

This study guide can be used for individual Bible Study, small group curriculum, or family studies.

Small Group Leaders Note:

The purpose of this study guide is to draw you and your group into conversation and discussion of God's Word and its application to our lives. The questions are posed in a specific order and each of the questions has a specific purpose. As you become familiar with the purpose of each question, this will help guide the flow of the discussion.

A high-level view of the five basic questions and their functions:

1. Introduction (*lean in*). The goal of this first question is to get everyone in the group to “lean in” and get involved. It is normally easy to answer, fun, and creates a sense of energy—so much so that you’ll see group members sometimes physically lean in as they engage in the discussion.
2. Observation (*look down*). This is an observation question. It is designed to help group members “look down” and see the relevant details and facts in the Bible passage being studied. This question establishes a solid foundation for the rest of the study. Regardless of how much time someone has spent studying God's word, everyone in the group can get involved simply by taking an observant look at what the passage says.
3. Evaluation (*look up*). What do we learn about God from this passage? This is the ultimate goal of every Bible study—to get a clearer picture of the God we worship, so that we can serve and love Him better.
4. Understanding (*look out*). This question helps group members “look out” and see the principles of the Bible passage through the lens of the world today. It builds a bridge between the facts of the passage and our understanding of it as it relates to our lives and culture.
5. Application (*look in*). This is where group members begin to “look in” and see what God might be nudging them to change in their lives. During this part of the study, group members move from “knowing” to “doing” what God's word says. It's the final step of all Bible study: life change—of being transformed into the likeness of Christ.

Week One

One of the most glorious truths in scripture is that God works through broken creatures like us to do His work. He restores the damaged and downtrodden and heals the broken hearted—and uses them to accomplish glorious things for Him. A common reason many Christians hesitate to seek out opportunities to be used by God is that many of us unknowingly and mistakenly believe deep down that we are too broken for God to use. We think God only places His favor upon the ones who “have it all together.” Yet scripture is full of stories that illustrate this is not the case. The goal of this series is to show that God uses the broken to do great things.

The idea that we humans are fallen, frail, and sinful creatures is most certainly not a new idea to you. In fact, you undoubtedly experience the consequences of this reality every day. The effects sin has had on the world are far-reaching and all-pervasive. When we read the news in the morning and see wickedness abounding, we feel the weight of “the Fall”. When a sudden and surprising anger wells up within us when someone cuts us off on the freeway, our heart reveals the impact “the Fall” has had. Even the very laws of nature proclaim this to be true. For example, we notice our garage needs to be cleaned out much more often than we would like. This is simply the Second Law of Thermodynamics at work. This law states that everything tends towards disorder, unless significant effort is brought in to counter this. Again, this is a result of “the Fall.” We could explore far less tame examples. Clearly, this world can be a wicked place. However, the message of scripture is that this is not how things were meant to be. It was once perfect...but then something happened.

So what is this “Fall”? In order to understand more fully how God uses broken, sin-filled, “fallen” creatures to accomplish His purposes, we need to understand how we came to be in this predicament.

In the book of Genesis we read how God created our world to be a perfect place of communion with Him—a place where He could pour out His love upon His children. Nevertheless, we rebelled against our creator. We believed the lie that we could be on the throne of our own lives. God gave us a choice—to obey Him and worship Him as our loving creator, or reject Him and worship ourselves. When Adam and Eve made the choice to rebel, scripture refers to this as “the Fall.” Mankind, who was created and designed to be in a loving relationship with God, “fell” from that exalted position. We were now separated from the source of life. The world continues to suffer the consequences of that choice.

Many people ask why Adam and Eve’s choice has to affect them. After all, I wasn’t the one who ate the forbidden fruit, was I? The reality is, it actually was you and it was me who made that choice. Every time we sin, we confirm that the choice Adam and Eve made is the same choice we would have made had we been in the garden. They represented humanity perfectly. This idea is referred to as “Original Sin.”

The term “Original Sin” does not simply refer to the first sin ever committed, but rather to the “origin” or cause of the state in which we now find ourselves. Original sin is the condition of moral corruption and the sinful disposition that results from that corruption which draws us all to sin—all coming as a result of the sin of Adam and Eve. We are now

all born desiring sin rather than desiring God. It takes a supernatural work of God to rescue us from that predicament.

Romans 5:12 states, “...*just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.*” Romans 5:18 tells us, “*So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men* (see also Ps 51:5; Rom 3:23; Eph 2:3; 1 Cor 15:22).”

The good news is that just as through one man—Adam—sin spread to the world, so too, through one man—Jesus Christ—salvation is now available. Just as sin and death were imputed (credited to our account) to us through Original Sin, life and righteousness are now imputed to us through faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross.

Yes, we are broken and fallen. However, scripture tells us that broken and fallen people are the kind of people God desires to use for His glory.

1. What food do you find difficult to resist?

2. How does the serpent mix truth with lies in Gen 3:1-5? Where have you seen truth mixed with lies: (1) in the church; (2) in the world around you? Why do you think this is such an effective tool of Satan?

3. What do we learn about the heart of God in this passage? Why do you think God gave mankind a choice to obey or not to obey? Why is freedom so crucial in a love relationship? In allowing Adam and Eve to fail, what does this say about God and His plan, and about what He wants from us?

4. From this passage, how would you define sin? How do you think the world defines and understands sin?

5. What are the consequences of sin?

Going Deeper:

1. How were the individual curses appropriate for each of those involved (man, woman, serpent)? How did they perfectly suit each party?

