



INVITATION

Exploring the Mission
and Message of Jesus

Ron Pickell

Leader's Guide

Invitation – Leader’s Guide

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Journey...

is the life we were made for and have always wanted.

Who was Jesus? What was His mission? What can Jesus teach us about ourselves, the meaning of life, and our relationship with others? *Invitation*, the first of the *Journey* series, is an introduction into the life and mission of Jesus. It is a personal journey into the life God has in mind for all of us. The purpose of the *Journey* series is to learn about God together with a small group of friends through the life and ministry of Jesus and to embrace Him fully. If you're ready for the ultimate adventure, then hold on tight and let's see where the living Christ and a journey with Him will take us over the next few weeks together!

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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 *Invitation*:

- 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 _____

Come and See!

The Journey Begins

Just as Frodo Baggins left the safety of the Shire on an adventure to get rid of the ring, so are we embarking on a journey together with Christ in which God will take us where He chooses. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. He is the resurrection and the life. He came so that we might have a more abundant life in Him.



1. What's the best trip you have ever taken?
2. Describe your greatest childhood fantasy adventure.
3. How can we relate the Christian life to a great and exciting adventure?

Note: When John describes what it was like to be with Jesus, the word "boring" never appears in his vocabulary. Notice his reflections on life with Jesus: "From the very first day, we were there, taking it all in—we heard it with our own ears, saw it with our own eyes, verified it with our own hands. The Word of Life appeared right before our eyes; we saw it happen! And now we're telling you in most sober prose that what we witnessed was, incredibly, this: The infinite Life of God himself took shape before us. We saw it, we heard it, and now we're telling you so you can experience it along with us, this experience of communion with the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:1-3, MSG).



John 1:35–51

1. John and Andrew wanted to hang out with Jesus. What do you think impressed John and Andrew, and in turn Peter, Philip, and Nathaniel, to want to know more about Jesus? What indications did they have that He was in fact the Messiah? What was Jesus' response to them?
2. Why did Nathanael question if anything good could come from Nazareth? What might have been questionable about Jesus' background?
3. Jesus showed an interest in each of these early followers—especially Peter. What nickname might Jesus have given you if you were one His followers?
4. What are some obstacles in the way of you discovering more about Jesus?
5. What intrigues you most about Jesus? What seems to be drawing you to want to know more about the life of God? What great things do you want to see from God?
6. How can this group pray for you?



1. How has God been using *Invitation* in your life and witness this week?
2. What were the Jewish expectations of the Messiah? What were some of the promises that Jewish messiahs were making at the time?
3. As you meditate on verse 39, what do you think Jesus wants you to come and see about Him?



Backstory

I guess you could say I am a part-time Warriors basketball fan – part time in that I get excited whAs we begin *Invitation*, we are setting out on a journey of discovery about God through the life and ministry of Jesus. There are several key points to make about this first lesson that will help set the stage for the entire Journey series.

The first is that this is an invitation to check Jesus out. John made it very clear why he wrote his gospel account of Jesus in John 20:30, 31 – that we might believe. In other words, John was very selective. In John 21:24, 25, he tells us that he is the one who wrote the account and that if he were to write down everything he knew about Jesus, there wouldn't be enough books to contain all the good things Jesus did. So, again, he was very selective in what he included so that, in reading these stories, we might come to the same conclusion about Jesus that he did. This means that John's gospel needs to do the work. As you lead out in this study, keep in mind that the pressure to bring people to the faith rests on God's Word, not on you as the leader. Let the Word do its work and let people wrestle with it on their own. John points out seven signs Jesus did that prove He is Messiah:

1. Turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana (John 2)
2. Healing an official's son in Cana (John 4)
3. Healing a man at the Pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath (John 5)
4. Feeding the Five Thousand near the Passover (John 6)
5. Replacing water and light during the Feast of Tabernacles (John 8)
6. Healing a man who was born blind (John 9)
7. Raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11)

The greatest sign that proves His identity, of course, is His death and resurrection, to which all of these other signs point.

My second key point is that when we check Jesus out, we discover right away that He already knows us. This is a great lead in to the next lesson, which talks about who Jesus is and how it is that He knows so much about us. The journey with Jesus is as much a journey to self-discovery as it is learning about God. We see this during this first lesson when we read about Jesus giving Peter a nickname and knowing so much about Nathaniel.

Nathaniel's conversation with Jesus was important since it proved to him that Jesus was the Messiah. What was it about Jesus seeing him under the fig tree that convinced him that Jesus was the one? Ellen White suggests in her book *The Desire of Ages* that Nathaniel was praying for direction about the Messiah's coming (page 140). Other scholars agree that the fig tree might have been a place of solitude and prayer for Nathaniel and that Jesus heard and saw him praying for insight. This would explain Nathaniel's enthusiasm and his 180° reversal. Nathaniel's response about Jesus coming from Nazareth was not really about how bad Nazareth was. Everybody knew that the Messiah was supposed to come from Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). Jesus demonstrated even more knowledge about Nathaniel when He complemented him for knowing the Scriptures and remembering the Messiah's true birthplace.

Jesus rewarded Nathaniel's belief when He quipped that a simple answer to prayer is enough to believe. Nathaniel would see even more than this later on. In Jesus, Nathaniel would see heaven opened and have constant access to God. This was also what John intended for us to see. Heaven will be opened up for us as we walk, watch, listen, and pray for God to reveal Himself to us through Jesus.

My third key point is that as the leader, you should always remember to encourage participants to follow the Five S's in the introduction. The principles of Seek, Soak, Seal, Script, and Share will make the difference in helping each *Invitation* participant become more than a spectator as they listen and follow the disciples on their journey with God toward self-discovery. Enjoy the journey!

Who Am I?

Journey to Self-discovery

Who really knows you? How can we truly even know ourselves? Most of us are afraid of being known by anyone, so we hide and pretend to be something we're not or what others want us to be. One of the greatest evidences of the fall is our own sense of -inadequacy, self-doubt, and self-hatred, so we wear our masks to cover up. Is it possible to know ourselves truly and to love ourselves? Doing so begins by seeing ourselves the way God sees us. This is why our journey with God begins not with self-examination, but by examining God. In this week's road map of Scripture, we will focus on God and what He knows about us. God is before all things. If He already knows and loves us, understanding this is the first step in knowing and loving ourselves.



1. What are some funny characteristics or stories you can share about yourself?
2. Share something that best describes you.
3. How would your best friend describe you?

Note: Psalm 139 goes into great detail about God's intimate knowledge of us. Notice how just how infinite His knowledge of us is:

"O Lord, you have searched me
and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways."



John 1:1-34

This passage reminds us of Jesus' preexistence and complete knowledge of us, which led Him to take on humanity and become our Savior and Lord.

1. If you had the task of introducing Jesus, what would you say about Him? How does John introduce Jesus here? Who does he claim Jesus is?
2. Jesus is the Word of God and the light of the world. What does Jesus' identification as the Word tell us about Him? In what way is Jesus the light of the world?
3. Word and light are metaphors for knowledge and revelation. If Jesus is the Word of God and the light of the world, what does that tell us about what He knows about us? What does Jesus know about you?
4. Jesus came down from God to live and dwell with us. Jesus was Immanuel – God with us. What does moving into our neighborhood tell us about His feelings for us? Would you be open to having God move onto your campus or into your dorm room?
5. What role did John the Baptist play in revealing Jesus as the Messiah? What was so important about John's mission? How did he help John (the disciple) and Andrew become followers of Jesus?
6. Meditate on verses 1-4. What does God want to say to you about the living Word?
7. How can this group pray for you?



1. How has God used *Invitation* in your life and witness this week?
2. Meditate on verses 1-4. What does God want to say to you about the living Word in your life?

Who Am I?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Who am I? They often tell me
I stepped from my cell's confinement
Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
Like a squire from his country house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I used to speak to my warders
Freely, friendly and clearly,
As though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I bore the days of misfortune
Equably, smilingly, proudly,
Like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I myself know of myself?
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
Struggling for breath, as though hands were
Compressing my throat,
Yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voice s of birds,
Thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,
Tossing in expectation of great events,
Powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
Weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
Faint, and ready to say farewell to it all.

Who am I? This or the Other?
Am I one person today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
And before myself a contemptible woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army
Fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!



