

SMALL GROUPS AT CHURCH OF THE RESURRECTION



COMMUNITIES OF BLESSING

YEAR | ONE



Written and edited by
Justin Schoolcraft

In collaboration with the 2022 Adult Discipleship
team at Church of the Resurrection

A SPECIAL WELCOME

from Pastor
Matt Bisel
Lead Director of
Adult Discipleship



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WELCOME TO SMALL GROUP!

Church of the Resurrection is a place full of amazing people – people who are just like you. This loving, diverse and vibrant group of individuals, though not perfect, are together on a journey of becoming more and more shaped by God's love. We are driven by our purpose, which is to build Christian community where non and nominally religious people are becoming deeply committed Christians. One of the key words in that statement is becoming. It signifies a journey of constant growth in grace for old and new followers alike. So, no matter who you are or where you're coming from, what you believe or don't believe – God loves you, we love you, and we invite you to join us on this amazing and wonderful journey of becoming. Our hope is that this not only becomes a place where you experience God's love, but that it becomes the place where you find your people.

We are convinced that the work you do in this book and the time you spend with your group will be transformative. Life is full of ups and downs with plenty of surprises along the way, but rest assured and know that you are in the right place. You've made it to your group. You are embarking on this exciting journey together, and our hope is that you open yourselves up to the experience and say yes to whatever God has in store. We as the Adult Discipleship team have been praying for you and will continue to pray for you and for this group. We also look forward to hearing from you along the way, so please reach out and share with us how God is working in your life and the life of your small group.

–Pastor Matt Bisel



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH OF THE
RESURRECTION



THE JOURNEY OF THE JOURNAL

Justin Schoolcraft
Small Groups and Young Adults
Program Pastor

I'll never forget the moment I realized that small groups are uncomfortable. I was just starting graduate school at Emory University in Atlanta and was trying to find a church home. I gave a small church close by a shot. (I've tended to feel at home in small congregations. Oh, the irony of my current pastoral assignment!) They had small groups. I was new to the area and in need of a new social network, so I thought, *why not?* When I showed up, I was the youngest in the room by 20 years. Some people in that group had barely any time on their hands – they were parents of teenagers or busy with travel schedules. Others had time to spare. I was somewhere in between. The leader, an older fellow, got us going by asking, "So, how is it with your soul?"

What? I thought. *How is it with my soul? Who even are you?? I don't know these people; we've barely even said hello...and you expect me to just tell you what's going on in my soul?*

Have you ever had an experience like that? Maybe it wasn't in a small group, but I bet you've had an awkward encounter at church in some kind of a group setting. If you're new to the whole church thing, maybe you can relate to an uncomfortable workplace seminar where things got a little too personal. Either way, gathering with people – especially new people – can feel awkward. Even when you gather with people you know, there can still be a weird tension in the room: You might think, *I'm tired of the surface level and want to go deeper. Does anyone else? Or, I feel like I care for all these people. But do they also care for me, really?* Yes, gathering with people to share the nitty gritty of our lives can feel downright strange.

And yet you feel a call, don't you? That's why you're here. You feel a deep call on your life – maybe you've identified God as the source of it – to share your life more deeply with trusted companions on the journey. At your worst moments you want people to whom you can reach out. At your best moments you want to celebrate with others. In all the moments in between, it's comforting, even *transformative*, to have those trusted people by your side. What we recognize, though, is that those kinds of God-oriented relationships aren't just zapped into existence; they are *cultivated*. Those people to whom we open our lives become *companions* as we share experiences and become a part of each other's stories.

This journal takes seriously that the movement towards meaningful connection in community is *a journey*, not a sudden arrival. It's also a journey that can be fun, joyful, and even sacred from the get-go. This journal is your guide to that journey. It is our best attempt to welcome you where you are and travel with you towards deeper connection, whether you've been here for a day or for decades. The Discipleship team has prayed about this journal and has dedicated much time and thought to leading you along this journey through the pages ahead of you.

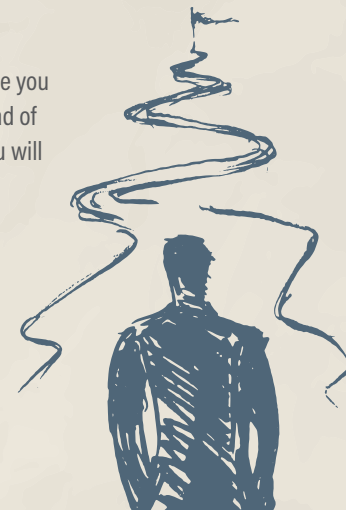
So here's what you can expect: we are talking about the small group journey as having three steps: *PURPOSE*, *BELONGING*, and *GROWTH*. There are three corresponding sections of the journal, with each section containing a number of lesson plans, personal reflection prompts, and group activities. Each section will feel a little different and have specific goals in mind.

- ▶ In the *PURPOSE* section (kickoff gathering + 5 sessions), the goal is to examine Church of the Resurrection's purpose statement and put it into practice within your small group as you get to know each other.
- ▶ In the *BELONGING* section (10 sessions + churchwide celebration), the goal is to experience what it means to belong to the story of God, to your community, and even to yourself. There is an exciting social component to this section, as well.
- ▶ In the *GROWTH* section (6 sessions), the goal is focus specifically on historic forms of group conversation that promote a deeper relationship with God.

This journey will last about 9 months. You'll notice that there are far more weeks in that timeframe than there are lesson plans. This is highly intentional on our part. The goal is to create flexibility and breathing room so that this journey is not overbearing on your schedule. You or your group leader should have access to a recommended meeting schedule. This schedule is just a suggestion. While it is our hope that you will follow these lesson plans in such a way that all our small groups will be in the same general place at the same general time, the actual roadmap for how to get there will be your group's call. Do you need to meet three weeks in a row at one point? Do you need to take two weeks in a row off? Whatever you need to do is fine, but the most important thing is for us all to experience the shared celebration at the end of the Belonging section (Part 2) together. We'll be in touch with that information throughout.

The Discipleship team has been in prayer for you long before you picked up this journal. We're excited about the journey ahead of you. The God who calls you is a faithful guide – we hope you will come to say the same thing about the people around you.

—Pastor Justin Schoolcraft





GETTING STARTED

Logistics of the Group Meetings

YOU'RE ALMOST READY TO JUMP IN!

Before you do, here's a little bit about how to use this journal.

► Each week will have a lesson. Because it is our desire to eliminate as much pre-work as possible, our recommendation to you is to actually read the lesson aloud during your group time. You can do this by going around in a circle with each person reading a paragraph. The lessons are not long, and while it may feel different at first, you will get used to this practice quickly.

► Having said that, some weeks will have a recommended "to-do" activity before you arrive to the session. This work is not essential. Sometimes it will be as simple as scanning a QR code and watching a short video. Most of the time, the recommendation is only that you read the "Focus Scriptures" ahead of time. On weeks in which this prework is included, it will be identified at the top of the lesson plan, so check in advance.

► This journal has been written to promote shared ownership of the group time. There is not a separate version of this journal just for leaders. Therefore, it will not always be obvious who is supposed to lead a certain section of a lesson plan. While your group has a designated leader who can fulfill that role, the goal here is for participants to naturally step up and lead as the lesson plan progresses. It'll be fun!

► You will see reflections from Resurrection staff members and congregants throughout the pages of the journal. It would make the most sense to read these wonderful insights on your own rather than read them aloud during the group meeting.

A GUIDE TO RESPECTFUL PARTICIPATION

And now we highlight best practices for engaging with your group. Some of these practices may seem obvious, but it never hurts to review before you begin.

COMMITMENTS TO LIVE BY:

- Confidentiality: Do not share outside the group what was shared inside the group, except when absolutely necessary for one's personal safety.
- Support: Root for the other members of your group, whether that be the development of their spiritual, professional, or personal life. This is especially important if and when opinions differ.

- Contribution and Attendance: Make an effort to contribute to the group. This means allowing participation to be a priority, thoughtfully listening and responding to fellow group members, and sharing in the work of community-building at Resurrection.
- Respect: Listen to each other, be mindful of the impact of your words, limit use of devices while others speak, and share the metaphorical microphone.
- Spiritual Growth: Your involvement is about more than socialization. Socializing is great! But your group should strive to *grow spiritually* with your time together and jointly pursue the Christian life. (But you'll have lots of fun as you do that!)

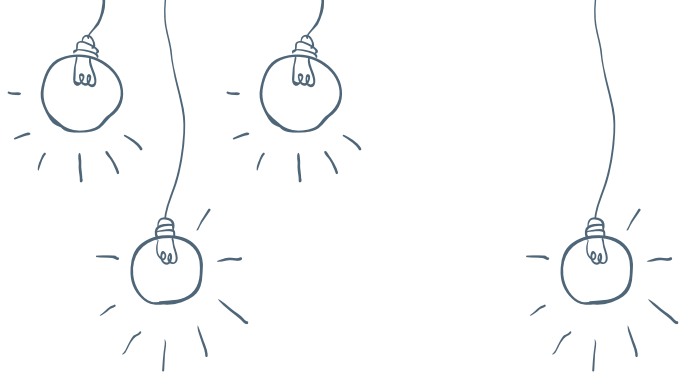
BUILDING A CULTURE OF RESPECT:

- A group builds trust when it feels safe for everyone to have a chance to talk. Early on as a group forms, sometimes waiting to speak a second time until everyone has had a chance to talk is helpful.
- Comments that are thoughtful but concise can encourage others to talk. Likewise, comments that are significantly off-topic can shut conversation down.
- Try to gauge the comfort level of a group. Sharing comments that are weightier than the group is ready for can cause a feeling of disconnect. Let the group *build* to that comfort level rather than trying to force it.
- A sense of belonging happens when everyone feels like their words matter. When someone shares, it is very helpful to acknowledge their words with simple phrases such as "thank you for sharing" or "I'm glad you shared that." As a rule, don't allow someone's comment to be met by total silence.
- Balanced participation is a goal, but not mandatory - some participants rely on other group members to keep the conversation going. If you don't want to speak about a particular topic, you always have permission to take a pass. Sharing is not required or forced. Never feel embarrassed to take a pass, and give grace to those who do so.

You commit to these standards when you join a small group at Resurrection. Group leaders may have a one-on-one conversation if a member of a group is not meeting these guidelines for the sake of graceful accountability and Christian growth. These guidelines help us live out our purpose to become deeply committed Christians.

TIPS FOR PARTICIPATING IN AN ONLINE SMALL GROUP:

- As a rule, leave your camera on. The goal is to engage rather than just listen.
- Tip to live by: lighting should be in front of you rather than behind you. When a light source is behind you, it significantly darkens your face.
- Did you know that most people focus on their own camera image during online meetings rather than that of the other participants? We all do it! Try to keep your eyes on your other members rather than the image of yourself during small group.
- Unless directed by your leader, leave your mic on mute when you aren't speaking.
- It can be helpful to make an effort to unmute your mic to validate another group member's comments when they speak. Again, try not to let anyone's comments go unrecognized. This takes a little more effort in an online group.



Part ONE PURPOSE

Have you ever heard someone talk about a “city on a hill?” What does that mean – and where does it come from? Maybe you’ve been driving along a winding road in the dead of night, and off in the distance you can see a home lit up on a mountainside. Even if that home is miles away, you can see its light cut through the heavy shadows of night and reach you where you are. Have you had an experience like that? It stirs something in you, makes you want to draw near to the comfort of a safe haven illuminated in the darkness.

Jesus referred to the people of God as a city on a hill in Matthew 5:14: “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.” It’s a beautiful image that captures the magnetism of a community of people who orient their lives towards blessing others. When individuals called by God band together in communities of blessing, they live counterculturally: they share their resources, they testify to God’s hope instead of the world’s cynicism, and they mobilize to confront the brokenness around them. It’s no wonder that people would be drawn to a community like that – communities that shine for the whole world to see, like a light on the face of a mountain in the dead of night.

This image captures an important truth for the small group journey: in order for a community to shine like a city on a hill, its members must first love one another well before they can engage in the hard work of changing the world around them. Can you see that tension?

A community that wants to change the world but whose members haven’t learned to love one another *within their own walls* won’t shine for the world to see. Those cities will crumble. Likewise, a community focused only on loving the people inside its walls without engaging the world outside will also not shine. Those communities hide their lamp under a bushel.

You are setting out on the first section of a journey intended to help Resurrection’s small groups live into their calling to become a *community of blessing*, a city on a hill that shines for the world to see. This section, called *PURPOSE*, will specifically look at how your group can learn to love one another well within your own “walls” so that, as others are drawn to this place, they’ll find people who model the Christian life well.

What will that look like? In the lessons ahead you will explore Resurrection’s purpose statement, ***to build a Christian community where nonreligious and nominally religious people are becoming deeply committed Christians***. Our senior pastor, Adam Hamilton, has written a book called *The Walk: Five Essential Practices of the Christian Life*. This book is important to Church of the Resurrection’s “DNA,” and beautifully spells out how we can live out our purpose. In each lesson, you’ll examine one of the essential practices from *The Walk* and think about how you can live it out within your small group. While it is not required, picking up a copy of *The Walk* and reading it along the way could greatly enrich your experience. Let’s get started!

WEEK 1 | WORSHIP

BEFORE THE SESSION

If you have a chance before the session, watch these short videos of Jamie Lee Curtis and Patrick Stewart as they discuss the increasing role of digital technology in our lives.

<https://bit.ly/corworship1>



<https://bit.ly/corworship2>



INTRODUCTORY EXERCISE: 3x3x3 QUESTIONS

Let’s start by getting to know each other a little bit. We will repeat this exercise every week during our study of the 5 essential practices. The questions will get more outrageous as the weeks progress.

- In Person: Pair up with one person. You have 3 minutes total for each person to answer 3 questions, so move quickly! At the end of three minutes, find a different partner and repeat 2 additional times, for a total of 3 sessions. (approx. 10 minutes)
- Online: Divide your room into randomized breakout groups of 3 people each. In each group, every person should take 3 minutes to answer 3 questions. (approx. 10 minutes)

QUESTIONS:

1. What is your name, hometown, and current place of residence?
2. What is your current or past vocational background (work, stay at home, etc.)?
3. Have you ever snuck into a movie theater?

ORIENTING

Church of the Resurrection’s purpose statement is ***to build a Christian community where nonreligious and nominally religious people are becoming deeply committed Christians***. The goal of these first sessions is to work towards putting that purpose into practice *within your small group*. Specifically, we’ll study how the five essential practices of the Christian faith as defined in Pastor Adam’s book, *The Walk*, give us a roadmap for living out Resurrection’s purpose. But practicing your purpose starts within your small group, so that is where we begin.

RESPECTFUL PARTICIPATION

Take a moment during your group time to turn back to the “Guide to Respectful Participation.” Review that information together and discuss any questions that may arise.

SAVE THE DATE: THE AGAPE MEAL

In the next session you will begin filling out member profiles. These are short and include only basic information. Our hope is that they will provide you with a reference to support one another – for example, so you can send a happy birthday message to someone in your group, or even so you can send some friendly banter if their favorite team is playing your favorite team. These profiles will also ask what your favorite food is. For the fifth session of your small group's study of the essential practices, we encourage you to use that week for a shared potluck-style meal called The Agape Meal. It is our hope that each person's favorite food will be represented in that meal. This meal will be accompanied by a call and response prayer that highlights the sacred role that shared meals play in the Bible. Be mindful of that date as it approaches so you aren't caught off guard! (ONLINE GROUPS: turn to lesson 5 to see instructions for this meal.)

OPENING PRAYER AND LESSON

Now let's dive into our discussion time with a word of prayer. (Whoever prays can use the example here or come up with a prayer of their own.)

*Loving God, thank you for walking with us. Thank you for inviting us to walk with you.
Be with us as we learn together and grow in our understanding of what it means to
be a Christian. In the name of your Son Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.*

In *The Walk*, Pastor Adam discusses the five essential practices of the Christian faith: worship, study, serve, give, and share. He uses the example of hiking: just like we need regular exercise to thrive on a physical task such as a hike, our spiritual life also needs exercise so that we will not become winded. "Without spiritual exercises or practices, we will find it difficult to keep up as Christ calls us to follow" (12). *The Walk* explores five essential "exercises" that keep us in spiritual shape. "When pursued daily, these practices will increase your spiritual health, deepen your faith, make you more aware of God's presence, and help you live the Christian life" (13).

The first of these five practices is worship. Pastor Adam shares that "Worship is the primary and appropriate response of the creature to creator" (19). Worship recenters God and decenters us – we remember that we are not the center of the universe, God is. Likewise, worship cultivates a sense of gratitude. When we recognize that God is at the center of every good thing in our lives, we turn to God and say, "Thank you!" And even when we face hard circumstances, we recognize that God is at the center of everything, which helps us put those challenges in perspective. God may not have caused those challenges, but worship can remind us that God is *bigger* than those challenges. Worship puts our lives in perspective.

But we can also think of worship in another way. Theologians (people who talk about God for a living) have pointed out that what we really do in worship is *pay attention* to God.

¹ Hamilton, A. (2019). *The Walk: Five Essential Practices of the Christian Life*. Nashville: Abingdon Press. All quotations of Adam Hamilton and *The Walk* are internally cited with page numbers from this point on.

Simone Weil (pronounced "while"), a brilliant French thinker in the 20th Century, once wrote that the "faculty of attention" is "the very substance of prayer."² Attention, she says, is a rare gift that fixes our gaze on another and truly allows light to enter our mind. So it is that in worship, we *pay attention* to God, allowing God to take center stage of our lives, telling God "Thank you!" every opportunity we get. Without this act of paying attention to God during our worship, we wouldn't receive the benefits of worship.

But paying attention is not always an easy thing for us to do!

If worship is paying attention to God and recognizing our place in the universe – what happens if we live in a world where we are so distracted? What if our world makes it hard to pay attention to anyone or anything, let alone God? Technology is having a huge impact on our ability to pay attention. The notifications, demands of email, abundance of screens – all of this shapes our ability to pay attention. Might technology impact how we pay attention to God in worship? If you had a chance to watch the videos before this session, think about what Jamie Lee Curtis and Patrick Stewart shared about technology. Even if you didn't get to watch them, maybe you can relate to the ways it's becoming harder and harder to pay attention – and worship – in our world.

Make no mistake, worship does not just happen during church services. Actually, you might find it easy to pay attention during those times. But what about all the other opportunities we have to worship God throughout our day – in times of personal devotion, prayer, moments of silence, even car rides? Worship is something we can do continually, and this constant "recentering" of God throughout our day can make us deeply rooted people. Maybe it's the daily worship times, not the church services, in which it is hard for us to pay attention.

At the end of the day, our times of worship have the potential to be life changing. Giving God our full attention isn't just a gift we can give him; it's also a tremendous gift we can give to ourselves. God pays attention to us deeply, loving us no matter how well we return the favor. Paying attention to that love has the power to change everything – but it might take practice.



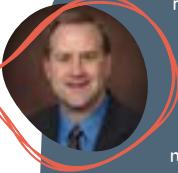
"There's nothing sweeter than going through the day-to-day motions and having the sudden realization that God is with me. When I say realization, I mean something more than just the one that happens in the brain. I also mean the one that happens in the body. The tangible, goosebumps-raising one that comes to me when I am washing my dishes. The one that surrounds me when I'm looking at my dog zip through a grass field. The one that whispers in my ear that I am tenderly loved while I am laughing so hard I can barely breathe. It dawned on me not too long ago that I could find those moments by simply checking in with the present. By slowing down and focusing on the way the warm water flows over my hands. Slowing down and realizing just how fortunate I am that I have running water, and dishes to clean, and food to make them dirty. Slowing down, and focusing in, on the moment at hand – that is what I've found brings me to the space where I am paying attention to God"

Sam Wells

² Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God."

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Keeping in mind the benefits of technology, how is technology changing our ability to pay attention?



"For thousands of years there existed naturally recurring moments of stillness in our lives. A farmer would silently walk his fields, thinking about his crops and wondering if they would provide sustenance. A mother would nurse her child, staring quietly at this beautiful new creation and pondering who they might grow to be. People would lie in darkness in the silence of night, contemplating their day as they moved gradually into the ritual of sleep. It was in these times where questions such as "Who am I?", "Why am I here?", "Is there a higher power who created all of this?" would be considered. Such questions naturally lead to further meditation on God and our own spiritual place in the world. Today, quiet life rituals such as those are crowded out by listening to podcasts, watching the latest television series, or enjoying music on Spotify. Those aren't bad – they're just louder. But do we still purposely create moments of silence that are needed to adequately worship our God and contemplate our place in his world? For perhaps the first time in human history, such moments of silence will not occur unless we intentionally create them."

– Dave Krug

2. Can it feel hard to connect with God during worship services? What about other times of personal worship?

3. Think of a time when you had a powerful experience in worship. What was happening? What was your mind doing?

4. What are little things you could do in your daily life that could help you cultivate the gift of paying attention?

5. How could you cultivate this gift in your small group?

Examples during group time:

Be mindful of your use of devices; make good eye contact; practice close listening.

