# The Blessing God's Promise, Our Purpose



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Written by Molly Wall

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#### Acknowledgements

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# **A Message for Translators**

We hope this manual will benefit many peoples in their quest to know and experience God's story. Our primary aim is to make this material available to as many as will use it, in a way that honors everyone involved in the work. For this reason, we grant you permission to translate this work into languages other than English, free of charge, and without soliciting our written permission, in accordance with the following conditions:

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# A Message for Group Leaders or Instructors

We designed this material for study in a group setting, whether through formal classroom instruction or informal discussion and training. However, the material may also be used for individual study. For the information you need to use this material effectively, please see page 173, *Appendix A: For Leaders—How to Use This Resource*.

# How to Study the Bible to Be Transformed

A people group, community, family or individual can only experience transformation when there are radical changes in their views of the world. A people must seek and find better answers to the basic questions of life. All people groups of every generation seek answers to these questions.

- » The **Bible** answers these questions for us:
  - » Who are we? Where do we come from? What is our purpose?
  - » What has gone wrong with humanity and the world?
  - » What is the solution or the way out?

God's answer to these life questions is at the heart of the Great Story revealed in the Bible.

When we come to each story or passage of text in the **Bible**, we face an opportunity to encounter God and experience His transforming power. This is no small matter and we must begin with reverence and open hearts.

Understanding the **Bible** is something God makes possible for every man, woman and child to do today. "*Ears that hear and eyes that see—the LORD has made them both*" (Proverbs 20:12).

The steps for study we outline below come from Jesus' teaching to the disciples in Matthew 13:15. They will guide you through the process of opening your heart and mind to God so that He might transform you, your family, and your community, through the study of His story as He reveals it through the **Bible**.

When we come to each story or passage of text in the Bible, we face an opportunity to encounter God and experience His transforming power.

#### "... they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears...." (Matthew 13:15)

Step One: When we come to a story or passage of text in the **Bible**, we first put aside all the things we think we know or understand about God, about humanity, and about the world.

If we do not open our hearts and put aside our boastful knowledge, we cloud our eyes and ears with messages from our own culture and from God's enemy. We must put our own ideas aside enough that we are able to truly see what is in this part of the **Bible**.

- » We ask:
  - » Who are the characters?
  - » What are the important events?
  - » What do humans do and say in this story?
  - » What does God do and say in this story?
  - » What thoughts, feelings, decisions and actions do those in the story experience?

Step Two: As we think of questions, we look for answers in the story itself. Engage in conversation with the story.

We often must read or listen to a story several times to see and hear all the information the author includes. We begin to hear how the story breaks into sections marked by key ideas, words, or phrases the author repeats. We begin to identify the important thought of each section of the story, then the important thought of the story or passage itself, and we are ready for what God does next.

#### "... they might...understand with their hearts...." (Matthew 13:15)

Step Three: Once we hear and see the truth revealed in what a story or passage of text tells us, we are able to discover what it means. God transforms our minds and beliefs as He reveals truth to us.

Each story or passage we study in the **Bible** was included by its author for a reason. There is a meaning or message God wants us to understand.

- » To discover that message or meaning, we ask:
  - » Why does the author include this story or text in this place?
  - » How does it fit with the other stories that come before or after it?
  - » If you were the author, what message would you be trying to give?
  - » If you were one of the original readers or hearers of this story or text, what message would you understand?
- » To help you understand more about the meaning, ask:
  - » How is God at work in this place, among this people, to restore His good relationship with all peoples?
  - » How is God at work in this place, among this people, to restore His righteous rule over all kingdoms?
  - » How is God at work in this place, among this people, to make His name and reputation known to all peoples so that they may honor and follow Him?

Step Four: Only when we understand the meaning of a story or passage can we begin to understand it with our hearts.

When we understand the original message of a story or text, we can translate that message into our own culture, to our own people and our own generation. If we seek to understand the message in this way, we will gain more than just information. We will gain true understanding of God's message, revealed to our hearts.

"...if you...[apply] your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God" (Proverbs 2:1-5).

#### "... and turn..." (Matthew 13:15)

Step Five: When God reveals His truth and His message to us in the stories and texts of the **Bible**, they touch our minds and hearts in a way that compels us to respond.

After Jesus reveals God's truth and message to the crowds, He asks them to repent and **believe** (Mark 1:15). When we repent, we turn away from **seeking our own way**, and turn towards seeking the way of God. When God reveals truth in the stories and texts of the **Bible**, we recognize Him asking us to repent and **believe**.

- » We ask:
  - » Does this story or text contain a new truth for me to believe?
  - » Does it correct an error in my previous understanding?
  - » Does it reveal a new attitude I must adopt or a new command to obey?
  - » Does it reveal a sin or destructive behavior I must give up?
  - » Is there an example I must follow, or one I must avoid?
  - » Is there a promise I must believe and remember?
  - » Is there a prayer I must pray?

As we repent and turn, we remember the warning James gives, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does" (James 1:22-25).

#### "... and I would heal them." (Matthew 13:15)

Step Six: When we repent and believe, God restores us to good relationship with Himself. God heals us. He transforms us. He invites us to share the truth of this story and text with others.

When God heals us, we reflect His image to others. Our hands do His good and loving deeds, our mouths speak His truth, our feet carry us throughout the world to bless all peoples. When we are healed we have life, and we share that life with others.

Healed families and communities reflect God's righteous kingdom to all peoples. Our relationships demonstrate love and forgiveness. Our families bring strength and honor to our people. Our community prospers and overcomes evil and suffering, replacing them with good works. When our families and communities are healed we bring the **kingdom of God** near to others.

God heals and transforms us in this way if we are faithful to study the stories and texts in the **Bible**. Every lesson in this material contains key stories designed for you to study in this way. Each story reveals God's truth and important messages for all people and for your people. Follow the six steps outlined above each time you approach a story. Expect God to heal and transform you through this process.

The Blessing: God's Promise, Our Purpose

# Introduction

#### **The Great Story**

History is the **Great Story** of God at work among the peoples of the earth. It is the story of God restoring His rule over His creation. It is the story of God blessing and transforming entire peoples. It is the story of God displaying His glory to and through His creation and receiving worship from all He has made.

God reveals His **Great Story** to humanity through the words and deeds of His followers. Entire groups of peoples recognize their part in the story. They worship Him. They reveal His glory on earth. They join in His work in the world. This **Great Story** transforms thousands of peoples and individuals—Europeans, Asians, Africans and Latin Americans.

God reveals His story all through history. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, men and women recognize it. Obedient prophets and servants of God preserve the meaning for us. We hold that inspired record in our hands—the **Bible**.

All peoples must discover how their story is part of God's **Great Story**. We designed this course so that your people might recognize how your story brings glory to God, then help others discover the same.

#### The Bible Reveals the Story

The **Bible** is not just a collection of stories, myths and fables. It is the most trustworthy book of all time. In its pages, the **Bible** tells about Creation, including the creation of humanity. It reveals how evil enters creation and how humanity responds to the Evil One. It reveals God's **promise** to overcome evil and restore His rightful rule over creation.

It tells of God's love, and how all peoples can have their relationship with God restored through the **Promised Son**, Jesus. The **Bible** reveals the **Great Story**—past, present and future.

More people have wanted to read the **Bible** than any other book ever written. They can read it now in over 1,700 languages. The hard work and sacrifice of those who made God's Word available to us in our own language inspires us.

#### A Story for All Peoples

Two men on the road to Emmaus, confused by events that just happened in Jerusalem, hear a story from Jesus that changes their lives. "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, (Jesus) explained what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27).

Soon after they hear His story, the events in Jerusalem make sense to them. Jesus opens their eyes and they recognize Him. His story connects these followers' lives to God's **Great Story** (see Luke 24:30-32). Stories still capture our minds and hearts. They make it easy for new truths to take root in our lives.

In the **Great Story**, we find the early parts to our own peoples' story. We find meaning to the stories unfolding in our day, both for us individually and in the life of our people. We find understanding for both the difficult and wonderful parts of our story.

People—alienated from their Creator, unaware of His love and work—wander off to **seek after their own way**. By their own efforts, they try to find meaning and **purpose** in life. They are on a path that leads nowhere. They become corrupt in their thinking and behavior. They exchange a lie for the truth of who they are and why God created them (Romans 2:25).

We designed this course so that your people might recognize how your story brings glory to God, then help others discover the same.

Humanity's deepest need is to turn away from **seeking after its own way** and return to the way of the Creator God. Returning to God gives us new **identity** as members of His household. This **identity** gives us honor. It gives us value. It also gives us **purpose**: to connect others to the **Great Story**.

Prophets of the Old Testament and apostles of the New Testament recognize God's **purpose** in their day. They understand God reveals truth and writes history. They believe God controls history and completes it according to His **promise**.

This truth changes their lives and they become His followers—ambassadors and servants who worship Him and make Him known on earth.

Our **purpose** as God's people is to realize our place in His **Great Story** in our own generation. The most freeing, life-giving experience is to know and worship the Creator God, to recognize His work in the world, then to offer ourselves for the completion of His story on earth. He makes us for this **purpose**.

Jesus says, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to finish His work" (John 4:34). Can we say the same about our lives today?

#### The Great Story is the Whole Bible

How do you use your **Bible**? For many people, it sometimes feels overwhelming to read and understand the **Bible**. They do not take time to hear it or learn from it.

Others turn only to the last part of the book, the New Testament. This is like starting in the middle to tell a story. Much of the story's meaning is lost. We must know the beginning of a story to understand it fully.

Others choose parts of the **Bible** they want to study, and focus only on that which interests them. These people may have an incomplete understanding of a story and miss the truth. We look to the **Bible** to meet our needs. We find comfort when we hurt (I Peter 5:7). We find spiritual food to help us grow (II Timothy 3:16-17). We find guidance for the future (I Corinthians 2:9-16).

The **Bible** is a good resource for us. But if we use it only as a resource for our needs, we may miss the overall message it reveals.

Every book of the **Bible**, and even each small story inside every book, is a part of God's **Great Story**. Two themes work their way from the beginning of God's Word to the end.

- God's purpose for all peoples is to worship and follow Him (Genesis 3:15, 12:1-3 through Revelation 7:9-12).
- The **Promised Son**, Jesus, makes a way for blessing to flow to all peoples (Genesis 3:15).

In this way, God restores His rule over humanity, and over all His creation.

It is easy to miss the **Great Story** when we only focus on the concerns of our own lives. Few people connect their own stories and the story of their people with the **Great Story**. Few people understand this story gives us our **identity** and **purpose**, for which we work and give our lives.

As you work through the pages that follow, let God connect you now to the **Great Story** for life. Begin on the first page of the **Bible**, where God begins His story to us. The Blessing: God's Promise, Our Purpose

# Chapter 1

## **The Early Story of God's People**

"Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth" (Psalm 46:10).

Chapter 1 introduces us to the early characters and events of God's **Great Story**. Through these characters and events, we meet the central themes. When we discover these themes of the **Bible**, the whole **Great Story** makes sense. Our understanding of the whole **Bible** and the world around us deepens.

It takes time and careful thought to read and understand the **Bible**. We do not understand the **Great Story** without studying the smaller stories it contains in order. We follow the story as it passes from one era to the next, from one people group and language to another. As we see it develop, we see God's **promise** fulfilled from one generation to another, throughout history up to our own day.

> Lesson 1. God Reveals a Promise Lesson 2. Abraham and God's Covenant Lesson 3. The Hebrew People and God's Covenant

### Lesson 1. God Reveals A Promise

#### The Creation and the Fall



#### **STORY FOR STUDY: GENESIS 1-2**

"...God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters" (Genesis 1:1-2). God bursts forth and speaks His creation into being. He looks at all He makes and sees it is good (Genesis 1:3-25). God continues creating and makes a man—the first man, Adam—in His own image. To Adam, He gives the first woman—Eve. God blesses them and enjoys relationship with them (Genesis 1:28). They worship Him and enjoy Him deeply. God sees that what He has created is very good (Genesis 1:31).



#### STORY FOR STUDY: GENESIS 3:1-7

One of the most significant characters in all world history enters the story as a serpent in Genesis 3. The Evil One—Satan—is God's adversary. Satan asks Eve, "*Did God really say...?*" He deceives and distorts the words God speaks. In doing this, he reveals his rebellion against God and his own purpose for humanity. Satan is at war with God. Adam and Eve choose to disobey God and join the Evil One in his rebellion, a cosmic conflict that rages through all human history.

Beginning in the Garden of Eden, this conflict between the **kingdom of God** and the kingdom of darkness continues to our day. The reality of this conflict touches every man, woman and child, every day. Because of the rebellion of Satan and the disobedience of Adam and Eve, **life is a war** between these two kingdoms.

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: GENESIS 3:8-24**

Immediately after they disobey, Adam and Eve hide in shame. They are afraid of God and shamed by their wrongdoing. What will God do to them? If God were human like us, He might choose to destroy man and all His creation, including Satan and the kingdom of darkness. He has the power and the right to do this when His creation rejects and dishonors Him.

God's character is certainly righteous and just, but it is also loving and merciful.

God acts with a **purpose** that will both affect all peoples and defeat the kingdom of darkness. God seeks out Adam and Eve and **promises** He will "...*put enmity between (Satan's) seed and (Eve's) seed*" (Genesis 3:15).

God reveals His intention to fight and win the war so that His creation might worship and enjoy Him again. He also reveals His strategy for victory, which involves sending a **Promised Son**. The Great Story is the story of God at work in the world to restore humanity and to restore His kingdom rule.

God intends to bless humanity by removing our

shame of rebellion and disobedience and **restoring us once again to a good relationship with Him** in His kingdom. He intends to destroy the kingdom of darkness and **restore His rule over all creation**.

God is active in the war. He never loses control over history. He never leaves humanity or the world alone. It is all to His glory—that He may be known, worshipped and enjoyed by all peoples (Psalm 67).

The **Great Story** is the story of God at work in the world to **restore humanity** and to **restore His kingdom rule**. God will **restore followers to good relationship with Him** from among every people. God will **restore His rightful rule over all kingdoms**, all creation. This is His **purpose** for all history and all peoples. The **Bible** reveals how He fulfills this **promise** from one generation to the next, even up to our day.

When we open our eyes to see the **Great Story**, we understand God's love for all peoples is actually the whole message of the **Bible**. This understanding reveals many things to us about our own people and our **purpose**. Reflect on your own life. How does your peoples' story connect with God's **Great Story**? How are your people still **seeking after their own way** and rebelling against God?

"Now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation" (II Corinthians 6:2). Turn from **seeking after your own way**, reclaim your **identity**, and fulfill the **purpose** God intends for you. "Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only" (Luke 4:8).

#### » Tell about the **Great Story**:

- » How does it begin (Genesis 1:1, 31)?
- » What is the problem (Genesis 3:1-13)?
- » How does God **promise** to solve the problem (Genesis 3:15)?

- Sod's purpose is to restore. What two destroyed possessions of His does He seek to restore?
- » What is the **Bible**? How does the **Bible** relate to the **Great Story**?
- What does it mean to say "life is a war between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness?"
  - » Who is at war?
  - » Who starts the war? What do we know about the character of this being?
  - » Who is the real enemy?
  - » How does the war end?
  - » How does this war between the kingdoms affect your family, your community, or your people?

#### Saving Faith—What is it?

We clearly understand from God's **Great Story** that He requires His followers to demonstrate **faith** that He will restore a good relationship with them. Hebrews 12:1 says **faith** is "*being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*" As you study the smaller stories within the **Great Story**, watch for the many examples of **faith** demonstrated by the people of God.

God continually invites people back into a good relationship with Him:

- By asking them to **believe** Him and His **Promised Son**,
- By having them demonstrate **faith** both in His ability and in His **promise** to save them from the rule of the kingdom of darkness, and
- By giving them opportunities to **obey** or act on that **belief** in the context of their own lives and families.

**Obedient belief** in God's **promise** pleases Him because we depend on Him alone. **Obedient belief** is confidence in God's **promise** and in His character. **Obedient belief** saves us from the fate of those who disobey God. This is why some call it **saving faith**, or a **faith that saves** (Luke 7:50, Ephesians 2:8, James 2:14).

Regardless of when we live on earth, we must all put our **belief** in the **Promised Son**, Jesus Christ. Today, we can know what His life is like, and what His death and resurrection mean for humanity and for God's **purpose**. We know Jesus removed the shame of our sin, overcame the sting of death, and made it possible for God to restore His good relationship with us.

We also know Jesus will come again to rule God's kingdom at the end of the age. This has not happened yet but, by **faith**, we **believe** it will. By **faith** we **obey** God and follow His commands, sure of what we hope for because of the finished work of Jesus. This gives us confidence in what the future holds: God

will accomplish His work on earth, just as He says He will.

As we study the **Great Story**, we find examples of men and women who demonstrate **saving faith** in the **promise** God makes of a seed: the **Promised Son** (Genesis 3:15). For a good list of these examples, read Hebrews 11. Jesus' work fulfills God's **promise** for all peoples.

#### **The Flood**

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: GENESIS 6-9**

Many of Adam's descendants begin **seeking after their own way**, following their own wicked desires rather than honoring God, until the "wickedness of man was great on the earth... every intent of the thoughts of his heart (were) evil continually" (Genesis 6:5).

Humanity's behavior saddens God so much that He decides to destroy His creation with water. He does not forget His original **promise** to restore and rule (Genesis 3:15). He cannot allow His **promise** to go unfulfilled. By sparing the family of a righteous man, Noah, He allows His **purpose** to go forward (Genesis 6:6-8).

Noah's family survives the flood and God promises never to destroy all life by water again (Genesis 9:12). A very short time later, however, Noah's family sinks into wrongdoing (Genesis 9:21-22). Within a few generations, the people begin **seeking after their own way** by trying to honor themselves and make themselves famous instead of honoring the Creator (Genesis 11:4), the Most High God.

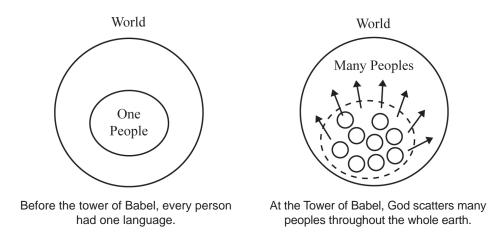
God again intervenes in history to move His **purpose** forward for the people He loves.

#### The Tower of Babel

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: GENESIS 11:1-9**

At that time, every person had one language. Together, they rebel against God and seek great fame for themselves. At the Tower of Babel, God divides the people into many separate people groups, so that each one speaks a language different from all others (Genesis 11:6-9). They no longer communicate as one group.

From that time until our day, these many people groups have divided into thousands more, speaking many different languages and following many different traditions. Some count over 24,000 people groups in the world today.

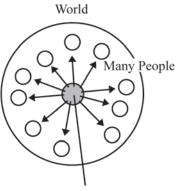


By dividing humanity into separate groups, God prevents them from continuing to rebel together. He also changes the way He communicates with humanity. From Babel until our day, God speaks with people in their separate groups, through their separate languages and traditions, rather than speaking to them as one group. Watch for examples of this as you study God's story.

#### God's Plan to Restore All Peoples

After Babel, God reveals more to humanity about His **plan** to reach out to all the peoples of the earth. He plans to select one special people out of the many He creates. He blesses that people, shares more with them about the **Great Story** and the **Promised Son**, then tells them that all the other people groups will be blessed through them.

God's **plan** begins with Abraham's family and continues until our day. God's **plan** will continue until Jesus comes again at the end of the age. In lesson 14, we learn how many people groups already know God's story. We also learn how many people groups are still waiting for God to reveal His story to them through His people.



God selects one people to receive his blessing and bless all other peoples.



#### **STORY FOR STUDY: REVELATION 7:9-17**

We know all the peoples of the earth will hear the **Great Story** before the end of the age. Jesus says, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all (peoples), and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14). In Revelation 5 and 7, we see how the story ends—John's great vision reveals that many people from "*every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues*" gather before the throne of Jesus to worship Him. God accomplishes His **purpose**.

While that day may be close, it is also yet to come. We find ourselves somewhere in the middle of God's story. What does this mean for us as God's people? If we recognize that **life is a war** between kingdoms, and if God has given us a new **identity** as citizens of His kingdom of light, then we have an amazing opportunity. God invites us to live in such a way that our story connects with His story once again, just as it did in the beginning.

God invites us to live in such a way that our story connects with His story once again, just as it did in the beginning.

In war, there is no neutral ground. Jesus says, "*He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters*" (Matthew 12:30). Either we participate with God in His work or we assist in Satan's rebellion against God.

- What is God's plan for restoring His relationship with all the people groups of the earth? How does the story end (Revelation 22:1-5)?
- >> How does participating with God to carry out His plan define our own identity and give our people purpose?

#### **Humanity Worships God**

God creates us to worship. All of humanity worships someone or something. Some people worship using complicated rituals. Others worship by offering gifts. Others seek out special people and pay them to worship for them. Others do not believe in God. They worship themselves or their possessions. They **seek after their own way**.

The Most High God desires and commands our worship. Worship means to honor, praise, adore and obey. We worship God by making Him the ultimate ruler of our lives and our people, giving Him everything we have and everything we are for His use.

Worship has two parts: what we see and what we do not see. We cannot see what is on the inside of a person. God sees the inside. There is only one type of true and **acceptable worship**. God desires worship that starts with a right attitude. He is less concerned with specific actions. People are free to worship God according to their traditions. To learn more about **acceptable worship**, hear what Jesus says in Matthew 23:25-28, Mark 12:38-40 and Mark 12:41-44. The attitude of the heart is important to Him. Look for ways God's people worship Him throughout the **Great Story**. Watch for what is important to God about every people's worship.

#### **Explore the Scriptures**

- » Read Genesis 3-11.
- » Answer the following questions about God's **purpose**:
  - » How does God act to **restore His good relationship with humanity** in this part of the **Great Story**?
  - » How does God act to restore His kingdom rule?
  - » How does Satan try to prevent God from carrying out His **purpose** to restore?
- Answer the following questions about humanity's response to God. Tell about our identity.
  - » How does humanity participate in the war between God's kingdom and the kingdom of darkness?
  - » How does God reveal Himself to humanity and communicate with them?
  - » How does humanity respond to God's revelation?
  - » How do the people of God honor and worship Him, both as individuals and as a community?

#### **Reflect on What God Teaches You**

What has God revealed to you in lesson 1 about Himself, His purpose and your people through this study of Genesis 3-11?

# Pray God Accomplishes His Purpose through You and Your People

- » Ask God to reveal to you specific things you and your family can do to participate with Him in carrying out His **purpose** to **restore His relationship with all peoples**, and to **restore His kingdom rule** on earth.
- » Share the things God reveals with your family and with others who study this course. Commit to pray this week for direction and guidance in these areas.

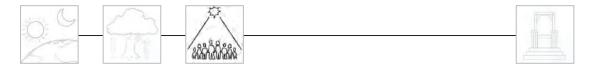
# Lesson 2. Abraham and God's Covenant

Do you realize if our ancestors had not listened to Satan and rebelled against God we would probably not need a **Bible**? There would be no **promise** to trace through the Old Testament. There would be no **Promised Son** to expect and no resurrection victory to proclaim.

Instead, we would still be sharing life face to face with God as part of His family. God would rule His good kingdom without opposition and we would be in a loving relationship with Him, worshipping Him unhindered by our shame and sinfulness.

Because of our rebellion, God's love compels Him to set a **plan** in motion and carry out His **purpose** to restore. He reveals this **plan** to those who listen and obey. In Genesis 12, God selects one man and his family to reach all the families of earth. He selects Abraham's family to be the one to bless all others.

#### The Family of Abraham Receives the Blessing of God



#### STORY FOR STUDY: GENESIS 11:10-12:9

Abraham has a very intimate relationship with God. God speaks to Abraham. Abraham hears God's command and says "Yes" to His call. His journey begins with a relationship with His creator and an act of **obedience** (Genesis 12:4).

God invites Abraham and his family to become His partners and to join Him in carrying out His **purpose**. Abraham and his family have a God uses one righteous man and his descendants to bring the Great Story to all.

big task ahead. God works through this family to share His story with the other families on the earth.

Beginning with Abraham, God's story becomes a story of one people reaching out to another people, bringing them back to worship the Most High God, their Creator.

God uses one righteous man and his descendants to bring the **Great Story** to all. He sends them out with the blessing they receive to be a blessing to all the other families. This is His **plan** to bless all the peoples of the earth.

God interacts personally with individuals, speaking to their hearts in order to restore them to a good relationship with Himself. When restored individuals begin living in a way that honors God, whole families can be renewed in their relationship to God. Families begin joining other families and God restores them to righteous living within the natural community where He places them. Through communities living by **obedience** and **faith**, God restores entire people groups and societies.

God desires a good relationship with all the people groups on earth, and He works through individuals—in their families, in their communities—to restore all peoples.

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: GENESIS 12:1-3**

God makes a covenant with Abraham and his descendants. A covenant is a special agreement. Much like a contract or partnership, a covenant

God's covenant with Abraham shows us how He works in and through the traditions of Abraham's own people. identifies the duties each individual or group agrees to do. Each person must fulfill his part of the agreement or there will be consequences.

God reveals more about His **promise**. He tells Abraham He will make him the father of a great people. He promises to bless him materially and spiritually. God's part of the covenant includes making Abraham's name or good reputation

known to all and using Abraham to bring glory and honor to Himself. He promises to bless those who bless Abraham and curse those who curse him. God's blessing restores Abraham to good relationship in the security of God's family.

At the same time, God instructs Abraham to leave his own country and go to a land that God will show him. He tells Abraham He will bless all of the peoples of the earth through him and his descendants.

God loves Abraham and wants to bless Him. But He does not want to bless only Abraham—He wants to bless one man and his family so that they will bless the other families of the earth. God begins working through His servant to accomplish His **purpose**.

- What is God's covenant with Abraham? What does God promise to do? For what is Abraham responsible?
- What does God's covenant with Abraham reveal about His purpose to restore His relationship with humanity and to restore His rightful kingdom rule?

#### God Values the Traditions of Abraham's People

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: GENESIS 15**

God seals His covenant with Abraham using a tradition common among Abraham's people: splitting animals in two pieces and passing between the two halves (Genesis 15). Later, God seals the covenant again by using another tribal tradition commonly used among several ancient people groups including Abraham's: circumcision (Genesis 17:9-14).

God speaks to Abraham according to the traditions of his people. When Abraham meets God, he is already part of a people group. His people have their own customs and traditions regarding food, language, worship rituals, and more. These traditions make up Abraham's **natural identity**—the **identity** of his people, into which he was born.

God's covenant with Abraham shows us how He works in and through the traditions of Abraham's own people. God does this even though the traditions of Abraham's people are no more holy than the traditions of any other people group. He does this so that Abraham understands Him. God also does this so that Abraham may keep his **natural identity** and continue living as part of his own people. Not everything about the traditions of Abraham's people is pleasing to God, but God knows how to speak through the good that is there.

Why does God seal the covenant with Abraham according to the tradition of his own people?

#### STORIES FOR STUDY: GENESIS 12:5-9, 22:9-14 and ROMANS 4:3-25

Abraham worships God using worship rituals of his people such as sacrificing animals, building altars, or stretching himself out face down on the ground in God's presence. He takes his family away from their home to a new land because God tells him to do so.

When Abraham follows God, God gives him a new **identity** as a member of His family and His kingdom. Abraham lives according to his **natural identity** on the outside, but his heart changes on the inside—he chooses to align himself with God and His kingdom. Because Abraham **obeys** God, he begins to live his life differently.

