

ENCOUNTERS

— with —

Jesus



INTRODUCTION

The life of Jesus is truly inspiring. For a man who only lived around 33 years, his impact on human history is beyond measure. For those who know his life well and have come to love him, it is likely that you also recognise him as Lord of your life and Saviour of the world.

Jesus interacted with many different people across his life. The way he shared his identity with them was not a cookie-cut set of steps or statements. Rather, it varied depending on who the person was, where they were at in life and their degree of understanding in Jewish beliefs and customs.

These eight stories of encounters with Jesus aim to focus our attention on his life and to learn from how he shared himself with others. We hope that our attitudes, words and approach - particularly in evangelism - will be shaped by those of Jesus. His life challenges us to look beyond appearances and to go out of our way to reach people that may easily be written off as outcasts. May God shape your heart to be like that of Jesus as we share his love and message with others, just like he did for us.

Study 1 / John 2: 1-11

THE WEDDING FEAST

Context

Jesus performed his first miracle at a wedding in Cana, a small village near Nazareth where he grew up. Since Mary (Jesus' mother) was there helping, Jesus probably knew or was related to the groom. Many scholars believe that Joseph (Jesus' father) had passed away. Therefore, as the eldest male in the family, Jesus would have been the head of the house.

Jewish weddings at that time usually went on for seven days. It was more than just a party. The honour and reputation of the groom, bride and their families was on the line. Running out of wine in the middle of the feast would be a major disaster that show poor planning and inability to provide for the guests.

Observation

1. Jesus addressed his mother as "woman" (verse 4). This was not harsh or disrespectful, but it was uncommon (Kruse, 2003). Many commentators believe Jesus was distancing himself from Mary. Why did he do this?
2. Although Jesus' reply was not necessarily accommodating, Mary told the servants "do whatever he tells you". What does this signify?

Meaning

3. Why was Jesus referring to his death on the cross by saying "My hour has not yet come" at the wedding (verses 2: 4, 7: 6 and 13: 1)?

4. What is the significance of Jesus' decision to use the six stone water jars that were for purification (verse 6)?

5. Why did Jesus choose turning water into wine as his first miracle, as opposed to something more impressive like healing the sick or the blind?

Timothy Keller explains the significance of this miracle in his book "Encounter with Jesus".

In verse 9, we are introduced to the "master of the banquet". He was essentially a master of ceremonies, a presider. It was his job to call people to celebrate and to make sure the conditions for that celebration were all in place. Bottom line: It was his job to make the party great. And when Jesus turns water into wine and saves the day, do you see what Jesus is saying? He is saying, as it were, I am the true master of the banquet, I am Lord of the Feast.

"Wait". Someone says. "I thought he came to humble himself, to lose his glory, then to be rejected and to go to the cross." Of course that is right, but in a way, Jesus is putting even that terrible loss and pain into context.

"Yes" he is saying, "I'm going to suffer. Yes, there's going to be sacrifice – for me first and then for my followers as well. But it's all a means to an end, which is festival joy! It's all in order to bring about resurrection and the new heavens and new earth. The end of all evil and death and tears. You know all those Dionysian legends about the forest running with wine, dancing, and music? That's nothing compared to the eternal feast that is coming at the end of history. And those who believe in me will have within them a stream of that joy, a foretaste of that joy, now. A taste that will be profoundly consoling and refreshing in driest of times – like living water. That, ultimately, is what I've come to bring. That's why this is my first sign." Jesus Christ says, "I am the Lord of the Feast. In the end, I come to bring joy. That's the reason my calling card, my first miracle, is to set everyone laughing.

Application

Mary finally witnessed the first sign of Jesus as the Messiah 30 years after his birth. She kept her faith. Although she was the mother of Jesus, she submitted to his authority.

