

## SE ONLINE

### Spring 2023 Bible Reading Plan

Resurrected // 6 Weeks Post-Easter

#### RESURRECTED: Encounters with the Risen Jesus

*“Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. This whole story hinges on it.”*

- Daniel Nayeri

Christ’s resurrection from the dead is the centerpiece of our faith. Everything we believe grows out of the historical fact that Jesus Christ rose on the third day. From the earliest days of the church, the resurrection of Jesus has been held up as the defining event of all history. Paul – writing mere decades after Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection – confirmed this in his letter to the church at Corinth:

**“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born...”** (1 Corinthians 5:3-8).

The resurrection is of “first importance” to our faith. The apostles preached the good news that the most miraculous thing we could imagine actually happened! Not only that, but it happened in the sight of eyewitnesses! In fact, Paul asserts that over 500 people saw and interacted with the Resurrected Jesus. Each of these encounters offers us proof of His resurrection life – and the life He offers us today!

The stories of those who encountered the Resurrected Jesus reverberate into our own stories. As we look at the lives of those who met Jesus – from Mary Magdalene to Doubting Thomas to Paul – we catch a glimpse of the difference the Resurrection can make in our culture. Where there is death, the Resurrection speaks life. Where there is loss, the Resurrection speaks hope. Where there is pain, the Resurrection speaks peace. The Resurrection isn’t just the centerpiece of our faith; it’s the centerpiece of our very lives!

Week One: MARY MAGDALENE (John 20:1-18) → Reviving Your Losses (from Despair to Joy)

Christopher Watkin: *“The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the first glimpse of the shafts of breaking dawn that will one day flood the sky with brilliant light in the new heavens and the new earth.”*

We forget that the first Easter morning had more in common with a funeral than with a party.

Jesus’ followers and friends had watched in horror as He had been tried, condemned, and murdered right before their eyes. With Jesus’ death, many of their hopes and dreams had perished as well. They walked to the tomb not with triumph in their eyes, but with tears. They weren’t walking in a victory parade; they were part of a funeral procession.

When the women headed towards the tomb that first Easter Sunday, they had no expectation. They had no thought that something miraculous might have happened. In fact, they were more concerned with the task at hand. According to Mark’s Gospel, they spent most of the trip wondering how they were going to roll the stone away from the tomb’s entrance (Mark 16:3).

**“Who will roll away the stone?”** Who will undo what death has done? The rock guarding Jesus’ tomb felt like an insurmountable obstacle. How would they ever move it? It seemed as though all hope was lost.

We’ve all been there, haven’t we? We’ve stood by graves. We’ve mourned the loss of those closest to us. In that moment, the same question comes to our minds. Who is going to fix this?

Upon their arrival to the tomb, the women found all their worrying had been for nothing. The stone had already been rolled away! What’s more, God had left some messengers there at the tomb with a message for the women – one that would shake the very foundations of the world.

**“He is not here; He has risen!”** Those seven words changed everything! The tomb was empty! The stone had been rolled away! Jesus, just as He had foretold, had risen from the grave! For once, death didn’t have the final word!

You would think this kind of incredible news would warrant an exuberant response. Yet, those who first heard of Jesus’ Resurrection didn’t know what to make of it. Even the Eleven thought it sounded like complete nonsense (Luke 24:11). The first proclamation of Christ’s Resurrection wasn’t met with worship, but with wondering. What in the world was going on here?

Thankfully, the events of that first Easter Sunday didn’t just end with an empty tomb. His appearance to Mary Magdalene offered definitive proof of His return. More than that, it offered Mary a reason to trade her sorrow for celebration and her despair for joy. The grave could not hold Jesus. Death would not have the final word. Everything they had lost was now in the process of being restored.

We all know the pain of loss. Treasures rust and rot. Accomplishments diminish and fade. People grow old and die. We've all lost things it feels like we'll never get back. Yet, the Resurrection shows us that no loss is terminal. If God could remake the pain and death of the cross to bring about life and hope, then there's nothing He can't transform. The Resurrection proves that He has the power to redeem and restore all things.

There's nothing so dead that He can't bring it back to life.

#### **READ Luke 23:50-56**

- These women had lost so much when they lost Jesus. They lost their friend. They lost their Teacher. They lost their hope. When they placed Jesus in the tomb, they placed part of themselves with Him. What all had Jesus represented to them? In what ways have you experienced these same kinds of losses?
- The people who knew Jesus best spent the Sabbath preparing spices and perfumes to embalm His body. What does this tell you about their expectations? Were they anticipating a resurrection?