As the story continues, Abraham learns to live by some traditions of the other peoples he meets in Canaan and Egypt. Even when Abraham adopts some new traditions on the outside, he always worships the Most High God in his heart. His true **identity** never changes. Paul tells us it is not what Abraham does that makes him a righteous man. It is Abraham's **faith** that makes him righteous (Romans 4:3-25). It is the attitudes and motives of his heart, which only God can see, that make his actions **acceptable worship**.

This is important for us to understand because God values the traditions of every people group. He rejoices in the variety of all the **natural identities** of the different people groups. In our day, He still communicates with people through their own traditions as He does in Abraham's day. We will see more examples of this later in God's story.

#### » What is Abraham's **natural identity**?

We understand that in reality, we cannot divide our **identity**. We are human, and both natural and spiritual at once. In this course, we use this way of thinking about our **identity** to help us understand the difference between the following two things:

- The different traditions people follow on the outside (their **natural identity** part of an earthly people or family group).
- The way we are all the same on the inside (**true identity** part of God's people or family, or else part of the rebellion).

We hope this distinction will be useful to you, even while it an imperfect means of describing our human experience.

- >> How does Abraham worship the Most High God according to the traditions and customs of his own people, even when his people use these traditions to worship other gods?
- What does God reveal about Himself with regard to human customs and traditions?
- » How do we offer **acceptable worship** to God?

#### Abraham's Family and the Covenant (Genesis 12-50)

#### STORY FOR STUDY: GENESIS 26:1-5 and GENESIS 28:10-17

God repeats His covenant four times in Genesis: two more times to Abraham, once to Isaac, and once to Jacob (Genesis 18:18, Genesis 22:16-18, Genesis 26:2-5, Genesis 28:13-15). We find God's covenant repeated, in fewer words or with different words, nearly 400 times in the **Bible**. For example, it is in Psalm 72:17, Isaiah 49:6, Jeremiah 4:2 and Zechariah 8:13.

This covenant reveals God's **promise**—the unchanging **promise** He fulfills through Abraham's descendants. This includes Abraham's physical descendants—his family, the Hebrew people group, and even his descendant, Jesus. It also includes all the people of God who are the spiritual descendants of Abraham: the followers of Jesus in our day.

God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12 is an early announcement of the Great Commission Jesus gives His followers thousands of years later (Matthew 28:19-20). Jesus commands them to "*make disciples of all nations*." This is also God's command to Abraham and his descendants, that they bless all the other families or people groups of the earth. All who follow the **faith** of Abraham in every generation are heirs of God's covenant **promise** and command.

Sod's Covenant is with Abraham and all his descendants. The Bible tells us that we who follow the faith of Abraham are Abraham's descendants (Romans 4:16-18). What does it mean for your people to be heirs of the covenant promise God made with your ancestor Abraham?

#### STORY FOR STUDY: GENESIS 16 and 21:8-20

God chooses Abraham's son, Isaac, to fulfill His covenant **promise**. Remember that God chooses Abraham and his family to be a blessing

to other people groups not because He loves them more, but because He loves all peoples and He wants to use Abraham's family to reach them.

God cares about and has just as much love for Abraham's first-born son, Ishmael, and for Hagar, his mother. God loves the descendants of Abraham through Ishmael, too. God speaks to Hagar through His angel in her time of distress, encouraging her and blessing her son with strength and fruitfulness (Genesis 16:10-16). All who follow the faith of Abraham in every generation are heirs of God's covenant promise and command.

Abraham also asks God to bless Ishmael, whom he loves. God also promises Abraham that Ishmael will be both fruitful and the father of a great people (Genesis 17:18-20).

Many people groups and families trace their ancestry to Abraham through Ishmael. They, too, are the peoples of the earth that God loves and wants to bless through His covenant **promise**. Abraham loves all the members of his family and understands they are also part of God's story, even when they play different roles. We must understand this, too, and join in God's loving **plan** to bless the many Arabic people groups descended from Ishmael.

#### Saving Faith—Abraham, Friend of God

A braham may not meet Jesus on earth, but God fulfills His **promise** to Abraham in Jesus. God's covenant with Abraham's family includes a **promise** that all peoples will receive blessing through Abraham's descendant. That descendant is Jesus.

Abraham does not know the details of the **Great Story** or how God writes history to fulfill His **promise** of salvation and blessing. Still, Abraham **believes** God and looks forward to the **Promised Son** (the "seed" of Genesis 3:15) who will come. Jesus says, "*Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad*" (John 8:56).

Abraham obeys God's commands based on this belief. This is his saving faith.

God credits righteousness to him through the work of Jesus Christ (Genesis 15:6, Galatians 3:6, Revelation 13:8). God brings salvation and blessing to Abraham and his family through Jesus Christ, by **faith**, because of his **belief** in God demonstrated by his **obedience**.

The apostle Paul writes that God announces the **Good News** in advance to Abraham (Galatians 3:8). Did Abraham hear and believe the **Good News**? What is the **Good News**?

We often have modern definitions of the **Good News** that include many specific **beliefs** about God and His Son, Jesus. Jesus preaches the **Good News** before He dies and rises from the dead. What is the **Good News** Jesus preaches?

Paul calls the covenant **promise** to Abraham—that all the peoples will be blessed in him—the **Good News** preached to Abraham. He says that Abraham **believes** this **Good News**.

God restores us to relationship with Him through **faith** in Jesus—whether we look forward to the **Promised Son**, as Abraham did, or backward to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, as we do now. We demonstrate this **faith** through our **belief** in God's **promise**, and our **obedience** in worship.

#### **God Reveals Himself to Other Families**

Genesis provides the record of God fulfilling His **promise** through His people. The smaller stories usually focus on God, His people and His **plan**. But there are also stories of others, among other people groups, who know and worship the Most High God.

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: GENESIS 14:17-24**

The king of Salem, Melchizedek, meets Abraham after a difficult battle. The king brings Abraham food and drink, blesses him, and blesses God. Though he is not part of Abraham's family, Melchizedek is a priest of the Most High God (Genesis 14). God restores His good relationship with this king before he encounters Abraham or his family.

#### STORY FOR STUDY: GENESIS 20 and 21:22-34

Abimelech is another king who lives in Abraham's day. Though he is not part of Abraham's family, God speaks to him in a dream. Abimelech listens to and speaks to God (Genesis 20). Abraham sees the outside acts of the people in Abimelech's kingdom and wrongly decides that nobody fears God there (Genesis 20:11).

God is always at work revealing Himself in every people group. We find people who

worship the Most High God in even the most unexpected places. These people might be eager to hear the story we bring them about God and His **purpose** for their people.

#### **Explore the Scriptures**

» Refer to the smaller stories found in Genesis below.

Genesis 1:1-2:3	Genesis 11:1-11	Genesis 25:19-34
Genesis 2:25-3:24	Genesis 12:1-3	Genesis 37:1-11
Genesis 9:20-29		

» Answer the following questions about God's **purpose**.

- » How does God act to restore His good relationship with humanity in this part of the Great Story?
- » How does God act to restore His kingdom rule?
- » How does Satan try to prevent God from carrying out His **purpose** to restore?
- > Answer the following questions about humanity's response to God. Tell about our identity.
  - » How does humanity participate in the war between God's kingdom and the kingdom of darkness?
  - » How does God reveal Himself to humanity and communicate with them?
  - » How does humanity respond to God's revelation?
  - » How do the people of God honor and worship Him, both as individuals and as a community?

#### **Reflect on What God Teaches You**

- What has the Holy Spirit revealed to you about the identity of your people through this study of Genesis 1 through 50 in lessons 1 and 2? Share what you have learned with your family and others in your study group.
- » Think about blessings.
  - » What is a blessing?
  - » What does it mean to speak a blessing to someone?
  - » What does it mean to receive a blessing from another?
  - » What does it mean to bless another people group?

#### Pray for the Families of the Earth

- Think about this: If God's plan is to bless a people so that they can bless other people groups, then Satan's plan must be to attack that people and stop the blessing. In what ways do your people experience Satan's attack? God has blessed your people, and He desires that through your people the other peoples of the earth will receive God's blessing. Pray that:
  - » God's protection for your own people extends to even the fourth generation.
  - » God's healing, peace and restoration will be upon your people, on each family within your people group.
  - » You have authority to fight against Satan's attack on your people, and each of the families in your people group.
- Ask God to reveal to you the people group He would like to bless through you. Begin to pray regularly for them.

# Lesson 3. The Hebrew People and God's Covenant

#### The Birth of a People (Exodus 1-15)

As the story continues, God grows a large people from Abraham's household.

#### STORY FOR STUDY: GENESIS 37, 41 and EXODUS 1

Abraham's family grows in size and fame in the land of Canaan, but a famine comes to the land and almost destroys them. How does God save them? Years before the famine, Jacob's sons sell their brother, Joseph, to slave traders who sell him in Egypt. But God uses this shameful situation in Jacob's family to advance His **plan**.

Over time and through much suffering, God raises Joseph to a position of power in Egypt. When the famine comes, his family—Abraham's descendants—finds safety there. Even though Joseph is a blessing to the nation of Egypt, over time the Egyptians forget Joseph's name, good reputation and service to them.

The Egyptians force Joseph's descendants into slavery. This time of oppression is harsh and painful for them. God blesses them by allowing them to grow in numbers without having their own land. By the time Moses is born about 400 years later, Abraham's descendants are a large nation. We know that nation as Israel, or the Hebrew people group.

God intends for the Hebrew people—the people descended from Abraham through Isaac and Jacob—to bless all the other peoples, just as His covenant **promises**. The Hebrews bring blessing to Egypt through Joseph's leadership. The Hebrews also bless Egypt by sharing the **Great Story** of the Most High God. Some Egyptians choose to follow Him. But God's **plan** is to use the Hebrew people in a greater way.

#### STORY FOR STUDY: EXODUS 2:23-4:17 and 5:22-6:8

God chooses to send Moses, a Hebrew who is raised in the palace of the Egyptian king, to reveal His power and make His name and glory known throughout the earth. The God of the Hebrews does this by proving Himself through mighty deeds and miracles to be more powerful than all the Egyptian gods (Exodus 7-12). God proves all-powerful over all nature by parting the Red Sea (Exodus 14).

Through these deeds, God makes Himself famous throughout the known world (see Exodus 9:16, Nehemiah 9:10, Psalm 106:8, Isaiah 63:10-12, Jeremiah 32:20, Daniel 9:15, for examples).

Why does God make His name known? When people seek fame it is prideful and boastful. But God is not like us. He is completely good. It is not boasting for God to make Himself known as good. It is truth. He wants to be known for being a good, loving and just God. He wants more people to know and worship Him. He wants this for everyone because He loves all the peoples of the world.

#### God Works Through Moses in a Special Way

Moses has a **natural identity** that includes the traditions of two different people groups. He is born into one group, the Hebrew people. He also learns the ways of the Egyptians (Acts 7:22) because the family who raises him in the palace is from that people group. He is a Hebrew, a descendant of Abraham, and considers the Hebrews his people (Exodus 2:11). He learns the Hebrew traditions from his mother, who is his nursemaid in the palace. Being a Hebrew is part of his **natural identity**.

Moses communicates well with both Hebrews and Egyptians. Both people groups accept him as one of their own. Moses does not plan this. But, because he is comfortable with both traditions, God has a special use for Moses.

Throughout Scripture, God uses other people like Moses to accomplish His **plan**. Paul and Timothy are other examples of individuals whose **natural identity** includes the traditions of two or more people groups. While God uses any person who **obeys** Him, we know He uses people like Moses in unique ways to fulfill His **promise** to bless all peoples.

Are you a person like this? Does your **natural identity** include the traditions and customs of more than one people group? Pray that God reveals to you how your unique **identity** plays a role in His **Great Story**.

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: EXODUS 19:1-9**

God powerfully delivers the Hebrews from Egypt. Then He reminds them of His covenant **promise** given to Abraham, their ancestor (Exodus 19:4-6). He reminds them that He blesses them by allowing them to grow into a great people and by delivering them from slavery in a miraculous way.

God says they will be a **kingdom of priests** and a **holy nation**. This defines their **identity** and **purpose**. As a **kingdom of priests**, they serve God, receive His blessing and make Him known among the peoples. They help others be restored and reconciled to God. As a **holy nation**, they reflect the goodness, love and holiness of God by how they live, both as individuals and within the community. They glorify Him as the one and only good and righteous God.

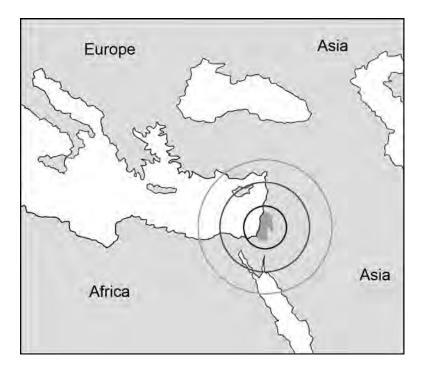
To help them know more about living as a **holy nation** in His **kingdom**, God gives them the Law through Moses (see Exodus and Leviticus). This Law teaches them to honor and worship God with all their heart, soul, and might (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). They learn how to live rightly and lovingly with one another and how to dwell righteously in the land He gives them (Leviticus 19:18).

Some parts of the Law are very similar to laws used by the other people groups living around the people of Israel. Other parts are unique to God and His **kingdom**. The Law shows that humanity is not perfect—that we will sin. It shows people how to cope with personal sin and with the sins of the community in a righteous way. The Law is part of God's **plan** to make the people of Israel a blessing to all people groups.

- What does it mean for God's people to be a kingdom of priests? What role does God expect His people to have as priests?
- What does it mean for God's people to be a holy nation? What does this tell us about our identity as His people?

#### **God Dwells Among His People**

God dwells in a tabernacle in the midst of His people now called Israel. Israel becomes a bridge between God and the people groups dwelling around them. Through Joshua, God blesses Israel with land and—through King David's family—with a righteous political kingdom to rule. These blessings are part of God's **plan** to use Israel to bless all peoples.



The land God gives to Israel is located in a place where three continents come together: Africa, Asia and Europe. Ezekiel calls it "*the center of the land*" (Ezekiel 38:12). Peoples from all over the world pass through this area as they trade and migrate. In this way, God

blesses the kingdom of Israel with opportunities to bless many peoples.

By watching Israel's actions and hearing Israel's message, all nearby people groups can know the Most High God. This **plan** works when Rahab, in Jericho, meets and follows the God of the Hebrew people

God blesses the kingdom of Israel with opportunities to bless many peoples

(Joshua 2:8-11, 6:25). The **plan** works with Naaman the Syrian (II Kings 5:15), Ruth the Moabitess (Ruth 1:16-17) and others from nearby people groups.

#### The Glory of God

When we speak of God's glory we speak of His person, power, beauty and value. We are talking about His honor. To glorify God is to first experience His beauty, value and power, and then to make Him known to those around us and to all the peoples of the world.

God reveals His glory through His creation, through His Word and through the peoples who worship Him in Spirit and in truth (John 4:23). We return glory to Him by honoring Him among the peoples with our lives—our words and deeds—so others also can know Him, worship Him and join in His work.

"Sing to the LORD all the earth; proclaim His salvation day after day. Declare His glory among the nations, His marvelous deeds among all peoples. For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; He is to be feared among all gods" (I Chronicles 16:23-25).

Solution Solution Solution Control Control

#### Israel and the Kingdom of God

#### STORY FOR STUDY: I SAMUEL 15; 2 SAMUEL 7; I KINGS 8:22-61



The Hebrew people ask for a king. After the first king fails to obey

Him, God chooses a special individual, King David, to establish a righteous kingdom on earth for Israel. God expects this kingdom to act as a **kingdom of priests** and a **holy nation**. He expects this kingdom to reveal truth about the **kingdom of God** which Jesus reveals more fully

at His birth (Psalm 99, Matthew 4:17).

Starting with Abraham, the task given to the people of Israel was a sacred task—to represent the Most High God among all the peoples of the world.

As with Abraham, God blesses King David. This blessing is not only for Israel's sake. God expects them to fulfill the covenant and bless all peoples. God uses this kingdom, under David's son, Solomon, to draw the queen of Sheba to Israel where she learns of Israel's famous God (I Kings 10:1). Through Israel, God attracts other peoples to Himself.

The temple built by Israel's kings—the place of God's dwelling in Israel's midst set apart for special ceremonies and religious practices—is also for all peoples. In the temple, there is room for peoples other than the Hebrews to come and pray before God. (See Solomon's prayer to God for dedication of the temple in I Kings 8:41-43.)

In Isaiah 56:6-7, God again reveals His desire for all peoples to worship at the temple of Israel. In Matthew 21:13 and Mark 11:17 when Jesus quotes this Scripture, He is angry that the Hebrew people do not allow the other peoples access to the temple courts dedicated to them. Starting with Abraham, the task given to the people of Israel was a sacred task—to represent the Most High God among all the peoples of the world.

- >> How does God fulfill His promise to bless Abraham and his family during the part of the Great Story from Abraham to Solomon's day as they grow from a family into a large people, then a nation and a kingdom?
- >> How does God carry out His purpose to restore His good relationship with humanity and to restore His kingdom rule through the Hebrew people during this part of the Great Story?

#### Saving Faith—Israel, Kingdom of God

God expects the people of Israel to bless all peoples. What is the blessing Israel brings? It is the Good News of God's Great Story. This story is the story of all peoples. God chooses the people of Israel, through their father Abraham, to share the story with all peoples so that they might worship and follow the Most High God, allow Him to restore their good relationship with Him, and join Him in advancing His **plan**.

Through the people of Israel, God reveals His kingdom. The way God interacts with the people of Israel reveals His nature, character and deeds to the surrounding people groups (I Chronicles 16:7-36). They tell of God's saving power and the **Good News** that humanity may call on God to receive it (Genesis 4:26, Romans 10:13). They tell of His **promise** to bless all peoples. They tell of the **Promised Son** who will destroy the kingdom of darkness and provide a way for humanity to be restored to God. They tell of God's victory at the end of the story and His return to rule His kingdom (Psalm 67, Micah 4:1-4).

Throughout history, men, women and children receive salvation by demonstrating **belief** in the Most High God, by placing their **faith** in His ability to save them through the **Promised Son** and by **obediently** submitting to His **kingdom** rule in their lives and families.

The New Testament reveals more of the story—information about how God fulfills His **promise** through Jesus. But the people who live before Jesus have as much confidence as we have that God saves them.

Long before Jesus comes to earth, one righteous man says, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end He will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see Him with my own eyes...how my heart yearns within me" (Job 19:25-27).

#### The Hebrew People Forget the Covenant and Disobey God

God commands that there be a **kingdom of priests** and a **holy nation**. A small group of faithful servants and prophets that **obeys** and worships God exists throughout Israel's history. We can read their stories in the Old and New Testaments in places such as Hebrews 11.

Sadly, Israel does not always choose to **obey** the commands of the Most High God. Many times, they turn from Him to worship other gods. The kings that follow David and Solomon lead the people in rebellious deeds, and the people gladly follow. They **seek after their own way**. They even begin to sacrifice their own children to other gods (2 Kings 16:3).

The people of God take the blessings God gives and begin to build a name and reputation for themselves rather than making God famous.

Again, the people of God take the blessings God gives and begin to build a name and reputation for themselves rather than making God famous. Israel largely forgets God and His covenant requirement to bless all the peoples. It seems God's **plan** to use one people group to bless all the peoples of the earth ends. What will God do with His rebellious people this time?

#### **God's Plan to Restore All Peoples**

God does not forget His covenant with Abraham. He still keeps His **promise** to use Abraham's descendants to bless all peoples, even if He must do it by force. Let us see how God accomplishes this.

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: JONAH**

God sends the prophet Jonah to a nearby people group. The Assyrian people are enemies of Israel who oppress them. Jonah, a prophet of God, needs to have an attitude toward the Assyrians that is humble and loving, not superior or arrogant. He receives the blessings of God for his own people, but is unwilling to bless this other people group, who are his enemies on earth (see Jonah 1-4).

We see or meet people like Jonah today who receive God's love but will not share it with those of another caste, race, religion or social position, especially with those who have caused them harm. No matter what our reason may be, we must depend on God for the power and humility to love and forgive others. We must remember the covenant and obey as He commands.

#### STORY FOR STUDY: 1 KINGS 16:29-17:24 PROPHECY FOR STUDY: ISAIAH 42:1-9 and 49:1-6; JEREMIAH 3:6-4:4; DANIEL 9:1-19; HAGGAI 2:1-9

For many years, the people of Israel go back and forth **obeying** and disobeying God. For a while they serve God. Then, for a very long time, Israel turns her back on God and goes her own way. God's people are like an unfaithful wife. God's prophets work very hard to ask the people of Israel to turn from **seeking their own way**. They ask them to go back to God and back to walking in paths of righteousness. Sometimes it works. Many times it does not.

You can find the messages of these prophets preserved in the Old Testament. Most of the prophets speak only to Israel, though some prophets speak to other people groups, too.

In time, God judges the people of Israel. They come first under the power of the Assyrian people then, later, under the power of the Babylonian people. Eventually, the people of Israel wander the earth, living among many different people groups.

God sends prophets to the leaders of Israel to remind them of the covenant, and of their true **identity** and **purpose**. When the leaders repent and turn towards God, He blesses Israel. When the leaders refuse to repent, God removes His hand of blessing from Israel.

#### STORY FOR STUDY: 2 KINGS 17:5-23 and 24:1-25:21

The people of Israel fail to fulfill the covenant requirements, and fail to sincerely serve God. God's punishment is to send them into exile, scattered among the peoples. This results in their blessing by helping

them finally turn away from the worship of idols and **seeking their own way**, and turn back to the worship of the Most High God. After the period of exile, the people of Israel never worship idols again.

But the punishment of exile also provides a way for Abraham's descendants to fulfill God's covenant responsibility to bless other peoples. In His mercy, God restores His good relationship with the people of Israel so His **plan** can go forward. Many peoples of God judges and punishes the people of Israel, allowing other peoples to take them away from their land as captives. This punishment is difficult, but God will accomplish His purpose.

Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, and other nations finally encounter the Most High God through the words and deeds of the exiled communities of God's people living among them.

In their new lands, the people of Israel again follow the Law and honor God. Many other peoples who see them begin to worship and **obey** the Most High God. This prepares the way for the coming **Promised Son** and the spread of the **kingdom of God** throughout the world.

God judges and punishes the people of Israel, allowing other peoples to take them away from their land as captives. This punishment is difficult, but God will accomplish His **purpose**.

>> How does God use the punishment of exile to bless other peoples after the people of Israel stop obeying God and participating in His plan? What does this reveal to us about the character of Most High God?

#### **Explore the Scriptures**

» Read one or more of the following passages

Exodus 5:1-2; 7:1-5, 17 Exodus 8:10, 18-19; 9:13-17, 29 Deuteronomy 4:5-8 I Kings 4:29-34; 10:1-9 Esther 8:15-16 Daniel 6:16-28

- » Answer the following questions about God's **purpose**.
  - » How does God act to restore His good relationship with humanity in this part of the Great Story?
  - » How does God act to restore His kingdom rule?
  - » How does Satan try to prevent God from carrying out His **purpose** to restore?

- Answer the following questions about humanity's response to God. Tell about our identity.
  - » How does humanity participate in the war between God's kingdom and the kingdom of darkness?
  - » How does God reveal Himself to humanity and communicate with them?
  - » How does humanity respond to God's revelation?
  - » How do the people of God honor and worship Him, both as individuals and as a community?

#### **Reflect on What God Teaches You**

- Why do you think Israel disobeys God's covenant command to bless all peoples? Why do you think they ignore God's purpose for them and their responsibility in that purpose?
- Do you think the people of God in our generation forget the covenant requirement, too? Do you think we miss God's purpose for blessing us and miss our responsibility in that purpose?

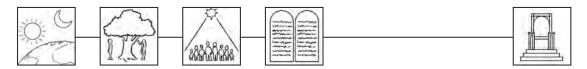
#### **Pray for Repentance**

Ask God to reveal any ways you or your people receive God's promised blessing but forget to bless others as He commands. Repent and ask His forgiveness. Recommit to be part of His covenant **promise** to bless you so that you can bless others.

# Apply What You Learn

# Share the Great Story

Gather your family and share the **Great Story** revealed in the Old Testament record. Use the illustration below as a guide to help your family understand the main events and plot of the story. Help them see God's love for your family, community, and your people. Help them see God's desire for your family to carry on the covenant responsibility given to your forefather Abraham.



When you meet again with your study group, discuss together your experience as a storyteller.

- Did your family see that their own story connects to God and His Great Story? How did you help them see this?
- » What new things did your family learn while they listened to you?
- » What new things did you learn while you were telling the story?

## **Be Transformed**

Knowing God requires knowing His story well. We must learn to see His hand at work in the world around us today and through all of history. Are you committed to knowing God and His Word intimately? Are you committed to studying each of the smaller stories in order, so you may fully understand the message of the **Great Story**?

If you have not done so already, set aside a time each day or week for **Bible** study with your family. Begin working through the smaller stories of the **Great Story** in order, from the beginning, following the unique way the **Great Story** unfolds from generation to generation. See *How to Study the Bible to Be Transformed* for a guide to help you study the **Bible**.

(continued on next page)

# **Get Involved**

God blesses us so that we can be a blessing to the peoples of the earth. Reflect together with your study group on ways your people group already fulfill their covenant responsibility to bless all peoples. If you are not already involved, list some ways to participate in God's **plan** for the world. First consider the following.



Pray for God's kingdom to come and His will to be done on earth. Pray for the peoples of the world who do not worship Jesus and pray for those who go out to bless them (Acts 12:12, Romans 14:30-31, II Corinthians 1:8-11, Ephesians 6:18-20, Philippians 1:19). Pray for the restoration of God's rule over all creation and pray for His people who work to overcome evil with good (Micah 6:8, Romans 12:21, Ephesians 2:10, James 1:27).



Find people from other people groups living in your village or city. Welcome them to their new home. Bless and serve them in a way that makes God's name and character glorified among them (Leviticus 19:34).



Who from among your people will go out to share the **Great Story** and blessing with other peoples (Matthew 28:19)?



Care for those who go out from your people to bless others. Care for their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs (Philippians 4:15-20).



Share the **Great Story** with others from your people. Challenge your own family and friends to join God in carrying out His **purpose**. Connect those who go out to those who will pray and care for them.

# Chapter 2

# The Story of Jesus Alive on Earth

"...when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman..." (Galatians 4:4)

When the majority of Abraham's descendants and the people of Israel choose to **seek after their own way**, God allows nearby kingdoms to force them into exile and scatter them among many other people groups. It may seem that God's **plan** of blessing the Hebrew people to be a blessing to other people groups ends badly. If we look more closely, however, we see this is not the case.

Chapter 2 introduces more characters and events of the **Great Story**. Beginning with a birth, God brings to light the most significant character of all, a Hebrew son called Jesus.

Lesson 4. Jesus is the Long-Awaited Promised Son Lesson 5. Jesus Reveals the Kingdom of God Lesson 6. Jesus and God's Covenant

# Lesson 4. Jesus is the Long-Awaited Promised Son

The New Testament record continues the **Great Story** with the birth of Jesus, the coming **Promised Son**. Since God's first **promise** to Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:15), humanity **believes** and looks for its fulfillment. God can choose to fulfill this **promise** at any time in history, yet He carefully designs the time and the place for Jesus to enter the world as a human.

What makes this particular time and place so perfect? We must pick up the story hundreds of years before Jesus' birth to find answers to this question. God mercifully works in the world through many people groups to prepare for the coming **Promised Son** and the spread of the **kingdom of God**.

