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Introduction: Count the Cost

Do you really want to do this? Do you truly want to start down a path of life change that will radically alter your thinking, your relationships, maybe even your career path? Are you ready to fully open yourself up and let God shape and form you into the man or woman He wants you to be?

What an introduction, right?

If I were a salesperson, I might try to convince you that this journey you are about to start is *easy*. “This can be yours for just a few easy payments of \$19.95!” But I am not a salesperson, and I am not going to lie to you. Being a disciple of King Jesus is not *easy*, it is *costly*.

Following Jesus is Costly.

Luke 14:25-33

Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.¹

Now stop! Read that again . . . slowly this time.

What is Jesus saying here? If you were to boil these verses down into one sentence, what would it be?

Here is my stab at summarizing Luke 14:25-33:

We cannot be a disciple of Jesus unless we are prepared to go “all-in.”

What does it mean to be an “all-in” disciple of Jesus? If you are a poker player, you are familiar with the term. When a player thinks she has a winning hand, she might push all her money into the pot and bet everything she has. Now, in doing so she is taking a risk. She is giving everything she has in hopes of winning a greater prize.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all scripture citations come from the English Standard Version.

This is what Jesus expects of us.

Luke 9:57-62

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Yeah . . . Jesus wasn't big on the whole easy sales pitch idea. Jesus raised the bar high, spoke the truth about the cost, and expected His disciples to rise to the challenge. Oh, and He made sure they had plenty of help along the way. We'll get to that.

Sadly, so many of us in the Church have gotten away from Jesus' costly call.² Being a *follower* of Jesus has been replaced with being a *consumer* of Jesus. I am a customer who comes to church to receive goods and services: a healthy marriage, parenting advice, ease for my guilt-troubled conscience, etc.³ As an astute customer, I want to get the most bang for my buck. So I go to whichever local church gives me the most of what I want for the lowest cost of my time, energy, attention, or resources.

How have you experienced this before?

Confession time! Leaders in the local church often struggle with how to meet people *where they are* to get them to *where they need to go*. So to get a consumer Christian to become a legit disciple of King Jesus, we sometimes dress up the process of disciple-making in consumer clothes.

Instead of lifetime commitments, we ask for six to ten weeks.

Instead of calling for commitment, we offer easy outs.

Instead of making disciples being the core mission of the church, it becomes one optional program on the menu.

² To be fair, I come from the American Evangelical Non-denominational branch of the Church's family tree. If you don't know what that means, don't worry about it. Basically, I am admitting that I do not speak for all churches across the globe, only those that I am most familiar with.

³ Other "goods" people expect from their local church: friendships and community, social or political connections, affirmation of previously held biases, childcare, financial and emotional support, purpose or feelings of power over others.

In other words, we lower the cost of following Jesus in the hopes that the life of Jesus will rub off and cause the person to crave something more. But so often what happens is that we just feed the consumer beast.

Bill Hull, the author of several books on the subject, laid out the cost very succinctly, “Discipleship isn’t a program or an event; it’s a way of life. It’s not for a limited time, but for our whole life. Discipleship isn’t for beginners alone; it’s for all believers for every day of their life. Discipleship isn’t just *one* of the things the church does; it *is* what the church does.”⁴

Following Jesus is Costly. Not following Jesus costs even more.

Everything has a cost, even doing nothing. In business, this is referred to as “opportunity cost.” Dallas Willard, one of the foremost American writers on Christian spirituality sums up the opportunity costs of not following Jesus well, “Nondiscipleship costs abiding peace, a life penetrated throughout by love, faith that sees everything in the light of God’s overriding governance for good, hopefulness that stands firm in the most discouraging of circumstances, power to do what is right and withstand the forces of evil. In short, it costs exactly that abundance of life Jesus said he came to bring (John 10:10).”⁵

Reflect on what you know about Jesus so far. What are some of the other costs of not following Jesus?

Preachers like to use alliterations to help drive home points and make them memorable. So when I think about the costs of nondiscipleship, I think about the costs of peace, power, and presence.

Peace in Hardship

Let’s face it, life can be hard sometimes. You lose your job. Your favorite team misses the playoffs. Your significant other calls it quits. You finish the show you’ve been binge-watching. The biopsy comes back with bad news. The drive-thru gets your order wrong. Sometimes life just hurts.

Now obviously all of those examples are not the same, but I include them all for a reason. Sometimes when we are using all of our mental and emotional reserves to handle the big things in life, it ends up being the little things that send us over the edge.

⁴ Bill Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, 24.

⁵ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission*, 22.

Yet Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace⁶ and following His life and teaching leads to peace *even in the hardships of life*. That last part is key. Jesus does not promise a life free of hardship. He states pretty clearly we will have the opposite.⁷ However, even though we still get rocked by the storms of life, we can still find peace as we follow King Jesus.

Matthew 11:28-30

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

When was the last time you experienced true rest? I don't mean mindlessly fiddling with your phone while binge-watching a show until bedtime. I am talking about soul-filling rest.

Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Can you imagine your life free from anxiety? How different would that be from what you are currently experiencing?

Power Against Sin

According to the author of the book of Hebrews in the Bible, King Jesus was “one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”⁸ Jesus lived on this earth and faced all the same struggles that you and I face: anger, pride, selfishness, etc. However, where you and I so easily give in to those temptations, Jesus resisted time and time again.

We can't help but wonder how He did it. How in the world could Jesus go through the whole of the human condition without once letting His guard down and giving in to sin? Some say He cheated. They say that because He was God in the flesh, He was never really tempted. (Picture Superman with bullets just bouncing off of him.) Yet, that would seem to contradict what Hebrews tells us.

⁶ Isaiah 9:6.

⁷ John 16:33.

⁸ Hebrews 4:15.

Rather, I believe that Jesus faced temptation the same way He calls on us to face it. He gives us an example by His way of life of how to think and feel and live in this world. His constant prioritizing of time away with the Father, His memorizing in both heart and head God's Words in Scripture, and His reliance on the Holy Spirit all show us a model for doing spiritual battle against those desires of our heart that would lead us astray.⁹

Let's look a little closer at the passage in Hebrews I mentioned earlier:

Hebrews 4:14-16

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

What the author is saying here is that precisely because Jesus fought and won the victory over sin, He is now ready and able to help us follow in His footsteps. This does not mean we will see instant results. Our sinful habits and patterns of behavior were formed over a lifetime. They will take some time to unravel and replace with the habits of Jesus, but over time, we will find ourselves more and more thinking, feeling, and acting like Jesus.

What are some areas of life where you struggle with doing the right thing?

Meaningful Presence in a Sinful World

According to King Jesus, His followers are meant to be salt and light in the world.

Matthew 5:13-16

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

We go deeper into what this means later on, but for now, it will suffice to understand that the followers of King Jesus have a purpose. That purpose is to live in such a way that it leads others to give glory to God. Later in the Bible, the Apostle Paul calls us *ambassadors* for King Jesus.¹⁰ In other words, we represent Jesus in the world.

⁹ All of these can be seen clearly in Matthew 4:1-11.

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:20,

Now, how can we do that? How can we represent Jesus if we are nothing like Jesus?

How can we curse someone out on the highway with a Jesus bumper sticker on our car?

How can we be known as a regular in both the local church and the local strip club?

How can we spew venom, gossip, and hatred out of the same mouth we use to praise Jesus and declare His love for people?

Granted, following Christ is the journey of a lifetime. There will be growth, but there will also be failures. However, each one who wears the name of Jesus ought to ask himself or herself, "Am I more like Jesus today than I was last year?"¹¹

If, after decades of calling myself a Christian, I am just as mean-spirited, angry, and selfish as I was before, there is a problem. I would be salt without flavor. I would be a lamp without light. I would have forfeited my purpose as a follower of King Jesus.

I don't want that to happen, and I hope you don't want that either.

Time to Choose

So now is the time for you to make a choice. King Jesus compared this choice to a fork in the road.¹² One fork leads to a wide, easy road. The other fork leads to a narrow and difficult path. One fork leads to destruction. One fork leads to life.

Matthew 16:24-26

Then Jesus told his disciples, "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 will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?"

This is what I call the Disciple's Paradox. To save your life, you must surrender it.

There is a cost to following Jesus. There is a cost to not following Jesus. Which will you choose? Are you ready to go "all-in" with Jesus? If so, keep reading.

¹¹ Think of your spiritual health like the stock market. Day to day there may be peaks and valleys. Some days we take two steps forwards, and then the next day we take a step backwards. However, over time, we want the course of our life to show an upward trajectory towards being more like Jesus.

¹² Matthew 7:13-14.

What Next?

If you are ready to continue on this journey, let me give you some advice.

- 1) **Don't go alone.** I mean that sincerely. We were made for community with other people. The goal for this book is to be used by a more spiritually mature disciple of Jesus with one or two others who are not as far along on their journeys with King Jesus. If you cannot find a more spiritually mature disciple, find a peer with whom you can go through this journey together. Commit to meeting with your disciple partner regularly: weekly or bi-weekly.
- 2) **Take your time.** Growing as a disciple of Jesus is not a quick process. It takes time. Think slow-cooker instead of a microwave or a marathon instead of a sprint. Take it at least one chapter per week, if not one every other week. Yes, that may mean it will take a year or two to finish. (Remember that whole cost of following Jesus discussion?) Better to spend two weeks of deep reflection on one topic than hurriedly skimming five chapters and forgetting about them.
- 3) **Do the work.** In each of the following chapters, you will find a verse of scripture to memorize, reflection questions to consider, and action points to . . . you know . . . act upon. These are not thrown in just because. Rather, they are added intentionally to help you grow in your knowledge of Jesus, your love for Jesus, and your obedience to Jesus. It is in doing the work that we put ourselves in a position for King Jesus to change our lives.
- 4) **Keep going.** Do not think that after you work through this material with your disciple partner that you have "arrived." Ideally, this is just the beginning. Take what you learn through this experience and invest in someone else who needs a more mature disciple. Also, keep learning and growing. In each chapter, you will find recommendations for further reading, even if you are not a huge reader, there are abundant resources for those who want to learn. If nothing else, keep reading the Bible to learn more about King Jesus.

That's it. That's my advice to you. God bless you on your journey!

Session 1 -- What is a Disciple?

Core Idea:

A Disciple of Jesus is a follower who seeks to model the whole of his or her life after King Jesus.