Examples outside of group time:

Make plans to sit together in worship; plan a hike with your group and experience God's beauty in nature; share music or art that helps you connect with God.

give this some time & attention – how could you actually model it in your group?

To cultivate the gift of attention in our small group, we will:

-
-
-
-

CLOSING PRAYER:

For your closing prayer, you are invited to share requests during the prayer itself. The leader can open in prayer, and then open it up to the group before closing.

Use this format as a guide:

Leader: Opens the prayer and then invites others to join.

Member: For (something going on his or her life)

Leader: For _____

All: Lord, hear our prayer.

(Repeat as many times as needed before the leader closes the prayer)

So, as an example, after the leader opens:

Member Joe: For my family member, Bob, who is sick.

Leader Sue: For Joe's family member, Bob –

All: Lord, hear our prayer.

Member Jeff: For my new job.

Leader Sue: For Jeff's new job –

All: Lord, hear our prayer.

WEEK 2 | STUDY

BEFORE THE SESSION

If you have a chance before the session, watch this 3-minute video that speaks into a question we will take up this week: is our life just a collection of random events? This stop-motion video is elegant and beautiful – but we'll discuss how there may be something more to life than what we see here.

INTRODUCTORY EXERCISE: 3x3x3 QUESTIONS

Once again, we'll introduce ourselves using the 3x3x3 practice we did last week. You can refer to those instructions if you need a refresher. If you're in person, try to find new partners this week and in the weeks ahead. If you're online, stick to a randomized breakout group for the duration. Again, we'll do this practice every week during our study of *The Walk*.

QUESTIONS:

1. Growing up, were your parents around? If so, what did they do?
2. Have you ever asked someone who was a stranger on a date?
3. Have you ever yelled at your boss at work?

ORIENTING

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OPENING PRAYER AND LESSON

Now let's dive into our discussion time with a word of prayer. (Whoever prays can use the example here or come up with a prayer of their own.)

Holy and loving God, thank you for walking with us. Thank you for revealing yourself to us as we walk with you. We pray that you will open our eyes and our ears so we may be mindful of what you are saying to us. Open our hearts to receive your word. In the name of your Son Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

This week we continue our study of *The Walk* by Pastor Adam Hamilton. In *The Walk*, Pastor Adam discusses the five essential practices of the Christian faith: worship, study, serve, give, and share. To recap: "When pursued daily, these practices will increase your spiritual health, deepen your faith, make you more aware of God's presence, and help you live the Christian life" (13). These practices are central to a strong walk of faith. Last session we discussed worship and the gift of paying attention, which is cultivated through practice.

<https://bit.ly/corstudy>



The second of these five essential practices of the Christian faith is studying. Like worship, study is deeply dependent on paying attention: In the midst of so many voices speaking to us, we have to pay attention to God's voice to ensure that it cuts through the noise and reaches us. It can be hard to hear that voice. And to complicate the matter, sometimes when we *think* we're hearing God's voice, we may just be hearing our own or someone else's voice. "The word we hear from someone else may not be God's word to us but only their opinion," says Pastor Adam (48). However, one of the primary ways we can pay attention to God's voice – and test to see if it's really God's – is to study Scripture and see if that voice reflects what the Bible tells us. Therefore, reading and studying the Bible is essential to the walk of faith.

But what is the Bible? For starters, it is God's great story. Scripture is "a wonderfully rich and diverse collection of writings, composed over a period of approximately 1,400 years, including sixty-six documents...in two 'testaments'" (49). "The Old Testament is the story of Israel and Israel's relationship with God.... The New Testament is the story of Jesus, God's son, the long awaited Jewish Messiah, the Savior and King" (50). To know this great story – to really *know* it – is to be able to test the voices we hear to discern when it is the living God speaking to us. We ask, "Does that voice seem to reflect what I hear in the Bible, God's great story?"

So yes, studying the Bible's great story is important. But did you know that having a sense *for your personal story* is also foundational to discerning God's will? Reflecting on the story of your life can give you a deep sense of identity. When troubles

come or indecision arises, you can refer to your personal story to answer, "Who am I? In light of my story, what path forward makes the most sense?" Oftentimes, we find that God works in our lives in a way that is consistent with the story he has been writing in us. That is not to say God wants to work in your life in predictable ways. Instead, it means that God is making a purposeful creation in *you*, and God wants to do so in a way that is fitting to the unique identity he gave you. You can see why, then, it's important to be in touch with what your identity is in the first place! What's your story? Who are you? It matters greatly for discerning how God is calling you.

In this day and age, though, having a thorough sense for what your personal story is can be challenging.

"Who am I, really? And how would I know? Many of us learned in childhood to hide our true selves and alter our personality in an attempt to earn the love and favor of our family or friends. That makes living into our true selves hard. Also hard is that modern generations tend to move away from our hometown and family of origin. We put down roots and recreate ourselves in a new community, always changing. Personality tests tell us all about our strengths and weaknesses. Marketers tell us who we could be if only we purchase their product. Bosses will tell us how we can become our best and enhance our performance at work. Social media influencers tempt us to mimic them. All of this noise must be silenced to hear the voice of our Creator. Scripture says each of us is a beloved child of God, cursed with the propensity to sin, yet brimming with potential for sacrificial love and grace. That is the universal human story. But to know my unique story, I must consider the way I was raised, the people who have come and gone from my life, experiences that shaped me, and dreams for the future so that I can live into who I really am."

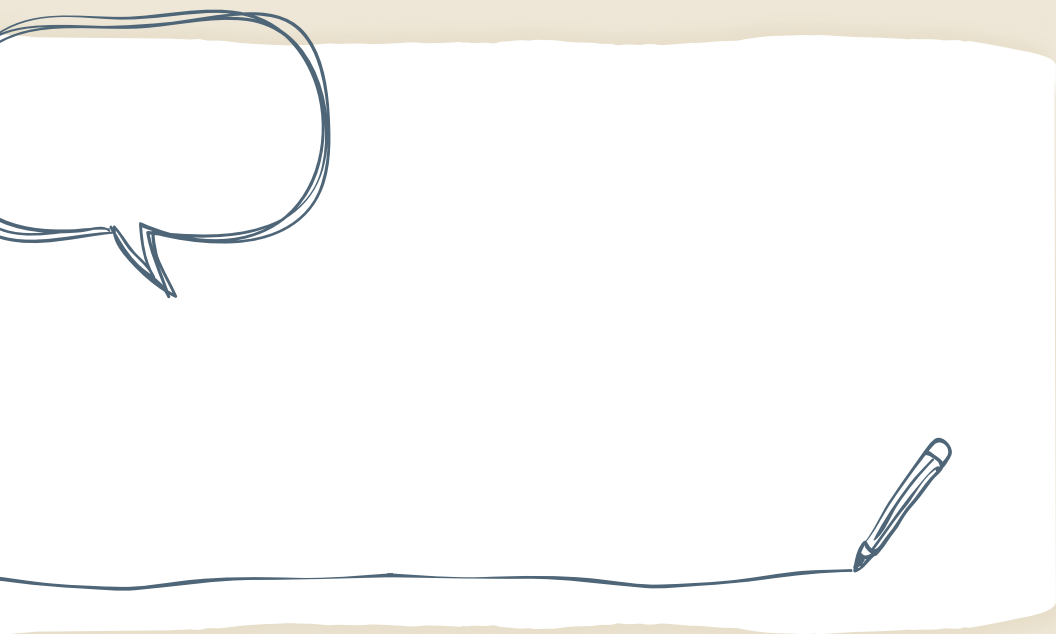


Anne Williams

In our society we move from city to city often and lose a sense of place. We change jobs frequently and have to rethink our vocations. And many of us are located away from our families, making us feel alone. We even try to change our personalities, adapting to new culture and people as needed, potentially losing ourselves as we do so. We start to feel like our stories are a jumbled mess with no cohesion, just one random event after another. If you had a chance to watch the video before this session, you saw a beautiful rendering of the idea that our lives are a series of moments that lead us to a destination based on happenstance.

It's not that this perspective on our personal stories is wrong – it's just that Christians believe this perspective is incomplete. We believe that there is a God at work in the world – a God who is writing a great, powerful story of love, redemption, and peace. And God wants to use you to write that story! This means that God deeply cares about the story of your life: God wants it to be full of meaning, complete, and lived in a joyful direction. There is more to you than just a series of random events, even though it may not feel that way sometimes. When the story of your life feels broken, God is one who draws near to bring healing so that you can confidently discern how God wants to use you. When you know your story, you're primed for God's story.

Does that mean God plans out your story in advance? No. God respects your free will and the free will of others. But God is intimately involved in guiding you to walk according to his will in a way that uniquely fits you. It's not premeditated... but it's not random, either. We'll take up this theme much more in the Belonging section. The invitation is yours, then: Study deeply God's great story, the Bible. Additionally, study your own story. How is your story part of God's great story? Let's discuss.



GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Think about the amount of change in your life. Have you moved a lot? Have you changed careers before? Have you adapted your personality?

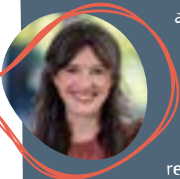
2. How have those changes (or absence of changes) impacted your understanding of your life story?

3. Do you have a sense of familiarity with the story of Scripture? (It's okay if not!)

4. Do you see any points of connection between God's story (Scripture) and your story?

5. Put it into practice! Move on to the next exercise!

"It was the end of March 2020, and COVID was still a novel word. For me, it was particularly scary because I was in a hospital room, in labor with my daughter, and terrified about what this might mean for her safety and my own. But it wasn't COVID that ended up threatening anything, but rather, my dropping heart rate and hers as I labored. I can still remember the feeling of the anesthesiologist holding my shoulders as I cried uncontrollably while an emergency C-Section was being performed. It wasn't that I was worried about my health or the health of sweet Poppy. I knew we would be safe, but my tears were about letting go of control, grieving what I thought would be, and realizing that my life, as much as I want to plan it all out, is full of twists and turns. While there are beautiful moments, like holding her for the first time, there are also really scary and sad and difficult times too. And while I might like to skip past those parts, the reality is, those are every bit as important to who I am today as the joyful moments. My life story will continue to surprise, delight, and sometimes scare me, but if I allow myself to really see the beauty in it, I realize that I will experience a transformation far beyond what I could have ever imagined."



- Wendy Chrostek



GROUP MEMBER PROFILES/AGAPE MEAL REMINDER

As human beings we have an innate need to feel like our story is heard and known by others. This week we will begin filling out profiles in order to model within the small group what it means to hear and know each other's stories. Don't worry, though – we're starting off simple. These profiles are short and include only basic, noninvasive information. Our hope is that they will provide you with a reference to support one another – for example, so you can send a happy birthday message to someone in your group, or even so you can send some friendly banter if their favorite team is playing your favorite team.

As a reminder, these profiles will ask what your favorite food is. For the fifth session of your small group's study of the essential practices, we encourage you to use that week for a shared potluck-style meal called The Agape Meal. It is our hope that each person's favorite food will be represented in that meal. This meal will be accompanied by a call and response prayer that highlights the sacred role that shared meals play in the Bible. Be mindful of that date as it approaches! (Again, online groups have special instructions – see lesson 5.)

Use the remaining time in your small group session to fill out these profiles. Recommendation: Go around and invite each person to share the information with the group, allowing everyone to write as they listen. **They do not need to be finished this week.** If you don't have time for everyone to go this week, you can come back to it next week.

CALL AND RESPONSE PRAYER

When you reach the end of your time, you are again invited to pray in the call and response format introduced last week. Turn back to that session if you need a refresher.



GROUP MEMBER PROFILES

Name:
Hometown:
First Job:
Best Friend and/or Spouse's Name:
Favorite Sports Team:
Favorite Food:
(Optional) Preferred Way to Contact:

Birthday:

Name:
Hometown:
First Job:
Best Friend and/or Spouse's Name:
Favorite Sports Team:
Favorite Food:
(Optional) Preferred Way to Contact:

Birthday:

Name:
Hometown:
First Job:
Best Friend and/or Spouse's Name:
Favorite Sports Team:
Favorite Food:
(Optional) Preferred Way to Contact:

Birthday:

Name:
Hometown:
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Best Friend and/or Spouse's Name:
Favorite Sports Team:
Favorite Food:
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Birthday:

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Favorite Food:
(Optional) Preferred Way to Contact:

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Best Friend and/or Spouse's Name:
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Favorite Food:
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Best Friend and/or Spouse's Name:
Favorite Sports Team:
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Best Friend and/or Spouse's Name:
Favorite Sports Team:
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Best Friend and/or Spouse's Name:
Favorite Sports Team:
Favorite Food:
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Best Friend and/or Spouse's Name:
Favorite Sports Team:
Favorite Food:
(Optional) Preferred Way to Contact:

Birthday:

Name:
Hometown:
First Job:
Best Friend and/or Spouse's Name:
Favorite Sports Team:
Favorite Food:
(Optional) Preferred Way to Contact:

Birthday:

WEEK 3 | SERVE

BEFORE THE SESSION

ONLINE GROUPS: get a sheet of blank printer paper and draw two short horizontal lines across it, leaving about an inch between them. (Use the orange lines below as a reference.)

ALL GROUPS: In the session for this week we'll be discussing busyness. If you get a chance, take a moment to watch this super funny video of a four-year-old talking about his busy schedule.

<https://bit.ly/corserve>



INTRODUCTORY EXERCISE: 3x3x3 QUESTIONS

QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever been sent to the principal's office?
2. Have you ever recorded yourself singing just to hear what your singing voice sounds like?
3. Have you ever struggled with not being able to throw away a stuffed animal you had as a kid?

ORIENTING

Church of the Resurrection's purpose statement is *to build a Christian community where nonreligious and nominally religious people are becoming deeply committed Christians*. The goal of these first sessions is to work towards putting that purpose into practice *within your small group*. Specifically, we'll study how the five essential practices of the Christian faith as defined in Pastor Adam's book, *The Walk*, give us a roadmap for living out Resurrection's purpose. But practicing your purpose starts within your small group, so that is where we begin.

WRITING EXERCISE

On the adjacent page, is a passage of Scripture from John 13:4-9, in which Jesus washes his disciples' feet. This scene is one of the most powerful in all the Bible in that it shows us what it means to serve – Jesus, having the full power of God, humbled himself and took the place of a servant. We'll discuss more about that in a minute. But first, we're going to do a writing exercise (that will make sense soon!). Take five minutes and copy these verses into the blank space between the two orange lines. **However, leave no room for margin on the page:** write from the very end of the page to the opposite end, almost going off the edge. Additionally, remove the lines between paragraphs. Copy all the words, even if it forces you to go outside the line at the end.

(If you are an **online** group, use your sheet of blank paper with two lines for this activity.)

Picking up a linen towel, [Jesus] tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a washbasin and began to wash the disciples' feet, drying them with the towel he was wearing. When Jesus came to Simon Peter, Peter said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

Jesus replied, "You don't understand what I'm doing now, but you will understand later."

"No!" Peter said. "You will never wash my feet!"

Jesus replied, "Unless I wash you, you won't have a place with me."

Simon Peter said, "Lord, not only my feet but also my hands and my head!"

~John 13:4-9



OPENING PRAYER AND LESSON

Now let's dive into our discussion time with a word of prayer. (Whoever prays can use the example here or come up with a prayer of their own.)

Holy and Loving God, thank you for inviting us to draw closer to you. Thank you for each person in this group. Be with us as we answer your call to love our neighbor and serve those in need. In the name of your Son Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

This week we continue our study of *The Walk* by Pastor Adam Hamilton. In *The Walk*, Pastor Adam discusses the five essential practices of the Christian faith: worship, study, serve, give, and share. Last session we discussed study. Specifically, we discussed how it is important not just to study God's story found in Scripture, but to study our own life story as well. Knowing your own story helps you discern your place in God's story.

This week we come to the essential practice of serving. Perhaps more than any other essential practice, the goodness of service can be seen across religions and walks of life. One does not have to believe in God to see the value of serving one's neighbor. However, a distinctly Christian understanding of service recognizes that God serves us just as he calls us to serve others. When we understand that our all-powerful God consistently acts in the world to serve the humans he created, we see why God's defining characteristic is love. God could use power for dominance and control, but instead he uses it to expand his reach of self-emptying love. We have already looked at one instance of such service. Jesus, the Son of God, knelt down to wash the feet of his disciples (John 13:4-9). That is only one example, though: Jesus' *whole life* and ministry was spent serving people in need. Those who were sick, lonely, grieving, or living in brokenness were transformed by the radical service of Jesus.

Because God works in the world by serving, God calls us to spread his love by embodying this same life of service to others. "God's primary mode of working in the world is through people," Pastor Adam says (67). God empowers you and me to love our neighbors through tangible acts of service. God doesn't ask us to serve to get us to check off boxes that will earn our way into heaven. On the contrary, God is brokenhearted for those who are hurting and wants to use you to be part of the solution (68). In fact, serving our neighbor is so central to the Christian faith that "it is impossible to be the kind of Christ follower Jesus longs for without concern for justice and mercy for the vulnerable, the weak, the marginalized, the poor." (70). And though serving isn't always easy, when the whole body of Christ, the Church, joins together in collective service, the impact is far greater than any one individual could have (71-72).

But although many of us want to serve in this way, it may feel daunting. We're busy people! When you have a full calendar, when your family is involved in a variety of activities, when you're exhausted beyond measure when you get home at the end of the day... how do you give up more time to serve others? How are we supposed to make room for others when we're so depleted, overscheduled, and in need of every minute of free time we get? It's a simple principle that you can't pour into others unless you are first filled. So, do you try harder to squeeze more into a life

about to burst? Maybe you feel like the four-year-old recounting his long list of schedule items to his mother from the video, if you had a chance to watch it.

In his book *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives*, Richard Swenson (M.D.) suggests that the concept of "margin" empowers us to cultivate healthy balance in our lives. "Margin," he says, "is the space between our load and our limits. It is the amount allowed beyond that which is needed...the gap between rest and exhaustion" (69)³. Our society conditions us to feel guilty when we complain, and to brag about being busy – yet we carry a "deep-seated subjective ache" from our inability to create space in our calendar to truly enjoy our lives (71). Yet margin in our lives – space to both do what we love, and to take a breath between obligations – is as essential as sleep. Without margin we become "more concerned with personal sanity than with service to the needs of others" (77). But how do we create margin in our lives? Dr. Swenson has a host of suggestions: cut back activities that aren't aligned with your priorities, replace mindless activities with mindful activities, limit the ability for technology to interrupt you, and focus on getting the *right* things done rather than the most things done. Simply put, your value is not in what you produce or accomplish.

The Christian faith makes a bold claim: service is not only central to our calling; it's also joyful. The more we serve others, the more fulfillment we get in turn – and the more God is known to others. Seeing both the necessity of service *and* the abundance we receive when we serve might lead us to prioritize it as something for which we create margin. It might lead us to look at our time, scheduled activities, and workload, and ask if we could give something else up so that we might prioritize tangible expressions of loving our neighbor.

"We're meant to ask, 'God, what do you need me to do; where can you best use me today?'" Frederick Buechner, the late theologian and writer, wrote the question this way, 'The place God calls you to is the place where your deep

gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.' We yearn for meaning and purpose within our work, our homes, and our lives. Most often, I find that a meaningful life and faith

comes from serving others. When we put our faith in motion by serving, we find that our service deepens our relationship with God.

Here's one way to think about this: by being open to the divine interruptions of life God changes us. I find that during any given week I have multiple projects to complete. Inevitably, I'm interrupted! I think God wants to use those interruptions not only to use us as a blessing to someone else, but also to shape us, renew us, and fill us with love, compassion, kindness, mercy, and justice. When we allow God to interrupt our lives, sending us in service to others, we encounter God at work within us, in our community, and even the world."

Joshua Clough

³ Quotations throughout this paragraph taken from Swenson, Richard MD, *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2004.

Take a look at the writing exercise you did. Can you see how the words go end to end, maybe even extending past the line? Maybe that's how your life feels sometimes. Our culture says that's something we should brag about – or even feel ashamed about if our lives *don't* look that way. Why not live into the better picture God has for you? Why not find abundance by taking the time – by cultivating the needed margin in your life – to serve others?



GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Reflect on your weekly schedule and rhythm. Do you feel like you have room for margin that allows for both rest and activities you enjoy?

2. What *are* some activities you truly enjoy and give you life?

3. Can you think of an experience you had of service to your neighbors? Don't be shy – brag away! What was going on? What were you feeling? What was God saying to you through that act?

