

# **THE HOLY LIFE**

## **Bible Studies For Small Groups**

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# THE HOLY LIFE

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Beth Crawford, General Editor



## A Definition of “The Holy Life”

When we use the term, “the Holy Life,” we mean a life that reflects the character and heart of God. “Holy” comes from the Hebrew word *qadosh*. “It refers to that which is ‘other’” (VLI, p. 16). It did not originally have a negative or positive moral tone to it; it just referred to all gods being in a different category than humans. “But God showed the Hebrews that he alone is truly ‘other,’ that what the pagans called gods are not really ‘other’ at all, but just part of the cosmic system. So if there is only one Holy Being...and if that Being’s character is consistent...it becomes possible to determine what holy character looks like” (VLI, p. 16).

Another way to put this is that “the holiness of God is His separateness...His uniqueness, His distinction as the Wholly Other, the One who cannot be confused with the gods devised by men...the One who stands apart from and above the creation” (Harrison, p. 725).

From God revealing that He is above and separate, unlike anything or anyone in the cosmos, comes the secondary idea that God is morally perfect (Harrison, p. 725). Today, when people speak of holiness, we usually think of God’s essential perfection, His moral purity, those characteristics that differentiate Him from anything that is imperfect or evil. For most theologians, this is the highest quality of God’s character and “overshadows all others” revealed in the Old Testament (Harrison, p. 725). By saying God is “holy,” we affirm that He is flawless, always perfect in love, power, wisdom, justice, action, word, and intent.

In the Old Testament, because of God’s holiness, anything associated with Him or His worship had to be pure. This called for separation from evil, including separating His people, cleansing them, and requiring them to live according to ritual and moral purity. In order to take a sinful people and make them His own, God had to establish a way for them to become clean and thus “safe” in His presence, since He cannot dwell with evil (Genesis 32:30; Exodus 33:19–20; Isaiah 6:3–7; Habakkuk 1:13). Therefore, the worship practices and laws set out in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy were really to benefit His covenant people, the Jews, and those who wanted to draw near to Him (Brower, p. 477).

God’s purpose was to have the nation of Israel stand out in a dark and unjust world like a bright light pointing to His love, goodness, justice, and faithfulness. They were to live in obedience to Him, receive blessings from Him, and signal to all the nations that they too could enjoy the good fruits of a holy, God-centered life. But fallen human nature usually seeks its own agenda, and God’s people often corrupted their call with legalism and hypocrisy—outwardly pious behavior that lacked inward devotion to God. God’s prophets exposed the hypocrisy of those following the prescribed religious requirements merely to appease God while pursuing their selfish goals (Isaiah 29:13; Jeremiah 7:21–16; Hosea 6:1–6; Amos 5:21–26; 1 Samuel 15:22–23).

In the New Testament, holiness expresses itself less in terms of living a life separated from all evil and more as maintaining a relationship with Holy God while representing Him in the midst of a polluted world (Richards, pp. 339–341). Jesus came as the morally pure Son of God who lived a perfect life (1 Peter 2:22) and died as the spotless Lamb of God to pay the penalty for the sins of the world (John 1:29). Jesus did not pray that His disciples would be taken out of the world, living in a separate nation or neighborhood from the pagan, idolatrous society they found themselves in. Instead He prayed that the community of His people would be set apart to serve God in that wicked world. He also prayed that His Father would protect His followers from the evil one as they were sent into the world, just as He had been sent to reveal the Father’s holy and undeserved love (John 17:15–19). And, Jesus promised to send the *Holy* Spirit to dwell in His followers, the Spirit who is linked with Himself and the Father (John 14:26; 15:26). His Spirit

would not only mark them as His own but also inwardly produce evidence of His holy nature in them (Romans 8:9–16; Galatians 4:4–6, 5:16–18, 22–25).

In some people’s minds, holiness brings up a negative image of strict, rule-keeping, sour-faced, judgmental people who won’t participate in anything considered remotely fun. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Most of Israel’s holy days included festivities of communal eating, drinking, and celebration—all at God’s command (Buchanan, pp. 242–243)! Holiness is not about God’s people trying to stay away from sinful humanity by following a long list of “do’s and don’ts.” It’s not about trying to avoid prohibited behavior or to reach “unattainable perfection” (Bridges, p. 19). Either extreme can turn our quest for a holy life into something we can achieve on our own, which will lead us in the footsteps of the legalistic Pharisees Jesus condemned in His day or the hypocritical religious people the prophets admonished (Isaiah 29:13; Matthew 15:8–9).

Rule keeping is not what Jesus wanted to promote when He said, “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). Jesus was calling for a people who admitted their helplessness to live the holy life and turned to trust in His righteousness alone (Romans 3:9, 20–30). He was looking for followers who would confess their sin and receive cleansing and forgiveness not by slaughtering an animal but by trusting in His shed blood as the life poured out to death for them.

The assumption in all of Scripture is that we will daily express the moral goodness of our Father, resisting temptation to live for our own pleasure, esteem, or security—three common motives for human behavior (St. Romain, cited in Moon, p. 192). One scholar wrote, “The call to holiness in the N[ew] T[estament] is a call to let our Father be seen and glorified in our lives” (Richards, p. 341, brackets added). Peter conveyed this in his first letter: “But just as he who has called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy because I am holy’” (1 Peter 1:15–16). Note that Peter quoted from the Old Testament book of Leviticus, in which the Lord commanded His people, Israel, to demonstrate His sacred nature in all their dealings with Him and others (Leviticus 11:44, 19:1, 20:7, 26).

As New Testament believers, living the holy life is not something that is sheer effort on our part. In fact, Paul tells us we cannot restrain our tendency towards sensual indulgence merely by following a list of “do nots” (Colossians 2:20–23). The indwelling Holy Spirit imparts His holiness to us, and develops a desire in us for holy living. At the same time, we are called to try to live out that identity, that holy nature of our Heavenly Father, in cooperation with His Spirit.

Therefore, the keys to living a holy life are seeing ourselves as God’s holy children who share our Father’s nature and living in a way that pleases our Father (Ephesians 5:8–10). How to reflect His nature without striving every moment, without relying on formulas or external markers, without becoming self-righteous and puffed up—that is the point at which many well-meaning Christians trip, fall, grow weary, and get discouraged. Mark Buchanan writes,

Our instinct is to appease God or impress Him with our stuff and our busyness. Those of us who have tried that—most of us, at some point—discover what is true of the older son, the frugal son, in Jesus’ parable: By our very busyness, we cease to dwell in the bounty of the Father’s house. By our very religiosity, we get stuck...and become so slow-hearted that we fail to see Christ when he stands before us, to hear the Father when He asks us to join the celebration. In our arduous efforts to find God, we lose Him.

It is not what God wants. “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). God asks us to be *like* Him—doing justly, loving mercy. And He asks us to be *with* Him—walking humbly. ...

Perhaps that seems pedestrian. The word pedestrian has two meanings: one who walks, and that which is dull, commonplace, boring. The invitation God extends is to walk. “Come, follow me” is Jesus’ way of calling us to new life (pp. 123—124).

Thankfully our Father knows that we need help in fleshing out His holy character in our lives. Rather than leaving us as orphans who slavishly work out a pattern for living that meets His criteria, the Father and the Son sent us the Holy Spirit who not only brings us new birth but also helps us grow up in that new life. Paul talks about this encouraging reality in various ways:

- “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27).
- “But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness” (Romans 8:10).
- “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16).
- “So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. ...Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16—17a, 24—25).
- “Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6).
- “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12—13).

We may agree with all that has been said about the Holy Life but still not know how to live it out. Keys to reflecting God’s holiness on a daily basis are knowing God and practicing holy habits. By “knowing God,” we mean going through our daily lives conscious of God’s intimate presence in us and with us, and remaining in constant communication with Him—through listening and responding. This has been called “the practice of the presence of God,” living in a trusting dialogue with our Heavenly Father (Lawrence, p. 71). Through continual communion (or the effort to stay aware of this communion) and by holy habits, we develop a personal and deep relationship with Almighty God.

By “holy habits” we mean those disciplines of the faith that develop in us a greater ability to live as Jesus did, to access the power and authority of His kingdom. Holy habits are the routines that enable us to do what we couldn’t do on our own by sheer willpower (Buchanan, pp. 131—132). Those who have trained themselves through holy habits know that practicing God’s presence, Scripture reading and meditation, worship, listening prayer, living simply, giving sacrificially, silence, solitude, fasting, etc., contribute to a greater capacity to know God, to live in harmony with Him, and to act effectively on His behalf.

In this series, we have not tackled the topics of the holy habits (spiritual disciplines). Some of them have been included in other small group Bible studies [prayer, giving, fasting, etc.] and in Life of the Disciple Classes. Instead we have addressed issues we struggle with in trying to live in communion with God and in trying to live like Jesus, issues that point to our need for being transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit and our “efforts” to cooperate with Him. We hope that these studies will help stimulate new growth in faith and character so that God’s people may resemble Him more closely as we increasingly share in His divine nature. As one songwriter has penned,

The more I see You,  
The more I want to be just like You.  
The more I know You  
The more I want to be just like You.  
The more I want to be just like You  
Just like You, just like You.

*Holiness is being just like You,  
Set apart in all I do.  
Holiness comes from loving You,  
And all I ever want to be is  
Just like You, just like You, just like You.*

Like a moth drawn to the flame  
Like a child and his dad  
Who longs to proudly wear his name  
All I ever want to be is  
Just like You, just like You, just like You.

(“Just Like You,” © Joel Seymour, italics added)

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# THE HOLY LIFE

## 1

### GODLY SPEECH

#### James 3:1—12

By Elizabeth B. Crawford

*The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.*

Proverbs 18:21

*“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. Good people bring good things out of the good stored up in their heart, and evil people bring evil things out of the evil stored up in their heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.”*

Luke 6:43—45

*“But I tell you that people will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken.”*

Matthew 12:36

*Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.*

Ephesians 4:29

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## AIM OF THE STUDY

- To recognize that our speech should bless God and others, bringing praise and strength, not poison and destruction.

## KEY VERSES

*With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?*

James 3:9–11

## PREPARATION

The authors of this series suggest you read over the notes on “How to Teach the Bible in Small Group” and “Some Practical Suggestions for Leading a Small Group Discussion” in Vineyard Church of Columbus’ *Small Group Leadership Training Manual* if you feel your inductive study skills are rusty. Next, before you go over the Scripture text, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then, read through the passage, keeping an open heart and ear to the Lord. Finally, work through the Bible study notes and questions below.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. Therefore, use this Bible study as a framework for the discussion you lead in your small group meeting. This means you will need to

- Go over the questions and choose which ones you want to emphasize and which you will eliminate since your time is limited.
- Note that the application questions are marked with a bullet. Rather than leaving all of these until the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture’s truths and applying them to their own lives.
- Pace yourself. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could summarize some of the passage and then go to the final questions.
- Select one application question you will use with your group at the end. The question may have more than one part, but focus on the vital Biblical truth you want to encourage your group to put into practice in your final question.
- Feel free to suggest that your group continue a discussion at the next meeting or at another informal get together. You want to leave time for worship, listening to God, and prayer ministry, so don’t feel you must cover every nugget of truth in a passage or allow each group member to share a mini-sermon on every question!
- You may want to create your own introduction by using a personal example or current event that illustrates the point of the study. Your introduction and any background material shared should help lead the group members’ thoughts from the present moment into the text.

The authors of this series are providing these questions and accompanying material for the leaders’ benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to supply resources for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously, we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor.

We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The New Bible Commentary* as excellent resources for further study.

Also note that some studies advise the leaders to make copies of a handout or bring some helpful communication tool, etc.

## **SPECIAL NOTES FOR THIS STUDY—HOW TO GET HELP**

Vineyard Church of Columbus has several ministries that can assist small group leaders who pastor individuals who require more help than their small group members can give. Vineyard Columbus periodically offers seminars designed to help people with their problems. There are also recovery groups that meet together for the purpose of mutually helping each other work through a specific life problem they share in common, such as addiction to various substances, sexual behaviors, or unhealthy relationships. In the past, the church has offered support groups for those who need help dealing with anger, anxiety, divorce, grief, and post abortion trauma. Please check the Small Groups Cards displayed in the church lobby or contact the Small Groups Ministry Administrative Assistant for current information. The Small Groups Ministry staff will be happy to talk with you, as well.

For those who need more help than a seminar or small group can provide, there are two additional levels of support available. Vineyard Columbus has a team of lay counselors trained to provide short term, individual counseling. Although lay counselors are not professional counselors, they have received basic training in applying biblical principles of counseling and prayer ministry. To receive lay counseling, a person must be a regular attendee of Vineyard Church of Columbus. For further information, please contact the Lay Counseling Ministry Coordinator at the church. For those who need professional help, the Vineyard Counseling Center, a ministry of Vineyard Columbus, has several clinically and biblically trained counselors on its staff. Please call the church and ask for the person who coordinates intake of new clients and appointments.

Finally, after the Vineyard Columbus weekend services, there is always a visitor's welcome. It provides an opportunity for individuals to meet and pray with a pastor or mature leader in the church. Those pastors and leaders may then refer individuals to a group or ministry for further assistance.

## **OPENERS**

If we were asked to rate the top five sins in terms of their offensiveness, what would we choose?

*You may decide if you want to let folks answer or just use this question rhetorically. However, don't spend too long debating this, since you want to focus more on speech than on other sin areas.*

Where would we put the sins of our mouths? How does God view our speech? How seriously does He take our cutting comebacks, off-color comments, or tidbits of gossip? The Bible tells us that the first sin following the fall of Adam and Eve was a sin of speech (Moyter, p.119)—Adam blaming Eve for giving him the forbidden fruit to eat and blaming God for giving him this woman in the first place! There are other biblical examples of how serious the sins of our tongue are, including Isaiah's confession of unclean lips among a people of unclean lips (Isaiah 6:5) and Paul's indictment of all people as sinners (Romans 3:13–14; see Psalm 5:9, 140:3, and 10:7; cited in Moyter, p. 119).

Several times in my life, God has taught me the importance of godly speech through unforgettable lessons. While serving as a campus staff member with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, I had the privilege of meeting John Perkins, the Mendenhall and Voice of Calvary Ministries founder. In 1960, the Lord had used John to start a holistic gospel ministry in Mendenhall and later in Jackson, Mississippi. John's work had focused on assisting the poor, especially his fellow African Americans, to overcome racial, social, economic and educational difficulties. He had gained national attention not only for the training programs, housing development, health care centers, and outreach to young people, but also because of his own testimony of God's grace enabling him to forgive those who treated him brutally during the civil rights movement ("Our History").

When John visited one of the colleges I worked with, a few student leaders and I had the privilege of eating lunch with him. John shared one vital component of his walk with Jesus: never speak badly about another Christian brother or sister. Never. When the press would call him for interviews, they would try to lure him into making statements about Christians on the left and right of the political spectrum. John always spoke well of the other notable figures not because he always agreed with them but because they were his family in Christ, and he did not want to say anything that would hurt the unity of the church and the advance of the gospel. He even named very controversial figures that he had been asked about, and shared with us the kind of positive, non-judgmental remarks he might make. Since that time, I have always had an aversion to speaking negatively about another Christian or church, and feel it my duty to warn others against the same.

A second lesson I will never forget came through a very different meeting. Years later, I was shopping at a Christian bookstore when I saw a woman I hadn't spoken with in a long time. I knew that one of her relatives had recently passed away, so I decided to express my sympathy. As soon as I mentioned the deceased, she quickly began to download some family problems that had caused a great deal of pain in her life. I was not expecting this and felt very uncomfortable listening to her in such a public place. However, I didn't want to appear uncaring, so I waited until I could graciously exit. After leaving the store, I prayed briefly in the car for her.

That night, I woke up with a terrible ache in one ear, which spread to the whole side of my face. I awakened my husband and begged him to pray for me. As he laid hands on me and listened to the Holy Spirit's direction, he felt impressed to ask me, "Did you listen to any gossip today?" I was astonished because I had never mentioned anything about the earlier incident to him. The fear of God struck me as never before. I began to explain what had happened, but I was very careful not to name the woman or give clues so he would know who was involved. The Lord did not take away all my pain, but I was able to go back to sleep. The next day I went to my doctor who said my ear infection was a classic textbook case and the worst he had ever seen! I knew the Lord was teaching me that He wants us to avoid gossip or negative speech, even when we merely listen to someone but do not spread it. Ever since, I have tried to avoid any gossip, taught my children to report situations without using their friends' names when something negative has occurred, and even cut off friends in mid-sentence to make sure that what they were about to say was something I should listen to.

## **PRAYER**

*Pray that the Holy Spirit would teach you all through this passage, and convict each person of the importance of a pure heart and godly speech.*

## INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

*This is background material for leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.*

The theme in the book of James is spiritual maturity (Nathan). James wrote so his readers would become well-rounded, healthy disciples. James probably was one of the half-brothers of Jesus of Nazareth, perhaps the oldest of Joseph and Mary's biological children (Matthew 13:55; Burdick, p. 1879). Some scholars disagree, calling him a cousin of Jesus, since the Semitic word for "brother" used of James could be translated "cousin" (Harris, p. 959; Wessel, p. 963). Either way, he was a respected leader in Jerusalem serving on the church council with the apostles and other elders (Acts 12:7, 15:13–21, 21:28; 1 Corinthians 15:7; Galatians 1:19, 2:9). He was known for his wisdom and holy life (Harris, p. 959), and many of the verses in this book can be directly linked to the teachings of Jesus (Burdick, pp. 1879–1880). The letter was addressed to "the twelve tribes scattered among the nations" referring to Jewish Christians who lived outside Palestine (the Holy Land). He wrote with a leader's authority and a pastor's concern for believers struggling to live out the gospel in a hostile world. His comments indicate than many were poor (Wessel, pp. 964–965) or discriminated against by the rich.

### STUDY THE PASSAGE: James 3:1–12

James says that if we want to be a mature church and mature individuals, we need to pay attention to our speech. In Chapter One, verse 19, he tells us to "be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (Nathan). He also describes the Christian who can't control his words as deceived and his religion as "worthless" (1:26). He goes further (3:1) and warns leaders that their words will be more strictly judged than others. He also corrects those who boast (4:13–16), and tells us not to grumble against each other (5:7–9).

#### 1. Let's read James 3:1–2, 3–6, 7–8, and 9–12.

##### Whom does James first warn about their speech (v. 1)?

James warns those who are or who desire to become teachers in the church. Paul lists those with the gift of teaching among the key people who help build up the church until all the members reach the "whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11–13). Peter says that those who speak "should do it as one speaking the very words of God" (1 Peter 4:11a). These are tremendous responsibilities that some of us may take for granted. The people James points to would have great influence since many of his readers would be first generation followers of Christ. There weren't Christian books, tapes, or conferences to attend to help new believers grow in Christ-likeness. Also, there were not many mature role models for the hearers to imitate. These teachers would not only have to instruct the congregation in the truth of the gospel and how it applied to all areas of life, but they would also need to model what a life worthy of the gospel looked like. Very often discipleship is more "caught than taught."

- **Why do leaders and people in authority need to be cautious about what they say and how they say things?**

Just as children imitate their parents in learning to talk and walk, spiritual children often look up to and imitate their pastors, teachers, small group leaders, and mentors. Because the scribes and Pharisees sometimes twisted the law to justify themselves, Jesus spoke

harshly against their legalistic and hypocritical influence. He said they not only made it hard for others to enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 23:13–14), but when some did convert or repent, these false leaders then put excessive burdens on their disciples by what they required, and didn't lift a finger to help them (Matthew 23:4; 15). Just as when a celebrity endorses a product and sales soar upward, so the things that a Christian leader may say or do become an unspoken endorsement of those thoughts or behaviors. John Maxwell pictures a leader's ability to influence others' attitudes like carrying two buckets. One bucket is full of water; one is full of gasoline. Those in authority can douse negativity with water, but pour gasoline on vision for kingdom life that should burn brighter in fellow believers.

## **2. If we have control over our tongues, what does that reveal about our lives (v. 2)?**

There may be a misunderstanding if we think that James uses *never at fault* and *perfect* to mean "sinless." Instead, James envisions a person who is mature in Christ-like character, letting the Holy Spirit produce His fruit completely. Davids see this as someone radically committed to obeying God, willing to repent when he or she sins, and desiring to become fully like Jesus (pp. 28, 81). Since we will not reach 'completion' (James 1:4) until we are face to face with Christ and He has transformed us (1 John 3:2), we will have to pursue maturity our whole lives with the Holy Spirit's help. James indicates that if we can gain control over our speech, then self-control in other areas should be easy to accomplish (Moyter, p. 120).

### **• What are some keys to gaining self-control?**

Obviously, we want to co-operate with the Holy Spirit as He produces self-control in us. Dr. William Backus, in *Finding the Freedom of Self-Control* suggests a few strategies:

- Identify the lies we believe that cause us to act in some ungodly way.
- Repent of those lies.
- Replace those lies with God's truth.
- Journal about our plans to change and journal when we fail.
- Tell someone who will encourage, pray for, and hold us accountable (pp. 153–157).

## **3. What pictures does James use to highlight the difficulty we have in controlling our tongues (vv. 3–5a)?**

James talks about horses that humans can control by exerting pressure on a small bit in the animal's mouth, and ships that a pilot can steer with a small rudder. James underscores the small size of the bit and rudder in comparison to the larger, powerful objects they help humans harness. Then he states that our tongues are a small part of our bodies, but they can exert great influence on our lives by what we say. James uses the example of boasting, perhaps because arrogant, self-centered people aren't ones who humbly trust in and serve God (Bultmann, cited in Martin, p. 112). Martin also points out that the images of horses and ships, although found in ancient literature, were ordinary modes of transportation, so that James may not have relied on other sources for these illustrations (pp. 110–111). The irony is already apparent: humans can control powerful horses and ships driven by mighty winds, but can't control something so small as the tongue muscle!

#### **4. How does James point out the inflammatory aspect of our speech (vv. 5b–6)?**

James again uses a contrast between something very small impacting another thing much larger than itself. Here he points out that it only requires a small spark to set a whole forest on fire. This image points to the extremely destructive nature of ungodly speech and how rapidly it can spread (Martin, pp. 112–113). Martin points out that Jewish writings also use the image of fire for the tongue (Psalms 39:1–3; Proverbs 16:27; Proverbs 26:21; Isaiah 30:27; p. 113). James also calls the tongue a fire, and a world of evil in the body parts, and a source of corruption in our lives, set on fire by hell. These phrases are not easy to translate and interpret, so you may find different wording in various Bible texts. Overall, James seems to mean that our tongues are an evil influence in our own lives and/or in the church ‘body’ often empowered by Satan to cause harm. The evil that can be set in motion by words might include false teachers leading believers astray (Martin, pp. 113–117) as well as the hurtful gossip or judgments we initiate or pass on. When Peter opposed Jesus’ idea of having to suffer and die before He would be victorious, Jesus rebuked his disciple with, “Get behind me, Satan! ...You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men” (Matthew 16:23, Moyter, p. 123). Our complaining is another example of how a believer’s speech can be used by Satan to destroy the church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book on Christian fellowship, reminds us that a person seeking community should not become “an accuser of his brethren...” who complains about not finding his ideals met in the body of Christians he belongs to (p. 28). Since Revelation 12:10 refers to Satan as “the accuser of our brothers” we should not join in that activity but rather be thankful for the fellowship God has given us, as imperfect as it may be (Bonhoeffer, pp. 28–29).

- **When have your words increased the heat or spread something negative like wildfire?**

#### **5. What hope is there to have control over our speech if “no man can tame the tongue” (vv. 7–8a)?**

James uses the animal kingdom that humans have tamed to contrast with the fact that no one can tame the human tongue. The J. B. Phillips paraphrase of verse 8 points out that the idea of the tongue’s restlessness is like an untamed beast pacing in a cage “always liable to break out” (J. B. Phillips, cited in Moyter, p. 124, and Martin, p. 117). James is referring here to the unpredictability of when we might let something evil or poisonous slip out. We might wonder why James would point this out if there were no one who can control his or her speech. Certainly, our hope lies beyond our own efforts. Because Jesus was tempted but sinless in His words (Hebrews 3:18; 1 Peter 2:22–23), we can turn to Him for help. Surrendering our hearts, minds, and mouths to Him, we can invite His Spirit to respond or refrain through us when we have opportunity to express ourselves. By faith in Him, we can have victory over sin patterns. Also, the Holy Spirit desires to produce His fruit in us, including love, peace, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23).

## **6. How can words be poisonous (v. 8b)?**

Martin translates this phrase as “full...of lethal...poison...” (p. 118). Speech that can wound and kill godly fellowship as well as the individual hearers includes self-focused complaining, gossiping, demeaning or ranting at others, or using obscenities. In Ephesians 4:29, Paul writes, “not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.” This makes a good guide to go by if we ask ourselves before speaking aloud, “Will this benefit the other person?” Paul continues by listing the things we should not have in our hearts or express with our mouths: bitterness, rage, slander, malice, (Ephesians 4:31) obscenity, foolish talk, and coarse joking (Ephesians 5:4).

- **How frequently do your words poison the atmosphere around you?**

## **8. What is the highest purpose our tongues can have (v. 9)?**

James now switches to the positive use of our tongues—praising God who gave us the gift of speech. The Scriptures are full of commands and calls to worship God through praise, prayer, and song. As we declare the greatness of God, we not only build our faith and love for Him, but we also assist others to see Him as He truly is and join our celebration. Our worship can become a powerful part of our witness.

Besides praising and communicating with our heavenly Father, speech enables us to speak with other humans created in God’s image. We have already noted that we are also commanded to speak only what will strengthen our brothers and sisters in Christ and words that will be appropriate given each individual’s needs (Ephesians 4:29; 1 Thessalonians 5:14). James doesn’t mention this here, but perhaps it could be implied in his warnings about the danger of uncontrolled speech.

## **9. What is the greatest misuse of the gift of speech (vv. 9—10)?**

James quickly turns to the opposite use of our tongues when we curse another human being who is made in the image of the very God we have just praised. In our culture, we associate curse words with anger and may see them as rude or even cruel. However, in the ancient world, words carried great power, so that a curse really impacted a person or group negatively (Davids, p. 85). Moyter points out that Christians today may act shocked at someone’s misuse of the Lord’s name and write critical letters to the media when that occurs. But we hardly notice or hesitate before speaking negatively of someone else (p. 126). We should be sorrowful for such hypocrisy that also dishonors the Lord’s name and reputation of His people. Martin points out that James began this section speaking to those who teach or aspire to teach, but his rebuke of hypocrisy applies to every church member (Martin, p. 119).

- **How do you regularly respond to gossip or negative talk about others?**

**10. What do our words reveal about our inner nature or “heart” (vv. 10–12; see Luke 6:43–45)?**

The Bible maintains that our “heart” is the key to who we are (Proverbs 4:23), and Jesus points out that it’s “out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34). James believes this, too, and therefore chides us for being unstable, ungodly, and uncontrolled in our speech (Davids, p. 86). Davids states, “The problem is that both cursing and blessing are directed at the same object: God and a person-in-the-image-of-God” (p. 86). However, James doesn’t stand above his fellow Christians and denounce them; instead he identifies with them using “my brothers” (vv. 1, 10, 12).

James asks two rhetorical questions using examples from nature to illustrate that we demonstrate or manifest outwardly what is at the core of our being. His audience would know that a spring is either sweet or bitter, but not both. But if two sources of water meet, and one is salty, then it changes the other and the liquid is no longer suited for drinking (Martin, p. 120). Similarly, a fig tree can’t grow olives, nor can a grapevine produce figs, because God designed plants to bear after its own kind (Genesis 1:11). James again repeats this point: a salty source of water can’t produce fresh water just as a heart that is full of evil can’t speak sinlessly. Martin believes James is contrasting the examples of animals, water, and plants with humans. The first set of created things all do what they were intended by God to do, whereas the human being has the ability to either follow or disregard the design or direction of the Creator (p. 121).

