



SESSION 1



He Chose to Become One of Us

God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins.

Romans 8:3 NLT

You alone are the God for us—because you alone are the God who has been one of us. You felt what we feel, you touched the death that we know, you came to us as Immanuel:

God with us.

Ann Voskamp, aholyexperience.com

WELCOME

Welcome to session 1 of *He Chose the Nails*. If this is your first time together as a group, take a moment to introduce yourselves to one another before watching the video. Then let's begin!

VIDEO: *HE CHOSE TO BECOME ONE OF US* (14 MINUTES)

Play the video segment for session 1. As you watch, use the outline provided to follow along or to take additional notes on anything that stands out to you.

Notes

The gifts of Easter are the most precious gifts any person could ever receive because they cost God so much to give.

God's greatest gift of all—his greatest act of love for us—was sending Jesus into our world.

Jesus gave up:

Timelessness: Jesus swapped eternity for calendars. The Bible tells us God is “beyond our understanding! The number of his years is past finding out” (Job 36:26). There is no moment when God was not God, for he is eternal.

Boundlessness: Jesus gave up being a spirit to live in a body. One moment he was a boundless spirit; the next moment he was flesh and bones.

Sinlessness: Jesus became sin for us. An object that symbolizes the consequences of sin in humanity’s heart is a thornbush (see Genesis 3:17–18; Numbers 33:55; Proverbs 22:5; Matthew 7:16). The thorny crown on Christ’s brow is a picture of the fruit of our sin that pierced his heart.

We are “by nature children of wrath” (Ephesians 2:3 NASB). Though we have been made in God’s image, we’re corrupt at the core. The sinless One took on the

face of a sinner so that we sinners could take on the face of a saint.

Jesus never knew the fruits of sin until he became sin for us (see 2 Corinthians 5:21). When he was crucified, he cried out in a loud voice, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). Those are not the words of a saint but the cry of a sinner.

The crown of thorns could have been made—and should have been worn—by every one of us. But it was not, thanks to the greatest gift of all.

Why did God give us this gift? “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

God did it for us—just for us—because he loves us.

GROUP DISCUSSION (44 MINUTES)

Take a few minutes to talk about what you just watched.

1. What part of the teaching had the most impact on you?

Receiving the Gifts of Easter

2. Imagine for a moment that you have decided to do a random act of kindness for a stranger by leaving a \$100 bill in a public place (such as a park, a lobby, or a store aisle). After placing the cash where it can be easily spotted, you hide nearby to see who will find it. As you wait, you begin to think about who might receive your gift.

- What kind of person do you most hope *will* and *will not* find your gift? For instance, you might hope a struggling single parent *will* find it, and that a compulsive gambler *will not* find it. Identify three or four kinds of people you would consider *deserving* recipients and three or four you would consider *less than deserving*.

- If someone in the less-than-deserving category were to find your gift, what thoughts might you have about his or her

way? For example, *You don't deserve it. You'd better not waste it. Someone else needs it more.*

- The same way we think about giving gifts is often reflected in the way we think about receiving them. Consider the internal response you tend to have when you are the recipient of a gift, whether material or immaterial. What might the thought zingers you just identified suggest about your own ability to receive a gift, perhaps especially when it is unexpected? Do you send similar thought zingers to yourself? (*I don't deserve it; I better not waste it; someone else needs it more.*) What other internal dynamics sometimes make it difficult for you to truly receive a gift?

3. Max described the period leading up to Easter as a season of gifts—precious gifts that God gave us at the cross, such as the crown of thorns. For centuries, Christians throughout the world have used the season of Lent to prepare themselves spiritually so that nothing prevents them from receiving and celebrating the greatest Easter gift of all—the resurrected Christ.

