



CHERISHING GOD

What
We Love

Most
About God

Ron Pickell

Leader's Guide

Cherishing God – Leader’s Guide

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Greater Things...

is about learning God—not *about* God or how to follow God, but to learn God—to truly love and cherish Him simply for who He is!

God expects his people to cherish him and He sums this up in the Hebrew Shema, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 4:4, 5). Why does God expect and command us to love Him? Can anyone be commanded to love another? God can command our love simply because He is God. Love is what God wants and expects from us first because God is love, but more importantly because love is what we have received from Him. God requests us to cherish Him because He cherishes us: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us” I John 3:16.

What or who do you love most? Whoever captures our heart comes down to the things we appreciate most about them – their habits, personality, character traits. By definition, God should be our greatest love and if He does not hold the highest most cherished place in our life, He is not God to us. He is eclipsed by whatever we place before Him. What we love most often translates into worship. In this sense, “to cherish” is a helpful way to describe how we ought to feel about God.

Cherishing someone comes with time and from learning more about them – what makes them who they are and what is so special about them. Cherishing is a heart thing. If we’re going to cherish God, it will only come with time spent learning all we can about Him. This is what *Cherishing God* is all about.

What do the high points in scripture teach us about God? What do biblical doctrines and the great themes of the Bible teach us about Him? Each great truth – Creation, the fall, the cosmic struggle, incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, high priest ministry, final judgment, second coming, and Sabbath rest – all have the potential to tell us more and more, leading us to a deeper understanding and a greater love for the one who deserves and commands our greatest affections.

The Westminster (shorter) Confession reminds us that “man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” Knowing about God is one thing. Being grateful for our salvation is another, but to cherish God and love Him forever because of who He is and the express beauty of His character—even if it is a command will only come from intentional study, meditation on His very being and His magnificent acts. In *Cherishing God*, we are encouraged to learn more about God through the great truths of the Bible, to cherish and to love Him forever!

Titles and Topics Covered in <i>Cherishing God</i>	1. The Perfect Example	6
	2. War Of The Worlds	10
	3. The One Who Made Us.....	12
	4. For God to Be Greater in My Life	14
	5. Blessings from the Fall.....	16
	6. A God Like Us.....	18
	7. Dying to Live.....	20
	8. Becoming Superman.....	22
	9. King of Glory	24
	10. Loyal Advocate.....	26
	11. Death Has Ended	28
	12. Happily Ever After!.....	30
	13. A Wrinkle in Time	32

Breaking Down *Journey*

Journey was created for larger weekly on or off campus meetings in a teaching format and small group discussion. The beginning story or illustration introduces the topic of study.



- **Journey Together** helps ease participants into the topic through ice-breaker related questions.



- **Road Map** is the main passage for discussion followed by questions that help draw out the topic. If you are leading *Journey*, feel free to depart from these as needed and come up with your own questions, while staying on track with the main direction of the study laid out in the leader's guide.



- **My Story** has been prepared as a continuation of the larger group meetings for smaller groups that meet during the week to check in with one another and reflect on how God is using *Journey* in their daily life. We recommend these groups be flexible in terms of location and meeting time. Also, the amount of questions are limited in the My Story section, allowing for more personal interactions and life application.



- **Back Story** is a helpful guide for those leading out in the *Journey* Series and is only included in the leader's book.
-

Getting the most out of *Journey*

What You're Going to Need for *Cherishing God*:

- Good soil – an open and receptive heart
- Willingness to work the soil – determination and diligence
- Hunger and thirst – a desire for God

The Five S's of Hearing and Discerning God's Voice

- **Seek:** Pray for God to open up each week's Bible passage for you. Is there a promise for you to claim, a sin to confess, words for you to follow, or an insight to share?
- **Soak:** Read the passage each day and write down any observations, thoughts, questions, connections, or anything God speaks to you about what you have read.

- **Seal:** Seal God's word to you deep within your heart by taking some time to meditate on whatever the most important truth to you was this week. Ask God to open the deeper recesses of your heart to teach you what you need most in your life this week.
- **Script:** Journal or write (even if only a few lines) noting the ways that God spoke to you during your reading, your meditation, or the group's time together. This will help you keep better track of God's voice and the way He is speaking through scripture.
- **Share:** Share with someone what you are learning from your time with God during Journey. As you share what you are learning, it will help drive God's word home to you even more and you will notice how God will use what He has revealed to you to bless others.

Journey
Covenant

I want to grow in my understanding of Jesus and the life he has for me. I want to participate in Journey to enhance my own relationship with God this year. I will commit to doing the weekly assignments and life group meetings.

Signature _____

My best times of availability are

Morning: _____

Evening: _____

Email address _____

Cell Phone _____

Loving God

The Perfect Example

In the early years of our romance, I would tell Carolyn, my wife, how much I loved her. I know she appreciated hearing it. But one day she came back with, "But do you cherish me?" Cherish. What a rich and compelling word! Did I cherish her? I had to think about that. To cherish someone or something is to have them in your thoughts, to keep them close to your heart, to desire to be with them when you are away. God asked Israel the same question when He requested them to keep Him first in their life. He challenged them to cherish Him by loving and keeping His commands. He told them to talk about them, tie them as symbols on their hands and foreheads, and to write them on the doorframes of their homes. In today's passage, we see what it really means to cherish God by putting Him above everything else in our life.



1. What was your favorite childhood toy and why?
2. Besides God, what do you cherish most in life?



Genesis 22:1–19

1. This story often evokes a conflicting response especially when reading it for the first time. What is your first impression or thoughts about this story? What do you appreciate about it? What makes you uncomfortable?
2. What spiritual lessons can we draw from this story? Some refer to this as Abraham's great test. What was God testing here and why was Abraham being tested?
3. Have you ever felt like God was testing you? What are some tests that God is taking you through right now?
4. What does this story teach us about cherishing God and putting him before everything else in our life?
5. In the grand scheme of God's overall purpose, what role does this story play in helping us understand who God is and what he requires of us? Why was this experience and test so important for Abraham as the father of the people of God?
6. What role did Isaac play in this story? How was this a test of his own faith in his father and especially in God?
7. What is the ultimate test here for all of us? What can we learn from this story about the sacrifice of Christ and the meaning of the gospel?

"Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates."

Deuteronomy 6:5–9



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week to cherish Him?
 2. In what areas of your life is God taking second place?
 3. What can we pray about today to help you cherish God more?
-



Backstory

I don't like tests, especially tests of love and loyalty. But the story of Abraham offering up Isaac is just that. How could God ask this? What is God doing here? Why does Abraham need to be tested?

On the one hand, it is a very disturbing story. What could we ever cherish more than our own child? This was especially true for Abraham and Sarah; they had waited so long for Isaac. Abraham was 100 years old by the time Isaac was born and Sarah was 90. No wonder she laughed at God when He predicted his birth. Up until then she had been barren and at her age giving birth would have been impossible for a woman with normal child bearing capabilities. The birth of Isaac was impossible – impossible for Sarah, but not for God! To give up this miracle child was the test beyond all tests.

Even more, Abraham was tested by God to offer Isaac up in sacrifice. To give Isaac away is unthinkable, but to offer him up as a child sacrifice is unconscionable. Unconscionable for us, but maybe not for Abraham. He was a man of his time and offering up your first-born son was not as strange or absurd for him as it would be for us today. The people surrounding Abraham (Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites) practiced child sacrifice routinely. It's what the gods of their territory demanded. It's also what the later Israelites slipped back into before they were punished for it and taken off into captivity by the Assyrians and Babylonians.

