

WARM-UP

- › Describe the most beautiful landscape you've ever seen.
- › Did you grow up with strict or lenient parents? Give an example that illustrates your answer.
- › What's your dream job?

WORD

Genesis 1:1 — In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

Why are we here? That's a question asked by thousands of people and answered thousands of different ways. Knowing the "how" isn't enough for us. We want to know the "why." Through the Bible, God has provided an answer to this question. By focusing on three major themes in Genesis—themes that continue throughout the Bible—we begin to glimpse the answer to this question. We also get an explanation for the state the world is in.

1. Good

Genesis 1:31a — And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.

It might be hard to believe when we watch the news, but the world that God created was good. It wasn't just certain aspects of creation that were good either. Everything that God made was good. Light and dark were good. The ocean and land were good. Vegetation and food... good. Seasons... good. Animals... good. People... good. There was no evil or suffering in all creation. People walked with God, enjoyed his creation, and worked to cultivate and protect it. All of life was good.

Discussion Question

What do you see in the world that makes it difficult for you to believe creation was originally good?

2. Sin

Genesis 3:11 — He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"

The good life didn't last long. Adam and Eve disobeyed God, and through their disobedience, sin spread to all humanity. As the author of life, God's desire for all humanity was goodness, but humanity's disobedience opened the door to everything in life that isn't good—violence, disaster, and death. Sin didn't only corrupt nature. It also corrupted the human heart and made it rebellious toward God. The Bible points to sin as the core problem that prevents humans from participating in all the good that God intended for creation.

Discussion Question

Give an example of an evil in society. What human heart issue can that evil be traced back to?

3. Salvation

Isaiah 53:5 — But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

Our plight seemed hopeless. We couldn't undo what Adam and Eve had done, and our hearts were corrupt to the point of no return. But God had a plan to rescue us. Jesus Christ came to earth as our substitute. He died on the cross to pay the price for our sin, even though he was sinless. He then rose from the dead, breaking the power of death over humanity, offering us a new heart and a way back into relationship with God. In this extraordinary act of power, mercy, and grace, Jesus Christ became the centerpiece of salvation—God's plan to restore the goodness we thought was lost.

APPLICATION

- › What's one aspect of creation to which you really want to see goodness restored?
- › What is one thing about sin and its consequences that surprised you while studying Scripture this week?
- › Have you put your faith in Christ for salvation? If you haven't, would you like to today?

PRAYER

Pray for anyone in the group committing their life to Christ, that he or she would have a transformative experience of God's salvation.

WARM-UP

- › Who was your closest friend growing up? What's your best memory with him or her?
- › Give an example of something mischievous you did as a child that you thought you'd get away with but landed up getting caught.
- › Do you think the teachings of Christianity are too strict? Why or why not?

WORD

“Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”— Acts 2:36

Last week we saw that disobedience was the starting point for evil entering into the world. It only makes sense, then, that part of God restoring creation involves restoring our obedience. Obedience is an unpopular word, however, and hearing it makes us think of abusive tyrants and evil empires. And in any case, doesn't God's forgiveness and grace mean we don't have to pay attention to all the Bible's rules? The truth is, obedience to God is the only way to truly live. But there are two incorrect approaches to obedience and one correct approach. These incorrect approaches are useless and dangerous. However, if we get the approach right, we will love God and live life to the full.

Error 1 — I'm saved, so I don't need to obey.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”— Matthew 7:21d

Salvation isn't some magic formula: this word + that word = salvation. In the same way that having a job in which you call your superior “boss” but don't follow his or her instructions won't last, we can't use Jesus' name as a get-out-of-hell-free card and then live however we want. That attitude is proof that our sinful actions—impurity, covetousness, sexual immorality—are more important to us than Jesus. This approach aims to deceive God, but he can't be deceived. After all, he's God.

Discussion Question

What are some sinful actions in your culture that people have a difficult time walking away from?

Error 2 — I obey in order to be saved.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”— Ephesians 2:8–9

This error is very subtle. It uses obedience as leverage against God. As if to say, “Because I obey you, God, I expect salvation and blessing.” Seeing salvation this way, however, has two equally bad results. It can make us arrogant, because we look down on people who don't live up to our standards. Or it results in shame if we feel like we've fallen short of God's standards. This is no way to live. On days when you're keeping the standard, you'll feel confident. But on days you fall short, you'll be filled with shame and embarrassment. Two equally bad results.

