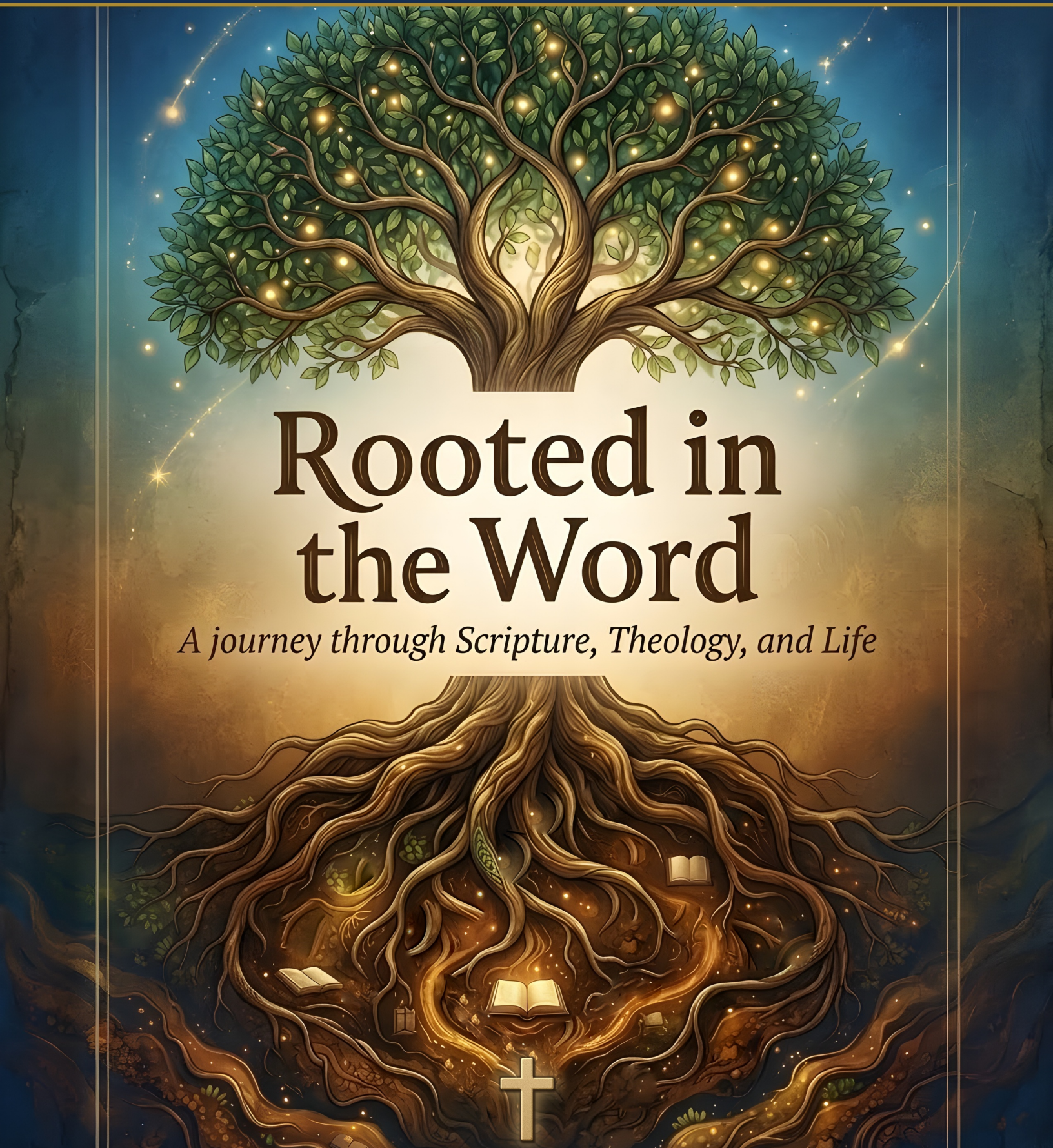
PARTICIPANT JOURNAL



Rooted in the Word

A journey through Scripture, Theology, and Life

by Brian K. Bauer

Rooted in the Word

A Journey through Scripture, Theology, and Life

PARTICIPANT JOURNAL

Room to write for every chapter: discussion questions, Scripture exercises, application exercises, and case studies

Brian K. Bauer

Rooted in the Word: Participant Journal

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How to Use This Journal

This journal goes with *Rooted in the Word*. The guide does the teaching; this is where you do the writing. Every discussion question, Scripture exercise, application exercise, and case study from the guide is here, with room to answer.

You don't need to fill every line. Write enough that you'll remember what you saw in the text and where God put His finger on something in your life. A sentence is plenty. Some weeks a single word is plenty.

Bring it to group. Your notes are where the best conversations start, and over a season they become a record you can come back to: what God was teaching you, and when.

Your group may be working through one of the tracks in "Planning a Course" rather than all fifty-six chapters. That's fine. Every chapter starts on a new page, so just turn to the chapter your group is studying.

And keep it honest. Nobody grades this. It's between you and the Lord, and whoever you choose to share it with.

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

CHAPTER 1

Foundation 1 — How to Read the Bible Well

Inductive Bible Study

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to approach any passage of Scripture using three simple movements — observing what it says, interpreting what it means, and applying what it asks of you. None of the three is optional, and skipping straight to application is the mistake I've watched trip up more sincere readers than any other. Think of it less as a technique to master and more as a posture of humility before God's Word. And it starts, before any of the three movements, with a simple prayer asking God to open your eyes to see what's actually there (Psalm 119:18).

Discussion Questions

1. When you read the Bible, what is your usual approach? Do you tend to read quickly for comfort, or slowly for understanding — and why?

2. What is the difference between reading the Bible to find what you already believe, and reading it to discover what God is actually saying?

3. The Bereans in Acts 17 examined the Scriptures daily. What would it look like for you to build that kind of habit?

4. What is one passage you have read many times but feel you may not fully understand? What questions does it raise for you?

5. Do you think of careful Bible reading as an act of worship, or more like an academic exercise? What's the difference, in your experience?

Scripture Exercise

Read James 1:19–27 together as a group. Begin with a brief prayer asking God to open your eyes to what's in the text (Psalm 119:18) — this isn't a formality, it's dependence. Then spend five minutes simply observing — write down everything you notice: repeated words, commands, contrasts, images. Then spend five minutes interpreting — what is the main point James is making? Finally, spend five minutes applying — what is one specific thing this passage is asking you to do this week? Share your observations with the group.

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — The Three-Movement Journal

This week, choose one short passage (4–6 verses) on three days. For each one, write three short lines, not full entries: (1) Observation — What's one thing you notice? A repeated word, a command, an image. (2) Interpretation — What's the main point, even in a fragment? (3) Application — What does it ask of you? One word can be enough — "wait," "confess," "call her." Use whatever's already in your hand — a phone note, a Bible margin, a napkin. Bring one line to the next chapter, not a full entry. Don't wait until you have something impressive to share. The plain lines are usually the useful ones.

Application Exercise 2 — The Berean Challenge

Choose one teaching you heard this week — podcast, sermon, book, or social media. Pick just one Scripture reference the teacher leaned on and read its surrounding paragraph. Ask: Does the passage actually say what the teacher claimed? Answer in a sentence or two — written, texted to a friend, or said out loud to someone. The point here isn't suspicion; it's a love for truth. From the outside the two can look identical, since both slow down and check the sources. What tells them apart is the heart behind the checking.

Case Study

A newer believer in your group has started reading one verse a day from a phone app, and he treats whatever jumps out as God's word for that day. This week it was Joshua 1:8: "For then you will prosper and succeed in all you do." He's convinced it means the business he's about to launch with most of his savings can't fail. His hunger for God is real, and you don't want to crush it. But you also don't want to watch him build a major decision on half a verse. Using Psalm 119:18, Joshua 1:8, and Acts 17:11, discuss: What would careful observation notice in Joshua 1:8 that he skipped? How could you walk him through interpretation before application without making him feel foolish? What might this verse actually be asking of him this week?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 2

Foundation 2 — Reading Scripture in Its Own Voice

Exegesis and Hermeneutics

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to read any verse in its own setting — its sentence, its paragraph, its book, its genre, and its author's purpose — and to keep asking the question at the heart of this chapter: am I hearing the text, or myself? You'll also learn to spot one of the most common ways Scripture gets misused: lifting a line out of its setting to win an argument. Take a verse you've probably heard used to shut down almost any moral evaluation: "Do not judge, or you will be judged" (Matthew 7:1). Now put it next to what the same Jesus says a few chapters later: "Stop judging by outward appearances, and start judging justly" (John 7:24). Two commands, same Teacher. A verse lifted out of its setting can be made to say almost anything, which is exactly the danger.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever heard a Bible verse used in a way that felt disconnected from what the passage was actually about? What happened?

2. What does it mean to let Scripture interpret Scripture? Can you think of an example?

3. Why is it important to ask, "What did this mean to the original audience?" before asking, "What does this mean to me?"

4. How does knowing the genre of a passage (poetry, prophecy, letter, history) change how you read it?

5. What are the dangers of building a major belief on a single verse taken out of context?

Scripture Exercise

Step 1: The Target Scripture

Philippians 4:13: “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.”

Step 2: Observation & Historical Context

Before looking at the meaning, look at the historical setting. Paul wrote this letter from a Roman prison.

Question 1: Who is writing this letter, where is he physically located, and what is he experiencing?

Question 2: Circle the phrase “all things.” Looking strictly at verse 13 by itself, what boundaries or limits does the text explicitly place on that phrase?

Step 3: Literary Context (The Surrounding Verses)

To find out what “all things” means, expand the field of vision to the immediate paragraph.

Philippians 4:11–12: “I am not saying this out of need, for I have learned to be content regardless of my circumstances. I know how to live humbly, and I know how to abound. In any and every situation I have learned the secret of being filled and being hungry, of having plenty and having need.”

Question 3: In verses 11 and 12, what specific situations or life circumstances does the author explicitly list? Group them into opposites.

Question 4: What is the specific skill or attitude the author claims he had to “learn” while facing these extreme highs and lows?

Question 5: Connect verse 12 directly to verse 13. Based on the list of hardships and abundances the author just named, what is the grammatical anchor for “all things”?

Step 4: Synthesis & True Meaning

Question 6: Based on your answers above, is verse 13 a promise for achieving personal ambitions (like winning a trophy or landing a promotion), or is it a promise for enduring difficult circumstances and situations? Explain your reasoning.

Question 7: How does knowing the author was hungry and imprisoned change the way we understand the “strength” Christ provides in this verse?

Step 5: Hermeneutical Application

Question 8: Contrast the cultural use of this verse (e.g., printed on athletic gear or motivational posters) with the actual biblical context. What is the danger of using this verse as a guarantee for personal success?

Question 9: How can you practically rely on Christ’s strength the next time you face a season of lack, disappointment, or unexpected suffering?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Genre Identification

This week, read one chapter from each of the following genres: (1) a Psalm (poetry), (2) a passage from one of Paul's letters (epistle), and (3) a narrative passage from the Gospels. For each, write one sentence describing how the genre shaped the way you read it. Bring your observations to the next chapter. For a quick-reference guide to biblical genres and the literary devices Scripture's authors used, see Table C and Table D in the Appendix.

Application Exercise 2 — Context Rescue

Jeremiah 29:11 — "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, to give you a future and a hope" — is one of the most quoted verses in the Bible. Read Jeremiah 29:1–14 together. Who was God speaking to? What was their situation? What was He actually promising? How does understanding the context change — or deepen — the meaning of verse 11 for us today?

Case Study

Your small group is talking through something hard. One member gently raises a concern about a choice another member shared, and the room goes quiet. Then someone says, "Jesus said, 'Do not judge.' That settles it." A few people nod with relief. You don't want to win a point at anyone's expense, but you also know that verse is being asked to carry more than its setting allows. Using Matthew 7:1, John 7:24, and 2 Timothy 2:15, discuss: What kind of judging is Jesus forbidding in Matthew 7:1, read in its own paragraph? How do Matthew 7:1 and John 7:24 fit together without contradicting each other? How could you raise this in the moment so it sounds like an invitation to read together, not a correction?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 3

Foundation 3 — The World Behind the Words

Historical-Cultural Backgrounds

By the end of this chapter, you will appreciate how knowing the historical and cultural world of the Bible helps you understand what God was actually saying — and you'll see that the same historical record, recovered piece by piece over the last two centuries of archaeology, has repeatedly confirmed rather than undermined the Bible's own account. I want to name the risk up front: background can illuminate a text or it can quietly hijack it. Learn to use it as a lamp, not a lens. When background illuminates, you understand the text more deeply. When it hijacks, you stop reading what God said and start reading what the culture allows Him to have meant. That difference matters a great deal, and this chapter will help you guard it. The goal is to shed light on parts of Scripture we might not fully see or appreciate without understanding the world it was first given to.

Discussion Questions

1. How does knowing that Paul wrote his letters to specific churches with specific problems help you understand what he was saying?

2. What is the difference between a cultural practice in the Bible (like greeting with a holy kiss) and a timeless principle (like showing genuine affection and welcome)?

3. Can you think of a passage that became clearer to you once you understood its historical background?

4. How do we guard against using cultural context as an excuse to dismiss commands we find difficult?

5. Why is it important that God chose to speak through real people in real history, rather than giving us abstract principles?

Scripture Exercise

Read 1 Corinthians 8:1–13 together. The issue is eating meat sacrificed to idols. Discuss: What is the timeless principle Paul is teaching? How does that principle apply to decisions your group faces today — things that may be permissible for you but could harm someone else's faith?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Background Research

Choose one passage from the New Testament that has always puzzled you. Using a Bible dictionary, a commentary, or a resource like the IVP Bible Background Commentary, spend 20–30 minutes researching the historical and cultural background. Write a paragraph on what you learned.

Application Exercise 2 — Then and Now Bridge

Read Deuteronomy 15:1–11 (the Year of Release / debt cancellation). Identify: (1) the specific historical and cultural situation God was addressing; (2) the timeless principle about generosity, justice, and care for the poor; (3) one concrete way that principle applies to your life or community today. This is practice in moving from the ancient world to the present without losing either the original meaning or what it asks of us now.

Case Study

A friend has been listening to a popular podcast that explains Bible passages through their ancient background. At first it opened the text up for her, and the meat-market scene behind 1 Corinthians 8 finally made sense. Lately, though, she's noticed a pattern: whenever a command feels uncomfortable, the host calls it "just their culture" and moves on. She asks you, "How do I know when background is helping me, and when it's letting me off the hook?" Using 1 Corinthians 8:1–13, Romans 16:16, and Romans 15:4, discuss: Where does background sharpen what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 8, and how could it be misused? In Romans 16:16, what is cultural and what still asks something of us today? How would you put the lamp-or-lens question into your own words for her?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 4

Foundation 4 — The Story That Holds It All Together

Biblical Theology and Typology

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to trace the single, unified story of Scripture — from creation to new creation — and see how Jesus Christ is woven through every book of the Bible: promised in prophecy, pictured in type and shadow, and finally revealed in the flesh. Once you see it, you won't be able to un-see it. And you'll start to see why: this is the story of a God who loved His people too much to leave them where they fell.

Discussion Questions

1. Before this chapter, did you think of the Old and New Testaments as one connected story, or as two separate books? How has your thinking shifted?

2. What Old Testament figure or event do you find most powerfully points to Jesus? Why?

3. What do you make of Jesus' claim in John 5:39 that the Scriptures testify about Him? What would it mean for how we read the Old Testament if He's right?

4. How does seeing the Bible as one unified story change the way you read individual passages?

5. What is the danger of reading the Old Testament as merely a collection of moral examples, rather than as a story pointing to Christ?

Scripture Exercise

Read Exodus 12:1–13 (the Passover) and then 1 Corinthians 5:7 ("For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed."). Walk through the details of the Passover together: the lamb, the blood on the doorposts, the protection from judgment. How does each detail find its fulfillment in Jesus? What does this teach us about how God planned redemption from the very beginning?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — The Shadow and the Substance

Go through each of the following and see if you can identify the typology pointing to Jesus:

The Beginning — God Provides a Covering — Genesis 3:6–7, 21

The Seed — A Promise Hidden in a Curse — Genesis 3:15

The Father and the Son — A Mountain in Moriah — Genesis 22:1–14; Hebrews 11:17–19; John 3:16

The Lamb — Blood on the Doorpost — Exodus 12:1–13, 21–23; 1 Corinthians 5:7

The Deliverer — Through Water to Freedom — Exodus 14:10–31; 1 Corinthians 10:1–4

The Serpent on a Pole — Unlikely Salvation — Numbers 21:4–9; John 3:14–15; 2 Corinthians 5:21

The King — A Throne That Would Not Fall — 2 Samuel 7:12–16; Luke 1:32–33

The Suffering Servant — Written Seven Centuries Early — Isaiah 52:13–53:12; Acts 8:30–35

The Cross — Where Every Shadow Lands — John 19:16–30; Hebrews 10:1–14

The New Creation — The Story Isn't Finished — Revelation 21:1–5; Romans 8:19–21

Application Exercise 2 — Typology Discovery

Choose one of the following Old Testament passages and read it slowly: (a) Genesis 22:1–19 (Abraham and Isaac), (b) Numbers 21:4–9 (the bronze serpent), or (c) Jonah 1–2. Then read the New Testament passage that explicitly connects it to Jesus: (a) Hebrews 11:17–19, (b) John 3:14–15, or (c) Matthew 12:39–41. Read both once more, side by side if you can. Instead of writing a paragraph, just jot down two or three words or phrases for what struck you — what matches, what the fulfillment adds to or surpasses in the original — and come ready to talk it through out loud at the next chapter. Take your time with this one. It rewards patience more than most.

For a full worked example tracing the olive oil typology from Genesis to Revelation see Table S in the Appendix.

Case Study

Two people in your group have landed in opposite places after this chapter. One is thrilled and has started finding Jesus in every detail: the loops on the tabernacle curtains, the color of every thread, the name of every minor character. The other is uneasy and wonders whether Christians just read Jesus back into stories that were really about Israel. Both love the Lord, and both are asking honest questions. But the conversation is getting tense. Using Luke 24:27, John 5:39, and 1 Corinthians 5:7, discuss: What do these passages show about whether the Old Testament really points to Christ? What guardrails help us tell a true type from a creative guess? How could the group honor both people's concerns while keeping Jesus at the center?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 5

Foundation 5 — Loving God with the Mind

Philosophy, Logic, and Christian Discernment

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to identify a claim, examine the reasons and evidence offered for it, recognize common errors in reasoning, and respond with both biblical conviction and Christian humility. Let me say plainly what this chapter is not: logic is not a substitute for Scripture or the Holy Spirit. It is one way of loving God with the mind He has given us and testing whether a teaching is true. God has already given us real help for this — gifts like wisdom, discernment, and knowledge, and His own Spirit, whom Jesus promised "will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). We were never meant to rely on the mind alone. But God calls us to seek Him with a willing mind, and to love Him with all our mind — and that's exactly what this chapter is about: using this gift to reach for Him and grow in understanding.

Discussion Questions

1. When you hear the words "philosophy" or "logic," what comes to mind? Have you thought of careful reasoning as part of Christian discipleship? Why or why not?

2. Some people treat careful thinking as a purely academic skill, unrelated to loving God. Do you agree? What would you say to someone who draws a hard line between the two?

3. What is the difference between testing a claim and attacking the person making it? Why does that difference matter in the church?

4. Why does Scripture command believers to test prophets, teachers, and spiritual claims rather than simply accept them?

5. How can a person be sincere, emotionally moved, or confident — and still be wrong?

Scripture Exercise

Read Acts 17:10–12, 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22, and 1 John 4:1–6 together. Make four headings: "What should believers do?", "What should believers avoid?", "What standard should be used?", and "What attitude should guide us?" List what each passage teaches under those headings. Then identify one current claim, teaching, social-media statement, or spiritual testimony that could be evaluated using this biblical process. These three passages fit tightly. The Bereans show the posture (receive eagerly, then test), the Thessalonian letter gives the command (don't quench the Spirit, but test everything), and John gives the test itself (test the spirits by their confession of Christ). Together they answer a question every believer faces: how does a Spirit-filled believer stay both open and protected?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Claim Analysis

This week, choose one teaching, social media post, or spiritual claim you encounter. Write it down as a clear statement. Then answer: (1) What exactly is being claimed? (2) What reasons or evidence are offered? (3) Is the evidence sufficient? (4) Does the conclusion follow from the reasons? (5) Are any reasoning errors present? (6) What does Scripture say? Practice this process with humility and charity — the goal is truth-seeking, not fault-finding. Those two goals get confused more often than any of us would like to admit.

Application Exercise 2 — Loving Disagreement

Think of a theological or practical disagreement you have had with another believer. Write a brief account of it. Then evaluate: (1) Did you address the actual claim, or did you respond to a version of it that was easier to dismiss (straw man)? (2) Did you listen fully before responding (Proverbs 18:13)? (3) Did you respond with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15)? (4) What would you do differently? The point isn't to beat yourself up. It's to grow into the kind of discerning, loving community God calls us to be. Be as honest with yourself here as you'd want someone else to be with you.

Case Study

A visiting leader tells a congregation: "A powerful experience happened tonight, many people were affected, and anyone who questions it is resisting the Holy Spirit. Therefore, this experience must be from God." Using Deuteronomy 13:1–4, Proverbs 18:17, Acts 17:11, and 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22, discuss: What is the specific claim? What reasons are being offered for accepting it? What evidence is missing? Which reasoning errors may be present? What biblical tests should be applied? How can someone respond with both discernment and gentleness?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 6

The Story of Scripture — The Biblical Covenants: God's Unfolding Plan of Redemption

Biblical Theology / Covenant Theology

By the end of this chapter, you will have a clear, accessible map of the major biblical covenants — the Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New Covenant. These aren't six competing stories; they are one story, advancing, and you will see how each covenant carries God's single plan of redemption forward to its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. You will be equipped to read the whole Bible as one coherent story rather than a collection of disconnected books, and you will understand why the covenants are the key to responsible interpretation of Old Testament promises. You'll begin to read every page of Scripture as part of one great story, and every covenant as another chapter in the love of a God who will not let His people go.

Discussion Questions

1. Before this chapter, how did you think about the relationship between the Old and New Testaments? Did they feel like two different books, or one unified story? How has this chapter changed or deepened your understanding?

2. A covenant is more than a contract — it is a binding relationship initiated by the greater party. What does it mean to you that God is always the initiating party in the biblical covenants? What does that tell you about the nature of your relationship with Him?

3. The Abrahamic covenant promised that "all the families of the earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3). How does this promise shape your understanding of the church's mission? How does it connect to the Great Commission?

4. The New Covenant promises that God will write His law on our hearts rather than on stone tablets (Jeremiah 31:33). What is the difference between external law-keeping and internal transformation? How do you experience that difference in your own life?

5. 2 Corinthians 1:20 says "all the promises of God are 'Yes' in Christ." How does this principle guard against misreading Old Testament promises — like Jeremiah 29:11 — as direct personal guarantees? How does it also affirm that those promises are genuinely available to us in Christ?

6. Ancient land deeds were kept in two copies — one sealed, one open — until the time came to claim the inheritance. How does that change the way you read Revelation 5, where only the Lamb is found worthy to open the sealed scroll?

Scripture Exercise

Read Hebrews 8:6–13 together as a group.

Step 1: Read the passage aloud. What does the writer say about the relationship between the old covenant and the new covenant (v. 6)?

Step 2: What were the limitations of the old covenant (vv. 7–9)? What did it fail to do, and why?

Step 3: What does the New Covenant promise that the old covenant could not deliver (vv. 10–12)? List each element: law written on hearts, direct knowledge of God, complete forgiveness.

Step 4: What does verse 13 say about the old covenant? What does it mean that it is "obsolete" — does that mean the Old Testament is irrelevant?

Step 5: Discuss together: How does understanding the New Covenant change the way you read the Old Testament? How does it change the way you understand your own relationship with God?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — The Covenant God Walked Alone

Read Genesis 15:7–21 together as a group.

In the ancient Near East, a covenant like this one was sealed with a specific and unsettling ritual: animals were cut in half and laid out in two rows, and both parties to the covenant walked together between the pieces. The act was a self-maledictory oath, a curse you called down on yourself. Without a word, it said, "may what has been done to these animals be done to me if I fail to keep this covenant." Ancient Near Eastern treaty texts confirm this was standard practice: ratifying a covenant meant staking your life on it, visibly, in front of witnesses.

