

In Pursuit of the Message

Exploring and Expressing Faith

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Invitation

Week 1

This week in summary

<u>Invitation</u>	<u>WEEK 1</u>	
How to Negotiate with God	<i>Deuteronomy 5</i>	<i>Day 1</i>
Invitation	<i>Deuteronomy 6</i>	<i>Day 2</i>
Caution	<i>Deuteronomy 7</i>	<i>Day 3</i>
Prepare	<i>Deuteronomy 8-9</i>	<i>Day 4</i>
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Day 1

How to Negotiate with God

When God makes a deal with people it’s called a covenant. A covenant is similar to the deal between parents and children. Parents provide food, shelter and guidance. Independent of the parents’ provision, the children abide by a certain standard of behavior. Even if the children fail on their side, the parents continue to provide. The parents do what they can to help the children succeed. In reality God’s deals are more like two independent promises. One promise from him to us is clearly on his shoulders. The other promise from us to him is on our shoulders but He also gives us what we need to keep up our end of the bargain. Even if we fail to keep up our side, God will continue to hold up his side offering immense support and motivation to see us accomplish great things.

Scripture reading this week covers one of these special deals between God and the descendants of Abraham. Nearly 500 years after Abraham the family has grown into a small nation. God is giving them a land to call home after they’ve been wandering homeless for a generation. This fulfills a promise God made to Abraham long ago. Moses is the current leader of this nomadic nation and before they take possession of the land they are stopping to review their land grant deal with God.

A reading outline Deuteronomy 5-11

5 Introducing God as Lord of this Covenant

6 Consecration

7 Program of expansion in the new land,

8 Commitment in new land

9 Remember the lessons past

10&11 Call to commitment

Reading Today: Deuteronomy 5

10-15 minutes

Day 2

The Invitation

The message of Jesus begins with an invitation: “repent, the Kingdom of God is here.” This was the message of John as he prepared his kin for the arrival of Jesus. This was the message of Jesus’ students as they continued promoting the Kingdom after Jesus’ departure.

In this message they announce that the Kingdom of God is here. The kingdom of God is everything and everyone everywhere that lives in line with God’s will. Everyone outside the Kingdom lives in rebellion to God following after any number of different ideals and desires. The announcement of the Kingdom of God is the announcement that something or someone here is in submission to God’s will. You stand in the presence of an agent of God. What will you do?

This brings up a unique opportunity: You can join God’s Kingdom. This is the invitation: you can bring your life in line with God’s will with all the benefits, blessings and peace that God offers. More significant by far: life with God. The alternative is you can continue to take your chances and seek your own. While this isn’t strictly a one-time offer, your choice now is a solid indication of your choice in the future. Don’t put this off, seize the opportunity.

Finally, the message is to repent. This is the call to action and invitation. To repent is to change your mind and your allegiance from whatever you once swore fidelity replaced by God. It’s a fitting call for those who are changing their citizenship to Heaven. But it’s a costly call. Repentance demands that we forsake all other loyalty to country, family,

spouse, every vow, honor and resource we have is given to Jesus to use or discharge as he sees fit. We are called to turn traitor to all we held dear and betray every relationship, redeemable only as He sees fit.

When someone joins the Kingdom it expands. God's will is manifest through the new citizens as they submit their lives to the will of God. Now the Kingdom goes where ever they go. The tide of vicious calamity that characterizes the world's approach to life is rolled back as God's Kingdom rises up in the hearts and the influence of the people who choose Him.

*Your Kingdom come, Your will be done
on earth
as it is in Heaven.*

Jesus's Prayer to God

Reading Today: Deuteronomy 6

10-15 minutes

Day 3

Caution:

When Jesus calls us to follow Him, what's the alternative? What happens if we say no to Jesus? Short answer: bad things, very bad things.

And if you forget the LORD your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you will perish. Deuteronomy 8:19

This is not a threat; it's a warning about the nature of reality. Being separated from God leads to destruction much like separation from oxygen leads to death. When we choose to live separated from the source of life, the only possible outcome is destruction. This isn't a punishment. God wants us to have life. If we turn our back on God we turn our back on life. Jesus clarifies:

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." John 10:10

The warning about worshipping other gods isn't because we might pick up some cultic worship of an ancient pagan deity. "Other gods" have much more familiar faces like: money, power, popularity and social acceptance. The most common replacement for your ultimate devotion and allegiance is to you. To repent and follow God, you have to evict your favorite object of worship - yourself.

Three paths to destruction:

If you choose to replace God, no matter how you replace him, the destruction will come in one of three forms. Jesus faced all three and shows us how we can overcome each.

*For all that is in the world—the **desires of the flesh** and the **desires of the eyes** and **pride of life**—is not from the Father but is from the world. The world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God lives forever. 1 John 2:16-17*

“Desires of the flesh” indulge in all kinds of appetites and sensual gratification. This path happens when normal elements of life are taken without moderation or restraint. They include gluttony, inappropriate sexual gratification, alcoholism, and all kinds of addictive behaviors. **“Desires of the flesh”** doesn’t trust God. It says that God’s provision isn’t enough.

Jesus faced this temptation and responded by quoting a message from God. *“Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”*

Jesus trusted God to sustain everything he needed in life. Even more amazing he said this after 40 days without food. He didn’t even use his own words to express his position. Jesus quoted a message of God to underscore how much he was trusting God to provide.

The second path to destruction is “**desires of the eyes.**” It is characterized in all manner of attention getting bells and whistles. It includes shiny bling, accessories, immodesty, eye-candy and publicity stunts. “**Desires of the eyes**” screams out ‘People look at me!’ The problem is that “**desires of the eyes**” cares more about the opinion of the populace than it cares about the opinion of God. It makes the crowd into a god and we worship the crowd.

Jesus faced this when he stood at the highest point in the crowded center of the largest city in Israel. He had a guarantee from God that if He jumped angels would appear and catch him midair. Talk about a publicity stunt.

Jesus again responded quoting the last line of another well-known message from God. “*You shall not put the LORD your God to the test.*”

Jesus knows that God’s attention is enough. Whatever you do in life be satisfied simply that God knows. His attention and approval should be enough. Do rightly by God and all other opinions don’t matter.

The third path of destruction is the **Pride of life**. This includes honors, prestige, titles, accomplishments, abilities, stature, connections, and family ancestry. All the things we boast in can destroy us when we consider ourselves more important than God.

Jesus stood on top of a mountain. From his vantage point he could see roads leading to all the empires of the earth. The devil himself offered to give Jesus his authority over every nation on earth. The offer was legitimate. On earth the devil had taken all the authority as a usurper king. Jesus was about to launching a counter invasion from Heaven. The devil was willing to give Jesus the whole thing right then and there if Jesus would just worship him. Whatever you take pride in it can’t compare to the complete conquest of earth.

Jesus resisted this temptation quoting from God's message, *"You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve."* There is nothing of greater worth than God. There is no accomplishment greater than what God had done. There is nothing you can do that is greater than the work God has for you. Take pride in God. Boast in what He has done.

Jesus knew that all value, all significance comes from God and any view that diminishes God diminishes the self even more. He called us to change our view and put God back on the throne. *"If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me"* (Mark 8:34).

Response:

How often did Jesus quote a message from God to resist the paths of destruction?

Which path of destruction does not trust God to satisfy?

Which path of destruction replaces God's approval with someone else's approval?

Which path of destruction values the self above God?

Which path of destruction is most tempting to you?

What can you do to avoid destruction by following Jesus' example?

Reading Today: Deuteronomy 7

10-15 minutes

Day 4

Prepare

Take time today to prepare to facilitate your study group.

Reading Today: Deuteronomy 8&9

15-20 minutes

Day 5

Review

Look over the personal life mission statement that you developed during the first section **inPursuit of Jesus**.

Have you noticed any of these traits in the past few months?

From what you've learned what adjustments might you need to make?

List some of the lessons and action steps you took during the twelve lessons in section 2 **inPursuit of God**. What trends do you notice?

Do any of the action steps or lessons correspond with your life mission statement? How?

Reading Today: Deuteronomy 10&11

15-20 minutes

God with us

Week 2

This week in summary

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God with us	<i>Genesis 2</i>	<i>Day 2</i>
What else is living with us?	<i>Genesis 3</i>	<i>Day 3</i>
Prepare	<i>Revelation 21</i>	<i>Day 4</i>
Review	<i>Revelation 22</i>	<i>Day 5</i>

Day 1

God's Unstoppable Approach

Every part of the cosmos God created. When he finished each piece he said "it is good." Then God made humanity and he did something very different. God created humanity in his image. He breathed in life from his own breath. And He said "it is *very good*." God created a garden for humans to live. God himself walked with humanity in the garden.

Then separation entered the picture. Humanity choose something other than what God offered. We lost our innocence and our intimacy with God. Life became hard.

God started a program to overcome the separation and bring back the intimacy with humanity. It began with God communicating through messengers sent from Heaven. Then God took a step closer speaking directly to prophets like Moses.

God demonstrated his love for humanity by rescuing a dying nation of refugees from slavery. Ever closer, He personally led them to a land where they could thrive. He took the form of a cloud during the day and a pillar of fire by night. During the journey God moved closer to them, He moved into their camp. He asked the people to build a special tent so he could live with them. They did. God filled the tent with his spirit.

It seemed as if God's mantra was "closer still"

So He took human form and lived among the people going by the name Jesus. At the same time He showed them a new approach to life. It was almost like the garden again. God walked among humanity.

Just when we can't imagine any way God could get closer than he already was walking as one of us, God astonishes us by placing his own spirit inside us. The spirit of God lives in us, cohabitating with our spirit. Intimacy is restored. Finally God is with us.

With all that separation done God gives us a picture of the end. It parallels the original intimacy from the garden but now there is a colossal heavenly city where once there was a simple garden. Instead of a mere two people there are nations and kings all living together in one city.

"Behold, the dwelling place of God is with mankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death will be no more, neither will there be sorrow, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

And the One who is seated on the throne said, "Behold I am making all things new."

Reading Today: Genesis 1

10-15 minutes

Day 2

God with Us

There is a long list reasons to follow Jesus including: hope, peace, joy, community, gifts, power, love, value, life (both abundant and eternal life) and simply because you believe that Jesus' way is the best way to live. But there is one reason that stands out above and beyond all the others. The single greatest reason is God. Jesus offers us a connection to God. God is worth more than anything else we have or could have in life.

I feel like anyway I write this article is going to undersell God. It's God with us – the possibilities are limitless. Even that statement undersells God. So let's look at God with us.