Discussion Question

How have you seen the arrogance or shame caused by this error affect people?

The Gospel — I'm saved, so I obey.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”— Jesus, John 14:15

God isn't a tyrant. He's the Creator of a universe in which he wants his creatures to thrive. The commandments he gives us are for our good, but our sinful hearts deceive us into thinking he's keeping some good from us (just like Adam and Eve thought). What can combat the deception of our sinful hearts? The truth that God loves us. When you see Jesus on the cross, dying to restore us to our Heavenly Father, your heart will love him. And true obedience flows out of a heart that has been captured by the love of Christ.

APPLICATION

- › Which error listed above do you tend to fall into, and how can the Gospel change the way you view obedience?
- › Are there areas in your life in which you have become condescending towards others? Are there areas in which you experience too much shame? How has your thinking gone wrong in these areas?
- › Are there ways you are currently disobeying God? How can the love of Christ help you walk away from those sins?

PRAYER

Prayer for a deeper revelation of Jesus' love.
Pray for more obedience to flow out of that revelation.

WARM-UP

- › Give an example of a perspective you had as a child that changed as you got older. Why did it change and how did it change?
- › In your opinion, what are some traits of healthy relationships (friendly, family, or romantic)?
- › What's one thing that surprised you this week while studying repentance and baptism?

WORD

"Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins..." — Acts 2:37–38a

How does a person become a believer in Jesus? We've looked at the source of the problem with creation—sin that ruined the goodness God planned—and we've looked at the way God began his rescue plan—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now we'll look at how a person who wants to follow Jesus can respond to his salvation. Though the process is simple, it is profound. It cuts right to the heart of our problem and opens up a new way to live life.

1. A Turning Point

But when he came to himself, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.'" — Luke 15:17–18

The scripture above is from the parable of the prodigal son. It's a story Jesus told that illustrates what it looks like to repent. Repentance involves a realization that sin isn't just external but it's in our hearts. We're part of the problem. The person who repents wants to stop living in a way that deepens the relational hurt between them and God. So they return to God, leaving behind whatever they were pursuing before, with a desire to restore their relationship with their Heavenly Father.

Discussion Question

What fears might the prodigal son have had when returning to his father? In what way do similar fears prevent people from returning to God?

2. A Breaking Point

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of

life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. — Romans 6:4–6

Paul uses the image of breaking away from our "old self" to describe what happens through baptism. In baptism, we signify publicly that we are no longer enslaved to sin, that we've broken away from our old life. It's an outward display of our inward repentance. This is why baptism is a focus in Christian churches; it's a chance for us to celebrate with people who have found freedom from those things which brought relational fracturing between them, the people around them, and most importantly, God.

Discussion Question

Do you think people have the ability on their own to turn away from lifestyles that don't glorify God? Why or why not?

3. A Savior

Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. — 1 Peter 3:21

The act of baptism doesn't save you, just like the words used to repent don't save you. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus saves us. Repentance and baptism both point to our Savior. Jesus suffered what the prodigal son deserved so that our Heavenly Father could welcome us home. In the waters of baptism, we're reminded that Jesus was immersed in death itself on our behalf. When we come up out of the water, we're struck by the reality that Jesus didn't stay in the grave. He rose again, and is at the right hand of God. We now have relationship with God and access to his life.

APPLICATION

- › Like the prodigal son, are there fears that are stopping you from turning to God through repentance? How have those fears been impacted by this discussion?
- › Are there aspects of your life that you haven't broken away from? How might those choices be keeping you enslaved?
- › Do you trust Jesus as your Savior? Have you signified it through repentance and baptism? Would you like to do so today?

PRAYER

Pray for an increased desire for holiness and a breaking with the sinful nature of our past.
Pray for a deeper understanding of the Father's love for us.

WARM-UP

- › Who's your favorite superhero and why?
- › If there were three character traits that you'd want every friend of yours to have, what would they be?
- › Describe a "eureka" moment in your life, where your thinking about something changed drastically.

WORD

"Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you." — John 16:7

Imagine what it would've been like to walk with Jesus. Seeing his miracles first-hand and watching him teach with unmatched authority would've been breathtaking. Surprisingly, Jesus tells his disciples that it's to their advantage that he goes away. It makes us wonder what would be more advantageous than walking with God in the flesh. Jesus answers that question—the Holy Spirit, described here as our "Helper." Let's look at three ways in which the Holy Spirit helps us, and why it's to our advantage.