- **What does your speech reflect about your heart attitudes?**

## **APPLICATION**

*Select one of the following application questions to finish your discussion time.*

- **Where do your speech habits fall short of the Bible’s standards? What have you learned in this study that might help you gain victory over old habits?**
- **What patterns of speech do we need to change in our group?**
- **Since our impure words and attitudes can grieve the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30), how can we cooperate more fully with Him in the area of our speech?**

- **What kinds of things can we replace our unwholesome words with?**
  
- **Who could you ask to be an accountability partner that would humbly and lovingly remind you of your goal in this area, and to whom you could confess your failings?**

## **WRAPPING IT UP**

James wants us to recognize how difficult it is to control our speech and how damaging ungodly words can be. This should make all of us become more careful about our words. Those who teach can greatly influence fellow church members for good or evil. Therefore, God judges those in leadership more strictly. But all of us need to use the precious gift of speech as it was intended: to bless God and others; to spread the good news of salvation; to instruct and gently correct; and to encourage and strengthen fellow believers. In the coming week, let's invite the Holy Spirit to cleanse our hearts and develop His self-control in us so that we have His guidance as to whether respond or remain silent in various conversations.

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# THE HOLY LIFE

## 2

### HUMILITY: OVERCOMING PRIDE

**Judges 6:1—16,  
7:1—22**

By John Ebert

*Let those who boast boast in the Lord.*

1 Corinthians 1:31; 2 Corinthians 10:17

*Moses spent forty years thinking he was somebody; then he spent forty years on the back side of the desert realizing he was nobody; finally, he spent the last forty years learning what God can do with a nobody.*

D. L. Moody

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## AIM OF STUDY

- To develop humility by listening to God, depending on God, boasting in God, and waiting on God's actions on our behalf.

## KEY VERSE

*The Lord said to Gideon, "You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands, or Israel would boast against me, 'My own strength has saved me.'"*

Judges 7:2

## PREPARATION

The authors of this series suggest you read over the notes on "How to Teach the Bible in Small Group" and "Some Practical Suggestions for Leading a Small Group Discussion" in Vineyard Church of Columbus' *Small Group Leadership Training Manual* if you feel your inductive study skills are rusty. Next, before you go over the Scripture text, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then, read through the passage, keeping an open heart and ear to the Lord. Finally, work through the Bible study notes and questions below.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. Therefore, use this Bible study as a framework for the discussion you lead in your small group meeting. This means you will need to

- Go over the questions and choose which ones you want to emphasize and which you will eliminate since your time is limited.
- Note that the application questions are marked with a bullet. Rather than leaving all of these until the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture's truths and applying them to their own lives.
- Pace yourself. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could summarize some of the passage and then go to the final questions.
- Select one application question you will use with your group at the end. The question may have more than one part, but focus on the vital Biblical truth you want to encourage your group to put into practice in your final question.
- Feel free to suggest that your group continue a discussion at the next meeting or at another informal get together. You want to leave time for worship, listening to God, and prayer ministry, so don't feel you must cover every nugget of truth in a passage or allow each group member to share a mini-sermon on every question!
- You may want to create your own introduction by using a personal example or current event that illustrates the point of the study. Your introduction and any background material shared should help lead the group members' thoughts from the present moment into the text.

The authors of this series are providing these questions and accompanying material for the leaders' benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to supply resources for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously, we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor. We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The New Bible Commentary* as excellent resources for further study.

Also note that some studies advise the leaders to make copies of a handout or bring some helpful communication tool, etc.

## **SPECIAL NOTES FOR THIS STUDY—HOW TO GET HELP**

Vineyard Church of Columbus has several ministries that can assist small group leaders who pastor individuals who require more help than their small group members can give. Vineyard Columbus periodically offers seminars designed to help people with their problems. There are also recovery groups that meet together for the purpose of mutually helping each other work through a specific life problem they share in common, such as addiction to various substances, sexual behaviors, or unhealthy relationships. In the past, the church has offered support groups for those who need help dealing with anger, anxiety, divorce, grief, and post abortion trauma. Please check the Small Groups Cards displayed in the church lobby or contact the Small Groups Ministry Administrative Assistant for current information. The Small Groups Ministry staff will be happy to talk with you, as well.

For those who need more help than a seminar or small group can provide, there are two additional levels of support available. Vineyard Columbus has a team of lay counselors trained to provide short term, individual counseling. Although lay counselors are not professional counselors, they have received basic training in applying biblical principles of counseling and prayer ministry. To receive lay counseling, a person must be a regular attendee of Vineyard Church of Columbus. For further information, please contact the Lay Counseling Ministry Coordinator at the church. For those who need professional help, the Vineyard Counseling Center, a ministry of Vineyard Columbus, has several clinically and biblically trained counselors on its staff. Please call the church and ask for the person who coordinates intake of new clients and appointments.

Finally, after the Vineyard Columbus weekend services, there is always a visitor's welcome. It provides an opportunity for individuals to meet and pray with a pastor or mature leader in the church. Those pastors and leaders may then refer individuals to a group or ministry for further assistance.

## **OPENER**

John Newton, author of the hymn "Amazing Grace," achieved great fame and influence in his lifetime as a preacher, spiritual mentor, and composer. But he never forgot how far from God he had run and how much God had forgiven him. So, he often called himself, "the 'old African blasphemer'" (Armstrong, p. 1). Newton's humble view of himself stemmed from remembering years of arrogantly relying on himself and rebelling against authority.

Up to age seven, John learned about God from his mother who taught him Scripture, church catechisms, and hymns. After she died, he had less Christian influence in his life. He sailed with his father five times from ages 11 through 17. While learning about seamanship, he probably absorbed some lessons from the men who crewed those ships, too! In between those trips, his stepmother did not monitor him closely, so he got into trouble at home (Armstrong, p. 1). At 17, John fell in love with the daughter of some wealthy friends. He wanted to be with her and decided to ignore his father's plans for a career in the sugar and slave trades. When his father disciplined him by sending him to sea as a common sailor, John strayed far from his strict upbringing by smoking, swearing, and indulging in sexual sin. He impulsively followed his heart, ran from his father's plans again, and ended up being pressed into service by the British navy.

During his navy years and later ones working among slave traders, he relied on worldly wisdom and disregarded a significant dream reminding him of his faith. He often found himself in desperate situations, would reflect on the mess he'd made of his life, but efforts to obey Christ were short-lived. Repeated crises including falling overboard at sea and having to work as a lowly servant to a slave trader in Africa did not persuade him to return to Christ until he fell ill and nearly died (Armstrong, pp. 2–4). “After this episode, Newton never went back on his faith. He developed a consistent habit of prayer, and his watchword became humility: ‘What a poor creature I am in myself, incapable of standing a single hour without continual fresh supplies of strength and grace from [God]...’” (Armstrong, p. 4).

Newton learned to depend on God's grace since he later faced storms, starvation, mutiny, and slave uprisings. He married the woman he loved but kept his faith to himself for some time. He idolized his wife and was embarrassed to speak about Christ with her or her family. However, his surrender to Christ was sincere and gradually the whole pattern and direction of his life changed. While still in the slave trade, he began praying for the slaves on his ship. Then, John reconnected with a man he had influenced years before to abandon Christian beliefs. Despite counseling this acquaintance to repent, Newton could not persuade him to do so. Later, when he learned this young man had died screaming about going to hell but still would not repent, Newton was filled with regret. After another serious illness and meeting a genuinely Christian sea captain, he gave up commanding slave ships and finally abandoned the slave trade entirely (Armstrong, pp. 4–5). He got a government job and became an active layman in England, which led to studying for the ministry. He pastored in a small town, where he enjoyed teaching children and joining ministers in his area who held meetings to reach out to youth (Armstrong, pp. 5–6).

After years of mocking God, he was openly emotional in his sermons pleading with his hearers to be reconciled to God. He was hospitable and held long discussions in his home or traveled to share Christ when invitations came (Armstrong, p. 7). He even published his autobiography without using his name, but that only spread his fame more widely because readers soon guessed whose story it was. He wrote hymns including “Amazing Grace,” which we still sing today. Eventually he was invited to pastor in one of London's richest districts, which enabled him to influence an entire generation of evangelical leaders (Armstrong, p. 8).

Still, he never forgot how far he had strayed from the Lord and had his tombstone engraved with “John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had laboured to destroy” (Armstrong, p. 8).

Why did someone of John Newton's reputation draw attention to his faults and not his successes? Why would an influential role model for young people and British statesmen call himself a blasphemer, an infidel, and a libertine? John Newton, like the apostle Paul, was deeply aware of the depths of his own spiritual poverty and the riches of Christ's gracious forgiveness. John Newton had finally abandoned pursuing life on his own terms and had responded to God with humility. Newton began to imitate the surrendered life Jesus had modeled by humbly following His Father's will. When the Father required Jesus to literally love us to death, He suffered torture and a criminal's death on the cross for our misdeeds. Along with others, John Newton found great success when he stopped relying on himself, stopped listening to worldly wisdom, and humbly served the Lord Jesus Christ. In this study, we will look at a man who went from obscurity to victory not because of his own cleverness or resources but only by the grace of God. His name was Gideon.

## PRAYER

*Pray that God would give you humility to listen to what He wants to say to you through this study and that you would put it into practice.*

## INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

*This is background material for leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.*

The Book of Judges records the events that take place after Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt and after Joshua led them into the Promised Land of Canaan that God had given them. It covers a period of several hundred years and culminates when Samuel anoints Saul to be the first king of Israel (Olson, p. 724). The last verse of the book summarizes the situation in Israel throughout this time:

“In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit” (Judges 21:25).

As this verse says, the people usually did not see fit to worship God and obey His law during this time. Without a strong leader like Moses or Joshua to guide them, the people continually went astray. When Samuel ends the period of Judges by anointing Saul as king, the hope is that his leadership will help the people to be faithful to God once again.

The Israelites obviously needed strong leadership, as the following verses note.

Whenever the Lord raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the Lord relented because of their groaning under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their ancestors, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways.

Judges 2:18–19

This cycle of Israel’s idolatry, oppression by their enemies, and then God’s deliverance through an anointed judge occurs repeatedly throughout this book. Gideon is such a judge; God used him to deliver the people. Gideon’s story is recounted in Judges 6–8. He is a member of the Abiezrite family, which according to Joshua 17:2 and 1 Chronicles 7:18 is part of the tribe of Manasseh. The exact location of Gideon’s hometown, Ophrah, is uncertain, but it is most likely west of the Jordan River in the Jezreel Valley. This large valley connects the Jordan River with the Mediterranean Sea. It contained fertile farmland, but was also the natural route for traders and invaders to take through the land of Israel (Block, p. 258; Schneider, p. 103, note 4).

## STUDY THE PASSAGE: Judges 6:1–16, 7:1–22

### 1. Let’s read aloud Judges 6:1–10.

#### **According to this passage, what had God done?**

God gave the Israelites into the hands of the Midianites for seven years (v. 1). Verse three expands the description of the invaders to include “the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples.” All these peoples were from the area east of the Jordan (Schneider, p.

102). They were not settled people, but nomads, “a roving tribe.” Apparently they invaded Israel each year at harvest and took all the food and then moved on (Wood, p. 203).

God sent a prophet to the people of Israel, who reminded them that God had brought them out of slavery in Egypt. Then, God had delivered the Israelites from Egypt and all their oppressors and had given them their land (v. 9). Finally, God told them that He is their God and that He has commanded them not to worship the gods of the Amorites but they had not listened (v. 10).

The Amorites were people from the west, closer to the Mediterranean Sea (Schneider, p. 102). These were the people that God had driven out in order to give the promised land of Canaan to Israel. But instead of worshipping God, who had graciously given them their land, the Israelites were worshipping the false gods of the people who had been driven out.

The people of Israel should not have been surprised by the oppression that they were suffering. God had warned them that this is what would happen if they failed to keep their covenant with Him. For example, Deuteronomy 28:29 and 31 says they will be “oppressed and robbed” and their animals will be taken from them (Davis, p. 91).

Note that the word “impoverished” in verse six literally means “made small” (Younger, p. 169). Another synonym might be “humiliated.” Because the people of Israel were not willing to humble themselves and worship God, they were being humbled by His judgment on them. Of course, the Lord designed this punishment to lead them to repentance so that He could restore them (Deuteronomy 30:1–10).

## **2. According to this passage, what had the Israelites done to bring about their own ruin?**

Verse one records that “the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord.” The specifics of what kind of evil they did are not described, but based on verse 10, we can guess that they were worshipping gods other than the true God. Whatever evil they were doing, the result was God’s judgment in the form of oppression by the Midianites and other peoples from the east.

In verse two, the Israelites made shelters “in mountain clefts, caves and strongholds.” The word translated as “shelters” in the NIV might more accurately be interpreted as “hiding places” as it is in the NRSV. The first response of the Israelites to their oppression is not to look to God for help, but to try to hide from their oppressors, to solve the problem on their own. Only after seven years of suffering do they look to God.

Verse six says that the people “cried out to the Lord for help.” They do not turn away from the evil they are doing; they just cry for help. “There is no hint of repentance, only a cry of pain” (Block, p. 253). The prophet’s message in verses eight to ten confirms that the people’s cry to the Lord “had been merely a cry for help and not of repentance for sin” (Wood, p. 204). It is not clear whether the Israelites are so desperate that they will ask any god they have heard of for help or that they think that God owes it to them to rescue them no matter what they have done. Whatever they think, “the relationship between Yahweh and Israel is not a mechanical process in which Israel can manipulatively call on Yahweh and he instantaneously responds” (Younger, p. 170). The

people cry for help, but they don't change their ways. Note: "Yahweh" is the transliteration of the Hebrew's special covenant name for God. This word is normally translated as "the LORD" in the TNIV.

### **3. Why is God so disappointed with the Israelites (vv. 1, 10)?**

The Israelites refused to listen to God. "Yahweh's disappointment with the response of his people is summarized in a few words: 'You have not listened to me [lit. 'my voice']'" (Block, p. 256). God had promised that if the Israelites kept His covenant and worshipped Him, He would bless them, but if they did not, then their enemies would oppress them. These blessings and curses are summarized in Deuteronomy 27 and 28, but the people had forgotten these words. They had not listened to their God.

In the Vineyard, when we talk about God speaking to us, we often think of God revealing in some special way, such as through receiving a mental impression, having a Scripture come to mind, seeing a vision, sensing an inner voice, having a dream, or something like that. But that is not what this passage is referring to. The Holy Spirit had not yet been poured out widely on God's people. That was promised to occur when the Messiah came and God would restore His people (Joel 2:28–29). In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit visited or anointed certain individuals for specific roles, so the Israelites were probably not listening to God in the same ways we do. Instead, He spoke to the Israelites in more public ways: through actions He'd undertaken on their behalf (e.g., deliverance from Egypt, defeat of enemies), provision of the Promised Land of Canaan, and raising up judges to deliver them from their oppressors. God also spoke to them through the Mosaic Law handed down through Moses after He brought them out from under Egyptian rule. Finally, He communicated to them through prophets, such as the one who announced the word of the Lord in verses eight to ten.

Instead of hearing what God had said to them in all these different ways, the Israelites chose to listen to the people and the culture around them. God had told them to drive out the Amorites in order to purify the land (Deuteronomy 7:1–6). However, they failed to do this (Judges 1:27–36) and were being influenced by the pagan culture instead of remaining loyal to Yahweh. They even went so far as to follow and worship the gods of the Amorites and the other peoples around them (Judges 2:12–13).

Even after the Israelites had suffered oppression and judgment for seven years, they still did not listen to God. Instead, they relied on themselves. First, they tried to hide from their oppressors (v. 2). When that didn't work, they cried to God for help (v. 6). Even their cry for help was on their own terms. They wanted God to help, but they wouldn't change their ways or stop following other gods (Block, p. 253; Wood, p. 204).

- **Who do you listen to regularly? How often do you turn to God in a crisis without fully surrendering to Him then or in the good times as well?**

*This could be asked rhetorically.*

- **How often do you read Scripture and ask God to speak to you through His Word? When do you take time to be quiet and listen to God?**

Today we have the privilege of the Holy Spirit speaking to us through God’s Word and other revelatory gifts. Reading Scripture is like listening to God talk about Himself. In the Bible, He tells us what He is like and how He deals with people. When we become familiar with His character, we can more easily discern how He might act or respond to us. We may also learn to trust Him more. We also can discover that He wants to disclose Himself to us—if we will be patient and listen. If we don’t quiet ourselves and practice listening to God, we might miss the wonderful things He may want to reveal.

#### **4. Would someone please read Judges 6:11–16?**

##### **Based on what Gideon does and says in verses 11, 13, and 15, on what or whom is he depending?**

Verse 11 says that Gideon “was threshing wheat in a winepress.” Typically, a winepress would have two layers (Smith, “Wine-press”) and might be dug into the ground because it would need to contain the grapes being crushed and the liquid pressed from the grapes. A threshing floor would not usually be dug into the ground but rather be on an open flat area so the wind would drive off the lighter chaff leaving the grain behind. So Gideon is threshing in the winepress in order to hide what he is doing from the Midianites (Block, pp. 258–259). Gideon is depending on himself, on his own cleverness, to keep his wheat safe from the oppressors by threshing it in a place he thinks they won’t look for it.

In verse 13, in response to the statement that the Lord is with him, Gideon asks, in effect, “What has the Lord done for us lately?” For him, the stories of Exodus are just tales from the past, not the present (Schneider, p. 104). However, Gideon seems to only know parts of these stories from Israel’s history. Gideon and the rest of the Israelites are so influenced by the pagan culture that they don’t even remember the details of God’s covenant with them (Younger, p. 180). Like the other Israelites, Gideon fails to acknowledge Israel’s responsibility for their crisis. Instead, he blames God for what has happened (Block, p. 260; Schneider, p. 104; Younger, p. 175). In reality, the problem is not that God has turned away from the people, but that the people have turned away from God (Isaiah 59:1–2, Davis, p. 95). As a result of his ignorance of God’s covenant and his flawed view of God, Gideon fails to depend on God.

In verse 15, Gideon protests that he is the lowest member of the weakest clan in Manasseh. He is the least likely candidate to save Israel. While he does show “a spirit of humility in referring to his own lowly position among the people” (Wood, p. 205), he is again indicating that he is depending on himself and not on God. He is looking at his own position and ability and he sees that in himself he is not able to save Israel.

#### **5. According to verses 12, 14, and 16, on what or whom does the angel of the Lord (or the Lord) say that Gideon should depend?**

Note that verses 11 and 12 identify the one speaking to Gideon as “the angel of the Lord” and verses 14 and 16 identify the one speaking as “the Lord.” Although the Lord himself is speaking to Gideon, Gideon does not appear to recognize the supernatural character of his visitor until verse 22. Apparently the angel or the Lord appeared in human form. The unusual manner in which the angel or the Lord spoke to him might have led Gideon to

suspect something, but he is not certain about this until the miracle in verse 21 (Block, p. 259; Wood, p. 205).

In verse 12, the angel of the Lord tells Gideon that the Lord is with him and calls him a mighty warrior. In verse 14, the Lord tells Gideon to go in the strength he has and save Israel. The Lord also says that He is the one sending Gideon, indicating in a different way that He is with Gideon. Finally, in verse 16, the Lord again promises to be with Gideon. With the strength of the Lord's presence with him, Gideon will be able to defeat all the Midianites and save Israel. Each of the three speeches refers to God's presence with Gideon and the strength available to Gideon (Block, p. 262).

In verse 12, the angel of the Lord addresses Gideon as "mighty warrior." This is ironic because Gideon is not a brave soldier preparing for battle. Instead, he is hiding in a winepress to avoid his enemies. He seems to be the very opposite of a mighty warrior (Block, p. 259; Olson, p. 796; Younger, p. 173).

Gideon's claim in verse 15 that he is the least in his family might mean that he is the youngest. While that would make him an unlikely choice from a human perspective, God often chooses differently from men. For example, David was the youngest in his family, yet God chose him to be king of Israel (1 Samuel 17:14). When He chose David, God told Samuel that He did not look at things the way men did, but He looked at people's hearts (1 Samuel 16:7) (Schneider, p. 105).

Gideon's protest that he is too young and insignificant to lead is reminiscent of Moses' objection to God's call in Exodus 3–4. Likewise in Judges, God's response to the person resisting Him is similar (Schneider, p. 105; Block, p. 257; Younger, p. 173). "Against Gideon's inadequacy, Yahweh stacks his adequacy—and it is simply the same promise of verse 12 only in its classic form. Everything that Gideon needs is supplied in this brief statement: 'I will be with you' (v. 16)" (Davis, p. 95). This is the same way that God answered Moses' objections in Exodus 3:12 and Joshua's worries in Joshua 1:5. This same promise appears repeatedly throughout the Bible: Genesis 28:15; Genesis 46:4; Deuteronomy 20:1; Psalm 23:4; Isaiah 41:8–10; Isaiah 43:2, 5; Matthew 28:20; and Acts 18:9–10. "God has nothing else or more to offer" Gideon than His presence with him. While the promise of God's presence doesn't answer all Gideon's questions or give him all the details, it is enough to enable him to step out in obedience to God (Davis, p. 95).

Finally, "in the ways of the Lord, Gideon's weakness is a virtue" (Olson, p. 796). Paul calls attention to this characteristic of God in his letters to the Corinthians: "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things..." (1 Corinthians 1:27–28a). "For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength" (1 Corinthians 1:25) (Olson, p. 798). "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'" (2 Corinthians 12:9). "Gideon's inadequacy allows room for what is most important and determinative in this mission: God's presence and God's strength" (Olson, p. 796).

- **On whom do others see you depending? Do you experience insecurity because you rely on yourself or others more than on God?**

Insecurity is really the flip side of pride. Either way we are self-focused, not God-focused.

## **6. Would someone else please read Judges 7:1–8?**

**Imagine the scene in verse one. Gideon and his 32,000 men are camped on a hill and below them in the valley are 135,000 Midianites (Judges 8:10) (Younger, p. 192). If you were Gideon, what would you think the odds would be of defeating Midian’s army?**

Attacking an army of 135,000 with only 32,000 men does not give one good odds for victory. There are some possible strategies outnumbered troops can use [see below], but what is significant here is what the Lord directs Gideon to do.

Do not get bogged down in military plans since all of these are speculative. Instead, move on and discuss what surprising orders the Lord gave. It’s often easier for a smaller army to take a defensive position and force the larger army to attack. So one thing Gideon might do is stay on the high ground, prepare a defensive position, and wait.

Also, outnumbered forces can engage in guerilla attacks in order to avoid direct confrontation with the enemy. Gideon and his men might stay hidden and watch for opportunities to sneak up on the Midianites and destroy some of their supplies or steal a few of their animals. If he can do enough damage to the Midianites with these quick raids, the Midianites might decide they are not getting enough plunder from the Israelites to offset what they are losing to Gideon. This might cause the Midianites to stop invading Israel.

A better strategy for Gideon might be to divide and conquer the enemy. Instead of attacking the whole Midianite army at once, he might wait until they divide up into raiding parties. By taking on smaller raiding parties one at a time, Gideon might be able to eventually subdue the enemy.

## **7. In verses two to three, what does God tell Gideon to do?**

Although the Midianites already have a five to one numerical superiority over Gideon, God tells Gideon that his army is too big and he needs to send some of his men home!

While Gideon might feel that he can’t afford to give up any of his soldiers, the first reduction in verse three does make some sense. In Deuteronomy 20:8, part of God’s law for preparing for battle was to tell everyone who was afraid to go home (Olson, p. 802; Younger, p. 189). The logic behind this might be that soldiers who are afraid may turn and run away when the battle starts. The enemy might be able to exploit the gap left by the fleeing soldiers, or the other soldiers might be discouraged and give up the fight as well when they see some of their own run away. Unfortunately for Gideon, the morale of his men is so low that more than two thirds of them leave because they are afraid (Wood, p. 215). Even though Gideon is obeying God’s Word and trying to make sure he has soldiers who are brave enough to fight, he had to be discouraged to see so many leave.

## 8. Why does God tell Gideon to send away most of his troops (v. 2)?

From a human perspective, one would expect verse two to say that *Midian* has too many men, not that Gideon has too many (Block, p. 275)! Gideon is already outnumbered five to one. How can he have too many men?

As verse two indicates, the problem is “man’s proneness to take credit to himself for victories won, rather than giving it to God” (Wood, p. 216). Even though they are outnumbered, God doesn’t trust that the people will acknowledge that He had given them victory (Schneider, p. 110). God saw that prior to the reduction, if Gideon won, the people would just claim they had beaten the odds. Even after the elimination of those who were fearful, the people would probably still claim that their bravery had achieved the victory. God has to reduce Gideon’s army to a mere 300 making the odds so impossible that “the men now would admit that God was the One who gave the victory” (Wood, p. 216). The Lord’s goal is that Gideon and his men will have to depend on God and “that God will receive all the glory for the coming victory” (Younger, p. 189).

“Because of the tendency of God’s people to glorify their own efforts, to trust in their own proven methods, to credit their own contributions, to think well of their cleverness, Yahweh frequently insists that his people be reduced to utter helplessness, so that they *must* recognize that their deliverance can only be chalked up to Yahweh’s power and mercy” (Davis, p. 104). “God must bring his servants to a moment when all human confidence is stripped away, when they sit silently in humble adoration of this God as the One who is totally sufficient against all odds to accomplish his divine will” (Younger, p. 193). Because we have this “tendency to steal God’s praise,” “He cannot trust us with his work unless we realize how inadequate we are to do it” (Davis, p. 104).

“F.F. Bruce’s paraphrase of 2 Corinthians 12:9 nicely sums up the primary thrust of the Gideon story: ‘My power is most fully displayed when my people are weak’” (Davis, p. 102). God purposely weakens Gideon’s army so that the power of God will be displayed in the victory rather than the power of men.

## 9. In verses four to eight, what does the Lord direct Gideon to do next?

God, however, does not seem discouraged by the loss of more than half the army. In fact, God says that the remaining army is still too big (v. 4)! To further reduce the size of the army, God tells Gideon to divide the men based on how they drink. The specifics of the test are somewhat unclear because lapping like a dog would seem to require kneeling down (v. 5). From the reference to lapping with the hand to the mouth in verse 6, it appears that lapping like a dog refers to scooping the water in one’s hand and bringing it to one’s mouth to lap rather than bending over to lap directly from the water (Wood, p. 232, note 26).

Some commentators think that the choice of lappers over kneelers implies a greater alertness for battle, or less interest in satisfying personal need, or some other suitability for fighting (Wood, p. 215). However, all such suggestions seem to infer far too much about each man’s character from simply looking at how they drink. It seems more likely that the test has no particular meaning, but is simply an arbitrary way to reduce the number of soldiers (Block, p. 277; Younger, p. 189). In fact, if God’s intent was to weaken Gideon’s army, picking braver or more capable troops would seem to be

counterproductive (Davis, p. 104). Choosing a less militarily able group would serve better to demonstrate that it is God who will give the victory (Schneider, pp. 111–112).

**10. Based on Gideon’s actions, to whom was Gideon listening? On whom was Gideon depending?**

God tells Gideon to send most of his troops home and Gideon does what God says. By sending all but 300 of his soldiers home in obedience to God, Gideon is clearly depending on God for the victory. In Chapter Six, Gideon was relying on himself; in this chapter Gideon is listening to God, obeying God, and depending on God.

