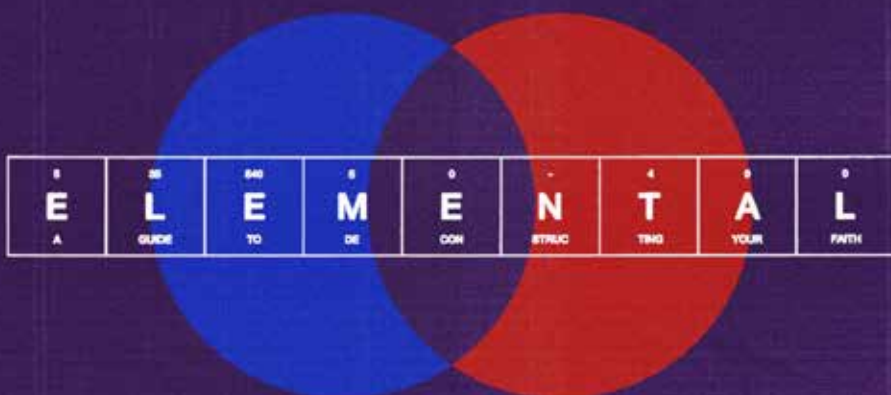


CRSWLK



SEASON TWO

INTRODUCTION

ELEMENTAL SEASON 2

In Elemental, Season 1, we introduced a challenging idea—that it's appropriate to inspect our faith. It's ok to note inconsistencies, conflicts, and even ideas that don't seem useful, unearth difficult questions, admit confusion and doubt, and sometimes take the Lego® blocks of our faith apart. We're calling this uncomfortable examination *deconstruction*, where questions are a typical, even essential, ingredient in belief and spirituality. And we landed on the notion that trust, rather than certainty, is the goal of Christianity.

Early in our spiritual journey, everything makes sense. Things are black and white. Then, one day, confusion sets in, and conflicts emerge. The children's story at church proclaims that God protects all who follow Him. Just pray and ask Him for what we need. But then we find ourselves standing at the graveside of our faithful mother who lost her battle with cancer at too young an age, despite our prayers. Maybe we engaged in a conversation over things that had always seemed obvious—abortion or sexual identity; creation, evolution, and science; organized religion or politics; and something suddenly felt off. Was it a new argument we never considered, or a persuasive person successfully toppling the arguments we've always used? Suddenly, what used to be evident and true becomes muddy, cloudy, and unclear. Our beliefs feel undone.

So, we deconstruct, taking one block apart from the others, turning it over in our minds. This is normal. This is good. The Bible reminds us, "*Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding...*" (Proverbs 3:5) This verse implies you will always have misunderstandings that surface, points of confusion that remain. Still, trust is always available, and it is the key to our spirituality.

Is it possible that faith and doubt are not enemies—that one doesn't destroy the other? Could it even be that faith and doubt are good companions? Maybe doubt is an inevitable part of this broken world to which faith is God's answer. Hebrews 11:1 subtly refers to "*being sure of what we hope for*". Seriously? Which is it, are we *sure*, or are we just *hoping*? On the one hand, the difference is night and day. Or does this verse announce the Christian dance between doubt and faith?

Of course, our goal isn't to wallow in a deconstructed graveyard of yesterday's thinking. Nor will it do to give in to our confusion. Rather, God would have us take things apart so that He can help us put them back together again, however often that loop might be required. And so we launch Elemental, Season 2, a time of reconstruction. We'll walk together through the rubble of our deconstruction and sift out the most elemental building blocks of our faith—those pieces that form the foundation, erect the walls and shape the roofline of belief.

Week
1 **PATIENCE**

Week
2 **WRONG**

Week
3 **WIND**

Week
4 **BARBECUE**

Week
5 **FOLLOW**

CLARITY

Isaiah 55:9

“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Regularly, throughout my life, I have prayed for clarity. I could boldly follow God if the pathway seemed clear. At times, I have been confident that God has answered my prayer. But there are other times when I don't see the path, hear His voice, or feel assured about what way to turn, where to go, or how to live. What then? Lack of clarity doesn't give us permission to sit down on the path, paralyzed. Somehow, amidst confusion, we must find a way to move forward. But where does this put us in our relationship with God?

In his book *Ruthless Trust*, Brennan Manning tells the story of famous ethicist John Kavanaugh's trip to Calcutta, where he hoped to work with Mother Teresa. A few months into his labors, Kavanaugh asked Mother Teresa to pray for him amidst a personal crisis. "What do you want me to pray for?" she asked. He responded, "Clarity. Pray that I have clarity." Her reaction was short and shocking. "No, I will not do that." When he asked why not, Mother Teresa said, "Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of." This dismayed Kavanaugh since it appeared that Mother Teresa had clarity in her life, and he was only

asking for the same. Mother Teresa laughed and replied, “I have never had clarity. What I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God.”

So now I pray for understanding, for glimpses into these “higher ways.” And I pray that I can make sense of the difficult situations I find myself in. But more than these, I ask for trust, the kind of trust that dominates over confusion and answerless questions. If I’m honest, this prayer leads me to a confession that many in my profession need to make. We’ve buckled under the pressure to act like we know more than we could. This pressure turns leaders like me into fakes, pretenders, and frauds, passing ourselves off as some kind of spiritual answer key. In so doing, we perpetuate the myth that a faithful follower of Jesus is measured by the texts we can cite and the doctrinal proofs we can give. Lord, forgive us.

May the one who can see the things you cannot bless you with peace, hope, and deep trust as you continue on this reconstruction journey.

1. What is a belief that is currently very clear to you?
2. What personal decision(s) do you wish you had greater clarity over?
3. What area of your life should you release to God as a statement of trust?

CHOICES

Joshua 24:15

“...choose for yourselves this day... But as for me...”

Let's admit something. As we start reconstruction by grabbing a meaningful brick and looking for a foundational keystone, we are not equals in this conversation. I'm the writer, controlling which blocks we look at, the sequence, and priorities. You, the reader, decide if I've shared anything of value. We each have choices to make. But I'd like to acknowledge that my choices do limit yours. And if you're not careful, you could accidentally adopt a new checklist of correctness based on my ideas and words. So don't take anything I write as “the truth.” Test it for yourself. Reorder it. Exercise the freedom to discard what doesn't make sense, or you don't find meaningful. Choose for yourself.

How we start rebuilding feels incredibly important. A good foundation is critical. As Jesus' parable suggests, we're looking for solid rock rather than shifting sands on which to build. We're searching for a foundational stone to which all others connect and make sense—a keystone, a cornerstone.

JESUS.

This probably feels cliché. Like the child who knows that 'Jesus' is probably the correct answer to every question received in church, it seems obvious and predictable. It is predictable

and obvious. Predictable or not, Jesus is the foundation of our faith structure.

Peter had just watched his culture's faith construct collapse and days later, found himself standing before a large crowd, attempting to explain Jesus. Acts 3 tells of a lame man healed and an uproar that followed. Peter and John spent the night in prison for their claims about Jesus. Everyone knew Jesus had died. And while some had dared hope Jesus was the Messiah, those hopes had been nailed to a cross and dissolved in a tomb. Still, here Peter stands, claiming a game-changing perspective—Jesus is the key to everything we know about God, ourselves, life today, and life eternal.

It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.' Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:11-12)

And so we begin to rebuild... with Jesus.

1. When you are with friends, would you rather pick the restaurant or have it chosen for you?
2. How easily do you trust the ideas of others?
3. Is it more comforting or disturbing that Jesus controls your salvation?

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"[Jesus] is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

Every once in a while, I field concerned questions about how much focus a faith community places on Jesus. It usually sounds something like, “They only preach Jesus there, right?” The implication is that too much emphasis on Jesus avoids the meatier subjects. It’s as if we understand that the immature probably *need* to hear about Jesus. But sooner or later, you should grow up, move from the minor to the major leagues and get into more profound material. The suggestion is that too much sharing about Jesus avoids the more complex and challenging topics. I once heard someone complain, “Love, love, love; Jesus, Jesus, Jesus; that’s all they talk about.”

I submit that, in Jesus, we have avoided nothing. He is the lens through which we clarify any portion of the Bible. And while he is the foundation of our rebuild, He is also the thread that runs throughout, like a nervous system or bloodstream, connecting and powering everything. If you can find something in scripture that doesn't have to do with Jesus, it's not worthy of consideration.

