

The image features a central beige rectangular area with the word "ESTABLISHED" in a dark serif font. This central area is framed by wood grain patterns in the top right and bottom left corners. The wood grain is detailed, showing concentric growth rings and radial lines, with a dark, textured bark-like edge. The overall composition is balanced and evokes a sense of tradition and stability.

ESTABLISHED

established

Established (Version 3.0)

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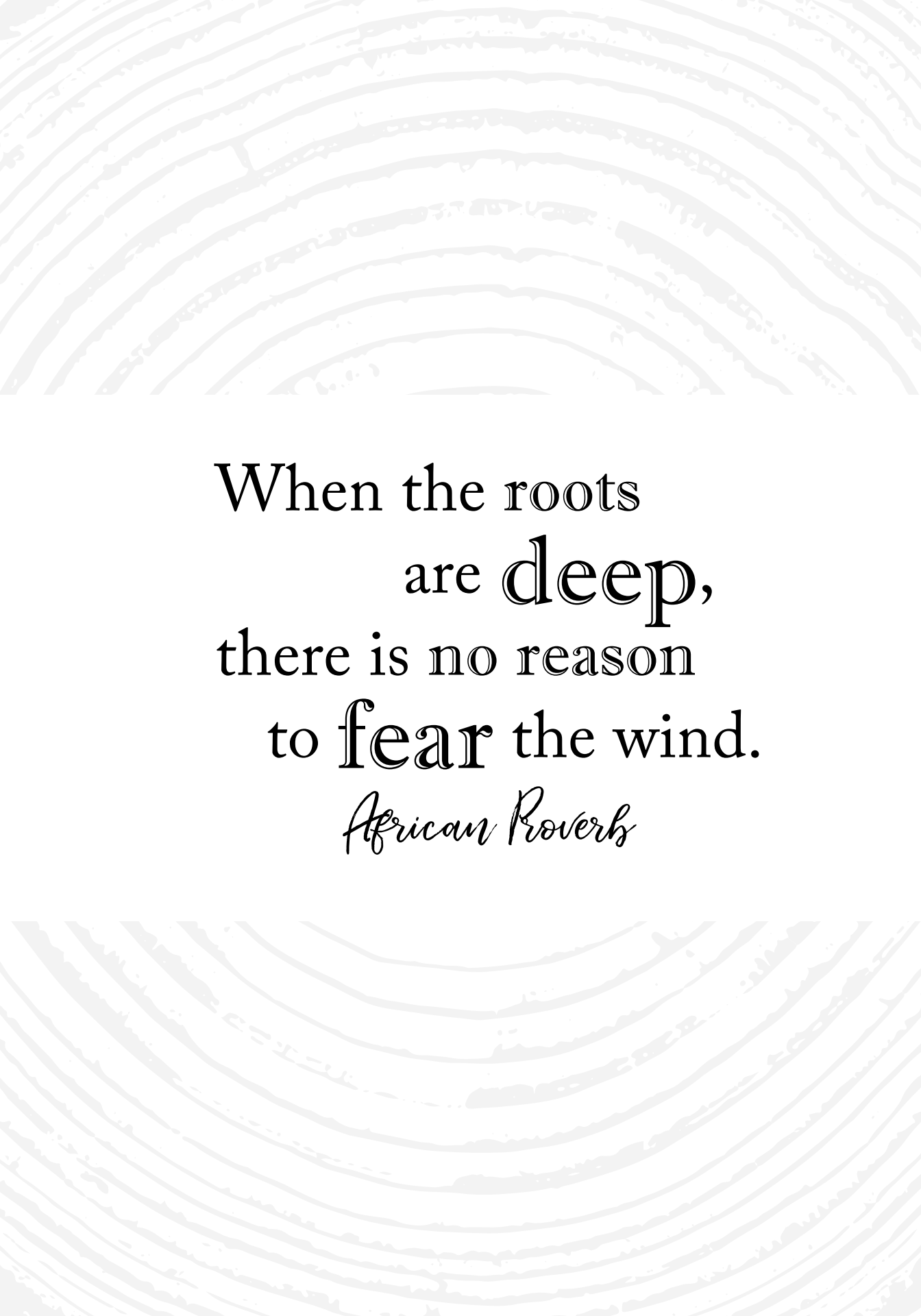
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When the roots
are deep,
there is no reason
to fear the wind.

African Proverbs

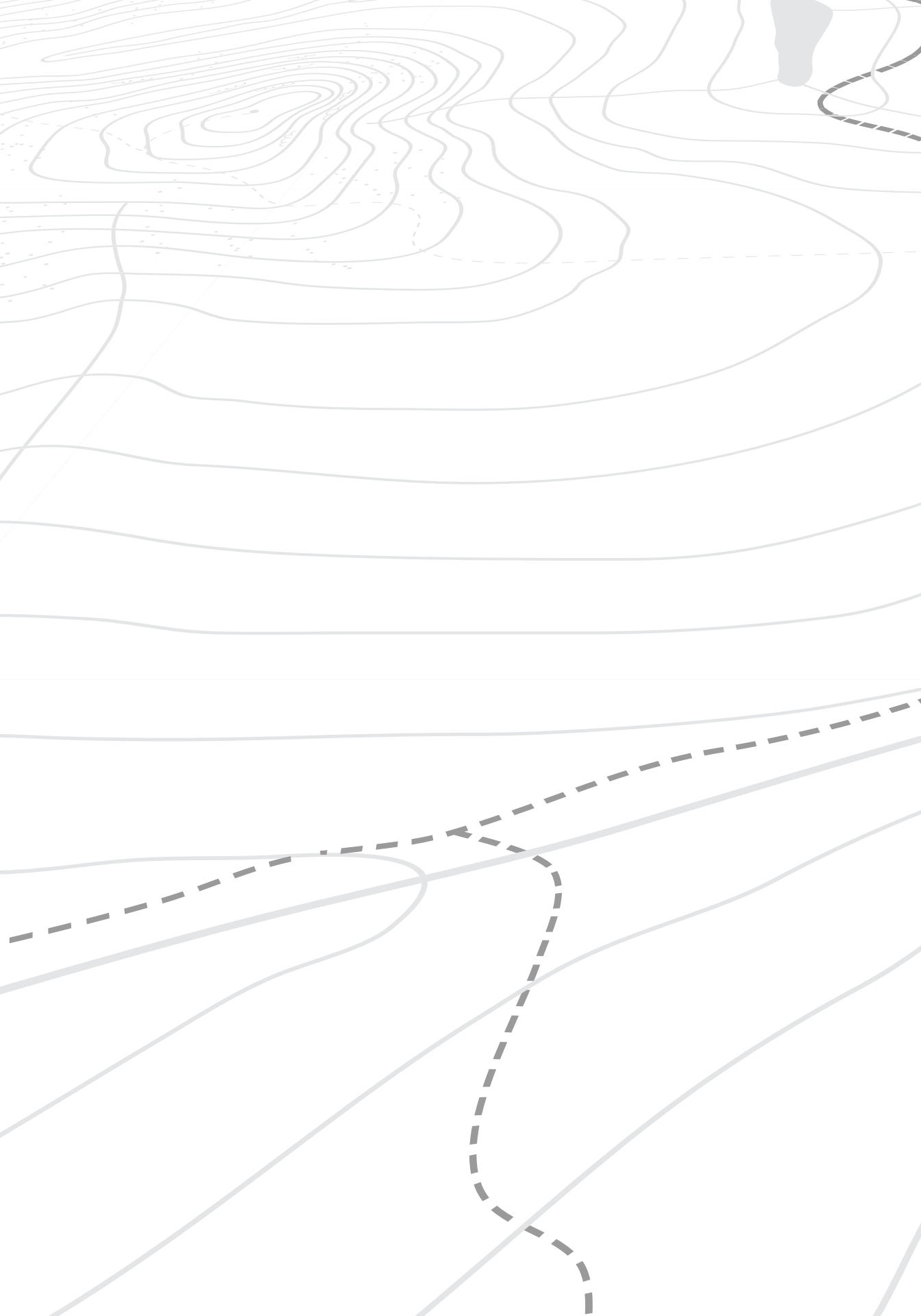


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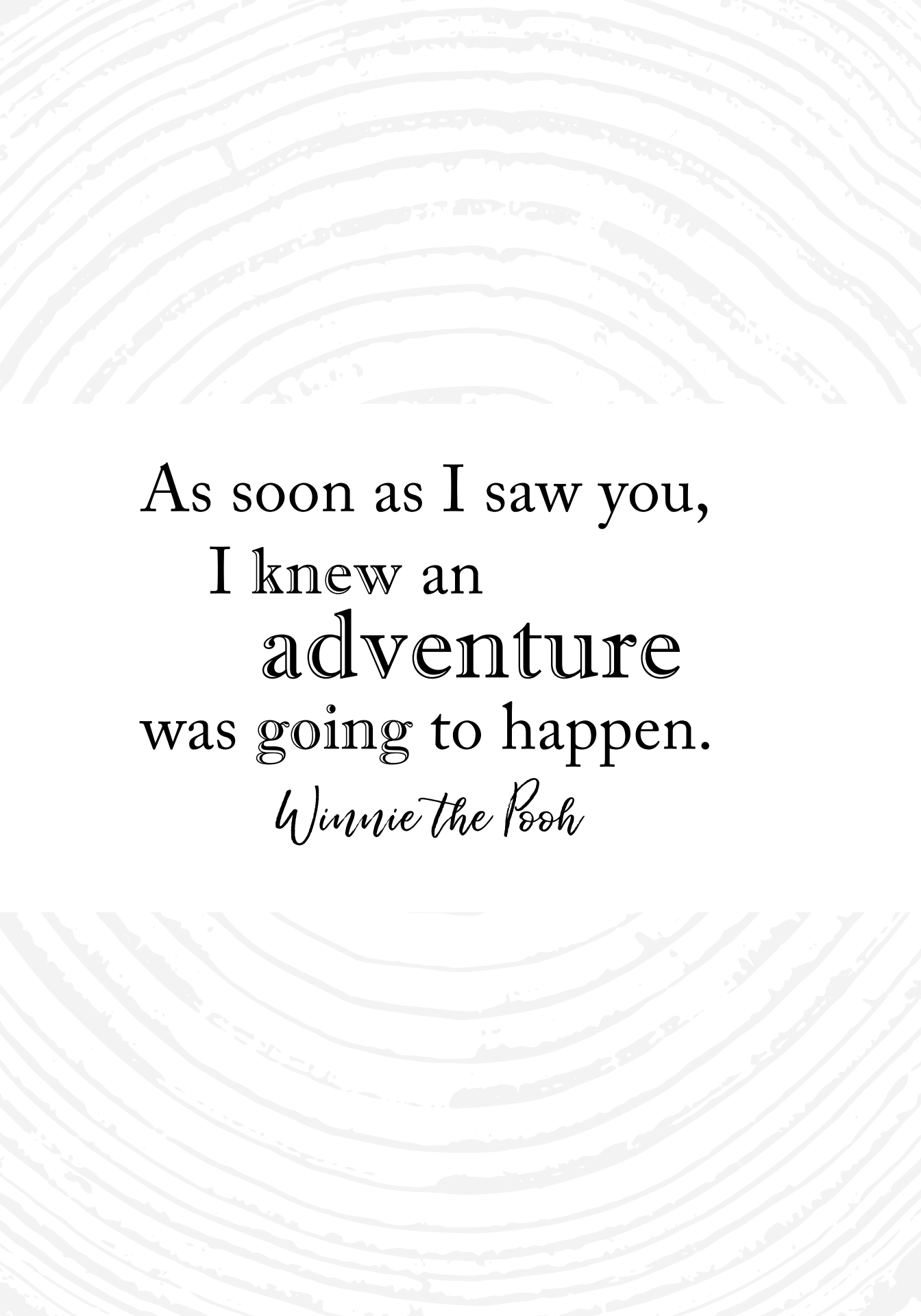
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As soon as I saw you,
I knew an
adventure
was going to happen.

Winnie the Pooh

The Adventure Ahead

Can you think of a time when you wished you had more confidence? Maybe you wanted to jump off the high dive or ask someone out on a date. Maybe you were about to request a promotion at work or hold your newborn in your arms for the first time. Or maybe it had something to do with faith and God. All of us, no matter our background or how long we've been in church, have had moments when our confidence was shaken... times when we've wondered if God is really there, if the Bible is really true, or if our lives really matter.

Our culture has a way of adding more pressure—putting us on edge and throwing us off balance. Most of us could describe our everyday lives with words like “tired,” “distracted,” “stressed,” “discouraged,” “anxious,” or “confused.” It's easy to start thinking this is just the way life is and always will be.

That's why the picture painted in the book of Jeremiah is so compelling and refreshing:

But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose *confidence* is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.

Jeremiah 17:7-8

Who wouldn't want to be more like that tree? It's deeply connected, constantly refreshed, and confidently rooted no matter what's happening around it. You may even know someone who resembles that tree: a person of integrity, strength, and conviction, even during difficulty.

Whether we've been journeying with God a long time or not at all, we all want more confidence in what we believe. We yearn for richer connections with other people in our often-lonely world. And all of us could stand to dig our roots down a bit deeper. Making those things happen is what *Established* is all about.

The Trail Before You

The signature trail in Yosemite, one of America's most popular national parks, is the Mist Trail. The name sounds inviting, but the park's description of the trail is even better: "While many of Yosemite's trails are popular due to having a single spectacular destination, the Mist Trail has fabulous views scattered along it," winding you through "two unforgettable waterfalls that fall a combined 900 feet, and ending with perhaps the most striking of all: the view of Nevada Fall, Liberty Cap, and the back of Half Dome."¹ If that isn't intriguing enough, type "Mist Trail" into Google Images and you'll have the next item on your bucket list.

While it's hard to compete with the Mist Trail, *Established* is designed in a similar way. This experience isn't built around one singular destination since all of us are at different places in life and our faith journey. Instead, the intent is for us to find moments of inspiration along the way—something refreshing, or an "aha!" moment or clarifying thought, or a great conversation or friendship that develops and deepens.

Over the next seven weeks, this journey will help you gain confidence in the areas of faith, Jesus, God, prayer, purpose, and the Bible. Growth will not look like a straight line. Instead, it will be more like the tree described by Jeremiah, adding new growth rings with each new season. You can think of each week as a new ring or layer that will help you become more confident and connected over time.

In *Established*, each week will build off the one before it through the following two components.

Daily Personal Reflections: Every week contains five days of individual exercises such as reading, journaling, engaging in a creative element, or completing an activity. These are not meant to be overwhelming; each day's activity takes about 15-30 minutes to complete. They will help you dive into a specific area around that week's theme.

Weekly Group Gatherings: This is important! Our journey isn't meant to be done alone. It's hard to push ourselves to new heights or depths without the encouragement of others. If you don't have a group, contact the church so we can help you get connected with some fellow journeyers. Each week you'll gather with your group to process and discuss what you're learning together. These weekly gatherings will take about an hour and a half.

The Mission... If You Choose To Accept It

Over 6,000 people have gone through *Established*. As we've heard their stories, a few common themes pop up about what helps take this experience to the next level. Here are three values we ask all *Established* groups to adopt in order to make this the best possible journey.

Commitment (“We’re all in this together!”): Doing anything significant, whether at the gym, school, work, or home, takes time and intentionality. The same is true with God and this group. Committing to this journey means making it a priority to both come to group meetings and do the daily reflections. This will help you engage and allow your voice and perspective to benefit others in your group, too! One important note: **please still attend group meetings, even if you haven’t finished all of the week’s reflections.** You can still contribute, and your presence is what is most important.

Openness (“Let’s stretch ourselves a bit!”): Some topics we cover may be completely new to you. Others may be very familiar. No matter what, make a decision to be open. All of us are works in progress—none of us have arrived. We’re all in the same boat, so no one should be preaching or lecturing others in the group. We are all learners. So let’s be open to what we can learn each week.

Confidentiality (“What is said here, stays here!”): The depth of your conversations is directly related to the level of authenticity and trust in your group. Digging below the surface in areas of faith or our story requires trust. It’s a privilege to hear the stories and questions of others. So, work to make your group a trustworthy place.

We believe these next few weeks will be life-giving for you. As you embark on this trail, thanks for stepping out of what feels comfortable and safe in pursuit of something more.

Group Gathering

Getting Started

Welcome to the first meeting of *Established*. Don't worry—no prep work is needed for today. This time is all about setting up for the journey ahead as we get to know each other, share what we're hoping to gain from this experience, and explore about the format and feel of *Established*. To get started, let's do an activity to help us get acquainted.

- **The Two-Minute Interview:** Break up into pairs and have each person share three or four facts about themselves. If your group already knows one another, share surprising or little-known facts. Come back together and have each pair introduce or share a surprising fact about one another. Keep the introductions brief (remember, it's a "two-minute" interview).

Discuss Together

- Describe a time when you stepped out of your comfort zone to grow somewhere—like at the gym, in school, at work, or someplace else. What motivated you to take the step? What happened as a result?
- What do you hope to get out of your *Established* experience? Is there a particular area of faith in which you'd like to grow more confident? Is there a particular way you'd like to grow in connection with the church?

You may have read the intro to Week 1 called "The Adventure Ahead." It provides some great information about what this experience is all about. For your group time, ask someone to read the last section called "The Mission... If You Choose To Accept It."

- Which of the three values resonates the most with you? Why?
- What has your experience been with groups at church? Have you ever done something like this before, or is this completely new to you? If you have done a group, what has been the difference between an "okay" experience and a "great" experience?
- Are there any questions about the format of *Established*?

Look Ahead

Next week, we're starting the first day of reading. These readings aren't meant to take a lot of time. Typically, they're about 15-20 minutes long. All the readings are built around a theme.

- Ask someone to read the introduction to Week 2, found on page 11.
- Take a moment to pray together. Ask God to meet you in this journey over the next few weeks.

Finally, there is a useful tool on the next page to help your group stay connected. Before you leave, fill this out together. You may decide to pass your book around and have everyone print his or her name. If you know them, list out the dates for your meetings so you can put them in your calendars.

My Group

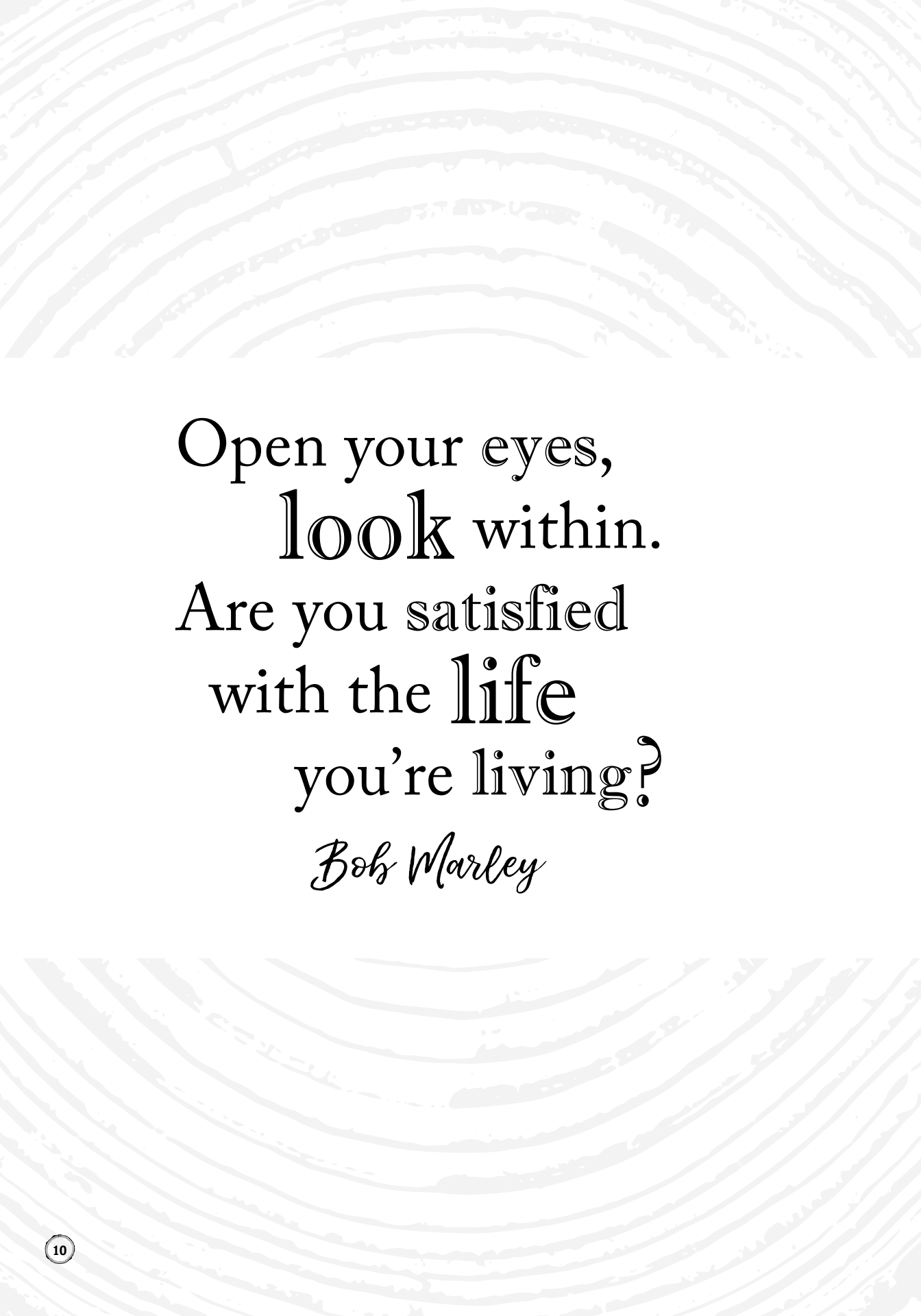
Names

_____	_____
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Meeting Dates

Week 1: <i>Completed!</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Week 2: _____	<input type="checkbox"/>
Week 3: _____	<input type="checkbox"/>
Week 4: _____	<input type="checkbox"/>
Week 5: _____	<input type="checkbox"/>
Week 6: _____	<input type="checkbox"/>
Week 7: _____	<input type="checkbox"/>
Week 8: _____	<input type="checkbox"/>





Open your eyes,
look within.
Are you satisfied
with the life
you're living?

Bob Marley



WEEK 2

Something More

It's easy to ignore seeds. If we're eating a piece of fruit like a strawberry or blueberry, we probably don't even notice them.

But seeds are remarkable. How does a small acorn turn into a majestic tree? What is it within this little hard shell that compels it to push up through the dirt in search of something more? You must admit that little seed has spunk.

There is something within us, too, that is constantly seeking and searching—an inner compulsion that longs for deeper meaning, bigger purpose, and lasting connections. And there is something all around us that should compel us to look up, ask big questions, and yearn for more. Maybe we're more like seeds than we thought.

Great journeys don't start with answers. They begin with questions and a dream for something more. The greatest explorers saw the horizon and wondered what adventures it might hold. So, as we start our journey together, let's use our eyes, ears, hearts, and minds to look around together. What stirs our souls and calls us to something more?

The Call of the Wild

More than ever before, people are ditching the city lights for a trip to the outdoors. Camping (and yes, “glamping” counts!) is incredibly popular, and attendance at national parks is shattering records. The allure of a night under the stars or a walk among the trees has never been stronger.

