

OneBook.

Invitation

A TEN-WEEK BIBLE STUDY

with Brian D. Russell



Copyright 2015 by Brian Russell

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission, except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles.

Scripture quotations are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, TODAY'S NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION™ TNIV®. Copyright © 2001, 2005 by Biblica
www.biblica.com. All rights reserved worldwide.

Printed in the United States of America

Print ISBN: 978-1-62824-135-8

Mobi ISBN: 978-1-62824-136-5

ePub ISBN: 978-1-62824-137-2

uPDF ISBN: 978-1-62824-138-9

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014955588

Cover Design by Nikabrik Design
Page design by PerfecType, Nashville, Tennessee

SEEDBED PUBLISHING

Franklin, Tennessee

Seedbed.com

SOWING FOR A GREAT AWAKENING

With gratitude to the God who loves me and whose grace
has always proven itself sufficient.

This page intentionally left blank

CONTENTS

Publisher's Foreword: OneBook Bible Resources	xi
Preface	xiii
Acknowledgments	xvii
About This Study	xix

Introduction

The Biblical Story	3
---------------------------	----------

Chapter One

Realigning with God—Jesus Proclaims the Kingdom 11

Day 1: Announcing a Kingdom	12
Day 2: Missional Community	15
Day 3: The Mission and the Kingdom	18
Day 4: A Holy Missional Community	21
Day 5: God's GPS for Living	24
Group Session One	28

Chapter Two

Creation and the Mission of God 31

Day 1: God Creates the Heavens and the Earth	32
Day 2: The Shape of Creation	36
Day 3: Humanity and the Image of God	40

CONTENTS

Day 4: The Gift of the Sabbath	44
Day 5: Jesus and New Creation	48
Group Session Two	52

Chapter Three

Paradise Lost 55

Day 1: The Garden	56
Day 2: Good-Bye to Eden	60
Day 3: Sin—The Next Generations	63
Day 4: Noah and the Great Flood	67
Day 5: Human Corruption and God's Mission	71
Group Session Three	75

Chapter Four

Israel as God's New Humanity for the World 77

Day 1: God Calls Abraham	78
Day 2: God's Faithfulness to His Promises	82
Day 3: Holiness and God's Promises	86
Day 4: Privilege, Power, and the Mission of God	91
Day 5: Abraham and the Gospel	95
Group Session Four	99

Chapter Five

Exodus, Liberation, and the Mission of God 101

Day 1: Exodus as a Foundational Event	102
Day 2: God Calls and Commissions Moses	106
Day 3: The LORD Is King of All Creation	110
Day 4: Passover and God's Victory	114
Day 5: A Purposeful Deliverance	118
Group Session Five	122

CONTENTS

Chapter Six

God's Holy Vision for His Missional People 125

Day 1: Mission and God's Commandments	126
Day 2: Mission and the Promise of God with Us	130
Day 3: God's Grace and the Danger of Disobedience	134
Day 4: Loving God: The Great Commandment	138
Day 5: Loving Neighbor: Practicing Justice for All	142
Group Session Six	146

Chapter Seven

Israel's Life in the Land: The Potential and Pitfalls of Living as God's Missional People 149

Day 1: Israel's Golden Generation	150
Day 2: Tragedy in the Promised Land	154
Day 3: Longing for a Messiah	158
Day 4: The Temple and God with Us	162
Day 5: Sin, Exile, and Restoration	166
Group Session Seven	170

Chapter Eight

The Prophets: Servants of Faithfulness and Proclaimers of God's Future 173

Day 1: Introducing the Prophets	174
Day 2: Isaiah, Human Lostness, and God's Mission	178
Day 3: The Prophetic Call to Practice Justice	182
Day 4: God's Mission for the Nations	186
Day 5: The Prophets and God's Coming New Age of Salvation	190
Group Session Eight	194

CONTENTS

Chapter Nine

Jesus, the Church, and God's Mission 197

Day 1: Jesus Fulfills the Old Testament Story	198
Day 2: The Kingdom and Breaking Down Boundaries	202
Day 3: The Kingdom and Lostness	206
Day 4: Responding to the Kingdom: Belief and Unbelief	210
Day 5: Living "All In" for Jesus' Kingdom	214
Day 6: Cross, Resurrection, and Mission	218
Group Session Nine	222

Chapter Ten

Church and New Creation 225

Day 1: Mission and the Holy Spirit	226
Day 2: The Apostle Paul and God's Mission	230
Day 3: Sharing the Good News with All People	234
Day 4: God's Future and the Present Mission of the Church	238
Day 5: New Creation: The Fullness of Salvation	242
Group Session Ten	247
Notes	249

PUBLISHER’S FOREWORD: ONEBOOK BIBLE RESOURCES

Welcome to OneBook, the Bible study resource brought to you by Seedbed. In all of the history of the world, one book stands in a category of its own. Obviously, we read many books during the course of our lives but one book towers over them all. I’m referring, of course, to the Bible—the Word of God.

Unparalleled in truth and unmatched in wisdom, the Bible tells us the story of the world, from Creation to New Creation. It reveals the reality of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and teaches us what it means to be a human being, created in the image of God, broken by sin yet redeemed by grace and destined for a life of profound purpose and deep meaning.

As a result, the Bible is worthy of our highest attention and deepest devotion. To be sure, it is a complex book, actually made up of sixty-six books, written in three different languages, over the course of 1500 years across three continents by over forty authors. It is in the marvel of such complexity that we discover the miracle of its simplicity: from beginning to end, Genesis to Revelation, the Bible tells a single, unified story.

John Wesley once famously said:

I am a spirit come from God, and returning to God: just hovering over the great gulf; till, a few moments hence, I am no more seen; I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing—the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach me the way. For this very end He came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be a man of one book.¹

We want to invite and inspire you to give yourself to a lifelong study of the Bible. We want you to become a person of OneBook. We are determined to help you read it for all it's worth, and to understand it and what it says about God's purposes for your life. This is not so much a book we seek to master as a book we seek to be mastered by.

We have carefully chosen teachers—men and women—who have given their lives to understanding Scripture and who in the process have stood under its teaching. We have searched for exemplars who love Jesus, who love the church, and who love people.

We are pleased to present to you an introductory study entitled, *Invitation*, with Dr. Brian Russell. This ten-week study includes a daily study guide and a weekly thirty-minute video teaching session.

Invitation can be engaged individually, however, it is recommended as a group study. As the title indicates, this study will work well for people who have never studied the Bible. Likewise, Dr. Russell's handling of the text will offer depth of insight to even the most learned Bible students.

Brian Russell is a seasoned teacher of Scripture. As a professor of biblical studies his expertise is in the Old Testament; however, he approaches Scripture with a decisively New Testament approach to the mission of the church. He has planted churches, pastored, and taught in local churches for decades. Brian is an ordained pastor, a husband, and a father. You will be delighted by the Word of God, drawn closer into relationship with Jesus Christ, and disciplined in the ways of the Holy Spirit through his teaching.

PREFACE

Several years ago in the springtime, my daughters and I took a trip to the beaches south of Cape Canaveral on the east coast of Florida. It was a beautiful day. The sky was blue. The air was cool. The sun's rays warmed our faces. The waves rolled gently onto the shoreline. The water was clear, but too cold for us Floridians. Only a few brave tourists from much colder climates were splashing about in the water. But it was a perfect day for a walk along the shoreline. My daughters and I picked up seashells, chased gulls, and watched a group of skates cruising just below the surface a few yards offshore.

As we walked north toward the jetty that marked the entrance into Port Canaveral, my daughters spied an unusual object about fifty yards ahead of us. They immediately ran to see what it was. As they drew near, they began jumping up and down and waving wildly for me to move faster. I walked a little quicker, still not sure what the object was. Finally, when I was almost on top of it, it came into focus. It was a discarded five-gallon blue paint bucket. The bucket had washed ashore and most of it lay buried beneath wet sand. It had been out to sea for some time as the several dozen attached barnacles attested. The barnacles were still alive and they flexed in and out of their shells.

This was a remarkable sight, but my daughters immediately noted the precarious nature of the situation for the barnacles. The sun would soon dry them up and already a large flock of gulls gathered a few yards out of the reach of my daughters. They squawked in delight as they anticipated a deliciously easy meal. My daughters looked at me and said in unison, "Dad, you have to save them!" Not wanting to disappoint my daughters, I attempted to dislodge the bucket from the sand. Unfortunately, the wet sand provided a firm lock on the bucket and I could not budge it. It would have taken a full-sized shovel to dig it out of the sand. Next, I attempted to pull the barnacles off of the bucket so that I could toss them back to the safety of the sea. I reached down and gripped one with my fingers. As I tried to pull it free from the bucket, I

crushed the poor barnacle in my hand. The barnacles were so securely fastened to the bucket that it was impossible to remove them without simultaneously destroying them.

My rescue attempt was hopeless. I recognized that there was nothing that I could do. They were unable to release from the bucket. This was their natural defense against moving tides and predators. Yet the barnacles' predicament has haunted me. At some point in time, it had made perfect sense for them to attach to the bucket. But now the context had changed and they were in trouble. The story that they had begun to write was rapidly coming to an end *and* they were unable or unwilling to change. This would be their final act. If they could only let go and embrace a new future . . .

