10; 9:14)? Thank God for the peace He brings to us through Jesus, the Prince of Peace.
3. The Lord urges His people to “bring the full tithe” (Malachi 3:10). What is His argument as to why they should do this? See Malachi 3:1, 6, 17; 4:2. According to Isaiah 49:6, how has God given us “the sun of righteousness” (Malachi 4:2)? What implications does this section of Malachi have for us as we plan our budgets and make use of the resources God has given us?

## June Week 1

### June 1–4; Matthew 1–6

1. Study the activities of the “angel of the Lord” recorded in Matthew 1–2. What do these activities of the angel tell us about God and His care for the Gospel and His people?
2. In *Discourses in Matthew: Jesus Teaches the Church* (CPH, 2004), David P. Scaer contends Matthew wrote his Gospel to prepare early Jewish catechumens for Baptism and the Eucharist and that this Gospel could serve a similar function in today's church. What topics would you begin with if you were going to write a catechism for the church? After providing a bit of information regarding Jesus' early life in chapters 1 and 2, what topics did Matthew introduce in Matthew 3–4? Summarize what Matthew says about these topics as you might express them when you witness to a person being introduced to the Christian faith.
3. In Matthew 3:7–8, John the Baptist confronted the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.” Jesus sets out to teach His followers how to “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” in His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). Discuss what Jesus said about living in keeping with repentance in Matthew 5–6. Then, pray for His help to live a life of repentance.

## June Week 2

### June 5–11; Matthew 7–17

1. Taken by itself, Matthew 7:21 is a difficult passage to understand. Look at these similar passages: Matthew 12:50; Romans 2:13; James 1:22; and 1 John 3:18. What seems to be the message of these passages? Then read Psalm 14:3; 1 John 1:8; and Galatians 3:10–11. According to these passages, who will be saved? Matthew is warning his catechumens, and us, about the “false prophets” (Matthew 7:15) who do not live what they preach. Rather, Jesus wants them to trust in “the rock” (Matthew 7:24). What is that rock? See Matthew 5:17; 4:17; 1:21 and relate these passages to Matthew 7:21.
2. Count the miracles of Jesus recorded in Matthew 8–9. Why did Jesus do so many miracles in such a short amount of time? What was His concern? See Matthew 8:10, 26; 9:6, 13, 22, 28–29. If you had been there to hear His Sermon on the Mount, see all this miracle activity, hear Him say, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few” (Matthew 9:37), and then in the next chapter listen to additional instruction, what would you conclude about what Jesus wants in His disciples? Pray for a rich supply of people who will preach and teach the Gospel.
3. What question did John the Baptist ask Jesus (Matthew 11:2–3)? How is this same question phrased today? How did Jesus answer this question? What Scripture passages help answer this question? How might Christians respond today?
4. Look at each of the seven parables in Matthew 13. Where is Jesus in each parable? What does He do for His people in each one? What is the overall message of the parables for us?
5. Some Pharisees and teachers asked Jesus why He allowed His disciples to break the tradition of the Jewish elders (Matthew 15:2). Why were they offended? Can you identify any traditions that Jesus followed (Matthew 23:23)? What are some church traditions with which you are familiar? Are people offended or upset if any are not followed? Why are traditions important to us? What was more important to Jesus than traditions (Matthew 15:3–9)?
6. Review Matthew 17:1–13. Unlike those who opposed Jesus, the disciples did not demand a spectacular sign to prove He is the Messiah. Yet Jesus gave them such a sign—freely!

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Peter, James, and John saw the Son of God in His splendor. What was the significance of Jesus' change in appearance? (Compare this incident with Exodus 33:18; 34:29–30.) Why did Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus (Malachi 4:4–6)? What future effect did this experience have on the disciples? See 2 Peter 1:12–21.

## June Week 3

### June 12–18; Matthew 18–28

1. All of us have seen situations where people get ahead of themselves or jump the gun, so to speak. A child might ask, “Can I sit next to Grandpa at the ballgame?” when the first question to ask is “Will you take Grandpa and us to the ballgame?” What was the disciples’ “jumping the gun” question in Matthew 18:1? Who finally asked the right question? What was it (Matthew 19:25)? Between these two questions, Matthew reports on a long discussion and two incidents that shed light on these questions. What is Jesus’ answer to each question?
2. Nowadays we think of kidnappings when we hear the word *ransom*. Kidnappers send ransom notes or make their demands in the media. They want something for the safe return of the one who has been kidnapped. Jesus says He came “to give His life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). Explain Jesus’ metaphor and apply it to your own situation. Who was kidnapped? Who did the kidnapping? How is the ransom paid? Who gets released? In light of this passage, how do reports of recent kidnappings increase your appreciation of what Jesus has done for you?
3. “Obey your parents, but don’t do what they do.” What implications about you are in this statement? Or what would such a statement imply if it were made about the police? Jesus made such a statement regarding the Pharisees (Matthew 23:3). He explains His statement in the rest of chapter 23. What were some of the charges He made? After listing some of the charges, ask yourself if you have this same “Pharisee problem.” Jesus implies the only solution in Matthew 23:39. Explain His implied solution and praise Him for it.
4. Some commentators think Jesus was speaking of the Antichrist prior to Judgment Day, the destruction of Jerusalem, or sacrileges done to the temple when He refers to the “abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel” (Matthew 24:15). More recently, David Scaer, in his book *Discourses in Matthew: Jesus Teaches the Church*, suggests Jesus was talking about His own imminent suffering, crucifixion, and death in Matthew 24–25. How would Jesus’ teachings in this section of Matthew help the disciples be ready for the events of Holy Week?
5. Two titles given to Jesus prominently stand out in His trial—Son of Man and Son of God. Jesus used Son of Man when He referred to Himself (Matthew 24:30; 25:31; 26:24, 45, 64. See also Mark 8:31). Why would Jesus use this term for Himself so often? Why would others use the term Son of God when referring to Jesus (Matthew 3:17; 4:3, 6;

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17:5; 26:63; 27:40, 54)? What benefit is it to us to believe and confess Jesus as both “true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary” (Luther’s Small Catechism, explanation of the Second Article)?

6. Reflect on the account of the resurrection of Jesus in Matthew 28. How does Jesus show He was with His disciples and the people He knew? How is God with us even today (Matthew 1:23; 28:18–20)? Why was the message “Jesus is with you” important for the disciples? Why is it important for us?

## June Week 4

### June 19–25; Mark 1–10

1. How do you know when someone has authority? In the first two chapters of his Gospel, Mark shows Jesus establishing His authority. How do these events show Jesus had authority: John's statements about Jesus (Mark 1:7–8); Jesus' Baptism (Mark 1:11); His preaching in Galilee (Mark 1:14–15, 22); His recruitment of disciples (Mark 1:16–20); His dealings with evil spirits (Mark 1:23–27); His healing of illness (Mark 1:30–31, 42); His defense of disciples who did not fast (Mark 2:18–20); and His "work" on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23–27)? What authority did Jesus most want to establish (Mark 2:5–11)? Why is Mark's emphasis in these two chapters beneficial to you?
2. In contrast to the growing hatred among the religious leaders toward Him, as seen in the Herodians and the Pharisees and reported in Mark 3–4, Jesus enjoyed great popularity and acceptance among the people. What accounts for this difference? Are there any similar differences of opinion about Jesus today? Identify them. How do you explain these differing opinions? What clues to solving this problem does Jesus suggest in the parables of the lamp on a stand (Mark 4:21–25) and mustard seed (Mark 4:30–32)?
3. How did Herod react to John the Baptist and his message (Mark 6:14–20, 26)? Do you know any people who react to the Christian Gospel in the same way Herod reacted to John's message? What would Jesus' advice be to us in dealing with such people? Look at the account of the feeding of the 5,000 that immediately follows the story of John the Baptist's beheading for clues.
4. What should you use to be truly clean, perfume or soap? What were the Pharisees worried about—the perfume or the soap (Mark 7:1–8)? Explain your answer. The disciples needed to think about this question also, and Jesus raised it with them in Mark 8:27–38. What was the soap that really cleansed people? Jesus was not against the perfume, the ceremonial washing (John 2:6–8), but what was His greater concern (Ephesians 5:2, 25–27; 1 John 1:7; Titus 3:4–6; Hebrews 9:13–14)? With Paul, praise God for your cleansing by putting your name in 1 Corinthians 6:11.
5. Mark 9 is filled with helpless people. List them and explain why they were helpless. What does this chapter reveal about Jesus' willingness and ability to help the helpless (Mark 9:25, 31, 35)? When do we help the helpless in His name (Mark 9:29, 37, 41, 50)?



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6. Helplessness and fear go hand in hand. The people in Mark 10, like those in Mark 9, were helpless and, as a result, fearful. Some of their helplessness and fearfulness is not obvious at first. Think carefully and describe the fears of the people in Mark 10. How are their fears like our own? What comfort does Jesus offer?

## June Week 5

June 26–30; Mark 11–16

1. Following His entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus, it seems, set out to cleanse the whole temple area (Mark 11:15–19). In view of this context, what would be the implications of Jesus not allowing “anyone to carry anything through the temple” (Mark 11:16)? Do any people today use the church on their way to somewhere else? Have you used the church that way? What is Jesus really trying to accomplish by cleansing the temple courts? Consult these passages for help as you consider this question: Mark 11:17, 25; Acts 3:19; 2 Chronicles 6:20; Matthew 21:28–32.
2. The parable of the tenants (Mark 12:1–11) is an interesting parable. Read it carefully and explain its meaning in your group. Who is the owner and who is the son? What is the point? One item that doesn't seem to fit with many interpretations is the reaction of the owner (Mark 12:9). Why would the owner react in this way? Does God react this way? What is marvelous in our eyes (Mark 12:11)?
3. The woman who poured perfume on Jesus (Mark 14:3–9) can help us meditate on our own life of sanctification. Who was she? Why were her reactions a great way to honor Jesus? What does it mean for us to live a sanctified life in our culture? Pray for the Spirit's strength to live a sanctified life.
4. The crucifixion and death of Jesus, together with His resurrection, is the focal point of the Christian faith. In several respects, the statements of ridicule hurled at Jesus when He was on the cross echo the temptations that the devil used to attack Jesus. What similarities do you see between the statements at the cross (Mark 15:29–32) and the devil's temptations (Matthew 4:1–11)? Praise God that Jesus conquered all these temptations as He suffered on the cross, conquering the devil for us and assuring that the punishment for our sins would be complete.
5. Though it is the climax of his book, Mark 16 describes the resurrection of Jesus simply. Summarize the details as Mark gives them. Note especially the details the angel covers in the announcement of the resurrection to the women. How does each statement of the angel answer a concern that people might have and also comfort and bring joy to the disciples and people everywhere who realize their need for a Savior?