## God Prepares the Way for Jesus by Making His Name Known

At many times in the **Great Story**, God receives glory throughout the world from true worshippers among many people groups. Over time, peoples begin **seeking after their own way**. They forget God and allow Satan to distort much truth about Him. After the Hebrew people become the political nation of Israel ruled by a king, they also begin **seeking after their own way**.

When God's people no longer worship Him or reveal His glory among the peoples, many people groups forget God throughout the world. God acts to make His name known once again.

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: DANIEL 1-6**

While the Israelites live among other peoples, they have opportunities to speak about the Most High God and demonstrate His power. Daniel does this with the Chaldeans, the Babylonians and the Persians. Esther, Ezra and Nehemiah do this in Persia. In some cases, even the rulers of these kingdoms praise and honor the Most High God through the witness of faithful Israelites (Daniel 4:34-37, 6:25-28). In some cases, God calls these rulers His servants and works through their words and deeds as well (Isaiah 44:28, 45:1-17).

God works through His faithful servants to be a blessing to other peoples, even when those servants are oppressed, held captive and treated badly.

» How does God act to make His name known on earth before the time of Jesus?

During the 700 to 800 years following the first exile, the people of Israel finally begin to make their God known among other peoples. In this way, God makes Himself

known throughout the world once again. We have record of some of the Israelites' experiences in Babylon and Persia (in Daniel and Ezekiel, for example), but little record of their exile among other people groups.

The Old Testament record stops about 400 years before the birth of Jesus. From other historical documents, however, and from New Testament references, we learn how God uses the Jews to bless and reveal God to the peoples of the world among whom they live.

The temple at Jerusalem is the worldwide center of Jewish worship for centuries. It is the place where God dwells among His people. When God sends the Jews into exile, invading armies destroy the temple. Jews scatter throughout the world, far from the temple or a tabernacle. Where

does God dwell? How do His people worship Him?

God's people begin to meet together in synagogues in the foreign lands where they now The Jews learn that in truth, God dwells among His people, not in buildings made with human hands.

live. Synagogues are centers of group worship established wherever communities of Jews live. The local families meet at the synagogue for prayer and community events. The heads of each family lead the community. They meet together to help one another have **faith** and be **obedient** to God, to hear from the Holy Scriptures and to worship God together.

Because the Jews follow Abraham's tradition of worshipping and honoring God together with others from their own family and household (see Genesis 18:19, Deuteronomy 6:6-9), they can continue that practice while living in foreign lands.

Scattering the Jewish community does not destroy the **kingdom community**, or the community of God's people. The Jews learn that in truth, God dwells among His people, not in buildings made with human hands (1 Kings 8:27). The center of daily devotion to God is their own household and local community, not a temple building.

We know there are many synagogues around the Roman Empire (parts of Africa, Asia, and Europe) by the time Jesus comes to earth. During this time, God scatters the Israelites widely and uses them to bless many other people groups. He uses them to make His name known throughout the world once again.

- » Where does God dwell on earth? Where does God dwell among your people?
- **»** What is a **kingdom community**?

# God Prepares the Way for Jesus by Working Through Other People Groups

A people that **seeks after its own way** seeks fame, power, and wealth on earth. Yet even while political nations disobey God and practice evil to accomplish this, God often works through them to accomplish His great **purpose**.

During the years before Jesus comes, Greek becomes the most common language used in the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire at this time included parts of Europe, Africa, and Asia. Faithful servants of God translate the Old Testament Hebrew scriptures into Greek. Today we

God works in all peoples, at all times in history, in order to accomplish His purpose for the world. call this Greek translation the "Septuagint" or LXX. Jesus and His followers read and study this Greek translation in addition to Hebrew and Aramaic texts.

*for the world.* The Greek translation of Scripture allows people in synagogues all over the Roman world, both Jews and others, to study and hear the Scriptures in a language they understand. Even though Greek is not the mother tongue of many people, it is a trade language through which God can reveal His story. A Greek translation of the Scripture prepares the way for many to receive the message of the coming **Promised Son**, Jesus (Acts 8:26-40).

God uses a widely known trade language and a translation of Scripture to reveal the **Great Story** to many people groups that do not speak Hebrew. Many years later when Latin becomes a widely known trade language, faithful servants translate the scriptures into Latin. This also allows many peoples to learn the **Great Story** in a language they can understand.

During the years before Jesus comes, Romans build good roads from the city of Rome in Europe to many parts of Europe and Asia. They open good sea routes to parts of Africa. Jews who are no longer captives in foreign lands travel these same passages to centers of business. There they share truths about God among the people groups with whom they work and live.

Other Jews travel these roads to return to Jerusalem for feasts and holy days at the temple in Jerusalem after it is rebuilt (see Nehemiah). Later, Jesus and His followers, and Paul and the other apostles, use these same roads and sea routes to make their way to "*the ends of the earth*" (Acts 1:8) with the **Good News of the kingdom**.

God uses the technology of the Roman peoples to spread the **Great Story** to many people groups. The Romans build these roads for their own glory and fame, but God uses them for His glory and fame. God works in all peoples, at all times in history, in order to accomplish His **purpose** for the world.

>> How does God prepare the way for Jesus and His followers through the work of other peoples during the years before Jesus comes?

# The World at the Time of Jesus

In the time of Jesus, the Jews see the peoples of the world in two groups: themselves (Jews) and everybody else (Gentiles). Jesus interacts with people in both these groups. Later Paul and the other apostles do, too. To understand the stories of the New Testament we must understand a few things about both these groups.

#### Jews

Jews are the natural or physical descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob. In the Old Testament record they are also called the Hebrew people or the people of Israel. There are different groups of Jews: the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, the Zealots and others. Each group holds different opinions on God, the Scriptures, and the **Promised Son**, but they all worship the God of Israel.

Jesus is born to a Jewish family that traces its ancestors back through King David to Abraham (Matthew 1, Luke 3). The twelve apostles He selects are Jews. Jesus spends most of His time on earth with other Jews.

#### Gentiles

Gentiles are not natural descendants of Abraham like Jews. They can be spiritual descendants—and part of God's people. Jesus says, "*I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven*" (Matthew 8:11). Rahab, who helps God's people, is a Gentile (Hebrews 11:31). King David's ancestor, Ruth, is a Gentile (Ruth 1). Jesus spends time with Gentiles. He loves and serves Gentile peoples and teaches His followers to do the same.

#### STORY FOR STUDY: ROMANS 1:18-2:16

At one time in the **Great Story**, all people know the Most High God. However, since the time God scatters humanity at the Tower of Babel, many forget about Him. Eventually, lies replace the truths people once knew about God.

People turn to **seeking after their own way**. This clouds the truth about God. But the truth is not completely hidden. God is always at work in every people group.

At the time of Jesus' birth, Gentile peoples all over the world still need to be reconciled to God. They need the truth of the **Great Story** revealed again within their people group.

They need to be reminded of what they forgot—that they are God's people, that He loves them and wants them to worship Him, and that they have a part to play in His story.

We see later in the **Great Story** how some of these Gentile groups learn about God's story and are restored to relationship with Him, joining His work in the world. Today many Gentiles worship God. Unless your ancestors are Jews, your people are a Gentile people.

- >> How do a people who worship God become a people who forget God and worship false gods, idols, or distort the truth about Him? What things must your people do to be sure you do not become a people who disobey God and forget about Him?
- If we know that all peoples at one time know and worship the Most High God, even if they now forget Him, how does this affect the way we view other people groups who are not yet reconciled to God in our day? How does this affect the message and story we bring to them to bless them? How does this affect they way we serve and honor them?

#### Gentiles Who Worship the Most High God

When Jesus comes, Jews have two ways of describing Gentiles who worship the Most High God: proselytes and God-fearers.

Proselytes are Gentiles who want to follow the Most High God, and who choose to leave the way of their own people and adopt the Jewish way of life. The Jews in Jesus' day require this change of any Gentile wanting acceptance within the Jewish community.

These Jews require Gentiles to follow Jewish law and traditions completely. They must change their lifestyle, their customs, their friends or community. Often their morals and their ways of thinking must change, too (see Matthew 23:15, Acts 2:11, 6:5 and 13:43, for example).

The Jews misunderstand God's **plan** for all peoples, and will not accept Gentiles as true worshippers of the Most High God unless they first change their outward appearance. They forget that God does not look at our outward appearances, but at our hearts. They think that without changing **natural identity** to become like the Jewish people, God will not give Gentiles a new **identity**.

Some Gentiles are attracted to the Jews and to their God and desire to worship Him. However, unlike the proselytes they do not want to leave their own people and become like Jewish people. The Jews call these people God-fearers or devout persons. They allow them to visit the synagogue for meetings if they stay at the back of the room and do not speak. This does allow many Gentiles to hear about God from Scripture. Imagine how excited the God-fearers are when the apostle Paul brings them the message that God fully accepts them in His kingdom even when they keep the **natural identity** of their own people. Imagine how free they feel when they recognize their peoples' story is part of the **Great Story**, too.

#### Gentiles Who are Attracted to the Jews

It is curious that so many Gentiles are attracted to small communities of Jews scattered throughout the Middle East, North Africa, Europe and into Asia and Africa. What makes the Jews so attractive to Gentiles? Why do they want to learn more about the God of the Jews? Why are some even willing to leave their own people and become like the Jewish people?

While some Gentiles probably see God performing miracles through Jews, most are probably attracted to the **kingdom communities** because of the way they live. Compared to the Gentile communities, the Jews—while still sinful—are comparatively successful within their families and households.

Sending Jesus to earth is not a new plan in the Great Story. It is the next step in God's amazing plan—a plan He forms from the beginning of time.

They care for one another well and they manage their affairs effectively. These things allow them to prosper. The orderly aspect of their lives is attractive to some Gentiles who may believe the lives of their own people are meaningless and immoral. Even though many Jews do not fully follow God as He desires, by practicing His good Law they reveal God's holy, loving and merciful character. The events Gentiles see confirm God's Word they hear. The Gentiles are attracted to the Most High God.

- Reflect for a moment on the kingdom community within your own people and how attractive you are to others. Does your family and community stand out from the people groups around you in ways that attract others to you?
  - » Do you live differently than people who worship other gods?
  - » Are your families and households more loving and in better order?
  - » Do you manage your affairs more honestly and carefully?
  - » Do you handle sin and conflict with humility, repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation (John 13:35)?
  - » Has your **kingdom community** separated itself from others in ways that may offend and dishonor them, whether in your dress, diet, or traditions?
  - » Do you reveal God to others by loving and serving them as Jesus loves and serves them?
- Reflect on ways the kingdom community within your people might attract others through your love for one another, your deeds, and the presence of God and His Word dwelling among you.

As the **Great Story** continues, keep in mind the different people groups with whom Jesus and His disciples interact—Jews, proselytes, God-fearers and other Gentiles. Watch how God reveals Himself to each group and how He helps His followers better understand His **plan** to bless all peoples.

#### Saving Faith—The Jews, People Who Follow God's Law

Simeon is a Jewish man who meets Jesus' parents at the temple when they bring him there for circumcision, according to the Jewish Law. We do not know much about Simeon, but we know he is a righteous and devout man.

God reveals to Simeon that he will not die until he sees the **Promised Son**. He **believes** this **promise**, and demonstrates his **faith** by going to the temple courts when the Holy Spirit tells him to do this. He sees the baby Jesus and praises God saying, "...*my eyes have seen Your salvation*..." Simeon does not place hope for salvation in his good deeds or in keeping the Jewish Law. He places his hope in what God will do in the future through the **Promised Son**, Jesus (Luke 2:25-35).

Before Jesus comes, the Jews **believe** God will fulfill His **promise** even though they do not meet His **Promised Son** on earth. The Jews **obey** the Law God gives to Moses because of this **belief**. This is their **faith**. God gives righteousness to them through the work of Jesus Christ, slain from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8), even though they do not know Jesus' part in the **Great Story**.

God gives salvation to the Jews and foreigners who live before the time of Jesus based on their **faith**, demonstrated by their **belief** in God shown in their **obedience**. They keep and follow the Law out of **obedience** to God, and to help them live as a **holy nation**.

God never intends the Law to be a list of rules to follow in order for people to be reconciled to Him. However, many Jews misunderstand the Law, and, over time, look at the Law in this way. They begin to believe and act as if they can claim righteousness and salvation by keeping all of the Law's requirements. Many Jews in Jesus' day believe this, so He corrects their wrong thinking and actions. When Jesus does come to earth, those like Simeon who **believe** God's **promise** for their salvation, recognize Him as the **Promised Son** for whom they wait.

Keeping the Law is never a way for God to reconcile humanity to Himself (Romans 3:20). Only Jesus can accomplish that. God's requirement for His people always remains the same: have **faith** that leads to **obedience**. The prophet Micah explains God's requirement this way:

"He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy And to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

# The Promised Son is the Savior of the Whole World



#### **STORY FOR STUDY: LUKE 1**

After almost 600 years of exile, God speaks to His people once again in a special way. God sends His angel to announce the birth of John the Baptist who will "... go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17).

The angel then announces to Mary and Joseph that a son will be born to them, and that they are "...to give Him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; His kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:31-32). This announces the coming of the long-awaited **Promised Son**, the Jewish Messiah the world's coming righteous King.

>> Jesus is the Savior of the whole world and you are His follower. What does it mean for you, your family, and the kingdom community within your people to be followers of the Savior of the world?

Sending Jesus to earth is not a new **plan** in the **Great Story**. It is the next step in God's amazing **plan**—a plan He forms from the beginning of time. God asks Jesus to take the punishment for the sins and rebellion of all humanity through His suffering and death. Jesus willingly submits and **obeys** God.

God then washes away the shame of all our wickedness with Jesus' resurrection. Jesus reveals His power over the curse of sin and death and gives that power to us so that in Him we may live a new kind of life, free from this curse.

Jesus' life is important, too. God reveals His kingdom to humanity more fully through Jesus, then spreads it far and wide through the work of Jesus' apostles and all who follow Him. This spread of the kingdom continues until our day.

Sending Jesus makes it possible for God to accomplish His **purpose** for all peoples.

 Through Jesus' sacrifice—His death and resurrection—God removes the sins of man that Adam brings to humanity thousands of years before. Jesus defeats the power and shame of sin (see Romans 5:12-21).

- Through Jesus' life, death and resurrection, God defeats evil once for all time.
   God makes clear the destiny of the evil kingdom—utter destruction. While
   Satan's kingdom remains for a time, the final defeat is already clearly determined.
  - >> How do Jesus' life, death, and resurrection make it possible for God to accomplish His purpose to restore His relationship with humanity?
  - >> How do Jesus' life, death, and resurrection make it possible for God to accomplish His purpose to restore His kingdom rule?

## **Explore the Scriptures**

- » Refer to the smaller stories found in Luke below.
  - » Luke 1:46-80
  - » Luke 2:21-35
  - » Luke 4:14-30
  - » Luke 13:22-35
  - » Luke 19:28-44
  - » Luke 24:13-35
- » Answer the following questions about God's **Promised Son** and His **purpose**.
  - » How does God act to restore His good relationship with humanity in this part of the Great Story?
  - » How does God act to restore His kingdom rule?
  - » How does Satan try to prevent God from carrying out His **purpose** to restore?
- Answer the following questions about humanity's response to God. Tell about our identity.
  - » How does humanity participate in the war between God's kingdom and the kingdom of darkness?
  - » How does God reveal Himself to humanity and communicate with them?
  - » How does humanity respond to God's revelation?
  - » How do the people of God honor and worship Him, both as individuals and as a community?

#### **Reflect on What God Teaches You**

- Think about the ways God carefully designs a time and place for Jesus to enter the world as a human. Praise God for His faithfulness to work in all history, even in ways people cannot see at the time.
- In what ways might God be at work in our day to carefully design the spread of the Good News to the ends of the earth? Think of events happening in our world today, or in your region in particular.
  - » How might God use these events to reach all peoples?

- » What **kingdom communities** are scattered and living among other people groups like the communities of Jews after their exile?
- » What trade languages do many people know in our day that can help Scripture begin to be widely understood by many?
- » What areas of new technology, such as the Roman roads, give followers of God today easy access to new areas and people groups?
- » What ways has God prepared your people to reach a people group that does not yet know their part in His **Great Story**?
- » What unique roles in the modern world has He given you that connect you with another people group?
- » For more information about current global trends, see page 208, "What is God Doing in the World Today?" in *Appendix D: Additional Articles*.

# Pray for God to be Known and Worshipped Throughout the World Once Again

Pray that Jesus is known as the Savior of the whole world. Pray that the false teachings that Satan spreads about Jesus—that He is a god for Western people only, or that He is not the **Promised Son**, for example are revealed as false. Pray that the truth about who Jesus is and His saving acts will be known by every family and people on earth. Pray that those who do not yet know or see the truth about Jesus are finally willing to hear and accept Him. Pray that God restores all peoples to right relationship with Him.

# Lesson 5. Jesus Reveals the Kingdom of God

God reveals some truth about His kingdom through the kingdom of Israel we learn about earlier in His story. He reveals His kingdom is to be a **kingdom of priests** and a **holy nation** whose citizens are heirs of the covenant **promise** with their ancestor Abraham. This reveals the **identity** and **purpose** of all citizens of His kingdom. We see glimpses of truth about the **kingdom of God** in Israel.

Prophets of old understand God's kingdom in their own day. King David says, "... Yours, O LORD, is the kingdom; You are exalted as head over all" and "Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and Your dominion endures through all generations" (I Chronicles 29:11, Psalm 145:13).

But the political kingdom of Israel is an earthly kingdom, ruled by sinful humans, and it falls short of truly revealing the **kingdom of God**.

Jesus is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). He is the living revelation of God's **purpose** to **restore His people to good relationship with Him**—to His kingdom—and to **restore His kingdom rule**. Jesus tells stories about the kingdom, brings messages from God, and performs many signs and good deeds, all to help people recognize the **kingdom of God**.

# Secrets of the Kingdom of God

#### **STORIES FOR STUDY: MATTHEW 13**

One day Jesus goes out from the house where He is staying to spend the day by the sea. Many people recognize Him. Soon a large crowd surrounds Him. He gets in a boat to escape the pressure of the crowd

Jesus tells stories about the kingdom, brings messages from God, and performs many signs and good deeds, all to help people recognize the kingdom of God. and begins to tell them stories. He tells a story about a man who goes out to sow seed and what happens to that seed as it falls along the path, upon the rocks, among the thorns and onto the good soil.

The crowd listens carefully to this story, but does not understand its

meaning. Jesus' followers take Him aside. They ask Him why He speaks in stories the crowd does not understand. Jesus explains, "...*knowledge* of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them" (Matthew 13:11) because their hearts are not open to hearing it.

He goes on to share some of these secrets of the kingdom with His followers whose hearts are eager to hear. They sit before the King of all

creation as He reveals His secrets to them on that special day. Can you imagine how excited these men and women must have been to hear such teachings from Jesus Himself?

We, too, can learn these secrets about the kingdom of God from Jesus.

"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough" (Matthew 13:33).

We **introduce the kingdom of God** from the outside, but it spreads in every direction through the inside. We **introduce the kingdom of God** in small measure, yet it quickly leavens a larger area.

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches" (Matthew 13:31-32).

The **kingdom of God** may appear very small, but when planted, it grows to be very great, extending great distances.

"...the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 13:47-50 and see also the parable of the seeds in Matthew 13:24-29, 36-43).

As the **kingdom of God** spreads and grows in the world, there are followers of God and followers of the Evil One living and growing together, side by side. God sows the good seed, His followers, but the enemy sows bad seed, those who do evil. God gathers both the good and the bad. God alone knows people's hearts. It is not for us to separate the good from the bad. God separates these at the end of the age.

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it" (Matthew 13:44-46).

A person who recognizes the **kingdom of God** values it so much he gives everything he has to make sure he does not lose it.

Jesus shares many more secrets of the **kingdom of God** with His followers. To learn more, take time to read and consider all that Jesus teaches about the kingdom in Matthew and Luke.

- Why is it important for us to learn about the kingdom of God from Jesus' own teachings on this subject?
- » Jesus spent many hours teaching about the **kingdom of God**.
  - » Have your people spent many hours studying this subject?
  - » Do teachers and preachers of our day spend hours sharing about this subject?
  - » Why do you think this message often has been lost or changed since Jesus and the apostles taught it to all who had eyes to see and ears to hear?

## The Kingdom of God is Spiritual

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: LUKE 17:20-21**

One day, the Pharisees ask Jesus when the **kingdom of God** will come. They look and wait for another earthly kingdom similar to the rule of David or Solomon. Jesus tells them, "*The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is (among) you*" (Luke 17:20-21).

This **kingdom of God** is a real spiritual rule and reign. The spiritual kingdom comes near to us, on earth (Matthew 4:17, 10:7). We recognize it. We enter it. We become

The kingdom of God is not bound by any earthly limits of nation, race or politics. It is not even bound by religious limits. citizens of it. We do not have to die to enter God's kingdom because it is His rule here on earth as in heaven. We labor to see it spread throughout the earth. The **kingdom of God** is not bound by any earthly limits of nation, race or politics. It is not even bound by religious limits.

All people groups must have the opportunity for God to **restore them to good relationship with Him**. They

must no longer be slaves to Satan's rebellious kingdom. "For He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:13-14).

## The Kingdom of God is Relational

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: MATTHEW 8:5-13**

On one of Jesus' journeys to the town of Capernaum, an officer in the Roman military approaches Him. The man asks Jesus for help because one of his servants lies at home paralyzed and suffering terribly.

When Jesus says He will go to the officer's home, the man replies, "Lord, I do not deserve to have You come under my roof. But just say

the word, and my servant will be healed.' When Jesus heard this, He was astonished and said to those following him, 'I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.' Jesus sends the man away, telling him He has granted this request. The man returns home and finds his servant healed from the very hour when Jesus spoke" (Matthew 8:5-13).

What does this Roman officer see when he looks at Jesus that gave him such **faith**? He reveals his understanding in this verse: *"For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he* 

goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it" (Matthew 8:9).

He does not see Jesus as a magician or a healer with special powers. He sees Jesus as a man with authority in a spiritual kingdom who commands others under His authority to do His work. He sees Jesus in relationship to others. He sees a new spiritual family the **kingdom of God**. The kingdom of God is relational, like a family, and our identity within it comes from our relationship to King Jesus and to our fellow servants.

Jesus reveals to His disciples more about this reality of kingdom relationships when He grants them authority and power to bind and loose earthly matters (Matthew 18:18), and again when He sends them out to make followers of Jesus from every people group (Acts 1:8). Paul teaches us more about this, as he describes the kingdom as a living body (I Corinthians 12) and a household (Ephesians 2). The apostle Peter later describes it as a spiritual house or **holy nation** (I Peter 2).

The **kingdom of God** is relational, like a family, and our **identity** within it comes from our relationship to King Jesus and to our fellow servants.

# The Kingdom of God is Already but Not Yet

One great mystery of the **kingdom of God** is that it is already upon us, ruling over all, and not yet upon us, ruling over all.

We know that Jesus triumphs over death and evil and establishes His **kingdom** of righteousness when He comes to earth the first time. Through Jesus' death and resurrection from the dead, Satan's power is completely defeated. His kingdom of darkness suffers the ultimate defeat God **promises** in Genesis 3:15. Death no longer rules. Sin no longer rules. Satan no longer rules. The end of the battle is decided and there is no question that God is the victor.

But after Jesus rises from the dead two thousand years ago, we still experience death, sin and evil on earth. The kingdom of darkness is still active on the earth. The Evil One is still at work in the world. We experience this daily. Why does the evil kingdom remain? According to the **Great Story**, the **kingdom of God** comes to earth in at least two parts.

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: MATTHEW 11:2-6**

When Jesus comes to earth the first time, He brings the **kingdom of God** near to us in a new way. One **purpose** of His coming is to call people to Himself. He offers mercy, grace and forgiveness for sins to all who will hear, repent and **believe**. He brings it quietly, in small ways, and begins spreading it through those who follow Him and who do the same.

This hardly seems like the powerful coming of a kingdom that destroys an evil kingdom, once for all, as Daniel prophesies. In fact, John the Baptist is so surprised by the way Jesus brings the kingdom to earth he sends some of his disciples to make sure Jesus truly is the **Promised Son**.

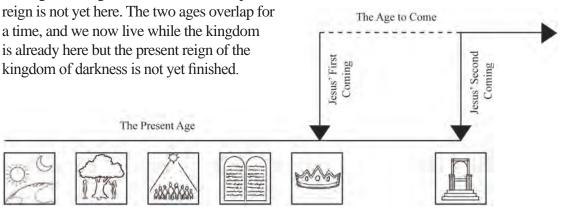
#### STORY FOR STUDY: REVELATION 19:11-22:21

The second coming of the **kingdom**—when Jesus returns to earth in total power—will bring about the final end of this present age. At that time, every king, president, premier and person living in this world will come under His rule forever. The people of God will inherit the kingdom when Jesus comes the second time (Matthew 25:34). This is where the **Great Story** ends with God's **promise** fulfilled.

We will see the total, visible triumph over death, sin and Satan. From that time forward we will no longer see or know evil. Jesus' reign will be complete and absolute.

With Jesus' first coming, the **kingdom of God** came near to all peoples (Matthew 4:17). The **kingdom of God** will come near to humanity in a new way again with Jesus' second coming (Luke 21:25-28, 31).

We live sometime between the first and second coming of the kingdom. Jesus already ushers in the glorious age to come but His complete



Why does God allow the kingdom of darkness to continue its rule in this present age? Why does He not finally destroy the Evil One when Jesus rises from the dead? While we cannot know the mind of God, we do know His covenant **promise** is for all

the peoples of the earth to have the opportunity to receive the blessing of a restored relationship with Him and new **identity** as part of His kingdom.

#### STORY FOR STUDY: MATTHEW 24:1-14

One day the disciples ask Jesus when the end of the age will come. He tells them, "*No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*" (Matthew 24:36). We cannot know or plan for the arrival of the age to come.

However, Jesus also tells His disciples "...*this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come*" (Matthew 24:14). We do know God must fulfill His covenant **promise** before Jesus returns and rules for eternity.

God already brings this blessing to many people groups as He carries out His **plan** announced to Abraham. These peoples take their place in His **Great Story**. Still, God has not yet restored His relationship with many peoples on earth.

- >> Our generation lives in a day when the kingdom of God is here already, but is not yet completely come. Now the present evil age overlaps the glorious age to come.
  - » What does this mean for you, your family, and your people?
  - » How do you experience the present evil age in your daily life and work?
  - » How do you experience the glorious age to come in your daily life and work?
- >> How does this teaching about the kingdom bring us hope for our lives and our people, both now and in the future?

For helpful instruction about living in this present age among the kingdom of darkness, see page 203, "Life is a War Between Spiritual Kingdoms" in *Appendix D: Additional Articles*.

# The Good News of the Kingdom of God

When Jesus says, "...this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations..." what does He mean by gospel (**Good News**) of the kingdom? When Jesus' followers today speak of the **Good News**, or gospel, they often refer to a message about the death and resurrection of Christ. Sometimes they speak of a way to get to heaven after death. Sometimes they speak of a way to have sins forgiven.

Each of those modern messages is partly true. Jesus preaches the **Good News of the kingdom** before He dies and rises from the dead. What is the **Good News** Jesus preaches?

The message Jesus communicates contains three important parts:

- Repent from sin and seeking after your own ways,
- Believe and live by faith that results in obedience, and
- Recognize the rule of the **kingdom of God** is upon us now.

The Good News of the kingdom is that all peoples can be restored to good relationship with God and experience the kingdom reign and rule of God, here and now. This message gives freedom, hope, and purpose to us all. It forces us to a point of decision. Will we shift our loyalty and allegiance to God, and allow Him to change our understanding of life and the world? Will we accept our identity as kingdom citizens, and take our place in the Great Story?