What is it that draws us to the outdoors? At first glance, it may seem strange, given how most of us are creatures of comfort. There’s no air conditioning outside. Connectivity to the internet is spotty, at best. And the bugs... there are so many bugs! Despite the many inconveniences, there has always been something rejuvenating about escaping to nature. Have you ever gone outside and felt something click within your soul? Has a beautiful sunset, full of red and orange beams shooting across the sky or the sight of a cascading waterfall seemed more than simply a great view? Did it feel... *spiritual*?

If you’ve felt this way, you’re not alone.

John Muir, the famous conservationist who helped start the National Park System, once said this about nature: “Few are altogether deaf to the preaching of the pine trees. Their sermons on the mountains go to our hearts.”² For Muir, the trees talked to him. They preached a message that spoke to his soul. His thoughts echo words written thousands of years earlier by a man named David, who wrote a psalm (a spiritual hymn) to describe his feelings when he looked up at the sky.

The heavens declare the glory of God; *the skies proclaim the work of his hands*. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. **Psalm 19:1-4**

When he looked around, David didn’t just see nature. He saw something more that inspired him. Countless artists, poets, and lyricists have felt the same way. Think of how many paintings, photographs, songs, movies, and other works of art are based on the wondrous beauty of nature.

David tells us the reason we’re inspired is that creation declares the glory of God. The world around us is a canvas, and like any canvas, we can learn much about the artist if we take time to look closely. God is revealing himself to us. His majesty, power, and wisdom are on full display to anyone at any time. Theologians call this concept **general revelation**. It’s the idea that at any moment we can see the fingerprints of God around us. The wild is calling to us. It’s preaching a message that, without words, can be universally understood across languages, countries, and generations.

Heart Strings

We talk a lot about the heart. As author Brent Curtis puts it,

We describe a person without compassion as “heartless,” and we urge him or her to “have a heart.” Our deepest hurts we call “heartaches.”

Jilted lovers are “brokenhearted.” Courageous soldiers are “bravehearted.”

The truly evil are “black-hearted” and saints have “hearts of gold.” If we need to speak at a more intimate level, we ask for a “heart-to-heart” talk.

“Lighthearted” is how we feel on vacation. And when we love someone as truly as we may, we love “with all our heart”.³

When we talk about the heart this way, we are referring to the deepest places within us—our greatest passions, highest hopes, and innermost feelings. The heart is a key part of what it means to be human. And while nature can certainly draw us to ask bigger questions, our hearts also compel us to search for something more. One of the writers of the Bible, a king named Solomon, said,

[God] has also set *eternity* in the human *heart*. **Ecclesiastes 3:11**

Solomon meant that within our hearts is a sense there must be something more beyond what we can see and touch. Deep down, we are searching for a bigger story.

Maybe this is why movies are so popular. Every year, billions of dollars are spent making (and watching) them. A great movie can spark something deep within us. Even the most strong-willed of us will admit to shedding an unexpected tear a time or two in a movie theater.

Or maybe this is why music is such a big deal. Have you ever noticed how a song can stick with you for a long time? Sometimes we wish we could get one out of our heads! Music is more than notes or lyrics on a page. A song can encourage us in the best times and provide comfort during terrible moments. It can speak to our hearts.

The same could be said about a great work of art, a passionate poem, a delicious meal, or a deeply meaningful experience we share with someone else. These all tug at our heartstrings in a way that, if we stop to think about it, connects us to the deepest longings within us.

ACTIVITY: Yesterday, we spent some time going outside to see what stirred our souls. Today, take a few moments to reflect on some of the things that resonate with your heart. Below is a list to help you think through your favorite stories, songs, or other engaging experiences that have particularly inspired you. Don't worry about filling out every category. Just write down the ones where something has tugged at your heartstrings... and then think about why these things connected so deeply with you.

My "Favorites" List

Movie: _____

Book: _____

Song/Album: _____

Artist/Work of Art: _____

Food: _____

Place to Visit: _____

Gift Received: _____

Holiday: _____

Moment/Memory: _____

Reflection

Look through your list. Why did these things resonate so much with you?

There are some sacred moments when it is clear there is something more to life (a graduation, a birth of a child, a valued friend, or a special vacation). Does a moment (or a photo in your phone) come to mind? What is it about that time that tugs deeply at your heart?

Something's Wrong

What you know, you can't explain, but you feel it. You've felt it your entire life, that there's *something wrong* with the world. You don't know what it is, but it's there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad.

Morpheus (The Matrix)

There's a lot that's right about our world. That's been the focus of the past two days. But, while it's great to think about the good, it's important to recognize a lot is wrong, too.

C.S. Lewis, one of the most influential Christian writers of his generation, came face-to-face with brokenness throughout his life. Having served in the trenches during World War I, he saw the horrors of battle. Twenty-four years later, when his native Great Britain was under constant threat of German bombing at the start of World War II, he observed: "If you look at the present state of the world, it is pretty plain that humanity has been making some big mistake. We are on the wrong road."⁴

What do you see when you look at the state of our world today? Although World Wars I and II have come and gone, disharmony and discord haven't gone away. Simply turn on the television, scroll through the news, or look at your social media feed, and you'll see there is a breakdown...

In Nature

Earthquakes, floods, tornadoes, diseases, and other natural disasters are all around us. While they occur in nature, they don't feel natural. These are the moments that make us cry out, "That shouldn't happen!" And something within us believes that's true—these things shouldn't be happening. Something is wrong. This resonates with what Paul, an author of much of the New Testament, writes in the book of Romans:

We know that the *whole creation has been groaning* as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. **Romans 8:22**

Among Nations

From beauty contest finalists to athletes and politicians, almost everyone loves to say they want world peace. While it's a nice sentiment, we know the reality is far different. Peace has eluded every generation, and the current state of our world is no different. Whether it is tension between nuclear powers, the constant threat of terrorism, or the images we see of people struggling in war-torn countries, our world is not in a state of harmony.

Between People

Most people would admit our culture is on edge. Recent surveys show that people are angrier than ever.⁵ Relational tension is everywhere, whether it's an extended family gathering at Thanksgiving or the comments section on any number of social media posts. Each day, we expect to encounter others who are angry, bitter, and frustrated. And we know the feeling of not being understood, respected, or loved by others too.

In Me

Author Philip Yancey wrote, "As a rule, people find it easier to recognize the existence of evil—some dark force present in criminals and mass murderers—than the possibility of more subtle, personal sins lurking inside themselves."⁶ It's easy to point to breakdowns in our world. But being a good observer means we're willing to do a reality check on ourselves. When we do, perhaps we'll find what Paul discovered about himself.

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... *For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.* For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, *but it is sin living in me* that does it. So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me.

Romans 7:15, 18-21

Paul recognized a breakdown inside himself. He knew he had good desires, but he also saw how easily they shifted to something unhealthy, even evil. Have you ever noticed this in yourself? The way a desire for intimacy and connection, which is good, can all too quickly become lust or anger? Or how a desire to make a difference can, if we're not careful, become a source of pride or envy?

There is a lot of brokenness all around us... and inside of us. While it's not fun to think about, acknowledging when something's wrong is important. We shouldn't ignore it. When we see something that isn't right or is not fair, unjust, or wrong, we are essentially admitting the world is not working the way it should.

C.S. Lewis said, "A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line."⁷ Any time we say, "This isn't the way life should be," we are proclaiming there is a way the world should be that has been lost. Any time we say, "I'm not perfect," we admit there is such a thing as perfection, and we are not it. Paul had a word for the breakdown he saw in himself: *sin*. A sin is any failure to live into God's perfect design. He created things (and us) to thrive through him. When we fail to live and act according to that design, which we all do, everything falls apart. As we look at the world, we should see something is wrong. To appreciate the



Cues and Clues

A tree in the woods doesn't wonder how it got there. No red oak in your front yard worries about the meaning of life. Trees don't have the capacity to think about such things. But people do. Every culture we have on record has, at some point, wondered about the existence of God. Somehow, spirituality is deeply ingrained in our minds.

Have you ever wondered whether God exists? Some of us have doubts. Maybe we were taught he didn't exist or that God wasn't compatible with science. Or maybe when we needed him most, God didn't seem to show up, at least not in the way we hoped. For some of us, we grew up believing in God, but it's been a while since we thought about why we believe what we believe.

As we've seen in the last few days, our eyes, ears, and hearts can clue us into some important things about life. Our minds can, too. So, let's together consider these five compelling reasons that point to God's existence.

1. You Are Here

Somehow and in some way, you—along with the rest of the world—got here. How did that happen? Many scientists argue the universe began with the Big Bang, a singular event that initiated space, time, and everything that exists. Robert Jastrow, an astrophysicist, said,

The seed of everything that has happened in the universe was planted in that first instant; every star, every planet, and every living creature in the universe came into being as a result of events that were set in motion in the moment of the cosmic explosion... The universe flashed into being, and *we cannot find out what caused that to happen.*⁹

Even though he believes in the Big Bang theory, Jastrow admits he doesn't have an answer for what set off the bang. Every effect has a cause. If you want to impress your friends, tell them this is the cosmological argument for God, which says that there must be something that caused everything to come into existence.

2. The Thumb Test

Sir Issac Newton said, "In the absence of any other proof, the thumb alone would convince me of God's existence."¹⁰ Newton looked at his world (including his thumb) and concluded it was too detailed, complex, and intricately designed to have come about by accident.

The thumb isn't our only clue. You could also call this the Eye Exam. Did you know the eye can distinguish among seven million colors and has automatic focusing? Or you could call this the Earth Evaluation. The size, shape, tilt, and location of the Earth in our solar system perfectly aligns to make life possible. How could all of this exist by mere chance?

3. Law and Order

The universe is a rule-follower. Ask any scientist. Dr. Paul Davies, who wrote an article in *The New York Times* called, "Taking Science on Faith," observed, "All science proceeds on the assumption that nature is ordered in a rational and intelligible way. You couldn't be a scientist if you thought the universe was a meaningless jumble of odds and ends haphazardly."¹¹

Every morning when you get out of bed, gravity will be there to keep you from floating away. Every night when you go to sleep, you can rest knowing the earth will keep spinning in the same way it always has around the sun. How is it possible the universe is so orderly? Was it made that way?

4. Right and Wrong

A sense of morality has been ingrained in all of us. Every culture throughout history has had some form of law that dictates good and bad behavior. To be sure, some of these behaviors differ. However, there is also a remarkable amount of similarity too. Almost everyone sees murder, greed, lying, and stealing as immoral. How do we account for this? Is it possible there is a lawgiver that exists outside of any one culture or time period?

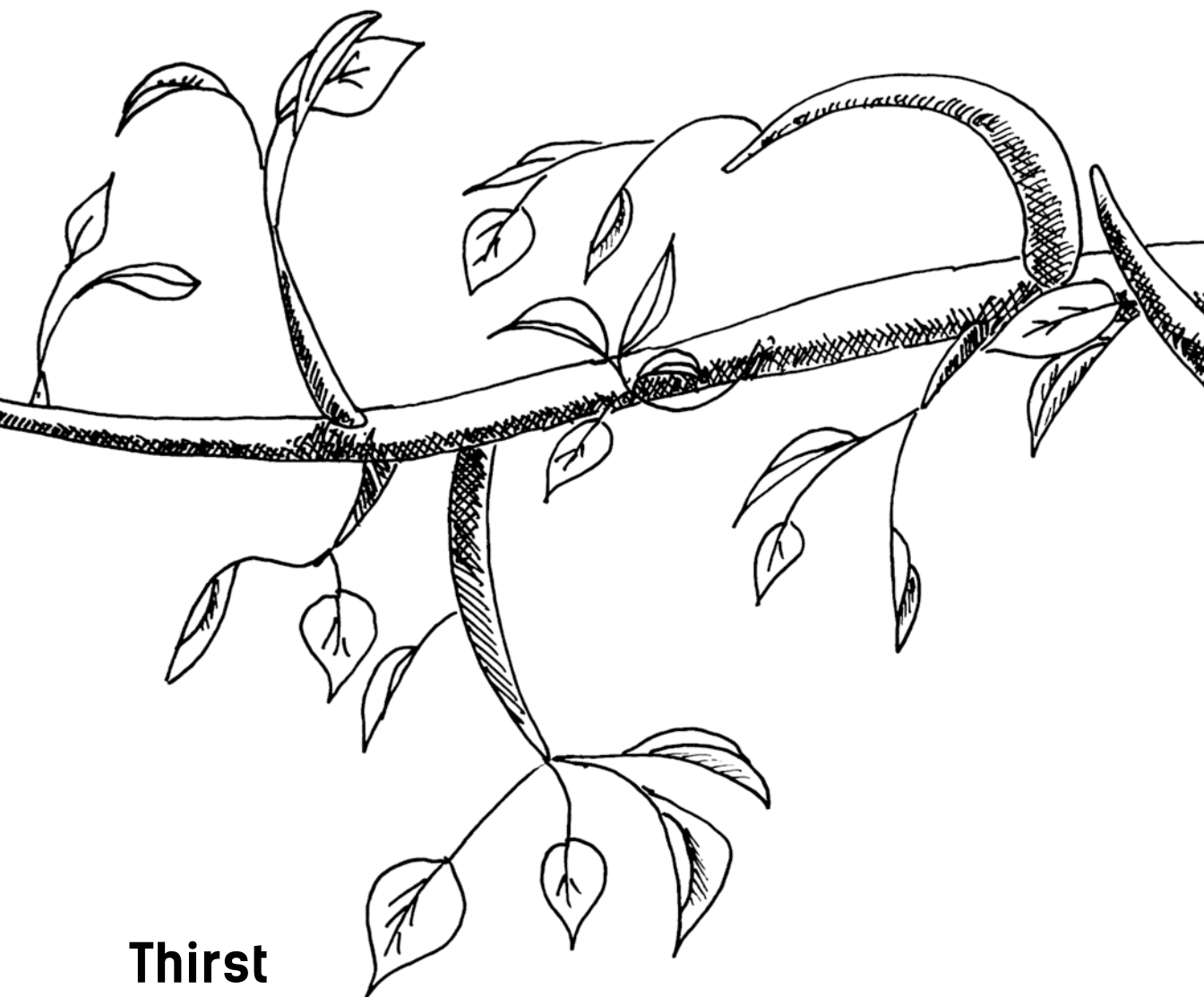
5. Purpose and Value

If God doesn't exist, it would be hard to say a human has more value than a rock or a tree. But almost all of us feel differently about human value. We would say people are more than just a combination of cells and molecules. Humans have immense value, and we cringe when anyone is denied dignity and justice. Where do those feelings come from? What bestowed this value?

While none of these five cues and clues completely answer all our questions, at the very least they should intrigue us. As Paul said,

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—*have clearly been seen, being understood from what has been made*, so that people are without excuse. **Romans 1:20**





Thirst

In the busyness of life, it can be hard to slow down, ask the big questions of life, and let our souls long for something more. That's what today is all about. Take a moment to read the quotes below. As you do, reflect on what your soul is thirsting for today. And, consider coloring or shading the drawing as a way to slow down and meditate on God.

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet
with God? **Psalm 42:1-2**

Give me one who yearns; give me one who is hungry; give me one far
away in this desert, who is thirsty and sighs for the spring of the eternal
country. Give me that sort of man; he knows what I mean. But if I speak
to a cold man, he just does not know what I am talking about.

Augustine of Hippo



Color me...
you know you
want to!



Something More

Core Concepts

Our eyes, ears, hearts, and minds can clue us into some big truths about life and God. There are cues and clues everywhere. However, to see them, we need to slow down and be great observers.

These cues and clues won't answer all our questions. But they should compel us to seek out and thirst for something more.

Root Words

General Revelation: Truths that can be known about God through nature, human reasoning, philosophy, and even history. As one theologian said, it is “the revelation of God to all people at all times, and in all places that proves God exists and that he is intelligent, powerful, and transcendent.”¹²

Sin: A failure to live into God's perfect design. He created things (and us) to thrive through him. When we fail to live and act according to that design, we sin.

Group Gathering

Getting Started

- What's the most inspiring place you've ever visited? Was it a particular city, a place in the mountains, an island vacation, or someplace else? What made it so inspiring?
- Take a moment to flip through last week's readings. What ideas or days did you find most compelling? Is there anything you want to make sure we talk about?
- Day 2 asked us to think through our “favorites.” Share one or two things that made your list. Why do these things resonate so deeply with you?

Discuss Together

This week, we went through several “cues and clues” that point us to something more. In fact, the Bible talks about a few. Read the following passages together: **Psalm 19:1-4**, **Ecclesiastes 3:10-11**, and **Romans 1:20** and **8:22**.

- According to these passages, in what ways has God always revealed himself to all people? Can you personally identify with any of these passages?
- If God is constantly revealing himself and there are cues and clues pointing us to him, why is it hard to see him sometimes?
- This week, we thought about how the world is broken. Is there something in the world that particularly breaks your heart? What is it and why?
- If someone asked you to explain why you do or don't believe in God, what would you say?

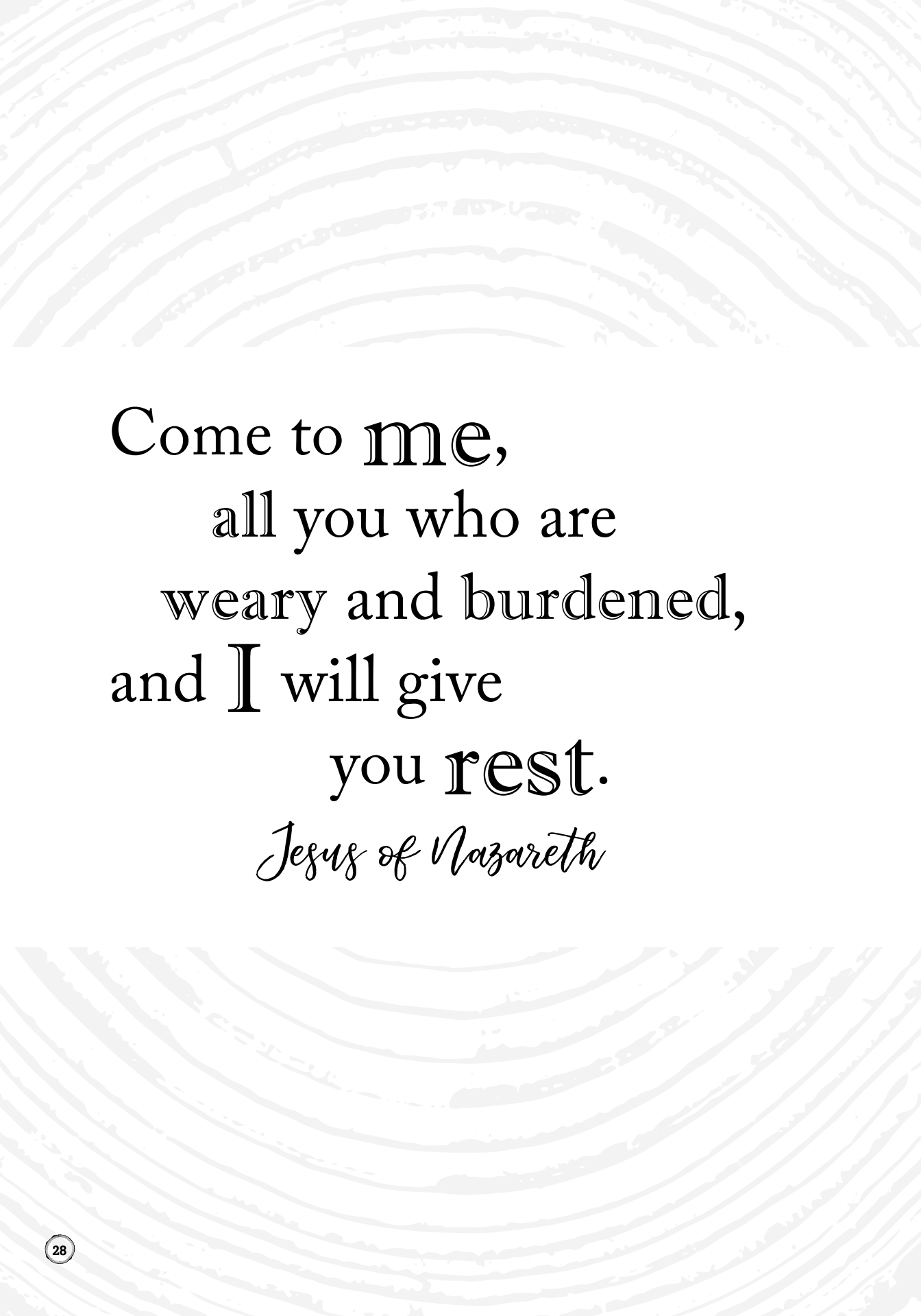
Read together **Psalm 42:1-2**.

- What does it mean to thirst for God?
- Is there a particular place you are thirsting for God today? Are you hoping for clarity about him or comfort from him in a specific way?

Look Ahead

God loves thirsty people. And he offers to meet us and help us learn more about him if we're open to it. Next week, we'll get the chance to look at how God revealed himself in big ways to a group of ordinary people. Two thousand years ago, a strange and compelling rabbi named Jesus showed up on the scene, and the world was never the same.

- Ask someone to read the introduction to Week 3, found on page 29.
- Close in prayer. Ask God to open your eyes, ears, hearts, and minds to know more of him.



Come to me,
all you who are
weary and burdened,
and I will give
you rest.

Jesus of Nazareth



WEEK 3

Someone More

Everyone seems to have an opinion about Jesus. Major world religions talk about him. Politicians believe they would win his vote. Statues and artists' images of him are everywhere, and references to his sayings and life stories fill our language and culture. Clearly, his life has made a huge impact on our world.

While Jesus is history's most familiar figure, he can also be one of its most puzzling. N.T. Wright said, "[Jesus] is so unlike what we know about anybody else that we are forced to ask, as people evidently did at the time: who, then, is this? Who does he think he is, and who is he in fact?"¹³

From his youth to the day he died, Jesus amazed, astonished, and angered people. He was never boring. Ordinary people like us were drawn to him, and he would do things that would make people say to their friends, "You have to come see this guy!" And they did.

This week, let's come and see Jesus with fresh eyes. We'll discover how Jesus offered to quench thirsty souls and answer life's biggest questions. Each day, we'll look at a characteristic of Jesus as we together ask, "Who is this man?"

Inviting

When Jesus began his ministry two thousand years ago, the people who came to see him repeatedly called him by one title: “rabbi,” or “Jewish teacher.” So, as we look at Jesus with fresh eyes, the first thing we can say is that he was a rabbi.

In Jesus’ day, becoming a rabbi was an exclusive and difficult process. Higher education was reserved for a few select boys. Only the best of the best—those who had shown promise through years of rigorous training—could continue their studies past the age of fifteen. Aspiring students also needed a personal invitation from a rabbi to become a *disciple* (a devoted follower, student, or apprentice). If a rabbi liked a candidate and determined he met all the requirements, the rabbi would extend this special invitation by saying, “Come, follow me.”

Jesus operated very differently than other rabbis. He invited people to follow him, but the ones who received his invitation were surprisingly different from the typical list. Read the passages below. As you do, underline or circle words or phrases that describe the types of people who followed this unique rabbi.

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” At once they left their nets and followed him. **Matthew 4:18-20**

As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “Follow me,” Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. **Mark 2:14-16**

After this, Jesus traveled around from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod’s household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means. **Luke 8:1-4**

Then he said to them all: “Whoever wants to be *my disciple* must deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me.” **Luke 9:23**

Below, consider the different types of people who followed Jesus.

Fishermen: Many of Jesus' first followers were fisherman, tradesman who would not have been highly educated. They would have been passed over by rabbis long ago and moved on to continue the family business of fishing. They were hard workers, but their resumes wouldn't have impressed any respected rabbi in that culture.