Read the passage again and notice who actually walks. Abram prepares the animals (vv. 9–10), but verse 12 tells us he falls into "a deep and dreadful darkness" before the ceremony begins — he's not conscious for what follows. Then in verse 17, a smoking firepot and a blazing torch, visible symbols of God's own presence, pass alone between the pieces. Abram never walks the path. Only God does.

Discuss:

1. If the walk between the pieces was supposed to be a mutual pledge, what does it mean that only God walked it?

2. What does that say about whose obligation the covenant's curse actually became?

3. Read Galatians 3:13 — "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us." How does Genesis 15 help you see what that verse is actually describing?

4. Table J in the Appendix lists a sign for every covenant. How does the smoking firepot function as the first of all of them — a foretaste of the cross, where God, in Christ, bears the covenant curse Himself rather than requiring it of us?

Close by reading Isaiah 53:5 aloud together — the prophet describing, centuries in advance, what Genesis 15 had already shown in symbol:

"But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on Him, and by His stripes we are healed." Same God. Same path. Let that sit for a moment before you move on.

Application Exercise 2 — The Covenant Community

The covenants were never just personal. God makes them with a people, not with isolated individuals. As a group:

Read Genesis 12:1–3 together. Note that the promise to Abraham was not just for him — it was for "all the families of the earth." Discuss: What does it mean that you are part of the fulfillment of this promise?

Read 1 Peter 2:9–10 together: "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." Discuss: How does this New Covenant identity shape how you think about your community of faith?

Identify one specific way your group or church community is living out the Abrahamic promise — being a blessing to the nations, to your neighborhood, to the people around you.

Pray together as a covenant community — not just as individuals, but as a people who belong to God together, who are part of His unfolding story of redemption. That last phrase is worth sitting with longer than the exercise probably gives you room for.

Close by reading Revelation 21:3–5 together as a vision of the covenant's ultimate fulfillment:

"And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the former things have passed away.' And the One seated on the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new.'" That's not a small promise. Let it actually land before you move on.

Case Study

A woman in your group lost her job last spring. A friend wrote Jeremiah 29:11 on a card for her, and she taped it to her mirror, sure it meant the next job was just around the corner. Six months later she's still looking, and one night she quietly asks the group whether God broke His promise. She isn't angry, just confused. How do you help her read that verse in its covenant setting without taking away the real comfort it holds? Using Jeremiah 29:10–14, 2 Corinthians 1:20, and Genesis 15:17, discuss: What did God actually promise the exiles in Jeremiah 29, and how does that promise reach her through Christ? What can she trust God for right now, even if the job doesn't come? How does a God who walked the covenant path alone change the way she waits?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 7

Why Truth and Doctrine Matter

Prolegomena

By the end of this chapter, you will understand what doctrine is — the church's summary of what Scripture teaches about God, Christ, salvation, and life — and why it isn't dry or divisive, whatever its reputation. You'll hear the common objections ("deeds, not creeds," "doctrine just divides people") and see why they don't hold up: what we believe about God determines how we live before Him, and there's no getting around that math. And you'll come away seeing doctrine the way it was meant to be seen, as the shape of a life of worship, maturity, holiness, and love.

Discussion Questions

1. When you hear the word "doctrine," what comes to mind? Has this chapter changed that picture at all?

2. How does what you believe about God shape the way you treat people, make decisions, or handle suffering?

3. Why do you think some people resist doctrine, preferring to say, "I just love Jesus"? Is there something right in that instinct — and something missing?

4. Can you think of a time when a wrong belief led to a wrong action in your own life or in someone you know?

5. How is sound doctrine an act of love toward the people around you?

Scripture Exercise

Read Matthew 16:5–12 together. Notice how quickly the disciples assume Jesus is talking about bread, and how patiently He walks them back to what He actually meant: the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Discuss: Why do you think the disciples missed it at first? What small, reasonable-sounding ideas about God tend to work their way into our thinking today, the way leaven works through dough? And how does 1 Corinthians 5:7, "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed," keep this from becoming fear instead of faith? Close by asking God to show each of you one belief that needs His truth, and to give you the courage to let it go.

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Testing a Real Debate: Can a True Believer Lose Salvation?

Read these two sets of passages side by side, and don't rush past either one. Set A: John 10:28–29 ("I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one can snatch them out of My hand … My Father who has given them to Me is greater than all. No one can snatch them out of My Father's hand"), Romans 8:38–39, Philippians 1:6, and Ephesians 1:13–14. Set B: Hebrews 6:4–6, Hebrews 10:26–29, Galatians 5:4, and Matthew 24:13. State each side's claim in one honest sentence before you try to reconcile them — most people skip straight to defending the side they already believe. Then use the tools from Chapter 5: which reasoning errors are easiest to fall into here, and which questions actually move the conversation forward instead of just winning it? Consider 1 John 2:19 as one place Scripture may be doing more reconciling than contradicting. I won't tell you how this one resolves — sincere, careful Christians have read these same texts and landed in different places for centuries, which is exactly why it belongs in Table L as a second-order issue and not a first-order one. What I want is for you to feel the real weight of both lists before you reach for the easy answer. However you land, land there having actually wrestled with the half of the Bible you didn't want to quote.

Application Exercise 2 — The Creed as Prayer

Obtain a copy of the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed — both are reproduced in full in the Appendix (The Creeds in Full) if you don't already have one at hand. Read it slowly, phrase by phrase, as a prayer rather than a recitation. After each phrase, pause and ask: (1) Do I actually believe this? (2) What difference does it make to my life today? (3) Is there any phrase I find difficult or confusing? Write down your reflections and bring them to the next chapter. The creeds weren't written to end the conversation. They were written to start it, giving the church a shared language for worshiping the true God together. Old words, still doing real work.

Case Study

A friend tells you: "I don't care about theology — I just want to follow Jesus and love people." How would you respond? Using John 4:23–24 and Romans 12:2, discuss: Is it possible to truly love people well without knowing truth? What happens to a community when feelings replace doctrine as the foundation?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 8

Why These 66 Books

Bibliology / Church History

By the end of this chapter, you will understand how the Old and New Testament canons took shape, and you'll be able to explain the difference between the church recognizing Scripture and the church creating it — a distinction that matters more than it might sound. You'll learn the questions the early church asked in recognizing which books were Scripture, why Protestant and Catholic Bibles differ over the Apocrypha, and how to answer the popular claim that a council or an emperor simply picked the books. My hope is you'll walk away with greater confidence in the Bible you hold, not less, and keep it as your first source for knowing God.

Discussion Questions

1. Does it change anything for you to learn that Athanasius's 367 AD letter — not a later medieval council — is the earliest document listing exactly our 27 New Testament books?

2. What is the difference between the church 'recognizing' Scripture and the church 'creating' Scripture? Why does that distinction matter?

3. 2 Peter 3:15–16 shows one apostle already referring to another apostle's letters as 'Scripture' within the New Testament era itself. What does this tell us about how early the church recognized apostolic writings as authoritative?

4. Marcion's attempt to create his own shortened, edited canon in the second century pushed the wider church to clarify what it already believed. Have you encountered modern versions of this same impulse — reshaping Scripture to fit a preferred conclusion?

5. How does understanding this history change your confidence in the Bible you hold, or raise new questions you want to explore further?

Scripture Exercise

Read 2 Peter 3:15–16 together as a group — one of the earliest places in the New Testament where an apostle refers to another apostle's writings as 'Scripture,' placed alongside 'the rest of the Scriptures.' Discuss: what does this tell us about how quickly the earliest church began to recognize apostolic writings as carrying the same authority as the Old Testament?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Answering a Real Objection

Pick one common objection to the Bible's reliability — "it's been translated too many times to trust," "we don't have the originals," "the Gospels were written too late to be accurate." This week, find a solid, honest answer — a trustworthy apologetics resource, a pastor, or material like Wesley Huff's or Cross Examined's — and write it in your own words, short enough to say out loud. Share it with your group. Not to win an argument — just so you're ready the next time someone raises it.

Application Exercise 2 — How Jesus Read His Bible

Look up how Jesus Himself treated the Old Testament as real history: Adam and Eve (Matthew 19:4–5), Noah's flood (Matthew 24:37–39), Jonah (Matthew 12:39–41), Moses at the burning bush (Mark 12:26). Write down what it means that the same Jesus you trust with your salvation also trusted these accounts as true. If He didn't need to hedge, maybe you don't either.

Case Study

A coworker finds out you read the Bible and mentions a documentary she watched. "You know the emperor Constantine picked those books, right? There were other gospels, like Thomas, and they just threw out the ones they didn't like." She isn't trying to pick a fight. She honestly believes it, and she's curious what you'll say. You want to answer truthfully, including the parts of the history that are messier than people expect, without turning a lunch-break conversation into a lecture. Using Luke 24:44, 2 Peter 3:15–16, and 2 Timothy 3:16–17, discuss: How would you explain the difference between the church recognizing Scripture and creating it, in a sentence or two? Which facts from this chapter would actually help her? And how do you leave the door open for a second conversation?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 9

The Bible: God's Word, Our Authority

Bibliology — Authority and Sufficiency of Scripture

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to explain and defend what Christians mean when they call the Bible inspired, inerrant, and infallible. Those are three related but distinct claims, not interchangeable words, and taken together they mean the Bible isn't just one helpful resource among many. It is the final, sufficient, and authoritative Word of God for all of life and faith. Every nation gives its citizens a constitution — a document that defines what is true, what is right, and how life is to be lived within its borders. God has done the same for His people — except His document is not the work of human hands, cannot be amended by popular vote, and does not expire. But a constitution doesn't love its citizens. This Word comes from a Father who does. The Bible isn't our backup plan. It's the foundation we build our whole life on.

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to you personally that the Bible is "God-breathed"? How does that change the way you approach it?

2. In what areas of your life do you find it hardest to submit to what Scripture says? Why?

3. How do you respond when someone says, "The Bible is outdated" or "That was written for a different culture"?

4. What is the difference between the Bible being sufficient and the Bible being the only thing that matters? (For example, does sufficiency mean we ignore science, history, or wisdom?)

5. How does trusting the Bible as God's Word bring freedom rather than restriction?

Scripture Exercise

Read Psalm 119:97–105 together. List every word or phrase the psalmist uses to describe his love for God's Word. Then discuss: What would it look like for your group to have this kind of relationship with Scripture? What is one practical step each person could take this week?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Scripture Memory

Choose one verse from this chapter's supporting scriptures that speaks most powerfully to you. Write it on a card, put it somewhere you will see it daily (bathroom mirror, phone wallpaper, desk), and commit to memorizing it by the next chapter. When you have memorized it, write a sentence about why this verse matters to you personally. Scripture memory isn't an academic exercise. It's storing God's Word in your heart so it can speak to you in moments of temptation, grief, confusion, and joy. You won't know which moment it's for until you're already in it.

Application Exercise 2 — Sufficiency Test

Identify one area of your life where you have been looking primarily to sources other than Scripture for guidance — perhaps a relationship decision, a career question, a parenting challenge, or an emotional struggle. Spend 30 minutes searching the Scriptures (using a concordance or Bible app) for what God's Word says about that area. Write down what you find. Then ask: Does Scripture speak to this? Is it sufficient? What would it look like to let God's Word have the final word in this area of my life? Ask that last question honestly. It tends to be more revealing than it first appears.

Case Study

A man in your group has been offered a promotion that would mean working most Sundays and moving his family across the state. He tells the group, "I love the Bible for spiritual things, but it doesn't say anything about a decision like this. I'm just going to pray and go with my gut." He's sincere, and he's not asking for a lecture. But you sense he's drawn a line around his life that Scripture isn't allowed to cross. Sufficiency doesn't mean there's a verse that names his exact job offer. It does mean God's Word has something to say. Using 2 Timothy 3:16–17, Psalm 119:105, and Hebrews 4:12, discuss: What does Scripture actually speak to in his situation? Where do wisdom, counsel, and prayer fit alongside it? How could your group help him without handing him a proof text?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 10

Knowing God: Who He Is and How He Lives

Theology Proper — The Character and Triune Life of God

By the end of this chapter, you will grow in your understanding of who God truly is by looking at Him three ways: His attributes (what kind of God He is, including what He alone is and what He shares with us), His triune life (one God, eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), and His names (how He has revealed Himself across Scripture). Along the way, you'll see how easily we settle for smaller pictures of Him, and you'll learn to recognize the old errors about the Trinity the church has had to answer. This is not a chapter to master and move past. My hope is simply that your worship, trust, and confidence in Him deepen, this week and long after.

Discussion Questions

1. Which attribute of God — His holiness, His love, His justice, His mercy — do you find easiest to embrace? Which is hardest? Why?

2. How does knowing that God is Trinity (Father, Son, Spirit) — a community of love — shape how you understand relationships and community in the church?

3. What is the difference between knowing about God and actually knowing God? How do we move from one to the other?

4. How does God's unchanging character give you stability when life feels uncertain?

5. In what ways has your picture of God been shaped more by your experiences than by Scripture? How might this chapter correct or deepen that picture?

Scripture Exercise

Read Exodus 34:5–8 together. When Moses asks to see God's glory, God answers by proclaiming His name and His character. Then notice what Moses does next. Discuss: Which of these attributes comes most naturally to you, and which one do you tend to skip past? How can mercy and justice both be true of the same God at the same time? And where do you see them meet at the cross? Close the way Moses did, by bowing in worship together and thanking God for showing you who He really is.

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Attribute Meditation

Choose one attribute of God that you find most challenging or least familiar. Spend 20–30 minutes reading the passages suggested at the end of this exercise for that attribute. Write a paragraph answering: (1) What does Scripture say about this attribute? (2) Why might I find it difficult? (3) How does this attribute work together with God's love and grace? (4) How does understanding this attribute change my worship, my prayer, or my daily life? Suggested starting points: Holiness — Isaiah 6; Leviticus 19:2; 1 Peter 1:15–16. Sovereignty — Romans 9:14–24; Isaiah 46:9–10. Wrath — Romans 1:18–32; Nahum 1:2–8 (read alongside Nahum 1:7).

Application Exercise 2 — Trinitarian Prayer

Write a prayer — or pray aloud — that consciously addresses all three persons of the Trinity. Begin by addressing God the Father as Creator, Provider, and the one who sent His Son. Then thank God the Son for His incarnation, death, resurrection, and intercession. Then ask God the Holy Spirit for His presence, power, and guidance in a specific area of your life. This isn't a formula; it's letting our prayers take the shape of the gospel.

Case Study

A church member says: "I believe in God, but I think of Him mostly as a loving Father — I don't really focus on His holiness or justice." Using Exodus 34:6–7 and Isaiah 6:3, discuss: What is lost when we emphasize only one attribute of God? How do His love and holiness work together rather than against each other?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 11

The Gospel of Grace and Assurance

Soteriology

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to articulate the gospel clearly, in your own words, without borrowing someone else's script. Jesus came preaching the Good News, and He commands us to preach and teach that same Good News and make disciples in His name. You'll also see why Paul reacts so fiercely whenever law-keeping starts crowding grace out of the picture — because that is the difference between resting in a finished work and laboring under an unfinished one. I hope you'll rest a little easier in the assurance that salvation is entirely the work of Christ — received by faith, not earned by effort. And underneath all of it is love: "God proves His love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

Discussion Questions

1. How would you explain the gospel to someone who had never heard it before? Try it in two or three sentences, or sketch it: the house, the crack, the stone laid in the gap, the city.

2. Do you ever find yourself trying to earn God's favor rather than rest in His grace? What does that look like in daily life?

3. What does assurance of salvation mean to you? Is it something you have? What gives it to you?

4. How does the gospel change the way you relate to people who are far from God — with judgment or with compassion?

5. Why is it important that the gospel is good news — not good advice or a good example?

Scripture Exercise

Read Romans 8:31–39 together slowly. List every question Paul asks and every answer he gives. Then discuss: What is the most personally meaningful assurance in this passage for you right now? Why?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Naming the Resistance

Think of a real objection you've heard raised against the gospel — from a friend, a family member, a coworker, or even a doubt of your own. Common ones: "How could a loving God send anyone to hell?" "Isn't it arrogant to say Jesus is the only way?" "The Bible has been rewritten too many times to trust." "I'm a good person — why do I need saving?" Write down: (1) the objection as you've actually heard it, not a straw-man version; (2) what you think is the honest question or fear underneath it; (3) how you would begin responding — not to win an argument, but to keep the conversation open. Read 1 Peter 3:15 (BSB) first: "Always be prepared to give a defense to everyone who asks you the reason for the hope that is in you. But respond with gentleness and respect." Notice both halves of that command are non-negotiable — readiness without gentleness wins arguments and loses people; gentleness without readiness has nothing to say. Bring your objection and your answer to the group. You may find someone else has wrestled with the very same one.

Application Exercise 2 — Assurance Inventory

Read 1 John 5:11–13 slowly and prayerfully. Notice why John says he wrote at all: "so that you may know that you have eternal life." Then write down one specific fear or doubt about your standing before God, and bring it to the passage: what does John say to that fear? Close by praying together, thanking God for the assurance that is yours in Christ. Say the fear out loud if you can. It tends to lose some size that way.

Case Study

Two people in your group are struggling with assurance in opposite ways. One has been a Christian for years but goes forward at nearly every altar call, because every time he sins he wonders whether he was ever really saved. The other prayed a prayer at a youth camp at twelve and says she's "covered," though she admits nothing much in her life has changed since. Both of them are leaning on something, and neither of them is leaning on the right thing yet. Using Ephesians 2:8–10, 1 John 5:13, and Matthew 7:21–27, discuss: What does the gospel say to each of them? What's the difference between resting on Christ and resting on a past decision or a present feeling? How can your group encourage real assurance without feeding either fear or complacency?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 12

Jesus: Fully God, Fully Man, Fully Ours

Christology — The Person and Work of Jesus Christ

By the end of this chapter, you will know and worship Jesus more deeply — not only as He walked among us, but as He has always been: the eternal Son through whom and for whom all things were created, who appeared to His people before He was ever born of Mary, who lived among us fully God and fully man — a claim that has never been easy to hold in one hand — who reigns now at the Father's right hand, and who will return as the conquering King to claim His bride. Understanding who He is and what He has done on your behalf is not academic. It changes what you're actually doing when you pray.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does it matter that Jesus was fully God — not just a great teacher or a divine messenger?

2. Why does it matter that Jesus was fully human — that He got tired, grieved, and was tempted?

3. How does Hebrews 4:15 change the way you bring your struggles and weaknesses to Jesus in prayer?

4. What aspect of Jesus' life or character do you find most compelling right now? Why?

5. How does the resurrection of Jesus change everything — not just about the afterlife, but about how you live today?

Scripture Exercise

Read Philippians 2:5–11 together. Notice that Paul begins with the Son "existing in the form of God," and that He "emptied Himself" by taking something on, the form of a servant, not by ceasing to be who He was. Then follow it down to the cross and back up to the exaltation. Discuss: What did Jesus take on in the incarnation, and what did He never lay aside? Why does Paul tell this story to a church that was struggling with pride and division (v. 5)? And what would it look like this week to have the same mindset toward one person in your life? Close by praying verses 10–11 aloud together, bowing before Him as Lord.

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Chalcedonian Reflection

Write down one area of your life where you need Jesus as fully God (His power, authority, and divine sufficiency) and one area where you need Jesus as fully human (His empathy, understanding, and solidarity with your weakness). Pray specifically into both. Both halves matter. Neglect one and your prayer life starts to lean. (For the full wording of the Chalcedonian Definition itself, see the Appendix — The Creeds in Full.)

Case Study

Someone in your group says, “I think Jesus was a great moral teacher, but I’m not sure He was actually God.” Walk through John 1:1–14 and Colossians 1:15–20 together. What claims does Scripture make about Jesus that go far beyond a moral teacher? What would be lost — for us and for the world — if Jesus were not truly God? Sit with that loss for a minute before you move on.

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 13

Turning Around: Repentance and Faith

Hamartiology and Soteriology

By the end of this chapter, you will understand what genuine repentance actually looks like: a real turning of the whole person away from self-reliance and toward trust in Christ alone (Acts 20:21). Sorrow is easy enough to fake. Turning is not. People picture repentance in many ways: turning away from sin, doing a complete 180 with their lives, or making restitution for past misdeeds and the harm they caused others. Each of those holds part of the truth (Acts 26:20; Luke 19:8). Our focus will be on the whole picture, on how God sees repentance and how His Word describes the person who has truly turned. As Paul puts it, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation without regret, but worldly sorrow brings death" (2 Corinthians 7:10).

Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between feeling sorry for your sin and truly repenting of it? Have you experienced both?

2. What does it mean to repent from "dead works" — things we do to earn God's favor rather than trusting in Christ?

3. How is faith more than intellectual agreement? What does it mean to trust Christ with your whole life?

4. Is repentance a one-time event or an ongoing posture? How does it show up in daily life?

5. How does understanding the depth of your sin actually deepen your gratitude for grace?

6. If repentance is something God grants, how should that change the way you pray for, and speak to, someone you love who is far from Him?

Scripture Exercise

Read 2 Corinthians 7:8–11 together. Paul had sent this church a hard letter, and it hurt them. Notice that he isn't glad they were hurt. He's glad the hurt went somewhere. Look at verse 11 and list everything their godly sorrow produced. Then ask: What is the difference between sorrow that turns you toward God and sorrow that only turns you inward? How can you tell which one you're feeling? Why does Paul say worldly sorrow "brings death"? Close by praying for one another in the words of Lamentations 5:21: "Restore us to Yourself, O LORD, so we may return."

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Psalm 51 Prayer

Read Psalm 51 slowly and personally. Identify the specific elements of David's repentance: acknowledgment of sin (v. 3–4), appeal to God's mercy (v. 1–2), request for inner transformation (v. 10–12), and commitment to restored worship (v. 13–15). Write a brief personal prayer modeled on David's, bringing a specific area of your own life before God. Specific is the whole point. A vague prayer is easy to pray and easy to forget.

Application Exercise 2 — The Prodigal Son(s) Study

Read the whole parable, Luke 15:11–32 — it's about two sons, not one. First, the younger son: identify the moment of repentance. What did he turn from? What did he turn toward? How does the father's response — running to meet him, before a word of the rehearsed speech is spoken — picture God's response to genuine repentance?

Now the older son: he never left home, never touched the inheritance, never did anything scandalous — and he's just as far from his father's heart. His own words give it away: "All these years I have served you and never disobeyed… yet you never gave me even a young goat" (v. 29). That's not the language of a son. It's the language of an employee tallying wages. He obeyed, but he never believed he was loved — so obedience curdled into resentment, and his brother's grace felt like an insult to his own labor.

Which son are you more likely to resemble this week: the one whose sin is obvious, or the one whose sin is dressed up as duty? Read the father's words to him twice: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours" (v. 31). That was true the whole time. He just never let himself believe it. (This reading of the parable — that both sons are lost, just differently — owes a real debt to Tim Keller's book The Prodigal God.)

Case Study

Someone in your group admits they've confessed the same sin, losing their temper with their kids, almost every week for a year. "Maybe I never really repented," they say quietly. "If I had, wouldn't it be gone by now?" Another member suggests they just need to want it more. How do you help them see the difference between real repentance and a perfect track record, without making light of the sin or handing them more effort as the answer? Using 2 Corinthians 7:10, 1 John 1:8–9, and Hebrews 3:12–13, discuss: What would godly sorrow look like here, as opposed to worldly sorrow? What does 1 John 1:9 promise someone who keeps coming back with the same sin? How could the group "exhort one another daily" so this person keeps turning instead of giving up?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 14

How Grace Reaches Us

Soteriology / Systematic Theology

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to explain what Scripture teaches about God's sovereign initiative in salvation and summarize the major historical positions on election. I won't pretend this chapter resolves a debate that's outlasted centuries of far sharper minds than mine. What I hope you leave with instead is conviction and humility in the same hand, rather than anxiety or pride. Whatever tradition you land in, election begins with love: "In love He predestined us for adoption as His sons through Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 1:4–5).

Discussion Questions

1. When you read Ephesians 1:4–5 and John 6:44, what is your honest emotional reaction — comfort, discomfort, confusion? Why do you think you react that way?

2. Romans 9 and Romans 10 sit side by side in the same letter — one emphasizing God's sovereign choice, the other pleading with people to believe and call on the name of the Lord. How do you hold both truths without collapsing one into the other?

3. How might the doctrine of election, rightly understood, actually be a source of comfort rather than anxiety for a struggling believer?

4. Reformed and Arminian Christians have disagreed on this question for centuries while remaining brothers and sisters in Christ. What does it look like to hold a firm conviction here without treating it as a test of someone's salvation?