It's not surprising that everything Jesus said and did was in perfect submission to the will of God. It isn't surprising that as King, Jesus requires that we also step in line, following the same will of God. But God's requirements are high and Jesus raises the bar. God sent a law to the people through Moses which included statements like, "do not commit adultery." Jesus took restrictions like that and expanded to the highest standard by saying, "anyone who looks at a woman with lust, commits adultery."

Here are some examples of Jesus' high ethical standards. Love & pray for your enemies. Always forgive. If your enemy strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other cheek. Sell all your possessions and give to the poor, then come follow me. You cannot serve both God and money. If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out. If your hand causes you to stumble cut it off. Unless you become like a child you cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Take up your cross and follow me.

Jesus' standards are high, so are his expectations of us. That's a good thing, a great thing in fact. Image how much better your job would be if Jesus was in charge. What about your family? Or your school?

So how can we live up to Jesus' expectations? His standards are so high that it's practically impossible for us to attain on our own. Jesus said if you love me you'll obey my command. Many people try to resolve this tension by looking for loop holes and clever ways to minimize the requirements Jesus presents. But Jesus provides the means to meet his high standard.

After Jesus departed, God sent his own Spirit to live in Jesus' followers. This was a game changing move. With help from the Holy Spirit they could accomplish what Jesus required from them. Jesus calls us into assisted obedience. He gives us the provision to accomplish God's will. He requires righteousness from us that only He can supply. And supply he does.

I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Jesus

Reading Today: Genesis 2

10-15 minutes

Day 3

What else is living with us?

Prior to meeting Jesus we were on a collision course with destruction for ourselves and the people around us. Our life was headed into disaster and emptiness. We were separated from God's will and the purpose he created us. Our values reflected a single-minded embrace of a path that leads to death.

Then something changed. We met Jesus. We began to trust Jesus. Suddenly another way of live began to form. The Spirit of God began to influence our lives and our thought. This was a positive change. We have a new voice that leads us to life.

But then we're conflicted. We have two competing sets of values, two different approaches to life, two spirits living in one body. We became walking contradictions. Living hypocrites. We have a flesh calling us to death and a Spirit calling us to life. We have conflict.

Conflict is good. It means that there is a voice within us guiding us to life. We are no longer dominated by the path of death. So conflict is good.

Conflict is bad. It means that there is a voice within us enticing us to destruction. Do everything you can to resist that voice. Call on God. He will rescue you. This will likely be an ongoing struggle so keep calling. Each time you give in, it becomes easier and easier to resist the God of Life. The reverse is also true. Each time you call to God it gets easier and easier to resist the one who would destroy you.

"Submit yourselves to God, resist the Devil and his will flee from you." - James

Reading Today: Genesis 3

10-15 minutes

Day 4

Prepare

Take time today to prepare to facilitate your study group.

Reading Today: Revelation 21

15-20 minutes

Day 5

Review

Look over the personal life mission statement that you developed during the first section **inPursuit of Jesus**.

Have you noticed any of these traits in the past few months?

From what you've learned what adjustments might you need to make?

List some of the lessons and action steps you took during the twelve lessons in section 2 **inPursuit of God**. What trends do you notice?

Do any of the action steps or lessons correspond with your life mission statement? How?

Reading Today: Revelation 22

15-20 minutes

Appendix

Deuteronomy 31:6

Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the LORD your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you

Joshua 1:9

Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.

Hebrews 13:5,6

he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?"

Romans 8:31,

If God is for us, who can be against us?

Matt 28:19-20

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age

Romans 8:38-39

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Isaiah 41:10

Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

1 Corinthians 3:16

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

John 14:16-17

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

Ephesians 3:17

So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love,

Matt 18:20

Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.

Psalms 139:7-10

Where will I go from your Spirit?

Where will I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there!

If I make my bed in the grave, you are there!

If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand will lead me, and your right hand will hold me.

Matt 1:23

Behold, the virgin will conceive and bear a son, and they will call his name Immanuel (which means, God with us).

Isaiah 7:14

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin will conceive and bear a son, and will call his name Immanuel.

1 John 4:12-13

If we love one another, God lives in us and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

James 4:8

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.

Grace

Week 3

This week in summary

<u>Grace</u>		<u>WEEK 3</u>
An Audience with the King	<i>Romans 1</i>	<i>Day 1</i>
Fire and Jesus	<i>Romans 2</i>	<i>Day 2</i>
Justified	<i>Romans 3</i>	<i>Day 3</i>
Prepare	<i>Ephesians 1</i>	<i>Day 4</i>
Planning	<i>Ephesians 2</i>	<i>Day 5</i>

Day 1

An Audience with the King

How can you know if things are going well between you and God? Maybe you're living life blissfully unaware that you're on a collision course with disaster. Maybe tragedy knocked you to the floor and you need to sort things out with God. Maybe you're convinced you were given a crappy draw at life and you want to take it up with management.

How could you get an audience with God?

What if God was too busy to listen to you? On average 4 people are born each second on earth. This means if God were limited by time and attention the way we are, he would only have a quarter of a second to touch base with you. That's enough time for you so pronounce the first letter in your name before God needs to turn his attention to someone else. What if he's too busy attending to everyone else on the planet and just doesn't have time to get to you.

Well, little snowflake, What makes you so special?

Why do you think you deserve an audience with the High creator of the earth, our galactic super cluster and all that exists; the one who created beauty and is called "beautiful beyond description."

How are you going to get God's attention?

Put simply, we don't deserve God's attention let alone his favor and there is nothing we can ever do to change that.

Since we can't earn God's favor in this life, what hope is there for us after we are dead?

However, there's good news. God did for us what we can't do for ourselves. God gives us his attention, his favor and his love as a free gift. God sent Jesus to connect us with God. Jesus is the only one who has the right to stand before God because of who he is (Son of God) and because of what he's done (died on the cross, paying for all of humanity's offenses against God)

Putting it another way we enter heaven by the credit Jesus earned. It is a gift from God.

If you are still trying to earn God's favor, why are you trying to earn what you've already been given? Just believe that it's already happened and celebrate, give thanks to Jesus for doing what we couldn't do. If we could earn God's favor, then we could brag about how we earned it. We could sell ways for others to achieve God's favor. We could compete with others for it. We could use it to coerce others. Worst of all, we would have leverage over God diminishing Him, everything and everyone. That's not possible.

God gave us Jesus as a gift. That's how we know we're in good with God.

So how will you approach God? Trusting in your own merit or trusting that Jesus has provided what we couldn't earn?

*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to **everyone who believes**, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed **from faith for faith**, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." -Romans 1:16-17*

Reading Today: Romans 1

10-15 minutes

Day 2

Fire and Jesus

There are so many trivial things in this world that are based on what we earn and deserve. It's easy for us to start to see everything through this filter. My rights and what I deserve become my chief concerns. This leads to judgment. Judgment kills. Grace makes us alive.

Grace is the way God operates by a different economy than we are used to. Grace is the economy of giving and gratitude. Grace is getting blessings we don't deserve and *not* getting the crap we do.

To picture grace, imagine brave men and women running into a burning building to save victims. The rescuers don't check your criminal history or bank account. They look for everyone they can save. For people trapped in a burning building the question is this: "Are you going to trust your rescuer or are you going to resist them?" When the firefighter comes bursting into your room, you grab hold of him with all your strength. So it is with Jesus. **Grab a hold of him for dear life.**

Salvation comes by the grace of the rescuers, not the merit of the trapped.

What's become horrifying is that there are trapped people who ignore the rescue operation instead playing perverse religious games as if it will lead to salvation. While flames leap around them, they compete with each other over who is the better victim. The building falls apart and they teach postures and rituals. Death surrounds them and they carry on in their delusion. All the while Jesus runs into danger, reaching through the flames, yelling at the top of his lungs, "TAKE MY HAND I CAN SAVE YOU!" And we sit back thinking "maybe I should get washed up first?"

Reading Today: Romans 2

10-15 minutes

Day 3

Justified

How do we claim that what we're doing is right? Let's examine some of the ways humanity tries to leverage favor from God.

Amoral

To start there is an extreme approach to life that rejects any kind of sense and decency. It goes beyond simple free spiritedness; it's a rejection of all morals. It's extremely rare because most people who claim to be a type of anarchist still believe in some sort of fair play. Watch them bristle with moral objection when something is taken from them. The amoral approach to life is easiest to reject it brings about its own destruction in spectacular drama.

Moralist

Being a good moral person doesn't put us in good standing with God. He judges by actions and for all the good we claim and bad we forget, God has a more accurate view of our lives than our rose colored lenses. We're moral but we're hypocrites. We know it's wrong but we do it anyways and we hope God won't notice. But God is no fool. Ironically, God could impartially judge any of us by our own favorite standard and we would still fail, every one of us.

Privileged

Some of us just have more to offer than the average person. We're privileged by knowledge of the truth, family, religion, or some special power. Because of our privilege we'll be judged by a higher standard but we're failing the basic standards of human decency. We know the truth and yet we

live contrary to it. We are part of a healthy community and religion but we fail in ways that the ignorant and isolated succeed. We are bringing down God's reputation among those who don't know him. We are privileged by God and we make him look bad.

Accomplished

Some of us have great accomplishments next to our names. But all our accomplishments are worthless compared to God's accomplishments. Only accomplishments in obedience to God have any value, and those are done in His name and for His glory. What can our accomplishments compare to his?

There is no status, achievement or lifestyle that can justify us before God. We have no leg to stand on. The only thing left for us is to believe that God accomplished through Jesus what we couldn't do for ourselves.

Reading Today: Genesis 3

10-15 minutes

Day 4

Prepare

Take time today to prepare to facilitate your study group.

Reading Today: Ephesians 1

15-20 minutes

Day 5

Planning:**Taking steps to accomplish my Purpose and Vision**

Write your life vision statement:

Identify the following:

What your top 4 strengths?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

What are 4 of your weaknesses?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

Identify 4 opportunities facing you right now that may advance your purpose and vision

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

Identify 4 threats facing you right that hinder your purpose and vision

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

How can you use your strengths to take advantage of opportunities?

How can you use your strengths to overcome threats?

How can you take advantage of opportunities in your weakness?

What can you do to mitigate or avoid threats against your weaknesses?

