



Date: 17<sup>th</sup> & 24<sup>th</sup> March 2024

Theme: Obedient unto Death

Bible Readings: Mark chapters 14 and 15  
& Philippians 2:1-11

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## PREPARATION FOR GROUP LEADERS

Please remember to contact your group beforehand to remind them of the date and time. And please read through all the material and passages. For this session, you might like to prepare **some music, a worship song or hymn** to share with the group. Something on the theme of the cross, the death of Jesus, or his sacrifice, would be appropriate. Use a CD or the internet, or whatever works best for you.

## PREPARATION FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS

At this time in Lent, we begin to think about the **Passion of Jesus** – meaning his suffering and death. From the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent to Good Friday we are in the season of 'Passiontide'. We turn our thoughts to what Jesus' death means to us; we read in the gospels the accounts of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday; in some places it is traditional to have 'passion plays', and you might know of some good films that portray the story of Jesus' death and resurrection. The four gospels tell the story in very similar ways, with subtle differences. You might be very familiar with some of these. This year, we are following Mark's Gospel closely, so it would be good preparation to read Mark's account of the events.

Either reading your Bible at home, or borrowing a copy from the church, **please read Mark chapters 14 and 15** (or just Mark 15 if you're short of time). Read it slowly and carefully. Try to imagine yourself in the action: a bystander in the crowd, a disciple in the room or in the garden, a soldier by the cross.

*What do you notice? What is said? What is done to Jesus? How does he respond? What is missing? How do you react or respond to this powerful story? How does it make you feel?*

## STARTING THE SESSION: FINDING OUR ROOTS

As you gather together, in groups of 3-5, discuss your questions or feelings on the Passion story.

*What did you notice afresh when reading the story of Jesus' suffering and death?*

*What words would you use to describe this story? What does it mean to you?*

*Which parts are the most meaningful for you, or the hardest? What questions do you have?*

*Did you notice parts of the story missing? (Do you know where to find them in the other gospels?)*

*Do you think such a detailed story as this could ever be invented or 'made up'?*

## A PRAYER

God of love,  
You show us in the suffering of Jesus that you are with us in our suffering,  
You show us in your sacrifice the extent of your love.  
Help us to know your presence with us today;  
Help us to comfort and support one another in all our sharing, thinking and praying;  
Open our hearts and minds to your Spirit and love, and bring your peace. **Amen.**

## READING THE SCRIPTURES

**Read together the Bible passage:** **Philippians 2: 1-11**

**Background Information:** This reading is part of one of St Paul's letters from prison (on one of the occasions he was arrested for his proclamation of Jesus). It was written by Paul and Timothy to the Christians in Philippi, Greece. They would probably have met together in a house for worship, prayer and teaching. Paul's first 'convert' in Philippi was a woman named Lydia (**Acts chapter 16**) and this led to the gathering of a church there. The church in Philippi was obviously respected and loved by Paul, but it also had its struggles. **Verses 1-4** reveal some of the ordinary human relationships and tensions we can find in any society. Paul asks them, however, in **verse 5**, to try to find a different mindset...

It is thought by many scholars that **verses 6-11** are actually the words of an early Christian hymn or liturgy, which may have been familiar to the members of the Philippian church. We call it 'A Song of Christ's Glory'. It describes the obedient **humbling** of Christ, from the same status and nature of God: He descended to human form, and then even further down to his death on the cross (the humiliating and painful death of a criminal). In this obedience, we can see both God's will and Jesus' purposeful love. **Verse 7** says 'He emptied himself' or 'made himself nothing'. The Greek words for this mean 'he poured himself out'. Charles Wesley beautifully expanded on this verse when he wrote 'Emptied himself of all but love' (in the hymn 'And Can it Be').

Finally, we see that the descent of Jesus is gloriously reversed in his ascension – where he is '**highly exalted**' by God, and given the highest power and authority, with future adulation and universal worship. The word '*therefore*' in **verse 9** suggests that Christ's exaltation to glory is the reward for his obedience and humility. Indeed, Jesus had said, '*All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted*' (**Matthew 23:12**), and several other sayings like that.

## DIGGING DEEPER – Questions for group discussion

*What does this passage from Philippians mean to you? Does it remind you of anything else?*

*What do you think Paul was trying to get the Philippian Christians to see or understand? What was his aim in reminding them of what Christ did?*

*When is **obedience** important in our lives and faith? And when should it be questioned or challenged?*

*What should **Christian humility** look like in practice? What does it mean to be equal under God?*

Sometimes moves towards equality, diversity or social justice are resisted by those who feel they are 'better' than others, or have a vested interest in keeping their status. *How does the Philippians passage help us to keep ourselves in the right perspective?*

Read again **Mark 15: 16-39**.

*Why do you think Jesus had to suffer? What hope or help can this give to us in times of suffering?*

*Have you ever asked the question of God: "Why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). Did you find help during that time? What restored your faith or hope?*

*What does the hope of Easter mean to you?*

## PRAYING TOGETHER

- If you've prepared some **music**, play this as a reflection to lead into a time of prayer together.
- Pray for those you know who are going through times of suffering, anxiety or ill-health;
- Pray for an increase in compassion and humility in the world, and in the church;
- Pray for those working in the health and care services; and for all who receive their care;
- Pray for the church as we celebrate Easter and offer God's hope and salvation to others;
- Pray **the Lord's Prayer** together, and ask for God's kingdom to come.