



# INVITATION

*A Bible Study to Begin With*

BRIAN D. RUSSELL



*Invitation*

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## 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 more than 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.<sup>1</sup>

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



## PUBLISHER'S FOREWORD

help you read it for all its 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, he is an expert 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 had 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 continue to astonish me with the 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 (AD 354–430) 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.”

## ABOUT THIS STUDY

Welcome to *Invitation: A Bible Study to Begin With*. 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 people 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 Bible Study to Begin With* is formatted with several consistent components:

- **Daily readings.** There are five daily readings that should be read before your weekly group session. Each reading has a Core Truth at the start of the reading and two or three questions that 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 people to lead these prayers. Many folks are hesitant at first to pray publicly, 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 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 ensure 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 those 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



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## 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 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 the 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 (Ex. 9:16). God shows himself to be incomparable to all other gods (Ex. 15:11) and the true King of all creation (Ex. 15:18).

*Covenant at Sinai*

At Sinai (Exodus 19–Numbers 10:10),<sup>3</sup> 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 (Ex. 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 how 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.



## 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 people who 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 onetime 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 those 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?

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

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## 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?

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

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## 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 those 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?

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

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## 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 people 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 people outside the circle of Christ-followers.

### **Questions for Reflection**

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

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

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

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## 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 with 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).

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

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## 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

Ask that God would astonish us anew with fresh insight from God's Word and transform us into the disciples that Jesus desires us to become.

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

## **DEBRIEF THE READING FOR THE WEEK (15 MINUTES)**

- What were key insights or takeaways that you gained from your reading during the week?
- In particular, how did these help you to grow in your faith and understanding of Scripture this week?
- What parts of the lesson raised questions for you?
- 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 Brian’s teaching resonated with you most deeply? Why?
- What questions did Brian’s talk raise for you?
- How does Jesus’ message of the kingdom challenge the realities of our present world?
- Who is your mission?
- Who is the community with whom you will do life?
- What kind of person do you need to become to live in light of Jesus’ kingdom?
- Who in your life needs to join us in our journey through the Scriptures?

## **CLOSING PRAYER**

Emphasize God’s ongoing work of transformation in our lives in preparation for loving mission and service in the world. Pray for missing class members as well as for people whom we need to invite to join our study.