Write a specific prayer and a plan in each of the four boxes:

		Internal	
		Strengths	Weaknesses
External	Opportunities	Strengths - Opportunities	Weaknesses - Opportunities
	Threats	Strengths - Threats	Weaknesses - Threats

Reading Today: Ephesians 2

15-20 minutes

Citizens of God's Kingdom

Week 4

This week in summary

<u>Citizens of God's Kingdom</u>		<u>WEEK 4</u>
Identity and the King	<i>Isaiah 1</i>	<i>Day 1</i>
Citizens and God's Kingdom	<i>Isaiah 2&3</i>	<i>Day 2</i>
Authentic	<i>Isaiah 4&5</i>	<i>Day 3</i>
Prepare	<i>Isaiah 6&7</i>	<i>Day 4</i>
Planning	<i>Isaiah 8&9</i>	<i>Day 5</i>

Day 1

Identity and the King

The big questions of life like “Who am I?” and “Why am I here?” are at their core basic questions of identity. Fortunately, God as our Creator understands our need to know who we are and how we are to live. He graciously gives the gift of identity to His people through both his promises and His laws. What we sometimes mistake as moral checklists carry with them the intention of providing definition for the people of God. These laws and promises describe who we are, what we do and why we do it.

Even greater, these promises and laws reveal to us the nature and character of God. Through this identity, we are invited to understand who we were created to be and who God is.

When Jesus came to earth, he came as God among us; the living, breathing demonstration of the will of God and an exact representation of His identity. King Jesus came to establish the Kingdom of God, to fight for the true identity of God's people in the face of centuries of that identity being corrupted and misused. The call of Jesus to those in His time, just as it is today, is for us to join him as citizens of the Kingdom. This call is so radical that we are to think of it as nothing short of a rebirth, where everything starts again and we live in a whole new way and with a whole new purpose. In the Kingdom of God, we get a new identity that comes from the King.

We are not left to guess how a citizen in Jesus' Kingdom acts. Both the teachings of Jesus and the very example of His life are meant to help us understand our identity as citizens of the Kingdom. The answer of who we are meant to be, then, is a simple one...we are meant to be like Jesus! We love like our King loves, we are merciful like our King is merciful, we fight the way He fights (and for the same reasons) and hunger and thirst for what is right, just as He does. As citizens of the Kingdom, we are called to live and faithfully serve King Jesus in the same manner that he has faithfully served and died for us.

Of course, there are perks to living in God's Kingdom. We fall under the protection of our King, who has sacrificed Himself that we may live forever in peace within His Kingdom. Jesus defeated Satan, sin and death leaving us nothing to fear. We also share in our King's family, gaining a Heavenly Father who loves us. And as we face the very daunting prospect of trying to live up to the identity our King has given us, we are given the Holy Spirit who resides inside of us to help us live up to the people we were truly created to be.

Reading Today: Isaiah 1

10-15 minutes

Day 2

Citizens and God's Kingdom

When we become citizens of the Kingdom of God, we inherit not only the benefits of the Kingdom but the work of the Kingdom as well. When the first humans made choices that separated them from God, it ruined both the relationship between God and humanity and the state of the rest of creation. Ever since then, God has been taking steps to set those wrongs right, reorienting humanity back to Him and ultimately restoring creation to what it always should have been. As citizens of His Kingdom, bearing His image and the identity of King Jesus, we are part of God's plan of setting the wrongs right.

The life and teachings of Jesus do not exist to give a set of moral guideposts so that we may hit them as a "thank you" to God for letting us into the Kingdom. The life and teachings of Jesus exist to show us the mission we have inherited and how it is to be undertaken; how those that are captive are to be set free and how the wrongs are to be made right.

That mission and our submission to the authority of Jesus on that mission, is not aimed to merely tell us what to do, it is to show us who we are. What we do in the Kingdom is a natural outflow from the identity we've been granted.

On a daily basis, then, we don't do the things that Jesus did in order to be citizens of the Kingdom. We do the things that Jesus did because *we are already citizens* of the Kingdom. It is simply what those that live in the Kingdom do. It is not the "good" citizen of the Kingdom that cares for the poor, brings hope to the hopeless, shines light into darkness and forsakes the things of this world to do so. That is the cause of every citizen of the Kingdom. It is not the "chosen" citizen of the Kingdom that is willing to lose her life that another may live.

That is the example of our King and part of the identity of every citizen to do so. It is not the "special" citizen of the Kingdom that seeks to share the truth and grace with others. That is the reality under which we all live and as we truly seek to love others it simply cannot be helped but to share the root of our identity with them.

We have been reborn as citizens of the Kingdom of God. We are called to a free and abundant life under the loving protection of King Jesus as willing soldiers in the mission to call as many as will come to that same love and protection. It is a day by day, person by person call to fight to right the wrongs, and as citizens of the Kingdom it is indeed now our fight.

Reading Today: Isaiah 2&3

10-15 minutes

Day 3

Authentic

In movies there are people who talk and act like people they are not in order to tell a particular story. We accept this even though we have seen those actors in other movies or have heard details about their true lives and know for certain that how they are acting onscreen doesn't really represent who they are.

Although this is an acceptable practice when it comes to acting, the Kingdom of God doesn't work that way. God is not looking for worked over, painted up, gilded citizens to falsely inflate the size of His Kingdom (who wants to spend eternity in the Kingdom with that guy?) He is not looking for those that are willing to play the part. God desires those that are truly willing to give up their old identity and their own kingdoms to accept the identity and Kingdom that God is offering. This is why both John the Baptist and Jesus join repentance, the changing of allegiances, with the announcement of the arrival of the Kingdom.

Sometimes in our effort to be working citizens of the Kingdom we end up just playing the part. How does this happen? Primarily this occurs when we separate the words of Jesus from the actions and person of Jesus. We do this when we take his words and make them a checklist, a simple indicator as to whether we are good or not. We quickly come to the realization that not only can we not live up to that standard but things just don't feel right. This is because we have not accepted our change of identity as forgiven and empowered through the Holy Spirit for the work of the Kingdom.

Often we have just kept our own identity, our own kingdom, and tried to borrow Jesus' morality to clean it up a bit. This is being a play actor, or as John the Baptizer might say, a hypocrite. This is not what Jesus is calling us to and it's not what the Kingdom is fighting for. Jesus' is the Kingdom of freedom, not division and confusion. This is why he doesn't ask us to keep our identity and clean it up to be a citizen, He requires that we give up our old identity so that we may live freely in our new one.

This does not mean, of course, that we will live perfect lives. Our pursuit to live rightly within our new identity as a citizen of the Kingdom will sometimes fall short. But grace and forgiveness are part of the benefits of the Kingdom. Our shortcomings do not surprise our King, He is the source and provider of grace precisely because He knows that the citizens of His Kingdom need it!

Ultimately we avoid being thrown off of our mission or relying on measures that God is not interested in when we focus on and follow the lead of our King. He will guide the mission to its right and appropriate end; the end result is not our business. As we follow Jesus, do what He does in the way that He does it, the work of the Kingdom will be done and the wrongs will be made right and we will share in an eternity of creation and humanity being in right relationship with our Creator.

Reading Today: Isaiah 4&5

10-15 minutes

Day 4

Prepare

Take time today to prepare to facilitate your study group.

Reading Today: Isaiah 6&7

15-20 minutes

Day 5

Planning:

Identify 3 opportunities facing you right now that may advance your purpose and vision

- 1
- 2
- 3

Identify 3 threats facing you right that hinder your purpose and vision

- 1
- 2
- 3

Write a specific prayer and a plan in each of the four boxes:

		Internal	
		Strengths	Weaknesses
External	Opportunities	Strengths - Opportunities	Weaknesses - Opportunities
	Threats	Strengths - Threats	Weaknesses - Threats

Reading Today: Isaiah 8&9

15-20 minutes

Freedom

Week 5

This week in summary

Freedom		WEEK 5
Religion in Politics?	<i>Galatians 1&2</i>	<i>Day 1</i>
Following the Leader	<i>Galatians 3</i>	<i>Day 2</i>
Freedom	<i>Galatians 4</i>	<i>Day 3</i>
Prepare	<i>Galatians 5</i>	<i>Day 4</i>
Planning	<i>Galatians 6</i>	<i>Day 5</i>

Day 1**Religion in Politics?**

To say that Jesus was a game changer is a cosmic understatement. He turned society on its head. He dropped statements like: *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven."* *"How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God"*
"the first will be last, the last will be first"

In the years after Jesus departed the believers were guided by the Spirit of God to make sense of this upside-down movement. There was contention over the issue of what to do with the old Jewish life-style they had followed for centuries. A life-style that was inspired by God and should not be dismissed lightly.

On one side were religious teacher who rejected Jesus and his claim to be the Messiah. On the other side there were the apostles and disciples who followed Jesus and learned from him directly. Then you have the middle ground: some among the religious teachers believed Jesus was the Messiah and they join his movement. They were followers of Jesus but continued to teach the old religious law. So the question came up: **What is the place for religion in Jesus' kingdom?**

Paul addresses this topic to the believers in the region of Galatia. He fundamentally agrees with the Apostles on the issue. His message cannot be dismissed as a reproduction of the Apostles message because He met Jesus through unique circumstances independent of the Apostles. (Chapter 1&2)

Paul then compares living by faith in the Spirit with living by the religious code of conduct. It's no contest that living by the freedom of the Spirit is better. (Chapter 3&4)

To finish off his letter Paul warns against misusing the freedom that the Spirit gives. Following your desires will lead to slavery. *For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.* (Chapter 5&6)

From Paul's perspective people follow the desires of the flesh to their own destruction, so God gave them the law to contain the destruction and reveal how unhealthy it was. The law didn't fix the problem nor was it ever designed to, it just reveal that the problem was there. There is tension between the requirements of the law and the desires of the flesh. So the gut reaction is to embrace the desires of our flesh, but the Spirit's freedom from the law is not a license to pursue those unhealthy desires. Not at all. The desires of the flesh are just another form of slavery.

We are called not to follow the rules, nor are we called follow our desires. **We are called to obey the Spirit of God directly.** It is the only true freedom. In the Spirit all things are possible but not everything is beneficial. It is as unsettling as it is freeing. It's not like the life we knew before.

Let not sin reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death

Romans 6

They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Romans 1:29-31

Reading Today: Galatians 1&2

10-15 minutes

Day 2

Following the Leader

For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is now free in the Lord.

Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ.

1 Corinthians 7:22

There are two deals offered, the first is a slave becoming free. That's easy to sell. But, it's hard to believe. The key to believing it is that Christ is more powerful than whatever holds you captive. Whatever your baggage is: Jesus owns whatever owns you. He has conquered it. He is your new master and he set you free. In Christ you have the freedom to disobey your previously irresistible force.