Memory Verse:

2 Corinthians 3:18

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

So what is a disciple? In Churches, sometimes we throw around these words without ever taking the time to define them properly. This is especially annoying when it involves words that no one else uses. *Disciple* is one of those words. No one outside of the Church world uses this word to my knowledge. However, it is meaningful enough that I think we should keep it.

Some have tried to replace the word *disciple* with a modern equivalent. They will use words like student, mentee, or apprentice. Each of these captures a piece of what a disciple is, but none fully translates this word well.

A student is one who learns **information** from a teacher.

A mentee is one who learns **character** from a mentor.

An apprentice is one who learns **skills** from an expert.

A disciple learns all of these from a master, and when that Master is King Jesus, then we must also include the idea of **submission** to the King's authority.

What has been your experience as a student, a mentee, or an apprentice?

A disciple of King Jesus submits to the authority of the King. What thoughts, fears, or concerns does this idea evoke in you?

“Follow Me”

The fundamental call of Jesus is the simple command to follow Him. Check out these passages from the Gospels in which Jesus called His first disciples.

Matthew 4:18-22

Luke 5:27-28

John 1:43

Matthew 19:16-22

What similarities and differences do you notice in these passages?

Jesus calls men and women to follow after Him. This is what it means to be a disciple. Now, He is not calling us to merely walk around the desert with Him. No, we are being called to follow His teachings and His example for how to live (information, character, and skills).

Matthew 16:24-28

Then Jesus told his disciples, “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 will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

For the original disciples of Jesus, this was an odd and confusing statement. “Cross? Losing our lives? What is Jesus talking about?” They did not understand that Jesus was going to lay down His life and die on a Roman cross for human sin. When Jesus tells us to “take up our cross and follow,” He is telling us to be like Him, to live like Him, to follow His example.

Reflect on what you know or have heard about Jesus. What about Jesus’ life and example are you most eager to imitate?

What about Jesus’ life and example are you least eager to imitate?

My favorite verse about being a disciple is the one picked for the memory verse for this section. (You did take time to memorize it, right?)

2 Corinthians 3:18

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

This passage sums up what being a disciple is all about. By beholding (looking at intently, studying) the life and teachings of King Jesus, we are being changed little by little over time into His image and character. John Mark Comer, in his book, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, says it better, “Because what you give your attention to is the person you become.”¹³

As we focus our attention on King Jesus’ life and teachings, we begin to:

- Believe as Jesus believed (Information).¹⁴
- Love as Jesus loved (Character).
- Live as Jesus lived (Skills).

Believe as Jesus Believed

Everyone has a worldview, a kind of mental filter through which he or she looks at the world. This mental filter is developed through one’s life, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally. We develop our worldview intentionally when we study, ask questions, and challenge our assumptions about how the world works. We develop our worldview unintentionally when we just float through life absorbing the worldviews of those around us like sponges.

Now this is key:

A disciple of King Jesus learns to view the world through the mental filter of Jesus.

A disciple who takes her relationship with King Jesus seriously will challenge her assumptions and thoughts about the world constantly. For example, when she finds a conflict between her politics and the way of Jesus, she leaves her politics behind.

Matthew chapters 5-7 contain a section of the teachings of Jesus called the Sermon on the Mount. Through this sermon, Jesus challenges the worldviews of His audience (and honestly, our own as well).

Matthew 6:31-33

Therefore do not be anxious, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

¹³ Comer, *Ruthless*, 54.

¹⁴ I am indebted to Bull Hull and Paul Mascarella for this phrasing. *Experience the Life Series*.

Reflect on Matthew 6:31-33. How do Jesus' words here challenge your culture or your way of thinking?

Spend some time thinking about your own mental filter. What influences have shaped how you view the world?

Our thinking shapes our behavior. Consider the words of the Apostle Paul:

Romans 12:2

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

The word “*transformed*” that Paul uses here. This is the same word he uses in our memory verse 2 Corinthians 3:18. We are *transformed* into the image and character of King Jesus as we turn away from the world’s way of thinking and take up Jesus’ way of thinking.

Love as Jesus Loved

If you were to ask me to summarize Jesus’ worldview in one word, I would have to choose “love.” Love defined all that Jesus did and all that Jesus taught. Now I am not talking about the sappy sentimentalism or romanticism that the world tries to sell us on February 14th each year. No, I am talking about true, do anything, lay down one’s life, type of love.

At one point in Jesus’ life before the cross, He was challenged by some religious leaders. These men were raised in the Jewish religion and were scholars and students of the *Torah* (the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). The *Torah* contained hundreds of laws that God gave to His people. So these men wanted to know which of all of these laws were the most important. Here is Jesus’ answer.

Matthew 22:37-40

And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Did you catch what Jesus said? He summed up all of God’s laws, commands, and instructions into two: love God, love other people. Master those two and you’ve got this whole thing covered.

The Apostle John, another disciple of Jesus, makes this point as well.

John 13:34-35

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

What is the measure of a disciple according to Jesus Himself? Its love.

Read John 3:16. What is the ultimate expression of God's love? What does this teach us about how Jesus wants us to love?

Live as Jesus Lived

In sports, there is a saying, "You play like you practice." This saying holds true for life as well. When it comes to living as a disciple of Jesus, it is imperative that we follow not just the teachings of Jesus, but His daily habits and practices as well. John Mark Comer puts it well, "If you want to experience the *life* of Jesus, you have to adopt the *lifestyle* of Jesus."¹⁵ We cannot play like Jesus unless we are prepared to practice like Him.

Through the centuries, disciples of Jesus have passed down a legacy of spiritual disciplines. If the word *discipline* scares you, consider them spiritual exercises. These are daily and weekly habits that function for our spiritual lives the way weight lifting and cardio function for our physical bodies.

Consider some of the spiritual disciplines that were a regular part of Jesus' life. This is by no means an exhaustive list. Rather, this is from a quick scan of the earliest part of Jesus' life and ministry from Mark and Matthew.

- Solitude -- Mark 1:12-13
- Fasting -- Matthew 4:2
- Scripture Memorization -- Matthew 4:4, 7, and 10
- Sabbath -- Mark 1:21
- Prayer -- Mark 1:35

Does this seem like too high a bar? If I told you to go swim laps against 23-time Olympic gold medalist Michael Phelps, you would look at me like I grew a second head. Of course, you could not keep up with Phelps, he is a champion! But why is he a champion? Is he just genetically superior to other people? Maybe genetics has something to do with it, but even more than that, Phelps is a champion because he did the work a champion does to prepare and to win.

¹⁵ Comer, *Ruthless*, 82.

If you or I want to be like Jesus, we have to live like Jesus. That means taking on new habits and patterns in place of old ones.

What are some of the habits you engage in every day? Do these habits have a positive or negative impact on your spiritual life?

What changes would you have to make to your daily routine to live more like Jesus?

One More Thing

So a disciple answers the call of King Jesus to follow Him. He believes as Jesus believed, loves as Jesus loved, and lives as Jesus lived. After His death and resurrection, Jesus gave a final command to His followers before ascending into heaven.

Matthew 28.18-20

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Let me be clear. We are not living in obedience to King Jesus if we neglect this final command. Everyone who calls themselves a disciple of Jesus is commissioned with the King's authority to invest in others so that they might grow as His disciples.

You may not feel like you are ready. You may not feel like you know enough or are good enough at following Jesus. I am telling you right now that none of that matters. Why? Because as Jesus said, "I am with you always." You may only be a chapter or two ahead of the person you are investing in, but it does not matter because King Jesus is right there with you every step of the way.

When you think about helping another person grow as a disciple of Jesus, what thoughts or feelings come to mind?

How do your thoughts about feelings change when you realize and accept that King Jesus is with you?

Action Points

In a journal, reflect on and write out all the ways that following Jesus might change you. What impact would these changes have on your life? Are you prepared to follow this journey wherever it leads?

If you have not already found someone, look for a disciple-partner to go along on this journey with you. Your disciple-partner might be someone who has walked with Christ longer than you and is investing in your growth. He or she might be someone newer to following Christ and someone in whom you are investing. Your disciple-partner might also be a peer who is in the same place as you are spiritually. Whoever it is, commit to go through this material together and meet regularly to discuss what you are learning.

Disciple-Partner Discussion Questions

Reread the Core Statement and the Memory Verse of this chapter. How would you summarize each of them in your own words?

What thoughts, fears, or concerns do you have about submitting the whole of your life to King Jesus? Are there any areas of your life that you do not want to submit to Jesus? What are they and why?

What about Jesus's life and example are you most eager to imitate? What are you least eager to imitate? Why?

John Mark Comer, in his book, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, writes, "Because what you give your attention to is the person you become."¹⁶ Do you agree or disagree with this statement? To what do you give the majority of your attention? How does this shape who you are becoming?

Read John 3:16. What is the ultimate expression of God's love? What does this teach us about how Jesus wants us to love?

¹⁶ Comer, *Ruthless*, 54.

What are some of the habits you engage in every day? Do these habits have a positive or negative impact on your spiritual life?

What changes would you have to make to your daily routine to live more like Jesus?

What did you learn from doing the Action Points?

Extra Resources

A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society by Eugene H. Peterson

The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ by Bill Hull

Follow Me by David Platt

Session 2 -- God's Story I: Creation

Core Idea:

The truth of creation is that God is the Supreme King in whose image humans are made.

Memory Verse:

Genesis 1:27

**So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.**

As much as we like to pretend that we are rational creatures shaped by facts and reasons, the hard truth is that you and I respond much more powerfully to stories. Whether based in truth or fiction, stories shape our worldview and mental filters. Stories give us heroes to model our lives after, values to embrace, and behaviors to imitate.

Consider some of the stories that shaped your childhood. Who were your heroes, and what lessons did you learn from them?

The God who created us knows that we are creatures of story. That is why He revealed Himself to us in a book filled with stories¹⁷, what followers of King Jesus call the Bible. This book is filled with history, poetry, music, emotion, and drama. Above all, the Bible tells the story of God at work in and through His creation. So the first thing we want to do is get a big picture view of this amazing story as told in four movements: Creation, Fall, Rescue, and Restoration.

The Story of Creation

The story of creation begins with the first book of the Bible: Genesis. Take a moment and read the first chapter of Genesis right now.

Read Genesis 1:1-31. What stands out to you about this story? What questions come to mind?