5. How does 2 Peter 3:9 shape the way we think about evangelism and God's heart for those who don't yet know Him?

Scripture Exercise

Read Romans 9:14–24 and Romans 10:9–13 together as a group. In the space of one letter, Paul insists that God has mercy on whomever He wills (9:18) and also pleads, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (10:13). Don't rush to resolve the tension. Sit with it. Ask: why might Paul have felt no need to fully reconcile these truths for his readers? What does his example teach us about how to hold God's sovereignty and our responsibility together, without letting go of either?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Assurance, Not Anxiety

This week, write out, in your own words, why your salvation rests on God's faithfulness rather than the strength of your own resolve. Read Philippians 1:6 — "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" — and John 10:28–29, where Jesus says no one can snatch His sheep out of His hand or His Father's hand.

Christians have long agreed that these verses describe the security a believer has in Christ — even while Reformed and Arminian traditions have understood differently what this means for someone who later walks away from faith altogether. You don't need to resolve that question this week. Instead, focus on what both traditions affirm: your standing before God was never based on your own strength to begin with, and it isn't sustained by your own strength now.

If you have ever struggled with anxiety about your standing before God, bring that honestly to Him in prayer this week, and ask a trusted friend or mentor to pray with you about it. That last step is the one people skip, and it's usually the one that helps most.

Application Exercise 2 — Praying Both Truths

Choose one person in your life who does not yet know Christ. This week, pray for them daily using both truths this chapter has explored: pray boldly that God would draw them, open their eyes, and grant them faith (John 6:44) — and also look for a natural, loving opportunity to actually speak with them about Jesus, trusting that God works through your witness (Romans 10:14–15). Afterward, write a sentence about what it felt like to live both truths at once. Both at once is uncomfortable at first. It gets easier with practice.

Case Study

Two friends in your group are arguing about election, and it's getting sharp. One has just discovered Reformed theology; the other, raised Wesleyan, feels her faith is being called shallow. A newer believer asks whether she even chose Jesus at all. Using Ephesians 1:4–5, John 6:44, and 1 Timothy 2:3–4, discuss: What do both friends already agree on about grace? How would you answer the newer believer? How can each hold a firm view without testing the other's faith?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 15

Growth in Grace — Sanctification: Growing in Holiness

Soteriology / Practical Theology

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to clearly distinguish between justification — the once-for-all declaration that you are righteous in Christ — and sanctification — the ongoing, Spirit-empowered process of being made holy. Mixing them up has caused a lot of needless anxiety for a lot of sincere believers. You will understand that holiness is not a performance for God's approval but a response to grace already given, and you will be equipped with a biblical framework for growing in Christlikeness throughout your life. This matters for more than theology. A person who knows they are already accepted is free to grow.

Discussion Questions

1. Before this chapter, how would you have explained the difference between justification and sanctification? How has your understanding developed?

2. John Owen said, "Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you." Does that feel too harsh, or does it ring true? What does it look like practically to "kill" a sin rather than just manage it?

3. What is the difference between pursuing holiness out of fear (trying to earn God's approval) and pursuing holiness out of love (responding to grace already given)? How do you tell the difference in your own heart?

4. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says we are "being transformed into His image with intensifying glory." This is a process, not an event. What does that mean for how you respond to your own failures and slow progress?

5. What is one specific area of your life where you sense the Holy Spirit calling you to deeper holiness right now? What would it look like to cooperate with that work rather than resist it?

Scripture Exercise

Read Romans 6:1–14 together as a group.

Step 1: Read the passage aloud. What question does Paul begin with (v. 1), and why is it important that he asks it?

Step 2: What does Paul say happened to us in baptism (vv. 3–4)? How does our union with Christ in His death and resurrection form the basis for our sanctification?

Step 3: What does Paul mean by "count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (v. 11)? Is this a feeling, a fact, or a choice — or all three?

Step 4: What is the practical command in verses 12–13? What does it mean to "present the parts of your body to Him as instruments of righteousness"?

Step 5: Discuss together: How does the indicative ("you are dead to sin") ground the imperative ("do not let sin reign")? Why does the order matter?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — The Mortification Journal

John Owen taught that we must be specific about sin — vague repentance produces vague change. This week, work through the following privately:

Identify one specific sin pattern — not a vague category like "I struggle with pride," but a specific, concrete manifestation: "I consistently speak critically about my colleague," or "I habitually look at things online that I know are harmful."

Write down: What does this sin promise me? What does it actually deliver? What does it cost me and those around me?

Identify the root: What is this sin feeding on? Fear? Loneliness? Pride? Unbelief?

Write out a specific prayer of repentance and a specific plan of resistance — not just "I'll try harder" but a concrete strategy (accountability, removing access, replacing the habit with a godly alternative).

Share your plan (not necessarily the specific sin) with one trusted person who will pray for you and ask you about it. Accountability only works if you actually let someone follow up. Make sure they do.

Application Exercise 2 — The Means of Grace Inventory

Sanctification doesn't happen in a vacuum. It happens through the ordinary means of grace that God has given His church. As a group, work through this together:

List five ordinary means of grace: Scripture reading and study, prayer, corporate worship, the Lord's Supper, and Christian community/accountability.

Each person honestly rates their current engagement with each one on a scale of 1–5 (1 = rarely, 5 = consistently).

Identify the one means of grace where your engagement is weakest. Share it with the group, or simply name it honestly to yourself — that's often the harder confession anyway.

Together, brainstorm one specific, practical step each person could take this week to strengthen their engagement with that means of grace.

Pray for one another specifically — not just "Lord, help us grow" but naming the specific area and asking for the Spirit's help. Vague prayers get vague answers, or at least vague peace. Be specific.

Case Study

A friend who came to faith two years ago tells you he's exhausted. He reads his Bible every morning, never misses church, and keeps a list of sins to avoid, but he still feels like God is disappointed in him. "If I let up for even a week," he says, "I'm afraid I'll lose everything." A different friend, hearing this, says he's overthinking it: "Grace covers it all, so just relax." Both are partly right, and both are missing something. Using Philippians 2:12–13, Romans 6:1–2, and Hebrews 10:14, discuss: Which ditch is each friend closer to? How would you help the first friend rest in what is already true of him without growing careless? What does "dependent responsibility" look like in his ordinary week?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 16

Baptism: Going Public with Your Faith

Ecclesiology / Soteriology

By the end of this chapter, you will understand baptism not as a ritual that saves you, but as a public declaration of what has already happened — your death to the old life and resurrection into new life in Christ. You will also be able to distinguish John's baptism of repentance, Christian water baptism in the name of Jesus, and Christ's baptism with the Holy Spirit, and see how all three belong to one story of redemption. And because sincere Christians disagree about who should be baptized and how, you'll meet the main views — the baptism of believers and the baptism of infants into the covenant community — fairly and charitably, so you can hold your own conviction without holding it against others.

Discussion Questions

1. What does baptism mean to you personally? If you have been baptized, what was that experience like? What did it signify?

2. How does Romans 6:3–4 describe what baptism pictures? What does it mean to be "buried with Christ" and "raised to new life"?

3. What is the difference between John's baptism of repentance and Christian baptism in the name of Jesus? Why does that distinction matter?

4. How does the Old Testament pattern of water-crossings (the flood, the Red Sea, the Jordan) enrich your understanding of what baptism declares?

5. If baptism is a public declaration of faith, what does it say to the watching world — and to the spiritual world — when a believer is baptized?

Scripture Exercise

Read Matthew 3:13–17 together, and then John 1:29. Notice that John tries to stop Jesus, and that the Father speaks before Jesus has preached a single sermon or done a single miracle. Ask together: Why would the sinless Son of God step into a baptism of repentance? What does it mean to you that the Father's "well pleased" came before any of Jesus' public work? If you have been baptized, how does His baptism change the way you think about your own? Close by thanking God for the Lamb He provided, and asking Him to help you live out what your baptism declares.

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Baptism Testimony

If you have been baptized, write a brief paragraph describing what it meant to you at the time and what it means to you now. If you have not been baptized, write a paragraph describing what is holding you back and what you believe baptism would declare about your faith. Share with the group. Whatever is holding you back is worth saying out loud, even if it feels small.

Application Exercise 2 — Water Typology Map

As a group, trace the water-crossing events in the Old Testament (the flood, the Red Sea, the Jordan) and discuss how each one pictures an aspect of what baptism declares: judgment passed, slavery ended, inheritance entered. How does seeing these connections give you a fuller picture of what Christian baptism means? It's easy to let a familiar ritual go quiet on you. This is a way of waking it back up.

Case Study

Megan was baptized as a baby in a Presbyterian church and came to real faith in college. Now she attends a Baptist church that she loves, and the pastor has gently asked whether she would like to be baptized as a believer. Her parents are hurt. To them, it sounds like their church's faithfulness to her as a child never counted. Megan wants to honor both her conscience and her family, and she isn't sure what she believes yet. How would you walk with her through this decision? Using Romans 6:3–4, Colossians 2:11–12, and Acts 8:36–38, discuss: What do both views of baptism agree it declares? How might Megan explain her decision, whichever way she lands, in a way that honors her parents? Why is this a second-order question, and how should that shape the conversation?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 17

The Lord's Supper: Remembering, Receiving, Hoping

Ecclesiology / Christology

By the end of this chapter, you will understand what the Lord's Supper is — a meal of remembrance, proclamation, and hope that Jesus Himself gave His church — and what Paul means when he warns against eating it "in an unworthy manner." You'll see that Christians have long differed on how Christ is present at the Table, and why those differences matter less than the Lord we meet there. And my hope is that you'll come to it differently: with greater reverence, deeper unity with your brothers and sisters, and renewed hope in Christ's return, not as a ritual you've done a hundred times before.

Discussion Questions

1. What does the Lord's Supper mean to you personally? How do you prepare your heart before taking it?

2. Why does Paul say we "proclaim the Lord's death" when we take Communion? What are we declaring to the world and to ourselves?

3. What does it mean to eat while "recognizing the body" (1 Corinthians 11:29)? How does this connect to how we treat one another in the church?

4. How does the Lord's Supper point us forward to Christ's return? How does that future hope shape how we live now?

5. How can your church community make the Lord's Supper a more meaningful and unifying practice?

Scripture Exercise

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 together as a group.

Step 1: Read verses 17–22 aloud. What was actually happening when the Corinthians gathered? Why does Paul say their gatherings did "more harm than good" (v. 17)?

Step 2: Read verses 23–26. Paul calls this something he "received from the Lord" and "passed on." Why do you think he answers a church problem by retelling the night Jesus was betrayed?

Step 3: Read verses 27–32. What does it mean to eat "in an unworthy manner" (v. 27)? Is Paul describing unworthy people, or an unworthy way of coming to the Table?

Step 4: Read verses 33–34. What is Paul's practical fix? What might "wait for one another" look like in a church today?

Step 5: Discuss together: How does this passage tie our relationship with Christ to our relationship with one another? Why can't the two be separated at this Table?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Table Preparation

Before your next Communion, spend 10 minutes in personal examination using 1 Corinthians 11:28. Write down: (a) one sin to confess, (b) one relationship to reconcile, and (c) one promise of Christ to receive with gratitude. Come to the Table having done this work. Ten minutes of honesty beforehand changes what the bread and cup actually mean that day.

Application Exercise 2 — Passover Connection

Read Exodus 12:1–14 together and then read 1 Corinthians 5:7 and 1 Corinthians 11:23–26. Discuss: How does understanding the Passover deepen your appreciation for what Jesus was doing at the Last Supper? What elements of the Passover find their fulfillment in Christ? Once you've traced it once, you won't take the Table quite the same way again.

Case Study

Jordan has been attending your church for six months. Every time Communion comes around, he lets the bread and cup pass. When you finally ask, he admits two things: he feels like too much of a mess to take it, and he hasn't spoken to another member, someone sitting three rows over, since a sharp argument last spring. He figures it's safer to skip it than to eat "in an unworthy manner." How do you help him come to the Table rightly, neither forcing him nor leaving him on the sidelines? Using 1 Corinthians 11:27–29, 1 Corinthians 10:17, and Luke 22:19–20, discuss: Is Paul warning unworthy people away, or an unworthy way of coming? What should Jordan do about the broken relationship before his next Communion? What would you want him to hear in Jesus' words, "given for you"?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 18

The Church: You Belong Here

Ecclesiology — Belonging and Accountability

By the end of this chapter, you will understand what Scripture means by the church: the people of God and the body of Christ, gathered in local congregations, rather than a building or an event. You'll see why the local church is not optional for the Christian life, however independent-minded any of us might feel some mornings, and you'll be able to answer the popular idea that you can follow Jesus just fine on your own. You'll also leave with a clearer picture of how to actually belong: the place where you grow, serve, are truly known, and are held accountable in love.

Discussion Questions

1. What has the local church meant to you in your spiritual journey? What has it given you that you could not have found alone?

2. Why do you think some Christians resist committing to a local church? What do you think is gained — or lost — either way?

3. What does it mean that "you are the body of Christ, and each of you is a member of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27)? What happens to a body when a part is missing or disconnected?

4. How does accountability in the church — being known and being challenged — help you grow in ways that private devotion cannot?

5. What is one way you could invest more deeply in your local church community this season?

6. If your church could only use a New Testament name, which would you choose, and why?

Scripture Exercise

Read 1 Peter 2:4–10 together as a group.

Step 1: Read verses 4–5 aloud. Peter calls Jesus "the living stone," and then calls us "living stones." What does it mean that we share His description?

Step 2: What are the living stones being built into (v. 5), and what do they do there? How does that change the way you think about a Sunday gathering?

Step 3: Read verses 6–8. The same stone is "precious" to those who believe and "a stone of stumbling" to others. What makes the difference?

Step 4: Read verse 9. List each name Peter gives God's people. Which is hardest to believe about yourself?

Step 5: Read verse 10 slowly: “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.” Discuss together: What does it mean to belong to a people, and not just to believe on your own?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Body Audit

Using 1 Corinthians 12:12–27, identify your spiritual gift(s) and how you are currently using them in your local church. If you are not sure of your gifts, ask two or three people who know you well what they observe in you. Write down one specific way you could serve your church more intentionally. Specific beats sincere. A vague intention to “serve more” rarely survives the week.

Case Study

A believer in your group says, “I love Jesus, but I’ve been hurt by the church before. I worship at home now — I don’t need a building or an institution.” How do you respond with both compassion and truth? What do Hebrews 10:24–25 and Acts 2:42–47 say about the necessity of gathered community? Role-play the conversation in pairs, then debrief together.

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 19

The Gospel and the Table We Share

Ecclesiology / Ethics

By the end of this chapter, you will understand what Scripture teaches about ethnic diversity and reconciliation in the church — one new humanity in Christ, not one culture — and see how the earliest Christians actually worked through real ethnic tension, including the day Paul confronted Peter at Antioch for pulling away from Gentile believers (Galatians 2). You'll learn to recognize favoritism when it hides in a church's ordinary habits, and you'll be equipped to take practical steps toward unity across difference as a gospel priority, not a political footnote.

Discussion Questions

1. Acts 6 shows the apostles taking a complaint about ethnic disparity seriously rather than dismissing it. What does their response teach us about how a church should handle these conversations today?

2. Paul was willing to publicly confront Peter — a fellow apostle — over an issue of ethnic exclusion at the table (Galatians 2:11–14). Why might this have felt so urgent to Paul, even at the cost of an uncomfortable public conflict?

3. How does Revelation 7:9–10's picture of heaven — "every nation and tribe and people and tongue" worshiping together — shape how we think about unity in the church now?

4. What does it mean that the gospel reconciles ethnic groups to one another "without requiring assimilation into a single culture"? Why does that distinction matter?

5. What is one honest, practical step your own church community could take to reflect Ephesians 2:14's vision of the "dividing wall" being torn down?

Scripture Exercise

Read Acts 6:1–7 and Galatians 2:11–14 together as a group — two real, uncomfortable moments of ethnic tension in the early church, both addressed directly rather than swept aside. Discuss: what tone did the apostles and Paul take in each situation? What can we learn from their willingness to name the problem plainly while still pursuing the unity of the church?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Naming the Table

Take a few minutes this week to reflect honestly: who is present at your church's table, and who might be missing? The point isn't guilt. It's honest observation, following the model of Acts 6. Write down one specific, practical way your church or small group could become more intentionally welcoming across ethnic or cultural lines, and share it with a pastor or leader as a genuine suggestion, not a complaint. Tone matters here as much as content. Say it like you actually want it to land well.

Application Exercise 2 — Listening Across the Line

This week, have a real conversation with someone from a different ethnic or cultural background than your own — ideally someone in your own church family. Ask them, with genuine curiosity rather than an agenda, what their experience of church and faith community has been like. Simply listen. Afterward, write a few sentences about what you heard and what, if anything, surprised you. Don't skip the surprise part. That's usually where the real learning is.

Case Study

In your small group, Andre, the only Black member, shares that he loves the church but often feels like a guest rather than family. Before anyone responds, another member says warmly, "I don't really see color. We're all just Christians here." Andre goes quiet. The person meant it kindly, and several others agree with her, but the moment clearly landed wrong. How do you, as a group, honor both Andre's experience and your shared identity in Christ, without turning the evening into a political argument? Using Ephesians 2:14–16, Galatians 2:11–14, and Revelation 7:9, discuss: What does it mean to be one in Christ without becoming the same? What did Paul see in Peter's behavior that Peter couldn't see himself? What would listening well look like next week?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 20

Life Together — Forgiveness and Reconciliation: The Hard and Holy Work

Pastoral Theology / Ethics / Ecclesiology

By the end of this chapter, you will understand what forgiveness is and, just as importantly, what it is not. You will be equipped to pursue it not as a feeling you're supposed to manufacture on command, but as a decision made and sustained by the grace of a God who has forgiven you infinitely more than you will ever be asked to forgive another. You will also understand the important distinction between forgiveness, reconciliation, and trust — three things that are related but not identical. It's more than a relational skill. It's the posture of someone who has stood before the cross and understood what that love cost.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the most important distinction you learned in this chapter — between forgiveness and trust, forgiveness and reconciliation, or forgiveness and forgetting? Why does that distinction matter practically?

2. The parable of the unmerciful servant ends with a warning, not just a lesson. What does Jesus mean? Is He saying our forgiveness of others earns God's forgiveness of us, or is He saying something else?

3. Tim Keller calls forgiveness "a form of voluntary suffering." When someone has wronged you, who has been paying the cost so far: them, or you? What would it look like to bear it on purpose, rather than by default?

4. Is there a difference between forgiving someone who has repented and forgiving someone who has not? Does forgiveness require the other person's repentance, or can it be given unilaterally? What does Scripture say?

5. Is there someone in your life — past or present — whom you have not yet forgiven? You don't need to name them, but: what is the cost of holding onto that unforgiveness? What would it take to begin the process of releasing it?

6. Is it possible you've been treating the command to forgive as a command to walk back into an unsafe relationship? How can you release someone from your vengeance while still keeping wise, godly boundaries?

7. Is there a hurt you've forgiven that still comes back? Which of the five signs do you see in yourself, and which one still needs work?

Scripture Exercise

Read Matthew 18:21–35 together as a group.

Step 1: Read the parable aloud. What is the scale of the first debt (ten thousand talents)? What is the scale of the second debt (a hundred denarii)? Why does the disproportion matter?

Step 2: What motivated the master to cancel the first debt (v. 27)? What does this tell us about the basis of God's forgiveness toward us?

Step 3: What did the first servant do immediately after being forgiven (vv. 28–30)? What does this reveal about the condition of his heart?

Step 4: What is the master's response (vv. 32–34)? What does Jesus mean by "from your heart" in verse 35?

Step 5: Discuss together: How does meditating on the size of your own forgiven debt change the way you think about forgiving others?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — The Forgiveness Inventory

This exercise is private and should be approached with prayer and gentleness toward yourself:

Ask the Holy Spirit to bring to mind anyone toward whom you are carrying unforgiveness, bitterness, or resentment — however old or recent, however large or small.

For each person, write down: What did they do? What did it cost you? What have you been doing with that debt — holding it, rehearsing it, using it?

Read Ephesians 4:32 slowly: "Forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." Sit with the weight of what God has forgiven you.

Make a decision — not a feeling, but a decision — to release the debt. You may need to make this decision again tomorrow, and the day after. That is normal. Forgiveness is often a journey, not a moment.

Then pray for them by name, every day for a week. Not for them to get what's coming, but for their genuine good: "bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6:28). Keller is right that "it is hard to stay angry at someone if you are praying for them." Notice what it does in you.

If reconciliation is possible and safe, consider what a first step toward it might look like. If it is not possible or safe, bring that to God in prayer and ask Him to carry what you cannot. Some things genuinely aren't yours to carry alone. This is one of them.

Application Exercise 2 — The Reconciliation Practice

As a group, work through the Matthew 18 process together — not with a real conflict (unless one exists and all parties are present and willing), but as a practice run:

Read Matthew 18:15–17 together. Walk through each step: private conversation, bringing a witness, bringing it to the church.

Discuss: What is the goal of each step? (Not punishment, but restoration — "you have won your brother over.")

Role-play a low-stakes scenario: one person plays someone who has been hurt, one plays the person who caused the hurt. Practice the conversation of Matthew 18:15 — honest, direct, gentle, and aimed at restoration.

Debrief: What was hard about that conversation? What made it easier? What would make you more likely to go to someone directly rather than talking to others about them?

Pray together for any real conflicts in the group or in your community, asking God for the courage and grace to pursue reconciliation. Courage first, then grace to actually follow through. Both are in short supply some weeks.

Application Exercise 3 — When the Memory Comes Back

Keep this one close for the days a memory catches you off guard. Walk your heart through four simple movements:

Tell God the truth. Don't minimize it or clean it up. "Put my tears in Your bottle" (Psalm 56:8).

Look at your own canceled debt. "He forgave us all our trespasses, having canceled the debt" (Colossians 2:13–14).

Release it again. Tell Him, "I'm not collecting on this today," and leave room for His justice (Romans 12:19).

Bless them. Ask God for their good, even if all you can manage is a sentence (Luke 6:28).

And on the days you don't have time for all four, just this: "Lord, I already handed this to You. I'm not picking it back up today."

Case Study

Your friend Rachel tells the group that her father, who walked out on the family when she was twelve, has reached out. He's sick now and wants a relationship. He said he was sorry, but he brushed past what happened as if it were small. Her brother says forgiving him would let him off the hook. A well-meaning friend at church says that if Rachel had really forgiven him, she'd move him into her home. Rachel isn't sure what she owes him, or what God is asking of her. Using Matthew 18:21–35, Romans 12:17–19, and Ephesians 4:32, discuss: What would it look like for Rachel to forgive her father fully? Does forgiving him require immediate reconciliation or restored trust? How can she release the debt while staying honest about the harm and wise about boundaries?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 21

Marriage, Family, Singleness, and Holiness

Anthropology and Ethics

By the end of this chapter, you will understand God's design for marriage, family, and singleness — not as shifting cultural preferences, but as distinct callings rooted in covenant love, holiness, and service to others. You'll see where our culture quietly bends these callings, treating marriage as a contract to keep only while it satisfies, or singleness as a waiting room for real life, and how Scripture answers both. Whether you are married or single, with or without children, God has good purposes for you right where you are, and none of these callings is second-class in His kingdom. You'll leave with a clearer sense of how to honor Him in the calling you're in today.

Discussion Questions

1. How does Ephesians 5:25–27 redefine what it means for a husband to love his wife? How is this different from the world's picture of love?

2. What does it mean that marriage is a picture of Christ and the church? How does that raise the stakes of how we treat our spouses?

3. How does the church often fail single people — treating singleness as a problem to be solved rather than a calling to be honored?

4. What does holiness in relationships look like practically — in dating, in marriage, in friendship?

5. How can your church community better support both married people and single people in living faithfully?

6. Paul says singleness frees a person for "undivided devotion to the Lord" (1 Corinthians 7:35). Whatever season you're in, what competes most for your devotion right now?

7. When conflict comes, do you tend to fight or to flee? What would "fixing" look like the next time it happens? And which of the six ways we stop listening do you fall into most?

Scripture Exercise

Read 1 Corinthians 6:12–20 together as a group.

Step 1: Read verses 12–13. The Corinthians had slogans: "Everything is permissible for me" and "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food." How does Paul answer each one? What slogans does our culture use about sex today?

Step 2: Read verses 15–17. What does Paul say happens even in a casual sexual encounter? Why do you think he quotes Genesis 2:24 here?

Step 3: Read verse 18. Why does Paul say to "flee" rather than to resist or manage? What does fleeing look like practically?

Step 4: Read verses 19–20. What reasons does Paul give that "you are not your own"? How does being "bought at a price" change the way you see your own body?