#### **READ Luke 24:1-9**

- Why do you think everyone had such a hard time believing in the Resurrection? What would have kept you from accepting the good news?
- Are you naturally optimistic or pessimistic? In what ways has this world conditioned us to expect bad news? Does the state of our world make it easy for you to be an optimist? Why or why not?
- How does losing people/things in our own lives cause us to lose hope? What happens to us when we lose hope? Think of a time in your life where hope seemed hard to come by. How did God ultimately bring you out of that time?

#### **READ John 20:11-18**

- Why do you think Mary was unable to recognize Jesus at first? What caused her to finally see it was Him? How have you experienced hearing His voice in your own life?
- What confidence does it give us to know that Jesus has ascended to the Father? What does this say about Him? What does this mean for us as His people?
- Read I Corinthians 15:20-28. What does Jesus' Resurrection guarantee? How does the reality of that day change the way we live on this day? When you think about the resurrection we'll all share in, what are you looking forward to the most?
- How does the reality of the Resurrection change the way we face loss today? How can it bring hope and joy to even the darkest of circumstances?

## GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What resonated with you from the video teaching time? How does the reality of the Resurrection change things? How has it transformed our world? How has it transformed your life?
2. As a Group, read 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. What do these verses teach us about the importance of the Resurrection? How central is it to our faith? List out all the historical facts Paul lists as being of “first importance” to what we believe. Why is each of these historical truths important to our faith? How would Christianity be affected if we did have one of these truths?
3. Is it easy for you to find hope in this world? Why or why not? In what ways has this world conditioned us to expect loss and suffering? How does the Resurrection breathe hope back into our world? How does it change the way we view our losses?
4. Read Mark 16:1-8. Why do you think the women were initially so afraid to share the good news with anyone else? Why can sharing hope make us nervous? What are some excuses we give to avoid sharing the good news today? How do we overcome those obstacles and excuses?
5. The Resurrection reminds us there’s nothing we can lose that Jesus can’t restore. How does this truth speak hope into our lives? How could it speak hope into our world? What are some ways we can share this hope with our friends and families, our neighborhoods and communities? What does it look like to be ambassadors of this kind of hope?
6. Jesus’ Resurrection guarantees our own. When you think of our Resurrection, what are you most looking forward to? In your opinion, what is going to be the best part of the new heavens and new earth (with new bodies!)? How does the reality of our hope on that day change the way you live on this day?

Close your group with a time of prayer. Thank God for the reality of the Resurrection. Thank Him for the hope we have because of Jesus. Pray that He would empower you to live out of the hope and joy the Resurrection brings. Ask Him to bring you into contact with people who need to be reminded of that hope. Pray that your life would be characterized by a longing for the Resurrection only He can bring.

Week Two: PETER (John 21:1-19) → Reviving Your Failures (from Regret to Restoration)

David Mathis: *“God wrote ‘good’ on the single worst day in the history of the world. And there is not one day — or week, month, year, or lifetime of suffering — not one trauma, not one loss, not one pain, momentary or chronic, over which God cannot write ‘good’ for you in Christ Jesus.”*

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

On the night before Jesus died, the apostle Peter had made an incredible boast. He claimed to love Jesus more than any of the other disciples. Even if everyone else abandoned their Teacher, Peter would be the one to stand his ground. He would never fail or falter in his faith.

Yet, by the time the next morning arrived, Peter had revealed himself to be the biggest coward of them all. His braggadocio evaporated the second someone recognized him as part of Jesus' inner circle. Standing by the fire outside the High Priest's house, Peter denied that he even knew Jesus, much less followed Him. It wasn't enough for him to say it once. Peter repeated his denial three times. The breadth of his fall was matched only by the bitterness of his tears.

In the days following the Resurrection, Peter surely must have wondered how Jesus felt about him. How would Jesus respond to such a betrayal? How would He respond to such a traitor? Yet, the first few times the disciples encountered the risen Jesus, the Lord never said a thing about Peter's three-fold denial.

It wasn't until they gathered around another fire that Jesus would breach the topic. As the Eleven shared a meal together, Jesus asked Peter a pointed question: “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” Using Peter's own boast in question form wasn't exactly subtle. Nor was the fact that Jesus would repeat the question three times. The intention was clear. Jesus was giving Peter the opportunity to rewind the tape back and try again.

Three affirmations of love to wipe away three moments of weakness.

The Resurrected Jesus gave Peter a chance for redemption. More than that, He presented Peter with a chance to move past his past. Those three confessions of love weren't for Jesus. They were for Peter. Jesus knew Peter's heart. He knew how Peter felt about Him. But, Peter needed to know it, too. He needed to hear himself say that he loved Jesus. More than that, he needed to know that Jesus loved him in return.

Peter could have been swallowed up by his regrets. He could have spiraled in shame and guilt. The Resurrection reassured him that Jesus offered forgiveness. The Resurrection restored Peter and allowed him to share that same restorative work with others.

