



# Leader Devotions

## DAY 1: ENCOUNTER IN THE TEMPLE

**LUKE 2:41-52**

**POINT: JESUS KNEW WHY HE CAME.**

Our family recently went on a trip to the mountains—three generations of wild and crazy fun. I was still recovering from a recent surgery, so I opted to enjoy the beauty from my front porch rocking chair while the rest went for a hike in the woods. As they returned, the youngest came racing up to me, “Guess what we saw? It was an elk! And it was RIGHT THERE!” In a few moments the rest had gathered and young and old alike were telling of that moment with childlike enthusiasm. “I wish you could have been there!” The hike had taken a couple of hours, but those few unexpected moments were what changed a fun but ordinary day into a never-to-be-forgotten moment.

During VBS this week, [the daily stories] appear to be simple words printed on the pages of your Bible. They will be brief moments to describe. But you have the opportunity to [see] how these snapshots, frozen on the pages of Scripture, are never-to-be-forgotten moments ordained by God. Each one gives us a glimpse into His amazing gift, His Son Jesus, who is the Savior of the world.

Today’s passage chronicles the first recorded words of Jesus. A lot of unanswered questions exist between the few tidbits we know of Jesus’ birth and early childhood and the twelve-year-old in today’s story. Luke, the writer of this Gospel, was obviously enthralled by the details of Jesus’ life. In fact, the word translated “amazed” or “astounded” is found thirteen times in the Book of Luke. It is also interesting to note that many scholars believe Mary, Jesus’ mother, was one of Luke’s sources of information. As a physician and acquaintance of Mary, it is not surprising that Luke’s Gospel includes some of the details of Jesus’ early life.

Traveling to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival was an annual custom. The distance from Nazareth to Jerusalem was about seventy miles. The average distance traveled per day may have been between twenty and twenty-five miles. So, this journey would have taken three or four days. The festival lasted a week, and then the return journey began. Families and friends generally traveled together for companionship as well as safety. As a twelve-year-old, Jesus was less than a year away from being considered an adult Jewish male. Under these circumstances it was probably easy to assume that Jesus was somewhere in the group of travelers. How Jesus ended up talking with the teachers at the temple or how long He had been there is unclear. However we do know that, at day’s end, His absence was discovered.

The Bible doesn’t tell us what Mary and Joseph said or thought as they retraced a day’s worth of travel and began the search through the large city. As a parent, I can only imagine the various waves of emotion that must have colored those hours. We see a hint of it in Mary’s first words to Jesus, “Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.”

Jesus answered with, “Why were you searching?” At this point Mary and Joseph seemed to be struggling with understanding the full meaning of who their Son was. However, by age twelve, Jesus indicated full awareness. He was in “His Father’s house.” This was not a put down to Joseph who had the earthly responsibility of serving as father. Jesus was acknowledging who He is. He is the Son of God.

Luke (most likely a Gentile) used carefully investigated facts presented in an orderly sequence to his friend, Theophilus, to shore up his friend’s belief with certainty (Luke 1:1-4). May Luke’s words do the same for us over two thousand years later. Pray that the Holy Spirit will shine a light on your path as you read God’s Word and may you encounter Jesus like never before.

**Bonus Verse:** For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. – John 6:38 (CSB)

### PERSONAL FOCUS

1. Read John 6:38 (today’s bonus verse). What truths about Jesus do you find in this verse?
2. As you read today’s Bible passage what “snapshot” stood out to you? What was intriguing about it?
3. How would you describe your relationship with Jesus to someone else?



## DAY 2: ENCOUNTER AT THE RIVER

### MATTHEW 3:1-17

#### POINT: JESUS IS THE SON OF GOD.

As you flip through dozens of snapshots, all evidence of amazing moments and fond memories, do you ever find one that causes you to stop and gaze in amazement? Then, you begin to envision all the fabulous ways to display it! Today's Scripture snapshot is one that is worth enlarging, mounting, and hanging! In this one frozen-in-time moment we see the obedience of the Son, the blessing of the Spirit, and the declaration of the Father—God in three persons—Blessed Trinity.

