

**CORE
CHRISTIANITY
101**

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101**

LEADER'S EDITION

Core Christianity 101

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CONTENTS

05 INTRODUCTION
Why This Study?

08 LESSON 1
Jesus Is God

18 LESSON 2
God Is Three Persons

28 LESSON 3
God Is Great and Good

38 LESSON 4
God Speaks

48 LESSON 5
God Made the World but We've Made a Mess of It

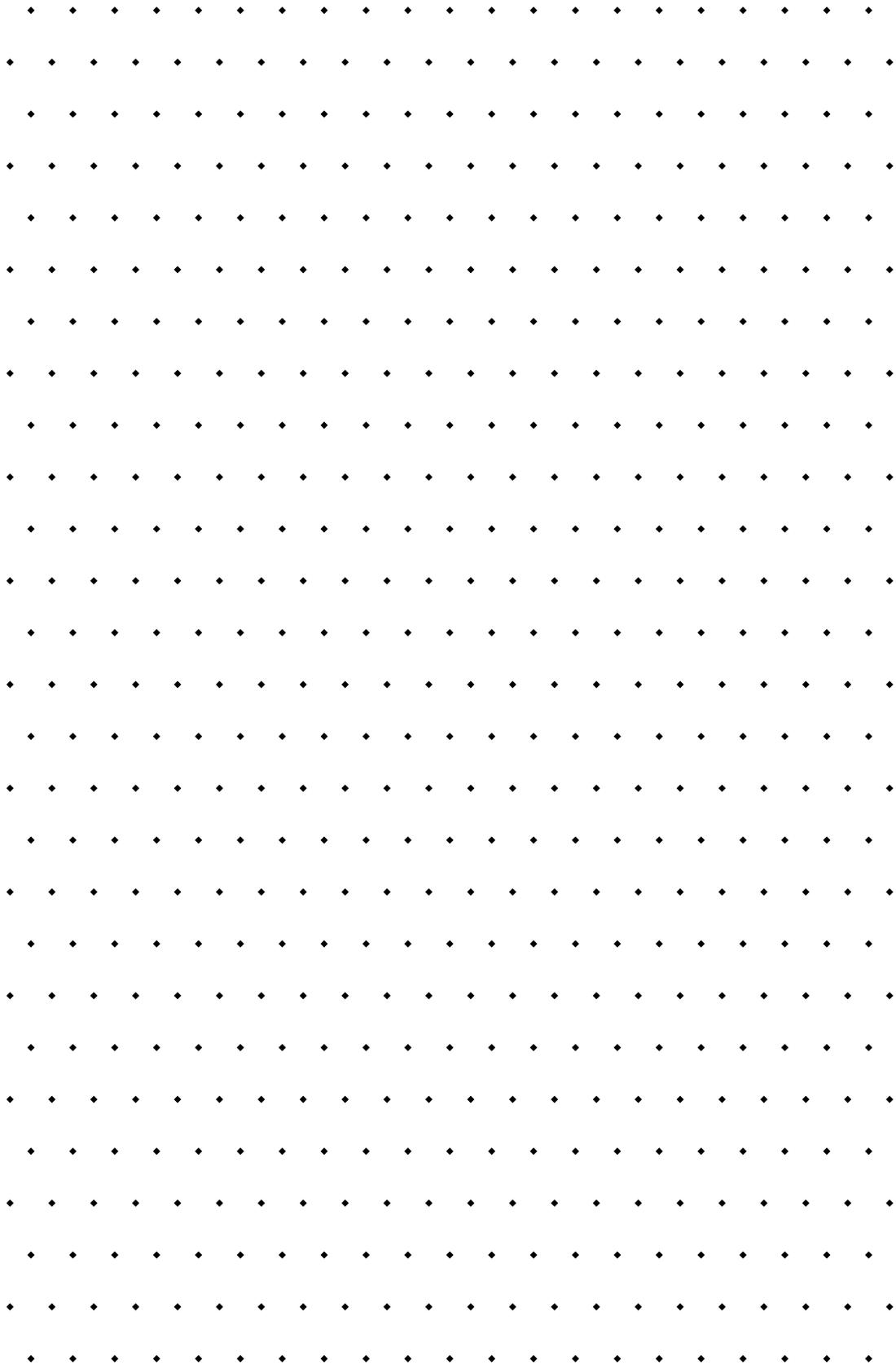
58 LESSON 6
God Made a Promise

68 LESSON 7
Joy to the World!

78 LESSON 8
Jesus Is Lord

88 LESSON 9
What Are We Waiting For?

98 LESSON 10
In the Meantime: Callings



W H Y
this
S T U D Y ?

INTRODUCTION

To begin, we would like to thank you—students, congregants, church leaders, elders, pastors, and churches—for supporting and using this *Core Christianity 101* Bible study. We hope it enriches your Christian life, challenges your heart, and builds up your faith to the glory of God.

WHY CORE CHRISTIANITY 101?

Biblical literacy is at an all-time low, and many Christians have no idea what they believe or why they believe it. Core Christianity exists to help remedy that, answering questions and creating content to help people mature in their knowledge of God's word.

We created this *Core Christianity 101* Bible study to be a complete, self-contained study on the Christian faith, aimed at building a solid foundation in the basics. For those who wish to dig deeper, each lesson complements a chapter of Michael Horton's book, *Core Christianity: Finding Yourself in God's Story*. You can also watch Michael Horton give an overview of this study here: <http://www.corechristianity.com/overview>.

ALL OF OUR STUDIES ARE DESIGNED WITH SEVERAL THINGS IN MIND:

1. To advance the gospel. The Pew Research Center reports a rapidly changing religious landscape in the U.S., with the percentage of those identifying as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular” up nine percent in just the last 10 years.¹ Almost 60 percent of our youth leave their churches as young adults, with many joining this growing number.

Despite this unsettling news, the core message of Christianity—the gospel—is still capable of renewing our lives and the church.

Rather than worrying or acting out of fear and self-preservation, the best hope for Christians, the church, and the people who feel pressure to abandon their faith is the historic Christian faith, the gospel announcement of what God has done through Jesus Christ for the world.

2. To speak to honest questions. Many in our evangelical, Baptist, Reformed, Lutheran, and Anglican churches have honest questions about faith and life that they may be afraid to ask. We shaped this study to address the concerns of long-time, committed Christians, new Christians, Christians with wavering faith, and skeptics alike.

3. To engage the drama of Scripture, teach the doctrine of historic Christianity, move us to doxology (worship), and enable healthy discipleship. Our studies are written to show how doctrine naturally arises out of the Bible's narrative of Jesus Christ and his saving work. We designed the reflection and discussion questions with a practical emphasis to help you engage the material in a prayerful way that should inspire worship and lead to a fuller understanding of how to live as a disciple of Christ.

4. To be useful in a variety of settings. We wrote this study thinking of Sunday school classes, Bible study groups, informal gatherings among friends, and individuals who want to learn more about the Christian faith. Each lesson includes a series of short sections containing a reading and a set of reflection questions. The leader's edition of this study has group discussion questions so that Christians can come together to share insights, ask questions, pray together, and be equipped to share what they're learning with friends and family.

We recommend you work through one lesson per week. If meeting with a group, we suggest reading the lesson and answering the questions on your own first.

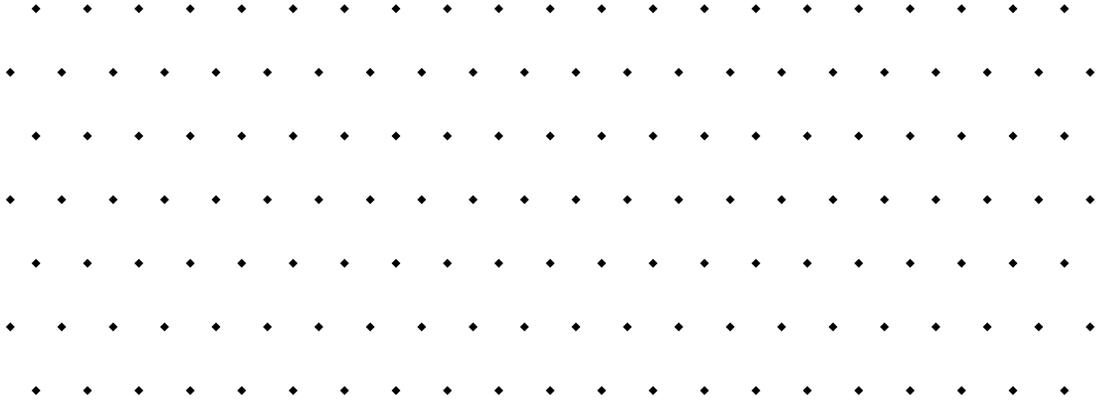
¹ <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

NOTE TO LEADERS (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

Again, thank you for supporting and using this Bible study. Here are some tips for doing this study with a group:

- Encourage group members to get their own copies of the Bible study. Each week, they should read the lesson in advance and answer the reflection questions, so they're prepared to meet and share their thoughts with the group.
- Prepare in advance to lead the discussion. Your leader's edition has additional sections (highlighted with gray boxes) to help you lead your time together. It also contains page numbers for the study book to help leaders cue the correct page.
- Though it's common for discussion to stay at the intellectual level, the questions in this study are aimed at being practical. It's important to help people think about how the truth of God's word intersects with their daily lives. We encourage you to model and encourage personal reflection and application.
- Be patient with your discussion time. Leading group discussion is hard! It takes practice, and it can take time for people to feel comfortable sharing. It can also be frustrating when people show up unprepared, but your grace and patience will help people continue to show up.
- Invite people to participate by reading a passage of Scripture or a section of the study, or closing in prayer at the end. Welcome their thoughts and reflections. Invite questions. The more people participate in the study, the more they will enjoy their time, and the more they will learn.
- Keep in mind that you don't have to follow the lesson exactly as it's written. The written materials are designed to aid you, not lock you into a certain mode. Feel free to change things to fit your context and level of experience in teaching.

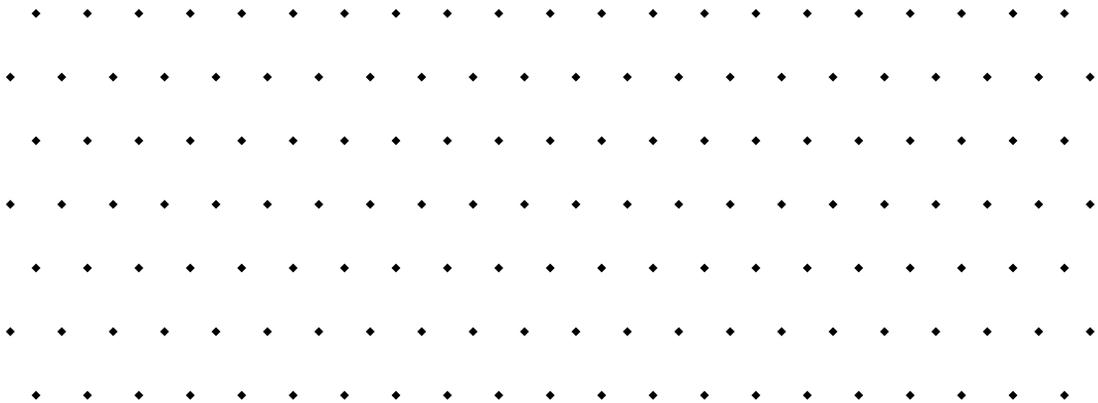
Ultimately, remember that it's God who's at work in his word, and he is faithful!



“HE SAID TO THEM, ‘BUT WHO DO
YOU SAY THAT I AM?’ SIMON PETER
REPLIED, ‘YOU ARE THE CHRIST,
THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD.’”



MATTHEW 16:15-16



J E S U S

is

G O D

PRAY (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

Heavenly Father, you sent your Son, Jesus Christ, to reveal your glory to us, win eternal life for us, and reveal your mercy through Christ's resurrection from the dead. May we receive grace and ongoing power through your Holy Spirit. Help us as we await the glory of the resurrection through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

READ TOGETHER: MATTHEW 16:13–16 (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

OPENING REFLECTION QUESTION (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

How is Jesus portrayed in the media? Who does the world say that he is? Think about some of your friends: How would they answer Jesus' question?

READ MARK 2:1–12 (BIBLE STUDY P. 12)

Mark 2:1–12 reveals that Jesus is God through his act of forgiving sin. Rather than simply heal this man, Jesus exposes his deepest need, his need for salvation. The problem is that only God has the authority to forgive sins. Jesus knows this and demonstrates his authority to forgive sins through also healing the paralytic. In this way, the healing acts as a sign to demonstrate Jesus' message that he is God come to save the world. But just like the people in Jesus' day misunderstood his true identity, so do people today.

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

Many people around the world from a variety of religious backgrounds have a positive view of Jesus. Some say he was a great teacher of high moral principles, like Buddha. Others revere him as a prophet. So, was Jesus a kind of sage or guru, or was he something more?

The actual term Jesus used to describe himself wasn't sage, or guru, but the Christ. We find this word in numerous Old Testament passages that describe a coming Messiah who would rescue people from their sin. And this Messiah, or Christ, was to be nothing less than God himself.

In the book of Daniel, we're told that this Messiah would both atone for iniquity and reign forever on David's throne (Dan. 9:24). Isaiah 9:6 says, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." So, according to the Old Testament prophets, the Jews weren't expecting another good teacher, or sage—they were expecting God himself to come down.

But did Jesus ever claim to be this divine Messiah? According to the New Testament, many people in Jesus' day assumed he was a prophet like Elijah, or John the Baptist. When he pressed his own disciples asking, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:15–16). Upon hearing this, Jesus offered not one word of rebuke. He only affirmed what Peter said.

You can also watch Michael Horton teach the following section here:
<http://www.corechristianity.com/lesson1>

LESSON 1

Jesus also said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9), which would have been highly inappropriate, and even blasphemous to say if he were a mere prophet, or teacher of high morals. But he actually went further, saying, “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58). He applied to himself the very divine name which God revealed to Moses in the burning bush (Exod. 3:1–6). This offended his hearers so much that they actually picked up stones to throw at him (John 8:59).

Now, it’s one thing to claim to be divine, but quite another to prove it. Consider the kinds of things Jesus did in order to demonstrate that he was God in human flesh:

- 1. Jesus performed numerous miracles.** According to the eyewitness accounts, Jesus calmed a storm, walked on water, healed people, and even raised the dead. Even Jesus’ enemies conceded he was a miracle worker, but they simply argued that he performed these feats through sorcery.
- 2. Jesus forgave sin.** Jewish people believed only God could forgive sin, but we saw the inescapable point in Mark 2:1–12: Jesus was able to both heal and forgive this man because he was God.
- 3. Jesus fulfilled numerous prophecies and interpreted the Old Testament as if the whole book were about him.** On one occasion, Jesus told the religious leaders of his day, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, but it is they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39). No other good teacher or prophet of Israel ever spoke in that way.

HOW DID PEOPLE RESPOND TO JESUS’ CLAIMS AND ACTIONS?

According to the Gospels, Jesus allowed himself to be worshipped on many occasions, and his followers continued to argue for his divinity throughout their lives. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul wrote that Jesus is the image of the invisible God, and that by him all things were created (Col. 1:15–16). At the beginning of John’s Gospel we read, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him and without Him was not anything made that was made ... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:1–14).

Jesus’ opponents also acknowledged his repeated claims to divinity and ended up charging him with blasphemy, saying, “You, being a man, make yourself God” (John 10:33).

By a careful study of the earliest evidence, we discover that Jesus’ contemporaries didn’t think of him as a kind of teacher, prophet, or political Messiah. His earliest followers worshipped him as God, and even his opponents understood this claim.

Those who claim Jesus was merely a good man or helpful teacher neglect the reality of what he claimed for himself. Jesus claimed to be the divine Messiah promised in the Old Testament Scriptures. And he demonstrated his divinity by performing miracles and forgiving sins.

Jesus claimed to be God. And he proved it.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION (BIBLE STUDY P. 13)

1. Why does it matter that Jesus claimed to be God?

2. What stands out to you about the ways Jesus proved his claim to be God?

3. How have you responded to Jesus' claims and actions?

READ COLOSSIANS 1:15–20 (BIBLE STUDY P. 14)

The most basic claim of the Christian faith rests on the person of Jesus, and the truth of the Bible depends on the truth of Jesus being God. If Jesus isn't God, the Bible is nothing more than a mixture of history, philosophy, fables, and advice. If Christianity isn't true, then Scripture is neither useful nor helpful. But if Jesus *is* God, then the Bible's message is of the utmost importance for every human being.

The British apologist C. S. Lewis made this very case in his book *Mere Christianity*. He referred to a famous argument called the "trilemma." If Jesus didn't come in the flesh, live a sinless life, die on the cross, and rise from the dead, he was either a *liar* (since he promised he would rise from the dead) or a *lunatic* (since only a crazy man would claim to be the Son of God who came down from heaven). Yet, if he was who he said he was, and did what the apostles said he did, then Jesus is *Lord*.

If Jesus is who he said he is—God who became man for our salvation—it changes everything. It will change the way you think about God, your life, and the world around you. Let's examine the facts about Jesus' life and ministry.