## Leaders Notes

Many of the questions call for group participants to share personal insights, examples, or life experiences and applications. Answers to these questions will vary. If no one answers right away, allow a moment or two of silence so that everyone has time to think through the question. Other questions call for specific factual or analytical responses. Suggested answers for these appear below.

### April Week 1

#### April 1–2; Daniel 1

1. In these two verses, Daniel establishes a basic understanding for his readers: everything he records and everything that has happened to him and his friends is God's doing. God is the God of history, and He guides all events for the good of His people. These passages also speak to this: John 17:1; Romans 4:18–21; 8:28; 2 Corinthians 6:1–2; Galatians 4:4–5. At a specific time in history, God gave His Son to be our Savior. Now is our time to trust Him and do His work. God is the God of history—this is one of the themes of Daniel, and it is an encouragement God gives to His people of all time.

## April Week 2

### April 3–9; Daniel 2–9

1. Moses praises God—the Rock—for being perfect, faithful, upright, just, and without iniquity (Deuteronomy 32:4). The solid, dependable attributes of our God are emphasized. The psalmist confesses the Lord is his rock in terms of being a stronghold, a place of refuge and safety, a place that provides protection and saves from danger (my salvation) and destruction (Psalm 18:2). Isaiah says the Lord is an “everlasting rock” (Isaiah 26:4) who has been tested and therefore qualified to serve as the “cornerstone, of a sure foundation” for life (Isaiah 28:16). The apostle Paul identifies Christ as the rock that nourished the Old Testament people, a reference to the refreshing water that came from a rock during the time of the wilderness journey of the Israelites and a reminder that in our own Baptism we receive saving nourishment from Jesus, our Rock (1 Corinthians 10:4). Peter speaks of Jesus as the living stone who is using us, His living stones, to build a house that serves God faithfully (1 Peter 2:4–8). He also warns that some people will stumble over this Rock and live in unbelief and disobedience. Close by singing a hymn, one that refers to Jesus as the Rock. Look at these if you have difficulty choosing from so many: *LSB* 534:4 or 575 and 576.
2. Daniel advised the king to renounce his sin and wickedness by doing what was right. John the Baptist echoed his thoughts by telling people to “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matthew 3:8), and Jesus, after absolving the adulterous woman, told her “from now on sin no more” (John 8:11). In view of the fact that the king previously had praised God (Daniel 2:47) but had then decreed that people in the kingdom do something sinful (worship an image of gold, Daniel 3), Daniel wanted the king to show he was truly sorry for his sin. Luther’s definition of confession includes both repentance and absolution, confession and forgiveness through Christ. Acts 3:19 assures us that, when we confess our sin, God will forgive us. Conclude with a prayer for a repentant heart and rejoice in the Lord’s forgiveness through His Son.
3. Considering the many problems in the world today, your group will be able to create a long list of concerns. Spend only a short time with this activity. Then look at the suggested passages and other passages that members of your group might know that bring special comfort from God’s Word to us in times of trouble. Under God’s guidance, Daniel told the king that his God, the Most High God, ruled all the kingdoms of earth and determined who will rule in each. God always has ruled the world and served as a safe dwelling place for His people for many generations (Psalm 90:1–2), has given His promised Messiah to bring eternal life to all who believe (Romans 6:23), and works all things out for the good of those who believe (Romans 8:28). He continues to supply all we need (Psalm 145:15–16) and intends everything that happens for our ultimate good today also (Genesis 50:20). Even today, He deals with His children with compassion and love (Psalm 103:13).
4. A creed is a statement of belief. Darius states God is a living God who will endure forever and whose kingdom will have no end. He also states God rescues and saves people and gives the example of God saving Daniel in the last line. Darius also states God performs wonders, perhaps a reference to God giving Daniel the wisdom to know

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the king's dreams and the ability to interpret them. Perhaps others heard the stories of the God of Israel, such as those about the exodus from Egypt. Encourage your group to list some statements to make in their own creeds. Say one of them or the Apostles' Creed together.

5. These verses from Daniel 7 assure us that all events and world powers are within the control of the Most High God, who will work out these situations in favor of the saints (Daniel 7:22, 26). Jesus, the Son of the Most High God, rid the man of his many demons (Mark 5:13), as He did for us when He conquered Satan through His death and resurrection (Romans 8:2, 37–39). “Lord Jesus, deliver us from all of Satan's schemes. Amen.”
6. After reading Jeremiah, Daniel could be expected to pray that, after seventy years of exile, the Israelites have suffered enough. God needs to keep His promise and move His people back to Jerusalem. Throughout his prayer, Daniel confesses the unfaithfulness of the people throughout their history, including their unfaithfulness in his own time during the exile. They have not changed their ways; they are no better than their ancestors in following God's Law. His requests are simply that God would listen, hear, and act because of His mercy. Christians today also are sinful people; those of us who follow Jesus must admit to much unfaithfulness to God, who has already given His Son to save us and has raised Him from the dead. Unlike Daniel's Israel, we can look back at the fulfilled promises of God regarding the Messiah-Savior. Rather than prescribe what God should do, we, too, must pray God would remember His people and listen, hear, and act on their behalf on the basis of His mercy and Jesus' merits—never ours.

## April Week 3

### April 10–16; Daniel 10–12; Hosea 1–10

1. While most of our acquaintances may be Christian, many people do not live in such a world. Daniel became very upset, not only at what he saw in the vision, but also because he was asked to look at a vision by “a man clothed in linen” (Daniel 10:5). The vision showing constant battles, kings being overthrown, and God’s people having to suffer through it all grieved Daniel. To him, it seemed that God’s people, the temple, and the hope of returning to Jerusalem were doomed (Daniel 11:28, 30–31). Although the vision painted a dire picture, the man in linen left the promise that “many shall purify themselves and make themselves white and be refined” (Daniel 12:10). Through Jesus, we have been purified, refined, and made spotless in the blood of the Lamb (Malachi 3:2–4; 1 John 1:7). Jesus has promised to be with us to the end of time.
2. A husband might do all of these things to prevent his wife from being unfaithful to him and to save her and their family. Hosea’s wife, Gomer, was unfaithful to him and did not act like she was thankful for the food, jewelry, and clothing that he had furnished for her (Hosea 2:8–9), so he said he would take it all back. He wanted her to be faithful to him. He planned to do all he could to win her love and faithfulness (Hosea 2:14) and, in effect, remarry her (Hosea 2:19–20). Remember that this story of Hosea and Gomer is a picture of God’s relationship with unfaithful Israel. Gomer’s children were named “No Mercy” and “Not My People” (Hosea 1:6, 9). Then God promises mercy to “No Mercy” and declares, “You are My people” to “Not My People” (Hosea 2:23; see also 1 Peter 2:10 and Romans 9:25–26). God wants all people to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4) and gave His Son to be the Savior of all (1 Timothy 2:6).
3. The Lord gives these reasons regarding why the Israelites were so disobedient: they lacked knowledge and ignored the Law of God (Hosea 4:6); the priests sinned and “feed on the sin” of the people (4:7–8); the parents sinned and the children followed suit (4:13); their rulers loved shameful ways (4:18). Here is a call to us, by the Spirit’s power, to resist the temptations surrounding us in our own society, to be active in Christian education programs that teach both God’s Law and His gracious Gospel in Jesus, and to provide Christian models for children. In spite of Israel’s extreme unfaithfulness, the Lord promises His deliverance to them (Hosea 14:4) and gave His Son to redeem us (Galatians 3:13).
4. Sin leads to more sin. Those who deny their sin or justify it are certain to continue sinning. The office thief who claims he or she is doing no wrong will continue to steal. The homosexual who defends this lifestyle will continue to live in sin. God will condemn people for their unrepented sin (Leviticus 26:18; Ezekiel 18:20; Romans 6:23; Galatians 3:10). Only in Jesus is there salvation; He has rescued us through His suffering, death, and resurrection. Those who reject Him and continue in their sin will not see life (John 3:36). Those who repent, trust in Jesus for forgiveness, and live by the Spirit will not, by God’s grace, continue their sin (Galatians 5:16).
5. We in our time have any number of idols, including good-paying jobs, financial security, fame, and celebrity status. We often act unethically and do things contrary to God’s Law

to obtain them. We are caught in this quagmire. The psalmist calls on God for mercy (Psalm 51:1), asks God to wash away all of his sin (Psalm 51:2), and confesses many of them (Psalm 51:4–6). He pleads with God to cleanse him (Psalm 51:7, 9), create a new heart in him (Psalm 51:10), and restore his joy (Psalm 51:12) so that he can teach God's ways to others (Psalm 51:13), praising God with voice (Psalm 51:15) and right sacrifices (Psalm 51:19). Pray that you might bring "right sacrifices" to the Lord, for in Christ you have God's mercy and forgiveness (Colossians 1:22).

6. God created a perfect garden in Eden as a home for Adam and Eve. It provided them pleasure and food (Genesis 2:9) as well as the opportunity to serve God as they cared for the garden (Genesis 1:28) and lived life in God's presence. After the fall into sin, the Scriptures at times portray life as a desert. God acts to convert our desert lives into Edens, gardens of the Lord, filled with gladness and thanksgiving (Isaiah 51:3) and fed by a "spring of water, whose waters do not fail" (Isaiah 58:11), who is Jesus (John 4:10, 14). Ezekiel pictures the blessings of Eden people enjoyed until "unrighteousness was found in you" (Ezekiel 28:15). Later, Ezekiel reminded them of God's promise to cleanse them in order that the desolate land would be replanted to make it like the Garden of Eden (Ezekiel 36:33, 35), a promise fulfilled in Jesus, our Savior. Hosea describes God's garden, His repentant people, as producing righteousness and love (Hosea 10:12). Jesus Himself spoke of a garden where His heavenly Father is the gardener who cares for it, where He is the vine that provides nourishment and life for all the branches, and where believers in Christ, the branches, produce a life marked by love and obedience to the Father (John 15:1–17). This picture of a garden tended by the Father and nourished by the Son through His life-giving suffering, death, and resurrection forms a comforting metaphor similar to that of Jesus as the Good Shepherd who cares for His sheep.