¹⁷ When we say that the Bible is a story, we are not saying that the Bible is a work of fiction, something made up. The Bible is a true story of how God has shown Himself and interacted with His people.

So often what people want to do with Genesis 1 is to skip ahead and argue over the *How* of Creation. Was the world created in seven days or billions of years? Are we the product of intelligent design or unguided evolution? These are good questions, and I certainly encourage you to wrestle with them. In fact, at the end of this chapter, you will find resources to address these questions written by men and women far more qualified than me.

Instead of focusing on the *How*, I want to draw your attention to the *Who* of creation. You see, Genesis 1 is a story told by God through Moses to the people of Israel after they had been rescued from slavery in Egypt. These men and women grew up surrounded by Egyptian creation stories--stories which depicted the sun, moon, rivers, and seas as divine beings and stories that justified the king of Egypt acting as though he were a god. The people of Israel needed a new creation story in which to ground their identity as the people of God.

Many creation stories of the ancient world depict one or more gods fighting for power against each other or some form of primordial chaos. At times, human beings in these stories are created as slaves with the purpose to serve the ever-changing whims of the gods. These stories stand in stark contrast to the creation story of the Bible.

Now consider Genesis 1 again.

Genesis 1:1-3

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

Don't you just love how matter of fact that is? There is no competition between God and the forces of chaos. There is no war or battle. There is no one to oppose God's plans or purpose. When it comes to creation, God doesn't even have to get His hands dirty. He simply speaks, and the universe obeys.

Notice how it says that the earth (creation) was without form and void (empty). Now check this out, in the first three days of creation, God is going to form creation. Then in the next three, He is going to fill it.

Forming	Filling
Day 1 -- Light and Dark	Day 4 -- Sun, Moon, and Stars
Day 2 -- Sea and Sky	Day 5 -- Fish and Birds
Day 3 -- Vegetation on the Land	Day 6 -- Land animals and Human

Also, pay attention to how much happens each day. Maybe it would be clearer to say, look at how many words are used to describe what happens each day. Each day gets more words than the last, almost like a song building in volume and intensity until it reaches a climax at the pivotal moment. And what is this pivotal moment?

Genesis 1:27

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

Genesis chapter 2 offers a closeup view of what happens on the Sixth Day. I said before that God did not need to get His hands dirty to make creation happen. He simply spoke everything into existence. Yet human beings are special. For us, God got His hands dirty.

Genesis 2:7

. . . then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.

Genesis 2:22

And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

After each day, God looks at His creation and calls it good (pleasant, beautiful). On the sixth day, after creating human beings, men and women who bear His image, His special creation God looked at it all and called it “very good.”¹⁸

If you had grown up as a slave, how would the creation story in Genesis 1 affect you?

Do you believe that God cares for you and that you are special to Him? Why or why not?

Jesus and Creation

Something I wish all Christians understood about God’s story in the Bible is that Jesus is central to all of it. From beginning to end, King Jesus is the centerpiece. Even when Jesus is not mentioned by name, we see Him foreshadowed and hinted at in scripture.

To demonstrate this, compare the following passage of the Bible.

Genesis 1:1-3

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.

¹⁸ Genesis 1:31

John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

What similarities and differences do you notice between these two passages?

John, an early disciple of Jesus, goes on to explain that this Word is in fact Jesus.¹⁹

Now I will be honest with you. This part trips up a lot of people. According to Scripture, God exists eternally in three Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three are distinct from each other but inseparable.²⁰ All three share the same character and the same divine power. This means that when we see God create in Genesis 1, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all at work together.

Colossians 1:16-17

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

How does this change your view of who Jesus is?

The Meaning of Creation

So what does all of this mean? What's the point? How does this story change how I live today, tomorrow, or the day after that?

You are not an accident

First of all, the story of creation in the Bible affirms the fact that you are not an accident. You are not the product of blind chance, some random convergence of primordial ooze. You were brought into existence by a Creator. This Creator God is not a giant watchmaker like some people describe Him. He does not wind up His creation, get it ticking, and then move on to

¹⁹ John 1:14-18

²⁰ John 10:30; 14:5-14

some other project. No, the God of the Bible is a personal and loving God who gets up close and personal with His creation.

Psalm 139:13-14

For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

You are wonderfully made. You are no accident. I encourage you to read through the rest of Psalm 139. The Psalmist sings about how God is always with him. For someone like me who has struggled with loneliness, it is a breath-taking and awe-inspiring thought.

Read through Psalm 139 slowly and deliberately. Let the words and ideas stir your soul. Write or pray aloud your response to God.

There is more to life

In the ancient world, men and women saw the divine in everything. The sun was a god. The rivers were gods. The trees were gods. Genesis 1 reminds us that there is only one God. The moon and stars, the seas and the land, all of it owes its existence to the God of the Bible.

In the modern world, the problem is different. We try to take God out of everything. Naturalism, the belief that the natural world is all there is, sits as a core feature of the modern worldview. This world, this life, that is all there is, nothing more.

The problem with this worldview is that it leads nowhere. Life has no meaning and no purpose. Humans are the product of blind chance. We have to either embrace the absurd reality that nothing matters, or we have to plow onward pretending that life matters in the face of an uncaring universe.

However, Genesis 1 tells us that there is more to this world and this life than the physical. While the universe may not care, the Creator of the universe does! King Jesus, the one in whom all things hold together (remember Colossians 1:17), He is the one who bestows creation and our lives with meaning and purpose.

Psalm 19:1-2

The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours out speech,
and night to night reveals knowledge.

Where have you seen the worldview of naturalism? How have you embraced this worldview?

In your own words, how does the Creation story give life meaning and purpose?

Action Points

Get out in nature. Go for a walk. Look up at the stars. Feel the breeze. Experience the reality of Psalm 19:1-2 for yourself.

Write a poem to God. It does not have to be fancy or publication-worthy. Just between you and God, let your thoughts and feelings merge in poetry to Him.

Disciple-Partner Discussion Questions

Reread the Core Statement and the Memory Verse of this chapter. How would you summarize each of them in your own words?

What are some of the stories that shaped your childhood? Who were your heroes, and what lessons did you learn from them?

Share what stood out to you when you read Genesis 1:1-31. What questions came to mind?

Do you believe that God cares for you and that you are special to Him? Why or why not?

Consider John 1:1-5 and Colossians 1:16-17. Do you struggle with the idea that Jesus is God and was active in creation? Why or why not?

How does John 1:1-5 and Colossians 1:16-17 change your views about Jesus?

How does Psalm 139:13-14 change how you view yourself? How does it change your view of God?

Where have you seen the worldview of naturalism? How have you embraced this worldview?

In your own words, how does the Creation story give life meaning and purpose?

What did you learn from doing the Action Points?

Extra Resources

From Creation to the Cross: Understanding the First Half of the Bible by Albert H. Baylis

Four Views on Creation, Evolution, and Intelligent Design edited by J. B. Stump

The Trinity by Roger E. Olson and Christopher A. Hall

Session 3 -- God's Story II: Fall

Core Idea:

Our rebellion against God as King created a rift between us and God.

Memory Verse:

Romans 3:23-24

. . . for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus . . .

At the end of Genesis chapter 2, we have a beautiful picture of God and humanity. The first man, Adam, and the first woman, Eve, lived in a beautiful garden, Eden, in perfect harmony with God and the world around them. Many refer to this picture of perfect harmony with the Hebrew word *shalom* or peace.

Can you imagine what that was like?

Can you imagine a world with no crime, no violence, no lies or betrayals?

Can you picture a world with no heartache, no sickness, and no tears?

It is hard to visualize, isn't it? It is hard to fully grasp that kind of world, because our world is so, so different. We do not live in the world of Genesis 2. We do not live in the Garden of Eden. No, ours is the world of Genesis 3. Ours is the world of crime and tears and violence and illness. Ours is the world of cancer diagnoses and natural disasters. What happened in Genesis 3 that brought everything to ruin?

Genesis 3 brings us to the second movement of God's story. The first was Creation. We call this second movement The Fall because here everything goes horribly wrong.

Genesis 3:1-7

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened,

and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

Read this passage slowly and deliberately. What does the serpent ask the woman? How does he respond to her after she answers?

The Heart of Sin

In Genesis 3:1-7 we see a microcosm of what happens in the hearts of every man, woman, and child on planet earth. Note the question that the serpent²¹ asks, “Did God actually say?” This is part of the serpent’s arsenal of lies and deception. He subtly raises the question to get the man and woman to doubt their understanding of what God plainly said.

Then he proceeds to call into question the goodness of God. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened.” Do you see the lie? Can you see the web of deception he is weaving? The serpent wants the man and woman to question whether or not they can even trust God. “Does God really have my best interests at heart? Or is God trying to deprive me of something good, something better?”

Finally, the serpent hits them with the closer, “You will be like God.” This here is the heart of all sin—an effort to dethrone God and take His place. Let me say that again:

Sin is an effort to dethrone God and take His place.

Rather than submitting to God as King, we say, “No thank you, we’ll take it from here. We’ll make our own rules. We’ll do whatever we well please.” Then, we proceed to make a royal hash of things because you and I are not meant to be king. Neither of us can handle being king or god over our lives.

Now when we refuse to submit to human governments and decide to do whatever we want, we call that rebellion or even treason. Pretty serious stuff, right? Why would it be any less serious when we commit treason against the King of the universe?

Reflect on a time when you did the wrong thing and faced consequences for your actions. What were the consequences? How would your life have been different if you did things God’s way instead?

²¹ Scripture makes clear that this serpent is Satan (Revelation 12:9).

How does your view of sin change when you think of it in terms of rebellion against God?

Effects of Sin

The equation with sin is pretty simple. When we submit to God as King, life tends to go a lot better. There is peace and wholeness like there was in the Garden of Eden. However, when we try to dethrone God and be kings and queens of our own lives, we experience devastating consequences: shame, alienation, death, and slavery.

Shame

Let me draw your attention to a small, easily overlooked passage of scripture in Genesis 2.

Genesis 2:25 Emphasis added

And the man and his wife were both naked and were *not ashamed*.

Now look again at what happened after the man and woman rebelled against God.