- What is the Good News of the kingdom? What is the blessing with which God blesses us, so that we can go forth and bless others with it?
- Compare what the Bible reveals about Jesus' message with the way you think about sharing the Good News. How is the Good News you share the same as the Good News Jesus shares? How is it different? Does this change your message in any way?

# Jesus Invites Many to Enter the Kingdom of God

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: MATTHEW 3**

John the Baptist prepares the people alive in Jesus' day for the arrival of Jesus. His message is *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near"* 

To enter the kingdom of God we must repent, turn from seeking after our own ways, and practice new ways of living that honor the King. (Matthew 3:2). He prepares the Jewish people to expect a king.

He also warns them that they must turn from **seeking after their own ways** in order for this king to accept them into His kingdom. John also instructs them to "…*bear fruit in keeping with repentance*…" (Matthew

3:8). To repent means to turn from **seeking after our own ways** and practice new ways of righteousness. In Luke 3:10-14, the apostle John gives good examples of these new ways.

Not long after John begins preaching this message, Jesus preaches this also (Matthew 4:17). This teaches us that to enter the **kingdom of God** we must repent, or turn from **seeking after our own ways**, and practice new ways of living.

Jesus says we must receive the **kingdom of God** as little children (Mark 10:15). What is it we receive? Is it a church or religious community, rules to live by, or cultural practices, such as dressing and talking a certain way? Jesus says the **kingdom of God** is very different from this. He instructs us to first seek His kingdom and righteousness

(Matthew 6:33). Then we receive His rule, His kingship, His authority and victory in both our lives and in the lives of our families (Luke 18:17).

To enter the **kingdom of God** we must repent, turn from **seeking after our own ways**, and practice new ways of living that honor the King. The Good News of the kingdom is that all peoples can be restored to good relationship with God and experience the kingdom reign and rule of God, here and now.

- » Read each of the passages below and discuss with your study group what you learn about the message preached by each of the following people about entering the **kingdom of God**.
  - » What message did John the Baptist give in Matthew 3:2, 8; Mark 1:4; and Luke 3:3, 8?
  - What message did Jesus give in Matthew 4:17; 21:31-32; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 5:32; 13:3, 5; John 3:15-16 and 6:28-29?
  - » What message did Jesus instruct the disciples to give in Matthew 10:5-7; Mark 6:12; Luke 9:2; 10:1-8; and 24:47?
  - What message do Jesus' followers preach in Acts 2:38; 3:19; 10:43; 17:30; 20:21; 26:20?
- » Look up each of the passages below and write what you learn from Jesus about entering the **kingdom**.

Matthew 5:20 Matthew 7:21 John 3:3-6 Matthew 18:1-4 Mark 10:15 Mark 1:15

Explain to someone in your own people group the way to enter God's kingdom. Discuss your experience with others in your study group.

## **Explore the Scriptures**

» Look up each of the passages below and write what you learn from each one about the kingdom of God. Create a description of the kingdom based on what you learn.

> Matthew 4:17 Matthew 5:20 Matthew 6:33 Matthew 13:31-32 Luke 17:20-21 Luke 21:25-31 John 18:36

Romans 14:17 Romans 3:21-26 I Corinthians 4:20 I Corinthians 15:50 Colossians 1:13 Hebrews 12:28 II Peter 1:10-11 » Look up each of the passages below and write what you learn about Jesus, the King. Create a description of Jesus based on what you learn.

Matthew 20:25-28	John 18:37
Matthew 21:5	I Timothy 1:17
Mark 9:35	Hebrews 13:8
Luke 1:31-33	Revelation 17:14
Luke 4:18-19	Revelation 19:11-16
John 12:25-26	

#### **Reflect on What God Teaches You**

- Discuss with others in your study group what you learned from answering the questions above about the kingdom of God. What has the Holy Spirit revealed to you about God, the kingdom, the King, or your role as a kingdom citizen?
  - » How would you describe the **kingdom of God** to someone in your own people group? Where could you show them evidence of God's kingdom among you?
  - » How would you describe Jesus to someone in your own people group? Where could you show them evidence of Jesus among you?
- Share what you learned about the kingdom of God with someone you meet this week. Discuss your experiences with others in your study group. What did you learn or observe from these times of sharing?

## Pray "Your Kingdom Come..."

Jesus taught His followers to pray that God's kingdom will come on earth as it already is in heaven (Matthew 6:10). Have you prayed for this lately? Take time now to ask God to bring more and more of the kingdom, especially to the places and to the people on earth who currently see more of the kingdom of darkness than they do the kingdom of light. Pray for citizens of God's kingdom to take the Good News of the kingdom to all the people groups of the earth who still have not experienced it. Pray that God will accomplish His purpose on earth and then bring about the return of King Jesus.

# Lesson 6. Jesus and God's Covenant

Jesus is the **Promised Son**, but many Jews do not recognize Him. Once again they forget God's covenant and their **purpose** to bless all peoples. They seek a blessing from God for the sake of their own people only. Jesus challenges them by revealing again God's love and blessing for all peoples.

#### Jesus is a Different Kind of King

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: ACTS 1:1-8**

As Jesus grows in wisdom and stature, He does not do what the people of Israel expect Him to do. They misunderstand God's prophets, and expect God to send them an earthly king, like King David. They expect a king to make war against the nations oppressing them—against the Roman Empire, for example—and again establish a prosperous earthly kingdom for Israel.

They expect the coming king to free them from their oppressors, just as God does earlier through King Saul and King David. But God's **Promised Son**—Jesus—comes bringing the spiritual kingdom to earth. Just as before, this kingdom is not only for the blessing of Israel. The spiritual kingdom is for the blessing of all people groups.

Jesus is a different kind of king than people are expecting. Many Jewish people do not see the truth, and refuse to believe He is the **Promised Son**. Jesus' words and deeds reveal that He is who He says He is, and He fulfills all the prophecies about Himself. However, very few Jews are willing to follow Him when He asks them to.

Others grow so afraid and confused by Him they want to kill Him. God's **Promised Son** and King is murdered by men of whom Isaiah prophesied "...you will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them" (Matthew 13:13-15).

Even those who do believe and follow Jesus find it hard to believe He does not plan to establish a political kingdom on earth. In Acts 1:6, His disciples and close friends ask, *"Is now the time...?"* They think that an earthly kingdom for Israel will still come through the Messiah, the **Promised Son**.

Why are they so confused? See the prophecies about Jesus in the following passages to better understand why they misunderstood Scripture: Zephaniah 3:14-17, Isaiah 2:2-4 and 66:13-16.

God never intends the **kingdom of God** to be a political, physical kingdom ruled by man and entered by force. The **kingdom of God** is a spiritual kingdom ruled by love and entered by invitation.

Citizenship in the **kingdom of God** is not a political citizenship. Citizens of any earthly tribe or nation may be citizens of God's kingdom. Citizenship in the **kingdom of God** gives all who enter an **identity** as God's people, and a **purpose** as heirs of the covenant with our spiritual ancestor, Abraham.

- Why do the Jews fail to recognize Jesus as the Promised Son when he comes to earth?
- >> How do our own misguided expectations cause us to miss God's revelation when it comes to our people? Ask God for eyes to see and ears to hear His revelation to us.

## A Kingdom for All Peoples

Jesus is very clear that the **Good News of the kingdom** is for both Jews and Gentiles—for all the peoples of the earth. He spends most of His time on earth with Jews, but He takes many opportunities to teach them that God loves Gentiles and Jews alike, and that He wants to bless the Jews so that they will go and bless the Gentiles of the earth. He continues teaching them how to fulfill the covenant made with their father, Abraham.

Jesus wants the Jews to stop thinking they are more righteous than other people groups. They think others are dirty, unlovable and not worthy of God or His story. This is a lie from Satan. They forget their responsibility in the covenant God makes with their ancestor Abraham.

If we find ourselves thinking that our people are more righteous than another people group, or that we can bring God more glory than they can, we believe the same lie from Satan. Jesus loves all peoples, no matter what they are like or what others think of them, and He teaches His disciples to do the same. His life and teaching reveal His love for Gentiles as well as Jews.

#### STORY FOR STUDY: MATTHEW 1:1-17 and LUKE 3:23-38

In Jesus' family tree we find that even though His mother and father are Jewish, some of his ancestors are Gentiles. His family records are in Matthew 1 and Luke 3. In fact, three of the four women mentioned in Matthew's genealogy are Gentile women who followed the God of Israel (Tamar, Rahab and Ruth).

Even the ancestral line of the **Promised Son** reveals His desire for all nations—not just Israel—to be part of the blessing and covenant.

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: MATTHEW 4:12-17**

Jesus walks among both Jews and Gentiles. He starts His public ministry from the city of Capernaum instead of Jerusalem so He can be among the Gentiles and fulfill prophecy (Matthew 4:12-17). He performs

miracles for Gentiles (see Matthew 4:23-25, 8:5-13, Mark 8:1-9, Luke 17:11-21, for example). Jesus shares the **Good News** with a Samaritan village and many become His followers (John 4). Samaritans are a people group that descends from both Jewish and Gentile ancestors.

Citizenship in the kingdom of God gives all who enter an identity as God's people, and a purpose as heirs of the covenant with our spiritual ancestor, Abraham.

Jesus teaches the disciples and Jewish leaders by using stories and lessons about Gentiles (Luke 10:30-37, Luke 4:16-30). Jesus also

corrects the religious leaders at the temple for keeping Gentiles out of the temple and for filling the Gentile area with merchandise and money changers (Mark 11:15-17).

Many prophets of old reveal that Jesus is the Savior of the whole world, not just the Savior of the people of Israel (see Isaiah 42:5-7, 49:6 and Luke 2:25-32, for example). Jesus lives and works among Gentiles to reveal His love for all peoples to all, including His disciples (Matthew 15:21-28).

When the Jews forget their covenant responsibility to bless other peoples, they seek a blessing for their own people only. Why is it important for our people to understand that Jesus came to bless all the peoples of the world?

#### The Jews of Jesus' Day and the Covenant

During the days before Jesus comes, many Jews travel throughout the Middle East trying to make proselytes of the Gentiles who spend time in the synagogues. They understand part of God's command and covenant expectation that they bless other peoples. However, they also misunderstand God. They think He wants them to change the customs and traditions of all peoples to be like the Jewish people's customs and traditions.

Some call these people Judaizers because they do not necessarily make followers of the Most High God. They make followers of the Jewish culture. They lead people astray. They focus on themselves and the traditions of their own people group, judging the customs and traditions of other peoples who are not like them. Jesus harshly addresses the practices of these Judaizers (Matthew 23:15). Paul also addresses this issue many times in his letters (see Galatians, for example).

Remember, God does not love the traditions of the Jews any more than He loves the customs and traditions of any other people. He chooses to bless the Hebrew people and set them apart as a **kingdom of priests** and a **holy nation** so that they will be a blessing to the other peoples.

God wants the Jews to spread the **Great Story** to all peoples so humanity can be reconciled to God. He does not intend to make all peoples adopt the **natural identity** of the Jewish people.

#### STORY FOR STUDY: JOHN 3:16-21 and MARK 5:1-20

Jesus urges people to repent and leave the kingdom of darkness and come to the kingdom of light. At the same time, He wants people to keep the **natural identities** they have when He finds them. He does not want them to adopt a new or foreign way of living that might bring shame to their family or people.

When a Greek man Jesus heals wants to travel with Jesus and His Jewish disciples, Jesus instructs the man to return to his own (Gentile) people and spread the **Good News** among them. He does not allow the man to leave his own people and travel with the Jews. Jesus does not turn this man away because he is not Jewish. He turns Him away because He loves this man's people and wants them to receive the **kingdom of God** from someone with their same **natural identity**.

Jesus never asks for a change of **natural identity**.

- Political loyalty does not change. Jews remain part of the Jewish community, Samaritans remain in their Samaritan villages with their people, and Roman citizens remain involved with Roman citizens, even while their spiritual allegiance shifts from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. God's people obey Him as the highest authority.
- Family or household loyalty does not change. With God as heavenly Father, servants remain servants, and fathers, sons, mothers and daughters remain loyal to their family responsibilities.
- Social or religious community loyalty does not change. Jews remain part of the Jewish community. Samaritans and Greeks each remain part of their own communities. In the kingdom of God, God's people worship only the Most High God.

We want to be careful not to change Jesus' message and practice. We introduce people to the **Great Story** and the **kingdom of God** by introducing them to Jesus the King. Jesus does not ask people to change their **natural identity**, and neither should we.

In most cases, people who enter the **kingdom of God** will not need to make a break from their political authorities, the authority of their family or household, or even the authority of their own religious or community leaders and groups. What is necessary is that God becomes the ultimate authority for all individuals and communities, and that we all follow God's command, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3).

- What positive practices do we learn from Jews who introduce the kingdom to Gentiles during the time before Jesus?
- What do we learn from the mistakes of Jews who introduce the kingdom to Gentiles during this time?
- >> How can you apply these lessons to the work your people group does to introduce the kingdom to other people groups?

# Saving Faith—The Disciples, People Who Follow Jesus

People who live during the time of Jesus enjoy a unique opportunity to interact with God. Jesus, "*the image of the invisible God*" (Colossians 1:15), walks among them, eats with them, teaches them and performs signs and wonders which confirm He is the **Promised Son** from God. We call those who follow Jesus as He teaches and moves around the countryside His disciples.

What is **saving faith** for these men and women who follow Jesus? In our day, we sometimes think **saving faith** is belief in a set of truths about Jesus. Today we know more of the story than the disciples do in Jesus' day. For example, Jesus' disciples did not know He would die and rise again.

In our day, we sometimes think **saving faith** is performing rituals or practices, or belonging to a particular group. But at every point in the **Great Story**, people demonstrate worship for God according to the traditions of their own people group. These traditions are very different across the ages and from people to people.

God reconciles Jesus' disciples to Himself the same way He reconciles Abraham, the Israelites, and others before them—through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is true even though some of them enter the kingdom before Jesus dies or rises from the dead. **Saving faith** for the disciples is not a set of practices or membership in a nation or family. It comes through **belief** in Jesus' **Good News of the kingdom**, which results in their **obedience**.

Jesus invites people to follow Him and many do. Others do not. He teaches the truth to those who do follow Him. He sends them out to do His work (Luke 9, 10). Maybe even before they recognize He is the **Promised Son**, He sends them out to share the **Good News** about the **kingdom of God**. What do we learn from this?

Jesus gives people many opportunities to demonstrate **faith**. As He teaches, He calls for people to change their ways. Changing ways cannot save them or

restore them to God, but **obeying** Him is an opportunity for them to demonstrate **belief** in Him and His message. This **belief**, which results in **obedience**, is their **saving faith**.

God seems eager to use His people to carry out His **plan**, even before they understand everything we now understand about Jesus. In fact, we never correctly understand everything about Jesus while we live on earth.

Praise God that He shows us how to follow Him and be His people. He gives us His Holy Spirit to instruct us and correct us along the way. Those who follow Him join in God's work, sharing His message and eventually sharing in His suffering as they identify with Jesus.

**Saving faith** for the disciples is the same as **faith** for Abraham, the Israelites and all who come before them. It is not simply a set of practices or traditions, or being part of a certain people group or family. **Faith** comes from their **belief** in the message they hear, their experience with the **Promised Son**, Jesus, and their **obedience** to God.

## **Following Jesus**

Jesus Blesses His Followers

## STORY FOR STUDY: LUKE 9:57-62

Jesus said, "...*if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me*" (Luke 9:23). This means to be a disciple, or follower, of Jesus, we must deny ourselves and follow Him.

Men and women who receive the **Good News of the kingdom** experience a new birth (John 3:5-6). God restores us to life according to our true **identity** as citizens of His kingdom. Once restored, we live according to kingdom values and our lifestyle

One amazing truth about the Good News is that we can follow the ways of the kingdom of God while remaining part of our own family and community. changes. Through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, we live a new kind of life in our old surroundings.

One amazing truth about the **Good News** is that we can follow the ways of the **kingdom of God** while remaining part of our own family and community, the **natural identity** into which we are born.

- » What does it mean to follow Jesus?
- Have you made a choice to repent from seeking after your own way and believe the Good News about God's purpose to forgive you and restore your good relationship with him? Do you receive the kingdom of God, and daily follow Jesus in obedience? Pass along to your children the story of when and how your people first made this choice.

#### Jesus Reminds His Followers of God's Command to Bless All Peoples

According to the **Good News** preached to Abraham, our **identity** also gives us **purpose**—that through us the peoples of the earth will receive a blessing. The **kingdom** 

of God begins to spread like yeast through dough, until many from among our own people recognize and enter the kingdom. We also join God's people all over the world in sending out messengers to carry the Good News of the kingdom to places where Jesus is not yet recognized as the longawaited Promised Son.

Jesus affirms God's covenant with His people, reminding them of their responsibility to bless all peoples.

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: MATTHEW 28:16-20**

Before He leaves earth and ascends into heaven, Jesus instructs His followers, "...go and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19). Jesus clearly reminds God's people of their **purpose**, and their responsibility as heirs of God's covenant **promise** with Abraham.

Jesus affirms God's covenant with His people, reminding them of their responsibility to bless all peoples.

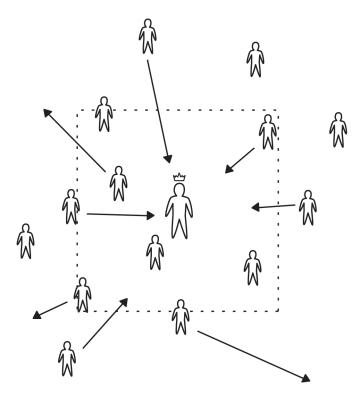
>> How does Jesus' command in Matthew 28:16-20 remind the Jews of their responsibility to the covenant made with Abraham?

# Making Disciples in Every People Group

The only way we can accomplish Jesus' command to make disciples in every people group is to faithfully point people to Jesus, the **Promised Son**. When we see and hear Jesus, we see and hear God and know His love for us (John 12:44-46).

Jesus claims, "*But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself*" (John 12:32). Jesus seeks followers. How do we lift up Jesus so He might draw all men to Himself?

Every person we encounter, at any time, either moves toward following Jesus or away from following Him. We can encourage people we meet to turn toward Jesus and follow Him and His teachings, and we can reveal truth about His kingdom to them.



God uses us to point all people toward Jesus and His Kingdom

If the people we encourage already follow Jesus, the Holy Spirit may use us to help them grow in knowledge and devotion to God. If the people we encourage do not follow Jesus yet, maybe the truth they see and hear in us will lift up Jesus so He can draw them to Himself. Maybe they will soon be ready to repent, turn from **seeking their own way**, and follow Jesus. God uses us to point all people toward Jesus and His kingdom.

**Obeying** Jesus by making followers puts the power, control and knowledge of entry into the kingdom entirely in Jesus' hands where it belongs. We do not know who is in the kingdom or who is not. Jesus says the separating will come at the end of the age (Matthew 13:47-52).

Only Jesus knows what is in the heart of each person. In the present age, this makes the kingdom seem confusing to us. God is not confused. We are not to be concerned about such things. We are only to obey Jesus.

#### **Explore the Scriptures**

» Look up each of the passages below and write or discuss what you learn about the **Good News of the kingdom**.

Matthew 24:14; Mark 13:10	II Corinthians 9:13
Mark 8:35; 10:29	Galatians 2:14
Luke 9:6	Galatians 3:8
Luke 20:1	Ephesians 6:19
Acts 8:25, 40	Philippians 1:27-30
Romans 1:2; 1:16	Colossians 1:5-6
I Corinthians 9:12	I Thessalonians 1:5
II Corinthians 4:3-4	I Thessalonians 2:4

## **Reflect on What God Teaches You**

- » Meditate on Matthew 18:18-20. Even if this passage is familiar to you, ask God to reveal new insights to you about His love for humanity and His purpose.
- » Discuss these questions with your study group:
  - » What have you learned about the message—the Good News of the kingdom?
  - » What have you learned about making disciples, or followers, and the **kingdom of God**?
- » Go and share with your family, including women and children, the truths the Holy Spirit reveals to you.

## **Pray for Revelation**

For which people group has God specially created and placed you and your people to bless with His story? Ask Him to reveal this to you. Ask Him to reveal ways and opportunities through which you can bless those people and effectively communicate with them. God wants to use you and your people.

# Apply What You Learn

# **Share the Great Story**

At the end of Chapter 1 you shared the first part of the **Great Story** with your family. Gather them again and share next event in the story, the coming of the **Promised Son**, Jesus. Share with them the **Good News about the kingdom of God** that Jesus brings.



When you meet again with your study group. Discuss your experiences and the following questions:

- » What parts were easy for your family to understand as truly Good News?
- » What parts were confusing to them or made them feel uncomfortable?
- » Did they have questions? What were those questions?
- What obstacles do you think you face in sharing the Good News among your own people?

# **Be Transformed**

Jesus teaches us to pray, "... *Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*" (Matthew 6:10). Reflect together with your study group on what it might look like for the **kingdom of God** to rule and reign in your family. Discuss the following:

- In order for the kingdom of God to rule and reign in your family, which kingdom teachings and guidelines do you think you need to introduce?
- > Are there any areas where kingdom teachings and values need to replace worldly or cultural values that cause your family to seek after their own way, or seek their own fame?
- In what ways can your family demonstrate the kingdom of God to others in your community through serving them and living according to kingdom teachings and values?
- » Are there any changes you will make in coming days for the sake of the kingdom? Choose one change to start with today. Commit these changes to God and one another.

Repeat this activity, imagining what it might look like for the **kingdom of God** to rule and reign in your local community, among your own people group, in your city or village, and even in your entire political nation or country.

# **Expand Your Understanding**

Read what Jesus teaches His disciples about worship in the following stories:

Matthew 23:25-28 Mark 12:38-40 Mark 12:41-44

Now read about a Gentile who begins to worship the Most High God in II Kings 5:1-19.

Discuss with others in your study group what the Holy Spirit reveals to you about **acceptable worship** through these stories. Discuss how the stories relate to the **natural identity** of your people group, and your true **identity** as God's people.

Consider and discuss with your study group how the truth in these stories applies to situations where a family from a Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or tribal people group begins to worship the Most High God.

Chapter 2 - The Story of Jesus Alive On Earth

# **Chapter 3**

# The Age of the Apostles, Part One

"...you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Jesus lives a life without sin, yet some of His own people conspired in His death. They do not understand the truth of who He is. It may seem once again that God's **plan** of blessing the Jews to be a blessing to other people groups ends badly. If we continue the story, however, we see this is not the case.

Three days after His death, Jesus rises from the earth, alive. He overcomes the curse of death and separation from God, and breaks the authority of the evil one. He appears to His followers to encourage them, guide them, tell them about the coming Holy Spirit, and affirm their covenant responsibility once more (Acts 1:8).

Chapter 3 tells the part of the **Great Story** that begins after Jesus ascends into heaven in a glorious way in front of His disciples at Jerusalem.

Lesson 7. The Holy Spirit and God's Covenant Lesson 8. Sent-Out Disciples Lesson 9. Kingdom Communities

# Lesson 7. The Holy Spirit and God's Covenant



The next events in the **Great Story** usher in the age of the apostles. This is an age where Jesus' apostles, together with all His faithful followers, **obey** His command to make disciples of all peoples, teaching them to **obey** all His commands.

This part of the story continues until Jesus returns at the end of the age. Even though the age of the apostles begins over two thousand years ago, our generation lives in this age. We still have opportunity to enter the work of these faithful apostles and followers in our day.

## God Sends the Holy Spirit to His People

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: ACTS 2:1-41**

As Jesus promises before He leaves earth (Acts 1:8), God sends His Holy Spirit to the disciples in a new and amazing way at a festival in Jerusalem called Pentecost. At Pentecost, the disciples in Jerusalem begin to speak in other languages and share the Word of God with people there from many different people groups (Acts 2:4).

Later, Jesus' followers begin to recognize God's work among Gentiles when the Holy Spirit comes upon Gentile families in the same way He comes to Jews (Acts 15:8). The movement spreads quickly through the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the apostles and new followers.

We recognize a **kingdom community** by the presence of the Holy Spirit dwelling among a people. God's people are empowered and led by the Holy Spirit.

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: ACTS 3**

Once the Holy Spirit comes upon the early disciples, many begin to work signs and wonders (see Acts 2:43, 5:12-16, 6:8). They heal people and cast out demons as they preach the Word of God.

God also shows Himself to His followers in special ways, by speaking through visions and dreams (see Acts 9:10, 12; 10:3, 9-16; 16:9; 18:9). God is active and involved in the lives of His people in Jerusalem during this time, showing Himself to the disciples in obvious ways, and working

through them in miraculous ways.

Those who have eyes to see His works and ears to hear the **Good News** experience the love and power of God through the work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

#### STORY FOR STUDY: ACTS 4:1-31 and 5:12-42

After receiving the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8, 2:1-4), the early disciples speak the Word boldly, and with powerful results. Many people repent and begin following Jesus' teachings through the witness of these disciples (see Acts 2:37-42, 4:4, 4:32-35). With these great results, suffering comes.

Government and religious leaders arrest Jesus' followers many times (see Acts 4:3, 5:18, 6:11, for example). Sometimes they put them in jail (Acts 5:19), beat them, and even tell lies about them (see Acts 5:40, 6:11-12, for example). They often want to kill the disciples for disturbing the people (Acts 7:57-60). Sometimes God miraculously allows them to escape from jail.

Many of Jesus' followers suffer without food and sleep. They endure competition from those who seek fame. The disciples escape from physical attacks by robbers. They go to prison, endure beatings, and much more (see I Corinthians 4:11-13 and II Corinthians 1-2, 4 and 6).

Even when God's people suffer, they consider it an honor to suffer for Jesus (Acts 5:41). They rejoice that God considers them worthy to suffer as Jesus did. Since no one likes to suffer, this joy must come from God. Peter writes, "So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good" (I Peter 4:19).

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: ACTS 2:42-47**

In Jerusalem, the new disciples devote themselves daily to spending time with one another in their families and in the temple. They regularly spend time eating together and listening to the teaching of Jesus' apostles. They pray together, share their things whenever someone has a need, and praise God together (Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-35, 5:42, 9:31).

They stay in one another's homes when they travel (Acts 16:14-15, 31-34). They work together in their trade (Acts 18:1-4). They correct and instruct one another (Acts 18:24-26, 28:30-31). They share the **Good News** with households who want to hear it (Acts 18:7-8 and I Corinthians 7:17-24). They also appoint men to oversee the care of those in need (Acts 6:3-4).

Their new **faith** and **obedience** to Jesus does not cause them to leave their community and form a new community somewhere else in Jerusalem. Instead, God empowers

them to change their communities into loving, caring, generous, encouraging places to be. The church is not a building they go to or even an event they attend. The church is this community of God's people, a **kingdom community**—the kind of community that reflects the values of the **kingdom of God**.

The disciples continue to meet formally in the temple and synagogues, as they had done before, according to the Jewish customs and traditions.

The church is this community of God's people, a kingdom community—the kind of community that reflects the values of the kingdom of God. They meet daily in the temple to talk about Jesus, and on the Sabbath in the synagogues (Acts 5:42, 18:4, 7-8). They stay connected to their community and are able to introduce people from their community to Jesus' teaching.

They continue going to the temple for the times of prayer (Acts 3:1), even though this means worshipping and praying alongside Jews who

do not follow Jesus, or Jews who are even hostile to Him. In spite of this, the disciples continue to go to familiar places of prayer and to pray to God in Jesus' name.

