

STUDY GUIDE

FOUR SESSIONS

WHY  
**EASTER**  
MATTERS

ANDY  
STANLEY

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**EASTER**  
MATTERS

**ANDY STANLEY**



ZONDERVAN

*Why Easter Matters Study Guide*

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# [ CONTENTS ]

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Using the Study Guide . . . . .  | 5  |
| Introduction . . . . .   | 7  |
| <b>Session One: <i>The High Cost of Following Christ</i></b> . . . . . | 11 |
| <b>Session Two: <i>The Risk of Surrendering to God</i></b> . . . . .   | 21 |
| <b>Session Three: <i>The God Who Can Be Trusted</i></b> . . . . .      | 35 |
| <b>Session Four: <i>The Foundation of Our Faith</i></b> . . . . .      | 47 |
| Leader's Guide . . . . .   | 61 |

# **USING THE STUDY GUIDE**

## **BEFORE THE FIRST GROUP MEETING**

Read through the Introduction for an overview of the study.

Flip through pages 11–20 to understand the layout of a session.

## **DURING EACH GROUP MEETING**

1. Turn to the Video Notes page and watch the video segment.
2. Use the Discussion Questions to have a conversation about the video content.

## **AFTER EACH GROUP MEETING**

On your own, read the Think About It section.

Review the Before the Next Session section at the end of each session and complete the tasks.

# [INTRODUCTION]

One of the things that baffles non-Christians about Christians is how often Christians resist the God they say they trust. Let's be honest: If you're a Christian, you'd probably say that at some point in your life—maybe today—you've had an internal battle with God. Have you ever found yourself resisting the God you say you trust? We all have.

Maybe you knew you should forgive someone who'd wronged you, but it was hard—*really* hard. Maybe you were in an unhealthy relationship and you knew you should get out, but something about the relationship was fascinating, even a little addictive. Maybe you knew you shouldn't go to a certain place, but you did anyway because you were afraid of missing out. Maybe you knew you shouldn't spend money irresponsibly and you should be more generous, but the temptation to indulge yourself was irresistible.

Your conscience tells you what's right. The Scriptures tell you what's right. You're trying to be a Jesus follower, but you just want to do what you want to do. You find yourself resisting the God you trust.

Non-Christians have a word for this: *hypocrisy*. They're not wrong. When we don't walk our talk, we're hypocrites. It's best to just own that. But be merciful with yourself and others. It's difficult to surrender your life to a God you've never seen. It's difficult to surrender your life to a God who speaks to your heart and mind through your conscience and ancient literature.

This is the ongoing struggle. Even non-Christians understand this battle. Every person, believer or nonbeliever, knows what it's like to wrestle with their conscience. It's just a part of the human condition: we apply standards to our lives that we have trouble living up to.

During the four sessions of this study, we're going to take a look at three people whose lives intersected Jesus' life in the weeks leading up to his crucifixion. Each of them had an agenda that put them at odds with God and with Jesus. And as we're going to see, there's a little bit of them in all of us.

But here's what's interesting: *Their stories of resistance illustrate the futility of resisting God.*

If you've been a Christian for long, you know that your story of resistance is also an illustration of the futility of resisting God. In

fact, every person's life—believer or nonbeliever—is a story of resisting God. And every person's life is an illustration of the futility of resisting God.

That's why Easter matters.

## SESSION ONE

# **THE HIGH COST OF FOLLOWING CHRIST**

The first character we're going to talk about in this study is Joseph Caiaphas. If you grew up in church, you probably know him as Caiaphas. He was the high priest during the time of Jesus—the most powerful, influential person in Jerusalem, Judea, and what we would consider ancient Israel. He was the connecting point between the nation of Israel and the Roman Empire. He was the person that communicated with Pilate and other leaders.

Even more important, Caiaphas was part of a family that controlled the temple for 40 years. His father-in-law and five of his brothers-in-law were high priests. They had enormous power and influence.

They were extraordinarily wealthy. There were amazing financial perks that came with being at the epicenter of the Jewish religion in the first century. Jews all over the world paid a temple tax to support the operation and upkeep of the temple in Jerusalem as well as to pay the priests and high priests.

Life was pretty good for Caiaphas until a carpenter-turned-rabbi stepped onto the pages of history . . .

## OVERVIEW

Everywhere Jesus went, hundreds or even thousands of people followed. The crowds were enormous. This was a threat to Rome. And it was a threat to the Jewish religious establishment because crowds in first-century Judea tended to lead to division and insurrection. Crowds made Rome nervous. That put pressure on Caiaphas, because one of the things Rome expected of him was to maintain the peace by keeping his own people under control.

The other problem Jesus posed to Caiaphas was that when he spoke, he spoke with authority. People were amazed by Jesus' authority. He behaved and spoke with extraordinary confidence. And he was critical of the religious leaders.

Because of the corruption inside the temple system, Jesus took the temple leaders to task. Matthew 23 offers a startling example of Jesus' passionate criticism of a system that had grown to exploit the very people it was meant to serve. He goes on and on about the hypocrisy of the religious leaders, even saying:

“You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?” Matthew 23:33

That’s harsh. It’s no wonder Caiaphas had a problem with Jesus given Jesus’ authority, the crowds he drew, and his criticism of everybody Caiaphas worked with and respected. Jesus threatened the peace and the peacekeepers. He was challenging the foundations of Caiaphas’ power and wealth. He was challenging the foundations of his life.