*Optional: You may summarize these verses and move on.*

**11. Let’s read Judges 7:9–18. How does the Lord encourage Gideon to attack?**

God wakes Gideon and tells him to go to the Midianite camp. This is a way to boost Gideon’s courage. Gideon and his servant can first spy on the camp. They overhear one soldier discussing a dream with his friend. The friend interprets it as Israel’s certain victory because God has delivered the Midianites into Gideon’s hands.

**12. Let’s read Judges 7:19–22.**

**In this passage, what did Gideon and his men do?**

Gideon and his men approach the Midianite camp at the changing of the middle watch, which would be around midnight (v. 19). At that time, one set of guards would be tired and the next set would not yet be fully awake and accustomed to the darkness and noises. Attacking at this moment would maximize the opportunity for confusion in the Midianite camp and would induce the Midianites to mistake one another for enemies (Schneider, p. 115; Wood, p. 219).

Note: “surprise night attacks do not always succeed.” If even a small contingent of the Midianites were able to organize themselves in the confusion, they would most likely be able to defeat Gideon and his 300 men. “Any number of things could go wrong with Gideon’s strategy—as ingenious as it is. Unless Yahweh is in control of the events and especially the disposition of the Midianites in the camp, things could easily turn out another way” (Younger, p. 191).

In fact, instead of actually attacking the Midianite camp, Gideon and his men just blow trumpets, smash jars, wave torches, and shout (vv. 19–20). It is ironic that Gideon’s men shout, “A sword” in verse 20, because they are armed with trumpets, jars and torches, not swords. The Bible never mentions that Gideon or any of his men have swords. The Bible does say that the Midianites have swords, but they end up using them on each other (v. 22) (Block, p. 282).

Even after blowing trumpets and shouting, Gideon and his men still do not attack. Gideon’s men stand in place while their enemies frantically try to escape (v. 21) (Block, p. 282). Although Gideon’s plan for a surprise attack at night is ingenious, his men “remain

primarily hornblowers,” standing by and watching the resulting confusion in the Midianite camp (Davis, p. 105). Gideon’s winning strategy is to trust and obey God.

The locations of Beth Shittah, Zerarah, Abel Meholah, and Tabbath (v. 22) are unknown (Schneider, pp. 115–116). Presumably they are to the east, because it is most likely that the Midianites are fleeing back to their home area to the east.

### **13. In this passage, what does God do?**

No activity is attributed to God until verse 22. In that verse, the Lord causes the Midianites to turn on each other (Younger, p. 196). Gideon and his 300 were not the reason for the victory, but were used by God to achieve God’s victory. It’s all about God, so He should receive the glory (Younger, p. 201).

Note the “balance between divine agency and human participation” in this passage. Previously, God weakened Gideon’s army, but He did not tell Gideon to send the entire army home. Although God does not want humans to take away His glory, He still chooses to use humans to help accomplish His will (Olson, pp. 804–805). In this passage, Gideon and his men must sneak up on the enemy camp, make noise, and stand their ground before God acts to defeat their enemies. While God gives the victory and God receives the glory, God may not act if we do not listen to Him, trust Him, and glorify Him.

*Optional: If you were Gideon, in the “post-battle” interview, to what would you attribute the victory?*

### **14. The word “humility” does not appear in any of the passages in this study and none of the questions mentioned it either. What do these passages teach us about humility?**

In Judges 6:1–10, the Israelites were listening to themselves and the culture around them instead of listening to God. Because they did not do what God commanded, the Israelites were brought low or humiliated by their enemies. Their choice was to disobey God and be humbled by their enemies instead of to humble themselves and obey God. This illustrates that one way to show humility is to acknowledge that we don’t know everything, to listen to God, and to do what He says.

In Judges 6:11–16, Gideon is depending on himself for protection from the Midianites. Because he trusts only himself, he is hiding in a wine press and hoping the Midianites don’t notice him. Then the Lord appears and promises to be with him. When he depends on God’s presence and God’s strength, Gideon is able to come out of hiding and defeat the whole Midianite army. Another way to show humility is to obey God and depend on Him to work through us to accomplish what we know we cannot do on our own.

In Judges 7:1–8, God tells Gideon to send most of his soldiers home so that Israel will not boast against the Lord. Our human tendency is to boast about our accomplishments. It takes humility to look away from ourselves and boast about what God has done. Sometimes God has to help us by putting us in situations where it would be impossible for us to succeed without His intervention. Even in less extreme circumstances, we show humility by boasting in the Lord instead of in what we have done.

Finally, in Judges 7:19–22, Gideon and his men approach the enemy camp and make a lot of noise, but then they stand and wait for God to act. Standing and waiting for God can be difficult, especially in precarious situations like a battle against a large enemy army. It is often easier for us to keep doing things, trying to force events to come out the way we want. When we wait for God and trust Him to act on our behalf, we show humility.

One of the slogans John Wimber gave the Vineyard church is, “It’s not about you; it’s about Him [God].” That may be the essence of humility. When we listen to ourselves, depend on ourselves, boast in our own efforts, and rush in to do things our way, we are demonstrating pride. When we listen for God to speak through the Bible, through His actions, through other people, through His Spirit, etc., we show humility. When we depend on God, by trusting Him and obeying Him, we show humility. When we boast in what God has done, by glorifying, praising, and thanking Him, we show humility. When we wait on God, by obeying His commands and looking for Him to act, we show humility.

This is what the LORD says: “Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let those who boast boast about this: that they understand and know me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,” declares the LORD (Jeremiah 9:23–24).

## **APPLICATION**

*Select one of the following application questions to finish your discussion time.*

- **Is there some area of your life that the Holy Spirit has brought to your attention where you need to develop humility? For example:**
  - **Where you are listening to yourself instead of obeying God?**
  - **Where you are depending on yourself instead of trusting God?**
  - **Where you are boasting in yourself instead of glorifying God?**
  - **Where you are rushing to act instead of waiting on God?**
  
- **What do you boast about when you experience success or victory in your life? One sign of humility is boasting in the Lord. What are some things you can boast about that the Lord has done for you?**

- **Humility is hard for us because humans are naturally self-focused. Even when we try to be humble or when we notice that we are being humble, we often begin focusing on ourselves again as opposed to simply having Jesus' humble heart. Let's pray for one another that God would develop in us unconscious habits of listening to, trusting, obeying, glorifying, and waiting on God, so that we can be humble without becoming proud of our humility.**

## **WRAPPING IT UP**

Humility means trusting in God more than myself. It means putting God first and honoring Him as Lord. It means depending on God to guide us through life instead of relying on our own plans and schemes. It means noticing how often God rescues us and takes care of us instead of taking credit ourselves for the good things that happen to us. It means taking time to praise and worship God instead of boasting about our efforts. It may mean waiting for God to intervene in our lives, and humility requires us to let go of trying to control everything ourselves.

Humility is difficult because we don't like to give up control and trust God when the outcome is uncertain. Humility is difficult because it also involves looking to the needs of others instead of just paying attention to our own. Humility means taking the lowly posture of a servant rather than being in the forefront as a leader or media star. It means obeying what God has commanded in the Bible instead of following the trends of the culture around us. Humility is hard because it requires us to imitate the humble heart of Jesus who gave up all His privileges in heaven to die stripped of honor, abandoned by friends, and seemingly rejected by God. Clearly the Bible portrays a choice for us: to be proud and self-sufficient but ultimately forfeit our lives, or to humble ourselves before God and have life with Him for eternity.

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# THE HOLY LIFE

## 3

### **PATIENCE: ACCEPTING GOD'S TIMING**

#### **I Samuel 24:1—12**

By John Ebert

*Impatience is a form of unbelief. It's what we begin to feel when we start to doubt the wisdom of God's timing or the goodness of God's guidance.*

John Piper

*God may seem slow, but He's never late.*

Roy Lessin

*I find the doing of the will of God leaves me no time for disputing about His plans.*

George MacDonald

*More mistakes are probably made by speed than by sloth, by impatience than by dilatoriness. God's purposes often ripen slowly. If the door is shut, don't put your shoulder to it. Wait till Christ takes out the key and opens it.*

John Stott

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## AIM OF STUDY

- To help us develop patience by being willing to wait on God’s timing even when people or circumstances suggest we make things happen by our own efforts.

## KEY VERSE

*“Some urged me to kill you, but I spared you; I said, ‘I will not lay my hand on my lord, because he is the Lord’s anointed.’”*

I Samuel 24:10b

## PREPARATION

The authors of this series suggest you read over the notes on “How to Teach the Bible in Small Group” and “Some Practical Suggestions for Leading a Small Group Discussion” in Vineyard Church of Columbus’ *Small Group Leadership Training Manual* if you feel your inductive study skills are rusty. Next, before you go over the Scripture text, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then, read through the passage, keeping an open heart and ear to the Lord. Finally, work through the Bible study notes and questions below.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. Therefore, use this Bible study as a framework for the discussion you lead in your small group meeting. This means, you will need to

- Go over the questions and choose which ones you want to emphasize and which you will eliminate since your time is limited.
- Note that the application questions are marked with a bullet. Rather than leaving all of these to the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture’s truths and applying them to their own lives.
- Pace yourself. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could summarize some of the passage and then go to the final questions.
- Select one application question you will use with your group at the end. The question may have more than one part, but focus on the vital Biblical truth you want to encourage your group to put into practice in your final question.
- Feel free to suggest that your group continue a discussion at the next meeting or at another informal get together. You want to leave time for worship, listening to God, and prayer ministry, so don’t feel you must cover every nugget of truth in a passage or allow each group member to share a mini-sermon on every question!
- You may want to create your own introduction by using a personal example or current event that illustrates the point of the study. Your introduction and any background material shared should help lead the group members’ thoughts from the present moment into the text.

The authors of this series are providing these questions and accompanying material for the leaders’ benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to supply resources for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously, we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor. We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The New Bible Commentary* as excellent resources for further study.

Also note that some studies advise the leaders to make copies of a handout or bring some helpful communication tool, etc.

## **SPECIAL NOTES FOR THIS STUDY—HOW TO GET HELP**

Vineyard Church of Columbus has several ministries that can assist small group leaders who pastor individuals who require more help than their small group members can give. Vineyard Columbus periodically offers seminars designed to help people with their problems. There are also recovery groups that meet together for the purpose of mutually helping each other work through a specific life problem they share in common, such as addiction to various substances, sexual behaviors, or unhealthy relationships. In the past, the church has offered support groups for those who need help dealing with anger, anxiety, divorce, grief, and post abortion trauma. Please check the Small Groups Cards displayed in the church lobby or contact the Small Groups Ministry Administrative Assistant for current information. The Small Groups Ministry staff will be happy to talk with you, as well.

For those who need more help than a seminar or small group can provide, there are two additional levels of support available. Vineyard Columbus has a team of lay counselors trained to provide short term, individual counseling. Although lay counselors are not professional counselors, they have received basic training in applying biblical principles of counseling and prayer ministry. To receive lay counseling, a person must be a regular attendee of Vineyard Church of Columbus. For further information, please contact the Lay Counseling Ministry Coordinator at the church. For those who need professional help, the Vineyard Counseling Center, a ministry of Vineyard Columbus, has several clinically and biblically trained counselors on its staff. Please call the church and ask for the person who coordinates intake of new clients and appointments.

Finally, after the Vineyard Columbus weekend services, there is always a visitor's welcome. It provides an opportunity for individuals to meet and pray with a pastor or mature leader in the church. Those pastors and leaders may then refer individuals to a group or ministry for further assistance.

## **OPENER**

How hard is it for you to wait for something you expect to happen? How much harder is it when God has clearly told you what His will is? Many of us feel the urge to pray, "Father, Thy will be done...and please do it RIGHT NOW!" We may even be tempted to "help God out" since He doesn't always move as quickly as we would like Him to. Just like us, people in the Bible wrestled with waiting for God's timing versus acting independently by trying to make things happen to satisfy their own wishes. Of course sometimes they created unnecessary trials and had to live with the consequences of their sins just as we do.

God promised Abraham a large number of descendents, but when his wife couldn't get pregnant, she decided to "help God out." Her maid would become the surrogate mother. After all, it was a legal practice in the Ancient Near East. Fourteen years later, when Abraham and Sarah did conceive, pride, jealousy, and conflict erupted. Sarah and Abraham had thought that *they* could get what God promised, but instead they reaped a bitter harvest. Despite their impatience, God fulfilled His words and their son Jacob was born in the Lord's perfect timing.

Other Biblical characters, faced with unpleasant waiting, decided to “help God out.” Saul, chosen as the first king of Israel, was told to wait for Samuel, the nation’s prophet, for seven days at Gilgal. At that time, a special offering would be made to ask for God’s favor in battle. While waiting, Saul had watched his troops dwindle in number and hide due to fear of their opponents. When Samuel didn’t appear on the seventh day, Saul usurped the priestly role and offered the sacrifices. Just then Samuel arrived, confronted Saul, and delivered God’s message that Saul’s impatience and disobedience would cost his family the crown. [More details are given in the background information for leaders below.]

The moment we begin manipulating lives in order to control circumstances, we become slaves to our own plan, get in God’s way, and eventually reap grievous, unintended consequences. The Holy Life is a life of believing, accepting, hoping, and trusting in God’s perfect will, in God’s perfect timing.

## **PRAYER**

*Pray that the Holy Spirit will guide you through this study and reveal issues related to why we have difficulty being patient. Ask Him to cultivate this fruit in our lives.*

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

*This is background material for leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.*

At the beginning of the Book of I Samuel, the people of Israel did not have an official government. They were to live under God’s kinship (Deuteronomy 33:5; Judges 8:23). The Book of Judges records that the people often followed their own choices rather than closely following the Lord. Then, a crisis would occur in Israel, the people would turn back to God and ask for help, and God would call a leader to rescue the people. The leader would succeed because of God’s mercy, and the people would rejoice. But, when the crisis had passed, the people would go back to doing as they saw fit (Judges 21:25) until another crisis visited them.

Early in I Samuel, God raised up Samuel as a prophet, priest, and judge to give direction to the nation. When threatened by enemies, the people asked Samuel to give them a king (I Samuel 8). This was a slap in God’s face who served as their King and ruled through His law and leaders. But, with God’s guidance, Samuel anointed Saul as king of Israel (I Samuel 9–10). Unfortunately, Saul had difficulty trusting and obeying God and eventually, “the Lord was grieved that he had made Saul king over Israel” (I Samuel 15:35b).

In one incident (recorded in I Samuel 13:1–14), Saul was preparing to fight an enemy. Samuel had told him he would arrive on a certain day to offer sacrifices to seek God’s favor. Saul was afraid that his army would desert him, and because Samuel didn’t arrive at the expected time, Saul offered the sacrifice himself, even though it was against God’s command. Samuel actually came just after Saul finished the sacrifice, indicating that Saul could not even bring himself to wait a few hours for Samuel to arrive.

Saul’s impatience showed that he did not trust God and, as a result, God would no longer trust him. God did not immediately remove Saul as king, but Samuel told him, “now your kingdom will not endure; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of this people, because you have not kept the Lord’s command” (v. 14). That man who trusted God more fully was the teenaged shepherd, David. Before becoming known as king, he would serve in

Saul's army, marry Saul's younger daughter, and become a trusted friend of the crown prince Jonathan. Not until Saul's death would David assume the role of king even though he had been anointed many years beforehand.

## **STUDY THE PASSAGE: I Samuel 16:1, 10—13; 18:5—11; 24:1—12; 26:7—12**

### **1. Would someone please read aloud I Samuel 16:1, 10—13?**

#### **What do we find out about David in this passage?**

Except for a genealogy at the end of the Book of Ruth, this passage is the first place in the Bible to mention of David. He is introduced as one chosen by God to become the second king of Israel. In verse one, the Lord told Samuel He had chosen one of the sons of Jesse of Bethlehem to be the next king. A better translation of the Lord's statement might be, "I have provided *for myself* a king from among his sons," (Arnold, p. 230) implying that God created David for the purpose of being king. In verse 10, Samuel stated that the Lord had not chosen any of Jesse's other sons. In verse 12, the Lord identified David as the one He had chosen.

From a human perspective, no one would have expected God to pick David. "David was not the oldest, the biggest, the strongest, or the most impressive of his brothers. He was such an unlikely candidate that his father didn't even invite him to the sacrifice! "But the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (v. 7, Cartledge, pp. 203—204). While Saul had been chosen to be king in part because of his physical size (I Samuel 10: 23—24), "God's concern now focuses on the unseen qualities of character, leadership and obedience" (Philbeck, p. 51). These qualities in David's life become more visible as his story unfolds through the rest of this study and II Samuel.

Finally, we learn that the Spirit of the Lord came upon David with power from that day on (v. 13). Through His Spirit, God equipped David for the role to which he had called him. The character qualities that David displayed later were not simply the result of David's own efforts, but were developed in him by the gracious working of God's Holy Spirit. This is similar to our being transformed into the image of Christ developing the fruit of His Spirit as we cooperate with the Lord's work in us (Romans 8:29; Galatians 5:22-23; Philippians 1:6, 2:12—13).

*Optional: You could summarize these verses for your group and go on to the next text in question 3.*

### **2. Would someone else please read I Samuel 18:5—11?**

#### **What new information does this passage reveal about David?**

David was now no longer an unknown shepherd, but had become a successful, well-known, and popular figure in Israel. In I Samuel 17, David demonstrated courage and faith in God by defeating Goliath, the hero of the Philistines, who were the primary enemies of Israel at this time. Verses 5—6 indicate that God had favored David with success in everything he had done and that all the people, even Saul's officers, were pleased with David.

Only King Saul was unhappy with David's success. "While probably still unaware that David had previously been anointed by Samuel, Saul could see that the young man's popularity would eventually lead him to seek the throne" (Philbeck, p. 58). Since Saul already knew that the Lord had decided to take away his kingdom and give it to another (I Samuel 13:14), it is not surprising that he feared that David would take his place as king.

Saul, like David, was once filled with the Spirit of the Lord (I Samuel 11:6). But now, Saul's disobedience had twisted his heart away from God's, and now an evil spirit plagued Saul (I Samuel 16:14). Under the influence of this evil spirit, Saul attempted to keep his throne and thwart God's will by killing David. God, however, protected David and enabled him to escape.

This passage outlines the conflict that David would face for the rest of I Samuel. On the one hand, he has been chosen by God to be king and his consequent success and popularity seem to be bringing him quickly to that position. On the other hand, Saul, the previous king whom God had chosen, was still in power and was not afraid to use his power to stop David from becoming king. Despite his popularity, David had to flee the king's court and hide in the desert to preserve his life (I Samuel 19–22).

### **3. Let's now read I Samuel 24:1–12.**

*If two people wish to read, one can read verses 1–7 and the other verses 8–12.*

#### **What situation did David find himself in here?**

En-ge-di was the most important of several spring-fed oases on the western shore of the Dead Sea. It was about 35 miles southeast of Jerusalem, just below the steep limestone cliffs that led to the Judean wilderness. As an oasis, it was a refuge in the midst of a desert for both humans and animals, including the wild goats that lent their name to the nearby "Crag of the Wild Goats" (Arnold, p. 330; Cartledge, pp. 280–281).

Although Saul was busy ruling Israel and fighting off raiding Philistines, he was still pursuing David whenever the opportunity came in hopes of killing him. Having been told that David was at En-ge-di, he arrived with 3,000 soldiers to find and kill David. David might have had about 600 men with him (I Samuel 23:13). They were not soldiers, but just men who were "in distress or in debt or discontented" (I Samuel 22:2). Rather than risking a direct confrontation with Saul, David fled and hid, trying to avoid him. As Saul closed in on them, David and his men withdrew to a cave in the cliffs near En-ge-di.

Then something unexpected happened. Saul needed to relieve himself and decided that one of the caves would make a fine restroom. The cave he chose was the very one that David and his men were hiding in! With Saul's soldiers waiting outside, the odds were now reversed. Now it was only Saul by himself against David and all his men.

### **4. What did David's men say God's will was in this situation?**

David's men saw God's hand in this unlikely turn of events. They had been running and hiding from Saul for a long time. Of all the caves in the whole area, the chances were slim that Saul would walk right past the one David and his men were in, need to relieve

himself at that very moment, and pick that exact cave to enter alone. It seemed obvious to David's men that God had orchestrated this moment. "David's friends saw this as the perfect opportunity to dispatch their nemesis and make a bid for the throne" (Cartledge, p. 287). God had already rejected Saul and anointed David to be king. With David's previous success and popularity, it seemed that Saul was the only thing standing in the way of God fulfilling His promise to make David king. Now God had given David the chance to eliminate Saul. To David's companions, it seemed so perfect, and they reasoned it had to be God's will for David to kill Saul.

**5. Look at the words that David and his men use to describe Saul (especially vv. 4–6). How do their perspectives on Saul differ?**

David's men referred to Saul as "your enemy" (v. 4). However, the promise from God that they quote, "I will give your enemy into your hands for you to deal with as you wish," did not apply to Saul. In I Samuel 23:4, God had promised to give the Philistines into David's hand (Klien, p. 239). David's enemy was the enemy of Israel *and* of Saul—the Philistines.

David most typically called Saul, "the Lord's anointed" (vv. 6, 10), but also described him as "my master" (vv. 6, 10) and "my lord" (v. 8) (Klein, p. 238). While David's men saw the conflict between them and Saul, David focused on the similarity between himself and Saul. God chose and anointed Saul as king of Israel, just as He chose and anointed David. Perhaps David was imagining himself in Saul's place and thinking about how he would want to be treated (Cartledge, p. 281).

**6. What did David think God's will was? How did David come to this conclusion?**

Regardless of why God had delivered Saul into his hands, David was clear about one aspect of God's will—it was not God's will for David to kill Saul. While we might focus on the specifics of a particular situation to try to discern how God would want us to act, David started with the absolute rule—it is wrong to kill God's anointed. Even cutting off the hem of Saul's robe caused David to wonder if he had come too close to disobeying God (v. 5). For David, "it is more important that he complies with the will of God where it is unmistakably clear. What appears to the others as the will of God seems to him to be a temptation from which God will 'preserve' him" (Arnold, p. 332, quoting Hertzberg, "I and II Samuel," p. 196).

Another factor to consider was that David recognized Saul as the Lord's anointed, not as his enemy. God chose Saul to be king over Israel and, despite Saul's difficulties and disobedience, God had not yet removed him from that position. Unlike his men, David did not see Saul simply in relation to himself. He looked at Saul the way God did. Since God had not removed Saul, David did not presume to do what God had not yet done.

While David's men thought Saul's appearance alone in the cave was a God-given opportunity for David to kill Saul, David saw a different way to take advantage of this situation. He "used the opportunity to do something good by proving his innocence to Saul, leading the abashed king himself to proclaim the certainty of David's future rule. The kingdom would indeed be 'established in David's hand' (v. 20), but at the proper time and in the proper way" (Cartledge, p. 287).

Ultimately, David spared Saul. “He refuses to trust in the wisdom of his men and in his own ability to kill his adversary. Rather, he trusts in God to accomplish his purposes for his life” (Arnold, p. 334). “He will eventually have the throne of Israel, but as a gift of God rather than as a result of his grasping and maneuvering” (Arnold, p. 334). David had learned “never to challenge God’s plan or God’s *timing*. He was willing to wait on God’s timing to become king, even though it meant taking the risk and prolonging the time during which Saul could attempt to end David’s life” (Arnold, p. 336).

### **What do you think would have happened if David had followed his men’s advice?**

Things might have worked out for David to become king even if he had killed Saul. The people might have welcomed David as their new ruler, and he might have had a long and successful reign. However, this would not be a sure thing.

Even if the people accepted David as king, he would have set a precedent that there was nothing wrong with killing the king and taking his place. Someone might become dissatisfied with David’s reign, try to kill him, and replace him as king. The later history of Israel (and of many other countries) was filled with examples of this happening over and over again. Murder is not the basis for a stable government.

Even with Saul out of the way, the people might have rallied around one of Saul’s sons. Then the army of Israel would not be pursuing David simply because the king thought he was a threat. They would be pursuing a man who had murdered the king. In fact, even though he didn’t kill King Saul, David still had to wait seven years after Saul died before Saul’s family became so weak that all of Israel was willing to accept David as king (II Samuel 5:5).

However, the most critical issue was how God would view David’s murder of Saul. If it weren’t God’s will for David to kill Saul, then David would have become just like Saul—a man who was anointed by God to be king, but who disobeyed God. As a result, David might have found himself rejected by God, just like Saul.

- **Have you ever been in a situation like David where God *seemed* to have given you an opportunity, but there was something wrong with pursuing it?**

### **7. Let’s now read I Samuel 26:7–12.**

**This passage describes a situation similar to the one we just studied. What does David’s statement here (vv. 9–11) add to your understanding of David’s perspective?**

In verse 10, “the NIV assumes the first clause is the general statement and the last two are particular ways in which the Lord may ‘strike’ Saul, through natural causes or military defeat. But the text may actually intend three possibilities: premature death by disease, natural death, or death in battle. See Youngblood, “1, 2 Samuel,” p. 769 for discussion of the translation possibilities” (Arnold, p. 353, note 5).

In any case, David's statement made it clear that he did not believe that it was God's will for him to kill Saul. He did not doubt that he would become king, so he was willing to wait for God to bring it about rather than taking matters into his own hands. God had made Saul king and it would be up to God to decide when Saul's reign should end. David's place was to patiently wait for God to do what He intended

In I Samuel 25, David nearly killed a man named Nabal who had insulted him, but was dissuaded from shedding blood. A few days later, God struck Nabal (with what seemed like a stroke) and Nabal died. "Having learned from Nabal's sudden death, which benefited him so unexpectedly, David has learned that it is *always* better to wait patiently for God's timing and methods" (Arnold, p. 355).

"With the recent events of that chapter in mind, David is more resolved than ever to allow God to work out the details in his own timing.... Patience and restraint are the path to Yahweh's best plan, while violence only gives way to more violence" (Arnold, p. 353).

### **What does David's example in these passages teach us about patience?**

David faced a dilemma between the promises of God—that he would be king—and the law of God—that he should not kill the Lord's anointed king. Sometimes we are tempted to believe that we have the right to do whatever it takes to receive what God has promised, as David was tempted to kill Saul. David's example shows us that the only way to truly receive what God has promised is to obey what God has commanded and wait patiently for God to fulfill his promise. Patience includes trusting that God will do what He says and obeying what God has commanded while waiting for God to fulfill His Word.

Another aspect of David's example that can benefit us is learning that God took time to unfold His purposes for David. It is true that God had promised that David would be king. Yet, God already had a king—Saul. However, Saul was not the kind of king that God wanted. God did not want just any king. God wanted a king who would be "a man after his own heart" (I Samuel 13:14), that is, someone who would willingly obey God in every circumstance. The trials that David endured were all part of God's plan to develop David's character, so that he would trust and obey God.

Saul received God's promise and became king, but his lack of patience, trust, and obedience turned his heart away from God. David was promised the kingship but had to endure persecution and wait for God's timing to accept the crown. David's life shows us that patience may require waiting for God to develop our trust in and our obedience to Him so that when we receive God's promised blessings we will not turn away from Him or forsake our relationship with Him.

### **APPLICATION**

- **When is it most difficult for you to be patient? Think about what this says about your view of God's purposes and timing. What thoughts or beliefs do you need changed in order to trust God more fully?**

- **Since patience is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22–23, it is part of the character of Jesus that God wants to develop in us. What situation would you most like to gain patience in? Did anything during this study come to your mind that might direct our prayers for you?**
- **Do you have trouble being patient with God? Do you find yourself doing things because you don't expect that God will do anything about it? Let's pray that God would increase your faith to believe that He is working even when you don't see how. Let's pray that God would give you patience to wait for His timing. And, we could pray that God would give you direction, so that what you do will be consistent with God's will.**
- **Is there an area of your life where you believe God has promised you something, but the promise has not been fulfilled? Maybe things seem to be going the wrong way—like David who was not living in a royal palace, but was being hunted down in the desert. Let's pray that God would give you patience to wait for His timing, but also pray that God would do what He has promised.**

## **WRAPPING IT UP**

David was just a teen when God chose him to be the second king of Israel. However, David did not immediately become king. At first, he seemed to be on the fast track to success. He defeated the enemies of Israel, was welcomed into the king's court, and was popular with all the people. Then life seemed to turn against David. King Saul suspected David was going to usurp the throne. Saul tried to kill David, and David was forced to flee to the desert. Saul pursued David relentlessly, and David often feared for his life. David must have wondered if God had forgotten His promise that he would become king.

