

Experiencing Discipleship



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 17:1–13; 18:1–4, 24; Mark 8:27–30; John 6:43–58.*

Memory Text: “And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (*Mark 8:34*).

All through the Gospels, all through the stories of Jesus as recorded there, we can find material that will help us understand what it means to be a disciple.

As we read, one point should come through again and again: *Discipleship is an experience.* To be a true follower of Christ, we need to have an experience with Jesus. We need to know Jesus; we need to have been changed by Jesus; we need to partake of Jesus and what He offers us.

Head knowledge is not enough; being able to recite Bible texts is not enough; knowing doctrines is not enough. To be a disciple of Christ, you must have had a personal experience with Him, one that has changed and is still changing your life.

This week's lesson will help us better understand what some of these experiences must entail.

The Week at a Glance: What does it mean to eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ? What lessons about faith can we learn from the Transfiguration? Why does Jesus tell us we must become as little children? What does it mean to bear our cross for Jesus?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 23.*

The Bread of Life

Read John 6:43–58. What important spiritual lesson is Jesus giving here? Why is what Jesus says here so important for all would-be disciples? Why are the truths here so important for those who seek to disciple others?

It is no coincidence that Jesus expressed these words not long after the miracle of feeding the five thousand (*John 6:1–14*). The response of the people, however, showed that their hearts were still set on worldly things, that they saw Jesus as a worldly king, one who could meet their temporal needs. That is not why Jesus came; that was not His primary purpose.

What did the texts for today tell us the purpose of Jesus' coming was? *See also John 6:26, 27.*

“To eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ is to receive Him as a personal Saviour, believing that He forgives our sins, and that we are complete in Him. It is by beholding His love, by dwelling upon it, by drinking it in, that we are to become partakers of His nature. What food is to the body, Christ must be to the soul. Food cannot benefit us unless we eat it, unless it becomes a part of our being. So Christ is of no value to us if we do not know Him as a personal Saviour. A theoretical knowledge will do us no good. We must feed upon Him, receive Him into the heart, so that His life becomes our life. His love, His grace, must be assimilated.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 389.

What has been your own experience in eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Jesus? How do you do this, and what changes has this brought to your life? Be prepared to talk about your answer in class.

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *John 6:47–51*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize that what food is to the body, Jesus is to the soul.

Feel: Foster a desire to allow nothing to take Christ’s place in our lives.

Do: Determine to receive Christ into the heart, so He may live out His life through us.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Jesus, the Bread of Life

A Clearly the Communion—eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Christ—is symbolic. Symbolic of what? Why did He use this startling, even disturbing, image?

B How do we “eat” His body and “drink” His blood?

C How does the miracle of feeding the five thousand give special significance to Jesus’ words that He is the Bread of Life?

II. Feel: Christ in the Heart

A Why is the Communion truth so important for disciples? Why is it essential for those who seek to bring others to Jesus?

B How can we tell if His life has become our life and that His love and grace have been assimilated?

III. Do: Feeding on Jesus

A An apple does your body no good on a plate. How does a relationship with Christ work the same way? What does our daily need for food tell us of our daily need for Jesus?

B How do we keep from treating the Bread of Life as though He were merely something to alleviate temporal needs instead of Someone that enables us to be living bread to others?

▶ **Summary:** Just as the body needs food and water, the soul needs Christ in order to live.

Children and Discipleship

In Matthew 18:1, the disciples came to Jesus, wondering who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Why would they be asking such a question? Parallel accounts show that the disciples were, in fact, fighting among themselves over which one of them would be the greatest in the kingdom of God (*Mark 9:33, 34; Luke 9:46–48*). This not only showed insensitivity but demonstrated the disciples' poor understanding of the principles of humility and love, key elements of Jesus' kingdom.

How did Jesus answer them? *Matt. 18:1–4*. What is it about children that make them such good examples of discipleship?

Think about the importance of what Jesus is saying. Unless we are converted, unless we become as little children, we shall not enter His kingdom. In other words, we shall be lost!

There are a number of ways to look at what Jesus said. Perhaps the key word in these texts is *humble*. As disciples, we must be humble, like children. We must realize our total need and dependency on God our Father, just as children realize their need of their own parents. Children cannot survive on their own; we cannot survive without God. And it is so crucial that we recognize our need. Sin began on earth with Adam and Eve thinking that they could do things their own way, apart from God.

