

Small Group Study Guide

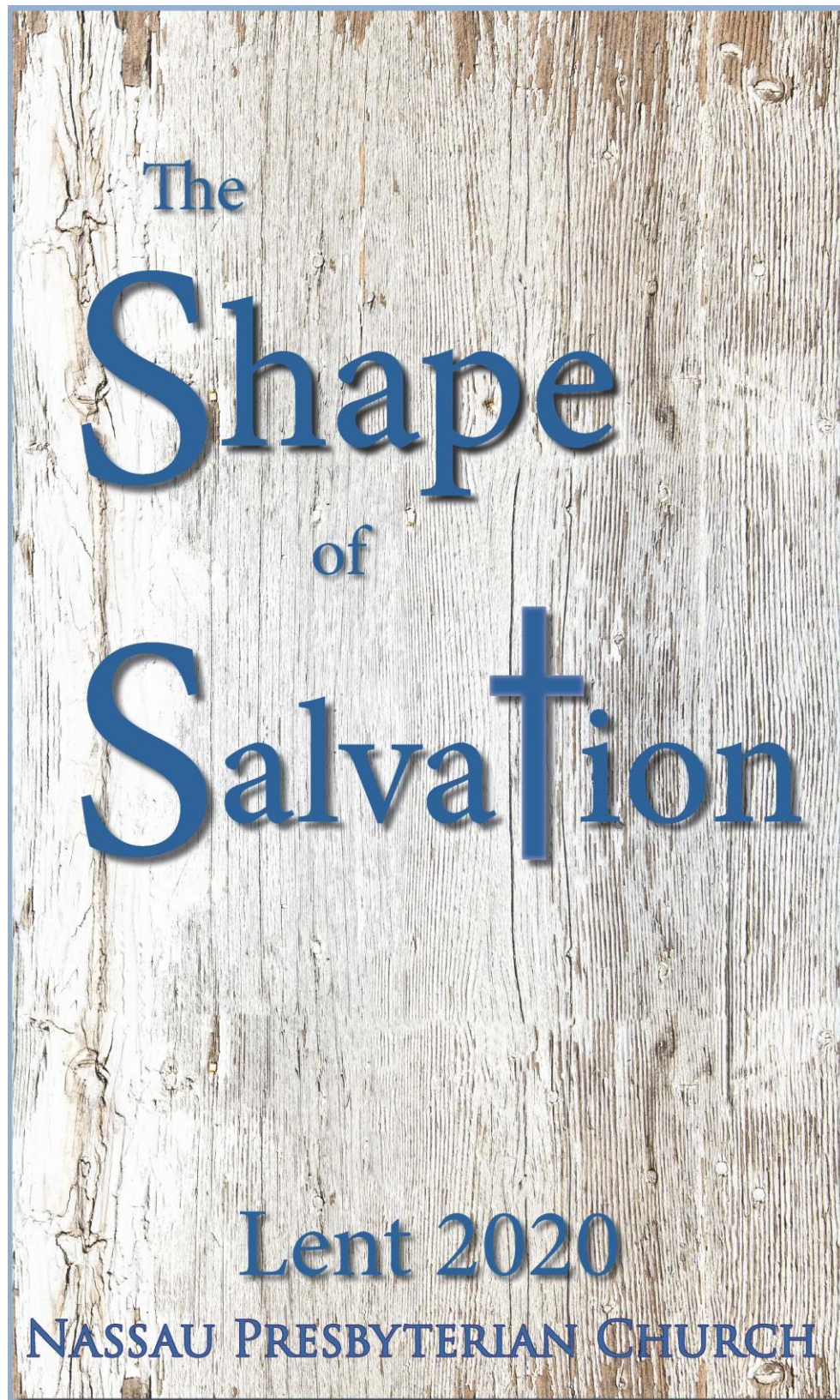


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INTRODUCTION

In Luke's narrative, Jesus preaches salvation for all who believe in him. But what does salvation mean? Is it only a future hope or possibly a present reality? Salvation, in Luke, is not deferred. Salvation is now. What are Jesus' followers saved from? And what are they (and we) saved to?

Join us each Sunday morning as Eric Barreto leads us through the Gospel of Luke, examining not only the biblical and historical context of Luke's narrative of Jesus' life and ministry but also its timely and timeless impact on our lives today.