1. THE BIBLE REVEALS THAT JESUS AND THE EARLY CHURCH THOUGHT HE WAS GOD.

As we've already seen, according to Jesus' own claims, the testimony of the Bible, and other first-century documents, Jesus was called God. This is an important point because, if Jesus didn't claim to be God, he wouldn't have been arrested and tortured by the Jewish leaders. The fact that he was charged with blasphemy proves that he couldn't have been just a guru or prophet. Rather, Jesus existed from the beginning of time; he called himself God and was called God (John 8:58; 14:9; Isa. 9:6; Matt. 16:16; Phil. 2:9b–11; Col. 1:15, 19).

We've also seen that Jesus performed numerous miraculous works that only God could do. Jesus' miracles included healing the blind, lame, and deaf; calming the seas; feeding thousands with only a small amount of bread and fish; casting out demons; and resurrecting the dead (for some examples, see Matt. 9:2–8; Mark 8:1–9; Luke 8:22–25; John 11:38–44; 20:30).

The magi, disciples, and early Christians—most of whom were Jewish—all worshiped Jesus as God (Matt. 2:11; 14:33; 28:19; John 20:28). The fact that the early church so quickly began to worship Jesus is significant. While the Gentiles worshiped a pantheon of deities, the Jews worshiped the one true God. The early church was committed to the Jewish belief that there was only one God, YHWH, the God of Israel, and they were to worship YHWH alone. When Jesus claimed to be equal with God, this required the church to reconsider everything they knew about God and to embrace a new idea. Since Jesus claimed to be equal with the Father, he was either God come to rescue his people or a blasphemer. He couldn't possibly be merely a good teacher.

2. JESUS DIED, WAS BURIED, AND WAS RESURRECTED.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are historical accounts about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that are tied to datable events. While we know very little about Jesus' childhood, Roman rulers like Caesar Augustus, Pontius Pilate, Felix, and the Jewish king Agrippa appear in the Gospel records. Even Quirinius, governor of Syria, is included in the Christmas story (Luke 2:1–2). Because of this, no reputable scholar today disputes that Jesus lived. Even liberal New Testament scholars such as John A. T. Robinson and Bart Ehrman do not question the life, crucifixion, and death of Jesus.

Consider these facts:

- The Jews alive at the time of Christ's crucifixion were convinced Jesus died, so much so that they wanted the Romans to guard Jesus' body (Matt. 27:62–66).
- The Talmud (Jewish rabbinic teachings) also recorded the execution of Jesus (*b Sanh.* 43a.–b.).
- The renowned historian Josephus (AD 37–100) did not dispute the fact of the empty tomb.

The facts point to a real Jesus, who lived and died. According to all four Gospel accounts, Jesus rose from the dead on the third day after his burial as the promise of our resurrection and eternal life (Matt. 28:1–10; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–12; John 20:1–18).

All four Gospels mention that the high-standing Jewish leaders Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus assisted in Jesus' burial in Joseph's tomb, while the apostles were hiding from the authorities (Matt. 27:57–60; Mark 15:42–46; Luke 23:50–56; John 19:38–42). It's highly unlikely that the Gospel authors would include such unflattering remarks about the disciples if their accounts were fabricated.

While various theories have been put forth to explain away the empty tomb, no one has ever been able to bring forth any evidence of sightings of Jesus alive or dead that disprove his resurrection.

For more on this subject, read pages 23–37 in Michael Horton's *Core Christianity*.

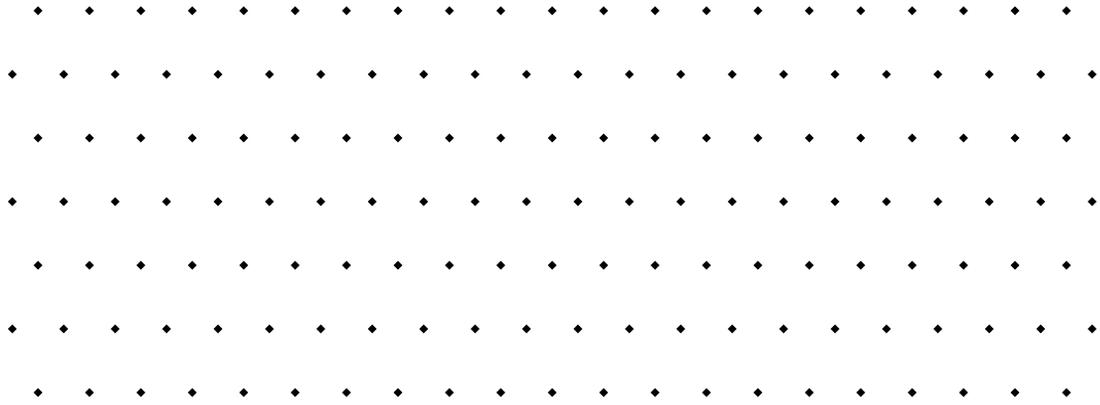
When we take into account Jesus' claims of divinity, his deeds, his resurrection, and how people worshiped him, we can come to only one conclusion: Along with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, Jesus is God. As God, he is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

Fully God and fully man, Jesus experienced everything we experience in this sin-cursed world yet was without sin. He then took our place on the cross and

bore the punishment for our sin. Conquering death, Jesus now offers new life to all who believe in him. Christians are those who place their faith and trust in who Jesus is and all that he's done for them (Rom. 1:16; Eph. 2:1–9). This is the good news—the gospel of Jesus Christ.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION (BIBLE STUDY P. 15)

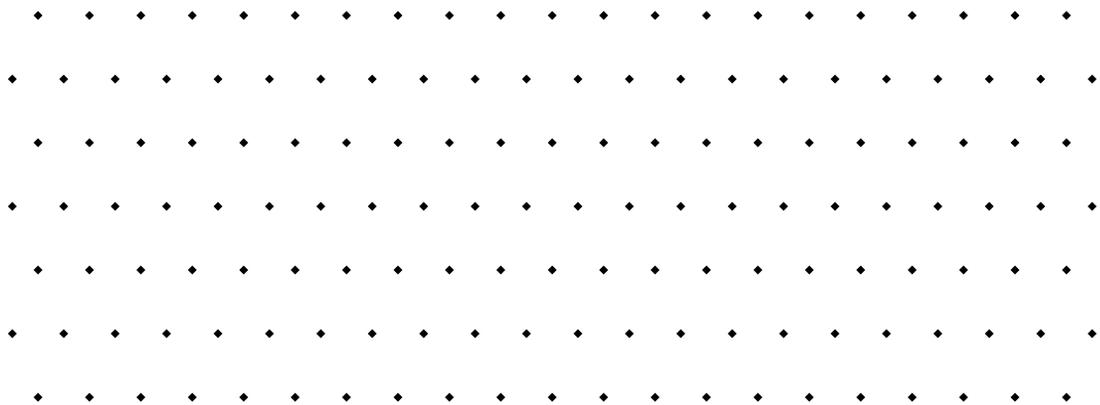
1. What are some ways you are trying to honor Jesus as Lord in your life?



“BUT WHEN THE HELPER COMES,
WHOM I WILL SEND TO YOU FROM
THE FATHER, THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH,
WHO PROCEEDS FROM THE FATHER,
HE WILL BEAR WITNESS ABOUT ME.”



JOHN 15:26



G O D *is*
T H R E E
P E R S O N S

PRAY (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

Dear Father, you've revealed your glory through the work of your Son, Jesus Christ, who lived, died, and rose for our salvation, and you've brought us into salvation through the Holy Spirit. Help us to embrace your love, the salvation you've freely given to us, and the incomprehensible mystery of your work in the world through Jesus Christ, who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

READ TOGETHER: HEBREWS 1:1–4 (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

OPENING REFLECTION QUESTION (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

When you think about the glory of God, what comes to mind?

READ JOHN 17:1–26 (BIBLE STUDY P. 22)

In John 16, Jesus spoke to his disciples about leaving them so that the Holy Spirit would come. Here, in John 17:1–26, Jesus prays to his Father, and this prayer gives us a glimpse of the glory of Christ's mission. From this prayer, we learn that Jesus intends to bring glory to the Father through the Father glorifying him. He asks that the Father preserve and watch over his people. And he prays that his people would share the same love that he shares with the Father. Here John reveals the inner dialogue between the Son and the Father so that we might be captivated by the mystery of the Trinity, knowing that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have sought to bring us into an eternal life of love and communion.

WHAT DO CHRISTIANS MEAN WHEN THEY DESCRIBE GOD AS A TRINITY?

Is this idea of the Trinity taught in the Bible? Does it even make sense? How can God be both three and one at the same time? And why is this doctrine even important in the first place?

First, the doctrine of the Trinity doesn't imply that God is both three and one in the same way, which would be a contradiction. Rather Christians maintain that God is one in essence, and three in persons.

You can also watch Michael Horton teach the following section here:
<http://www.corechristianity.com/lesson2>

One in Essence

To understand what this means we have to look at a number of important texts in the Bible. In Deuteronomy 6:4, we find Israel's famous creed of monotheism—their belief in one God: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” And in the book of Matthew, Jesus affirms the essence of this creed when he says, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve” (Matt. 4:10). In the same way, the Apostle Paul expresses his hope in one Lord, one faith, one baptism (Eph. 4:5).

Three in Persons

And yet, in the opening verses of John's Gospel, we also find the following statements about Jesus: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were

LESSON 2

made through him and without Him was not anything made that was made ... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:1–14). Here we’re forced to come to terms with the fact that Jesus is mysteriously described *as* God, yet somehow also *with* God. In other words, God the Son is distinct from God the Father, but both the Father and the Son are identified as God.

The Holy Spirit is also identified as God, but distinct from the Father and the Son. In Acts 5, for example, Peter confronts two people who lied to the Holy Spirit. But he goes on to say they haven’t lied to men, but to God. Further, during Jesus’ baptism, as Jesus comes out of the water, the Spirit descends upon him in the form of a dove, and a voice from heaven declares, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). All three persons of the Trinity are mentioned again in the words of the Great Commission, as Jesus commands his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19–20).

Some people have tried to argue that Father, Son, and Spirit are just different names for the same person or different ways of speaking about the one true God, but the biblical narrative is far more interesting and complicated. For example, before his crucifixion Jesus prayed to the Father saying, “Not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42), showing that the Father and Son are distinct persons. And Jesus describes the Spirit as a person, not as a force, saying “He will bear witness about me” (John 15:26).

There are also some who claim that, though Jesus is divine, he’s not quite as divine as the Father. In other words, they say he’s like a great archangel created by God before all other things. The problem with this view is that Jesus isn’t described in Scripture as a creature—even as the first and greatest one—but as the creator. In the book of Revelation, John is actually rebuked for worshipping an angel instead of God (Rev. 19:10), yet by the end of the book, all the saints are found worshipping at the throne of God and the Lamb (Rev. 22:3).

Many in our day dismiss the doctrine of the Trinity as non-essential because they say it makes little difference to religious experience and practical Christian living. But in reality, people do experience the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in distinctive ways. We’re adopted by the Father as co-heirs with Christ. We’re redeemed by Jesus’ atoning blood. We’re indwelt by the Holy Spirit who regenerates and renews us. And in response to all this gracious work, we worship God in the light of his self-revelation, praying to the Father through the merit of the Son, and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The doctrine of the Trinity isn’t the fruit of ivory tower speculation or religious imagination. The facts of history, particularly as they were revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, forced the first Christians to think about God in a way they never could have invented among themselves. The Bible teaches that God is one in essence, and three in persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION (BIBLE STUDY P. 23)

1. The doctrine of the Trinity puts us face to face with mystery, that God is incomprehensible. Write down a few of the ways that the mystery of the Trinity might inspire you to worship.
2. How does the doctrine of the Trinity make a difference in your religious experience and practical Christian living?

READ JOHN 14:25–31 (BIBLE STUDY P. 23)

We saw that the doctrine of the Trinity teaches that God is one in essence and three in persons. Now let's dig deeper into what this means.

The Bible tells us that God is one. The Bible also tells us that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. The math just doesn't seem to add up correctly. When it comes to describing God, however, we don't mean one and three in the *same way*.

How can God be one in essence *and* three in persons? Though some religions believe and worship many gods (polytheism), or everything as one with God (pantheism), Christianity, Islam, and Judaism believe that there is only one God. The belief and worship of one God is called *monotheism*. God is one essence.

WHAT IS GOD'S ESSENCE?

When we refer to God's essence, we're addressing the concept of his *being*. Here, it's important to understand that God is one, that he isn't made up of parts and material like human beings. God is Spirit and God is one. We learn this in both the Old and New Testaments.

The Old Testament teaches that there is one God.

From the early stages of its existence as a nation, Israel was taught that there is only one God (Deut. 6:4). The prophet Isaiah affirmed this same monotheism when he said, "Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god" (Isa. 44:6).

The New Testament teaches that there is one God.

The New Testament writers continued the monotheism of the Old Testament. We find many statements in the New Testament that assume or affirm Israel's monotheistic creed, including Paul's words in Ephesians 4:4–6:

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

The doctrine of the Trinity evolved from the drama of redemption over time. All the first Christians were Jews who were faced with the fact that God had become flesh in history. After Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection, Christians were able to return to the Jewish scriptures (Old Testament) and understand certain passages better in light of these extraordinary events.

THREE DISTINCT PERSONS ACTING IN THE STORY OF REDEMPTION

In Scripture, we find many places in which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are revealed as three distinct persons acting in history. For example, the Bible teaches that Jesus *prays* to his Father (John 17); the Father *speaks* from heaven (Matt. 3:17); and the Holy Spirit *reveals* Jesus as the Son (Matt. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:10). These three actors participate on the same stage throughout the Gospel narratives.

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one God, equal in power and glory.

In the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16–20), Jesus told his disciples to meet him on a mountain. As the disciples ascended the mountain and approached Jesus, they began to worship him. Then Jesus, as their Lord and Savior, told them to "make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." The disciples were to baptize Christ's followers into *one name*, the name that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit share.

LESSON 2

In Ephesians 1:3–14, the Apostle Paul records a wonderful doxology (expression of praise) to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit for their shared work in salvation. Paul declares that the Father has predestined believers “for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace” (Eph. 1:5–6), and sealed them “with the promised Holy Spirit” who is the guarantee of their inheritance (Eph. 1:13–14).

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all active in carrying out the mission to save people from sin and death and draw these same people into a loving relationship with the Trinity.

- In his love for humanity, the Father sends the Son to earn eternal life and pay the penalty for human rebellion (John 3:16).
- The Son of God is conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary (Luke 1:34–35).
- Jesus casts out demons by the power of the Spirit of God (Matt. 12:28).
- The Father by the Spirit raises Jesus Christ, the Son of God, from the dead (Rom. 8:11).
- The Son ascends to his kingly rule and sends the Holy Spirit to gather his people to himself (Acts 1:8–9).
- The Father and the Son manifest their divine power and glory as they glorify one another (John 17:1–5).

COMMON ERRORS

In the early church, Christians struggled to understand how God might be one and yet revealed as three distinct persons. Before coming to a clear definition of the Trinity, the church often fell into two different errors.

Some people, like the early theologian Origen (AD 184–253), attempted to say that Jesus was a lesser god than the Father. A man named Arius (AD 256–336) took it a step further. He fell into the error known as Arianism, which argues that the Father alone is God while the Son is only a created being. Today, Jehovah’s Witnesses embrace this same error.

Others (such as Sabellius in the third century) taught that God only appears in different forms or modes, like someone wearing different masks. This error is called modalism.

For more on this subject, read pages 39–52 in Michael Horton’s *Core Christianity*.

These two errors were so serious that the church officially called these views “heresy.” A heretic, therefore, is someone who holds to a position that strikes at the core beliefs of the Christian faith, going against the clear teaching of Scripture and the collective wisdom of the church.

The Nicene Creed is a doctrinal statement that is the result of the first ecumenical (universal) church council in AD 325. It was revised to its final form in AD 381 at the Council of Constantinople. Contrary

to the errors of the day, the creed affirms that the Son and the Spirit are of the same essence as the Father, but each are different persons.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION (BIBLE STUDY P. 25)

1. Ephesians 4:4–6 says, “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” Take the time to write down some ways you might pray for the church to manifest unity in Christ. Take this time to pray for your church, your denomination, and the church around the world.
2. Because the Trinity is hard to understand people sometimes become afraid that they might get it wrong. Instead, it’s better to see that the Trinity should inspire awe and humility, revealing the limits of our understanding and language. Write down one new idea or thought you had either in this study or inspired by this study.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION (LEADER’S EDITION ONLY)

1. When Christians pray, they pray to the Father, through the mediation of Jesus Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. What are some Bible verses that teach this? How does this give you confidence that God hears even our confused or pain-filled prayers?
2. The mystery of the Trinity should shape us into a different kind of people. As you reflected on the Trinity this week, what are some of the effects that you hoped this would have on your life?
3. The Trinity is immensely practical because it is the theology that drives missions. Imagine being encountered with the gospel in all its Trinitarian glory for the first time (maybe this is the first time). How might we help people not just understand the Trinity, but worship the Trinity?