I distracted my daughters with the offer of pizza and ice cream and we left the barnacles and bucket behind. As I led my daughters back to our car, I pondered my own life's story. *Who am I? What are the limits to my existence? What is my purpose? What story shapes my life? Am I holding on to an old story line that requires updating or needs a new ending? Is there a better story or a more compelling story that will shape and unleash me to live fully in our world in times of joy or in times of sorrow; in times of plenty and in times of trouble?*

The Bible as the True Story of Our Lives

I have found the Bible to be the most compelling story; I hope to guide you into a journey of discovering its riches. As my daughters and I walked through the sand away from the barnacles, I remembered my initial encounters with the Bible as a teenager. I was looking for meaning and answers. At a New Year's Eve gathering in 1984, my youth pastor, Steve, challenged our youth group to read through the New Testament in the coming year. I didn't immediately take up this charge but a few months into 1985 I was struggling personally and spiritually. I was unsure of who I was or who I was supposed to become. These were the typical struggles of adolescence, but it is often in such moments that we reach a crossroads in life.

I was in my bedroom reflecting and I remembered Steve's challenge to me. I looked over at my bookshelf and saw the Bible that I had received at my church in the fourth grade. I picked it up and turned to the book of Matthew. I prayed a simple prayer: "Lord, if you are real, reveal yourself to me. Amen."

I began the habit of reading the Bible that evening. Its richness and depth continues to astonish me with its good news about God and inspire me to live moment by moment as the person God created me to be.

One of the world's spiritual giants Aurelius Augustine (354–430 AD) became a follower of Jesus through a powerful encounter with the Scriptures. He shared his testimony in his classic work, *Confessions*. He had been learning about the Bible and the message of Jesus. At a pivotal moment in his life, Augustine was outside in his yard deeply longing for truth and praying in desperation to God. He shares this experience with us:

So was I speaking and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when, lo! I heard from a neighboring house a voice, as of boy or girl, I know not, chanting, and oft repeating. ‘Take up and read; Take up and read.’ [*Tolle, lege! Tolle, lege!*] Instantly, my countenance altered, I began to think most intently whether children were wont in any kind of play to sing such words: nor could I remember ever to have heard the like. So checking the torrent of my tears, I arose; interpreting it to be no other than a command from God to open the book, and read the first chapter I should find.²

Augustine goes on to describe how a copy of Paul's Letter to the Romans from the New Testament was nearby. He picked it up and opened it to chapter 13. Paul's words gripped Augustine and transformed his life. The Bible's story became Augustine's story. He grew to serve as one of the church's great theologians and leaders. The Bible desires to become the narrative that shapes our lives as well.

The Bible tells a poignant and timeless story. It offers narratives, proverbs, songs, poems, prophecy, apocalyptic visions, instructional letters, law, directions for worship, and even genealogies. But at the end of the day, the Bible as a whole weaves all of these elements and genres together into a tapestry that guides us to live as the people whom God created us to be.

The Invitation

Over the next ten weeks, we will explore the overarching story of the Bible as a means of inviting you to taste and experience the power of the Scriptures personally or, perhaps even better, in the company of others hungry for a fresh

PREFACE

vision of life as God intended it to be. As you prepare to begin our study, my prayer for you is that the Scriptures will astonish you. Whether you have some previous experience of the Bible or none at all, open yourself up to its message and pray a simple prayer. This is one that I often use: “God, I am here ready to listen and receive all that you have for me. Astonish me with your Word. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Invitation emerges out of the last decade of my reflection and teaching of the Scriptures at Asbury Seminary and in various settings around the country. I am grateful for so many who have shaped my thinking, provided encouragement, and walked with me on the journey of faith.

The writing of *Invitation* has been a pleasure and a labor of love. I am grateful for J. D. Walt and Andrew Miller of Seedbed for the opportunity to take on this project and for their enthusiastic support each step of the way. Thank you, Ryan Staples, for capturing my live teaching for the video component. Equally I wish to thank Holly Jones and her team of editors for helpful suggestions that strengthened the manuscript and cleaned up my many errors.

Thank you to the hundreds of students at Asbury Theological Seminary who listened carefully to early versions of the content of *Invitation* and asked great questions that helped me to expand and further develop the presentation.

I am likewise grateful for the many passionate followers of Jesus at places as diverse as the Youth Ministry Institute, Vineyard Church, Family Bible Camp, International Mentoring Network, University of Georgia Wesley Foundation, and First United Methodist Winter Park, who kept asking for the book version of my presentation on the missional overview of Scripture. Here it finally is!

Thank you to my good friends Eric Currie, Bill Tillmann, Bob Tuttle, Steve Harper, Tarquin Adams, and Richard Kravetz who have been there during critical moments in my life to help me stand when I might have otherwise fallen.

Thank you to my parents, Dale and Midge Russell, who raised me well and have loved me extravagantly throughout my life.

I am deeply grateful for my daughters, Micaela and Katrina. The privilege of fatherhood has made me a better man, and I seek to live out the story of this book as a witness to God for you. May you grow up wise and deep as a testimony to the faithfulness of God.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my step-children, Sarah, Pati, Nana, and Bebo, along with my step-grandchildren, Athena and Nicholas. You have been a blessing to me and offered many kindnesses.

And finally, *gracias para ti mi amor*, Astrid, for creating a life with me of new beginnings, beautiful days, and pure joy. Your unconditional love kept me grounded and created an environment for the words of *Invitation* to flow effortlessly during the hours I spent writing in our home. Life is beautiful with you.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

Welcome to *Invitation: A Ten-Week Bible Study*. This fast-paced survey will acquaint you with the entire biblical story from Genesis to Revelation. The author and instructor Dr. Brian Russell has been teaching this dramatic narrative to seminary students and church members alike for many years. In that time he has come to understand the many various points of confusion and areas of questioning that most people have as they are first introduced to the Bible.

Invitation is ideal for beginners who are new to the faith and attempting to get their bearings as they consider the Bible for the first time. Likewise, many longtime church attenders will find *Invitation* a valuable tool to help them fill in some of the blank places in their understanding; enabling them to better see the totality of the biblical story line. Most especially persons who know and love the Scriptures will find it useful when joining with those less familiar with the Bible as they come alongside them in classes, mentoring, or discipling. All of which are essential for new believers as they grow in their faith.

Each chapter of *Invitation: A Ten-Week Bible Study* is formatted with several consistent components:

- **Daily readings.** There are five daily readings which should be read prior to your weekly group session. Each reading has a Core Truth at the start of the reading and two or three questions which will help prompt you in your subsequent group discussion.
- **Weekly video.** Each week has a thirty-minute video presented by Dr. Russell. This video should be viewed during the weekly group session.
- **Weekly group session outline.** This outline will guide your group time. Please note that the outline recommends that the group time be opened and closed with prayer. You may wish to invite in advance different persons to lead these prayers. Many persons are hesitant

at first to pray publically so those who are reluctant may appreciate having a bit of warning as well as time to hear other more experienced “pray-ers” model this activity for them.

- **Conversation.** The conversation portion of the weekly meeting is the time where the earlier readings and video content are considered in context with the discussion prompts in the session outline.

Overall there may be more discussion material proposed here than can be covered in the normal session time. In our experience, participants always feel better about having too much to share rather than not enough. Those participating in the discussion will bring their own questions and concerns to the time together as well. Don't feel frustrated if all of the discussion material cannot be addressed in each session.

Since the study will require ten full weeks, we suggest that an introductory week be scheduled in which the group gathers, receives their books, has refreshments, and gets to know each other a bit. Participants can then use the following week to begin their daily reading and be ready to view the video and participate in the discussion when they have their first group session.

Group sessions will require a maximum of ninety minutes total. Since Dr. Russell is thoroughly teaching the material via the DVD and in the written text, the group leader is serving more as a host and facilitator of the discussion. Thus the leader doesn't need to be a biblical authority. His or her most important role is to insure that all participants have an opportunity to share. This is especially true in an introductory class such as this where those less familiar with the Bible may feel intimidated by others with more knowledge of Scripture. At its best this class is intended for those seeking to make sense of the complex story line of the Bible for the first time. The facilitator should be especially sensitive to the least experienced student to make certain that the most basic questions are not skipped over or minimized by the rest of the group.

This study should be a marvelous time to receive a solid inaugural grounding in Scripture or an excellent refresher course for persons with a spotty or incongruent understanding of the Bible. We encourage each person to invite the Holy Spirit into their life and into their group time so that hearts and minds will be opened anew to hear God's voice as they study his Holy Word.

Invitation

This page intentionally left blank

INTRODUCTION

The Biblical Story

Life is a story. Each of our lives tells a story and intersects with the stories of others. All of our stories weave together into the complex tapestries that form the human story. God desires to shape and transform all of these tapestries into a beautiful grand tapestry that points the world to God's goodness and love. To serve this purpose, God speaks to us through Scripture. Followers of Jesus call their Scriptures "the Bible," which means "The Book." The Bible is God's gift to us. The Bible narrates a story. It is the story of God's plans and actions for humanity and all creation. It includes God's perspective on the world as God intended at creation, how it is today, and how it will be in the future.

Some people think of the Bible as an answer book. But this can be misleading if we expect the Bible to answer every conceivable question we may want to ask. I think of it more as a book of questions that God wants us to ask of ourselves. If we read and ponder the Bible carefully, it will ask us questions and shape us with its answers. Since the beginnings of the Christ-following movement, God's people have read the Old and New Testaments as sacred Scripture. The biblical story proclaims a counter-story to every other human story. It engages every human culture and works to realign those cultures with the will and purposes of God. It does this by intersecting with our stories at key points but then offering a crossroads to lead us into the new story that God desires to write through us. The question for us is this: *What story primarily shapes our life?* This is a question that we must continually reflect upon as we read the Bible. But first let's look briefly at the broad contours of God's story

in the Bible. The rest of this introduction will provide a snapshot of the Bible's content and provide a broad outline of how this study will proceed.