Small groups will focus on these texts in a way that encourages participants to reflect deeply and personally upon them, and even to wrestle with them. The goal is to engage the text each week in a way that shapes and nurtures our own faith in the safe, welcoming context of a small group. There is then the opportunity to hear that same text taught in Sunday School and preached in worship the following Sunday.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is for both the leaders or facilitators and the participants. Participants can prepare for the group discussion by reading the text and the session plan in advance. However, this is not necessary in order to take part. If you are unable to attend one of the small groups or the adult education class, you can use this guide in several ways:

- Read the text and ponder the questions each week to prepare to engage the topic more readily in adult education and to hear the sermon in worship on Sunday.
- Read the text and discuss the questions as a family or couple.
- Set up a group with friends online and discuss the questions in the comfort of your home.
- Use the questions as a focus for journaling each week during Lent.

This guide is also available on the Nassau Church website, to make it easy if you are traveling or prefer to read it on your electronic device.

Leaders of small groups, see the end of the guide for suggestions and reminders about leading small groups in general and this series in particular.

No matter how you make use of this opportunity for Bible study during Lent, bring your own questions. May your faith and your understanding of salvation increase even as you find new questions in these Bible passages.

WEEK 1

Promise Fulfilled: Jesus saves us from hopelessness to hope

The story of Elizabeth and Zechariah is an old story in Scripture and a common story in our world today. The story of loss and hope, promise and disappointment is a vibrant way to start our study of salvation, for God's salvation is rooted in God's promises and our trust that God is faithful to God's promises. Salvation is thus about a hope rooted, not in naïveté or optimism, but a hard-earned trust in God's promises.

Read the Text: Luke 1:5-25

Going Deeper into the Text

1. Zechariah and Elizabeth were of priestly families: Zechariah of the house of Abidjan; Elizabeth of the house of Aaron. Why might they believe that God would transform their hopelessness into hope? Or why did Zechariah find it incredulous? As you think about this, consider the stories of barren women in the Old Testament, such as Sarah (Genesis 21:1–7) and Hannah (1 Samuel 1:9–20).
2. While the stories of Sarah and Hannah, two barren women who do conceive and bear children might give hope to Elizabeth and Zechariah, the promise that God made to Abraham would be foundational to any hope for them. Read Genesis 13:14–18. How might knowledge of this history keep hope alive for the couple?
3. Why do you think Zechariah was silenced until the birth of John? Compare his experience with Gabriel and that of Mary that follows in Luke 1:26–38. What meaning might this silence have for John? For us today?

Salvation as Promise Fulfilled

In the introduction to this study, Dr. Barreto strongly states that salvation is not something in the future. “Salvation, in Luke, is not deferred. Salvation is now.” In the lives of Zechariah and Elizabeth, salvation comes to them in the birth of a child. Their hopelessness is reversed and promise is fulfilled.

- What factors of the culture and place would have brought hopelessness to Elizabeth and Zechariah because they were childless?
- When John is born, Zechariah prophesies about God’s plan for his son. Read Luke 1:61–79. How do these words offer salvation to God’s people through John?
- How does this moment of salvation help you rethink salvation, either as you have understood it or as a new concept?

Questions for Reflection

Hopelessness can take many forms, from a loss of confidence in ourselves to a crisis in the government.

- When have you felt or do you feel hopeless today?
- What from God’s story with God’s people counters this hopelessness?
- When have you experienced salvation as a move from hopelessness to hope or promise fulfilled?
- What from your reflection or the discussion do you want to think about more deeply this week?

WEEK 2

Freedom Fulfilled: Jesus saves us from oppression to liberation

Jesus' preaching at his hometown synagogue in Nazareth is a mission statement of sorts for the Gospel of Luke. Salvation in this sermon is tangible and embodied. The liberation Jesus proclaims is of imprisoned bodies, oppressed bodies. Salvation in this sermon is also present. Notice that Jesus concludes, "Today, this has been fulfilled in your hearing." This "today" is central to Luke's vision of salvation. Last, the reaction of Jesus' hometown neighbors is striking. When we encounter a word of liberation, we too often tend to worry that someone else's liberation will mean that we lose something. Salvation then also liberates those who benefit from privilege, freeing them too.

Read the Text: 4:16–30

Going Deeper into the Text

1. Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah, chapter 61. Read Isaiah 61:1–3 to get a little more of the text. What might have made this text attractive to the listeners in the Nazareth synagogue? When Jesus began to preach or interpret this text, what turned the congregation against him?
2. Jesus interpreted this text through the use of two stories from the Hebrew Scriptures that the people would have recognized: Elijah, who helped the widow of Zarepheth, was running away from an angry Queen Jezebel and King Ahab during a three and a half year drought. Read 1 Kings 17:1–16. Why did this reference upset the people?
3. Jesus confounded matters by also reminding the people that Elisha, another prophet of God, healed Naaman, a soldier of the conquering army from Aram. Read 2 Kings 5:1–19. How is this story alike and different from the one about Elijah and the widow of Zarepheth? Why would it upset the people?

