

SUNDAY SCHOOL

SONG THEOLOGY



THIS BOOK BELONGS TO:

Preface:

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 are 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 how much time someone has spent studying God’s word in their lives, 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). Here 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.

Adapted from the Liquid Curriculum Series

5 Transformational Activities

We have a new feature we are now including in our Study Guides. This will be an opportunity for you to take additional steps in growing deeper in your faith and drawing closer to your Creator. We believe there are five transformational activities that can deepen your time with God—in whatever Bible study setting you find yourself. These are also great practices we are asking all our small groups to incorporate into the life of their groups.

We will be recommending one of these activities each week for you to integrate into your study and devotional time—with your family, or small group, or any place you engage with these study guides. Here is a list of these transformational activities as well as a brief description for each. At the end of the study questions, you will find each week that we have included a suggested activity. We pray that this may this deepen and enrich your time with God and that you may you draw closer to the God you love.

1. Bible Study — We seek to learn more about the triune God with the goal of knowing Him better and applying His will in our lives.

2. Prayer — We seek to learn how to have a deeper and richer prayer life that is consistevnt and meaningful. We will practice this both individually and corporately.

3. Community — We grow more when we are together than in isolation. We want to have a place to love and support each other and encourage one another in the faith. “From Jesus, the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Ephesians 4:16).

4. Worship — We seek to incorporate into our study of God an element of worship. Knowing about God is different than knowing and worshipping God. This may or may not include music. Worship is a response to all that God is with all that we are. All of life is worship.

5. Outreach — We seek to be healthy in our spiritual growth by avoiding insulation and isolation—which comes from a loss of vision and passion for reaching out and ministering to those around us.

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Introduction

There was a book written some 30 years ago whose title captures the essence of what this new series is all about: *All I Really Need to Know, I Learned in Kindergarten*. Likewise, we could, in some sense, say that just about everything we need to know in the Christian life, we learned through the songs we sang in Sunday school.

Whether or not we realize it, we learn a great deal of theology through the praise songs we sing. That is one of the reasons the old classic hymns still resonate today. They carry rich, vibrant expressions of theology that shape and guide our thinking on who God is and what He has done. In the same way, for those of us who grew up going to church, many of the songs we sang in Sunday school helped lay a foundation in our young minds for understanding key, important truths about God.

Through those songs we learned that “Jesus loves me, this I know”. We learned that “the B-I-B-L-E, yes that’s the book for me”, and that “we stand alone on the Word of God”. We also learned that we need to “trust and obey”. In all my years of walking with Jesus, I have never heard a clearer, more precise (and concise) description

If you want to know how well you have mastered a subject, try explaining it to a child.

of what God wants of us and for us. “Trust and obey, for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus.” That is the whole of the Christian life expressed in three short words.

Through this sermon series, the goal is to explore some of these amazing truths in a more in-depth way. But it is the simplicity of how these truths are expressed in these children’s songs that makes them so profound. So, in this study guide we will explore some of these profound truths; yet we will explore them in a way that honors their simplicity. Oftentimes, we over-complicate things that can really be described in easy-to-understand ways. It has been said that if you want

to know how well you have mastered a subject, try explaining it to a child.

So that is what we will do. We will explore the themes presented in each of these Sunday school songs, and attempt to describe them in ways that perhaps a child or youth could understand—intentionally avoiding loaded theological terms and jargon. Simple and straightforward explanations of profound truths can go a long way toward cementing them in our minds. Another benefit of this approach might be to encourage you to have conversations with your children or grandchildren about these transformative truths—or even with the kids you minister to as you serve at VBS, Sports Camp, or in our Sunday school programs.

As you think through these truths, it is crucial to remember that you are the primary disciplers of your children. And we, as a church, want to do everything we can to equip and support you in that important role. So please consider using the messages of this study guide as conversation starters with your family.

But we also hope that this might be a tool you can use to explain key truths from God's Word to those who do not yet know Him. When we use big 50-cent theological terms as we are sharing our faith with others, it can be both intimidating and often not very profitable. We all want to share our faith more than we currently do. Hopefully, the simplicity of this discussion might help you in that goal as well.

Please prayerfully consider what God might be saying to you, and prompting you to do, as we make our way through this 9-week series. We pray that you will hear His voice and follow His call as we seek to be and make disciples of Jesus.



"TRUST AND OBEY...
IS THE WHOLE OF
THE CHRISTIAN LIFE
EXPRESSED IN THREE
SHORT WORDS."



MY GOD IS SO BIG

My God is so big, so strong and so mighty
There's nothing my God cannot do
My God is so big, so strong and so mighty
There's nothing my God cannot do

The rivers are His, the mountains are His
The stars are His handiwork too
My God is so big, so strong and so mighty
There's nothing my God cannot do



My God is So Big

Everyone has an inner sense that God exists built into their very hearts and minds. God actually made us that way. We all know deep down there is something out there bigger than us—something powerful enough to be able to create all that we see. Different people have tried to explain this built-in truth in different ways. Some people describe it as our “conscience”. In other words, we all seem to have a sense for what is right and wrong. Most cultures around the world reflect this. Others describe this sense as a hole in our heart that we are always seeking to fill. Still others see it as a sense of longing for *home*. However we try to describe it, that sense is universal. It is something we all share.

Because of this awareness that everyone has, the Bible doesn't take time to try and explain how or why God exists. It is just assumed. The way the Bible begins in Genesis is a good example of this: “In the beginning, God...” It simply jumps right into the story, telling us about what God was up to, rather than giving us complicated explanations and arguments for why we should believe there is a God.

This simplicity is also seen in the name of God. When Moses asked God what His name was, God simply said, “I AM”. He was basically saying: “I am the One who exists. I am life itself. Everything flows from Me.” In the culture in which the Bible was written, a person's name said a lot about them. Sometimes names were given as prophecies or hopes as to what kind of person the parents wanted their child to be. At other times, names were given based on qualities or characteristics parents noticed in their child. For example, in the book of Ruth, Naomi named her boys “Mahlon” and “Chilion” (meaning weak and sickly). These names apparently came from their poor health when they were born. As a result of this condition, both young men died fairly young. In the Bible, names say a lot about who you are. This very simple

name that God wants to be known by tells us a lot about Him.

One thing God's name tells us is that He does not rely upon anything else to exist. That idea might be something that is difficult for us to relate with. Everything we know depends on something else. For example, the only reason I exist is because my parents decided to have children. I am able live on this planet because of a lot of things that are outside of myself: like gravity, oxygen in the atmosphere, an abundant food supply, etc. I depend on these things to survive. I am a dependent being.

Sometimes it is easier to understand things we cannot see by comparing them to the things we can see.

But God is not. He does not *need* anything. That is one very important, very basic truth about God. In fact, because of this, we can know that God has always existed. He does not depend on anything else.

This helps us to see that God is in a different category than we are. He is different from us. But even still, when God created us, He did it in such a way that helped us understand Him better. The way the Bible describes this is that "God made us in His image". In other words, God chose certain aspects of what He is like and designed us with similar traits.

Sometimes it is easier to understand things we cannot see by comparing them to things we can see. For example, we are all pretty confident the wind exists, even though we cannot see it. We believe this because of the effect we see the wind have on the world around us. In the same way, although God is not visible, we can be confident that He exists because of the things we see Him do. The wind is a good analogy to help us understand that the saying "seeing is believing" isn't necessarily true.

It's clear from the Bible that one of the traits God possesses is love. Likewise, we too have the ability to be loving. In looking at the beauty of the world around us,

it's obvious that God is creative. We also have that same creative ability. So, we can look at the many good traits we humans possess and understand God a little better because of them. God is wise, just, holy, and merciful. And because we can reflect aspects of those things in our lives, we are able to understand our invisible God a little better.

These traits are called God's attributes: truths about who He is that are visible, tangible things we can relate to. Because we can love, and are creative—because we have rational thoughts, and have the ability to have relationships with others—we can understand God better, precisely because these things are true of Him as well. Obviously, we are not *all-loving* like God is, but we can absolutely *reflect love* in our lives.

There are some attributes, or characteristics of God that we share with Him, and others we do not—things that are true of God alone. For example, God is all-powerful—able to do anything. Also, God is everywhere all at once. God knows all that can be known. And even though God is outside of His creation, He is also nearby and closer to us than we can even imagine. These are all things that are true of God alone.

In addition to looking at the traits God possesses, another way to help us understand who God is and what He is like is by looking at what He does. For example, God loves. In creating the earth and everything else that exists, we see that God provided a place where He could pour out that love. He sent His Son to die on our behalf and be the sacrifice for our sins. That was the ultimate act of love. God also provides and protects. He heals and gives life. God teaches us and guides us in the ways we should go. All these actions of God reveal His heart and His character and help us understand God a little bit better.

If we want to know what God is like, our best bet is to get to know Jesus.

But by far the best way that God has helped us

understand what He is like is by actually taking on a physical form and becoming a human Himself. In that way, humanity could see, feel, touch, and experience all that God was through our own senses. That is who and what Jesus is. He is God in human flesh. Jesus said, “if you have seen me, you have seen the Father”. If we want to know what God is like, our best bet is to get to know Jesus.

We will never truly understand all there is to know about God. But God clearly wants us to know Him. He wants to be in relationship with us. So, God spoke. He communicated to us. He created the universe so that He could be known. The song says, “My God is so big, so strong, and so mighty...” The powerful theology we learn in this song draws us toward seeking out more and more knowledge of who God is.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

There are many misconceptions people have about God. Take a few of these and discuss them in your group:

- “I can’t believe in both science and God.”
- “God will solve all my problems.”
- “God supports my political party.”
- “God will not give me more than I can handle.”
- “God doesn’t want me to have fun.”
- “God promises to heal me if I have enough faith.”
- “God won’t let bad things happen to Christians.”

Discussion Questions

1. In looking back at your life, when did you first start thinking about God? If you grew up in the church, what did you picture God was like when you were young? If you did not, what are some of your earliest memories or thoughts or impressions of who God was?

