Rooted in the Word

A Journey through Scripture, Theology, and Life

LEADER'S GUIDE

Two pages for every session: how to prepare, how to open, where to start, and how to care for your people

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Rooted in the Word: Leader's Guide

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How to Use This Guide

Thank you for saying yes to leading. This guide is here to help you do it well, and to do it without needing to be the expert in the room.

Every session has two facing pages. The left-hand page is for preparing: what the chapter is about, what to read first, a few talking notes for opening the evening, and where groups tend to get stuck. The right-hand page stays open on the table while you lead: how to spend the time, which questions to start with, what the hardest question is really asking, and how to close.

You won't find answer keys or scripted prayers here. The book already holds the teaching, and your group already has the Holy Spirit. What this guide offers is a direction to guide toward, the cautions an experienced leader would mention over coffee, and care for the people in the room.

Part 1, Leading Well, is meant to be read once before you begin, and again whenever you need it. Part 2 holds the fifty-six session guides, numbered to match the chapters of the book and the Participant Journal. Part 3 gathers resources you'll reach for when something comes up: tender sessions, safety and referral, an index of the hard questions, a planner for your season, and answers to the questions leaders ask most.

And above all, come humble. You may be the one with the blind spot. Let God speak, fully, from the whole of His Word, and go first in honesty. That is most of what leading well looks like.

"Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom." — Colossians 3:16

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PART 1

Leading Well

Your Role

You don't have to be the expert in the room. You have to be the one who keeps bringing everyone back to the text, and who goes first in honesty. The best thing you can model for your group is the one the book names on its first pages: not having all the answers and still wanting to know God more. What you are helping build is the maturity Hebrews describes: "solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained their senses to distinguish good from evil" (Hebrews 5:14). It comes by constant use, week after week, which is why every session starts in the text.

Think of yourself as a guide on a trail you're walking too. You've read ahead a little. You know where the steep parts are. But you're not carrying anyone, and you're not lecturing from the front. And pray for your people by name during the week. That's the part of leading no one sees, and it matters most.

The Posture We Bring

Lead as a servant, not a judge. Jesus "did not come to be served, but to serve" (Mark 10:45), and that sets the tone for every session. Come in humility, open to the possibility that you are the one with the blind spot, the wrong thinking, or the confusion. "Now I know in part" (1 Corinthians 13:12) is true of the leader too.

Then let God speak, fully. The question in the room is never "Which verse backs up my view?" It is "What does God say about this, and how does He want us to meet this need?" Don't reach for one verse to condemn or one verse to comfort. Read the passage in its setting, bring in what the rest of Scripture says on the same subject, and let the whole picture shape where you land. Paul "did not shrink back from declaring to you the whole will of God" (Acts 20:27), and the Bereans "examined the Scriptures every day to see if these teachings were true" (Acts 17:11). That is the pattern.

A few habits keep this posture in the room:

- **When someone quotes a single verse,** read the verses around it together, then ask, "What else does Scripture say about this?"
- **Hear the other side before settling.** "The first to state his case seems right until another comes and cross-examines him" (Proverbs 18:17).
- **Say "I may be wrong here," and mean it.** Then go back to the text together.
- **Pray for yourself first.** "Search me, O God, and know my heart" (Psalm 139:23), before you pray for anyone else's.

Preparing in 20 Minutes

Read the chapter the way a participant would, early in the week, with a pencil in hand. Then, the day before you meet, give the session guide twenty minutes:

1. Read At a Glance and say the big idea out loud in your own words.
2. Read the Scripture Exercise passage twice. Know it better than anything else in the chapter.
3. Read the Lay of the Land notes until you can say them without reading them.
4. Choose your Start Here questions, and decide which ones you'll drop if time runs short.
5. Read the Care Note, if there is one, and think about who in your group it may touch.
6. Ask God to open your eyes, and theirs (Psalm 119:18), and to show you where you might be the one who needs correcting.

The Shape of a Meeting

Every session follows the rhythm the book already teaches: start in the text, pick a few questions, live it during the week. Each session guide gives the timing for a 90-minute meeting, which is the length this guide recommends. Seventy-five minutes works well too. Sixty minutes can work, but only for a group that reads the chapter ahead of time and a leader who has prepared carefully, because there is little room to recover. Use this table to adjust, and treat it as a starting point.

Step	What happens	60 min	75 min	90 min (recommended)
1. Welcome	Check in on last week's Application Exercise	5	5	10
2. Lay of the Land	Recap the topic, setting, key passages, and Bible-wide thread, so no one is lost for not reading	5	7	8
3. Read the text	Read the Scripture Exercise passage aloud and work through it together	10	13	15
4. Discuss	The three Start Here questions, more if time allows	25	30	37
5. Case Study	Work the case, or let it become the discussion	10	15	15
6. Close	Read a passage, pray in your own words, name the one thing to try this week	5	5	5

In a 60-minute group, the Case Study is the first thing to cut, and the Lay of the Land should stay short, because everyone has read. And in any group, keep the Lay of the Land to talking notes and a timer. It's there so no one is lost, not to replace the reading.

Leading a Good Discussion

- **Start in the text.** Read the passage aloud before anyone gives an opinion. It sets the authority in the room.
- **Ask, then wait.** Silence after a good question is people thinking. Count to ten before you rescue them.
- **Send people back to the page.** "Where do you see that?" is the most useful question you'll ever ask.
- **Draw out the quiet, slow down the quick.** "Let's hear from someone who hasn't spoken yet" is kind to both.
- **Say "I don't know."** Then add, "Let's find out," and bring something back next week.
- **End on time.** People come back to groups that respect their evenings.

When the Group Disagrees

Not every disagreement is the same size. Table L in the book sorts doctrines into first-, second-, and third-order issues, and Table Z maps fifteen debates where faithful Christians differ. On a second-order question, let both views be stated at their best, the way the chapter does, and don't try to settle it in one evening. On a first-order question, be clear and kind at the same time. Either way, the goal is a group that can disagree and still love each other on the way to the car.

Caring for People

What's shared in the group stays in the group, with the exceptions in the next section. Listen before you advise, and don't rush to fix. A text during the week ("I've been praying for you since Tuesday") often does more than anything said in the meeting. "Carry one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2) is the job description.

Safety, Referral, and Reporting

Some things aren't yours to carry alone, and you shouldn't try.

- **Bring in your pastor** when someone discloses a serious struggle, a marriage in crisis, or spiritual harm from a past church.

- **Refer to a counselor or doctor** when someone describes depression, anxiety, addiction, or trauma. Pastoral care and professional care work together.
- **If someone may harm themselves,** don't wait. In the U.S., call or text 988, the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, and stay with them until help is there.
- **If a child may be at risk,** report it to the authorities and follow your church's safeguarding policy. In many U.S. states, clergy and church workers are required by law to report child abuse.
- **Never promise secrecy you can't keep.** Abuse, a risk of self-harm, or harm to a minor is not a secret to keep.

SESSION 1 · CHAPTER 1

How to Read the Bible Well

At a Glance

Read slowly and in order: observe what the text says, interpret what it means, then apply what it asks, and ask God to open your eyes before you start. This is the first session of every track, so the habits your group forms tonight carry through every chapter after it.

Prepare

Read Psalm 119:18 and James 1:19–27 twice. Be able to explain the three movements in about a minute. Bring paper or the Participant Journal, because tonight people write.

Lay of the Land (5 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** how to read any passage in three movements: observe what it says, interpret what it means, apply what it asks.
- **The setting:** Christians have argued about how to read the Bible for as long as there's been one. The chapter traces nine approaches through history (Table Q). The inductive study many of us learned in small groups is one of the newest.
- **Key passages:** Psalm 119:18, Luke 24:27, Acts 17:11, and tonight's James 1:19–27.
- **The thread:** Ezra set his heart to study the Law, practice it, and teach it (Ezra 7:10), the same three movements centuries early. The Bereans carried the pattern on, and so can we.

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Skipping to "what this means to me."** It's the most common habit and the hardest to break. The Core Teaching walks through why the order matters, and Chapter 2 picks it up next week.
- **Thinking careful reading is cold or academic.** Point to the Emmaus paragraph: their hearts were burning while Jesus opened the Scriptures (Luke 24:32). And the Spirit is the One who opens the text.
- **Feeling unqualified.** The Bereans weren't scholars. They were ordinary listeners who checked what they heard (Acts 17:11).

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome and introductions (15) · Lay of the Land (5) · James 1:19–27 in three movements (20) · Discuss (30) · Case Study (15) · Close (5). Tonight the welcome runs a little longer, because people are meeting.

Start Here

- **Question 2** (reading to confirm versus reading to discover) sets the posture for the whole book.
- **Question 1** (your usual approach) lets people be honest about their habits without shame.
- **Question 5** (worship or academic exercise) ties back to Emmaus.

If time is short, drop 3 and 4. They're good for people to journal on their own.

The Hard Question

Question 2 is really asking whether we come to Scripture to be confirmed or to be corrected. Guide people toward naming a time a passage surprised them, or told them something they didn't want to hear. That moment is what listening to the text feels like.

Case Study Notes

The Joshua 1:8 case tests whether the group will observe before applying. Read the whole verse together: it's about meditating on God's law and doing what it says, spoken to Joshua at a specific moment in Israel's story. One follow-up question: "What would you want to ask this verse before asking what it promises you?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, the Three-Movement Journal, and three short lines on three days. Read Chapter 2.

Close

Read Psalm 119:18 aloud: "Open my eyes that I may see wondrous things from Your law." Then invite the group to ask God for that, in their own words.

SESSION 2 · CHAPTER 2

Reading Scripture in Its Own Voice

At a Glance

Every verse has a home: its sentence, its paragraph, its book, its genre, and its author's purpose. A passage has one meaning and many applications, and Scripture interprets Scripture. The question under the whole session is the chapter's own: am I hearing the text, or myself?

Prepare

Read Philippians 4:10–20 twice, so you know the setting of verse 13 well. Read Matthew 7:1–5 and John 7:24 for the case study. Glance at Tables B, C, and D in the Appendix so you can point people to them.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** reading every verse in its own setting, and the difference between exegesis (drawing the meaning out) and eisegesis (reading our own meaning in).
- **The setting:** the early church had two schools. Alexandria, led by Origen, looked for hidden layers beneath the words; Antioch, shaped by John Chrysostom, insisted the plain meaning came first. The medieval church read in four layers for nearly a thousand years, and then the Reformers insisted the clear meaning of Scripture stood above tradition.
- **Key passages:** Nehemiah 8:8, 2 Timothy 2:15, Matthew 4:1–11, and tonight's Philippians 4:11–13.
- **The thread:** in the wilderness Satan quoted Psalm 91 out of its setting, and Jesus answered with Deuteronomy read rightly. The Lord and His apostles read the Old Testament closely, down to the tense of a verb (Matthew 22:32) and a singular noun (Galatians 3:16). We can slow down too.

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **"So it means whatever it means to me."** Point to the Core Teaching's principle: one meaning, many applications. Ask, "What did it mean to them first?"
- **Feeling robbed of a favorite verse.** When Philippians 4:13 or Jeremiah 29:11 is read in context, some people feel something was taken. Let the context do its work: strength to be content in hunger and in plenty is a bigger gift than a trophy.
- **Context as a trump card.** Once people learn the tool, some start using it to win arguments. The chapter's case study is the corrective: the goal is an invitation to read together, not a correction.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Philippians 4:11–13, Steps 1–5 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5). The Scripture Exercise has nine questions; in fifteen minutes, use Questions 1, 3, 5, and 6.

Start Here

- **Question 1** (a verse used out of its setting) lets everyone bring a story, and nearly everyone has one.
- **Question 2** (Scripture interpreting Scripture) is the habit every later session leans on.
- **Question 5** (a major belief built on a single verse) is the heart of the chapter.

If time is short, drop 3 and 4. The Scripture Exercise covers both in practice.

The Hard Question

Question 5 is easy to answer about other people's beliefs. It's really testing whether we'll apply it to our own. Guide the group toward naming one belief they hold and asking, "Where else does Scripture speak to this?" Consider going first.

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether the group can correct a misuse of Scripture without using Scripture as a weapon. Read Matthew 7:1–5 together: Jesus doesn't forbid helping a brother see. He tells us to deal with our own eye first, and then to help. One follow-up question: "What would you say in that moment so it sounds like 'let's read it together'?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 2, Context Rescue, reading Jeremiah 29:1–14. Read Chapter 3.

Close

Read 2 Timothy 2:15 aloud: "Make every effort to present yourself approved to God, an unashamed workman who accurately handles the word of truth." Then invite the group to pray in their own words.

SESSION 3 • CHAPTER 3

The World Behind the Words

At a Glance

Knowing the Bible's world helps us hear what God said to the first audience, and the record recovered by archaeology has repeatedly confirmed Scripture's account. But background is a lamp, not a lens. It should sharpen a command, never explain it away.

Prepare

Read 1 Corinthians 8:1–13 twice, and be able to describe the city where the marketplace, the temple, and the dinner table were tangled together. Look over Tables E, F, and G. If you own a Bible dictionary or background commentary, bring it so people can see what one looks like.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** how the Bible's historical world helps us understand it, and how to keep background from hijacking the text.
- **The setting:** the Old Testament grew up among the empires and covenant-making kings of the Ancient Near East; the New Testament lands in Second Temple Judaism under Rome. Paul says God sent His Son "when the time had fully come" (Galatians 4:4): a common Greek, Roman roads, synagogues, and the Old Testament already in Greek. Archaeology keeps confirming the record, from the Hittite capital found in 1906 to the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947.
- **Key passages:** Galatians 4:4–5, Romans 15:4, Romans 16:16, and tonight's 1 Corinthians 8:1–13.
- **The thread:** the Exodus was a real event in real history, and it also set the pattern of redemption fulfilled in Christ, our Passover Lamb. God speaks in history, through history, and to history.

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **"That was just their culture."** Give the group the Core Teaching's test question: is this background helping me understand what the text says more clearly, or helping me avoid what it says?
- **Telling custom from command.** The holy kiss in Romans 16:16 is the chapter's test case: the custom doesn't transfer directly, but the warm, unmistakable affection underneath it does.
- **Background that can't be documented.** Some "ancient customs" taught from pulpits have no real source. Table AA collects several. The healthy question is simply, "Where does that come from?"

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · 1 Corinthians 8:1–13 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 3** (a passage that became clearer) is a warm way in and lets people share a discovery.
- **Question 2** (cultural practice or timeless principle) builds the skill the chapter is teaching.
- **Question 4** (using culture as an excuse) is the honest one. See below.

If time is short, drop 1 and 5.

The Hard Question

Question 4 is really testing whether we'll turn the lamp on ourselves. Most of us have a command we'd like to call "just their culture." Guide the group back to the test question, and let the leader be the first to name one of his or her own.

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether the group can hold both sides: background as a gift and background as an escape. The friend isn't wrong to love what she's learned. One follow-up question: "What would it look like to obey the command under Romans 16:16 in our church this Sunday?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 2, the Then and Now Bridge, with Deuteronomy 15:1–11. Read Chapter 4.

Close

Read Romans 15:4 aloud: "For everything that was written in the past was written for our instruction, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope." Invite the group to pray in their own words.

SESSION 4 • CHAPTER 4

The Story That Holds It All Together

At a Glance

Scripture is one story, from creation to new creation, and Jesus is woven through all of it: promised in prophecy, pictured in type and shadow, and revealed in the flesh. Typology is real, and it has guardrails. Not everything is a type, and the New Testament is our guide.

Prepare

Read Exodus 12:1–13 and 1 Corinthians 5:7 twice. Skim Tables H and I so you can point to them. Look over the ten threads in Application Exercise 1; they make a good map of the whole session.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** the single story of Scripture, and how Christ is promised and pictured all through it.
- **The setting:** the promise begins right after the fall (Genesis 3:15) and grows more specific through Abraham, David, and the prophets. Micah names the town; Isaiah describes a servant who bears the sin of many. The Dead Sea Scrolls show a Jewish community watching for a deliverer, and by AD 170 Melito of Sardis was preaching the Passover lamb as a portrait of Christ. Paul had said it a century earlier.
- **Key passages:** Genesis 3:15, Luke 24:27, John 5:39, and tonight's Exodus 12:1–13 with 1 Corinthians 5:7.
- **The thread:** an unblemished lamb whose blood turned judgment aside, and then "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7). Peter adds that the prophets searched carefully for what they were writing, and learned they were serving us (1 Peter 1:10–12).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Jesus in every thread.** Some people start finding Christ in every curtain loop. Point to the Core Teaching's guardrail: not everything is a type, and the New Testament shows us where to look.
- **"Christians just read Jesus back in."** The Historical Background answers this: the promise was already there, God's people were already watching, and Jesus Himself made the claim (Luke 24:27).
- **Bible heroes as role models only.** Question 5 names this: reading the Old Testament as a set of moral examples misses the story it's telling.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Exodus 12:1–13 and 1 Corinthians 5:7 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 2** (the figure or event that most points to Jesus) lets people share what moves them.
- **Question 3** (John 5:39) is the claim the whole chapter rests on.
- **Question 5** (moral examples or a story pointing to Christ) helps people see what they may have been missing.

If time is short, drop 1 and 4.

The Hard Question

Question 3 asks what it would mean if Jesus is right. It's really testing whether we'll let Jesus' reading of the Old Testament govern ours, rather than our cleverness or our skepticism. Guide the group to Luke 24:27: He is the interpreter. Hold most firmly to the connections the New Testament itself names, and hold the rest with an open hand.

Case Study Notes

The case tests the guardrails in both directions, and both people have a point. One is right that Christ is there; the other is right that imagination can run ahead of the text. One follow-up question: "In Application Exercise 1, which threads does the New Testament itself name, and how confident should we be about the rest?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 2, Typology Discovery, with two or three words jotted down instead of a paragraph. Read Chapter 5.

Close

Read Luke 24:27 aloud: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explained to them what was written in all the Scriptures about Himself." Invite the group to thank God in their own words for the story He has been telling.

SESSION 5 • CHAPTER 5

Loving God with the Mind

At a Glance

Careful thinking is one way to love God with the mind He gave us: name the claim, weigh the reasons, spot the errors, and respond with conviction and humility. Logic doesn't replace Scripture or the Holy Spirit. It serves them.

Prepare

Read Acts 17:10–12, 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22, and 1 John 4:1–6 twice. Know the eight reasoning errors well enough to give an everyday example of two or three. Look over Table AA in the Appendix; someone may ask about it.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** how to test a claim well, with conviction and with humility, and how to test ourselves the same way.
- **The setting:** Justin Martyr argued that Christianity fulfills reason rather than opposing it. Anselm, building on Augustine, called it "faith seeking understanding," and Aquinas held that reason and revelation can't truly contradict, because both come from the same God. The Reformers didn't abandon reason; they submitted it to Scripture.
- **Key passages:** Matthew 22:37, Deuteronomy 13:1–4, Proverbs 18:17, and tonight's Acts 17, 1 Thessalonians 5, and 1 John 4.
- **The thread:** Israel was told to test prophets (Deuteronomy 13; 18:20–22), and Proverbs contrasts the simple person with the prudent one. John carries it forward: test the spirits (1 John 4:1). And at the end of all our reasoning, truth is a Person (John 14:6).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Using the tools as weapons.** People learn the list of errors and start labeling everyone else's. Point to the last posture in the chapter, "Aim at the person, not the win," and to Application Exercise 2, which turns the test on ourselves.
- **Fearing that testing is unbelief.** Some worry that questioning an experience quenches the Spirit. 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22 holds both together: don't quench the Spirit, and test everything.
- **"They were so sincere."** Question 5 is the place for this. Sincerity matters, but it doesn't settle whether a claim is true.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Acts 17, 1 Thessalonians 5, and 1 John 4 under four headings (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5). The four headings work well on a whiteboard or a large sheet of paper.

Start Here

- **Question 3** (testing a claim or attacking the person) sets the tone for every discernment chapter that follows.
- **Question 4** (why Scripture commands testing) keeps the discussion anchored in the text.
- **Question 5** (sincere and still wrong) is the honest one. See below.

If time is short, drop 1 and 2.

The Hard Question

Question 5 is really testing whether we'll accept that we, too, can be sincere, moved, confident, and wrong. Paul was (Acts 26:9; Philippians 3:6). Guide the group toward the chapter's question "What would change their mind?" and then ask it of ourselves.

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether the group can name a weak argument without dismissing the experience or the people in it. Hold the conclusion loosely: something good may have happened that night, and the argument still doesn't prove it was from God. One follow-up question: "What would you say to a friend who was deeply moved that night?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, Claim Analysis, on one claim they meet this week. Read Chapter 6, which opens Part 2.

Close

Read Matthew 22:37 aloud: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." Invite the group to offer their minds to God in their own words.

SESSION 6 · CHAPTER 6

The Biblical Covenants

At a Glance

The six covenants (Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New) aren't six stories. They're one story, advancing, and each carries God's plan forward to Christ. God always initiates. Underneath every covenant is hesed, love that has bound itself by promise. And there has only ever been one way to be right with God: by faith.

Prepare

Read Hebrews 8:6–13 twice, and Genesis 15:7–21. Look over Table J and Table R in the Appendix. Be ready to explain in a sentence or two what an ancient treaty between a great king and a lesser people looked like.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** the covenants as the backbone of Scripture, and why they are the key to reading Old Testament promises well.
- **The setting:** the word covenant appears over three hundred times in the Bible. In the ancient Near East, covenants bound a great king to a lesser people: he set the terms and promised protection, and they owed loyalty. Hittite treaties followed a six-part pattern you can trace point by point at Sinai. This book reads the covenants through covenant theology, and Table R sets out four other frameworks faithful evangelicals hold.
- **Key passages:** Genesis 15:6, Jeremiah 31:31–34, Luke 22:20, 2 Corinthians 1:20, and tonight's Hebrews 8:6–13.
- **The thread:** in Genesis 15 only God passed between the pieces, taking the covenant's curse on Himself, and at the cross Christ became "a curse for us" (Galatians 3:13). The story ends with a sealed scroll that only the Lamb who was slain is worthy to open (Revelation 5).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Covenant confusion.** The Core Teaching names three common errors: applying Israel's national promises straight to individuals, treating the Mosaic law as the Christian rulebook, and dismissing the Old Testament altogether. Let the group find which one they've met.
- **"Obsolete means irrelevant."** Step 4 of the Scripture Exercise is written for this. Hebrews 8:13 retires the old covenant; it doesn't retire the Old Testament.
- **Lost in the names.** Six covenants can feel like a vocabulary test. Keep Table J open and keep coming back to one sentence: one story, advancing.

Where Christians Differ

The chapter uses one framework and says plainly that it isn't the only faithful one; Table R summarizes dispensationalism and three others. Christians also differ on how baptism relates to circumcision (Chapter 16). If someone holds another framework, let them say so, and keep the shared ground in view: one God, one way of salvation by faith, and every promise "Yes" in Christ. These are second-order questions (Table L).

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Hebrews 8:6–13 in five steps (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5). This is a full chapter. If your group is drawn to Genesis 15 (Application Exercise 1), it can take the Case Study's place.

Start Here

- **Question 2** (God always initiates) speaks to how each person relates to God, not just to the history.
- **Question 5** (all the promises "Yes" in Christ) is the reading key the chapter is handing us. See below.
- **Question 4** (law on the heart) moves the discussion from information to transformation.

If time is short, drop 1, 3, and 6. Question 6 makes a good journaling question.

The Hard Question

Question 5 is really testing whether we can hold two things at once: a promise like Jeremiah 29:11 wasn't first written to us, and it still reaches us through Christ. Watch for both ditches, "it has nothing to do with me" and "it's my personal guarantee." Guide the group to God's character in the passage: the same God who kept faith with the exiles through seventy years (Jeremiah 29:10) keeps faith with us.

Case Study Notes

The case tests the same balance with a real person, and her question is tender. Comfort before you correct. One follow-up question: "What did the exiles have to wait through before the promise came, and what kept them while they waited?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, The Covenant God Walked Alone, ending with Isaiah 53:5. Read Chapter 7.

Close

Read Lamentations 3:22–23 aloud: "Because of the loving devotion of the LORD we are not consumed, for His mercies never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness!" Invite the group to thank God in their own words for keeping His promises.