- Why did Jesus' followers continue to live and worship together with other Jews who did not yet follow Jesus? Why did they continue going to the temple, even though the temple authorities ordered Jesus' execution only weeks before? Why do they remain part of their own families and communities?
- What do these disciples' actions within their own community reveal about God's plan to bless all peoples?

The disciples do gather separately on special occasions. The focus of these special meetings is usually to work out concerns and problems within the **kingdom community**. They discuss them and make important decisions (Acts 6:1-4). On other occasions, the apostles deliver special messages and reports (Acts 10:24-25, 14:27, 21:17-21). Sometimes they meet to worship God and fast (Acts 13:1-3). They meet to honor and celebrate God with special feasts, to share together, and to build one another up in the Lord (I Corinthians 11:17-22, 14:1-40).

*"The believers, at times, devote themselves to special times of prayer"* (I Corinthians 7:5). Explore the passages below and fill out the chart to see how the disciples ask God for help to live together as a community of His people, and to pray for their needs.

Scripture	For what did the disciples pray?	Scripture	For what did the disciples pray?
Acts 1:24		Acts 9:40, 28:8	
Acts 2:42, 4:24, 6:4, 10:9		Acts 12:5 & 12, 13:3, 16:25	
Acts 4:23-31, 16:25; Ephesians 6:19		Acts 20:36, 21:5	
Acts 6:6, 14:23		Acts 27:29	
Acts 8:14-17		I Thessalonians 3:1	
Acts 8:22; James 5:16		James 5:14	

Prayer occurs in many places, in many forms (on knees, lying flat, while working, and in other ways). Making time for prayer is an important part of living together as God's people.

# Jesus' Followers Worship God

Those who repent and **believe** the **Good News of the kingdom** after meeting Jesus join God's people in worship.

Those whose **natural identity** is Jewish continue to worship by practicing Jewish traditions. Because God changes their true **identity**, they now understand more and **believe** more about God and His **promise**. As they change on the inside, their outward ways of relating to God become **acceptable worship**.

While He is on earth, Jesus does not introduce new ways of worship. He does not set up a church in the way we might expect. He does not set up a new religious community. He introduces all peoples to the **kingdom of God**, and reveals God to them in a new way. He lives as a Jew, but shows people what God is like in human form. He says to worship the Father in spirit and in truth (John 4:24, 39-42).

Jesus' followers do not need to follow the Jewish forms of worship in order for their worship to be acceptable. It is their changed attitude toward God that makes their worship **acceptable** to Him.

- » In your own words, tell about the early days in Jerusalem, when the kingdom enters the Jewish community through the teaching of the apostles and the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Describe the nature of a kingdom community as it begins to emerge and grow within a people group.

# The Apostles Spread the Good News Inside Their Own People Group

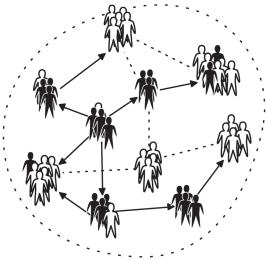
After these exciting times in Jerusalem where many repent, **believe**, and begin to follow Jesus, the persecution in Jerusalem eventually moves the disciples out of that city into the surrounding areas of Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1).

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: GALATIANS 2:7-10**

The disciples focus on making disciples within their own people group. This is an important task. People receive the **Good News** most naturally from others like them, who speak the same language and know their traditions. Apostles like Peter, and many of the other disciples who remain in Jerusalem after Pentecost, devote themselves to spreading the kingdom among their own people group, the Jews.

Peter spends much of his time teaching the disciples the ways of the kingdom and how to be in good relationships with others in their family and community (see I Peter). When there are strong community and family relationships, the kingdom grows among the Jewish community naturally and with greater power.

People sharing the **Good News** within their own people group already have trust relationships with those who receive it. This makes the spread of the kingdom more natural. Maybe there are families with whom you do business, with whom you are connected through marriage, or with whom you spend time in the community in another way. Sharing Jesus with them is like the **natural spread** of yeast through dough as the woman mixes it in Jesus' parable (Matthew 13:33), whether it takes days or generations.



The kingdom of God spreads naturally through a people group.

Many disciples, as they go out from Jerusalem, the share the news of Jesus and the kingdom with Jewish communities living in other lands. This is also an

Jewish communities living in other lands. This is also an example of the **natural spread** of the kingdom within a people group. This is an important task. As we study God's **plan**, however, we learn He also wants His kingdom to spread from people groups who receive it to other people groups who have not yet received it.

# The Apostles and the Covenant

The foreigners who were in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost begin to return to their homes and take the **Good News of the kingdom of God** with them. More and more people enter the **kingdom of God**.

God acts very clearly in the lives of Peter and Paul to make sure they do not work only to **naturally spread** the **Good News** among other Jews. He causes them to leave their Jewish people and traditions in order to **introduce the Good News** to Gentile people groups.

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: ACTS 10**

God speaks to Peter in a vision and sends him to meet Cornelius, a Roman military officer. Cornelius and his family are not Jewish, but they are God-fearers. They give alms generously and pray to the Most High God. God's angel tells Cornelius to send for Peter. When Peter arrives and shares the **Good News** about Jesus, the Holy Spirit comes upon everyone in the Roman's household. Peter recognizes that God accepts and blesses Gentiles with the Holy Spirit, just as He does Jews at Pentecost.

#### STORY FOR STUDY: ACTS 9:1-31 and ACTS 11:19-30

Jesus appears in a mighty way to Paul—a religious terrorist known first as Saul—who seeks to arrest followers of Jesus. Paul becomes a preacher of grace and mercy and a witness to God's kingdom, God's **plan** and the work of Jesus (see Acts 9). God sets Paul apart, along with other early disciples, to take the **Good News** to the Gentiles (Acts 15:7).

Because Gentiles practice different traditions and worship other gods, most Jews consider them unclean and unworthy of God's blessings. In addition to that, one group of Gentiles—the Romans—are their captors and rule over the region of Judea, treating the Jewish people badly.

We can understand why the Jews do not want to share God's **Good News** with people who oppress them and cause them to suffer unjustly. However, God wants them to make disciples of all peoples, including the Romans. Because our own prejudice and hatred motivate us at times, we must continue to allow God to give us His grace and love for all peoples.

- In these days, the kingdom spreads rapidly among Jews. Many of Jesus' disciples work hard to spread the Good News to other Jews throughout the known world.
  - » Why does God act to direct some disciples to Gentiles as well as Jews?
  - » What do God's actions toward Gentiles reveal about His character and His **plan**?

# The Apostles Spread the Good News Among Other People Groups

#### STORY FOR STUDY: GALATIANS 2:7-10 and ROMANS 15:14-22

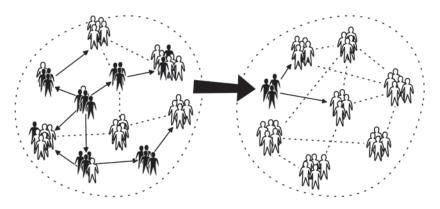
God uses apostles like Paul and his friends to be part of spreading God's kingdom to people groups other than the Jewish people. They do share about the kingdom with other Jews, but their first commitment is to spread the **Good News** to the Gentile people groups—the Ephesians, the Romans, the Corinthians, the Cretans, and many others.

These people groups speak different languages and have very different traditions than the Jewish people do. Because of this, these apostles work hard to introduce and communicate the message of the **kingdom** of **God** in a way that Gentiles can understand.

Paul understands that once he **introduces the Good News** to a new people group, those new followers of Jesus will then work to **naturally spread** the kingdom through their own families and communities, just as Peter and others do among the Jewish people. Paul often writes to them about ways to strengthen relationships in their families and communities so that the kingdom might spread more quickly and effectively (see Ephesians and Colossians, for example).

While the kingdom spreads through one people group, other people groups still wait to hear the **Good News**. In order to share the truth about Jesus with a people group where no families follow Jesus, a family—or group of disciples like Paul and his group—leaves their own people group and intentionally goes to another one in order to introduce them to the **kingdom of God**.

Those who **introduce the kingdom** to a new people group must communicate with them in ways they will understand. They must learn their language and their traditions. They must form good trust relationships with them. Most importantly, they must love and serve them in meaningful ways. Jesus demonstrates the kingdom through His love and life as a servant to others. The kingdom must be introduced carefully, like the woman introduces yeast into her dough, so it will **naturally spread**.



Followers of Jesus leave their own people group and intentionally go to another in order to introduce the kingdom of God.

Out of all the disciples working to spread the kingdom in our day, only a few are working to **introduce the kingdom** to people groups with no followers of Jesus. The majority serve in people groups where disciples have already **introduced the kingdom**, and where it is already **naturally spreading** throughout that people group.

We need more disciples who express Paul's burden: "It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation" (Romans 15:20).

- What is the difference between the primary task given to Peter and the primary task given to Paul?
- What is the difference between the work of introducing the kingdom to a people group with no followers of Jesus yet, and the work of naturally spreading the kingdom through a people group where there are already followers of Jesus?
- What do we learn about the spread of the kingdom from Matthew 13:33? What do we learn about the spread of the kingdom in Matthew 13:31? What part of the parable teaches us about **natural spread** of the kingdom? What part teaches us about **introducing the kingdom**?

#### **Explore the Scriptures**

» Refer to the smaller stories found in Acts below.

Acts 1:1-8	Acts 5:12-42
Acts 2:1-36	Acts 6:8-7:60
Acts 3:1-26	Acts 9:1-31
Acts 4:32-5:11	Acts 9:32-10:48

- » Answer the following about God's **purpose**:
  - » How does God act to restore His good relationship with humanity in this part of the Great Story?
  - » How does God act to restore His kingdom rule?
  - » How does Satan try to prevent God from carrying out His **purpose** to restore?
- Answer the following questions about humanity's response to God. Tell about our identity.
  - » How does humanity participate in the war between God's kingdom and the kingdom of darkness?
  - » How does God reveal Himself to humanity and communicate with them?
  - » How does humanity respond to God's revelation?
  - » How do the people of God honor and worship Him, both as individuals and as a community?

# **Reflect on What God Teaches You**

- Ask God to reveal truth to you about any bad attitudes or prejudice among your people that prevent the Good News from going forth in your city, your area, or from your people group to other people groups.
- » Confess your sin and ask God to forgive you and your people. Ask Him to remove any hatred and replace it with love and mercy.

## Pray for those who Suffer Persecution

Like the early disciples in Jerusalem, many in the world today suffer unjustly because they follow Jesus. They are in prison. People attack them physically or emotionally. Some are murdered like Stephen (Acts 7). Pray that these precious brothers and sisters in the Lord find hope, comfort and encouragement in the Lord Jesus, just as Stephen found (Acts 7:54-55). Pray that they are strong and bold. Pray for their families and communities to find forgiveness, healing and encouragement. Ask God to meet the needs of widows and children. Pray that God uses this evil for good and that His kingdom grows in spite of the attack. Pray by name for those you know who are suffering in this way. Pray that your family and community will be prepared to endure unjust suffering when the time comes.

# Lesson 8. Sent-Out Disciples

Jesus reveals Himself to Paul, changing him from one who persecutes Jesus' disciples to one who makes disciples. God reveals His love and acceptance of Gentiles to Peter, his friends, and Cornelius' family (Acts 10). Soon after these life-changing events, the Holy Spirit reveals more about God's **plan** to the **kingdom community** in a town called Antioch.

# **Kingdom Communities Send Off Disciples**

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: ACTS 13:1-3**

One day, some devoted disciples worshipping in Antioch receive a message from the Holy Spirit. After praying and fasting, they send off Paul and Barnabas to visit other communities in the Roman world.

Paul, Barnabas, and a number of other devoted disciples form the first group sent off to **introduce the kingdom** to new people groups (Acts 13). Apostle means "sent one," so the **Bible** often refers to these men and women as apostles. In this course, we refer to them as the **sent-out disciples**.

The local **kingdom community** focuses on seeing the kingdom **naturally spread** within its own people group. The community is the place where God dwells among a people group. They use all the gifts God gives them to build up the community of God's people within their own people group. They manage their households according to kingdom values and work to introduce other men and women to the truth about Jesus within their families and communities.

But local **kingdom communities** also recognize their covenant responsibility. They send off disciples and support them by providing resources, by encouraging them, and by praying for and sometimes joining their efforts. They wait eagerly for Both the local kingdom communities and the sent-out disciples rejoice and share together in the work God gives each to do.

reports from the **sent-out disciples** to hear about the work God does among other people groups. They actively seek opportunities to bless other peoples around them.

The **sent-out disciples** go off from a local **kingdom community** to focus on **introducing the kingdom** to new people groups. They use all the gifts God gives them to build up one another so that they can introduce families and communities from other people groups to Jesus, His kingdom values, and His **purpose** for them. They tell the **Great Story** to others who are different from them.

The **sent-out disciples** pray for the local **kingdom communities** who send them. Whenever they can, they return and bring reports of their work so their own people can pray for the new **kingdom communities** that begin to grow in new areas. Both the local **kingdom communities** and the **sent-out disciples** rejoice and share together in the work God gives each to do. They work separately from one another at times, to focus on two different ways of spreading God's kingdom. They work independently, and neither group is under the control or authority of the other group. They rejoice together in all God does through their people. They rejoice in the **purpose** God gives them all.

- Think about the two different groups of Jesus' followers we can identify at work in Acts—the local kingdom community and the sent-out disciples.
  - » What are their two different focuses in the spreading of the kingdom?
  - » How are they alike?
  - » How are they different?
  - » When and how do these two groups relate to one another? What do they share? What do they do separately?
  - » How do these two groups share in the work God gives His people?

# **Paul's Group of Sent-Out Disciples**

The **kingdom community** sees Paul off on three different journeys. On the first journey, the disciples at Antioch see Paul and Barnabas off with a small team. This is their first attempt to **introduce the kingdom** to people groups who have not yet heard the **Good News**. They learn many lessons and visit several cities where Gentiles begin to follow Jesus. Then they return to Antioch and gather the community of disciples together to share with them what God has done (Acts 13-14).

On the second journey, Paul and Barnabas go separate ways. Although this is a result of a sad conflict, God uses the new teams to spread the kingdom over a greater area. Barnabas takes John Mark, Paul takes Silas, and later Timothy joins Paul. A network of **sent-out disciples** begins to develop. They stay in contact with one another by sending letters and by passing messages through the **kingdom communities** of the towns they visit (Acts 15:36-18:23).

By the third journey, this network of **sent-out disciples** is quite large. Paul directs Jesus' new disciples to go throughout the known world for specific purposes. For example, he sends Timothy to Ephesus and Titus to Crete to appoint elders and instruct the disciples there. The authorities capture Paul and take him to Rome, but the work continues under his direction through letters and messengers. Paul recruits and trains those who can continue this work (Acts 18:23 to the end of Paul's life).

- » Think about your own people group as you answer the following:
  - » Who makes up your local **kingdom community**?
  - » Who are the elders of this local **kingdom community**?
  - » Who are the disciples you have sent off to other peoples?
  - » With what new people groups have the sent-out disciples shared the Good News?
  - » How do the sent-out disciples organize themselves? Who guides and directs them?
  - » How do the sent-out disciples relate to the rest of the kingdom community within your people?
- » Are your local kingdom community and group of sent-out disciples organized and governed in ways that make sense for your people group and your current situation?
  - » If so, what makes your situation work well?
  - » If not, what complications do you face? What structures or networks might work better for your people?

# Introduce the Kingdom—Learn From Paul

When Paul and the other **sent-out disciples** go on a journey to **introduce the kingdom** to a different people group without a **kingdom community**, what do they do when they arrive there? We find the stories of his journeys in the book of Acts. Every situation is different from another, but the stories of the early **sent-out disciples** guide us in our work.

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: ACTS 14:20-28**

Paul and his friends go to a Gentile city to preach the **Good News**. Many **believe** and begin to follow Jesus. Paul and his team do not stay long, but continue on their journey. They pass through cities they visited earlier to encourage the disciples there who face persecution because they now follow Jesus.

In each city, they appoint elders among the local **kingdom community** as it emerges and grows. Paul spends special time with the elders and commits them to the Lord. Paul and his team return to Antioch where they report on the journey and on all God has done in their travels.

"They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples" (Acts 14:21).

Paul and his companions follow Jesus' command to make disciples. He preaches in the synagogues and he talks in the marketplace or outside the town. He speaks to individuals who invite him and his companions into their households. He performs miracles.

The Holy Spirit sometimes shows the **sent-out disciples** exactly what to do and gives them power to do extraordinary things. Other times, disciples use the knowledge, wisdom and intelligence given by God to make wise and strategic decisions.

"Then they returned..." (Acts 14:22)

The **sent-out disciples** do not usually stay very long in one place. They travel to a village or city, stay a while, then travel on to other places to which they sometimes return later. They are able to do this because many of them already know the language and traditions of the different people groups they visit.

"...strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. 'We must go through many hardships to enter the **kingdom of God**.' they said" (Acts 14:22).

The new followers of Jesus sometimes experience persecution and times of testing. Paul and the other disciples encourage them. They challenge them to be true to their faith in Jesus, remembering the comforting words of Jesus, "*In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world*" (John 16:33). They do not seem to remove the new followers of Jesus from their communities or families and take them to safer places when persecution comes. They encourage the new followers to persevere.

#### "Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church" (Acts 14:23).

The new **kingdom communities** are not dependent on the **sent-out disciples** for leadership in matters of daily life and worship. In each community, Paul and Barnabas designate elders to oversee the local **kingdom community**. These elders manage the households of faith. Paul does not train new followers of Jesus to be pastors or elders. He finds those who are already elders in the community and appoints them as overseers of the local **kingdom community** in that place. He spends time with them, teaching them to obey all that Jesus' commands.

In I Timothy 3, we learn that elders must be able to teach those within their household and under their care. Paul understands that the Holy Spirit gives gifts to each member of the **kingdom community** and those with gifts of teaching, teach others (see Ephesians 4).

#### "...and with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust" (Acts 14:23).

Paul trusts the Holy Spirit to guide the new followers of Jesus and their elders. He does not stay to give them daily direction. He knows he is a **sent-out disciple** and must continue to share the **Good News** with other people groups. He **introduces the kingdom** like yeast into dough. Then he leaves it to work with the help God's Word of those already within the community. He writes to them and sends them messages. He even sends other disciples to them to teach them or give advice when they experience times of testing.

"From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch... On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles" (Acts 14:26-27).

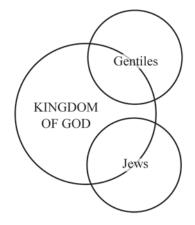
Paul returns and shares with the **kingdom community** in Antioch all that God does in other new **kingdom communities**. He connects the followers of Jesus in Antioch with new followers of Jesus he knows in other cities. As Paul tells of the great and marvelous works of God, he encourages all God's people. This increases compassion, concern and love between these communities who do not know each other face to face. This is one way God brings unity to His people living around the world.

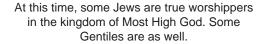
# A Great Conflict

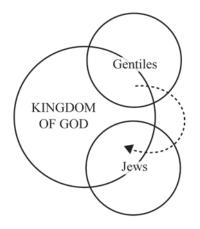
The **kingdom of God** spreads rapidly among Jews and Gentiles during this part of the **Great Story** due to the work of the Holy Spirit through Peter, Paul and other faithful apostles and disciples. As it spreads, however, some of Jesus' followers begin to disagree. Difficult issues arise and cause sharp conflict. The apostles and other elders must address these disagreements (Acts 15:2).

The roots of this conflict begin hundreds of years before Jesus comes, when Jews share the teachings of God with Gentiles. These Gentile converts become Jewish proselytes (see lesson 6). These Jews misunderstand the The kingdom of God spreads rapidly among Jews and Gentiles during this part of the Great Story due to the work of the Holy Spirit through Peter, Paul and other faithful apostles and disciples.

commands of God and think all Gentiles must change their **natural identity** and become like Jews in order to be true worshippers in the kingdom of Most High God. We know through the teachings of Jesus and His disciples that this teaching is false.







Many Jews misunderstand God and think Gentiles must become like Jews in order to be true worshippers.

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: ACTS 15:1-35**

As Paul **introduces the kingdom** to other people groups, he instructs them in the ways of the **kingdom of God** but not in the ways of Jewish

The kingdom of God is free to enter any people group. It can take on the traditions of every unique people group as the Holy Spirit transforms minds and hearts. traditions. He does not require them to adopt Jewish ways of worship or receive circumcision. He allows them to keep their **natural identity** and remain part of their own people group.

Without first becoming Jewish, the Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit from God (Acts 10:44-48, 13:52). Paul sees God work in this way and understands the only requirements of God are repentance and **faith** that leads to **obedience**.

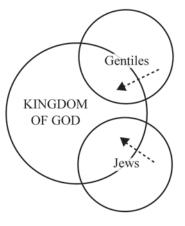
The Jewish followers of Jesus who still misunderstand God and believe Gentiles must change their **natural** 

identity oppose Paul, who teaches that they do not need to do so.

The **kingdom community** in Antioch sends Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem when the conflict grows serious. Paul and Barnabas discuss the disagreement with the Jewish disciples and the elders of the **kingdom community** in Jerusalem.

The leaders in Jerusalem listen to arguments on both sides of the issue. Many Jewish followers of Jesus still claim that without following all the Law, Gentiles cannot enter the **kingdom of God** or become true worshippers (Acts 15:1, 5).

Others, like Paul, believe that because God loves Gentiles and gives them the Holy Spirit, He approves of them just as He approves of the Jewish disciples. They believe God gives the Gentile disciples a new **identity**, even while their outside appearances remain the same. They understand that all peoples—Jewish and Gentile—enter the **kingdom of God** and become true worshippers only through **faith** in Jesus.



The Holy Spirit reveals that Gentiles are accepted as true worshippers without following Jewish laws and traditions.

After hearing both opinions, the elders meet to think about the arguments and examine the Scriptures. Finally, they decide that Gentiles who want to follow Jesus do not need to follow Jewish laws and traditions. Gentiles are free to remain part of their own people group. They may keep the **natural identity** they have when they begin following Jesus. However, Jesus' disciples and the other elders in Jerusalem do require them to follow a simple dietary rule and to remain pure.

After this decision, the disciples and elders become more aware of

how God's **Great Story** is unfolding. The **kingdom of God** is free to **naturally spread** within any group. It can finally take on the traditions of every unique people group as the Holy Spirit transforms their minds and hearts.

- >> How does the decision of the leaders in Jerusalem show God's purpose to restore His good relationship with humanity in this part of the Great Story?
- >> How does this decision reveal that the elders understand that God's plan includes not only the Jews, but also all the peoples on the earth?

# A Great Conflict in Our Day

Even while the elders and leaders in Jerusalem resolve this disagreement, many continue to oppose Paul and the other **sent-out disciples** who abide by the elders' decision. In fact, this Great Conflict continues

throughout history. Almost every time a **sent-out disciple introduces the kingdom of God** to a new people group, this conflict appears in some form.

A follower of Jesus is identifiable by the ways He is like Jesus, not by his natural identity.

On one side of the issue are disciples who believe the new followers must change parts of their **natural identity** to be more like their own **natural identity** in

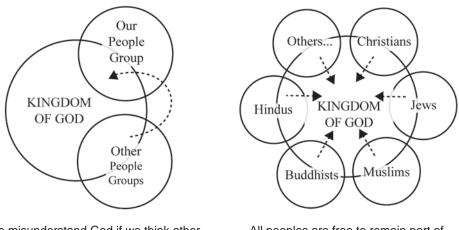
order to be true worshippers, accepted by God. On the other side of the issue are disciples who, like Paul and the early leaders, recognize that God does not require this kind of change.

» Has this Great Conflict touched your people in some way in the past or present?

We know God changes our true **identity** when we repent and allow Him to restore us to good relationship with Him. We must not also require people of other social or religious groups—like Muslims, Hindus or Buddhists—to enter the **kingdom of God** and become true worshippers by first changing their **natural identity** to be like the **natural identity** of another people group. We learn this lesson from the decision the leaders made in Jerusalem (see Acts 15).

In the eyes of most law-abiding Jews at that time, the Gentiles are dirty people with many evil practices and sins. God does not see the Greeks or Romans this way. He sees their sins as He sees the sins of all people groups. God allows Greeks and Romans to repent, enter His kingdom, and worship Him. He restores them to good relationship with Him and accepts worship from a pure heart. He does this in the same way He allows Jews to enter His kingdom and accepts worship from a pure heart. If your Muslim friend repents and begins to follow Jesus, God gives him the same Holy Spirit He gives Cornelius (Acts 10:44-48) and you. If your Hindu friend repents and begins to follow Jesus, God will forgive his sins in the same way He forgives yours.

People of other social or religious groups repent, enter the **kingdom of God** and worship Him just as Jews and Greeks do. No one can enter through adopting the cultural traditions and practices of another social or religious group. At the meeting in Jerusalem, James concludes, "*It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God*" (Acts 15:19).



We misunderstand God if we think other people must become like our people in order to be accepted as true worshippers.

All peoples are free to remain part of their own people group and worship God according to their own traditions.

A follower of Jesus is identifiable by the ways He is like Jesus, not by his **natural identity**.

God plants the **Good News** like a seed in the good soil of a receptive person, family or community. This seed takes root and grows up within the traditions of that person or people group. The plant that grows looks like that people group. It may look very different from the plant growing up within your own people group or ours. We may not recognize it at first, but the fruit it bears—the fruit of the Spirit—will always reflect the character of God (Galatians 5:22-25). Jesus' followers might express love, joy or kindness differently, but their words and deeds points others to God.

- What is the difference between the **natural identity** of a people group and an **identity** as true worshippers of Most High God?
- What do you learn from the diagrams above about entering the kingdom of God and becoming God's people who worship Him in spirit and truth?
- >> How does the natural identity with which we are born relate to the way we enter the kingdom of God? How does God change our identity when we enter the kingdom of God?

# Saving Faith—The Gentiles, Heirs Together with Israel

The **Great Story** is full of examples of **saving faith** among many peoples living in many different places and times. Truly, God wants to restore all the peoples of the earth to a good relationship with Himself. God reveals this in a powerful way to Peter, to Paul, and to other early disciples as many Gentiles repent and believe the truth of who Jesus is by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Gentiles throughout history learn of God's story and of His desire to forgive and restore them. God uses Israel to bless many Gentiles.

The Jewish people in Jesus' day have a difficult time accepting that God also welcomes Gentiles as His people and members of His household. Even those Jews who recognize that some Gentiles worship the Most High God struggle to believe that God considers them part of His **promise** and heirs together with Israel of the blessing God gives Abraham.

Paul instructs Jewish followers of Jesus by asking, "*Is God the God of Jews* only? *Is He not the God of Gentiles, too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only* one God, who will justify the circumcised [Jews] by faith and the uncircumcised [Gentiles] through that same faith" (Romans 3:29-30). Later Paul explains that Gentiles have become part of God's family the way a branch cut from one plant is grafted to another (Romans 11:17-24).

Paul understands that some Gentiles **believe** in God's **promise** to restore humanity to Himself. They demonstrate this **belief** in God's **promise** through their **obedience** to Jesus and to God's commands. This **obedient belief** is **saving faith** that moves them from the kingdom of darkness to the **kingdom of God**.

Throughout His **Great Story**, God invites people from different backgrounds to come to Him, **believe** His **promise** and the work of Jesus, and then demonstrate that **belief** through their **obedience**. God restores His good relationship with all who do so, whether Jew or Gentile. All become citizens and heirs of His kingdom. All become part of God's household, just as Paul tells the Gentiles, "…you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household…" (Ephesians 2:19).

