

WEEK 1:

The Big Picture

by Discipleship Pastor

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WEEK ONE:

The Big Picture

MEMORY VERSE

“that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” John 17:21

INTRODUCTION | *The True Story of the World*

Christianity, most essentially, is about a story. We all have stories—who we are, how we grew up, what happened in our lives, or even about what we ate yesterday. Who doesn’t like a good story? Children love stories. A well-told story can keep the attention of children (and adults) at almost any age. The most popular books or movies in our culture today are the ones that tell good stories: the scene is set, the characters are introduced, something happens—tension rises—the problem is resolved, and they live happily ever after. Not every story is the same, but the really good ones all have the same basic structure.

Only humans tell stories. This is something that separates humans from other creatures. Only humans are made in the image of God. This is also something that separates humans from other creatures. Is there a connection between telling stories and being made in the image of God? Yes. God is a storytelling God, and so humans made in his image are a storytelling people.

Why do people love stories? Because we are storied creatures, made to love stories, share stories, and tell stories. Stories are not just fun to listen to; they shape us in powerful ways. Stories change the way we see ourselves and the world around us.

We see the effect of good storytelling when a little boy or girl pretends to be the hero they see in a movie, or when a child dresses up to imagine themselves like a character they admire. We see it in teenagers when they are influenced by the stories they hear on social media and wonder if they measure up to other people's lives. But what is our story? What story are we part of?

For better or worse, we are part of the story we live out. We all live out a story. But there are a lot of false stories out there: materialism tells us that money or wealth defines success and will make us happy. Disney tells us to follow our (wicked, little) hearts to become whoever we want to be. Instagram tells us that we are the center of the universe. Other religions tell different stories of the world to try and make sense of the big questions in life: why we are here, where we are going, and what it all means. There are billions of stories out there, but what is the true story of the world?

The story of humanity is not "from nothing to nothing." We are not just cosmic dust that takes shape and floats on a piece of rock called "Earth" for a few thousand years before returning to cosmic dust again. We were made for more than this, and we know it.

Thankfully, God is not silent. God has spoken. And God tells us the true story of the world in the Bible. The Bible is an ancient text, made up of sixty-six books and written by many different authors over centuries. But ultimately, one Author stands behind every page of Scripture to tell us one story. In this way, the Bible is ultimately one book that tells one story – the greatest story ever told.

Christianity is based on this story. To be a Christian means to follow this story, this Jesus, and this God of the Bible. Christians are simply those who believe this story, see everything through this story, and then live out this story. So, what is the story?

The story is about the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus (or at least that's the Gospel, which is the best part of the story, but the story doesn't start there). The story starts in the beginning, way back before anything existed at all.

From eternity past, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have enjoyed a perfect relationship of love. Out of sheer grace, the Triune God creates the universe and everything in it (especially humanity) so that people can share in their relationship. Humans were created to reflect God's image by ruling over his creation and by taking care of it. Instead of doing this however, they reject God and trust their own way. Sin thrusts them headlong into death. Now their relationship with God is broken. All that remains is brokenness, hopelessness, and doom.

Nevertheless, God is gracious and freely decides to save humanity by setting in place a plan. Starting with Abraham, and then through the nation of Israel, God blesses the world. God gives the law and prophets to show his people how to live. But sin already roots itself too deeply in their hearts, and despite God's words to them, they continue to forsake his way.

God solves this problem by sending his Son into the world, Jesus Christ, who takes on flesh – not only to show us more fully what God is like, but also so that Jesus can die for us. In this way, Jesus takes on the punishment for sin that people deserve, defeats the power of death, and disarms the forces of evil.

Jesus lives a perfect life, dies on a cross, resurrects three days later, appears to many people afterwards, and then ascends into heaven before giving his Spirit as a helper, to be with them, to comfort them, and to lead them in truth. Jesus will come back again to make all things right. When Jesus returns, he will bring God's kingdom to earth in all its fullness to judge the wicked and to reward the righteous, and then dwell with his people in a perfect relationship forever.

That's the Story

It's the story we're all part of. The Gospel is the good news that God has provided a way for us to be in a right relationship with him through Jesus. By simply trusting in Jesus to save us from sin, we are saved from the judgment that sin deserves. By simply believing in this story, God brings us into restored fellowship with himself.

So, over the first week in *Growing Together*, we are going to consider the main parts of this story: God, creation, sin, salvation, and eternity. After all, living out the true story of the world starts by getting the story right.