Matthew included the details of Jesus' baptism in his Gospel as did Mark and Luke. All three acknowledge that John the baptizer was the one Isaiah had prophesied about who would herald the coming Messiah (Isaiah 40:3). You don't have to dig very deep in the New Testament to know for certain that John the baptizer was sent as the forerunner of Jesus. Jesus Himself called John the greatest of all prophets (Matthew 11:9-13).

People from Jerusalem, all around Judea, and the vicinity of the Jordan came to the wilderness where John had been preaching. His message convicted those who heard and many confessed their sins. Baptism was symbolic, even then, of changing one's mind and going a new direction.

Many people feel puzzled about why Jesus came to be baptized. John was preaching a message of repentance symbolized by the rite of baptism. Since Jesus was "the one who did not know sin" (2 Corinthians 5:21) why would He place Himself in such an act of submission? In one respect, this action on Jesus' part gave validity to John's message and ministry. But, the prevailing reason was Jesus was being obedient to the Father. This simple act was symbolic of an entire life that was obedient—obedient even unto death (Philippians 2:8). No step of God's plan could be skipped if Jesus was to fulfill all He came to do.

John, understandably, resisted at first. But Jesus explained that they must do this to "fulfill all righteousness." (v. 15) So, John complied. What happened next is that picture-perfect moment—the obedience of the Son, the presence of the Spirit, and the affirmation of the Father. For John the Baptist, this visible presence of the Spirit was confirmation of a promise he had received that Jesus was indeed the Son of God (John 1:32-34).

Twice in the Book of Matthew, God spoke from heaven declaring that Jesus is His Son. We read about it here and later at the transfiguration (Matthew 17:5). Many commentaries explain that God's declaration combines phrases from Psalms and Isaiah. The first portion echoes Psalm 2:7, which was used at the coronation of Israel's kings. The second portion alludes to Isaiah 42:1, declaring Jesus to be the Servant promised. Jesus is the King of kings and the Suffering Servant who became our Savior.

Who heard the voice of God? The Scripture is unclear. Many believe those present heard. Either way, Matthew was confident enough to describe it here and John the Baptist described the event later in the Gospel of John (John 1:32-34). This amazing encounter was the official inauguration of the ministry phase of Jesus' life. Jesus stepped out of the waters of the Jordan on a journey that would end in three short years at the cross.

**Bonus Verse:** I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God. – John 1:34 (CSB)

#### PERSONAL FOCUS

1. Read John 1:34 (today's bonus verse). What were some encounters that helped John declare this with certainty?
2. What are experiences that have helped you know for certain that Jesus is the Son of God?
3. Take a few moments to pray for kids who will attend [VBS]. Pray that they will come to truly know that Jesus is God's Son and that He loves them.



## DAY 3: ENCOUNTER ON THE WATER

### MATTHEW 14:22-33

#### POINT: JESUS PROVED HE IS GOD'S SON.

If you're hoping to see animals in the wild, it's easy to miss some great opportunities if you are in a hurry or fail to focus. But if you are alert and patient, what appears to be just another bush will reveal the flick of a tail or the twitch of an ear, and then you realize what has been there all along!

Today's passage is much the same. It may be a familiar story, but be alert! Ask the Holy Spirit to focus your heart to see a bit of something you may have missed before.

In verse 22, it says that Jesus "made" the disciples get into the boat. His command was going to put them right in the middle of a crisis. The disciples obeyed. Obedience sometimes puts us on course for rough seas. But rest assured, the One who made the sea is fully in control.

Some of the disciples were experienced fishermen and well aware of the surprise storms that could pop over the ridges that surrounded the Sea of Galilee, almost without warning. The disciples must have been tired. They had already crossed the sea earlier that day (v. 13), spent all day with Jesus while He taught, then helped feed five thousand plus people. Late into the night, rowing against the wind, they must have felt like they were going nowhere. I'm sure their tired brains thought their eyes were playing tricks on them when they saw movement on the water. Was it a ghost? Physically and emotionally exhausted, they cried out in fear.

