

# Believe!

## SESSION 5

**John 20:1-17**

**Memory Verse: John 20:8**

**Jesus offers salvation to all who believe in Him.**

Rachel Saint, sister of martyred missionary Nate Saint, devoted many years of her life to working among the Waorani (Auca) tribes of Ecuador, the same tribe that killed her brother. The president of Ecuador once asked how she had been able to effect change among this dangerous tribe. Rachel explained that the same message of forgiveness and faith in Christ to change an individual's heart applies to all people everywhere who will believe in Him as Savior. The president then asked one of Nate Saint's killers, "Who is Jesus Christ?" The man quickly responded, "He is the One who came from heaven, died for my sins, and made me stop killing. As a result, I now live happily with my brothers."

In John 20, the Gospel writer reported his own belief in Christ's resurrection, as well as Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Lord. As you dig into this Easter lesson, ask God to help you avoid taking the new life He provides for granted. Seek ways to live out His new life each day and pray that the adults in your group experience Him in a special way this holiday.



SCAN ME

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Daily we are presented with information that requires us to make a choice to believe it or not. It may be something as simple as a weather forecast that will affect what we decide to wear that day. What we believe about some things may not matter all that much, while what we believe about other things may be a matter of life or death. This is true when it comes to believing in Jesus. He said, “The one who believes in the Son has eternal life, but the one who rejects the Son will not see life” (John 3:36). (PSG, p. 46)

### What does it mean to “believe in” Jesus?



## Understand the Context (John 19–20)

John 19 documents Jesus’s trials before Pilate, as well as His crucifixion and burial. Chapter 20 begins with the evidence of His glorious resurrection, followed by eyewitness accounts of that event. It also includes Jesus’s commissioning of His disciples.

After the frenzied crowd had demanded that he release Barabbas instead of Jesus, Pilate had Jesus flogged despite declaring Him innocent. Pilate perhaps made one last attempt to have Jesus released by presenting Him to the mob after the severe beating. The religious leaders, however, insisted on His death because He said He was God’s Son (John 19:7).

Pilate, claiming authority either to release or to crucify Jesus, questioned Him further. Jesus responded that Pilate really had no authority over Him unless he received it “from above” (19:11). After additional attempts to free Jesus, Pilate acquiesced to the crowd and handed Jesus over to be crucified.

The Romans reserved crucifixion for criminals and slaves. The Old Testament prophecies regarding the Messiah were fulfilled in Jesus’s death and resurrection, including gambling for His clothes (19:24; see Ps. 22:18). Before His final cry, “It is finished,” Jesus committed His mother to John’s care.

Soldiers broke the legs of the criminals crucified alongside Jesus. They did not break Jesus’s legs, however, because He had already died. Thus, the prophecy that none of His bones would be broken was fulfilled (John 19:36; see Ps. 34:20). Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus hastily prepared Jesus’s body for burial and placed it in a new tomb.

Mary Magdalene arrived at this tomb early on the first day of the week and discovered the stone covering the entrance had been rolled away (John 20:1). She ran to tell Peter and John, who entered the tomb and found the linen wrappings. The head wrapping folded and sitting apart from the other clothes indicated an intentional act, rather than grave robbery (20:7). The disciples, however, did not yet understand that Jesus had to rise from the dead (20:9).

Weeping at the tomb, Mary Magdalene encountered two angels. She then turned to find herself unknowingly in Jesus’s presence. Mary assumed He was the gardener until she heard Him call her name. Immediately she recognized Him, reminding us of His teaching that His sheep know His voice (see 10:4).

John 20:19-22 records Jesus’s commissioning of the disciples. As the Father had sent Him, He was sending them to share the good news of the gospel.

Thomas had been absent when Jesus appeared to the other disciples. His doubt turned to faith when Jesus gave him the opportunity to touch His wounds. Jesus’s interaction with Thomas prompted a blessing on those who believe without seeing (20:29). John concluded his Gospel with his statement of purpose: He wanted people to come to Christ in faith so they could experience new life in Him (20:31).