Our stories are still being written, but they are never so good as when they are caught up in his story. Our stories begin to make sense in light of the Gospel. They begin to find their place in light of the true story of the world, the greatest story ever told, a story about a man named Jesus.

Let's jump in!

DEVOTIONAL

Day One God

There was a shepherd tending his flock in the wilderness of Israel. The animals were his only company, and he led them to one side of a mountain. Suddenly, the light of a nearby fire catches his eye. Intrigued, he approaches the flame to investigate. All at once, an unmistakable voice addresses him by name: *“‘Moses! Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am’”* (Exodus 3:4b).

It is here in the true story of the world where an obscure shepherd meets God. He takes off his sandals and stands in the LORD’s presence, terrified.

So, who is God? God tells Moses his name: *“I AM WHO I AM”* (Exodus 3:14). God simply is. God is self-defining. God is greater than our best thoughts of him. Later in the book of Exodus, on this same mountain, God proclaims his name to Moses,

“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation” Exodus 34:6-7.

Here in this passage, God more fully reveals himself. He is the LORD, the self-existent God, personal and relational, merciful, gracious, patient, loving, faithful, forgiving, and just. The whole story of the Bible, from the beginning to the end, unfolds the meaning of this name.

God is who he is, the LORD. He is, always was, and always will be. He creates everything that is not God. He is the Creator and is himself uncreated. He reveals himself as holy when he grieves sin but is not afraid to judge it (Genesis 6:5-7), as gracious when he shows favor to Noah to preserve humanity (Genesis 6:8), as Redeemer when he carries out his plan through Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3),

as Savior by rescuing his people from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 3:8), as loving by giving his instructions for their good (Deuteronomy 10:12-15), and even hints of himself as *“Father”* when he calls his people *“son”* (Exodus 4:22). This last designation of God, as we learn from Jesus, is the closest example of how Jesus talks of God.

In this way, God progressively reveals himself from Genesis to Revelation. So, while we learn of his eternal power and divine nature in creation (Romans 1:20), we learn more personally who he is through his words in the Bible, and ultimately, through Jesus (Hebrews 1:1-3). As it turns out, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Way back in Genesis, we read that *“God created the heavens and the earth”* (Genesis 1:1). God doesn’t have to create, but he does – already this says something about who God is. In the next verse, we read that *“the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters”* (Genesis 1:2). Now we are introduced to another figure, not just to *“God”* anymore, but to *“the Spirit of God”*. Is there more than one person at the beginning of creation?

Going into verse 26, God says, *“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.”* (Genesis 1:26) Who does *“us”* and *“our”* refer to? If God is One, and he makes us in his image, then why does he refer to *“our image”* and *“our likeness”*? Of course, he can’t be referring to the angels because nowhere does it say in Scripture that we are made in the image of angels. So then, who is he referring to?

Already from the start, we know that God is One, but somehow, he is more than one person.

Enter Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who comes from heaven (John 3:13). Jesus does miracles and forgives sin, which only God can do (Mark 2:1-12). Jesus says, *“I and the Father are one”* (John 10:30), and *“before Abraham was, I am”* (John 8:58). He claims exclusive knowledge of who God is and even exclusive power to reveal him (Matthew 11:27). Jesus gives *“life to whom he will”* (John 5:21), is granted all judgment over the living and the dead (John 5:22), is honored just the same as the Father is (John 5:23), and is given all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18). Then to make it painfully obvious, the Bible explicitly calls Jesus *“our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ”* (Titus 2:13).

What are we to make of this? The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God—yet there is one God. Who is this one God?

Jesus’ words are helpful: *“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in*

heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name [singular] of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:18-19). The one God has one name, and that one name is Father, Son, and Spirit. They share the same name.

Theologians came up with the term “Trinity” (Tri-unity) to express this biblical concept of one God in three persons. This is what separates the Christian God from other so-called “gods” of other religions. The God of the Bible is Father, Son, and Spirit. God is Trinity.

This changes everything, not least our view of ourselves, salvation, and what Christianity is all about.

Few times in Scripture do we get to “listen in” on a conversation of how God talks to God. But in John 17, we get a whole chapter on what the Son says to the Father: *“Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you”* (John 17:1). Why does Jesus call God “*Father*”? Because that is who he is. That is his name. And why does Jesus call himself “*Son*”? Because that is who Jesus is. That is his name. “*Father*” and “*Son*” are not just metaphors of who God is; that is who they are.

