

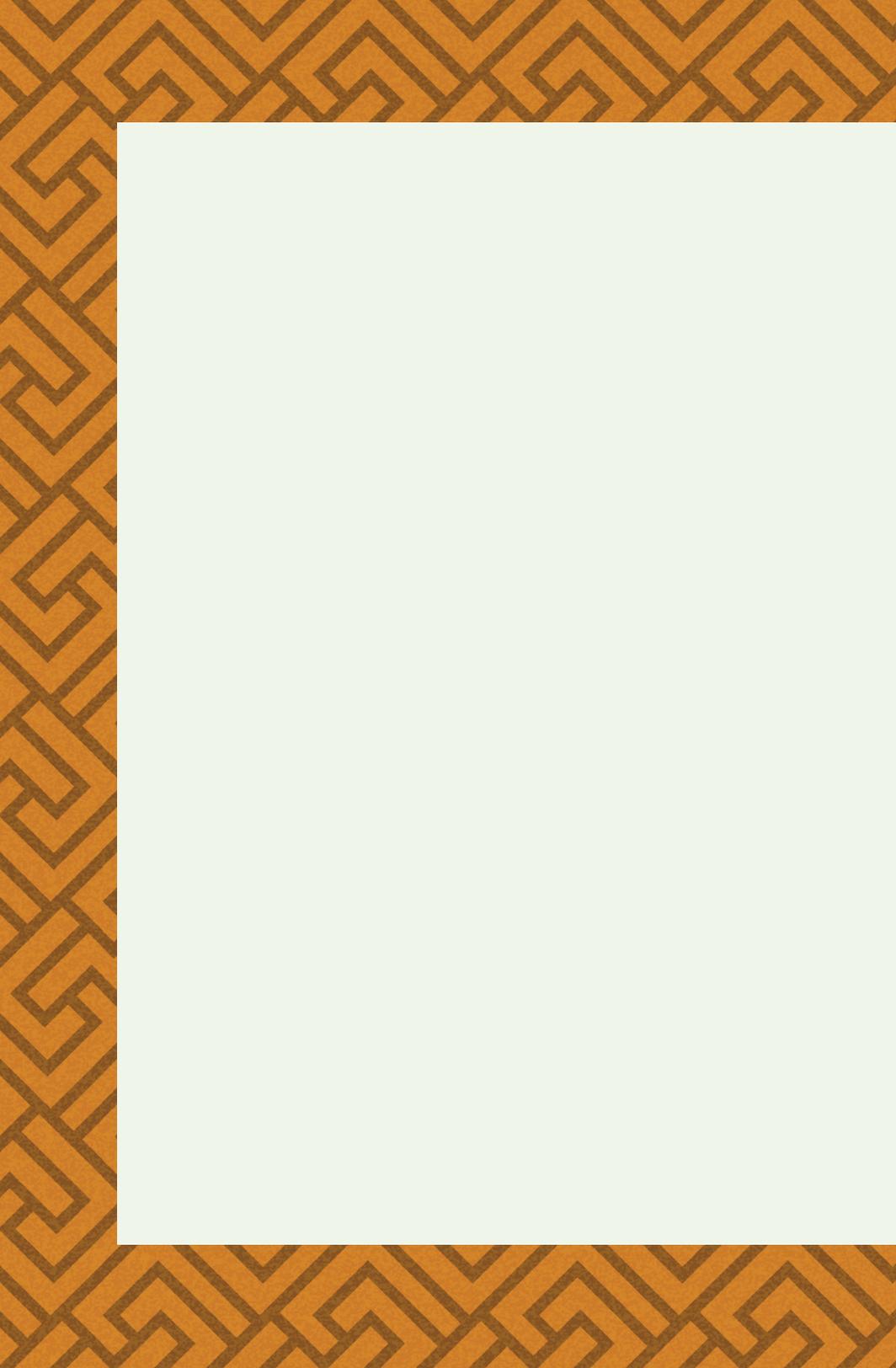


THE PRIORITIES THAT SHAPE US

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**A 7 WEEK STUDY
OF THE PRIORITIES
THAT SHAPE US**



WEEK ONE



WORSHIP

WHERE WORSHIP BEGINS

WEEK 1 • DAY 1

It has been a hot topic since the beginning of the church, really. For centuries, people have argued, fought, and even entered into “wars” about it. There have been so many different ideas about it, that at times, we’ve lost sight of what God intended it to be.

Worship.

Everyone seems to have an opinion about it. How it should happen. When it should happen. Who it should happen for. Most of the heated discussion around worship stems from defining worship as music alone. Scripture tells us worship is so much more than the songs we sing. It’s more than a musical preference or style. It is beyond a weekly gathering. It is so much more.

So, what is worship then? It’s an integral part of our relationship with God. It’s a way we connect with Jesus. It’s how we both love him and love others. It makes us better disciples. We desire to make worship a priority. We want to seek God’s presence and honor in everything we do, doing it “all for the glory of God.”

According to the *New Bible Dictionary*, the word “worship,” is rooted in the Old English word ‘weorthscipe,’ meaning ‘worth-ship.’ The term “originally referred to the action of human beings in expressing homage to God because he is worthy of it.”¹

In *The Way of a Worshipper*, Buddy Owens writes,

“Authentic worship is a response to an authentic encounter with the living God...When we worship God, we declare his worth. But in order to declare God’s worth, we must first discover his worth. And that brings me to a question: What is God worth to you? To the extent you can answer that question,

you'll be a worshiper. Your life will reflect his value, both in the things you say and, more convincingly, by the way you live...We worship God, not to win an audience with him, but because he first came seeking an audience with us."

Worship actually begins with God. It begins with his inherent worth, his pursuit of his people, his love and grace given to us, his power and authority over us. Worship begins with the love of God. God is the initiator of all worship by design. He is the Creator of it all. He first came seeking an audience with us. He reveals himself and only then do we respond.

So, what is God worth to you?

Take a moment to sit with that question and journal your response.

¹ I. H. Marshall, "Worship," ed. D. R. W. Wood et al., *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1250.

² Owens, Buddy, *The Way of a Worshipper*, (), 17-18

WHERE WORSHIP BEGINS
WEEK 1 • DAY 1

Read all of **Psalm 96** in your Bible.

In verse 8 of this Psalm, the Psalmist invites us to “ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name.” According to dictionary.com, The word “ascribe” means “to give, provide; to credit or assign, as to a cause or source; to attribute.” This text invites us to credit or attribute God the glory he is due because of who he is. What does it mean to “ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name?” What would that look like on a daily basis?

Read through **Psalm 96** again. Make a list of the actions of God, the Creator, and a separate list of the actions of creation and man. What is attributed to God and what is attributed to creation? What do you notice as a result?

Today, as you wrap up your time with God, take a moment to write your own letter or Psalm to God, telling him what he is worth to you.

WHERE DO YOU BOW DOWN? WEEK 1 • DAY 2

In American culture, our only real understanding of bowing refers to a curtain call at the end of a theatrical performance as performers bow with the audience roaring in applause. In Eastern cultures, bowing is a sign of deep respect. In the ancient world, bowing low before a king was expected, something we don't have to practice much in our democratic culture.

Yesterday, we looked at what it means to “ascribe” worth to God, to give him the glory that is due his name. Today we're going to look at one way the word *worship* is defined in the Hebrew and Greek texts.

The term *worship* in the Old Testament translates to the Hebrew word meaning ‘to bow down, prostrate oneself,’ a posture indicating reverence and homage given to a lord, whether human or divine.³ The similar Greek word for worship (*proskyneo*) also means to bow down. This meaning of the word *worship* demonstrates surrender and submission towards the one to whom we bow.

Whatever we worship is where we've surrendered. Wherever we've bowed is what we've given lordship over us.

Each of the Scriptures below uses this particular definition of the word *worship*—to bow down, prostrate oneself; to surrender or submit in authority; to give reverence to.

Read through the following Scriptures with this definition of worship in mind.

- 1 Chronicles 16:29
- Psalm 95:6
- Psalm 99:5, 9
- Matthew 2:8-11
- Matthew 4:9-10
- Revelation 4:9-11
- Revelation 13:1-4

What do you notice as you read these Scriptures? What stands out to you?

We can bow before anything. It's probably a bit shocking to read through a text that includes the same word for worship we would hope would be aimed at God, but find it is actually aimed at the enemy. Anything can be the object of our affection. We can ascribe worth to anything.

Worship can also be defined as directing our affection and devotion toward someone or something in response to a perception of ultimate worth.

Where are your affections directed?
Where is your devotion directed?
What is really worth something to you?

Take a moment to allow these questions to settle in your mind.

Truly, what grabs your attention these days? Where do you spend your time? If you look at your calendar, your checkbook, your phone's screen time, what do you see? Does the reality of your life align with where you hope it would?

Choose one of the first three Scriptures previously listed and write it on a post-it note. Place it somewhere you will see it every day. As you go about your day, invite God to be the object of your affection and devotion. Ask him to lead you as you bow before him. Invite him to show you where there are other affections in his place as Lord.

³ Paul J. Achtemeier, Harper & Row and Society of Biblical Literature, *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 1143.

WORTHY OF WORSHIP?
WEEK 1 • DAY 3

Yesterday we took time to assess our affections. We answered some questions about where our devotion is directed. We looked at where we are bowing down, what we are worshiping. Today we want to take time to see if those places where our affections and devotions lie are truly worthy of our worship. As we begin today, look back over your answers to yesterday's questions about your affections. Keep them in mind.

Is the object of your worship worthy of worship?

Not everything can bear the weight of being ascribed ultimate worth. Created things cannot bear the weight the Creator alone was meant to bear. Let's take a look today at the only God who can bear the weight of ultimate worth—the only one who is worthy of our worship.

Read through John's account in **Revelation 4:2-11** as he peered into heaven's worship of the living God.

Who do the twenty four elders say is "worthy?"

What do they say he is worthy of?

Why do they say he is worthy?

In **Acts 17**, Paul visits Athens and is distressed by all the idols in the city. He encounters an altar “To An Unknown God” in the midst of the idols. He proclaims to the men of Athens who the living God is and what he is like.

Read what Paul tells the men of Athens about God in **Acts 17:24-28**.

What do you notice about God in this text? From this text, what is he like?

It's ludicrous to worship something made by our own hands, isn't it? But isn't that what we do when we choose a created thing to worship or hold our affection? How often do we take the place intended for God alone and fill it with something that isn't God? Something that has absolutely no power? We craft a false god, a false savior, but God doesn't live in temples built by the hands of humans. He wasn't created. He is the Creator. He isn't fashioned. He alone fashions. God doesn't need us. He doesn't need our worship. Yet, he welcomes us to worship him.

WORTHY OF WORSHIP?
WEEK 1 • DAY 3

When we worship him, he doesn't say, "Thanks for the reminder, guys. I forgot that I was God." He has the ability to speak and create complex things. He doesn't need us, *but because of his great love for us*, he made a way for us to come into his presence and to have a personal relationship with him. This fact alone makes him worthy of our worship.

Re-read **Acts 17:24-28**. Take some time to write a response to God as you read. What would you like to say to him?

PRAYER FOR THE DAY

Lord Jesus, you alone are worthy to receive glory and honor and power.

You alone are worthy of my worship for you created all things. In you I live and move and have my being. Give me courage to worship you alone. Show me what it looks like to give you all my affection and devotion. Amen.

PURSUING GOD'S PRESENCE
WEEK 1 • DAY 4

Throughout this week, we've been defining worship, naming where our affections and devotion truly resides, and naming Jesus as the only one who can bear the weight of our worship.

Our desire for worship as a priority includes seeking and desiring the presence of God. So, why would we desire that and ultimately what does that look like?

Let's begin with a simple question: do you know the God of the universe wants to just be with you?

God created us for relationship with him. When sin entered, that relationship was broken. Jesus left heaven, put on flesh, and came down. He became Immanuel, "God with us." He went to the cross and gave his life to mend that broken relationship once and for all. He rose from the grave, conquering sin and death so we could experience the love of God in its fullness. When Jesus went back to heaven, he sent the Holy Spirit to be our guide, to live in us so we would have the indwelling presence of God.

God has always wanted to be with his people. His presence is what changes us. As we worship him, we will seek him in all we do.

Today we're going to read through some Psalms, the "prayer book" of the Bible. These Psalms are prayers written to God. Today, we get to make them our prayers, too.

As you read through each Psalm, think about what it means to seek God's presence in your life. Read through each Psalm slowly. Mark words or phrases in each that stand out to you. Invite God to show you what it means to want to seek his presence.

PSALM 27:1-14

What stands out to you in this Psalm? Which words or phrases are most significant? What is God inviting you to with these words? Write a prayer based on the words of this Psalm.

PSALM 84:1-12

What stands out to you in this Psalm? Which words or phrases are most significant? What is God inviting you to with these words? Write a prayer based on the words of this Psalm.

PSALM 63:1-11

What stands out to you in this Psalm? Which words or phrases are most significant? What is God inviting you to with these words? Write a prayer based on the words of this Psalm.

What is the one significant thing you've seen in your time with God today? Write it down.

ALL FOR THE GLORY OF GOD
WEEK 1 • DAY 5

So far this week, we've defined worship as directing your affection and devotion toward someone or something in response to a perception of ultimate worth. We've looked at the Hebrew and Greek understanding of the word worship as bowing down before someone in reverence. We've discussed God being the only one worthy of our worship. We've examined what it means to seek God's presence.

As we continue our conversation of worship, we want to talk about what it means to honor God in everything we do. What does it look like to live "all for the glory of God?"

Romans 12:1 says,

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship."

The Greek word for worship in this text is *latreia*, which means "service, worship, the state of a hired laborer, the business, or duties." This understanding of the word worship should stand out to us, especially when we define worship as music or singing together in a service.

This text is showing us that when we worship (*proskyneo*—bow down), it will lead us to worship (*latreia*—service, duties). When we bow our knee to Jesus, we will be about his business. Because we bend our knee to Jesus, our lives will be different. We will serve him and bring him honor and glory.

1 Corinthians 10:31 says,

"So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

In this passage, Paul is addressing questions about whether believers should eat food sacrificed to idols. He simply says, whatever you do, just do it for God's glory. If what you are doing brings honor and glory to God, it is right and good.

So much of the time, we look at worship as an adjective rather than a verb. We think of worship music or a worship service or gathering. If that is the case, we can make a case for worship driving, worship grocery shopping, worship conversations, worship sports, worship studying, worship reading, worship talking, worship working, worship resting. The options are endless! If worship is the focus, it will bring glory to God. This is what Paul is inviting us to do. Worship Jesus with our very lives by bringing him honor and glory in *everything* we do.

So, what does that look like exactly? Let's continue to read some of **Romans 12** to see what Paul suggested.

Read **Romans 12:1-21**. As you read the text, notice all the actions described.

Which actions stand out as you read through the text? Which actions are easiest for you to do? Which actions are more difficult? Why? Which ones do you need to invite the Holy Spirit to help you with? Which ones do you need accountability in order to grow in them?

D.L. Moody once said,

*“The problem with a living sacrifice is
that it keeps crawling off the altar.”*

This statement is so true. We just don't like to stay in the place of sacrifice. It's hard to bring glory to God in everything we do. It takes time and cooperation with the Holy Spirit. God's deep love and grace for us invite us to crawl back up to the altar as many times as we need to. His grace doesn't run out when we don't serve him well.

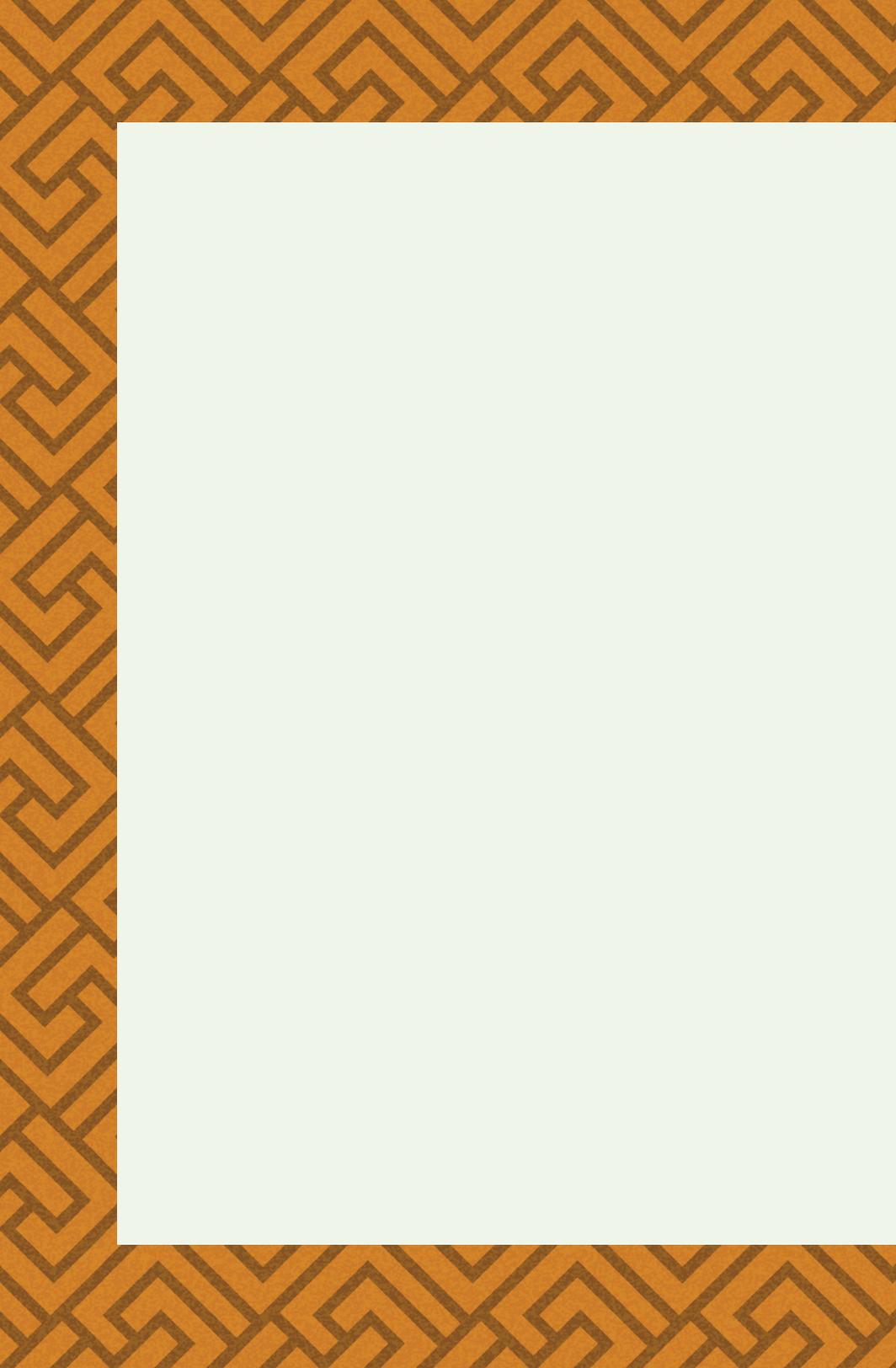
The Message translation states **Romans 12:1** a little differently. It says,

“So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him.”

