

The
Series
Guide

The Fourth Wall

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INTRODUCTION

There is an old trope in acting that the camera is the fourth wall. This convention imagines a wall between actors and their audience. While the audience can see through this “wall,” the convention assumes that the actors cannot.

Every once in a while, you will see an actor look directly into the camera or at the audience, and they will speak through the Fourth Wall and break that convention. This is when they recognize that there is more going on than what they assume at the beginning of the performance. It is a powerful and sometimes comedic technique that, when used sparingly, becomes a memorable moment. (Think Deadpool movies).

As Christians, when we look at the three walls of our existence, we feel that that is all there is. But we know there is something behind that Fourth Wall. We know that this world is not all we see, that something more is happening, and that we have hints and allegations throughout scripture. We see this assent to something more everywhere when we are willing to look beyond our 2-dimensional world and see things in 3 dimensions, or even 4!

This journey is happening at a critical time in the United States. There is much at stake, or seems to be, in this election season. And while I don’t know what is going to happen as I write this, I know that anxieties will be high,

anger, frustration, and a deep sense of helplessness will grasp many of us. According to polls, this week, close to half of us will be unhappy with the outcomes.

However, I am writing this series with these things in mind. I want all of us to remember that there is more happening in this world than we grasp. These things are massive distractions from the greater things of faith. It is almost impossible to find God in a world that seems so chaotic, fractured, and dissonant. But we are called to look through that fourth wall of the world that we have been given and recognize that something more is happening every second that transcends our world experience and moves us into the reality of our faith and our God.

Thank you for joining us on this journey in these tumultuous times.

Grace to you and peace,

Pastor Tim and the Series Guide Writing Team.

Day 1

IMAGINE...



Imagine those moments when you are lying in bed, and you find yourself inundated with great and warm feelings about your faith. These are the moments that we find peace in our faith. These moments hook us into the idea and experience of faith. Admittedly, these moments are too few and too far between for many of us.

Now, imagine a very different experience: Waking up at night feeling a bit overwhelmed by doubt, anxiety, feelings of emptiness, and loneliness. No matter how hard you try, you cannot shake the feeling that we are all alone in our experience of the world, that there is no God and to even comprehend God's existence is beyond your ability to cognitively capture.

When you look at the world and see the foolishness, the pain, the suffering, and heartache, it is hard to imagine a God who cares, let alone a God who even exists. You stare up in the dark and all you get in return is the darkness of the night.

That seems pretty terrible, and it seems like a strange way to begin a series guide that is supposed to give us hope in

the midst of everything that is happening. However, this is often how many of us feel.

Does this mean that we have faith that first night, but none that second? Is faith a matter of being able to imagine or feel that God exists?

I don't think so.

God's existence is not dependent on our belief in it, whether strong or weak one day or the next. Faith is not the same thing as being able to imagine God's existence from one day to the next. We are often unequal to the task of imagining God anyway.

This is why the prayer in **Ephesians 1:17-18** is often so important to us:

“**17** asking God, the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to give you spiritual wisdom and insight so that you might grow in your knowledge of God. **18** I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the confident hope he has given to those he called—his holy people who are his rich and glorious inheritance.”

In this text, the author, Paul, is asking that those people in the Ephesian church might have a greater revelation into who God is and how God exists at all. Beyond that, he is also asking that they be given “light”, which I would interpret as a sense of God’s presence, so they might continue to look past what the world is offering them and they might be able to see how God inhabits the world around them.

This is the same prayer that I pray for Crosswalk. That we may understand God in ways that transcend what we seem to be given every day as we look at the news, worry about our families, and stress over our jobs and politics in the world. We hear about wars and worry about the next war that might begin. This is a prayer for the presence of God in your lives. A presence that continually tears our walls of reality down so that we can see that, despite what it feels like, we live in the kingdom that God inhabits.

Remember, Jesus already told us this when he said in **John Chapter 18:36** Jesus answered, “My Kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. . .”

There is more to this world than simply what we see.

1. How do you feel about the existence of God? Does it change as circumstances in the world change?
2. How can we be sure there is more than what we simply see?
3. Can we share the hope that we have, even when we struggle with that hope?

Day 2

THE CULTURE WE SEE.



We live in an interesting culture. I am in London as I write this series guide. I am doing an evangelistic series at a church in Central London. London is a megacity that has meant so much to Western culture. But the reality is that the church in England and London is going through a very difficult time. Modern London culture, by and large, no longer has the imagination to believe in God.

We probably have a friend, spouse, family member, child, or close friend who has “left the faith” to move on to more reasonable things. Some people have unconsciously decided to live as if there is no God and have long ago stopped expecting God's presence to appear in their lives. However, they may still call themselves Christians and live with the trappings of Christianity and faith.

Is that not true of each of us to a certain extent? We live lives of quiet agnosticism, knowing that our faith often feels like doubt. Our everyday experience has little awareness of God. As modern society has moved into a much more agnostic way of living, the integration of faith is less likely. We may go to church, but we often leave God there, like a lost handbag that we don't need anyway.

This is true of Europe and Australia, but you may feel like our lives in the United States are not so dire regarding faith. However, I would posit that we live in a culture that has co-opted the idea of God for an idea of religion that exists to serve our civic needs, desires, and politics. This is worse than the loss of faith entirely. We have so much damaged the idea of God that we have distorted His image in the world to the place where people are walking away from the fun-house mirror version of God that we are offering them.

So how do we remain curious and imaginative about God amid these cultures that ignore, distort, or deny God? These cultures that leave us without hope of something more in this world than what we see, or show us an alternate reality that is so compelling that we have to join in?

As people of God, we need to take on the Romans 12:1-2 text that states: **12: 1-2** So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you. (**Message Bible**)

1. How do you not conform to this world? What do you need to incorporate into your life, and what do you need to leave behind?
2. How can you make your life into a life of worship to God?
3. What does offering mean in this text?

Day 3

WHAT WE INCLUDE.



When Christians think about not conforming to this world, we usually go to those things that we need to exclude to not conform to what is happening in the world. We try to find those things that cause us to sin or that we think are sinful, and we exclude, or at least try to exclude, those things from our lives. We often go to the next step and assume everyone should exclude those things from their lives. We do this as a form of protection for others or God, which I don't think makes much sense.

When we begin to realize that there is another way and another world that we need to recognize and try to live into, we realize that it is perhaps not so much about what we exclude but about what we include in our lives.

Many of us have tried to exclude so much from our lives that it is a little like trying to be on an extreme diet. We expect to walk away from all of those things we have become used to. We starve ourselves of our regular lives, and then we long for what we no longer have. We don't give ourselves time to wean off of those things that have become habits.

It is akin to trying to run an Ironman Triathlon without any training. I don't know why we can do that with any success. Crash diets, massive lifestyle changes, and going from 0 to 100 in a day rarely work when it comes to creating habits and new directions in our lives.

Changes in our lives happen in millimeters, not miles. Those millimeters aggregate and become the miles we want to travel, but they don't happen all at once. And perhaps we are even taking the wrong approach to making those changes.

Rather than making those changes through lack, scarcity, and unreasonable discipline, what if we began to add more and more things into our lives full of abundance and love and have a density of compassion that eventually pushes out the space for those things we want to exclude? Therefore, the exclusion process becomes natural, easy, and almost an afterthought to those things that fulfill us daily.