Now think of that: Father and son are relational terms—to be a father means to have a son, and to be a son means to have a father. So, from all eternity, God has been in relationship as Father and Son and Spirit. And in fact, that is exactly what Jesus says, “And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.” (John 17:5). So what was happening before the world existed? Father, Son, and Spirit were enjoying a perfect relationship of love. God was perfectly happy. God didn’t have to create the world, but he did. Out of sheer grace, he made us so that we could share in that very same relationship.

That is what Christianity is all about: it is about sharing in the relationship that the Father has with the Son. This is the highest possible good. This is the height of what God’s love does for us.

In what is (perhaps) the greatest verse in all the Bible, Jesus prays, *“that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me”* (John 17:21). That phrase, “*that they also may be in us*” is a world of bliss, a heaven of heavens, and the greatest of God’s gifts to us. Everything that God does for us in Jesus is a means toward this end. In this verse, Jesus prays for us to share in the relationship

that he has with the Father. There is nothing better and nothing greater. This is what we are saved for; this is what we are saved into.

God is love. God is love, because God exists as Trinity. God loves us because of who he is, not because of who we are; God's love for us is not based on who we are, our accomplishments or works, or anything that we can offer. Instead, his love is based on who he is, a loving God, unconditionally giving of himself to us. All that God does is based on who he is. He loves us because of the kind of God he is, not because of the kind of people we are. This is the kind of God that we worship – a loving God, a trinitarian God, and a God worthy of all our worship!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. What is most beautiful or compelling to you about God? Why?
2. How has your understanding of who God is changed over time? Explain.
3. How does God as Trinity change your view of salvation?
4. “God is love because God is Trinity”. What do you think about the connection between the Trinity and love?

Flip to the next page to take notes.

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Life is full of questions: “What college should I go to?”, “Who should I marry?”, “Which career path should I pursue?”, and so on. Some of us wrestle with deeper questions: “Why do I feel insecure?”, “Why am I addicted to this?”, “Am I a good friend?”, and so on. And some of us struggle with even deeper questions: “Am I worth anything?”, “Why am I here?” or “Why do I have to suffer in this way?”

So how do we get the right answers to all our questions? More importantly, how do we get the right answers to our deepest questions? Google cannot answer our deepest questions. All the AI supercomputers in the world combined into one would still be unqualified to help us. The world is simply not equipped to give us the right answers. The difficulty in answering these questions is compounded because of sin. Sin muddles everything. It brings chaos, confuses our logic, contorts our desires, and prevents us from seeing reality as it is. Sin makes God’s will appear unclear to us.

So Where Do We Go?

To give us perspective, we will look at three places in the Bible where there is no sin and where all is as it should be. This will give us a better sense of how things “ought” to be.

First, we must begin at the beginning. We have to go back to the garden, and further back still to where the winds of eternity are blowing. Before the sun, moon, and stars were brought forth, before the mountains were born, when, as Charles Spurgeon paints it, “the un navigated sea of space had never been disturbed by wing of seraph, and the awful silence of eternity had never been startled by the song of cherubim when God dwelt alone”—if you can imagine the time before all time, that vast eternity, just wait there a moment. Do we find our answers here?

You’re in the right place. In your imagination, wait here a moment. Something is about to happen.

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...And God said, 'Let there be light, and there was light.'" (Genesis 1:1, 3)

God speaks. *"God said"*. From this divine voice, everything comes to be. It rings out with infinite power, sweeping across the waters and echoing through the deeps, generating life and being to whomever or whatever is the object of his speech. *"The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over many waters. The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty"* (Psalm 29:3-4). God's voice is the brush that paints the universe in all its vivid colors and beauty. *"Let there be light."* God is a talking God. God's word is God's action: it does what it says. It enacts what it commands. *"Let there be...and there was."* Every created thing rushes to obey the voice of its Maker. All creation follows suit with his word. God simply speaks, and that which was not, now is; he *"calls into existence the things that do not exist"* (Romans 4:17); he makes something from nothing, **ex nihilo**.

Did you ever notice how creation never rebels from God's Word? There is a profound lesson for us here. May the same be true of us.

"And God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:9). After each day of creation, God affirms the goodness of his creation (Genesis 1:4, 9, 12b, 18b, 21b, 25c, especially verse 31). Creation is "good" in the sense that it reflects the beauty and value of its Creator; everything is as it should be. Everything is aligned to the will of God in this place. It is here where we begin to find the answers to our deepest questions.

