

# IGNITE

4-Part Series to Get  
Your Group Started



**focus**  
fellowship of Catholic  
university students

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# IGNITE

## 4-Part Series to Get Your Group Started

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# LEADER'S INTRODUCTION

The Ignite Series contains four one chapter studies that can be used in a variety of ways. Maybe you're just starting a Bible study and want to show your participants what Bible study is all about before you launch into a specific Bible study series or topic. Perhaps, you just ended a Bible study series with two weeks left in the semester and don't want to begin a new full-length Bible study yet. The Ignite Series can provide one session Bible studies to fill in these gaps and help ignite your small-group Bible study. See the guide below on how to lead this Bible study.

## **How FOCUS Equip Studies Work**

Each FOCUS Equip study highlights one particular passage of Scripture. As the leader, you guide a discussion about the passage, which allows participants to discover truths within the passage for themselves. This process is called self-discovered learning. Its format can help participants learn about Scripture and the way to discover Scripture on their own.

At the same time, you are not left alone to understand the Scriptures by yourself. Each chapter will contain a section titled "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?" It will provide you with details about the passage, along with summaries about the passage's big picture, how it applies to Jesus, and how it can apply to your group.

## UNDERSTANDING

# WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

The discussion guide supplies you with an opening question, some background information to share about the passage, and a set of example questions and answers on each passage to use with your group.

## DISCUSSION

# DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Prepare by studying “What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?” before the Bible study, and then use the discussion guide to direct the conversation with your group.

### **How to Prepare Your Study**

With all of this information at your disposal, you are all set and ready to go. You just need to pass out the notes, ask each question as it is written, and read the answers to the questions, right? Well, not exactly. It would not make for a very engaging Bible study. This material is a Bible study in a can: It is meant to preserve good-quality Biblical content and allow for a broad distribution, but someone still needs to take the material out of the can, spice up the content, and serve it to your study. That person is you.

## Introduction

This is where the audience for your study is crucial; these are the people for whom you are “cooking.” Whether you have a group that has never heard the Gospel before or a group that attempts to live out the Gospel each day, you can adapt the Bible study to the group. The flexibility of this format is what can make it so effective.

Most likely, however, you will have a group with both kinds of people. Follow the example of my dance lesson: try to create a Bible study where beginners can learn the basics while the experts can be rejuvenated. Scripture is a great way to do this. St. Gregory the Great once said, “Holy Scripture is a stream in which the elephant may swim and the lamb may wade.” Both groups should be able to discover something meaningful in the Scripture passage.

**For more on How to Lead a Bible study, check out our resource on [FOCUSEquip.org](http://FOCUSEquip.org). As a review, FOCUS Bible study leaders have 3 roles and 3 goals in each study.**

### Your 3 Key Roles

With all of the above information in mind, remember that you have 3 key roles in this study. These 3 roles are your contribution to the study, and doing these 3 things well will make the study successful.

1. **Prayer:** Ultimately, it will be God Who changes the lives of the participants. By personal prayer and praying for your participants, you open the door for God to accomplish great things. Please take time to pray for your group, talking with God about each participant.
2. **Hospitality:** Effectively welcoming participants, getting to know them, meeting them outside of Bible study, and becoming real friends will be a great asset to the study. Create an environment that is open and personal, allowing

participants to feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and experiences.

3. **Facilitator:** A good discussion really enhances the fruitfulness of a Bible study. Take the time to review the study and ask good, relevant questions to your group. Guide the discussion, allowing everyone to participate. Bring the discussion back if it gets too far astray.

### **Your 3 Key Goals**

There will, no doubt, be many questions and discussions that come up throughout the study. You may even find yourself a bit lost here or there. However, the goals listed below are what you are ultimately trying to accomplish. Keeping these in mind throughout the study will help you stay on course.

1. **Deep Transformation:** Through interaction with God's word and one another, it is our hope that the lives of your Bible study members will be profoundly changed. The purpose of a Bible study is not to simply learn information or to be a part of a Bible study club, but allow the Lord to transform our lives. Specifically, we hope that students, through Scripture, are drawn more intimately to our Lord in the sacraments and liturgy of the Church where they can most fully receive the gift of God's grace in their lives.
2. **Intimate Fellowship:** If people are going to be deeply transformed, they will need others along the way, not only to help this transformation, but also to make sure they continue this transformation in the future. Your goal as a leader is to take a group of people with various backgrounds and personalities and help them form authentic relationships with one another.

## **Introduction**

3. **Spiritual Multiplication:** Another important dynamic of small groups is their ability to be reproduced. As you lead, pray that the Lord will raise up members of your small group to go on to disciple others and to lead Bible studies of their own.

### **Final Note**

One of the best ways to learn how to lead a Bible Study is to learn from others. Consider observing someone else's Bible study to learn how they have been successful. Also, ask a missionary or your discipler to come to your study and give you feedback on how you are doing.





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Part 1 of the Ignite Series

# Nicodemus

John 3:1-21

**UNDERSTANDING**

Pages 8 - 13

**DISCUSSION**

Pages 14 - 18

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UNDERSTANDING

# WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

*Read John 3:1-21*

## Goal

The goal for this chapter is to help your group be open to the spiritual life.

