

YOUR STORY

- ▶ **Elijah stood on the side of truth in the midst of widespread opposition to him and his belief in God. What are some ways we can do the same in our own culture today?**
- ▶ **Elijah confronted the false prophets, not to show that he was superior, but so they would know God is the one true God who could turn their hearts to him. What does this tell us our motivation should be today when we stand for truth?**
- ▶ **Why is it important to see that God's display of power was not only for His glory, but so that the people might also turn from their false gods to the one true God?**
- ▶ **How has this session challenged you personally?**

YOUR MISSION

Head

No matter what century or culture you are in, one thing is for certain across the ages—humans will always worship. That's why we see humans sacrificing their lives in worship of many different things: hot-topic causes, sports, celebrities, politics, money, possessions, fashion, and so on. Though the modern Western mind sometimes relegates worship to something done by ancient and ignorant people, we all end up in a worship-like state of something when we sacrifice our lives on the altar of that thing.

- ▶ **How can you explain the difference between sacrificing your life to a false god and allowing God's sacrifice to give you life?**
- ▶ **What are some "altars" you have established in your own life that have caused you to neglect your relationship to God?**

Heart

As we see with Elijah and the people of his day, the real problem in our own society today is spiritual disloyalty. Spiritual disloyalty ultimately leads to spiritual drought and destruction. We constantly look for peace, love, and grace in things that are incapable of delivering those to us in a lasting sense. And when we do that, we end up worshiping the created instead of the Creator. It is only when our eyes are opened we can clearly see that only the true God, and not the things He has made, is the source of all we need and desire.

- ▶ **What are some of the things that attract a person's loyalty in our current culture, thus compromising their loyalty to God?**
- ▶ **How can we show others that loyalty and faithfulness to God are better than these worldly loyalties?**

Hands

When the people of God spend the majority of their time and energy on the things of this world, they quickly discover that the desire to join in God's ministry to others is reduced. This is because false idols use up our time and energy and deplete us, often demanding much of our physical and spiritual resources. The true God is the One who builds us back up and ministers to us, so that we have the potential to be effective witnesses to the power and grace of God.

- ▶ **Can you name any "false gods" in our day that consume our time and effort (in reference to both Christians and non-Christians)?**
- ▶ **Can you think of why these things take so much of our time and effort?**

HIS STORY

Elijah retreats out of fear for his life

It is difficult to believe that after the events of Mount Carmel, Elijah would respond to the threat against him by running away in fear. But this is what we see. Like we often do, Elijah forgot the truth of God's power and responded to threatening circumstances by creating distance between himself and the threat.

- ▶ **Share about a difficult time in your own life where God was faithful in ministering to you.**
- ▶ **In what ways are you tempted to forget about God's power and allow your circumstances to overwhelm you?**

God ministers to Elijah in his distress

After ministering to Elijah's physical and emotional exhaustion through the gift of food and rest, the Lord questioned Elijah. He engaged Elijah's reasoning.

God's reply to Elijah was extraordinary. Rather than argue with Elijah, God drew Elijah into an encounter with Himself. The encounter was an important moment in Elijah's life, because God showed Elijah a truth about His nature: God doesn't always display His work in fantastic ways, He also works in small and subtle ways.

God reaffirms to Elijah his ministry and purpose

One way God ministered to Elijah was to re-commission him to prophetic ministry and show him a remnant of people who were still faithful. God would minister through Elijah to others and through others to Elijah.

When our thinking becomes negatively self-centered, we can forget to acknowledge the goodness and light spread by God revealing Himself through us. We can also forget to acknowledge the goodness and light that has spread from the work of others. Yet God calls us to remember that we live in community with others who also desire to spread the truth of God's love.

Essential Doctrines

God is Immanent: *When we say that God is immanent, we mean that God is personable and relatable to those made in His image, while remaining completely distinct and unique from all of His creation. It means that God is not a distant deity (as imagined by the deist) who only sits on His heavenly throne with no interaction, but instead is a personal God who created people in His image to be in personal relationship with Him.*

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YOUR STORY

- ▶ **What does God's ministry to Elijah during this season of doubt and despair tell us about the character of God?**
- ▶ **Elijah's emotional disappointment and despair contributed to him not being able to see beyond his immediate circumstances. What are some ways we can help those around us to see the bigger picture when blinded by emotional pain?**
- ▶ **Part of Elijah's disappointment came from the fact that the events at Mount Carmel didn't have quite the impact he imagined they would. Have you ever experienced something similar? In light of Elijah's story here, how should you respond to similar moments?**
- ▶ **Surely Elijah was encouraged to hear others would be joining him in his cause for truth. What does this teach us about the importance of surrounding ourselves with other believers as we seek to live out the Christian life?**

YOUR MISSION

Head

Many churches tend to focus so much on doing the "big things" for God, like musical and drama productions or mission trips and big evangelism events. But what if we are overlooking the small ways God works in our daily lives? Here is an area of church life that is difficult for us: learning to find God in the small things and in the quiet of the world. We must learn to drown out the human noise, quieting our souls long enough for God's Word to break through and change us. When we only expect "fire from heaven," we miss the "still, small voice."