Genesis 3:7

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

What happened here? Before they rebelled and tried to dethrone God, everyone and everything was in its proper place. There was no shame, no guilt. But after the rebellion, the man and the woman are suddenly self-conscious about their nakedness, and they feel this instinctual need to clothe themselves. This is shame entering their hearts. Even though they were co-conspirators in the treason, they could not bear being seen by each other. But it gets worse.

Genesis 3:8

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

Not only do they instinctively cover themselves from each other, but they also feel the need to hide from God. Note carefully, *God does not hide from them*. They hide from Him. God does not pull away from us; we pull away from God.

How have you experienced the effects of shame?

Alienation

This leads to the second effect of sin: alienation. Alienation is the pulling apart of a relationship. Imagine a piece of cloth woven together, all the threads intertwining with one another. Now imagine that cloth being torn in two, all those threads snapping and breaking. This is what sin does to our relationships. We betray one another, and then in shame, we pull away and hide from each other.

Genesis 3:12

The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate."

Look at how quickly the man throws his wife under the bus! He blames not only her but God for creating her. The unity of marriage and the closeness with God in the Garden of Eden already torn to shreds in one act of rebellion.

Again, who is doing the tearing? Who is shredding the relationship? Not God.

How have you seen relationships lost or fractured because of sin (yours or someone else's)?

Death

As a consequence of their rebellion, the man and the woman are exiled from the Garden of Eden. They do not die right then and there, but they are cut off from the Tree of Life which, as its name suggests, gave life. Their bodies eventually wore out and they died.

Whatever power the Tree of Life possessed, the true source of all life is God Himself.²² When we rebel and attempt to dethrone God, we disconnect ourselves from the source of all life.

I am not just talking about physical life, although He is the source of that as well. I am talking about everything that makes life worth living--joy, hope, peace, love, meaning, and purpose. God is the source of all of these. If we lose connection with Him, what do we have left? Death, darkness, despair.

I know that is a heavy thought, so let me lighten it up with some good news. Though we have pushed God away and put up walls between us and Him, He did not give up on us. The reason the entire world has not fallen into darkness and despair is that God is working out a plan to rescue us from this mess we have made. He does this by sending Jesus to bring us life, and not just life after death, although that is part of it. Jesus brings us new life *right now*.

²² John 1:4

John 10:10

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

Slavery

“But Sam,” you ask, “how can you say that life and joy and everything good is only found in God? Aren’t there millions if not billions of people who experience all of these without God?”

Yes, that is true. We can catch glimpses of joy, peace, hope, and love in this world without God. I say glimpses because in reality that is all this world can offer us. ***It does not last***, and often it does damage to us in the long run.

Take food for instance. Food is good. Food is a gift from God. He designed us with taste buds that can experience pleasure. One of the great joys in this world is good food in the company of good friends. Yet after the meal is over, the taste and the pleasure fades away. It does not last. If you pursue food for pleasure too often, it will have a negative effect on your health.

Pick anything you want, any source of joy or pleasure. Alcohol? Shopping? Sex? Exercise? Drugs? Whether it is a moral good or not doesn’t matter. The pleasure is temporary. To keep that feeling, we have to come back to it again and again. And here we find the hook in the bait.

When we dethrone God from our lives, we leave a God-shaped hole that we try to fill with other things. Because they do not fill the hole completely, we have to go back again and again and again becoming slaves to whatever is we are pursuing. Instead of being king over our lives, we become slaves to things that are not God and cannot fill the place of God.

Romans 1:21-25

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

Here the Apostle Paul describes how people replaced the one true God with idols (false gods connected to statues and images of men or animals). Though we do not build statues to our idols, we still have plenty. If you look at the Greek and Roman pantheons, their gods and goddesses are little more than personification of human desires: sex, family, wisdom, war, power, drink, money, fame, success, etc.

These are all gods and goddesses that we still pursue, desires that we think will fill the holes in our hearts. They were just more honest about it than we are.

What false idols or desires have you pursued to find joy or meaning in your life?

How can even morally good things like food become idols for us?

Promised Remedy for Sin

We cannot leave Genesis 3 without mentioning verse 15. In Genesis 3:15, God makes a threat/promise to the serpent.

Genesis 3:15

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.

In literature, we call this foreshadowing. A son of the woman would be sent to do battle with the serpent. This son of the woman is going to defeat the serpent and undo all the damage from Genesis 3. The rest of the book of Genesis and, it could be argued, the rest of the Bible, looks to answer the question, "Who is this son of the woman who will undo Genesis 3?" Hint: It is Jesus.

Action Points

In addiction recovery programs like Celebrate Recovery, they talk about the power of naming how we have rebelled against God through a Moral Inventory. The purpose of this is not to wallow in shame for our failures. Rather, it is to be honest about the ways we have attempted to dethrone God and areas of our lives we need to offer up to Him in submission.

Take your list with you to your meeting with your Disciple-Partner. Discuss one or two steps you will take and changes you need to make in your life to follow King Jesus more faithfully. (Choose one or two so that you do not get overwhelmed trying too much at once). Pray together and ask King Jesus for help and forgiveness. Save your list so that you can measure the progress being made as you follow after King Jesus.

Disciple-Partner Discussion Questions

Reread the Core Statement and the Memory Verse of this chapter. How would you summarize each of them in your own words?

How does the serpent's words in Genesis 3 parallel the lies and deception Satan uses on us today?

How do you respond to the definition of sin as “an effort to dethrone God and take His place”? Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

Reflect on a time when you did the wrong thing and faced consequences for your actions. What were the consequences? How would your life have been different if you did things God’s way instead?

How does your view of sin change when you think of it in terms of rebellion against God?

How have you experienced the effects of shame?

How have you experienced the effects of alienation due to sin?

What false idols or desires have you pursued to find joy or meaning in your life?

How can even morally good things like food become idols for us?

What did you learn from doing the Action Points?

Extra Resources

Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters by Tim Keller

Respectable Sins by Jerry Bridges

We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry by Gregory K. Beale

Idols of the Heart: Learning to Long for God Alone by Elyse M. Fitzpatrick

Session 4 -- God's Story III: Rescue

Core Idea:

Though humanity rebelled against God, God enacted a plan to rescue humanity from its own destructive choices.

Memory Verse:

Genesis 15:6

And [Abram] believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Thus far we have looked at two of the four major movements in God's grand story: Creation (Genesis 1 and 2) and Fall (Genesis 3). Now we turn to the third major movement: Rescue (Genesis 4-John 21). In case you missed the significance, this third movement covers the rest of what Christians call the Old Testament and the first four books of the New Testament, just shy of 45 books of the Bible or about 2000 years worth of history. Needless to say, that is a lot of ground to cover.

Obviously, we are not going to cover every person, place, or event in that period in this short chapter. I would remind you, though, that following King Jesus is the journey of a lifetime. As you continue growing in your knowledge of, love for, and obedience to King Jesus, it would be well worth your time to dive into the writings of the Old Testament.

This leads to the question of how to best summarize this part of God's story. After the first man (Adam) and woman (Eve) rebelled against God, they set the rest of humanity on a path of rebellion and self-destruction.²³ God, however, was not surprised by any of this, nor did He abandon humanity. Rather, He strategically engaged with people at different points in time to set in motion His eternal plan to redeem or rescue us.

One of the most significant ways God has engaged with humans is through enacting special relationships called *covenants*.

A Covenant is a sacred relationship between two parties.

In the ancient world, covenants were enacted between people for various purposes. Sometimes they were enacted as treaties between two groups in conflict (Genesis 31:43-54). Sometimes they were enacted between a king and his people. Covenants were often made with an appeal to divine witnesses and blood sacrifice highlighting the significance of the relationship.

²³ Romans 5:12-21.

Covenant with Abraham²⁴

In Genesis chapter 12, God spoke to a man named Abram (later to be renamed Abraham) and gave him both a command and a promise.

Genesis 12:1-3

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

God promised Abraham that from him would come a people, a nation, and from this people, all the families on earth will be blessed. What is this blessing? Remember what we read in Genesis 3:15?

Genesis 3:15

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.

God is promising Abraham that from his descendants would come the one to defeat the serpent and undo the effects of our rebellion.

However, there was a problem with this promise. Abraham and his wife, Sarah, were both elderly and had no children. To have descendants that will become a great nation, you have to start with at least one child. Understandably, Abraham struggled with waiting for the promise God made. In Genesis 15, we see a fascinating conversation between Abraham and God, and we see God affirm His promise by making a covenant with Abraham.

Read Genesis 15:1-21. What promises does God make to Abraham in this passage? What does He ask Abraham to do?

In Genesis 15:17, what vision does Abraham see?

²⁴ Often you will see the covenants mentioned here referred to as the Abrahamic Covenant, the Davidic Covenant, or the Mosaic Covenant.

When Abraham sees the smoking fire pot and flaming torch passing between the pieces of the animals he sacrificed, that was God's way of saying, "May what happened to these animals happen to Me if I do not keep My promise." God does not make promises lightly, and He does not fail to fulfill His promises, even if the timing and the means are different than we expect.

Covenant with the People of Israel

The next covenant is the one God made between Himself and the people of Israel. This is also referred to as the Mosaic Covenant, named after Moses who acted as the go-between for the people of Israel and God.²⁵

After years of waiting, Abraham received the son promised by God and named him Isaac. Isaac had children, one of whom was Jacob. After a midnight encounter with God, Jacob's name was changed to Israel.²⁶ Jacob/Israel had twelve sons, and their descendants grew to become the twelve tribes of Israel.

To escape from a famine, Israel's family moved to Egypt and settled there for over four hundred years. Over those hundreds of years, ethnic animosity led to their enslavement by the Egyptian peoples and their kings, the Pharaohs.²⁷ Even worse, there were attempts at genocide and population control through infanticide as well.

In response to this, God raised Moses to be His spokesman to the Israelites and Pharaoh. God devastated Egypt with a series of plagues until Pharaoh relented and freed the people of Israel. Moses led them to Mount Sinai where God made a covenant with the people, forming a nation with laws and social structure.

Exodus 19:1-8 Emphasis added

On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, while Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. *Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*' These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel." So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. All the people answered together and said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do." And Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord.

²⁵ Exodus 20:18-21.

²⁶ Genesis 32:22-32

²⁷ Exodus 1:1-22

What condition does God place on the promise that Israel will be His treasured possession among all peoples?