## A Messiah Context

Throughout history, the Jewish people were acutely aware of the need to fix the problem of sin that had begun in the Garden of Eden. They waited for the day when God would make everything right and fix the chaos in humankind and in nature. In particular, they were waiting for a messiah. Messiah in Hebrew means “anointed one” and refers to the anointing of a king. They envisioned a day when God would send a new messiah, or king, who would resolve the tragedy of sin that started with Adam and Eve.

## The Messiah and the Pharisees (John 3:1 - 2)

The Gospel of John tells us that Nicodemus was a “man of the Pharisees” (Jn 3:1). The Pharisees were a prominent group of teachers in Jesus’ time. They believed the messiah could come at any moment,

an event they eagerly awaited as they attempted to live out the Jewish law to the fullest.

In the Gospels, Jesus slowly reveals Himself to be this messiah to the Jewish people — but some Jews, including the Pharisees, have a hard time accepting Jesus' kingship and question His teachings. One of the promises of the messiah was that he would perform signs or miracles (Isa 35:5 – 6). Just before this passage, Jesus teaches in the Jewish temple. The teachers there question Him by asking, "What sign have you to show us for doing this?" (Jn 2:18). Then, in John 2:23 – 25, Jesus performs many signs, and some of the Jews believe in Him.

In the dark, Nicodemus enters the conversation with Jesus as a Pharisee who believed in the signs that Jesus performed. We are told that Nicodemus comes by night and calls Jesus a "man of God" (Jn 3:2). He courageously tries to investigate who Jesus is because of the signs that Jesus performed (Jn 3:2; 2:23).

And yet, their conversation reveals more about Nicodemus' character than Jesus'. Nicodemus is interested in what Jesus has to say but remains skeptical. At the heart of their conversation, Jesus and Nicodemus discuss the kingdom of God for which the Pharisees were longing. Specifically, Jesus (as king) tells Nicodemus how to enter this kingdom: by being born again through water and Spirit (a reference to baptism).

### **Born Again**

But Nicodemus fails to understand what Jesus is saying. Rather than accepting the teaching and trying to understand, Nicodemus challenges the validity of the teaching: "How can a man be born when he is old?" (Jn 3:4). He has seen the signs that Jesus has done, and yet

he still will not put his full trust into what Jesus is saying. Jesus points out the key problem: Nicodemus fails to get beyond the flesh or the natural world to see the work of the Spirit (Jn 3:6). Because of this, Nicodemus cannot understand what Jesus is saying. Jesus challenges Nicodemus to listen to the testimony that he has heard (Jesus' reference to "our testimony" in John 3:11 refers to the testimony of Jesus, including the signs he performed, and John the Baptist).

### **For God So Loved the World**

Jesus makes a bold claim to establish credibility and authority with Nicodemus: He has descended from heaven and will then be lifted up. Jesus refers to a story about Moses. During the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, the people were bitten by serpents. For them to be healed and for their lives to be saved, Moses erected a golden serpent for the people. Whoever looked upon the serpent would be healed (Num 21). Jesus takes this analogy and uses it to illustrate the reason He is here on Earth: He will be lifted up (on the cross), and whoever believes in Him will have eternal life.

Jesus then utters one of the most famous verses in the Bible, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." It has become famous because of how it succinctly states the reason why the Father sent Jesus into the world: not to condemn it, but to save it. "For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (Jn 3:17). This is the revolutionary point for our culture. There are people who associate Christianity with a condemnation to hell. Here, Jesus notes that this is not His intention at all. He has come not to condemn, but to save.

## **Why Does the World Reject Jesus?**

So, if Jesus came to save, why does the world reject Him? Jesus gives a direct answer: The world loves the darkness instead of the light (Jn 3:19). They mistakenly prefer condemnation to salvation. They are unwilling to have their lives and works exposed in the light, and so they stay in the darkness (Jn 3:20). In a subtle way, Jesus is also speaking of Nicodemus' actions in the darkness. Nicodemus must not be afraid to let them be exposed.

At the end of the passage, Jesus connects with the theme of sin and brokenness. Many people are given the opportunity to leave their brokenness behind, and yet a part of them still ironically clings to this brokenness. Jesus comes not just to give us a free pass but the opportunity to transform our lives from division and strife to wholeness and peace, if we are willing to do so. But we have to make the decision to cross this line. We have to overcome our attachment to the darkness.

### **Final Analysis**

In some ways, the people in your study could be very much like Nicodemus. They may have heard of Jesus and accepted the invitation to hear more about Him. They may know the miracles He performed and how He rose from the dead, but they remain skeptical. Hopefully, through the questions of Nicodemus, they can courageously explore who Jesus is and why He came to Earth. Through an exploration of the message of Jesus and His death and resurrection on the cross, they can come to trust Jesus fully, just as Nicodemus did at the foot of the cross (Jn 19:39).

