



**Foundations of Faith Church-Wide Discipleship**

**Weekly Study Guide**

## **Foundations of Faith** **A Life *for* Liberty Discipleship Series**

For our 90th anniversary, the Church at Liberty Square is pairing the two essential cornerstones of any church, evangelism and discipleship, into this yearlong, church-wide study.

Jesus Himself specifically linked the two together as symbiotic within a healthy church (Matthew 28:19-20). And the early church repeatedly proved the point that evangelism and discipleship go hand-in-hand. Moreover, discipleship is often the direct fuel for church growth (e.g., Acts 2:42-47).

After the Gospels and the book of Acts, almost the entire remainder of the New Testament is an extended primer on discipleship – exhortation, encouragement, reproof, rebuke, and correction around *understanding* and *living* the Good News individually and as a church. Indeed, now, just as then, we often *share* the Good News by how we *live* it. Actions still speak louder than words.

In fact, the biblical record and pattern of evangelism seem to suggest that a small subset of everyday Christians evangelized with actual words of preaching and teaching – primarily the apostolic leadership, appointed deacons, and those whose ministry required them to “do the work of an evangelist.”

But the writings of Paul, Peter, James, and John demonstrate that *all* in the early church were expected to evangelize through how they lived their everyday lives, sanctified by the blood of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. In doing so, they were true to two of Jesus’s central exhortations to His church: “In the same way, *let your light shine before others*, so that *they may see your good works* and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16), and “A new commandment I give to you, that you *love one another*: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. *By this all people will know that you are my disciples*, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35).

This makes sense, because the New Testament spends considerable time and energy on how to actively live a Christlike life, to be like Jesus. The Bible repeatedly admonishes and teaches us to love with *action* not just with *words*. “Little children, let us not love in word or talk, but in deed and truth” (1 John 3:18); “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only...” (James 1:22); “They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works” (Titus 1:16); “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps” (1 Peter 2:21).

In short, to evangelize well – to show the world we are Christ’s by how we actively love others (John 13:34-35) – we must first disciple well within our church.

This guide will help us do just that.

### **How to Use This Study Guide**

On the first Wednesday of each month in 2026, we will teach on a monthly discipleship focus. We highly encourage each person at Liberty Square to attend these first Wednesday night lessons. They will form the backbone of our corporate discipleship for that month and, indeed, each month will build on the previous one.

But the teaching does not stop with the Wednesday lesson. Unique to this series are follow-up materials for each component of discipleship. For each week, we will provide **additional scriptures and reflective readings about the monthly topic, as well as questions and points of prayer to consider in one’s own devotion and study time.** In addition Liberty Groups and other discipleship-oriented church groups and ministries will highlight the monthly theme.

So how does one use the guide?

First, **go at your own pace each week.** We intentionally will not provide you daily material, because we want you to take your time and linger over the weekly scriptures and questions. We would rather you repeatedly read a passage and let it sink in than superficially gloss over multiple chapters.

Second, **think practically.** For most of the series, the weekly reflections will include ways that we can internalize the monthly discipleship theme and then live it out in our lives, whether at home, at work, at church, or within the community. Remember, the overarching goal of discipleship is to make us more like Christ. This takes practice. Our salvation came freely to us by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and through our confession of His Lordship. Our sanctification, however, requires effort from us. And our submission is an invitation to the Holy Spirit to remake, reorient, and rehabilitate our lives.

Third, **use this guide with others.** Use it in your families, within your Liberty Groups, in your Sunday morning class, in any ministry within Liberty Square. We sometimes over-individualize the Christian journey, neglecting that much of the book of Acts paints the picture of a church that “had all things in common,” that prayed, worshipped, learned, fellowshiped, and “did life” together (Acts 2:42-47). The goal of

Foundations of Faith is to grow us both in our personal walk but also equip us for life within the body of Christ.

\* \* \*

Because we want the Church to deliberately move together, month-by-month, we will be sharing each month's focus and guide when we arrive there in the year. The order of the topics is purposeful, all with an eye to a more purposeful, more disciplined, more fruitful Christian life (individually, at home, and within the Church) and more robust personal evangelism.

I look forward to sharing this journey with you as we grow in Christ together “so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Ephesians 4:14-15).

Let us “grow in the grace of knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity” (1 Peter 3:18).

Amen.

In the love of Christ,

Pastor Chris  
Executive Pastor, Discipleship and Community  
The Church at Liberty Square

**January 2026**  
**Studying and Reading the Bible**

We will start our journey with one of the most fundamental building blocks of our apprenticeship to Christ – interacting with the living Word of God.

Recently, after a teaching on how to read and study the Bible, I had a man come up to me, tears welling in his eyes. He grabbed both of my shoulders, pierced me with his anguished expression, and then sighed deeply, “I’ve been a Christian for decades. I’m in my sixties. Today was the first time anyone ever taught me *how* to read the Bible”

At first, that saddened me. But then it made me angry, because it speaks volumes about how we treat our relationship with the Word. We chalk it up as a “Christian perfunctory.” In fact, that is the typical discipleship advice we dispense to new Christians, old Christians, young Christians, little Christians, big Christians, all Christians: read your Bible. “Get in the Word of God,” we say.

Well, yes. But to what end? And how? And why? And where do I start? And what version? And how much? And a thousand other questions.

That man’s personal testimony made me do some hard reflection, which led me to this stark reality: I do not think we teach people *how* to read the Bible.

And, if you think about it, this makes no sense. Literature teachers explain to their classes how to approach a Shakespearean tragedy before assigning *Hamlet*. Trigonometry teachers assume a student’s strong foundation in geometry before they draw a sine curve on the board. A basketball coach drills into his team the fundamentals of passing the ball before he ever allows them on the court.

Why do we then assume that Christians naturally know how to approach a complex book, written over 1,500 years, in three languages, on three continents, by more than 40 authors?

We should never make that assumption. Even factoring in the amazing, inexplicable supernatural discernment that can flow into our lives by the Holy Spirit (“Speak Lord, your servant is listening...”), we should never make that assumption. We are to love the Lord with everything we have, including our mind, surrendering it to diligent, earnest study to become a trustworthy “workman” of his Word (2 Timothy 2:15).

Yet many reduce their intimacy with the Word to a read-the-Bible-in-a-year reading plan. On the surface, there is nothing wrong and plenty right with those sorts of plans... until it becomes a Christian chore instead of a way to draw closer to God. “Oh, I have to read five chapters today or I’ll fall behind.” So, they feverishly race through those five chapters and retain absolutely none of it, as if this were some sort of forced march of faith. Reading the Word will not be void in their life, but one wonders just how much good comes from this approach?

Others take the opposite approach, choosing daily devotional readings. Again, there is nothing wrong and plenty right with that, too. But devotions are bite-sized snippets of scripture, frequently edited or taken completely out of their original context, all to prove a point that someone else is trying to make. And the point of being in the Word is that we personally receive revelation, wisdom, truth, and life directly from the Holy Spirit.

So, then, how should we approach the Bible?

First, **we should approach respectfully**, as we would anything so organic, so pulsing with vitality and life and the power that those bring. “The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). Stated differently, we wrap our reading around the truth Peter uttered to Jesus in John 6:68, “Lord, where else would we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

Second, **we should approach it personally**. God is speaking to you individually and us as a church – directly, powerfully, forthrightly. Yes, God speaks to us in many other ways, including sermons, teachings, devotions, other people, nature itself. But the Bible is explicitly clear that *scripture* is a profitable cornerstone in our lives for teaching, training, correction, revelation, worship, wisdom, and understanding.

Third, **we should approach it prayerfully**, inviting the Holy Spirit to “teach [us] all things” (John 14:26). Indeed, we should mimic Samuel and say, “Speak Lord,” and then listen.

Fourth, **we should approach it deliberately**. Reading the Word should not be an afterthought in your day. Instead, it, along with prayer, should be the very hem stitches around any day.

Over the four weeks of January, we will learn all of these approaches together. Do not rush through the weekly readings. Instead, linger in them. Slow down. Ponder. Even wrestle. Let the Lord speak and teach you about the beauty of His Word.

## **Week 1 - January** **Treasure the Word**

### **Weekly Readings:**

- Psalm 119
- 2 Timothy 3:14-17
- Key idea – Yes, the Word is a sword, but it must be sharpened in our lives before it can be unsheathed and wielded.

Do you open your Bible on days other than Sunday? If not, why? Is it time? Interest? Difficulty in comprehension? What stands between you and the Word?

In Scripture we are specifically urged to treasure the Bible in our hearts, to look to it frequently for training and teaching in righteousness, and to allow the Lord to speak to us through His Word. The Bible is the place where we read of the wonders of a mighty God, His covenantal promises, the stories of ordinary people being used to do extraordinary things, the good news of Jesus Christ, and the ongoing plan for our salvation and redemption.

Indeed, the Gospel contained therein is what changes our lives and our destinies.

But in order to truly explore the foundations of our faith, and be equipped to share the good news to others, we must view the Bible and its study as *essential* in and to our lives.

So, before we move onto the rest of this week, let's challenge ourselves to reflect on the place of the scriptures in our lives. Is it cherished in our hearts? Is it training us daily? Is it an integral part of who we are? Or is it something we infrequently approach, more often than not through a pastor's sermon instead of our own study?

**Exercise** – Explain how reading the Bible is currently situated in your life. Is it an every-day source of teaching, wisdom, growth, and inspiration? Or something different?

**This week** – Over the course of the week, with deliberation and purpose, read Psalm 119. (Yes, it is long, so break it into chunks. Do not rush. Linger with the Word and let it linger within you.) Observe how the writer truly relies upon – *and loves* – the Scripture.

Then, read 2 Timothy 3:14-17.

Answer these questions:

- What are these two passages speaking into your life?
- In what ways might they reshape how you value and approach Scripture?
- What new practices can you put into place to treasure the Word in your heart?

With those answers in hand, take a few minutes to define your goals related to the study of Scripture, including any new practices you want to incorporate.

\* \* \*

*Final Thoughts – Take a few moments to consider how the writer of Psalm 119 values the word of God. Below is a place to write a reflection and prayer. Ask God to lead you to esteem the scriptures in new ways this year and beyond in your journey with Christ. Ask Him for a hunger for His precepts, ask Him for revelations that speak into your life, for His Holy Spirit to speak to you and train you up so that you may be complete, equipped for His good work to come to pass in and through your life.*

## **Week 2 - January**

### **The Full Counsel of Scripture, Part 1**

#### **Weekly Readings:**

- Jeremiah 29:11 (then all of Jeremiah 29)
- Lamentations 3:23 (then all of Lamentations 3)
- Key idea – Yes, individual verses carry enormous weight and power, but a mature reader of the Bible will always read them in the context of the full section, chapter, and even book.

The Bible is a spiritual document, but is also a historical one, a poetic one, an apocryphal one, among many other genres. The Bible is a book of truth. It is *the* book of truth. But that does nothing to diminish the fact that it is also a book of stories, narratives of God’s power and provision, of the Jewish people, of Jesus’ life, of the early church, and so much more.

As readers of the Bible, we should approach the book with lots of things in mind – the authorship of a book, the historic setting in which it was written, how its message would have been read and understood by its initial and intended audience, and much more.

For instance, when one reads a prophecy in Amos or Hosea, one must ask, “To whom was this prophecy made? And has this prophecy been fulfilled?” If the prophecy has been fulfilled, we do not negate the book. We simply shift how we read the powerful words of the prophets and ask instead, “What does this passage teach us about God?”

In addition, reading one verse in isolation is like taking a single piece of a 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle and somehow claiming that it gives us the full picture. Of course it doesn’t. That seems silly. Isolating a verse can likewise give us a distorted picture of what the Word of God is actually saying. Only by reading it in context can we truly absorb its full meaning.

So, this week and next, we are going to practice reading verses and passages in their full contexts, not separated from their supporting stories, and certainly not clichéd scriptural nuggets that paint incomplete pictures of spiritual truths.

This week, we will read two passages from the Old Testament. Next week, the New Testament. We will devote two weeks to this discipline because of just how critical it is.

**Exercise 1** – Read Jeremiah 29:11. No doubt this is an extremely familiar passage.

What do you take away from this verse? How does it speak to you?

Now, read the whole of Jeremiah 29, the entire chapter. Write down a few observations about its context – to whom was it written, when, etc.? What was happening in that chapter that gave rise to Jeremiah’s writing? And, more pointedly, taken in the whole counsel of that chapter, what new understanding do you have about the eleventh verse?

\* \* \*

Hopefully that exercise made you think anew about reading (and even quoting/using scriptures in isolation, whether in your own life or when you hear a pastor preach). God, through Jeremiah, is telling his people to get comfortable in a foreign, unfamiliar, not-promised place. In fact, He is telling them to pray for the prosperity of those holding them in exile.

That seems far afield from how we typically proclaim Jeremiah 29:11. What should that teach us? Among other things, we should realize that the promises of God are not ineffective, but they may have terms and conditions we conveniently leave out when we do not live in that full counsel of Scripture. We may have seasons of “slow” and “grow” before we hear the word “go.”

**Exercise 2** – Now do the exact same thing with Lamentations 3:23. Read that verse first, and answer the exact same questions about that *single* verse.

Then read the whole of Lamentations 3, the entire chapter, and answer the same questions for that passage. (Remember, same author.) How does your perception of new mercies every morning change in light of everything else that Jeremiah wrote around that oft-quoted verse?

\* \* \*

*Final Thoughts* – What benefits are there to reading the full Biblical context of verses, instead of smaller snippets? How can you apply the reading of full Scriptural context to your personal time in the word?

## Week 3 - January The Full Counsel of Scripture, Part 2

### Weekly Readings:

- John 3:16 (then John 3:1-21)
- Revelation 3:20 (then Revelation 3:14-22)
- Key idea – Yes, individual verses carry enormous weight and power, but a mature reader of the Bible will always read them in the context of the full section, chapter, and even book.

This week is a continuation of last week, but we will use two New Testament passages instead. The premise, approach, and exercise patterns are all the same.

**Exercise 1** – Read John 3:16. In fact, most of us could quote it. What does that mean to you personally? What spiritual lessons and truths do you draw from it?

Now read John 3:16 and 17 together. Ask the same questions. How does your perception change after reading the two as a couplet?

Finally, read the first 21 verses of John 3 as a single unit. Think about the historic, religious, and cultural realities of that moment. See vv. 16-17 now in light of the larger narrative, and what do you discover?

**Exercise 2** – Read Revelation 3:20. Again, same question. What is the imagery you see? What idea or audience does this verse conjure in your mind?

Now read the entire letter of Jesus to the church at Laodicea, Revelation 3:14-22. What changes about that verse? What jumps off the page?

By now, hopefully you see that v. 20 was not meant as an invitation to sinners, though Christians almost exclusively deploy it as such. No, Jesus was purposefully talking to Christians. To us. To the church. To his bride. What does that tell us about this passage specifically (as applied to us) and about scriptural readings generally?

\* \* \*

*Final Thoughts – Try this with other Bible passages. Find one where a single verse takes on a different light when read in the fullness of the chapter. Bring that to your group/family to share.*

## Week 4 - January Meditate on the Word

### Weekly Readings:

- Psalm 23
- Luke 10:38-42
- John 8:2-11
- Key idea – Slow down. Learn to meditatively read the Bible by taking your time and placing yourself in the middle of the narrative.

The Bible is fairly straightforward about the benefits of *meditating* on its truths. “But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night” (Psalm 1:2). “The Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it” (Joshua 1:8). “Oh, how I love your law! All day long it is my meditation” (Psalm 119:97).

But what is meditation? Here again, we find a word that we throw around (because it is in scripture), yet we rarely teach what it means spiritually. And, unfortunately in modern America, our vision of meditation is sitting cross-legged on a yoga mat humming a mantra.

Biblical meditation, though, is a purposeful act of pondering, of reflecting deeply on the Word, and then internalizing the truths within it. The goal is not necessarily the absorption of knowledge (which is what we do when we read a study Bible, check concordance references, etc.) Instead, the goal is to *think* upon God’s Word and, in the process, transfer that wisdom and truth from our *head* to our *heart*. In meditation, we want to foster a deeper connection with God and draw our heartbeat to a rhythmic oneness with Him.

Put more bluntly, secular meditation seeks to empty the mind; biblical meditation is the active *focus of the mind* on God and his character.

But it involves us shutting our mouths and listening to what the Word is speaking back to us.

One effective way to meditate on the Word is an ancient church practice called *lectio divina*. *Lectio* involves reading, meditating on, and praying with Scripture in four distinct states: *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (contemplation).

At its heart, *lectio* invites us to “listen” to Scripture and respond to God’s word with intimacy. Those four stages are often relabeled as the four Rs: reading, reflecting, responding, and resting.

This week, with three passages, we will ask you to do those four stages.

The key with *lectio*, though, is that you are simply reading the passage. So, if you can, choose a Bible devoid of the clutter of study notes, cross-references, inset maps, and the like. And, by all means, do not use your phone. (Bible apps on your phone are terrific, but phones offer too much of a distraction for our minds, eyes, ears, and hearts. Sit them down for this exercise and use an actual Bible for these exercises.)

For each passage, do the following:

- Read it slowly. Very slowly. Even pause between phrases, certainly between verses. Let it wash over you. You are reading not for word-for-word textual comprehension so much as for spiritual growth.
- In fact, this exercise is optimal if someone else reads the passage, which you can accomplish in a group or family setting. Then you can close your eyes and truly meditate with full concentration.
- Place yourself in the narrative. That is a critical component to *lectio*. Put yourself in the action. Notice where you stand, what you see, even what you smell or hear. Are you a participant? Are you an observer?
- Then, pause after the first reading. What stuck out to you? What did you notice? Did you see something new about Jesus or another character? What were you actually doing? The Bible reminds us that it is living, so organically place yourself within it. That is not arrogance, but it is a response to its invitation to make it real and practical within our lives.
- Then, respond – pray something worshipful or as supplication in your own life based on what you just read.
- Then, wait. Rest. Contemplate what you just learned about the nature of God or His Son, Jesus. Think about what it means for your relationship with the Trinity.
- Finally, do it again. Read it a second time, following the same steps.