Through the rest of Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, God gives the people rules and laws for how to live as His holy nation. *To be holy means to be set apart*, and many of the rules given to Israel are for that purpose, to set them apart from the nations around them. Thus, by what they ate and how they dressed, they would testify to themselves and those around them that the God of Israel was not like the gods and goddesses of the other nations. Unfortunately, the people of Israel failed to be the holy nation they were called to be. They ran after the false gods of the people around them time and time again.

Let's make sure we are connecting the dots as we go. God made a promise that a descendant of the woman would crush the serpent and undo the rebellion in Genesis 3. God promised Abraham that his descendants would be a nation through whom blessing would come to the world. Now, God is covenanting with those descendants that they will be His treasured possession and a holy nation.

Covenant with David

As God brought His people, the Israelites, to the land He promised them and as they settled in the land, He would raise men and sometimes women to lead the people. These were called judges. You can read about them in the conveniently named book of the Bible: Judges. However, this arrangement was not good enough for the people. They wanted a king like the nations around them had, forgetting that in fact, God was their king.²⁸ (Rejecting God as king . . . hmm . . . sounds familiar.)

So God gave the people a king. First He gave them Saul, a man who looked the part of a king. Saul was everything the people wanted, but he lacked the temperament or the faithfulness to God. Then God raised a man named David, the kind of king God had in mind for His people all along. David, though by no means a perfect man, was considered a man after God's own heart.²⁹ David becomes known as the ideal king against which all the other kings of Israel are judged, and often fall short.

As He had with Abraham and with the people of Israel, God made a covenant with David.

2 Samuel 7:12-16

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a

²⁸ 1 Samuel 8:4-9

²⁹ Acts 13:22

father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.

In other words, God promises David that one of his descendants will reign over God's people forever.³⁰ However, much like with Abraham, there is some waiting involved. The nation of Babylon attacked and destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC, thus ending David's dynasty in an earthly sense and leading to the exile of the people from the land God had given them.

Promised New Covenant

This might be hard for most of us to imagine, but try to put yourself in the place of the people of Israel around 586 BC. Growing up, you heard about the promises of God and the covenants He made with your forefathers Abraham, Moses, and King David. You believe that God is one who keeps His promises and yet here is this pagan nation, Babylon, invading and pillaging your country.

As with our rebellion in the Garden of Eden, God was not surprised by this. In fact, God had been warning the people of Israel through His prophets³¹ that because of their continued rebellion and violation of their covenant with God, He was going to withdraw His protection from them. Do you see the parallels with Genesis 3? Rebellion against the King leads to separation from the source of life. God did not turn away from them, but the people of Israel turned away from Him and the consequence was the Babylonian exile.

However, even in the Exile, God did not forget His people. Through one of His prophets, Jeremiah, God gave the people words of hope and the promise of a new covenant.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

The Mosaic covenant between God and the people of Israel was written down on stone tablets and was mediated by Moses. The people did not want a direct relationship with God. They wanted Moses to talk to God and tell them what He said.

³⁰ Jeremiah 33:17

³¹ Prophets were people who spoke on behalf of God often calling people to repentance and a return to God as King.

However, the New Covenant will be different. God's laws will not be something external, but internal. People will not follow God out of fear of consequences but out of love for God and desire to do what is right. People will not rely on mediators like Moses to talk to God for them, but they will have a direct relationship with the King of the Universe!

Meditate on the difference between fear-based obedience and love-based obedience. How are the two different? Which one should motivate us as disciples of King Jesus?

Jesus Fulfills the Covenants

God is faithful to keep His promises, though often the end result is even greater than we originally expected. For all of the promises we have looked at so far, the ultimate fulfillment is found in King Jesus..

He is the descendant of the woman who crushes the head of the serpent (Hebrews 2:14-15).

He is the descendant of Abraham through whom all peoples are blessed (Galatians 3:16).

He is the only one to perfectly keep God's Law for the nation of Israel (Hebrews 4:15).

He is the heir to the throne of David and king over God's people (Luke 1:32-33).

Moreover, He is the one who enacts the promised New Covenant and provides forgiveness of sins (Hebrews 9:15).

However, Jesus does this in one of the most unexpected ways imaginable. When you think about Jesus gaining victory over the serpent, blessing all people, and claiming the throne of David, maybe you picture a triumphal procession with trumpets and dancers and celebrations. Maybe you picture a throne room decked out in gold and a massive crown and thousands of people bowing before the King.

If you do, you are not alone. A lot of people expected the Messiah (aka the one who fulfilled the promises of God) to come like that, even some of Jesus' disciples.

However, Jesus did not come with a crown. He came with a cross. Though He kept God's commands perfectly, the people had Him executed like a criminal. Though He brings blessings to all people and defeats the serpent, He does so by laying down His life. Jesus fulfills all the promises of God by dying on the cross. Only after dying on the cross, does He defeat death by His resurrection and pick up His crown!

This is what so many contemporaries of King Jesus missed. They expected some kind of religious, military, or political leader. They did not expect a Suffering Servant.

Read Isaiah 52:13-53:12. How is God's servant described in this passage?

How is this picture different from how we view earthly leaders?

Action Points

Choose one of the men mentioned in this chapter: Abraham, Moses, or David, and read deeper into their lives. How did God communicate with them? How did God bless them? How did God use them to fulfill His purpose?

Think about the promises you have made in your life. List out each one you can remember. Consider whether you have fulfilled the promises you have made or not. Are you someone whose word you would trust? If not, consider making amends to the people to whom you broke your promise.

Disciple-Partner Discussion Questions

Reread the Core Statement and the Memory Verse of this chapter. How would you summarize each of them in your own words?

How would you describe the difference between a covenant and a contract?

If you were in God's place when humanity rebelled, what would you have done? What does it say about God that He sets out to rescue us?

Abraham waited 25 years between God's promise and God's gift of a child. Have you ever waited for God to answer a prayer? What do you think would happen if God always answered prayers on our schedule?

In Exodus, the people of Israel wanted Moses to be the one to stand between them and God. Why do you think that was? What are some ways you have tried to push God away or keep Him at a distance?

King Saul looked like a king, but was not a man of God. Read 1 Corinthians 1:26-31. What does this say about the kind of men and women God uses?

Meditate on the difference between fear-based obedience and love-based obedience. How are the two different? Which one should motivate us as disciples of King Jesus?

Read Isaiah 52:13-53:12. How is God's servant described in this passage? How is this picture different from how we view earthly leaders?

What did you learn from doing the Action Points?

Extra Resources

God's Work in History: 50 Biblical Predictions Made and Fulfilled by Don Stewart

A Popular Survey of the Old Testament by Norman Geisler

Encountering the Old Testament: a Christian Survey by Bill Arnold and Brian Beyer

Session 5 -- God's Story IV: Restoration

Core Idea:

In His life, death, and resurrection, King Jesus restores the Kingdom of God as men and women turn from their rebellion and follow Him as King.

Memory Verse:

Matthew 6:9-13

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. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

In God's original creation, men and women lived with God in perfect peace (Hebrew *shalom*). God was king, and Adam and Eve served under Him as vice-regents over creation. However, as we saw in Genesis 3, humanity rebelled against God as king. Wanting to be like God with the ability to decide good and evil for themselves, they disobeyed and set all of their descendants on a path of continued rebellion.

Though God was still king over the universe, His image-bearers on earth were in a state of rebellion. Remember how the Apostle Paul described the situation:

Romans 1:21-23

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Do you see what happened? Humanity has in essence replaced God as king. Instead, we have turned to other things (images or idols) and have made them king or gods and goddesses in our lives. The prophet Jeremiah says something similar.

Jeremiah 2:12-13

Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.

Into this world of rebellion, God sent His Son, Jesus to restore His Kingdom and end the rebellion. However, He does this in the most unexpected way imaginable. He does not end our rebellion through conquest or subjugation of His enemies. Instead, He ends our rebellion by showing us mercy, love, and by ultimately giving His life for our sake.

What is the Kingdom of God?

What exactly do we mean by “the Kingdom of God”? More accurately, what does Jesus mean by the phrase. After all, according to the Gospel of Mark, the Kingdom of God was *the good news* Jesus preached.³²

Mark 1:15

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

In your own words how would you define and describe a human kingdom? What sets a kingdom apart from say a democracy or a republic?

Any kingdom, whether we are talking about God’s kingdom or some earthly kingdom needs three things: a ruler, a reign, and a realm. A Kingdom must first of all have a king or queen, someone who acts as the sovereign **ruler**. Though some earthly kingdoms limit the authority of their kings and queens through constitutional monarchy, in the Kingdom of God, King Jesus is the absolute ruler.

This leads to the next point, a kingdom needs a **reign**. In other words, the ruler of the kingdom has *authority* to make degrees and govern life in the kingdom. Imagine a “kingdom” in which the king or queen has no authority, where he or she is merely a figurehead who waves from the castle but does nothing else. Could that really be called a kingdom?

Finally, a kingdom needs a **realm**, a people over which the ruler reigns. If a king issues a command and there is no one to obey it, is he really a king? Without all three, ruler, reign, and realm, you do not have a true kingdom.

Now let’s apply our three elements of kingdom to the Kingdom of God. Of course, God is the supreme ruler of His kingdom. God has authority over all creation. He speaks the universe into existence and it obeys Him. We see in Jesus the ability to command nature, disease, and spiritual entities like demons.³³ So ruler and reign are a given. However, what is missing for the Kingdom of God is a realm, a people that submits to and acknowledges God as King. This is what Jesus seeks to restore as he proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of God and called people to repentance (more on this later).

In the memory verse for this session, Jesus gives perhaps the simplest definition of God’s Kingdom when He teaches His disciples how to pray.

³² The word *gospel* literally means “good news.”

³³ In Matthew 8 we see examples of all three.

Matthew 6:9-13 Emphasis added

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.** Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

Do you see the connection here? **God’s Kingdom = God’s will being done.** In other words, whenever and wherever men and women cease their rebellion and recognize the authority of King Jesus, there you have the Kingdom of God.

*In Matthew 6:10, Jesus tells us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, **on earth as it is in heaven.**” What is the difference between heaven and earth? Why do you think Jesus added this statement?*

What would happen if God’s will were done on earth as in heaven? What would be different?

What would happen if God’s will were done in your own life? How would your life be different?