I'm not alone in this strong sentiment. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:2, *"For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ,*

and Him crucified.” Don’t worry, Paul realizes the same thing John the Apostle shares in the first chapter of his Gospel—that the Jesus of the New Testament is the God and Creator in the Old. They will both tell us, “...all things were created by Him...” (John 1:1; Colossians 1:16)

So, whether you wonder about the identity of the YAHWEH, God of the Old Testament (John 8:58), the focus of the book of Revelation (1:1), or anything in between, It's all Jesus. The author of Revelation writes down Jesus' own words, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End." (Revelation 22:13)

Any faith worth having shares a common thread wound through its very fabric—the presence of Jesus. He is the foundation, and He is more. He is the elemental breakdown, the reduction sauce of all of scripture. So at every turn, we will want to ask, “What does this tell us about or have to do with Jesus?”

1. Can you think of a time following a set of instructions when you missed a key ingredient?
2. What is an example of a pivotally important idea that gets ignored?
3. Does it feel theologically safe to insist on only thinking and talking about Jesus? Why or why not?

“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

The Hebrews of Jesus' day had built their identity around rule-following. Under the direction of the Rabbis, the ten commandments slowly grew to 613, most with their own sub-commandments. The Sabbath received special attention, resulting in 39 different categories of prohibition with thousands of specific applications. The Hebrew culture painted a picture of God as austere and exacting. His disapproval was palpable as God's people moved in slow motion, attempting to live up to expectations on His holy day.

Jesus' observance of the Sabbath is a constant source of conflict with religious leaders as He reshapes our understanding of its purpose. Gone is the sense that Sabbath is a test to see how loyal we'll be, whether we'll measure up, or if we'll trip and find ourselves excluded from the Kingdom.

Jesus heals on the Sabbath. Fail. Jesus eats from the goodness of the land on Sabbath.

Notice, for all the destruction in Jesus' wake, He was quick to reconstruct. He would explain that the Sabbath was about doing good rather than prohibition. He reminded us that it was a part of God's attempt to draw us near like a hen with her chicks rather than to drive us out or exclude us. Ultimately, He would tell us that the Sabbath was a gift given to humanity, made for us—not the other way around.

So if you feel paralyzed by conflicting spiritual thoughts or unanswerable questions, Jesus can relate. He knows what it is like to flip nicely organized tables of belief, sending security, even identity, clattering across the floor. Jesus knows. Jesus understands the confusion and the disorientation. He can relate to the desire to withdraw, to retreat. And, rather than disgust, He meets us with sympathy, crossing the divide between heaven and earth and patiently walking beside us. Then, when we are ready, He breathes the silent, simple truth, *"I will never leave you nor forsake you."* (Hebrews 13:5)

1. Name a rule you find frustrating.
2. Do you find it easy to be compliant, or do you easily rebel against authority?
3. What freedom do you wish you could experience today? Rules

SMALL GROUP BIBLE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion. Feel free to add or subtract or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

OPEN

Share a time when you experienced growth. What did you learn that was new and helpful? What did you let go of that seemed to not work for you anymore? What was that process like?

HEAD

Read Psalm 46:10; Isaiah 55:9; Psalm 119:105; Joshua 24:15; Colossians 1:17; and Mark 2:27 together and share any wisdom, insights, or questions in response to the reading.

As you reflect on these passages, what do you think is their theme or common thread?

Psalm 46:1 proclaims an incredible promise over our lives. What difference does it make in your life to know that Jesus is Lord over all the chaos? That He is ever-present to help when you're in need? What difference does/did that make for you during this Elemental sermon series?

How has The Word helped you discern between "right" and "wrong" paths? Has it helped you on this journey?

Does knowing that God's ways and thoughts are "higher" than ours help strengthen your faith or does that leave you with more questions?

HEART

What does it mean for you to "choose God." How is that choice evident in your life, words, and actions? Do you think others can see that clearly or would they ever question your allegiance?

When you say "yes" to serving God, what are you saying "no" to? Are those choices easy or hard?

HANDS

How have you noticed the Holy Spirit moving in your life the past few months? How can you give credit or acknowledge that work as you move forward through the remainder of the year?

When Jesus deconstructed the Pharisees' understanding of the Sabbath, He was quick to reconstruct and offer a new way. What "new way" has He offered you in your process?

If you haven't found a "new way" yet...how can this group pray for you and help you?

LIVING WORDS FOR YOUR WEEK

"Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before God made anything at all and is supreme over all creation. Christ is the one through whom God created everything in heaven and earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see—kings, kingdoms, rules, and authorities. Everything has been created through him and for him. He existed before everything else began, and he holds all creation together."
Colossians 1:15-17

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Luke 24:21

"...we had hoped He was the one..."

Everybody's theology is just one good crucifixion away from collapse.

We don't know much about these two men except one of their names and the town where they lived. We do know that, somewhere along the line, their spirituality, likely dry and dutiful, came alive. They met Jesus.

Were they in earshot the day Jesus prayed a blessing over a basket of loaves and fish and then fed thousands of people on a crowded hillside? Did they notice a little boy's pride as he donated his lunch to the miracle-working teacher? Had they left their jobs to follow town to town as Jesus healed every person in the city limits? Were they standing close enough to Lazarus' tomb to feel concerned about the smells as Jesus commanded the stone to be rolled away? And how many of Jesus' stories had they heard firsthand, maybe even receiving a private explanation once the crowds departed? Had they been with the other disciples the day Jesus tried to warn them that He would be betrayed, killed, and rise after three days? We don't know much about them.

When we first meet Cleopas and his friend from Emmaus, it's the weekend of Jesus' crucifixion, and everything they have hoped for has been destroyed. You know the story. They can barely walk and talk simultaneously as they return from the religious festival of Passover weekend in Jerusalem. Their eyes are blinded with tears as a third party joins them for the 7-mile hike. Then the amazing happens.

Amid their confusion and heartbreak, the stranger begins to share spiritual connections, scripture comes alive, and the two disciples emerge from the fog. How had they been so wrong, so off base? The conversation crackles with God-infused energy as their teacher demonstrates how the crucifixion of Jesus is the answer and fulfillment rather than the destruction of their hopes.

By the time the three stand outside Cleopas' house, the two disciples are renewed, reborn. They realized their previously held assumptions needed to collapse to make room for all God intended them to understand. Later, after recognizing it had been Jesus journeying with them, they say, *"Did not our hearts burn within us while He talked to us on the road, while He opened to us the Scriptures?"* (Luke 24:32)

So, what do we take away? These two from Emmaus knew they were wrong. But they were wrong about what they were wrong about (say that three times quickly). And the greatest reason for their new sense of peace? They had gotten to walk and talk with Jesus. He is always the most critical piece of the puzzle, the elemental minimum of our reconstruction plan.

Turns out, everybody's theology is just one good resurrection away from revival.

1. Have you ever witnessed something miraculous? What was it?
2. When was the last time you were emotional to the point of tears?
3. Is there a disappointment you want Jesus to know about? What would need to happen to bring you peace?

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WATER

Jeremiah 2:13

"My people...have forsaken Me, the spring of living water..."

It's a well-known story with at least one missed detail. Maybe you never overlooked it. But for the longest time, I did.

Another story from the audacious life of Christ: John tells of a trip Jesus took to visit a very specific woman. He went out of His way. He crossed a border He shouldn't have and embraced the criticism that accompanies our prejudices. He HAD to talk with her. How very Jesus.

A cup of water serves as the conversation starter for the Samaritan woman to come face-to-face with her deep, unquenchable thirst. If I'm honest, I've never been all that thirsty. Sure, I've experienced parching heat and once had a headache from dehydration. But I've only ever known "normal thirsty." Still, even I know if you are truly thirsty, you're not looking for juice, coffee, or a soft drink. For deep thirst, only water will do. So the woman's interest is peaked when Jesus announces, "If you knew who I was you would be asking Me for water."

Their conversation will twist and turn through the woman's personal life and her errant theology. And we might get distracted, wondering if this woman made such poor relationship decisions that the whole town considers her an "easy" woman, only willing to come to the well in the middle of the day. Or have all five of her husbands died? If so, she would be known as cursed and unacceptable to

God. And the woman's theology? As expected, her Samaritan roots mean decades of Hebrew faith mixed with paganism. And what are Jesus' responses? He seems to say to her lifestyle, "You are bad," and to her theology, "You are wrong." But here is where I missed the detail.

We would expect this woman to look for a quick, angry exit from the conversation. Instead, she goes deeper, more vulnerable. Essentially, she asks Jesus if He's the Messiah. He methodically peels the skin of her life, painful layer by layer. And her response is worship? What are we missing?