Since many of you will be new to this practice, we have chosen three familiar passages. All of these are quite well suited to meditative scripture reading. And all can be done individually, with your family (which we *highly* encourage), and within your groups.

The three passages are:

- Psalm 23 – This passage has become so familiar, almost to the point of rote recitation, that an exercise like this may prove spiritually profitable. Again, slow

down. Digest the words one by one. What is the Holy Spirit revealing to you? What can you actually *see* and *feel*?

- Luke 10:38-42 – The famous story of Mary and Martha. Same questions.
- John 8:2-11 – The story of the adulterous woman. Again, same questions.

\* \* \*

*Final Thoughts – Reading the Bible this way is sometimes uncomfortable. Many of us do not like to see or place ourselves in the stories. And others of us see this method as conflicting with how we were conditioned to read the Bible. But for many of us, this may open up a new way to absorb the deep and exhaustless supply of truth from its pages. In a way, it makes the Bible “come alive,” which is great since scripture affirms that it actually is alive. How might you deploy meditation in your own personal devotional life? What about that of your family?*

**February 2026**  
**The Trinity: The Divine Dance of Love**

The average person – and, sadly, even the average Christian – thinks a lot of things are in the Bible that simply are not there. For instance, the Bible never says that God helps those who help themselves; that is either from Aesop or Benjamin Franklin, take your pick. Charles Dickens penned the idea that cleanliness is next to godliness, not Solomon. And we will not find the thought “to thine own self be true” coming from Jesus or Paul; no, Shakespeare put the notion in Polonius’s mouth in *Hamlet*.

And even when we have the black-and-white words of the Bible staring us in the face, we tend to add to them. Jonah was swallowed by a “great fish,” not necessarily a whale. Adam and Eve took the forbidden fruit of the tree, not necessarily an apple. A number of wise men sought after the baby Jesus, not necessarily three and certainly not on the actual night of our Savior’s birth. Mary Magdalene had seven evil spirits cast out of her, but the Bible never says she was a prostitute.

But what happens when the opposite is true – i.e., when something is so very clearly *in* the Bible, in fact *permeates* every page of the Word of God, yet it is never directly referenced?

Such is the case with **the Trinity**. The Triune God – one God existing in three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit – is the very cornerstone of Christian theology. And yet the term “Trinity” is nowhere to be found within the pages of the Bible, which itself is a frequently cited criticism of Trinitarianism. How can something be so fundamental yet never explicitly mentioned in the text?

No doubt you have heard of Sir Isaac Newton and his famed Third Law of Motion, that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. You believe that even though, for most of us, the only real reference point we have is observational and experiential. You see that – and painfully feel it, too – when you drop a cast iron skillet on your bare foot. You will almost certainly have a bruised, swollen, and perhaps broken foot. But you arrive at that point through experience, not via mathematical proof.

Such it is with the Trinity. Scriptures in the Bible lead us to a Triune God, but our own personal experiences are the real prooftexts. We visibly see and feel God as our good creator, loving redeemer, and empowering sustainer.

Other critics will point to the most fundamental declaration of Jewish monotheism, the Shema, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4). How can the one true God now be three? (Hint: we will unpack this as we examine John 17.)

But the reality is this: you could read the Bible until Jesus returns, and you will not find a scripture that explicitly, bluntly, unmistakably says, “God exists in three distinct persons, all with the same unified essence and substance, the same divine nature, the same omnipotence and omniscience and omnipresence, all fully God, pre-existent, co-eternal.”

As true as that statement is – and it *is true* – it is a derived, or extrapolated, or revealed theology.

But it is soundly based in scripture. Jesus himself said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them *in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” (Matthew 28:19). Paul writes in a beautiful benediction, “The grace of *the Lord Jesus Christ*, the love of *God*, and the fellowship of *the Holy Spirit* be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14). Peter opens his first letter with this, “according to the foreknowledge of *God the Father*, in the sanctification of *the Spirit*, for obedience to *Jesus Christ* and for sprinkling with his blood” (1 Peter 1:2).

And those are but three of many, including the scene at Jesus’s baptism in Matthew 3, which is the first public conspicuous manifestation of the Trinity, when all three persons were either audibly or visibly present.

So... if it is all right there in the Bible, why did it take so long to put the pieces together?

Put down your twenty-first century glasses for a moment, and pick up those worn by Peter and John and James. We must never forget that our church ancestors were seeking to understand this all in real time and, for those who were Jewish, also trying to reconcile the monotheistic anchor of the Shema with the fact that they had encountered the Son of God in the flesh... who explicitly told them he was “one with the Father” (John 10:30, 17:21). Show them grace. Even today, as it was then, the Holy Spirit reveals things to us as our capacities to understand them will allow.

Thus, we finally see the first direct references to Trinitarian theology appear in Greek in the writings of Theophilus of Antioch (late second century A.D.), in Latin in the writings of Tertullian (early third century), and in the apologies and teachings of the great Cappadocian Fathers, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus and brothers, Saint Basil the Great and Saint Gregory of Nyssa (fourth century). In fact, Trinitarianism was not formally codified by the Church until the Council of Nicaea in 325 and not fully expounded to its present orthodox form until the Council of Constantinople in 381. Who among us today can say we fully understand the mysteries of God?

Yet nothing is more foundational to our faith. And it was all there in the Bible all along.

Is your head spinning yet? Don't worry. You are not alone. "Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty? It is higher than the heavens—what can you do? Deeper than Sheol—what can you know? Its measure is longer than the earth and broader than the sea" (Job 11:7-9).

**But just because a concept is difficult does not mean we should run and hide from it, especially one so definitional to being a Christian.**

This month, we will deepen our knowledge and understanding of the Trinity. In doing so, we will hopefully become better witnesses to the roles each of its three members plays in our lives, our journey of salvation and sanctification, and the world around us.

However, there is a more fundamental – and extremely practical – reason why we should seek to know the Trinity more intimately.

Before we explore, turn your attention to this beautiful prayer from Psalm 119: "**Open my eyes that I may contemplate wondrous things out of your law**" (v. 18). Because the fullness of the Trinity is a mystery, we need to approach it in that same headspace and heartspace, even that exact prayer. So, let's pause for a moment and make that same petition: Lord, open our eyes so that we may understand *and experience* the Trinity afresh and anew. Because when we begin to grasp this next idea, our whole purpose and our whole journey come into much sharper clarity.

Now, consider these extraordinarily powerful words from C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*. He writes that when people equate God and love, they:

"... seem not to notice that the words 'God is love' have no real meaning *unless God contains at least two persons*... If God were a single person, then before the world was made, He was not love... They believe that the loving dynamic activity of love has been going on [alone] in God forever... [But God is] a dynamic, pulsating activity, a life, almost a kind of drama. Almost, if you will not think me irreverent, **a kind of dance.**"

The Trinity, at its core, is an eternal, dynamic exchange of **love, a divine dance** between and among its constituents – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If we say God is love, and he is, then he must have an object of that love. Saying that humans are the primary object is both shortsighted and arrogant, because it implies that God, who is perfect love, loved nothing before he created us. That is illogical and cannot be true.

Before creation, God loved his Son. In fact, if we want to put it in the terms Jesus used, “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58), then we would say, “Before creation ever was, God *loves* his Son,” a simple, unmistakable present tense, ongoing now, without end.

And it is that love, characterized by joy, that is both the centerpiece and model for our lives. We were created in that love by the Father. We are redeemed in that love by the Son, whose love was so great that he came and dwelt among us. We are sustained and inspired and guided and transformed in that love by the Spirit. And that love is simultaneously unchanging, yet never static. No, it is the most dynamic force in the universe, the binding agent that holds all together.

Everything flows from that, including and especially our atonement. If Jesus were not also God, were not also love, then his sacrifice on the cross would not have been voluntary, rather something imposed upon a human by God. He put on flesh to dwell among us, because he wanted to restore us to this reality: we were created in love, by love, through love and made to be in the middle of that divine dance of love.

Think of the implications for us. **The model of Trinitarian love is revolutionary. It is limitless, always giving and forgiving, always seeking the good of the other, always offering profound peace and healing. It is the headwaters of our submission to one another, and it fertilizes our lives to bear fruit.**

Lewis later writes, “The whole dance, or drama, or pattern of this three-personal life is to be played out in each one of us: or, putting it the other way round, each one of us has got to enter that pattern, take his place in that dance. **There is no other way to the happiness for which we were made.**”

In *Miracles*, Lewis summarizes, “As we draw nearer to its uncreated rhythm, pain and pleasure sink almost out of sight. There is joy in the dance, but it does not exist for the sake of joy. It does not even exist for the sake of good, or of love. It is Love Himself, and Good Himself, and therefore happy. **It does not exist for us, but we for it.**”

In short, the Trinity forms both the boundaries and the means to fulfill our purpose, given to us by Jesus himself: “And he said... ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second *is like it*: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40).

Those two are mutually inclusive and fully descriptive of what the Trinity models for us: to love God fully and to love others fully.

\* \* \*

This month, return again and again to that prayer from Psalm 119:18. Let it start your individual time with this material, as well as that with your family and your groups.

Let's summon our best angelic exhortation and tell each other, "Do not be afraid... of studying the Trinity!" In reality, Trinitarian truth spills forth from the pages of the Old and New Testament. We just have to do the work of a disciple. Let's unpack it together.

## Week 1 - February God the Father

### Weekly Readings:

- Psalm 23 (The Lord as Shepherd).
- Psalm 46 (The Lord as Refuge and Strength).
- Psalm 86 (The Lord as Mercy, Love, and Goodness).
- Psalm 91 (The Lord as Protector).
- Psalm 103 (The Lord's Forgiveness and Goodness).
- Psalm 139 (The Lord's Intimate Knowledge).
- Psalm 145 (God's Greatness, Goodness, Glory, Guarantee, and Grace).
- Key idea – God is the source of all things, including all of us. He is love and is without end. His mysteries are beyond comprehension.

We believe fully in the Trinity. But to understand Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as a Triune God – completely unified, of one essence – it is often helpful to understand each distinct person first, and then piece it together. Within the Godhead, each has a role to play, and those roles directly inform our own lives and our journey of becoming like Jesus. So, we will examine each in turn and then, during the fourth week, tie it all together.

Let's start with God the Father.

**Exercise** – When you think of God the Father, what imagery comes to mind? Literally, close your eyes, and who/what do you see? Be honest. Now, take five minutes and just jot down on a piece of paper a list of adjectives or descriptive phrases that capture how you perceive God. Write exactly what comes to mind. Again, be completely honest.

\* \* \*

To some, this may seem like a silly exercise, but people view God in so many complicated, stereotyped, unbiblical ways. Some see him as the cosmic sheriff, a law enforcement officer who is ready to lock us up for any infraction. Some view him as a stern judge, incapable of mercy and grace, always defaulting to punishment. Still others see him as a doddering old grandfather, always ready with a piece of candy from his pockets but not really involved in our day-to-day lives. An unfortunate number of folks think of him as Santa Claus or a genie in a bottle, someone who listens to our wish list and, if we have been good enough, grants those requests.

When it comes to adjectives, you might have written loving, smiling, gracious, or available. But you might also have written cruel, distant, angry, or even powerless or

irrelevant. And, for so many of us, we attach the imagery of our own earthly father to that of our eternal father, God.

The point is this – our view of God is often complicated and riddled with baggage. But the Bible testifies to who God really is. In no particular order, consider these attributes of God the Father:

God the Father is the **source and author of everything**. We quite literally learn this from the first ten words of the Bible: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1), meaning *everything*. And Jesus reinforces God as the font for all life, “For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son also to have life in Himself” (John 5:26). Paul expounds upon this when he writes of God the Father, “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever,” (Romans 11:36). Paul also forthrightly declares, “yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist” (1 Corinthians 8:6a). God is the originator.

God the Father is **love**. “Anyone who does not love does not know God, *because God is love*” (1 John 4:8).

God the Father **sends the Son, Jesus, for our redemption, all in love**. Jesus directly avows this in His conversation with Nicodemus: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). And that this was God’s plan from the start: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. *In love* he predestined us for adoption to Himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will...” (Ephesians 1:3-5).

God the Father also **sends the Holy Spirit for our sanctification**. Jesus was explicit with his disciples about this: “the Helper, the Holy Spirit, *whom the Father will send in My name*, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:26).

God the Father is **merciful and gracious**. “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness...” (Exodus 34:6). “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Psalm 103:8).

God the Father is **holy and just**. “The Rock, his work is perfect, for all His ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without inquiry; just and upright is He” (Deuteronomy 32:4). “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord” (Isaiah 6:3). “Be holy, for I am holy” (Leviticus 11:44). “Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at His holy mountain, for the Lord our God is holy” (Psalm 99:9).

God the Father **does not change**. “For I the Lord do not change...” (Malachi 3:6).

God the Father is **omnipotent**. “Ah, Lord God! It is You who made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for You” (Jeremiah 32:17).

God the Father is **omnipresent and omniscient**. “Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from Your presence?” (Psalm 139:7). “The eyes of the Lord are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good” (Proverbs 15:3). “The Lord looks down from heaven; He sees *all the children* of man; from where He sits enthroned He looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth” (Psalm 33:13-14).

And God is **our Father, too**. Jesus taught us to pray not to *His* Father, but to *our* Father (Matthew 6:9), meaning we are adopted into this family, not by our own works but because of the unmerited favor of God and the unmerited sacrifice of His Son. But it does not stop here. Jesus intimately and fervently prays for that adoption, that we “may all be one, just as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be in Us...” (John 17:21). And Paul testifies, “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of *adoption as sons*, by whom we cry, ‘*Abba! Father!*’ The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit *that we are children of God*, and if children, then heirs – *heirs of God* and fellow heirs with Christ...” (Romans 8:15-17a).

And that all does not even scratch the surface.

**This week** – At the beginning of this week, we listed seven entire psalms. Ideally, you and/or your family/group will take a psalm a day, read it, and reflect upon what each teaches you about the character and nature of God. But you can also pick one or two psalms and meditate on those.

In your prayer time, intentionally focus on the attributes of God that the psalmist describes. Worship God for each of them, for his holiness, for his mercy and grace, for his forgiveness. And ask God to reveal more of himself to you, growing you in wisdom and knowledge but also growing your *awe* of him.

\* \* \*

*Final Thoughts – Sometimes Christians are so focused on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, that we have an incomplete view of God the Father. John Bryan Smith wrote a wonderful book titled *The Good and Beautiful God*, which I highly commend to you.*

*But its subtitle both touched and challenged me: **Falling in Love with the God Jesus Knows**. Let that be the focus of your Trinity exploration. Fall in love with the God whom Jesus calls Father... and whom we now do, too!*

## Week 2 - February Jesus Christ, God the Son

### Weekly Readings:

- The Seven “I Am” statements of Jesus – John 6:35, 48, 51; 8:12; 9:5, 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; and 15:1.
- Matthew 16:13-19
- Key idea – Jesus is fully divine and fully human, and that matters to our ultimate salvation, sanctification, and generation. Even today, he is our prophet, high priest, and king.

God the Father is the origin and source of all things. But Jesus Christ, his Son, is the agent of that creation and, ultimately, of our salvation. He is the implementation and fulfillment of God’s redemptive plan. And he is the mediator between the Father and all of humanity.

But before we get there, let’s settle one thing in our hearts and minds. The Son of God, though a separate person within the Trinity, is God. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and ***the Word was God...*** And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1, 14). “To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is ***the Christ, who is God over all...***” (Romans 9:5). “And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. He is the ***true God and eternal life***” (1 John 5:20).

Jesus is pre-existent, without beginning or end. He is eternal. He is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. He is God. He is love. **Jesus is fully divine.**

Yet Jesus carries with him the most critical of additional attributes. **Jesus is also fully human.** He is equally a son of man, fertilized within the womb of a woman, naturally born of that woman, and subject to all the things we humans face, including a dying earthly body. In fact, Son of Man is Jesus’s favorite title for himself. It carries with it both a human meaning (Mark 10:45, Isaiah 53) and divine authority (Mark 2:10; John 5:27; Daniel 7:13-14).

In short, we can distill it to this truth – **the Kingdom of God has come and now has a human face and a human name: Jesus.**

Indeed, to confess that the eternal Word of God became incarnate is nothing less than the keystone belief of our entire faith: that Christ, our Lord, is fully God and fully

human, all united in one person, this man Jesus (John 1:1-5, 14-18). In that profound declaration, we say that Jesus, God himself, willingly left heaven and took on a full human nature to die on a cross (Philippians 2:5-8). He assumed a body, yes, but he likewise assumed a mind and soul, with all the frailties of every human. Yet he lived perfectly under God's law and, in doing so, he fulfilled the law on our behalf. The very human Jesus died as a blood sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins (Hebrews 2:17, 10:5; 1 John 2:2; 1 Peter 3:18; 1 Timothy 2:5). And, ultimately, because Christ united every part of our humanity with his divinity in his incarnation, then every part of our humanity can be saved (Galatians 4:4-5).

Think even more deeply upon that. Two natures, a fully divine one and a fully human one. One person, this man Jesus (John 1:1-5, 14-18; Romans 1:1-4; Colossians 2:9-10). Only a truly righteous human – one who completely shared in our sinful nature yet never sinned himself – could be a worthy sacrifice for our sins and for our corrupt nature (Hebrews 2:14-18, 12:2-4; Romans 5:18-19). If Jesus were not human, he could not identify with us in all ways, he could not suffer in our stead, and he could not understand and pity us in our manifold weakness. If Jesus were not divine, he simply could not have borne and satisfied the fullness of God's wrath (Psalm 49:7; Galatians 4:4-5; 1 Timothy 2:5). Nor could he have been resurrected from his literal death and thereby secured our own resurrection and eternal life (John 5:21-23; 1 John 5:20; 1 Corinthians 15:20). His divinity imbues his human death and resurrection with infinite worth to us (1 Peter 1:18-19; Hebrews 7:27; Philippians 3:8).