Backstory

The first steps on our journey with Jesus that we'll be starting this week actually run backward. In last week's lesson, we accepted the invitation to "come and see." We saw how quickly people were drawn to Jesus, and were given a brief disclosure of how His work as the Messiah would open the way to God and He is the true stairway to heaven. We also saw how much He knows about people—an insight that inspired Him to give Simon the nickname Peter, which means "rock"—and His foreknowledge that He would find Nathaniel praying under the fig tree. All of this culminates in John's observation at the end of chapter 2, that "he knew all men. He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man" (John 2:24, 25).

This means, of course, that Jesus not only knows about the human condition, He also knows about us. This is the truth that is revealed to us as we begin to learn about Jesus. We discover right away that as we learn more about Him, we also learn about ourselves in the process. A journey with Jesus is a journey to self-discovery.

Where does Jesus' self-referential insight and truth come from? How does He know so much about us? This is why we must go backward in this week's journey with Jesus. We must go all the way back to the beginning so we can see what John came to understand as he walked with Jesus and personally learned about the greatness of Christ.

The task of this week's lesson is to decipher what it means for Jesus to be the Word of God and the light of the world. What does it mean that John uses the term "Word," or *logos* in Greek, as the all-encompassing reference for Jesus? Have the group stop and meditate on this. What are words? Words are descriptors. Jesus is the physical representation of God. He is God's thoughts made audible, as Ellen White expressed it in *The Desire of Ages*.

For John, this was significant from both a Greek and a Jewish perspective. Heraclitus, an early Greek philosopher (535-475 BCE), referred to *logos* as the undifferentiated material substrate from which all things came into being. *Logos* is the *arche*, the first principle of the cosmos in pre-Socratic philosophy.

On the other hand, Philo (20 BCE-50 AD), a Hellenized Jewish philosopher, used the term *logos* to refer to a creative principle. Philo followed the Platonic distinction between imperfect matter and the perfect idea. The *logos* was necessary, he taught, because God cannot come into contact with the material world. According to Philo, *logos* is the divine wisdom.

So, Heraclitus referred to *logos* as the first principle of the universe, but, not really being a theist, he never went so far as to associate it with the divine; Philo, on the other hand, borrowed from Greek philosophy and synthesized Jewish belief with the Greek worldview, referencing *logos* as the *arche*—the beginning from which all things originated. The way he saw it, *logos* was the instrument of God, the divine wisdom—the active agent in creation. God alone was transcendent and had no immediate contact with the material world of man. John, on the other hand, made the audacious claim that not only was Jesus the first cause of the universe, one with God, but also that He took on human flesh and joined Himself with the material world. The Word became flesh. God incarnated.

In fact, John even takes it one step further. Just as Genesis, the first book of the Bible, declares, "In the beginning, God..." so John affirms, "In the beginning was the Word." The first thing the God of Genesis created was light, so the evidence that Jesus is the living Word is that He brings light into the dark chaos of our lives, just like He originally spoke it into the darkness and void of Planet Earth.

If the world did in fact begin with a big bang, then Jesus, the Word of God, was the first cause—the divine *arche* that brought everything into existence. This is why He knows everything about us, since He was the one who spoke everything into being. Proverbs 8 makes a similar reference to Wisdom also existing alongside God from the beginning. Is wisdom—which we see personified in Proverbs 8—another name for Jesus, just like *logos*? Christ is the wisdom of God, which means that God's wisdom has been expressed in our salvation. Paul hints at this in 1 Corinthians 1, where he talks about the wisdom of God being greater than the foolishness of man!

This is where Psalm 139 fits into this week's journey with Jesus. Psalm 139 affirms all that God knows about us and the plans He has for us. I can still remember the first time I read Psalm 139. I sat in awe of how close it made me feel to God. It felt like the curtain had been torn open and I was sitting naked before Him. I had never considered before how intimate and personal God's knowledge of me was. It is this personal knowledge about us that led God to become human, accept the responsibility for our sin, and die in our place. John's introduction of Jesus is unique. It goes beyond the human lineage Matthew and Luke traced. John introduces Jesus as the first cause, the divine wisdom who knows everything about us, the one who is bringing the light of a brand-new life into a world made dark by the fall in the garden.

The challenge of this week's lesson is to recognize the greatness of Christ and to realize that God cares about us enough to come in search of us and make His dwelling with us. We are not making our way to God through human effort or religious practices. God made His way to us through the person of His Son. We could not go to God, so God came to us. John the Baptist testified to this. John the evangelist also testified to it through the account he provided of Jesus' life and message.

What is our testimony? What have we seen and heard about Jesus? Who is Jesus? Each week we will see and learn more. When we begin our journey with Jesus, we become recreated, reborn, and transformed. Already we want to be more like Him!

Jesus, Our Good Shepherd

Guide for the Journey

A shepherd is one of the best metaphors we could use for the loving, constant care of Jesus. It is one thing to be known and loved, but it's another to be cared for and protected by a trusted friend.

David reflects on this very thing in Psalm 23. Each stanza repeats another aspect of God's watchful care. When David considered the way he protected his own timid and vulnerable sheep before he became king, it must have made him wonder, "Who is watching over me?" With beaming pride, Psalm 23 provides the answer: "The Lord is my shepherd." Because the Lord is our shepherd, we are getting the best of care. "I shall not be in want."



1. Have you ever owned a pet? What are some things a pet depends on us for?
2. Read Psalm 23 out loud together. What are some of the elements of the Good Shepherd's care? What specific things is He being praised for? How many of these elements have you experienced in your life, and when?
3. What aspect of God's shepherding care do you need most in your life? How do you need direction, protection, or celebration most right now?



John 10:1-18

This passage reminds us of Jesus' constant care for us.

Note: In John 10, Jesus claimed to be both the sheepfold gate and the shepherd. This can seem confusing to us today. If so, remember that shepherds often protected their sheep during the night by walling them into a secluded, guarded area and guarding the only opening. In this respect, the Good Shepherd leads His flock to safety and stands guard over it throughout the night.

1. What impresses you most about Jesus' shepherding care?
2. What makes Jesus the only true shepherd? What distinguishes Jesus from all others?
3. Jesus has a very intimate relationship with His sheep. How can we learn to hear and follow His voice?
4. What does Jesus say the Father loves about Him? What makes Him the Good Shepherd?
5. Jesus said He was prepared to lay down His life for His sheep. What do you appreciate most about all that Jesus has done for you?
6. Shepherds watch over and protect their sheep, but they also lead them to greener pastures and sometimes through dark valleys. What are some ways God is leading you right now? How does the promise of God's leading in your life bring peace to you?
7. How can this group pray for you?

The Hound of Heaven

Search and Rescue

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.*

*Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.*

*But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbèd pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat—and a voice beat
More instant than the Feet—*

“All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.”

So writes Francis Thompson in *The Hound of Heaven*, his famous poem about God’s pursuit of the human family. The life of John Newton (1725–1807), the pastor and lyricist responsible for the best-known hymn of all time, “Amazing Grace,” serves as a great illustration of God’s pursuing love. Born to a merchant mariner father and a spiritually devout mother, Newton fled from God with such determination that his journey left him blind, lost, and enslaved to an African queen off the coast of Sierra Leone. Newton recounts the many ways that God intervened throughout his life while he avoided and resisted Him. When he finally converted, it was the result of a horrible storm at sea. Afterward, he wrote in his journal about how God finally got through to him in the midst of that storm and through a gracious deliverance. Newton forever praised God for His goodness and faithfulness in pursuing him.



1. What are some of the steps that God has taken to get through to you?
2. In what creative ways have you avoided Him?
3. When did you first notice God’s pursuit of you?
4. What do the parables in Luke 15 tell us about God’s deep love and faithfulness toward us? When did you first experience God’s faithful persistence in your life?

Note: Our first glimpse in the Bible of God’s persistent pursuit of us is in the story of the creation and the fall, in which God came searching for the first man and woman following their disobedience. When Adam and Eve did not come to meet Him at their daily rendezvous, God called out to them, “Where are you?” Our disobedience and rebellion from God precludes us from running after Him. Fear, a sense of inferiority, and self-absorption keep us locked away in a kind of spiritual prison. God is always the one taking the first step toward us.