**As you read John 20:1-17, identify reasons for believing in the risen Jesus. (PSG, p. 47)**



**PRIOR TO THE SESSION:** Display **Pack Item 6** (Poster: Key Verse: John 20:8) for reference later in the session. On a large sheet of paper, record the following names on the left side in a column format: *Mary Magdalene, Peter, John*.



**INTRODUCE:** Direct the group to signal with a thumbs up (yes) or a thumbs down (no) their responses to the following questions:

- *Have you ever read the entire menu in a restaurant and still had trouble choosing?*
- *Have you ever been unsure what to wear for a special occasion?*
- *Have you agonized over a large purchase?*

**EXPLAIN:** Point out that we make dozens of decisions each day. Lead a brief discussion about the relative importance of our decisions each day. Enlist a volunteer to read the session introduction on page 46 of the PSG.

**ASK:** **What does it mean to “believe in” Jesus?** (PSG, p. 46) Share that accepting Jesus is the biggest decision we will ever make.

**SUMMARIZE:** Share that today’s session steps away from Genesis to focus on Easter. Use Understand the Context on page 60 of the Leader Guide to summarize the events of John 19.

**TRANSITION:** *In today’s session we will dig into some decisions made on that first Easter—and how they relate to our decision related to Jesus.*

## Group Activity Option

### Music

Point out that songs about the resurrection have resonated with Christ followers through the years. *In 1708, Charles Wesley wrote “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today.” In 1933, Alfred H. Ackley composed “He Lives.” In 1971, Bill and Gloria Gaither penned “Because He Lives.” And in 2023, Phil Wickham released “Sunday is Coming.”* Direct adults to work in four teams, giving each team a copy of the lyrics to one of these songs. (NOTE: An individual can be a team.) Instruct the teams to read their songs and to summarize how they proclaim the hope of Easter. After a few minutes, allow the teams to report. Enlist someone to lead the group in singing one of the songs or reading it responsively.

## A Removed Stone (John 20:1-2)

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**1** On the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark. She saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. **2** So she went running to Simon Peter and to the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said to them, “They’ve taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they’ve put him!”

**(v. 1) First day of the week:** John along with the other Gospel writers noted that the resurrection occurred on the **first day of the week**, which would be Sunday. Thus the early Christians established this day as their day of worship, moving away from the Sabbath observances that ran from Friday night to Saturday night in Jewish life. Sunday became known as the Lord’s Day in the early church (see John 20:19,26; Rev. 1:10).

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### Key Person

#### Mary Magdalene

From Magdala in Galilee, Mary faithfully followed and supported Jesus’s ministry (Mark 15:40-41). Part of her devotion was due to the gratitude she felt for His miraculous work in her life, exorcising seven demons from her (Luke 8:2). She also had witnessed Jesus’s death on the cross and burial in the borrowed tomb (Matt. 27:55-56,61). While the other Gospel writers mentioned additional women at the tomb in their Easter accounts, John highlighted Mary as the first person to see the empty tomb and to encounter the risen Christ (John 20:1-18).

**(v. 1) Tomb:** Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea placed Jesus’s body in a new **tomb** located in a garden near where He was crucified (19:38-42). The tomb belonged to Joseph (Matt. 27:59-60) and was large enough for someone to sit inside (Mark 16:5). A huge rolling stone sealed the entrance (Matt. 27:59-60).

The tomb probably contained a passageway leading to a chamber where the body, after being wrapped in a linen cloth, could be laid. Two sites have been suggested for the location of Jesus’s tomb. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre marks the traditional site. The alternative site, located adjacent to Gordon’s Calvary, is called the Garden Tomb.