The Bible contains the story of God's purposes for humanity and the world. It can be summarized in six movements: creation, the fall, Israel, Jesus the Messiah, the church, and the New Creation.

Creation

The biblical story begins with God's creation of a very good world (Gen. 1–2). This is an important beginning. The world that we find ourselves in today is not the world as God originally intended. God's original creation is a place of wonder and goodness. It is not fractured by violence or any form of evil. Instead, God fashions a place of abundance, beauty, and justice. As God creates, he evaluates his handiwork as “very good” (Gen. 1:31). God fills this earth with plants and living creatures. God creates humanity as a community of women and men to serve as his hands, feet, and mouthpieces—his ambassadors to and stewards of creation. Remember this. God created us for his mission. The Bible emphasizes the importance of men and women in God's plans by declaring that God has crafted all humanity in the very image of God. The invisible Creator desires to manifest his character and plans through the lives of the human community. In the beginning, humanity lives in a garden of abundance and experiences harmonious relationships between humanity and God, between humanity and creation, and between women and men. This is Eden and life as God intended it.

The Fall

But the biblical epic takes a pivotal turn in Genesis 3–11. In these chapters, humans choose their own way over God's. The Bible calls this sin. Sin exists because God allowed for its possibility. Authentic relationships require choices. God did not create robots when he made us. God desires humanity to live eternally in communion with him. This is the highest and best purpose for all people, but God did not compel the first humans to obey (nor does he compel us). In the stories of these chapters, humanity chooses to live outside the boundaries of God's purposes. This choice has

profound implications. It fractures the created order and causes a breach in the harmony of creation. Humanity falls short as stewards of creation and in its role of embodying the invisible God to creation. These stories teach that humanity has lost its way. But God does not give up on his creation. Rather, God responds by reaching out to bring healing and reconciliation to creation. The bulk of the biblical story is the narrative of God's mission to redeem and restore a lost humanity and broken creation. God's goal is to make it "very good" again.

Israel: The People of God

Israel's Ancestors

The remainder of the biblical story narrates God's solution to problem of a lost humanity and fractured creation. In the rest of the Old Testament, God calls forth a new humanity (Israel) to serve as his special people and as agents of God's blessings to the nations. The story of Israel begins with Abram (later Abraham) in Genesis 12. God chooses to use a family to initiate his plan of salvation. God's mission will advance through Abram's descendants. He calls Abram and his wife, Sarai (later Sarah), out of the context and turmoil of Genesis 3–11 to be the first family of a new humanity through whom God will bless all nations (Gen. 12:3). He blesses them so that they can be a blessing to the world. This will be a pattern throughout the Bible's story. An encounter with God's graciousness is always a commission to God's mission. It will be through Abram and his descendants that God's mission of salvation will reach its climax.

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus will serve as the fullest expression of God's mission that begins with Abram (see Matt. 1:1). But we are getting ahead of the story. God calls Abram and Sarai to migrate to a new promised land: Canaan. God gives Abram a new name: Abraham. God then gives Abraham and Sarai a promised son, Isaac, in their old age. God's blessings flow to Isaac who has two sons, Esau and Jacob. The mission of God moves forward through Jacob's side of the family. Jacob's twelve sons give the names to the twelve tribes who will soon become the nation of Israel. Late in life Jacob and his entire family migrate to Egypt during a time of famine.

Deliverance from Egypt

Israel lives in Egypt initially as guests, but soon Egypt's pharaohs enslave God's people and thwart God's mission to bless the nations through Israel. This oppression sets the stage for God's fundamental actions of salvation in the Old Testament: God's dramatic deliverance of his people from slavery in Egypt, the establishment of covenant with his people at Sinai, and the return of his people to the Promised Land. God delivers his people from Egypt, the dominant superpower of the time, through a decisive demonstration of his power and ability to save. He does this as a means of revealing his name and glory to all the earth (Exod. 9:16). God shows himself to be incomparable to all other gods (Exod. 15:11) and the true king of all creation (Exod. 15:18).

Covenant at Sinai

At Sinai (Exodus 19–Numbers 10:10)³, God reminds and recalls Israel to the mission given to Abraham: God's people are to serve as a missional community that reflects his character in/to/for the nations and the world (Exod. 19:4–6). At Sinai, God invites his people into a special relationship that the ancient world called a covenant. In this covenant, God's people agree to live out God's ethic to the world. This ethic may be summarized as "Love God and love others." God pledges himself to his people as their unique deity. God's people will serve as his hands, feet, and mouthpieces in the world in the service of God's mission to bless the nations. The bulk of Exodus–Deuteronomy describes the way in which God's people are to live to embody his character in the worship of God and in their relationships with one another before the eyes of the nations. These books also warn God's people about the dangers of idolatry, injustice, and unfaithfulness to their fulfilling God's mission in the world.

Promised Land, Kingship, Temple, and Exile

The remainder of the Old Testament's historical books (Joshua–Nehemiah) narrate the potential and pitfalls of living as God's missional people in the world. God settles Israel in the land originally promised to Abraham. These books recount times of blessing in which God's people are faithful to their covenantal commitments. High points include Joshua's generation in settling the land, the rise of David and his kingdom, Solomon's building of the temple in Jerusalem, the reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah, and the renewal of God's people in the days of

Ezra and Nehemiah. But much of these books tell of the unfaithfulness of God's people through their practices of idolatry and injustice. These practices ultimately cause the destruction of God's temple in Jerusalem and the exile of God's people to Babylon. This part of Israel's story serves as a warning to future generations of God's people. Faithfulness matters in God's mission to bless the nations. Idolatry and injustice remain potent forces that compete with God's desire for faithfulness.

God's Prophets

What is the meaning of the unfaithfulness of God's people and how does God react to it? God's people are unable and often unwilling to live faithfully within his covenant. They turn away from their exclusive relationship with God by pursuing other gods and goddesses. They also practice injustice within the community and by mistreating outsiders. In response, God sends his prophets. The books of Judges through 2 Chronicles contain some stories and words of the prophets, but the prophetic books (Isaiah–Malachi) record the vast majority of the messages of the prophets.

The prophets serve primarily to call God's people to realign with their God-given mission of reflecting God's character in, to, and for the world. The prophets address God's people and demand them to return immediately to God's ways. The prophets call God's people back to the ethos and mission described for God's people in Genesis–Deuteronomy. But the prophets also point forward to a future work of God in which God will usher in a new age of salvation. The prophets foresee a time in which God will act decisively to advance his mission to bless the nations, redeem humanity, and heal all creation. This new age will be known as the kingdom of God. Much of the expectation centers on visions of a messiah or descendant of David who will rise up and once again serve as king of God's people. It is fitting that the Old Testament ends with the writings of the prophets, as they function as a natural bridge to the arrival of Jesus and his gospel of the kingdom.

Jesus the Messiah

The New Testament opens with Jesus announcing the arrival of the kingdom of God. This is the beginning of the new age of salvation envisioned by the prophets. The New Testament continually references and alludes to the Old

Testament to make it clear that God's new work in Jesus is an extension and fulfillment of the Old Testament. Jesus proclaims, teaches, and embodies the kingdom through his words and deeds. Jesus' preaching and actions emphasize the kingdom's openness to the marginalized among God's people and even to foreigners. Jesus dies a sacrificial death by crucifixion for the sins, injustices, and suffering of the world. He dies as Israel's messiah who lays down his life willingly for the sake of others. The cross is God's answer to the brokenness, shame, and lostness of humanity and all creation. God vindicates Jesus' life and death by raising him from the dead on the third day. Jesus' resurrection announces God's victory and ushers in the age of the church in anticipation of New Creation.

The Church

Following his resurrection, Jesus sends his followers into the world to live as God's missional community that reflects God's character in, to, for the nations. The church goes out in the power of the Holy Spirit. God's people serve as witnesses and clues to the reality of the kingdom of God. They proclaim the good news of God's salvation and healing. The New Testament teaches the earliest Christians how to live as God's people with the goal of extending God's salvation to the world through the testimony of their words and lives. Each book offers reflection and instruction for living as God's holy and missional people. The dominant ethic of the early church was a commitment to reaching others. Each church in the fledgling Christ-following movement was a kingdom outpost surrounded on all sides by competing religions and ideologies.

The apostle Paul's writings dominate the second half of the New Testament following the four Gospels and Acts. Paul is a central actor in the book of Acts. He epitomizes the "go to" ethos of the New Testament. Through the faithfulness of Paul and his companions, God propels the gospel across much of the Roman Empire. Paul and his associates start new churches and move on to the next place where the true God is not yet known. The writings of the New Testament take seriously the challenges of living as God's people in a world that does not share or encourage the values of the gospel. Reading these books helps us today to understand and embody the good news of Jesus for the watching world.

The New Creation

The New Testament ends with a vision of a secure future in God's New Creation. All creation returns to relational wholeness and goodness. The New Testament does not lay out a precise road map or time line to this future. The New Testament's visions of the future are not couched in some code that we can decipher nor are they intended to give us a play-by-play description. They exist to encourage believers to remain faithful witnesses in the present in the full confidence that God's desired future is secure and will be wonderful. Most of the New Testament books address the future in some way, but God's good future dominates the overall vision of Revelation, the final book of the Bible. Just as the first two chapters of Genesis begin the Bible with a description of a very good creation, the final two chapters of Revelation bring the biblical story to a conclusion by describing the New Creation as a New Heaven and New Earth. The abundance, goodness, peace, and justice of the original creation returns and God is enthroned and recognized as Lord of Creation while dwelling forever with God's people. Creation is as God intended it and humanity serves forever as God's missional community that reflects God's glory.