SESSION 7 • CHAPTER 7

Why Truth and Doctrine Matter

At a Glance

Doctrine is the church's summary of what Scripture teaches, and it isn't dry. What we believe about God shapes how we live before Him. There are two ways to fail: believing the wrong things, and holding the right beliefs while staying unchanged by them. Good theology ends in worship.

Prepare

Read Matthew 16:5–12 twice, and 1 Corinthians 5:6–8. Look over the creeds in the Appendix (The Creeds in Full). Think of an everyday "doctrine" of your own, like the examples in the Chapter Objective, so you can go first.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** what doctrine is, why it matters, and the quiet danger of right beliefs that never change us.
- **The setting:** the early church faced teachings that shrank Christ or blurred the Trinity, and the councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) gave us the Nicene Creed. They weren't scholars at a desk; they were shepherds protecting a flock. Athanasius stood "against the world" for Christ's full deity. The Reformers wrote catechisms for ordinary families.
- **Key passages:** Hosea 4:6, John 4:23–24, Romans 11:33–12:1, and tonight's Matthew 16:5–12.
- **The thread:** leaven. Israel cleared every trace of it before Passover (Exodus 12:15). Jesus warned of the leaven of the Pharisees, meaning their teaching, and Paul warned that a little leaven works through the whole batch. And Paul's answer is the Passover Lamb: "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **"Doctrine just divides people."** Question 3 is the place: there is something right in "I just love Jesus," and something missing. Let the group name both.
- **Right answers, unchanged life.** The Core Teaching calls this the more dangerous failure. Ask gently whether any of us recognize it in ourselves, the leader included.
- **Leaven turning into fear.** Some people leave this session anxious about every small error. The last question in the Scripture Exercise brings them back to 1 Corinthians 5:7: faith, not fear.

Where Christians Differ

Application Exercise 1 sets two lists of passages side by side on whether a true believer can lose salvation, and the chapter deliberately doesn't resolve it. If it comes up, honor that design: let both lists be read in full, state each side fairly, and leave it as a second-order question (Table L).

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Matthew 16:5–12 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 2** (beliefs shaping actions) connects doctrine to Monday morning.
- **Question 3** ("I just love Jesus") is the honest one. See below.
- **Question 5** (doctrine as love for others) changes how people hear the word.

If time is short, drop 1 and 4. Question 4 is better journaled than discussed.

The Hard Question

Question 3 is really testing whether we can be fair to people who resist doctrine. Many have seen it used as a club. Guide the group toward Jesus' own words: the Father seeks those who worship "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24), both, not one. Paul says the same in "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). Truth without love and love without truth both fall short.

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether we can answer the friend without proving her point by being argumentative about theology. One follow-up question: "What does your friend already believe about Jesus that is itself a doctrine?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 2, The Creed as Prayer, phrase by phrase. Read Chapter 8.

Close

Read Romans 11:33 aloud: "O, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and untraceable His ways!" Invite the group to pray in their own words, letting what they believe turn into worship.

SESSION 8 • CHAPTER 8

Why These 66 Books

At a Glance

The church recognized the canon; it didn't create it. The Old Testament was settled before Jesus' day. The 27 New Testament books were recognized by whether they were apostolic, widely used in worship, and consistent with the faith, and Athanasius first listed exactly those 27 in 367. Protestants and Catholics share the New Testament and differ honestly over the Old.

Prepare

Read 2 Peter 3:14–18 twice. Know three dates from the Historical Background: the Muratorian Fragment (about 170), Athanasius's letter (367), and the councils of Hippo and Carthage (393 and 397). Look over Tables N and T.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** how the 66 books came to be recognized, and why "recognized, not created" matters for our confidence.
- **The setting:** by Jesus' day the Hebrew Scriptures were a settled three-part collection (Luke 24:44). Around 140 a teacher named Marcion cut the Bible down to fit his views, which pushed the church to say clearly which books it already received. Catholics and Protestants differ over seven Old Testament books; Jerome favored the shorter Hebrew canon, and the Council of Trent closed the question for Catholics in 1546.
- **Key passages:** Luke 24:44, 2 Timothy 3:16–17, 1 Timothy 5:18, and tonight's 2 Peter 3:15–16.
- **The thread:** God's people guarded His word from the start. Moses placed the Law beside the ark (Deuteronomy 31:24–26), and when a king burned Jeremiah's scroll, it was simply written again (Jeremiah 36). God has kept His word.

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **"A council or an emperor picked the books."** This is the case study, and the Historical Background gives the dates to answer it.
- **"If people decided, can I trust it?"** The Core Teaching answers this: Scripture's authority never depended on a vote. The councils confirmed what believers had long recognized.
- **Scorekeeping on the Apocrypha.** The chapter calls this a genuine, centuries-old disagreement with deep roots on both sides. Model that same care, especially if someone grew up Catholic.

Where Christians Differ

This guide follows the 39-book Hebrew canon and says plainly that the wider-canon view also has deep historical roots. If someone in your group grew up Catholic or Orthodox, invite them to share, and keep the conversation on what the history shows rather than who wins.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · 2 Peter 3:15–16 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 2** (recognizing or creating) is the heart of the chapter.
- **Question 3** (Peter calling Paul's letters Scripture) shows how early that recognition began.
- **Question 5** (confidence, or new questions) is the honest one. See below.

If time is short, drop 1 and 4.

The Hard Question

Question 5 is really testing whether our confidence can survive honest history, including the messy parts. Guide the group toward the chapter's own posture: "I'd rather you know the real history than a tidier version of it." Our confidence rests on God having spoken and kept His word, and on how Jesus Himself trusted the Scriptures (Application Exercise 2), not on the story being tidy.

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether we can answer a sincere misunderstanding truthfully and briefly. A good answer may be two sentences and an invitation. One follow-up question: "What's one question you could ask her back that keeps the conversation going?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 2, How Jesus Read His Bible. Read Chapter 9.

Close

Read 2 Timothy 3:16–17 aloud: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for instruction, for conviction, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, fully equipped for every good work." Invite the group to thank God in their own words for His preserved Word.

SESSION 9 · CHAPTER 9

The Bible: God's Word, Our Authority

At a Glance

Inspired is a claim about the source, inerrant a claim about accuracy, infallible a claim about reliability. Together they make Scripture the final, sufficient authority for faith and life, and sufficient is a stronger word than helpful. This Word comes from a Father who loves His people.

Prepare

Read Psalm 119:97–105 twice. Be able to explain each of the three I's in a sentence; Table U lays them side by side. Read the paragraph on 2 Peter 1:21 and the ship in Acts 27:15; it's the clearest picture in the chapter.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** what we mean when we call the Bible inspired, inerrant, infallible, and sufficient.
- **The setting:** at the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther said his conscience was "captive to the Word of God." Later centuries brought new challenges: historical criticism, liberal theology, and the idea that every text means whatever its reader makes of it. In 1978 the Chicago Statement affirmed that Scripture is without error in what its authors originally wrote.
- **Key passages:** 2 Timothy 3:16–17, 2 Peter 1:21, John 10:35, Matthew 5:18, and tonight's Psalm 119:97–105.
- **The thread:** from "You must not add to or subtract from what I command you" (Deuteronomy 4:2), through the joy of Psalms 19 and 119, to Jesus Himself: "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isaiah 40:8).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Three words that blur together.** The Core Teaching separates them by the question each answers: Did this come from God? Can I trust what it says? Will it lead me wrong?
- **"Sufficient means we ignore doctors and science."** Question 4 is written for this. Sufficient doesn't mean only; it means God's Word has the final say.
- **"Inerrant means every copy and translation."** The chapter limits the claim to what the authors originally wrote. Chapter 8 takes up how the text was preserved, and Chapter 42 takes up translations.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Psalm 119:97–105 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 2** (where it's hardest to submit) is the honest one. See below.
- **Question 4** (sufficient but not the only thing) heads off the most common misunderstanding.
- **Question 5** (freedom rather than restriction) lets people say what trusting Scripture has given them.

If time is short, drop 1 and 3.

The Hard Question

Question 2 is really testing whether Scripture is our authority where it costs us something. It's possible to affirm inerrancy and still edit the Bible by ignoring it. Go first, and keep it real. Then guide the group to Psalm 119:105: a lamp usually shows the next step, not the whole road.

Case Study Notes

The case tests sufficiency in an ordinary decision. Scripture doesn't name his job offer, but it speaks to worship, family, work, wise counsel, and trust. Watch for the group answering him with a single verse; that's the very thing he doesn't need. One follow-up question: "What questions could we help him bring to Scripture, rather than answers to hand him?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 2, the Sufficiency Test, on one real area of life. Read Chapter 10.

Close

Read Psalm 119:105 aloud: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." Invite the group to pray in their own words, asking God for one area where His Word can have the final say.

SESSION 10 • CHAPTER 10

Knowing God: Who He Is and How He Lives

At a Glance

We get to know God through His attributes (what He alone is, and what He shares with us), His triune life (one God, eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), and His names. It's easy to settle for a smaller picture of Him. This session is meant to end in worship more than mastery.

Prepare

Read Exodus 34:5–8 twice. Study the Shield of the Trinity in the chapter well enough to walk the lines out loud. Glance at Table O, the Names of God.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** knowing God through His attributes, the Trinity, and His names.
- **The setting:** in the fourth century Arius taught that the Son was created: "There was a time when He was not." Athanasius saw a pastoral catastrophe in that, because a lesser Christ couldn't save, and he was exiled five times for saying so. Nicaea (325) confessed the Son to be of the same substance as the Father, and Constantinople (381) extended that confession to the Spirit.
- **Key passages:** Deuteronomy 6:4, Exodus 3:14, John 8:58, 2 Corinthians 13:14, and tonight's Exodus 34:5–8.
- **The thread:** God's own description of Himself to Moses (Exodus 34:6–7) echoes all through the Old Testament (Numbers 14:18; Psalm 103:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2), and at the cross His mercy and justice meet. Jesus took up the divine name for Himself: "before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:58).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Illustrations that break.** Water, ice, and steam pictures modalism; a shamrock pictures three parts. The chapter shows why, and points to the Shield instead.
- **A one-attribute God.** Love without holiness, or holiness without love. That's the case study.
- **A picture of God shaped by pain.** Question 5 asks whether experience has shaped our view of God more than Scripture. For some, an earthly father makes "Father" hard to hear. Go gently.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Exodus 34:5–8 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5). The Scripture Exercise ends in worship; save that part for the Close.

Start Here

- **Question 1** (easiest and hardest attribute) lets everyone answer honestly.
- **Question 3** (knowing about God or knowing Him) is the heart of the chapter.
- **Question 5** (experience or Scripture) is the tender one. See below.

If time is short, drop 2 and 4.

The Hard Question

Question 5 is really testing whether we'll let Scripture correct our picture of God, even when that picture came from real hurt. Don't push anyone to explain why. Guide the group to what God says of Himself in Exodus 34:6–7, and to Jesus: "Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether the group can hold God's love and holiness together without ranking them. Exodus 34:6–7 holds both in a single breath. One follow-up question: "Where in the life of Jesus do you see love and holiness at the same moment?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, Attribute Meditation, on the attribute each person finds hardest. Read Chapter 11, which opens Part 3.

Close

Read Isaiah 6:3 aloud: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Hosts; all the earth is full of His glory." Then do as Moses did: invite the group to bow and worship in their own words.

SESSION 11 · CHAPTER 11

The Gospel of Grace and Assurance

At a Glance

The gospel is good news, not good advice: salvation is entirely the work of Christ, received by faith, not earned. Works that come before justification are sand; works that come after it are fruit. Assurance stands on God's promise, a changed life, and the Spirit's witness, held together.

Prepare

Read Romans 8:31–39 twice. Practice saying the gospel yourself in two or three sentences (Question 1), using the five movements on the Gospel in One Page. Read "The Galatian Rebuke" closely; it's where most questions land.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** the gospel of grace, why adding anything to Christ is a different gospel, and how we can know we belong to Him.
- **The setting:** many Jewish teachers in Paul's day emphasized careful law-keeping to stay in good standing with God, and Paul proclaimed righteousness credited through faith (Romans 3:21–26). In Galatia, teachers insisted Gentile believers be circumcised, and Paul called it a different gospel. Luther rediscovered this in Romans and Galatians, and the Reformation summed it up in the Five Solas.
- **Key passages:** Ephesians 2:8–10, Galatians 5:1, Matthew 7:24–27, 1 John 5:13, and tonight's Romans 8:31–39.
- **The thread:** Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6) centuries before the Law; "the righteous will live by faith" (Habakkuk 2:4) is quoted three times in the New Testament. In Zechariah 3 the high priest's filthy clothes are taken away and splendid robes put on him: Christ takes our rags, and we wear His robe (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Faith plus works.** The Core Teaching's equation is the clearest help: faith equals justification plus works. The order is everything.
- **"Fallen from grace" means losing salvation by sinning.** The Galatian section explains Paul's narrower target: making law-keeping the basis of our standing.
- **Assurance resting on a feeling or a past prayer.** That's the case study. Point to the three supports: promise, fruit, and the Spirit's witness.

Where Christians Differ

Whether a true believer can lose salvation is a second-order question, and the chapter deliberately doesn't settle it here (see Chapter 14, and Chapter 7's Application Exercise 1). If it comes up, let both sets of passages be read in full and keep the focus on what everyone shares: Christ's finished work is the only ground of assurance.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Romans 8:31–39 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 1** (the gospel in two or three sentences) gives everyone practice. Go first, and keep yours simple.
- **Question 2** (trying to earn God's favor) is the honest one. See below.
- **Question 3** (assurance) opens the case study well.

If time is short, drop 4 and 5.

The Hard Question

Question 2 is really testing whether we actually rest. Most of us affirm grace and still live as if the scoreboard were running. Guide the group to the thief on the cross: his only answer at the gate was "The man on the middle cross said I can come." The safe answer always starts with "Because He…"

Case Study Notes

The case tests both ditches at once: fear and complacency. The same gospel speaks to both: Christ's finished work for the one afraid, and fruit as the evidence of a living faith for the one at ease. One follow-up question: "What would you want each of them to hear first?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 2, the Assurance Inventory, with 1 John 5:11–13. Read Chapter 12.

Close

Read Romans 8:38–39 aloud: "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor principalities, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Invite the group to thank God in their own words.

SESSION 12 • CHAPTER 12

Jesus: Fully God, Fully Man, Fully Ours

At a Glance

Jesus is one person in two natures, fully God and fully man. The eternal Son was active in creation and walked with His people before Bethlehem. He intercedes now, as a man, at the Father's right hand, and He will return as King. Scripture frames the cross in four pictures, and they work together.

Prepare

Read Philippians 2:5–11 twice, noticing that the Son "emptied Himself" by taking something on, not by ceasing to be God. Read the paragraph on the modern teaching that Jesus set aside His divine powers. Look over the four pictures of the atonement and Table V.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** who Jesus is: the eternal Son, fully God and fully man, and what He has done for us.
- **The setting:** Arius said the Son was created, and Nicaea (325) answered that He is of the same substance as the Father. Then one error split Christ into two persons and another blended His natures into one. The Council of Chalcedon (451) confessed one person in two natures, "without confusion, change, division, or separation." (The Oriental Orthodox churches did not accept Chalcedon's exact wording.)
- **Key passages:** John 1:1–14, Colossians 1:15–20, Hebrews 4:15, Hebrews 7:25, and tonight's Philippians 2:5–11.
- **The thread:** the seed of the woman (Genesis 3:15), a prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15), the King-Priest of Psalm 110, Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14), and the Son of Man (Daniel 7:13–14) all meet in Jesus. Many see the Son Himself in the Angel of the LORD who met Hagar, Gideon, and Joshua.

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **"Jesus set aside being God."** The chapter names this modern teaching gently and plainly. Philippians 2 is the answer: He emptied Himself by taking on the form of a servant.
- **Holding only one nature.** Some quietly assume His temptations weren't real because He was God; others see only a Spirit-filled man. Questions 1 and 2 together keep both in view.
- **Choosing a favorite picture of the cross.** The chapter's line helps: "You don't have to choose a favorite. Scripture never asks you to."

Where Christians Differ

Not every interpreter identifies each appearance of the Angel of the LORD as the Son, and Christians weigh the four pictures of the cross differently; the chapter holds penal substitution at the center while affirming the other three as real. Let people explore those freely. Chalcedon itself, fully God and fully man, is first-order.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Philippians 2:5–11 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 2** (fully human) is the half many believers quietly neglect.
- **Question 3** (Hebrews 4:15 and prayer) is the honest one. See below.
- **Question 5** (the resurrection and today) moves the session from doctrine to life.

If time is short, drop 1 and 4. The Scripture Exercise and the Case Study both press Question 1.

The Hard Question

Question 3 is really testing whether we believe Jesus understands us, not only that He forgives us. Many people trust His mercy but still pray to a distant King. Guide the group to Hebrews 4:16, "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence," and to Luke 22:32, where Jesus prayed for Peter before Peter fell.

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether we can let the text make the case for Jesus' deity rather than pressing someone with our own certainty. Read John 1 and Colossians 1 slowly and let the claims stand. Honest doubts deserve patience. One follow-up question: "If Jesus isn't God, what happens to the cross?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, Chalcedonian Reflection: one area where you need Him as God, and one where you need Him as man. Read Chapter 13.

Close

Pray Philippians 2:10–11 aloud together: "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Invite the group to worship Him in their own words.

SESSION 13 • CHAPTER 13

Turning Around: Repentance and Faith

At a Glance

Repentance is a turning of the whole person, mind, heart, and will, away from self-reliance and toward Christ. It is a gift God grants and a command we obey. Faith is knowing, agreeing, and trusting. And grace keeps calling us back: repentance is a posture we return to, not a test we eventually fail.

Prepare

Read 2 Corinthians 7:8–11 twice. Read the paragraph on Judas and Peter, and "Faith: Knowing, Agreeing, Trusting." Pray for anyone in your group who has carried shame for a long time.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** what genuine repentance is, why it isn't simply trying harder, and how it pairs with faith.
- **The setting:** the Greek metanoia means a change of mind and direction, and the Hebrew shuv means to turn or return. Erasmus noticed that the Latin Bible had rendered metanoia as "penance," and in 1517 Luther's first thesis declared that Jesus willed "the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."
- **Key passages:** Acts 20:21, Acts 11:18, 2 Timothy 2:24–26, 1 John 1:8–9, and tonight's 2 Corinthians 7:8–11.
- **The thread:** covenant return runs from Deuteronomy 30 through Psalm 51 and Joel 2: "Restore us to Yourself, O LORD, so we may return" (Lamentations 5:21). Jesus pictures the answer in a father who runs to his son while he is still far off (Luke 15:20).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Sorrow mistaken for repentance.** The Judas and Peter paragraph draws the line: "Regret looks at what it cost. Repentance looks at the Savior."
- **"I just need to try harder."** The Core Teaching explains why repentance isn't simply effort, and why that's good news.
- **Quietly taking one area off the table.** "Grace Keeps Calling You Back" names this drift: a habit or a grudge no longer called sin, just "how I am."

Where Christians Differ

Christians explain differently how God's gift and our response fit together, and Chapter 14 sets out the views. This chapter insists only that no one repents unless grace goes first. If the election debate starts, gently save it for next week.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · 2 Corinthians 7:8–11 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 1** (feeling sorry or truly repenting) is the heart of the chapter.
- **Question 3** (faith as trust) brings in the new section on knowing, agreeing, and trusting.
- **Question 6** (praying for someone far from God) is the honest one. See below.

If time is short, drop 2 and 5. The Case Study covers Question 4.

The Hard Question

Question 6 is really testing whether we trust God with the people we love, or try to argue and pressure them into turning. Guide the group to 2 Timothy 2:24–26: stay kind, keep teaching, and hope in what only God can give. "I planted the seed and Apollos watered it, but God made it grow" (1 Corinthians 3:6).

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether the group can tell a perfect record from a turned heart, without making light of the sin or handing the parent more effort. Notice what 1 John 1:9 asks for: honesty, not a clean track record. One follow-up question: "What would 'exhort one another daily' look like for this parent this week, in practical terms?"

Care Note

Shame runs deep for some people, and this chapter can stir it. The Judas paragraph mentions suicide; someone in the room may have lost a loved one that way, so don't speculate about anyone's eternal state. If someone speaks with hopelessness about themselves, take it seriously and follow the safety steps in Part 1. In the U.S., the 988 line is there day and night.

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 2, The Prodigal Son(s), reading both sons. Read Chapter 14.

Close

Pray together in the words of Lamentations 5:21: "Restore us to Yourself, O LORD, so we may return." Then invite anyone who wants to pray in their own words.

SESSION 14 • CHAPTER 14

How Grace Reaches Us

At a Glance

Salvation begins with God's initiative. Reformed and Arminian Christians have answered differently for centuries how God's sovereignty and our choice relate, and both affirm grace first, faith alone, and no boasting. This is a second-order question. The goal is conviction and humility in the same hand.

Prepare

Read Romans 9:14–24 and 10:9–13 twice. Study the two-column table well enough to say where the orders differ: does new life come before faith, or after? Read the section on eternal security. Know where you land yourself, and be ready not to lead with it.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** how grace reaches us: election, and the two main Protestant ways of understanding it.
- **The setting:** in the fifth century Augustine answered Pelagius, who taught that people could choose God by their own strength, and the councils of Carthage (418) and Orange (529) largely sided with Augustine. At the Reformation, Erasmus defended free will and Luther answered with The Bondage of the Will. Arminius raised questions about Calvin's teaching, and the Synod of Dort (1618–1619) answered with what became the five points of Calvinism.
- **Key passages:** Ephesians 1:4–5, John 6:44, John 12:32, 1 Timothy 2:3–4, 2 Peter 3:9, and tonight's Romans 9–10.
- **The thread:** God rarely chooses the one we would pick: Isaac, Jacob, Ephraim, David the youngest, and four women in Jesus' family line. At the center stands the Chosen One, "This is My Son, whom I have chosen" (Luke 9:35), and we are chosen in Him and chosen to be sent (Genesis 12:3; 1 Peter 2:9).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **The debate taking over.** Point to "Notice what neither side will say": grace comes first, faith alone, and no one boasts.
- **"How do I know I'm chosen?"** Question 3 and Application Exercise 1 turn election toward comfort, not anxiety.
- **"Then why share the gospel?"** Question 5 and Application Exercise 2 hold both truths together: pray boldly, and speak.

Where Christians Differ

The whole session is a second-order question (Table L). Let each view be stated at its best, with its own verses and in its own words, and don't let anyone describe the other side in terms that side wouldn't accept. The chapter's picture of the door, with an invitation on the outside and election on the inside, is a good place to land.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Romans 9:14–24 and 10:9–13 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5). Don't rush to resolve the tension in the Scripture Exercise. Paul didn't.

Start Here

- **Question 1** (your honest reaction) lets people bring feelings before positions.
- **Question 3** (election as comfort) keeps the session pastoral.
- **Question 4** (firm conviction without testing someone's salvation) is the honest one. See below.

If time is short, drop 2 and 5. The Scripture Exercise covers Question 2, and Application Exercise 2 covers Question 5.

The Hard Question

Question 4 is really testing whether our convictions are held in love. It's easier to be right than to be kind. Guide the group toward what both traditions share, "so that no one may boast in His presence" (1 Corinthians 1:29), and then ask each person: what would the best defender of the other view want me to take seriously in Scripture?

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether the group can protect a newer believer from the crossfire. Both traditions can give her the same pastoral answer: your choice was real, and God was there first. One follow-up question: "Which verse would each friend want the other to take more seriously?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 2, Praying Both Truths, for one person who doesn't yet know Christ. Read Chapter 15.

Close

Read Ephesians 1:3–6 aloud, beginning, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms." Invite the group to praise Him in their own words for grace that came first.

SESSION 15 • CHAPTER 15

Growth in Grace: Sanctification

At a Glance

Justification is the once-for-all verdict; sanctification is the lifelong, Spirit-empowered growth that follows it. Holiness is a response to grace, not a performance for approval. The road runs between two ditches, moralism and carelessness, and the work is "dependent responsibility": we labor, and the energy is His.