God wants our everyday, ordinary life—the places where we eat, breathe, work, love, laugh, and live.

Wherever you are in living your everyday ordinary life, invite God. He's waiting to meet you there.

Write a prayer today inviting God to lead you in your everyday, ordinary life. Where do you need him to help you bring him glory in what you do? Invite him to help you.



WEEK TWO



GOSPEL

GOOD NEWS
WEEK 2 • DAY 1

This week we're taking a look at our priority of "Gospel." And before we dive too far in, we want to pause a moment and think about that word. Think back to a time before you heard a sermon on the concept of "gospel". How would you explain the gospel if someone had asked?

Take a few moments and write out what your response would be if you had to answer the question, "*What is the gospel in one word?*" Then reflect on why you chose that word.

Okay, onto round two. If you had to answer the question, "*What is the gospel in one sentence?*" What one sentence would you share? Again, reflect on what you wrote.

Now to the last round. If you had as much space and as many sentences as you wanted, how would you answer the question, “*What is the gospel?*” Use the provided space to write your response. Finally, reflect on what you wrote.

It’s probably a helpful exercise to sit and articulate what the gospel is since it’s so foundational to who we are as followers of Jesus. As Paul says in **1 Corinthians**, this gospel is of “first importance...” (**1 Corinthians 15:3**).

The gospel is at the core of who followers of Jesus are. Tomorrow, we’ll dig into some Old and New Testament passages to help us better understand it.

But, for now, we could just simply rest in knowing that the word “gospel” literally means “good news.” Let’s define news as something that happens in the past as a result of which everything is now different.

For example, when the Chicago Cubs won the 2016 World Series, everything changed. They had not won a World Series in 108 years. To Cubs fans, this news was cause for great joy. To Indians fans (whom they beat in the World Series), it was a stumbling block, and to everyone who didn’t care about baseball...well, the whole ordeal probably seemed like foolishness (see **1 Corinthians 1:21-24**). But you get the point. The Cubs won. Kyle Schwarber, Kris Bryant, Javier Báez, and others have become household names in the world of baseball. The Cubs were now the champions. Everything was different.

You can probably think back and identify different pieces of news that changed your life in both large ways and small ways (and also in good ways and bad). Maybe it was the news of a college acceptance letter, maybe it was the news of your favorite sports team making it to the championship round, maybe it was the news of a new child on the way.

All of these examples have a couple things in common...

- Something happens in history
- The world is different as a result

In Jesus’ day, the word “gospel” was a message and a declaration that went throughout the land when a great military victory was won or, in certain cases, when a new king was born.

For our purposes here today, we can rest on the declaration that the core of the gospel is this: That Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection happened, and as a result, everything is different. A victory had been won. Sin, Satan, and death have been vanquished. Forgiveness of sins is here. The Messiah has come bringing his good kingdom.

Ultimately, Caesar is not in charge, the President of America is not in charge, and you and I are not in charge. Jesus is. He is the ruler of the Universe. And it is that reality, as Christians, that we shape our lives around.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What is an example of a piece of news that radically changed your life?

How does narrowing down the gospel to simply, "Jesus is Lord" compare and contrast to how you defined it above?

Reflect on how the gospel has impacted you personally. What does it mean to have Jesus be King? What does it mean to you to have forgiveness of sins? What does it mean for you that Jesus defeated death?

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL? WEEK 2 • DAY 2

Yesterday, we looked at defining the word gospel. Today, we are going to dive into some of the relevant Scripture passages to better understand the term.

The Old Testament uses the Hebrew word basar when talking about “good news.” In your translations, you might read it as “good news,” “proclamation,” “glad tidings,” “to preach,” etc. And we see it all throughout the Scriptures.

Look up the following passages and note the way in which “good news” is used. What is happening in and around these verses? What sort of connotations does “good news” have according to these verses?

- **1 Samuel 31:1-9** (see verse 9)
- **Psalms 68:1-12a**
- **Isaiah 52:7-8**

Now, let's do the same thing with some New Testament uses of the word gospel. Again, look up the following passages and note the way in which "gospel" is used. What is happening in and around these verses?

What sort of connotations does "good news" have according to these verses?

- **Mark 1:14-15**
- **Luke 2:8-11**
- **Romans 1:1-4**
- **1 Corinthians 15:1-5**

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

WEEK 2 • DAY 2

Are you noticing a theme here? Like we mentioned on Day 1, the word gospel as it's used in the Scriptures carries notes of triumph, victory, kingdom, and ruling. In one of the Old Testament passages, we even saw that the word for gospel could be used in conjunction with the victory of the enemies of God's people because for them it would indeed be "good news." In the rest of the Old Testament passages, the word for "good news" most often indicates the reality that no one else reigns except God, that forgiveness of sins is available, and that a new Kingdom is here.

But that's not all. Now read these verses that explain the gospel without directly referencing the word itself. How do they expand or fill out the idea of the gospel for you?

- **Romans 3:21-26**
- **2 Corinthians 5:17-21**
- **2 Corinthians 8:9**
- **1 Peter 3:18**
- **Galatians 3:10-14**

As you can see, the gospel is a very rich and robust term! There's a lot that it connotes. And it's that reality that should propel us to worship!

With all of this in mind, however, we want to end today by simply contrasting the *news* of the gospel with the *good advice* that the world gives.

Good advice is positive and helpful. And everywhere you look you can find people or companies giving you advice about how to achieve your best life now, how to be happy, and what makes for a life well lived. There's nothing particularly wrong with that. But the point here is simple... good advice is different from good news. Good advice puts all the emphasis on what *you* need to do. And if you listen closely enough, sometimes the advice the world gives is conflicting!

The gospel is different. The good news isn't about what you have to do, it's about what's already been *done* for you. Big difference.

It takes the pressure off. No need to fret. God, in his mercy and kindness, has offered us salvation. All we are called to is to receive this good news.

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?
WEEK 2 • DAY 2

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What do you think about the distinction between good advice and good news? What are some examples of “good advice” you follow to make your life as meaningful as possible?

What would it look like for you to receive the reality of the gospel into your life 10% more than you do right now?

How do the aforementioned Scriptures help clarify for you how you think about what the gospel is?

THE STORY OF THE GOSPEL

WEEK 2 • DAY 3

Every piece of news has a backstory. For example, imagine living 1000 years in the future and reading a 2016 news headline that just said, “Cubs Win the World Series!” If you had no cultural context for that statement, you might really be confused. Baby bears winning something? World series? Series of what? The whole world is involved? There was a world-wide competition of baby bears?

What is happening here? You see how that could get slightly confusing, right?

The gospel of Jesus Christ is no different. It can sometimes be a little confusing. That’s because the gospel isn’t just a piece of news in a vacuum. It has a context. It, too, comes with a story (both past and future) that helps shed light on its meaning and implication.

So, what is that story?

Take a few moments to watch this video from our friends at the Bible Project.



In the opening pages of the Bible, in Genesis 1 and 2, we read about God’s good created world. In this world there was life, peace, responsibility, relationship, justice, and peace – all things that make for human flourishing were had in the Garden of Eden. Humanity was in right relationship with God, humanity was in right relationship with each other, and humanity was in right relationship with the Earth.

Humankind was given the responsibility to rule and have dominion over the Earth (see **Genesis 1:26, 28**). Unfortunately, they idolized themselves, wanting to be like God, and they rebelled. Because of this act of rebellion and their faulty dominion, humanity’s relationship with God, humanity, and the earth was fractured and broken (see **Genesis 3**).

And this brokenness plays itself out throughout the entirety of the Old Testament as Israel, from the family of Abraham, is given the task to rule on God's behalf so as to be a blessing to the nations (see **Genesis 12**).

Time and time again, however, they fail. And because they fail, they end up in exile.

Despite Israel's mishaps, mistakes, and disordered desires, it was foretold that a prophet like (but greater than) Moses, a king like (but greater than) David, and a priest like (but greater than) Aaron would come to lead the people of God rightly – someone who wouldn't look to his own interests (like Israel), but would live a life fully surrendered to God. This someone was referred to as Israel's "Messiah" or "Christ."

This is who the New Testament writers refer to Jesus as – the person who was fully surrendered to God's will, the person who would bring redemption and salvation to God's people, and the person who would reign and bring about God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus is God's Messiah. He is the Christ (**Matthew 16:16**).

Of course, some folks disagree (see **John 7** for example), and Jesus is crucified. At the cross, however, we see that Jesus wins a decisive victory over evil, Satan, sin, and death through suffering love (not through military might or prowess). On the cross, Jesus was tortured and put to death. Jesus' blood was poured out. His side was pierced. Jesus became the propitiation for sins. As our sacrificial Lamb, Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice. He was better than any sacrifice ever made before. In fact, he was the ultimate, once and for all, sacrifice. The sacrifice to end all sacrifices (**Hebrews 10:1-14**). And to top it all off...on the cross, Jesus became king.

Then, by the Spirit of the Living God, Jesus was resurrected bodily from the dead (**Romans 6:10-11**), trampling over death by death (**1 Corinthians 15**).

THE STORY OF THE GOSPEL

WEEK 2 • DAY 3

There's no question that this is how the gospels portray the events of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, a theme picked up by Paul and others (see **Philippians 2:5-11**; **Colossians 1:15-20**). With Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel's story, conquering the dominion of darkness, and being enthroned as Lord of the Universe, he is now bringing renewal and restoration to all of creation (**Colossians 1:20**; **Ephesians 1:10**).

That story is a little different than how we usually talk about the gospel. The gospel isn't just that humans can go to heaven when they die, the gospel's implications bring about the redemption and restoration of all the entire cosmos since it was marred by sin (**Romans 8:20-21**). This is what it means when we read about the coming of a new heaven and new earth (**Revelation 21**) with no more tears, death, or pain.

This is important for us to realize because if the gospel is just about "going to heaven when we die" then we miss out on all of creation being redeemed and restored. The Gospel has a universal impact, not just an individual one.

This is, in short, the story of God. This is the story that the Bible tells us. This is the story that Christians claim as reality. This is the story that shapes who we are, the story that shapes our answers to all of life's questions:

- Who are we?
- Where did we come from?
- What's wrong with the world?
- What's the point of all this?
- Who's going to fix what's wrong?
- How do we live rightly in our world?

We'll talk about some other stories our world tells tomorrow, but could you imagine what would happen if this story came into the hearts and minds and lives of our church family? What would the impact be on our families, relationships, friends, and city if we lived out this story?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

When you think about the gospel story, which part resonated with you most? Explain

What does that story reveal to you about God's character?

THE STORY OF THE GOSPEL
WEEK 2 • DAY 3

How does the story of the gospel help your understanding of what Jesus accomplished on the cross?

Write a prayer to God expressing your thanks, thoughts, and feelings about his story.

LIVING IN THE GOSPEL STORY

WEEK 2 • DAY 4

The famed story expert Bobette Buster once remarked, "Narrative is our culture's currency; he who tells the best story wins."

We have already begun talking about the gospel story, but today we want to shift a bit and talk about other stories that try to compete with the gospel. To do that though, let's start with an illustration...

I remember hearing of a guy who visited the Dallas Cowboys stadium for a game and, in doing so, felt like he landed on "planet football." He had never been to a professional football game before so going to this game was eye-opening for him. He said that everything in and around AT&T Stadium was telling a compelling story to try and bolster the allegiance of people who were already Cowboy fans and to win the allegiance of people who weren't. How did the Cowboys tell this story?

Well, this guy went on to explain how everything from the parking lot banners with the big, blue Dallas Cowboy star on them to the memorabilia you could buy outside and inside the stadium, to the amount of people sporting Cowboys apparel, to the cheerleaders urging the fans to cheer for their team, to the giant endzone-to-endzone screen pumping up the crowd inside the stadium and replay only positive Dallas Cowboy plays, to past Cowboy players coming out at halftime to help invigorate the crowd – it all told a compelling narrative. That narrative essentially consisted of the following: Cowboy fans unite! THIS is our year! We have the guys to WIN! We can BEAT any team! We need YOUR help!

That was the story of the Cowboys. And they actually tell that story really well to win the allegiance of people everywhere. But, they're not the only ones telling a story like that.

If you pay attention to the companies, organizations, and people around you, you'll see that everyone is telling a story to win, as one writer says, your "mind space and brand allegiance."

They know that if they get your "mind space and brand allegiance," then they've got your time, your money, your support, and your evangelistic efforts.

As followers of Jesus with the gospel story in mind, it's important to reflect on what story or stories we are living out of. An important life axiom goes like this: "The story we live in is the story we will live out."

We talked about how much we are formed when we chatted about discipleship. A part of coming under the discipleship of Jesus is realizing what stories have been forming us so that we can be intentional about allowing God's story to reshape our thinking, feeling, and acting.

We each have a story or a framework that we live by – this story could have been shaped for us by our family of origin, our culture, our country, our friends, our desires, etc. Or...it could be some conglomeration of all of these.

Some people live according to the American Dream ("I'm just concerned with my two kids, nice house, and white picket fence and nothing else"), others by materialism ("I'm concerning myself with what I can get out of life"), others by secularism ("God is not really involved with my everyday life"), some by liberty ("I'm only concerned with my own individual freedom in any and every matter"), etc.

The list goes on and on and on. The question for us though is this: Are we living in accordance with some made up story with certain promises that will ultimately leave us bankrupt or are we living in accordance with the gospel story?

LIVING IN THE GOSPEL STORY

WEEK 2 • DAY 4

Being intentional about living in God's story has always been a quintessential part of being God's people. This is why if you read through the Psalms, you see a lot of remembrance going on. The Psalms will often poetically retell God's saving work in the history of the people of Israel to help the reader live in the reality of God's story as opposed to any other.

Read **Psalm 136**.

Did you notice the repeated phrases?

"For His steadfast love endures forever"

Did you notice how the Psalmist retells the story of God's works and deliverance?

"To him...who made the heavens...who spread out the earth... who brought Israel out [from Egypt]...who divided the Red Sea in two..."

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What do you think are three influential stories that impact your life (for example, the stories of my family of origin, the story of consumerism, and the story of secularism are especially dominant in my thinking)? How do you see these stories impacting your day-to-day life?

What do you imagine God saying about each of those stories at work in your life? How does the gospel specifically confront those other stories?

What are some practical ways you can begin to adjust your story to align more with Jesus'? To more intentionally live in and live out of God's story?

HOW THE GOSPEL CHANGED US

WEEK 2 • DAY 5

We're four days into studying the gospel story and how the stories of the world intersect with it. But, let's get a little more practical. One question we have to ask is "How does knowing all of that change things for us?"

Well, it should change everything! Here are three examples:

EXAMPLE 1

Think about how the gospel changes a person's tendency to struggle with comparing themselves to others. Often when one person compares themselves to another, they do one of two things: (1) They think of themselves better than the other person; or (2) they think of themselves worse than the other person.

The gospel confronts all of this though! In the gospel, we learn that every person is more sinful than we ever dare imagine (because Jesus had to die for us), but we also learn that every person is also more loved than we could ever hope to realize (because Jesus was glad to die for us).

With this knowledge in mind, and by fully internalizing it, it should shatter a person's tendency to compare themselves to others. They cannot think of themselves as better than their neighbor (because they are sinful too), nor can they think of themselves as lesser than their neighbor (because they are equally loved by God).

EXAMPLE 2

Think about how the gospel changed Kevin's interactions with one of his employees. Kevin owns his own business and hired a young man to join his team. Because of the type of business Kevin ran, this young man needed to pass some certification tests that required lots of study. The man studied long and hard, but when the test results came back, his scores were miserable. He had failed his certification.

Walking into Kevin's office with his head bowed low and as small as he could make himself, he said to Kevin, "Kevin, I didn't pass. I feel like I've let you down."

In a typical business, an owner might at this point terminate his new employee. Instead, because Kevin knew that God had given him chance after chance, he was willing to give this young man another chance to pass his test.