Jesus illustrated God’s persistent love even further through the three parables about grace in Luke 15—the Parable of the Lost Coin, the Parable of the Lost Sheep, and the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The Pharisees and scribes and their surprise about Jesus’ acceptance of tax collectors and sinners who were drawing near to Him serve as His reason for telling these three stories. Not only did Jesus not draw away from these outcasts, He went even further and demonstrated God’s persistent pursuit of them like we might search for lost money or a family pet. In the final story, Jesus portrayed God as an eager father running to welcome home his recalcitrant son.



John 6:22–70

This passage reminds us of how God is pursuing all of us in Jesus, the living bread come down from God.

1. How is bread a good metaphor for God's sustaining life? What comparisons did Jesus make between Himself and God's gift of manna in the wilderness? How is Jesus the true bread come down from God to feed the world?
2. It may look like people are seeking Jesus, but in truth Jesus is the one who approaches them with the real sustaining life and living bread of God. Have you ever thought you were searching for God, only to find that it was really the other way around?
3. Describe God's pursuit of you. In what way is He pursuing you right now? 8. Take some time to read again and meditate on the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15. The real message in this story is that both sons are lost or fail to understand the Father's love for them. What's keeping them from their father? One son rebelled and left home. The other lived in a kind of rebellion in spite of never leaving his father's side. Which son do you most identify with? Why? Is there anything keeping you from the Father right now?
4. How can this group pray for you?



For further study, check out Song of Songs 2:9–13, John 15:16, and John 6. These passages continue to illustrate God's patient pursuit.

1. How has God used *Invitation* in your life and witness this week?
2. What do these additional Scripture references tell you about God's faithful persistence?
3. Jesus called for a decision from those who were following Him. Many found it too challenging and left. The disciples, however, chose to seal their commitment to Jesus. What about you? Do you see yourself moving toward God's pursuit of you or away from it? Why do you think that is so?



So far in *Invitation* we have learned that God knows us intimately and that He is watching over and caring for us as a shepherd watches and cares for his sheep. This week, we learn that it is God's deep and faithful love that moves him to come search for us. Our lost state is so great that someone has to go in search of us. The parables we take a look at in this lesson show us both of the groups that God is searching for—the tax collectors and the sinners, and the scribes and Pharisees. The lost sheep (prodigal son) wandered off. The missing coin (older son) was lost inside the house. However, both were equally lost and in need of a caring God to search for them. The message of the Bible is that it is not us who find God. God makes His way to us, and does so through the salvation of His Son.

Something similar happens in the story found in John 6, where Jesus fed the five thousand. This miracle is reminiscent of the time God sent down the bread of heaven—in this case, manna—to the people of Israel while they were wandering in the wilderness. Just as God provided for the Israelites back then, so Jesus is the bread of life for us today. The problem in John 6 is that the people were not seeing who Jesus really was. Just like the scribes and Pharisees in Luke 15, they did not understand their great need for Jesus. They wanted to use Jesus and accept Him only on their terms. If He was the Messiah, they reasoned, then He would not be hanging out with people like them. If He was the Messiah, then He should be able to perform the miracle they wanted and provide bread on a daily basis. Some of us have the same idea today. We want God to do this or that for us, but not to be our Lord and Savior. But God is who He is and will not be deterred from His mission to seek and save those who are lost. Both the feeding of the five thousand and His decision to hang out with tax collectors and sinners are indicators of who Jesus really is, since the work of the Messiah was to bring good news to the poor, bind up the broken hearted, and proclaim freedom to the captives (Isaiah 61:1–4). He had not come to work miracles or to be a pawn of the religious establishment. Jesus was on a mission to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10).

Jesus on Message

Where Are We Going?

Every four years, the United States engages in the national ritual of electing a new president. Candidates from the various parties begin lining up to convince prospective voters why their ideals for the country would make them the best and strongest leader. This is a presidential candidate's political platform—their candidacy's values and positions on key issues. In recent years, voters have become more and more disillusioned by political speeches that are long on rhetoric and short on specifics of what one candidate will do to solve the nation's ills. Voters have come to accept that we will not hear about specifics until the candidates debate. It often takes the opposing side to bring a candidate out of his or her corner and tell us what they really think about a certain issue. Even then, we voters are often surprised at the skill with which some candidates deflect and dodge the issue and tell us nothing about their true positions.

Did Jesus have a spiritual platform? What was Jesus trying to do? Was Jesus clear about His mission? Understanding Jesus' mission and message is key to understanding everything He said and did. It will also help us understand what He expects from His followers.



1. How important are the message and objective of presidential candidates?
2. How do you decide who to vote for? How important is it to take his or her message and position into account when making your decision?
3. What was Jesus' message? Did He have a clearly stated mission? After listening in on Jesus' conversation with a Pharisee named Nicodemus in John 3, what would you say was Jesus' message and mission (John 3:1-8)?

Note: Answering this question will help unlock the message of the entire Bible, as Jesus Himself once said that all the Scriptures either directly or indirectly point to Him. It will also help us understand Jesus' ongoing mission and how we fit into it today.



Mark 1:14-15

1. What does this passage tell us about Jesus' message? What is the kingdom of God, and how was it coming near at the launching of Jesus' ministry?
2. Matthew 4:23-25 begins Jesus' public ministry with an assault on Satan's kingdom through miraculous healings, deliverance from evil spirits, and forgiveness of sins. How do these actions help clarify the good news of Jesus' kingdom?
3. In Matthew 6:9, 10, Jesus taught the disciples to pray the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." How is heaven a good example of God's kingdom? What would life on earth be like if God were followed and obeyed like He is in heaven?
4. "Kingdom" is an old-fashioned word that we do not often use in more democratically run societies. What do you think Jesus meant by the "kingdom of God"? How is the ministry of Jesus establishing God's kingdom on earth?
5. When we think of a kingdom, we often think of the medieval world of King Arthur's court and the story of Robin Hood. In Matthew 12: 22-30, Jesus was a spiritual Robin Hood who took from the devil and gave back to God. What are some comparisons you can make between the story in Matthew 12 and the legend of Robin Hood? How does it help you appreciate Jesus' mission from a larger, kingdom perspective?

6. In His conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus made it clear that His kingdom was different from the nations and kingdoms of this world, and that entering His kingdom demands a new birth experience. What do you think Jesus meant by this that? What is the relationship between it and entering His kingdom? How do you relate to the idea of new birth, and in what way is it like a change of kingdoms?
 7. How can this group pray for you?
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1. How has God used *Invitation* in your life and witness this week?
 2. Surprisingly, anytime someone refers to the Good News, or gospel, in the Bible, they are often referring to the good news of the kingdom. How does seeing the Good News from the perspective of God's kingdom broaden your understanding of the gospel?
 3. Read Luke 12:32. How have you experienced the kingdom of God this week? What are some ways that God might be directing you to help advance His kingdom?
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The goal of this week's lesson is to listen closely to Jesus' message and how He describes His mission. Too often, our understanding of Jesus and His mission centers around our personal salvation or the business of growing and advancing the church. However, the more we reflect and listen closely to what Jesus is saying, the more we will realize that both of these outcomes are result of His greater mission – to establish the kingdom of God on earth. Understanding this larger perspective opens our eyes to who Jesus is and will begin to unlock not only the New Testament, but also the entire Bible for us.

To begin with, Jesus and the disciples rarely referred to the Good News (the gospel) without including the good news of the kingdom. It was always the good news of God's kingdom. Your challenge as leader is to help people understand what Jesus meant by the "kingdom of God." How does this insight into Jesus' mission and message help enlarge our understanding of who Jesus is and what He came to do? What does discovering the good news of Jesus' kingdom mean for us?

John doesn't talk very much about the kingdom of God. Instead, he tends to refer more to belief and the personal struggle that goes on in the process a person goes through when deciding if Jesus is the Messiah. However, during His night visit with Nicodemus, Jesus got straight to the point. When Nick flattered Him by calling Him "rabbi" and referring to the miraculous works that He had performed, Jesus called him out and got to the real question. Nicodemus believed Jesus was somebody special and that God was with Him. But what he really wanted to know was whether Jesus was the one the Jews had been looking for.