Something nearly magical happens when Jesus shows up in our confusion, failure, and pain. The Bible doesn't explain how it happens. But we hear it in the words of the disciples from Emmaus. We hear it now as the woman attempts to reflect her experience with Jesus to the people of her town, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" (John 4:29)

This is the gulping sound of spiritual water passing cracked lips, rushing down a dusty throat, nearly choking with its speed. Jesus is essential if our lives will ever be more than dry, thirsty, and dead.

1. In what way have you felt excluded, an outsider?
2. What is something you fear others think about you?
3. What are you thirsty for that only Jesus can supply?

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Luke 18:11

“God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.”

Timeout. I have an honest question. Who gets to decide what it means to be a Christian? In this day and time where everything gets labeled (ADHD, LGBTQ+, PTSD, SDA, SBC, SAU, you get it), how do we maneuver labeling problems?

When one Christian believes a person can be born gay and may never “change,” another believes God hates gays. Which one is Christian? One group worships on Sunday and another on Saturday. Some drink alcohol while others don’t. For one, only males can pastor, preach, or teach and others celebrate the calling of women to ministry. Some go to Christian schools, others to public institutions. Some want to react to social causes, while others fear being “woke.” What music do you like? What food do you eat? How do you feel about tattoos? It’s a labeling nightmare out there.

So pick a spot, state your claim, and you get to be a particular sort of Christian. Or maybe you get to say who the Christians are. We draw up walls to keep the “others” out. And we say things like, “We are more loving here,” “We aren’t judgmental like they are,” or “We follow Biblical truth.”

Do I get to say what it means to be a Christian? More significant still, if I claim to follow Christ, do I get to sit things out and refuse to participate in the definition of Christianity?

These questions aren’t new. During Paul’s day, you might be in the circumcised or uncircumcised camps. You might be willing or unwilling to eat meat offered to idols, be among those who speak in tongues or those who don’t. Interestingly, in Romans 13-14 and 1 Corinthians 11-14, Paul shares an approach we rarely experience. He refuses to come down on one side or the other. He never settles the arguments. Instead, he suggests we stop being judgmental, quit with the divisiveness and open our arms to those thinking differently by adopting a radical posture of love and peace. He says things like “Let us stop passing judgment on one another,” (Romans 14:13) “Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food,” (v20) and “So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God” (v22) On and on Paul goes in these two passages. And the surprise ending? 1 Corinthians 13, an admission that we only see things dimly and a call to a love that doesn’t keep score.

So maybe I need to buck the reflex to fight labels with more labels. I should break the cycle. Perhaps we could be the ones to include rather than exclude, to love, always love. Okay, that was therapeutic. Thank you.

1. Whom have you watched get pushed out of Christianity? Why was that done to them?
2. Who do you think should be allowed to define Christianity?
3. Whom is God whispering to you about, suggesting you be more accepting and less judgmental?

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OBVIOUS

Job 38:1-2

“From out of a storm, the LORD said to Job: Why do you talk so much when you know so little?”

Agnosticism [ag-nos-tuh-siz-uhm]

The belief that the answers to the basic questions of existence, such as the nature of the ultimate cause and whether there is a supreme being, are unknown or unknowable.

I spent a few years as a chaplain in secondary education, teaching junior and senior religion classes. During that time, the consistency of specific questions and conversations caused me to write a list of ideas titled “Pastor Dave’s Personal Rules for Believing.” I want to share the first two with you, if you don’t mind.

RULE #1: I’m wrong about stuff.

This isn’t a suggestion or mere possibility. It’s a truth. I don’t understand how it could be arguable. Not because we are talking about me specifically (though some might make that point) but because we are talking about human beings. This is a bankable truth: humans are fallible, flawed, problematic, and broken. We’re wrong about stuff. Rule two flows quickly and smoothly out of the first.

RULE #2: I DON’T KNOW WHICH STUFF I’M WRONG ABOUT.

This might seem obvious. But it’s a profoundly complicating factor. If I knew I was wrong

about which day I should set aside to worship God or that you are in an unconscious sleep once you die, I could gain ground on becoming right about it. Beyond that, everything feels more fragile when I don’t know which stuff I’m wrong about. Could the thing I hold dearest be incorrect? Does the Bible matter? Did Jesus really exist? Were we created or just an accident? Does my life have a purpose? Why are painful things happening to me? Can we know anything for sure?

Ahhhh...agnosticism. We find ourselves at a crossroads by the end of these two rules. Some might slide down an offramp from these rules with the tidy conclusion that you might as well not even try to figure anything out. About the time you’re sure of something, you might be wrong and not even know it. So, agnosticism makes sense...if certainty is our goal. But it is not. Certainty is not the goal of Christianity.

If you’re frustrated, I understand. Hold on—good news is coming in rules three and four. But I’m going to ask you to hit the pause button and wait in the rubble until tomorrow.

1. What spiritual belief matters most to you? What if you were wrong?
2. Have you ever considered agnosticism?
3. Is there a passage of scripture that comforts you when you’re confused? What is it?

Psalm 42:1

“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.”

You survived the first two rules: 1) I'm wrong about stuff, and 2) I don't know which stuff. Now, let's address rules three and four simultaneously.

RULE #3: Dig deep & RULE #4: Believe hard.

Something in me chooses to double down on my “unknowing.” Like an excursion that would disappoint if it ever ended, I chase after the uncapturable God. I am Moses asking to see God’s face in Exodus 33, only to be shown a sliver of His back while hiding behind a rock. I am Elizabeth in Luke 1, trying to explain the sensation that the baby in my womb recognized the presence of the Almighty God in the womb of another standing near me. I am Peter in Matthew 17, moved to worship at the transfiguration of Christ, wanting to build three tabernacles to house grandeur in the festivals of the past. I’m so often wrong. But I am giddy with God’s presence in my life.

I want more. I am the little boy chasing my Father who knows exactly how fast to run so that I will never catch Him, but also, I'll never stop chasing. I accept the premise of the first two rules: today's truth may be overturned tomorrow. But I choose to reject

discouragement and embrace the adventure of ever-growing zeal. This is the other option at the fork in the road.

I like birdwatching. Sometimes alone, but best with my dad. He knows birds. At least, I trust he does. We'll trudge through woods listening stalking, occasionally lifting specialized lenses to our eyes, confirming the bird we believe exists. And occasionally, my dad's voice or mine will pitch differently because of what we see. Something new or rare has materialized along our path, sometimes meriting a life-list notation. We'll emerge from our time together with stories and experiences, some of life's treasures. But none of our sightings can be proven to someone who wasn't there. You're just going to have to trust us.

Here we discover an important wall for our house of faith—pursuit. The goal of Christianity isn't to achieve certainty, as if we could capture God. Instead, the goal is the experience of faith. Sure, it involves your mind. But it fully engages your soul panting, longing after God.

1. What hobby do you have that supplies both peace and adventure?
2. Have you ever tried to explain an experience and weren't believed?
3. What area of your life would you love to see God show up?

1 Corinthians 13:12

"Now all we can see of God is like a cloudy picture in a mirror. Later we will see him face to face."

I love my wife. More impressive? She loves me. I'm still a tiny bit surprised when I think about it. Maybe it's because of my self-image during the teenage years. I thought of myself as being on that rung on the ladder just above ugly—not quite to the level of the cuteness of a pet. I didn't believe anyone found me attractive. I was fighting to fit into high school society.

Then in college, I became a bit more secure. I met an attractive, intelligent girl named Caryl Lynn. I took some risks and fell in love. She said yes, we were married—the end.

Wait, what?

Only young, immature love could think of a wedding as the end rather than the beginning. Sure, I had distilled hours, even days of research into the informed decision to connect myself eternally to this woman. But how well could I know her in a year and a half of dating during our early twenties? It was a statement of faith on both our parts when we embarked on a life together.

This year we celebrated our 35th anniversary. We're seasoned vets. I know Caryl Lynn better than anyone else does. But hang on a minute. I don't want to give the wrong idea. One of the reasons I feel tingling surprise

that she loves me back is that even after all these years, I blow it. I let her down, sometimes considerably. And it isn't just that I fail to follow through with what I know she would like. It's more complicated than that. There are days it feels like I must have skipped multiple chapters of the Caryl Lynn manual. Do I know her at all? But this is how it goes with relationships.

Sometimes we talk about God like the goal is to tackle Him to the ground, dissolve Him into an essence, and maybe download Him onto a hard drive. There, now we can explain Him. But what human is like that, let alone God? My wife certainly isn't. And I would hate it if she were. Gone would be the sense of adventure if she were fully capturable, contained in my thinking. No, I have to show up to the relationship each day, often with surprise, to see what will happen, who she is, who we are.