That story has been simplified, but you get the point. The gospel intersected with Kevin's work and made an impact on this young man that he'll likely never forget.

EXAMPLE 3

Lastly, think about Martin Luther King Jr. There was a time when MLK Jr. was giving a speech and in the middle of it, a man from the crowd jumped up on the stage from which Dr. King was speaking and punched him, smashing him in the face. As *Smithsonian Magazine* reports, the assailant, "Punched him hard. And then punched him again. After the first punch... King just dropped his hands and stood there, and allowed the assailant (who turned out to be a member of the American Nazi Party) to punch him again. And when King's associates tried to step in, King stopped them: 'Don't touch him!' King shouted. 'Don't touch him. We have to pray for him.'"

That day, everyone quickly realized that although King was beaten, he ultimately won the fight.

That is the power of a person who has the gospel of Jesus. Dr. King knew that he had a Savior who loved him even when he was an enemy of God. Dr. King knew that God would rather die for his enemies than hurt them. On the day of that speech, MLK Jr. embodied that gospel reality and showed the world the transformative power of the gospel.

HOW THE GOSPEL CHANGED US

WEEK 2 • DAY 5

In all kinds of ways, the gospel, the reality of the good news of Jesus – forgiveness, Jesus' Lordship, Jesus taking our place – is there to intersect with our everyday lives. It can change how we think of ourselves, how we parent, how we love our spouses, how we work, and so much more!

The gospel changes everything!

“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Mark 10:45

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Which of these stories resonate with you most? Why?

How has the hope of the gospel changed your life already?

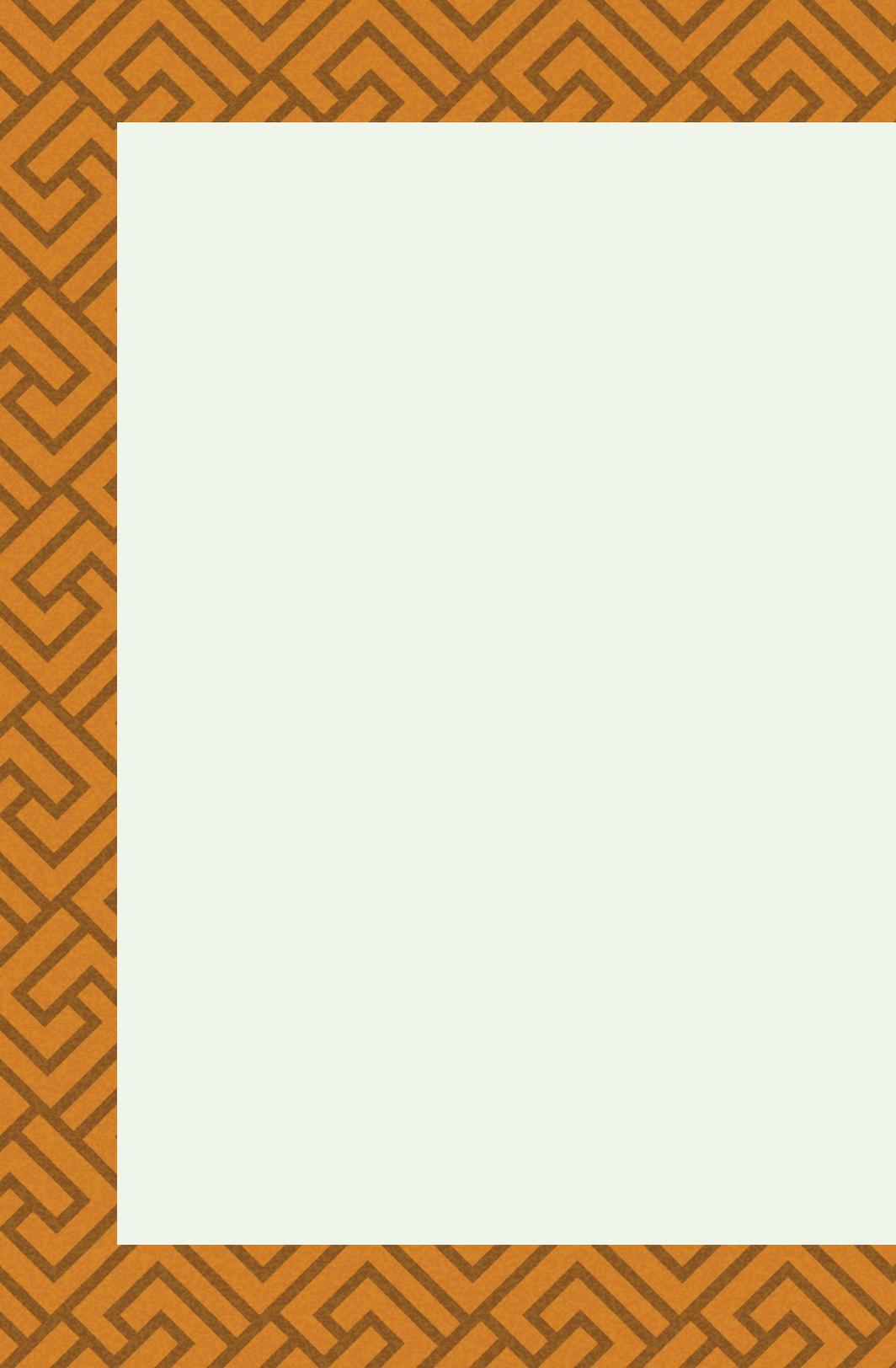
HOW THE GOSPEL CHANGED US
WEEK 2 • DAY 5

Think about the following five areas of your life:

1. Family
2. Work
3. Friends
4. Finances
5. Identity

How might the gospel impact each of these areas of your life?

Write a prayer asking God to transform you by the power of the gospel.



WEEK THREE



KINGDOM

If the message of the Gospel is *Jesus is Lord*, and we are Christ's ambassadors bringing that message to the places we live, the next logical question is, "How, then, shall we live?" Let's start to answer with our next priority: Kingdom. When God created the world, he created it in a state of shalom. "Shalom" is a word that simply means "peace." This peace is not just an absence of fighting or strife, but it's the peace that comes from God's goodness in our lives. Shalom exists when God's peace is fully realized in the earth. Shalom was God's design for creation.

Where'd it go wrong? Sin. When we, God's creation, decided to rebel against him and to go our own way, we lost shalom. Heaven and earth were split from one another. And it wasn't just any split; it was a deep, wide, insurmountable chasm. We used the free will God gave us to deny him and set ourselves up as royalty. We can see the result of that brokenness everywhere we look. The world is hurting, yearning for the shalom that it was designed for.

But the Gospel reminds us there's good news. Really good news. His name is Jesus. Not only did he come to rescue us from our sins to make us right with God, but he came to bring shalom. That's why he gave sight to the blind, gave strength to the legs of the paralyzed, he opened deaf ears, and so much more. He was heaven embodied. Shalom was being restored in Christ Jesus. As Mark tells us...

"Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.'"

Mark 1:14-15

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What is your understanding of shalom? How have you seen the absence of God's shalom in your own life? Where have you seen signs of its presence?

Imagine what it might have been like to grow up in first-century Israel, learning about God's holiness and the divide between us and God's kingdom. What if you'd heard Jesus say, "The kingdom of God is at hand"? How revolutionary must have that sounded? How revolutionary is it in your own life today?

SHALOM

WEEK 3 • DAY 1

Take time to review some of Jesus' miracles (try starting with **John 2:1-11**; **Luke 5:1-11**; **Mark 1:40-45**; **Matthew 8:5-13**; **Matthew 8:23-27**). Look for the restoration of God's shalom in each one. What do you notice about each of these, where shalom was missing, and how Jesus brings shalom? How does any of this apply to your own life?

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

WEEK 3 • DAY 2

While Jesus was praying for and actively bringing the Kingdom, he also taught about it. He compared it to a lot of different things: a hidden treasure (**Matthew 13:44**), a mustard seed (**Matthew 13:31-32**), a landowner (**Matthew 20:1-16**), a fishing net (**Matthew 13:47-50**), a merchant (**Matthew 13:45-46**), just to name a few.

A few more aspects of kingdom to highlight:

- It was prepared for us from the beginning of time. (**Matthew 25:34**)
- It is worth anything we would give up for it. (**Mark 9:47**)
- It is unattainable without sincere faith. (**Mark 10:15, Mark 10:23**)
- When we seek it first, we will be supplied with what we need. (**Luke 12:31**)
- We have been sent by Jesus to proclaim it. (**Luke 9:2, Luke 9:60, Luke 10:9**)

What is “kingdom” and why did Jesus put such an emphasis on it?

Biblically speaking, kingdom refers to a reign, not a realm. The “Kingdom of God” or the “Kingdom of Heaven” isn’t some alternate dimension. It’s for right here on earth.

If you look at the Lord's prayer and how Jesus teaches his disciples to pray (**Matthew 6:10**), you'll see that Jesus connects "your kingdom come" with "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" because one relates directly to the other. To put it simply:

Where the will of God is done, that is where his kingdom has come.

God rules heaven, absolutely and without rival. When Jesus prays for the will of God to be done on earth as it is in heaven, he is praying that God's will and his rule would be established on earth in the same way it is in heaven – not that Christians would occupy more land, resources, or money as in an earthly kingdom. Jesus is establishing an upside-down kingdom. It is not made up of material wealth or territory; it is found anywhere the will of God reigns in the hearts of his people (which we'll talk more about tomorrow).

THE KINGDOM OF GOD
WEEK 3 • DAY 2

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Take some time to read a few of the aforementioned Scripture passages in context with their stories. Notice how Jesus is responding in each one. Apply those responses to your own life. See how you might be inspired by Jesus' view of the kingdom. What analogy or metaphor that Jesus used to describe God's kingdom stood out to you? Why did it resonate? What did it teach you?

What does it mean that Jesus established an upside-down kingdom? How does that impact your understanding of our Kingdom priority?

WHERE THE KINGDOM COMES

WEEK 3 • DAY 3

Yesterday we began talking about how God's kingdom is where God's will is manifested. Today, let's think about *where* God's kingdom comes.

When we apply that to God and his kingdom, we're tempted to begin by thinking really big, right? Obviously, God is large and in charge, right? We know that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and everywhere all at once. But because of this knowledge, we can be tempted to forget about the places where God does not yet rule.

Of course, he reigns over the entire universe, but there's also a sense in which (until Christ returns) Satan rules in this world (see **2 Corinthians 4:4**).

We can get into a rut thinking about how big God's kingdom is and how his rule spans the entire cosmos that we actually miss out on how God's kingdom works itself into our own lives. And how God is looking to take territory away from the devil. For those not under God's rule, Jesus is looking to take ground in their lives for the first time. For those who already claim Christ to be their king, Christ is always looking to take new ground in our hearts and lives. That's why Paul exhorts the Ephesians, "Do not give the devil a foothold" (**Ephesians 4:27**).

God may rule over the universe, but he also deserves to rule over your little corner of the world too.

This can be scary, yes. But remember what we touched on last week? Jesus is the kind of king we can trust. He is good. He is compassionate. He is trustworthy. He is just. There are no skeletons in God's closet.

It's crucial to note that God's kingdom is small enough to be able to start within each and every one of us. If God's kingdom is the place where he reigns, that means your heart can be one of the starting points of where his kingdom intersects with yours.

Jonathan Edwards, an 18th century theologian, said,

"The seeking of the kingdom of God is the chief business of the Christian life."

If the kingdom of God is where the will of God is done, then it should start with us. Is the will of God done in our hearts? Can we look at our hearts and say, "God's kingdom has come, and his will is being done in my heart"?

Read **Ephesians 4:1-32**.

Are there areas in your heart where Jesus does not rule? Jot down some of your thoughts in the provided space.

You might think of the kingdom of God and how it grows as a bullseye, with yourself in the middle. As God's kingdom comes to reign in you (the bullseye), it then has the ability to come into your family (the next ring around the bullseye). Then, it could have the opportunity to be in your extended family (the next ring out). Then, in your neighbors, co-workers, and social groups (the next ring out). And so on and so on. You get the picture.

WHERE THE KINGDOM COMES

WEEK 3 • DAY 3

If you wanted to identify where the kingdom exists, you would need to start with yourself. Then it grows in concentric circles out from you. Those rings are going to be different for each of us based on the influence we have and the people we're in contact with.

Take some time to identify those kingdom circles. Draw a bullseye and label those rings of influence. Your finished 'kingdom map' could have as little as three rings and as many as ten rings.

Think about all the places in your life where you interact and have influence with others: your household, neighborhood, work environment, school, life group, organizations, etc. There isn't a wrong answer, as long as identifying them can help you add intention to doing your part to making God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

As you draw out our 'kingdom map,' ask the Holy Spirit to help you identify one way you can bring God's kingdom to bear in that specific circle - in yourself, in your family, in your neighborhood, etc. Be prepared to share this map with your life group.

“After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two-by-two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.’”

Luke 10:1-2

Imagine your life group as a kingdom community, serving alongside one another to bring shalom to the world around you, focused on seeing God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Imagine how that might change not only the people you would serve, but also each member of your group.

Imagine God’s kingdom coming into your own heart and flooding out of it with power from the Holy Spirit.

Jesus, through his example, shows us how to bring about his kingdom. And, really, it comes as we live in the way of love. The kingdom of God comes through agape. It comes through the giving up of our own wants, ideals, desires, preferences, hopes, and goals so that others can flourish instead of ourselves.

This isn’t some weird form of asceticism; this is following after the footsteps of Jesus. Take some time to view some famous artists’ rendition of Jesus’ crucifixion:

Christ Crucified
Diego Velazquez



The Crucifixion
Matthias Grunewald



Christ on the Cross
Peter Paul Rubens



Christians believe that when we look at Jesus, and Jesus on the cross, we are seeing the character of God on display (see **Hebrews 1:1-4**). And Christ on the cross, like these many paintings show us, does not operate out of coercion or force. Christians follow Jesus' example.

Jesus opted to change the world through co-suffering love. And we do the same.

We choose to empty ourselves. We choose to enter into the mire of burdened people. And we choose to suffer with those around us.

You see, it's easy to equate kingdom with "work" — doing things for God, being active and busy in his service. The problem is that when "work" and "progress" become the goals, then that means that the ends are justified by whatever it takes to get there. It doesn't matter if we bring God's kingdom in a loving way or not. What matters is that the work gets done.

Not true. That doesn't fully encapsulate Jesus' heart for God's kingdom. Jesus, knowing our hearts and minds, wanted to see God's kingdom come to every area within us and in the world, but he wanted it to come about in the right way: through love.

We are workers being sent into the fields of harvest. It's about following in his footsteps, taking on his mindset, and living out Paul's vision for the Christian life when he says, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives within me" (**Galatians 2:20**).

As noted before, **Habakkuk 3** says,

"LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, LORD. Repeat them in our day, in our time make them known."

KINGDOM COMING
WEEK 3 • DAY 4

This is our prayer at The Creek when it comes to our priority of Kingdom. We want to see God's fame and deeds repeated in our day. It starts with God, and it flows through each of us as we keep our eyes out for where he's working and we choose to bring whatever we have to make it happen. We bring about his kingdom through love.

And what's glorious about this is that you're not a lone wolf in this endeavor. You have a pack. We're not asked to do this alone. Just like Jesus sent followers out in pairs and in groups, he's doing the same thing with your group.

Let's do what we can to bring shalom to the world around us and to see God's fame and deeds repeated in our day.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

If you were writing the same prayer that Habakkuk wrote thousands of years ago, how would you write it? In what ways would you want the fame and deeds of God to be known and repeated in our city and in our day?

Ask the Lord of the harvest to send workers into his field, including yourself and your group (aren't you glad God called you to the harvest fields but he didn't call you to do it alone? He's given you a group of people to serve alongside!).

Spend some time in gratitude, thanking him for providing you with people and resources that can be used to bring his kingdom to earth. Look around at the places where he's at work and see with your group how you might join him in that work. Then make a plan to go do that.

We've seen how God's upside-down kingdom works, we've seen that Jesus brought that kingdom wherever he went by serving others, we've mapped out the kingdom for ourselves, and we've seen how we ought to bring about God's kingdom through love.

Now that we know these things, it's time to invite the Holy Spirit to start to conform our desires to seeing God's kingdom come, to seeing his will be done wherever, whenever, and however he desires. But until it is our chief desire, we will probably not choose to spend our time and influence seeing it come true.

Today, let's turn to Jesus' own words to reflect on His prayer. If we can let them sink in, they will properly drive our actions and thoughts.

