

# CONTENTS

Read Me First	7
<b>SESSION 1</b> The Teacher	11
Personal Health Plan	22
<b>SESSION 2</b> The Healer	24
<b>SESSION 3</b> The Shepherd	36
<b>SESSION 4</b> The Servant	46
<b>SESSION 5</b> The Savior	57
<b>SESSION 6</b> The Risen Lord	73
<b>APPENDIX</b>	
Frequently Asked Questions	83
LIFE TOGETHER Agreement	86
Small Group Calendar	88
Team Roles	89
Personal Health Assessment	92
Personal Health Plan	94
Sample Personal Health Plan	96
Journaling 101	98
Bible Reading Plan: 30 Days through the Gospel of Mark	99
Leading for the First Time	100
Hosting an Open House	102
EXPERIENCING CHRIST TOGETHER in a Sunday School Setting	103
<b>LEADER'S NOTES</b>	105
About the Authors	121
Small Group Roster	122

# THE TEACHER

The novel *Across the Nightingale Floor* is a classic hero tale set in an imagined ancient Japan. Cut off by tragedy from his childhood world, Takeo sets out to forge a new life as the adopted son of Lord Shigeru. Shigeru is nothing like the villagers among whom Takeo was raised, but the teenager quickly decides he wants to be just like Shigeru when he becomes a man. It's not just that Shigeru has saved his life. Shigeru also has qualities that Takeo wants: wisdom, patience, kindness, and the skills and honor of a warrior. Takeo commits his life to emulating his adopted father/master and fulfilling Shigeru's goals.

Like Takeo, we were born to bring about significant good in the world. But who can save our lives and then show us how to live them? Jesus can. In this study, you'll meet Jesus as his first followers met him. Whether you have been committed to him for years or are checking him out for the first time, this is your chance to look at him with fresh eyes. Who is he really, and does he embody the qualities of a hero worth following?



## CONNECTING WITH GOD'S FAMILY

20 min.

Just as we have all had first impressions of Jesus, so we all have first impressions of each other. Sharing pieces of our stories helps us know each other better, just as the stories about Jesus give us a clearer picture of him. In this study, you're going to connect with Christ and each other at a deeper level. To get the most out of this experience, it's worth taking some time to learn more about one another.

1. Respond to both of the following:

Who was one of your childhood heroes? How was that person heroic to you?



What do you hope to get out of this study?

2. Whether your group is brand new or ongoing, it's always important to reflect on and review your values together. On pages 86–87 is a sample agreement with the values we've found most useful in sustaining healthy, balanced groups. We recommend that you choose one or two values—ones you haven't previously focused on or have room to grow in—to emphasize during this study. Choose ones that will take your group to the next stage of intimacy and spiritual health.

**For new groups:** You may want to focus on welcoming newcomers or on sharing group “ownership.” Any group will quickly move from being “the leader’s group” to “our group” if everyone shares a small role. See pages 89–91 for help on how to do this well.

**For existing groups:** We recommend that you rotate host homes on a regular basis and let the hosts lead the meeting. We've come to realize that healthy groups rotate leadership. This helps to develop every member's ability to shepherd a few people in a safe environment. Even Jesus gave others the opportunity to serve alongside him (Mark 6:30–44). Session 3 will explain how to set up a rotating schedule.



## GROWING TO BE LIKE CHRIST

40 min.

When Simon, Andrew, James, and John first met Jesus, they were already looking for something more in their lives than just fishing (John 1:35–42). They were looking for the Messiah, a King who would free God's people from oppression and usher in God's kingdom of justice. They thought Jesus might be the one. At their first meeting, they addressed him as “Rabbi” or “Teacher” (verse 38). In those days a rabbi wasn't just an academic lecturer, and a student or

“disciple” wasn’t interested in mere information. A rabbi taught truth to base one’s life on. Jesus wasn’t someone who made his disciples think, “I want to know what he knows,” but someone who made them think, “I want to be like him.”

3. Have someone read aloud Mark 1:14–20. If this were all the information you had, what would you say motivated the four fishermen to leave their jobs and follow Jesus?

4. In verse 15, Jesus summarizes his entire teaching. If we deeply understand this verse, we understand the essence of his message.