The popular view at that time was that when the Messiah came He would usher in the kingdom of God, which would be more like a return of the glorious days of David and Solomon when Israel was on top. Nicodemus believed that God was with Jesus, but he wanted more evidence that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus cut right through all of Nicodemus' flattery and let him know that his real question was about the coming of the kingdom. In effect, Jesus was saying, "Nick, you will not know if I am the Messiah and if the kingdom of God has come unless you have been born again. The kingdom of God is not the political reality you and the other religious leaders are looking for. It is a spiritual reality, and someone must be born again to even perceive it."

This, of course, supported the efforts and ministry of John the Baptist, since John was preparing people for a spiritual kingdom by calling them to repentance and baptism. According to Jesus, one could be in the very presence of the kingdom and miss it if they were not tuned in spiritually or if they were looking for the wrong thing. The ultimate evidence that the kingdom of God has already come was the sign of Jesus being lifted up on the cross, embracing the world's sin and burying it through His death and resurrection. The cross became the ultimate evidence of Jesus' kingdom. His death and resurrection mark the end of the tyranny of sin and death, and the beginning of a new life of forgiveness, freedom from sin, and reunion with God.

Both Mark and Matthew begin their accounts of Jesus' public ministry following His victory over the devil in the wilderness with the proclamation that the kingdom of God had come. Jesus had defeated the devil and had come to take back that which had been lost through sin. This is

The Stone Kingdom

Jesus' Mission Rooted in History

John Lennon's song "Imagine," released in 1971, considers a world in which differences do not divide and people coexist in a state of mutual support and love for one another. The truth is God does more than imagine such a world. A world in which love reigns supreme is the goal of Jesus' mission.

Last week, we explored the mission and message of Jesus in His proclamation of the kingdom of God. The gospel, or Good News, of Jesus is actually more often than not referred to as the good news of the kingdom. The loving, peaceful world that Lennon could only imagine was the world that Jesus gave His life for.

Jesus was not the first one to introduce the concept of the coming of God's kingdom—a kingdom literally built by God. That idea was already well established by the Old Testament prophets. This week, we are going to look at an ancient story from the prophet Daniel that helps explain what Jesus meant when He announced the establishment of God's kingdom on earth.



1. Describe your most memorable dream.



Daniel 2

1. What impresses you most about this story?
2. Describe the details of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. What successive kingdoms were presented before the king and how were they differentiated? What do we know about these kingdoms?

Note: The learning of the Chaldeans (Dan. 1:4; 2:2; 4:7; 5:7, 11) consisted of the old languages of Babylonia; some astronomy and astrology; mathematics, which their sexagesimal system of numeration seems to have facilitated; and a certain amount of natural history. They also had a store of mythological learning, which included legends of the creation, the flood (closely resembling in all its main points the account in the Bible), and apparently also the temptation and the fall.

3. What is so different about the fifth and final kingdom, the rock kingdom?

Note: Luke 20:17, 18 seems to identify this as the kingdom that Jesus is inaugurating—a kingdom so different from all the others represented in the king's dream that it smashed and crumbled everything that came before it: "Jesus looked directly at them and asked, 'Then what is the meaning of that which is written: The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone?' Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed." Luke 20:17, 18

4. How does Jesus' message about the kingdom of God help us understand His mission as something more than just salvation from sin? What are the implications of the good news of the kingdom?

5. Ultimately, the reality of God's kingdom on earth is in process. It is something God is accomplishing every day through Christ. It is also something Jesus encouraged us to pray for, as we mentioned last week ("Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."). How is the kingdom of Jesus a source of good news for you? What evidence do you see of the presence of Jesus' kingdom already at work in your life and in the lives of others?
6. How can this group pray for you?



For further study, read John 3:22–36

Note: In John 3:22-36, the disciples of John the Baptist were jealous of the new attention people were giving to Jesus, which was drawing them away from John. Notice how John handled the shift from himself to Jesus.

1. How has God used *Invitation* in your life and witness this week?
2. In what areas of your life does Jesus need to become greater?
3. How can we best participate in God's kingdom rule today?



Because of the sequence of nations in Daniel 2 and the eventual rise of the Roman Empire, modern-day theologians are tempted to place the stone kingdom at the end of Earth's history. Though the event is accurate, the timing is off. It turns out that the stone kingdom is not as much about the end of time as it is about the end of the kingdom of man and the setting up of God's eternal kingdom. The stone kingdom represents the kingdom that Jesus inaugurated with His victory over sin and death. In fact, Daniel reminds us, "In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people" (Daniel 2:44).

This new stone kingdom would come in the very midst of the rise and fall of the other nations. This was the good news that Jesus came to share and bring into reality. The days of oppression and injustice of the other kingdoms would be over. God would establish a new rule on earth under the lordship of Jesus Christ. All these other kingdoms would be mere idols in comparison with the government of God. This is why the apostles saw this world passing away in lieu of Christ and His mission.

Our task in this week's lesson is to realize that the coming of God's kingdom was actually announced hundreds of years before it was to arrive. In fact, Jesus' favorite reference for Himself was a term that came straight from Daniel 7, which says one like the "Son of Man" would be ushered in to receive a kingdom from the Ancient of Days (see Daniel 7:13 and 14).

This is the same authority over heaven and earth that Jesus declared He had been given in passages like Matthew 28:18. This is the authority He was extending to His disciples—a vital part of Jesus' message and mission and key to ending Satan's rule. The gospel also includes the wonderful truth that the power of Satan's rule in our lives has come to an end with the victory of Christ.

John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, was about the only one who recognized the greatness of Jesus and the full importance of His mission. John's message was a reiteration of Daniel's. His pronouncement to his own disciples—"He must increase and I must decrease" (John 3:30)—was a reminder of the grand purpose of God: setting up the stone kingdom—a kingdom made without human hands—and a rule that would never end.

Heaven Now!

The Two-phased Kingdom

Last week, we looked at a disturbing dream that a pagan Old Testament king received concerning God's kingdom. Nebuchadnezzar was given a pre-screening on the development of history and his place in the context of God's eternal kingdom. This dream revealed that Jesus came not only to deliver us from sin, but also to completely overturn Satan's rule on earth.

One of the very surprising lessons we learn right away about the setting up of God's kingdom is that it did not come in one climactic event, as some had expected. Jesus introduces us to this two-phase structure in a couple of His most famous stories—the Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Parable of the Leaven.

Some of the holidays we celebrate have a similar structure. Take Christmas, for instance. The Christmas season kicks off in December, culminates in Christmas Day, and winds down with the celebration of the New Year. In a way, it's all Christmas.



1. What is your favorite holiday of the year and why?
2. Describe something you have had to wait a long time for.

Note: In Matthew 13: 31-33, Jesus also explained the coming of the kingdom as a multi-faceted event. He relates the kingdom to a mustard seed, the tiniest of seeds that also becomes the largest of shrubs, and gives the birds of the air a place to nest. He then compares the kingdom to leaven working its way completely through the dough of a loaf of bread.



1. How do these parables help explain the two phases of the kingdom?
2. Jesus made the official announcement that the kingdom had arrived in Mark 1:15 ("The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"). What evidence did Jesus give in verses 16-45 that the kingdom of God had begun with the authority of God already at work?
3. What additional evidence did Jesus give in Mark 4:35-41 of who He is and the presence of God's rule on earth? What other evidence can you think of in Jesus' life and ministry that demonstrates the presence of the kingdom in His life?
4. Revelation 21-22:7 describes the second phase of God's kingdom on earth in the coming of the New Jerusalem down from God out of heaven. What are some notable differences between the second phase of the kingdom, described here, and phase one (Jesus' first coming)? What do you look forward to most about the New Jerusalem and the final establishment of God's kingdom rule?
5. How does a two-phase kingdom provide a better explanation of Jesus' overall ministry and mission? Some have referred to the kingdom of God as "here and not yet," meaning that it has already begun, but also is not yet fully realized. In what way do you already see yourself living in the kingdom? What are you most looking forward to about God's kingdom that is still yet to come?
6. How can this group pray for you?



Ephesians 6:10–18

1. Paul often referred to himself as Christ's ambassador—meaning that he belonged to God's kingdom while also representing God's affairs in a foreign land. In the verses above, he also reminded us that we are being waged in a spiritual battle between conflicting kingdoms. The kingdom of God has come and we are victorious in God's strength. However, the prince of darkness still fights on against God's rule. How are we most vulnerable in this battle and what weapons do you most need to win your current struggles?
2. How does this fuller reality of God's kingdom both present and future give you real perspective on your spiritual life right now?
3. How is God using *Invitation* in your life and witness this week?