1. He Produces Fruit

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law... If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. — Galatians 5:22–23,25

It's hard to imagine living every day embodying the traits listed above. It's as if our sinful hearts were once only capable of growing weeds. Even if we did produce a healthy sprig, it would get choked out by the weeds. The Holy Spirit changes our hearts, regenerating us to reflect the character of Christ. It's as if the Holy Spirit transforms the soil of our hearts, making it a place where the gospel can produce fruit for God's glory and our good.

Discussion Question

In your opinion, which of the "fruits" listed above seem to be lacking the most in your cultural context.

2. He Apportions Gifts

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good... For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it

is with Christ. — 1 Corinthians 12:4–7,12

The Holy Spirit isn't only interested in us as individuals. He wants a healthy, thriving, growing Church. To that end, he has given each disciple spiritual gifts—Spirit-empowered abilities for the good of others. Before Jesus ascended, he ministered from a certain geographical location (wherever he was). Now the Holy Spirit gives us gifts to continue Jesus' ministry to all nations, which is an exponential increase in reach. No wonder Jesus called the Holy Spirit an advantage.

Discussion Question

How have you seen spiritual gifts used for the good of others?

3. He Glorifies Christ

"He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you." — John 16:14

When you read accounts of Jesus' twelve disciples in the Gospels, and then you read about them in Acts, it's hard to believe these are the same people. Even though the disciples walked with Jesus, seeing hundreds of miracles firsthand, they lacked courage and faith until the Holy Spirit filled them at Pentecost. The courage the Holy Spirit gave them through revelation turned the world upside down. It goes to show, we can't glorify God on our own. When the Holy Spirit shines a floodlight on the cross, it melts our hearts with the love for Christ. To know and love God—the very essence of life—is now possible through the Holy Spirit.

APPLICATION

- › In your current season of life, what fruit of the Spirit do you need in extra measure?
- › How can you use the spiritual gifts you've been given for the good of others?
- › How would you describe what happens in your heart when the Holy Spirit shines a floodlight on the cross of Christ?

PRAYER

Pray for a fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit in your life.
Pray for a deeper revelation of Christ to know and love God.

WARM-UP

- › Describe a birthday or other holiday where or when you became obsessed with a certain gift. What was that gift and why did you want it so badly?
- › Describe your top two most nervous moments in life.
- › On a scale of one to ten, how much do you crave other people's approval (one being not dependent and ten being completely dependent)? Why did you score yourself where you did?

WORD

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. — Romans 10:17

If you were writing a novel, and you wanted to let your characters know that you were their author, you would need to write yourself into the story. That's exactly what God has done through his Word. He has revealed his character, the purpose of life, and how we can know him. But so what? Why do we benefit from knowing God's word? In short, faith. Let's look at what faith provides for disciples and why it's vital to life.

1. Assurance

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for... — Hebrews 11:1a

The atheistic view argues that the sun will eventually swallow the earth and all human history will disappear. Some argue that life's brevity is what makes it beautiful. If one is intellectually honest, however, they'd see that beauty and meaning are useless to us if we're all doomed. The Word of God makes assurances that tap into our deepest longings—eternal life, a sense of purpose, hope that evil will disappear—and it guarantees us that God (and not the sun) will have the final say.

Discussion Question

Do you think that life's brevity is what makes it beautiful? Why or why not?

2. Conviction

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. — Hebrews 11:1

Ever since the Enlightenment, Western culture has by and large adopted the view that empirical evidence is required to prove something exists. The Christian faith involves a lot of things that are not seen but that exist nonetheless. (God, for instance.) Conviction is the link between belief and action. For example, praying to God for healing from a sickness, without the conviction that he exists and has the power to heal, is nothing more than wishful thinking. God's word gives us the conviction we need to live every day in

light of the unseen, unshakable power of God.

Discussion Question

Do you believe that empirical research is the only way to prove something exists? Why or why not?

3. Commendation

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation... [For] in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. — Hebrews 11:1–2, Galatians 3:26

Commendation is God's approval—a cosmic "thumbs-up." As humans, one of our deepest needs is the approval of our Creator, and we'll all appeal to God for his approval based on something. Maybe it's trying to live as a good person, or having a good family, or having a good career, or giving money to the poor. Although those are all good, they don't get us God's commendation. We get God's approval through faith. And not just faith in general, but faith in Jesus, through whom we are accepted as God's children. God's word continually reminds us to stop trying to get God's approval from other sources, and have faith in Christ alone.