Children often believe, even without full understanding, what we tell them. In the same way, how often must we learn to believe and trust, without full understanding, what the Lord tells us? If we have to have everything about Jesus and salvation explained to us fully before we will believe, we will never be saved, because we will never believe. We must have the conversion that Jesus talked about, and conversion involves becoming like children, believing in what we do not fully understand. Plus, if we fully understood, then where would be the role of faith?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate!**

“ ‘He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him’ ” (*John 6:56, NKJV*).

Discuss the spiritual application of this verse with your class. Those who accept Christ as their personal Savior believe that His body was crucified for them and His blood was shed for them. It’s *personal*. He died to blot out *my* sins. And when I abide in Him—remain in Him—I am symbolically eating His flesh and drinking His blood. Disciples of today abide in Christ on a daily basis, just as the disciples of old stayed with Jesus every day and followed Him wherever He went.

We abide in Christ through the power of His indwelling Spirit, through prayer and meditation on the Word of God, by daily surrender to His will, and by answering the call to service. The outward evidence of abiding in Christ (eating His flesh and drinking His blood) is that we will bear much fruit—the fruit of His Spirit (*John 15:5; Gal. 5:22, 23*).

Consider This: Why does Jesus use the analogy of eating His flesh and drinking His blood to show the importance of abiding in Him? See *John 15:5*.

Just as our physical bodies cannot survive without food and water, we cannot survive spiritually without Christ. *Without Him we can do nothing*. The characteristics of Jesus must permeate the whole being, just as the nutrients and minerals of food and water saturate the cells of body tissues. Disciples must feed on Jesus.

► **STEP 2—Explore!**

Bible Commentary

I. As Little Children

“ ‘Unless you . . . become as little children, you will . . . [not] enter the

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The Transfiguration and Failure

One of the most amazing experiences recorded in the Gospels is what is called the Transfiguration, in which God manifested His presence in a remarkable way before the eyes of some of Christ's disciples.

Read Matthew 17:1–13. What three specific things happened that should have done much to strengthen the faith of the disciples?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Jesus never calls us to discipleship, to being a follower, without giving us reasons to believe. Not everything, of course, is answered, but we are given enough reasons to have faith, enough reasons to believe even in what we do not fully understand. And though we might not witness the kind of things that the three did on the mountain, as disciples of Christ we have been given enough for us to trust in the Lord and in His goodness. What we do with that faith, that gift (*John 1:9, Eph. 2:8*), will determine whether it grows, stagnates, or dies away.

The disciples had the great privilege of seeing things that most of us in this world never will. Still, what do the following texts reveal to us about them? *Matt. 26:56, 69–75; Mark 9:30–32; John 20:19.* What lessons can we draw from their experiences?

Sometimes we can get caught up in the attitude, “Oh, if only God would do this for me, then my faith would be stronger, or if God did that for me . . .” What are the dangers of such an attitude for a disciple of Christ? Instead, what positive things can we do to build up and utilize the faith that we already have been given?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

kingdom of heaven' ” (*Matt. 18:1–4, NKJV*).

Children are teachable: Always learning and eager to learn. As disciples of Christ, we must be willing to learn, just as children are. It takes humility to have a teachable spirit (*vs. 4*). We are often quick to share what we know (or what we think we know). Instead, we should be open to being taught by the Holy Spirit. This often comes through the knowledge and experience of other believers. And many of the things we need to learn are about our own character defects. We may understand and accept the truth that is in God’s Word. But it is not always so easy to understand ourselves and to accept the truth about our own faults.

The time that Jesus had with His disciples was spent in teaching them about themselves and the qualities they would need to have in order to minister to others.

Read the following texts. Then discuss, as a class, the qualities that each passage brings out.

- *Matt. 8:23–27*
- *Mark 8:34–36*
- *Luke 5:16*
- *Luke 6:41*
- *John 4:6–9*

Did you discover faith, self-denial, or impartiality? Those who choose to follow Christ will learn these and other qualities that will make them effective disciples.