In this week's lesson, we learn that the kingdom of God is both already here and still to come. During the time of Jesus, people were looking for and expecting the kingdom of God any day. The glorious restoration of the temple mentioned in Ezekiel 43 and the future prosperity of God's people following the Babylonian captivity predicted by all the prophets was based on the hope of a David-like deliverer and Messiah, which means "anointed one." Israel's deliverer would lead them in triumph over their enemies and firmly establish them as the powerful and successful nation they once were in the days of David and Solomon—only greater!

The Messiah was their only hope for the glorious return of God's kingdom the prophets promised. In fact, all the major groups of Jesus' day—the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Zealots, and the Essenes—all had their own ideas of what would most influence the Messiah's coming. The Zealots believed that if they took a revolutionary stand, God would respond by sending the Messiah. The Essenes believed that if they lived pure enough lives, they could influence God to send the Messiah. The Pharisees believed that the Messiah's coming depended on the keeping of the law. Each group was looking for and hastening the Messiah in their own way.

What they completely missed was that they were actually looking for a dual event—a two-phased kingdom. Even John the Baptist seemed to be a bit confused about the nature of God's kingdom. John preached a baptism of repentance in preparation for the Messiah, but when we look closer at his message in Luke 3:7, it is clear that John expected the Messiah's coming to be a single, final judgment event. John was preparing people for judgment as described in Malachi 3:1-3, which said the Messiah would come as a "refiner's fire."

John was a bit confused when Jesus did not do what he had been expecting. Matthew 11 records this confusion and the messengers he sent to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Matthew 11:3)

John had been correct. Jesus was the Messiah, but the kingdom of God was coming a bit differently than even John had anticipated. The kingdom of God was coming in two stages. It would appear first as insignificant and as tiny as a mustard seed. Later in the future, at the end of the age, the kingdom would manifest a second time as the largest of shrubs. Everyone—including John -- was expecting the large shrub kingdom instead of the tiny mustard seed one.

We tend to focus on the shrub kingdom, as well. We are often guilty of emphasizing the good news of Jesus' Second Coming when good news is already here about the forgiving grace of God and how Jesus delivered us from sin and set the world right. In our longing and expectation for Christ's return, we must remember that He has already come and the kingdom of God is at hand! Our responsibility is to proclaim the good news of the kingdom that has already begun.

It is important for us to grasp this about Jesus' mission and message. It means that God is already present in the world and His kingdom has already begun! It means that salvation is already available. When Jesus told the Parable of the Great Banquet in Luke 14, He was referring to a banquet that the religious leaders were being invited to right then, but were making excuses not to attend. So Jesus began to invite the poor, the lame, and the Gentiles instead. The good news of God's kingdom was being extended, but some of the people were not taking Jesus up on the offer.

The point of this week's lesson is that the kingdom of God is already here, and that people need to listen to Jesus' invitation and accept His gracious offer. If we are waiting for the kingdom to arrive with the return of Jesus, we are waiting for something that is already underway. Only those who enter into God's kingdom right now, while also looking forward to Jesus' return and the kingdom's consummation, will be ready for His coming since they have already surrendered their lives to Jesus the Messianic king, have joined Him in the work of His kingdom, and are eagerly waiting for Him!

Kingdom Architecture

Defining the Kingdom of God

In our lesson last week, we read about the dimensions of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21. John says it measures six hundred miles high and is as long and wide as it is high. Today, we could probably care less about the dimensions. We are really more concerned about the quality of life in the city.

And that raises this question: What does the kingdom of God look like now? Some of the Pharisees once asked Jesus when the kingdom of God would come (though what they were asking was more like, "Where is this kingdom you keep talking about?"). Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God will not come with our careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is among you." Jesus' very own presence constituted the reign of God on earth" (Luke 17:20, 21).

Jesus also described the kingdom in its present form as a mustard seed – the tiniest of seeds (Mark 4:30-32). Later, when He described it privately to His disciples, Jesus actually referred to the inauguration of His kingdom as a secret that only a few were beginning to unpack (Mark 4:10, 11).

This means that the kingdom of God could actually be all around us, yet invisible to those not spiritually in tune (the way C. S. Lewis portrayed heaven in *The Last Battle*, the seventh in his series of children's books about the land of Narnia). In fact, Jesus once told a Pharisee named Nicodemus that he would never see the kingdom without being born again. The present manifestation of God's kingdom is apparently a spiritual dimension that can only be spiritually discerned.



1. Have you ever had to explain a difficult thing to a child? What was it?
2. What do you find the hardest to understand about heaven?



Spirituality, unfortunately, can be rather vague. What else did Jesus say about the nature of his Kingdom already growing and taking shape on earth? This week, we are going to look at three very important and tangible aspects of the Kingdom life that is even now sprouting and growing through the work of Christ.

Authority: In Luke 10:17-20, Jesus talked about how the establishment of His kingdom was bringing down the rule of Satan. We see this very thing happening in many people's lives, but perhaps none more clearly than in the life of the demon-possessed man discussed in Mark 1:21-28.

1. Have you ever seen someone that you thought might be possessed by a demon? How would you describe this person?
2. Have you ever been enslaved to a bad habit that you just couldn't seem to kick? What is the worst part about addiction for you, the habit itself or the frustration and impotency of knowing you just can't break free?
3. Jesus came to deliver us from our sin and painful addictions. Has Jesus ever helped set you free from a bad habit? Describe how it happened and share a bit about the freedom you have experienced through Him.

Forgiveness: In John 8:1-11, Jesus forgives a woman brought to Him who had been caught in the very act of adultery. The kingdom Jesus is launching is a place where every citizen will know and enjoy the blessing of God's forgiving love.

4. What is the first thing you remember being forgiven for?

5. What is the most difficult forgiveness you have ever had to offer?
6. When and how have you accepted God's forgiveness in your life?

Justice: Justice is an often-repeated theme in the Old Testament. It was because of Pharaoh's unjust treatment of the Israelite slaves that God intervened for their deliverance. Jesus also demonstrated God's justice on many occasions, but perhaps none more dramatically than with the cleansing of the temple (John 2: 12-17).

7. Why was Jesus so angry here?
8. In another story about caring for the poor and imprisoned (Matthew 25:31-46), Jesus links acts of justice for the oppressed with caring for Himself. How does this parable help you understand justice and mercy and their close connection with God?
9. In the ancient story of Robin Hood, Robin steals from the rich and returns money to the poor. How is this story a helpful comparison to the work of God's kingdom Jesus did during His ministry?

Forgiveness: When Jesus says that His kingdom is at hand, we should expect some tangible evidence. As we embrace His kingdom, we discover a new authority in our life, forgiving grace, and appreciation for God's justice. Extending these to others reveals and advances His kingdom to them and us. These are some of the tangible manifestations we can expect from God's kingdom right now.

10. How can this group pray for you?



1. How has God used *Invitation* in your life and witness this week?
2. Where have you seen the kingdom of God at work this week?
3. In the light of this week's lesson, what does it mean to seek first the kingdom?



In this week's lesson, we focus on the tangible aspects of the kingdom Jesus came to establish. If the kingdom of God has already come, as Jesus proclaimed, then where is it and what does it look like? John the Baptist once asked Jesus the same thing: "When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'" (Matthew 11:2,3)

As we have already seen, people were expecting great things from the coming of the kingdom of God. They believed that the Messiah would rise up on their behalf and help them defeat the Romans. They were looking for action and political change, but Jesus seemed to have a different agenda. Jesus told John's disciples to go back and tell him, "The blind were receiving their sight, the lame were walking, lepers were being cured, the deaf were hearing again, the dead were being raised and the poor had good news brought to them" (Matthew 11:5). Rome was not being overturned, but the powers of darkness were being shaken. Jesus said this was the evidence that the kingdom of God was at hand – Satan's kingdom was being overturned!

The good news of God's kingdom took on new meaning as the disciples began to comprehend Jesus' message. In this week's lesson, we look at three very tangible aspects of the kingdom of God that are making an impact in our world.

