

SMALL GROUP ESSENTIALS

| ESSENTIALS OF FAITH

 **GROUPS**

ESSENTIALS OF FAITH

There are many doctrines of the Christian faith and throughout the centuries passionate and intelligent people have discussed and debated what is essential. The global reach of our daily lives and instant access to anything and everything can deceive us into thinking everything is important. However, in small groups priorities can drift quickly if there is not clarity on what we believe to be true. Our beliefs shape us and the choices we make.

ESSENTIALS OF FAITH

| God

by Clayton Aker

Leader: Discussion this week should be filled with reflection and feedback from group members. Try and build in extra time for people to discuss their responses from this week's lesson.

Group Member: Jot down statements or phrases that stand out to you in the lesson this week. Posture your heart for full participation as you read through the assigned Scriptures. Be ready to share your responses to the questions posed in this lesson at your group meeting this week.

DISCOVER

Theologian A.W. Tozer once stated that, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." In this statement, Tozer is saying that your theology affects everything about you. It affects your actions and your relationships and especially your goals in life. Everyone's a theologian because theology is simply the study of God. This means that everyone has thoughts and beliefs about the world and the existence or nonexistence of a higher power. Tozer also explains that in order to begin thinking about who you are called to be as a Christ follower, it is first and foremost important to think about who God is.

DEVELOP

We are first introduced to God in Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God". The Bible tells an epic story of how God invited humanity to partner with Him, how we messed it up, and how he pursued us, restored us, redeemed us and how his justice will one day make all things right, to bring shalom. Shalom is oversimplified as our word, peace, but it is so much more, it is a restorative peace, painting the picture as "the way things should be."

As we read Scripture we learn more about who God

is and his characteristics. The frustrations in life, the anxiety we fill, the anger that boils up, if we traced it back, it would reveal that we have a faulty idea of who God is and what he does. Remember, "what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." If we think we are the hero of our story, it will lead to frustration that things don't go our way, but if we remember, that God, is the author and perfecter of our faith and life, that all of life is a gift given by him, it's freeing!

D.A Carson said, "To know God is to be transformed, and thus to be introduced to a life that could not otherwise be experienced." As we explore who God is and what he is doing, may we let his truth and love transform us to go out and declare his goodness and glory to all we encounter (1 Chronicles 16:23-25).

Read the following description of God, paraphrased by Gordon Lewis. Underline words/phrases you do not understand. Circle words/phrases that you resonate with concerning God's character.

"God is living and personal, one in essence and three in person. He is unlike any other being that ever was or ever will be. He has no limit or time. He is real, eternal, omnipotent and unchanging. Intellectually, God is omniscient, faithful and wise. God is good! He is just and merciful and loving. He is emotional in that he detests evil. He is longsuffering and He is compassionate. God is also relational! He is transcendent and imminent which means that while He is completely independent and needs nothing for His existence, He is also fully present in the world and accessible to all of humanity while He works out His plan for redemption."

On your own, look up and read the following verses and write the attribute this verse seems to explain about God.

- NUMBERS 23:19
- EXODUS 34:6-7
- ISAIAH 6:3
- ISAIAH 42:5-9
- JOEL 2:12-13
- 1 JOHN 4:8-10

Our hope as we study the work of God is that we might

grow in our awareness of His presence and activity in our life. Perhaps one of the most beautiful truths about God is that while He is holy, mighty, glorious and perfect, He also deeply loves His creation and is invested in our stories.

Read Psalm 23 and write down 7 things the author writes that God does for us. Use your own words to rewrite these 7 things that God does for you.

DEEPEN

Describe a time when you have felt wonder and affection for God. What attributes stirred your affections?

Read Gordon Lewis's description of God and share about the words/phrases you didn't understand and the ones you resonated with.

Discuss the attributes of God that stick out to you. How does understanding this concept affect your life?

- Eternal
- Wise
- Truth
- Transcendent
- Unchanging
- Holy
- Detests Evil
- Merciful
- Omniscient
- Love
- Compassionate
- Just

- Faithful
- Good
- Omnipotent
- Infinite

What attribute above that is most difficult for you to believe. What might be the danger of not believing this to be true of God's character?

As a group, read Psalm 19:1-6. How has God revealed Himself to the whole world?