## April Week 4

### April 17–23; Hosea 11–14; Joel 1–3

1. Encourage your group members who have children to share their child-raising experiences, noting the loving care involved when parents help their children learn basic skills. Parents rejoice at the first steps a child takes, the first bicycle ride by herself, the first pages read; and they agonize when children are hurt while they learn to walk. God tells us, through Hosea, that He has gone through the same process, holding Ephraim up as he learned to walk, protecting him with kindness and love, lightening his load, and feeding him (Hosea 11:3–4). As Ephraim grew older, he strayed away and did evil (Hosea 11:2, 7, 12). In love, God could not destroy His child (Hosea 11:8–9), but He punished His other Son, Jesus, our Savior. Thank Jesus for His sacrificial love; He took God's punishment for you and me. We are Ephraim.
2. In His descriptions of the punishment He would bring on the people for their unfaithfulness and sin, God uses words and pictures that describe Him as attacking them like a lion or an angry bear, devouring them and taking them apart (Hosea 13:7–8), as an east wind that dries up their wells (Hosea 13:15), as plundering the treasures they have stored (Hosea 13:15), and as crushing their children on the pavement and ripping open the wombs of pregnant women (Hosea 13:16). God wants His horrible descriptions to grab the people's attention so they stop their evil ways and repent of their atrocities. In spite of these words, the people continued in sin. Paul's Good News to the Ephesians, and to us who are dead in our sin, is that God in His mercy and love saved us through Christ Jesus and raised us up with Christ to a new life filled with good works (Ephesians 2:1–7, 10).
3. Discuss the various words suggested by your group that mean "repent." Many times in Hosea, God calls His people to return to Him, but they always want to return to their former gods (Hosea 7:10). Their evil ways prevent them from returning to God (Hosea 5:4). God returns them to their enemies for punishment (Hosea 11:5). Even when God insists they return (Hosea 12:6), they continue in their own ways. In one last attempt, Hosea calls on the people to return (Hosea 14:1–2) to the Lord; the Lord promises to "love them freely" (Hosea 14:4) as He has done in Jesus (John 3:16; Colossians 1:13).
4. List the concerns members of your group would have should farms, gardens, and crops be destroyed by drought or pests. In Joel's day, a swarm of locusts and drought destroyed the country's crops. As a result of this destruction, he anguished that the people could no longer bring their sacrifices and offerings to the Lord; there was nothing to bring. He looked upon this plague and drought as a sign that the final "day of the LORD," a day of destruction, would come soon (Joel 1:15). He turned to the Lord for help (Joel 1:19), for he knew, as did Matthew and Paul, that the people, the Lord's Church, and the Gospel could be preserved only by the Lord Himself (Matthew 16:18; Galatians 1:13–17) and would be preserved by Him as He promised (2 Thessalonians 3:3). Conclude your meditation with a prayer that your church and its people would be preserved in faith in Jesus until the Day of the Lord.



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5. Through God's inspiration, Joel saw the destruction caused by the locusts and the drought as an urgent reminder: the Lord's punishment for the sins of the people would come soon. He used the Lord's words to urge them to repent (Joel 2:12–13). Some of the images in the Lord's reply included promises to relieve the distress caused by the swarm of locusts and the drought. Grain, wine, and oil will be furnished in abundance (2:19), trees will be green and bear fruit (2:22), rain will come (2:23), and there will be plenty to eat (2:26). Enemies will be banished to the dry, harsh areas (Joel 2:20). Even more important, the Lord promised to pour out His Spirit on them—a promise fulfilled at Pentecost (Acts 2:16–20)—and provide deliverance in Jerusalem (Joel 2:32; Luke 24:18–27, 45–47). Praise God for His blessings to you in Christ.
  
6. Joel 3:10 is a prelude to God's mighty action to bless His people. First, the people are ordered to make weapons out of their farm implements. Then God blesses His people by defending them with force, by judging the enemies of God's people guilty of great wickedness (Joel 3:13) and violence (Joel 3:19) against Judah, and by punishing all those who scattered and ravaged His people (Joel 3:2–3, 13–16a). Isaiah pictures the peace God will bring to His people. The weapons of war are made into farm implements (Isaiah 2:4), which are used in times of peace. God provides refuge for His people (Joel 3:16b), lives among them and provides for them (Joel 3:17–18), and drives their oppressive enemy far away (Joel 3:20). God blesses us in this twofold way also. He defends us against our enemies, cares for us, and drives away Satan and our sin for Jesus' sake.

## April Week 5

### April 24–30; Amos 1–9

1. Amos lived in a time of great prosperity, but the people committed great sin as well. In Amos 1–2, the prophet spells out in no uncertain terms the long-term sins of the nations, including Judah and Israel, God's chosen people. He specifically mentions Damascus's brutality toward Gilead (Amos 1:3), the slave-trading practices of Gaza and Tyre (Amos 1:6, 9), Edom's anger toward and bestial treatment of close relatives (Amos 1:11), Ammon's greedy land expansion and the wicked practices associated with it (Amos 1:13), Moab's despicable treatment of the body of Edom's king (Amos 2:1), Judah's rejection of God's Law by worshiping other gods (Amos 2:4), and Israel's mistreatment of the poor and needy (Amos 2:6–7). No doubt the sins identified for one nation were present in all of them. In our own time, sin is just as prevalent in all of our lives, including those of us who faithfully attend church and study God's Word. We can only pray the prayer of the tax collector: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13). Each person will probably have his or her own favorite passages that announce God's grace and mercy in Christ to sinners. These are among the favorites that bring peace to our troubled hearts: John 3:16; Romans 5:8; Romans 6:23; 1 Corinthians 6:11; Ephesians 2:4–6; Colossians 1:21–22.
2. Encourage members of your group to share things that they have heard are inevitable; death and taxes come to mind. The Lord gave Amos some examples of other things that are inevitable. A bird will not get trapped unless it goes pecking around the trap (Amos 3:5), for example. The Lord's point is that He will punish everyone who keeps on in sin, including Israel's sin, and He will destroy all that causes sin (Amos 3:2, 15). Another inevitable event is that out of His grace and mercy God will save a remnant, wounded and broken as it is (Amos 3:12). Inevitably, God will save from sin's punishment those who believe that Jesus lived, suffered, died, and rose from the dead (John 3:16). Through Jesus, God does purify us (1 John 1:7). He will rescue us from temptations and take us to heaven (2 Timothy 4:18). Believers in Jesus will have eternal life (John 14:19). He will appear at the Last Day to bring salvation to those who trust Him (Hebrews 9:28). He will continue to work faith in our hearts until the day He returns (Philippians 1:6). Your group will, inevitably, be able to add other passages that assure them that Jesus will keep His promises to His people until eternity. Praise God for His faithful love.
3. God is eternal, unchangeable, almighty, omniscient, omnipresent, and holy. These are a few of God's attributes. "Frustrated" does not make the list as an essential aspect of God's nature, but God does get frustrated, as Amos 4 illustrates. In effect, God asks, "What does it take to get you to repent?" God is good (Psalm 145:9), merciful (Titus 3:5), gracious (Exodus 34:6–7), and loving (1 John 4:8). These attributes, essential parts of God's nature, moved Him to give of Himself in the person of Jesus to save us from sin, take our punishment onto Himself, and give us the gifts of forgiveness, purity, and strength for a new life in Him. Praise Him for these attributes in the words of the hymn or a prayer of your own. Amidst the words of judgment, God reminds His people of His infinite grace and mercy in the words "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24).

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4. Some of the acts and attitudes God condemns on the part of Israel include complacency with their own lives (Amos 6:1), lack of concern for the poor and needy (see Amos 6:6 and Ezekiel 16:49), pride in their own work and strength (Amos 6:8, 13), and making a mockery of justice in public life and turning good things into bitter things (6:12). Your group members will identify similar situations today. Based on Amos 6:6, for example, they might write that we spend lots of money on alcoholic drinks, but we don't adequately support our local homeless shelters. Christians should repent of their own sin in this regard and pray about these situations (James 5:16); rejoice that God has forgiven their sin in Jesus (Matthew 9:2); teach others God's Law and point out these wrongs to those who commit them (Psalm 51:13); serve others with love, joy, patience, and kindness (Galatians 5:13, 22–23); do good works (Ephesians 2:10); faithfully study God's Word, receive the Lord's Supper, and develop relationships with fellow Christians (Acts 2:42); and live God-pleasing lives so others may praise God in their own lives (1 Peter 2:12). Conclude your session with a prayer asking God to strengthen each one for living the Christian life.
5. First, have your group members share their ideas about whether they like that God is a determined God. Encourage them to share their reasons. The three visions of Amos 7 show God determined to punish the sin and unfaithfulness of His chosen people. He has a swarm of locusts ready to destroy the crops meant to feed them (Amos 7:1), He calls for fire to destroy the land (Amos 7:4), and He tells Amos that His people are completely out of plumb when it comes to following His Law and so must be destroyed (Amos 7:8–9). Although Amos did not want to see the people punished so severely (he pleaded with God to stop in verses 2 and 5), he proclaimed to Amaziah that Israel would go into exile as punishment (Amos 7:17). God's response to Amos's pleading indicates God's determination in another way; He is determined to save His people. He was determined to give Mary a Son who would save His people (Matthew 1:21), and this was accomplished in due time (Galatians 4:4–5). God is determined that through the power of the Lord Jesus' believers would be equipped to live sanctified lives (1 Thessalonians 4:3; see the following verses for an explanation of all that that entails) and love others (1 John 4:9, 11). Praise and thank God for His determination to love us forever (Psalm 118:1).
6. When he felt afraid, Saul was distraught when God did not answer him (1 Samuel 28:6). Micah spoke of the despair of the people when God would not answer their prayers because of the evil they had done (Micah 3:4, 7). On the other hand, the rich message of God's love and grace to us in Christ Jesus would no longer be heard, taught, or sung if God were to be silent. No prayer would be answered. The favorite passages of comfort and the wonderful message of God's gift of His Son to be the Savior of all would be lost. The assurance of the forgiveness of our sins in Jesus and the triumph of His resurrection at Easter would go unannounced. We would be dead in our sins, as Paul once stated (Ephesians 2:1). Discuss some of the messages of grace and comfort listed, and encourage your group members to share some of their own favorite Scripture passages they would miss if God were to be silent. Thank God for His gracious speaking and His glorious Word.
7. At the happy ending of a movie in which the hero/heroine faced all kinds of dangers and challenges and still prevailed, one might exclaim, "Finally, after all that!" When a child successfully completes a tough school project, parents might say, "Finally, after all that!"

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After a long time of testing, treatment, surgery, and rehabilitation, family members might rejoice as they leave the hospital, “Finally, after all that!” After all the pleadings to repent, calls to return to the Lord, and predictions of punishment and exile, Amos, by the Lord’s inspiration, finally brings a message of hope and restoration: The Lord will restore David’s booth, He will bring back the exiled, and times of bountiful harvest will return. After contemplating the story of God’s fulfillment of His promises in the sending of His Son and the account Jesus’ sacrificial death and resurrection to atone for the sins of all people, we might rejoice with the words “Finally, after all that!” However, we also know that there yet remains much to be done, for many do not know the story of God’s love. While we praise God for His Word of reconciliation in Jesus in our own prayer or the words of the hymn, let us also ask God for the skill, dedication, and the resources to share His great Gospel with others.