Women: In that culture, women didn't travel with men, let alone learn from them. But Jesus was different. He respected, honored, and welcomed the opinions of women. As John Ortberg pointed out, "Women were [even] paying the bills—including, you may have noticed, a woman named Joanna, whose husband worked for Herod. The Herod who was trying to kill Jesus."¹⁴ Women weren't bystanders to the movement of Jesus; they were key contributors.

Tax Collectors: At the time of Jesus, Israel was under Roman occupation. Roman governors chose Jewish men to collect taxes from their community. So, in the eyes of Jews at the time, another way to describe a tax collector was "traitor." Not only would tax collectors never have been chosen to be disciples, they were also hated by most everyone.

Sinners: This was a "catch-all" category used by religious leaders of the day to describe people who were not good at being good. Some were too poor, ignorant, or busy to live up to the rules of the religious authorities. Others were serious criminals. These were people from the wrong part of town (or trees from the bad neck of the woods), and they loved being around Jesus.

Anyone: If his invitation wasn't open enough, Jesus cast the net even further. He said *whoever* wanted to come and follow him could do so. And when Jesus said "anyone," he meant it. One of many examples is found in John 4 as Jesus interacted with a Samaritan woman at a town well. The whole encounter was highly unusual, even scandalous, given that Jewish people and Samaritans didn't get along. As we learn from the story, this woman had a past full of mistakes. Jesus not only spent time with her, but he also extended this invitation:

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

John 4:13-14

Jesus offered an invitation to any thirsty soul to follow him and discover eternal refreshment. A person's past behavior or present standing made no difference. He built the most inclusive movement ever; anyone and everyone could come follow him, no matter what their resume. He extends the same invitation to us, too.

Accepting the invitation isn't without risk, however. The fishermen gave up their nets. Levi left his tax collector booth. The women who supported the ministry sacrificed financially. They had to leave their comfort zones to pursue something more. We have to step out in faith, too.

Reflection

Have you ever felt excluded? Where and in what way?

Picture you were alive two thousand years ago and Jesus came up to you and said, "Come, follow me." How do you think you would have responded? What would have intrigued you? What would have kept you from going?

Astonishing

When the disciples began following Jesus, they knew he was a gifted teacher. But it didn't take long for them to realize he was more than just a rabbi. They started seeing things—strange and incredible things—that made them ask, “Did he just do that?” and “Okay, seriously, who is this guy?”

Below are three passages from the book of Mark. As you read, imagine you were there when these events happened. (Some of us may doubt whether they actually happened or if they're just good stories. If that's you, don't worry, we'll revisit that question next week. But for today, assume they're historical.) Picture yourself there, and reflect on each passage by asking three questions:

- **What did he do?** (What was the astonishing thing Jesus did? Get specific.)
- **How would I have reacted?** (What emotions would you have felt?)
- **Who is this guy?** (What would you honestly have thought about Jesus in that moment?)

Some men came, bringing to him [Jesus] a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the person was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Now some of the teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, “Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” Immediately, Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, “Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk?’ But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” So he said to the man, “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!” **Mark 2:3-12**

What did he do? How would I have reacted? Who is this guy?

That day when evening came, he [Jesus] said to his disciples, “Let us go over to the other side [of the lake].” Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on the cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” They were terrified and asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” **Mark 4:35-41**

What did he do? How would I have reacted? Who is this guy?

While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. “Your daughter is dead,” they said. “Why bother the teacher anymore?” Overhearing what they said, Jesus told him, “Don’t be afraid; just believe.” He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James, and John the brother of James. When they came to the house of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, “Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep.” But they laughed at him. After he put them all out, he took the child’s father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, “Talitha koum!” (which means, “Little girl, I say to you, get up!”). Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. **Mark 5:35-42**

What did he do? How would I have reacted? Who is this guy?



Life-Giving

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have *life*, and have it to the *full*.” **John 10:10**

Jesus was an itinerant preacher. He went from town to town, teaching about what God is like, what it means to love well, and how to find and live a fulfilling life. He surprised and amazed his audiences because what he taught was so counterintuitive, undermining the prevailing wisdom of the day... and our day too. Rich Villodas, an author and pastor, observed, “What the world prizes, Jesus devalues, and what Jesus applauds, the world rejects.”¹⁵

Nowhere is this clearer than in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. He didn’t give this message only one time; think of it more like history’s greatest TED talk that he’d give wherever he went. It was his main teaching, and in it, he, “invites us into a whole new way of seeing, hearing, and being.”¹⁶ Jesus taught that finding life that is really life requires significant re-orienting and re-ordering in two big ways.

Inside Out

Back in Jesus’ day, it wouldn’t have been difficult to spot a religious leader. A first-century Pharisee (a God-fearing, law-abiding, deeply committed Jew), would have stood out in any crowd. They wore robes with long tassels to show their religious devotion. They took the command to keep God’s Word “top of mind” literally, strapping verses and prayers to their arms and foreheads. They’d stop frequently to pray loud and extravagant prayers. If any of us lived back then and saw a Pharisee, we’d be impressed. But Jesus wasn’t.

“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites [the Pharisees], for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your father, *who sees what is done in secret*, will reward you. **Matthew 6:5-6**

It’s not that Jesus was against praying in front of other people; there are times he prayed in public. Jesus’ point was that God isn’t impressed with external displays of piety; he’s more concerned about the heart. That’s why he spoke so harshly about the way many Pharisees lived.

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you *hypocrites!* You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside

are full of bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous, but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.” **Matthew 23:27-28**

The Pharisees were trying to look good on the outside when, in reality, they were a mess on the inside. It’s easy to equate religion with external activity—things like doing the right things, not saying the wrong things, and actively attending church. But according to Jesus, none of that goes deep enough.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her *in his heart*.” **Matthew 5:27-28**

Jesus taught that sin goes way deeper than we think. It’s more than a bad habit or rule-breaking. We have a heart issue. Sin has impacted us deep in our core, and it’s not easily rooted out. Finding life that is really life means going *inside out*. Instead of focusing on how we appear on the outside, we invite God to transform every part of us, including our innermost desires and deepest motivations.

Upside Down

We use the words “bless” and “blessed” a lot. If someone sneezes, we might say, “Bless you.” When our circumstances turn out well—maybe we get a promotion or a raise, or we find a new romantic partner—we might say, “I’m so blessed.”

But Jesus flipped the idea of blessing upside down. At the start of his sermon in **Matthew 5**, Jesus gave seven statements (often called the Beatitudes) that begin with the phrase, “Blessed are you if...” And here’s who he said was blessed: the persecuted, the mourners, the poor, and the suffering. They’re the exact opposite of who we picture as blessed.

The New Testament was originally written in Greek. The Greek word Jesus used for “blessed” is *makarios*, a much richer word than its English translation. *Makarios* means having a deep sense of satisfaction and contentment that extends beyond great circumstances or good fortune. Jesus wants us to experience a *makarios* life, but the way it is found is surprising.

“Blessed are the *poor in spirit*, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
Matthew 5:3

According to Jesus, blessed people are those who are desperate and in need. They are fully aware that they are lacking and bring nothing to the table. In Jesus’ upside-down way of thinking, the screw-ups and sinners are the ones who will be most open

to God's blessing and the *makarios* life... because they long for God's grace. As for impressive people who think they are spiritually superior? They miss out.

Real spirituality begins with the realization that when we come to Jesus, we have nothing but desperation for him. All of us need God's grace. None of us are good enough; nobody has arrived. We are all poor in spirit, no matter what power, position, or prestige we may have. In fact, in light of this, we're called to live in an upside-down way.

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles [non-Jewish people] lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. *Not so with you.* Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." **Matthew 20:25-28**

Most of the world operates "top down," but not Jesus. His way is "bottom up," where we use whatever power we have to sacrificially serve those with less influence. That's what Jesus did with us when he went to the cross to die for our sins. And he calls us to live the same way—with radical, sacrificial love.

Jesus taught that the way to find life is a counter-intuitive one. We all long for fulfillment and contentment, and yet so few of us seem to find it. Jesus isn't surprised by that, since most people are going about it all wrong. He re-orient us to think inside out and upside down.

Reflection

On a scale of 1-10, how fulfilling does life feel to you at the moment? Why?

How do you think Jesus would invite you to re-orient and re-order? Why?

Controversial

Jesus often found himself in hot water. One time, he said something that almost got him killed right then and there. Jesus was teaching to the crowds, and a Pharisee asked him, “Who do you think you are?” Here was Jesus’ response:

“Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.” “You are not yet fifty years old,” they said to him [Jesus], “and you have seen Abraham!” “Very truly I tell you,” answered Jesus, “before Abraham was born, *I am!*” At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.

John 8:56-59

Why did they respond so violently? It was because Jesus said, “I am.” In the Old Testament, God sent a man named Moses to free his people, the Israelites, from captivity in Egypt. Moses asked who he should say sent him. Here is how God responded:

“*I am* who *I am*. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘*I am* has sent me to you.’” **Exodus 3:14**

When Jesus called himself “I am,” he was declaring he was the eternal God incarnate—in other words, God in a “bod.” It was so controversial that his listeners picked up stones to kill him for blasphemy (which was claiming to be God).

Jesus’ declaration is controversial today, too. Nowadays, it’s common to say all religions are essentially the same. However, no other founder of a major religion talked the way Jesus did or made the claims he made. Consider just a few quick comparisons:

Lao-Tzu (Taoism)

The founder of Taoism, an ancient Chinese philosophy, declared, “I alone am empty. Ignorant man am I, O so ignorant! I am dull! I alone am confused, so confused.”¹⁷

Jesus said,

“*I am* the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” **John 6:35**

“*I am* the true vine.” **John 15:1**

Guru Nanak (Sikhism)

Sikhism founder Guru Nanak once said, “I have become perplexed in my search... in darkness, I find no way. Devoted to pride, I weep in sorrow. How shall deliverance be obtained?”¹⁸

Jesus said:

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” **John 8:12**

Confucius (Confucianism)

Confucius stated, “As to being a Divine Sage or even a Good Man, far be it from me to make any such claim.”¹⁹

Jesus said:

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” **John 10:11**

The Buddha (Buddhism)

Although many Buddhists consider the Buddha divine, the founder of Buddhism never claimed to be God or that he had the ability to save people. Instead, Siddhartha Gautama pointed them to a set of works—the Noble Eightfold Path—as a means of salvation. He also said, “You disciples, do not affirm that the Lord Buddha reflects thus within himself, ‘I bring salvation to every living being.’ Subhuti entertain no such delusive thoughts! Because in reality there are no living beings to whom the Lord Buddha can bring salvation.”²⁰

Jesus said:

“I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.” **John 10:9**

Muhammad (Islam)

The founder of Islam confessed to being only a man and instead pointed people to Allah. According to the Koran, Muhammad said, “Surely I am no more than a human apostle,” and that he was “naught but a messenger.”²¹

Jesus said:

“I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die.” **John 11:25**

“*I am* the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” **John 14:6**

Jesus did not claim to show people one of many paths to salvation or a better life. He claimed that he himself is salvation. Every other religion is based on works and human effort. Jesus based his movement on himself—his life, his character, and the fact he would die on the cross and rise again from the dead. Jesus made absolute statements about himself that left no wiggle room for other interpretation.

As C.S. Lewis famously said,

I am trying to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about him: “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God.” This is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.²²

Reflection

Do you believe there is only one way to God? Why or why not?

What do you think about Jesus’ claim to be God?

Confusing

Have you ever gotten lost? In an age of smartphones with map apps and GPS, it's not as common. But if we suddenly find ourselves off the grid (or our phone battery dies), it's easy to get disoriented if we don't know our surroundings.

Our faith journey can be disorienting, too. Following Jesus will often bring us through significant moments of questioning or doubt. It can feel like something is wrong with us, or that we're the only one who isn't sure what we believe. And yet, almost all of Jesus' first followers wrestled with doubt.

Throughout this week, we've journeyed with the disciples as they followed Jesus. They saw him do miraculous things and teach with authority. Many of them had come to believe Jesus was someone more—the Chosen One, the promised Messiah, the Son of God. So imagine how confusing it must have been when their friend, teacher, and Savior was arrested and then, killed. It would have been earth-shattering and completely disorienting.

After the crucifixion, the disciples scattered. At that time, they didn't know what we do now: that Jesus wouldn't stay dead. No one was sitting at the tomb with a countdown clock, waiting for Jesus to rise (even though Jesus had said he would). It wouldn't make sense to them until later.

We often think faith and doubt are polar opposites from each other, but that's not true. You can have both at the same time. In fact, doubts can be helpful to faith. Writer Alice Morris said, "Doubts allow us to dig deeper into our faith. They unearth concepts, ideas, and questions about the very thing we believe in. If we approach doubts the right way, we can actually learn more about God than we perhaps realize."²³

God isn't afraid of our doubts. He meets us in them. Consider this moment that happened shortly after the Resurrection when Jesus suddenly appeared to the disciples.

They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." **Luke 24:37-39**

Someone More

Core Concepts

As we took a fresh look at Jesus this week, we saw that he was inviting, astonishing, life-giving, controversial, and confusing.

Jesus' invitation to become his disciple is for anyone and everyone. But following him requires stepping out of our comfort zones.

Jesus was a great man and teacher; however, it became clear to his first followers that Jesus was more than a man. He taught with authority, performed miracles, told people their sins were forgiven, and even claimed to be God in the flesh.

Root Words

Disciple: A devoted follower, student, pupil, and apprentice. A disciple of Jesus is someone who has decided to let Jesus re-order and re-orient their entire lives around his radical love.

Group Gathering

Getting Started

- Can you think of a time when you had a first impression of someone, but the person turned out to be different than you initially thought? Share with the group.
- When did you first hear about Jesus? Has your impression of him changed over time? How?
- Take a moment to flip through your book and look over last week's readings. What ideas or days did you find most compelling?

Discuss Together

- Jesus taught that we need to re-orient and re-order our lives to find fulfillment (Day 8). Why do you think so many people today struggle to find contentment and fulfillment? On a scale of 1-10, how fulfilling does life feel to you right now? Why?

This week, we took time to “come and see” Jesus with fresh eyes. While Jesus is history’s most familiar figure, he can also be puzzling. N.T. Wright said, “[Jesus] is so unlike what we know about anybody else that we are forced to ask, as people evidently did at the time: who, then, is this? Who does he think he is, and who is he in fact?” Re-read some of the passages covered this week: **Mark 4:35-41**, **Mark 5:35-42**, **John 8:56-59**, and **John 14:6**.

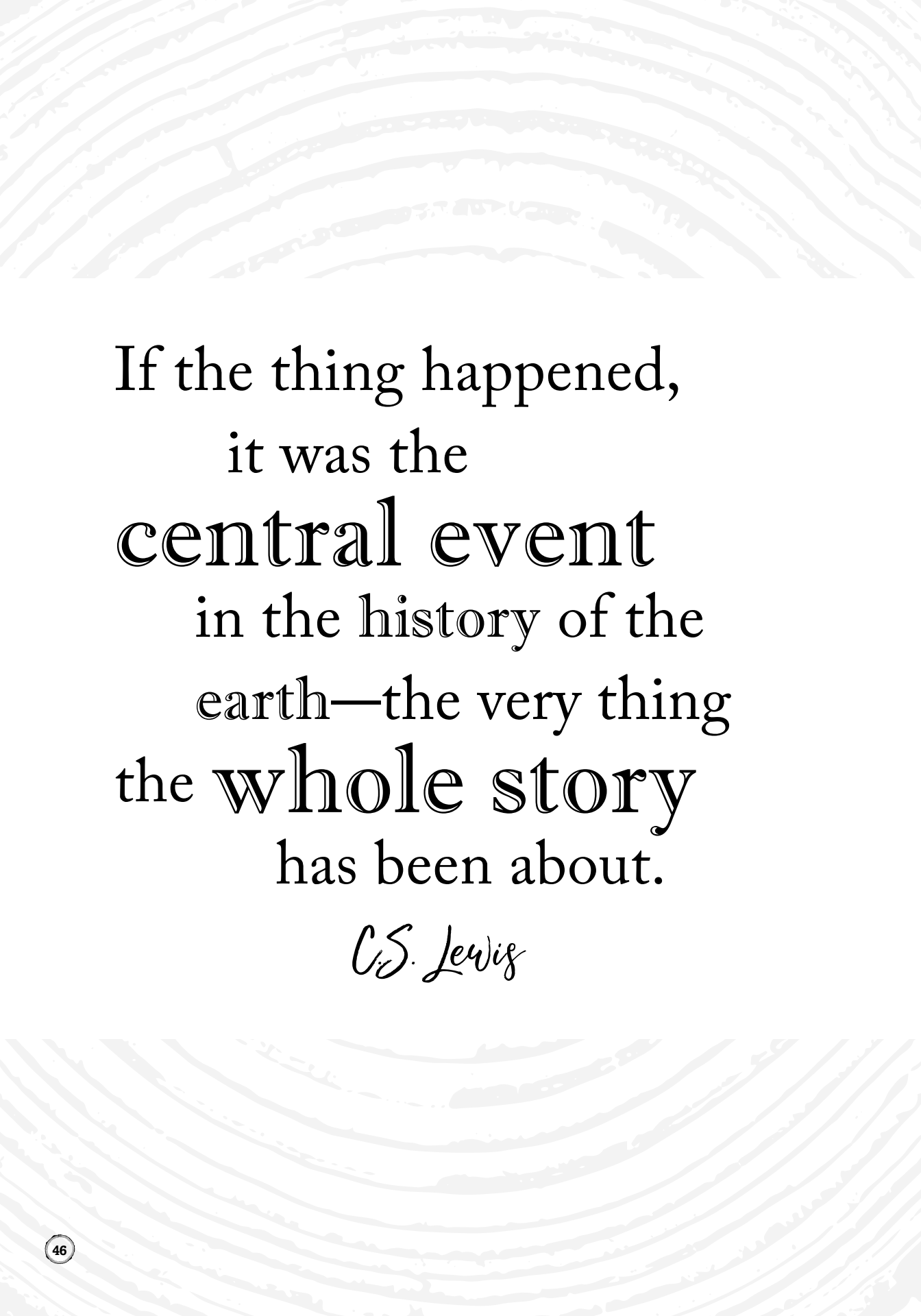
- Summarize what Jesus did or said in each passage. How would you have responded if you were there to witness what he did or said?
- Jesus claimed to be the only way to God. Do you believe there is only one way to God? Do you believe truth is absolute? If someone asked you to explain your view, what would you say?
- This week we read about faith and doubt (Day 10). If you are comfortable sharing, what is confusing to you right now in your faith journey?
- Have you ever had a doubt get resolved with time, a fresh perspective, or a helpful conversation? Has doubt ever helped your faith?

Look Ahead

The reality of the Resurrection caused a lot of commotion. It began a whole movement that changed the course of history... and transformed the course of many peoples’ stories.

Next week will guide us through thinking about our own stories, emphasizing some of the key moments in our lives. At some point during *Established*, each of us will take 10 minutes to share an overview of our own story. Please know that no one will be forced to share anything they don’t want to; however, also know this group is meant to be a safe place. The more honest and authentic we are, the deeper connection we’ll have and the bigger our potential to see God at work in one another. Since leaders lead, the group leader will share first. Then we’ll scatter opportunities to share stories throughout the rest of *Established*.

- Ask someone to read the introduction to Week 4, found on page 47.
- Close in prayer. Ask God to open your eyes, ears, hearts, and minds to know more of him.



If the thing happened,
it was the
central event
in the history of the
earth—the very thing
the **whole story**
has been about.

C.S. Lewis



WEEK 4

From the Ground Up

The crucifixion of Jesus should have been the end. Instead, it marked a new beginning—one that sprouted a movement which altered the course of history forever. What grew and spread after that event wasn't simply news of Jesus' great teachings. People claimed to have seen and experienced something both earth-shattering and life-changing.

The life and death of this controversial rabbi from two thousand years ago still impacts us today. There's a reason we're meeting to read and talk about him. His story not only changed history, but it has the power to transform our own stories, too.

Impact Event

When Jesus was crucified, the disciples scattered. Their rabbi, friend, and Savior had been brutally killed. His death must have caused them to question whether Jesus really was all he claimed to be. The cross should have crushed this upstart movement.

But then, *something* happened. A short while later, these disillusioned and fearful followers re-emerged with newfound confidence to make a stunning declaration.

“The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. *You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this.*” **Acts 3:13-15**

In no uncertain terms, they claimed that Jesus was no longer dead—the tomb was empty, he had come back to life and appeared to them, and everyone needed to repent and place their faith in him. Talk about bold!

As you can imagine, these claims sparked a lot of intrigue, debate, and skepticism. A second-century Greek philosopher named Celsus declared, “The appearances of Jesus after his death, as narrated in the four Gospels, were dreams, tall tales or hallucinations—the products of fancy, ambition, or wishful thinking.”²⁴

He wasn’t the only one who doubted. Today, it’s common to see television specials or investigative reports pop up around Easter or Christmas and promise to debunk Jesus’ resurrection. Doubts are understandable: resurrection, or coming back to life after death, runs counter to our experience. We expect dead bodies to stay dead. It’s no wonder so many people question whether the accounts of Jesus are meant to be read as actual, historical fact.

Does it matter if the *Resurrection* really happened? The followers of Jesus made it clear how important it is.

And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead... If Christ has not been raised, *your faith is futile*; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.
1 Corinthians 15:14-15, 17-19

Many of these early followers died for their claim that Jesus was alive again. The Bible says King Herod had James put to death (**Acts 12:2**). Church tradition says Peter was crucified upside down, because he didn't want to be killed in the same way as his Lord, Jesus. All of the first disciples faced prison, beatings, and social scorn because of their insistence that Jesus had risen from the dead. Unlike other religious martyrs who were killed for their *beliefs*, the disciples suffered because of what they claimed to have *seen*. If the Resurrection didn't happen, why would they have died for a lie?

Author Frank Turek observes:

Remember, the apostles were Jews who thought they were God's chosen people. They had no motives to make up a new religion, especially one that would get them excommunicated from the synagogue and then beaten, tortured, and killed! Yet suddenly these pious Jews abandon their long-held beliefs and adopt new ones that would only cause them excruciating treatment here on earth. Why would they do that? The best explanation is they experienced an "impact" event—an event so powerful and dramatic, that it transformed scared, scattered, skeptical Jews into bold Christians who, in turn, became the most effective peaceful missionary force in the history of the world. The impact event was that Jesus actually rose from the dead just as he predicted.²⁵

The Resurrection changes everything for us, too. Tim Keller puts it this way:

If Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all he said; if he didn't rise from the dead, then why worry about any of what he said? The issue on which everything hangs is not whether or not you like his teaching but whether or not he rose from the dead.²⁶

Reflection

If you witnessed a person who was dead come alive, how would you react? If you had seen Jesus rise from the dead two thousand years ago, what would you have done?

What gives you confidence that Jesus rose from the dead? What questions do you have?

Based on a True Story

Thanks to AI, it can be hard to know what's real anymore. Social media doesn't help. Fake stories spread all the time, making it hard to know what to believe and what to dismiss. No one wants to find out that a story they've bought into is a tall tale—or worse, an outright lie.

What about with Jesus? If we're going to let the stories and events involving him impact our own lives, we want to know they're anchored in the truth. Some scholars allege that these stories distort reality because the writers of the Gospels purposefully sought to turn Jesus from “merely a wise teacher into the mythological Son of God.”²⁷ If that hypothesis is true, it changes everything.

Here are three great reasons we can be confident that the accounts we have about Jesus are historically accurate.