How have you seen the Lord at work in this way?

Underline one of these that you desire to experience from the Lord right now. Why does this feel important to you in this season of life?

DREAM

Write a thank you letter to God for how you have seen him move in your life.

With the attributes of God in mind, commit to one way you will continue to dwell on the character of God this week.

Suggested Resources

The Knowledge of the Holy by A.W Tozer
The Pursuit of God by A.W Tozer
The Divine Conspiracy by Dallas Willard

ESSENTIALS OF FAITH

| Jesus

by Cole Guidroz

Leader: Discussion this week should be filled with reflection and feedback from group members. Try and build in extra time for people to discuss their responses from this week's lesson.

Group Member: Jot down statements or phrases that stand out to you in the lesson this week. Posture your heart for full participation as you read through the assigned Scriptures. Be ready to share your responses to the questions posed in this lesson at your group meeting this week.

DISCOVER

When someone tells you they have the most important thing ever to share, it can either be lack-luster or life-changing. That phrase could conjure up images of a first pregnancy, engagements, and positive doctor diagnosis, or images as simple as your friend telling you they made the best grilled cheese sandwich ever! One is life-changing; the other doesn't really affect anything except your time. Jesus Christ of Nazareth is the life-changing news that God has shared with us. The question now is how we will respond to the news of the Person of Jesus Christ. Will we see the life-changing aspect of Him, or will it be more lack-luster news about a regular moral man?

C. S. Lewis, when talking about the person of Jesus Christ, said it this way

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse.

You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

Jesus Christ is not another in a long line of religious teachers telling us ways to make it to God, but is the Son of God in flesh that has come to bring us to God Himself. If this is the case, Jesus Christ is the most important person in history and the Eternal Lord forever. The difference between those two perspectives impacts all of eternity.

DEVELOP

What is so special about Jesus Christ? Why does it impact my life?

READ ROMANS 3:23-26, EPHESIANS 2:1-10

How do these verses describe the condition of man? Have you tried to fix a problem externally, or internally, only to come out unable to?

The Bible raises the issue of not how can bad people become better, but how can dead people, separated from God because of their sin nature, be made alive and have a relationship with God again. This is the fundamental question our souls are craving to be answered. We try everything to fix ourselves and better our lives. Self-help books are sold by the millions to help become the better you. Every other religion is based around what deeds, or what truths, must I follow to be right with God, and addictions are fueled every hour to help make the world more pleasurable for our desire starved soul. The inconvenient truth is we are not people who do bad things that just need a quick fix, but rather we are rebels that do not love God. This rebellion makes us guilty and separated from God, who is the source of life itself. Brokenness in and around us is a result of the sin within each of us. We need something else, or someone else.

How does this affect how you see your group members? What about their difficulties they bring to the group?

READ 1 TIMOTHY 2:5-6, LUKE 19:10, AND 2 CORINTHIANS 5:21

Take 2-3 deep breaths. Stop and think: What do these passages say Jesus came to do?

In the proper time, God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die in the place of everyone's sins. The Bible says that every single one of our sins carried a debt with it that we owed God. None of us are able to pay this debt and are guilty before Him. However, God didn't leave us to rot in our brokenness and guilt. When we could not save ourselves the one we had wronged the most, Jesus, came to save us. Jesus died a violent death by crucifixion. The sinless Son of God died in the place of sinners and rose again on the third day in victory. Therefore, sinners who believe in Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, acknowledge their sin and ask for forgiveness not only experience a forgiveness for their sin, but now live freely the abundant life. Through Jesus, your guilt is paid for, your shame is forgotten, and your life is made new in Christ alone.

Pause. Take a 2-3 deep breaths. Reflect: How does God view you now because of Christ?

How does being the righteousness of Christ allow you to live more fully and freely than before?

READ PHILIPPIANS 2:6-8 AND MARK 8:27-30

How is Jesus described in these verses?