God creates beauty in order: the design in a butterfly's wings, the symmetry of a flower, the structure of a snowflake, the vibrant art in a peacock's feathers, ad infinitum. This beauty exists because of order. Everything is in proportion; everything is happy in its place. God makes distinctions within his creation, and these boundaries help to clarify the unique identity of each thing. *"And God separated the light from the darkness"* (Genesis 1:4b); *"Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters"* (Genesis 1:6); *"Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night"* (Genesis 1:14a).

These distinctions bring definition to each thing; boundaries accentuate the beauty of each thing, as water and land complement the differences between themselves: *"And God said 'Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And*

God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:9-10). So God makes distinctions within his creation and calls these distinctions "good". In the same way, he makes creatures "each according to its kind" (Genesis 1: 11, 12, 21, 24, etc.), that is, uniquely set within categories of species which do not cross over into other species. These boundaries, differences, and distinctions within God's creation complement one another and give beauty to the whole. Thus God gives to each thing its own unique identity and names them: *"God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night"* (Genesis 1:5a); *"God called the expanse Heaven"* (Genesis 1:8a); *"God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas"* (Genesis 1:10a), and so on. But the most beautiful distinction within God's creation is found in his masterpiece: humanity. *"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."* (Genesis 1:27). Of all God's distinctions worth celebrating (besides the Creator/creature distinction itself), this one is the greatest.

The point is this: here in the garden, at the beginning of God's creation, all is as it should be. God's will is perfectly enacted. The created order reflects the goodness of God's design.

Then Sin Happens

Sin enters the world and ruins everything (almost). It isn't until Jesus Christ, the Son of God, enters the world at the fullness of time that perfection reappears. "Goodness" is embodied in Jesus; God's will is once again carried out perfectly, but this time in the person of Jesus Christ. The God-man, Jesus Christ, lives a perfect life, and in so doing, shows us how we ought to live as well. He sets the example for us. He is the "second Adam" who shows us what true living is. Jesus himself is the ultimate answer to all our questions. Truth is found in a person, and in fact, truth is a person (John 14:6).

After his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus gives us his Spirit to guide us into truth (John 16:13). But until he comes back again to finally do away with sin's effect on us, we will continue to struggle against our sin, death, and evil.

This Brings Us to Our Final Destination: The End

Revelation 21-22 gives us a picture of the end. It is amazing. The Bible begins in a garden, but it ends in a city (Hebrews 11:16; 12:22; Revelation 21:2). It is here in the new heavens and the new earth where God's will is perfectly enacted. Everything is and evermore will be as it ought to be. This is where perfect peace and justice

reign. This is where God's kingdom comes to earth in its fullness. *"The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea"* (Habakkuk 2:14). No tears, no death, no crying, no pain - *"Behold, I am making all things new"* (Revelation 21:4-5).

The beginning, middle, and end of the story give us perspective on everything else. If you want to learn what God's will is for your life, if you want to learn the answers to your deepest questions, start by looking in these three places. Look at the beginning, look at Jesus, and look at the end. These are the windows into which God's perfect will is expressed. These are pictures of what is meant to be. These are the examples that set a standard for us of what is good, what to long for, and what to conform our lives to. Our questions are no longer overwhelming in light of the hope we have. Now we are in a better place to answer the questions we have. What matters in life is made clearer in light of what lasts forever. Praise God that he has given us these anchors in his Word to ground us through any confusion or trial!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. What stands out to you from today's devotional? Why?
2. How do you think the "bookends" of Scripture shed light on questions about meaning, purpose, and significance?
3. What does the beginning (Genesis 1-2), middle (Jesus), and end (Revelation 21-22) of the story reveal about God's will for your life?
4. What does the beauty of God's distinctions and boundaries in creation imply about the differences between men and women? What does this mean about their sexual identities and roles?

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DEVOTIONAL

Day Three Sin

Something has gone terribly wrong with the world. It is obvious to everyone that the world is broken. We know it is. Whether or not we can put our finger on the reason why, we can see the brokenness everywhere. We look around, in horror, and see two planes crash into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001. We remember when Nazi Germany marched millions of Jews to their death and waged war on the world. Besides that, disease, illness, and cancer have taken the lives of many loved ones. Heart attacks, car crashes, and other unexpected traumatic events happen every day. We are dying.