This is the story that we will explore in greater detail. This is the story that God desires for us to use as an authoritative guide to living the life of God's dreams. This is the story that will invite us to live as the people whom God has created us to be. We will now tell this story in more detail beginning with Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom.

This page intentionally left blank

CHAPTER ONE

Realigning with God— Jesus Proclaims the Kingdom

We start our journey through Scripture at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus' initial act is to announce the arrival of God's kingdom into the world. Jesus proclaims the good news that God's future age of salvation is now present and available to all. Jesus calls all who hear his message to realign their lives continually with values and ethic of the kingdom. In response to the arrival of God's kingdom, Jesus creates a new community that exists to spread the good news of the kingdom to the world by living as the people whom God created men and women to be.

DAY 1

Announcing a Kingdom

Read Matthew 4:17

From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”—Matthew 4:17

Core Truth: Jesus calls all who hear him to realign themselves with the values and mission of God’s age of salvation.

Jesus does not come to start a new religion; Jesus comes to unleash a kingdom. Jesus begins his public ministry by proclaiming boldly and audaciously the kingdom of God in Matthew 4:17.⁴ Jesus the Son of God begins his ministry with a single sentence! Yet his words are thick with meaning. But it is a message embedded in the language and culture of the first century AD. We will need to unpack it. When we do, we will discover a profound word for the twenty-first century. Jesus’ core message will then serve as a jumping-off point into the rest of the biblical story.

Announcing God’s Kingdom

Jesus’ message contains two elements: 1) an exhortation to repent, and 2) the announcement of the arrival of God’s kingdom as the reason for the repentance.

God’s people in the first century longed for God to act to bring human history to a climax and to pour out God’s saving power into the world. They considered the present world to be the age of evil. In the evil age, God’s people were under the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire. Rome elevated its suffocating claims of power over all others. God’s people suffered and languished. In addition to oppression, they faced similar issues to the ones we face today: economic uncertainty, lack of personal security, fears for their children’s future,

and political and societal upheaval. Yet in all of this, God's people waited for their God to act as he had in their Old Testament Scriptures when he delivered their ancestors from slavery in Egypt and raised up inspired leaders such as King David. Yes, God was still present, but they longed for a new day of salvation when God would make all things right and good again.

God's people called this future age the "kingdom of God" or "kingdom of heaven." Kingdom language implies that God is the true King over all the world. In the kingdom, God's people would enjoy peace, justice, mercy, kindness, forgiveness, and joy. So when Jesus opens his public ministry with kingdom language, he is tapping into the deepest longings of his audience and declaring that God's new era of abundance has arrived. Kingdom talk gained the attention of those who heard him speak. As we read through the Bible, we will talk about the gospel. In essence, the gospel is the good news about the arrival of God's kingdom through Jesus. There is no gospel without the good news of the kingdom.

When we talk about finding our place in the biblical story, we are talking about becoming persons that embody and proclaim the good news of the kingdom today. The Bible invites us to live as ambassadors of God's abundance and voices of hope for a world that desperately needs it. In the Lord's Prayer (see Matt. 6:9–13), Jesus teaches us to pray for the kingdom to manifest itself so that God's will is done equally on earth as it is in heaven. The sign of the kingdom is the will of God manifesting on earth. Wherever and whenever God's will is done, there is the kingdom. This is what Jesus' life will model.

Realigning with God's Kingdom

How then do we respond to Jesus' announcement of the kingdom? Jesus frames our response with a single word, "Repent!" To repent is to make a radical reversal in life and realign with God. To repent or realign is a dynamic term that is more than a one-time event. Of course, there must be an initial turning to God, but the language of Matthew 4:17 indicates that repentance is a crisis moment *and* an ongoing way of life. We could more accurately capture Jesus' message by translating 4:17 "Repent continually" or "Be repenting continually." Jesus' words invite us to make sure that our lives are in alignment with God's character. This is a process that occurs moment by moment. Jesus calls us today to realign continually with the good news of the kingdom.

Jesus' Audience

When Jesus announces the kingdom, he is addressing both deeply committed religious people as well as outsiders to the religion of Judaism such as Romans and Greeks and persons marginalized by its adherents including women, lepers, and the poor. By stressing the necessity of ongoing realignment, Jesus is able to direct a clear word that touches his audience whether they are an insider or an outsider to the ways of God. It's the same message. Jesus calls the person hearing the good news of the kingdom for the first time to align. Likewise, Jesus challenges the men and women who have previously aligned with his movement to realign.

Of course, realigning involves turning away from obvious evils and sins, but it also involves an ongoing assessment and shifting to better serve the mission of God in the world. As we read the Scriptures, we will hear them calling us to realign with God and become the people whom God created us to be. This is the message of the kingdom.

Questions for Reflection

What about Jesus' initial words do you find interesting or inspiring?

What would it look like for you to realign with God today?

DAY 2

Missional Community

Read Matthew 4:18–22

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” At once they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.—Matthew 4:18–22

Core Truth: Following Jesus involves living as part of a community that guides and points others to God.

Jesus began his ministry by announcing God’s kingdom and calling his audience to realign with it. What does it look like to realign with God?

Jesus begins to answer this in Matthew 4:18–22 by creating a new community that will embody the kingdom’s values. This new community begins with two sets of brothers: Simon Peter and Andrew, and James and John, the sons of Zebedee. It is important for us to understand and see that the value and importance of community is embedded in the DNA of God’s kingdom. We were created for community. Following Jesus involves being part of the new humanity that lives for God’s kingdom.

A Community for the World

Jesus’ new community will embody the kingdom in the world, to the world, and for the world. Too often we can equate spirituality and religion with

separation from the surrounding world. Monks move away from society to live in monasteries. Priests and shamans wear distinctive clothing to mark their separation from the rest of humanity. Even ordinary Christians spend time away on retreats from the world. Jesus' new community will be different.

The community of Jesus exists not as an escape from the world but rather as an outpost for the kingdom of God. It is in the community of Jesus' followers where the kingdom of God is made manifest. Jesus' new community lives in anticipation of the coming day of abundance where all creation will bear witness to the justice, peace, joy, and love found in God. Until that day, Jesus' disciples serve as clues to the wider world of the good news of God's future.

Communal Not Individualistic

There is a temptation in the spirituality of our world to focus solely on the individual. Christians sometimes talk about the need to have a personal relationship with Jesus. There is truth in this as each of us must answer Jesus' call to follow him. But notice that from the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he called two sets of brothers rather than merely solitary persons. There was never a moment when there was only Jesus and a single follower. He called brothers in part to signify that following Jesus means joining and participating in a new community. If Jesus were in our modern context, he would likely have called brothers and sisters or maybe even sisters. But the ancient world was male-driven and dominated, so a band of men was the only option to speak meaningfully to the culture of the ancient world. Moreover, Jesus' new community would eventually include twelve male disciples. This number was symbolic and meaningful for the Jews of Jesus' day because ancient Israel had been organized around twelve tribes that each traced their ancestry back to the twelve sons of Jacob/Israel (see chapter 4).

The implications of the necessity of community are vast. The fundamental truth is that we need each other in our journey of becoming all that God desires for us to be. Yes, each of us must exercise personal faith, but true faith manifests itself in relationships with others.

Those of us steeped in American mythology tend to amplify the hero over the collective. We tend to read the Bible as instructions for us as individuals. As we journey through the biblical narrative together, a key learning will be the *communal* nature of what it means to be a Christian as well as a human. God

originally created humans for community. Part of our brokenness involves the fracturing of our relational lives. Jesus calls men and women to a new community. We genuinely need one another. We misread the Bible whenever we forget that Scripture speaks to us as people in community more than it addresses us merely as individuals. Each of us has a part to play. But we are part of a team.

Missional Community as Clues to the Kingdom

God's people on mission serve corporately as clues to the reality of the kingdom. In the New Testament book of Philippians, Paul uses a powerful metaphor to describe how a missional community manifests the kingdom in the world, to the world, and for the world. In Philippians 2:15, he describes how God's people shine forth like stars. This is a rich image. Imagine the stars on the darkest of nights when you are far from the lights of any city. How do they appear? They leap off the fabric of the sky and radiate brightly. For millennia, humans have used the stars for guidance and to tell stories. Sailors have navigated their vessels by way of the stars. Storytellers have found pictures outlined by groupings of stars in order to narrate memorable tales. When Paul talks about shining like stars, he is reminding the Philippian Christians that their words and actions tell a story. Individual followers of Jesus serve as clues to the kingdom of God. The beauty of community is the possibility for enough clues to group together to point to the deepest truths about God's love and desire to bless the world.

Questions for Reflection

How is your current understanding of the church challenged or stretched by the biblical emphasis on community?

Who currently walks with you in your journey with God into the world on mission? Who needs to join you?

DAY 3

The Mission and the Kingdom

Read Matthew 4:19

“Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.”—Matthew 4:19

Core Truth: The call to follow Jesus is a commission to serve as God’s agents of blessing for the world.