Salvation as Freedom Fulfilled

From this story, we recognize that salvation comes from being set free or liberated. However, the hometown folks, who knew Jesus as the son of Joseph the carpenter, rejected this freedom.

- Read Jesus' words in verses 24–27. Why were the people so angry after hearing this?
- How was the congregation or individuals in it oppressed?
- What did Jesus mean when he said, “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled as you heard it”?
- Notice the use of “today” in this sentence. What could that imply about the presence of salvation?

Questions for Reflection

- Where do you identify people who are oppressed today? How would they hear this passage from Isaiah?
- How are we in this country oppressed by our privilege? What does Jesus' sermon say to us?
- From what do you need to be freed?
- What from your reflections or the conversation do you want to add to your understanding of salvation?

WEEK 3

Hunger Fulfilled: Jesus saves us from hunger to an abundant table

One of the defining characteristics of Jesus' ministry in Luke is eating and drinking at all kinds of tables with all kinds of people. Accused of being a "glutton and a drunkard," Jesus embodies salvation at welcoming, abundant tables. Thus, tables are not just places wherein Jesus preaches but a very embodiment of salvation. Salvation tastes like the wonderful meals Jesus sets before us, feels like the inclusion we feel at these tables. Moreover, that salvation is wide, tangible, and present. At Jesus' table the food is delicious. The food never runs out. And there is always one more chair.

Read the Text: Luke 7:36–50

Going Deeper into the Text

1. Luke identifies the woman as a sinner. Commentators have generally assumed that she was a prostitute, but the text doesn't specify her sin. What difference does it make whether we know what sin she has committed?
2. Pharisees wanted to follow God's laws as much as was possible. Jesus eats with them two other times in Luke. See also 11:37–54 and 14:1–24. What do you discover about the relationship between Pharisees and Jesus from these stories along with the text for today?
3. How is the table where Jesus is sitting enlarged or made more inclusive in this meal?

Salvation as Hunger Fulfilled

- Hunger is manifested in other ways than needing food. What is the hunger in this story? Who is hungry?
- In Genesis 18:1–15, a meal accompanies another kind of hunger. Read this story about Abraham and Sarah. What does the meal served to the three travelers signify? What hunger is fulfilled?
- What do you surmise about the openness of table fellowship with Jesus from the story of dining at the home of the Pharisee?
- “And there is always one more chair.” Who might fill that chair at Jesus’ invitation? At your invitation?

Questions for Reflection

- Who sits at the table with Jesus today? Who is missing?
- When have you felt out of place or not welcome at the table?
- How can the church, Nassau Church in particular, show that there is abundant food at the table today?
- How can the church, Nassau Church in particular, make sure that everyone is aware that there is “always one more chair”?

WEEK 4

Wholeness Fulfilled: Jesus saves us from sickness, death, and the ways they divide us, to resurrected life

When Jesus heals in Luke, he saves. He delivers those he heals from maladies that constrict their lives in various ways. But just as much, Jesus' healing saves the communities around those he heals. That is, healing in Luke is not an individual experience but a communal one. When Jesus heals a demoniac, the former demoniac's community is transformed. And they are fearful. Why? Perhaps because the salvation Jesus brings in his wake is disruptive and unexpected and disorienting. Why? Because when Jesus sets the world right, sometimes we too are afraid.

Read the Text: Luke 8:26–40

Going Deeper into the Text

1. What is your initial reaction to this healing story?
2. What words are attributed to the demons in this passage?
3. The source for Luke's story is Mark 5:1–10. What is different about it from the Lukan account? (It is also in Matthew 8, but the account is brief and two men are possessed with demons.)
4. How does this information help you think about this story:
 - a. The man lived "among the tombs" suggests that he was an outcast, living among the dead.
 - b. "Legion" is a large company in the Roman army.
 - c. Pigs are unclean animals and Jews do not eat them or have anything to do with them.
5. How does the man who was once possessed by demons return to the community? What is the reaction of the community? Why do you think the community reacts in that way?

Salvation as Wholeness Fulfilled

Wholeness, as defined in the subtitle for this session, suggests a renewal or resurrection from any illness or death that divides or separates a person from community. But other conditions divided communities too.

- What illnesses, such as AIDS or a flu epidemic, separate a person from the community?
- Brainstorm the ways that a person can be separated from community, the church community or the public community.
- Read Psalm 103:1–5. Discuss the ways that this psalm conveys the message that God’s salvation includes a return to wholeness.