God is a Holy God. This means that He is set apart from everything, especially sin. God is unlike anyone or anything and can do no wrong. This also means He is just and merciful. So, when we sin God must act with justice. Therefore, for our sins to be forgiven someone has to pay! That is the beauty of Jesus Christ. God Himself came down to us to redeem us. The payment for our sins could not just be a normal person, it couldn't be a moral teacher, it couldn't be by following a different religious teaching. This is because we are all sinners and fall short of God's standard. No one lived up to the standard of perfection no matter how "good" of a person they were. However, Jesus Christ, God in flesh, the Messiah, entered into our cesspool of sin, yet without sinning Himself, so that on the cross, Jesus endured the just wrath of God for sin and enabled the mercy of God to come to sinners. The question should no longer be how many ways to heaven are there, but instead how gracious is our God that there is a way at all. Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. (John 14:6). Jesus Christ is the central character of God's word and the most life-changing news in the world.

Why is it important that Jesus Christ not just be another "path" to heaven?

What does it mean that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life?

DEEPEN

Why is a mediator needed between God and man?

Why did Jesus need to be fully man and fully God?

Who do you say Jesus Christ is?

Have you recognized your need for Jesus to save you from your sin?

If our life is now Christ's life, how does this change your pursuits in the world? At work? At home?

How do we keep Christ at the center of everything we do in group? Discussion, service, family-time, etc.

DREAM

- Write down your original thoughts on who Jesus was compared to who you believe He is now. Consider this: We want to become more like Jesus so that we can be Jesus to the overwhelmed, under-resourced, and far from God. This statement means that in groups we are learning to be a disciple of Jesus, embracing one another as the family of Jesus, and being missionaries with Jesus to the world.
- Brainstorm what these identities of a follower of Christ could look like in your group.
- Assess what characteristics of Christ you struggle with the most when it comes to reflecting it in our love for one another.

ESSENTIALS OF FAITH

| *Holy Spirit and Gifts*

by Stan Rogers

Leader: Discussion this week might be a struggle. The topic of spiritual gifts can be an awkward one. Primarily because people might not know/remember what their gifting is and how to use to edify the church. Try and build in extra time for people to discuss their responses from this week's lesson and their results from their spiritual gifts inventory.

Group Member: Jot down statements or phrases that stand out to you in the lesson this week. Posture your heart for full participation as you read through the assigned Scriptures. Make sure to take the spiritual gifts inventory at the assigned link. Be ready to share your spiritual gifts inventory findings and responses to any questions in the lesson.

DISCOVER

Scripture promises that all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved (Romans 10:13). Not only are we saved from eternal separation from Christ after death (John 5:24), but we are also saved from living a fruitless, powerless life on earth (Acts 1:8). The Holy Spirit is given to every Christ-follower (Acts 2:38). It is the Holy Spirit working in and through us that empowers us to live the victorious, abundant life Christ died to give. Each one who accepts Jesus' invitation to "deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me" (Luke 9:23) becomes the temple of God where the Spirit of God resides (1 Corinthians 6:19). Along with the Holy Spirit, every Christian is imparted with gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:7) which enable us to be vibrant, fruit-bearing disciples of Christ.

In Romans 12, the Apostle Paul uses the human body to describe the work of Christ's followers in the Church. Beginning in verse four and continuing through the first part of verse six, Paul writes, "Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other. In his grace, God has given us different gifts for

doing certain things well." The abilities given to us, by the Holy Spirit, are to enable the body of Christ to function as God intends.

DEVELOP

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-14

Over the years my sons have asked some pretty weird questions. When they were younger, they loved to ask "what if" questions. These inquiries would go something like this, "Dad, what if you were stranded on a desert island. What would be the one item you would take with you?" Another might be, "Dad, what if you were starving to death and you had to choose between me or my brother to eat, which one would you eat first?"

One of their favorite "what if" questions concerned super-hero powers. They would ask, "Dad, what if you could have any one of the super-hero powers; which one would you choose?" After giving my answer, they would proceed to debate with me and argue with one another about why their super-hero power trumped all others.

When I came to faith in Jesus, I received special abilities—a type of super-hero powers—to use within the Body of Christ. In verses 4-7 of 1 Corinthians 12, Paul writes that there are different types of abilities given by God so He may work through us in differing ways, but the purpose is for the "common good" of His church.

In order for the church to function properly, each follower of Christ must use his or her God-given gifts within the body of Christ. This is best illustrated by thinking about the human body and its various functions. If the eyes do not see, if ears do not hear, if feet do not walk, it affects the whole body. If a believer does not use a specific gifting from the Holy Spirit, it has a negative effect on the body.