END IN PRAYER (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

Pray for the needs of the group, the good of the church, the salvation of people, and any other needs that may arise.



“SO TEACH US TO NUMBER OUR DAYS

THAT WE MAY GET A HEART OF WISDOM.

RETURN, O LORD! HOW LONG?

HAVE PITY ON YOUR SERVANTS!

SATISFY US IN THE MORNING WITH YOUR STEADFAST LOVE,

THAT WE MAY REJOICE AND BE GLAD ALL OUR DAYS.

MAKE US GLAD FOR AS MANY DAYS AS YOU HAVE AFFLICTED US,

AND FOR AS MANY YEARS AS WE HAVE SEEN EVIL.

LET YOUR WORK BE SHOWN TO YOUR SERVANTS,

AND YOUR GLORIOUS POWER TO THEIR CHILDREN.

LET THE FAVOR OF THE LORD OUR GOD BE UPON US,

AND ESTABLISH THE WORK OF OUR HANDS UPON US;

YES, ESTABLISH THE WORK OF OUR HANDS!”



PSALM 90:12-17



G O D
is
G R E A T
and
G O O D

PRAY (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

Glorious Father, you satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Help us to resist the evil around us and oppose the evil hidden within our hearts that through the grace and mercy the Spirit gives we may rejoice that you do all things well. This we pray through our merciful savior Jesus Christ who reigns from heaven with you and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

READ TOGETHER: PSALM 13 (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

OPENING REFLECTION QUESTION (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

Have you ever met anyone who wondered if God really cares about stopping evil and establishing justice?

READ PSALM 90:1–17 (BIBLE STUDY P. 34)

Psalm 90 reflects a prayer that has traditionally been attributed to Moses, the man of God who led Israel out of Egypt. While he was in the wilderness, Moses caught a glimpse of the Lord's glory. Here, he prays to the Lord who is mighty, asking him to show his mercy to his people again. He prays that the Lord, who has been their dwelling place (v. 1), will show his work and reveal his glorious power (v. 16). This prayer teaches us an important reality about God—God is great. But this prayer also trusts that God is good, remembering God's past faithfulness as evidence of his goodness.

HOW CAN GOD BE GOOD WHEN THE WORLD IS FULL OF SUFFERING AND EVIL?

Given the horrendous amount of evil and suffering that exists in our world, how can we believe in a loving and all-powerful God? If God is good, then why does he allow tsunamis and terrorist attacks? Are we forced to conclude that God is either good, or all powerful, but not both?

Before we answer, we first need to explain a few things about the God of the Bible. Throughout the pages of Scripture, we're introduced to a self-existent, eternal, and all-powerful God, who is also loving, gracious, and merciful. In the opening lines of Genesis, we're told that this God spoke the universe into existence by the word of his power and does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. This God, according to Jesus, is not only great and powerful, though—he's also infinitely good. In fact, Jesus says, at the end of the day—after the fall—no one is good except God alone (Mark 10:18).

According to the Bible, evil isn't an aspect of God's nature but is something that arises out of the corruption of our own sinful hearts. Its source can be traced to the free decision of our first parents who rebelled against God and earned for themselves and their posterity a world subjected to frustration, futility, and death. And yet, in his great mercy God didn't leave us in that state of sin and misery. Even while we were his enemies, God sent his son to save and rescue us from the curse of sin and death.

You can also watch Michael Horton teach the following section here:
<http://www.corechristianity.com/lesson3>

LESSON 3

Christians believe that it's not by speculating about God, but rather by reading his word and observing his actions across time that we come to know who he is and what he's like. It's through that unfolding drama of creation and redemption that we see both his surpassing greatness and his amazing love. And in the person of Jesus Christ, we discover that God isn't unconcerned with a problem of evil, but actually took it upon himself to redeem and rescue mankind from it.

We need to understand that the problem of evil is actually only a problem for those who already assume God's existence. If you don't believe in an absolute standard of right and wrong, there can't be any such thing as evil to begin with. In a purely naturalistic worldview, it makes no sense to offer moral judgments about the evil of terrorism contrasted with the virtue of tolerance. That would be like sharing your preference for latte over espresso. The fact is, you can only have objective standards of morality if there's a transcendent agent who creates that standard in the first place. Far from being an argument against God, the fact that humans everywhere are troubled by real evil is a good indication that there really is an objective moral standard that transcends our subjective feelings. The fact that evil really exists requires us to believe that a God who really exists, too.

To summarize, Christianity presents a God who is great, all-powerful, and good, and it's only in the Bible that we find a real solution in history to the problem of evil:

- We see that evil is a corruption of God's created order, rather than an attribute of God or his work of creation itself.
- God promises that one day all wrongs will be set right. He will overcome evil with good.
- In Christ, we see that God isn't indifferent to the problem of evil, but at great cost to himself provided a way to rescue us from it.
- Far from being an argument against God, the existence of evil actually requires us to believe in the objective standards of a transcendent God to begin with.

A God who is great but not good is an all-powerful monster. A God who is good but not all-powerful can't save us. But in Scripture we discover a God who's not only all-powerful, loving, and merciful, but also one who took it upon himself to interrupt the self-destructive course of human history. Jesus Christ was born of a virgin, lived a righteous life, suffered in our place, and was raised on the third day. In the cross and the resurrection of Christ, more than any other place, we see that God overcomes evil with good.

Christians celebrate God's surpassing greatness. But they also revel in his kindness and mercy. The simple child's prayer got it right: God is great; God is good; so let us thank him for our food.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION (BIBLE STUDY P. 35)

1. Often the existence of evil and suffering can be one of the most challenging experiences for Christians. Below are four questions. Answer the two that most apply to your situation:
 - How has the existence of evil and suffering in the world and your own life personally affected you?
 - How did you think about it while experiencing the pain of suffering?
 - How were you different after passing through the dark time?
 - What questions do you still have?

READ PSALM 145 (BIBLE STUDY P. 35)

GOD IS GREAT AND GOOD

Despite the truths we've considered thus far, the problem of evil isn't so easily dismissed. If God is great, why doesn't he prevent natural disasters and terrorism? Some people think the answer is that God must not be good. If God is good, why does he allow for evil to exist in the world? Some people think this means God must not be great. If God were great, he'd at least be able to get rid of evil. The fact that evil still exists only seems to prove that God is not great.

The answer God gives in the Bible about the presence of evil in the world may surprise us. It's important to realize that much of who God is and what he does remains a mystery to us as creatures. What he has revealed, however, is enough for us to trust his character and have faith that he will be true to his word.

The Bible teaches that God is great.

We tend to imagine that God is a greater version of ourselves. Actually, God is in a totally different category. In fact, he is in a class all by himself. God alone is eternal, immortal, all-powerful, all-wise, and all-knowing (1 Tim. 6:15–16). His spectacular majesty is beyond our ability to comprehend:

- God is *independent* of all created things (Acts 17:24–25). The technical term is *aseity*. He exists as the Triune God from all eternity in perfect love and fellowship.
- God is pure *spirit*. He is not made up of parts and has no means of corruption as we do (John 4:24). Another way of putting this is that God is *simple* and *unified*. He is also perfect and unchangeable (*immutable*).
- God is *omniscient*. Rising above our limited perspective, God knows the end from the beginning because he is eternal (Ps. 139:16).
- God is *omnipresent*. Because he is spirit, God rises above the category of “place” that limits us in our words, speech, actions, and presence (Jer. 23:24).
- God is *omnipotent*. That is, he is all-powerful. Some people think of God's sovereignty and human freedom as if they were pieces of a pie: God may have a larger piece, but it is the same pie. God is not just *quantitatively* greater than his creatures, but he is also *qualitatively* greater (Matt. 19:26).

These attributes of God are called his *incommunicable attributes*, because they belong to God alone.

The Bible reveals that God is also good.

Everything God does is good because God is pure good. While people can be loving, compassionate, and merciful, showing concern for justice and righteousness, these attributes are only analogies of those God holds in complete perfection. These are also known as God's *communicable attributes*.

Consider how you relate to your infant or child, or an elderly parent. Similarly, God condescends to us as our heavenly Father. The following attributes of God testify to his loving care for his creation:

- God is *loving, compassionate, and merciful*. The biblical story shows us a God who is love (1 John 4:8). Though he is high in the heavens above us, majestic in glory, he is yet full of compassion and mercy, that “while we were enemies” Christ died for us (Rom. 5:10).
- God is *just and holy*. Holiness is the moral, transcendent perfection of God. It's the purity of his goodness; there's no evil in him at all. God's holiness asserts that he alone defines what is good; hence, his judgment is good. While the judgment of sinners in the Bible is often seen as cruel and unfair, God's goodness is actually seen in his just judgment of sin.

LESSON 3

- God is *faithful*. He is faithful to his word. He is faithful to his justice and holiness. He does not change, because he is faithful to himself. Yet, he is also faithful to his promises, sending his Son to fulfill the law and bear our curse. Because of his great love, he found the way to be faithful to his justice and greatness while showing merciful love and saving compassion—through his Son’s sacrifice on the cross: “It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26).

Let’s contrast this with two popular ideas.

First, most polytheistic religions teach that good and evil spirits struggle for control of the universe. The Bible tells us that (1) God is the perfect moral lawgiver, and that (2) evil is a *corruption* of God’s good gifts of creation.

Second, atheists who deny the existence of God because of the existence of evil are not standing on a firm ground of reason. Something is “evil” or “good” only when we compare and contrast it with a perfect, moral law. The sense of a moral law within all human beings points to a “moral law-giver” (Rom. 1:18–23).

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Rather than deny the existence of God because of the existence of evil, we must trust the God who is good and great to conquer evil. The Bible doesn’t deny evil, but instead gives us a story in which God overcomes evil.

The Bible tells the story of the problem of evil in a world that was originally created good by a supremely good and majestic God. Evil is not a timeless principle but is actually the corruption of good due to the rebellious actions in history against God’s rule. All sins are evil, but not all evils are sin. The world is filled with natural evils—including hurricanes, earthquakes, pestilence, and droughts—that are the results of the common curse from Adam’s fall (Gen. 3:17–19).

Consider two verses:

- “For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you.” (Ps. 5:4)
- “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” (Rom. 8:20–21).

For more on this subject, read pages 53–66 in Michael Horton’s *Core Christianity*.

Evil exists in the world for the time being, but God promises to one day destroy sin, death, and the devil. We know this is true, because the resurrection of Christ is the beginning of evil’s defeat (1 Cor. 15:20–28). For now, we live with the existence of evil while we wait for God to finally destroy it.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION (BIBLE STUDY P. 37)

1. Take one of the incommunicable attributes of God. Think of a time in your life where it would really matter that God had that particular attribute. How might you praise God for that aspect of who he is?

2. Take one of the communicable attributes of God. Think of a time in your life where it would really matter that God had that particular attribute. How might you praise God for that aspect of who he is?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

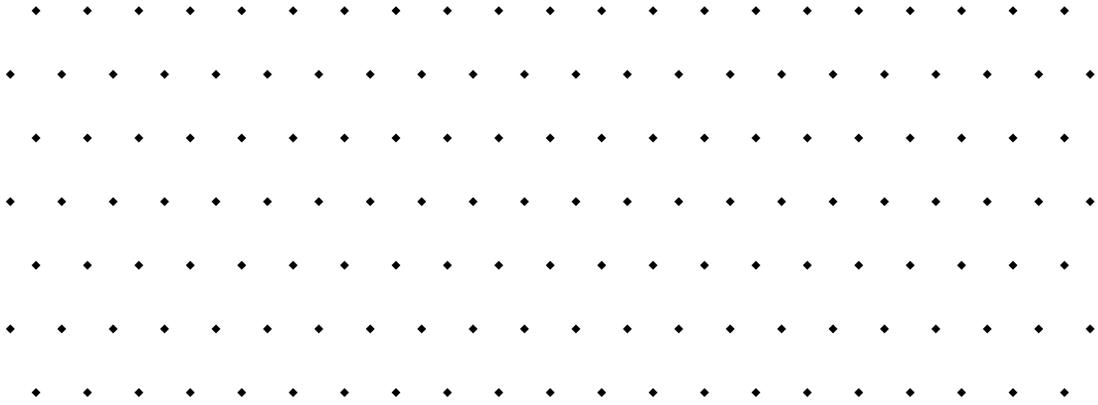
1. What has God promised to do about evil? Why can we trust that God will keep this promise?

2. Imagine a friend from church confessed to you that they had a hard time believing in God because of some evil or suffering in their life. The temptation might be to just rebuke them for weak faith. But how might we be compassionate toward a person with such a confession? What should we do when people admit struggles and doubts?

3. The Bible presents a God who is both great and good. Many Christians who have suffered have drawn courage and hope from the Bible. How might we read the Bible not simply as a book of information but as a way to draw hope in God and courage to do what is right? What are your own habits in Bible reading? What might you change in light of the first question?

END IN PRAYER (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

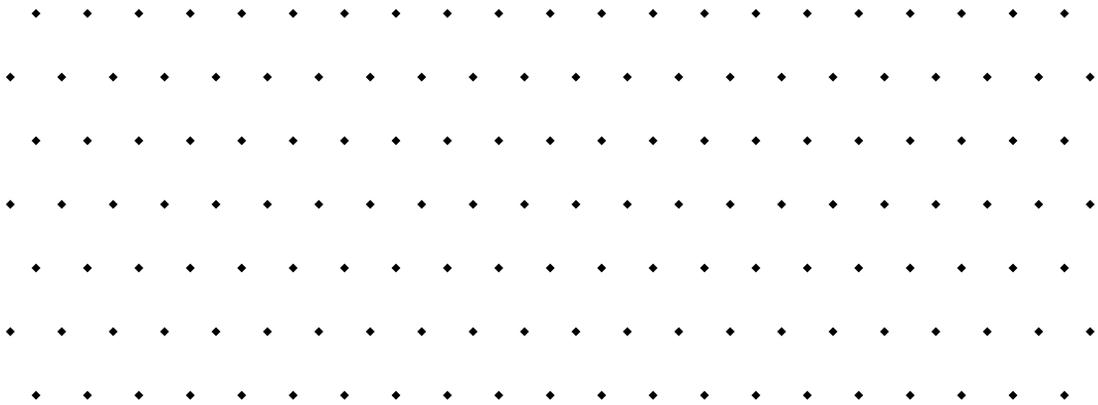
Pray for the needs of the group, the good of the church, the salvation of people, and any other needs that may arise.



“ALL SCRIPTURE IS BREATHED OUT BY
GOD AND PROFITABLE FOR TEACHING,
FOR REPROOF, FOR CORRECTION, AND
FOR TRAINING IN RIGHTEOUSNESS, THAT
THE MAN OF GOD MAY BE COMPLETE,
EQUIPPED FOR EVERY GOOD WORK.”



2 TIMOTHY 3:16-17



G O D
S P E A K S

PRAY (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

Merciful God, you have given your Holy word for our good and for our salvation. Enlighten our minds to receive it, meditate upon it, and act in response to it. Help us to glorify your name and seek to do good to those around us through Jesus Christ our Lord and savior, who with you and the Holy Spirit is worthy of our heartfelt devotion. Amen.

READ TOGETHER: 2 TIMOTHY 3:10–17 (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

OPENING REFLECTION QUESTION (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

What makes the Bible unique and unlike other books you have encountered?

READ 2 TIMOTHY 3:10–17 (BIBLE STUDY P. 44)

2 Timothy 3:10–17 reveals Paul's desire for his friend and understudy, Timothy. Amid the trials and persecutions that the early church faced, Paul encourages him to continue as a faithful witness to Jesus Christ, modeling his life after what he's seen from Paul's example. And Paul especially encourages him to stay committed to the sacred Scriptures that are able to make one wise for salvation. This text reveals that the writings of Holy Scripture are meant for life and salvation. They're a guide to receiving the saving grace of Jesus and living the way of Jesus, the kind of life that glorifies God. Because in the Bible, God's saving message and desire for our life is clear.

DOES GOD TALK TO YOU?

There are a lot of people today who think God talks to them. Some even say that he speaks audibly, giving directions about where to go and what to do. Maybe you wonder, *Why hasn't this happened to me?* The truth is, this sort of thing is actually quite rare, even in the Bible.

Rather than speaking directly to every believer, at various points throughout Israel's history God raised up certain prophets who spoke God's word to his people. Later, the writings of these prophets were collected and became the bulk of what we call the Old Testament today. So, God does speak to his people, but today he does so through the Scriptures.

But, you might ask, many people claim to speak for God. What's so special about this particular holy book written by diverse authors over two millennia? The Bible has an incredible unity that can only be attributed to a divine author. All the promises of the Old Testament come to life in the New Testament as meticulously-detailed prophecies are fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In fact, this is the very claim that Jesus made about himself as he was speaking to the religious leaders of his day: "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life. Yet it's they that bear witness about me" (John 5:39). Not only does Jesus personally affirm the inspiration and authority of Scripture, but he also claimed to be its major subject. And he vindicated that claim through his fulfillment of countless prophecies and chiefly by his resurrection from the dead.