Questions for Reflection

- What is the responsibility of the community, particularly the faith community, in helping a person back to wholeness? In staying in touch during the separation?
- In the description of this session, it is suggested that communities are often fearful when someone is made whole and returns to the community. How can this be disruptive, unexpected, or disorienting?
- What might be frightening about a community being transformed by the inclusion of a person who has been saved from disease, death, or exclusion in the community?

WEEK 5

Belonging Fulfilled: Jesus saves us from isolation to belonging

The Zacchaeus story is usually read as a story of conversion and redemption. The crooked tax collector is saved when he changed his crooked ways. However, a different reading of this story is possible, one in which Zacchaeus does not change as much as the community around him changes. Perhaps we mis-label Zacchaeus as a crooked tax collector in the same way that his community once did. Perhaps the picture of salvation here is of recognition, of a community recognizing that Zacchaeus is a son of Abraham, just like everyone else in that community. Jesus saves by subverting our assumptions about power and weakness. Jesus saves by drawing communities back together by naming the belonging of those on the margins.

Read the Text: Luke 19:1-10

Going Deeper into the Text

1. Throughout Luke, tax collectors are represented as sinners. They were Jews employed by the hated Roman emperor, whose army had conquered the land and now occupied it. The Roman government collected taxes to pay for the cost of occupying their land. To earn a salary, the tax collectors took more money than was demanded. Some greedy tax collectors took much more. As a “ruler among tax collectors” (Common English Bible) or “chief tax collector” (NRSV), Zacchaeus may have been in charge of a group of tax collectors. What does verse 2 suggest about his standing in the Jewish community?
2. Unfortunately, in the story of Zacchaeus is known more for his height than his welcome by Jesus. How do verses 3 and 4 suggest a different impression of Zacchaeus?
3. Traditionally, the text is translated as though Zacchaeus has seen the light and, in the future, will “give half of my possessions...to the poor” and will pay back four-fold anyone he has defrauded. But as suggested in the paragraph above, this can also be translated: “I give half of my possessions

to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much” (Common English Bible). How does each translation affect the story for you?

Salvation as Belonging Fulfilled

In the previous session (Wholeness Fulfilled), the emphasis is on the individual made whole. In the story of Zacchaeus and salvation as belonging restored, the emphasis is on the restoration of the community, the community made whole. For Jesus, when and where is God’s Kingdom?

- Read verse 9, with the understanding that “this household” or “this house” is the community that it is being restored. How does this affect the individuals in the community as well as the community?
- The importance of community is recognized in Ecclesiastes 4:7–10. Read it and discuss how these words bolster the importance of community or not.
- Compare Jesus inviting himself to the home of Zacchaeus for a meal with the story of dining with the Pharisee in Week 3 (Luke 7:36–50).

Questions for Reflection

- When have you been part of a community, either faith or public or family, when a new person joined? How did the community have to change or reform to include the new person or persons?
- What groups are on the fringe or edge of your congregation? How would full inclusion of them change your community?
- How does salvation as belonging fulfilled increase your understanding of salvation?

WEEK 6

Worship Fulfilled: Jesus saves us from idolatry to trust

Many of us tend to associate idolatry with statues of gods and with rituals around graven images. Certainly, the Bible imagines idolatry in this way, but also something far deeper. Idolatry is when we substitute the created for the creator, fear for trust, weakness for power, answers for questions. In this story, Jesus reminds us that we are not in the position to judge the righteousness of our neighbors or the reason for their suffering. When we try to tell others why God has deserted them, we err and take a role that belongs only to God. True worship is not just a matter of what we do on Sunday mornings in church, but how we treat and view and deal with our neighbors. Salvation moves us from certainty to trust, from judgment to grace, from idolatry to true faith.

Read the Text: Luke 13:1-5

Going Deeper into the Text

1. While no additional information has been found in the Bible or outside sources about Pilate killing Galileans in the act of worshiping God, such an act is not hard to imagine from him. No other information about the tower of Siloam collapsing and killing many people has been found either. Jesus' response is the same in both instances. What interpretation of these events is Jesus countering?
2. The iconic text about the worship or making of idols is in the Ten Commandments, Exodus 20:1–7. Read it. How do these commandments feed into what Jesus is telling the people to do?
3. Read the last sentence in the paragraph above again: “Salvation moves us from certainty to trust, from judgment to grace, from idolatry to true faith.” What do each of these comparisons mean to you?

