

SMALL GROUPS AT 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

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# A SPECIAL WELCOME

from Pastor Matt Bisel  
Lead Director of Adult Discipleship

## 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.

There are a couple of things we hope you’ll experience this year - things that, for us, are measures of success. First, this journal is intended to lead you on a journey towards deeper connection with God, your group members, and yourself. Second, it is our desire that you will feel connected to the larger community of Resurrection through this program, especially in the ways you serve alongside your small group. Therefore, the major goal of this program is that, by the end of the year, you are serving with your group, and that you deeply know the people you are serving with. Next year, in Year 2, the goal is a little bit different: that you deeply know the people you serve. A theme throughout this journal, though, is that your small group is the best place for you to practice the Christian life, so we’ll begin there.

*-Pastor Matt Bisel*



# 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. 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 the group had barely any time on their hands, as they were parents of teenagers or busy with travel schedules. Others had time to spare. I was somewhere in between. The leader 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? If you've been around churches, I bet you've had an awkward encounter in some kind of a group setting. It's bound to happen in communities of faith. If you've not been around churches, though, you can likely relate to an uncomfortable workplace seminar where things got a little too personal. Bottom line, gathering with people in an attempt to know them better can feel awkward. If you're sitting with people who are brand new to you, you can experience the constant back and forth of, "How much do I share? Was that too much? Why is that person so weird...oh, no - do they think I'm the weird one?" But it can be awkward, too, to meet with people you've known for some time without having ever learned the ebbs and flows of their lives. In those settings, it can still feel like you're gathering with strangers. So, whether you're with people who are new or people who have been longtime acquaintances, you may hear a voice calling from your bedrock, singing out a desire to be *known*...And trying to program that kind of connection into our churches and organizations can be downright uncomfortable.

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.

Here are a couple of clues for this journey. First, this program is a *small group* program rather than a traditional Bible study. That is not to say that you will not encounter the Bible in the pages ahead - you will, and in a significant way. However, the major goal of this program is *character over competence*. Competence in the Christian faith is vital, and we hope you are engaging study habits to further your personal competence, but this program focuses on the development of Christian character through group conversation. Second, it is important to the Discipleship team that this program helps you feel connected to the larger life of the community, especially through service. Through it all, we hope you might catch a glimpse of God's mission for the church and your role in it: a calling to participate in a community that radically blesses the world around it. I believe your small group can be a community like that. I believe your small group could be a *community of blessing*.

We have set out an intentional journey for you to further these goals, a journey that has three steps: PURPOSE, BELONGING, and GROWTH. There are three corresponding sections of the journal, with each section having specific goals in mind.

In the PURPOSE section (kickoff gathering + 6 sessions), the goal is to get to know your group, explore how the Five Essential Practices of the Christian faith help us live into Resurrection's purpose, and to evaluate how you are doing in each of those practices through low-pressure conversations with your group.

In the BELONGING section (9 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.

The last thing to mention is in response to what is mentioned above: starting a new group can be awkward at first. It is our strong desire that you might try meeting with your group for the first six sessions. The end of Part One is a natural place to step back from your group if this program isn't right for you (or to reach out to a Discipleship staff member if your group isn't a good fit for you). Think of moving into Part Two as a transition from exploring to engaging. It's okay if you need to step back, but again, consider attending six times. As humans, we tend to avoid things that are uncomfortable or challenging, even if they're good for us. Push back against that temptation!

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.