Paul shares some examples of various gifts or abilities given to Christ's followers (8-11). It is important to understand that each gift is important to the work of the church. We do not get to choose the gifts we want based on how important we may think one gift is over another. Often times, we desire what we don't have, not appreciating what we have been blessed with. Much in the way a teenage girl with straight

ESSENTIALS OF FAITH

| Bible

by Barry Parker

Leader: Discussion this week might be a struggle. The topic of the Bible can be an awkward one. Primarily because the issue of the Bible in our culture is post-Christian. The issue of authority always seems to come up. Try and build in extra time for people to discuss their responses from this week's lesson and build in time for people to share what they wrote in the dream section.

Group Member: Jot down statements or phrases that stand out to you in the lesson this week. Posture your heart for full participation as you read through the assigned Scriptures and write out your answered prayer. Be ready to share responses to any questions in the lesson.

DISCOVER

The question has been asked many times, why are Christians willing to place all their faith in only one book when there are so many other great books of wisdom? It's a great question and it is true there are many books that contain great, and important information. However for the Christian it is a decision of faith that the bible contains the true words of life. It's a decision to fully trust that the Bible is the perfect, timeless Word of God! So, where do we acquire this faith? Romans 10:17 says "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

DEVELOP

The Bible is really not just one book it is actually comprised of 66 books, divided among the Old and New Testaments, written by some 44 different authors and over a period of 1500 years all compiled under one cover. The compelling part of the Bible is that it wasn't written in secret. Many people over many years contributed together to create what we have now and historically it is proven to be accurate and reliable. In an article written by pastor Clayton Kraby in Reasonable Theology, he writes "Fortunately, there is an incredible number of surviving copies of original

Biblical writings. These copies are called manuscripts, and there are roughly 6,000 surviving manuscripts for the New Testament alone. The value of having a large number of manuscripts is that it provides us with ample opportunity to compare writings, which is especially valuable when cross-checking manuscripts from different geographic areas or from different time periods."

The word Testament means "covenant" so it could be said the Bible is God's covenant and instruction book for humankind. Pastor and Theologian John MacArthur says, "It tells us how to live, how to prepare to live forever, it's God's laws for man's life." Along with the Bible's reliability and what others have said about it, we have what the scripture claims about itself. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). If we recognize the Bible as God's direct word to us, then it would be imperative for us to read it for ourselves and learn what God desires from us. Psalms 19:7-11 gives us a wonderful example of what God says we can expect from His word.

READ PSALMS 19:7-11

Submitting to and believing by faith in the Bible is a major triumph, however actually doing and obeying what it says will take a lifetime and even then, no one has ever done it perfectly except one, Jesus Christ. Jesus is the centerpiece, He is the main character of the Bible. Consider what the Bible says about Jesus:

READ JOHN 1:1-4 & JOHN 1:14

Pause. Take 2-3 deep breath and reflect on these verses.

There it is, "The Word" became flesh, That's Jesus! If Jesus is the Word of God and He is life, then what is more important to humans than life? Nothing! Jesus himself claims to be the way, the truth, and life. Jesus is saying, there is no other way to eternal life in heaven or to a relationship with God the Father than through accepting His Word and His free gift of salvation.

Jot down what thought you are having right now about Jesus _____

ESSENTIALS OF FAITH

| *Salvation*

by Clayton Carver

Leader: Discussion has the potential to be clarifying for many people who don't understand the nature of salvation. Also there is a group activity in the dream section. Don't complete this activity during group time but rather pick another night. It will be worth it!

Group Member: Jot down statements or phrases that stand out to you in the lesson this week. Posture your heart for full participation as you read through the assigned Scriptures. Be ready to share responses to any questions in the lesson.

DISCOVER

Salvation is at the core of the Christian faith. We believe that our God is one who saves. Paul writes in 1 Timothy 1:15, "This saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." The whole story of the Bible is about a God who loved a world that has rebelled against Him; so much so that He was willing to enter into an evil world in order to provide a way back into a relationship with Him, just as Adam and Eve had in Eden before sin entered the world. So then, for us to fully understand who we are and who God is, we must look at what He has done for us, and then in turn, how we are to respond to the work of God. Then we can ask how our salvation fits into the bigger story that God is telling.