APPLICATION

- › What's one area of your life in which you believe a doctrine but currently lack the conviction to live according to it? How can God's Word give you the conviction you need?
- › What can you do practically to make sure you're becoming more and more familiar with God's Word?
- › What significance does it bring to your life that you are (or can be) a child of God through faith in Christ?

PRAYER

Pray for the area in which you need conviction, pray that God would show you what parts of his Word to meditate on. Pray for the revelation of God's approval we have through Christ.

WARM-UP

- › What was your first job? What lessons did you learn about work from it?
- › Describe a time when you felt part of a great team. What made the experience great?
- › If you could spend one day with a famous person, who would it be and why?

WORD

And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." — Mark 1:17

The word "Christian" is very broad. Someone might consider themselves a Christian if they attend a certain number of religious services per year, if they were baptized as a child, or a host of other nebulous qualifications. The cultural definition of a Christian might be vague, but fortunately there's a term in Scripture that removes all the guesswork. The term is "disciple," and what it means to be a disciple is crystal clear in Scripture. Jesus calls us to be disciples and to make disciples, and that requires the following three life changes.

1. Leave our nets.

And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." And immediately they left their nets and followed him... And immediately [Jesus] called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him. — Mark 1:17–18,20

Following Christ is all or nothing. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus continually teaches that discipleship requires a fundamental shift of loyalty. Whatever once had our utmost loyalty—family, career, personal dreams and desires—all have to file in behind Jesus. He's first. He's foremost. To be a disciple is to let Jesus become your new source of security and identity.

Discussion Question

Give an example of when you've seen career or family be a person's source of identity and security. What effect does it have on that person's life?

2. Lift our cross.

And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." — Mark 8:34–35

The life of a disciple involves suffering. The world is steeped in sin, so it's no surprise that Christ's redemptive work would meet resistance. Discipleship calls us to endure, and to place the advancement of God's kingdom above our personal comfort and safety. Jesus says that this act of lifting

our cross up onto our shoulders and following him into adversity, will actually be a process of discovering true life.

Discussion Question

What makes you nervous about the role of suffering in the life of a disciple?

3. Live to God.

For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. — Romans 6:10–11

The call to be a disciple is the call to follow Christ and his example. In the verse above, Paul shows us that Jesus lived his life for God's glory. The weight of God's magnificence will fill the universe, and the life of a disciple is part of the permeation process. This world once scarred with sin will be completely healed. God will dwell with his people, his disciples, forever.

APPLICATION

- › Are there sources of identity and security that you're still looking to other than Christ? What might it look like for you to leave those nets?
- › What sources of suffering do you foresee as you take the gospel into your culture? How can Christ's suffering for you give you courage?
- › In what ways would you like your life to glorify God?

PRAYER

Pray for the courage to advance God's kingdom with boldness.

Pray for a revelation of what it looks like to live for God's glory.

WARM-UP

- › Describe the worst injury you ever experienced.
- › What's the most beautiful building you've ever been inside of? What made it beautiful?
- › What do you like or not like about weddings?

WORD

And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. — Ephesians 1:22–23

The role that the Church plays in the Christian faith is significant. However, many think incorrectly about church, assuming it's a place you attend to please God. We know that faith in Christ is how we please God, and religious duties have nothing to contribute to our righteous standing before him. Viewing church as a religious checkbox is tragic, because it misses the significance of what it means to be God's people. Using metaphors, New Testament authors Paul and Peter help us understand what it means to be the Church.

1. The Church As Christ's Body

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. — 1 Corinthians 12:12,27

God has given each of us a custom-made life. Only you have the combination of your personality, your experiences, and your talents. As the body of Christ, we have taken on his mission to spread God's kingdom throughout the whole earth. God uses each person to accomplish a unique part of this breathtakingly huge mission. The Church is a diverse, global body of people committed to Christ's purposes, and each of us has a unique role to that end.

Discussion Question

In what ways have you seen the diversity of disciples strengthen the Church and its mission?