1. The Authors' Intent

The Gospel writers made it clear they wanted to accurately portray what happened. They didn't set out to write mythology. For example, Luke clearly described his purpose from the outset:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have *carefully investigated* everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an *orderly account* for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. **Luke 1:1-4**

Luke claimed to be writing history—a careful account he had meticulously investigated himself. He did this because he wanted his readers to have confidence and certainty that these things really did happen.

2. The “Born On” Date

Legends take time to develop. Stories passed down from generation to generation can certainly be embellished over time. But the accounts of Jesus are different. We have good reason to believe the stories about him, along with much, if not all, the New Testament, were written within about forty to fifty years of Jesus' life.

New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg said,

The standard scholarly dating, even in liberal circles, is Mark in the 70s [AD], Matthew and Luke in the 80s, John in the 90s... Consequently, these late dates aren't all that late. The two earliest biographies of Alexander the Great were written... more than four hundred years after Alexander's death in 323 BC, yet historians consider them trustworthy.²⁸

With that in mind, there's good reason to think the stories about Jesus were written even earlier. In 70 AD, a devastating event happened in Jerusalem: the destruction of the temple by the Roman Empire. No New Testament writer mentioned this catastrophic event, which would be surprising unless it hadn't happened yet. It's reasonable to conclude these writings came before then and well within the lifetimes of those who witnessed the events surrounding Jesus.

3. The Amount of Detail

The Gospels beg to be fact-checked. They include details that easily could have been debunked if they weren't true. Consider the following passages:

A certain man from Cyrene, *Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus*, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross. **Mark 15:21**

In the *fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar*—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphus, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. **Luke 3:1-2**

Why all the names? Since we can be confident these accounts were written within a few decades of Jesus' death, there's a good chance Simon, Alexander, and Rufus were still alive. Mark was basically saying, "Go ask them! See if they back this up!" Notice, too, how specific Luke gets in his account. There isn't any vague "once upon a time" language. The Gospels are written "in a sober and responsible fashion, with accurate incidental details, with obvious care and exactitude. You don't find the outlandish flourishes and blatant mythologizing that you see in a lot of other ancient writings."²⁹

On top of that, the Gospels include a lot of embarrassing details that make the disciples look downright bad. They are depicted as scared, slow to learn, and unimpressive. If the writers of the Gospels were just trying to gain power or create a great legend, they would have presented themselves in the best light possible. But that's not what we find in the New Testament.

Amazing Grace

“By instinct I feel I must do something in order to be accepted. *Grace* sounds a startling note of contradiction, of liberation, and every day I must pray anew for the ability to hear its message.” **Philip Yancey**

One of history’s biggest questions is how over two thousand years ago, a small group of insignificant people ignited a movement that is still thriving today. Empires have come and gone, including that of Rome, which carried out the Crucifixion. Yet the movement of Jesus is alive and well.

The message of this movement—of what Jesus accomplished through his death and resurrection—was (and is) revolutionary. It has continued to resonate and reverberate with people, no matter the generation or culture, ever since. How and why has the message behind the movement of Jesus endured? The answer is *grace*. The Bible puts it this way:

In the same way, the *gospel* is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God’s *grace*. **Colossians 1:6**

The word “gospel” literally means “good news.” To understand why the message of Jesus’ death and resurrection is good news for us, we need to wrap our minds around God’s grace, the unearned, unmerited favor he offers to each of us as a free gift.

Jesus + Nothing = Everything

We live in a world of constant pressure to measure up, earn our way, make the team, get the grades, or build a career. It’s all conditional: we need to do something good to get something good in return. If we’re performing poorly, we become insecure; if we’re performing well, it’s easy to be arrogant. This is especially true when it comes to our spirituality, where we feel pressure to perform well in order to earn God’s favor. It’s an exhausting way to live.

But Jesus offers a radically different way.

“Come to me, all you who are *weary and burdened*, and I will give you *rest*. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find *rest for your souls*. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” **Matthew 11:28-30**

Jesus came to restore us through a right relationship with God. He did all that it took to make this right relationship possible. Jesus, who was fully God, took on

human flesh, lived a sinless life, died on the Cross to take on the penalty for our sins (theologians call this **substitutionary atonement**), and rose to life from the dead. This is incredibly good news because, on our own, we're hopelessly stuck.

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, *made us alive* with Christ even when *we were dead in transgressions*... For it is by grace you have been saved, *through faith*—and this is not from yourselves, it is *the gift of God*—not by works so that no one can boast.

Ephesians 2:4-5, 8-9

Our relationship with God is not based on our performance, but on his grace. It's not about what we do but what he has done. It isn't about what we give but what he gave. It's Jesus + nothing = everything. Because of him, we are in with God. Through faith alone in what Christ has accomplished for us, we are permanently adopted into the family of God.

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called *children of God*! And that is what we are! **1 John 3:1**

Living by Grace

What this means is we don't need to clean up our lives before we approach God. We can't do that on our own. Instead, all we can do is to come as we are, confess we are hopeless on our own, and receive the free gift of God's grace, forgiveness, and redeeming presence in our lives. When we do that, we are placing our trust in Jesus and what he has done for us.

If you've never done that before, you don't have to wait. There's no ceremony to attend, class to pass, or ritual to perform. Simply receive the gift of what Jesus has done for you. A way to do that is to pray something like this:

“God, I need you. I am a sinner who falls short of who you created me to be. The only way I am able to come before you is because you sent Jesus to die for my sins. I place my trust in him alone. Thank you for giving me this incredible gift of salvation. Please help me on this journey and transform me through your grace. Amen.”

For those of us who have already taken that step, we need this reminder about grace, too. The Christian life is learning what it means to continually journey in grace.

Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh? **Galatians 3:2-3**

Understanding the Gospel is not a one-time thing. Every day we need to fight the desire to try to earn favor with God. We've been set free, and it's in this newfound freedom we learn to live by grace: loving others in the way Jesus has loved us. We do all of this from a place of acceptance, knowing that the chains of guilt and shame are gone. This frees us to obey God and serve him out of love.

Two thousand years ago, a small group of people spoke about and lived by God's revolutionary grace... and the world has never been the same since. It's a timeless message that has connected across completely different generations and cultures. Today is no different. In a culture defined by conditionality, people are thirsty for grace... and God is here, ready to give it in abundance.

ACTIVITY: God's grace is a free gift available to all of us. What do we do when we receive a gift? We say, "Thanks!" So, write a thank-you letter to God in the space provided.

Dear God,

The Start of My Story

Every tree has growth rings that radiate out from the core. You can see them on a cross section of a branch or trunk. There's a whole field of study related to studying these rings: dendrochronology. A tree's rings can tell us a lot. We can approximate the age of the tree. And we can find out about the past conditions it lived through—the width of each ring indicates whether it was an easy season to grow or one where nutrients were scarce.

The church has rings to its story, too. Church history began with the impact event of Jesus' resurrection. Since then, the movement has continued to grow, inspired by grace and powered by the Holy Spirit. Along the way, there have been seasons of incredible growth; there have also been times that were especially hard and unhealthy.

Historian John Dickson observed, "Jesus wrote a beautiful composition. Christians have not performed it consistently well. Sometimes they have been badly out of tune.... [but] Christ's melody remains beautiful—dare I say unique. And when Christians perform it, they leave an indelible mark on the world."³⁰

Seeing the whole story matters. When the church has gotten off track, Christians throughout history have called each other to re-tune and return to what Jesus called us to do from the very beginning. When Christians have gone through hard moments and persecution, remembering how God had worked in the past serves as a helpful reminder that he is still at work in the present.

The same is true with our own stories. God loves to use imperfect people like us to change the world. But to see how he's been at work, we have to take time to look. That's why a critical experience of *Established* is sharing our stories. All of it, the good and the hard, can remind us of how God's grace has shown up in our lives. And sharing our stories connects us deeply with one another.

Over the next two days, we'll guide you through a process to help you see a snapshot of your story. Tomorrow we'll look at some of the rings in our story—good seasons and the tough ones, too. But for today, let's start at the beginning and the core family dynamics in the home you grew up in.

Each of us enters into an environment we didn't choose. We didn't decide who we were born to, the state or country we grew up in, or the family history that came before us. But all of that deeply impacts our stories.

On pages 60-61, you will be building out your "**Tree Ring Story.**" At the top you'll see a place to share **where you grew up** and write down **three words that describe**

Wide and Narrow Rings

Life is full of ups and downs. Every tree you see has had times of great growth: seasons full of rain, sunshine, and great soil. It's also had to push through difficulty and less-than-ideal conditions, whether it was a drought, a strong storm, or something else. Growth doesn't happen evenly.

Our lives aren't straightforward, either. There are times where everything seems to click—we see God doing a lot and huge steps are taken. There are also seasons of struggle—things are stagnant, a major crisis happens, or we hit a big snag that causes us to take a step backward.

God is with us in all of it, even through difficulty. We may not see it in the moment, but when we look back with perspective, we often realize God was doing some of his biggest work in the narrowest of rings. Hard moments can be some of our clearest, most intimate experiences of God's strength and presence. It was for Paul, one of Jesus' first followers and author of many books in the New Testament.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this *all-surpassing power is from God* and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. **2 Corinthians 4:7-9**

He also observed how some things can only happen through hardship.

And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. **Romans 5:2-5**

As you fill out the rest of your **Tree Ring Story** on pages 60-61, take some time to think about wide and narrow rings in your life. A **wide ring is a highlight moment**, a key time where you saw God at work in a big way or something important happened that helped you take a big step forward. A **narrow ring is a hard moment** when you encountered something difficult, painful, or discouraging.

In the reflection below, you can privately journal through different wide and narrow rings in your life. Then, **select two wide rings and two narrow rings** to put in your Tree Ring Story on pages 60-61. Also, finish up this exercise by sharing **a person who has been most influential to you**—someone who has helped you journey well through life's ups and downs.

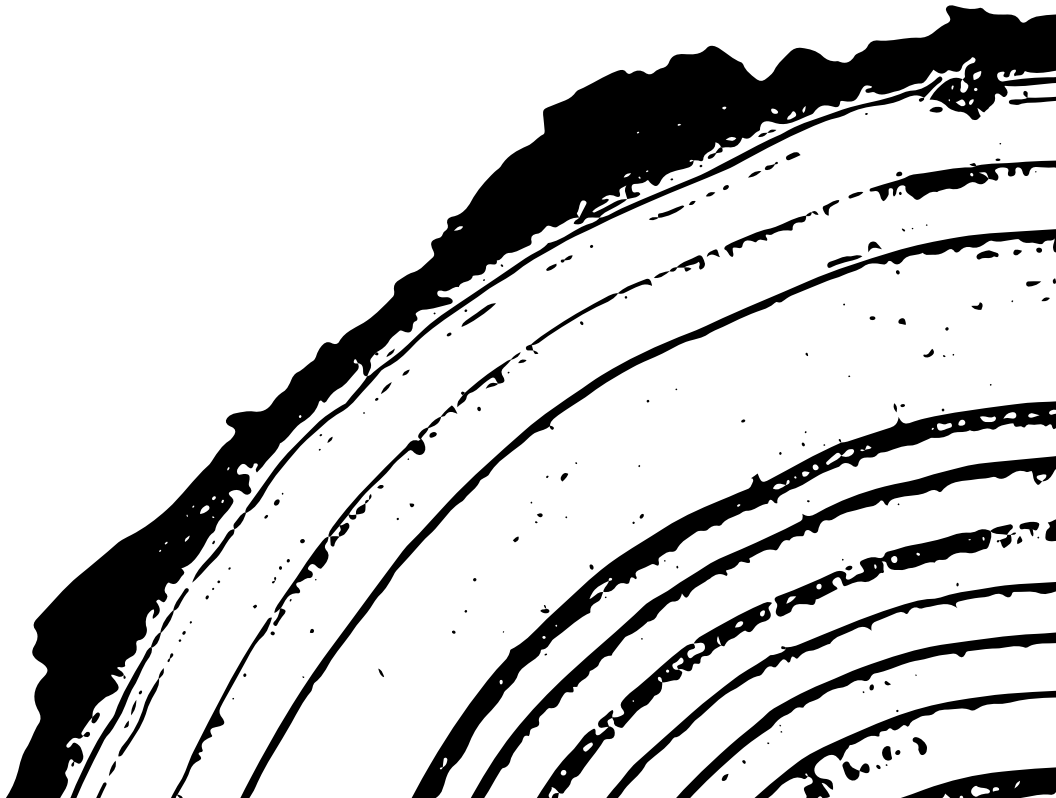
My Tree Ring Story

I grew up in _____ and **three words that describe my home growing up are:** _____, _____, and _____. I chose these words because...

Two of my **wide rings** (highlight moments where I took a big step forward) are:

1. _____

2. _____

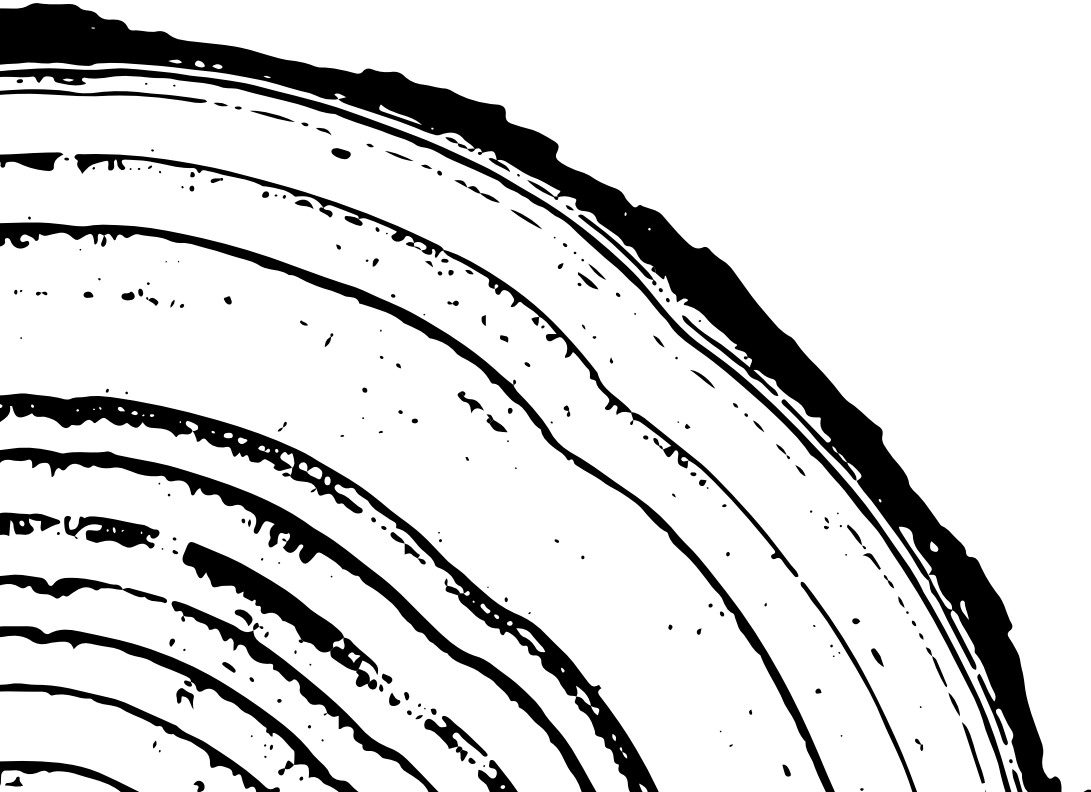


Two of my **narrow rings** (times of difficulty, pain, and discouragement) are:

1. _____

2. _____

The **person most influential** to me was _____, because...



From the Ground Up

Core Concepts

Christianity is grounded in an historical event: the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. If this didn't happen—if Jesus didn't rise from the dead—then, in the New Testament's words, "Our faith is futile."

There are good reasons to trust the accounts we have about Jesus. The authors intended to record history. And they begged to be fact-checked—they wrote early after the Resurrection and included details that could have easily been debunked.

The revolutionary message of Christianity is about grace. We cannot work our way towards God; instead, Jesus came to us, paid the penalty for our sin, and rose again from the dead so that we can have new life in him. All we do is receive this free gift of grace by trusting in Christ alone for the forgiveness of our sins.

Root Words

Resurrection: The act of physically rising from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus is the foundational event for Christianity—that Jesus actually died on the Cross for the sins of the world and physically rose from the dead to defeat sin and death.

Grace: Unmerited favor. God offers us salvation as a free gift. It is by grace we are saved, through faith, not by any work we do (**Ephesians 2:8-9**).

Gospel: The good news that Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead. As Timothy Keller said, "The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared to believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared to hope."³¹

Substitutionary Atonement: A theological concept that refers to Jesus dying as a substitute for our sin. The penalty of sin is death (**Romans 6:23**), and at the Cross, Jesus died for our sins in order to take the penalty we deserved.

Group Gathering

Getting Started

- What is your favorite fairy tale, legend, or story? Or, which one do you remember the most from your childhood?
- How confident are you that the Bible tells us about actual history? Has there been a time when your confidence in the Bible was shaken? Share with the group.
- Take a moment to flip through your book to look over last week's readings. What ideas or days did you find most compelling

Discuss Together

We all grew up with nice fairy tales and fables that taught us lessons on morality. It didn't matter if these stories were true as long, as they were helpful. Is the same true with Christianity and the Bible? Read together **1 Corinthians 15:17-19**.

- Tim Keller said, "If Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all he said; if he didn't rise from the dead, then why worry about any of what he said? The issue on which everything hangs is not whether or not you like his teaching but whether or not he rose from the dead." React to this statement. Do you agree or disagree, and why?

After Jesus' resurrection, a revolutionary message spread like a wildfire that the forgiveness of sins was possible and God offered a free gift of salvation to anyone who would receive it. Read **Ephesians 2:4-9**.

- Based on this passage, how would you describe the Gospel (the "good news" that Jesus came to bring)?
- What is grace? Can you think of a time where someone in your life showed you grace? How did that impact you?
- Why do you think the message of God's grace is so revolutionary? How does it run counter to the way our culture works?
- Have you received the free gift of salvation Jesus offers? If so, when did you take that step? If not, what is keeping you?

WEEK 4 IN REVIEW

This week, we took time to think through our own Tree Ring Stories. For the rest of *Established*, we'll have each of us share what we're comfortable sharing (you are completely in control of what you choose to include). We'll do a few each week. Today, the leader will go first.

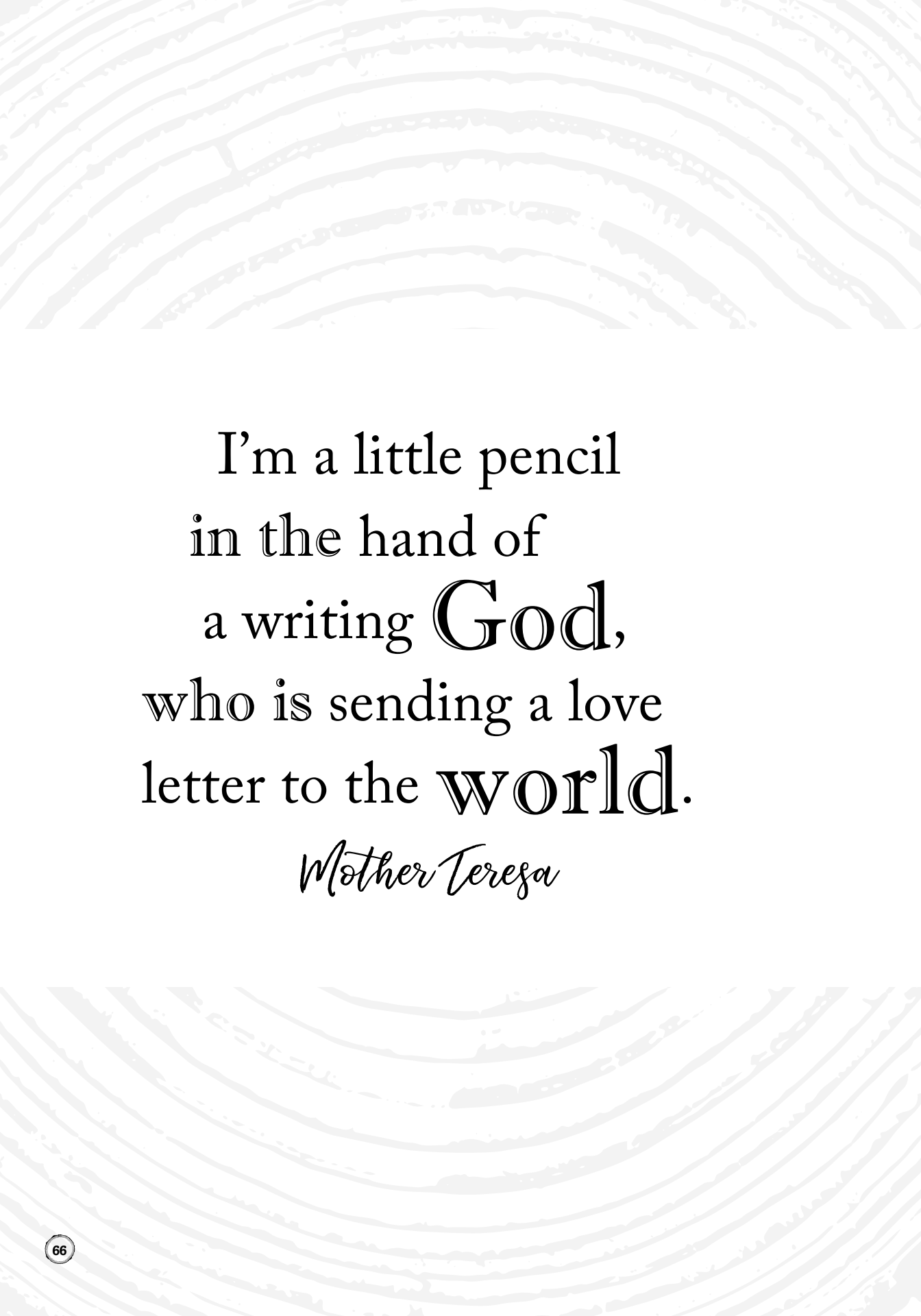
When you share your story, use the guide on pages 60-61. Stories should take ten minutes (the leader will use a timer to stay on track). As we share, let's remember that storytelling is a sacred process. Let's listen intently, value greatly, and encourage deeply every story shared. For many groups, this winds up being the most memorable part of *Established*. Thank you for sharing the start, ups, and downs from your life story.

- Have the leader share his or her Tree Ring Story first. If time permits, share one or two more.
- After someone shares, ask another group member to pray for that person, thanking God for his or her story.
- Make a schedule for when others will share their stories for the remaining weeks.

Look Ahead

- Ask someone to read the introduction to Week 5, found on page 67.
- Close in prayer.





I'm a little pencil
in the hand of
a writing **God**,
who is sending a love
letter to the **world**.

Mother Teresa



WEEK 5

A Bird's Eye View

Perspective changes everything. A trail can seem like just a bunch of trees until we reach a beautiful vista and see the entire valley we went through to get there. A city looks very different through an airplane window in-flight versus a car window on the freeway. When we zoom out, the big picture becomes much clearer and more inspiring.

This week, we're going to zoom out to look at the big picture of who God is, who we are, and the overall story of Scripture. Getting a bird's-eye view will help us navigate well as we see how Jesus brings clarity to everything, including the deepest parts of who we are.

The Big Landscape

The Bible is the most read book of all time. An estimated 5 billion copies have been sold around the world! But just because it has been broadly distributed doesn't mean it's been widely understood.