# NOTES

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DISCUSSION

# DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

*John 3:1-21*

## **STEP 1: OPENER**

Have you ever spent an extraordinary amount of time trying to figure out an answer to something? Perhaps you watched a TV show marathon to see what happens in the end. Or maybe you Googled a topic and wouldn't rest until you found exactly what you were looking for.

## **STEP 2: BACKGROUND**

Today we are going to read about Jesus' interaction with Nicodemus, a Jewish leader, and see how his story applies to our lives.

## **STEP 3: PASSAGE**

Read John 3:1 – 21 together.

## **STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

Note that answers appear in italics.



## EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

### **1. From verses 1 – 2, what do we know about Nicodemus?**

*Answer: We know that Nicodemus is a man of the Pharisees, that he comes to Jesus at night and that he believes Jesus is a man of God because of the signs He performs.*

### **2. Why do you think that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night?**

*Allow the group to discuss. One answer might be that he was afraid of what others would think about him coming to Jesus.*

### **3. In the previous chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus performs signs for the people. That is part of the reason why Nicodemus is approaching Jesus. What role do signs play in faith?**

*Allow the group to discuss. Miracles can help us believe in God, and Jesus used miracles to confirm His identity. However, becoming too enamored with miracles can provide the wrong foundation for our faith or make us more interested in Jesus saving us materially (in finances, health, hunger, etc.) rather than saving us from sin. See CCC 547 – 550 for more on the role of signs.*

### **4. What are Jesus and Nicodemus discussing?**

*Answer: If Jesus is the messiah-king, then He will have a kingdom. Jesus is telling Nicodemus how to enter this kingdom. Jesus tells him that he has to be born again through water and Spirit. This is a reference to baptism.*

**5. What is Nicodemus' reaction? Do you think it is understandable? Why or why not?**

*Allow the group to discuss. Nicodemus does not understand what Jesus is talking about and questions how "being born again" can be possible.*

**6. What does Jesus think about Nicodemus' reaction? Why do you think Jesus feels this way?**

*Answer: Jesus thinks Nicodemus, as a teacher of the law, should have a better understanding of these things. Jesus notes the signs and testimony that Nicodemus has seen. These should have helped Nicodemus see more clearly.*

**7. Jesus is trying to help Nicodemus see beyond the material world to the spiritual. Do you ever think about what is beyond the material world? Explain.**

*Allow the group to discuss.*

**8. John 3:16 is one of the most famous verses in the Bible. You can even find it written on signs at sporting events. Why do you think this verse is quoted so often?**

*Allow the group to discuss. An example might be the verse sums up why Jesus came into this world.*

**9. Oftentimes, Christianity is portrayed as being judgmental or condemning. How do these verses challenge that notion?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*

**10. If Christianity is so good, why is it often rejected? What reason does Jesus give for why people do not accept Him?**

*Allow the group to discuss. The people wish to choose the darkness instead of the light. They do not want their evil deeds revealed.*

**11. What does this say about a person's role in accepting Jesus Christ and Christianity?**

*Answer: Our belief in Jesus involves changing who we are and how we act.*

# NOTES

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Part 2 of the Ignite Series

# The Sower and the Seeds

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

**UNDERSTANDING**

Pages 20 - 25

**DISCUSSION**

Pages 26 - 30

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UNDERSTANDING

# WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

*Read Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23*

## The Big Picture

Jesus tells of a farmer who scattered seed across his land, but only the seed that fell on good soil grew to produce lasting crops. What kind of soil are we and what do our lives produce?

“The Sower and the Seeds” is the first in a series of seven parables or stories in Matthew 13 that discuss the kingdom of heaven. In it, Jesus explains our part in the kingdom of heaven, what we must do to become and remain a part of it, and how we are to share the good news with others.

## A Summary

In the parable, Jesus tells the story of a farmer who scatters seed all around his land (v. 1-9). Some seed lands on the path and is eaten up by birds. Some falls on rocky soil, where it is prevented from growing deep roots and ends up withering in the sun. Some seed lands among thorns and is choked. Finally, some seed lands on good soil, where it produces abundant fruit.

## **An Explanation**

Jesus later explains this parable to the disciples (v. 18–23). The seed that lands on the path and is eaten by birds is representative of those who do not allow Jesus' message to penetrate their hearts, leaving the message to be picked away by Satan. The rocky soil represents those who believe in Jesus at first but who, because of their shallow faith and understanding, fall away when trials and tribulations occur. The thorn-infested soil points to those who believe but who allow worldly cares and desires to smother their once lively faith. Finally, the good soil that bears much fruit represents those who hear and follow Christ's message.

## **Application to Jesus**

Jesus' message is powerful; it has the ability to give life and reproduce itself.

## **Openhanded Farming**

To the modern listener, the farmer's method of seeding the land seems extraordinarily wasteful. The farmer doesn't seem too particular about where the seed lands, scattering it almost randomly as he goes. This says a lot about who God is. He does not preach only to those He knew would believe in Him, but gives Himself to each and every man. Christ's message comes to all, regardless of the preparedness of their hearts.

What does this say about how we should share the gospel?