So, who was really being tested here? Yahweh! Yahweh was testing Abraham concerning his loyalty to Him by asking if he would surrender the thing he treasured most. More importantly, Abraham was being tested concerning his knowledge and understanding of who Yahweh was. God was testing Abraham about who He was in contrast to the gods of the surrounding nations. God was not like Baal, Dagon, and Ashteroth. Yahweh was not like these gods in the most basic of ways. Yahweh would never allow or accept a human sacrifice. The only sacrifice Yahweh would accept was a substitute: Himself!

This was Abraham's test. It was a test of his understanding of Yahweh in contrast to the gods around him. If Abraham was to be the father of the people of God, the start of a family in which God would make Himself known to the world, Abraham must understand this most fundamental truth about Him if he and His family were going to teach the world about the one true God. So here it is: the most important core truth we must learn about the God of the Bible is that He takes responsibility for his children and their mistakes. Even though God was not the cause of our sin, he accepted its consequences by righting our wrongs.

Abraham passed the test first by trusting God completely. He took Isaac, his cherished son, up to mount Moriah, which was also the threshing floor of Onan that David later purchased as a sacrifice to stop the plague caused by his lack of trust in God and which also became the location of Solomon's temple where substitutionary atonement was symbolically offered on a daily basis (2 Samuel 24:18; 2 Chronicles 3:1). He took him there and got as far as raising the knife to slit Isaac's throat when the angel of the Lord stopped him. But before the final step, Isaac asked his father, "Father here is the wood and the fire, but where is the sacrifice?" Here is where Abraham passed his test when he answered, "God will provide the sacrifice."

As the letter to the Hebrews clarifies, Abraham either knew that God was not like the gods of the nations around him and would never accept a human sacrifice or he knew that God would ultimately provide the sacrifice by raising Isaac from the dead (Hebrews 11:17-19). What he ultimately learned that day is that Yahweh was not like other gods. Ultimately, God would provide the sacrifice – throw Himself into the brink instead of the human family reaping the consequences from our fall into sin. Man could never die for sin and expect to live again, though death was our ultimate fate in rejecting God. Our only hope was for a perfect substitute not deserving of death, One who would die in our place yet triumph over our sin, condemnation, and death through a

War of the Worlds

When I was about 5 or 6 years old a famous sci-fi movie called *War of The Worlds* was released for TV and my family couldn't wait to watch it. I was too young to view such a scary movie due to the nightmares it would bring so I was sent off to bed early. I was the only one in the back bedroom of our house, a room that was somewhat unfinished with bare walls that echoed noise from the living room. I could almost hear every word and being alone only made me more frightened than actually watching the movie with my family.

The passage we are studying today is about the real war of the worlds and would be much scarier than the Hollywood version if it were not for God stepping in. This is the core story of what Seventh-day Adventists refer to as the "Great Controversy" between good and evil. Our challenge is to pay close attention to learn what the grand narrative, the great controversy, teaches us about God leading us to cherish him even more.



1. What was one of your greatest childhood fears?
2. What frightens you most about the Devil?



Revelation 12

1. What are your first impressions of this passage? List the characters here. Who might they represent?
2. Verse 7 says there was war in heaven. What do you think this war looked like? According to these verses, the battle rages on earth with the dragon pursuing the rest of the woman's offspring. What are the implications for us on planet earth?
3. Take a moment to reflect on the two images presented here of the woman and the dragon. What comes to mind when you think of a woman and a great dragon chasing her and her children? Who are these characters and what do they represent?
4. Do you ever feel like you're in the middle of a great spiritual conflict—a great controversy? What does that feel like?
5. Where is the good news here? What verses give you hope?
6. In the grand scheme of God's overall purpose, what role does this story play in helping us understand God and what is required of us? What is important about this great cosmic struggle?
7. Romans 8 reminds us that, "God is for us, not against us." How do you see God being for us in Revelation 12? What important lessons do we learn about God in the great controversy?
8. How can this group pray for you today?

"At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever."

Daniel 12: 1-3



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week to cherish Him?
 2. Where are you most experiencing the conflict between good and evil?
 3. What can we pray about today to help you cherish God more?
-



Backstory

The Bible begins the account of the accuser and enemy of God with the serpent in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3. Is this serpent who tempts Adam and Eve to doubt God and eat from the forbidden tree the devil? This is how it has been understood throughout the ages. In similar fashion, he shows up from time to time in other Old Testament books like Zechariah where he accuses Joshua the high priest of appearing in filthy garments before God (Zechariah 4).

He is the same character in the book of Job who claims to be roaming the earth as the lord or representative for our planet in heaven (Job 2 and 3). Here he accuses God of keeping a hedge of protection around Job, making it nearly impossible for him to sin. Job is the exception to those who do not follow God. Job is God's example that the human family still belongs to Him and evidence of His sovereignty on earth. At Satan's request, God allows Job's loyalty to be tested. What will happen when God removes His assumed protective hedge and is plagued by Satan?

In all of these "devil" stories, it seems that his strategy to thwart God's purpose on earth is to attack the human family. Mankind is his way of getting to God. Isaiah 12 and Ezekiel 28 appear to provide additional background to this villain. In both cases, the archetypal enemy of God is revealed in the account of human enemies of God's people—in Isaiah, the king of Babylon and in Ezekiel, the king of Tyre. Again, in both cases the description goes way beyond human personalities and seems to give background on the ultimate enemy of God and His people.

Jesus saw Satan fall like lightening from heaven (Luke 10). Was this the war in heaven mentioned in Revelation 12? If so, it must mean that the place that God's enemy had acquired for himself as Earth's representative in the councils of heaven, which originally would have belonged to Adam and Eve, was now lost. This was due to the victory of Christ over Satan in the wilderness temptation found in Matthew 4, Mark 1 and Luke 3. When Jesus defeated Satan in the wilderness, he lost his place as Earth's representative; it no longer belonged to him. Jesus was winning the war of the worlds. Is it any wonder that Satan used the heart of another king, this time Herod, the king of Israel, to do all he could to have Jesus killed at birth?

Revelation 12 reveals the whole drama in apocalyptic style in the woman (Eve or the church) giving birth to a male child who was pursued by the dragon (serpent). He was delivered and hidden away in Egypt for a time, but then revealed when his time had come. In his victory over the devil, Satan was forced out of heaven forever. Now Satan is bound to the Earth and he is still strategizing to get at God by destroying the human family.

This brief portrait of the cosmic struggle puts things in perspective. It reminds us as the Apostle Paul explains that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). It is as Satan acts in and through us that we are in direct opposition with God and His mission. When we allow him a foothold in our lives, the war of the worlds plays out on the battle field of the human heart and the only way the conflict will be won is through the victory of Christ and our surrender to Him. This fight reaches a high point in Revelation 12:11: "They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death."

Jesus is God's mighty warrior battling our greatest enemy and has defeated him on our behalf. And this is why we cherish Him above everyone and everything!

The One Who Made Us

In my last year of undergrad, my wife Carolyn and I began to think about finishing school and setting up a real home. We had been married almost a year and were excited about living in something more than an apartment. However, the more we looked at furniture, we could not imagine ever being able to afford new store prices. I had some elective credits to fill so I decided to take a woodworking class and make our own dining room table. We wanted something big enough to entertain plenty of friends and that we could be proud of. We settled on an oak trestle table modeled after an Ethan Allen original. It took all semester to cut, glue, plane, and fit the pieces together, but when it was finished I could not have been prouder of what I had made with my own two hands. I even made a couple of benches since we had no chairs. When friends would visit, they would often comment on our beautiful table.

God made a universe and filled it with stars and planets. Then he formed the earth, complete with beautiful living things. This week we want to stop and consider what we can learn about God as our creator and our connection to him as *the One who made us*.