With that settled, let's consider the roles of Jesus within the Trinity. Jesus, our blessed Mediator, holds and serves in three offices. **He is our ultimate prophet, priest, and king.**

Moses foretold of one who would be raised up as a greater prophet than he (Deuteronomy 18:15), and Peter and John confirmed Jesus as that prophet (Acts 3:22-23). As the prophet of prophets, Jesus inspired and surpassed all others (1 Peter 1:10) in testifying to the truth of God and his plan for us (John 18:37). Even today, all divine revelation of the truth that leads to our salvation comes by Jesus through the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 1 John 2:27).

David wrote of an everlasting priest after the order of Melchizedek (Psalm 110:4), and the writer of Hebrews affirms that it is Jesus (Hebrews 7). As our perfect high priest, he offered himself as the once-for-all sacrifice necessary for reconciliation to God (Romans 6:10; Hebrews 7:27, 9:26, 10:10; 1 Peter 3:18). Even today, he stands at God's right hand as our high priest, interceding for us (Romans 8:34-35; Hebrews 7:25).

Isaiah beautifully presaged the birth of a child upon whose shoulders every government would rest, a wonderful, mighty, everlasting prince of peace (Isaiah 9:2-7). Jeremiah told of God's promise to raise up a righteous branch for David who would reign as king (Jeremiah 33:14-16). And Zechariah foresaw the promised king riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, carrying with him righteousness and salvation (Zechariah 9:9). Whether in Gabriel's annunciation to Mary or in the shouts of the sons and daughters of Zion, Jesus is blessed as the king who comes in the name of the Lord (Luke 1:31-33; Matthew 21:5; John 12:13). As our king, he rules over all of us and all of creation, defending, directing, and sustaining his people. Even today, though we live in the present reality of the kingdom of God (Matthew 4:17, 10:7; Mark 1:15), we await its ultimate fulfillment and universal acknowledgment (Isaiah 45:23; Philippians 2:10-11; Romans 14:11; Revelation 19:16).

And, just as with God the Father, we have barely scratched the surface. For example, one of the most critical parts of Jesus's life is that he teaches us to be *missional* – i.e., he models for us what life in the Kingdom of God looks like. From him, we learn how to reveal the Kingdom in both word and deed, to live sacrificially and obediently, both in love.

Likewise, from him, we understand the critical centrality of the church, of community, to our journey. Jesus may be our individual, personal Savior, and that is blessedly true. But we cannot – we must not – stop there. We, *the church writ large*, are the bride of Christ, and he points us repeatedly to the importance of that blood-bought family.

When Bill and Gloria Gaither penned the wonderful song *There's Something About That Name*, she wrote a rarely-used but extremely powerful monologue to go along with it.

Jesus, the mere mention of his name can calm the storm, heal the broken, raise the dead. At the name of Jesus, I see sin-hardened men melted, derelicts transformed, the lights of hope put back in the eyes of a hopeless child. At his name, hatred and bitterness turn to love and forgiveness, and arguments cease.

I've heard a mother softly breathe his name at the bedside of a child delirious from fever, and I've watched that little body be quiet, fevered brow cooled. I've sat at the bedside of a dying saint, her body wracked with pain who, in those final fleeting seconds, summoned her last ounce of ebbing strength just to whisper earth's sweetest name: Jesus, Jesus.

Emperors have tried to destroy it. Philosophies have tried to stamp it out. Tyrants have tried to wash it from the face of the earth with the very blood of those who claimed it, yet it still stands.

And there shall be that final day when every voice that has ever uttered a sound, every voice of Adam's race, shall rise in one mighty chorus to proclaim the name of Jesus. For that day, 'every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ' is truly Lord!

Ah – so you see – it was not a mere chance that caused the angel one night long ago to say to a virgin maiden, “His name shall be called Jesus.” Oh, there is something about that name.

\* \* \*

**Exercise #1** – Again, just like the seven psalms that describe God, this week we will consider seven passages that describe Jesus, only we will use Jesus's own words. Jesus metaphorically describes himself as the bread of life; the light of the world; the door of the sheep; the good shepherd; the resurrection and the life; the way, the truth, and the life; and the true vine.

Either on your own, or with your family/group, read and meditate on one of his famous “I Am” statements per day. In light of Jesus's role as our prophet, priest, and king, and also in light of his fully human and fully divine nature, what new and fresh meaning do each of those statements take on for you? In your current journey with Jesus, which “I Am” statement carries the most weight for you?

**Exercise #2** – Take three minutes and, on your own, write down every name/title/nickname of Jesus that comes to mind. To get you started, here are three: the Alpha and the Omega, the Lily of the Valley, the Bright and Morning Star. (You will run out of time before you run out of names. By some counts, there are nearly 200 of them in the Bible!) Do this with your family and/or group. And share your lists aloud. In your walk with Jesus right now, which names are most resonant?

\* \* \*

*Final Thoughts – In Matthew 16, Jesus asks the disciples the single most important question ever posed. “Who do you say that I am?” (v.15). No other question ever asked or imagined carries with it the same level of eternal consequence. Our lives come down to how we answer it. Who do we say Jesus is? Our answer, generated by the faith given to us by the Holy Spirit, should be resolute and resonant with the confession of Peter and of the whole church since: Jesus Christ is God's only Son, our Lord, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified, died, buried, and resurrected. **So... who do you say Jesus is?***

## Week 3 - February The Holy Spirit

### Weekly Readings:

- John 16
- Romans 12
- 1 Corinthians 2:6-16
- 1 Corinthians 12 and 13
- Galatians 5:16-26
- Key idea – The Holy Spirit, the Giver of Life, is God’s *active presence* in the world and within the lives of believers. He dwells inside of us, regenerates our lives, convicts us of sin, reveals the truth that we might grow to be more like Jesus, and equips us with spiritual gifts to serve the body of Christ.

Before I entered vocational ministry, I spent a full professional life in the senior echelons of government, both state and federal. For two decades, I planned high-level events, inaugurations, funerals, meetings, international and domestic trips, and the like for presidents, prime ministers, governors, Cabinet secretaries, ambassadors, and the occasional royal. One of the hallmarks of the work was the requirement to sink quietly into the wall. In other words, people were never there to see me. My team and I were there to make sure all the conditions and ingredients for success were present, and then we were expected to blend into the background, almost as if we were wallflowers.

In 2001, Frederick Dale Bruner and William Horden wrote a theological book with a provocative title: *The Holy Spirit – The Shy Member of the Trinity*. At first blush, you might recoil. How could the very giver of life, the very one who empowers us to live like Jesus, be shy? But that misapprehends the authors’ point.

The Holy Spirit is shy, because he always points us away from him and toward the other members of the Trinity. Just like I had to be in my previous line of work, the Holy Spirit is perfectly content to guide us where we should go, give us what gifts we need to serve the body of Christ, and grow us in our Christlikeness. He is decidedly not a wallflower, but everything he does directs us to the truth he hears from the Father and the Son (John 16:13-15). He does not make things up, rather he teaches and reminds us of everything Jesus said (John 14:26). He loves them (and us) so much that he illumines our path with their true light.

As we did with Jesus, let us be abundantly, unmistakably clear. The Holy Spirit is God. Of the same essence as God the Father and Jesus Christ, His only Son. Pre-existent. Co-eternal. Omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent. And He is a “He,” not an “it.”

In fact, the Spirit of God makes an appearance in the Bible before Jesus is referenced. God the Father, creator of all things, is mentioned in Genesis 1:1. In Genesis 1:2, scripture tells us that the Holy Spirit brooded “over the face of the waters,” reporting to the enclosed society of the Godhead that the depth of darkness was unlike Him, devoid of life and light.

The Holy Spirit did not merely show up in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost. Nor, today, does the Holy Spirit belong to the sects of Christianity that trace their lineage to Azusa Street or Appalachian revival movements. He, like the Father and the Son, is without beginning or end. And the church of any era, apart from the Holy Spirit, is impotent and lifeless.

The Holy Spirit’s function within the Trinity and, by direct association, within our lives, is unique among the three. Let’s consider a few of the primary functions given in scripture, again in no particular order:

- The Holy Spirit is the Giver of Life (John 6:63; Romans 8:11; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Job 33:4).
- The Holy Spirit searches the depths of God’s mind and then reveals those truths to us and helps us to understand (1 Corinthians 2:6-16).
- The Holy Spirit glorifies Jesus and declares Him to all people (John 16:14).
- The Holy Spirit is the agent of our regeneration, moving us to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ (John 3:5-6; Titus 3:5).
- The Holy Spirit leads believers into all truth (John 16:13; Romans 8:14).
- The Holy Spirit takes residence, or *indwells*, in the bodies of those who are in Christ, now the temples where the Lord lives (1 Corinthians 6:19-20; John 14:17; Romans 8:9).
- The Holy Spirit gives us *power* to live for and like Jesus (Acts 1:9; Luke 24:49).
- In conjunction with our own obedient submission, the Holy Spirit sanctifies us – i.e., He cleanses us, sets us apart, transforms our lives, renews our minds, and makes us holy (2 Corinthians 3:18; 2 Thessalonians 2:13).
- The Holy Spirit is our Comforter, our Helper, our Advocate (John 14:16, 26).
- The Holy Spirit affixes believers with a seal, marking us as God’s very own, ensuring our inheritance in Christ (Ephesians 1:13-14; 2 Corinthians 1:22).
- The Holy Spirit convicts the world of its sin and unrighteousness and points it toward Jesus (John 16:8).
- The Holy Spirit guides us in true worship (John 4:23).
- The Holy Spirit produces spiritual fruit within believers (Galatians 6:16-26).
- The Holy Spirit distributes spiritual gifts to edify the church (Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12).

And so much more. That list is hardly exhaustive, and we could write entire books on any of those functions.

Moreover, just like Jesus, the Holy Spirit is referenced by many titles, idiomatic expressions, and, particularly in his case, symbols. A few of the common ones include:

- **A dove** – Likely the most common symbol, it was a dove that signaled the end of the flood (Genesis 8:8-12) and that descended upon Jesus at his baptism (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32). A dove represents God’s blessing, pleasure, purity, patience, and peace.
- **A tongue of fire** – This symbol comes directly from Luke’s account of Pentecost (Acts 2:3-4), when the Holy Spirit descended and was visualized as a tongue of fire that rested atop the head of each person in the Upper Room. John the Baptist clearly prophesied that Jesus would baptize believers with the Holy Spirit *and fire* (Matthew 3:11). Fire purifies, extracting that which is valuable and consigning to ash that which is not. The Holy Spirit, as fire, fulfills Jesus’s own words, that He came to set the earth on fire (Luke 12:49). And the tongue is also symbolic of speech broadly. Believers are equipped by the Holy Spirit to speak the truth with boldness.
- **A wind** – Though invisible, the life-giving wind (or breath) of the Holy Spirit is ubiquitous. Humans owe their very lives to the breath of the Spirit, the only part of God’s creation into which He *breathed* life (Genesis 2:7). His wind blows wherever it pleases, especially in the lives of those born of the Spirit (John 3:8). Pentecost itself was accompanied by the sound of this mighty, rushing wind (Acts 2:2), but sometimes the wind of the Spirit comes as a whisper (1 Kings 19:12).
- **Oil** – This symbol of the Holy Spirit represents anointing and approval. In the New Testament, anointing with oil is a picture of the blessing of the Holy Spirit on all believers (1 John 2:20), while the Old Testament details multiple accounts of kings and priests being anointed with oil as a sign of God’s choice and blessing (e.g., Exodus 29:7, 30:30; 1 Samuel 10:1, 16:13; 1 Kings 1:39). And Jesus himself speaks of his anointing as coming *directly from the Holy Spirit* “to proclaim good news to the poor... freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free” (Luke 4:18, paraphrasing Isaiah 61:1). And the oil we used to anoint the sick reassures someone of the healing and consoling presence of the Holy Spirit (James 5:14-15).

Others include rays of light (Luke 1:35), a cloud of the abiding presence of God (Exodus 13:21-22, 33:9, 40:36-38; Numbers 9:15-23, 11:25; 1 Kings 8:10; Ezekiel 10:3-4), water that quenches thirst and gives life (John 3:5, 4:14; 1 Corinthians 12:13; John 19:34; Isaiah 55:1; Zechariah 14:8); a seal (John 6:27); a seal and a pledge of God’s ownership

of us (Ephesians 1:13-14; John 6:37), and the “finger of God” (Luke 11:20; Exodus 31:18; 2 Corinthians 3:3).

**Exercise #1** – Among the reading passages this week is one from 1 Corinthians 2. Read it through a couple of times and, in light of what you now know about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, what do these versions tell you about their *relationship* and, critically, *how it affects/impacts us*? What is our role in receiving and applying the wisdom that comes from the Spirit?

**Exercise #2** – First individually, and then with your family/group, read the whole chapters of Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, not just the short passages on the gifts of the Spirit. Like we learned in January, put it all in a broader context. What jumps off the page to you? When the Holy Spirit gifts us, *why* does He do so? Couple this with 1 Corinthians 13 to amplify that answer. Return to who God the Father and God the Son are, and remember that is to whom God the Spirit points us. What does that say about our Christian walk together?

\* \* \*

*Final Thoughts – Sometimes we get caught up on the legalistic mechanics of what it means to be “filled with” or “baptized in” the Holy Spirit. What is exceptionally clear is that the infilling of the Holy Spirit is real, contemporary to today, and essential for living in power and victory (Ephesians 5:18).*

*What is remarkable about the biblical record, though, is the sundry ways in which the Holy Spirit manifests that indwelling in our lives. We see the pyrotechnics of Acts 2. And sometimes the Bible conspicuously notes that people spoke in various tongues, but not always. Sometimes people, like Saul/Paul, were miraculously healed at their infilling. Sometimes the very room was shaken. And on it goes.*

*Two things, though, seem ubiquitous. First, Jesus forthrightly says that those who are filled with the Holy Spirit will “receive power” to be the bold witnesses for him, both in word and in deed (Acts 1:8). And the biblical record testifies to that repeatedly. Second, the infilling of the Spirit was demonstrated time and again not by a formulaic set of manifestations, rather by the production of spiritual fruit in one’s life and the granting of spiritual gifts to serve the body of Christ. Jesus said we would be known to be His by how we love one another, and the Holy Spirit was the catalyst for that transformation in the lives of the early church... and is so for our lives today. We should have the humility to allow the Holy Spirit, in his creative greatness, to vary his movement in someone’s life rather than try to make them carbon copies of us.*

*And never forget that every vehicle needs fresh oil to run. So do we. Pray every day for a fresh, new infilling of the Holy Spirit. (We will explore this more next month.)*

## Week 4 - February Life in the Trinity

### Weekly Readings:

- John 17
- Matthew 22:34-40
- Key idea – The Trinity is not merely a theological theory; it is a practical guide for how we live our lives in love and with sacrifice.

Admittedly, the first three weeks of our study this month have been theologically dense – rich, to be sure, but also dense. But we hope that something has taken root in your heart and mind: our entire faith centers on the Trinity and Trinitarian love.

Yes, God is one being with three persons (Deuteronomy 6:4; Matthew 28:19). But confessing a triune God is more than a nifty explanation for the theological mysteries of creation (Genesis 1:26a), the incarnation (Luke 1:35; John 1:1-3), or the baptism (Matthew 3:17). No, confessing a triune God is how we understand our salvation, our life in Christian community, our worship and prayer, our very journey to become more like Christ, and our hope and assurance of life everlasting to come.

We are declaring that our God, who is love, is relational. The three persons are relational to each other in perfect love and unity, and their relationship is the blueprint for us and the essential stuff of the gospel (John 17:24; 1 John 4:7-12). The Father's love sent the Son (John 3:16), the Son's sacrifice reconciled us to the Father, and the Holy Spirit's indwelling makes us more like Jesus. Jesus employed that same model to send us out with the good news (John 20:21).

Our brother Paul gave us the beautiful model of how it all fits together: “The *grace* of the Lord Jesus Christ and the *love* of God and the *fellowship* of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14).

So, to return to and paraphrase C.S. Lewis, there is a dance party going on, and we are all invited!

And no member of the Trinity has ever hidden the invitation, starting at the very moment of our creation. “And God said, let *Us* make man in our own image, after our own likeness” (Genesis 1:26). It was the whole Trinity that created man, and, at the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3, we see the whole Trinity seeming to say, “Let us save man!”

We promised a return to John 17, which is perhaps the greatest scriptural indication that we were created for *oneness*, for *unity* with the Trinity, especially since the words flow from Messiah himself. We are invited to dance right in the middle of their love.

Consider Jesus's words in His high priestly prayer:

“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word, that they may all be one, just as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You have sent Me. The glory that You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one even as We are one, I in them and You in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that You sent Me and loved them even as you loved Me. Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, may be with Me where I am, to see My glory that You have given Me because You loved Me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, even though the world does not know You, I know You, and these know that You have sent Me. I made known to them Your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which You have loved Me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:20-26).

Whew! What a prayer! What a promise!

But beyond its beauty, do not miss what Jesus is praying. He is asking God the Father for us to be in the middle of their eternal relationship of love – to share in His glory, to be intimately unified with the Father, to know the God who He knows... which, as He says at the outset of the prayer, “is eternal life,” that we know “the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3).

When we begin to understand that – that Jesus wants us to be in the middle of this love with Him – our faith springs to life at a whole new level. Kingdom life, which we are to seek, is an invitation to run directly, unreservedly into this love.

We will never fully understand the mystery of the Trinity – one yet three, three yet one – until our glorification. But we can understand this: we are called to live life as they do.

This is when Trinitarianism becomes completely practical, not just theological or theoretical. Think about everything the Trinity teaches us when we observe their relationship one to another:

- We are to live in harmony with others, for this is what love does.
- We are to submit our wills to others (Ephesians 5:21; Philippians 2:3-4).
- We are to serve others (Matthew 20:28).

- We are to live life with sacrificial love and humility, laying down what we want for others (John 15:13; Philippians 2:3-8).
- We are to live together in communion, fellowship, and with all things in common (Acts 2:42-47).
- We are to submit our diverse gifts and talents for the unity of the body (Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 4:1-6).