***“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.”***

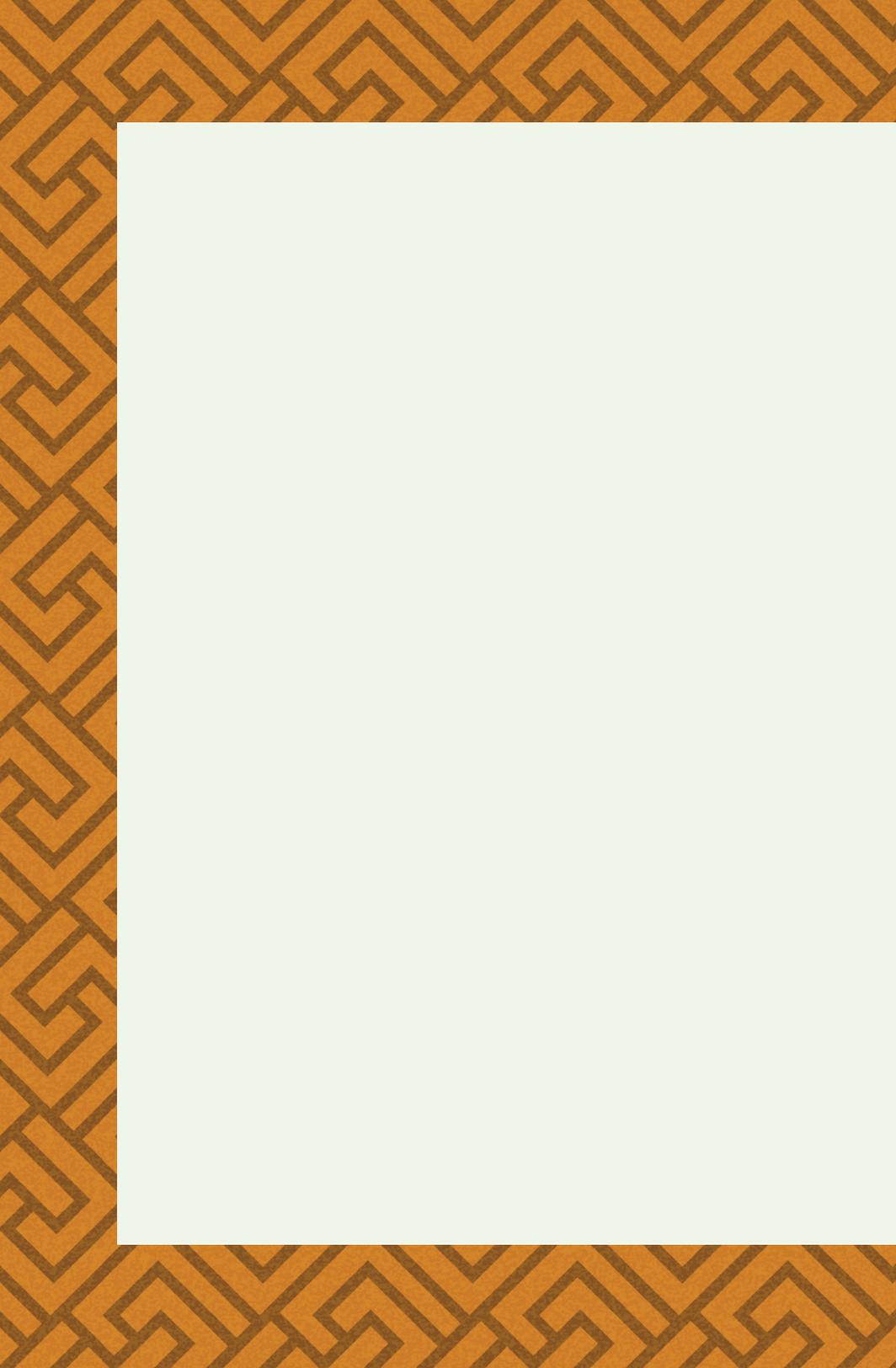
Matthew 6:9-13

Here are a handful of steps to help you do this:

1. Read through the text slowly. Look it up online and try a few different translations, especially if you're already familiar with it.

2. Read it again and use your imagination to capture the heart of Jesus when he asked for God's kingdom to come and his will to be done.
3. Read it again and think about those metaphors Jesus used to describe God's kingdom. What do you picture in your mind? What does God's kingdom—that starts in your own heart—look like?
4. Journal your observations, your thoughts, any invitations that God might be making.
5. Finally, write out your own paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer on the next page. When finished, jot down 2-3 ways you plan on embodying that prayer this week.

How can you take time and make space where you can go away to be with God? In the rush of modern culture, do you have a room, a space, a secret place where you can be alone with God? Have you made time in your crowded calendar to just spend time with Jesus?



WEEK FOUR



SCRIPTURE

SCRIPTURE FOUNDATIONS

WEEK 4 • DAY 1

At The Creek, we believe that the Holy Scriptures—in their entirety—are inspired by God and wholly true and trustworthy in all they affirm. We also believe that all the teachings of the Bible, when properly interpreted, are to be believed and obeyed. This is because the Bible is our supreme authority in every matter of belief and conduct.

So, let's talk about the Bible.

Take a few moments to watch this video from our friends at the Bible Project.



A search for “holy books” on Google will result in more than 300 titles, all claiming to be holy. Have you ever wondered what makes the Bible unique among so many others? What makes the Bible special? What makes it holy?

The Bible is not a single book; it's more like a library. It actually consists of 66 books, written over roughly 2,000 years by 40 different authors from three continents, who wrote in three different languages. It is the best-selling book of all time, with over five billion copies in print.

The Bible, because it is God's Word, is authoritative for our lives, is without error in all it affirms, and *the* key way in which we hear from God and are formed into the image of Jesus with the help of the Holy Spirit.

The Bible you have on your coffee table contains the same Old Testament that Jesus read and taught from in the synagogues. The New Testament you hear read in our church is the same that was circulated among the first churches soon after the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. These facts certainly make the Bible unique, but uniqueness isn't the same thing as holy. What makes the Bible holy? The answer can be summed up with one verse, “*All Scripture is God-breathed*” (**2 Timothy 3:16**).

The Greek word used for the phrase “God-breathed” is *theopneustos*. “Theo” means “God,” and “pneustos” means “to breathe.” Consider the power and uniqueness of the breath of God. We see it in **Genesis 2:7** when God breathed into Adam’s nostrils the breath of life, and he became a living being. The Bible is the living, breathing Word of God and that’s what makes it holy.

There’s no other book like it. No other book contains the very words of God. Throughout the pages of the Bible, God reveals himself as the God who sees, hears, knows, and rescues. The God who sees and hears you is the same God who wants you to see and hear him! How can you and I see and hear God?

The answer may not be as complicated as you think. We see and hear God when we read our Bible. Good news! It is possible to grow in your love for God’s word. It is possible to enjoy reading Scripture, and the best news is this: God will reveal himself and speak to you through his Word.

The number one way God reveals himself is through his written Word—the Bible.

- If we want to know God, we must **know** our Bible.
- If we want to love God more, we must **love** our Bible.
- If we want to hear God speak, we must **hear** our Bible.

Be encouraged today, friend—if we ask God to give us eyes to see him, he will! If we ask God to give us ears to hear him, he will!

SCRIPTURE FOUNDATIONS
WEEK 4 • DAY 1

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

How did you view the Bible growing up? How has your view of the Bible changed over time (if at all)?

What does your rhythm of being in the Bible look like currently?
Are you satisfied? Why or why not?

What are the biggest obstacles preventing you from reading the Bible as much as you would like?

When it comes to the Bible, what other questions do you have that you wish you had better answers for?

DELIGHT, NOT DUTY
WEEK 4 • DAY 2

So we want to acknowledge that the Bible is special amongst other “holy books.” It’s unique. It’s the Word of God. It’s not just one book, but it’s a compilation of 66 different books. It’s more like a library with poetry, narrative, and discourse as the main genres.

But we also want to be a place where we not only affirm what Christians have been saying about the Bible for 2000 years, we also want to be a people **who delight in God’s word and live it out on a daily basis.**

In Dan’s message, he talked about this. And in talking about delighting in God’s Word, he gave us four different metaphors to consider Scripture as. He said the Word of God is like a compass (**Psalm 119:105**), he said it’s like food (**Psalm 119:103; Jeremiah 15:16**), he said it’s like a filter that gives us truth (**John 17:17**), and he said that it’s like pure gold (**Psalm 19:9-10**).

Those are all great reasons to delight in something. If you find something to be useful like a compass, nourishing like food, helpful like a filter, and valuable like gold, then odds are you’ll delight in that something!

Think with me now about the nature of “delight.” The Psalmist says in **Psalm 1:1**,

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers but His delight is in the law of the Lord...”

Why is it that the *blessed* person is the one who *delights* in God’s law? Could it be because the psalmist knows that what you delight in determines the rest of your life? Think about that.

What you delight in will determine where you walk, it will determine where you stand, and it will determine where you sit. Delight is a function of the heart. And your heart determines everything about you. For example...

- If you delight in a hobby (take photography, for example), you will be moved to buy the equipment, buy a nice camera, spend time taking photos, spend time editing photos, download certain programs, talk about and share your photos, and so on.
- If you delight in a sports team, you'll be moved to watch every game, see them in person, buy their gear, and teach your kids about supporting them!
- If you delight in your kids, your life will revolve around them (getting them to practice, taking them on trips, buying them the latest and greatest, etc.).

You get the point. Delight is a function of the heart. And your heart determines everything about you.

That's why the Psalmist says that the "blessed" or "happy" person is he or she who delights in God's "law" or "word." The "not-blessed" person actually ends up, in the Psalmist's point of view, walking, standing, and sitting in places he or she doesn't actually want to be. That person winds up listening to the counsel of the wicked, standing with sinners, and sitting with scoffers.

Our world is full of what the Psalmist calls the "counsel of the wicked."

When I was growing up, I would have known *exactly* what the counsel of the wicked meant. The counsel of the wicked was basically anyone who told me to have sex before marriage, go out and get drunk, or be an atheist. And there may be truth to that, but I think it's more subtle in our culture.

DELIGHT, NOT DUTY
WEEK 4 • DAY 2

All around us (online, on TV, through advertisements, in people's conversations, etc.) we hear our culture telling us to acquire more, be more successful, look younger or sexier, and get even with those who hurt you and by sheer inundation, the world has a way of convincing us of what a blessed and flourishing life looks like.

John Ortberg once gave examples of what the counsel of the wicked would be like in our day. Here's what he said: "The counsel of the wicked tells you..."

- To live as if it were not true that you are an unceasing spiritual being with an eternal destiny in God's universe.
- To believe as if God is not real or present, active in your life.
- To live as if the outcomes of my life are on my shoulders and I control them and so I must have that constant pressure on my life.
- To live as if satisfying my desires and appetites is central to my well-being...and a wise strategy for living."

These are the kinds of things that the writer of this psalm is warning us against. And to avoid going down a path we ultimately do not want to go down, we need to heed his advice and delight in God's Word. Why? Because God's Word reveals reality. It tells us what is truly true about life, faith, meaning, existence, purpose, God, mankind, evil, suffering, and salvation.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What is something or who is someone you delight in? How has your delight in that something or someone moved you to rearrange your life in practical ways?

How would you describe how you view God's Word right now? Would you say that you delight in it? Why or why not? If you delight in it, what helped to get you there? If you don't delight in it, what's making delight hard?

Which of the different examples of "counsel of the wicked" resonates with you the most? Why?

SCRIPTURAL EXPECTATIONS

WEEK 4 • DAY 3

This week, we began thinking about our priority of Scripture by talking about what's special about God's Word. On Day 2, we talked about delighting in God's Word. Today, let's talk about what happens when the Scriptures that we are supposed to delight in don't *feel* very delightful.

Yesterday, in one of your reflection questions, you had a moment to consider if you experience delight in the Scriptures or not. And you also had some space to reflect on and why or why not.

Whatever your answer was, oftentimes delight is found missing in someone's time reading or studying the Bible for a couple reasons:

1. Faulty expectations of the Bible
2. Uncertainty with how to engage the Bible

Today, we'll look at the expectations we bring to the Bible and what expectations are appropriate to have. Tomorrow, we'll look a little closer at how we can engage with the Scriptures.

Many times in life, feelings of frustration or defeat can surge up within us when we have an expectation of something but that expectation is not met.

If you've ever grown frustrated with a person, it's probably because that person didn't meet some spoken or unspoken expectation you held. If you've ever grown frustrated with an object (say your car not starting), it's probably because you had an expectation that it would start when you turned the key over in the ignition.

So, think for a moment...what are your expectations of the Bible? When you come to do your study or devotional time, what are you expecting out of that time? Jot down some of your thoughts in the provided space.

Many times, we can get frustrated with the Bible when we view **what it is** and **what its purpose is** incorrectly.

C.S. Lewis once wrote,

“The first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from a corkscrew to a cathedral is to know WHAT it is—what it was intended to do and how it is meant to be used. The first thing is to understand the object before you.”

And he’s so right. We will delight in our corkscrews when we come to them knowing precisely what they are and what their purpose is. We probably won’t find them very delightful if we expect that corkscrew to hold a painting to the wall like a nail or regular screw. If we come to a cathedral thinking that it’s there for our entertainment, then we will be left wanting. It was built to facilitate worship, not amusement.

SCRIPTURAL EXPECTATIONS

WEEK 4 • DAY 3

So, if you had to think about what the Bible is, how would you answer that? Note your response in the provided space.

What is the Bible?

Now, if you had to say what the purpose of the Bible is, what would you say? Note your response in the provided space.

What is the purpose of the Bible?

Sometimes people think that...

- The Bible's primary purpose is FOR changing our behavior, so it IS a divine rule book.
- The Bible's primary purpose is FOR teaching theology, so it IS a theology answer book.
- The Bible's primary purpose is FOR teaching us a kind of mathematical, scientific truth, so it IS a science textbook.

The list could go on. The hard thing is that there are semblances of truth in these visions of what the Bible is FOR. We absolutely learn God's rules for living, we absolutely encounter good theology, and we most certainly come to God's Word to hear God's voice.

But the Bible isn't primarily a divine rule book, a theology answer book, a divine love letter, or a science textbook. Rather, the Bible is a story.

The Bible is a story.

Take a few moments to watch another video from our friends at the Bible Project.



So, the Bible is a story. And, specifically, the Bible is a story that points us to Jesus. Jesus, in fact, says about as much in **John 5:39**. He says to the Pharisees, *"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; but it is they that testify about me!"*

When we search the Scriptures looking primarily for anything other than Jesus, we're bound to run into some problems. Like John the Baptist, the Bible points us to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (**John 1:29**).

SCRIPTURAL EXPECTATIONS
WEEK 4 • DAY 3

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

How is this way of looking at the Bible's primary purpose different from what you had thought previously or had thought growing up?

How is that the same or different from the video you just watched from the Bible Project?

For today's devotional time, we're going to talk about a few different ways you can engage with Scripture. Like a piece of good music or art, you don't need to know the ins and outs of its background to enjoy it and allow it to move you. Similarly, you don't necessarily need to know the language, the history, or the culture that surrounds whatever Bible passage you happen to be reading in order to get something from it or to allow it to challenge you.

You have to allow God's Spirit to move in you as you read. There are multiple ways you can do this.

Followers of Jesus throughout history have been reading, meditating on, and re-reading the Scriptures, and have found several ways to meet God in his Word. Below are several ways you can engage with the Bible individually, as a family, or even as a community.

The goal for today is to read through some of the different ways to engage with the Bible and pick one to do that is less familiar to you. Then, when you go to your life group next week, you can share which one you chose and what that was like!

Without further ado, here are six ways that you can engage Scripture:

1. READ SCRIPTURE ALOUD AS COMMUNITY

Many different people engage with Scripture in many different ways today – some people read it first thing in the morning, other people read it at their favorite local coffee shop, and still others listen to it on an app. When the early church first started engaging with the Scriptures, they didn't even have their copies of the Bible. In postures of humility and surrender, they would listen to large portions of it being read aloud in community. To practice this way of engaging the text...

GET COMFORTABLE

You'll be reading for the next 20 or so minutes, so make sure that you're in a place, position, and posture to be still, attentive, and open to God.

ESTABLISH THE READER(S)

Decide who will read it. One person can read the whole thing, a few of you can split it, or (what we would recommend) each person can read some of it until the whole passage is read. Spend a moment to decide how you will break up the text and who will read.

INVITE THE HOLY SPIRIT

Take a deep breath and settle in. Have one person invite the Holy Spirit to help you all to listen in a posture of surrender and to form you by what is read.

READ

Spend time to read the entire text in one sitting aloud together.

SILENCE & PRAYER

After the last verse is read, don't rush onto the next part. Take a moment in silence and stillness, letting the words reverberate inside your mind and soul. After a bit, have someone pray to thank God for the experience of this practice.

DEBRIEF

When you have finished in prayer, discuss what stood out, what your experience was like, what new thoughts and insights you have from this practice.

Some good Scriptures to read aloud are **Ruth, Esther, Isaiah 40, Psalm 139, Matthew 5-7, Philipians, 1 John**, and **James**.

2. LECTIO DIVINA

Psalm 1 says, *“Blessed is the man... whose delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night.”* Meditating on Scripture is different than studying Scripture. In studying, we are coming to the text to learn. In meditating, we are coming to meet with Jesus.

To do this, followers of Jesus have been practicing a discipline called Lectio Divina for many years. In Lectio Divina, the Jesus followers allow the Scriptures (in cooperation with the Spirit) to lead them into further intimacy with God as they move slowly, carefully, and repeatedly through the same text.

Here’s how to do it:

PREPARE

Before beginning, be sure to turn your phone off and leave it another room. Situate yourself comfortably in a quiet, solitary place. Calm your body and quiet your mind before God as you work to prepare your heart to receive what God has spoken through the text, and to respond accordingly. Finally, invite the Holy Spirit to guide your thinking and feeling as you read.

LISTEN

Read the passage. Sit quietly for a moment before you begin. Ask the Holy Spirit to speak and show you what the Lord wants for you in this passage. Mark words or phrases that stand out as you read.

LINGER

Read the passage again out loud. Are the same words or phrases you marked the first time still standing out? Write them down. How do these words or phrases apply to your life right now?

LEARN

As you read the text for a third time, ask yourself, “How is God inviting me to respond? What does he want me to learn from this?” Write out what comes to mind.

LEARN MORE

Read the passage one last time and answer these questions:

- Why is God showing me this now?
- What does this mean for my life?
- What needs to change in my life?
- How do I need to live differently?