1. Do you like to make things from scratch? Why?
2. What are some things you like to make?



Revelation 4

1. What are your first impressions of this passage? What is the central focus of this scene in heaven? What surprises you most about it?
2. What is the relationship between this chapter and chapters 1-3? What is the context and why is it so important to keep in mind?
3. Who and what are the characters in this scene?
4. What is happening here? Why is everyone gathered around the throne? Who is on the throne? Describe this being.
5. What do these gemstones of brilliant color represent? What do these images tell us about the One Who Sits on the Throne?
6. What can we learn about worship from those gathered around the throne? Why are they worshipping this being of brilliant colors? What surprises you most about their worship?
7. All things were created by God. Why is this truth about God the center of heaven's worship? What is so fundamental about worshipping God as our creator? How does this help you cherish God more?

"Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory in the heavens. When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!"

Psalm 8:1, 3, 4, 9



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?
 2. What do you cherish most about God's creative power?
 3. What can we pray about today to help you cherish God more?
-



Backstory

Taking a DNA test to discover our ethnicity and identity is the new and cool thing to do. Luke 3:38 reminds us that our DNA goes all the way back to God. We are more than pond scum and more than flawed sinful beings. We come from our glorious Creator. We were made in His image, but our only hope of revealing His image is in seeing and cherishing Him for who He really is—our Creator God!

Revelation is a mosaic of the transition from the present evil age to the glorious kingdom of Christ established during His first coming. It reveals how Jesus' ministry on earth—his life, death, resurrection, and ascension—will finalize His kingdom. It begins in chapter one with Jesus, our high priest, representing His people in the heavenly sanctuary. He has assumed his reign in heaven at the right hand of God and ministers on our behalf by walking among the church, the real sanctuary. In this sense, the portrait of Christ on earth is being revealed on the canvas of the church. The church is the beginning answer to Jesus' prayer, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). In fact, as we study closely the intricate description of John's vision of the glorified Christ, we see these very elements showing up again in the seven churches that follow. Jesus is now being revealed through the prism of the church!

However, as we study the churches of Revelation, we come away with a rather blurred vision of Christ. Some of the churches are revealing a better portrait of Jesus than others. Many of them are suffering persecution and all are experiencing great temptation. Keeping up with the flow of the narrative as one scene impacts the other is crucial to our understanding of John's vision of the triumph of Jesus' kingdom. He presents the transition from the age of sin to the age of salvation, the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light, as one of great tension and struggle. Between the ascension and return of Christ, we have the rival kingdoms of the dragon and the lamb in great conflict. The vision of Revelation is the account of the final conflict of what Seventh-day Adventists have often referred to as the "Great Controversy" between Christ and Satan.

The good news in Revelation is that the lamb wins! The sanctuary vision of Revelation 4 and 5 is the account of His triumph. After the compromising account of the seven representative churches in Revelation 2 and 3, John is invited into the throne room of God. "After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this'" (Revelation 4:1).

And what does he see? The image is of a being with beautiful colors reminiscent of Exodus 24:9-18 when the Sinai covenant was created and Moses was instructed to come up to the mountain and meet with God. Moses was told to bring Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu along with seventy of the elders and to come before God in worship.

Revelation 4 and other throne room visions throughout the Old Testament (Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1) repeat the glory of our Creator God represented in Exodus 24. Why does John need to see this? Why does he want us to see this? He is instructed to walk through the open door and take notice of what he sees.

How will the church, the portrait of Christ on earth, reveal the triumph of Christ throughout the transition from this present evil age to the kingdom of Christ? Only by keeping the vision of the Creator God fixed before them. Paul's counsel to the Colossians sums it all up: "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Colossians 3:1-4).

Greater in My Life

I remember the first time we visited Yosemite National Park. It's about two and a half hours from Berkeley and we seemed to wind our way up and up the mountain with nothing all that spectacular in sight. When we finally reached the summit drive into the park, I was not all that impressed. I kept waiting for the spectacular views I had been told about and seen from a PBS special on our National Parks, but it wasn't how I had imagined it. We kept driving and driving on a narrow park road and the scenery was beautiful... but nothing all that spectacular.

Finally, we rounded this corner and I got my first view of El Capitan and the Yosemite floor. I had to pull over; it was massive and breathtaking. It was like driving into a lost and magical world that must have captivated explorer John Muir when he first laid eyes on this scene. I found myself stumbling into an ancient world of grandeur and indescribable beauty. Magnificent!

I wonder if this might describe John the Baptist and his testimony about Jesus. John saw something in Jesus that was unnoticeable to most people and he realized that his own world was about to become much larger as he focused on Him. John exclaimed, "He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30). Today we learn how our world becomes larger when we make room for God.



1. What food do you now like that you never thought you would?
2. What is your greatest concern in life right now?



John 3:22–36

1. What impresses you most about this passage? What do we know about John the Baptist and his relationship to Jesus? Why is John's testimony about Jesus so important?
2. What do you think the controversy was between John's disciples and Jesus? What do you imagine the 'certain Jew' had said in verse 25? How would you have felt if you were one of John's disciples?
3. How does John respond in verses 27–30? What is John's point in the allegory of the bride and the bridegroom? What does John's response tell you about him?
4. What facts about Jesus does John bring out in verses 31–36? What are the implications of 'rejecting the Son'?
5. When you consider verse 27, what have you received from heaven? How are you making use of God's gift?
6. How can we apply John's statement, 'He must become greater. I must become less' especially as we think of our witness?

"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! 'Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?' 'Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?' For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen."

Romans 11:33–36



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?
 2. How is God becoming greater in your life?
 3. What can we pray about today to help you cherish God more?
-



Backstory

John the Baptist was a big deal, much bigger than we have often considered. On one occasion, Jesus was questioned about his authority to say and do the things he did (Matthew 21:23-27). He referenced John the Baptist in His reply to the religious leaders who questioned Him. "John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?" This threw the scribes into conflict since John was so respected by everyone. If they said John was a fake, the people would have turned against them. If they said from heaven, then John's testimony about Jesus would have affirmed Jesus as Messiah.

John was great for other reasons as well. Jesus said on one occasion that no one born in the human family was more important than John, yet even the least individual in the kingdom of God would be considered greater than him (Matthew 11:11).

John was the last of the Old Testament prophets. In fact, we might consider his voice the last voice from an intermediary before we hear the very voice of God Himself in the person of Jesus Christ. This means that John's voice is the culmination of the entire Old Testament. When John speaks, it's as if his voice is the crescendo of all that God has spoken up until this time. When John identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29), it isn't just John that is testifying, it is the culminating word of all the law and prophets in the last and final word pointing directly to Jesus (Matthew 11:12, 13).

Yes, John was a big deal; he was a powerful witness and had a huge following. People came from all over Israel to be baptized by him in preparation for the coming Messiah. Until John, baptism was only for purification; it was a *mikvah*, a ceremonial bath. People were baptized if they had become unclean by touching a dead animal, had an open sore, healed from leprosy. Converts to Judaism also had to go through the ritual *mikvah* since they too were considered unclean. But John claimed that in preparation for the Messiah, everyone was unclean regardless whether they had come in contact with anything that could have defiled them or not—Priest, Scribe, Pharisee, Sadducee, common person. John claimed they needed a *mikvah*, a bath, baptism in order to prepare for Messiah's coming.

People listened to John. They went to the Jordan River to be baptized in the dirty water because they believed that John was the real deal. Even Herod believed that John was a true prophet and feared and protected him.

This is why it is so amazing that John understood who he was and yet did not allow himself to get caught up in the fame of being the last and greatest of the prophets. When John saw the Spirit of God descend upon Jesus, he knew who Jesus was and admitted that he was not even worthy to serve as his house servant. He took no claim to fame for himself. When his own disciples became jealous of the growing attention Jesus was receiving, John deferred to Jesus, "He must become greater. I must become less" (John 3:22-30).