The New Testament book of Hebrews begins with these words: "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God

You can also watch Michael Horton teach the following section here:
<http://www.corechristianity.com/lesson4>

spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb. 1:1–2). Taken as a whole, then, we should see the Bible as the unfolding plan of redemption which culminates in the person of Jesus Christ. It’s crucial to recognize this point, because we can easily turn Scripture into a kind of handbook for practical living with out-of-context verses that form a kind of “fortune cookie spirituality.” When we go to the Bible with our own questions, demanding that it speak to whatever we find important, relevant, interesting, or comforting, then we often end up obscuring its Christ-centered plotline.

In America’s history, a revolutionary war was fought over independence from Great Britain, and the Constitution was drafted in order to establish this new republic. In an analogous way, God has given us his word to serve as a kind of foundational document which determines the faith and practice of the church throughout all ages. The prophets and apostles were the founding fathers of our faith, and they left no successors. But we have their inspired words collected in Scripture, which ordinary ministers are called to proclaim as they equip the faithful and build on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone (Eph. 2:20; 4:11–12).

TWO DISTINCT ANNOUNCEMENTS

Hearing this word preached and proclaimed is actually the main way in which we’re formed and disciplined throughout the course of our life. In his letter to the Romans, Paul says, “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). Through the preached word, God publicly addresses us with two distinct announcements: First, he tells us the bad news in his law. And second, he tells us the good news in his gospel.

In his law, God warns us saying, “No one is righteous, no not even one” (Rom. 3:10). At the end of the day, it’s merely foolish optimism that refuses to face the fact that one day we’ll die. And after this comes the judgment. Paul argued in his famous Mars Hill address that God has given proof of this coming judgment by raising Jesus from the dead (Acts 17:31).

Fortunately, God’s word doesn’t stop there. It also proclaims to us the gospel—the good news. When we hear the law, it’s like receiving a diagnosis of a terminal disease. It’s no longer a nagging internal suspicion that something isn’t right—now it’s confirmed by objective evidence. We have broken God’s law, but in his great mercy, God the Father sent his own Son to become one of us, so that he might live a righteous life in our place and bear the judgment that we all deserve. So whereas the law proclaims God’s righteous requirements, the gospel proclaims that which Christ has provided as a free gift and which we receive by faith alone.

Therefore we see that God does speak to us today. He speaks to us in his word as he declares the sober reality of our sinful and lost condition. But more importantly, he tells us the good news about Jesus, who, though he was rich, became poor for our sake (2 Cor. 8:9). The law is in us by nature, but the gospel of Jesus Christ is a kind of foreign announcement that runs counter to every other religious claim in the world. We need to not only read about this good news in the pages of Scripture, but we also need to have it preached to us week-in and week-out by faithful shepherds who point us away from ourselves, so that we might focus on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith (Heb. 12:2).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION (BIBLE STUDY P. 45)

1. Have you ever been guilty of using the Bible as a handbook for practical living, applying it to “fortune cookie spirituality”? How should the fact that the Bible is all about Jesus change our approach to Scripture?

2. What are some ways you have observed the Bible's unity?

READ PSALM 119:9–16 (BIBLE STUDY P. 45)

HOW DOES GOD SPEAK?

God still speaks to us today, but it's not in the way that usually makes the news headlines and sells books. From Genesis to Revelation, God proclaims his Son Jesus, the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). We've seen that we can understand God's speech from three angles. Let's dig deeper into each of those:

God speaks today through the Bible.

The Bible is a collection of 66 books, written by humans across different times and places. These authors were weak and sinful, just as we are, but God used their words, thoughts, and individual styles to put into writing what he wanted to tell us in a trustworthy way.

The apostles and prophets have no successors. Rather, ordinary ministers now build on the foundation the apostles and prophets laid, and their ministries are judged by how faithfully they communicate God's word. New revelation cannot be added to the Bible. The Holy Spirit illumines the hearts and minds of his people to understand, interpret, and obey his written word.

The Bible was written by diverse authors over two millennia, and yet it still has a unity that can be attributed only to a divine author. It reads from promise (Old Testament) to fulfillment (New Testament) and is the greatest story ever told, revealing the greatest Savior to behold. We can have confidence that the Bible is the Word of God because it is *inspired, authoritative, inerrant, clear, and sufficient*.

- *The Bible is inspired by God.* The very words—and the entirety of Scripture—are "God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16). The apostle Peter states, "For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21).
- *The Bible is authoritative.* Jesus, who is God incarnate, viewed the Old Testament as authoritative (Matt. 19:4–5). Jesus also viewed the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah as being fulfilled in himself (Luke 4:21). Furthermore, Jesus authorized the apostles to speak in his name (Matt. 18:18; 28:16–20).
- *The Bible is inerrant.* If God is behind the writing of the Bible and God is great and good, then it follows that Scripture is without *error, falsehood, or deceit*: "The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever" (Ps. 119:160).
- *The Bible is clear in its message.* Moses was not an astronomer, and the Bible is not a science textbook. If we go to the Bible looking for answers to questions that are beyond its purpose and scope, we will turn it into an entirely different book, as did the Pharisees to whom Jesus said, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:39–40).
- *The Bible is sufficient.* The scope of the Bible is God's commands and promises—law and gospel—centering on the unfolding plan in Jesus Christ, the main character and center of the plot: "Then he said to them, "These

are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44).

God speaks through the preaching of his word.

Although God speaks to us through the Bible, he especially speaks to us in the public gathering of his people each Sunday through the *preaching* of his word. One way to understand preaching is to distinguish between two main activities that a preacher does while preaching: exposition and application.

Exposition seeks to explain the meaning of the Bible respecting its historical context, the original authors’ intentions, the nature of the Bible’s literary forms, and the Bible’s broader redemptive purpose. Scripture contains differences in genre (history, poetry, parable, doctrine, etc.). We need to respect those differences and allow the Bible to ask its own questions and provide the answers God wants to give us. This often involves the preacher in studying history, the ancient world, Greek, and Hebrew while trying to understand the meaning of the author’s ordinary words. Exposition respects the very human and historical nature of the Bible.

In reading the Bible, what becomes apparent is that much of the Bible’s larger context is a unified story of salvation. It’s a story about God and human beings. In this story, human beings are disobedient, stubborn, and disoriented. Because of the choices of the first human beings, mankind as a whole is in a mess of guilt and corruption. The Bible presents God’s answer to this human plight. God sent Jesus Christ to live, die, and rise for the forgiveness of sin. The broader story becomes very important in Bible application.

Application seeks to show how God speaks to our needs and our situation today. Application shows that God’s word in its historical context and with its redemptive intention is relevant for us today. The Bible shows us how God is involved in our lives, that he’s with us, that he’s offering himself to us in mercy and grace.

If we look at the sermons in the book of Acts, for example, we see the apostles engaging in this kind of exposition and application. In Acts 2, the apostle Peter takes a text from the Old Testament prophet Joel and reveals how that prophecy came true in the person and work of Jesus. Then he states the response required to the good news of what Jesus Christ has done in his sacrificial death and resurrection—to repent of their sins and trust in Jesus for their salvation. Here’s an early example of “Christian” preaching, where Christ is the focus of exposition and application.

God speaks law and gospel.

There are two main parts to the word of God: law and gospel.

The law includes everything in Scripture that God commands us to do or prohibits us from doing. Paul captures this commanding nature of the law in Romans. He says, “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20).

The law is a word that comes to us from within, and it’s written on everyone’s heart (Rom. 2:15). It was once written on stone tablets in Israel’s history, and in the history of man it’s inscribed on the conscience. Everyone gets law, and everyone prescribes law to others. When you ask a friend for some advice, the first words spoken are often words of doing: Do this. Don’t do that. The law brings no hope of relief but only tells us where we’ve gone wrong and what we need to do in order to make things right (Rom. 3:19–20). The law says, “Do this and live” (Lev. 18:5; Gal. 3:12).

It’s not that the law is bad. In fact, the law itself is good because it comes from God and reflects his good character. The apostle Paul even says that the “law is spiritual” (Rom. 7:14). So we know that the problem isn’t with the law—the problem is with us. As Paul concludes, “The law is spiritual,” but “I am of the flesh, sold under sin” (Rom. 7:14). We’re bad—the law exposes our sin—and that’s why the law becomes bad news for us.

The gospel is the good news, given throughout the Old and New Testaments, regarding what God has done in Christ out of his love to reconcile the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:19). God’s law is good, but we’re unable to keep it because of

our sinfulness. Thankfully, God sent his Son to do for us what we couldn't do ourselves. Paul captures this aspect of God's word in Romans:

[Now] the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe (Rom. 3:21–22).

The gospel is a word that comes to us from outside of us, and it's been revealed by God in Christ. This word must be spoken, and it's the good news of what God has done in Christ to reconcile us to himself—to satisfy all the demands of the law and to make atonement for all sins committed. What the law required Jesus Christ has accomplished. What the law demanded Jesus has satisfied. The gospel says, "Believe this, and it's done already." Jesus' final words on the cross are appropriate to summarize the good news of the gospel: "It is finished!" (John 19:30).

Whenever you read a verse, you can immediately tell whether it's law or gospel by either the demands it makes upon you or the promise it offers you. The law commands you to do something, or to stop doing something. The gospel, however, tells you what God has done for you, or what he will do for you.

What separates the teaching of Christianity from every other world religion is that the Bible reveals to us how the law can never save us; only Jesus can. No other religion tells us that God has done what we could not do for ourselves. No other religion offers us the gospel—the free grace of God in Jesus Christ. "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom. 7:25)

For more on this subject, read pages 67–79 in Michael Horton's *Core Christianity*.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION (BIBLE STUDY P. 48)

1. Find one passage in this study about the Bible's authority. What are some ways in your church and in your own devotional life that the Bible is honored as the word of God?
2. What is exposition? Why is application important?
3. Through the Bible, God speaks a powerful message of grace. What are some key passages about the gospel that you know? What do these teach you about God?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

1. The Bible is inerrant and inspired, but our interpretations are not. Yet, whenever we read the Bible, we must interpret it. How should this bring humility to our reading of the Bible?
2. Sometimes people pit reading the Bible “devotionally” against “study.” How are you currently reading the Bible and how might that change after having done this study?
3. Even though we’re not saved by the law, we must still seek to glorify God in keeping the law. How does knowing that you’re saved by grace inspire you to still do good works? What are some good works that are easy to overlook either because they are too ordinary or because they are challenging?

END IN PRAYER (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

Pray for the needs of the group, the good of the church, the salvation of people, and any other needs that may arise.



“THEN GOD SAID, ‘LET US MAKE MAN IN OUR
IMAGE, AFTER OUR LIKENESS. AND LET THEM
HAVE DOMINION OVER THE FISH OF THE SEA
AND OVER THE BIRDS OF THE HEAVENS AND
OVER THE LIVESTOCK AND OVER ALL THE
EARTH AND OVER EVERY CREEPING THING
THAT CREEPS ON THE EARTH.’

SO GOD CREATED MAN IN HIS OWN IMAGE,
IN THE IMAGE OF GOD HE CREATED HIM;
MALE AND FEMALE HE CREATED THEM.

AND GOD BLESSED THEM. AND GOD SAID
TO THEM, ‘BE FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLY AND
FILL THE EARTH AND SUBDUE IT, AND HAVE
DOMINION OVER THE FISH OF THE SEA AND
OVER THE BIRDS OF THE HEAVENS AND OVER
EVERY LIVING THING THAT MOVES ON THE
EARTH.’... AND GOD SAW EVERYTHING THAT
HE HAD MADE, AND BEHOLD, IT WAS VERY
GOOD. AND THERE WAS EVENING AND THERE
WAS MORNING, THE SIXTH DAY.”

GENESIS 1:26-31



G O D
M A D E *the*
W O R L D
but W E ' V E
M A D E
a M E S S
of I T

PRAY (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

Almighty God, we have sinned against you in our thoughts, in our words, and in our actions. We have failed in what we have done and what we have left undone. We have not loved you with all our heart. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry, and we humbly turn to you for the grace to obey your law. For the sake of your Son, have mercy on us and forgive us that we may live to the glory of your name and the good of our neighbors. Amen.

READ TOGETHER: GENESIS 3:1–24 (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

OPENING REFLECTION QUESTION (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

Why do you think the concept of sin is so taboo among both Christians and non-Christians?

READ GENESIS 3:1–24 (BIBLE STUDY P. 56)

Genesis 3 tells the story of the first human beings. God had placed them in the garden to work and keep it. They could eat any of the fruit except for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Then one day, a serpent entered into the garden. He tempted Eve. She ate the forbidden fruit. She gave some to her husband. He ate. They recognized their nakedness. They'd become guilty of disobeying God and now all humanity deals with the consequences. But there is hope. Clothed in the form of a curse to the serpent, God promised to Eve a Son who would crush the serpent's head. This promise comes to fulfillment in Jesus' victory over sin, death, and the devil.

WHY IS THE WORLD SUCH A MESS?

Have you ever seen one of those sci-fi movies in which someone creates an intelligent machine that ultimately becomes self-aware? The result of which is that chaos begins to erupt all over the world? Strange as it may seem, that kind of story actually provides a good analogy for us to consider as we think about why the world is in such a mess.

You can also watch Michael Horton teach the following section here:
<http://www.corechristianity.com/lesson5>

According to the Bible, the Triune God is the creator of all things. He spoke, and the world came into being. It's sort of like the author of a book who first imagines a world and then brings it to life through words. In order to understand who we are, we need to know something about God, the author and creator of all things.

In the beginning, God made the world good. And after placing man in charge of all the created order, he declared his whole creation "very good" (Gen. 1:31). There's a special dignity and nobility to human beings over all the other creatures since God made man in his own image and called him to rule as his royal representative. Our first parents were created in true righteousness and holiness, and they were given the responsibility to execute all of God's commands and to have dominion over the earth. They also had free will, which gave them the ability to obey or disobey God's word.

But instead of ruling over everything, Adam and Eve ended up listening to the voice of the serpent, who enticed them to rebel against their creator in the headlong pursuit of their own autonomy. Sin and misery entered the world because of this singular act of high treason. And from that day on, the human race has been barred from Paradise.

LESSON 5

This is the Christian understanding of the creation and fall of the human race: God made the world good—in fact, very good. But at some point, we decided to rebel against our Creator, resulting in the chaos of sin that we witness on every newscast, and experience every day in our own broken relationships, and in the recesses of our own sinful hearts. The doctrine of original sin teaches that all human beings are heirs of Adam’s guilt and corruption. Since Adam failed to carry out his commission as the servant king of God, all of his descendants are implicated as well. As goes the king, so goes the kingdom.

We’re all born in sin with a corrupt nature, and that means all sinful acts spring from this source. We sin because we’re sinners. We’re not sinners because we sin, or as Jesus put it: “Out of the heart proceeds evil thoughts, murder, adultery, theft, and slander. These are what defile a person” (Matt. 15:19–20). To make a long story short, the world is a mess because humans have made it that way, not God. Human oppression, violence, idolatry, immorality, and all the other evil in the world are perversions of the way things were originally created to be.

Politicians sometimes speak as though they can solve the world’s problems simply by putting forward the right kind of legislation. But that’s just to offer a Band-Aid solution for an incurable disease. We can’t fix the brokenness of our world for the simple reason that we can’t fix the brokenness of our own sinful hearts. But thankfully the story doesn’t end there.

God in his mercy promised Adam and Eve that a savior would come one day to crush the head of the serpent and redeem the human race from the state of sin and corruption. Though we can’t save ourselves, God provided a solution in the person and work of his Son, Jesus Christ, who lived the life that we should have lived, and died the death we all deserve.

In summary:

- God made the world good. He made man in his image to be his royal ambassador on the earth and to rule over all creation.
- Adam and Eve used their free will to sin and rebel against God, and this act of high treason merited eternal condemnation, not only for themselves, but for all their posterity.
- As a result of the fall, the world is under a curse and mankind is banished from Paradise. But God in His grace promised Adam and Eve that he would one day send a child, born of the woman, to set things right. That hope is fulfilled in the person work of Jesus Christ.

If you’ve ever looked around at all the problems in the world and thought, *it’s not supposed to be like this*—you’re right. It’s not. The world is broken, and we can’t fix it. But knowing the big story of who God is and what he’s done to save us from ourselves provides real joy, lasting confidence, and eternal hope.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION (BIBLE STUDY P. 57)

1. When you think about being made in the image of God, how does that make you feel? It’s especially true with victims of violent crimes that they could lose a sense of value as human beings. What might you want to tell someone who has lost a sense of human dignity?

2. Genesis 3 records the story of the fall, when Adam and Eve sinned against God. When you think about sin and misery in the world, what comes to mind? What would you pray for people who are experiencing that kind of sin and misery?

READ PSALM 19 (BIBLE STUDY P. 57)

DISTINGUISHING CREATOR AND CREATION

The Bible tells us that God made the world very good (Gen. 1:31). If that's the case, why do people face so many struggles in life? To understand the world as it is today, we need to learn about the biblical account of creation and where we fit into the story.