- ▶ **What are some smaller ways we can see God working our own lives?**
- ▶ **How can the student ministry you are a part of encourage one another by pointing to God's work in these smaller ways?**

Heart

Everyone faces the disappointing sting of failure in one way or another. We do not need to beat ourselves up for our moments of despair, nor do we need to deny them. Yet we cannot stay in those moments forever. In this passage, God ministered to Elijah in his despair for over a month while Elijah made his way to Mount Horeb (Mount Sinai). Yet, as the angel noted, there was more to come. Elijah still had a good purpose to fulfill in this world. The Lord wanted to use Elijah, which should encourage us and strengthen our faith that God would want to use us as well.

- ▶ **How do you typically respond to moments of disappointment and failure?**
- ▶ **What are some biblical and healthy ways we can respond to these moments?**

Hands

Even in our dark and difficult times, God still works through us to affect our world for His purposes and Kingdom. This is why we need to resist the temptation to think that our lives do not truly matter. Like Elijah, we can be tempted in exhaustion and pain, to become narrow-minded and blind to God's mission for mankind. We might say things like, "If these big things didn't change the hearts of men, then I give up! Nothing will work." Yet, God has shown us through the obedient suffering of Jesus Christ and His redeeming resurrection, there is hope no matter how grim our current situation.

- ▶ **What are some ways God has worked through you in difficult times to minister to others?**
- ▶ **What are some ways God has worked through others in difficult times to minister to you?**

The Point: God's cure for spiritual sickness involves humility and repentance.

HIS STORY

Naaman recognizes he has a serious disease

At first glance, Naaman seemed to possess all the necessary qualities and blessings of what we might consider a successful life. As the commander of the Syrian army, he was highly esteemed by the king himself. Despite his being a Gentile, the Lord actively blessed Naaman's work. His military prowess and relentless bravery were unquestioned.

But behind all the accolades, this Aramean hero battled a skin disease called leprosy. Not only was this malady incurable, but it also tainted every good thing in Naaman's life. The joy of his present reality could not rival the future demise that awaited him. Leprosy was a death sentence, leaving the star general hopeless and defeated.

Naaman responds to God's instructions

The focus of this story is not the supernatural ability of Elisha. That's obvious in the prophet's sending a messenger to meet Naaman instead of greeting him personally. The focus was on the humility required to receive grace and the single source from which grace comes—God Himself.

God reaffirms to Elijah his ministry and purpose

Realizing the magnitude of what took place in his body, Naaman's eyes were opened to the reality that grace is found in the God of Israel alone. No false god could have brought about immediate, comprehensive healing such as this. The general humbled himself and confessed the core Jewish belief that there is only one true God who deserves worship and praise.

► **Compare Naaman's words in the previous passage with his words in this passage. What difference do you see in his attitude? What are the signs that he has been radically changed?**

Essential Doctrines

Guilt and Shame: *Guilt refers to the objective status of someone being found guilty for a wrong committed, as well as the incurring of punishment that comes with it (Matt. 5:21-22; Jas. 2:10). Shame is the emotional pain that comes from sinful actions. Scripture teaches that human beings are guilty in an objective sense, and also feel the weight of shame in a subjective sense.*

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HIS STORY

Isaiah encounters God in the temple

In 2 Chronicles 26, we read Isaiah chronicled Uzziah's reign. It is likely that Isaiah was greatly affected by the death of the king. Within that context, here is Isaiah's testimony of what took place on the day of his vision.

- ▶ **Take a few minutes to jot down the different words and phrases that describe Isaiah's vision of God. What do these words communicate? What atmosphere do these phrases create?**

Isaiah recognizes his sin in light of God's Holiness

Once Isaiah was made aware of the wonder of God's holiness, he came to a greater knowledge of himself and his nation. In short, he saw himself and his people against the backdrop of the glorious standard of God's goodness.

Isaiah was filled with both awe and terror. In recognizing the purity and goodness of God, he came to see his own lack of goodness—his uncleanness and sin. Even more importantly, he recognized that he was ruined in light of God's holiness.

Isaiah receives grace and is sent on mission

In the next scene of Isaiah's vision, an angel of the Lord took a burning coal from the altar. The imagery of the altar is important. On earth, the priests performed the sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins, but here, the heavenly messengers performed the imagery-laden ritual of the removal of sin.

It is interesting to note that Isaiah never pleaded with God. Nor did he beg for God to show him mercy. He did not attempt to strike a bargain with the Lord. Rather, the atonement was an act of God's sheer grace in response to Isaiah's confession of his sinfulness. There was nothing magical about coal that could deal with the sinful condition of Isaiah's heart. It was a sign of God's mercy and forgiveness, of God's good gift of redemption.

Essential Doctrines

God is Holy: *God's holiness refers to His uniqueness in being separate from all He has created. The Hebrew word for "holy" means "separate" or "set apart." God's holiness also refers to His absolute purity. God is unstained by the evil of the world. His goodness is perfect, and the moral code we find in the Scriptures is a reflection of His holy nature. As people made in God's image, we are called to holiness.*

HIS STORY

The Suffering Servant is rejected

Scholars from every generation have celebrated the beauty and marveled over the prophetic accuracy of Isaiah 53. Consisting of five stanzas, this passage is the fourth song in Isaiah, a song that helps us understand God's servant, the Messiah.

The Jews of Jesus' day were hoping for a Messiah who would be a king with the power to conquer their enemies. Instead, Isaiah predicted a servant who would be "despised" and "rejected," without "impressive form" and "majesty."

The suffering Servant is a substitute

Next, Isaiah's song unveils for us the reason Jesus is often unattractive to those who encounter Him. Because God's Servant had to bear everything we would like to change about ourselves, His lack of beauty is the direct result of our ugly lives. With pinpoint precision, Isaiah describes for us the events of the cross before they occurred. The Servant became a suffering substitute for us.