We must remember that God's message is to be shared with

everyone. Just as the farmer sows without worrying where the seed lands, trusting that rain and the sun will bring to life those seeds that find root, so must we trust in the Son and the Spirit who rains down from heaven to bring life in those souls who open themselves to the love of God.

### **The First Two Kinds of Soil**

This analogy helps us identify what kind of soil we are and what kind of soil we want to become. We can be like the path, closed off and impenetrable. We can allow ourselves to listen without hearing. If Christ's message is not allowed to make a difference in our hearts, to penetrate our souls and draw us to conversion, we will remain hard and dry.

We can be like the rocky soil, rejoicing over God's truth for a time, but not allowing it to change us much, leaving our shallow roots to wither from the persecutions we endure and the troubles that come our way. Troubles will always come. There will always be illness, family strife, shattered relationships, financial worries, and unmet expectations. And persecutions are promised for those who genuinely try to follow after Jesus' example. The difference lies, Jesus says, in the way that we choose to respond. If our faith is shallow, untended, and unwatered, we will not have the strength to withstand these difficulties. The harshness of the world is quick to burn up the life of Christ if we do not work to protect and care for it.

### **The Last Two Kinds of Soil**

The next two types of soil both represent those who believe in God's word, but there is a distinct difference between them. The person who is the good soil "hears the word and understands it; he indeed



bears fruit, and yields in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty" (v. 23). Most of us are not familiar with farming terminology, so it is important to make sure we see the implications here. Those who are good soil see fruit in their own lives, but they also reproduce that fruit 100 times over! When God plants His word in our lives, He doesn't just want to just see our own salvation; He wants us to spread His word to others.

This is vastly different from the soil with thorns. In this soil, weeds and thorns spring up, allowing desire for power, money, pleasure, or honor to smother our faith. Not only are we not fruitful in our own life, but we do not yield or reproduce the faith elsewhere. How many people are like this in our Church today? Their faith is shallow and not seen as something they need to share with others. The cares of the world make their faith sterile.

Jesus tells us that we must let go of the world and its cares if we are to follow Him. He is the ultimate good, and to choose earthly things in place of Him is to reduce our ability to reproduce the faith. All secondary goods and pleasures will fail to satisfy. As St. Therese of Lisieux said, "Possessing them [all the things of this world], I should be utterly unhappy, my heart would be so empty!... It's incredible how big a thing my heart seems when I consider the world's treasures... since all of them massed together could not content it...but how small a thing it seems when I consider Jesus."

### **What Kind of Soil Do You Want to Be?**

In the end, we get to choose what kind of soil we want to be. Jesus gives us an incredible vision of what good soil can produce. But, if we want to produce, we must be willing to cultivate our hearts. Farming is dirty work. We must get down on our hands and knees to root out

the weeds, rocks, and thorns that threaten to overtake us. We must learn to turn from those thorns—wealth, fame, and power—when they push us away from God. We must be willing to prune ourselves so that God can have room to move in our lives. What kind of soil do you want to be?

**Application to Our Lives**

What kind of soil will we be? Are we willing to work to rid ourselves of the things that keep us from knowing Jesus and making Him known?



DISCUSSION

# DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

*Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23*

## **STEP 1: OPENER**

Have you ever grown anything before? How did it go?

## **STEP 2: BACKGROUND**

The parable in the passage today is about a farmer who scatters his seed on all types of terrain. It helps us explore whether we are accepting Jesus' message in our lives and how we will spread it to others.

## **STEP 3: PASSAGE**

Read Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 together.

## **STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

Note that answers appear in italics.

## EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

### **1. Jesus tells of a farmer who is sowing seed in his field. Is there anything striking about how he is scattering the seed?**

*Answer: He isn't too particular about where the seed lands, scattering it as he goes.*

### **2. What does this say about God?**

*Answer: God is willing to give Himself to each and every man. Christ's message comes to all, regardless of the preparedness of their hearts.*

### **3. What does this example say about how we should share the faith?**

*Answer: We are often too afraid to share ourselves with others, especially when it comes to something as "controversial" as faith in Jesus. However, we are called to share the truth with all men—especially when it comes to Him who is Truth—and especially with those who need to hear it the most. Like the farmer who trusts that the rain and sun will bring to life those seeds that find root, so must we trust in the Son and the Spirit who rains down from heaven to bring life in those souls who open themselves to the love of God.*

### **4. To dive into this passage, it is first helpful to identify the four kinds of places the seeds land and Jesus' explanation for each. Would anyone like to share one place the seeds land and Jesus' explanation?**

*Answer: The path represents those who hear the message of the kingdom but don't understand. Satan snatches away what was sown.*

- *The rocky soil is those who receive the word with joy but have no roots and are destroyed by trials and persecution.*
- *The thorn-infested soil is those who believe in Jesus but allow the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of worldly cares to choke their faith.*
- *The good soil is those who hear, understand, and cultivate the message they have received, bearing much fruit.*

**5. Read 2 Timothy 2:26. Compare the contents of this verse with the seed that falls on the path. What is God's perspective on those who don't believe in Him?**

*Answer: They are in bondage.*

**6. How might God's perspective change the way we look at those who don't believe?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*

