

ada bible church

Welcome to *We Believe*

We are glad you are going through *We Believe* because there is value in taking the time to consider the foundational matters of the Christian faith. This booklet summarizes Ada Bible Church's core beliefs. Knowing a church's core beliefs is important for those who attend, and especially for those joining the church as members.

The idea of studying beliefs (or theology) may seem intimidating. The word "theology" literally means words (logos) about God (theos). Studying theology means studying things about God. It really shouldn't be boring or intimidating, but applicable to life. There are some great reasons to think about what we believe:

- We all believe something, whether we think about it or not.
- Our beliefs impact who we are and the choices we make.
- Our beliefs are caught and taught from friends, family, and our culture. If we don't think about them, they usually lack consistency.
- When we think about what we believe we join Christians from all of history who considered it important to think about what they believe.
- If we love someone we study them, get to know them, and cherish them. If we love God we will study him, get to know him, and cherish him.
- Thinking about what we believe engages our mind in worship and leads to growth.
- Knowing what we believe lets us help others grow.
- Thinking about what we believe encourages us to share our faith with others.

This booklet is arranged in nine sections, each covering one topic (or doctrine). For some the sections will be a review, perhaps organized in a different way. For others this will be new. Regardless of where you find yourself, we pray you will be blessed by having the things of God brought to mind. There's no test at the end and no expectation you'll retain everything. Rather, we want you to be confident in some of the main elements of each doctrine and to come away with a better grasp of what God reveals to us in his Word, the Bible.

Our hope is that you interact and wrestle with this material to strengthen your faith. This booklet is designed to be used in a small group, but can also be done as a personal study. If you work through it on your own, we encourage you to discuss the questions with someone else, maybe a spouse or a friend. If you are going through it with a small group, you will get more out of it by reading the material each week before your group meets.

We Believe | Session One | God

Before Your Group Meets...

Read through **We Believe: God** underlining any thoughts or statements you think are important. Jot down what you find **new or compelling** or any **questions** you have.

We Believe: God

*However we view God, our lives, attitudes, and actions will follow suit;
how we view God impacts everything.*

What is God like? When you think of God, what do you think of most? Perhaps you view him as:

- A demanding drill sergeant who enforces rules and brings punishment
- A guiding shepherd who feeds and protects
- The father figure—sometimes aloof, sometimes engaged
- Your grandfather-like figure in the clouds who always understands
- A divine butler or waiter—normally not involved but comes to your aid when you ask

Which image best fits your view of God—not the “right” picture, but the image closest to how you actually think and feel about God? No matter how you feel about God, it does matter. A.W. Tozer, a respected Christian teacher and writer claims, “What comes to our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”¹

The way we think and live are intimately tied to our concept of God. It is fundamental to our worldview; it guides and shapes almost everything else about our lives. A distant and uninvolved God will be ignored. A drill sergeant causes us to fear every action, or leads to rebellion against his heavy hand.

Whatever our view of God, our lives, attitudes, and actions will follow—even our relationships, our approach to finances, how we spend our time, and so on.

There are some key characteristics or attributes of God in the biblical story that are important to know. This lesson intends to portray a healthy biblical perspective on God, not an exhaustive one, and is a brief sample of all that can be said of who God is. God is mystery and yet he has chosen to reveal himself.

The Bible was written for this very reason—to reveal God to *us* and to help us know him. Three key Scriptures and five pictures help show who God is. There will be other characteristics or attributes explored, but the key Scriptures and pictures will help hold them together.

The first Scripture is at the very beginning of the Bible. The book of Genesis begins, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1.1). These opening words of Genesis were counter-cultural and controversial. The first readers would have immediately noticed a few things about this statement. First, nothing is said about God’s back story. Where did he get so much power? Who did he defeat in order to do this? The silence is deafening, and the message is clear: God has always existed. He is eternal. He has no

¹ A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy: The Attributes of God: Their Meaning in the Christian Life* (Harper & Row, 1961), 1.

beginning and no end. We can identify philosophical reasons to believe God exists, but Scripture simply starts with the assumption— God exists. Second, and this would have been earth-shattering in their culture, is that there is only one God, the Creator of all things. God did not overcome other gods in order to create the world, and he did not need help from any other gods (with a small “g”). In fact, when God speaks, things simply happen.

Creator Ruler. God is the all-powerful, sovereign ruler over all things. He is not an impatient drill sergeant, or a divine butler. He is the creator, leader, and ruler of our world. As Creator, he has the *right* to lay out his plan for creation and work toward ensuring it happens.

God created everything, which means before he created there was nothing but him. God is uncreated, eternal, independent, infinite God. Everything else is created, time-bound, dependent, and finite. God is in his own category. Theologians use words like transcendent to describe this, and the Bible uses the word holy, which literally means “set apart.”

Set apart does not mean distant or uninvolved. It means God is set apart from sin, darkness, and evil so we can trust him to always be good in his nature. The picture of God as sovereign ruler also carries with it what theologians call God’s providence. God is not only the authority over his creation, he is actively involved in it, working out his plan. Related to this concept of ruler is that of Shepherd. God is protecting and guiding at all times. The best rulers are wise and that is true of God. Because God is wise, we know God’s guidance is the absolute best possible plan.

Father. In Genesis, chapter 2, we read how God creates the first people in his image and sets them as delegated authorities over all creation. Here, the relational side of God is revealed.

God creates humanity and walks with them. He shows Adam he is alone by assigning him the task of naming the animals (he is helping Adam learn). Then, God creates Eve to be his companion. They are naked before each other and before God without any sense of shame. The intimacy reminds us of a loving Father with his dear, innocent children. This picture of Father comes alive in the New Testament as God wants to adopt us into his family.

He is no impersonal force. He is personal. God is a subject not an object; a person, not a thing. He thinks, feels, makes plans, cares, loves, and so on. And God really is knowable. Beyond just information about him, we are created to know him, and he wants to be known.

However, God is also more than we can conceive and understand. In Isaiah 55.8-9, we hear God say, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. . . .As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” God is knowable but he is also incomprehensible. We cannot fully comprehend God no matter how hard we try. If we ever get to the point where we have no more questions, when everything about God is clear and understandable, we are no longer talking about the true God.

Trinity. We believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit because the Bible presents him in just this way. The word Trinity is not in the Bible, but the concept is. The writer of Genesis is adamant there is only one God, the Creator of heaven and earth. The clearest statement comes when Moses commissions the Israelites. “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6.4-5). This is core to biblical faith: There is only one God.

The Apostle John quotes a passage in Isaiah where the prophet sees God “high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple” (Isaiah 6.1). But, when John quotes Isaiah, he says, “Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him” (John 12.41). The point is Jesus is the God of the Old Testament at the same time Jesus is not the Father.

It works the same way with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of the Lord is very active in the Old Testament. He is present at creation and he empowers individuals like Samson, Saul, and David in amazing ways. But, in some places, it becomes clear the Spirit is distinct from the Father. Isaiah says, “the Sovereign Lord has sent me, endowed with his Spirit” (Isaiah 48.16). How could God send his Spirit separate from himself? The New Testament makes it clearer. Jesus says in John 14.26, “the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things.” Paul teaches in Romans 8.26 “the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.” The Holy Spirit actually prays to the Father on our behalf. It is one person of the Trinity speaking to another!

Throughout the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, there are indications the one true God is more than one person. He is three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Why is this important? The Trinity is man’s best effort to explain what is in the Bible, but more than that, it provides a compelling picture of God. Statements like “God is love” in 1 John 4.8 take on new meaning. The Creator of the universe is a community of three persons, characterized by self-giving love, unity, and intimacy. Adam was not God’s first relationship. At his very core, God is relationship. So when Scripture says human beings were created in the image of God, it means we were created for relationship, consistent with God’s nature.

God is relationship and wants a relationship with people. The book of Exodus gives a compelling look at how God relates to his people. He delivers Israel from slavery in Egypt, meets them at Mount Sinai, and makes a covenant with them. A covenant is an agreement that binds two entities in a permanent commitment to each other—just like a Christian marriage. The Ten Commandments serve as the obligations of the covenant (Exodus 20.1-17), and unfortunately, the people fail immediately. We read in Exodus 32-34 how they made a golden calf and worshiped it as if it were God.

And what does God do? He responds with justice, mercy, and grace. The Israelites experience serious consequences for their sin, but God does not abandon them. His promises and his commitment to them are permanent; and he loves them, so he shows them mercy. Over time he restores the relationship and continues to bless them. In the middle of this situation, God proclaims his name and really his character before Moses. Here are God’s own words describing himself:

*The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God,
slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness,
maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness,
rebellion and sin.
Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished (Exodus 34.6-7).*

In these words, we discover God’s compassion, grace, patience, love, faithfulness, and forgiveness. And we also see his justice. God is relentless in his desire to show grace and compassion on his people, and he is equally relentless that those people follow him faithfully and obediently, for their own good.

Husband. Marriage is a covenant, and throughout the Bible God uses marriage as an illustration of how he relates to his people. In Hosea 2.16, God is called the husband of Israel. In Matthew 9.15, Christ is called the husband of the Church. Set aside all the failed versions of marriage you may have seen or experienced, and

picture this: God is the most faithful, committed, and caring husband imaginable, and although we are unfaithful to him, he is always faithful to us. He promises to never leave us, nor forsake us (Hebrews 13.5).

Jesus. When Jesus was talking to his disciples, one of them said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.” Jesus answered, “. . .Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14.8-9).

This cannot be emphasized enough. Jesus of Nazareth, the man who was born to Mary and Joseph, who learned carpentry as a child, is the fullest picture of who God is. When we hear his words, see his miracles, watch him die and resurrect, we see God—his heart and his love. Hebrews 1.3 puts it this way: “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (cf. Colossians 1.15). The “exact representation” of God. If we want to know what God is like, Jesus shows us. If we want to draw close to the heart of God, Jesus is the way.

Having a right view of God is important. We see God is the sovereign Ruler, Creator of heaven and earth; he is our caring and intimate Father; and he is a community of three persons (Father, Son, and Spirit—each distinct but fully God).

God is relational and desires a deep covenantal relationship with us. He desired this so much he sent himself—his son Jesus—to earth to break down the barrier between humanity and God. He is as committed to us as a loving Father and a faithful husband. He knows and wants what is best for us. If we can gain a proper view of God, it will change our lives, attitudes, actions. . . everything.

Small Group Discussion!

Look Back: *Begin your time by reviewing the Scriptures and the important points of the reading.*

This week's reading opened with five ways people sometimes view God. If you close your eyes and think of God, what image comes to mind?

Discuss this statement. Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer.

The way we think and live are intimately tied to our concept of God. Fundamental to our worldview, it guides and shapes almost everything about our lives.

Spend 10 minutes reading these verses that highlight four different pictures of God. Briefly discuss what you see and experience in the passages. Further questions for discussion will follow.

- **Genesis 1.27 (Creator Ruler)**
- **Galatians 4.4-7(Father)**
- **Hosea 2.19 (Marriage)**
- **Hebrews 1.3 (Jesus)**

Thinking back over the reading for the week, take five minutes to discuss:

- What you found new or compelling
- What questions you have

Mary's Story: *Have someone in your group read this story aloud.*

Growing up with a verbally and emotionally abusive father, it was easy for Mary to think her Heavenly Father was like this too.

A horrible life event reinforced her false view of God and she felt betrayed; her anger smoldered into a raging inferno. Setting her Bible on a shelf, she swore God off.

Graciously, God didn't accept her resignation. She cursed, swore, and said horrible things to him, but he refused to leave her alone. "He was just there. It was a quiet presence, not a condemning one. No matter what I did or said to him (and I said some pretty horrible things), he would not leave me alone!"

God's unending presence began to melt her heart. Finally, she dusted off her Bible. Reading, she noticed the passages she previously underlined were all the hard and difficult things about God. Wondering if her friend had underlined the same things in her Bible, Mary called to ask what she underlined. Her friend read a passage in Lamentations – "the Lord's mercies never end and his love never ceases."

For the first time Mary began to recognize her skewed view of God. Mary realized she needed to base her view of God on the whole Bible, instead of on her earthly father, so she bought a brand new Bible.

In what ways do you identify with Mary in this story?

Look In: *Discuss together what God is asking you to do and encourage each other.*

- **Creator Ruler.** God is the all-powerful, creator, and sovereign ruler over all things. The best rulers are wise and that is true of God (Romans 11.33). Because God is wise, we know God's guidance is the absolute best possible plan. Do you ever have a hard time thinking of God as the expert creator who knows the best way to live? If so, when and where in your life does that happen?
- **Father.** The picture of God as Father comes alive in the New Testament as God wants to adopt us into his family. God longs to relate to us as a loving father. Jesus' death on our behalf grants us his standing before God as dearly loved children. How would being able to see God as a loving father help us trust him? What are some obstacles in the way of seeing God as a loving father?
- **Marriage.** Marriage is a covenant. Throughout the Bible God uses marriage as an illustration of how he relates to his people. Setting aside all the failed versions of marriage you have seen or experienced, picture this: God is the most faithful, committed, and caring spouse imaginable. Although we are unfaithful to him, he is always faithful to us. In your own words, describe God's relational commitment to you. How does knowing God's faithfulness and his commitment to a relationship with you affect your view of him?
- **Jesus.** God is relational and desires a deep covenantal relationship with us. He desired this so much he sent himself—his son Jesus—to earth to break down the barrier between humanity and God. He knows and wants what is best for us. Discuss the following statement: God knows what is best for us. Do you agree or disagree and why?

Look Ahead: *Consider your next steps following this discussion.*

If our view of God truly impacts everything, what are some next steps we can take to help us get a fuller picture of God? Think about these next steps in the context of the Row (weekend services), the Circle (small group) and the Chair (regular time alone with God).

As we continue the *We Believe* series, we hope the next eight weeks will help you develop a fuller picture of God.

In The Chair this week...

- Memorize, meditate on (read over slowly and deliberately numerous times), or write in your own words Galatians 4:7.
- Spend some time confessing the way you have falsely viewed God, and ask God to reveal his true nature to you.
- Meditate on God as loving Father. Thank God for adopting you into his family.
- Since God is the Creator Ruler with the best life guidance, prayerfully identify areas where you need to take God's instruction more seriously. Choose one area as a next step to improve and ask a friend to come alongside you to help you grow in this area.

We Believe | Session Two | *The Bible*

Before Your Group Meets...

Read through ***We Believe: Bible*** underlining any thoughts or statements you think are important. Jot down what you find **new or compelling** or any **questions** you have.

We Believe: Bible

Because the Bible is how God has chosen to reveal himself to us, only when we make it our personal authority can it fully speak to us and help us fall in love with God.

People view the Bible in many ways: confusing, boring, intriguing, inspirational literature, or even irrelevant. For many, the Bible has been life changing. Some think the Bible is interesting as long as someone else explains it, while others are not crazy about reading it. Many people, if they are honest, may wonder why we follow the Bible at all. No matter what your experience has been with the Bible—positive or negative—God wants to meet you through the pages of Scripture. He promises to speak to you through his Word and work in your life, if you open your heart to him.

Although the Bible may be a bit awkward to get into at first, it is truly an amazing book. The Bible is riveting history, brutal battle accounts, and sensuous love stories—real life. Not only that, it is absolutely unique and fascinating as literature. It has 66 books made up of lengthy compositions, speeches, poems, songs, and personal letters. It was written over the span of 1,500 years from the Middle East, Africa, and Europe; and in three languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek). Over 40 authors and contributors were involved: men and women, Israelites and non-Israelites; and really no final editor, other than God. Yet, the Bible communicates one seamless story with astounding continuity and consistency—God creating all things, humanity rejecting their Creator, and God graciously working to redeem all things—the most influential story in history.