# 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 pre-work 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.

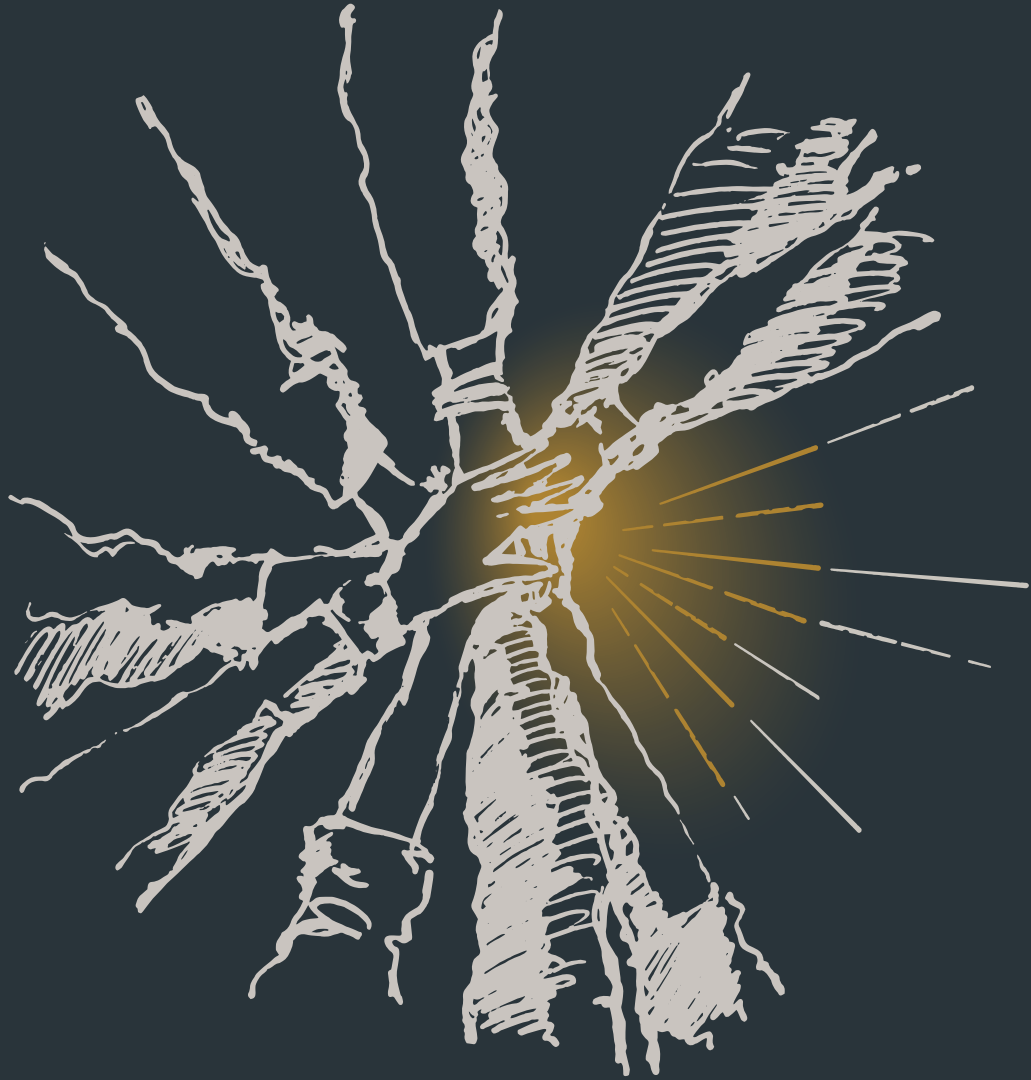
*You commit to these standards when you join a small group at Resurrection. Group leaders may have a one-on-one conversation if a member of a group is not meeting these guidelines for the sake of graceful accountability and Christian growth. These guidelines help us live out our purpose to become deeply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



**BELONGING**



# BELONGING

In the PURPOSE section, we looked at practices – and the purpose toward which they point – that undergird the life of communities who shine for the world to see. Those practices are invitations for us to consider where we are and where we wish to be. The journey towards more purpose-filled lives, we saw, begins in our small group. Communities must do the hard work of learning to love one another within their own walls so that they can bless the world around them.

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. The assurance of belonging is crucial: it gives us the resiliency we need to love others well, both inside and outside the community, because even when we fail or mess up, there are people who support us and encourage us to try again.

Moreover, a community that prioritizes belonging knows that each member brings unique skills and stories to the group. Members of a community that pursue a common purpose may be shaped by common practices, but the personalities, strengths, and skills are unique for each person.