**(v. 1) Stone:** In biblical times people often used single stones to close the mouths of cisterns, wells, and tombs (Gen. 29:1-2; Matt. 27:59-60; John 11:38). The **stone** covering the entrance to the tomb where

Jesus’s body was laid was “great” (Matt. 27:60) and “very large” (Mark 16:4). Often such a stone fitted into a groove or track in front of the tomb’s doorway and could be rolled back to allow access to the burial chamber. Mary Magdalene and the women with her that first Easter morning questioned who would roll the stone from the entrance for them (Mark 16:3).

**(v. 2) Simon Peter:** A fisherman by trade, **Simon** left his nets to follow Jesus. His brother, Andrew, initially brought Simon to Jesus, and Jesus gave him the new name of Cephas or **Peter**, which means “rock” (John 1:40-42). Peter lived in Capernaum and was married (Mark 1:21-31). He often served as leader and spokesman for the Twelve.

Peter sometimes demonstrated a self-seeking attitude (Matt. 19:27). At other times, he was self-sacrificing (Mark 1:16-18). Sometimes, Peter showed spiritual insight (Matt. 16:16), while on other occasions he seemed slow to perceive spiritual matters (Matt. 15:15-16). This disciple played a prominent role in the early church (Acts 1-5). Peter died a martyr’s death in Rome under the emperor Nero. Tradition holds that he asked to be crucified upside down because he felt unworthy to die in the same manner as his Lord.

**(v. 2) The one Jesus loved:** Church tradition and biblical evidence identify this as John, the writer of the Gospel. John and his brother, James, were sons of Zebedee engaged in the fishing business. He is listed among the inner three disciples who were with Jesus on special occasions. Five New Testament books have been attributed to John: the Gospel of John; 1, 2, 3 John; and Revelation. Tradition holds that John lived to an old age in Ephesus, where he fought against heresy and taught believers to love one another.

# EXPLORE John 20:1-2



**APPLICATION POINT:** Everyone needs to inquire about the truth of Jesus’s resurrection.

**REVIEW:** Distribute copies of **Pack Item 11** (*Handout: The Post-Resurrection Appearances of Jesus*). Allow adults a minute or two to scan the handout. Highlight Jesus’s appearance to Mary Magdalene and use content from “Key Person: Mary Magdalene” on page 62 of the Leader Guide to share information about her. Use “Did You Know?” (PSG, p. 48) to supplement the discussion.

POST-RESURRECTION APPEARANCES OF JESUS

Witness	Date	Place	Signs	Comments
Mary Magdalene	First appearance	At the tomb	She saw the stone rolled away	She was the first to see the risen Jesus
Mary Magdalene	Second appearance	On the road to Emmaus	She recognized Jesus	She was the first to see the risen Jesus
Mary Magdalene	Third appearance	At the tomb	She saw the stone rolled away	She was the first to see the risen Jesus
Mary Magdalene	Fourth appearance	At the tomb	She saw the stone rolled away	She was the first to see the risen Jesus
Mary Magdalene	Fifth appearance	At the tomb	She saw the stone rolled away	She was the first to see the risen Jesus

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read **John 20:1-2** as the group identifies Mary Magdalene’s reaction to the stone being removed.

**RECORD:** Beside Mary’s name, write “unsure” and “fearful.” Lead a brief discussion about why those words accurately described Mary’s feelings. Encourage the group to scan the content for verse 2 on page 49 of the PSG and to identify possible explanations that could have gone through Mary’s mind.

**ASK:** **What are some elements of faith that are hard to understand? How does that help or hinder people when it comes to accepting Christ?** (PSG, p. 49)

**TRANSITION:** *Confused and grieving, Mary turned to Peter and John. Upon hearing her report, they immediately took off for the tomb.*

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## Group Activity Option

### Object Lesson: Empty Box

Prior to the session, wrap an empty box like a present. During the session, encourage volunteers to guess what might be in the box. Allow an adult to open it and show that it’s empty. Ask: **How does an empty box make you feel?** Acknowledge that if we were expecting a gift, we might have been confused or disappointed. Share that as Mary Magdalene arrived at the grave, she was also surprised to find the stone moved and the tomb empty. Note that she also may have been confused, scared, and sad. Emphasize that unlike the box, the empty tomb was actually a good thing.