Now and Not Yet

At this point, we may look at the world around us and think, “Hold up! If Jesus is King, why is the world so messed up? Why isn’t God’s will being done on earth as in heaven?” That is a valid question. Yes, Jesus has restored the Kingdom of God in his life, death, and resurrection. He is currently reigning as King, and men and women all around the world bow their knee to Him. However, the work is not finished yet. Jesus has entrusted His message about the Kingdom of God to His disciples to take to the ends of the earth. Remember Matthew 28?

Matthew 28.18-20

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Kingdom work is happening all over the world. It may not be on our time table or the way we picture it, but it is happening. It happens every time an addict finds freedom and recovery in Christ. It happens every time a marriage on the brink of divorce is reconciled and becomes healthy through forgiveness found in Jesus. It happens as followers of King Jesus begin to live and love as Jesus in their homes and neighborhoods.

This brings us to one of the key characteristics of the Kingdom of God. It is both *now and not yet*. The Kingdom of God and the restoration the kingdom brings is both a present reality happening now and a future reality awaiting fulfillment.

As I am writing this, it is almost Thanksgiving. Though December 25 is still a month away, already the Christmas decorations are going up in homes across America. In a way, the Christmas holiday season is here right now, but Christmas is not yet. We are preparing now for a celebration that is coming in the future.

In many ways this is what the Kingdom of God is like. The decorations are going up as Jesus' disciples live out Kingdom lives here and now, but the real party is in the future when God fully restores all things. David Young, in his book, *King Jesus and the Beauty of Obedience-Based Discipleship*, puts it this way, "For King Jesus came not merely to forgive sins or to take us to heaven when we die. He came to restore fully the reign of God among humans so that we could live in full communion with Him both here and in the hereafter."³⁴

Why is it important for us to live as citizens of God's Kingdom here and now?

Where do you see God's Kingdom at work here and now? What is the difference between Kingdom work and social work?

Even though we see glimpses of the Kingdom of God in the present, we dare not confuse these glimpses with the fullness of God's promises. What we see of the Kingdom of God now is good, great even, but it pales in comparison to what we will see when King Jesus finishes the restoration work and brings the Kingdom of God to its final culmination. Listen to how the Apostle John describes it:

Revelation 21:1-4

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

³⁴ David Young, *King Jesus and the Beauty of Obedience-Based Discipleship*, 29

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. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

This is the Kingdom of God in its fullest expression. This is what we forfeited in the Garden of Eden when we rebelled against God. This is what King Jesus came to restore.

Read Revelation 21:1-4 multiple times and slowly. What words or phrases stand out to you? What emotions do these words stir in you?

How do I enter the Kingdom of God?

In the third chapter of the Gospel of John, the Apostle records a nighttime encounter between Jesus and a Jewish religious leader named Nicodemus. During this encounter, Jesus astonishes Nicodemus by this statement:

John 3:3

Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus is taken aback by this statement. He believes Jesus is referring to a literal rebirth. "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Nicodemus asks. However, Jesus is not referring to a physical but a spiritual rebirth. *To be born again is to renounce or turn your back on your old, rebellious life and start living the new life in King Jesus. We call this **repentance**.*

I like to illustrate this with a sports metaphor. For a long time we have played on the world's team. We have worn the world's jersey and used the world's playbook. Now we have switched teams. We are now on Team Jesus. We wear His jersey and use His playbook. Players for Team Jesus should not be scoring points for the other team.

Read Ephesians 4:17-32. How does Paul describe the "old self", and how does he describe the "new self"?

What areas of the "old self" do you most struggle with putting off?

Action Points

Colossians 3:17 says, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” For one week, keep a daily journal of all your activities. Consider how each of these can be done “in the name” or for King Jesus.

Meet with someone who is doing Kingdom work in your community. Ask them to share their story and their passion for the work they are doing. Pray for them and find ways to encourage them.

Disciple-Partner Discussion Questions

Reread the Core Statement and the Memory Verse of this chapter. How would you summarize each of them in your own words?

In Matthew 6:10, Jesus tells us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, **on earth as it is in heaven.**” What is the difference between heaven and earth? Why do you think Jesus added this statement?

What would happen if God’s will were done on earth as in heaven? What would be different?

What would happen if God’s will were done in your own life? How would your life be different?

Why is it important for us to live as citizens of God’s Kingdom here and now?

Where do you see God’s Kingdom at work here and now? What is the difference between Kingdom work and social work?

Read Ephesians 4:17-32. How does Paul describe the “old self”, and how does he describe the “new self”?

What areas of the “old self” do you most struggle with putting off?

What did you learn from doing the Action Points?

Extra Resources

How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels by N. T. Wright

Kingdom Conspiracy by Scot McKnight

The Drama of Scripture by Craig G. Bartholomew

Session 6 -- Kingdom of God I: What Kind of King?

Core Idea:

Jesus, the Son of God, is heir to God's Kingdom and reveals what kind of King God is.

Memory Verse:

Mark 10:45

For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

In the Garden of Eden, the serpent spun a web of deceit centered on one powerful lie, “You cannot trust God.” By getting the first man and woman to doubt the goodness and wisdom of God, he was able to steer them into rebellion against the King of the universe, and we are living with the consequences to this day.

This same lie is still in force deceiving men and women around the world. We do not trust that God is good and that His way leads to life and peace. Let's look at some of the misconceptions people have about God.

Misconceptions about God

The first common mistake people make about God is assuming that God is **angry**. People think that at best God barely tolerates us, and at worst, He is watching from heaven with lightning bolts in hand waiting to zap us over every misstep. This image has more to do with Greek mythology than the Bible.

Another mistake people make is thinking that God is **distant**. The technical term for this idea is *deism*. God is seen as a cosmic watchmaker who has set the world in motion and is now off to bigger and better things. He no longer cares about this little ball of mud and our little lives.

Understand that both of these misconceptions work not only at the intellectual level but at the emotional level as well. (Humans are not the purely logical creatures we sometimes pretend to be.) Often, how we view God correlates with our childhood experiences with our parents, especially our fathers. After all, God is called a Father. If one's biological father or mother was angry and abusive or distant and neglectful, it is all too common that those feelings would be projected onto God.

Reflect on your own relationship with your parents. How has your experience with them shaped your view of God?

Another misconception of God goes in the opposite direction. Here God is seen as a cosmic **butler**. In this view, God's purpose is seen as primarily to give me what I want. God provides me health, wealth, and happiness, and if I do not have all three, it is all God's fault. Whenever I am in trouble, I call up God through prayer and ask him for help. Then I go about my life with nary a care for what God desires.

Which of these misconceptions of God have you encountered in your own thinking or from those around you?

If God is neither angry, nor distant, nor a butler, what is He like? The short answer is **God is like Jesus**.

Jesus and God

We have mentioned the doctrine of the Trinity before, the idea that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are distinct persons sharing the one divine essence. Books upon books have been written to explore and flesh out that mystery. However, for our purposes here, we want to let scripture speak for itself.

Colossians 1:15-20

[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Hebrews 1:1-4

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

John 14:8-11

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.

In your own words, summarize what these passages reveal about Jesus and the Father.

Whoever has seen Jesus has seen the Father. In other words, if you want to know what God is like, His character and personality, look at Jesus. Does Jesus come off as angry all the time? When you read the stories of His life, is He cold, distant, and uncaring? On the other hand, does He let people treat Him like a butler, just doing whatever anyone asks? The answer to all three of these is “No.”

Jesus is . . .

Against the misconceptions of God as angry or distant, we see in Jesus a God of **compassion**. There are many, many stories we could point to in order to illustrate this truth. Let us start with one powerful scene in Luke 7.

Read Luke 7:36-50. Who are the characters in this story? What happens to them?

How does Jesus demonstrate compassion in this story?

When reading the biblical stories, we must be careful to keep in mind the social and cultural differences between then and now. This woman, who Simon the Pharisee considers a sinner, is breaking all kinds of religious and cultural rules by approaching and touching Jesus in this manner. Her actions and Jesus’ non-reaction scandalize Simon. Simon expects Jesus as a religious teacher to recoil from the woman and berate her for her sinful lifestyle. However, what do we see Jesus do? He rebukes the “religious” man and speaks softly to the “sinful” woman even forgiving her for whatever sins she has committed.

This is not the first time Jesus rebukes the righteous in favor of those considered more sinful. Look at this encounter in Luke 5:30-32.

Luke 5:30-32

And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” And Jesus answered them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

Over and over again, Jesus shows a preference for those society considers outcasts. Tax collectors were considered outcasts by proper Jewish religious society because they collaborated with the Roman occupiers. Nevertheless, Jesus befriends them. He speaks with women and foreigners. He spends time with drunks and nobodies. Jesus speaks softly to those who know they are sinners in need of a savior. He speaks loudly against those who because of their religion think they are better than others.³⁵

Meditate on the compassion of Jesus. Do you see Jesus showing you the same compassion He shows others? Why or why not?

Would others consider you to be a person of compassion? What would it look like if you were more compassionate to those around you?

While Jesus is compassionate and often speaks softly to those in distress, it would be foolish to mistake such compassion for weakness. Jesus is very much a leader and a king. However, He is a **servant-leader**. He is one who leads with compassion, not for His own glory but for the sake of others.

In Mark chapter 10, we see some disciples of Jesus arguing over issues of power and authority. Two of Jesus' earliest disciples, James and John, had the audacity to ask Jesus if they would be His right-hand men when Jesus became King. (They expected Jesus to be an earthly king like David or Caesar.) This provoked hard feelings and anger among the other disciples. Therefore, Jesus had to set them all straight about what power and authority look like in the Kingdom of God.

Mark 10:42-45

And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Did you catch what Jesus is saying here? CEOs and presidents and leaders in the world, they use power and authority to exalt and promote themselves. However, in the Kingdom of God, following the example of King Jesus, leaders are first of all servants. Jesus does not only talk the talk, He walks it as well.

³⁵ In Matthew 23, Jesus condemns as hypocrites the Jewish religious leaders who look down upon and harass others.

Read John 13:1-20. How does Jesus lead through service here? What is a task similar to foot-washing that you can do for those around you?

How is Jesus' sacrifice on the cross an example of both His compassion and His nature as a servant-leader?

Jesus shows us that God is both compassionate and a servant-leader. There is one more image we must look at before we move on from this topic. In the Gospel of John chapter 10, Jesus presents Himself as the Good Shepherd.