When Jesus calls his first followers into his new community, he immediately initiates them into his mission. He calls them from their vocation of fishing to become part of a movement that will multiply itself by extending God’s blessings to others. Notice the words that Jesus uses to call his initial disciples: “‘Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will send you out to fish for people’” (Matt. 4:19). This text is vital for understanding what it means to be part of God’s people. God’s mission is central to the meaning of true spirituality. God’s people are a community that exists for a purpose greater than itself. God’s people are a missional community whose vocation is to share the good news of God’s kingdom with the world.

Mission as Central to Following Jesus

Much of Christianity today has lost its connection to God’s mission. We are more likely to hear about following Jesus as a means of going to heaven than we are to hear about following Jesus into the world to extend God’s blessings to others. If we want to recapture the original power of the Christ-following movement, we must reconnect spirituality and mission. We are blessed to be a blessing to others.

Following Jesus is a commission to mission. There is no waiting period before a disciple becomes a maker of disciples. It is significant to recognize that as soon as the brothers answer Jesus' call, they are now part of Jesus' mission.

From Believing to Following

Words matter. We often hear more about "believing in Jesus" than "following Jesus." The New Testament does emphasize the necessity of faith and belief. Jesus does not use the phrase "follow me" to deny the importance of belief, but rather to make explicit its connection to life in the world. Jesus calls his followers to put their beliefs into immediate practice by living them out and embodying the deepest truths of the kingdom as a witness to the world.

Jesus' words, "follow me," also imply movement. Following Jesus is not an abstract intellectual pursuit. It is not detached from the world. It involves a moment-by-moment relationship with Jesus. Jesus models movement in the way he lived. As we read the Gospels, we will discover that Jesus moves from place to place and manifests the power and good news of the kingdom wherever he goes. Jesus teaches his disciples about God's mission by engaging them in his mission. Mission is about multiplying God's blessings to others. Jesus' mission includes shaping and forming new followers into people who can bless others while extending the kingdom to persons yet to experience it. Missiologist and thinker Alex McManus has often said, "The gospel comes to us on its way to someone else." This is the way of Jesus. As we hear Jesus' call to realign with the kingdom, we must hear this as an exhortation to God's mission in the world.

Relevant Language

Notice the language Jesus uses to call his first disciples. His choice of words is illuminating. He engages his initial followers with words that are easily understood in their context. He speaks in words and metaphors from the lives of his listeners. Jesus' first followers are all fishermen. This is their livelihood and what they know best. He uses words that connect directly with their lives. Jesus calls fishermen to become a new type of fisherman: ones who fish for people. This is Jesus' way of translating the message of mission into the common

language of his first followers. This is a crucial principle for us today as well. If we want to reach others with the good news of the kingdom, we need to learn enough about those whom we are seeking to serve so that we can use their language rather than insisting that they adopt our language. The implication of Jesus calling fishermen to become fishers of people is that if Jesus were calling, say, accountants or construction workers, he would use different words.

As we think about what it means to follow Jesus today, it is vital for us to recognize the centrality of mission. Jesus calls us so that we can be an extension of his mission. He invites us into relationship so that he can send us out to invite others. He blesses us so that we can bless others. When we follow Jesus, we function as Jesus' hands, feet, and mouthpieces in the world. We are clues that point to him.

Questions for Reflection

How does Jesus' call to mission cause you to realign your understanding of the meaning of a spiritual life?

Who are the people in your life that God desires for you to serve and bless as God has blessed you?

DAY 4

A Holy Missional Community

Read Matthew 4:18–22

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” At once they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.—Matthew 4:18–22

Core Truth: Jesus’ followers reflect the character of God and the values of God’s kingdom in their daily lives as they embody his mission.

Jesus calls disciples to follow him into the world and serve as a missional community. Central to this mission is the ethic or way of life that God’s people live out. God’s people are to reflect and embody the values of the kingdom in their lives together as Jesus’ disciples and in their interactions with the wider world. God desires to do a transforming work in our lives so that we can be shaped into the people whom God created us to be.

Mission and Holiness

We’ve already learned that the call to follow Jesus is a commission to mission. Following Jesus also involves serving as models of Jesus’ way of life to the world. God desires that our lives manifest the values we hold and the mission we proclaim. Following Jesus involves learning both God’s mission and the

habits of life that show others the goodness and love of God. The Scriptures call this holiness. Holiness is a characteristic of God and one that he desires to be present in and modeled by his people. At its heart, holiness is love. If love is absent, God's mission is not advanced.

When Jesus says, "Follow me," he is calling his disciples to observe and imitate him. He desires to instruct and form in them habits of holy love. When we read the Gospels, the stories about Jesus serve to teach us how to live. They are not merely reports about the past. Following Jesus is about walking moment by moment with mindfulness. We follow Jesus so that we begin to live and act in ways that align with his life. The holiness that Jesus teaches is a missional holiness. Jesus' disciples don't become holy so that they can go on mission; they learn the necessity and way of holiness by engaging in mission.

Missional Holiness as Light in the World

The holiness that Jesus teaches is not a flight from or separation from the world. Jesus' mission is to engage the world with the good news of the kingdom. Jesus understands that the kingdom is more dangerous to the world than the world is dangerous to the kingdom. Jesus engages the world in the confidence that his light will illuminate the darkness and spark new life and light in others. He is not worried about having his light snuffed out by the world.

Jesus' disciples model and reflect God's character as the means of bearing the light and blessings of God into even the darkest places on earth. When we read the Gospels, we encounter Jesus touching diseased persons without fear of contamination and driving out demons without fear of the power of evil. Jesus calls all of his disciples to ongoing and continual transformation as the essential means of carrying out his mission. The goal of transformation is the fulfillment and embodiment of the character of God in/to/for the world. Thus, holiness is a necessity to life on mission in the world.

When my youngest daughter, Katrina, entered kindergarten, some of my more religious friends disapproved of the decision to send her to public school. I was not worried about this. She was raised with the values of Jesus. Every day before school, I always prayed this prayer with her: "Live by faith, be known by love, and serve as a voice of hope for others. Amen." About two months into the school year, her teacher invited me to a conference to talk about Katrina's progress. The teacher's first words to me were this: "Mr. Russell, I want you to

know that Katrina is a voice of hope in my classroom.” My jaw dropped, but I should not have been surprised. This is how it’s supposed to be. The message of the kingdom is more powerful than any danger lurking in the world.

Mission, Holiness, and Community

Jesus’ holiness is both individual and corporate. In Matthew 4:18–22, Jesus calls brothers into a community, but ultimately each one has to answer Jesus’ call as an individual. In the Western world, we tend to focus on our individual walk with God apart from any communal commitment. We compartmentalize our religious or spiritual commitments apart from our work lives or interactions with others. But note that Jesus emphasizes the communal aspect. We are not called to solitary lives of holiness. Jesus’ call to “follow” him as part of a missional community is a crucial step in becoming a disciple.

Holiness manifests itself most clearly and missionally in our relationships with others. It matters how we interact with other followers of Christ. It matters how we engage persons outside the circle of Christ-followers.

Questions for Reflection

What kind of person do you hear Jesus calling you to become?

How would you need to change if you were to follow the way of Jesus?

How would your community need to change in order to prioritize mission and holy living?

DAY 5

God's GPS for Living

Read Psalm 119:105

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.
—Psalm 119:105

Core Truth: Mission, community, and holiness are three core themes that serve to guide us through the Bible as God's GPS: Global Mission, Persons in Community, and Spirit-Transformed (holiness).

Jesus calls those of us living today to respond to the good news of the kingdom by realigning continually to his words and life as we find them in Scripture. In fact, Jesus' call to realign invites us to go back to the beginning of the Bible and read it from Genesis to Revelation as a journey of realignment.

Reading Scripture as a Journey

What does the journey of realignment entail? What sort of life do the Scriptures imagine for us? How do we read them in a way that allows the scriptural story to transform rather than to merely inform? Life is a journey and the Bible is our authoritative guide to living as the people whom God created us to be. So the questions become: How do we get to where God wants us to be? What does the life of God's dreams for us look like?

In the modern world, when we take a journey, we have tools to help get us there. We can use maps. Many of us also use GPS navigational technology. GPS technology depends on the use of a series of satellites orbiting earth. As long as the traveler is able to triangulate his position with three available satellites, GPS systems are able to guide him to his final destination. They lead us by locating our position and continually realigning our movement so that we

make it safely to the desired location. Airlines and ocean freighters use the technology as well. Remarkably, while en route, planes and ships using GPS are at any given moment slightly off course. But the GPS continually recalculates the position and the vessels are able to realign so that they end up safely where they are intending to go. Even in our cars, if we miss a turn or move in an unexpected way, our GPS recalculates our position and makes adjustments to our route in order to find the next best way to arrive at where we are going.

The Bible is the map to the life of God's dreams for us. But how do we figure out how to use it? Wouldn't it be great if there were a GPS for reading the Bible? We've already described the Bible as God's story. It is a story that seeks to shape us to live as God's people. Jesus' announcement of the kingdom is nothing more and nothing less than a reaffirmation of this intention. When we talk about a continual realigning of our lives with the values and ethics of the kingdom, we are talking about tapping into the navigational system that God has given us in the Bible.

GPS for the Bible

We need a GPS system because God's story is about advancing the gospel. Jesus creates a movement. The gospel is always moving to bless those who do not yet know God. As Jesus' followers, Jesus calls us to follow him into the world (see Matt. 16:24; 28:18–20). Since we are moving, just like an airliner or ship with GPS, we will need to make ongoing realignments in order to stay on track to where Jesus is leading us.