## An Empty Tomb (John 20:3-10)

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**3** At that, Peter and the other disciple went out, heading for the tomb. **4** The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and got to the tomb first. **5** Stooping down, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. **6** Then, following him, Simon Peter also came. He entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. **7** The wrapping that had been on his head was not lying with the linen cloths but was folded up in a separate place by itself. **8** The other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, then also went in, saw, and believed. **9** For they did not yet understand the Scripture that he must rise from the dead. **10** Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying.

**(vv. 3-4) Other disciple:** Along with the expression “the one Jesus loved” (John 20:2), John used this title to designate himself. In John 18:15-16 the references to “another disciple” and the **other disciple** who helped Peter gain access to the high priest’s residence most likely designate John.

**(v. 4) Running:** It is worth calling attention to the fact that Peter and John started **running** to the tomb after hearing Mary Magdalene’s report. Grown men typically did not run in the culture of first-century Palestine. Thus, the fact that Peter and John ran perhaps demonstrates an unusual degree of curiosity and excitement on their part. In addition, running could have drawn attention to them, which is something they probably wanted to avoid. Yet, they felt an urgency to get to the tomb that overcame social stigmas and fears.

John outran Peter and **got to the tomb first**. This is probably because he was younger than Peter.

**(v. 5) Linen cloths:** **Linen**, spun from the flax plant, was the most common fabric used in the ancient Near East. It was typically bleached before being woven into bedding, clothing, curtains, and burial cloths.

It was customary to wrap a dead body with linen strips and to cover the face with a separate cloth, as noted in the description of Lazarus (John 11:44) and what Peter and John found in Jesus’s tomb (v. 7). Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus performed this customary preparation for Jesus’s body (19:40). Those who prepared the body used embalming spices when such spices could be afforded (19:39-40).

**(v. 7) In a separate place:** This covering may have been used as a way of keeping the corpse’s mouth or chin closed, but John’s description of it signals the reader that something unusual had occurred. The fact that it lay in a separate place indicated an intentional act on someone’s part. This piece of evidence counters the notion that grave robbers had stolen the

body. Thieves would not have taken the time to fold the head wrapping. Of course, they would not have unwrapped the body and left the burial clothes neatly lying in place either.

**(v. 8) Saw:** Several different Greek words are rendered **saw** in John 20:1-17. However, the Greek verb used in verse 8 occurs only one time with that meaning in the passage. The term means “to perceive with understanding.” Thus some measure of spiritual perception allowed John’s seeing to become believing. While it is not clear exactly what John believed, he is the only person in the Gospels who is recognized as believing as a result of seeing the empty tomb. Most of Christ’s followers needed to experience a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to believe He really was alive.

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### Key Word

#### Believed

This Greek verb is closely related to the Greek noun that is translated “faith.” It conveys the idea of trust and a firm conviction regarding the veracity of a person or claim. In the New Testament it is a personal, trusting response to God’s revelation of Himself in Christ. As the incarnate Son of God, Jesus is the perfect means by which a person can know God and experience eternal life (John 17:3). Jesus offers salvation to all who believe or trust in Him.

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**(v. 9) Scripture:** The Scriptures for Jesus’s disciples would have been our Old Testament since the New Testament had not yet been written. Therefore, John may have been thinking of Isaiah 53:10-12. This Suffering Servant passage, long interpreted to describe the Messiah, refers to His resurrection following His agonizing death and burial. Another possibility is Psalm 16:10.

# EXPLORE John 20:3-10



**APPLICATION POINT:** Believers can express faith in Jesus.

**READ:** Read aloud John 20:3-10 while the group listens for the details of what Peter and John found at the tomb. Encourage the group to imagine what Peter and John were thinking as they ran to the tomb. Remind them that, at this point, neither of them really understood what was happening.