## May Week 1

### May 1–7; Obadiah; Jonah 1–4; Micah 1–5

1. When someone ties up the loose ends, the person finishes a job by completing the last details. In previous prophetic books, God called His people to repentance and showed them the punishment that would be theirs—exile in Babylon—because of their unfaithfulness to Him (Amos 2:4–5; Jeremiah 3:11–13). In Obadiah, God picks up the loose ends; He now condemns the descendants of Esau for rejoicing at the fall of Israel and for taking advantage of Israel's misfortune (Obadiah 12–15), especially since their ancestor Esau was the twin brother of Israel's ancestor Jacob (and was reconciled to Jacob in Genesis 33:4). We are all sinful descendants of Adam and Eve; all of us are also recipients of God's grace in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 3:6). In the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus also shows us how to love all people. On Mount Zion, in Jesus, is forgiveness for the times we have rejoiced over the misfortunes of others and for taking advantage of people when they are down; in Him who has given His own blood on the cross (Hebrews 12:24) is power to amend our sinful lives through loving service to others, especially to all those in need when He turns godlessness away from Jacob (Romans 11:26–27).
2. Jonah confessed that God was a God of power and might (he knew the attributes of God) and that God had created the world (Jonah 1:9). Jonah also knew about sin and what it was to confess sin—he penitently confessed his own sin (Jonah 1:12; 2:1–2). He knew and experienced the separation from God that sin brings (Jonah 2:4), and he knew that his only hope to be saved was to turn to God for help (Jonah 2:2, 4). He also knew that his salvation was possible only when God acted to save him (Jonah 2:6) and that salvation was a gift of the Lord (Jonah 2:9). He also experienced God's gracious deliverance (Jonah 2:10). Jonah's faith pretty well covers the content of the three articles of the Apostles' Creed. The fact that people of faith do not fully carry out God's mission command to call people to repentance and announce God's forgiveness in Christ finds its explanation in the devastation and weakness that sin causes in us all. Like Jonah, who was saved by gracious action (Jonah 2:10), only with God's strength and deliverance in Christ and through the working of the Holy Spirit can we be delivered and carry out His call (Jonah 2:9; Ephesians 2:10; 1 Peter 2:9).
3. At first, Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh and call its inhabitants to repentance as God had directed him to do. At the end of the book, Jonah still is not happy about God's willingness to forgive Nineveh. However, after his experience in the belly of a large fish, Jonah did travel to Nineveh. Despite Jonah's reluctance, the Spirit worked—He called the people to repentance with great effectiveness. But Jonah's idol was wanting God to be God for Israelites only; he did not want the enemies of Israel to benefit from God's grace. Our own idols keep us from sharing the Good News of God's grace in Christ Jesus; they may be our own safety or our desire to honor the privacy of others when it comes to their religious faith. In addition, we may idolize our own time (we don't want to use our time to talk to others about Jesus). God offers forgiveness for our lapses in sharing the Gospel of salvation through Jesus (Ephesians 2:4–5, 8–9). May His grace in Christ impel us to proclaim His grace in Christ to all and to live joyously in the forgiveness that is ours.

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4. Your group's list of Israel's sins might include idolatry (Micah 1:7), coveting and fraud (Micah 2:2), robbery (Micah 2:8–9), and perhaps lying and drunkenness (Micah 2:11)—sins very similar to those of our own day. God says He will stop the sinning by bringing a conqueror to take over the nation (Micah 1:15). God will save a remnant of Israel to keep His promise of a Savior, the One who breaks open the way (Micah 2:13), the Root of Jesse who will provide rest for the people, Jesus Christ whom God raised from the dead (Romans 10:9–12). Use the hymn verse to praise God for the salvation He has given you in Christ.
5. Your group will have a variety of responses to the first question. They will probably identify various wars, advances in technology and medicine, and the events surrounding 9/11 as significant. Advances in science and technology and efforts to solve various world problems will probably be anticipated in the future. The people of Micah's time had seen the Assyrian empire take over most of the area in which they lived, including the Northern Kingdom of Israel (722–721 BC). The Southern Kingdom became more vulnerable and was overrun by Sennacherib; Jerusalem finally fell in 587 to the Babylonians. During all of this unsettling activity, Micah spoke confidently of walking in the name of the Lord and of being rescued by the Lord from their enemies in Babylon (Micah 4:5, 10). Although many unsettling things may happen in our own day, the Lord's words given to us through Micah remain sure: "the LORD will redeem you" (Micah 4:10). These words are especially sure regarding the redemption we have in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:3, 7).
6. Encourage your group to think of adjectives that describe several rulers of our day. The idea of "shepherd-like" will probably not be among them because we don't think in terms of shepherds. The Good Shepherd the Lord promised will provide for the physical and psychological needs of the flock (Psalm 23:1–2, 5), guide with righteousness (Psalm 23:3), and provide protection (Psalm 23:4). God's Shepherd will shepherd with integrity, skill (Psalm 78:72), care (Psalm 95:7), and tenderness (Isaiah 40:11). Knowledge and understanding will mark His shepherding (Jeremiah 3:15). God's Shepherd will seek those who need help and care for them in a just way (Ezekiel 34:11–16). Of course, this promise in Micah was fulfilled most completely in Jesus, our Savior, who gave His life to save His flock (John 10:11, 14), rose from the dead to equip us for doing His will (Hebrews 13:20–21), will give us, His sheep, the crown of glory (1 Peter 5:4), and will wipe away all tears from our eyes (Revelation 7:17). Pray the hymn in praise of your Good Shepherd.

## May Week 2

May 8–14; Micah 6–7; Nahum 1–3; Habakkuk 1–3; Zephaniah 1–2

1. Israel was probably blaming God for their suffering at the hand of Assyria and for the prospect of being taken to Babylon in exile, as Micah had told them (Micah 4:10). Your group will probably be able to identify times when they or others have blamed God for bad things in their lives. When bad things come into the lives of people, Christians included, here's the bottom line: Adam and Eve's fall into sin ruined creation, and the sinful choices we and others make cause much suffering (Psalm 51:5; Romans 5:12; Galatians 5:19). Through Micah, God reminds His people that He brought them out of Egypt and over the Jordan into the Promised Land (Micah 6:4). He also reminds them of the protection He gave to them by citing the example of Balaam's refusal to curse the people when Balak requested it (Numbers 22:16–18). God also reminds the people of His promise that "a star shall come out of Jacob" to deliver the people (Numbers 24:17), a promise fulfilled in Jesus (Matthew 2:2). Help your group give praise for the blessings they have from God, especially the blessings that come through Jesus, the Star of Jacob and our Savior.
2. Encourage your group to think of interesting and picturesque ways of describing the fact that Christ has completely removed our sin from us. Then discuss the suggested passages from Micah and other places in Scripture. The psalmist says our sins are removed an impossible distance away (Psalm 103:12); Micah says they are ground underfoot and thrown into the sea (Micah 7:19); Isaiah says God will blot out our sins, or erase them (Isaiah 43:25), so that they cannot be remembered. He also describes our sin as a mist or cloud that God blows away (Isaiah 44:22). Luke says our sins are "blotted out" (Acts 3:19), and Paul says that "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Galatians 5:24). All of these descriptions show that Christ destroyed sin and its power over us; we are free of its domination. What comfort that message brings to us. Sing our Savior's praise in the words of the hymn.
3. While Jonah pictures the mercy and patience of God in dealing with the brutal Assyrian Empire, represented by its capital Nineveh, Nahum prophesies that Nineveh will be destroyed (Nahum 1:8) completely (Nahum 2:13). God's people will be free to celebrate their festivals because the wicked will be destroyed (Nahum 1:15). Nineveh's destruction is a picture of the complete victory Jesus Christ will have over the devil and all that plagues the Christian. Paul thanks God that we have been "set free from sin" (Romans 6:17–18) and that, because Christ has been raised from the dead, nothing can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:38–39). He also assures us that, in His own time, God will "repay with affliction those who afflict" us (2 Thessalonians 1:6). Peter assures us God's mighty hand will lift us up (1 Peter 5:6). Together praise God for the grace and mercy He has shown to you in Christ Jesus.
4. Habakkuk first asked God to put a stop to the injustice and wrong that he saw among the Israelites. God's answer was not what Habakkuk expected. God said He was sending the feared and brutal Babylonians to "march through the breadth of the earth" to put an end to the evil in Israel (Habakkuk 1:6). Habakkuk could not believe it; he asked God why He would use people who were more evil than Israel to punish Israel. God answered that "the

righteous shall live by his faith” (Habakkuk 2:4), and He assured Habakkuk that He was still in charge (Habakkuk 2:20). The psalmist assures us the Lord says “no evil shall be allowed to befall” us (Psalm 91:9–10). Several times, Paul assures people sin will be punished (Romans 6:23) but that God works for the good of those who fear Him (Romans 8:28). Paul tells the Thessalonians the Lord will protect us from the evil one (2 Thessalonians 3:3) and the Lord will rescue us from every evil attack (2 Timothy 4:18). Although evil may continue for a while, God does not tolerate evil in the sense that He would put up with it as we might tolerate something unimportant or that’s just a different way of doing things. He allows evil to exist for a time so that His mercy in Christ Jesus might be proclaimed to as many people as possible. Assure one another of God’s faithfulness by using the words of the hymn.

5. In our modern time, most of us want God to answer *all* our questions. Habakkuk stopped asking questions when God told him “the righteous shall live by his faith” (Habakkuk 2:4) and that He was still in charge and the world should just be quiet (Habakkuk 2:20). Habakkuk then stopped questioning and prayed (Habakkuk 3:1), remembered God’s merciful and saving acts of the past (Habakkuk 3:2–15), resigned himself to “quietly wait” for what the Lord would do (Habakkuk 3:16), and rejoiced in God, his Savior (Habakkuk 3:18) who would give him strength (Habakkuk 3:19). Pray that God would strengthen your faith in Him.
6. When people think of “sweeping away,” they probably most often think of getting rid of dirt completely. Zephaniah quotes the Lord as saying He will “sweep away everything from the face of the earth” (Zephaniah 1:2) because of His anger with the idolatry and sin that was so prevalent (Zephaniah 1:4, 17). God expressed this same anger with sin many times, including before the flood (Genesis 6:7), at the time of the exodus (Exodus 32:9–10), and at the time of the prophets (Ezekiel 7:10–12), for example. God calls us to confess our sin, not hide it or deny it (Psalm 32:3–5), so that He, through the atoning sacrifice of Christ, might forgive it, purify and cleanse us (Psalm 51:1–2; 1 Corinthians 6:11), and “sweep it away” (1 John 1:7; 2:1–2). Praise God in prayer for “sweeping away” your sin; then serve Him joyfully today.