And just so you know, you are not alone in feeling the way that you do. Paul struggled with some of these same issues: **Romans 7:15-21:** *For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but*

what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good.

Paul struggled with these concepts just like we do, and what was the solution? **Romans 7:24-25** *What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? 25 Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

Knowing there is only one solution, we should start there. Rather than starting with an iron will and a list of things to exclude, begin with Jesus and see what he adds to your life!

1. What have you been trying to exclude lately?
2. How is that going? Do you see victory?
3. What do you think God wants you to add to your life?

Day 4

WHATEVER IS TRUE.



Philippians 4:8 *And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.*

So, what should we add to our lives? The above list is probably a great place to start, but let's break that list down a bit more.

“Fix your thoughts on what is true. . .”

Do we even know what is true anymore? I actually think that we can. However, it is a bit harder than we think. I keep hearing people say, “Do your own research,” to mean that they are finding truth from their own sources. To be clear, using a different search engine does not mean “doing your own research.”

In my doctoral program, you don’t even begin to do your own research until you have done a literature review, which takes months and even years to understand what is being said about the topic. Then, you have to do abstracts for most of that writing to synthesize existing research. Then, you produce a thoughtful and thorough bibliography

that shows you know the extent of the topic and the salient voices and that you have read, understood, and reviewed them. Then, you begin “your own research. . .” Short of doing this sort of thing, don’t say you have done “research” you have not.

So, how do you know what is true? First of all, we should be much more circumspect than we often are when it comes to what is really happening. We have to understand the media, what motivates each platform, and what are their end goals. You might want to ask yourself if listening to a 22-year-old making content from the front seat of his 2011 Honda Civic is really doing research, or if you are just being entertained or allowing for your bias to be fed into.

So start here: Scripture speaks of God, who God is, what God does, and the fruits of following Christ. Understanding the fruits of those you follow, their impact on the world, who they surround themselves with, and if they have a motive of God or not is important and possible. Also, don’t paint someone or something with such a wide brush that everything around it gets smeared along with it. Start with what we know to be true, and if you are wondering, get as close to the source as you can.

- 1. How do you find out what is true?**
- 2. How would you start to “do your own research?”**
- 3. What can you know to be true about God and his will for your life?**

Day 5

WHATEVER IS HONORABLE.



Philippians 4:8 *And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.*

Honor is the second concept that we are to look into when it comes to what we are to add to our lives. So what around you is honorable and how do you decide? Here again, scripture gives us some help when it comes to knowing what is honorable.

Most of us would be appalled and embarrassed if all our thoughts were made public. John Milton, a 17th-century writer and thinker, wrote an apt description of the human mind's inner workings in his classic poem Paradise Lost: "The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven."

As Milton inferred, our thoughts are like water; they easily flow downward. This thinking hollows us out by degrading our moral selves. As **Proverbs 23:7 (NASB)** reminds us, "*For as he thinks within himself, so he is.*" How easily sinful thoughts spiral in a gravitational pull toward

that which is dishonorable. Mentally, we start in the Sea of Galilee but end up stuck in the Dead Sea.

While our minds may seem like an out-of-control inferno, Scripture urges us to renew them by governing our thoughts. It requires us to think about our thoughts. This thoughtful and directed thinking in the Bible calls for a renewed mind. It is a mental consciousness that strives to harmonize with God's truth found in Scripture and Christ. It transforms the content and habits of our thinking by aligning our values with God's will. When our minds are renewed, our desires agree with God that his will is good, pleasing, and perfect (**Rom. 12:2**).

“Honorable” is a word found elsewhere in the New Testament to describe the character of the deacon and elder in 1 Timothy 3. It is an aspirational life quality for older men in the faith in Titus 2. The root word is “revere” or “worship,” and the sense is worthy of being lifted high and put on display. If somebody exposed our thoughts, would they earn higher respect for their virtue and nobility?

“Whatever is honorable” provides a grid to evaluate my thoughts and raises the question, “Honorable to whom?” Our world often honors the dishonorable, as the glittering honors of any significant media award show verify. **The biblical measure of what is honorable is what is honorable to God.** We are horrified at the

prospect of others knowing our thoughts and ignorant that God knows them all.

The command to think honorably is a grace. As our contemplations marinate in what is true, beautiful, and excellent in God's eyes, our hearts and lives increasingly reflect nobility, purity, and charity. As our inner selves think like Christ, our outer selves look increasingly like him too. When we fail and our thoughts disappoint us, it is another occasion to marvel at Jesus. He never had a dishonorable thought, and his every contemplation is worthy of our adoration.

1. What in your life is honorable to God?
2. How can you do more of that?
3. What changes and decisions do you need to make in order to be closer to that which is honorable in your life?

Day 6

WHATEVER IS RIGHT (JUST)



Philippians 4:8 *And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.*

Another word for “right” that is used often in translations is “whatever is Just.” So maybe we need to look into what it means to be Just.

Justice has become a word that people are wary of, often because it is connected to the phrase “social justice.” We think that this is some liberal phrase that means we have to be some sort of “woke” to believe in. However, the concept of justice is seen all over the Old Testament. Here is an assignment: read any of the 12 minor prophets and see what they say about bringing justice into the experience of Israel.

I know, I am using triggering words here for some of you. But I want you to understand the concept of justice comes from long before any of the culture wars that we see happening today. The culture wars in Israel surrounded the ideas of whether or not we were going to make sure there

was equity for those who had no voice. It hasn't really changed that much.

Now, you may think that I am being political, and of course, the ways we get to justice won't be agreed upon by people of differing political views. But as Christians, to not believe in Justice is to not believe in the Missio Dei, or the mission of God that Jesus exposed us to in **Luke Chapter 4: 16** When he came to the village of Nazareth, his boyhood home, he went as usual to the synagogue on the Sabbath and stood up to read the Scriptures. **17** The scroll of Isaiah the prophet was handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where this was written:

18

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released,
that the blind will see,
that the oppressed will be set free,

19

and that the time of the Lord's favor has come.[\[a\]](#)”
20 He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. All eyes in the synagogue looked at him intently. **21** Then he began to speak to them. “The Scripture you've just heard has been fulfilled this very day!”

I quote this often because it is why Jesus came into the world; it was his mission, and he fulfilled it. And justice plays a major role in this mission.

So we need to be involved in ministries that lead toward justice, and do so by using mercy and compassion to reach those ends.

I can't get to the other two concepts; loveliness and admirable. So those will have to wait for another time, here are a few questions you might ask yourself today.

1. What do you do in your life that brings about more justice in the world?
2. How, in your job, can you work toward these ends?
3. How can you teach this to your family?

Day 7

SMALL GROUP STUDY



INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion between you and the person you're studying with, or your Connect Group. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Holy Spirit to lead in all things.

OPENING QUESTION(S)

The focus of this sermon series is seeing beyond the world we see, to recognize there is always more going on than meets the eye. There is a greater story. What ways do you think we can help remember this larger story, the kingdom of God story, especially when our world is so divided and seems like it's falling apart?