**EXAMINE:** Direct adults to work in pairs to read the content for verses 3-10 (PSG, pp. 49-51) and discuss the details of the empty tomb. Allow adults to share how these details pointed to Jesus’s resurrection, rather than grave robbery or another theory.

**ASK:** How does evidence of the empty tomb bolster a person’s willingness to believe in Jesus? (PSG, p. 51)

**WRITE:** Beside Peter’s name write “amazed.” Beside John’s name, write “believed.” Point out that John wasn’t clear about what he believed, but he did demonstrate faith. Highlight the following quote: “Many believed in Jesus because they saw Him after the resurrection. John *believed* before actually seeing the risen Savior.” (PSG, p. 51) Allow volunteers to share what makes that kind of faith difficult to live out each day.

**HIGHLIGHT:** Direct attention to **Pack Item 6** (Poster: Key Verse: John 20:8). Explain that this is the memory verse for the session. Read the verse together. Encourage adults to meditate on and memorize this verse during the week. Challenge them to carry the power of Easter into their daily routines.



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## Group Activity Option

### Word Study

Place adults into several teams (an individual can be a team) and give each team a Bible dictionary. Lead the teams to work together to examine the word “resurrection.” Direct attention to the Bible Skill (PSG, p. 51) and guide the teams to complete the activity together. After a few minutes, allow volunteers to share what they discovered from the Bible Skill activity.

## The Living Teacher (John 20:11-17)

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**11** But Mary stood outside the tomb, crying. As she was crying, she stooped to look into the tomb. **12** She saw two angels in white sitting where Jesus's body had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. **13** They said to her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "Because they've taken away my Lord," she told them, "and I don't know where they've put him." **14** Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know it was Jesus. **15** "Woman," Jesus said to her, "why are you crying? Who is it that you're seeking?" Supposing he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you've carried him away, tell me where you've put him, and I will take him away." **16** Jesus said to her, "Mary." Turning around, she said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" — which means "Teacher." **17** "Don't cling to me," Jesus told her, "since I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."

**(v. 11) Crying:** Mourning for the deceased in the biblical period might include tearing one's garments, wearing sackcloth, covering one's head, smearing one's head or body with dust or ashes, fasting, and hiring professional mourners. Similar to today, weeping was a primary expression of grief (Matt. 9:23).

**(v. 12) White:** The supernatural messengers who appeared to Mary were dressed in **white**. (For more on angels, see the comments on p. 50.) Colors are sometimes used as symbols in Scripture and may convey theological truth. For example, white has been associated with purity or joy. It describes the garments of both Jesus and angels, suggesting glory (see Matt. 17:2; 28:2-3; Acts 1:9-11).

**(v. 13) Woman:** This designation by which both the angels and Jesus addressed Mary Magdalene was not disrespectful or severe. Instead, it was a term of affection or endearment. Jesus used this form of address when speaking to His mother (John 2:4; 19:26).

The designation can apply to a woman of any age and marital status, whether a virgin, married, or a widow. Jesus not only made His first resurrection appearance to a woman, but He also came to one who had known great sin. This fact highlights the grace and openness of the gospel.

**(v. 13) My Lord:** The Greek word can also be translated "sir" or "master" as a title of respect for a human being. In this context, though, **my Lord** undoubtedly conveys Mary's personal relationship with Jesus. Because He had freed her from seven demons (Mark 16:9), she had become a devoted follower (Luke 8:1-3).

**(v. 14) She did not know it was Jesus:** Why didn't Mary recognize the resurrected Christ? Perhaps tears had blurred her vision. Perhaps it was still too dark to see clearly. Certainly she was not expecting to see

Jesus and may have presumed that only the gardener would be present at that hour.

Some suggest that Jesus's resurrection body was somehow different (see 1 Cor. 15:35-50). The Gospel writers reported other instances where the disciples initially did not recognize Him (see John 21:4; Luke 24:15-16). This theme of failure to recognize Jesus may stress the importance of knowing Jesus by faith.