David demonstrated patience by obeying God and sparing Saul's life even when God seemed to have provided the perfect opportunity for David to kill Saul and take the throne. David chose to obey God even when disobedience appeared to be to his advantage. God wanted a king who would trust and obey Him, the King of all kings. God permitted David's difficult circumstances proving that He is faithful to protect us from evil while developing David's character as a leader. Despite some personal failings that he repented of, David was such a successful king that he became the measure for every king after him. Beyond that, he became the ancestor of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Savior and King not only of Israel, but also of the whole creation. This week, let's pray that God gives us similar patience to wait for Him to act and to allow Him to develop godly character in us.

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# THE HOLY LIFE

## 4

### OVERCOMING SINFUL ANGER

#### James 4:1—10

By Jill L. Anderson

*Anger is not neutral. A line between wisdom and foolishness runs through the center of every instance of “anger”; it is either godly or devilish.*

David Powlison

*“In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry....*

Ephesians 4:26

*My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because our anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.*

James 1:19—20

*“You have heard it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother or sister will be subject to judgment.”*

Mathew 5:21—22a

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## AIM OF STUDY

- To discover the difference between righteous anger and unrighteous anger.
- To discover the root of anger and anger's characteristics.
- To apply God's word to our struggles with anger and find healing.

## KEY VERSE

*What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?*

James 4: 1

## PREPARATION

The authors of this series suggest you read over the notes on "How to Teach the Bible in Small Group" and "Some Practical Suggestions for Leading a Small Group Discussion" in Vineyard Church of Columbus' *Small Group Leadership Training Manual* if you feel your inductive study skills are rusty. Next, before you go over the Scripture text, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then, read through the passage, keeping an open heart and ear to the Lord. Finally, work through the Bible study notes and questions below.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. Therefore, use this Bible study as a framework for the discussion you lead in your small group meeting. This means you will need to

- Go over the questions and choose which ones you want to emphasize and which you will eliminate since your time is limited.
- Note that the application questions are marked with a bullet. Rather than leaving all of these until the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture's truths and applying them to their own lives.
- Pace yourself. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could summarize some of the passage and then go to the final questions.
- Select one application question you will use with your group at the end. The question may have more than one part, but focus on the vital Biblical truth you want to encourage your group to put into practice in your final question.
- Feel free to suggest that your group continue a discussion at the next meeting or at another informal get together. You want to leave time for worship, listening to God, and prayer ministry, so don't feel you must cover every nugget of truth in a passage or allow each group member to share a mini-sermon on every question!
- You may want to create your own introduction by using a personal example or current event that illustrates the point of the study. Your introduction and any background material shared should help lead the group members' thoughts from the present moment into the text.

The authors of this series are providing these questions and accompanying material for the leaders' benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to supply resources for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously, we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor.

We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The New Bible Commentary* as excellent resources for further study.

Also note that some studies advise the leaders to make copies of a handout or bring some helpful communication tool, etc.

## **SPECIAL NOTES FOR THIS STUDY—HOW TO GET HELP**

Vineyard Church of Columbus has several ministries that can assist small group leaders who pastor individuals who require more help than their small group members can give. Vineyard Columbus periodically offers seminars designed to help people with their problems. There are also recovery groups that meet together for the purpose of mutually helping each other work through a specific life problem they share in common, such as addiction to various substances, sexual behaviors, or unhealthy relationships. In the past, the church has offered support groups for those who need help dealing with anger, anxiety, divorce, grief, and post abortion trauma. Please check the Small Groups Cards displayed in the church lobby or contact the Small Groups Ministry Administrative Assistant for current information. The Small Groups Ministry staff will be happy to talk with you, as well.

For those who need more help than a seminar or small group can provide, there are two additional levels of support available. Vineyard Columbus has a team of lay counselors trained to provide short term, individual counseling. Although lay counselors are not professional counselors, they have received basic training in applying biblical principles of counseling and prayer ministry. To receive lay counseling, a person must be a regular attendee of Vineyard Church of Columbus. For further information, please contact the Lay Counseling Ministry Coordinator at the church. For those who need professional help, the Vineyard Counseling Center, a ministry of Vineyard Columbus, has several clinically and biblically trained counselors on its staff. Please call the church and ask for the person who coordinates intake of new clients and appointments.

Finally, after the Vineyard Columbus weekend services, there is always a visitor's welcome. It provides an opportunity for individuals to meet and pray with a pastor or mature leader in the church. Those pastors and leaders may then refer individuals to a group or ministry for further assistance.

## **OPENER**

What do you know about anger? Before we begin this study, let's debunk some common myths about anger in the following true or false test.

*[The following material is summarized from several articles listed in the bibliography. You may use this information to help back up the study, or you may jump-start the study with one of these common misconceptions. Be aware that if you try to discuss all four of them at length, you may never get to the passage in James! If this true or false test raises more questions than it answers, you may suggest that the group work through this Bible study first and then continues studying Anger at another gathering.]*

### **#1: Anger is morally neutral. It is neither good nor bad.**

False. We tend to think that feelings are something that happens to us, like sneezing. The Bible teaches us that feelings can be good or bad, and what makes them so is how

they relate to God. “If they show that God is true and valuable, they are good, and if they suggest that God is false or foolish or evil, they are bad” (Piper, p. 10).

Anger has the potential to be righteous or unrighteous. Throughout the Bible, we have examples of God’s righteous anger against evil. In fact, God’s anger is always righteous. Even in the difficult passages of the Old Testament where God allows whole cities to be wiped off the face of the earth, His anger is blameless. “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness...” (Romans 1:18). In Matthew 21:12–13, Jesus turns over tables and drives out those who have turned the temple into “a den of robbers.” His anger at what people were doing to the temple was righteous anger.

We also have examples of man’s unrighteous anger in Cain (Genesis 4), David (1 Chronicles 13), and Jonah (Jonah 3–4). “Anger is not neutral. A line between wisdom and foolishness runs through the center of every instance of ‘anger’; it is either godly or devilish” (Powlison, “Anger, Part 1,” p. 46). Fooling ourselves into believing there is nothing wrong with our anger leads us away from God.

Are we capable of righteous anger? Yes! “The clearest gauge of whether anger is right or wrong in its expression is whether it acts to condemn or to offer help.... Anger motivates us to intervene to stop wrong, to protect the weak, to challenge tyrants...to reprove, to warn the unruly, to alert people to danger” (Powlison, “Anger, Part 1,” p. 50). We need to be angry about sin, about wickedness, about the evil that goes on in this world. “[Anger] is meant to do good first, and obviously, to the victims or potential victims of evil. And it is meant to do good second, sometimes not so obviously, to the perpetrators of evil” (Powlison, “Anger, Part 1,” p. 50).

What constitutes sinful anger? Mack says our anger is sinful when:

- It involves brooding or fretting.
- We keep a running record of how we have been mistreated.
- We pretend we are not angry.
- We return evil for evil or attack the person with whom we are angry.
- We attack or hurt a substitute, not the person or issue we are truly angry with (pp. 25–38).

## **#2: Anger is something stored inside me.**

False. Anger is not a thing that is separate from me, which is stored up in various quantities. It is easy to believe this because we use so many phrases about anger that give us this impression. Consider these phrases: *I’m ready to explode. I’m boiling mad. My anger is pent up. I’ve stored up my anger inside for so long that I need to get it off my chest so I can feel better.*

Anger involves the whole person. It is an emotional, physical, behavioral, and mental response. We feel upset, frustrated, and “out of control.” Physically, our faces may become flushed and we may shake with rage. Anger can lead to a behavioral response. We may scream, hit, or attempt to hurt ourselves or another person. Even if we never act out our anger, we may judge another person, speak ill of them in our minds, or play over and over again in our heads what they have done to us. Anger is something we do with our whole person. It is not just a personal problem; it also has an interpersonal component. Anger has a target.

The problem with believing that anger is something inside of us results in our believing that we just need to find a way to release our anger. Sometimes we feel relieved when we do an activity that reduces the pressure, but those actions only serve as a temporary measure to help us feel better. They will not really change our hearts (Powlison, “Part 2,” p. 13). When we see anger as something that involves our whole being, then we are more likely to see it as a response to handle wisely rather than just a burden to unload. When we express our anger sinfully, we need to repent and make changes in our minds, emotions, and behavior.

### **#3: It is never right to be angry with God.**

True. Anger is “a whole-personed, negative reaction that arises from a moral judgment against a perceived wrong” (Jones, p. 15). Indeed, if anger is not morally neutral, but a reaction that involves a judgment, then anger at God is wrong. When we are angry with God, we are in effect accusing God of doing wrong to us or to someone else. God is incapable of wrongdoing. Therefore our anger toward him is not warranted and is sinful.

Does this mean we can’t express our frustration or disappointment or sadness that something bad has happened to us? Not at all. “Believers in Christ are sometimes baffled by God’s ways, bewildered by His providential dealings and confused by His apparent inconsistencies. Yet Scripture teaches us the art of holy lamenting—learning how to complain in faith—to God about the calamities He sovereignly sends/permits” (Jones, p. 18). We can follow the model of the Psalmists. We can express our sorrow, frustration, and sadness in holiness and humility, recognizing God’s ultimate goodness to us and to all humankind. “In the ‘anger’ psalms, without exception, what breathes through is an attitude of faith” (Powlison, p. 14). Sometimes writers of the Psalms express anger to God about evil they have seen or experienced. These are called imprecatory psalms. They can be used to channel our anger and help us express it to God, trusting Him to act justly to right the wrong rather than sinfully seeking revenge ourselves. Psalms 12, 35, 58, 59, 69, 70, 83, 109, 137, and 140 contain portions that illustrate this idea (Fee and Stuart, pp. 182–183).

### **#4: When I am angry with myself, I just need to forgive myself.**

False. We are often angry with ourselves because we have not lived up to some standard we set. The standard itself may be completely self-imposed (like a perfectly clean car or home), left over from authority figures that tried to impose them in the past (like straight A’s), or it may be a Biblical one (like avoiding sexual sin). When we don’t live up to this standard, we judge ourselves. When we judge ourselves, we replace God as judge. The implication is that God’s judgment and His forgiveness aren’t satisfactory. We “simultaneously play judge, criminal, and savior, and know nothing of the righteousness of Christ that makes the New Testament sing for joy” (Powlison, “Anger, Part 2,” p. 16). Our standards should be God’s standards, not our own or even other people’s. When we hold ourselves up to the light of His word and laws, we begin to see the truth about ourselves. “Jesus gives a real righteousness—His own perfect life—to people who sin. He gives real forgiveness—His perfect self-sacrifice to bear our punishment—to people who sin. He gives indwelling power—His Holy Spirit—to renew our minds, give us joy, and change us” (Powlison, “Anger, Part 2,” p. 17). We don’t need to judge, forgive, or save ourselves. It has already been done for us perfectly.

## PRAYER

*Pray that our misconceptions about anger will be swept away in the light of God's word. Pray that James' clear and practical teachings will revolutionize the way we see our "quarrels and fights," and the Holy Spirit will convict and encourage us as we see our desires clearly, uncover our motives, and once again align ourselves with God rather than the world.*

## INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

*This is background material for leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.*

The author of the book of James is most likely the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem council. This book may have been written before A.D. 50. The recipients of the letter are stated in James 1:1: "the twelve tribes scattered among the nations." Because of this statement, the time the letter was written, and the use of Hebrew words for the Lord Almighty, scholars believe James wrote this letter to Jewish Christians. The letter of James is perhaps best known for its emphasis on the relationship between faith and works.

## STUDY THE PASSAGE: James 4: 1—10

### 1. Read James 4:1—10. Noticeably absent in this passage is the word "anger." Is James dealing with anger in this passage?

Yes. James never says the word anger, but he discusses the symptoms of anger, or the visible consequences of it. Words like quarrel, fight, battle, kill, and covet refer to anger.

### 2. James wrote this letter to Jewish Christians. What is your first reaction to the warlike language James uses? Can he really be talking about believers?

The warlike words are used to horrify us. "I get angry, but I'm not that bad," we might say. But the reality is that we are that bad. "You don't need to rant and rave to have a problem with sinful anger. Grumpiness, the cutting remark, sulky self-pity, and the critical attitude all qualify" (Powlison, "Anger: Part 1," p. 45). Do you recognize any of these manifestations of anger? Other words that may indicate anger include disrespect, harsh words, unwholesome talk, cursing, gossip, strife, deceit, boasting, blasphemy, false accusations, mocking, arguing, hatefulness, bitterness, lack of love, unkindness, unforgiveness, lack of mercy, impatience, intolerance, ungratefulness, or selfishness.

### 3. Read Matthew 5:21—22. In what ways do we kill others?

In Matthew, Jesus offers a fuller interpretation of the law "Do not murder." "But Jesus presses beyond behavior specifically punished by law to the kind of heart that generates such behavior. Anger that would generate murder if unimpeded is the spiritual equivalent of murder" (Keener, p. 114).

#### 4. Why do we fight and quarrel?

“*Why* do you fight? James does NOT say, “You are fighting because the other person is a blockhead; because your hormones are raging; because a demon of anger took up residence; because humans have an aggression gene hardwired in by our evolutionary history; because your father used to react in the same way; because your core needs are not being met; because you woke up on the wrong side of the bed and had a bad day at work.” Instead, James says, you fight because of “your desires that battle within you. You want something but don’t get it.” The biblical analysis is straightforward and cuts to the core. *You* fight for one reason: because you don’t get what you want” (Powlison, “Getting to the Heart,” p. 34).

- **What are some desires within us that cause conflict? Are these desires always a bad thing?**

Let’s use an example from a marriage relationship. The husband gets home at the end of a hard day and desires to rest in front of the television or the paper. He doesn’t want to engage in conversation; he’s tired! But the wife has been home with the little ones by herself and she desires intimate conversation. This causes them to fight. Are their desires wrong? No. But when the desire for the things we want become so important that they RULE us, thus replacing the Ruler of heaven and earth, it becomes sin. When we start to demand that others give us what we want, or even for God to give us what we want, our desires have gotten out of control.

#### 5. There are two reasons we do not get what we want (vv. 2–3). What are they?

We don’t get what we want because we don’t ask. When we do ask, we don’t get what we want because we ask with the wrong motives, that we may spend what we get on our pleasures.

- **What is an example of a good desire coupled with the wrong motive that may lead to conflict?**

Examples:

- *I want my kids to be obedient, respectful children.* However, there may be another driving motive behind my insisting on this behavior besides the fact that God wants them to obey their parents: I want other people to think I’m a good parent. If I fear losing other’s approval, I may discipline my kids in anger, rather than in love, and I may speak harshly to them so that they don’t embarrass me in public. Obviously, my desire for obedient children, coupled with a sinful motive of gaining or keeping others’ approval, will not produce happy, respectful children.
- *I want to show others that Christian professionals (or students) are competent and dependable.* But, if I fear that others will think that Christians are mediocre, I may start pointing out others’ weaknesses to make myself look good. When I let my desire for a good witness at work or school be corrupted by my fear of what others think, I shoot myself in the foot by acting proudly.

- *I want to use my home as a place others can meet Christ.* However, if I idolize a spotless home with the latest furnishings and gourmet meals, my obsession with perfection can make others feel out of place and therefore unwelcome. Non-believers certainly won't want to linger and get acquainted with a Jesus they might already view as too demanding if they see me continually striving for the idol of perfection.

**6. In verse four, James uses strong language and calls us “adulterous people.” How is friendship with the world linked to our quarreling and fighting? How might friendship with the world lead to anger toward God?**

We have already learned that our conflicts are rooted in our desires; or basically, wanting our own way. “Our cravings rule our lives; they directly compete with God Himself for lordship” (Powlison, “Getting to the Heart,” p. 34). Our desires become idols. “The best evidence that a Christian desires (loves) something more than he desires (loves) God, is his willingness to sin against God, either in order to acquire that desire or because he cannot acquire it” (Priolo, p. 107).

When God does not give us what we want, we align ourselves with the world and against Him. “If I believe that God exists to give me what I want, I will burn when He doesn't deliver” (Powlison, “Anger Part 1,” p. 46). Our anger toward God is a sin and needs to be confessed. (See True or False statement #3 above.)

**7. What does pride have to do with anger (v. 6)?**

Pride is rooted in the belief that we know better than God how to run our lives. If God doesn't give us what we think we need or want, we become frustrated with Him.

**What does God's grace have to offer us?**

“But, God gives grace to the humble” is such good news to us! No matter how far we have turned our backs on Him, He does not abandon us. “What comfort there is in this verse! It tells us that God is tirelessly on our side.... His resources are never at an end, his patience is never exhausted, his initiative never stops, his generosity knows no limit: *he gives more grace*” (Moyter, p. 150). We who have been self-pleasing people and have cheated on God and aligned ourselves with the world can still find forgiveness when we turn to Him and repent.

**8. What commands does James give us in verses seven to ten?**

Submit, resist, come near, wash, purify, grieve, mourn, wail, change your laughter, and humble yourselves.

**What promises?**

When we resist the devil, he will flee. When we draw near to God, He will draw near to us. When we humble ourselves, He will lift us up.

## APPLICATION

*Select one of the following application questions to finish your discussion time.*

- **If we were to consider anger a disease, does James offer us a cure? What is it?**

There is never an easy formula to plug ourselves into and find the healing and freedom we desire. However, James did point us in the right direction for diagnosing our sin. This passage puts us on the pathway to holiness by helping us to uncover the desires that have become idols in our lives, helping us to see how we put ourselves on the throne.

Ultimately, we are called to repent, confess our idolatry, and return to worship the Lord alone.

- **Have you been unfaithful to God in pursuing your desires? Is your desire for good things ruling you?**
- **Identify a situation in which you habitually become angry. Can you apply some truths you learned in this study to your situation?**

**Here are some questions to consider:**

- **What happened to provoke my anger?**
- **What did I want, desire, or long for when I became angry?**
- **What does the Bible say about what I wanted?**
- **What should I have wanted more than my own selfish and idolatrous desire?**

(from Priolo, pp. 189–191)

## WRAPPING IT UP

James has exposed the foundation of anger clearly in this passage. Our conflicts are the direct result of wanting our own way and fighting to make it happen. When our own selfish desires become the driving force behind our every action, we need to turn from our sin and turn back to God. God offers us His grace and promises to “lift us up.” The alternative is a futile pursuit to secure what we desire for our own pleasures; the alternative is anger. God says He will not give us what we want and will block our way. He opposes the proud. Learning to live by faith, believing that God’s way is the best way for us, will transform our relationships with others and with Him.

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# THE HOLY LIFE

5

## **FORGIVENESS: OVERCOMING BITTERNESS AND RESENTMENT**

**Romans 12:17—21**

By Jill L. Anderson

*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

Ephesians 4:32

*We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.*

Martin Luther King, Jr.

*We eye the evil face to face and we call it what it is. Only realists can be forgivers.*

Lewis B. Smedes

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## AIM OF STUDY

- To discover how to handle hurt and disappointment.
- To catch a glimpse of God's perspective and plan for those who harm or hurt us.
- To convince believers to forgive those who have wronged them, based on God's promise to avenge and Jesus' forgiveness of us.

## KEY VERSE

*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Romans 12:21

## PREPARATION

The authors of this series suggest you read over the notes on “How to Teach the Bible in Small Group” and “Some Practical Suggestions for Leading a Small Group Discussion” in Vineyard Church of Columbus’ *Small Group Leadership Training Manual* if you feel your inductive study skills are rusty. Next, before you go over the Scripture text, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then, read through the passage, keeping an open heart and ear to the Lord. Finally, work through the Bible study notes and questions below.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. Therefore, use this Bible study as a framework for the discussion you lead in your small group meeting. This means you will need to

- Go over the questions and choose which ones you want to emphasize and which you will eliminate since your time is limited.
- Note that the application questions are marked with a bullet. Rather than leaving all of these until the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture’s truths and applying them to their own lives.
- Pace yourself. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could summarize some of the passage and then go to the final questions.
- Select one application question you will use with your group at the end. The question may have more than one part, but focus on the vital Biblical truth you want to encourage your group to put into practice in your final question.
- Feel free to suggest that your group continue a discussion at the next meeting or at another informal get together. You want to leave time for worship, listening to God, and prayer ministry, so don’t feel you must cover every nugget of truth in a passage or allow each group member to share a mini-sermon on every question!
- You may want to create your own introduction by using a personal example or current event that illustrates the point of the study. Your introduction and any background material shared should help lead the group members’ thoughts from the present moment into the text.

The authors of this series are providing these questions and accompanying material for the leaders’ benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to supply resources for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously, we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor. We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The New Bible Commentary* as excellent resources for further study.

Also note that some studies advise the leaders to make copies of a handout or bring some helpful communication tool, etc.

## **SPECIAL NOTES FOR THIS STUDY—HOW TO GET HELP**

Vineyard Church of Columbus has several ministries that can assist small group leaders who pastor individuals who require more help than their small group members can give. Vineyard Columbus periodically offers seminars designed to help people with their problems. There are also recovery groups that meet together for the purpose of mutually helping each other work through a specific life problem they share in common, such as addiction to various substances, sexual behaviors, or unhealthy relationships. In the past, the church has offered support groups for those who need help dealing with anger, anxiety, divorce, grief, and post abortion trauma. Please check the Small Groups Cards displayed in the church lobby or contact the Small Groups Ministry Administrative Assistant for current information. The Small Groups Ministry staff will be happy to talk with you, as well.

For those who need more help than a seminar or small group can provide, there are two additional levels of support available. Vineyard Columbus has a team of lay counselors trained to provide short term, individual counseling. Although lay counselors are not professional counselors, they have received basic training in applying biblical principles of counseling and prayer ministry. To receive lay counseling, a person must be a regular attendee of Vineyard Church of Columbus. For further information, please contact the Lay Counseling Ministry Coordinator at the church. For those who need professional help, the Vineyard Counseling Center, a ministry of Vineyard Columbus, has several clinically and biblically trained counselors on its staff. Please call the church and ask for the person who coordinates intake of new clients and appointments.

Finally, after the Vineyard Columbus weekend services, there is always a visitor's welcome. It provides an opportunity for individuals to meet and pray with a pastor or mature leader in the church. Those pastors and leaders may then refer individuals to a group or ministry for further assistance.

## **OPENER**

Before we begin our discussion, let's remember an important Biblical principle—to speak well of others. Let's be very careful not to broadcast the sins of others. When speaking about individuals we may have hurt or who may have hurt us, let's use fictitious names or refer to them as "a family member" or "an old friend." [Leaders can see more about this in the Godly Speech study.] With a Bible study like this one, we could focus solely on those who have wronged us. But, let's begin this study on the "other side of the fence," so to speak. Let us first take a look at ourselves to help give perspective and depth to this particular study.

*Can you remember a time when you wronged someone? How did you feel? Were you able to make amends? Describe how you felt when you were forgiven.*

*If that person has not granted forgiveness to you, how has his/her lack of forgiveness affected you?*

Now, for the purposes of this study, recall one person who has wronged you. As we read the Scripture passage, keep that person in mind. We do not want a discussion about forgiveness that is based in theory, but one that will be based in practice. We want to be able to apply what we

read and study together. If we recall all the wrongs people have committed against us, forgiveness may seem unattainable. If we discuss forgiveness in theory only, its benefits may completely elude us. But, if we choose one person to focus on, we may be able to see the light at the end of the tunnel and take small steps toward a huge goal.

With this person or event in mind, let's take a few moments for quiet reflection and prayer.

## **PRAYER**

*Pray that the group members would hear God's voice during this meeting and know His plan for them regarding forgiving those who have hurt them. Pray for a breakthrough for those who have been unsuccessful in forgiving and struggle with bitterness and resentment.*

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

*This is background material for leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.*

The Apostle Paul is the author of Romans. He wrote this letter to the predominately Gentile church at Rome on his third missionary journey around A.D. 57. Romans is generally agreed to be the most important book of the New Testament from the standpoint of the meaning of salvation and the Christian life. The issues discussed in Romans are at the core of what it means to be a Christian.

The Roman church was a mixture of Jewish and Gentile Christians, with Jews in the majority. When Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome in A.D. 49, the Gentiles were forced to develop their own leadership and evangelize their own countrymen. After Claudius' death, the Jews returned, but the Gentiles were now in the majority. The Jews and the Gentiles were divided over issues regarding the place of law in the Christian life. The Jewish Christians were judging the Gentiles for failure to keep the laws regarding food and holy days. The Gentile Christians were upset with the Jewish believers for not fully grasping the fact that Christ had freed believers from the law.

One of the many purposes of the letter to the Romans was to bring unity to a church in conflict. Paul refers to the law-observant Jews as "the weak" and the law-free Gentiles as "the strong." "Paul wanted both sides to understand that God expects each Christian to live at the level of his or her faith and to forge a unity out of our differences, thus bringing peace to the church" (Osborne, p. 20). Paul pleads for peace at every level, "between self and God, between Jew and Gentile, and within ourselves" (Osborne, p. 20). Paul most likely intends this message for Christians everywhere.

In the Old Testament, forgiveness is usually conveyed through atonement (being brought into right relationship with God) by way of sacrifice. In the New Testament, there are several Greek words used to convey forgiveness. Their definitions include: to deal graciously with, to send away, to release, and a passing by. In the NT, several points are emphasized. One is that the "forgiven sinner must forgive others" (Douglas, Ed., p. 382) as noted in Luke 6:37 and other places. Also, a willingness to forgive others is an indication of our own true repentance. Our forgiveness is also to be wholehearted, like Christ's forgiveness of us (Colossians 3:13).

## STUDY THE PASSAGE: Romans 12:17—21

### 1. Read Romans 12:17—21. What does Paul tell us NOT to do?

#### Now, what does he tell us to do?

Do not: repay evil with evil, take revenge, or be overcome by evil.

Do: do right, live at peace, leave room for God's wrath, feed and give drink to your enemies, and overcome evil with good.

- **Which do you find easier, to refrain from evil actions, or to do good actions? Why must we do both?**

Merely refraining from evil does not complete the full picture that God intends for us as we relate to each other. As His children, we are to reflect God's dealings with others in our relationships. With God, we see Him both doing good to us and restraining evil against us. He also makes it rain on the just and the unjust. We should mirror this balance, too.

When we wrestle with all the ugly emotions that accompany unforgiveness, the temptation is to get rid of the negative emotions without necessarily replacing them with positive ones. We don't want to feel the pain or the hurt anymore, but moving toward forgiveness seems too difficult. "Now there are two ways to eliminate unforgiveness. First, you could chip away at it by replacing a little unforgiveness with a little forgiveness over hundreds of experiences. Second, you could whack unforgiveness with a giant dose of empathy, sympathy, compassion, or love and simply overwhelm it" (Worthington, "Forgiveness," p. 46)

- **How does repaying evil with evil, taking revenge, and being overcome by evil cripple your walk with Jesus?**

Negative emotions accompany each of these activities. If we repay evil with evil or take revenge, we sin. If we let evil overcome us, we allow ourselves to be defeated. In all these activities, we dwell on the event or person that hurt us instead of God. Bitterness and resentment can then take root in our hearts. By bitterness, we mean an intense, unpleasant emotion (m-w.com, "bitter") resulting from not dealing Biblically with something negative in our lives. "The Bible describes bitterness as being in the root of the soul, the by-product of intense animosity, characterized by cynicism and ill will" (Armstrong). By resentment, we mean the on going ill will or grudge someone has in response to perceived wrong, insult, or injury (m-w.com, "resentment").