## May Week 3

May 15–21; Zephaniah 3; Haggai 1–2; Zechariah 1–5

1. What connections do you see between the thoughts in Zephaniah 3 and the events and message of Pentecost (Acts 2)? Some points of comparison and connection between Zephaniah 3 and the Pentecost event described in Acts 2 follow. Encourage your group to discuss these and any others they may find that encourage them in their Christian faith.
  - Zephaniah says that after the Lord consumed the whole world by the fire of His anger, He “change[d] the speech of the peoples to a pure speech” so they could call on His name and serve Him (Zephaniah 3:8–9). After the Lord consumed our sins through the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross on Good Friday and raised Him from the dead (Acts 2:22–24), at Pentecost the Holy Spirit enabled the lips of the disciples to proclaim the Gospel in many languages and worked in the hearts of many people so that God’s name would be praised and many would serve Him (Acts 2:4, 11, 17, 41–45).
  - One outcome of receiving the forgiveness of sins through Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection is that believers serve the Lord “with one accord” (Zephaniah 3:9). This “shoulder to shoulder” service was very evident following Pentecost also. Believers helped others by teaching the Gospel, having fellowship and developing close relationships with others, worshiping and praying together, and caring for one another (Acts 2:42–45). This same “shoulder to shoulder” phenomenon is evident in many Christian families and congregations as the members work together to help and care for one another. Both Zephaniah and Peter proclaimed to the people, “The LORD has taken away the judgments against you” and has “cleared away your enemies” so that “you shall never again fear evil” (Zephaniah 3:15). Find these same thoughts in Peter’s message: Acts 2:21, 23–24, 36.
  - In both Zephaniah’s and Peter’s messages are the thoughts that God’s salvation in Jesus is for all people and that God wants all people to benefit from the forgiveness He provides in Christ. Through Zephaniah, God says He will “save the lame” and “gather the outcast” and give honor to those “in all the earth” (Zephaniah 3:19–20). Peter says the blessings of Christ’s forgiveness are “for your children and for all who are far off” (Acts 2:39). Remember that he was speaking to people from many places (Acts 2:9–11).
  - Zephaniah reports that God promised to leave a small group of people who “shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD” among the people to speak the truth to them (Zephaniah 3:12). At Pentecost, God created a small group of people to speak God’s truths to people all over the world (Acts 2:4, 32, 47). In our own day, God has placed Christians all over the world, sometimes in small groups, to proclaim His Good News of Jesus Christ and has promised to be with them (Matthew 28:20; Zephaniah 3:15). Encourage members of your group to find and share additional insights that are found in both Zephaniah 3 and Acts 2. Blessings as you search.

2. God gave these reasons for rebuilding the temple: Since they had stopped rebuilding the temple, they had worked on their own houses, worked, and saved money, but “it came to little” (Haggai 1:9); He implied that prosperity would return when they completed the task. God also said they should be strong and work; He would be with them and bless their efforts (Haggai 2:4). God also reminded the people that rebuilding the temple was part of His long-standing covenant with Israel (Exodus 29:46) to give them the land. His Spirit was still with them (Haggai 1:13; 2:5), so they need not be afraid of those who had threatened them when they started the rebuilding project (Ezra 4). Urge your group to apply these words of encouragement from the Lord to the task we have of proclaiming the Gospel to people who still do not believe in Jesus, our Savior. Perhaps they can also apply these words to local tasks of ministry. You may want to use the words of the hymn “Oh, Blest the House” (*LSB* 862) as your prayer for this session.
3. The first vision of the man and the horses among the myrtle trees (Zechariah 1:7–17) is a message of hope for Israel. The horses that had visited throughout the world reported finding peace everywhere. An angel asked how long it would be before Jerusalem and Judah could have peace, to which the Lord replied that His “cities shall again overflow with prosperity” and He would comfort Zion (Zechariah 1:17). The vision of the four horns and the four craftsmen pictures craftsmen who have come to dismantle a display of trophy horns that represent those who have conquered Judah; the display will be completely destroyed (Zechariah 1:21). In the vision of the man who is going to lay out the size of Jerusalem’s walls, an angel is told to tell him that Jerusalem won’t need walls because so many people will live there and because God will provide the protection it needs (Zechariah 2:4–5). Overall, these visions are messages of hope for Israel as they return from exile. They are messages of hope and assurance for us as well because they remind us God is faithful to His promises and acts for the good of His people. This He did especially by giving His Son, Jesus, to be the Savior from sin, for in Him believers have overcome the world (1 John 5:4).
4. One way to describe God’s plan for our salvation is to use the picture of God cleaning away our filth of sin. Zechariah pictures the high priest Joshua, who is dressed in filthy priestly clothes, getting a new glorious set of clothes from the Lord; Zechariah clearly relates this to God cleansing His people of their sin (Zechariah 3:4, 9) by mentioning God’s servant the Branch (Zechariah 3:8; see also Isaiah 4:2 and 11:1) and by promising to “remove the iniquity of this land in a single day” (Zechariah 3:9), a Good Friday reference. Christians often use this picture of cleansing to explain God’s actions to save all people. All of us are filthy with sin (Isaiah 64:6) and can do nothing to clean ourselves (Jeremiah 2:22). The parable of the wedding feast reminds us of the wedding garment—Christ’s righteousness—that makes us suitable to be in God’s presence (Matthew 22:11). The blood of Jesus, shed on the cross, cleanses us completely (1 John 1:7) in the water of Baptism (Ephesians 5:26). When we sin, our prayer is that God would cleanse us of our sin (Psalm 51:1–2). Jesus’ righteousness is indeed our “glorious dress” (*LSB* 563).
5. Encourage your group to suggest a few small things God uses (has used) to do His work. They may give examples from their own experience or biblical examples such as jars of water to make wine, the baby Jesus to be the Savior, water combined with the Word to forgive sin in Baptism, or Jesus’ body and blood with the bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper. A plumb line enables builders to construct truly vertical walls, for example. Olive oil was used in the ancient world as a fuel for lamps. In our own day, we often think power is important to govern, to win wars, and to prevail on important issues. The

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Lord told Zechariah He would not do His work with power, but that His Spirit would be the means to accomplish the rebuilding of the temple (Zechariah 4:6). The message of Zechariah's fifth vision is that mountains of problems would be leveled by His Spirit (Zechariah 4:7) working through Zerubbabel in the kingly office and Joshua in the priestly office (Zechariah 4:14). It is a picture of the Priest-King Jesus accomplishing God's work of saving all people. Praise God for His saving work among us completed through the preaching and teaching of His Word.

6. In the sixth vision, Zechariah sees a huge banner with “everyone who steals shall be cleaned out” on one side and “everyone who swears falsely shall be cleaned out” on the other side (Zechariah 5:3). In the seventh vision, Zechariah sees a basket with Wickedness in it (Zechariah 5:8). The basket's lid is pushed down tightly to contain Wickedness, and then the basket is carried away to Babylon, out of the Promised Land (Zechariah 5:8–11). Both visions teach that God wants evil removed from His land and that He will act to send it to hell in a handbasket, so to speak. Babylon, a land of evil, is a fitting place for evil to be sent (Zechariah 5:11). Through Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection, God has defeated sin, death, and Satan (Hebrews 2:14–15).

## May Week 4

### May 22–28; Zechariah 6–13

1. That God is eager to have His message of salvation through Jesus proclaimed and taught throughout the world is illustrated in the picture of the four horses being sent in all directions (Zechariah 6:5). These horses were straining to “go, patrol the earth” (Zechariah 6:7), so the Lord released them to do so. When the temple is rebuilt, God is not done building, but He continues to build His temple, the Church, in other places (Zechariah 6:12). These people will also help build the temple (Zechariah 6:15). Encourage your group to develop some ways that they could help share the Gospel with others. Practice speaking the Gospel in your group so that each one is prepared to share it with someone else when the opportunity arises.
2. The people of Bethel wanted to know if they should continue to mourn and fast to remember the breaching of the walls of Jerusalem, the burning of the temple, the assassination of Gedaliah (2 Kings 25:22–25), and the siege of Jerusalem. At this point, the Lord does not answer their question directly, but, through Zechariah, He answers their question with a question aimed at getting them to think about why they were fasting. “Was it for Me that you fasted?” (Zechariah 7:5–6). Fasting and repenting aren’t meaningful exercises unless the fruits of repentance become evident in our lives (Matthew 3:8). That is why God reminds them to “show kindness and mercy to one another” (Zechariah 7:9) and to produce other good works. Repentance and the forgiveness of sins through Jesus produce good works (Ephesians 2:10), which have value in all areas of life (1 Timothy 4:8). Godly sorrow produces repentance and just actions (2 Corinthians 7:10–11). Since the blood of Jesus has opened a new way of living for us, we live in hope, love others, do good deeds, and meet together to receive the blessings of God’s Word and the Sacraments (Hebrews 10:19–25).
3. Some of the sad and somber occasions your group might identify include funerals, Memorial Day, Veterans Day, and similar occasions where we remember the deaths of loved ones and the sacrifices made by members of the military and their families. They may also mention Lent and Good Friday, where Christians remember the suffering and death of Jesus, our Savior. The Lord turned David’s sorrow into rejoicing when He mercifully forgave and healed him (Psalm 30:2, 11). The Lord turned Habakkuk’s woe into rejoicing by acting mercifully (Habakkuk 3:2, 13, 18). Through the forgiveness we have because of Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection, God turns our sorrow into joy (John 3:16; Philippians 4:4), even though we may still endure suffering (1 Peter 4:13). Praise God for the joy He brings in prayer.
4. The Lord cares for His people. No doubt your group members will find many expressions of this truth in these chapters. To show His care, the Lord describes the ways He will defeat the enemies of His people—by taking away their enemies’ possessions and destroying their power (Zechariah 9:4), taking their kings away (Zechariah 9:5), and disarming them (Zechariah 9:10). Then the Lord will send a gentle Savior-King (Zechariah 9:9) who will shield and save His people (Zechariah 9:15–16), care for His flock (Zechariah 10:3), and make them strong and able to defend themselves (Zechariah 10:4–5). They will be people who will remember the Lord wherever they go (Zechariah

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10:9) and walk as His people (Zechariah 10:12). Other Scripture passages assure us God will care for us, such as Psalm 23; Matthew 6:25–34; Romans 5:6–8; and Galatians 4:1–7. Encourage members of your group to share their favorite sections of Scripture that assure us the Lord cares for His people. Thank Him for His care in your closing prayer.