**(v. 16) Rabboni:** This title is a variant spelling of "rabbi" and conveys the force of "my teacher." The term may carry heightened emphasis or greater honor than the rabbinical designation. It is certainly more personal.

**(v. 17) Don't cling to me:** Jesus connected this instruction with His ascension. He did not forbid anyone from touching Him (Luke 24:36-43) and even challenged Thomas to put his hand in His side (John 20:27). Jesus's personal statement to Mary must have indicated that she was no longer to relate to Him through the physical senses because His ascension would end His tangible presence with His followers. Nevertheless, it was crucial that these early witnesses hear, see, and touch Jesus and affirm the physical reality of His resurrection (1 John 1:1-3).

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### Key Doctrine

#### God the Son

He was raised from the dead with a glorified body and appeared to His disciples as the person who was with them before His crucifixion. (See 1 Corinthians 15:1-8,12-19.)

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## EXPLORE John 20:11-17



**APPLICATION POINT:** Believers can tell all people about the resurrected Jesus.

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read **John 20:11-17** as the group listens for Mary Magdalene's next encounter at the tomb.

**REFLECT:** Encourage adults to imagine that they are in Mary's sandals, standing by the tomb. Direct them to share emotions and feelings they might experience and write those on the board. Enlist a volunteer to read John 20:11-17 again.

**ASK:** **How did Jesus get Mary's full attention? How did her reality change in that moment?**

**EXPLAIN:** Share that aside from her great joy, Mary also received an assignment from Jesus. Direct adults to read the information on pages 52-53 of the PSG and to identify how Jesus helps people know Him and understand Him better.

**GUIDE:** Lead the group to examine the words written beside the names on the board. Point out that each person came to believe in their own way. Explain that people often respond to Jesus in similar ways today.

**TRANSITION:** *An empty tomb and a living Savior changed the lives of Mary, Peter, and John. Thankfully, He still changes lives today. And He wants to use us to tell people who still need to hear.*

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### Group Activity Option

#### Drama

Prior to the session enlist four people to portray Mary Magdalene, Peter, John, and Jesus. Arrange three chairs in a horseshoe shape to represent the tomb. As a narrator reads John 20:1-17, direct the four actors to portray their characters. Discuss: ***How does picturing the resurrection morning solidify our faith?*** Remind adults that Easter should not be a one-day experience for Christ followers. Emphasize that we are called to live out the truth of Jesus's resurrection each day—including sharing this good news with others.

## CHALLENGE

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- SUMMARIZE:** Review these points from Apply the Text on page 54 of the *Personal Study Guide*:
- *Everyone needs to inquire about the truth of Jesus's resurrection.*
  - *Believers can express faith in Jesus.*
  - *Believers can tell all people about the resurrected Jesus.*
- READ:** Share the lyrics to Chris Tomlin's song "Resurrection Power." Allow volunteers to share words and phrases that connect with them. Highlight how Jesus's empty grave frees us from shame. Read aloud Hebrews 4:14-16 as the group reflects on what it means to have a High Priest.
- REFLECT:** Direct the group's attention to the inside front cover of the PSG. Briefly walk through the Plan of Salvation. Challenge adults to spend a minute talking to God about their relationship with Him. Let adults know that you are available to talk with anyone who has not received Jesus as Savior. Remind them that Easter is a perfect day to make that life-changing decision.
- PRAY:** Close the group time with a prayer, praising God for the empty tomb. Thank God for giving us a High Priest and ask Him to help each adult to live out the reality of Easter each day.

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## After the Session

Reinforce the study by encouraging the group to reflect on what the resurrection means in their life and how they might look for opportunities to share the "good news" with others. Send a text or email to adults during the week reminding them that Jesus is still alive. Encourage them to continue memorizing John 20:8 and to spend time praying about reasons they can "believe."

## ADULT COMMENTARY



Want to go deeper in your study?  
*Explore the Bible Adult Commentary* offers additional information and biblical insights related to the key passages.  
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