### 2. In verse 15, what are the two qualifying statements to Paul's command to "live at peace with everyone"? Are there times when living at peace with everyone is not possible and may not depend on you?

Paul says "if it is possible" and "as far as it depends on you." Obviously, we can't control other people. No matter what we choose to do, others may not be willing to receive our kindness/forgiveness and may continue to hurt us. For example, God does not expect us to remain in an abusive relationship where another person can continue to mistreat us. Nevertheless, we still must forgive the abuser. Forgiving the abuser is not the same thing as reconciliation. Forgiving an abuser simply means that we refuse to hold anger and

vengeful feelings toward that person and we leave all justice up to God. We may, however, have to distance ourselves from the person in order to protect ourselves from serious mistreatment.

### **3. Is there a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation?**

One reason many people struggle with forgiveness is because they believe it means reconciling with the one who has wronged them. Forgiveness and reconciliation are two different things. Forgiveness is internal and is offered as a gift. It is a way of replacing negative emotions. Reconciliation is interpersonal and is not given away, but earned. You *can* have forgiveness without reconciliation. “*Reconciliation is restoring trust in a relationship in which trust has been damaged.*” Reconciliation requires both people to be trustworthy” (Worthington, “Forgiving and Reconciling,” p. 170). In the case of abuse or other sins against us, reconciliation requires true repentance and evidence of change on the part of the abuser before full relationship can be restored.

### **4. What does it mean, “to leave room for God’s wrath” (v. 19)?**

Leaving room implies giving God time to act. Often we are impatient and want to take matters into our own hands and “fix” the situation ourselves. See more on waiting patiently for God to act in the study in this series on Patience.

### **5. Paul refers to Deuteronomy 32:35 in verse 19. Look it up and read the entire verse. What in this verse gives you hope?**

Deuteronomy 32:35 says, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay. In due time their foot will slip; their day of disaster is near and their doom rushes upon them.” If we are hanging our hopes on God’s revenge, this is a great verse to quote and pray. But, read on.

### **6. Read Deuteronomy 32:39. Is God’s vengeance a sure thing? Is it guaranteed?**

Verse 39 reads, “I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand.” This verse seems to indicate that it is God’s prerogative whether to exercise revenge or not. Likewise, Psalm 115:3 and Isaiah 46:10 indicate that God is absolutely sovereign and does whatever He pleases. Therefore, we are not guaranteed that God will inflict pain on someone who has wronged us. God may choose to show mercy to that person just as He has shown it to us. Still, Scripture overwhelmingly affirms God is just and will avenge His people (Revelation 11:15–18, 19:1–2).

### **7. Read 2 Peter 3:9. What is God’s ultimate plan for all mankind?**

“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

Herein lies the crux of the situation. We can read these verses and hang our hopes on God bringing out the revenge we’ve been plotting ourselves. Or we can read these verses in the context of all Scripture and find out what our hopes really should be—that those who have harmed us would ultimately come to repentance.

- **Is it difficult to accept God's possible mercy for those who have hurt you? What does your answer reveal about your ability to trust God?**

**8. Paul also refers to Proverbs 25:21, 22 in v. 20. What promise is attached to loving your enemy?**

"And the Lord will reward you."

**What is the result of heaping burning coals on your enemy's head?**

Kill him with kindness. Shame him. Romans 2:4 says, "God's kindness leads you toward repentance." Our kindness may have similar results with those who sin against us.

**9. What does Paul mean by “overcoming evil with good”?**

Overcoming evil by itself might mean fighting to stop it, revenge, or any means necessary. But Paul says to overcome evil "with good." This implies some action on our part. Goodness does not happen on its own.

- **How might you be tempted to repay the evil done against you?**

**APPLICATION**

*Select one of the following application questions to finish your discussion time.*

- **What steps do you need to take to overcome evil? In other words, how do you move toward forgiveness and away from bitterness and resentment?**

**A:** way we may overcome evil with good is described in the “Pyramid Model to REACH Forgiveness” from the book *Forgiving and Reconciling* by Worthington.

**R:** Recall the hurt. This means acknowledging the hurt and facing it. It does not mean dwelling on the pain and plotting revenge.

**E:** Empathize. Empathy means seeing things from the other person's point of view.

**A:** Offer the altruistic gift of forgiveness. Recall how God has forgiven you and His command in Luke 6:36, "Forgive, and you will be forgiven."

**C:** Commit publicly to forgive. By telling someone else, you are less likely to doubt it later.

**H:** Hold on to forgiveness. When you are tempted to let all the pain and negative emotions return, remember the commitment you made to forgive.

- **What holds you back from forgiving? What have you learned in this study that might help you forgive more freely?**
  
- **What is one thing you can do this week to forgive someone who has wronged you?**

## **WRAPPING IT UP**

Forgiveness is never easy. Our natural tendency is to hold on to our resentment and bitterness. We want the pain to stop and we want to keep ourselves safe and ensure that we aren't hurt again. We want justice and sometimes we even want revenge. All those negative emotions threaten to overwhelm us and keep us imprisoned, for they are sin. While we are in this prison, we cannot fully experience all that God has for us.

But God is gracious to us, slow to anger, abounding in love. He has something better to offer us. He promises to take our resentment and replace it with mercy and forgiveness. He will empower us to do the impossible: grant another human being the same grace that He has bestowed on us.

This week you may want to copy down some of the verses in this study. One more that we didn't look at may also be helpful: "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13).

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# THE HOLY LIFE

## 6

### PURITY: OVERCOMING LUST

#### 2 Peter 1:1—11

By Elizabeth B. Crawford

*“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”*

Matthew 5:8

*I now know that giving in to lust means taking, while standing for true love means giving.*

Tim A.

*Jesus said, if you don't fight lust, you won't go to heaven. Not that saints always succeed. The issue is that we resolve to fight, not that we always succeed.*

John Piper

*For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful to even mention what the disobedient do in secret.*

Ephesians 5:8—12

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## AIM OF STUDY

- To encourage sexual purity so that we live in a way that pleases the Lord and does not bring guilt, shame, and harm to others or ourselves.

## KEY VERSES

*His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.*

2 Peter 1:3–4

## PREPARATION

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- Feel free to suggest that your group continue a discussion at the next meeting or at another informal get together. You want to leave time for worship, listening to God, and prayer ministry, so don’t feel you must cover every nugget of truth in a passage or allow each group member to share a mini-sermon on every question!
- You may want to create your own introduction by using a personal example or current event that illustrates the point of the study. Your introduction and any background material shared should help lead the group members’ thoughts from the present moment into the text.

The authors of this series are providing these questions and accompanying material for the leaders’ benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to supply resources for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously, we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor. We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The New Bible Commentary* as excellent resources for further study.

Also note that some studies advise the leaders to make copies of a handout or bring some helpful communication tool, etc.

## **SPECIAL NOTES FOR THIS STUDY—HOW TO GET HELP**

Vineyard Church of Columbus has several ministries that can assist small group leaders who pastor individuals who require more help than their small group members can give. Vineyard Columbus periodically offers seminars designed to help people with their problems. There are also recovery groups that meet together for the purpose of mutually helping each other work through a specific life problem they share in common, such as addiction to various substances, sexual behaviors, or unhealthy relationships. In the past, the church has offered support groups for those who need help dealing with anger, anxiety, divorce, grief, and post abortion trauma. Please check the Small Groups Cards displayed in the church lobby or contact the Small Groups Ministry Administrative Assistant for current information. The Small Groups Ministry staff will be happy to talk with you, as well.

For those who need more help than a seminar or small group can provide, there are two additional levels of support available. Vineyard Columbus has a team of lay counselors trained to provide short term, individual counseling. Although lay counselors are not professional counselors, they have received basic training in applying biblical principles of counseling and prayer ministry. To receive lay counseling, a person must be a regular attendee of Vineyard Church of Columbus. For further information, please contact the Lay Counseling Ministry Coordinator at the church. For those who need professional help, the Vineyard Counseling Center, a ministry of Vineyard Columbus, has several clinically and biblically trained counselors on its staff. Please call the church and ask for the person who coordinates intake of new clients and appointments.

Finally, after the Vineyard Columbus weekend services, there is always a visitor's welcome. It provides an opportunity for individuals to meet and pray with a pastor or mature leader in the church. Those pastors and leaders may then refer individuals to a group or ministry for further assistance.

## **NOTE TO LEADERS ABOUT DISCUSSING THIS TOPIC**

Although in Scripture "lust" can mean "strong desire" and is not necessarily ungodly or sexual in nature (Allender, p. 1), in this study we use the word lust to refer to the misuse of the God-given sexual desires we have. Please note, "Lust is not the same thing as sexual desire. We are apt to feel sexual desire at any time. Lust occurs when we decide to take our sexual desire and apply it to fantasies or memories or specific images" (Medinger, p. 61). When we use the term purity, we mean "innocence," or "freedom from sin or guilt" (*American Heritage*, p. 1006).

While discussing human sexuality, please be sure group members understand that our God-given sexual nature is a good part of creation. We want to learn to express our sexuality as God intended, not label and repress all such feelings as evil. Fighting lust and choosing pure thoughts, speech, and actions enable us to honor other men and women as the valuable individuals God created them to be, and keep us from misusing our sexuality both within and outside of the marriage relationship.

Please keep in mind that the topic of this study requires a delicate balance between honesty and discretion. Some of your group members may be very reticent to share on such a private topic

while others are eager to verbalize their struggles. During this study, we do not want to expose salacious details of sin or increase people's sense of shame. If your group has both males and females present, you could divide them into same sex groups for the entire study provided you have mature leaders for both groups. If not, please divide at least when you discuss the application questions. Refer to the Guidelines in the Application section at the end of this study before you begin the study to review with your group members how to keep sharing appropriate. And note the section below on How To Use This Study so that you adequately prepare before leading it.

## HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

This study provides a number of options so that diverse groups with different needs can use it. Please follow the steps below to determine which parts of the study to use and how you will lead the study. If you lead a co-ed group and intend to split the group by gender for the entire study or for the application discussion, review this approach with your co-leader(s).

- [Advance Preparation] Select an opener or develop an opener that's more suitable for your group. The opener should support the aim of the study.
- [Advance Preparation] Distribute copies of materials to co-leaders as required if you are going to split either the entire study, or the application discussion.
- [Advance Preparation] Review the leaders' interpretation notes included for selected verses. The notes provide important information about proper interpretation of terms used in the study passage. You can summarize the information for the group as you begin to discuss a verse, or you can use it to explain the verse if the discussion indicates people are misunderstanding it due to changes in how we understand terms today.
- If a second leader is available, split the group by gender before you begin. Explain that this is to allow for more open discussion that still meets the discussion guidelines.
- Review the discussion guidelines provided at the start of the application section with the group(s). It's important to keep sharing at a proper level.
- Begin the study and work through the questions on the passage.
- If you can't split the group for the entire study, split into male/female groups for the application discussion if possible. Remind all members of the discussion guidelines. If it's not possible to split into two groups, facilitate the group to keep the discussion at an appropriate level for a mixed gender group.
- If follow-up is needed, each group leader should individually determine whether to use one of the listed resources for gender-specific study in the future, or if referring specific group members to a life support group would be more suitable.

## OPENER

*The paragraphs below have been written with different focus groups in mind. You may want to create your own discussion opener or edit one of these to fit your particular group.*

### FOR WOMEN'S GROUPS:

*With an all women's group, you may want to use these quotes from a woman in our church who kept a journal for over six years. In these selections, she shares her desire for lasting love and reflects honestly on a relationship that was not based on Christ nor followed His pattern for sexual purity.*

When we discuss sexual issues, some women feel uncomfortable because of the intimate nature of the subject. Sexual purity is a very personal topic. And, some feel uncomfortable because of the compromises they have made in order to get or keep a boyfriend, fiancé, or partner. Perhaps you or someone you know has felt the way this young woman did when she wrote in her journal:

*I have been feeling pretty down in the dumps again. It started about a week ago when I asked my boyfriend if he thought I was more in love with him than he is with me and he said "yes." Something changed inside of me when I realized what he said. I have felt so bad all week. I have been kind of mad at him. I want to see him, but at the same time I don't. I miss the way things used to be with us. I really didn't appreciate the roses he gave to me. I think they were just his way of relieving his guilt because he does not really love me all that much.... Part of me wants to end things. Part of me hopes it will all work out. I feel like I will never find someone who loves me the way I would like. I feel pretty bad about myself right now. ...*

*I am afraid that I won't find someone else if this relationship ends. I guess I feel like he is my last chance. I'm so out of shape. I feel like my age is starting to show. I don't feel like I am as pretty as I used to be. I worry all the time. I worry that I am going to grow old alone.... Lately, I feel like time is slipping away. For the first time ever, I really feel like I might miss out on something by not having a child.... I know that what I want is normal. It just hurts that I don't have it.*

*It is hard not to blame myself. I know I need to work on things. I am too critical of people. I lash out too often. I want to feel good about who I am.... I don't think my boyfriend understands the hurt I have been through. I'm not sure anyone does. I wonder if people can really understand another's pain. I used to be a more compassionate person. I'm so self-absorbed that I don't really have the energy or the patience to listen to other people.*

*I pray about things... [regarding] my boyfriend. Maybe I'm getting my answer, but I'm not listening because it's not what I want to hear. Right now, I don't want to have sex with my boyfriend. I don't feel like being close to him in that way. It hurts too much. I hope things will get better. Sometimes I think I am mildly depressed....*

*Right now, I can think of more negative things about me than positive things. This is not good. I need to get some self-esteem. How does one get that? I think church would be a start.*

A little more than three years later, after finding a real relationship with God, this is what she wrote:

*Reading what I wrote reminds me of where I was and how far I have come. I'm so thankful to the Lord. I would have never made it out of the "black hole" without him. I like myself a lot more now. God has given me a more compassionate heart. It feels good.*

*I feel a little down today, I think it may just be a PMS thing. I'm not lonely like I used to be. It sure would be nice to have a special someone in my life, though. I still miss my ex-boyfriend at times.... Sometimes I wish he and I could get back together. I only want it if it is what God wants, though. I wish we could start over and do things the right way.*

*I really would like to be married. I'm tired of the single life.... [However] I'm just glad that I am a happy person these days. My life is good. God has truly blessed me and answered my prayers. I still have much to work on, but I know the Lord loves me where I am. I'm His work in progress. The Lord really filled the "black hole" deep inside of me. He removed the hardness from my heart. I could never live without the Lord. I've tried it and it is not fun. It's absolutely horrible. There is no hope or purpose without Him. I feel like being alone tonight. I still really miss my ex-boyfriend at times. I hope he is doing well. I would never want the relationship back the way that it was. I only want it if we are both walking with the Lord....*

Finally, listen to what this same woman wrote three years after that:

*Lord, as you know, I still struggle some days. I'm not always a pleasant person. Some days I'm frustrated and tired of waiting for you to bring that someone special in my life.... Some days I'm lonely and some days I cry out to you and ask "why?" But through it all I know you love me. I know that you have an amazing adventure planned for me. I don't know how it will all turn out, but I do know what you have told me during our intimate times with each other. I know that you ALWAYS have my best interest at heart.... You are the great love of my life and I believe you will bring that special someone to me when the time is right. And, I know he will be worth the wait. ...*

*My life just doesn't work without you. I know I will face difficult things in this life, but I also know that I will never have to do this life alone. I also know that you will never leave me. I know that I am safe and secure in you and in your love for me. And that feels good! Thank you for being my Jesus. I love you.*

This study is designed to help us know how to fight the temptation to lust. By lust, we mean misusing our God-given sexual desires. By purity, we mean innocence or freedom from sexual sin or guilt. But before we go further, let's agree that anything shared in this meeting is confidential and will be kept that way. We need to honor one another's integrity and have the humble heart of Jesus Christ toward one another. Keep in mind that all of us are imperfect. All of us are people in need of a Savior. If we deny that, we would be calling God a liar since His Scriptures tell us that all people have fallen short of His standards, have missed the mark (Romans 3:23). All of us have gone our own way at one time or another, not wanting to submit to God's authority (Isaiah 53:4–6). Even if we have not battled with sexual temptation a great deal, all of us have been tempted and have given in to some sinful behavior. Even Jesus, God in human form, was tempted in every way—although He remained sinless (Hebrews 4:15). So let's have a compassionate and humble attitude towards one another. Let's make our group a safe place where we can admit struggles and confess sins, and instead of pronouncing judgment, we announce the good news of forgiveness through the blood of Jesus Christ (1 John 1:9).

## **PRAYER**

*Pray that the Holy Spirit will convey to the participants a strong desire to follow God's best plans for our sexuality and live a pure life, learning to overcome sexual temptation.*

## **FOR MEN'S GROUPS:**

*In a men's group, you may want to use this analogy as an opener. A ministry leader in our church wrote it.*

I have a wife and two kids, and we call 44 acres in the country our home. We take care of a few animals: 12 cows, 1 bull, 3 horses, 2 dogs, 1 cat, 12 chickens, and 2 rabbits. You might call me a gentlemen's farmer, but my real job is selling real estate.

One day while at work, a frantic call came from my wife. "The fence is down, the bull's out, and he's terrorizing the neighborhood!"

Being pragmatic, my first response was, "What do you mean, 'terrorizing the neighborhood'?" I missed the main point: the bull's out! I was more irritated and disturbed by her over-reaction, in my opinion, to the problem [than the problem itself]. She further explained there was a deputy sheriff at our home... who had just said those ... words to her.

So I rushed home from my real estate office, which was a 20-minute drive. In the meantime, my wife had lured the bull back into our pasture through the hole he had made in the fence. As I drove up to the house, the sheriff's car was still sitting in my drive[way]. I thought, "Oh great, what is he still doing here?"

He whipped out his ticket book and began to lecture me on the dangers of my bull running loose. ... Ohio...law says that if you don't adequately and safely contain your stud horse, your bull, or your boar pig, you can be fined.... If my animal hurts someone or does some property damage, I am liable. So he fined me \$70.00.

The sheriff left and needless to say, I was embarrassed, angry, frustrated, and disappointed in myself.... This was the second time that week my bull had gotten out. I had patched the one spot and noticed a weakness in another area. [I had] said to myself [that] I've got to come back here and fix this soon. But time and other distractions made it less of a priority. So I began to go over my I options:

1. Repair the fence like I had done at least 20 times.
2. Get rid of the bull. [But] a bull is a good thing to have with 12 heifers and proper boundaries....
3. Bite the bullet, have the old fence removed, and replace it with a new one.  
Cost: \$6,000.00.

I chose to patch the fence. I had a few minutes before my next real estate appointment, so I hiked out to the back fence with my needle nose pliers and a piece of old fencing for patching. While working on the fence, I dropped the pliers in the leaves! I looked everywhere—no pliers! There was not enough time to go back to the house to get another pair. I can't fix the fence without the pliers. Frustrated, I cried out, "God, help me here!" Still I could not find the pliers. ...

Anger began to well up inside me and I was extremely provoked.... Frustrated and out of ideas, I started the long walk back to the house blaming everyone I could think of....

[I asked,] "God, why is life so hard? I'm trying to do what is right. Can you give me some slack here?"

God didn't respond so I kept moaning and feeling sorry for myself. All of a sudden, a picture of my 8 year old...flashed into my mind. What I saw was the way our child throws a fit when things aren't going the way ...it should. Convicted, I said, "God, you're right.

I'm acting like a child." After quietly continuing my trudge home for a few moments, the Lord spoke softly but fatherly: "It's time to replace the fence."

No more promises, making excuses, complaining, blaming other people, no more patching the fence!

Many of us are stuck right here.

[We have been] making promises that I'm never going to do this or that again:

1. Never look at pornography again or read romance novels.
2. Never be unfaithful to my wife by lusting in my heart [after someone else].
3. Never flirt with another woman at work.
4. Never put my spouse down.
5. Never vent my anger at my kids.
6. Never drink that much again.
7. Never eat six donuts at one sitting again.

[Perhaps we have been] blaming other people:

1. If my wife were more loving, more sensitive to my needs, ...she would make love to me as often as I wanted.
2. If my husband were more attentive, romantic, etc.
3. If my parents had done this or not done that, etc.
4. If my church was more like....
5. If I were married....

[Perhaps we have been] patching the fence [denying reality]:

1. I don't really have a problem.... [How many times can one masturbate, lose one's temper, get plastered, get high, or overeat before it's a problem?]
2. I'm in a small group at our church—isn't that enough?

By ourselves, we self deceive. The Bible says our hearts are deceitfully wicked...my heart is deceitfully wicked. [We need God's Word.] We need one another. We need accountability. We need other men and women in our churches. We need people in our lives that will ask us the hard questions.

This study is designed to help us know how to fight the temptation to lust. By lust, we mean misusing our God-given sexual desires. By purity, we mean innocence or freedom from sexual sin or guilt. But before we go further, let's agree that anything shared in this meeting is confidential and will be kept that way. We need to honor one another's integrity and have the humble heart of Jesus Christ toward one another. Keep in mind that all of us are imperfect. All of us are people in need of a Savior. If we deny that, we would be calling God a liar since His Scriptures tell us that all people have fallen short of His standards, have missed the mark (Romans 3:23). All of us have gone our own way at one time or another, not wanting to submit to God's authority (Isaiah 53:4–6). Even if we have not battled with sexual temptation a great deal, all of us have been tempted and have given in to some sinful behavior. Even Jesus, God in human form, was tempted in every way—although He remained sinless (Hebrews 4:15). So let's have a compassionate and humble attitude towards one another. Let's make our group a safe place where we can admit struggles and confess sins, and instead of pronouncing judgment, we announce the good news of forgiveness through the blood of Jesus Christ (1 John 1:9).

## **PRAYER**

*Pray that the Holy Spirit will convey to the participants a strong desire to follow God's best plans for our sexuality and live a pure life, learning to overcome sexual temptation.*

## **FOR GROUPS WITH SINGLE ADULTS:**

*You could divide the group into men and women. Then use the opener written for women's groups for the women, and use the following two testimonies from two single adult men in our church with the men. In the first statement, the author shares his perspective on sexual purity beginning at the time he was converted until now, two decades later.*

I gave my life to the Lord ...and have never looked back. The first year that I was saved, I spent many hours every day in prayer and reading the Word because I really wanted to know the Lord in a most personal way.... As a result of my time in the Word, I learned very quickly what God's view of sexual purity was. It was simple. Any and all sexual activity was created for relationship of a husband and a wife. This was a new concept for me. I never knew it was wrong to be with someone sexually unless married to him or her.

The minute I learned this, I let the Lord know that I was sorry for my past behavior, and that I now committed myself to his plan. I committed to never be with another woman sexually until married.

I am very glad that the Lord did not tell me then how long it was going to be because I probably would have gone into shock. It has been 21 years now, and I have kept my promise to the Lord. I can also truly say that I am so grateful that I did because now I have this gift to give to my wife. Something very interesting has happened to me throughout this time of remaining sexually pure. I have developed a tremendous sense of self-respect.... It makes me feel very, very good about myself that I am not falling for his [Satan's] tricks and schemes designed to ensnare God's people.

But even more rewarding than that, is the feeling I have knowing that my obedience to my Lord in this area is one strong way I can tell the Lord how much I love him.... I will not just love him in words only, but in my actions by doing what he says to do.

...Lastly, I want to be married to a godly wife. And I know that if I really want to have a godly wife, I myself must be a godly man.

Another young man wrote:

Having been a Christian for over 30 years and having dated during that time I cannot say that I have followed God's design for relationships every time. However, I can say that I wish I had done so. If I could go back and do them over again, I would definitely keep them from falling into the sexual temptations that at times took over.

After suffering the fall out of being pulled away from God, feeling guilty, ... and suffering the pain of breaking up with someone that I had inappropriately built a physical bond with, I have definitely concluded that God was right.... I am definitely determined to keep the physical in proper perspective and not let it confuse or alter another

relationship. I really want to build a true friendship and a bond with a healthy foundation.

Many young adults have to admit that they have let their physical attraction to another person blur proper boundaries in a relationship and have acted in defiance of God's guidelines for human sexuality. [Or, Many of us have to admit that we have let our physical attraction to another person blur proper boundaries in a relationship and have acted in defiance of God's guidelines for our sexuality.] This study is designed to help us know how to fight the temptation to lust. By lust, we mean misusing our God-given sexual desires. By purity, we mean innocence or freedom from sexual sin or guilt. But before we go further, let's agree that anything shared in this meeting is confidential and will be kept that way. We need to honor one another's integrity and have the humble heart of Jesus Christ toward one another. Keep in mind that all of us are imperfect. All of us are people in need of a Savior. If we deny that, we would be calling God a liar since His Scriptures tell us that all people have fallen short of His standards, have missed the mark (Romans 3:23). All of us have gone our own way at one time or another, not wanting to submit to God's authority (Isaiah 53:4–6). Even if we have not battled with sexual temptation a great deal, all of us have been tempted and have given in to some sinful behavior. Even Jesus, God in human form, was tempted in every way—although He remained sinless (Hebrews 4:15). So let's have a compassionate and humble attitude towards one another. Let's make our group a safe place where we can admit struggles and confess sins, and instead of pronouncing judgment, we announce the good news of forgiveness through the blood of Jesus Christ (1 John 1:9).

## **PRAYER**

*Pray that the Holy Spirit will convey to the participants a strong desire to follow God's best plans for our sexuality and live a pure life, learning to overcome sexual temptation.*

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

*This is background material for leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.*

*2 Peter* is a letter, apparently written by the Apostle Peter (1:1). The letter uses a large amount of religious or ethical Greek vocabulary and several styles of writing from the ancient Greek and Jewish world (Bauckham, pp. 173–174). *This means we have to pay close attention to how the first century pagan and Jewish authors used these words rather than taking them on face value today.* [The Leaders' Interpretation Notes will help you do this.] Some believe the letter was a final message from the aging apostle based on 1:12–15 (Keener, "2 Peter, Introduction, Authorship and Date"). The early church and many of today's scholars have questioned Peter's authorship because it differs so much from *1 Peter*. Some have suggested one of his disciples wrote the letter to further Peter's teachings after his death (Fee, p. 407). Other scholars see the difficulty in proving Peter's authorship, but propose that Peter simply used a different scribe in this so-called second letter than his scribe Silas whom we are told in 1 Peter 5:12 had helped him write *1 Peter* (Keener, "2 Peter, Introduction").

All seem to agree, however, that the letter was written to a specific group of people based on comments in *2 Peter* 3:1 and 15–16 (Bauckham, p. 165) and all believe Peter was concerned with the false teachers who were living immoral lives (2:1–3, 10–22, 3:17). Throughout the letter, Peter reaffirms the historical return of Christ and the judgment that all will face at that time. Consequently, believers should make the effort to grow in godliness given all that Jesus has done for them and all that He will examine one day. Peter warns them not to follow the sinful

behavior of the false teachers who denied Jesus' second coming (3:3–4) and possibly used the grace of God as an excuse for loose living (Fee, pp. 407–408).

Moo outlines Peter's message, following his greetings, this way:

1. God has given Christians all that they need to be spiritually mature (vv. 3–4).
2. Christians must actively pursue spiritual maturity (vv. 5–9).
3. Christians must pursue spiritual maturity if they expect to be welcomed in God's eternal kingdom (vv. 10–11) (Moo, pp. 40–41).