We are made to live in community, both with the Trinity and with one another.

Think about the implications for marriage, family life, friendships, work, and, especially, the church. We find our true selves, who we were created to be, by giving ourselves to others, reflected the self-giving nature of the Godhead. Our relationships are meant to mirror that one – lasting commitments built on the bedrock of love.

When we understand that, we can begin to grasp even more of the beauty of God’s breathtaking design for us. Everything is relational.

**Exercise #1** – Return to John 17. Read that chapter slowly, deliberately, maybe even a few times. Imagine Jesus sitting beside you, praying those very words over you. After all, our Savior makes it clear that He is praying for all believers, for all time. What do you feel? Now that we have spent a month in the Trinity, what leaps off the page? Where do you see yourself in the intimate oneness that Jesus seeks for you?

**Exercise #2** – This is more practical, but it also may be more difficult. Do an inventory of your relationships. Start at home. Move to your extended family. Now your neighbors and colleagues. End at the church, but do not pay it short shrift. Think very carefully about your church community. Ask yourself (and share your answers with your family/group, if you want) the hard question – in how I relate to other people, do I mirror the Trinity? Is my love selfless and sacrificial?

\* \* \*

*Final Thoughts – Return to the words of Jesus in Matthew 22, the two greatest commandments: to love the Lord your God with everything and to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus said the second was like the first, and that everything in the Law and everything a Prophet ever said radiated from those two commands, mutually inclusive of one another. Do you get it now? We cannot love God fully – we cannot be in true Trinitarian harmony with Him – if we are not submitted in love to others. Keep in mind that your brothers and sisters in Christ are grafted to the same vine, baptized into the same body, and are invited to the same dance. That alone ought to condition how we speak with, work with, relate to, serve with, and love others.*

**March 2026**  
**A Christian's Journey**

Just for a moment, picture yourself back in your high school biology class. No, this is not a fun lab day where we can dissect frogs. Instead, you walk in and see that the teacher has written “Lifecycle of a Plant” on the board. You groan and yawn and then you start to squirm as the teacher explains each step.

Every plant starts as a seed. Then, when the right external conditions exist (sunlight, water, soil nutrients, season, etc.), the seed germinates, or breaks out of its seed casing. At the same time, that seed starts to grow roots downward into the richness of the soil from which it will draw the ingredients of life. Eventually, the seed produces a green shoot that bursts out of the soil and reaches toward the light.

Then, and only then, can a plant begin to grow leaves and start the process of photosynthesis, which converts solar energy into sugars. Over time, the seedling, combining the light it receives from the sun and nutrients and water from the soil, matures into an adult plant. But nary a single plant on the planet possesses deterministic growth. In other words, plants do not have an exact and particular shape or size to grow into. Instead, how big and sturdy and fruitful a plant becomes is largely determined by how the environmental conditions interact with the plant's innate biology.

Eventually a plant will reproduce itself, which is when flowers bloom and blossom. This allows for pollination, which fertilizes the plant, and additional seed production. Those seeds disperse, allowing other plants to grow and thrive. And this is all contained within a rhythm of rest (dormancy) and work governed by the seasons.

No doubt some of you are in hives right now, remembering all the traumas a biology class can wreak on a tenth grader. Hopefully, though, for most of you, a light bulb is beginning to buzz over your head. Our brains are hard-wired to find patterns, and yours is probably saying, “You know, that sounds a lot like us!” And you would be right.

All living things in God's created kingdom – bacteria, fungi, molds, protists, plants, animals, and, yes, humans – have a divinely designed life cycle that involves some variant of what we just reviewed. Life starts at some reproductive process. Life continues through some growth and maturation process. That part of the cycle repeats itself over and over. And then life ends through some death process.

But wait! There's more!

Didn't Jesus specifically say that Christians must experience two different kinds of birth, that of the flesh (or water) and that of the spirit (or blood)? Yes, he did, to Nicodemus in John 3:5-8. We are born from our mother's womb, of the flesh, from water. That is true of every human who breathes. But for those of us born of the spirit, in Christ's blood, we are entirely new: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a *new creation*. The old has passed away; behold, the *new* has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

So, wait, does our new life in Christ also carry this cycle of birth and growth that is so clearly written into God's creation? You bet it does. Remember, all life in God carries this familiar pattern, and your life as an apprentice of Jesus does, too.

But with one major exception – life in Christ abolishes the final stage of the cycle, or, more accurately, the point where the cycle ends: our death. As Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment but has passed *from death to life*" (John 5:24). We move from a familiar cycle of life to life everlasting after our present earthly bodies expire.

This month we will dive into our life cycle as a Christian. Together, we will explore some concepts that plenty of people know about but perhaps struggle to adequately explain from a solid biblical perspective: **regeneration, salvation, justification, consecration, sanctification, and glorification.**

These are some of the most beautiful – but loaded and misunderstood – words in all of Christianity. And our understanding of them often comes with a tremendous amount of church baggage. But, like any life cycle, they all go hand-in-hand, each building upon the previous one. What each does, through the power of the Holy Spirit, tells the story of our redemption, our reconciliation, our restoration, and our renewal.

We hope by now you are comfortable with each month's rhythm. And we also hope you are beginning to see how everything nests together. First, we learned how to better read, study, know, and live God's Word. We will spend a great deal of time in the Bible, and, as with any sword, it works better if you know how to use and wield it. Second, we learned about the most quintessential and foundational of all Christian ideologies: the Trinity. The Trinity is the fountainhead for how we love and how we live our faith, and everything else we study will flow from it.

Now, in March, we turn from the enclosed society of the Godhead to how the Father, Son, and Spirit directly, intimately, and willingly relate to us.

## Week 1 – March Regeneration and Salvation

### Weekly Readings:

- John 3:3-8
- Ephesians 2:1-10
- Key idea – Regeneration is the *cause*; salvation is the *effect*.

For two thousand years, Christian pastors and theologians have spilled a mind-boggling amount of ink explaining, discussing, arguing about, modifying, supporting, questioning, refuting, and recasting what the church believes about any of the doctrines we examine this month. What more could we possibly add?

But keep in mind our aims. We are not equipping you to teach in seminary, score points in a debate, or sound more clever than your friends. No, our goals are far more practical and holy. We want you to be more confident and biblically based in your understanding of the foundations of our faith. We want you to be more confident and biblically based in how you speak about your faith to others. And we want you to be more confident and biblically based in how you live your faith each day, particularly in the contexts of your family and your church.

So, let's start with the basics.

**Exercise #1** – In your own words, how would you define **regeneration** and **salvation**? If you were asked by someone from another planet who knew absolutely nothing of Christianity, how would you explain it to them?

And this is not always an easy exercise. Think of it this way. What if I asked you to define the color **red** to someone who is blind? How would you possibly do that? Most of us would probably start describing an apple, a fire truck, a rose, or even blood. But the person who is without sight has never seen any of those things. They have no solid reference point. We might also describe red with feelings, like passion, anger, even love. But how can those abstract ideas actually tell a blind person what *red* actually is? Maybe in frustration we just say, “well, red is red,” but remember we cannot define a thing by the thing itself, contrary to all the times our parents bluntly told us, “because I said so!”

For this exercise, I strongly suspect that most of you will have a more complete, richer definition of salvation. Preachers certainly preach about it more. And how many times do we ask someone, “Are you saved?” versus, “Hey, have you been regenerated?” We are just more comfortable with salvation, whether or not we fully understand it.

\* \* \*

So, what are regeneration and salvation? To start, they are not the same thing. In fact, when many Christians, particularly evangelical and charismatic Protestants, refer to “salvation,” they are likely speaking of “regeneration.”

Regeneration is instant. Regeneration is supernatural. Regeneration is the immediate work of the Holy Spirit that makes a dead person come alive, on-the-spot newness in Christ. Regeneration is our new birth, just as Jesus described to Nicodemus in John 3.

Moreover, regeneration precedes salvation. In fact, regeneration gives us the faith required for our salvation (1 Corinthians 2:14; 1 Corinthians 12; 2 Corinthians 4:13; Romans 10:17; Ephesians 2:8-9).

And perhaps most critically, regeneration is solely initiated by the Triune God. It is expressly the work of the Holy Spirit breathing into us. The Spirit initiates it; the Spirit nourishes it; the Spirit finishes it. Salvation, though, requires a simple but profound human response.

Therein lies the key difference. Regeneration is the *cause*; salvation is the *effect*. We are given a new heart to believe, and, when we do – when we say yes, when we confess – we are saved. Old things pass away, and we are made new in Christ.

That human response, of course, is fully empowered, enabled, and encouraged by the Holy Spirit. But it nevertheless requires us to respond with “yes” to the regenerative catalyst in our heart.

But our “yes” is not nearly as complicated as we sometimes make it. St. Paul provided the simplest, cleanest framework in Romans 10:9-10. “If you *confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved*. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”

Look carefully at what Paul says about salvation. He does not mandate that a person list every sin he or she has committed. He does not suggest praying a so-called “sinner’s prayer,” and indeed, one is never mentioned in the Bible. He does not require a series of good works to earn righteousness. He does not enroll people in catechism classes.

No, our salvation is solely because of Jesus. And Paul keeps that reality beautifully unadorned, placing salvation within reach of every regenerated heart – we must only confess the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and we must only believe in his resurrection.

Ultimately, Paul knows that salvation – and the regeneration of our hearts that leads to salvation – is a complete gift of *grace* from God. Nothing, absolutely nothing, we do can make us righteous before God. Only what Jesus has done. (Again, we are getting ahead of ourselves, but that is a preview of justification.) Paul drives this point in so many of his letters – to name a few, Romans 3:20; Ephesians 2:8-9; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 3:5.

And our confession is not that Jesus was just a good man. No, we confess his lordship over all things and all people. That confession and belief may be straightforward, but they are by no means inconsequential. Stop for just a moment and think about what we are doing. We are joining our voices with the company of saints and martyrs, countless hundreds of millions over two millennia, the very bride of Christ. We make salvation an individual event in our life, and it certainly is, but we are also grafted into a nifty family.

By now, I suspect some of you are rounding up torches and pitchforks and ready to storm the gates of the church, screaming, “What about repentance?!” I can hear you all quoting Jesus, John the Baptist, John the Beloved, Peter, Paul (Matthew 3:2; Mark 1:15; Luke 15:7; Acts 2:38, 3:19; 2 Peter 3:9; 1 John 1:9), not to mention a roll call of Old Testament prophets.

Repentance is absolutely, unequivocally a biblical concept. And repentance is absolutely, unequivocally a requisite in our lives. But... what does it really mean?

**Exercise #2** – Define biblical repentance as you understand it.

For many, repentance has become a legalistic checklist of sins. We believe we must rehearse every wrong we have ever committed in order to gain the gift of salvation. The troubles with that quickly sharpen into focus. First, how in the world can we possibly remember every sin of omission and commission in our lives, every impure thought, every idle word, every moment of selfishness? We can't. It is simply impractical, and for those who do try this, they live in a perpetual state of fear that they forgot to confess something. This is especially sad since Jesus taught us simply to pray with an earnest heart, “Forgive us our trespasses,” our sins, the times we went where we ought not to have (Matthew 6:12).

More soberly, a list comes dangerously close to turning repentance into a work, a mechanical cataloguing and recitation of our wrongs in order to receive absolution. But we cannot be made righteous by our own works.

And, ultimately, this does violence to what repentance actually means. Repentance, from the Greek *metanoia*, quite literally means “a change of mind.” It is *not* that

recitation of everything we have done. And it is not simply remorse or conviction, although those feelings can be used by the Holy Spirit to spur us into repentance. Instead, it is a fundamental, internal transformation, a reorientation of one's entire life and heart. To put it in the terms said by Mary Magdalene in the television show, *The Chosen*, "I was one way, and now I am completely different. And the thing that happened in between was Him." Jesus. Or, more familiarly, my grandfather often said, "I just ain't the man I used to be."

Repentance, thus understood, is a bold declaration that we no longer live our lives in sinful things that hurt us. Our entire being has been (and is being) transformed. We have walked in darkness, but we have seen a great light, and we have turned our hearts toward that light.

Yes, we acknowledge our past wrongs, but repentance is beautifully forward-looking, not backward-looking in condemnation. We deliberately choose a new direction.

This all begs the question: from *what* exactly are we saved? We will think more about this in the next two weeks (justification and sanctification), but we can certainly say we are saved *from* the penalty of sin (death and eternal separation from God), the power of sin (living empowered lives), the wrath and judgment of God, and, in the fullness of time, the presence of sin (glorification).

However, I would suggest that we think of our salvation with a different preposition. Yes, we are saved *from* something, but what if we were saved *for* something, in the here and now? In other words, what if we imagined our salvation as more than just escaping hell but living in the fullness of the kingdom... today?

Think about all the right-now benefits of salvation that Jesus and Paul list for us:

- We are saved *for* good works (not *by* good works). (Ephesians 2:10)
- We are saved *for* abundant life. (John 10:10).
- We are saved *for* the fullness of joy in God. (John 15:11)
- We are saved *for* the assignment of disciple-making. (Matthew 28:19-20).
- We are saved *for* the declaration of the gospel. (Mark 16:15)
- We are saved *for* obedience. (John 14:15-17)
- We are saved *for* empowered living through the Spirit. (Acts 1:8; Ephesians 1:13)
- We are saved *for* the fulfillment of God's will. (Philippians 4:13).
- We are saved *for* the Master's use. (2 Timothy 2:21).

And that is barely scratching the service.

We are saved to brilliantly display the wonders and powers of God's grace to others. And we are saved to look like, sound like, act like, and become like Jesus. Jesus specifically commissions us to be the light of the world reflecting him (Matthew 5:14-16). This stands as proof positive that we are saved *for* a purpose in this world, not just *from* God's wrath in the world to come.

Even the Greek word for salvation, *sozo*, is much deeper, much richer, and much more comprehensive than just rescue from judgment. *Sozo* is a word of healing and deliverance, the idea of making something whole. So, yes, salvation in the New Testament refers to spiritual rescue from sin, but it also speaks to something much more holistic – the healing of spirit, soul, and body, the (eventual) full restoration of our humanity as God initially created. Christ's incarnation, which we discussed last month, makes this kind of *sozo* possible. As St. Gregory of Nazianzus said, "What is not assumed is not healed," but Jesus assumed it, Jesus paid it all, and Jesus healed it all. And faith in him, as he told the woman with the blood disorder, makes us well (Matthew 9:22).

So, let's briefly review. Regeneration is instant; salvation is a process. Regeneration triggers our heart to believe; salvation is holistic, a comprehensive redemption of everything that Jesus assumed – our spirits, our bodies, our minds. Regeneration opens the door for repentance and salvation; salvation opens the door for justification, sanctification, and glorification, which we will explore more deeply this month.

\* \* \*

*Final Thoughts – Some of you may be tempted to think all this is nothing more than theological hair-splitting. I understand your concern. But think of it like this. When you travel to another country, you need a passport. That passport unlocks everything else – your ability to get on a plane or boat, your ability to check-in to a hotel, your ability to move around freely, etc. Without it, you are boxed into the same place; with it, you can experience more of the world around you.*

*Regeneration is your passport to Christianity. It is the prerequisite work of the Holy Spirit that allows us to walk the Christian journey, starting with faith to believe, a gift from the Trinity, moving to confession and repentance, our responses to this blooming faith. Accepting that there is an act of regeneration that is sovereign of God reinforces the truth that the whole salvific process is a work of God's grace, not our will.*

*All pieces of this journey share a common vocabulary, so it is rather easy to blur the lines between these two and also with sanctification. But God is not haphazard. He is ordered. And he has chosen to begin our journey back to him with a circumcision of our heart, regenerating our faith and pointing us to confession and repentance.*

## Week 2 – March Justification

### Weekly Readings:

- Romans 3
- Romans 5
- Key idea – Justification is both about present peace and future hope.

When most pastors preach about justification, they set the scene in a courtroom. The word picture goes something like this.

You have committed a crime. No doubt exists about your guilt. Video cameras have captured it. Multiple witnesses will testify to it. A paper trail of evidence proves it. And, most significantly, the judge himself has seen it all. You have no alibi, no defense, nothing at all that will assuage the demands of the law and the wrath of the judge. You stand condemned, and your punishment, whatever it is, will be completely merited.

But then, just as the judge is about to pronounce you guilty and decree your sentence, an attorney – an advocate – rises from his seat at your defense table. He tells the judge that, despite your guilt, he will serve your sentence because he loves you. The judge does not even hesitate in accepting the advocate's offer, because this is what the judge intended and wanted to happen in the first place, before your case was ever called before his bench.

Therefore, without hesitation, the judge considers the advocate's substitution completely sufficient for the crime, applies it to your guilt, and, in the name of that advocate and solely on the basis of what he has done, pronounces you not guilty. The judge refuses to condemn you and, instead, pronounces you worthy to enter the fullness of a perfect society.

Whew!

We should pause a moment and just give thanks that this scene is not fiction but fact. This is *our* story. We are all sinners. We all miss the mark. We are all incapable of living a holy life on our own merit. We all face eternal separation from a righteous God because of our individual sins and the scourge and curse of sin itself. Yet Jesus stepped in and, ever obedient to the Father's will, lived a perfect life, died a sacrificial death in our stead, and applied that death as atonement for us.

That is justification. We are *justified* – made right before God – because of Jesus.

Since Adam and Eve's sins in the Garden of Eden, none of us is clean and righteous, thus nothing we could do could ever restore us before God (Acts 17:26; Psalm 53:1-3; Isaiah 64:6; Romans 3:9-23; Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:21-22). And that necessarily means that God's law condemns us (Psalm 130:3; Luke 5:8).

But Jesus becomes God with us, incarnated as the second Adam, fully divine but, critically, fully human. We believe that means he could, as a perfect human, be a perfect sacrifice for all human sins. That is certainly and inviolably true. (Isaiah 45:21-25; Philippians 2:6-11; Matthew 1:21; Luke 2:11; Acts 5:31; Titus 2:13). Upon our confession of faith in his lordship and resurrection, we are saved and thereby justified before God.