All who follow Jesus become descendants of Abraham and heirs of the **promise**, as Paul explains, "*Consider Abraham: 'He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.' So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith*" (Galatians 3:6-9). This is **Good News** for the Gentiles of Paul's day, and **Good News** in our day, as well. Most of the peoples in the world are Gentile people groups.

## **Explore the Scriptures**

- » Read the account of the council meeting in Jerusalem from Acts 15:1-35. Answer the following questions.
  - » Who is on the Council and what is the **purpose** of the Council meeting?
  - » Why do some believe that Gentiles must follow all Jewish traditions? Who argues for this position? How do you describe their primary interests?
  - » Why do some feel that Gentiles do not need to follow all Jewish traditions? Who argues for this position? How do you describe their primary interests?
  - » How does the Council arrive at a decision? What factors do they consider?
  - » What is the final decision?
  - » What does the decision mean for the spread of the kingdom at that time?
  - » What does this decision mean for the spread of the kingdom today among those who do not yet follow Jesus?
  - » How can we apply the decision of the Jerusalem Council to our work today?

# **Reflect on What God Teaches You**

Are there ways your people have unknowingly required other people groups to adopt your own customs and traditions before entering the kingdom of God? Do you require that they follow your peoples' traditions before they can follow Jesus or be accepted by the kingdom community? Have you asked those from other people groups to change their natural identity as the Jewish people required of the Gentile people? What is God showing you through this lesson about the peoples of the earth, true worshippers and how to enter His kingdom?

# Pray for the Spread of the Kingdom

- Pray that in our day, God gives you eyes to see how and where He carries out His **plan**. Pray that you can have eyes to see how He wants to work through your people. Ask God to spread His kingdom naturally within your own people group. Pray for families and communities to come to know and worship Jesus as their King.
- Pray that God introduces His kingdom to other people groups who have not yet heard the Great Story. Ask God to show your people whom He chooses from among you to be sent-out disciples. Thank Him by faith that some among your people will carry the blessing you receive to others.
- Pray that we can have eyes to see His kingdom growing and spreading among other people groups and ears to hear what God is doing, even if it looks very different from how the kingdom looks in our own people groups. Pray for God's patience with the ways we, His people, misunderstand Him. Ask for His grace to do His work, and for His wisdom to know what to do and how to do it.
- Pray that we have the mind of Jesus (I Corinthians 2:16), being His servants in the world. Pray that God continues to transform our hearts and our minds. Pray that we will always want Him to teach us something new.

# Lesson 9. Kingdom Communities

#### STORY FOR STUDY: ACTS 16:11-40 and ACTS 18:1-17

The early disciples make their way throughout their part of the world sharing the **Good News**. Individuals, groups, and even communities repent and believe the **Good News** and enter the **kingdom of God**. Most new **kingdom communities** consist of households, like the household of the official who seeks Jesus in John 4:53, Cornelius in Acts 10, Lydia in Acts 16:15, Crispus in Acts 18:8, and many others.

As more families and groups begin to follow Jesus, the number of cities with local **kingdom communities** increases throughout the ancient world. These **kingdom communities** are the Church.

To learn about how this happens, we look at how God **introduces the kingdom** into the ancient port city of Ephesus.

# The Kingdom Introduced in Ephesus

#### STORY FOR STUDY: ACTS 18:18-19:41

Ephesus, at the time of the apostle Paul, is a regional capital and one of the largest cities in the world. Many different people groups live or visit there. For example, merchants come to sell or trade goods. Greeks and Romans travel from far away to worship the goddess Artemis in the largest temple of the ancient world. Ephesus is a very religious city and its people are devoted to their idols and gods.

A community of Jews lives in Ephesus for hundreds of years before Jesus comes. They form a synagogue. Like many synagogues of the ancient world, some Gentiles who fear God also gather there with the Jews. None has heard yet about Jesus, His teachings or the **Good News** about the **kingdom of God**.

Paul journeys to Ephesus and speaks in the synagogue. Even though the Jews ask him to stay, he leaves to accomplish other business. His friends, Priscilla and Aquila, stay behind. While he is gone, Apollos comes, The families and households who receive the Good News and follow Jesus become the church in that city and God dwells among them.

teaches, and learns from Priscilla and Aquila. Later, when Paul comes back, he finds several followers of Jesus among the Ephesians who have received the Holy Spirit.

Paul then spends three months in Ephesus preaching in the synagogue about the **kingdom of God.** Some Jewish men speak harmfully about

following Jesus and strongly oppose Paul. He begins teaching in a nearby building open to anyone who wishes to share ideas. For two years, many Jews and Gentiles come to hear Paul teach there about the **kingdom of God**.

God does many miracles through Paul. Many Ephesians repent and begin to follow Jesus, even those who practice magic and witchcraft. This is a very exciting time because the number of disciples grows in

When the community becomes the church and the new disciples keep their natural identity, God's church grows quickly. both the Jewish and Gentile communities. Paul sends Timothy and Silas, other **sent-out disciples** who are with him during those two years, to do work in other cities while he stays in Ephesus.

Many Ephesians leave idol worship to worship the living God. One day, a great riot breaks out because the idol makers are losing

business and are angry. They wrongly accuse Paul of bringing shame to their people and their god. The city leader reminds the people that Paul and his friends do not blaspheme or dishonor their god or people. Instead, they teach about the **kingdom of God**. The crowd calms down and Paul escapes to another city.

In Ephesus, the **kingdom community** of Jesus' followers grows first within the Jewish people group and the Jewish religious system. The Jewish followers of Jesus continue to live and meet with other Jews. They follow the Jewish way of life. Later, when others make them stop meeting at traditional gathering places, they begin to meet in their homes or in other buildings.

The families and households who receive the **Good News** and follow Jesus become the church in that city and God dwells among them. The **Good News** spreads within their community.

As Gentile families and households receive the **Good News**, the **kingdom community** also grows within Gentile people groups. Jews and Gentiles sometimes meet together even though they worship God differently. When new disciples remain part of their own families and communities the **kingdom community** is the church in that place.

Paul does not start a new religion, set up rules to follow, teach new religious practices, or organize new followers of Jesus into separate communities. He does not even speak badly of the people's gods, even while he knows they are false gods and the people are deceived. Instead, Paul **introduces the kingdom** and expects it to spread like yeast through dough. He honors Jesus, and focuses His message on truth. He watches the new **kingdom community** grow within the existing communities of the city. Both Jews and Gentiles continue to practice their own traditions while Jesus transforms their lives.

The church gathers in the same way the community gathered before they followed Jesus. Now when they are together they thank and praise God and remind one another

of Jesus' teachings. They also meet to listen to teaching of others like Paul, to pray, to hear Scripture read aloud, to care for one another, and to share the **Good News** with others.

The new disciples talk to one another about Jesus when others are nearby who do not yet follow Jesus. These discussions happen near Jews in synagogues, near Gentiles in lecture halls, and near unbelieving family members. Followers of Jesus continue to live with unbelievers as before, but now with new **purpose** and joy.

Those who practice magic at Ephesus change their allegiance from worship of false gods or evil spirits to worship of Jesus when the Holy Spirit convicts them of their sin. The Holy Spirit convicts all disciples of sin. When this happens, we begin to remove practices or thoughts from our lives that do not please or honor Him.

When we repent and enter the kingdom, God changes our **identity** and restores us to good relationship with Himself, but we keep our own **natural identity**. We continue to practice many traditions in the same way, but now with new and glorious meaning, full of worship for the Most High God. When the community becomes the church and the new disciples keep their **natural identity**, God's church grows quickly.

- » We learn two important lessons from the story about Ephesus:
  - The **kingdom community** or community of new followers is the church in that place.
  - New followers of Jesus keep their **natural identity**.
    - » How do these two lessons apply to the spread of the kingdom today? What might it look like for the church—the kingdom community—to grow inside another people group when individuals and families begin living as followers of Jesus within their households and communities?
    - What are some of the unique traditions of your people that the local kingdom community from your household, community, city or region still uses to worship God?

# Paul Writes to the Church at Ephesus

#### **LETTER FOR STUDY: EPHESIANS 1-6**

After Paul leaves, he does not return to Ephesus though he is still in contact with the followers of Jesus there. About ten years later, another **sent-out disciple** named Tychicus brings a letter from Paul to encourage the Ephesians. In that letter, Paul reminds them about their **identity** as chosen, restored members of the household of God.

He reminds them about God's **purpose** both for them and for all the peoples of the earth. He reminds them of God's **promise** to restore to Himself some from every people group and to rule again over all His creation.

He tells them that Jesus is the head of God's **kingdom community** on earth. Though as Jews and Gentiles they were once enemies, now their faith in Jesus unites them in **identity** and in **purpose**.

We recognize the kingdom community in every people group when we see God's people lovingly serve one another and serve others in their community. Paul instructs them to honor God and build His kingdom by living together in community and by using the gifts He gives each person. He teaches them how to love and serve one another even when they disagree and have conflicts. Paul gives very special instruction about how, as followers of Jesus, they must treat others in their household as members of a **kingdom community**.

Paul closes his letter by reminding them that **life is a war** between the **kingdom of God** and the kingdom of the Evil One, and encouraging them to stand together against evil.

The most important instruction for God's **kingdom community** is to live together daily in a way that honors and pleases God. God designs and equips **kingdom communities** to make decisions, solve problems, celebrate, grieve, learn, raise children, care for elders, and meet mutual needs for food and shelter.

Church is not a place to go, or group to join. Church is a **kingdom community** where God dwells. We recognize the **kingdom community** in every people group when we see God's people lovingly serve one another and serve others in their community.

For other good examples of Paul's teachings about relationships, see Romans 12-16, Galatians 6, Ephesians 4-6, Philippians 2, and Colossians 3-4. Peter also teaches about relationships in I Peter 4:8-11. James and John instruct **kingdom communities** about relationships in their letters, too.

- What comes to your mind when someone mentions the word "church?" Is it somewhere you go, something you belong to, or a daily life together with others in God's kingdom? How does this compare with what Jesus or Paul says when they speak of church? If your thoughts are different from Jesus' or Paul's thoughts, why do you think there is a difference?
- The strongest social group in the time of Jesus and His apostles is the household or family. What is the strongest group of your society today? Does your society depend primarily on strong households or extended families? Does your society depend more on groups of friends or workrelated groups instead of households and families?

What will it look like for the kingdom community to grow within the existing communities of your people or of the people group among whom you work? What will it look like for that community or social group to become the church in that place?

# Paul Sends Timothy Back to Ephesus

## STORY FOR STUDY: ACTS 20 LETTER FOR STUDY: I TIMOTHY

The disciples rush Paul out of Ephesus because of the riot started by the idol makers. He visits other towns in that region. On his way back to Jerusalem, he sends for the elders of the **kingdom community** in Ephesus to meet with him.

For the last time, he teaches and encourages them in person. He reminds them of how he lived while among them and instructs them to be good shepherds of the **kingdom community** they oversee.

He prophesies they will have trouble. Some among them will distort the truth. He tells them how to suffer this hardship well and entrusts them to God.

Paul and the Ephesians love one another dearly. They kneel and pray together, weeping, because they will not see each other again. They believe Paul will soon be in prison and be persecuted. They see that God set Paul apart for this work and send him along with the others to Jerusalem.

Even later, while in prison for several years, Paul does not forget about those who follow Jesus in Ephesus. He sends Timothy to revisit them and to remind them about the truth they learned from him. Timothy also instructs them on qualifications for leadership and on maintaining good relationships within the household and the **kingdom community**.

When we think of leaders appointed in the church, we often look to Paul's letter to Timothy. It is important to note that Paul first visits Ephesus about a decade before he writes this letter. The Ephesian community of faith grows in maturity and spreads for more than ten years without hearing from Paul in this way.

If we understand the church as a **kingdom community** growing inside an existing community, we realize that households and communities already have leaders. When Cornelius' household repents, **believes** and receives the Holy Spirit, that community becomes the church in that house. The community continues under the existing leadership Cornelius provides.

We never see Jesus or any of His apostles appointing new leaders for households or communities. The leaders of households continue to guide those under their care,

The leaders of households continue to guide those under their care, overseeing them in ways that honor God. overseeing them in ways that honor God. Those under their authority are to honor leaders in ways that please God.

When Timothy returns to Ephesus years later, the **Good News of the kingdom of God** has **naturally spread** from household to household. The number of disciples grows throughout the city. Timothy selects and appoints a few elders from among all the elders of households. These are the overseers of the whole **kingdom community** in

that city, of both Gentiles and Jews. Timothy commissions leaders who are of good character and reminds them that their righteousness matters to God.

- If there are already elders or overseers leading the kingdom community while Paul is at Ephesus and in the years that follow, why does Timothy go there years later? Who are these leaders? Who selects and appoints them? What are their qualifications? What do they do? What does Timothy instruct them to do when he arrives?
- What do you learn about leadership in a kingdom community from this lesson and from I Timothy 2:1-15, 3:1-16?

Jesus and His apostles do not teach about new pastors or apostles who earn money for their full- or part-time work as leaders in their **kingdom community**. This practice of paying workers develops many years later. Paul teaches that—through the gifts of the Holy Spirit—the **kingdom community** builds itself up and matures (Ephesians 4:11-16).

Leadership structures in the modern church develop over time and fit the traditions of each people group. A certain style may serve one group well but cause difficulty in another group. As we consider the idea of leadership for **kingdom communities**, we must carefully examine the principles found in Scripture.

- » How do Jesus' and Paul's instructions to the disciples in their day apply to our understanding of "planting churches" in our day?
  - » Does Jesus "plant a church" in the Jewish culture?
  - » Does Paul "plant a church" in Gentile cultures?
  - » What is it that we really want to "plant" or introduce in a new culture?
- Think about this issue and discuss all you learn with others in your study group. Keep a record of the insights the Holy Spirit reveals to you.

## **Explore the Scriptures**

- Read Matthew 16:13-20, Ephesians 1-3 and Colossians 1. Write down your thoughts about how the authors describe the church in these passages. Praise God that He has called you to be part of His church.
- >> How do you think these passages about the church or kingdom community relate to Matthew 28:18-20? Read I Corinthians 10:31-33. What guidelines in this passage help us know how we are to act?

## **Reflect on what God Teaches You**

- Consider the people group to whom you will send out disciples in order to introduce the kingdom. Ask God to reveal to you what a kingdom community might look like as it grows within that group.
  - » At what times and in what places do people already gather or meet and share their lives?
  - » What celebrations, festivals, and special meetings already exist when the community gathers?
  - » Of the regular, formal meetings that occur already, which would be good opportunities for sharing among individuals and within the community to teach about Jesus and proclaim the **kingdom of God**?
  - » What places do they already use for worship or religious practice?
  - What expectations do you have for the kingdom community in another people group based on your own experiences with your own people? What expectations do you need to release in order to allow the Holy Spirit to grow a unique **kingdom community** within other people groups that are different from yours?

# Pray for the Kingdom Community Within Your People

Pray, as Paul prayed for the kingdom community at Ephesus, that the Holy Spirit strengthen you so that Christ may dwell in you (Ephesians 3:14-21).

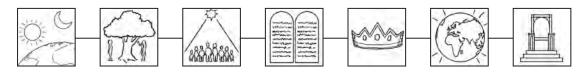
"...I kneel before the Father, from whom His whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of His glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."

# Apply What You Learn

# **Share the Great Story**

Gather your family again, and share the next part of the **Great Story**—the exciting way the **kingdom of God** spreads in the days following Jesus' days on earth.



Seek direction from God together with your own household regarding the role He has for you to play in the **Great Story**. Consider whether there is work you can do to **naturally spread** the **kingdom of God** within your own family and community.

Consider also whether God will send you off to another people group to **introduce the kingdom**. Consider whether God will use you to lead a support and prayer effort for other **sent-out disciples**.

Make a plan to put your affairs in order so you are ready to participate in the work of **introducing the kingdom** to a new people group, whether you go or whether you send others to go.

When you meet again with your study group, discuss your experience sharing with your family. Learn from one another and pray for each family represented.

# **Be Transformed**

Jesus' disciples gathered at Jerusalem in the early days devote themselves to prayer and to caring for one another's needs. Are you devoting yourself also to prayer and caring for one another?

If you have not done so already, schedule a regular time for prayer. Bring praise and thanksgiving to God, along with your requests. Spend time listening to one another. Remember to ask God for ears to hear and eyes to see Him among you.

Pray for the peoples of the world. To get information about other people groups and how to pray specifically for them, see resources like <u>www.operationworld.org</u> and <u>www.joshuaproject.net</u>.

# **Get Involved**

With your study group, make a list of all the workers you know of who are **sent-out disciples** from your own people group for the sake of the **Good News**. Reflect on the work they do. If they work with other **kingdom communities** in other people groups so that the **Good News spreads naturally** throughout that group, write their names in one list. If they work to **introduce the kingdom** to people groups where there are few or no known followers of Jesus or **kingdom communities**, put their names in another list.

Evaluate and discuss your people's current role in blessing all peoples. Where is your current focus? Are more of your **sent-out disciples** working in people groups where there are already followers of Jesus? Are more working where there are few or no known followers of Jesus? Are there too few **sent-out disciples** from your people? Set some good goals for **sending off disciples** in coming days.

Chapter 3 - The Age of the Apostles, Part One

# **Chapter 4**

# The Age of the Apostles, Part Two

"Through Him and for His name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith" (Romans 1:5).

Jesus' twelve apostles, then Paul and his group of **sent-out disciples**, actively fulfill the covenant responsibility in their day. In only thirty years, the **Good News** of the kingdom spreads from the area around Jerusalem in the Middle East to most major cities of the Roman Empire in Europe, Africa, Asia, and through many villages surrounding these cities. Three hundred years after the ascension of Jesus, the number of His followers grows from about three thousand on Pentecost to over six million.

The **Good News of the kingdom of God** spreads more rapidly than at any time before in history when Jesus and His apostles, then many **sent-out disciples**, travel from one city and village to the next. The New Testament record gives us many of their stories. These are worthy men and women of great **faith** and **obedience**.

They are also men and women like us. They disagree with one another. They become sick or discouraged. They fail and make mistakes. They care for family. As they travel together, they must address practical matters such as handling money, baptizing and training new followers, recruiting more workers, and making difficult decisions.

The **Bible** records many of these stories, too. In Chapter 4, we think deeply about the stories of these early followers of Jesus. They instruct us about living together on earth as **sent-out disciples**.

Lesson 10. Daily Life of Early Sent-Out Disciples Lesson 11. Early Sent-Out Disciples Communicate Good News Lesson 12. Barriers to Communication

# Lesson 10. Daily Life of Early Sent-out Disciples

#### How the Sent-Out Disciples Select and Train Workers and Leaders

# STORIES FOR STUDY: LUKE 5:1-11, 27-28; 8:1-3; 9:57-62 and JOHN 6:60-70

Jesus begins His service traveling throughout His home region of Galilee. Many people see His miracles, hear His teaching, and decide to follow Him in order to learn from Him as a teacher and leader. Some become His disciples while others do not (see Luke 5:1-11 and 27-28, Luke 8:2-3, Luke 9:57-62). Some people join Him in the work. Others turn back and stop following Him (John 6:66).

#### STORIES FOR STUDY: MARK 3:13-19 and LUKE 6:12-16

After spending some time with His disciples, Jesus selects a group of men from among them to travel more closely with Him. Before He chooses them, He spends the night praying on a mountain. At daybreak, He gathers His disciples and chooses the Twelve. He commissions them

Jesus trains the sent-out disciples as they live and work together. He trains the sent-out disciples within community. as **sent-out disciples**. He will send them out to preach the **Good News** and perform good works.

Jesus teaches a broad audience of hearers. Much of the time He speaks to large crowds. The **sentout disciples** receive instruction from this public teaching and from extra time Jesus spends teaching only the Twelve. He often talks to them away from the crowds to explain His message more clearly.

He helps them understand more about His own **identity**. He tells them He is the awaited **Promised Son**, sent from God. He also helps them understand more about God's **Great Story**. He shows them how—as the people of Israel—their story fits into God's story. He teaches them as they travel and live together. They learn from watching His example.

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: MATTHEW 10 and LUKE 9:1-10**

One day, Jesus sends the Twelve out to proclaim the **Good News** about the **kingdom of God** to their own people, the Jews. He wants it to **naturally spread** among that people group. The Twelve go out in twos. Jesus instructs them to take nothing with them and to look for worthy men who will welcome each pair into their households as guests. Then they are to bless those men and their households through their message and their works. Jesus also warns them about the challenges of rejection and persecution they will face. Sometime later, Jesus sends out seventy-two disciples to do similar work (Luke 10:1-24). When they return, they share with Him about their experience (Luke 10:17-23).

He sends off the twelve apostles to proclaim the **kingdom of God** to other Jews. Many days after they return, Jesus questions Peter about who people say that Jesus is. Peter, for the first time we see, confesses that Jesus is the **Promised Son** (Luke 9:18-20).

Jesus seems to focus more on the work and the **obedience** of the disciples than on making sure they know all the right answers about God before they go. He seems to look for **faith**, **obedience**, and a desire for right living. Jesus prays for those He chooses and sends out, seeking God's favor and blessing for them.

#### STORY FOR STUDY: JOHN 13:31-16:33

Jesus prepares His disciples for the time when He will no longer be with them. At that time, He will leave them to continue doing the work on earth with the help of the Holy Spirit. He teaches them things they will need to know and tells them how to face the difficult days to come. He prays for them.

Immediately after Jesus' death, the Twelve and the other disciples are very confused. After they see Jesus resurrected from the dead and, later, ascend into heaven, they receive the Holy Spirit. Peter and the other **sent-out disciples** then begin carrying on Jesus' work in Jerusalem, the Middle East and many other areas of the world.

Jesus trains the **sent-out disciples** as they live and work together. He teaches through Scripture and through firsthand experiences of God working among their people. He trains the **sent-out disciples** within community. Jesus never stops training His disciples. After Jesus ascends into heaven, His Father sends the Holy Spirit to continue the instruction and guidance.

Paul follows Jesus' model when he selects and trains **sent-out disciples**. Review the section "Paul's Group of Sent-Out Disciples" in lesson 8.

The Holy Spirit directs Paul's choice of **sent-out disciples**, such as the time He sets apart Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1-3). Paul selects other disciples to join him based on the recommendation of the **kingdom community**, such as Timothy (Acts 16:1-3). Paul also recognizes that God can select **sent-out disciples** directly (Galatians 1:15-17).

Paul finds people from many different people groups to travel with him (see Acts 20:4). He reaches as many people groups as possible by identifying disciples to send out from within each group. Paul trains the **sent-out disciples** much like Jesus does, by bringing them with him in the work he is doing (Acts 13:5, 16:4, 18:18). These disciples learn from Paul as he teaches and speaks in various cities. He also sends them out to do specific tasks (Acts 18:19, 19:21-22, 20:5). They also learn from his letters and messages to them, such as his letters to Timothy and Titus. Paul prays for those he chooses and sends out (II Timothy 1:3).

Paul recognizes the work must carry on, generation after generation, and cannot depend on the leadership of any one person. He instructs, "... the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (II Timothy 2:2).

- Based on the stories above from the lives of Jesus and Paul, make a list of guidelines to follow in choosing and training disciples or leaders to send out.
- Consider what you are learning about selecting, training and sending out leaders. Using the list of guidelines from the question above, evaluate how well you select and build leaders in your current work. In what areas are you strong and in what areas might the Holy Spirit lead you to change?

# How the Sent-Out Disciples Learn About God

#### STORY FOR STUDY: MATTHEW 15:21-28

Jesus brings the twelve apostles with Him on a trip to the coast to visit the Gentile cities there. A Gentile woman comes to Him for help. The disciples tell Jesus to send her away. They do not think the Lord is concerned about Gentiles. They think He is only concerned about Jews. Jesus does not send her away. Instead, He grants her request and compliments her faith.

The disciples learn that their Jewish understanding of God is too small. God's **Great Story** is for all people groups, including Gentile peoples.

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: MATTHEW 16:21-28**

Near the end of Jesus' life, He teaches His followers about the suffering that will come. Peter does not think this kind of suffering will happen to the **Promised Son**, so he takes Jesus aside to correct Him. Jesus corrects Peter instead, because Peter tries to prevent God from accomplishing His **plan**.

God shows Peter that his human point of view is too narrow. God's **Great Story** is a **plan** to restore His good relationship with all humanity by way of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

After Jesus ascends into heaven, God again corrects the disciples' understanding about His great restoration **plan**. When Peter visits the household of Cornelius, he is amazed to see God giving the Holy Spirit to Gentiles. Again, God shows Peter His **Great Story** is for all peoples, not just Jews.

We will see all things clearly when we are with Jesus in heaven. However, while we live on earth, we cannot understand everything about God. We must continue to

accept correction when we are wrong and be willing to continue to learn new things about the wonderful Most High God.

How do the early disciples learn about God? God reveals Himself through the Old Testament Scriptures (Matthew 5:21-48 and Luke 24:27), through angels (Luke 1:8-20 and 26-38), through visions or dreams (Acts 9:10-16, Acts 10:1-8 and 9-16), and through the Holy Spirit (Luke 2:25-27, Acts 13:2). The disciples learn that their Jewish understanding of God is too small. God's Great Story is for all people groups, including Gentile peoples.

God reveals the most about Himself through Jesus, the

exact representation of God, whose words and deeds teach the disciples more about what God is like, about His purposes for mankind and the world, and about how to live correctly (Colossians 1:15-20 and Hebrews 1:1-14).

We use Scripture to guide our understanding because God never does anything contrary to His Word or His character. Also, the Holy Spirit dwells in us to help us understand our part in God's **plan**. We must trust that He teaches others in the same way He guides us.

Discuss with your study group a time in your history when God changes or corrects a misunderstanding about Himself among your own people. Are you still open to receive this kind of instruction today?

# How the Sent-Out Disciples Handle Money

The **sent-out disciples** do many wonderful things as they travel throughout the land. They also eat, find shelter, and buy needed items. Where do they get resources for this? Read each passage and fill out the chart below.

Scripture	Who receives or gives support?	How do the sent-out disciples meet their own needs?
Luke 8:1-3		
Luke 9:1-6; Luke 10:1-12		
Acts 18:1-5		
Philippians 4:10-20		

While our situations today are different in some ways, we can learn principles from the early **sent-out disciples** about meeting our physical needs.

- The **sent-out disciples** do not think the work of sharing the **Good News** must be a long-term paid job. They sometimes have other work they do to meet their need for money.
- Other followers of Jesus sometimes give gifts to support the work of the sent-out disciples. These gifts are meant for a short time. They are not a steady promise of money that might lead the apostles to depend on any one group or source of support other than their own family or community.

The disciples often run into problems with money. Read each passage below and fill out the chart to learn ways they solve these problems.

Scripture	What is the problem faced with regard to money?	How do the disciples handle this problem?
Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-27		
Acts 6:2-7		
Acts 11:27-30		
I Corinthians 16:1-4		
I Timothy 5:17-18		

While our situations today are different in some ways, we can learn principles from the early sent-out disciples about solving problems with money.

- Paul links the kingdom communities that have resources (like the church at Antioch) to those kingdom communities without resources (like the church in Jerusalem during a famine). He is involved in helping all the communities of God's people care for each other when there is need.
- When problems come, the sent-out disciples carefully consider the needs of everyone. Then they make decisions that best allow the Good News to spread quickly. They find solutions that both help the local kingdom communities and allow the work of the sent-out disciples to continue.
- The disciples appoint small groups of trustworthy people to handle both the money and the resources for that group.

Neither Jesus nor Paul depends on any one source for income, yet God meets the needs of both men. They seek first the **kingdom of God**, and trust Him to meet their need. They understand they might at times have very little, but later have an

abundance (see Luke 9:57-62; Philippians 4:10-14). Their focus is on **obedience** to God in the work to which they are called.