2. Outside of scripture, what evidence do you see that God exists? What evidence is most powerful and meaningful to you? What argument for the existence of God do you most often use?

3. What are some of the attributes of God? Which of God's attributes mean the most to you? Why? Which attribute are you perhaps confused about or would like to know more about?

4. What misconceptions do you think people (both inside and outside the church) have about who God is and what He does? Where do you think these misconceptions come from?

S. What are some ways that you reflect the character of God in your daily life? What are some ways that you would like to see some improvement in this? What is one practical step can you take this week to be a reflection of God to those around you?

Going Deeper

1. What does it mean that God is holy? What does the holiness of God demand of us—in our worship, how we set our priorities and make decisions, where we invest our time, talent, and treasure (Ex 15:11; Ps 96:9-13)? What reaction did people in the Bible have to the holiness of God? What reaction do you see people today to the holiness of God? What are some practical ways in which we might treat the holiness of God with the importance it deserves?

2. Read John 14:6. What does this verse mean? Dissect each part of the verse and discuss what each of these statements refer to. How does the world view “truth”? How does the message of scripture undermine this view? Why do you think it is so hard for people today to accept that Jesus claimed to be the “only” way?

Transformational Activity

Worship

When meditating on the attributes of God, we are naturally and rightly drawn into praise. This week, take some time and think through some of God's attributes and try to connect with them personally. Do a simple search on the attributes of God and choose a few that stand out to you. For each one, identify its impact on your life. Start with the phrase, "Because God is..." and then finish your own sentence. For example: "Because God is unchanging, *I never need to worry*". "Because God is all-powerful, *He can help me with anything*." Choose several other attributes and worship God for who He is. Here are a few to get you started: "Because God knows everything, _____." "Because God is merciful, _____." Spend some time in praise and worship and we invite you to come back next time ready to share what God revealed to you.



THE B-I-B-L-E

The B-I-B-L-E
Yes, that's the book for me
I stand alone on the Word of God
The B-I-B-L-E



The B-I-B-L-E

Whether or not we realize it, we make certain assumptions about the books we read. For the most part, when we pick up a book, we assume it is just one book, typically written by one author, composed at one point in time. But the Bible is a very different kind of work. We need to think differently about it than we do other books. The Bible is not, in fact, just one book. It is 66 different books, written by about 40 different authors, over a period of some 1,500 years. These 66 books have been compiled together and they all fit neatly within one cover. But the most unique thing about the Bible is that it is supernatural in origin. Yes, it was written by men, but the ultimate author is God Himself. That one fact alone makes it the most unique book ever written. This week, our Sunday school song prompts us to ask: where did the Bible come from and why should we trust it?

We saw last time that God designed us in such a way to understand at some deeper level that He exists. This is one example of God revealing Himself to us, but there are other ways God does this as well. We can look at the beauty of creation and see that God loves us and wants to give us good things. We can look at the complexity and order in the universe and understand that God has taken great care to design everything that exists with precision. We can look at history and see how God has preserved His people Israel through unending trials and struggles. From this we know that God keeps His promises. We can also look at evidence from our own lives of how God has provided for us time and time again. Here we see His faithfulness. There are so many ways and places we see God revealing Himself to us. But none of these can tell us *how* God wants us to live our lives, what the purpose of life is, and what God's plan is for fixing everything that is broken. For that, God gave us the Bible.

Where did the Bible come from? The Bible itself claims to be from God Himself. In fact, the language 2

Timothy 3:16 uses to describe how this came about, is that the Bible is “God-breathed”. God breathed out to and through the hearts and minds of the men who wrote it, using their own personalities and abilities, the precise message He wanted communicated. God did not dictate to them word for word. But He superintended the process, to ensure that what was produced was exactly what He intended.

God used people from all kinds of backgrounds to write the Bible. He used prophets and priests, kings and fishermen, and doctors and statesmen to write the individual books of the Bible. Through this process of breathing out His Word, God made sure that the finished product was without any error or mistake. And He then preserved His Word down through the centuries, so that we can be confident that what we have in our Bibles is essentially the very same writing the original authors created.

The discovery of the “Dead Sea Scrolls” helps support the confidence we have in the reliability of scripture.

A question many people ask is: “how we can know that errors haven’t crept into the text over the many centuries since the Bible was written?” After all, the printing press wasn’t invented until 1436

A.D. Prior to that, copies were all made by hand. One powerful answer to that question came to us through a monumental archeological discovery in 1947. In a bunch of desert caves just above the Dead Sea in Israel, dozens of ancient scrolls were found that rocked the world of biblical archeology. The discovery of the “Dead Sea Scrolls” helps support the confidence we have in the reliability of scripture.

To understand the significance of the Dead Sea Scrolls, we need to have a bit of background on the original writings of scripture. The Old Testament was written in two languages: the majority was written in Hebrew, and a few sections of Daniel and Ezra were written in Aramaic.

It was written between around 1450 B.C. and around 450 B.C. It was compiled and completed most likely by approximately 400 B.C.—but at the very latest by 275 B.C. (nearly three centuries before Christ was born). The New Testament was written in Greek from the years 40 A.D. to around 90 A.D.—all within a generation after the time of Christ.

We know that the books of the New Testament were written on vellum or parchment, which were the common materials they had available to the writers at the time. But we need to understand that we don't have those original manuscripts. Those manuscripts were passed around from church to church and place to place, and they eventually wore out over time. But everywhere these original manuscripts went, people made copies, so they could have their own copies of God's Word.

The staggering reality is that we have so many copies of the books of the New Testament, from so many different places around the Ancient Near East, from different time periods, that, by comparing them, we are able to have a high degree of confidence that what we now possess is almost identical to the original documents. In fact, when it comes to the New Testament, there are over 26,000 manuscripts and fragments of manuscripts to compare with one another.

Everything we know about the Bible gives us the confidence that it is God's very Word.

Yet it is not only in the amount of manuscript evidence, but in the close proximity in time between when the New Testament books were written, and the oldest manuscripts we have found, that gives us so much confidence. The New Testament was written in the first century A.D.—starting at around 50 A.D. The final book was written about 90 A.D. And we have manuscripts and fragments that go back as early as 135 A.D.—which is within one person's lifetime of the writings of the originals. That is very close to the time of the writing, leaving very little time for changes to happen.

That gives us significant confidence that what we have is what was in the original.

But when we get to the Old Testament, that is where the Dead Sea Scrolls come into play. The earliest Old Testament copies we had (prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947) dated only back to around 900 A.D.—which is quite a bit of time between when they were written and the copies we had—something like 1300 years. That is significantly more than the 40-year gap with the New Testament. But the Dead Sea Scrolls date all the way back to as early as 150 B.C. That significantly closes the gap between when the Old Testament was complete (around 400 B.C.), and the newly discovered earliest manuscript copies (around 150 B.C.).

The big question is: how do these recently discovered manuscripts from the first century B.C. compare with the version of the Old Testament we already had from 900 A.D.? The amazing news is that they are almost identical. That is why the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls was so monumental. It confirmed what we already had confidence in—that God preserved His Word for us down through the centuries.

STUDY TIPS

When reading scripture, it is helpful to constantly ask yourself questions about what you are reading: What do I learn about God from this passage? What do I learn about myself? What changes in my life is the Holy Spirit prompting because of what I am reading? How does this passage help me become more God-focused in my life, rather than self-focused? What does this passage tell me about how to relate with others in a more godly way? How would the original audience have understood this passage?

The Bible is comprised of 66 books: 39 in the Old Testament, and 26 in the New Testament. Over time,

men of God recognized which books were inspired by God and these were the books that ended up in our Bible. Everything we know about the Bible gives us the confidence that it is God's very Word, and that it is the love letter He left for us so that we could know Him better.

When we look back to the verse mentioned earlier, 2 Timothy 3:16, we see that this magnificent, God-breathed book provides for us teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness, so that we might be equipped for every good work. God has provided in His Word everything we need to live lives of godliness (2 Pet 1:3).

Discussion Questions

1. Which Bible translation do you read the most? Why have you chosen that one?

2. What does it mean that the Bible is the inspired Word of God? Does that *inspiration* vary from book to book, or idea to idea? In other words, when the Bible discusses science, it is just as much God's Word as when it discusses the Christian life or history? What are some examples of this? What is the difference between saying that the Bible "contains" the Word of God vs. the Bible "is" the Word of God?

3. What do we learn about the heart of God by the very fact that He spoke and revealed Himself to us? What is the “plot” of the Old Testament? What is the “plot” of the New Testament? How would you describe the connection between the Old and New Testaments?

4. Why do you think it is so easy to read and yet not apply what we are learning in our study of the Bible? What has been your experience with this? Read James 1:22-25. What details stand out in this passage? What aspects of this passage can you relate to?

S. What are the practical benefits of regularly reading and studying the Bible? What does it mean to submit to the authority of scripture? What obstacles do you face when applying God's Word to your everyday actions? What is one step you can take this week to more fully allow the Holy Spirit to do His sanctifying work in your heart as you meditate on His Word?

Going Deeper

1. There are many stories in the Bible that either make outrageous claims or simply seem unbelievable to some people. What passages or stories in scripture do you struggle with? What are some difficult messages in the Bible you continue to wrestle with?

2. Some people make a hard distinction between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. What are the problems with this idea? Why do you think so much of the Old Testament is focused on the nation of Israel? What role does Israel play in the plan of God? What passages in the New Testament help us understand the future God has for the nation of Israel?

Transformational Activity

Prayer

Take some time this week to pray that the Spirit would ignite in you a passion for reading your Bible. Ask Him to reveal your motivations for why you might not make it the priority in your life that it could be. Pray that He will open your eyes to ways that you approach the Bible as a list of tips and “how-tos”, rather than a love letter from the heart of God to yours. In what ways has your study of scripture sometimes become short-sighted or self-centered? Do you approach time in the Bible with the question “What can I get out of this”, rather than an opportunity to see God more clearly? Pray that you will walk away with more clarity on why you approach the Bible the way you do.