Prepare

Read Romans 6:1–14 twice. Be able to explain the three tenses (already set apart, being made holy, one day completely holy) and the sailboat picture. Read "Two Ditches, One Road."

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** growing in holiness, and why it must never be confused with being declared righteous.
- **The setting:** the medieval church treated justification as a gradual process through sacraments, penance, and merit. Luther separated what that system had fused. The Puritan John Owen wrote, "Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you." Wesley taught a second work of "entire sanctification," and the later Keswick movement spoke of surrender, sometimes tipping into passivity.
- **Key passages:** Philippians 2:12–13, 2 Corinthians 3:18, Hebrews 10:14, Romans 7:19–8:1, and tonight's Romans 6:1–14.
- **The thread:** "Be holy, because I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16, from Leviticus) runs from Sinai to the church, and Psalm 51 shows a heart longing to be made clean. We become like what we behold (Psalm 115:8), and as we behold the Lord we "are being transformed into His image" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Mixing up the verdict and the growth.** The Chapter Objective names it: confusing justification and sanctification has caused needless anxiety for many sincere believers.
- **Falling into one ditch.** Moralism (earning God's approval) or carelessness ("grace covers it, so it doesn't matter"). That's the Core Teaching, and the case study.
- **"A real Christian wouldn't struggle like this."** The Romans 7 paragraph answers it: the fight itself is a sign of life, and the next verse is "no condemnation" (Romans 8:1).

Where Christians Differ

Christians read Romans 7 in more than one way, and the Wesleyan and Reformed traditions describe the goal of sanctification differently. The chapter notes both, and points out that on "dependent responsibility" they agree almost completely.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Romans 6:1–14 in five steps (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 3** (holiness from fear or from love) is the honest one. See below.
- **Question 4** (slow progress) is a relief to most people in the room.
- **Question 2** (Owen's "be killing sin") keeps the session from going soft.

If time is short, drop 1 and 5. Question 5 fits better in Application Exercise 1.

The Hard Question

Question 3 is really testing whether we can recognize performance in our own hearts. One place to look is what failure does to us: fear tends to run from God, and love runs back to Him. Guide the group to Romans 8:1, and then to Hebrews 12:2: the most practical thing we can do isn't to stare at our sin but to fix our eyes on Jesus.

Case Study Notes

The case puts the two ditches into two friends, and both are partly right. Help the first rest in Hebrews 10:14, perfected for all time and still being sanctified, without growing careless. One follow-up question: "What would his ordinary week look like if he believed that verse?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, the Mortification Journal, done privately, with the plan (not necessarily the sin) shared with one trusted person. Read Chapter 16.

Close

Read 2 Corinthians 3:18 aloud: "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into His image with intensifying glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." Invite the group to pray in their own words for one area where they want to grow.

SESSION 16 • CHAPTER 16

Baptism: Going Public with Your Faith

At a Glance

Baptism publicly declares what Christ has done: death to the old life and new life in Him. The word means to be immersed, overwhelmed, and changed. Christians differ on who should be baptized and how, and both main views agree that baptism was commanded by Christ, belongs to Christ, and points to Christ. The water doesn't save. Christ does.

Prepare

Read Matthew 3:13–17 and John 1:29 twice. Read "Who Should Be Baptized? Two Faithful Readings" and the paragraph on whether baptism saves. Know what your own church practices and teaches, so you can answer simply if someone asks.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** what baptism declares, and the main ways faithful Christians practice it.
- **The setting:** the Didache, the oldest Christian manual outside the New Testament, calls for fasting and immersion in running water, with pouring allowed when needed. Later centuries added long instruction and baptism at Easter. In fourth-century Jerusalem, candidates faced west to renounce Satan, then turned east to confess the Father, Son, and Spirit.
- **Key passages:** Matthew 28:19, Romans 6:3–4, Galatians 3:27, 1 Peter 3:21, and tonight's Matthew 3:13–17.
- **The thread:** all through Scripture water marks a new beginning: the flood (1 Peter 3:20–21), the Red Sea (1 Corinthians 10:1–2), and the Jordan. And the Passover lamb was chosen and watched for four days before it was offered (Exodus 12:3–6); at the Jordan the Lamb of God was presented, and the Father pronounced Him "well pleased."

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **"Does baptism save me?"** The paragraph on 1 Peter 3:21 holds the balance: the water doesn't save, Christ does, and baptism still isn't optional, because Jesus commanded it.
- **"Should I be baptized again?"** That's the case study, and it's a second-order question. Help people think it through rather than settling it for them.
- **Treating baptism as a formality.** The Historical Background shows how seriously the early church took it, as a public act of belonging to a new Owner.

Where Christians Differ

Who should be baptized, and how, is second-order (Table L). Believers baptize those who can confess Christ for themselves; others baptize the infants of believing parents as a covenant sign; some traditions see baptism as a means God uses to give His grace. Present each at its best, in its own words. It's fine to say what your church practices. It isn't fine to suggest the other side isn't faithful.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Matthew 3:13–17 and John 1:29 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 2** (buried and raised with Christ) is the heart of what every tradition sees in baptism.
- **Question 1** (what baptism means to you) invites stories. Some may not be baptized; let that be safe to say.
- **Question 5** (what baptism declares) is the deeper one. See below.

If time is short, drop 3 and 4. Application Exercise 2 covers Question 4.

The Hard Question

Question 5 asks what baptism says to the watching world and the spiritual world. It's really testing whether we see baptism as allegiance: being handed over to a new Owner. Guide the group to the old practice of turning from west to east, to Paul's "Were you baptized into the name of Paul?" (1 Corinthians 1:13), and to Galatians 3:27: those baptized into Christ have clothed themselves with Christ.

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether we can help someone decide a second-order question with her conscience and her family both intact. Don't decide for Megan. Help her hear both readings fairly. One follow-up question: "Whichever way she lands, what could Megan say that honors what her parents did for her?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, Baptism Testimony, written whether or not someone has been baptized. Read Chapter 17.

Close

Read Romans 6:4 aloud: "We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may walk in newness of life." Invite the group to thank God in their own words for the Lamb He provided.

SESSION 17 • CHAPTER 17

The Lord's Supper: Remembering, Receiving, Hoping

At a Glance

Jesus gave His church a meal of remembrance, proclamation, and hope. Paul's warning about eating "in an unworthy manner" concerns an unworthy way of coming, not unworthy people. Christians differ on how Christ is present at the Table, and they agree on the Lord they meet there.

Prepare

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 twice. Know the four views of Christ's presence well enough to describe each one fairly in a sentence. Find out how and how often your church celebrates the Supper.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** what the Lord's Supper is, and how to come to it.
- **The setting:** Jesus gave the Supper at Passover, taking the bread and cup and reinterpreting them around His own body and blood. The early church celebrated it often, within a shared meal. In Corinth the wealthy ate lavishly while the poor went hungry, and Paul corrected them sharply. Over the centuries Christians came to understand Christ's presence in four main ways.
- **Key passages:** Luke 22:19–20, 1 Corinthians 10:16–17, 1 Corinthians 11:26, Revelation 19:9, and tonight's 1 Corinthians 11:17–34.
- **The thread:** from the Passover lamb, Melchizedek's bread and wine, the manna, and the meal on Sinai, to Isaiah's banquet where God "will swallow up death forever" (Isaiah 25:8). Jesus is waiting for that meal too: "until that day when I drink it anew with you in My Father's kingdom" (Matthew 26:29).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **"I'm not worthy, so I'll skip it."** Step 3 of the Scripture Exercise asks the key question: is Paul describing unworthy people, or an unworthy way of coming?
- **The Table as private devotion only.** "Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body" (1 Corinthians 10:17). Question 3 on recognizing the body draws this out.
- **Debating Christ's presence.** The chapter lists four views and notes what all of them agree on. That agreement is the place to stand.

Where Christians Differ

How Christ is present at the Table is second-order (Table L). Let anyone describe their own tradition's view in its own terms, and don't allow any view to be mocked. Every tradition agrees that the Table is a place of remembrance, proclamation, and hope.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 in five steps (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 3** (recognizing the body) is the honest one. See below.
- **Question 2** (proclaiming the Lord's death) connects the Table to the watching world.
- **Question 4** (pointing to Christ's return) brings in the hope many people miss.

If time is short, drop 1 and 5.

The Hard Question

Question 3 is really testing whether we believe our relationships with one another are part of our relationship with Christ. Guide the group beyond 1 Corinthians to Jesus' own words: "leave your gift there before the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:24).

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether we can help someone come to the Table rightly, neither forcing him nor leaving him on the sidelines. Let him hear "given for you" as an invitation, and the broken relationship as something to take a step on. One follow-up question: "What's one step Jordan could take this week toward the person three rows over?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, Table Preparation, before the next Communion. Read Chapter 18.

Close

Read 1 Corinthians 11:26 aloud: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." Invite the group to thank God in their own words for the cross and for the meal still to come.

SESSION 18 • CHAPTER 18

The Church: You Belong Here

At a Glance

The church is God's gathered people and the body of Christ, visible in local congregations, not a building or an event. Belonging isn't optional: we grow, serve, are known, and are held accountable at close range. Scripture has named God's people long before any sign out front.

Prepare

Read 1 Peter 2:4–10 twice. Look over the four pictures of the church (body, temple, bride, household) and the table of names. Remember the case study: someone in your group may have been hurt by a church.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** what the church is, and why belonging to a local church isn't optional.
- **The setting:** the first believers shared life daily (Acts 2:42–47), led by elders and deacons. By the second century Ignatius was urging Christians not to stay away from the assembly, and Hebrews had already warned against neglecting to meet. The Nicene Creed confesses "one holy catholic and apostolic Church," and the Reformers named three marks of a true church: the gospel preached, the sacraments rightly given, and loving discipline.
- **Key passages:** Hebrews 10:24–25, 1 Corinthians 12:27, Ephesians 2:19, Matthew 16:18, and tonight's 1 Peter 2:4–10.
- **The thread:** God has always been gathering a people: the assembly at Sinai, the praise "in the assembly" of Psalm 22:22 that Hebrews 2:12 places on Christ's lips, and at the end the bride made ready (Revelation 19:7). "Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God" (1 Peter 2:10).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Making too much of a word.** The Core Teaching gently corrects the popular "called-out ones" explanation of ekklesia. What makes the church different is whose assembly it is.
- **"I can follow Jesus fine on my own."** That's the case study, and "Why the Local Church Isn't Optional" answers it.
- **Church hurt brushed aside.** Some people have been harmed by a church. Listen first; Chapter 33 addresses harmful control directly.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · 1 Peter 2:4–10 in five steps (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study, in pairs (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 1** (what the church has meant to you) lets people tell good stories first.
- **Question 2** (why some resist committing) is the honest one. See below.
- **Question 4** (accountability) names what private devotion can't give.

If time is short, drop 3, 5, and 6. Question 6 is a good lighter one if you have a spare few minutes.

The Hard Question

Question 2 is really testing whether we can listen to people who have been hurt by the church without defending the institution or excusing the drift. Both are real. Hebrews 10:25 calls us to keep meeting, and Ezekiel 34 shows how seriously God takes shepherds who harm His sheep, and that He Himself will "search for My flock and seek them out" (Ezekiel 34:11).

Case Study Notes

The role-play tests compassion and truth in the same conversation. Let the first partner practice listening before answering. One follow-up question: "What would a safe first step back into community look like for this person?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, the Body Audit, asking two or three people what gifts they see. Read Chapter 19.

Close

Read 1 Peter 2:9–10 aloud: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, to proclaim the virtues of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God." Invite the group to pray in their own words for your church by name.

SESSION 19 • CHAPTER 19

The Gospel and the Table We Share

At a Glance

In Christ God makes one new humanity, not one culture. The earliest church named ethnic tension honestly and acted on it (Acts 6, Galatians 2, Acts 15). Favoritism hides in ordinary habits. And reconciliation is not the same as assimilation: distinct peoples, reconciled, still recognizably themselves.

Prepare

Read Acts 6:1–7 and Galatians 2:11–14 twice. Read the Core Teaching's paragraph on reconciliation and assimilation, and James 2:1–9. Think honestly about who is present at your own church's table, and who might be missing.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** the gospel and unity across ethnic and cultural lines.
- **The setting:** in Acts 6 Greek-speaking widows were being overlooked, and the apostles took the complaint seriously. The church at Antioch had a Cypriot, a man called Niger, a North African, a man raised in Herod's court, and a former Pharisee among its leaders (Acts 13:1). In later history the church at times betrayed this, and at times lived it out, from Wilberforce's fight against the slave trade to Black, white, Asian, and Latino believers worshiping together at Azusa Street in 1906.
- **Key passages:** Ephesians 2:14–16, James 2:1–9, Revelation 7:9, and tonight's Acts 6:1–7 and Galatians 2:11–14.
- **The thread:** every person bears God's image (Genesis 1:27); a mixed multitude left Egypt with Israel; Ruth the Moabite entered the Messiah's line. At Babel God divided the languages, and at Pentecost He answered without erasing them: "each one heard them speaking his own language" (Acts 2:6). The story ends with a multitude "from every nation and tribe and people and tongue" (Revelation 7:9).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **"I don't see color."** That's the case study. The Core Teaching points out that the multitude in Revelation 7:9 is still recognizable by nation and tongue.
- **Turning it into politics.** The chapter treats unity as a gospel priority, not a political footnote. Keep bringing the group back to the passages.
- **Guilt or defensiveness.** Application Exercise 1 sets the tone: "The point isn't guilt. It's honest observation."

Where Christians Differ

Christians hold different views on the wider political debates around race, and this session isn't the place to settle them. Keep the group in Acts, Galatians, and Ephesians, where the apostles' example is plain.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Acts 6:1–7 and Galatians 2:11–14 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 1** (the apostles' response in Acts 6) gives a model before anyone shares an opinion.
- **Question 4** (reconciliation without assimilation) is the chapter's key distinction.
- **Question 2** (Paul confronting Peter) is the honest one. See below.

If time is short, drop 3 and 5. Application Exercise 1 covers Question 5.

The Hard Question

Question 2 is really testing whether we can see our own blind spots the way Peter couldn't see his. Peter had seen the vision and sat at Cornelius's table (Acts 10), and still drew back under pressure. Guide the group toward humility: any of us could do what Peter did. Paul's measure wasn't a cultural standard but whether they were "walking in line with the truth of the gospel" (Galatians 2:14).

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether the group can listen before it explains. The kind member meant well, Andre's experience is real, and both are family. One follow-up question: "What would you want to ask Andre, rather than tell him?"

Care Note

If someone shares a painful experience of being excluded, thank them, listen, and don't debate their experience or rush to explain it. Follow up during the week.

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 2, Listening Across the Line, with genuine curiosity and no agenda. Read Chapter 20.

Close

Read Revelation 7:9–10 aloud: "After this I looked and saw a multitude too large to count, from every nation and tribe and people and tongue, standing before the throne and before the Lamb… And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" Invite the group to pray in their own words for unity in your church.

SESSION 20 • CHAPTER 20

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

At a Glance

Forgiveness is a decision to release a debt, made by grace and made again when the hurt comes back. It isn't trust, it isn't reconciliation, and it isn't forgetting. Of all the life chapters, this one most often has someone in the room carrying a fresh wound.

Prepare

Read Matthew 18:21–35 twice. Be ready to explain the three distinctions (forgiveness, reconciliation, and trust) in plain words. Look over the five signs in "How Do I Know I've Forgiven?" And pray for the people in your group who are carrying something you may not know about.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** what forgiveness is, and what it isn't: not trust, not reconciliation, not forgetting.
- **The setting:** Peter asks how many times he has to forgive, and Jesus answers with the parable of the unmerciful servant. One servant is forgiven a debt he could never repay in a thousand lifetimes, then jails a friend over a few months' wages.
- **Key passages:** Matthew 18:21–35, Romans 12:19, and Ephesians 4:32.
- **The thread:** on the Day of Atonement the scapegoat carried Israel's sins into the wilderness (Leviticus 16:22), and "as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12). From Joseph to the cross, forgiveness flows from people who know how much they've been forgiven.

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **"Forgiving means pretending it didn't matter."** Point to the paragraph on Romans 12:19: forgiveness doesn't cancel justice; it hands justice to God.
- **"Forgiving means going back."** The chapter's list of what forgiveness is not separates it from reconciliation and trust, and Question 6 is the place to talk about wise boundaries.
- **"I forgave, so why does it still hurt?"** The five signs and Application Exercise 3 are written for exactly that.

Where Christians Differ

Christians differ on whether full forgiveness waits for repentance. Some point to "if he repents, forgive him" (Luke 17:3); others point to Jesus' call to forgive whenever we stand to pray (Mark 11:25). The chapter's distinction helps both: releasing the debt before God is always ours to do, while reconciliation takes two. This sits in the second order (Table L), so let both readings be heard.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Matthew 18:21–35 in five steps (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 1** (the distinction that mattered most) lets people name what was new without telling their story.
- **Question 6** (forgiveness versus walking back into harm) protects anyone who's been told to forgive and forget.
- **Question 4** (forgiving without repentance) opens the honest disagreement above.

Question 5 asks people to think of someone they haven't forgiven. Offer it for silent reflection, not discussion.

The Hard Question

Question 2 asks whether our forgiving earns God's forgiveness. It's really testing whether we understand grace. Guide the group to the order in the parable: the master forgave first, freely, and the servant's refusal showed he never grasped what he'd been forgiven (Matthew 18:32–33). Forgiven people forgive. They don't forgive to get forgiven.

Case Study Notes

Rachel's case tests whether the group can hold forgiveness apart from reconciliation and trust. Watch for the two pressures in the story: her brother saying forgiveness lets her father off the hook, and the friend saying real forgiveness means moving him in. One follow-up question: "What's one boundary that would let Rachel forgive fully without pretending?"

Care Note

Someone may be carrying abuse or betrayal. Never press anyone to forgive on a timetable, or to reconcile with someone who isn't safe. If someone discloses abuse, listen, believe them, and bring in your pastor; if a child may be at risk, report it. Application Exercise 1 is private by design, so don't ask anyone to share names.

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, the Forgiveness Inventory, done privately. Read Chapter 21.

Close

Read Ephesians 4:32 aloud: "Be kind and tenderhearted to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you." Leave a minute of silence, then invite anyone who wants to pray in their own words.

SESSION 21 • CHAPTER 21

Marriage, Family, Singleness, and Holiness

At a Glance

Marriage, family, and singleness are distinct callings rooted in covenant love, and none of them is second-class in God's kingdom. Marriage pictures how Christ loves His people; singleness shows that Christ is enough. Holiness in our bodies means refusing to use another person. And in Christ, the church is family.

Prepare

Read 1 Corinthians 6:11–20 twice. Read "Two Pictures of One Christ" and "Growing Closer When It Gets Hard," with its fight, flee, and fix table. Think about who is in your group: married, single, divorced, widowed, with or without children. Every one of them should hear their calling honored tonight.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** God's design for marriage, family, and singleness, and holiness in our bodies.
- **The setting:** in the ancient Near East marriage was mostly a social and economic arrangement between families, and Genesis 2 stands out as a covenant of companionship. The Greco-Roman world was permissive, and Paul went against the grain twice: he called husbands to self-sacrificing love, and he honored singleness as a full calling. The early church honored both marriage and celibacy.
- **Key passages:** Genesis 2:24, Ephesians 5:21–33, 1 Corinthians 7:32–35, Mark 3:34–35, and tonight's 1 Corinthians 6:12–20.
- **The thread:** all through Scripture marriage pictures God's covenant with His people, from Hosea to Ephesians 5:32. And Isaiah promised faithful eunuchs "a name better than that of sons and daughters" (Isaiah 56:5), pointing past biology to a family that grows by new birth. Every family "derives its name" from the Father (Ephesians 3:15).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Singleness as a waiting room.** Question 3 and "Two Pictures of One Christ" answer this: marriage shows how Christ loves His people, and singleness shows that Christ is enough.
- **Love that runs on feeling.** The Core Teaching's point about agape: when the New Testament commands love, it commands a chosen commitment. That's the married couple in the case study.
- **Getting stuck on Ephesians 5:22.** See below, and point to Chapter 44.

Where Christians Differ

Faithful Christians read Paul's words to wives in more than one way, and Chapter 44 lays out both views. Some things hold whichever view you take: the passage begins with mutual submission (Ephesians 5:21), a husband's headship is modeled on a cross, not a throne (5:25), and nothing in it asks anyone to submit to abuse.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · 1 Corinthians 6:12–20 in five steps (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 1** (how Ephesians 5:25–27 redefines love) gives everyone, married or not, a picture of Christ's love.
- **Question 3** (how the church fails single people) needs to be heard, especially from single members.
- **Question 7** (fight, flee, or fix) is practical for every relationship, not only marriage.

If time is short, drop 2, 4, and 5. Question 6 is below.

The Hard Question

Question 6 asks what competes most for our devotion. It's really testing whether we will name our idols, including good things like a spouse, children, or the hope of marriage. Guide the group gently: married and single people can both have divided hearts. Jesus put it plainly: "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me" (Matthew 10:37). The answer is not loving family less, but loving Christ first.

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether the group sees love as commitment and belonging as family. Both situations reveal the same hidden expectation: that marriage is what makes us whole. One follow-up question: "What's one thing this group could do differently at the next social night so Dana is family, not a guest?"

Care Note

Someone may be in a hard marriage, divorced, widowed, grieving infertility, or longing to marry. Speak of every calling with honor. If anyone discloses abuse or violence at home, safety comes first; leaving to be safe is not "fleeing" (see Chapter 38 and the steps in Part 1). For anyone carrying regret, 1 Corinthians 6:11 is there for them.

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, the Marriage/Singleness Reflection, whatever season people are in. Read Chapter 22.

Close

Read Ephesians 3:14–15 aloud: "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name." Invite the group to pray in their own words for the marriages, the single members, and the families represented in the room.

SESSION 22 • CHAPTER 22

Raising Children Who Know and Love God

At a Glance

Faith doesn't pass down by birth. It is told, modeled, and handed forward on purpose, and no method guarantees an outcome. It starts with God's words on our own hearts, makes room for children the way Jesus did, protects them, holds firm and kind together, and aims them like arrows.

Prepare

Read Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and Psalm 78:1–7 twice. Look at the two dials (structure and warmth) in "Shaping, Aiming, and Letting Go," and read the closing paragraph on children who have wandered. Remember that not everyone in the group has children; Questions 4 and 5 and Application Exercise 2 are for everyone.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** how faith is passed to the next generation, by parents and by the whole church.
- **The setting:** Israel's Passover meal was built around a child's question: "What does this service mean to you?" (Exodus 12:26). The Puritan Richard Baxter taught his people family by family. Susanna Wesley set aside one-on-one time with each of her children, and in 1780 Robert Raikes started a Sunday school in Gloucester to teach factory children to read from the Bible.
- **Key passages:** Deuteronomy 6:5–7, Mark 10:13–16, Ephesians 6:4, 2 Timothy 1:5, and tonight's Deuteronomy 6:4–9 with Psalm 78:1–7.
- **The thread:** God builds reminders where a curious child will ask about them, like the twelve stones at the Jordan, "when your children ask" (Joshua 4:6–7). Faith ran from Lois to Eunice to Timothy, and its goal is the joy John names: "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth" (3 John 4).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Guilt about programs that didn't last.** That's the case study. The chapter's goal is "a few realistic, sustainable practices, not a program to feel behind on."
- **Reading Proverbs 22:6 as a guarantee.** The chapter is clear: proverbs are patterns, not promises. Faithful parents have prodigal children, and the story isn't over.
- **People without children feeling left out.** Questions 4 and 5 and Application Exercise 2 are written for them.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and Psalm 78:1–7 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 4** (your Lois or Eunice) lets everyone answer, parent or not.
- **Question 2** (faith in the ordinary rhythms of the day) keeps it realistic.
- **Question 7** (the two dials) gives people honest, practical language.

If time is short, drop 1, 3, and 5. Offer the second half of Question 6 for silent reflection.

The Hard Question

Question 6 is really testing two things: whether our homes and churches hinder children without meaning to, and whether we ourselves still receive God like a child. Guide the group to Mark 10:15, "anyone who does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it," and to Paul's balance: childlike, not childish (1 Corinthians 14:20).