HEAD

1. Read Ephesians 1:17-18 and John 18:36 together and share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts that come to you from the reading of the Word.
2. What do you think the kingdom of God is and how/ where does it show up?
3. Read Romans 12:1-2 from the ESV and the Message Bible, and share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts that come from the reading of the Word.
4. What do you think it means to be “transformed by the renewal of your mind”? What does this look like?
5. Read Romans 7:24-25 and Philippians 4:8, sharing any wisdom, insights, or thoughts that come from the reading of the Word.
6. Who can help us see beyond the reality in front of us to the bigger story and how can we live a life that reminds us of this other reality on a regular basis?
7. In Philippians 4:8, to “fix your thoughts” means to turn them from one thing and place them somewhere else. Without intentionality, where do our thoughts rest on a regular basis? How do we “fix” them elsewhere?

HEART

1. If we are to live here on earth as citizens of the kingdom of heaven, how do we daily remind ourselves of this

other reality when our world and it's culture and pace slams up against us with continuous force?

2. As citizens of this other kingdom, knowing that God is sovereign, how should we approach the coming elections, the ongoing wars, the hurricanes and devastations? How do we help others through these times?

HANDS

This week, prayer for God to open your eyes to see from a kingdom of God perspective. To love those you disagree with. To seek to be a blessing, a light in the darkness, a city on a hill. When the world fights, argues, and runs in fear, our call as citizens of the kingdom is to live like Jesus, and lovewell. Let's be intentional about how we do that always, but especially this next week.

WORDS TO REMEMBER

“Then he told John’s disciples, ‘Go back to John and tell him what you have seen and heard—the blind see, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor.’ And he added, ‘God blesses those who do not fall away because of me.’”

Luke 7: 22-23, NLT

Day 8

ACTS 15-JERUSALEM COUNCIL

15 While Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch of Syria, some men from Judea arrived and began to teach the believers: “Unless you are circumcised as required by the law of Moses, you cannot be saved.” **2** Paul and Barnabas disagreed with them, arguing vehemently. Finally, the church decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, accompanied by some local believers, to talk to the apostles and elders about this question. **3** The church sent the delegates to Jerusalem, and they stopped along the way in Phoenicia and Samaria to visit the believers. They told them—much to everyone’s joy—that the Gentiles, too, were being converted.

Who can forget the opening scene of *Fiddler on the Roof* as Tevye rolls his wheelbarrow onto the stage and addresses the audience in the now-famous song, “Tradition.” He explains life set against Czarist Russia in the little town of Anatevka, populated largely by hard-working Jewish families. The year is 1905. The Russian Revolution is about to begin. In the village of Anatevka, a pious Jew, who raises his five daughters with the aid of quotations from the Bible (many of which he invents himself), explains that their village has chosen guidelines unrelated to the Czar or the Revolution. The peasant dairyman and his friends acknowledge that age-old laws of tradition govern their lives. Their traditions give order to their lives and stability to their community. Without their traditions the good citizens of Anatevka would be as shaky as a “fiddler on the roof.”¹

¹ Kenneth O. Gangel, *Acts*, vol. 5, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 245.

I played one of the sons in this play in high school. I certainly did not understand the significance of the play or of the song " Tradition" when I was a junior in high school, but it is not lost on me now. Tradition anchors us to the past, our culture, our faith, and our predecessors.

Paul and Barnabas were experiencing a difficult moment in the development of the early church. They had to deal with the traditionalists who thought they had to follow in the footsteps of their Jewish parents and make new converts have to cling to those old traditions, one of which, circumcision, was not insignificant.

Now, we will not speak of the rightness or wrongness of traditions in this pericope, but we will look at how they handled disagreements in the early church. Like today, not everyone agrees with how things should be in church settings. Crosswalk has not always had the blessing of a strong leadership team that has bought into the vision of "loving well," our mission and calling in the world. There were times when people left the church because of significant differences in the direction the church should go. These issues were undoubtedly theological, but many were process-oriented, culture-oriented, and opinion-oriented.

The early church had to deal with disagreements, and we will, too. Unfortunately, our disagreements are more related to how the world expresses itself in politics and policies. The church needs to exist to explore a third way of looking at the world, developing relationships, and creating hope for the future and even for today.

Looking at the text, we see that the disagreements were such that Paul and Barnabas were called home to Jerusalem to discuss the arguments. They went with some local elders and were blessed to see that many Gentiles converted to faith in Christ in Phoenicia and Samaria. This would have bolstered their argument.

In the upcoming texts, we will see how the church dealt with disagreements among believers, and perhaps we can find a third way to disagree and stay together.

1. Have you ever disagreed with someone in church? What was the reason for the disagreement?
2. How can churches, full of people with differing opinions, get along?
3. What do you do with traditions that stand in the way of people converting to faith in Jesus?

Day 9

ACTS 15-JERUSALEM COUNCIL

Acts 15:4 *When they arrived in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Paul were welcomed by the whole church, including the apostles and elders. They reported everything God had done through them. 5 But then some of the believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and insisted, “The Gentile converts must be circumcised and required to follow the law of Moses.”*

They were welcomed to the community, even though there was clear a looming disagreement. They got to the argument, but not before they welcomed Paul and Barnabas into the fellowship. I have always found this to be comforting: even if we disagree, we can still have fellowship together, at least most of the time.

I have mentioned before that the Biblical Research Institute has investigated me personally, as well as a few of my friends, as we were establishing the Jesus-centered ministry we called “the One Project.”

I can remember the day well. I wore a suit, which tells you how seriously I was taking the whole situation. But one thing stuck out in my head about the day. Before we started to talk about the theology of Jesus that they seemed to hold suspect, we spent time getting to know one another. We shared about our lives and our ministries, and this set the tone for the conversation to be much more personable and reasonable than simply what could be construed as a theological disagreement.

This was probably more important than the content of the “disagreement,” which turned out not to be a

disagreement at all. (For information's sake, we were found to be deeply Adventist in our approach to ministry and theology, and our Christology was found to be grounded in Scripture, adhering to the great tradition of Christianity.)

But because of the time we spent fellowshipping and getting to know one another, we had a positive experience, even if the assumptions that led to the meetings were wildly uninformed. What could have been a conflict was a conversation and a relatively pleasant one at that.

How do you engage in fellowship with those you disagree with? Do you take the time to get to know them, to share your story with them and to hear theirs? Or do you get right to the conflict, more interested in being correct or proven right than interested in creating a friendship that might transcend the current conversation that you must have?

1. How do you create fellowship with those you disagree with?
2. How can you find a way to connect before the conflict/conversation?
3. Would it seem strange to break bread with someone you were about to disagree with, to spend time to get to know them, their motivations, their history, and understand where they are trying to go with their way of thinking?

Day 10

ACTS 15-JERUSALEM COUNCIL

6 So the apostles and elders met together to resolve this issue. **7** At the meeting, after a long discussion, Peter stood and addressed them as follows: “Brothers, you all know that God chose me from among you some time ago to preach to the Gentiles so that they could hear the Good News and believe. **8** God knows people’s hearts, and he confirmed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. **9** He made no distinction between us and them, for he cleansed their hearts through faith. **10** So why are you now challenging God by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? **11** We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus.”

The discussion seems long, and the author does not give us the finer points that were made. But what the author does share with us are Paul's words, which seem to bring some clarity to the conversation as it stands so far.

Paul wanted them to understand at least two things: 1) His calling to the Gentiles. And 2) His unwillingness to burden them with something that the Jews themselves were unable to accomplish.