Seeking to highlight the Servant's substitution for all people, Isaiah repeatedly used the words "we," "us," and "our" to communicate that we are the beneficiaries of His work and also guilty for these crimes.

The Suffering Servant is exalted

As predicted in his introductory stanza, Isaiah concludes his song by describing the Servant's work on our behalf with the exaltation and victory it brings.

► **Have you ever thought of yourself as a reward to Christ for His work on the cross? How does this change your desire to live for Him?**

Essential Doctrines

Christ as Substitute: *At the heart of the atonement is Jesus Christ substituting Himself for sinners as He died on the cross. This truth is seen against the backdrop of the Old Testament sacrificial system, which provided a picture of humanity's need for sin to be covered and guilt to be removed by an innocent sacrifice. Jesus perfectly revealed and did the will of God, taking upon Himself human nature with its demands and necessities and identifying Himself completely with humankind yet without sin. He honored the divine law by His personal obedience, and in His substitutionary death on the cross, He made provision for the redemption of humanity from sin.*

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YOUR STORY

- ▶ **How does the fact that these prophecies were recorded hundreds of years before the birth of Christ strengthen your faith in the reliability of Scripture?**
- ▶ **In what ways have we gone astray like sheep in our own lives?**
- ▶ **After having gone through this session, how would you answer someone who asks you why we need a substitute for our sins?**
- ▶ **What is something new this session taught you regarding God and His desire to rescue His people?**

YOUR MISSION

Head

A Savior who appears to be nobody is not very appealing to the masses who are desperate to be somebody. If Jesus is not a ticket to a better life now, most will find no value in following Him. We falsely assume that no one would humble himself intentionally, especially God. But make no mistake—the final exaltation of Christ will leave unbelievers, both Jew and Gentile alike, shocked when they consider the truth of Jesus in light of their previous notions of Him.

- ▶ **What are ways people mentally re-create Jesus today in order to make Him more appealing?**
- ▶ **How do these “re-creations” distract us from the primary work that Jesus came to do?**

Heart

People who fear that salvation is unattainable or question whether they can be saved can reassure themselves that Jesus’ work on the cross is an expression of His love toward all people (Rom. 5:8). No sinner is out of reach (Isa. 59:1), and no saint can forfeit the safety of the Savior’s steady hand (John 10:28).

- ▶ **How encouraging is it to know the Servant lives to intercede for His people?**
- ▶ **How can this session encourage you in your own faith, especially if you have had doubts about your own salvation?**

Hands

Since God loved us enough to offer His Son as a Suffering Servant, how should we respond? What kind of lives should we live in light of such a sacrifice? For starters, we should not dare to squander such a costly sacrifice on our behalf. Christianity is more than a one-time decision, after which we choose to live independently of God. Accepting Christ’s death also requires yielding to His life (Gal. 2:20). Just as Jesus sought to obey His Father in all things, we too, must die to ourselves so that He might live through us as we eagerly spread the good news that salvation is available to all.

- ▶ **How should the knowledge that God demonstrated His love in the substitution of His Son impact your daily decisions?**
- ▶ **What are some things you need to “die” to and submit to God in your own life in response to the Servant’s dying on your behalf?**

HIS STORY

Assyria threatens to destroy

When Assyria came against Hezekiah and Israel's southern kingdom, the primary target was "your God, whom you trust" (19:10). When the Assyrians listed the other nations and the gods that were unable to save them, they became instruments of Satan used to mock the name of Yahweh by lumping Him into the same category. Through these mouthpieces, Satan mocked the notion that God was able to deliver His people (18:22-24). He even suggested that the pagan gods of surrounding countries approved and commissioned the attack due to Hezekiah's efforts to reestablish the worship of Yahweh as the only true God.

- ▶ **Why do you think the Assyrians focused on Israel's trust in God, making Him seem deceptive?**
- ▶ **What stands out to you about their taunting? Have you ever experienced something similar—being taunted or ridiculed because you trust God? What happened?**

Hezekiah prays that God would deliver and exalt his name

Can you imagine the pressure Hezekiah must have felt? Despite his efforts to honor the commandments of the Lord, he found himself in a desperate situation with no apparent solution. Unless God intervened, certain destruction awaited Judah. But notice how Hezekiah responded to hopelessness he faced.

Obviously, Hezekiah asked the Lord for the salvation of Judah (19:19). But note also the strong emphasis on the integrity of God's name. Divided into three parts, his prayer magnified the power of God, stated the problem facing the nation, and then appealed directly to God for help.

God delivers for the sake of his name and the good of his people

With their backs against the wall, the only hope for Judah's victory over Assyria was God's action on their behalf. Then, just as Isaiah predicted (19:7), Sennacherib fell in defeat as God fought to preserve His people. God eagerly protected those who belonged to Him. The sudden death of 185,000 Assyrian soldiers not only speaks of God's power, but also shows His relentless determination to take care of His own. Whether it's the execution of a multitude or the execution of His own Son, God stands ready to do whatever necessary to save those who humbly seek the kingdom of heaven.