But, what is the Bible? Is it simply a book written by a bunch of dead guys who lived in far off places and times? It is far more than a simple book. Five words help us understand the importance of the Bible: revelation, inspiration, canon, reliable, and authority.

Revelation. Revelation refers to something that is revealed or made known (do not confuse this with the last book of the Bible). The Bible was revealed to us (it came from God) and reveals something to us (it shows us who God is and what he is doing in the world). Revelation assumes something must be revealed. Something was hidden—God. More accurately, people are unable to see or communicate with God because of sin. We are separated from him unless he does something.

The first Bible stories tell us about this separation. The first humans were created to know God, walk with him, and talk with him. But they rebelled and distance grew until people's view of God deteriorated. Paul describes the effects of this in Romans 1.21-23, "For although they knew God, [speaking of people in general, especially ancient people] they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles." Without God's help our thoughts are futile and our hearts are darkened. Hidden

because of our sin, if God does not step in and do something, we are left in the dark. The good news is that God has revealed himself.

God has always revealed certain aspects of himself. This is called general revelation. Paul writes that “since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse” (Romans 1.20). God revealed himself enough through general revelation that we are all accountable to him. However, we really need to know more. So God stepped into history in a special way in order to fully reveal himself and his will to us. This is called special revelation. God first started revealing himself in this way to specific individuals in Genesis chapter 12. In a world full of idol-worshippers, God made covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David to start his redemptive plan. He spoke to the people through numerous prophets, and later apostles, who spoke and wrote the very words of God.

Then Jesus steps on the scene—the supreme source of special revelation. The writer of Hebrews opens his letter declaring that Jesus is “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.” In Colossians 1.15 we read, Jesus is “the image of the invisible God.” Jesus Christ is the fullest revelation of who God is. His words, his miracles, his death and resurrection, reveal God, his heart, and his love. Jesus says in John 14.9, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” We do not need to live back then in order to know God through Jesus. The Bible reveals God to us and helps us begin a genuine relationship with him. That is why it is called revelation.

Can you see how relational the Bible is? If the Bible is God’s way of cutting through the fog to reveal himself so that we can know him, one of its core purposes must be relationship.

When you think of revelation, remember: God revealed himself. The Bible is not just about learning information, being inspired, or finding wisdom for life—it is about knowing God intimately as Lord and Savior, the one who loves you more than anyone else ever could. In the process, the Bible helps us understand ourselves. It reveals blind spots (the areas of sin we overlook) and through God’s Spirit the Bible helps transform us. The Bible is a huge part of God’s plan to form us into people who reflect his character.

Inspiration. Where did the Bible come from? Who wrote it and how? The Bible is called God’s Word, but there are also human authors of the Bible: Moses, David, Matthew, Paul, and others. Did God write it, or people?

Two key texts give pictures of how God wrote the Bible through people. The first is 2 Timothy 3.16, and the picture is breathing or speaking. Paul says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness.” “All Scripture” refers to the Old Testament and those New Testament books known as Scripture (2 Peter 3.16). This verse makes clear the source of Scripture is God. It is God-breathed. Some English translations use the word “inspired” here, hence “inspiration.” But, it is not that the authors were inspired or the Bible is inspiring. It is that the Bible is inspired, or better yet exhaled—breathed out by God—through human authors. God used people to write his story the way he wanted it written—every word.

In 2 Peter 1.20-21 the picture is sailing. Peter writes, “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Peter gives us a hint about the mechanics of how the Bible was written. The writers were carried along by the Holy Spirit. Spirit is the same word for wind. Think of a sailboat pushed along the water. God’s Spirit is the wind, and the writers the boats. Just as wind drives a sailboat across the water, the Holy Spirit moved the

writers of the Bible to record exactly what God wanted. God did not override their personalities, cultures, perspectives, or concerns. He used them. The writers wrote for their own purposes, and God was driving the process from beginning to end.

With inspiration, think: It came from God. The human authors wrote the text, but God wrote it through them.

Canon. How do we know which books of the Bible are the inspired word of God? What about the books left out? Canon means rule or measuring stick. The canon of Scripture refers to the 66 books determined to be revelation from God. How was this decided? The Old Testament books were accepted very quickly because the prophets who spoke the Word of God also had it written down. Jesus himself submitted to these Old Testament Scriptures and referred to them as authoritative.

The emergence of the New Testament was slightly different. There were many writings immediately after the life of Christ, so the church had to recognize which books were God-breathed and which were not. Because at first everyone knew which books were authoritative, there was no need for an official list. Later, when people started to introduce writings contradicting the teachings of Jesus or the Apostles, it became clear they needed to determine the canon. The church officially finalized the canon about 350 years after the time of Jesus.

You may wonder how we can have confidence in the process. First, only a few books were ever seriously debated. The vast majority of the New Testament was regarded as authentic revelation from the beginning. Second, the church developed specific criteria in order to authenticate the 27 books of the New Testament. The book had to be written by an Apostle or direct associate, it had to be accepted and used by the many local churches at the time, and it had to be consistent with what Jesus and the Apostles taught. And, third, they were very selective. A lot of writings were rejected for various reasons.

Factor in Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit would guide his followers "into all truth" (John 16.13), and we can have full confidence the 66 books of our Bible genuinely make up the authentic Word of God. With canon, remember the statement: We have all of it. We have all the writings God breathed in order to reveal himself.

Reliable. Can we really trust the Bible? What makes us think such ancient texts written by people would not be full of inaccuracies, copying mistakes, or even foolishness? In Psalm 19, the writer declares, "the statutes of the LORD are trustworthy." The common belief in Israel was that God's Word is fully true, trustworthy, and righteous. Jesus submitted to the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, claiming in Matthew 5.18, it was authoritative and true to the extent that "not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished." Jesus would disagree that the Bible is false, misleading, or inaccurate.

Furthermore, if the Bible is from God, we have reason to trust it because we trust God. God is the source of Scripture, and God does not lie (Hebrews 6.18), so it stands to reason the Bible is truthful. The veracity of the Bible is known as inerrancy or infallibility. This means the Bible is true in everything God intended to communicate through the authors.

But were these truthful words preserved over time? Do our English translations reflect the words and message of the original authors? The manuscript evidence for the Bible is robust. The number of Old Testament manuscripts is few, but highly accurate, and continually confirmed as reliable by archaeology. There are over 5,000 copies of all or portions of the Greek New Testament, dwarfing the evidence for any other ancient writing of the time. Plus, the manuscripts are virtually identical. None of the differences

between them have any bearing on core Christian beliefs. Scholars agree that over 99.5% of the words are pure and reflect accurately what the authors wrote.

How can the Bible, an ancient collection of writings, have an impact today? God promises when we read the Bible we are not alone. The Holy Spirit is alive and working through the Bible to help us. The author of Hebrews says, "For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4.12). Many testify of times the teaching of the Bible struck home, and God worked to change their hearts. Scholars call this illumination: the Holy Spirit's work of giving insight into his truth, taking us beyond an intellectual understanding of a passage to showing how it impacts our lives. This is when the Bible comes alive. The story does not merely become interesting, but the story becomes significant and powerful. We walk away changed because God worked in our hearts through his Word.

Perhaps the work of the text itself is the most important evidence for the truth of Scripture. When reading the Bible, it has a way of cutting through our objections and convincing us it is credible. There are all sorts of external reasons you can trust the Bible, such as archaeological evidence or the hundreds of fulfilled biblical prophecies. If you are not convinced the Bible is true, give it time. Read the Bible for yourself and see what you find. Ask God to speak to you, and he will. Alongside reliable, know: I can trust it.

Authority. Ultimately the question is: Are we willing to submit our entire lives to the teachings of the Bible? If the Bible really is from God and communicates who he is and what he is doing in the world, the only rational response is to listen, understand, and respond.

People declare the absolute authority of God's Word over them in numerous places in the Bible, but the heart of this is captured in Psalm 119:43-45, 89-97:

*Never take your word of truth from my mouth, for I have put my hope in your laws.
I will always obey your law, forever and ever.
I will walk about in freedom for I have sought out your precepts...
Your word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens...
Your laws endure to this day, for all things serve you.
If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction.
I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have preserved my life...
Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.*

Do those words express your heart? The Bible is our final authority for faith and life because it is God's Word. Its authority comes from God's authority as our Creator and Redeemer, so we choose to allow his voice to speak over all the other voices we hear. When we discover our thoughts or behaviors are in conflict with what God has said, we should want to submit to him and follow his will.

Our goal should be to make the Bible our personal authority, to allow it to help us fall in love with God. With authority think: I will submit. The Bible only has real authority in our lives as we submit to its teachings.

Revelation: God revealed himself. **Inspiration:** It came from God. **Canon:** We have all of it. **Reliable:** I can trust it. **Authority:** I will submit. As you continue in your spiritual journey, no matter how much or how little you know of the Bible, God wants to meet you there, speak to your heart, and guide your life.

Small Group Discussion!

Look Back: *Begin your time by reviewing the Scriptures and the important points of the reading.*

When you were a kid, what did you think of the Bible? What role did the Bible play in your home?

Which of the following most accurately describes your current view the Bible?

- Intimidating and hard to understand
- Compelling if others explain it
- Something I'm learning to understand on my own
- A big part of my spiritual journal

Discuss this statement. Do you agree or disagree?

The Bible is our final authority for faith and life because it is God's Word.

Spend 10 minutes reading these verses that highlight four main ideas about the Bible. Briefly discuss what you see and experience in the passages. Further questions for discussion will follow.

- **Romans 1.21-23** (Revelation)
- **2 Timothy 3.16** (Inspiration)
- **Psalms 19.7** (Reliable)
- **Psalms 119.43-45, 89-97** (Authority)

Thinking back over the reading for the week, take five minutes to discuss:

- What you found new or compelling
- What questions you have

Jill's Story: *Have someone in your group read Jill's story aloud.*

Jill had been around the Bible her whole life. She grew up in the church and knew all the stories. She said, "I used to think the Bible was basically just two things: stories and rules. Stories about things that happened a long time ago and rules to tell you what to do." Jill had never found either the stories or the rules that applicable to her life. Sure, she went to church. She even read her kids the Bible stories because she figured that is what parents were supposed to do, but the Bible just didn't make sense to her. She didn't feel like she needed to know any more stories about what happened a long time ago, or learn any more rules, since she had a hard time keeping the ones she did know.

Then Pastor Jeff Manion challenged the whole church to read through the New Testament during a sermon series called *New Testament Challenge*. Jill was reluctant to do so, but "I'm a team player and didn't want to be that person not doing it." As she read through the New Testament, she began to realize the Bible wasn't just stories and rules, but something more. One morning as she read Matthew 6.19-21 (Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also), she felt "like Jesus was talking right to me. I just sat there unable to move. I realized I had been doing everything I could to store up treasure on earth and it wasn't working."

She had never felt something like this after reading the Bible (though to be honest she hadn't really read it in a long time). She didn't know how to describe what she felt. That night after putting the kids to bed, she opened her Bible and read it again. The words didn't seem that unimportant anymore, they "suddenly seemed like the most important thing in the world." Jill knew something had to change and committed herself to learning what it meant to serve God instead of money.

Jill reads her Bible almost every day now. Not every morning is like that morning, but she has found there are mornings when the words on the page jump out to her, challenging her to be a better person and showing her more clearly who God is.

In what ways do you identify with Jill in this story?

Look In: *Discuss together what God is asking you to do and encourage each other.*

- **Revelation.** If the Bible is God's way of cutting through the fog to reveal himself so we can know him, one of its core purposes must be relationship. The Bible is not just about learning information, being inspired, or finding wisdom for life—it is about knowing God intimately as Lord and Savior. He is the one who loves you more than anyone else ever could. In the process, the Bible helps us understand ourselves. How have you seen the Bible be more than just historical information, helping you know God intimately or better understand yourself?
- **Inspiration.** Ultimately the question is: Are we willing to submit our entire lives to the teachings of the Bible? If the Bible really is God-breathed (inspired) and communicates who he is and what he is doing in the world, the only rational response is to listen, understand, and respond. What is one time the wisdom of the Bible was powerfully evident in your life?
- **Reliable.** People often raise questions about whether the Bible is reliable or if the English translations reflect the words and message of the original authors. The manuscript evidence for the Bible is robust. What are some of the common attacks levied against the Bible and how would this week's reading answer those attacks?
- **Authority.** The Bible's authority comes from God's authority as our Creator and Redeemer, so we choose to allow his voice to speak over all the other voices we hear. When we discover our thoughts or behaviors are in conflict with what God has said, we should want to submit to him and follow his will. What are some areas we often struggle to submit to God?

Look Ahead: *Consider your next steps following this discussion.*

What do you need to do to help you engage the Bible more in this stage of your life? What are some steps you've found helpful for engaging the Bible that might be helpful to others?

In The Chair this week...

- Memorize, meditate on (read over slowly and deliberately numerous times) or write in your own words Psalm 119:105.
- Spend some time confessing you sometimes question the relevance of the Bible, and ask God to speak to you through his Word this week.
- Meditate on the grace of God to reveal himself through his Word. Thank God for giving you his Word in a language you can read.
- Since the Bible is God's Word, with the best life guidance, prayerfully identify areas where you need to base decisions upon God's Word instead of the values of our culture. Take the next step this week to improve in one area and write it down to remind you of your goal.

We Believe | Session Three | *Jesus*

Before Your Group Meets...

Read through **We Believe: Jesus** underlining any thoughts or statements you think are important. Jot down what you find **new or compelling** or any **questions** you have.

We Believe: Jesus

The Bible makes important claims about Jesus. There are a lot of competing voices making claims about who Jesus is, so coming to grips with the claims of the Bible is vital for our faith. We cannot move forward in our spiritual journey unless we trust Jesus is who he said he was.

Who is Jesus? Do you believe all the things usually said about him, or deep down do you wonder? Did you know Jesus himself asked this? "When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' 'But what about you?' he asked, 'Who do you say I am?'" (Matthew 16.13-15).

First, Jesus asked them what people around them—their society or culture—believed about him. Then, he asked them what they believe. Peter nails it. He said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16.16). Was Peter clear on this before Jesus asked him? Perhaps having to think through the question, "Who is Jesus?" gave Peter the nudge he needed to recognize and really own what he believed.

Some view Jesus as a good moral teacher, prophet, guru, or even a legend developed over thousands of years. C.S. Lewis, author of the *Chronicles of Narnia*, one of the most influential Christian writers of the past century, profoundly observed Jesus cannot be just a good guy. He claimed to be God. Lewis argues a man who claims that must be either delusional (a genuine lunatic), evil (a liar of the worst sort), or God. People must look at what the Bible says about Jesus, search their hearts, ask the hard questions and then, decide what they really think.

This summary journeys through Scripture to look at what God said about himself and his Son, Jesus. Five important words guide the study of Jesus: Lord, Sacrifice, Resurrection, Mediator, and Teacher.

Lord. In the New Testament, Paul claims, "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10.9). "Lord" was a common word meaning master, and usually a way of showing someone respect (Matthew 10.24). But, the Bible fills this word with much more meaning, rooted in the Old Testament.

"Lord" is the term used to translate God's personal name, Yahweh or Jehovah (LORD in SMALL CAPS, for instance Psalm 16.2). By the time of Jesus and the early church, "Lord" became synonymous with Yahweh. When Paul and early Christians say "Jesus is Lord" they not only mean "Jesus is my master;" but "Jesus is the God of the Old Testament, the Creator of heaven and earth, the king over all creation."