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether we can lift guilt without lowering the call. Deuteronomy 6:5 comes before verse 7: the parents' own love for God is where it starts. One follow-up question: "What's one rhythm small enough that they'd still be doing it six months from now?"

Care Note

Some carry real grief here: a child who has walked away from faith, infertility or never having children, or a painful childhood of their own. Never use Proverbs 22:6 as a verdict on anyone's parenting. If a child may be at risk, report it (see Part 1 and Chapter 38).

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, a Simple Family Rhythm, for parents, and Application Exercise 2, Investing in a Younger Believer, for everyone else. Read Chapter 23.

Close

Pray the old blessing of Numbers 6:24–26 over the group: "May the LORD bless you and keep you; may the LORD cause His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; may the LORD lift up His countenance toward you and give you peace." Invite people to pray by name for the children in their lives.

SESSION 23 • CHAPTER 23

Spiritual Formation: Habits That Make Room for Grace

At a Glance

Prayer, Scripture, worship, fasting, and obedience are means of grace, not achievements. A branch bears fruit by staying attached to the vine. And grace isn't opposed to effort, only to earning: Christ took hold of us first, and so we press on, together, because we aren't formed in isolation.

Prepare

Read Philippians 3:7–14 twice. Shade your own Life Assessment Wheel before the meeting, so you can go first. If you plan to try Lectio Divina (Application Exercise 1), practice it once yourself with Psalm 23.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** spiritual disciplines as habits that make room for grace, not ways to earn it.
- **The setting:** in the fourth century the Desert Fathers and Mothers left the cities to seek God, and their sayings are full of practical wisdom. Benedict organized monastic life around prayer, work, and slow, sacred reading of Scripture, and in the twelfth century Guigo II described that reading in four steps: read, meditate, pray, and rest in God.
- **Key passages:** John 15:4–5, Philippians 2:12–13, 1 Timothy 4:7, Hebrews 10:25, and tonight's Philippians 3:7–14.
- **The thread:** the Shema put God's words into every part of the day (Deuteronomy 6:7); Psalm 1 pictures a tree planted by streams; Daniel kept praying though it could cost his life (Daniel 6:10). Israel as God's vineyard (Isaiah 5) finds its fulfillment in the true Vine (John 15). And Jesus Himself kept rhythms of worship and prayer (Luke 4:16; Mark 1:35).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Disciplines as a scorecard.** The Core Teaching names it: the same practice can be performance or response, and the reason makes all the difference.
- **"It's all grace, so effort doesn't matter."** "Press On" answers it, with the chapter's summary line: grace is opposed to earning, not to effort.
- **Comparing wheels.** The wheel's goal is "not to win anything, but to grow." Keep it personal and kind.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Philippians 3:7–14 in five steps (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 2** (means of grace or a way to earn) is the key distinction.
- **Question 1** (your current rhythm) lets people be honest about what feels dry.
- **Question 6** (maintenance or pressing on) is the honest one. See below.

If time is short, drop 3, 4, and 5.

The Hard Question

Question 6 is really testing whether we can admit we've settled into maintenance without sliding into guilt. Guide the group to the order in Philippians 3:12: Christ took hold of Paul first, and pressing on is the response. "You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13).

Case Study Notes

The case puts the two ditches into two people: Sam's scorecard and his friend's "it's all grace anyway." Each is partly right. One follow-up question: "What is one small, realistic step Sam could take this week, and who could take it with him?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 2, the Life Assessment Wheel, with one step and a partner to check in. Read Chapter 24.

Close

Read Psalm 63:1 aloud: "O God, You are my God. Earnestly I seek You; my soul thirsts for You. My body yearns for You in a dry and weary land without water." Invite the group to pray in their own words, asking God for both the desire and the strength (Philippians 2:13).

SESSION 24 • CHAPTER 24

Stewardship and Generosity

At a Glance

Giving is a glad response to the grace of a Savior who became poor for us. We are stewards, not owners, and money is one of the most honest mirrors of where our hearts rest. Christians differ on whether the tithe still applies; both views expect regular, proportional, cheerful, often sacrificial giving, and neither allows guilt or pressure.

Prepare

Read 2 Corinthians 9:6–15 twice. Read "Does the Tithe Still Apply?" closely enough to state both views fairly, in their own words. Remember that money is tender: someone in the room may be in debt or real hardship.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** money, stewardship, and the generous life.
- **The setting:** Abraham gave a tenth to Melchizedek and Jacob vowed one at Bethel, both before the law. Under Moses, tithes supported the Levites, funded the feasts, and every third year cared for the poor. Jesus praised the widow's two coins, the Acts church astonished the ancient world by giving to strangers, and the Macedonians gave beyond their ability, "because they had first given themselves to the Lord."
- **Key passages:** Psalm 24:1, Matthew 6:21, 24, Luke 12:15–21, 2 Corinthians 8:9, and tonight's 2 Corinthians 9:6–15.
- **The thread:** the firstfruits were given before the harvest was secure, a creed made with the hands (Proverbs 3:9–10). Every offering pointed to the One who gave Himself completely: "though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Giving as a transaction.** Step 3 of the Scripture Exercise asks whether 2 Corinthians 9:8–11 is a prosperity promise. Chapter 40 takes this up fully.
- **Guilt and pressure.** Both views of the tithe rule it out, in Paul's own words: "not out of regret or compulsion" (2 Corinthians 9:7).
- **"Saving is wrong," or "I can't give yet."** The balancing word on the cistern and the pipe helps: saving isn't sin, and the problem is when nothing flows out.

Where Christians Differ

Whether the tithe still applies is a place where faithful Christians honestly differ, and the chapter presents both views fairly: the tithe as a starting point, and grace giving with no fixed percentage. Let both be stated at their best, and notice how much they share. Don't let either view be used to shame anyone.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · 2 Corinthians 9:6–15 in five steps (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 3** (transaction or worship) is the heart of the chapter.
- **Question 7** (pressured, or hiding behind "grace giving") is honest from both sides.
- **Question 8** (money competing for the throne) brings it home.

If time is short, drop 1, 2, 4, and 6. Question 5 is below.

The Hard Question

Question 5 is really testing whether we trust God's provision with real numbers, not just in principle. Don't ask anyone to share amounts. Guide the group to two men who met the same Jesus: the rich young ruler walked away to keep his money, and Zacchaeus let go of his money to keep Jesus. "Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether we can hold what each friend gets right and help the couple start somewhere without guilt. One follow-up question: "What first step would be regular, proportional, and cheerful for them this month?"

Care Note

Never ask anyone to share their income, giving, or debt. If someone discloses a financial crisis, your church may be able to help in practical ways; bring in a pastor or deacon.

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, the Stewardship Audit, done privately. Read Chapter 25, which opens Part 4.

Close

Read 2 Corinthians 9:15 aloud: "Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!" Invite the group to thank God in their own words for what He has given, and to offer Him their open hands.

SESSION 25 · CHAPTER 25

Worship: Encountering God in Spirit and Truth

At a Glance

Worship is a whole-life response to who God is, in spirit and in truth, not a style of music. Isaiah 6 gives it a shape: upward, inward, outward. God sometimes refuses worship that looks right from hearts far from Him. Feelings follow truth; they don't replace it. And worship doesn't bring God into the room. It wakes us up to the One who never left.

Prepare

Read Isaiah 6:1–8 twice. Look over the table of questions for testing a song, and the Song Review Sheet in the Appendix. Be ready to say plainly, if it comes up, that this chapter isn't about musical styles.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** worship in spirit and in truth, on Sunday and every other day.
- **The setting:** Christian worship grew out of the synagogue, which was shaped by the Temple. Around AD 155 Justin Martyr described a Sunday gathering: Scripture, a sermon, prayers, the Lord's Supper, and a collection for the poor. The Psalms were the early church's songbook, and the Reformation restored congregational singing and put the Word back at the center.
- **Key passages:** John 4:23–24, Romans 12:1, Amos 5:21–24, Colossians 3:16, and tonight's Isaiah 6:1–8.
- **The thread:** from Moses removing his sandals at the burning bush to the elders casting their crowns before the throne (Revelation 4–5). What was shadow became substance: the place, the access, and the sacrifice (John 4:21; Hebrews 10:19; Romans 12:1). Christ Himself leads the song (Hebrews 2:12), and God "will rejoice over you with singing" (Zephaniah 3:17).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Style wars.** The case study shows both favorite ditches: quiet and private, or loud and electric. Neither style is the point.
- **"Did I feel it?"** "Heart Worship or Emotional Worship?" and the train picture help: fact is the engine, and feeling is the caboose.
- **Critiquing people instead of songs.** The song questions are for reading words, not judging a worship team or another church. Keep it there.

Where Christians Differ

Christians differ on musical styles, instruments, and how expressive worship should be, and the chapter doesn't take sides on those. Keep the group on what it does insist on: spirit and truth, and every line true. Avoid naming or criticizing particular churches or music ministries in the group.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Isaiah 6:1–8 in five steps (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 2** (spirit and truth) is the definition the whole chapter rests on.
- **Question 6** (critic or priest) gently searches everyone in the room.
- **Question 4** (lament in worship) is the honest one. See below.

If time is short, drop 1, 3, and 5. Question 7 is a good exercise at home, read alone with the lyrics.

The Hard Question

Question 4 is really testing whether we bring our whole selves to God or only the polished parts. Guide the group to the Psalms of lament: "How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever?" (Psalm 13:1). Jesus Himself prayed Psalm 22 from the cross. Honest lament is worship.

Case Study Notes

The case puts the two ditches into two church members, and each is partly right. One follow-up question: "What would Isaiah's three movements, upward, inward, and outward, look like for each of them next Sunday?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, the Amos 5 Heart Audit, done privately. Read Chapter 26.

Close

Read Psalm 95:6 aloud: "O come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD our Maker." If your group is comfortable, bow or kneel, and invite everyone to worship in their own words.

SESSION 26 • CHAPTER 26

Hope That Holds: Resurrection, Judgment, and the New Creation

At a Glance

Our hope is Christ's personal return, the resurrection of the body, a judgment that sets things right, and a new creation that renews this world rather than replacing it. Christians differ on the millennium and on how to read the warnings about hell, and they share the essentials. Healthy hope makes us more holy, more hopeful, and more useful now.

Prepare

Read 1 Corinthians 15:35–58 twice. Look over the table of three millennial views and the table of three distortions. Read "The Hardest Truth" slowly: someone in your group may be grieving a loved one who died without professing faith.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** Christian hope: Christ's return, the resurrection, the judgment, and the new creation.
- **The setting:** Jewish writings before Christ already expected a resurrection (Daniel 12:2), and the Pharisees affirmed it while the Sadducees denied it. The first Christians proclaimed something new: it had already begun in Jesus. In Corinth some believers, likely shaped by Greek thinking that the body is something to escape, denied the future resurrection, and Paul answered with 1 Corinthians 15.
- **Key passages:** 1 Corinthians 15:20, Romans 8:18–25, Revelation 21:1–5, Matthew 24:36, and tonight's 1 Corinthians 15:35–58.
- **The thread:** the promise that the serpent's head would be crushed (Genesis 3:15) is finished in Romans 16:20; Isaiah's promise to "swallow up death forever" is quoted in Revelation 21:4; Ezekiel saw dry bones live. The cross was God's D-Day, and His return will be V-Day: already won, not yet finished.

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Date-setting and fear.** That's the case study, and the chapter's table of three distortions: date-setting, fear-selling, and escaping.
- **A disembodied heaven.** "Renewed, Not Replaced" answers it, and Jesus' own risen body is the best evidence (Luke 24:39).
- **Turning the millennium into a fight.** See below.

Where Christians Differ

The millennium is second-order (Table L), and the chapter sets out three views that share the same ending. It also presents two readings of hell held by faithful Christians, eternal conscious punishment and conditional immortality, while noting that universalism stands outside the church's historic teaching. Let each view be explained by someone who holds it, and keep the shared hope in the center.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · 1 Corinthians 15:35–58 in five steps (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 1** (resurrection hope and suffering) brings the doctrine home.
- **Question 3** (the new creation) corrects the most common picture of heaven.
- **Question 6** (living between D-Day and V-Day) makes it practical for this week.

If time is short, drop 2 and 5. Question 4 is below.

The Hard Question

Question 4 is really testing whether we can hold judgment as both good news and sober truth. Guide the group to the chapter's picture of a good judge in a corrupt city: every wrong answered, every victim vindicated. Then to Romans 8:1 for those in Christ, and to Paul's "deep sorrow and unceasing anguish" (Romans 9:2), which keeps the truth from ever making us smug.

Case Study Notes

The case tests both ditches at once: obsession and indifference. Answer the coworker with gentleness, and answer the shrug with Scripture's call to watch. One follow-up question: "What would 1 Corinthians 15:58 look like on her calendar this week?"

Care Note

Someone may be grieving a person who died without professing faith. Don't pronounce on anyone's eternal state; God is the Judge, and He is "patient… not wanting anyone to perish" (2 Peter 3:9). Others may carry real fear about the end times. If that fear is constant or disabling, follow up during the week (see Chapter 51).

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 2, Suffering and Hope, with Romans 8:18–25. Read Chapter 27.

Close

Read 1 Corinthians 15:57–58 aloud: "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast and immovable. Always excel in the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." Invite the group to pray in their own words.

SESSION 27 • CHAPTER 27

Faith Under Fire: Suffering and the Faithfulness of God

At a Glance

Suffering is not proof of God's absence or of our failure; it is often the workshop where He does His deepest work. Scripture gives many reasons for suffering, and we will rarely know which one is at work. We don't need to; we need to stay. God entered our suffering rather than explaining it away, and lament is faith still talking to Him.

Prepare

Read Psalm 22 twice, and Psalm 13. Read "Many Reasons, One God" and "When the Psalm Doesn't Resolve." Pray for anyone you know is suffering; this session may bring fresh pain to the surface.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** suffering, perseverance, and the faithfulness of God.
- **The setting:** Job's friends made the oldest mistake about suffering: assuming it always comes from the sufferer's sin. God answered Job with His presence, not an argument. The early martyrs saw suffering for Christ as a sign of His nearness, and Tertullian wrote that "the blood of Christians is seed." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed weeks before the war ended, and Corrie ten Boom, who lost her father and sister, both found God in the dark.
- **Key passages:** Romans 5:3–5, John 11:33–35, Hebrews 4:15, Romans 8:28, and tonight's Psalm 22.
- **The thread:** Psalm 22 begins in desolation and ends in praise, and Jesus prayed its first line from the cross. Isaiah's servant was "a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). In the furnace there was a fourth man (Daniel 3:25): "When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched" (Isaiah 43:2).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Becoming Job's friends.** Assuming someone's suffering comes from their sin. The warning after "Many Reasons, One God" is the place to go: "You need to stay."
- **Hurrying to the praise.** Psalm 88 has no resolution, and God put it in the Bible anyway. Let people be in the middle.
- **Hearing "rejoice" as "pretend."** Question 3. The Core Teaching asks us to hold real pain and real purpose at the same time.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Psalm 22 in five steps (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5). Read the whole psalm aloud, slowly, without commentary first.

Start Here

- **Question 6** (what hurt more than it helped) almost everyone can answer, and it teaches the group how to care.
- **Question 4** (lament as holy prayer) gives permission many people need.
- **Question 8** (the Refiner, the Fourth Man, or the Weaving) lets people say where they are without explaining why.

If time is short, drop 1, 2, 5, and 7. Question 3 is below.

The Hard Question

Question 3 is really testing whether we can hold real pain and real purpose without minimizing either. Guide the group to Romans 8:18, a comparison Paul could only make by taking both sides seriously, and to Lazarus's tomb: Jesus knew Lazarus would walk out within minutes, and "Jesus wept" (John 11:35).

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether we can help heal a wound another believer caused, without explaining the illness. Start by naming what the comment got wrong (Job 42:7). One follow-up question: "What would faithful presence look like for her in month three, not just this week?"

Care Note

This may be the most tender session in the book. Someone may be in fresh grief, chronic illness, or a Psalm 88 darkness. Don't hurry anyone toward resolution, and don't offer reasons for their suffering. Some may have been hurt by "not enough faith" teaching (see Chapters 37 and 40). If anyone speaks of hopelessness or of harming themselves, follow the safety steps in Part 1; in the U.S., call or text 988.

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, Writing a Lament, using Psalm 13 as the model. Read Chapter 28.

Close

Read Psalm 22:24 aloud: "For He has not despised or detested the torment of the afflicted. He has not hidden His face from him, but has attended to his cry for help." Leave a minute of silence, then invite anyone who wants to pray, honestly, in their own words.

SESSION 28 • CHAPTER 28

The Holy Spirit: Gifts, Fruit, and Maturity

At a Glance

Gifts are tools for serving others; fruit is Christlike character growing within. Both come from the same Spirit, who is a Person, not a force, and whose aim is to glorify Christ. Love governs every gift. Chase the fruit first, and trust the Giver with the gifts.

Prepare

Read Galatians 5:16–26 twice, and 1 Corinthians 13:1–7. Look over the gifts-and-fruit table and Table Y in the Appendix. Know the four honest questions for testing any claimed gift.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** the Spirit's gifts and the Spirit's fruit, and why they must never be confused.
- **The setting:** Paul planted the church in Corinth around AD 50, a wealthy port whose temples prized ecstatic experience. The Corinthians were richly gifted and immature, using gifts to compete, so Paul put the love chapter between two chapters on gifts. Early writers like Irenaeus describe gifts still at work, and the Didache already gave instructions for testing prophets.
- **Key passages:** 1 Corinthians 12:4–11, 1 Corinthians 13:1, 1 Peter 4:10, John 16:7, 14, and tonight's Galatians 5:16–26.
- **The thread:** the Spirit filled Bezalel with skill to build the Tabernacle (Exodus 31), and Moses wished "that all the LORD's people were prophets" (Numbers 11:29), a wish Pentecost fulfilled. Isaiah's Spirit-filled Branch (Isaiah 11:1–3) shows the character the Spirit now grows in us. And the high priest's robe was hemmed with bells and pomegranates, side by side.

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Ranking gifts, or not fitting a list.** The chapter notes several lists of gifts, overlapping and none complete. That frees us from both worry and ranking.
- **Mistaking gifts for maturity.** That's the case study, and the fig tree full of leaves with no fruit (Matthew 21:19).
- **Whether the miraculous gifts continue.** See below. Chapters 29 and 43 go further.

Where Christians Differ

Whether the miraculous gifts continue today is second-order (Table L). The chapter notes that the disagreement is narrower than it sounds: both sides affirm the Spirit's work in new birth, holiness, and fruit. Let both be heard, and keep the session on what the chapter is about: love governing every gift.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Galatians 5:16–26 in five steps (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 2** (why the love chapter sits in the middle) unlocks the whole passage.
- **Question 3** (gifts or fruit, and which the church emphasizes) is the honest one. See below.
- **Question 6** (bells and pomegranates) lets people answer about themselves.

If time is short, drop 1, 4, and 5. Application Exercise 1 picks up Question 1.

The Hard Question

Question 3 is really testing whether we value what's visible over what's formed. Guide the group to the table's "Can it be faked?" row: gifts can be (Matthew 7:22), and fruit can't for long (Matthew 7:16). Then to 1 Corinthians 13:8, "Love never fails." Go first with your own bells and pomegranates.

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether we can name gifts without fruit as harmful and still address it in love. "You who are spiritual should restore him with a spirit of gentleness. But watch yourself" (Galatians 6:1). One follow-up question: "Who should have that conversation, and how would 1 Corinthians 13:4–7 shape the way they have it?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 2, the Fruit Audit, for seven days. Read Chapter 29.

Close

Read Galatians 5:22–23 aloud: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law." Invite the group to ask the Spirit in their own words for the fruit they most need.

SESSION 29 • CHAPTER 29

Baptism in the Holy Spirit: When Do You Receive It?

At a Glance

Faithful Christians differ on when the baptism in the Spirit happens: at conversion, or as a distinct empowering afterward. Both agree that the Spirit lives in every believer from the moment of faith. Keep the timing question apart from the question about gifts. There is one baptism and many fillings, and Jesus invites us to ask.

Prepare

Read Acts 1:4–8 and 2:1–4 twice, then Acts 8:14–17. Read "What Both Views Already Agree On" and "Two Questions, Not One." Know where your own background has shaped you, and plan not to lead with it.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** two main views of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, and the large ground they share.
- **The setting:** Pentecost fell on the Feast of Weeks, which remembered the giving of the Law at Sinai. At Sinai about three thousand died after the golden calf (Exodus 32:28); at Pentecost about three thousand were added (Acts 2:41). Later, Wesley taught a "second blessing," the Holiness movement called it the baptism of the Spirit, and the Pentecostal movement grew from Topeka (1901) and Azusa Street (1906).
- **Key passages:** Romans 8:9, 1 Corinthians 12:13, Ephesians 5:18, Luke 11:13, and tonight's Acts 1:4–8 and 2:1–4.
- **The thread:** Moses wished all God's people were prophets (Numbers 11:29); Joel promised the Spirit poured out on all flesh (Joel 2:28–29); Ezekiel promised a new heart and God's own Spirit within (Ezekiel 36:26–27). Pentecost delivered it: "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Feeling like a second-class believer.** That's the case study. Romans 8:9 is the floor everyone stands on.
- **Talking past each other on how to read Acts.** The paragraph "Underneath both views" names the real question: how much weight to give the stories in Acts.
- **Blending two questions into one.** "Two Questions, Not One" separates the timing of Spirit baptism from whether the gifts continue.

Where Christians Differ

The whole session is second-order (Table L). State each view in words its own holders would use, and note the chapter's list of positions "between and beyond" the two. Respected teachers have crossed the expected lines, which should make all of us humble.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Acts 1:4–8 and 2:1–4 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 1** (which view shaped you) lets people name their background without defending it.
- **Question 4** (new birth and empowering) finds the ground both views can stand on.
- **Question 5** (relating across the difference) keeps the group together.

If time is short, drop 2 and 6. Close with the first half of Question 6 if you can.

The Hard Question

Question 3 asks how to read Acts 8:14–17. It's really testing whether we can let a passage that doesn't fit our view stand without explaining it away. Guide the group to admit that each view has texts it must work harder to explain: 1 Corinthians 12:13 for one, Acts 8 for the other. Reading both honestly is what the whole counsel of Scripture asks of us.

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether the group can protect a newer believer's assurance and the group's unity, while everyone keeps their convictions. Start with what she already has (Romans 8:9). One follow-up question: "What could each member say to her that is true, and that the other member could also affirm?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 2, Charitable Reading, of a view different from one's own. Read Chapter 30.

Close

Read Luke 11:13 aloud: "how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!" Then do what Jesus said: invite the group to ask, in their own words.

SESSION 30 • CHAPTER 30

Putting It Into Practice: Scripture Study Practicum

At a Glance

This session hands the group the tools and lets them work a disputed passage for themselves in six steps: pray, observe, read the context, let Scripture interpret Scripture, check faithful teachers, and hold the conclusion with the right grip. The goal isn't winning. It's handling the Word so carefully that you could explain your reading, and someone else's, with a clear conscience.

Prepare

Choose the passage ahead of time from the five in "Choose Your Passage," so the evening isn't spent deciding, and read it and its chapter twice. Bring two commentaries from different traditions, or a page from each. Read the Psalm 22 worked example so you can show how the methods layer together.

Lay of the Land (5 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** how to work a disputed passage with care and humility.
- **The setting:** Berea sat just off the Egnatian Way, Rome's great road across Macedonia. Luke calls the Bereans "more noble-minded," not for their status but for how they handled Scripture: eagerly, and checking it every day (Acts 17:11). Chapter 1 traced the methods the church has used since (Table Q).
- **Key passages:** Acts 17:11, Proverbs 18:17, 2 Timothy 2:15, Hebrews 4:12, and tonight's chosen passage.
- **The thread:** Israel's king was to write out his own copy of the Law and read it all his life (Deuteronomy 17:18–20), and every believer is now a royal priest (1 Peter 2:9). Philip modeled the method on a desert road: he "began with this very Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Rushing to the commentaries.** Step 5 says "only now." Let the group observe and read the context before anyone tells them what it means.
- **Finding what we hoped to find.** Step 1's second prayer helps: ask God to show you what you're hoping it says. The case study shows how quickly this happens.
- **Needing a winner.** The chapter's goal is a clear conscience, not a verdict. Step 6 asks for one confident sentence and one open question.