Essential Doctrines

God's Glory: *The glory of God is His manifest work, the way He represents His perfect character through His activity. It also refers to His excellent reputation and is given as one of the reasons we are to praise His name. Another sense of the word is the inherent beauty of God, the unbearable brightness and beauty of His being as He radiates His own attributes and characteristics for all to witness. The Scriptures speak of humanity as having "fallen short" of God's glory (Rom. 3:23) because we have rejected the purpose for which God created us—to glorify Him.*

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HIS STORY

Hosea pursues an unfaithful bride

When God designed marriage, He instituted a relationship of such intimacy, such sacrifice, and such mutual love, that it would serve as a walking, talking, living, breathing, illustration of the relationship between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:32).

In commanding Hosea to take an unfaithful wife like Gomer, God was demonstrating the intensely personal relationship He desires with His people. Further, He illustrated just how painful and sacrificial that relationship has always been for Him as the faithful partner.

Hosea's marriage represents God's unending love

If Hosea, a man, showed this kind of love and faithfulness to his wife while knowing her pattern of unfaithful behavior, then how much more must God love His people? How much more passionately does His affection burn even for those who time and time again walk away from Him?

God, in His love, not only pursued us in the midst of our unfaithfulness as Hosea did with Gomer; God promises His love to us forever. Threaded inseparably into the narrative of Hosea's marriage is God's promise of love for His own people. Just as Hosea was called to continue to pursue and love his wife, so God had committed Himself to His people.

► **Take a minute to list the promises God made in this passage. What promises stand out to you? Why is it important to know that God will not withdraw His love from His people?**

Gomer is purchased out of slavery

The imagery is vivid and powerful. Hosea—the abandoned but faithful husband who has every right to turn his back. Gomer—powerless to affect her situation. And then the husband, in love, paying the price to purchase the freedom of the one he loves. This passage gives us a mental picture of several relatable points to the message of the gospel.

Slavery. It wasn't just that Gomer was gone; she was enslaved. Because of her lifestyle, Gomer has found herself trapped and powerless to change her own circumstances. Instead, she was at the mercy of others.

Rescuer. Hosea had every right to leave his wife to what she deserved, but he did not. The Lord commanded him to "go" to her because there was no way she could come to him, even if she wanted to.

Price. Hosea did not buy back Gomer on emotion, sentiment, or good intentions. He didn't stand at a distance and shout about His love for her; instead, Hosea recognized freedom doesn't come cheaply, so He went with His pockets full in order to pay the price so that the one he loved could go free.

Essential Doctrines

God is Gracious: *God's nature is to delight in giving unmerited favor to those who are undeserving (Eph. 2:8-9). His grace toward sinners is found most clearly in the salvation He has provided through Christ. Because of sin, humanity is undeserving of salvation: all of us have turned our backs on God, and as a result, we deserve death (Rom. 6:23). However, instead of leaving people in their sins, God has demonstrated His graciousness by providing atonement and forgiveness for our sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus (2 Cor. 5:21).*

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YOUR STORY

- ▶ **In what ways have you found sin to be a snare that enslaves, rather than something that frees?**
- ▶ **Like Gomer, what are some sins that you keep running back to in your own life?**
- ▶ **What does the story of Hosea and Gomer teach us about God's character, especially as it relates to our own unfaithfulness to Him?**
- ▶ **What are some ways we can cultivate uncompromising devotion to God in our own lives?**

YOUR MISSION

Head

Like Gomer, you and I are enslaved to the pattern and ways of this world. We are chained by our own sin, and both because of our nature and our choices, are incapable of escaping from those chains. Like Gomer, we are on the slave block, and unless someone intervenes, our eternal destiny is set. We will be chained for all eternity as a result of our sin.

- ▶ **List some ways the prophet Hosea (whose name means Savior) resembles Jesus and His work.**
- ▶ **How does understanding the love of Hosea for Gomer help us grow in gratitude for the way God has treated us?**

Heart

This picture of the love of God stands in stark contrast to what passes for love in our culture. We love sports, movies, pets, food, actors, games, and a host of other things. We throw around the word without thinking about it; it's part of our regular vocabulary. It seems that to us, at least based on the way we use the word, love is a feeling or emotion. According to that mind-set, love is not commitment based, but sits on the shaky foundation of personal preference and taste. With God, we find the true definition of the word love. It's a definition forged not with word, but with action, exemplified by the work of Jesus on the cross.

- ▶ **How do we, based on our usage of the word in our culture, define love?**
- ▶ **How is that different than the picture of God's love we see in Scripture?**

Hands

Having been pursued and loved by God, and in light of the great personal cost to Himself, we are called to extend that same pursuit and love to others. We love because we have been loved (1 John 4:11). As in the case of Hosea, this love for others is not emotional attachment, and it's not without cost. To pursue others with the message of the gospel will be a costly endeavor—it will cost us time and the realignment of priorities. But when the cost might seem to be too great, it's helpful for us to call to mind the great cost that God Himself paid for us.

- ▶ **Why do you think God asked Hosea to marry this woman? Why was it not sufficient for Hosea to deliver God's message with words alone?**
- ▶ **How can you use the story of Hosea when sharing the gospel with someone?**

HIS STORY

God pursues a disobedient prophet

Why would someone think they could run from God? God is not like a man—His reach is boundless and His eyes move throughout the earth. Yet Jonah, despite being a prophet, decided that the call of God was so distasteful that he could get away from it if he ran far enough.

Jonah, like Adam and Eve before him, ran and hid. But God was not content to let the issue pass.