We should not diminish the importance of these words. They have resonated down through the centuries, and we function today in the way that Paul would have us function,

not in the way that those elders in Jerusalem would have had us function. In other words, we don't have to circumcise our men when they come into the faith or when they are born. They do not need to carry that particular mark of fellowship that the Jews believed was imperative to show they were descendants of the covenant of Abraham.

Paul made this argument clearly and with power in no small part because he was a Pharisee in his former life and would have adhered to all of the requirements of the law of Moses at that time. I would argue that it is possible that he was still pretty involved in many of those laws, as they had become a part of his life. However, he was not interested in making others follow that same line of lifestyle identification. He knew the obstacle that would become, and he also knew that God was not interested in rituals but was interested in the whole hearts of those who came to accept the gospel in their lives.

1. What do you think about Paul's statements versus the statements of the elders in Jerusalem?
2. Would you have been willing to be circumcised when you were converted to Christianity?
3. How do you think the church would have grown in the world if these requirements were left in place for the Gentiles?

Day 11

ACTS 15-JERUSALEM COUNCIL

12 Everyone listened quietly as Barnabas and Paul told about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

13 When they had finished, James stood and said, “Brothers, listen to me. **14** Peter has told you about the time God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for himself.

15 And this conversion of Gentiles is exactly what the prophets predicted. As it is written:

16

‘Afterward I will return
and restore the fallen house of David.
I will rebuild its ruins
and restore it,

17

so that the rest of humanity might seek the Lord,
including the Gentiles—
all those I have called to be mine.
The Lord has spoken—

18

he who made these things known so long ago.”

19 “And so my judgment is that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. **20** Instead, we should write and tell them to abstain from eating food offered to idols, from sexual immorality, from eating the meat of strangled animals, and from consuming blood. **21** For these laws of

Moses have been preached in Jewish synagogues in every city on every Sabbath for many generations.”

“And so, my judgement is that we **should not make it difficult** for the Gentiles who are turning to God. . .”

We should sit on this for a while and reflect on whether or not we make it difficult for people to come to Christ.

I was just doing a series in a church somewhere in the world, and when they did baptisms at the end of the series, they brought up the baptismal candidates and they read each one of the baptismal vows that are for the SDA Church and each candidate had to assent to each of the vows. Honestly, I had not heard the vows in many years, if at all. They are . . . interesting, to say the least.

There was another person who had a deep interest in being baptised from the series, but as the vows were read, he was confused as to what they were agreeing to. There is a great deal of insider (Adventist) language that made him concerned.

I thought of this text when I heard his concerns. As the church was relatively traditional, I wasn’t able to have the conversation with the young man, but I sure wanted to. I wanted to tell the church that it is not our job to make it difficult for someone to accept Christ and move into our fellowships, but it wasn’t the time or the place.

1. Have you ever made it hard for someone to become part of the fellowship of believers?
2. What can we do as a church to keep things easy?
3. What happens to the people who want to be part of what we are doing when we don't allow them to become part of what God is doing? Do they stay around, try harder, or just fade away?

Day 12

ACTS 15-JERUSALEM COUNCIL

22 Then the apostles and elders together with the whole church in Jerusalem chose delegates, and they sent them to Antioch of Syria with Paul and Barnabas to report on this decision. The men chosen were two of the church leaders—Judas (also called Barsabbas) and Silas. **23** This is the letter they took with them:

“This letter is from the apostles and elders, your brothers in Jerusalem. It is written to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. Greetings!

24 “We understand that some men from here have troubled you and upset you with their teaching, but we did not send them! **25** So we decided, having come to complete agreement, to send you official representatives, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, **26** who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. **27** We are sending Judas and

Silas to confirm what we have decided concerning your question.

So, we see that Peter wants to make sure that he makes it right and sends the decision results to Paul and Barnabas in Antioch. He does this so that there will be no confusion. While they still require some regulations, they are relatively simple to keep. They really have to do with dietary and some morality clauses that the early church wanted them to keep.

We see Peter realizing there is more to this world than simply the rules and regulations required of the Jewish tradition and that God was probably doing a new thing that needed to be considered. For Peter to realize this was for Peter to recognize that since God was doing something new, the old needed to be reconsidered and recalibrated. The reality that he had lived for so long was changing, and he was trying very hard to keep up with the change.

It is easy for us to fall into the reality of everything we have ever known. When God decides to do a new thing, which is pretty often, I believe, it means that we have to live into the future; we have to live into the changes that God is making rather than leaning back to the past and just allowing ourselves to become comfortable in what was.

You see, there is a new reality that is always being created by God to continue the work that God is doing in the world, and therefore, we have to be aware of the future

that is being built. We don't forget the past, but we need to live in the future with God rather than in the past with our memories and accomplishments.

1. What is the future that God is creating that we can't quite see but that we can feel beginning to take shape?
2. How can we build our lives toward that future?
3. What is the greatest thing God has ever done in your life? Do you think he has more in store?

Day 13

ACTS 15-JERUSALEM COUNCIL

28 “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no greater burden on you than these few requirements: **29** You must abstain from eating food offered to idols, from consuming blood or the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. If you do this, you will do well. Farewell.”

30 The messengers went at once to Antioch, where they called a general meeting of the believers and delivered the letter. **31** And there was great joy throughout the church that day as they read this encouraging message.

32 Then Judas and Silas, both being prophets, spoke at length to the believers, encouraging and strengthening their faith.

33 They stayed for a while, and then the believers sent them back to the church in Jerusalem with a blessing of peace.

35 Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch. They and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord there.

So, it is resolved. And it came to a great resolution because those in the church were willing to look past that fourth wall and see what God was doing. When you realize there is something more than what you have previously experienced, you begin to realize there is nothing impossible for God.

But the Jerusalem council teaches us a few other things as well. It teaches us that people can and do change. I have found this to be true as well. While change is difficult, and it seems like it rarely happens with people, there are those who are willing to listen to reason, those who are willing to see what is really going on in the world, and those who believe the information they can find, and it even changes their minds.

Evangelism in the church has often been thought of as convincing people by making sure you have the best argument. We are rapidly approaching a world and have even entered into a reality where the best argument doesn't always win. This is sometimes due to the overwhelming amount of information that we are supposed to consume in order to make an opinion. Honestly, it becomes

overwhelming, and then it becomes a pursuit that we no longer undertake. We lean back into what we think we know or those sources we are comfortable with. This has massive implications for the world. Who you believe in, who you vote for, and what you believe to be true about the world and reality. All of these things depend on your ability to discern through much information.

The same is true of your biblical work as well. There are many sources, and not all are saying the same things. Your hermeneutic needs to be thought about and understood. You have to become consistent, and you need to find sources you trust but know why you trust them.

This is just the same process you have to take with all the information you are getting from the world today. You have to make sure you can vet your information so you can make a great decision rather than an uninformed decision. It will not be easy, and it is getting harder, but we were hoping you could take this seriously, or our whole world is in jeopardy.

1. Where do you get the information that helps you make informed decisions?
2. How can you learn to vet your sources better than you do, both for Scripture and for other sources?
3. How can the church help?

Day 14

SMALL GROUP STUDY

INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion between you and the person you're studying with, or your Connect Group. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Holy Spirit to lead in all things.