Some good passages to begin with Lectio Divina are Scriptures like **Exodus 32, 1 Kings 1-2, Daniel 6, John 4, John 9, Acts 3-4**, et al.

3. IMAGINATIVE PRAYER

Another way Jesus followers have been engaging with the Scriptures is through a practice called Imaginative Prayer. In this discipline, readers of the text actually imagine themselves in its story, encountering what is being written through their senses and creativity. Here's how to engage with the Bible in this way:

Read a portion of the Bible.

Visualize what is happening in the story. Take some time to imagine what the scene was like. Listen to the words spoken in the text again as if you were one of the first hearers of them.

Now begin to imagine the scene as if you were right in the middle of it.

- *Who are you in the story?*
- *What do you see?*
- *What do you hear?*
- *What do you smell?*
- *What's your position?*
- *Who else is there with you?*
- *What are you feeling?*
- *What's the mood of the crowd?*
- *What is your response to all you experience?*
- *What questions do you have?*
- *What fears do you have?*

Don't worry about historical accuracy. Just allow God to bring the story to life. The people we read about in Scripture were real people who walked the earth and had feelings and thoughts much like ours.

Once finished imagining, ask yourself: *"What am I noticing from my responses?"*

As you listen, notice how you sense God inviting you to respond. Ask, *"What are God's invitations from this story for me today?"*

Some good passages to begin with Imaginative Prayer are Scriptures like **Genesis 16, Joshua 2-4, 1 Samuel 17, Mark 5, Luke 7, Acts 17:22-34**, et al.

4. PRAYING SCRIPTURE

A fourth way that you can engage with James' letter is by praying it. To engage with the Scriptures this way, slowly read a text multiple times. Then, after finishing that section of Scripture, write out a prayer that expresses what that portion of Scripture prompted within you.

For example, if you were to read **Mark 10:13-16**, where Jesus says "Let the children come to me..." you might wind up writing a prayer like the following:

*Father, you are indeed father
to all the children of the
world. Your kingdom was
made for people such as
these. Help me to become
like a child—trusting,
surrendered, and dependent
on you, O God. For you are
my Provider, my Deliverer, my
Help, and my Refuge.*

Your prayer could be longer than that or shorter. There is no right or wrong way to go about it! The key is to slowly and prayerfully engage the text and to be real and honest before God.

5. MEMORIZATION

One of the best ways to engage with Scripture is by memorizing it.

Christian philosopher Dallas Willard writes that,

*“Our concentration on Jesus will be strengthened by memorization of great passages (not just verses) from Scripture. Passages such as **Matthew 7, John 14-17, 1 Corinthians 13, and Colossians 3** are terrific ‘soul growing’ selections. This practice of memorizing the Scriptures is more important than a daily quiet time, for as we fill our minds with these great passages and have them available for our meditation, ‘quiet time’ takes over the entirety of our lives.”*

God once spoke to Joshua and told him,

*“This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success” (**Joshua 1:8, NASB**).*

One of the ways we can follow in Joshua’s footsteps is by memorizing God’s Word.

6. STUDY

Another way that you can engage with the Bible is through the practice of study. This is the practice where we primarily like to land as Westerners, which has both positives and negatives. But this practice is intended to help the learner engage their mind and focus their attention on the Scriptures so as to help them understand and apply biblical truth to the entirety of their lives. There are three main steps to Bible study:

OBSERVATION

In this step of study we are asking, *"What do I see in this text?"* This might involve asking questions like:

- Who is involved in this text?
- What is actually happening in this text?
- What places or buildings are present in this text?
- What time period is this text?
- What metaphors, analogies, or commands are present in this text?

INTERPRETATION

In this step of study we are asking, *"What does this mean?"* This might involve asking questions like:

- What is the author who wrote this text trying to convey?
- What would the hearers of this text have thought upon reading this text?
- What does the historical/cultural background of this text have to do with its interpretation?
- What kind of literature is this text? How does that shape how this text should be read?
- What does this text mean in its literary context?
- What do these individual words or phrases mean?

APPLICATION

In this step of study we are asking, “*What do I do?*” This might involve asking questions like:

- Is there an example to follow? Or *not* to follow?
- Is there a command to adhere to?
- How does this shape my current reality practically?
- What do I do as a result of this story?

SUGGESTED RESOURCES TO HELP STUDY THE BIBLE

- Check out Bible Project! bibleproject.com
- A helpful online tool is blueletterbible.org
- N.T. Wright’s *For Everyone* Commentary Series: Choose a book of the New Testament and pick up one of NT Wright’s short *For Everyone* commentaries on that book. These commentaries are short, accessible, and could be read in small sections each day.
- Find a good study Bible. A couple good ones are the *ESV Study Bible* and the *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Commentary*.
- You could also buy a Bible Dictionary, other Bible commentaries, or other Bible background books such as (*The New Testament in it’s World* by N.T. Wright and Michael Bird).

In Trevin Wax's book *This Is Our Time*, he shares the story of the Romanian people at the closing of World War 2. He shares how at the end of WW2, the Communist party of Romania seized power. They ended up rigging their election and then they moved quickly to ensure that no one could stop them from being the ones large and in charge.

In order to consolidate their power, the Communist party did two things: Ie think that...

1. The new regime enacted a new security force that led to unbelievable repression.
2. They changed the history books.

The revolutionaries knew that the way to consolidate and maintain their power was to control the way the Romanian story was told. It wasn't enough to flex their political muscle; if they were to succeed long-term, they would need to capture the Romanian imagination. And so they decided to retell Romania's story and rewire the Romanian people, to make clear that the Communists were the heroes, not the bad guys.

By the mid-1980s, electricity and gasoline were rationed and food was scarce. The government has stepped up their surveillance by hiring more secret police.

At the same time, all across the country of Romania secret gatherings began to take place: "video nights" they were called. The power in these "video nights" wasn't in that they provided the Romanian people an escape from their harsh lives for two hours every so often. Rather, the power was in what these movies revealed about life outside of Romania. An uncensored, foreign film punctured holes in the Iron Curtain and allowed Romanians to peer into another world. Women saw western fashions for the first time. Men saw new kinds of cars on the street. Everyone who saw the films were astounded at what life looked like on the "outside."

As one Romanian noted, "The films changed your perspective on life...they changed what you were looking for, what you wanted. You developed through the films." Just a few years after these video nights became common in Romania, the Iron Curtain fell and the Romanians deposed their dictator. On the streets, a different vision of the world won. A different future took hold.

As Christians, we need to realize that the Scriptures are to us what those "video nights" were to the Romanians. For us, the Scriptures peel back the curtain of the counsel of the wicked and reveal reality. God's Word isn't just fun to read because, like a good history book, it contains interesting stories or good historical information. God uses his Word to mold us to look, live, and love like Jesus.

For Christians, one of the ways we pursue formation unto Jesus is by engaging in God's Word. We allow the authority of God to enter our lives through the living and active Word of God.

Before we ever think about going off to thump someone in the head with our Bible verses, the Bible is something we allow to challenge us. We read Scripture not to arm ourselves with Bible-verse-bullets in case we ever feel threatened by "culture," but to have our own lives reordered with God's wisdom (see **Romans 12:1-2; Psalm 1; Psalm 19; Psalm 119; 2 Timothy 3:16-4:4**).

Eugene Peterson once said,

“Christians don’t simply learn or study or use Scripture; we assimilate it. We take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into acts of love, cups of cold water, missions into all the world, healing and evangelism and justice in Jesus’ name, hands raised in adoration of the Father, feet washed in company with the Son.”

If it weren’t for the video nights in Communist Romania, those people would have never known what life looked like “on the outside.” But because of those video nights, the Romanians had a picture of reality and that picture of **reality** prompted them to live and think differently.

As Christians, we come to the Scriptures to meet with God and to have our worldview and lives shaped by them so that we might become a transformed people who love God, love people, make disciples, and connect people to Jesus.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

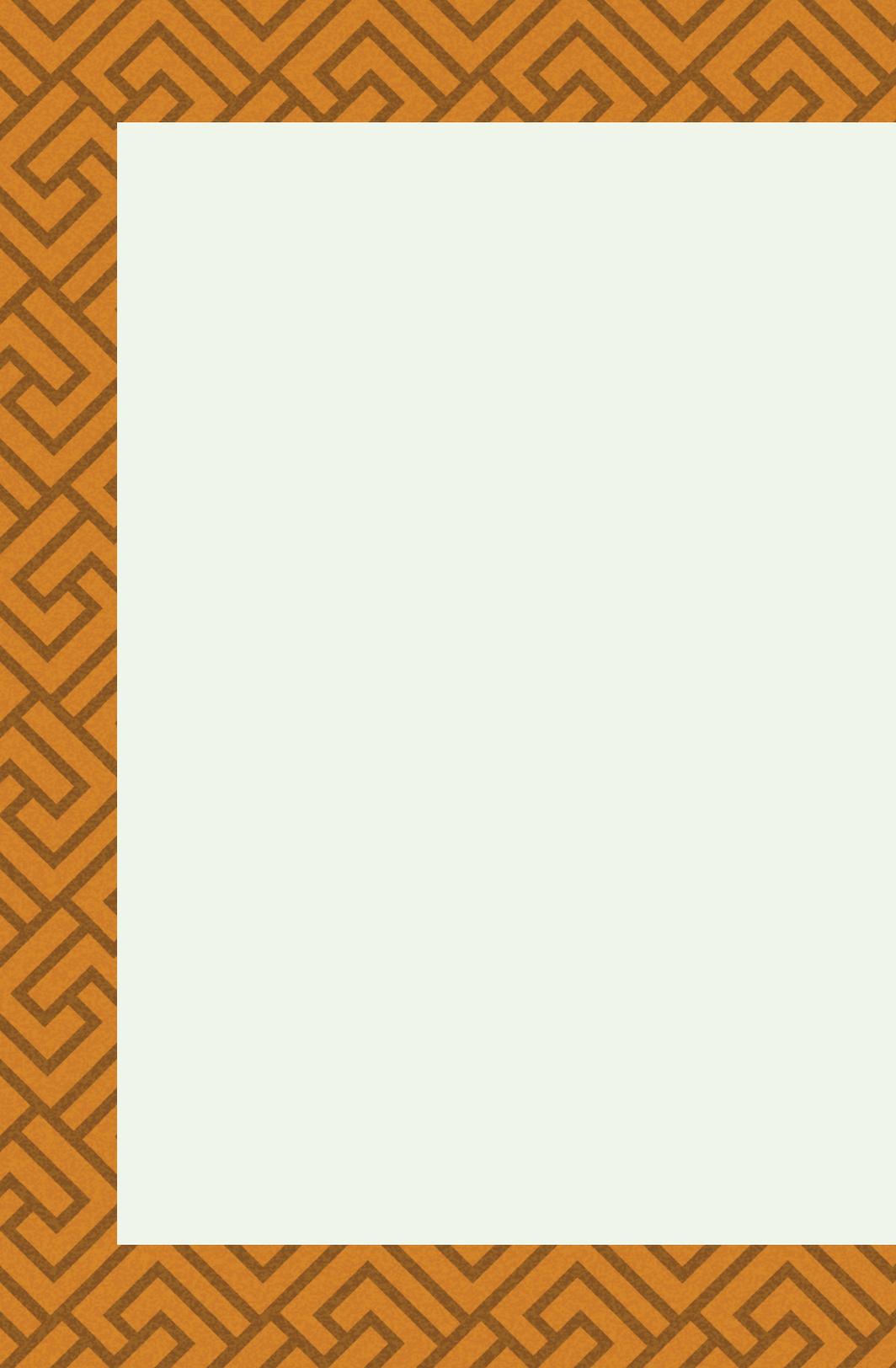
How have the Scriptures been influential in your discipleship to Jesus?

In what ways have you seen the culture around you trying to mold you into its story? How has steeping yourself in the Scriptures shone a light “from the outside” on your situation? What was that experience like? How did you wrestle with that tension?

How often would you say you intentionally “audit” your life to make sure your worldview and habits are aligned with God’s vision for your life according to the Bible? In what ways can you be more intentional in doing so?

SHAPED BY SCRIPTURE
WEEK 4 • DAY 5

Which of the different ways of “engaging with Scripture” are you going to use to help shape and mold you to look, live, and love like Jesus? What is your plan to put that into practice?



WEEK FIVE



IDENTITY

FULLY KNOWN & FULLY LOVED
WEEK 5 • DAY 1

Who are you? Not a question we'd like to be asked early on in a new relationship. We're comfortable with "what do you do?" and other pleasantries, but the question of "who we are" requires a more substantial answer.

This week we'll be discussing our church's fifth priority: *identity*.

So many things compete to find their way into the fabric of our identity. Sometimes the message is "I am what I do" or "I am what I have." Other times it's "I am who others say I am" or even "I am who I say I am." Our culture, life experiences, and the messages we received along the way all contribute to the way we view and ultimately define ourselves. Maybe one of these messages resonates more deeply than the others. Maybe they all have a voice.

All of us long to be fully known, to be told we have value, to be loved as we are, but underneath it all, we fear it might never happen. So, we parade around, silently begging for the approval of others or trying to convince ourselves that we really don't care — when we really do. We produce and perform, doing our song and dance, hoping someone will really see us, all while fearing we might never be known, valued, and loved at all.

We wrestle with belonging. We fear we aren't enough and never will be. We fear failure because if we fail, then who are we? We grapple with putting forth enough effort to be valuable in God's eyes, as though we have to earn his love. The enemy whispers that it's impossible for us to be loved in our broken state. He hisses, "You're not worth anything." And we believe it. We may believe God knows us, but it's difficult to imagine God actually knowing us and loving us anyway. It seems too good to be true.

But it is true. God made a way for us to step off the stage. We no longer have to live afraid. The God of the universe knows you fully and delights in how he made you. You are the beloved of God — fully known and fully loved.

Read these words by Henri Nouwen in his book, *Life of the Beloved*:

"Aren't you like me, hoping that some person, thing, or event will come along to give you that final feeling of inner well-being you desire? Don't you often hope: 'May this book, idea, course, trip, job, country, or relationship fulfill my deepest desire.' But as long as you are waiting for that mysterious moment you will go on running helter-skelter, always anxious and restless, always lustful and angry, never fully satisfied. You know that this is the compulsiveness that keeps us going and busy, but at the same time makes us wonder whether we are getting anywhere in the long run. This is the way to spiritual exhaustion and burn-out. This is the way to spiritual death.

Well, you and I don't have to kill ourselves. We are the Beloved. We are intimately loved long before parents, teachers, spouses, children, and friends loved or wounded us. That's the truth of our lives."

Today we're going to sit with the truth found in **Psalm 139**. This may be a passage you've heard before and it may be a brand-new Scripture for you. Either way, take a moment to invite God to show you something new about your identity in the words you read today.

FULLY KNOWN & FULLY LOVED
WEEK 5 • DAY 1

Throughout the Psalms you will see the word *selah* printed in your Bible. The Psalms were a songbook of sorts for God's people. This word indicated a place where, as you read the text, you would take a pause or a break.

As you read through this text, take a *selah* or a short pause between each stanza or paragraph as it's listed in your Bible. Ask God to show you what he'd like to say to you through the passage.

Read **Psalm 139:1-16**.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

How do you feel as you read this text? Is it easy to believe God loves you even though he knows you so well?

What do you think about God knowing you the way this Psalm describes?

How is God inviting you to think differently about your identity from this passage?

Allow these questions to dig under the surface a bit. Invite God to show you what's underneath.

Take one last *selah* or pause, inviting God's presence to anchor you in this moment. Thank him for his love, grace, and the truth that you are the beloved of God.

THE CURE FOR SINNERS, PART 1

WEEK 5 • DAY 2

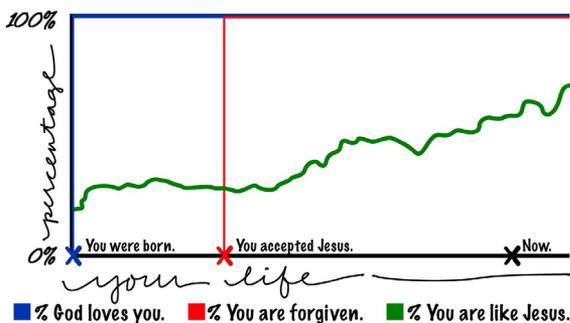
As we're building a complete picture of our identity, it's important to understand that our identity is a double-sided coin. Just like we discovered yesterday, we are God's beloved. He knows us intimately and deeply loves us. This truth is woven throughout the Bible. At the same time, however, we must be honest about the part sin plays in our identities. We are both the beloved *and* sinners in desperate need of a Savior. Today we're going to look at how sin plays a role in our identities.

Our culture's system of economics says we should get what we deserve, be paid whatever wages we have earned. The book of Romans tells us we have earned death because of our sin (**Romans 6:23**). This is where God's economy differs from ours. He exchanges the life of his son simply because of the worth he sees in us, because of his love for us. Christ demonstrates his love for us by dying in a heinous manner while we are still sinners (**Romans 5:8**). He went to the cross knowing we would choose sin. *Love held him there*. Understanding why he would do it is difficult. We don't love that way, but God does.

God gave us a gift of grace, unmerited favor. We do not deserve forgiveness or acceptance, but God gives it anyway. It is a free gift, available to all who believe in Jesus. We are saved by his grace, not by anything we have ever done (**Ephesians 2:8**). *Nothing* we can do will ever erase our sin and shame. Our sin can *only* be covered by the blood of Christ.

We regularly confuse God's level of love, acceptance, and forgiveness toward us with our rate of growth as we come to look more like Jesus. We misunderstand, thinking they are somehow dependent upon one another. They are not. This mix-up leads to confusion and prevents us from understanding how God loves us.