Because Jesus rose from the grave, we can have the same thing. We are not our failures. We are not our faults. Because Jesus is alive, He can bring life to even the worst moments of our lives. The words we wish we wouldn't have said, the roads we wish we hadn't walked down, the decisions we wish we hadn't made – all these things find their redemption in Him! When our regrets weigh us down, we can remember the Resurrected Jesus offers restoration.

#### **READ Matthew 26:31-35**

- What do you think Peter was thinking in this moment? Why would he make such an incredible boast in front of the other disciples? What was he trying to prove to Jesus? What was he trying to prove to himself?
- Have you ever made a boast that ended up backfiring? What happened in that situation? How did it make you feel? How did you come to regret the boast you had made? Why is it that we are so tempted to make such prideful boasts and assertions?

#### **READ Luke 22:54-62**

- What happened while Peter was in the courtyard of the High Priest's house? Put yourself in Peter's shoes in this moment. Why do you think he did what he did? How do you think Peter felt in this moment? What would your primary emotion have been? How would you have handled your regret in that moment?
- Luke 22:61 mentions that Jesus made eye contact with Peter at the moment of Peter's denial. How does this change your perception of the event? How do you think this added to Peter's emotions? How does it recast our own regrets to know that Jesus sees us in the middle of those moments?
- Our regrets in life normally center on one of two things: We can either regret the things we did or we can regret the things we didn't do. Which form of regret is most powerful to you? Why? How have you seen this form of regret in your own life? Why do our regrets hold such power in our lives?

#### **READ John 21:1-17**

- How did Peter respond when he realized it was Jesus waiting for them on the shore? Why do you think he was so desperate to get to Jesus? In that moment, would your response have been to run toward Jesus or run away from Him? Why?
- What question did Jesus ask Peter? How was this question similar to the boast Peter made during the Last Supper? How does Peter's response show us that he learned from his previous failure?
- What task did Jesus give to Peter? In what ways does this task reveal a second chance to Peter? How did Peter's failures and regret qualify him for this role? Take a look at Luke 22:31-32. How could Peter's weakness help strengthen the other disciples?
- How has God used your regrets to shape you into the person you are? What has He taught you in those moments? How can the restorative work He's done in you benefit others?

## GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What resonated with you from the video teaching time? What comes to mind when you think about the story of Peter's denial? How do you think Peter felt in that moment? Do you think he was ever able to fully forget the regret of that day?
2. Read John 21:1-17. What stands out to you in this account? If you had been in Peter's shoes, would you have been in such a hurry to get to Jesus? Why or why not? Why do you think Jesus felt the need to repeat the question to Peter three times? How would the parallels of these questions with his denial have affected Peter? How did Jesus meeting Peter's regret head-on help the healing process?
3. We talked about the two kinds of regret: Regret for the things we did and regret for the things we didn't do. Which kind of regret feels the most powerful to you? Why? How do you see both of these forms of regret in your life? How does Jesus speak into our regrets and the pain they bring?
4. What regrets do we see in our culture today? As a Group, make a list of some of the common sources of shame and regret that you see people wrestling with today. How does the Gospel speak into that shame? In what ways is the Gospel an antidote to regret?
5. Peter was restored to his position to do a restorative work in others. How did Peter's failure make him uniquely qualified to lead the early church? How might it have helped him as a leader? How have you seen Jesus redeem your regrets? How has He used those things to minister to others?
6. How does this story of Peter's denial and eventual restoration help us trust Scripture more? With Peter serving as the leader of the early church, would it have been tempting to leave this story out? How does it help us identify more with Peter? In what ways does it remind us that the Gospel offers restoration for everyone?

Close your group with a time of prayer. Pray that God would meet you each in your regret. Pray that you would experience His healing and hope in those places still marked with pain and shame. Ask that He would show you all those areas where He can use your story to restore others. Thank Him for the ways the Resurrection reminds us that there is freedom and forgiveness for us all.

Week Three: THOMAS (John 20:19-31) → Reviving Your Faith (from Skepticism to Confidence)

Philip Yancey: *“Doubt always coexists with faith, for in the presence of certainty, who would need faith at all?”*

Thomas wasn't always a doubter.

When Jesus announced His intention to head towards Jerusalem, Thomas boldly proclaimed that he would follow Jesus to the end: **“Let's go too – and die with Jesus”** (John 11:16). Thomas had such strong faith that he would willingly walk into the jaws of death at Jesus' command.

And yet, with Jesus' death on the cross, Thomas' faith dried up. When the other disciples reported that they had seen the Risen Lord, Thomas refused to believe it. He didn't want to be let down. He wasn't going to let himself be fooled. Unless he could see and touch Jesus' nail-scarred hands, there was no way he would ever let himself believe again.