What makes Jesus so much greater than John? On the one hand, it's really quite simple: He's Jesus! He's the Son of God and John, great as he was, was only a man. We can never hope to truly cherish God for who He is until, like John, we admit how far from God we are and how small we are in comparison.

Blessings from the Fall

I have a good friend who lost his eyesight when he was just 18. He woke up from surgery and had suffered a subarachnoid hemorrhage—a broken blood vessel under the covering of the brain. He had lost his sight and all feeling on the left side of his body. Fortunately, his feeling came back, but his eyesight was gone forever.

Amazingly, he credits this terrible loss at such a young age with opening his spiritual eyes, so he could see the movement of God in his life. Before the accident, he believed in God but was not following or serving him. He was preoccupied with his own life and interests. Now everything had slowed down and he thought much more deeply about his purpose and the meaning of life. He had experienced a huge loss, but in the end, he considers it the turning point of his life and he actually says he wouldn't change it back if it meant the loss of his spiritual vision. These are some of the life lessons we can learn from great loss. They are what I refer to as blessings from the fall as we attempt to learn and grow from separation from God. How important is the fall of sin in the garden? How can we learn and benefit from this horrible tragedy?



1. What was one of your early childhood acts of disobedience?
2. What did you learn from that experience?



Matthew 5:1–12

1. Jesus calls us blessed when we are poor in spirit, mourning, meek, hungry, and thirsting for righteousness, full of mercy, pure in heart, making peace, and being persecuted on his behalf. Share a time when you felt blessed though experiencing hardship?
2. What is the blessing here? Why does Jesus consider these the marks of the blessed person?
3. Which of these beatitudes can you relate with most right now? How are they a blessing in your life?
4. The beatitudes can all be traced back to the Garden of Eden when sin first entered the world. If Jesus can find a blessing in these conditions, where is the blessing in the original fall of our first parents? What promise in Genesis 3 is connected to these blessings?
5. What is so important about understanding and acknowledging our separation from God in the very beginning of our existence? How does this help us appreciate the gospel?

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

II Corinthians 12:9, 10



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?
 2. How is God working in your areas of weakness?
 3. What can we pray about today to help you cherish God more?
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Backstory

At first glance, the beatitudes seem a strange contradiction. What is the blessing in poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, a deficit in righteousness, and persecution? Showing mercy, heart purity, and peacemaking are the only beatitudes that on the surface could be construed as blessings. There is only one way to consider these traits as blessings – Jesus!

The message is this: those who can admit their spiritual poverty, who mourn their life in the fall, accept that we will never take the earth back by force (meekness), acknowledge that righteousness cannot be produced, but only received, and that it is better to preserve our soul for the kingdom than to lose it by running away from persecution, these are the prerequisites for the kingdom. In other words, since the kingdom of God is at hand in the ministry of Christ, those who recognize that things are not as they should be and can admit their need are the blessed!

This is in stark contrast with those we would expect to be blessed people. According to the standards of this world, we would consider the rich, powerful, famous, and privileged to be blessed. We even say things like, “Man, that person is really blessed!” But Jesus turns blessing on its head here. Blessing can only be considered in light of the kingdom. Anything less than God’s kingdom is not a blessing. It is part of the curse and whatever helps us recognize the true state of things will open our eyes to the kingdom.

It is in this sense that the fall, or recognition of how the fall plays to our advantage, can become a blessing. The Gospel turns the curse into a blessing, but not if we fail to see and accept how things are. If we have embraced the thought that everything is as it should be or that we are already righteous and not in need of the righteousness from above, then we will have no need for the good news of the kingdom.

Genesis 3 is crucial to everything else that follows the biblical story. Without the clear understanding and acceptance of the truth of the fall of the first family and the result of plunging the world into separation from God, we will never appreciate the gospel and how we have been reconciled to God. The fall teaches us that there is only one way out of the vicious cycle of sin, condemnation and death (Romans 5:12-21). Salvation does not begin with, nor does it develop from us. Salvation comes from outside us, because everyone (and the Bible says everyone) has contracted the disease from the fall. This means that the answer for the fall cannot come from the fall. It cannot come from below; it must come from above. This is why the people surrounding Jesus are blessed. They are not blessed because they are poor, mournful, meek, or unrighteous. They are blessed because they have Jesus. They are here with Him because they acknowledge the reality of their disease.

The story of the man born blind illustrates this perfectly: “Jesus said, ‘For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.’ Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, ‘What? Are we blind too?’ Jesus said, ‘If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains’”(John 9:39-41).

Only as we come to terms with how far we have fallen, will we ever learn to cherish Jesus for raising us up and removing the curse. “By His stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).

A God Like Us!

Sometimes I look at our dog, Wally, and I think how smart he looks. He is this very furry, wire-haired creature with the most piercing eyes. When he wants something he cocks his head, looks intently, and then barks at me like I should understand him. Of course, he also does some very stupid things like chase after skunks and run right out into the road with no sense of oncoming traffic. He did that when he was just a pup and it nearly cost him his left leg at the hip.

I do love our dog and we go for walks most mornings. I might even be willing to make some sacrifices for him. In fact, I have made sacrifices for him, but I would never want to be him. What I mean is that even though I have made some personal sacrifices for our dog and might even put my own life at risk to save his, I would never choose to become a dog in order to help him. That is completely out of the question. However, in this week's lesson we are going to discuss the most profound mystery of the Christian message: the incarnation of Jesus, God becoming human!



1. Have you ever wanted to be someone else? Who have you wanted to be and why?
2. What is one of the greatest sacrifices anyone has ever made for you?



John 1:1–5, 14

1. What thoughts do you have about Jesus as the WORD and the WORD becoming human? What mysteries come to mind when you stop to consider what John is trying to tell us here?
2. Why is WORD or Logos a fitting expression for the second person of the Godhead? What do you think John might have had in mind by referring to Jesus as the WORD?
3. What questions come to mind as you think about God becoming human? How was this possible for God?

Note: Philippians 2:5-11 is one of the first Christian hymns or creedal statements about God emptying and humbling Himself by becoming human and surrendering Himself to the humiliating death of Roman crucifixion.

4. The beatitudes can all be traced back to the Garden of Eden when sin first entered the world. If Jesus can find a blessing in these conditions, where is the blessing in the original fall of our first parents? What promise in Genesis 3 is connected to these blessings?

Note: The doctrine of the Fall teaches that man rejected being like God, while the doctrine of the Incarnation teaches that God embraced becoming like us.

5. What is the ah ha moment for you in this week's lesson? What difference has God becoming human made in your life?
6. How can you imitate the humility of Christ this week?

"For this reason, he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."

Hebrews 2:17, 18



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?
 2. How do you feel about God knowing and understanding what it's like to be human?
 3. What can we pray about today to help you cherish God more?
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Backstory

The message in today's lesson is the length that God has gone to save us from ourselves and the fall, a downward spiral of sin, condemnation, and eventually death (Romans 5:15, 18, 19). God is the Creator. This means all He had to do when we disobeyed and turned to our own way instead of trusting Him was start over and make a couple of new human beings who would trust His word and obey His command. Instead, He chose a much more difficult path for Himself and for the human family that would protect our freedom of choice and guarantee a relationship of love instead of fear.

