

Explore the Bible Adult Leader Guide Teaching Plans

Session 1: The Way Prepared

Text: Matthew 3:1-12

Memory Verse: Matthew 3:3

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

READ Matthew 3:1-12 and Understand the Context. Review the introduction to Matthew.

STUDY Matthew 3:1-12, using the commentary provided. As you study, consider how John prepared the way for the promised King and how you can prepare the way in your community for King Jesus.

PLAN the group time using the ideas that follow. Since one of this session's critical issues is the nature of salvation, review "Life by Design" before the group time. Additional ideas for your group are available at blog.lifeway.com/explorethebible and in *QuickSource*.

GROW from expert insights on weekly studies and view the video introduction to Matthew by Gregg Matte on the Ministry Grid (ministrygrid.com/web/explorethebible).

GATHER THE FOLLOWING ITEMS:

Index cards and pens; Personal Study Guides. Prepare to display the following Pack Items: **PACK ITEM 2** (*Book Outline: Matthew*); **PACK ITEM 3** (*Poster: Winter 2015-16*); **PACK ITEM 4** (*Time Line: Matthew*); **PACK ITEM 5** (*Bookmark: Memory Verses*); **PACK ITEM 8** (*Chart: Jewish Sects in the New Testament*).

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

SHARE: As the group arrives, invite them to describe the Christmas preparations they've made this past week, such as baking, decorating, shopping, or mailing cards.

DISCUSS: Note how busy the Christmas season can be for many of us. *How do you decide which Christmas preparations get priority in your life? What do most people mean when they ask, "Are you ready for Christmas?" How do you respond?*

LOOK: Focus attention on **Pack Item 2** (*Book Outline: Matthew*) and **Pack Item 3** (*Poster: Winter 2015-16*). Also refer to the book introduction (PSG, pp. 8-9) and **Pack Item 4** (*Time Line: Matthew*) to help introduce the Book of Matthew and set the context for today's study.

TRANSITION: *As we begin turning our thoughts toward Christmas, we begin our study of Matthew. Remember that Matthew wrote after four centuries of silence—the inter-biblical time between the Book of Malachi and the Gospels. Let's examine how John the Baptist prepared the way for the coming King.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 3:1-6, emphasizing the message John preached that called for people to repent of their sins.

DIRECT: Instruct the group to search verses 1-6. Then guide them to name (1) what we learn about the man John the Baptist and how people responded to him, and (2) what we learn about the message John preached.

DISCUSS: *Delivering a message of repentance is not always popular. How do we deal with the negative reaction some have when challenged by the need to repent? What motivates people to present the truth regardless of the reaction of others?* (PSG, p. 15)

GUIDE: Lead the group to define *repentance*.

EMPHASIZE: *John had a straightforward approach when preaching about the need for the people to repent. Point to the paragraphs under Verses 2-4 in the PSG (pp. 15-16) to further explain John's preaching style and his appearance.*

DISCUSS: *How would you compare John the Baptist's style with that of some of today's recognized religious leaders? How do you think people today would respond to John's appearance and preaching style?* (PSG, p. 16)

EXPLAIN: *John quoted the prophet Isaiah (see Isa. 40:3); both men called the people of their generation to repent and accept God's forgiveness.*

ASK: *What were some factors that probably motivated the large crowds of people to come out to hear John? How did their enthusiasm impact others?* (PSG, p. 17)

TRANSITION: *John was preparing the way for the coming Messiah in both his words and actions.*

ASK: *In what ways can we prepare our lives today for this season where we celebrate the birth of the King?*

READ: Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 3:7-10, as the group listens for attitudes expressed in this passage.

DISCUSS: *Sometimes we judgmentally and unkindly refer to some fellow believers as being "pharisaical." What do we mean by this? How can we avoid the attitude seen in the Pharisees?* (PSG, p. 18)

GUIDE: Instruct the group to silently read the paragraphs under Verses 7-8 in the PSG (pp. 17-18) and underline some of the facts they find about the Pharisees and Sadducees. Invite volunteers to tell what they learned about these two groups of religious leaders. (Option: Use **Pack Item 8** (*Chart: Jewish Sects in the New Testament*) to help them better understand the Pharisees, Sadducees, and other Jewish groups at the time.)

SHARE: *The Pharisees and Sadducees were clinging to a false hope that they could gain salvation because of their heritage. John preached boldly, stressing that faith is defined not by our words but by our actions.*

ASK: *What are some examples of false hopes that people cling to today?*

DIRECT: *List some ways Christians demonstrate the genuineness of their faith.* (PSG, p. 19)

TRANSITION: *John stressed that a person's salvation would bring a transformed lifestyle. He pointed to the coming King who would separate the true believers from unbelievers.*

READ: Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 3:11-12, encouraging the group to listen for how Jesus is described in these verses. Call for another volunteer to read the paragraph under Verse 12 in the PSG (pp. 19-20), while the group listens for the explanation of the process of separating the wheat from the chaff.

DISCUSS: *How is a believer's role today similar to the role played by John when Jesus came the first time? How can we point others to Christ?* (PSG, p. 19)

SHARE: *For John, Jesus is the all-powerful King who is superior in every way. So John devoted his message and life to pointing people toward that King. The passing of time has not changed the message—we carry the same message of Jesus Christ as Savior today.*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

ASK: *What questions do you have about John's preparation for the coming of the King? How does this study affect your preparation for celebrating Jesus' birth?*

DIRECT: Encourage the group to consider their responses to the second question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 20). (*Reflect on your commitment to Christ. Make sure you are depending on Him and not your own abilities to secure your salvation. Review the information on the inside front cover as a part of your reflection.*) Challenge the group to reflect as individuals on their commitment to Christ.

PRAY: Ask God to prepare the way for the King in our hearts as we celebrate His birth this Christmas season.

PRACTICE

Evaluate your own heart. How are you preparing for the King this Christmas season? What examples will you set for your group in this area?

Follow up with any answers to questions the group had during today's study.

Send a text or email to the group, encouraging them to share the ways that they celebrate the birth of the King in their homes with family and friends.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To supplement the introduction to today's study, distribute index cards and pens to the group. Instruct the group to list on their cards three things they need to do this week to get ready for Christmas. Call for volunteers to share one of the "things to do" from their lists. Encourage the group to ponder what it means to truly prepare our hearts and our lives as the Christmas season approaches.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

To help set the historical context for today's study, ask a volunteer in advance to read about the inter-biblical period (or intertestamental period) and be able to describe briefly what was happening during this roughly 400-year period between the writings of the Old and New Testaments.

To reinforce the idea of the importance of a consistent lifestyle (vv. 9-10), when our outward actions reflect the inward transformation that has taken place, call for a volunteer to read Matthew 7:19. Stress Jesus' harsh condemnation of the false teachers who talked about having faith but failed to show it in their actions.

To encourage the group to remember the memory verse for this session, Matthew 3:3, refer to **Pack Item 5** (*Bookmark: Memory Verses*).

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Direct the group to the first question set in the PSG on page 20. (*List ways God is at work in your community today. List ways God is working in the lives of people in your community today. Discuss actions the group needs to take to point others to Christ.*) Encourage the group to name specific ways they could get involved in God's work around them—as a group working together. Call for volunteers who are willing to take the lead in helping the group get involved in one or more of these activities.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Review the words to the traditional French carol, "Angels We Have Heard on High," encouraging the group to prepare their hearts as we celebrate the King. Sing the hymn as a group.