It took seven days, but Thomas finally received the proof he longed for. Appearing to His disciples a week after the Resurrection, Jesus met Thomas' objections head-on. He showed Thomas His nail-scarred hands. He allowed Thomas to touch His wounded side. In the face of doubts, Jesus responded with proof. More importantly, He responded with the truth.

Notice that Jesus attacked the doubts without ever attacking the doubter. He never criticized or condemned Thomas' doubt. He didn't accuse Thomas of having insufficient faith. Instead, He met Thomas in his doubt. He showed Thomas the reasons to believe. He gave Thomas reason to hope. The Resurrection offered faith for even the most skeptical of doubters.

Today's world makes doubt easy to come by. We've all believed in things we later discovered to be a lie. We've all been duped by people who claimed to have our best interests in mind. As a result, we've become fluent in skepticism. It's practically our default language!

Like Thomas, our hearts clamor for proof. We want to know the certainty of what we believe. We want to get out of doubt's shadow and live in the light of hope. Thankfully, we follow a Savior who can handle our doubts. He meets us in our struggles. He answers our uncertainties. He knows how to crush our doubts while comforting the doubting.

What would it take for you to imagine the unimaginable? What would you have to see in order to believe the unbelievable? What proof would you require? Though we'll likely never receive the kind of proof Thomas got, the evidence for the Resurrection abounds. From the eyewitness testimony to the growth of the early church, we know something miraculous happened on that first Easter Sunday. After all, the Resurrected Jesus didn't just change Thomas' heart; He changed the whole world.

When we struggle for something to believe in, the Resurrection reminds us that we can fully and firmly put all our hope in Jesus.

### **READ John 11:1-16**

- On what occasion did Jesus decide to head back to Judea? Why was it so dangerous for Him to travel there? What was Thomas' response to this danger? How does this compare with the usual picture we have in our heads of "doubting Thomas"?
- How far would you be willing to go to follow Jesus? If you were being honest with yourself, would your attitude have been the same as Thomas'? Why or why not? In what ways do our doubts affect what we are willing to sacrifice for Jesus? How do you think this played out in Thomas' story?

### **READ John 20:19-29**

- When Jesus appeared to the disciples on that first Easter evening, what proof did He offer to them? How did the wounds offer proof for who He was and what He had done? If you had been able to see the Resurrected Jesus, what proof would you have wanted?
- Why do you think Thomas had such doubt? In your opinion, was his doubt reasonable or unreasonable? Why? As you look at your own life, what are some issues that have caused you to doubt? How has Jesus answered those questions? Who or what has He used to help lead you through your doubts?
- How did Thomas respond when he got the proof he asked for (John 20:28)? What does this tell us about the depth of Thomas' newfound faith and conviction? How can working through our doubts actually improve the quality of our faith? How have you seen this play out in your own life?
- Jesus' final words in this passage speak to us: "**Blessed are those who believe without seeing me.**" Why do you think Jesus said it was more blessed to have belief without having seen? Given the choice, would you rather be able to see the Risen Jesus like Thomas did or have faith without sight? Why?

### **READ 1 Corinthians 15:3-9; 1 John 1:1-4**

- According to 1 Corinthians 15, how many witnesses saw the Resurrected Christ? What confidence does this give us in our faith? What does the presence of so many eyewitnesses say about the historical reality of our faith?
- How did John appeal to his status as an eyewitness of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection? Why did he have to proclaim what he had seen and experienced? How have we been blessed by that today?
- In your opinion, what's the single greatest piece of evidence for our faith? Why does this particular piece of evidence speak so clearly to you? How has your own life served as evidence for the power of the Gospel?

## GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What stuck out to you from the video teaching time? Has this week changed the way you look at “Doubting Thomas”? In what ways can you relate to his story?
2. Read John 20:19-29. How do you think Thomas felt in that week between hearing the other disciples’ story and actually seeing Jesus for himself? How do you think the other disciples viewed him? Were they understanding? Were they judgmental of his doubt? How do believers today tend to treat those who doubt? What should our response be?
3. How have you experienced doubt in your life? What have been some of the biggest sources of doubts and questions for you? How has Jesus met you in those doubts? How has the community of believers helped you as you wrestle with those things? How can you all, as a Group, help support one another in seasons of doubt?
4. Would you say that faith comes easily for you? Why or why not? In Thomas’ case, his doubts pushed him to a deeper and more complete faith? How has doubt served to grow and expand your faith? In what ways can doubt be constructive? In what ways can it be destructive? How can we ensure our doubts push us in a positive direction?
5. In the personal reflection time, you thought about which piece of evidence is most convincing in your faith journey. Spend some time talking about the pieces of evidence that have had the most impact on your life. How have these evidences encouraged you? How can you all encourage one another to remember the historical reality of faith?
6. Read Jude 1:22. What should our posture be towards those who doubt? How do we need to exhibit this quality when other people doubt? How do we need to show this same posture to ourselves when we doubt? What confidence does it give us to know how Jesus responded to Thomas’ doubt?