So it is with relationships, ours with God, mine with Caryl Lynn. The qualitative measure will never be based on how much I know or my intellectual understanding. The standard will be the intensity of my pursuit in this gamble of love.

1. Do you have a friend who knows you better than anyone else does?
2. What is something that friend would be surprised to learn about you?
3. Who are you currently working to create a better friendship with? How are you doing that?

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INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion. Feel free to add or subtract or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

OPEN

Have you ever been found out to be wrong about something that at one point you were so sure you were right about? Share what it was and what it felt like.

HEAD

Read Luke 24: 13-21, Job 38: 1-2 (CEV), Psalm 42: 1, 1 Corinthians 13: 12 together and share any wisdom, insights, or questions in response to the reading.

Concerning the encounter on the road to Emmaus, what do you think are the feelings behind the words in verse 21? Are you open to being wrong about some element of your current understanding of faith?

In Job, most of the book up to this point has been Job and his friends talking about their understanding of God and how he works, but now in verse 38, God speaks. Why do you think they talked so much and seemingly listened so little? What are some of the ways God speaks to us today?

In David's prayer in Psalm 42, he talks about thirsting for God. Why might a verse like this come in a series about deconstruction and questions? How do we thirst for God today?

Corinthians was a community full of bronze mirrors. They aren't as good as the ones we have today. They were dim. You could see, but not well. Knowing that the context of 1 Corinthians 13: 12 is love, what is Paul referring to that we see dimly now?

HEART

Being wrong is not an easy thing for many of us to follow, but being wrong about something that has been so elemental to our faith in the

past can shake the ground beneath us. How can you and I have convictions in our beliefs, and yet still be open to what else God has to teach us, to show us? Is being wrong bad? Can it lead to something better?

James wrote that we should be "quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry." What are some ways we can practice, and encourage one another, listening more in our faith journey instead of doing all the talking?

When our body thirsts for water, if we don't meet that need it can wreck us physically. When we have questions about our faith, how do we continue to recognize that at the end of the day what we need most is God, which doesn't always mean we get all the answers?

HANDS

The challenge for this week involves spending some time listening to God. At least two options to try just that: 1. Spend time literally listening to Scripture being read instead of just reading it. Pray before and after, asking yourself what is God seeking to show you today. 2. Pull out a journal or piece of paper and as part of your prayer time, ask God what He may want to say to you today. Then, write whatever comes to mind (this may take several tries before it begins to connect with you).

LIVING WORDS FOR YOUR WEEK

"Then Job replied to the Lord: 'I know that you can do anything, and no one can stop you. You asked, 'Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorance?' It is I—and I was talking about things I knew nothing about, things far too wonderful for me. You said, 'Listen and I will speak! I have some questions for you, and you must answer them.' I had only heard about you before, but now I have seen you with my own eyes. I take back everything I said, and I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance.' Job 42:1-6NLT

John 3:8

"The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going."

One day at Andrews University, I passed by the football field on the way to the cafeteria for supper. Stopping to watch some of my friends in an intramural game, I noticed the girl I liked was there watching, too. Caryl Lynn and I hadn't dated yet. But we were on the same co-ed flag football team. So, conversation came easily. It was cold and she had no jacket so I asked if she wanted mine. "Sure," she replied. And in a questionably smooth move, I opened my arms, allowing her to join me on the inside of the coat. Surprisingly, she moved over and snuggled in. Wow... I mean, come on now... Of all the things that could have happened on a Tuesday, that was the best.

That concrete moment is part of what we crave from God—tangible, tactile, physical. We can't see Him. We don't hear Him, at least not generally in conventional ways. But, if I'm honest, I feel Him, at least sometimes. John's reference to the wind makes sense to me. I can feel God's movement as I grasp for Him, sometimes grazing my fingertips as He escapes my capture. The Bible describes this spiritual game of tag using multiple metaphors. He is the water we bathe in for cleansing. He is a fire

that warms but would consume us if we came too close.

But Jesus' arrival on this planet comes nearest to feeding my hunger for a concrete relationship. He walks and talks, teaches and breathes. He holds little children and rubs healing mud on the eyes of the blind man. His feet get washed and He washes feet. He walks on water—WITH HIS FEET! He handles bread and multiplies it. He grabs tables and a whip, changing the décor. He pulls gauze from the recently dead. He rides on donkeys and sails in boats. And He bleeds.

He bleeds and cries and gasps for air. He feels the kiss of betrayal and stumbles under the weight of the beam. Spit splashes on His cheek. Fists bounce off His face. And He is beaten... oh, how He is beaten. As He hangs suspended between heaven and earth, chest heaving to survive, Jesus calls out to His Father and maybe to me, "Why have you forsaken me?"

And here I am caught in the irony of eyes
awash in tears and the continued hunger that
He be more real.

1. Whose hand do you find most comforting to hold?
2. Is there someone you wish were more comfortable to be around?
3. What moments in the life of Christ do you find most relatable?

Ecclesiastes 12:13

“Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole [duty] of man.”

Hey, writer of Ecclesiastes... What is this you say has been heard?

Well...

The book of Ecclesiastes is, to be frank, very depressing. It begins with a simple premise, *“Everything is meaningless... a complete waste of time.”* (1:2) If you think it will soften from there, guess again. King Solomon seems to admit, *“All of my wisdom is a chasing after the wind.”* (1:17)

The writer bounces from one disappointing observation to another, all meaningless, foolishness, a waste. He finds his best work ridiculous, food and drink worthless, wealth and treasure pointless. He notices the major downer that good men suffer while the wicked skate by unscathed. There’s no figuring it out, no merit to what happens here on earth:

The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all. (9:11)

Why is Solomon so down and depressed? Because we’re all going to die. Worse still, we’ll

be forgotten shortly after death. (1:11; 2:16) If this isn’t bad enough, this author seems to question that anything happens after death, even to good people. (3:19-21; 12:7)

So, this tortured, depressed soul comes to the end of the book, and what is the conclusion? In chapter 12, he warns us to be careful because there is no end to books and too much study will wear us out—or, don’t even try to figure things out, it’s a waste of time. (v12) So again, his conclusion?

Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole [duty] of man. (12:13)

Huh? Even though we can’t make sense of things, fear God anyway? Trust God anyway? Yup, trust God anyway.

This is the essence of our pursuit of the incomprehensible God. On days that make sense and those filled with confusion, trust God. When our carefully packaged conclusions come under fatal attack from personal pain, trust God. When we understand and when we don’t, trust God anyway.

1. How much do you struggle with depression and anxiety?
2. When you’re anxious, is there someone you have found helpful to talk with?
3. What most commonly causes you to distrust?

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UNBELIEF

Luke 17:6

"If you have faith as small as a mustard seed..."

I'm amused by passages of scripture that contain an apparent contradiction. In the eighth chapter of his book, John told the story of a woman entrapped in a compromising sexual encounter and brought as a case study to Jesus. The religious leaders and legal experts hoped to catch Him being more gracious than the law permitted. Side note: I love that what Jesus' enemies know of Him suggests that He will heal when He shouldn't, love whom He mustn't, and flatly extend way more grace than their sensibilities would allow.

So, when Jesus flips the script, writes in the sand, and sends the accusers scurrying for cover, He carries on a private conversation with the petrified woman. He asks her about her abusers, and she looks up to see they have all gone. And then He says, *"Neither do I condemn you. Now go and sin no more."* (v11) How does He say He doesn't condemn her and call her a sinner in the space of two sentences? No conflict. It must be that her actions don't define her. Jesus sees identity in terms other than behavior. With Jesus, we can fail and not be failures. We struggle with sin and are still sons and daughters.

Then in Mark 9, Jesus encounters a demon-possessed boy's father, desperate for rescue.

The horrors of watching the battle raging in his little one had taken a toll. Shaken, the father asks if Jesus can help. And Jesus wonders back, "Do you believe in me?" The father responds, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief." (v24) So, which is it? Belief? Unbelief?

Something about that statement is at once confusing and relatable. If there were a belief Richter scale, I doubt I would shake the earth the same way every day. In fact, for any of us who have encountered pain and disappointment, isn't it likely that our belief always feels mixed with qualifiers? Beautifully, this is ok with Jesus. He is always interested in growing our faith. But He doesn't turn it into another way for our behavior to earn His love.

Jesus' disciples come to Him in Luke 17 and ask for *more* faith. Jesus responds that if they had faith the size of a mustard seed, it would be enough to cause trees to walk into the sea. In other words, it's not about the size of your faith. It is where your faith is actively placed that makes all the difference.