The second deal looks like a hard pill to swallow, but it ultimately comes down to the same issue: faith. This is an exchange that can only be made in faith. You must trust that obedience to Jesus is better than obedience to the self. Otherwise you will always go back to obeying the self.

Q: Why would someone who has freedom apart from Christ sell their freedom to be a slave of Christ?

Answer: Because Christ is better.

Obedience to Christ brings freedom and life.

Slavery to Jesus simplifies life. We are no longer pulled in every direction by hundreds of voices: family, job, relationships and society. They all belong to Jesus now. He frees us from our obligations the crowd. Even our bodies belong to Jesus. Jesus breaks all those ties and binds us only to him.

Jesus is now the only filter for all decision we now make. All aspects of our former life and now subject to him. We are accountable to him alone. Christ frees us from all other obligations. All other membership allegiance and responsibility is subject to our relationship to God. Every relationship and every ethic is filtered through His lens. Every decision comes down to one issue: "how does this affect your Kingdom, Jesus?"

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Matthew 6:33

Reading Today: Galatians 3

10-15 minutes

Day 3

Freedom

The world says do what you want to do, follow your heart; but is this really freedom? Do whatever you want is the behavior of toddlers and psychopaths. Freedom to do what you want is really slavery to the whims of your flesh. I can quit smoking any time I want. Just last week, I quit smoking 6 times. To be free means not satisfying the desires of 'the sinful nature', because to do that would put us back into slavery again. Think about it, using alcohol as an example, someone with a drink problem gets saved and then gets told that they can do whatever they want, in most cases the need/desire for alcohol is still strong, satisfying that need will lead them straight back into slavery again, their life will revolve around getting a drink and then another, and then another...and so it goes on.

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

John 8:31-36

Although they believed they were free, they were really slaves to sin. As much as they were following the Law, they followed sin too. They looked for every imaginable legal loophole to have their sin and follow the law at the same time. They had no choice about it. They had to sin wherever they could.

For example they invented a legal system “Corban” where they could selfishly use their wealth for themselves and give to the poor as the law required. By Corban you can enjoy your wealth as much as you like while you are alive and after your death your wealth is given to the poor. They invented a way to be selfish and generous at the same time. To do what the law required but to sin as much as they could get away with.

Although they believed they were free, they were truly slaves to sin. They weren't aware of their slavery because they choose it. But it wasn't really a choice as they had no alternative. Jesus gives an alternative. In Christ you have the freedom to disobey the flesh, a previously irresistible force.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

Romans 8:1

The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. Romans 8:21

Forms of slavery in modern society:

Financial debt

Threat of violence (#whyIleft, #whyIstayed)

Poor self-image

Substance addiction (narcotics, alcohol or tobacco)

Material desire (wanting something)

Jealousy (wanting what someone else has, or is)

Anger

Need for attention or affirmation (social peer pressure)

Addiction to flesh (food, sex or sensations)

You were bought with a price; do not become slave of men.

1 Corinthians 7:23

The world says indulge but it wants to take control from you.

The Spirit offers you self-control.

Reading Today: Galatians 4

10-15 minutes

Day 4

Prepare

Take time today to prepare to facilitate your study group.

Reading Today: Galatians 5

15-20 minutes

Day 5

Planning:

Identify 3 opportunities facing you right now that may advance your purpose and vision

- 1
- 2
- 3

Identify 3 threats facing you right that hinder your purpose and vision

- 1
- 2
- 3

Write a specific prayer and a plan in each of the four boxes:

		Internal	
		Strengths	Weaknesses
External	Opportunities	Strengths - Opportunities	Weaknesses - Opportunities
	Threats	Strengths - Threats	Weaknesses - Threats

Reading Today: Galatians 6

15-20 minutes

Image of God

Week 6

This week in summary

<u>Image of God</u>		<u>WEEK 6</u>
All in the Family	<i>Romans 4</i>	<i>Day 1</i>
Real Fatherhood	<i>Romans 5</i>	<i>Day 2</i>
Image of God	<i>Romans 6</i>	<i>Day 3</i>
Prepare	<i>Romans 7</i>	<i>Day 4</i>
Planning	<i>Romans 8</i>	<i>Day 5</i>

Day 1

All in the Family

Jesus can be bit of an enigma. He is the walking, talking, interactive message from God. He is the Son of God. And Jesus is God. He is simultaneously all of the above. The mind spins with wonder at the possibilities and questions: How can God be his own son? Perhaps the answer to that comes from the flesh and bones that God wore as He stood before us.

From the very beginning God made human beings special. He made them in his image. He made them female and male. He filled them with His own Spirit by breathing into them. There was something special about being human: God himself was part of the human condition. Filled with His Spirit and bearing His image we are children of God. This familial relationship with humanity was always part of God's design. We have always been destined to be children of God.

Then disaster struck. We sold our birthright. As an entire species and each of us as individuals; we sold our spiritual heritage for a cheap substitute.

But God had a plan to bring us back into His family. God took on a human form. He showed us how to live. In human form, God lived according to His original design for humanity: He lived as a child of God. God's will for humans is to be his children. Jesus lived as a human according to God's will.

Jesus had to be the son of God to show us how to be children again.

In many families the firstborn child is the model child that the younger children try to copy. So it is with Jesus. He is the “firstborn”, the example for us to follow.

By his sacrifice Jesus returns to us the right to be children of God. By his life Jesus shows us how to live as children of God. By his resurrection Jesus gives us hope of an inheritance as princes and princesses of the King of the Universe.

- All humans were children of God
- All humans sold their birthright
- God became human - the firstborn Son of God
- God showed us how to be a child of God
- He adopts us back to His family by His Spirit
- We have an inheritance

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as children, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

Romans 8:14-17

Reading Today: Romans 4

10-15 minutes

Day 2

Real Fatherhood

So we are Children of God. And God is our Father. There are all kinds of fathers among humanity and all kinds of different thoughts about what it means to be a father. What kind of Father is God?

Perhaps the best insight into fatherhood comes from Jesus as He describes his picture of fatherhood based on God.

Jesus tells the story of two lost sons and a prodigal Father. This story is often called the story of the prodigal son because one son squanders his inheritance in a foolish way. He demands his father's money as an early inheritance and he runs away from home. Judging by his actions he wished his father was dead. The son makes a fool of himself and squanders every penny. He picks himself up from the gutter and decided it would be better to be a servant in his father's home than to live in the trash on his own. His father had been eagerly watching for him hoping for his return, at which point He runs with all His strength and embraces the young man as His son. He throws a huge party that his lost son has returned!

But there were two sons and both were lost, in different ways. The older brother stayed at home and continued to work the fields. When his younger brother left home, the father abandoned the fields instead watching day and night for the return of his son. Father sets the priority of the family, but his older son didn't join him in the watch.

By his actions the older son abandoned his father to tend to his own inheritance. By his attitude it's obvious that he didn't appreciate his father. Though they shared the same roof, they were hardly family. In the end the father begs his "faithful" son to rejoin the family.

Even though one son spent his money foolishly, the Father is the one who spends recklessly and extravagantly on His children. This is the kind of Father we have in God. Every time Jesus tells a story involving a father, He's teaching us about God. In every story the father's generosity is overflowing.

What can Jesus' stories tell us about the kind of Father God is to us?

Reading Today: Romans 5

10-15 minutes

Day 3

Image of God

How can we be made in the image of God? We aren't even the same substance. God is spirit, we are flesh. We have as much in common with God as a manhole-cover has in common with the number 7.312. How can a bag of meat and bones be related to God?

If God made us immeasurably more than flesh and blood when he breathed his spirit into us, then the spiritual side of us can be a reflection of God. As a species we are either a product of the whims of nature taking their course in a random chance of meat and minerals accountable to no one with no greater purpose than to toil at our own cravings; or we are created in the image of God: designed with significance and purpose to be part of living community with our creator and all other forms of life he created.

If God put his spirit in human beings there are some serious implications:

#1 God gave us a gift. Just like all of God's gifts, it comes without merit. There was nothing physically remarkable about humans that we deserved to receive God's spirit.

Compared to other species on the planet, a human being is not the best of anything. We aren't the strongest, the tallest or most agile. We don't have the biggest brains, sharpest claws or thickest hides. We aren't the only species with opposable thumbs. We are actually pretty fragile.

We aren't even the most numerous species on earth. There are species whose populations grow and shrink in one year by the same number as all human beings on earth today. Our population is their variance.

God gave us a gift that we did not deserve.

#2 God gives gifts to be passed on. If God gives you strength it's to serve others. Perversion says use your strength to dominate others. God says use it to serve. Whatever your God-given gift is, use it to serve others.

The implication of God blessing humanity is that we are to bless all other life around us. Things that walk, crawl or just sit and absorb sunlight are all under our protection. One conclusion of God putting his spirit in us is that we have a mandate to lead the charge for ecological issues. We are stewards of this planet. As God treats us, so we should treat the other life forms. How we regard earth says a lot about how we estimate God regards us.

#3 Humanity is unique among all other living things on earth. When God put his spirit in the first human beings, they became something substantially different than all other living things on earth. We are more than flesh and bone. We are spiritual.

Or for another perspective: we are spirits just renting these bodies for a few short years. Don't get too attached to your flesh. Don't take your body so personally. It's not who you are. Your body is just something you have for a while.

#4 We are valuable to God. He favors us. I don't know why. Maybe it's because we are so fragile. Maybe it's our capacity as conduits of blessings. Maybe it's the way we can reflect his spirit and his character. I don't have a reason. Maybe you can find that in God's eyes. All I know is that he looks at us and sees value.

Reading Today: Romans 6

10-15 minutes

Day 4

Prepare

Take time today to prepare to facilitate your study group.

Reading Today: Romans 7

15-20 minutes

Day 5

Planning:

Identify 3 opportunities facing you right now that may advance your purpose and vision

- 1
- 2
- 3

Identify 3 threats facing you right that hinder your purpose and vision

- 1
- 2
- 3

Write a specific prayer and a plan in each of the four boxes:

		Internal	
		Strengths	Weaknesses
External	Opportunities	Strengths - Opportunities	Weaknesses - Opportunities
	Threats	Strengths - Threats	Weaknesses - Threats

Reading Today: Romans 8

15-20 minutes

Eternal Life

Week 7

This week in summary

<u>Eternal Life</u>	<u>WEEK 7</u>	
Eternal Life	1 Thessalonians 1&2	Day 1
Then and Now	1 Thessalonians 3&4	Day 2
Death and Life	1 Thessalonians 5	Day 3
Prepare	3 Thessalonians 1&2	Day 4
Planning	3 Thessalonians 3	Day 5

Day 1

Eternal Life

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” - Jesus (John 3:16)

In this statement from Jesus to a man named Nicodemus we have perhaps the most powerful and succinct description of the good news that He brings. There is a God who created the world, watched as that world separated itself from Him, and still reacted with a sacrificial love by sending His Son to ensure that world's restoration. We are invited to respond, to accept that sacrifice, and as a result are saved from condemnation and get to enjoy the rewards of the Kingdom, eternal life.