Scripture tells us the following about God's work in creation:

- God is the author of creation: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1).
- Next, we learn that God *spoke* all the material of creation into existence from *nothing*: "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Gen. 1:3).
- God's spoken *commands* also shape creaturely responses: "And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.' And it was so" (Gen. 1:24).

This speech points to the specific *relationship* between God and creation. God is the Lord, and creation is his servant.

Only two categories exist: God and everything else. Creator and creation.

MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE

God made humans alone in his own image and gave them a special role in creation:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:26–27)

God made humans his royal representatives.

To be human is to hold a high office, maintaining God's good order of love, righteousness, holiness, and justice. Everyone is intrinsically aware of this divine calling: All people have God's moral law etched on their consciences (Rom. 1:20).

God placed his image bearer Adam "in the garden of Eden to work and keep it" (Gen. 2:15). He then gave Adam a command to test his covenantal faithfulness:

"You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." (Gen. 2:16–17)

LESSON 5

As God's royal representatives, Adam and Eve were supposed to exercise their authority and drive God's enemies from his garden. Instead, the serpent (Satan) twisted and corrupted God's word. Satan enticed Adam and Eve to rebel against God by telling them that they would not die but would instead "be like God, knowing good and evil" if they ate the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:5). Even while Satan was falsely promising Adam and Eve autonomy if they obeyed him rather than God, he knew autonomy was impossible: Adam and Eve would serve someone. Satan wanted humans to bear his image, not God's.

AN ACT OF TREASON

When Eve "saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise," she took the fruit and ate it and gave some to Adam, who ate it as well (Gen. 3:6). Their eyes were opened, but not in the way they expected. They were naked, ashamed, and unable to cover their sin and guilt with man-made coverings of fig leaves (Gen. 3:7).

God found Adam and Eve in the garden and demanded an account of their treason (Gen. 3:8–10). God then exercised his righteous judgment by the following sanctions:

- He cursed the serpent (Gen. 3:14–15).
- He multiplied Eve's pain in childbirth (Gen. 3:16).
- He cursed the ground upon which Adam would labor with great toil (Gen. 3:17–19).

For more on this subject, read pages 81-97 in Michael Horton's *Core Christianity*.

Adam, God's covenant servant, defied his own high office and committed treason against his king. Sin and misery entered the world because of Adam's rebellion, breaking the relationship between God and creation. God made clothes from animal skins and clothed Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:20). He then cast Adam and Eve from the garden and barred them from the tree of life. Adam *and his posterity* were now in bondage to sin and estranged from God (Isa. 59:2; John 8:34).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION (BIBLE STUDY P. 59)

1. Consider the two categories: creator and creation. How does understanding that distinction shape how we live?
2. Where do you observe the effects of sin in the world? In your own heart?

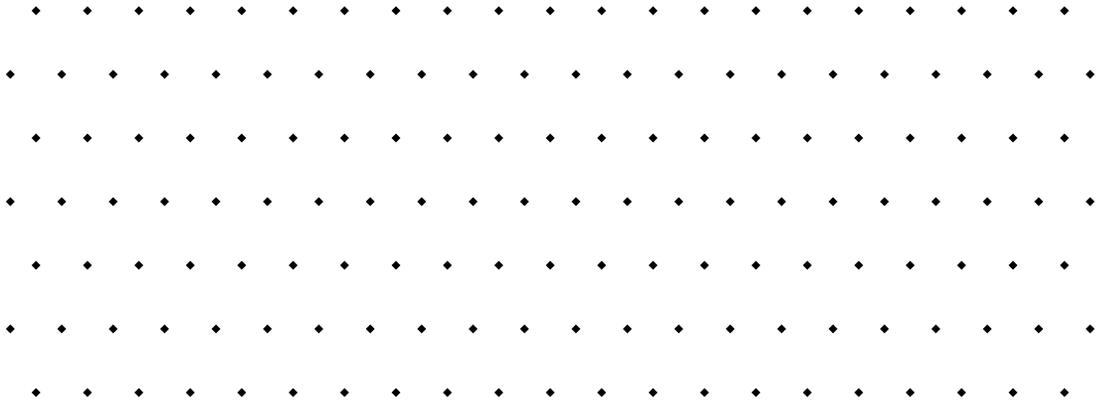
3. Psalm 19 is a beautifully written poem about creation displaying the glory of God. Write down a couple of the praises in this psalm that stand out to you.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

1. What comes to mind when you read when you read these words: "To be human is to hold a high office, maintaining God's good order of love, righteousness, holiness, and justice. Everyone is intrinsically aware of this divine calling. All people have God's moral law etched on their consciences (Rom. 1:20)"? What are some things we can do on a day-to-day basis to begin to look at people as made in the image of God?
2. In Matthew 22:34–40, Jesus taught that the entire law of God can be summarized as loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself. And in Matthew 23:23 Jesus said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others." What are some of the weightier matters of the law in our situation that challenge us?
3. Genesis 1 reveals God as the author of creation. A God who is powerful enough to create the world out of nothing is definitely powerful enough to work in our lives and to save anyone who would come to him. When you think about God's power to save, how does that give you hope for the people you know who don't yet know Jesus as their savior?

END IN PRAYER (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

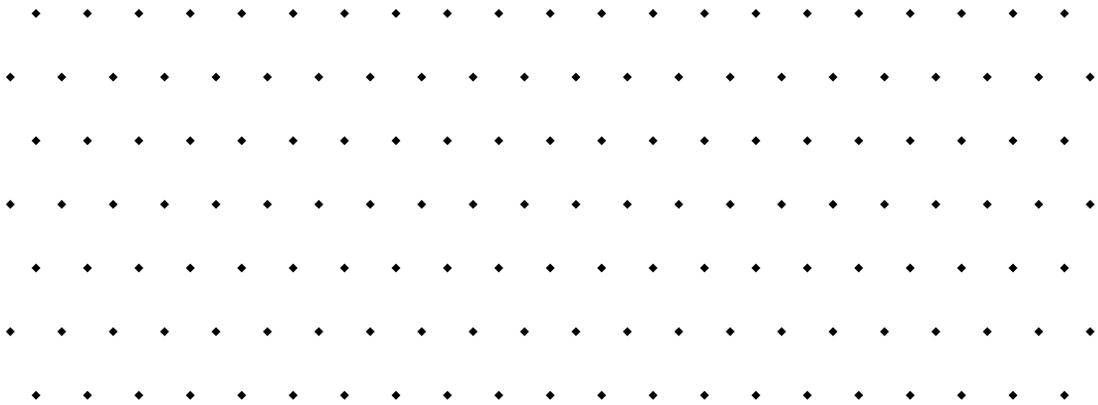
Pray for the needs of the group, the good of the church, the salvation of people, and any other needs that may arise.



“SO THEN, THOSE WHO ARE
OF FAITH ARE BLESSED ALONG WITH
ABRAHAM, THE MAN OF FAITH.”



GALATIANS 3:9



G O D
made a
P R O M I S E

PRAY (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

Gracious Father, you have made a promise that you would gather a people, give them a land, and bless the nations through them. And through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, you have shown yourself faithful. You are gathering a people. You are recreating the world. You are bringing salvation to all the nations. Give us the confidence to share your mercy and pursue righteousness and justice, trusting that your kingdom will come by your grace and power through Jesus Christ, who is blessing the nations with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

READ TOGETHER: EPHESIANS 2:8–9 (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

OPENING REFLECTION QUESTION (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

It's really hard for people to understand that salvation is a free gift. Why do you think that is?

READ GENESIS 15:1–20 (BIBLE STUDY P. 66)

Genesis 15 records God's promise to Abram. God makes a promise to bless him and give him more descendants than stars in the sky. And then, taking up a common Ancient Near Eastern practice of covenant-making, God displays that his promise in no way depends upon Abram's obedience. Instead, God makes it clear that his promise is completely dependent upon his grace and kindness.

SCRIPTURE AS AN UNFOLDING DRAMA

Have you ever read a novel that you just couldn't put down, or watched a movie that you never wanted to end? Good stories have a way of stirring our hearts and minds in ways that we never expected. That's actually one of the main reasons the Bible has captivated so many people across the ages. At its heart, the Bible tells the story of God with us from the creation and fall of the human race at the beginning, all the way to the new creation at the end of the book. In spite of our mutiny against God, he sent his own Son to reconcile us to himself in an amazing story of rescue and redemption. It literally is the greatest story ever told.

If you grew up in the church, you may have been taught to see the Old Testament as a collection of character studies. Abraham was the man of faith; Joseph was an example of how to resist temptation; Joshua provided leadership tips. One hymn even encouraged us to "dare to be a Daniel." Much like *Aesop's Fables*, the stories of the Bible were seen as morality tales, and we weren't really sure how all the pieces fit together. It's a little surprising to return to these stories later on as an adult, only to discover that Abraham told lies and questioned God's promise; Moses disobeyed God and was barred from entering the promised land; and David—the man after God's own heart—initiated an adulterous relationship with a woman he gazed on while she was bathing.

There are moral dimensions to these and other Bible stories, but the Bible shouldn't be treated as a catalogue of principles and platitudes with a few stories thrown in. Instead, we should see Scripture as a great unfolding drama with all sorts of plot twists and turns, yet all centering on God's gracious promise to save his people by a coming deliverer.

You can also watch Michael Horton teach the following section here:
<http://www.corechristianity.com/lesson6>

This coming one was to be a kind of second Adam who would not give into temptation. He was to be the true seed of Abraham, through whom the Lord would provide redemption, and by whom all the nations would be blessed. He was also to be the ultimate prophet, greater than Moses, and the true and faithful King, greater than David. Though all of Adam's offspring are born sinful and corrupt, God would one day say of this new faithful servant, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17).

The primary reason for reading the Bible this way is that it's precisely the way Jesus taught his followers to read Scripture. For example, on the road to Emmaus, Jesus said, "Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:26–27).

Evidently, in the 40 days between his resurrection and ascension, Jesus' instruction paid off. His disciples finally got it. The result is that all the sermons we encounter throughout the book of Acts proclaim Christ as the fulfillment of all the Old Testament promises. Unpacking this Christ-centered, promise-fulfillment story is what the apostles do throughout all their epistles as well.

FROM DRAMA TO DOCTRINE, DOXOLOGY, AND DISCIPLESHIP

The grand drama with its plot and intriguing subplots gives rise to crucially important doctrinal confessions. The gospel message, Paul says, is rooted not only in the fact that Christ died and was raised, but that he died *for our sins* according to the Scriptures, and was raised *for our justification* (Rom. 4:25). The drama and the doctrines inspire us to respond with doxology, or praise, as we begin the lifelong pursuit of Christian discipleship.

At the end of the day, the Bible is the unfolding story of a very specific promise. This is a worldwide, game-changing promise, and every story in the Bible finds its way back to that central theme. Yet when we consider the Old Testament, it can be confusing to dip into one part of it, especially without knowing much about the other parts. It's sort of like working with a jigsaw puzzle. The best way of understanding how any individual piece relates to the overall pattern is by looking at the box top. When it comes to the Bible, Jesus is that box top pattern. In John 5:39, he told the religious leaders of the day, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, but it's they that testify concerning me."

Jesus isn't simply a good teacher who helps us follow the golden rule—he's the faithful prophet, priest, and king that Adam and all his descendants—including us—have failed to be. He fulfilled the commission that God gave to humanity and entered heaven victoriously with us in his train.

In short, the Bible is the history of a very specific promise: Though we deserve nothing but death, he will bring us into his heavenly rest, through the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of his Son. Abraham, Moses, and David all take their place with us as joyful beneficiaries of the God who's the real hero of this story.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION (BIBLE STUDY P. 67)

1. Did you grow up hearing the Old Testament taught as a bunch of character stories or moral lessons? What does it change to see Scripture instead as an unfolding story of redemption?

2. How do doxology (worship) and discipleship naturally flow out of the unfolding drama of Scripture and its resulting doctrines? How have you seen that in your own life?

READ 2 SAMUEL 7:4–17 (BIBLE STUDY P. 67)

KEY CONTEXT: COVENANT

The story of the Bible is the unfolding of God's promise that—though we deserve death for our sin—God will bring us into glory through the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return of his Son, Jesus. God is the ultimate hero in the greatest story ever told.

The key context of this promise is covenant. A covenant is an oath or promise that forms a relationship between two or more parties. Even though there are several different covenants throughout the Bible, each of these covenants is united by one central truth. Let's look at the different covenants God made and kept with Abraham, Moses, and David.

The Abrahamic Covenant

The Abrahamic covenant terms are *unconditional and permanent*. Usually in the covenant-making process, one party was greater than the other party. We see a clear example of this in Genesis 15. In that story, God completes a covenant-making ceremony by passing between the pieces of severed animals. This was often the way treaties were ratified in biblical times. This act signified that the party passing through was assuming the same fate as the animals, should he fail to keep the terms of the treaty. Normally, the lesser party would walk through—in this case, Abram (God changes Abram's name to Abraham in Genesis 17). In an unusual yet beautiful twist, God, the greater party, walks through the pieces. *God is willing to die should he not uphold his unconditional and permanent covenant!*

The Sinai (or Mosaic) Covenant

The Sinai (or Mosaic) covenant terms are *conditional and temporary*. On Mount Sinai, God gives the law to Moses, the mediator of God's covenant with the nation of Israel. Israel receives detailed commands governing every aspect of its life. Here, along with the bloody sacrifices, the tabernacle and priesthood testify to the demand for righteousness by a holy God, the seriousness of sin, and the need for a mediator greater than Moses to reconcile us to God. Time and time again, God demonstrates his faithfulness and love, in spite of the people's faithlessness and disobedience. No matter how hard it tries, Israel cannot keep up its side of the covenant. Though Moses' lieutenant Joshua is able to bring Israel into the promised land of Canaan, Israel continues to disobey God's commands. Even though Israel fails to keep its commitments, God keeps all his promises to Israel in the conditional and temporary Sinai covenant (Josh. 23:14).

The Davidic Covenant

In the Davidic covenant, God promises that a descendant of David will rule on the throne forever. Even through the period of the judges, Israel remained unfaithful, forsaking the true God for other gods. So the last judge, Samuel, is told by God to anoint a king over Israel. Their first king, Saul, is promising, but he can't attain to the level of obedience demanded by God. The Lord then chooses David as the king of Israel. David's desire to replace the impermanent tabernacle with the permanent temple serves as the occasion for God to make an unbreakable covenant with David (2 Sam. 7:4–17). Though sinful, David receives a promise that his house/dynasty will be an everlasting throne that is ruled by his son.

Although David's son Solomon is credited with much wisdom, he too can't escape the foolishness of sin. Solomon fails to be the promised forever king. As each generation passes, we read of kings who come and go and, for the most part, lead their people away from God. Eventually, the sin of God's people becomes so great that judgment must be dispensed. Israel and Judah are conquered by foreign nations and taken into exile.

God keeps his promise to David by sending his own Son to be the king who will be righteous for the people. Hope remains, not in the temporary and conditional covenant made at Sinai, but on the basis of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. A new covenant is promised in Jeremiah 31:31–34. Here, God reminds his people that, in spite of their infidelity, he will bring forth a greater prophet, priest, and king: one who will fulfill all the promises and commands of the Old Testament and establish his throne forever. He will lead his people on a greater exodus and allow them entrance into the greater promised land. *God will redeem his people—but this will come with a cost.* Through his perfect life, sacrificial death, and vindicating resurrection, Jesus will conquer death itself for his people and grant access into God's presence forever.

For more on this subject, read pages 99–116 in Michael Horton's *Core Christianity*.

delity, he will bring forth a greater prophet, priest, and king: one who will fulfill all the promises and commands of the Old Testament and establish his throne forever. He will lead his people on a greater exodus and allow them entrance into the greater promised land. *God will redeem his people—but this will come with a cost.* Through his perfect life, sacrificial death, and vindicating resurrection, Jesus will conquer death itself for his people and grant access into God's presence forever.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION (BIBLE STUDY P. 69)

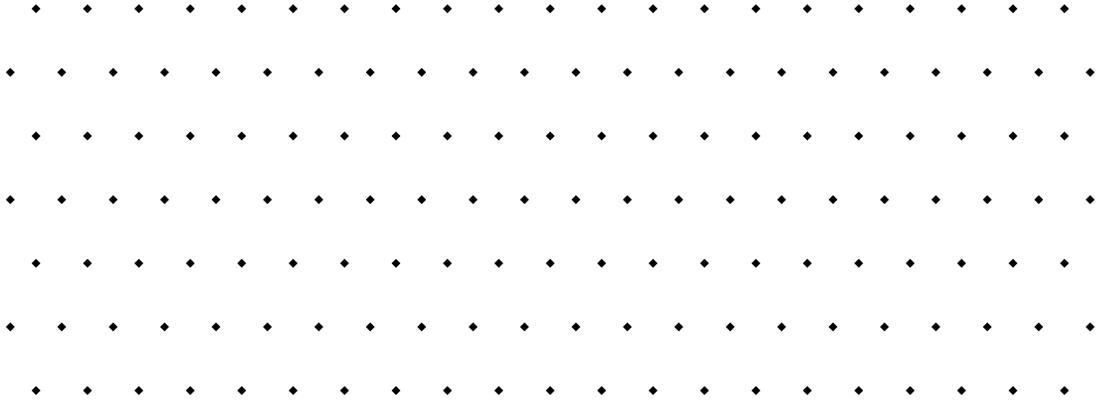
1. “The story of the Bible is the unfolding of God's promise that—though we deserve death for our sin—God will bring us into glory through the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return of his Son Jesus.” Does this sentence reflect the way you understand the Bible and history? How might this statement of theology give hope to a Christian who is going through challenge after challenge with no end in sight, feeling like life is mostly meaningless?
2. The history of Israel can be summarized by this one sentence: “Time and time again, God demonstrates his faithfulness and love, in spite of the people's faithlessness and disobedience.” How is this true in your life?
3. As a descendant of David, Jesus is the promised king who will rule the world in righteousness. Read Psalm 2. What strikes you about the Son's rule?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

1. What's the difference between a conditional and an unconditional promise?
2. How does God's faithfulness despite Israel's disobedience give us confidence that he's able to gather people who stray from his grace?
3. Psalm 2:10 says, "Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth." When you think of this as both a promise of God and an expression of hope upon the lips of God's people, what comes to mind? How might this comfort a people who feel oppressed by sin from within and evil from the outside? What do you think is the good news of Jesus as King?