DEVELOP

READ EPHESIANS 2:1-10

There are two main sections to this passage that show our life before Christ and our life after Christ. The hinge of the passage is the phrase in verse 4, "But God..." Before this phrase, we see what our lives were before Christ graciously chose to save us. And, honestly, it isn't much of a "life" at all, because the Bible says that we were dead! Not hurt, handicapped, hung-up, in trouble, trapped, or dying. We were dead. Pastor Matt Chandler once said, "It is the thesis of my

life that outside of Jesus Christ, there is existence, but there is no such thing as life." There was no life to be found in our soul before Christ came into the picture. I once heard a pastor say that before we were saved we were drowning in a storm, and Christ was holding out his hand to us and all we had to do was take it. As well-intentioned as this illustration is, it does not paint an accurate picture of what the Bible says about salvation. Rather, we were not merely drowning, we were dead on the ocean floor. If we want to fully understand the magnitude of the grace given to us, we must never minimize the severity of our situation before Christ rescued us.

Therefore, if we are dead, being saved means being brought back to life. And that is precisely where this passage turns. "But God....made us alive with Christ..." This is the Gospel! We were dead, but Christ brought us back to life. Death had overtaken our souls, but the One who defeated death has taken us back as His own.

The Bible has other illustrations that speak to what God has done for us, all just as radical as the other:

READ ROMANS 5:6-10 & HOSEA 1:2; 3:1-3

Not only does the Bible teach us that God is saving individual sinners, but that He is in the process of redeeming all His Creation back to its intended state. Understanding this aspect of salvation involves seeing the overarching narrative of the Bible as one big story.

In the beginning, the Bible tells us that God created all things (Genesis 1). In the beginning, heaven was not separate from earth, and God and man were in perfect relationship with one another. However, not long after creation, the first humans, Adam and Eve, chose to rebel against God. At this moment, sin entered the world, the universe became fractured, and heaven and earth were separated, and God and man along with them. But God, in His grace, immediately begins to set about His plan to save humanity and the world from the evil that has overtaken it (Genesis 3:15). From that moment on, every passage in the Bible links back to God's plan of salvation.

In the big picture of salvation, we can think of salvation as the process of heaven and earth slowly

being reunited, restored to creation's intended state. In the Old Testament, this was done at the temple in Jerusalem, and the tabernacle in Exodus before that. This was the place where God would dwell among His people; this is the place where heaven would meet earth. Fast forward to the New Testament and life of Jesus. Jesus, who was God in the flesh, was a type of "temple." Jesus was the way heaven and earth would unite. Now, by sending the Holy Spirit, we are able to carry the message of the Gospel and good news about Jesus, creating little pockets of heaven as we go. Now, our single salvation has a place in a bigger story. When we are saved, we now join God in his plan of redeeming the world and bringing heaven and earth back together.

DEEPEN

Read through the passages above again. What ways does the Bible describe us before we were saved? After?

Why could a person consider salvation as such a radical event? Why not?

How could you change if you were consistently aware of the magnitude of your sin and your salvation?

Read Luke 15:11-32. What is the picture of salvation in this passage? Which person do you identify with most in the story? What does this tell us about the nature of God?

What would change if you began to view your life as a part of God's bigger salvation story?

In what ways could you be a "pocket of heaven" where you live, work and play?

DREAM

One of the best ways to better understand what God has done for us through Jesus Christ is to see it displayed before us. Recently a movie was released called *The Heart of Man*. As a story, it is a narrative re-telling of the prodigal son, but at its core, it is a picture of the salvation that Christ has provided for us. Although it specifically addresses the issue of sexual sin and temptation, the overarching message of the film is for everyone. As a group, pick a night to all watch this movie together (bring your tissues!) and then spend some time afterward to reflect and discuss how it spoke to you.

ESSENTIALS OF FAITH

| Church

by Clayton Carver

Leader: Discussion has the potential to be clarifying for many people who don't understand the role of the Church. Also there is a group activity in the dream section. Don't complete this activity during group time but rather pick another night. It will be worth it!

Group Member: Jot down statements or phrases that stand out to you in the lesson this week. Posture your heart for full participation as you read through the assigned Scriptures. Be ready to share responses to any questions in the lesson.