OPENING QUESTION(S)

Have you ever witnessed a disagreement within the body of Christ that split that body, and/or, deeply hurt members of that body? What was that experience like for you and were there any lessons you took away from it?

HEAD

1. Read Acts 15:1-35 together and share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts that simply come to you from the reading of the Word.
2. We often romanticize the early church; the gospel was preached, the Spirit was powered out, miracles happened, the church grew. But there were struggles and disagreements too. Why do you think the Jesus movement struggled to truly embrace and live the Jesus Way?
3. Why was it so hard for the Pharisees, even the ones who believed in Jesus, to accept and be excited about Gentiles giving their heart to Jesus/God?
4. Concerning v. 19, in what ways do you think the early church made it difficult for the Gentiles to turn to God? In what ways do we make it difficult today?

5. In a world that is so full of information, how do you and I discern good sources from bad sources, continuing to grow in grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ?

HEART

1. Jesus always transcended the moments we face, as does the kingdom of God. His way wasn't the left, right, or even middle, but His way, or the third way, is above that plain. How do you think the Jesus Way, the third way, differs from that of the world? How can you and I ascend to the Jesus way, even when our disagreements are deeply rooted?
2. What do you think is at the core of some of our toughest disagreements as it pertains to the body of Christ, His church?
3. How do you think we should handle disagreements in the church?
4. What are some tangible ways that you think we could work today to make it even easier for people to come to God?

HANDS

We've encouraged this before and do it again here as it seems appropriate to help us live the Jesus way no matter what we face in this world. Over this next week, take time each day to pray Ephesians 3: 14-21. Pray that no matter what happens in our world, you may be rooted and established in God's love, so that you may respond with love, to honor the one who is love.

WORDS TO REMEMBER

“Dear brothers and sisters, I close my letter with these last words: Be joyful. Grow to maturity. Encourage each other.

Live in harmony and peace. Then the God of love and peace will be with you.”

2 Corinthians 13:11, NLT

Day 15

2 KINGS

2 Kings 6:24 *Some time later, however, King Ben-hadad of Aram mustered his entire army and besieged Samaria. 25 As a result, there was a great famine in the city. The siege lasted so long that a donkey's head sold for eighty pieces of silver, and a cup of dove's dung sold for five pieces of silver.*

26 *One day as the king of Israel was walking along the wall of the city, a woman called to him, “Please help me, my lord the king!”*

27 *He answered, “If the Lord doesn't help you, what can I do? I have neither food from the threshing floor nor wine from the press to give you.” 28 But then the king asked, “What is the matter?”*

She replied, “This woman said to me: ‘Come on, let's eat your son today, then we will eat my son tomorrow.’ 29 So we cooked my son and ate him. Then the next day I said to her, ‘Kill your son so we can eat him,’ but she has hidden her son.”

30 When the king heard this, he tore his clothes in despair. And as the king walked along the wall, the people could see that he was wearing burlap under his robe next to his skin.

31 “May God strike me and even kill me if I don’t separate Elisha’s head from his shoulders this very day,” the king vowed.

32 Elisha was sitting in his house with the elders of Israel when the king sent a messenger to summon him. But before the messenger arrived, Elisha said to the elders, “A murderer has sent a man to cut off my head. When he arrives, shut the door and keep him out. We will soon hear his master’s steps following him.”

33 While Elisha was still saying this, the messenger arrived. And the king said, “All this misery is from the Lord! Why should I wait for the Lord any longer?”

This pericope begins a story of trust, momentum, and recognizing that there is more happening in the world than we see in our everyday, regular lives. I went back to chapter 6 to show you how bad things are.

In verse 25, did you notice that a donkey’s head would sell for 80 pieces of silver? I am assuming that is a great deal of money for that time and even for today. And who wants to eat a donkey’s head anyway? But that is not the worst of it. The worst is that a cup of dung from a dove sold for five pieces of silver!

How bad do things have to be for anyone to eat dove's excrement? Things were horrible. And this is exactly what would happen during a siege and why they were so popular. The longer the siege lasts, the more desperate they become. This is why they created a water source inside the walls of Jerusalem called Hezekiah's Tunnel. This tunnel allowed water to flow into the city from the spring of Gihon, which was relatively well-hidden outside the city.

This context is what we need to see how bad things were during the siege, and it sets the stage for the next part of the story. We see a horrible situation that is not getting better, desperate people and a king who is unsure what to do.

1. Have you ever felt this desperate? Even metaphorically?
2. Can you imagine what a siege would be like back then?
3. Do you ever feel like the enemy is besieging you and are at your wit's end? What do you do in that situation?

Day 16

2 KINGS

7:1 Elisha replied, “Listen to this message from the Lord! This is what the Lord says: By this time tomorrow in the markets of Samaria, six quarts of choice flour will cost only one piece of silver, and twelve quarts of barley grain will cost only one piece of silver.”

So, Elisha predicts things will get better. It has to be hard to believe since things were so terrible at this point, and the turnaround is supposed to happen super quickly. Because things were so bad at this point, no one can believe that things will get better too quickly. Certainly, only a miracle will make things change.

Compared to how things were today, tomorrow, getting that much better doesn't seem to make sense. Particularly when you compare today's and tomorrow's predictions.

Comparison is a deadly situation in our lives. The reality behind social media is that there is no reality behind it. I was at Trafalgar Square in London the other day, and the place was inundated by “Influencers” making videos for their social media accounts. Honestly, and perhaps I am showing my age here, they looked ridiculous. The behind-the-scenes of these videos are not only mundane but often move into farcical categories. I guess that is how movies shot on a green screen feel.

What I mean is that our reality is significantly different from what is happening. Social media gives an alternate reality with very little to do with what is happening in each

person's world. The same can be said for the "news" we also receive on social media. It is a shade of "truth" but not the reality of an epistemological truth we can trust. Without knowing the motivation, the bias, and the monetization of what you are watching, you are going to not only get a distorted reality, but it will confirm the bias that you already have in your heart and mind.

You see, these are dangerous times we are living in. A time when everything you "want" to be true will be true to you. However, this has very little to do with what is happening worldwide. When we experience this type of "reality," we aren't experiencing reality. Rather, we are experiencing a curated truth and reality that fits into our preconceived notions of how things should be.

We could continue with this, but let me brass-tax it for you. Get your information from various sources, know their bias, and learn to discern.

1. What is the bias that you want to hear in your news reports?
2. How does social media add to the anxiety and FOMO you live with?
3. How can you go directly to the source of what you are trying to discover?

Day 17

2 KINGS

2 The officer assisting the king said to the man of God, “That couldn’t happen even if the Lord opened the windows of heaven!”

But Elisha replied, “You will see it happen with your own eyes, but you won’t be able to eat any of it!”

The officer working with the king couldn’t imagine that things could be so bad today and so good tomorrow. He couldn’t fathom how this turnaround could occur; perhaps that is a measure of his faith. He was, after all, speaking with a prophet of God. But sometimes it is difficult to believe that God will really come through, particularly when you are in a crisis.

We go through crisis all the time. We almost always head to one, in the midst of one, or coming out of one. We often can’t see how good God can be through all of these struggles because it is difficult to get perspective in those times. Trying times create a myopathy that can be deadly when it comes to seeing how God is working. Interestingly, these are often the moments when we are crying out to God more and more, hoping for a result.