1. **The authority of God.** Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, therefore go and make disciples..." (Matthew 28:18). It is only through the authority of Jesus that we can hope to advance against the prince of darkness. We operate under the authority of Christ. The nature of His kingdom is the exact opposite of the world's way of doing things. Power is manifested as weakness in Jesus' economy. We operate under the authority of the cross, where Jesus gave up His life for others instead of destroying His oppressors. The first evidence we have that God's kingdom is working in our lives is the presence of God's peace ruling in our hearts and taking authority over our troubled spirit.
2. **Forgiveness.** Another way God manifests His kingdom in our lives is by not holding our sins against us. Forgiveness is ours right now. We do not have to wait to know that God forgives us. We live in a constantly new state with God while we await His glorious return. We also know the wonderful favor of God – He is for us and not against us. This is the wonderful

Dressed In Royalty

New Clothes From The King

When I was seventeen, I helped lead a group of early teens in spelunking through a cave in northern Alabama. We spent the entire weekend living in this cave, which went on for miles underground and contained some vast rooms that were about 280 feet high, narrow passages, and a small stream. It was completely dark except for the light we brought in with us. We had a lantern that was comically named the “sun,” which lit up only during daylight hours, and another called the “moon” that of course only shone at night. These lanterns were the only way of telling the difference between day and night inside the cave.

We had a blast exploring the underground caverns and mysteries of the cave, but none of us expected how filthy we would look when we finally popped out again on Sunday morning in the naked light of day. With hundreds of miles to travel before arriving back home, we decided to look for a way to clean up before starting the long trek back. Someone had the bright idea of renting a motel room so we could all take a shower and put on fresh clothes, which we did (though we made sure to leave an extra tip for the maid). I cannot remember appreciating a shower more in my life. Clods of red Alabama mud washed off our bodies and down the drain, leaving us fresh and clean for the first time in three days.

The message of John the Baptist was that everyone in comparison to Jesus is unclean. John called everyone high and low to baptism, a kind of ritual bath, in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. Jesus continued John’s theme when He told a well-respected, notable Pharisee named Nicodemus that he too must be washed in order to enter God’s kingdom. In fact, Jesus said he needed a new birth of water and Spirit before he could see the kingdom.



1. What do you think is the best part about being clean?
2. Imagine being washed in the Spirit. What would that feel like?



John 3:1–15

1. What does baptism by water and Spirit have to do with God’s kingdom? Why did Jesus say that Nicodemus would never see the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit?
2. Why was the idea of new birth in the Spirit so difficult for Nicodemus to understand and accept? What might water and Spirit represent in Jesus’ message to the Pharisee?
3. How would you describe your own new birth? How does it feel to be washed clean by baptism and the Spirit’s indwelling? What does baptism and new birth in the Spirit reveal to you about life in God’s kingdom?

Note: If you read Revelation 21, you’ll see that it talks about a new heaven and earth filled with new people. The key word here, of course, is “new.” God is making everything new by introducing the principles of His government – His authority, forgiveness, and justice, which we read about and studied together last week. These principles are changing the world from the inside out like leaven rising in dough. But now He talks about birth – a new life in Him cleansed by water and Spirit. New people transformed by His Spirit are the way Jesus’ kingdom is at hand.

4. What do these additional Scripture references tell you about living clean in God’s kingdom?

5. What is the relationship between being washed, experiencing new birth, and God making all things new through His kingdom? How does the reality of God's new authority, forgiveness, and justice as well as new birth in our lives help clarify the kingdom of God in real and practical terms for us today? How is God making these things real in your life right now?

Note: In John Bunyan's famous book *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian is on a journey away from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. Pilgrim goes through many experiences and life-transforming events along the way that help him better understand his journey and his new life under the lordship of Christ.

6. We are going to look more into the process of entering God's kingdom and how the life of Jesus can become ours. New birth in and through Jesus is still the only way our life in Christ can begin. How is Jesus washing and making you a new person every day in your heart, in your mind, and in your relationships with others?
7. What questions do you still have about being born again? How would you explain what being born again is like to others?
8. How can this group pray for you?



1. How has God used *Invitation* in your life and witness this week?



Preparation for Jesus' kingdom comes in the form of a bath. The message to Nicodemus—and for all of us—is that no matter who we are, what pedigree we come from, or even how religious we are (as in the case of this dignified Pharisee), in comparison with Jesus we are all unfit for the kingdom. This was not an easy message for Nicodemus to hear. The entire conversation got turned upside down for him since it began with what he knew—“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him” (John 3:2)—and ended with him wondering, “How can this be?” The *mikvah*, a ceremonial bath, was for converts and those who had defiled themselves by touching blood or something unclean. The Pharisees kept themselves clean by refraining from contact with defiled things and through constant washings. Suggesting that Nicodemus needed a *mikvah* was out of the question.

There are a couple of word associations with water, Spirit, and new birth here. The first is the obvious connection between John the Baptist and Jesus. For the people of that day, John's ministry of baptism and repentance preceded the baptism of the Spirit they received from Jesus; this is the connection between water and the Spirit. There is also a connection between water and the analogy of human birth Jesus uses in His conversation with Nicodemus: All of us begin our lives in the watery state of our mother's amniotic fluid. When Nicodemus questioned how it could be possible to get back into his mother's womb, Jesus responded by saying that we must be born of water and Spirit. Being born physically is not enough. We must also be born spiritually. This is a recurring theme in John's writings. We find it right from the beginning in John 1:12, 13. “To all who received 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.”

We see it again in 1 John 5:6-8: “This is the one who came by water and blood— Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.”

Baptism is the way into the kingdom—first by water, then by Spirit. This was an important issue in Acts 18 and 19, when Apollos was baptizing new converts in water after the manner of John the Baptist, but making no reference to the Spirit or the Spirit's demands for clarification

Kingdom Transactions

Passports to Freedom

The last time I purchased a new car, I had to sign a bunch of papers and loan documents before I could actually say it was mine and drive it off the lot. The same was true when we signed papers for our first home. In fact, when you buy a house you have to go to a completely different organization called the title company, where all the important papers need to be signed. The title company reviews all documents and uses a legal, binding agreement to guarantee that everything is in order to protect the buyer, the seller, and the loan company.

Our goal in *Invitation* has been to walk with Jesus and learn firsthand about Him and His mission. One thing we've learned is how much Jesus emphasized His kingdom and how it is something we can enter now. His continuing theme was that the kingdom of God has come.

If God's kingdom has already begun, then the most important issue is signing up and getting involved. The apostle Paul actually goes through some very important transactions step by step that God designed to take place in our lives when we take up residence in His kingdom, both now and in the future.



1. What important documents or papers have you had to sign recently?
2. How often do you read the fine print of contracts? Why or why not?



Romans 5–8

These chapters move us through the four kingdom transactions and reveal how the life of God can become our own. Here is a brief overview:

- **Romans 5**—Free from the wrath of God. This chapter reveals the transition from condemnation (Adam) to justification (Christ).
 - **Romans 6**—Free from sin. This chapter reveals the transition from sin to righteousness.
 - **Romans 7**—Free from the law. This chapter reveals transition from being married to the law to being married to Christ.
 - **Romans 8**—Free from death. This chapter reveals the transition from death (flesh) to life (Spirit).
1. In our flesh, or in Adam, we live under the tyranny of sin, condemnation, and death—the wrath of God. But through our new life in Christ Jesus, we can live in righteousness and justification, which is the grace of God. We have an abounding life in Christ that overcomes the curse from the fall. In Christ, we are living in the jet stream of God's kingdom life. In Romans 5, Paul describes this new life as “standing in grace.” How would you describe your experience of being at peace with God and standing in abundant grace and life through Jesus Christ?
 2. If our old life in Adam was already buried with Jesus' death on the cross, why is it necessary to consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God? Why is it so important that we understand our solidarity with Christ and His cross and move from death to life?
 3. How does the law figure in to our new life? What relationship does the law have with sin and disobedience to God? Why is the law no help in living this new life of victory? How does the burial of our old life in Adam free us from the endless cycle of sin, condemnation, and death that comes from our dysfunctional relationship in the law, and allow for a new rhythm of righteousness, justification, and life in a marriage to Christ?

4. Jesus came that we might have life in Him. This life is new in that it is through Him and through the Holy Spirit's indwelling. The fruit of the Spirit is listed in Galatians 5:22, 23. These are some of the best tangible evidences of Christ's life taking shape in us.

List some characteristics of a new life in Christ through the Spirit:

5. How do these four chapters in Romans help explain the intricate transactions that take place when we move from our life in the old age to living a new life of the Spirit in the kingdom of God?
6. What transactions still need to take place in your life for the kingdom to be real for you?
7. How can this group pray for you?



1. How is God using *Invitation* in your life and witness to others this week?
2. The gospel of Jesus is about freedom. We have been freed from the wrath of God, sin, law, and death. Which of these freedoms is most meaningful to you right now and why?
3. Which fruit of the Spirit are you most grateful for? Which one would you most like to see developed in yourself?



In this week's lesson we learn some important steps in trading in the old life we inherited from the fall of Adam and Eve for a new life in Christ. Our study this week is both complex and simple, depending on how deeply people choose to go in Romans 5-8. This is not meant to be an exhaustive study of what many consider to be the foundational core of Paul's gospel. Steering participants back to a broader reading of these chapters and staying close to the questions in our lesson will help them get more of a bird's-eye view of Paul's message and hopefully see the overarching issues that he is addressing.

For starters, it is helpful to take apart the beginning of Paul's letter to the Romans. By his own admission, he had never been to Rome, but he was still anxious to hear how the gospel was advancing in the capital of the empire. He was also eager to share his understanding of the gospel as God had revealed it to him.

Many commentators hold that Paul's entire premise is summed up in Romans 1:16-17, which says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'"

Paul understands the gospel is the power God unleashed for our salvation—for Jew and Gentile alike. He says that in the gospel a righteousness from God has been revealed by faith and for faith, and then quotes an Old Testament verse from Habakkuk 2:4.

Unfortunately, the context of this quote doesn't correlate exactly with Paul's message in Romans 1:17. The issue Habakkuk faced in his time was that the wicked were going unpunished while God appeared to stand idly by. The prophet registered a complaint against God for allowing evil to go on unchecked. But God informed Habakkuk that it would not continue that way forever. The kingdom of Babylon would eventually be the hand of God's judgment for rebellious Judah. But even in the midst of that punishment, a person who was righteous would still be able to live by his or her faith in God. This was a word of promise and hope for Habakkuk and anyone else who feels like they are being overcome by evil.

Paul quotes this verse both to show how God has stepped in to interrupt evil with the good news of Christ in the past. But—and this is very important—Paul very skillfully twists the verse in Habakkuk to reinforce what he is going to share about the gospel later on.

In Habakkuk, the verse reads: "The righteous will live by his faith." But in his original Greek writing, Paul intentionally turns the quote around to read: "By faith the righteous will live." Modern translations miss the nuance in their attempt to render this verse less cumbersome, but the switch from the original is for effect. Romans 1:18–4:25 deals with the first part of the verse by demonstrating that it is only by faith that anyone can become righteous. Paul ends this half of his argument by referencing two important Old Testament characters—Abraham and David—as examples. Abraham was the father of faith, and David was forgiven and justified by faith. In both

Giving Away the Kingdom

Sharing the Good News

I was so happy when Panera Bread (a pastry, sandwich, and coffee shop) opened a restaurant in Knoxville, Tennessee, where I was working as a university chaplain at the time. I could literally walk down the hill in the morning to a scrumptious Danish, bagel, or latte and good conversation with a friend. Imagine my delight one morning when I noticed large garbage bags of discarded Panera morsels waiting to be carted off to the dumpster. Having gotten to know the manager a bit, I asked him about the bags and learned they were filled with day-old bagels and pastries slated for the trash.

This gave me the idea to make these day-old delicacies available to my students. I quickly loaded the bags into my van and carted them up to our student center, where they could be enjoyed by all. Thus began a daily pickup of day-old pastries from Panera Bread. I quickly became the best-loved pastor on campus. However, I soon discovered that the number of pastries was too much for even the students to eat, so I began looking for other places to share them. Next, I was driving up to married student housing and dropping garbage bags full of day-old delights to graduate and international students. This, of course, brought me into contact with lots of people I would never have met without those Panera freebies.

What if sharing the story of Jesus was as easy as giving away sweet rolls? What if this is what Jesus meant for it to be like when He sent out the disciples two by two with instructions to drive out evil spirits, anoint the sick, and proclaim the Good News to the poor? Is this what it means to evangelize and announce the good news of Christ and His kingdom by introducing others to God's new authority in their lives, His forgiving grace, His perfect justice, and a new birth?



1. Which do you like better, hearing a secret or sharing a secret? Why?
2. What's the best news you have ever been privileged to share?



Luke 10:1–24

1. Jesus' instruction to the seventy disciples in verse 9 was, "Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The Kingdom of God has come near to you.'" How does caring for others translate to getting a taste of the kingdom? What have you learned about the benefits of God's kingdom that are revealed through acts of kindness and justice?
2. Why were the disciples so excited that even the demons were subject to them? What does this victory over evil reveal about the overall purpose of Christ? Why did Jesus caution them to be more grateful that their names were already written in heaven than for the fact that they had succeeded in trampling down Satan? Why does Jesus express such joy at the disciples' experience here?
3. What benefits of God's kingdom have you received or been blessed with that you can happily share with others? When has giving away the kingdom produced great joy in your life?

Surprised By the Kingdom: One day while I was walking our dogs, a woman stopped me and asked me to share a treat with her dog. It seemed a rather strange request, so I questioned her. She explained that this was part of the dog's rehabilitation therapy after being used as bait in attack dog training, and pointed to the dog's missing ear. Taking the dog out on walks was helping

her overcome her fear of other dogs—a fear that was now being transferred to men, the real cause of her terror. Having different men stop and give her a treat was helping her realize that all men were not so cruel.

I stooped down and offered the dog a treat from my hand while gently stroking her head as much as she would allow. As I walked on, I could have sworn I heard God whispering in my ear that I had just witnessed the presence of the kingdom. Maybe acts of compassion are the subtle, gentle workings of the mustard seed kingdom—a mustard seed that will one day develop into a large bush that offers a place to nest and shade for all the birds of the air. If so, I want to belong to that kingdom, where the hurts and abuse from the fall are transformed by acts of tender compassion into missions of mercy and grace.

Advancing the Kingdom: Matthew 25:14–30

4. What is the relationship between investing God’s property and giving away the kingdom?
5. What is a talent? Why did the third manager hide his talent? What does hiding our talent represent in this story? What great investments have you already made or can make to advance God’s kingdom?
6. What excites you most about giving away God’s property?
7. How can this group pray for you right now?



1. How is God using *Invitation* in your life and witness this week?
2. We have all been affected by the fall and injustice of Satan’s rule in our lives. Talk about a hurtful or painful experience in your own life that helps you appreciate the coming of the kingdom.
3. How has the simplicity of advancing the kingdom changed your perspective on sharing the Good News of the gospel?



So far in our journey with Jesus, we have seen that Jesus is more than a personal Savior from sin. He is the Messianic king reestablishing God’s rule on earth. Bringing glory to God on earth was His *mission*. “The kingdom of God is at hand!” (Mark 1:15—that was His *message*. He came to invert the fall by calling us to repent of our smaller, self-serving lives and to proclaim the good news about a kingdom where God is at the center of everything. In this government, God is our king and we are His people. A kingdom is wherever a king or queen’s dominion extends and the subjects over which they rule are found. In this government, God rules from the throne of our hearts. When God becomes the center of our lives, everything else begins to fall into place. Jesus came to turn everything back to God!

In ancient and medieval times, the birth of a son and heir to the throne was good news. The birth of a son was especially good news if the king was a good king and the kingdom was prospering under his government. This is where the term “gospel” comes from. The good news, or gospel, was about the extension of a king’s rule. An “evangel” was a person who was sent on a mission to announce the heir to the throne to the rest of the kingdom. Evangelists were agents of the empire who were specially commissioned to announce the good news that the king and queen had given birth to a son and thereby extended their dynasty. The phrase “Long live the King!” referred to the hope that the King would continue his rule through a rightful heir.

The mission and message of Jesus is that God’s rule has been extended! The king has had a son, and God’s rule has been reestablished on earth. As citizens of God’s kingdom, we have the privilege of being evangelists—of announcing the good news that the government of God has been established on earth in the birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of God’s son. Long live our king!

Our role is not to pressure, cajole, or guilt anyone into following God. Our primary role is to announce the good news of God’s government. Our message is a call to hear the good news about God, recognize the opportunity to join in this new life under God’s rule, repent of a life centered on ourselves, and turn to a full life where God is the center and priority in all that we do.