- ▶ **Has God ever called you to go somewhere or do something you found difficult to obey? What did He ask of you? How did you respond?**
- ▶ **After reading about Jonah's response, what do you think you can do to avoid making the same mistake in your own life? How can you commit to obey God immediately, no matter what He asks?**

God forgives Jonah and the Ninevites

Ironically, Jonah found himself in the exact same position as the Ninevites. He was disobedient, living in the middle of God's discipline, and he needed to repent and ask for forgiveness. He had to, in a sense, preach the message to himself that God had given him for the Ninevites. And when he applied the message to himself, he was thankful for the same character of God that had driven him to such rage days earlier. Jonah 2:7 recorded part of Jonah's prayer from inside the fish.

After Jonah's repentance, it is as if the story starts over again. Jonah was again given the same command to go and preach to Nineveh, but this time God was more explicit in the message. Jonah didn't have any improvisational freedom in his sermon, he had to say exactly what God told him to say.

- ▶ **Do you think it was difficult for Jonah to find himself in need of the same repentance God sought from the Ninevites? Why or why not?**
- ▶ **Why do you think Jonah's message penetrated the Ninevites hearts so quickly?**

God exposes the source of Jonah's anger

You've got to give it to Jonah—he was confident in the power of God's Word and God's gracious character. But you have to wonder, as the scores of Ninevites were repenting and crying out to God, if Jonah simply stood by with his arms crossed, rolling his eyes because he couldn't overcome his personal hatred and bias.

Essential Doctrines

God is Merciful: *Mercy refers to God's compassion and is often expressed in God withholding something, such as punishment for sin (Eph. 2:4-5; Titus 3:5). Both mercy and grace are undeserved, meaning that there is nothing humanity can do to earn God's mercy and grace. If one could, then it would no longer be the free gift of mercy or grace.*

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The Point: Repentance requires grieving over our sin and turning away from our sin and toward God for forgiveness.

HIS STORY

God calls His people to grieve over their sin

We don't know much about the prophet Joel, but we do know that his message from the Lord was a sober reminder about the deplorable nature of sin. In the days of Joel, an unprecedented disaster had overtaken the land of Judah, and Joel wanted to make sure no one attributed this disaster to bad luck or happenstance. This was judgment from God.

Joel gave his people a strong dose of reality. The locust swarm was meant as a wake-up call for people to recognize their sin and return to the Lord. The beginning of a return to God involves proper grief over sin.

- ▶ **Does it surprise you that God sent the locusts as a warning to His own people? Where else in the Bible did He use locusts to send a message?**

God calls His people to return to Him in repentance

In the days of Joel, God called His people to not only stop in their sin, but to turn to the only true Source of joy and satisfaction.

God promises to restore His people by His Spirit

Though the text doesn't tell us exactly what happened, the change in the mood of the rest of the Book of Joel is so dramatic that some scholars believe the people got the message. The people repented, and they began to see the compassion of the Lord played out in their land. As chapter 2 continues, we see that not only was there an immediate fulfillment to God's promise of restoration, but the text also points forward to an even greater and more lasting restoration by the Spirit of God.

Essential Doctrines

Repentance: *Repentance is a response to God's gracious call to salvation, and includes a genuine sorrow for one's sin (Luke 5:1-11), a turning away from one's sin toward Christ (Acts 26:15-20), and a life that reflects lasting change and transformation (Ps. 119:57-60). It is the human counterpart to God's work of regeneration, helping us to see what takes place from the human side of conversion.*

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The Point: God equips those
He has chosen to minister in
His name.

HIS STORY

God's plan for Jeremiah preceded his birth

These two short verses provide powerful insight into the character and power of God. Sometimes, even as Christians, we tend to think of ourselves as victims of circumstance. But if we really believe what the Bible says about God, then we must accept that God actively forms and calls us to fulfill His will.

Long before Jeremiah could walk, talk, or fully and completely formulate his thoughts, God set him apart as a prophet to the nations. Before giving Jeremiah this task, God reminded him that his days were planned from the beginning. God constructed Jeremiah for a purpose, and sent him on a mission planned well before Jeremiah's time.

► **God actively formed you and called you to a specific purpose to fulfill His plan for the world. What does this reveal to you about God's character? Your purpose in life?**

God promised to be with Jeremiah

Despite the truth of God's formation and God's call, Jeremiah was still hesitant to take on his mission. He wasn't the first reluctant messenger of the Lord, and he certainly wouldn't be the last. However, as is always the case, Jeremiah's focus was on the wrong thing when he protested.

Do you see where Jeremiah's focus was? In that single verse, he used the pronoun I three different times. Jeremiah was focused on himself—his own shortcomings, limited abilities, and inexperience. It's not unlike Moses, who also protested to God's mission, claiming that he could not speak clearly and the Israelites wouldn't listen to him.

► **How do you typically think of success? How does your view differ from God's view of success?**

► **What are some steps you can take to better align your definition of success with what it means to be successful in God's eyes?**

God equipped Jeremiah with a message

What an amazing thing to be able to say, "Thus says the Lord." Jeremiah was given the very word of God to speak throughout the land, and that word came with power. Jeremiah's message would not be empty rhetoric, but instead would be powerful because of the One who gave it. No matter what else might come in his life in the future, the weeping prophet would know that he was speaking and could stand on the very word of God.