Because we are sometimes blinded to the way that God works, we find ourselves trusting other things more than we trust God, much like the assistant to the kind in this story. Elisah essentially told the man that he would not be able to partake of any of the bounty due to his lack of faith.

Have you ever lacked faith in God and been surprised that God showed up? Conversely, have you ever believed that God would change things, and it felt like God did not make any appearances at all? These things can be incredibly confusing to us as we are trying to figure out how God is working in our lives.

Perhaps it is best if we are not prescriptive with God, but we try to be more descriptive of how God has been faithful in the past. Rather than trying to see where you would imagine God working right now, look back to the past to see how God has been faithful, and perhaps that will give us insight to where God continues to work in our lives.

1. Have you ever been disappointed by God? How did that make you feel?
2. Did God ever surprise you and show up when you didn't expect it?
3. Have you ever driven yourself crazy trying to figure out how God works? Should we even do that?
4. How has God been faithful in the past in your life?

Day 18

2 KINGS

3 Now there were four men with leprosy sitting at the entrance of the city gates. “Why should we sit here waiting to die?” they asked each other. 4 “We will starve if we stay here, but with the famine in the city, we will starve if we go back there. So we might as well go out and surrender to the Aramean army. If they let us live, so much the better. But if they kill us, we would have died anyway.”

I don't know if you have read this story before, but when I first came upon it, I laughed out loud at these men with leprosy. Not because they were funny or because leprosy is funny, but because these guys had figured something out that no one else had. They figured out that they had very few good choices, and so they decided that they should figure out what is the best of a bad situation and move forward in that direction.

These four guys showed some chutzpah, as it is known in Yiddish. This means that they have some self-confidence or even audacity to move forward in this situation. They were willing to trust the Aramean army even before they were interested in trusting their own people. They didn't think either option was great, but at least they were willing to give it a try.

Have you ever had to choose between two bad choices? What did that make you feel like? And how did that go for you? Interestingly, these poor guys had to decide between their own people and the invading army, and they chose the other army.

Sometimes, being desperate gives you a moment for real reflection and serious soul-searching. Without a positive option, but just a chance, you might find yourself having to lean into the mercy and grace of God, and when you do this, a whole new reality might show up and teach you something you never knew before. You might just find out that God is still working things out for you, and the situation might not be as desperate as you thought originally.

When you think back to those difficult choices, where it felt like you really didn't have any choice at all, how did you find yourself leaning into hope? Faith and hope are often words that go together. When we don't have anywhere else to turn, we turn to hope, which is not knowing the outcome, but believing that there may be a choice we didn't actually know about before.

1. Have you ever been desperate?
2. Did God show up?
3. If so, how? If not, why not?
4. How can you lean into hope more consistently in your life?

Day 19

2 KINGS

5 So at twilight they set out for the camp of the Arameans. But when they came to the edge of the camp, no one was there!

6 For the Lord had caused the Aramean army to hear the clatter of speeding chariots and the galloping of horses and the sounds of a great army approaching. “The king of Israel has hired the Hittites and Egyptians to attack us!” they cried to one another. 7 So they panicked and ran into the night, abandoning their tents, horses, donkeys, and everything else, as they fled for their lives.

Day 20

2 KINGS

8 When the men with leprosy arrived at the edge of the camp, they went into one tent after another, eating and drinking wine; and they carried off silver and gold and clothing and hid it. 9 Finally, they said to each other, “This is not right. This is a day of good news, and we aren’t sharing it with anyone! If we wait until morning, some calamity will certainly fall upon us. Come on, let’s go back and tell the people at the palace.”

These are some good lepers! I know that might sound weird, but the truth is that they are super gracious to realize that they should not be hoarding this loot, but they should be sharing it with the community that wouldn't let them be a part and would not give them safe shelter in the midst of the siege.

They realized that good news is something that is to be shared, and when you get it, you have to give it away as well. So that is exactly what they did. They leaned on God for provision, he provided, and then they shared what God had provided them. This was truly an act of grace.

10 So they went back to the city and told the gatekeepers what had happened. “We went out to the Aramean camp,” they said, “and no one was there! The horses and donkeys were tethered and the tents were all in order, but there wasn’t a single person around!” 11 Then the gatekeepers shouted the news to the people in the palace.

It took a while for the king to believe it. They sent two chariots and scouts to make sure the men were not setting up a trap. But when they realized they were telling the truth, they plundered the Aramean camp as quickly as they could. And sure enough, what Elisha had said previously became true. God had provided everything that they had needed.

If they had only looked into the reality that they could see in front of them, they would have been without hope.

However, when they realized that God is working at a completely different level, they began to understand that there is more to this life than simply what we see.

1. How do you think God is working to provide for you today?
2. How can you lean into that provision, while still working out things for yourself?
3. Do you think that God wants to provide as much for you as you want to provide for yourself and your family? How could he do that?

Day 21

SMALL GROUP STUDY

INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion between you and the person you're studying with, or your Connect Group. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Holy Spirit to lead in all things.

OPENING QUESTION(S)

Have you ever had a moment that was hard to believe even with your own eyes? Or someone told you about something so amazing that you said you wouldn't be able to believe unless you saw it for yourself?

HEAD

1. Read 2 Kings 6:24-7:11 together and share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts that simply come to you from the reading of the Word.
2. If food was sparse, and other supplies needed to sustain life were dwindling, what different emotions do you think the people of Samaria were feeling? How do you think they reacted to those emotions?
3. Verse 30 says the king tore his clothes in despair at what the two women shared about their children. Do you think the king blamed himself for their behavior? Do you ever find yourself blaming yourself for others bad behavior?
4. In verse 33, the king said that all their misery was from God. Do you believe that God causes misery?
5. Spend some time considering how hard it would be to think their circumstances would change so quickly from horrific, to plentiful, from scarcity to abundance. Can you identify with the people having a hard time believing Elisha?
6. Isn't it amazing how the lepers were willing to share their good fortune with others? They were outcasts with those others while they were sick, but when given a chance, they happily shared the good news with others. What can we learn from this story about sharing good news with others even when our lives aren't going so great?

HEART

1. Think of the course of your life. If you're willing to share, what was one of the toughest moments that you thought would never get better and you had a hard time seeing your way out of? What ended up happening?

2. It seems that so often in life, we're traveling at such a fast pace that we only have time to react to a moment (often emotionally and/or not in the best way possible), versus responding thoughtfully. What are some ways we can orient our lives to live less reactionary, and more in response to what God is doing in us and in the world around us?
3. We live in a world driven by scarcity, but we say we serve a God of abundance. How do we live into God's promises, trust in His goodness, even when what we see with our eyes tells a different story?

HANDS

When I think of abundance, I think of joy. I think we serve a God who loves us more than enough, who gives us more than enough, and serving a God like that gives me joy. How can we love on another person this week while leaning into abundance? Can we share a blessing we've been given with someone else, be that blessing good news, or a resource, or something?

WORDS TO REMEMBER

“I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

John 10:9-10, ESV

Day 22

2 KINGS 5

1 *The king of Aram had great admiration for Naaman, the commander of his army, because through him the Lord had given Aram great victories. But though Naaman was a mighty warrior, he suffered from leprosy.*

2 *At this time Aramean raiders had invaded the land of Israel, and among their captives was a young girl who had been given to Naaman's wife as a maid. **3** One day the girl said to her mistress, "I wish my master would go to see the prophet in Samaria. He would heal him of his leprosy."*

You probably haven't heard this story in a while. The story of the healing of Naaman was a story that for some reason I heard a great deal about when I was younger. I even remember a song that was written about him going down to the river seven times. It was a great song and I even covered it in a band I played with in college.