Close your group in prayer. Spend some time praying for your doubts. Ask God to give you each the confidence and trust to move through those doubts into a deeper faith in Him. Pray also that He would give you grace and patience as you interact with those who are struggling in their own faith journey. Thank Him for meeting us in our doubts and for answering our objections with His wisdom and truth. Pray that your Group would be a place where doubts could be shared freely and honestly.

Week Four: EMMAUS ROAD DISCIPLES (Luke 24:13-34) → Reviving Your Disappointments (from Disappointment to Expectation)

Timothy Keller: *“Though most spiritual seekers start their search afraid of disappointment, Jesus says that he will always be infinitely more than anyone is looking for. He will always exceed our expectations; he will be more than we can ask for or imagine.”*

The commotion and confusion of that first Easter Sunday left a lot of people scratching their heads.

As news of the women’s encounter at the tomb filtered through the city of Jerusalem, the supply of answers was no match for the demand of questions. Even those who loved Jesus the most weren’t quite sure what to make of the empty tomb. What had actually happened behind that stone? Where was Jesus’ body? Had He really risen from the dead? All of Jerusalem was abuzz with speculation and surprise. No one knew what to believe or whose account to trust.

In the midst of that afternoon’s chaos, two of Jesus’ followers left Jerusalem to head to their nearby hometown of Emmaus. As they walked along the road, they talked about all they had seen and experienced during their visit to the city. Their conversation was soon interrupted by a stranger who joined them on the path. Much to the friends’ surprise, their new traveling companion seemed to know nothing about all that had transpired in Jerusalem over the long Passover weekend.

So, they began to tell him the story of Jesus. For them, Jesus had been so much more than a teacher. They had hoped that Jesus was the Messiah. They had hoped He would make everything right. In their eyes, Jesus’ death was the most heartbreaking disappointment. Everything they had hoped for had died on that cross with Jesus.

Little did they realize that the stranger they were talking to was Jesus Himself!

Seizing the opportunity, Jesus began to teach these men what the Scriptures really said about Him. As they walked along the road, Jesus walked them through the Old Testament, explaining that the Messiah had to suffer and die. What they saw as a disappointment was really a Divine appointment in disguise.

The road to Emmaus – the path of disappointment – is not a road we like to walk on. Yet, we’ve all wandered there, wondering why things didn’t work out the way we planned. We’ve all lamented what could have been. We’ve all mourned over what we think should have been. Like the men on the Emmaus Road, our lives are filled with broken dreams and vacant visions. Our lips – and sometimes our hearts – cry out with the same depressing refrain they used: **“We had hoped...”**

What we fail to recognize is that even if things haven't gone according our own plans, they always work out according to His. The Resurrection reminds us that God can take our disappointments and defeats and turn them into His triumphs. Our misplaced hopes give us the opportunity to place our ultimate hope in the One person who will never let us down.

#### **READ Luke 24:13-34**

- What are some of the things you find interesting in this story? In what ways does this passage catch the confusion of that first Easter Sunday? Why do you think God initially kept them from recognizing who Jesus was? What do you think it was like to have Jesus explain the Old Testament to them?
- In verse 21, the men use that depressing refrain: **"We had hoped..."** Think of a time when you hoped for something that didn't happen. What was that like? How did that leave you feeling? Why do our unrealized hopes/dreams have a way of sticking with us? Where do we see these misplaced hopes in our culture today?
- How does it make you feel when things don't go according to your plan? Is it easy for you to see God's plan in the midst of that detour? Why or why not? How does Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection show us that God's plans don't always match up with the way we think things ought to go?
- How do you think these men felt once they realized Jesus had been walking with them the whole time? When you look back on your life, how can you see that He's been doing the same for you? Have you ever gone through a season where Jesus seemed absent only for you to realize He was walking with you the whole way?

#### **READ Luke 24:35-49**

- What happened when Jesus appeared to them all in the Upper Room? What did He tell them? How did He prove His Resurrection to them? How did He reaffirm that everything that had happened to Him was according to God's plan?
- What happens to us if we live in disappointment too long? How can that affect our mindset? How can that affect our relationships? How did Jesus pull His followers out of disappointment and set them on a new mission? In what ways does He do the same for us?

#### **READ Romans 5:3-11**

- What does Paul say about the hope we have in Christ (v. 5)? How does this hope compare to the other things we put our hope in? How will it never disappoint us?
- Read through this passage again and underline or circle all the things God has given you in Christ. How do these promises make you feel? How can focusing on them help you when you face the disappointments of life?

## GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Was there anything in the video teaching (or the Scripture reading) that stuck out to you? What do you think it was like to be one of the travelers on the Emmaus Road that day? Is there any part of their conversation you would have liked to hear?
2. Read Luke 24:13-34. In talking about Jesus, the men on the Emmaus Road use the phrase, "**We had hoped...**" How does this phrase describe disappointment? What are some common sources of disappointment today? How have you experienced some of these disappointments in your own life?
3. Why are we so tempted to assume that our disappointments mean that God's plans have been thwarted? What are some practical ways we can remember that His plans still prevail even when our plans fail? How does the Resurrection show us that God has a different way of accomplishing His plans than we might expect?
4. What happens to us if we stay in a place of disappointment for too long? How does it affect our hearts and minds? How can it affect our relationships – both with God and with others? How does the Gospel speak into our disappointments and heartbreaks? What hope does it offer us?
5. In the personal reflection time, you thought about a time when things didn't go according to your plan. What was that like? Were you ever able to realize how Jesus was with you on that path of disappointment? How does it make you feel to know He walks the "Emmaus Road" with us?
6. Read Romans 5:5. Our hope in Christ will not disappoint us. When you think about the promises God has made to us, what makes you most excited? Together as a Group, make a list of all the promises you are looking forward to in Christ. These hopes and dreams will not disappoint! How can we live our lives in expectation of these things?

Close your group in prayer. Spend some time thanking God for His great promises. Thank Him for the assurance and expectation we have because of what Jesus has promised to us. Pray that we would live with the confidence and courage that comes from knowing He will follow through on His promises. As a Group, pray for the disappointments you each face in this life. Ask God that He would encourage you each as you deal with your broken hopes and broken hearts. Thank Him for walking alongside us on those disappointing roads.

Week Five: PAUL (Acts 9:1-19) → *Reviving Your Accomplishments (from Achievement to Relationship)*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *“Do not desire to be strong, powerful, honored, and respected, but let God alone be your strength, your fame, and your honor.”*

What if everything you valued came crashing down in a day?

Saul had spent his entire life being the best. He had been brought up in the best schools, trained by the best rabbis, and was considered the best in his class. His credentials separated him from all his peers. Everything he touched turned to gold.

So, when the High Priest needed to deal with the insurgent Christian movement, he naturally chose Saul to take care of it! Word had spread to Jerusalem that the Christians were gaining a foothold in Damascus. The Temple leadership, recognizing that they needed to crush this burgeoning movement, commissioned Saul for the task. His credentials for the mission were matched only by his zeal to see Christianity eradicated.

And yet, on the road to Damascus Saul encountered someone whose résumé was far more impressive than his own. Saul came face-to-face with the Resurrected Jesus.

As Saul approached the outskirts of the city, Jesus appeared to him in a blinding vision. He confronted Saul about his persecution of His people and his hatred of what God was building through the church. More importantly, He told Saul that the road to Damascus wasn't the right road. Jesus had a better path in mind for this young Pharisee.

Stumbling away from this encounter, Saul was left physically blinded and spiritually baffled. For the next three days, he sat in darkness. It wasn't until a believer by the name of Ananias came to heal Saul's blindness that he was actually able to see the road ahead. From that moment on, nothing about Saul's life would ever be the same. The persecutor became a preacher. The man who was once so focused on destroying the church would do more to build it up than perhaps anyone else in history.

One encounter with the Risen Jesus changed everything for Paul. He came to recognize that nothing about his résumé mattered – including the name at the top!

Like Saul (or Paul, if you prefer), we can start to think that life is found in the sum of our accomplishments. So, we keep trying to add things to our life, thinking that the multiplication will somehow make us feel less divided inside. We spend our days chasing a bigger house, a better job, a larger paycheck.

The Gospel, on the other hand, reminds us that all these things pale in comparison to what Christ has done. He has given us things that we could never have gotten for ourselves. In Him, we have purpose. In Him, we have meaning. In Him, we have life.

No matter what we achieve or gain for ourselves, we will never be able to match Jesus' greatness and glory. He overcame the grave! He conquered death! There's no résumé in the world that compares to His. Knowing that our salvation rests on His accomplishments rather than our own frees us up to pursue the one thing in this world that really matters: a relationship with Him!

### **READ Philippians 3:3-6**

- Make a list of the credentials Paul lists in this passage. Why do you think each of these qualifications mattered to him? What meaning/purpose do you think he derived from these things? How could they have come to define his identity?
- Make a list of your greatest accomplishments. Why do these things matter to you? What do they represent in your life? In what ways are they different/similar to the accomplishments Paul listed in his bio? If you were being honest, how do you think your "résumé" stacks up against other people?
- Why do we feel such a need to be accomplished and to find success? Where do you think that drive comes from? How do our accomplishments help us feel superior to other people? How can they make us feel like we've gained God's attention/favor? How do you think Paul's accomplishments impacted the way he saw his standing before God?