Where Christians Differ

All five passages are ones sincere Christians read differently. The aim tonight isn't to settle them; it's for each person to state the main readings fairly and to know which parts they hold firmly and which humbly (Table L).

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (5) · Work the passage through the six steps (40) · Discuss (20) · Case Study (10) · Close (5). This session is a workshop, so the Scripture Exercise takes most of the time.

Start Here

- **Question 1** (the text, or our assumptions) is the honest one. See below.
- **Question 3** (humility where godly people disagree) is the posture the chapter is after.
- **Question 5** (secondary or primary) helps people know how tightly to hold what they found.

If time is short, drop 2 and 4. Step 3 of the exercise covers Question 4.

The Hard Question

Question 1 is really testing whether we can see our own assumptions. Guide the group back to Step 1: "Ask Him, too, to show you what you are hoping it says." Then ask each person to name one thing they brought to the passage before they read it.

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether the group can handle a passage honestly while caring for someone it touches personally. Care for the member first. Whatever the details of James 5 mean, some things are plain: call the elders, pray, confess, and "the prayer of a righteous man has great power to prevail" (James 5:16). One follow-up question: "What can we say with confidence to her tonight, and what should we hold humbly?"

Care Note

When a passage touches someone's illness or grief, don't let the debate become a verdict about anyone's faith. Pray for the person before you go home.

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, Inductive Study Practice, on a passage from a book they've never studied. Read Chapter 31.

Close

Pray Psalm 119:33–34 together: "Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes, and I will keep them to the end. Give me understanding that I may obey Your law, and follow it with all my heart." Invite the group to pray in their own words.

SESSION 31 • CHAPTER 31

Testing What You Hear: Teachers, Prophecy, and Experiences

At a Glance

Scripture gives five tests that work together like the legs of a stool: Scripture, Christ, fruit, prophecy, and experience. A claim's power to move us isn't proof that it's true; Scripture judges experience, never the reverse. Test yourself too, and remember that you are weighing the teaching, not the state of someone's soul.

Prepare

Read 1 John 4:1–6 twice. Know the five tests and the five steps in "How to Test What You Hear." Read "When Someone Says, 'Don't Test.'" Look over Table AA in the Appendix.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** how to test teachers, prophecies, and spiritual experiences.
- **The setting:** the Didache gave practical tests for traveling prophets: Does he ask for money? Does he stay too long? Does his life match his message? In the second century the Montanists claimed new authoritative revelations, and the church didn't deny the Spirit's work; it tested every claim against what the apostles had handed down. The Spirit never contradicts the Word.
- **Key passages:** Deuteronomy 18:21–22, Matthew 7:15–23, 1 Thessalonians 5:19–21, Acts 17:11, and tonight's 1 John 4:1–6.
- **The thread:** from Moses' tests (Deuteronomy 13 and 18), to Jeremiah and Hananiah (Jeremiah 28), to the old prophet who "was lying to him" (1 Kings 13:18), to John's "test the spirits": God never asked His people to believe every voice that spoke in His name.

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Leaning on one test.** The chapter's stool picture: a claim should pass all five, not just the easiest one to check.
- **"Touch not God's anointed."** The four objections are answered in "When Someone Says, 'Don't Test.'"
- **Judging hearts.** "You are weighing the teaching, not the state of someone's soul." That keeps discernment honest and kind.

Where Christians Differ

Christians who believe prophecy continues today don't all agree on how it works. Some hold that New Testament prophecy is weighed and can be partly mistaken; others hold that Deuteronomy's standard applies to every claim. The chapter notes what both share: "Thus says the Lord" claims God's own authority.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · 1 John 4:1–6 in five steps (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 4** (open to the Spirit and discerning) holds both sides from the start.
- **Question 5** (character and fruit) is the test most often skipped.
- **Question 6** (the four objections) gives people words for real conversations.

If time is short, drop 1 and 3. Question 2 is below.

The Hard Question

Question 2 is really testing whether we can admit we've been misled without shame. Most of us have been moved by something that wasn't true. Go first. Then guide the group to the chapter's word on testing ourselves: "The heart is deceitful above all things" (Jeremiah 17:9), and "we most readily believe the message we already wanted."

Case Study Notes

The case tests discernment and care in the same moment. The failed prophecy fails Deuteronomy 18:22, and the blame placed on the sick person repeats the mistake of Job's friends (see Chapter 27). One follow-up question: "What would you say this week to the person who wasn't healed?"

Care Note

Someone in the room may have been hurt by a prophecy that didn't come true, or told their faith was too small. Listen, and point them to Chapters 27 and 37.

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, the Discernment Journal, for two weeks. Read Chapter 32.

Close

Read 1 John 4:4 aloud: "You, little children, are from God and have overcome them, because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world." Invite the group to pray in their own words for wisdom (James 1:5).

SESSION 32 • CHAPTER 32

Knowing the Difference: Error, False Teaching, and Heresy

At a Glance

Not all error is equal. Disagreements fall along a spectrum: opinion, secondary doctrine, serious error, and heresy. Fight hard for the essentials, correct serious error carefully, and stay in charitable fellowship over the rest. Firm with error, gentle with people.

Prepare

Read Galatians 1:6–9 and 1 Corinthians 15:1–8 twice. Study the spectrum table and the four questions in "How to Tell Where Something Belongs." Look over Tables L and Z in the Appendix.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** how serious a disagreement is, and how the answer shapes our response.
- **The setting:** the early church defined right belief in the heat of controversy: Nicaea (325) over whether the Son is fully God, Chalcedon (451) over His two natures. The Reformers distinguished essentials from matters where Christians may differ. In the 1620s a Lutheran pastor wrote the line still quoted today: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."
- **Key passages:** Jude 3, 2 Peter 2:1, Romans 14:1–5, 2 Timothy 2:24–25, and tonight's Galatians 1:6–9 with 1 Corinthians 15:1–8.
- **The thread:** Israel's confession, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4), was the boundary of the covenant. Jeremiah's false prophets offered false hope to people in open rebellion (Jeremiah 23:16–17). And Paul names what is "of first importance": Christ died, was buried, and was raised (1 Corinthians 15:3–4).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Everything is heresy, or nothing is.** "A Spectrum, Not a Switch" names both mistakes and the damage each one does.
- **"If it's unclear, it must be unimportant."** The chapter notes the limits of that rule: the Trinity isn't spelled out in a single verse. Use the four questions instead.
- **Labeling people.** The first guardrail: calling a brother or sister a heretic over a secondary matter "isn't zeal; it's bearing false witness."

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Galatians 1:6–9 and 1 Corinthians 15:1–8 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 2** (heresy or secondary disagreement) is the skill the chapter teaches.
- **Question 4** (a teaching you think is wrong, placed on the spectrum) is the honest one. See below.
- **Question 5** (treating everything as equally serious, or equally unimportant) names both ditches.

If time is short, drop 1 and 3. Application Exercise 1 covers Question 1.

The Hard Question

Question 4 is really testing whether we sort our own convictions as honestly as we sort other people's. Guide the group to the chapter's legalism example and its warning: "Raise an opinion to an essential, and you can become the very false teacher you meant to guard against." Then the last question of the Scripture Exercise: which way are you more tempted to lean?

Case Study Notes

The case tests the sorting itself. One speaker denies the bodily resurrection, which Paul treats as the center of the gospel (1 Corinthians 15:14–17); the other has a conscience about Christmas, which Romans 14:5–6 leaves free. One follow-up question: "How would your response to each speaker sound different, and still be kind?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 3, the Debate Map, using Table Z. Read Chapter 33.

Close

Read 1 Corinthians 15:3–4 aloud: "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." Invite the group to pray for courage to hold the center firmly and grace to hold the rest with an open hand.

SESSION 33 • CHAPTER 33

Healthy Authority, Harmful Control

At a Glance

Jesus' measure of authority is the towel, not the title. Christ alone is Head of the church, and leaders are under-shepherds with real authority that has edges. Every control teaching puts a person between you and God. And members have a part too: building up, taking concerns to the person, staying through the hard parts, and leaving well when we must.

Prepare

Read John 13:1–17 twice. Read "What Leaders Are Given, and What They're Not" and "Our Part: Being a Safe Member." It's wise to let your pastor know the group is studying this chapter. And pray for anyone in your group who may carry spiritual harm.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** the difference between servant leadership and controlling authority, for leaders and for members.
- **The setting:** the prophets condemned shepherds who fed themselves (Ezekiel 34), and in Jesus' day the Temple leadership was tangled up with money and power. Paul warned of wolves rising from within (Acts 20:29–30), and Peter told elders not to lord it over the flock (1 Peter 5:3). In the 1970s a movement that began with a good instinct for accountability hardened into "covering" and control, and some of its own leaders later repented publicly.
- **Key passages:** Mark 10:42–45, Colossians 1:18, 1 Peter 5:1–5, Hebrews 13:17, and tonight's John 13:1–17.
- **The thread:** God indicted the false shepherds of Israel and promised, "I Myself will search for My flock and seek them out" (Ezekiel 34:11). He kept that promise in Jesus: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep" (John 10:11).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Suspicion of every leader.** The chapter says plainly that most pastors are faithful servants. Spotting harm is what lets us honor the good ones freely.
- **Naming names in the room.** Keep the conversation on patterns and Scripture, and take real concerns to the person first (Matthew 18:15).
- **Missing our own part.** Question 7 and the table of calls to members turn the questions around.

Where Christians Differ

Churches are governed in different ways (see Chapter 18), and the chapter's tests apply in every structure. The question is never whether a church is congregational, presbyterian, or episcopal, but whether its authority looks like a towel.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · John 13:1–17 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 4** (Mark 10:42–45) sets the standard before anyone describes a bad example.
- **Question 2** (warning signs) gives people words for what they may have sensed.
- **Question 7** (turning the questions on ourselves) keeps the session honest and humble.

If time is short, drop 1, 5, and 6. Question 5 is personal; offer it, never press it.

The Hard Question

Question 3 is really testing whether we can understand people who stayed under control, rather than judge them. Many stay out of love, loyalty, fear, or because control was taught as faithfulness. The author of this book saw red flags and stayed silent, and says so. Guide the group toward gentleness, and to Galatians 5:1: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free."

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether the group can name the error plainly: approval for life decisions, and the threat of losing God's protection for leaving. Nothing in 1 Peter 5:2–3 gives a leader that. One follow-up question: "What would you say to a friend in that church who is afraid to leave?"

Care Note

Someone in the room may have been spiritually harmed, and this session can stir it up. Believe them, listen, and don't press for details or names. If abuse or a crime is involved, it goes to the proper authorities (see Chapter 38 and Part 1). Don't let the group become a place to accuse people who aren't there.

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, Leadership Reflection, and walking through the eight questions in Application Exercise 2 privately. Read Chapter 34.

Close

Read John 13:14–15 aloud: "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example so that you should do as I have done for you." Invite the group to thank God for faithful shepherds and to pray in their own words for your church's leaders.

SESSION 34 • CHAPTER 34

Apostles, Authority, and the Church Today

At a Glance

The New Testament uses "apostle" three ways: the Twelve and Paul, a foundational office laid once; messengers sent by churches; and apostolic work that continues. Many modern claims borrow the second and third meanings and then claim the authority of the first. Test them as Scripture does. What continues is the apostles' teaching, their mission, and elders in every church.

Prepare

Read 2 Corinthians 11:1–15 twice. Know the three meanings of apostolos and the marks of the foundational apostles. Read "How It Comes In" and "You Don't Have to Choose."

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** how to weigh modern claims of apostolic authority, without dismissing them and without simply accepting them.
- **The setting:** Acts 1:21–22 required an apostle to have been with Jesus and to have witnessed His resurrection. The Didache told churches to let a traveling apostle stay a day or two, and to treat one who asked for money as false. In the 1830s a British movement appointed twelve modern apostles; when the last died in 1901, none replaced him. In 1949 the Assemblies of God rejected the Latter Rain teaching on restored apostles.
- **Key passages:** Ephesians 2:19–20, 1 Corinthians 15:8, Revelation 2:2, Acts 2:42, and tonight's 2 Corinthians 11:1–15.
- **The thread:** God spoke with Moses face to face (Exodus 33:11) and promised a prophet like him, fulfilled in Jesus (Acts 3:22–23). Malachi warned that those who claim to speak for God answer for more (Malachi 2:1–9). The city of God has twelve foundations bearing "the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb" (Revelation 21:14), and "no one can lay a foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:11).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **The package deal.** "Welcome today's apostles or shut the door on the Spirit." "You Don't Have to Choose" answers it.
- **Arguing about labels.** The chapter's advice: look past the name to the teaching. Are there apostles over the churches? Is their revelation binding? Is the Bible still enough?
- **Mocking.** The case study asks for honesty without mockery. Many sincere people in these settings want more of God.

Where Christians Differ

Christians who believe every gift continues today and those who don't can agree that there are no apostles today with the authority of the Twelve. Traditions that hold to apostolic succession see bishops as guarding the apostles' faith, not bringing new revelation. In the group, examine teachings rather than naming living leaders.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · 2 Corinthians 11:1–15 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 2** (a foundation laid once, and ongoing gifts) is the key distinction.
- **Question 5** (honoring leaders without giving them Christ's authority) keeps the session from turning cynical.
- **Question 6** (pressure to accept a claim to stay open to the Spirit) speaks to anyone from a charismatic background.

If time is short, drop 1, 3, and 4. Question 7 is below.

The Hard Question

Question 7 is really testing whether we can look honestly at our own church and experience without either paranoia or denial. Not every healing service is a Trojan horse, and the chapter says so. Guide the group to Paul's own remedy for the church at Ephesus: not a new apostle, but "I commit you to God and to the word of His grace, which can build you up" (Acts 20:32).

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether the group can answer honestly without mocking the leader's ministry or pretending the question doesn't matter. Jesus commended a church for testing those who claimed to be apostles (Revelation 2:2). One follow-up question: "What could you gladly honor in his ministry, and what one question would you want to ask him?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, Authority Evaluation, honestly and privately. Read Chapter 35.

Close

Read Acts 20:32 aloud: "And now I commit you to God and to the word of His grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all who are sanctified." Invite the group to pray in their own words for your church's elders.

SESSION 35 • CHAPTER 35

Gifts as Grace, Not Status

At a Glance

Spiritual gifts are grace-gifts, given freely, for others, as the Spirit decides. The body has no rankings, and "greater," in Paul's mind, means more helpful to others. There is real truth in the laying on of hands and in growing a gift, and Scripture draws lines that much of today's practice crosses. Love is the measure of every gift.

Prepare

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1–7 twice, and 1 Corinthians 12:12–27. Look over the table of gift lists. Read "Impartation, Activation, and Training" for both what it affirms and where it draws lines.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** gifts as grace given for others, not badges of status.
- **The setting:** Simon the magician tried to buy the power to give the Spirit (Acts 8:18–20), and the church named the buying and selling of spiritual things after him: simony. In the medieval church even high offices were bought and sold, and the Reformers condemned it. Today it shows up as fees for "gift activation" and prophetic words for sale.
- **Key passages:** 1 Corinthians 12:4–7, 12:21–22, Romans 12:6–8, Matthew 10:8, and tonight's 1 Corinthians 13:1–7.
- **The thread:** Bezalel's skill was given, not earned (Exodus 31). Elisha refused Naaman's payment, "As surely as the LORD lives, before whom I stand, I will not accept it" (2 Kings 5:16), and Gehazi's greed brought leprosy. Jesus summed it up: "Freely you have received; freely give" (Matthew 10:8).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **A ladder of gifts.** "One Body, No Rankings" corrects both the proud and the person who thinks she has nothing to offer.
- **Overlooking the quiet gifts.** "The Gifts Nobody Fights Over" and Question 6 bring them into the light.
- **Throwing everything out.** The chapter affirms real impartation and growth in a gift (Romans 1:11; 1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6) before it draws its lines.

Where Christians Differ

Christians differ on how the gifts are given and how they operate today (Table Y; Chapters 28, 29, and 31). The chapter holds both the truth and the lines. Don't mock anyone who has attended an activation event or school; many went because they genuinely want more of God.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · 1 Corinthians 13:1–7 in five steps (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 2** ("for the common good") reframes every gift.
- **Question 3** (gifts as a sign of status) is the honest one. See below.
- **Question 6** (planting a church with five gifts) is the most fun, and the most revealing.

If time is short, drop 1, 4, and 5.

The Hard Question

Question 3 is really testing whether we quietly rank ourselves and others by gifts. Guide the group to Paul's question, "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?" (1 Corinthians 4:7), and to Jesus' warning that a gift is never proof of knowing Him (Matthew 7:22–23).

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether the group can name what's wrong without dismissing the gifts themselves: a fee, a promise to unlock gifts on demand, and practice "words" given to strangers. One follow-up question: "What would a healthy way to help someone discover and grow in a gift look like in our church?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, Gift in Service, with no audience and no recognition. Read Chapter 36.

Close

Read 1 Peter 4:10 aloud: "As good stewards of the manifold grace of God, each of you should use whatever gift he has received to serve one another." Invite the group to offer their gifts back to God in their own words.

SESSION 36 • CHAPTER 36

Prayer: Bold, Dependent, and Surrendered

At a Glance

Prayer is a conversation with a Father who is sovereign, good, and near, not a technique for controlling outcomes. It is bold, dependent, and surrendered at the same time; take away any one and prayer gets bent out of shape. The Lord's Prayer is a map of everything prayer holds. And unanswered is never the same as unheard.

Prepare

Read Philippians 4:6–7 and Romans 8:26–27 twice, and Matthew 6:9–13. Look over the seven-line guide in Application Exercise 1. Read "When Prayer Gets Bent."

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** prayer that is bold, dependent, and surrendered, shaped by the prayer Jesus taught.
- **The setting:** Jesus gave the Lord's Prayer to correct showy public prayer and empty repetition, and it shares much of its shape with Israel's own prayers. The Didache told believers to pray it three times a day. In 1535 Luther wrote to his barber, who had asked how an ordinary man should pray: take the Lord's Prayer one phrase at a time and let each line warm the heart.
- **Key passages:** Matthew 6:9–13, Hebrews 4:16, James 4:2, Luke 22:42, and tonight's Philippians 4:6–7 with Romans 8:26–27.
- **The thread:** Abraham pressed God over Sodom (Genesis 18); Moses pleaded and the LORD relented (Exodus 32:14); Jehoshaphat prayed, "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon You" (2 Chronicles 20:12). And in Revelation the prayers of the saints rise before God like incense (Revelation 5:8; 8:4).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Prayer as a formula.** That's the case study. Jesus prayed with perfect faith in Gethsemane, and the answer was the cross.
- **"If God is sovereign, why pray?"** James answers in one line: "You do not have, because you do not ask" (James 4:2).
- **Every "no" as punishment.** The chapter is honest that cherished sin can hinder prayer, and warns against making that the explanation for every unanswered prayer, as Job's friends did.

Where Christians Differ

Many Christians who speak of "declaring" in prayer simply mean bold, faith-filled prayer. The chapter's concern is narrower: when spoken words are treated as a way to oblige God or command spirits. Question 4 is the place to sort that out charitably.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Philippians 4:6–7 and Romans 8:26–27 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 1** (boldness and surrender in the Lord's Prayer) sets the frame.
- **Question 6** (the line you rush past, and the posture that comes hardest) lets everyone answer honestly.
- **Question 3** (praying boldly and not receiving) is the tender one. See below.

If time is short, drop 2, 4, and 5.

The Hard Question

Question 3 is really testing whether our trust in God can survive "no" and "not yet." Don't try to explain anyone's unanswered prayer. Guide the group to Jesus in Gethsemane, to Paul's thorn and "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:9), and to the golden bowls of Revelation 5:8: no prayer is ever lost.

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether we can encourage bold faith without endorsing a formula, and without making a hurting friend feel foolish. One follow-up question: "How could you pray with her this week in a way that is bold and surrendered at the same time?"

Care Note

Someone may be carrying a prayer that has gone unanswered for years. Honor it, pray for it, and resist the urge to explain it.

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, Praying the Lord's Prayer, slowly, for seven mornings, with the guide table. Read Chapter 37, which opens Part 5.

Close

Pray the Lord's Prayer together slowly (Matthew 6:9–13), pausing after each line so people can add their own words. End with Ephesians 3:20–21: "Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine… to Him be the glory."

SESSION 37 · CHAPTER 37

Healing, Suffering, and Faithful Care

At a Glance

Pray boldly for healing and care tenderly for those who suffer, holding God's power and His purposes together. Jesus' healings were signs pointing to who He is. The early church prayed, used ordinary means, and never blamed the sick. Faith is never a sick person's report card, and the church's real work often begins in the parking lot.

Prepare

Read Philippians 2:25–30 twice, and James 5:14–16. Look over the table of every case of sickness from Acts through the letters. Read "Two Ditches" and "Faith, the Atonement, and Healing." Know who in your group is sick, or caring for someone who is.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** praying for healing, and caring well for people whether healing comes now or later.
- **The setting:** olive oil was both medicine and a sign of consecration, and the disciples anointed the sick (Mark 6:13). James wrote to scattered Jewish believers, and early writers like Origen and Tertullian describe anointing as a church practice. Augustine first wrote that miracles like those in Acts had ceased; late in life he described healings he had seen in his own church and had the accounts read aloud.
- **Key passages:** James 5:14–16, 2 Corinthians 12:8–9, Matthew 11:4–5, Revelation 21:4, and tonight's Philippians 2:25–30.
- **The thread:** "I am the LORD who heals you" (Exodus 15:26); Moses' five-word prayer for Miriam; Hezekiah's prayer answered alongside a poultice of figs (2 Kings 20:5, 7). One sign was saved for the Messiah: "Never before has anyone heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind" (John 9:32). The story ends with leaves "for the healing of the nations" (Revelation 22:2).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Falling into one ditch.** "God always heals now, so something's wrong with you," or "God doesn't really do anything anymore." The chapter's "Two Ditches" names both.
- **Faith as a report card.** "Faith, the Atonement, and Healing" shows Jesus healing people who didn't know who He was, and others because of their friends' faith.
- **Prayer and medicine as rivals.** The chapter is plain: God used Hezekiah's figs, Timothy's wine, and Luke's skill. Pray, and keep the doctor's appointment.

Where Christians Differ

Christians read the fading of dramatic healings after Acts differently, and they differ on whether physical healing is provided in the atonement. The chapter shows where both sides meet: the cross guarantees the full healing of our bodies at the resurrection (Romans 8:23). The question is how much of it we taste now.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Philippians 2:25–30 in five steps (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 3** (praying boldly without shaming the unhealed) is the heart of the chapter.
- **Question 6** (Trophimus and Timothy) brings the honest small verses to light.
- **Question 7** (the blind man led out of the village, the girl given something to eat) shows Jesus' heart.

If time is short, drop 2, 4, and 5. Question 1 is below.

The Hard Question

Question 1 is really testing whether we can hold "God heals" and "not everyone is healed" without letting go of either. Don't explain anyone's illness. Guide the group to Scripture's own honesty: David's son died (2 Samuel 12:22–23), and Elisha died of an illness (2 Kings 13:14). Then to Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:9), and to the day when there will be no more pain (Revelation 21:4).

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether we can answer false blame and care for the one who was hurt by it. The visiting minister's words are the theology of Job's friends (Job 42:7). One follow-up question: "What would 'welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor' (Philippians 2:29) look like for her this month?"

Care Note

This chapter touches people directly: chronic illness, disability, grief over someone who wasn't healed, and shame from "not enough faith" teaching. Never explain why anyone isn't healed. If someone in the group is sick, offer to pray for them by name as James 5 invites, if they wish, and then follow up with practical help during the week.

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, Pastoral Reflection, with one practical act of care. Read Chapter 38.

Close

Read Psalm 34:18 aloud: "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted; He saves the contrite in spirit." Then pray for anyone who is sick, by name if they wish, in your own words.