4. Have you ever felt like God was serving you through an experience?



"When we talk about being a disciple, we often discuss how we serve God when we serve others. But as a disciple, we don't always think much about how God serves us, even though He is constantly serving us. He bears our burdens, He carries and sustains us, He leads us and provides for us and gives us strength. Several years ago, my daughter had to be hospitalized for several months in another city. As we packed up and drove to Denver, I had a sinking feeling that I was woefully unprepared mentally, physically, and spiritually for the unknowns that lay before me. We listened to praise music for the 11-hour drive, and I knew with certainty that God was with me, giving me strength and comfort in that moment. What I didn't realize immediately was that He had already given me everything I needed, not only to navigate this difficult time, but to grow from it and also to be a resource and a help to others. My strengths and experiences, and most of all *my Faith*, were gifts from God. He was serving me then and continues to serve me now. And He loves me so much that He sent His son to show me how to serve and love others."

- Suzy Ayres

5. What would cultivating margin for service look like in your small group – both serving the other members of your group as well as serving your neighbors?

Examples for your group to serve together:

Donate items to Resurrection's foster care ministry; support Resurrection's food drives; attend Serve Saturday.

***If your group lives outside the KC area, you can support similar initiatives in your local community**.*

Examples to serve the other members of your group

supply meals when someone becomes sick; make note of important dates that mark loss or grief and send notes when those dates come; pray specifically for each other's needs during the week.

To cultivate the practice of serving in our small group, we will:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

GROUP MEMBER PROFILES:

If you did not complete filling out the group member profiles last week, you could do so at this point.

CALL AND RESPONSE PRAYER

Leader: Opens the prayer and then invites others to join.

Member: For (something going on his or her life)

Leader: For _____

All: Lord, hear our prayer.

(Repeat as many times as needed before the leader closes the prayer)

So, as an example, after the leader opens:

Member Joe: For my family member, Bob, who is sick.

Leader Sue: For Joe's family member, Bob –

All: Lord, hear our prayer.

Member Jeff: For my new job.

Leader Sue: For Jeff's new job –

All: Lord, hear our prayer.



WEEK 4 | GIVE

BEFORE THE SESSION

If you have a chance before the meeting, take 8 minutes to watch this PBS video on a University of California study about the effects of wealth. If at any point you find yourself slightly offended by the video, keep in mind that you don't need to agree with it – keep an open mind as the findings of the study prepare us well for the topic of discussion this week: generosity and giving.

<https://bit.ly/corgive>



INTRODUCTORY EXERCISE: 3X3X3 QUESTIONS

Once again, we'll introduce ourselves using the 3x3x3 practice we did last week. You can refer to those instructions if you need a refresher. If you're in person, try to find new partners this week and in the weeks ahead. If you're online, stick to a randomized breakout group for the duration. Again, we'll do this practice every week during our study of *The Walk*.

QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever attended a funeral for an animal?
2. Have you ever lied to get out of a date?
3. Have you ever spontaneously decided to get a tattoo? If not, what would you think about getting if you visited a tattoo shop this instant?

ORIENTING

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OPENING PRAYER AND LESSON

Now let's dive into our discussion time with a word of prayer. (Whoever prays can use the example here or come up with a prayer of their own.)

Holy and Generous God, we thank you for your abundant blessings and your amazing generosity toward us. We stand in awe of your gifts of overflowing grace, mercy, and love. Open our hearts that we may respond to your love with generosity toward others. In the name of your Son Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

In *The Walk*, Pastor Adam discusses the five essential practices of the Christian faith: worship, study, serve, give, and share. Last session we discussed serving. Specifically, we looked at how serving is a virtue for all religions, but Christianity is unique in that it asserts that God serves us

even as we serve others. This week we come to the essential practice of giving. Churchgoers often feel uncomfortable when this topic comes up, understandably so. It is natural and human to ask the question, "Am I about to be pressured to give my money right now?" But Pastor Adam expands the concept of giving in *The Walk*. It's not just about giving money – it's also about generosity and gratitude (though money is part of it, too!).

In regard to giving, generosity, and gratitude, what we think about spending and material possessions matters a great deal. Pastor Adam reminds us that "Jesus speaks of money and material possessions more than he speaks of worship, prayer, and Scripture study combined" (88). "What we do with our money tells us something about the condition of our heart," Pastor Adam says (90), and the same is true for material goods. Do we make an idol out of stuff? Do we crave possessions that are not essential to our wellbeing? Does the way we utilize our money make it impossible for us to contribute to charitable causes, thus impacting our ability to serve? Of course, there are times in our lives when we struggle to meet our basic needs. In these seasons we might need to rely on the generosity and giving of others. Or, we may need to be careful with our money so we don't overspend, and so we can use our resources to meet our own needs. However much or little we have, how we relate to money and possessions matters.

Many of us, though, struggle with a topic Pastor Adam addresses in this chapter: Hedonism. Hedonism is an ancient Greek philosophy "that taught that the highest good is pleasure and that the chief end of humanity is to maximize pleasure and minimize pain" (92). Pleasure is not bad, but if pleasure is our highest desire, we will "find satisfaction elusive and a deep spiritual life impossible to attain" (92). This challenge rears its ugly head because the pleasure we derive from new possessions is short lived rather than eternal: the luster of a new phone dissolves quickly, the new shoes don't seem as appealing after wearing them, and the new car smell pretty soon just smells like... well, car smell! And yet we find ourselves craving new stuff. But the transitory pleasure we derive from our possessions can work against joy – it can instead make us greedy, less content, and grumpy.

If you had a chance to watch the PBS video before our time together, maybe you found it to be illuminating. Maybe you found it to be frustrating. Either way, the video points to an interesting dynamic: **accumulating wealth and possessions does not necessarily lead to joy, but can actually produce bitterness when desire gets out of control.**

"Being content isn't about having everything you want or even need. It's about experiencing a deeper peace in your mind, body and spirit because of your relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The best way I know to practice contentment is to spend time thanking God for the many blessings in my life. Even in my most challenging moments, I know there are things for which to be thankful; I just have to stop and remember. Practicing gratitude eases my mind, calms my body, and brings contentment to my soul."



Chris Holliday

However, Pastor Adam suggests that gratitude and generosity are powerful antidotes to this sickness. Gratitude is developing the habit of “learning to want what you already have” and seeing it as a gift from God (94). This gratitude can in turn cultivate a deeper love for God. “We find meaning not in acquiring things, but in loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength,” he says (97). Generosity, on the other hand, is the sharing of our money and resources with others. Generosity enables us to “have a collective impact on the world around us” so that we participate in making God’s Kingdom present on earth. Christians historically have participated in this practice through tithing – giving a portion of their monthly income – to the ministries of the Church. This practice is vital to the impact a church can make in the world. Giving a portion of our resources to the ministries of the church is not a shame-based command; it is a way of cultivating love and joy.

We live in a world of Hedonism. Maybe you know deep down that stuff cannot make you happy, and that true joy is made of something deeper. Giving, gratitude, and generosity can be your first steps to a more abundant and joyful life.

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Judgment free zone here... What new possessions get you the most excited? New tech, new clothes, etc.?

2. Do you ever feel yourself becoming less joyful the more you have, as the video might suggest? Do you ever feel yourself becoming more joyful the less you have?

3. Who is the most generous person you have ever met?

"It often seems like anytime I am longing for the latest and greatest or just wanting more stuff, I'm going out of my way to avoid what is actually at the root of my discontent. These sought after people, places, or things may serve as a temporary band aid but eventually fade, leading me back to wanting more all over again. What starts out as a superficial attempt to avoid my primary turmoil can easily grow into a cluttered room full of disappointments. In those moments when I turn my will and my life over to God, the need for distractions dissipates, and I am overwhelmed with joy in the simplicity of God's love."

– Jen Schultz



4. Thought experiment: Jesus, the savior of the world, was a poor carpenter in a podunk town. Yet he never indicated that he lacked in anything. What does that mean to you?

5. Let's try an exercise where we model gratitude and generosity within our small group.

It might feel a little weird at first, but that's part of the fun! Being grateful extends beyond material possessions – it can also extend to people. Being generous with your comments can cultivate a spirit of giving within your group. Here's what we'll do: each person in the group will have someone speak a statement of gratitude over them, and they will do the same for one other person. This gratitude should go beyond a compliment and instead lift up a specific gift seen in that person. Since we're talking about the five essential practices – **worship, study, serve, give, and share** – let's use those as a roadmap. Use the statement below for each person. Record what you say about another person, and then record what someone says about you.

► *My shared statement to someone in my group:*

_____, I see the essential practice of _____ in you.

I am grateful for that because _____

_____.

► *The statement made to me:*

_____ sees the essential practice of _____ in me.

_____ is grateful for that because _____

_____.

REMEMBER!

NEXT SESSION IS THE SHARED MEAL

Next session we will live into the essential practice of sharing by sharing a meal with one another! There will be a short lesson to accompany this time, but the main goal of the evening will be to have fun. It is our hope that we will practice sharing by ensuring that each person's favorite food(as recorded in the member profiles) is represented in that meal. This may take a little more communication than other weeks, but it will be well worth it!

CALL AND RESPONSE PRAYER

WEEK 5 | SHARE

THE AGAPE MEAL

BEFORE THE SESSION

Prepare for the shared meal!

IN PERSON GROUPS: Each person should prepare/purchase the favorite food listed by a fellow group member. Bring enough to share with all! You will need to coordinate this meal in advance so that all bases are covered.

ONLINE GROUPS: Each person should prepare/purchase one portion of someone else's favorite meal. When you get to the call and response, all can leave their mics unmuted.

ORIENTING

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This week is totally different! We are going to dive into the Essential Practice of sharing in a unique way. First, we'll hear just a short word on the importance of sharing. But then we'll move into a historic Christian practice called *The Agape Meal*. First, you'll hear the background of *The Agape Meal*. And then you'll feast!!

A word on procedure: You're probably hungry. You can probably smell all the smells right now. Hang tight for just a moment before you dish up the food. Dinner is just a few minutes away. For now, all you need to do is follow the guide. When the opening ritual is over, the rest of the time is unstructured and can be spent in fun dinner conversation or whatever you wish.

SHORT LESSON

Let's begin with a word on sharing, our 5th Essential Practice, as described by Pastor Adam in *The Walk*. Sharing our faith with others prompts us to clarify what we actually believe, perhaps giving us a renewed understanding of who we are. "It is in giving away our faith, sharing it with others, that our faith and our spiritual passion grow" (114). But it also has an impact on others: we proclaim a faith that is good news, and we desire for others to experience that good news as well. Sharing our faith through words and actions is the invitation those who are non-religious and nominally religious may need to begin their journey of becoming a deeply committed Christian. "Most people who choose to follow Jesus do so because of the positive witness of Christians" (118), Pastor Adam says. It is a task all of us must take up.

But how do we have a positive witness? We live *incarnationally*, which means we put flesh and bones on our faith, just like God took on flesh and bones in Jesus. "Our most powerful sermons are those that we preach by our actions," Pastor Adam says, in addition to our words (131). And a

great way to give witness to our faith is to incarnate the 5 Essential Practices, just as we've been doing, and to share them with the world.

Today, we have an opportunity to live incarnationally through the act of sharing with our group. This opportunity models the premise of these first sessions: a great starting place to live out the Five Essential Practices – and in turn, Resurrection's purpose statement – is in your small group itself. Modeling Jesus first to your group members equips you to model Jesus to the world. That's what we're going to do this session – which leads us to the next part.

For centuries, Christians have participated in a ritual called *The Agape Meal*. John Wesley, founder of Methodism, put *The Agape Meal* into practice in the 1700s all across England. Wesley took seriously that the Christian faith is most often shared in ordinary, day-to-day moments...such as over a shared meal at a table. This practice vitalized the Methodist movement for hundreds of years, and many communities are beginning to reclaim it. Let's share with one another.

At this point, you can dish up your food! Return to your seat once you have your food and feel free to start eating. **You can eat as you go through this next section.**

the Agape Meal

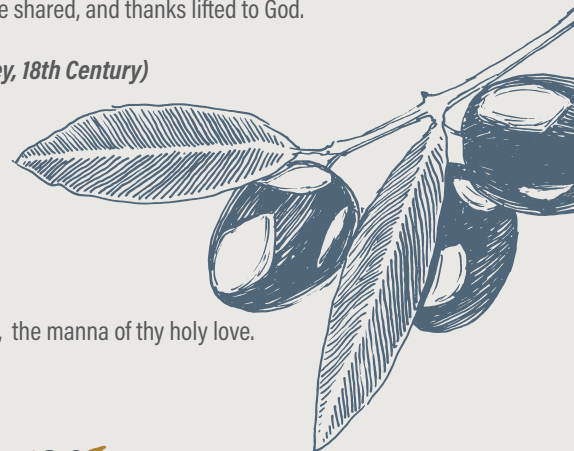
(Once everyone has their food and is seated)

LEADER: This Agape Meal celebrates the love within the body of Christ. Agape is a Greek word in the New Testament that refers to selfless love. It is the highest form of love there is – the kind Christ showed us. But this love doesn't only happen in sublime moments. In ordinary things like food and fellowship, we experience the mystery and power of God, the essence of which is love. When we gather around the table, we prove that faith is most commonly lived out in small, ordinary ways: friends gathered to eat, resources that are shared, and thanks lifted to God.

Opening Prayer (source: Charles Wesley, 18th Century)

LEADER: Father of earth and heaven,
Thy hungry children feed,
Thy grace be to our spirits given,
That true immortal bread.

ALL: Grant us all and do not haste -
The sweetness of thy pardoning grace, the manna of thy holy love.
In Jesus Christ here and above.
Amen.



Scripture: 1 John 4:7-12 NIV (LEADER reads)

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

ALL: We are thankful, God. Empower us to love one another.

Sharing the Feast

LEADER: We now share with one another just as God has shared with us. God gives us spiritual food for every day, our daily bread. Today we share with each other real food. Woohoo! Everyone is now invited, one by one, to share the food you have brought, and whose favorite food it is. As you share, say the person's name, what the food is, and invite them to share what they have brought. If you did not bring food, that is okay! Simply say, "This evening I receive," to which all can respond, "Amen." Otherwise, use this structure:

IN PERSON GROUPS:

(Name), I brought your favorite food, (kind of food), in the hopes that it sustains you and all of us just as God's love sustains me.

The one who receives will then share what they brought with the same formula, but with one addition: **(Name), I receive your care.** And now, (Name), I brought your favorite food...

ONLINE GROUPS:

(Name), I have prepared your favorite food, (kind of food). I am grateful to share in a part of your life – may God bless you. (Comment about how you like it!)

The one who receives will then share what they have prepared with the same formula, but with one addition: **(Name), God's blessing be with you, too.** And now, (Name), I have prepared your favorite food, (kind of food). I am grateful to share in a part of your life – may God bless you.

You may go around until everyone has taken their turn. Once you are all finished sharing, you are invited to say together:

For the bread of life, the love of God, and the love we share with one another, we give you thanks, Lord. Amen.

Only one thing left to do: eat and party!



In the introduction to the *PURPOSE* section, we looked at the power of communities of blessing who shine for the world to see like *cities on a hill*. We saw that being a city on a hill has two parts: on the one hand, God calls communities to structure their lives in a way that blesses the world around them. On the other hand, God calls the members of those communities to love one another within their own walls before they can share that love with the world. Maintaining that tension is vital. In your examination of the Five Essential Practices, your small group explored what it means to embody Resurrection's purpose within your group. Our hope is that you built a foundation of loving one another well.

But now we move further along the journey towards becoming a *community of blessing*. We recognize that, to be a thriving community that loves one another and the world around us, each of us must know without a doubt that we belong. Belonging is a fundamental need for human beings – we need to feel seen, heard, and known by those around us to become what we were made to be.

This assurance of *BELONGING* is crucial: it gives us the resiliency we need to love others well, both inside and outside the community. All of us must be able to say:

- ▶ I belong to the community
- ▶ I belong to God's story
- ▶ I belong to my own story

Without this assurance of belonging, you feel lost. But when you have this assurance, you are ready to share your gifts with the world knowing you belong to a community that supports you.

So how do you get there? This journal will help you. Specifically, it will equip you to answer a key question: *How does my story belong to God's story?* Having a good, thorough answer to this question is an indicator that you are ready to live out your calling in the unique ways God has intended just for you. So here's the roadmap for what's ahead: these lessons take you through a grand sweep of the story of God, the Bible. The story of the Bible is divided up into 3 major "acts." In each act, you'll meet characters who embodied the life of faith. But you will also reflect on your personal story by thinking of your life in the form of 3 acts. The intention is to make frequent connections between God's story and your story. This journey will lead you to a special group session in which you will share 7-word testimonies, sure to be a great experience.

Additionally, these lessons have a couple features worth noting. In each lesson you'll find a section called "Big Story Idea" that summarizes the main ideas. You'll also find a section called "Narrative Themes" that lifts up major themes from the Bible (as seen in that particular lesson) that we still experience today. Lastly, each lesson has a discussion question **Set the Scene**, which is bound to nudge some of you out of your comfort zone. These questions ask you to act out short, easy scenes to get a deeper feeling for what is going on.

That's what to expect in your small group. We now turn to Shannon Starek to hear about what will be happening in the larger community during this time, which will also lead you towards *BELONGING*.

WELCOME TO THE SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN

Shannon Starek
Downtown Adult Discipleship Director



As your group journeys towards belonging, we invite you to do so alongside the larger community! You have an awesome opportunity to engage across Resurrection through a social media campaign just for our small group program!

When we grow in our faith, we naturally feel a desire to share that growth with others. We want others to experience the hope that we have found. A great way to do that is to jump into all the wonderful ministries Church of the Resurrection has to offer. Serving is a wonderful thing to do on your own, but there can be even more power behind it as you connect with the larger Resurrection family, Kansas City community, or whatever community you find yourself in. This power can be found in the act of serving itself, but it can also happen as we share about it on social media. We can use our profiles to radiate hope and kindness to all who see them. We empower you to do just that... through a fun, churchwide competition!

So here is your challenge. During the dates of _____ to _____, attend as many Resurrection functions as you can with at least one other member of your small group. While there, take a group photo. Upload that photo to your social media page using the hashtag _____. (If you don't have social media, email the photo to the Adult Discipleship team.) If all the small groups of Resurrection collectively reach _____ posts,

(If you are online and outside the Kansas City area, attending online classes, worship, or engagements counts, as do service opportunities in your home community. Your photo can be a selfie with just you in it – another member of your group is not required.)

We will have a joint celebration on _____ at the end of the *BELONGING* section to award best individual posts, and hopefully, to celebrate achieving the churchwide goal! Let's get to it!

TRIGGER WARNING: When Our Stories Bring Up Painful Memories

As mentioned above, we will take dedicated time in the lessons ahead to reflect on our personal stories. We want to say clearly at the outset that **you should not feel pressured in any way to share with others information that brings up pain or trauma for you.** If you find yourself struggling when you get to these sections, you are encouraged to do a couple of things. First, you can skip anything you need to skip and give yourself space. Second, you can reach out to the church for help as you work through those memories. If you type cor.org/counseling into your browser, you'll be directed to a page where you can learn more about counseling referrals, community care scholarships, and sessions with student interns that come with no cost (though there is a waitlist for these free sessions). And of course, Pastors are available to listen to and pray for you. Resurrection is dedicated to mental health services, and we are here to help.

ACT 1: BEGINNINGS, EXODUS & MISSION

WEEK 1 | MISSION IN THE MIDST OF CHAOS: ABRAHAM & SARAH

BEFORE THE SESSION

FOCUS SCRIPTURES: Genesis 11:1-9, 12:1-4

ICEBREAKER

What could you give a 30-minute presentation on with no preparation?

CHECK IN: HIGHS AND LOWS

Throughout the *BELONGING* section, your group is encouraged to take 10-15 minutes to check in with one another. We recommend you do this by having each person share their personal high from the previous week, as well as their low.

ORIENTING

You were made for *purpose* – it sets you on the right direction; it brings meaning to your life. In the first section we examined how you might embody Resurrection's purpose statement within your small group. But knowing your purpose is just one part of the journey. Effective groups have a shared purpose, but each *individual* must know that they belong – and the journey of belonging is more personal. It asks, "What's my story, and how does it belong to God's story?" That is the question we seek to answer in our journey towards *belonging*.

LESSON

God's story, The Bible, begins with a scene of chaos – at the beginning of creation, the earth was "a formless void," the text says (Genesis 1:2), an unruly mess of water and shadow. But this turmoil is quickly interrupted by a God who shows up in love to order the mess and create new life. Even at the very beginning, God reveals himself as one who shows up in narratives of chaos and sets a brand-new story into motion. As you will see, God will do this over and over.

But today's story begins with a different scene of chaos. Just a few pages later in the Bible, Genesis 11 tells an imaginative story in which all the civilizations of the world migrated from the East and "settled down" in a place called Babel (11:2). These gathered civilizations grew in power, strength, and wealth. The people of Babel said to one another, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves" (11:4). When God saw this tower, God confused the language of the people so that they could not understand each other, and then scattered them "over the face of all the earth" (11:9). The result of this action was chaos: where there was a unified people with a unified power structure, now there was political and geographic confusion – an ancient power vacuum.