### **READ Acts 9:1-19**

- Why was Paul headed to Damascus? How was he the right man for this job? What happened on the road into Damascus? What do you think this encounter was like? How would you have responded had you been in Paul's place? How does encountering Jesus change our perceptions of ourselves?
- What do you think those days of blindness were like for Paul? What thoughts were going through his mind? How did he ultimately get his sight back? How do you think Paul's perception of Christians changed when he met Ananias?
- Take another look at Acts 9:16. What was God showing Paul through this encounter? How does suffering teach us more about God than success does? What do we learn about Him in times of suffering and difficulty? How do these seasons deepen our relationship with Him?

### **READ Philippians 3:7-14**

- How did Paul's perspective on his accomplishments change? How did Christ give him a new perspective? Has something similar happened in your life? In what ways has your relationship with Jesus changed the way you view your achievements?
- In your opinion, what's the difference between religion and relationship? How is relationship easier/more difficult than mere religion? What does it mean to know Christ and the power of His Resurrection? How have you seen this in your own life?

## GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What stuck out to you in the video teaching time? Is there any part of Saul/Paul's story that you can relate to? In what ways has Jesus changed your perception of what's important in this life?
2. Read Philippians 3:3-6. Why do you think Paul picked these specific accomplishments to highlight? As part of the personal study, you were asked to list some of your own achievements. What were some of the common threads as to why those events were so significant in your life? Why is it so easy for us to look to our achievements for value? Why is this so dangerous for our souls?
3. Read Philippians 3:7-14. How did Jesus change Paul's outlook on his accomplishments? What was Paul chasing after now that he knew Jesus? How does knowing Christ help reframe our ideas of what a successful life looks like? What does it look like to have a life that's focused on Christ more than personal achievements?
4. When you come to the end of your life, what will a "successful" life have looked like? In light of that day, what are the metrics you will use to define success? How do those priorities impact the way you live now? What are some obstacles that keep you from living according to those values?
5. How does Paul's story highlight the difference between religion and relationship? Why is this distinction important? How is relationship simpler/more difficult than religion? How have you experienced this in your own life? What's it been like for you to understand the relationship aspect of our faith?
6. Read Romans 6:3-5. In our baptism, we were united with Christ's accomplishments – His death and Resurrection. How do both of these events change the way we approach our day-to-day life? How should the fact that we are united with Christ's death change the way we live? How should the fact that we will be united with Him in Resurrection change our lifestyle?

Close your group in prayer. Spend some time thanking God for all He has achieved for us in Christ. Thank Him for all the things He's given us that we never could have gotten for ourselves. Repent for some of the ways we've made our faith about religion more than the real relationship He wants to have with us. Pray that each of you would live with the same attitude Paul exhibited – that you would seek to know Christ and the power of His Resurrection. Pray that He would empower you to live every day in the power and the promise of what Christ has done.

Week Six: THE ELEVEN (Matthew 28:16-20; Acts 1:6-11) → Reviving Your Purpose (from Our Kingdom to His Kingdom)

Chris Hodges: *“You can also rest in the knowledge that you have a very specific purpose. Not only did God create you to live in this particular season, but he gave you just the right personality, abilities, talents, and gifts to accomplish what you’re called to do. You are not an accident. You are here on purpose for a purpose. And once you know your purpose in life, you will more clearly understand your true identity. Then nothing can stop you.”*

What now?

After spending 40 days with His followers, the time arrived for Christ to ascend into heaven. Before He left, the remaining disciples had a question for Him – a question they had probably wanted to ask since Palm Sunday: **“Lord, has the time come for you to free Israel and restore our kingdom?”**

Even after all they had seen and heard, the disciples had still missed the point.

For whatever reason, they were still confused about Jesus’ ultimate mission. They still had it in mind that Jesus had come to restore the nation of Israel to its former glory. They believed He had come to create political power and social influence. After all, Jesus had proved Himself a King. What greater thing could He do than rule over Israel and bring His people to a place of prominence and prestige.

They wanted a king who ruled from a palace of stone. What they didn’t realize is that Jesus is a King who rules in the human heart.

The Kingdom Jesus had come to build had little to do with establishing a new country or building a new castle. Jesus came to build a new people. In fact, His Kingdom would transcend borders and politics. It would bring together people from all nations, tribes, and races. Jesus’ Kingdom would be a Kingdom unlike any other – a Kingdom that would stretch into eternity.

And so, with His final words, Jesus gave the Eleven their marching orders. They were to go out and be emissaries of the Kingdom. Whoever they met and wherever they went, they were to invite people into the Kingdom by telling them about their King: **“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere – in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”** (Acts 1:8).