Essential Doctrines

Evangelism: *It is the duty and privilege of every Christian and of every church of the Lord Jesus Christ to make disciples of all nations. The new birth of man's spirit by God's Holy Spirit means the birth of love for others. Missionary effort on the part of all rests thus upon a spiritual necessity of the regenerate life, and is expressly and repeatedly commanded in the teachings of Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ has commanded the preaching of the gospel to all nations. It is the duty of every child of God to seek constantly to win the lost to Christ by verbal witness undergirded by a Christian lifestyle, and by other methods in harmony with the gospel of Christ.*

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YOUR STORY

- ▶ **How often do you think about the fact that God has a plan and purpose for your life? How would doing so more often change the way you approach your daily activities?**
- ▶ **The fact that Jeremiah was known as “the weeping prophet” and Jesus wept over the state of Jerusalem should tell us something about the way we view those who don’t know God. In what ways does this affect your view of others? How will your thoughts and actions toward them change after this study?**
- ▶ **Why is it important to have your focus fixed on God instead of yourself as you attempt to live on mission for Him? What happens if our focus is misplaced?**
- ▶ **What kinds of obstacles do you see in your way to being a messenger of the gospel? How does God’s abiding presence answer those hesitations?**

YOUR MISSION

Head

These passages together remind us that we all are more than jumble of cells and tissue. If God is involved at that specific level, then there is inherent value in every human life. What’s more, we should have the same response when we look at ourselves, those around us, and the unborn. The very essence of human existence, as intricate and specialized as our lives are, is a signpost pointing us to the reality and glory of God.

- ▶ **What are some signs that might tell us that we have failed to properly recognize God’s activity in all of humanity?**
- ▶ **How does the way we look at ourselves and others change when we recognize that God has truly formed us?**

Heart

Never before has the Word of God been so accessible, and yet we are finding more and more that we do not know what it actually says. We must, if we want to follow Jesus, be people of the Word. We must treat it with care, love it, cherish it, and commit it to memory. When we do we will find that the Word of God finds its place in us, and having been established in us, it will naturally come out.

- ▶ **What habits in your life are you cultivating in order to grow your love and knowledge of God’s Word?**
- ▶ **What are some distractions in your life that might hinder you from committing to these habits?**

Hands

We start with knowing God’s Word, but then we must make the active choice to speak God’s Word. Over time, choices like this become easier, but we have to start somewhere. We have to choose to actively speak the Word of God, though it might not be well-received or popular.

- ▶ **What are some obstacles that keep you from speaking God’s truth to others more often?**
- ▶ **How does the story of Jeremiah’s calling encourage you to be more bold and confident in your task of speaking the truth to others?**

The Point: God promises to write His law on our hearts and send the Holy Spirit to dwell within us.

HIS STORY

The problem with the human heart

Looking back to the beginning of the Bible’s storyline, we recall that in that garden, everything was good and right. Then, a deceiver corrupted the word of God. Humanity believed the lie and chose to live outside the loving rule of its Creator. And suddenly, earth was radically changed. Sin had entered the world, and the effect was devastating.

Let’s not miss the fact that sin isn’t so much an action as it is a condition. It’s true, whenever we violate God’s revealed will we sin, but we do this because it’s in our nature. Put simply—we don’t become sinners when we sin; we sin because we are sinners. That’s our heritage. It’s the spiritual DNA we inherited from the parents of the human race.

► **Think of a time when trusting your feelings didn’t turn out well. What happened? In the future, how could you instead rely on the truth of God’s Word in a similar situation?**

The Promise of a heart indwelt by God

Perhaps one of the reasons the people rejected Jeremiah’s message was because they wanted to hear a different kind of good news than what he delivered. No doubt the people in Jeremiah’s day wanted to hear a message about outward prosperity, peace with the warring nations around them, and stability in their lives.

Jeremiah’s message from the Lord might not have met the people’s expectations in terms of the physical, but it cuts straight to the heart of the matter. Because our problem is far worse than we dare to imagine, the message is better than we could have dreamed.

- **What characterizes the new covenant God made with us through Jesus Christ? Why is this so important?**
- **Have you ever been tempted to follow God simply because of the desire for outward prosperity and peace or go to heaven? How is it possible for your heart to be redirected toward a deep love for God?**

The privilege of a heart that knows God

This new covenant meets us at our deepest need because our hearts are engraved with sin—it offers the promise of a new heart indwelt by God. This new covenant gives us the amazing privilege of living in fellowship with our Creator. Through this promise, we have the privilege of a heart that truly knows God.

Essential Doctrines

Work of the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Christian: *The Spirit’s work in the life of a Christian begins in the work of salvation in bringing a person to faith in Christ, and is continued through the work of sanctification in helping the Christian to become progressively more like Christ throughout the course of his or her life. He also empowers and indwells believers, intercedes on their behalf, and equips them with special gifts for the service of God’s Kingdom. He is the Comforter to the believer and aids us in properly interpreting the Bible.*

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YOUR STORY

- ▶ **How important would you say it is to you to know God right now? What are some ways you could cultivate a greater desire to know God personally?**
- ▶ **In what ways do you often think of your relationship with God? Are you ever tempted to think of Him as no more than a cosmic butler, answering to our wishes and desires? How can you guard against this in your own life?**
- ▶ **How does the new covenant benefit us? What does it do to our hearts?**
- ▶ **What do you think it means that God will forgive us and no longer remember our sin?**

YOUR MISSION

Head

God's plan was not new to God, but it was new to the people. For generations, the people had a history of trying and failing, never being able to live up to the written code of God's covenant. God was merciful time and time again, pursuing them to bring them back to Him. Even so, the old covenant only imposed the law, while doing nothing to empower the people to keep it. However, in the new covenant, God would not only provide the knowledge of His will, He would also write it within the new hearts He gave to His people.