One area of confusion comes from calling it a book. The Bible is actually a collection of 66 different books, written by 40 authors over a period of 1,500 years in one of three original languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek. Think of it more like a small library collection.

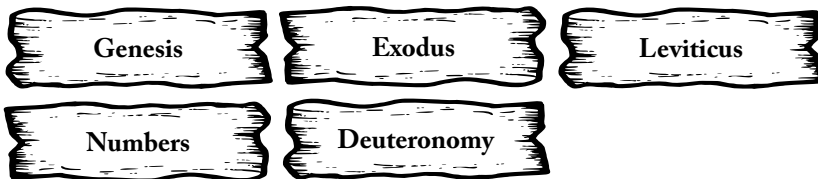
What's remarkable is that woven throughout all of these different books, we see a unified story that ultimately points to Jesus. Jesus himself recognized this fact; right after the Resurrection, Jesus "explained to them [a few of his disciples] what was said in all of Scripture about himself" (**Luke 24:25-27**).

To help us see this overarching story, we've grouped the books of the Bible into different sections with brief descriptions of the content and genre (or type) of writing. Seeing where each book fits in the bigger picture of Scripture helps us better understand what we read, and it points us to the grace and truth of Jesus.

Old Testament

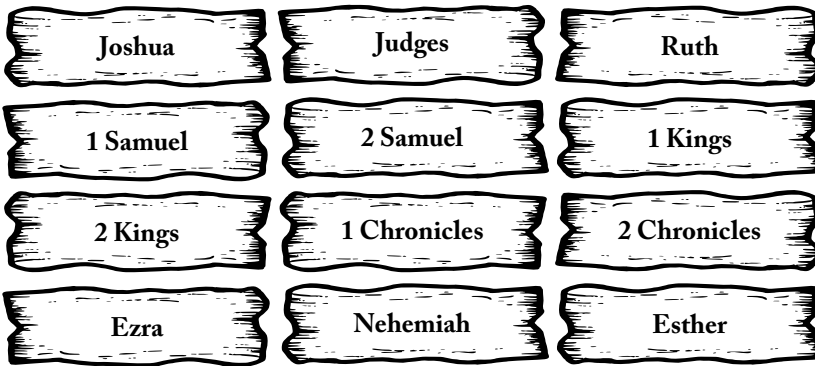
All 39 books of the Old Testament work together to reveal that apart from God we can do nothing, setting the stage for God's fulfillment of his promise to restore us to himself.

The Law



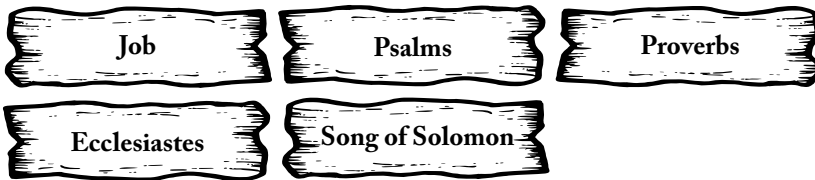
Writings (historical narrative and legal code) that explain our universal problem (the rebellion of humanity) and an enormous promise (God will restore all things by working through a particular people group: Israel). Contains instructions from God about how Israel should live so that he may be revealed to the nations.

The History of Israel



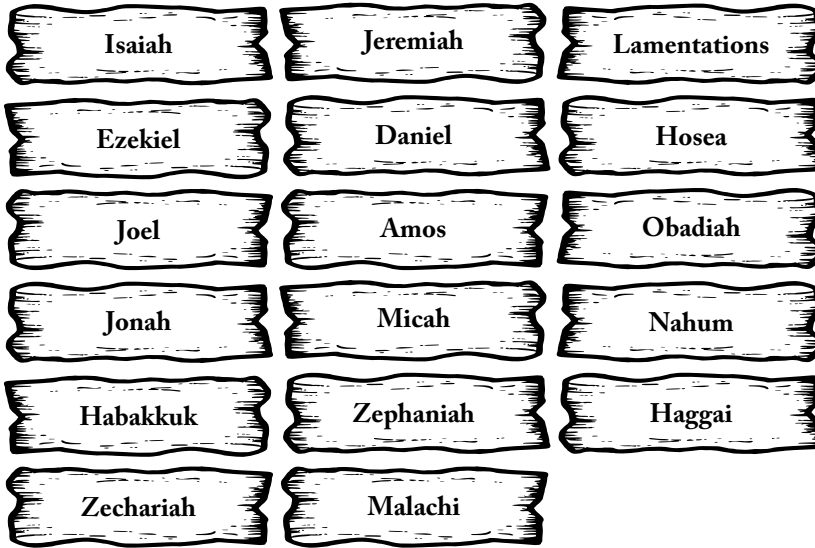
The history of Israel as a nation—from its rise to the moment its people settle in the Promised Land, then to the strife and exile they face because of their sin.

The Writings



“Wisdom” books that incorporate story, poetry, and proverbs to share ancient wisdom about the world and reveal God’s design for humanity.

The Prophets



Writings by ancient “preachers” who called God’s people to return to faithfully following him. Prophesied God’s promise and blessing if they returned to him and God’s loving discipline if they did not.

New Testament

The 27 books of the New Testament reveal the fulfillment of God’s promise in Jesus Christ and the future perfection awaiting us in heaven.

The Gospels



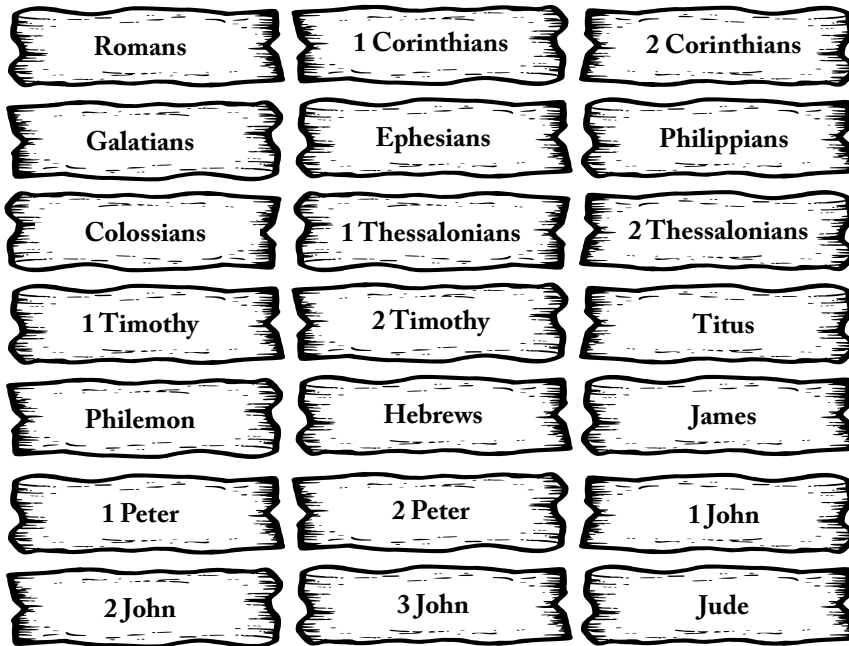
Combinations of biography, history, and theological reflections named after the disciples who wrote them; contain particular perspectives on Jesus: the king we should serve (**Matthew**); the servant who came to save (**Mark**); the Savior we should worship (**Luke**); and the Son of God in whom to believe (**John**).

The History of the Church



Historical description of the rise and spread of the early church, beginning with Christ's ascension to heaven, the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the missionary journeys of Paul.

The Letters



Letters with instructions originally written to early church communities about how to live out faith in each church's context; provide guidance and insight for our own life and conduct today through the risen Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Revelation



A vision of the ultimate restoration of all things in the future, and encouragement to stay faithful in the meantime.

Navigating the Terrain

Getting into the Bible (and letting the Bible get into us) is crucial. According to Jesus, it makes the difference in whether we will live an established life, filled with confidence in an often-chaotic world.

“Therefore everyone who hears these *words of mine* and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these *words of mine* and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.” **Matthew 7:24-27**

The Bible is called God’s Word because it originated with him. He inspired human authors to write the very words he wanted to communicate to us.

All Scripture is *God-breathed* and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. **2 Timothy 3:16-17**

While the entire Bible is useful, interacting with it can still be tricky. The different books were written at specific times to particular audiences in a specific context. To navigate Scripture well, we must track how what was said and written long ago applies to us today.

Bible scholar and author Dr. Gene Getz urges us to look for “biblical truths that are not limited by time, geography, or various societal dynamics.” Good interpretation looks at the “actual intent of the authors of Scripture,” and it will “represent the total biblical narrative... and redemptive story.”³²

This process takes practice. Perhaps this is why God gave the Bible to us in the format that he did, knowing we would have to slow down, think about it, pray for wisdom, and wrestle over it with others. Remember, God wants a relationship with us, which takes time and intentionality to build.

Let’s practice interacting with God’s Word today. On the next page is an extended passage of Scripture. Read through it slowly and carefully. As you do, **make notes and mark it up**. Look especially for things that are emphasized and repeated. Also make note of words you don’t understand. We’ll then guide you through a few questions to help you navigate this passage well.

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, to the church of God in Corinth, to those *sanctified* in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge—God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly await for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas”; still another, “I follow Christ.”

Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don’t remember if I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. **1 Corinthians 1:1-17**

Orient Yourself:

What type of book is this (look on Day 16)? What is the genre of literature? Who was the original audience?

Look Closely:

What words or phrases are repeated? What topics are discussed?

Dig Deeper:

Do a little research. Clarify the meaning of specific terms to enrich your understanding. Start with these three words to look up and define:

- Sanctified: _____
- Spiritual Gift: _____
- United: _____

There are lots of resources to help you get more context for this passage. Scan the code to access an overview of 1 Corinthians from *The Bible Project*.



Observations about this passage from *The Bible Project*:

Summarize and Connect:

In your own words, summarize in one or two sentences the big idea(s) in this passage:

Finally, connect the dots from the original context of the passage to today. What are the timeless principles you need to apply in your life?



The Beautiful Mystery

If God were small enough to be understood he would not be big enough to be worshipped. **Evelyn Underhill**

One of the great paradoxes of the Christian faith is that limited, finite people like us can intimately know an eternal and infinite God who, by nature, surpasses all understanding. God graciously chooses to reveal himself to us. And yet, as much and as hard as we seek to understand him, there will always be a portion of God that remains a beautiful mystery to us.

Nowhere is this truer than when it comes to the core Christian belief that there is one God who exists eternally in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This concept is known as the Trinity and it's a difficult one to understand. And yet, for the earliest Christians, it emerged as the only natural conclusion about God's nature when they looked at the totality of how he revealed himself. Let's look at the idea of the Trinity more closely.

One God

The Bible is clear there is only one God. In stark contrast to the surrounding polytheistic nations of the Old Testament, Israel proclaimed this belief in their creed (known as the Shema):

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. **Deuteronomy 6:4**

Later, Jesus' followers affirmed this truth too. Paul, in the New Testament, wrote:

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. **Ephesians 4:4-6**

In Three Persons

While they affirmed there is only one God, Jesus' followers came to worship him and the Holy Spirit as God. Why? As they reflected on all they had seen and experienced, they were compelled to.

Jesus did things only God is able to do. As we saw back in Day 7, Jesus forgave sins, healed people, and performed miracles. When Jesus walked on water, "those who were in the boat worshipped him" (**Matthew 14:33**). Jesus and his followers all knew that only God should be worshipped, and yet Jesus didn't correct or rebuke them for their worship of him. Instead, he accepted it.

Something extraordinary happened at Jesus' baptism. Everyone at the baptism heard a voice from heaven—the voice of God the Father—declaring “This is my Son, who I love; with him I am well pleased.” And they saw the Spirit of God descending “like a dove and alighting on him [Jesus]” (**Matthew 3:16-17**). This moment revealed three divine and distinct persons who were all present at the exact same time. Jesus echoed what happened at his baptism when he commissioned his followers to go out into the world to baptize others. He said:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” **Matthew 28:18-20**

Soon after Jesus ascended to heaven, the Holy Spirit came to his followers in a powerful experience. People saw what “seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them” (**Acts 2:3**). In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is equated with God (**Acts 5:3-4**) and knows the depths of the thoughts of God (**1 Corinthians 2:10-11**). Jesus' followers came to worship the Spirit alongside Jesus as fully God.

While the Trinity is more clearly revealed in the New Testament, we also see it in the Old Testament. Theologian Michael Horton notes,

When we reread the Old Testament in its [the New Testament's] light, we pick up on references that we (and old-covenant believers) may have easily overlooked. As early as the first verses of Genesis, we're told that when the Father spoke the creation into existence, “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” (**Genesis 1:1-2**). And at times we see a servant of God such as the “angel of the Lord” identified as God himself (**Genesis 22:11-18, 32:24-30, and Exodus 3:2-6**). Later, in the Psalms and Prophets the coming Messiah is lauded with attributes that belong to God alone.³³

Taking all this into account, early Christians concluded that God is one in essence and exists eternally as three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The three persons are God in exactly the same way and to the same degree. And yet, each person has his own personal attributes that distinguish him from the others. For example, when it comes to how we are saved, John Wesley described each person's role within the Trinity: “The Christian's salvation is through the grace, mercy, and love of the Father; the sacrificial death of the Son; and the cleansing and empowerment of the Holy Spirit.”³⁴

God is Love

While it can be confusing to understand and explain, the concept of the Trinity is also beautiful. It means that God exists eternally in community with himself, which helps us understand this passage:

This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. **1 John 4:13-16**

Love cannot exist by itself. When the early church figure Augustine reflected on this verse, he concluded that love requires both a lover and a beloved, as well as a spirit of love that flows between them. Some theologians call this the divine dance, in which the Trinity is a set of harmonious relationships that share a constant, beautiful flow of mutual giving and receiving. In other words, love.

What is amazing is that God, who has eternally existed in perfect love with himself, invites each of us in. We, too, can join the dance. Not because we earned it, but because he wants us too... and because he made a way for us.

A 360-Degree View of Me

When you look in the mirror, what do you see? In some areas of life, at different moments, we might be tempted to be overly impressed with ourselves. Other times, we may be hypocritical of who we are and focus only on the negative, the broken stuff, and the failures. The Bible warns us to avoid both extremes.

Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather, *think of yourself* with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. **Romans 12:3**

Instead of zeroing in on only the good or the bad, thinking rightly about ourselves means seeing the full picture of who we are—a 360-degree view of you and me. That requires God’s perspective.

What does God see when he looks at us? We don’t have to wonder; he tells us in his Word. As we look at the totality of Scripture, here are a few big truths about ourselves we need to keep in mind. The first three listed below apply to everyone. The last one is for those who have trusted in Jesus. Taken together, all these truths help us avoid the extremes of thinking too highly or lowly about ourselves.

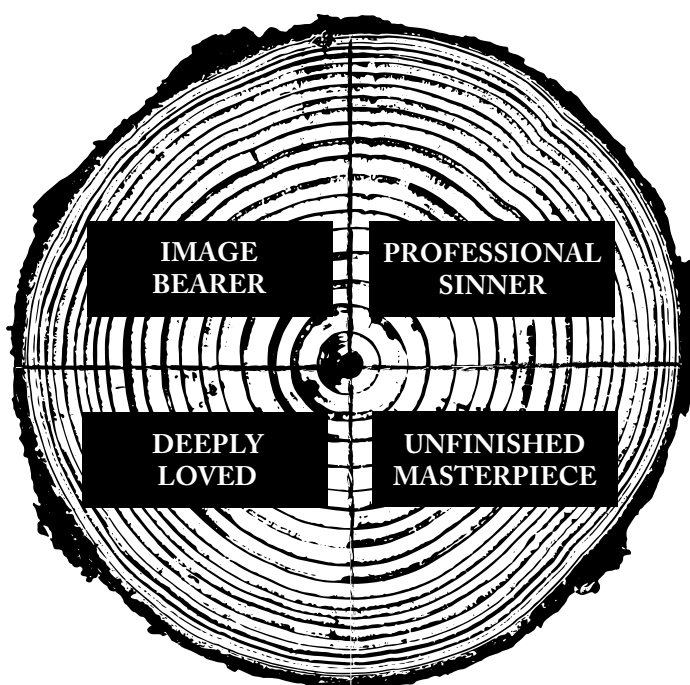


Image-Bearer

So God created mankind in his own image, in the *image of God he created them*; male and female he created them. **Genesis 1:27**

Every person you meet has been stamped with God's image. We aren't God, but we reflect him in a unique way as we reflect his creativity and help our world flourish. Whether married or single, male or female, one ethnicity or another, we all have innate dignity, beauty, and incredible value bestowed upon us by our Creator whom we reflect.

Professional Sinner

For *all have sinned* and fall short of the glory of God... **Romans 3:23**

Every person has been born into a world affected by sin. And we ourselves are "professional sinners" who feel the impact of sin in every area of our lives. This means we are all really good at justifying poor decisions and sinful choices. We have a propensity that pulls us from doing what we want—and ought—to think and do.

Deeply Loved Individual

For God so *loved the world* that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. **John 3:16**

Some of us feel unloved right now. Maybe we think we are unlovable because of who we are or what we've done. But the reality is, you (and every person you've ever interacted with) are deeply loved by God. He's not far off, looking down with disappointment and hatred. Instead, he is pursuing all of us because he loves and longs to connect with each of us, more than we know.

Unfinished Masterpiece

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. **Ephesians 2:10**

... being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. **Philippians 1:6**

For those of us who have trusted in Jesus, we are freely forgiven (**Galatians 5:1**), fully justified (**1 Corinthians 6:11**), adopted as children into the family of God (**1 John 3:1**), and completely secure (**Romans 8:38-39**). But we are still works in progress. On this side of heaven, none of us have fully arrived. We will still struggle. But, as we do, we know that the Spirit of God is at work in and through us. We are his handiwork. And, as he transforms us, he uses us to make a difference in the world.

Ingrained

Yesterday we spent time looking at a few passages that describe how God sees us. Today, we're going to let the truth about who we are in him sink in more deeply. Below are some of the passages we referenced on Day 19, along with a few more that describe who we are in Jesus.

Slowly read each passage and then **circle one of the verses** that you would like to focus on (perhaps a truth you especially need to remember about yourself today). Then, on page 86, write this verse out **three different times**, one inside each of the wood planks. This is great way ingrain this truth in your mind—to meditate on and memorize a passage so we can recall it when life gets crazy.

I Have Been Made New.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! **2 Corinthians 5:17**

I Have Been Set Free.

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. **Galatians 5:1**

I Have Been Made Clean.

You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. **1 Corinthians 6:11**

I Am Completely Secure.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. **Romans 8:38-39**

I Am a Child of God.

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! **1 John 3:1**

I Have the Power of the Holy Spirit.

For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love, and self-discipline. **2 Timothy 1:7**

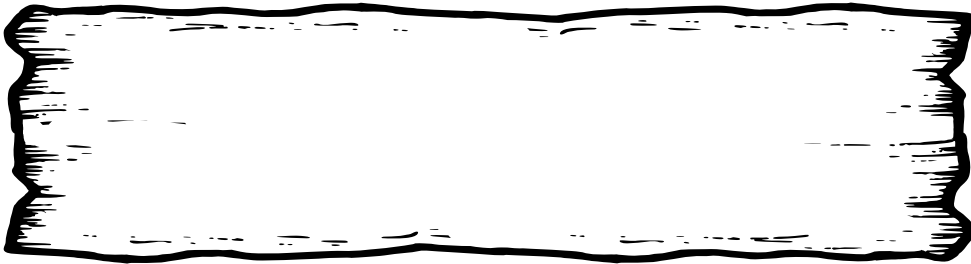
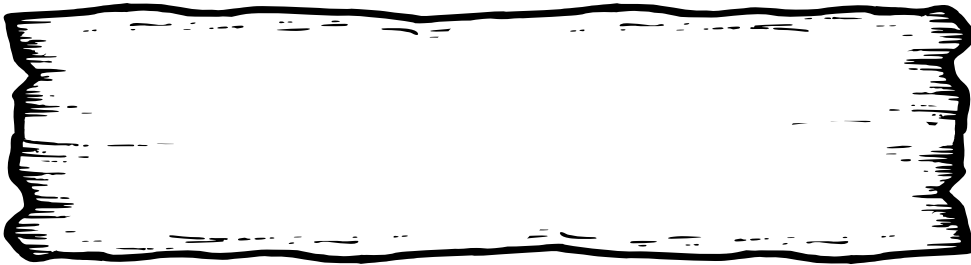
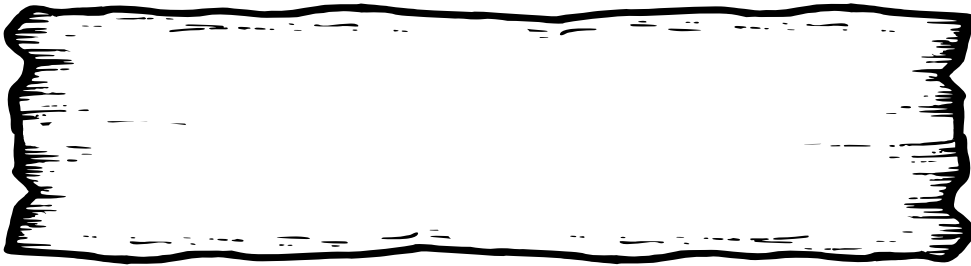
I Represent Christ.

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. **2 Corinthians 5:20**

I Am God's Masterpiece.

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. **Ephesians 2:10**

ACTIVITY: Pick one of these listed verses and write it three separate times, once inside each plank below.



A Bird's Eye View

Core Concepts

While the Bible is a collection of 66 different books, it tells a unified story that ultimately points to Jesus.

All Scripture is God-inspired and helpful to us today. But, to navigate it well, we need to understand the original context, track how it applies to us today, and put it into practice.

God is love. He exists in perfect love with himself (God is one God who has eternally existed in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). And he invites us into this community of love.

The Bible guides us to think rightly about ourselves—not too highly or lowly. We should remember we are image-bearers, professional sinners, deeply loved individuals, and unfinished masterpieces.

Root Words

The Trinity: A core Christian doctrine about the nature of God. The Bible teaches there is one God made up of three distinct persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All three are equally divine and yet, in a mysterious and supernatural way, the three are united as one.

Group Gathering

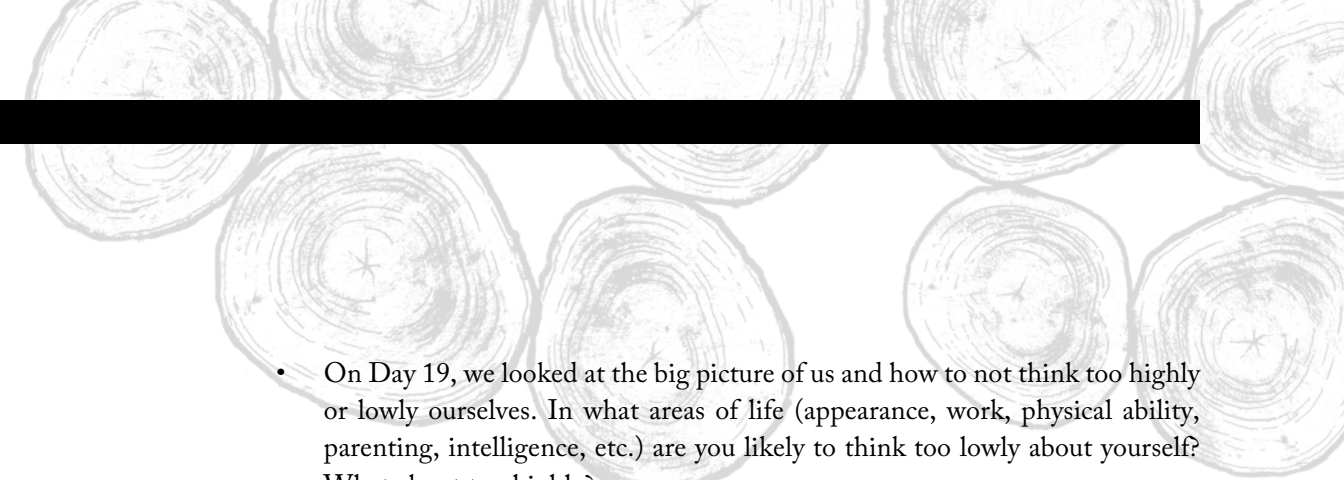
Getting Started

- What is the best view you've ever seen (a vista, a sight from a skyscraper, or something else)? Is there a view you'd like to see that is on your bucket list?
- This week we zoomed out to see the big picture in several areas, including the Bible. Take a moment to talk about the big picture of your interaction with the Bible. When were you introduced to it? What has your journey with the Bible been like, since then?
- Make sure to leave time to share some Tree Ring Stories. You can do that now or towards the end.