Some of the words in the first two verses refer to key ideas in Peter's letter: righteousness; faith; knowledge; God and Savior Jesus Christ. The writer also likes to use pairs of words, such as, servant and apostle, God and Savior Jesus Christ, grace and peace, life and godliness, glory and goodness, great and precious, ineffective and unproductive, nearsighted and blind, calling and election. These pairs usually have a close relationship or similar meaning (Bauckham, p. 178). Since this letter is so brief, you may have time to read the whole book in order to grasp the context of this passage better.

## **STUDY THE PASSAGE: 2 Peter 1:1–11**

### **1. Let's take turns reading the passage aloud.**

#### **How does Peter describe himself (v. 1a)?**

In our minds there may be a sharp contrast between a lowly “servant” and an authoritative “apostle,” but Peter sees himself as both. Serving Christ requires a humble outlook while exercising the authority we've been delegated. As an apostle, Peter looks out for the welfare of these young churches, and not only encourages but also corrects and reminds believers to continue to live holy, faith-filled lives as they journey with Jesus.

#### **How does Peter identify the group he's writing to (v. 1b)? How does he greet them (v. 2)?**

Peter defines those he's writing to as Christians—fellow recipients of God's gifts of faith and righteousness. Right here he sums up the gospel and a whole sermon could be preached on this verse alone. But you don't have to dwell here. Just be aware as you read through this passage that everything comes from God, and any commands given us are to be viewed in the context of *what God has done for us and given to us*. We have been *given* the very ability to understand and believe the truth of the gospel. By faith we have *received* Christ's perfect righteousness, the perfect obedience Jesus demonstrated in His earthly relationship with God the Father. This is our new life, our new status, and the new nature *put* in us when we believe. This is the life of Jesus communicated to us by the indwelling of His Holy Spirit. *All of this is God's doing*, His divine activity. And, amazingly, this is all we need to live as Jesus did, if we could only grasp the powerful implications of these truths. Peter says this more clearly in verse 3.

#### **Leaders' Interpretation Notes**

Because he says they “have received a faith as precious as *ours*,” he is probably reassuring these Christians that their faith is just as authentic as that of the apostles who saw Jesus during His earthly life. Scholars also interpret the word “righteousness” in

verse 1 as a description of *God* who has been faithful and just by giving the same faith to each generation, rather than choosing only a few privileged apostles to have access to Himself. Therefore, it is not the usual reference to Christ's perfect relationship with God given to us (Bauckham, pp. 167–168). And, because there is no other mention of Jewish versus Gentile division in this letter, we shouldn't read into "ours" and "yours" a racial division in this church (Bauckham, p. 167).

Peter uses the familiar "grace and peace" pairing that Paul often used in his letters. There was a Greek greeting from the same root word as "grace" and the Jews most often used "peace" as their greeting (Bauckham, p. 166; Keener, "2 Peter 1:1–2" and "Romans 1:1–7"). Peter mentions "knowledge of God" as the way we can have this grace and peace. He is referring to the fact that we come to *know* God and Jesus Christ through salvation, indicating a personal experience of knowing, as one human meets another. This knowledge that leads to finding God's grace and peace is not simply knowing the facts about God contained in the gospel—even though we do need to first understand the content of the gospel before responding by faith. Peter is probably distinguishing here between what we know of God at salvation (1:2, 3, 8, 2:20, 21), versus the knowledge we accumulate about Christ and discipleship as we grow in the faith (indicated in 1:5, 6, and 3:18, Bauckham, pp. 169–170). Therefore, when we meet God through faith in His Son, we have access to grace and peace simply because He bestows them on us.

## **2. What does Peter say that Christians have been given by God (vv. 3–4)?**

Peter first mentions divine power (v. 3) referring to the power of God.

Through His divine power Christ has given us "everything" we need to live a godly life. It is again "through our knowledge" of Him that we receive all we need. Bauckham states that Christ's first gift to us—"the knowledge we gained in conversion"—is also the way we are able to please Him, living a reverent, holy life (p. 178).

Next Peter talks about the promises (v. 4) we have been given, promises that probably refer to enjoying eternity with Christ.

### **Leaders' Interpretation Notes, Verse 3**

We can assume that Peter is saying Jesus has given this power since the "His" at the beginning of verse three probably refers back to the end of verse two—"Jesus our Lord." [Scholars point out that this is a fairly clear indication that the early church did see Jesus as God (Keener, "2 Peter 1:1–2"), a point that some liberal scholars have questioned. People in your small group may not need to discuss this fact, so remember that you don't have to bring up every item we give you in these notes.] Moo thinks that this is the saving power of Christ, which now enables us to live a godly life (Moo, p. 41).

Peter points to Jesus' "own glory and goodness" as the means for calling us to salvation. This is perhaps another way to talk about the "divine power" being shown in His life, death, and resurrection (Bauckham, pp. 178–179). When humans are captivated by the perfect love and immeasurable goodness of Jesus' life and sacrifice for their sins, generally those individuals decide to place their faith in Jesus in response to what they know of Him at that time. Certainly they will grow in their knowledge of Him if they pursue the relationship He offers. This "glory and goodness" evident in the life of Christ not only calls us to be saved but also gives us the "promises" we can have for our future life with Him. Everything comes to us through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ.

### **Leaders' Interpretation Notes, Verse 4**

We may be quick to assume that the “promises” are all those in Scripture that we count on when we need encouragement in trials or direction in prayer. And, that would be logical given the phrase about escaping corruption. But Peter has just said we have everything we need to live our lives now, so the promises seem to relate to something other than our present lives. And the whole focus of this passage is living now in such a way that we will get to enjoy eternity with Christ, so the promises are probably ones related to eternity, as those clearly mentioned in Chapter 3:4, 9, and 13 (Bauckham, p. 179). Paul writes on a similar note in Romans 8 when he refers to the fact that all of creation along with us is awaiting the hope of receiving our resurrection bodies. This is the hope we were saved in, and this is the promise the Holy Spirit is guaranteeing that we will realize one day (Romans 8:22–25).

### **3. Why has Jesus given us His “power” and “promises” (vv. 3–4)?**

In verse three, Peter says we have received power for “life and godliness” and in verse four, he says we have received promises to “participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”

### **Leaders' Interpretation Notes**

Life and godliness probably refer to “a godly life” here on earth rather than “eternal life” (Bauckham, p. 178). Another way to phrase this is a life that is pleasing to God (Moo, p. 41). Peter is saying that we can live a life pleasing to God right now, through faith in Christ, through His indwelling power that has freed us from sin and given us His ability to say no to temptation and old habits (Romans 6; Titus 2:11–14).

Bauckham writes that the goal of the godly life and promises is spending eternity with Christ, and therefore the promises are those related to one day escaping death (mortality) and become immortal like God (Bauckham, p. 192). These promises carry with them a strong incentive to live a morally pleasing life now so that our welcome into the kingdom of God will be a warm one when we meet the King (v. 11).

Peter says that participating in the divine nature of God is one of the reasons Christ has given us His divine power. Both “divine power” and “divine nature” were terms in Greek culture (Keener, “2 Peter 1:3–11”). Greek philosophical thought saw the world divided into the material and the spiritual or divine. The spiritual world was seen as permanent, eternal, and superior, while the material world was viewed as temporary and inferior. The Greeks believed that the higher nature of each human had the potential to regain immortality, usually through moral and intellectual improvement in this life and eventual death that freed the spirit. Other religious practices at the time taught that people could become one with the gods and therefore share a divine nature. A person would usually accomplish this divine status through secret rituals or secret knowledge obtained through other more enlightened individuals (Bauckham, pp. 179–180).

In contrast, Jewish scholars had ideas about humans being able to reflect God’s nature by becoming immortal through God’s gift, not man’s efforts (Bauckham, pp. 180–181). Against this backdrop of Greek, pagan, and Jewish thought, Peter says that followers of Jesus may escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires” (v. 4b). Bauckham interprets this as Christians become “immortal and incorruptible” because of God’s grace. This means we can be alive eternally and that we can live in the realm of the One who is divine, Almighty God (Bauckham, p. 180). Peter is *not* teaching that we humans

have the potential to become gods or divine ourselves as some in the first century claimed and other cults today maintain.

While we think of eternal life beginning at the moment of conversion, when the Holy Spirit begins to live in us because we are joined to Christ by faith, Peter probably was referring to life *after* death as the time frame for when Christians participate in the divine nature--that is, when they are no longer mortal. Likewise, when Peter wrote of escaping corruption, he meant that we would be escaping the physical corruption of this world, i.e., death (Bauckham, p. 183). By “evil desires,” Peter is pointing to the fact that the root of the corruption or decay leading to death is the evil desire (Bauckham, p. 183) that leads to disobeying the divine warning of Genesis 2:17. This disobedience brought the judgment of death in Genesis 3:19. Paul makes this point when he writes, “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12).

However, the way we live our lives now *is* relevant and important. We aren’t just waiting for death to make us holy as we stand face to face with Christ. Peter states that progressing in moral purity is a part of this escape, because we have been given the means to live a godly life now, and he argues that we should make every effort to become more Christ like while we have the means (vv. 5–11).

#### **4. What does Peter say our response should be since Jesus has done so much for us and given so much to us (vv. 5–7)?**

Peter says we should “...make every effort to add to your faith...” (v. 5) meaning we have an active part to play in growing in godliness. But notice that Peter says this is a gradual process of adding one virtue to another rather than all at once. God does not transform us into godly people overnight (Buchanan, p. 134). This is important to realize because we often become discouraged in our struggle to resist temptations and eventually surrender to those that seem impossible to defeat. The frustration or hopelessness some experience can cause them to become so disillusioned that they quit living as a follower of Christ.

Many times we would like God to send His Spirit to mature us or someone we care about instantly, fulfilling our calling to resemble Jesus (Romans 8:29). If He did, we imagine that we would struggle less, having been freed of our self-centered desires and seemingly having become immune to the numerous temptations around us (Romans 7:15–24). However, this would not eliminate warfare altogether. Even Jesus, who was sinless, did not avoid struggles with temptation. In fact, He faced similar battles, although He remained sinless. Because of this, and His perfect obedience to the Father, He could take our place and win our victory on the cross. Since He knows what it is to battle and resist temptation, we have the privilege of looking to Him in faith to supply the strength we need to resist sin (Hebrews 2:17–18, 4:15–16).

Knowing that God’s ways are not always our ways, we must both trust His Spirit to transform us and cooperate by our own efforts to be transformed. While we live daily in the hope that He will complete His work in us when we see Jesus (Philippians 1:6), we also “make every effort” to “work out our salvation” with His help (Philippians 2:12–13).

- **Does this phrase, “make every effort,” mean that we are saved by grace through faith but have to continue in the Christian life through sheer willpower to avoid evil and become holy, blameless, etc.?**

There are eight passages in the New Testament that use “make every effort” (Buchanan, p. 133) in describing our part of the process of becoming like Jesus:

- Luke 13:24
- Romans 14:19
- Ephesians 4:3
- Hebrews 4:11
- Hebrews 12:14
- 2 Peter 1:5
- 2 Peter 1:15
- 2 Peter 3:14.

However, these passages and the whole of Scripture do not teach that the Christian life is simply a matter of human willpower. Paul makes this clear when he sharply rebuked the Galatians,

You foolish Galatians! ... I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? ... Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?  
Galatians 3:1–5

Paul’s point is that we are saved by God as He gives us faith to trust in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ on our behalf (“what you heard”). Paul wants us to realize that we also continue to live by the same graciously-given faith, not by our mere human efforts to follow all God’s rules (“observe the law”). Paul encourages us to let the fruit of the Spirit develop in us (Galatians 5:22–23) and to keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:25), two metaphors for describing the dependence we maintain in trusting in, listening to, and obeying the Spirit of Jesus in us.

**5. What is the first thing Peter mentions in this list (v. 5)? What is the final or ultimate virtue that he mentions (v. 7)?**

As stated above, faith is our starting point and the means by which we grow in our relationship to and resemblance of Jesus Christ. Peter puts love at the top or end of the list. Scholars recognize that Peter is drawing on ancient Greek and Jewish traditions when formulating this “catalog of virtues.” In comparison to similar lists in Paul’s letters, Peter leans more towards Greek literature (Bauckham, pp. 174–175), which is likely due to trying to use vocabulary relevant for his audience that has been infiltrated by false teachers.

- **Why is “love” the goal of our faith?**

If someone makes this point as you discuss the question before it, then feel free to move on. However, it’s good to be reminded that behind all that God does, and behind all that He asks of us, is His perfect, self-less, life-giving love. And this love is the highest virtue

or characteristic that incorporates all the other virtues in the Bible (Bauckham, p. 187). This helps set up the next question, which talks about Christ-like love being our motivation for godly living, too.

### **Leaders' Interpretation Notes**

In case your group members ask about the meaning of any of these virtues, here's a simple definition for each. However, don't dwell on these at length. The questions about love are much more important to the issue of fighting lust. Bauckham defines the virtues as follows:

- Faith: faith in the gospel that is the foundation for our Christian life.
- Virtue: moral excellence.
- Knowledge: practical wisdom obtained as we grow in our relationship with Jesus and His Word that helps us discern how to live a godly life.
- Self-control: self-discipline and restraint from indulging our physical desires excessively.
- Steadfastness: courageously enduring and holding on to the hope we have in God.
- Brotherly Affection: affection for other brothers and sisters in Christ.
- Love: this encompasses all the others (Bauckham, pp. 185—187).

Here are a few thoughts about how these qualities apply to fighting lust and living a godly life.

- Faith enables us to believe God's way is the only way to enjoy a really satisfying life. By exercising faith in Jesus, we not only enter eternal life now, but we continue to trust Jesus for the abundant life that comes with obedience, putting His teachings into practice.
- Virtue points us toward following God's ways and living within His commands. This lifestyle promotes good mental, physical, social, and spiritual health. So seeking to grow in godly virtues is a way we invite God's blessings on our lives.
- Knowledge helps us as we continually get to know the Lord and understand the beauty and brilliance of His ways, His teachings, and His promises.
- Self-control is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, not a quality we develop out of self-effort. God has given us the power through His Spirit to say no to ungodly desires. Our efforts on our own to limit or refrain or restrict our sinful nature will ultimately fail. Edward Welch has written, "Self-control is the skill of saying 'no' to ungodly desires even when it hurts" (p.29).
- Steadfastness grows as we live consciously with a future goal in mind: one day Jesus will meet us and welcome us. This truth can help us make right choices in the present moment when temptations are at their peak.
- Brotherly affection grows out of the convictions that: we all are in the same need of a Savior because we all are sinners saved simply by God's extravagant grace; we all are in God's family by His loving design; we all need each other's support and encouragement to live out our kingdom calling and destiny.
- Love is personified in Jesus Christ who came to model and restore true humanity. See I Corinthians 13 and I John 4:7—21 for God's way of defining His love.

**6. How might “love” motivate us to strive for sexual purity? How do we express love for God when we don’t indulge our desires inappropriately? How do we express love for someone else by keeping our thoughts, our speech, our appearance, or our actions pure?**

The first and greatest commandment is to love God with our whole being (Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37–38). It is to love Him first and seek His pleasure before ours. It is to live to please Him, not our sinful desires (Ephesians 5:10). It is to honor His design of our feelings by expressing them as He intended, such as expressing our sexual desires within the boundaries of marriage. Edward Welch writes:

Our relationship to God in Christ should be characterized by emotional intensity; our response to our own sin should be hatred and tears; our love for others should be such that we are moved by both their pleasure and pain. Scripture does not oppose strong desire; instead, it both approves and commands it. The problem is the purpose of our passions. Do our passions express a heart that seeks the glory of Christ and intensely desires the things which Jesus desires? Or do they express our own desires to serve ourselves and our own glory? It is likely that our repentance of addictions should include repentance for not being passionate about...Christ and the things He loves (p. 27).

Ways we can express our love for God, others, and ourselves include refraining from treating another person as a sexual object of our lust, keeping ourselves away from things that tempt us to lust and act out other sexual sins, and keeping from tripping others up and contributing to their sinful downfalls. Since we were made for God and are meant to bring Him honor whether others witness our behavior or not, we have a strong incentive to turn away from sexual temptation as soon as it appears. Such choices please the Lord and keep us freer and cleaner for healthy interactions with others. Learning to value members of the opposite sex for their unique personal qualities, as fellow members of the Body of Christ, and as spiritual family members strengthens Christ’s church and enables us to work together to advance His kingdom, not being distracted by our own sexual agenda.

Making a firm commitment to refrain from intimate sexual activity outside marriage does bring future happiness. Numerous studies show that refraining from sexual activity before marriage is a key factor to sexual satisfaction within marriage. Almost 50 % of the couples who live together or have intimate relations before marriage divorce within five years (Osterheldt, p. D3).

Some young people or single adults think that marriage will be the solution to sexual temptation and sinful habits. They believe that sexual intercourse with their spouse will quench their sexual thirst. In fact, intimacy with one’s spouse, which is designed to be a sacred, pleasurable act of communion between a married man and woman, may actually be disappointing, dissatisfying, and guilt-ridden for the person who often fantasizes or is a sexual addict. Therefore, learning to flee sexual temptation, to abstain from acting on sexual urges, and to express our sexual drives in appropriate ways is extremely important. It’s especially important for young people in our culture, so that they will not have to unlearn destructive habits later in life. Whether one remains single or marries, sexual self-control is vital to personal happiness.

**7. What benefit does Peter promise these virtues will have in our lives (vv. 8, 10–11)?**

Peter uses a pair of words that are negative, ineffective and unproductive, to point out what we should be: effective and fruitful. Bauckham writes that these words were used in early Christian circles to refer to the fact that the Christian faith should have “ethical effects” in believers’ lives. This is the subject James takes up when he discusses faith without works in James 2:14–26, especially verse 20 (Bauckham, p. 188). He relates this to the result of *knowing* Jesus Christ because we are in relationship with Him. Because Jesus lives in us and with us, we should be exhibiting the fruit of His Spirit, rather than just sitting idly by holding an “eternal life insurance policy” that we hope will allow us to escape hell at the end of our lives. In fact, Peter’s point in verse nine shows he does not believe we can remain the same as we were at conversion, lacking the virtues that should characterize our lives.

- **What help does an eternal perspective bring to us when we battle temptation in any area of life?**

Saying “no” to temptation and sin *now* because we believe God has a better reward for us *later*—if we continue to live obediently—is what John Piper calls “living by faith in future grace.” “The power of all temptation is that it will make me happier [than prompt obedience to God]” (Piper, p. 334). Piper urges us to use the Word of God when battling any form of temptation. It is the Sword of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 6:17), and bringing Scripture to mind can help us have God’s perspective. “The Word of God cuts through the fog of Satan’s lies and shows me where true and lasting happiness are found” (Piper, p. 335). The purpose of reciting or reading God’s Word in the moment of temptation is not just a negative one—to warn us. Most of us know that despite many warnings, we cross the line and do things that are harmful to our bodies, emotions, spirits, and relationships. Something stronger has to lure us away from the lusts of our flesh (Piper, p. 336). Piper says that when he uses God’s Word to battle temptation, the Scriptures “...feed faith’s appetite for God. And in doing so, it weans my heart away from the deceptive taste of lust” (p. 335). “Our chief weapon is the Truth that says *God* will make our future happier” (Piper, p. 336). Paraphrases of Scriptures that he includes are below. You, and members in your group, may want to add favorite verses to create a list that can be a powerful tool against temptation.

- Philippians 4:8–9: Thinking on pure and lovely things will bring God’s peace.
- Romans 8:6: Focusing on fleshly things brings death, but focusing on the Holy Spirit and the things that He delights in is key to life and peace.
- 1 Peter 2:11: Sinful desires wage war against our souls. Therefore, we need to wage war against them.
- Luke 8:14: The pleasures of this life choke out God’s seed and Spirit in us.
- Psalm 84:11: God does not withhold any good thing from those who live uprightly.
- Matthew 5:8: The pure in heart will see God.

Likewise, continually focusing on the idea that it is more loving towards others when I refrain from sexual sin now is a future-based decision. It is choosing to value our future, when there will be a rich reward for having said “no” to ungodliness now. This is difficult since we live in a culture saturated with messages that we ought to live in the moment, that instant gratification is normal and good, and that we deserve to please ourselves as much as possible.

Edward Welch sees contemplating the return of Jesus Christ helping us in several ways to develop self-control, to say no to ungodly desires (p. 30):

- Knowing that Christ will return and our battle against lust will end can give us hope when we feel otherwise.
- Thinking of eternity can sharpen our discernment of what our priorities are.
- Meditating on the person of Christ and being transformed into His likeness can help us develop an accurate image of true humanity, so that we no longer see accommodating sin as part of the picture God intended for us.

## **8. What does Peter say about those who do *not* continue to grow in godliness (v. 9)? What can happen when we do not look ahead or cannot see the future?**

Being nearsighted is “to be able to see near things more clearly than distant ones” (m-w.com). Peter also uses the word blind. Blindness in Scripture refers to the inability or unwillingness to see spiritual truth, and Bauckham thinks the author has used another pair of words to mean practically the same thing (p.189). However, if we take not seeing well at a *distance* metaphorically as not being able to focus on the *future*, then lacking the ability to see in the distance means the person who is not practicing the things learned as a Christian has lost sight of the long range or eternal goals that godliness aims towards.

Peter also says this person “...has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.” In other words, one who does not attempt through faith to “...pursue virtue must have forgotten his baptism, and is in danger of relapsing into his pre-Christian condition” (Bauckham, pp. 189–190).

- **How can we avoid forgetting or turning away from what Jesus has done for us?**

## **9. What does Peter urge in light of all this (vv. 10–11)?**

Peter urges the believers to make more effort in the moral arena, not because this is what saves them but because this evidences saving faith and is necessary for our final experience of salvation. He says that pursuing godliness means we will be guaranteed *by Christ* of our final salvation, thus making our call and election more certain. This is not a direct contradiction to Paul’s adamant teaching about being saved by grace alone, since the context for all that Peter is saying is that the grace of God has given us all we need. And Paul does point out the necessity of godly living in order to avoid condemnation at our final judgment as he clearly stated in Galatians 5:19–21 (Bauckham, p. 190):

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Thus it is very important that we make good use of the gifts the Father has lavished on us. Peter says we won't stumble [better than translating the Greek word as "fall"] meaning that we would not reach our final destiny. Some have interpreted this incorrectly to mean that we would never sin (Bauckham, p. 191). Finally, Peter portrays our salvation as the welcome into Christ's eternal kingdom, and again mentions grace in pointing out that this is given or provided by God for us (Bauckham, p. 191).

### **Leaders' Interpretation Notes**

The comments about our "final experience of salvation" do not imply that we can't be assured of our salvation when we confess our sin, turn from it, and accept Jesus as Lord and Savior (Romans 10:9–13). However, once we profess Christ, we should begin to change. Paul writes that salvation is a process of becoming conformed to the image of Christ, although it won't be completed until we die and receive our resurrection bodies (Romans 8:23, explained by Dunn, pp. 489–491). Paul also says that he is in a process of becoming like Christ but that he hasn't arrived yet (Philippians 2:10–16). While salvation through faith in Christ's death and resurrection is brought about by the work of the Holy Spirit, it also consists of His work to transform us. Gordon Fee explains,

When we receive the Spirit at conversion divine perfection does not set in, but divine infection does! We have been invaded by the living God himself, in the person of his Spirit, whose goal is to infect us thoroughly with God's own likeness. Paul's phrase for this is the fruit of the Spirit. ...The growing of this fruit is the long way on the journey of Christian conversion, the "long obedience in the same direction," and it is altogether the work of the Spirit in our lives (pp. 112–113).

James tells us that saving faith must be more than mere mental assent to ideas about God and Christ. He says that faith that is not evidenced in good works is dead, meaningless (James 2:14–25). Therefore, Peter is not alone in saying that it matters how we live this life and how we make use of the gifts of God while we wait for Christ's return or for our meeting Him after death.

Also, the comments above about final judgment are not meant to create insecurity in Christians. Paul writes that God does not condemn us for our sin because God has transferred the charges against us to Jesus who paid our penalty with His sacrificial death (Romans 8:1–4). We are not only acquitted on all charges but we are considered right with God because God has accounted Christ's sinless life to our record (Romans 5:18–19). This means we can face final judgment free of fear of punishment. While we who put our faith in Christ for salvation will escape condemnation, punishment, and banishment from Christ's presence in eternity, we should not presume on His grace and live merely to please ourselves. Using the analogy of running a race for the Christian life, Paul writes that he does not want to disqualify himself from the prize by failing to battle his sinful tendencies (1 Corinthians 9:27). "Paul's fear was not that he might lose his salvation, but that he might suffer loss through failing to satisfy his Lord (cf. 3:15)" (Wright, p. 138). Paul had already stated to the Corinthians that Christians will be saved

by faith, but our work will be tested by fire to determine if we have built carefully on the foundation of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 3:10–15).

Paul must have been accused of advocating the heresy of licentiousness since after teaching justification by grace alone, he had to explain that he was not promoting loose living. Paul asserts that we are saved by God's grace not to go our own way but in order to live a new life, a Spirit directed life (Romans 6:1–4; 8:12–14). The author of Hebrews wants to encourage Christians who are undergoing persecution and are tempted to give up. So he repeatedly says to persevere in trusting Jesus until death so that we can share in Him eternally (Hebrews 3:6–14; 4:1–3, 9–11). Thus Scripture is consistent with Peter when he insists Christians need to live with the end of their lives in mind when we will either receive a warm welcome from Jesus or face His stern rebuke.

Because of this, Vineyard Church of Columbus includes in our statement of faith that we have an obligation to persevere in faith and holiness to the end of our days.

## **APPLICATION**

*Select one of the following application questions to finish your discussion time.*

*The Holy Spirit may have been bringing to mind personal struggles with sexual lust that group members or others in their circle of influence may have. Thus, be very careful to protect the dignity and confidentiality of individuals by reviewing the following with your group:*

### **Guidelines for Sharing:**

When sharing our struggles and prayer requests, let's observe the following guidelines so that our group is a safe place for each person, and so we can find acceptance and healing here.

1. Keep sharing appropriate so that we don't cause others to sin by using such explicit language that we plant ideas in others' minds.... For example, let's avoid being overly graphic in discussing our temptations and failings.
2. Keep sharing Christ-centered. If we confess some sin, keep it in light of the forgiveness of Christ that we can find because of His death on the cross for our sins. Also, let's keep the sharing focused on how Christ can redeem us, not on how rotten we have been or currently are.
3. Keep the names of others we talk about anonymous. Let's be sure we do not uncover or confess the sins of others for them.
4. Keep anything that is shared in this group confidential and within this group. We should not speak about the confessions or struggles of others to anyone outside the group, nor should we fall into gossip by speaking negatively about someone when they are not present. [Note: the content of gossip may be truthful, but that doesn't automatically qualify it as something to be passed on. If the truth will not improve the reputation of the person we are sharing about nor is appropriate for the hearers to know, then we should refrain. Gossip not only sins against the person spoken against but also pollutes those who listen to it.]
5. Determine the level of accountability you want. Discuss that with the person or persons you confide in. Others should not take it upon themselves to probe or seek information when

they have not been asked to be in an accountable relationship. Avoid passing on prayer requests or mentioning others struggles' when they have not specifically asked you to do so.

6. Generally, men should share with other men, and women with other women. Avoid one on one situations between two people of the opposite sex whenever possible. If a man gets a prophetic leading for a woman in the group, at least one other person should be present if he prays for her, and vice versa.

*At this time, separate men and women if possible. You should have previously appointed and prepared one person in each group to lead the prayer and ministry time as they consider one of the following application questions.*

- **How have I viewed sexual purity?**

1. As something I should pursue.
2. As something I should pursue but don't.
3. As irrelevant, old-fashioned, not for my generation.
4. As something impossible to achieve or maintain.
5. As something that makes me feel dirty and ashamed.