- ▶ **What are some the implications of God residing within you?**
- ▶ **How does knowing you have a new heart change the way you approach obedience to God?**

Heart

This new covenant isn't written on tablets or paper, but in our hearts. Paul commented on this reality in 2 Corinthians chapter 5. In verse 17, he wrote "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away, and look, new things have come." When we believe the message of the gospel, the old person we once were dies, and we are spiritually resurrected with Christ. Our new self, with a new heart, has new desires, new tastes, and most importantly, a new Master. No longer are we imprisoned by sin; instead, God indwells our hearts through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

- ▶ **Worldly wisdom will tell people "trust your heart" or "believe in yourself." How do the passages in this session challenge this way of thinking?**
- ▶ **Why is it important for us to understand we don't only commit sins, but are sinful in nature? How does this knowledge impact the way you understand the effects of the gospel?**

Hands

Knowing God is a two-sided coin. The first side of the coin is our personal relationship with God—a return to intimacy with God as seen in the garden. The other side of the coin is the desire to make God known. This is also part of our return to God's original intent for humanity. Adam and Eve not only knew God, they were also given the job of reflecting God and making much of Him in everything they did. Like them, we are called to spread the glory of God throughout the earth, making the gospel of Jesus known to everyone around us.

- ▶ **How has this session encouraged and challenged you when it comes to your own relationship to God?**
- ▶ **How has this session encouraged and challenged you when it comes to reflecting God to those around you?**

The Point: God patiently pursues sinners, but those who harden their hearts will one day face judgment.

HIS STORY

Zedekiah ruled with a hardened heart

The final downfall of Israel had been set in motion through the hardened heart of their ruler, which was a reflection of the hardened hearts of the people. This text tells us the true source of Zedekiah's actions: He was not acting out of a sense of national pride or noble desire for independence. Instead, he was living out the natural way of his hardened heart.

One of the sure signs of the hardening of one's heart is pride. In this text we see Zedekiah's pride running out of control, symptomatic of his hardness of heart. In retrospect, we can look at the situation he found himself in. He was a puppet king installed by the Babylonians. His army was not large enough to counter the Egyptians, much less the Babylonians.

- ▶ **Have you ever witnessed someone who had hardened their heart toward the will of God? What happened?**
- ▶ **Have you ever noticed yourself taking this same path? How can you guard yourself from this in the future?**

Zedekiah rejected the word of the Lord

Despite his hardness of heart, Zedekiah still had the sense to speak to Jeremiah the prophet of God. At this point, he evidently realized that God might have something to say about the trajectory of the nation. But when he approached God's prophet, he received a message of judgment.

Jeremiah told the king the truth, but the question remained: How would Zedekiah respond to God's truth? Would he persist in his hard-heartedness, or would he return humbly to the Lord, accepting the word of God from the prophet? The response to God's Word is the next progression in spiritual downfall. If spiritual downfall begins with hard-heartedness, the next step on this downward spiral is our reaction to God's Word. When God's Word calls us to repentance, we can either humbly accept what He says or ignore His Word and continue on our own path. The latter was the path that Zedekiah chose both for himself and the nation under his care.

Judgment came against the people's hardened hearts

No doubt the weeping prophet's reaction was different than Jonah. Jonah, who so earnestly desired God's judgment to come on Ninevah that he said he would rather die than see the Ninevites come to repentance, shed no tears over God's judgment. But Jeremiah embodied the heart of the Lord. Time and time again, even up to the end with Zedekiah, Jeremiah offered a way to postpone the wrath of God. He called out for the people to return to the Lord up to the end.

Essential Doctrines

Sin as Transgression: *The word transgression means to cross over or to pass by, and is often used in reference to transgressing God's explicit commands. When God gives a specific command, as He did with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, and when that command is disobeyed, transgression has taken place (Rom. 5:14; 1 Tim. 2:14). In this sense, sin is law-breaking.*

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YOUR STORY

- ▶ **In your own words, what is hardness of heart? What are some of the ways you can identify if your heart is becoming hardened?**
- ▶ **How does our response to God's Word serve as an indicator to the condition of our hearts?**
- ▶ **In what ways does it motivate you to know God desires none to perish? How does it change the way we see the judgment of God?**
- ▶ **In what ways should believers today be like Jeremiah—weeping over the state of our world while delivering God's message to people? In what ways are believers today different from Jeremiah?**

YOUR MISSION

Head

Lack of repentance walks hand in hand with pride. Zedekiah had every opportunity to repent, or return to the Lord. He could have listened to the council of Jeremiah, humbly acknowledged the Word of the Lord, and demonstrated that acknowledgment by turning away from his own wisdom and coming back to the Lord. However, Zedekiah was convinced his way was right, and he felt no need to turn away from it.

- ▶ **Why do you think pride comes along with hardness of heart?**
- ▶ **What are some of the active ways we can help each other fight against pride?**

Heart

In both the previous session and this one, we clearly see that the heart is deceitful. Because of this, diagnosing what's truly happening inside you is an incredibly difficult thing. For this reason, David prayed and asked the Lord to diagnose his heart for him: "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my concerns. See if there is any offensive way in me; lead me in the everlasting way" (Ps. 139:23-24).