The Bible speaks about life and death both as physical and spiritual realities. Physically, there is no shortage of reminders of the frailty of our earthly existence. As we prepare our gardens we understand that some plants will return every year and some will only survive for one. Even the remains of a squirrel or possum that miscalculated either their own dexterity or the velocity of oncoming traffic reminds us that death is part of the comings and goings of daily life and that how we interact with the world and the decisions we make in it can have the ultimate physical consequence.

This frailty though, our greatest physical weakness, is transformed by the sacrifice of Jesus. When we are reconciled to God, we are reconciled to life as God created it to be. Death is a consequence of our own sin and life is an outpouring of God's love, as it has always been. The deterioration of our current bodies, although still an inevitable event, is stripped of all the accompanying fear, uncertainty, and finality.

Spiritually, life and death represent our standing of either being eternally under the care, protection and love of God or being forever separated from that love and protection. Eternity need not carry with it the question of whether we continue to exist; we are all beings who, once created, will always exist. The relevant question is in what way. Will we have eternal life in God's Kingdom or eternal death separate from His Kingdom? In this way we understand the spiritual descriptions of life and death not as existing vs. not existing but as descriptions of the type of existence we will experience.

Understanding this dual nature of life and death as both a physical and spiritual reality helps us to better comprehend some of the interesting things that Jesus had to say when it comes to life and death: Jesus said to her, *"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"* (John 11:25-26)

Notice what Jesus said earlier to Nicodemus is re-framed here with the same promise accomplished in the same way from the same source. As before, what remains is our choice to accept or reject this promise.

Reading Today: 1 Thessalonians 1&2

10-15 minutes

Day 2

Then and Now

Often times when we speak of eternal life we do so as a gift yet to be given for a time that has not yet occurred. Although there is some truth in that, it is also true that the very nature of eternal life makes it just as real and relevant to our day to day physical lives as it does to the experience that is to come afterwards.

Towards the end of his life, John, one of the disciples of Jesus, wrote a letter to be shared among the churches in Asia Minor. The other 10 disciples of Jesus had long since died, martyred for their refusal to deny Jesus. John himself had been boiled alive in oil but survived only to be forced into exile. The churches John was writing to found themselves under not only physical and sociological persecution for their belief in Jesus but also under constant pressure to conform to the norms of the society around them, norms that ran counter to the life Jesus was calling them to. These were very real pressures that many of those in God's Kingdom still face today.

John's letter reminded these churches, as it does us today, how the eternal life found in Jesus informs how we react to the circumstances around us. When faced with trial and persecution in the service of the Kingdom, we do not shrink from death, for in death there is nothing to be feared. We cannot be threatened or coerced or brought to our knees for the greatest threat against our mortal bodies was stripped of its power. No man may end our existence any more than a mere man can claim the honor of creating it. Eternal life means that which mortal man will go to any length to preserve, a citizen of the Kingdom will go to any length to sacrifice if in the service of the King.

This sacrifice is not exclusive to physical persecution, it also means giving up the way of living that honors ourselves and our kingdom for a life that pursues the work of the Kingdom of God. Jesus at one point reminds a group of religious leaders that God is not God of the dead but of the living. His Kingdom is here, right now, and it brings with it eternal life that has already begun! Although we can take comfort in knowing what comes after our physical death, we are not called to simply put our heads down and "make it through" life until that time comes. We are to live and live abundantly with what remains of our physical existence under the confidence that doing so is just as much part of our eternal life as what follows.

Reading Today: 1 Thessalonians 3&4

10-15 minutes

Day 3

Death and Life

I don't believe in an afterlife, so I don't have to spend my whole life fearing hell, or fearing heaven even more. For whatever the tortures of hell, I think the boredom of heaven would be even worse. - Isaac Asimov

One of the great deceptions in the world is that our physical death is the end of all things. This deception is rooted in a misguided faith in our own experiences. Our limited perspective is that of a physical being existing on the earth. We cannot speak to an afterlife that we have never experienced and the very nature of it means that we are not privy to the experiences of those that have gone before us. Using a standard that says what we can physically perceive is true and that anything outside of that is not true logically leads to the conclusion that there no such thing as eternal life. If we see a world around us that experiences death and cannot see it living again we conclude that it remains dead and life stops for good at that point.

However, there are complications with this understanding. It is far too simplistic to say that things we can physically perceive are true and that anything outside of that is not true. It is widely agreed upon that the atom is the basic building block of ordinary matter yet it has never been seen. Like gravity, although physically imperceptible, there are compelling reasons to believe in the atom's existence based upon how it behaves and impacts the world around it, just as a proper understanding of eternal life and God's presence in our lives can be evidenced in not only how we live but how our lives impact those around us.

To adhere to this belief we must also understand truth to be something that is able to change over time. The men who believed that the earth was flat were working with what they could perceive and calling it truth. However, their perspective was limited; they did not know that what they were seeing wasn't the whole picture and couldn't comprehend what information would need to exist for that perspective to be wrong. For us to accept that what is true is a product of what we can perceive, we would have to accept that truth itself changes with our perceptions. The fact is that the earth has always been round even when all mankind could perceive and understand was a flat earth. In the same way, the fact that an afterlife, an eternal life, cannot be perceived or experienced in our current state is not an appropriate basis to reject the possibility of its existence.

Finally, the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. There is simply no factual basis to reject the possibility of eternal life because of the belief that there is no evidence for it in this life. And even that requires us to reject the reality that the story of God presents. The experience of a rich man and a beggar named Lazarus shows us a man who has died who both seeks relief from his situation and for his family to be warned of its reality. Further, Jesus can be nothing if not a liar if eternal life does not exist as it is one of His explicit promises of the Kingdom. We cannot accept his wisdom of how to live if he we accept that he is so foolish to believe in a false reality after death.

Certainly, even if we can accept the reality of eternal life, it leaves a vast unknown ahead of us. Or does it? Isn't the God that gives us life today the same God that rules over the eternal life of tomorrow? Won't the character of our King, who presides over the real and present Kingdom, continue as his Kingdom comes into its fullness? And don't we know from the story of God that He created a world that was good; a

world with many of the same things that we experience in creation today, just in a fallen state?

The story of not only our eternity but the eternity of the creation we exist in is one of transformation. Through God's love and justice we are redeemed and made new, but not in the sense of being replaced with something altogether different. We are made new in the sense that we are restored to what we were always meant to be. In that way, although it is likely true that eternal life will carry with it things we have not yet been able to comprehend, it seems unlikely it will be altogether foreign, for what was good once will be restored to being good again.

Reading Today: 1 Thessalonians 5

10-15 minutes

Day 4

Prepare

Take time today to prepare to facilitate your study group.

Reading Today: 2 Thessalonians 1&2

15-20 minutes

Day 5

Planning:

Identify 3 opportunities facing you right now that may advance your purpose and vision

- 1
- 2
- 3

Identify 3 threats facing you right that hinder your purpose and vision

- 1
- 2
- 3

Write a specific prayer and a plan in each of the four boxes:

		Internal	
		Strengths	Weaknesses
External	Opportunities	Strengths - Opportunities	Weaknesses - Opportunities
	Threats	Strengths - Threats	Weaknesses - Threats

Reading Today: 2 Thessalonians 3

15-20 minutes

Changes

Week 8

This week in summary

<u>Changes</u>		<u>WEEK 8</u>
Transformation	<i>2 Corinthians 1&2</i>	<i>Day 1</i>
The New Mind	<i>2 Corinthians 3</i>	<i>Day 2</i>
Surrender	<i>2 Corinthians 4</i>	<i>Day 3</i>
Prepare	<i>2 Corinthians 5&6</i>	<i>Day 4</i>
Planning	<i>2 Corinthians 7</i>	<i>Day 5</i>

Day 1

Transformation

We were never supposed to be where we are right now. The world was supposed to be the perfect and complete wonderful paradise created by God: a place of perfect peace, contentment and communion. The communion that God has in mind for all of His created beings, but which was precluded by the disobedience in the garden that resulted in our untransformation, so to speak. We were perfectly fitted to be constantly in the presence of the God of the Universe. But now ever since we were cast out of the Garden we have been in need of transformation. The Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 12 that we need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. The fact that we need to be transformed means that something happened to us, something that has changed everything.

The process of transformation is a daily practice. It is by no means a onetime thing. The Apostle Paul urges us therefore in view of God's mercy to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, Holy and pleasing to God, this is our spiritual act of worship. A living sacrifice sounds to be, shall we say impossible. But it's not. In fact it's what God requires. Our lives should be in fact completely sacrificed to the One to whom we belong. Everything else is meaningless when compared to the One to whom we belong. As we move closer and closer to the One,

we are transformed into what He longs for us to be: Holy and pleasing to Him.

The common butterfly is a perfect example for us. As the stages of its life unfold it becomes what it was always supposed to be, a beautiful creation that graces the sky and strikes wonder in the hearts of all who witness its beauty. The butterfly begins as a ravenous caterpillar, it travels and eats. Then all at once it stops eating and through an amazing process become a chrysalis. The caterpillar is encased in a hard shell or becomes a hard shell and stays that way for a period of time until one glorious day God reveals it for what He always intended it to be: a beautiful butterfly that flits through our world with its wonderfully colored wings.

So it is for us, a creation so far superior to the common butterfly it is completely amazing. We in fact are the very first fruits of His creative power. We are in fact His best. How should we not submit to His command to be completely transformed by His power into His perfect image? As followers of His Son we cannot. So I, as Paul did centuries ago say again, be transformed into His image for the world's sake and for ours.

God gives us a new identity, how does that change the way we live life?

Reading Today: 2 Corinthians 1&2

10-15 minutes

Day 2

The New Mind

The Bible tells us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds: literally begin again. Genesis describes our beginning in a garden paradise. But we separated from God and death entered the world. Since then we have been in need of a new beginning. That comes about by renewing of our minds with a new identity from God.