6. How should we keep our faith and submit to Jesus' authority as the Lord of the Feast?

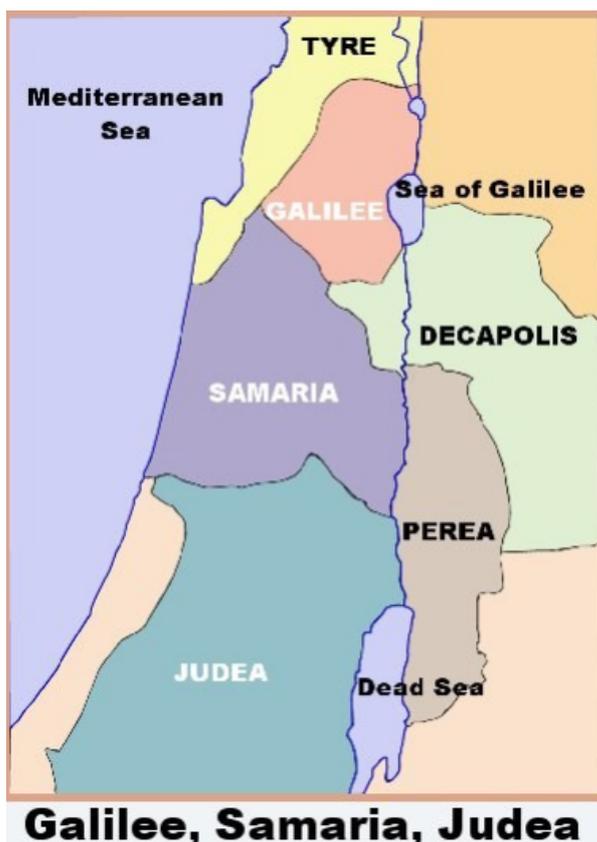
7. This story points to the cross and the eternal feast beyond the cross. When sharing the gospel, we must talk about Jesus' death on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. How do we also point people to the eternal joy that Jesus has promised?

Study 2 / John 4: 7-30

THE SAMARITAN WOMAN AT THE WELL

Context

The Jews and the Samaritans often fought over their differences. The Samaritans were the descendants of the northern kingdom of Israel. However, many of the leading citizens were taken away by the Assyrians (721 BC). A group of colonists was sent by the Assyrians to resettle Samaria, whose intermarriages led to a religion with parts of Judaism and Assyrian worship. Furthermore, the Samaritans rejected the temple in Jerusalem and chose the temple on Mount Gerizim as their highest place of worship.



Jesus “had” to go through Samaria to travel from Judea to Galilee (verse 4), which is a relatively logical conclusion according to the map. While a “good” Jew would go around Samaria (verse 9b), Jesus broke the taboo on relations with Samaritans by choosing to go through the area.

He also broke the taboo on strict relations between men and women. A devout Jewish man would not walk with his wife, who would remain behind him. They would talk only at home. It was not proper for a Jewish man, especially a religious leader, to talk to a woman (4: 27).

1. Share of a time when you stepped outside of societal norms to reach out to someone you would not have encountered in your day-to-day life.

Observation

2. Jesus asked for a drink from the Samaritan woman (verse 7) who had come to the well alone at the sixth hour (i.e. noon). Why did the woman choose the hottest time of the day when others were unlikely to be there?
3. What prompted the woman to say “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet” (verse 19)?

Meaning

4. Jesus knew about the woman’s relationships without having ever met her before. What was the connection between her past life and the living water Jesus offered her?
5. The woman did not understand what “living water” meant. What did Jesus mean by “never be thirsty again” and “spring of water welling up to eternal life”?

The woman said “I know the Messiah is coming... He will tell us all things” (verse 25), to which Jesus responded “I am He” (verse 26). This was the first occasion Jesus proclaimed himself as the Messiah.

6. The God-King, who was born in a manger with no place to rest his head (Luke 9: 58), made his first proclamation as the Messiah to (i) a woman, (ii) a Samaritan and (iii) an outcast even within her own society. What does this signify?