Is Jesus the God of the Old Testament? In John 12.41, John quotes from the prophet Isaiah, in the Old Testament, where Isaiah has a vision of God "high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe

filled the temple" (Isaiah 6.1). John quotes from this vision and claims: "Isaiah says this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him," John asserts when Isaiah saw God sitting on a throne and filling the temple, he saw Jesus. Jesus is God.

Jesus, the Father, and the Holy Spirit, are all called "Lord." "Lord" is essentially God's personal name. This is why several hundred years after Christ, Christian leaders wrestled with passages and developed the concept of the Trinity. They needed a way of explaining what God said about himself. God is three persons, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Each person is fully God, and yet, there is only one God.

Jesus is the second Person of the Trinity, the one and only begotten Son of God. But, what does it mean? Hebrews 1.2-3 describes Jesus: "in these last days he [God] has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word" (cf. John 1.1-18; Colossians 1.15). Jesus of Nazareth, the man who was born to Mary and learned carpentry as a child, is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being." He is the fullest picture we have of God. When we hear his words, see his miracles, watch him die and resurrect, we see God, his heart, and his love.

We may not be able to fully comprehend the concept of the Trinity, but that is alright, because we are thinking about God, and he is way more than our minds can grasp.

Sacrifice. Jesus' sacrifice focuses on his humanity, Jesus as a human being. John states, "[Jesus] is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2.2). What is an "atoning sacrifice"? To deal with human sin, something more than animal sacrifices were needed. Sin is a human problem. As weird as it sounds, we needed a human sacrifice, and it had to be flawless—a sinless human had to die (Hebrews 2.17; Leviticus 1.3). This was quite the problem.

But, God stepped in and did something truly radical. The Second Person of the Trinity, God himself, became a human being. Paul states,

[Christ Jesus] being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness (Philippians 2.6-7).

Theologians call this the incarnation. God took on human flesh and walked among us (John 1.1, 14). We do not serve an aloof God who cannot relate to our struggle. We serve a God who not only can relate, he stepped into human history to save us when we could not save ourselves.

The writer of Hebrews helps us understand why, "he too shared in their humanity... he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted." Not only that, he goes on: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (Hebrews 2.14-18; 4.15).

Can you hear the heart of God in that? Jesus obediently stepped into human history. Miraculously conceived in a virgin named Mary, he was born through the normal human process of gestation and birth (Luke 2.5-6; Galatians 4.4). He lived a normal human life (Luke 1.80; 2.52). He suffered, experiencing all the temptation we experience, but remained sinless. Then, in the greatest act of love the world has ever known, Jesus offered

himself up for us (John 10.18; Matthew 26.36-42). His suffering at the hands of Roman soldiers, his death on the cross, and his burial were all real. The Gospels are clear on that.

What led Jesus to die? Love, because by his death our sins are “atoned for.” The penalty of death is removed from us, and we are permanently reconciled to God through faith in him. This is why we say Jesus is our “substitute sufferer.” He is the one and only sufficient sacrifice for our sins. Because he died, we do not have to.

He saved us from sin, death, and an eternity separated from God (1 John 4.14). The reality of Jesus’ divinity, incarnation, and human life is vital for our faith. Jesus is fully God and fully man. If you find yourself struggling to understand this, remember, God is more than we can fully comprehend.

Resurrection. When Jesus walked out of the tomb, everything changed. We often focus on Jesus’ death. Jesus also rose from the dead, an act as important as his death. The work of salvation is only complete with both death and resurrection. Through his resurrection, Jesus accomplished at least three things.

First, Jesus proved his divinity—that he really is God (Romans 1.4)—and vindicated both the reality and the justice of God. Jesus’ resurrection was God’s way of proving what he has been saying is true, and all the predictions and promises of the Old Testament are fulfilled in him.

Second, by coming back to life, Jesus broke death’s grip on creation. When Jesus submitted to death and came back to life, he conquered death—he destroyed it (2 Timothy 1.10). This is why Paul rejoices in 1 Corinthians, “Death has been swallowed up in victory. ‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ’” (1 Corinthians 15.54-57). Jesus’ resurrection brought a new kind of life to humanity, one not subject to death. We call it “eternal life,” and because he has it, he can offer it to us.

Third, Jesus’ resurrection made our resurrection possible. Without Christ we are all dead spiritually (cut off from God), facing physical death with an eternity apart from him. Yet, since Jesus died as our substitute, in God’s eyes, we died with him. And dying with him, we are also raised to new life with him. Paul writes, “By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also” (1 Corinthians 6.14). The new life he lives is ours to live through faith in him.

This new life is not only eternal life someday after we die, but new life today. Paul declares, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me” (Galatians 2.20). If you are a Jesus follower, if you have trusted Christ for salvation, you no longer live but Christ lives in you. You are not living by your own power or for your own purpose. You are a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5.17).

How does Christ live in us? This is key for understanding our new life in Christ. Paul explains, “if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you” (Romans 8.11; cf. 1 Corinthians 6.19).

It is the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ himself—who lives in us and gives us new life. It is why Paul says, “Christ lives in me.” When Jesus came back to life, he paved the way for all people to be resurrected, and that resurrected life is the Holy Spirit living in us.

Any forward movement in our spiritual journey comes as the Spirit of Christ lives in us and brings change. That's why we call him our "resurrection." Plus, we know he will one day resurrect our physical bodies to live forever with him (1 Corinthians 15.50-58).

Mediator. "For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people" (1 Timothy 2.5-6). Jesus is the one and only mediator between God and humanity. Without Christ we are enemies of God. Paul makes this clearer than we may want to admit in Colossians 1.21: "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior." We need a mediator to go before us, to make a way to God. We cannot do it ourselves. Jesus did this by enacting a new covenant in his blood (Luke 22.20) which, as promised in the Old Testament, replaced external religion with internal devotion.

Through Christ, God gives people new hearts and new spirits, writing his laws on their hearts, changing them from the inside out (Ezekiel 36.26-27; Jeremiah 31.31-34). Today, God offers to embrace all people—not just Jews—in that covenant through faith in Jesus Christ.

Jesus continues to be our mediator. He is interceding for us (Romans 8.34), and he promises to return one day as King and Judge of all creation (Acts 1.11; Hebrews 9.28; Revelation 19.11-16).

Teacher. Even non-Christians agree certain things Jesus taught are really great. But, having Jesus as our teacher in the fullest sense of the word may be one of the hardest aspects of the Christian faith. Jesus sets a high standard. Jesus says in Luke 9.23-24, "whoever wants to be my disciple he must deny himself and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it." Being a follower of Christ, a disciple, is costly. All other relationships and desires come after our pursuit of him (Luke 14.33). Salvation is free—we do not earn it—but it demands our total allegiance to Jesus Christ.

When he called Matthew, Peter, James, John, and the other disciples, Jesus said, "Follow me," (Matthew 9.9), common words for Rabbis to say when they wanted younger men to spend time with them, learn from their wisdom, and pattern their life after the Rabbi's. This call is another way of saying, "Come, be like me." That is why Peter encourages Jesus followers in their suffering by saying, "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2.21; cf. John 13.15; 1 Corinthians 11.1).

Jesus is the model of life and love. Jesus says, "As I have loved you, so you must love one another," (John 13.34), and after Jesus' death on the cross, John looks back and says, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters" (1 John 3.16). Love is more than mushy, emotional "connections" between people, more than being nice to each other or helping each other out. It is the often hard, painful step of giving our lives away to others. Wives do this for their husbands and husbands do this for their wives—sometimes without getting the same in return. We do it for our friends, neighbors, and even our enemies. The life of love Jesus modeled and taught is one where we go beyond what common courtesy expects in order to care for others physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Why? Because this is exactly what Jesus did for us, and it is the only path to true life.

Who is Jesus? He is our Lord, our sacrifice, our resurrection, our mediator, and our teacher.

Small Group Discussion!

Look Back: *Begin your time by reviewing the Scriptures and the important points of the reading.*

Some view Jesus as a good moral teacher, prophet, guru, or even a legend developed over thousands of years. What is the craziest thing you have ever heard someone say about Jesus?

Spend 10 minutes reading aloud these verses that highlight four main ideas about Jesus. Briefly discuss what you see and experience in the passages. Further questions for discussion will follow.

- **Romans 10.9** (Lord)
- **1 John 2.2** (Sacrifice)
- **1 Timothy 2.5** (Mediator)
- **Matthew 7.24-29** (Teacher)

Thinking back over the reading for the week, take five minutes to discuss:

- What you found new or compelling
- What questions you have

Ralph's Story: *Have someone in your group read Ralph's story aloud.*

"I never took him seriously." Ralph couldn't believe he was actually saying the words. They seemed sacrilegious. How could someone who claimed to be a Christian for the past 20 years say that about Jesus? Ralph clarified, "It wasn't like I didn't think he died for my sins or anything. I understood that part. I asked him for forgiveness and everything. I just never took him seriously beyond that." The small group listened as Ralph continued his story. Ralph told how he trusted Jesus as his savior when he was a kid, and tried to live a good Christian life. However, one day he was challenged by something he was reading to take a fresh look at Jesus. He said, "The gist of it was to look at Jesus not just for salvation, but for how to live the right life."

Ralph said his life was forever changed by that challenge. Suddenly Jesus' teachings were no longer cute or trite stories, but the instruction manual for living a whole life. Not just a "good" life, but a life with purpose, value, and balance. Ralph told the group he realized Jesus wasn't giving rules, but trying to help people become the type of people who thrive in life. The kind of people who don't need to seek revenge to feel better, the kind of people whose emotions aren't driven by life situations, the kind of people who can find their self-worth in God and not their net-worth. Ralph said, "I'm so glad I was challenged to take a fresh look at Jesus. I'm a completely different person, life makes so much more sense now."

How do you identify with Ralph in this story?

Look In: *Discuss together what God is asking you to do and encourage each other.*

- **Lord.** In the New Testament, Paul claims, "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10.9). "Lord" was a common word meaning master, and usually a way of showing someone respect. But, the Bible fills this word with much more meaning. What do you think it means to say "Jesus is Lord"? What impact should Jesus as Lord make on the life of the believer?

- **Sacrifice.** Jesus' sacrifice focuses on his humanity, Jesus as a human being. We do not serve an aloof God who cannot relate to our struggle. We serve a God who stepped into human history to save us when we could not save ourselves. Discuss the following statement: It is important that Jesus not only offered himself for us on the cross, but is also able to relate to our every struggle.
- **Mediator.** Jesus is the one and only mediator between God and humanity. Without Christ we are enemies of God. We need a mediator to go before us, to make a way to God. We cannot do it ourselves. Jesus did this by enacting a new covenant in his blood. Share about when you asked Jesus to be your mediator.
- **Teacher.** Even non-Christians agree certain things Jesus taught are really great. But, having Jesus as our teacher in the fullest sense of the word may be one of the hardest aspects of the Christian faith. Jesus sets a high standard. And he gives us a great illustration about obeying him.

Have someone read the following aloud:

We have all seen what sometimes happens to houses when flooding occurs. We've seen pictures of banks eroding and houses crumbling into rivers, of ocean waves toppling houses. We've also seen pictures of two houses, side by side, with one crumbled and the other standing straight and tall. Sometimes the damage might not be as drastic. Perhaps one house on a street has a perfectly straight roof line, while another slants to the side. Or maybe one house has a straight porch, while the other droops. These problems have to do with craftsmanship. How the house was built. Perhaps no part of a house is more important than the foundation. Foundations can make a difference during floods, earthquakes, and over time. Jesus knew this truth and in Matthew 7 and Luke 6 he tells about two men building a house. One man works hard to put his foundation on a rock. The other just builds his house straight on the sand. You can figure out what happens, the house on the rock can survive a storm, and the house on the sand doesn't fare very well. Then Jesus explains what he means and often we miss what he says. He tells us the man who built his house on the rock is like the one who listens and obeys what Jesus teaches. It isn't just the one who asks Jesus for salvation. It is the one who listens and obeys.

Jesus says we build a strong foundation in our lives when we listen and obey his words. What are some weak foundations our culture tries to get us to build our lives upon? How have you personally experienced in your own life or seen in others a weak foundation lead to a collapse?

Look Ahead: Consider your next steps following this discussion.

Jesus said the strength of our life is based upon hearing his words and putting them into practice. Using these two criteria, what are some specific ways you can strengthen your life?

In The Chair this week...

- Memorize, meditate on, or write in your own words John 13:34.
- Spend some time confessing we sometimes don't put into practice what Jesus teaches. Ask God to speak to you through his Word this week and to give you the strength and courage to obey.
- Meditate on the role of Jesus as mediator. Thank God for sending his Son as a sacrifice for your sins.
- Since Jesus is the greatest teacher who ever lived, with the best advice for living life, spend some time reading Matthew 5-7: The Sermon on the Mount. Ask God to reveal one area of Jesus' advice you need to apply this week as a next step and work toward that end. Write out a verse that reminds you of your goal and stick it somewhere you will see it.

We Believe | Session Four | *Humanity*

Before Your Group Meets...

Read through ***We Believe: Humanity*** underlining any thoughts or statements you think are important. Jot down what you find **new or compelling** or any **questions** you have.

We Believe: Humanity

Because God chose to create people in his image and he loves them, there is perhaps no better barometer of our heart for God than that we obey him by treating people like he wants us to.

Why are we here? What is the nature of reality? In this summary, four topics will help answer those questions: image of God, sin, depravity, and male and female.

Image of God. God created humanity in his image. Without God, nothing exists (John 1). The opening chapters of the Bible show God's special relationship with the first man and woman. Genesis paints an intimate portrait of his creative work bringing human beings to life. God does more than simply create the first humans, he breathes life into them:

Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being (Genesis 2.7).

God and man have a special tender relationship from the beginning. God did not have to create people. He chose to create out of his desire. God did not create because he lacked anything within himself—as if people could fill some deficiency in him. Love and community eternally existed in the Trinity (John 17.5, 24). God created out of his free will and good pleasure, showing in greater detail that he is highly relational and desires a relationship with those he created.

Genesis 1.26-27, shows God creating humanity in his image:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

What does it mean that people are created in God's image and likeness? First, like God, we have personhood, consisting of intellect, will, and emotions. Second, humanity is highly relational, similar to the three members of the Trinity. The Father loves the Son and the Spirit. The Son loves the Spirit and the Father. The Spirit loves the Son and the Father. People were made for community. Third, God gave people governance over creation and made them stewards of it (Genesis 1.28). Fourth, we are moral creatures who have consciences (2 Corinthians 4.2). Fifth, we have a spirit, letting us relate to God, who is spirit (John 4.24).

It is clear God created people so we could bring glory to him. Paul says in Ephesians 1.11-12:

*In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the **purpose of his will**, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, **might be for the praise of his glory.***

Humanity has incredible significance in the created order. Humanity maintains an elevated status before God because we were uniquely created to give God glory, simply by living the abundant life for which he created us.

We are the pinnacle of God's creation. God blesses man and then calls creation very good instead of just good (Genesis 1.25 and 31). God says he takes great delight in people in Zephaniah 3.17:

The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.

Sin. The Greek word most used for sin in the Bible is "hamartia," meaning to miss the mark. When we sin, we miss the mark for which we were created. It is a relational term. We were meant to love God and live in harmony with him.

Sin entered the world through an event (the fall), recounted in Genesis 3. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, not satisfied with being created in the image of God, wanted to be God; so they disobeyed. Their relationship with God changed from peace and harmony to opposition, and sin entered the world.

Sin leads to death. Prior to Adam and Eve's rebellion, they could have lived on the earth forever in perfect union with God. The fall brought death and tarnished the image of God in people.

Since the fall, all people have inherited a sin nature. Scripture teaches the sin nature is imputed (or given) to us through Adam. His guilt passes to us, also known as original sin. Paul writes in Romans 5.12:

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned...