- Based on the stories above from the lives of Jesus and Paul, make a list of guidelines to follow as you provide for the needs of the sent-out disciples and other leaders of your people.
- Consider what you learn about providing for needs of the sent-out disciples. Using the list of guidelines from the question above, evaluate how well you handle finances for God's work. In which areas are you strong, and in which areas might the Holy Spirit lead you to change?

# How New Followers of Jesus Participate in Baptism

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: LUKE 3:3-22**

John the Baptist begins baptizing Jews with water as a symbol of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John later baptizes Jesus in water and the Holy Spirit descends on Him in a special way.

Jesus does not baptize anyone with water. John says Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Luke 3:16). Later, Jesus' disciples do baptize new disciples and the practice of baptism continues in various forms (John 4:2, Acts 8, I Corinthians 1).

What is baptism? What does it represent? What does it mean to the Jews? What does it mean to the Gentiles? There are many questions about this custom. God's people around the world practice many different traditions with regard to baptism.

What does it mean for us that Jesus commands His followers to make disciples and baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19)?

There is much we do not understand about the ancient practices of baptism. But the **Bible** does tell us some things about baptism that we can understand.

- Jesus commands baptism and His followers practice it.
- Baptism of the Holy Spirit or by water is not a requirement for receiving or entering the kingdom of God. It is not required for entering or participation in the kingdom community, in the global community of God's people, or in the work of the kingdom in the world.
- There are no rules about who can or cannot baptize. Many disciples baptize new followers of Jesus.

Some people defend their traditions about baptism so fiercely that **kingdom communities** split apart over this issue. While there is much disagreement in the New

Testament, it is not about baptism. When God's people do disagree about other issues, however, they do the following (see Acts 10, 11 and 15).

- Look at what the Holy Spirit is doing in their day.
- Search the Scriptures to correct their understanding.
- As a group, apply the Scriptures to their situation.

#### How the Disciples Make Decisions

The **kingdom communities** and the leaders within them help answer difficult questions for the **sent-out disciples**. They also help them solve problems, discipline them when needed, and encourage them.

The examples of the early sent-out disciples guide us because they show how to make good decisions.

In turn, the **kingdom communities** in cities like Corinth turn to Paul and the **sent-out disciples** for advice on dealing with problems they face. For example, the first letter to the Corinthians addresses baptism, disagreements, immorality, lawsuits, marriages, idols, temples made to honor other gods, and other matters.

Paul and the other **sent-out disciples** working with him also turn to the authority of the twelve apostles still in Jerusalem when

they have questions on matters that cause disputes among God's people (Acts 15). Even while Paul and others are not under the control or authority of any group, at times they submit their concerns for discussion within the broader **kingdom community**.

The examples of the early **sent-out disciples** guide us because they show how to make good decisions.

- The disciples use principles from Scripture to help decide what to do when faced with difficult questions (Acts 15:13-18; I Corinthians 1:18, 5:13).
- The disciples seek solutions that preserve and strengthen relationships in the **kingdom community** (Acts 15, Ephesians 4-5).
- The disciples suggest ideas that allow followers of Jesus to keep their natural identities without losing their allegiance to Jesus and His kingdom (I Corinthians 7-8).

The role of a spiritual overseer—someone who provides guidance in making decisions—is a difficult one but one worthy of the diligence it requires. Such leaders help provide protection for our **kingdom community** from the sin that so easily entangles us.

Think about what you have learned from this lesson so far. How would you help another people group learn about God? How would you help them learn to make difficult decisions?

# **Explore the Scriptures**

- » Explore the stories in Luke and Acts and do the following:
  - » Look at a map and find all the places Jesus and His disciples visit.
  - » With what people group were they interacting in each place? For example, were they with Jews, Gentiles, or both?
  - » What significant events happen in each place?
  - » What do you see the twelve apostles do that might guide you in your role as a **sent-out disciple**?
- What do you learn from this activity about how the Good News spreads rapidly in these early days?
- Ask the Holy Spirit to show you how this spread of the kingdom throughout the Roman world might apply to the **natural spread** among your own people. How does this apply to **introducing the kingdom** to another people group among whom you live and work? Discuss this with others in your study group and record what you learn.

# **Reflect on What God Teaches You**

- Paul makes tents for a living. At times he uses his skills to support himself as he works at spreading the Good News around the Gentile world. You may not know how to make tents, but maybe you or your family has skills to use to support yourself at times as you work to introduce the kingdom into a new people group. Consider the possibilities as you answer the following questions.
  - » What are your gifts, interests and special skills?
  - » What education or training have you had? What is your profession?
  - » What do you know about the location where you might go? Is your profession useful there? For example, if you are a farmer but are moving to a desert where growing crops is difficult, maybe you need other skills that are more useful. Will your skills bless or contribute to the lives of the people in some way?
  - » What job opportunities exist in the place where you might go? Are they looking for skilled laborers in a particular field? What needs or demands are there that you can fill?

### Pray for the Kingdom of God to Spread among Your People

- Pray that God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, opens wide the door of opportunity for His Good News to naturally spread through your own people group. Pray that this work of the Spirit moves quickly from your people to another people group who has not yet heard or responded to the truth of who Jesus is. Pray that God will remove all obstacles and barriers.
- Pray for healing and reconciliation within the kingdom community where there are divisions and broken relationships. Pray for divine direction and for effective interaction among His people.

# Lesson 11. Early Sent-Out Disciples Communicate Good News

Many early disciples are not great speakers or leaders. They are fisherman, government workers, tradesmen or farmers. They are ordinary by the standards of the world. Yet God uses them to communicate powerfully to many peoples throughout the region. We learn important lessons from their stories about how to communicate **Good News of the kingdom of God**.

# Peter and Paul Connect People to the Great Story

### STORY FOR STUDY: ACTS 2:14-42

On Pentecost, Peter speaks to a large crowd in Jerusalem. Most of the people listening are Jewish. His sermon reminds his hearers of the prophesies of Joel, a Jewish prophet, and the words of King David, who both speak of the **Promised Son**. Peter teaches them that Jesus is definitely the **Promised Son** that the Old Testament Scriptures describe.

Peter recalls David's words about the resurrection and, as he concludes, many Jewish men and women are cut to the heart. Scripture records that 3,000 repent and receive baptism. The truth of Scripture is now real to them. They see the **Great Story** more clearly.

#### STORY FOR STUDY: ACTS 17:16-34

A few years later, Paul travels to Athens on one of his journeys. He spends time watching and learning from the Athenians. He also preaches to them as Peter does in Jerusalem. Paul's sermon tells the story of God's creation and how all men and women continue to **seek after their own way**.

Paul quotes from the Athenians' own prophet and poet. He tells them that God wants everyone to seek Him. He tells them about the resurrection. Some listeners follow Jesus and others ask to hear more.

What the **sent-out disciples** say to Athenians shows that they understand God is already at work among the Greek people. Paul sees that the Athenians are a religious people and connects them to God's **Great Story** through an inscription he sees on one of their own altars. By bringing attention to the space they prepared for an unknown god, Paul alerts them to the presence of the Most High God among them, His importance to their ancestors, and His desire to restore His relationship with them.

Paul quotes the Jewish leaders, Solomon, Isaiah, and Stephen, but he does not tell the Athenians that his words are from the Jews' Scriptures. He tells them God's truth and speaks the words of one of their own prophets, *"For in him we live and move and have our being."* He also speaks the words of one of their poets, *"We are his*  *offspring*." Because Paul uses both the truth from Scripture and some truth from within their own traditions, his message is clear to his audience.

The message Jesus and His disciples share varies depending on their audience, but it always connects the listeners with the understanding they already have of who God is.

- What does Peter's message to the Jews in Jerusalem reveal to us about where he finds God and His truth already at work in the Jewish people (see Acts 2)?
- What does Paul's message to the Athenians reveal to us about where he finds God and His truth already a part of the their religious places and traditions, even before he proclaims the Good News of the kingdom here (see Acts 17)?

When Paul visits Athens, he wants to tell about God and His **Great Story**. He begins his message with an observation about something in their culture. He uses part of their own religious system to point them to God. The people of Athens have many objects of worship around the city. Paul finds an altar that says, "To an Unknown God." He tells them this unknown god is the Most High God.

Even though the idols and altars for false gods deeply upset Paul, he

does not tell them that it is very wrong or bad to worship idols. Idol worship does anger God, but Paul chooses to lift up other truth instead of condemning their actions. He sees that they are serious about religion, and says that the altar to an unknown God proves that their ancestors once knew about the Most High God.

Paul focuses on the pieces of their culture that are true and the evidence that God is already at work there. He encourages them to return and seek the Most High God who is the creator of all things (Acts 17). Because Paul uses both the truth from Scripture and some truth from within their own traditions, his message is clear to his audience.

Paul takes time to learn things about the people and culture of Athens before he shares **Good News** with them. He listens to them and observes them. Even though these people do not follow God and do not know about Jesus, Paul has eyes to see that they are religious and that some of their own people speak truth. Paul **introduces the kingdom** by pointing out traces of it that are already part of this people's **identity**.

Why does Paul choose to first lift up the truth he sees among this people rather than to speak against the false gods and deception he sees? (See John 12:32 for help.) What results does this have on his audience? What instruction does this give us about communicating Good News with others? God shows Himself to each unique people group. He does this through His creation (Romans 1:20). He also gives everyone a conscience (Romans 2:13-15). We know what is right and wrong. People who do not have Scripture still know some things about God. God shows that He cares for all people groups (Acts 14:16-17) by

Paul introduces the kingdom by pointing out traces of it that are already part of this people's identity. revealing Himself to everyone through Creation and the human conscience.

All peoples trace their ancestry to Adam through Noah, so all peoples are in relationship with God at one time in their story. God's **purpose** is to restore this relationship and He wants to use us as ministers of reconciliation (II Corinthians 5:17-21), His **kingdom of priests**.

Wise **sent-out disciples** have eyes to see and ears to hear the truth and presence of God in another people group. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can find and use these truths to lead peoples back to Him. **Sent-out disciples** help a people to connect their story to God's **Great Story** once again.

What are some of the ways God reveals Himself to peoples all over the world? If we believe God reveals Himself to people groups in these ways, and that He is already at work in every people group, what impact does that have on the way we approach a people to **introduce the kingdom**, even if we do not know of any followers of Jesus living among them?

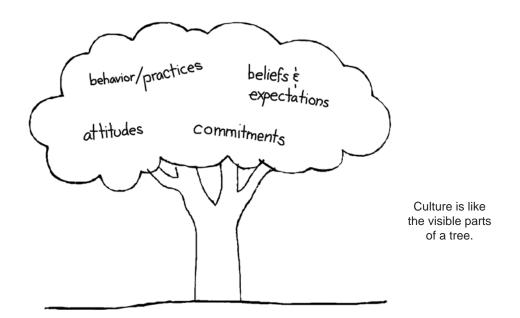
### Early Disciples Understand Culture and Worldview

When Paul visits Athens, he takes time to learn about the Athenian people and their traditions and customs before he begins sharing **Good News** with them. In our day, we might say that Paul takes time to learn their culture and to understand their worldview.

Culture is a system of traditions, ideas and values people share. It is the way a group of people lives—whether they are a small tribe or a large nation. Each people group has its own traditions. We learn, share and maintain the ways of our people in our community and within our culture.

Our culture binds us together, giving us a sense of **identity.** We know who we are. Our culture gives us a sense of dignity. We are proud of who we are. It gives us a sense of continuity. We share things in common with our ancestors and will pass our traditions on to our children. Everyone lives within a culture—it is impossible to not be part of a culture.

Culture is like the visible parts of a tree. Our customs, behaviors and many of our beliefs are the parts of the tree you can see—the branches, the leaves and the fruit. You can observe culture whenever you are among people.



- What different cultures can you remember from Scripture? What cultures do the Israelites meet when they enter the land of Canaan? What cultures does Paul find in the book of Acts? What are some other examples of customs and traditions in Scripture?
- What can you describe about your own culture? What are some of the social and religious customs, traditions, and behaviors of your people?

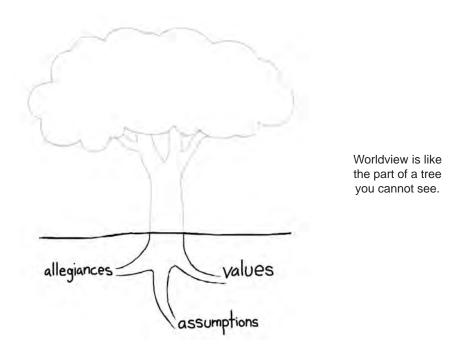
Worldview is the lens at the heart of every people's culture through which a people perceives and seeks to understand the world. It is the way we determine what is real.

It is what we do not have to explain because we just know it is true—whether it is really true or not. We may not realize it, but we build everything else our beliefs, our values, our customs and traditions, even our individual actions and feelings—on our worldview.

People are transformed when there is a radical shift in their worldview, or their understanding of truth.

Everyone has a worldview and each person's worldview is a little bit different. But among the same people group, there are many shared viewpoints. These help peoples to make sense of life, to understand their experiences, to interpret events, and to decide what is significant and what is not.

Worldview is like the part of a tree you cannot see—the many roots spreading out below the ground. You do not see the roots, but the roots support the whole tree and everything is connected. These are the values, allegiances, and assumptions about the world that support our behaviors and our choices.



- » Use the tree diagram to explain to someone the difference between culture and worldview. Think of examples for each.
  - » Name a custom of your people. That is culture.
  - » Why do you perform this custom? This is more difficult. Think about the values and priorities your people have that led your people to adopt this custom. Think about the allegiances or power relationships that led your people to adopt this custom. That is worldview.

If we want to see God's kingdom come among a people group, then we need to pray for changes in worldview. People are transformed when there is a radical shift in their worldview, or their understanding of truth. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to show us how He wants to bring truth, new life and allegiance to Jesus into the lives of a people.

We do not necessarily want people to change just their outward behaviors, such as their cultural or their social and religious practices. We want to see God work at the root—not just in the branches and leaves. Good roots produce good fruit.

Why is it important to pray and work for change in a people group's worldview rather than only a change in their culture? What problems may happen when there is a change in a people's culture but not in their worldview? Can you think of any examples of this among your own people?

# **Early Disciples Identify With Others**

#### STORY FOR STUDY: PHILIPPIANS 2:3-11 and ACTS 10

In Acts 10, Peter breaks social rules of his own culture in order to identify with people in another culture. He puts aside his own Jewish customs that are a barrier to sharing the **Good News** with the household

of Cornelius. It is probably uncomfortable for Peter to enter the home of those he considers unclean according to Jewish law.

Peter realizes we "should not call any man impure or unclean" (Acts 10:28). "God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear Him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34b-35). God accepts Cornelius, who is a Gentile, without requiring him to become a Jew either religiously or culturally. He gives His Holy Spirit to all in the household of Cornelius because they trust in Jesus. We must learn to identify with other people groups and their cultures in the same way Jesus identifies as a human when He is on earth.

God creates all people groups to have a unique culture. We must learn to identify with other people groups and their cultures in the same way Jesus identifies as a human when He is on earth. He is vulnerable. He suffers rejection, loss, misunderstanding and many challenges. He is emotional—in Scripture we see Him weep. He eats and sleeps. At times He is hungry, joyful or frustrated. In anguish, He faces death for our sake.

Jesus also identifies as a Jewish man when He is on earth. He reveals God and His kingdom to Jews through their own Jewish culture so they see God is not far from them (Acts 17:27).

When we go to another people group, our **natural identity** is different from theirs. We follow Jesus' example of serving others and give up some of our **natural identity** to take on some of their **natural identity**. We learn a new language. We learn new social customs. We learn to live like those around us. We reveal God and His kingdom to a people through their own culture so that they might see that God is not far from them.

Paul says, "We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our own lives as well, because you had become so dear to us" (I Thessalonians 2:8). Paul and his fellow workers are delighted to share their lives with the people to whom they go. They do not learn only a few things about a culture or only speak once to the people. They share their very lives.

What does it mean to identify with another people? What are some ways we need to identify with another people group in order to reveal God and His kingdom to them through their own culture? >> Jesus says, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all" (Mark 9:35). What does it mean to be a servant of all? How does living as a servant of all affect the way we relate to other peoples we live and work among?

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: I CORINTHIANS 9:19-23**

Paul says in I Corinthians 9:19-23 that he voluntarily becomes all things to all men. He says, "*I make myself a slave to everyone, in order to win as many as possible.*" We identify with people so that they see and hear our message that the **kingdom of God** is near. Like Paul, we want to see as many won as possible.

Even though Paul is free from following the Jewish law, when he is with Jews who live under the law, he lives like them and follows the law. When he is with Gentiles who are not living under the law, he lives like them and does not keep the law. Paul identifies with each people group in order to reveal God to them through their own culture.

Paul does not expect those from other people groups to become like him. He becomes like them so that he is able to **introduce the kingdom of God** to them—so that he is able to introduce them to Jesus.

When **sent-out disciples** communicate **Good News** through a culture, the Holy Spirit reveals Himself through what they understand already, just as He does with Abraham, Moses, and many others. Individuals and families begin to repent, **believe**, and follow Jesus.

Three times in his teaching, the apostle Paul urges people to remain in the situation in life to which God has assigned them for the time being (I Corinthians 7:17, 20, 24). They become like salt and light to others around them and the kingdom **naturally spreads** (Matthew 5:13-16).

We become like a people, so they can stay like their people—that we may win as many as possible (I Corinthians 9:22-23).

>>> Learning a new language is sometimes difficult but not always uncomfortable. It is very uncomfortable for Peter to enter the house of a Gentile his people consider unclean and eat with them. What are some uncomfortable things we must do for the sake of the kingdom? Read and meditate on Philippians 2:1-12. Allow the Holy Spirit the opportunity to help you identify right and wrong attitudes you have developed toward yourself and others. Which of the verses reveal something about the attitudes we must have toward people of other cultures or different worldviews? Write down the verse number and what it teaches us about relating to other people groups.

# The Impossibility of Completely Identifying with Another Culture

#### STORY FOR STUDY: ACTS 16:1-5 and GALATIANS 2:1-5

Paul wants to take a young man named Timothy along with him in his work. Timothy's mother is Jewish and his father is Greek. So Paul circumcises Timothy before they leave because they will be traveling among Jews. They need to show the Jews that Paul is not asking them to abandon their own culture by not being circumcised. Instead, Paul teaches them to keep their Jewish **natural identity**.

But Paul is also concerned with Greek culture and other Gentile cultures. Since the **Good News** is the most important thing, Paul keeps the focus on Jesus, who is the **Good News**. Paul knows that the work of spreading that **Good News** requires sensitivity to cultures.

Some Jewish disciples teach that all new followers of Jesus must be circumcised to enter the **kingdom of God** (Acts 15:1). Titus, another one of Paul's companions, is not circumcised as Timothy is. Paul and Barnabas feel it will communicate a distorted and foreign message if they circumcise Titus, who is a Greek follower of Jesus, since it will appear that circumcision is required to enter the **kingdom of God**. It is not possible for Titus to identify with both the Greeks and the Jews.

Even while we desire to identify with another people for the sake of Jesus and His kingdom, we cannot give up parts of our own culture and worldview. These differences will set us apart from each other. We cannot, nor do we need to, completely change our **natural identity**. Rather, we need to identify with other people groups in ways that reveal God and His kingdom to them through their own culture.

### Some Things in Every Culture Do Need to Change

About 200 years ago, William Carey, a **sent-out disciple** to South Asia, arrives, settles among a people there, and begins to learn the culture and language. Over time, he grows aware of a custom among the people of leaving female or sickly babies outside to die.

Carey recognizes that this custom reveals a lack of value for human life in the worldview of this people. He knows that God values all human life—females, children, the sick and deformed—because He makes humans in His own image. Over time he also sees the destruction this practice brings to families and a society. Carey feels compelled to seek change on behalf of these precious humans God loves.

Carey begins to raise awareness of the practice among other foreigners and the government officials. They ask him to make a report of the

practice. He takes on this assignment and files the report, and eventually the practice becomes outlawed in that area.

God knows what needs to change or to be removed from a culture.

However, Carey recognizes that changing the law about the custom will not abolish the practice. God must change the worldview of this people, to value human life. So Carey spends many hours **introducing the kingdom of God** to

his friends among this people.

Over many years, some repent and begin to follow Jesus. God begins to change their value or worldview with regard to human life. Carey's faithfulness brings lasting change to this people group.

We know there is good and truth in every culture. There is also evil in every culture. When Paul faces evil in the idolatry of the Athenians, he chooses to first lift up truth rather than point out sin. When Carey faces the murder of infants, he chooses to point out the sin and work to change this part of the culture and worldview. How do we know when to lift up truth and allow the Holy Spirit to convict others and when to point out sin and work for change?

This is not an easy question, and we must seek guidance from the Holy Spirit in each situation, considering the following:

- We remember the Holy Spirit is the one who changes the motives and hearts of people. We cannot change a person's heart. God knows what needs to change or to be removed from a culture. The magicians in Ephesus bring their books of magic to be burned and destroyed when they recognize the work of the Most High God among them (Acts 19:19). Paul does not tell them to do this. It is the Holy Spirit that leads them to do this.
- We humbly recognize there is also sin in our own people that is difficult for us to see. Jesus says, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:3-5).
- We humbly recognize that we misunderstand what we see in another culture. William Carey lives among a people for many years, making many friends, serving the people and revealing God to them before he works to change the culture in this way.

Pray earnestly for guidance from God when your **sent-out disciples** face difficult questions of culture and worldview. Only He knows the path of wisdom and right living.

## **Explore the Scriptures**

- The apostle Paul introduces the kingdom to other people groups in addition to the Jews. When Paul speaks to his own people, the Jews, he shares his message in a different way than when he speaks to a Gentile people group. Paul is inside the Jewish people group, but outside the Gentile people groups.
- Read about a time Paul speaks to a group of Jews in Acts 13:13-43. Answer the questions in the first column of the chart below.

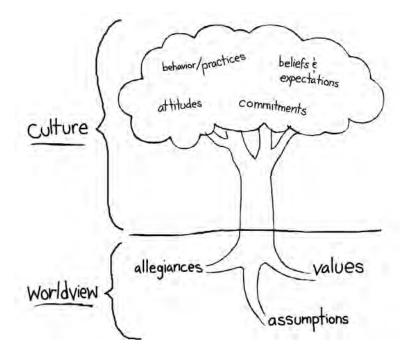
	Acts 13:13-43	Acts 17:19-32
How did Paul gather an audience?	See vv. 15-16	See vv. 19-21
With what information does Paul begin his speech? How does he relate to the story of this people group?	See vv. 16-22	See vv. 22-23
What new information does Paul bring them? How does he relate the story of this people group to <b>God's Great Story</b> ?	See vv. 23, 26-31	See vv. 24-25, 26-28, 29
Who does Paul reference or quote in his speech?	See vv. 25, 33, 34, 35, 40-41	See vv. 28
What name does Paul use to describe his audience?	See vv. 16, 26	See vv. 29
To whom does Paul say this message applies?	See vv. 26, 32	See vv. 30
What does Paul ask the people to do?	See vv. 38-39	See vv. 30-31
How do the people respond to Paul's message?	See vv. 42-43	See vv. 32

- Read about a time Paul speaks to a Gentile audience in Acts 17:19-32. Paul introduces the kingdom from outside this Gentile people group. [Note about the text: The Areopagus is a place in that city where the elders and leaders meet, and where thoughts are considered and decisions are made.] Answer the questions in the second column.
- » Reflect on and discuss these two stories with your study group. What instruction do these two stories give you about communicating **Good News**?
  - » Did you notice that in Athens, Paul asks the Athenians to repent, but he does not even mention Jesus by name? This does not mean Jesus

is not as important to Paul (see I Corinthians 2:2). This shows us that Paul understands every people group knows different parts of the **Great Story**, and he must tell the story from the beginning. With Jews, he begins with the story of the Hebrew people in Egypt. He traces the Jewish ancestors of Jesus, the **Promised Son**. With Gentiles, he begins with God's creation of the world. He traces the ancestors of all humanity from Adam.

### **Reflect on What God Teaches You**

» Reflect on how the culture and worldview tree relates to your own people.



- » How has the worldview of your people changed over time?
- » How have the outward actions of your culture (the branches and leaves) been changed over time because of change in the worldview (roots) of your people group?
- » Are there outward actions of your culture that have remained the same but had their meaning change over time?
- » Are there outward actions of your culture that need to change to honor God?
- » Are there aspects of your people's worldview, your beliefs and values, which need to change in order to reflect the truth of God's Word?
- Why is it important to work at the "roots" (worldview level) and wait for a people group to change outward actions as God leads them to do so?
- Why is it important to understand the customs of your own people group? Why is it important to understand the customs of another people group? How might this understanding affect the way you share the Good News?

# Pray for Eyes to See and Ears to Hear

- Pray that God reveals to you an ability to see new cultures with His eyes. Pray for a vision of what it might look like for God to transform the worldview of the people group you are praying for. Pray that God leads them to worship through outward actions that honor and glorify God through Jesus. Pray that this people group worships God from the heart, in spirit and truth.
- Pray for humility for your own people group and for a supernatural ability to see the places in your culture and religious practices where God still desires to transform your culture and worldview. Ask God to help you live in that humility so that you might model to others what it means to submit to Jesus as a King. Pray that we all together "...*continue to work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling*..." remembering that "...*it is God who works in [us] to will and to act according to His good purpose*" (Philippians 2:12).
- » Thank God for His continued work among your people group and for the privilege of being part of His work among other people groups for His glory.
- >> Thank God for giving you the Bible and the Holy Spirit—the best training for all sent-out disciples in every generation.

# Lesson 12. Barriers to Communication

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: ACTS 14:8-18**

On their first journey together, Paul and Barnabas meet people who speak a different language. While visiting their village, Paul heals a crippled man. The people see the miracle and think Paul and Barnabas are two of their own gods. They believe that only gods perform miracles.

In their native language, the people shout, "*The gods have come down to us in human form!*" The people of this village want to offer sacrifices to worship Paul and Barnabas. At first, it seems that Paul and Barnabas

We must identify the communication barriers we face, overcome them, and communicate God's Good News of blessing to all people groups. do not understand what is happening. Maybe they do not understand the language or know about the beliefs of this people group.

When they see priests come to offer them sacrifices, they are grieved and try to teach about the Most High God. The people do not understand that Paul and Barnabas want them to praise God instead of themselves for the miracle.

The language and beliefs of this people group are barriers for Paul and Barnabas. Because it is very

difficult to communicate God's message, the people do not understand the **Good News**. When Paul and Barnabas leave the village, the people there have not accepted the truth of who Jesus is and do not realize their place in the **Great Story**.

Good communication happens when a person receives our message and understands it. This is what happens when many Jews hear Peter's sermon in Jerusalem and repent (Acts 2:37-42). Miscommunication happens when a person receives our message and misunderstands it. This is what happens when Paul and Barnabas perform a miracle and the people think they are gods (Acts 14:8-18).

We want people to understand **Good News of the kingdom**. In order for them to understand, we must make sure that what they receive and understand is the message we intend to give. This is not always easy when we try to communicate with someone whose language, culture, and worldview are very different from our own.

- What barriers in culture and worldview prevent Paul and Barnabas from communicating Good News in the story above?
- >> What barriers in culture and worldview prevent the village people from receiving Good News in the story above?

### **Recognize and Overcome Communication Barriers**

We must identify the communication barriers we face, overcome them, and communicate God's **Good News** of blessing to all people groups. By learning about some common barriers to understanding the **Good News**, we might learn to avoid some mistakes.