END IN PRAYER (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

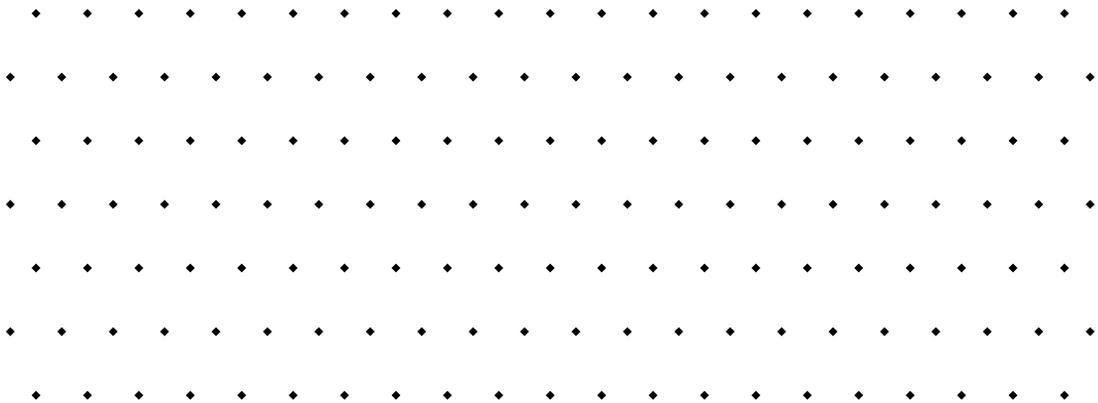
Pray for the needs of the group, the good of the church, the salvation of people, and any other needs that may arise.



“AND THE ANGEL SAID TO THEM, ‘FEAR
NOT, FOR BEHOLD, I BRING YOU GOOD
NEWS OF GREAT JOY THAT WILL BE FOR
ALL THE PEOPLE. FOR UNTO YOU IS
BORN THIS DAY IN THE CITY OF DAVID A
SAVIOR, WHO IS CHRIST THE LORD.’”



LUKE 2:10-11



JOY
to the
WORLD!

PRAY (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

Lord God, you have sent your Son in humility to experience the pain and suffering of life and death for us. By the power of the Holy Spirit, you raised him to new life. And now he has ascended to your right hand where he waits to come again and bring the fullness of his kingdom, of which we now know in part through grace. Help us to look forward to his coming and to rejoice as we wait and hope for the day when you will end all suffering, sickness, and death for the people who trust in your mercy through Jesus Christ, who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

READ TOGETHER: LUKE 18:9–14 (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

OPENING REFLECTION QUESTION (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

Why do you think Jesus told this story?

READ MATTHEW 1:18–25 (BIBLE STUDY P. 76)

Matthew 1:18–25 records the story of Jesus' birth. It's a story that begins with a virgin who is found with child. The problem is that she hasn't yet married Joseph, so it looks like she's been with another man. But she hasn't. Instead, God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, supernaturally creates a child in the womb of the virgin Mary. Joseph doesn't know this and intends to end his betrothal without bringing public shame upon her. But an angel appears to him and tells him what God is doing and that he should take Mary as his wife. Jesus would be God with his people, come to save them from their sins.

AN ACT OF REDEMPTION

In the story leading up to the exodus, God tells Moses to go and speak to Pharaoh saying, "Thus says the Lord, 'Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me"' (Exod. 4:22). Now, of course, we know the outcome of the story. Though Pharaoh didn't let God's people go, God intervened by rescuing his people from slavery and oppression, through an amazing act of redemption. This word "redemption" was used in the ancient world to describe those who would purchase slaves in order to set them free. In the case of the exodus story, God liberated the people of Israel from their slavery and gave them special privileges, as of a firstborn son.

It's striking how many of the references to this father-son relationship are made in the context of Israel's sins and transgressions. "Children have I reared and brought up," said God through the prophet Isaiah, "but they have rebelled against me" (Isa. 1:2). It's this background that we should keep in mind as we find Jesus referred to as the Son of God. It's a title of intimacy.

Throughout the unfolding drama of redemption, we discover this growing realization of the pervasiveness of sin, along with an increasing expectation for a coming Messiah, who would end up fulfilling all righteousness as God's true and faithful servant. Jesus is precisely this unique Son, fully human from the line of David. His love for the Father contrasts sharply with the history of Israel's unfaithful kings.

You can also watch Michael Horton teach the following section here:
<http://www.corechristianity.com/lesson7>

It's crucial that our Savior be fully human. He had to be a true son of Adam in order to fulfill the trial that Adam failed, and win for us the right to eat from the tree of life. He had to be the true offspring of Abraham, through whom the world would be blessed. He had to be the true shoot of Jesse, who would reign as a righteous king on David's eternal throne.

THE FAITHFUL SON

The Father's always had his loving, eternal Son at his side, but the appearance of Christ on the world stage was the first time in human history in which God finally had a Son who refused to satisfy his selfish desires, but instead said, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to accomplish his work" (John 4:34). Jesus is the fulfillment of everything to which the Old Testament law pointed by way of commands and promises. As Jesus himself says in Matthew 5:17, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." This righteous fulfillment is credited to all those who are united to Christ by faith. This is what Isaiah meant when he spoke of this coming servant: "By his knowledge shall the righteous one ... make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities" (Isa. 5:11).

Therefore, we can be justified, or declared righteous, before God only on the basis of Christ's finished work on our behalf. In short, God declares unrighteous people like you and me to be righteous, even while we're still sinners (Rom. 5:8). This is the good news. It's the heart of the gospel. It may sound impossible: How could a just God regard sinful human beings as if they were completely holy, righteous, and good? But as the Bible makes abundantly clear, Christ graciously gives us his own righteousness as a free gift. When we place our trust in Him alone, all our sins are credited to Christ, and his perfect obedience is given to us as a free gift.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus frequently exposed the rift between those who trusted in their own righteousness and those who put their hope and trust in Him. In fact, in one of his most memorable parables, he described two men who went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee said, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get" (Luke 18:11–12). But the tax collector, standing far off, simply said, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:13). Jesus then concluded: "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other" (Luke 18:14).

The Bible is chiefly a story of redemption. As fallen children of Adam, we've all failed to live up to God's righteous requirements. But God interrupted the story and didn't let us have the last word. He sent his son to fulfill the law for us, perfectly loving the Father and his neighbors in our place. He bore the curse of our sins on the cross and rose again so that we could be justified, or declared righteous, through faith in him. So now we're adopted sons and daughters, co-heirs with Christ of all the heavenly estate. As the angel announced at Christ's birth, this is indeed good news of great joy for all people (Luke 2:10).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION (BIBLE STUDY P. 77)

1. What ideas come to mind when you think about Jesus' birth? What are some biblical ideas that seem to be out of step with pop culture understandings of Jesus' birth?

2. Reflect on the story of the tax collector and the sinner (Luke 18:9–14). With which character do you most identify? Why?

READ LUKE 2:8–20 (BIBLE STUDY P. 77)

The best news in the world makes everyone want to burst into song. The coming of Jesus is the turning point in God's story. God does indeed send a redeemer for Israel, but this savior isn't going to return God's people to a nation or state made up of a physical land under theocratic rule. Jesus comes to 1) earn eternal life for his people by keeping God's law perfectly, which Adam, Israel, and all humanity failed to do, and 2) offer himself up as the perfect sacrifice for their sins.

THE BIBLE IS CHIEFLY A STORY OF REDEMPTION.

The big plot of Scripture is the war between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). Throughout the Old Testament, the devil is hard at work attempting to thwart God's plan to save people from their fallen state. From the days of Noah to the testing of Abraham, from the persecution of the Hebrews by Pharaoh and the struggles of the Israelites in the wilderness, to the temptations to which David succumbs, Satan seeks to destroy God's people by preventing the coming of the Messiah.

In Luke's account of Jesus' birth, an angel appears to a Jewish virgin named Mary "in the days of Herod, king of Judea," with the most wonderful news: she shall bear a son named Jesus who "will be called the Son of the Most High," of whose kingdom there will be no end (Luke 1:5–33). Even after Jesus is born, Satan doesn't stop trying to eliminate the promised seed. When Herod hears of a king's birth from the wise men, he orders all the children under the age of two years old to be murdered to remove any possible competition to his crown (Matt. 2:13–15), but God protects Jesus from harm and he grows up (Luke 2:52).

JESUS IS THE TRUE AND FAITHFUL SON.

In his genealogy of Jesus, Luke refers to Adam as "the son of God" (Luke 3:38). Yet, Adam failed to obey God. In Exodus 4:22–23, God refers to Israel as his "firstborn son," yet Israel also failed to keep God's law. Ever since sin entered the world through Adam, God was waiting for a true and faithful human son who would keep his law out of duty and joyful thanksgiving, fulfilling the purpose of humanity's creation.

To be God's true and faithful son, Jesus needed to fulfill specific requirements and prophecies:

- The greater Adam: Jesus must be the fully human descendant of Adam in order to prevail in the trial where Adam failed and win the right to eat from the tree of life (Lev. 17:11; Heb. 4:15; 9:22; 10:4).
- The promised Seed: Jesus must be the true offspring of Abraham by Sarah in order to be the child of promise through whom the world would be blessed and not the child of human effort, which is represented by Hagar (Gal. 4:21–34).
- The eternal king: Jesus must be the true shoot of Jesse and the descendant of David who would keep God's law perfectly in order to rule on the everlasting throne (2 Sam. 7:12–13; Isa. 11:1; 1 Kings 9:4–9; 11:4–8).

LESSON 7

The four Gospels describe Christ's work to redeem humanity from sin, judgment, and death. Since no mere human being could keep God's law perfectly because of Adam's fall, only Jesus, being both fully God and fully man, could be the perfect Son of Israel.

Where the nation of Israel failed to keep God's law, Jesus succeeded in every way. The covenant mediated by Moses was conditional and was never meant to last. The old (Mosaic) covenant ended when Jesus lived the perfect life and offered up the perfect sacrifice for all those who trust in him. The greater unconditional promises of the Abrahamic covenant are fulfilled in the new covenant of grace through Jesus Christ. At last, God had a true and faithful Son who willingly obeyed his Father and submitted to his will in all things.

God declares unrighteous people to be righteous in Christ.

What does Christ's fulfillment of the Law and his perfect sacrifice mean for us? The *doctrine of justification* explains how sinful humans are declared righteous before a holy God through the finished redemptive work of Christ:

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. (Rom. 5:18)

It's not enough to just be acquitted of guilt—we must also be righteous before God to merit eternal life. When we place our trust in Christ alone, not only is our curse imputed (counted) to Christ, but his righteousness is also imputed (counted) to us. The apostle Paul sums up these amazing gifts of God's grace in his letter to the Corinthians:

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5:21)

Protestant Reformer Martin Luther called this transfer of our debts for Christ's riches "the marvelous exchange." God doesn't *make* a person righteous upon conversion; rather, he declares the believer justified by a legal verdict in Christ alone, through faith alone, by grace alone, on the basis of God's promise (Rom. 5:1).

For more on this subject, read pages 117-130 in Michael Horton's *Core Christianity*.

It's futile to try to win God's approval through our own inadequate works, since "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Jesus triumphed over sin and death with his perfectly obedient life, substitutionary sacrifice on the cross, and vindicating resurrection from the dead (Heb. 4:15). Salvation comes only by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ Jesus alone.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION (BIBLE STUDY P. 79)

1. Because Jesus kept the law on our behalf, we can keep the law not to earn salvation but because we are free to love God, having received salvation as a gift (Eph. 2:8). And in Ephesians 4:1-3, Paul says,

I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

What does Jesus' faithful life teach us about what it looks like to obey Paul's command?

2. In Romans 5:6–8 Paul says,

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

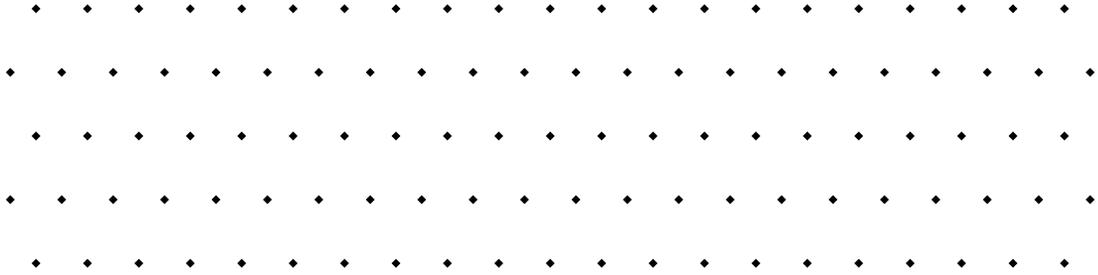
Read this verse over a few times. What thanksgiving could you pray to God as a response?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

1. When Jesus was born, he was subject to the same suffering and pains we are. He was born into poverty and into a world of conflict, between Satan and the world on one side and God and his people on the other. How might this give us confidence that God understands our situations and cares about all the details?
2. How does Jesus' life model obedience to God? What is similar about our call to obey God and Jesus' call to obey God? What is different about our call to obey God and Jesus' call to obey God?
3. Imagine a Christian friend who feels that they are not sure they have done enough good works to gain salvation. How might we speak to a person about the grace of the gospel?

END IN PRAYER (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

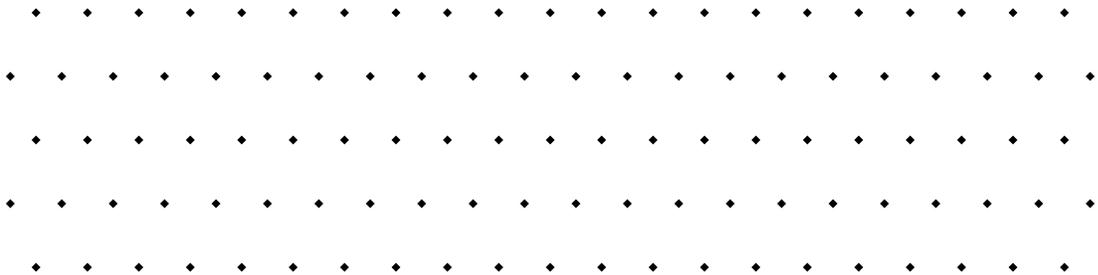
Pray for the needs of the group, the good of the church, the salvation of people, and any other needs that may arise.



“AND JESUS CAME AND SAID TO THEM,
‘ALL AUTHORITY IN HEAVEN AND ON
EARTH HAS BEEN GIVEN TO ME. GO
THEREFORE AND MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL
NATIONS, BAPTIZING THEM IN THE NAME
OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND
OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, TEACHING THEM TO
OBSERVE ALL THAT I HAVE COMMANDED
YOU. AND BEHOLD, I AM WITH YOU
ALWAYS, TO THE END OF THE AGE.’”



MATTHEW 28:18-20



J E S U S

is

L O R D

PRAY (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

Gracious God and Father, you have given your people a commission that we don't deserve and a commission that we cannot fail because you have promised to be with us. Give us the confidence to trust your words and go forward, sharing in the mission to make disciples of all the nations THROUGH our Lord Jesus who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

READ TOGETHER: PHILIPPIANS 2:5–11 (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

OPENING REFLECTION QUESTION (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

What does it mean to say that Jesus is Lord?

READ MATTHEW 28:16–20 (BIBLE STUDY P. 86)

This passage is famously called the Great Commission. Jesus comes to the disciples who had all scattered on the night Jesus was betrayed. Instead of bringing disappointed words of judgment, he does the unthinkable. Jesus approaches them. He gives them a new mission, including them in the mission that God had set in motion at the beginning of history after Adam and Eve had sinned. Jesus calls his disciples to make disciples of all the nations, baptizing and teaching them. And the best news is that it's a commission that they cannot fail—Jesus has all authority in heaven and earth, and he's with them even until the end of the age.