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TO AND THROUGH THE
HEARTS AND MINDS
OF THE MEN WHO
WROTE [THE BIBLE],
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MESSAGE HE WANTED
COMMUNICATED."



JESUS LOVES ME

Jesus loves me, this I know
For the Bible tells me so
Little ones to Him belong
They are weak but He is strong

Yes, Jesus loves me
Yes, Jesus loves me
Yes, Jesus loves me
The Bible tells me so



Jesus Loves Me

We see three of the most important words ever uttered together here in this simple song title: “Jesus Loves Me.” In fact, this profound truth of God’s love for us must be our starting place when talking about what it means to be saved. Sometimes it is easy to get lost in the weeds when trying to understand all the very important details and every subtle nuance of how God has chosen to make that salvation happen. But it is also important to take a step back and try to see the big picture, and gaze at the simplicity and beauty of what God was doing in both creating and then saving us. This simple gaze is what is in view in this powerful and profound song. Our salvation is mighty and profound, but it is also simple and beautiful.

One of the first truths we learn when we spend any time exploring who God is and what He has done is that God is love. When describing the work of salvation, it is here we must start. So, what does it mean to say that God is love? Many people misunderstand this idea and see this truth through their own definition of love. They might think that if God is love, He won’t ever judge or condemn people—that God’s standards of right and wrong need to align with our own standards. But even though we might mistakenly think of love in this way, that is not who God is or how He has revealed Himself. And we absolutely must let God define Himself. How foolish it is to think that we can force our own views of who God is on the creator of everything.

Yes, God is love, but He is also holy, righteous, and just. Everything that is true about God must be seen in light of all the other truths about God. We can only understand the love of God when we understand the holiness of God. We can only understand the holiness of God when we see His goodness. All of His attributes are intertwined with the others, and are interdependent upon each other. The problem comes when we take one

truth about God and isolate it all by itself.

To be clear, love is not what God is. Love is what God does. Sometimes we say, “you are what you eat”. But it is also true that “you are what you do”. God is not made up of a substance called “love”. When we say “God is love,” it’s because He is the source of love. He is the standard of love. To love is what God naturally does. He cannot do otherwise. In fact, we define love simply by looking at God. He is literally the meaning and definition of love. God loves because that is who He is. We only understand love because God has revealed Himself to us and has modeled love for us.

To love is what God naturally does. He cannot do otherwise.

What does it look like in a practical way that God is love? Some have described it this way: even before the universe was created, such an overabundance of love existed within the very being of God that this overflowing love needed to be poured out. So, God created a world in which He could place creatures, upon whom that love could be lavished. He created mankind—little reflections of who He is—whom the Father called His children. He fashioned a world of beauty and plenty where we, His children, could live. He gave us everything we would ever need. Thus, love was the motivation for God creating all that there is.

God then provided for us an opportunity to choose to love Him, and serve Him, and express our gratitude to Him as the creator of all things—as well as obey Him as our loving Father. He did not have to do that. He could have simply enforced our servitude and obedience and we would never have strayed from the path of compliance. But the love of God becomes clear again in the fact that He gave us a choice. We *could* follow Him as the rightful object of our devotion. Or we could choose not to. Choice is an essential element of love. Love that is compelled is not love. It must be given as a free-will gift. If a parent declares to a child, “you must love me”, what is given in

response is not love, but mere duty.

Yet sadly, after God created us and lavished that love upon us, rather than honoring God as our Father and creator, we rebelled against Him. We wanted to be the boss of our own lives. The problem was that God is the source of everything good and right and beautiful. So, when we chose to go our own way, we were, as a result, choosing to be separated from everything that is good. The Bible calls the ultimate place of separation Hell. Hell is the destination where we would experience the absence of the overflowing goodness of God's presence. But that destination and that separation is what we chose.

Since God is the author of life and the creator of all that there is, He has the right to establish the rules and boundaries for how we live our lives. When we stray from doing what God has asked us to do, the Bible calls that rebellion "sin". But sin is so much more than just breaking the rules. It is ingratitude to God for what He did to create us. It is an assault against the nature of God Himself. Sin goes against the natural order of life and is an attack against our own natures. We were created to be in union and fellowship with God—to be plugged into God as the source of life. When we disconnect ourselves from that source, we separate ourselves from life itself. We are tearing away at the core of our own soul. It is unnatural and devastating.

God tells us what is right and wrong not because there is some arbitrary list, but because it is a revealing of who He is. Sin is an attack on the person and character of God. Sinning can also be seen as us doing to ourselves something that is inherently wrong and harmful. In His love, God wants the best for us—and that best is Himself. Yet what God desires is not only what is best for us, but is what is, by definition, good and right. When we sin, we are

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turning our backs on God—which is turning our backs on all that is good and right.

When we rebelled, we separated ourselves from God. This separation is called death. This wicked choice we made had other consequences as well. It turned our eyes away from God and infected every part of us, down to our core. That infection grew and spread and took control of us so completely that we were no longer even able to see the beauty of God. Since God created us to live forever, unfortunately, that separation would never end. We would be separated from all that is good forever and ever.

So often, when talking about what God expects of us, we will hear it said that God's standard is perfection—and when we fail to live up to that standard, God requires punishment. While that is technically true, that language doesn't really capture *the heart* of what God was doing in creating us and setting up rules for us to live by. The Law of God comes from a place of love. His punishment for sin comes from a place of love. Everything God does flows from the heart of a loving Father. When we see our rebellion against God in that light, God's love is so much more on display, and His judgment makes more sense.

DID YOU KNOW...

There is a false teaching that is growing in popularity today that argues that eternal punishment in Hell is not really eternal. It is sometimes referred to as “annihilationism”. This is the idea that after a period of punishment, God will annihilate the souls of the damned, rather than having them suffer for all eternity. While we may wish for this to be the case, the Bible is clear that Hell is forever. In one powerful verse, Jesus destroys this false doctrine. In Matthew 25:46 Jesus uses the same word to refer to both eternal life and eternal punishment. In other words, if Heaven lasts forever, Hell does too.

The first step in understanding the love of God is in seeing the perfect and holy rules and laws by which life operates best. Only then can we understand the remedy God provided to fix that tear in the universe our rebellion caused. Next week, we will continue looking at what it means to be saved, and how salvation is intimately intertwined with the love of God.

Discussion Questions

1. How old were you when you began following Jesus? What did God use to draw you to Himself?

2. Many questions arise when talking about being saved. When we use the term “salvation”, what is it we are being saved from? What is the spiritual condition of humans before being saved? What effect does sin have on us before we are saved? What does God do in us at the moment of salvation? What changes happen because we are saved (both temporal and eternal)?

3. What do we learn about God from the scriptural truth that sin separates us from Him? What does it mean to repent? What does it mean to have faith? What does it mean when the Bible says that faith without works is dead? How would you describe the phrase “born again”?

4. Many of you may have heard this statement: “It doesn’t matter what you believe, as long as you’re sincere.” What are some of the biggest misconceptions in popular culture today about being saved? These misunderstandings show up in the answers to questions like: what is sin? How many roads are there to God? What can we do to earn our salvation? Such misconceptions can really take people down a harmful path. What other misconceptions have you come across? How do you answer these kinds of objections/challenges?

S. What would you say if someone asked you how they could be saved? Where would you start? What would your process be for walking with them through this journey? Who is someone you are praying for right now who needs to hear about the love of Jesus? What is one thing you can do to be more active in sharing your faith?

Going Deeper

1. How would you respond to these common questions many believers have: Why do I continue to sin after I am saved? How do I know that I am saved? What should I do if I do not *feel* saved? Read Romans 8:38-39. What do we learn in this passage about our salvation?

2. When we are saved, we are adopted into God's family. What are some of the ways God pours His blessings on us as His children? What privileges do we now have? What do we learn about God and about our new status with Him through the picture of adoption?

Transformational Activity

Bible Study

There are so many facets to the salvation God provides. We could spend a lifetime studying it and never exhaust the topic. Perhaps this week, choose one facet of salvation and do a study on that issue. Next time we meet we can discuss what you discovered. Here are some possible areas to explore: adoption, regeneration, faith, eternal security, atonement, justification, sanctification, born again, forgiveness, gospel, or repentance. While you are exploring this topic, try to make it a devotional experience as well, and praise God for the salvation He has provided.





"IN HIS LOVE, GOD
WANTS THE BEST
FOR US—AND THAT
BEST IS HIMSELF."



DEEP AND WIDE

Deep and wide

Deep and wide

There's a fountain flowing deep and wide

Deep and wide

Deep and wide

There's a fountain flowing deep and wide



Deep and Wide

When was the last time you had an argument with someone? What was the result? How did it affect your relationship? While you were in the midst of that fight, did you enjoy the sweet fellowship and closeness you had before? Unfortunately, that is not how relationships work. When there is conflict, there is division and separation. There is pain and sorrow. Until that relationship is mended, you no longer have the closeness and intimacy you previously enjoyed.

That was the result of our rebellion against God. We were now separated from Him. We could no longer enjoy the fellowship we were created for. We could not experience the overflowing love He had for us. That is the problem facing every human being that has ever lived. We have all chosen to reject God. Because of this, we would now have to suffer the consequences of turning our backs on Him: living forever outside His presence.

But God did not want to leave things that way. He created us as children upon whom He could pour out His love. So, He set about on a plan to fix that situation. The problem was that our rebellion had a cost. The price tag for choosing to live in a universe without God...is a universe without God. We thought we wanted to be the ruler of our own lives. We believed the lie that being independent was a good thing. Our eyes were so squarely fixed on ourselves that we could not see the horrible truth—that we were rejecting the very thing we were created for, and that God is all we ever truly want or need. When we are separated from God, all that is left is misery. But experiencing misery for all eternity is what we deserve, and is what we chose.