The word *Lent* comes from the Old English word *lenc-ten*, which means *spring*. In its earliest observance, Lent was

a time for new converts to prepare for their baptism on Easter Sunday. Today, Lent marks the forty-day period before Easter that begins each year on Ash Wednesday.* Although it is traditionally a time devoted to self-examination, self-denial, and repentance, Lent sinks its deepest roots into the joyful expectation of new life through God's forgiveness and steadfast love. This sense of Lent is evident in the words of John the Baptist: "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15). We also find it in this passage written by the prophet Joel, traditionally read at the beginning of Lent:

"Even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning." Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity (Joel 2:12-13).

The time during which Joel was a prophet was one of great prosperity. God had richly blessed his people, but their hearts had grown cold over time. They began to take "God and his blessings for granted. [Their] faith had degenerated into an empty formalism and their lives into moral decadence."¹ Through the prophet, God pleaded with his people to return to him with their whole heart.

The season of Lent issues a similar call to God's people today. It is a time to take seriously the areas of our lives in

* There are actually forty-six days between Ash Wednesday and Easter, but the six Sundays in Lent are traditionally set aside as days of renewal (considered "mini-Easters") and so are not counted as part of Lent.

which we fall short, feel defeated, or have grown cold. And we do so not to beat ourselves up but to prepare for God's gifts:

Lent is a time for discipline, for confession, for honesty, not because God is mean or fault-finding or finger-pointing but because he wants us to know the joy of being cleaned out, ready for all the good things he now has in store.²

This process of being cleaned out is part of how we return to God with all our heart, which is what Lent is meant to help us do.

- How would you describe your understanding and experience of Lent over the years? In what ways is it similar to or different from the description you just read?
- What, if anything, shifts in your perspective when you think of Lent less as a season of guilt or giving something up and more as a time to be intentional about preparing to receive joy and good things from God?
- The Hebrew verbs translated *rend* and *return* in Joel 2:12–13 are images of repentance in action. People would

rend or tear their garments as an expression of intense grief or in response to a catastrophe.³ To *return* means to make a U-turn, to go back to the point of departure, to change one's mind.⁴ What do these two words—*rend* and *return*—suggest about what it means not only to seek reconciliation with God but also to do so *with all your heart*?

- Drawing on any previous experiences of repentance and forgiveness (with God or others), what three words or phrases would you use to describe what it's like to *rend* your heart? What three words or phrases would you use to describe “the joy of being cleaned out”?

4. A crown is a symbol of honor and authority. In the Old Testament, a crown (or turban) was a mark of consecration for a priest (see Exodus 39:27–31) and a sign of sovereignty for a king (see 2 Kings 11:12). In the New Testament, the apostle Paul acknowledged the crowns given to athletes as symbols of their victory and reward (see 1 Corinthians 9:24–25). The elements of a crown, and the materials used to make it, were often significant. For instance, the number of bands around a crown might indicate the number of territories over which a king had dominion.⁵ Crowns given to

kings were made of precious metals and sometimes adorned with gems (see 2 Samuel 12:30); crowns or garlands given to athletes were made of leaves or other perishable foliage (see 1 Corinthians 9:25).

- In the video, Max explored the many uses biblical writers make of thorns as symbols for the consequences of sin. Drawing on the examples of crowns in the Bible, what insights do they suggest about the significance of Jesus' crown of thorns? For example, what might a crown of thorns symbolize about the source of Jesus' authority as both priest and king? Over what did his crown give him dominion?
- The Roman soldiers who made a crown of thorns for Jesus intended it to be not only a means of physical torture but also of humiliation. However, in making it a gift of the cross, God utterly transformed it—a mock crown of pain and shame became a true crown of victory and glory. Consider the implications of receiving or declining this particular gift of the cross—of allowing God to transform whatever has been a source of pain and shame into a crown of victory and glory. What might make it difficult to truly receive this gift? What would receiving this gift require of a person throughout his or her walk with God?

5. In his allegorical novel about heaven and hell called *The Great Divorce*, author C. S. Lewis characterizes souls who set themselves against God as those who are determined to refuse the good gifts God constantly offers them.