Nature itself is messed up, too. In 1780, a hurricane swept through Barbados and killed 22,000 people. More recently, in 2004, another hurricane swept through Haiti, the Dominican Republic, the Bahamas, and Florida, and killed 3,000 people. That same year, an earthquake and tsunami occurred off the coast of Indonesia that killed over 200,000 people. The world is broken.

And besides all this, the Bible tells us about an evil spiritual kingdom that is set against us. An organized army of demons, some more wicked than others, all led by a demon-king named Satan, is bent on destroying us. The Bible calls him the “*devil*” (Revelation 12:9), the “*enemy*” (Luke 10:19), the “*accuser*” (Revelation 12:10), “the evil one” (1 John 5:19), “Beelzebul” (Matthew 12:24) which most likely means something like the “Lord of the flies”, “*the prince of demons*” (Matthew 9:34), “*the ruler of the kingdom of the air*” (Ephesians 2:22), and on and on. You will learn more about our enemy in week seven.

But there is an even greater enemy than the devil and his fallen angels. Who is it? Or what is it? The greatest enemy of God and humanity is not the devil—it is sin. Sin has no form or substance, and yet it follows us wherever we go. It is like a black, liquid poison in our veins that attaches itself to our nature and will; it is like a spiritual cancer, a terminal illness that leads to death. It is parasitical, and we cannot shake it. It infects us to the core of our being and

turns us away from God and everything that is good. Only the Gospel can cure this kind of spiritual sickness.

Sin is the greatest enemy of God and people. Sin is the reason for everything bad. Sin is the root cause of every evil. Sin is the greatest problem of all, not only outside (in the world), but inside (in our hearts). Murder, adultery, idolatry, the horrors of the abortion industry, the wickedness of the sex trafficking cartels, racism, addiction, rape, bullying, violence, gossip, pornography, depression, insecurity, drunkenness, cheating—all of it is rooted in sin. Sin is our greatest problem.

Why Is Sin Our Greatest Enemy, and Not the Devil?

Jesus Christ did not die because of Satan; he died because of sin. Sin is so serious, so terrible, and so horrific that the Son of God himself had to die in order to defeat it. What does this teach us? Don't take sin lightly. It cost God his own Son.

Some ask, "Well, why doesn't God just forgive us?" Sin is more serious than that. Jesus' death on the cross is not an overreaction to sin; it is the answer to it. It proves the gravity of sin. In this way, before we can understand the seriousness of the cross, we have to understand the seriousness of sin. We will not see the height of God's mercy until we see the depths of sin's wickedness.

So What Is Sin?

Sin is living your life in a direction away from God. It is a mocking of God, a turning away from God, and a turning into oneself. Sin is distrust in God and an unbelief in his Word. It is putting ourselves in God's place, prideful at its core, saying "no" to God and saying "yes" to what is infinitely less than him. In short, sin wants something else more than God. In this sense, it is idolatry. Every time we sin, we find all of this at work—unbelief, pride, idolatry, and covetousness.

When the first humans took of the fruit in the garden and ate of it (Genesis 3), the world began dying. The seed of sin was planted, and it continued to grow, bringing death wherever it went.

The bad news is that sin leads us to death: *"Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned"* (Romans 5:12). So what is the hope for us?

Jesus Is Our Hope

Death came into the world by the tree, but then life came into the world through Jesus, who hung on a tree. Jesus reverses the effects of the fall.

So even though sin is the greatest problem, the Gospel offers a greater solution. If sin is like a zombie apocalypse, then the Gospel is the only cure. Jesus dies to set us free from sin. *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes”* (Romans 1:16). Sin leads us to death, but Jesus leads us to life. By trusting in Jesus to save us from sin, we are saved. It is simple: *“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved”* (Acts 16:31).

Three Takeaways About Sin

First, be as serious in killing sin as sin is in killing you. Take sin seriously. Don't make excuses for it. It is no light thing. Jesus had to die for it. Jesus uses radical language when talking about our fight against sin (Matthew 5:29-30). So be as radical in killing sin as sin is in killing you.

Second, sin kills us slowly, hardly ever all at once, so pay attention to wherever and whenever it crops up in your life. Icelanders would catch wolves by putting a knife in the snow until the wolves would slowly lick the salt of their own blood to their death. Oftentimes, sin kills us in the same way – slowly, and when we don't realize it. Are there habits of sin in our lives that we allow because we don't think they're a big deal? We would be wise to take Solomon's words to heart here: *“Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that spoil the vineyards”* (Song of Songs 2:15). The little sins are the dangerous ones because we tend to find excuses for them more easily. Acorns may be small, but they can grow into oak trees; a little leaven makes the whole loaf rise; a spark of fire can set an entire forest ablaze; give the devil an inch, and he'll take a foothold. Sin is always a progression, and its end is death (James 1:13-15).