Step 5: Discuss together: Read verse 11 alongside this passage. Why do you think Paul puts the promise of being washed before the call to flee?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Marriage/Singleness Reflection

Whether married or single, write a brief paragraph answering: "How does my current relational status give me a unique opportunity to reflect Christ's love and serve His kingdom?" Share with the group and pray for one another. Whatever season you're in, someone else in the room is in a different one. Listen as much as you share.

Application Exercise 2 — 1 Corinthians 7 Study

Read 1 Corinthians 7:32–35 together. Paul describes the unique freedom and focus that singleness can bring. Discuss: How does the church sometimes unintentionally communicate that singleness is inferior? How can we honor both callings — marriage and singleness — as genuine gifts from God? What would it look like in your church to do this better? An honest answer here might be uncomfortable. Say it anyway.

Case Study

A couple in your small group, married eight years, admit things have gone flat. They're kind to each other but mostly feel like roommates, and one of them quietly wonders whether they simply married the wrong person. Later that week Dana, single at thirty-six, mentions she's stopped coming to group social nights. Every conversation turns to dating advice or kids' schedules, and she feels like an extra. Both conversations leave you thinking about how your group sees love and belonging. Using Ephesians 5:25–27, 1 Corinthians 7:7, 32–35, and Mark 3:34–35, discuss: How does agape love speak to a marriage that no longer runs on feeling? What would it look like for your group to treat Dana as family rather than a guest? What do both situations reveal about what we expect marriage to do for us?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 22

Raising Children Who Know and Love God

Practical Theology / Family Discipleship

By the end of this chapter, you will understand the biblical pattern for passing faith to the next generation. I want to be honest going in: no method in this chapter will guarantee an outcome. Scripture doesn't promise that either. What it does say is that faith is meant to be told, modeled, and handed forward, deliberately, generation by generation. You'll see how the church has carried that charge across the centuries, and you'll walk away with a few realistic, sustainable practices, not a program to feel behind on.

Discussion Questions

1. When you think back on your own childhood, who — if anyone — modeled a real, lived faith in front of you? What did that look like practically?

2. Deuteronomy 6:7 pictures teaching faith happening "when you sit at home and when you walk along the road" — in the ordinary rhythms of the day, not only in formal settings. What might that look like realistically in your own week?

3. Susanna Wesley made time for individual spiritual conversations with each of her children. What is one small, sustainable practice — not a perfect system — your family or household could realistically begin this month?

4. 2 Timothy 1:5 names three generations of faith: a grandmother, a mother, and Timothy himself. Who has been a 'Lois' or 'Eunice' in your life, even if you're not a parent yourself?

5. How can those without children of their own — through the church family, mentoring, or simply their presence in a young person's life — participate meaningfully in raising up the next generation?

6. Jesus was indignant when His disciples kept children away (Mark 10:14). Where might your home or church be unintentionally hindering children from coming to Him? And where have you stopped receiving God like a child yourself?

7. Look at the two dials. Which corner did you grow up in? Which corner do you drift toward when you're tired or stressed? What would one step toward "firm and kind" look like this week?

Scripture Exercise

Read Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and Psalm 78:1–7 together as a group. Notice how both passages assume faith must be actively spoken, repeated, and modeled — it is never treated as automatic. Discuss: what are the 'stones of remembrance' in your own household or church family right now — the practices, stories, or traditions that keep pointing the next generation back to God?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Building a Simple Family Rhythm

This week, choose one small, repeatable rhythm to build faith conversation into your household — a short Scripture reading and one question at dinner, a bedtime prayer that includes thanking God for something specific from the day, a five-minute conversation on the drive to school, or a hand on each head at bedtime and the old blessing, "May the LORD bless you and keep you" (Numbers 6:24), the way Jesus "took the children in His arms, placed His hands on them, and blessed them" (Mark 10:16). Don't aim for an elaborate program; aim for something so simple you'll actually keep doing it. Try it at least three times this week and note what happened — including what felt awkward, and what felt good.

Application Exercise 2 — Investing in a Younger Believer

If you don't have children at home, this exercise is for you too. Identify one younger person in your life — a niece or nephew, a student in your church, a young adult just starting out in faith — and reach out to them this week with a specific, low-pressure invitation: grab coffee, ask how you can pray for them, or simply tell them one way you've seen God at work in their life. Faith has always been carried forward by more than parents alone; write a sentence about what it might look like for you to be part of that chain for someone.

Case Study

Marcus and Jen have two kids, ages seven and ten. Their church sends home a weekly family devotional, and in the past year they've started and abandoned three different plans. Sundays are chaotic, weeknights are full, and Jen admits she feels like a failure every time she sees another family's photo of morning Bible time. Meanwhile, Marcus's mother keeps asking why the grandkids don't know more Bible stories. They love Jesus and want their kids to know Him. They just don't know where to start again. Using Deuteronomy 6:5–7, Ephesians 6:4, and Mark 10:13–16, discuss: Where does Deuteronomy 6 say faith-sharing begins, before any program? What is one small rhythm that could fit the life this family actually has? How might their church family, and Marcus's mother, help carry this instead of adding to the pressure?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 23

Spiritual Formation: Habits That Make Room for Grace

Practical Theology

By the end of this chapter, you will have a clearer picture of what a grace-centered spiritual life actually looks like, and some practical ways to build one: prayer, Scripture, worship, fasting, and obedience, along with a simple tool for seeing where you are. You'll learn to steer between two ditches — treating the disciplines as a performance for God, which is exhausting and was never the point, and drifting without them, as though growth just happens on its own. What's left is a response to His love: one that seeks, trains, and presses on, relying on the Holy Spirit for every step of the change.

Discussion Questions

1. What does your current rhythm of prayer and Scripture look like? What is working? What feels dry or forced?

2. What is the difference between spiritual disciplines as a means of grace and spiritual disciplines as a way to earn grace?

3. How does John 15 describe the relationship between abiding in Christ and bearing fruit? What does "abiding" actually look like in daily life?

4. What is one spiritual practice you have found genuinely life-giving? What made it meaningful?

5. How does community — worshipping and praying together — strengthen your personal walk with God?

6. Paul writes, “Not that I have already obtained all this… but I press on” (Philippians 3:12). Where has your walk with God settled into maintenance? What would pressing on look like for you in this season?

Scripture Exercise

Read Philippians 3:7–14 together as a group.

Step 1: Read verses 7–9. What did Paul count as loss, and why? Where does he say his righteousness comes from?

Step 2: Read verses 10–11. List what Paul says he wants to know. Notice that his goal is a Person before it is a performance.

Step 3: Read verse 12. Who took hold of whom first? Why does that order matter for the way you pursue God?

Step 4: Read verses 13–14. What does Paul forget, what does he strain toward, and what is the prize? What might you need to leave behind to run this way?

Step 5: Discuss together: How do verse 9 and verse 14 fit together — a righteousness that comes from God, and a life that presses on? Which way do you tend to lean too far?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Lectio Divina (Sacred Reading) Practice

As a group, practice Lectio Divina with Psalm 23. Read it aloud slowly (Lectio). Sit in silence for 2 minutes, noticing what word or phrase stands out (Meditatio). Pray briefly in response to what you noticed (Oratio). Then sit in quiet rest before God for 2 minutes (Contemplatio). Debrief: What did you notice? How was this different from your normal Bible reading? Slower isn't the same as less thorough. Most of us could use more of it.

Application Exercise 2 — The Life Assessment Wheel

Pursuit needs an honest starting point. I put this wheel together for our own small group, and it has been one of the most useful tools we've used. It takes stock of eight areas of the Christian life. The last one, Pursue Holiness, borrows its verbs from Scripture: lay aside "every encumbrance and the sin that so easily entangles" (Hebrews 12:1), repent, and seek.

The Life Assessment Wheel

For each of the eight areas, shade the ring that honestly describes your life right now: 1 (minimal to no activity), 2 (minimal to moderate), or 3 (regular and planned). The goal is to move outward, toward the green outer ring — not to win anything, but to grow.

Look at the shape you've drawn. Where is it fullest? Where does it pull in toward the center?

Choose one area to move outward this month. Write down one specific, realistic step, and ask the Holy Spirit for both the desire and the strength to take it (Philippians 2:13).

Share your wheel and your one step with a partner who will check in with you in a week. Then come back in three months and shade a fresh wheel. Growth is easier to see over seasons than over days.

Case Study

Sam came to faith last year and was on fire for the first six months: up early to read and pray, journaling every day, even fasting once a week. Now he's missed his quiet time for three weeks straight, and he tells your group he feels like a fraud. "I guess I'm just not a disciplined Christian." Another member tries to comfort him: "Don't worry about it. It's all grace anyway." Sam seems relieved, but not quite settled. Using John 15:4–5, Philippians 2:12–13, and Philippians 3:12–14, discuss: What is each of them getting right, and what is each one missing? How would you help Sam see the disciplines as means of grace rather than a scorecard? What might a realistic next step look like for him this week?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 24

Stewardship and Generosity — Money, Giving, and the Generous Life

Practical Theology / Ethics

By the end of this chapter, you will understand the biblical foundation for giving — not as a legal obligation to check off, but as a joyful, Spirit-led response to the grace of God, the grace of a Savior who became poor for your sake. You will be equipped to think theologically about money, stewardship, and generosity, and to see that how you handle your finances is one of the most honest indicators of where your heart truly rests. At heart, it's about trust: the open hand of a person who knows they are a steward, not an owner.

Discussion Questions

1. Before this chapter, how did you think about tithing or giving — as a duty, a discipline, a joy, or something else? How has your thinking shifted?

2. Jesus returns to money and possessions again and again in the Gospels. What do you think that tells us about the relationship between money and the human heart?

3. What is the difference between giving as a transaction ("I give so God will bless me") and giving as worship ("I give because God has already blessed me beyond measure")? How do you guard against the transactional mindset?

4. The early church in Acts 2 and 4 gave with a generosity that astonished the ancient world. What would it look like for your community to practice that kind of generosity today? What would have to change?

5. Is there an area of your financial life where you are holding on tightly — where trust in God's provision is genuinely hard? What would it look like to open that hand?

6. When money is genuinely tight, how do you decide what to give and what to hold back — and how do you choose between good causes without guilt replacing conviction as the reason?

7. Have you ever felt pressured or guilted into giving? Or, on the other side, have you used "grace giving" as a quiet reason to give very little? What would honest, cheerful, generous giving look like for you right now?

8. Jesus said you cannot serve both God and money. Where do you feel money competing for the throne in your life? What would loosening its grip look like this month?

Scripture Exercise

Read 2 Corinthians 9:6–15 together as a group.

Step 1: Read the passage aloud slowly. Note anything that surprises you.

Step 2: Identify what Paul says about the attitude of giving (v. 7). What does "cheerful" mean here? What does it rule out?

Step 3: What does Paul say God will do for the generous giver (vv. 8–11)? Is this a prosperity gospel promise? How is it different?

Step 4: What is the ultimate result of generosity according to verses 12–15? Who benefits, and how?

Step 5: Discuss together: What would it look like to give in a way that produces "thanksgiving to God" in others?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — The Stewardship Audit

This week, take 30 minutes alone with a notebook and work through the following:

Write down Psalm 24:1 at the top of the page: "The earth is the LORD's, and the fullness thereof." Sit with that for a moment before you begin.

List the three largest categories of your monthly spending. For each one, ask honestly: Does this reflect the priorities of someone who is a steward of God's resources, or the priorities of someone who believes these resources are ultimately mine?

Open your bank or card statement for the last 30 days. If someone who didn't know you looked only at where your money went, what would they conclude you love, fear, and trust?

Consider your current giving. Is it proportional to what God has entrusted to you? Is it given cheerfully or reluctantly?

Identify one specific, concrete step you could take this month to move your giving closer to the biblical vision of joyful, generous, worshipful giving.

Close by praying Proverbs 3:9–10 back to God as a prayer of surrender and trust. Say it slowly. It's easy to rush past a verse about money without feeling its weight.

Application Exercise 2 — The Generosity Project

As a group, identify one tangible act of generosity you can do together this month — not as a church program but as a spontaneous, Spirit-led response to grace.

Brainstorm together: Who in your immediate community has a genuine need?

Decide on one practical act of generosity (giving, practical help, or both), give freely and without pressure, and carry it out together.

Reconvene next chapter and share: What did it feel like to give? Don't be surprised if the honest answer is more complicated than you expected.

Case Study

A couple in your group came to Christ this year. They're paying down credit card debt and living close to the edge every month. One Christian friend tells them a tenth is where faithful giving starts, debt or no debt, and that they should trust God with the rest. Another friend says the tithe was Old Testament law and they shouldn't think about giving until they're out of debt. Both friends love them. Now they feel guilty and confused, and they ask your group what to do. Using 2 Corinthians 8:1–5, 2 Corinthians 9:6–8, and Luke 21:1–4, discuss: What does each friend get right, and where might each one miss the mark? How can this couple begin giving regularly and cheerfully, without pressure or guilt? What would faithful stewardship look like for them in this season?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 25

Worship: Encountering God in Spirit and Truth

Worship Theology

By the end of this chapter, you will understand worship not as a style of music or a Sunday morning routine — both of which have taken more blame and credit than they deserve — but as a whole-life response to who God is, offered in spirit and in truth. Through Isaiah's vision in Isaiah 6, you'll see the shape worship takes when we truly meet God, and you'll see from the prophets why God sometimes turns away from worship that looks right but comes from hearts far from Him. You'll leave with practical ways to worship Him both on your own and with His people, rooted in His living Word.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you define worship to someone who has never been to church? What is it, and what is it not?

2. Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that true worshipers worship "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). What do you think each of those words means? What happens when we have one without the other?

3. Romans 12:1 calls offering our bodies a "spiritual service of worship." How does that expand your understanding of worship beyond Sunday morning? What does daily worship look like in ordinary life?

4. The Psalms include lament, anger, doubt, and praise. What does that tell us about the kind of worship God welcomes? Are there emotions you have held back from God in worship?

5. The early church in Acts 2 worshiped together daily — in the temple and in homes. What is the difference between corporate worship and personal worship? Why does the gathered community matter, and not just private devotion?

6. When you walk into a Sunday gathering, do you come more like a critic rating a performance — the songs, the sound, the lighting — or like a priest entering the throne room? Psalm 100:4 says, "Enter His gates with thanksgiving." What would it look like to do that before the first note is played?

7. Think of a worship song you love. Read the words aloud without the music. What does it teach about God? Would you want a new believer to believe exactly what it says?

Scripture Exercise

Read Isaiah 6:1–8 together as a group.

Step 1: Read verses 1–4. What does Isaiah see and hear? Notice that the scene opens "in the year that King Uzziah died." Why might it matter that God showed Himself in a season of uncertainty?

Step 2: Read verse 5. What is Isaiah's first response to seeing the King? Why does a clearer view of God lead to a clearer view of ourselves?

Step 3: Read verses 6–7. Who takes the initiative in cleansing Isaiah? What does that tell you about where confession leads in worship?

Step 4: Read verse 8. What question does God ask, and how does Isaiah answer? Why does the call to go come after the cleansing, and not before?

Step 5: Discuss together: Where do you see these three movements — upward, inward, outward — in your church's worship? Which one do you most tend to skip?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — The Amos 5 Heart Audit

This one is private, so be as honest as you can. Read Amos 5:21–24 and Romans 12:1–2 side by side, noting what Paul calls your "spiritual service of worship."

List what God rejected in Amos 5 (feasts, songs, offerings), then look at verses 11–12 for why.

Draw two columns. In the first, list your outward worship habits. In the second, write honestly about your hidden, everyday life: how you treat the people closest to you, your integrity at work, where your thoughts go when no one is watching.

Ask yourself: If God silenced every song I sing, what worship would my daily life still be offering Him? Bring one area you're holding back from being a "living sacrifice" to Him in prayer this week; that's often where real worship starts.

Case Study

A church member tells you, “I don’t really connect with the worship music at church — it feels too loud and emotional. I prefer to worship quietly on my own at home.” Another member says, “I only feel close to God when the music is powerful and the atmosphere is electric — otherwise I don’t feel like I’ve really worshiped.” Using John 4:23–24 and Romans 12:1, discuss: What is each person getting right, and what might they be missing? How does Scripture define genuine worship without reducing it to a feeling or dismissing the heart? Most of us have a favorite ditch.

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 26

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

Eschatology

By the end of this chapter, you will understand the hope Scripture actually promises: Christ's personal return, the resurrection of the body, a final judgment that sets things right, and a new creation that renews this world rather than replacing it. You'll get a fair overview of the main views Christians hold about the millennium and the end times, and learn to hold them with charity. You'll also learn to spot the familiar distortions — date-setting, fear-driven speculation, and a hope so heavenly it forgets the earth. My hope is that you'll live with greater hope, and I mean that word carefully: not wishful thinking, but confident expectation.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the hope of resurrection change the way you face suffering, loss, or death?

2. What does it mean that Christ is the "firstfruits" of resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20)? What does that image communicate about the certainty and nature of our own resurrection?

3. How does the vision of the new creation in Revelation 21–22 challenge the idea that heaven is just a disembodied spiritual existence? What does it mean that God will make "everything new"?

4. How does the reality of the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10) motivate you to live faithfully now — not out of fear, but out of love and accountability?

5. What is one area of your life where you need to live more intentionally in light of eternity? What would change if you truly believed that "our present sufferings are not comparable to the glory that will be revealed" (Romans 8:18)?

6. Look at the timeline in this chapter. Where are you on it right now, and what does it mean to live between D-Day and V-Day this week?

Scripture Exercise

Read 1 Corinthians 15:35–58 together as a group.

Step 1: Read verses 35–38. What two questions does Paul say people ask? How does the picture of a seed answer them?

Step 2: Read verses 42–44 and list each contrast Paul draws between the body that is sown and the body that is raised. Which one gives you the most hope?

Step 3: Read verses 51–53. What does Paul say will happen "in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye"? Who is included?

Step 4: Read verses 54–57 aloud. How does Paul talk to death? Why can he speak that way?

Step 5: Discuss together: Verse 58 turns all of this into a command for today. What would it look like for you to be "steadfast and immovable" this week, knowing your "labor in the Lord is not in vain"?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Resurrection Hope Letter

Write a brief letter (half a page) to yourself from the perspective of your future resurrected self — living in the new creation, in the presence of God. What would you tell yourself to hold onto, let go of, or pursue more urgently? Share with the group if you are willing.

Application Exercise 2 — Suffering and Hope

Read Romans 8:18–25 together. Identify one area of suffering or longing in your own life. How does the promise of resurrection and new creation speak to that specific pain? Pray together, bringing those sufferings before God with the confidence that "the One seated on the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new.'"

Case Study

A coworker new to your church has been watching videos that tie the news to Bible prophecy. She texts you a chart showing that Christ will return within the next few years. She's stopped saving for retirement and feels anxious most of the time. At small group, another member shrugs: "Nobody knows, so why even think about it?" Using Matthew 24:36, 42–44, 1 Thessalonians 4:16–18, and 1 Corinthians 15:58, discuss: How would you respond to your coworker with both honesty and gentleness? What does the group member miss by dismissing the subject? How should hope in His return shape this week?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 27

Faith Under Fire — Suffering, Perseverance, and the Faithfulness of God

Pastoral Theology / Soteriology

By the end of this chapter, you will have a biblical framework for understanding suffering — not as evidence of God's absence, and not as evidence of your own failure, both of which are easy conclusions to reach in the middle of it. Suffering is often the very place where God does some of His deepest, most purposeful work. You will be equipped to hold your own pain with honesty and hope, and to walk alongside others in theirs with genuine pastoral care. This is more than a position you hold. It's a posture: the posture of someone who has learned to trust a God who loved us enough to enter our suffering rather than explain it away.

Discussion Questions

1. Before this chapter, what was your instinctive theology of suffering — what did you assume it meant when a Christian suffered? How has this chapter challenged or confirmed that assumption?

2. Job's friends insisted that his suffering must be the result of his sin. Why is this such a persistent and damaging error? Have you ever experienced someone applying this logic to your own pain?

3. Romans 5:3–5 says we can "rejoice in our sufferings." That sounds almost impossible. What does Paul mean? Is he asking us to pretend suffering doesn't hurt, or is he pointing to something deeper?

4. The Psalms of lament are inspired Scripture — God's endorsement of honest, anguished prayer. What does it mean for your prayer life to know that "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is a holy prayer?

5. How do you walk alongside someone who is suffering without offering easy answers or false comfort? What does faithful pastoral presence look like in practice?

6. What did someone say to you in a hard season that hurt more than it helped? Why did it land that way, and what would have helped instead?

7. Psalm 88 ends in darkness, with no resolution. When you read it, what do you feel — relief, discomfort, something else? Why might God have wanted a psalm like this in the Bible?

8. Which of the three pictures (the Refiner, the Fourth Man, or the Weaving) speaks most to where you are right now? Why that one?

Scripture Exercise

Read Psalm 22 together as a group.

Step 1: Read the entire psalm aloud. Note the movement: where does it begin, and where does it end?

Step 2: Identify the specific language of lament in verses 1–21. What does the psalmist feel? What does he fear? What does he remember?

Step 3: What shifts in verse 24? What does the psalmist say God has NOT done, despite appearances?

Step 4: Jesus quoted verse 1 from the cross (Matthew 27:46). What does it mean that the Son of God prayed this psalm in His darkest moment? What does that tell us about the legitimacy of our own lament?

Step 5: Discuss together: What would it look like to pray this psalm honestly in the middle of your own suffering — not skipping to the end, but walking through the whole journey?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Writing a Lament

The Psalms teach us that honest lament is a form of faith, not a failure of it. This week, write your own lament, using Psalm 13 as your model. In just six verses it moves through five parts:

Address God by name. "How long, O LORD?" (Psalm 13:1). Lament is prayer, not venting into the air.

Complain honestly. Name the pain, the fear, the confusion, the unanswered prayer — "How long must I wrestle in my soul, with sorrow in my heart each day?" (v. 2). Don't clean it up or make it sound more spiritual than it is.

Ask for something specific. "Consider me and respond, O LORD my God" (v. 3). Lament isn't only telling God how it is; it's asking Him to act.

State what you know to be true, even when you can't feel it. "But I have trusted in Your loving devotion" (v. 5). Not a denial of the pain, but an anchor in it.

If you can, end with praise — "I will sing to the LORD, for He has been good to me" (v. 6). If you can't yet, that's all right. Psalm 88 didn't either.

If you are willing, share your lament with one trusted person in the group. Lament isn't a lack of faith. Some of the most faithful people I know are also the most honest about pain.

Application Exercise 2 — The Ministry of Presence

It helps to know what tends to help and what tends to hurt. Job's friends actually got the first week exactly right: "they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights, but no one spoke a word to him because they saw how intense his suffering was" (Job 2:13). It was when they started explaining that they went wrong.

☒ Fresh grief. Helps: "I'm so sorry." "I'm here." Showing up, bringing a meal, staying. Hurts: "Everything happens for a reason," "God needed another angel," "At least…"

☒ Long illness or chronic pain. Helps: "This is hard. How are you really doing?" Regular check-ins, practical help, presence that lasts past the first month. Hurts: "Have you tried praying more?" or "Maybe there's sin in your life."

☒ Unanswered prayer. Helps: "God hasn't stopped listening. I don't know why the answer hasn't come." Praying with them. Hurts: "You just need more faith."

☒ Anger at God. Helps: "The Psalms are full of this. God can handle it." Reading Psalm 13 or 22 together. Hurts: "You shouldn't feel that way."

One of the most important things the church can do for people who are hurting is simply show up, with love rather than answers. As a group:

Identify one person in your community — in the church, in your neighborhood, in your family — who is currently walking through significant suffering.

Discuss together: What does that person actually need right now? (Not what would make us feel helpful, but what would genuinely serve them.)

Commit to one specific act of presence this week: a visit, a meal, a phone call, a handwritten note. Not to fix anything — just to be there.

Pray together for that person by name, asking God to make you instruments of His comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3–4).

Reconvene next chapter and share: What happened? What did you learn about the ministry of presence? Presence rarely feels like enough in the moment. It usually is.