Good beats upon the damned incessantly as sound waves beat on the ears of the deaf, but they cannot receive it. Their fists are clenched, their teeth are clenched, their eyes fast shut. First they will not, in the end they cannot, open their hands for gifts, or their mouths for food, or their eyes to see.⁶

As you anticipate learning more about the gifts of Easter in the remaining sessions of this study, in what ways does this perspective about receiving God's gifts challenge you? In what ways does it intrigue you or encourage you?

Walking Together through Lent

6. In addition to studying together, it's also important to walk together through Lent—to share our lives with one another and to be aware of how God is at work among us. In each session, there will be many opportunities to speak life-giving—and life-challenging—words and to listen to one another deeply.

As you look ahead to the coming weeks of learning and walking together, what request would you like to make of the

group? How do you hope other members will challenge you or encourage you? Use one or more of the sentence starters below, or your own statement, to help the group understand the best way to be a good friend to you throughout this study. As each person responds, use the two-page chart that follows to briefly note what is important to that person and how you can be a good friend to him or her during your discussions and times together.

You can help me to take Lent seriously this year by . . .

I'd like you to consistently challenge me about . . .

It really helps me to engage in a group when . . .

I tend to withdraw or feel anxious when . . .

*In our discussions, the best thing you could do for
me is . . .*

Name	The Best Way I Can Be a Good Friend to This Person Is . . .

SAMPLE

Name	The Best Way I Can Be a Good Friend to This Person Is . . .

SAMPLE

INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY: WHAT I WANT TO REMEMBER (2 MINUTES)

Complete this activity on your own.

1. Briefly review the outline and any notes you took.
2. In the space below, write down the most significant thing you gained in this session—from the teaching, activities, or discussions.

What I want to remember from this session . . .



Lenten Practice

Each session in the *He Chose the Nails* study includes a Lenten practice for you to complete between sessions. Although the practice is completed on your own and outside of group time, it's a good idea to briefly preview the practice description before concluding your meeting each week. As an intentional act of preparing our hearts for Easter, the practices throughout the study require setting aside time each day to complete. To get the most out of the practice, it's important not to hurry or try to complete activities at the last minute.



CLOSING PRAYER

Close your time together with prayer.

SAMPLE

SESSION 1

Lenten Practice

Let's take a good look at the way we're living and reorder our lives under God.

Lamentations 3:40 MSG

THE STARTING POINT FOR JOY

The starting point for Lent requires holding two things in tension—a humble reckoning of our sinful condition and a brave expectation that we will be changed. It is a spring-cleaning of the soul that gives us permission to take seriously the areas of our lives in which we fall short, feel defeated, or have grown cold. And it is a kindling of the soul that sparks our desire to return to God with our whole heart. The author of Hebrews captures this demanding yet joyful spirit of Lent with these words:

Let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne (Hebrews 12:1-2 NLT).

The Message offers a fresh perspective on this familiar passage:

Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honor, right alongside God (Hebrews 12:1-2 MSG).

As we begin the Lenten journey in preparation for Easter, we commit to an honest examination of our lives but not to morbid introspection. We let go of hindrances but not our status as beloved children of God. In all things, we refuse to lose sight of where we're headed—an exhilarating new life with Christ. At all times, we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and the joy before us.

The practice for this week—which you will continue and build on throughout the study—is to set aside time each day to listen to God through Scripture and prayerful reflection. The invitation is to cultivate a humble spirit of hope and expectation

that God will meet you in this practice if you are willing to trust him. Author and pastor N. T. Wright writes:

Whenever God does something new, he involves people—often unlikely people, frequently surprised and alarmed people. He asks them to trust him in a new way, to put aside their natural reactions, to listen humbly for a fresh word and to act on it without knowing exactly how it's going to work out. That's what he's asking all of us to do this Lent. Reading the Bible without knowing in advance what God is going to say takes humility . . . we may have to put our initial reactions on hold and be prepared to hear new words, to think new thoughts, and to live them out.⁷

At the beginning or end of each day this week, set aside fifteen to twenty minutes to read and prayerfully reflect on the Daily Scripture Readings (see page 29). The readings for each day are taken from the *Book of Common Prayer Daily Office* and include morning and evening psalms as well as selections from the Old Testament, New Testament epistles, and the Gospels.