Two thousand years later, the mission hasn’t changed. The marching orders are still the same. We are not spectators of the Kingdom’s growth. We are active participants, advancing the Kingdom every time we step out the door. Whether we’re walking down the sidewalk or stepping into our office, our calling never changes. We, like the first disciples, are emissaries of the Kingdom. We are witnesses of the Resurrected King.

Everybody wants to do something significant. We all want to live a life that means something. Jesus offers us a chance to do just that. We can spend our lives chasing after our kingdoms or contributing to His. We can work under our own power or we can trust in the power of the Spirit. We can build our brand or make His name great. Every day, we face the choice between two kingdoms. Whose kingdom are you living in? Whose kingdom are you living for?

### **READ Acts 1:1-11**

- Why do you think the disciples asked Jesus about restoring the kingdom to Israel? How had they so misunderstood what He had actually come to do? What are some ways we can misunderstand Jesus' mission? How does this cause us to misunderstand the mission He has put us on?
- Jesus told His disciples that they would be "witnesses" to Him. What does a witness do? What do they tell people about? What does this teach us about the nature of evangelism and sharing our faith? In what ways have you witnessed Jesus in your life? How can you use that to share your faith with others?
- The angels at the end of this passage remind the Eleven that Jesus will one day return. What kind of accountability does this give us in our mission? What assurances does it give us to know that our efforts for Jesus will not be in vain?

### **READ Matthew 28:16-20**

- What authority was Jesus given? How does this motivate us to obey Him? What importance does this place on the mission He gave us? How does this remind us that our mission is not optional?
- The phrase "go and make disciples" might also be translated "as you are going, make disciples." How does this change the way you read this command? How should disciple-making be the driving force of all we do in every place we go? How have you (or how can you) build this mission into every part of your day?
- Jesus promises that He is with us to the very end of the age. How does His presence with us help us to live on mission? Does knowing that He goes with you make you more likely to share your faith? Why or why not?

### **READ 2 Corinthians 5:14-21**

- How does Paul describe our mission in these verses? What would it change in your life if you were to view yourself as God's ambassador? How would this change the way you interact with people in your community? In your workplace? In your home?
- In your opinion, what's the hardest part of sharing your faith with another person? What scares you the most when you think about living life on mission? Pray that God would strengthen you to deal with those concerns.

## GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What resonated with you from the video teaching time and personal study? Obviously, the Eleven took their mission seriously, which is why we're here today. What does success look like in our mission? How can we be as faithful to our calling as they were?
2. Read Acts 1:1-11. In this passage, Jesus describes our mission in terms of being His witnesses. What does this mean to you? Does it make you think of evangelism any differently? In what ways have you witnessed Christ work in your life? How can this help you share your faith?
3. As Jesus' followers today, how would you describe our mission? What does it look like for us to be focused more on expanding His Kingdom than growing our own? What little changes can we make to help ourselves focus more of our time and energy on His eternal Kingdom?
4. In your personal study time, you reflected on what it means to be "God's ambassador." What would it change in your life if you were to view yourself in this way? How would this change the way you interact with people in your community? In your workplace? In your home?
5. Who is one person you would like to share your faith with? Have you made an effort to share with them in the past? How did that go? If you haven't, what's kept you from taking that step? What are some practical ways you can make sure you are serving as "God's ambassador" to that person?
6. Read Ephesians 1:18-21. Paul tells us that the same power that brought Christ back from the dead is available to us. Do you often live in the reality of that power? How have your encounters with the Resurrected Jesus changed the way you live? What would it look like for you to "practice resurrection" and live in His power in your day-to-day life?

Close your group in prayer. Thank God for the purpose and mission He has given us in Christ. Thank Him for those who have proven faithful to that mission in the past and who have brought us into His Kingdom. Pray that He would give us the courage and strength to be faithful to that mission in our day. Pray specifically for those who you mentioned in question 5. Pray that God would open up opportunities for you each to share your faith with those who need to hear about the Resurrected Christ. Ask Him to show you what it looks like to live each day in Resurrection power.

**“But the truth is that Christ *has* been raised up, the first in a long legacy of those who are going to leave the cemeteries. There is a nice symmetry in this: Death initially came by a man, and resurrection from death came by a man. Everybody dies in Adam; everybody comes alive in Christ. But we have to wait our turn: Christ is first, then those with him at his Coming, the grand consummation when, after crushing the opposition, he hands over his kingdom to God the Father. He won’t let up until the last enemy is down—and the very last enemy is death! ... It’s resurrection, resurrection, always resurrection, that undergirds what I do and say, the way I live.”**

- 1 Corinthians 15:19-26, 30 (MSG)

*“Finiteness and infiniteness are the two poles of the human experience. Everything we do, think, feel, imagine, discuss is framed by the notion of whether our death is the end or the beginning of something else.”*

- Bono