Once again, the answer is Jesus.

1. Has someone tried to embarrass you publicly? What did you do?
2. Have you had someone speak up for you at a pivotal moment?
3. In what area of your life do you think Jesus is anxious to see faith?

SET FREE

Luke 4:18-19

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

As a high school chaplain, I found the rhythms of a senior’s year predictable and interesting. They would return to campus the stars of the show, the adults of the student world. Dating would be taken more seriously, and their ways of getting into trouble were more costly. Many would have more fun this year than the rest of their entire high school career. Then, returning from spring break, they would become entirely unteachable, so ready to graduate.

What stood out most was the common thread of certainty in what they would experience after graduation. Many were confident of the degree they would pursue in college (even if that would change by the time they got there). Some had summer jobs lined up. They all knew one thing they were looking forward to—freedom.

“I can’t wait to get out into the real world,” they would say. Little did they know of the “real world,” with its 60-hour work weeks, bills, taxes, and financial obligations. They were oblivious to workplace rejection, holding a job they hated, or coming home to help with homework that wasn’t their own. I was especially amused when a student who chafed under the oppression

of a school dress code used their first act of freedom to join the military. So much they had to learn.

But I recognize what was happening there. I believe every human heart echoes the sentiment of the high school senior, “I want to be free.” Sometimes I forget there are places in the world a person can’t drive because they’re a woman, children can be abused without recourse, or people of certain ethnicities are forbidden basic opportunities. Not long ago, in my hometown, I wouldn’t have been able to vote or get a mortgage if my skin had been a few shades darker. And as I ponder these things, my heart cries out, “I need to be free.”

I resonate with Luke’s Jesus, who steps out of a desert of preparation and onto a synagogue stage, scroll in hand; whose first recorded words are, “I bring good news... I bring you freedom.” Sure, He reads from a prepared script. But that makes it more remarkable. Of all the words He could have been handed to read, He reads FREEDOM. It is a prophecy describing what God cares about most, the work of the Messiah to come, rescuing the oppressed—setting us free.

1. If you had a magic wand, what task would you wave and never do again?
2. If you could go back and talk with the high school senior version of yourself, what would you tell them?
3. What spiritual issue has you bound, tied up? What would you want Jesus to know about it?

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KNOCK, KNOCK

Revelation 3:20

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in..."

Jesus and I agree that freedom is essential. It's elemental. Apologies if I've made myself sound equal to Jesus here. But we both have a say because I'm free. In fact, it's Jesus who made my voice equal to His on this subject.

And so I snap another Lego block onto my faith reconstruction. I confidently reach through the supplies of yesterday's thinking and select "freedom." This wall is significant to my house of faith. I'm grateful that it's so important to Jesus as well. Consider Revelation 3:20 above. You might have thought the most impressive takeaway was Jesus' persistence as we visualize His knocking, knocking, knocking at our heart's door, never giving up. But isn't it more remarkable that He refuses to crash through the door, taking our relationship by force? As much as anything, this verse reiterates a truth scattered throughout scripture—God tethers His love for you to His absolute respect for your freedom. You cannot discuss God's love without acknowledging that freedom is the first ingredient.

To say that God wants you around Him, Him around you, is obvious. *"For God so loved you that He gave His own Son to be around you."* (John 3:16, my version) But He could have gone about it a vastly different way. At the moment

of the first sin in the Garden of Eden, He could have reached into Adam and Eve's brains, flipped some switches, erased memories, rebooted, and tried again until they passed the test. Or He could have jumped forward, skipping their sin and keeping them perfect. But something fundamental would have been missing.

To love means to choose. And the best love wants to be loved back and chosen in return. God could have made a charade out of His love for us, caging us at His side for eternity. And maybe He could have done so without our realization. But He would have known. And we know for sure that He didn't do it that way. How? Sin.

Our sin is evidence that God does what He says He will do. He gives me freedom. My sin demonstrates my liberty. That doesn't make my sin a good thing. It just establishes proof. I am FREE to love God.

Now, let's go open the door.

1. If you could go anywhere in the world for one week and do anything you wanted, what would it be?
2. If you could have anyone across time as a guest for dinner in your home, whom would it be (pick someone other than Jesus)?
3. If you could participate in any story from the life of Jesus in the Gospels, which one would you choose? What would you want to do?

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SMALL GROUP BIBLE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion. Feel free to add or subtract or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

OPEN

Have you ever had to deal with uncertainty? What was it like for you to live in the tension of “not knowing”? Share!

HEAD

Read John 3:8; Ecclesiastes 12:13; Luke 17:6; Luke 4:18-19; Revelation 3:20; and Galatians 5:1 together and share any wisdom, insights, or questions in response to the reading.

What point is Jesus trying to make in John 3:8 when he compares spiritual birth to the wind? Is that a comforting or challenging metaphor for you?

When Jesus used the term “born again” do you think he meant it in the same way we do today? What was your spiritual rebirth like? A one time event? An ever evolving process? Something else?

In Ecclesiastes we’re admonished to trust. Trust in the midst of meaninglessness and uncertainty. Trust when things don’t seem to matter or even make sense. Despite what circumstances may come, we’re still called to trust and believe. What has that process been like for you? Did you find trust easy when times are tough?

HEART

How does Jesus’ call to have faith the size of a mustard seed speak to you and your faith journey? Do you find yourself more often asking for faith like the disciples or exhibiting strong faith?

Which of Jesus’ words in Luke 4:18-19 do you need to hear most today?

How does the theme of “freedom” presented in Luke 14 and Galatians 5, speak to your life today? Have you ever felt enslaved or entrapped by certain beliefs or structures? How did (or how can) you let those things go?

Revelation 3:20 paints a beautiful picture of Jesus. He’s at the door of not only your heart but everyone’s heart; standing, waiting, knocking, looking for an invitation in. What does it look like for you to let him in and how can you share that with others this week?

HANDS

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free...”

This week we invite you to step more fully into that freedom through the practice of benevolent detachment. Whenever you pray, take a moment to simply give *everyone* and *everything* over to God. Let go of your worries. Release your concerns. Hand over the people, places, or things that have been weighing on you. Give up your cares, cast off your stressors, and entrust everyone and everything to God. Our prayer for you is that through this process you will be able to live *freely and lightly* in the presence of an Almighty God who cares deeply for each and every care and concern you have.

LIVING WORDS FOR YOUR WEEK

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

Matthew 11:28-30 MSG

BARBECUE

Matthew 24:14

“And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”

There are many things I treasure about having grown up in the Seventh-day Adventist faith community. There are a few I don't. I've always found it irritating that groups like ours begin to feel closed over time. No one intends it. But slowly, fluidly, we develop a culture that feels less than welcoming. One of the ways this happens is through specialized, insider language. We develop catchphrases and acronyms, including them in conversation and programming in a tone that silently suggests you either know what we're talking about or you should probably leave. Guests are on their own to figure out this verbal secret handshake.

One such phrase for Adventists is “Third Angel's Message.” There was a day when its visual depiction was used to identify an Adventist church on our signage. This is because our tradition suggests that God has a special purpose for our community, to articulate a particular message to our neighbors in the surrounding world. But I doubt many of us have shared it.

Can you imagine, say, next fourth of July, as the family feasts on picnic fare in your backyard, you notice the neighbors over the fence grilling and seize the moment? Summoning your courage, you start with small talk, “Say Fred, those burgers smell great. In fact, your barbecue reminds me of something I've been

meaning to share.” And from there, you're off and running. You mention that God has given you a special message to deliver. And then, as you gesture toward the smoking burgers, you quote Revelation 14 with a fair amount of gravel in your throat:

A third angel... said in a loud voice: “If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever.” (Revelation 14:9-11)

Woof. Who decided we were the ones to deliver this to the neighborhood? What a ridiculously awful task. Or is it? What if, buried in this apocalyptic language, we discovered the DNA of God? The God who is love? What if this message is all about freedom?

Ok, this is going to take a minute to unpack. So, I'll hit pause on that cliffhanger until tomorrow.

1. Have you ever been asked to deliver bad news? What was it?
2. If I told you there is good news and bad news and asked which you wanted first, what would you say?
3. Do you think Jesus would ever ask you to deliver a difficult message? Like what?

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"How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I let you go, O Israel?"