**How does my view of sexual purity line up with God's? How can I cultivate a pure heart?**

See the question on strategies to help overcome temptation.

- **What has the Word of God and or His Spirit been prompting me to change especially during this Bible study?**

1. A change in my thoughts, outlook, attitude towards members of the opposite sex.
2. A change in my thoughts, outlook, attitude towards members of my same sex.
3. A change in my thoughts, outlook, attitude towards my fiancé/fiancée.
4. A change in my thoughts, outlook, attitude towards my spouse.
5. A change in my viewing habits—whether TV, magazines, books, websites, movies, videos, DVD's, or live performances.
6. A change in my speech patterns about sexual topics.
7. A change in my appearance so that I will not cause others to be tempted.
8. A change in my behavior with or around the opposite sex.
9. A change in my behavior with a specific individual.
10. A change in my behavior with my fiancé/fiancée.
11. A change in my behavior with my spouse.
12. A change in my behavior with members of my own sex.
13. A change in my behavior when I am alone.

**What step(s) will I take this week to make the change the Lord wants me to implement?**

Encourage your group members to choose one thing to change or pray about and ask them to write this down. Then ask them to consider sharing that one thing (remembering the guidelines for sharing above) with at least one other person and praying for each other before leaving the meeting. Suggest that they pray for one another once a day for the next week or until your group meets again.

- **What if I have already “blown it” in the past? How can I be pure now? Why should I even try?**

You may find a large percentage of people in your group who know they have not remained pure in their minds, bodies, and relationships. Some who are unmarried are no longer virgins. Others who are married may have unhealthy habits that are hidden or seldom confessed. The sexual revolution of the 1960’s continues to have a huge impact:

About 65 percent of American teenagers have sex before they finish high school, and the number of unmarried couples living together has shot up tenfold between 1960 and 2000. Sexual morality has also collapsed among Christians, with one survey finding that two-thirds of single Christians have not practiced chastity. A 2003 study of young people signing abstinence pledges found that, while the vows did postpone sex, 61 percent eventually broke their promises. Of the 39 percent who kept their pledges, 55 percent said they had oral sex, which they didn’t consider to be sex (Veith, p. 36).

Given such statistics, some in your group may need to experience a safe person to confess sinful attitudes and actions with, and need to hear reassurance of God’s pardon. [See application question below.] Even after that, if people still do not feel the same as before engaging in sexual sin, we can encourage them to turn away from those habits that have left them sensing guilt and estrangement from God. For those who have lost their virginity, there will still be sexual pressure from peers, media, and the enemy. But as one author wrote, “...you needn’t surrender to promiscuity. For all who didn’t save it, it’s never too late to become pure in thought” (Cornell, p. 2).

- **What strategies will help us overcome sexual temptation and lust?**

While your group cannot substitute for an overcomer’s group, there are some basic patterns that will help us change habits and live more freely in Christ. Since we were designed for relational intimacy with God, all humans desire to know love and be loved. However, in our brokenness, we seek satisfaction from sources other than our Creator. These become false gods, idols that enslave us. “And this is the power of addiction. Whatever the object of our addiction is, it attaches itself to our intense desire for eternal and intimate communion with God and each other.... Our heart will carry us either to God or to addiction” (Curtis and Eldredge, pp. 1–2). “Addiction is the most powerful psychic enemy of humanity’s desire for God” (Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace*, cited in Curtis and Eldredge, p. 2).

The good news for Christians is that Jesus came to set us free from slavery to sin. We can encourage people who have sought substitute intimacy through fantasy or sexual relations outside of marriage to repent and reconnect with God. This is the only path to true satisfaction since “...indulgence leaves us empty and primed for the next round of thirst quenching” (Curtis and Eldredge, pp. 1–3). As Oswald Chambers said, “There is only One Being who can satisfy the last aching abyss of the human heart, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ” (cited in Curtis and Eldredge, p. 3).

Here are some simple pointers to help us move towards freedom.

1. We need to confess our sins and repent of the lies or behaviors that have become substitutes for God or enslaved us. This can take place in our small groups and ought to happen men with men and women with women.
2. Verbally convey assurance of God's forgiveness and cleansing through Christ to a person who is confessing (1 John 1:9).
3. Cultivate a grateful heart. *Pride* and *self-pity* are two sinful attitudes that can make us vulnerable to lust [or other sin areas].

Pride exalts the self. Pride tells me I deserve good things. Pride tells me that I have earned good things. Pride tells me that I am the judge of what is good for me. Sexual pleasure is a good thing. I deserve some.... Self-pity is the other side of pride. Self-pity tells me what a poor thing I am. Self-pity tells me that I haven't received a fair shake in life. Self-pity tells me that I deserve some comfort. ...A grateful heart, on the other hand, knows that we don't really deserve anything (Medinger, p. 62).

A grateful heart knows that God is the source of all the good in our lives so that there is no room for pride (Romans 11:33–36). A grateful heart also knows that while God has given us so much, there is no guarantee that our lives will be free of problems (John 16:33). So, there is no reason for self-pity either. “An ungrateful heart draws us into ourselves and therein lie our difficulties. A grateful heart connects us with God, our source of all things that are good” (Medinger, p. 62).

4. Leaders ought to know that without a written or formal plan, we seldom will make the needed changes in our lives or battle the temptations that plague us (Welch, p. 31). So, you may want to ask group members to write down specific steps to take in the next week to either combat sexual temptation or get help from others outside the group to overcome it. Some concrete steps might include:
  - Seek satisfaction in your relationship with Jesus. Develop a passion for His presence and His worship. Therefore make appointments with God if you don't already have regular time in your daily schedule to enjoy His presence and worship. Use worship music, dance, praying or singing aloud, Scripture reading, silence and listening to cultivate more whole-hearted worship and dialogue with the Lord.
  - Become involved in serving others. Giving of our time, talents, and relational energy is not only the pattern Jesus set for His disciples but also one that He promised would bring us joy (Mark 10:45; John 15:10–11; Acts 20:35). By looking to the needs of others, we may be able to substitute healthy and rewarding behaviors for the sin nature's insatiable urge to indulge ourselves in unhealthy ways.

- Avoid people, places, and activities that usually set you up for sexual temptation or falling into sexual sin. You may need to cultivate new friendships with people in this small group. You and your fiancé(e) may have to have a frank discussion with a mentoring couple or pastor about how to set firm guidelines for your physical relationship. Or, you may need to spend more time in public with your boyfriend or girlfriend engaging in non-intimate activities. A study indicates, “that when a couple has been together for approximately 300 hours, even most of those trying to be moral will do things they didn’t intend originally” (Dobson, p. 1).
  - You may also want to avoid certain places in your own home that are associated with impure thoughts or behaviors. You may need to dispose of literature that tempts you to sexual sin whether it’s romance novels or pornography. If your viewing habits on the TV or movies are your downfall, find someone that you can call when tempted or that will check up on you in a loving but firm way. Finally, if your Internet habits contribute to sinful behavior, sign up for a filter that will keep you from viewing pornography on the web or get a trusted friend to install blocking software for you.
5. For those in a long-term struggle with sexual sin, it would be best for them to seek godly counsel and also to join a support group where others acquainted with similar struggles can offer genuine acceptance and loving accountability. It’s likely the person trapped in any form of addiction has tried numerous times to stop the behavior without long-term success. The kind of isolation practiced by sexual addicts needs to be addressed in a specialized group where others can identify with feeling broken, ashamed, and guilty. The isolation is actually part of the woundedness that needs healing from God in a context of safe relationships (Weiss, pp. 1–5).

## WRAPPING IT UP

How can pursuing a lifestyle of purity affect others and us? One young man claims,

There is such freedom in it. ...People who don’t pursue purity sometimes think they want to be free. What they don’t see is how impurity enslaves you. It takes this wonderful gift and dirties it. It makes you its slave as you serve your lustful desires. Living a life of purity just gives you so much freedom. ... Freedom from guilt. Freedom from regret. Pursuing purity brings freedom (Joshua Harris, cited in Gresh, p. 171).

Dr. Edward Welch writes, “Satan knows sin and he has well-tested strategies to persuade us that sin is not really that bad and God is not really that good” (p. 26). However, when we buy into Satan’s lies, we forfeit intimacy and genuine joy in our relationship with God, freedom from addictions and shame, a healthy sense of self-esteem, and harmony in our relationships with others. But by God’s grace, we can be forgiven, cleansed, released, and empowered to live as sons and daughters who are deeply satisfied by God’s love and able to resist impure desires and habits that rob us of His joy.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following is a list of resources for gender-specific study in groups that recognize a need for more in-depth study and discussion in a supporting environment:

- Arterburn, Stephen and Fred Stoeker. *Every Man’s Battle: Winning the War on Sexual Purity One Victory At a Time*. Ed. Mike Yorkey. Random House: 2000.
- ---. *Every Young Man’s Battle: Strategies for Victory in the Real World of Sexual Temptation*. Ed. Mike Yorkey. Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2002.
- Ethridge, Shannon and Stephen Arterburn. *Every Woman’s Battle: Discovering God’s Plan for Sexual and Emotional Fulfillment*. Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2003.
- ---. *Every Young Woman’s Battle: Guarding Your Mind, Heart, and Body in a Sex-Saturated World*. Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2004.

The following is a list of resources for further reading or study:

- Gramckow, Jerry. "Why Sexual Purity Matters." *Boundless Webzine*. 2000. Focus on the Family. 12 Jul. 2005.
- May, Gerald G. *Addiction and Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions*. New York: HaperCollins, 1991.
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The author of this study wants to thank all those brothers and sisters in Christ who helped her by sharing their struggles and victories, their wisdom and resources, their prayers and encouragement.

# THE HOLY LIFE

7

## PEACE: OVERCOMING ANXIETY

### Philippians 4:4—9

By Mary Youtz

*The root cause of anxiety is a failure to trust all that God has promised to be for us in Jesus.*  
John Piper

*Some give themselves up to such experiences [periods of tumult and storm that make peace seem unreachable] as a fate which they cannot avoid, or attempt to drown their fears and dull their senses to suffering and danger. But faith cleaves its way through the murky mists and driving cloud-wrack [dark or thick clouds], and establishes a sure connection with the throne of the Eternal Father. This is what the New Testament calls the anchorage of the soul, and however severe the storm that sweeps over the earth, the soul that shelters there is safe.*

F. B. Meyer

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## AIM OF STUDY

- To understand how we can overcome anxiety and be at peace through our trust in our Lord Jesus Christ.

## KEY VERSES

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

Philippians 4:6–8

## PREPARATION

The authors of this series suggest you read over the notes on “How to Teach the Bible in Small Group” and “Some Practical Suggestions for Leading a Small Group Discussion” in Vineyard Church of Columbus’ *Small Group Leadership Training Manual* if you feel your inductive study skills are rusty. Next, before you go over the Scripture text, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then, read through the passage, keeping an open heart and ear to the Lord. Finally, work through the Bible study notes and questions below.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. Therefore, use this Bible study as a framework for the discussion you lead in your small group meeting. This means you will need to

- Go over the questions and choose which ones you want to emphasize and which you will eliminate since your time is limited.
- Note that the application questions are marked with a bullet. Rather than leaving all of these until the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture’s truths and applying them to their own lives.
- Pace yourself. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could summarize some of the passage and then go to the final questions.
- Select one application question you will use with your group at the end. The question may have more than one part, but focus on the vital Biblical truth you want to encourage your group to put into practice in your final question.
- Feel free to suggest that your group continue a discussion at the next meeting or at another informal get together. You want to leave time for worship, listening to God, and prayer ministry, so don’t feel you must cover every nugget of truth in a passage or allow each group member to share a mini-sermon on every question!
- You may want to create your own introduction by using a personal example or current event that illustrates the point of the study. Your introduction and any background material shared should help lead the group members’ thoughts from the present moment into the text.

The authors of this series are providing these questions and accompanying material for the leaders’ benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to supply resources for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that

may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously, we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor. We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The New Bible Commentary* as excellent resources for further study.

Also note that some studies advise the leaders to make copies of a handout or bring some helpful communication tool, etc.

## **SPECIAL NOTES FOR THIS STUDY—HOW TO GET HELP**

Vineyard Church of Columbus has several ministries that can assist small group leaders who pastor individuals who require more help than their small group members can give. Vineyard Columbus periodically offers seminars designed to help people with their problems. There are also recovery groups that meet together for the purpose of mutually helping each other work through a specific life problem they share in common, such as addiction to various substances, sexual behaviors, or unhealthy relationships. In the past, the church has offered support groups for those who need help dealing with anger, anxiety, divorce, grief, and post abortion trauma. Please check the Small Groups Cards displayed in the church lobby or contact the Small Groups Ministry Administrative Assistant for current information. The Small Groups Ministry staff will be happy to talk with you, as well.

For those who need more help than a seminar or small group can provide, there are two additional levels of support available. Vineyard Columbus has a team of lay counselors trained to provide short term, individual counseling. Although lay counselors are not professional counselors, they have received basic training in applying biblical principles of counseling and prayer ministry. To receive lay counseling, a person must be a regular attendee of Vineyard Church of Columbus. For further information, please contact the Lay Counseling Ministry Coordinator at the church. For those who need professional help, the Vineyard Counseling Center, a ministry of Vineyard Columbus, has several clinically and biblically trained counselors on its staff. Please call the church and ask for the person who coordinates intake of new clients and appointments.

Finally, after the Vineyard Columbus weekend services, there is always a visitor's welcome. It provides an opportunity for individuals to meet and pray with a pastor or mature leader in the church. Those pastors and leaders may then refer individuals to a group or ministry for further assistance.

## **OPENER**

The first time I remember sensing the peace of God was when I was traveling in Europe after graduating from college. I had taken the trip with my younger sister. When we got to the London airport to catch our flights back to the US, her plane was ready to leave as scheduled, but my flight was delayed. I found out that my plane could not leave because it was presently not permitted to land in US airports. The plane was a DC-10, and there had been a major accident involving that type of plane a few days earlier. Since I had paid for a charter flight, the airline was under no obligation to pay for any food or lodging expenses incurred from the situation. I had little money left for expenses, and the information from the airlines was that the planes might not be allowed to land in the US for a week or more.

Soon, my sister's flight departed and I was left alone on my first major trip overseas. I could not get in touch with my parents through a collect phone call. The situation scared me and I could

not think clearly about what to do because I was so upset. I spent the rest of that day and all of the next trying to get help—with no results. In desperation, I prayed for God’s help. Soon after I prayed, I sensed that I would be OK and make it home with the small amount of money I had, and I experienced a sense of peace that had no rational basis in light of what I had been told by the airlines.

The assurance I sensed turned out to be correct. I called the airline again and learned that they had arranged for the passengers to fly on other airlines—at no additional cost. My connecting flight in New York City had left a few days earlier, but when I explained the situation the ticket employee wrote “involuntary reroute” on the ticket and told me I had a seat on the plane. I had to spend only a minimal amount of money to eat at the airport and arrived home safely the next day!

What are some ways you have handled a stressful situation? What methods were effective? What didn’t work?

The opening question is to help people compare their habits of dealing with situations outside their control with the commands given in the Bible passage we will be studying. Also, the responses will reveal to the group members the effectiveness (or lack of effectiveness) of their current methods of handling anxiety. This should generate more interest in pursuing the teaching of how we should handle worry and anxiety.

## **PRAYER**

*Pray that each person in your group will see that uncertainty is to be expected in life, and that the Holy Spirit will teach them how God wants them to respond to it.*

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

*This is background material for leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.*

### Philippians

Paul and his companions, Silas and Timothy, started the church at Philippi during the trip described in Acts 16:9--40. They began the trip in obedience to a vision God gave Paul of a man pleading, “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (Acts 16:9). The church at Philippi probably represented the first apostolic evangelistic mission in what we now call Europe. Paul’s visit left behind a devoted group of Christians, and he returned once or twice more on later journeys (Wenham, p. 1245).

Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians in part to address his concerns for the church related to potential disunity, Jewish legalism, and the need to live in single-mindedly, trusting the Lord in all situations. Much of the letter deals with practical issues of Christian living, rather than Christian beliefs or theology. However, the practical living issues are tied closely to key Christian beliefs such as the importance of the cross, the Holy Spirit’s work, and the hope we have in Christ (Wenham, p. 1247). Dominant themes in the letter are

- Joy (1:4; 2:17; 4:1)
- Fellowship and Unity (1:5, 7; 4:2–3, 15)
- Commitment (1:20; 3:7–14; 4:11, 13).

It’s clear that Paul wrote Philippians while he was in prison (Philippians 1:12–26). The date he wrote the letter is uncertain because details of his imprisonment are not given. According to the

book of Acts, Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea and Rome, and many Biblical scholars believe he was also imprisoned in Ephesus. Because of the uncertainty about which imprisonment is referred to in Philippians, the book could have been written anytime between 54 and 62 A.D. (Wenham, p. 1247). The important thing to keep in mind during this study is that the book was written during a long period of imprisonment—a time that would not have been stress-free for Paul—yet he passes along God’s mind for peace, joy, and successful Christian living. No doubt Paul had learned what he wrote about through his own trials.

The term “**stress**” was originally used as an engineering term that referred to the amount of weight a building or piece of furniture could hold without breaking. Now, the term is often used to refer to the pressures of daily life, brought on by things such as:

- Overloaded schedules
- Uncontrollable circumstances
- Work and family issues

Many circumstances and things in an individual’s life can contribute to stress and worry. Therefore, learning what the Bible recommends as an alternative to worry is relevant for everyone in our groups.

One of the primary points of this teaching is to increase people’s knowledge of God and His character. (See the application question under #3.) The root cause of anxiety is a failure to trust in God (Piper, p. 54). Reading and meditating on Bible passages that tell us about God’s character will help us trust God for His solution to the problems we are facing. Encourage the group members to memorize and think about these verses, or other verses that are meaningful to them, and act on them instead of worrying.

The passage can be broken down into two main parts:

1. Philippians 4:4–7 includes commands for when adverse circumstances interrupt our life (Melick, p. 148).
2. Philippians 4:8–9 discusses the need for creating a peaceful environment so that we more often dwell on the God of peace who promises to be with us (Melick, pp. 148, 150).

## **STUDY THE PASSAGE: Philippians 4:4—9**

### **1. Would someone read Philippians 4:4—7 aloud for us?**

#### **What commands do you find in the passage?**

Paul encourages the following:

- Rejoice. Our joy in the Lord can be unchanging, regardless of external circumstances.
- Be gentle. The Greek word used is *epieikes* and also suggests selflessness.
- Don’t be anxious.
- Present your requests to God.

These commands cover all areas of our lives. The command to be joyful helps us engage our inner life. Our anxious feelings may lessen as we focus on all the good God has done on our behalf. Being gentle with others moves us into the realm of our interpersonal lives. Some translations use the word “big hearted” instead of gentleness in verse five.

Real gentleness towards others rests on our trusting God rather than insisting on our own way or viewpoint. This should be true of all Christians and should be an obvious difference in our lives to those around us (Melick, p. 149). The command to pray about our needs involves our whole being as we express ourselves to God. Rather than anxious chatter, frantic activity, or soothing ourselves through addictive habits, speaking to our loving and powerful Father will bring better results in the long run. Praying helps us admit our dependence upon the Lord and show our trust in His promises now by making requests of Him.

- **Would people around you at home or at work characterize your general attitude as one of rejoicing and gentleness?**

If not, anxiety may be interfering with your ability to experience God's peace.

## **2. What are some common causes of anxiety?**

The Bible is so realistic. It mentions many sources of worry for humans. Jesus often told His disciples to "fear not" or not to worry because they did! He stated that we would have situations in life that could cause us to be anxious. Matthew 6:25–34 specifically mentions:

- Food
- The future
- Shelter
- Clothing.

He also warned that "the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches," and the lust for other things, can choke out the life of God in us (Matthew 13:22). We are never free from the recurring waves of temptations that can cause us to be anxious. If the frontline of attack is not about food and clothes, it may be about money, or friends, or lack of friends, or some other difficult circumstance. It is one steady attack, and we can become anxious if we yield to temptation rather than focusing on God and His provisions for peace (Chambers, entry for date 1/27).

"Our Lord says to be careful [full of care or concern] about only one thing—our relationship with Him. But our common sense shouts loudly and says, 'That is absurd, I must consider how I am going to live.' Jesus says you must not worry about how you will live. Jesus Christ knows our circumstances better than we do, and He says we must not think about these things..." to the point where they become the primary concern of our life (Chambers, entry for date 1/27).

It's important to realize, from the above quote, that worry is a constant temptation for us. Other Bible passages (Matthew 6:25; Psalm 37:1–3) also command us to not worry and to trust in God's provisions for us. Every Christian needs to develop habits of thinking to help us refocus our minds when anxious thoughts come to us.

*Optional: The next two questions, #3 and the Application question following it, go outside the passage. You may simply want to refer to these verses if people in your group need more Scripture resources for dealing with their anxiety.*

### 3. Would someone read Psalm 56:3–4? What response to fear does this passage suggest?

We should trust in God. Note the use of the word “when” in verse three. “When” implies that we will feel fearful at times. Jesus and the Bible both promise that we will have situations in life that could cause us to be anxious. For example, in John 16:33, Jesus said, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” What’s important is that we respond to anxiety on the basis of a trusting relationship with God, as described in Psalm 56.

In another passage, 1 Peter 5:7 tells us to cast our anxiety on Jesus. *The Amplified Bible* translation of Proverbs 16:3 is a description of the process of doing this:

“Roll your works upon the Lord [commit and trust them wholly to Him; He will cause your thoughts to become agreeable to His will, and] so shall your plans be established and succeed” (Proverbs 16:3, *The Amplified Bible*, quoted by Copeland, entry for date 1/5).

These verses indicate the choices that the Bible advises we make. Proverbs 16:13 also suggests that as we go through this process, God may change our thoughts about the situation to agree with His Will. This suggests that our initial or natural solution will not always be the same as His. There is also a promise that His plan will succeed.

*Optional:*

- **What are some of God’s attributes that allow us to have faith in Him and His provisions for our needs?**

This question is designed to increase the group’s knowledge of God’s character. This will lead to more ability to trust in Him for the inevitable uncertainties we face in life, and to seek His will for the solution. The following are some of God’s attributes that we can think about to increase our faith:

- God is Love (1 John 4:8). He loves us and cares for us (John 3:16; Romans 5:5; 1 John 3:1a; 1 John 4:8b–10). In all things, He is working for good in the circumstances of our lives (Romans 8:28).
- God is Present. He is with us by His Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 1:21–22; Ephesians 1:13–14). He will give us grace to overcome temptations (Romans 5:1–2; 2 Corinthians 12:9; 2 Timothy 1:7, Hebrews 4:15–16).
- God is Trustworthy. He has both the ability and the desire to keep His promises (Joshua 23:14; 1 Kings 8:56; 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24). The consistent testimony of God’s children in the past is that He always keeps His promises.
- God is Omniscient [all knowing] (2 Chronicles 16:9; Psalm 139; 1 John 3:20b). Not only does He know about us, He sees the future and inside the hearts of all people. He knows all about every aspect of the things that are troubling to us and He has the knowledge He needs to provide the best solution from His perspective.
- God is Omnipotent [all powerful] (Genesis 18:14; 2 Chronicles 20:6; Jeremiah 32:17; Romans 1:20; Ephesians 1:19b–22). God is able to perform anything within His will. (However, you may need to point out that God will never override a person’s free choice.)

- God is our Protector (Deuteronomy 32:10; Psalm 91; Ephesians 6:11–13; 2 Thessalonians 3:3).
- God is our Provider (Isaiah 58:11; Matthew 6:25–34; Philippians 4:19). Recognizing that God is our provider can be helpful when we are praying for material needs.
- God is our Guide (Psalm 23:2–3; Psalm 25:4–5; Isaiah 42:16; John 16:13–15).

#### **4. What is the Biblical response to anxiety (Philippians 4:6)?**

The response to anxiety is prayer in everything. We are to pray and make our requests known to God. There are many non-Biblical responses to anxiety, including responding:

- Passively, with inaction or apathy;
- In self-pity, with a victim mentality;
- In anger, blaming God for our circumstances.

All of the above are negative reactions that will not lead us into the peace of God. Instead, the Bible emphasizes an active, optimistic, and thankful response of prayer.

#### **5. How are we supposed to pray?**

We are instructed to:

- Present our petitions to God. The word “petitions” suggests our daily needs and also the needs of those around us. We are to ask God to act on our concerns.
- Pray with thanksgiving. We are to thankfully acknowledge God’s work on our behalf in the past.

- **Why is thanksgiving important in our prayers?**

The habit of thanksgiving gets our minds off the worrisome current situations and puts our focus on God. Thanksgiving, because it causes us to recall how God has acted in the past, increases our faith that God has answers for our current problems. In general, thanksgiving is to be a regular part of prayer.

You can also direct the group to study the following prayers on their own: Daniel (Daniel 9:4–19); Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1:4–11); and Ezra (Ezra 9:5–15). Each of these prayers recounts past deeds of God before requesting help in the current situation.

#### **6. What is the result when we pray instead of becoming anxious (Philippians 4:7)?**

The peace of God will guard our minds and hearts. Paul uses both “minds” and “hearts” to describe the result of trusting God with our worries. The “mind” is the part that thinks, analyzes, and sorts out information. The word “heart” is used for other parts of our soul, or personality, such as our emotions, our will (or decision maker), our imagination, and our memory. All of these areas can be adversely affected by worry, but a person can experience peace by focusing on God and presenting needs to Him. And as we pray, the Holy Spirit can direct us into harmony with God’s will so that what may have first caused us to worry may look differently to us from God’s perspective.

## 7. What does the passage tell us about the peace of God?

- Its source is divine. A characteristic of God invades the Christian. Paul didn't envision any situation or need that could not be met by God's peace.
- It transcends understanding. Our human understanding cannot explain the reason for the peace.
- It guards our heart and mind. The Greek word for "guards" is a military term. The "peace" stands on duty, like a military sentry guarding a post, to keep out anything that causes anxiety in our minds (Melick, p. 150).

The peace of God is the peace of the Divine Nature—the very tranquility that prevails in the heart of the God of Peace. It was this that Jesus spoke of when He said, "My peace I give unto you," (John 14:27) since He was filled and blessed with it during His earthly ministry. The Greek word translated "peace" means "arbitrate." Let God's peace act as an umpire in your life (adapted from F. B. Meyer, entry for 11/24).

"In the present context, it [peace] is the God given reward from joyful reflection on God's bounties, magnanimity toward the neighbor and trustful prayer to God" (Hendriksen, p. 197).

Together, the Greek words for "guard" and "peace" imply that peace is to be used as a filter to help us determine what thoughts we accept into our minds. You may find it helpful to also direct the group to Proverbs 4:23. This well-known verse reminds us that we have a responsibility to watch the thoughts we allow into our minds.

## 8. Would someone read **Philippians 4:8–9**? What are the qualities that should characterize our thought life? How would they act as "filters" to keep worry from our thoughts?

In verse eight, Paul lists qualities that define what we should think about. The wording, "let your mind dwell on these things," stresses the idea of constant thought processes. Each of the characteristics describes positive thought; none of them allow for worry.

The following list provides simple definitions for each quality Paul mentioned. If you need more information about the words, look them up in a general dictionary. However, the main idea is to use the list as a guide for the basic characteristics of the thought life.

- True – consistent with fact or reality.
- Noble - having qualities of high moral character.
- Right – conforming to justice, law, or morality.
- Pure - having no faults, sinless.
- Lovely – inspiring love or affection.
- Admirable – deserving high esteem.
- Excellent – of the highest quality.
- Praiseworthy – highly commendable.