Case Study

A woman in your small group has been praying for two years for her husband's healing from a chronic illness. Last week someone at church told her, kindly enough, that healing would come once she stopped "speaking doubt." Now she is ashamed of her questions and has stopped praying out loud. She tells you she isn't sure God is listening, and she is tired of pretending she's fine. How do you help her pray honestly again, without handing her a tidy explanation or brushing past the hurt she received from a fellow believer? Using Psalm 13, Job 42:7, and Romans 5:3–5, discuss: What did that comment get wrong? What would honest lament look like for her right now? What would faithful presence look like over the next several months, not just this week?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 28

The Holy Spirit: Gifts, Fruit, and Maturity

Pneumatology

By the end of this chapter, you will understand the difference between the Spirit's gifts and the Spirit's fruit: gifts as tools for serving others, fruit as the true mark of a Christlike life. Both come from the same Gift Giver, the Holy Spirit, and both are meant to build up the body of Christ. But they are not the same thing, and it's easy to chase one and neglect the other. You'll learn a few honest questions for testing any claimed gift, including your own, and practical ways to serve with the gifts you've been given while His fruit grows in you.

Discussion Questions

1. What spiritual gifts do you believe God has given you? How are you using them to serve others?

2. Why does Paul place 1 Corinthians 13 (the love chapter) right in the middle of his teaching on spiritual gifts? What is he saying?

3. What is the difference between the gifts of the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit? Which do you think the church tends to emphasize more?

4. How does the fruit of the Spirit grow in a person? Is it something you produce, or something that grows as you abide in Christ?

5. What would your church look like if every member were both gifted for service and growing in the fruit of the Spirit?

6. Think about the bells and pomegranates. In your own life right now, is there more bell than pomegranate, or more pomegranate than bell? What would it look like to have both?

Scripture Exercise

Read Galatians 5:16–26 together as a group.

Step 1: Read verses 16–18. What two forces does Paul say are at war in the believer? What does he say to do about it?

Step 2: Read verses 19–21 and then verses 22–23. Notice the words Paul uses: the "acts" of the flesh, but the "fruit" of the Spirit. What is the difference between something you produce and something that grows?

Step 3: Look again at the list in verses 22–23. Paul says "the fruit of the Spirit is," not "the fruits are." Why does it matter that these nine belong together?

Step 4: Read verses 24–25. What has already happened to the flesh, and what does it mean to "walk in step with the Spirit"?

Step 5: Discuss together: Verse 26 warns against becoming "conceited, provoking and envying one another." How might that warning apply to the way a church thinks about spiritual gifts?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Gift Inventory

This week, ask two people who know you well: "What do you think my spiritual gifts are?" Write down their answers alongside your own sense of your gifts. Bring your reflections to the next chapter. Notice the gap, if there is one, between what you'd say and what you're actually doing.

Application Exercise 2 — Fruit Audit

Choose one fruit of the Spirit from Galatians 5:22–23 that you feel is least developed in your life right now. For the next seven days, journal one specific situation each day where you had the opportunity to express that fruit — and whether you did. At the end of the week, bring your observations to a trusted friend or small group for prayer and accountability.

Case Study

A church member is very gifted — they teach powerfully, pray boldly, and lead with confidence. But they are also harsh, impatient, and dismissive of those who disagree with them. Using 1 Corinthians 13:1–3 and Galatians 5:22–23, discuss: What is missing? How do gifts without fruit become harmful? How would you lovingly address this?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 29

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

Pneumatology — A Pastoral Conversation

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to engage the two major Christian views on the baptism of the Holy Spirit with understanding, charity, and biblical grounding. I don't expect this chapter to settle the question for you, and it isn't meant to. What I hope it does is let you hold it with humility, anchored in what Scripture clearly teaches about the Spirit's work in every believer.

Discussion Questions

1. Before this chapter, which view were you most familiar with — or most shaped by? What experiences or teachings formed that understanding?

2. Read 1 Corinthians 12:13 carefully. What is Paul's main point in this verse? Does the word "all" settle the question for you, or does it raise further questions?

3. In Acts 8:14–17, the Samaritans had believed and been baptized, but had not yet received the Holy Spirit. How do you understand this passage? Does it support a "second experience" view, or is there another explanation?

4. What is the difference between the Spirit's work in regeneration (making us new) and the Spirit's work in empowering (equipping us for witness)? Can both views agree on this distinction even if they disagree on the timing?

5. How should Christians who hold different views on this question relate to one another in the local church? What does it look like to hold a conviction humbly while remaining in genuine fellowship with those who differ?

6. Ephesians 5:18 tells us to keep on being filled with the Spirit. Whatever your view of Spirit baptism, what would living "filled" look like for you this week? And does separating the question of when we are baptized in the Spirit from the question of which gifts continue today change how you see believers who differ from you?

Scripture Exercise

Read Acts 1:4–8 and Acts 2:1–4 together. Jesus tells His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for "the gift the Father promised" — the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Then Pentecost arrives.

Discuss as a group: The disciples were already followers of Jesus before this moment. What changed at Pentecost? What did the Spirit's coming enable them to do that they could not do before? How does this passage inform — without necessarily settling — the question of whether the Spirit's empowering is always simultaneous with conversion, or whether it can come as a distinct experience? What do both views agree on?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Personal Testimony

Write a brief (one-page) account of your own experience of the Holy Spirit. When did you first sense His presence? Have there been moments of particular empowering or filling? Share this with a trusted friend or small group. Whatever your view, someone across the table from you has come to a different one honestly. Keep that in view.

Application Exercise 2 — Charitable Reading

Read a short article or chapter that represents a view of Spirit baptism different from your own. As you read, write down: (a) the strongest argument the other view makes, and (b) one thing you can genuinely appreciate about it. Bring your reflections to the group. Reading the other side well is harder than it sounds, and more worthwhile than it sounds too.

Case Study

Your small group includes people from different church backgrounds. One member, raised Pentecostal, gently asks a newer believer whether she has "received the baptism of the Holy Spirit yet." She goes home anxious that she's missing something. Another member says flatly that anyone who believes in a second experience "doesn't understand the Bible." How do you protect her assurance and the group's unity while everyone keeps their convictions? Using Romans 8:9, Acts 8:14–17, and Ephesians 5:18, discuss: What does every believer in the room already have? What is fair to say about each view?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 30

Putting It Into Practice: Scripture Study Practicum

Hermeneutics and Exegesis

Discussion Questions

1. Think about the passage you chose. What makes it "disputed" — the text itself, or the assumptions we bring to it?

2. How do you respond when two people you respect interpret the same passage differently? What process do you use to work through it?

3. What is the role of humility in Bible study — especially on passages where godly people disagree?

4. In the passage you worked through, what did the surrounding context (the chapter, the book, the whole Bible) clarify? What did it leave unresolved?

5. What is the difference between a secondary disagreement (where Christians can differ) and a primary one (where the gospel is at stake)?

Scripture Exercise

Take the passage you chose from "Choose Your Passage" and work it through together.

Step 1: Pray together, asking God to open your eyes and to guard you from reading in only what you want to find.

Step 2: Read the passage aloud twice. List everything you observe: who, what, when, where, repeated words, and anything that surprises you.

Step 3: Read the whole chapter around it. How does the context shape what this passage means?

Step 4: Find two or three other passages that speak to the same question. Do they clarify it, or add to the tension?

Step 5: Compare two commentaries from different traditions. Where do they agree, and where do they differ?

Step 6: Write one sentence summarizing the main point you are confident of, and one question you are still holding. Then name one way this passage calls you to live differently.

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Inductive Study Practice

Choose a short passage (5–10 verses) from a book of the Bible you have never studied carefully. Using the Observe–Interpret–Apply method, spend 30 minutes working through it on your own before consulting any commentary — starting, as always, with a short prayer for illumination. Then check a trusted commentary. What did you see that the commentary confirmed? What did you miss? Missing something isn't a failure; it's why the method includes a second set of eyes.

Application Exercise 2 — Scripture Memory

Memorize 2 Timothy 2:15 this week. Reflect on what it means to "accurately handle" the word of truth. What habits of study, prayer, and humility does that phrase call you to? Share your reflection with a partner.

Case Study

Your small group is studying James 5:14–16. One member, whose mother is seriously ill, reads that the prayer offered in faith will restore the sick and is sure it promises healing if the elders pray rightly. Another member quickly answers that the passage is really about spiritual weakness, not illness, and the conversation turns heated. Both may be bringing what they hoped to find. How would you slow the group down and work the passage together? Using Acts 17:11, Proverbs 18:17, and 2 Timothy 2:15, discuss: Which of the six steps would help most here? How do you care for the member whose mother is ill while still handling the text honestly? Where should the group hold its conclusion firmly, and where humbly?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 31

Testing What You Hear: Teachers, Prophecy, and Experiences

Discernment and Apologetics

By the end of this chapter, you will be equipped to test spiritual claims — teachers, prophecies, experiences — by the standards Scripture itself gives us: the Word, the gospel, the character of Christ, and the fruit of a life. You'll see why a claim's power to move us isn't proof that it's true, and how a sincere crowd, a gifted speaker, or a deeply felt moment can carry us right past questions we should have asked. And you'll leave with five tests that work together, and a simple way to use them the next time something sounds right but you aren't sure.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the tests Scripture gives us for evaluating a teacher or a prophetic claim? List as many as you can find.

2. Have you ever been in a situation where something felt spiritually powerful but later turned out to be misleading? What did you learn?

3. Some people think testing what a teacher says is unloving or unspiritual. How would you respond? What does 1 John 4:1 assume about the spiritual world we live in?

4. How do you balance being open to the Spirit's work with being discerning about what claims to be the Spirit's work?

5. What role does a teacher's character and fruit play in evaluating their ministry?

6. Which of the four objections in this chapter have you heard, or maybe used yourself? How would you answer it gently, in a way that keeps the conversation open?

Scripture Exercise

Read 1 John 4:1–6 together as a group.

Step 1: Read verse 1. What does John assume about the world his readers live in? Why do you think he calls them "beloved" in the same breath as he warns them?

Step 2: Read verses 2–3. What is John's test? Why was the truth about Jesus "come in the flesh" the dividing line in his day, and what versions of that question still come up today?

Step 3: Read verse 4. Where does John place the believer's confidence: in their own cleverness, or in "He who is in you"? How does that change the way we approach discernment?

Step 4: Read verses 5–6. John says the world listens to those who speak "from the world's perspective." Is popularity ever a reliable test?

Step 5: Discuss together: Of the five tests in this chapter, which ones can you find in these six verses?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Discernment Journal

For the next two weeks, keep a brief log of spiritual claims you encounter. For each one, note: (a) What is being claimed? (b) What Scripture is cited? (c) Is the Scripture used in context? (d) What is the fruit of this teaching in people's lives? (e) Which of the five tests does it clearly pass, and which are still unclear? Bring your observations to the group. Five tests, not one gut check.

Application Exercise 2 — Gospel Anchor

Write out in your own words the core gospel message (who Jesus is, what He did, why it matters, how we respond). Use this as your "plumb line" for evaluating any teaching you encounter. Share your summary with a partner and refine it together.

Case Study

A popular speaker visits your church and gives a prophecy that a specific person in the room will be healed of cancer. The person is not healed. The speaker says, “The person didn’t have enough faith.” Using Deuteronomy 18:21–22 and Matthew 7:15–16, discuss: How do you evaluate this? What questions would you ask? How do you care for the person who was not healed?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 32

Knowing the Difference: Error, False Teaching, and Heresy

Systematic Theology and Apologetics

Chapter 31 asked whether a teaching is true. This chapter asks what to do when it isn't, and how much it matters. By the end of it, you will be able to place a disagreement on a simple spectrum: matters of opinion, where we leave one another room; secondary doctrines, where sincere Christians disagree with conviction and charity; serious errors, which distort the gospel and harm people; and heresy, which denies the gospel itself. Learning to tell these apart may be one of the more useful things this guide offers you.

Discussion Questions

1. What doctrines do you believe are so essential that denying them puts someone outside the Christian faith? Why?

2. What is the difference between a heresy and a secondary disagreement? How do you tell them apart?

3. Why is it important to contend for essential truth without becoming harsh, divisive, or uncharitable toward those who differ on secondary matters?

4. Think of a teaching you've concluded is wrong. Where does it fall on the spectrum — opinion, secondary doctrine, serious error, or heresy? What makes you put it there, and how should that shape the way you respond?

5. What is the danger of treating every theological disagreement as equally serious — or equally unimportant?

Scripture Exercise

Read Galatians 1:6–9 and 1 Corinthians 15:1–8 together. Notice how strongly Paul speaks: this isn't a difference of opinion but "a different gospel." Then notice what he names "of first importance" in 1 Corinthians 15. Discuss: Why did Paul treat the Galatian teaching so seriously? What truths does Paul put at the center in 1 Corinthians 15, and how does that list help you tell an essential from a secondary matter? Where are you more tempted to raise an opinion to an essential, or to lower an essential to an opinion? Close by praying for courage to hold the center firmly and grace to hold the rest with an open hand.

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Doctrinal Triage

Draw three concentric circles. In the innermost circle, write the doctrines you believe are essential to Christianity (e.g., the Trinity, the physical resurrection, justification by faith). In the middle circle, write serious errors that damage faith but may not exclude someone from the faith. In the outer circle, write secondary matters where Christians can differ. Matters of opinion, where Scripture leaves room, sit outside the circles altogether. Share your diagram with a partner and discuss where you agree and disagree. Where you land on the circles matters less than whether you can explain why you put something where you did.

For a durable reference card built from this exercise, with real doctrines already sorted into the three categories, see Table L in the Appendix.

Application Exercise 2 — Creed Study

Read the Nicene Creed aloud as a group — the full text is in the Appendix (The Creeds in Full) if you need a copy. For each clause, identify: (a) What heresy was this clause written to counter? (b) What Scripture supports this affirmation? (c) Why does this doctrine matter for everyday Christian life? If you can't answer that last question, it's worth sitting with a while longer before moving on.

Application Exercise 3 — The Debate Map

Using Table Z in the Appendix, go down the list of fifteen debates and mark three things: which ones you've heard of, which ones you already hold an opinion on, and which ones you could explain fairly from both sides. Notice the gap between the second mark and the third; many of our opinions are inherited rather than studied. Then pick one debate and spend this week reading the strongest case for the view you don't hold.

Case Study

Your church is considering inviting a speaker who teaches that Jesus was not physically resurrected — only spiritually. Another speaker teaches that Christians should not celebrate Christmas because it has pagan roots. Using 1 Corinthians 15:14–17 and Romans 14:5–6, discuss: How do you categorize these two positions? Which is a matter of essential doctrine, and which is a matter of conscience? How does that distinction shape your response?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 33

Healthy Authority, Harmful Control

Spiritual Abuse and Unhealthy Authority

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to tell the difference between the servant leadership Jesus modeled and commanded and the controlling authority that harms the very people it claims to serve. You'll be able to recognize teachings that bind people to a human leader instead of to Christ — "you need a covering," "you can't leave without my blessing," "to question me is to question God" — and answer them from Scripture. I hope you come away freer, not more suspicious: grateful for faithful shepherds, alert to false ones, and settled in the truth that Christ alone is Head of His church, and He leads His people with love.

Discussion Questions

1. What does servant leadership look like in practice? Can you describe a leader who modeled it well?

2. What are the warning signs that a leader or community is moving from healthy authority into harmful control?

3. Why do people sometimes submit to controlling leadership even when it hurts them? What makes it hard to leave?

4. How does Jesus' model in Mark 10:42–45 redefine greatness and authority in the kingdom of God?

5. If you have experienced spiritual abuse, how has God brought healing? If you haven't, how can you be a safe person for those who have?

6. Have you ever heard "covering," "alignment," or "honor" language used to discourage questions or leaving? How does "Christ alone is the Head" change the way you hear it?

7. This chapter has asked hard questions of leaders. Now turn them around: Where are you most tempted to tear down rather than build up? Is there a concern you've shared with others that you've never taken to the person directly? Have you ever left a church, or wanted to, over something you never tried to work out?

Scripture Exercise

Read John 13:1–17 together. Notice the order: Jesus knew the Father had put all things into His hands (v. 3), and what He does with that authority is pick up a towel and wash His disciples' feet, even the feet of His betrayer. Discuss: What does this passage teach about what real authority is for? Why does Peter resist at first? In verse 15 Jesus calls this an example. What would following it look like for you, wherever you have influence? Close by thanking God for faithful shepherds, and asking Him to make each of you a safe and humble servant.

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Leadership Reflection

Think of the best leader you have ever known — in the church, family, or workplace. What made their authority feel safe and life-giving rather than controlling? Write down five specific qualities or behaviors. How do those qualities reflect the servant-leadership model of Mark 10:42–45? The best leaders I've known were rarely the ones who talked about leadership the most.

Application Exercise 2 — Safe Community Audit

As a group, discuss: What would it look like for your small group or church community to be a genuinely safe place — where questions are welcomed, disagreement is handled with grace, and no one is shamed for leaving? Identify two or three concrete practices your group could adopt to cultivate that safety. Concrete practices, not good intentions. Good intentions are easy to have and easy to forget.

Then, whether you're looking at your own church or one you're considering, walk honestly through these eight questions. One or two concerns may mean nothing. Several together are worth a closer look.

☒ Can the leader be wrong? Have you ever heard them say "I was wrong" about something that mattered?

☒ Who holds the leader accountable? Whatever your church's structure, is there anyone who can actually say no?

☒ Can you leave without penalty? Would they send you off with a blessing, or with warnings and cold shoulders?

☒ Is disagreement safe? Can you raise a concern without being labeled rebellious, divisive, or unteachable?

☒ Is there independent financial oversight? Do more than one or two people see where the money goes?

☒ Is the talk more about loyalty than about Jesus? Do people quote "what the pastor said" more than what the Bible says?

☒ Are you growing more confident with your own Bible? Or more dependent on someone to tell you what God is saying?

☒ Does the leader raise up other leaders? Or followers who can't function without them?

Case Study

A church leader tells members that they must get his approval before making major life decisions — job changes, marriages, moves. He says this is "spiritual covering" and that those who leave without his blessing will lose God's protection. Using 1 Peter 5:2–3 and Mark 10:42–45, discuss: What is wrong with this picture? What does genuine pastoral authority look like, and what does it never do?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 34

Apostles, Authority, and the Church Today

Apostolic Restoration and Church Authority

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to weigh modern claims of apostolic authority carefully, without brushing them aside and without simply taking them at face value. You'll learn the three ways the New Testament uses the word "apostle," the marks that set the first apostles apart, and a handful of honest questions to ask of anyone who claims their authority today. Just as importantly, you'll see what does continue: the apostles' own teaching, still leading the church, built on the one foundation already laid — Jesus Christ.

Discussion Questions

1. What were the qualifications for an apostle in the New Testament (see Acts 1:21–22)? How do modern claims of apostleship compare?

2. What is the difference between the foundational role of the apostles (Ephesians 2:20) and ongoing leadership gifts in the church?

3. How should a church respond when a leader claims special apostolic authority that places them above accountability?

4. What role does fruit — character, gospel faithfulness, care for the vulnerable — play in evaluating any claim to spiritual authority?

5. How do we honor genuine leadership and gifting in the church without giving any human leader the kind of authority that belongs to Christ alone?

6. Have you ever felt pressure to accept a leader's apostolic claim in order to stay open to the Spirit's work? How does separating those two questions help you hold both conviction and charity?

7. Look at the five stages in "How It Comes In." Do you recognize any of them in your own church or experience? Which question from this chapter would you most want your leaders to ask?

Scripture Exercise

Read 2 Corinthians 11:1–15 together. Paul warns about "super-apostles" who present themselves impressively but preach a different gospel. What markers does Paul use to distinguish true from false apostolic ministry? How do those markers apply to evaluating leaders today?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Authority Evaluation

Think of a Christian leader whose authority you currently submit to (a pastor, teacher, mentor, or author). Using the criteria from this chapter — Acts 1:21–22, Matthew 7:20, 2 Corinthians 12:12 — evaluate their ministry. What gives their authority legitimacy? What keeps it accountable? Write a brief reflection. Be honest here even if the honest answer is uncomfortable. That's really the point of the exercise.

Application Exercise 2 — Accountability Structures

As a group, discuss: What accountability structures does your church have in place for its leaders? Who can question the pastor? Who can remove an elder? How are financial decisions made transparently? If these structures are weak, what would it take to strengthen them? Pray together for your church's leadership. Weak structures don't fix themselves. Someone has to actually raise the question.

Case Study

Your small group has been working through a popular online course, and the next session features a leader introduced as an apostle over a network of churches. He teaches that God is releasing new strategies to the church through apostles like him, and that believers who want them should come under his “covering.” Several in your group are excited. One friend quietly asks you afterward whether it’s even right to question him. How do you answer honestly, without mocking his ministry and without pretending the question doesn’t matter? Using Ephesians 2:19–20, Revelation 2:2, and Acts 2:42, discuss: What would you want to ask about this leader’s claim? What can you gladly honor in his ministry? How would you help your friend see that testing a leader isn’t the same as resisting the Spirit?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 35

Gifts as Grace, Not Status

Impartation, Activation, and Spiritual Gifts

By the end of this chapter, you will receive spiritual gifts as grace given for the service of others. Not as a badge of spiritual status, not as something to be bought and sold, and not as a show to put on. You'll see why Paul calls them grace-gifts, why the body of Christ has no rankings, and why love is the measure of every one of them.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever seen spiritual gifts used in a way that seemed more about the person than about serving others? What did that look like?

2. What does it mean that gifts are given "for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7)? How does that reframe how we think about our own gifts?

3. What is the danger of treating spiritual gifts as a sign of spiritual maturity or special status?

4. How does the story of Simon in Acts 8 warn us about treating spiritual gifts as something to be acquired, purchased, or controlled?

5. What gift do you believe God has given you, and how are you using it to serve your community?

6. If you had to plant a church with only five gifts, which five would you choose? Now picture two churches: one has only teaching, serving, encouragement, giving, and leadership; the other has only the most dramatic gifts. Which would be healthier? What does that tell you about how God values the quiet gifts?

Scripture Exercise

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1–7 slowly, together or on your own.

Step 1: Read verses 1–3. Paul names the most impressive gifts he can think of. What does he say they amount to without love?

Step 2: Read verses 4–7 aloud, one phrase at a time. Notice that almost every line describes something love does or refuses to do, not something it feels.

Step 3: Now read verses 4–7 again, putting the gift you believe God has given you in place of the word "love." Where does it ring true? Where does it catch?

Step 4: Read 1 Corinthians 14:12 and 14:26. How does Paul's phrase "build up the church" sharpen what love looks like when we use our gifts together?

Step 5: Discuss together: What is one way you could use your gift this month in a way no one would ever notice or applaud?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Gift in Service

Identify one spiritual gift you believe God has given you. This week, find one specific, concrete way to use that gift to serve someone else — with no audience, no recognition, and no expectation of return. Afterward, ask what it taught you about grace.

Application Exercise 2 — Gratitude Inventory

Make a list of every spiritual gift, ability, or resource you have received from God. For each one, write: "I received this freely. I will give it freely." Pray through the list, offering each gift back to God for His purposes and the common good of His people. They were never yours to keep.

Case Study

A ministry charges a fee for a “gift activation” conference, promising that attendees will receive or unlock spiritual gifts through the laying on of hands. Its advanced track offers a certificate in prophetic ministry, where students practice giving personal words to strangers and are told that mistakes are simply part of the training. Using Acts 8:18–20 and 1 Corinthians 12:4–7, discuss: What is wrong with this model? What does Scripture say about how gifts are given and for what purpose?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 36

Prayer: Bold, Dependent, and Surrendered

Prayer, Petition, Declaration, and Authority

By the end of this chapter, my hope is that you'll pray with greater boldness and greater dependence at the same time — which sounds contradictory until you understand that prayer was never a technique for controlling outcomes. It's a conversation with a Father who is sovereign, good, and near, and who loves you. Along the way, you'll learn to pray using the model Jesus Himself gave when His disciples asked, "Lord, teach us to pray."

Discussion Questions

1. How does the Lord's Prayer model both boldness ("give us," "deliver us") and surrender ("Your will be done")? How do those two things work together?

2. What is the difference between praying according to God's will and praying to change God's mind?

3. Have you ever prayed boldly for something and not received it? How did you process that? What did it teach you about prayer and trust?

4. What does it mean to "declare" something in prayer? When is that biblical, and when might it cross into something else?

5. How does Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane (Luke 22:42) model the posture we should bring to every prayer?

6. Which line of the Lord's Prayer do you tend to rush past or skip? And which of the three postures — bold, dependent, or surrendered — comes hardest for you right now?

Scripture Exercise

Read Philippians 4:6–7 and Romans 8:26–27 together. What do these passages say about what prayer does in us, not just what it accomplishes for us? Discuss: How does prayer change the one who prays, even when the answer is "not yet" or "no"?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Praying the Lord's Prayer

For the next seven days, begin each morning by praying through the Lord's Prayer slowly — one phrase at a time. For each phrase, pause and personalize it: What does "hallowed be Your name" mean for my life today? What "daily bread" do I need? What debts do I need to confess? Keep a brief journal of what surfaces in each phrase. Bring your reflections to the group. Slow prayer feels unproductive at first. Stay with it anyway.