Only once does scripture show the fullness of what Revelation 14 describes. In only one moment does someone fully and finally drink

the cup of the wine of God's wrath. It is Jesus on the cross. We have already watched Him suffer in the Garden of Gethsemane under the weight of His decision, "*Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.*" (Matthew 26:39) Then, as He is captured that night, one of His disciples attempts to rescue Him from the crowd. And after replacing someone's ear, Jesus says to Peter, "*Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup?*" (John 18:11)

We watch the cross intently, looking for the moment God rains down His wrath, expecting fury. Instead, we see a mirror image of the description in Romans 1. Jesus hangs, gasping for breath just before death, and calls out, “*My God, why have you forsaken me?*” (Matthew 27:46) He could have said, “I feel you letting me go, giving me up, abandoning me to this cup.” Then He dies, not from some torturer inflicting damage on His body. He dies from the inside out because of His choice to drink the cup.

Pause...I know, I know. We're almost there.

1. What makes you angry?
2. What is the most painful thing you have experienced?
3. Have you ever wanted to stop someone from choosing something you believed wasn't good for them? How did that go?

So, what is in this “cup of God’s wrath,” and who made it? We have all the clues to figure it out.

If you think your cup is not so bad, the Bible reminds us that we all have sinned (Romans 3:23) and that even our best days add up to filth, garbage, and excrement. (Isaiah 64:6) We made this cup. And it is filled with caustic trash. Do you want to know what would happen if you drank your cup? Watch Jesus implode, inside out, on the cross.

I mentioned that this is the second cup described in the New Testament. The first is the cup of the covenant, the blood of Jesus' sacrifice. He introduced it to us at the last supper. And as Jesus holds it aloft in His hands, He announces that He will not drink from the

cup of the covenant again until we are all safely together in His kingdom. (Matthew 26:29) He signals a trade. From here forward, we will drink His cup, and He drinks and dies from ours.

So, if the cup of Revelation 14 is my stanky, death-filled cup that Jesus drinks at the cross, and if there's a time coming when God will let us go to our decisions, whichever cup we choose to hold, what idiot wouldn't trade for the cup of salvation? Actually, lots of us idiots.

But don't miss the point. This whole cup metaphor is an exercise of freedom. You and I get to choose.

You know the saying, “You can lead a horse to water (or a cup), but you can’t make him drink.” If God lets me go, it will be because I insist on it.

Oh, and if, by chance, my neighbor Fred doesn't realize this situation is happening and that he doesn't have forever to exercise his freedom, wouldn't you think a loving God would at least send someone to warn him? Yeah, I do.

1. What was the last purchase you made that you second-guessed sometime later?
2. What is an area of your life you are working to improve?
3. What would you like to say to Jesus, knowing the trade He makes for you?

Proverbs 27:17
“Just as iron sharpens iron, friends sharpen the minds of one another.”

We’ve identified significant rebuilding blocks as we sifted through our thinking of the past. First, there’s Jesus. Every block we handle, every idea considered, if it has anything to do with God, it has Jesus in it. In the New Testament, sure. In the Old Testament? Surprisingly, yes. In nature, our friendships, and in logic, He is everywhere.

And as we assemble the walls built on this firm base, we’re reminded that this is a relationship we’re building. So, this won’t be about capture, conquest, or complete comprehension. We’ll erect the sturdy wall of passionate pursuit. Then we’ll marry it to the wall of freedom fully exercised. This is our choice, purchased by the sacrifice of Christ.

So, what’s next?

I have a recommendation. It grows from Matthew 18:20, which says, *“For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”* How interesting that Jesus implies there is greater power when faith is shared between two or more people than when carried alone. Maybe He’s watched us deconstruct from time to time and knows how fragile we can become. He understands that we experience moments of

personal instability and are safest surrounded by the faith of others.

Nature is filled with examples declaring the power of two or three amidst attack, injury, or the need to find food. So it is in our human family. God made us to thrive in groups.

There, another wall to consider—staying with a group, singing a duet rather than a solo. This is tricky because groups can be awful. Most of us have considered casting aside the Lego block of church. We were insulted by their words or embarrassed by their ideas. We grew up and grew out of it. And like a pair of high-water pants, we left it behind. Or maybe we were asked to leave. Either way, Matthew 18’s words persist. It’s harder to find Jesus alone.

This is how it is with relationships—friendship, marriage, parenting, God, church. They can hurt us so deeply. But we need them so much. Community is elemental. So, we must learn how to risk, whom to trust (not everyone), and gravitate toward one another.

1. Who are the five friends closest to you outside your family members?
2. Who would be surprised to learn they are on your list (you should probably tell them)?
3. Who has recently shown you a picture of Jesus you needed to see (yeah, you should tell them, too)?

Galatians 6:2

"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."

I'm fascinated by Jesus' healing of the paralytic man in Mark 2:1-8. He obviously can't get to Jesus by himself. Four friends carry him. My mind builds the picture of a group of five that drew close as children. Did they give each other nicknames? Did they call him "Quick" because of his wit?

Then, in our story, when they arrive at the home where Jesus teaches a houseful, they are too late. The crowd is too thick. Their awkward group of five is too large. They're out of luck and can't get in. Or, can they?

We don't know who suggested it, but it's probably the friend they nicknamed "Nine Lives" years ago. Without permission, they climb onto the roof and undo some tiles. Carefully, they begin to lower their friend to Jesus. Almost certainly, this is not Quick's idea. Is he arguing with his friends as they drop him, if only with his eyes? His life is out of control. He's a public spectacle. As he falls, his field of vision is limited to the impish faces of his friends.

Then, suddenly there is another face hovering over his. It is Jesus. Does the young man recognize Him? Has he seen His face before? Are Jesus' eyes smiling at the adventurous spirit of his friends?

This profound interaction is described in the same way by Mark and Luke. They say, “When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’” (Mark 2:5; Luke 5:20) Let that sink in. “When He saw **their** faith...” Does this mean Quick wasn’t just relying upon their physical prowess? Was he also dependent on their spiritual vitality? He will run from that house, healed, forgiven, and clean. Because of **their** faith?

Jesus will do anything to save me. And when I'm at my lowest and can't even speak up for myself, there seems to be some faith transference that God allows between members of His family. I don't know how to explain it. But I like it. This would mean that living in a spiritual community is my safety net against spiritual lethargy and religious injury. God's desire to save me is way bigger than I had thought. And not just His desire, His power to save me is more significant than I had imagined.

Speaking of imagination—turns out Quick was faster than any of his friends (who knew?). They wouldn't catch him till they reached his house later that night.

1. Who has been a spiritual mentor to you?
2. When you're feeling spiritual discouragement, who can you turn to?
3. What burden do you need help carrying today?

Matthew 10:40

"Anyone who welcomes you welcomes Me..."

Caryl Lynn and I always wanted children. So over eight years, we had three and our lives filled with joy. We were young, and there were diapers and onesies, Playmobil® sets and Legos, tea parties and trampolines. We loved our time together at summer camp, Ocean City, and Christmas at Grandma and Grampy's. There were always lights on at our house (oh, the electric bill) and usually laughter.

As a boy, I noticed the house in the neighborhood where all the teens hung out on the weekends. I remember thinking, "Wouldn't it be great to be the cool parents with the fun house where everyone collected?" So quietly, over time, I built a fantasy that our children would prefer to bring their friends and spend time with us rather than escape, create distance, and be away. For the most part, my dream came true.

Now, several decades and the life of one chocolate Labrador Retriever later, we wake up in a quiet, empty nest. Our children are scattered across the country. But we all plan to spend an August week in Michigan. Then, for Thanksgiving, we'll collect in California to eat turkey and celebrate some birthdays. And finally, everyone will gather for Christmas at our house here in Tennessee. It will be glorious—the game playing, music, special meals, galloping footfalls of two dogs, and even an argument or two. We love each other and still prefer

spending our time with this little handmade community.

But today, there's a missing texture from the picture of the family I painted years ago. We went to church. We sang Bible songs in the car, read the Chronicles of Narnia, and prayed the Lord's Prayer before chasing our kids to bed. We had Bible studies in our home and a "Heaven Party" one weekend (the kids designed it). We loved Jesus together.

Now each of our children is disconnected from organized church. I don't feel confident saying they want to walk with Jesus. And we've decided it's not Mom and Dad's place to regularly remind them of or invite them to spiritual things. They know what we believe. We are called to walk beside them.

So, if my child doesn't intend a life with Jesus but wants to spend time with me knowing I'm walking with Jesus, play that scene out in your mind—my child, me, and Jesus. Somehow faith is flowing like an electric current. It's a little mystical, a calculus I don't fully understand. But I'm counting on it. I believe there is unique spiritual power in community; salvation through connection—for *"anyone who welcomes us, welcomes Jesus..."*

4. What is one of your favorite family games?
5. How close is your life to what you dreamt? Why is that?
6. Who are you presently trying to carry to Jesus?