Jesus' initial proclamation of the gospel and calling of his first followers serves as a model and paradigm of this navigational system. In announcing God's kingdom and calling disciples, Jesus creates a missional community that reflects and embodies the values and ethics of God's kingdom in the world, to the world, and for the world. Notice the three key themes present in Jesus' initial action: mission, community, and holiness. This triad of themes serves as the three points of God's GPS for reading Scripture. We can remember them through the use of an acronym:

G = God's mission (mission)

P = Persons in community (community)

S = Spirit-transformed (holiness)

As we move through the Scriptures, we will use these three themes to help us illuminate the message of the Bible and allow it to shape us as Jesus' disciples in, to, and for our world. Our spirituality is for the world; our community is for the world; and our mission is for the world. We will use GPS as a guiding light to see if it helps us to grow in God's grace and truth. We are not going to insist that every single text in the Bible speak to all three themes of GPS, but we will discover that most texts will engage at least one of these themes.

We also want to remember that we are reading the Bible together with others who may or may not consider themselves Jesus' followers. Just as Jesus proclaimed the kingdom without discriminating between insiders and outsiders to the kingdom, we must follow his example and listen to the Bible as a whole as an address to humanity. Those who are already seeking to listen to and walk with God need to hear the Scriptures as a continual call to realign with its message. Those who are on the boundaries of faith and exploring Jesus' message need to hear the Bible as an open invitation to align with Jesus for the first time. Jesus' message of realignment is open to all. We can use GPS as followers of Jesus desiring to grow in faith or as seekers of Jesus pondering making a commitment. In both cases, the Bible will call us to a deeper place as we align with Jesus and his kingdom.

Here are some questions that we will use to help us in our journey through the Scriptures:

Global Mission

Followers: How does this text shape our understanding of God's mission in the world? How do we need to change to embody this mission for the world around us?

Seekers: What sort of world is this text inviting me to spend my life working to create? What would my life look like if I joined this mission?

Persons in Community

Followers: How does this text envision the corporate life of God's people? How do God's people need to change in order to embody the portrait of community assumed by this text?

Seekers: What type of community is this text inviting me to explore? How is this text inviting me to participate in a community that exists for something greater than my own wants and desires?

Spirit-Transformed

Followers: What sort of person do I need to become in order to live out this text? How do God's people need to change in order to more profoundly reflect the character of God?

Seekers: What type of lifestyle/character is this text inviting me to embody? How would my life be enriched by aligning my character with the vision of this text?

Questions for Reflection

Describe your current understanding of the themes of mission, community, and holiness (GPS).

In what ways do you need to grow in mission, community, and holiness to become the person God created you to be?

GROUP SESSION ONE

Realigning with God— Jesus Proclaims the Kingdom

CORE TRUTHS

1. Jesus calls all who hear him to realign themselves with the values and mission of God's age of salvation.
2. Following Jesus involves living as part of a community that guides and points others to God.
3. The call to follow Jesus is a commission to serve as God's agents of blessing for the world.
4. Jesus' followers reflect the character of God and the values of God's kingdom in their daily lives as they embody his mission.
5. Mission, community, and holiness are three core themes that serve to guide us through the Bible as God's GPS: Global Mission, Persons in Community, and Spirit-Transformed (holiness).

OPEN SESSION WITH PRAYER

Briefly introduce yourself and give each member of the group an opportunity to introduce themselves using these two questions: About what would the person who knows you best say that you are most passionate? Why are you interested in studying the Bible?

DEBRIEF THE READING FOR THE WEEK (15 MINUTES)

- What were your key takeaways from this week's reading?
- What aspects of the reading did you find confusing?
- What is the kingdom of God?

- What does it mean to “repent” or “realign”?
- What are the themes for the Bible’s GPS?

WATCH VIDEO (30 MINUTES)

CONVERSATION (15 MINUTES)

- What aspects of the message resonated with you most deeply?
- What questions did Brian’s talk raise for you?
- How does Jesus’ message of the kingdom challenge the realities of our present world?
- What does it mean for you to realign or repent today?
- Who is your mission?
- Who is the community with whom you will do life?
- What kind of person does Jesus’ kingdom desire you to become?
- Who in your life needs to join us in our journey through the Scriptures?

CLOSING PRAYER

This page intentionally left blank

CHAPTER TWO

Creation and the Mission of God

The beginning of the Bible narrates God's creation of a very good world. The Bible begins with a portrait of the world and life as God originally intended it. The story of creation introduces us to a God who creates a beautiful and wondrous world and crafts men and women to serve as his hands, feet, and mouthpieces of his goodness. God also orders his world to move from work to rest.

DAY 1

God Creates the Heavens and the Earth

Read Genesis 1:1–2

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.—Genesis 1:1–2

Core Truth: Creation stories teach us about God, the world, and ourselves.

To understand who God is, who we are, and what the world is supposed to become, we must begin at the beginning. The book of Genesis opens with two narratives that describe creation as God intended it. The goal of the creation stories in Genesis is to introduce us to the only God who is truly worthy of our worship, service, and our lives and to show us the profound people whom God created us to be.

The Challenge of Reading the Creation Stories in the Twenty-First Century

The opening chapters of Genesis present challenges for people living in the modern world. We grow accustomed to modern explanations of origins such as the Big Bang theory. Physicists tell us that the universe is almost fourteen billion years old. Nuclear scientists work with subatomic particles. In comparison, the Bible's story of beginnings is radically different. Genesis does not use modern scientific language. It uses language and imagery

that made sense to ancient people. If we expect to find modern science in Genesis, we will be disappointed. But if we read and listen to Genesis as a means of realigning with God, Genesis will astonish us with its profound and deep truth.

Many of us wonder how the biblical accounts of creation match up with modern science. Often we reduce studies of Genesis 1–2 to a debate over creation in a single week against modern explanations such as the Big Bang or theories of evolutionary biology. Such questions are interesting, but the conversation that Genesis 1–2 desires to have with us is not primarily a scientific one. It is a theological and anthropological one. Genesis wants to ask us questions as much as it wants to answer our questions. Critical to understanding the Bible's creation narratives is the need to recognize that Israel's creation accounts do not exist in isolation. Israel's neighbors all had their own creation stories. These stories tried to make sense of the world and explain the relationship between humanity and the divine. Israel's neighbors worshiped many gods and goddesses. Israel's neighbors also had a vastly different understanding of the role and value of the average person. Creation stories served to shape the foundational beliefs of ancient people about the nature of God, themselves, and the world.

Introducing God in a World of Many “Gods”

Genesis opens with a short sentence: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (1:1). The opening line declares that all creation is the handiwork of God. It introduces us to the key actor in the biblical story: God.

Who is God? This may not seem like an important question. We all know who God is, right? Yet this question cuts to the heart of what Genesis wants us to explore. In the ancient world, polytheism (the belief and worship of many gods and goddesses) was the norm. Every nation and tribe understood the divine within the framework of polytheism. To say the word “god” would only generate the question, “Which one?” Even in our twenty-first century context, “Who is God?” remains a vital question. God is a word that is used almost universally, but everyone has his or her own understanding of its meaning. As we read the Bible together, it is critical to allow the Scriptures to teach us about God rather than importing our own assumptions.

What's in a Name? LORD Versus God

Notice that Genesis 1:1 uses the word “God.” It is one of the two most common ways that the Old Testament talks about God. The other is “LORD.” Of the two, LORD is God’s personal name. LORD is the way that the ancient Israelites verbalized God’s personal name, “Yahweh.” Since the Bible is Yahweh’s story, we might have expected Genesis 1:1 to begin, “In the beginning the LORD created the heavens and earth” rather than with the more generic name “God.” But it doesn’t. What difference does this make?

By beginning with the more generic term *God*, Genesis signals that all that the Bible expects of its readers is an openness to the reality of god or gods. The word translated “God” in 1:1 is the Hebrew word *Elohim*. Elohim is a plural noun and in a different context it could be translated “gods.” In the Old Testament, when God’s people write the word “Elohim,” they of course mean God. Their use of a plural is their way of emphasizing the authority, distinctiveness, and power of their God the LORD over the gods of their neighbors. In Genesis 1:1–2:3, we will find that Elohim occurs thirty times. Elohim is the sole Creator. This claim is unmistakable. The exclusive and persistent use of Elohim makes it clear that Genesis desires for its readers to ask these questions: Who is Elohim? What is the name of this God?

If Genesis 1:1 had simply declared Yahweh (LORD) to be the Creator, it would have been a conversation stopper. Of course, the author of Genesis desires to declare and lift up the LORD as the Creator God, but he also wants to engage the world with this truth in a compelling way. This is the genius of using the word “God.” It opens Israel’s Scriptures in a more inclusive and universal way. It begins Genesis with a global vision. It leaves the reader/hearer wanting to know more. It allows Genesis to describe a different kind of God than the world has ever known. It leaves the reader open to hear the good news. It also models how to introduce others to the God who loves them. This, of course, means that this God desires to know you personally as well.

Questions for Reflection

What are different names for God in our world today?

What do you mean by the word “God”?

What do you think or feel about the reality that the Creator God desires to know you?

DAY 2

The Shape of Creation

Read Genesis 1:3–2:3

And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

And God said, “Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years, and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth.” And it was so. God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. God set them in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth, to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.—Genesis 1:3–5, 14–19; 2:1–3

Core Truth: God carefully crafted a very good world with humanity as its highest expression and Sabbath rest as its climax.