Don't you love that "immediately" Jesus spoke to them? Jesus told them to have courage and not be afraid. "It is I" is literally translated "I Am." In God's amazing economy, He often packs tons of meaning into the most basic of statements. This allusion to Exodus 3:14 hinted again to the fact that "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). Also interesting to note is Job 9:8 that hints of this very miracle.

Peter's response was to ask Jesus to command him to come walk on the water with Jesus. Peter was learning that power came from Jesus. Can you even imagine what those first steps were like for Peter? As a fisherman who had surely plunged into those depths many times, now Peter felt those waves solidly supporting his weight! Who could have kept from glancing around at this amazing phenomenon! Suddenly that sinking feeling returned, because he was indeed sinking! Peter cried out to the Lord for help, and Jesus reached out and caught hold of him. Jesus said, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Then together they climbed back into the boat ... and the wind stopped!

Have you ever experienced noise so loud you had to shout for the person next to you to be able to hear? When that noise stops suddenly, you almost hold your breath, the silence is so profound. Was that what the disciples experienced? Did they collectively hold their breath as what they had witnessed filled their senses? The next instant was a unanimous response of worship. Even though they had seen mind-blowing miracles earlier in the day, this encounter was an eye-opening experience and their heartfelt response was, "Truly You are the Son of God!"

**Bonus Verse:** Don't let your heart be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. – John 14:1 (CSB)

#### PERSONAL FOCUS

1. Read John 14:1 (today's bonus verse). How can this verse help you at this midpoint of VBS?
2. Can you relate to the disciples' situation? Think back to a time when you were physically and emotionally drained. How has God spoken to you to restore your peace and courage?



## DAY 4: ENCOUNTER AT THE TOMB

**JOHN 20:1-18**

**POINT: JESUS ROSE FROM THE DEAD.**

Do you look forward to that rare morning when you don't have to set an alarm or fly out of bed before the sun is even up? And, why is it that on those rare mornings, every bird in the neighborhood decides to put on a command performance in the tree right outside your bedroom? I love the sound of birds singing, but what is up with that early morning concerto? Did you know there is a name for it? It's called the "dawn chorus." There are several theories about this phenomenon, but in general, it seems to center around the male birds showing their power to stake a claim to a certain territory. It's sort of a "the night is over and I'm alive!" cry to the world.

On the third day after Jesus' crucifixion, most of His followers were feeling frightened and alone. Yet in the predawn darkness, the soft crunch of footsteps could be heard headed to the tomb where Jesus' body had been laid. The John passage only mentions Mary Magdalene, however other Gospels list other women and Mary's use of the word "we" in verse 2 indicates she was part of a group.

Considering that this is John's version of what happened, it's not surprising that his details involve those that impacted him directly. Mary Magdalene brought the news of the empty tomb to Peter and John, who raced off to see for themselves. John got to the tomb first and peered in. At this point the light of dawn was sufficient to see inside, and John described the linen burial cloths lying empty and made the special note that the head wrapping was folded up and placed separately from the rest. As John was noting this, Peter rushed past and ran straight into the tomb. John wrote that they "saw and believed" but "did not yet understand." Isn't this a great description of faith in Jesus? There is so much I believe and yet so much I don't understand.

From a Jewish perspective, John covered a couple of significant points. Under Jewish law, there must be two witnesses for evidence to be considered admissible. Peter and John both saw the empty tomb. The fact that they "did not yet understand" what the resurrection meant was further evidence that they didn't make up the story. Why would they make up facts about something that did not yet have significance to them? The neatly folded cloth also gave evidence to a careful sequence of events, not to grave robbers who would have more likely moved in haste.