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INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion. Feel free to add or subtract or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

OPEN

If you were to describe God to someone who had never heard of Him, or maybe a child, what would you say?

HEAD

Read the following in sections. Start with Revelation 14: 9-11 and Romans 1: 18-24 then share any wisdom, insights, or questions in response to the reading. Then do the same with Matthew 26: 39-42, Matthew 27: 45-46, and Luke 22: 14-20. Then again with Matthew 18: 19-20, Proverbs 27: 17 and Galatians 6: 2. End with Matthew 10:40.

When you read Revelation 14, what images come to mind when you read “drink the wine of God’s anger” and “god’s cup of wrath”? What feelings does reading this passage conjure up, or past teaching that you think of?

In Romans 1, it says that God abandoned them to their choices instead of saying that God caused them to suffer. Is that have you’ve understood the consequences of sin in the past, or no? How does this speak to God giving his children the freedom to make choices?

What results did Jesus suffer (physically, mentally, spiritually) by drinking the cup of God’s wrath towards sin? Do we experience this today? If so, how is our experience and Christ’s different?

HEART

What does it mean to you that Jesus drank the cup we deserve, while giving us the cup He deserves? Have you thought about communion in this way? If not, how might this change your experience of drinking the cup?

Why do you think Jesus, and Scripture, makes such a point to talk about the importance of friendship and community in our Spiritual journey?

How can you and I, led by a spirit of love, help other people find the joy found in accepting and following Christ instead of being abandoned to the consequences of our choices?

HANDS

Two things to consider this week about ways to put the teaching into action:

If you’ve never had communion with your connect group, this is a great week to do it, and you can even do it online with advance notice to your group to come with a cup of juice and some bread. Read through 1 Corinthians 11: 23-26 and partake.

Think through your community, your 2-3 (metaphorically), and spend time in prayer over them thanking God for their relationships and asking Him to be present with them. And if you feel you don’t have community, ask God for help to grow one for you and with you.

LIVING WORDS FOR YOUR WEEK

“For I pass on to you what I received from the Lord himself. On the night when he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread and gave thanks to God for it. Then he broke it in pieces and said, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, he took the cup of wine after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant between God and his people—an agreement confirmed with my blood. Do this in remembrance of me as often as you drink it.” For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are announcing the Lord’s death until he comes again.”

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 NLT

FOLLOW

Mark 3:14

"Then He chose twelve of them to be His apostles, so that they could be with Him."

One of Jesus' most common opening lines is, "Follow me." Not, "Act like me. Change your behavior. Start by being perfect," but, "Follow me." Listen to this invitation in basic terms. He's asking that we spend time with Him, rearrange our lives so He fits, help Him create a community.

Jesus throws this invitational phrase around quite freely. He said it to Peter and Andrew, James and John, Matthew and Philip. And He invited plenty of people who didn't take Him up on it: Pharisees and teachers and a rich young ruler. His universal question is, "Do you want to be with me?"

Frankly, Jesus invites people I wouldn't. His crew is made up of all those who say yes. And He asks so many people. So open are the doors to this community that prostitutes and tax collectors walk in even when religious leaders and high society won't. But there are fishermen, women and children, rulers and teachers, and a great many regular folks. Jesus doesn't want to be alone. Neither should you.

As God walks the earth in human form, He behaves on the principle first voiced in Genesis 2:18, "It is not good for man to be alone."

So, if you thought Jesus set up His band of disciples simply to teach truths or create an

evangelistic strategy for once He leaves, think again. Selecting the building block of community is not original to us. Jesus started it.

Let the words of Mark 3:14 sink in: *"Then He chose twelve of them to be His apostles, so that they could be with Him."* Did you catch it? A reason He chose disciples and asked so many to follow Him? Simply to be with them. He didn't want to be alone. Jesus will draw aside by Himself for only so long before walking across a lake to join the disciples in a boat amid a storm. He sounds desperate in the Garden of Gethsemane amidst the pain of decision because they're asleep and not awake with Him. Catch His eyes filled with tears as Peter denies he is his friend. And in John 6, as the tide of Jesus' popularity turns, He painfully asks His twelve closest friends, "Are you also going to leave?"

So yes, it is safer for us to be in community. We find and keep faith more easily. But more basic than that, Jesus wants to be with us. He would rather die than go without us.

1. How many friends did you typically hang out with in high school? Who were they?
2. How much alone time do you need to be at your best? Per day? Per week?
3. What kind of conversations do you have with Jesus while living your life? While driving your car? While you're alone?

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1 John 4:8
“God is Love.”

I'm not a huge puzzle guy, but there is one thing I have learned about putting them together. The picture on the box is critical. I can't fathom the evil required to wrap that rectangle with a misleading photo just to toy with puzzle enthusiasts. That would be messed up.

On the rare occasion I put a puzzle together, the box stands propped at the head of the table, the picture fully visible. Parts are strewn around, categorized by edge pieces, sorted by color, or snapped together in obvious groupings. Pieces will be handled one by one, and regularly my eyes will bounce back and forth to the picture on the box for reference.

So it goes rebuilding our portrait of God and life with Him. There is a guiding picture. And as we consider a belief to include in the puzzle, we hold each piece, eyes darting back to the photo for clarification. Never should our collection of beliefs alter the picture on the box. If they do, we've got it wrong.

That picture? God is love.

Allow it to sink deeply into your heart. See the Creator in Genesis desperate for our companionship, the Lamb of Revelation bent on rescuing us from disaster, and every verse of scripture in between calling out God's love. Every spring flower, the smell of a newborn baby, coffee at the kitchen table with a good

friend, every good thing is a gift from a God who loves us. (James 1:17).

And then there's Jesus. John 3:16 says Christ's arrival on earth is God's proof of love. He holds nothing back from us. He gives His very best to us. And while Christ's life on this planet serves as a sacrifice for our sins and His method of salvation, never miss that it is also God's love song to you and me.

No wonder Paul writes:

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

So live in full appreciation of the picture of how the puzzle ends up. Love is the roofline tying together the walls of our beliefs. It is elemental. Any piece that can't snap into that concept should be discarded.

1. What is a place that is particularly beautiful to you? Why?
2. What is something or someone that demonstrates the love of God to you?
3. What is a time when you felt the love of God profoundly? Why do you think that was?

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*"Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens.
Bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens.
Brown paper packages tied up with strings.
These are a few of my favorite things." —The Sound of Music*

Have you considered that you are one of God's favorite things?

I enjoy thinking about favorite things. My favorite color is blue. My favorite holiday is Christmas (a snowy one). I prefer fall and spring, football and golf, and usually salty over sweet. But if it's got to be sweet, I'll take pies over cake every day of the week.

And I've noticed people like talking about their favorites, too. As a high school chaplain, I always knew I could get a good discussion going by asking about favorites. What's your favorite thing to do in your spare time? What's your favorite item in the cafeteria? What's your favorite cereal, superhero, store or musician? And boom, we would be launched into conversation.

There's something wonderful about being a favorite, too. I would regularly joke about being my mom's favorite child in front of her and my siblings just to see her reaction. It was classic. Somehow, with a smile, she could communicate how much she enjoyed my little game while making it clear that we were all her favorites.

In Zechariah 2:8, God makes an interesting

claim. He says, “...for whoever touches you touches the apple of My eye...” That expression reminds me of the grandparent looking for any excuse to tell you a story about their little grandson who took their first steps or granddaughter who is probably a genius. Play your cards right, and a cell phone will materialize with album upon album of pictures. Ok, we get it. Little Johnny is your favorite. Ah, that’s how God feels about you. Can you imagine God wandering the heavens looking for someone to whom He hasn’t already shown a video of your recital?

Consider, out of everything God could be doing today, He'd prefer to spend time with you. This is His history with humanity. Every day he pursues us, hoping we will give Him a little time. As Genesis describes, He walks through our world looking for our companionship, calling out, "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:8)

So, listen and notice. He whispers in the winds and calls out through thunder. He whistles through the sparrow's song and holds you during sleep. He is the sunshine, a cool drink and a deep cleansing breath. And everywhere He goes, He calls out for you.

1. What is your favorite holiday? Why?
2. Who is one of your favorite people? Why?
3. What are your favorite aspects of God? Why?

John 13:35

“By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.”

There is something genuinely wonderful about capping our rebuild with the umbrella of love. What is more important than hearing that the Creator of heaven and earth is head over heels in love with us? It gives me more patience with my faith when I realize God's devotion and risky commitment to us.