Read the study note on “the kingdom of God.” How would you explain verse 15 in your own words?

5. “Repent” is a scary word for many people today. After all, it asks us to think and act differently. Why is repentance necessary if we want to experience God’s kingdom? (You may want to refer to the study note on “repentance.”)

6. Read Mark 1:21–39. Here Mark shows a broad picture of Jesus’ early ministry. What are the various things he did?

How did people respond?

7. What was the connection between Jesus' actions and his message?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. Jesus' "authority" amazed people (verses 22, 27). What is authority?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
9. Jesus gives us the same invitation he gave his first disciples: *Repent. Believe the good news. Follow me.* How is this different from merely believing a set of facts about Jesus and about how we get to heaven?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
10. If Jesus has authority—to summon followers, to teach how to live a good life, to heal, to free people from evil spirits—what authority do you think he wants you to give him in your life today?

### **FOR DEEPER STUDY**

Luke 5:1–11 presents an expanded version of the day when Jesus called Simon, Andrew, James, and John. John 1:35–42 presents Simon and Andrew's first encounter with Jesus, which took place days or weeks earlier. What do these add to your picture of Jesus? What qualities or actions attracted these men to Jesus?

Mark 4:1–34 records some of Jesus’ teaching. What do you learn about the kingdom from these stories?

Isaiah 50:4–11 is an Old Testament portrait of a true disciple. Jesus lived this way. What features of this portrait seem most significant to you?



## DEVELOPING YOUR GIFTS TO SERVE OTHERS

20 min.

11. EXPERIENCING CHRIST TOGETHER is an opportunity to do what Jesus’ first disciples did: follow him around and learn to pattern your life after his. You’ll make this a priority to the degree that you’re convinced that he has “authority” (Mark 1:27)—that he really is the expert on living a healthy, balanced life.

Jesus had five basic life purposes he wanted his followers to pursue. One is what we call discipleship or “Growing to Be Like Christ.” That is, living as a disciple of Christ the Teacher. Are you ready to let Jesus be your personal trainer in how to live? If so, which of the following growth steps are you willing to take on for the next six weeks?

- Prayer.** Jesus habitually set aside time alone to pray (Mark 1:35). When can you make time for prayer each day? If you’re new to prayer, you might try just five minutes a day when you get up in the morning or when you arrive at work. You could pray, “Jesus, train me to live today. Train me to think your thoughts. Train me to feel toward people what you feel. Train me to do what you would do.” Then review your day with him. You may find

it helpful to write your prayer in a journal or on the Reflections page (page 20).

- Gospel Reading.** On page 99 is a plan for reading through the gospel of Mark in thirty days. We recommend that you jot down your thoughts on the Reflections page or in a journal.
- Meditation.** If you've read Mark before, try meditation as a way of internalizing God's Word more deeply. Copy a portion of Mark 1:14–39 onto a card, and tape it somewhere in your line of sight, such as your car's dashboard or the kitchen table. Think about it when you sit at red lights, or while you're eating a meal. What is God saying to you, here and now, through these words? Several alternative passages for meditation are suggested on the Reflections page in each session.

12. Pair up with someone in your group. (We suggest that men partner with men and women with women.) This person will be your “spiritual partner” during this study. He or she doesn't have to be your best friend but will simply encourage you to complete the goal you set in question 11. Following through on a resolution is tough when you're on your own, but we've found it makes all the difference to have a partner cheering us on.

On pages 22–23 is a Personal Health Plan, a chart for keeping track of your spiritual progress. In the box that says, “WHO are you connecting with spiritually?” write your partner's name. In the box that says, “WHAT is your next step for growth?” write the step(s) you chose in question 11. You have now begun to address two of God's five purposes for your life! You can see that the health plan contains space for you to record the ups and downs of your progress each week in the column labeled “My Progress.” And now with your spiritual partner you don't have to do it alone, but together with a friend.

Tell your partner what step you chose. When you check in with your partner each week, the “Partner's Progress” column on this chart will provide a place to record your partner's progress in the goal he or she chose. If you have more than one

partner, an extra Personal Health Plan can be found on pages 94–95 or downloaded from [www.lifetogether.com/healthplan](http://www.lifetogether.com/healthplan).