This story always captivated my imagination, as I believe it was written from a little slave girls' perspective. As a child, the story was a narrative of redemption and restoration.

We see that Naaman was the commander of the army of Aram, and the king really seemed to like him. However, Naaman suffered from leprosy.

Remember, leprosy might have been the true leprosy disease that we sometimes see in the modern world, or it could have been a significant skin disease. Either way, there was a stigma that went along with this disease. It was akin to being exiled from your life, family, job, and everyone you cared about.

It was a courageous thing for the little girl who had been given to Naaman's wife as a slave to exert that he might want to go and see the prophet in Samaria. She had a great deal of faith that this prophet could heal Naaman. I'm not sure that I would have had that kind of faith and assurance that things would work out.

Have you ever had to make a move that was significantly built on faith? Have you had to move, get a new job, or try something you know you should do, but also know that you can't do without God's help and blessing? Perhaps this is what this little girl felt.

But there is a truth in saying that faith in children is incredibly strong. She probably believed the things she had learned about God, and even though she was in a situation that was less than ideal, being a slave and all. She believed and told her mistress that Naaman should go and see the prophet who could heal him. This was a leap of faith.

1. Have you ever had to take a leap of faith?
2. What was it and how did it turn out?
3. Would you do it again?
4. How was God faithful to you through that time?

Day 23

2 KINGS 5

4 So Naaman told the king what the young girl from Israel had said. 5 “Go and visit the prophet,” the king of Aram told him. “I will send a letter of introduction for you to take to the king of Israel.” So Naaman started out, carrying as gifts 750 pounds of silver, 150 pounds of gold, and ten sets of clothing. 6 The letter to the king of Israel said: “With this letter I present my servant Naaman. I want you to heal him of his leprosy.”

7 When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes in dismay and said, “Am I God, that I can give life and take it away? Why is this man asking me to heal someone with leprosy? I can see that he’s just trying to pick a fight with me.”

8 But when Elisha, the man of God, heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes in dismay, he sent this message to him: “Why are you so upset? Send Naaman to me, and he will learn that there is a true prophet here in Israel.”

This is where the story gets interesting. So, as you read, the king is amenable to having Naaman go to Israel, even though they are already in a bit of a conflict. So Naaman brings a ton of riches to try and butter up this prophet and his king. But when the king of Israel sees the note from the King of Aram, he gets pretty worried, as he thinks that he is supposed to heal Naaman, and if he can't he assumes he will be attacked. In fact, that is something that might have happened had Naaman not been healed.

This is a pretty precarious situation. I don't think that the problem is that the king of Israel didn't have faith, I think he was just doing politics and trying to figure out what the king of Aram was up to. He was probably right to be worried about an invading army pulling something like this.

But when Elisha heard of his consternation, he wasn't having it, and he pushed back on the king, basically saying, "hey man, you know I am a prophet of the one true God, right? Relax!"

Have you ever stuck your neck out, only to be worried that it might get cut off? It is entirely possible that this would not have worked out for Naaman, Elisha, or the king of Israel.

Anytime we are going to trust in God for the solution there is going to be some danger, some questions, and

some concern that things might not work out. That is not always a lack of belief, that is just being human.

When we take on the risk of trusting in God, we sort of have to go all in! We can't sort of hope that it works out. We have to dive head first, trusting that God will make good on his promises. And to be clear, this is pretty scary.

But think of the alternative. A life where you hold your own counsel, where you expect nothing more than what is expected, and you stop believing that God is still at work and worth trusting. I never want to live like that. I want to live in the awe and wonder of believing that God is still working in our lives and in this world.

1. Do you believe God is still alive and moving in the world?
2. How can you put your trust in God just a little more today than yesterday?
3. Do you think the king was reasonable in his concern?

Day 24

2 KINGS 5

9 So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and waited at the door of Elisha's house. **10** But Elisha sent a messenger out to him with this message: "Go and wash yourself seven times in

the Jordan River. Then your skin will be restored, and you will be healed of your leprosy.”

11 *But Naaman became angry and stalked away. “I thought he would certainly come out to meet me!” he said. “I expected him to wave his hand over the leprosy and call on the name of the Lord his God and heal me! **12** Aren’t the rivers of Damascus, the Abana and the Pharpar, better than any of the rivers of Israel? Why shouldn’t I wash in them and be healed?”*
So Naaman turned and went away in a rage.

Well, that didn’t go very well!

What was Elisha thinking? He didn’t even come out and see Naaman, who was a pretty important man at the time. And, he was a pretty important enemy.

This was not at all lost on Naaman at the time. He was angry, and the scriptures say that he left in a rage. Have you ever been in a rage? What did that feel like? Did you ever rage at someone, lose control and simply let your tongue go without reservation or thought? It is not usually a good look.

But something interesting is happening here. Elisha is so unconcerned about what will happen that he is just telling Naaman to go and wash in the river, the muddy river that is close to his house, and in that way he will be following the will of God and doing what he asks.

But Naaman wasn't having any of it. He was a VIP and should be treated as such. He shouldn't be simply dismissed to go and take his ablutions at the river. It makes sense he was incensed about it. He probably should have been treated with some deference.

But here is the thing; everyone is the same in the eyes of God. Everyone deserves grace, healing, compassion and love. Naaman wasn't actually special because of who he was, he was special because he was a child of God, just like all of us.

And I know the old saying from the "Incredibles" movie, "if everyone is special than no one is special. . ." But I don't think it works that way with God. Rather, he is constantly showing his love, grace, and mercy to us through his acts of faithfulness to his people. We are considered his people because he created and loves us. Naaman was no different. We are no different.

1. Have you ever felt special to God?
2. When and where? What happened to make you feel that way?
3. Do you feel that way when things go your way? Or do you feel that when they don't?

Day 25

2 KINGS 5

13 But his officers tried to reason with him and said, “Sir, if the prophet had told you to do something very difficult, wouldn’t you have done it? So you should certainly obey him when he says simply, ‘Go and wash and be cured!’” **14** So Naaman went down to the Jordan River and dipped himself seven times, as the man of God had instructed him. And his skin became as healthy as the skin of a young child, and he was healed!

15 Then Naaman and his entire party went back to find the man of God. They stood before him, and Naaman said, “Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel. So please accept a gift from your servant.”

16 But Elisha replied, “As surely as the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will not accept any gifts.” And though Naaman urged him to take the gift, Elisha refused.

17 Then Naaman said, “All right, but please allow me to load two of my mules with earth from this place, and I will take it back home with me. From now on I will never again offer burnt offerings or sacrifices to any other god except the Lord. **18** However, may the Lord pardon me in this one thing: When my master the king goes into the temple of the god Rimmon to worship there and leans on my arm, may the Lord pardon me when I bow, too.”

19 “Go in peace,” Elisha said. So Naaman started home again.

Sometimes, the best thing that you can have is a good friend in your corner. And that is what Naaman had. His officers helped him listen to reason. And the truth is, sometimes, we need help when it comes to this. Leaders, passionate ones in particular, are not always the most rational people. This is perhaps why they can get so much done. But it is also why they sometimes see the world with a myopathy that is unhelpful in certain situations.