But why would God create this chaos? Why scatter the people after they banded together and built a skyscraper? Genesis 12 provides some clues. After the political chaos caused by Genesis 11, God zeroed in on a wandering nomad named Abraham and his wife, Sarah (both of whom were elderly), the unlikely of characters in the divine story. God appeared to Abraham and called him to gather his family and belongings and to move to a land that would be revealed later. Yes, you read that correctly: God told Abraham and his family to uproot their whole life and start off on a journey the destination of which was as unknown as the number of drops in the ocean. The only thing God gave to them was a promise: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (12:2). In remarkable obedience, Abraham and Sarah left their home with no end coordinates in mind.



"At first glance, it seems strange that God asks Abraham to leave his homeland and go to a new country; this feels like a calling that is far removed from what most of us experience in our own spiritual journeys...until you look at it in context. Abraham is going through a lot – and God is going to change him in some incredible ways. His name is changed (Abram to Abraham), his family status is changed (an aging man with no heir to the father of many nations), and his relationship with God is changed (from a righteous follower to the bearer of the covenant). All this change is giving space to the God-sized dreams that are beginning to take place in his heart. God might call you to places (or conversations, or relationships, or actions...) that on the surface can feel strange. Maybe you will spend your free time in a different way. Maybe you start looking for a different job. Maybe you will socialize with a different group of people. And maybe, in strange situations, you might also find your life transformed like Abraham."

Bill Gepford

Here's what that has to do with Babel. It is no mistake that the Tower of Babel and the promise to Abraham are located next to each other in the Bible. We're meant to see something powerful in the tension between these stories: what God has in mind for the redemption of the world. It's a dynamic contrast highlighted by the underlines above: the people of Babel have a desire to "*settle down*" and "*make a name for themselves*." However, God's mission for Abraham and Sarah is to "go" to the place of God's leading, and in the process, *God will make their name great*. The people of Babel want to build a reputation on their terms. Abraham and Sarah are promised that if they follow God's terms, *he* will provide them with a great reputation, a reputation defined by a mission: they will be the parents of a great nation, and that nation *would be a blessing to the whole world*. While Babel was about power, security, and securing a reputation for oneself, Abraham and Sarah's story was about trust, blessing, and finding identity in the God who loved them and put them on mission.

Right off the bat, Abraham and Sarah were tempted to doubt this God who appeared to them. Do you blame them? God had promised them numerous descendants, but they were childless and elderly! How would that even work? However, Abraham and Sarah are remembered throughout history because they are the ones who radically trusted in God. They trusted in this promise, and it came into fruition. Sarah conceived and gave birth to Isaac (which means "one who laughs" in Hebrew, a fitting name since Sarah laughed when she was told she would conceive), and Isaac was proof that God intended to do what he promised.

To be clear, though: Abraham and Sarah did not always succeed at trusting God. They especially failed in their relationships (as did most of the families in Genesis). On multiple occasions, Abraham put Sarah in danger to protect his own life. And Sarah had such little confidence that she would conceive in her old age that she set Abraham up with one of the servant girls to secure a child for Abraham. This lack of trust is pretty...well, *human*.

But at the end of the day, Abraham and Sarah learned to turn their eyes away from the absurdity of the promise (a child in old age, a whole nation from their descendants that would bless the world) and focus on the promise-giver: the person of God. They learned that God was stronger than their fallible behavior, and that God would stop at nothing to show up in the midst of chaos and set a whole new story into motion.



In the stories of Babel and the call of Abraham, we learn that God's primary strategy for redeeming a broken world is not through powerful empires who bring political conformity, nor is it through the singular vision of a gifted leader. Instead, God's strategy is to call communities to himself – and these communities are called to order their lives around blessing others. So it was with Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants who would be known as the people of Israel.

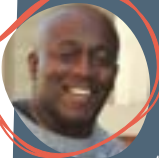
NARRATIVE THEMES:

- **Chaos:** Chaos appears throughout the Bible. It is the undoing of peaceful, life-giving structure, often caused when those in power make decisions that benefit themselves at the expense of others. Humans created chaos through our persistent sinning beginning in Genesis, and it has stayed with us ever since. Chaos in the Old Testament is often symbolized by oceans, which for ancient peoples was a source of mystery and darkness.
- **Calling:** Throughout the story of God, God is one who shows up and puts people on mission. God called Abraham and Sarah to establish a nation of blessing. God calls individuals to take up the mantle and work for justice and mercy. And God calls you. In every instance, God is the one who calls. We don't come up with the calling ourselves.



GROUP DISCUSSION

1. When you look at our world today, what are some areas of chaos in need of hope that the Church can bring?



"Abraham and Sarah certainly lived in times of chaos. But we still deal with chaos today. One area of chaos that needs the Church's hope that has been heavy on my heart lately is the continuation of gun violence in our country, as we've seen with Highland Park, Uvalde, and Buffalo just in the weeks prior to me answering this question. It is sad that some rights, like the rights to own weapons, outweigh other rights. Abraham and Sarah had their moment in their time, but this is our moment for our time. What are we going to do about this violence? We have the ability by the power of the Holy Spirit to stand up for this injustice and demand change. What will we do?"

-Darryl Burton

2. What are some ways you have personally experienced that chaos?

3. **Set the scene:** If your group is larger, you may want to split up into two groups. Designate one person to be God (but don't let it go to their head!). Go around one by one in the group. Have "God" address each individual by name, saying, "_____, go from your city, your people and your household to the place that I will show you." Each individual should attempt to reply with an authentic reaction they might have if God were really to say that to them today. What would you have to leave? What would you miss? What fears would you have?

4. Do you feel that society pressures you to "settle down and make a name for yourself?" What does allowing God to provide your identity look like?

5. Was there a time in your life in which you were a part of a community that richly blessed other people? How did you sense God's movement in that community?

CALL AND RESPONSE PRAYER

Reflect

on your own
this week...

THE LIFE OF SARAH

In this story, the text unfortunately narrates Sarah's place as secondary to Abraham, to whom God dictated the call and the promise. In that patriarchal culture, the norm was for a wife to follow the decisions of her husband, and it seems that the writer(s) of Genesis had the same worldview. In reality, though, her role was probably much larger than the story gives her credit for. Her trust in God to place her life (and her family's life) in God's hands should not be overlooked. What must it have been like to hear Abraham say that God was telling their family to leave? How would it change your understanding of the story if Sarah's decision to follow the voice of God was her decision, too, not just Abraham's?



ACT1 WEEK 2

MISSION MEET EMPIRE: JOSEPH, JOCHEBED & MOSES

BEFORE THE SESSION

FOCUS SCRIPTURES: Genesis 45:4-11; Exodus 1:8-11, 15:19-21

ICEBREAKER

Where did your name come from?

CHECK IN: HIGHS AND LOWS

ORIENTING

You were made for *purpose* – it sets you on the right direction; it brings meaning to your life. In the first section we examined how you might embody Resurrection's purpose statement within your small group. But knowing your purpose is just one part of the journey. Effective groups have a shared purpose, but each *individual* must know that they belong – and the journey of belonging is more personal. It asks, "What's my story, and how does it belong to God's story?" That is the question we seek to answer in our journey towards *belonging*.

LESSON

Our story resumes three generations after the life of Abraham and Sarah. Their children and grandchildren lived around the region that would later take the name Judah (the southern half of modern Israel). The mission of becoming a great nation of blessing wasn't going so well: the early families of Israel excelled at sibling rivalry, deception, and violence. It seemed that God's calling on their lives was threatened. And we pick up there not with good news, but with yet another threat to the mission that God had given to Israel: that of *empire*.

It all started like this: Abraham and Sarah's great grandson (Isaac's grandson), Joseph, was the favorite child of his father, Jacob. This position of prominence was not met kindly by Joseph's eleven half-brothers. They resented him for getting special gifts (like a colorful coat – see Gen. 37:3) and attention, and for the way he shared openly about his favor. Their frustration was understandable, but it grew out of control: Joseph's brothers tied him up, threw him in a ditch, and left him to be sold him off into Egyptian slavery. When Joseph was taken to Egypt, he was purchased by a man named Potiphar, the chief officer of the Pharaoh (the king).

What happened next was clearly the result of God's provision: Joseph excelled in his new position within Potiphar's house and won the favor of those around him. When Pharaoh became troubled by disturbing dreams, he called on Joseph (having heard of his godly reputation) to interpret them, and Joseph did so successfully. Egypt was an empire growing in power and wealth, but when Pharaoh learned through his dreams that a famine would soon devastate the nation's farmland, he chose Joseph as his second in command to take precautions. Joseph's cunning leadership oversaw the creation of storehouses that saved enough food to avert disaster during the seven years of famine that followed. Pharaoh, in gratitude, invited Joseph's extended family to settle with him in Egypt, where they lived the remainder of their lives in prosperity.

But what was good for Joseph's family turned out to be a nightmare for the people of Israel. Joseph's descendants lived comfortably in Egypt, now a powerful empire, for 400 years and grew exponentially in population. This is how the Book of Genesis ends. But then you turn the page to Exodus. Exodus 1:6 tells us that "a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." This new Pharaoh enslaved the Israelite people out of fear that there were too many of them – perhaps enough to unify and turn against Egypt. The new Pharaoh could only see the world through the lens of limited resources: *there is only so much food and money out there, so we better secure it all for ourselves!* The Israelites were a threat because they made a claim on Egypt's resources, striking fear into the wealthy Pharaoh's heart. Scholars refer to this mindset as the *myth of scarcity*, the belief that there is not enough to go around, and therefore adequate resources need to be secured for "our people" by any means necessary.

Pharaoh's mindset was in stark opposition to the mindset of God's people. God's mission runs counter to the myth of scarcity spouted by the empire. In God's good creation, *there is always enough for everyone if we can learn to share what we have with others*. The practice of radical generosity was central to God's plan to redeem the world: the people of Israel were to order their community life so that everyone had a seat at the table and access to resources. Foreigners, widows, orphans, the poor, the young, and the old were all to be equal recipients of God's goodness. As a result, other nations would look upon Israel and see in them a hopeful vision for the world. Empires preach scarcity. Communities of blessing practice abundance.

But what happens when you get stuck in the wrong story? Israel was given a mission, but this mission was derailed by their enslavement. How were they supposed to be a community of blessing while they were trapped by an empire? They were trying to live out a good story, but now the story was broken. In this sense, Joseph's story is similar in that his personal story was broken by his brothers' evil act to sell him into slavery. These stories beg the question: if our lives get stuck in the wrong story, does that mean that God's promises have failed?

The answer is a resounding "no." Because it is precisely in these contexts of broken stories that God shows up and refuses to abandon us. God showed up both for Joseph and the Israelites in Egypt. In the case of the latter, God again zeroed in on an unexpected character, this one named Jochebed, an Israelite woman living in Egypt. When

"Do you know the name of Moses's mother? Don't worry if you don't. I had to look her name up too! Moses's mother is Jochebed, but her name isn't actually told in the famous story where she hides her infant son in the Nile River (Exodus 2:1-10). In fact, we don't find out Jochebed's name until four chapters later under Moses's genealogy and family lineage. Yet, this brave and courageous woman risked her life to protect her child, who would grow up to lead the people of Israel out of slavery and to the Promised Land. While we more commonly know the names of Moses and Aaron from the Exodus story, there were many women like Jochebed who bravely followed God and stood up to their Egyptian oppressors: Shiprah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives who refused to participate in the killing of baby boys (Exodus 1:15-21); Miriam, Moses's older sister, who protected Moses and watched over him at the riverside (Exodus 2:4); Pharaoh's daughter, who adopted Moses, even though he was a foreign child, and raised him as her own (Exodus 2:10). God is calling us to lift up the names and stories of the women in our history—and in our own lives—who've boldly followed God and stood up to injustice. May we remember them, and may we seek to do the same!"



Shannon Greene

Egypt enforced an unthinkable decree in which all male Israelite newborns were to be put to death. Jochebed placed him in a woven basket and set it in the Nile River hoping that it might carry Moses to a safer land – only for the basket to be intercepted by Pharaoh's daughter, who unexpectedly looked with compassion upon the child and allowed him to live.

Moses' childhood was spent with his family, but when he was a teenager, his family took him to live in the house of Pharaoh as Pharaoh's daughter had requested. One day, Moses went out and saw a Hebrew man being beaten by an Egyptian. In an act of rage and compassion, Moses killed the Egyptian man and, in terror for what he had done, ran away to Midian, where he took a wife and settled down as a shepherd. But while he was shepherding one morning, God appeared to Moses in a bush, and called Moses to return to Egypt and demand that Pharaoh release the Israelites. The stubborn Pharaoh laughed in the face of this demand but relented after God's power was shown through ten plagues that struck the land of Egypt. Pharaoh did respond by releasing the Israelites. They packed their things and set out to leave Egypt. But when they were nearly to safety, Pharaoh changed his mind and sent an army after them. Stuck in place by the waters of the Red Sea, Moses lifted his staff, and God split the waters of the sea down the middle, allowing the Israelites to cross through on dry ground to a new land.

This act of God to split the waters in two was a defining moment for the people of God. It proved without a doubt that God shows up to those who are stuck in the wrong story – and miraculously orders the chaos, begins a new chapter, and puts his people back on mission.



In the stories of Joseph and the Exodus, we see that God's people often collided with powerful empires that lived by the fear of scarcity. This fear led those empires to practices of greed and oppression. God's people, though, were to counterculturally bless the world through practices of abundance. And just when the enslaved Israelites felt like they were stuck in the wrong story, God showed up to create a new future, putting his people back on mission to bless the world.

NARRATIVE THEMES:

► **Broken Stories:** Throughout Scripture, we read of characters whose lives were going just how they were supposed to go, when out of nowhere tragedy struck and left them feeling like their story was over. But God constantly proves in the Scriptures to be One who shows up to those who feel their story is finished, and partners with them to write a new chapter.

► **Scarcity and Abundance:** One of the fundamental questions God's people face throughout the Bible is whether they can learn to trust God as provider. The question was not necessarily if God would provide material needs for individuals, as many faithful people had very little. Instead, the question was, "Can our community trust that God can bless others through our shared generosity? Or will we hoard it all for ourselves?" Empires preached scarcity and fear. God called his people to practice abundance.



GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What are ways that our culture continues to struggle with the myth of scarcity? How so?

2. In what areas of your life – either personally or in situations in your immediate surroundings – do you see the myth of scarcity at work?

"One bit of Moses' story that speaks powerfully to me comes when Moses is trying to find a way out of the assignment to go to Egypt and confront Pharaoh. Moses said, 'But what if they don't believe me or pay attention to me?' And at first glance God doesn't even seem to answer, because God just asks, 'What's that in your hand?' (Exodus 4:1-2) There have been, and are, many instances in my life when, like Moses, I don't feel up to what I believe God wants me to do. If I imagine myself in Moses' shoes, I picture myself saying, 'Give me 10,000 soldiers, 50 or 60 chariots, and a budget to match Pharaoh's and I'll be happy to challenge him!' And God seems to say to me, as God did to Moses, 'What's that in your hand?' What gifts, experiences and partners do you have? Will you trust me to make them enough to do what I'm calling you to do? Scarcity often seems to whisper in my ear, 'You don't have enough to do this, certainly not to do it as well as it needs to be done.' But any good I've done in life has come about because, in some fashion, I've answered the question, 'What's that in your hand?'"



–Darrell Holtz

3. **Set the scene:** Pretend you, an Israelite, are living in Egypt. Your family has been here 400 years after Joseph saved the nation from famine and resettled his relatives to this land. Now a new Egyptian king is in power who knows nothing of Joseph. Suddenly he and everyone else says you Israelites shouldn't be allowed the same freedom as the Egyptians. Your pretend child gets home from school one day and asks you, "What do I say to the other kids when they tell me we shouldn't be here?" How do you respond?

4. Is there someone in your life who has made a great impact – and whom the world might classify as "an unlikely character"? _____

5. Do you trust God to show up when it feels like your story is stuck? Is that hard to do?

CALL AND RESPONSE PRAYER



on your own
this week...

WHEN HAVE YOU FELT STUCK?

Have there been times in your life where it felt like things were going well – only to have unexpected circumstances derail the story you thought you were living? What were some of those times, and what did you do when they came? Did God show up?



ICEBREAKER

What was your favorite band when you were a teenager? Why?

CHECK IN: HIGHS AND LOWS

ORIENTING

This week we begin a journey of reflection over our life stories. We'll do this work in conversation with the story of Scripture as we've engaged it in previous sessions. There is great power and meaning to be found in our life stories – the more we can understand them, the more we can draw on them as an endless source of inspiration. Our unique identity is created by God as good. Throughout the course of our lives, we either live more fully into that identity, or we allow other voices to tell us who we are, voices that can lead us astray. We start to believe that we are what we do, what we earn, or what others get from us. But when we stay anchored to who we are as God created us, we grow more fully into who God wants us to be.

However, our personal stories are not lived in isolation – they are a beautiful part of God's story unfolding all around us. Going deeper into your story and going deeper into God's story are journeys that go hand in hand. It's not as if we just do one or the other. *You are a character in God's story.* You can live into your unique identity by following God's call on your life to use your gifts, skills, and passions to serve others in your community and beyond. Knowing both your story and God's story can give you the resiliency to persevere through both chaotic and joyful seasons of life. You can stand firmly in the knowledge that you are a unique part of a *community of blessing* on mission to serve the world.

Your small group will walk through a series of exercises in the coming weeks intended to help you discern how your story belongs to God's story. At times, it may feel different than other group experiences you've had. You'll move between group discussion and personal reflection. When you get to the sections in which you will do individual work, don't feel like the room must be silent with everyone's head down. You are encouraged to get comfortable in your space, talk amongst yourselves, or play music. These weeks will culminate with a group session dedicated to a seven-word testimony service. If you want to read more about that service, flip ahead to those pages.

Let's get to it! (*Times are suggested.*)

EXERCISE 1

GOD'S ACT 1: GROUP (15 MINUTES)

1. Review the "Big Story Idea" and "Narrative Themes" from the previous two lessons. Which ones stand out to you the most and why? _____

2. How would you, in your own words, describe what God is *doing* in those themes and big story ideas? _____

3. How are those themes and ideas still true or pertinent in our world today? Is God still showing up in the same ways? _____

YOUR ACT 1: INDIVIDUAL (20 MINUTES)

1. Here comes the imaginative part. Think of your life as if it were a three-act play. Don't think of Act 3 as "the end," since your story is unfinished with other acts to follow. But up to this point, if you were to divide your life into three acts, how would you divide them up? It is unlikely that each act will have the same number of years. Think more in terms of "seasons" of life, in which, for a given number of years, your life had certain qualities to it that make that season unique.

MY LIFE (AGE ► AGE)

ACT 1: _____ ► _____

ACT 2: _____ ► _____

ACT 3: _____ ► _____

2. Now, consider just your Act 1. Take a moment to write out, in bullet point format, some things that were going on during that period. What was your life like in relation to your family? To your education, your career, etc.? Who were the major characters present? What was going on in the world? Think big picture rather than in too much detail.

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

3. What stands out to you most from your Act 1? Are there any major "themes" that emerge from this time – just like God's Act 1 has themes, does yours? _____

- _____
- _____
- _____

"In my Act 1, I experienced a lot of loss while growing up. By the time I started college, all that complicated grief had caught up to me. I could no longer hide the sadness, pain, and anger. It began impacting my schoolwork and friendships. During this time, God was at work in my life through people who lived out the commandment to love God and "love your neighbor as yourself." A few gals from my dorm, whom I'm still friends with today, showed up, giving me space to grieve and share my doubts about my faith. Most importantly, they cared for me even when I didn't feel I deserved it. God working through these friends in my Act 1 changed how I continue to see God and myself today. Since then, my view of God's love and grace has expanded significantly. I have the honor of sharing God's love daily in big and small ways. Whether listening to someone's story, praying for others, showing up with a meal for a grieving friend, or being kind to a stranger, I can reflect God's love. It is something we can all do."

-Lydia Kim



4. Now, think about this. Looking back, how do you think God was at work in your Act 1, *even if you weren't aware of it*? What was God *doing* in your life during your Act 1?

5. Look at the work you've done so far, both in your group's reflections on God's Act 1 and in your personal Act 1. You've thought about what was going on, what God was doing, and the major themes of those acts. *Do you see any points of connection between God's Act 1 and your Act 1? If so, what are they?*



GROUP DISCUSSION

Take a moment to summarize the work you've done using the following format. Again, think big picture as you summarize rather than trying to capture every detail:

Act 1 of my life was defined by:

God was at work during my Act 1 in this way:

My Act 1 is related to God's story because:

With what remaining time you have, group members who feel comfortable are encouraged to share the preceding three statements with the group, giving additional context if desired.

CALL AND RESPONSE PRAYER



Reflect on your own this week...

OWNING YOUR STORY

Gaining clarity on your life story will yield fruit as you learn to align the core values of your identity with your actions. As you think of your Act 1, what are concrete things you can do to live into your identity? For example, in my Act 1, I (Pastor Justin) developed an appreciation for music as I participated in band. I continue to water those roots by listening to recordings of wind band music when I drive – it connects me to my story.