Discuss Together

Through the Holy Spirit, God inspired people to write the books of our Bible. Each book was written at a specific time to a particular audience and context, but it is also how God communicates with us today, too. Read **2 Timothy 3:16-17** and **Hebrews 4:12**.

- How is the Bible useful to us? How has it helped you in your life?
- While all Scripture is helpful and inspired, some sections and books can be tricky. What challenges have you run into as you've interacted with the Bible? What parts have you found difficult to navigate?
- On Day 17, we looked at a longer passage (**1 Corinthians 1:1-17**). Share your observations with each other. What stood out? What principles did you take away?
- What tools and resources have you found useful to help you study and apply the Bible?
- On Day 18, we looked at the big picture of God and the beautiful mystery of the Trinity. Do you think belief in the Trinity is vital to the Christian faith? Why or why not?

- 
- On Day 19, we looked at the big picture of us and how to not think too highly or lowly ourselves. In what areas of life (appearance, work, physical ability, parenting, intelligence, etc.) are you likely to think too lowly about yourself? What about too highly?
 - What verse did you decide to “ingrain” on Day 20? Why did you select that verse?

Look Ahead

- Ask someone to read the introduction to Week 6, found on page 91.
- Close in prayer.

The problem is not that
people don't want to
change (most do) or aren't
trying to change
(most are); it's that
they don't know
how to **change**.

John Mark Comer



WEEK 6

Step by Step

The best plans are customizable. If we aspire to grow in some area—to eat better, lift more weights, or develop a skill like cooking—we need a path that accounts for the fact we’re all different. We don’t all start from the same place, nor are we all wired the same way. We also have unique hopes and dreams that God has placed on each of our hearts.

While we are each different, our paths still share some similarities. God wants to do specific things in each of us as we follow him on a journey toward a life of flourishing. Knowing how the journey works will help us get going, keep moving, and stay on track, every step of the way.

The Four Myths

What comes to mind when you picture spiritual growth? Depending on background, we may have different ideas about what it looks like. Some of us grew up being told that growing meant going to church more, cussing less, giving up a bad habit, or reading our Bible more regularly. All of those can be good things, but is that really all there is to it?

The New Testament repeatedly uses three words to describe the journey God wants to take us on. We've highlighted them below.

We have heard of your *faith* in Christ Jesus and of the *love* you have for all God's people—the *faith* and *love* that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven... **Colossians 1:4-5**

We remember before our God and Father your work produced by *faith*, your labor prompted by *love*, and your endurance inspired by *hope* in our Lord Jesus Christ. **1 Thessalonians 1:3**

For this reason, ever since I heard about your *faith* in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you... I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the *hope* to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance. **Ephesians 1:15-16, 18**

May the God of *hope* fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with *hope* by the power of the Holy Spirit. **Romans 15:13**

A new command I give you: *Love* one another. As I have *loved* you, so you must *love* one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you *love* one another. **John 13:34-35**

Spiritual growth is about maturing in faith, hope, and love. Faith is gaining confidence that Jesus is who he said he is and did what he said he would do; it's about putting greater trust in him with all aspects of our life. We grow in hope by joining God in the redemptive work he's up to in the world, knowing that he will ultimately bring restoration to everything. And as we love God more and more, we look to love others in the sacrificial way Jesus loves us. All of this happens from a place of acceptance and security as God's children. And he's empowered us with his Holy Spirit to mature us.

As each of us looks to grow in faith, hope, and love, there are some common assumptions many people have that, if we're not careful, can hold us back. Here are four faith journey myths that we'll work to dispel in the days ahead.

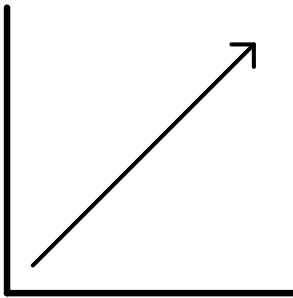
MYTH #1: Journeying with God looks the **same for everyone**.

It's easy to look at someone else's spiritual journey (a friend, a spouse, or a parent) and think ours needs to look like theirs. Sometimes it can be discouraging when we don't have the same experience with worship and prayer, or when a particular message or topic that resonated with them doesn't connect with us. We might think, "Is there something wrong with me? Maybe I just don't have enough faith."

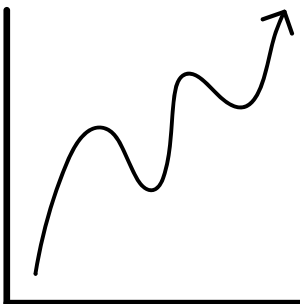
But journeying with Jesus is uniquely personal. God designed you with precision. Each of us has unique DNA, along with distinct personalities, pet peeves, quirks, gifts, strengths, and ways we connect with God. We'll look more into this idea tomorrow as we explore different ways we're spiritually wired. A big key to growing spiritually is figuring out how you are drawn to connecting with God and then pouring fuel on that fire.

MYTH #2: Journeying with God is **straightforward**.

We often think following God should look like this:



But in reality, spiritual growth looks more like this:



We see this fact time and time again in the Bible through the stories of King David, Peter, or many others who took big steps in faith—only to mess up shortly after. Even more common are the times when we make progress in some aspect of faith while struggling in another area.

Journeying with God is an imperfect process, and we are all works in progress. On this side of heaven, none of us are perfect. So when it comes to spiritual growth, it's best to think, "Where am I right now, and what is the best next step to move forward?"

MYTH #3: Journeying with God will simply happen.

If we want to grow in physical fitness, we know it takes work. We need to go to the gym, or watch our eating, or get coaching from an expert. It takes intentionality. The same is true with growing spiritually.

Spiritual transformation doesn't happen naturally. The Bible tells us it's a supernatural process that's powered by the Holy Spirit. It also isn't natural in that we won't merely drift into it on our own. We are to "make every effort" (**2 Peter 1:5**). In the words of theologian Dallas Willard, "Grace is opposed to earning, but it's not opposed to effort."

MYTH #4: Journeying with God can be a solo hike.

Going to church and connecting with others spiritually can be challenging and messy. It's tempting to go it alone in our faith journey and say, "It's just about me and God... why try to complicate it with other people?"

But, as we'll see in the days ahead, we need others on the journey with us. Jesus told us that learning to love God more includes learning to love others better (**Matthew 22:36-40**). On top of that, we go further and faster on any journey when we have others who join us along the way.



The Seven Pathways

Each of us is wired differently, which impacts our relationships with others as well as God. Author Gary Chapman suggests there are different spiritual pathways that highlight distinct tendencies and preferences in how people connect to God. He says, “Most of us will naturally have a certain predisposition for relating to God, which is our predominant spiritual temperament.”³⁵

Below is a compilation of his seven pathways.³⁶ Read each one and try to identify a pathway that best describes the ways you most naturally connect with God.

	DEFINITION	ENJOYABLE ACTIVITIES	NOTABLE EXAMPLE
ACTIVISM	Taking action to right a wrong or initiate a change	Promoting important causes, fighting for others rights	Martin Luther King, Jr.
CONTEMPLATION	Enjoying solitude, prayer, and meditation	Meditation, prayer, private acts of devotion	St. Augustine
NATURE	Enjoying the natural world	Watching sunsets, taking walks	St. Francis of Assisi
INTELLECT	Pursuing knowledge	Apologetics, systematic theology, reading	C.S. Lewis
RELATIONSHIP	Connecting with others	One-on-one conversations, small groups, talking with others about faith	Joseph (OT)
SERVICE	Completing meaningful tasks on behalf of others	Serving the less fortunate, mentoring, showing hospitality	Mother Teresa
WORSHIP	Participating in musical or artistic expression	Music, art, writing	King David

Stage of Life

We often talk about the stage of life we're in. Whether it's being an empty nester, a high school senior, a young professional, a parent of young kids, or something else, the stage we are in dictates a lot. Each stage has unique challenges we're trying to solve, questions that are top of mind, and needs we're trying to meet.

Our faith has stages, too. Experts have developed different categories in the spiritual development process to identify how people become more like Jesus over time. While the "stages on the journey are very fluid"³⁷ (we can move between them regularly), most of us have a "home stage" that best describes where we are right now. Knowing our current stage helps us think through what taking a next step looks like for us.

Look below to see four of the big faith stages.³⁸ While it may feel a little oversimplified, see if you can identify the stage that best describes where you are today in your faith journey.

EXPLORING

(Discovery Stage)

Those of us who are questioners, who are curious and open to answers.

"I'm curious about Jesus, but have questions—how do I know this is real? What does it mean to have a relationship with God?"

BUILDING

(Developing Stage)

Those of us who have started a relationship with Jesus and want to learn more about the whole picture.

"I believe what the Bible says about Jesus, but how does this all fit together?"

OWNING

(Doing Stage)

Those of us who are ready to take on responsibility and live out our faith.

"I know what my faith is all about and how great it is for me. I have a strong sense of responsibility to lead others on that same path to fullness in God."

MULTIPLYING

(Delighting Stage)

Those of us who have a renewed sense of calling and mission learned from life, faith, and perseverance through an extended time of growth and struggle.

"How do I use my wisdom gained from struggles to guide others? How do I maximize my impact for the Kingdom?"



A Year from Now

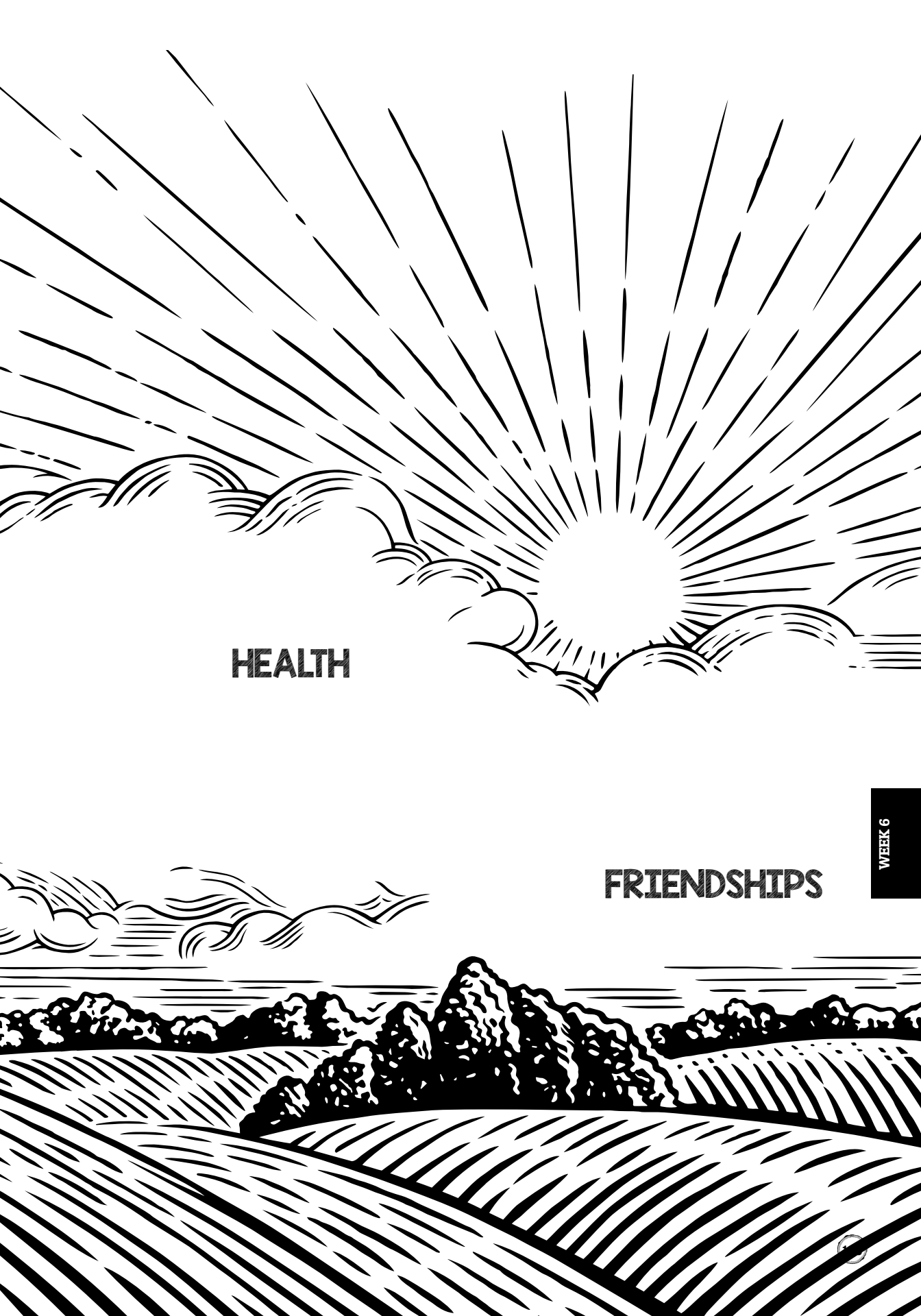
It's helpful to get specific about what you'd like to see happen in your life. So, use the space below to write out ideas, dreams, things you'd like to see God do, or goals you'd like to achieve. We put some **categories in the clouds**, but you can dream about whatever you want that answers the question, "A year from now, what do you hope would be true about you or about life?"



FAMILY

FAITH

CAREER



HEALTH

FRIENDSHIPS

WEEK 6

Take the Plunge

Life is full of defining moments. There are times when we've had to "show our cards," "put skin in the game," or "take the plunge." It might be the moment when we accepted a job, got down on one knee to propose, moved to a new city, gave away a lot of money to an important cause, or raised our hand to lead something for the first time.

Each of these moments carries inherent risk. They require a step of vulnerability, which sometimes doesn't pay off or go the way we hoped. But the fact that we worked up the courage to step out in some way tells us something important: we cared deeply enough (about a person, a job, ourselves, our faith) to take a risk when it would've been easier not to. That's why they're called defining moments.

Baptism: The First Act of Obedience

Perhaps this is why *baptism* is so important to Jesus. It's a vital part of the mission he's given us.

"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing* them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." **Matthew 28:19-20**

Baptism isn't what saves us. As we read on Day 13, salvation is a free gift from God (**Ephesians 2:8-9**). We don't do anything to earn it. Rather, it's something we freely receive based solely on the work of Jesus at the cross on our behalf.

Jesus does, however, command us to be baptized. In fact, it's the first thing he asks us to do when we decide to follow him. In the New Testament, people got baptized right after they professed faith. They didn't wait, because they believed it was a step Jesus wanted them to take.

Why is Jesus so passionate about people being dunked in water? Out of all the things he could have asked us to do, why does he emphasize baptism? It's not normal for people to get in a body of water and get submerged while others watch. And yet, it's one of the most important things a Christ-follower can do.

A Reflection of the Resurrection

The act of baptism is powerfully symbolic. The New Testament explains its imagery.

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore *buried* with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was *raised* from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may have new life. **Romans 6:3-4**

Getting baptized is a tangible way to show what has already happened to us spiritually. It communicates, both to us and publicly to others, that we have died to our old way of life and have been raised to a new one in Jesus.

A Mile-Marker Event

When we first trust in Jesus, it can seem a bit intangible. We may wonder if it “took,” or if God really saved us, especially when we mess up again (which we will). Baptism can be a specific, concrete moment that seals our decision. It's a stake in the ground where we can definitively say, “From this point forward, my life is about Jesus Christ.”

Like all defining moments, getting baptized requires risk: we get wet, it's uncomfortable, and it takes vulnerability. Some of our friends and family may not understand our decision or the act itself. And yet, taking this step reveals something about our heart. Baptism is the first thing Jesus asked believers to do, and it's a public way to profess our love for Jesus and desire to follow him.

If you are a Christ-follower who has yet to be baptized, now is the perfect time to take the plunge. Your *Established* group leader will have the date of the next baptism at the church, or you can make arrangements to do the baptism in your group.

Reflection

What are some defining moments in your life? What risk did each of those times carry? What caused you to take the plunge?

Have you ever been baptized? If so, when? What caused you to take the step? If not, is anything stopping you from getting baptized?

Step by Step

Core Concepts

Spiritual growth is maturing in faith, hope, and love. From a place of security and acceptance as God's child, the Holy Spirit helps us move forward one step at a time.

Journeying with God doesn't look the same for everyone; it's not straightforward, will not simply happen, and isn't a solo hike.

We all connect with God in different ways (the seven spiritual pathways). And we're all at different places (the four faith stages). The best way to move forward is to find out how we are wired to connect with God and pour fuel on that fire, and to know where we are in the journey so we can identify the best next step.

Baptism is a defining moment in the faith journey of a Christ-follower. Not only is it the first thing Jesus asks us to do, it is also a powerful way to publicly profess a private decision.

Root Words

Baptism: Literally means "to immerse." This practice is a picture of what happens spiritually at salvation. Going under the water represents how our sins were buried with Jesus. Coming out of the water pictures how we are raised to new life in Christ.

Group Gathering

Getting Started

- Have you ever found a particular growth plan (a diet, a workout routine, a training program, etc.) really helpful? If so, what made it so impactful to you?
- What does it mean to grow spiritually? How has your answer to that question changed over time?
- Make sure to leave time to share some Tree Ring Stories. You can do that now or towards the end.



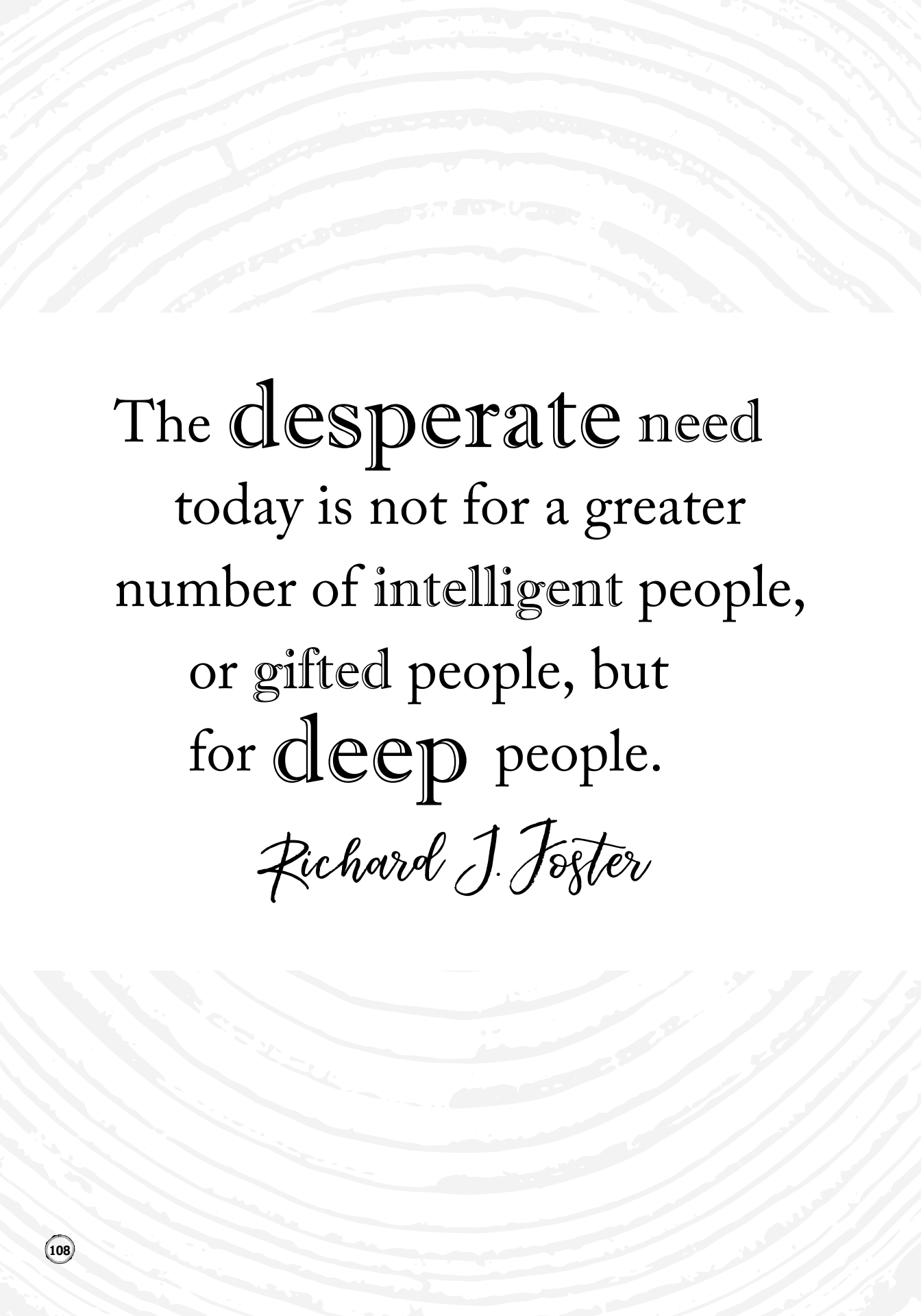
Discuss Together

Read **Colossians 1:4-5**, **1 Thessalonians 1:3**, **Romans 15:13**, and **John 13:34-35**.

- What can we learn from these passages about what it means to grow spiritually? Why do you think the New Testament emphasizes faith, hope, and love?
- On Day 22, we listed out the seven spiritual pathways—different ways people tend to connect with God. Which ones resonate the most with you? Why?
- Given your pathway, what would be a way to lean into that preference? What activities do you need to do more of in order to connect more regularly with God?
- On Day 23, we talked about different stages of the faith journey. As you look back on your faith journey, do you see different stages? Why or why not?
- How would you describe where you are right now in your faith journey? Share with the group?
- On Day 24, we spent time writing out different hopes and dreams. A year from now, what do you hope will be true about you or your life?
- On Day 25, we talked about defining moments, including baptism.
- Have you taken the step of baptism? Why or why not? Do you want to get baptized?

Look Ahead

- It's hard to believe it, but we're just a few weeks away from finishing *Established*. Let's talk for a moment about what a next step for our group could look like after we finish. Do we want to continue?
- Ask someone to read the introduction to Week 7, found on page 109.
- Close in prayer.



The **desperate** need
today is not for a greater
number of intelligent people,
or gifted people, but
for **deep** people.