Application

7. How did the woman respond to Jesus' news (verses 28-30)? How does this compare to the response of the Samaritans in Luke 9: 51-56? What will be your response?

Study 3 / Mark 10: 17-31

THE RICH YOUNG RULER

Context

This prominent encounter is recorded in three gospels (i.e. Matthew, Mark and Luke). In those days, it was uncommon to be rich, young and in a position to rule. The society would assume this successful man was blessed by God. Simply put - he had it all.

Observation

1. Observe the young man's behaviour and words (verse 17). Considering his status as a ruler, how was his attitude towards Jesus?

2. Instead of answering the young man's question, Jesus asked "why do you call me good?" (verse 18). Why did Jesus focus on the word "good"?

Meaning

During Jesus' time, the Jews were still following the Mosaic Law (i.e. the Ten Commandments).

3. The young man was confident that he had kept all the commandments. Why would he kneel and ask Jesus how to inherit eternal life?

4. What is the relevance of Jesus "loving him" (verse 21)?

5. The young man was disheartened and sorrowful after hearing Jesus' answer, for he had many possessions (verse 22). What is so tragic about this story?

The disciples were shocked when Jesus described how difficult it was to enter the Kingdom of God.

6. What was the comforting message as Jesus clarified his teaching (verses 27, 29 and 30)?

Application

7. Our obsession with "earthly treasures" will hinder us from following Jesus. What "earthly treasures" do you need to give up?

8. It is one thing to share the Gospel with someone. It is another thing to love the people we are sharing the Gospel with. How did Jesus challenge our attitude towards those who are yet to follow him?

Study 4 / Matthew 8: 5-13

THE CENTURION AND HIS SERVANT

Context

In the first seven chapters of Matthew's gospel, Jesus gained a huge following of people due to his miraculous healings and amazing teaching. When Jesus came down from his sermon on the mount (8: 1), Matthew's gospel provided a stronger statement about the possible overflowing of Jesus' salvation offer to Gentiles and Jews.

At that time, tension was great between the occupying Roman forces and the subjugated Jewish nation. Through the healing of the Roman centurion's servant, Jesus challenged the Jewish presumptions on who was "in" and "out" when it came to the Kingdom of Heaven.

1. Before his encounter with the centurion, Jesus healed a leper (8: 1-4). By healing a leper and a Gentile, what message might Jesus send to an average Jewish person at that time?

Observation

2. Despite his enormous authority, the centurion referred to Jesus as "Lord". He also believed he was not worthy to have Jesus enter his home (verse 8). How would this interaction impact observers?
3. Given the centurion's concern for his servant, what kind of person was he?

Meaning

4. Even as a man of power, the centurion was powerless to help his servant. Yet he believed that Jesus could heal his servant without being near him. What did he acknowledge about the extent of Jesus' authority and power?
5. Jesus was amazed by the Gentile centurion's faith. He also made a confronting statement for those who considered themselves "in" (verses 11-12). Who would recline at the banquet table? How would this challenge his audience (Isaiah 25: 6-9)?

Application

6. We might think that church attendance and involvement guarantees our entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. How does this passage transform our understanding about salvation and faith?
7. Like the centurion, how can our understanding of Jesus' authority help us to trust him in difficult situations?

Study 5 / Luke 7: 36-50

SIMON AND THE SINFUL WOMAN

Context

All four gospels have an account of a woman anointing Jesus with expensive perfume. Mary (Lazarus' sister) anointed Jesus' head and feet before wiping them with her hair (Matthew 26: 6-13, Mark 14: 3-9 and John 12: 1-8). This happened at the home of Simon the leper in the final week before Jesus' death in preparation for his burial.

What was recorded in Luke, however, could be a different encounter. Based on customs in hospitality, the Pharisee's house would have been open for uninvited strangers to walk in and out, look on and speak with the guests. The Jews usually ate while reclining on their left side on cushions with their feet behind them. They removed their sandals upon entering the house. Their feet were often washed (although not in John 13) and anointed with oil, especially if they were special guests. Kissing on the hand or cheek was a common greeting, even the kissing of feet.