2. Where, today, do we hear that same question the serpent asked Eve: "Did God really say...?"

Week Two

In Genesis chapter 12, we turn a page in redemptive history. Up until this point in the story God is telling, we see glimpses and snapshots of the early history of mankind. However, starting in Genesis chapter 12, the story God is revealing begins to possess a somewhat different character.

One feature we do not find in scripture is a chapter that lays out “the overview of the plan of God in redeeming mankind back to Himself.” Many of us wish God had given this to us. Yet the absence of such a chapter forces us to search the scriptures to discover this for ourselves. When we do, we come to learn that the mechanism through which God has chosen to work out His plan of redemption is that of covenants. By looking at the formal covenants in scripture, we can understand the big picture of salvation history much more clearly—and when the big picture makes sense, each individual story makes more sense.

What is a covenant? It is an agreement in contract form. It could be a promise, a will, a treaty, a deed, etc. It is basically a formal agreement that defines relationships between two parties. It is through the agreements (or covenants) God makes with mankind that we see the broad strokes of His plan of salvation come into focus.

Why is God making covenants—making agreements with His children? He is taking the first steps of establishing a relationship with us and setting out the parameters of that relationship. Up until this point in scripture all we have seen is that mankind has sinned against God and broken that relationship—and we have seen the fallout from that brokenness. But that is all God has revealed so far.

The purpose of God in establishing covenants with mankind is to establish a relationship with His children. Why is this necessary? Why does God need to go so far as to set out a contractual relationship with us? Since God’s holy nature requires punishment for sin, and since our fallen nature ensures we will continually fall into sin, we would always be in danger of the wrath of God falling upon us. Therefore, God establishes covenants with His children, promising us initially that He would not destroy the earth in the same way (by flood) again—through the covenant with Noah. Then later, through a series of covenants known as “the redemptive covenants,” He promises mankind that an ultimate way of salvation from that ever-present sin would be provided.

With these agreements from God, humanity would not always have to worry about God’s just judgment falling upon us at any moment for our continued sin. We would not have to go through life wondering whether if, at any moment, God might justifiably zap us for our sin.

In Genesis 12, with the Abrahamic covenant, God reveals the first step of His gracious plan to rescue us from this predicament of sin. Prior to this, God had not revealed anything regarding how this would be accomplished.

This Abrahamic covenant is the first statement by God in scripture as to how He is going to institute His plan of salvation. This is not just a covenant that deals with Abraham and Israel—it is the first step God takes in putting in motion the salvation for all mankind that culminates at the cross.

In this covenant, God is taking the first steps in moving toward establishing a kingdom among men and electing or choosing Israel to be His channel of blessing to the

world. This initial step in the implementation of His plan gave God a base among men from which to launch His offensive against sin.

One cannot over-emphasize the importance of the Abrahamic covenant when trying to understand and describe salvation history. It is the starting point, foundation, and anchor of our salvation.

The four main (redemptive) covenants are the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and the New covenants. Discussing all of these will have to wait for another day. In the Abrahamic covenant God promises blessing to the world (ultimately through the sending of the Redeemer) and chooses Israel to be the channel of that blessing. We see God reveal all the various aspects of His covenant with Abraham not all at once, but all throughout Abraham's life (Gen 12, 13, 15, 17, 18, 22). As Abraham is faithful and trusts God, God reveals more about His plan.

In this covenant, God promises to bless Abraham and make his name great. Abraham will be the channel of blessing from God to the world. He will produce a great nation and God will give him innumerable descendants. But the most important thing to understand about this covenant is that it is THE statement by God wherein He promises to save mankind. When God says to Abraham, "I will bless you and bless all nations through you," here "blessing" ultimately means that He is going to save us from the predicament we have placed ourselves in because of our sin. This covenant is God's promise to send a Messiah, a savior, and make all things right.

The cross is the culmination of God's promise to Israel to bless them and to bless the world through them. It should not be the starting point in our understanding of our own salvation, but should be seen as the climax of the story of our redemption that is still unfolding. And it all flows from this initial covenant God makes with Abraham in Genesis 12.

1. When did you first leave home? Why did you leave (work, school, other)? What did you miss the most (security and safety, mom's home cooking, laundry, etc.)?

2. Read Gen 12:1-7. Where was God leading Abram to dwell? What land had God promised Him? Read Gen 12:8-10. Describe Abram's actions here. Was he being obedient/disobedient? Was he operating out of faith or fear? In other words, if God had promised this land to Abram, why would he go down to Egypt? What were the ramifications of this choice (Gen 12:11-20)?

3. What does God promise Abram in Gen 12:1-3? What all is included in this promise? What do we learn about God from this first statement of the Abrahamic covenant?

4. Describe a time when you had to completely trust and rely on God—where you had no other options. What was the result?

5. Where do you feel like you are trusting God in your life right now? Where do you feel you are not trusting Him? How do both of these choices play out in your everyday life?

Going Deeper:

1. Read Gen 11:27-32 and Acts 7:1-4. Where was Abram when God called him originally? What was God's original directive in Acts 7:3? How did Abram obey or not obey God in this? Where was Abram when God spoke to him in Gen 12:1-4? How was the command in Gen 12 both a reminder and perhaps a rebuke?

2. How do you see Abraham growing in faith throughout his life? What evidence do you see that he eventually learned the lessons God had for him?