SESSION 38 • CHAPTER 38

Deliverance, Inner Healing, and Wise Pastoral Care

At a Glance

The spiritual realm is real, and it isn't the only explanation for our struggles. Jesus set people free briefly, by His own authority, and sent them home restored. The cross settled the case: the enemy has no "legal rights" over a believer. God's main path to healing the inner person is the slow work of sanctification, surrounded by wise care, real safeguards, and professional help where it's needed.

Prepare

Read Mark 5:1–20 twice. Read "The Cross Settled the Case," "Inner Healing Through Sanctification," and the safety table in "When Ministry Becomes Dangerous." Know your church's policy on referral and reporting before the meeting.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** deliverance, inner healing, and how to care for hurting people wisely.
- **The setting:** exorcism was common in Jesus' day; what set Him apart was His authority (Mark 1:27). Early church writers describe prayer for deliverance, and the Reformers stressed Christ's finished victory and the ordinary means of grace. In the last fifty years new ideas have spread: "legal rights," "open doors," generational curses, and scripted sessions. When this ministry goes wrong it does real harm, from a death in Germany in 1976 to the false "recovered memories" of the 1980s and 1990s.
- **Key passages:** Ephesians 6:12, James 4:7, Colossians 2:13–15, Philippians 1:6, and tonight's Mark 5:1–20.
- **The thread:** the serpent's head would be crushed (Genesis 3:15); God judged the gods of Egypt (Exodus 12:12); the LORD rebuked the accuser of Joshua the high priest (Zechariah 3). At the cross Christ "disarmed the powers and authorities" and "made a public spectacle of them" (Colossians 2:15).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Falling into one ditch.** Dismissing the spiritual realm, or going beyond what Scripture teaches. The Core Teaching names both.
- **"Legal rights," "open doors," and curses.** "The Cross Settled the Case" walks through each one with Scripture.
- **Spiritualizing everything.** Question 3. Some struggles need a doctor or counselor; that's not a lack of faith (see Chapter 51).

Where Christians Differ

Sincere Christians differ on how much the enemy can influence a believer, and careful teachers on every side urge both seriousness and caution. They agree on what matters most: a believer belongs to Christ, and the devil has no ownership and no legal claim (1 John 4:4).

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Mark 5:1–20 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 4** (confidence in Christ or recklessness) keeps the session anchored in 1 John 4:4.
- **Question 6** (a long struggle as part of God's slow work) is personal and hopeful.
- **Question 3** (spiritual, psychological, or medical) is the hard one. See below.

If time is short, drop 1, 2, and 5. Question 7 is for leaders; take it to your pastor or elders.

The Hard Question

Question 3 is really testing whether we can resist making every struggle spiritual, or every struggle medical. Guide the group to Matthew 4:24, where people brought Jesus "all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering acute pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and He healed them." Scripture tells them apart, and so should we, while caring for the whole person (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether the group can sort what's true from what isn't: family patterns are real, but "a son will not bear the iniquity of his father" (Ezekiel 18:20), and the cross has already canceled the record (Colossians 2:14–15). One follow-up question: "What would genuine care look like for her this month, and who would walk with her?"

Care Note

Someone may have been through a harmful deliverance session, or may carry trauma, anxiety, or a family history of the occult. Never pray with anyone alone, and never suggest anyone stop medication. If abuse, danger at home, or thoughts of self-harm come to light, stop and follow the safety steps in Part 1; in the U.S., call or text 988.

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, the Armor of God Inventory. Leaders may want Application Exercise 2 for themselves. Read Chapter 39.

Close

Read Philippians 1:6 aloud: "being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Invite the group to thank God in their own words that the work is His.

SESSION 39 • CHAPTER 39

Spiritual Warfare: The Armor of God

At a Glance

Every believer is in a spiritual battle, and the enemy's main weapon is deception, not raw power. The armor of God isn't a ritual; it's the life we already have in Christ, worn every day and worn together. We don't fight for victory. We stand in the victory Christ has won. And a stronghold is usually a lie we've built a fortress around.

Prepare

Read Ephesians 6:10–18 twice. Look over the armor table and the stronghold table. Read "The Battlefield of the Mind" and the paragraph on Daniel 10.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** spiritual warfare: a real enemy, a defeated enemy, and the armor of God.
- **The setting:** the Desert Fathers saw the mind as the main battlefield; Evagrius listed eight tempting thoughts, which became the seven deadly sins, and taught believers to answer each with Scripture and bring it into the light. Luther built "A Mighty Fortress" (1529) on Psalm 46. In the 1980s and 1990s some taught "strategic-level" warfare against territorial spirits, a method the chapter weighs carefully.
- **Key passages:** John 8:44, 2 Corinthians 10:4–5, Colossians 2:15, 1 Peter 5:8–9, and tonight's Ephesians 6:10–18.
- **The thread:** Genesis 3:15 is the first declaration of the war. In Isaiah God Himself puts on righteousness as a breastplate and salvation as a helmet (Isaiah 59:17), and Paul hands that armor to us: "clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 13:14). Elisha's servant saw the hills full of chariots of fire (2 Kings 6:17).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Falling into one ditch.** Ignoring the battle, or becoming fixated on the enemy. That's the case study.
- **The armor as a morning ritual.** "Read the Armor as the Ending of the Letter" shows each piece echoing what Paul already taught in Ephesians 1–5.
- **Misusing "stronghold."** "What a Stronghold Really Is": Paul's words point to the mind. The bottle isn't the stronghold; the lie is.

Where Christians Differ

Some Christians practice warfare prayer against territorial spirits. The chapter raises honest concerns, especially about building that practice on Daniel 10, where Daniel prayed and God's angels did the fighting. Discuss it charitably; many who practice it are sincere and passionate about evangelism.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Ephesians 6:10–18 in four steps (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 3** (not flesh and blood) changes how we see the people we struggle with.
- **Question 6** (three chapters before the armor) is the key to reading the passage.
- **Question 7** (the lie beneath a stronghold) is the personal one. See below.

If time is short, drop 1, 2, 4, and 5.

The Hard Question

Question 7 is really testing whether we'll name the lie under our own stronghold. Go first if you can, and offer silent reflection to anyone who prefers it. Guide the group to the question the chapter asks, "What do you run to when life gets hard?", and then to the true fortress: "He alone is my rock and my salvation. He is my fortress; I will never be shaken" (Psalm 62:2).

Case Study Notes

The case puts the two ditches into two group members, both sincere. Each needs a different truth: Colossians 2:15 for the anxious one, 1 Peter 5:8 for the skeptic. One follow-up question: "What would standing shield beside shield look like for these two this week?"

Care Note

If someone names an addiction, remember the chapter's word: physical dependence is real, and stopping some substances suddenly can be dangerous. Encourage medical help alongside prayer and the Word.

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, Putting on the Armor, with one verse memorized for the battle each person is most likely to face. Read Chapter 40.

Close

Read Psalm 62:1–2 aloud: "In God alone my soul finds rest; my salvation comes from Him. He alone is my rock and my salvation. He is my fortress; I will never be shaken." Invite the group to pray for one another by name.

SESSION 40 • CHAPTER 40

Money, Contentment, and the Prosperity Gospel

At a Glance

Money is a gift and a danger. Contentment is learned trust, generosity breaks money's grip, and stewardship means managing what belongs to God. Prosperity teaching bends a true promise, that God supplies our needs, into a formula, and adds guilt to suffering. Meet people shaped by it with compassion, not contempt. The real riches are Christ.

Prepare

Read Luke 12:13–21 twice, and 1 Timothy 6:6–19. Look over the steward's framework and the table of prosperity claims. Remember that someone in the room may have been shaped or hurt by this teaching, or may be in real financial hardship.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** contentment, generosity, stewardship, and the prosperity gospel.
- **The setting:** prosperity teaching has roots in the New Thought movement of the late 1800s, which taught that positive thinking could produce material results; it was later blended with Christian language and spread widely through Pentecostal circles and television. A 2006 Pew survey found majorities of Pentecostals and charismatics in 9 of 10 countries affirming that God grants prosperity to those with enough faith. In 2008–2009 African church leaders gathered by the Lausanne Movement in Ghana took the needs behind it seriously and warned that it burdens the poor.
- **Key passages:** Proverbs 30:8, Matthew 6:24, Philippians 4:11–13, Hebrews 13:5, and tonight's Luke 12:13–21.
- **The thread:** Moses warned Israel not to forget God in prosperity: "it is the LORD your God who gives you the power to gain wealth" (Deuteronomy 8:18). Amos thundered against those who exploited the poor; Job was blameless and lost everything. And the true wealth came this way: "though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Money as evil, or as a reward.** "Money Is a Gift, and a Danger" holds both, with Agur's prayer: "Give me neither poverty nor riches" (Proverbs 30:8).
- **Philippians 4:13 as a success promise.** The chapter reads it in context: Christ's strength is the power to rest in Him, whether full or hungry.
- **Contempt for people shaped by prosperity teaching.** The chapter's word: lead with compassion. Most of them wanted to know that God is for them.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Luke 12:13–21 in four steps (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 4** (Paul's contentment and our culture's idea of success) searches everyone.
- **Question 6** (what your spending says you treasure) is honest and private. No one has to share.
- **Question 1** (the appeal of prosperity teaching) is the hard one. See below.

If time is short, drop 2, 3, 5, and 7.

The Hard Question

Question 1 is really testing whether we can understand the hope behind a false teaching instead of mocking it. Guide the group to what's true underneath: "my God will supply all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19). Then to where God has already proved He is for us: 2 Corinthians 8:9.

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether the group can name what's wrong and still care for the people caught in it. The "seed" formula turns giving into "compulsion" (2 Corinthians 9:7) and turns lack into blame. One follow-up question: "What would you say first to a member who gave a seed she couldn't afford?"

Care Note

Never ask anyone about their income, giving, or debt. Someone may have given more than they could afford to a ministry that promised a return; meet them with grace, and bring in a pastor or deacon if there is real need.

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, the Contentment Audit, done privately. For anyone in debt, Application Exercise 3 offers a simple, hopeful plan. Read Chapter 41.

Close

Read 1 Timothy 6:6–7 aloud: "Of course, godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, so we cannot carry anything out of it." Invite the group to thank God in their own words for what they already have in Christ.

SESSION 41 • CHAPTER 41

The Kingdom of God and Our Place in It

At a Glance

The kingdom of God is His reign: already present in Jesus, not yet complete until He returns. “Your kingdom come” makes us petitioners, not builders. It rules out conquest and it rules out escape; the alternative is faithful presence. Love your country and serve it well, and never fuse the kingdom with any nation or party.

Prepare

Read Matthew 5:13–16, 6:9–10, and 26:36–42. Read “Five Ways the Kingdom Gets Bent” and “Kingdom, Nation, and Party.” Decide ahead of time not to share your own politics tonight; your goal is a group that stays together under the King.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God, and what we’re asking when we pray “Your kingdom come.”
- **The setting:** after Rome was sacked in 410, Augustine described two cities, one formed by love of self and one by love of God, and called Christians pilgrims in the first. When church and empire grew intertwined, the church gained influence and often paid for it in compromise and coercion. Luther described God ruling through the gospel in the church and the sword in government. The “already and not yet” framework became the main evangelical view, and in recent decades some movements have tied the kingdom’s progress to Christian control of society.
- **Key passages:** Mark 1:15, Luke 17:20–21, John 18:36, Jeremiah 29:7, and tonight’s Matthew 5:13–16, 6:9–10, and 26:36–42.
- **The thread:** humanity was made to steward creation (Genesis 1:26–28); the Psalms celebrate God’s kingship; Daniel saw the Son of Man receive an everlasting dominion (Daniel 7:13–14). In exile God told His people to “seek the prosperity of the city” (Jeremiah 29:7), and Daniel served Babylon without bowing. At the end, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ” (Revelation 11:15).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Arguing elections.** That’s the case study. Keep the group in the passages and away from candidates.
- **Conquest or escape.** The prayer “Your kingdom come… on earth” rules out both, and the chapter’s table names five ways the kingdom gets bent.
- **Throwing labels.** The chapter is careful: not every believer who loves their country is a nationalist, and the word shouldn’t be thrown at everyone who votes their conscience.

Where Christians Differ

Christians hold different political convictions and different views on how the church should engage public life, and that is not the question tonight. The chapter asks one thing of every side: that no nation or party be confused with the kingdom. It also distinguishes historic postmillennial hope, that the gospel will win hearts, from claims that the church must win power.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Matthew 5:13–16, then 6:9–10 with 26:36–42 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 1** (already and not yet) gives the whole group a shared framework.
- **Question 6** (what we're asking in "Your kingdom come") brings it to the cross.
- **Question 7** (citizenship or fusing faith with a party) is the honest one. See below.

If time is short, drop 2, 3, 4, and 5.

The Hard Question

Question 7 is really testing whether we can see the temptation in ourselves, not only in people on the other side. Guide the group through the chapter's honest questions, especially "Am I as troubled by wrongdoing on 'my side' as on the other?" Then to Gethsemane: the clearest answer to "Your will be done on earth" was the King laying down His life, not taking power (Matthew 26:42).

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether the group can stay together under the King. Each member is getting something right: one cares about the public square, the other about the church's witness. One follow-up question: "What would it take for the two friends to pray together next week?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, Kingdom Mapping, in each sphere where people have influence. Read Chapter 42.

Close

Read Luke 12:32 aloud: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom." Then pray Matthew 6:10 together, and invite the group to pray in their own words for your city and nation.

SESSION 42 • CHAPTER 42

Reading the Bible Well: Translations and Paraphrases

At a Glance

Know what kind of Bible you're holding: word-for-word, mediating, thought-for-thought, paraphrase, one person's expansion, or a version reshaped to fit a group's doctrine. Faithful translations differ in wording and agree in meaning, and a committee of scholars is a reader's best protection. Honor what translation cost, and read carefully.

Prepare

Read the Scripture Exercise's four versions of Psalm 23:1–2 aloud once before the meeting. Bring three Bibles or apps from different points on the spectrum. Look over the key-verse table. Be ready for someone whose favorite Bible appears on the "avoid" end of the table.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** Bible translations and paraphrases, and how to tell what you're reading.
- **The setting:** the Septuagint carried the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek before Christ, and Jerome's Latin Vulgate served the Western church for a thousand years. In the 1380s Wycliffe's followers produced the first complete English Bible. Tyndale translated from Greek and Hebrew in hiding, wanting a plowboy to know Scripture, and was strangled and burned in 1536. The King James Version of 1611 was the work of about fifty scholars. The BSB used in this book entered the public domain in 2023.
- **Key passages:** Proverbs 30:5–6, Nehemiah 8:8, Acts 2:8, John 5:39, and tonight's Psalm 23:1–2, John 1:1, and Ephesians 2:8–9.
- **The thread:** "You must not add to or subtract from what I command you" (Deuteronomy 4:2). Ezra read the Law and the Levites explained it (Nehemiah 8:8), and the Masoretes copied it with extraordinary care. At Pentecost the crowd asked, "How is it then that each of us hears them in his own native language?" (Acts 2:8). From the beginning God has wanted to be understood.

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **"More literal is always more accurate."** The chapter's examples help: "gird up the loins of your mind," and "I shall not want."
- **Loyalty to one version.** "If you grew up with the King James, honor it." The chapter is generous, and the leader should be too.
- **Alarm over bracketed passages.** Nothing is hidden, and the chapter is plain that no doctrine of the faith rests on a disputed reading.

Where Christians Differ

Faithful translators disagree about gender language where the original uses a masculine word in a general sense, and careful cases have been made on both sides. The chapter draws a different line where a version changes how God names Himself or the titles Christ claimed.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Psalm 23:1–2 in four forms, then John 1:1 and Ephesians 2:8–9 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 2** (why translation matters for study) is the practical heart of the chapter.
- **Question 6** (what Tyndale's Bible cost) brings gratitude into the room.
- **Question 7** (checking a verse that sounds unfamiliar) gives people a skill to use this week.

If time is short, drop 1, 3, and 5. Question 4 is below.

The Hard Question

Question 4 is really testing whether we hold our own favorite versions to the same standard we hold others', and whether we can talk about a Bible someone loves without contempt. Guide the group to the key-verse test and the habit of comparing three translations. "Every word of God is flawless" (Proverbs 30:5), which is exactly why we want His words and not someone's additions.

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether we can be truthful about a translation without crushing what moved someone. Start with what God may genuinely have used in her heart. One follow-up question: "What passage in a faithful translation says something close to what moved her?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, Translation Comparison, then running their own Bible through the key-verse test. Read Chapter 43.

Close

Read Psalm 119:130 aloud: "The unfolding of Your words gives light; it informs the simple." Invite the group to thank God in their own words for the people who gave their lives so we could read it.

SESSION 43 • CHAPTER 43

Signs, Wonders, and Careful Discernment

At a Glance

Welcome God's genuine power, and test every claim: power is not proof. In Scripture, signs reveal God, confirm His message, and flow from compassion. Our protection isn't suspicion; it's a love of the truth. The kingdom doesn't come with observable signs, so look for the surer evidence: changed hearts, love for one another, and people pointed to Jesus.

Prepare

Read Mark 1:40–45 twice. Look over the seven questions for any sign and "Methods to Watch For." Read "What It Looks Like When God Is Moving."

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** signs and wonders, and how to welcome God's work while testing every claim.
- **The setting:** since the Reformation, cessationists have argued that the miraculous gifts ended with the apostles, and continuationists that they continue, governed by Scripture. Twentieth-century revivals produced real fruit and real excess. Scholars on both sides model the same habit: take a claim seriously enough to check it. In 1986 a television faith healer was exposed receiving his "words" through a hidden earpiece.
- **Key passages:** Deuteronomy 13:1–5, Matthew 24:24, Luke 17:20–21, 1 Thessalonians 5:19–21, and tonight's Mark 1:40–45.
- **The thread:** the plagues were given so that "the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD" (Exodus 7:5). After the fire on Carmel, God met His weary prophet not in wind, earthquake, or fire but in "a still, small voice" (1 Kings 19:12). And Jesus' signs were written "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ" (John 20:31).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Gullibility or cynicism.** "Open Hands, Open Eyes" names both, with Paul's four commands that hold them together (1 Thessalonians 5:19–21).
- **"Don't question it."** That's the case study. Real works of God can stand up to a question (Acts 17:11).
- **Measuring God by what's visible.** Luke 17:20–21 and Question 6 point to the quieter evidence.

Where Christians Differ

Christians disagree about whether the miraculous gifts continue today (see Chapter 29). The chapter lists what both sides agree on: God can act at any time, every claim must be tested, Scripture has the last word, false signs are real, and fruit matters more than power.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Mark 1:40–45 in four steps (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 6** (why we're drawn to outward signs) opens the heart of the chapter.
- **Question 5** (open without being credulous) is the balance Paul asks for.
- **Question 8** (believing too easily or doubting too quickly) lets everyone place themselves honestly.

If time is short, drop 1, 2, 3, and 4.

The Hard Question

Question 7 asks what loving the truth looks like. It's really testing whether we love what God has said more than any experience, including our own favorite ones. Guide the group to 2 Thessalonians 2:10, where those deceived are not people too open to God but people who "refused the love of the truth," and to the Bereans, eager and careful at once (Acts 17:11).

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether the group can evaluate manifestations by Scripture rather than by intensity, and answer "don't question it" gently. One follow-up question: "What would 'Tell me more' sound like with a friend who was there and loved it?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 2, Openness and Caution, in a journal or with a partner. Read Chapter 44.

Close

Read John 20:31 aloud: "But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name." Invite the group to pray in their own words that God would make them people who love the truth.

SESSION 44 • CHAPTER 44

Women in Ministry: Reading Carefully, Honoring Faithfully

At a Glance

Women's roles in church leadership are a second-order question, and sincere, Bible-believing Christians land in different places: complementarian and egalitarian. Start with what everyone agrees on, read every key text side by side, and let every text stand, including the ones that make your side uncomfortable. Whatever you conclude, honor women's faithful service fully.

Prepare

Read Luke 8:1–3 and John 20:11–18 twice. Study the two-views table and "The Key Texts, Side by Side." Know what your own church practices and why, so you can say it simply and kindly. Decide ahead of time not to argue your own view tonight.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** how to read the debated passages about women in ministry, and how to live together when we differ.
- **The setting:** the early church included Phoebe, a diakonos and patron (Romans 16:1–2); Priscilla, who taught Apollos with her husband (Acts 18:26); Philip's four prophesying daughters; and Junia, whom John Chrysostom praised as a woman counted among the apostles. Most scholars on both sides now agree Junia was a woman and still debate what the verse means for church office. Churches today land in many places, from reserving the pastorate to men to ordaining women, with many in between.
- **Key passages:** Genesis 1:27, Galatians 3:28, Acts 2:17–18, 1 Timothy 2:11–15, and tonight's Luke 8:1–3 with John 20:11–18.
- **The thread:** Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah spoke and led among God's people. Joel promised that "your sons and daughters will prophesy," and Peter declared it fulfilled at Pentecost (Acts 2:17). And the first witnesses of the resurrection were women: "Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord!'" (John 20:18).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **"This one verse settles it."** "The Key Texts, Side by Side" sets every passage next to the others, with both readings and a question for each.
- **Leaning on a single word.** "Two Words Worth Knowing" shows what is and isn't settled about authentein and kephalē. No one word decides the matter.
- **Letting the debate eclipse the honor.** The Core Teaching names what isn't in dispute: women's faithful, Scripture-honored service from Deborah to Junia.

Where Christians Differ

The whole session is second-order (Table L). Use the terms each view uses for itself, and notice that the chapter's table names each view's hardest text and the failure each must guard against. Invite people to state the other view first. Honor your church's practice without suggesting that churches who land elsewhere are unfaithful.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Luke 8:1–3 and John 20:11–18 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 1** (women in New Testament ministry) begins with what everyone can celebrate.
- **Question 6** (1 Corinthians 11:5 beside 14:34–35) practices letting both texts stand.
- **Question 5** (conviction without contempt) is the posture the chapter asks for.

If time is short, drop 2, 4, and 7. Offer Question 8 for private reflection; never press anyone to answer it aloud.

The Hard Question

Question 3 asks how we tell a cultural situation from a timeless principle, and who decides. It's really testing whether we use the same method everywhere, or only where it helps our side. Guide the group to the chapter's four tests, especially the whole-Bible test ("Does my reading let every text stand?") and the submission test, which warns against bending the text to what "a culture, any culture, prefers."

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether a church can work through a real disagreement while honoring her gift and staying united, and it asks what the elders should have made clear beforehand. One follow-up question: "How could the elders explain the church's practice with both clarity and charity, so no one learns it by running into it?"

Care Note

Some women carry real hurt from being dismissed, and some men feel pressure from both directions. Hear both rather than managing them, and keep the conversation kind.

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, listing every woman in Romans 16. A group that wants more can work 1 Timothy 2 together using Application Exercise 3. Read Chapter 45.

Close

Read John 20:18 aloud: "Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord!' And she told them what He had said to her." Invite the group to thank God in their own words for the women who have served Him faithfully in their own lives.

SESSION 45 • CHAPTER 45

Faith and Daily Life: Vocation, Work, and the Glory of God

At a Glance

Daily work isn't a secular interruption of the spiritual life; it's one of the main places we serve God and love our neighbor. Work began before the fall, the fall made it hard, Christ redeems it, and the new creation will fulfill it. And rest confesses that the world runs on God's work, not ours.

Prepare

Read Matthew 25:14–30 twice. Look over the table of four movements and the four tests. Think about the range of work in your group: paid and unpaid, caregiving, retired, between jobs. All of it counts.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** vocation: ordinary work, offered to God, and the rest that keeps it in its place.
- **The setting:** the idea that some work is sacred and other work secular owes more to Plato than to Scripture, and by the Middle Ages it had produced a two-tier Christianity. Luther answered that a cobbler, a smith, and a farmer are all "consecrated priests," and that God feeds the world through ordinary people. Bach signed his work "to God alone be the glory," and Dorothy Sayers wrote that a carpenter's first duty is to make good tables.
- **Key passages:** Colossians 3:23–24, 1 Corinthians 10:31, Mark 2:27, Galatians 2:20, and tonight's Matthew 25:14–30.
- **The thread:** God worked six days and rested, and He placed the man in Eden "to cultivate and keep it" (Genesis 2:15), with a Hebrew word also used for worship. Bezalel the craftsman was "filled with the Spirit of God" (Exodus 31:3). Jesus spent most of His life as "the carpenter" (Mark 6:3), and the nations will bring their glory into the new city (Revelation 21:26).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Second-class Christians.** That's the case study, and Luther's point that ordinary work is a priestly service.
- **Work as identity.** The fourth test, the idol test: has my work become the thing I couldn't lose without losing myself?
- **Guilt about rest.** The chapter's word on Sabbath, including for shift workers, caregivers, and new parents, keeps rest a gift and not a test.