Yet we often paint that courtroom scene as one that occurs at the end of our lives, when we die and stand before God's throne. But what if we looked at it as a present and real reality? For a moment, let's shift the setting from a courtroom to a hospital.

You come into the emergency room, and, after extensive blood work and medical tests, your doctors tell you that your death is certain. They can do no more. The ravages of disease have caught up with you, and you have no hope to be cured. They pronounce your condition mortal and walk away.

But then another doctor comes in, a universal donor of blood, and says he can give you a blood transplant. Not a transfusion, which would be just a temporary boost of blood, but a transplant, where your sick and decaying blood is drained and his life-giving, breathing blood is given to you. And, he says, the results are astounding – 100% of those who receive this transplant have life everlasting, *starting immediately!*

Now, what are you going to do? I can't imagine anyone who would say no.

The analogy is the same as the courtroom – you are condemned, you (nor anyone else) can do anything to give you life, your sick blood punishes you with certain death, and only one man's blood can save you. The courtroom paints a picture of our own personal sins, the individual litany of all the times we transgressed God's holy law. The hospital paints a picture of the very curse of sin, so horrible that it infects every single person's blood with the certain decay of death, regardless of their own merit.

But the key with the hospital analogy is this –it is not set at the judgment bench of God. No, when you receive the blood, and you stand justified, you are now sent forth to flourish. One of the more remarkable aspects of justification is this – even as the Holy Spirit continues to build righteous behavior within us (sanctification, which we discuss next week), God treats us as if we were righteous now, today, able to approach him boldly, and able to live in his peace and joy.

You see it, right? Yes, justification is completely about future hope. Our account with God is settled and held against the day of our judgment because of Christ. We pass from death to life (John 5:24).

But we miss out on the whole beauty of justification if we do not recognize its present peace. All of our legal obligations are fulfilled, which means we can turn to what life unshackled truly means. Our blood has been cleansed – and is still being cleansed until our eventual glorification – by the transfusion of the blood of Jesus.

We are freed *from* the tyranny of works righteousness by justification, and we are set loose into the world *for* good works and gospel testimony born of his blood, of his love, and of his character.

In other words, our justification is a legal exchange, yes. But it is so much more, because that legal exchange opens the door for us to experience and share life in the kingdom.

**Exercise #1** – How do you view justification? Is it that legal exercise in a courtroom, a transaction between God the Father and God the Son that allows you to be justified before him? Or is it the transplant in the hospital, where the blood of death is replaced by the blood of life? Or is it both?

**Exercise #2** – Read Romans chapters 3 and 5 this week. Slowly, steadily, deliberately, meditatively. In light of this week’s lesson, what jumps off the page? What speaks to your heart? How are you beginning to understand the fullness and richness of justification?

\* \* \*

*Final Thoughts – Humans have a tendency to make everything about us. So, as with that trial metaphor, we see ourselves before the judge, but we forget that Jesus was, too. And that wasn’t the Trial of the Century or even the Millennium, but it was the Trial of Eternity. Throughout Holy Week, Jesus was questioned over and over by the religious leaders. Just as the priests did with the Passover lamb, Jesus was repeatedly inspected to ensure he had no blemish, no fault, nothing that would disqualify his sacrifice. And the high priest always examined the lamb that would be sacrificed for all the people’s sin, just as Caiaphas did with Jesus. Even worldly authorities (Pilate/Rome/Herod) inspected Jesus and found no fault with him. By every measurement, by every person, Jesus was perfect, which made his death perfect for our justification. Nothing else would do.*

## **Week 3 – March**

### **Consecration and Sanctification**

#### **Weekly Readings:**

- Romans 6 and 12
- Hebrews 10
- Key idea – Consecration and sanctification are two sides of the same coin – a decision to be set apart for a holy purpose, and then growth and empowerment necessary for that purpose.

We identify one another by tribes. Yes, I am an American, but I am also a Southerner, and I am also a Georgian. And most folks who live where I live are also part of another critically important tribe to our existence: the college football team for which we root. (Clearly we are sane and stable folks, measuring our happiness each autumn weekend by the performance of teenagers and young adults during a three-hour game!)

A common football ritual is national signing day, where young, gifted athletes from all over the country announce their selection of a school. The ceremony is a big one, complete with families and coaches and a formal table for the high school senior to sign an actual letter of intent. The climax happens when the new commit pulls out a baseball cap of his new team, bends its bill, plops it on his head, and smiles at the camera.

Then he enrolls at the university over the summer and quickly learns that his mother is nowhere to be found. Coaches work him hard... then ask for more. They tear down everything he learned from high school coaches and knead into him new disciplines, new rhythms, new approaches. He has to be up early and has to clear most every part of his life with a coach, an academic advisor, a nutritionist, a doctor, and a few others.

This, brothers and sisters, is a picture of consecration and sanctification. The first is me placing my life on the altar; the second is the Holy Spirit shaping what I placed there.

Consecration is like national signing day, when you say, “Lord, I am yours,” and put on the “Team Jesus” hat. Sanctification is God’s response, through the Holy Spirit, to your decision. He says, “Great! Now, let me make you in the image of Jesus.” And then, his coaching and correcting and empowering combine with your sweat equity to produce fruit within you and for the kingdom of God.

And if that sounds a little bit different than regeneration, salvation, and justification, it should. All of those parts of our journey are centered on the work of the Triune God. The Holy Spirit regenerates our heart, preparing us for a confession of faith. Jesus saves us through his sacrificial atonement on the cross and his resurrection thereafter. And

God the Father considers us justified – and not condemned – by the work of his Son. In none of those steps do we have anything to offer, other than our obedience and response. The work is not ours.

But in consecration and sanctification, we are fully expected to be active participants. Let's start with consecration, an Old Testament centerpiece:

- “For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy” (Leviticus 11:44).
- “Consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am the LORD your God” (Leviticus 20:7).
- “And say to the people, ‘Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat’” (Numbers 11:18).
- “Then Joshua said to the people, ‘Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you’” (Joshua 3:5).
- “Get up! Consecrate the people say, ‘Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow; for thus says the LORD, God of Israel, ‘There are devoted things in your midst, O Israel. You cannot stand before your enemies until you take away the devoted things from among you’” (Joshua 7:13).
- “And he said, ‘Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves, and come with me to the sacrifice’” (1 Samuel 16:5).
- “And [David] said to them, ‘You are the heads of the fathers’ houses of the Levites. Consecrate yourselves, you and your brothers, so that you may bring up the ark of the LORD, the God of Israel, to the place that I have prepared for it’” (1 Chronicles 15:12).
- “And [Hezekiah] said to them, ‘Hear me, Levites! Now consecrate yourselves, and consecrate the house of the LORD, the God of your fathers, and carry out the filth from the Holy Place’” (2 Chronicles 29:5).

**Exercise #1** – What jumps off the page to you about these representative verses when taken in isolation? Why did the Lord ask the people to consecrate themselves? And what role was a person expected to have in the process?

Now, pick one or two and read the verse in its larger context (i.e., the full narrative passage/chapter). Do this first by yourself and then perhaps choose a different verse to explore your group/family, answering the same questions.

\* \* \*

Is it not striking that the Lord asked people to set themselves apart, knowing full well that we humans are incapable of living holy lives separate from the power of the Holy

Spirit? Yet there we are. Time and again, the Lord tells Israelites to separate themselves from the pagan cultures and practices that surrounded them.

What, then, do we make of this?

Perhaps this – while we do nothing to earn our salvation, God takes seriously our zeal and desire to live separately from the world, i.e., *in* it but not *of* it. The things God wants to do in, with, and through us – and the spiritual promised lands to which he wishes to take us – require us to sweep the leaven out of lives. We have to learn the discipline of saying no to unholy things and of turning away.

In plain language, we are set apart... so God is asking us to act like it.

Paul bluntly commands us to do: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, **to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship**” (Romans 12:1). Or, even more strongly, “Do not present your members [parts of your body] to sin, as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life...” (Romans 6:13).

So, what then do we say of consecration’s partner, sanctification?

Let me confess a frustration of mine. I think Christians argue too much about a lot of things, but, in particular, I think branches of our family miss the forest for the trees when it comes to sanctification. We all seem to agree that, at its core, it is something that makes us more holy, more like Jesus.

But our tribes argue whether that is a once-for-all-time sanctification, something like a single lightning bolt that strikes us pure and free from sin’s clutches. Or whether it is a lifelong process of heart circumcision, where we learn more and more to set aside the unholy, live the holy, and produce good fruit.

What if the answer were just... yes?

Scripture seems to strongly suggest that true sanctification is both, i.e., both *definitive* and *progressive*.

**Exercise #2** – Read Hebrews 10 in its entirety. After reading it, in your own words, how would you describe sanctification?

\* \* \*

That passage seems to suggest that Jesus is the definitive agent of sanctification, his sacrifice breaking once-for-all the bondage of sin in the lives of believers. But it also seems to suggest that there is an ongoing work of God's grace through the Holy Spirit, regenerating us in order to put sin to death more each and every day.

In 1647, our spiritual forefathers wrote in the Westminster Catechism this simple and beautiful definition: **“Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.”**

In other words, when asked to define sanctification, our brothers just said, “Yes.” In that one statement, they frame it as both a single and an ongoing work.

I think they are right.

And Jesus sets the substance and benchmark of our sanctification – the truth. Jesus specifically prayed to the Father that all of us would be sanctified: “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). But who is the truth? Jesus. Jesus is the word of God. Jesus is the way, *the truth*, and the life. We are sanctified holy in him alone.

So, tying it all together, what can we say?

- We are commanded to consecrate ourselves, but the Holy Spirit must partner with us.
- Consecration is a worshipful offering of ourselves to God – our lives, our bodies, our ways, our relationships, our beliefs, etc.
- What we consecrate to God, he will make holy. He takes ownership of that which is consecrated to him.
- Regeneration, salvation, and justification must precede consecration.
- Sanctification, or being made holy, cannot begin until we have consecrated ourselves and our things to him. Consecration first, sanctification follows.

\* \* \*

*Final Thoughts – In my denominational tradition, old-timers would often say, “I’m saved, sanctified, and filled with the Holy Ghost.” I fully understand their sentiment, and I never doubted their relationships with Jesus.*

*But you see the problem with their framing, right? Every verb is in the past sense, including sanctified. I supposed we could be sanctified once and then have to grow*

*into it like a hand-me-down to a twelve-year-old who has not gone through a growth spurt. The garment is just an awkward fit until we grow.*

*Yet that seems contradictory to so much of the New Testament's writing, particularly that of Paul, about our Christian walk. Its authors frequently deploy a verb tense common in Greek but unknown in English – present passive imperative. A verb in that tense means that the action is 1) continuous, ongoing, repeated, and decidedly not a single time; 2) accomplished through the act of another (in our case, the Holy Spirit); and 3) commanded.*

*So, Ephesians 5:18 transforms from “be filled with the Spirit” to “be being filled,” i.e., presently, accomplished by the Spirit, and urgently so. Every day.*

*That verb tense litters the pages of the New Testament. Be being... saved (Acts 2:40), transformed (Romans 12:2), reconciled (2 Corinthians 5:20); enlarged/widened (in your hearts) (2 Corinthians 6:13), separated (2 Corinthians 6:17), perfected (2 Corinthians 13:11), empowered (Ephesians 6:10), humbled (1 Peter 5:6), and, yes, sanctified (Revelation 22:11)*

*And when we read any of those in the present passive imperative, we begin to realize just how continuously transformative our Christian should be. Or, in the language of this week, continuously sanctified to fulfill the purposes for which we are consecrated to the One.*

*In the words of the old hymn, “I need thee every hour, most gracious Lord, no tender voice like thine can peace afford. I need thee every hour, stay thou nearby; temptations lose their power when thou art nigh. I need thee every hour, teach me thy will, and thy rich promises in me full. I need thee, O I need thee. Every hour I need thee. O bless me now, my Savior, I come to thee.”*

*Amen.*

## Week 4 – March Glorification

### Weekly Readings:

- Romans 8:18-30
- 1 Corinthians 15
- 1 Peter 1
- Key idea – “We shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”

Think back for a moment to your high school graduation. Perhaps you recall all the pomp and pageantry, marching into the stadium or auditorium. A band played. Bunches of people spoke. And then, at some point, the principal stood up and said something like this to the superintendent: “On behalf of the faculty of this high school, I certify that these candidates have completed all the requirements for their diploma.”

Then, row by row, you joined your classmates in walking across the stage, receiving your diploma, shaking hands with the dignitaries, and returning your seat. Yet one final act remained – moving the tassel of your mortarboard from one side to the other, officially signifying to everyone that you were a graduate!

The finality of that moment – whether five or fifty years ago – has never changed. You reached the end of a journey that started well before kindergarten. A lifelong process transitioned in an instant, from student to graduate.

To some degree, this mirrors the biblical concept of glorification.

Glorification is the final, *future* stage of salvation. It is the last link in the golden chain of salvation – from being called and regenerated to being justified to being sanctified to being glorified (Romans 8:29-30). All of the work is complete. We are completely, wholly, and eternally saved, freed from sin and completely, wholly, and eternally transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Like Jesus, glorification necessarily means a glorified body and spirit – resurrected, immortal, experiencing unceasing, unrestrained communion with the Trinity. Christ’s resurrection is the firstfruit, or initial proof and earnest payment, of our own resurrection, and his glorified body is likewise (1 Corinthians 15; Philippians 3:20-21).

And, perhaps more overwhelmingly wonderful than anything is John’s bold witness: “Beloved, we are God’s children *now*, and what we *will be* has *not yet* appeared; but we know that when he appears, *we shall be like him*, because we *shall see him as he is*. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (1 John 3:2-3).

Mercy. Sit back and let that sink in a minute.

We shall see Jesus as he is, fully glorified, fully transfigured, fully God, fully man. Why? Because on that day, we will be like him. We will have graduated. We will have turned our tassel to the other side – one in the presence of Jesus Christ and one where the presence of sin, suffering, evil, and their effects and influences are permanently eradicated.

Now, when John says we shall be like him, he does not mean that we will be gods in our own right. Instead, he means, quite literally, that we will be glorified – trading the mortal for immortal, the perishable for the imperishable (1 Corinthians 15:50-58) – as Christ and, through him, able to stand pure and blameless before God. The whole life cycle of our Christian faith culminates in an eternity where we have been fully conformed into the image of our older brother, our Savior, our Jesus.

Lest you think this is some pie-in-the-sky theology, this is exactly what Jesus himself prayed over us on the night of his betrayal. Quite literally, he asked the Father, “The glory that you have given me I have given to them that they *may be one even as we are one*. I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one... Father, I desire that they also, whom you “have given me, may be *with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me...*” (John 17:22-24).

And does anyone really think that God the Father will not answer and fulfill the prayers of his beloved Son?

Jesus prayed this over you and every believer for all time. And every time a follower of Christ is glorified, God the Father answers this prayer yet again.

How good does all that sound? I can promise you that the reality will far exceed whatever your imagination allows you to imagine. Paul, in Romans 8, exhorts us with this breathtaking truth – our present sufferings cannot even be held up as a comparison point for what a glorified life will be like.

An unfortunate trend within churches is to make our journey all about “getting to heaven,” which often neglects the present reality of the kingdom of God that is explicit and pervasive in Jesus’s teachings. And, building off that trend, some churches stop our journey just inside the eastern gate. We get to heaven, we simply lay it all down and are done.

But heaven is not the point. And – sit down for this – heaven was never the real goal. The goal is to be like Jesus and to be one with the Trinity (again, painstakingly read what Jesus prayed over us in John 17). **The very desire of Jesus’s heart is for our glorification.** To share Jesus’s home for eternity, we must be glorified.

**Exercise** – This week, we only have one exercise, but we really want you to take your time and think. Read 1 Peter 1 several times. (It is only 25 verses. Try making it your primary Bible reading this week. Work to memorize some of it, if you can.) But within 1 Peter 1, what do you notice? Identify the life cycle of a Christian in Peter’s exhortation – regeneration, salvation, justification, consecration, sanctification, and glorification. We promise, it’s all there. Reflect on this whole month. What do you more deeply appreciate about your walk with Christ? And, in light of what Peter writes, what do you think about your (temporary) problems and sufferings in this world? Within the life of a believer, what do these things do?

Look how Peter concludes that passage – “And this word is the good news that was preached to you” (v. 25).

This is the good news, the gospel – for unto us is born a Savior, Christ the Lord. He, along with the Father and the Spirit, are intimately involved in our redemption – from the regeneration of our heart... to the healing of our sin sickness through salvation... to our justification before God by the blood sacrifice of Jesus... to our impulse for consecration and the work of sanctification... and ultimately to our full transformation into Christlikeness at our glorification.

So, fear not! We shall see him as he is, because we shall be like him.

\* \* \*

*Final Thoughts – I do not know everything glorification entails, but I earnestly believe that it is far greater and far more comprehensive and wonderful than I can imagine in my feeble brain. But I also believe the church fails to add its “amen” to glorification. We talk of our resurrected bodies and of life everlasting, both true and real. Yet those are rewards. Great rewards, unspeakably wonderful rewards, but rewards nevertheless. The product of this whole journey – the magnetic north on our entire spiritual compass – is to be like Jesus. And, to reach that ultimate goal, to be like him and to see him as he is, we must be glorified. In the end, glorification is more than a promise, though it is that. Glorification is God’s final act of restoration of our full humanity into its perfect image, the same state that, on the sixth day of creation, caused God to look at us and say it was “very good.” With glorification, we can be in Eden once more, walking with our Lord in the cool of the evening.*

**April 2026**  
**The Problem of Sin**

Imagine you are in an appointment with a cardiologist. For weeks, you have dreaded this appointment, because you were quite certain the doctor was about to put the hammer down on your sedentary lifestyle and eating habits. Intuitively you know that things must change – I mean, pizza and fried chicken can't be the best options for *every* meal, right?