Richard J. Foster



WEEK 7

Deepening Roots

Last week, we looked at how God wants to help us grow in faith, hope, and love. It's an imperfect process that has a promised destination. Along the way, Jesus keeps us secure in him—and it's from this place of acceptance that God transforms us from the inside out.

Though this journey will look different for all of us (since we're each in a unique place, with unique wiring), our journeys have similarities, too. As we listen to peoples' stories, we can identify five common ingredients God uses to propel people forward. If we want to grow, we need to know and pursue these five things. They'll make all the difference in nurturing a life of depth.

Fertilizer for the Soul

No one wants to be described as “shallow.” Yet, finding depth of connection with others and God is challenging. And in a chaotic world, it’s easy to feel uprooted and unstable.

What does it take to be a deep person? We’ll explore this “in depth” this week. What we’ll discover is the most established trees in the forest are the best nourished. They have roots that constantly seek out replenishment.

In his book, *Deep and Wide*, pastor and author Andy Stanley digs into what faith nourishment looks like. He started with the question, “What fuels the development of faith? What are the ingredients that, when stirred together, result in greater confidence in the person and promises of God?”³⁹

As Andy heard stories from people and churches all over the country, he discovered commonalities in how God helps us grow. He labeled these as the Five Faith Catalysts⁴⁰. Each catalyst is a vital element for faith development. Together, they make up the fertilizer that nourishes your soul, helps your roots grow deep to sustain us for the long haul (even through storms), and spur growth into the life God has for us.

Think about your own story. Who or what did God use to help you grow? Chances are, most, if not all, of the catalysts show up on your list. The more we leverage these catalysts in our life, the deeper we’ll go. We’ll describe each of them below and then expand upon them in the coming days.

1. Practical Teaching

When someone helps the Bible come alive for us, it’s a game-changer. Perhaps you can remember a particular teacher, mentor, or small group leader who challenged you to take what is written in the Bible and do something with it. Make a change. Have a difficult conversation. Ask for forgiveness. The impact of this shouldn’t surprise us. On Day 17 we read:

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.”

Matthew 7:24

This catalyst shapes the way our church approaches sermons and small group discussions. Our weekend messages and group conversations are biblically based; they also consider felt needs and drive us toward life application. Just as we did on Day 17, we need to practice putting the Bible into practice. It’ll change our lives when we do.

2. Private Disciplines

As we'll see on Day 28, our personal habits shape us for the long haul. We all want visible results in our lives. Many of us love to set goals for ourselves. But it's really the systems we set up that will help determine whether we get to where we want to go. In the case of our faith, there are certain disciplines that make an outsized impact in our connection with God.

3. Pivotal Circumstances

During *Established*, we've been sharing our Tree Ring Stories. One theme has probably popped up as you've heard people recount their stories: life's toughest moments can often be our clearest experiences of God's presence in our lives. This isn't always the case. Sometimes a challenging season can damage our faith, too. Later this week, we'll look at navigating the storms of life, because the way we do that makes a huge difference in our faith journey.

4. Personal Ministry

God does something in us when he does something through us. Nothing helps us grow like depending on him as we step out to serve in ways that stretch us. Most of us wonder if we're ready to lead or use our gifting. We think we're unqualified, or that someone else is more knowledgeable or better equipped than we are. But the truth is no one is fully ready to serve God when they start. We take a leap of faith, bringing what we have (our gifts, strengths, and willingness) as we expect God to show up big.

5. Providential Relationships

Journeying with God is not a solo hike. He uses other people to help us see things in ourselves we would never have noticed on our own. And, healthy and helpful friendships can power us to go further than we ever would have gone by ourselves. Finding community isn't easy. There are real challenges to establishing great friendships today. But it is incredibly necessary if we want to grow.

Those are the five faith catalysts. We've already spent time thinking through practical teaching on Day 17. Next week we'll look at the power of personal ministry and providential relationships. For the remainder of week 7, we'll focus on **private disciplines** and **pivotal circumstances**.

As we look at these catalysts, think about your own story. We're betting as you do, you'll see these five ingredients pop up as you've grown in faith, hope, and love.



Soil Test

Whether it's a professional farmer or a family trying to maintain a lawn, evaluating the soil is important if we want something to grow. Tests can let us know what nutrients are lacking and what fertilizers are most needed.

Yesterday, we spent time looking at the five faith catalysts—fertilizers that help your soul flourish. Today, take a moment to look at the current conditions of your soil. This will help you see where things feel good... and where you may need more nutrients.

In the circle to the right, there are 12 different areas to evaluate. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 as the low and 10 as the high, color or shade the pie chart up to the number that best reflects how life is going in that area right now.

MENTAL

Learning: Feeding my mind with good things—reading, listening to podcasts, exploring interests

Margin: Creating space by limiting screen-time, setting good boundaries, and having intentional unhurried space in my schedule

Thought-Life: Fighting temptation, avoiding or addressing destructive thinking about others or myself

PHYSICAL

Exercise: Staying active with gym time, workout rhythms, and fitness

Nutrition: Eating healthy, avoiding excessive drinking or eating

Stress Management: Handling anger, frustration, and worry in a healthy way

SPIRITUAL

Bible Engagement: Interacting regularly with God's Word

Prayer: Bringing needs, feelings, and requests to God, listening to God, praying with others

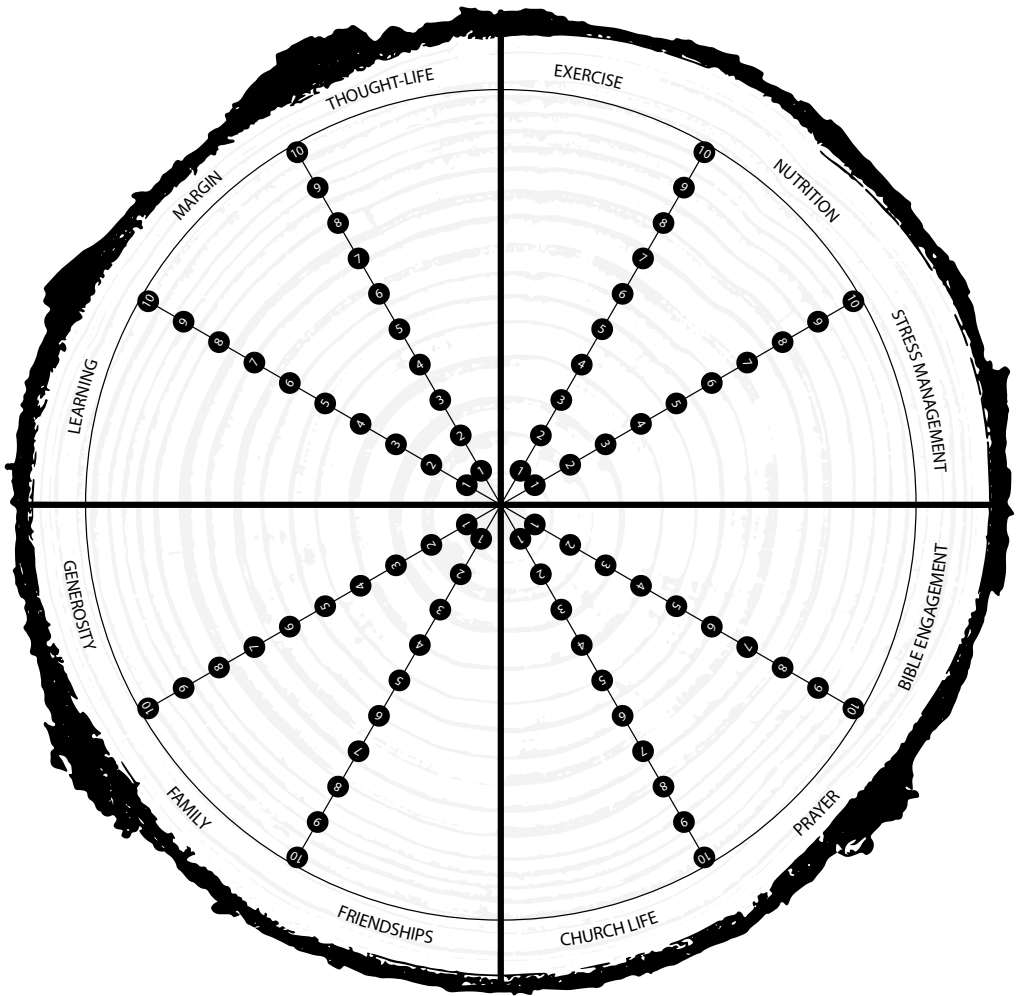
Church Life: Attending weekend services, engaging with a small group, serving on a team

SOCIAL

Friendships: Connecting deeply with authentic, healthy people

Family: Engaging well at home or with immediate/extended family

Generosity: Giving of my money, time, and energy to make a difference



Reflection

As you look at the circle, where do you feel encouraged? What places need more nutrients and attention?

Private Disciplines

In any relationship, intimacy is cultivated over dedicated time. You can't shortchange it, speed it up, or spend your way there. We need unhurried moments. Intentional conversations. And, especially when life gets busy, we need a system—a structure or plan to make sure we stay connected and have the space we need.

Our relationship with God works the same way. Many of us can remember when we started to devote private time to connect with him. Maybe it was when we began morning devotionals or worked at memorizing a passage. Or we developed a habit of praying at a particular time of the day. Whatever it was, that time likely helped to fuel a greater sense of connection.

There is something powerful about private disciplines. God shows up in a unique way as we purposefully order our lives, schedules, even our resources, around him. Jesus talked about this with the discipline of prayer (we read this passage on Day 8).

“But when you pray, *go into your room*, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who *sees what is done in secret*, will reward you.” **Matthew 6:6**

Notice the intimacy of this passage. As we pray to God in the quiet moments of our day, we are rewarded by our *Father*. It's an opportunity to connect with him in a deeply personal way as we share our hearts, concerns, and needs with him.

Sometimes we make prayer too complicated. We think it requires fancy language or doing it in just the right way. Jesus made it clear God simply wants us to come to him. To connect. To spend time. We can simply talk to him, being open, transparent, and even unpolished as we share with him what's going on.

Prayer is just one of many ways to purposefully connect and grow in intimacy with God. Christians throughout the centuries have found other practices to be deeply meaningful, including

Scripture Reading and Meditation: Spending regular time in God's Word as we seek to learn about him and his truth

Silence and Solitude: Finding moments of peace and quieting the noise so the Holy Spirit can speak to our hearts

Giving and Generosity: Intentionally releasing our resources as a reflection of our contentment in God

Fasting: Refraining from food, technology, or something we regularly consume to focus on our dependence on God

Rest and Sabbath: Setting aside specific time to rejuvenate and enjoy God and our connection with others

These practices re-direct our minds, souls, and bodies to God and re-tune us to the Holy Spirit. Each one is a way to say to God, “You’re here, you’ve always been here, and I need you.” Things like rest, generosity, and fasting are ways to acknowledge our resources and schedules aren’t the source of our identity. Prayer and Scripture reading helps us remember that God is in control, and we need his perspective.

None of these disciplines are natural. Each one takes practice and intentionality, which means we need to decide ahead of time how to connect with God in the rhythm of our lives. What private disciplines do we need to do daily? Weekly? Monthly or seasonally? This will look different for each of us because, as we’ve talked about, we’re different people at unique places in our journey. And none of this should be based on guilt. Instead, think of how you can insert practices into your life to help you connect with God your Father who loves you deeply... and wants you to come to him.

ACTIVITY: Pray for 10 minutes today. Find a quiet place nearby and talk to God. To help you start, follow the model Jesus gave us in **Matthew 6:9-13**, using the acronym, “P.R.A.Y.” as a guide.

PRAISE – Acknowledge God’s greatness and grace

REPENT – Confess specific sins and receive his forgiveness

ASK – Bring your requests to him

YIELD – Submit to God and take time to listen



Practicing a Practice

Below are a few additional ways to be intentional in your relationship with God. Look at the ideas below. Then, **circle one** you'd like to do in the **next month**. Each option is a great way to practice one of the practices we discussed yesterday.

- Take a DAWG (“Day Alone with God”) Day:** Make plans to spend an entire day (or half-day) with God. Include a few activities to help you connect with him. You could go for a hike, read Scripture, journal, listen to music, head to a favorite spot—anything to help you disconnect from the busy pace of life (such as turning off your phone) so you can focus on connecting with him.
- Read a Book of the Bible.** Select one to go through this month. If you don't know where to start, go with the Gospel of John. As you read, use resources like The Bible Project (accessible for free online) to help you go deeper.
- Morning Prayer Routine.** Develop a habit of praying in the morning before you get out of bed. Instead of scrolling through your phone, purposefully decide to pause... and pray. Invite him God to meet you with his presence and peace. Ask for wisdom as you think about what you'll face in the day to come. Pray that God would help you love others the way you are loved by Christ.
- Do a Random Act of Giving:** All Christ-followers are called to make giving to the church a regular habit (a good starting point is 10% of our income, known as a tithe). In addition to that, try to be spontaneously generous to someone or an organization this month. You could give a large tip or make a donation to a cause you care about. Or maybe you want to encourage a neighbor by leaving an anonymous gift or cash in their mailbox.
- Fast from Sun-up to Sundown.** Pick a day this month to refrain from something in your normal routine (e.g., eating food, watching a show, scrolling through social media) from when you get up until the sun goes down. Instead of engaging in that activity (for example, during mealtime), read and pray. Fasting is a great way to express our dependency on God.

Powerful Storms

In our Tree Ring Stories, we talked about wide and narrow rings (Day 15). We also looked at different defining moments in our life (Day 25). Those can be good, but just as often they are not.

When people look back at their faith journey, they often point to a **pivotal circumstance** that caused them to connect differently with God. Maybe it was a divorce, a prolonged illness, a death of a loved one, a job loss, or something else. Sometimes these moments push us away from faith. Other times they draw us closer to God in a deeply intimate way. That's what makes them pivotal.

When we start following Jesus, it's easy to think life should get easier or better. In some ways, that makes sense. We're in a relationship with the Creator of the universe. He's given us his Holy Spirit. We're aligning our lives more and more around his grace and truth, which will lead to flourishing. He promises to produce in us more love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (**Galatians 5:22-23**). Life should get better. But when a storm inevitably comes, it can be incredibly disconcerting and disorienting, prompting us to ask, "Where did this come from? Does God care? Is God there?" Those are real questions that come from deep places in our soul. When we find ourselves asking these things, we're in good company. David, an Old Testament King, asked hard questions in many of the Psalms (spiritual hymns) he wrote.

How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? *How long will you hide your face from me?* How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death, and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall. **Psalms 13:1-4**

We don't have to hide big questions or strong emotions. David didn't, and God called him a man after his own heart (**1 Samuel 13:14**). But in the midst of his storm, David did something important: he took his emotions *to God*. As he did, it caused him to reflect on what gives him strength in the middle of the chaos.

But I trust in *your unfailing love*; my heart rejoices in *your salvation*. I will sing the LORD's praise, for he *has been good to me*. **Psalms 13:5-6**

Wind resistance has been shown to strengthen trees. Storms are the reason behind deep root systems. Similarly, challenging moments in life are not fun. But they do give us a chance to examine where we find hope and remember where our strength lies.

David, who openly wrestled with questions and hurts, also wrote one of the most comforting texts in history: **Psalm 23**.

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. *Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me;* your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. **Psalm 23:1-6**

The storm was a chance for David to remember, "He [God] is with me. And that changes everything." The darkest places caused him to trust in God more and to cling to his guidance, goodness, and comfort in a way that he wouldn't have if the challenges hadn't come.

Powerful storms can propel our faith if we go to God in them. When we do, these moments can draw us closer to him. Even more profound, these pivotal circumstances can often become the biggest way God uses us to minister to others.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, *so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.* **2 Corinthians 1:3-4**

Think about the storms in your life. Maybe you're in one right now. You don't need to sugarcoat them; life is full of hard seasons, and we can be authentic with God about the hurts we've experienced. As you reflect on these things, has a storm ever caused you to reassess where your hope truly lies? As you've faced hard stuff, has God's presence, even his goodness, become more real? And have you seen how God has used you to minister to others who have gone through similar storms?

Hardship shouldn't surprise us. While God is at work redeeming and restoring everything (including us), we still live in a broken world. But we can have hope. It's often in the stormiest seasons that these words of Jesus become the most meaningful.

"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! *I have overcome the world.*" **John 16:33**



Deepening Roots

Core Concepts

While our faith journey will look different for each of us, there are similarities in how God helps us grow. We call these the five faith catalysts: practical teaching, private disciplines, pivotal circumstances, personal ministry, and providential relationships.

Depth of connection with God takes intentionality and structure. There are private disciplines that help us build intimacy with God: prayer, scripture reading, solitude, generosity, fasting, and rest.

Pivotal circumstances can either push us away from faith or propel us closer to God. The key is bringing our authentic emotions to him. And, as God comforts us in these moments, he wants to use us to bring comfort to others facing similar storms.

Root Words

Prayer: Talking to God. We simply come to him as children, sharing our hearts, bringing our requests, asking for forgiveness, and looking to connect. We don't need to pray using fancy language or in a particular way.

Fasting: Abstaining from something, usually food, for a certain period of time in order to connect deeply with God. It is a physical and tangible reminder of our dependence upon him.

Tithe: One tenth of annual earnings. In the Old Testament, Israel is called to tithe (give one-tenth) in different ways and seasons to honor God. For Christians today, we have freedom in the amount we give, but a tithe is a good starting point. We're called to be "cheerful givers" (**2 Corinthians 9:7**), recognizing all of what we own is God's anyways. For many Christians, they follow the 10/10/80 plan (give 10%, save 10%, and live on the rest).

Group Gathering

Getting Started

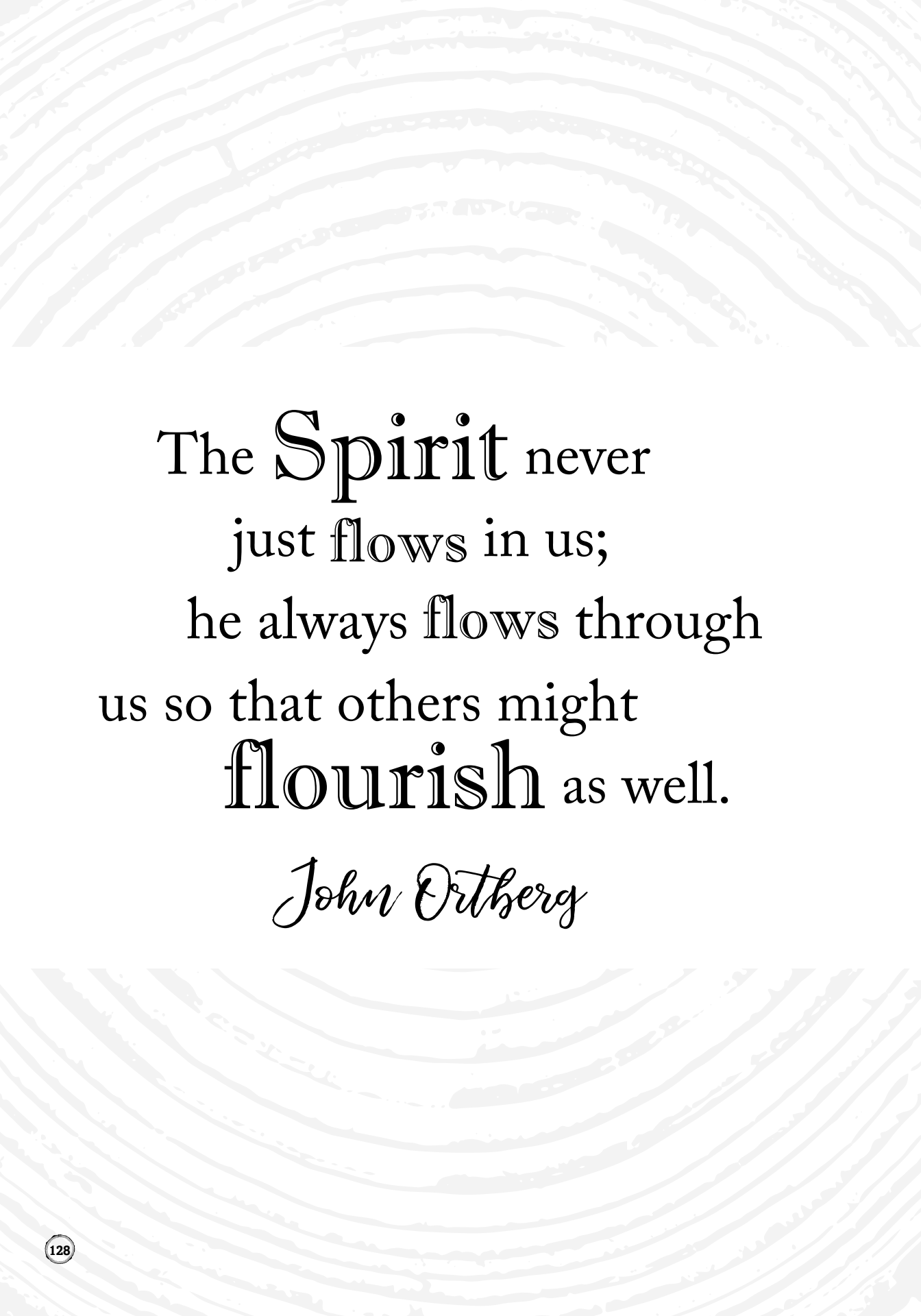
- How much of a “green thumb” do you have? Could you make it as a farmer? Why or why not?
- This week we talked about what it takes to grow spiritually. Look at Day 26 and the Five Faith Catalysts. How have you seen these catalysts play a role in your life?
- Today’s discussion is intentionally shorter for two reasons. First, we want your group to finish up your Tree Ring Stories today. Second, we want to leave time at the end for an extended time of prayer.

Discuss Together

- On Day 27, we looked at how our “soil” is doing right now. What stood out to you? Where do you feel well nourished? Where are you feeling depleted?
- Read **Matthew 6:6**. Why do you think Jesus emphasizes the power of prayer that is done in secret? Is public prayer bad?
- How have private disciplines enhanced your connection with God? What struggles have you encountered? What have you learned about not doing these practices out of guilt?
- Look at Day 29. What activity did you circle and why? What is your plan to put this practice into practice?
- Read **2 Corinthians 1:3-4**. On Day 30 we talked about pivotal circumstances. How has God used the storms you’ve been through to minister to others? Or, how could God use them to bring comfort to those who need it?

Look Ahead

- Next week is our last *Established* gathering. We want to finish strong and celebrate big, so please come! Ask someone to read the introduction to Week 8 on page 129.
- Before closing, take a little longer with prayer. Ask someone to read aloud **Psalm 23**. After reading, take a moment to praise God together. An easy way to begin is to say, “God, I praise you for...” Then, offer requests. Is there a way you, someone in your group, or someone in your life, needs God’s comfort?



The **S**pirit never
just flows in us;
he always flows through
us so that others might
flourish as well.

John Ortberg



WEEK 8

Branching Out

Just because a tree has been around a long time doesn't mean it's doing well. Healthy trees have new growth. They reproduce. Apple trees should have apples and cherry blossom trees should produce cherry blossoms.

Healthy Christ-followers also stretch out to bring life to others, whether it's using our strengths to make a difference, or by pouring into others relationally. God is building a community marked by the grace of Jesus in order to bring hope to a broken world. He invites us to join him in what he's doing. And, in a divided world, he calls us to be deeply connected to one another as we unite around his radical love.

This week, let's finish strong as we look at the final two faith catalysts: personal ministry and providential relationships.