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, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

- Psalm 1

In Psalm 1 we get the picture of what we were created to be, firmly planted in the truth of all that God has communicated to us. The psalmist says that that man is blessed because he dwells on the law of the Lord and on that Law he meditates day and night. Day and night, that does not leave room for much else that might influence our thinking. This one is described as a tree that is planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, and whatever that one does prospers. Amazing! With our minds renewed we are everything we were ever supposed to be, fruit bearing followers of the Living Lord of the universe.

The really amazing thing about the person who is described in Psalm 1 is that they are prepared for life and are preparing for eternal life. In Proverbs 22:17-19a we find more benefits of a renewed mind where the writer tells us to, “Pay attention to the words of the wise; apply your hearts to what I teach, for it is pleasing when you keep them in your heart and have them ready on your lips, so that your trust may be in the Lord.

For our trust to be in the Lord we must know Him and His Word. Keeping the words in our hearts means that we not only dwell on the Word we memorize it. We are literally made new by consuming His Word and believing what it says about us. We must believe the identity that God has for us and we demonstrate that by what we say and how we live our lives. The writer of this section of Proverbs says that having His Words in our hearts and having them ready on our lips will produce a pleasing life. It is pleasing Him to whom we listen, to us and to those that we meet along the way. The teaching here in Proverbs is consistent with Paul’s instruction in Romans 12 that our lives should be a living sacrifice, set apart for God’s use. This process of being made new is all at once and at the same time gradual. We are made new by the acceptance of the sacrifice of Jesus and we are perfected by the continuing impact that Word has on our lives as study and live our lives according to it.

What does God say about who you are?

Are you going to trust what God says about you when evidence in your life points against it?

Reading Today: 2 Corinthians 3

10-15 minutes

Day 3

Surrender

As we have been looking at transformation a thought has struck me, real transformation is hard. It always has been I suppose but for us in 21st century America there are so many conflicting philosophies that compete for our minds. As much as we don't want it to happen much of what the world thinks and practices finds its way into the life of the church.

Here are some common view points that are in direct conflict with the view that God holds and desires for His children to hold.

Don't try to change me just accept me for who I am. After all it's not my fault that God made me this way. I can't help it if this is who I'm supposed to be and no one should even try and change me. What makes you think that you could even come close to knowing enough about me to determine should be and how I should live my life. But that flies in the face of how God looks at this situation. Paul says this in 1 Corinthians 6:19b-20; *...you are not your own you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body. Not my own, so I really have no right to say who I should be.*

Then there is change by sheer will and determination. This is the old relocation by means of one's own boot straps. We think that if we reach high enough and try hard enough we'll be able elevate ourselves to the place we should be, like we even know what that is. But we can't even draw a breath of air without God's help much less draw to Him and become what we were always supposed to be on our own power.

That worked out real well for the inhabitants of the ancient world who thought they could make a name for themselves

by building a tower to reach the heavens. (See Genesis 11) They were determined to do something together that would establish them as self-sufficient; again not God's plan. He is our God and causes everything to happen as He sees fit. We cannot exclude God from the transformation process. It's His process.

Lastly there is change based on environmental conditions. This view says that I am who I am because of what is going on around me. I can't help it if my situation has changed me, and everyone needs to just get over it. But blaming our lifestyle and behavior on our environment is too easy. That makes everything and everyone else responsible for the way we are. Just because everyone's doing it does not mean that we have to. We can through God's power become what He wants us to be, transformed into His perfect likeness.

All these views are completely at odds with what God thinks and we should be way more interested in what He thinks than anyone else. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says; *"Therefore if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation, the old has gone and the new has come."* The old has gone and the new has come, now that's transformation. Sheer determination and excuse making and blaming of others and our surroundings only gets in the way of true transformation. Real transformation comes from surrender to God.

Reading Today: 2 Corinthians 4

10-15 minutes

Day 4

Prepare

Take time today to prepare to facilitate your study group.

Reading Today: 2 Corinthians 5&6

15-20 minutes

Day 5

Planning:

Identify 3 opportunities facing you right now that may advance your purpose and vision

- 1
- 2
- 3

Identify 3 threats facing you right that hinder your purpose and vision

- 1
- 2
- 3

Write a specific prayer and a plan in each of the four boxes:

		Internal	
		Strengths	Weaknesses
External	Opportunities	Strengths - Opportunities	Weaknesses - Opportunities
	Threats	Strengths - Threats	Weaknesses - Threats

Reading Today: 2 Corinthians 7

15-20 minutes

Trust

Week 9

This week in summary

Trust		WEEK 9
Faith	<i>James 1</i>	<i>Day 1</i>
How Then Should We Live	<i>James 2</i>	<i>Day 2</i>
Sight for the Blind	<i>James 3</i>	<i>Day 3</i>
Prepare	<i>James 4</i>	<i>Day 4</i>
Planning	<i>James 5</i>	<i>Day 5</i>

Day 1

What does the Bible say about faith?

Faith bears immense importance in the Bible considering the subject is brought up over 900 times. But its ultimate significance is not held in the sheer frequency of the word's occurrence. Rather, we find the importance of faith established in this: *“without faith it's impossible to please God,”* and, *“the righteous will live by faith”* (Hebrews 11:6 and Habakkuk 2:4). With that level of importance attached to it, we should probably safeguard ourselves against misunderstanding what the Bible speaks of as *“faith,”* for if we begin with a bad foundation, we'll end up with a towering monstrosity.

What most people think of as *“faith”* might not square with how the Bible describes faith. Frankly, when one looks at how the word *“faith”* is used in the totality of scripture, it becomes obvious that it means something far different from what many—including much of Christianity think it means.

In another article, we'll explore more about how—and possibly why—the word *“faith”* is misunderstood and wrongly defined. But for our discussion here, it will suffice to say that much of the world defines faith as believing blindly—a leap in the dark, so to speak. Nothing could be further from the truth. But let's explore a couple of popular verses.

“Now faith is the foundation of things being hoped for, the conviction of unseen realities.” (Hebrews 11:1) It doesn't mean that the Bible is here describing “blind faith” per the narrative of both popular Christianity and atheism. What the author is here conveying is a simple truth that is axiomatic to all of life: if you have hope for something, you must also have trust in the means of that hope. That trust that you have is the foundation for your hope. When you board a plane, your hope is that you reach your destiny. The foundation for that hope is your trust that you will get there. However, **trust always has a reasonable foundation**. Let that sink in.

Consider our airplane analogy for a moment. We have a reasonable trust in the technology because it has proven over and over that it is capable. But we still know that something along the way might fail. Anyone who refuses to fly is likely doing so out of what we might call an irrational fear—that the most unlikely of events will transpire and they will lose life or limb in some freak incident.

So then, we have these layers: hope is grounded in trust. Trust is grounded in good reason, which our current text doesn't mention because the author is only concerning himself, here, with establishing the nature of faith as the foundation and confidence for hope. He doesn't concern himself with the foundation for trust. The foundation for trust is proven character or reasonable and sufficient evidence. Does the Bible support that? Look at the Bereans in Acts 17:11. They were considered nobler because they checked Paul's assertions about how the life of Jesus lined up with scripture's portrait of the Messiah. There was discussion. There was thinking involved. *“Test everything,”* Paul wrote to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 5:21). *“Test the spirits,”* John wrote (1 John 4:1). Christianity is not a brainless endeavor, but neither is it a troll's playground for mere intellectual dopamine highs. There are some in this world

who just want to argue and nothing more. Jesus said not to throw pearls before swine or give what is sacred to dogs. He was basically giving us leeway to not feed trolls (Matthew 7:6).

Well if Hebrews 11:1 doesn't teach blind faith, surely John 20:29 does! Jesus says, "Blessed are they who have not seen and yet believe." That, surely, is blind faith! Au contraire! Note that Jesus only pronounces a blessing on those who have not seen Him, His wounds, etc., and yet they believe. He wasn't pronouncing condemnation on those who want empirical evidence; otherwise, what of Thomas? Why is his faith journey displayed so prominently in John's gospel? The main theme of John's biography is faith in Jesus and Thomas's faith journey is highlighted as a beneficial example.

These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

John 20:31

Again, this kind of trust isn't blind, but is a trust born of former foundations. In other words, because of a previously existing relationship, Thomas could have chosen to trust his companions. Again, His words don't exclude this blessing from people who want to do some investigating. He only means to express the smile on God's heart when He no longer

Did you know?

Faith, Believe and Trust

come from the same word. The Bible uses these words interchangeably. Real faith is active. It is not a passive belief in a historic event nor is it an acknowledgement in the existence of God.

When Jesus says believe in God, he doesn't care about your opinion on the existence of God. He wants you to trust God in a way that makes you vulnerable to Him. How does trusting God make you vulnerable to God? How does it change the way you live?

needs to constantly go through the “A, B, C’s” of what it means to trust Him. Just as no parent wants to constantly have to win his or her child's trust each and every painstaking time they need to rely on their child's trust in the situations that arise in life, so God also wants us to get to a point where we trust Him without Him having to go through all the proofs each and every time. This is the essence of having a mature relationship with God.

To be sure, there have been charlatans who have taken advantage of people's good trust in the Lord. History is replete enough with examples so as not to waste the reader's time. But just as bad news attracts more attention than good, the reader would do well to familiarize him- or herself with good examples from history of men and women of the faith who have not abused the privileges the Lord gave them, but actively worked to promote goodness, love, hope, and trust in God.

Not one of all the LORD's good promises to Israel failed; each one was fulfilled.

Joshua 21:45

Reading Today: James 1

10-15 minutes

Day 2

How Then Should We Live?

Knowing that faith, as scripture relates to it, is not blind...

Knowing that faith is simply trust, but not a blind trust...

And knowing that faith without action is dead (James 2:17)...

How does this change the way we live?

That's really the task of each person and each congregation in the Lord: to discuss with each other and to speak to the Lord in prayer and listen to His leading.

Some questions, then...

What ways do you as a person think or feel God calling you to trust Him?

Are there issues that have undermined your ability to trust? What are they, if any? (For example, does the Bible still appear too much like fairy tales to you? Or do you have a lifestyle you don't want to sacrifice—that is, it still “works” for you? Hint: “I dunno; I just can't” isn't an answer with which one should ever feel satisfied. That's like the religionist who says, “Don't think! Just believe!”)

How might you begin to work through those issues? (For example, do a little more homework on the history, archaeology, and other background work on how the Bible came to be? Research your apparently harmless thing you do and think through long-term consequences? Dig deeper than “I dunno's?”)