Take a look at this explanation:



Notice the blue line measuring God's love for us. Before you were born, out of love, God knit you together (**Psalm 139**). You bear his image and his likeness. When he formed you, he loved you. Before you were even born. Before you took a breath. Before you sinned and then even when you did. There is nothing you could ever do to make God love you more. There is nothing you could ever do to make God love you less. Ever. That line is non-negotiable. It's not up to us. It originates with a loving, gracious Father and is truly unconditional — not because we are lovable, but because it's God's nature to love (**1 John 4:8**).

God loves us, but sin forges a great chasm. Our holy God cannot be in the presence of sin. We need something — someone — to bridge the divide between a sinful people and a holy God. We need a cure. A cure that is two-fold is what God provides — a *double cure*. Today, we'll look at the first part of the two-sided cure and tomorrow we'll examine the second.

The first part of the cure we need is forgiveness. We need our sins erased and atoned for. Examine the line calculating our level of forgiveness. When we choose Jesus as Savior and surrender our lives to him, we jump from the 0 percent mark on the forgiven scale to the 100 percent mark on the scale — no stops along the way. The shift is drastic and radical. This forgiveness is only possible because of the cross.

THE CURE FOR SINNERS, PART 1
WEEK 5 • DAY 2

There is no condemnation for those in Christ, only forgiveness, acceptance, love (**Romans 8:1**). His work on the cross takes away our sin and shame. Period. Nothing is required on our part to receive forgiveness other than confessing we are sinners in need of a Savior and choosing to accept the gift of grace Jesus offers by being baptized into him. His pain covers our shame. Completely.

Read slowly through **Ephesians 1:3-14**.

What do you see about your identity as you read through this passage?

Read through the passage a second time. As you read, list out the words or phrases that define who you are and what you've been given in Christ. What do you notice about this list? Is it easy for you to live out?

Do you struggle with believing you've been 100% forgiven?
Why or why not?

What do you think about knowing you are 100% loved by God without any wavering on his part? Do you ever struggle to believe this truth? If so, how would your life change if you fully believed God loved you always?

THE CURE FOR SINNERS, PART 2

WEEK 5 • DAY 3

Yesterday we looked at how God loves us, how we are forgiven, and how we needed a double-cure for sin that God so lovingly provided. Today we will continue to dig into the second part of the cure for sin — *sanctification*.

Remember our graph from yesterday? Take a look at the squiggly, unpredictable green line. Notice its ups and downs. Do you see how there really is no pattern to it, no real rhyme or reason?

God desires to grow and change us. He longs for us to be formed into the image of Jesus. This line is the gradual, slow process moving us from our sinful state to looking more like Jesus. It measures our growth and spiritual maturity. This line is called *sanctification*, or the process of becoming holy — becoming more like Christ.

The problem we have, though, is we often mistake this unpredictable line for God's love and acceptance of us or our measure of forgiveness in Christ. It's not tied to either of those lines whatsoever.

When we measure our worth and forgiveness based on this line, we flirt with disaster. If we are moving in the right direction, we begin to think we are somehow more valuable than someone who might not be as far along as we are. We might judge them, elevating our own worth, allowing pride and self-righteousness to creep in. The opposite can also be true. If we believe others are further along in the journey, then we think we are somehow less valuable to God. Neither of these is true, and both are playgrounds for shame. Becoming more like Jesus is a slow journey with ups and downs. You can take steps forward and just as quickly spiral down again. All of us struggle in it. Sometimes we do it well, and other times, not so much. Basing our value and worth on this line will prove uncertain every time, leading us to an identity rooted in our performance and not in the love of God.

Sin is separation from God. Whatever your sin is, it separates you from God. God has no degrees of separation based on your offense; every single sin ever committed requires the exact same price to redeem it. No sin is exempt from needing the blood of Jesus to restore it. The same covering is required for us all.

Just as in the beginning when sin entered, God made a sacrifice and a covering for Adam and Eve; Jesus gave his life to cover you and remove completely the shame of your sin, once and for all (**Hebrews 10:10**). When we believe it takes our work and effort to earn God's love, we begin to believe we had something to do with our redemption. *"God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it"* (**Ephesians 2:8-9**). We cannot take credit for the grace we've been shown. God gifted grace. It's not a reward for good behavior. If it were, you better believe we'd all be thinking more about how great our performance was instead of how remarkable our God is. He is the source of it all, and we are the recipients of the gift.

Read **Ephesians 2:1-13**.

As you read, answer these questions.

What was your life like before Christ? What did it look like to be "dead in your transgressions...when you followed the ways of this world"?

THE CURE FOR SINNERS, PART 2
WEEK 5 • DAY 3

When was the last time you felt the full weight of your sin, nailing Christ to the cross? In order to fully understand the gift we've been given as beloved sons and daughters of God, we must fully understand the weight of our sinful nature and what it did to Christ on the cross. Take a few moments to reflect on how Christ suffered to give you the gift of grace so freely. What is your response to that gift? Write a prayer to Jesus in response.

How do you view grace? Because of God's great love for you, you've been made alive in Christ. You've been forgiven, raised up with Christ, and seated with him. How do you feel in response to that truth?

If the definition of grace is “unmerited favor,” how have you seen “unmerited favor” poured out by God into your life?

How does it change things knowing grace is a gift of God, something you cannot take credit for? Have you ever tried to take credit for your own salvation or tried to earn God’s love or favor? What was that like?

What would you like to say to Jesus in response to this passage? Take a few moments to pray a prayer in response to **Ephesians 2:1-13**. You can even take a few moments to read through the passage again before you pray.

As we continue our conversation about identity, examining the truth Scripture gives, let's talk about an important word that contributes greatly in forming our identity in Christ.

Righteousness.

It's a word I'm sure you've heard before, but it may very well be difficult to explain to someone else.

Now, before you just put down your pen and Bible, quitting altogether, let's look at what Tim Keller has to say about this "churchy" word. I think you'll find it very interesting and vital to the priority we're discussing this week.

"Now the trouble with the word righteousness is, I'm a person (a regular American type), and when I think of the word righteousness, right away the first thing I think of is a stiff, starched shirt... That's not really it. In the Bible, the word righteousness is a relational word. It's a word that really means to be right with somebody. It means to be received. It means to find favor. It means to be welcomed, and the opposite of righteousness is not immorality. The opposite of righteousness is rejection."

Keller goes on to list examples of what this "rejection" looks like. He includes being dressed inappropriately for some official occasion. When you're wearing inappropriate attire, you feel naked, vulnerable, anxious. It seems as though you're not "right" with the host or the others at the event. Keller also uses the example of a job interview. At every job interview, they are looking at your attire, your references, your resume, the answers to your questions. They are looking at every little thing about you they can.

Ultimately what we need is a verdict. We want to know where we stand. Are we “right” with others? We’re looking to others to find the answer and to give us a verdict.

Keller tells the danger of this others-referenced verdict:

“What happens is over the years, thousands and thousands and thousands of these verdicts are coming in, and they accumulate. As time goes on, you develop your own standards for what you believe will make you acceptable. You see, righteousness is a sense of being acceptable...It starts to come on in, and it becomes part of that standard of righteousness...You can shrug off a lot of things people say, but over the years what your parents have said, what your friends have said, what those people who didn’t want to marry you said, what those people who turned you down said, or the people who told you did a great job at the audition or in the contest or on the job application, all those things have sunk in, and you have come up with your own standards... This is what sin is. Sin is we will go and establish our own righteousness. We’ll say, ‘If I achieve that standard, if I can do that, then I know I exist. Then I know I’m acceptable in my own sight and in the sight of significant others and, in some general way, in the sight of God.’ Everybody does that. Everybody has a set of standards. Everybody goes about seeking to establish their own righteousness.”

HIDDEN IN CHRIST
WEEK 5 • DAY 4

Paul, of all people, had every right to brag about the standards his life met, but he had something to say about his own righteousness.

Read **Philippians 3:3-11**.

How do you respond to Keller's definition of righteousness as you read this passage?

Read through the passage again, putting yourself in the place of Paul. How do you "hustle" for your own righteousness? Where do you need to lay down seeking to establish your own righteousness and accept the righteousness you've been given in Christ?

Is there anywhere you need to be “made right” with God? Is there an area of sin in your life that needs to be confessed? Take a moment to bring it before our loving God, inviting his forgiveness — the gift that is already yours in Christ.

Read **Philippians 3:3-11** one last time.

Spend time praying the words of this Scripture as you invite God to redefine your identity as the beloved in him.

WHO DOES GOD SAY I AM?

WEEK 5 • DAY 5

A big part of fighting and winning the battle with our identity comes in understanding who God says you *really* are. Knowing you belong to Christ and you are his own child brings a freedom no other truth can.

Take some time today to read through this list of statements and the scripture references rooting them in truth. Allow these truths to really soak into your soul. Ask yourself if you really believe this is true. Spend some time writing your responses to these truths under. Be honest with God. Be honest with yourself. You may be struggling to believe some of them. Tell him. Ask for help understanding what he says about who you are. Spend time thanking him for his word and his truth.

WHO YOU ARE IN CHRIST

Truth: I am a child of God.

Jesus came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. (John 1:10-12 NLT)

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are (1 John 3:1a NIV)

My Response:

Truth: I have been bought with a price. I belong to God.

You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20 NLT)

Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are mine. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. Others were given in exchange for you. I traded their lives for yours because you are precious to me. You are honored, and I love you. (Isaiah 43:1, 3-4 NLT)

My Response:

Truth: I have been adopted as God's child.

Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son. (Ephesians 1:4-6 MSG).

My Response:

WHO DOES GOD SAY I AM?
WEEK 5 • DAY 5

Truth: *I have been redeemed and forgiven of all my sins.*

For he has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins. (Colossians 1:13-14 NLT)

My Response:

Truth: *I am complete in Christ.*

For in Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body. So, you also are complete through your union with Christ, who is the head over every ruler and authority. For you were buried with Christ when you were baptized. And with him you were raised to new life because you trusted the mighty power of God, who raised Christ from the dead (Colossians 2:9-10, 12 NLT).

My Response:

Truth: I cannot be separated from the love of God.

I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39 NLT)

My Response:

Truth: I have not been given a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power, love, and a sound mind.

For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline. So never be ashamed to tell others about our Lord...With the strength God gives you, be ready to suffer for the sake of the Good News (2 Timothy 1:7-8 NLT).

My Response:

WHO DOES GOD SAY I AM?
WEEK 5 • DAY 5

Truth: I am God's workmanship and am wonderfully made.

For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago. (Ephesians 2:10 NLT)

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. (Psalms 139:13-16)

My Response:

Truth: I may approach God with freedom and confidence.

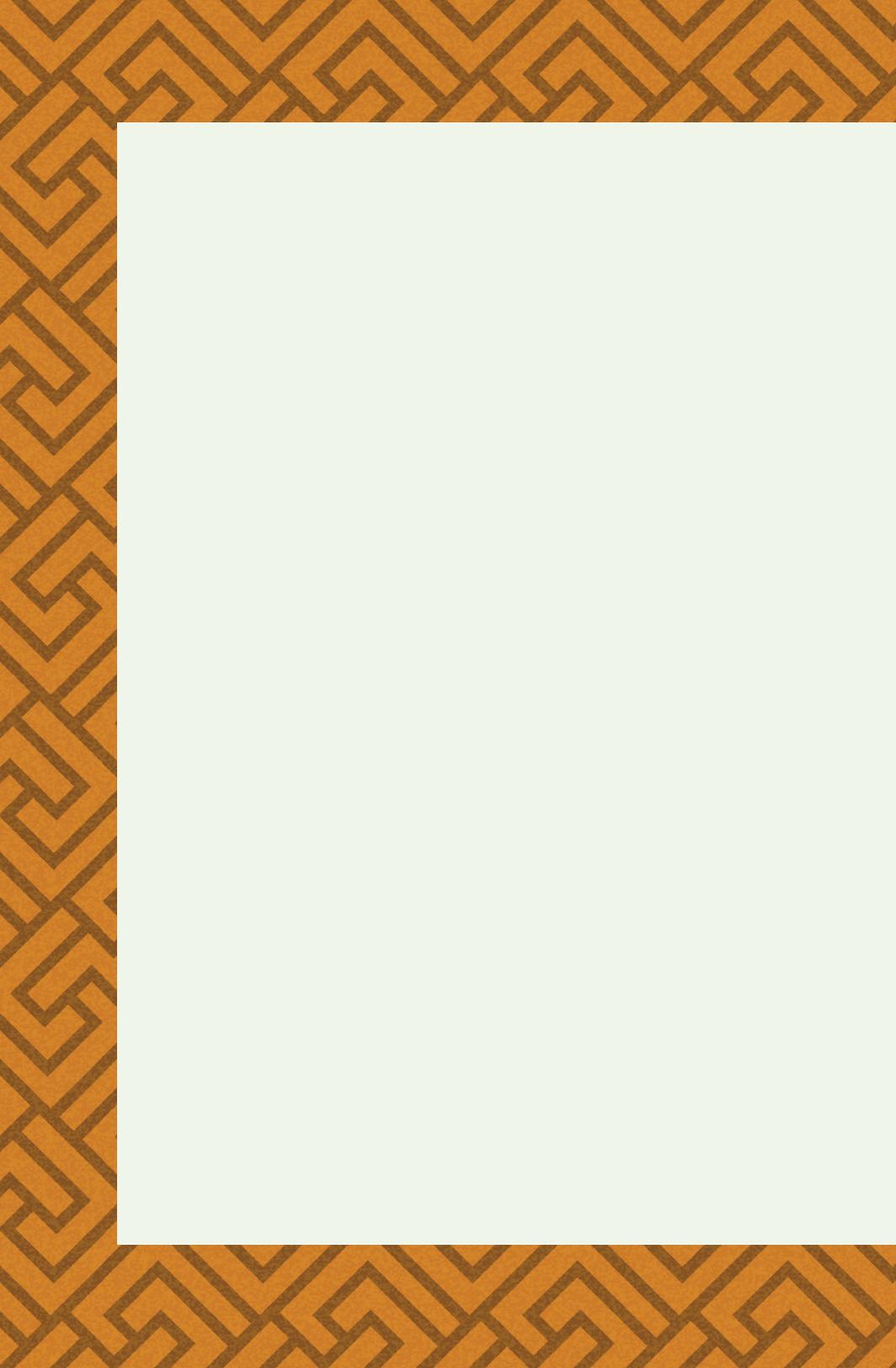
In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence (Ephesians 3:12 NLT).

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:15-16 NLT).

My Response:

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Choose your favorite truth statement and write a prayer thanking God for making it true in you. Which one is the most difficult to really believe? Write a prayer asking God to help you understand this truth about who you are.



WEEK SIX



COMMUNITY

THE CALL OF COMMUNITY

WEEK 6 • DAY 1

This week, we're focusing on our church's priority of community.

In our culture today, however, community seems a little hard to come by. In the age of Instagram, Facebook, Amazon, Kroger Clicklist, and more, what even is community? In an age of transience and moving locations and not knowing our neighbors very well, where do we get our community? In a time when more people form their own communities (like the 90s sitcom *Friends*) than previous times when people were born into their communities (think small-town America in shows like *Little House on the Prairie*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, or the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*), what should Christian community look like for us?

That's what we'll be diving into in this week's devotionals.

In shows like *Little House on the Prairie*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, or in the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, the community portrayed consisted mainly of one's family. The Ingalls family all were there for one another out on the prairie – father Charles, mother Caroline, and their daughters. Andy Griffith found community with his son Opie, Aunt Bee, and even their funny cousin Barney Fife. And what made life so wonderful for George Bailey was all of his small-town connections he had maintained since he was a child – his mother Irene, his wife Mary, his brother Harry, and so on.

In shows like *Friends*, you have sort of the opposite of the three examples of above. In *Friends*, Rachel, Ross, Chandler, Joey, and others don't make community by staying put in their small towns and caring for their friends and family over the course of their lives. Instead, they find community by leaving their family of origin and forming new relationships together in the big city. The result is a mixed group of 20-somethings who do life together with only the occasional appearance by members of their family.

There are obviously pros and cons to both the situation found in the shows and movies like *Little House on the Prairie* and the situation found in *Friends*. What's interesting, however, is how our culture's conception of community has changed since *Little House on the Prairie* in the late 19th century to what community looks like in the late 20th century in *Friends*.

So in a cultural milieu with ever-changing ideas of what community is, what community looks like, and what community should be like, what are Christians to do as they form Christian community? What does it look like to live in faithful Christian community in our day and age?

In the gospels, Jesus' call to *himself* is actually a call to *community*. When Jesus calls the disciples to follow him, he's not just calling them to follow him individually, one person each in their own way. No, his call was a call to a life of discipleship *within* the context of a group. And this group was made up, quite literally, of people who would have otherwise never "hung out."

Take, for example, Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot (**see Mark 3:13-19**). Matthew had a history of working for the Romans and collecting taxes from the Jewish people (which also probably meant that he extorted his own people too). Simon, as a zealot, was about as far away from Matthew as one could possibly be on the political front. As a zealot, Simon had bought into the vision that one must do whatever it takes to overthrow the Roman government, including acts of violence, terrorism, and even holy war.

So, Jesus invites both of these guys into his "life group" and you can be sure that things were probably tense. Two political archrivals in close proximity...yikes!

THE CALL OF COMMUNITY

WEEK 6 • DAY 1

Their allegiance to Jesus trumped their political ideologies and they remained bound together despite their differences – all because Christ was a greater adhesive than what the world's ideas could pull apart.