**7. The rocky soil receives the seed with joy, but the plant withers when trials and tribulations come. How can trials and tribulations weaken our faith?**

*Allow the group to discuss. Example response: Trials can make us doubt and question God.*

**8. How can trials and tribulations strength our faith?**

*Allow the group to discuss. Example response: Trials can help us realize that we need God, especially during difficult times.*

**9. What is the result of the good soil?**

*Answer: It is fruitful and yields "in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."*

**10. What do you think Jesus means by yield? What would this actually look like?**

*Answer: The fruitfulness applies to their own life, but the yielding means that they have reproduced or spread the faith to many other people.*

**11. The third kind of soil has thorns that prevent the seed from flourishing and producing more fruit. What does Jesus say prevents it from becoming fruitful?**

*Answer: The cares of the world and the delight in riches choke the word.*

**12. What sort of soil are you, and why? Are you more like one, or are you a combination?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*

**13. What kind of soil do you want to be, and what prevents you from being that type of soil?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*

**14. What is one area in your life you want to work on to make yourself more fruitful?**

*Allow the group to discuss. Example response: I am going to pray 10 minutes each day this week.*

# **NOTES**

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Part 3 of the Ignite Series

# Following the Good Shepherd

John 10:1-18

**UNDERSTANDING**

Pages 32 - 37

**DISCUSSION**

Pages 38 - 42

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UNDERSTANDING

# WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

*Read John 10:1-18*

## **The Big Picture**

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who gives His life for His sheep. Hearing His voice, His listeners must choose whether or not they are going to follow after Him.

One of the oldest images in early Christianity is a picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The metaphor, powerful in that time, is just as meaningful for us today. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, cares for us, protects us, feeds us, and leads us. Even more, He demonstrated how much He was willing to do for us. He gave up His life by dying on the cross and rising again so that we might have a new—and more abundant—life in Him.

## **Context: Setting the Scene**

The discussion of Jesus as the Good Shepherd in John 10:1-21 comes immediately after Jesus had healed a blind man. The Pharisees (who were Jewish teachers in Jesus' day), heard about the miracle and refused to believe it. Jesus told the Pharisees that they could not

understand who He is because they, much like the man He had just healed, were blind and unable to see. Like all the Jewish people, they had been hoping and waiting for the Messiah (“the Christ” in Greek) for hundreds of years. As leaders of the Jewish people, they should have been leading others to Jesus. Instead, they were doing just the opposite.

### **The True Shepherd vs. the Thieves and Robbers (John 10:1-6)**

To help the Pharisees understand their failings, Jesus compares robbers and thieves to a shepherd. Robbers and thieves sneak into the sheepfold to steal what is not theirs. The shepherd, on the other hand, is the true leader of the sheep. The sheep know their shepherd’s voice and follow him willingly. To the modern shepherd (or to the viewer of movies), this parable seems to be missing a character: There is no sheepdog urging the sheep along, keeping them in line. But in Jesus’ day, there was no need for the sheepdog. The sheep knew their shepherd personally. He lived with them, camped out with them, travelled with them. They knew his voice, and he had only to call for them to follow after him.

The Pharisees were familiar with shepherding practices in their day. They knew of passages in the Old Testament where God spoke of Himself as a shepherd. They also knew of warnings given to Israel, telling of false shepherds who would lead them astray. God warned that those He had put over Israel as guides and protectors—the kings and priests—had grown corrupt and lazy. They were ignoring and mistreating the people, leaving them open to political and spiritual attack. And so God had promised that He Himself would care for Israel to lead them back to safety.

### **Application to Jesus**

The analogy of the Good Shepherd shows God's willingness to sacrifice His life for ours.

### **"I Lay Down My Life for the Sheep" (John 10:7-18)**

Rather than clarifying His message immediately by explaining that they are the robbers and He is the shepherd, Jesus says that He is the gate of the sheepfold. In order to be saved, He says, one must enter through this gate. Shepherds often corralled the sheep into a sheepfold or cave and would then lay down at the opening. They used their very bodies as the gate, placing themselves at the door. Understood this way, Jesus is both the shepherd and the gate through which the sheep must pass.

Even further, as the shepherd lies down to act as the gate, Jesus says He will lay down His life for His sheep. A hired hand works for pay and runs when danger comes. Shepherds would fight off wild animals to protect their flocks, but it would have been foolish to give their lives freely to save the sheep. But Jesus, the Good Shepherd, willingly accepts danger and death for His sheep. He chooses death in order that the sheep might have life. In doing this, Jesus demonstrates God's love for us. His passion and death on a cross is the ultimate sacrifice of love. This sacrifice is for all. There are others, Jesus says, who are not yet in the sheepfold, whom He must rescue so that there might be one flock and one shepherd. Offering Himself, Jesus promises to bring all under His care.