Some may think it unfair Adam's guilt passed to us since we were not in the garden with him. However, no one can claim to not sin. Even without original sin, we are all guilty of our own, personal sins. Furthermore, if we protest the sin passing down to us from Adam as unfair, we would have to protest the undeserved imputation of Christ's righteousness to us by faith. While we are given sin from Adam, we are also given the gift of forgiveness from sin through Christ.

Depraved. Just how bad is our predicament? Bad enough. Scripture uses the word depraved. People are incapable of pleasing God. Before a person is given the gift of saving faith in Christ, they are impacted by the full weight of original sin.

Several passages describe different aspects of this condition: our minds are depraved and blinded (Romans 1.28; 2 Corinthians 4.4), our understanding is darkened and we are separated from a life with God (Ephesians 4.17-18), our emotions are defiled (Romans 1.21), and our will is enslaved to sin (Romans 6.20). The consequence of this state is spiritual death—estrangement from God.

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6.23).

Mercifully, God provides a two-part solution. The first part deals with eternity. Ultimately God eliminates the sin nature of those who believe in Jesus and returns them to a state of perfect harmony after Christ's return. The permanent kingdom of God will be without sin (Revelation 21.1-4, 22-27).

The second part deals with life now. Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection from the dead purchased salvation from sin. Those estranged from God can be reconciled by placing their faith in Christ. When a person comes to faith, they move from a state of estrangement from God to one of peace and unity with God. Paul's great passage from Romans summarizes this Good News:

But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Romans 3.21-24).

Through faith in Christ, we are free to walk with confidence before God, in peace and freedom. Paul writes in Romans 5.1-2:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

Though we are no longer condemned by sin we cannot fully shed the ongoing effects of our sin nature and still give in to temptation. Thankfully, God has given us tools to defeat temptation. First, we have the perfect life modeled for us by Christ. Jesus obeyed the Father (John 14.31), he lived a life pleasing to God (John 8.29), he lived in accordance with the will of God for his life (John 6.38), and he completed the task for which God had called him (John 17.4). Second, the Holy Spirit resides within the believer giving counsel and strength to help us obey the Lord. Third, we have the Word of God to provide guidance. Fourth, God builds the church to provide accountability, teaching, and encouragement.

The first humans, Adam and Eve, lived in perfect harmony with God until they disobeyed. Through this rebellion (the fall), both sin and death entered the world. The guilt of Adam's sin is passed to us. Yet, the believer is forgiven and Christ's righteousness is given to him. Nonetheless, in daily life, we are prone to sin. Thankfully, God provides tools for us to overcome temptation. Even with these advantages, when we fail and sin, we confess it to God and he is pleased to forgive and cleanse us.

Male and Female. God created humanity male and female, equally made in the image of God.

When God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And he named them Mankind when they were created (Genesis 5.1-2).

Men and women are created equal, but with distinct roles. The Scriptures teach the equality of the genders. All believers are equal in Christ. The New Testament has a number of practical examples of male and female being created equal in stature. First, the sign, or symbol, a person is one of God's people changed from circumcision (male only) to baptism, available to both male and female (Acts 2.41). Second, at Pentecost and afterward, the spirit is poured out on all believers (Acts 2.17-18). Finally, both male and female are given spiritual gifts intended to edify the church (1 Corinthians 12.11).

The Trinity models equal persons filling different roles in pure love and unity. The members of the Trinity operated in different ways in creation. They have different roles within God's plan of redemption. The Father sends the Son to be the sacrifice for sin (John 3.16). The Son obeys the Father sacrificing his own life so we

can live (Luke 22.42). The Son sends the Spirit to equip and empower the church (John 16.7). All three are equal yet assume a different role. Similarly, men and women are equal but fill different biblically-defined roles.

In the creation story, we see several hints of the distinct functions of the genders. God creates man first. Next, Eve is called Adam's helper. This term does not imply subservience, instead, it means she will assist and be a partner in the family tasks. The same word, "helper" is used in Scripture to describe someone who is superior. God is even described as helper in Psalm 118.7. Third, after the fall, God came first to Adam asking, "Where are you?" indicating God intended Adam to be responsible in this new relationship (Genesis 3.8-13). Adam's failure to lead his family was one cause for sin entering the world. Finally, Adam is named as representing the human race. Paul indicates this when he writes,

For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive (1 Corinthians 15.21-22).

In the Bible, marriage is defined as a covenantal union between a man and a woman lasting for a lifetime. In this covenantal relationship, husbands and wives are equal, with different roles. In a Christ-centered home, the husband is to honor his wife and lovingly provide godly directive, pointing his household toward God by example and teaching. He is to love his wife as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5.25-28). The wife is called to honor her husband and to lovingly submit to his direction, as she would Christ (Ephesians 5.22-24). Both the husband and the wife surrender their rights for the betterment of the other.

Our marriages on earth should be a picture of the larger kingdom of God, where God shows undying love for the church. Husbands and wives are to love one another and show the unity God models in the triune godhead: Father, Son, and Spirit.

Having a biblical perspective concerning humanity is important for several reasons. First, if we understand God chose to create us, it has important ramifications for our perspective about God and what he desires. He longs to have a relationship with us. Life has meaning as we understand God has placed us here for a reason—to enjoy a relationship with the living God and to bring him glory through our lives.

Second, if we understand sin relationally, when we sin we know we are distorting the life the Creator gave us. The right response to sin is to confess to a God who loves us, thanking him for the forgiveness he freely grants us in Christ and calling upon the Holy Spirit to help us avoid the same temptation in the future.

Finally, people are created in the image of God, making all human life sacred. From unborn children to the most senior citizens— all are divinely created beings, special to God and loved by him. All human life should be protected from harm, and the sanctity of life is an essential perspective for the believer.

Small Group Discussion!

Look Back: *Begin your time by reviewing the Scriptures and the important points of the reading.*

Discuss this statement. Do you agree or disagree?

The Spirit is fully God, not just some force or ghost.

Spend 10 minutes reading these verses that highlight four main ideas about the Bible. Briefly discuss what you see and experience in the passages. Further questions for discussion will follow.

- **Genesis 1.26-27** (Image of God)
- **Romans 5.12** (Sin)
- **2 Corinthians 4.4** (Depravity)
- **Genesis 5.1-2** (Male and Female)

Thinking back over the reading for the week, take five minutes to discuss:

- What you found new or compelling
- What questions you have

Sally's Story: *Have someone in your group read Sally's story aloud.*

Sally had a good life. Everyone told her how wonderful her kids were, how hard of a worker Paul, her son, was, and how helpful Julie, her daughter, was whenever she saw a need. Despite a good husband and kids, Sally said, "I just couldn't shake the feeling something wasn't right with the world. I felt like I was seeing the cracks in the world and they were just becoming more obvious." Diane, her best friend from college, was going through a messy divorce. Jill, their next door neighbor, was fighting stage 4 breast cancer and only had months to live. Sally never talked about it, but her two miscarriages weighed heavy on her heart, even over ten years later.

The hurting people she knew, coupled with the pain she kept tucked in her heart, started to make her question the meaning of life on a regular basis. She didn't talk about it, but she thought about it a lot. One week her brother, Tom, invited her to Ada Bible Church. Pastor Jeff Manion spoke about sin and slavery and redemption. Something resonated with Sally. It was like the message spoke right to her. She didn't have the courage to say anything that week, but she decided she wanted to hear more and kept coming back. Finally, she asked her brother, Tom, to grab coffee one morning to talk about Jesus and what he had done.

In what ways do you identify with Sally in this story?

Look In: *Discuss together what God is asking you to do and encourage each other.*

- **Image of God.** God created humanity in his image. We are the pinnacle of God's creation. God blesses man and then calls creation very good instead of just good (Genesis 1.28 and 31).. How should understanding that people are created in God's image impact the way we view ourselves and how we treat people?
- **Sin.** When we sin, we miss the mark for which we were created. It is a relational term. We were meant to love God and live in harmony with him. How have you viewed the meaning of sin in the past? If sin is relational in nature, how is that different from what most people think about sin?

- **Depravity.** Just how bad is our sinful predicament? Bad enough. Scripture uses the word depraved. Discuss the following statement: Before a person is given the gift of saving faith in Christ, they are impacted by the full weight of sin and are incapable of pleasing God. Do you agree or disagree?
- **Male and Female.** Men and women are created equal, but with distinct roles. The Scriptures teach the equality of the genders. All believers are equal in Christ. The Trinity models equal persons filling different roles in pure love and unity. The members of the Trinity operated in different ways in creation and they have different roles within God's plan of redemption. Discuss this statement: Men and women are equal but fill different biblically-defined roles.

Look Ahead. Consider your next steps following this discussion.

If human life is sacred because we are created in the image of God, what steps do you need to take to rightly value the people around you this week?

In The Chair this week . . .

- Memorize, meditate on or write in your own words Genesis 1.27.
- Spend some time confessing how hopeless your situation is without Christ and ask him to help you understand the relational nature of sin.
- Meditate on the picture of a perfectly committed marriage as a glimpse of God's love for us. Thank God that all believers are equal in his eyes, whether male or female.
- Since God created us in his image all people have incredible value. This week identify those people you treat with less value because of their mind, looks, or job. Work toward valuing those people based on their God-given value.

We Believe | Session Five | *Spirit*

Before Your Group Meets...

Read through **We Believe: Spirit** underlining any thoughts or statements you think are important. Jot down what you find **new or compelling** or any **questions** you have.

We Believe: Spirit

The Spirit lives in the believer. If we allow the Spirit to be active in our lives, he will counsel us and work with us to transform us into the image of Jesus, to live the life we were created for.

The Holy Spirit may be the least understood and talked about member of the Trinity. This summary is comprised of two parts: "Who is the Holy Spirit?" (His identity) and "What does the Holy Spirit do?" (His ministries in the world and in our lives).

Who is the Holy Spirit? In Genesis 1.2 (as God creates all things) we read "the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." Later, in Judges 3.10, "the Spirit of the Lord came upon" certain individuals. Based upon the things the Spirit does in the Old Testament, the Spirit is virtually indistinguishable from God himself. In fact, the Spirit is God, so when God acts, the Spirit is present and powerful to accomplish his will.

In the New Testament, there is a direct connection between Jesus and the Spirit. Although Luke distinguishes between Jesus and the Holy Spirit [in the story of Jesus' baptism where the Spirit descends on Jesus (Luke 3.22)], later in Acts 16.7, Luke writes "the Spirit of Jesus would not allow" the apostles to enter certain regions as they sought to spread his message. The very same Spirit, the Spirit of the Lord, is referred to here as the "Spirit of Jesus." Elsewhere, he is referred to as the "Spirit of Christ."

When thinking about the Holy Spirit one must begin with the Trinity. The Bible reveals God is a community of persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. They are not identical but are unified in the fullest sense of the word. Together, they are the one true God, and the names—*Spirit of God, Spirit of the Lord, and Spirit of Jesus*—point us in this direction. The Spirit is fully God. He is not a "force," an inclination, or a ghost. The Holy Spirit is fully God.

Each person of the Trinity has different roles to fill as God accomplishes his will, but that in no way compromises the reality of the Trinity. Jesus himself links the three persons of the Trinity so directly he leaves no room to doubt they are all part of the godhead. In the Great Commission (Matthew 28.19), Jesus says, "therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." This very clearly points to the Trinity. Paul does the same thing as he closes his second letter to the Corinthians.

Just as God is perfect and infinite in all his attributes, in various ways, the Spirit is described as eternal, omniscient (or knowing all things), omnipotent (being all powerful) and omnipresent (existing in all places at the same time). These can only be true of God himself.

The Holy Spirit is God and acts like God. The Spirit was present at creation and instrumental in it. He was involved in the virgin birth of Christ. He descended upon Jesus at his baptism and anointed him for ministry. According to Hebrews 9.14, the Spirit empowered Jesus to remain sinless and obedient to the Father.

The Spirit spoke through prophets in the Old Testament and helped the apostles of the New Testament remember the details of Jesus' ministry. Through the Spirit, human beings faithfully recorded God's Word in the Scriptures. The Spirit is God's Spirit, a co-equal member of the Triune God.

When someone asks, "Who or what is the Holy Spirit?" we answer, "The Holy Spirit is God, the third member of the Trinity, the power behind all that God does."

What does the Holy Spirit do? The Spirit is extremely active in the life of a follower of Jesus in two primary categories: first, what the Spirit does as a person moves from being a non-believer to a believer; and second, what the Spirit continues to do for the rest of a believer's life.

Jesus taught in John 3.3, "no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." The "born again" idea is that all people who repent of their sin and come to faith in Jesus Christ are, technically, born again. They experience what Jesus refers to as a second or new birth. We have all been born physically, but we also need to be born spiritually. Paul described it this way in 2 Corinthians 5.17: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"

Regenerates. God regenerates—or some might say revives or resuscitates—a person who repents and believes the gospel of Jesus Christ. Regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit, demonstrated in Titus 3.4-6: "*[God] saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.*" Just as the Spirit was involved in creation, he is the One who recreates the believer. He brings new life in Jesus Christ.

Indwells. When people come to faith in Jesus Christ they are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. To be "indwelt by the Spirit" means the Holy Spirit literally takes up residence within the believer. Paul speaks directly of this when he writes, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?" (1 Corinthians 3.16). God's Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, lives in every follower of Jesus Christ to counsel, guide, and strengthen. If a person trusts Jesus as their Lord and Savior, they are never alone. God is with you even when you do not feel it.

Adopts. The new believer is adopted by God and placed into his family, the church. All true Jesus followers have moved from being outside God's family—spiritual orphans—to inside God's family. We are now his fully loved sons and daughters.

Paul links the Spirit's indwelling with the believer's adoption. He writes, "You . . . are controlled . . . by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ" (Romans 8.9). Then, just a few verses later he continues, "those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. . . you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father" The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (Romans 8.14-16). Without God's Spirit in our lives we would still be spiritual orphans—helpless and hopeless.

Seals. Often people ask, "Even though I am adopted as God's child, how do I know I am still God's child if I struggle to change? How do I know the Spirit is still living in me?" This question leads to a concept called "sealing." When we come to faith in Jesus Christ, we are sealed with the Holy Spirit. God uses the Spirit to permanently mark (or seal) his children, guaranteeing he will complete our salvation.

Paul states, "When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession" (Ephesians 1.13-14). This is a bedrock truth that should give us great comfort now and hope for the future. If you have committed your life to Jesus Christ, God has sealed you with the Holy Spirit. You cannot be misplaced, confused for another, redirected, diverted, stolen away, rejected, relabeled, or lost. You belong to Christ, the Spirit has sealed you and God guarantees your salvation. It simply does not get any better.

The Spirit regenerates (or gives us new life). He indwells or comes to live inside us. He adopts us into his family; and he seals us, marking us as his. All of that happens by the work of God's Spirit the moment we come to faith in Christ.

Transforms. The second group of things are ongoing ministries. These ministries fall under what we call "sanctification" or "spiritual formation," the process of being formed into people who reflect the character of Jesus Christ.

This process of spiritual formation is a lifelong pursuit empowered by the Holy Spirit. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3.18: "And we...are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." There is a connection between the Spirit and our ongoing transformation. All who believe in Jesus Christ are being transformed—are being made more like Jesus in our hearts, our character and our actions—and this transformation comes from the Spirit of God who lives in us.

How does transformation work? First, at conversion, God gives us new life. He regenerates us. This does not mean he makes us immune to sin. We are still susceptible to temptation and can still sin. However, God's Spirit indwells us, helping us defeat sin and live lives pleasing to God. People cannot defeat the power of sin by their own strength. Sin is defeated by God's strength. God has given his Spirit to help in the battle. Thankfully the Spirit is more powerful than us and more powerful than the Enemy who tries to tempt us. The apostle John wrote, "the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4.4). The Spirit helps us drive sin out of our lives over time and pursue the fruits of the Spirit.