II. Dependency

Children are dependent. They depend on their parents to feed them, clothe them, shelter them, nurse them when they are sick, protect them, and teach them. In fact, in our society, minor children must have their parents’ permission to do just about anything. In the same way we must be totally dependent on the Savior. He is our Provider, our Healer, our Defender, our Teacher. We should be careful not to embark on any endeavor without His permission—His guidance.

Read the following texts. Describe how the disciples were dependent on Christ in each example: *Matt. 14:15–19, 14:24–32, 17:24–27*.

The Olivet Discourse

In Matthew 24 and 25, Jesus gives what has been called the Olivet discourse (because He gave it on the Mount of Olives). The disciples' action in pointing out the magnificence of Herod's temple formed the background of Jesus' words.

What are some of the major signs of the Advent that Jesus gave the disciples in the Olivet discourse?

Matt. 24:4, 5

vss. 9, 10

vss. 11–13

vss. 23–27

vss. 36–44

There are a number of important things about discipleship that we can take from here. Perhaps one of the most important is that, as disciples, we need to be aware of the spiritual dangers out there. We are in the midst of a great controversy, one between good and evil, one in which we will be subject to many deceptions, some so great that if it were possible even the elect would be deceived (*Matt. 24:24*). And, considering the context of Jesus' message, as we near the end of time, we must be even more vigilant regarding these deceptions.

Thus, we must be sure that we, ourselves, are firmly grounded in what we believe and why we believe it, and that as we bring in new members, discipling must include making new members aware of these deceptions.

Of course, the best way always is to know the truth; to be grounded in what is right is the surest way to know what is error. Especially as we near the second coming of Jesus, how crucial that we make an earnest effort to help all members, especially new ones, to be aware of the signs of the times and dangers we can face in these times.

False christs might not necessarily be manifested as someone coming and claiming to be Jesus. What are other ways we can be led astray by anything that usurps the place that Christ alone deserves in our hearts?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**III. Fishers of Men**

Read John 21:3–12. This passage could have a twofold message. First, Jesus calls the disciples *children*, suggesting their dependency and vulnerability. He then provides for them what they could not provide for themselves. All night they caught nothing, but with the Lord's help they catch more fish in their nets than they could carry. And when they reach the shore, they find a meal prepared for them by the Lord Himself. Here Jesus provides for their immediate physical needs and satisfies their hunger.

The second implication is a spiritual one. When Jesus first called them to be disciples, He told them He would make them fishers of men. Just as they caught an abundance of fish in their nets, they would also, through the power of Christ, bring many lost souls to the Lord.

► STEP 3—Practice!**Thought Questions:**

- 1 Why did Jesus allow Peter, James, and John to witness the Transfiguration? (See *Matt. 17:1–13*.)
- 2 What significance does the Transfiguration have for us today?
- 3 What actions in your personal life show your belief in Jesus as the Son of God?

Application Questions:

- 1 In the Garden of Gethsemane, all of the disciples fled the scene for fear of the multitude. What message can be derived from that experience for disciples of today? (See *Matt. 26:56*.)
- 2 How is it possible to have the Lord with us, and to have the knowledge of *who He is*, and still give in to human weaknesses and sins?
- 3 Even though the Lord has called us to discipleship, what provisions, if any, has He made for our propensity to yield to sin and temptation? (See *Heb. 7:25, Heb. 9:24, 1 John 2:1*.)
- 4 Although it is easy to succumb to human weaknesses, what specific things can we do to overcome these weaknesses?

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Bearing the Cross

In Mark 8:27–30, Jesus asks the disciples about how He is perceived by others. After getting an answer from them, He asks who they think He is. Of them all, Peter is recorded as confessing Jesus as the Christ. Jesus, though, then tells them basically not to tell others. Why would He say that? Wasn't the whole point of everything He did to get the people to know that He was the Christ?

Why do you think Jesus told them what He did? Could there be a lesson here for us, as disciples, about how time and circumstances must be considered before we act? *See also John 4:25–30.*

Notice what follows next in Mark. Jesus' response to Peter should have basically affirmed for them that He was the Messiah. Imagine what must have gone through their minds when He started telling them what would happen to Him (*Mark 8:31*). Notice, too, it is again Peter who responds, the same Peter who just a few verses earlier professed Jesus as the Messiah (*vs. 32*).