Here is a simple guide to keep beside you. Linger where you need to. Think of it as a trellis, not a cage.

Application Exercise 2 — Lament and Surrender

Write a prayer of lament — bring to God something you have prayed for and not yet received. Be honest, bold, and specific. Then, at the end of the prayer, write a sentence of surrender: "Yet not my will, but Yours be done." Read it aloud. How does it feel to hold boldness and surrender together? Share it with a trusted friend or group.

Case Study

A friend in your group has been praying for months about her husband's job. At a recent conference, she was taught to stop "asking" and start "declaring" — to speak the new job into existence and refuse to say anything that sounds like doubt. Now she winces when you pray, "if it's Your will," wondering if that phrase is what's holding the answer back. She's sincere, and she's hurting. How do you encourage her bold faith without endorsing a formula, and without making her feel foolish for hoping? Using Matthew 6:9–13, Luke 22:42, and James 4:2, discuss: Is "Your will be done" a lack of faith? What does bold prayer actually look like?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 37

Healing, Suffering, and Faithful Care

Pneumatology and Pastoral Theology

By the end of this chapter, you will pray faithfully for healing while caring tenderly for those who suffer, holding together two things Scripture never lets us separate: the reality of God's power, and the mystery of His purposes. Along the way, you'll walk through the stories of sickness and healing in the early church, see why the Messiah's healings were signs pointing to who Jesus is, and learn what it means to love sick people well, whether healing comes now or waits for the day He makes all things new.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you hold together the truth that God heals and the reality that not everyone is healed? How do you talk about this honestly with someone who is suffering?

2. What does Paul's experience in 2 Corinthians 12 teach us about the relationship between suffering and God's grace? How does his response model a healthy theology of unanswered prayer?

3. How can the church pray boldly for healing without making those who are not healed feel like they have failed or lacked faith?

4. What does it mean to "care tenderly" for someone who is suffering — especially when you cannot fix their situation? What does faithful pastoral presence look like?

5. How has suffering shaped your own faith? What has it taught you about God that you could not have learned any other way?

6. Paul left Trophimus sick in Miletus and prescribed a little wine for Timothy's stomach. How do these small, honest verses change the way you think about sickness in your own life or church?

7. Jesus led the blind man out of the village before He healed him, and told the girl's parents to give her something to eat. What do those small details tell you about His heart? How would they change the way your church prays for the sick?

Scripture Exercise

Read Philippians 2:25–30 together as a group.

Step 1: Read verses 25–26. List everything Paul calls Epaphroditus. What does that tell you about how Paul valued him?

Step 2: Read verse 27. How sick was Epaphroditus? How does Paul describe his recovery, and whose mercy does he credit?

Step 3: Notice the phrase “sorrow upon sorrow.” What does it tell you that an apostle who had seen extraordinary miracles still feared losing his friend?

Step 4: Read verses 28–30. How does Paul ask the church to receive Epaphroditus? What does honor look like for someone who has been through serious illness?

Step 5: Discuss together: Is there someone in your church who has been sick a long time? What would it look like to “welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor” him (v. 29)?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Pastoral Reflection

Think of someone in your life who is currently suffering — physically, emotionally, or spiritually. Write a brief prayer for them using the language of James 5:14–16 and Psalm 34:18. Then consider: what one practical act of care could you offer them this week? Commit to doing it. An idea for care that never turns into an act of care isn’t much use to anyone.

Application Exercise 2 — Theological Journaling

Read 2 Corinthians 12:1–10 slowly and prayerfully. In your journal, write about a time when God's answer to your prayer was not what you asked for. Looking back, how do you see His grace at work in that season? What would you say to someone going through a similar experience right now? Whatever you'd say, say it plainly. Suffering doesn't need decoration.

Case Study

A beloved church member has been praying for healing from a chronic illness for three years. A visiting minister tells her that she is not healed because of unconfessed sin or insufficient faith. Using James 5:14–16 and 2 Corinthians 12:8–9, discuss: How do you respond to this? What does Scripture actually say about the relationship between faith, sin, and healing? How do you care for this person?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 38

Deliverance, Inner Healing, and Wise Pastoral Care

Angelology and Pastoral Theology

By the end of this chapter, you will approach deliverance and inner healing practices with biblical discernment, real pastoral safeguards, and genuine care. There are two ditches on this road, and this chapter is about staying off both of them: dismissing the spiritual realm, and going beyond what Scripture actually teaches. Along the way, you'll see that God's main path to healing the inner person isn't a special session or a trained specialist. It's the patient work of sanctification — the One who began a good work in you, carrying it to completion.

Discussion Questions

1. What does Scripture teach about the reality of spiritual warfare? How does Ephesians 6 describe both the battle and the armor? What is the significance of Paul writing this from a Roman prison?

2. What are the biblical safeguards for any ministry that involves prayer for deliverance or inner healing? What questions should a pastor or ministry leader ask before engaging in this kind of ministry?

3. What is the difference between a spiritual problem and a psychological or medical one? How do we avoid confusing them — and why does the distinction matter for the person being cared for?

4. How does 1 John 4:4 give us confidence without making us careless or presumptuous in spiritual warfare? What is the difference between confidence in Christ and spiritual recklessness?

5. What pastoral care should surround anyone going through a process of deliverance or deep inner healing prayer? Who should be involved, and what accountability structures are needed?

6. Think of a struggle you've carried for a long time. What would it look like to approach it as part of God's slow work of sanctification — with His Word, His people, and time — instead of searching for one moment that fixes it?

7. Look at the safety tests in this chapter. Which ones does your church already practice, and which are missing? Who would you talk to about putting them in place?

Scripture Exercise

Read Mark 5:1–20 (the Gerasene demoniac) together. What does Jesus do? What does He not do? What is the outcome for the man? What does this story teach us about the authority of Christ, the reality of the demonic, and the goal of deliverance — restoration to community and witness?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Armor of God Inventory

Read Ephesians 6:10–18 slowly. For each piece of armor, ask yourself: Where is this piece strong in my life right now? Where is it weak or missing? Write a brief prayer asking God to strengthen the areas of vulnerability you identify.

Application Exercise 2 — Pastoral Safeguards Discussion

Think through: If someone came to you saying they believed they needed deliverance prayer, what would your first three steps be? What questions would you ask? Who would you involve? What would you not do alone? Draft a simple set of pastoral guidelines you could use. Simple is the operative word. An elaborate policy nobody remembers protects no one.

Case Study

A young woman in your church has struggled with anxiety for years. At a conference, a prayer team tells her it comes from her grandmother's involvement in the occult, that this has given a spirit legal rights over her, and that she'll need a series of sessions to find and break each curse. Using Colossians 2:13–15, Ezekiel 18:20, and Philippians 1:6, discuss: What is true and what is untrue in what she was told? What would genuine, loving care look like for her this month?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 39

Spiritual Warfare — The Armor of God: Standing Firm in the Battle

Practical Theology / Angelology

By the end of this chapter, you will understand that every believer is in a spiritual battle, whether they're aware of it or not. Awareness doesn't create the battle; it just helps you fight it well. You'll see that the enemy's main weapon is deception, not raw power, and you'll learn to read the armor of God the way Paul wrote it, as the climax of Ephesians: not a ritual to recite, but the life you already have in Christ, worn every day. You'll learn to stay out of two ditches, ignoring the battle or becoming fixated on the enemy, and to stand like a soldier who knows the victory is already won and whose job is simply to stand in it.

Discussion Questions

1. Before this chapter, how real did spiritual warfare feel to you in your daily life? Did you tend toward ignoring it entirely, or toward being overly focused on it? What shaped that tendency?

2. C. S. Lewis showed that the enemy is most dangerous not when he is obviously terrifying but when he is subtly mundane. What are the most common ways the enemy tries to erode your faith through distraction, discouragement, or small compromises?

3. Paul says our struggle is "not against flesh and blood." How does this change the way you think about conflict with other people — in your family, your workplace, your church?

4. The armor of God includes both defensive pieces (breastplate, shield, helmet) and one offensive weapon (the sword of the Spirit — the Word of God). What does it mean practically to use the Word of God as an offensive weapon in spiritual battle?

5. Revelation 12:11 says believers overcome "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony." How does your personal testimony function as a weapon in spiritual warfare?

6. Paul spends three chapters telling us who we are in Christ before he ever mentions armor. Why do you think he puts it in that order? What changes when you see the armor as the Christian life itself, rather than something added to it?

7. Think of something you've called a stronghold: a habit, a substance, a person. What's the lie underneath it, the belief that says this will make you safe or happy? What truth from Scripture answers that lie?

Scripture Exercise

Read Ephesians 6:10–18 together as a group.

Step 1: Read the passage aloud. Note that Paul begins with "be strong in the Lord" — not "be strong in yourself." Why does this matter?

Step 2: Work through each piece of armor together. For each one, ask: What does this protect against? What is the corresponding attack of the enemy?

Belt of truth — What lies does the enemy tell that this counters?

Breastplate of righteousness — What accusations does the enemy make that this answers?

Feet fitted with readiness — What does it mean to be "gospel-ready" in daily life?

Shield of faith — What are the "flaming arrows" in your own experience?

Helmet of salvation — How does the enemy attack the mind, and how does the assurance of salvation protect it?

Sword of the Spirit — How did Jesus use this weapon in Matthew 4? How can we?

Step 3: Note that verse 18 adds prayer as the atmosphere of the whole battle. What does it mean to "pray in the Spirit at all times"?

Step 4: Discuss together: Which piece of armor do you most need to consciously put on right now?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Putting on the Armor

This week, practice remembering what's already true of you in Christ. This isn't a ritual that keeps you safe for the day; it's a way of reminding yourself who you are and whose armor you wear:

Each morning this week, before you begin your day, read Ephesians 6:10–18 aloud.

Pray through each piece of armor specifically: "Lord, I put on the belt of truth — ground me in Your Word today. I put on the breastplate of righteousness — let me live with integrity in every interaction…" and so on through each piece.

Identify the specific "flaming arrows" you are most likely to face today — the temptations, discouragements, or lies that are most active in your life right now — and pray specifically against them.

Choose one verse to carry into the battle you're most likely to face, and memorize it this week. A few to start with: against fear, 2 Timothy 1:7; against condemnation, Romans 8:1; against doubt, Philippians 1:6; against temptation, 1 Corinthians 10:13; against hopelessness, Romans 8:18; against loneliness, Hebrews 13:5.

Close by praying for one other person in the group by name, asking God to equip them for the battle they are facing.

At the end of the week, share with the group — or write it in your journal if it's just you: What did you notice? Did the practice change how you experienced the day?

Application Exercise 2 — Identifying the Enemy's Strategies

C. S. Lewis's The Screwtape Letters — a work of fiction, but one Lewis intended as serious theological satire — is a wonderful help in recognizing the enemy's methods. Here's how to use it:

Read aloud one short excerpt from The Screwtape Letters (alone, start with Letter 2, 6, or 12).

Discuss: What specific strategy of the enemy does this letter describe? How have you seen this strategy at work in your own life or in the church?

Together, identify the biblical counter to that strategy — a specific Scripture, a specific practice, a specific posture of faith.

Each person identifies one specific area where they sense the enemy is most actively at work in their life right now — not to dwell on it, but to name it and bring it into the light.

Pray for one another specifically, asking God to give each person the specific piece of armor they most need for the battle they are in. Not everyone in the room is fighting the same battle. Pray like you know that.

Case Study

A new believer in your group has started to see the enemy behind everything — a flat tire, a bad night's sleep, a tense meeting at work. She's reading about binding spirits over her neighborhood, and she's become anxious and worn out. Another member, by contrast, admits he's never really believed the devil is more than a symbol for evil. Both are sincere, and both are part of your group. How do you help each of them toward the steady ground Paul describes, without shaming either one? Using Ephesians 6:10–18, 1 Peter 5:8–9, and Colossians 2:15, discuss: What truth does each of them most need to hear? What would "standing firm" look like for each this week? How can the group stand together, shield beside shield, around them both?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 40

Money, Contentment, and the Prosperity Gospel

Prosperity Teaching, Wealth, and Contentment

By the end of this chapter, you will embrace contentment, generosity, and faithful stewardship as the biblical way to hold money. You'll also learn to notice a quiet belief most of us carry without realizing it: that more money would fix what's actually wrong. And you'll be equipped to recognize, and gently correct, prosperity teaching that distorts the gospel.

Discussion Questions

1. What does the prosperity gospel teach, and what is its appeal? Why do people — especially those experiencing poverty or hardship — find it attractive?

2. How does 1 Timothy 6:6–10 reframe the relationship between godliness and financial gain? What does Paul say is "great gain"?

3. What is the difference between God blessing His people materially (which Scripture affirms) and a guaranteed formula for wealth in exchange for faith or giving?

4. How does Paul's contentment in Philippians 4 challenge the way our culture — and sometimes our churches — talk about success, blessing, and the good life?

5. What does generous, joyful giving look like in your own life? What holds you back from greater generosity?

6. Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). If someone looked only at your spending over the last month, what would they conclude you treasure?

7. If the younger people in your life — your children, or newer believers — watched you handle money for the next two decades, what would they pick up? Open hands or clenched ones? Peace or worry? Gratitude or always wanting more?

Scripture Exercise

Read Luke 12:13–21, the parable of the rich fool, together as a group.

Step 1: Notice what prompts the story: a man asks Jesus to settle an inheritance dispute (vv. 13–15). What warning does Jesus give before He tells the parable?

Step 2: Count how often the rich man says “I” and “my” (vv. 17–19). Who is he talking to? Who is missing from his plans?

Step 3: What does God call him, and why (v. 20)? His problem wasn't success. What was it?

Step 4: What does it mean to be "rich toward God" (v. 21)? Name one way you could practice that this week.

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Contentment Audit

Read Philippians 4:10–13 and 1 Timothy 6:6–10. Then honestly assess: In what areas of your life do you struggle most with contentment? What does your spending, saving, and giving reveal about where your treasure actually is? Write a brief prayer of surrender in this area. Money has a way of exposing exactly where our trust sits.

Then try two quick lists. On the first, list what you truly need but lack right now. On the second, list what you own today that you didn't own five years ago. Compare them honestly. Which items on the first list are really wants?

A few questions to sit with privately: What's your first feeling when you picture your finances a few years from now? If an unexpected gift of money arrived today, what would you do with it first? When did you last give something away and feel joy instead of obligation? Have you ever given because someone promised God would multiply it back?

Application Exercise 2 — Generosity Plan

Prayerfully consider one concrete step toward greater generosity you could take in the next 30 days — whether giving to your church, supporting a person in need, or contributing to a ministry you believe in. Write it down, share it with an accountability partner, and follow through. The writing-down part matters more than it sounds like it should.

Not sure where to start? Pick one small act this week that actually costs you something: a generous tip, groceries for a neighbor who's having a hard month, an anonymous gift toward a need in your church, or one step up in your regular giving. Afterward, pay attention to what went on in your heart before, during, and after. The amount matters far less than the practice.

Application Exercise 3 — Charting a Way Out of Debt

Years ago I sketched a simple picture that has helped me with nearly every goal since. It has three circles: where you are now, where you'll end up if nothing changes, and where you want to be. Here it is applied to credit card debt:

Charting a Way Out of Debt

Start with your current state, and be honest about it: in this example, $10,000 on credit cards at 18 percent interest. Then look at the undesired future. If nothing changes, that balance grows to roughly $12,000 in a year and over $14,000 in two. Debt never stands still; it compounds. "The borrower is slave to the lender" (Proverbs 22:7).

Now name the desired future, specifically: here, debt-free in three years. Last, write the few planned actions that connect the two. In this example, a steady $375 a month clears the balance in about 34 months, with roughly $2,900 in interest along the way, as long as nothing new goes on the card.

Draw your own on a sheet of paper for whatever you owe. Pray over it, share it with someone who will ask you about it, and remember that the goal isn't only a better balance. It's a freer heart, and more room to give.

Case Study

A church teaches that if you give a “seed offering” of a specific amount, God is obligated to multiply it back to you financially. Members who are not prospering are told they need more faith or a bigger seed. Using 1 Timothy 6:6–10 and Luke 12:15, discuss: What is wrong with this teaching? What harm does it do? How would you help someone who has been shaped by this message?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 41

The Kingdom of God and Our Place in It

Dominion Theology and the Kingdom of God

By the end of this chapter, you will understand what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God and what you're really asking when you pray, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." You'll learn to serve faithfully in society and culture while keeping your ultimate hope where it belongs, in Christ's return and the kingdom He alone will establish, not one we build for Him. And you'll be able to recognize the ways that prayer gets bent: into cultural conquest, prosperity, escapism, or a faith fused with a nation or a party.

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean that the kingdom of God is "already" here but "not yet" fully here? How does that tension shape how we live, serve, and hope?

2. What is the difference between working for justice and human flourishing in society (which is good and biblical) and believing that Christians must take dominion over culture to usher in Christ's return?

3. How does John 18:36 shape the way we think about political power and the church's role in society? What does it mean that Jesus' kingdom is "not of this world"?

4. What does Micah 6:8 call us to do in the world? How is acting justly and loving mercy different from a program of cultural conquest or political control?

5. How do you hold together genuine engagement with the world and genuine hope in Christ's return — without collapsing one into the other?

6. What are you asking God to do when you pray, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"? How does Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:42) shape your answer?

7. How can you tell the difference between faithful Christian citizenship and fusing your faith with a nation or a political party? Where are you most tempted to blur that line?

Scripture Exercise

Read Matthew 5:13–16 (salt and light) together. What does Jesus say the church's role in the world is? How is being "salt" and "light" different from taking control? What does faithful presence in society look like for your community?

Then read Matthew 6:9–10 and Matthew 26:36–42 side by side. What words does Jesus repeat? What did "Your will be done" cost Him? What might it cost you this week?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Kingdom Mapping

Think about the spheres of life where you have influence — your workplace, neighborhood, family, church, community. Write down one specific way you could act justly, love mercy, or walk humbly in each sphere this week. This is kingdom work — not because it ushers in Christ's return, but because it reflects His character now. That distinction is worth keeping close. It changes why you'd bother at all.

Application Exercise 2 — News and Kingdom

Choose one current news story or social issue. Discuss in your group: How does the "already/not yet" framework shape how you respond to this? What does faithful Christian engagement look like — neither withdrawing from the world nor confusing political victory with the kingdom of God? Both ditches are tempting on different days, for different reasons.

Case Study

Your small group is splitting over an election. One member says, "If we don't take the mountain of government, the kingdom can't come. This is spiritual warfare." Another says the church should stay out of politics entirely. Two longtime friends in the group have stopped speaking. Using Matthew 6:10, John 18:36, Jeremiah 29:7, and 1 Peter 2:9–17, discuss: What is each person getting right, and what are they missing? How would you help the group stay together under the King?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 42

Reading the Bible Well: Translations and Paraphrases

Translations, Paraphrases, and Counterfeits

By the end of this chapter, you will know what kind of Bible you're actually holding: a word-for-word translation, a thought-for-thought translation, a paraphrase, or a version reshaped to fit a group's doctrine. You'll understand why faithful translations differ, why a committee of scholars matters, and how to compare versions for yourself. You'll also learn to recognize when a so-called translation quietly adds to or changes what God said. And you'll be equipped to choose your Bible resources wisely, with real gratitude for those who risked their lives to put Scripture in our language.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between a formal equivalence translation (word-for-word), a dynamic equivalence translation (thought-for-thought), and a paraphrase? Can you give examples of each?

2. Why does it matter which Bible translation you use for serious study? What is the risk of relying primarily on a paraphrase for teaching, preaching, or doctrinal formation?

3. How do you evaluate a Bible translation or paraphrase? What questions would you ask about its translation philosophy, its handling of the original languages, and its theological commitments?

4. What does Proverbs 30:5–6 say about adding to God's words? How does that apply to translations that insert interpretive content not found in the original text?

5. What translation do you currently use for personal study? What do you appreciate about it? What are its limitations?

6. Tyndale wanted a farm boy to know Scripture better than the scholars of his day, and it cost him his life. What does it cost you to read the Bible today? How might remembering what it cost others change the way you read?

7. Someone quotes a striking verse that doesn't sound like the Bible you know. What steps would you take to find out whether it comes from a faithful translation?

Scripture Exercise

Read Psalm 23:1–2 aloud in four forms of English, oldest to newest:

Old English (c. 900s): "Drihten me raet, ne byth me nanes godes wan. And he me geset on swayth good feohland. And fedde me be waetera stathum."

Middle English (Wycliffe Bible, 1380s): "Our Lord gouerneth me, and nothyng shal defailen me. In the step of pastur he sett me ther. He orissed me upon water of fyllyng."

King James Version (1611, modern spelling): "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters."

Berean Standard Bible (2023): "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters."

Step 1: Which of these is "the Bible"? (All four render the same Hebrew psalm, each in the English of its day.)

Step 2: Which would a new believer understand? What does that tell you about why translation has to keep going?

Step 3: Now read John 1:1 and Ephesians 2:8–9 in three translations drawn from different parts of the spectrum. Where do they agree? Where do they differ, and does any difference change the meaning?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Translation Comparison

Choose a passage you know well — perhaps John 3:16, Romans 8:28, or Ephesians 2:8–9. Look it up in at least three different translations (e.g., BSB, ESV or NASB, NIV, and The Message). Write down the differences you notice. What is gained and what is lost in each version? Which would you use for a sermon? For personal devotion? For a new believer? Different tools for different jobs. That's not a compromise; it's just good sense.

Then run the translation you use most through the key-verse test in this chapter. What did you notice?

Application Exercise 2 — Translation Criteria

As a group, develop a simple checklist of five questions you would ask before recommending a Bible translation to a new believer or a small group. Share your lists and discuss: What matters most? What are the non-negotiables? Fewer non-negotiables than you'd expect, once you actually try to name them.

Case Study

A friend in your small group shares a verse that moved her deeply. It came from The Passion Translation, and when you look it up in two other translations, half of what she read isn't there. Using Proverbs 30:5–6 and the questions in this chapter, discuss: How would you talk with her about it gently, without crushing what moved her? What would you suggest she read alongside it, and why?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 43

Signs, Wonders, and Careful Discernment

Signs, Wonders, and Manifestations

By the end of this chapter, you will welcome the genuine work of God's power while still testing every claim carefully. Not every supernatural experience is from God; Scripture says so plainly. And Scripture, not the experience itself, is the standard. You'll learn why power is not proof, how to recognize the pressure of "don't question it, this is the Spirit," and what Jesus meant when He said the kingdom "will not come with observable signs" (Luke 17:20). And you'll learn to look for the surer evidence that God is moving: changed hearts, love for one another, and people pointed to Jesus.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the purpose of signs and wonders in Scripture? What are they meant to point to — and what are they not meant to point to?

2. Why does Matthew 24:24 warn that even the elect could be deceived by false signs? What does that tell us about the importance of discernment and the limits of experience as a guide?

3. How do you evaluate a claimed miracle or supernatural manifestation? What questions do you ask — about the fruit, the theology, the character of the leader, and the effect on the community?

4. What does 1 Corinthians 14:40 say about how the Spirit works in gathered worship? How does that apply to unusual manifestations that create disorder or confusion?

5. How do you remain open to God's genuine work without becoming credulous about every claimed supernatural experience? What does healthy, Spirit-filled discernment look like?

6. Read Luke 17:20–21. Why do you think we're drawn to outward signs as proof that God is moving? What quieter, inward evidence of His work have you seen in your own life or in your church?

7. Paul says those deceived by false signs "refused the love of the truth" (2 Thessalonians 2:10). What does loving the truth look like in practice, and how does it protect us?

8. Which way do you tend to lean, toward believing too easily or toward doubting too quickly? What would it look like to practice "Tell me more"?

Scripture Exercise

Read Mark 1:40–45 together as a group.

Step 1: What moves Jesus to act (v. 41)? What does He do before He says a word?

Step 2: Why do you think He tells the man not to tell anyone (v. 44)? What happens when the man ignores Him (v. 45)?

Step 3: Compare this scene with a modern healing service you've seen or heard about. What is the same? What is different?

Step 4: What would it look like for your church to care for the sick with Jesus' compassion and without the spotlight?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Discernment Framework

Using Isaiah 8:20, 1 John 4:1–3, and 1 Corinthians 14:40, work through the seven questions in this chapter for evaluating claimed supernatural experiences. Test it against a real example — either from church history or a contemporary situation you are aware of. A real example will teach you more than a hypothetical one every time.