## **The Abundant Life**

Not only that, but Jesus says that He came that they might have life, and “have it more abundantly.” By giving up His life, Jesus is promising that His followers will have a better life, a complete life, a life of absolute freedom and fulfillment. Following Jesus doesn’t restrict freedom, but rather enables it. The world often thinks freedom means “freedom from” (freedom from high taxes, from oppression, etc.), when true freedom is really “freedom for” (freedom for truly loving others, being a good friend, etc.). Freedom allows us to seek out those things for which we were made, to pursue true happiness. Trains cannot run when off the track, because they are made for it. We do not run well apart God, because our hearts are made for something bigger. Every person wants to be greater than what he is, and following Christ’s example by living virtuously enables us to become that person.

## **Are We Sheep?**

Now that we know how Jesus is the Good Shepherd, how are we like the sheep? Sheep have no real natural defenses, are easy targets for predators, and rely on shepherds for protection and care. Sheep also are not very smart and are given to herd mentality. Sheep tend to follow each other blindly, not thinking about where they are going or the dangers that might be waiting for them. Dr. James Dobson wrote:

*I observed this herd instinct a few years ago in a documentary on television. It was filmed in a packing house where sheep were being slaughtered for the meat market. Huddled in pens outside were hundreds of nervous animals. They seemed to sense danger in their unfamiliar surroundings. Then a gate was opened that led up a ramp and through a door to the right. In order to get the sheep to walk up that ramp, the handlers used what is known as a “Judas goat.” This is a goat that has*

*been trained to lead the sheep into the slaughterhouse. The goat did his job very efficiently. He confidently walked to the bottom of the ramp and looked back. Then he took a few more steps and stopped again. The sheep looked at each other skittishly and then began moving toward the ramp. Eventually, they followed the confident goat to the top, where he went through a little gate to the left, but they were forced to turn to the right and went to their deaths. It was a dramatic illustration of unthinking, herd behavior and the deadly consequences it often brings.*

Whether or not we like to admit it, we often fall into this same pattern of non-thought. We tend to follow our peers, or the most charismatic personality in the group. We just “go with the flow,” even if the flow isn’t carrying us anywhere in particular, or is carrying us in the absolute wrong direction.

Even if we avoid this herd mentality for the most part, we still cannot do everything for ourselves. God refers to us as sheep to remind us that we need a shepherd to lead us, and that we are dependent on Him. He brought the world into existence. He holds it in balance, so that we have food, shelter, work, and rest. And He brings us from this life to the next. We can no more easily save our souls from death than we can cause the stars to shine or the plants to grow. Understood this way, the metaphor of the sheep should be just as meaningful for us as it was for the Israelites.

### **Application to Our Lives**

Jesus seeks to teach us that, like sheep, we are easy prey and are swiftly led astray. Will we choose to follow the Good Shepherd who sacrificed His life for us?

# NOTES

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DISCUSSION

# DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

*John 10:1-18*

## **STEP 1: OPENER**

Have you ever had a coach, teacher, friend, etc. that you looked up to as a role model? What about them made you want to follow in their footsteps?

## **STEP 2: BACKGROUND (READ THIS TO YOUR GROUP)**

The ancient Israelites looked to God as their shepherd. Jesus makes a bold claim: He is the Good Shepherd. He is the one who will lay down His life for His sheep so that they are able to have an abundant life on earth and eternal life in heaven. This passage will look at what we can do to make Jesus our shepherd and listen to His voice.

## **STEP 3: PASSAGE**

Read John 10:1-18 together.

## **STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

Note that answers appear in italics.



## EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

### **1. Read a few verses back to John 9:39-41 for a bit of context. Who is Jesus speaking to in our passage?**

*Answer: Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees, a group of spiritual teachers and leaders in Israel.*

### **2. Why does He direct His statements to them?**

*Answer: They did not believe that Jesus could heal the blind. Jesus is showing them that they are spiritually blind— blind to the truth that He is the true shepherd, whereas they have led many astray.*

### **3. Why were the religious people in Jesus' day thieves and robbers?**

*Answer: Even though they were religious, they still failed to see God working around them.*

### **4. What are some ways that religious people today (including ourselves) can be thieves and robbers?**

*Example responses: Being overly judgmental of others; refusing to reach out to others because they are different from us; not being willing to recognize how God is moving in our lives and on our campus.*

### **5. What does it mean for Jesus to be the Good Shepherd?**

*Answer: Jesus is saying that He is the one promised by God who would lead His followers to peace and safety. He will care for them, protect them, and provide for them.*

**6. Jesus says, "I came so that they might have life, and have it more abundantly." What is the difference between life and an abundant life?**

*Answer: The abundant life, beyond normal "life," means freedom, fulfillment, and happiness.*

**7. If you could have an abundant life, what would it look like?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*

**8. What does the world think about following Jesus and the Church? Do they think it leads to a more abundant life?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*

**9. If you had to convince someone that being Catholic led to an abundant life, what would you say?**

*Allow the group to discuss. Example responses: Following Jesus doesn't restrict freedom, but rather enables it. Trains cannot run when off the track, because they are made for it. We do not run well apart God, because our hearts are made for something bigger. Every person wants to be greater than what he is, and following Christ enables us to become that person.*

**10. Read the quote from Dr. Dobson. Why do you think God uses sheep to describe us?**

*Answer: We are easily led astray, have no spiritual defenses apart from God, and need His care. God refers to us as sheep to remind us that we need Him and are dependent on Him. We can no more easily save our souls from death than we can make the plants grow.*