Week Three

When someone sneezes, what do we say? “Bless you!” Sometimes that is as far as our culture goes in the giving and receiving of blessings. But in the Bible, a blessing is something far more significant. Biblical stories can be difficult for us to understand because we live in a very different culture from the Israelites.

In the culture in which Jacob and Esau lived, the birthright and the blessing were special privileges bestowed upon the oldest son. The birthright gave the oldest son the privilege of a double portion of the inheritance, as well as the title of priest, judge, and leader of the family. The blessing, on the other hand, was intangible and spiritual. The patriarch could speak the blessing only once because the words could not be undone.

The picture of blessing is found all throughout scripture. In fact, the way that God expresses to His children His intention of rescuing us from sin and providing salvation for us is expressed in terms of blessing. God tells Abraham that He will bless him and the world through him. This is God’s declaration and promise of salvation—God’s statement of blessing to the world.

All of salvation history can be seen as a pendulum swing between blessing and cursing. God inaugurated history with statements of blessing upon that which He had created (Gen 1). Following hard upon this comes "the Fall" with the accompanying curse (Gen 3:14-19). Moving forward we see that the curse that is so prevalent in the next few chapters (Gen 3, 4, 5 & 9), is then swallowed up by the blessing that God promises to the world through Abraham and his seed (Gen 12:3). All throughout salvation history, we see this pendulum swing back and forth.

So, what is a blessing according to scripture? First, a blessing was a public pronouncement to all who would hear, a message of favored standing with men and with God. It was a way of declaring, “This person is special.” We see this very clearly in Isaac’s blessing of Jacob (Gen 27).

However, even more significantly, a blessing was something that possessed inherent power. It was life-giving. It was a declaration of a wish or desire that God’s favor would rest upon someone. Yet it actually carried with it the power to grant that prosperity and success. This is why Esau was so upset that Isaac gave away the blessing he thought was his—and why Isaac could not repeat that blessing for him.

This blessing was a familial, generational grant; and once it was spoken, just like prophecy, could not be changed. It was Isaac serving as a mouthpiece for God, and as an embodiment of prophecy, it could not be altered. Isaac trembled violently when he realized what had happened. God had sovereignly redirected events to make sure the right person received this blessing. Isaac eventually recognized that he had been fighting against God’s will in trying to bless Esau.

In addition to a theology of blessing, there are so many lessons that flow from these chapters. The first lesson that stands out is that you reap what you sow. Despite

God's promise of blessing, Jacob does all that he can to get in the way of that blessing by his conniving and scheming. All that Jacob does through this scheming comes back upon him in droves.

The second lesson for us is that God is in control. He will accomplish His ends, despite how circumstances seem. No matter what Jacob did, God got him to the place He needed him to be. Consequently, the Abrahamic blessing continued through his family.

A third lesson might be that we are stiff-necked, obstinate people. Undoubtedly, we can see ourselves in the stories of Jacob. We are stubborn and we rarely learn the lessons God has for us the first time around. Despite the many blessings God bestows upon us, we still go our own way, operate according to our own devices, and sow to the flesh. Yet, even still, God's promise of blessing stands.

1. Describe the biggest fight you ever had with a sibling (or a best friend).

2. What do we learn of Jacob's character here, early in his life? What kind of person is he? How did Jacob hurt his family through deception? What other stories about Jacob support this assessment?

3. By the end of Jacob's life, what lessons has he learned about selfishness, trust, and the consequences of deception? What do we learn about the character of God by reading the story of Jacob?

4. Whose blessing or approval means the most to you? Why do you think this is? How might you still be working for their approval?

5. God extended grace to Jacob by being faithful to and providing for him throughout his struggles. How has God shown His grace to you? How have you grown in faith through the trials you have experienced?

Going Deeper:

1. How is trust in God the cure for dishonest or deceitful behavior? In other words, what does dishonesty say about us and our view of God?

2. Explore some of the details of Jacob's life to help fill out a picture of the kind of person he was and was foretold to be: his birth (Gen 25:21-26), his first deception (Gen 25:27-34), his next deception (Gen 27:18-23), his dream (Gen 28:10-22), his wrestling with God (Gen 32:22-30).

Week Four

In our study of how God works through brokenness to accomplish His purposes, we come to the story of Joseph. This story is a bit different though, in that, rather than brokenness being exhibited in Joseph himself, we see this brokenness all around him. Nevertheless, God still brings about His will in a way that is important for us to examine.

The brokenness in focus here is that of jealousy. Jealousy rears its ugly head in the story of Joseph and his brothers like few other stories in scripture. Yet, another powerful theme is also present. This theme is the role that trials and struggles play in our lives. The way Joseph is treated and the trials he encounters are nothing less than shocking. It seems patently unfair. He is sold into slavery by his own family. He is falsely accused and unjustly imprisoned. How could God let this happen to one of His children?

The way we often hear this question posed is, "Why do bad things happen to good people"? This is a question asked by many who struggle with the truth claims of Christianity. It is also a question asked by sincere followers of Jesus mired in their own struggles and trials. It is a challenging question, but a question that does have reasonable answers. This is the question raised by the experience of Joseph in the book of Genesis.

Some may ask, was Joseph really a good guy? Well, while either a bit arrogant or simply candid as a youth, there is nothing that scripture says of Joseph that is negative. He and the prophet Daniel are unique in this distinction of major characters in the Bible. Regardless of his worthiness, the question of fairness remains.

What this question really points us to is the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. Romans 8:28 is an anchor for many people who are going through difficult times. Here Paul tells us, "...*God causes all things to work together for the good of those who love God and who are called according to His purpose.*" This passage reassures us that God can and does bring good results from bad circumstances. It is the anthem verse for our understanding of His sovereignty.

The story of Joseph shows us that his brothers did not trust God. They thought the blessings bestowed upon him were unjust or unfair. They were jealous. One question we should ask, though, is this: did God just pour out His favor on the life of Joseph arbitrarily--or was it in response to Joseph's unrelenting integrity? That is not to say that the exercise of integrity is a guarantee of God's favor, but surely it must be a necessary condition. Scripture is clear that God blesses obedience.

However, when blessings don't come, how are we to navigate the waters of trusting God when things don't seem fair or just; when jealousy might rise up within us as well?

We must anchor our confidence in God and cripple our anxiety, fear, and envy with God's word. We need to understand and even meditate on passages such as, "*All who desire to live a godly life will be persecuted*" (2 Tim 3:12); and, "*Consider it all joy my brethren when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance, and let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing*" (James 1:2-3).

Trials and struggles should not come as a surprise to us. Jesus promised us as much. If we expect smooth sailing, the inevitable storms of life will cause us frustration

and even anger. Yet, when we see that it is through such trials that God works to transform us, we can begin to actually welcome them.

What is jealousy other than unmet expectations? When Joseph's brothers are jealous, and indeed, when we are jealous, are not our eyes fixed squarely on ourselves and our circumstances, rather than on God and His perspective?

How does jealousy relate to the sovereignty of God? Jealousy is nothing more than a lack of faith in His sovereignty. The remedy for jealousy is both developing an attitude of gratitude as well as growing in understanding about what the sovereignty of God truly means.

Another pivotal verse that reorients our thinking comes from the lips of Joseph himself, when he declares, "... *You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good...*" (Gen 50:20). God was at work behind the scenes accomplishing His purposes all along. God had a work to do in the brothers' hearts. God was preparing his servant Joseph for a great work. God was also providing for His people during a terrible famine. All the while, His sovereignty and glory were on display.

We simply cannot come away from reading about the life of Joseph without a more confident and robust understanding of the sovereignty of God. However, we also must not walk away without a sincere repentance for our own self-centeredness—which God wants to transform into God-centeredness.

1. Who is someone you haven't seen in a long time that you would like to see again? Why?

2. Using the details of the story of Joseph, how would you define "God's providence?"

3. What do we learn about God through trials and suffering that we cannot learn elsewhere? What do we learn about God from this passage?

4. When have you seen jealousy rear its ugly head in those around you? When has it happened with you?

5. What does the phrase "God provides" mean in your life? What are some examples?

Going Deeper:

1. Why do you think Joseph waited so long to reveal his identity to his brothers? Do you think that Joseph had truly forgiven his brothers? Why or why not?

2. Joseph saw God in control in every area of his life. Where do you struggle to see God as in control?

Week Five

One of my favorite quotes of all time comes from C.S. Lewis: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world" (C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*). There are so many lessons we can learn about God and about life from that simple, yet profound idea. Yet, one easily overlooked truth is simply that our God is a God who speaks. God has chosen to reveal Himself to us.

One of the things we take for granted when we read scripture is the fact that God speaks at all. Why is this significant? What does this tell us about God? This is important because if we are to know anything about God, He must reveal Himself to us. There is too great a divide between the finite and infinite, between the holy and profane, between the creature and our creator for us to be able to understand or even imagine what God is like. As A.W. Tozer has said, "*It is not possible for the mind to crash suddenly past the familiar into the totally unfamiliar*" (*The Knowledge of the Holy*).

The next question is: how has God deigned to communicate with us? This, too, reveals the love God has for us. For He could have simply chosen one way to speak. Yet, God communicates to us in a variety of ways. Sometimes it pleases God to speak audibly to His children. In our Exodus chapter 3 passage this week, we see God chose to speak with an audible voice from a bush that is burning, yet not consumed. In the early chapters of Genesis, God spoke directly to Adam & Eve, Cain, and Noah. He also spoke directly to Samuel and David (1 Samuel 3 & 23). We also see in the New Testament God spoke directly to Paul (Saul) in Acts 9. If only God's voice was always that obvious.

Sometimes God speaks through dreams. We remember Joseph upsetting his brothers by telling them the dream God gave him (Gen 37). Daniel saw both dreams and visions from God (Dan 2 & 7). Even pagan rulers were spoken to by God in their dreams. Both Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar received messages from God by way of dreams. God spoke to Joseph, the husband of Mary, in a dream, warning them to flee to Egypt (Matt 1).

Beyond the more spectacular methods of communicating, scripture also records God speaking to us in many other ways. He speaks through our circumstances, through the Holy Spirit speaking to our spirit, through nature, through the wisdom of others, through teachers, through our difficulties and struggles, through our conscience, through prayer, and even through a still small voice. God can gently bring a verse to mind that we have memorized in the precise moment we need it. These are all ways that God can and does speak.

One of the most powerful ways God has spoken to us is through His word. Paul tells us in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, "*All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God*

may be adequate, equipped for every good work." The word "inspired" here means "God-breathed." This carefully crafted word communicates to us that just as God speaks out His word at times, here, He breathed out His word to have it recorded as scripture for our benefit. The scriptures are the primary way God has revealed Himself to us.

God has given us His fullest revelation of Himself through His Son. The book of Hebrews begins by saying, *"God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son..."* (Heb 1:1-2). Jesus is the most complete revelation of who God is. Jesus tells us, *"If you have seen me, you have seen the Father"* (John 14:9). Why is this easily overlooked idea important for us to understand? We need to have confidence that the infinite, eternal, sovereign, unapproachable creator God of the universe is not only knowable but has reached out to us to make Himself known. Yet, simply hearing God's word and being exposed to His revelation of Himself is not enough. The next step is that we must believe it and then we must obey it.

God has provided for us enough revelation to inspire in us both a desire to know more, and a foundation for faith and trust in who He is and how He cares for us. Peter tells us, *"His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness"* (2 Peter 1:3 NIV). God has given us everything we need. He gave us Himself, and it is now our task to pursue Him and become more like Him.

1. Describe a time when you experienced doubts, but pushed through anyway. What was the result?

2. Read Numbers 12:3. Seeing that Moses spent the first 40 years of his life having his ego fed—being the adopted son of Pharaoh—and the next 40 years being humbled by God in the back side of the desert, how does this help us understand his fear, doubt, apparent lack of confidence, and hesitancy to jump into God’s plan? How does this humility play out in this story (Ex 3:12-12, 4:1, 4:10, and 4:13)?

3. Read Exodus 3:7 out loud. What does this verse remind us about God? Where is God in our sufferings? How might this verse help when you are having doubts?

4. Why do you think there are so many people within the church that look for the miraculous or spectacular as evidence that God is at work or speaking? How can we also see God in the mundane?

5. How has God revealed Himself to you in the past? What was your response?

Going Deeper:

1. God reveals His name to Moses in this passage (Ex 3:14). What do we learn about God from this name? What else do we learn about God from the seven "I AM" statements by Jesus in the book of John (John 6:35; 8:12; 10:7-9; 11:25; 10:11, 14; 14:6; 15:1, 6)?

2. Some people believe that the Bible is God's word. Others believe that it only "contains" God's word. Some see the Bible as the inerrant, inspired Word of God. Others believe that it is only reliable as it pertains to matters of faith and practice, but that it does not attempt to be scientifically reliable or accurate. How do you view the Bible? How does our view of scripture affect our beliefs, our obedience, and our view of the authority it has over our lives?

Week Six

According to the Jewish calendar, the book of Ruth is the story that is read every year in Jewish homes at harvest time during the Feast of Weeks—what we know as Pentecost.

The book of Ruth is fascinating in that while it does give us a vivid peek into what life was like in the time of the Judges, it also highlights some very interesting laws that reveal the heart of God and His plan of salvation in exciting ways. The first of these laws shows how God had provided mechanisms to help those in Israel who were in need. This was called the Law of gleaning (Lev 19:9-10).

According to this law, as a landowner, you were allowed to reap your fields on one pass only. What was accidentally left behind was available to the widows or the poor to glean for themselves. Farmers could not go back and make a second pass to gather what was missed the first time. So, the poor would follow behind the reapers picking up any scraps they could find.

Landowners were also required to leave the corners of their fields untouched—so the poor would have more to glean. This was a welfare system of sorts for Israel. God was ensuring the poor and needy would be provided for in this way.

Unbeknownst to Ruth, in chapter two, the landowner Boaz arranged for his reapers to additionally drop “handfuls on purpose” (as the King James so beautifully describes it) in front of Ruth to make sure she had plenty of grain to take home. That phrase “handfuls on purpose” vividly pictures how God consistently pours out His blessings on us—in abundance, with handfuls on purpose.

Another law we see in the book of Ruth is the Law of Redemption (Lev 25:23-28). Today, when property is sold in our culture, the title is usually passed from owner to owner, with the buyer having full rights of ownership. However, it was different in the land of Israel. This is because God literally owned all the land. Israel’s land was granted back in the days of Joshua to each of the tribes—and the land was to be kept forever within the families of those tribes. This is why genealogies were so important in Israel. It was a way for them to keep track of land rights.

When someone sold a property to pay debts, or for any other reason, the transaction was what we would now view as a lease. There were provisions in the Mosaic Law, at the time of Jubilee, for the land to revert back to the original owner. A title deed would thus include the terms that a kinsman of the family could perform to redeem the property back to the family.

The next law is the Law of Levirate Marriage (Deut 25:5-10). This was an unusual procedure to assure the continuation of a family name, in the event of the death of a husband who did not have any children. If a widow had no son, she could request the next of kin to take her as a wife and raise the first child to continue the firstborn’s bloodline. We see this mentioned by the Sadducees to Jesus in Matthew 22. The firstborn son would retain the family name of the older dead brother, as well as retain his property rights. This would ensure the continuation of the bloodline of the deceased man, as well as keep the property within the family.

This strange law is the key to unlocking what is happening in Ruth chapter 3. Naomi realized that Boaz was a relative, a near kinsman. Therefore, she knew there was an opportunity to get back the family properties lost by her dead husband ten years

earlier, and also a chance for Ruth to have a new life. Because of this law, the widow Ruth would now be taken care of by her kinsman Boaz, who is called the “kinsman-redeemer,” and the property Naomi’s husband owned would remain in the family.

All of these laws weave together in the story of Ruth and Naomi to give us a picture of the redemption that God provides for us. It is a beautiful love story of Ruth and Boaz, but also a love story of Christ and the church. The stories in Ruth serve as a “type” or picture God gives us in advance of His redemption. We recognize Boaz as the “goel”, or kinsman-redeemer. We can easily see how he, in some ways, pre-figures our own kinsman-redeemer, Jesus Christ.

The book of Ruth is beautiful and descriptive, yet also prophetic. Through his act of redemption, Boaz returns Naomi (who is a “type” of Israel) to her land, and also takes Ruth (a Gentile, a “type” of the church) as his bride. This gives us a beautiful picture of how Christ does the same thing. In His act of redemption, He takes a Gentile bride (the church) for Himself, and also will eventually return Israel to the land—as we saw so miraculously happen in 1948.

1. Describe a time when you felt like an outsider (because of race, creed, color, economic background, politics, etc.).

2. A lot of background story is told in the first five verses of Ruth. Describe what you think would be going through Naomi’s heart at this point in the story. What doubts do you think she might have been experiencing? In light of the plight of widows in that day and the hatred of Moab by those in Israel, why do you think Naomi urged her daughters-in-law to stay behind as she returned to Israel?

3. Do you believe Elimelech and Naomi made the right decision to leave Israel and journey to Moab? Do you think Naomi made the right decision to move back home? What factors do you think affected those decisions? What do we learn about trusting God from this story?

4. What do you think most people think of when the story of Ruth comes up? What new insights do you have about the story and about God from this journey through Ruth?

5. How does the example of Ruth encourage you in the struggles you face? What do you think God is teaching you through this book? Whom do you know who might need to be reminded of God's love?

Going Deeper:

1. Using the details in the story of Ruth, how would you define and describe God's providence?

2. How does God work through the brokenness of life in the story of Ruth and Naomi? How has God worked through the brokenness of your life?

Week Seven

In Numbers chapter 16, we read the extraordinary story of the rebellion of Korah. This story is remarkable in several ways. Here we see Korah, the cousin of Moses, rebelling against the leadership of Moses and jealous over the preference of Aaron as high priest. We also see God quelling this rebellion in a most unique and memorable way. But probably most noteworthy of all, we see a startling reference made to the abode of the dead, Sheol, which demands a bit of exploration.

Our knowledge of the immediate destination and status of those who die is quite limited. We are given glimpses in scripture that we need to piece together to gain a fuller picture. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5 that when we are absent from the body, we are present with the Lord. That is surely a comforting thought. However, there is more revealed in scripture about what happens when we die.

In Luke 16, Jesus tells us a story about a rich man and his connection with a poor man named Lazarus. These men both died, yet Jesus explains that there are different destinations for these two after death. What we learn from this story is that there is a place where the souls of the dead reside—those who died prior to the cross. It is a place called Hades (in the Greek) and Sheol (in the Hebrew). Sometimes this word “Sheol” is translated as “Hell,” but this leaves us with the wrong impression. Sheol is not the final destination for the wicked. This is just an unfortunate and inaccurate translation.

To understand this concept of Sheol, we need to realize that human beings are made up of both physical and spiritual natures. We have both bodies and souls. When we die, our bodies are separated from our souls. This is precisely what death means—literally, “separation.” Our bodies are buried in the ground, awaiting our resurrection and the eventual reuniting of our bodies with our souls (1 Cor 15). However, our souls do not wander around aimlessly. They have a particular place where they are said to reside after death.

Prior to the cross, before the price for sin was paid, there were two compartments in Sheol, the abode of the dead. Jesus describes it as having a place for the righteous dead and a separate place for the unrighteous dead. The compartment for God-worshippers is called “Abraham’s Bosom.” We see Lazarus comforted in the presence of Abraham (Luke 16:25), while the rich man, who is not a follower of God, is in a state of torment, awaiting judgment. Thus, there are two different, completely separate compartments of Sheol, which house the souls of the departed dead.

The early part of Ephesians chapter four gives us the picture that, at the time of the resurrection of Jesus, He brought with Him into Heaven the souls who were part of Abraham’s bosom—thus forever emptying that compartment. The reason that these souls could not be in God’s presence until after the cross is that the price for sin had not yet been paid, and these souls were waiting for their atonement to be made. Now, however, after the cross, whenever the saved die, they are immediately ushered into the presence of God—like we see in 2 Corinthians 5. To be absent from the body (now) is to be present with the Lord.

So now, after the cross, Sheol has only one occupied compartment. This is the place of torment for those who will be resurrected at the 2nd resurrection, the

resurrection unto death. This is known as “The Great White Throne Judgment” (Rev 20:11-14). At this time, the unsaved dead from all time will be brought to judgment. One interesting thing noted here in Revelation 20 is that not only are the unsaved thrown into the Lake of Fire, but death and Hades (or Sheol) are also cast into the Lake of Fire. Sheol is temporary, but the Lake of Fire is eternal.

We need to be clear we understand that this place of torment where the unsaved dead await their judgment has nothing to do with the Roman Catholic concept of Purgatory. That idea is not at all biblical and serves to undermine our understanding of “justification”—how we are made right with God.

Knowing that we will immediately be in God’s presence after we die is a wonderful source of hope and comfort, both for us and for our loved ones after we die. It’s good to know that scripture does give us perhaps more clarity on the plaguing question “what happens when we die?” than many of us might have thought.

1. Was there a favorite child in your house growing up? How did that make you feel (as the favorite or not)?

2. What were the complaints of the rebels in Numbers 16 (vv.3, 13-14)? Why do you think these people were complaining? How does Moses clarify whom their complaint is really against (v.11)?

3. What do we learn about God’s heart for the authority He has established? How long into the 40-year wilderness wanderings is this event? How would these kinds of revolts endanger the people throughout their time in the wilderness? How might this help explain the severity of God’s punishment?

4. What sorts of influences around us can cause us to compare and complain? Why is this? Why do you think we continue to expose ourselves to these influences?

5. What does comparison and complaining say about the state of our hearts, and also about our view of the sovereignty of God? What is one area in your life you would like to commit to refraining from complaining about? What is one antidote to complaining that has worked well in your life?

Going Deeper:

1. Read Jude 1:8-11, 16. What else do we learn about God's view of authority? What unusual example does Jude give to illustrate this?

2. This is not the first time the people had complained. Turn back to Numbers 11:1-15. What were the people complaining about this time? How did Moses respond? Why do you think Moses responded in this way?

Week Eight

In Acts chapter 9, we see an amazing transformation. Saul, who is later sometimes called Paul, has grown up a devout follower of God. He is zealous for the God of Abraham, the God revealed in the Old Testament. Unfortunately, as happens with just about everything man touches, this religious system God originally instituted in Judaism had been warped and corrupted over the years into a manmade religion that bears little resemblance to what God desired. This is the religion Saul was brought up in. While his zeal for God was commendable, that zeal was not according to knowledge—as he would later write in Romans 10:2. The Judaism of Saul's day was not the Yahweh worship God had instituted with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and later Moses.

So, when God meets Saul on the road to Damascus, Saul is confronted with the one true God and the one true Son that this God had sent. The first question Jesus asks Saul is: “Why are you persecuting me?” This had to be beyond shocking for Saul. He was surely convinced he was doing everything he could to rightly worship and protect God and protect the religion he knew. To now be asked why he was standing in opposition to God must have shaken Saul to his core. However, the question this event brings up is: what exactly happens to Saul that transforms him so mightily and so radically that he becomes no longer the most passionate persecutor of “the Way”, but rather its most passionate promoter; and champion of a cause he is willing to die for. And the question behind this question is: what is the process of spiritual transformation that happens to us at the moment of conversion? This is what we are going to examine.

The first thing we need to explore is the state of mankind prior to salvation. We need to acknowledge, as Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:1 that we were dead in our trespasses and sins. This does not mean sick in need of help. It does not mean mortally wounded with little chance of recovery. It does not mean someone who is drowning, who simply needs to reach his hand up for the life preserver that has been cast his way. Rather, continuing that analogy, it means someone who is lifeless at the bottom of the ocean. It clearly describes one who is completely and hopelessly spiritually dead. It takes a miraculous work of God to make that person alive again.

How did this happen, you might ask? How did mankind come to be in this predicament? It all goes back to Adam and Eve, as we discussed in week one. At the Fall, mankind died spiritually. You might recall that God told Adam “in the day you eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall surely die” (Gen 2:17). As we follow the story though, we see that when they did eat of that fruit, they did not die—at least not physically. Therefore, we come to understand that God meant that they would die spiritually. In scripture, death simply means separation. So, in the day they ate of the fruit, their spirits died. They were now separated from God—unable to commune with and have a relationship with Him. This is the state all subsequent humanity is born into. We are all born with dead spirits. That is why Jesus tells us that we must be born again (John 3:7).

So we understand that we are dead in our sins, but Paul goes on in Ephesians chapter 2 to tell us that even though we were dead and separated from God, He has made us alive again. When we are saved, our spirits are made alive, and that

separation from God is now gone. We begin to see life with new eyes, from a new perspective. We have new desires we never had before.

Whereas, before, we were at war with God before salvation, we are now at peace with Him. Before we were living for ourselves. Now we are living for Him. Before we were running away from God. Now we are running toward Him. This radical transformation affects everything we do in life—everything we experience, everything we see, hear, and think.

When we are saved, God sends His Spirit to dwell within us, giving us new desires. Before we were saved, the Bible—the Law of God—was an external set of commandments, a rulebook telling us what we should and should not do. The Law was originally written on tablets of stone—an external prompting to obedience. However, when we are regenerated and made alive, the Law of God is now written on our hearts. It is an internal motivation for living. We now desire to obey God because we can now see God for who He is. And because He is the most desirable thing in existence, we want to serve Him and obey Him.

There is an actual supernatural transaction that occurs at the moment of salvation. It is a decision that we make, but it is so much more than that. When our dead spirits are made alive, we enter a new mode of existence connected with the creator of the universe. This is why Saul was so radically different after His encounter with the risen Lord. He had new desires, new priorities, a new mindset, and a new direction he was heading. He had a new Lord he was serving. This is what God does to, in, and through us when we are saved. *Soli Deo Gloria (to God alone be the glory)!*

1. Describe a time when you felt led by God to do something difficult.

2. Read Acts 9:3-6. What details do you notice? Read Acts 27:12-18. What additional details does Paul add here? To whom is God sending Saul? Why is this significant? Why would it be so difficult for the Jews to understand and accept this message?

3. What does this passage tell us about people we think may be beyond reach? What is precisely our role in sharing our faith? How does this help us understand that conversion is a work of God from beginning to end?

4. Who is someone who has helped you on your spiritual journey? What was this like? Describe a time that you helped someone else on his or her spiritual journey.

5. How did God first get your attention? Was it some sort of dramatic event, or was it something more subtle? Describe how you came to know the Lord.

Going Deeper:

1. In Acts 9:16, what does God tell Ananias? At first, this might seem to be a strange way for God to describe the plans He has for Saul. Why do you think this is what God chose to say to Ananias? Read James 1:2-3, 1 Pet 1:6-9, and 1 Pet 4:12-13. What role does suffering play in the lives of followers of Jesus?

2. In this chapter, we see the Lord appearing to Saul. Read Rev 1:12-17, Isa 6:1-7, and Dan 10:5-8. What is the typical reaction when people are confronted with a vision of God? Why do you think this is?

Week Nine

Queen Victoria of England once stated that she was saved by an “M.” She had read in 1 Corinthians chapter one how the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of man. Here Paul tells us to consider our calling—how there were not many wise according to the flesh, that there were not Many noble. According to her, (being the height of nobility) but for that one solitary “m” she said she would have had no chance.

Paul begins this section in 1 Corinthians chapter one by saying that God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the wise. He is taking the focus off himself and putting it on Christ (1 Cor 1:13-15). He emphasizes that the effectiveness of the gospel was not due to his own cleverness. The way he illustrates this is by claiming that the message of the gospel itself is not clever, but rather, according to the world’s standards, appears to be absolutely foolish. How is it that the word of the cross can be foolishness?

Paul sets his crosshairs in this passage immediately and forcefully on the so-called “wise” of this age. Right out of the starting gate Paul blasts anyone who considers himself to be smart or wise or learned. Paul says God will destroy the wisdom of the wise and completely confound those who think they have understanding (1 Cor 1:19). Why would God bother to do this?

First, we need to understand that there is a war being waged for our hearts and minds. There are competing value systems fighting one against the other. It is often difficult for us to recognize, (much as it is difficult for the proverbial frog in the kettle to recognize the ever-increasing temperature of the water in which he sits), that the value system of this world has infected us to such a degree that we aren’t even able to grasp just how far away from God’s value system we have veered.

We have grown up in a world that glorifies the traits of self-reliance and independence. We aspire to be one who can “pull himself up by the bootstraps,” and make something of himself. This surely is part of the American dream—to become a self-made man! What we fail to recognize is that this independence is completely counter to the message of scripture—a message that promotes and values “dependence” above all else. God wants us to recognize our inadequacy and learn to depend upon Him as the source for all we need. What we begin to realize the more time we spend with God in His word, is how utterly and profoundly self-centered we truly are. This value system has been so ingrained in us that many of us even chafe at the idea that there is even a problem with this.

The focus of this passage is that the message of the Bible is foolishness to those of “the world.” What this is saying is that the message of the gospel is radically counter-cultural. Why? Because the culture of this world; the culture of this age; the culture of all of us who are born into and who are enculturated by the mores, the customs, values, and traditions of the world are radically self-centered. Whereas the message of the gospel is radically God-centered.

It has been said that there are two different types of people in this world—those who are man-centered, and those who are God-centered. Within the latter category are two types of people—those who think God is man-centered and those who think God is God-centered. The more we read scripture, the more we begin to comprehend that God is radically God-centered.

At first blush, this seems to be an appalling thought. We are taught to hate pride and self-centeredness, aren't we? However, these traits are only repugnant because it would be appalling and sinful for *us* to be radically self-centered. We are confusing categories and not realizing that the entire universe was created to magnify and glorify God. The reason it is wicked for us to lift ourselves up to be adored and revered is that our self-centeredness is, at its root, a distraction that hinders the ability of others to set their focus on the one who truly deserves that reverence and awe.

As has been well said by John Piper, God is the one being in the universe for whom self-exaltation is the highest virtue and the most loving act. God's desire that we praise Him serves to expose to us the most profitable, valuable, desirable, and needed object that humanity can experience. His self-revelation to us and His demand that we interact with Him through praise is the most loving thing God can do for us.

A.W. Tozer begins his monumental work, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, by saying, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." We need to rightly think about God. We need to rightly think about ourselves. The purpose of this life has been described as a journey from radical self-centeredness to radical God-centeredness. Undoubtedly, Heaven will be a place of radical God-centeredness. We are now in training for this. The pursuit of the glory of God and His glory is life's highest calling. If that is true for us, why would it not be true of God?

1. Who is the most powerful or famous person you have ever met?

2. Paul tells us that God will use the foolish and weak things of the world to shame the wise and the strong. To what do you think he is referring? Why do you think God does this?

3. In the context of this passage, Paul begins the discussion by contrasting what the world considers wise and what God considers wise. What is the difference between worldly wisdom and Godly wisdom? What is the standard of wisdom for each? In other words, what is the basis for each understanding of wisdom?

4. Where have you seen the wisdom of God being ridiculed and despised in the world today? Where have you seen Christian values demeaned and mocked?

5. In your own life how have you seen your wisdom replaced with (or transformed into) God's wisdom? How has God used you, a broken vessel, in spite of your brokenness? How do you think God would like to use you?

Going Deeper:

1. Why is it important that no man “should boast before God” (vv. 29-30)? Read Eph 2:8-9 and Romans 3:23-28. In other words, why is it important that we do not try to take credit for the work that God does in salvation, or in our lives?

2. Why do you think God uses broken people to do His work?

“These resources were very helpful in the creation of this study guide. “SmallGroups.com” and “Serendipity Bible for Groups.” For helpful answers to many of your Bible questions, the website GotQuestions.org has often proven to be useful.”