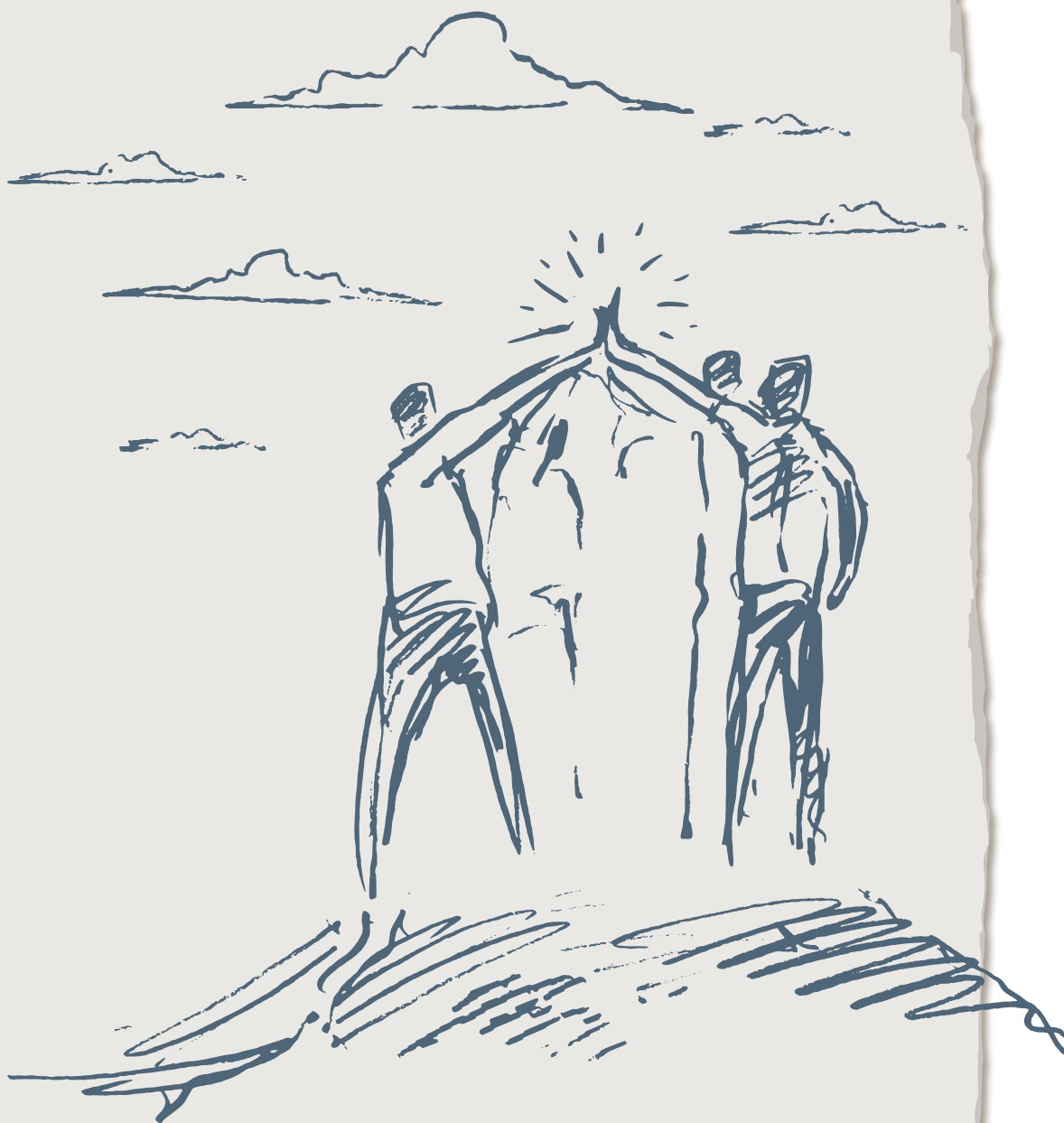
- ▶ I belong to the community
- ▶ I belong to God's story
- ▶ I belong to my own story

This section of the journal is intended to help you pursue belonging - the assurance that you are known and that you know others. The guiding question throughout the following pages is simple: 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 in your community. Important to this journal is a thorough knowledge of your own life story. Knowing both your story and God's story is vital to belonging.

So here's the roadmap for what's ahead: these lessons take you through a grand sweep of the story of God, the Bible. This section 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.

This section will leave you with one dominant idea: that a joyful life of blessing others is found through repeated decisions to trust in God's abundance. May you find that sacred abundance with the group that accompanies you.



# 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 unlikeliest 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?

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"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?

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**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?

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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?

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## CALL AND RESPONSE PRAYER



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?