**11. What challenges do we face if we follow Jesus as our shepherd?**

*Answer: In today's culture, the world is filled with competing voices, each claiming to have the answers or to bring real happiness. We can easily get off track when we follow these other voices.*

**12. How do we overcome these challenges?**

*Example responses: Root our identity in Jesus and the true freedom and abundant life He gives us; listen to Jesus' voice found in Scripture and in prayer; be fed by the Shepherd through the Sacraments.*

**13. What is one specific way you want to follow Jesus this week?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*





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Part 4 of the Ignite Series

## Rock and Sand

Matthew 7:24-27

**UNDERSTANDING**

Pages 44 - 49

**DISCUSSION**

Pages 50 - 53

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UNDERSTANDING

# WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

*Read Matthew 7:24-27*

## **The Big Picture**

Jesus says that the man who builds his life on His teaching will stand firm. Those who reject Christ and His teaching, however, are like those who build their houses on sand.

Jesus tells us of a man who built his house on rock and a man who built his house on sand. When storms came, the house built on rock stood firm, but the house built on sand was destroyed. Christ tells us that He is our Rock. With God as our firm foundation, the storms life cannot defeat us.

## **A Shaky Seaside Situation**

Just a couple dozen miles north of Oregon lies Cape Shoalwater, Washington. Along with its sandy beaches and ocean-view cliffsides, Cape Shoalwater has a problem: The land along the sea has been eroding an average of 100 feet every year for more than a century. Because of this, it has earned the nickname Washaway Beach. In 2010, windstorms began to threaten vacation homes that had been

in families for decades. Rather than eating up the typical 100 feet of land, the winds swept away miles of coast. Homes that once had been a fifteenminute walk from the shore were now toppling into the sea. The families had dreamed of cabins by the shore; they just didn't mean to be so close.

### **Solid Rock: Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:24)**

In Matthew 7:24-27, Jesus is concluding His most famous teaching, the Sermon on the Mount. He had just given His listeners:

- the Beatitudes as guidelines for growing in holiness (Matthew 5:1-12)
- teachings on anger and lust (5:21-30)
- commands to turn the other cheek and to love our enemies (5:38-48)
- the charge to do to others what we would have them do to us (7:12)
- instructions on how to pray, including the "Our Father," and how to fast (6:5-18)

To conclude the Sermon, Jesus tells the story of the two men who had built homes they intended to last. The one who listens to and obeys the teachings He had just given will be like a wise man who builds his house on the rock. When storms come and the winds blow, his house will not fall. But the one who ignores Christ's teachings will be like a foolish man who builds his house on the sand. When storms come, his house will fall with a great crash. Jesus is urging His listeners to build their houses, their lives, on His teaching. With Him as their foundation, they will be able to remain firm, no matter what comes along.

### **Application to Jesus**

In giving the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus set forth strong teaching on following God. Jesus proclaims that He is the Rock on which we are to build our lives. His teaching is our sure foundation.

### **A Firm Foundation?**

Jesus promises that those who build their lives on Him will be secure. He knew that there are many other options in the world we could use, other things we could choose to build our lives on. Some place all their hopes on childhood dreams, spending their whole lives aiming for fame and fortune. Some make their jobs their security. Others depend entirely on family and friends. Some set their store in revolutionaries, others in politicians. Some place their hope in humanitarians and do-gooders, or in pastors and teachers. Some place every ounce of their trust in science, or philosophy, or the arts. Some define their lives by liberal ideals, some by conservative ideals. Still others trust only in themselves.

However, none of these foundations will remain firm. Friends and family will let us down. Jobs will be lost. Revolutionaries, politicians, pastors, and teachers will all disappoint. Science and philosophy will fail to answer the longings of the human heart, and the arts will fail to express our deepest desires. Ideals will leave us empty. And we will often fail to live up to our own standards.

God, however, remains the same forever. "Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed," He says, "yet my unshaken love for you will not be shaken" (Isaiah 54:10). St. Teresa of Avila wrote, "Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing frighten you. All things are passing.



God never changes. Patience attains all things. He who has God finds he lacks nothing. God alone suffices." God is the only foundation that provides perfect stability. Unlike the many options suggested by the world, He is the only one that will not leave us floundering. He alone remains firm and solid under our feet. Architects know that the tallest buildings always have the deepest foundations. The deeper our foundation in Christ, the higher we can build our houses. The Christian walk is never over. We must always be striving to build our houses and to strengthen our reliance on Christ, our Rock.