JESUS REDEFINES LORDSHIP

A number of people over the years have said that they were once Christian, but they now no longer believe in Christ. Many of them became Christians because they were told that Jesus was the answer to questions such as, "How can I be happy?" or, "What's the best way to have success in life?"

Instead of promising that Jesus will be the answer to the questions we're interested in, we need to encounter Jesus through the pages of Scripture in order to find out who he really is and what he really came to do.

When we explore the Bible on its own terms, we discover that Jesus often gives us better questions. In truth, we don't really know what we need. Our immediate problems aren't our most serious concerns. We tend to focus on symptoms like depression, fractured relationships, financial struggles, or health issues. These are real problems that each of us face, but Jesus didn't come to give us our best life here and now. He came to live the life we should have lived, and to die the death which all of us deserve. Jesus isn't a supporting actor in our life movie. He isn't there to encourage us to "be all we can be," and he can't be reduced to a mascot for our social and political agendas.

Jesus Christ is the Lord of the universe. But he redefines lordship for all of us, since he's both the Lord who commands and the servant who obeys. What king is this who rules, not by demanding the life of his subjects for the extension of his empire, but by giving his own life for them? Very odd, isn't it? To say that Jesus is Lord is to say that he's sovereign—in charge of everything in heaven and earth—and yet it's to say so much more than that. Death no longer has the last word, because he does. He's Lord not only over Satan and his legions but over CEOs, presidents, and

You can also watch Michael Horton teach the following section here:
<http://www.corechristianity.com/lesson8>

LESSON 8

celebrities. He's spreading his empire of grace to the ends of the earth, barely noticed by a world distracted by the trivial bells and whistles of this passing age.

Christ exercises his sovereignty not only over all creation by his daily providence, but also over his church through saving grace. Sometimes it's hard to imagine that the church is actually the official embassy of a king who declares, "All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me" (Matt. 28:18). The church seems weak, and even sometimes in retreat, but Christ is building his kingdom and the gates of hell will not prevail against it (Matt. 16:18). People from every tribe, language, and nation are being brought into God's kingdom as the word is proclaimed. The Holy Spirit is opening hearts, and Christ is welcoming outcasts to his baptismal bath and royal meal.

WHAT IS DISCIPLESHIP?

Not only do we need to be clothed, bathed, and fed with Christ's saving gifts, but also we need to be taught, guarded, and guided by his ministers and elders. A disciple is one who learns, both through sound teaching and godly examples. A disciple is shaped by the hymns and prayers of the church as well as by the common confession of sins that we express together. Sometimes discipleship involves being corrected in matters of doctrine or life. After all—we're sheep, and sheep are prone to wander. Christ loves us too much to let us wander off by ourselves straight over a cliff.

Those who are united to Christ are incorporated into his body. A Christian can't be attached to the vine without being, at the same time, grafted onto the other branches. The local church is essential to being a disciple of Jesus Christ. The church isn't just where disciples go once a week. It's where disciples are made through the ordinary ministry and the fellowship of the saints. Pastors don't represent the preferences, ideas, and interests of the people, but of Christ. Elders are wise in the faith and able to counsel, exhort, and steer the spiritual life of the churches. It may run against our individualistic grain, but our king commands, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account" (Heb. 13:17). In short, we submit to Christ's lordship by submitting to his shepherds who have been entrusted with the care and protection of the sheep.

Christ isn't only the Lord of the universe. He's also the head of the church. And he calls all those who trust in his finished work not to go it alone but to submit to the teaching, fellowship, and discipline of his body. This is where and how his saving lordship is exercised.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION (BIBLE STUDY P. 87)

1. Are you ever tempted to doubt that Christ is building his church? How does it comfort you to see Christ as the king who declares, "All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me" (Matt. 28:18)?
2. Consider the elements of discipleship listed above. How are you being discipled at your church? What are some ways you can become more active in being a disciple?

READ PHILIPPIANS 2:5–11 (BIBLE STUDY P. 87)

Heaven and eternal life can seem pretty far away at times. Some people look to Jesus mainly to help them with their problems here on earth. Jesus does care about the difficulties we face in this life, but he came to the world to do much more than make our daily lives more fulfilling.

JESUS IS LORD OVER DEATH.

The day after Jesus rose from the dead, two of his disciples were walking along the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13). They didn't recognize Jesus at first because they had certain expectations about who the Messiah was and what he had come to do. What actually happened was very different from what they expected. These disciples needed someone to teach them the Bible to understand why Jesus was crucified, since they thought he was supposed to free the Jews from Roman rule.

Jesus explained the Scriptures to these confused disciples:

“Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. (Luke 24:25–27)

Later, Jesus joined them for dinner, and their eyes were opened when he took the bread, broke it, and gave it to them. Jesus wanted his disciples to first recognize him as the fulfillment of the Old Testament story *before* they recognized him by sight.

We're in the same position today as these disciples were on the road to Emmaus. People often look for a sign or vision to learn about God, but what they need to know is the story in which Jesus is the central character. We can't shoehorn Jesus into whatever we want him to be. He has cast us as characters in *his* story, and what a joyful story it is!

As the Lord who commands and the servant who obeys, Jesus humbled himself to be born in the flesh to conquer sin, death, Satan, and hell as one of us. He reigns as both fully God and fully man, being the faithful and victorious last Adam. Jesus rules by serving and serves by ruling.

Christ is building his kingdom on earth, but his methods and means differ from those of the world. We can be confident that Christ has the authority to rule because of his vindicating resurrection from the dead and promise to overcome the world. Our relationship to death has drastically changed because we're united to Christ in his resurrection, but the sting of death isn't completely removed from us presently. As Christians, though, we can have hope even in the midst of grief (1 Thess. 4:13).

JESUS IS BUILDING HIS CHURCH BY THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

Jesus is building his kingdom through the building of his church, which is his people (Matt. 16:18). If you want to be a disciple of Jesus, then you should join a local church. Jesus doesn't save his sheep from the wolves only to leave them to fend for themselves (John 10:10–16).

While there are many aspects of church life that help people grow in their faith, the Holy Spirit primarily works through the ordinary means of the preaching of the word, the administration of the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper), and godly discipline to build up the body of Christ (John 14:26; Eph. 1:17–18).

There are several ways in which Jesus as Lord presently disciplines us in ordinary ministry:

- Jesus serves us by the word. The regular preaching of the word is vital to our discipleship. The Bible tells us that faith comes by hearing the gospel (Rom. 10:17; 1 Pet. 1:23–25).

LESSON 8

- Jesus serves us by baptism. Being baptized and remembering our baptism is vital to our discipleship. Baptism lies at the heart of our Lord's Great Commission, being the entrance into the church, the public assembly of his saints (Matt. 28:19).
- Jesus serves us by the Lord's Supper. Regularly taking the Lord's Supper is vital to our discipleship. The Lord's Supper is a feast that's meant to nourish us spiritually and assure us of our sharing in Christ (1 Cor. 10:16).

A *disciple* is one who also learns and comes under instruction and guidance. Christ disciplines his sheep in the three ways:

- Discipleship involves learning through sound teaching and through wise, godly examples (2 Tim. 3:10; 4:2).
- Discipleship involves being shaped by the prayers of the church both spoken and sung, and by the common confessions of sins and of faith in Christ.
- Discipleship sometimes involves needing to be corrected in doctrine or life. Jesus calls us his sheep because, like sheep, we are prone to wander (Ps. 119:176; Matt. 18:12–13).

Christ has given his church servants. Christ has given his church the *special offices* of pastor, elder, and deacon to guide, protect, and care for his sheep. To grow and thrive, Christians need to be properly disciplined by the leadership of the local church. While most believers don't hold a special office in the church, we all hold a *general office* as royal priests, loving and serving one another in the name of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:9). All believers are priests

because we each have access to God's presence through Christ (Eph. 2:18). We also offer spiritual sacrifices of thanksgiving to God through Christ (Heb. 13:15).

For more on this subject, read pages 131–143 in Michael Horton's *Core Christianity*.

For now, the church is where and how Jesus' saving lordship is seen and heard. Even though our churches may appear to be small and insignificant in the eyes of the world, they're the consulates of Christ's embassy of grace. Jesus is Lord!

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION (BIBLE STUDY P. 89)

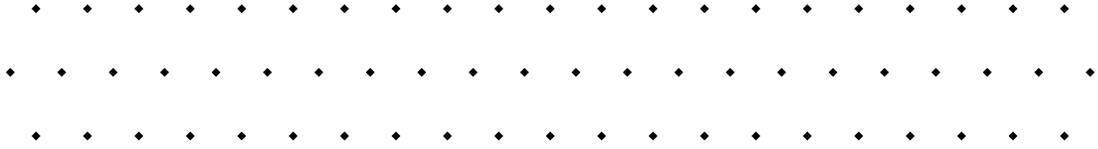
1. As the Lord who commands and the servant who obeys, Jesus humbled himself to be born in the flesh to conquer sin, death, Satan, and hell as one of us. He reigns both as fully God and fully man, being the faithful and victorious last Adam. How does Jesus' victory over death inspire your worship and prayer life?
2. Jesus is building his kingdom by the power of the Holy Spirit, and he's using the ordinary means of preaching and teaching, baptism, the Lord's supper, and the discipline of the church to do it. What is one area of your church's ministry for which you are especially thankful?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

1. How does Jesus' victory over death inspire your worship and prayer life? How might this inspire us to share burdens with people and help them?
2. The Bible teaches that Jesus is building his kingdom by the power of the Holy Spirit, but sometimes it's hard for people to see this. The church doesn't often look glorious. People suffer. Scandals happen. How should we see the kingdom expanding despite the challenges we experience?
3. Often the words "church discipline" scare people because it can sound like the church wants to punish sinners. But when we think about it more carefully, church discipline isn't just calling people to repent or excommunicating people who don't repent. Church discipline includes all the work pastors and church leaders undertake to form us in Christ. What are some good sides to how pastors and church leaders do the work of discipleship through discipline?

END IN PRAYER (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

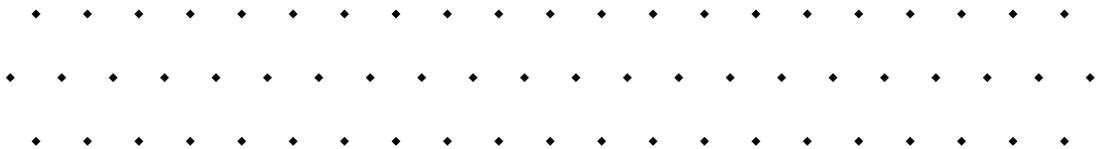
Pray for the needs of the group, the good of the church, the salvation of people, and any other needs that may arise.



“SO WE DO NOT LOSE HEART.
THOUGH OUR OUTER SELF IS
WASTING AWAY, OUR INNER SELF
IS BEING RENEWED DAY BY DAY. FOR
THIS LIGHT MOMENTARY AFFLICTION
IS PREPARING FOR US AN ETERNAL
WEIGHT OF GLORY BEYOND ALL
COMPARISON, AS WE LOOK NOT TO
THE THINGS THAT ARE SEEN BUT TO
THE THINGS THAT ARE UNSEEN.
FOR THE THINGS THAT ARE SEEN
ARE TRANSIENT, BUT THE THINGS
THAT ARE UNSEEN ARE ETERNAL.”



2 CORINTHIANS 4:16-18



WHAT
are WE
WAITING
for?

PRAY (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

Dear Father, though our bodies are wasting away and death is an unavoidable future, we know that Christ is coming and he will save us. Help us to hope in Christ's coming so that we might find the strength to face the day through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives with you and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

READ TOGETHER: ROMANS 8:18–25 (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

OPENING REFLECTION QUESTION (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

Do you ever feel like life is meaningless? How does this passage from Romans give you a different perspective?

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 4:7–18 (BIBLE STUDY P. 96)

Paul reveals the nature of the Christian life using himself as an example. Though Paul had a special calling as an apostle and minister of the gospel, as Christians, God has called each one of us to love, service, and witness in our everyday situations. And, like Paul, much of our efforts may seem like a failure by the world's standards. We will suffer. We will grow old and tired. And much of our life will appear petty and insignificant. Yet, God doesn't waste our lives. He uses them for his glory, and though it may appear that this suffering is at times too much to bear, it's only temporary. God is preparing a new creation of blessedness for us who believe. The entire Christian life isn't oriented toward the despair of the moment but the hope of the future. We live now expecting Christ to return, raise the dead, and bring us into a new creation free from the sufferings of this life.

A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF DEATH

If you want to ruin an otherwise-successful dinner party, just start a conversation on the subject of death. A lot of people today are uncomfortable even with the thought of the word itself and would much rather focus on living the good life here and now. But this "Chicken Soup for the Soul" isn't a healthy diet, as we learn when real struggles eventually hit. Instead, Scripture promises much more than a kind of "spiritual makeover." In fact, it promises an entirely new creation. And this anticipation creates a deep and lasting joy, even when we're lying at death's door.

One characteristic that seems to distinguish us from our pets is the inextinguishable passion to hope. With hope, a person can endure the direst circumstances. We're by nature prospective creatures—always looking ahead to whatever's next on the horizon. But Christian hope isn't a general upbeat attitude. Our hope is generated by the gospel. Knowing that Christ bore the curse of sin for us on the cross, and that he was raised for our justification, gives believers a unique ability to accept the reality of suffering, weakness, and even death. Because we know it's not the final chapter.

There are many different theories about death floating around in today's world. Some believe in reincarnation, while others say that we become one with the universe. Some believe in a literal heaven and hell, while others maintain that we just cease to exist. If you ask a friend why he or she believes in a particular view of the afterlife, or lack thereof, you're likely to hear something like, "That's just what I choose to believe." But all these views can't be right.

You can also watch Michael Horton teach this section here:
<http://www.corechristianity.com/lesson9>

READ I CORINTHIANS 15:12–26 (BIBLE STUDY P. 97)

IF JESUS IS KING, WHY IS THE WORLD STILL FILLED WITH SUFFERING AND DEATH?

We need to understand that death is the last enemy, and its defeat is certain (1 Cor. 15:26). People often try to smooth over the grim reality of death by turning funerals into celebrations with no place for mourning. Death, however, is not natural; it's a horrible thing that has entered our world because of sin (Rom. 5:12). Yet, Christ's work for believers has radically transformed their experience of death.

Christian hope is generated by the gospel. Rather than trusting in our own personal views or wishes about what will happen after we die, we can trust God's word to know the truth. Death is cause for real sorrow; yet, even as we mourn, we have hope because Christ bore the curse of sin for us on the cross. God foretold Jesus' coming in the Old Testament, and Christ's resurrection is the vindicating proof that God will fulfill all his promises throughout the entire Bible (Acts 17:31). The resurrection of Jesus is the hope upon which the Christian faith stands (1 Cor. 15:14).

The Bible tells us that the sufferings of this present time—physical illness, pain, sorrow, death—are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us (Rom. 8:18). Paul suffered from many afflictions in his life, including illness, beatings, and a stoning so severe that he was nearly blinded. Still, Paul rejoiced in spite of these adversities:

For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. (2 Cor. 4:17)

DEATH IS NOT THE FINAL CHAPTER OF THE STORY.

Christians can accept the reality of death because they know it's not the final chapter of the story. Immediately after death, we enter into the presence of God, waiting for the resurrection of our bodies at the last day (2 Cor. 5:8). As we saw earlier, this is the *intermediate state*.

Our future in the presence of God is far better than our situation now, but it's far less than the resurrection. During the intermediate state, our bodies decay in the earth, not yet being raised in glory. In Revelation 6:9–10 we have a picture of the departed saints who are fully aware of the persecutions and struggles of those who have not yet entered the intermediate state. These departed saints cry out, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (v. 10).

The intermediate state is temporary as we wait for Christ to return and bring us into a new creation that will be just as physical and terrestrial as the current creation but without sin, sorrow, pain, or death.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WHEN CHRIST RETURNS?

When Christ returns and ushers in (consummates) the new creation, he will raise the dead, judge the nations, and lead all believers into the everlasting glory of the age to come. All the dead will be raised, and Christ will judge righteously by his perfect standard (Matt. 12:36–37; 2 Tim. 4:1).

Apart from Christ, the entire world stands guilty before God, awaiting punishment (Rom. 3:9–20). Salvation in the Bible is salvation from God's wrath (Rom. 5:9).

There are important differences between Christians and non-Christians at the final judgment:

- While non-Christians are judged according to their own works, Christians are judged according to the finished work of Christ done on their behalf (Rom. 4:23–25).
- Christians receive the reward because they are heirs with Christ (Gal. 4:1–4).

LESSON 9

- God will recognize many ordinary acts of love and kindness that Christians didn't even realize were good works, whereas the non-Christian's best works will be judged as filthy rags (Matt. 25:31–46; Isa. 64:6).
- The final judgment turns out to be a final vindication for Christians as their faith is proved to be not in vain (Luke 9:23–26; 1 John 5:4).