Application Exercise 2 — Openness and Caution

In your journal or in pairs, reflect: On a scale of 1–10, where do you fall between "closed to anything supernatural" and "accepting of everything claimed as supernatural"? What experiences or teachings have shaped where you are? What would a more biblically balanced position look like for you? Balanced isn't the same as uncommitted. Worth remembering as you answer this one.

Case Study

At a conference, people are falling, shaking, laughing uncontrollably, and claiming to receive gold dust and gemstones. The leader says, "Don't question it — this is the Holy Spirit." Using Isaiah 8:20 and 1 Corinthians 14:40, discuss: How do you evaluate this? What is the biblical standard for testing manifestations? How do you respond to someone who says questioning these things is quenching the Spirit?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 44

Women in Ministry: Reading Carefully, Honoring Faithfully

Hermeneutics / Ecclesiology / Pastoral Theology

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to read the debated passages about women in ministry with careful attention to context, original language, and the whole of Scripture, rather than the one verse someone has already decided settles it. You'll understand the two main views, complementarian and egalitarian, as their best defenders hold them, and why sincere, Bible-believing Christians land in different places. And whatever conclusion you reach, you'll honor the considerable, faithful service of women throughout the biblical story. You'll hold this question with conviction and charity, as the secondary issue it is (see Chapter 32).

Discussion Questions

1. What examples of women in significant ministry roles do you find in the New Testament? What does their presence tell us about the Spirit's work in the early church?

2. How do you approach passages that seem to restrict women's roles (like 1 Timothy 2:12) alongside passages that describe women prophesying and leading (like Acts 21:9 and Romans 16:7)? What interpretive principles help you hold them together?

3. What is the difference between a passage that reflects a specific cultural situation and one that establishes a timeless principle? How do you tell them apart — and who gets to decide?

4. How can a church honor and release the gifts of women without either dismissing biblical teaching or using it as a tool of exclusion and control?

5. What does it mean to read debated passages with humility — holding your interpretation with conviction but without contempt for those who read it differently?

6. Set 1 Corinthians 11:5 beside 14:34–35. Can both hold at once? Try to give the best answer each view offers before choosing your own.

7. In Acts 18:26, Priscilla and Aquila take Apollos aside and explain "the way of God more accurately." What does this scene suggest? Priscilla is named before Aquila in several passages (Acts 18:18, 26; Romans 16:3; 2 Timothy 4:19) but not in all (Acts 18:2; 1 Corinthians 16:19). What might the naming order suggest, and what caution does the variation give us?

8. If you're a woman, how has the way your church handles this question shaped how you see your own gifts? If you're a man, have you ever asked a woman that question?

Scripture Exercise

Read Luke 8:1–3 and John 20:11–18 together. Who are the women in these passages? What roles do they play? What does it mean that women were the first witnesses to the resurrection — the most important event in human history? How does that shape your understanding of women's place in the story of the gospel? Notice what the risen Jesus does with that moment: "Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord!'" (John 20:18).

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Women in the Biblical Story

Make a list of every woman mentioned in Romans 16. Look up each one and write a brief note about her role. What does this chapter tell you about the diversity of women's contributions to the early church? Share your findings with the group. There's more in that chapter than a quick reading usually turns up.

Application Exercise 2 — Honoring Women in Your Context

Think about the women in your church or ministry context. Are their gifts being recognized, developed, and released? Is there a woman whose contribution has been overlooked or undervalued? What is one concrete step your community could take to better honor and deploy the gifts of women? Concrete, not aspirational. Aspirational steps are easy to agree with and easy to forget.

Application Exercise 3 — Working 1 Timothy 2

Using the steps from Chapter 30 ("How to Work a Disputed Passage"), work through 1 Timothy 2:11–15 as a group, with both readings from this chapter on the table. Begin with prayer. Read the passage in its setting (1 Timothy 1:3–7; 3:1–7), then compare it with 1 Corinthians 11:5 and Romans 16. Note where the two readings agree, where they part ways, and what question decides it for you. End by naming one thing you respect about the view you didn't choose.

Case Study

A woman in your church has a clear, widely recognized gift for teaching Scripture. She leads a thriving women's Bible study, and people often say they understand the Bible better because of her. While the pastor is away, he invites her to preach one Sunday, and two of the elders object. Using 1 Timothy 2:11–15, Acts 18:26, Romans 16:1–7, and the four tests in this chapter, discuss: What would each view say, and why? How could the church work through the disagreement in a way that honors her gift and keeps the church united? And before the conflict arose, what should the elders have already made clear about the church's practice, and why?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 45

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

Practical Theology / Ethics / Anthropology

By the end of this chapter, you will understand that your daily work — whatever it actually is, however ordinary it looks from the outside — isn't a secular interruption of your spiritual life. It's one of the main places where you serve God, love your neighbor, and participate in His ongoing care for the world. You will be freed from the false sacred/secular divide that diminishes ordinary work, and equipped to bring the full weight of your faith to bear on everything you do from Monday to Saturday. This is more than a theology of work. It's a way of living, the outlook of a person who has understood, in words made famous by the Dutch theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper, that there is no square inch of human life over which Christ does not say, "Mine."

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever thought of your daily work as a calling from God — as sacred as any ministry? What has shaped your view of the relationship between your faith and your work?

2. Luther said a cobbler serves God as truly as a monk by making good shoes. Does that feel liberating or unsettling? What would change in how you approach your work if you genuinely believed it?

3. Dorothy Sayers said the first demand Christianity makes on a carpenter is that he make good tables. What does excellence in your work look like as an act of worship? Are there areas where you have settled for less than your best?

4. The Fall made work hard — thorns and thistles, frustration and futility. How do you experience the fallenness of work in your own life? How does the gospel speak into that frustration?

5. What does Sabbath rest look like in your life? Is it a genuine practice of trust, or is it something you struggle to give yourself permission to do? What would a healthy rhythm of work and rest look like for you?

6. Read Genesis 3:17–19 beside Colossians 3:23–24. How can work be both under a curse and a calling at the same time? Where do you feel each in your own work?

7. One of the first people Scripture describes as "filled with the Spirit of God" was Bezalel, a craftsman (Exodus 31:3). What does that do to the idea that only "religious" work is spiritual?

Scripture Exercise

Read Matthew 25:14–30 together as a group.

Step 1: Read the parable aloud. What does the master entrust to each servant? What does he expect when he returns?

Step 2: What is the difference between the first two servants and the third? What motivated the third servant's inaction (v. 25)?

Step 3: What does the master's commendation — "Well done, good and faithful servant" — tell us about what God values? Note that he says "faithful," not "successful."

Step 4: How does this parable apply to the gifts, skills, opportunities, and resources God has entrusted to you in your work and daily life?

Step 5: Discuss together: What would it look like to hear "well done, good and faithful servant" at the end of your working life? What would have to be true about how you worked?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — The Vocation Reflection

This week, take 30 minutes to reflect on your work as a calling:

Write at the top of a page: "Whatever you do, work at it with your whole being, as for the Lord and not for men" (Colossians 3:23). Sit with that for a moment.

Describe your current work — paid or unpaid, professional or domestic. What does it involve? Who does it serve?

Ask: How does my work contribute to the flourishing of others? How does it participate in God's ongoing care for the world He made?

Identify one specific way you could bring greater excellence, integrity, or Christlike character to your work this week.

Identify one specific way you could be more intentionally “salt and light” in your workplace or daily environment — not by preaching at people, but by the quality of your presence, your character, and your care. Few people are won over by a sermon they didn’t ask for. Presence works differently.

Application Exercise 2 — The Sabbath Experiment

As a group, commit to a genuine Sabbath practice for one week:

Discuss together: What does Sabbath mean? What does it include and exclude? (Rest from productive labor, delight in God and people, worship, play — not merely a day off from work.)

Each person identifies the specific obstacles to Sabbath in their life: overwork, digital distraction, the inability to stop, the fear of falling behind.

Each person commits to one specific Sabbath practice this week — a full day, or if that is not possible, a significant block of time — devoted to rest, worship, and delight rather than productivity.

Reconvene next chapter and share: What happened? What was hard? What did you discover about yourself and about God in the rest?

Discuss: What would it look like to make Sabbath a sustainable, regular practice in your life? Sustainable is the key word. An ambitious plan you abandon by week two helps no one.

Application Exercise 3 — The Balanced Life Wheel

Our work never stands alone. It sits inside a whole life, and when one part grows at the expense of the rest, something gives. I put this wheel together for our own small group as a companion to the Life Assessment Wheel in Chapter 23. That one looks at the practices of the Christian life; this one looks at the whole shape of your week. The right side is about stewarding yourself: mind, body, career, and quiet. The left side is about your relationships with God and with the people He’s given you.

Behind this wheel is a simple picture I drew years ago and called “One King.” God sits on the throne, and under Him, love for yourself and love for others hold each other in balance. That’s Jesus’ own summary: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind… Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37–39). When anything else takes the throne, even good work, the wheel goes lopsided.

The Balanced Life Wheel

For each of the eight areas, shade the ring that honestly describes this season: 1 (minimal to no attention), 2 (some attention), or 3 (regular and planned). If you're single, use the spouse slice for your closest relationships.

Look at the shape. Has work, or anything else, crowded the other areas toward the center? Is one side much fuller than the other?

Choose one area to move outward this month, and write down one realistic step. Then pray over it with these verses: "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Matthew 6:33); "be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2); "aspire to live quietly… and to work with your own hands" (1 Thessalonians 4:11); "act justly… love mercy… walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8); "godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Timothy 6:6); and "God works all things together for the good of those who love Him" (Romans 8:28).

Share your wheel with someone who knows you well, and ask whether they see it the same way. Then shade a fresh one in three months.

Case Study

An accountant in your church tells you he feels like a second-class Christian. "The pastor and the missionaries are doing real ministry," he says. "I just do taxes." He's thinking about quitting to go to seminary, though he isn't sure God is calling him there, and his wife is uneasy. Meanwhile his hours keep creeping up, and his family barely sees him. Using Colossians 3:23–24, Exodus 31:1–5, and the four tests in this chapter, discuss: What would you say to him? How would you help him tell a genuine call from guilt or restlessness?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 46

Witness and Mission — Sharing Your Faith: The Sent Life

Missiology / Apologetics / Evangelism

By the end of this chapter, you will understand that every believer is called to be a witness — not only the professional ministers or the naturally gifted evangelists among us. You will be equipped to share your faith naturally, humbly, and confidently in the ordinary rhythms of daily life. Witness isn't a technique or a program. It's what happens when people who have been found by grace "cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). You'll also see that your witness is your whole life (your home, your work, your money, your humor, even what you choose not to take part in), so that the way you live adorns the message your words carry (Titus 2:10).

Discussion Questions

1. When you think about sharing your faith, what is your honest emotional response — excitement, anxiety, guilt, something else? Where do you think that response comes from?

2. John 9:25 gives us the simplest possible testimony: "I was blind, but now I see!" What is your version of that sentence? What has changed in you since you came to faith?

3. What is the difference between proclamation (telling people about Jesus) and presence (living the gospel in front of people)? Why do we need both? Which one do you find easier?

4. 1 Peter 3:15 says to give a reason for your hope "with gentleness and respect." How does the manner of our witness affect its credibility? Can you think of a time when you saw someone share their faith in a way that was true but not gentle — or gentle but not true?

5. Some Christians care for people's needs so strongly that telling them about Jesus fades away; others talk about Jesus but neglect to care for people. What is lost in each case? Which way are you more likely to lean?

6. Finish this sentence in your own words: "Because of Jesus, I ___" (see Mark 5:19). Whatever you write there is where your testimony begins. What would it sound like said out loud to a friend?

7. In Luke 15, both sons are far from the father, one through rebellion and one through rule-keeping. Tim Keller called them "two ways of being lost." Which people you know are lost the second way, and how might the gospel of grace reach them?

8. If your life were the only Bible your neighbors ever read, what would they learn about God from your home, your work, and your weekend?

Scripture Exercise

Read Acts 8:26–40 together as a group.

Step 1: Read the passage aloud. Note the role of the Holy Spirit in directing Philip (vv. 26, 29). What does this tell us about who is ultimately responsible for witness?

Step 2: How does Philip begin the conversation (v. 30)? What can we learn from his approach — asking a question rather than launching into a speech?

Step 3: The Ethiopian is reading Isaiah 53. Philip "began with this very Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus" (v. 35). What does this tell us about the relationship between the Old Testament and the gospel?

Step 4: What is the immediate response of the Ethiopian (v. 36)? What does this tell us about the power of a clear gospel presentation?

Step 5: Discuss together: What would it look like to be as available and responsive to the Spirit's leading as Philip was in this story?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Writing Your Testimony

Your personal testimony is your most powerful and irreplaceable tool for witness. No one can argue with what God has done in your life. This week, write out your testimony in three parts:

Before:

What was your life like before you came to faith? What were you trusting in, living for, or running from? (2–3 sentences)

The turning point:

How did you come to faith? What happened? What did you hear, see, or experience that brought you to Christ? (2–3 sentences)

After:

What has changed? What is different about how you see yourself, God, and the world? (2–3 sentences)

Read it back to yourself. Is it honest? Is it clear? Could someone who doesn't know Christian language understand it?

Practice sharing it with one person this week — a fellow group member, a family member, or a friend. Start with someone low-stakes. The confidence you build there carries into harder conversations.

Application Exercise 2 — The Prayerful Three

One of the most practical and powerful habits of a witnessing life is to pray regularly for specific people who do not yet know Christ.

Each group member writes down the names of three people in their life who do not yet know Jesus — family members, friends, colleagues, neighbors.

Share those names with the group (or with a trusted partner if the group is large, or simply bring them before God in prayer if you're on your own).

Commit to praying for those three people by name every day for the next month — not just for their salvation, but for opportunities to show them the love of Christ in practical ways.

Look for one natural, non-forced opportunity this month to have a genuine conversation with one of those three people about faith, life, or meaning.

Reconvene next chapter and share: What happened? What did you notice? What was hard? Hard is normal here. Don't mistake discomfort for doing it wrong.

Case Study

A coworker you've grown close to notices that you pray before lunch and asks, a little defensively, "Why do you Christians always need to talk about Jesus? Can't you just be a good person?" Using Romans 10:14–17, 1 Peter 3:15, and the five movements in this chapter, discuss: How would you answer honestly and gently? What would you want your coworker to understand about Jesus, and what would you want them to feel about you when the conversation ends?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 47

Living Truth in Love: A Life Rooted and Sent

Spiritual Formation and Ecclesiology

By the end of this chapter, you'll be able to name the thread that has run through every page so far: truth and love held together, just as they are in Jesus, who came "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Not truth without love, and not love without truth. You'll also leave with a simple rhythm you can keep for the rest of your life: time in the Word, prayer, worship and fellowship in a local church, and service to others. And you'll see why knowing the truth isn't the same as being changed by it, and how the Holy Spirit carries what we know into what we love, what we do, and what we keep doing. Most of all, you'll learn to test how you speak, see, and receive truth against the way 1 Corinthians 13 describes love, so that everything you do with the truth flows from love for the Father and for the people He made. This isn't a finish line. It's a checkpoint, a chance to look back at how far God has brought you and to set your course for the road ahead.

Discussion Questions

1. Looking back over the journey so far, what is the one truth that has most changed the way you think or live? Share it with the group, or write it down as the one thing you most want to remember.

2. Stott said truth becomes hard without love, and love becomes soft without truth. When you're under pressure, which way do you tend to lean? What happened the last time one showed up without the other?

3. Read 1 Corinthians 13:1 again. Where in your life might there be a lot of sound but not much love: things you know and like to show, opinions you're quick to defend, gifts you use for your own sake? What would change if love were added?

4. Think of a truth you've known for years that has never really moved from your head to your heart, or from your heart to your hands. What do you think is in the way? Ask the Spirit about it this week.

5. What does it mean to be "rooted" in Christ (Colossians 2:6–7)? What does a rooted life look like in your daily rhythms, relationships, and decisions?

6. How will you keep growing in Scripture in the weeks and years ahead, long after this guide ends? Which of the four devotions in Acts 2:42 is strongest in your life right now, and which is weakest?

7. Who is one person you could share something you've learned in this guide with?

8. Look at the table of love's questions. Which is hardest for you: speaking truth in love, seeing people who reject it with love, or receiving it yourself? Why?

9. Who or what is most likely to climb onto the throne of your heart: yourself, or someone or something you love? What does that look like on an ordinary day?

Scripture Exercise

Read John 17:17–21 together, where Jesus prays: "Sanctify them by the truth; Your word is truth." After a few minutes of silence, share: What is one way you want to be sanctified — set apart and shaped — by truth in the coming year? Close in prayer together, asking God to make you people who are rooted in His Word and sent into the world with His love.

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — The Subtract-Love Audit

Write out your own spiritual résumé the way Paul does in 1 Corinthians 13:1–3: what you know, the doctrines you've studied, the convictions you've formed. Then draw a line through all of it and write underneath, "…but if I have not love, I am nothing." Sit quietly before God, then ask: Whom has God placed in my life to love with what I've learned?

Application Exercise 2 — A Rule of Life for an Ordinary Week

Use the three-circle picture from Chapter 40: where you are now, where you'll end up if nothing changes, and where you want to be. Do it for the four devotions: the Word, prayer, worship and fellowship, and service. For each one, set one goal that is SMARTER: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound, then evaluated and reviewed. Put each one in next week's actual calendar. At the end of the week, write down what really happened, and do it with grace. You're training, not earning, and missed days are part of training. Share it with a friend who will ask you about it.

Application Exercise 3 — Passing It On

Identify one person with whom you could share what you have learned in this guide. Write down three things you would pass on, and one way to start that conversation in the next two weeks.

Case Study

In your small group, Dan has been a Christian for thirty years and knows his Bible better than anyone in the room. He corrects every loose statement, and newer believers have quietly stopped speaking up. Rachel is warm and welcoming, and everyone loves her, but when a friend in the group says she's leaving her husband for someone she met at work, Rachel says only, "I just want you to be happy." Using Ephesians 4:15, 1 Corinthians 13:1–3, and the two ditches in this chapter, discuss: What is each one getting right? What is each one missing? If Jesus, full of grace and truth, sat in that group, what might He say to each of them, and how would He say it?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 48

Biblical Justice vs. Secular Justice

Ethics / Old Testament Theology

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to distinguish biblical justice — mishpat and tzedakah — from modern ideologies, on every side, that borrow its language without its roots. You'll be ready to pursue righteousness, defend the vulnerable, and act justly in ways rooted in Scripture, without either sitting on your hands or getting swept into someone else's political program. You'll also be able to test any cause, from either side of the aisle, against Scripture's own standard. Justice, rightly understood, isn't a political stance. It's what a people look like when they reflect the character of a God who loves justice.

Discussion Questions

1. Before today, what did you think "justice" meant? How do mishpat (giving people what they're due, including protection and care) and tzedakah (right relationships) stretch that picture?

2. Read Jeremiah 22:15–16. God says caring for the poor and needy is what it means to know Him. How does that connect with what we said in Chapter 47 about knowing about God versus knowing Him?

3. Where do you see real overlap between today's social-justice movements and biblical justice? Where do you see real differences, in how they diagnose the problem or in what they offer as the solution?

4. Leviticus 19:15 forbids favoritism toward the poor or the rich, yet the Jubilee protected families from permanent poverty. How do impartial fairness and protective care fit together?

5. Which ditch are you personally closer to, complacency or co-option? What would it look like to take one step back toward the middle?

6. How can a church pursue biblical justice without being co-opted by either political party?

7. Name one widow, orphan, immigrant, or poor person in your own community. What is one specific thing you could do for them this month?

8. Think of a problem in your community. Which institution should carry it first: the family, the church, or the government? What happens when it lands on the wrong one?

9. Romans 13:1–4 and Acts 5:29 both appear in this chapter. When, if ever, should a Christian refuse to obey the government? What would it cost, and how should the refusal be carried out?

Scripture Exercise

Read Amos 5:21–24 and Jeremiah 22:13–16 together. Notice what God rejects in Amos and what He calls "knowing Me" in Jeremiah. Then ask: If God looked at our worship this month, what would He say about how we treated the vulnerable around us? Close by praying Micah 6:8 back to Him, asking for all three: to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly.

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — The Justice Audit

Read Isaiah 58:6–12. God defines true fasting as loosening the chains of injustice and sharing food with the hungry. Spend time reflecting: Think about the quartet Scripture keeps naming: widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor. Where do I see them in my immediate community (foster care, human trafficking, local poverty, elderly isolation)? Write down one practical way you can use your resources, time, or influence to pursue mishpat and tzedakah in that specific area this week. Small and specific beats large and vague. Pick the thing you can actually do.

Application Exercise 2 — The Gospel and Justice

As a group, draft a one-page statement for your church or small group defining "Biblical Justice." Define what it is (rooted in the imago Dei, restorative, compassionate) and what it is not (captured by any party, reduced to politics alone, or ranking group identity above identity in Christ). Pray this statement back to God, asking Him to make your community a people who act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly. All three, in that order. It's easy to reach for one and drop the other two.

Application Exercise 3 — The Cause Check

Choose one cause you care about, or one you're being asked to support, from either side of the political aisle. Run it honestly through the four tests in this chapter: roots, quartet, gospel, and humility. Write down where it passes and where it doesn't. Then do the harder part: run a cause you instinctively dislike through the same four tests, just as fairly. What did you learn about the causes, and about yourself?

Case Study

A local church is approached by a secular community organization to partner on a "social justice" initiative. The initiative uses language and frameworks rooted in critical theory, emphasizing identity-based power dynamics and group guilt. The church wants to help the poor but is uncomfortable with the underlying worldview. Using Micah 6:8 and Isaiah 58, discuss: How should the church respond? How can they partner to help the vulnerable while maintaining a distinctly biblical, gospel-centered framework for justice and human dignity? Then turn it around: how would you answer a member who says justice is a distraction from the gospel (Amos 5; James 2)? Finally, reverse the setting: the invitation comes from a group on the opposite side of the political aisle, with a different vocabulary and its own assumptions. Does your answer change? If it does, ask why.

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 49

Gender, Sexuality, and Pastoral Care

Anthropology / Pastoral Theology

By the end of this chapter, you will understand God's good and beautiful design for gender and sexuality, rooted in the imago Dei and the creation order. You will also be equipped to offer Christ-like, compassionate pastoral care to those experiencing same-sex attraction, gender dysphoria, or the fallout of sexual brokenness, holding the line of biblical truth without losing the warmth of gospel grace. The goal is a church that speaks the truth in love, reflecting the Word made flesh, who came "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

Discussion Questions

1. How does the image of God shape our view of every person's dignity, however they identify or whatever they struggle with?

2. Before talking about anyone else: where do you carry sexual brokenness, temptation, or doubt about who you are? (You don't have to share it. Just notice that the gospel asks everything of all of us.)

3. What is the difference between experiencing temptation or attraction and acting on it? Why does Hebrews 4:15 matter so much for someone who struggles?

4. Read Isaiah 56:4–5 and Acts 8:35–38. What "fences" might our church have built around people whose bodies or futures don't fit the usual pattern?

5. Which of the two ditches, truth without grace or grace without truth, is your church more likely to fall into? Which are you?

6. Why does a "no" without a bigger "yes" so often lead to despair? What is the "yes" the gospel offers a single person, or someone who may never marry?

7. What would it look like for your church to walk with a family for years, not just one conversation, as they love a son or daughter through this?

8. Why does it matter that the person who is struggling is not the enemy (Ephesians 6:12)? How would that change the way you talk about these issues?

9. Which sexual sins does your church talk about, and which does it stay quiet about? What would change if it spoke about all of them with the same honesty and the same grace?

Scripture Exercise

Read Isaiah 56:3–5 and then Acts 8:26–39 together. Notice how Philip begins: he runs alongside, listens, and asks a question before he explains anything. Notice what he doesn't do: he puts no fence between the man and the water. Then ask: Whom has God placed alongside my road? What question could I ask them this week, and what would it take for me to really listen to the answer?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — The Empathy and Truth Map

Write down three common cultural arguments regarding gender and sexuality. Next to each, write down the biblical response (Truth). Then, write down the underlying human longing or pain that the cultural argument is trying to address (Empathy). For example: Cultural Argument: "You are whatever you feel you are." Truth: "God made you male and female; identity is received, not self-created." Empathy: "A deep longing to be known, accepted, and free from shame." Write the empathy column before the truth column; it will change how you say the truth. Pray for those carrying these burdens. If someone in your life is carrying one of these right now, let that shape how you pray.