2. The Church As God's Temple

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. — Ephesians 2:19–22

When Adam and Eve sinned, it fractured the relationship between God and the people he'd created. As creatures designed for the presence of God, people flounder without

him, like fish out of water. But God's redemption in Christ heals the relational fracture. He is reversing the tragic history of man by restoring our relationship with him. As more believers are added to the Church, God's healing presence stretches out across the earth through us.

Discussion Question

In your opinion, what about God's presence seems necessary for people?

3. The Church As Christ's Bride

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. — Ephesians 5:25–27

If we only had the image of the Church as Christ's body and God's temple, we run the risk of picturing God as a pragmatist. That's misguided. God's motivation for redeeming the world is to live in relationship with us in it. God loves us. He wants to heal our fractured relationship. We now know that Christ was crushed and fractured that we might be healed. And we can look forward to our wedding feast, to the day the last fracture heals, and we will live like we were made to—in his presence.

APPLICATION

- › Do you view church as a religious duty? In what way has this discussion changed that view?
- › In what ways can you spread the presence of God into your culture?
- › What makes you excited about standing before Christ as his bride?

PRAYER

Pray for wisdom to know your unique role in the body of Christ.

Pray for a deeper revelation of Christ's spousal love.

WARM-UP

- › Tell of a time when you felt intimidated by someone else's skill or talent.
- › What are two or three financial goals you have in your life?
- › Do you think prayer works? Why or why not?

WORD

"And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this..."
— Matthew 6:7–9

Jesus prayed. This is a bit strange if you think about it. God in flesh should've had sufficient power not to need anyone. However, this misses the point. Life is meant to be lived in relationship with God, and Jesus modeled relationship. Prayer is one way we cultivate our relationship with God, and praying the right way is vital to the life of a disciple. In Jesus' model prayer, we see three major pursuits of prayer.

1. Prayer for Perspective

"Pray then like this: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'" — Matthew 6:9–10

Anxiety, fear, and worry are matters of perspective. The unshakable belief that God is in control gives a disciple the ability to endure even the toughest circumstances. Martyrs have been known to sing God's praises while being burned. That's only possible because they knew God had the final say. When we magnify God through prayer, we give him an opportunity to eclipse our fears with his glory. When we set our eyes on his kingdom, we gain wisdom for how to live.

Discussion Question

What causes us to lose perspective in life?

2. Prayer for Provision

Give us this day our daily bread. — Matthew 6:11

In verse eight, Jesus says that the Father knows what we need. It seems strange that he'd instruct us to ask God for daily provision. But praying for provision is an important reminder that God is our source. Everything we need to live our lives comes from his hand. This makes us both humble and confident—humble because we realize we're dependent, and confident because we're dependent on a God who has limitless power and resources.

Discussion Question

What risks are involved in forgetting that God is our source?

3. Prayer for Power

[And] forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. — Matthew 6:12–15

Look at the importance Jesus puts on forgiveness. Unless we forgive others, God won't forgive us. Those are high stakes. In a world full of sinful people, this constant forgiveness requires deep reservoirs of mercy. We can only forgive like that when we realize the forgiveness God has given us in Christ. We can only show that kind of mercy when we see his mercy on display in Christ's bloodied body on the cross. We pray to remember his grace. Only then can we extend that grace to others.

APPLICATION

- › Are there areas in your life that are filled with anxiety, fear, and worry? What about God's power can give you perspective in those areas?
- › What provision are you currently trusting God for?
- › Are there people you haven't forgiven? Do you feel as though you have the power to forgive them because you've seen Christ's forgiveness for you? Why or why not?

PRAYER

Glorify God in prayer for a few minutes. Pray that God's grace through Christ would empower us to show the same grace to others.

WARM-UP

- › Do you think aliens could exist? Why or why not?
- › What's the most intense argument or fight you've ever been in?
- › What comes to mind when you hear the word "hope"?

WORD

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. — 1 John 3:1–3

If you've ever heard the saying, "He's so heavenly minded that he's no earthly good," it sounds logical. It encourages us to focus on the present rather than living with our head in the clouds. However, disciples should be intensely focused on the future. What we know about the future informs how we live in the present. What the Bible says about Christian hope makes us both excited for the future and filled with purpose in the present. John explains how.

Our Present Battle

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. — 1 John 3:1

A disciple seeks first the kingdom of God (Matt 6:33). This means that God's kingdom isn't yet fully established on earth. As a result, disciples experience persecution. Because our loyalty to Christ challenges worldly pursuits, people who feel threatened lash out. Our ultimate peace, prosperity, and fulfillment won't be realized now. That's why the apostle Peter calls us "exiles" (1 Peter 2:11). As exiles, we are to show the same love and mercy to others that Christ extended to us. This is far from comfortable and easy.