Salvation as Worship Fulfilled

How we approach God in worship says much about how we define our relationship with God. To worship God is to place God at the center of our lives. To worship God is to place our trust in God. What do you think the man was seeking from Jesus?

- Worshipping together is only part of the worship of God. Our worship leaves the sanctuary and goes with us into life the rest of the week. If salvation is worship fulfilled, what does that mean for Monday through Saturday?
- What other teaching from Jesus comes to mind when you associate this aspect of salvation with this text? You might consider Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman (John 4:19–24) or healing on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1–6).
- How does salvation move us today from certainty to trust? From judgment to grace? From idolatry to true faith?

Questions for Reflection

- How does this text and discussion open up your understanding of worshipping God?
- How might you carry each part of worship into your life? Into your work or school? Into the community where you live?
- This completes our Lenten exploration of salvation. How has your understanding of salvation been challenged? Changed? Reinforced?

NOTES FOR LEADERS

Approaching your task as the leader of a small group is different from how you approach leading a Bible study. The goal of a Bible study is to increase the biblical literacy of the learners (and usually the teacher/leader). The primary goal of the small group is to deepen relationships among the participants as each one grows in relationship with God and Jesus. Depending upon the materials used, one's knowledge of the Bible or theological concepts may be increased as well. This may happen as the small groups discuss the texts from Luke chosen for these Lenten reflections together.

At the first gathering, take time to review the group covenant at the end of this guide. Invite the group to add to the covenant.

A simple process for each week could be:

- Ask a get-acquainted question (see below).
- Pray.
- Present the topic for the entry meditation (see below).
- Read or invite a group member to read the Bible passage aloud.
- Read and discuss the questions in “Going Deeper into the Text.”
- Read and discuss the questions in “Salvation as ...”
- Discuss or allow time for silent reflection on one or more questions for reflection.
- Invite prayer requests and close with prayer. The prayer might be one in which participants speak prayer requests or pray, and the response of the group is a version of the subtitle for the session, such as “Jesus, save us from hopelessness today” (Week 1).

Get-acquainted Questions

To help participants move from the often hurried pace of getting to the group and to help them get to know one another better, invite everyone to answer a question at the beginning of each gathering. These questions have no special connection to the topic for the session, but they set a tone of conversing together. The questions or directions below are suggestions; feel free to use your own.

- Week 1: In one sentence, describe a church you attended as a child or young person.
- Week 2: Without going into detail, what is something that surprised you recently?
- Week 3: What was a memorable birthday present?
- Week 4: What was the name of your best friend in elementary school? Are you still friends?
- Week 5: What is your middle name? Does it have any particular meaning for you?
- Week 6: What is something you look forward to on Easter Sunday?

Entry Meditation

To help group members make the transition from a day filled with other activities, ease their way into the topic with a brief time for meditation on a subject that links with the topic for the session. This can be a time of silence, a space when those who wish to may respond, or conversations in pairs. This is a time of preparation, not necessarily a time to hear from everyone if your group is at capacity.

- Week 1: What pops into your mind when you hear the word “salvation?”
- Week 2: Recall a time when you or someone you know has felt oppressed (anything from an illness to discrimination).
- Week 3: Recall a meal when something awkward happened (an unexpected guest arrived, someone brought up a topic that no one wanted to discuss, etc.).
- Week 4: Remember a situation when you have felt out of place or left out, whether as a child or an adult.
- Week 5: Call to mind a time when you were part of a group that excluded someone or that included someone whom others had excluded.
- Week 6: Recall a moment in worship that helped you trust God or opened you to a closer relationship with God or Jesus. OR When, after a disaster have you heard someone say it was caused by God as punishment? How might you respond to such a comment?

May leading your small group during Lent be a joy and a spiritual discipline that forms and strengthens your faith.

GROUP COVENANT

- ❖ **What happens in the group stays in the group.** To build and maintain an atmosphere of trust, confidentiality is essential.
- ❖ **Speak and make space for others to speak.** Each voice is important. If you are usually quiet, make an effort to offer your thoughts. If you speak out easily, hold back for others to speak or invite someone who hasn't spoken to speak.
- ❖ **Stay with the group.** Physically, be present at each gathering rather than treat attendance as just another option. Mentally, listen to others and participate.
- ❖ **Focus on ideas, not the person.** If you disagree, disagree with the idea, but don't belittle the person.
- ❖ **Speak from your own awareness.** When offering an opinion, claim it as your opinion rather than make generalizations.
- ❖ **Everyone in the group is a learner.** In a small group, there are no experts. Learning is a lifelong process.

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