DISCOVER

When we come to know Christ, we gain not only a father but a family. This family is the church. Our identity is not only marked by our individual relationship with God but with this community of believers.

Many times when we think of a church, we begin to picture a building with big wooden doors, a tall steeple, and pews that creak when people come to sit. Or these days, perhaps you think of a big modern building that looks more like a mall.

In Scripture, whenever the church is referenced, the Greek word *ecclesia* (ἐκκλησία) is used. Directly translated, *ecclesia*, refers to a gathering of people. There is no reference to a building in Scripture because most of the original Christian churches were held not in a building, but in a home. Some would even say this is why the gospel spread at such a rapid pace because they were meeting from home to home.

As we ask the question, "what is the church," it is important to see that there are a few ways of thinking about the church. The local church refers to the group of believers that gather together in a particular locality. These are the people who are in the same room with you when you attend a small group or go to a worship service. The universal church refers

to everyone, both past and present, who have confessed Christ as the redeemer of the world and have committed to living for Christ and His purposes.

DEVELOP

Important passage(s) w/Personal Reflection

Let's just say it, "church is not a building." Our language is extremely formative, and we are all guilty of saying it, "let's go to church." It's not a bad phrase, but in our minds, what's happening is we are associating church with a time and a building. We, as people of God, as the gathered ones, are the church. We should say "let us gather AS the church." Every time we gather, the empty halls are filled with people, gathering to worship Jesus and experience life and community together. PEOPLE are the church.

As we read through scripture, three things stick out about the church. There are plenty more, but let's focus on these three.

The Church is a family.

Read the following passages and write what each verse reveals about your identity as part of the church.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:27, EPHESIANS 2:19-20, 1 CORINTHIANS 12:13-14

The Church is a Reflection.

READ JOHN 17:22-23 ALOUD.

Pause. Take 2-3 deep breaths and reflect: What thoughts or feelings does Jesus' prayer evoke?

Scripture identifies unity not uniformity as a key characteristic that should describe the church. In summarizing the John 17 passage, Pastor Tim Keller

writes; "...one of the most crucial ways that the Christian church embodies the gospel is in the unity of Christians who are different from one another—economically, culturally, racially. In general, the job of the church is to show the world that people who cannot live in love and unity outside of Christ can do so in Christ."

Describe a way YOU can contribute to a unity that reflects Jesus' heart for the church.

The Church is on Mission Together.

READ MATTHEW 9:35-38 AND MATTHEW 10:1-5

Jesus came proclaiming the coming Kingdom of God and asked his followers to pray with him for God to send works out into the city and countryside declaring the good news. I can pray for that! But what Matthew tells us next is that Jesus gave his followers authority and then commissioned them to go and declare the good news! Not just sit and pray, but go and be contagious. Jesus sent out his disciples. The Greek word here is *ekballo*, which means to send out with force! He was sending out his followers, his body, his church, to proclaim and demonstrate his Kingdom with the authority he has given them.

Read Matthew 28:16-20. Pause and take 2-3 deep breaths and reflect: What does Jesus call us to do and what does he give us to accomplish his mission?

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 5:17-21

The Apostle Paul says, if you are new in Christ, you are an ambassador of Christ. To be new means to be an ambassador, as the church we cannot separate these two identities. We declare the hope and reconciliation that we have received in and through Jesus.

What is easier for you to see yourself, new or an ambassador? How could you grow in both identities as a follower of Jesus?

DEEPEN

In your view, how does this generation perceive the church. Why do you think this is true?

Describe how you might define 'church' to someone who asks.

Write down what stands out from John 17:22-23. What thoughts or feelings does Jesus' prayer evoke in you?

Look up and read the following passages and jot down what each verse reveals as purposes of the church.

- Luke 4:8
- Timothy 2:15
- Acts 2:42
- John 13:35
- Titus 2:11-12
- Luke 22:19-20
- Acts 22:16
- Hebrews 10:25

ESSENTIALS OF FAITH

| Man

by Clayton Carver

Leader: Discussion has the potential to be intimidating for many people if the group does not have trust with each other. The activity in the dream section is meant to be reflective after an in-depth lesson. Don't force the activity but your group will be better if they engage fully.