But, the only way He could do this was to join the human family and live out His own creative purpose for the world. In reality, God has started over with humanity through the incarnation of Jesus. Humanity was first defined by Adam and Eve and their posterity. Now the human family is being redefined by being reborn through the person of Jesus Christ. The incarnation of Jesus provides a way for us to die and to be reborn in His death and resurrection. Our solidarity with Jesus in His death is the end of our life in Adam and Eve, just as our union with Christ is the start of a new life in and through Him. We are being regenerated through Christ, leaving the downward spiral of sin, condemnation, and death through His righteous life, justification, and resurrection.

"For as in Adam all die, in Christ all will be made alive" (I Corinthians 15:23).

"Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Romans 6:3, 4).

This is why John talks so much about new birth in Jesus.

"To all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (John 1:12, 13).

"Jesus replied, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.' 'How can someone be born when they are old?' Nicodemus asked. 'Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!' Jesus answered, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit'" (John 3:3-6).

The message we learn from the incarnation of Jesus is that the human problem is much worse than we imagined. The only escape from the fall is to be reborn. But reborn as what? We have no new and pure species to be born into and no way back from death if death is truly death. Our only hope is a new humanity – one given by God Himself. In Christ becoming human, He assumes our sin, dies our death, rises for our new life, and puts us back in right standing with God. Jesus is the beginning of a new humanity with the power of saving us all from the horrible cycle of sin, condemnation, and death, by offering His life in exchange for ours.

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ... God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (II Corinthians 5:17, 18, 21).

Dying to Live!

A story is told of a little girl who was critically ill and needed a blood transfusion to save her life. Her older brother's blood type happened to be a perfect match. When asked if he would be willing to give his blood in order to save his sister, he said he would have to think about it. In the morning, he agreed.

After the transfusion was completed, the boy turned to the doctor and asked, "When am I going to die?" That's when the doctor realized that the boy had misunderstood and thought that sharing his blood with his sister literally meant giving his life.

As the Apostle Paul points out in the book of Romans, "rarely will someone die for a righteous person, though for a good person one might possibly be willing to die. But God demonstrated his love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Romans 5:7, 8

Today we are reflecting on God's amazing gift of life—a gift that cost his own life in our place. What could lead us to cherish God more than such a great sacrifice?



1. What are some sacrifices you have made for others?
2. Who would you give your life for and why?



Revelation 5

1. What jumps out at you as you imagine this scene?
2. What do you think these images represent:
 - Lion of Judah/Root of David
 - Sacrificial Lamb
 - Mysterious Scroll
3. What is the connection between chapter 4 where God is worshipped as our Creator and this chapter where the Lamb is worshipped for opening the scroll? What is so important about this scroll? What does the scroll have to do with us?
4. Why is the Lamb worthy to open the scroll? How does being a sacrificial lamb give Him the right?
5. The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders sing a new song because the Lamb takes the scroll from the One Who Sits on the Throne. What is the content or message of this song? What does it say to us about the scroll and the human family?
6. If you could write a song to Jesus about his triumph in your life, what would it say?

"It was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors.' For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors."

Isaiah 53:10-12



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?
 2. What do you cherish most about Jesus' sacrifice for you?
 3. What can we pray about today to help you cherish God more?
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Backstory

Most people appreciate the suffering and sacrifice that Jesus endured for our salvation. However, more and more people question why He had to die. Couldn't God just forgive us? Why does our salvation demand death – our death or Jesus'? How does Jesus' death help in my salvation experience? For many, it is a confusing theological labyrinth.

It is also true that if Jesus' death is not really necessary for our salvation, then the cross can be easily misunderstood and mocked as God's ploy to gain our sympathy. Did Jesus die just to make us feel bad about sin, to make us turn away from it? If the crucifixion does not accomplish anything absolutely necessary for our salvation, then the death of Christ is, at best, the epic mistake of the universe or, even worse, a sick joke to gain our sympathy.

Why did Jesus have to die? Or perhaps a better question is, why do we have to die making Jesus' death in our place so necessary? The key word here is atonement. Why is death a requirement to atone for our sin and how can death, Jesus' or ours, atone for anything?

Some of the main theories of Christ's atonement include the Moral Influence theory: Jesus died because of His exemplary life and His sacrifice compels us to lead a new life like His. The Ransom Theory says Jesus died to ransom us away from the devil, who plunged us into sin. The Substitutionary Theory: Jesus died in our place as our substitute to save us from God's wrath. For a quick synopsis of the seven related theories of Christ's atonement check out Stephen D. Morrison's "7 Theories of the Atonement Summarized."

What if Jesus' death in our place is about all these things and yet much more than any one of them? Jesus died to provide a way for us to die through Him not as a substitute to escape God's wrath, but in our place to free us from what the Apostle Paul refers to as "this body of death" (Romans 7:24). Sin is like a cancer (Romans 5:12-21). The sin of our first parents ruined the entire human system spiritually, mentally, physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Genesis 3 provides the picture of Adam and Eve in their innocence: they were naked, yet not ashamed. It has been suggested that the light of God's presence surrounded them. However, after the fall they were aware of their nakedness and felt guilt and shame. When they disobeyed God, the Spirit of God left them. They became "flesh" only, instead of beings enshrouded by the Holy Spirit.

There was no turning back from this. The human family made their choice and plunged us all into the mutated form of "the flesh." Forgiveness is only part of the answer. God loved Adam and Eve and had forgiven them before they even disobeyed (Ephesians 1:4, 5) but the consequence of their disobedience had begun. Our only hope was to put an end to the cancer of sin, but, like cancer, the cure can also lead to death. Chemotherapy, unfortunately, kills both the good cells as well as the bad cancer cells.

In Christ's death for us, our cancer of sin was isolated in Him: "He took our infirmities and carried our diseases" (Matthew 8:17). "If I be lifted up, I will draw all men unto me" (John 12:23-33). As our sin bearer, Jesus takes on the sin of Adam and Eve's family. The fallen human family comes to an end through Him. Jesus was not Himself a sinner despite being born human through Mary because he was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is free from the cursed effects of Fall and death has no hold on Him. This means through Jesus, our life in Adam and Eve can come to an end, but also through Jesus we can live in the power of His victorious resurrection. His death is the reason we can be free from the Fall and the vicious cycle of sin, condemnation, and death. Death is a central part of God's equation for new life in and through Jesus Christ as His death becomes ours through baptism.

"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6-8)

Becoming Superman

My friends in the neighborhood where I grew up were really into comic books. They had stacks of Marvel comics and knew all the characters and how they were connected with their superpowers, whereas I never really knew any of them. The only superhero I had any limited knowledge of was Superman. I guess I related to him best because he was the most like me. I imagined myself flying like Superman, running fast, and, of course, helping others.

Jesus was a kind of Superman, as Sufjan Stevens sings in the *Illinois* album. He was human, but what human beings were meant to be and have: super compassionate, super faith, superpowers to heal and raise the dead! But what made him the most superhuman of all were not His superpowers, but how He raised us up with Him. All His powers were meant for one purpose: to help us regain our one superpower of being like God again, the image of God lost in the Garden of Eden because of sin. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, the image of God has been restored and we are being transformed back into the super people we were created to be. Life in Jesus is the new normal! It's time we embraced our resurrection life and become the super people made in the image of God we were created to be!



1. Who was your favorite childhood superhero and why?
2. If you could have one superpower what would it be? How would you use it?



Romans 6

1. Paul begins this chapter with a question: "Shall we go on sinning so that grace can increase?" Where does such a question come from and how shall we answer it?
2. How would you describe your baptism? What enduring difference has it made in your life?
3. What is the connection between Christ's death/resurrection and our baptism? How have you experienced both aspects of Christ's death and resurrection through your baptismal experience?
4. What is the difference of being "under" law or being "under" grace? How would you compare a triumphant life in Jesus with trying to live a godly life through our efforts to keep God's law?
5. Have you ever confused grace as a license to sin? Why do you think Paul spends a whole chapter on this issue? Why do we think the law is a better enforcer for righteous living than grace?
6. What does being raised up with Christ look like for you? How does Christ's resurrection help you live a triumphant daily life?