John 10:11

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

God is not the angry tyrant with lightning bolts. God is not far off and distant like the god of deism. God is not our divine butler here to give us anything we want. No, Jesus shows us that God is a compassionate shepherd who cares for His people like a shepherd cares for His sheep. He can be fiercely protective of His flock when needed. He provides everything His sheep need. He leads us through hard spaces to get to green pastures on the other side because as the shepherd, He knows what is best for us. Because He is a good shepherd, we can trust Him to be a good King as well.

Action Points

Read Psalm 23 and John 10. How is Jesus like a shepherd? If necessary, do some research on shepherds.

Write down what you believe God is like. Then ask three different people their honest opinion about what God is like. How are your beliefs similar or different?

Disciple-Partner Discussion Questions

Reread the Core Statement and the Memory Verse of this chapter. How would you summarize each of them in your own words?

How has your relationship with your parents impacted your views about God?

Reflect on the three misconceptions about God mentioned in this session: angry, distant, butler. How have you encountered these in your own thinking or in the thinking of others?

Can you think of other misconceptions about God that people have? How does Jesus answer those misconceptions?

In your own words, summarize what Colossians 1:15-20; Hebrews 1:1-4; and John 14:8-11 reveal about Jesus and the Father.

What questions do you have about Jesus and the Father or the doctrine of the Trinity?

How does Jesus demonstrate compassion in Luke 7:36-50?

Meditate on the compassion of Jesus. Do you see Jesus showing you the same compassion He shows others? Why or why not?

Would others consider you to be a person of compassion? What would it look like if you were more compassionate to those around you?

Read John 13:1-20. How does Jesus lead through service here? What is a task similar to foot-washing that you can do for those around you?

How is Jesus' sacrifice on the cross an example of both His compassion and His nature as a servant-leader?

What did you learn from doing the Action Points?

Extra Resources

Simply Jesus by N. T. Wright

The Jesus I Never Knew by Philip Yancey

The Case for Christ by Lee Strobel

Session 7 -- Kingdom of God II: What Kind of Kingdom?

Core Idea:

The Kingdom of God is unlike the kingdoms founded by sinful humans.

Memory Verse:

Matthew 7:13-14

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

The Kingdom of God is unlike any kingdom, nation, or culture on earth. So different is the way of Jesus that some have taken to referring to it as the “upside-down” kingdom. Although, in reality, our human ways of acting, thinking, and relating are truly upside down. Jesus’ way is the right way that we should have been following all along.

In this session, we will explore how life in the Kingdom is different in two main areas: 1) how we relate to others and 2) how we relate to wealth. But before we get there, take a look at the memory verse for this session, Matthew 7:13-14. This passage is found at the end of a lengthy section of Jesus’ teaching called the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapters 5-7. Read and reflect on this passage for a moment.

How would you summarize Matthew 7:13-14 in your own words?

How are Jesus’ words here “upside-down” compared to the world’s way of thinking?

As a child, I remember the pull of being popular. The goal was not to stick out like some sort of freak. Being different was one of the worst things to be. Rather, peer pressure helped to mold and shape most of us into a common image. So many of us wore the same clothes, shared the same interests, spoke the same way, all in an effort to “fit in” like everyone else.

As an adult, the appeal to be like the majority does not go away. In business, the goal is to capture the largest market share by appealing to the largest number of people possible. Commercials try to sell us on what is popular so we will spend money. In democratic forms of government, majority rules.

In other words, everything is telling us that the wide, easy way is where we want to be, but not Jesus. King Jesus comes along and says, "That road, the wide and easy one, is headed off a cliff. My road is different. It may seem hard. It may seem lonely at times, but this is the path to life."

A Kingdom Manifesto

The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew spells out what this path to life is like.³⁶ Here He sets Himself apart from another group of Jewish teachers known as Pharisees. He contrasts His way of life against theirs as well as against the lifestyles and priorities of the Roman pagans.

Wasting no time, Jesus begins His teaching with a bold series of pronouncements that highlight just how upside-down His Kingdom is. These pronouncements are commonly referred to as the Beatitudes because they pronounce blessings on different groups of people.

Matthew 5:3-12

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Read Matthew 5:3-12 multiple times and slowly. Who does your culture consider to be blessed? Write out your version of the world's beatitudes.

³⁶ In Luke we find a similar set of teachings called the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17-49). As a traveling teacher, it is not surprising that Jesus would teach the same material again and again to different audiences, making changes as necessary depending on the make-up of the audience.

Which of these blessings is the most surprising? Which of these is the most confusing? Why?

Compare Matthew 5:3-12 with Luke 6:20-26. What similarities and differences do you notice? What does this say about Jesus' audiences for each sermon?

In the Kingdom of God, it is not the rich, the well-off, the famous, or the well-connected that are blessed. These traits are actually hindrances to Kingdom life. In Matthew 19, Jesus meets a wealthy young man who asks about eternal life.

Matthew 19:16-22

And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?" Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Seeing the man's response, Jesus turned to His disciples and said:

Matthew 19:23-24

And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."

The man's wealth had such a grip on his life that it prevented him from surrendering everything and being all-in with Jesus. Thus, he missed the blessings of life in God's Kingdom. Meanwhile, the poor, the mourning, the meek, those with nothing to lose, they are the very people who realize how much they need Jesus. They are under no illusions about their strength or their resources. They are at the end of their ropes and are ready to go all-in with Jesus and find true blessings.

The Kingdom and Others

Through the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus draws a contrast between His way of life and that of the dominant cultures of His time. Being a Jew, the dominant culture He most often

butted heads with was the Jewish religious establishment, namely a group of traditionalists known as the Pharisees.

The Pharisees preached adherence to the Jewish Law found in the first five books of what Christians call the Old Testament. However, their interpretation of this law was colored by layers upon layers of commentaries and oral traditions, all done in the name of “helping” people understand and apply the Law better. However noble this motive might have been, in the time of Jesus, this system led to a great deal of religious hypocrisy.

The Pharisees “looked” like decent and moral people on the outside because they obeyed the rules, but Jesus made clear that true morality went all the way down into one’s heart. It is not enough to go through the motions of obeying God, we are actually supposed to change from the inside out.

Thus, where the Pharisees say, “Good people don’t murder.” Jesus says, “Don’t let anger consume you and destroy your relationships with others. Actively work to reconcile your broken relationships” (Matthew 5:21-26 paraphrased).

Where the Pharisees say, “Good people do not sleep with someone not their spouse.” Jesus says, “Don’t sexually objectify others. Also, honor your marriage commitments” (Matthew 5:27-32).

Do you see where He is going with this? **In the Kingdom of God, the disciples of Jesus actively care about others.** We do not measure our rightness before God by external conformity to rules. Rather, true morality is measured by how we care about others. In case you are still on the fence, Jesus goes further.

Matthew 5:38-48

You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

In your own words, summarize the point Jesus is making here.

What concerns do you have about Jesus' words here? Do you think this is doable? Why or why not?

The Kingdom and Wealth

Another clear example of the upside-down nature of Jesus' teaching is His view on money. Consider how much of our lives is devoted to the making or spending of money. How many hours of our lives are spent selling our labor for money only to turn around and spend that money on stuff that ultimately gets sold in a garage sale a few years later? Compare the world's view of money with what Jesus says in Matthew 6.

Matthew 6:19-21

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Matthew 6:24

No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

Jesus goes on to tell us not to be worried about physical needs like food and clothing, but to trust Him to provide.

Matthew 6:31-33 Emphasis added

Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles³⁷ seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. *But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness*, and all these things will be added to you.

In a world where material possessions and net worth are viewed as the ultimate status symbols, King Jesus says that these are not nearly important as we make them out to be. Instead, the Kingdom should be our highest priority.

In your own words, how does Jesus' view of wealth contrast to the world's view of wealth?

³⁷ The word "Gentile" refers to non-Jewish peoples.

*On a scale of 1-10, how much does money or material possessions consume your life?
Why?*

Action Points

Read Matthew chapters 5-7. List out everything that Jesus says that is counter-cultural or upside-down compared to the world's way of doing things.

Take a day to mindfully examine the culture around you. What messages do you see reinforced by advertising or entertainment? What ideas are propagated by news or social media? How do these ideas compare or contrast with what you know about Jesus?

Disciple-Partner Discussion Questions

Reread the Core Statement and the Memory Verse of this chapter. How would you summarize each of them in your own words?

How are Jesus' words in Matthew 7:13-14 "upside-down" compared to the world's way of thinking?

Read Matthew 5:3-12 multiple times and slowly. Who does your culture consider to be blessed? What is your version of the world's beatitudes?

Which of the blessings in Matthew 5:3-12 is the most surprising? Which of these is the most confusing? Why?

Compare Matthew 5:3-12 with Luke 6:20-26. What similarities and differences do you notice? What does this say about Jesus' audiences for each sermon?

In your own words, summarize the point Jesus is making in Matthew 5:38-48.

What concerns do you have about Jesus' words in Matthew 5:38-48? Do you think this is doable? Why or why not?

In your own words, how does Jesus' view of wealth contrast to the world's view of wealth?

On a scale of 1-10, how much does money or material possessions consume your life? Why?

What did you learn from doing the Action Points?

Extra Resources

The Cost of Discipleship by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Christian Counter-Culture by John R. W. Stott

Living the Sermon on the Mount by Glen H. Stassen

Session 8 -- Kingdom of God III: Kingdom Values

Core Idea:

Life in the Kingdom of God is governed by two great commands: Love God and Love Others.

Memory Verse:

Matthew 22:37-40

And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

In High School, I had a biology teacher whose constant refrain was “Repetition is the mother of retention.” Let me say that again, “Repetition is the mother of retention.” Needless to say, I forgot a lot that I learned about biology that year, but this mantra stayed with me.

Though we examined the counter-cultural nature of the Kingdom of God as it relates to personal relationships in the last chapter, it is important that we repeat this theme over and over again. Repetition being the mother of retention and all. If there is one word we could use to describe life in God’s Kingdom, that word would have to be “love.”

In his book, *How God Became King*, author N. T. Wright writes, “Our ‘big story’ is not a power story. It isn’t designed to gain money, sex, or power for ourselves, though those temptations will always lie close at hand. It is a love story--God’s love story, operating through Jesus and then, by the Spirit, through Jesus’s followers.”³⁸

Centrality of Love

Love is central to understanding the story of the Bible. Everything God does is born out of His character and nature of love.³⁹ All of His commands stem from love. The divine love we see in the Trinity between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, is the same love He shows to all of us and calls us to show to others.