At Christ's return, he will lead creation into everlasting glory in the new age (Rev. 21:1–4). Scripture uses many pictures to give us an idea of what the new heaven and new earth will be like. What we know is that—having been resurrected—we will experience physical existence. It's often pictured as a feast (Isa. 25:6–9; 55:1–3; Matt. 22:2–14; Rev. 19:6–10). Scripture teaches that the new creation will contain worship (Rev. 19:10) and that God's glory will be its light (Rev. 21:23). We know that the new heaven and new earth will be free from sin, sorrow, death, and pain (Rev. 21:4).

For more on this subject, read pages 145–156 in Michael Horton's *Core Christianity*.

The most significant thing about heaven on earth is that God himself will dwell with us, and we will behold him face-to-face (Rev. 21:1–3; 1 Cor. 13:12). While Scripture has only given us hints about the new creation, we know enough to understand that it will be greater than anything we've ever experienced. Thus, as God's people, we wait and hope for Christ's return. Come, Lord Jesus!

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION (BIBLE STUDY P. 99)

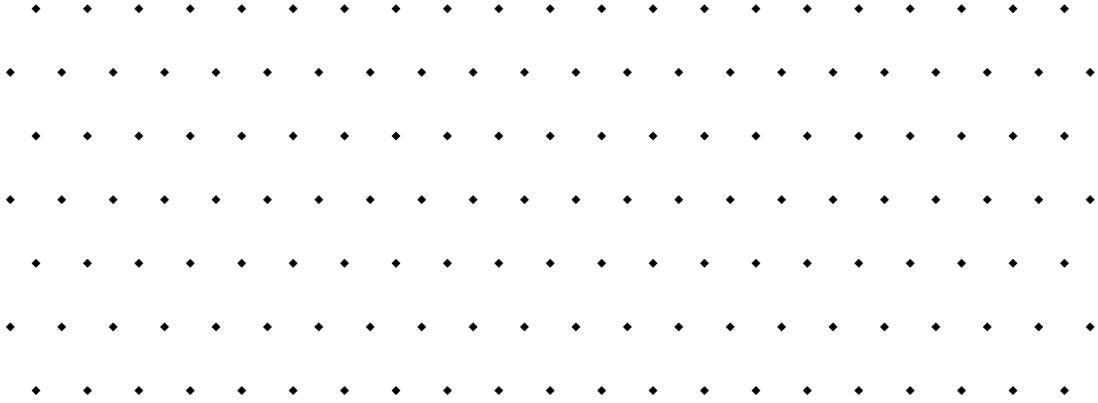
1. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13. How would you pray for someone who is grieving over the death of a Christian family member?
2. The most significant thing about heaven on earth is that God himself will dwell with us, and we will behold him face-to-face (Rev. 21:1–3; 1 Cor. 13:12). Look up these two verses. Write down what most stands out to you.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

1. Because Jesus is Lord over death, we can be confident that through faith in Jesus, even though we die, we will enter into the presence of God and be raised on the last day. In light of this truth, how can we better comfort Christians who are grieving over the death of a Christian family member? What might we say? How can we pray? What could we do to help?
2. The Bible tells us that the sufferings of this present time—physical illness, pain, sorrow, death—are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us (Rom. 8:18). How does this motivate you to keep living for the glory of God and for the good of your neighbor?
3. The final judgment turns out to be a final vindication for Christians as their faith is proved to be not in vain (Luke 9:23–26; 1 John 5:4). At Christ's return, he will lead creation into everlasting glory in the new age (Rev. 21:1–4). Why should this give us confidence that God will gladly receive us into his glorious kingdom?

END IN PRAYER (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

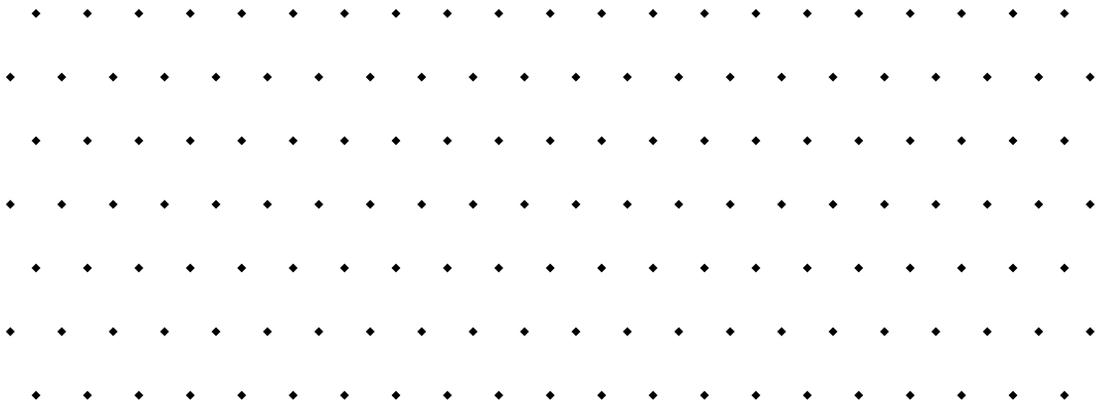
Pray for the needs of the group, the good of the church, the salvation of people, and any other needs that may arise.



“FOR WE ARE HIS WORKMANSHIP,
CREATED IN CHRIST JESUS FOR
GOOD WORKS, WHICH GOD
PREPARED BEFOREHAND, THAT
WE SHOULD WALK IN THEM.”



EPHESIANS 2:10



In the
MEANTIME:
CALLINGS

PRAY (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

Dear God, you have shown us grace and mercy. We are your workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which you prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Help us to be faithful to your calling through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit reigns forever. Amen.

READ TOGETHER: 1 THESSALONIANS 4:1–12 (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

OPENING REFLECTION QUESTION (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

Why do you think people worry that they're going to miss out on God's best for their lives? What might be misguided about this worry?

READ 1 THESSALONIANS 4:1–12 (BIBLE STUDY P. 106)

People often wonder, "What is God's will for my life?" Here in 1 Thessalonians 4:1–12 we receive clear direction. God's will is that his people would be holy, that we'd live lives empowered by the Spirit to do what's right in our everyday situations. This is freeing for one important reason: In all our decision-making, we don't have to worry about what God secretly wants for each of us in particular. God has given us the freedom to choose what we want to do. We can choose among several jobs and career paths. We can choose who we want to marry or even not to marry. What God wants is that, in whatever choice we make, we would seek the path of holiness.

WHAT DO WE DO IN THE MEANTIME?

If you have a bad sense of direction, your first stop at the mall is probably the directory with its map. "You are here" gives us a point of reference. In Scripture we discover that we're all located in this precarious intersection between this present evil age and the age to come. Christ's kingdom is already here, but it's not yet consummated. Christ came the first time in humility and self-sacrifice to bring salvation; the second time, he'll come in power and glory as the judge of the world (Matt. 24:30; 25:31–36). So what do we do in the meantime?

Some answer this by saying we need to transform the world into the kingdom of Christ. Others react to this by saying, "Why rearrange the furniture on a sinking ship? The only true and lasting work is that of saving souls." There's also a third and more biblical view which says that Christians are called to witness to Christ while serving their neighbors through their various callings.

In Romans 12, Paul writes, "I appeal to you, therefore ... by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1). We don't appease God by our good works, but those who trust in Christ are made recipients of God's grace and mercy. Believers are passive receivers of the gift of salvation; we're then made active worshipers in a life of thanksgiving that's exhibited chiefly in our loving service to our neighbors.

You can also watch Michael Horton teach this section here:
<http://www.corechristianity.com/lesson10>

LESSON 10

Out of gratitude for all that we've been given, we worship God not merely in once-a-week church service in which we sing God's praises and receive his good gifts. We're also called to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, and to show hospitality to others. See, this is why we're encouraged both to sing hymns with thanksgiving, as well as to work well with our hands, so that we may win the respect of outsiders (1 Thess. 4:11–12). We're all waiting for the day when Christ returns and makes the kingdoms of this world into the kingdom of Christ. Until then, we're called neither to transform society nor to abandon it, but simply to love and serve our neighbors in sincerity and truth. And we do this in response to God's grace, not as a means of acquiring it.

WHO'S IN FRONT OF YOU?

There are many common callings in the world. Some help to extend Christ's kingdom directly, but most of us are called simply to provide loving service to others according to the gifts that God has distributed. You may be called to a particular profession—you may design buildings, practice medicine, or clean washrooms. Just as there are no insignificant callings in Christ's body, there's no role in society that's beneath you. After all, given the humility of our Savior—even to the point of suffering on the cross—the real question isn't what's beneath you, but what's in front of you—namely, your neighbor, who needs your help. All this is part of your call to be salt and light.

At this point, it's good to think about the way God answers us when we ask him to “give us this day our daily bread” (Matt. 6:11). How exactly does God answer that request? Has bread ever fallen into your lap? Probably not. But God has provided you with bread and nourishment through providence. In other words, God is our ultimate provider who serves us through the callings of farmers, truck drivers, bakers, storekeepers, and so forth, regardless of whether they're Christians or not. We should love and serve others to the best of our ability, knowing that God is the one serving them through us.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION (BIBLE STUDY P. 107)

1. Do you struggle to see your ordinary roles in life as worthwhile? How does it shape your role in designing buildings, practicing medicine, cleaning washrooms, raising children, etc. to consider your work as an act of worship?
2. Reflect on the explanation of how God gives us our daily bread. Where can you see God's provision for your life in the ordinary callings of your neighbors? How might he be using you to provide for those around you?

READ MATTHEW 25:31–36 (BIBLE STUDY P. 107)

When it comes to knowing the times and seasons of God's unfolding plan, we need to know where we are and where we're headed. Christ's kingdom is already here, but it's not yet fully arrived in all its glory.

In Scripture we discover that we're located at a precarious intersection between this present evil age and the age to come. Christ came the first time in humility and self-sacrifice to bring salvation. At his second coming, Christ will come in power and glory as the judge of the world.

WAITING FOR CHRIST'S RETURN

How should we wait for Christ's return? We considered three answers to this question:

- Christians should be *triumphalistic*: This view teaches that Christians should transform the world for Christ and make the world a better place, suitably fit for Christ's return.
- Christians should be *defeatists*: This world is doomed, so we must save as many souls as possible from this "late, great planet earth."
- Christians should be *witnesses*: We are called to be witnesses of Christ, to suffer for that witness, and to love and serve our neighbors in our worldly callings.

The third view—being a witness for Christ—best recognizes the tension between the "already and not yet" of Christ's kingdom here on earth while we wait for Jesus' return. Christ has toppled the dominion of sin and even now we can see the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, though at times it seems indiscernible.

LIVING IN AN ECONOMY OF GRACE

Since Christ has already come and brought us peace with God, our lives take on an attitude of thanksgiving. We no longer offer sacrifices for guilt. We live as those who belong to Christ, moved into a kingdom of grace and not of debt. We are free at last to be thankful, offering ourselves as "living sacrifices" of praise to God (Rom. 12:1).

We must not shrink from our responsibilities in daily living, and we also must be clear about our calling as Christians in this present world. We need to keep two things in their proper order:

- First, God first serves us with his saving grace (Acts 17:25–26; Rom. 11:35–36; James 1:17).
- Second, receiving God's saving grace, we do good works out of the love God forms in us by the Holy Spirit. And God uses these good works to serve our neighbors in daily life (Rom. 13:8–10; Gal. 5:22–24; 6:2; Col. 3:17; Eph. 2:8–10)

Remembering the following will help Christians keep a proper focus on how to live in this world:

- Christians are not building a kingdom; they're *receiving* one (Heb. 12:28–29; Rom. 12:1–8). The church is this new body in Christ where each person does his or her job to nourish and strengthen other members by the Spirit's gracious gifts (Rom. 12:3–8; 1 Cor. 12:12–27).
- Christians are called to love and serve their neighbors to the best of their ability. Believers do good works for the glory of God and the good of others (1 Cor. 10:31).
- Whether it's in the church, the family, or in a secular vocation, God has given each of us various callings. A Christian can be—and often is—a parent, spouse, employee/employer, deacon, child, and volunteer, all at the same time! We sometimes think our gifts don't matter much, but they're essential (Rom. 12:1–8).

Sometimes new Christians wrongly assume that life will be better now that they've trusted in Christ as their Savior. Life can actually become more complicated as a Christian, because there's a war going on inside of us between our desire to obey God's will and our indwelling sin, even though we've been justified by God because of Christ's righteousness that's counted to us.

LIVING WITH COMMON GRACE

Christians share in the common curse and common grace of this world along with unbelievers. We enjoy the benefits of human progress from medicine, technology, and other good inventions. We also still get sick and die. Yet, death no longer has the final word for believers. God uses it to free us from our decaying bodies so we can be raised in glory (1 Cor. 15:43).

God's will for our lives doesn't have to be a mystery. Everything God says that we need to know is contained in Scripture. Beyond that, God's secrets are just that—*secret* (Deut. 29:29; 1 Thess. 4:1–12). We're free to be who God made us to be, where we are, with the gifts he's given us, without worrying about finding out his secret will. God has revealed his saving will and love for us and has made us to be a conduit of his love in our service to others. We need to wisely interpret Scripture regarding the good and necessary principles for life that God gives us in his word.

God gives us gifts, not only for fellow believers, but also for those who do not yet know Christ. God makes us his ambassadors, witnessing by word and deed to Christ's victory over sin and death, all the while conforming us to the image of his Son.

As we close this study, here is a summary of the core truths we've learned: The drama of redemption is the good news that we need every day. We don't ascend to God; he descended to us and assumed our humanity. He fulfilled all righteousness and bore our judgment. All saving benefits come from the Father, in the Son, through the Spirit. Together, we're shaped by the story through the fruit it yields in prayer and praise, and a life of increasing gratitude and hospitality. As a result, we live as those who are not our own, but belong to Jesus Christ. This lifelong process

of discipleship or sanctification grows out of living on the vine, in union with Christ and among the communion of saints. It's here that we learn what it means to be ambassadors of God's kingdom and learn to witness to Christ, both by word and deed.

For more on this subject, read pages 157–168 in Michael Horton's *Core Christianity*.

So give up whatever script you may have been working on for your own life movie, start digging into God's script, and the Holy Spirit will cast you as a character in the greatest story ever told.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION (BIBLE STUDY P. 109)

1. We're called to be witnesses of Christ, to suffer for that witness, and to love and serve our neighbors in our worldly callings. This can be a frightening call, but God has given us the Holy Spirit. Beyond church on Sundays, how else are you a witness in your situation? Consider the small, everyday interactions.
2. The problem with triumphalism is not its goal. Christians should want to see their good works produce change in their lives and change in their society. The problem with triumphalism is that it expects us to transform the world so that Christ's kingdom will come. It imagines that Christ's coming is dependent upon our work. How does knowing that Christians receive the kingdom by grace free you to serve in love?

3. Because of common grace, even non-Christians contribute to the well-being of society. What are some of the general good things in the world that you are thankful for?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

1. What are some practical ways we can share the gospel with people? How does our love and service help or hinder our witness?
2. The good news about your calling is that through the ordinary simple stuff like going to work or school, serving our families and friends, and speaking Christ's words of hope, God serves the world. God serves the world through us. How does this reveal that your life has meaning?
3. In this world, we participate in common goods with Christians and non-Christians. This is not to say that either Christians are doing everything right or that non-Christians never oppose God. It's to say that God, through common grace, uses Christians and non-Christians together to accomplish his care and preservation of society. How does this idea free us to work in secular spaces with a spirit of gentleness for the common good? Why is it a good thing to work with non-Christians to do good in the world?

END IN PRAYER (LEADER'S EDITION ONLY)

Pray for the needs of the group, the good of the church, the salvation of people, and any other needs that may arise.

“FOR I DELIVERED TO YOU AS OF FIRST IMPORTANCE WHAT I ALSO RECEIVED: THAT CHRIST DIED FOR OUR SINS IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE SCRIPTURES, THAT HE WAS BURIED, THAT HE WAS RAISED ON THE THIRD DAY IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE SCRIPTURES.”

(1 CORINTHIANS 15:3-4)

CORE
CHRISTIANITY
101

LEADER'S
EDITION

“HOW CAN JESUS BE GOD?” “How does God speak today?” “How can God be good when the world is full of evil?” “What is our place in God’s story?” These are questions we often receive at Core Christianity. And whether you’re a new believer or have been walking with Christ for decades, Core Christianity’s Core 101 Bible study will help you build a solid foundation as you look at God’s unfolding story of redemption in his Son.

At Core Christianity, we strive to help people understand the core truths of the Christian faith. Every time we answer a caller’s question on our daily radio show, every article we run on corechristianity.com, and every resource we produce seeks to help people gain a clearer understanding of the gospel—the core message of Christianity.

We wrote this study thinking of Sunday school classes, Bible study groups, informal gatherings among friends, and individuals who want to learn more about the Christian faith. Designed for groups to move through in 10 weeks, this study is perfect for a semester or quarterly study. Each weekly lesson includes selected passages from the Bible, explanations of the key themes revealed in that passage, and reflection questions. This leader’s edition includes prayer suggestions, leader’s notes, and additional reflection questions that will help leaders facilitate edifying discussions each week.

We pray this study will help you to grow in confidence in your Christian faith, equipping you to know what you believe and to share it with others.



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