"For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!"

Romans 5:17



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?
2. How has being raised up with Christ impacting your daily life?
3. What can we pray about today to help you cherish God more?



Backstory

As I think back, I am surprised at how little importance I placed on Jesus' resurrection despite growing up in a Christian family. Even though I knew the story, I was more captured by His crucifixion than Jesus rising from the dead. It wasn't till I ran across a book on Christian apologetics, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* by Josh McDowell, and read some of the significant details surrounding Jesus' resurrection that I began to see how important this doctrine is.

Of course, the truth of the empty tomb is surprising enough, but the significance for our personal salvation is monumental. Again, it is solidarity with Jesus in His life, death, resurrection, and ascension that means everything for the believer. All other members of the human family are a mutation from God's original creation having suffered from the fall. In His death, we find a real and definite end to the curse and vicious cycle of sin, condemnation, and death. Now, in His resurrection, we have hope for a new life beyond the grave.

"If, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!" (Romans 5:10)

Jesus' resurrection is our resurrection. His triumph over death is our victory over death. When He rises, we rise with Him. Our life has been swallowed up in His life. Richard Foster sums it up this way:

"We are, to be sure, reconciled to God by Jesus' death, but even more, we are 'saved' by his life (Romans 5:10)—saved in the sense of entering into his eternal kind of life, not just in some distant heaven but right now in the midst of our broken and sorrowful world. When we carefully consider how Jesus lived while among us in the flesh, we learn how we are to live—truly live—empowered by him who is with us always even to the end of the age. We then begin an intentional *imitatio Christi*, imitation of Christ, not in some slavish or literal fashion but by catching the spirit and power in which he lived and by learning to walk "in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21)." *Streams of Living Water*, p. 3

Life in the resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of eternal life. It means looking to Jesus and depending on Christ's indwelling through the Spirit. Paul describes this life in his letter to the Romans. In chapters 1-4, he explains how we are to live by faith. In chapters 5-8, he describes what living by faith is really like. It is life by the power of Jesus' resurrection and summed up by living free from God's wrath (chapter 5), free from the power of sin (chapter 6), free from law (chapter 7) and free from death (chapter 8).

Through the power of Jesus' resurrection, we have a new trajectory of life that overcomes sin and death. In the wake of His victory, we have begun the life of the kingdom of God!

"I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable...When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:50, 54-57).

King of Glory

In the story of the "Prince and the Pauper," two boys who are direct look-alikes trade places; one is a poor peasant boy and the other heir to the throne of Henry VIII, king of England. In their role change, they learn to appreciate life from their new circumstances. Edward Tudor, the true prince, learns about his future kingdom first-hand in his experience as a peasant. It enables him to be more sympathetic when he finally rules.

In John 17, Jesus prays for the glory He once shared with His Father and that His followers might see Him as He really is. Jesus' ascension is as much about His coronation as king as about completing His mission on earth. Like the story above, taking on humanity and sin for us did not ruin His divine status. On the contrary, it made Him an even greater sovereign, one who truly understands our human predicament. The incarnation, life on earth, crucifixion, death, and resurrection prepared Him well to be our King of Glory. More importantly, His ascension raised us up and seated us with Him. His coronation is our coronation. His reign is our reign. We share His glory. Jesus' journey from heaven to earth and back to heaven not only helped Him understand us but also reign in life with Him!



1. What are some things you would do if you suddenly became president or made king/queen?
2. How have your eyes been opened to the real needs of others?
3. How did Jesus' time on earth help Him become an even greater king?



Ephesians 2:1-7

1. In these few short verses, because of the work of Christ, we go from death to life and seated in heaven with Christ, from the depths of hell to high heaven. What are some of the specific impossible barriers listed here keeping us from the life of God? How have you experienced these barriers in your life?
2. What specific things does Paul mention here that Christ has helped us overcome? How have you experienced these freedoms in your life? What difference has the death, resurrection, ascension, and reign of Christ made for you?
3. Heaven formed a reception party to receive Jesus back from earth. It's recorded in Psalm 24 where angels announce Him as the "King of Glory." Our verse claims that we are now reigning with Him. What would it be like for angels to receive you like this?
4. In Colossians 3:1, Paul reminds us to "set our minds on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God." How does it help you to think of reigning with Christ? How is Christ reigning in your life right now?
5. How does reigning with Christ help you cherish God more?

"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."

Colossians 3:1-4



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?
 2. How have you been "reigning" with Christ this week?
 3. What can we pray about today to help you cherish God more?
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Backstory

In Revelation 4:1, John the Revelator is invited through an open door into heaven itself to join the ongoing worship from the throne of God. This is an invitation from Jesus to John, but it also points all believers to our proper focus since Jesus' resurrection and ascension. In the first three chapters of Revelation, believers are given a revelation of Jesus now, officiating as our high priest, wearing priestly garments and walking among the candlesticks of worship on earth. Interestingly enough, each of the seven churches that follow display specific features and characteristics of the image of the glorified Christ as we move from church to church.

The churches are a mixed bag of devotion and compromise; still, Jesus has a message for each one and holds the leadership of the churches in His hands. But the real message is the focus He is directing believers to. John is our guide and, along with him, we are all instructed to keep our focus on life above—to our Creator God and to the Lamb holding our eternal destiny in His hands.

The focus of Revelation 1-5 is graphic imagery of the Apostle Paul's message to the church in Ephesus. Ephesians 2:1-10 traces the hopeless situation of the human family. Paul's description is death. Outside of the ministry of Christ, the human family was and is "dead in our trespasses and sins, following the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath."

But God stepped in!

"But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:5-7).

We were all in a death spiral of sin, condemnation and death (Romans 5). We were dead in trespasses and sins following the ways of the world, slaves to the power of the prince of the air, and trapped in our addictions and cravings of the flesh. We were lost in the course of a dying world, gripped by the spiritual power of the devil above and infected with our own sinful desire. Death was around us, above us and within us!

But God stepped in and breathed new life into us, delivered us from the infectious world of sin and raised us above the power of the Satan and has seated us with Jesus in heavenly places. Jesus has given us a new identity, a new community and a new authority. This is why our focus needs to be above, where our life now comes from. We need to focus on reigning with Christ.

Jesus' ascension is important not so much for Him since He has always reigned with God on high. His ascension is part of the great good news of our new identity, community, and authority given completely as the gift of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. We need to remember that heaven rejoices when the lost are found just as angels celebrated Christ's journey home from completing His work on earth! (Luke 15:7)

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Force from the Throne!

Unfortunately, I was in an automobile accident a few years back and totaled my car. I mistakenly thought I was in the left turning lane and when the green arrow flashed, I took off and side swiped the car making a left-hand turn in front of me. In spite of having moved only a couple of car lengths, it did a lot of damage to both vehicles. Two of the passengers in the other car were taken to the hospital.

I could not be sure how badly they were hurt, but a few years later I faced a lawsuit for their injuries. As part of the process, I had to give a deposition of my account of the accident. You can imagine my relief when my attorney showed up and counseled me through the whole ordeal, coaching me on how to answer each question, and guiding every step of the way. He protected me from answering questions that the deposing attorney could not lawfully ask and cautioned me with a gentle tap of his left foot when the questions needed careful consideration. In the end, I was thankful to have someone so well-informed and stepping in on my behalf. The role that Jesus plays in heaven for us now is a bit like my loyal attorney representing my case and defending my rights. When our eternal life is at stake, Jesus' advocacy is our only hope.