The woman recorded in Luke 7 was likely to be a prostitute. She might have purchased the perfume for that purpose (Proverbs 7: 17), but she came to repent. Wearing her hair loose signified mourning. She might not have planned to wipe Jesus' feet, but since the host (also named Simon) did not offer Jesus this courtesy, she used her tears and hair for the job of a slave. She might not consider herself worthy to anoint Jesus' head, so instead she anointed his feet.

Observation

1. Simon's spoken and unspoken words, as well as actions and inactions, could be interpreted in opposing ways. Was he sincere in inviting Jesus to his home?

2. Jesus freely associated himself with all social classes. Jesus was also unafraid to eat and drink with sinners, which he did at Simon's house. Initially, he was willing to overlook Simon's lack of courtesy. How did he try to reach out to Simon with his words and actions?

Meaning

3. Jesus said "her sins, which are many, are forgiven - for she loved much" (verse 47). Are we forgiven by loving (verses 42 and 50, Romans 5: 1)?
4. Jesus gave the woman the assurance of forgiveness (verse 48). He also told her to go in peace as her faith had saved her (verse 50). How can we find assurance of forgiveness (1 John 1: 9)?

Application

5. Sometimes we take Jesus for granted and do not offer him what he deserves. How can we honour him more in our daily lives?

Simon judged Jesus according to the tradition of the Pharisees that they should not speak to or touch a sinner or a woman. In contrast, Jesus cut through the tradition by shifting the focus to God's love and promises.

6. We might have judged God and other Christians by our own traditions or cultures, where we failed to imitate the way Jesus treated the woman. What are some cultural barriers in our church, your life group or the general public?

Study 6 / John 9

THE MAN BORN BLIND

"I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see."

John Newton, Olney Hymns, 1779

Context

Birth defects, such as this man's blindness, were seen as punishment for sin committed by the parents or ancestors of the person afflicted (Exodus 20: 5). However, Jesus said that this man's blindness was not caused by his sin or his parents' (verses 3-5). As the man finally gained physical sight for the first time, he also gained spiritual insight on Jesus Christ as the Son of Man in his journey of faith.

1. How was Jesus' perspective on this man's blindness different from his disciples'? What was "the Father's work that must be done while it is day"?

Observation

Jesus reminded his disciples that "night is coming, when no one can work" and healed the blind man despite it being a Sabbath. He did not hesitate while expressing a sense of haste in doing God's work (Galatians 6: 10).

2. Jesus kneaded mud using his saliva and dirt to anoint the blind man's eyes. He then asked him to wash in the Pool of Siloam. What does the sight restoration signify (Isaiah 29: 18, 35: 5 and 42: 7)?

Some of the Pharisees saw Jesus as a sinner for not keeping the Sabbath, while others questioned how a sinner could heal a blind man (verse 16).

3. The blind man believed Jesus was a prophet (verse 17). What would happen to Jesus if he was a sinner according to the Pharisees (Deuteronomy 13: 1-5)?

4. How was Jesus' miracle different (verse 33)? What did it show about his authority?

5. Why was it necessary for Jesus to be falsely accused (Luke 9: 20-22)?

For the healed blind man, gaining sight for the first time would have been overwhelming. He also had to face curious and doubtful neighbours, as well as stubborn Pharisees. Yet he remained steadfast in faith and was able to see Jesus' true identity.

6. What was significant about Jesus allowing the man to worship him (verses 38-39)?

Application

7. The Pharisees were unable to see Jesus' true identity due to their presumption of knowledge. In light of this, how should we guard our hearts and attitudes (1 Corinthians 8: 1-3, Proverbs 26: 12)?

8. The Pharisees resented the healed blind man for pointing out their ignorance. They also looked down on him as a sinner in their society (verse 34). How can the oppressed find their voice like the healed blind man (Luke 6: 22)?