Genesis 1:1 summarizes God’s creative work: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” It declares that God made all that is. The Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation tell a unified story of the God who

is both the Creator and the Savior. The Bible begins with creation to link the story of God's people with all creation. Beginning with Genesis 12, the Bible will focus on the beginnings of God's people: Israel. But first it connects Israel's story to the broader human story. God's people cannot be properly understood apart from their connection to the rest of humanity as well as to creation itself. If we want to understand our purpose in the world, we must understand God's original purposes in creation.

The Pattern of Creation

Genesis 1:2–2:3 describes how God guided creation from a state of formlessness to goodness and Sabbath rest. Genesis uses a seven-day pattern to organize its description of creation.

Creation is a reflection of God's purposes. From the very beginning, God demonstrates a mission. God desires to move creation from disorder and formlessness in 1:2 to a place of beauty and order by 1:31. At the conclusion of each day, God evaluates his handiwork as "good." After God creates humanity and thereby finishes the work of creation, God declares it not merely "good," but "very good." This is emphatic language. The world that God created was *very good*. God always desires the best for creation and for us. This has been true from the moment that God spoke creation into existence.

God acts purposefully and alone to move creation to completion. Verse 2 marks the initial beginning of creation. Genesis 1:2 describes the chaotic state of the creation at its origin. In the creation stories of Israel's neighbors, creation emerged out of chaotic battles between the gods. In one story, the heavens and the earth were two halves of a goddess hacked into two pieces during one such battle. In Genesis, there is no hint of this. In fact, the biblical account is quiet and orderly. God acts unilaterally. The God of Genesis 1 does not need the permission of other deities, nor do other deities attempt to thwart his intentions. Creation is *good*, just as God willed it to be.

God creates by speaking the world into existence. The God of the Bible simply creates what he wills by commanding the various parts of creation into existence. God works to craft a very good universe. The biblical writer describes God's creative process in a way that enhances this portrayal of God in contrast to the haphazard, noisy, and chaotic creation accounts of Israel's neighbors.

God Separates and Fills

Embedded in the six days of creation is a parallel structure between days 1–3 and days 4–6. In days 1–3, God separates and prepares the creation for life. In days 4–6, God fills this empty framework with objects, plants, animals, and people.

On day 1, God separates light from darkness; on day 3, God fills these spaces with the sun (the light during the day) and the moon and stars (lights during the night). The creation of the sun, moon, and stars is also a not-so-subtle declaration that these elements are not divine. Other nations worshiped these as deities. Genesis desires for us to worship only the invisible Creator God. Everything visible is simply part of the wondrous and good world that God made.

On day 2, God separates the waters above from the waters below; on day 5, God fills the waters above with birds and the waters below with fish. In the understanding of the ancients, the earth is surrounded by water. God creates a space for the land by separating the waters by means of a firmament or dome that prevents the waters above from falling. In this view of reality, the firmament or dome is the sky upon which the sun, moon, and stars (from day 4) move and in which the birds fly. The waters below are the oceans, rivers, streams, and springs in which the fish thrive and swim.

On day 3, God separates the waters below so that dry and inhabitable land can appear. God also commands the earth to send forth vegetation. By the end of day 3, God's good creation includes dry land covered with seed- and fruit-bearing trees. On the first part of day 6, God creates all the animals by commanding the earth to bring them forth. This is of course described as good, but God is not finished. He has one final act. On the second half of day 6, God pauses for a brief moment and then he forms humanity in his image. The invisible God will be made visible in only one part of creation: men and women. At this moment, creation is finished and the Creator looks down at the work of his hands. Creation is not merely good; it is now *very good*. God's creative activity ends with the creation of humanity to multiply, fill the earth, and serve as God's stewards over all creation.

God Rests: Sabbath

The seventh day of creation contains a profound statement of God's inactivity. God's work is not the climax of creation; the true high point is God's Sabbath

rest. The opening segment of Genesis (1:1–2:3) announces that the God who creates is also the God who rests. Moreover, God embeds Sabbath rest into the very framework of the universe that he crafted and formed. This is very good news indeed. In the following sections of this chapter, we will explore humanity as the high point of God’s work and the climactic announcement of God’s Sabbath rest.

Questions for Reflection

What do you learn about God and the nature of our world from Genesis 1:1–2:3?

How would you describe the world that God made?

Is our world still “very good” today? Why or why not?

DAY 3

Humanity and the Image of God

Read Genesis 1:26–31; 2:4–25

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”—Genesis 1:26–28

Core Truth: God creates all men and women in his image to serve as a missional community that reflects his character.

Image and Mission

In 1:26–31, God creates humanity to make visible the invisible Creator. It is humanity alone that bears the image of God. Theologians use the Latin phrase *imago dei*. The word for image in Hebrew is *tselem*. It indicates a visible image or representation of something. The Old Testament often uses *tselem* to mean “idol.” Idols served as visible representations of gods or goddesses. In the ancient world, great kings also would erect images of themselves across their realms. This allowed the king to project honor, glory, and power to those subjects who never saw him in person. Genesis 1:1–2:3 presents God as the Great King of creation. God is invisible and exists apart from his creation. On the sixth day, God crafts women and men to make the truth of his existence and character visible and tangible to all. It is humanity alone that serves

God by reflecting God's character. This is why the Bible is so adamant against worshipping anything but God or fashioning an idol to represent God. God created humans as his idols, or images, to make himself known to the rest of creation. At the heart of God forming us in his image is God's mission to reveal himself to all creation.

In Genesis 1:1–2:3, God creates the world as his cosmic temple. God is the Great King. Humanity serves as God's priests and visible representatives. In the Old Testament, priests connected others to God through sacred rituals and ordered the community through teaching God's ways. In Genesis 1:26–31, God crafts women and men for the mission of embodying his ways and modeling them for the rest of creation by serving the good of creation. This is the meaning of being made in the image of God. This is a mission worthy of our talents, passions, and lives.

Image in All People

You can find other ancient writings that talk about humans in the image of God, but the Bible does it in the most radical way. When Israel's neighbors spoke of humanity in God's image, they typically affirmed that only the king bore God's image. In other words, Israel's neighbors used the image of God to grant privileges to the powerful (usually only the king) and to degrade the value of everyone else. The rest of humanity was reckoned to be slaves of the gods. Inequality is not part of Israel's vision of creation. The God of Genesis 1:1–2:3 has a different valuation of people. Humans are not mere afterthoughts or slaves of the gods. Instead, all humanity reflects the image of the Creator and thus has value and importance. There are no insignificant people or meaningless lives. Every human being has a role to play in God's mission. Profoundly, the Bible affirms against the grain of a male-dominated culture that women equally reflect God's image.

Image as Community

Central to bearing God's image is humanity's creation as a *community*. In Genesis 1:1–2:3, only humanity is explicitly created male and female. This is important. God created us for community. God creates men and women in his image to serve as a missional community. Genesis 1:26–31 describes

humanity's mission to serve as stewards of creation. They fulfill this role by filling the earth with other men and women. God desires to have visible representations of his character and purposes spread across the world reflecting God to all creation.

Humanity at the Center of God's Plans

Genesis 2:4–25 builds on the story of 1:26–31. It is in 2:4 that we first learn the name of God. Our translations typically read “LORD God.” This is a traditional way of translating *Yahweh Elohim*. Always remember that when you read “LORD” in the Old Testament that it is God's personal name and not a formal title. If Genesis 1:1–2:3 raised the question of the true identity of God, 2:4 proclaims that God's name is the LORD (Yahweh).

Genesis 2:4–25 reaffirms humanity's mission of caring for creation. Adam demonstrates humanity's stewardship and dominion over creation by naming the animals (2:19–20). Dominion does not give humans the right to abuse or neglect creation. Humanity is to serve rather than exploit. It is a dominion through service rather than through domination. The language of “work it and take care of it” in Genesis 2:15 indicates a level of creativity and enhancement of God's creation.

In Genesis 2, the creation of the first woman takes center stage. God affirms the importance of community, saying, “It is not good for the man to be alone” (2:18). God creates a partner (helper) for man. Helper is not a subservient role for women. In fact, in the majority of occurrences of “helper” (Hebrew *ezer*) in the Old Testament, God is the helper (see Ps. 121). If God can be called Israel's helper, then this role is certainly not a demeaning or lesser role in any way. The union of man and his partner brings Genesis 2 to a conclusion (2:23–25). Their relationship is beautiful and models authentic community rooted in equality, harmony, peace, and mutuality.

A Holy Missional Community

God creates humanity to serve as a missional community that reflects his character to the rest of creation. As we seek to realign with God, we must take seriously mission, community, and character. In fact, Jesus came to announce the kingdom as the means to call women and men to their true humanity.

This is good news, but there is still more. We will move to the full climax of creation: God's gift of Sabbath.

Questions for Reflection

What does it mean to be human according to Genesis 1–2?

How does our culture's view of humanity contrast with the biblical view?

How does this text call you to live out mission as part of a community that reflects God's character?

DAY 4

The Gift of the Sabbath

Read Genesis 2:1–3; Exodus 20:8–11

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.—Exodus 20:8–11

Core Truth: The climax of creation is God’s resting on the Sabbath day. God extends this blessing to all creation.

After God forms humanity and pronounces creation “very good,” God rests. How many of us *rest*? Modern life is filled with complex and multiple demands. Yet the Bible begins by asserting that Sabbath rest is the climax of the creation. Life is not designed to be endless toil. Even the most life-affirming activities must cease for Sabbath. God’s work of creation moved the universe from emptiness (1:2) to very goodness (1:31) to Sabbath rest (2:1–3). Sabbath is God’s final gift to the creation.