Where Christians Differ

Christians differ on how the Sabbath should be kept today, and on which day. The chapter holds the principle every view shares: some regular, unproductive rest is not negotiable, because the world depends on God and not on us.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Matthew 25:14–30 in five steps (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 2** (Luther's cobbler) lets people say whether that feels freeing or unsettling.
- **Question 6** (work under a curse and a calling) is honest about how work actually feels.
- **Question 5** (Sabbath) is practical for almost everyone.

If time is short, drop 1, 4, and 7. Question 3 is below.

The Hard Question

Question 3 asks where we have settled for less than our best. It's really testing whether we can be honest without sliding into perfectionism. Guide the group to the master's words in Matthew 25:21, "Well done, good and faithful servant," and notice: faithful, not successful. Then to Colossians 3:24: "It is the Lord Christ you are serving."

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether we can help someone tell a real call from guilt or restlessness, and see that his ordinary work already matters. His hours and his family matter too. One follow-up question: "What questions would help him discern a genuine call, and whom should he talk with first?"

Care Note

Someone may be unemployed, unable to work, retired and feeling useless, or stuck in work they dislike. Honor unpaid and caregiving work as fully as any paycheck.

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, the Vocation Reflection, or the Balanced Life Wheel in Application Exercise 3. Read Chapter 46.

Close

Read Colossians 3:23–24 aloud: "Whatever you do, work at it with your whole being, as for the Lord and not for men, because you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as your reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving." Invite the group to offer their week's work to God in their own words.

SESSION 46 • CHAPTER 46

Witness and Mission: The Sent Life

At a Glance

Every believer is a witness, not only the gifted or the paid. Witness overflows from being found by grace, and our whole life is a letter people read long before they open a Bible. Words are necessary and so is love; walk between silence and pressure. Present Christ faithfully, and trust God with the results.

Prepare

Read Acts 8:26–40 twice. Look over the two ditches and the five movements of the sent life. Write your own "Because of Jesus, I…" sentence (Question 6) so you can go first.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** witness: the sent life of every believer, in word and in deed.
- **The setting:** when persecution scattered the church in Jerusalem, ordinary believers "preached the word wherever they went" (Acts 8:4). In 1792 a cobbler named William Carey argued that the Great Commission binds every generation; he labored seven years in India before his first convert. And the line "Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words" isn't from Francis of Assisi, who preached constantly.
- **Key passages:** Acts 1:8, Romans 10:14–17, 1 Peter 3:15, 2 Corinthians 3:2–3, and tonight's Acts 8:26–40.
- **The thread:** God promised Abraham that "all the families of the earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3), and called Israel to be a light to the nations (Isaiah 49:6). Jonah didn't want Nineveh saved; Ruth found Israel's God through Naomi. The story ends with a multitude from every nation before the throne (Revelation 7:9).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Silence or pressure.** The two-ditches table: each gets something right, and each gets something wrong.
- **Fear.** "When You're Afraid": Peter denied Jesus, then preached at Pentecost. The difference was the Spirit.
- **Measuring by results.** The fifth movement: we plant and water, and God gives the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6–7).

Where Christians Differ

Christians use different methods of evangelism, and the chapter doesn't require any one of them; Jesus met Nicodemus and the woman at the well very differently. The chapter does insist on keeping word and deed together.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Acts 8:26–40 in five steps (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 1** (your honest emotional response) lets fear and guilt be named.
- **Question 6** ("Because of Jesus, I…") gives everyone the start of a testimony.
- **Question 8** (your life as the only Bible your neighbors read) is searching and practical.

If time is short, drop 2, 3, 4, and 7. Question 5 is below.

The Hard Question

Question 5 asks which way we lean, toward deeds without words or words without love. It's really testing whether we will keep both. Guide the group to the chapter's line, "We serve the poor because we love them; we tell them about Jesus because we love them more," and to Paul: our lives "adorn the teaching" (Titus 2:10), and "faith comes by hearing" (Romans 10:17).

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether we can answer a defensive question honestly and gently, without winning an argument and losing a friend. One follow-up question: "What question could you ask your coworker back that would keep the conversation open?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 2, the Prayerful Three, praying daily for three people by name. Read Chapter 47.

Close

Read Acts 1:8 aloud: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Invite the group to pray by name, silently or aloud, for people they love who don't yet know Jesus.

SESSION 47 • CHAPTER 47

Living Truth in Love: A Life Rooted and Sent

At a Glance

The thread through every chapter is truth and love held together, as they are in Jesus, "full of grace and truth." Truth has to travel from head to heart to hands to habits, and the Spirit carries it. 1 Corinthians 13 becomes a mirror for how we speak, see, and receive truth. Order your loves under one King, and keep a simple rhythm: Word, prayer, worship and fellowship, and service. This is a checkpoint, not a finish line.

Prepare

Read John 17:17–21 and 1 Corinthians 13:1–7 twice. Look over love's checklist and the head, heart, hands, and habits table. This chapter closes Part 5, so plan to give thanks for how God has worked in your group. If your track ends here, Part 3 of this guide will help you plan the next season.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** truth and love held together, and a rhythm to carry them for a lifetime.
- **The setting:** the word disciple means learner, and in the ancient world a disciple apprenticed himself to a teacher's whole way of life. The Didache describes a community shaped by prayer, fasting, the Lord's Supper, and mutual accountability. Bonhoeffer warned that "cheap grace," forgiveness without transformation, is no grace at all, and called Christian community a gift to receive.
- **Key passages:** John 1:14, Ephesians 4:15–16, 1 Corinthians 13:1–7, Acts 2:42, and tonight's John 17:17–21.
- **The thread:** Deuteronomy 6:5–8 gives the whole path: love God, hold His words in your heart, teach them, and wear them into the ordinary rhythms of the day. Psalm 1 and Jeremiah 17 picture a tree rooted by water, and the story ends at the tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:1–2).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Truth without love, or love without truth.** That's the case study, and the chapter's two-ditches table.
- **Assuming knowing is the same as being changed.** Jesus' words to careful Bible students: "you refuse to come to Me to have life" (John 5:39–40).
- **Treating the end of a part as the finish line.** The chapter calls it a checkpoint. Help people name their next step.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · John 17:17–21, with a few minutes of silence (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 1** (the one truth that has most changed you) lets the group give thanks together.
- **Question 2** (which way you lean under pressure) is honest without being heavy.
- **Question 9** (who's on the throne) brings the "One King" picture home.

If time is short, drop 3 through 7. Question 8 is below.

The Hard Question

Question 8 asks which is hardest: speaking truth in love, seeing others with love, or receiving truth ourselves. It's really testing the last row of love's checklist, the one the chapter says we skip. Guide the group to Psalm 141:5, "Let the righteous man strike me; let his rebuke be an act of loving devotion," and to the motive under all of it: "We love because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Case Study Notes

The case puts the two ditches into Dan and Rachel, and each is getting something right. Jesus with the woman at the well shows the way between: He named the hard truth while offering her living water (John 4). One follow-up question: "If you loved them both, what would you want to say to Dan, and to Rachel?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 2, A Rule of Life for an Ordinary Week. If your group is finishing its track here, add Application Exercise 3, Passing It On. Read Chapter 48, which opens Part 6.

Close

Read Jude 24–25 aloud: "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you unblemished in His glorious presence, with great joy— to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority through Jesus Christ our Lord before all time, and now, and for all eternity. Amen." Then pray for one another by name.

SESSION 48 · CHAPTER 48

Biblical Justice vs. Secular Justice

At a Glance

Biblical justice, mishpat and tzedakah, grows out of God's own character: impartial and protective, setting wrong right and caring for the vulnerable. Frameworks on every side borrow its language without its root. Walk between complacency and co-option, and test every cause, including your own side's, by Scripture. Justice is the fruit of salvation, never its price or its substitute.

Prepare

Read Amos 5:21–24 and Jeremiah 22:13–16 twice. Look over the table of Scripture's one connected story, the three lanes, and the four questions to ask of any cause. Decide ahead of time not to share your own politics tonight; let Scripture do the talking.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** what Scripture means by justice, and how to tell it from borrowed language.
- **The setting:** in the ancient Near East, justice usually meant whatever kept the powerful in power, and Israel's covenant law was revolutionary by comparison. Christians have not always gotten this right, but when they have, it changed the world: the early church took in abandoned infants, Wilberforce fought the slave trade, Douglass and Spurgeon rebuked churches that defended slavery, and King argued from God's law in a Birmingham jail. The record has a dark side too: many congregations defended slavery and segregation with Bibles open.
- **Key passages:** Micah 6:8, Leviticus 19:15, Matthew 23:23, James 2:15–17, and tonight's Amos 5:21–24 with Jeremiah 22:13–16.
- **The thread:** every person bears God's image (Genesis 1:27). Israel's law built justice into daily life through gleaning and the Jubilee; the prophets called worship without justice hollow; and of a king who defended the poor God asked, "Is this not what it means to know Me?" (Jeremiah 22:16). Jesus came "to preach good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18), and at the cross God showed Himself both just and the One who justifies the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:26).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Turning partisan.** The case study's last turn reverses the setting on purpose. Ask the group whether their answer changes, and why.
- **Impartial or protective.** Question 4. The chapter shows Scripture holding both: no favoritism (Leviticus 19:15), and gleaning and Jubilee for the poor.
- **Arguing over labels.** The chapter's counsel: ask what a specific proposal actually claims rather than judging it by its label.

Where Christians Differ

Christians agree that Scripture tells us how to treat the foreigner and differ on border policy; many also add unborn children to those who cannot speak for themselves. How much modern frameworks owe to particular thinkers is debated among thoughtful people. The chapter asks one thing of every side: test the cause by Scripture.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Amos 5:21–24 and Jeremiah 22:13–16 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 2** (Jeremiah 22 and knowing God) ties justice to the heart of discipleship.
- **Question 4** (impartial fairness and protective care) keeps both halves in view.
- **Question 7** (one vulnerable person in your community) makes it concrete.

If time is short, drop 1, 3, 6, 8, and 9. Question 5 is below.

The Hard Question

Question 5 asks which ditch we're closer to, complacency or co-option. It's really testing whether we can be honest about our own lean. Guide the group to Application Exercise 3's "harder part": running a cause you instinctively dislike through the same four tests, just as fairly. Then to Micah 6:8: act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly. All three, together.

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether a church can help the vulnerable without taking on a framework it doesn't share, then turns the question around twice. One follow-up question: "If the invitation came from the other side of the aisle, would your answer change? If so, why?"

Care Note

Someone in the room may have experienced injustice personally: racism, poverty, hardship as an immigrant, or being a victim of crime. Listen, thank them, and don't debate their experience.

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 3, the Cause Check, including a cause they instinctively dislike. Read Chapter 49.

Close

Pray Micah 6:8 back to God together: "He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you but to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" Invite the group to pray in their own words for the vulnerable people they named.

SESSION 49 • CHAPTER 49

Gender, Sexuality, and Pastoral Care

At a Glance

God's design for male and female is good and plain in Scripture, and the people who struggle are neighbors to love, not opponents to defeat. Truth and grace belong in the same conversation, because they meet in one Person, "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). This is the session most likely to touch someone in the room personally.

Prepare

Start with the chapter's own Word to Leaders, right under the objective. Read Isaiah 56:3–5 and Acts 8:26–39 twice. Know the five beats well enough to walk through them: show up, listen fully, name truth gently, offer a better identity, and keep walking together. Then pray as if someone in your group, or someone they love, is carrying this, because they may be.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** God's design for gender and sexuality, and how to care well for people who struggle.
- **The setting:** the early church's sexual ethic set it apart from the Roman world around it. In the West that ethic began to shift quickly after the 1960s. The chapter also owns that the church has at times answered people with contempt, mockery, or silence.
- **Key passages:** Genesis 1:27, Matthew 19:4–6, Psalm 139:13–16, and tonight's Isaiah 56:3–5 with Acts 8:26–39.
- **The thread:** all through Scripture marriage pictures God's covenant with His people, ending with the church as the Bride of Christ (Revelation 19). And Isaiah's promise to faithful eunuchs, "a name better than that of sons and daughters" (Isaiah 56:5), shows God's welcome for those who felt shut out.

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Debate mode.** Groups drift into arguing the culture instead of caring for people. Point to "The Real Battle, and the Real Enemy": the person who struggles isn't the enemy (Ephesians 6:12).
- **Confusing temptation with identity, or with sin itself.** The chapter's table answers this: temptation is not identity (James 1:14–15), and Jesus was tempted in every way, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15).
- **Fearing that grace means compromise, or that truth means cruelty.** That's the Two Ditches section. Let the group name which ditch they lean toward.

Where Christians Differ

The chapter holds the historic Christian view, and it states the affirming readings at full strength in "Reading the Hard Texts Fairly." Let the group engage those readings honestly and without caricature. But don't present this as an open, second-order question; the chapter doesn't.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Isaiah 56 and Acts 8 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 1** (the image of God and every person's dignity) sets the tone before anything else is said.
- **Question 2** (where do you carry brokenness?) reminds everyone the gospel asks everything of all of us. No one has to share an answer.
- **Question 8** (the person isn't the enemy) keeps the discussion from turning into a debate.

The Hard Question

Question 6 asks why a "no" without a bigger "yes" leads to despair. It's really testing whether the church is offering a family or only a rule. Guide toward the chapter's line that "a church that has only marriage to offer has little to offer anyone," and ask what your church actually offers a single person for the next thirty years.

Case Study Notes

The case tests the first conversation, not the whole plan. Ask, "What would you say in the first sixty seconds?" Then walk through the five beats. Hold the case's own guardrails: involve a pastor or experienced counselor, involve parents or guardians if the person is a minor, and act at once on any sign of self-harm.

Care Note

Keep every comment about people dignified. No jokes, no "those people." If someone discloses after the meeting, thank them, listen, and with their permission bring in your pastor. The exceptions in Part 1 still apply: abuse, a risk of self-harm, or harm to a minor is not a secret to keep. In the U.S., the 988 line is there day and night.

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, the Empathy and Truth Map, writing the empathy column first. Read Chapter 50.

Close

Read Psalm 139:13–14 aloud: "For You formed my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." Invite the group to pray in their own words for anyone carrying this, by name only if they choose.

SESSION 50 • CHAPTER 50

Creation Care and Environmental Stewardship

At a Glance

Caring for creation is a priestly calling: cultivate and keep, neither exploiting the earth nor worshipping it. Before creation is a resource, it's a worshipper, so join its song. God redeems what He made rather than throwing it away. The balance in three words: stewardship without idolatry. Keep the earth well, and share the gospel first.

Prepare

Read Psalm 104:10–30 twice, and Psalm 148. Look over the steward's job description and the two ditches. Be ready to keep the session out of politics and in Scripture.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** caring for God's creation as stewards, not owners.
- **The setting:** in 1967 an influential essay blamed the Christian idea of "dominion" for the ecological crisis. It overlooked centuries of Christian reflection the other way, from Basil of Caesarea's sermons on creation to Francis of Assisi's Canticle of the Sun and Calvin's picture of the world as a theater of God's glory. Francis Schaeffer answered in 1970, and in 2010 the worldwide Lausanne gathering in Cape Town gave the church a balanced statement.
- **Key passages:** Genesis 2:15, Psalm 24:1, Romans 8:19–21, Colossians 1:16–20, and tonight's Psalm 104:10–30.
- **The thread:** the land had its Sabbath; God's covenant after the Flood was "with every living creature" (Genesis 9:10); Isaiah saw the wolf lying down with the lamb. Creation waits to be "set free from its bondage to decay" (Romans 8:21), and Jesus spoke of "the renewal of all things" (Matthew 19:28).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **"It's all going to burn anyway."** The section by that name walks through 2 Peter 3, Romans 8, and Matthew 19:28.
- **Turning it into politics.** The chapter calls stewardship "a priestly calling, given at creation," not a stance borrowed from outside the faith.
- **Ranking creation above people.** Jesus' question settles the order: "Are you not much more valuable than they?" (Matthew 6:26).

Where Christians Differ

Christians differ on specific environmental policies, and on whether 2 Peter 3:10 describes this creation's renewal or its replacement (see Chapter 26). Hold those loosely and the calling to cultivate and keep firmly.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Psalm 104:10–30 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 1** (Psalm 148 and creation's praise) changes how people see a forest or a flock of birds.
- **Question 3** (dominion as priestly service) is the heart of the chapter.
- **Question 6** (noticing creation's glory) brings it into ordinary life.

If time is short, drop 2, 4, and 7. Question 5 is below.

The Hard Question

Question 5 asks how to answer "It's all going to burn anyway." It's really testing whether what we believe about the end shapes how we live now. Guide the group to Peter's own comparison with the Flood (2 Peter 3:5–7), which cleansed the earth rather than erasing it, to the new earth "where righteousness dwells" (3:13), and to the carol line: "He comes to make His blessings flow far as the curse is found."

Case Study Notes

The case puts both ditches into two church members, and each is getting something right. One follow-up question: "What is one thing both of them could gladly do together this year?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 2, a Psalm 148 Walk, without a phone. Read Chapter 51.

Close

Read Psalm 104:24 aloud: "How many are Your works, O LORD! In wisdom You have made them all; the earth is full of Your creatures." Invite the group to thank God in their own words for something in His world they saw this week.

SESSION 51 • CHAPTER 51

Mental Health, Psychology, and the Life of Faith

At a Glance

Faith and mental health belong together. Medicine and counseling are common grace, and the church's care does what medicine alone can't. God fed Elijah before He corrected him. Lament is worship, and darkness isn't proof that faith has failed. Thankfulness is medicine for discontent, not a diagnosis for every darkness.

Prepare

Read 1 Kings 19:1–18 twice. Read the chapter's Word to Leaders and the two ditches. Have local resources and the 988 number ready before the meeting. And pray as if someone in your group is struggling, because someone likely is.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** how faith and mental health care work together.
- **The setting:** for most of history the church was the main caregiver for the mentally ill, with methods ranging from compassionate to tragic. In the modern era a split opened between treating the mind as pure chemistry and treating every struggle as spiritual failure. Some of the church's most trusted leaders knew this darkness from the inside: Luther's seasons of anguish, Spurgeon's recurring depression, and Lewis's grief after his wife died.
- **Key passages:** Psalm 34:18, Psalm 42:5, Romans 8:26, Luke 5:31, and tonight's 1 Kings 19:1–18.
- **The thread:** David, Elijah, and Job all knew deep darkness, and God met them with bread, presence, and the Psalms. God even put a psalm that ends in the dark into His people's hymnbook (Psalm 88:18). Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick" (Luke 5:31), and He bears our griefs (Isaiah 53:4).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **"Just pray more," or "faith is irrelevant."** The two-ditches table: each gets something right, and each turns down part of the care God provides.
- **Prescribing gratitude.** The chapter is clear: thankfulness is medicine for discontent, not a diagnosis for every darkness. Sit with people first.
- **"Love yourself first."** "Love Your Neighbor as Yourself" shows that our love for others grows out of being loved first (1 John 4:19).

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · 1 Kings 19:1–18 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 2** (what God did for Elijah, in order) is the chapter's whole pattern for care.
- **Question 3** (Spurgeon, Lewis, and Luther) lifts shame for anyone who has struggled.
- **Question 7** (a group where people can say "I'm not okay") makes it practical.

If time is short, drop 1, 4, 5, and 8. Offer Question 5 for private reflection.

The Hard Question

Question 6 asks how to tell spiritual conviction, ordinary sadness, and an illness that needs medical care apart. It's really testing whether we will resist one-size explanations. Guide the group to the whole person, "spirit, soul, and body" (1 Thessalonians 5:23), and to the chapter's point that all three may need attention at once. When in doubt, refer, and keep caring.

Case Study Notes

The case tests correction with grace in both directions: the member who said "pray harder," and later the member who says "therapy is all I need." One follow-up question: "How would you stay close to the first member through both seasons?"

Care Note

This session may touch someone directly. If anyone speaks of self-harm or suicide, take it seriously and help them connect with care that same day; in the U.S., call or text 988, and stay with them until help arrives. You are not their therapist and don't need to be. Never discourage medication, and follow the confidentiality limits in Part 1.

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 3, Talking Back, privately. Leaders may want Application Exercise 1, Resource Mapping. Read Chapter 52.

Close

Read Psalm 42:5 aloud: "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why the unease within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him for the salvation of His presence." Leave a minute of quiet, then invite anyone who wants to pray in their own words.

SESSION 52 • CHAPTER 52

Deconstruction, Doubt, and Faith Transitions

At a Glance

Honest doubt brings its questions to God and stays in the conversation; unbelief treats the tension as a verdict already reached. Jesus met Thomas with His wounds, not with shame. Many people walk away from a church that hurt them rather than from Christ, so own the church's share. A faith resting on a church, a leader, or tidy answers will shake; point past the bride to the Groom.

Prepare

Read Psalm 73 twice. Read the chapter's Word to Leaders, "When the Church Is the Wound," and "Walking with a Friend Who Is Deconstructing." Pray for anyone in or near your group who is questioning, and for families whose loved ones have walked away.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** doubt, deconstruction, and how to walk with people through faith transitions.
- **The setting:** "deconstruction" began in the 1960s as a way of reading texts and around 2018–2020 became shorthand for taking apart the faith one grew up with. The pattern isn't new: a 2019 LifeWay study found that about two in three young adults who attended church regularly as teens stopped attending for at least a year between 18 and 22. Scripture and the church have long made room for doubt, from Thomas and Asaph to the "dark night of the soul."
- **Key passages:** Mark 9:24, Jude 22–23, John 20:27, John 6:68, and tonight's Psalm 73.
- **The thread:** Job received the Who rather than the why. Asaph nearly slipped "until I entered God's sanctuary" (Psalm 73:17). Hosea's God kept pursuing an unfaithful bride (Hosea 2:20), and "if we are faithless, He remains faithful" (2 Timothy 2:13). And the faith rests on an event: "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile" (1 Corinthians 15:17), but He has been.

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Treating all doubt as sin, or all deconstruction as brave.** The two-ditches table, with Jude's command: "have mercy on those who doubt" (Jude 22).
- **Defending the church first.** The chapter's counsel: don't start by defending the bride. Ask who they were really trusting.
- **Trying to win in one night.** The Word to Leaders: resist the urge. Slow is usually faster here.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Psalm 73 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 2** ("I do believe; help my unbelief!") gives permission to be honest.
- **Question 3** (honest doubt or settled unbelief) is the key distinction.
- **Question 7** (a group where hard questions are safe) is the practical goal.

If time is short, drop 1, 4, 5, and 6. Question 4 is tender; offer it, never press it.

The Hard Question

Question 8 asks where our faith has rested on a person, a church, or a set of answers instead of on Jesus. It's really testing our own foundations, not someone else's. Go first. Guide the group to 1 Corinthians 3:11, "no one can lay a foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ," and to Peter's answer when others walked away: "Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether we can keep a friendship open without pretending to agree or turning every conversation into a debate. Start by understanding whether your friend carries mostly a wound, mostly questions, or both. One follow-up question: "What would keeping the friendship warm look like next month, in practical terms?"

Care Note

Some in the room may carry church hurt or spiritual abuse, and some may have children or friends who have left the faith. If someone describes spiritual abuse, involve your pastor. Don't predict how anyone's story will end. Keep praying, and keep the door open.

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 2, a Lament of Doubt, or Application Exercise 3, Doubt Your Doubts. Read Chapter 53.

Close

Pray Mark 9:24 together: "I do believe; help my unbelief!" Then read John 6:68 aloud, and invite the group to pray in their own words, by name, for anyone they love who is questioning.