On pages 96–97 you’ll find a completed health plan filled in as an example. For now, don’t worry about the WHERE, WHEN, and HOW questions on the health plan.



## **SURRENDERING YOUR LIFE FOR GOD’S PLEASURE** 15–30 min.

13. Allow everyone to answer this question: “How can we pray for you this week?” Be sure to write these requests on your Prayer and Praise Report on page 19.
14. Worship comes naturally when we truly see Jesus as the King of his kingdom, our Master and Teacher, the One with authority over disease and evil. What kind of worship fits your group? Here are two ideas:
  - Use a song from the DVD, the LIFE TOGETHER Worship DVD/CD set, or a CD of your choice, to worship God with music.
  - Psalm 119 praises what God teaches in the Old Testament. It’s equally relevant to Jesus, our Teacher. Have someone read aloud Psalm 119:33–40 to begin your worship time. You may also read the passage aloud together.

## **STUDY NOTES**

Something about Jesus drew Simon, Andrew, James, and John. What was it? Luke and John said the four fishermen spent time with Jesus and even saw him do miracles before they decided to follow him (Luke 5:1–11; John 1:35–42). But Mark focused on Jesus’ message. Jesus spoke with authority like no other rabbi they had known. And his actions backed his words.

***The kingdom of God (Mark 1:15).*** The realm in which God’s will is done God’s way (Matthew 6:10), a realm of goodness, joy, and beauty. Most of the universe is part of God’s kingdom because the stars and planets function exactly as God made them to function. Our planet withdrew from God’s kingdom when humans

(whom God had put in charge) rebelled against him. The Bible tells the story of how God has been working for millennia to bring us back into his kingdom.

God created the nation of Israel to be an outpost of his kingdom, to attract the rest of humanity to rejoin his kingdom. But Israel repeatedly failed to obey God's commands. As a result, God let one empire after another oppress them. By the time of Jesus, the Roman Empire was in charge. Many Jews were desperate for a leader who would throw out the Romans and restore God's kingdom politically and spiritually. This much-prophesied leader would be called the Messiah (Greek: Christ). Gossip swirled around every potential leader: could this be the Messiah?

Jesus was the Messiah, and God's kingdom was the central issue of his teaching. But he had no intention of being a military Messiah to oust the Romans and establish a political kingdom. Instead, he invited everyone to stop pursuing their own agendas and rejoin God's realm of justice and joy. God's kingdom was (and is) immediately available in part to anyone who would follow Jesus. But only in part. Christ will bring his kingdom in its fullness when he returns.

**Repent (1:15).** The Greek word here means to change your mind. To think about things in a radically different way. A related Hebrew word means to change course, to look for what you need in a completely different direction. Feeling bad about your behavior or yourself is called "remorse" and is useful only when it leads to a change in behavior. We can't always decide to change our thinking—we don't know what we don't know, so God often has to take the initiative. Our job is *humility*: the willingness for God to change our minds, the willingness to say, "I'm wrong. I'll change course. I'll do it your way."

**Follow me (1:17).** Believing in Jesus as an intellectual exercise wasn't enough. Jesus wanted followers—people who would be with him constantly over years so he could train them to be who God made them to be. His disciples were like apprentices who imitated everything he did.












## PERSONAL HEALTH PLAN

This worksheet could become your single most important feature in this study. On it you can record your personal priorities before the Father. It will help you live a healthy spiritual life, balancing all five of God's purposes.

PURPOSE	PLAN
<b>CONNECT</b> 	WHO are you connecting with spiritually?
<b>GROW</b> 	WHAT is your next step for growth?
<b>DEVELOP</b> 	WHERE are you serving?
<b>SHARE</b> 	WHEN are you shepherding another in Christ?
<b>SURRENDER</b> 	HOW are you surrendering your heart?



If your group is new, or even if you haven't been together for a few weeks, we recommend that you plan a kick-off meeting where you will pray, hand out study guides, spend some time getting to know each other, and discuss each person's expectations for the group. A meeting like this is a great way to start a group or step up people's commitments.