ACT 2: LAND, EXILE & HOPE

WEEK 1 | THE PROBLEM OF POWER: ELIJAH & ESTHER

BEFORE THE SESSION

FOCUS SCRIPTURES: Deuteronomy 8:11-20; 1 Kings 18:17-19; Esther 4:10-17

ICEBREAKER

What's something new that you learned yesterday?

CHECK IN: HIGHS AND LOWS

ORIENTING

You were made for *purpose* – it sets you on the right direction; it brings meaning to your life. In the first section we examined how you might embody Resurrection's purpose statement within your small group. But knowing your purpose is just one part of the journey. Effective groups have a shared purpose, but each *individual* must know that they belong – and the journey of belonging is more personal. It asks, "What's my story, and how does it belong to God's story?" That is the question we seek to answer in our journey towards *belonging*.

LESSON

The characters we've met in our journey thus far have embodied the primary issue that defines the first act of God's story: identity. The first five books of the Bible especially wrestle with questions such as, who is God? Who are we in relation to him? We learned that God's mission for Israel to be a community of blessing was challenged by empires that tried to secure an identity apart from God. As we move into Act 2, the Israelites, who were for so long at the mercy of power, start to gain some for themselves – and they don't handle it well.

After God saved the Israelites from Egypt, they set out for a land called Canaan, a large territory that covered much of what we know as modern-day Israel. The land of Canaan was more than just a place to live safely; it had *supreme* significance to Israel for a couple of reasons. First, it was where their ancestors had lived - Abraham and Sarah had lived there long ago. Secondly, it was to be the place they would finally embody their mission to be a community of blessing. Before the Israelites formally set out for this land of Canaan, though, they made an important stop. As the story goes, after the Exodus, Moses led the people to Mount Sinai on the other side of the Red Sea to receive laws from God - laws that would teach them how to live once they arrived in Canaan. These laws were more than just rules to obey; they were guidelines for how to structure their lives so that their generosity towards one another and to other nations might reflect the generosity God had shown them. These laws were understood as a gift from God. Some of the most important of them are in Leviticus 19. The people were not to harvest the edges of their fields so that the poor and foreigners could collect food (19:9). They were to avoid deceit, theft, and unfair payment practices (19:13). They

were to respect the elderly (19:32) and treat foreigners as equals, remembering that they had once been foreigners in Egypt (19:34). Moving into this land signaled a new chapter in Israel's story: they would finally become who they were meant to be.

But the people regularly failed to enact these laws. Their mission quickly met another challenge: the problem of power. As Israel moved into Canaan, they became enamored with the gods of the surrounding nations. ("Nations" in the Bible are not so much political territories as they are what we call "people groups.") Other nations held that *their* gods could provide power, wealth, and fertility – and the allure of these promises captured the hearts of the Israelites. The act of turning away from God to other sources to find provision and security is what the Old Testament calls "idolatry." Theologically, idolatry is not about worshipping statues of false gods. Instead, it's about the question, "To where will you look for provision?" God promised to provide Israel with everything they needed, and then he called them to share the power they earned with their neighbors. But when times got tough and resources were scarce, it was easier to turn to false gods that offered instant gratification with no need to share. Why look to a God I can't see – and who asks me to share – when these other cultures say that if I worship the god depicted in this statue, I'll instantly get everything I want for myself?

Complicating the matter of idolatry was that, when Israel turned to idols, they did in fact gain more political and economic power. This largely happened because alliances with nations who worshipped idols created opportunities for growth and conquest. But the means by which Israel gained this power contradicted their mission: the power they gained benefited only the ruling class and marginalized the most vulnerable. On the flip side, when Israel relied on God for power, it came slowly, and with strings attached to lay that power down for the sake of others. Gaining power in this way was not popular – but it was what God called them to do. God saw power not as a bane, but as a blessing, though a vulnerable one at that. Power could easily corrupt, but when handed down, it could be a means of God's love. Some faithfully lived into this use of power when it seemed like no one else was. Let's meet two of them.



"I believe that God calls those who have been given authority to use their power with humility, with discernment, with affirmation, with courage, and with love (of God)! Just like Jesus did and as one of my favorite people in Scripture, Esther! When we are called to whatever our role is, it is our responsibility to fully live out that role, according to God's standards! I see that clearly in Jesus. I see that clearly in Esther. When I think back over my ministry journey and life, there have been times when I did not fully utilize my power, I didn't fully utilize my voice. Sometimes it was due to lack of knowledge (is that mine to say? Mine to do?) Sometimes it was due to lack of courage (I can't say that, not as an African American clergywoman!) Even in my old age, I have to look in Scripture and see the examples set by Jesus, by Esther, and stir up the courage to do what I believe God has empowered me to do. I am learning that it is never too late to take "thou authority"! Perhaps you are in the position that you are in, at the place you are now, in the circumstance that you have been placed in, for such a time as this! Take thou your authority! To the Glory of God! Amen? Amen!"

Cheryl Jefferson Bell

The first is Elijah, whose story is found in 1 Kings. Elijah lived during the reign of Ahab, a power hungry

Israelite king who persistently turned to idols. Ahab's wife, Jezebel, worshipped Ba'al (pr. "ball"), the most popular false god. Ahab and Jezebel used any means necessary to make Israel wealthy, such as violence and alliances with idol worshiping leaders. But as the nobility grew rich, those who suffered were the ones the Sinai laws explicitly commanded Israel to care for: widows, orphans, and foreigners. Into this context God called Elijah, a prophet with a little known background, to remind King Ahab of where power really came from. Elijah declared a drought to make clear who controlled the weather – not Ba'al, but the living God. Then Elijah confronted Ahab and challenged his minions to a duel. Ahab was fed up with Elijah – his reputation for performing miracles to widows and orphans earned him the name "troubler of Israel" (1 Kings 18:17), so he agreed. Ahab's prophets prepared a sacrifice on an altar and called for Ba'al to answer, but nothing happened. But Elijah *also* readied a sacrifice and called on God, causing fire to fall from heaven upon the altar, terrifying the onlookers. There could be no mistake about who had power: not some false idol, but the living God who had authority even over nature. Elijah used what power he had to confront evil and testify to God's true power.

But there is perhaps no better character in the Old Testament who faithfully embodied the use of power than Esther. Esther's story took place in Persia later in the history of Israel after the Jewish people had been scattered. Ahasuerus, the reigning king, threw a wild banquet one year and ordered his wife, Vashti, to parade herself around. She refused his ridiculous command, which angered him so much he wanted to never see her again. Now lacking a queen, the king had his servants search Persia for beautiful women. This search led them to Esther, an orphaned Jewish woman raised by her uncle Mordecai, who worked in the citadel of the king.

The king was smitten by Esther and gave her the royal crown. However, one of the king's officers, Haman, became enraged when Mordecai would not bow to him in the citadel. Haman was so upset that when he learned Mordecai was a Jew, he plotted to kill *all* the Jewish people in Persia. Mordecai learned of the plot and confided in Esther. Esther knew the only hope was for her to ask the king to put an end to the plot. But she also knew of the law that anyone who entered the king's quarters without being called, even his own wife, would be put to death. However, without hesitation she entered the king's room, and he allowed her to do so since she had won favor with him. She disclosed Haman's intentions and persuaded the king to put a stop to it, which he did. Esther, given great power that could have been used for a lifetime of personal wealth and comfort, instead used it to aid her people, even at the risk of her own life.



We see in the Old Testament that the power that comes through having resources, fertility, and wealth is a vulnerable asset that can only be entrusted into the hands of God. Any power that God's people receive should first be seen as a gift given by God rather than earned by themselves. Likewise, this power comes with a responsibility to give that power to the most vulnerable. This give and take is God's design for how to use power.

NARRATIVE THEMES:

- **Trust:** God's people always face a choice: do I trust in the God who has been faithful to provide, even though I can't see him, or do I secure provision through other channels?
- **Power:** Israel was to be a community of blessing by sharing the power they gained with others. But power bred the desire for more power, and the Israelites abused it often.



GROUP DISCUSSION


1. Idolatry is identified above as "the act of turning away from God to other sources to find provision and security." How might idolatry still be a problem in our culture today? _____

2. Either in your close surroundings or in the world at large, have you seen someone lose track of who they are as more power was given to them? Have you ever faced that risk? _____

3. **Set the scene:** If your group is large, split into two groups. Choose someone in your group to be the troublemaker. Everyone else, pretend you are the CEO of a Fortune 500 company (maybe you really are!). You have everything you want. People respect your name. You're a sought-after speaker. Now have the troublemaker address each person one by one, saying, "(name), you haven't taken God's laws seriously. You've taken shortcuts on your way to fame, and it's been hard on the poor. God has sent me to oppose you." What would you honestly say, CEO?

4. Who is someone in your life who used the authority given to them to bless others? _____

5. Has there been a gift of provision in your life – financial, relational, etc., that looking back, you can only attribute to God? Do you continue to trust God as provider? _____



"I once worked at a church and had a Pastor who continually gave away their power. They used their own authority to empower others, draw out gifts and talents, and let others take the lead. Their example changed my entire perspective on what it means to be a leader. Yes, sometimes a leader is called upon to wield their power, but in seeing this Pastor use it to bless others, my entire life trajectory shifted. I stepped into new pathways previously buried deep and through their example I saw not only myself, but others step up to serve, lead, and grow. What a beautiful way to use authority to bless others."

-Shannon Starek

Reflect

on your own
this week...

THE WILDERNESS WANDERINGS

Not mentioned above is a chapter of Israel's history called "the wilderness wanderings." This was a time period immediately after the Exodus in which the Israelites were sent to wander in the desert for 40 years. Why? Because God commanded them to go into the land of Canaan, but when the people saw how big and strong the inhabitants of Canaan were, they became afraid and missed their opportunity to go into the land (Num. 13:25-29). But God provided even in their time of wandering: he sent manna (a bread-like substance) and quail meat to feed them. The Israelites grew tired of this food, but there was something redemptive about this long, transitional season: they learned to trust God to provide for their needs. In God, they could find everything they needed. Have you had a season of wilderness wanderings? Have you faced a transitional time in which you felt stuck in between the season behind you and the season ahead of you? How did God provide for you during your wilderness wanderings?



ACT 2 WEEK 2

BACK TO BASICS: EZEKIEL AND THE BRIDE

BEFORE THE SESSION

FOCUS SCRIPTURES: Ezekiel 36:21-28; Song of Solomon 2:8-17

ICEBREAKER

What is the weirdest thing you have purchased on Amazon?

CHECK IN: HIGHS AND LOWS

ORIENTING

You were made for *purpose* – it sets you on the right direction; it brings meaning to your life. In the first section we examined how you might embody Resurrection's purpose statement within your small group. But knowing your purpose is just one part of the journey. Effective groups have a shared purpose, but each *individual* must know that they belong – and the journey of belonging is more personal. It asks, "What's my story, and how does it belong to God's story?" That is the question we seek to answer in our journey towards *belonging*.

LESSON

In the last session we met King Ahab, the idol-worshipping ruler whom Elijah confronted. Ahab was but one of many unfaithful kings in Israel's history. Truthfully, there were only a handful of kings who carried a good reputation with them to the grave. But where did Israel's kings come from in the first place? It all started in the Book of 1 Samuel. God's people had moved into the land of Canaan and settled after their escape from Egypt. Initially they were ruled by leaders called "judges," military figures who preserved order, kept the people safe from invaders, and performed miracles. However, the Israelites looked at the nations around them, all of them more powerful than they, and noted that *those* nations were ruled by *kings*. The people demanded that Samuel, the last judge, appoint a king to rule over them "like other nations" (1 Sam 8:5). Samuel cautioned against it but reluctantly appointed a boy named Saul to be king.

The theological importance of Israel's demand for a king cannot be overstated. The problem was not that they wanted a king; it was that they wanted to be *like other idol-worshipping nations* who did not honor the true God. As you read these chapters of the Bible, you can hear the authors shouting from the pages, "Hey reader! Can you see that the kings of other nations were unfaithful, power hungry, and violent? Why be like *them*?" We've already explored the answer in previous sessions: Israel was drawn more to the easier option to secure power for themselves than with the riskier option of trusting God, who they could not see, as provider. In doing so, they neglected their mission to bless others as God had blessed them.

Now let's pick up where we left off. After Ahab there was a series of bad kings, including Ahaz, Manasseh, and Zedekiah, whose stories are told in 2 Kings. Ahaz was so terrible that the northern tribes of Israel revolted against him, forcing him to request military help from Assyria. Sadly, Assyria made Ahaz acquiesce to their demands in return for their assistance. Ahaz agreed but unknowingly

established a precedent. Eventually, two powerful empires emerged: Assyria and Babylon. These kingdoms demanded tributes and cultural reforms from God's people in exchange for their safety. The kings of Israel relented, and even *partnered* with those kingdoms to secure peace. But those kingdoms demanded more and more. When Assyria demanded vast amounts of tribute money, the northern tribes of Israel asked *Egypt* for help (can you see the irony?). Assyria found out and besieged northern Israel. Later, Babylon eclipsed Assyria and pressured southern Israel in the same manner. King Zedekiah rebelled against this pressure, instigating the Babylonians into retaliation. Babylon's army came to Jerusalem and destroyed it. Many Israelites died, and many more were forcefully relocated to Babylon.

The destruction of Jerusalem and forceful relocation of its people is referred to as the *exile*. The exile is a pivotal moment in the history of God's people. To put in context the devastation of this moment, we must remember that God had called Israel to settle in their land and worship him faithfully, and as they lived in that land, they would become a blessing to the world. So when Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and carried off its citizens, God's people lost their land and their leader. How was their mission possible without those? But more than that, their exile caused them to ask tough questions. Had God vanished? Did our God "lose" to the gods of Babylon? If the God who called us to our mission was missing – did the mission still stand?

But Israel's God could not be defeated, nor was he intimidated by the schemes of empires. God did not cause Israel's destruction – Babylon did – but God forced good to come from it. It was in this moment of devastation that God triumphantly appeared within the pages of a broken story to write a new chapter. Specifically, after Israel lost sight of themselves, God used the tragedy of exile to call his people back to the basics of who they were: a sacred community in loving relationship with God, put on mission to bless the world. Let's look at two ways God did this.

First, God called a prophet named Ezekiel. Ezekiel, a former priest, was one of Jerusalem's relocated citizens. Ezekiel had a unique voice in the Old Testament in that he lived among the exiled Israelites in Babylon and was therefore in close proximity to a hopeless community. The opening verse of Ezekiel is itself a powerful declaration: God shows up on the banks of a Babylonian



"Every spring, I am reminded of how much beauty can come from the dust of our lives. My favorite worship song to listen to just as the trees begin to bloom and the shoots come up from the

ground is 'Beautiful Things' by Gungor. The lyrics say this: 'All this pain, I wonder if I'll ever find my way? I wonder if my life could really change, at all? All this earth, could all that is lost ever be found? Could a garden come out from this ground, at all? You make beautiful things out of the dust...out of us. You make me new, you are making me new.'

I love to pay special attention to the change from the dead of winter to the new life of spring. So much so that I also read a little life changing book each year titled 'The Tree that Survived the Winter.' It is about surviving the hard seasons where we feel far from God. I do all of this - listen to Gungor and read about the winters of life - because I have experienced seasons where hope is hard to find, and I remember how it feels to have hope spring up from the ground of my life. I think the change from winter to spring is the best seasonal switch to parallel our faith story. It reminds me that God will never leave us in the winters of our lives. There is always a spring that will come. With God, new life is our never-ending horizon."

Ashley Morgan Kirk

river (1:1). We may not think that statement to be a big deal, but to Ezekiel it was extraordinary: not only was God still alive and in control, *God had travelled all the way to Babylon* to rescue his people. God commissioned Ezekiel to perform a series of strange acts (today we'd call them "crazy") that conveyed a message of radical hope. Ezekiel proclaimed that God was about to do a brand-new thing: no longer would Israel have to rely on their own strength to follow God's will. Instead, *God* would give them a new heart and a new spirit (36:26) that would supernaturally enable them to live out their mission. To call the people back to the basics of a pure, loving relationship, God would take the initiative in Israel's transformation instead of waiting for them to do it themselves.

Second, God used the voices of poets to call Israel back to basics. The poets had an innate ability to draw on the power of emotion to lead the people to truth in a way rational persuasion could not. Poetry comprises a large part of the Old Testament. One work of poetry, the Song of Solomon, stands out among the rest. This "song" is a poetic love song between a bride and her husband. The Song of Solomon is a celebration of many things – physical intimacy, romance, and passion, among others. Considering that other works of poetry in the Bible address more obviously religious themes, one may ask why this particular book is included in the Bible. Why include the song of a bride who watches and delights as her lover approaches their home from across the hills? Because the Bible wants to remind us that relationships are beautiful. Pure, simple joy found in the presence of the other is the wellspring of a life well lived, and the Bride's song elegantly depicts that kind of relationship. But the poets also celebrated this love because it served as a reminder of the pure, simple relationship Israel was to have with God – the exact kind of relationship they abandoned for power and security. This love song was one of many poems that called them back to basics. Despite all the ways they had twisted their calling, healing could come by refocusing on "the basics" – a trusting relationship with the God who loved them and called them to mission.



As generations passed, God's people encountered an increasing number of threats from the growing empires around them. Sadly, their strategy to counter these threats relied on accepting the practices of the empires to avoid their fury, and in the process, Israel became the mirror image of what they hated, leading to their exile. But God raised up faithful leaders who called the people back to the basics of what their lives were supposed to be about: a trusting, pure relationship with God who empowered them to be a community of blessing.

NARRATIVE THEMES:

► **Love:** Isn't it amazing how easy it is to forget the basics of who we are the more complex our lives get? God's people did this all the time. It took the words of poets to remind them of their defining characteristic: pure, childlike, simple love. This love originates from God, fills us up, and overflows to our relationships and to our neighbors.

► **Hope:** God does not prevent the consequences of our bad decisions from occurring, but God refuses to abandon us to our own devices. God's persistence in making us new is alarming, stubborn, and better than we could imagine or deserve. In God's consistent acts of healing in our lives, God does not heal us back to the broken state of what we were, but instead promises to make us into a whole new creation.



GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Empires were powerful entities that offered alluring promises: wealth, prosperity, comfort, reputation. What are our "empires" today? How are they at work in the world? _____

2. Likewise, a hallmark of empires is that they always demand more. It starts off as a small tribute but grows into a constraining demand. How do our modern empires always ask for more? What are the consequences? _____

3. **Set the scene:** If your group is large, divide into two groups. Choose someone to be king or queen. The rest of you are prophets. King or queen: a vast army from a foreign land is at your city gates. You have two options: 1) Pay a large tribute that allows your land to be taken without violence against your citizens, but will result in your people having to adopt the religious practices of the foreign land. 2) Order your army to oppose their army in the hopes of keeping your sacred land and culture, which will undoubtedly cause enormous casualties. Make and then announce your decision. Prophets: talk amongst yourself and formulate what you think God would say to the king/queen in response to their decision and share it with your king/queen. (Why do this exercise? Hint: think about the ways in which Israel's kings positioned themselves so that there were no faithful options on the table.)

4. Keeping in mind that God does not cause tragedy, has God used moments of tragedy or heartbreak in your life to bring about something good? _____

5. Think about how God used the tragedy of exile to call Israel back to basics. Now think about your own Christian faith. Do you ever feel that, as life gets more complicated, it's easy to forget "the basics" of what a relationship with Jesus is all about? _____



"There are times that I attempt to do life in my own strength. I make my own rational decisions and choices until an emergency happens or something I need God's help with forces me to cry out 'help me Lord'. As I've grown to know the Lord's faithfulness I've learned that I need God's help in every situation. Getting back to the basics is about returning to Jesus, our first love. He is our strength, our guide and ever present help in our times of need. Jesus said 'Here I am. I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me.' Rev 3:19"

– Mike Ash

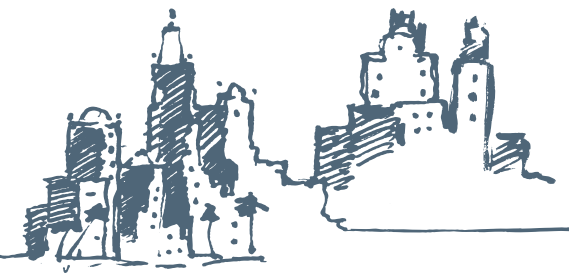
CALL AND RESPONSE PRAYER

Reflect

on your own
this week...

THE PROMISE OF HOPE

One of Ezekiel's primary messages was that when God healed Israel, God would not restore them back to who they were before their tragedy, but would instead heal them from the root causes of the brokenness that led to the tragedy itself. In your life, do you ever wish God would send you back to a previous version of yourself? What might it mean that God wants to do something even better in your future?



ACT 2

WEEK 3
GOD'S ACT 2 AND YOUR ACT 2

ICEBREAKER

Icebreaker: How do you pronounce the word "plaza"?