Discussion Question

In what way does the possibility of suffering for Christ make you uneasy?

Our Future Hope

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. — 1 John 3:2

Our persecution is only temporary. When Jesus returns, he will judge evil fully and finally, freeing the earth from its bondage to the decay of sin. What John means by "as he is,"

is that we will see Jesus in his full kingly glory. He will establish his kingdom in every nation, and God's people will reign and thrive on the renewed earth. Not only will we see Jesus in his fullness, but we will finally be freed from sin entirely.

Discussion Question

What have you grown up believing about the future or the end of time?

Our Present Purpose

And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. — 1 John 3:3

As we look forward to the day when we'll stand before God completely sinless, it gives us the perspective and motivation to glorify God in our lives now. Jesus persevered through unspeakable suffering by fixing his eyes on the glory of God that waited on the other side. We too endure by fixing our eyes on our future hope. As Paul said, "this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor 4:17).

APPLICATION

- › Are there ways in which you haven't fully accepted that you're an exile? What are you still looking to provide your comfort and fulfillment?
- › What reaction is caused in you when you think about Jesus' return?
- › What about Jesus' life helps you endure suffering as a disciple?

PRAYER

Pray for courage to live as exiles that glorify God in every sphere of life.

Pray for understanding about how our future hope should affect our lives now.

WARM-UP

- › What's your dream job? What do you think you'd enjoy about it?
- › What were the two most important lessons you learned about money early in life?
- › Do you think Christians should live a life of poverty? Why or why not?

WORD

The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. — 2 Corinthians 9:6–8

There's a lot of demand on our money. Whether it's an increase in living costs, a downturn in the economy, or a growing family, there seldom seems to be enough money for all that you need or want. This constant demand makes the topic of giving a sensitive one. But the Bible indicates that generosity should be a defining characteristic of a disciple. Rather than giving out of compulsion, Paul describes a generosity modeled by "cheerful givers."

1. Generosity That Enables Good Work

[So] that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. — 2 Corinthians 9:8b

Key to understanding biblical generosity is seeing that money has a God-given purpose. Yes, it's for our enjoyment, but it's ultimate purpose is to advance God's kingdom. Paul's says that generosity makes "every good work" possible. Whether it's cooking dinner for a new neighbor, adopting a child, or growing a business that meets the needs of its employees, the advancement of God's kingdom depends on generosity.

Discussion Question

Give your own example of a way in which generosity can advance God's kingdom.

2. Generosity That Recognizes Dependence

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. — 2 Corinthians 9:8

Your generosity is dependent on your trust in God. The radical generosity we see in the New Testament is accom-

panied by a radical belief in God's ability and willingness to provide. When Paul says that God will provide us with "all sufficiency in all things at all times," we see that his view of God is expansive. Our ability to give is directly linked with our view of God.

Discussion Question

What might happen if people lose sight of the fact that God provides everything to everybody?

3. Generosity That Flows from the Heart

The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. — 2 Corinthians 9:6–7

We're born sinful, and sin is selfish. Without intervention, we'd seek our own desires over the needs of others every time. But God has provided the ultimate intervention and the ultimate display of generosity. He gave something of incomparable worth for our needs—his Son, Jesus. The truth is, we can only be generous when the revelation of God's generosity toward us drops into our hearts. That's how we become cheerful givers.

APPLICATION

- › In what ways do you want to see God's provision in your life leading to good work?
- › Do you get anxious or fearful about money? How does the truth that God is your source affect that anxiety and fear?
- › Do you give cheerfully toward kingdom advancement? Will the revelation of God's generosity in Christ change the way you approach giving? How so?

PRAYER

Pray for guidance to know the ways in which God is leading you to be generous.

Pray for a deeper understanding of God's generosity toward us in Christ.

WARM-UP

- › Do you like telling friends and family about places you've been that you've enjoyed? What recommendation has been the biggest hit?
- › Tell of a time when you tried your best to make up for something you did wrong.
- › What is one aspect of religion you really enjoy and one thing you're confused by?