A partial list of the ways the Spirit helps:

- He strengthens us with power—that is, he strengthens our faith and our resolve to live out our faith when we feel weak. Ephesians 3.16
- He convinces us of the truth of God's Word. John 16.13
- He convicts us of sin and helps us defeat it. John 16.7-9, Romans 8.13
- He helps us pray—in fact, he prays for us when we do not know how! Romans 8.26-27
- He gives us spiritual gifts to build up and edify the church. 1 Corinthians 12.4
- He counsels us when we lean on him in times of need. Acts 16.6
- He fills us with joy in our journey with God. Acts 13.52
- He gives us peace and makes us righteous. Romans 14.17

According to Ephesians 1.13-14, the Spirit comes to live in us the moment we trust Christ for salvation. However, four chapters later in Ephesians 5.18, Paul says we are to be "filled with the Spirit." What is Paul talking about here? If we need to be filled with the Spirit, evidently he—or more specifically, his activity or influence over our lives—can be depleted. Perhaps the simplest way to explain how to be filled with the Spirit is: we walk in the Spirit, or as Paul says in Galatians, "keep in step with the spirit." This means we increasingly trust him and submit to his promptings. We strive to pay attention to what the Spirit wants, and we obey in everything. The more we live according to his will (remember, he is God), the more power we receive to continue being transformed. Our obedience fuels our transformation. We gain momentum in our

spiritual journey only as we submit to God's will and obey what he asks. But when we resist God's will or disobey, we are left to our own power to follow Christ and the results are dismal at best.

However, as we walk in the Spirit, God will produce more and more of what Paul labels the "fruit" of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5.22). This is spiritual formation into Christlikeness. We become less hateful and more loving, less cynical and more joyful, less anxious and more at peace, less impatient, and so on.

God's Spirit has come to live in each of us to change us from the inside out—which happens, not as we work harder to follow rules, but as we open ourselves to the Spirit's movement, pay attention to his guidance, and follow his lead. Change is a result of actively obeying the Spirit's guidance revealed through his Word and his indwelling.

The Holy Spirit is God, the third person of the Trinity, God's power and presence throughout history—starting with creation and ending with our re-creation as children of God. We know this because the Bible reveals the Spirit in just this way. He is called the "Spirit of God," the "Spirit of the Lord" and the "Spirit of Jesus." He has all the characteristics or attributes of God.

There are two categories of the Holy Spirit's ministries in our lives: the things he does the moment we come to faith, and the things he does as we seek to live out our faith. The moment we come to faith, the Spirit gives us new life. We are reborn (which we call regeneration), so that we are new creatures before God. He indwells us, he adopts us into God's family, and seals us with God's mark, assuring our salvation.

After we come to faith in Christ—as we seek to live out that faith—he is our Comforter or Counselor. He transforms us spiritually into Christlikeness. He makes us more and more like Jesus in our character and our actions, by showing us our sin, helping us defeat the power of sin, and producing in our lives the fruits of the Spirit—the very characteristics of Jesus himself. And when we struggle, he is more powerful than our enemy and wants to help us live lives pleasing to God.

Small Group Discussion!

Look Back: *Begin your time by reviewing the Scriptures and the important points of the reading.*

Discuss this statement. Do you agree or disagree?

The Spirit is fully God, not just some force or ghost.

Spend 10 minutes reading these verses that highlight three main ideas about the Bible. Briefly discuss what you see and experience in the passages. Further questions for discussion will follow.

- **Titus 3.4-6** (Regeneration)
- **2 Corinthians 3.18** (Transformation)
- **Ephesians 5.18** (Filled by the Spirit)

Thinking back over the reading for the week, take five minutes to discuss:

- What you found new or compelling
- What questions you have

George's Story: *Have someone in your group read George's story aloud.*

George joined a Men's Ministry group at Ada Bible Church almost on a whim. He was challenged by the teaching, and the work required wasn't easy, especially memorizing the verses. He hadn't been forced to memorize anything since he was in school and that was a while ago. After two years at GRCC he started his own landscaping business. "For some reason God really blessed my business" and now he had 10 employees working for him and he was able to live comfortably.

Spring is always a busy time for George and when he received an angry voicemail from a customer he really didn't want to have to deal with it. He had enough stuff going on already. As he pulled up to the house, the customer was already pacing around the front yard. As George opened the truck door the customer just unloaded on him. This was the last thing George wanted to deal with. He could feel his temperature start to boil. Then, suddenly a verse he had been memorizing started to pop into his head, James 1.19: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." He said, "It was like something held my anger in check and I was able to try and diffuse the situation, instead of just yelling at the guy." Though the customer was still mad, George wasn't.

The landscaping problem still needed to be fixed, but George left happy because he knew that conversation was a major victory. Typically, he would blow up at customers who treated him poorly. Something was different this time. As George told his small group about it the next day, one of the group members said, "George, the Holy Spirit helped you in that situation. He brought some of the verses you have been working on to mind and helped you stay calm."

In what ways do you identify with George in this story?

Look In: *Discuss together what God is asking you to do and encourage each other.*

- **Regenerates.** The Spirit is God and plays an important role in the life of the believer. The Spirit regenerates (or some might say revives or resuscitates) the believer, bringing new life. This is a big

deal, going from dead to alive. How have you seen this new life happen in your life or someone you know?

- **Transformation.** After the Spirit's work at the moment of salvation (Regeneration, Indwelling, Adopting, and Sealing) he is active in the work of transformation. One of the ways the Spirit helps us become like the Christ is by convicting us of our sin and helping us defeat it. What emotions have you felt when the Holy Spirit convicted you of sin? Identify some ways to properly respond to the convicting of the Spirit.
- **Filled by the Spirit.** The simplest way to explain how to be filled with the Spirit is: we walk in the Spirit, or as Paul says in Galatians, "keep in step with the spirit." This means we increasingly trust him and submit to his promptings.

Have someone from your group make chocolate milk (stopping to ask the questions) or read the following aloud:

When we accept Christ as our savior, we receive the Spirit. He indwells us. One way to think about this is like chocolate milk. If you take a glass of milk and just squeeze the chocolate into it, what does it do? Does the milk look much different? Does it taste different? Does it smell different? Now, say you take a spoon and stir the glass. Does the milk look different now? Does it taste different? Smell different? What made the difference? Kind of like the chocolate milk, we may have the Spirit living in us, but we need to stir up the Spirit (Ephesians 5.18).

What are some specific ways we can stir up the Spirit on a regular basis?

Look Ahead. Consider your next steps following this discussion.

Identify one or more ways the Spirit has used the Row (weekend services), the Circle (small group) or the Chair (regular time alone with God) to convict, challenge, or encourage you in the last few weeks. What are some steps you can take to follow through on what the Spirit is saying to you?

In The Chair this week . . .

- Memorize, meditate on, or write in your own words Romans 8.16.
- Spend some time confessing you sometimes quench the Spirit, and ask God's Spirit to be evident in your life.
- Meditate on the role of the Spirit in adoption. Thank God for adopting you into his family.
- Since the Spirit is active in our transformation, literally God indwelling us, give the Spirit some quiet time and space to speak to you.

We Believe | Session Six | *Salvation*

Before Your Group Meets...

Read through ***We Believe: Salvation*** underlining any thoughts or statements you think are important. Jot down what you find **new or compelling** or any **questions** you have.

We Believe: Salvation

If we are (and we are) sinful lost people, no gift can be better than life. Salvation through Jesus is that life.

Salvation is not merely adding Jesus to our lives. Although free, it is not a cheap ticket to heaven, a self-help method or personal development program—as if we come to Jesus in order to strengthen some weak areas in our lives. Salvation is all encompassing, changing everything about us.

“So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it’ (Genesis 1.27-28). Then, ‘The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it’ (Genesis 2.15). God created people to rule over nature, to cultivate and care for God’s creation, and to fill the earth. We were created to bring God glory, worship him, and accomplish something in the world.

In Genesis 3, everything changes. Adam and Eve question God’s goodness and choose to rebel. Humanity defies God, introducing sin and death into the world (Romans 5.12-21). Theologians call this event the “Fall.” Rebellion begins in the human race, and all creation is corrupted (Romans 8.20-21).

The fall tragically separated the entire human race from God, resulting in alienation from God and from each other, with physical death not far behind. Paul writes, “sin entered the world through one man [Adam], and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned” (Romans 5.12). Adam and Eve were the human race, so they represented everyone. The consequences of their sin impact everyone. Theologians call this “original sin.” The fall is why we are all born with a sin nature—an inward inclination away from God toward sinful behavior. The consequences of sin are serious. Paul writes in Romans 6.23, “the wages of sin is death,” including physical death, spiritual death, separation from God and eternal death.

People were created to be with God—to know him and daily walk with him (Genesis 3.8). Jesus expressed this when he prayed, “This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17.3). Eternal life is knowing God, so salvation must be more than “going to heaven when we die.” It is restoring a relationship that was lost.

Thankfully, God stepped in to fix the problem we created (Genesis 3.15). We all have our own brokenness, our own sin that separates us from God. We must all come to the place where we confess, as David did in Psalm 51.3-5, “I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”

We do not follow Jesus simply to make our lives better. We turn to him, humbly and broken, recognizing our sin and need for grace. However, the story is just getting started. Theologians call the Bible “Redemptive

History." It is the Story of Salvation—the story of God stepping into the world and saving us when we could not save ourselves.

God's Story of Salvation starts with a man named Abram. "The LORD had said to Abram, 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you'" (Genesis 12.1-3.) God is asking him to leave his home, his family, and his religion to go somewhere unknown. Abram is supposed to trust God and know he will make good on his promises.

We learn that Abram—later renamed Abraham—does trust God. He is not perfect, but God is patient and faithful. Eventually, the relationship becomes a permanent covenant God uses to initiate a fix for the problem of the fall and move people to follow and obey him (Genesis 17.1-8; 18.19). When we hear God call Abram to trust him, we need to hear God's call to us. Salvation begins with a calling to turn away from sin, turn back to God, and follow him—a calling that shapes the rest of our lives.

About 600 years later, Abraham's descendants are enslaved in Egypt. Through miraculous demonstrations of his power, God rescues his people and leads them out of Egypt. God's newly freed people are timid and untrusting, and we see the seeds of phrases like "dead in transgressions and sins" and "slaves to sin." They were slaves to Egypt, and we are slaves to sin (Galatians 4.3; Romans 6.6). They struggled to trust a God who would lead them into a desert, and we struggle to trust God in our own seasons of dryness.

Their story is our story. God announced to Israel, "I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment" (Exodus 6.6). Later Paul writes, through Jesus "we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Ephesians 1.7). God is reclaiming what is his and buying back those who are helplessly enslaved. He did it for Israel, and he is doing it for us through Jesus. With "redemption" think: set free, brought back, reclaimed.

People are being set apart for God's purposes. Abraham's family becomes a genuine nation, and God wants to develop a national character reflecting his goodness to the outside world. He calls them to "Be holy because I am holy" (Leviticus 11.45), which simply means "set yourselves apart from the sinful ways of the rest of the world." He gives them the Ten Commandments, not as a way to earn his favor (he already rescued them), but as a way for them to live as his people—a people characterized by his holiness and love.

Israel's journey is one of atonement. Although God rescued his people, they are deeply sinful. In order to approach God and live in his presence, the penalty for sin (God's wrath) must be dealt with or satisfied. So, God gives them a system of sacrifices in order to do this (see Leviticus). Death has always been the penalty for sin. Sacrifices never fully or permanently dealt with sin but were a way of managing sin and maintaining purity before God. With "atonement"—or in some versions of the Bible, "propitiation"—think: *satisfying God's wrath* or *meeting the penalty of sin*. Jesus did that for us and so, through Christ, we are made "at-one" with God.

As Israel struggles to obey God, it is clear their hearts are hard. The very sacrifices God told them to offer have become futile (Jeremiah 6.20; 7.22-23). They are engaging in mere external religion without genuine life change, and God hates that. He wants their love, their obedience, their entire lives. God needs to step in and change them at their core. Sin and death are still ruling the day so God will replace the Old Covenant with a new one (Hebrews 8). God promises Israel: "'The days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. . . I will put my law in their minds and write

it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor or say to another, "Know the Lord," because they will all know me" (Jeremiah 31.31-34).

This new covenant would involve the same call to trust, obey, and follow God. It would have the same purpose to bless all nations, and the same promise to enjoy a genuine relationship with God. But this covenant will be different. The recipients of the new covenant will be transformed from the inside out, empowered by God's own Spirit to trust, obey, and follow him wholeheartedly.

The night before Jesus died he takes a cup of wine at the Last Supper and says, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22.20). Jesus began the new covenant when he died on the cross and resurrected on the third day. Jesus becomes "the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2.2). Jesus does what bulls and goats could never do—permanently and fully remove the penalty of sin (Hebrews 10.1-18). Theologians call this "substitutionary atonement." Jesus died in our place, as our substitute, bearing the penalty of our sin (Romans 3.21-26).

This is why Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14.6). No one else has ever dealt with the penalty of sin, a key difference between Christianity and every other religion. It may sound "exclusive" for God to only provide one way to him, but in reality, it is profoundly merciful. God did not have to offer even one way, but he did and it cost him deeply.

Jesus conquered death, bringing life to humanity, a life no longer subject to death (2 Timothy 1.10). We call this "eternal life," and he offers it to everyone who trusts in him. Jesus said, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3.16). Without Jesus, we are all perishing. With Jesus, we can have eternal life.

The way to receive Jesus' sacrifice and have our sins forgiven is by faith in him as our personal Lord and Savior. Unable to earn salvation, only as we place our full trust in Jesus do we receive eternal salvation.

*But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given **through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe**. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and **are justified freely by his grace** through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Romans 3.21-24).*

We move from "perishing" to "eternal life" when each of us repents of (turns from) our sin and places our faith in Jesus Christ. Belief or faith in Jesus is more than just believing ideas about him. True faith is about acting on what we believe. God called Abraham to trust him. Abraham actually took the steps to trust God. He had to pack up and follow God.

It has never been enough to simply give mental ascent to certain concepts about Jesus if we do not commit our lives to him by repenting from our sin, turning humbly toward God, receiving his forgiveness, and following him. Jesus becomes the Lord of our lives and we seek to develop his character. Our obedience will never be perfect, but that does not surprise God. He does not ask for immediate perfection—he asks for trust. When Jesus says, "Follow me" (Matthew 4.19), he is echoing God's call to Abraham and taking us back to simple trust and obedience. This is why Paul calls us "children of Abraham" (Galatians 3.7; cf. Romans 4).

Here are some key concepts found in the Bible to describe what happens when we trust Christ for salvation:

- Justification. God justifies you or declares you to be righteous in his sight. You still struggle with sin, but because Jesus died in your place, you are now considered righteous (Romans 3.21-26).

- Reconciliation. Now justified, you are reconciled to God. No longer an enemy of God, no longer alienated from him, you are now brought near to him (Colossians 1.21-23). You have peace with God through Jesus Christ (Romans 5.1-11).
- Adoption. God looks at you and says, “You are my cherished daughter” or “my treasured son.” You move from being outside God’s family to being an adopted child of God with all the rights and privileges with it. You can call him your Father and even Daddy (Romans 8.15-17).
- Regeneration. You are made alive in Jesus Christ. As Jesus rose from the dead, God regenerates or makes your spirit alive. God sends his own Spirit to give you new life—Jesus’ new life.
- Sanctification. God set you apart as his child and begins a process of change from the inside out. You have a new heart and God’s Spirit is actively working to mold you to be like Jesus. We call this spiritual formation because God is transforming us into Christ’s likeness (2 Corinthians 3.18).