Then, much to your surprise, the cardiologist comes in, sits down, examines you, pores over your bloodwork, including a horrifically high lipid panel, and then exclaims, "Keep on doing what you're doing! Eat what you want, when you want, and how much you want! If it feels good to you, then, by all means, do it! We've got magic pills and magic surgeries that can fix it all!"

That may seem like a laughable, completely unrealistic scenario. But the reality is, we often treat sin in much the same way: something we know is inherently and utterly bad for us, but something we keep consuming because we view God's grace as a "get out of jail free" card applied to any and all behaviors.

So many people readily quote Romans 5:20-21 to justify this point of view – "Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Amen. But hang on just a minute. Paul's *very next words*, which we often overlook because editors placed them in a new chapter, were, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? **By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?**" (Romans 6:1-2).

The grace that Christ displayed on Calvary, though free to us, was not cheap. But Paul teaches us that we treat it that way when we live in habitual, perpetual sin after our regeneration.

Notice that Paul never says we will not be tempted. When we come to Jesus Christ through faith, yes, the bonds of sin are broken in our lives. Sin no longer *reigns* in and over our lives. But the temptation of sin most assuredly *remains* in our lives.

And this is why teaching on sin is mission critical for churches today. But sin has fallen out of favor as a discussion topic in pulpits and discipleship groups. As a pastor, I can certainly see the allure. No one wants to talk about bad stuff. Sin makes us feel

uncomfortable (as it should). And no one purposefully wants to make anyone feel bad or that something is wrong. We all want the joy stuff without any of the sanctification stuff to make us stronger.

And I cannot help but think that the enemy of our soul delights in that. Think about how relative everything is these days. People are openly encouraged to live out their “truth,” seemingly oblivious to the irony that if everyone has an individual truth (which they decidedly do *not*; Jesus rightly stakes claim to being *the* Truth), then there is no objective truth at all. The word disintegrates, and we openly invite people to live lives of selfish ambition, lustful desires, and misappropriated love.

Given this introduction, you might expect this month to be a hellfire and brimstone warning against specific sins. But you would be wrong. We have no intention of turning this into a recitation of sins of commission and omission. To bluntly paraphrase the prophet Micah in the reverse, the Lord has *also* told you, O man, what is bad. We already know that idolizing, killing, stealing, adulterating, coveting, and lying are on that list (Exodus 20). We know that other works of the flesh – e.g., sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger and rage, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, etc. – make the list, too (Galatians 5:15-21). We could go on and on, but you know right from wrong.

Moreover, such a list smacks of a legalistic approach to faith, as if God were a hall monitor waiting to write tardy slips to everyone not safely in a classroom when the bell rings. When we reduce sin to a checklist, we miss the point altogether.

The point is this: sin – any sin, every sin – always starts the same way. Sin starts in the heart with misplaced love.

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6), and throughout his whole ministry, stripped away the idea that sin was simply wrong acts. “For from **within, out of the heart of man**, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. **All these things come from within, and they defile a person**” (Mark 7:21-23).

However, like the hapless cardiologist telling his patient what he wants to hear, we preach and teach a gospel without the teeth of conviction and refinement so manifestly evident in Jesus’s ministry. Jesus, as plain as the nose on our faces, defined sin as a condition of the heart, a symptom of inner decay and corruption. He channelled the prophet Jeremiah, who wrote, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9). So, the anger, lust, hypocrisy, jealousy,

greed, judgmentalism and self-righteousness, unforgiveness, and pride that we harbor within are the greatest evidence of our need for sanctification. And out of the reservoir of such vile will eventually spring actions that hurt, wound, and break others and ourselves.

The trouble is we are much more likely to judge the latter, all the actual actions, as sin, but rarely, if ever, the thoughts of our heart.

So, this month, we will examine sin much more clinically and holistically. What is sin in the eyes of God? Why is it so serious? What does it do to us, to others, to the church, and even to the universe? What are its consequences? The answers to these questions matter so much more than just a list of “do’s and don’ts,” because they all point to sin’s headwaters.

We will not necessarily discuss the remedy for sin or overcoming temptation. We spent a great deal of time on regeneration, salvation, justification, sanctification, and the like last month. And later this year we will work through some practices of Christian spiritual formation that will help us avoid giving “any opportunity to the devil” (Ephesians 4:27).

Instead, everything this month will focus us on one central idea – sin is serious.

Sin is so much more than just modern Christian euphemisms – “my struggle,” “a point of brokenness,” or “the weakness of my flesh.” Despite our softened labels, sin is breaking God’s law (1 John 3:4). And that, by its very definition, means sin is gravely serious, and we will approach it with such sobriety.

## Week 1 – April What is Sin?

### Weekly Readings:

- Genesis 1-3
- 1 Corinthians 13
- Key idea – Sin, at its core, is the redirection of our love away from God and others and onto ourselves. Sin’s roots are pride and selfishness.

At the outset of this week and indeed this month, we need to discuss a thorny and complex issue, one that fills whole sections of theological libraries. What exactly is sin? And what is its origin?

And – surprise! – we will frame both the questions and answers in a way you might not have considered before. Let’s start with the standard answer.

As believers in Christ, we turn to the Bible for our answer. There, in the plain language of Genesis 3, we see the introduction of sin into God’s perfect creation. In the simplest of terms, eating the fruit of one tree was forbidden by God. The serpent lied to Eve about the consequences. Eve ate and offered the same to Adam. He, too, ate. And, consequently, sin, separation from God, and death immediately and cataclysmically corrupted creation. Not just humans but *all* creation.

**Exercise #1** – Read the whole of the creation narrative, every word of the first three chapters of Genesis. Read it slowly, deliberately, and meditatively. What do you notice about God’s intent for humans? Why do you think he made us in the first place?

Now, think about all of his instructions to Adam and Eve, both what to do and what not to do. Why might he give those specific directions? Finally, in the fall itself, what is happening? Think beyond the simple formula of “God said don’t. The serpent tempted. Eve ate. Adam ate. God banished.” While true, think more deeply. Beyond eating a piece of fruit, what exactly was the serpent encouraging Eve and, by extension, Adam to do here? And, based on what you said was God’s reason for creating humans, why did Adam and Eve ultimately do it?

\* \* \*

But for all the drama in the creation story, sin is only defined by inference, and then not even complexly. In fact, the definition is breathtakingly simple: doing what God told you not to do. (And, naturally, the opposite, not doing what God told you to do.)

So, sin, most straightforwardly, is transgressing against God’s law (1 John 3:4).

But that tells us nothing of sin's actual origin, only the action that encoded its curse into our DNA. If Adam and Eve were God's perfect creation, then why did they choose to do something so imperfect, so disobedient, so unholy?

Again, we could just leave it at the gift of human free will, God's intentional decision to voluntarily limit the exercise of his omnipotence so that humans could choose on their own to love him. Indeed, the scriptures are littered with examples of this, perhaps most notably Joshua's call to his people, "*Choose* you this day whom you will serve..." (Joshua 24:15). So, God gives us agency, and we misapply and misuse it.

But that still leaves something on the table. Reconsider our earlier prompt: why were we created in the first place? Because when we begin to consider sin in light of *why we were created* – i.e., the very purpose of our existence – then sin takes on a much heavier, much more jarring reality, and its true origin should petrify us.

By love and through love, God – himself, love – created humans to know him. To *know* him. In both biblical Hebrew and Greek, that knowledge is intensely intimate, close, and personal. In other words, we were created *for love*, which manifests itself in our worship, our joy, and our peace. The Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it thusly: "What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."

The object of that love was to be, first and foremost, the Triune God, followed by our neighbors, i.e., all others likewise made in the image of Almighty God. In short, we were made in his image in order to reflect his image; we were made by love to reflect love.

Think of it this way. In the second commandment, the prohibition against any graven images of God, we see both literarily and historically this idea: God is free to assume whatever form God chooses in revealing himself to his people, and he is *not* to be equated with the media of clay, stone, metal, wood, etc. At the time of Sinai, God had revealed himself in two conspicuous ways. He revealed his Name, which is an intimate sharing of his essence and availability, hence the third commandment's prohibition against misusing it. But he had also revealed, at least in part, that he had chosen a living image bearer – humans themselves. And, indeed, Jesus, the second Adam, is the *ultimate* image bearer of God, the "visible image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15).

What a beautiful gem of our theology. If we want to see the beauty, loveliness, imagination, and power of God, we do not need to look at anything made by the hands of man. We need only look at one another... *never* to worship a human, but to worship

the God who knitted us together *and to reflect his love to them and share and experience it with both them and him.*

Scripture bears this out. We are made in God's image, a bond of incalculable worth (Genesis 1:26-27). Through his only son, Jesus Christ, we were deliberately, affectionately, eternally chosen to be adopted into God's family (Ephesians 1:4-5). From Jesus we were given two similar commandments upon which everything else rests: love the Lord with everything we have, and love others as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:37-40). And we are able to love (both him and others), because he first loved us with an everlasting love that draws us in (1 John 4:19).

Now, at this point, you might be thinking, "This was supposed to be a lesson on sin. So, why are we talking so much about love?"

I am so glad you asked. Let's connect the dots together.

If we were created by love, through love, for love – and if the objects of our love were intended to be the Triune God (again, first and foremost, above anyone or anything), followed by other image-bearers of that same Triune God – then sin becomes much easier to define. And much more startling.

Sin, at its core, is the redirection of our love away from God and others and onto ourselves. Sin takes the love that God gave us and intended for worshipping, glorifying, adoring, serving, obeying, and living for him and repurposes it to what our own flesh, hearts, and minds want. Furthermore, sin takes the love that God gave us and intended for serving others, and perverts it with our own pursuits, ambitions, and appetites.

Sin is redolent with pride and selfishness.

Do you see it now? Sin does not have its origin in Satan. Sin does not have its origin in demonic powers. Sin does not have its origin in the Garden of Eden.

Sin's origin is much closer to home – our own pride generated by our own free will. In sin, we are purposefully using our free will to tell God, "I don't care what you think is best for me. I don't care what you want me to do with your love. I want what I want when and how I want it."

In essence, we corrupt the very love in which we were created, turning it away from God and away from others and onto ourselves. This is the very antithesis of a Christlike life, where we submit and surrender self first to God and then to one another.

In that light, you can bring much more clarity to all manners of evil. Murder, theft, assault, rape, arson, extortion, and the like all have their root in a warped, perverted human heart, just as Jesus says, one that places selfish love and pursuits above those of God. But the same can be said for avarice, jealousy, lust of any sort, vainglory, gossip, innuendo, dissension, fighting, malice, and all other sorts of maleficent attitudes and actions. Every single “sin” is really just the progeny of our primal sin – i.e., turning our affections away from God and others and placing them on ourselves.

This is sin.

Yes, our “inherited sin” comes from Adam’s “original sin.” Since we are all kin to him, we likewise inherit his sinful nature, sharing in its blame and its punishment.

But we would do well not simply to blame our great-grandparents, Adam and Eve. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). All of us have chosen to place ourselves above God. All of us have chosen to place ourselves above others, too.

Ultimately, any sin you might name is all about who is in control. Is God in control or you? Does your action show love for God and others or you?

Any sin. From the irreverent use of God’s holy name to whining and complaining. From speaking ill of your parents to suing other Christians. From sexual immorality to unforgiveness. From crude joking to loving money. From laziness to gluttony. From abortion to hypocrisy. From lying to lust. And a thousand more in between.

Can you now see the folly of trying to list every act of moral turpitude? Do you now understand the extreme difficulty that even the most devout Israelite would have had with keeping all 613 commandments in Torah? And do you comprehend the silliness in trying to “tier” our sins, particularly in light of what James teaches, that “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty *of it all*” (James 2:10).

We are wired with a free will nature, from the Almighty himself, that often recalibrates our love to what we want, not what is best for us, i.e., the love and law of God.

Paul says as much in his last exhortation to Timothy (and, really, to all of us). “But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be **lovers of self**,” the leading sin among twenty or so others (2 Timothy 3:1-5). This kind of pride, said C.S. Lewis, is tantamount to “spiritual cancer,” that metastasizes throughout a person’s whole being.

At no point should one read any of this as being dismissive of the serious nature of heinous acts of sin. In fact, next week we will discuss the seriousness of sin. But we contend that the most serious act is vitiating the love of God through our own pride.

\* \* \*

A brief word here about another even pricklier issue. If God created all things, did he also create sin? And if he created sin, why? Why would he create something that he knew would ensnare and ultimately destroy the apple of his eye, the pinnacle of his creation, and the object of his love?

My meager thoughts pale in comparison to the theological giants who have written and taught on this conundrum. I am not even remotely in their league. But let me share a very simple thought.

The creation story we read earlier tells us that God created all things and then pronounced the lot of it to be “very good” (Genesis 1:31). Sin, by any definition and especially by the definition we propounded here, is not good and can never be good. Sin runs contrary to the goodness of God’s creation and could not flow from him. And it is impossible for God to do, be, or create something outside of his character.

In Romans 5:12, Paul writes, “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.” The Greek word that Paul uses for “came,” *eiserchomai*, literally means “go into” or “to come into,” with the focus being on the initial act. In other words, Paul is saying that when Adam disobeyed, sin entered into the world for the first time. Sin did not exist in the world until he disobeyed.

So, could God have just created us without the ability to sin? Sure. With God, nothing is impossible. However, God wanted us to freely choose him. He never wanted us to be forced into loving him, which would necessarily be the case if our free will was removed. (Note that this is different from being forced to acknowledge his sovereignty and lordship. Every knee *will* bow, and every tongue *will* confess, but those forced into that posture are those who purposefully rejected God’s love.)

Because free will exists, sin exists. But now, we are able to experience his love and his mercy.

All that said, I believe the answer to be far less obtuse than theologians might have us believe. I believe the answer requires the most important ingredient in our relationship with God: *faith* (Hebrews 11:6). These are mysteries too great to comprehend, but I

have faith that the God I love and the God I serve helps me each day to redirect my love away from me and onto him and others. And I also have faith that the divine goodness in which God created the earth and all things in it will be vindicated.

\* \* \*

*Final Thoughts and **Exercise #2** – Read 1 Corinthians 13. We looked at it together in February, but this time, read it in a new light. That entire chapter is about love. Paul eloquently describes the beauty and the disposition of true, unadorned, unalloyed love. In doing so, though, he gives us a comparison point with sin, which, as we have seen, is the misdirection of our love. Read the chapter in that light.*

*In particular, verses 4-8a list so many wonderful attributes of love: it is patient, kind, does not envy or boast, is not arrogant or rude, does not insist on its own way, is not irritable or resentful, does not rejoice at wrongdoing, rejoices with the truth, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, and never ends.*

*If you are uncertain as to whether something in your life is sin, this is a Holy Spirit-inspired litmus test. Run the action or the thought against the sieve of 1 Corinthians 13, this poignant and pointed definition of love. If that action or thought runs contrary to it, then it probably means you have redirected your love away from God and/or others and on to yourself. This is sin. Confess, repent, seek forgiveness, and move forward.*

## Week 2 – April The Seriousness of Sin

### Weekly Readings:

- Leviticus 19-20
- Hebrews 12
- Key idea – We are set apart in holiness, but sin begins to erase and redraw those boundaries away from righteous living and toward the way everyone else lives.

When we begin to understand that sin’s root is our desire for what we want more than what God commands, then we treat the whole enterprise with much more sobriety.

Sin does some awful stuff to us. We need not sugarcoat it. We must not ignore it.

To better understand the seriousness of sin, we will turn to an Old Testament passage in Leviticus. At the outset, let me say this. The passage is difficult and covers some uncomfortable topics. If you are walking through this study with children, you may wish to consider an alternative (perhaps only read the first chapter) or at least think about how you might talk about the wicked practice of child sacrifice or the perversions of sexual immorality.

That said, when we read this passage, we will not concentrate on the specific sins. That is a pitfall into which many Christians fall. “I don’t do this or that, so this chapter isn’t talking about me.” We get into a debate over whether a levitical command was ceremonial, civil, or moral, trying to divine whether it is still applicable to us.

And we do the exact same with the New Testament. Any time Paul rattles off a litany of sins, legalistic believers go through them with a fine-toothed comb to see if he calls out their behaviors, never pausing to consider their illustrative, inexhaustive nature. Paul was never saying, “Just these things and nothing more constitute sin,” rather, “These are examples of ways your love is on yourself and not God!”

The same applies here. In the exercise below, you will read through Leviticus 19 and 20, but do not become caught up in the specific obscenities to God. We accept at face value that child sacrifice is an abomination, and we trust that you are not the purveyor of such evil. Instead, think about *why*. Think about why these (or any) sins are called out in scripture. What is God saying directly or through his messenger to us about sin? And do the same with their consequences.

This is why we will not shy away from hard passages. They drive home a critical point. Sin is serious, and for too long, the church has tiptoed around its seriousness by

applying a coat of fresh grace. Well, sure, grace abounds all the more, but grace's presence does not simply negate sin's presence in the world. That vanquishment is certain, but it is yet to come. We continue to live in a fallen world with fallen people, and, contrary to what some may teach, sin remains a present reality in our lives.

Moreover, I believe that if we understood just how serious sin is – and not a particular cherry-picked list, but all sins, from murder to complaining and everything in between – we might actually be better disciples through our ongoing sanctification.

That is where Leviticus (and Deuteronomy and, really, the whole Old Testament) comes in. The Law seems to have fallen out of favor with many. Yet to understand anything of the New Testament – especially the Gospels and the Book of Hebrews, and specifically Jesus's sacrifice and the atonement, the holiness of God, and the two great commandments – Leviticus is essential reading. Its overarching theme is a call to holiness (Leviticus 19:2): "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." In other words, we are set apart, distinct from others, and sin begins to erase and redraw those boundaries away from righteous living and toward the way everyone else lives.

**Exercise** – Read Leviticus 19 first. What do you notice about God's commands and statutes here? Why might God command such a seemingly disjointed list of things, from garment construction to men's grooming to dietary habits? This is important, so do not gloss over it. God specifically forbade certain practices. Why? And what connections can you make between this chapter and the teachings of Jesus?