- ▶ **When has God revealed to you some uncomfortable truth through His Word?**
- ▶ **How did you respond? What do you think your response communicated about the condition of your heart?**

Hands

Another sign of hardness of heart in these verses is the lack of distinction between God's people and the rest of the nations. From the beginning God planned for the people of Israel be a people of distinction on the earth. They alone would shine forth His glory as a kingdom of priests set apart specifically for the Lord. But in the days of Zedekiah, "all the leaders of the priests and the people multiplied their unfaithful deeds, imitating all the detestable practices of the nations" (2 Chron. 36:14a). In other words, they abandoned their distinction as God's people and began to follow the ways of everyone around them instead.

- ▶ **Why do you think God desires His people to be distinct and set apart from the world in the way that they live?**
- ▶ **What are some ways God has called us to be distinct from the world around us?**

The Point: God's Word is capable of bringing life where there is none.

HIS STORY

Ezekiel has a vision

This valley was a picture of death and desolation. Not only was it filled with bones—these bones were dry, completely devoid of life of any kind. We could not imagine a more hopeless scene.

The Lord asked Ezekiel a simple question when confronted with this scene: “Can these bones live?” When Ezekiel saw the picture of death, he knew the only way the bones could live was if God did something miraculous. No matter how much those bones might have wanted to live, they were powerless to change their situation. Can these dry bones live? You alone know, Lord. And you alone can do it.

► **Imagine you were Ezekiel. How would you respond to such a vision? How would you look at God, God's people, and your mission differently?**

God's Word is capable of bringing life where there is only death

Ezekiel's people had failed to heed the Word of God when it came to them through the prophets. Because of their failure to listen and obey, they found themselves in exile. Even the pagan nation of Babylon, though they might not have recognized it, only had the power they possessed because God allowed it to be so.

Here, though, Ezekiel saw the power of God's Word to restore life. At the command of God, Ezekiel began to prophesy. First there was the noise. Only a slight rumble at first, but the rumble grew to a roar. There was the clacking of bone on bone as these once-dry bones suddenly began to form into recognizable shapes. Then there was the sound of skin covering the newly formed skeletons. And then came the breath of life, blowing like the wind into the valley.

God promises to do the same for His people

In a strange way, the exile was not just evidence of God's judgment; it was evidence of His faithfulness. If God had not kept His promise of judgment, then perhaps He would not keep His other promises either. But because God kept His word, doing exactly what He said He would do, the people could look to this vision, at this time, and know that God still keeps His promises. Here, He promised that this exile was not the end.

Essential Doctrines

Resurrection: *Both the Old and New Testament teach that one day believers will experience a resurrection of the body from the dead (Isa. 26:19; Ezek. 37:12-14; John 11). The promise of the resurrection is found in the resurrection of Christ from the dead, and will take place at the future return of Christ. Because Christ was the first fruits of the resurrection, Christians can be assured that their resurrection will be similar in nature, meaning it will be both bodily and glorious (Rom. 8:22-23; Phil. 3:20-21). The hope of the future resurrection gives Christians confidence that death has been defeated in the death and resurrection of Christ.*

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YOUR STORY

- ▶ **What kinds of questions do you think the people of Israel were asking about God? How would this vision have given Ezekiel's people hope?**
- ▶ **In what ways does God's promise to restore Israel give us confidence in His faithfulness? What does the Lord's promise here show us about the nature and character of God?**
- ▶ **Share about a time when God's Word brought spiritual awakening in your own life.**
- ▶ **How does it encourage you to know that even when we are spiritually dead, God still pursues us with the life that only He can bring?**

YOUR MISSION

Head

This valley of desolation represents Israel in exile. It also reminds us of what our hearts are like before we trust in Christ. We are in exile from God our Creator, dead in our sin, separated from God. "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins in which you previously walked according to the ways of this world, according to the ruler who exercises authority over the lower heavens, the spirit now working in the disobedient. We too all previously lived among them in our fleshly desires, carrying out the inclinations of our flesh and thoughts, and we were by nature children under wrath as the others were also" (Eph. 2:1-3).

- ▶ **What is the value of recognizing the danger you were once in before you become a Christian?**
- ▶ **How does acknowledging that danger change the way you look at the gospel?**

Heart

The hope of restoration does not belong only to the exiles living in Babylon. We claim the same hope of experiencing restoration, the restoration that comes through Jesus Christ. How are we made alive? In the New Testament, Paul reminded us that it's through hearing and believing the Word of God that we are spiritually resurrected, saying "faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the message about Christ" (Rom. 10:17). When we hear the Word of the gospel spoken, something begins to happen inside of us. Our hearts, hardened because of our sin, suddenly begin to soften until we are also standing anew before God.

- ▶ **How does it change your perspective on the gospel when you see yourself as coming alive at the Word of God?**
- ▶ **What are some of the implications of this truth when it comes to our own attitudes and approaches to being in God's Word?**

Hands

God's Word is powerful enough to bring life out of death. Notice God didn't speak directly to the bones; instead, He commanded Ezekiel to do it. Ezekiel, then, became the mechanism that God used to bring life from death. In turn, the prophet had the amazing privilege of seeing it happen before his very eyes. Likewise, we can have a similar experience when we freely share the good news of the gospel. Like the prophet speaking over a valley of dry bones, we have been commanded to speak the words of life to those dead in sin.

- ▶ **Why is it important that Ezekiel spoke the Word of God over the dry bones before they came to life?**
- ▶ **How does this story motivate you to become better equipped in sharing the Word of God with others?**