³⁸ N. T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels*, 276.

³⁹ Some try to argue that in the Old Testament, God appears harsh and angry, the very opposite of the loving and compassionate Jesus in the New Testament. However, when we consider the extraordinary patience of God, often sending multiple reminders of His love and calling people away from their rebellion and evil, we see that God is just as compassionate in the Old Testament as He is in the New.

1 John 4:7-12 Emphasis added

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, *because God is love*. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation⁴⁰ for our sins. Beloved, *if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another*. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

This is one of those passages that deserves to be read slowly and meditated on thoughtfully. Take some time with this passage. How does God show His love for you? How does God's love motivate us to love others?

In the time of Jesus, the Jewish religious leaders liked to debate and discuss the finer nuances of God's Law found in the Old Testament. They wrote large commentaries trying to flesh out exactly how to follow God's will in any possible circumstance. One question they debated was which command in the Law was the most important one. In the Gospels, we see them pose this question to Jesus as well.

Matthew 22:34-40 Emphasis added

But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees,⁴¹ they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. *On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.*"

Do you catch what Jesus is saying here? All the commands in the Law come down to these two ideas: Love God and love others. The Apostle Paul echoes Jesus in his letter to the Romans.

Romans 13:8-10

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

⁴⁰ In upcoming sessions we will explore what this word means in depth and how King Jesus deals with our sins.

⁴¹ The Sadducees were another Jewish religious group like the Pharisees.

In other words, if you make it your ambition to love God and love other people, you are not going to steal from other people. You are not going to murder them, lie to them, or in any way try to harm them. Love God and love others, and by default you will fulfill God's will.

Definition of Love

At this point, the lawyers among us will ask, "But what is love? What does it look like? How do we do it?" This is a decent question, and we will attempt to answer it. However, we must be cautious. If we try to define the exact behavior for each and every possible situation, then we are right back to the Old Testament Law. That said, the Bible does give us some general principles.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives what is most often known as the **Golden Rule**.

Matthew 7:12

So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

Now let me introduce you to the **Silver Rule**. "Whatever you *do not* want someone to do to you, do not do to them."

Did you catch the difference between these two rules? One is passive: do no harm to another person. One is active: do good towards the other person. Jesus does not let us get away with just passively standing by while others are hurting. He calls us to actively pursue what is good for others.

1 John 3:17

But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?

In your own words, how would you describe the difference between the Golden Rule and the Silver Rule? Which of these two best describes how you treat others?

What are some practical examples of how you can show this kind of love?

The Apostle Paul writes about love in 1 Corinthians 13. Often this chapter will be used in weddings to describe the relationship between husband and wife. That is perfectly appropriate, but Paul is not talking about marriage in this chapter. Rather, he is talking about how disciples of King Jesus ought to act towards each other.

1 Corinthians 13:1-7

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Read through Paul's description of love. Which of his statements about love stands out to you the most? Why?

Example of Love

Even more than commanding or defining love, Jesus gives us an example of love. Or rather, Jesus gives us THE example of love through His sacrifice on the cross.

John 15:12-13

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

John 3:16

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Philippians 2:1-11

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Read the passages listed above. What did Jesus give up out of love for you?

*What are you willing to give up out of love for God and for others? What are you **unwilling** to give up?*

Action Points

Make a list of five people you regularly interact with in life (family, friends, co-workers, etc.). Write out one practical way you can show them love in the next week and do it.

One day this week take an inventory of your actions for 24 hours. Keep a journal as you go through the day if you need to. Prayerfully assess whether or not your actions are following the Golden Rule. Discuss what you learned with your disciple-partner.

Disciple-Partner Discussion Questions

Reread the Core Statement and the Memory Verse of this chapter. How would you summarize each of them in your own words?

How does God show His love for you? How does God's love motivate us to love others?

In your own words, how would you describe the difference between the Golden Rule and the Silver Rule? Which of these two best describes how you treat others?

What did you learn when you did your Action Point and assessed how often your actions aligned with Jesus' Golden Rule?

What are some practical examples of how you can show the kind of love Jesus calls us to?

Read through Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians 13. Which of his statements about love stands out to you the most? Why?

In Philippians 2:1-11, what did Jesus give up out of love for you?

What are you willing to give up out of love for God and for others?

What are you **unwilling** to give up? Why?

What did you learn from doing the Action Points?

Extra Resources

Loving the Way Jesus Loves by Phillip Graham Ryken

Love Walked Among Us by Paul E. Miller

The Good and Beautiful God by James Bryan Smith

Session 9 -- The Cross I: Representation

Core Idea:

When He came to earth, the Son of God took on all the brokenness of humanity in order to restore it.

Memory Verse:

Hebrews 4:15

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Sitting in my office on one of my bookshelves is a piece of glass shaped like a diamond. I picked it up at some hobby store years ago for a sermon illustration, but I keep it around to remind me that truth is often like a diamond. What do I mean? Picture a cut-diamond in your mind. On all sides of this precious stone there are cuts or facets. You hold the diamond up to the light and it sparkles as the light refracts through it. Then, as you turn the diamond ever so slightly, the sparkles change as the light hits at different angles.

Often, truth is like that diamond. It is multifaceted and complex. As you turn the issue over in your mind, you see things from different angles. If you fixate on one facet, you miss the depth and beauty to be seen from the other side.

As we consider the life, death, and resurrection of King Jesus, we realize that what He did for us is like that diamond. When discussing what exactly Jesus accomplished for us on the cross, we use the word *atonement*. In His sacrifice, Jesus deals with our sin and reconciles us with God. He literally makes us “at-one” with God. When we consider the effects of the atonement on us, our sin, God, and our enemy, Satan, we realize that depth and beauty of what Jesus has done. Words often fail to capture the fullness of it all. At best, our words can describe one facet of the atonement at a time.

What happens when we limit ourselves to only looking at one side of an issue?

The first facet of the atonement we will explore is what I am calling *representation*. It is significant that Jesus took on human nature, was born as a child, and lived into adulthood before His crucifixion. Jesus became *incarnate* (took on flesh) in order to save us. “In the

incarnation, God identifies with humans--all humans in all the dimensions of human life--to bring humans grace. He becomes what we are so we can become what He is."⁴²

Identification

In order to undo the sinful rebellion of humanity and all its effects (shame, alienation, slavery, and death), Jesus had to first identify with us. According to the Bible, Jesus had to walk a mile in our shoes, so to speak. He faced the same ups and downs we all face. The author of Hebrews does a great job of describing how Jesus identifies with us.

Hebrews 2:14-18 Emphasis added

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. *Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.* For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

In order to die for our sins, Jesus had to first be able to die. He had to become one of us so He could destroy the power of death. Angels could not do it. Animals could not do it. Only Jesus, being fully man and fully God could die for us.

When it comes to Jesus being fully man and fully God, what questions do you have?

How does the fact that Jesus would identify with humanity make you feel? What emotions does that thought evoke in you?

Not only does Jesus' incarnation enable Him to save us, it also gives us confidence to trust in Him as both our King and our High Priest.

Hebrews 4:14-16

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

⁴² Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*, 56.

What significant struggles or temptations have you faced in life? How has Jesus dealt with similar challenges?

Substitution

Not only does Jesus identify with our plight as humans, the Bible is also clear that Jesus serves as our substitute, dying in our place.

2 Corinthians 5:21

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Christian theologians refer to this as the Great Exchange. Jesus takes upon Himself our sin and the death we have earned. In exchange, He gives us the eternal life that He earned by His perfect obedience.

At this point we may ask, “Is this fair?” Is it fair for Jesus to carry all of our sin and shame and death? Is it fair that we can be forgiven for our sins and receive life we do not deserve? The hard truth is that no, it is not fair. It is grace. God gives us something we do not deserve out of His extraordinary love and compassion for us.

What comes to mind when you think about Jesus dying in your place?

Union

Having identified with humanity in the incarnation and having substituted his life for ours, King Jesus makes it possible for us to experience union with Him both now and into eternity.

Romans 5:12-17

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses

brought justification. For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

In your own words, what is the Apostle Paul saying here?

To understand the point the Apostle Paul is making, I want you to imagine two boats. The first boat, the *S. S. Humanity*, is captained by Adam, our forefather, and all of us who are descendants of Adam are cruising along with him. Now Adam, as our captain, has charted a course for *Humanity* and has steered us all into an iceberg. Now *Humanity* is sinking, and unless something happens, we will all perish!

At this point, another ship pulls up alongside us. We will call this the *H. M. S. Kingdom*. The captain of the *Kingdom* is none other than Jesus Christ. As Adam was the captain of *Humanity*, so Jesus is the captain of the *Kingdom*. Where Adam shipwrecked us all by his actions, Jesus offers us salvation. We can leave the old, sinking *Humanity* and join Him on the *Kingdom*.

Paul takes this thought even further.

Romans 6:1-11

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 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. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. 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.

To continue with our boat metaphor. Captain Adam's boat was full of sin and rebellion and vice. However, Captain Jesus runs an altogether different ship. Since we have left the old way to unite with Jesus, we must commit to living the way our new Captain would have us live.

What does it mean that the "old self" has been crucified with Christ?

Action Points

Over the next week, look for opportunities to practice empathy for others. Empathy is the ability to understand another person's perspective. Listen and try to discern not only what people are doing, saying or feeling, but why they might be doing so.

Practice serving others outside of your comfort zone. Do a job that you think is beneath you or a group of people you do not normally interact with. Reflect on what it was like for Jesus to incarnate and serve humanity.

Disciple-Partner Discussion Questions

Reread the Core Statement and the Memory Verse of this chapter. How would you summarize each of them in your own words?

What happens when we limit ourselves to only looking at one side of an issue?

When it comes to Jesus being fully man and fully God, what questions do you have?

How does the fact that Jesus would identify with humanity make you feel? What emotions does that thought evoke in you?

What significant struggles or temptations have you faced in life? How has Jesus dealt with similar challenges?

What comes to mind when you think about Jesus dying in your place?

In your own words, what is the Apostle Paul saying in Romans 5:12-17 and 6:1-11?

What does it mean that the "old self" has been crucified with Christ?

What did you learn from doing the Action Points?

Extra Resources

A Community Called Atonement by Scot McKnight

The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views edited by James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy