

NEW HOPE MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH

**WHAT CHRISTIANS BELIEVE**  
**BIBLE STUDY SERIES**



12 LIFE GROUP STUDIES

# WHAT CHRISTIANS BELIEVE

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# Getting the Most Out of *Christian Beliefs*

Many new Christians learn all of what they know about the Christian faith through church teachings, Pastors or Ministers sermons and Bible studies. Some soon discover however, that many Bible studies and sermons leave them both confused and frustrated. Many have trouble putting all the pieces together especially since various denominations seem to hold different and often conflicting views. Much of this boils down to problems in exegesis and or interpretation. The enemy is crafty enough to know that confusion and frustration can cause some to be very errant in their beliefs as Christians. This has led to many professing Christians of our day to conclude that there is no one solid source of truth and so they develop belief systems of their own and use statements such as “My Truth.” There is only one source of truth, and that is God’s Word. In our study we will study basic foundational Christian doctrine that all Christians should know and believe.

Although there have always been theological differences among Christians, there is a great deal that we have in common. C. S. Lewis called this common core of belief “mere Christianity.” These common beliefs can be briefly summarized under six headings.

- Revelation.** It refers not to the last book in the Bible but to how God makes himself known.
- God.** What is he like? What can we know about him?
- Human Nature.** What are we like? How are we to relate to God? What happened when we sinned?
- Salvation.** What has God done to rescue us from sin?
- The Church.** Jesus has called us to follow him together. What does he require of us?
- The Last Things.** Jesus is coming back. How can we live in hopeful expectation?

These headings also provide the outline for our study guide.

A systematic study of our beliefs as Christians can provide many personal and practical benefits. First, Christian beliefs help us make sense of the world we live in. How can we explain the presence of both incredible beauty and ugliness in the world? Why do we see not only supreme goodness but also diabolical evil? A knowledge of basic Christian beliefs helps us wrestle with questions that have baffled people for centuries.

Second, Christian beliefs strengthen our identity in Christ. Our culture urges us to seek our identity in our possessions, our personal achievements or our careers. Yet Scripture tells us our identity is not derived from these things. It depends not on how others see us, but on how God sees us. As we learn the essential beliefs of Christianity, we begin to discover who we really are.

Third, Christian beliefs not only guide our thinking but also direct our behavior. In our day we desperately need men and women of integrity, people who are living examples of biblical values. As we learn these essential values, the Holy Spirit gradually transforms us into the likeness of Christ himself. Christian beliefs build Christian character.

Finally, and most importantly, Christian beliefs help us draw near to God. As we look into the Scriptures, we come to know the Author of Scripture. Biblical truths become a window into the heart and mind of God.

In our day there is this wishy-washy relativism that masquerades as faith which says, “It doesn’t matter what you believe, just as long as you believe.” “All roads lead to God.” “The important thing is to be sincere.” If we really know what we believe, we will resist such shallow claims. God is personal. He has told us about himself and what he requires of us. All the rich knowledge of God is expressed through our Christian beliefs.

If we approach the Scriptures with humility and a fervent heart, Christian beliefs can strengthen our faith and ignite our souls. For a comprehensive overview of Christian doctrine you might want to also check out *Know the Truth* by Bruce Milne, *Knowing Christianity* by J. I. Packer, *Theology for Ordinary People* by Bruce L. Shelley or *Foundations of the Christian Faith* by James Montgomery Boice.

## **Study helps for your Individual Study**

1. As you begin each study, pray that God will speak to you through his Word.
2. Read the introduction to the study and respond to the personal reflection question or exercise. This is designed to help you focus on God and on the theme of the study.
3. Each study deals with a particular passage so that you can delve into the biblical author’s meaning in that context. Read and reread the passage to be studied. If you are studying a book, it will be helpful to read through the entire book prior to the first study.
4. This is an inductive Bible study, designed to help you discover for yourself what Scripture is saying. Each study includes three types of questions. *Observation* questions ask about the basic facts: who, what, when, where and how. *Interpretation* questions delve into the meaning of the passage. *Application* questions help you discover the implications of the text for growing in Christ. These three keys unlock the treasures of Scripture.  
Write your answers to the questions in the spaces provided or in a personal journal.  
Writing can bring clarity and deeper understanding of yourself and of God’s Word.
5. It might be good to have a Bible dictionary handy. Use it to look up any unfamiliar words, names, or places.
6. Use the prayer suggestion to guide you in thanking God for what you have learned and to pray about the applications that have come to mind.
7. Spend some time on the suggestion under “Now or Later,” for practical application of what you have learned in the study.

## Study helps for Members of a Life Group Study

1. Come to the study prepared. Follow the suggestions for individual study mentioned above.  
You will find that careful preparation will greatly enrich your time spent in group discussion.
2. Be willing to participate in the discussion. The leader of your group will not be lecturing. Instead, he or she will be encouraging the members of the group to discuss what they have learned. The leader will be asking the questions that are found in our study guide.
3. Stick to the topic being discussed. Your answers should be based on the verses which are the focus of the discussion and not on outside authorities such as commentaries or speakers. These studies focus on a particular passage of Scripture.
4. Be sensitive to the other members of the group. Listen attentively when they describe what they have learned. You may be surprised by their insights! Each question assumes a variety of answers. Many questions do not have “right” answers, particularly questions that aim at meaning or application. Instead the questions push us to explore the passage more thoroughly. When possible, link what you say to the comments of others. Also, be affirming whenever you can. This will encourage some of the more hesitant members of the group to participate.
5. Be careful not to dominate the discussion. We are sometimes so eager to express our thoughts that we leave too little opportunity for others to respond. By all means participate! But allow others to also.
6. Expect God to teach you through the passage being discussed and through the other members of the group. Pray that you will have an enjoyable and profitable time together, but also that as a result of the study you will find ways that you can take action individually and/or as a group.
7. Remember that anything said in the group is considered confidential and should not be discussed outside the group unless specific permission is given to do so.
8. If you are the group leader, you will find additional suggestions at the back of the guide.

# Session 1

## REVELATION

### *God in the World & in the Word*

#### *Psalm 19*

Although I was raised in the church to be honest, I had a problem believing in God or making any sense out of believing in God. When I look back often as a teenager when it came to belief in God I was confused, frustrated and sometimes angry. However, I found my unbelief hard to maintain. My adolescent questions weren't answered or satisfied in my going to church. I went to church with my family, and I heard much about God but did I really know Him? I knew very little about Him but I'm so glad He knew me. It was during my last years of high school and my first year in the military, God began to reveal himself to me in ways that I couldn't deny. After a year of His constant calling, I yielded.

**GROUP DISCUSSION.** C. S. Lewis writes, "Avoiding [God], in many times and places, has proved so difficult that a very large part of the human race has failed to achieve it." What influences and events have led you to faith in God?

**PERSONAL REFLECTION.** Both head and heart are required for a healthy relationship with God. Sit quietly and then consider: What do I feel toward God right now?

*General revelation* refers to the way that God makes his existence known in the world. *Special revelation* is the term for how God makes his will known to his people. Psalm 19 is a meditative reflection by the psalmist on both special and general revelation. *Re-read Psalm 19.*

1. How does the psalmist help us perceive the presence of the invisible God?

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2. The psalmist views the world as we might view a work of art (v. 1). How does seeing the world in this way help us to appreciate God's glory?

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3. The psalmist says the creation speaks in every language and in every corner of the world (v. 2). What can anyone in the world know about God through creation?

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4. What are some things about God that can't be known through creation?

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5. The sun gets special mention (vv. 4–6). How is God's glory particularly revealed in the sun?

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6. Which aspects of creation have helped you learn the most about God and his glory? Explain.

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7. In verses 7–14 the psalmist shifts his focus from the way God makes himself known in creation to the way he reveals himself in his law. What words does the psalmist use to describe God’s law?

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8. According to the psalmist, what are the benefits of knowing God’s law?

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What benefits have you received from God’s law?

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9. Why would reflecting on God’s creation and his law cause David to think about his own responsibility before God (vv. 11–13)?

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How do both nature and God’s law bring up the idea of sin and our need of forgiveness?

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10. God is a person who is making an effort to be known. What should you be willing to do to know him better?

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*Tell God that you want to know him better. Ask him to open your eyes to a sense of his presence and your mind to the understanding of his character.*

**Now or Later**

The sense of God’s presence is all around us, but for many reasons we are dull in our spiritual perception. Keep a record this week of every time that God comes to mind. At the end of the week review your notes and see if there are special actions or places that are a special means of God’s presence in your life.

# Session 2

## KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

### *Knowing God*

### *Isaiah 40:9–31*

With over thirty years of ministry, I've had the privilege of encountering many people who were not Christians. When talking to people about God, it's not uncommon to hear them say: "My God is not like that."

Different religions are all around us secularism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam to name a few and every religion has its own set of beliefs about God. As Christians we believe in the God of Abraham, the God and Father of Jesus Christ. But who is he, and what is he like?

**GROUP DISCUSSION.** What are some common opinions that you run into about what God is like?

**PERSONAL REFLECTION.** A. W. Tozer wrote, "What comes into your mind when you think about God is the most important thing about you." Consider what comes into your mind when you think about God.

In this chapter Isaiah writes as though Judah's captivity in Babylon judgment is almost over. His comforting words present a dramatic portrait of God. *Re-read Isaiah 40:9–31.*

**1.** Some people have the idea that thinking about the character of God is abstract and not very practical. What might Isaiah say to that? (Draw from his proclamation of the good tidings of God, vv. 9–11.)

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**2.** What do Isaiah's questions encourage us to ponder about God (vv. 12–14)?

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**3.** Focus on verses 15–24. What encouraging insights about God does Isaiah's contrasting of God with the nations surrounding Israel lead to?

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**4.** Isaiah prophesied in order to bring comfort to Israel as they were facing threats from other countries. What comfort do you receive from knowing God has power over the nations?

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**5.** Isaiah exposes the foolishness of idolatry (vv. 18–24) in his day by comparing it to the power of the Creator God. What idols in our culture need to be exposed as foolish by the power of the Creator God?

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6. Why is it that worshiping idols in any age and culture seems preferable to worshiping the living God?

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7. Some people today view God as an uninvolved Creator who stands at a distance to watch his world. What does verse 26 reveal about God's involvement?

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8. Classical theology describes the essential characteristics of God as eternal God's existence which transcends time, infinite, unlimited by time or by space, omnipresent, present everywhere at all times, and omniscient, knowing everything that is happening everywhere. How many of these characteristics can you discover in verses 27 and 28?

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9. Some people in Isaiah's time, not understanding these wonderful characteristics of God, complain that God doesn't know what is happening to them (vv. 27–28). What hope does Isaiah offer them (vv. 28–31)?

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10. What does it personally and practically mean to you that God's knowledge is not limited by anything?

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11. Those who know God look to him for help. Describe a time when the Lord renewed your strength or enabled you to soar on wings like an eagle.

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*Ask God to enable you to find strength for the challenges you face in his wonderful character and his personal commitment to you.*

### **Now or Later**

One famous description of God contained in the Westminster Shorter Catechism is this: "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, justice and love." Choose a characteristic of God mentioned in this definition for each day of the upcoming week. Reflectively ponder that characteristic throughout the day; consider why it's good that God is like that. Consider as well what you (and the world) would be missing if he weren't.

God is holy (Exodus 3:5–6; 19:23); God is good (Luke 18:19; Romans 8:28); God is omnipresent (Psalm 139:7–10); God is omniscient (1 John 3:20; Matthew 6:8) God is omnipotent (Matthew 19:26; Psalm 115:3); God is immutable—unchanging in his character (Malachi 3:6; James 1:17); God is perfect (Matthew 5:48); God is love (John 3:16; Romans 5:8; 1 John 4:10–11); God is forgiving and compassionate (Psalm 103:3–6; Exodus 3:7–8).

# Session 3

## CHRISTOLOGY

*Jesus: God with Us*

*John 1:1–18*

Almost everyone believes *something* about Jesus. Some suggest that he was merely a great teacher. But as C. S. Lewis wrote, any serious look at the Gospels rules out that option. In fact, Lewis reduced our options to three words: *liar, lunatic* or *Lord*.

If Jesus knew he was not God but chose to deceive others anyway, then he was a liar. If he truly thought he was God but was self-deluded, then he was a lunatic. However, if Jesus was neither a liar nor a lunatic, then the third option is inescapable he is Lord and has the right to be believed and obeyed.

**GROUP DISCUSSION.** What are some common opinions in your experience that people express about Jesus?

**PERSONAL REFLECTION.** What in your personal experience led you to believe in Jesus as Lord? What continues to affirm and confirm your faith that he is Lord?

Through their accounts of Jesus' teaching and actions, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John show us his divine character and the eternally saving work he achieved for us. In classic theology this is referred to as "the person and work of Jesus." The Gospel of John is the most explicit of all four Gospels in declaring Jesus' person and work in its opening verses. *Re-read John 1:1–18.*

1. John writes with images and metaphors, referring to Jesus as the *Word*, the *life* and the *light* (vv. 1–9). What do these images communicate about him?

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2. How have you experienced Jesus as Word, life and light?

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3. The opening words about the Word are not easy to comprehend (vv. 1–4). As we seek to unravel these puzzling words, we are confronted with our limited ability to comprehend God. How do you respond to the idea that the Word is both God and with God?

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4. What actions that only God can do are attributed to the Word?

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5. Why might these verses and others like them lead early Christian theologians to develop the doctrine of the Trinity that there is one God but three persons?

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6. How does John’s mention of light versus darkness prepare us to understand the outcome of Jesus’ earthly ministry (vv. 5, 10–13)?

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How does it help us understanding the subsequent course of Christianity through the march of two thousand years of history?

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7. Not only is Jesus God, but he became a human (vv. 14–15). This is referred to in classic theology as the incarnation. Why might the incarnation be described as the ultimate miracle against which all other supernatural works of God pale in comparison?

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8. How do these verses speak to the mistaken teaching that Jesus was merely an enlightened human with a highly developed “God consciousness”?

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9. How do these verses speak to the mistaken teaching that Jesus became God because of the outstanding quality of the moral life that he lived?

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10. John claims that they all received “one blessing after another” from Jesus (v. 16). What blessing does he refer to in verses 12 and 13?

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What are some of the blessings you have received from your relationship with God through Jesus?

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*Thank God that he has come from heaven to enter the events of your life.*

### **Now or Later**

The privilege of becoming children of God is given to those who believe in the name of Jesus. Perhaps you could enter more fully into the emotional knowledge of this reality by picturing yourself as a child sitting in the lap of God as your heavenly parent. Sit there for a while and enjoy the care and security of his loving presence. After you have spent time in his presence, make a note of how it affected you. For further study on God as Trinity:

- The Father is God: 1 Corinthians 8:6; John 5:23–24, 26; 8:54
- The Son is God: John 8:58–59; Colossians 1:15–19; 2:9
- The Holy Spirit is God: Psalm 139:7; Acts 5:3–4; Hebrews 9:14.

# Session 4

## THE HELPER

*The Holy Spirit*

*John 14:15–27*

While in Belgium in the military I was a member of a denomination that is considered charismatic. While in bible college I attended the Baptist church that I grew up in. In my home church there was very little if any teaching on the person and ministry of the Holy Spirit let alone gifts of the Spirit. When I advanced in my education as a theological graduate student, I had to explore the work of the Holy Spirit. I attended a seminary that taught that the gifts of the Spirit and supernatural manifestations had not ceased at the end of the first century. However, I had friends involved in other non-charismatic movements who assured me that this was not true as they spoke from their spiritual experience. Who was I to believe?

**GROUP DISCUSSION.** Teaching about the Holy Spirit can be exciting for some and threatening for others. Some churches major on the work of the Holy Spirit and the gifts he brings. Other churches don't mention the Holy Spirit or spiritual gifts at all. What is your experience?

Why do you think that issues about the Holy Spirit can generate such emotion?

**PERSONAL REFLECTION.** In what ways are you aware of the work of the Spirit in your life? In what ways would you like to see the work of the Spirit in your life?

In pondering the differences I began to see that understanding the Holy Spirit begins not with spiritual gifts but with a personal connection with Jesus Christ. The foundational teaching on the Holy Spirit comes from Jesus as he prepares his disciples for a new spiritual connection with them that will bridge the gap between heaven and earth. *Re-read John 14:15–27.*

1. The night before his crucifixion Jesus tell his disciples that he is leaving them. They are troubled and fearful (14:1, 27). What does he say to calm their fears?

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2. How do the titles Counselor and Spirit of truth (vv. 16–17) help them understand the nature of the One Jesus promised?

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How have you experienced the Holy Spirit as a counselor and Spirit of truth?

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3. What is the difference between a Christian's experience of the Holy Spirit and those of the world (vv. 17–18)?

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**4.** From your experience, how can our daily concerns either dull or awaken our sense of the Spirit's presence?

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**5.** Jesus promises that the relationship with the Spirit will be both *permanent* (v. 16) and *intimate* (v. 17). How does this address the anxiety of the disciples?

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How might this address your spiritual anxieties?

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**6.** Jesus promised to not leave us as orphans but continue with us through the Holy Spirit (v. 18). What is the relationship between the Jesus and the Holy Spirit?

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How might this insight about the presence of Jesus and the Holy Spirit help provide a bridge between denominational differences on the Holy Spirit?

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**7.** In the midst of anxiety Jesus promises peace (v. 27). What ministries of the Holy Spirit bring peace to Jesus' followers (vv. 25–27)?

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Other places in the New Testament teach us that the Spirit works both in our hearts directly and through fellow Christians (Ephesians 1:17–18 and Ephesians 4:11–12). How have you experienced the ministry of the Spirit?

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**8.** What differences are there between the Spirit-inspired peace of Jesus and that of the world (vv. 25–27)?

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**9.** As has been noted before, Christians believe that God is Trinity. There is one God existing in three persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Based on this passage, how would you describe the relationship between Jesus, the Father and the Holy Spirit?

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**10.** Throughout this passage, Jesus emphasizes the importance of keeping his commands in order to be in loving spiritual connection with him through the Holy Spirit (vv. 15–16, 21, 23). Describe the relationship between love and obedience.

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## 11. What has this study revealed to you about your relationship with the Holy Spirit?

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*Pray the apostle Paul's prayer that ties the ministry of the Father, Son and Spirit together in the depth of our being: "For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:14–19).*

### **Now or Later**

Ask God to refresh and renew your sense of the Spirit's work. Perhaps you could picture your heart as a large empty pool. Invite the Spirit to fill it. As you do make a note of what sort of insights and perspectives you gain about the Spirit's work inside of you.

Take time to read more about different aspects of the Spirit:

- the Spirit of God at creation (Genesis 1:1)
- the Spirit of God as God's presence (Psalm 139:7)
- the Spirit of God as holy (Isaiah 63:10)
- the Spirit of God as God's power (Zechariah 4:6)
- the Spirit of God as God (John 4:24)
- the Spirit of God as God's wisdom (John 14:26)

# Session 5

## IMAGO DEI *Our Identity & Dignity* *Genesis 1:24–2:25*

John Calvin, one of the early Reformers of the church, wrote in the opening pages of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that it wasn't clear which came first, a knowledge of ourselves or a knowledge of God our Creator. In any case, he wrote that our knowledge of self and God are important issues and inseparably intertwined.

**GROUP DISCUSSION.** Who are the people that have most shaped the way you perceive yourself?

**PERSONAL REFLECTION.** What makes you feel good about yourself? (Be honest!)

According to Genesis, we are made in the image of God (*Imago Dei*). In this study we will consider what that means. *Re-read Genesis 1:24–2:25.*

1. We humans were created on the sixth day, along with the land animals. We are similar to them yet very different. What special privileges did God bestow on humanity (1:24–31)?

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2. Compare the two accounts of the creation of the human race (1:26–30 and 2:4–25). What different emphasis is given in each account?

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Together what do they teach us about ourselves?

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3. How would you describe God's relationship with Adam (2:15–18)?

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4. Imagine Adam beginning life with just the animals around him and no contact with God. How would his life have been different?

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5. Like Adam, we too need to be on personal terms with God. How does knowing God make a difference in the way you live and think about yourself?

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**6.** Adam was given complete freedom in the Garden except for access to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:15–17). In what ways do you think placing that tree off-limits would have affected Adam?

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What would Adam learn about God by this prohibition?

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**7.** What benefits have you received by the freedoms and restraints that God requires of you?

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**8.** One of the special abilities that God gave to Adam, and all humans, is the ability to name (2:19). How does this naming ability set Adam, and all humans, apart from the rest of creation?

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**9.** As Adam is naming the animals, he discovers a need for companionship that isn't being met (1:18–25). How would you describe the intended relationship between Adam and Eve?

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In what ways would Eve fill a need for companionship and help that neither God nor the animals filled?

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**10.** God says that it isn't good for a man to be alone (1:18). From your experience, what is wrong with being alone?

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How does feeling alone affect your sense of identity and self-worth?

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**11.** Summarize the essentials of human identity that come from Genesis.

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How might this passage provide insight for you to grow in your sense of dignity and self-worth?

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*Ask God to provide you with the relationships, responsibilities and personal connection with him that are essential for your well-being.*



**Now or Later**

Since we are made in the image of God, we are very valuable. When we lose sight of this, we seek our values in what we own, what we do or the status others attribute to us. In order to gain a glimpse of your value to God, why not give him all your false sources of value and ask him to affirm you as his creation and his child. Picture yourself standing before him now with a box full of your trophies that stand for your efforts to achieve personal significance. Give them over to him and invite him to affirm you. After you have done this, make a note of how it affected you.

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# Session 6

## Fallen

### *Identity & Depravity* *Genesis 3*

Terrible themes recur in the evening news—pain, conflict, violence and corruption. Through the miracle of technology, we often see people inflict pain on other people. The victims of pain stretch from the cities we live in to the far reaches of the world. Every night there is a dreary inevitability about it. The themes are the same; only the names and circumstances change.

**GROUP DISCUSSION.** How can we explain this constant and universal pain and corruption? Is that just the way life is? Are they the result of evolution? natural causes? God? humanity? Explain.

**PERSONAL REFLECTION.** How do you feel when you hurt others because of your selfishness or thoughtlessness?

Genesis 3 is one of the most pivotal chapters in Scripture as we see the introduction of Christian understandings of the origin of human sin. *Re-read Genesis 3.*

1. If you were making a movie based on this passage, describe the music you would use for the background.

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2. The scene opens with a conversation between the serpent and the woman (vv. 1–5). How does the serpent raise doubts about God’s motives?

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3. The evil one approached Adam and Eve through the serpent. What disguises does he use today?

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In what situations might he try to get us to question God’s character and motives?

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4. Adam and Eve chose to disobey God. What do you think may have been going through their minds as they were eating the fruit (vv. 6–7)?

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**5.** The first “fruit” of their disobedience was a sense of nakedness (v. 7). Why do you think they felt a need to make coverings for themselves?

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**6.** Since Adam and Eve, all of us (except Jesus) have sinned. What “fig leaves” do we use to cover our own sins?

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**7.** As God appears in the Garden (vv. 8–9), Adam and Eve are hiding in the bushes. How do we hide from God?

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**8.** The Lord knows everything. Why then do you think he uses questions to investigate Adam and Eve’s sin (vv. 9–13)?

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**9.** In response to sin, God delivers a curse. As the curse spreads throughout creation, what effects will it have on the human race (vv. 14–19)?

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**10.** What hope does God provide even as he is delivering judgment (v. 15)?

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**11.** Although his law is broken, God takes steps to extend his grace.

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How does he give protection and grace to our sin-damaged race (vv. 21–24)?

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**12.** There is no hope for us until we acknowledge that sin affects us—our relationships, self-image, actions and so on. How can we become more honest about ourselves and our sin?

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**13.** This study and study five together cover the essentials of the Christian understanding of human nature. Summarize your understanding of human nature from Genesis 1–3.

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*The following prayer comes from churches with a strong liturgical tradition. Conclude your study time by praying this prayer or rephrasing it in a way that you feel comfortable: “Almighty God, my heavenly Father: I have sinned against you, through my own fault, in thought, and word and deed, and in what I have left undone. For the sake of your Son our Lord Jesus Christ, forgive me all my offenses and grant that I may serve you in newness of life, to the glory of your Name. Amen.”*

**Now or Later**

Invite God to take a tour of your inner life for the purpose of cleaning it out. Keep in mind that the purpose of this tour is not to condemn you but to cleanse you. As God walks through the corridors of your heart, let him see your self-centeredness, envy, anger, jealousy, bitterness and whatever else that God calls sin. Ask God to cleanse each sin with his transforming holiness and grace. After you have spent some time with God on this tour, make a note about how it affected you.

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# Session 7

## JUSTIFIED *The Great Deliverance* *Romans 3:9–31*

Funny thing, *sin* is not a word that we use to describe wrongful behavior anymore. Somewhere in the twentieth century it dropped out of our daily speech. Yet, although the word *sin* is no longer used, the experience of guilt is as prevalent as ever.

**GROUP DISCUSSION.** What is the attitude of those around you—in your workplace and neighborhood—to the word *sin*?

Why do you think the word *sin* has fallen out of use in our daily vocabulary?

How does the contemporary attitude toward sin affect the way people think about Christianity?

**PERSONAL REFLECTION.** What sins do you struggle with, and how does the sense of being a sinner affect the way you feel about yourself?

God takes sin very seriously. That is why he has sent his Son to deliver us. The classic term to describe his initial work of deliverance is *justification*. The passage you are about to read is the most complete summary of justification in the New Testament. *Re-read Romans 3:9–20.*

1. Notice Paul's use of the words *all* and *no one* (vv. 9–12). How would you respond to those who claim that anyone who seeks God and does good will be acceptable to him?

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2. Paul mentions several parts of the human body—throats, tongues, lips, mouths, feet and eyes (vv. 13–18). How do these paint a vivid picture of our spiritual and moral condition?

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3. Why do you think we seldom see ourselves or those we know as fitting his description?

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4. Jews tried to follow the Old Testament law as a means for overcoming sin. What was wrong with this (vv. 19–20)?

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5. *Read Romans 3:21–31.* What hope does God offer those who are condemned, who have failed to become righteous by law?

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What is God’s part and what is our part in this righteousness?

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6. What key words in verses 24–25 describe what God has done for us in Christ?

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7. We are “justified freely” (v. 24), which means to be legally acquitted of all wrongdoing. What is free and what is costly about our justification?

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8. The word *redemption* (v. 24) means to be bought from bondage to sin and freed into fellowship with God. How have you experienced deliverance from the slavery of avoiding and disobeying God?

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9. The words “sacrifice of atonement” (v. 25) come from the temple sacrifices. How do you respond to the fact that Christ died the horrible death you deserved?

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10. How does the righteousness from God demolish human pride (vv. 28–30)?

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11. This passage shows all that God has done to restore our relationship with him. How do you feel toward God after reading this passage?

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12. Based on this passage, how would you explain to a non-Christian both the bad news about sin and the good news about Jesus Christ?

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*Thank God that he has delivered you from bondage to sin and delivered you into the kingdom of his Son, in which we have redemption from sin and great spiritual blessings both for this life and the life to come.*

### **Now or Later**

In the “Now or Later” section of the last study, you invited God to take a tour of your heart in order to expose some of the sins that were present. Review those sins that you became aware of. Now picture yourself standing before God in a courtroom with all those sins listed on legal

document. Allow God to take that list and give it to Jesus Christ. Then listen to hear him say directly to you, “Not Guilty.” What responses do you have?

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Memorize the following classic definition of *justification*: “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, by which he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.”

# Session 8

## SANCTIFIED

### *Freedom to Be Holy*

#### *Romans 8:1–17*

Addiction is slavery. We start out enjoying what later becomes a habit we can't break. Whether it is food, drugs or alcohol, there is a humiliating bondage to anything that controls us. Sin is an addiction. We may choose to do some action that we know to be wrong but seems to be pleasurable. We think we can stop whenever we choose but soon discover that we have desires that overcome our will to resist.

**GROUP DISCUSSION.** By the end of the first thousand years of Christian history, the church had identified seven deadly sins: envy, lust, sloth, pride, greed, gluttony and hate. What is “deadly” about each of these sins?

**PERSONAL REFLECTION.** Are there any of the seven deadly sins that you especially struggle with? How has God been working in your life to deliver you?

Once God has broken the power of sin through justification (study 7), he now leads us into the battle to stay free from sin. The classic term for this is *sanctification*. *Re-read Romans 8:1–17.*

1. What resounding good news does Paul declare to those who struggle with sin (vv. 1–4)?

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2. How does deliverance from the condemnation of sin (v. 1) contribute to our deliverance from the act of sin?

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3. God is not willing to leave us in a desperate state of condemnation. According to verses 1–17, how is the entire Trinity—Father, Son and Spirit—involved in our deliverance?

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4. What contrasts does Paul make between those who live by the Spirit and those who live by their sinful nature (vv. 5–8)?

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How can we know which description applies to us (v. 9)?

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5. Paul states that Christians do not live according to the sinful nature (v. 4) and are not controlled by the sinful nature (v. 9). How does that fit with your experience? Explain.

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6. According to Paul, what role does the mind play in a life of sin or a life of righteousness (vv. 5–8)?

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How have you observed the role of the mind in your own combat with sin?

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7. In living righteously, what is the difference between setting our minds on the Spirit and sheer willpower?

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8. Explain in your own words the deep tension that exists between our body and our spirit (v. 10).

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How will the Holy Spirit ultimately resolve that tension (v. 11)?

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9. In light of what he has written, Paul states that we have an obligation (v. 12). What is our part and what is the Spirit's part in fulfilling that obligation (vv. 12–17)?

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10. As you look back at this passage, how would you summarize the Spirit's work in our holiness?

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11. How can you cooperate with the Spirit as he keeps you free from the addiction to sin?

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12. Salvation could be described as both a definite act of God and an ongoing process. How do both *justification* (study 7) and *sanctification* work together to provide the way for living a holy life?

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*Thank God that he has delivered you from the condemnation of sin and the guilty conscious it produces. Ask that the Spirit might work in you the joy of being cleansed and forgiven*

### **Now or Later**

The following verses provide some further insight into the process of sanctification: Romans 6:4, 14; Ephesians 4:23–24; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Peter 1:3–11; 3:1–3.

# Session 9

## OUR GLORIOUS FUTURE

*The Best Is Yet to Come*

*Romans 8:18–39*

Whether your life has been relatively free of trouble or full of pain, there comes a point when you begin to feel there has to be more to this life—somewhere. Several years ago some commercials summarized a popular attitude: “You only go around once in life, so grab all the gusto you can get.” Such an approach may sound attractive, but it isn’t real. Ultimately we become frustrated as we find that some pleasures are beyond our reach or fail to live up to our expectations. The Bible presents a different perspective toward life. The good things we experience now are just a taste of what is to come. And the suffering we see and feel encourages us to live in anticipation of Christ’s return.

**GROUP DISCUSSION.** When you think of life beyond the grave, what comes to mind?

**PERSONAL REFLECTION.** What experiences cause you to reflect on the limitations of this life?

God has delivered us from condemnation of sin through justification (study 7) and has given us the power to wrestle with sin by means of sanctification. In addition he wants us to anticipate and aspire to a greater experience of freedom in heaven on the other side of death. This final state of God’s victory over sin is, in classic Christian teaching, called *glorification*. *Re-read Romans 8:18–27.*

**1.** How does Paul describe the suffering that we (and the rest of creation) experience during the present time (vv. 18–25)?

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**2.** What hope does Paul offer us in the midst of our suffering (vv. 18–25)?

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How does the hope of future glory encourage you when you are suffering?

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**3.** Paul speaks of waiting eagerly (v. 19) and waiting patiently (v. 25). How can these two ideas be reconciled?

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**4.** How does the Spirit help us during our present sufferings, groanings and weakness (vv. 26–27)?

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5. Read Romans 8:28–39. What is God’s good purpose for us (vv. 29–30)?

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What steps has God taken in order to fulfill that purpose?

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6. Verse 28 is often misread. What is the difference between God “working in all things” (the better reading) and “causing all things” (the conventional misreading) for the good of those who love him?

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7. Describe a time when the knowledge of God’s loving control was a source of strength and comfort to you.

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8. What guarantee do we have that God will fulfill his promises to us (vv. 31–34)?

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9. Notice the dangers Paul says we face in this life (vv. 35–39). When have dangers and problems caused you to question God’s love?

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10. How do the powerful enemies that threaten us actually reveal the strength and depth of God’s love (vv. 37–39)?

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11. God’s saving work is constant in our lives. How might the following sentences be a helpful summary of the classic Christian understanding of salvation encompassing justification, sanctification and glorification: I have been saved. I am being saved. I shall be saved.

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12. How does your understanding of salvation as justification, sanctification and glorification affect the way you think and experience the Christian life?

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*Thank God for his love, present help and promises of future glory.*

### **Now or Later**

Picture yourself on the other side of death: you no longer struggle with sin, physical or emotional weakness, or any other problem. As you look back on your life, what do you see?

For further study read Philippians 1:21–22; 2:12–13; Hebrews 12:1–3; Revelation 4:1–5:14.

# Session 10

## THE CHURCH GOD SEES

### *The Mission of the Church*

#### *Acts 2*

Many have become disillusioned with the church and dropped out. Many resist those from the church who seek to evangelize them. But even as they resist, there is something that shines through the genuine fellowship of believers that appeals to them and attracts them. The Holy Spirit draws those who have genuinely been converted but have possibly been hurt or confused and walked away from the true fellowship. The Holy Spirit helps to draw them both to the Lord and the church.

**GROUP DISCUSSION.** What does your church do to participate in the mission of spreading the good news of salvation? What excites you about this?

Is there anything about the way your church is active in evangelism and missions that makes you uncomfortable? Explain.

**PERSONAL REFLECTION.** What motivates you to share your faith with others?

The church is God's mission base. In addition to saving us by means of justification, sanctification and glorification, God puts us together with others through whom he can continue to both enrich us and share with us the task of proclaiming his saving work to others who don't yet know him. *Re-rad Acts 2:1-41.*

**1.** Looking over the whole chapter, what is the role of the three persons of the Trinity in the mission of the church?

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**2.** The events on the day of Pentecost begin to fulfill Jesus' promise in Acts 1:8 of church growth. What is there about this experience that lays the foundation for the church to be multicultural, multigenerational and multinational?

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**3.** In what ways have you experienced the church as multicultural, multigenerational and multinational?

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**4.** Peter and the disciples had been in hiding in fear and confusion after Jesus' crucifixion. How would you compare the attitude of Peter and the early church now?

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**5.** The mission of the church is to proclaim the message “Jesus, whom you crucified, [is] both Lord and Christ” (v. 36). What reasons does Peter offer for believing that message (vv. 22–41)?

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**6.** How does that first message about Jesus compare and contrast with the message the church proclaims today? (Give examples.)

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**7.** Thousands responded to Peter’s sermon (v. 22–39). Why do you think his message was so convincing to the people gathered in Jerusalem?

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How convincing is that message in our culture today? Explain.

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**8.** *Read Acts 2:42–47.* The church’s mission and message created a fellowship. How would you describe that first fellowship of believers?

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**9.** There were larger worship gatherings at the temple and smaller gatherings in homes (v. 46). Why are both important?

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**10.** “The Lord added to their number daily” (v. 47). What is our role and what is God’s role in the growth of the church?

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**11.** What are the consequences of losing sight of our role or God’s role in adding people to the church?

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**12.** In what ways could your church or fellowship benefit from the example of the early church described in this chapter?

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*Ask God to give you the motivation to share in the task of spreading the good news of salvation to those who are like you and to those who are different from you.*

**Now or Later**

Sharing the good news of Jesus with another in a way that leads to conversion is generally a process that takes place over a period of time rather than a one-time experience. What was the process by which you came to a saving faith in Jesus Christ?

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How have you been involved in the process of sharing the faith with someone not yet a Christian?

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# Session 11

## COMMON-UNITY

### *The Community of the Church*

#### *Ephesians 4:1–16*

The church is made up of all who call on the name of the Lord. We are *one* in Jesus Christ. We share a common-unity community. But the practice of Christian community is difficult. For example, there is a well-known Christian college that broke off from a denomination in the 1960s, which broke off from another denomination in the 1950s, which broke away from another denomination in the 1930s, which was part of a denomination that split in the 1850s.

**GROUP DISCUSSION.** Why do you think there are so many divisions in the church? How does the existence of so many denominations affect your attitude toward the church?

**PERSONAL REFLECTION.** How do you contribute to the unity or disunity of the church?

Many things divide Christians from other Christians—gifts, doctrine, church government, mode of baptism and so on. Whether we like it or not, divisions have occurred, and we must live with them. But we can be inspired and guided by Scriptures to do better. *Re-read Ephesians 4:1–16.*

1. Why are the qualities mentioned in verses 1–3 essential for unity in the church?

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2. Christian unity must be built on a foundation of shared beliefs and experiences. What shared beliefs and experiences does Paul mention (vv. 4–6)?

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How do these “ones” provide the foundation for unity?

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3. What steps might you take to strengthen your own relationships within your church or fellowship?

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4. Triumphant conquerors often gave gifts to their citizens. What “gifts” did Christ give the church when he ascended to heaven (vv. 7–11)?

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5. What is the overall purpose of the gifts mentioned here?

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**6.** One purpose of gifted church leaders is to equip or prepare God’s people for service, that is, ministry (4:12). How does that compare with the way we often think about Christian ministers?

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**7.** The Greek word translated “prepare” or “equip” (4:12) means to mend a net or set a broken bone. How does preparing/equipping enlarge your understanding of the way Christians are to live and work together?

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**8.** In what areas do you feel prepared for service within your church or Christian community? Explain.

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**9.** What dangers threaten an immature church (vv. 14–16)?

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**10.** The Christian church in every generation must confront false “winds of teaching.” What false teachings are we facing in our generation?

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**11.** For the church to mature in Christ, members must “speak the truth in love.” What can happen when truth is not spoken in love?

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What happens when love is spoken without truth?

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**12.** Paul uses the image of the body to describe the way the church should work together. What part of the body are you?

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How can you do your part to build up the body in truth and love?

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**13.** Summarize your understanding of essential elements of the church contained in this study and study 10.

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*Ask God to show you your place in the community and mission of the church.*



**Now or Later**

The church can be described as a fellowship of the saved. Based on our previous studies concerning sanctification, the church could also be described as the fellowship of those who are being saved. Make a list of the ways in which the church has been used by God to shape your character and aid your growth in salvation.

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Read the following passages for further study and reflection on the nature and purpose of the church: Matthew 16:13–28; Acts 2:42–47; 1 Corinthians 6:1–13; 12:12–26; Philippians 4:1–9.

# Session 12

## ESCHATOLOGY & GLORIFICATION

### *Hope for the Future* *2 Peter 3:3–14*

As children we may remember magazines that had futuristic drawings on the covers. Some magazines were science fiction; others were technical magazines about machines or cars. As I remember, many magazines with those bright colored cover graphic illustrations had a mystical effect on us. They created an anxious hunger for the future, a hope for a glittering utopia of human civilization run by amazing machines. Now, many years later, we're still waiting for the "future." Granted, we have some amazing machines, but the dawning of utopia seems pretty far off. The Scriptures speak of the future, but its character and coming are different and far better than many of our childhood fantasies. This biblical teaching about the future is called *eschatology*.

**GROUP DISCUSSION.** Every so often certain groups of Christians proclaim that they have figured out the secret of the time of the return of Jesus Christ. How do you respond to such teaching? Why does a reflection on the teaching of the last things inspire so much excitement?

**PERSONAL REFLECTION.** What are you most looking forward to about the Lord's return?

Glorification focuses on the personal condition of a believer on the other side of death. The study of eschatology is a consideration of the condition of the entire world when God completes his saving and restoring work of his fallen and rebellion creation. *Re-read 2 Peter 3:3–14.*

1. Looking over the whole passage, what are some things that the coming of the Lord involves?

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2. We think of the last things as dealing with the future, but that is only part of it. How does the teaching on the last things look back to the past as well as to the future (vv. 1–7)?

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3. Christians can expect to encounter scoffers in the "last days." What reasons do scoffers give for scoffing at the Lord's coming (vv. 3–4)?

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4. Believers, too, are tempted to be discouraged and skeptical about the Lord's return. How have you handled such struggles?

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5. Why would scoffers want to forget about the creation and the flood?

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6. How can recalling the creation and the flood strengthen our faith in the Lord's return?

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7. What frustrations and benefits arise from the way God measures time (vv. 8–9)?

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8. What does Peter mean when he says, “the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (v. 10)?

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9. There are groups of people who say that Jesus has already secretly returned. Based on Peter's teaching, what can we say to them?

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10. What will the coming judgment be like (vv. 7, 10)?

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11. God will create a new heaven and earth in place of the old (vv. 10–13). How will life on earth be different than it is now?

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12. Thinking about our hope for the future is much more than idle speculation. How can thinking about the future practically affect your way of thinking and acting (vv. 11–14)?

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*Ask God to help you face the challenges of today with a strong hope for his future.*

### **Now or Later**

Going outside onto a street at night you can easily have a sense that something is not quite safe. After Jesus returns, the world is restored and the curse is removed, it will be safe to go out anywhere, at any time. Try picturing yourself in a renewed world now. How do you respond to the idea of being in a world whether there is no more danger or pain?

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