9. We might have suffered physically, emotionally or spiritually. How can Jesus' true identity enable us to look beyond our circumstances?

“How precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed.”

John Newton, Olney Hymns, 1779

Study 7 / Luke 23: 39-43

ROBBERS ON THE CROSS

Context

All four gospels describe the crucifixion of Jesus along with two robbers (Matthew 27: 33-56, Mark 15: 22-41, Luke 23: 33-49 and John 19: 16-30). According to the law of Moses, robbery was not punishable by death. These two robbers, however, might have also committed murder.

Some of Jesus' followers (John, the women and other acquaintances) were at the scene. There were also three other groups of people, who all insulted Jesus:

- the chief priests, rulers, elders and scribes (Matthew 27: 41-43)
- the soldiers and the centurion (Luke 23: 36-37)
- the crowd and passersby (Matthew 27: 39-40)

They mocked Jesus for saving others but not himself, despite his name that meant "the Lord saves". The chief priests also mocked his status as "the King of the Jews" (John 19: 19-22). Even the robbers joined in (Matthew 27: 44, Luke 23: 39).

Observation

1. What was on the mind of the unrepentant rober (verse 39) and the repentant robber (verses 40 and 42)?

2. Becoming a follower of Jesus involves the stages of hearing, believing, confessing and repenting (Romans 10: 14), as well as discipleship and proclamation (Matthew 28: 19-20). Do you see these stages in the repentant robber (Matthew 27: 44, Luke 23: 40-42)?

Meaning

3. What is the significant of “today” and “with me” (verse 43)?
4. This passage is often used to discuss the importance of baptism. What can we learn about baptism (Matthew 3: 11, 28: 18-20)?

Application

When Jesus experienced this great suffering, he took the time to:

- welcome the repentant robber to glory
- arrange for his mother’s welfare (John 19: 26-27)
- ask God to forgive the people (Luke 23: 34)
- help the people see the fulfilment of Psalm 22 (Matthew 27: 46)

He fully accomplished God’s work (John 19: 28-30) and called us to follow his example (John 5: 17, 13: 15).

5. How can we care for others when we ourselves are having difficulties (2 Timothy 4: 2)?
6. In his worst state, the repentant robber took the time to speak to the other robber before turning to Jesus. What can we learn about evangelism and selflessness?

Study 8 / John 20: 24-29

DOUBTING THOMAS

Context

The story of Thomas doubting Jesus' resurrection can be both an encouragement and a challenge. We too sometimes need "evidence" before accepting something as truth.

There is comfort in knowing that even the first disciples struggled to believe that a man could live again after being brutally murdered and buried for three days. Yet, the challenge remains. Thomas' faith lacked the childlike trust Jesus was hoping for. The challenge for us is not just whether there is enough evidence, but also how to interpret the evidence.

1. How did Jesus identify himself to his disciples (verses 19-20)?

Observation

2. Thomas did not accept the testimony of his fellow disciples (verse 25). Given that Jesus invited Thomas to touch him (verse 27), was Thomas' scepticism positive or negative?
3. Compare and contrast how Jesus identified himself (verses 19-20) with the evidence Thomas requested (verse 25).

Meaning

4. What is significant about Thomas' confession of Jesus as Lord and God (verse 28)?
5. We are in the category of "believing without seeing". In what way should we consider ourselves blessed?

Application

6. Read verses 30 and 31. How does the story of Thomas equip us in approaching those who are sceptical about Jesus' resurrection?
7. Jesus accommodated Thomas' scepticism. What can we learn in our own approach to evangelism?

THANK YOU

Thank you for participating in this eight-week series on Encounters with Jesus. We hope that you've been encouraged and strengthened in your faith by reflecting on the life of Jesus and the different people he came across.

Not only did Jesus die for sinners, he also associated with them across his life. He shared who he was with them to save them from sin, death and judgement. May you also take steps to share the good news of Jesus with those around you, so they too can know Jesus as their Lord and Saviour.