SESSION 53 • CHAPTER 53

Technology, Social Media, and the Attention Economy

At a Glance

Our tools shape us, and the attention economy is built to make stillness feel like wasted time. The screen puts John's three old desires, of the flesh, of the eyes, and the pride of life, in our pocket. A phone is neither neutral nor demonic; it needs to be discipled. Reclaim solitude, keep a Sabbath from the feed, guard your eyes, and build habits together.

Prepare

Read Luke 10:38–42 and Matthew 6:1–6 twice. Look over the table of three desires and the two ditches. Check your own screen time before the meeting so you can speak honestly. The chapter's paragraph on lust is frank; plan to handle it with care and without asking anyone to confess in the group.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** technology, social media, and how the attention economy shapes our hearts.
- **The setting:** the printing press served the Reformation, but every tool also shapes its users: "We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us." Every new medium has stirred alarm, from novels to comic books to television, and some of those warnings were overblown. The smartphone era is different in scale; researchers have documented rising anxiety and depression among teens since the early 2010s, while still debating how much phones are the cause.
- **Key passages:** 1 John 2:15–17, Psalm 46:10, Romans 12:2, Psalm 119:37, and tonight's Luke 10:38–42 with Matthew 6:1–6.
- **The thread:** the tree in Eden was "good for food," "pleasing to the eyes," and "desirable for obtaining wisdom" (Genesis 3:6), the same three desires John names (1 John 2:16). Jesus faced all three in the wilderness and stood where Adam fell (Matthew 4:1–11). He "frequently withdrew to the wilderness to pray" (Luke 5:16), and Job made "a covenant with my eyes" (Job 31:1).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Moral panic, or "it's just a tool."** The two-ditches table: each gets something right. The chapter's middle path is a phone that's discipled.
- **Rules without the heart.** Colossians 2:23: restrictions alone "are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh." Pair limits with the Word and with people.
- **Shame about lust.** The chapter's word: "you're not beyond grace, and you shouldn't fight it alone. Tell someone you trust."

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Luke 10:38–42 and Matthew 6:1–6 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 1** (Pascal and sitting quietly) is a gentle, honest way in.
- **Question 4** (the part of your spiritual life no one sees) is the heart of Matthew 6.
- **Question 8** (which of the three desires your phone feeds) makes it personal.

If time is short, drop 3, 5, and 6. Question 7 makes a good closing commitment.

The Hard Question

Question 2 asks people to place one digital habit on the Psalm 1:1 ladder: walking past, lingering, or settled in. It's really testing whether we'll be honest about where a habit actually sits. Go first with one of your own. Then guide the group to the hopeful part: Jesus answered each temptation with the Word, and "the world is passing away, along with its desires; but whoever does the will of God remains forever" (1 John 2:17).

Case Study Notes

The case tests pastoral care for a family, not only a screen-time rule, and the chapter itself asks for a doctor or counselor because the anxiety is severe (see Chapter 51). One follow-up question: "What shared habits could the parents adopt themselves first, so the rule of life belongs to the whole family?"

Care Note

Some may be fighting pornography or other content that feeds lust; never ask for confession in the group, and offer to talk privately or connect them with your pastor. If a teen's anxiety or self-image is severe, encourage medical or counseling help.

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 2, the 24-Hour Digital Sabbath, and journaling what was hard. Read Chapter 54.

Close

Pray Psalm 119:37 together: "Turn my eyes away from worthless things; revive me with Your word." Then read Psalm 46:10, "Be still and know that I am God," and keep a full minute of silence before you pray.

SESSION 54 • CHAPTER 54

The Cloud of Witnesses: A Panoramic View of Church History

At a Glance

Church history runs on two threads at once: what the Spirit has built, and how people, including God's people, have failed. It is neither a golden age to idealize nor a cautionary tale to dismiss. Resist chronological snobbery, read old books, and tell the story whole. The church is still here, and the whole cloud of witnesses is running toward the same Jesus.

Prepare

Read Hebrews 11:32–12:2 twice. Study the two-thread timeline and the Crusades test case. Choose one witness from church history you love, and be ready to introduce them in a minute.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** the church's two-thousand-year story, told honestly.
- **The setting:** the chapter's timeline runs from Pentecost through the persecuted church, the councils, the medieval church, the Reformation, the awakenings and the modern missionary movement, to today's global church. In every era the Spirit built and people failed, the reformers included. Today most of the world's Christians live in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and millions face serious persecution.
- **Key passages:** Hebrews 12:1–2, Matthew 16:18, Acts 5:38–39, 1 Corinthians 10:11–12, and tonight's Hebrews 11:32–40.
- **The thread:** Hebrews 11 traces the witnesses from Abel to the prophets, and God has always kept a faithful remnant (Isaiah 10:20–22). Gamaliel warned, "if it is from God, you will not be able to stop them" (Acts 5:39), and Jesus promised, "the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). Two thousand years have tested both.

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **A golden age, or a "dark" age.** Chronological snobbery runs both ways. The two-thread timeline corrects both.
- **Hero worship or cynicism.** The chapter's "Five Errors to Avoid" names both, and reminds us that Scripture doesn't paint David or Peter without flaws.
- **Passing along myths.** Many famous quotes were never said, and Constantine didn't pick the books. Check before you share.

Where Christians Differ

Christians read Galatians 6:16, "the Israel of God," in more than one way, as the chapter notes. And every tradition tells the church's story a little differently; the chapter warns against tunnel vision and includes Eastern, Catholic, Anabaptist, and Global South believers in the cloud.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Hebrews 11:32–40 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 2** (which thread you assumed was the whole story) reveals our starting point.
- **Question 3** (Polycarp's simple answer) makes long faithfulness feel within reach.
- **Question 7** (your own cloud of witnesses) lets people share the saints who shaped them.

If time is short, drop 1, 5, and 6.

The Hard Question

Question 4 asks which failure in the timeline looks most like a temptation the church faces today. It's really testing whether we can see ourselves in the failures instead of feeling superior to them. Guide the group to Paul: those failures "were written down as warnings for us… So the one who thinks he is standing firm should be careful not to fall" (1 Corinthians 10:11–12). Even the reformers persecuted others.

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether we can admit the church's failures honestly and still tell the whole story. Telling it whole means neither defending all of it nor apologizing for all of it. One follow-up question: "What is one thing true in what your coworker said that you could admit right away?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 3, One Old Book, for the month ahead. Read Chapter 55.

Close

Read Hebrews 12:1–2 aloud: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off every encumbrance and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with endurance the race set out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith…" Invite the group to thank God in their own words for the witnesses who passed the faith to them.

SESSION 55 • CHAPTER 55

The Global Body of Christ: Learning from the Majority World

At a Glance

Christianity's center of gravity has moved to the Global South, and that's good news; the faith was never a Western religion to begin with. The Western church needs what the Majority World church carries, and giving flows both ways. Read Jesus' seven letters as a mirror, starting with your own church. And pray for the persecuted church by name.

Prepare

Read Revelation 2:8–11 and 3:14–22 twice. Look over the seven-letters table and the two-way exchange table. Bring the name of a persecuted church or region to pray for; a resource like Operation World can help.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** the worldwide church, and what we can give and receive.
- **The setting:** in 1900 about 82% of Christians lived in the Global North; today about 67% live in the Global South. The gospel reached North Africa, Ethiopia, Persia, and India in the church's first centuries, and much of that ancient church shrank under Islamic rule from the 630s on. In Uganda young believers were martyred in 1885–87, and the church there grew. By 2024 there were more than 700 million Christians in Africa alone.
- **Key passages:** Acts 1:8, 1 Corinthians 12:21–26, 2 Corinthians 8:13–14, Revelation 7:9, and tonight's Revelation 2:8–11 with 3:14–22.
- **The thread:** all nations will stream to the mountain of the LORD (Isaiah 2:2); "all the families of the earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3); Pentecost answered Babel in every tongue. An Ethiopian was baptized before Paul ever reached Europe (Acts 8), and Paul went to Macedonia only because the Spirit closed other doors (Acts 16:6–10).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **Romanticizing, or paternalism.** "Five Errors to Avoid" names both: the Majority World church has its own struggles, and partnership flows both ways.
- **Using the seven letters to label others.** The chapter is plain: they are "a mirror for every church in every age, starting with ours."
- **"Too charismatic," or "uneducated."** That's the case study. Hold the unity of the Spirit with the diversity of cultures.

Where Christians Differ

Christians differ on the Spirit's gifts today, and the chapter notes it. Wherever a teaching sounds like the prosperity gospel, weigh it by Scripture, in any culture, including our own (see Chapter 40).

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · Revelation 2:8–11 and 3:14–22 side by side (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5).

Start Here

- **Question 1** (your picture of a "typical Christian") widens the room right away.
- **Question 2** (the "Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist") is searching for a comfortable church.
- **Question 3** (which of the seven churches yours resembles) uses the letters as a mirror.

If time is short, drop 5 through 8. Question 4 is below.

The Hard Question

Question 4 asks why the two churches Jesus doesn't rebuke are the poor and weak ones. It's really testing whether comfort has blinded us, as it blinded Laodicea: "You say, 'I am rich… and need nothing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked" (Revelation 3:17). Guide the group to Jesus' counsel in the next verse: "buy from Me gold refined by fire."

Case Study Notes

The case tests whether a congregation can appreciate the global body without either dismissing it or swallowing everything it hears. Weigh what sounds like the prosperity gospel by Scripture, without dismissing the whole church the speaker represents. One follow-up question: "What could your church gladly receive from this speaker?"

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 2, Praying the Global Church, every day for a month. Read Chapter 56.

Close

Read Psalm 67:3–4 aloud: "Let the peoples praise You, O God; let all the peoples praise You. Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for You judge the peoples justly and lead the nations of the earth." Then pray by name for the persecuted church you brought.

SESSION 56 • CHAPTER 56

Death, the Intermediate State, and the Hope of Resurrection

At a Glance

Christians grieve, as Jesus wept at Lazarus's tomb, but not like those without hope. A believer who dies is with Christ, and the resurrection of the body is certain. On the hardest questions, such as suicide, children who die, and those who never heard, Scripture comes first, hope second, and humility third. The anchor is the finished work of Christ. And for a group finishing the whole book, this is a trailhead, not a summit.

Prepare

Read 1 Corinthians 15:35–58 and John 11:17–44 twice. Read the table of hard questions and "Jesus Wept: Caring for the Grieving." Know who in your group is grieving. If this is your final session, plan a few extra minutes to give thanks, read part of the Closing Word, and talk about what comes next.

Lay of the Land (8 minutes)

Talking notes for the opening, so no one is lost for not having read.

- **The topic:** death, what happens between death and resurrection, and the hope of the resurrection body.
- **The setting:** the early church stood apart from Greek thought that despised the body and from the Sadducees who denied the resurrection. The Reformation rejected purgatory and indulgences as later additions. Even the word cemetery tells the story: it comes from a Greek word for "sleeping place," because Christians buried their dead expecting them to wake.
- **Key passages:** Philippians 1:21–23, 2 Corinthians 5:8, 1 Thessalonians 4:13, Romans 8:39, and tonight's 1 Corinthians 15:35–58.
- **The thread:** "I know that my Redeemer lives" (Job 19:25); "many who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake" (Daniel 12:2). Jesus answered the Sadducees from the burning bush: "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to Him all are alive" (Luke 20:38). And the risen Lord says, "I hold the keys of Death and of Hades" (Revelation 1:18).

Where Groups Get Stuck

- **First-day platitudes.** "At least she's with Jesus" can wound even when it's true. The chapter starts where Romans 12:15 starts: weep with those who weep.
- **Building on near-death stories.** The hard-questions table: don't mock people's experiences, and don't build doctrine on them. Scripture is enough.
- **Too much certainty, or none.** The table models Scripture first, hope second, humility third, and names what we entrust to God.

Where Christians Differ

Most of the church has taught conscious presence with Christ after death; some, including Seventh-day Adventists and other Protestant scholars, believe the dead sleep until the resurrection. Catholic teaching holds to purgatory, and Protestants read Hebrews 10:14 differently. Christians also differ about those who never heard. All agree the believer is safe in Christ and the resurrection is certain.

Session Flow (90 minutes)

Welcome (10) · Lay of the Land (8) · 1 Corinthians 15:35–58 (15) · Discuss (37) · Case Study (15) · Close (5). If this is your group's final session, take five minutes from Discuss to give thanks for the journey and name next steps.

Start Here

- **Question 1** ("Do you believe this?") lets everyone answer Jesus Himself.
- **Question 4** (Jesus wept) gives grieving people permission to grieve.
- **Question 3** ("to Him all are alive") speaks to everyone who has lost a believer.

If time is short, drop 2, 5, 7, and 8.

The Hard Question

Question 6 asks which hard question touches your life most directly. It's really testing whether we can hold Scripture's confidence and its silence together. Don't press anyone to explain their loss. Guide the group to the chapter's entrust test and to Abraham's question: "Will not the Judge of all the earth do what is right?" (Genesis 18:25).

Case Study Notes

Maria's case tests whether the group can offer real hope about her daughter (2 Samuel 12:23; Matthew 19:14) and answer her harder questions with humility and grace. Comfort before content. One follow-up question: "What would you say to her first, and what would you wait to say?"

Care Note

This session will touch people who are grieving, including some who have lost someone to suicide or lost a child. Speak tenderly and don't hurry anyone. If anyone is struggling with thoughts of ending their life, follow the safety steps in Part 1; in the U.S., call or text 988. Follow up during the week with anyone who grieved openly.

Before Next Week

Suggest Application Exercise 1, the One-Paragraph Gospel of Death. If your group has finished its track, see Part 3 for planning the next season, and encourage each person to pass on what they've learned to one other person.

Close

Read John 11:25–26 aloud: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me will live, even though he dies. And everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" Then close with the book's own doxology, Ephesians 3:20–21: "Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen."

PART 3

Leader Resources

Tender Sessions at a Glance

These sessions include a Care Note. Read it before you lead, and think about who in your group it may touch. The most tender are marked.

Session	What may surface	Most tender
13. Turning Around: Repentance and Faith	Shame; loss of a loved one to suicide	●
19. The Gospel and the Table We Share	Experiences of racism or exclusion	
20. Forgiveness and Reconciliation	Abuse, betrayal, and unforgiven wounds	●
21. Marriage, Family, Singleness, and Holiness	Hard marriages, divorce, singleness, infertility, abuse at home	
22. Raising Children Who Know and Love God	Prodigal children, childlessness, painful childhoods	●
24. Stewardship and Generosity	Debt and financial hardship	
26. Hope That Holds: Resurrection, Judgment, and the New Creation	Grief for loved ones who died without professing faith; fear of the end times	
27. Faith Under Fire: Suffering and the Faithfulness of God	Fresh grief, chronic illness, long darkness	●
30. Putting It Into Practice: Scripture Study Practicum	Illness touched by a disputed passage	
31. Testing What You Hear: Teachers, Prophecy, and Experiences	Hurt from failed prophecies or blame	
33. Healthy Authority, Harmful Control	Spiritual harm from controlling leaders	●
36. Prayer: Bold, Dependent, and Surrendered	Long-unanswered prayer	
37. Healing, Suffering, and Faithful Care	Chronic illness; shame from “not enough faith” teaching	●
38. Deliverance, Inner Healing, and Wise Pastoral Care	Harmful deliverance sessions, trauma, family occult history	●
39. Spiritual Warfare: The Armor of God	Addiction	
40. Money, Contentment, and the Prosperity Gospel	Money given under pressure	
44. Women in Ministry: Reading Carefully, Honoring Faithfully	Women dismissed in church; pressure on men from both sides	
45. Faith and Daily Life: Vocation, Work, and the Glory of God	Unemployment, retirement, caregiving	
48. Biblical Justice vs. Secular Justice	Personal experiences of injustice	
49. Gender, Sexuality, and Pastoral Care	Gender and sexuality struggles, in someone present or someone they love	●
51. Mental Health, Psychology, and the Life of Faith	Depression, anxiety, thoughts of self-harm	●
52. Deconstruction, Doubt, and Faith Transitions	Church hurt; loved ones who have left the faith	●
53. Technology, Social Media, and the Attention Economy	Struggles with lust; anxiety in teens	
56. Death, the Intermediate State, and the Hope of Resurrection	Grief, including loss of a child or loss to suicide	●

Safety and Referral Checklist

Keep this page where you can find it. Most leaders will never need it in a crisis; every leader should know it before they do.

Before your season begins

- ☐ Know how to reach your pastor, and when to call.
- ☐ Get a copy of your church's safeguarding and reporting policy, and read it.
- ☐ Keep a short list of trusted local Christian counselors and doctors.
- ☐ Save the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline in your phone (call or text 988 in the U.S.).

In the moment

- ☐ Listen, and believe the person enough to take it seriously.
- ☐ If anyone is in immediate danger, call 911 or your local emergency number.
- ☐ If someone may harm themselves, call or text 988 together, and stay with them until help is there.
- ☐ If a child or vulnerable adult may be at risk, follow your church's policy and report it to the authorities.
- ☐ Never promise secrecy you can't keep. Abuse, a risk of self-harm, or harm to a minor is not a secret to keep.

Afterward

- ☐ Tell your pastor, the same day if it's serious.
- ☐ Follow up with the person during the week.
- ☐ Record what your church's policy asks you to record, and nothing more.
- ☐ Pray, and let someone pray for you. You weren't meant to carry this alone.

Important numbers

Pastor: _____ Church office: _____

Counselor: _____ 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: call or text 988

Child abuse hotline (your state): _____ Emergency: 911

Index of the Hard Questions

Every session names one hard question and what it is really testing. Use this index to see the shape of a whole track, or to find a session for a question your group is already asking.

Session	Question	What it's really testing
1	2	Whether we come to Scripture to be confirmed or to be corrected
2	5	Whether we'll apply it to our own
3	4	Whether we'll turn the lamp on ourselves
4	3	Whether we'll let Jesus' reading of the Old Testament govern ours, rather than our cleverness or our skepticism
5	5	Whether we'll accept that we, too, can be sincere, moved, confident, and wrong
6	5	Whether we can hold two things at once: a promise like Jeremiah 29:11 wasn't first written to us, and it still reaches us through Christ
7	3	Whether we can be fair to people who resist doctrine
8	5	Whether our confidence can survive honest history, including the messy parts
9	2	Whether Scripture is our authority where it costs us something
10	5	Whether we'll let Scripture correct our picture of God, even when that picture came from real hurt
11	2	Whether we actually rest
12	3	Whether we believe Jesus understands us, not only that He forgives us
13	6	Whether we trust God with the people we love, or try to argue and pressure them into turning
14	4	Whether our convictions are held in love
15	3	Whether we can recognize performance in our own hearts
16	5	Whether we see baptism as allegiance: being handed over to a new Owner
17	3	Whether we believe our relationships with one another are part of our relationship with Christ
18	2	Whether we can listen to people who have been hurt by the church without defending the institution or excusing the drift
19	2	Whether we can see our own blind spots the way Peter couldn't see his
20	2	Whether we understand grace
21	6	Whether we will name our idols, including good things like a spouse, children, or the hope of marriage
22	6	Two things: whether our homes and churches hinder children without meaning to, and whether we ourselves still receive God like a child
23	6	Whether we can admit we've settled into maintenance without sliding into guilt
24	5	Whether we trust God's provision with real numbers, not just in principle
25	4	Whether we bring our whole selves to God or only the polished parts
26	4	Whether we can hold judgment as both good news and sober truth
27	3	Whether we can hold real pain and real purpose without minimizing either
28	3	Whether we value what's visible over what's formed
29	3	Whether we can let a passage that doesn't fit our view stand without explaining it away
30	1	Whether we can see our own assumptions
31	2	Whether we can admit we've been misled without shame
32	4	Whether we sort our own convictions as honestly as we sort other people's
33	3	Whether we can understand people who stayed under control, rather than judge them

Session	Question	What it's really testing
34	7	Whether we can look honestly at our own church and experience without either paranoia or denial
35	3	Whether we quietly rank ourselves and others by gifts
36	3	Whether our trust in God can survive "no" and "not yet." Don't try to explain anyone's unanswered prayer
37	1	Whether we can hold "God heals" and "not everyone is healed" without letting go of either
38	3	Whether we can resist making every struggle spiritual, or every struggle medical
39	7	Whether we'll name the lie under our own stronghold
40	1	Whether we can understand the hope behind a false teaching instead of mocking it
41	7	Whether we can see the temptation in ourselves, not only in people on the other side
42	4	Whether we hold our own favorite versions to the same standard we hold others', and whether we can talk about a Bible someone loves without contempt
43	7	Whether we love what God has said more than any experience, including our own favorite ones
44	3	Whether we use the same method everywhere, or only where it helps our side
45	3	Whether we can be honest without sliding into perfectionism
46	5	Whether we will keep both
47	8	The last row of love's checklist, the one the chapter says we skip
48	5	Whether we can be honest about our own lean
49	6	Whether the church is offering a family or only a rule
50	5	Whether what we believe about the end shapes how we live now
51	6	Whether we will resist one-size explanations
52	8	Our own foundations, not someone else's
53	2	Whether we'll be honest about where a habit actually sits
54	4	Whether we can see ourselves in the failures instead of feeling superior to them
55	4	Whether comfort has blinded us, as it blinded Laodicea: "You say, 'I am rich… and need nothing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked" (Revelation 3:17)
56	6	Whether we can hold Scripture's confidence and its silence together

Planning Your Season

The book's "Planning a Course" page offers six sixteen-week tracks. Every track opens with the five Foundations and closes with Chapter 47. Choose one, or build your own the same way, then fill in the planner below.

Track	Weeks 6–15
New in the Faith	9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18
Discernment and a Healthy Church	7, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 38, 40, 42, 43
Life Together: Church, Marriage, and Family	18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 33, 36
Spirit-Filled and Grounded	25, 28, 29, 31, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 43
Faith in the Real World	26, 27, 41, 45, 46, 48, 49, 51, 52, 53
Hope in Hard Seasons	10, 20, 26, 27, 36, 37, 51, 52, 54, 56

Only have twelve weeks? Teach Chapters 1 and 2 together, ask the group to read 3–5 at home, and pick eight chapters instead of ten.

Season Planner

Group: _____ Track: _____ Meeting length: _____

Week	Date	Session	Who opens	Care Note?	Notes
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
8					
9					
10					
11					
12					
13					
14					
15					
16					

Questions Leaders Ask

What if most people haven't read the chapter?

That's what the Lay of the Land is for. Give the five-to-eight-minute recap, read the passage aloud, and start the discussion. Then gently encourage reading for next week. Never shame anyone for not reading.

What if I'm asked something I can't answer?

Say, "I don't know. Let's find out," and bring something back next week. It models the humility the book is trying to teach, and it's more trustworthy than a guess.

What if someone disagrees with the book?

Thank them, and go back to the text together. On a second-order question, let both views be stated at their best (Table L). On a first-order question, be clear and kind. The goal is a group that can disagree and still love each other.

What if one person dominates the discussion?

Try "Let's hear from someone who hasn't spoken yet." If it continues, talk with them privately and kindly, and ask for their help drawing others out.

What if the discussion turns political?

Bring it back to the passage: "Where do you see that in the text?" Several sessions (19, 41, 48) include specific guidance. Keep your own politics out of the room.

Can we skip chapters, or take two weeks on one?

Yes. The book's "Planning a Course" page offers six sixteen-week tracks, and the planner in this part helps you lay out a season. If a chapter needs two weeks, take two.

What if someone discloses abuse, danger, or thoughts of self-harm?

Follow the Safety, Referral, and Reporting steps in Part 1 and the checklist in this part. Don't wait, and don't carry it alone.

What if someone new joins in the middle of a track?

Welcome them, give them a copy of the book and journal, and point them to the Lay of the Land notes. They can read the Foundations (Chapters 1–5) on their own as they go.

Do I need to use every part of each session guide?

No. Read it all as you prepare, then use what serves your group. Each session is timed for 90 minutes; in a shorter meeting, the Case Study is the first thing to drop.

Where can I get more copies of this guide?

Churches and small groups using the book may download, print, and share this guide with their leaders at no charge.