**The price tag
for choosing
to live in a
universe
without God...
is a universe
without God.**

The story we see play out in the Bible shows us that

someone had to pay that price. Either we could pay it ourselves, or someone would need to pay it for us. But who would be qualified to do that? It would need to be someone who did not owe that cost themselves. They would have to be perfect and sinless. It would also need to be someone whose death was worth so much more than ours. Basically, if we were to avoid eternal separation from God, He needed to pay that price for us Himself.

So, God sent His Son Jesus to become human. He left the glory and beauty of Heaven—the freedom and perfection of all that comes with being honored as God—to be born as a creature. The creator of the universe was now housed in human flesh. He was born as a baby, and lived a life that was pleasing to God. He never rebelled against His Father like the rest of us had. So He did not owe that penalty we all owe—eternal separation from God.

He chose to pay that penalty for us. He chose to experience everything we would have experienced if we had been separated from all that is good—for all eternity. Everything that you and I would have felt if we were forever outside the presence of God, the source of all goodness—the isolation, loneliness, fear, sadness, grief, pain, anguish, distress, sorrow and agony—He experienced while on the cross. An eternity of suffering for an entire human race is what it cost Jesus to pay for our sin.

We can easily hide behind simple phrases that don't really convey the full weight of what happened. We say "Jesus died on the cross for our sins". Or we say that "the blood of Jesus paid the price I owed". And those statements are very true. But what is meant by those phrases goes far deeper than we sometimes realize. "Jesus died on the cross for my sins" means that the cumulative suffering owed for all the evils ever committed by everyone who has ever lived was felt by Jesus in the span of six grueling hours on the cross. It was as if He were separated from all that is good forever and forever.

And He experienced all of that, multiplied over and over again, for each and every one of us.

This glimpse into the journey of Jesus on the cross ought to cause us to fall on our knees in sorrow for what our choices cost Him. In essence, every time we sin, we pound another nail through the hands and feet of Jesus. Yet we continue to do that very thing day after day. The limitless love of God in giving us His Son—and the matchless love of Jesus in willingly choosing to endure that unbearable weight of suffering for us—is what draws us back to relationship with God.

Jesus paid that price we all owe. And He offers that payment to us as a perfectly free gift. There is nothing we can do to earn or deserve it. There is nothing we can add to it. When we try, we tarnish the beauty of that gift—and reveal that we don't truly understand it. All we must or can do is accept the gift. We must humbly say thank you. We must agree that we are rebels and that we deserve to be separated from God. And we must bow before God and ask Him to apply the beautiful and horrible payment Jesus made on our behalf to our eternal account.

**In essence,
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When we surrender the right to be our own boss, and acknowledge that God is God, and that He deserves honor and glory and obedience, God then forgives our sin and wipes our slate forever clean. Not only are our past sins forgiven, but all our future ones as well. He adopts us into His family and we become children of God. We are now promised an inheritance that only a child of the King deserves.

God also gives us the gift of His Spirit to dwell within our own hearts, comforting us, teaching us, guiding us, and helping us choose to follow the right path. God Himself is now present with us forever. All that is good and right and holy is our ever-present companion in the person of the Spirit. All we need to do to experience

this is to essentially say “no” to ourselves and “yes” to God.

The salvation God provides from our hopeless situation is a beautiful love story He has been writing all throughout history. It began in the Garden of Eden where our rebellion was first seen. And it has continued generation after generation, as God patiently held back the judgment we all deserve. The story reached a climax when Jesus suffered and died on the cross. And the story started a new chapter when Jesus rose from the dead, showing that He was more powerful than death, and that His sacrifice was accepted by the Father.

The love of God is deep and wide. It is boundless. It is an overflowing flood of goodness available to us. But we must accept it. Just like the blood of the innocent lamb didn't accomplish anything until it was applied to the doorpost of the Jewish homes in the Exodus from Egypt, the blood of our sinless Savior must be applied to the doorposts of our hearts. It is the choice we make when we become a follower of Jesus.

The story of salvation is the thread that ties together all of history. Not only are we saved from an ultimate destiny of

DID YOU KNOW...

Since there is nothing we did to earn or deserve our salvation, there is nothing we could ever do to disqualify ourselves from that salvation. Salvation is a work of God from beginning to end. The Abrahamic covenant, the promise by God of salvation for the world, is unconditional. It is unlike the Mosaic covenant, which is conditional. This Mosaic Law was simply a contract that promised enjoyment of God's blessings in the land of Israel. If they disobeyed, they would be disciplined. That is the conditional aspect of their relationship with God. But their status as His children (just like our salvation), was never in question. As long as the sun, moon, and stars are in the sky, God promises Israel will be His chosen nation (Jer 31:35-37, 33:19-26).

separation, but we are saved for a blessed life of love, joy, and peace in the here and now.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe a time when you were separated from someone you loved.

2. One of the most precious promises in scripture is that once we are a child of God, there is nothing that can change that. We are, and forever will be, part of God's family. Read John 6:37-39, 10:27-29. What do we learn here about our salvation? Read Romans 8:28-39. What stands out to you in this passage? What is highlighted in vv. 38-39?

3. Read Ephesians 2:8-9; 1 John 5:13; and 2 Timothy 1:12. What do we learn about God from these passages? And what do we learn about our salvation? What does it mean to be sealed (Eph 1:13-14; 2 Cor 1:21-22)? What does sealing mean for the security of our salvation?

4. Why do you think so many Christians believe we can lose our salvation? If losing our salvation were actually possible, what would that say about the promises and character of God (1 John 2:25)?

S. What comes to mind when you think about the fact that our eternal destiny is secure? How does it make you feel about your Heavenly Father, knowing that He holds you tightly in His hand? What is your motivation for serving Him? What does 1 John 5:13 clarify for us regarding this idea? This week, think about and pray over the idea that confidence in our salvation leads to freedom and joy, rather than fear and insecurity. What is one verse or promise that you will hold on to this week to help remind you of this promise?

Going Deeper

1. One of the amazing benefits of being saved is that we are adopted into the family of God. Yet the reality is that we continue to sin—to rebel against the authority of God. How does our sin affect our relationship with our Heavenly Father? Does it affect our status as His children or does it simply affect our fellowship? What does that look like? Read Hebrews 12:5-11. Discuss what this discipline looks like. How has this discipline showed up in your life?

2. What should we do when we sin? Read Proverbs 28:13; 1 John 1:6-10. What steps are discussed in these passages?

Transformational Activity

Outreach

If you had the cure for cancer, what would you do with that cure? If you had the answer to world hunger, would you keep it to yourself? The amazing reality is that we have a message to tell that far outweighs the importance of any other good news. We have THE Good News, the Gospel. This is the truth that sets people free from the fear of death and gives them access to the God of the universe. This God wants to adopt them into His family and bless them for all eternity. What should we do with this Good News?

Take some time this week to pray that God would open your eyes and heart to the importance and urgency of this Good News, and that you would feel motivation like never before to share that news with others. Pray each day that God would bring someone across your path that needs to hear this news. And then share it! Come back next time and share what God did in your heart.





"ALL THAT IS GOOD
AND RIGHT AND
HOLY IS OUR EVER-
PRESENT COMPANION
IN THE PERSON OF
THE SPIRIT."



FATHER ABRAHAM

Father Abraham had many sons
Many sons had Father Abraham
I am one of them, and so are you
So let's all praise the Lord
*Right arm! (etc.)



Father Abraham

When reading our Bible, sometimes we focus in on the individual stories, and how God is active in people's daily lives. At other times, we need to step back and try to understand the big picture—in an attempt to make sense of how history is unfolding according to what God has planned. In this big picture view, we understand that God has a plan to rescue all of humanity from the hopeless situation we got ourselves into through our rebellion against Him. Mankind was destined for a Godless eternity because we chose to go our own way, rather than follow and worship our creator. We spent the last two weeks looking at what this plan of salvation is all about. But we also notice when reading our Bible that this plan of salvation is sprinkled all throughout the story of scripture. There is not one particular chapter that covers “the plan of God”. So where is this plan revealed? Where is the first place God makes known what salvation is all about?

The first hint of this plan comes at the very beginning of the Bible. In the first couple chapters of Genesis, God tells us that He created the world, formed and fashioned His children, and placed them in a beautiful garden. Here we get the first big plot twist in history. Even though a perfect Father created perfect children and provided a perfect place for them to live, these children rebelled. This is the setting where the story of salvation starts to unfold. Before we can explore what salvation is, we need to know why we need salvation in the first place. What was broken that God needed to fix? This is why studying the Old Testament is so important. It allows us to lay the proper foundation for our understanding of who God is and what He has done. The salvation that Jesus brings in the New Testament makes no sense without the background of the rebellion of mankind in the Old Testament.

We see this rebellion in the first few chapters of

Genesis. It is here, in God's response to this rebellion, that He gives us a fuzzy, cryptic preview of how He is going to restore the relationship with His children. He tells Satan, embodied in the form of a serpent, that the seed of the woman will one day crush his head (Gen 3:15). In other words, God is saying that one of the descendants of Eve will prove to be the ultimate downfall of this rebel angel

Even though a perfect Father created perfect children and provided a perfect place for them to live, these children rebelled.

Satan. But that is all the information we really get from this part of the story. We will have to wait until later in the story for additional details about how He will make this salvation happen.

That brings us to the introduction of a new character in the story. At the end of Genesis chapter 11, we come across a familiar name in the midst of a lengthy genealogy. This man is Abram. God will later change his name to Abraham. Here we see a shift in the story God is telling. Up until this point in the Bible, the focus has been on the whole world and what was happening globally. Now, God zeroes in on one man and one family, through whom He will now tell His story. For eleven chapters God has set the stage for this unfolding drama. And now, for the rest of the entire Old Testament, the actors on that stage will come from the family of Abraham.