CHECK IN: HIGHS AND LOWS

(15 minutes)

ORIENTING

This week we continue our journey of reflection over our personal life stories. We'll do this work in conversation with the story of Scripture as we did in Act 1. There is great power and meaning to be found in our life stories – the more we can understand them, the more we can draw on them as an endless source of inspiration. Our unique identity is created by God as good. Throughout the course of our lives, we either live more fully into that identity, or we allow other voices to tell us who we are, voices that can lead us astray. We start to believe that we are what we do, what we earn, or what others get from us. But when we stay anchored to who we are as God created us, we grow more fully into who God wants us to be.

However, our personal stories are not lived in isolation – they are a beautiful part of God's story unfolding all around us. Going deeper into your story and going deeper into God's story are journeys that go hand in hand. It's not as if we just do one or the other. *You are a character in God's story.* You can live into your unique identity by following God's call on your life to use your gifts, skills, and passions to serve others in your community and beyond. Knowing both your story and God's story can give you the resiliency to persevere through both chaotic and joyful seasons of life. You can stand firmly in the knowledge that you are a unique part of a *community of blessing* on mission to serve the world.

This work is building to the creation of 7-word testimonies. Don't jump the gun on writing that testimony just yet – allow yourself to go through this Act 2 work and then the Act 3 work first. Like last time, this session will make room for individual reflection. Again, don't feel like the room must be silent with everyone's head down when you get to that part. You are encouraged to get comfortable in your space, talk amongst yourselves, or play music.

(Times are suggested.)

EXERCISE 2

GOD'S ACT 2: GROUP (15 MINUTES)

1. Review the "Big Story Idea" and "Narrative Themes" from the previous two lessons. Which ones stand out to you the most and why? _____

2. How would you, in your own words, describe what God is *doing* in those themes and big story ideas? _____

3. How are those themes and ideas still true or pertinent in our world today? Is God still showing up in the same ways? _____

YOUR ACT 2: INDIVIDUAL (20 MINUTES)

1. Remember, you've been thinking of your life as if it were a three-act play. Don't think of Act 3 as "the end," since your story is unfinished with other acts to follow. Turn back to Act 1 and remind yourself of how you divided it up.

MY LIFE (AGE ► AGE)

ACT 1: _____ ► _____

ACT 2: _____ ► _____

ACT 3: _____ ► _____

2. Now, consider just your Act 2. Take a moment to write out, in bullet point format, some things that were going on during that period. What was your life like in relation to your family? To your education, your career, etc.? Who were the major characters present? What was going on in the world? Think big picture rather than in too much detail.

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

3. What stands out to you most from your Act 2? Are there any major "themes" that emerge from this time – just like God's Act 2 has themes, does yours? _____

"I suppose I entered 'Act 2' of my life in my mid-30s, when my wife and I started a family. Prior to this I was a 'success' at my job and well-regarded. I invested a lot of time in my work and the results were evident. My wife and I were finding a rhythm with married life (a little rocky at first) and enjoying one another. Then, children began to appear in our house after seven years of marriage, changing everything. I felt less successful in my job because I was spending less time doing it. I was sure my wife had fallen out of love with me (she paid a lot of attention to the children). I was lost. That's where God found me and reminded me that my self-worth wasn't tied to my work or even my family. God valued me no matter what. I began to see myself as an employee, a husband and a father who only had to give his best given the circumstances of life. Even when my best didn't meet my standards, my best met God's. Even today I remind myself of this truth. God loves me and values me no matter what. Every given day there is a different set of circumstances by which I judge myself and (I think) others judge me. I give what I have for that day without regret. God honors that. When I embody that truth, I am able to give my best and move through to the next day. God empowers me, cares for me and loves me unconditionally."

-Steve Schneeberger



4. Now, think about this. Looking back, how do you think God was at work in your Act 2, *even if you weren't aware of it*? What was God *doing* in your life during your Act 2?

5. Look at the work you've done so far, both in your group's reflections on God's Act 2 and in your personal Act 2. You've thought about what was going on, what God was doing, and the major themes of those acts. *Do you see any points of connection between God's Act 2 and your Act 2? If so, what are they?* OR, might there be a theme from Act 1 of God's story that better applies to your Act 2? Write down any of those connections between your story and God's story here.



GROUP DISCUSSION

Take a moment to summarize the work you've done using the following format. Again, think big picture as you summarize rather than trying to capture every detail:

Act 2 of my life was defined by:

God was at work during my Act 2 in this way:

My Act 2 is related to God's story because:

With what remaining time you have, group members who feel comfortable are encouraged to share the preceding three statements with the group, giving additional context if desired.

CALL AND RESPONSE PRAYER



Reflect

on your own
this week...

OWNING YOUR STORY

Gaining clarity on your life story will yield fruit as you learn to align the core values of your identity with your actions. As you think of your Act 2, what are concrete things you can do to live into your identity? For example, in my Act 2, I (Pastor Justin) developed a passion for community. I continue to water those roots by making an intentional effort to host others in my home and to learn the stories of the people around me.

ACT 3: BROKEN CYCLES & LITTLE PINK SPOONS

WEEK 1 | BAD STORY BROKEN: JESUS, SIMEON & ANNA

BEFORE THE SESSION

FOCUS SCRIPTURES: Luke 2:22-38; 4:1-11

ICEBREAKER

What decade had/has the best music?

CHECK IN: HIGHS AND LOWS

ORIENTING

You were made for *purpose* – it sets you on the right direction; it brings meaning to your life. In the first section we examined how you might embody Resurrection's purpose statement within your small group. But knowing your purpose is just one part of the journey. Effective groups have a shared purpose, but each *individual* must know that they belong – and the journey of belonging is more personal. It asks, "What's my story, and how does it belong to God's story?" That is the question we seek to answer in our journey towards *belonging*.

LESSON

The history of God's people is a cycle of repeating stories. While the Old Testament may be intimidating due to its size and scope, it is essentially made up of a singular narrative that repeats itself over and over: God calls the people to work for redemption. The people mess it up and get in a sticky situation. God saves the people, and the people turn back to God. Repeat.

Towards the end of the OT, though, something changes. You saw a little bit of this change in Ezekiel. God's people, especially the prophets, began to see that there was little hope that they could ever become what they were meant to be by trying harder. Their mission to be a community of blessing wasn't possible of their own accord. Jeremiah admits it this way: no longer could the people rely on vain efforts to follow the law. If real change were to happen, God would have to "put his law within them" and "write it on their hearts" (31:33). Real, even supernatural, transformation was needed. The human will on its own was not enough.

But let's continue the story. The Israelites had an eventful 50 years of exile in Babylon. Many of them became wealthy and prospered. Additionally, the religious leaders wrote down the people's stories, codified the practices of their faith, and collected their sacred writings. Judaism, the formal religion of the Hebrew people, emerged. In this time of exile, Babylon was conquered by Persia. The king of Persia, Cyrus, felt his empire could be stronger if he allowed all exiled people to return to their homes. He issued an edict that let the Jews return to Israel, which many did while others migrated abroad (the "diaspora," Esther's narrative context).

It is theologically important to understand the anxiety of this time. Can you sense the dangerous hope the people felt? They were going to put the season of exile behind them and return home. Hallelujah! But what would happen once they got there? Here was the fear: *will we go back to the same sinful practices that defined us before?* Will we relive the same story?

Maybe you can understand this anxiety. Science has taught us that one of the brain's functions is to detect and create patterns.⁴ Learning patterns is helpful to our survival as we don't have to reteach ourselves basic skills, but instead can rely on a predictable outcome when we perform a task. One of the ways this function isn't helpful, though, is when our brains convince us that a pattern will emerge from a negative event which, unfortunately, our brains do often. We pursue our dream job only to be rejected. We say "I love you" only for those words to return empty. Soon, a fear creeps in: *If I do this again, the same bad thing will happen*. We allow our brains to persuade us that one negative event is enough to establish a pattern.

For Israel, when they tried to do the right thing and trust God, their lives seemed to get harder. They stood up to the empire only for the empire to double down. They practiced generosity only for a bad king to take over and worship greed. Can you see the pattern that emerges? *If I do the right thing, something bad will still happen! I might as well go a different route*. Israel was stuck in a pattern that led to the repeated abandonment of their mission. For real hope to be possible, God would have to do something so transformative that his people could follow him into the depths of a broken story without neglecting their calling, holding onto the steady conviction that even if empires and idols inflicted pain into their lives, God's story of goodness would ultimately get the last word. But where were they to find hope for such transformation?

It was a silent night in Bethlehem when, unknown to the rest of the world, this bad story was broken. The unlikelyst of characters, a teenager named Mary, gave birth to a baby conceived by the life-giving Spirit of God. Only a handful of shepherds and traveling stargazers knew at first there was something extraordinary about this baby. This baby was Jesus, and he was the Son of God incarnate. Incarnation literally means "embodied in flesh." In Jesus, God's Son took on human flesh. Within his very person was human nature – he was just like us humans trapped in a cycle of bad stories – *and* the nature of God, who is not contained by the limits of our stifling narratives. Jesus could dive deeply into the plots of people's lives but not succumb to the negative cycle of brokenness that was holding them down. If humans could somehow draw on this divine strength that Jesus had, real hope was possible. And as we'll find out, real hope *was indeed possible*. We *do* have the power to live into better stories with God's help.

"As human beings, we often edit our life choices while we look through a lens of safety and predictability. We are constantly looking for patterns and making meaning of our experiences so we can write personal stories that make sense and offer us security. Our brains crave to know what is coming next, and often asks the question, 'how can I survive?' We look for rituals to keep us grounded, and we love the safety of repeated meaningful outcomes. In pursuit of consistency, we often overlook new events or even vulnerable opportunities for new, life-giving connections. We can easily doubt if something new is actually good for us, or some even ask the question 'do I deserve good?' Many are unaware that we also grow and become more resilient when we step out of those patterned thoughts and preferences. The fast pace of our world, or past stories can keep us in a place that declines 'newness' or curiosity toward new events Jesus challenged that rigid thinking when He came to offer us something really new and really good.

What if we pursued His way of loving new and good things with a non-anxious, non-judgmental curiosity?"

But accepting new stories, even good ones, is not easy. Change is hard for



Bren Tally

⁴ <https://psychcentral.com/lib/patterns-the-need-for-order#1>

brains that love patterns – even with God’s help! Our inclination is to shy away from new narratives and trust the comfort of familiarity, which is why the stories of Simeon and Anna in Luke 2 are so important. We don’t know much about them: Simeon was a righteous man who spent years awaiting Israel’s redemption (2:25). Anna was a prophet “of great age” who had been widowed for years and spent her days in prayer (2:37). Guided by the Spirit, they both made their way to the temple in Jerusalem where they found the baby Jesus, who had been brought according to custom. Immediately Simeon and Anna discerned that this baby would be the savior who would write a new story for God’s people. And do you know what they did next? *They received Jesus into the embrace of their arms and sang praises.* Simeon and Anna – these seemingly minor characters – model for us the act of joyfully embracing a new story without fear.

As he grew up, Jesus proved that negative cycles had no hold on him. We’ll discuss Jesus much more in the next session. But for now, to show a powerful example of how Jesus broke bad stories, we focus on Matthew 4:1-11, in which Jesus was led into the desert to be tempted by the devil. In this passage, we essentially see Jesus relive the entire story of Israel in condensed form. He was tempted for *40 days in the wilderness*. He was tempted to *manipulate resources for himself* rather than trust God. He was tempted to *hoard the power of kingdoms* rather than lay down power. In every one of these temptations, Jesus faithfully broke a bad story: he fully trusted God as provider; he rejected the selfish power of kings. As fully human but fully God, Jesus embodied the possibility of real transformation out of Israel’s cycle of brokenness.



Our brains have an innate tendency to convince us that our lives are bound to follow negative cycles. Israel lived this negative cycle throughout their history – their stories of brokenness repeated over and over. But in the person of Jesus, we see God’s ability to break negative cycles and start a genuinely new story – if only we can trust him enough to receive it.

NARRATIVE THEMES:

► **Incarnation:** To say that Jesus was God incarnate is to say that in his very essence, Jesus had the nature of God and the nature of humanity. It is only through divine help that we can break our repeating stories – we cannot do this on our own. We look to Jesus for salvation because he was God incarnate. Jesus lived the human story but broke cycles of sin through his divine nature – and he continues to offer us new life.

► **Acceptance:** Jesus embodied God’s radical acceptance of his people. God the Father loved and accepted humanity so much that Christ, God’s Son, took on flesh so that we may finally become who we are meant to be. However, like Simeon and Anna, we must accept Christ’s newness – and that can be hard. Even good change is scary business.



GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Can you think of present-day situations in which real change was brought about by an unlikely character? _____

2. Do you resist change in your life? _____

3. **Set the scene:** Pretend you’re living in a modern-day situation in which you’ve been in a foreign land, exiled from your home, for 50 years. One day, you get word that the king of your land is allowing you to return home. Overjoyed, your family sits down to discuss the plans and dreams you have for the new chapter of your lives when you return. Your small group is now that family meeting. What do you want the new chapter to be like?

4. Have you ever made a decision that you felt was in alignment with God’s will, only for your life to get harder? If so, what did you want to say to God?

5. Has God ever broken the power of a bad story in your life and sent you on a whole new direction of goodness? _____

"When I accepted my call to vocational ministry in early 2015, I was headed to law school to become a corporate attorney. This was a dream I always had and was finally ready to pursue. However, after meeting with the KU law school dean and exploring the law schools at both Friends University and Washburn University, I still felt unsettled. I heard the Holy Spirit say to me, "I don't need you to argue in a court room; I need you to advocate for people in a different way." Now, that is not a put down to the attorneys out there. After praying and fasting for about two weeks, I was able to move forward in confidence to transition from the corporate business world to vocational ministry. I want others to experience the transformative power of God's love and grace! This adventure has led me to serving at the UM Church of the Resurrection in Guest Connections and Communications, Funeral Ministry in Congregational Care, and Missions Engagement. I am now ecstatic about the adventure ahead—pastoring as a solo pastor in a traditional parish! Stepping out on faith is not easy but has taken me places I have never imagined. Dare to step out on faith!"



–Yolanda Byers

CALL AND RESPONSE PRAYER

Reflect

on your own
this week...

PATTERNS AND FEARS

This week we discussed how our brains tend to make patterns, helpful and unhelpful. Do you see any fear in your life that is rooted from something bad that happened to you once? How does that event in the past shape your decisions in the present – is your brain telling you a negative pattern will emerge if you take a similar course of action? Sometimes that can be helpful (like if texting and driving led to an accident – don't do that again!) and other times it's not (like if a failed friendship is keeping you from seeking healthy relationships). Jot down what comes to mind.



ACT 3 WEEK 2

GAME CHANGED: JESUS, THE HOLY SPIRIT & LITTLE PINK SPOONS

BEFORE THE SESSION

FOCUS SCRIPTURES: Mark 14:32-36; Romans 8:9-17, 12:1-8

ICEBREAKER

On what part of a giraffe's neck would a tie be located – top or bottom?

CHECK IN: HIGHS AND LOWS

ORIENTING

You were made for *purpose* – it sets you on the right direction; it brings meaning to your life. In the first section we examined how you might embody Resurrection's purpose statement within your small group. But knowing your purpose is just one part of the journey. Effective groups have a shared purpose, but each *individual* must know that they belong – and the journey of belonging is more personal. It asks, "What's my story, and how does it belong to God's story?" That is the question we seek to answer in our journey towards *belonging*.

LESSON

Okay, it might be easy to say that Jesus has the power to break bad stories in our lives. But how does that really happen? In the Gospels we see Jesus' defeat of the temptations that historically held Israel back. But the Christian faith claims that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, that same power is available to *you*. Is that just cheap talk? How does it really happen?

Let's answer that question by looking at two of the primary characteristics of Jesus. The first is the radical trust he placed in God the Father. As he healed the sick, he trusted that the Father provided his power. As he associated himself with outcasts like tax collectors and prostitutes, he trusted that true respect isn't earned by high social status in the eyes of the Father. And when he multiplied loaves and fishes, he trusted that the Father could take scarcity and transform it into abundance. By living this way, he resisted the temptations Israel felt throughout their history to secure resources and a reputation for themselves. Instead, Jesus placed his identity, needs, and power in the hands of the Father, knowing the Father was loving and eager to provide. Unrestrained trust in God, it seems, is the first step out of a broken story.

Furthermore, we looked earlier at the laws given by God to the Israelites intended to structure their community so that they might be a blessing to their neighbors. We also saw that Israel was never able to live out those laws. But despite their failures, they never lost sight of how important these laws were. On the contrary, after their return from exile – when anxiety ran high out of fear of repeating a bad story – a sect of religious leaders called the Pharisees doubled down on the laws. Their argument was simple: *we got into trouble because we didn't follow the rules. If we just follow the rules better, we'll finally be what we were meant to be.* The logic was sound, but the consequence was not: it created a culture in which one could follow the rules perfectly without loving God or neighbor authentically. This leads us to the second main characteristic of Jesus: he boldly challenged the conception that the laws could save the people. He knew that true transformation of the heart, foretold by Ezekiel and Jeremiah, did not come from rules, but through relationship. In so many of Jesus' dialogues with religious leaders, he seemed

to say, *You might love the religious laws. But do you love God? Can you not see that all God ever wanted was a relationship with you, and that laws can only point to that relationship rather than replace it?* Jesus modeled this loving relationship with the Father. Even the term he chose to refer to the Father was unique: The Aramaic word *abba* is translated in our English Bibles as "Father," but it literally means "daddy." This term was not normally used for God, but Jesus used it openly. The immediacy and intimacy of Jesus' relationship with his *abba/Father* was startling in that day. He recognized that the Father was *always with him, accompanying him like a father holding the hand of a child.*

And though the people of Israel were too enmeshed in a bad story to recognize the good story that Jesus offered, God could not be stopped. Jesus' way of life – his miracles, relationship with the Father, claims to be God's Son, and attention from crowds – rattled the religious and political leaders. When a plot was set in motion to kill him, Jesus went to a garden to pray. His prayer evidenced amazing trust, even in the face of death: "Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36). This steady dependence on the Father proved worthwhile: the crowds, stuck in sin, arrested and killed Jesus. His body was placed in a tomb. But on the third day he was resurrected from the dead! He appeared to his disciples and commissioned them to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19) before he ascended into heaven. God's people had succumbed to a broken cycle once again – but God emphatically demonstrated that goodness and life have the last word.

But there is one more piece to this story. After Christ's ascension, a large and diverse crowd gathered in Jerusalem for the day of Pentecost, a Jewish festival, when wind and fire suddenly filled the atmosphere (Acts 2:2-3). Strangely, the crowd could understand each other's languages despite not having that ability before. Peter, Jesus' close companion, recognized it as the sending of the Holy Spirit, promised according to the prophets of old. This promise had come true – all those present were filled with this Holy Spirit. What was going on here?

To answer that question, we must meet one final character. One of the Pharisees who lived near Jerusalem was Saul. He did not like the followers of Jesus, called "Christians." He set out one day on a journey to Damascus intending to persecute the Christians there. But out of nowhere, a bright light struck him, and the resurrected Jesus appeared. Jesus changed Saul's name to Paul and commissioned him to bring the name of Christ before *all* people, not just Israelites (Acts 9:15). Paul's life was so transformed that he became the greatest missionary in Christian history and composed over half the letters that make up the New Testament.

Paul's message throughout his travels was that the Holy Spirit had changed everything.

"Paul fell off a horse and his entire life was transformed. Now, I'm not going to suggest that we all go out and find a bucking-bronco, but I do think we all have these falling off the horse moments from time to time in our lives. For Paul it was a literal horse, for Moses it was a burning bush, for Samuel it was a voice in the night, for Peter it was a coal-fire on the shores of Galilee. Transformation is God-initiated. It comes like an invitation, a calling, a nudge – or in Paul's experience, a falling. No matter how it comes we have a choice to make. Paul could have shaken his experience off as a bad concussion and gone on down the road. But he didn't. He said "yes," and let it transform him. For some reason, perhaps in a moment of weakness, you said "yes" to joining this small group. The question now is, "Are you going to continue to say yes and let the experience transform you?" John Wesley, the founder of a movement called Methodism, had one of these moments. He said, "I felt my heart strangely warmed." He would go on to let that experience and every day after transform him. Transformation starts with a yes, and then soon after comes another yes, and then another, and another..."



Matt Bisel

Here's how he put it: Jesus, both God and human, had an immediate and intimate relationship with the Father that empowered him to defeat the negative cycles of Israel's past. After he was crucified and resurrected, all who trusted in Jesus through faith received the Holy Spirit of God, the same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead. And now this Spirit was *living inside them* (Romans 8:11). Human beings, so incapable of living out their mission, now *literally had the power of God inside of them*. This Spirit could, in every moment of temptation, provide strength, even in the face of death, to make faithful decisions in accordance with God's will. Paul said it like this: The Holy Spirit has the power to transform us through the renewal of our minds (Romans 12:2). Paul knew that everything could be different because of this Spirit. He knew that God's people always had a difficult time living into their mission. But could the answer to this failure be as simple as the power of the Holy Spirit living inside them? Paul's answer was yes: the Holy Spirit was the definitive game-changer of God's story.