Application Exercise 2 — Auditing Our Church Culture

As a group, discuss: Does our church feel like a safe place for someone struggling with sexual brokenness or same-sex attraction to ask questions and seek help? What are the implicit messages we send? Brainstorm three ways your group can build a culture of grace, confidentiality, and Christ-like love for those who struggle.

Application Exercise 3 — Practicing the Five Beats

In pairs, one person shares a struggle, real or imagined, that is hard to say aloud. The other practices the five beats: show up, listen fully, name truth gently, offer a better identity, and plan how to keep walking together. Then switch, and talk about it: Which beat was hardest for you? Which one do you most need to grow in?

Case Study

A young adult in your small group shares, after the meeting, that they have been experiencing intense gender dysphoria for years and are considering transitioning. They are in real pain and confusion, and they also say they want to follow Jesus. Using Psalm 139:13–16, Hebrews 4:15, and the five beats in this chapter, discuss: How do you respond in that first conversation? What would a long-term, grace-filled, truth-holding plan of care look like? Involve your pastor or an experienced biblical counselor; this person deserves more support than a small group can give alone. If the person is a minor, involve their parents or guardians and follow your church's child-safeguarding policy. And if there is any sign of self-harm, don't wait: help them get professional care right away, and stay with them while they do. In the U.S., call or text 988, the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 50

Creation Care and Environmental Stewardship

Practical Theology / Ethics

By the end of this chapter, you will see caring for the earth as a faithful, priestly calling to steward God's creation, rather than a secular political issue or a form of pagan nature-worship. You will be equipped to "cultivate and keep" the earth, avoiding both the exploitation of creation and the idolization of it, recognizing that the earth is the Lord's and we are His stewards. Not owners, whatever the deed might say. Above all, you'll see creation the way Scripture does, as a choir already singing God's praise, and you'll be invited to join it.

Discussion Questions

1. Read Psalm 148 aloud. What does it do to your view of a forest, an ocean, or a flock of birds to know they are called to praise God? Why would we treat a fellow worshipper carelessly?

2. Which of Jesus' lessons from the fields speaks most to you right now: the sower, the mustard seed, the lilies, the vine? Why do you think He taught this way so often?

3. How does understanding "dominion" as priestly service (to cultivate and keep) change how you see your impact on the world around you?

4. What is the difference between biblical creation care and nature-worship? Where do you see each ditch in your own culture?

5. Someone says, “It’s all going to burn anyway.” Using 2 Peter 3, Romans 8:19–21, and Matthew 19:28, how would you answer?

6. Where in your week do you notice creation’s glory, and where do you rush past it? What would it take to slow down and see it?

7. What is one practical way your church or family can practice better stewardship of God’s creation?

Scripture Exercise

Read Psalm 104:10–30 together.

List the different animals and elements of nature mentioned. How does God provide for them?

What is the role of the Spirit in this passage (v. 30)?

Discuss: How does this Psalm shift your perspective from seeing nature as a “resource to be used” to a “community to be stewarded”?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — The Creation Audit

Evaluate your household or church's "footprint." Look at energy use, waste/recycling, and consumption habits. Identify one area where you have been careless stewards of God's creation. Commit to one specific, practical change this month (e.g., reducing waste, conserving water, supporting a local conservation effort) as an act of worship to the Creator. Small and ordinary, which is exactly the point. Worship doesn't require a grand gesture.

Application Exercise 2 — A Psalm 148 Walk

Spend 30 minutes this week in a natural setting (a park, forest, or garden) without your phone. Take Psalm 148 with you, and make a list of everything you see that the psalm calls to praise God. Practice the presence of God. Observe the complexity, beauty, and interdependence of creation. Write a short prayer of confession for times you have taken creation for granted, and a prayer of thanksgiving for the God of whom David sings, "You crown the year with Your bounty" (Psalm 65:11). Read that verse slowly. It's easy to skim past a phrase like that.

Application Exercise 3 — This Is My Father's World

Find the hymn "This Is My Father's World" and read all of its verses slowly, or sing them with your family or group. Notice the line in the last verse, "God is the ruler yet." Then write one sentence of your own, in your own words, thanking God for something in His world you saw this week.

Case Study

Your church is planning its year. One longtime member says creation care is a distraction: “It’s all going to burn anyway. Our job is saving souls.” Another member wants the church to put most of its outreach budget into environmental causes and calls the first member’s view “un-Christian.” Using Genesis 2:15, Psalm 148, 2 Peter 3:5–13, and the Cape Town statement in this chapter, discuss: What is each person getting right? What is each missing? What would a faithful, balanced plan look like for your church this year?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 51

Mental Health, Psychology, and the Life of Faith

Pastoral Theology / Practical Theology

By the end of this chapter, you will understand how to integrate faith and mental health. You'll be able to welcome medical and psychological help as common grace (the good gifts God gives to all people), while still affirming the church's vital role in spiritual care, community, and lament. You will learn to reject both the over-spiritualization of mental illness ("just pray more") and the secularization of the soul ("faith is irrelevant to the mind"). I've seen real harm done by both errors, sometimes in the same family.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it harmful to tell someone with clinical depression or anxiety that they "just need more faith"? Have you ever heard that said, or said it yourself?

2. Read 1 Kings 19:1–18. List everything God did for Elijah, in order. What does the order teach us about caring for someone who is worn out or despairing?

3. Spurgeon, Lewis, and Luther all knew deep darkness. What does that do to the idea that "real Christians don't get depressed"?

4. Psalm 88 ends in darkness, with no happy resolution, yet it's in the Bible. Why do you think God included it?

5. What has your inner voice been saying to you lately? What would it look like to answer it with truth, the way Psalm 42:5 does?

6. How do you tell the difference between spiritual conviction, ordinary sadness, and an illness that needs medical care? Why might all three need attention at once?

7. How can your church become a place where people feel safe saying, "I'm not okay"?

8. Which expectations, spoken or unspoken, have you been carrying that God never actually promised? What would it look like to thank Him for what He has given instead?

Scripture Exercise

Read 1 Kings 19:1–18 together. Trace Elijah's condition from the broom tree to the cave. Notice what God gives him before He says anything corrective, and notice the questions God asks. Then discuss: Who in your life right now needs "bread before the whisper": a meal, a ride, a nap, a quiet hour of company? Make a plan to give it this week.

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Resource Mapping

As a group, research and compile a list of local, biblically sound mental health resources (Christian counselors, support groups like Celebrate Recovery, trauma-informed pastors). Create a "care plan" for your church: Put the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (call or text 988 in the U.S.) at the top of your list. If someone comes to you in a mental health crisis, what are the first three steps you will take to ensure they get both spiritual and professional care? Both, not one instead of the other. That distinction matters more than this chapter can fully cover.

Application Exercise 2 — Praying the Mind

Choose one of the "dark" Psalms of mental anguish (Psalm 88 or Psalm 13). Read it slowly. Write your own prayer using the structure of the Psalm: (1) Honest complaint about your mental/emotional state, (2) A cry for help, (3) A choice to trust God's character, even if the feelings haven't changed yet. Share this practice with a trusted friend. Feelings catching up to truth takes time. Don't rush yourself past that.

Application Exercise 3 — Talking Back

For one week, notice the sentences your inner voice repeats when things are hard: "You always mess this up," "No one cares," "God is tired of you." Write two or three of them down. Next to each, write what God's Word says back, using a specific verse. Read your answers out loud, the way the psalmist talks to his own soul in Psalm 42. If the dark sentences won't let go, tell a trusted friend or pastor, and consider talking with a counselor.

Case Study

A faithful church member confides in you that they are suffering from severe, clinical anxiety and are seeing a therapist and taking medication. Another church member tells them, “If you just memorized more Scripture and prayed harder, God would heal your mind.” Using 1 Kings 19 and Luke 5:31–32, discuss: How do you correct the second member with grace? How do you affirm the first member’s use of medical help as a means of God’s common grace? And what would you say if, a month later, the first member decided to stop praying and leave the church because “therapy is all I need”?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 52

Deconstruction, Doubt, and Faith Transitions

Apologetics / Pastoral Theology

By the end of this chapter, you will understand the difference between healthy, honest doubt (which seeks God) and destructive unbelief (which rejects God). You'll learn to treat questions as normal, to walk alongside those "deconstructing" their faith with grace and truth, and to build a resilient faith that can withstand the fires of church hurt and cultural pressure. Neither honest doubt nor church hurt is a minor thing, and this chapter won't pretend otherwise.

Discussion Questions

1. Matthew 28:17 says, "They worshiped Him, but some doubted." Why would Matthew mention that at all? What does it say to you?

2. Why is Mark 9:24, "I do believe; help my unbelief!", one of the most honest prayers in Scripture? When have you prayed something like it?

3. What is the difference between honest doubt that seeks God and unbelief that has already decided? How might the same question sound different coming from each?

4. How has church hurt or hypocrisy affected you or someone you love? What would real repentance from the church look like in that situation?

5. Keller said every doubt rests on some other belief. Pick a common objection to Christianity. What belief is it standing on, and is that belief as solid as it seems?

6. Read Psalm 73:16–17. Asaph's perspective changed in the sanctuary, not in a debate. What practices have held your faith in hard seasons?

7. How can your small group become a place where people can ask hard questions without fear of being judged or rushed to an answer?

8. Where has your faith rested on a person, a church, or a set of answers instead of on Jesus Himself? What would it look like to rest it on Him?

Scripture Exercise

Read Psalm 73 together.

Trace Asaph's emotional journey. What causes him to doubt (vv. 3–14)?

What is the turning point (v. 17)?

How does his perspective change when he enters the sanctuary of God?

Discuss: How do corporate worship and community help anchor us when our individual minds are doubting?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — The Question Box

Create a physical or digital "Question Box" for your group or church. Invite people to submit their hardest, most honest questions about God, the Bible, or the church anonymously. Spend one meeting a month answering them together, modeling how to seek truth with humility, using Scripture, and admitting when we don't have all the answers. That last part is harder for some of us than the other two combined.

Application Exercise 2 — Writing a Lament of Doubt

Following the pattern of the Psalms, write a lament regarding a specific doubt or struggle you have with God. Do not censor yourself. Bring it to God. End the prayer not with a fake resolution, but with a statement of covenant loyalty: "I don't understand, but I will not let go of You." That's not a resolution. It's something sturdier than a resolution.

Application Exercise 3 — Doubt Your Doubts

Write down the three hardest doubts you have about the Christian faith, real ones, not safe ones. Pick one. Underneath it, write the belief that your doubt is standing on. Then ask: What reasons do I have for that belief? Take both lists to a trusted friend or pastor and talk them through. Doubts that are named in a safe place usually lose much of their power.

Case Study

A close friend tells you they've deconstructed their faith and no longer believe. They're not angry — just done, and more at peace than you expected. How do you respond in a way that keeps the relationship open without pretending you agree, and without turning every future conversation into a debate you're trying to win? Using Jude 22–23, Matthew 28:17, and the seven steps for walking with a friend in this chapter, discuss: Is your friend carrying mostly a wound, mostly questions, or both? What is one question you could ask to understand their story better? Has the church played a part in their hurt, and if so, how would you own that honestly? And what would it look like, over the next year, to keep the friendship warm, praying for them by name, without pressure and without pretending?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 53

Technology, Social Media, and the Attention Economy

Spiritual Formation / Practical Theology

By the end of this chapter, you will recognize how algorithms and the "attention economy" shape your desires, attention, and spiritual life. You'll learn to name the three old desires John warns about, the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16), and to see how a screen puts all three in your pocket. You'll learn to practice a digital Sabbath, take back your attention for God's glory, and resist the idols of personal branding and online comparison. More of our spiritual life runs through a screen than most of us are willing to admit.

Discussion Questions

1. Pascal said our unhappiness comes from not being able to sit quietly in a room. When did you last sit quietly with no phone, no music, and no feed? What happened inside you?

2. Name one digital habit and place it honestly on the Psalm 1:1 ladder: walking past, lingering, or settled in. What would one step back look like this week?

3. How do social media feeds shape your desires and emotions? Have you noticed a change in your anxiety or contentment based on your screen time?

4. Read Matthew 6:1–6. What part of your spiritual life would keep going if no one ever saw it or knew about it?

5. Which ditch are you more likely to fall into, moral panic or "it's just a tool"? Which one does your church lean toward?

6. How does keeping a Sabbath, including a Sabbath from screens, push back against the attention economy?

7. What is one boundary you can set this week to protect your attention, and who could help you keep it?

8. Look at the three desires in 1 John 2:16. Which one does your phone feed most in you, and what would starving it look like this week?

Scripture Exercise

Read Luke 10:38–42 and Matthew 6:1–6 together. Notice what Mary chose, and notice the room with the shut door. Then ask: What "many things" are pulling at my attention right now? What would it look like this week to choose "the good portion," time at Jesus' feet that no one else sees? Close by praying Psalm 119:37 together: "Turn my eyes away from worthless things; revive me with Your word."

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — The Digital Audit

Check your phone's "Screen Time" or "Digital Wellbeing" data. Look at your daily average and your most-used apps. Ask honestly: Is this aligning with Philippians 4:8? What is this feeding in my soul? Write down one specific app or habit you will fast from for 30 days. Thirty days is long enough to actually notice something. A week rarely is.

Application Exercise 2 — The 24-Hour Digital Sabbath

Commit to a 24-hour digital Sabbath (e.g., sunset Saturday to sunset Sunday). Turn off your phone, email, and social media. Use this time for what the Sabbath is intended for: worship, rest, delight in God, and face-to-face community. Journal your experience: What was hard? What did you notice about your own mind? How did it affect your spiritual awareness? Be honest here even if the honest answer is that you missed it more than you expected.

Application Exercise 3 — A Secret-Place Week

For one week, do three things for the Father alone (Matthew 6:6): one prayer, one time in Scripture, and one act of kindness. Don't post them, mention them, or count them. At the end of the week, notice how it felt to do something good that no one saw. That feeling is worth paying attention to.

Case Study

A teenager in your youth group is suffering from severe anxiety and body image issues tied to Instagram and TikTok. The parents are unsure how to handle it. Using Philippians 4:8 and Romans 12:2, discuss: How do you pastorally counsel the parents? What does a "digital rule of life" look like for a modern Christian family? Because the anxiety is severe, how would you also encourage the parents to involve a doctor or counselor (see Chapter 51), rather than treating it as only a screen-time problem?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 54

The Cloud of Witnesses: A Panoramic View of Church History

Historical Theology

By the end of this chapter, you'll have a wide view of the church's 2,000-year story, and see it as neither a golden age to idealize nor a cautionary tale to dismiss. You'll see how the Spirit has preserved, purified, and expanded His church through persecution, corruption, reformation, and global growth. You'll learn to resist the modern trap of "chronological snobbery," the assumption that newer must be better, and to use history as a tool: testing new teaching against what the church has long believed, and learning from both its faithfulness and its failures. What I hope you gain is confidence and humility in the same hand.

Discussion Questions

1. What is "chronological snobbery"? What is one belief our own age holds that people a hundred years from now might find strange?

2. Look at the two-thread timeline. Before reading it, which thread did you assume was the whole story, "the Spirit builds" or "people fail"? Why?

3. Polycarp had served Christ for eighty-six years. What do you think he knew that made his answer so simple?

4. Which failure in the timeline looks most like a temptation the church faces today? What would honest repentance look like?

5. Read Acts 5:38–39. After two thousand years, what does Gamaliel's test tell a new believer worried about the church's future?

6. How does knowing the story of the creeds and councils help you understand why we believe what we believe about Jesus and the Trinity?

7. Who from church history would you add to your own "cloud of witnesses," and what part of the race are you running now?

Scripture Exercise

Read Hebrews 11:32–40.

Notice the summary of the heroes' lives: they "conquered kingdoms," but also were "stoned," "chained," and "destitute."

Discuss: How does this passage redefine "success" in the history of the church? How does it comfort us when our own faithfulness feels unseen or unrewarded?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Adopt a Historical Witness

Research a figure from church history (e.g., Polycarp, Athanasius, Augustine, Hildegard of Bingen, Martin Luther, Corrie ten Boom). Read a primary source or a biography of them. Write a one-page reflection on how their life and struggles speak into your current context. Share this with your group. It's a strange kind of comfort, finding out you're not the first person to wrestle with something.

Application Exercise 2 — The Timeline of Grace

As a group, draw a massive timeline on a whiteboard or large paper. Mark the major eras: Early Church, Patristic, Medieval, Reformation, Puritan/Revivalist, Modern/Global. For each era, write two things: one way the Spirit built His church, and one way people failed. Then note one major contribution the church made to the world (e.g., the canon of Scripture, the university, the translation of the Bible, the abolition of slavery, global missions). Praise God for His faithfulness through the centuries. Two thousand years is a long time to have kept a promise. Worth actually pausing on that.

Application Exercise 3 — One Old Book

Take Lewis's advice. Choose one old book and read it over the next month: Augustine's Confessions, Athanasius's On the Incarnation, Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress, or Brother Lawrence's The Practice of the Presence of God. Keep a short list of anything that surprises you, challenges you, or sounds like it was written for today.

Case Study

A coworker learns that you're studying church history and says, "Christian history is the Crusades and the Inquisition. Why would anyone trust the church?" Using the two-thread timeline, Matthew 16:18, and 1 Corinthians 10:11–12, discuss: What is true in what your coworker said, and how would you admit it honestly? What part of the story might they be missing? How could you point them past the church's failures to the Christ the church has failed to follow perfectly, and has never stopped following?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 55

The Global Body of Christ: Learning from the Majority World

Missiology / Ecclesiology

By the end of this chapter, you will understand that the center of gravity for Christianity has moved again, this time to the Global South — Africa, Asia, and Latin America — and why that's good news. You'll see our own blind spots more clearly, especially Western individualism and consumerism, and learn from the Majority World church's emphasis on community, perseverance in suffering, and dependence on the Spirit's power, while keeping Scripture as the anchor for every tradition, including ours. You'll learn to see the church worldwide as one body that gives and receives in both directions, to examine your own church honestly in the mirror of Jesus' letters to the seven churches (Revelation 2–3), and to stand with persecuted believers in prayer. You'll leave with practical ways to learn from, and pray for, believers you may never meet. It's a humbling shift to actually reckon with.

Discussion Questions

1. Before this chapter, what was your mental picture of a "typical Christian"? Where did that picture come from?

2. Read the "Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist" description. Which part of it do you live as if it were true, even if you'd never say it out loud?

3. Walk through the seven letters in Revelation 2–3. Which one does your church most resemble right now? Which one do you fear it could become?

4. Why do you think the two churches Jesus doesn't rebuke, Smyrna and Philadelphia, are the poor and weak ones? What does that say to a comfortable church?

5. Read 2 Corinthians 8:13–14. What does your church actually receive from believers in other parts of the world? If the list is short, what would it take to start receiving?

6. What are the strengths and the dangers of the Majority World church? How does Scripture help us weigh both, and our own church too?

7. Wang Yi wrote that the goal is "to testify about another world." What would it cost you to live that way this week?

8. If the church's center has moved many times, what would it look like for your church to receive from where it is moving now, not just send?

Scripture Exercise

Read Revelation 2:8–11 (Smyrna) and 3:14–22 (Laodicea) side by side. Make two lists: what each church had, and what each church lacked. Notice what Jesus calls riches and what He calls poverty. Then discuss: What is the "gold refined by fire" (3:18) that the persecuted church already has, and how might a comfortable church come to share in it?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — Reading Globally

Commit to reading a book, watching a documentary, or listening to a podcast by a Christian theologian or pastor from the Majority World (e.g., Africa, Asia, or Latin America) this month. Write down three things you learned that challenged your Western assumptions about faith, wealth, or community. Some assumptions are easier to see once someone from outside your context points them out.

Application Exercise 2 — Praying the Global Church

Use a resource like the Joshua Project or Operation World to adopt a specific unreached people group or a persecuted church region. Commit to praying for them every day for a month. Ask God to give your group a heart for the global body, and look for one practical way to support their ministry or relief efforts. Practical, not sentimental. A genuine partnership costs something.

Application Exercise 3 — A Two-Way Exchange

As a group, make two columns: what your church gives to the worldwide church (money, missionaries, training) and what it receives (prayer, testimony, worship, courage, correction). If the second column is nearly empty, choose one way to start receiving this month: invite a believer from another country to share, read a sermon or book by a Majority World pastor, or learn and sing a worship song from another part of the world.

Case Study

A missionary from Sub-Saharan Africa is speaking at your church. They share stories of rapid church growth, but also of severe persecution and a heavy emphasis on spiritual warfare and miracles. Some in your congregation feel uncomfortable, viewing this as "uneducated" or "too charismatic." Using Acts 2 and Revelation 7, discuss: How do you help your congregation appreciate the global body of Christ? How do we hold together the unity of the Spirit with the diversity of cultural expressions? And if some of what you hear sounds like the prosperity gospel, how would you weigh it by Scripture without dismissing the whole church that speaker represents?

My Takeaway and Prayer

CHAPTER 56

Death, the Intermediate State, and the Hope of Resurrection

Eschatology / Pastoral Theology

By the end of this chapter, you will be equipped to face mortality with biblical clarity and, just as important, pastoral tenderness — these questions are rarely academic to the person asking them. You will understand the intermediate state, the reality of the resurrection body, and how to sit with hard, emotionally charged questions about suicide, near-death experiences, children who die, and the fate of the unevangelized, with every bit of hope anchored in the finished work of Christ. You'll see why Christians grieve, as Jesus did at Lazarus's tomb, but not "like the rest, who are without hope," and you'll be ready to sit with someone who is grieving.

Discussion Questions

1. Read John 11:25–26 slowly. Jesus ends with a question: "Do you believe this?" How would you answer Him honestly today?

2. What do you make of Jesus calling death "sleep"? How does that word comfort, and how could it be twisted?

3. Jesus said God "is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to Him all are alive" (Luke 20:38). How does that change the way you think about believers you have lost?

4. Read John 11:33–35. Jesus wept, knowing what He was about to do. What does that say about grief at a Christian funeral? What "comforting" phrases do you think He would not have said on the first day?

5. How does the promise of a resurrection body, not just a soul in heaven, change the way you think about your body and this world now?

6. Which of the hard questions in this chapter touches your life most directly? What does Scripture give you, and what do you need to leave with God?

7. If Paul couldn't describe what he saw in paradise (2 Corinthians 12:4), why do you think stories of visits to heaven are so popular? What does Scripture offer instead?

8. First Corinthians 15 ends with "your labor in the Lord is not in vain." How should resurrection hope change what you do this week?

Scripture Exercise

Read 1 Corinthians 15:35–58 together as a group.

Identify Paul's seed-and-plant analogy and what it teaches about continuity and discontinuity.

Note the four contrasts between the current body and the resurrection body (vv. 42–44).

Discuss: How does this passage ground Christian hope in something much more substantial than a vague "going to heaven when we die"?

Application Exercises

Application Exercise 1 — The One-Paragraph Gospel of Death

This week, write a one-paragraph answer to the question: "What happens when a Christian dies?" Use at least three BSB scriptures (e.g., Philippians 1:23, 2 Corinthians 5:8, 1 Corinthians 15). Share it with someone who is grieving or who has asked you this question. Equip yourself to give an answer with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15). Gentleness and respect aren't add-ons to the answer. They're part of the answer itself.

Application Exercise 2 — The Resurrection Hope Reflection

Read Philippians 1:21–23 and 2 Corinthians 5:1–10 slowly, as a prayer. Ask God to give you a genuine, joyful anticipation of being "at home with the Lord." Reflect on how this hope changes the way you face your own mortality, your daily risks, and your eternal priorities. Write down one way you will live differently this week in light of the resurrection. That's not a small thing to carry into an ordinary week. Let it actually change something.

Application Exercise 3 — Planning a Christian Funeral

As a group, outline a Christian funeral: which Scriptures you would read, which hymns you would sing, and what words of committal you would use. Then talk honestly about what you would and wouldn't say to a grieving spouse on the first day. This is hard to do in the abstract, and that's the point. It's far better to think it through now than for the first time at a graveside.

Case Study

A woman in your small group, Maria, lost her 8-year-old daughter to cancer last year. She is a believer and has been walking through grief with the group. This week she asks: "I know my daughter is with Jesus — but I'm not sure. She never made a formal profession of faith. She was baptized as an infant. Did she go to heaven? And is she conscious right now? Can she see me? I talk to her sometimes — is that okay?" Using 2 Samuel 12:23, Matthew 19:14, and 2 Corinthians 5:8, discuss: How do you respond? What scriptures would you use? What would you affirm with confidence, and what would you hold with humility? How do you address the question of talking to the deceased with pastoral grace?

My Takeaway and Prayer