1. Besides Jesus and family, who is your best friend and why?
2. Describe a time when someone had your back.



Hebrews 2:14–18

1. What do these verses tell us about how far Jesus was willing to go to help us?
2. Jesus is referred to here as our Brother, Author of Salvation, and High Priest. Which one means more to you right now and why?

Note: Close your eyes while someone reads Revelation 1:9–20

3. What impresses you most about John's vision of Jesus? What things stand out in your mind? How do these verses compare with the verses we just read in Hebrews 2?
4. This is the first vision John is given in the book of Revelation. What is so foundational about this vision and how does it help define the rest of the book?
5. John's vision of Christ in His glory is both terrifying and comforting. What is so important about both as our High Priest?
6. Sometimes we may wonder what the ministry of Jesus is now as our reigning king. What aspects of this vision of Jesus help explain His ministry in heaven and how is it helping you? What do you need most from Christ's priestly ministry?

"What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"

Romans 8:31, 32



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?
 2. What do you appreciate most about Jesus as your priest?
 3. What can we pray about today to help you cherish God more?
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Backstory

The truth about Jesus, our High Priest, is another reason to love and cherish God for taking our side! Three huge benefits on our behalf coming from Jesus' priestly ministry include the wonderful news that the one who represents us has personal and intimate knowledge of our predicament as fallen human beings. We do not have to wonder if God knows our situation. This was one of Job's complaints; he felt alone and misunderstood:

"How then can I dispute with him? How can I find words to argue with him? Though I were innocent, I could not answer him; I could only plead with my Judge for mercy. Even if I summoned him and he responded, I do not believe he would give me a hearing" (Job 9:14-16).

God joining the human family, living as one of us, and experiencing for Himself our weakened human state from the fall is great encouragement that we have someone representing us that truly knows how we have been affected by sin. It's one thing to have a good attorney who can appropriately represent our case, but it's another thing to have an advocate who already knows our guilt and has no need to hide the facts since He is serving both as our defense and the one who took our punishment and served our sentence. He speaks up for us because He became human with us embracing our sin and its consequences.

In fact, the book of Acts affirms that because of Jesus' heavenly ministry, there is a man now in heaven, while God is on earth. Through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and Jesus' intercession believers have full access to God through the avenue of prayer.

This is another reason why our focus needs to be directed toward God and heavenly places. "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:1-3).

We need to grasp how active Jesus' ministry is for us in the heavenly sanctuary. The vision of Christ glorified in Revelation 1 reveals Him as our high priest ministering in the sanctuary, walking among the candlesticks (menorah) and holding the leaders or pastors of the churches in His hand. This first vision in the book of Revelation shows the connection between heaven and earth and Jesus' continued ministry on our behalf.

In the Old Testament earthly sanctuary, the altar of incense sent sweet-smelling aromas up the curtain into the most holy place, where God sat enthroned between the cherubim. The incense symbolizes the prayers of believers ascending to God in the next compartment. The message is clear – God hears our prayers and they ascend to Him as a sweet offering.

The ministry of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary assures us that Christ is there to hear our every prayer and that His ministry is ongoing. He is performing the ministry of our high priest representing us before the throne of heaven and He hears and responds to every tough issue we face on earth from our life in the Fall.

"What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:31, 32)

Death Has Ended!

My first heartbreak with death involved my dog Spooky. Spooky was a black and white spitz runaway. He was a wanderer, so he had to always be on a leash or he would run off. I loved him and he was my dog, my first pet. We kept him and our other dog, Ted, chained up behind the garage when we had to leave the house. When we were home they were housedogs.

I can still remember getting home from seeing some friends and running out behind the garage to let Spooky off his chain. When I got to him, I found him lying on the ground, lifeless, with his chain wrapped around his neck. He had gotten tangled in some boards stacked behind the garage, his collar caught on something, and he suffocated. At first, I couldn't believe it. I just knew he was okay. But I finally had to come to terms with his death. I cried myself to sleep that night thinking about how horrible it must have felt choking to death in the cold.

Death is our worst enemy and greatest fear; it's why Jesus came. He came to put an end to death, to triumph over the grave. In fact, because of Jesus' resurrection, we no longer refer to someone who has placed their life in Jesus and died as "dead." As Jesus suggests in today's passage, this kind of death is really "sleep"—sleeping in Jesus, since all those who believe in Him will one day awaken from death to resurrection and eternal life in Him.



1. How did you cope with your first experience with death?
2. How has the Gospel changed your thoughts about death?



John 11:1–44

1. What impresses you most about this story?
2. What questions do you have?
3. Why do you think Jesus intentionally stayed behind when He heard that Lazarus was sick?
4. What do we learn about Jesus' emotions and His compassion for those who have lost family or friends that they love? What surprises you most about this?
5. What do we learn about Martha's faith when she explains that her brother will one day rise from the dead? What did Jesus mean by announcing that He is the resurrection and the life?
6. How does this story change the way you think about death? How does Jesus raising Lazarus after being dead four days, and Jesus' own resurrection from the dead help you face death?
7. What further questions do you have about death and the promise of resurrection in Christ?
8. How does Jesus' victory over death help you cherish God more?

"Death has been swallowed up in victory. 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But, thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

I Corinthians 15:55–56



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?
2. What do you appreciate most about Jesus' victory over death?
3. What can we pray about today to help you cherish God more?



Backstory

Michael Clarke Duncan plays John Coffey, a Christ-like figure, in the 1999 film *The Green Mile*. John is an accused rapist and killer who sucks in the pain and sickness of others and exhales their pain and disease as gnats. This reminds us of one of the clearest Old Testament prophecies of Christ and His sacrifice.

“He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed... he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:5, 12)

Clearly the last enemy of fallen humanity is death. “Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death” (Revelation 20:14).

Jesus came to our world to bring glory to God on earth, but His great priority in this mission was delivering the human family from death.

“Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds... Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!” (John 12:24, 27, 28)

Death is our greatest enemy and accepting death on our behalf reveals the extent that God was willing to go to end the curse of sin. Paul reminds us of Jesus’ downward spiral from heaven to earth then on to death itself.

“He made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:7, 8)

Defeating the enemy of eternal death is the ultimate victory since life in this world is so temporary. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, but there is no proof that Lazarus is still alive, which means that, even after his resurrection, Lazarus’ life was temporary. The life that Jesus gives is eternal life. It is abundant; the fear of eternal death has been wiped away. Jesus came to save us from eternal death. This means that our life in the fall is not the final story. We have a life we have only glimpsed from afar. This is the life Jesus came to give. Jesus reminded us not to “fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul” (Matthew 10:28). Jesus came to ensure the eternal life of God within us, because eternal life from Him can never be taken from us.

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: ‘For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 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 8:35-39).

Happily Ever After!

“And they all lived happily ever after...” So goes the ending to most fairytales. Most fairytales have ideal endings: the wicked witch get her due, the kingdom is restored, the prince or princess slays the dragon. Does the story of God have this type of ending? Is the story of God a fairytale? Not in the sense of a fable or fictional mythology. Our lives are being judged by the story of God, not the other way around. But the ending of this biblical tale is a genuine happy ending, the greatest of all! *Cherishing God* reaches its peak with life in His kingdom and God at the center. The book of Revelation brings us back home – it is a glorious story where our Creator comes for us, waking those who have died from their eternal sleep or lifting those who are alive and waiting for the grand reunion above. This is our God! This is our Savior! This is our King! There are many reasons to love Him and place Him first in our lives, but this is the greatest one of all. He has not forgotten us. He rejoices to be with us and is coming to bring us home!



1. Did you ever run away from home? What was it like and what lessons did you learn from it?
2. Describe a time when you were rescued. What did you appreciate most about it?