Read Jesus' response to Peter (*Mark 8:33–38*). What crucial message is Jesus giving for all who would be His disciples?

Verse 34 brings in an important element. It says that when Jesus called *the people* along with His disciples, He then began to give them these powerful words about what it means to be a follower, a disciple, of Christ. Though at that time there were certain things only a select few were privileged to know, this message here, about death to self, about bearing a cross, about losing everything for the sake of the gospel, was one everyone who wanted to follow Him needed to hear.

Ask yourself this question: When was the last time I bore a cross for Christ? What does your answer tell you about the kind of disciple you truly are? What changes might you need to make, and how can you make them?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**Witnessing**

At this very moment, Jesus is our Mediator in the heavenly sanctuary. Hebrews 9:24 tells us that He *now* appears in the presence of the Father on our behalf. As we seek to make disciples of others, we can give them this assurance. We serve a merciful God who understands our weaknesses and is able to help us overcome. (See *Heb. 4:15, 16.*)

► STEP 4—Apply!

In Matthew 24 and 25, we see Jesus sitting on the Mount of Olives with the disciples. Here He paints a picture for them that is not as beautiful as the one they see of the grand temple in their beloved city, Jerusalem. They hear Him speak of the fall of Jerusalem and ask, “ ‘when will these things be?’ ” (*Matt. 24:3, NKJV*).

Perhaps in asking what would be the sign of the Lord’s return, the disciples were expecting to hear of some spectacular revelation. Instead, they heard the cold, hard truth of this cruel, hateful world. Instead, they were given a picture of the reality of sin and the pain and sorrow that it would bring upon *them*—the followers of Christ.

But along with the stories of destruction, of degradation, of desecration, they were given hope. All of these things would happen, but with each passing event, they would be drawn a little closer to the day of their redemption. They knew the Lord would leave them for a while, but the horrific events to come were signs of the soon return of their Messiah. (*See Luke 21:28.*)

Consider This: Why do you think it was important for the Lord to openly share with the disciples the events that would come?

■ *What impact does the knowledge of last-day events have on your personal commitment to the Lord (especially considering how these things will affect the followers of Christ)?*

Further Study: Read *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, pp. 746–750, 973, 974; Ellen G. White, “The Crisis in Galilee,” pp. 383–394; “The Foreshadowing of the Cross,” pp. 410–418; “He Was Transfigured,” pp. 419–425; “Ministry,” pp. 426–431; “Who Is the Greatest?” pp. 432–442; “Blessing the Children,” pp. 511–517, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“Our Lord has said, ‘Except ye eat of the flesh of the Son of man, and drink His blood, ye have no life in you. . . . For My flesh is meat indeed, and My blood is drink indeed.’ John 6:53-55. This is true of our physical nature. To the death of Christ we owe even this earthly life. The bread we eat is the purchase of His broken body. The water we drink is bought by His spilled blood. Never one, saint or sinner, eats his daily food, but he is nourished by the body and the blood of Christ. The cross of Calvary is stamped on every loaf. It is reflected in every water spring. All this Christ has taught in appointing the emblems of His great sacrifice. The light shining from that Communion service in the upper chamber makes sacred the provisions for our daily life. The family board becomes as the table of the Lord, and every meal a sacrament.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 660.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, discuss what it means to eat the flesh and drink the blood of Jesus.
- 2 Dwell more on the idea that we need to be like children. What other traits do we find in children that make them such good examples? How can we be more childlike in our faith? At the same time, in what ways can we take the child analogy too far?
- 3 The lesson this week talked about various deceptions that we will have to face as disciples of Christ. What are some of these deceptions that the church is facing in your area of the world? How are they manifested? What kind of guises do they come in? How easily are our members swayed by them? As a church, what can you do to help protect all members from whatever spiritual traps might come their way?
- 4 What are all the reasons we have been given for faith? In other words, why are we believers? What evidence do we have for our faith? Dwell on your reasons for belief, and then as a class discuss your responses.
- 5 Summarize what you understand to be the experience of discipleship. What has that experience been for you? What does it encompass? In class, share your experiences.