Third, you are not alone in fighting sin, so don't try fighting alone. God has given you his Spirit and other Christians to help you in your fight against sin (James 5:16-20; Galatians 6:1). The person who tries on their own to save themselves from sin is like the person who tries to escape quicksand; the more you struggle against it, the deeper you sink. There is only one way out. You need a rescuer. You need someone else to throw you the rope of the Gospel to get you out. To put it another way, trying to conquer your sin is like trying to climb out of water in the middle of the ocean. You can try, but no matter how hard you try, gravity—or in this case, your own tendency to keep on sinning – will always prevail. What does the Bible say? *“Apart from me you can do nothing”* (John 15:5). We need Jesus' Spirit and strength to help us overcome sin; we can only kill

our sin by the power of the Spirit (Romans 8:13). We need Jesus, his Spirit, and his people.

In conclusion, Christians aren't those who don't sin; they are those who know what to do with their sin. They bring it to the cross, where they find forgiveness. The Bible tells us these comforting words: *"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* 1 John 1:8-9. It is true that we all sin (Proverbs 20:9; Ecclesiastes 7:20). We all sin, but what we do with our sin is what matters. Bring it to the cross.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. What is sin?
2. Why is sin our greatest enemy?
3. How does the Gospel set you free from the penalty and power of sin?
4. What strategies have been helpful to you in your struggle against sin?

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Day Four Salvation

The Gospel is what God has done for us in Jesus. Salvation is at the heart of the Gospel because the Gospel is about how God saves us from sin. This is why the Apostle Paul calls it, “*the gospel of your salvation*” (Ephesians 1:13). The Gospel is how God saves us from sin and brings us into a relationship with himself.

Why did Jesus come to us? What was his mission? Christmas is a celebration of the answer. The key verse is “*She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins*” (Matthew 1:21). Jesus came to save us.

Or to put it in Paul’s words: “*The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*” (1 Timothy 1:15). That’s why Jesus came. So, what does it mean to be saved?

To be saved means to be saved **from** something, and to be saved **for** something. We are not simply “saved”, end of story, and that’s it. To be saved is meaningless unless we’re being saved **from** something and **for** something.

Paul puts it this way, “*The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom*” (2 Timothy 4:18a). So God saves us from evil and saves us into (or for) a relationship with himself forever in his heavenly kingdom. We are saved **from** the power of sin (Romans 6:14) and **from** the wrath of God because of sin (Romans 5:9). And we are saved **for** eternal life in relationship with God (Titus 3:4-7; Ephesians 5:25-27; Revelation 21:1-4).

The idea of “*salvation*” is so rich that the Bible uses all sorts of different metaphors to describe it. Justification, redemption, reconciliation, and adoption are some of the ways the Bible pictures salvation for us. Each of these pictures of salvation communicates a distinct aspect of salvation. Viewing salvation from these different perspectives gives us a greater view of what salvation means. In short, justification is the legal perspective of salvation, reconciliation is the relational angle, redemption is the ownership angle, and adoption is the familial angle.

Let's look at how the Bible talks about each of these aspects and then draw some applications from it. Starting with the idea of "*justification*", the legal aspect of salvation, the basic meaning is the declaration of innocence by law. So, in our case, it is the legal declaration that we are right with God.

Because of sin, we are not right with God. And we cannot make ourselves right with God either. God knows this, so he decides to make us right with himself. He does this through Jesus. How? Because Jesus lived a perfect life, God takes his righteousness and credits it to our account; that is, he makes Jesus' righteousness our rightness, Jesus' life our life, and so we get the credit for what Jesus did by simply receiving the gift by faith. This is what it means to be "*justified by faith apart from works of the law*" (Romans 3:28), which basically means that we are made right with God by faith in Jesus without ever earning it. What God has done in Jesus is ours – we get the benefit of his reward. That is the outrageous gift of the Gospel.