5. Encourage your group members to share their thoughts about being strong. Strength is a quality our society admires and desires, as is evidenced by the many weight-lifting and other training programs available, the popularity of reality TV shows requiring strength for success, and the hero-worship given to athletes. We favor strong leaders, strong medicine, and a strong economy. Your group members will probably have other examples of how people admire strength or participate in activities to increase their strength. We tend to concentrate on physical strength. Zechariah says the people of Jerusalem would “have strength through the LORD of hosts, their God” (Zechariah 12:5). He is talking about the strength needed to live as God’s forgiven and serving people. The source of their strength was not their own effort; it was the Lord. Paul assured the Corinthians the Lord would keep them strong in faith to the end (1 Corinthians 1:8). By conquering death, the Lord has given us victory over sin, death, and the devil through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:57). “Be strong,” he says (1 Corinthians 16:13). To the Ephesians he says, “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might” (Ephesians 6:10). The source of our strength is not our own training programs; our strength comes from the Lord who has saved us through His Son. God has used His power to save us and call us to serve Him; nothing we have done saves us, Paul tells Timothy (2 Timothy 1:8–10), so “be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 2:1). Peter assures us that “the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you” (1 Peter 5:10). The power of God’s forgiveness through Christ, our Savior, strengthens us. Thank Him for the strength He has given you through Christ Jesus.
6. As our Fountain, God supplies us with life (Psalm 36:9), much as water gives us life. Through Isaiah, God invites us to come and drink of the living water He supplies, which we receive without paying any price (Isaiah 55:1); in hard times, people must often pay for good water. Jeremiah speaks of the Lord as the “fountain of living waters” that we all too often forsake for “broken cisterns” we ourselves dig (Jeremiah 2:13; 17:13). You might ask, “What broken cisterns do people of our own time use?” John reminds us Jesus provides the living water we need for eternal life (John 4:10, 14; 7:37–38). As our Shepherd, our Lord Jesus tends His flock with His power and gently cares for us (Isaiah 40:10–11). Jesus identifies Himself as the Good Shepherd, who willingly lays down His life for His sheep, as He did on Calvary. Now He searches for His lost sheep, whom He wants to save (John 10:11, 14–18). The writer to the Hebrews reminds us God raised Jesus, the Good Shepherd, from the dead and through Him will equip us for doing what is pleasing to Him (Hebrews 13:20–21). Peter assures us that the Shepherd, who bore our sins on the cross, has restored us to Himself (1 Peter 2:24–25). You may want to use the words of a hymn that praises Jesus for being our Fountain (*LSB* 423:1) or our Shepherd (*LSB* 524:4).

## May Week 5

### May 29–31; Zechariah 14; Malachi 1–4

1. Obviously, all people of every religion do not worship the same God. Buddhists and Jews do not worship the same God. Some hold the position that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all worship the same God. This also is not true. The only true God is the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God brought the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt (Exodus 20:2). Paul told the Corinthians that there was only one God (1 Corinthians 8:4) and used a blessing that named the three persons in the Trinity (2 Corinthians 13:14). He explained to the Ephesians that there is one Lord, “one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:6). This God has revealed Himself most clearly in Jesus Christ, His own Son (Hebrews 1:1–2); in Christ is the fullness of God (Colossians 2:9) and in Him is our salvation (Acts 4:12). On Judgment Day, all people will know the true God, even if they do not know Him now. In the meantime, Christians are commissioned by the Lord to proclaim the Good News God has for all people—Jesus Christ is the Savior for all (Matthew 28:19).
2. God wished someone would “shut the doors” of the temple so that no one could worship Him halfheartedly or bring useless offerings to Him (Malachi 1:10). The Israelites did not honor God rightly (1:6–7), thought worship was contemptible, and brought imperfect animals as sacrifices (1:12–13). In addition, they divorced their wives and married those who worshiped false gods (2:11, 16). We must confess that we, too, do not worship God as we should, both in our attention to His Word, in faithful and attentive worship, and in our daily lives. Encourage members of your group to give examples of ways we fail to honor our God, who has saved us. Because Phinehas, one of Levi’s descendants, honored God by carrying out God’s order to kill a man who had worshiped a false god, God made a covenant of peace with him (Numbers 25:10–13). Through Christ, God cleansed us so that we may serve Him faithfully (Hebrews 9:14).
3. Through Malachi, God has very pointedly reminded Israel of their unfaithfulness to Him. By bringing flawed animals to sacrifice and by divorcing their wives in order to marry women who worshiped idols, they showed that they did not honor God (Malachi 2:2). Yet His love for them had not changed (Malachi 3:6); He would send a messenger (Malachi 3:1) to begin the cleansing process by testifying against all the sins among them (Malachi 3:2–5). Then His “messenger of the covenant” (Malachi 3:1)—the Messiah—would come to forgive their wickedness (Jeremiah 31:31–34; Hebrews 9:15) and make them His people once again (Malachi 3:17). Jesus, the Sun of Righteousness, would bring healing and forgiveness (Malachi 4:2; Luke 1:78–79). Since He had been so faithful to them and would continue to do so, God challenged them to test Him by bringing generous offerings to His temple (Malachi 3:10). God has been faithful to us also. He has sent Jesus to be our Savior. Jesus has lived a perfect life for us, suffered, died, and rose from the dead to gain forgiveness of all our sin. He continues to nourish our faith through His Word and the Sacraments. We, too, can honor Him by using the resources He has given us wisely, bringing generous offerings, and loving and serving His people.

## June Week 1

### June 1–4; Matthew 1–6

1. The “angel of the Lord” appears several times in Matthew 1–2. The angel first appeared to Joseph to assure him Mary had not been unfaithful to him when she became pregnant with Jesus. The angel explained Jesus had been conceived by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:20), as we confess in our creeds. The angel also proclaimed to Joseph the Good News that this Son Mary would bear would “save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). In these appearances of His angel, God clearly shows that He will act to dispel our worries and that His first concern is to assure us that His people will have forgiveness for their sins. Here God turns Joseph’s dejected sorrow into joy. In the second appearance of the “angel of the Lord” (Matthew 2:13), the Lord sends the angel to protect the baby Jesus. The angel, by inducing a dream, warned Joseph of the danger from Herod and directed Joseph to take his family to Egypt. Since the angel used dreams in each of these cases in Matthew, it is possible that the angel was involved also in directing the Magi to return to their country by another way (Matthew 2:12). At any rate, here God is acting to protect Jesus from death and thereby assure, again, that our Savior can complete His work of redeeming us from sin. Sometime later, the angel returned to tell Joseph it was safe to return to Israel because Herod was dead and, to alleviate Joseph’s fears, also directed him to go to Nazareth in Galilee to avoid Herod’s son Archelaus (Matthew 2:22–23). Through the work of His angel, our Lord acts to proclaim the Good News that Jesus has come to save sinners, and He works to alleviate the fears of His people and care for them. It is no wonder that we, with Luther, pray God would let His holy angel be with us so that the devil may have no power over us. Depending on when you have your class session, pray either Luther’s Morning or Evening Prayer to close.
2. Encourage your group to share their ideas about what topics to begin with if they were preparing a new catechism. There will probably be many different ideas. Matthew began with meaningful confession (Matthew 3:5–12), living the repentant life by battling temptation (Matthew 3:13–4:11), and calling people to repentance and healing (Matthew 4:12–25). Through the inspired Matthew, God says that as John called people to repent and warned of God’s wrath if they did not (Matthew 3:1–2, 7), many did so. The Pharisees and Sadducees, however, did not truly repent, and their lives showed it (Matthew 3:7, 10). Here Matthew is calling the early catechumens, and ourselves, to truly repent of all sin. Then he wrote about Jesus facing temptation and defeating “the tempter” (Matthew 4:3), the devil, by using God’s Word (Matthew 4:7–11); Jesus’ work is a model for all of us to follow as we face temptations. Matthew showed Jesus recruiting disciples to be trained to call people to repentance (Matthew 4:18–22) and providing help and healing for all who came to Him (Matthew 4:23–25). For catechumens and for us, the message is clear: Confess your sin, use God’s Word to fight temptation, and look to Jesus for forgiveness and healing.
3. Encourage members of your group to find ideas for living the repentant life in Matthew 5–6. Completing a sentence such as this one may be helpful: When Jesus, my Savior, reassures me He has done everything necessary for my salvation, God will help me to . . . Here are some ideas your group might state:

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- Be hungry to receive God's righteousness (Matthew 5:6).
- Be joyfully ready to endure persecution and ridicule for being a Christian; be a Christlike example for others (Matthew 5:13–16).
- Obey God's Law (Matthew 5:17–20).
- Settle differences with others before they develop into murderous anger (Matthew 5:21–26).
- Be faithful to my spouse and live in a way that divorce is never necessary (Matthew 5:27–32).
- Honor my promises made to others as if they are made to the Lord and give simple yes and no answers to questions of truth (Matthew 5:33–37).
- Live in a loving way, even with those who are difficult or who are enemies (Matthew 5:38–48).
- Help those who need help without any fanfare (Matthew 6:1–4).
- Pray to our Father in heaven (Matthew 6:5) and forgive those who sin against me (Matthew 6:14).
- Humbly worship God and serve only Him (Matthew 6:16–24).
- Trust God our Father to care for me (Matthew 6:25–32).
- Trust God to sustain me through His Word (Matthew 6:33–34).



## June Week 2

### June 5–11; Matthew 7–17

1. Matthew 7:21 and the other passages listed say we cannot enter heaven unless we do the will of God. In other words, people cannot get to heaven unless they fulfill God's Law perfectly. Paul rightly concludes, "No one is justified before God by the law" (Galatians 3:11). Matthew warns his catechumens, and us, about "prophets" who teach one thing but live as if they need to keep the Law to be saved. Matthew has already spelled out that Jesus has kept the Law for us (Matthew 5:17), that we need to repent of our sin and our failure to keep God's Law (Matthew 4:17), and that Jesus came to save people from their sin (Matthew 1:21). Only in Jesus are we forgiven; through Him, the Father sees that believers have done His will (Matthew 7:21).
2. With a quick count, your group probably will find ten miracles, but there are too many to total because Jesus healed many that are not described fully (Matthew 8:16; 9:35). In several of the miracles that are described, Jesus shows His concern for the faith of the people involved. Jesus did miracles because He not only cared about the physical plight of people (Matthew 9:36), but He also wanted to increase the faith of the people and His disciples. He wanted them to trust He had come to remove their sin (Matthew 9:2, 6) and its consequences. This pattern of miracles and instruction indicates the time and effort Jesus spent to instruct and strengthen the faith of His disciples. He wanted them to be knowledgeable—the flip side of being well instructed—and faithful. The Church wants its pastors and teachers today to have the same concern and expend a similar effort, trusting that the Holy Spirit will bless their efforts. Pray for faith-filled and knowledgeable pastors and teachers and for those who train them in the Church.
3. John the Baptist asked Jesus if He was the promised Messiah or if the people should look for someone else to be the Messiah. John probably did not expect to languish in prison for so long. He perhaps wanted confirmation that he had prepared the way for the Messiah. Jesus told John's disciples to assure him Jesus really was the Messiah and to tell him about the people who had been healed and raised from the dead (Matthew 11:5) as Isaiah had foretold (Isaiah 29:18; 35:5–6; 61:1–2). Jesus pointed to evidence that people could see and verify; we would say Jesus pointed to verifiable historical and scientific evidence. Today, people ask if Jesus is the Savior by questioning the historical basis of Christianity, or they point to the various disputes within Christendom as evidence that Christianity could not be true and reliable. They question the virgin birth of Jesus, they doubt the slaughter of the children in Bethlehem after Jesus' birth ever took place, and, of course, they doubt the resurrection. Many scholars have devoted research and time to verifying Scripture through the use of archaeology and text analysis. There will always be questioning, as there usually is in the public press—at Christmas and Easter especially. Nothing will stop the questioning; Jesus compared it to the children who never wanted to play any game suggested (Matthew 11:16–17). Christians know Jesus and the salvation He brings through the Scriptures (John 20:31; Romans 10:17; 2 Timothy 3:15). While we should encourage thorough study of the Scriptures and its history, only the Gospel message of salvation through Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection should be the focus of our confession.