It may take some time to process these concepts. You do not have to understand them all in order for them to be true. So much happens when you become a follower of Jesus, it’s nothing short of miraculous. As Paul puts it, you became a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5.17).

What about heaven? After Jesus resurrected from the dead and ascended into heaven, he promised to complete his work of redemption—to remove from the world all effects of sin and evil. John describes the future kingdom of God, “I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth’, for the first heaven and the first earth passed away...and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God...He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’” (Revelation 21.1-5).

When Jesus returns, he will finish his work of transforming us. Even our bodies will be made new. This is known as “glorification” (Romans 8.30). Our physical bodies will be resurrected and changed into immortal bodies (1 Corinthians 15.49-53). This is the Christian hope! Jesus will return and make all things new and we will live with him as we were created to live—not like angels, but like Jesus.

Salvation gives us a new reality affecting our identity in both this life and the next. We are no longer dead enemies, slaves guilty of our sin, and under God’s punishment. We are fully loved and adopted sons and daughters, freed from sin and justified. We are new creations and given new power in this life. No longer helplessly separated from God, we are indwelt by God. Because God lives in us, we have the power to change and have new hope. (You will find more on this in our teaching on the Holy Spirit).

Finally, as followers of Jesus, we have a new mission in life. God has made us into a missional community of people who have a powerful role in the world (the church) and who are destined for an eternity in God’s presence. We are here to announce by our faith, lives, and deeds that Jesus has come to give us “life, and have it to the full” (John 10.10).

Small Group Discussion!

Look Back: *Begin your time by reviewing the Scriptures and the important points of the reading.*

The reading begins by saying: "Salvation is not a cheap ticket to heaven, a self-help method, or personal development program." How have you seen people treat Salvation in one of these ways?

Discuss this statement. Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer.

Salvation is all encompassing, changing everything about us.

Spend 10 minutes reading these verses that highlight four different pictures of God. Briefly discuss what you see and experience in the passages. Further questions for discussion will follow.

- **Genesis 3.1-7** (The Fall)
- **Genesis 12.1-3** (The Story of Salvation)
- **Ephesians 1.7-8a** (Redemption)
- **2 Corinthians 3.18** (Sanctification)

Thinking back over the reading for the week, take five minutes to discuss:

- What you found new or compelling
- What questions you have

Helen's Story: *Have someone in your group read Helen's story aloud.*

Helen started going to youth group with a boyfriend when she was in high school. Though she listened, she was just there because of hormones. She wanted to spend as much time with her boyfriend as possible. She heard the pastor talk about things like sin and being born again, but didn't know what they meant. When they broke up right before college, she quit going.

In her junior year of college, one of her friends invited her to a campus service and she had nothing else going on, so she went. After singing, the speaker talked about God and how much he loved her and wanted a relationship with her. Again, it was all pretty confusing to Helen. She liked the atmosphere and people though, so she kept going back.

Finally, one evening on the walk back to their house, she asked her friend, "What in the world does it mean to have a relationship with Jesus? I've heard people say God loves me, God wants a relationship with me, I need to be saved, and I need to be born again. What do I need to be saved from? I think it has something to do with Jesus dying for me, but I seriously have no idea what people are talking about."

In what ways do you identify with Helen in this story?

Look In: *Consider together what God is asking you to do and encourage each other.*

- **The Fall.** When Adam and Eve question God's goodness and choose to rebel, humanity defies God, introducing sin and death into the world. Rebellion begins in the human race, corrupting all creation. The fall tragically separates the entire human race from God and alienates people from each other. Discuss the following statement: We are all born with a sin nature—an inward inclination away from God toward sinful behavior.

- **The Story of Salvation.** The Story of Salvation is the story of God stepping into the world to save us when we could not save ourselves. From Abraham to Moses, their story is our story. God working through history to rescue us. When have you seen God work to rescue you? Just as Israel struggled to trust God, we often struggle to trust him. Why do you think Israel struggled to trust God? Why do you think we struggle? Where do you struggle to trust God?
- **Redemption.** Redemption, a marketplace term, means to buy something back. Slaves had two chances at freedom: being set free by their owner or being bought by someone and freed—redeemed. Because we're in slavery to sin (Romans 6.20), we need to be redeemed. Jesus, through his death on the cross, redeemed us. Simply put, we need to admit we could not do it ourselves and accept his offer of redemption.

Have someone from your group read the following aloud:

In the middle of the ancient ruins of Ephesus is the Agora (marketplace). This marketplace housed vendors selling all sorts of goods: fruits, vegetables, spices, clothing, leather goods, pottery, and even people. There is an inscription on the prominent arched gate leading into the Agora. It is a dedication to the emperor Caesar Augustus (and his family), written in 40 AD. Who would go to all the trouble to create something like this? Mazeus and Mythridates, former slaves, were freed by the emperor and given jobs working for him. Not only did they work for the emperor faithfully, they built the gate as a demonstration of their gratitude for their redemption. Mazeus and Mythridates understood the value of what they had been given (freedom) and responded with lavish gratitude. Jesus came to redeem us and offers us something far more valuable.

What lesson can be learned from the response of Mazeus and Mythridates? Have one or two people briefly share about their story of redemption.

- **Sanctification.** After accepting Jesus' gift of salvation, God sets you apart as his child and begins a process of change from the inside out. This is known as Sanctification. We should all be in the lifelong process of change. What are some areas you have seen God change your life in the past or what are some areas he is working on right now?

Look Ahead. Consider your next steps following this discussion.

If we are all sinners, our only hope is to accept the redemption offered through the cross. If you would like to take the next step of accepting God's offer of salvation, consider asking a friend from your small group to help you. For those who have already accepted God's gracious redemption, in a spirit of gratitude, write your story of redemption in less than 200 words and share it with someone in your group (someone other than your spouse) this week.

In The Chair this week...

- Memorize, meditate on, or write in your own words Ephesians 1.7-8a.
- Spend time confessing your sin (be specific), and ask God's Spirit to be active in sanctifying you.
- Meditate on the picture of redemption available through the sacrifice of Jesus. Thank God for loving you enough to send his Son.
- Since Jesus paid the price to redeem us, the only right way to respond is a life of service. Ask God to reveal where and how you can show your love to him through serving. This week take steps to begin serving.

We Believe | Session Seven | Church

Before Your Group Meets...

Read through **We Believe: Church** underlining any thoughts or statements you think are important. Jot down what you find **new or compelling** or any **questions** you have.

We Believe: Church

Through the church God is doing something vital and powerful, something not contained in a building or program and he wants you to be a part of it.

The church is more alive than any institution and more profound than a self-help method. It is God's mission in the world, the means by which God is blessing every nation on earth. It is a movement of people who have encountered God, are devoted to Jesus Christ and are being empowered by his Spirit. God invites each of us to know him, be transformed by him and to participate in his work of redemption by entering into an imperfect, but alive and vibrant, group of people—a group through which God is actively working to impact the world.

Christ followers should be gripped by the privilege, responsibility, and joy of being a member of the church—not merely of Ada Bible Church—but of the people of God.

This summary helps us discover what the Bible means by “church,” how the church began and why God started it. It will look at some key metaphors the Bible uses to explain what God had in mind when he started the “Jesus movement” and look at how he designed it to function.

Universal/Local. The *church* is the community of all true believers everywhere. Not a denomination, building, or merely a concept; it is the people of God from every corner of the planet. This “universal” church reminds us we are part of a worldwide community of Jesus followers. All our “local” churches (such as Ada Bible Church) belong to this larger community.

After people rebelled, God stepped in and started something new. He started a nation, Israel, who would be his people in a world that had rejected him. Though ancient Israel failed to live up to its calling, God did not abandon his plan of redemption. After Jesus completed his ministry on earth, something new and amazing happened on the Day of Pentecost. As the disciples gathered during a massive Jewish festival, “suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting... All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in this own language” (Acts 2.2-6).

The Spirit rushed upon Jesus' disciples and they miraculously began speaking to the people in languages the disciples had never learned. God empowered them to spread the message of Jesus to all people around them.

The book of Acts shows us God opened the door of faith and forgiveness to non-Jews as well, uniting all of his followers into one new people of God. Two thousand years later, the church has grown and spread across

the entire world. The ethnic division between Jews and Gentiles is set aside so that—as promised to Abraham—all peoples of the world can be blessed.

Paul teaches us God's people have been unified into one body: the church (Ephesians 2.14-18). Ethnicity, gender, race, family, denomination, and age distinctions take a back seat to this newly established community of grace and truth. In Galatians 3.26-28, Paul wrote, "You are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ . . . There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

God launched the church, a movement of Jesus followers, to be the agent of God's plan of redemption, thereby blessing all nations. His Spirit is driving the ship. In our culture, it is all too easy to treat the church like any other human institution, so God provides some pretty compelling imagery that helps us see things more clearly.

Below are four pictures of the church. If you have never heard these before, you may be surprised at just how profound and meaningful the church really is.

People of God. The Apostle Peter describes the church: "you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God" (1 Peter 2.9-10). This speaks of ownership, family, and calling. We are chosen by God, assembled by God, and sent out by God. We belong to God and we worship him alone. He is our Father and we are his kids. We all are family and our role in the world is to be his priests—not like with a collar— but people who approach God, worship him, and lead others to do the same.

God's Flock of Sheep. One of Jesus' favorite metaphors for the church comes from agriculture and livestock. Jesus said in John 10.14-16, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me . . . I lay down my life for the sheep . . . there shall be one flock and one shepherd." The church is a collection of sheep the Chief Shepherd (Jesus) leads and feeds. We follow his voice, obey what he says, and enjoy his protection. Jesus leads and guides us, and we are utterly dependent on him. Sheep, if left to their own devices, will follow each other over a cliff. We are the same. We need the Good Shepherd to guide and protect us.

Body of Christ. The Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians: "Now, you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (1 Corinthians 12.27). To Christians living in Rome, he explains "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (Romans 12.4-5). All followers of Jesus form one body, the Body of Christ, and he is the head. Jesus has only one body and Christians (everyone who genuinely trusts Christ for salvation) are part of this one Body of Christ—Baptists, Presbyterians, Mennonites, Nazarenes, Catholics. We are all members or body parts. Every member has a purpose and responsibilities, needing each other to grow and function in a healthy way.

Bride of Christ. Perhaps the most intimate and compelling picture of the church comes from marriage. During his ministry, Jesus described himself as a "bridegroom" (Matthew 9.15). When Paul writes to husbands telling them how they should relate to their wives, he says, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy . . . to present her to himself as a radiant church . . . holy and blameless" (Ephesians 5.25-27). Paul sees Christians as the collective Bride of Christ.

This picture speaks of intimacy, love and gentle care. Jesus is our beloved husband and we are his fully loved bride. Set aside all the failed versions of marriage you may have seen or experienced and imagine how

powerful this picture is. Jesus loves us as the most faithful and committed husband could ever love his wife. We are his bride, and although we are unfaithful to him at times, he is always faithful to us and will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13.5).

The church has immense value to God, but the church is not simply a “good thing.” It is vitally important to God who founded it, leads it, and cares for it. As Jesus said in Matthew 16.18, “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” Jesus gave his life for the church, so it came at a great cost to God. He loves it dearly and will not let it fail. Through disobedience we slow the process down, but ultimately, God is the one building his church. We can rest in that assurance.

The purpose of the church is to bring glory to God. In Ephesians 3.20-21, we read, “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.” All creation exists to bring God glory. Yet, bringing God glory is not often very clear. How does the church bring God glory? When the church fulfills its four core functions it glorifies God.

Salt and Light. The church is God’s salt and light in the world (Matthew 5.13-16). One of the key functions of the church is evangelism. Jesus followers are called to fill the earth with his image. Jesus said, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28.18-20). Jesus followers should never shrink from the truth that Jesus Christ is the only Way, Truth, and Life. But we need to creatively and lovingly engage our culture to make Jesus’ message clear and compelling.

Edification. Being salt and light is not simply speaking words. We glorify God as we reflect Christ’s image; namely, pursuing Christ-likeness: forming our character after his. An important function of the church is edifying or “building up” believers into mature, fully devoted followers of Jesus. Paul writes we “are being transformed into his [that is, Christ’s] image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3.18). In other words, the Spirit of God is active among us, transforming us into people who reflect Jesus’ character.

The church is responsible for creating environments which teach, correct, and encourage Jesus followers in their growth. The church must always seek to include teaching, fellowship, the Lord’s Supper, and regular prayer as key ways to foster spiritual formation (Acts 2.42-47).

Worshipping God. We should respond to our Creator and all he does with praise, adoration, and thanksgiving. We are to offer our very lives as living sacrifices to God, which as Paul put it, is our “spiritual act of worship” (Romans 12.1). It is crucial Jesus followers develop a regular rhythm of responding to God by praising his character and works. This is our calling as the people of God and our spiritual formation depends on it.

Love. Love is both an end result and a function of all Jesus followers. Asked which of the Ten Commandments is most important, Jesus says, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22.37-40). He taught his disciples love is the distinctive mark of his followers. He said, “Love one another. . . By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13.34-35). Jesus says in John 15.12-13, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” And later, looking back on Jesus’ sacrifice, John writes, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers

and sisters" (1 John 3.16). Love is often heart-wrenching and sacrificial. It is offering one's life for the good of another.

The New Testament provides a number of descriptions of how this love plays out. Here are just a few:

- Romans 12.10 "Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves."
- Galatians 5.13 "Serve one another humbly in love."
- Galatians 6.2 "Carry each other's burdens."
- Colossians 3.13 "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

Because life is hard and people do mean things, love is not easy. Jesus used his own death on the cross as our example. He asks us to sacrifice our lives for the good of others—like our spouses, our kids, our friends, our neighbors—to go beyond what is normally expected to care for other people, particularly fellow Jesus followers. Because that is exactly what Jesus did for us, and it is the only path to true life.

God's heart beats with love resulting in compassion, especially for those who are broken and oppressed. Jesus was known for his willingness to serve the oppressed, minister to the marginalized, and associate with outcasts (Luke 4.17-21). God calls his people to love others, especially four groups of people: the orphan, the widow, the foreigner, and the poor (Jeremiah 5.27-31; Zechariah 7.9-10). Jesus teaches in Matthew 25.31-46 "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." And "whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me." As we grow in Christlikeness, we should develop the same heart and willingness to reach out to those in need.

Our mission as the church is to bring glory to God by spreading Jesus' message, growing in Christlikeness, worshiping our Lord, and obeying Jesus' commands, particularly to love God and others well—to love sacrificially, with justice and mercy. Regardless of our circumstances, we have access to God's transforming and life-giving love and we are commissioned to be transformed by it and to offer it to all people everywhere. God chose the church to be the agent of his redemptive plan, a plan entrusted to us.

How Ada Bible Church is Led. We believe our local church should be independent and autonomous, solely responsible to God for its actions (see Revelation 1-3). Accordingly, Ada Bible Church is not under the authority of any denomination or other hierarchical form of government but is governed by leaders elected by the members. Members (and those desiring to become members) should actively participate, are committed to the long term, freely give their time, spiritual giftedness, and finances to fulfill God's mission. They agree to follow the doctrine, mission, philosophy, and leadership of Ada Bible Church.

The leadership of Ada Bible Church is modeled after principles found in Acts 6. It consists of two offices: elder and deacon. The elders are responsible for the overall direction and spiritual development of the Church. The deacons support the elders by administering all business matters of the church and being responsible for the physical needs of the congregation. Elders and deacons must meet the qualifications set forth in 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1 and Acts 6 (deacons). Elevation to the position of elder or deacon does not make them a leader—it is an affirmation by the congregation that they are already leading.