Do you struggle with guilt? Do you sometimes feel like you're not good enough for God or others? The truth is that you will always struggle with feelings of guilt and insecurity until you begin to see yourself as God sees you in Christ, clothed with his righteousness and not your own. You are not good enough; that much is true. But he is. And he makes you good enough for him. So, remind yourself of how God sees you; after all, that is the opinion that matters for all eternity. Meditate (prayerful reflection toward application) on the amazing promises of justification in the Bible (Jeremiah 23:6; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 4:5-6; 8:1-4), then walk confidently in this verdict.

The second picture that the Bible gives for salvation is "*redemption*". This is the ownership perspective and emphasizes the fact that we are purchased by God. To redeem something is "to free something by paying a ransom" or "to purchase or buy something of value/worth for a price." This is precisely what Jesus does for us by shedding his blood: "*You were ransomed... with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot*" (1 Peter 1:17-19). If you are a Christian, an infinitely valuable price has been paid for your salvation. That is how precious you are.

Do you struggle with self-worth? Do you sometimes feel that you are not worth much to God or others? Just as before, we will always struggle with self-worth until we begin to see ourselves from God's perspective. Only then do we realize who we are, who we're made to be, and what we're worth to him.

The third picture of our salvation is “reconciliation”. This is the relational perspective. To be reconciled means to be restored from a broken relationship. In our case, God has made right our relationship with himself through Christ, and now he calls us to help reconcile others to God as well (2 Corinthians 5:17-21). But broken relationships can only be made whole by forgiveness. Reconciliation is impossible without it. This is why forgiveness is so important to God. Jesus says, *“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses”* (Matthew 6:14-15). Unforgiveness is a big deal, to say the least!

Why is forgiveness so important to God? Because the logic of the Gospel demands it: *“as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive”* (Colossians 3:13). Christians have been forgiven of their sins against God, so we also ought to forgive others of their sins against us. Admittedly, this is a tall order. On our own, we could never bring ourselves to do it. Sometimes the wrong done against us feels too great to let go of. But our capacity to forgive increases along the axis of our knowledge of God’s mercy toward us (Matthew 18:21-35). The more we realize God’s mercy toward us, the more willing we are to allow God to work through us to forgive others. Besides this, God doesn’t ask us to do what he doesn’t empower us to do: *“where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom”* (2 Corinthians 3:17). The Spirit of God sets us free to do what we were previously unable to. God gives us the strength to forgive, which, in turn, opens the door for reconciled relationships.

Do you have broken relationships? Have you wronged or been wronged? In Christ, God calls us to reconcile with one another. We will never have the kind of relationships God intends for us to have until we allow God to work through us to forgive others and seek peace. The Bible teaches us to *“repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”* (Romans 12:17-18). Sometimes peace with others depends on us, and sometimes we encounter people who do not want peace. Remember, we’re accountable to God first and not for what others do or don’t do.

Lastly, the fourth picture is “adoption”: the **familial** perspective of salvation. Adoption is when God includes you as a member of his own family and gives you all the privileges of being his child (Galatians 4:4-7). *“So you are no longer*

a slave, but a son" (Galatians 4:7), and "you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons" (Romans 8:15b). From eternity past, this is what God destines us for: to be his very own children. *"In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ"* (Ephesians 1:4-5).

Have you ever felt like you don't know who you are called to be? Have you ever felt lonely or without God's attention? Again, we will always believe these lies until we see ourselves as God sees us: as his children, as sons and daughters of our Father in heaven.

In all these pictures of salvation, we get a fuller view of what salvation means for us, and it means all these things at once. We are right with God (justified), purchased by God (redeemed), at peace with God (reconciled), and children of God (adopted). This is who you are. Now live like it!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. Which picture of salvation is most compelling to you? Why?
2. Do you remember when you were saved? What was that decisive moment for you?
3. Each portrait of our salvation communicates something important about our identity. Which of them do you most need to be reminded of?
4. If you have uncertainty about your salvation, call your Life Group leader or a trusted Christian friend today to talk about how you can have assurance of salvation.

NOTES:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

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Day Five Eternity

*“For everything there is a season, and a time
for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace”*

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

In these, some of the most popular verses in all the Bible, the preacher poetically describes life as a swinging pendulum, as it were, oscillating back and forth between weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing, seeking and losing, and all between the poles of birth and death.

But is life nothing more than a pendulum, swinging between meaningless opposites? Is our destiny written by the cold, indifferent hand of chance or randomness? The reality of death forces us to consider the meaning of our lives. There must be a purpose for it all.

This is what the preacher asks just after this passage in verse 9, *“What gain*

has the worker from his toil?" (Ecclesiastes 3:9).

