

Community Group Study Guide

For the Week of December 24th-30th

This week, as has become our custom, we have the privilege to read and reflect on John Piper's classic poem, "The Innkeeper". Consider navigating, also, to <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-innkeeper> where you can watch and hear Piper read it, as well as listen to him share the story behind the

poem: <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/whats-the-story-behind-your-poem-the-innkeeper>

"The Innkeeper"

By John Piper

1986

Jake's wife would have been fifty-eight / The day that Jesus passed the gate
Of Bethlehem, and slowly walked / Toward Jacob's Inn. The people talked
With friends, and children played along / The paths, and Jesus hummed a song,
And smiled at every child he saw.

He paused with one small lass to draw / A camel in the dirt, then said,
"What's this?" The girl bent down her head / To study what the Lord had made,
Then smiled, "A camel, sir!" and laid / Her finger on the bulging back,
"It's got a hump." "Indeed it does, / And who do you believe it was
Who made this camel with his hump? / Without a thought that this would stump
The rabbi guild and be reviled, / She said, "God did." And Jesus smiled,
"Good eyes, my child. And would that all / Jerusalem within that wall
Of yonder stone could see the signs / Of peace!" He left the lass with lines
Of simple wonder in her face, / And slowly went to find the place
Where he was born.

Folks said the inn / Had never been a place for sin,
For Jacob was a holy man. / And he and Rachel had a plan
To marry, have a child or two, / And serve the folk who traveled through,
Especially the poor who brought / Their meal and turtle-doves, and sought
A place to stay near Zion's gate.

They'd rise up early, stay up late, / To help the pilgrims go and come,
And when the place was full, to some / Especially the poorest, they would say,
"We're sorry there's no room, but stay / Now if you like out back. There's lots
Of hay and we have extra cots / That you can use. There'll be no charge.

The stable isn't very large / But Noah keeps it safe." He was
A wedding gift to Jake because / The shepherds knew he loved the dog.
"There's nothing in the Decalogue," / He used to joke, "that says a man

Can't love a dog!"

The children ran / Ahead of Jesus as he strode
Toward Jacob's Inn. The stony road / That led up to the inn was deep
With centuries of wear, and steep / At one point just before the door.
The Lord knocked once then twice before / He heard an old man's voice,
 "round back!" / It called. So Jesus took the track
That led around the inn. The old / Man leaned back in his chair and told
The dog to never mind. "Ain't had / No one to tend the door, my lad,
For thirty years. I'm sorry for / The inconvenience to your sore
Feet. The road to Jerusalem/ Is hard ain't it? Don't mind old Shem.
He's harmless like his dad. Won't bite / A Roman soldier in the night.
Sit down." And Jacob waved the stump
Of his right arm.

"We're in a slump / Right now. Got lots of time to think
And talk. Come, sit and have a drink/From Jacob's well!" he laughed. "You own
The inn?" the Lord inquired. "On loan, / You'd better say. God owns the inn."
At that the Lord knew they were kin, / And ventured on: "Do you recall
The tax when Caesar said to all / The world that each must be enrolled?"
Old Jacob winced, "Are north winds cold? / Are deserts dry? Do fishes swim
And ravens fly? I do. A grim / And awful year it was for me
When God ordained that strange decree.

"How could I such a time forget? / Why do you ask?" "I have a debt
To pay, and I must see how much. / Why do you say that it was such
A grim and awful year?" He raised / The stump of his right arm, "So dazed,
Young man, I didn't know I'd lost / My arm. Do you know what it cost
For me to house the Son of God?"

The old man took his cedar rod / And swept it 'round the place: "Empty.
For thirty years alone, you see? / Old Jacob, poor old Jacob runs
It with one arm, a dog, and no sons. / But I had sons . . . once. Joseph was
My firstborn. He was small because / His mother was so sick. When he
Turned three the Lord was good to me / And Rachel, and our baby Ben
Was born, the very fortnight when / The blessed family arrived.
And Rachel's gracious heart contrived / A way for them to stay — there in
That very stall." The man was thin / And tired. "You look a lot like him."

But Jesus said, "Why was it grim?"

"We got a reputation here / That night. Nothing at all to fear
In that we thought. It was of God. / But in one year the slaughter squad
From Herod came. And where do you / Suppose they started? Not a clue!

We didn't have a clue what they / Had come to do. No time to pray,
No time to run, no time to get / Poor Joseph off the street and let
Him say good-bye to Ben or me / Or Rachel. Only time to see
A lifted spear smash through his spine / And chest. He stumbled to the sign
That welcomed strangers to the place, / And looked with panic at my face,
As if to ask what he had done.
Young man, you ever lost a son?"

The tears streamed down the Savior's cheek,
He shook his head, but couldn't speak.

"Before I found the breath to scream / I heard the words, a horrid dream:
'Kill every child who's two or less. / Spare not for aught, nor make excess.
Let this one be the oldest here / And if you count your own life dear,
Let none escape.' I had no sword / No weapon in my house, but Lord,
I had my hands, and I would save / The son of my right hand . . . So brave,
O Rachel was so brave! Her hands / Were like a thousand iron bands
Around the boy. She wouldn't let / Him go and so her own back met
With every thrust and blow. I lost / My arm, my wife, my sons — the cost
Of housing the Messiah here. / Why would he simply disappear
And never come to help?"

They sat / In silence. Jacob wondered at
The stranger's tears.

"I am the boy / That Herod wanted to destroy.
You gave my parents room to give / Me life, and then God let me live,
And took your wife. Ask me not why / The one should live, another die.
God's ways are high, and you will know / In time. But I have come to show
You what the Lord prepared the night / You made a place for heaven's light.

"In two weeks they will crucify / My flesh. But mark this, Jacob, I
Will rise in three days from the dead, / And place my foot upon the head
Of him who has the power of death, / And I will raise with life and breath
Your wife and Ben and Joseph too / And give them, Jacob, back to you
With everything the world can store, / And you will reign for evermore."