Group Member: Jot down statements or phrases that stand out to you in the lesson this week. Posture your heart for full participation as you read through the assigned Scriptures. Be ready to share responses to any questions in the lesson and fully participate in sharing your dream section activity with the group.

DISCOVER

We've all asked ourselves, "Why am I the way I am?" We've looked at another person and, just like the great theologian Michael Scott from the Office, asked, "Why are you the way that you are?" While on an individual basis these can be vastly complex questions, if we zoom to a 50,000 foot view of humanity, we can begin to see a common thread that tells us who we are as people. Understanding humanity helps us understand our very nature. Just as it is important to study and understand who God is, a true understanding of Christianity must also involve understanding who mankind. Understanding our human condition will ultimately magnify the name and character of God.

While this all sounds easy and simple, there is usually a problem that comes up with studying mankind from a biblical perspective. Much of what the Bible has to say about humanity isn't pretty! It starts off magnificent, even perfect, but we soon see that our human condition becomes one of constant destruction and overwhelming evil. However, we can be encouraged, because those in Christ know there is more to the story than our present state, and that the darkness that has overtaken our souls only makes the light of Christ shine that much brighter and appear

that much more beautiful.

DEVELOP

To understand mankind, we must look at ourselves in two basic ways: our dignity in creation and our destruction in rebellion.

Our dignity is found at the very beginning of the Bible, and is rooted in the creation story:

READ GENESIS 1:26-31

The root of human dignity is found in its Creator. We are made in the same likeness as the God who made us. And because God made us in His likeness, we are given the privilege to help him rule over Creation. By this we see that our dignity being found in God impacts all areas of our life. We are given the task to multiply and fill the earth, thus spreading God's image all over Creation.

At the end of the passage, it says that God looked over His Creation, mankind included, and declared that it was "good." In our original created state, humanity was good. More than that, humanity was perfect; perfectly made as the image bearer of a holy God. It was heaven on earth, but the most tragic part of the story is that this perfect state did not last.

READ GENESIS 3:1-7

This man and woman, created in the image of the perfect God, chose to disobey the command that He had given to them. And in that moment, from something as simple as eating a piece of fruit, the universe was thrown into darkness, and humanity brought its own destruction; humanity had become evil.

From that moment on, the Bible's description of humanity is not good. Take time to read the following passages and jot down your reflections. What do these passages stir up in you? What is state of your heart towards humankind? Towards God?

READ
GENESIS 6:5-7
ISAIAH 64:6-7
ROMANS 3:11
GALATIANS 5: 19-21

Sin has left humanity in a destructive and helpless condition. No one has escaped its grasp and we all suffer because of its oppression. Yet, the Bible makes it clear that sin isn't just something that happens to us - it is something that is in us. Sin has corrupted our very nature. It has changed our being. Yes, we were created in the image of God, but now that image has become distorted. More than that, it has caused a separation between ourselves and our Maker, a separation that we cannot fix. We are stuck and completely helpless to fix ourselves or our situation. As Galatians says, because of our sin we have no place in the Kingdom of God.

But there is good news. Even though we as humans have put ourselves in rebellion against God, that does not have to be the end of the story. There is One who still able to defeat the power of sin; and God, immediately after humanity had rebelled against Him, began working a plan to bring humankind back to their intended place - a relationship with Himself. Tim Keller once said, "You are more sinful than you ever dared imagined, but you are more loved than you ever dare hoped." This is the Gospel.

DEEPEN

What normally comes to mind when you think about sin?

How seriously do you take sin?

Do you tend to think of sin as something in the world or something that is in you?



We see in Scripture that we are both created with dignity and that we have destroyed that dignity by rebelling against God. What would be some dangers of focusing too much on one of these two aspect?

Why is being a "good" person not enough to get us back to God based on what we have learned about our condition?

DREAM

Understanding our sin nature is something that is vital to fully appreciating what God as done. Hopefully, by now, trust is being built among your group. In the space below write down the worst thing about you. Your biggest struggle. Be prepared to share this at your group meeting. While this may seem intimidating, if your fellow group members are willing to share their dark spots, hopefully that will encourage you to see that everyone is messed up. Everyone has flaws. And we are in this together. So be brave, and be honest!

| End Notes

1. Gordon R. Lewis, "Attributes of God," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (ed. W. Elwell; 2d ed.; Baker, 2001)