Small Group Discussion!

Look Back: *Begin your time by reviewing the Scriptures and the important points of the reading.*

People love to find reasons not to go to church. What are some reasons you have heard people give?

Discuss this statement. Do you agree or disagree?

The church is the tool God has chosen to spread his message around the world.

Spend 10 minutes reading these verses that highlight four main ideas about the church. Briefly discuss what you see and experience in the passages. Further questions for discussion will follow.

- **Matthew 5.13-16** (Salt and Light)
- **Acts 2.42-47** (Edification)
- **Romans 12.1** (Worshipping God)
- **John 13.34-35** (Love)

Thinking back over the reading for the week, take five minutes to discuss:

- What you found new or compelling
- What questions you have

Fred's Story: *Have someone in your group read Fred's story aloud.*

It was zero-dark-thirty and yet there was still a group of 10 people gathering in the Tim Hortons parking lot. Fred had been invited by Bill to join Bill's small group for a service project. They were headed out to do some landscaping and painting at a local elementary school. Though it was an Ada Bible Church group, Fred wasn't a church person. In fact, he thought most of the people who went to church were the uppity type and really judgmental and hypocritical. He worked with Bill and liked the idea of helping out, so he had agreed to come.

That day changed the course of Fred's life. It wasn't just the big things about the group that impressed Fred. Sure it was "great" they were up early to volunteer. Fred was really touched when the principal came out and thanked the group for coming to work at the school every quarter. Fred thought this was just a one-off service thing. Then the little things started to catch Fred's attention. One of the ladies asked about Bill's mother who had dementia and said she had been praying for her. Fred overheard two couples talking about raising teenagers and encouraging each other. He said, "It seemed like these people genuinely cared about each other." When Fred snuck away for a quick cigarette he was surprised the group didn't seem to shoot judgmental looks his way. As the day grew warmer, one of the guys noticed Fred was working up a sweat and grabbed him a bottle of water without Fred even having to ask. "Then I started thinking, maybe these church people weren't so bad after all."

The next week when Bill asked Fred if he might be interested in going to the church service on Sunday, Fred had to admit his usual line about Christians being judgmental and hypocrites didn't really apply to the group he worked with on Saturday. In fact, if Christians were like those people, maybe he should actually give church a chance, so he said yes.

In what ways do you identify with Fred in this story?

Look In: Discuss together what God is asking you to do and encourage each other.

- **Salt and Light.** The church is God’s salt and light in the world (Matthew 5.13-16). Jesus followers should never shrink from the truth that Jesus Christ is the only Way, Truth and Life. We need to creatively and lovingly engage our culture to make Jesus’ message clear and compelling. What are some ways we can creatively and lovingly engage our culture for Jesus?
- **Edification.** An important function of the church is edifying or “building up” believers into mature, fully devoted followers of Jesus. How have you experienced the church edifying or building up or seen it in the life of someone you know?
- **Worshipping God.** The church regularly gathers to worship God, helping us develop a rhythm of responding to God by praising his character and works. On a scale of 1-10, how well do you engage the worship opportunities in a weekend service? How can you better prepare yourself to worship during the weekend service?
- **Love.** Love is both an end result and a function of all Jesus followers. Asked which of the Ten Commandments is most important, Jesus says, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22.37-40). What is the biblical concept of love and how is it different from what people mean when they say people are “just supposed to love each other”?

Because life is hard and people do mean things, love is not easy. Jesus used his own death on the cross as our example. He asks us to sacrifice our lives for the good of others—especially our spouses, our kids, our friends, our neighbors. Of that group of people, where have you found it the hardest to love like Jesus loves and how can we love those people better?

John 13.34-35 says, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Discuss what you think Jesus meant by this. What are the marks or characteristics of a loving church community?

God chose the church to be his instrument of world change and calls it his bride. How would you rank your commitment to the church in your current season of life?

Look Ahead: Consider your next steps following this discussion.

What are some steps you can take to be more involved in the work of the church either through serving, small group participation, faithfully giving, regularly praying, or attending weekend services?

In The Chair this week...

- Memorize, meditate on, or write in your own words John 13.34-35.
- Spend some time confessing that sometimes you just don’t want to be a part of a church, and ask God to give you a passion for the church (his bride).
- Meditate on God inviting you to be a part of his international organization for world change. Thank God for giving the church as a place for edification.
- Since the church is the tool God has chosen to spread his message around the world, consider what role you have to play in it. This week take steps toward playing that role.

We Believe | Session Eight | *Eternity*

Before Your Group Meets...

Read through ***We Believe: Eternity*** underlining any thoughts or statements you think are important. Jot down what you find **new or compelling** or any **questions** you have.

We Believe: Eternity

It is vital to see eternal destinies in their proper perspective. It affects how we see people on this earth and how we choose to invest our time. The choices we make, whether for Christ or apart from him, have eternal consequences.

Where does a feeling of “there has to be something more” come from? Solomon wrote that God “set eternity in the human heart” (Ecclesiastes 3.11). God put in our hearts this sense of “something more,” a greater purpose, a God to worship, a destination to pursue. The writers of God’s Word make clear physical death is not the end of our stories because death is not the end of God’s Story.

Death is not the end of the story, so what happens when we die? Our view of that question directly impacts our lives today. Paul understood this writing, “Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.” (1Thessalonians 4.13). Paul believed if the early Jesus followers understood eternity they would have hope others did not have. They would grieve differently and they would relate to others in more life-giving ways.

Understanding eternity should help us be: encouraged there is hope (more to life than what you face today), inspired to engage life in a new and meaningful way, and convicted your life really does matter for eternity. Eternity should matter to you. In this summary we will explore the basic questions of what happens after death, where we will spend eternity and what it will be like.

Adam and Eve’s rebellion introduced sin (and death). Paul writes, “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned...” (Romans 5.12).

Death is linked to separation. Physical death separates us from the physical world, spiritual death separates us from God, and eternal death separates us from God eternally or permanently. Thinking of death relationally, as separation, helps us appreciate the significance of things like heaven and hell. Death was not part of God’s plan. People were meant for life: physical life in our physical world, spiritual life walking in God’s presence, and eternal life—enjoying God’s presence forever. Death ruined life, but the good news is Jesus came to reverse the curse of death by offering up his life and being resurrected to new life.

As Paul sat in a prison cell facing death, he writes Jesus “destroyed death” (2 Timothy 1.10). The new life Jesus lives is not subject to death and he offers life to us through faith in him. Paul writes, “the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!” (Romans 5.15). Adam condemned us to death and Jesus redeemed us from death. For the Christian, death simply continues the life that began when we accepted him as our Savior. Death finalizes our ultimate destination in God’s

presence. For those who reject Jesus and never receive life—those who choose to remain spiritually dead—death continues what was already true and finalizes their destination apart from God and his grace.

Some of us may flinch at the either/or dynamic: heaven or hell. The Bible wraps the heaven/hell discussion in the broader context of a relationship with God. People were created to be with God, but sin separates. Paul describes it in Ephesians with words like “dead in trespasses and sins,” “separate from Christ” and “far away.” Without God’s intervention, our choices and sinful behaviors lead to permanent separation from him.

What happens when we physically die? If we have already received new life through Jesus, our souls (also called “spirits”) are separated from our bodies and we enter God’s presence in a new, richer way. To the thief hanging on the cross next to him, Jesus said, “Today, you will be with me in paradise.” It will be a place of worship and rest—not a physical place but a spiritual place with no sin, no despair, no pain, no death, no illness, and no regrets in the presence of God.

Those who have rejected new life through Jesus go immediately into what the Bible calls “Hades” (sometimes translated “hell”), permanently separated from God’s love and fellowship (Luke 16.19-23). Hades is a place where God’s presence, goodness, love, peace, and joy are not present, which will be excruciatingly painful. Luke writes, “And besides this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us” (Luke 16.26).

At this point, either in God’s presence or in Hades, we will not have a body. We were not created to be without a body, so this is not our final destination. The Christian hope is not that we merely go to heaven when we die—it is that we will be resurrected, like Jesus, and live as humans were created to live.

We will be reunited with our actual resurrected and changed bodies. Paul writes, “So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body” (1 Corinthians 15.42-44).

The resurrected body will be physical, not ghostlike or immaterial. To prove his resurrected body was not a ghost, Jesus told them, “Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have” (Luke 24.38-39). Then, he ate in front of them. Jesus’ point was his resurrected body was physical—flesh and bone—and our bodies will be the same. We will not become like angels but like Christ.

Our bodies will be transformed and spiritual bodies. Paul writes, “But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Philippians 3.20-21). In the Old Testament, Isaiah writes, “But your dead will live LORD; their bodies will rise—let those who dwell in the dust wake up and shout for joy” (Isaiah 26.19). Jesus taught about the resurrection, and in one passage makes what seems to be a shocking statement, “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out – those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned” (John 5.28-29).

Not only believers will be raised, but also those who reject Jesus. Death is not the end of anyone, even nonbelievers. All people will appear before Christ to be judged and Jesus’ followers will receive rewards from Christ based on their actions in this life. Paul makes this clear, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5.10).

While salvation is a free gift through grace by faith (John 3.36), our formation determines the kind of rewards we are given in heaven. Paul writes, "If anyone builds on this foundation [that is, Christ] using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is... It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has built survives, the builder will receive a reward" (1 Corinthians 3.11-14). Whatever we do for the least fortunate, Scripture says, we do for Jesus. Jesus states, "The Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done" (Matthew 16.27). This passage shows our eternal lives are directly connected to our life on this earth, particularly as we serve the least fortunate. Our eternal life is guaranteed by grace through faith in the work Christ accomplished on the cross, but our rewards have a direct connection to the work we accomplish with God's help. We are becoming who we will be in eternity.

We have looked at death, resurrection, and judgment. This section looks at heaven and hell, not in the sense of where we go when we die, but their nature.

An unbeliever's death permanently separates them from God and all God's presence brings. Paul states, "He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might (2 Thessalonians 1.8-9). Those in hell experience the absence of God and since people are created with a built-in longing to be with God, torment ensues. Jesus describes Hades as a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 13.42), of darkness and fire (Matthew 8.12). Unbelievers will experience unending punishment for rejecting the grace offered through Christ's death on the cross. Hell is something we all choose when we sin because sinful actions are a way of rejecting God. If we reject God, he lets us have our way. We are becoming who we will be in eternity.

Jesus died for a reason. God made a way for us to be forgiven and our relationship with him to be restored. The whole discussion of hell is a warning to those who have not received Christ but is not meant to scare those who have. We can know with certainty our hope is somewhere else.

The Bible often refers to heaven as the place where God most fully dwells. Luke records Stephen "looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God" (Acts 7.55). When we die we will reside with God in peace, rest, and worship, awaiting the resurrection. However, just as the old hymn sings, "Heaven came down and glory filled my soul," heaven will come down again.

Many of us have this notion that heaven is "up there" or "out there" somewhere. Scripture actually teaches heaven will be a place on earth. It will, in fact, be a new earth. The second to last chapter of the Bible describes what it will be like when Jesus returns and finishes his work of redemption: "Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God'" (Revelation 21.1-3).

This "new heaven and new earth" is where we, as Jesus followers, will spend eternity. It will be a place of unimaginable beauty and splendor. God's glory will be fully manifest and will far exceed the highest form of beauty we perceive on this earth. Paul declares "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human—the things God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2.9; see also Revelation 21.18-23).

In heaven, all things will be made new. Broken lives will be remade. Evil will be finally and fully vanquished. God will be with us in the completest possible way and we will be entirely alive as humans were created to live. This is why we do not live our lives today as if they do not matter. We are created for this and we will spend eternity enjoying God's creation. The difference will be the absence of evil and the complete presence of God. Those who have made Christ their Lord in this life will enjoy God forever free of pain, suffering, illness, or sin—not as an arbitrary reward for those on the “inside” but because our sins are forgiven through Jesus. “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21.4).

No amount of hardship on this earth can compare with the splendor we will experience there. All present pain will be redeemed. Paul writes to encourage his friends that “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8.18).

Instead of sitting on clouds playing harps all day, Scripture teaches in the New Heaven and New Earth, we will be quite active, living abundant human lives in God's creation. Life will be marked by a certain and permanent state of joy. Psalm 16.11 offers this hope, “You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.” We will actively worship God forever. We will serve God in love and adoration, judge the world, and reign with him.

Why does all this matter? It is vital to see our eternal destinies in their proper perspective. It affects how we see people and how we choose to invest our time. The choices we make, whether for Christ or apart from him, have eternal consequences. As we endure pain, suffering, and the loss of loved ones, we can know with a settled confidence that Jesus is making all things new, including us. We can be encouraged and endure what we face today with patience and love because in Christ our future is settled. And it is a good one.

But this also motivates us to make a difference in this life and to invest our time in ways that glorify God and have eternal rewards. Scripture calls us to live lives that build on the reality of God in Christ and to treat our time on earth as an investment into God's eternal kingdom. If we want our life and our efforts to matter, we must live with an eye on eternity, knowing what the future holds for believers and unbelievers. Your life really does matter for eternity and eternity must matter to you. You are becoming who you will always be.

Small Group Discussion!

Look Back: *Begin your time by reviewing the Scriptures and the important points of the reading.*

C.S. Lewis, a respected Christian writer, wrote, "You have never talked to a mere mortal...it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendors." What do you think he meant by this?

Discuss this statement: Do you agree or disagree?

Death is not the end of the story.

Spend 10 minutes reading these verses that highlight four main ideas about Eternity. Briefly discuss what you see and experience in the passages. Further questions for discussion will follow.

- **2 Thessalonians 1.8-9** (Heaven and Hell)
- **Romans 5.12-15** (Death)
- **John 5.28-29** (Judgment)
- **Revelation 21.4** (New Heaven and New Earth)

Thinking back over the reading for the week, take five minutes to discuss:

- What you found new or compelling
- What questions you have

Sri's Story: *Have someone in your group read Sri's story aloud.*

Sri's parents moved to the United States two years before she was born. Her dad was an engineer and worked hard to make a good life for the family. Part of this was the daily worship of Lakshmi, a popular Hindu goddess. Sri's parents taught her to be a good person because like they said: "who she was in this life would affect who she would be in her next rebirth." She believed in karma and was concerned her bad deeds would come back to hurt her, both in this life and the next.

After Sri graduated college and set out on her own, she noticed she was having a hard time "making the good stuff outweigh the bad." She grew more and more concerned her devotion to Lakshmi and trying to do the right thing all the time just might not be enough. She was terrified of the karmic ramifications of her actions and what might happen when she died.

When a co-worker suddenly died from a heart attack, Sri was confronted with the suddenness of death and anxiety started to grip her life. Julie, a co-worker, noticed the change in Sri's life. During their daily trip to Starbucks, Julie asked her what was going on. Though usually a private person, Sri told Julie about her anxiety and fears of not being able to do enough, be good enough, or really know what would happen when she died.

Julie said, "Honestly, I was pretty scared, but I just felt like God gave me this opportunity to talk about my faith in Jesus and how I had overcome some of my own struggles with anxiety by trusting what Jesus said about life after death." Julie told Sri she would love to have her come to Ada Bible Church with her some Sunday. Though Sri didn't attend, Julie and Sri's relationship began to grow. One day Sri told Julie she had been reading the Bible and wanted to talk about what Jesus said. Julie was able to explain it a bit more, and Sri began a relationship with Jesus right there in the coffee shop.

In what ways do you identify with either Sri or Julie in this story?