We must not miss the significance of this important truth. God intentionally chose to reveal Himself to mankind by choosing one man, through whom He would rescue all of humanity. God could have accomplished this in any number of ways. But He chose one man and said through this man and his family, He would fix what was broken. This man Abraham would go on to have a family. This family would grow into a nation. And from this nation of Israel would eventually come a king, a savior, a Messiah, who would be that promised seed God warned Satan about back in the very beginning. The story of

salvation unfolds in the Bible through one chosen nation, Israel.

God decided to pour out His love on one particular people in a special way. He did not choose Egypt, or Assyria, or Persia, or any other ancient people. He chose Israel to be the “apple of His eye”. They are unique and special in His sight. God calls them His firstborn, His treasured possession. He loves them as His bride. They are the center and focus of His plan and the primary members of His family. The rest of salvation history revolves around the promises God made to Israel—promises that He will keep. If we do not properly understand the primary place Israel continues to hold in the plan of God, then we will not accurately understand most of the Bible.

The most important of these promises comes in the beginning of Genesis chapter 12. In this chapter, we finally see the first clear statement by God declaring His promise to bring salvation to the world. In Genesis 3:15 we only got a hint and a preview of this plan. But here in chapter 12 we get a bold pronouncement of God’s intention to bless the world by providing salvation through this family.

God told Abraham to leave the only home and family he had ever known, and to go to a place He would show him. God promised to make Abraham great and that He would bless him. And here is perhaps one of the most important verses in the Bible. God tells Abraham that He will bless those who bless him, and will curse those who curse him. And that in and through Abraham, all the nations of the world will be blessed. This promised “blessing” is God’s first step in implementing His plan of salvation. It is, in fact, God’s promise to save the world. The word “blessing” here ultimately points us

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to the salvation God will provide in the coming Messiah. God is telling Abraham that the salvation of the world will come from his line.

This promise is what we have come to call the “Abrahamic Covenant”. A covenant in scripture is simply a promise, will, contract, testament, or agreement. This promise to Abraham is God’s contract with the world that He will save mankind. As we make our way through scripture, we see that God enters into contracts, or covenants, with His children, promising certain things. By making covenants, God gives us confidence that He will fulfill what He has promised. This Abrahamic Covenant is the overarching promise of blessing to the world, and is the foundational covenant to which all other covenants are related. It is the core, source, and anchor of our confidence that God will save us. We cannot overestimate the importance of the Abrahamic Covenant in the unfolding story of salvation. It is literally step one.

Yes, this is a promise God made to Abraham, and thus to Israel, the nation that came from Abraham. But we Gentiles are able to access this promise because we are grafted into the family of God through Abraham (Rom 11). This is where we get the picture of being adopted. Because we are adopted into God’s family (Rom 8:15), we can call God our Father, and we are heirs to the salvation God promised Abraham’s offspring. The confidence we have that we will be saved comes directly through our

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

As we follow the journey of Abraham, we see that there was growth throughout his life when it came to trusting God. How did Abraham do early in his life when faced with challenges to his faith? What are some examples? What do the following passages teach us about the faith of Abraham: Gen 12:1, 4; Heb 11:8-10, 17-19; Gen 15:6; Rom 4:20-21? What has your own growth arc looked like when it comes to trusting God?

connection to Abraham (Gal 3:29; Rom 4:16) with whom God made this unconditional covenant.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever made a promise you weren't able to keep? How did that make you feel? What did you do about it?

2. What do we know about the world prior to the call of Abraham at the beginning of Genesis chapter 12? What major events had already happened? What do we know of the character of mankind up until this point? Why was this contract that God made with Abraham so monumental and foundational in the history of the human race? What did it signify? How does the narrative of scripture radically change after this event?

3. What is the difference between the promises man makes and the promises God makes? When it comes down to it, do you think you actually believe all of God's promises? Why or why not? What promises from God do you treasure the most? What promises do you struggle with? It is clear that God is a promise-making, promise-keeping God. What does that reveal about who He is (His character, what He values, and what He expects of us)?

4. Why do we make promises? How do promises affect the relationships we are building? What does promise-keeping reveal about our character? Where have you seen the effect of broken promises in the church? How might this reality drive us back to confidence and comfort in our faithful God?

S. What did God call Abraham to do? How much detail did He give him? How might this call on the life of Abraham mirror the call of God on our own lives? How much detail does God give us? In what way does God ask of us the exact thing that He did of Abraham—to give up the only home we have ever known and seek a land that God will show us? What is one way you can invest in eternal things this week?

Going Deeper

1. Read Genesis 15:1-21. Why is it significant that God put Abraham to sleep and that He passed through the animals alone? What does this tell us about the Abrahamic Covenant and the promises of God to the nation of Israel? How does this style of treaty ratification ceremony help ensure faithfulness by both parties to the promises made? How does the way this covenant is made help us understand our own salvation as well? What is important about verse 6? Where else do we see this statement in scripture?

2. Read Romans 11:1-32. What is the question Paul is answering in verse one? Why might that have been a pressing question? What is Paul referring to in his illustration of the olive branch in 11:16-24? Who are the natural branches and who is the wild olive? Why is it crucial for we Gentiles to understand this illustration from Paul? How does it help us understand our salvation better? How does it help us understand our connection to the Abrahamic Covenant? How does it help us understand the primacy of Israel in God's plan?

Transformational Activity

Worship

The unconditionality of the Abrahamic Covenant points us to the unfailing love of our covenant God. No matter what we do, we cannot disqualify ourselves from His blessings. The Hebrew term “hesed” is often translated as “unfailing love”. It is God’s lovingkindness, or perhaps His “love in action”. Take some time this week to meditate on the unfailing love that is displayed in God’s contract with Abraham, and through him, with the world—a promise to pour out His blessing on His children. Read Micah 7:8 and Isaiah 54:10 as a way to focus your thoughts on this powerful truth about God. Come back next time and share what God did in your heart through this experience.



OH BE CAREFUL LITTLE EYES

Oh be careful, little eyes, what you see
Oh be careful, little eyes, what you see
 For the Father up above
 Is looking down in love
So be careful, little eyes, what you see

(Oh be careful, little ears, what you hear)
(Oh be careful, little tongue, what you say)
(Oh be careful, little hands, what you do)
(Oh be careful, little feet, where you go)



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Oh Be Careful Little Eyes

One of the ongoing struggles we face in the Christian life is the challenge of living lives that are pleasing to God. The truth is, it is hard. We have a natural tendency and *pull* in our hearts to do things our own way. Sin has a hold on us. We naturally want to pursue the desires of the flesh. So how do we make progress—moving from where we are presently in our spiritual walk, to where God wants us to be?

The obvious reality is that we are not yet holy. But we are headed in that direction. It is important to see that it is a process. Despite what we might desire, we do not instantly become holy when we begin the Christian life. In trying to understand this process more clearly, sometimes it is helpful to look at the saving work God does in us by using the framework of “tenses”. There is a past tense, a present tense, and a future tense of our salvation.

In the past, God saved us. He made us right before Him. When we trusted in Jesus, He declared us not guilty—for all time. That is something God has completed in our lives, and we contribute nothing to it. That is the past tense of salvation.

There is also a present tense of salvation. God is presently *saving* us. He is changing us, little by little, into the kind of people He wants us to be. Even though our sins have been forgiven, we all continue to give in to sin every day. God is in the process of helping us see the damage that ongoing sin does to our lives, and He gradually helps us learn how to habitually make decisions that are pleasing to Him. Little by little, bit by bit, all throughout our lives, God is forming and shaping our decisions and our character, transforming us into a clearer reflection of His own beauty and perfection. This process is ongoing, and will never quite be complete in this life.

Then there is also a future tense to our salvation.

God says that we *will be* saved. This is where God will complete that process He has been working in our hearts all throughout our lives. When we die, we will be given perfect, immortal bodies that don't even desire to sin any longer. This is when God glorifies us. At this point we will be perfect and complete in every way. But this does not happen until after we die and are raised from the dead. This perfection is something we all long for. We don't

God is a loving Father who draws us to Himself through patience, kindness, and gentle loving care.

want to have to struggle with sin. We want to be complete and perfect. But it takes time for God to chip away at our rough edges before our lives start to resemble His perfection. It is in the future, after we die, that God finalizes that process.

One of the least helpful ways of teaching our kids about the expectations of God on our lives is to say that God expects perfection from us. How is that at all motivating? It is, at best, frustrating and defeating. It sets up an impossible standard that no one can meet. It can also set up our kids to be perfectionists, who are so hard on themselves when they fall short that they beat themselves up, and live in a near-constant state of depression.

What God expects of us is devotion, faith, repentance, and humble obedience. He does not stand over us as a taskmaster and demand perfection. God is a loving Father who draws us to Himself through patience, kindness, and gentle loving care. But He knows we will fall short of living according to His example. When that happens, in response to our repentance, He picks us up, dusts us off, and helps us take yet another step toward becoming a reflection of who He is.

Yes, God is perfect and holy. And yes, that which is not holy cannot dwell in His presence. But why is that? It is because that which is not holy, by definition, is opposed to God. If we choose to follow God, then our

aim and our goal is to be like Him. If we choose not to follow God, then being like God is not our goal. This is what cannot enter His presence—specifically, anything that is opposed to Him, that is living in defiance of Him. But if we are God-worshippers, then God will do whatever is necessary to prepare us to dwell in His presence. This is called sanctification.

God did not just save us *from* something. He saved us *for* something. Yes, He saved us from the penalty of sin in our life. And when He did that, He adopted us into His family. But God does not stop there. He also saves us from the power of sin in our lives, and saves us *for* a life of blessing. Again, this is a process. But if we are Christ-followers, we should see an upward trajectory of growth in faith and in holiness throughout our lives. Today, I should be making decisions and choosing the right path more often and more consistently than I did 10 years ago. And 10 years from now, I should be even further along in that process.