- Each day, begin with a brief time of silence (one to two minutes).
- In God's loving presence, reflect for a few moments on these questions: *Where in my life am I falling short, feeling defeated, or growing cold to God? What new thing do I hope God might do in me?*
- Ask the Lord to speak to you through what you are about to read. Read the Scripture passages for the day slowly

and prayerfully, paying attention to any words, phrases, or verses that stand out to you. What you're looking for is what is sometimes referred to as a "watchword"—anything that sparks a connection between the text and your life. It might be a promise, a word of wisdom, an admonition, a comfort, or an encouragement.

- Read your watchword again, receiving what you read as God's words especially for you. Then prayerfully reflect on the following questions: *What do I sense God may be saying to me? If I were to take these words seriously, how would I respond?* Spend time in silence again to listen for God, asking him to make his message clear to you.
- Use a journal or the space provided on the following pages to write down your watchword, your responses to the reflection questions, or any other observations about your experience of reading and listening for God.
- Close your time by asking God to help you "hear new words, to think new thoughts, and to live them out." Invite God to use your watchword to continue speaking to you throughout the day ahead.
- At the end of the week, review your daily reflections and observations. What stands out most to you about what God is saying to you? Write your observations in the space provided or in a journal.

Bring your notes to the next group gathering. You'll have a chance to talk about your experiences and observations at the beginning of the session 2 discussion.

DAILY SCRIPTURE READINGS

DAY 1

Morning Psalm: *Psalms 63:1–11; 98*

Old Testament: *Daniel 9:3–10*

Epistle: *Hebrews 2:10–18*

Gospel: *John 12:44–50*

Evening Psalm: *Psalm 103*

DAY 2

Morning Psalm: *Psalms 41; 52*

Old Testament: *Genesis 31:1–11*

Epistle: *1 Corinthians 1:1–19*

Gospel: *Mark 1:1–13*

Evening Psalm: *Psalm 44*

DAY 3

Morning Psalm: *Psalm 45*

Old Testament: *Genesis 37:12–24*

Epistle: *1 Corinthians 1:20–31*

Gospel: *Mark 1:14–28*

Evening Psalm: *Psalms 47–48*

DAY 4

Morning Psalm: *Psalm 119:49–72*

Old Testament: *Genesis 37:25–36*

Epistle: *1 Corinthians 2:1–13*

Gospel: *Mark 1:29–45*

Evening Psalm: *Psalms 49; 53*

DAY 5

Morning Psalm: *Psalm 50*

Old Testament: *Genesis 39:1–23*

Epistle: *1 Corinthians 2:14–3:15*

Gospel: *Mark 2:1–12*

Evening Psalm: *Psalms 59–60*

DAY 6

Morning Psalm: *Psalms 95; 40; 54*

Old Testament: *Genesis 40:1–23*

Epistle: *1 Corinthians 3:16–23*

Gospel: *Mark 2:13–22*

Evening Psalm: *Psalm 51*

DAY 7

Morning Psalm: *Psalm 55*

Old Testament: *Genesis 41:1–13*

Epistle: *1 Corinthians 4:1–7*

Gospel: *Mark 2:23–3:6*

Evening Psalm: *Psalms 138–139*

Day 1 Reflections and Observations

Day 2 Reflections and Observations

Day 3 Reflections and Observations

SAMPLE

Day 4 Reflections and Observations

Day 5 Reflections and Observations

Day 6 Reflections and Observations

SAMPLE

Day 7 Reflections and Observations

Week in Review

Briefly review your daily reflections and observations. What stands out most to you about what God is saying to you?