Look In: *Discuss together what God is asking you to do and encourage each other.*

- **Heaven and Hell.** When we think of Eternity, we often think about what happens when we die. Death is linked to separation. Physical death separates us from the physical world, spiritual death separates us from a relationship with God, and eternal death separates us from God eternally or permanently. How does thinking of death relationally, as separation, help us appreciate the significance of heaven and hell? Why do you think Paul, even when he was facing his own death, could say Jesus defeated death (2 Timothy 1.10)?
- **Death.** Death is not the end of anyone, even nonbelievers. Death finalizes our ultimate destination in God's presence. For those who reject Jesus and never receive life—those who choose to remain spiritually dead—death continues what was already true and finalizes their destination apart from God and his grace. Have you ever thought about death finalizing our ultimate destination based on the choices we make in this life?
- **Judgment.** All people will appear before Christ to be judged and Jesus' followers will receive rewards from Christ based on their actions in this life. Frequently when we think of judgment we think it is a bad thing. Why is judgment more than a bad thing? What's the danger of living your life just for this world? How do you see our culture value this life above eternity?
- **New Heaven and New Earth.** In heaven, all things will be made new. Broken lives will be remade. Evil will be finally and fully vanquished. God will be with us in the completest possible way and we will be entirely alive as humans were created to live. What are some of the common perceptions of what heaven will be like? Discuss this statement: Many of us have this notion that heaven is "up there" or "out there" somewhere. Scripture actually teaches heaven will be a place on earth. It will, in fact, be a new earth.

Look Ahead: *Consider your next steps following this discussion.*

If it is true the choices we make in this life have eternal consequences, what steps do you need to make to change the way you think and act?

In The Chair this week . . .

- Memorize, meditate on, or write in your own words Revelation 21.4.
- Spend some time confessing you don't always live like your actions have eternal consequences. Ask God to change your perspective.
- Meditate on God desiring a relationship with you. Thank God for sending his Son to make a relationship possible.
- Since what we do matters for eternity, try and identify some areas where you are living for this world and not the next. This week take the next step to deliberately choose to value people as eternal beings. Ask a friend to come alongside you to help you grow in this area.

We Believe | Session Nine | *Security*

Before Your Group Meets...

Read through ***We Believe: Security*** underlining any thoughts or statements you think are important. Jot down what you find **new or compelling** or any **questions** you have.

We Believe: Security

Eternal Security gives us incredible joy, rest, and confidence as we each pursue our spiritual journey.

Can someone really claim Jesus' forgiveness and live however they want? Is faith simply a license to sin? Can someone lose their salvation? Sincere people make professions of faith, but for whatever reason they do not last. Other people's struggle with sin or doubt is so paralyzing they begin to wonder if their faith is even real.

Security is very important. Missing or misunderstanding the doctrine of security can wreak havoc on our spiritual journey. Eternal security may give some a false confidence, tempting them to continue in sinful behavior, thinking they are forgiven anyway. Security can become a license to sin based on a prayer from years ago, completely incongruous with God's intent. Or, a believer may be unaware of their security in Christ, doubting their salvation or living in fear not realizing how secure they are. Some believers continually feel like they are just starting off in the faith, and eventually, may wonder if their faith is real at all.

How secure is a person who has placed their faith in Christ and received his forgiveness? We believe the Bible teaches those who have truly placed their trust in Christ for salvation will not lose their salvation. While there are many instances in Scripture where God commands the believer to persevere in the faith, a person seeking to love God never needs to fear God will turn his back on them. Christ never forgives someone to later condemn them.

This important teaching brings immense freedom for growth in the spiritual journey. Without it, we can easily remain in bondage to fear of judgment.

People doubt their security for a number of reasons. Even strong believers have occasional doubts about their faith. Some cannot pinpoint a specific time when they came to faith. Many continually struggle with the same sin and others never knew about security. Too many believe salvation depends, at least in part, on what they do, and if they do not keep doing, their salvation will be lost. Others simply have not studied enough to know what God's plan of redemption really is.

These are common experiences for genuine followers of Jesus at different points in the journey. If you feel this way and are anxious, be encouraged, your anxiety is a good indication your faith is real and God is at work in your heart.

Why do we believe believers are secure in Christ? It is a question of relationship. God has always related to people through what the Bible calls "covenant." A covenant was an agreement between two entities defining their promises and obligations. It is different from a contract because our contracts are typically for a specified term and only involve one part of a person (such as a skill). We sign a contract with someone to receive a service. Covenants are permanent arrangements involving one's entire being, even if the other party fails. You are totally committed to the other person.

God made several covenants with people in the Bible such as Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. He committed himself to them, gave them obligations (such as the Ten Commandments) and remained faithful. In one sense, the whole story of the Old Testament is about God making covenants and keeping them while his people repeatedly break them. Because of God's nature—his goodness, love, and justice—when he makes a covenant, it can be relied on. He will not back out, and he will not let anyone destroy his plan to make all things new.

After ancient Israel's utter failure to fulfill their side of the covenant, God offered to make a "New Covenant." This new covenant would be different from the previous ones because, instead of external laws written on tablets of stone, he would give his people a new heart and a new spirit (Ezekiel 36.26), while writing those laws on their hearts (Jeremiah 31.33). Rather than rules to modify behavior, he would transform them from the inside out. This promise of the new covenant was fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Luke 22.20). Everyone who believes in Jesus Christ is part of the new covenant, built upon God's covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David (Romans 4.16-25).

If you are a Jesus follower, you are in a covenant with God. The new covenant defines your relationship with him. In this covenant, God described himself in two very important ways. First, he is our Father, and he has adopted all Jesus followers as his children (Romans 8.14-17). Second, Matthew 9.15 describes God as our Husband. God often uses marriage—a covenant—to describe his relationship with his people (Jeremiah 3.14) and he promises to never leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13.5). Out of this covenant background, God makes some amazing statements and promises to those who follow him in faith.

There are good reasons to believe we are secure. This summary will look at five of them.

God's Purpose. Paul describes God's overall purpose for us in Romans 8.29. He writes, "those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son." God's purpose for believers is a transformation into Christlikeness. He plans to work in the hearts of his followers to make us like his Son through our obedience. This is the new covenant. God promises to give us a new heart and a new spirit, to write his laws on our hearts so we reflect his character to the world around us. If our salvation in Christ can be reversed, God's purpose can be thwarted.

God's Power. Jesus himself explains God's plan for our salvation cannot be stopped. Talking about his followers, Jesus said, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand" (John 10.27-29). Because God is at work protecting us, we are secure in Christ.

Peter makes this explicit in his first letter writing we are "shielded by God's power" (1 Peter 1.3-5). God's power keeps us secure, not ours. According to Paul, this is the same power that brought Christ Jesus back from the dead (Ephesians 1.18-21).

God's Gift. Jesus says, "I give them eternal life," which Peter describes as "imperishable" (1 Peter 1.23). When people come to faith in Christ, Jesus says we are "born again" (John 3.3); Paul describes it as being "made alive" from the dead (Ephesians 2.5). For all Jesus followers, this new birth happened in the past. God's grace is given as an irrevocable gift (Romans 11.29). We are already living our eternal lives, which—by definition—will not end.

God's Love Guarantees. The nature of God's love guarantees security. Paul writes, "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ . . . And we boast in the hope of the glory of God . . . and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given

us...God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5.1-8). Christ gave everything for us because he loved us, and he did that while we were still sinners.

In the Old Testament, a Hebrew word enriches the concept of love: *hesed*. Usually translated "lovingkindness" or "unfailing love," it is difficult to translate with simply one English word because it refers to going beyond what is normally expected—even sacrificially—to care for someone else. God's love is celebrated in the Psalms constantly because it is unfailing. Psalm 136 begins, "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever." This refrain is repeated in the Psalm. God's love is a covenantal love, not starting and stopping, but enduring and accomplishing what he intends.

God's Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit in our lives guarantees our security. "God's love has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who has been given us" (Romans 5.5). Paul writes the Holy Spirit was given as a down payment "guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession" (Ephesians 1.14)

God is at Work. In these five reasons, God is the one at work. Salvation is not a ticket into heaven easily acquired and clumsily lost. Salvation is new life in Jesus Christ, created by God himself through faith in him. Salvation is first and foremost a relationship between the living God and those he created and redeemed. God is highly relational and does not take his relationships lightly.

Paul, summarizing the doctrine of security in one of the most profound and encouraging chapters in the Bible, begins by writing, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8.1-2). Paul ends the chapter with a powerful declaration of our security:

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ... Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8.31-39).

We know our sins are forgiven and can approach God with confidence not because of anything in ourselves but because of what God has done and is doing on our behalf. It is true, Jesus offers to remove sin as far as the east is from the west, and not only that, to hold you secure in his hand. No one and nothing can pull you away.

But, some seem to follow Jesus and then reject him. What happened? Based on the teaching of Scripture, those who fall away are either true followers of Jesus who will return or they never really were followers of Jesus. Perhaps they liked certain parts of Jesus' message or enjoyed being part of the church community, but never really gave their heart and life to him through faith. Our role as their family or friends is to support them the best we can and pray for them.

If you have placed your faith in him, you can know you are right with God and know with certainty you are eternally secure because of God's faithfulness. For those struggling with sin, God promises to stay. Hebrews

12.2 describes Jesus as the “author and perfecter of our faith.” It is our great privilege to know our security rests in Christ’s death on the cross that once and for all covered our sins.

What difference does this make? Well, it should give us incredible joy, rest, and confidence as we each pursue our spiritual journey. Our identity is not in question. We have been adopted by God as his fully loved and cherished daughters and sons. We can pursue God and live our lives with complete abandon, trusting him to care for us, protect us, and guide us. No matter what challenges we face, we are his.

With our eternal lives guaranteed, believers should be the most thankful and worship-filled people alive. As the author of Hebrews states, “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe...” (Hebrews 12.28). God’s desire is our lives shine with freedom, grace, and thanksgiving for the gift of eternal security.

Small Group Discussion!

Look Back: *Begin your time by reviewing the Scriptures and the important points of the reading.*

People doubt their security for a number of reasons. Even strong believers have occasional doubts about their faith. Why might some people feel ashamed to admit they have doubts?

Discuss this statement. Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer.

***A right view of Security should give us incredible joy, rest,
and confidence as we pursue our spiritual journey.***

Spend 10 minutes reading these verses that highlight four different parts of Security. Briefly discuss what you see and experience in the passages. Further questions for discussion will follow.

- **1 Peter 1.3-5** (God's Power)
- **1 Peter 1.23** (God's Gift)
- **John 10.27-29** (God is at Work)
- **Ephesians 1.13-14** (Guaranteed)

Thinking back over the reading for the week, take five minutes to discuss:

- What you found new or compelling
- What questions you have

Jared's Story: *Have someone in your group read this story aloud.*

"Hi, my name's Jared and I have accepted Jesus about 47 times" is how Jared started telling his story to his small group. Jared grew up in a pretty conservative home with a lot of rules. Life wasn't always easy and Jared wasn't a rule follower by nature, unlike some of his siblings. As he continued his story, he said, "I know my parents didn't mean for it to happen like this, but I really felt their love depended on whether I did the right thing or not. I had a hard time not picturing God feeling the same way about me."

Jared continued to share his spiritual journey with the group, about struggling to stay on God's good side and going to bed some nights terrified of what would happen if he didn't wake up. "I knew I wasn't a good person and I definitely went through times where I told God I didn't want to have anything to do with him." Jared explained how he didn't feel like he could hold onto his salvation. As he wrapped up his story, he said, "I'll be honest, there are some days those feelings come back, but I just try and remind myself of what I know to be true about God and salvation. I know it really isn't something I did or do, but something he did."

In what ways do you identify with Jared in this story?

Look In: Consider together what God is asking you to do and encourage each other.

- **God's Power.** Because God protects us, we are secure in Christ. Peter makes this explicit writing we are "shielded by God's power" (1 Peter 1.3-5). God's power keeps us secure, not ours. Have you ever felt like your security depended upon doing the right things? What can you do to remind yourself it is God's power and not yours that keeps you secure?
- **Eternal Life.** Jesus gives us eternal life. It's a gift we can't earn. For Jesus followers who accepted that gift, new birth happened in the past. God gives his grace as an irrevocable gift. Because it is a gift and we don't earn it, we can't do anything to lose it. How does knowing we didn't earn our salvation help us feel secure in it?
- **God is at Work.** God is the one at work in our salvation. Salvation is not a ticket into heaven easily acquired and clumsily lost. Salvation is new life in Jesus Christ, created by God himself through faith in him. Salvation is first and foremost a relationship between the living God and those he created and redeemed. Have you ever doubted your salvation? What gives you assurance when you walk through times of doubt?
- **Guaranteed.** Ephesians 1.13-14 reminds us we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit who is a deposit guaranteeing our redemption. Every so often we may struggle with our salvation and feel lost or alone. Words like sealing and guaranteeing can be powerful. How do you think focusing on the fact you have been sealed and received a guarantee of your salvation could impact your walk with God?

Look Ahead. Consider your next steps following this discussion.

If our eternal lives are guaranteed, we should be the most thankful and worship-filled people alive. What are some of the ways you can rest in the promises of God's Word concerning security this week?

In The Chair this week...

- Memorize, meditate on, or write in your own words 1 Peter 1.23.
- Spend some time confessing you sometimes act like your salvation depends on what you do and ask God to change your perspective.
- Meditate on God sealing and guaranteeing you. Thank God for lovingly holding you securely in his hand.
- Since a right view of security should give us incredible joy, rest, and confidence as we pursue our spiritual journeys, identify some specific ways you can take the next step to deliberately rest in the promises and power of God for your security.

Thank you for interacting and wrestling with each section of *We Believe*. Hopefully you were challenged and your faith strengthened. We journeyed through the nine major beliefs (doctrines) of the Christian faith. Here's a quick review:

- **God:** However we view God, our lives, attitudes, and actions will follow suit. How we view God impacts everything.
- **Bible:** Because the Bible is how God has chosen to reveal himself to us, only when we make it our personal authority can it fully speak to us and help us fall in love with God.
- **Jesus:** The Bible makes important claims about Jesus. There are a lot of competing voices making claims about who Jesus is, so coming to grips with the claims of the Bible is vital for our faith. We cannot move forward in our spiritual journey unless we trust Jesus is who he said he was.
- **Humanity:** Because God chose to create people in his image and he loves them, there is perhaps no better barometer of our heart for God than that we obey him by treating people like he wants us to.
- **Spirit:** The Spirit lives in the believer. If we allow the Spirit to be active in our lives, he will counsel us and work with us to transform us into the image of Jesus—to live the life we were created for.
- **Salvation:** If we are (and we are) sinful lost people, no gift can be better than life. Salvation through Jesus is that life.
- **Church:** Through the church God is doing something vital and powerful—something not contained in a building or program—and he wants you to be a part of it.
- **Eternity:** It is vital to see eternal destinies in their proper perspective. It affects how we see people on this earth and how we choose to invest our time. The choices we make, whether for Christ or apart from him, have eternal consequences.
- **Security:** Eternal Security gives us incredible joy, rest, and confidence as we pursue our spiritual journey.

Take some time to review and reflect on the “look ahead” portion of each week. Consider your progress on the areas you identified for growth. Where do you need to renew your focus?

If you are going to be meeting with an elder for a membership interview, what questions came up that you want to ask them?

If you aren't doing an elder interview, is there an area you would like to sit down and talk about further with someone?

While this booklet focuses on our core beliefs, we were just able to scratch the surface on every doctrine. If you were challenged by a particular area or would like to continue your study, we would love to have a conversation with you.

*The LORD bless you
and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face toward you
and give you peace.*

Deuteronomy 6.24-26