And the same is true for our story. By drawing upon the power of the Spirit, we find ourselves able to resist cycles of brokenness and become the people we were meant to be. It does not mean that we'll *automatically* find freedom from our brokenness, but it does mean that the real potential to do so is available to us through the Spirit. We draw on the power of the Spirit by engaging in the practices of our faith, and by pausing in small, ordinary moments to ask for the Spirit to equip us to act in accordance with God's will. This reliance on the Spirit transforms our hearts and minds. We find that we can play our part in the mission that has been the same from the beginning: to model God's love to our community and the world.

Every character we've met along this journey has believed in that mission. They've put their hope in the fact that God is determined to make the world right again. And one day, God will. This world will become the Kingdom of God, where all have a seat at the table and worship God with their whole being. But we aren't there yet. Until that day, God *still* calls communities of blessing to proclaim and embody hope to the world.

Here's a lighthearted yet profound way to think about this. Have you ever been to a Baskin Robbins? When you go in, you can ask the employee for a sample of an ice cream flavor. When you do, they'll hand you a little pink spoon of ice cream – you can get just a little taste of the full serving that's about to come. And when you do, you get excited, eager, even *impatient*, for the full thing. Would you believe that the Christian life is the same way? When we choose to draw on the power of the Spirit, *we become little pink spoons: when people encounter us, they get an exciting sample of the coming Kingdom of God.*⁵ And when transformed individuals, living out their calling to be little pink spoons, band together and share their gifts in God's church, those churches become *communities of blessing, a foretaste of the coming Kingdom*.



Jesus invited the people of God to radically shift their understanding of righteousness. The people had become convinced that righteousness was achieved by following God's laws. Jesus modeled a different way: he trusted the law-giver (God the Father) more than he trusted the law itself. It is through childlike dependence on God that we become what we were meant to be. We acknowledge that no act of human effort or striving will ever be enough: we need the power of the Holy Spirit to become a community of blessing that is a foretaste of the end of the story to come.

⁵ My thanks to Rev. Dr. T Scott Daniels and the people of Nampa College Church of the Nazarene for sharing this wonderful analogy.

NARRATIVE THEMES:

- **Relationship:** In Jesus we most fully see that God desires for us to be in relationship with him. We are prone to making the Christian faith about everything other than what it is meant to be: a loving relationship between God's people and God. The childlikeness of this call often makes us sneer despite it being the very thing we need the most.
- **Transformation:** The Holy Spirit is the game changer. Having the power of God within us allows for real transformation to occur in our lives if we accept it. This transformation makes us characters in God's story – more than following rules, learning the story, or waiting for things to get better, we actually become a foretaste of the Kingdom of God.



GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Where are places in the world, religious or nonreligious, that you see an overdependence on rules? _____

2. Is there a moment you can look back on and realize that you were so stuck in something bad that you missed out on something good? _____

3. **Set the scene:** You're at a drive through window. The distraught teenager takes forever to give you your food, likely her first day. How can you be a little pink spoon to her? _____

4. In hard, conflicted, or tempting moments do you ever pause to reflect on the Holy Spirit's power that lives within you? Why is it so easy to ignore the Spirit? _____

5. Do you have a loving relationship with God? _____

CALL AND RESPONSE PRAYER

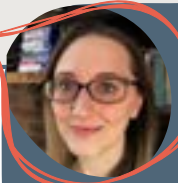
Reflect

on your own
this week...

CHARACTERS IN GOD'S STORY

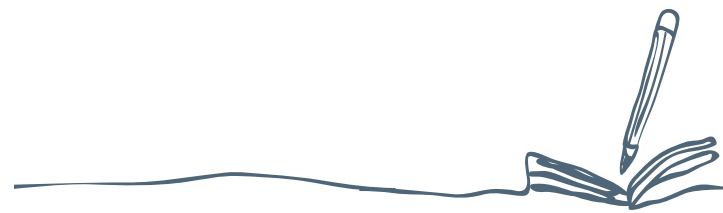
This week we discussed how the power of the Holy Spirit gives us the ability to break out of negative cycles and become who we were meant to be. As this transformation happens, we become the author of our own story – but really, we're writing the story with God. God calls us to become characters in his story, using our unique gifts and talents to bless others.

How are you a character in God's story?



"It's easy (and maybe even a little empowering) to think of ourselves as the writers of our own stories. As Christians, though, we recognize that we are not the ultimate authority. There is comfort in acknowledging that God is the author of all. The awareness that we are characters in his story frees us from the anxiety of trying to bend this world to our will. Instead, it's our sacred responsibility to do his will. For me, that means letting go of my personal frustrations and seeing the bigger picture. It's easier said than done! But when I let my white-knuckled grip on my own pen relax just a little, I find I have more energy to recognize the story happening around me—the one I did not write, but in which I play a valuable, if minor, role. It's messy at times, and I often don't know my lines, but I trust that what I experience is just a small fraction of a larger and far more beautiful work of art."

—Sarah Huppert



ACT 3

WEEK 3
GOD'S ACT 3 AND YOUR ACT 3

ICEBREAKER

Icebreaker: What is the coolest thing you've ever done in front of a group of people?

CHECK IN: HIGHS AND LOWS

(15 minutes)

ORIENTING

This week we continue our journey of reflection over our personal life stories. We'll do this work in conversation with the story of Scripture as we did in Act 1. There is great power and meaning to be found in our life stories – the more we can understand them, the more we can draw on them as an endless source of inspiration. Our unique identity is created by God as good. Throughout the course of our lives, we either live more fully into that identity, or we allow other voices to tell us who we are, voices that can lead us astray. We start to believe that we are what we do, what we earn, or what others get from us. But when we stay anchored to who we are as God created us, we grow more fully into who God wants us to be.

However, our personal stories are not lived in isolation – they are a beautiful part of God's story unfolding all around us. Going deeper into your story and going deeper into God's story are journeys that go hand in hand. It's not as if we just do one or the other. *You are a character in God's story.* You can live into your unique identity by following God's call on your life to use your gifts, skills, and passions to serve others in your community and beyond. Knowing both your story and God's story can give you the resiliency to persevere through both chaotic and joyful seasons of life. You can stand firmly in the knowledge that you are a unique part of a *community of blessing* on mission to serve the world.

This time is a little different. Act 3 will challenge you to think about the present while keeping in mind that there are more acts ahead for you. You'll think about how God is moving in your life now and how you belong to God's story today. If your story feels broken now, you are encouraged to put it into the larger context of your whole life and the entirety of God's story. How might you stay open to the possibility that God has beautiful chapters ahead for you?

Like last time, this session will make room for individual reflection. Again, don't feel like the room must be silent with everyone's head down when you get to that part. You are encouraged to get comfortable in your space, talk amongst yourselves, or play music. Next week, you will write and share 7-word testimonies, which has the potential to be a powerful experience. Don't think too much just yet about what your words are. Allow yourself to do this Act 3 work first.

EXERCISE 3

GOD'S ACT 3: GROUP (15 MINUTES)

1. Review the "Big Story Idea" and "Narrative Themes" from the previous two lessons. Which ones stand out to you the most and why? _____

2. How would you, in your own words, describe what God is *doing* in those themes and big story ideas? _____

3. How are those themes and ideas still true or pertinent in our world today? Is God still showing up in the same ways? _____

YOUR ACT 3: INDIVIDUAL (20 MINUTES)

1. Remember, you've been thinking of your life as if it were a three-act play. Don't think of Act 3 as "the end," since your story is unfinished with other acts to follow. Turn back to Act 1 and remind yourself of how you divided it up.

MY LIFE (AGE ► AGE)

ACT 1: _____ ► _____

ACT 2: _____ ► _____

ACT 3: _____ ► _____

2. Now, consider just your Act 3. Take a moment to write out, in bullet point format, some things that are going on now. What is your life like in relation to your family? To your education, your career, etc.? Who are the major characters present? What is going on in the world? Think big picture rather than in too much detail.

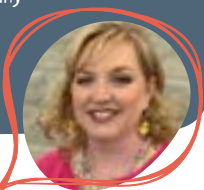
- _____
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3. What stands out to you most from your Act 3? Are there any major "themes" emerging – just like God's Act 3 has themes, does yours? _____

"Act 3 of my faith journey has been all about God equipping me for ministry. It was in Act 2 that I first heard God's invitation to be a part of His mission in the world. I was in middle school and found myself responding to a call to serve from a visiting missionary to our church. In typical middle school fashion, I bargained with God that if He didn't send me anywhere with a lot of snakes (not a big fan), I would gladly serve Him wherever He called me. Fast forward a few years and I found myself actively exploring my call to ministry. This is where my Act 3 began. God brought me into relationship with faithful mentors who gave me space and guidance to explore my calling. It was during this time that God began to mold me into who I am and am becoming today.

I say becoming because God isn't done. My Act 3 is ongoing. I am still learning about the gifts I have been given. I am still exploring what it means to answer the call to serve. He is still bringing new people into my life who are sharpening my gifts and skills. Act 3 isn't the end. In so many ways it is the start of God doing something new. 'There has never been the slightest doubt in my mind that the God who started this great work in you would keep at it and bring it to a flourishing finish on the very day Christ Jesus appears.' (MSG) Phillipians 1:6"

-Melanie Hill



4. Now, think about this. How do you think God is at work in your Act 3, even if you can't fully see it yet? What is God doing in your life right now?

5. Look at the work you've done so far, both in your group's reflections on God's Act 3 and in your personal Act 3. You've thought about what was going on, what God was doing, and the major themes of those acts. *Do you see any points of connection between God's Act 3 and your Act 3? If so, what are they?* OR, might there be a theme from Act 1 or 2 of God's story that better applies to your Act 3? Write down any of those connections between your story and God's story here.



GROUP DISCUSSION

Take a moment to summarize the work you've done using the following format. Again, think big picture as you summarize rather than trying to capture every detail:

Act 3 of my life is defined by:

God is at work in my Act 3 in this way:

My Act 3 is related to God's story because:

With what remaining time you have, group members who feel comfortable are encouraged to share the preceding three statements with the group, giving additional context if desired.

CALL AND RESPONSE PRAYER



on your own
this week...

OWNING YOUR STORY

Gaining clarity on your life story will yield fruit as you learn to align the core values of your identity with your actions. As you think of your Act 3, what are concrete things you can do to live into your identity? For example, I (Pastor Justin) have seen the importance of mentorship during my Act 3. I try to live that out by seeking wise counsel and being a mentor to others.

BEYOND ACT 3

WEEK 10 | THE 7-WORD TESTIMONY SERVICE

ICEBREAKER

Who would play you in the movie of your life?

CHECK IN: HIGHS AND LOWS

(15 minutes)

ORIENTING

We've arrived at the moment we've all been waiting for! In this section you will be challenged to think of your testimony, the story you tell about your life and God's work in it. With one caveat... you'll only have 7 (or fewer) words to do it!

We will be doing this activity for a couple of reasons that build on the work you've been doing during this season of Belonging. First, because it is a gift in and of itself to hear the testimonies of others, and to be able to share yours in return. We come to understand God more fully when we hear stories of how God works in our lives and that of others – that is a gift you can give to someone, even if it's just one statement. You've discerned the ways in which you are a character in God's story. Why not share that with others?

Second, when you have a clear sense of who you are and the story God is writing in you, you can stay anchored in that story in times of uncertainty. This has been the whole point of these reflection exercises: *Your story is not a mistake in God's eyes. It is a beautifully crafted gift to the world.* Your very life is an invitation for others to be part of a community of blessing. And your story will only get better if you learn to stay attuned to it, return to it often, and allow it to guide you. When you hit a rough patch, think of your 7-word testimony as a mantra to remind you of who you are. Having a day in which it feels like your story is broken? Think of your 7-word testimony. If something happens that creates a barrier to the plans you were making, think of your 7-word testimony. Mantras – especially ones of God's goodness in your lives – can be a powerful reminder that you belong.

Like last time, this session will make room for individual reflection. Again, don't feel like the room must be silent with everyone's head down when you get to that part. You are encouraged to get comfortable in your space, talk amongst yourselves, or play music.

(Times are suggested.)

EXERCISE 4

INDIVIDUAL WORK (20 MINUTES)

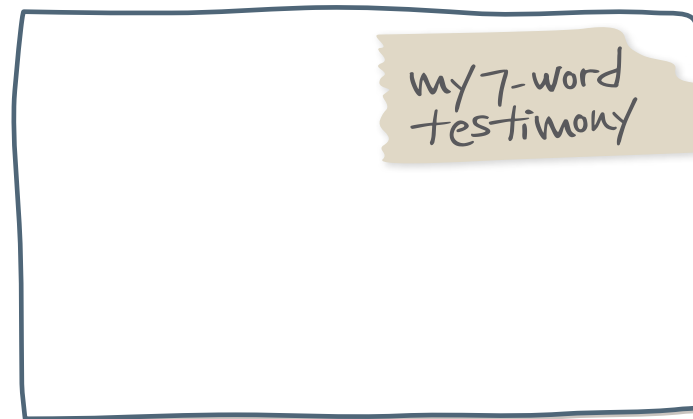
Let's get started! First, do some summarizing. Using your three "Act" summaries as a guide, see if you might summarize your whole life in the same format.

My life is defined by:

God has been at work during my life in this way:

My story is related to God's story because:

Now, here we go – doing the best you can, how would you encapsulate that testimony using only 7 (or less) words? You will have the most success with this exercise if you don't overthink it – don't agonize over every word. Simply write what comes to you. We'll share them with one another soon! *Before you begin, feel free to review the sample 7-word testimonies from your Adult Discipleship Team on the following page.* ▶▶▶



SHARING YOUR TESTIMONY

And now for the main event! You are going to share your 7-word testimonies with one another. It might make you feel a little nervous, but the good news is that your "public speaking" will only last a few seconds. Hopefully it's broad enough where you won't feel worried about sharing too many personal details. It may be best to circle up for this part if you are in person.

There are a couple of ground rules as everyone shares:

RULE 1: No apologizing for your testimony! No need to say, "This isn't very good, but..." or "I don't really have a good testimony, but..." Your story matters!

RULE 2: At the end of each person's testimony, the whole group should respond by saying "Amen!"

If someone's testimony moves you, you may wish to write it down. If so desired, return all the way back to your group member profiles and write that person's testimony by their name.

Take it away!

CALL AND RESPONSE PRAYER

SAMPLE:

THE 7-WORD TESTIMONIES OF YOUR ADULT DISCIPLESHIP TEAM

- ▶ God has never given up on me!
- ▶ Created to share God's love and hope!
- ▶ I am sceptic-mystic; broken-whole: paradox.
- ▶ God leading me to an unexpected mission.
- ▶ God has created abundance from my scarcity.
- ▶ Redeemed, called, and equipped to serve God.
- ▶ God was with me all the while.
- ▶ He didn't leave me where I was.
- ▶ Grown, broken, redeemed...all through loving freedom.
- ▶ God's abundant love and grace caught me!
- ▶ A rebel forgiven by God's loving grace.
- ▶ Called to serve with transparency and grace.



We now arrive to the final phase of year 1 of your small group's journey. Our sincere hope is that after you explored ways to enact our church's purpose statement within your small group in the Purpose section, you tasted a sense of belonging in the last section. To feel that we belong comes from a sense of deep connection to your story, God's story, and God's people.

The intention of this *GROWTH* section is to build on the good work your group has done together and focus squarely on our spiritual life and relationship with God. When we examined God's story in the last section, we were essentially looking at the past – How has God acted in the world? How has God acted in my life? This section, though, looks entirely at your present tense. Now that I see that I'm a character in God's story, what does that mean for me? How is God moving in my life now? How can my relationship with God grow today?

This section also leans on the tradition of the United Methodist Church. John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement in the 18th Century, believed that spiritual conversation in fellowship with other trusted believers is the foundation of the Christian life. Wesley set up group meetings in which participants asked each other a series of questions that promoted authenticity, vulnerability, and a genuine opportunity to grow in relationship with God.

Church of the Resurrection is lucky to have Chris Folmsbee, who has published several books about John Wesley, on our executive staff. One of those books is called *The Wesley Challenge*, in which he took John Wesley's historic questions for groups and updated them into modern language. Chris lays out Wesley's questions and offers reflection and real-life application on them in his book. With Chris' permission, this journal includes sections of *The Wesley Challenge* as well as 6 of the questions he updated (the book has 21 total) for your small group to discuss.

Your group time might feel a bit different in this section. The hope is that your group has spent enough time together that you will be able to self-guide your conversations a little bit. Therefore, these sessions are less structured, leaving more opportunity for authentic discussion. One of Wesley's questions, accompanied by a short reflection paragraph and a few follow up questions, will loosely guide your time.

We invite you to scan this QR code to watch a short video with Chris Folmsbee and Pastor Justin recorded specifically for this journal. You'll learn more about Chris, John Wesley, and how you can use *The Wesley Challenge*. Have a great time with your group!



<https://bit.ly/wesleychallenge>



FIVE KEYS TO PRAYING FOR YOUR GROUP

Rev. Steve Langhofer



As you grow in your faith and take more ownership of the group time, you and the other members of your group are invited in this section to pray aloud at the end of your time. You've been doing so in a call and response manner so far, but now we invite you to pray in a more open-ended and pastoral manner. Here are some tips for praying for your group.

1. Remember who you are. You are God's beloved child. Like any adoring parent, God loves and longs to hear from us. It pleases God when we pray, and when we help others pray. Believe this! And feel free to address God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit at the beginning. It all works!

2. Know that God enables your praying. The Spirit intercedes when we think we don't know how to pray as we ought. God promises to work within us. Ask for help. As prayer time approaches, ask, "Lord, what do You want me to say that Your people need to hear?"

3. What do you pray for? Don't overthink the contents of your prayer. Review the events of the week. What made you anxious, sad, glad? What have people shared that was heavy on their hearts, or that made them grateful? What issues have been in the news? Remember the sick, the grieving, the addicted, those in prison, those who are oppressed and their oppressors. Pray in a general sense for enemies, without naming names. Briefly name these in your prayer. And no matter how you began your prayer, remember at least once to name Jesus, who first called you to this ministry of praying. You may do this at the end before the "Amen!"

4. You are praying on behalf of your people. Lift what you know about their heartache and happiness as a holy offering to God. Don't be in a hurry. Try not to draw attention to yourself. Consider allowing time for silent confessions, petitions, and praise so each person can bring their own offering.

5. Expect to be surprised. You will amazingly find perfect words, not of your own choosing, coming into your mind. This is Christ's Holy Spirit praying through you, using you well. Rejoice and give thanks!

(Rev. Steve Langhofer co-authored Will You Pray With Me?: A Guide for Those Who Pray in Public with Rev. Anne Williams, Downtown Location Pastor)



WEEK 1
IS JESUS
REAL TO ME?

A schmet schmeeve is the opposite of a pet peeve. What is something seemingly small and inconsequential that brings you great joy? Could it be a rhythm in your day that makes you happy? Or something cool you get to witness on your drive to work? Share one by one.

In the first section we focused on enacting our purpose within the small group. In the second we explored the ways in which our story belongs to God's story, and how each of us belongs to the community. In this *GROWTH* section, we open ourselves up to the Spirit so that our relationship with God will be deepened through classic forms of Wesleyan conversation.

Someone in your group is invited to read this passage of Scripture aloud.

We begin our time together with the first of John Wesley's historic questions we'll consider in our group: *Is Jesus real to me?*

Here's a little bit of what Chris has to say about it:

Jesus is real to us when Jesus is tangible to others through words, actions, disciplines, and practices. Jesus is made real to us, and to others around us, when our trust relationship with Jesus is incomparably more important than just knowing facts and rules in a religion about Jesus...For Jesus to be real to us, there must be more than a mere nod of the head, so to speak. There must also be a trail of tangible evidence that we leave everywhere we go that helps people find what we have – a genuine, sustainable relationship with Jesus, the Christ. (19-20)⁶

Chris points to the fact that our relationship with Jesus is about much more than head knowledge. You may find that you know very little about the life of Jesus, or that you know a great deal. However, Jesus calls us to follow him. Following Jesus surely means learning about who he was and how he speaks to us today, but this journey is ultimately about allowing the Spirit to transform our thoughts, habits, and actions so that we become like Jesus. When you think about the question, "Is Jesus real to me?" ask yourself how you might become more like him, and what areas of your life might need to grow to make Christlikeness a reality.

⁶ All quotations taken from Chris Folmsbee, *The Wesley Challenge: 21 Days to a More Authentic Faith*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017.



GROUP DISCUSSION

Again, take some time on these questions. The conversation is the main event of this group session. If you don't get through them all, that's okay.