Most groups, if reconvened after a short break, will be renewed in seeing each other and open to increasing their commitment as much as 25 percent. We have seen some naturally move to a weekly format, begin doing homework, and commit to daily devotions simply because the leader shared his or her heart. What do you sense God wants from you and your group?

However, if your group is brand new, a simple meal, potluck, or even good desserts make a kick-off meeting more fun. After dessert, have everyone respond to an icebreaker question, such as, "How did you hear of this church, and what's one thing you love about it?" Or, "Tell us three things about your life growing up that most people here don't know."

Then ask everyone to tell what he or she hopes to get out of this study. You might want to review the LIFE TOGETHER Agreement (see pages 86–87) and talk about each person's expectations and priorities. You could discuss whether you want to do Bible study homework before each meeting—homework covering the questions under Growing and/or the For Deeper Study sections. Review the Small Group Calendar on page 88 and talk about who else is willing to open their home or facilitate a meeting.

Finally, cast the vision, as Jesus did, to be inclusive not exclusive. Ask everyone to prayerfully think of people who would enjoy or benefit from a group like this. The beginning of a new study is a great time to welcome a few people into your circle. Have each person share a name or two and either make phone calls the coming week or handwrite invitations or postcards that very night. This will make it fun and also make it happen. At [www.lifetogether.com](http://www.lifetogether.com) we have a free email invitation you may send to every potential member. Don't worry about ending up with too many people—you can always have one discussion circle in the living room and another in the dining room.

As a leader, your most important job is to create an atmosphere where people are willing to talk honestly about what Christ's words and actions have to do with them. Especially if your group is new, be available before people arrive so you can greet them at the door. People are naturally nervous at a new group, so a hug or handshake can help put them at ease.

If your group is new and you aren't able to hold a get-to-know-you meeting before you launch into session 1, consider starting this first meeting half an hour early to give people time to socialize without shortchanging your time in the study. For example, you can have social time from 7:00 to 7:30, and by 7:40 you'll gather the group with a prayer. Even if only a few people are seated in the living room by 7:40, ask them to join you in praying for those who are coming and for God to be present among you as you meet. Others will notice you praying and will come and sit down. You may want to softly play music from the DVD or the LIFE TOGETHER Worship DVD/CD series as people arrive and turn up the volume when you are ready to begin. This first night will set the tone for the whole six weeks.

You may ask a few people to come early to help set up, pray, and introduce newcomers to others. Even if everyone is new, they don't know that yet and may be shy when they arrive. You might give people roles like setting up nametags or handing out drinks. This could be a great way to spot a coleader.

**Question 1.** We've designed this study for both new and established groups, and for both seekers and the spiritually mature. New groups need to invest more time in building relationships with each other, while established groups often want to dig deeper into Bible study and application. Choose whichever icebreaker best fits your group. You should be the first to answer this question while others are thinking about how to respond. Be sure to give everyone a chance to respond to this question, because it's a chance for the group to get to know each other. It's not necessary to go around the circle in order. Just ask for volunteers to respond.

**Introduction to the Series.** Take a moment after question 1 to orient the group to one principle that undergirds this series: *A healthy small group balances the purposes of the church.* Most small groups emphasize Bible study, fellowship, and prayer. But God has called us to reach out to others as well.

He wants us to *do* what Jesus teaches, not just *learn about* it. You may spend less time in this series studying the Bible than some group members are used to. That's because you'll spend more time doing things the Bible says believers should do.

However, those who like more Bible study can find plenty of it in this series. For Deeper Study provides more passages you can study on the topic of each session. If your group likes to do deeper Bible study, consider having members answer next week's Growing section questions ahead of time as homework. They can even study next week's For Deeper Study passages for homework too. Then, during the Growing portion of your meeting, you can share the high points of what you've learned.

If the five biblical purposes are new to your group, be sure to review them together on pages 8–10 of the Read Me First section.

**Question 2.** An agreement helps you clarify your group's priorities and cast new vision for what the group can be. Members can imagine what your group could be like if they lived these values. So turn to pages 86–87 and choose one value that you want to emphasize in this study. We've suggested some options. If you choose "rotating leaders," you don't need to invest a lot of time in it now. In session 3 you'll have a chance to plan who will lead each meeting.