Now read Leviticus 20. This is a much grittier, grimmer chapter. Herein, God introduces penalties for sinning with much more precision than he did in chapter 19. Without becoming too fixated on the specific sins, identify the punishments enumerated in chapter 20. Try to categorize them in this way: one possible consequence of sin is \_\_\_\_\_. Look at your list, again without specific sins attached. What strikes you about the seriousness of sin?

\* \* \*

By now, you might be frustrated. We keep discussing sins in the abstract, but that is on purpose. So much Christian teaching focuses on concrete scriptural sins. That teaching is necessary and profitable to our souls, but, as we have seen, it often focuses on the mechanics of that specific sin rather than the underlying issue of all sin – our overall reprobate heart and our misplaced love, the reason that any and all sin happens in the first instance. Fix the latter, and the former fixes itself. Fix the former, and the latter still abides.

Moreover, when we focus on that core reason, all of the levitical punishments become crystal clear. Those punishments stand as proxy for what sin does to us. Far from being draconian, nitpicky, or vindictive, they show God to be righteous and just, jealously guarding that which is consecrated to him. And those punishments are far from abstract.

If all we had in the biblical record was Leviticus 20, here is a small sampling of what we could definitively say about just how starkly serious sin – the selfish, prideful misappropriation of our love – is to God:

- Sin separates us – cuts us off – from God, breaking the covenantal bond between him and us.
- Sin causes pain and death.
- Sin destroys our lives, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.
- Sin brings shame upon us and our family.
- Sin brings condemnation upon us and our family.
- Sin ruins relationships with family, friends, and the community.
- Sin leaves us with a barren legacy, inhibiting our ability to bear fruit.
- Sin defiles the land and the sanctuary.
- Sin breeds distrust within the community and often leads to ostracization and/or banishment, including in religious life.
- Sin, unaddressed, dulls and desensitizes the conscience, opening the door for more sin and for laxity in our pursuit of holiness.
- Sin prevents us from inheriting what God has promised us and may even cause part of the promise to “vomit” us out.
- Sin binds us and steals our freedom.

All that and even more can be discerned from Leviticus 20. It is just incredibly disquieting to read a passage like that. And here are three more extremely unnerving spiritual realities:

- Jesus’s death and resurrection did nothing to change the truth about any of those statements. Scripture tells us that Jesus conquered death, hell, and the grave (Revelation 1:18), meaning that sin’s effects no longer have eternal hold on those in Christ. But it does not follow that the effects of sin no longer exist at all. Of course they do. If they are now non-existent, then any belief about hell suddenly collapses. So long as sin still exists (and, at the time of this writing, it most certainly still exists), then all of those repercussions and reverberations remain.
- While specific sins were enumerated in Leviticus 19 and 20, God’s disposition toward sin – any sin, all sin, any willful placement of self over him and above

others – could not be more clear. He cannot stand it. It is a stench in his nostrils (Isaiah 65:5). We can readily make logical deductions and, in fact, see the levitical punishments as types for what sin does to us, no matter the era. Under grace, God may not ask us to stone to physical death people who violate his law, but people who violate his law still experience spiritual, eternal death. Under grace, God may not ask us to turn an offender from the church, but an offender must still be reconciled and restored, because sin has upset the order of the church. Under grace, God may not strike someone as barren, but people may live fruitless, aimless lives without his Son as their magnetic north. Studying the Old Testament reveals to us the most enduring principles of God’s character, and this one is as constant as the rest: sin separates and destroys. Sin’s wages are death (Romans 6:23).

- We cannot escape the fact that these punishments were *for God’s people*. God disciplines those he loves (Hebrews 12:6-11). That is not to say that other people’s sins are unserious; of course they are. And that is not to say that God does not love his entire creation; of course he does. And none of this precludes others from the consequences of sin; of course they will be affected. But recall last month’s lesson on consecration. God exercises a holy and jealous prerogative over those set apart for, by, and to him. In his perfect justice, he makes the consequences of sin among his people to be extreme, but “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether” (Psalm 19:9). The Lord gives and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord (Job 1:21). A holy God cannot tolerate unholiness. Yet God loves us, his elect, so much he makes a way for us to escape temptation (1 Corinthians 10:13) and overcome the consequences of sin.

\* \* \*

*Final Thoughts – Sin is gravely serious. But I hope you understand that all of God’s prohibitions and instructions in Leviticus 19 were never intended to play a game of “gotcha!” with the Israelites. Instead, God was laying down boundaries to keep his people separate and holy, distinct from the pagans and their practices. He did not want the Israelites to look, sound, act, or worship like the Philistines, Egyptians, Amorites, Babylonians, Persians, or anyone else. He wanted to fashion them into a light for all nations (Isaiah 49:6), a people from whom the Messiah would come to bless all people (Genesis 22:18). That same approach applies to us today. Jesus, though sanctioning us to go out into the world, reminds us of our responsibility not to conform to the world and its sinful nature (John 17:14-16). And Paul repeatedly adds his “amen” to that (Romans 12:2). The short of it is this: sin remains serious, and any flirtation with it damages us personally and our testimony to the world.*

## Week 3 – April

### What Sin Does to the Body of Christ

#### Weekly Readings:

- Joshua 7
- Romans 11:17-24 and 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 (together)
- Key idea – Personal sin can bring communal consequences.

In week 1, we explored what our sin does to God. Sin, a violation of God's law, denigrates his lordship over our life by redirecting our love away from him and other image-bearers and onto ourselves. In week 2, we discussed what our sin does to us on a personal level. Sin, left unrepented and unforgiven, destroys us, physically, spiritually, emotionally, and eternally.

This week we will examine what our sin does to the church, the very body of Christ.

To make any sense of this week, you must accept two biblical premises. First, if we are a Christian, then we are necessarily grafted to the true vine of Christ... and so is every other believer (Romans 11:17-24). We are baptized into the same family based on the same confession of faith. We are now blood kin.

Second, believers live in an interconnected reality, where what happens to one affects all. Paul themes much of his first letter to the Corinthians around this idea, the unity of the whole community of believers (or, more accurately for that letter, the disunity). In particular, in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Paul makes it explicitly clear that the church is *one body*, suffering together, working together, growing together, each part affected by the other. We are intricately interconnected in that one true vine, which means that the actions – including the sins – of one necessarily influence, even infect, the entire body.

You likely see where this is heading. Sin never happens in a vacuum. Our individual sins do violent harm to the body of Christ, both the local church to which you belong and the corporate bride of Christ.

But before we get there, consider this example from the world of sports.

Imagine you are a part of a championship-caliber football team. During a late-season game, your team is behind by three, but you have driven into field goal range. The coach calls a timeout with five seconds left. He elects to attempt the game-tying field goal and send the game to overtime. He sends the placekicker into the huddle with those instructions. The kicker, though, has other designs. In the huddle, he tells the tight end

on the end of the line to run a pattern into the endzone, and he will throw a fade to him to win the game.

When the ball is snapped, the holder laterals it to the placekicker, who chunks it to a wide open tight end. And the ball sails and lands just beyond his wide-open receiver. Your team loses, and your locker room is sullen and gloomy.

You see it, right? The kicker directly defied the coach, substituting his own plan for the one called by the man in charge. He knew the play, but he chose a selfish, vainglorious pursuit, and it harmed his whole team.

Now, expand that idea to something even more sobering: what if all eleven players had decided that the best course of action for the team was for them to do exactly what they wanted, all at the same time, regardless of what the coach told them? Imagine the chaos. And imagine the consequences.

The life of a church is much more serious than the life of a football team, but the principles are transferable. We have rules of engagement within the church and with the world, words of life given to us by our Savior and by his apostles. We have a head coach – Jesus, the head of the church, who signals the will of his Father via the Holy Spirit. And we have assistant coaches – pastors who have been called by the Holy Spirit and entrusted with positions of spiritual authority.

But when we get on the field and do whatever we want, contrary to God’s Word and contrary to how the Spirit directs our individual lives and the life of the church, we do harm to the body. We suffer because of the dereliction of one member. We hurt because of the selfishness of one part. We are wounded because of the misdirected love of one image-bearer, away from God and the others and onto himself or herself.

And, ultimately, our witness to the world is molested.

You may be offended by such language, but the Bible is unambiguous, whether Old or New Testament.

One of the most famous examples is the cautionary tale of Achan in Joshua 7. When the Israelites conquered Jericho, God’s direction was unambiguous. Destroy everything; take nothing. But Achan disobeyed, taking for his own some of the silver things devoted to pagan worship. As a result, Israel was resoundingly defeated in the very next battle, the initially ill-fated attempt to take Ai.

When God told Joshua about it, the Lord's words were astonishingly corporate: "But *the people of Israel* broke faith in regard to the devoted things... And the anger of the Lord burned against *the people of Israel*... *Israel* has sinned; *they* have transgressed my covenant that I commanded them; *they* have taken some of the devoted things; *they* have stolen and lied and put them among *their* own belongings" (vv. 1, 11).

Huh? In literal terms, all of Israel did *not* take the silver; only Achan did. But in spiritual terms, God assigned and ascribed the sin of one to the whole of Israel. The entire nation. All his people.

The message is unambiguously clear. Israel operated under a covenantal, corporate identity. The actions of one affected the standing of the entire group before God. Achan's act blatantly offended and defied God's direct command and placed the whole of Israel in jeopardy... not just at the battle of Ai, but, more critically, before God. This was elevated to and treated as a national act of disobedience, a defilement of the whole camp by the whole camp.

This ought not surprise us. Replete in the narratives of the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles is the idea that as the king went, so went the nation. The king, whether good or wicked, set the spiritual direction of the kingdom. If a king was committed to God and obeyed his commands, the nation was blessed. If a king resisted God and disobeyed his commands, the nation floundered, sometimes in destruction, often in war, eventually in exile.

This is sometimes hard for modern Christians, especially Americans, to accept, given our hyper and often misguided focus on individualism even within the body of Christ. But in the theocratic monarchy that was Israel, this was standard operating procedure. Even righteous prophets and people were affected by their unrighteous countrymen, particularly those in appointed leadership. A righteous remnant never negated the national effects of the wickedness of kings like Jeroboam, Ahab, Manasseh, Ahaz, Jehoram, Hoshea, and many others, all of which led to national exile.

The sum of it: personal sin can bring communal consequences.

In fact, that is the entire story of humanity. As Paul so eloquently writes, "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men... by the one man's disobedience, the many were made sinners..." (Romans 5:12, 19). Adam's personal sin brought the gravest judgment on all humans. A sin-nature was now our inheritance.

(Of course, “by one man’s obedience, the many will be made righteous.” We covered that last month, and this good news always bears repeating. But for this week, we are focusing on the ripple effects of our sin within the body.)

**Exercise** – Consider your local church. Imagine each of these scenarios. Please do this without thinking of specific people, families, or even events. These are illustrative and not meant to evoke actual situations.

- Thinking no one will notice, an usher steals a few hundred dollars from the offering one week.
- An elder is confronted with incontrovertible evidence of an extramarital affair, but he lies and denies it.
- Two folks stand in the lobby before service and complain about the songs selected by the worship pastor last week.
- A greeter tells an unmarried but co-habiting couple that they should not come to church until they are married.
- At lunch after church, an altar worker who prayed for a woman tells all the intimate details of the prayer request to those at her table.

Now consider these, too:

- A young adult who serves in the youth ministry posts photographs of her vacation on her social media. The photos, which were taken in a bar and dance club, show her in revealing clothing and are tagged with suggestive captions.
- A regular attender of the church is cut off while trying to turn into a parking spot at the grocery store. He lays down on the horn, spouts a stream of profanity with his window down, and then directs a few choice hand gestures to the other driver.
- A business executive and faithful giver to the church is dismissed from her high-paying job for inappropriate behavior.
- A faithful member is arrested for DUI.
- A father who plays an instrument in the band emotionally and sometimes physically abuses his family, frequently telling his children that they are worthless and a burden.

In each of those scenarios, a person has sinned – i.e., in transgressing against God’s law, he or she has redirected the love meant for the Triune God and for others and placed it on their own appetites and desires, from lust to gossip to greed. The first five all take place *within* the church, but the latter five all take place *outside* the church. Still church folks, but just outside the four walls of the congregation.

In each situation, brainstorm all the possible *congregational* side effects of that sin. Do not concentrate on the individual consequences, as painful and as obvious as they may be. Think only of how that sin might affect the local church, its members, and its mission. And, if you dare, list any additional side effects on the church as a whole – i.e., on the outward testimony of the bride of Christ to the world.

\* \* \*

That was an admittedly difficult exercise. But we hope you see the point – sin never happens in a vacuum. The sin of one member of the body affects (and quite possibly infects) all other members. What a person does or says creates ripples throughout the whole community.

People are hurt, broken, and wounded as a result of any of those situations. And we know that hurt people hurt people, broken people break people, and wounded people wound people. The cycle continues.

At the very least, we can say sin harms *the church* in these concrete ways, which you can apply to some or all of the scenarios listed above:

- Robs the church of the full fellowship, gifts and talents, and financial generosity of its members.
- Deprives the church of God's power and blessings.
- Weakens its testimony in the eyes of others, thereby eroding its spiritual potency.
- Debilitates our desire and ability to share the gospel.
- Impairs our mission beyond sharing the gospel.
- Reintroduces condemnation and judgment into our lives.
- Hinders, if not outrightly seizes and arrests, evangelism.
- Disrupts worship and hampers our prayers.
- Necessitates confession, forgiveness, discipline, reconciliation, and restoration, all of which take considerable time and energy, not to mention grace and mercy.
- Creates a stumbling block for other believers and/or for the most vulnerable and impressionable in the church, especially children and teenagers.
- Props the door open for the enemy of our church and our souls to infiltrate the congregation and wreak havoc, and, as leaven does, becomes contagious.
- Prevents people from serving.
- Sows seeds of distrust, doubt, suspicion, disloyalty, and the like.
- Brings divine judgment if left unrepentant and unaddressed.
- Destroys our unity.

And that is just a sampler platter of the horrible things that can and do happen. Which among them is the worst outcome is certainly a subjective matter, but I tend to think the

last one is. Jesus, in his benediction over his apostles and all his current and future disciples, specifically beseeches God for the blessing of unity in the church – unity with him, unity with God the Father (just as Jesus had), and unity one with another (John 17). This was heavy on Jesus’s heart in the final few hours before his crucifixion, and thus this unity ought to carry extra resonance with us, too.

Yet sin remains an ever-present threat to that unity, to those of us in a world whose final redemption is in the future. Sin no longer defines us, thanks be to God, but it surely stunts, stalls, and sidetracks us.

Even worse, when we sin, the effects transfer from us to the church. And hopefully now you are beginning to understand why we spent so much time defining sin not by individual acts but as an adulterization of the love we were given – the love meant for God and for one another. This is no more starkly evident than sin’s effects on the church. If we loved our brothers and sisters in full, then we would run from sin knowing just how toxic its effects will be on them. This is love. In fact, it is the greatest love because we are laying down our lives (not necessarily physically, but certainly what we want, desire, crave, and seek) in order not to harm God and to remain in full fellowship with Christ and his bride (John 15:13).

\* \* \*

*Final Thoughts – In Matthew 16:18, Jesus told the apostles that he would build his church upon Simon Peter’s confession. And he added that the gates of hell would never prevail against it. Jesus meant that, ultimately, the powers of death and evil would never destroy, overcome, or stop the church from fulfilling its mission (which he would more fully articulate in Matthew 28:19-20). The church will never suffer total apostasy, but that does not mean that sin and strife will be absent from the body. We know that sad reality all too well. And Jesus himself prophesied that apostasy and apathy would be with us until the end: “The love of many will grow cold” (Matthew 24:12). And he gives the reason, too, “because lawlessness will be increased.”*

*Lawlessness – in other words, sin; sin causes love to grow cold. And the Greek verb used for “to grow cold” actually refers to cooling something down by breathing on it, the way you blow on hot soup so you can eat it without scalding the roof of your mouth. So, think about that in the context of the church. When you sin, love decreases, specifically your love for God and the body of Christ. That love grows cold, because you are the one blowing on it, not the Holy Spirit with fire and power. Everything returns to that initial point – sin is the pinnacle of selfishness, producing actions in us that are motivated by self-love and not love of God or other image-bearers. Our sin blows cold air over us and our brothers and sisters. It is gravely serious.*

## Week 4 – April

### Why Do I Keep Struggling with Sin?

#### Weekly Readings:

- 1 John 1, 2:1-6
- 2 Corinthians 12:1-10
- Key idea – Our temptation to sin will *never* be removed in this lifetime, but the grace of the Lord Jesus gives us hope and strength.

Admittedly, this month has been heavy, but sin is no trivial topic. Not for God, the church, nor us individually. So, we should approach it with the sobriety it requires.

But, of course, the good news is that sin has no everlasting effect on those of us in Christ Jesus. Sin and all its vile consequences – namely, death, hell, and the grave, i.e., eternal separation from God – are swallowed up in the victory of Jesus on the cross and through his resurrection. We receive atonement and grace at his mercy seat.

Yet, if that's true, why do we keep struggling with sin? If we are saved, why do sinful temptations and thoughts vex us still? And why do we sometimes fall prey to them despite our best intentions?

To start, I think it is always helpful to remember you are in good company. Moses was called the greatest of all prophets; he sinned and his sins were recorded in the Bible, yet he still led Israel to the promised land. David was called a man after God's own heart and was God's anointed king; he sinned and his sins were recorded in the Bible in lurid details, including, remarkably, by his own hand (see Psalm 51), yet the Messiah still came from his house and line. Peter made the confession of Jesus's messiahship that formed the very foundation of the church; he sinned in three moments of breathtaking cowardice and his sin was recorded in the Bible, yet the Holy Spirit used him mightily in the early church.

What do we make of these examples?