It is an important question for many of us to answer for ourselves. What are our own lives getting at? What are we gaining at the end?

The preacher begins to answer this question for us in the following verse, and says, *"I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end"* (Ecclesiastes 3:10-11)

Far from a universe that is governed by a cold, indifferent hand of random chances, according to the author of Ecclesiastes, *"There is...a time for every matter under heaven"* (Ecclesiastes 3:1) because *"[God] has made everything beautiful in its time"* (Ecclesiastes 3:11). We don't need to sink into the ground of our grief or collapse into despair because of meaningless suffering or death. Instead, as humans, we are made in the image of God and are therefore made for something more. God designed us for something beyond our limited and enclosed cycle of circumstances, for something beyond the stars of our imagination.

So, what is this "something more"?

We just read it in verse 11, *"he has put eternity into man's heart..."*.

In short, we were made for eternity. God wired the human heart to long for what is eternal and not just for what is temporal – and in fact, the temporal is made meaningful in light of the eternal. All our grief, all our pain, all our suffering, and circumstances begin to make sense from an eternal perspective.

Humanity, therefore, isn't meant to be satisfied by what this world can offer us; instead, something within us longs for ultimate meaning that lasts longer than our lifetime, something eternal.

So how are we supposed to grab hold of this eternity? Doesn't death put an end to these fanciful dreams?

Moses gives us wisdom here. In the only psalm he is said to have written, he writes this: *"The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away"* (Psalm 90:10).

Life hardly gets going before our time is up. So, what are we to do amid the shortness of life? Moses continues in verse 12 of the same chapter, *"So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom."* (Psalm 90:12). Generally speaking, wisdom is knowing how to live well in the world. But more specifically,

according to the Bible, wisdom is knowing how to live well in the world before God.

The Bible says, “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.*” (Proverbs 9:10). So the starting place to begin answering the big questions in life is with God. In this way, a right perspective of God leads us to a right perspective of ourselves.

All our lives and all their happenings are in God’s hands. “My times are in your hand” the psalmist writes in Psalm 31:15. We are entirely bare and vulnerable before God. He has everything to do with us, and we have everything to do with him, whether we know it or not.

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 ends in this way: “*The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil*”.

Death does not need to be the end of all our dreams, hopes, and longings. We were made for something more. We were made to grab hold of eternity.

It is just this problem that the entire Bible seeks to solve. The good news of the Gospel is that Jesus Christ died on a cross and was buried; then, after three days, he rose again in order to beat death for us all. Now, by simple faith in his name, by trusting Jesus to save us from eternal death, we too can grab hold of eternal life in him. Jesus is the key that unlocks the door of eternity for us to be with him. Jesus gives us meaning in an otherwise meaningless universe by showing us the way to eternal life through him. He tells us to believe the impossible: God will raise our bodies from the dead. The resurrection of the dead is an absurd fantasy in a universe without God, but with God all things are possible. It just so happens that the entire Christian faith is based upon the reality of Jesus Christ’s bodily resurrection from the dead, and therefore of our bodily resurrection with him too.

This is what Jesus means when he tells Martha, “*I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?*” (John 11:25-26). The glorious truth is that in Christ, “*Death is swallowed up in victory*” (1 Corinthians 15:54). We are not trapped in a meaningless cycle of events after all; death is not the end. Jesus conquers death, and so all those who place their faith in Jesus get to follow him in the train of his victory with resurrected bodies that last forever. This is the Christian hope; this is the hope that the Gospel gives to us.

In one of the last few verses of the Bible, God invites us to “Come.” *“The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.”* (Revelation 22:17). The whole Bible has been leading up to this invitation, and now it is repeated for emphasis three times: *“‘Come’, ‘Come’, ‘let the one who is thirsty come!’”* God and his people are calling you to join them in eternity. By coming to Jesus, you come to life – because Jesus is life (John 14:6). Eternal life consists of knowing Jesus (John 17:3), and this is what we are invited to enjoy for all eternity. Won’t you come?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. How does the shortness of life and the foreverness of eternity give perspective about your life today? Explain.
2. Why does death seem to imply the meaninglessness of life, according to the author of Ecclesiastes?
3. In light of the shortness of life, what do you think it means to “get a heart of wisdom” according to Moses in Psalm 90?
4. What is eternal life, according to Jesus (John 17:3)? What does this imply about eternity and the meaning of our lives?

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