**Question 3.** Have someone read the Bible passage aloud. It's a good idea to ask someone ahead of time, because not everyone is comfortable reading aloud in public. When the passage has been read, ask question 3. *It is not necessary that everyone answer every question in the Bible study.* In fact, a group can become boring if you simply go around the circle and give answers. Your goal is to create a discussion—which means that perhaps only a few people respond to each question and an engaging dialogue gets going. It's even fine to skip some questions in order to spend more time on questions you believe are most important.

**Question 4.** Everyone needs to understand verse 15. Use the Study Notes to paraphrase this verse in words that make sense to group members. For instance, "The rightful King of the world has arrived. It's now possible to be part of the realm where what makes people truly happy is to do what God wants done. To have this joy, we simply need to change our dead-end ways of thinking (like, 'If I don't look out for myself, nobody else will') and trust the King and his message."

If you have seekers in your group, it's not necessary that they believe this. It's only necessary that they understand the ideas. Can they even imagine being happy in a world where people do what God wants done? It might help

to unpack the idea of what God wants done. For instance, God wants us to passionately pursue good for those around us. This is what Christians mean by love: pursuing good for others.

**Question 5.** We need to change our thinking and direction to the degree that we're not naturally drawn to the things God wants done. If we're naturally drawn to generosity, justice, creativity, and compassion—that's great. But if we're naturally drawn to value possessions or status ahead of people (for example), then we'll need a whole new outlook on what our lives are meant to be about.

**Questions 7 and 8.** The connection is "authority." Jesus seemed to have the right to teach this radical message about the kingdom. He demonstrated the same kind of authority or right over evil spirits and diseases. Lots of people want to tell us how to live. We need to decide if Jesus has the *right* to tell us how to live.

**Question 9.** We can believe a set of facts about Jesus (that he's the Son of God, for instance) and still live however we like. Jesus is asking us to believe he has the right, the wisdom, and the love to tell us how to live. This isn't just information that will get us into heaven. This is a new way of life that will get heaven into us—now.

**Question 11.** We've offered several options for personal time with God. Don't press seekers to do this, but every believer should have a plan for personal time with God. Walk the group through these three options. If group members have never read through the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), we strongly urge that they take on that option. This will immerse them in the person of Christ for the duration of this study. There's a blank page at the end of every session of this study for them to write down what they discover.

Instead of reading through the Gospels, those who want a deeper topical Bible study could do the For Deeper Study readings each week. It's important that people know this study can adapt to a more spiritually mature group.

For those who have done a lot of Bible study, we encourage the meditation option. Living with one short passage each week can help them move biblical truth from their heads into their hearts and actions. The prayer option—whether five minutes a day or thirty—is valuable for anyone. We strongly suggest those who have never used a personal prayer journal to give it a try.

On the DVD or at [www.lifetogether.com/ExperiencingChristTogether](http://www.lifetogether.com/ExperiencingChristTogether), you can find information on how to select a first-time or next-step Bible, ideas on which Bible to pursue, and simple suggestions on how to create your own Bible reference library.

**Question 12.** For those who haven't done a LIFE TOGETHER study before, spiritual partners will be a new idea. We highly encourage you to try pairs or triplets for six weeks. It's so hard to start a spiritual practice like prayer or consistent Bible reading with no support. A friend makes a huge difference. Partners can check in with each other weekly either at the beginning of your group meetings or outside the meeting.

**Question 13.** Never pressure a person to pray aloud. That's a sure way to scare someone away from your group. So instead of praying in a circle (which makes it obvious when someone stays silent), allow open time when anyone can pray who wishes to do so. Have someone write down everyone's prayer requests on the Prayer and Praise Report (page 19). If your time is short, consider having people share requests and pray just with their spiritual partners or in smaller circles of three or four.

**Question 14.** If you have seekers in your group who aren't accustomed to singing worship songs, it might be awkward to sing with the worship song on the DVD. In that case, you may use the DVD-based worship song as a mood setter at the beginning of your meeting and skip worship at the end. Select whichever option best fits your group.