### **"When the Rains Came..." (Matthew 7:25-27)**

It is important to note that, although God and His teaching are trustworthy and unmoving beneath our feet, it does not mean that we will never find our houses shaken. Jesus doesn't say "if the rain came down," "if the streams rose," and "if the winds blew and beat against the house"; He says "when." Trials and troubles are going to come no matter what. We are going to experience heartbreak, struggle, disappointment, confusion, doubt, sorrow, and grief. We may even feel as though we are utterly alone. But God is Truth, is Life, is Love. He is our firm and unmovable foundation. No matter what, no matter how we may feel, we can trust that God is always there. When the storms of life rage, He will reach out His hand to save us from drowning (Matthew 14:25-33). He will command the winds to cease and the waves to be calm (Matthew 8:23-27, Mark 4:35-41, Luke 8:22-25, and John 6:16-31). To each one of us, God's promise remains unchanged: "I will never leave you nor forsake you...Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go," (Joshua 1: 5, 9). If we build our lives on His teachings and trust in His promises, we will not be destroyed but will remain safe upon the Rock.

### **Going Deeper: Solomon's Temple and the Temple of the Holy Spirit**

To the Jews listening to Jesus, this encouragement to be like the wise man who built his house on the rock would have had special meaning. It would have immediately made them think about Israel's greatest king, Solomon, and the house for God he built on the massive Foundation Stone in Jerusalem. God had made a promise to King David that his son would be the one to "build a house for my Name" (2 Samuel 7:13). After his father David's death, King Solomon built the Jerusalem Temple, a magnificent and unparalleled house for God. The temple was important because it was where the very presence of God dwelt among His people. King Solomon had also been given wisdom by God Himself, who promised that Solomon would be wiser than any other man in all of history. So to the Jews, the image of a wise man building his house on solid rock would have reminded them of God's temple, God's house, built by Solomon.

With Jesus' coming, this promise of the temple of God is fulfilled in a new and surprising way. When we choose to make Jesus the foundation of our lives, He gives us each His Holy Spirit as a seal of His love. His Spirit helps us to follow God and transforms us little by little to make us holy. St. Paul wrote, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16). Like the Jerusalem Temple, we can become the house where God's Spirit comes to dwell by making Jesus the foundation of our lives and allowing His Spirit to work within us.

#### **Application to Our Lives**

Where will we build our foundation? What will happen to our lives when trials come?



DISCUSSION

# DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

*Matthew 7:24-27*

## **STEP 1: OPENER**

Share the story about “Washaway Beach” from “What Is This Passage All About?” Why do you think someone would stay there? What would you say to them if they wanted to stay?

## **STEP 2: BACKGROUND**

Jesus tells us of a man who built his house on rock and a man who built his house on sand. What do we build our foundations on? What happens when storms come? This passage will help us wrestle with these questions.

## **STEP 3: PASSAGE**

Read Matthew 7:24-27 together.

## **STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

Note that answers appear in italics.

## EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

**1. In Matthew 7:24, Jesus says, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine...” What words are these? What is the context for this passage?**

*Answer: The Sermon on the Mount*

**2. What does Jesus teach in the Sermon on the Mount?**

*Answer: Some of the topics are listed in the section “Solid Rock: Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount” in “What Is This Passage All About?”*

**3. What is the sand on which many people today build their lives?**

*Answer: the world and the various things on which we choose to build our lives: fame, jobs, political leaders, intellectual pursuits, society, friends, ourselves, etc.*

**4. What is the sand on which we as college students often try to build our houses?**

*Answer: Popularity, relationships, grades, success, future goals, etc.*

**5. How have these different foundations let us down in the past?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*

**6. What is different about what God promises us?**

*Answer: He is Truth, Life, and Love itself. He is the ultimate foundation upon which all things are built. He loves us and cares for us. And because God is unchanging and cannot be shaken, all who build their lives on Him find themselves secure.*

**7. What does having a good foundation in Christ look like and act like?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*

**8. What does Jesus say about the coming of storms?**

*Answer: Storms are inevitable. It is not if they will come, but when.*

**9. What are some of life's storms we face?**

*Answer: Loss of a loved one, loneliness, illnesses, failures, confusion, doubt, etc.*

**10. How have these storms tested your faith?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*

**11. What has helped you to build a foundation of faith to face these storms?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*

## **12. What else can we do to build a deep foundation?**

*Example responses: Build our lives on the truth. Spend time each day talking to God, and to read the blueprints He gave us—the Bible. Surround ourselves with people who are striving to build their lives on Christ as well, such as good friends and holy advisors. The deeper our foundation in Christ, the higher we can build our houses—that is, the more like Him we can become.*

## **13. What is one specific way to build a foundation that you would like to work on this week?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*

**14. Solomon, the wisest man in all of history, was given the task to build God a house on the Foundation Stone in Jerusalem. This Temple was adorned with gold and silver, fine gems, and precious metals. St. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 3:16 that each believer is themselves a temple of the Holy Spirit. What does it mean for us to be the dwelling place for God?**

*Answer: We must seek to live the Christian life to the fullest, and to allow the Holy Spirit to purify us. The more we allow Him to work in us, the more the fruits of the Spirit become evident in us. We become more holy, more virtuous, more Christcentered, more prayerful, more joyful. If we ask Him, Christ will grant us these things in His love and mercy.*

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## **FOCUS Equip**

'FOCUS Equip' is based on Ephesians 4:12 "for the equipment of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ." These materials seek to equip you for lifelong Catholic mission. We would love to hear your feedback at: [focusequip@focus.org](mailto:focusequip@focus.org)





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