But the final straw between Jesus and Caiaphas wasn’t something Jesus said. It was something he did—an act of compassion. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus had been dead and buried. The people in his hometown of Bethany had been to the funeral. So, when Lazarus came back to life and was walking around again, the crowds around Jesus swelled to unprecedented sizes. John’s Gospel says:

Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

John 12:9

Caiaphas realized his strategy of trying to publicly discredit Jesus wasn’t working. He and the other religious leaders had worked hard

to ask Jesus trick questions that would force him to either betray God or threaten the Roman Empire. But Jesus always outsmarted them—not because he was evasive with his answers or was good at playing political games. Jesus rejected the assumptions at the core of the religious leaders' questions.

When they asked him if people should pay taxes to Rome or give that money to God, Jesus responded: "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." Jesus was saying that money played a much less significant role in God's kingdom than the religious leaders believed—their priorities were all wrong. But after Lazarus, Caiaphas realized that these little traps weren't going to work.

Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.

"What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation."

Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man

die for the people than that the whole nation perish.”

John 11:47–50

The big worry of the religious leaders was that everyone would believe in Jesus. In their heart of hearts, they knew that to resist Jesus was to resist God. But following Jesus would have required them to let go of something that was important to them—something they’d built their entire lives around. The religious system rewarded and protected them. It defined them. And Jesus was bringing change. *If we don’t do something, they thought, we are going to lose everything that is important to us.*

So from that day on they plotted to take his life.

John 11:53

When you decide to follow Jesus, it will cost you something. In fact, as a Christian, every single time you decide to put Jesus front and center in your life, it will cost you something. This may be the reason you resisted church for so long.

Eventually, Caiaphas pegged Jesus with the charge of sedition against the Roman Empire, and he had Jesus crucified. The threat was eliminated. Caiaphas’ position in the nation was secure. And then just as the sun rose on the first day of the week after Passover,

## WHY EASTER MATTERS

there was commotion in the streets of Jerusalem. The body of Jesus was missing. A few days after that came reports of Jesus sightings all around the area. A few weeks after that, Jesus' closest followers came out of hiding and into the streets of Jerusalem saying, "You crucified Jesus. God raised him from the dead. We've seen him. Say you're sorry."

Suddenly there were crowds of people rallying around the name, reputation, and resurrection of Jesus. And it began to dawn on Caiaphas that Jesus had accomplished more by dying than he had during his lifetime.

Years later, Caiaphas lost his place of leadership. The Jewish people lost their temple when it was torn down by the future Roman emperor Titus in AD 70. Those who attempted to stand against the will of God became footnotes in the story of Jesus. Thus Caiaphas, the influential high priest, became a footnote in the story of Jesus of Nazareth.

What does that have to do with us? Everything. Because there is a little Caiaphas in each of us. There's something inside us that wants to preserve things at all costs. We want God to either help us or get out of our way. But Easter is a warning against that impulse. God does not compromise, and those who try to stand against him will become footnotes.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you hope to experience this Easter season? Do you usually observe Easter as a spiritual season, celebrate it as a holiday, or both?
2. During the message, Andy said, "When you decide to follow Jesus, it will cost you something." If you are a Jesus follower, what is something following has cost you?
3. What's intimidating about the idea that God's will can't be thwarted? What's comforting?
4. Read John 11:38–44 aloud as a group. What do verses 41 and 42 indicate about Jesus' intent in raising Lazarus from the dead?
5. Read John 11:45–50 aloud as a group. How do verses 49 and 50 demonstrate the human capacity for justifying wrongdoing? Talk about a time when you convinced yourself that something morally or ethically wrong was the right thing to do. What happened?
6. What are you currently trying to preserve that you need to surrender to God? What is one thing you can do this week to begin to let go? How can this group support you?

## THINK ABOUT IT

Whatever is in the center of your life is the thing that has replaced God. It may be a position at work, a grade-point average, an unhealthy relationship, money, power, or sex. Whatever that little voice inside is desperate to preserve is standing between you and your heavenly Father. And the thought of losing that thing probably terrifies you.

But whatever you've replaced God with is less than God. It is already diminishing in value and significance. Think about it. Your greatest regrets are connected to attempts to preserve something or someone that isn't even a part of your life anymore.

Don't let something that doesn't even matter in the long-run act as a "little-g" god in your life. The little gods always disappoint. God doesn't. God has a plan for your life. To put anything other than him at the center of your life is self-destructive.

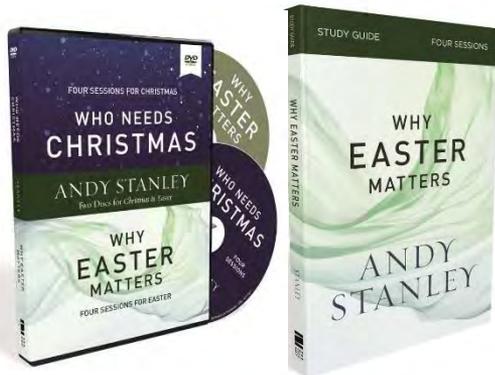
What are you trying to preserve that you need to surrender to God? What's the little god in your life that is demanding more and more and providing less and less? Saying yes to God will cost you something. Saying no will cost you more, including what you replace God with.

## BEFORE THE NEXT SESSION

To prepare for your next session, read the Overview for Session Two.

You can also look through the Discussion Questions if you want to.

During the week, spend some time each day reading John 13.



# WHY EASTER MATTERS

by ANDY STANLEY

## Have you ever been at odds with God?

Have you resisted, defied, or tried to bargain your way out of what you thought God wanted?

You aren't alone. Scripture documents similar stories.

In this Easter Study Andy Stanley looks at some of the people whose lives intersected with Jesus in the weeks leading to his crucifixion. Each of them had an agenda that put them at odds with God and Jesus. As you'll see, there's a little bit of them in all of us.

Designed for use with the *Who Needs Christmas / Why Easter Matters* Video Study (9780310121121), sold separately. Streaming video also available.

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