Naaman finally listened to reason, and did what was asked of him by the prophet of God. And low and behold, he was healed. In fact, it sounds like he was more than healed, he had the healthy skin of a young child!

This was not just a healing, it seems it was a conversion. He was so convinced that there was just one god after his healing that he offered all that he had brought with him, a sizable amount, as a thanks offering. Which Elisha was not keen to accept.

What Naaman was realizing is that there is a lot more going on than what he had previously thought. This was a very accomplished man, and accomplished people often have a hard time believing that there is anything more than what they have done in the world. Giving themselves over to another reality is pretty difficult, and there is a great deal of frustration when it comes to faith.

However, Naaman was willing to believe because of what he had just experienced. Sometimes, we have to experience the breaking of the fourth wall in order to believe that there is something more. That is what this healing was.

1. Have you ever experienced this breaking of the fourth wall?
2. What happened, what made you realize there is more going on than what we sometimes think?
3. Can anyone take that experience away from you?

Day 26

2 KINGS 5

20 *But Gehazi, the servant of Elisha, the man of God, said to himself, “My master should not have let this Aramean get away without accepting any of his gifts. As surely as the Lord lives, I will chase after him and get something from him.”* **21** *So Gehazi set off after Naaman.*

When Naaman saw Gehazi running after him, he climbed down from his chariot and went to meet him. “Is everything all right?” Naaman asked.

22 *“Yes,” Gehazi said, “but my master has sent me to tell you that two young prophets from the hill country of Ephraim*

have just arrived. He would like 75 pounds of silver and two sets of clothing to give to them.”

23 “*By all means, take twice as much silver,” Naaman insisted. He gave him two sets of clothing, tied up the money in two bags, and sent two of his servants to carry the gifts for Gehazi. **24** But when they arrived at the citadel, Gehazi took the gifts from the servants and sent the men back. Then he went and hid the gifts inside the house.*

25 *When he went in to his master, Elisha asked him, “Where have you been, Gehazi?”*

“I haven’t been anywhere,” he replied.

26 *But Elisha asked him, “Don’t you realize that I was there in spirit when Naaman stepped down from his chariot to meet you? Is this the time to receive money and clothing, olive groves and vineyards, sheep and cattle, and male and female servants? **27** Because you have done this, you and your descendants will suffer from Naaman’s leprosy forever.” When Gehazi left the room, he was covered with leprosy; his skin was white as snow.*

Yep. This is a difficult text. But man, Gehazi was really trying to pull a fast one on Naaman and on Elisha, and Elisha wasn’t having it at all!

It was a pretty sneaky thing to do, and incredibly greedy on the servants part. God does not need rewards from us for the good he has done in our lives. When we give an offering of thanks, it is not because God needs it, rather, it is the sacrifice we make as thanks for what he has done for us. Never let a church say that God demands your gifts or God needs your gifts. Your gifts are an incredible response of grace for the love and mercy God has shown you. We should always give from the overflow, rather than giving from a demand that comes to us from anyone.

This is the reality of working and living in faith. We believe that God's provision will take care of everything that we need. And I have found, over the last 30 years of ministry, that God has always been gracious, although rarely on my own timeline. We are blessed to have the opportunity to trust God year after year to provide for what his people need through the church. And I am always grateful for your gifts to the church.

I actually think that I have had those Gehazi moments when I thought I needed to chase someone around in order to get the gifts that they were willing to share. I think that Elisha had the right idea from the beginning. He knew that God provided all that he would need, so he turned down the gifts that Naaman brought. In doing so, he was reminding Naaman, that this God who had healed him was not a transactional God. But a God of love and forgiveness.

1. Have you ever chased a gift? How did that make you feel?
2. When you give, do you give out of obligation or joy?
3. How can you give from the overflow of grace you have been given? What would that look like?

Day 27

FINAL THOUGHTS

This month, we have been wanting you to realize that there is more to this world than what we see everyday. God has been working in the background, and sometimes the foreground throughout our whole lives and through the history of the world.

In today's reality it seems that we are stuck with the choices that come to us politically, with the ideologies that we encounter from culture, and we are stuck in the habits that we have formed.

I just want you to know that there is more. There is a whole other world that God is creating and making a reality in our lives when we accept him and give him lordship over our lives. We are not bound to the things of this world and we are blessed to be able to see more than the average person. What an amazing opportunity we have everyday to live into the more, to see through the 4th wall and move into a space that we never could have imagined.

We do this by staying close to the source of all reality, Jesus. We abide in his word, we pray, we worship, we fellowship and we grow closer and closer each day to the reality of eternity. That is what I want you to know, that is what I want you to know you have access to.

May you be blessed as we move into a holiday season, knowing there is so much more for you, your family, and all those you love.

Grace to you, and peace.

And of course, Lovewell!

TJG and the Series Guide Writing Team

Day 28

SMALL GROUP STUDY

INTRODUCTION

The following is a guide to help facilitate discussion between you and the person you're studying with, or your Connect Group. Feel free to add, subtract, or change questions to fit the conversation, and pray for the Holy Spirit to lead in all things.

OPENING QUESTION(S)

When you were a child, what stories or fairytales did you believe to be absolutely true?

HEAD

1. Read 2 Kings 5:1-27 together and share any wisdom, insights, or thoughts that simply come to you from the reading of the Word.
2. Jesus once said that our faith needed to be like that of a child. What is so special about a child's faith? Why do you think that they are so much quicker to see beyond what we can see and trust in something more?
3. Why do you think the King of Israel was so quick to think that he was the one to provide the solution? Do you and I do the same thing? Do we sense God calling us but then think that all the work depends on us? Why are we this way?
4. Why did Naaman get angry with Elisha and his response to Naaman's need?
5. Think about the rest of the story and what Naaman would have missed out on if his officers didn't step in to help. Are you and I at risk of missing out on God's blessings because of our own stubbornness or expectations? How do we seek to avoid missing out?
6. So Naaman agrees to go and do what the prophet commanded, but do you think Naaman was all in with each dip under the water, or do you think he wanted to give up after the third, or fourth, or fifth dip when nothing happened?

HEART

1. Naaman got to see through the fourth wall, peak into the kingdom of God, and his healing didn't just change him

physically, it converted him to be a follower of God. Have you ever had this kind of moment, a time when you saw passed what was going on in this realm, to see what God was up to in the next? What happened?

2. We are told in Scripture that this world is temporary, but that the things of God are eternal, and that we shouldn't let ourselves be caught up in the temporary. How do we go about living with the eternal mindset day to day? Is there a way we can help each other remember that no matter how hard things may be, they are not forever. Only God is forever, and guess what? His way has already won.

HANDS

This week, take time to read the following verse, praying over what they have to teach you about the kingdom of God, the world beyond the one we see. Maybe for you that means journaling, maybe it's another form of meditating on God's Word, but let them soak into you as you consider how God is calling us to live, here and now, as citizens of the kingdom of heaven: Romans 8:18-26, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, I Corinthians 15:42-44, 51-58, 2 Corinthians 4:7-10, 16-17, I Peter 1:6-13 and 5:7-11

WORDS TO REMEMBER

“I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.”

John 16:33, NLT



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