Just as Jesus called his initial group of disciples together, so too is he calling groups of people together today. This is what we call “the church.” And the church is made up of people with different political ideologies, non-essential theologies, socio-economic statuses, ethnic backgrounds, ages, sexes, races, and so many more variations it'd be impossible to list them all.

AND YET...even with *all* of these differences between us, we are held together by a greater sameness: Jesus himself.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Describe 2-3 examples of how your conception of community has been influenced by the culture around you.

What role has community played in your relationship with Jesus over the years?

What distinctions do you have with people in your group?
How is your love for Jesus allowing you to supersede these differences?

A THEOLOGY OF COMMUNITY

WEEK 6 • DAY 2

Sometime around 1410, Andrei Rublev painted a picture depicting three persons – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit – gathered around a table.

If you're able, take a moment to Google "*Andrei Rublev Trinity icon 1410*." You'll see the painting. What does this picture tell you about the nature of God? What invitations do you sense this picture is giving you? Take a few moments to reflect on this and jot down any reflections in the provided space.

In the picture, as the Trinity is seated, they are positioned with an openness to the viewer inviting each person who reflects on the image into the communal moment they are sharing together.

This serves as a good starting point for us as we continue our conversation on community.

One of the reasons as to why we pursue community is because God himself is a community. Christians, since the first followers of Jesus, have maintained that the God we worship is a triune God. In fact, to sum up our belief about God as a church, we'd say that, "We believe in one true God, Creator of all things, infinitely perfect and eternally existing in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

This means that at the core of God's being is his being a community. And not just any kind of community. God is a community of love.

In the book of John, as Jesus is giving some of his last words, Jesus relays some really interesting insights into the nature of God.

In **John 17:22-24**, Jesus says the following:

“The glory that you have given me I have given to them [those who believe], that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me...because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”

Did you notice Jesus’ words in just these three verses here? Three things to note:

1. Jesus says of God that they “are one” (verse 22)
2. Jesus says that God loved believers “even as you loved me” (verse 23)
3. Jesus says that God loved him “before the foundation of the world” (verse 24)

And lest we forget about the Holy Spirit, the Bible tells us that it is the Holy Spirit who co-existed eternally as God (**Genesis 1:2**) and who is the person in the Godhead who acts as the conduit of the love found within the Triune God (see **Matthew 3:16-17**; **Romans 5:5**).

This tells us three things about the nature of God that we have already looked at: (1) That God is a community; that (2) God is a community of love; and that (3) God has always been a community of love.

Now, as people who are created in the image of God (**Genesis 1:26-27**), who are striving to look, live, and love like Jesus (**Romans 8:29**; **Ephesians 4:13**), and who are partakers in the divine nature (**2 Peter 1:4**), it follows that we should be trying to both live within and embody that kind of community here and now.

As we discovered yesterday, Jesus calls us to community – not just to follow him individually. Because of this, there is a sense in which Christians do not form community. God has already formed our community for us. Our community is the group of believers both across the world and our local context. Our aim is to *realize* the community that God has already purchased by the blood of his son (Acts 20:28).

1. The bride of Christ (**Ephesians 5:25-33; Revelation 19:7-9; Revelation 21:9; 2 Corinthians 11:2**)
2. A body (**Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 10:17; 1 Corinthians 12:7; Ephesians 5:23**)
3. God's house (**Hebrews 3:6; 1 Timothy 3:14-15; 1 Peter 4:17**)
4. A temple (**1 Corinthians 3:11; 1 Corinthians 3:11 6:19; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:5-7**)
5. A family (which we'll talk about tomorrow)

Christian community, first and foremost, should resemble these various metaphors. And at the center of that resemblance should be love. As Jesus says, *"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another"* (**John 13:35**) and as Paul says, *"If I don't have love, I have nothing"* (**1 Corinthians 13:2**).

So, to summarize: God has always existed as a community of love. We, as his people, are both invited into that community and called to embody that kind of community here on earth with his people – the Church.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What new thoughts or questions do you have about the character of God or about the nature of Christian community?

Spend some time looking up the Scriptures for one of the different metaphors for the Church that you read about earlier. What do you learn about God's people from these verses? Are you living up to the metaphor? Why or why not? What's getting in the way?

When have you experienced the church as a community of love in your own life? When have you personally experienced the church being *less* than loving?

THE FAMILY OF GOD
WEEK 6 • DAY 3

On Day 1, we talked about how Jesus calls us into community. Yesterday, we talked about a theology of community which centered on the idea that God is a community of love that we are to join in on and to embody here on Earth. Today, we are going to expand on the idea of what it looks like to embody a community of love here on earth by talking about how the church is the family of God.

Alan Jones writes, *"In the waters of baptism we are reminded that we are not born in a vacuum, nor do we journey entirely alone...Being reborn, being made alive, involves being born into a community. So there are strings attached to this adventure."*

When it comes to Christianity, it seems as if Christians only ever talk about two aspects: (1) being made right with God and (2) becoming more like Jesus throughout one's life.

And rightfully so! But when we place our faith in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we need to know that we are at that point not *just* fully justified (i.e. made right with God), not *just* beginning to be sanctified (i.e. becoming more like Jesus), we are *also* placed into a new family – we are "familified."

In **Mark 3:31-35**, we read of Jesus' mother and brothers looking for him until they eventually find him and stop outside of one of the homes that he is in. The people inside alert Jesus that his family is seeking him. And, rather controversially, Jesus responds to the notion that his biological family is seeking him by asking, "Who are my mother and brothers?"

What? Why even ask that, Jesus? You know who your family is!

And then Jesus continued after posing his rhetorical question by looking at those he was with saying, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother!"

By saying this, Jesus was *radically* reorienting how people thought in his day.

In Jesus' day, your blood family ties, especially those between siblings, were the closest relationships one could have. But Jesus comes in, disrupts that line of thinking, and essentially says, "Relationships amongst God's children are to be the closest relationships you have in life – even above blood family ties!"

A crazy? Perhaps. People thought so too of Jesus.

However, if you look closer throughout the New Testament you'll see that there is a huge emphasis on God's new family being central – everything from Jesus talking about what it costs to follow him in **Mark 10:28-30**, Jesus' new surrogate family operating out of a common fund in **Luke 8:1-3**, Paul's use of brother/sister language in his letters (for a few examples see **Romans 16:1**, **1 Corinthians 1:10**, and **Colossians 1:2**), to Paul's theological foundation that we have all been adopted into a new family as sons and daughters like in **Ephesians 1:5**.

Now, this is not to say that, as Christians we should abandon our biological families. Of course not! Paul lays out in a couple of letters in the New Testament the roles of husbands, wives, and children in the home. Families are important to God.

At the same time, however, the New Testament's teaching on this is very clear: You have a faith family to whom you are obligated. There is no such thing as having Christ without his church. You can't have God as your Father without at the same time having fellow Christians as your brothers and sisters.

And if that is the case, that has huge implications for how one does community!

THE FAMILY OF GOD

WEEK 6 • DAY 3

In the early church, we see the sharing of resources (see **Acts 2:44-45**), the sharing of hearts (see Paul's example in **1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:8**), the commitment level each person had with one another (see Jesus' words about reconciling with a brother in **Matthew 18:15-17**), an emphasis on unity (**Ephesians 4:3**), as well as all sorts of commands to love, encourage, honor one another, and bear one another's burdens.

All of that is to say this: *Your local church is one of the tangible expressions of the family of God in your life.* And the key way we practice community here at The Creek is through attendance in the worship service on Sundays and by participating in a life group.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What do you make of Jesus' teaching on one's family being primarily those who "Do the will of God?" Why do you think Jesus says that? In what ways is that ultimately true?

How does it feel to know that your relationship with your faith family is central to your relationship with God? How does that work itself out in your life?

Take a few moments to list out in the space below some of the things your family does for each other (examples could include: share resources, hold one another accountable, cook meals for one another, count on one another, etc.). What sorts of things do you think should characterize how God's family (especially your life group) relate to one another that are like how your biological family relates to one another?

WHAT WILL KILL YOUR COMMUNITY, PART 1
WEEK 6 • DAY 4

We live in a unique time in human history. At no other point in human history has our ability to leave the people most proximal to us been easier or more encouraged. With the advent of technology like the internet, the cellphone, the car, Netflix, etc. it is so easy to opt out of our local communities emotionally, mentally, and even physically should we so desire. And sometimes, we are even encouraged to do so with cultural mantras like, “Anything that costs you your peace is too expensive, let it go...” or “If it doesn’t make you feel fabulous: don’t do it, don’t buy it, don’t keep it...” floating around.

And while some of the heart behind those sentiments is valid, those kinds of ideas can wreak havoc on one’s relationships.

What if a relationship becomes burdensome? What if bearing with a brother or sister in Christ is hard work and emotionally taxing? What if walking with someone through an addiction doesn’t feel fabulous? What if, what if, what if...?

Stop for a moment and think about what sorts of thoughts, mantras, or questions like the ones above that you maybe wrestle with that actually might hurt your chances of being in committed relationships with others. Jot down your thoughts in the provided space.

Many times in relationships, when the going gets tough, we opt to get out. We try to get out of dodge. The same thing happens in church communities...

- If the church or life group doesn't go "deep enough"... well, time to find another church.
- If people are too needy in the church or life group... well, that's too much, we didn't sign up for that.
- If someone disagrees with us and we don't wanna put up with it...sayonara!
- If the church or life group doesn't meet our expectations...we get frustrated, don't talk about it, and ghost everyone.

Today and tomorrow, we'll be looking at some problems that churches encounter that prevent them from being all that God intends for them to be. Today, we'll be talking about what we call the stages of church community life.

1. Stage 1 – A honeymoon stage
2. Stage 2 – A let-down stage
3. Stage 3 – A covenant stage

In **Stage 1**, you start at your church and everything seems to be going great. Everyone is getting along, your kids enjoy it, you like the preaching, you meet new people, you get invited over for a dinner or two, you do the same for others, you start to get involved, you join a life group, and you feel like this group could really be something special. Then, as time goes on, you enter Stage 2.

In **Stage 2**, scheduling conflicts start to arise, kids complain about going, the preaching has lost some of its luster, people start to get on each other's nerves, you find out that the church has different views than you on certain secondary issues, people begin to feel burdensome, and life is just chaotic for you. Of course, there are still some good things along the way, but is committing to this local group of people really worth the effort?

WHAT WILL KILL YOUR COMMUNITY, PART 1

WEEK 6 • DAY 4

Then comes the potential for Stage 3.

Upon arriving at **Stage 3**, you have a choice. You can either hunker down and covenant with this group of people or you can leave.

You probably experience something similar to these three stages with many things in life – school, hobbies, friendships, etc. And just like with everything else in life, where we have the option to commit to a hobby, or a sports program, or a job, or a marital relationship when it gets tough, so too do we have the option to do the same with our church. It is the task of every person and their church to move past Stages 1 and 2 and into Stage 3.

Lead Pastor Dan Hamel once gave a message at The Creek talking about the covenantal relationships we believe God is calling us to as a church family. In doing so, he talked a lot about oxen and yokes and how we are to be “yokefellows” with one another. He got this from **Philippians 4:3**. Here’s what he said about that and how that relates to covenanting with one another as a group:

“The picture of an oxen’s yoke takes us deeper than the public space or personal space, it’s private space. Private conversations aren’t for everyone....just for the few people intentionally included. Private space allows for more than just casual or committed friendships to develop, it allows for covenant friendships to develop. Just like oxen that have been yoked together, a covenant friendship is one where two or more people can say: God has called us to one another, God has brought our relationship together for the purpose of pursuing Christ together, for the purpose of mutual

encouragement, for the purpose of advancing his kingdom.

Covenant friendships aren't just people you work out with at the gym, or people you play sports with, or people you grab meals with, or go shopping with, though you might do those things with covenant friends. The real quality of covenant friendships is that you can say: 'Because God has called me to you and you to me, because he has united us together, my life is fully open to you, any question you want to ask, ask it. Any concern you want to share, share it. Any challenge you want to offer, offer it. We have complete access to one another's lives. There is nothing that's off-limits.'

And it's not just about character formation and having a Christ-like attitude and disposition; it's about the kingdom output of our shared relationship. Two oxen yoked together aren't just close to each other, they're not just good friends who know everything about one another, they do work together. Covenant friends are able to say God has joined us together for us to combine our efforts and our resources, our energy and passion, in order to bring him glory, in order to love and serve people, and in order to move the kingdom of Christ forward through our relationship."

WHAT WILL KILL YOUR COMMUNITY, PART 1

WEEK 6 • DAY 4

Your time in a church will inevitably reach Stage 2. Upon reaching Stage 2, you'll have to make the decision whether to enter into Stage 3 – the stage of covenantal relationships. It'd be well worth your while to really think about what kind of church community you want to be a part of, what your expectations are of the group, and if your expectations are in line with the purpose of the group.

If you want to know what will kill your relationship with your church or life group fast, look no further than one's inability to express their expectations, work through any conflict, and resolve to root themselves with others.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What kind of group do you want your life group to be? What are you hoping to get out of your life group? What are your expectations of it?

Read **Philippians 4:3**. When you read the above description of covenantal relationships, is that something you are searching for in your life group? In what ways are you personally contributing to this community being covenantal in nature? In what ways have you personally hindered that from happening?

Write out a brief paragraph of why you think covenanting with a community will serve your spiritual growth well. Then, write out a second brief paragraph about how not covenanting with a community will hinder your spiritual growth.

WHAT WILL KILL YOUR LIFE GROUP, PART 2

WEEK 6 • DAY 5

Do a Google search on the most invasive species in the world and more than likely you'll see something about the Cane Toad. Gross, right? The Cane Toad was introduced in many places like the Philippines, Hawaii, and Florida to combat certain insects. Little did folks know that the toad would be a much worse problem. With a heartiness and strength to fight against any would-be predators, a skin that releases toxins to shoo off anything that would eat it, and a reproductive ability to lay thousands of eggs a year through just one female toad, these beasts have become a force to be reckoned with.

Yesterday, we began talking about how the "let-down" stage of life groups can be a life group's killer. And while life groups may not have to worry about any amphibians ruining their weekly gathering, there are some other things that can occur within a life group that are as ugly as toads.

Here are *five* life group "killers" that, like the Cane Toad has done to environments around the world, will wreak havoc on your church and life group being all that God intends for it to be:

KILLER 1: SHAME

Researcher and author Brené Brown defines shame as the, "intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging."

All too often, churches and life groups, once safe havens for all kinds of spiritual maladies, become shame factories. A snide remark, a flippant joke, a dismissive criticism, a passive aggressive comment is all it takes and people begin to feel that maybe this isn't the safest place for them to bring their hurts, habits, and hang-ups. As pastor Timothy Keller writes, "Instead of being a hospital for sinners (where triage happens), they [churches] become a museum for saints."

Don't let shame ruin your church or life group.

KILLER 2: BITTERNESS

Hebrews 12:15 exhorts Christians to, “See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no *root of bitterness* springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.”

Bitterness, anger, and frustration can all well up within us when we have misguided expectations. Expectations are not misguided when they are stated clearly and agreed upon.

All too often, in churches and life groups, people will allow things that irk them or bother them to build up pressure inside of them until they can no longer take it anymore. At that point, they either leave a group or explode on unsuspecting victims.

Make it your goal to cultivate a church community that doesn't “let the sun go down on your anger” (**Ephesians 4:26**). But instead, resolves to be “quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger” (**James 1:19**) and that confronts people lovingly if you have something against them (**Matthew 18:15-20**).

Don't let bitterness ruin your church or life group.

KILLER 3: GOSSIP OR SLANDER

The third killer that can infiltrate your church or life group is gossip or slander.

Paul writes in **Ephesians 4** to “put away falsehood” (**4:25**), to “speak the truth” (**4:25**), to not allow any “corrupting talk” to come out of your mouth (**4:29**), but only that which is “good for building up” (**4:29**). He goes on to say that Christians should, “Let all...clamor and slander be put away from you...” (**Ephesians 4:31**).

WHAT WILL KILL YOUR LIFE GROUP, PART 2

WEEK 6 • DAY 5

Make it your aim to speak truth to those in your church and life group. Make it your aim to assume the best. Make it your aim to trust. Make it your aim to put away falsehood and seek clarity where clarity is needed. It does no one any good to get secondhand information, nor does it do anyone any good to spread false information.

Don't let gossip or slander ruin your community.

KILLER 4: PARTIALITY

This killer is less known than maybe the first three we've looked at, but it can be just as deadly if not nipped in the bud. Our culture applauds inclusivity (and rightfully so!), but there are parts of us that are naturally inclined to make judgements about people. And sometimes, whether we are aware of it or not, those preconceived ideas that we hold to can prevent us from showing the same care or concern for some people as others.

James writes about this in **James 2:1-9** saying, "My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism...If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers."

I'd encourage you to read all nine of those verses and commit to fostering a Christian community that is invitational to everyone in the group, is inclusive of everyone in the group, is ready to jump at a moment's notice to help, not just the people whom everyone likes, but those who are less popular as well.

Don't let partiality ruin your church community.

KILLER 5: IMMORALITY

This last invasive enemy of church and life groups probably goes without saying. Immorality will ruin your church community. And that goes for both immorality interpersonally between group members and immorality that goes on personally for just one member.

Paul, using a food illustration, writes in **1 Corinthians 5:6-7** to the Corinthian church saying, “Don’t you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are.”

Here, Paul is addressing the Corinthians that were allowing someone in their church to go on sinning deliberately. He compares that person to yeast in dough that affects the whole lump, even at a molecular level.