So many truths. We, discouraged by the enemy of our soul, disqualify ourselves long before God does. We have a weak appreciation for the strength of God's redemptive purpose and work. We foolishly overestimate our own sanctification and spiritual maturation absent the continual, refreshing infilling of the Holy Spirit. Left to our own devices, our sin nature – i.e., our own predisposition to redirect our love from God and others to ourselves – will continue to arise and corrupt our hearts and minds and, eventually, our actions.

And, above all, this: in the words of St. John, the beloved apostle, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

Easy John. Them’s fightin’ words. We are saved and sanctified. No deception here. Surely he was just talking about folks prior to regeneration and salvation, right? Once Jesus wipes it away, we have no sin, correct?

Well... yes... and no. Yes, he whom the Son sets free is free indeed. Our repented sins are now gone, and we are justified.

But the last time I looked, none of us is yet glorified. We still exist in broken human form awaiting the fullness and finality of our redemption, which necessarily means that our sin nature remains an active part of us. Rest assured – its power over us is broken, but that power is not fully manifested in our lives until our own glorification. Justification is complete; we are free from sin’s penalty. Sanctification is ongoing, freeing us from sin’s power.

So, as the kids would say, the struggle is real. The battle between our flesh and the Holy Spirit is that tug of war of sanctification to wrest us away from sin’s power.

To put it much more bluntly (and shockingly to some), a Christian is no longer a slave to sin, even though he or she may still sin. Or I really should say, a Christian is no longer a slave to sin, even though he or she *will* still sin. Find me a Christian who has never gotten angry, had an impure thought, gossipped, murmured, complained, or did anything selfish, and we can all touch the hem of their garment.

You see the difference, right? There is a marked contrast in being a slave to sin’s penalty – eternally condemned by its unrepented presence in your life – and still being affected by its power – continually drawn under its spell to go against the will of God. The former is proof that we have an unregenerate heart; the latter is proof we remain human and need to pray daily as Jesus taught us, “forgive us our trespasses...”

Go back to 1 John 1 and 2. Read three verses beyond where we stopped, into chapter 2. (And remember, biblical editors added the chapter and verse delineations. John did not separate his thoughts so discretely. This was one flowing passage meant to be read together.) In 1 John 2:1, he continues, “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you *may* not sin. But *if anyone does sin*, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”

John does not write, “you *shall not* sin.” That would be an imperative: upon your salvation, sin becomes impossible (i.e., you shall not sin because you simply cannot);

your transformation is complete. Sin loses its allure, and, because of your sanctification, you shan't sin.

Instead, he writes, “you *may* not sin.” That is decidedly less certain, permissive instead of mandatory language. And it also implies that we have a choice... because we do. Our human free will is not vitiated by salvation; we are still human. Our human free will is *daily, continually surrendered* in consecration and sanctification.

And that is no minor distinction or quibbling wordplay. John knew the truth. He was in the courtyard of Caiaphas when Peter denied Christ (John 18:15-16). And yet, fifty-three days later, John was in the Upper Room when Peter received the infilling of the Holy Spirit and preached the Pentecost message at the church's inauguration (Acts 2). Notwithstanding his own sins, John saw a man proclaimed by Christ to be the rock later falter and fail – and sin – and yet find restoration and purpose.

This should **encourage** you!

**Exercise** – Read the whole of 1 John 1 and then the first six verses of chapter 2. In your own words, what is John saying? In particular, how does this passage address our struggle with sin?

\* \* \*

What we should not take from John is a golden ticket to sin simply because of the grace of Jesus. In this, John echoes Paul, who writes in Romans 6:1-2, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” John explicitly says that if we walk in fellowship with Jesus, then we are cleansed of our sins. And *because of this*, we keep his commandments as a testimony to the work he has done in our lives.

But John does not bury his head in the sand. If we do sin, he says, we have grace through Jesus Christ, our advocate, the propitiation for our sins.

In other words, continual sanctification decreases the likelihood that we will sin, because our human nature is confirming into Christlikeness. The process should snuff out our *desire* to commit and live in sin; that is for certain. But it does not eradicate the temptation of sin in our lives, nor the reality that we sometimes fail and fall.

What John offers here is hope: the grace of the Lord Jesus. And it is that grace that performs a triple work: it frees us from the consequences of our sin; it conditions our hearts away from self and to the Triune God and others so that we will be less inclined to sin; and it advocates for us when we do sin. All three are operative in the life of the

believer, though both Paul and John admonish us not to abuse that grace by a purposefully sinful lifestyle.

Put all this together, and we return to where we started – the temptation to sin, to put your will above that of God’s, will be ever present in our lives. It was even with Jesus in the wilderness and even Gethsemane (“Nevertheless, not my will...”). What makes you more special or holy than Jesus?

And here the wild thing about all of this – this inertial weakness is actually reason to boast in Jesus Christ. Paul, in 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, details a thorn in his flesh. God permitted a messenger of Satan to vex Paul in some way. We do not know what the thorn was, and it is completely immaterial. The thorn had a singular purpose: to keep Paul from boasting in himself, his talents, and the fruits of his ministry.

Moreover, Jesus specifically and forthrightly declined to remove the thorn, despite Paul’s sincere and repeated prayers. And the reason why is central to this week’s lesson. Jesus told Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (v. 9a).

Don’t you see? Our temptation to sin will *never* be removed in this lifetime. Paul tells us as much in his first letter to Corinth: “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

That language could not be any clearer. We will struggle with temptation. But we have the power, through the Holy Spirit, to endure it.

And, when we do, we have the worshipful opportunity, just like our brother Paul, to boast both in our weakness and in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. “For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10b). For when we are tempted to sin, we are weak to overcome it on our own, but we are strong in Christ and can do all things, including fleeing the temptation.

This whole idea is a theodicy called *felix culpa*. A theodicy is a defense of God’s goodness and sovereignty in view of the very existence of evil, i.e., an attempt to answer why a good, just, and omnipotent God permits evils, trials, and temptations. *Felix culpa*, one such example, literally translates to “fortunate fall,” or “blessed fault,” and it simply means that a sin or fault or weakness leads to a greater good. The biggest biblical example is Adam’s fall – his sin was disastrous, but, in the fullness of time, it led to something better, a greater glory, that of our redemption in and through the incarnated, crucified, and resurrected Jesus Christ.

Paul's rationale of boasting in weakness is a *felix culpa* of sorts. His frailty – indeed, our frailty – leads to the opportunity for Christ's grace to be poured into us, and, by his own words, for his power to be made perfect in us.

So, we will glory not in the weakness, nor in the temptation, nor even in the sin, but in the one who overcomes all of those through his grace, and whose power is perfected and made stronger in us in those moments: Jesus Christ.

\* \* \*

*Final Thoughts – In large part, I think we frequently misapprehend God's grace as some sort of magic elixir that will wipe away all trouble. (Hence Paul's teaching in Romans 6.)*

*Consider this illustration. Remember when luggage had no wheels? When you schlepped your bags out to the car, holding them by that handle strap that you prayed would not break? Or ran through the airport with the side of an overstuffed suitcase bumping into and bruising your leg? And then do you remember when luggage finally came with wheels, but only two to start? You could much more easily wheel it around, but you could not turn or pivot quickly. Now, think about when luggage with four wheels hit the market. You could practically set your bags on cruise control, easily moving through airport terminals, hotel hallways, and the like.*

*But in no case did the size of your suitcase or the load it was carrying appreciably change. Only its mechanisms for steering, moving, and guiding. So it is with God's grace vis-a-vis human temptation. When we are free from sin's penalty through our regeneration, salvation, and justification, we trade our handheld bags for ones with four wheels. And consecration and sanctification are the lubricants that keep the wheels moving freely, safely, and effectively. But the load has not changed at all. The reality of our human nature remains very much intact.*

*The only difference? Grace has now made that load easier to withstand. We can maneuver in the power of the Holy Spirit. In short, we can withstand it, because we are no longer carrying it ourselves, turning our knuckles white under its impossible weight. In fact, the weight is now carried by the wheels, i.e., the Holy Spirit who guides and directs our lives. We can overcome it and arrive safely at our destination, because we are no longer the baggage handler. And the Lord's grace in doing that, like Paul and John encourage us, is something worth boasting about.*

## Appendix 1 – Questions to Ask When Reading/Studying the Bible

When you read the Word of God, try to start each encounter with a simple prayer. Perhaps just repeat Samuel’s boyhood words to God: “**Speak, Lord, your servant is listening**” (1 Samuel 3:9).

Approach each passage with these questions:

1. **Who wrote it?** Authorship matters. To test this theory, read the Beatitudes (and, indeed, the entire Sermon on the Mount/Plain) as Matthew and Luke separately record them. Notice the similarities and especially the differences. What does Matthew, the Jewish former tax collector and original disciple of Jesus, highlight versus Luke, the Gentile historian, doctor, and later convert?
2. **What is the passage’s setting?** Think of it like writing a book report back in high school. Situate the chapter in history and time, as well as on the map. Understand who the key characters are, including (and particularly) the initial intended audience for the book. In short, peg the *who*, *where*, and *when*.
3. **What is the passage’s genre?** We read poetry and wisdom (e.g., Psalms, Proverbs) quite differently than historical narrative (e.g., Exodus, 1 and 2 Kings, Acts), the Gospels, prophecy (e.g., Isaiah, Amos), or the instructional epistles (e.g., Romans, Philippians, 1 and 2 Peter). Each genre employs a different line between literal and poetic/figurative/symbolic language. And each has a different purpose for what it presents to the reader.
4. **What does this passage teach me about God?** Put differently, if this were the only scriptural witness we had, what would we learn about the Lord? When you uncover truths and wisdom about the wonders and depths of God, pause and worship him.
5. **What does this passage teach me about humans?** Not you specifically, but all of us, mankind. What might it reveal about our strengths, talents, abilities, aspirations, etc.? And about our weaknesses, failures, challenges, tendencies, etc.? Does it help you understand how God the Father, Son, and Spirit view the apple of their creative eye? And might it also help you see how the enemy of our soul sees us?
6. **How does this passage point (or point me) toward Jesus?** There is a very valid hermeneutic (way of approaching and interpreting the Bible) that says everything, from Genesis to Revelation, points to Jesus Christ, the Son of God,

the Messiah, our Savior and King. So, how might this passage fit in that hermeneutic? And, more specifically, how does this passage point me (my life, my hopes, my hurts, my desires, my strengths, my weaknesses, my sins, my future) directly to Jesus on a *personal* level? (This is particularly applicable to the Gospels and the epistolary writings.)

7. **What was the message to the initial audience?** Go back to the second question and think. What was the writer trying to transmit to the people he knew for certain would read it? Was it an instruction, a warning, an invitation, a desire to inform, a call to remember? Think of it this way – when the scroll was unfurled for the first time and read aloud, how might those gathered have received and interpreted it?
8. **Is that specific message still applicable to me?** Let's be clear – the Bible unequivocally applies to us today, especially the teachings of Jesus, Paul, and the other New Testament writers. But this question refers to things like peculiar Old Testament commands to Israel as a nation/people, prophecies that have come to pass, covenantal obligations that were fulfilled in Christ, etc. In those cases, distinct teachings, laws, prophecies, etc., shift and teach us about the nature of God, what matters to him, his justice, righteousness, mercy, grace, love, longsuffering nature, and so on. Every word of the Word is profitable, but, because it is alive and organic per the Scripture itself (Hebrews 4:12), it may simply be profitable to us in the 21st century in a different way that it was in the first or in the centuries before Jesus. Ask the Holy Spirit to animate the passage with the message for you and for us today.
9. **How can I apply all of this to my life, particularly to make me more like Jesus?** This is an eminently practical and deeply personal question. Turn it into a prayer. Lord, how can I take what I have read and apply it to my life to be more like you?

## Appendix 2 – Names and Title of Jesus

In Week 3 of February, we ask you to write down all the names of Jesus that come to your mind. This list is comprehensive but not exhaustive. By some counts, around 200 different appellations of Jesus are used in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. These are but a few. And note, these are names and titles, not adjectives. Jesus may be described as loving, kind, compassionate, righteous, etc., in the Bible, but those are just descriptive adjectives. Additionally, we have given only one illustrative scriptural reference, though for some there are many.

Advocate – 1 John 2:1	First Fruits – 1 Corinthians 15:20
Alpha and Omega – Revelation 1:8	Friend of tax collectors and sinners – Matthew 11:19
The Almighty – Revelation 1:8	Gate of the sheepfold – John 10:7
Amen – Revelation 3:14	Glory – Luke 2:32
Apostle and High Priest of our Confession – Hebrews 3:1	Good Shepherd – John 10:11
Author and Finisher of our Faith – Hebrews 12:2	Grain of Wheat – John 12:24
Beloved – Matthew 12:18	Great Shepherd of the sheep – Hebrews 13:20
Beloved Son – Colossians 1:13	Head – Ephesians 4:15
Bread of God – John 6:33	Head of the Church – Colossians 1:18
Bread of life – John 6:35	Hidden Manna – Revelation 2:17
Living Bread – John 6:51	High Priest – Hebrews 3:1
Bridegroom – John 3:29	He Who Holds of the Keys of David – Revelation 3:7
Brother – Matthew 12:50	He who is coming amid the clouds – Revelation 1:7
Captain of our Salvation – Hebrews 2:10	Holy One – Acts 2:27
Chief Shepherd – 1 Peter 5:4	Holy One of God – Mark 1:24
Chosen One – Luke 23:35	Holy Servant – Acts 4:27
Christ – Matthew 16:20	Hope – 1 Timothy 1:1
Christ Jesus – 1 Timothy 1:15	Horn of Salvation – Luke 1:69
Christ of God – Luke 9:20	I Am – John 8:58
Christ the Lord – Luke 2:11	Image of God – 2 Corinthians 4:4
Christ who is above all – Romans 9:5	Indescribable Gift – 2 Corinthians 9:15
Consolation of Israel – Luke 2:25	Intercessor – Hebrews 7:25
Chief Cornerstone – Ephesians 2:20	Jesus – Matthew 1:21
Dayspring – Luke 1:78	Jesus the Nazarene – John 18:5
Deliverer – Romans 11:26	Judge of the World – 2 Timothy 4:1
Eldest of many brothers – Romans 8:29	Just One – Acts 7:52
Emmanuel – Matthew 1:23	Just Judge – 2 Timothy 4:8
Everlasting Forever – Isaiah 9:6	King – Matthew 21:5
Faithful, True Witness – Revelation 1:5	King of Israel – John 1:49
First and Last – Revelation 1:17	King of Kings – Revelation 17:14
Firstborn of all creation – Colossians 1:15	

King of Nations – Revelation 15:3  
 King of the Jews – Matthew 2:2  
 Lamb of God – John 1:29  
 Last Adam – 1 Corinthians 15:45  
 Leader – Hebrews 2:10  
 Leader and Savior – Acts 5:31  
 Life – John 14:6  
 Light – John 1:9  
 Light of all – Luke 2:32  
 Light of the world – John 8:12  
 Lion of the tribe of Judah – Revelation 5:5  
 Lord – Luke 1:25  
 One Lord – Ephesians 4:5  
 My Lord and my God – John 20:28  
 Lord both of the dead and the living – Romans 14:9  
 Lord God Almighty – Revelation 15:3  
 Lord Jesus – Acts 7:59  
 Jesus is Lord – 1 Corinthians 12:3  
 Lord Jesus Christ – Acts 15:11  
 Lord of all – Acts 10:36  
 Lord of Glory – 1 Corinthians 2:8  
 Lord of lords – 1 Timothy 6:15  
 Lord of Peace – 2 Thessalonians 3:16  
 The Man – John 19:5  
 Master – Luke 5:5  
 Mediator – 1 Timothy 2:5  
 Messiah – John 1:41  
 Mighty God – Isaiah 9:6  
 Morning Star – 2 Peter 1:19  
 Nazarene – Matthew 2:23  
 Passover – 1 Corinthians 5:7  
 Perfecter of Faith – Hebrews 12:2  
 Power for salvation – Luke 1:69  
 Priest forever – Hebrews 5:6  
 Prince of Life – Acts 3:15  
 Prince of Peace – Isaiah 9:6  
 Rabbi/Rabboni – John 20:16  
 Ransom – 1 Timothy 2:6  
 Redeemer – Isaiah 59:20  
 Rescuer from this Present Evil Age – Galatians 1:4  
 Radiance of God’s Glory – Hebrews 1:3  
 Resurrection and Life – John 11:25  
 Rising Sun – Luke 1:78  
 Root of David – Revelation 5:5  
 Root of Jesse – Isaiah 11:10  
 Ruler – Matthew 2:6  
 Ruler and Savior – Acts 5:31  
 Savior – 2 Peter 2:20  
 Savior of the world – 1 John 4:14  
 Second Adam – Romans 5:14  
 Shepherd and Guardian of our souls – 1 Peter 2:25  
 Slave – Philippians 2:7  
 Son – Galatians 4:4  
 Beloved Son – Colossians 1:13  
 Firstborn Son – Luke 2:7  
 Son of Abraham – Matthew 1:1  
 Son of David – Matthew 1:1  
 Son of God – Luke 1:35  
 Son of Joseph – John 1:45  
 Son of Man – John 5:27  
 Son of Mary – Mark 6:3  
 Son of the Blessed One – Mark 14:61  
 Son of the Father – 2 John 1:3  
 Son of the Living God – Matthew 16:16  
 Son of the Most High – Luke 1:32  
 Son of the Most High God – Mark 5:7  
 Source of God’s creation – Revelation 3:14  
 Spiritual Rock – 1 Corinthians 10:4  
 Living Stone – 1 Peter 2:4  
 Stone rejected by the builders – Matthew 21:42  
 Stumbling Stone – 1 Peter 2:8  
 Sun of Righteousness – Malachi 3:20  
 Teacher – Matthew 8:19  
 True God – 1 John 5:20  
 True Vine – John 15:1  
 The Way the Truth and the Life – John 14:6  
 The One who is, is was, and who is to come – Revelation 3:7  
 Wisdom of God – 1 Corinthians 1:24  
 Wonderful Counselor – Isaiah 9:6  
 Word – John 1:1  
 Word of God – Revelation 19:13  
 Word of Life – 1 John 1:1