This mission is larger than our personal salvation since it has to do with the renewal of all things. It involves a renewal of the earth, so it has an environmental impact. It affects our relationships with one another as well as how we view others as people made in God’s image and the

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The Main Thing...

is Keeping the Main Thing, the Main Thing!

Self-discipline has never come easy for me. I was the first in my family to enter a four-year, degree-granting institution and had never considered myself an academic. By the first midterm of my freshman year, I had a .075 GPA. I suddenly woke up to the reality that unless I made some drastic improvements, I was going to be a college dropout. I decided it was important that I stay in college, and that learning and making the grade had to become a greater priority if I was ever going to make it.

Obviously things had to be different. At the time I was working a part-time job and living off campus in an apartment that belonged to my brother and his wife, who had not yet relocated to the area. Basically, I was living alone with few boundaries and no accountability. I was also busy making new friends and becoming more and more involved with a charming young female freshman. However, after seeing my startling GPA, I assessed my priorities and decided that I did feel called to ministry and that I wanted to pursue a college degree that would lead to full-time service for Christ. So I moved into the dorm, found a stable, balanced roommate, quit my job, and actually stopped seeing the girlfriend—for a while anyway.

Jesus said we need to know our priorities. On many occasions, He reminded the disciples that the kingdom of God was the most important thing of all. In Luke 14, Jesus emphasized the cost of being a disciple. He never made discipleship seem easy, just full of grace. In Luke 9, He talked about gaining the whole world but losing one's soul. He said that the kingdom was the greatest priority, that it was like finding treasure hidden in a field, and that upon discovery a person must be prepared to sell all they have to own the field and the treasure in it. He also compared the kingdom to someone who searches for fine pearls and after finding one, sells everything to own it. The emphasis is on selling all because the treasure or pearl is worth more than all we now possess.



1. What was your most prized childhood possession? Why did it mean so much to you?
2. What would you find hardest to part with in your life right now?



Matthew 19:16–30

1. What did the rich man have? What did he want? Why did he come to Jesus? What did Jesus have that he wanted?
2. Why did Jesus quiz the man about goodness and refer him back to the law? Why did He question him for calling Him “good”? What was he assuming about Jesus?
3. Did Jesus turn this man away? Why didn't the man recognize the greatness of Jesus' kingdom? What keeps people from selling all they possess for the kingdom today?
4. Why were the disciples fearful of losing out on the kingdom? What does it take to obtain the kingdom?
5. Who do you relate to most in this story, the rich man, Jesus, or the disciples? Why?
6. What is the main priority in your life?
7. How can this group pray for you?



For further study, read Matthew 6:33.

1. Where have you seen evidence of God's kingdom this week?
2. In what way has the kingdom become the main thing in your life?
3. What is your greatest distraction in seeking first the kingdom?
4. How do you see yourself advancing the kingdom among your friends, at work, or at home?
5. How has God used *Invitation* in your life and witness this week?

Note: Have you ever wanted someone or something so badly that you went to bed and woke up thinking about it? Maybe you couldn't get it out of your mind or stop imagining what it would be like to be with that person or have that thing. Maybe it was a new car, a new outfit, or a special person you were falling in love with. Jesus likened the kingdom to our most prized possession—the greatest dream or desire we could have for ourselves. In Matthew, He advised us—no, commanded us—to seek the kingdom first, and promised that in finding it we would find everything else. So you see, the kingdom is not a replacement of our basic needs. It is the key to them and everything else we need. When we possess the kingdom, we lack for nothing. In giving us the kingdom, Jesus is reinstating us with the dominion lost in Adam's fall and enabling God's rule in our lives again in Jesus' name.



We have come a long way since the start of our journey with Jesus. The invitation to come and see has taken us on quite a ride. One of the most impressive things about Jesus is how sure He is of Himself. He is so confident in who He is and certain of His mission that He is completely comfortable with us seeing Him for ourselves and coming to our own conclusions. Besides, He seems to know us better than we know ourselves.

Another surprising thing is how much of His teaching and preaching center around the theme of reestablishing God's rule on earth. The mission of our personal salvation is secondary to the broader purpose of overcoming evil and claiming victory over sin and the devil. Personal salvation is almost a by-product of this larger mission and message of Jesus. Jesus' vision for the world and humanity in general is breathtaking. He will stop at nothing less than our complete and total submission to His Father and the triumph of His Father's glory. Jesus is committed to the kingdom of God because Jesus is committed to God. He knows that only complete surrender to God's will and purpose will effect the change and transformation needed in the world. He is so committed that He was willing to endure Roman crucifixion to accomplish this mission.

Following Jesus and surrendering our lives to Him will mean the end of our own will and way. Embracing the kingdom of God involves a cross of our own. It means that nothing will keep us from the mission and message of Jesus. It is our last and final hope for ourselves and the world. It means that, like Jesus, we will lay down our lives in His death and resurrection to embrace God's vision for ourselves and the world. We want nothing less than what Jesus wants. We aspire to have the same hopes and dreams that Jesus has. We long and pray for the glory of God on earth, for God's love in our hearts, and for unity between ourselves, God, and one another. It means that we have embraced the forgiveness of Jesus for ourselves and for others. We seek His justice for the oppressed and we claim the authority of God that has already been given to Him. In fact, we live our lives under this new authority by announcing the end of the present evil age and the freedom and victory of the cross of Christ. Jesus has brought about a new world order and we are a part of this new thing that God is doing through Him.

The victory of Jesus over death gives us a whole new perspective on the world and everyone in it. We now know that no one is beyond the hope that springs from Jesus' resurrection. Paul reflects on this in his second letter to the Corinthians:

"For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer" (2 Corinthians 5:14-16).

In Jesus' victory and His vision of the world, we see endless possibilities. No one is beyond hope. We are limited only by our own confidence in Jesus' victory over sin and death. We know without a doubt that God is for us and because of Jesus nothing will be able to separate us from God's infinite love. Even death itself is not strong enough to keep us apart from God, since Jesus broke the chains of death. Through Jesus' life we live in a whole new paradigm of God's forgiving grace. We live in the truth of eternal life. We live in the power of God's authority over every power and dominion. There is no sin He has not forgiven. No weakness He has not overcome. No sickness He has not cured. No fear He has not vanquished. No death He has not restored to life. This is the greatest message of hope and life the world will ever know, and we have the privilege of not only swimming in it, but also of drinking it in. We have the joy of proclaiming it to others. Paul's delight continues in the next verses:

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:17-21).

The challenge in this final week of *Invitation* is to clarify what we have seen in our journey with Jesus. These backstories will help you, the leader, to help the others in your group reflect again on all we have seen and heard during our journey with God, and to see what they have seen and embrace what they have embraced. However, it is also important to discuss the observations and lessons that each person has gained during their personal discovery of Jesus' mission and message. Here is where the five S's—*Seek, Soak, Script, Sign, and Share*—will be most important. Have participants take time to look over what they have written during their own journey with Jesus and reflect on how God has used *Invitation* in their own lives. The closing questions of this lesson will also be an important step in understanding the message God has for each one of us.

In the end, *Invitation* is a precursor to an even deeper walk of discipleship with Jesus. *Invitation* only asks us to come and see, and then to make up our own minds about what we have seen and heard. The next step that Jesus invites those of us who understood His mission and message to do is to follow. *Greater Things*, the next Bible study in the *Journey* series is a lesson on discipleship from the Gospel of Matthew that invites us to a whole new level of relationship and commitment to Jesus. For those who understand the mission and message of Jesus and want to follow Him, you are invited to pick up your cross and follow Jesus into a new life of discipleship, where, in the words of Eugene Petersen, we can learn how to do life with Jesus as "learning the unforced rhythms of grace" (Matthew 11:28).

We have come so far with Jesus. We have seen too much to ever be happy with the world again outside of His vision and purpose for it and ourselves. We can identify with the disciples in John 6, when many of those in the crowd who had been following Jesus decided to turn and walk away. "'You do not want to leave too, do you?'" Jesus asked the twelve. But Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God'" (John 6: 67-69).

We, too, have come to see and know that He is the Christ—the Savior of the world. The only thing left to do, like Peter and the rest of the twelve, is to follow!