Planted on Purpose

Sometimes when you're in a dark place you think you've been buried but you've actually been planted. **Christine Caine**

In Matthew 16, Jesus took his disciples on a field trip to an unexpected location: a place outside of the city of Caesarea Philippi called "The Gates of Hades." It's the last spot any godly rabbi would have gone to because of the pagan worship that happened there. People would do all sorts of activities (things even Las Vegas would say are extreme) to entice the god, Pan, to emerge and make their crops grow. It's in this dark place the disciples came to an important realization about who Jesus is and what he's up to in the world.

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock *I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.*" **Matthew 16:13-18**

Jesus is building his *church*. He's powering a movement of people, transformed by his grace and truth, to reach a broken world. It's significant he made this statement where he did. It was his way of saying, "It's in the darkest, most hopeless and confused places that my light and hope are needed the most." He doesn't call his people to wall themselves off from culture; he also doesn't want them to blend in. Instead, he sends his people out into the world, seeing it as a *mission field* where God is at work.

God invites us to join him in what he is doing. We are part of what Jesus is building. Not only does he use us to make a difference, but he also changes us in the process. That's why **personal ministry** is a faith catalyst. Some of the biggest things God will do in us come when he does something *through us*. We have a role to play in what Jesus is up to in the world, one that God has specifically empowered us to do.

For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to the others. We have *different gifts*, according to the grace given to each of us. **Romans 12:4-6**

Each of you should use **whatever gift you have received** to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. **1 Peter 4:10**

You've been gifted by God in a unique way to do something specific. You weren't created to do just anything. God has gifted you to do *something*.

That sounds nice, but many of us struggle to live into our gifting. Finding our "something" can be challenging. Here are four common obstacles that get in our way.

OBSTACLE #1: We don't KNOW our "something."

Maybe we think there's no way God would use us to make a difference in the world. We don't feel gifted. Perhaps we've been told by people in our lives that we aren't special, unique, or talented. But the Bible lets us know we are all in the gifted and talented program (**Romans 12:4-6**). All of us have a role to play. We've all received gifts, and God wants us to know what they are.

OBSTACLE #2: We don't VALUE our "something."

We can sometimes think, "Other people got the 'good' gifts." But our gifts are good and necessary for the body to function well. Though it's easy to get envious when it comes to the strengths or talents of others, God wants us to value what he's given us (**Romans 12:4-6**).

Author Mike Foster puts it this way:

I've known a lot of talented, wonderful people who shy away from using their God-given gifts in more public ways because of this phrase, "I could never do that!" At first it sounds so humble. "I could never make a difference like those super talented people do." And then we just kinda laugh it off. But there's nothing humble or funny about diminishing the gift God has given you.⁴¹

OBSTACLE #3: We don't DEVELOP our "something."

Whenever we got a report card in school, most of us focused on the lowest grades. While it's important to address glaring weaknesses, we can often wind up spending the most time working on the places we're least gifted. Instead, God calls us to steward our gifts effectively (**1 Peter 4:10**). We should develop our areas of gifting and sharpen our strengths.

OBSTACLE #4: We don't USE our "something."

It's easy to sit on the sideline, waiting for the perfect timing or opportunity to jump in. However, our gifts are needed now (**1 Peter 4:10**)! We're called to use whatever God has given us.



GPS

A helpful way to discover your place of service is to think through your GPS, or your Gifts, Passions, and Story.

Gifts: What are the unique abilities and strengths God has given you? Here are some that the Bible mentions:

- Arts / Creativity
- Administration
- Evangelism
- Exhortation
- Giving
- Hospitality
- Leadership
- Mercy
- Pastoring / Care
- Serving
- Teaching
- Wisdom
- Worship

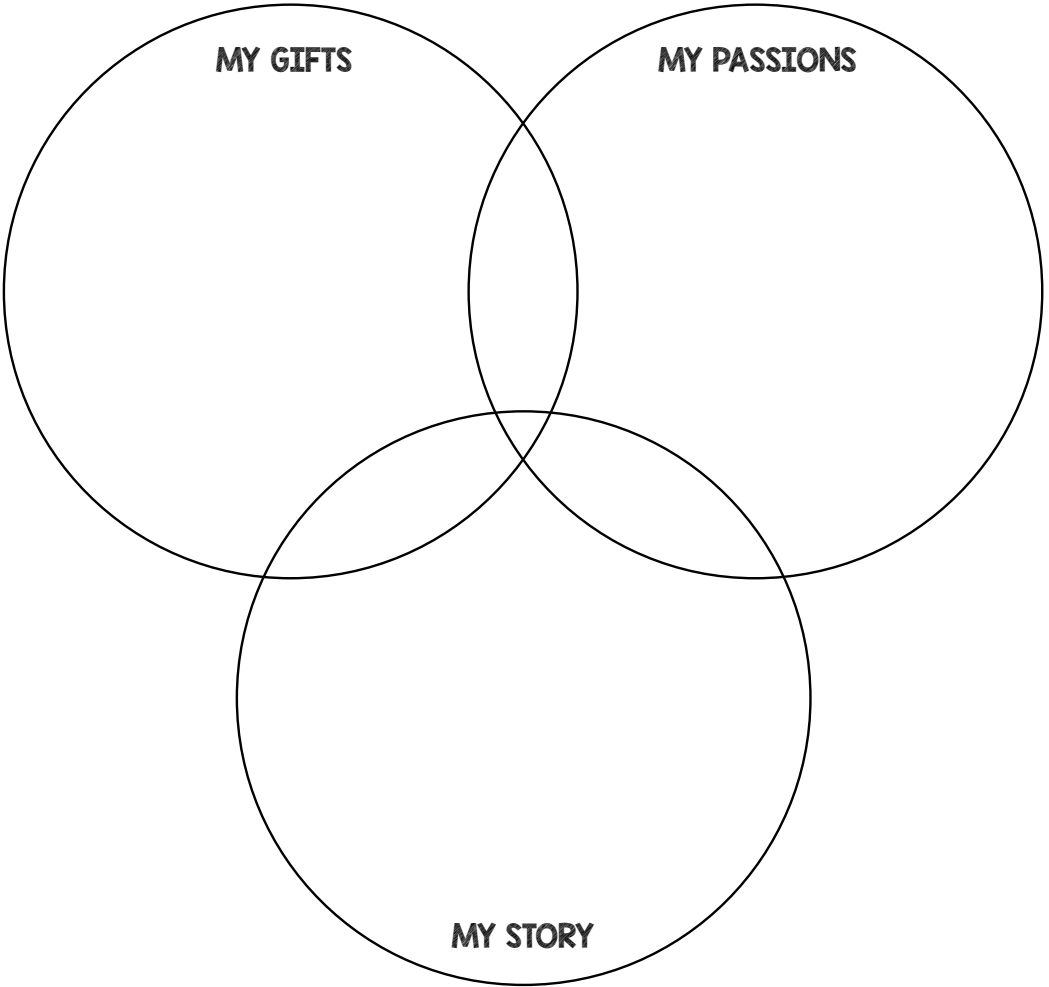
Passions: These are courageous convictions, things on your heart, or people or purposes you feel compelled to join, even at a cost to you. What needs do you see that most burden you?

Story: As we talked about on Day 30, God uses our experiences, particularly the hardest ones, to minister to others. Look at your Tree Ring Story. The rocky times in our stories—whether grief, divorce, financial struggles, doubts, hurts, or hard times as a kid or student—are often gateways into our calling today.

ACTIVITY: Fill out the GPS circles to the right. List some of your gifts, passions, and elements of your story that relate to how you could serve in the area to the right.

Reflection

Based on your GPS, where are some different places you could serve? Think about this question in terms of needs within the church (kids, students, greeting, worship, guest follow-up, etc.) as well as needs in the community.



One Another

If you visited Fishlake National Forest in Utah, you would see a lot of aspen trees—approximately 47,000 of them, in fact. This colony of quaking aspens is known as “Pando,” which is Latin for “I spread out,” and it certainly has done that for a long time. Scientists estimate Pando is over 80,000 years old, and it covers almost 107 acres.

But Pando is more than just a large group of trees that has endured over time. It is actually *one* tree. Genetic testing determined the entire colony to be one single organism with a massive underground root system, making it the largest and oldest living thing in the world.

Pando’s communal root system is incredibly beneficial. It makes it particularly resilient to droughts, climate shifts, diseases, and fires. These conditions often kill smaller plants, but Pando is able to survive underground until things improve and can quickly shoot up new stems afterwards or send resources to where they’re most needed.

That’s the power of community. And this doesn’t just apply to trees. The most resilient people are deeply connected to others. They are also the happiest, too. The longest running study in history, conducted by Harvard over the course of 85 years, found the biggest factor to overall life satisfaction is having positive relationships.⁴²

When Jesus described his church, he envisioned something much closer to Pando than we often think. For Jesus, church wasn’t a once-a-week type of thing to attend. It was an all-out, deeply committed, powerfully resilient community, united under him. In fact, he wanted the connection between his followers to be so close they would be seen as one. It’s what he prayed for.

“I pray also for those who will believe in me through their [the disciples’] message, *that all of them may be one*, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” **John 17:20-23**

Jesus was not talking about uniformity; his church was the most diverse community the world had ever seen, full of people from different cultures, political beliefs, and socio-economic statuses. But he did pray for unity among these community members, then and now. He wanted them—and us—to have an uncommon commitment to one another because of a shared faith built on his love.

This is a big deal to Jesus. He made it clear that the way we care for and come alongside one another is how a watching world will know he is the Messiah. It's also how God designed us: we need other people to help us thrive. We cannot stay on track (much less reach our full potential) on our own.

The New Testament talks a lot about what this community looks like. There are over fifty “one another” passages that describe how Christ-followers are to relate with other Christians in their lives. For example, we are called to

- Welcome one another (**Romans 15:7**)
- Confess to one another (**James 5:16**)
- Encourage one another (**1 Thessalonians 5:11**)
- Teach one another (**Colossians 3:16**)
- Serve one another (**Galatians 5:13**)
- Be devoted to one another (**Romans 12:10**)
- Carry one another's burdens (**Galatians 6:2**)
- Comfort one another (**2 Corinthians 13:11**)

One big faith catalyst is **providential relationships**. Most of us can think of a person or two who, at a key moment, came into our life and helped us take a step we would never have taken on our own. Somebody who encouraged you when you needed it or challenged you in just the right way. We call these relationships providential because, when we look back, we're convinced God brought them into our lives. He used them to help us move forward, just like he uses us to do the same in others.

And let us consider how we may *spur one another on toward love and good deeds*, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another. **Hebrews 10:24-25**

Healthy and helpful friendships make all the difference in the world. But they're rare, too. It's easy to think great relationships shouldn't take much work, but that's not true. They require time, commitment, and vulnerability.

Over the past few weeks, you've modeled this in your *Established* group. You took a risk to come, step out of the car, knock on a door for the first time, or click on the Zoom link, not knowing what exactly to expect. You've been vulnerable as you've shared

stories and given people your time, even though your schedule is busy. Hopefully as a result you've felt spurred along in your faith as you've been prayed for, encouraged, and supported. Perhaps a few deeper friendships have developed, too.

We face a lot of relational headwinds in our individualistic culture. Experts say we are in the middle of a loneliness epidemic, where many people say they don't have even one close friend. On top of that, many of us have significant relational hurt. We've attempted to connect and it hasn't gone well, making it hard to move forward or trust again.

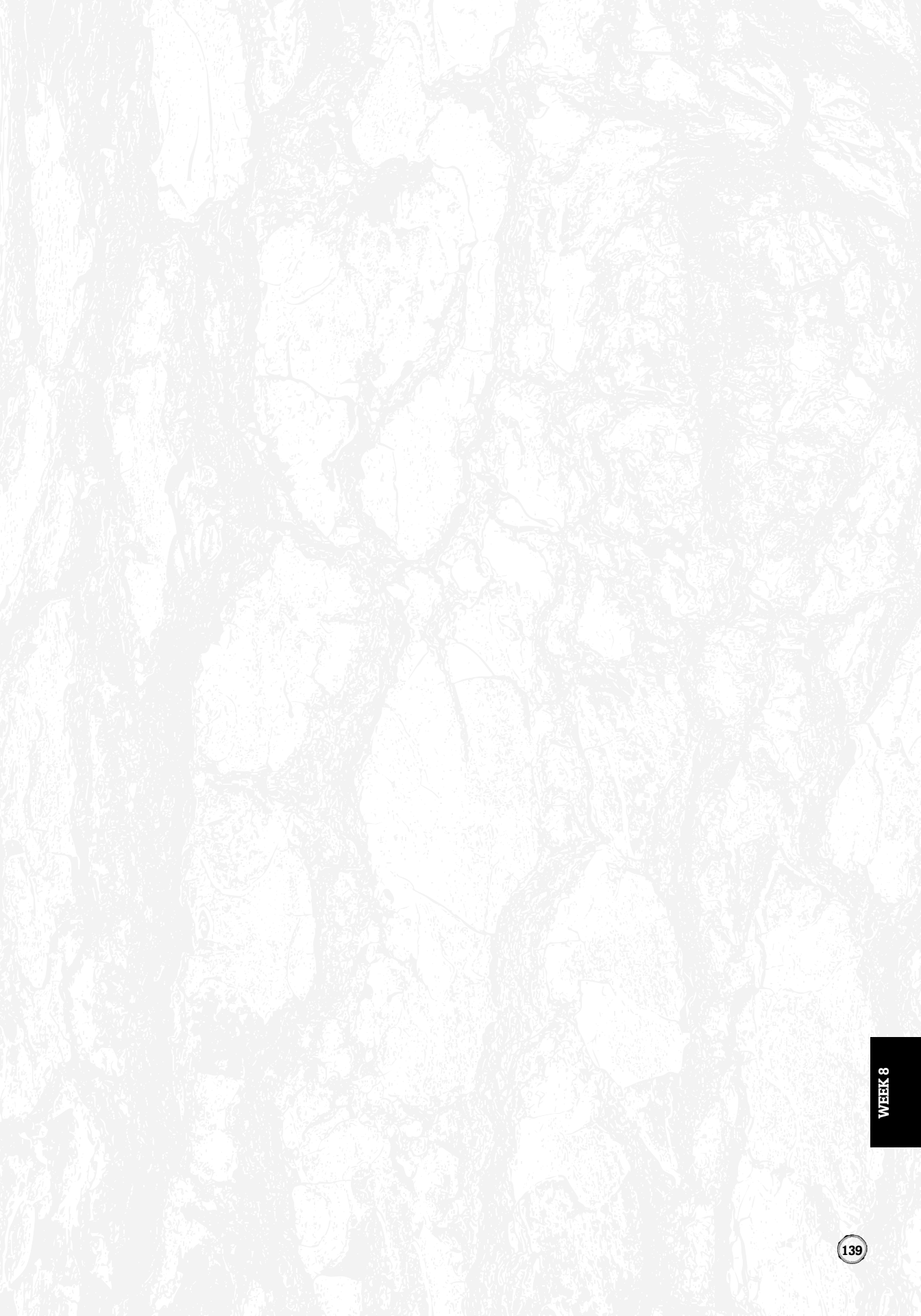
Because of these challenges, it's tempting to give up on community. But journeying with God isn't meant to be a solo hike. The most resilient people are the deepest connected. It's one of the reasons Jesus wants us to be unified as one. He knows we need it.

So, don't go it alone. Keep getting out of the car, knocking on the door, and making community a priority. Others will spur you along. And God can use you to be a providential relationship in the life of someone else.

Reflection

Who is a person (or two) who has spurred you along in your faith journey? Who is a person God has put in your life whom you can spur along?

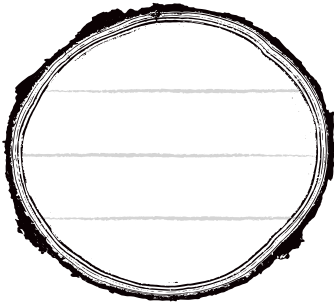
What would it look like for you to prioritize community after *Established* ends? Do you want your group to continue? If so, how can you help?



The 7 C's

Some relationships fuel us. Other relationships, we pour into. If we want to lead ourselves and others well, we need to understand the different connections in our lives, strive for balance among them, and establish good boundaries.

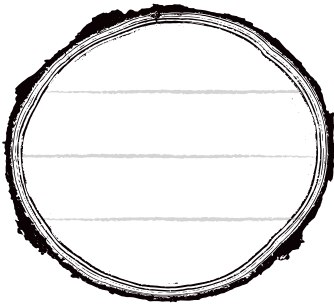
The 7 C's is a relationship tool to help you assess the different connections in your life.⁴³ **For each relational category below, write the names of people in your life who fit the corresponding description.** This exercise will help you see where you can invite someone to fulfill a needed role in your life, particularly in the coaching and comrade categories.



COACHES

People who don't need you, but you need them to teach you a skill.

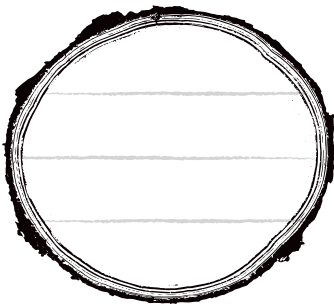
TIP: High-capacity leaders are coached 1-2 hours per week.



COLLEAGUES

People we team up with to accomplish the mission of the organization.

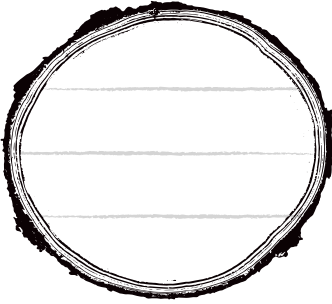
TIP: Find people who are mutually committed to the mission and comfortable in their own skin.



COMRADES

An assembly of friends engaged in growth. These are two-way relationships.

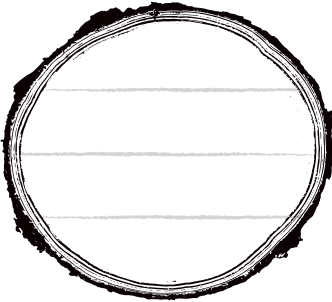
TIP: A structured meeting is helpful. Often, we need to pursue comrades—these relationships don't naturally happen.



CASUALS

People we pass time with, in a healthy way. With structure and purpose, casuals can become comrades.

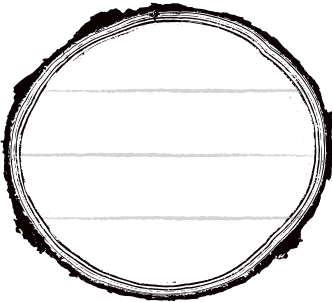
TIP: Be careful not to place all your relational capital in this one category.



CARE

People in need—possibly people you mentor or develop.

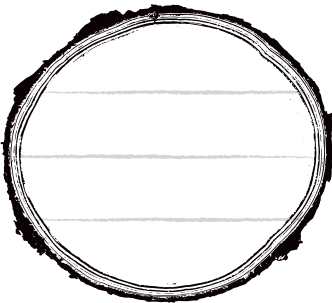
TIP: Be careful not to place all your relational capital here.



CHRONICS

These are people stuck in your care.

TIP: Have a short leash and strong boundaries with them.



CONTAMINANTS

These people want to harm you—sometimes unknowingly.

TIP: Protect yourself. Build a firewall. Grieve the loss.

Immeasurably More

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

And I pray that you, *being rooted and established in love*, may have the power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do *immeasurably more* than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. **Ephesians 3:16-21**

Paul's prayer in the book of Ephesians is a fitting way to close out *Established*. He puts into words what we hope this journey has helped you experience.

We pray that you've been strengthened these last eight weeks, experiencing the power of the Spirit in a deep way, whether it's been seeing how God wants to meet you in your deepest longings, or to bring healing and hope to the hardest parts of your story, or to empower you to use your gifts and strengths for good.

We've also learned a lot, which is great. But we hope this journey has helped you grasp in a bigger way the love of God that surpasses all knowledge. He is for you. Out of all the things God wants to communicate to each of us, we can't miss or overemphasize his love. It's what he wants us to be known for as we reflect his radical love to a broken world (**John 13:35**).

Not only is God for you, he's at work *in you*. As each of us makes plans for our lives, Paul's prayer warns us about the danger of thinking too small. God can do immeasurably more than all we can imagine—and most of us can imagine quite a bit! So dream big, because the God of the universe is not far off. He's here. He's been at work in generations past. And if we open our eyes and look intentionally, we'll see he's doing something amazing today.

Take a breath. Celebrate all that's happened. And look ahead, because the journey isn't over. On this side of heaven, none of us have arrived. What does a next step look like for you? As you move forward, have confidence, because he who began a good work will complete it. (**Philippians 1:6**).

Reflection

“Aha!” Moments and Next Steps

Take a moment to look back and ahead.

Below, record your “aha!” moments. Did something click or become clearer as you were going through *Established*? Maybe it was about God, you, or the Bible. Flip through the entire workbook to look at your reflections. Then, write down 4-5 new realizations you’re taking from this journey.

Now look ahead. Since faith is a journey in faith, hope, and love, what does your next step look like? Write down a few possibilities. Is it serving somewhere? Continuing on in the group? Having a needed conversation? Learning more? Write down 4-5 potential next steps.

My “Aha!” Moments

My Next Steps

Branching Out

Core Concepts

Jesus is building his church—a movement of people transformed by his grace—and nothing will stop it. He invites us to join him in bringing hope, redemption, and restoration to places of darkness in the world. And he empowers us uniquely by giving us a role to play along with strengths and gifts from the Spirit to do it.

A helpful way to discover your place of service is to think through your GPS: your Gifts, Passions, and Story.

Healthy and helpful friendships make all the difference in the world. We are to spur one another along in faith. These types of relationships don't just happen. They take time, commitment, and vulnerability.

Root Words

Church: The Greek word Jesus used to describe what he is building is *ekklesia*, which literally means “the called-out ones.” It refers to an assembly or gathering of different people who are committed to a cause. Jesus’s *ekklesia* is a movement of people called out by him to extend his grace and truth to a broken world.

Group Gathering

Getting Started

- This week we talked about gifts and strengths. Have you taken any assessments, whether at work or through church, to help you know what those are? What have you found helpful? What hasn't been?
- Has there been a time when you felt "in the zone" and were able to use your strengths in a meaningful way? When and where?

Discuss Together

- Read **Matthew 16:13-18**. What does it mean that Jesus is building his church? Why is it significant that Jesus said these words in a really "dark" location?
- What has been your experience with church? Have you found it difficult to find your place? Why or why not?
- Read **1 Peter 4:10**. How much clarity do you have in what gifts you have received from God?
- One of the faith catalysts is personal ministry. Have you experienced God doing something in you as he did something through you? Share with the group.
- Read **Hebrews 10:24-25**. One of the faith catalysts is providential relationships with people whom we're convinced God brought into our lives to spur us along. Can you name some key people who have spurred you along?
- If we all crave deep and meaningful connections, why are they so rare? What challenges to making connections have you faced?
- As we close out *Established*, have someone read **Ephesians 3:16-21**. Then, take time to reflect on your experience these past few weeks.
- On page 144, what were some of the "aha!" moments you listed (moments of clarity you had on this journey)? Did you find a particular week helpful?
- What are some next steps you're thinking through? Is there one that stands out?



Look Ahead

Let's end *Established* with a time of encouragement.

- **LEADERS:** Please go around the room and speak a word of encouragement to each person there. What do you see in them? How have you seen God work in them over these past few weeks?
- **PARTICIPANTS:** Please take a moment to share an encouraging word to your group leader. How have they helped you? Why are you thankful for them?
- Close out in prayer. Thank God for all he has done.

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ADDITIONAL NOTES