How do we gauge our progress in growing towards holiness? The Bible calls this “fruit”. The book of Galatians describes this fruit—this outgrowth of pursuing God. Some examples of this fruit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc. These are characteristics of hearts that are set on God. They are the product of living lives that are pleasing to God. When our eyes are fixed on God’s priorities, and we live in obedience to what He has asked of us, there will naturally flow from those choices feelings of joy and feelings of love. We will naturally exhibit acts of kindness and patience. These examples of fruit can be measuring sticks for our growth in holiness.

Is our life more characterized by this fruit than it used to be? That is evidence that the process of sanctification is happening. The fruit of the Spirit is produced as we

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throughout our
lives.**

make choices that are pleasing to God. But again, it is a journey, a process. It does not happen all at once. Just like it takes time for human relationships to grow and develop, it takes time to learn, understand, and imitate the heart of God.

Growing in our faith is a product of spending time with God. It involves learning to consistently say no to our own desires and say yes to what we know God wants of us. What does this journey look like along the way? What does it involve?

It involves increasing in our knowledge and understanding of God's Word. We will not know what God desires if we do not spend time in His Word. It involves a decrease in the severity and frequency of sin. Sin blocks fellowship with God. As we say no to sin, our souls are knit closer and closer to God. It also involves increasing in the practice of Christ-like qualities. The more we act like Christ, the more we become like Christ. And lastly, it involves increasing in our faith and trust in God. This is not a complete list, but it gives us a good picture of the journey.

God is a loving Father and He is working to form and shape us, to mold and refine us into purer and more accurate reflections of Himself and His holiness. That is why we are encouraged to be careful

STUDY TIPS

As you read your Bible, be on the lookout for key terms and ideas that merit closer examination. These are good candidates for a word study. This is where you take a concordance, a Bible dictionary, your favorite Bible study software or Bible website, and search for all the places this term appears in the text of Scripture. You can even do a simple Google search. Then explore the context, various uses, and what commentators have to say on each term. This will enrich your study of God's Word and deepen your understanding of His revelation. A key term for this week might be "holiness" or "sanctification".

with our eyes what we see. It is not only God working in us, it is also our participation that makes all the difference.

Discussion Questions

1. What is something you have worked hard to be good at (a skill, instrument, ability, sport, learning a language, etc.)?

2. What is the difference between justification and sanctification? Why is it important to understand justification? Why is “by faith alone” such a crucial part of our salvation? What does the process of sanctification look like in our lives? How does hard work and discipline factor into our growing in sanctification? What is the difference between “trying” and “training”?

3. How do we grow in sanctification? What should motivate our obedience to Christ? What is the role of gratitude in our sanctification? Read Romans 6:11-14. What does it mean to consider ourselves “dead to sin”? How can someone who is dead to sin still succumb to temptation? What are some practical ways of putting this principle into practice?

4. Why do you think people are drawn to the idea, “let go...and let God”? Why is this an unbiblical understanding of sanctification? What is God’s role in sanctification? What is our role? Where have you seen examples of holy living in those around you? What sets these people apart from others?

S. Do you think a life of holiness is possible? Why or why not? What has your growth in sanctification looked like? What has been the pace of growth in your life? What is something you can do to increase that pace?

Going Deeper

1. Read 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Romans 6:1-4. What stands out to you in those verses? “A genuine Christian will show evidence of a transformed life”—what do you think about that statement? How can it be misunderstood? Do you think the world agrees with that statement about transformation? Why or why not? Read John 13:35 and Matthew 7:16-20. What do these passages have to say about this idea?

2. Read Colossians 3:1-17. What are some practical steps Paul gives for pursuing a life of holiness? Read Romans 8:6-17. How can our mindset affect our growth in holiness? What does it mean to set our minds on things above?

Transformational Activity

Community

It has been said that theology is done best in community. You have life experiences that I don't have and a different perspective on things than I do. You have stories about how God has worked that will bless my life. We all need each other. That is what the picture of the body of Christ is all about. We are all unique, and when we all are contributing, the body of Christ is truly functioning. When we study a certain subject, there are different things that each of us brings to the table: different experiences, perspectives, and sometimes opposing ideas—and that's a good thing. That's what it means when Proverbs talks about iron sharpening iron. When we grapple with things together, we are all benefited. When we do theology in isolation, that's when problems come. More often than not, this is how we can fall into heresy. We need to grapple with our ideas about God together, in community. This week, pray about committing yourself to this idea. Bring your thoughts, ideas, and frustrations to whatever group you are connected with (Bible study, small group, mentoring relationship). If you are not connected in this way, pray about joining one. We are not meant to do life alone!

I'VE GOT THE JOY

I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy,
Down in my heart (where?)
Down in my heart (where?)
Down in my heart,
I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy,
Down in my heart (where?)
Down in my heart to stay

And I'm so happy, so very happy
I've got the love of Jesus in my heart
And I'm so happy, so very happy
I've got the love of Jesus in my heart



I've Got the Joy

What does it mean to have joy? Does it mean we walk around with a smile on our face all the time? Does it mean that we are simply happy? Or is it something deeper and more profound? In scripture we see that joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness can be described as an outward expression of elation, whereas joy is more an inner sense of peace, contentment, and trust. The source of joy is God. It is founded upon His goodness, His promises, His faithfulness, and His love. Joy is not temporary, because it is grounded in who God is. Joy is a bold declaration that regardless of circumstances, our hearts can rejoice. It is the jubilant cry of the heart that we are blessed and that God is good.

Joy is intimately tied to gratitude. It is actually a result of thankfulness. Paul ties joy and thankfulness together when he admonishes us to *“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”* (1 Thess 5:16-18). As God has designed in us, when we voice our appreciation, admiration, and praise of something, we actually experience the joy of that appreciation so much more. Our joy grows as our thankfulness increases.

But one aspect of joy is sometimes overlooked. Charles Spurgeon once said, “The steps by which we ascend to the place of joy are usually moist with tears.” Wait, does that mean that there is somehow a connection between suffering and joy? On the surface, that doesn’t seem to make much sense.

The book of James tells us: *“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 1:2-4). This idea might be hard to accept. How can we be joyful when we are going through testing, trials, and suffering?

Does the Bible have a completely different definition of joy than we do?

One of the clearest messages of the Bible is that our goal in life is to become more and more like Jesus. But when we say we want to be like Jesus, what does that mean? How *much* of Jesus is included in that desire? Certainly, we mean that we want to follow the example

Jesus wants us to examine our presuppositions and expectations, because this life is not supposed to be smooth and carefree.

of Jesus as He modeled love, patience, kindness, and humility. But what about the other aspects of His mission and purpose? Do we want to follow His footsteps when it comes to trials and sufferings? What did Jesus tell His followers in John 15:20? *“Remember the words that I said to you. ‘A slave is not greater than His master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also*

persecute you...” Do we indeed *remember*? Or is our tendency to focus only on the positive side of Jesus’ journey here on earth, and neglect or ignore the promises of suffering?

Why does Jesus want us to remember? Is it perhaps because we so easily forget? Is it also because we need to reorient our expectations? We spend so much time avoiding conflict and pain that the idea of expecting suffering in our lives seems foreign. But maybe that is His point. Maybe it’s all about expectation. So much of our contentment in life is tied to our expectations. If you expect life to be smooth sailing, you will undoubtedly get frustrated when it is not. For example, if you enter into a relationship thinking that the other person will always agree with you, you’re in for a surprise. Or, if you head toward basic training in the military anticipating sleeping in until noon and sipping lemonade by the pool, the 30-mile hikes at 4:00 am with 70 lb. packs will be quite the wake-up call.

Jesus wants us to examine our presuppositions

and expectations, because this life is not supposed to be smooth and carefree. It is not supposed to be easy. The Apostle Peter made that same point when he said, *“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation”* (1 Pet 4:12–13). Peter is saying that we should not be surprised. In fact, we should be expecting suffering. Suffering is part of the necessary testing we go through in this life. It is one of the primary purposes of this life.

The rest of scripture is also very clear on this point—that suffering and the Christian life go hand in hand. *“If we suffer we shall also reign with Him”* (2 Tim 2:12 KJV). *“For momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison”* (2 Cor 4:17). *“Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God”* (Acts 14:22b). *“But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering”* (Rom 8:17 NLT).

Philip Yancey has said: “We are not put on earth merely to satisfy our desires, to pursue life, liberty, and happiness. We are here to be changed, to be made more like God in order to prepare us for a lifetime with Him.” This is a fundamental truth we absolutely must plant firmly in our minds and in our worldviews. This life is supposed to be hard. We are supposed to go through trials. It is how God molds and shapes us.

Far from devastating our lives, suffering actually works to make us perfect and complete. If there are rough edges that need to be chipped away and smoothed, it will probably hurt, but we can rest assured the quality of the finished product will be worth the pain. And even more importantly, when the Lord is

**Suffering
is the
instrument
through
which God
turns our
eyes toward
Him.**

finished, the result will be what He wants it to be.

Suffering is the instrument through which God turns our eyes toward Him. It alone is powerful enough to force us to loosen the grip we have on the things of this world. And valuing the things of God above all else is the goal. Suffering makes us long for home, our true home. Suffering helps make it clear that this world is not our home.

Are you surprised when you encounter various trials? If so, it might be time to reevaluate your expectations of what the Christian life is all about. We are here to be trained. When that is our expectation, life makes more sense. And suffering makes more sense.

Suffering is the path by which we are prepared to be soldiers in the army of Christ. When we see suffering as a natural part of this age, it can help us fight off feelings of frustration and confusion when the storms of life come our way.

DID YOU KNOW...

A key component of God's perspective on joy is highlighted for us in John: *"If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love...I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."* (John 15:10–11). Joy is intimately tied to our relationship with Christ—and our obedience to Him. Joy is not just a random experience of happiness or bliss. It is inseparable from (and a byproduct of) a relationship with God and obeying His commands.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe your level of contentment, peace, and joy during the recent pandemic?

2. How do you define happiness? How do you define joy? What is the connection between happiness and circumstances? Why do you think so many people who have nearly everything they want are still not happy? What do you think the connection is between joy and contentment? Some people see joy as simply a choice we make. Do you agree? Why or why not? Read Philippians 4:4. How is it possible that joy can be commanded of us?

3. How does James 1:2-3 factor into this discussion about joy? What do these verses mean (and what do they not mean)? How might trials and suffering be necessary elements of finding true joy? Do you find yourself being surprised when trials come your way? Why do you think this is? How do our expectations influence our responses to trials and suffering?

4. What are some things in your life that tend to lead you toward worry? Where do you see others struggling with anxiety? How have you dealt with worry in the past? Where have we bought into the lies of the world regarding what will bring us happiness? How is the world's definition of happiness essentially self-centered?

S. How is it possible to maintain joy even through times of suffering? Do you find it easy to be full of joy? Why or why not? What do you think might be preventing you from experiencing joy and contentment right now? What are some practical ways we can fix our thoughts on the things of God? What is one decision you can make this week that will change that?

Going Deeper

1. Read Matthew 6:25-34 and Philippians 4:4-9. What seems to be the biblical formula for how to have joy and reject the temptation to worry? What steps are outlined in these passages? According to these verses, what will the outcome be of following these steps? What would true peace look like in your life?

2. How are gratitude and thankfulness connected to our experience of peace? Describe a time when you felt a strong sense of God's peace. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18. What does God command here? Why do you think this is something God would command? How does this relate to God's will for us? How is Jesus our example when it comes to this (Hebrews 12:1-3)?

Transformational Activity

Prayer

One question that can help refocus our hearts toward joy through thankfulness is: “What if you woke up tomorrow with only the things you thanked God for today?” By living in a constant state of gratitude, we are acknowledging God as the source of our blessings, and we are voicing that gratitude in praise. In your prayer time this week, really focus on the things you are grateful for. Each day, list out five things you are thankful to God for providing—and add new things to that list every day. As you do this, perhaps keep a journal tracking your sense of peace and contentment. We invite you to come back next time and share what God did in your heart.



TRUST AND OBEY

Trust and obey
For there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus
But to trust and obey



Trust and Obey

A young man quietly stood up during a Dwight L. Moody revival meeting in Brockton Massachusetts in 1886 and declared, “I am not quite sure—but I am going to trust, and I am going to obey”. The music director for that event jotted down that phrase, and later gave it to John Sammis, a Presbyterian preacher (and a teacher at Biola in the early 20th century), who transformed that simple idea into one of the most profound and long-lasting hymns in the church.

“Trust and obey” is a simple, concise phrase that captures in a beautiful way all that it means to follow Jesus. Those three little words tell us everything we need to know about what Jesus wants us to do. He wants us to trust Him. That is what salvation is all about. We trust that God is the solution to our ultimate problem, and realize that our trust cannot be in ourselves. We also learn to trust God all throughout our lives—with every worry, trial, frustration, challenge, choice, and situation. From that trust flows a desire to obey. Obedience reveals to God, and to ourselves, that our trust is sincere. It is the telltale sign that our hearts have been transformed and that we are pursuing God with all that we are. We could accurately summarize the entire teaching of the Apostle Paul with the phrase, “trust and obey”.

We could accurately summarize the entire teaching of the Apostle Paul with the phrase, “trust and obey”.

So many powerful ideas flow from this simple, yet rich idea. The first idea is that true, biblical, saving faith involves more than just saying you agree with something. It involves action. There is a belief floating around the Christian world today that is sometimes called “easy-believism”. This is the idea that all you need to do to be saved is “say the prayer” of repentance and you are all set. You have your “fire insurance”. But that is not what

the Bible teaches faith really is.

The book of James helps us understand that there is more than one kind of faith. James shows us there a kind of faith that is no more than mere words. In fact, James 2:19 tells us that “the demons believe, and also tremble”. We know that the demons are not trusting in Christ to save them. So, there must be more to true faith than mere words. What does true, legitimate, saving faith really involve?

The story is told of “The Great Blondin,” a famous tightrope walker who lived at the end of the 19th century. One of his most famous endeavors was crossing the Niagara Gorge on a tightrope. Legend has it that upon crossing the falls both back and forth, while pushing a wheelbarrow, he asked the amazed onlookers, “Who believes I can cross once again with this wheelbarrow?” Everyone enthusiastically applauded with agreement. Then he asked, “Who, then, will get in the wheelbarrow?” That is a good definition of faith. It is putting your weight in and staking all you have on the faithfulness of the one in whom you are trusting. It is following up declarations or statements of conviction with actions that show those statements to be sincerely heartfelt.

Scripture tells us that true faith is always accompanied by, and is evidenced by, actions that reveal that faith to be genuine. Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is never alone. It is always accompanied by works. This is the message we see in this song. The title is not, “Trust... and that’s all you need.” No, it is *Trust and Obey*. There is an action that faith naturally produces. True faith in Christ will always lead to a changed life. And a changed life is a result of obedience.

We are not just saved *from* something. We are saved *for* something. We are saved from an existence of loneliness and despair—no less than eternal separation from God. But we must not forget that we are saved *to and for* something as well. God saves us so that we can be His representatives in the world, spreading His

message of love and the good news of the salvation that is available to those who believe. He saves us so that we can be transformed into the image of His Son, reflecting all that Jesus is to those around us. God saves us for obedience.

In Ephesians 2:8-9 Paul tells us: *“For by grace are you saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast.”* This powerful passage teaches that we are saved only by faith, and nothing we do adds to that work of Christ. But the next verse goes on to say: *“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”* From the moment we are saved, we embark on a journey of doing works that God planned for us long ago and designed specifically for us. This is a crucial part of salvation. James says that faith without works is dead. If we do not have a desire to do good works in gratitude for the salvation we have been given, we ought to question the salvation we think we have.

Salvation is free, but in the end, it costs us everything. It requires us to give over all that we have to love and serve our creator. It transforms our hopes and dreams for what we think this life is all about, and gives us new dreams of living for the next world, rather than merely for this one. The obedience the Christian life requires is all-encompassing. It is not a request for half of our hearts, or a portion of our commitment. It is a claim on all that we are: our desires, our priorities, our hopes and dreams, and even our checkbook.

A complete life of obedience does not happen immediately upon conversion. It is often a painful process that involves learning that our natural desires are selfish. It means seeing that our priorities are perhaps focused

If we do not have a desire to do good works in gratitude for the salvation we have been given, we ought to question the salvation we think we have.

on this world and its values, rather than on God. It involves us learning how to give up what we think is best for us, and pursuing what the Bible reveals God says is best. It is a life-long process of allowing God to work through the voice of His Spirit in our heart of hearts, prompting us to say no to the things our flesh wants and the things the world around us tells us are desirable, and then beginning to habitually say yes to choices that will honor God.

Trust and obey are two sides of the same coin. Only when we truly trust will we desire to be obedient. And only when we obey will we have confidence that our trust is truly legitimate. When we act on our trust by obeying, the Spirit produces fruit in our lives that reveals that we are children of God.

We have printed portions of each of these Sunday School songs at the beginning of each chapter. But the message of this particular song is so powerful, we have included the full song here. Take a few minutes and speak out loud (or sing, if you know it) the amazing words of this blessed song—and make this a prayer, asking God to change you through this simple reminder:

*When we walk with the Lord in the light of his word,
What a glory he sheds on our way!*

*While we do his good will, he abides with us still,
And with all who will trust and obey.*

*Trust and obey, for there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.*

Not a burden we bear, not a sorrow we share,

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Jesus is the ultimate model for us regarding obedience. Read Matthew 26:36-42 and Hebrews 12:1-3. What do we learn about obedience through the example of Jesus? What do we learn about what motivated Christ's obedience? What did Jesus have to give up in order to be obedient? What must we give up in order to do the same?

But our toil he doth richly repay;

*Not a grief or a loss, not a frown or a cross,
But is blest if we trust and obey.*

*Trust and obey, for there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.*

*But we never can prove the delights of his love Until
all on the altar we lay;*

*For the favor he shows, for the joy he bestows,
Are for them who will trust and obey.*

*Trust and obey, for there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.*

*Then in fellowship sweet we will sit at his feet,
Or we'll walk by his side in the way;*

*What he says we will do, where he sends we will go;
Never fear, only trust and obey.*

*Trust and obey, for there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.*

Discussion Questions

1. Who is someone you implicitly trust? Why do you trust them?

2. We learn in scripture that trust leads to obedience. What are some examples in the Bible where you see this happening? What are some examples where you have seen this to be true in your own life? Can trust even be considered legitimate if obedience is not present? Why or why not?

3. It has been said that trusting God means transferring your confidence and hope from yourself to Him. Why do you think it is so difficult sometimes to trust God? What are the primary obstacles to experiencing that elusive *unwavering faith* we so desire? Why do you think God so closely ties trust with obedience? What does this tell us about our natural tendencies? And what does this tell us about what God values?

4. Why do you think it is often so difficult to obey God? When it comes down to it, why does God want us to obey His commands? How is obedience connected to: 1) His love, 2) His wisdom, and 3) His glory? Discuss each of these ideas one at a time. What picture of obedience do we get from the world? How does this differ from the freedom that obeying God provides?

S. How does obedience impact the intimacy you experience with God? What about disobedience? What is your process when you face a situation where your desires conflict with what God has clearly revealed His desires to be? What steps have you found to be most effective? What is one way this week you can die to your own desires and say yes to God's desires?

Going Deeper

1. Read Acts 7:2-7 and Genesis 12:1-5. What elements of “trust and obey” do you see in God’s interaction with Abraham? How well does Abraham do with the obedience part? Where was Abraham when God told him (again) to go the land He would show him (Gen 12:1-5)? Why do you think Abraham got stalled out in Haran before finally obeying God to leave his family? What other episodes in Abraham’s life put on display this idea of trusting and obeying?

2. What ultimately is the connection between trust and obedience? It has been said that we won't want to obey God if we don't trust Him. We won't trust God if we don't love Him. And we can't love God if we don't know Him. So, working backward, what can we do to know God better? Then, based on that knowledge, what are some practical steps we can take toward loving God more? As we experience that love from and for God, what are some of the primary areas where He asks us to trust Him? Finally, when we know, love, and trust God, what barriers remain for our whole-hearted obedience? How can we overcome these barriers?

Transformational Activity

Worship

This week, think and pray through how your obedience can be one of the highest forms of worship you can offer up to God. Meditate on the truth that obedience is simply doing what we were designed to do. When we do what we were designed to do, we find the greatest satisfaction our souls can experience. And when we find our joy and satisfaction in God, He is glorified and we are blessed. Spend some time praising God for His laws and commands, and for the journey He is bringing you through in dying to the desires that keep you from complete obedience to Him. As we come back next week, let's share what God revealed to us through this experience.



THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE

This little light of mine
I'm gonna let it shine
This little light of mine
I'm gonna let it shine, let it shine,
Let it shine, let it shine



This Little Light of Mine

One of the most important and most neglected elements of the Christian life is the task we are given by God to share the message of His salvation with others. God saved us and adopted us into His own family. We now share an inheritance that belongs to Jesus Christ Himself. That is the ultimate Good News—and it is both our responsibility, as well as privilege, to share that good news with others. The reality is that many Christians do not really do much when it comes to reaching out and sharing their faith. There are many reasons for this, which we will look at in a moment. But first, it might be helpful to lay down some foundational principles regarding God’s heart for us sharing our faith.

First, God loves all people and wants them to accept Jesus Christ as the one and only savior of mankind who paid the price we owe for our rebellion against Him. Second, God uses ordinary Christians to tell others about His plan for saving the world. Third, obedience to God means that every Christian should actively seek to make disciples. The amazing news is that Jesus has promised to help us accomplish this. With those principles in mind, we can and should enter into this task with joy, knowing that this is precisely why we were created—and this is precisely what God wants us to be doing.

To a great extent, Christians today find evangelism and outreach to be difficult and frustrating. There are many causes for this—reasons people are hesitant and even afraid to share their faith. But when we read God’s Word we see that we’re not alone in feeling like we need to have more boldness. Even the Apostle Paul asked other Christians to pray for him in this area: *“Pray also for me, that the message may be given to me when I open my mouth to make known*

**God uses
ordinary
Christians
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world.**

with boldness the mystery of the Gospel. For this I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I might be bold enough in Him to speak as I should" (Eph 6:19-20). If Paul needed courage, then we should not be surprised that we need it too.

Fortunately, we do not have to go it alone. In 2 Timothy 1:7-8, Paul reminded Timothy that God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power. God gave Timothy His Spirit to strengthen him. When you became a member of God's family, you too received God's Holy Spirit: *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth"* (Acts 1:8). The Spirit will help you share your faith. That's His job. However, you must be willing to let the Spirit work through you.

There are several misconceptions when it comes to God's command for us to share our faith. The first is that we think we need to have all the answers. "If I knew my Bible better..." "If I knew more about theology..." These kinds of excuses can paralyze us from ever stepping out and sharing our faith like we are called to do. The reality is, when it comes to evangelism, *it's not about you*. Saving souls is God's job. You will never talk someone into the kingdom. Your job is to sow seeds—to spread the Word. It's God's job to bring people into a saving relationship with Himself.

Yes, we are called to be ready in season and out—ready to share a reason for the hope that lies within us. This requires study, preparation, diligence, and knowledge of the Bible. But we cannot wait until we have attained a certain level of expertise before we share our faith. We need to trust that God will give us the words we need in the appropriate situation (Luke 12:12). We must learn to be okay with saying "I don't know"—but following that up with "I would love to find out and get back to you".

Another misconception is that the quality of our presentation is what really matters—as if God is not

truly in charge of the process. Sometimes we take on a responsibility and burden when it comes to evangelism that can actually paralyze us in our desire to be obedient to the command to share the good news. We feel like if we don't do a good enough job, this person might not get saved.

That can be an unbearable amount of pressure. But when we realize that our role, again, is to spread seeds—to share our story and also share God's story—not to convert someone—that takes a lot of pressure off. It is the job of the Holy Spirit to change hearts. It doesn't depend on the quality or even adequacy of our own presentation of the Gospel message. God is sovereign and He will save who He will save. He has just chosen to use unworthy vessels like us to be the conduits of that message.

Many people even operate under an umbrella of guilt—thinking that if they don't witness to a particular friend or family member, then no one might. And they feel the weight of that person's eternal destiny on their shoulders. Whereas a more balanced understanding is that it is the job of the Holy Spirit to convict people of sin and draw them to repentance. God simply uses us in the process.

Another misconception is that this command is focused on those who have been given the gift of evangelism. While it is true that some are given a supernatural gift (or more precisely role, or office) of being an evangelist, that does not relieve those of us who may have other gifts from the responsibility that God gives us all to spread the Good News. The Great Commission was not just given to evangelists.

1 Peter 3:15 tells us to always be prepared. Acts 1:8

Sometimes we take on a responsibility and burden when it comes to evangelism that can actually paralyze us in our desire to be obedient to the command to share the good news.

gives us the assurance that the Holy Spirit will be with us as we go into all the world. We all need to find a style of evangelism that we feel comfortable with. For some, it may be in close relationships. For others, it may be with coworkers or coffee shop acquaintances. Others of us may actually be called to the mission field. Whatever style works for you, use it. If you ask God to open up opportunities for you to share your faith, He will honor that.

Lastly, some people think they need to grow in their faith before they can share that faith with others. Yes, we are all called to grow in our faith. But is there a minimum amount of growth we must experience before we can start to share our faith with others? In Acts 1:8, God promises us the power of His Spirit to energize our witnessing. That is provided to every believer, not just the spiritually mature. Again, it's not about you. It doesn't matter how long you have been a believer. And sometimes newer believers have an excitement and fresh energy about their faith that can really energize their witness.

We were made in the image of God. It is our job to be the clearest reflections of God to the world that we can be. We must do whatever we can to grow in our faith and live lives that reflect God's image—but also trust that it is God that changes hearts and minds. We are just the tool in His hand.

We are called to be witnesses. A witness is one who testifies. Sometimes we hear people say, "Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary, use words." While living a Godly life can serve as a foundation to a powerful testimony, Christians can use this often-quoted statement (mistakenly attributed to St. Francis of Assisi) as an excuse not to openly share their faith with others. Yes, we should live a righteous, God-honoring life that will attract others to Christ. Doing otherwise would disqualify us from having any credibility upon which to stand when declaring the Gospel. But Scripture is full of examples of how the Gospel is taught, not just caught. We are all

called to be ambassadors of Christ. Use your Godly life as a starting place for sharing the Gospel. But share the Gospel.

Who has God put on your heart that needs to receive Jesus as their savior? Think and pray about this issue daily. Make a list and keep a journal of God's work in this area through you. Take a moment every day to pray that God will give you a renewed heart for the lost and a passion for sharing the good news with others. Then pray that God will bring someone that needs to hear about His love into your sphere of influence.

A great starting place for sharing your faith is simply telling how God has changed your life. Tell *your* story. That is not something anyone can argue with. The man born blind in John chapter 9 had a powerful testimony: "...whereas once I was blind, but now I see." There is no argument against that. God absolutely changes us. So, it's important to think through and prepare your testimony—and practice it as well.

But it is important not to stop there. Relating your own journey needs to be a segue into sharing the details of the Gospel message itself. Lots of people have had change happen in their lives—but we must explain why the change happened. Your spiritual journey can be the match that sparks a conversation opening up the gospel to someone.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

What does it mean to “earn the right to be heard”? How does evangelism in the context of relationship help empower our witness? On the flip side, how can this idea stifle our outreach at times, believing that witnessing can *only* happen in the context of relationship? What are examples in scripture where there was no prior relationship before the truth of the gospel was shared? How might we approach sharing our faith with both situations in mind?

Discussion Questions

1. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about evangelism?

2. What are “the four spiritual laws”? Why has this been an effective tool people have used to share their faith? What key elements of the gospel does it include? What are some possible downsides to getting locked into one “method” for evangelism? Why is it important to share your own experience when witnessing to others? Why is it important not to stop there, but to also include the story of the cross? In other words, what is the danger of focusing solely on our own experience when sharing with others?

3. What are some biblical reasons we should make evangelism a priority in our life? Read Matthew 28:19; John 20:19-21; Romans 10:14-15; Luke 15:7; and 2 Peter 3:9. What do these passages tell us regarding God's heart on this issue? What does this evangelistic priority reveal about God's nature? What does our passion for evangelism say about our passion for the things of God?

4. When have you seen evangelism done really well? When have you seen it done *not so well*? What did you take away from those experiences?

S. Why do you think some people are more passionate about sharing their faith than others? What obstacles do you feel get in the way, or even stifle your own desire to share your faith? What are some steps you could take to make outreach a more active part of your everyday life?

Going Deeper

1. What does Matthew 5:16 mean when it says to let our light shine? How do our actions affect our witness? How have your actions in the past been a barrier to your witness? How have they at other times been a benefit?

2. It is important to understand the Gospel message before we share it with others. Where would you start when sharing your faith with others? What are the most important elements to cover when talking through the Gospel message? What did Christ accomplish on the cross and why is it important to practice and master how to communicate this?

Transformational Activity

Outreach

On one occasion, a woman criticized D.L. Moody for his methods of evangelism. Moody replied, “I agree, I don’t like the way I do it. How do you do evangelism?” The woman said she really didn’t do much evangelism. Moody answered, “Then I like my way of doing it better than your way of not doing it.” This week, pray that God would lay upon your heart a more intense desire to share your faith. Then pray that God would bring someone across your path He has prepared to hear that message. Come back next week to share what happened.



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