Do you understand that God knows and can accommodate the one who might simply say, “*I believe. Help my unbelief*” (Mark 9:24)?

What about corporately—as a community of believers? In what ways have we allowed the wrong understanding of faith to affect the power of our influence with others?

How shall we perpetuate a biblical definition of faith in a way that invites others to adopt it (Hint: sound bite responses work well, as long as they're truthful; is there a way to convey a confident, but not arrogant, correction to those who say, “Faith is blind”)?

Reading Today: James 2

10-15 minutes

Day 3

Sight for the Blind

What does the world say about faith?

In preparation for this article, I posed a question to my social media wall asking what my readers' gutlevel, knee-jerk reaction to the word "faith" is. The respondents were a mixed bag of believers, former believers, and full-on atheists. What did they have to say?

Things like: Believing something you know isn't true. Belief in the unseen. Believing in what you can't touch or see. Hoping something is truth without substantiating evidence. Like faith in Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny. Or the Tooth Fairy. It's what kids can cling to for the sake of building a sense of security. Trust. What you believe with your heart (brain optional?). Belief when there is no proof. A leap into the dark. Blind (and that's a bad thing).

Google offers these two suggestions: Faith is "1. Complete trust or confidence in someone or something. 2. strong belief in God or in the doctrines of a religion, based on spiritual apprehension rather than proof"

It's interesting to note that the first definition is entirely correct, a Bible-believing person could get on board with it since that is faith as the Bible presents.

The second definition is entirely false and unbiblical because of the qualification "spiritual apprehension rather than proof." The first ascribes confidence to the foundation of that trust. The second one poisons the well; it leaves questions like, "what is this 'spiritual apprehension' of which you speak," and, "what do you mean by 'proof?'"

Perhaps the most insidious aspect to note about all of this is that both the unbelieving world and popular Christianity are founded on the second definition of faith.

Discussion Questions

1. What is your current knee-jerk reaction to the word “faith?”
2. In what ways does the “blind faith” definition play to the advantage of the unbelieving world?
3. In what ways does the “blind faith” definition play to the advantage of popular Christianity?

Reading Today: James 3

10-15 minutes

Day 4

Prepare

Take time today to prepare to facilitate your study group.

Reading Today: James 4

15-20 minutes

Day 5

Planning:

Identify 3 opportunities facing you right now that may advance your purpose and vision

- 1
- 2
- 3

Identify 3 threats facing you right that hinder your purpose and vision

- 1
- 2
- 3

Write a specific prayer and a plan in each of the four boxes:

		Internal	
		Strengths	Weaknesses
External	Opportunities	Strengths - Opportunities	Weaknesses - Opportunities
	Threats	Strengths - Threats	Weaknesses - Threats

Reading Today: James 5

15-20 minutes

RE: Jesus

Week 10

This week in summary

RE: Jesus		WEEK 10
Jesus Did It	1 Peter 1	Day 1
Jesus Paid It All	1 Peter 2	Day 2
Real Belief Causes Real Action	1 Peter 3	Day 3
Prepare	1 Peter 4	Day 4
Planning	1 Peter 5	Day 5

Day 1**Jesus Did It**

Would you really want to oppose God? Isn't God the one being you don't want on your list of enemies? Likewise you don't want God to consider you His enemy. SO how can we make sure we're in good standing with God? What do we need to do to be acceptable to God? The following verses will explain how to secure our position with God:

For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.

1 Peter 3:18

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all

1 Timothy 2:5-6

By the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Romans 5:19

One act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.

Romans 5:18

But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed.

Isaiah 53:5

We have now been justified by His blood.

Romans 5:9

While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son.

Romans 5:10

[Jesus] was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

Romans 4:25

God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,

1 Thessalonians 5:9

When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Titus 3:4-7

Simple definition for spiritual words

Righteousness: To be in right standing with God

Redeem: Purchase or to make valuable

Salvation: God's act of restoring us to the way he designed us

Justified/Justification: Innocent according to God

Justice: the process of making a situation right

Reconcile: To put into order, to make peace

We have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ

Romans 5:1

For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Colossians 1:19-23

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God

2 Corinthians 5:21

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed

1 Peter 2:24

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us: "We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

2 Corinthians 5:17-20

I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you.

Isaiah 44:22

He entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.

Hebrews 9:12

And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation."

Rev 5:9

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.

Ephesians 1:7

Christ obeyed God our Father and gave himself as a sacrifice for our sins to rescue us from this evil world.

Gal 1:4

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 & Matt 20:28

Did you notice a trend there? All those verses describe what Jesus did to make us acceptable to God. It turns out there's nothing we can do to put us in right standing with God. Everything God requires of us, Jesus accomplished. The entire work of putting us on God's good side was done by Jesus. This is the purest form of faith:

Jesus did it.

Reading Today: 1 Peter 1

10-15 minutes

Day 2

Jesus Paid It All

“It is finished!” - Jesus

There was once a cataclysmic separation between God and humans. Humanity tried to bridge the separation. We even tried to build a tower to reach God in the belief that God lived just past the clouds and if we could just build high enough we would be in his presence. We were fools. But for all the wrong assumptions of ancient humanity they did get one thing right: God is worth it.

For humanity there is no higher pursuit than God’s favor. The problem is there is nothing we can do to acquire it. We could no more invoke the attention of God than a dead ant on a highway can force a hurricane to turn around.

God is substantially different from humans. He is spirit, we are flesh and blood. You might as well use a magnet to move wood. God is all powerful, he sustains himself. With a word God created humanity and with a word he can end us.

We were created to be more than flesh and blood. We were created to be physical and spiritual beings. It is part of the human condition that we were meant to be part of a divine community. You + God + many others. But long ago we died spiritually leaving only in the flesh without a way to connect to a divine community. We made the same choice that our ancestors did, to choose our own council and reject God’s wisdom. We abandoned God. Our spirit died. Separate from God, a human is just a corpse with a fading heartbeat.

WE NEED GOD.

So our dilemma: no other pursuit in life compares to God, but we who are physical can’t make any progress on a spiritual matter. So some give up pursuing God, others take to a

religion in hope that it may take them one step closer to God's favor. All our attempts are fruitless. We are left with a divine frustration.

So God came to us. He became human. Real human: flesh *and spirit*. He showed us how to live again. Then He resurrected the spiritually dead. Whatever outstanding debts and grievances that stood between humanity and divinity, it was paid when Jesus was assassinated on the cross. All that separated us from God was done away with. Everything we need to find favor with God was provided by Jesus. There is nothing left for us but to believe and live in the reality that God created. We can either live in the reality that all is forgiven and God has a better plan for us than we could possibly imagine, or we can live in the delusion that our physical efforts can earn an audience with the supreme being of the universe.

There is nothing more we can do to earn God's favor. Jesus paid it all. Believe.

Reading Today: 1 Peter 2

10-15 minutes

Day 3

Real Belief Causes Real Action

You can tell what a person really believes by the actions they take. The person who truly believes airplanes are unsafe will choose another way to travel. Authentic belief causes real action.

Our entire spiritual life is a response to what Jesus did. Think about that for a moment.

But Jesus didn't connect us to God so that we could go back to ignoring God. What's the point? The moment we truly believed that Jesus restored our place with God we changed. How can we continue living like nothing changed? Everything changed!

No, Jesus sacrificed greatly to give us a new life in the Spirit. We don't need his sacrifice to pursue a life of the flesh. If we claim to believe in Jesus there should be some observable indication in our life.

Love doesn't leave someone in the gutter.

After a real connection with a guru – you should walk away with a new perspective. A close encounter with someone as significant as Jesus should change you. Only a great fool comes away from Jesus unchanged.

What changed when you first began to trust Jesus?

What today is the Spirit of God compelling you to change to be more like the example of Jesus?

Reading Today: 1 Peter 3

10-15 minutes

Day 4

Prepare

Take time today to prepare to facilitate your study group.

Reading Today: 1 Peter 4

15-20 minutes

Day 5

Planning:

Identify 3 opportunities facing you right now that may advance your purpose and vision

- 1
- 2
- 3

Identify 3 threats facing you right that hinder your purpose and vision

- 1
- 2
- 3

Write a specific prayer and a plan in each of the four boxes:

		Internal	
		Strengths	Weaknesses
External	Opportunities	Strengths - Opportunities	Weaknesses - Opportunities
	Threats	Strengths - Threats	Weaknesses - Threats

Reading Today: 1 Peter 5

15-20 minutes

Forgive

Week 11

This week in summary

Forgive		WEEK 11
Beautiful Forgiveness	<i>Romans 9</i>	<i>Day 1</i>
Full Blown Forgiveness	<i>Romans 10</i>	<i>Day 2</i>
Hold Nothing Back	<i>Romans 11-12</i>	<i>Day 3</i>
Prepare	<i>Romans 13-14</i>	<i>Day 4</i>
Planning	<i>Romans 15-16</i>	<i>Day 5</i>

Day 1

Beautiful Forgiveness

The story of mankind is marked with the ever present need for and consistent, loving provision of God’s forgiveness. Rightly understanding this forgiveness does not merely supply a salve to our moments that fall short of perfection but properly orients our understanding of who God is, how we have been separated from Him, and the lengths He will go to reconcile us to Him. It also provides us an example of how our forgiveness of others should look.

God once sent a man named Jeremiah to speak to His people. These people had discarded God's laws and served other gods. Jeremiah had the unfortunate task of communicating to them the consequences of this behavior which included being taken captive by other nations, removed from the land that God promised them and restricted from worshipping God in the Temple that remained there because it too was to be destroyed. Jeremiah spoke for God in saying to them, "I will discipline you in just measure, and I will by no means leave you unpunished." Their sin against God was great and it carried with it real consequences. To understand forgiveness it is necessary to acknowledge that our actions impact our relationships and right standings with people and God and that sometimes those impacts cannot be simply undone. To understand forgiveness we must first acknowledge that it is needed and that our actions have put us on the wrong side of justice.

However, as Jeremiah continues speaking to God's people, we see the message change. God understands the people grieving from His discipline and hears them, who he refers to as Ephraim, their family lineage, by saying:

I have heard Ephraim grieving, 'You have disciplined me, and I was disciplined, like an untrained calf; bring me back that I may be restored, for you are the LORD my God. For after I had turned away, I relented, and after I was instructed, I struck my thigh; I was ashamed, and I was confounded, because I bore the disgrace of my youth.'

Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he my darling child? For as often as I speak against him, I do remember him still. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him, declares the LORD....I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.