4. Jesus sows the seed in the first two parables (Matthew 13:3–9, 24–30). In the remaining parables, He plants the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31–32), mixes yeast into flour (Matthew 13:33), seeks treasure in a field and then—when He finds it—sells all He has to buy that field (Matthew 13:44), searches for fine pearls and finds one of great value and sells all his possessions to buy it (Matthew 13:45–46), and throws His net in the lake to catch all kinds of fish (Matthew 13:47–50). Together, the parables picture Jesus caring for His people, especially the catechumens, who are the focus of Jesus' and Matthew's teaching, and who David P. Scaer describes in his book *Discourses in Matthew: Jesus Teaches the Church* (CPH, 2004). In these parables, Jesus assures us that He has planted faith in our heart and makes it grow and that His people are His treasure whom He constantly seeks and protects. Indeed, He sold everything on the cross to make us His own. (Thank you to Professor Scaer for this insight and the further development of these ideas in his book.) Close your session with a prayer, asking God to continue nourishing your faith in Jesus as your Savior.
5. The Pharisees and teachers were offended because the disciples did not wash their hands before they ate, as the traditions required. These traditions may have had some roots in the ceremonial laws, and some were hygienically beneficial, but they all originated with the religious leadership. Jesus followed some traditions, notably those commanded by God with respect to the Passover and the feast days that reminded the people of God's blessings to them in the harvest and in their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, which was a picture of the deliverance from slavery to sin Jesus Himself would bring. Our traditions are important to us. Many religious traditions are intended to help us remember God's mighty acts done on our behalf to save us. These traditions are imbedded in the Church Year celebrations and may involve such things as Advent wreaths, Christmas gift exchanges, applying ashes on Ash Wednesday, the slamming of a book on Good Friday, and balloon launches on Ascension. Ethnic groups, families, and congregations have their own traditions. None of these practices are wrong in and of themselves. When they become more important than the commands of God, interfere with the clear proclamation of Law and Gospel (Matthew 15:6), or cause people to live contrary to the Law (Matthew 15:17–20), then it is time to repent and change them, as Jesus indicated. You may ask your group to explain some traditions they follow that are especially helpful tools of the Holy Spirit as they live out their Christian faith.
6. The glory of the Son of God was revealed. His glory, though hidden now on earth, would be revealed fully when He returned. Moses, the Lawgiver and deliverer from bondage, represented the old covenant and the promise of salvation. Elijah, the appointed restorer of all things (Malachi 4:5–6), represented the prophets, preparing the way for the Messiah. The transfiguration confirms Jesus as the Messiah, who fulfilled the Law and the Prophets through His death and resurrection. Moses, Elijah, and Jesus discussed His impending death and resurrection (Luke 9:30–31), which would bring God's people out of bondage and restore them to God. Moses' work was finished by Joshua (which means "the Lord saves"). Elijah's work was finished by Elisha, whose name is a form of *Joshua*. Jesus, also a form of *Joshua*, finished the work of both by bringing their work to fulfillment. The greatest Lawgiver and the greatest prophet recognized and acknowledged Jesus as the one whom they foretold. What encouragement that must have given Jesus! Later, Peter rested his message on what he heard and saw at the transfiguration and on the testimony of Scripture. His message did not come from human imagination, but from God. His experience on the mountain confirmed this, shaping and strengthening his ministry. We can assume it had a similar effect on the other two disciples.

## June Week 3

### June 12–18; Matthew 18–28

1. “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” was the disciples’ jumping-the-gun question. Jesus, in effect, said, “Hold on! The first question to ask is “How can I get to heaven?”” He then reminded them that they first needed to be like a humble child who knows their deficiencies and their sin (Matthew 18:3), and to be sure not to lead anyone else into sin (Matthew 18:5–6) or be led into sin (Matthew 18:7–9). God loves you and wants everyone saved (Matthew 18:10–14), but too often you fail to forgive those who sin against you; you are an unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:15–35). You continue to do things that are against God’s will because your hearts are hard (Matthew 19:8). You think you can get to heaven by obeying the Commandments, but you, like the rich young man, can’t do it (Matthew 19:16–24). There is no way to get into heaven except by the way God the Father provides (Matthew 19:26) through His Son. We face similar issues in our lives: we do not forgive as we should, we worry about being better than others, and we think we are better than we are. We cannot earn our way into heaven. Only by the blood of Jesus can we be saved. Pray for such a penitent, trusting faith in Jesus, who died and rose for you.
2. In this ransom metaphor, each of us has been kidnapped by Satan. Although the devil makes our future life of sin look attractive, that life will result in eternal damnation. Like any kidnapping victim, we are powerless to free ourselves from our captive state. To return us to His Father’s family, Jesus paid the ransom by dying on the cross in our place, since “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). Jesus’ resurrection indicates His payment has been accepted, we are freed, and Satan is defeated. The tragic deaths of some kidnapping victims are a grim, but still inadequate, picture of our own eternal deaths had Jesus not paid our ransom. Praise Him for your release using the words of stanzas 4 and 6 of the hymn “Salvation unto Us Has Come” (*LSB* 555).
3. The implication of these statements is that your children should obey you but that you are doing so many things wrong and have no integrity that your children should not follow your example. A similar statement about the police would imply the same thing: they have no integrity and are doing abominable things that police should not be doing. Jesus made such a statement about the Pharisees. He charged them with doing religious things to show off and wanting to appear as the most important person at public events (Matthew 23:5–6). He charged them with keeping people out of the kingdom of heaven rather than bringing them in (Matthew 23:13), with neglecting to act with justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23), and with being full of wickedness and hypocrisy (Matthew 23:28). Like the Pharisees, all of us like to appear as though we are God’s children and law-abiding citizens, yet we hide many sins and harbor sinful attitudes in our hearts. Sometimes we even say, “Do as I say, not as I do.” As Jesus states, we will not have His forgiveness until we humbly confess to God our weaknesses and failures and come to Him acknowledging that Jesus, His Son, is the promised Messiah. He came to earth to save us through His suffering and death. Praise Him for His salvation, as did the children of Jerusalem (Matthew 21:9; 23:39).
4. Knowing His trial, crucifixion, and death were coming soon, Jesus would be concerned about the welfare of His disciples. He would be especially concerned with keeping the

faith He nurtured in them from dying with Him. The Anointed One who will put an end to sacrifices and offerings, referred to by Daniel (Daniel 9:25, 27), was Jesus. His death on the cross would be the final sacrifice made for the sins of the world. He thus warned His disciples not to listen to any promises of another Christ (Matthew 24:23–24), but to be ready (Matthew 24:42–44) as the wise virgins were who took along sufficient oil, and to do God-pleasing activities (Matthew 25:21) as the faithful servants did when their master left. For their faithfulness, they would receive His inheritance (Matthew 25:34). The same loving care Jesus gave to His disciples in these words as He prepared them for His crucifixion and death He gives to us in His Word as He prepares us for judgment and eternity.

5. The most likely reason Jesus used the term *Son of Man* to refer to Himself is that He wanted to identify Himself closely with mankind, all humanity. He had been born in Bethlehem; faced the temptations, hunger, and sorrows people face; led the perfect life under God's Law, thereby fulfilling God's demands people could not; and suffered and died on Calvary as the substitute for all people. To call Himself Son of Man was another way to establish His connection with all people. God the Father called Jesus His Son, so the title Son of God indicates Jesus' divine nature. Satan, in trying to defeat Jesus, addressed Jesus as the Son of God even as he attempted to get Jesus to doubt His divine powers. At His trial, Jesus acknowledged He was the Son of God (Matthew 26:63–64). He was taunted for saying He was the Son of God but then doing nothing to get Himself down from the cross. A centurion who observed the events of the crucifixion finally had to conclude Jesus was indeed the Son of God (Matthew 27:54). As true man, Jesus lived a perfect life for us and suffered and died in our place. As true God, He conquered death and rose from the grave to give us new life. Confess your faith together using the words of Luther's explanation of the Second Article.
6. Matthew takes special care to assure his readers, the first catechumens, that Jesus is alive, not dead. He reminds them that even the enemy guards saw the angel and vouched for the resurrection by going to the authorities with their report of what had happened (Matthew 28:4, 11). Matthew also reminds his readers that Jesus made appearances to the disciples (Matthew 28:7) and the women (Matthew 28:9). Jesus is also with us in the baptizing (administering the Sacraments) and the teaching (teaching and proclaiming God's Word) done among us. In years to come, the words of Jesus assured His disciples He was with them as they traveled and taught His Gospel, survived opposition and persecution, and eventually died a martyr's death (except for John). His Word of promise assures us He is with us in all we do, in our trials and difficulties, in our successes and failures, forgiving and sustaining us in faith by the power of His Spirit.