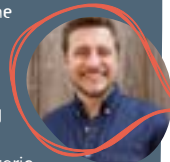
1. Is Jesus real to the world? _____

2. Is Jesus real in the witness of most Christians? If not, how so?

3. Who is someone in your life for whom there is no doubt Jesus is real to them?

4. Is Jesus real to you? _____

"Some months ago, my small group did a pilot of some of the material in the 'purpose' section of this journal. In the session on 'serve,' one of the questions in the guide asks, 'Can you think of an experience of service you've had?' Everyone in the group could quickly name scenarios or situations they had served, whether that was in a church sponsored service project, taking a meal to a friend who was sick, or by the simple act of holding the door for someone. But the next question in our guide was, 'Have you felt like God was serving you through an experience?' Our group fell silent and most of us felt stuck on being able to answer the question. After some discussion we realized it is easier for us to name moments we had served Jesus, compared to recognizing moments Jesus had served us.



One of John Wesley's historic questions is, 'is Jesus real to me?' Sometimes we can get caught up in the actions of being a Christian that we forget how Jesus is currently working in our lives. Jesus is always serving us, and it often requires effort on our end to recognize the way Jesus is moving right in front of our faces. John 1:14 describes how 'the Word became flesh and lived among us...' Jesus exists in our interactions with people at work, in moments we receive grace from a friend, and in the challenging moments we need an extra hand to guide us. When we are able to name the scenarios it was Jesus who was active and alive in that moment, then we are able to share a stronger sense of hope because we witnessed firsthand the power of Jesus being real."

-Blake Thomas

5. What might a journey of Jesus becoming more real to you look like? How can you help each other along that journey? _____

CLOSING PRAYER

During this section, a member of your group is invited to pray on behalf of your small group. See the preceding piece, "Five Keys to Praying for Your Group," for guidance if this is a new practice to you.



WEEK 2

AM I ENJOYING PRAYER?

OPENING EXERCISE: (IN)CONSEQUENTIAL MOMENTS

One by one, share an important event in your life that at the time seemed inconsequential, but actually had a big impact on the direction of your life.

CHECK IN: HIGHS AND LOWS

ORIENTING: GROWING IN GOD

In the first section we focused on enacting our purpose within the small group. In the second we explored the ways in which our story belongs to God's story, and how each of us belongs to the community. In this *GROWTH* section, we open ourselves up to the Spirit so that our relationship with God will be deepened through classic forms of Wesleyan conversation.

SCRIPTURE: PSALMS 139:1-12

Someone in your group is invited to read this passage of Scripture aloud.

LESSON

We continue our time together with the second of John Wesley's historic questions we'll consider in our group: *Am I enjoying prayer?*

Here's a little bit of what Chris has to say about it:

Be it daily, hourly, or occasionally, prayer is meant to be a positive and enriching worship experience... An experience involves insight gained from a practice. To pray and enjoy it, therefore, is to regularly engage in the practice of prayer and as a result develop a deeper understanding of God, self, others, and the world.... We may often find prayer pleasing and a delight. However, some prayer is painful... Have you ever questioned God with a loud cry of "Why?" That is also prayer. The moments that led you to that prayer were not likely pleasing and delightful, but I believe you may still "enjoy" prayer. (23-24)

Prayer may not always result in a swell of positive emotions, but it has the potential to be a positive *encounter* with God every time we engage in the practice. Authentically sharing with God what brings us joy, sorrow, or pain can be "enjoyable" because we trust the God who hears our prayers and takes some of our burden upon himself. We trust God loves us deeply, as well as the people and circumstances for which we pray. Balancing our petitions and expressions of hurt with gratitude – for what we have and for what God has done for us – leads to a positive encounter with God, even if what we say is hard.

GROUP DISCUSSION

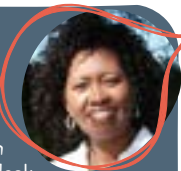
Again, take some time on these questions. The conversation is the main event of this group session. If you don't get through them all, that's okay.

1. Do you think many people understand God to be be someone who won't allow anger, hurt, or grief? Have you ever been around "happy feelings only" Christians? _____

give these some time & attention

2. Think of prayers that you hear out loud – at worship, at the dinner table, at other events. What kind of emotions do they make room for? _____

3. Do you find prayer to be difficult? If so, it's okay! What are your experiences of prayer normally like? _____



"That is a heavier question than I anticipated. After all I pray all the time – really – every opportunity I can get: Immediately when I wake up (I have set my clock on two setting- the first to wake me up so I can pray and the second to tell me I should now really get up), when I get in the car to drive, before I walk in to lead a meeting, before I eat my meals, etc. So, I believe I pray as often as many average people do. The deeper question that got me to stop and reflect is do I enjoy it? To reflect on this, I must define the word enjoy. The dictionary describes it as 'take pleasure in' or 'get pleasure from' which connotes a responsive experience of delight, relishing or appreciation. But it is also a sense of owning or experiencing the moment and benefiting from it. So, my answer is 'Yes' and 'maybe.' The 'Yes' is because I benefit from it by having peace and assurance that comes with it that God is with me for the circumstances I am praying for. I am reminded of 2 years ago when I became very sick with sepsis after a surgery and almost died. What got me through my many days in the hospital was the constant prayer I engaged and the knowledge that even when I couldn't pray, so many people were praying for me. Prayer gives me a divine connection and power to influence circumstances. The 'maybe' is the challenge I now have as I write this reflection, that I ought to own and intentionally experience the moments I have of prayer – after all it is a direct communication with God the almighty – what a privilege!"

– Anne Gatobu

4. Are you enjoying prayer? _____

5. Think about this as a group – what are some things each of you could try to make the practice of prayer more important in your life – or more enjoyable in your life? How could you support one another in that journey? _____

CLOSING PRAYER

During this section, a member of your group is invited to pray on behalf of your small group. See the preceding piece, "Five Keys to Praying for Your Group," for guidance if this is a new practice to you.

WEEK 3

DID THE BIBLE LIVE IN ME TODAY?

OPENING EXERCISE: SHOW AND TELL

Each person is invited to share a brief story about an object you brought with you. Garments count! It doesn't have to be brilliant, profound, or hilarious. Go!

CHECK IN: HIGHS AND LOWS

ORIENTING: GROWING IN GOD

In the first section we focused on enacting our purpose within the small group. In the second we explored the ways in which our story belongs to God's story, and how each of us belongs to the community. In this *GROWTH* section, we open ourselves up to the Spirit so that our relationship with God will be deepened through classic forms of Wesleyan conversation.

SCRIPTURE: COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

Someone in your group is invited to read this passage of Scripture aloud.

LESSON

We continue our time together with the third of John Wesley's historic questions we'll consider in our group: *Did the Bible live in me today?*

Here's a little bit of what Chris has to say about it:

I've learned over the years that engaging the Bible is more about intimacy, not literacy. Reading the Bible for knowledge of God is one thing. Allowing the Bible to read you for transformation is different...When we allow the Bible to read us, we place ourselves under the authority of the Bible and allow its truth to shape our lives in intimate ways... Wesley's question, "Did the Bible live in me today?" is profound. He didn't ask, "Did we read our bible today?" but did it live in us (36-37).

One of the things we see in the Bible is that God's word is not necessarily the same as written Scripture. Scripture is a collection of documents, inspired by the Holy Spirit, that point to the truth of God and God's word. We worship the God to whom Scripture points – we do not worship Scripture itself. God's word, though, is the ongoing dynamic communication of God that cannot be contained to a page, but instead reaches out to us in our present tense. The Gospel of John even refers to Jesus as the "Word," and in doing so, captures what it means to say that God's movement towards us is alive, living, and breathing. To read Scripture and allow it to live in us means to allow the living word of God to fill us up through our Scripture reading.



GROUP DISCUSSION

Again, take some time on these questions. The conversation is the main event of this group session. If you don't get through them all, that's okay.

1. Have you been a part of (or observed) contexts that seemed to worship Scripture more than God? What was that like? How did it shape your understanding of the Bible? _____

2. What are some challenges or obstacles to daily Scripture reading – time, lack of energy, lack of quiet, etc.? _____

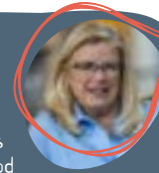
3. What does it mean to you that God's word is living, ongoing, and dynamic? How have you experienced that living word? _____

4. Did the Bible live in you today? _____

"Wesley's question, 'Does the Bible live in me today?' is a great prompt for reflection on our relationship with God. A biblical perspective teaches us that we were created by God for a purpose and that our life is most fully and joyfully lived under God's direction and guidance. When we ask this question we are engaging in a self-directed process that invites God to join us in reviewing our actions, past and present, to determine how we might live more fully into the future as the person God created us to be.

This is important because the gospel narrative –the Good News– doesn't end with the Bible. I believe that God's intention is to continue His story in every person's life. When we examine our lives for the ways that God has made Himself known to us and understand the impact it has had on our lives, and how it has and will shape our future, then we too have a story to share. We can become a witness to the Spirit of Christ at work in the world from our own experience. Our witness to God's work in our lives is relevant good news, not only important to understand but important to share."

– Penny Ellwood



5. Think about this as a group – can you think of a moment in any of your prior group sessions that God’s active and living word spoke to you through your time together? _____

CLOSING PRAYER

During this section, a member of your group is invited to pray on behalf of your small group. See the preceding piece, “Five Keys to Praying for Your Group,” for guidance if this is a new practice to you.



WEEK 4
DO I PRAY ABOUT THE
MONEY I SPEND?

OPENING EXERCISE:
SHOPPING AT THE GROCERY STORE
You walk into a grocery store and get one of those things that you push around on wheels. What do you call that thing? When you give your answer, state where you are from.

CHECK IN: HIGHS AND LOWS

ORIENTING: GROWING IN GOD

In the first section we focused on enacting our purpose within the small group. In the second we explored the ways in which our story belongs to God’s story, and how each of us belongs to the community. In this *GROWTH* section, we open ourselves up to the Spirit so that our relationship with God will be deepened through classic forms of Wesleyan conversation.

SCRIPTURE: 1 TIMOTHY 6:17-19

Someone in your group is invited to read this passage of Scripture aloud.

LESSON

We begin our time together with the fourth of John Wesley’s historic questions we’ll consider in our group: *Do I pray about the money I spend?*

Here’s a little bit of what Chris has to say about it:

Money has the power to either help us become more deeply committed Christians or to hinder our efforts... To pray about the money we spend means that we go to God realizing that we do not personally possess any money of our own. Rather, we are simply holding God’s money for the purposes of God’s work in the world – to provide the essentials for our families in order that we can work to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, provide shelter for the homeless, and, as far as our money will go, to make the world a place that looks like the kingdom of God. (45-47).

Maybe you grew up in church hearing sermons about money. Any of these sound familiar? “The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil” (1 Tim. 6:10); “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7); “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt 6:21). And we can’t forget this cheery one from James 5: “Come now, you rich people! Weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you!” Have you ever felt a little anxious when this topic, or these verses, are brought up in church? Make no mistake, there is truth in each one of these passages. When we hoard money and do not use it to further God’s Kingdom, we are outside of God’s will. But it’s important to reflect upon the more positive dimension of money that Chris points out: money is a good resource that we steward. Nothing we have – money, possessions, reputation – is really ours. Everything is God’s, and if the circumstances of our life lead us to possess more than others, we must realize that all we have belongs to God. This realization will free us to steward our possessions with a Kingdom-building purpose in mind – and to pray for help along the way.

GROUP DISCUSSION

Again, take some time on these questions. The conversation is the main event of this group session. If you don't get through them all, that's okay.

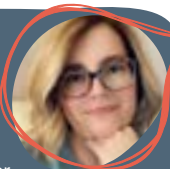
1. Have you had church experiences where the topic of money was spoken of in a manipulative way? What did that feel like? _____

give these some time & attention

2. We are to be a good steward of the money we have. Can you make any connections between that claim and the story of Israel as was discussed in the Belonging section? _____

3. What might it say about God that, in the Bible, those in need are never characterized as less valuable than wealthy people? _____

4. Can you think of someone in your life who exemplifies faithful stewardship of their resources? _____



"Prayer is a powerful tool that we can depend upon at all times, including the times we reflect on our relationship to money. We can go to God in prayer as we set our budgets on how we will use the resources that God has provided. Money is a challenge for us in today's world. We are in a society that breeds spending, but overspending doesn't really make us happy. Being happy and living with joy comes from the interior of our souls. I am personally fascinated by a way of living called Minimalism. This may or may not be a new concept for you, but it challenges us with the 'why' of our spending habits. Why are we scrolling on Amazon for the latest gadgets when the ones we have work perfectly well? I invite you to create awareness within you about your relationship with money. Ask yourself each time you spend: Why am I spending this, and for what purpose? What value does money bring to your life? Are there areas that you would adjust? I pray that your relationship with money continues to grow and mirror God's love."

- Jess Lovell

5. Do you pray about the money you spend? _____

6. What are ways that you could work intentionally towards faithful stewardship of what you have? How could you support one another in that journey? _____

CLOSING PRAYER

During this section, a member of your group is invited to pray on behalf of your small group. See the preceding piece, "Five Keys to Praying for Your Group," for guidance if this is a new practice to you.

WEEK 5

DO I GIVE TIME FOR
THE BIBLE TO SPEAK
TO ME EVERY DAY?

OPENING EXERCISE: BOOKS THAT SPEAK TO YOU

The Bible isn't the only book that speaks to us. What is a book (or series of books) from your childhood that deeply resonated with you as a kid? Do you still think of that book or series?

CHECK IN: HIGHS AND LOWS

ORIENTING: GROWING IN GOD

In the first section we focused on enacting our purpose within the small group. In the second we explored the ways in which our story belongs to God's story, and how each of us belongs to the community. In this *GROWTH* section, we open ourselves up to the Spirit so that our relationship with God will be deepened through classic forms of Wesleyan conversation.

SCRIPTURE: COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

Someone in your group is invited to read this passage of Scripture aloud.

LESSON

We begin our time together with the fifth of John Wesley's historic questions we'll consider in our group: ***Do I give time for the Bible to speak to me every day?***

Here's a little bit of what Chris has to say about it:

God speaks to us through revelation and illumination and by firing our imagination. To allow God to speak to us through the Bible we must develop the discipline of regular Bible reading and study. The discipline of finding and taking the time is essential to growing in our Christian faith. Wesley asks this question not to create more for the Christian to do. Rather, Wesley makes us confront our efforts to engage the Bible as we seek to have God speak to us so that we might become more deeply committed Christians. (50).

John Wesley knew the importance of habits, especially reading Scripture. He spoke often of what he called "means of grace" – practices through which God's grace actively transforms us. For Wesley, God's work of salvation has been accomplished in Jesus. It is up to us, though, to engage the means of grace so that Christ's work of salvation can transform us. Think of it like this: you're stranded in a desert with no chance of survival. As a free gift, God carves a stream of water that flows right to you, giving you new life. Now it's up to you to actually stoop down and drink that water! This is what the discipline of reading Scripture can do for us: it allows us to soak in the gift of life that has already been offered. The same is true for prayer, worship, and acts of service. We might even say our Five Essential Practices are means of grace. Wesley's question here pairs nicely with the one you've already looked at – Did the Bible live in me today? In that session we discussed that the Bible living in you requires more than just reading your Bible; it means putting the Bible into practice. But reading the Bible is important, also, for it is in the reading that we more faithfully learn and know what we are to live out.



GROUP DISCUSSION

Again, take some time on these questions. The conversation is the main event of this group session. If you don't get through them all, that's okay.

1. Have you ever been around a "Bible thumper" – someone who uses Scripture to criticize every situation? How might a Bible thumper be misunderstanding Wesley's call to engage Scripture every day? _____

← give these some time & attention

2. Can you think of a time that a Scripture verse or passage came to you at just the right moment? How did it speak to you? _____

3. Have you ever had a season of your life in which you felt really good about your devotional habits? What were you doing? What has changed since then? _____

[illegible][illegible]

105

Chris points out that sharing our faith is about far more than telling someone facts about Jesus. Likewise, sharing our faith is definitely about more than criticizing or judging someone into believing like we do. In fact, when someone is on the receiving end of a Christian sharing their faith from a judgmental standpoint, it can be really harmful. Instead, sharing our faith is all about testifying to the goodness that God has brought into our lives. It's about loving people right where they are and modeling for them that God loves them too. Sometimes sharing our faith in this way happens through words. Other times it happens through embodied acts of love. These are the two sides of the faith sharing coin, as Chris says.

We've been looking all year long at how God calls individuals of people to band together to become a community of blessing. This is God's plan for how to partner with humans to redeem the world. How might your small group be one of those communities of blessing? How might you live that out first to each other – and then to the community around you? Your journey of finding purpose, experiencing belonging, and growing deeper this year has hopefully prepared you to live out that wonderful call to share the Gospel. And it's a journey that's just beginning – you're a character in God's story. Who's to say what God could do through you?



GROUP DISCUSSION

For our abbreviated discussion, spend some time on these questions – there are only three this time, so you can give each one a good amount of attention.

1. What are some not so great examples out there of Christians sharing their faith with manipulative intentions? Have you experienced that personally? _____

2. What are healthier ways of sharing your faith – yes, even with your words? How might sharing your faith be a way that God is using you as a character in his story? _____

3. When was the last time you spoke with someone about your faith? _____





CLOSING RITUAL

CELEBRATING THE FINISH LINE

by Melanie Hill,
Leewood Adult Discipleship Director

Celebrating the end of things is something that is common in our culture. We cheer at the end of a race and celebrate the ending of one season merging into the next. We go all out for graduations. We've created whole holidays around this idea. We even throw big parties to usher in the end of each year. Most things have a natural end to them. In fact, one definition of the word "end" is "attainment of purpose" or "outcome worked toward". Although your group may be coming to the close of your first year, we can celebrate the work you have done together to attain its purpose – creating community and growing spiritually.

So, let's celebrate! Let's take a few moments in this last session both look back on what we have accomplished, and to look with hope at what lies ahead.

SCRIPTURE READING: HEBREWS 12:1-3

Someone in the group is invited to read the following verses.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

These verses remind us that we have endured much this year. But we also have much to look forward to. At the center of the struggle and the hope is the person of Jesus. As you reflect on the previous year, everyone is invited to share their responses to these questions:

- ▶ What was one of your "A ha" moments? Share a time that something really clicked for you.
- ▶ Look back at the 5 essential practices. Which practice now resonates most with you? Which practice stretched you the most?
- ▶ Share your 7-word testimonies with each other again. After a couple of months, what are your reactions to your 7-word testimony? Has anything changed as you've reflected on it?

Endings also mean new beginnings. When one thing ends something new begins. Take some time to think about what "new beginning" you want to have in your life because of the work you have completed here. All of you are now invited to share 1 or 2 things that you plan to incorporate into your life moving forward as part of your new beginning.

And lastly, just because your group has come to a close doesn't mean your relationships do. There is more ahead for your group – you can read about that in the pages ahead. The journey of becoming a *community of blessing* is lifelong, no matter what your community looks like. Throughout it all, God will be faithful. Jesus, God's Son, will have the final say in our small group time, as He invites us all to pray...

*Our Father, who art in Heaven,
Hallowed by Thy name.
Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done
On Earth as it is in Heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us, not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the Kingdom, the power, and the glory forever and ever
Amen.*



A WARM FAREWELL

...WITH MORE TO COME

From Pastor Matt Bisel,
Lead Director of Adult Discipleship



Congratulations! You've made it to the end of year one with your Small Group. It doesn't seem too long ago that we all met to kick things off, not sure of what was ahead. But remember now all the things your group has done together; think of the journey you've been on that has brought you here. You've studied together and shared your thoughts with each other. You've worshiped together, served together, had dinner together and, perhaps most importantly, you've laughed and grown together. Our hope is that you are looking at each other right now saying, "We don't want this to end!"

Your Discipleship team doesn't want this to be the end for you either! We would like to invite your group to join us for year two of small group – a new journal, a continued journey, but the same friends. Stay tuned for Year 2!

As you wait for our next kick-off event, we'd like to invite you as a group to take out your calendars and find some time to spend together. It doesn't have to be every week and you don't need to find something to study. Just spend some time doing things together that you like. Below are some suggestions...some things the Adult Discipleship Teams likes to do.

- ▶ Go to worship together then grab some coffee
- ▶ Continue reading *The Wesley Challenge* on your own
- ▶ Eat some tacos together
- ▶ Serve together (cor.org/serve)
- ▶ Go grab some ice cream
- ▶ Sign up for a class and learn something new together (cor.org/next)
- ▶ Plan an afternoon at the park or museum
- ▶ Volunteer in worship or at KiDSCOR
- ▶ Get together for a backyard potluck
- ▶ Share your experience and encourage someone to sign up for a small group

These are just a few ways to stay connected as a group. You can find more resources and ideas at groups.cor.org. This is the best way to stay up to date with all things Small Group at Resurrection.

We can't wait to see you and your group soon at our next kick-off event.





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