After Peter and John left, Mary was still crying near the tomb. She stooped to look inside and saw two angels, one near the head of the burial shelf and one near the foot. The brief conversation is interesting. Rather than being startled that angels asked why she was crying, Mary was hyper focused on finding the body of her Lord. "They've taken away my Lord ... and I don't know where they've put Him."

As she turned, a man was standing there who also asked why she was crying. It's unclear why Mary did not immediately recognize Jesus. In some cases it appears that recognition only happens through divine revelation. Maybe she was crying so hard that everything was blurry. At any rate, Mary assumed the man was the gardener. (Who else would be working in the garden so early in the morning?)

Then Jesus spoke her name, "Mary." I'm sure to Mary's ears this was the sweetest "dawn chorus" ever heard. It was the Lord! The night was over and Jesus was alive!

**Bonus Verse:** Jesus told him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." – John 14:6 (CSB)

### PERSONAL FOCUS

1. Today's bonus verse is John 14:6. Why is this verse important for today's session?
2. Jesus appeared first to a woman and gave her the job of reporting His resurrection to the disciples. Why was this such a remarkable thing in that day and time?
3. Peter and John knew what Jesus had told them about His coming death and resurrection, yet it was hard for them to believe. Why do you think people still have a hard time believing?



## DAY 5: ENCOUNTER ON THE ROAD

### LUKE 24:13-35

#### POINT: THE BIBLE WAS WRITTEN SO I CAN BELIEVE.

Recently I was chatting with a friend who loves to hike. (I only hike occasionally when coerced by my family.) He is also aware of my abject phobia of a certain “legless” creature. “You know,” he said, “they blend so well with their surroundings, I wonder how many times we’ve all walked right by them without seeing them.” Yikes! I immediately looked around and we were in a concrete office building six floors up!

Sometimes we don’t see things because we aren’t looking and sometimes we don’t see them because we don’t expect them to be there. And, in God’s own plan and blessing, sometimes we are prevented from seeing ... until just the right time.

On the day of Jesus’ resurrection two of His followers were making the approximately 7-mile trek from Jerusalem back to their home in Emmaus. We know the name of one of the men, Cleopas (who some Bible scholars think may have been the husband of one of the women at the foot of the cross—John 19:25).

The men were talking about the events of the last few days and the reports from the women and the disciples about Jesus’ resurrection. A man fell into step with them and joined their conversation. My mind races with questions. Why these two guys? They weren’t part of the inner circle. Why the mysterious “so what’s up guys” approach? Isn’t this the time for an encore of the heavenly host who announced His birth? God’s choices and timing are amazing and mind-boggling. Two ordinary guys were chosen by God to hear the full explanation of the gospel from Genesis to this true moment of revelation. Cleopas and his friend were shocked that their traveling partner seemed unaware of the mind-blowing events of the past few days in Jerusalem. And then this man began to speak. He explained how Scripture foretold everything that had happened. He talked about how the Messiah had to come and why He had to suffer.

The trio arrived in Emmaus near day’s end and the two travelers invited their new friend to stay for the evening meal. As they prepared to eat, Jesus broke the bread and blessed it. At that moment Jesus’ identity was revealed. The men were astounded ... and Jesus disappeared. My imagination is fired up again! Did they jump up from the table too excited to eat and race back to Jerusalem? Did they grab a hunk of that precious blessed and broken bread to sustain them for that 7-mile sprint back to Jerusalem? Either way, an unexpected face-to-face encounter with Jesus was not an experience to keep to themselves. The other disciples had to know!

Knowing Jesus is life-changing. Experiencing His presence is something that has to be shared.

**Bonus Verse:** So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the message of Christ. – Romans 10:17 (CSB)

#### PERSONAL FOCUS

1. Read Romans 10:17 (today’s bonus verse). Why is the message about Jesus Christ so important?
2. Think about a time when you were most aware of Jesus in your life. How would you describe it to someone?
3. In the busy-ness of VBS, it’s easy to lose the urgency of telling others about Him. Pray that God would make clear those moments when you can share the gospel with someone.