II Peter 3

1. What are your first thoughts, impressions of this chapter?
2. How does Peter build his argument here for the return of Christ? What is his explanation for the seeming delay in Christ's return?
3. Describe what you imagine the “Day of The Lord” to be like. What fears or concerns do you have about this event?
4. What do you think Peter means by hastening the day of the Lord? What is our role in determining the day of Christ's return?
5. Peter reminds us that the day of the Lord will come and not to give up hope. Do you sometimes find it hard to believe that Jesus is coming back? Why? What is so important about keeping Jesus' return always before us?

Read I Thessalonians 4:13-18. Afterwards, close your eyes and imagine this scene.

6. What were the underlying questions about death and the return of Christ that Paul is answering here for the Thessalonian people? What questions do you have about resurrection and Jesus' return?
7. Paul describes Jesus' return as a surprising event: like a thief in the night. How does this analogy make you feel? What fears or concerns does this evoke for you?
8. Paul writes to give the Thessalonian people hope about the resurrection and Christ's return. What hope do these words give you? What excites you most about Jesus' return?

“In that day they will say, ‘Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation.’”

Isaiah 25:9



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?
 2. How does the hope of Christ's return help you every day?
 3. What can we pray about today to help you cherish God more?
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Backstory

The story of the human family begins in a beautiful garden and ends in the garden of the most beautiful city (Genesis 2 and Revelation 22). After the horrible detour of the Fall, God has brought us home.

Peter reminds us that the end of this world is just as certain as the world's judgment in the flood. God's timing for this is not based on our human standard of reckoning. He is eternal and time is only a human construct; He lives outside time, space, and matter. A thousand years is as a day to God, so we should not be alarmed at what seems like a delay in His return according to human reasoning. Just as God promised to destroy the antediluvian world with the flood and did, so the world has been reserved for fire and the day of judgment will come!

The letter to the Thessalonians is one of the earliest books of the New Testament, dated around 45 AD. It is clear from this letter and other New Testament verses that Jesus' return was expected sometime in the first century. The question surfaced concerning believers who had died before Jesus returned – what would happen to them? How could they ascend with Him if they were already in the grave? Paul explains that death is not an issue for those who have trusted in Christ. When Jesus returns, those who have fallen asleep in Christ will rise from the grave and meet Him in the air. Those who are still alive when He returns will follow those who have been raised. The return of Christ will initiate a glorious reunion.

Home is where the heart is and we all long for it. There is water for our thirst and food for our hunger. Is there a home for our heartache to belong? Jesus said so in John 14:1-3: "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me. In my Father's house are many dwelling places. I go there to prepare a place for you."

This is His promise to us. "I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you that where I am there you may be also." God's plan and provision for reunion with the human family is based on an important Hebrew word from the Old Testament: *chesed*, or steadfast love.

"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is thy faithfulness!" (Lamentations 3:22, 23)

In other words, we cherish God because He first cherished us, will never forget us and is faithful to bring us home to be with Him! Maranatha! Even so, come Lord Jesus!

A Wrinkle in Time!

My father built me a tree house when I was nine or ten years old. It was a magical place where my friends and I could escape, play for hours, and pretend we were pirates or whatever we could imagine. My tree house was my refuge, my sanctuary, my time-out from life.

We all need a place like that: a time-out to gather ourselves and remember that we are more than what we do or make. We need a chance to be children again, to escape, play, and recapture why we are here. Turns out God knew how much we needed such a refuge, so He created a wrinkle in time in creation week. The Bible calls it Sabbath; this day reminds us that we are more than what we do, more than flesh, bones, and brain. We are spiritual beings made in the image of God to reflect His goodness and love. If we were only the material units we appear to be on the outside, we would not need Sabbath. The mere fact of our craving for such a sanctuary in time is evidence that we are much more than what we produce.



1. Describe your secret place of refuge or sanctuary as a child.
2. Have you ever experienced Sabbath? How would you describe it?



Genesis 2:1-3

1. Why are there 7 days in a week? What was so necessary about Sabbath before sin even entered the world?
2. On days one, two, and three, God created light, the atmosphere, and land. These were placeholders for the sun, moon and stars, which came on day four. He created birds in the sky and fish in the sea on day five and mammals on day six. If Sabbath was a placeholder on day seven, what did God fill it with and how important is it to us today?

Note: Sabbath was significant to Israel's entire economy. As a weekly day of rest, Sabbath was a reminder of creation and freedom from slavery in Egypt. It also was a weekly foretaste of life in the Promised Land. Sabbath was Israel's sanctuary in time.

3. Ready Matthew 11:28-30. What do you think Jesus means by taking on His yoke? In what way has your life been yoked up to God?
4. What does Sabbath teach us about God and our relationship with Him? How does Sabbath teach us to love God more?



1. How has God been using Journey in your life this week?
2. What is Sabbath teaching you about God?
3. What can we pray about today to help you cherish God more?



Backstory

We have come full circle. We are learning to love God as we get a glimpse of the beautiful reflections of His character. We have been seeing the multifaceted dimensions of His very being through the high points of the redemption story. The truths highlighted from Genesis to

Revelation are like prisms of light emanating from God who sits on the throne in Revelation 5. "God is light and Him is no darkness at all!" (1 John 1)

However, is there one all-encompassing sacrament (tangible expression of grace) that in one word, one act of grace, sums up the entire story of God for the human family? Yes! In a word, it is Sabbath! This day is our gift to God and God's gift to us. It's our gift in learning to rest in Him and it's God's gift in giving us someone to trust in as we learn to rest in Him fully and completely.

Sabbath is a completely practical yet deeply spiritual practice that invites us into the life of the kingdom. A friend recently shared a website about the Urban Homestead, an intentional community in Pasadena, California, that is experiencing and teaching others how to live a less hurried life. In 2010, they adopted Sabbath as part of the Urban Homestead life rhythm to establish balance to the busy life of city dwelling. You can read about their practice under the "Sabbath=Time Out!" blog entry on their website (urbanhomestead.org).

Sabbath is one of the great spiritual disciplines that is truly out of and beyond this world. Sabbath was created within the very creation week as the seventh day—the day God rested and reflected on all He had made. In creation, God invited the human family into His day of rest. Sabbath also became an important sacrament and discipline for the people of Israel leaving a life of slavery from Egypt. (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15). Sabbath also spans beyond the fallen world and into the age to come: "As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me,' declares the LORD, 'so will your name and descendants endure. From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me,' says the LORD" (Isaiah 66:22, 23).

Life as we know it is defined by time, space, and matter, but Sabbath is the foretaste of another reality where for 24 hours time stands still, providing communion with God and the life of His kingdom. Sabbath recalibrates our life to the creatures we were made to be—people living in harmony with God, ourselves, one another other, and the world around us. Sabbath is the life reboot we are all longing and desperate for.

Ellen White writes about having a taste of the age to come in the here and now exemplified by Sabbath.

"As through Jesus we enter into rest, heaven begins here. We respond to His invitation, Come, learn of Me, and in thus coming we begin the life eternal. Heaven is a ceaseless approaching to God through Christ. The longer we are in the heaven of bliss, the more and still more of glory will be opened to us; and the more we know of God, the more intense will be our happiness. As we walk with Jesus in this life, we may be filled with His love, satisfied with His presence. All that human nature can bear, we may receive here. But what is this compared with the hereafter?" *Desire of Ages*, p. 331

Sabbath—a sanctuary in time made real through the life, death, resurrection of Christ sums up all that we love, adore, and cherish about God. Rest in Christ. It's a rest in this world. Heaven has begun and offers us a taste of its abundant life every week in a beautiful wrinkle in time called Sabbath.