(Definitions adapted from *The American Heritage Dictionary*)

One commentator notes that the words are pagan virtues and may have come from Greek writings (Boice, p. 248). However, each item in Paul's list characterized the Lord Jesus Christ. Any list of pagan virtues would ultimately derive from the One God who is

completely good. Regardless of the source of the terms, or the fact that they are common to many cultures and not distinctively Christian, they can be used like a mental checklist when deciding what to think or speak about, or what activities to engage in (Boice, p. 248). Another scholar writes, “the Christian has a special obligation to demonstrate them and the enabling of the Spirit to do so” (Wenham, p. 1258). In other words, they should not only be true of our thoughts but also should be characteristic of our actions.

## 9. Trace the progression from thought to action in verse nine.

Verse eight represents thinking with a purpose, and the purpose is to lead to action.

Verse nine suggests the following learning cycle:

1. Maturing Christians hear. They are open to teaching by other Christians, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit. In this specific example, they are open to teaching from Paul.
2. Maturing Christians meditate on what they have heard until they understand it.
3. Maturing Christians act upon what they understand, putting it into constant practice.

The verse clearly indicates that the readers of the letter would have known Paul well enough to observe this cycle in his daily conduct (Hendriksen, pp. 199–200).

## 10. What is the result of the doing what is described in verses eight and nine?

The God of peace will be with us. Melick maintains, “When life is disorderly, the cure is mental and practical discipline” (p. 151). Thus, putting God’s will and advice into action can help us regain a sense or certainty that God is near. When we fail to heed God’s ways, we not only jeopardize ourselves physically, emotionally, and mentally, but we also may lose a sense of God’s felt presence and peace.

## APPLICATION

*Select one of the following application questions to finish your discussion time.*

- **If we summarized Paul’s advice in this passage with this equation, Rejoicing + Prayer + Thanksgiving + Practice = Peace, how would your life “add up?”**

**Does this equation help you recognize a possible weak area in your daily response to anxiety or stress?**

- **What did you learn from the study that could help you overcome anxiety? When will you start to “put it into practice?” Would you like to receive prayer about it today/tonight?**
- **Which of the commands in verses four through seven are the easiest for you to obey? Which are more difficult to obey? Why?**
- **How does the list of thought characteristics in verse eight compare to typical characteristics of your thought life? If the characteristics don’t describe your thought life, can you think of anything that you could add to—or eliminate from—your life that would help you experience the peace of God?**

## **WRAPPING IT UP**

Jesus promises we will experience trouble in this life (John 16:33). We will face unexpected trials and situations that we will not be able to control. However, Jesus has overcome all adversity, and by faith in Him we can experience His peace and have His resources to meet each crisis. We can—and should—learn how to respond to life in a way that shows our faith in God and encourages others to trust in Him, too. By prayer that acknowledges not just our needs but also how much God has done for us already, and by dwelling on all that is godly and true, we can experience and pass on the peace of God to others.

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# THE HOLY LIFE

## 8

### HOPE: OVERCOMING DESPAIR

#### Psalm 42

By Rhodara Shreve

*We say, then, to anyone who is under trial, give Him time to steep the soul in His eternal truth. Go into the open air, look up into the depths of the sky, or out upon the wideness of the sea, or on the strength of the hills that is His also; or, if bound in the body, go forth in the spirit, spirit is not bound. Give Him time and, as surely as dawn follows night, there will break upon the heart a sense of certainty that cannot be shaken.*

Amy Carmichael

*Let us not be surprised when we have to face difficulties. When the wind blows hard on a tree, the roots stretch and grow the stronger. Let it be with us. Let us not be weaklings, yielding to every wind that blows, but strong in spirit to resist.*

Amy Carmichael

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## AIM OF STUDY

- To find hope and faith in God in the midst of despair by examining the model provided by the writer of Psalm 42.

## KEY VERSE

*Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.*

Psalm 42:5a

## PREPARATION

The authors of this series suggest you read over the notes on “How to Teach the Bible in Small Group” and “Some Practical Suggestions for Leading a Small Group Discussion” in Vineyard Church of Columbus’ *Small Group Leadership Training Manual* if you feel your inductive study skills are rusty. Next, before you go over the Scripture text, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then, read through the passage, keeping an open heart and ear to the Lord. Finally, work through the Bible study notes and questions below.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. Therefore, use this Bible study as a framework for the discussion you lead in your small group meeting. This means you will need to

- Go over the questions and choose which ones you want to emphasize and which you will eliminate since your time is limited.
- Note that the application questions are marked with a bullet. Rather than leaving all of these until the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture’s truths and applying them to their own lives.
- Pace yourself. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could summarize some of the passage and then go to the final questions.
- Select one application question you will use with your group at the end. The question may have more than one part, but focus on the vital Biblical truth you want to encourage your group to put into practice in your final question.
- Feel free to suggest that your group continue a discussion at the next meeting or at another informal get together. You want to leave time for worship, listening to God, and prayer ministry, so don’t feel you must cover every nugget of truth in a passage or allow each group member to share a mini-sermon on every question!
- You may want to create your own introduction by using a personal example or current event that illustrates the point of the study. Your introduction and any background material shared should help lead the group members’ thoughts from the present moment into the text.

The authors of this series are providing these questions and accompanying material for the leaders’ benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to supply resources for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously, we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor. We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The New Bible Commentary* as excellent resources for further study.

Also note that some studies advise the leaders to make copies of a handout or bring some helpful communication tool, etc.

## **SPECIAL NOTES FOR THIS STUDY—HOW TO GET HELP**

Vineyard Church of Columbus has several ministries that can assist small group leaders who pastor individuals who require more help than their small group members can give. Vineyard Columbus periodically offers seminars designed to help people with their problems. There are also recovery groups that meet together for the purpose of mutually helping each other work through a specific life problem they share in common, such as addiction to various substances, sexual behaviors, or unhealthy relationships. In the past, the church has offered support groups for those who need help dealing with anger, anxiety, divorce, grief, and post abortion trauma. Please check the Small Groups Cards displayed in the church lobby or contact the Small Groups Ministry Administrative Assistant for current information. The Small Groups Ministry staff will be happy to talk with you, as well.

For those who need more help than a seminar or small group can provide, there are two additional levels of support available. Vineyard Columbus has a team of lay counselors trained to provide short term, individual counseling. Although lay counselors are not professional counselors, they have received basic training in applying biblical principles of counseling and prayer ministry. To receive lay counseling, a person must be a regular attendee of Vineyard Church of Columbus. For further information, please contact the Lay Counseling Ministry Coordinator at the church. For those who need professional help, the Vineyard Counseling Center, a ministry of Vineyard Columbus, has several clinically and biblically trained counselors on its staff. Please call the church and ask for the person who coordinates intake of new clients and appointments.

Finally, after the Vineyard Columbus weekend services, there is always a visitor's welcome. It provides an opportunity for individuals to meet and pray with a pastor or mature leader in the church. Those pastors and leaders may then refer individuals to a group or ministry for further assistance.

## **NOTE TO LEADERS REGARDING SUICIDE**

This study deals with overcoming depression or despair. Sometimes people carry a great deal of emotional pain inside but don't know how to deal with it. In a small group setting, an individual may feel safe to confide in the group leader or a fellow member. If you believe you have a potentially suicidal person in your group, here is some advice from Mark Sullivan, our counseling center director:

A small group leader can be helpful in assessing whether there is any risk of suicide simply by asking the person if he has been tempted towards suicide. People will usually be honest in their answers. They are often ambivalent about suicide and are relieved when someone asks.

If a person says he has had thoughts about suicide, then ask if he believes he might actually try it. Again, people will usually say, "Yes, I'm in enough pain that I have thought I could." Otherwise, they will usually say, "I've had thoughts but I know I couldn't do it because of my kids, ..." or the fear of going to hell, or some compelling reason to stay alive. BOTH of these types of responses necessitate a referral to a professional.

HOWEVER, PEOPLE WHO INDICATE INTENT TO COMMIT SUICIDE NEED IMMEDIATE AND DIRECT INTERVENTION. This means they need someone to get them to an emergency room at a local hospital or a mental health facility like Netcare.

Often a person with any suicidal ideation or intent will raise the issue of whether or not suicide would condemn him to hell. Regardless of what your theology is on this question, DO NOT reassure him of the security of his salvation. The fear of the possibility of hell may be the only thing keeping him from killing himself. You can answer with a non-committal response such as, “Christians have disagreed about that for 2000 years. I wouldn’t want to bet my eternal salvation on it.” The demonic deception in suicidal thinking is that it is a way to find relief from the pain of life. I am convinced that it is demonically inspired. Satan would not offer a person this way out if he thought it would mean relief from pain and immediate deliverance to God’s presence (Sullivan).

## OPENER

People struggle with despair for different reasons. Some seem genetically inclined to it; others sink to the depths due to adverse life circumstances. Despair isn’t the same thing as “the blues,” that sad, lonely “what’s-the-use” feeling we all experience sometimes. Instead, the pain of despair envelopes a person, making life seem literally hopeless and the slightest effort too monumental to even contemplate. Telling such a person to “snap out of it” is cruel and insensitive. No one *wants* to feel despair. Let the following two examples shed some light on how despair can affect one’s life.

One of the most poignant [stories of depression] is the story of David Brainerd, the young missionary to the Indians of New England in the eighteenth century. It seems that there was an unusual strain of weakness and depression in his family. Not only did the parents die early, but David’s brother Nehemiah died at 32, his brother Israel died at 23, his sister Jerusha died at 34, and he died at 29. In 1865 a descendent, Thomas Brainerd, said, “In the whole Brainerd family for two hundred years there has been a tendency to morbid depression akin to hypochondria.”

So on top of having an austere father and suffering the loss of both parents as a sensitive child, he [David] probably inherited some kind of tendency to depression. Whatever the cause, he suffered from the blackest dejection, off and on, throughout his short life. He says at the very beginning of his diary, “I was, I think, from my youth something sober and inclined rather to melancholy than the other extreme.”

Nevertheless he said that there was a difference between the depression he suffered before and after his conversion. After his conversion there seemed to be a rock of electing love under him that would catch him, so that in his darkest times he could still affirm the truth and goodness of God, even though he couldn’t sense it for a season” (quotes from Edwards, *The Life of David Brainerd*, cited in Piper, p. 300).

Compare David Brainerd’s testimony with this one:

My brother-in-law Douglas Hall, an uncommon lawyer with an uncommon passion for the weak and poor whom justice forgets, is an artist at trusting people in ways that make them strive to be worthy of his trust. Doug devoted the best part of his career to defending the poor people who could not afford an attorney. He retired and was given a dinner in his honor. One of the speakers was a federal judge, a stately looking, middle-

aged black man. The judge recalled how Doug's trust in him had given him hope and how his own hope for himself had changed his life. I recall Mary, Doug's wife, telling me what the judge said:

"I was a hopeless kid, on trial for a felony, and I was convicted. But the judge surprised everybody by putting me on probation in custody of my own attorney. I asked my attorney to tell me what he wanted me to do. He said that he wanted me to do whatever I wanted to do. He said that he trusted me to take responsibility for myself and do the right thing on my own. I said that I wasn't ready to be on my own, that I would probably go right back to do the same tricks. He said that that was a choice I would have to make. I begged him to tell me what to do. He said he trusted me, and that was that. I didn't know what to make of him; nobody had ever respected me that much. But I decided that if a man like Douglas Hall could trust me to make my own decisions, there must be some hope for me. So I grabbed hold of the hope and here I am" (Smedes, p. 103).

Ask group members to think of one example or a time in their lives when they felt a sense of despair. Encourage a few people to briefly share what despair was like for them.

## **PRAYER**

*Pray that the Holy Spirit will encourage and guide your time together. Pray for protection from the enemy and that the Holy Spirit would keep you from crippling discouragement. Pray that this study would strengthen your faith in God and increase your capacity to persevere with hope. Pray that those who are suffering will find new hope in God.*

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

*This is background material for the leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.*

The Psalms are rich, diverse writings, which are written, in various literary forms by a number of different authors. The most well known writer was King David, who lived during the tenth century B.C. The Jews referred to the Psalms as "The Book of Praises." John Calvin described the Psalter as, "An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul"; for there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated" (cited in Malick, p. 904). The Psalms have been read by thousands of people for reasons of comfort, encouragement, adoration, and praise, to name a few.

As you do this study, keep in mind the following:

Context of the life experience of the writer:

There are several key issues that the author of Psalm 42 is dealing with:

- Grief and loss;
- A sense of God's absence, no felt awareness of God's presence;
- An extreme change in his life circumstances;
- A threat of harm by enemies.

The psalmist asks a series of questions in this passage. Here is a list for you to review and be mindful of as you lead the study.

- 1) When can I go and meet with God? (42:2)
- 2) Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? (42:5, 11)
- 3) Why have you [God] forgotten me? (42:9)
- 4) Why must I go about mourning; oppressed by the enemy? (42:9)
- 5) Why must I be taunted by my enemies all day as they ask me, “Where is your God?” (42:3, 10)

You can use these as a springboard for discussion when you come across them or have the group review them at the end of the study. These questions drive the text and underlie the struggle with despair the psalmist is recording.

As a leader, there are a few comments about despair and/or depression that are important to consider. There are various reasons for this struggle in our lives. We know that this experience is common to all of humankind. Many philosophers and theologians have written about despair. Our personal experience confirms that humans need meaning and purpose in life. When discovering this is thwarted, people can feel confused, adrift, and hopeless. Wars, poverty, and injustices that oppress people can keep them in a place of despair. We also know that temperament and responses to everyday circumstances or crises can contribute greatly to this condition. Severe and/or prolonged despair can lead to mental illness or suicide. Thankfully, modern psychology has been able to identify signs of behavior that help diagnose and lead to treating these conditions.

Because we understand the nature of God’s kingdom to be both “now and not yet,” we encourage treatment of depression through various means such as healthy relationships, peer or professional counseling, medications—if appropriate, healing/soaking prayer, and deliverance—if warranted. God is able to do more than we can think or imagine, but we should not leave any stone unturned in ministering to the whole person. No one should be condemned or judged for seeking out professional treatment. We need to minister to those struggling with this condition with compassion, wisdom, and support. Our patience and longsuffering will go a long way as we continue to learn how to effectively care for those with this kind of need.

We can also continually seek to be a part of the solution for oppressed peoples. As Christians, we can work to make changes that improve the quality of life for others by being politically and socially active. When we see situations of injustice that call for government intervention or cultural change, we can get involved to help alleviate situations that perpetuate cycles of despair.

## **STUDY THE PASSAGE: Psalm 42**

As you begin, read the Psalm together. You can divide it up among group the group members to read in sections or have one person read through the whole psalm.

### **A. Verses 1–4**

#### **1. In verses one and two, what comparison does the psalmist make to describe the conditions he finds himself in?**

A deer seeks water when it is in a place of fatigue or even upon pursuit by hunters. “It plunges into a river to gather new strength and at certain times of the year, a deer will seek water with an almost incredible desire more intense than just a need to satisfy thirst” (Calvin, “Psalm 42”). The psalmist compares his need to a physically familiar experience so that we might comprehend the “draught” he is feeling at the deepest level

of his being. But it also describes *the strength of his desire*. He is in pursuit of a satisfaction found only in God.

**2. What words does he use to describe this condition? Based on these observations, how would you describe his condition in your own words?**

**3. Who is the psalmist addressing in these verses?**

He refers a number of times to his soul. This is not to convey some dualism between body and soul, but it is to acknowledge that he has been touched to His core, to the basic place within him from which he derives his sense of wholeness and integration. Eugene Peterson writes this about the soul:

“Soul” in the Hebrew language is a metaphor, *nephesh*, the word for neck. The neck is the narrow part of the anatomy that connects the head, the site of intelligence and the nervous system, with everything else; it literally keeps us “together.”... Our modern passion for analysis and dissection, trying to find out what makes us tick, is not a biblical passion. Our Scriptures come at us differently; they convey a sense of wholeness, created. The Hebrews had a genius for metaphors and “soul” is one of their finest. ... The term “soul” works like a magnet, pulling all the pieces of our lives into a unity, a totality. The human person is a vast totality; soul names it as such. ... When we say “soul” we are calling attention to the God-origins, God-intentions, God-operations that make us what we are. It is the most personal and most comprehensive term for who we are—man, woman and child. But in our culture, “soul has given way to “self” as the term of choice to designate who and what we are. Self is the soul minus God. Self is what is left of soul with all the transcendence and intimacy squeezed out, the self with little or no reference to God (transcendence) or intimacy (others) (Peterson pp. 36–37).

**4. In this place of longing, what is the first question he asks (v. 2)?**

**5. Why is the psalmist asking this question? What is he being prevented from doing at point in his life?**

He has been denied access to the temple where he had worshipped God for a consistent period of his life. This was his ritual, the familiar pattern in his life that enabled him to express his devotion and love for God. In Israel’s history, the temple was the physical place where God and man met, the sacred ground. The temple was the physical place on earth where God manifested His presence. Often in the Psalms, the author is in this physical place, worshipping God through songs, praise and thanksgiving. He had been cut off from the temple, which had a profound effect on his emotions. The isolation he is experiencing is creating a situation of extreme stress. He is recognizing the impact of this on his life. (See the note below on verse four, which further explains this.)

**6. Summarize what the psalmist is struggling with in verses two through four. What emotions is he trying to cope with?**

He has lost something important and familiar. When something is taken away from us that we rely on, whether it be relationships, our living environment, a job, etc., the loss may trigger a process of grieving. Grief is a natural human response to loss, but we can fall into despair if we do not respond appropriately. We can get “stuck” if we do not move through this process and get a hold of our faith again. There is not a timetable for this process. People need different amounts of time to grieve, but if grief lingers without some resolution and a reaffirmation of life, one can begin to feel trapped in a prison from which there is no escape.

**7. What is the next question that the psalmist must address and *who* does it come from (v. 3)?**

**8. What effect might this kind of question have on someone who is already despairing?**

- **Do we always have to answer our “enemy”? When might that not be necessary?**

**B. Verses 5–11**

**9. In verse five, the psalmist asks another question. Again, to whom is it addressed?**

There is a sudden shift now in the psalm. It is as if the writer suddenly takes a hold of himself and rises above his emotional turmoil for a moment to gain some perspective.

**10. How does the psalmist talk to himself? What kind of counsel does he give himself?**

Don Williams observes, “The psalmist exhorts his soul: ‘Hope in God.’ In this hope he knows that ‘praise’ will return because he will receive ‘*the help of His countenance*’ or literally, the ‘salvation’ or ‘deliverance’ of his face. To paraphrase the thought, God will restore him, delivering him from his brokenness, and manifest His face to him once again; this is his salvation (cf. 42:11; 43:5)” (p. 313).

**11. Why do you think the psalmist considers this to be his “way out”?**

Here the psalmist gives us a model of how to move through despair in a way that is honest but not disabling. He does not give in to hopelessness but rather preaches the truth about God to himself (Piper, p. 303). John Piper cites Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a medical doctor familiar with the complex causes of depression: “The ultimate cause of all *spiritual* depression is unbelief” (p. 301, italics added). Unbelief, the unwillingness to

believe what God says is true, cripples our ability to overcome despair. Satan wants us to believe his lies that God is not going to come through for us, that nothing will change, that our situation is hopeless (Piper, p. 303). Piper says, "...unbelief is the root of not making war on despondency with the weapons of God. Unbelief lets despondency take its course without a spiritual fight" (p. 302).

A powerful way to fight present despair is by believing that the goodness of God will manifest at some time in our future. "Faith is primarily a future-oriented 'assurance of things hoped for' (Hebrews 11:1). Its essence is the deep satisfaction with all that God promises to be for us in Jesus—beginning now" (Piper, p. 13). Thus the psalmist begins to fight despair by preaching the truth to himself in verse 5. "The psalmist does not yield. He battles unbelief with a counterattack" (Piper, p. 302). He "...takes the promises of God and throws them against despondency. ...The fight is a fight of faith in future grace. It is fought by preaching the truth to ourselves about God and his promised future" (Piper, p. 303). "The psalmist preaches to his troubled soul. He scolds himself and argues with himself. 'Hope in God!—Trust in what God will be for you in the future'" (Piper, pp. 303–304).

- **Have you ever found yourself doing this kind of "soul talk"? Do you think this a helpful way to do battle with despair? Why?**

Martin Lloyd-Jones comments:

Now this man's treatment was this: instead of allowing this self to talk to him, he starts talking to himself. "Why are thou cast down, O my soul?" he asks. His soul had been depressing him, crushing Him. So he stands up and says, "Self, listen for a moment, I will speak to you. ... "Why art thou cast down?"—what business have you to be disquieted? You must turn on yourself, ...exhort yourself, and say to yourself: "Hope thou in God"—instead of muttering in this depressed, unhappy way. And then you must go on to remind yourself of God, Who God is, and what God is and what He has done, and what God has pledged Himself to do. Then having done that, end on this great note: defy yourself, and defy other people, and defy the devil and the whole world, and say with this man: "I shall yet praise Him for the help of his countenance" (pp. 20–21).

12. **How does praise help us when we are in despair? This is often the last thing we think we are capable of doing, but what affect might praising God have on our mind and heart? Do you think praising God can help someone in despair? Why?**

Praising God in the midst of our despair is not a superficial kind of denial that maintains, "Wow, everything is fine, I am fine, the world is fine," but is an actual exercise of faith in the midst of very difficult circumstances. The psalmist is overwhelmed. He writes about the emotions that are flooding his soul, but he is struggling to manage these in a way that will honor God. To praise God is an act of faith and an expression of hope even in the midst of emotional distress. Hebrews 13:5 reminds us of this. It says, "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of our lips that confess his name."

**13. In the second part of verse five, the psalmist turns to another means of getting a hold of himself. What does he do?**

He calls to mind the things God has done. Since God does not change, it is reviewing and remembering truths we know about God and in our experience of God in the past that can help us bring our emotions under the reign of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. Remembrance is very important when the present does not seem very full of any hope or sign of God's activity. This was the way God called the Jews to live. We do not have to base our lives only on what our emotions and circumstances are telling us. We are free to respond to God in faith. Hebrews 11:1–3 says of this practice, “Now *faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see*. This is what the ancients were commended for. By faith, we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.” So also our lives will be made out of what is not always visible. We must remember. The church universal over the centuries has established rituals that help us to remember together, like taking communion, celebrating our religious holidays or reciting what we believe by saying the Apostle and Nicene Creeds.+ All these things help bring to our imaginations what happened in history. We walk by faith and not by sight by remembering God's faithfulness in the past in order to overcome despair in the present, and hope for God's continued faithfulness to us in the future. This is a courageous act of faith for many people who are undergoing extreme trials.

*+If you are not familiar with these creeds, or people in your home group have never read them, they are included at the end of the study. You might want to take some time to affirm your hope in God by reciting together these great declarations of our Christian faith. You could make copies before the meeting and hand them out at the end of the study to use in closing or for members to read in the following week.*

**14. There are a number of questions that follow in verses nine and ten. What are they?**

**15. What do these questions tell you about the psalmist's feelings?**

- **We can lose a felt sense of God's presence when we are in a place of despair. Does this necessarily indicate that God has abandoned us? How can we be sure that He is still with us whether we perceive Him or not?**

Christians who lose a sense of God's presence are in a very vulnerable place. Jesus found himself with an extreme sense of being abandoned by God in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross. He battled to overcome this lost sense of God's presence and hold onto the truth so he could complete His mission and endure the cross for our sake. John Piper comments about this:

The *distressing, troubling* temptation [for Jesus] was to despair and fail to carry out his mission. The flaming darts coming against him were thoughts—thoughts like, “It's not worth it. It won't work.” ... What Satan wanted to produce in Jesus was a spirit of despondency that would sink, unopposed, in resignation and prompt Jesus not to carry out what his Father had given him to do.

Now think about this for a minute. Jesus was a sinless man.... This means the emotional turmoil he was enduring that night was a proper and fitting response to the kind of extra ordinary testing he was experiencing. ...The Gospel of John says that Jesus was troubled (John 12:27; 13:21). ...But in this same Gospel it also says that the disciples should *not* be troubled [John 14:1]. ...Jesus was warning the disciples against *giving in* to despondency, *yielding* to it unopposed. Letting it fester and spread. And so he says, Fight back: Believe God, believe also in me (John 14:1)” (pp. 305–306).

Piper says that there is not a contradiction here. He goes on to affirm that Jesus was tempted to despair just as His disciples were and as we are. Temptation is not sin, but giving in to hopeless thoughts rather than confronting yourself with the truth is. If Jesus fought vigorously against despair and hopelessness, then we should do the same (p. 306).

**16. Once again in verse 11 the psalmist moves into “self talk” with his soul. What is the counsel he gives to “himself”?**

**APPLICATION**

*Select one of the following application questions to finish your discussion time.*

- **Do you think it is good to be honest about your despair with God? Does this kind of honesty help us or hurt us? Why?**
- **Let’s summarize the phrases from this psalm that convey the psalmist’s desires and requests to God.**

My soul thirsts for God (v. 2)  
When can I go and meet with God? (v. 2)  
These things I remember (v. 4)  
Why are you so downcast, O my soul? (v. 5)  
Put your hope in God (v. 5)  
Why have you forgotten me? (v. 9)  
I will yet praise Him (v. 11)

**As you look over these phrases, here are some questions you can conclude with:**

- **What kind of model does this psalm give us in terms of finding spiritual encouragement in despair? Would you add anything to the model?**
- **Why is God the only source of true hope in this life?**

- **How fully do you trust God to be that hope? Is there some area of your life that is causing your to despair right now?**
  
- **What can you do about your despair right now? How can you begin to “treat” your condition? Do you need to seek out some friends to help you through this, ask for prayer support, or talk to a peer or professional counselor?**

*Identify needs for prayer and take time for ministry. As noted earlier in the study, you might want to recite the creed(s) together, and or you might want to have communion together as an act of remembrance. Be sensitive to those individuals in your group who may have shared their struggle with despair and make sure you follow-up with them outside the group. Be sure they are receiving support, pastoral care, and if necessary, direct them to peer or professional counseling.*

## **WRAPPING IT UP**

We should not be surprised when sometimes we are asked to follow in the same path as our Lord. This can be a time of testing, a time of trial, or a time of temptation. The battle to overcome despair is fought in the same way Jesus and the psalmist fought it—through an honest dialogue with God that affirms our humanity, voices our fears, and even asks the hard questions. Ultimately, by God’s grace, we need to affirm our hope in God by grabbing a hold of ourselves, by remembering what God has done and will do in the future, and by not yielding to our despair without fighting the good fight of faith.

## ADDENDUM

Here are two of the great historical affirmations of the Christian faith that have been passed down from generation to generation. No matter how we feel at any given moment, *these great truths do not change*. They are true for all time and for everyone who professes a faith in Jesus Christ. This is the reality that we can embrace and build our lives on. If your group needs to be reminded of God's truth, take time to recite these together. Meditate upon them quietly and affirm together your faith in God. Remind your group to *put their hope in God*, as the psalmist says, for He cares for them. And finally, even when someone is not able to hold onto God, remind that person that God is more than able to hold onto those He made and died to save (John 10:27–30).

### The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.  
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit  
and born of the Virgin Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again.  
He ascended into heaven,  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic Church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting.

Amen.

([anglicansonline.org/basics/apostles.html](http://anglicansonline.org/basics/apostles.html))

[The word “catholic” means “universal” and does not refer to any one denomination of the church.]

## **The Nicene Creed**

We believe in one God,  
the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father.  
Through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven:  
by the power of the Holy Spirit  
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,  
and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.  
On the third day he rose again  
in accordance with the Scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.  
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.  
He has spoken through the Prophets.  
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.  
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.  
We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come.

Amen

([anglicansonline.org/basics/nicene.html](http://anglicansonline.org/basics/nicene.html))

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