And so we are introduced to His beautiful forgiveness. The offense has been committed and justice for the offense is due. And though that justice is righteous and fair, in His love God is willing to forgive what was done, removing the burden of justice and remembering the offense no more.

Forgiveness is not a fair deal or a compromise. It is a wronged party choosing to incur the cost of justice upon themselves, to forget the wrong that was done against them, and to restore the relationship and standing between themselves and the offender as if the offense never took place.

On the cross, we see Jesus, who is the wronged party, incur the cost of our offenses upon himself specifically so that the relationship between us and God can be restored and our standing as children to loving Father can be set right.

Reading Today: Romans 9

10-15 minutes

Day 2

Full-Blown Forgiveness

Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. (Matthew 18:21-22 ESV)

This question from Peter comes within a conversation between Jesus and his disciples about who is the greatest in the Kingdom. The answers Jesus provides points to a life that represents humbling themselves in the service of others (likely the exact opposite of what they thought would make them the greatest.) And here, Jesus addresses how His followers should forgive others.

In the Jewish mind, numbers were often used symbolically to demonstrate a bigger principle. The number 7 was used to represent a complete amount, referencing back to the number of days of Creation. So when Peter proposes this question to Jesus and offers his own answer, it appears like he has it nailed. However, even when the students of Jesus thought they knew the extreme nature of His heart, it generally turned out that they were just scratching the surface. Jesus' response here not only affirms the expectation of complete forgiveness but amplifies it to the extent that we should read it as forgiveness that cannot be tracked or counted.

In the Kingdom of God forgiveness is not only generous, it is by all reasonable means outrageous. As followers of Christ we are called to live a life of humility that has the will and strength to restore all relationships and to seek that restoration at our own cost. This often betrays our sense of

fairness, our sense of justice. But justice only demands that the wrongs be made right, it is blind to which party covers the cost of doing so. In our forgiveness, we take stock of the ways we have been wronged so that we may measure the cost of righting the wrong and take the balance upon ourselves.

That said, our forgiveness, just like the forgiveness of God, is a willing response to a seeking party, not an open invitation to be taken advantage of. Our understanding of what Jesus says to Peter sometimes causes us to be surprised at the number of times within God's story that we find His forgiveness being contingent on how people respond to Him. Although it is true that the well of forgiveness does not run dry, it still requires the thirsty man to drop his bucket in.

Reading Today: Romans 10

10-15 minutes

Day 3

Hold Nothing Back

The difference between Jesus' perspective of forgiveness and that of the world that surrounded him (and us today) is not a misunderstanding of the basic elements but a halfhearted commitment in seeing them through to completion. We want to "forgive" without the "forget". We want to see wrongs made right but only if the effort to do so comes from the person that committed the offense. We want to see relationships restored once but retain the right to be weary the next time restoration is needed. We want to be credited with the graciousness of being humble but also the shrewdness of not being fooled a second time.

Most of these are rooted in the desire that our hurts be acknowledged. We want people to know that we have been wronged, that what they have done has hurt us, and that we won't be taken advantage of. This is understandable, of course, and God is often described in the Bible as a loving Father, comforting His children when they need it. But when we stop halfway through the process of forgiveness we may very well have our hurts acknowledged but we also suspend those hurts indefinitely in our lives. Wrongs will be identified but never rectified. If we "forgive" but don't "forget", relationships will never be fully restored because you will always be holding something back or over the person who wronged you. In this way, we get stuck in our hurts but never free of them.

Forgiveness in the Kingdom of Jesus, however, does all of these things. When we forgive someone completely, wrongs are righted and we are free of them. Relationships are restored and we once again are able to embrace them. And

certainly our hurts are acknowledged, if not by the one that caused them, by our King who can provide peace in circumstances that could not be found regardless of the human effort. So we pursue forgiveness because forgiveness is concerned about justice, restoration and peace, all things that are tenets of the Kingdom we live in and of the aspects of the character of the King we serve.

Reading Today: Romans 11&12

10-15 minutes

Day 4

Prepare

Take time today to prepare to facilitate your study group.

Reading Today: Romans 13&14

15-20 minutes

Day 5

Planning:

Identify 3 opportunities facing you right now that may advance your purpose and vision

- 1
- 2
- 3

Identify 3 threats facing you right that hinder your purpose and vision

- 1
- 2
- 3

Write a specific prayer and a plan in each of the four boxes:

		Internal	
		Strengths	Weaknesses
External	Opportunities	Strengths - Opportunities	Weaknesses - Opportunities
	Threats	Strengths - Threats	Weaknesses - Threats

Reading Today: Romans 15&16

15-20 minutes

Victory

Week 12

This week in summary

<u>Victory</u>		<u>WEEK 12</u>
Jesus vs Death and Sin	<i>Daniel 1</i>	<i>Day 1</i>
A War of Life	<i>Daniel 2</i>	<i>Day 2</i>
... But Even If Not	<i>Daniel 3</i>	<i>Day 3</i>
Prepare	<i>Daniel 4</i>	<i>Day 4</i>
Planning	<i>Daniel 5&6</i>	<i>Day 5</i>

Day 1

Jesus vs Death

History proves that Death has a perfect record, completely undefeated. No matter how much medicine advances, death will claim us. No matter how many toys you have when you die, you still die. Guess what death won again. Science calls this entropy, the idea that everything will eventually be destroyed to a point of being useless.

On the other hand God has a perfect record. The sovereign creator of heaven and earth is also undefeated. So who would win in a fight between the creator of all things and the destroyer of all things?

Jesus' resurrection set the record straight. Death had its chance. Jesus proved that He could overcome the full power of death, heart stopping, brain function ceases, body fluids separate and rigor mortis set in. This is the full power of death, and Jesus got up from it like he was late for school. As 1st Corinthians paraphrases: Jesus is the only who showed death who is really in charge.

²⁶ *The last enemy to be destroyed is death.* ²⁷ *For "God has put all things in subjection under His feet."*

...

⁵⁵ *"O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"*

⁵⁶ *The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.* ⁵⁷ *But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

1 Corinthians 15

[Christ] will swallow up death for all time, And the Lord GOD will wipe tears away from all faces, And He will remove the reproach of His people from all the earth; For the LORD has spoken.

Isaiah 25:8

Jesus vs Sin

Most of us can come up with a rudimentary list of sins like lying, theft, cheating, murder and etc. - pretty much anything that we aren't proud of is a sin. This works for a simple understanding of sin.

But the problem of sin is deeper and more sinister than a list of actions or choices. Lying and cheating are the symptoms of sin; the cause of sin is separation from God. A person who is separated from God is a sinner no matter how honorable or debased his life choices. Without access to God's wisdom a sinner is more likely to choose the allure and destruction of sin.

But that isn't an issue now that you are in Jesus. Sin is separation from God. Jesus is connection to God. Being in Jesus means those poor choices no longer separate you from God. We still sin but we are no longer sinners: we are saints.

Being in Jesus doesn't mean you are suddenly perfect and incapable of doing anything morally wrong. More often than not we continue making poor life choices even though we are in Christ. Exposed to God's wisdom the choice to sin becomes a lot less appealing. But without God's influence

what hope is there? Sin aims to destroy the sinner. A saint aims to destroy the sin within just like students aims to destroy ignorance within them. We progress and we grow to be more like Jesus. The road is paved with both failure and success but we keep pressing on because Jesus is worth it. A saint isn't perfect, a saint pursues the One who is perfect.

Sin is separation from God. Jesus is connection to God. Jesus conquered sin. Through Jesus the worst of the worst of us has access to God. No matter how bad things have gotten, Jesus connects us to God in a way that nothing can separate.

35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? 36 As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8

For sin will have no dominion over you

Romans 6:14

Reading Today: Daniel 1

10-15 minutes

Day 2

A War of Life

Humanity is in a struggle against God that He has already won. God is an unconventional warrior. Instead of conquest by cutting down, He creates victory by lifting us up from our depravity. By doing this God converts the His enemies into His adopted children – His victorious children. God fights for our lives. He fights to give us life. Spoiler alert: He has already won.

I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.

-Jesus (John 16:33)

But thank be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. 15 For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, 16 to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? 17 For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

2 Corinthians 2:14-17

Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

1 John 4:4

*And they have conquered by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony, for they loved
not their lives even unto death.*

Revelation 12:11

*For the Lord your God is he who goes with you to
fight for you against your enemies, to give you the
victory.'*

Deuteronomy 20:4

Reading Today: Daniel 2

10-15 minutes

Day 3

... But Even If Not

God has promised us all these big things eternal life, freedom, significance, ultimate victory, etc. and you can rely on Him. But we also face situational struggles as modern life squeezes us and spiritual forces conspire against us. It's these day to day struggles that we meet God in prayer and our faith grows.

There's a story of three men who were faithful to God, but the king was jealous of their loyalty. The king demanded that they worship him instead of God. He even threatened them with execution by fire. The men refused. This is the reply they gave.

If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

Daniel 3:17-18

The story of three men continues. They were executed by a fire so hot the guards who carried out the execution died from the heat. Yet in the middle of the fire the three men were not burn. Witnesses saw a fourth figure standing beside them in the furnace. After the fire cooled the men stepped out and they didn't even smell of smoke.

Sometimes God takes away the struggles and pain. Sometimes God gives us the strength to overcome. And sometimes we won't see victory in our physical life times. It's

hard to tell which outcome God has planned, but the outcome is insignificant compared to the company. God himself stands beside us in the hardships and pain. He proved that He is not a God who avoids hard times. He endured pain, isolation and death to be with us. He stands beside you in your own loneliness. What's more? He can personally relate to your struggle.

*We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed;
perplexed, but not driven to despair*

2 Corinthians 4:8

“Even if not” God inspires faith that isn’t contingent on what we can get from Him like He’s a cosmic vending machine. God inspires faith because He stands beside us in our struggles. He isn’t a lofty leader, pampered and unfamiliar with hardship barking orders from a cushioned throne. Jesus was homeless, His feet were dirty, His hands were pierced, His face was disfigured, His heart was literally broken because of His faith in us. He believes that we will stand with Him. And we believe that He will always stand with us.

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets- who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight, women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep

and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated - of whom the world was no worthy – wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 11:32-12:3

Reading Today: Daniel 3

10-15 minutes

Day 4

Prepare

Take time today to prepare to facilitate your study group.

Reading Today: Daniel 4

15-20 minutes

Day 5

Planning:

Identify 3 opportunities facing you right now that may advance your purpose and vision

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Write a specific prayer and a plan in each of the four boxes:

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Reading Today: Daniel 5&6

15-20 minutes