Sabbath and God

God works. God rests. This establishes a key rhythm for understanding life. Ponder this: our Creator rests. This is a radically different world from the one we find today. Most of us race daily from one activity to another. We are tired. Some of us work long hours for little pay. Others are exhausted due to the weight of unemployment and the financial challenges that come with it.

Yet Genesis 2:1–3 offers us a portrait of abundance. God rests. Moreover, God blesses this day of rest and makes it holy (2:3). This means that God has set apart a sacred space and time for rest. Profoundly, God shares this rest with us by extending Sabbath to all creation. Sabbath serves as a principle for establishing justice and good in the world. Unlike other ancient creation stories, such as the Babylonian *Atrahasis* where humans exist merely to serve as slaves for the gods, the LORD demonstrates his ultimate goodness with the gift of Sabbath. Jesus will later remind us of this reality in the New Testament: “The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

Sabbath and Life

Sabbath is a core principle for ordering our spiritual, personal, and social lives. It connects us with the world around us. Later in the Old Testament, God’s Sabbath will be the key commandment for linking love for God with love for neighbor. In the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1–17 and Deut. 5:6–21), the command to honor and keep Sabbath is the longest and most detailed of the commands. It serves as the bridge between the commandments focusing on our relationship with God (i.e., other gods, idols, dishonoring of God’s name) and the commandments rooted in our relating with others (i.e., honoring parents, stealing, murder, adultery, false witness, coveting). Sabbath has all creation in view. Humanity stops its work and rests. This rest includes all of one’s family, all of one’s employees or servants, and even all of one’s animals. Sabbath is a community practice. There is no solitary Sabbath in Scripture. God rests and so does his creation.

Sabbath in the Old Testament

Throughout the Old Testament, the Sabbath pattern of six days of work and a seventh day of rest repeats and foreshadows God’s abundant future. In Exodus and Leviticus, the Sabbath principle establishes protections for humanity and creation. Slavery is regulated so that slaves are released after six years of service (Exod. 21:1–11). Agricultural lands receive a sabbath rest every seventh year (Exod. 23:10–11). These regulations point to God’s broader vision for justice in his world. Obviously, slaves were among the most marginalized populations in the ancient world. Most slaves in ancient Israel became slaves as a means

of paying off debts in an economy lacking modern bankruptcy protection. It is profound that the Bible confronted this tragic reality directly by offering real protections for those forced into slavery. Likewise, the resting of fields involved more than crop rotation. The sabbath rest for the fields served to provide food for the poor and for the animal world.

The book of Leviticus includes a bold vision for a once-in-a-generation economic reboot (see Lev. 25). After seven cycles of seven years, God expected his people to celebrate the year of Jubilee. In Jubilee, creditors forgave all debts, sold property was returned to its original owners, and slaveholders released slaves. Jubilee demonstrated God's justice and goodness. Thus, Sabbath points to the good life. We may find ourselves in difficult circumstances and trying times, but God's rest awaits us.

Living the Sabbath Today

Sabbath is a radical concept. We live in a 24/7 world. Sabbath challenges the busy-ness of life. What if the most profound act you could do is to be fully present and do nothing? Rest is not a means to some end; rest is the end. God moves creation from emptiness to very goodness and then rests. God doesn't rest so that he can work. God works so that he can rest. Rest is the final word. This signals something profound about life. The meaning of life cannot simply be reduced to what we do. Work is valuable. Mission is important. Community is critical. Holiness is necessary. Yet the climax of creation is a time carved out for rest in communion with God. Think about the witness that such a bold and daring time of inaction would offer to a world trapped in endless cycles of busy-ness and the chaos of over-commitment. Sabbath is a declaration of faith that our present and future does not depend on our actions but on God's.

As we read the Bible together, we will continue to talk about our role in God's mission. But the challenge of Sabbath is that God rested and so must we. The Jesus who calls us to serve as a missional community also invites us to Sabbath: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

Questions for Reflection

What does Sabbath teach us about God's mission?

How would you need to change in order to embrace a real Sabbath in your life?

DAY 5

Jesus and New Creation

Read John 1:1–18; 2 Corinthians 5:16–21

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, “This is he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’”) Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.—John 1:14–18

Core Truth: Jesus comes to model the truly human life and to make it possible for us to live as the people whom God created us to be.

Genesis 1–2 sets the stage for the rest of the biblical story by describing the very good world that God made. It paints a picture of the world as God intended it to be.

The story of Scripture from Genesis 12 through the book of Revelation focuses on God’s work of healing his creation and reconciling humanity to himself. We will discover that the Bible’s vision of creation remains a core theme as God works toward a New Creation. We’ll say much more about this when we get to the New Testament, but let’s look briefly at two New Testament passages: John 1:1–18 and 2 Corinthians 5:16–21.

John 1:1–18

John’s Gospel opens with words chosen to bring to mind the first words of Genesis: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the

Word was God.” John’s prologue is rich in imagery and thick in meaning. John uses a philosophical concept made popular by the first-century Jewish writer Philo. Philo described God’s word active in creation as the Word (in Greek, *logos*). Logos, or Word, referred to God’s agent of creation. Remarkably, John identifies the logos of creation with the pre-incarnate Jesus. Thus, John draws from a popular idea in his day to link Jesus the Messiah with God’s creative acts in Genesis 1. Jesus, the one through whom God announced the kingdom, was present from eternity and served as the agent of creation. From Genesis to the witness of the Gospels, the Bible affirms that the Creator and the Savior are one and the same. The God who creates a very good world is also the God who acts to save and redeem his creation.

By echoing Genesis 1:1, John also denies an often-believed assumption about the Bible. One often hears that the God of the Old Testament is radically different than the God of the New Testament. John confronts this directly by asserting that the God of the Old Testament manifests his character and identity most fully in Jesus. John goes on to say, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). What is Jesus’ role on earth? Jesus comes to show us the truth about God. The fullest expression of God takes on human flesh and blood.

John also writes, “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known” (John 1:18). God the Creator is invisible. Yet God desires to be known. In Genesis 1:1–2:3, God made human beings in his image for the purpose of making himself known to creation. Due to the failure of people to live out this mission, Jesus fulfills God’s intentions for humanity.

2 Corinthians 5:16–21

In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul writes: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” Paul profoundly states the reality of the work of Jesus for us. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is the climactic act of God’s plan of salvation. Through Jesus, God gives the gift of reconciliation. Through Jesus, God offers humanity the opportunity to become the man or the woman whom God created us to be. We can experience new creation. Jesus came to make us human again. Jesus works to restore us to serve as God’s people. Paul speaks of new creation in Christ and immediately

links it with mission through our roles as ambassadors. An ambassador represents a ruler and kingdom while living in a foreign land. The true king is not present so the ambassador speaks and acts on his behalf. Is this role sounding familiar? Paul uses slightly different terminology but his vision for new life in Christ is in harmony with God's original creational purposes for humanity. In Christ, we can be restored to be God's missional community that reflects God's character in/to/for the world.

Creation and Faith

We are getting ahead of our story a bit by jumping ahead to the New Testament. But this gives us a sneak peak of what is to come. As we seek to find ourselves in the biblical story, let us remember two key elements from our brief look at creation.

First, this world is the avenue of God's mission. God creates it and pronounces it "very good." As we will see, it has become fractured and infested by sin, but it remains the focus of God's activity. Following Jesus is not an escape from this world but a commissioning to Jesus' mission to bring hope, healing, and reconciliation.

Second, all human beings are created in the image of God and have dignity, worth, and value. Thus, following Jesus means practicing justice through the love and service of all people. The Christ-following movement must not be restricted to any ethnicity, socio-economic grouping, or region. Just as the book of Genesis opens with all the world in view, following Jesus involves an openness to the world and a desire to see God's kingdom manifest globally. The kingdom is good news for everyone, or it's not good news for anyone. We are blessed by God to be a blessing to others.

Questions for Reflection

How does Jesus' mission relate to God's original creation?

What would it look like to live as a new creation in your neighborhood today?

GROUP SESSION TWO

Creation and the Mission of God

CORE TRUTHS

1. Creation stories teach us about God, the world, and ourselves.
2. God carefully crafted a very good world with humanity as its highest expression and Sabbath rest as its climax.
3. God creates all men and women in his image to serve as a missional community that reflects his character.
4. The climax of creation is God's resting on the Sabbath day. God extends this blessing to all creation.
5. Jesus comes to model the truly human life and to make it possible for us to live as the people whom God created us to be.

OPEN SESSION WITH PRAYER

Welcome the group and give new participants the opportunity to introduce themselves.

DEBRIEF THE READING FOR THE WEEK (15 MINUTES)

- What were the key takeaways that you gained from this week's reading?
- What aspects of the reading did you find confusing?
- How does the intended world as described in Genesis contrast with our present world?
- How does the Bible's message of creation challenge our understanding of the world and the value of all people?
- What does it mean to be created in God's image?

WATCH VIDEO (30 MINUTES)

CONVERSATION (15 MINUTES)

- What aspects of Brian's message resonated with you most deeply?
- What questions did the video raise for you?
- What does the message of creation teach us about God and his mission?
- In what ways are you living as the person whom God created you to be?
- How does the Bible present Jesus as the way to life as God intended it to be?
- What would it look like to live as a new creation in your neighborhood today?
- Who in your life needs to hear the good news of the Bible?

CLOSING PRAYER