But I have learned that love is best experienced by giving it away. The love of Jesus is always on the move. So, accepting it means allowing it to flow through us. It's not surprising that He asks that we love one another. He says His body of believers will be known for love.

The New Testament writers repeatedly urge that we love one another. But it's not really a request. It's more of an explanation. 1 Peter 4:8 says, *"Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."* Despite flaws in our rebuilt house of faith, if we include the kind of love that reminds us of God, we'll be okay.

Let's pause here to discuss who "one another" might mean. When Jesus is asked about the greatest commandment in Matthew 22, He points to love. He responds, "Love God and love our neighbor." When asked about the identity of our neighbor in Luke 10, Jesus expands our understanding with the parable of the Good Samaritan. And then, in Matthew 5, He takes it further by saying we shouldn't stop at loving our neighbor as ourselves.

We should love our enemies. Apparently, “one another” is everyone.

I recently overheard something on a podcast that haunts me. A participant said, “There is no hate quite like Christian love.” Wow, that’s disturbing. It doesn’t sound like their experience was about love at all. He was probably reflecting on how often Christians are seen fighting, condemning and judging the world around us while seeming to only love ourselves. But Jesus won’t justify any reason to withhold love. His command is universal. Love one another. Maybe the test of whether we love at all is how well we love the person most “other” than us.

Then, right as we're ready to try loving everyone, Jesus switches things up. Rather than loving others as we love ourselves, He asks that we love one another as He loves us. (John 13:34) He says this just before going to the cross to die for us.

Crosswalk challenges our community to “Lovewell.” This is big. It means to love universally and deeply. It calls us to experiment with new and extravagant ways to sacrifice for those most different from us. “Lovewell” is a request to love like Jesus.

1. Who do you find irritating and challenging to be around? Why is that?
2. Are there two people whom you love being around and naturally connect with? Why do you think that is?
3. What characteristic makes you most difficult to love? What would you like to say to Jesus about that?

1 Corinthians 5:20

"We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us."

So, I've been thinking. If human beings are so much better off living in a community of faith and we're called to love others well, shouldn't we place a high priority on inviting others into this family? Isn't it an incredible act of selfishness to live with such benefits without attempting to share?

But if you're like me, the invitation process is uncomfortable. It feels invasive and sometimes a bit judgmental. It's like we're saying, "I know better than you," or "Your life is in trouble. Thank goodness I showed up to rescue you." I want to come across more like a friend who has tried a new ice cream shop, knows you would like it, and wants to take you there.

The key in the middle of that sentiment is the word **friend**. I'm not interested in mass advertising my Christian faith—mailing meeting invites to a series of zip codes, or porch-bombing neighborhoods with flyers from church. I've decided it starts with making friends, not guiltling or scaring people.

The other day I had a fun interaction with a workman servicing the HVAC system at our new Chattanooga facility. He was on task but pleasant. We ended up on the roof identifying units that supplied the nine sections of the building and discussing various things. We became familiar and struck up a good rapport.

Back in the church lobby, our coffee team leader was training a new barista, and lattes were coming off the machines with nowhere to go. So, I asked Mr. HVAC if he'd like one. "They are really good," I said. A delicious cup later and we were into conversation about his family and the difficulties of his wife's pregnancy. I was surprised by the tears welling in his eyes. He wanted to know more about our church, so we talked about music that he likes, the convenience of a Saturday morning service, how good the children's programming is, and that, yes, there would be more tasty espresso drinks and donuts. It was easy to say, "Man, you should bring your wife sometime. We would love to have you with us."

I don't know if he'll come to worship. And that's not the point. The point is how easily an invitation slid off my tongue. I couldn't help myself. And I know he was comfortable, that I added value to his life. Before he left, he asked me to pray with him for his wife and unborn child.

I sure wouldn't mind seeing Mr. HVAC again. He feels like a friend.

1. Where have you eaten recently that you could take a friend for the first time?
2. Do you find it easy to talk about shows you like to watch, a sporting event you attended, or music you listen to? In what circumstances do you do that?
3. When was the last time you invited someone to your community of faith? Was that easy to do? Why or why not?

WRESTLE

Psalm 13:2

*"How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and every day have sorrow in my heart?"*

If you have found this series difficult, I have a Bible character for you to consider.

Heard in children's story sound bites, his life is easy. He's a pillar of the faith chosen by God. His large family is a fulfillment of God's promises. He is wealthy and loved and part of the lineage of Christ. But listen a little closer. Read a little deeper.

Jacob spends most of his life in second-class as second-born. God makes him promises that don't seem to come true. He quietly hangs out with his mom in the kitchen because his dad favors his twin brother, Esau, who is boisterous, fun, and more successful at things men do.

In his forties, losing faith in God's promises, Jacob attempts to take control of his life and wrestle his destiny from his father's dying hands. But the plot is ill-fated. He must now run, leaving home, leaving mom, leaving everything he has known.

Confused and out of his element, Jacob dreams on the ground with a rock for a pillow. And God re-ups His promises, *"I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go."* (Genesis 28:15). Jacob falls in love, works hard, and seems blessed. But he's tricked, extorted, and marries the wrong woman. Years will pass, and he can't go home. Jacob must be thinking, "God, where are you when I need you? Why do your promises never come true?"

Finally, excruciatingly, Jacob begins the journey home. He is sixty, wealthy, and worried about Esau's vow to kill him when they meet. Not much of his life has gone well. It can't feel like God has done a great job watching over him. Then, the night before the showdown with his brother, Jacob is attacked by a stranger in the darkness. And though they wrestle and wrestle and wrestle, Jacob will not let go. Somehow, he knows it is God he is trying to hold onto. This is his life, the pursuit of a God always about to slip through his fingers.

If this is how it feels for you, hear the lessons of Jacob. Sometimes things look bleak, dark, and God's promises don't seem true. These patches of doubt can last for years. Keep wrestling. When you feel outcast, a foreigner, taken advantage of, and abused, keep wrestling. If you've made mistakes, lost your way, or tried to write your own story, obliterating God's plan for your life, keep wrestling.

"Reconstruct" and "wrestle" just might be synonyms—difficult, but worth it. So, I pray you have courage, develop trust and find a solid hold on Christ.

1. What exercise do you enjoy that always raises your heart rate?
2. Was there a time you resorted to trickery or falsehood to get what you wanted? When was that?
3. Describe a time when you felt God did not watch over you. What do you need Him to watch over now?

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SMALL GROUP STUDY GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion. Feel free to add or subtract or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Spirit to lead in all things.

OPEN

Share a time in your life when everything seemed to be “right.” All was well. Life was good. Everything seemed to fall into place. What was that season of life like?

HEAD

Read Mark 3:14; 1 John 4:8; James 1:17; Romans 8:38-39; Zechariah 2:8; John 13:35; 1 Peter 4:8; 2 Corinthians 5:20; Psalm 13:2 together and share any wisdom, insights, or questions in response to the reading.

As you consider Jesus’ invitation to “follow Him.” Remember that he also called the disciples to “be with him” before he sent them out. What does it mean for you to “be with him” and be “sent out” by him? How is his invitation to “follow” lived out in your life today?

How has God demonstrated that he is love to you? What was your journey to knowing that love like? Did it ever include fear? How can (or did) God’s perfect love cast out that fear?

God is crazy about you! How does it make you feel to know you are “the apple of his eye?” He knew you before you were born. He cares about every detail of your life. His love for you knows no limits! How can you live in that love and favor more fully?

HEART

It seems unlikely that we would need to “deconstruct” love but has God’s call to “love one another” ever challenged you? Right before

he went to the cross, Jesus told the disciples they should love one another just as he loved them. Those words ring true for us here and now...so, how is it going with your call to lovewell?

2 Corinthians 5:20 places us as ambassadors in the context of reconciliation. Vs. 19 tells us that, “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them.” We are then called to be ambassadors for God—AKA the highest ranking officers called to establish and maintain diplomatic relations between God and His people! That’s a high calling! How well are you functioning in your role as Christ’s ambassador?

HANDS

At the end of our series guide this week we were admonished to “keep wrestling.” Even though we’ve come through a season of deconstructing and reconstructing, that does not mean this work is over. We hope that you recognize this is a work you can continue with...questioning, wrestling, breaking down and building up. It’s all good and it’s all ok.

As you wrap up your connect group for this series, spend some time reflecting on what you have learned and how you have grown through season’s one and two of the Elemental series. What is one take away from this that you can share with your group? What is one thing you might still be wrestling with? How can this group pray for you today?

LIVING WORDS FOR YOUR WEEK

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”

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