## June Week 4

### June 19–25; Mark 1-10

1. Encourage your group to share their thoughts about how they know someone has authority. Someone might be given authority publicly; this is done at a presidential or gubernatorial inauguration. Someone may have authority by virtue of their office, such as a police officer or teacher. Others have authority by virtue of what they know or can do; I turn over fixing leaking pipes to my plumber because he has the skill and equipment to stop the leak. Mark shows Jesus to have authority immediately by having John the Baptist say Jesus has more authority than he, John, does (Mark 1:7–8). Jesus is given divine authority by His Father (Mark 1:11); His disciples respond to His call immediately (Mark 1:16–20); Jesus controls evil spirits by His power (Mark 1:23–27); He heals people with His power, demonstrating His authority over physical matters (Mark 1:30–31, 42); He shows He has authority to interpret and determine Church Law as He defends His disciples (Mark 2:24–27). His real purpose was to establish that He had the authority and that He could forgive sins (Mark 2:5–11). That Jesus had the divine authority to forgive sins, as well as to heal illness, comforts us as we deal with guilt and the consequences of sin. He can do all things for our good as we face illness and temptation. We are forgiven for Jesus' sake. Thank Jesus for wielding His authority on our behalf.
2. As Mark indicates under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Pharisees wanted to teach and obey the Jewish laws governing the Sabbath (Mark 2:24; 3:2, 4). The Herodians (who supported the reign of Herod) did not want Jesus stirring up trouble in the Jewish community. The common people, who had concerns about their own illnesses and those of friends and acquaintances, saw Jesus heal people and eagerly came to be healed (Mark 3:8–9, 20) and to listen to His teaching (Mark 4:1–2). Jesus obviously met a need of the people that the Pharisees and other leaders did not. There are many differences of opinion today about who Jesus is and what is important about Him. Some feel He is a good teacher and model to follow. Some believe He is a great prophet. Christians believe He is the Savior of all people. Jesus taught His disciples in the parable of the lamp on a stand (Mark 4:21–25) that they should witness boldly to the world about who He is—the Savior who died on the cross to redeem people. In the parable of the mustard seed (Mark 4:30–32), He taught that only through the planting of a small seed—the proclamation of the Word of the Gospel—would His kingdom grow. Pray together that members of your group may boldly confess their faith in Jesus as the Savior and wait in patience for His Word to take root in others.
3. “Yet he heard him gladly” (Mark 6:20). What an interesting comment for Mark to make about King Herod. Herod liked to listen to John the Baptist speak. Even though, or maybe because, John admonished Herod about his sinful life with his brother's wife (Mark 6:18), Herod thought John was “a righteous and holy man” (Mark 6:20). He was puzzled and fearful at the same time. Many people do not want to acknowledge their sin even though they like aspects of the Christian message—the Sermon on the Mount or “Love your neighbor as yourself,” for example. Even today, some people become fascinated with the preacher, but they do not like or take to heart the message. Jesus instructed His disciples, “You give them something to eat” (Mark 6:37). As the disciples distributed the food, Jesus fed the people. They ate and were satisfied. We can only share with people

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the Gospel that Jesus is the Savior, who suffered the punishment of their sins for them on the cross and rose to give them new life in Him. Through the Spirit's work, they will be satisfied, or they will reject it. Pray all people would have the opportunity to hear the saving Gospel and respond to it in faith.

4. Your group probably will agree that to be truly clean they need to use soap rather than perfume. By asking the disciples who they thought He was (Mark 8:29), Jesus was asking them whether they were still looking at the many miracles to identify Him or if they knew Him as the Christ, the promised Messiah (Mark 8:29). Jesus now is close to laying down His life for the sins of all (Mark 8:31–32) and wants all of His disciples to trust salvation was to come through His suffering, death, and resurrection. He was the one who would make us truly fragrant (Ephesians 5:2) through the cleansing sacrifice of His blood on the cross (Titus 3:5; 1 John 1:7; Hebrews 9:13–14) given to us in Baptism (Ephesians 5:26). Use 1 Corinthians 6:11 as a prayer, but replace the word *you* with the names of individuals in your group.
5. Your group's list of helpless people who appear in Mark 9 could include the three disciples at the transfiguration—Peter, James, and John—who were helpless in trying to understand all that Jesus was teaching them about His own suffering, death, and resurrection (Mark 9:10). The father and his son who was possessed by an evil spirit were also helpless in the face of this demonic power; in spite of their efforts, they could not drive out this demon, and neither could the disciples who had not been present at the transfiguration (Mark 9:14, 29). In the face of Jesus' power, the evil spirit was helpless (Mark 9:26). Jesus was willing and able to help all of these people. He patiently taught the disciples, He healed the sick, and He strengthened the faith of those who doubted. These promises He keeps for us also as we are nurtured by His Word and receive the Sacrament. He delivers His promises through people who speak God's Word to us: friends and neighbors, medical personnel, Bible study leaders, pastors, teachers, and many others. Thank God for those who are "salt" (Mark 9:50) in your life. Discuss how you and your group might help the helpless in Christ's name.
6. In the light of Jesus' evident popularity with the crowds who followed Him and saw the healing and help that He gave to people, the Pharisees (Mark 10:2–10) feared that they would lose their reputation as religious leaders, and the priests and Sadducees feared their positions and the long-standing temple life would be lost. The young rich man (Mark 10:17–22) feared he would have no security if he gave everything he owned to the poor. The disciples feared none of them could be saved if they had to give up everything (Mark 10:26). When Jesus and His disciples headed for Jerusalem, His followers, in the light of Jesus' predictions of His coming arrest and death (Mark 9:30; 10:33–34), feared what would happen when they arrived. James and John feared they would not have a prominent place in the kingdom (Mark 10:37), and Bartimaeus feared facing a future without the ability to see (Mark 10:51). All of us have our own fears as we look at our own situation and as we look into the future. Jesus rescued Bartimaeus from his fear by restoring his sight. He assured the disciples that "all things are possible with God" (Mark 10:27). To relieve our fears regarding our sin and our life with Him in heaven, Jesus headed to Jerusalem to die on the cross to atone for our sins (Mark 10:32–34) and give His life as a ransom for all (Mark 10:45). Take your own fears to Him in prayer. Then pray together stanzas 1 and 4 of "I Know That My Redeemer Lives" (*LSB* 461).

## June Week 5

### June 26–30; Mark 11–16

1. It seems people were using the temple area as a convenient shortcut to get their merchandise from one place to the other. They went through the temple, but not for the purposes for which it was intended. The Pharisees and other leaders worked in the temple, but they did not carry out the duties that would make the temple “a house of prayer” (Mark 11:17) or a place of repentance and forgiveness (Mark 11:25), as Solomon had described it (2 Chronicles 6:19–21). Jesus wanted the people to respond to His preaching with repentance, faith, and living a life of repentance like the tax collectors and prostitutes were doing, so He taught the parable right after He cleansed the temple (Matthew 21:28–32). Too many use the church for their own purposes, including getting better business deals, making friends, being entertained, or getting exposure in the community. Encourage your group to consider whether they have ever used the church for something other than hearing God’s Word, being nurtured and forgiven in the Sacraments, and praising and serving the Lord. These sins, too, are forgiven through the Lord Jesus. Pray that your worship and service might be acceptable to Him, our Lord and our Redeemer.
2. The owner of the vineyard is the Lord, who has created the vineyard (the world) and also brought His family (Israel or the Christian Church) into being. He placed the world and the Church in the hands of His people. Israel, or the Church, was to care for His Word and world. Rather than do this, however, Israel rejected the prophets who worked to keep Israel focused on the Lord’s work. Israel even rejected the Son, as the Pharisees and Sadducees were doing as they planned how to capture Jesus and put Him to death (Mark 12:12). The parable was an attempt by Jesus to call the Jewish leaders to repentance and faith; it is a reminder to us to repent of our sins and to live lives that reflect that repentance. Many do not believe God, the owner in the parable, would put to death those who do not repent. “God is a God of love who could never do that,” they say. God, however, will put to death those who do not repent (Mark 16:16), but “the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). That God should save sinners by sacrificing His own Son and declare us righteous for His sake is “marvelous in our eyes” (Psalm 118:23). Thank Him for His love in your prayers and in your life.
3. John mentions that the woman who poured the oil on Jesus was Mary (John 12:3), the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Mary is an example of a sanctified woman who lived the sanctified life. By God’s grace and the working of the Holy Spirit, she had been brought to faith and led a godly life. In Mark 14, we see her living out that sanctified life by pouring a fragrant perfume on Jesus. You may want to consult Luther’s Small Catechism, questions 156–68, for more information about sanctification. Mary had been brought to faith and gave evidence of that faith in her sorrowful, but confident, declaration that if Jesus had arrived earlier, her brother Lazarus would not have died (John 11:32). To anoint Jesus, she evidently used a very expensive ointment containing ingredients available only from India. She gave the best to Jesus, whom she believed was giving His life for her. Mary’s life of faithful attention to God’s Word (Luke 10:39), generous giving (Mark 14:3, 5), love for her family (John 11:33), and love for the Lord (Mark 14:3, 6, 8) is a model for our own sanctified life.

4. Here are some of the similarities your group might mention: (1) The cry “You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself, and come down from the cross!” (Mark 15:29–30) is reminiscent of the devil’s challenge “If You are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread” (Matthew 4:3). Both seek to make Jesus doubt His divinity, and both tempt Jesus to place Himself before sinners who need His salvation. (2) The taunt “He saved others; He cannot save Himself” (Mark 15:31) and the devil’s directive to “throw Yourself down” because the Father will send His angels to “bear You up” (Matthew 4:6) both imply Jesus is not powerful enough to save Himself, so He cannot save anyone else either. (3) The jeering remark that Jesus should “come down now from the cross that we may see and believe” (Mark 15:32) and the devil’s promise to give Jesus everything He could see from the temple tower if He would “fall down and worship” him (Matthew 4:9) both involve false promises—that the people would believe if Jesus came down from the cross when they had not believed in Jesus when they saw His miracles or heard His teaching and that the devil owned the land they could see and had the power to give it away. In response to all of these attacks, Jesus remained focused on His mission to resist the devil’s temptations for us all and to suffer all the punishment for our sin that was necessary to redeem us from the devil’s clutches. It is interesting that in order to resist the devil, Jesus used God’s Word, but to resist the taunts of the people He remained silent. You may want to use the words of stanza 5 of the hymn “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded” (*LSB* 450) to praise Jesus for suffering and dying for all of us.
  
5. Mark’s report is simple. He says that three women, after the Sabbath was over at 6 p.m., went to purchase some spices they might use to anoint Jesus’ body, which had been in the grave since Friday evening. Early the next morning (Sunday), the women walk to the gravesite, wondering how they will get the stone rolled away from the grave. They discover the stone rolled away and a white-robed young man sitting to the right of the entrance. The young man announces Jesus has risen and invites them to see where His body had been lying. There is no body because “He has risen” (Mark 16:6). As proof that Jesus is alive, the women are told to go to Galilee—and tell the disciples to go there too—where you will see Him. Remember, this is just like He told you. He has kept His promises. Each of the angel’s sentences address a concern people have about the Easter story: Jesus did rise from the dead. He really is alive. The women and disciples had physical proof of Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus kept His promises to rise from the dead, mentioned by Mark earlier in his book. All of this is the groundwork for the explosive work to come: Jesus’ ascension into heaven, the proclamation of the Gospel, and the Lord’s support of this proclamation. May the Lord strengthen your faith in Him and bless your own proclamation of the Gospel of salvation through Jesus, our Savior.