WORD

[Jesus] said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation." — Mark 16:15

It's tempting to think that preaching is the responsibility of pastors only. However, Jesus told all his disciples to preach the gospel of God's salvation. In other words, every Christian is called to preach. This might make us nervous and uncomfortable, but to be a disciple is to be a preacher. Instead of running from this calling, let's look at what the Bible says about how we preach, why we preach, and what we preach:

1. How We Preach

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." — Luke 15:1–2

We often think the Pharisees had no interest in making disciples. That's not true (Matt 23:15). It's how they disciplined that differed from Jesus. Pharisees made it a point to disengage from nonbelievers. If nonbelievers wanted to convert, they needed to make the changes necessary first. Jesus, however, engaged nonbelievers. He didn't preach at them from a distance. He befriended them. That's how Jesus calls us to preach.

Discussion Question

What's easier about the Pharisees' method than Jesus' method?

2. Why We Preach

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? — Romans 10:14

The gospel is so counterintuitive that people couldn't figure it out on their own. That's why we need to preach. Every other religion deals with guilt and shame by telling people to improve their behavior. That's why Paul says that people will only know about God's true salvation if somebody tells them.

Discussion Question

Explain how another religion you know deals with the issues of acceptance by God or the gods.

3. What We Preach

For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." — Romans 10:11–13

Everyone gets God's approval the same way—through faith in Jesus. His life, death, resurrection, and ascension are the guarantee of our eternal future with God. If people are going to stop trying to win God's favor on their own, somebody needs to tell them how. As disciples, we're not just salesmen peddling another religious product. We're bringing people the best news they'll ever hear in their lives.

APPLICATION

- › Are you intentionally engaging the nonbelievers in your culture and community? If not, how can you begin to build those relationships?
- › Are you trying to win God's favor through your own efforts? How's that turning out for you?
- › Do you have a clear understanding of the "riches" you have in Christ? How can you preach about those riches to friends and family?

PRAYER

Pray for courage to preach God's word with boldness (Acts 4:31).

Pray for a revelation of the greatness of the gospel.

WARM-UP

- › What's your favorite ending to a book or movie? What makes it great in your opinion?
- › Think about the question, "If you only had three months left to live, how would you spend your time?" Do you like questions like that? Why or why not?
- › What comes to mind when you hear the word "judgment?"

WORD

Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. — Revelation 1:7

Many people think that when a Christian dies, he or she goes to heaven, and that's it. The Bible reveals, however, that heaven is not our final destination. The end of this age will be marked by the return of Jesus to the earth. At his return, Jesus will do the following three things. These promises cause both trembling and very great hope. Jesus will...

1. Save his people.

And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. — Hebrews 9:27–28

Although we experience Christ's salvation in part now, it's just the tip of the iceberg. When he comes, he will give us resurrected bodies prepared for eternity. He will remove sin completely from our lives, bring us into the fullness of who we're meant to be, and save us from the persecution we've suffered as his disciples. Jesus' return is a pillar of Christian hope, because it signifies the fulfillment of our heart's deepest desires.

Discussion Question

What else do you think people need saving from?

2. Judge Satan and unrepentant people.

This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering — since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. — 2 Thessalonians 1:5–8

At first glance, judgment seems opposed to love. However,

the severity of God's judgment proves the depth of his love. Jesus offered himself as our substitute, taking the wrath from God that we deserved. Because we are all sinners, we all need saving. In his perfect justice, God has to judge sin. But if people don't accept Christ as their substitute, they subject themselves to God's judgment. A loving God can't let evil continue on forever.

Discussion Question

If the judgment of God didn't exist, how would people come to terms with injustices in the world like rape, genocide, and all other kinds of evil?

3. Establish a new heaven and new earth.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God." — Revelation 21:1–3

It's difficult to picture a world completely free from evil and suffering. But that's exactly what God promises. He will make all things new. The death and decay caused by sin will be no more. We will shine as the people of God in a renewed earth, walking with God through the ages to come. Jesus doesn't just forgive us for sin. He paves the way to an eternity that is so wonderful that it stretches the bounds of what we can imagine.

APPLICATION

- › How does the hope of Jesus' return affect your thoughts and actions?
- › Are you convinced that Jesus' judgment of evil is a good, righteous thing? Why or why not?
- › What excites you about the possibility of living as part of God's people in the renewed heaven and earth?

PRAYER

Pray that God's kingdom would come and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Pray that God would show you how this future hope affects your life now.