You may agree and see how interpersonal immorality could lead to a group’s demise, but personal holiness matters just as much as interpersonal holiness. It follows that if a church or life group is intent on looking, living, and loving like Jesus and helping one another do that, then each person must be committed to that goal both in a group sense and in a personal sense.

If one person goes on sinning deliberately, then he or she will slowly begin altering the course of the group. No longer is the group about following hard after Jesus. It becomes something else entirely.

Don’t let immorality ruin your church community.

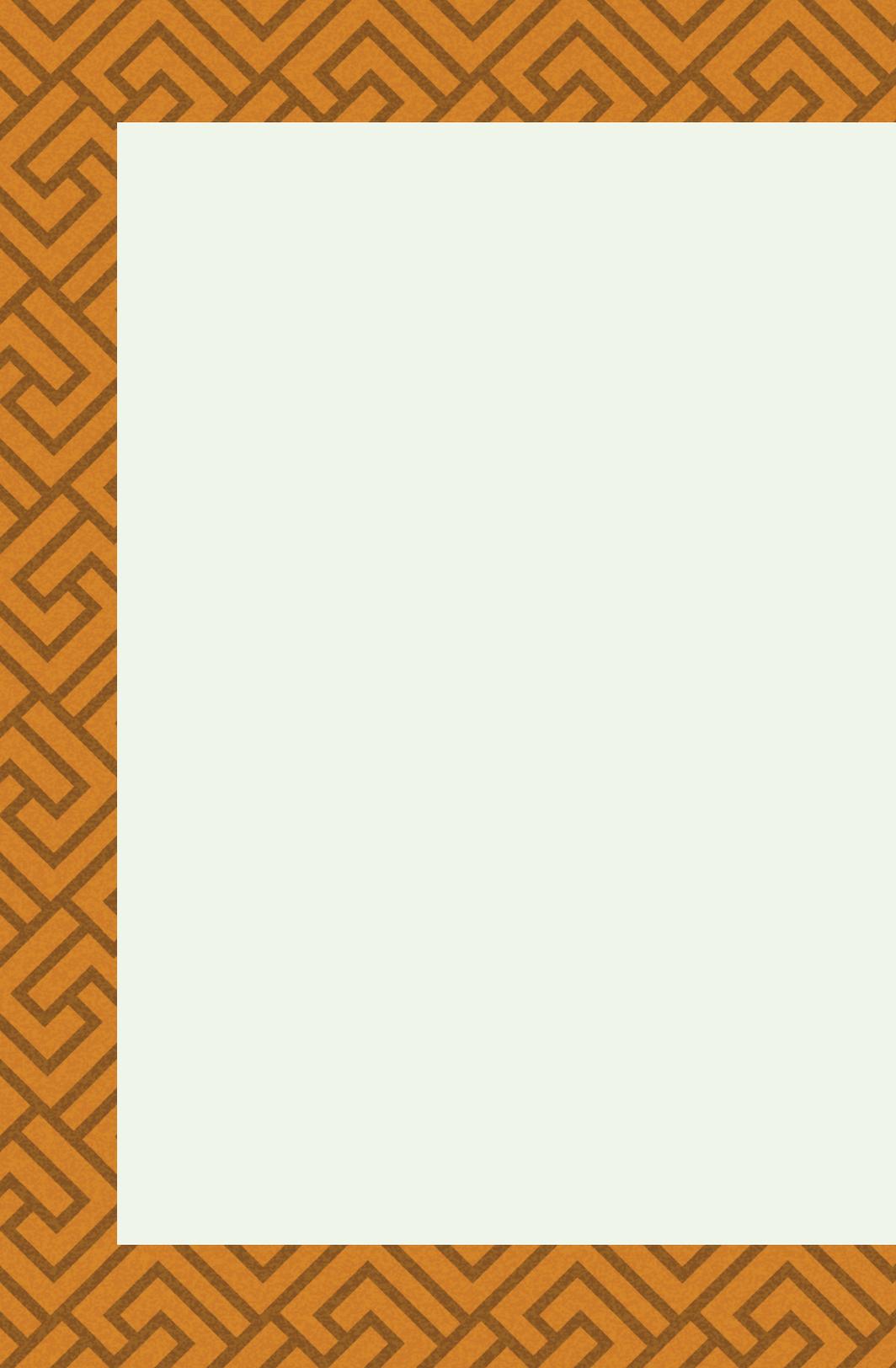
WHAT WILL KILL YOUR LIFE GROUP, PART 2
WEEK 6 • DAY 5

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Which of these five church community killers could you commit yourself to? When has one of these shown up in your relationships and hurt that relationship? How has one of these killers shown up in a relationship and hurt you personally?

What are some other community “killers” not listed here that you think could be just as detrimental? List 2-3 and why.

What practical steps or commitments do you think your community needs to make to ensure that none of the above “killers” ever get so bad that your group suffers as a result? List out 3-5 and know that you’ll have a space in your next life group gathering to discuss these commitments!



WEEK SEVEN



GENEROSITY

A GENEROUS HEART

WEEK 7 • DAY 1

I imagine she got up that morning, like every morning, thinking of her dear husband, who was now gone. She lived in a small room with very few things to call her own and just enough food to get by. She and her husband had moved to Jerusalem for business and had no other family nearby, so when he died, she was left alone.

Soon after waking up, dread started to set in. Today, she had to go to the temple to take her offering. She had saved as much as she could, and what she came up with wasn't even worth a measly penny. She could have just skipped it. No one would have noticed. What good was a penny going to do? But she had to give. She wanted to give. She had faith in her Jehovah Jireh – the God who provides. So she made her way to the temple.

When she arrived, she walked among others who were making a big deal about their large gifts. It's ironic that the offering boxes were shaped like trumpets, because some who gave were tooting their own horns – making sure as many people as possible knew how much they were giving. She tried to sneak by and around those people to be as inconspicuous as possible, hoping no one would notice.

But someone did notice. As he watched the gifts being given, he saw through all the show to the heart. He saw that the gifts filling the temple coffers were coming from empty hearts...until she arrived. He didn't miss her. In fact, as she approached, he called his followers to come and see. "Watch this lady...she's about to give what no one else has given today." They watched with rapt attention. And when they saw what she gave, they must have been a little disappointed.

They saw a small, insignificant offering. Jesus saw a heart poured out.

They saw a woman hiding from people. Jesus saw a woman shouting from the rooftops to her God that she trusted him completely...and there wasn't a greater gift given that day.

Generosity goes beyond giving obediently, and it goes beyond giving money. At the heart of generosity is love. Thomas Aquinas says, "To love is to will the good of the other." Sounds like love and generosity are cut from the same cloth, doesn't it? Maybe that's why **John 3:16** makes so much sense. "For God so **loved** the world, he **gave** his one and only son..." Generosity is one of the leading actions tied to love - and that's what our mission, vision, and priorities are all about.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Read the story of the widow's mite in **Mark 12:38-44**. Imagine the scene for yourself. What is Jesus' reaction to what she gives? Why did he call his disciples around? What does that tell you about Jesus? What did you learn about generosity from this story?

A GENEROUS HEART
WEEK 7 • DAY 1

What do you think has to be true of the widow's worldview that enabled her to be that generous? How does her outlook differ from the others giving large amounts of money? In what ways is her view of the world the same or different from yours?

Compare Jesus' reaction to this widow to his reactions to other acts of faith. Read **Matthew 15:21-28** and **Matthew 8:5-13**. What does this tell you about Jesus? What does it tell you about yourself?

THE GENEROSITY OF GOD
WEEK 7 • DAY 2

The Bible is replete with examples of God's generosity, goodness, kindness, and faithfulness; how he gave us this world to live in, how he gave us Jesus to save us, and how he continues to provide for our needs today — all of which are facets of his generosity.

Let's look at how the Bible depicts God's goodness and his resulting generosity. As you read each passage, mark down the phrases that demonstrate God's generous nature.

Psalm 8:3-4

Psalm 36:5-8

Matthew 6:25-34

2 Corinthians 9:8-11

1 Timothy 6:17

James 1:17-18

Jesus manifested all those remarkable qualities of God when he came to earth. Every day of his ministry was a day of giving: hope, salvation, healing, time, company. He constantly and generously gave. Read how he publicly announced the beginning of his ministry in **Luke 4:16-21**.

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

He declared his intentions to give fresh life to the hopeless, to free the oppressed, and to proclaim the Lord’s favor. That’s the same work we’re invited to do as God’s agents in the world.

THE GENEROSITY OF GOD
WEEK 7 • DAY 2

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Go back and revisit the scriptures you read and the phrases about God's faithfulness and generosity you wrote down. When you reflect on all of it, what does it tell you about God's character?

Do you feel like your character matches that of God's in terms of generosity? In what ways is this so? In what ways are you lacking?

How does the manifestation of Jesus, God in the flesh, renew your perspective about generosity?

CONDUITS OF GENEROSITY

WEEK 7 • DAY 3

God has invited us to partake in his generosity: to receive and to pass it along. We respond to his gifts with gratitude and with an eye toward others with whom we can share them. We act as a conduit of generosity because we are only giving back to God what he's given us.

Take this story from the Old Testament as an example. King David wants to build a temple, but he was told by God that his son, Solomon, will actually be the one to build it. But David wants to make sure he does his part in providing for its completion. As David is giving the money, everyone else started giving as well.

Read this from **1 Chronicles 29:10-14**.

David praised the Lord in the presence of the whole assembly, saying, "Praise be to you, Lord, the God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name. "But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.

The amazing part of the story is David's reaction. He was labeled (by God, no less) as a man after God's own heart. And his relationship with God humbled him to acknowledge that everything he had—some estimate his wealth to be in the hundreds of billions (in current dollars) — was God's. God's generosity to him was a bit overwhelming, but it was the generosity on God's part that prompted David to give back and to glorify God.

For David, God's generosity caused him to worship God. It's the same with us, our giving is not just an act of managing the resources God's given us, it's an act of worship. It's a declaration that we are grateful for what he's already done and trust him for what he will do. And we make that declaration by passing the same hope and freedom we've received along to others.

So, at the end of the day, it really isn't about the money. Some of us can give a lot; some of us very little. Our gifts become special when we add them to God's gift. That's what makes the difference. No matter the size of the gift, when we give as a form of worship, it becomes a fortune.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

When was a time in your life when you allowed yourself to be undone by God's generosity like David was? How did that impact you?

CONDUITS OF GENEROSITY
WEEK 7 • DAY 3

Read about Mary's extravagant gift to Jesus in **Matthew 26:6-13**. What does it teach you about giving as an act of worship? How can our giving to the church or to others act as the same kind of worship?

When have you been able to give generously to someone and then see God multiply the effects of that gift? How did it impact your own worship of God? How did it impact the recipient's worship?

IS MY HEART GENEROUS?

WEEK 7 • DAY 4

We know God is generous; we know what he's given us through Jesus. It's easy to look at him as our example and see generosity poured out. The problem sometimes becomes our desire or ability to follow that example.

There seem to be four types of givers in this world:

1. Some people *don't give*.
2. Some people *give meagerly*.
3. Some people *give obediently*.
4. Some people *give joyfully*.

Take time to honestly evaluate where you are in your current giving. Evaluate where you'd like to be. What's a simple step you can take to get there? What thought patterns or underlying beliefs about your world are undergirding your ability or inability to be generous (Example: "What if I don't have enough?" or "I'm not sure God will come through for me.")? Note your reflections in the provided space.

In **Matthew 6:24**, Jesus says, *“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”* This word “mammon” shows up in some translations like this one, the New King James; maybe you’ve heard it before and wondered what it meant. Mammon basically means “greed” or “the greedy pursuit of gain.” It’s easy to denounce mammon and say we shouldn’t be greedy. But, like all of Jesus’ teachings, there is a deeper truth and freedom that only he can offer.

It would be easy to say that mammon refers to collecting an excess of material possessions: nicer homes, faster cars, greener lawns, more luxurious bath towels. But what if mammon referred also to things we buy for safety: food on the table, a good education, a fully funded IRA. It’s easy enough to point our finger at one group and say it’s excessive while saying the other items are necessary for living. But Jesus wants us to realize that anything we count on for security, anything we would not immediately give up for the sake of his kingdom, anything we trust for our lives that isn’t him, it has in some way replaced him in our lives. It’s an insidious truth that sneaks in for all of us, and it’s why Jesus warned so heavily against it.

Money isn’t evil, nor are the things it can buy. We have freedom to make [wise] purchases and enjoy God’s goodness and abundance. The question is about control. Do we use our things to control life, to make sure we get the outcomes we want? When we look at our heart of hearts, are we trying to work a system, complete a program, match a percentage? Or are we looking at others with enough love and living a modest enough lifestyle to meet a need when we see it?

IS MY HEART GENEROUS?
WEEK 7 • DAY 4

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Read these two parables: **Luke 10:30-37** and **Luke 12:16-21**. Compare the main characters in each story. How are their perspectives different? Which one do you currently relate with more?

Greed is a sneaky sin that can quickly sneak up on us. How can generosity be an antidote to greed? How does giving help us keep a proper perspective on the things we own?

Spend time in prayer, asking God to forgive any lack of trust, confessing times when you held on too tightly when you should have let go, and accepting his great loving mercy and grace as he speaks truth to you. It's easy to feel condemned when the subjects of money and generosity come up, but know that, in Christ, there is no condemnation.

RADICAL GENEROSITY

WEEK 7 • DAY 5

Take a few moments on this final day to read two stories from the Gospel of Luke.

1. The first story is about the Rich Young Ruler.
Read **Luke 18:18-30**.
2. The second story is about a man named Zacchaeus.
Read **Luke 19:1-10**.

It's interesting that Luke places these two stories right next to one another. In both accounts, you have a rich man. In both accounts, the men encounter Jesus. The main difference between the two? One realizes that giving is better than getting. And the other does not.

One of the things we learn by comparing these two stories is that generosity isn't about giving away what's left after we've had our fill or have gotten all we want. Generosity isn't even about us. It's an opportunity to look at someone else and choose their good over our own. It's a realization that there is enough true goodness for all of us, no matter what we give away. It's about a shift in perspective from wanting what's best for me to wanting what's best for the people I love.

And weirdly, the way life works is that by giving away what we hold dear, we actually find even deeper fulfillment. That's what Zacchaeus realized.

And this is what Jesus says in **Matthew 10:38-39**. Take a few moments to read that passage. Then jot down your thoughts about the following questions in the provided space.

In what ways do you think you might have missed out on true fulfillment by holding onto something?

In what ways have you experienced true life by giving something or a part of you away?

That's what generosity is all about. The steps to generosity are sometimes measured, sometimes spontaneous. Sometimes big, sometimes small. But they always have the same effect of making us more generous. Generosity is born from love and it makes us more loving. Giving not only makes us more dependent on God, it makes us more like him.

When that becomes true of us, we don't give out of guilt or compulsion or because we're told; that's not how Jesus operates. We give because we love. And we love because God first loved us.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Do you have a story of giving that changed your perspective from self-centered to other-centered?

How might a desire to generously love others change the way you order your financial priorities? Are there things you can sacrifice in order to be ready to meet needs?

What would becoming 1% more generous look like for you practically?

THE EXAMEN: A PRAYER TO PRACTICE NOTICING GOD'S PRESENCE

The prayer of Examen is a simple, five-step prayer practice that helps us notice the presence of God throughout our day. It helps us to discern how God might be calling us in big and small ways. You can look back at a single day or the entire week or even a larger season. Take some time today to use this prayer to look for God's presence throughout your day.

BE STILL

Quiet your mind and heart. Ask God to help you see where He has been at work. Ask Him to show you what He wants you to see and learn. With God's help, be attentive to how His Spirit was working in and through you, others, and creation. Let yourself see your day as God sees it.

GIVE THANKS

Gratitude cultivates our hearts and minds to see God in all of our lives. Go through your day, giving thanks for all of God's good gifts to you—the small gifts and the bigger ones, too.

PRAY THROUGH YOUR DAY

Ask God to walk through your day with you. As you walk through the events of your day, ask these questions: Did this moment draw me closer to God? Did I sense His presence in this moment? Did I lean into His presence or withdraw from it? If I leaned in, why? If I withdrew, why?

REJOICE & SEEK FORGIVENESS

Rejoice in the moments God brought you closer. Confess (agree with God) and ask for forgiveness for those times when you resisted God's presence in your life. Thank God for the gift of awareness. Put on God's grace for the entire situation.

LOOK TO TOMORROW

Just as God was with you in this day, He will be faithful and will be with you tomorrow. Invite God to be a part of each moment in the coming day. What do you need God's help with? Ask Him for it. Commit the day to Him. Ask Him for a greater awareness of His presence. Thank Him for His grace.

**MISSION
VISION
PRIORITIES**

MISSION

Love God, Love People, Make Disciples

VISION

Connecting people to Jesus

PRIORITIES

Worship, Gospel, Kingdom, Scripture, Identity, Community, Generosity

Worship • “All for the glory of God”

We seek God’s presence and honor in everything we do.

Gospel • “Jesus Christ is Lord”

We proclaim the good news of Jesus and center our lives on his teaching and example.

Kingdom • “As it is in heaven”

We desire to see the fame and deeds of God renewed in our day—in Indianapolis and around the world.

Scripture • “Inspired and alive”

We delight in God’s Word and live it out on a daily basis.

Identity • “Children of God”

We receive God’s love and embrace our adoption as sons and daughters.

Community • “Devoted to one another”

We value relationships and build our lives together as family.

Generosity • “More blessed to give”

We share our resources to enrich others and advance God’s kingdom.



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