#### Barrier #1: Cross-cultural Misunderstandings

A man says to his wife, "The mayor has blood on his hands." His wife hears those words and understands that there is blood on the mayor's hands, probably from butchering an animal.

A man from another country passes through the village and overhears this conversation. In his culture, the phrase "blood on his hands" is a way of saying someone is guilty of a crime. He believes the man has told his wife the mayor is a criminal.

This is an example of a cross-cultural misunderstanding. Misunderstandings such as these are very common barriers to the **Good News**. People often misunderstand both the message and the messenger. We might think our words and actions are very clear. However, those hearing the message might understand something very different from what we intend.

#### Barrier #2: Language

Words are one way we take what is inside our minds and bring it out so others can know what we are thinking and feeling. However, words carry many different meanings.

A British woman takes a trip to visit friends in New York City. She arrives in a snowstorm and hires a taxi to travel from the airport to the flat of her friends. As she gets into the taxi, she drops her hat. The driver retrieves it for her. As he hands her the hat, she asks him to please put it in the boot. She is surprised and offended when he reaches toward her and attempts to place her hat inside her shoe.

In American English, the boot is a kind of shoe worn for cold weather. In British English, the boot is the compartment in the back of a car for storing belongings. An American must learn new meanings of certain words to communicate well in Britain even while both countries speak English. An American must learn a completely different language to communicate well in a country where English is not widely used such as Chad.

To communicate with peoples of other cultures, we must learn to speak their language in a way that makes sense to them. To learn more about the important role of language in God's **plan**, see page 206, "The Necessity of Bible Translation" in *Appendix D: Additional Articles*.

Barrier #3: Seeing the Outward Action, but Misunderstanding the Meaning

A man comes to a village that is not his own. He is a follower of Jesus and is from a different culture. The people invite him to eat with them. The man decides to give thanks to God for the meal. He closes his eyes and bows his head in silent prayer.

The people see him do this but say nothing. The people invite the man to many other meals. Always he closes his eyes, bows his head and is silent before he eats. Finally, they ask him about his strange habit. Why does he always take a nap before eating?

The people see the outward actions the man does—closing his eyes and bowing his head. They do not know the meaning—that he is praying to God. We must be aware

To communicate with peoples of other cultures, we must learn to speak their language in a way that makes sense to them. of how people see our outward actions. We must learn how they understand and interpret what we do in their culture. If we do not learn how others understand us, we may communicate something we do not want to communicate. This man believes he is demonstrating devotion to God. The message the people receive is that the man is lazy and takes many naps!

In some religions, people kneel while praying. In other religions, they bow down completely. Some chant prayers, others sing them, and others say them out loud or silently. The particular ways people pray are outward actions. These actions

are not necessarily good or bad. People give their actions meaning and value. For example, they decide to whom they are praying, why they are praying, and what they hope to accomplish by their prayers. These meaningful decisions are reflected in their outward actions.

A key to understanding cultures is to remember there is a difference between outward actions and inward meaning.

- When you communicate well with someone, what makes the communication work? When you have trouble communicating with someone, what makes it difficult or confusing?
- » Why is communication an important part of sharing the Good News?

Barrier #4: Outward Change Only

A village hears the **Good News** of Jesus. The elders of the village meet and decide to repent and follow Jesus. They instruct all the villagers to get rid of the idols they worshipped before. Months later, a sickness comes to the village and several people die. Many villagers believe the sickness is a curse from their ancestors. They feel afraid. They perform the old sacrifices and dig up the idols they buried. They make offerings to them and hope the sickness will leave the village.

In some cases, people make changes to their outward actions—like throwing out their idols. However, they still feel their old beliefs and values have meaning—like believing that, in times of danger, their idols and curses have more power than Jesus has. In this case, change touches their culture but does not reach their inner attitudes to change their worldview. This change in outward action, even done sincerely, does not change their allegiance from worship of idols or other gods to worship of the Most High God before all other gods.

The result of this kind of outward change can make the **Good News** seem very confusing. Those who begin to live this way might appear very strange to their own people. They might even appear to be followers of a new or foreign culture and religion rather than followers of Jesus. They might appear very strange to God's people from another culture, too. They might appear to be insincere in their faith or confused in their beliefs.

Barrier #5: Mixing Beliefs

#### STORY FOR STUDY: 1 KINGS 12:25-33

When David's son Solomon dies, his sons divide the kingdom and rule it in two parts: North and South. King Jeroboam, the king of the Northern

part, has much fear in his heart that if his people go to worship the Most High God in Jerusalem—in the Southern kingdom—they will decide to turn against him and follow his brother, King Rehoboam.

Out of his fear, he decides to create worship rituals in Northern cities, so the people of his kingdom will not travel to the kingdom of his brother. He uses many ideas for worship from the instructions God gave to His people, but he mixes them with worship practices of other people groups. Ask God to reveal to you His special handiwork in other people groups so that you worship Him more fully by loving others more sincerely.

He makes idols of gold and tells the people they are the gods who brought them safely out of Egypt and blessed them. He appoints priests, but not from among the people God chooses as priests. He creates festivals on the same days as the festivals honoring the Most High God, though he makes sacrifices to the idols instead. The people follow their king in worshipping false gods, even while many of the practices they use are like the practices others use to worship the Most High God. It is easy for us to mix the commands and values we learn from God with harmful ideas from our own culture. When we do this, the **kingdom community** among our people can become misled, distorting God's truth.

The Holy Spirit guides us as we study Scripture. He shows us the truth. Every time we add God's truth to our lives there is more that is true and less that is false. This is how we change, grow, and mature together as followers of Jesus.

We must be as honest before God as we can about what we know to be truth. We must also be honest about which of our beliefs might be cultural preferences or interpretations. Jesus' followers from other people groups can sometimes help us see where we are mixing our harmful beliefs with God's truth. It is often very hard to see it in our own people. We must consider this matter so that we pass along the **Good News** to others without passing along our own mixed beliefs.

#### Barrier #6: Cultural Arrogance

It is sad when people reject the Good News of Jesus because the sentout disciples among them do not honor the people's culture. We sometimes feel that our culture and traditions are better than those of other people groups. We might judge their traditions by the standards of our own culture. After all, our culture teaches us what is right and proper for life within our own culture. Different traditions might seem wrong to us. We must avoid this dangerous, judging attitude.

We selfishly think about our own situations and see the world through our own eyes. Life in the **kingdom of God** involves seeing through God's eyes. He sees that all the cultures and people groups of the world contain some bad and some good.

"God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear Him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34b-35).

Ask God to reveal to you His special handiwork in other people groups so that you worship Him more fully by loving others more sincerely.

It is sad when people reject the **Good News** of Jesus because the **sent-out disciples** among them do not honor the people's culture. Sometimes people may not reject the message, but they reject the messenger instead. This can happen if the messenger does not accept and love them or their culture. This can happen if **sent-out disciples** forget to live according to Jesus' command to be a servant of all (Mark 9:35).

>> Consider each of the six barriers listed above. Discuss the following with your study group:

- » Can you think of examples in your own culture where these barriers prevent communication within the **kingdom community**, or between the **kingdom community** and others?
- » Can you think of examples where your own **sent-out disciples** face these barriers of communication with other people groups?

- >> Have you ever tried to communicate with someone from a different people group than your own? Think about that experience or talk with someone who remembers an experience like that.
  - » Did you know anything about the other culture?
  - » Did you know anything about the other worldview?
  - » In what ways were you able to communicate well?
  - » In what ways was communication difficult or confusing?

### **Communication Is Difficult**

At first, it is exciting to live in a different culture because everything is new. After a while, however, we may become irritated with our surroundings. We do not understand the people around us. We might feel helpless, unable to easily do ordinary tasks. We are not aware of simple things that even small children are aware of in the culture. We can feel ashamed.

Sometimes we have a hard time communicating and we make many mistakes. We begin to feel irritated and frustrated at our slow progress. We long to be among our own people group again, to be with those who understand us well.

Disappointment and discouragement come from the constant pressure of learning new things and dealing with the unfamiliar. These feelings and thoughts are normal for anyone living among a people other than his or her own. This is all part of growing in another culture.

If we keep going, learning, and trying, then eventually we will adjust to the new culture. Our discouragement goes away and in its place is a new confidence and commitment to continue in God's work. The process of adjusting to a new culture can sometimes take one or two years or more.

"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people..." (Galatians 6:9-10).

>> How can knowing about the experiences you might feel when entering a new culture help you and your family overcome the discouraging times more quickly? What can you do now to prepare your family for these difficult times?

# Explore and Reflect on Lesson 12 with this case study: Three Different Churches

#### Part One

A **sent-out disciple** takes his family, leaves his home, and goes to live among a people group very different from his own where there are no known followers of Jesus. He learns the language and culture well, and makes some friends in the community where he lives. He meets individually with some men who seem interested in learning more about Jesus' teachings and the **Good News**.

Some of these young men decide to follow Jesus. The man rejoices. He decides to create a church like the one in his home city. He asks these new disciples to come to his home for church meetings. He is the pastor of this church and gives sermons like the ones he hears in his home city. He translates the songs he likes from his language into theirs and teaches the men to sing

Sometimes we have a hard time communicating and we make many mistakes. these songs. He teaches them from the **Bible**. The men do not know one another at first, but they agree to meet together at the man's home once a week to worship together. Their **natural identities** begin changing to become more like the **natural identity** of the foreign man.

When the man receives news of his father's sudden death, he returns to his home city. The new disciples decide not to meet together without the man because they do not know or even

like one another well. They are from different communities in the city. They prefer to seek out other foreigners who have other new ideas. No **kingdom community** takes root and grows in that city.

After several years at home, the **sent-out disciple** returns. He is discouraged to find that these men returned to their old way of life while he was away. He begins to realize he did not **introduce the kingdom** in a way that it could **naturally spread** into their whole people group. He considers that most of the men he spent time with before were young, single, from different communities and wanted to break away from the traditions and culture of their own people. He had unintentionally found people from their culture he could easily change and bring into his own culture, instead.

He believes his mistake is that he kept the yeast—the **Good News of God's kingdom**—inside his own house and culture. He pinched off little pieces from the dough—the people group of the young men—and took them away from their own people, to mix into the yeast. This is the opposite of Jesus' parable (Matthew 13:33).

- » Reflect on the following questions about Part One of our case study:
  - » What barriers of communication does the **sent-out disciple** face because he is a foreign man?
  - » What barriers of acceptance to the **Good News** face the people of this group he is living among?
  - » What did the sent-out disciple do well in his attempt to introduce the kingdom?
  - » What do you think the sent-out disciple could do to improve in the next city?

#### Part Two

Now that the **sent-out disciple** and his family know the language and culture well, they decide to spend time with the men and women who are their neighbors in a new city. Over time, two families on his street decide to follow Jesus. The man and his family rejoice. This time he plans to create a church more appropriate for that people group, instead of creating one just like the church in his home city.

Before he creates the new church, he goes to a local religious building and to some of the local festivals. He wants to find furnishings or practices in the people's culture that can replace the items he knows from his home church. He finds a building to rent that is similar to to the religious places used in this culture. He furnishes it in a different way from the earlier church in his home. For example, he sees the people sit on rugs at their religious meetings rather than on chairs. He notices they use flutes and drums for music at the festivals rather than guitars and pianos.

He gives new meanings that honor Most High God to some of the outward actions of worship he observes in their culture. After he shows the new disciples the new building and his ideas, they separate from their own community and begin to build the practices of their new **kingdom community** around the new religious practices that the foreign man teaches them.

Their **natural identity** as a group is still similar to that of their own people group even though it has changed. It is not like the **natural identity** of the foreign man but it is a new **identity** altogether—a mix between his **natural identity** and theirs.

One day, the leader of the people group's own religious center comes to talk with the foreign man. The leader tells the foreign man to leave at once because he has divided the community that was once peaceful. One group has remained faithful to the traditions of the people group while the other has changed and mixed their traditions with foreign ones. It no longer fits in with the people group. The man is confused. How could this new group appear foreign when they are using so many of the same outward actions of their people group? He wonders about this for many days.

Another **sent-out disciple** comes to visit the man. He sees what is happening in the community and asks the man, "Have you **introduced the kingdom of God** to this people group as yeast into their dough in a way it can **naturally spread** among the people?"

The man realizes what has happened. Even though He has been more careful not to introduce his own traditions to the people, he still put the yeast of the kingdom inside a building, pinched off larger chunks out of dough (the neighbor families), and separated them from their community to mix into the yeast. This is still the opposite of Jesus' parable.

He also realizes that he still made decisions for the people about when, how, and where to worship God. He began noticing that this people group never uses music at their daily or weekly religious gatherings as he does at his home church. These people only use music at their festivals. He recognizes that his observation about outward actions were uninformed, as he was still an outsider to this community.

- » Reflect on the following questions about Part Two of our case study:
  - » What barriers of communication has the foreign man overcome since his first attempt to **introduce the kingdom**? What barriers of communication does he still face?
  - » What barriers of acceptance to the **Good News** face the people of this group among whom he is living?
  - » How does the community view the neighbors of the **sent-out disciple** who begin to follow Jesus? Why do they view them this way?
  - » Why does the community leader ask the **sent-out disciple** to leave?
  - » Do you think that splitting the community is something the new **kingdom community** could avoid? How?
  - » What did the sent-out disciple do well in his second attempt to introduce the kingdom to this people?
  - » What do you think the **sent-out disciple** could do to improve in the next city?

#### **Part Three**

Because the community religious leader asks him to go, the foreign man leaves the **kingdom community** there and goes to a third city. He and his family seek to **introduce the kingdom** into families as he did before. After sharing and working together with the families around him, one large family decides to follow Jesus. The man and his family rejoice. This time, he realizes the yeast, which is now introduced into the dough, must find a way to **naturally spread**. He explains this to the family and they seek God together for wisdom. The family recognizes that they must bless their own people, and that they must decide how to worship God together as a people. The foreign man and the family begin looking together to the Holy Spirit and the Scripture for guidance on how to live out their new allegiance to Jesus among their own people and according to their own **natural identity**. The foreign man provides counsel to the elders. But the spread of the kingdom within this people group is dependent on the new followers of Jesus within that group, as they rely on the Holy Spirit. It is not dependant on the foreign man, whose knowledge and understanding of their traditions is good, but still limited.

Soon, the new followers have attracted the interest of many in their community because they are repenting of sin, experiencing joy, and changing the way they treat others. Two other families now follow Jesus. Some people in the community are suspicious of them and keep a distance. Others are curious and ask to study God's Word and hear more about Jesus.

The new **kingdom community** begins to **send out disciples** together with the man to a nearby people, in order to **introduce the kingdom** to another related people group. The blessing passes from one people group to another, bringing glory to God.

- » Reflect on the following questions about Part Three of our case study:
  - » What barriers of communication has the foreign man overcome since his first two attempts to **introduce the kingdom**? What barriers of communication does he still face?
  - » How does the community view the families who begin to follow Jesus? Why do they view them this way?
  - » Why are some people suspicious of the new disciples? Why are some people curious about them?
  - » What did the sent-out disciple do well in his third attempt to introduce the kingdom to this people?
  - » What do you think the sent-out disciple could do to improve in the next city?
- To follow Jesus, we must give up our allegiance to other gods and idols. God loves all cultures and wants to bring them all under His lordship. He does not want to them to change their **natural identity**. We must find ways to **introduce the kingdom** so it can **naturally spread** like yeast through dough in a people group. Discuss what God teaches you in this case study with others in your study group. Pray as the Holy Spirit directs you in your discussion.

# **Pray for Wisdom**

When we have wisdom, we know how to live well and we choose to do so. We live as God desires us to live. Pray that God will give you a love for His Word and a love for His wisdom. Pray that the Holy Spirit will guide you by Scripture in all matters of culture and worldview, and identifying with other peoples. Thank God for His Word and for the answers He provides us even to the most difficult questions.

# Apply What You Learn

# **Be Transformed**

To communicate well with people from a different culture we must understand more about our own culture and worldview. We must be aware of our own cultural behaviors and expectations in order to lay them aside to identify with the behaviors and expectations of another culture. We are sometimes unaware of our own customs, traditions, values and ways of thinking. To us they are obvious.

Spend time watching people from your own culture. Try to imagine you are an outsider observing your own people. What do you see and hear? Make note of the customs you see.

- Who is out on the street at different times of the day? How do they dress? How do they greet one another? What kinds of gestures do they make while talking to one another? What do they talk about? What do they do with their time outside the home?
- What are different people feeling as they interact with one another? What do they expect from one another when they interact in different situations?

Later, consider your notes and all you observed. Reflect on the meanings behind the actions.

- Why do your people do each of these things? Why do they dress the way they do? Why do they greet each other the way they do? Why do they spend time the way they do?
- What values do these activities reveal about your people? What beliefs do your customs reveal? What relationships of power and allegiance do feelings, and expectations reveal?

Meet with your study group to discuss your experiences as observers.

- What aspects of your culture may help your people effectively serve others and share Good News with them?
- What aspects of your culture might be a barrier to sharing the Good News with others?
- What cultural behaviors or expectations do you think your people will find easy to lay aside in order to identify with another culture? What cultural behaviors or expectations do you think your people will struggle to lay aside in order to identify with another culture?

# **Expand Your Understanding**

Reflect together with your study group on a religious tradition other than one from your own background. Discuss what you may already know about people groups who follow this tradition. As we learn from Jesus and Paul, there is some truth present

within every culture and tradition. Identify the truth and good you already see present in this other tradition.

Now discuss how the story of a people group from this tradition already connects to the **Great Story**.

- What parts of the story do the followers of this tradition already know and understand?
- What parts of the story has the enemy caused them to forget, confuse, or distort?
- >> How would you begin to share the Great Story? Where would you begin the story?
- >> How will you use the truth God has already put in their hearts and minds to point them toward the truth of who Jesus is?

How can you serve and bless the people groups from this religious tradition, demonstrating God's love for them? How can you **introduce the kingdom** to them through your humble service and good deeds? If there are people from this tradition in your community, serve them in some way this week.

# Chapter 5

# The Worldwide Spread of God's Kingdom

"And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world..." (Matthew 24:14)

The Age of the Apostles begins as Jesus ascends to heaven in front of the early disciples and will end when He returns to earth at the end of the age. From the days of the early disciples until our own day, faithful individuals and communities work to fulfill their covenant responsibility to bless all peoples.

Huge numbers of people from many people groups choose to follow Jesus in Europe and North America, and in parts of Asia, Africa and South America. The global community of God's people still changes and expands.

In Chapter 5, we learn the part of the **Great Story** that begins where the New Testament record ends, as **sent-out disciples** follow the examples of the early disciples and spread the **Good News** from the ancient Roman world to the ends of the earth.

Lesson 13. The Spreading Kingdom, First Century to Our Day Lesson 14. Our Generation and God's Covenant Lesson 15. Our Role in God's Great Story

# Lesson 13. The Spreading Kingdom, First Century to Our Day

As we look back at the **Great Story**, we remember that from beginning to end, God's **purpose** on earth is to **restore His good relationship with humanity** and to **restore His kingdom rule** over all. When His people respond, His kingdom grows because of His blessing and His power. In this lesson, we take a broad look at the ways many people find the kingdom throughout the last two thousand years of history.

# The Kingdom Spreads From People Group to People Group

God wants His followers to join Him in carrying out His covenant to bless all peoples (Genesis 12:1-3). This is one **purpose** for which He creates us. When God's people willingly share the blessing with another people, this is one way the kingdom spreads.

Sometimes other people groups with no **kingdom community** capture or scatter God's people, who share the **Good News** with their oppressors. Even when God's people are disobedient or reluctant to join Him in blessing others, He can continue to use them to do His work by sending or scattering them unwillingly to another people. When God sends or scatters His people to live among other peoples, this is another way the kingdom spreads.

The people of God willingly go to bless other people groups.

For more than a thousand years after the time of the apostle Paul, many monks from the Catholic Church willingly leave their homes as **sent-out disciples**. They travel across Europe and go to locations as diverse as China, India, Japan and the Americas to **introduce** 

**the kingdom** to many people groups. Through their work God restores His good relationship with many peoples—even very violent people groups—who join the work of blessing the nations.

In the mid-1800s, Hudson Taylor leaves his friends and family in his home country of England. He moves to the interior of China to **introduce the kingdom** to people groups he meets there. He learns their language and their traditions so that he can effectively communicate **Good News**. He recruits many young people to join the work with him. He does many good works that serve and bless the people. He also has many personal struggles. God uses the willingness of Hudson Taylor to go to the people of China to restore His good relationship with different peoples there. These people then join in the work of blessing others.

In the late 1800s, Lottie Moon willingly leaves her family in the United States to join her sister in northern China. She spends her life working among a Chinese people group. She **introduces the kingdom** to many

Chinese women, which is something men are not able to do. These Chinese women raise their children to follow Jesus. Through this work, God restores His good relationship with many among these people. Today these disciples and their descendants continue this great work in China and around the world.

In the mid-1900s, Jim Elliot voluntarily leaves the United States to work among the Huaorani people, a tribe in South America with no known followers of Jesus. After brief contact with that people group, men from that group kill him and the other **sentout disciples** with him. Later, his wife Elisabeth and other relatives of these men From the days of the early disciples until our own day, faithful individuals and communities work to fulfill their covenant responsibility to bless all peoples.

**introduce the kingdom** to the Hauorani people. They bravely carry on the work of the men who died. Through their work, God restores His good relationship with this people group. The Huaorani then also join in the work of **naturally spreading** the kingdom within their own people, and they extend that blessing to nearby people groups. In fact, one of the men who killed Jim Elliot in his younger years now leads his people in taking the blessing to other people groups.

Stop now and thank God for all those servants who have a part in telling your people about Jesus and the **Great Story**.

The people of God **unwillingly** go to bless other people groups.

The Old Testament shows us how God first scatters the people of the northern kingdom of Israel among the nations. Later, He scatters those in the southern kingdom of Judah. In this way, the **kingdom of God** is introduced to people groups in Babylon and Chaldea, among many others.

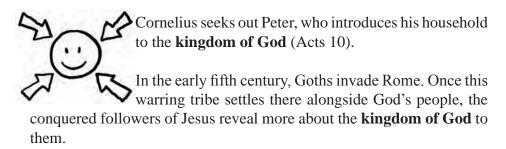
Not long after the time of the apostle Paul, Romans attack Jerusalem and many disciples flee, taking the **Good News** with them throughout the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, and even into parts of Asia. They come across many people groups and **introduce the kingdom of God** to them.

Over 1,000 years ago, the Vikings of Northern Europe conquer the people groups of Southern Europe. The Vikings take some Christian women and men as slaves, and the **Good News** travels back to Northern Europe through these slaves. Even though these followers of Jesus live in horrible conditions and receive harsh and unjust treatment, they **introduce the kingdom of God** to their captors. Women who follow Jesus raise their sons and daughters to follow Him. This builds a strong foundation of leaders for future generations.

In the 1970s, many followers of Jesus from people groups in Uganda flee their homeland unwillingly to avoid unjust suffering in their own country. They take the **Good News** with them and often **introduce the kingdom of God** to the other African people groups among whom they settle.

In these stories, God scatters His people through events beyond their control, such as turmoil, slavery, or exile. Sometimes this is punishment for sin. Sometimes it is unjust suffering. They do not go willingly, but they faithfully **introduce His kingdom** wherever they go.

Other peoples willingly come to live among the people of God.



In our day, hundreds of thousands of students and business people go to the United States and Western Europe for education and business opportunities. While they are there, living alongside God's people, some meet followers of Jesus who **introduce the kingdom** to them.

At times God brings those from other people groups willingly to dwell among His people. These temporary or new residents often find His **Good News** along with other things they seek. If these new followers of Jesus understand God's **purpose** for their own people, the **kingdom of God naturally spreads** among new people groups when those residents return home to share the **Good News**.

Other peoples unwillingly come to live among the people of God.

Other times, God **introduces** the kingdom by way of terrible events such as war, slavery, or exile.

In the Old Testament, we learn that the Babylonians force the Assyrian people to populate Jerusalem and the surrounding area after most of the Israelites are in exile. The few Israelites who remain in Jerusalem introduce the kingdom of God to those Assyrians.

For hundreds of years following the apostle Paul, Roman soldiers who live in all areas of Europe come to Judea and Galilee to suppress rebellious Jews. The **kingdom communities** they encounter there **introduce the kingdom of God** to those soldiers who listen. Many believe in Jesus even though they do not come voluntarily but are sent by their government.

Between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, European traders unjustly make slaves of Africans and bring them to Europe and America. The **kingdom communities** there **introduce the kingdom of God** to some of these slaves. Many become followers of Jesus, even though

they come to Europe and America against their will.

In our day, refugees from wars, natural disasters, and oppression often come to nations with active **kingdom communities.** Once there, followers of Jesus **introduce the kingdom of God** to these exiled people groups who have come to live among them against their will. God is the Lord of history. He works through all circumstances to fulfill His purpose.

God even uses the evil motives of men and women to accomplish His **plan**. A Hebrew boy called Joseph **introduces the kingdom of God** to the Egyptians even though his brothers sell him into slavery in Egypt. He recognizes this when he says to them, "*You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives*" (Genesis 50:20). God is the Lord of history. He works through all circumstances—when we are willing and when we are unwilling—when we prosper and when we suffer—to fulfill His **purpose** to restore His people and His kingdom rule.

- We take the Good News to other people groups and other people groups come to us to receive the Good News. Sometimes we willingly choose to go do this and sometimes we do not. Sometimes others willingly choose to come to us and sometimes they do not.
  - » Describe four different ways a people group that does not know about the **kingdom of God** may encounter it for the first time.
  - » In which of these ways did your people encounter the kingdom of God for the first time?

To develop a thorough study of the **Great Story** and your own people, use the guide *Appendix C: Optional Chapter—The Story of Your People and the Great Story*, beginning on page 187. The guide helps you design three lessons for study with your group to explore God's unique work among your own people.

### The Kingdom Spreads Throughout Communities and Across Generations

Once God's people **introduce the kingdom** into a new people group, it begins to **naturally spread**, like yeast through dough. As new followers of Jesus within a people group live alongside others in their families and community, the influence of the kingdom grows and spreads throughout that people group very quickly. The **kingdom of God** spreads most naturally along the relationship lines within families and communities.

There are many examples of men becoming followers of Jesus and then leading entire households—including family helpers, extended family

and friends—to the **kingdom of God.** In the book of Acts, Cornelius asks Peter to come not only for his own sake but also for the sake of his family and friends. They all gather to hear the **Good News** (Acts 10). There are other examples of this in the New Testament including the household of the boy Jesus healed from a distance (John 4:35) and the household of Lydia (Acts 16:14-15).

In many cultures today, the zeal of the household leader influences the whole family to follow Jesus. Sometimes the love and faithfulness of a daughter or even a child influences the whole family to follow Jesus.

In the 1800s, Korean women have a low status and are not prominent in the society. Others do not always see them as the good creations of God that they are. At that time, there are very few followers of Jesus among the Korean people.

The **sent-out disciples** living among the Korean people intentionally focus on loving and serving the women, sending many single women or wives to live among them. The Korean women who believe spread the message to their female relatives and to their children. Eventually, some Korean widows even travel from town to town, teaching women

The kingdom of God spreads most naturally along the relationship lines within families and communities. how to read their own language and how to study the **Bible**.

Many Korean women find new freedom in Jesus through these efforts. They find a new sense of community with other women—even eventually with men. God restores their **purpose** and **identity**. They are so joyful it often brings them to tears.

These women become the strength of the spread of the kingdom throughout the Korean people in their generation. They learn to serve as **sent-out disciples**, teachers, mentors and impressive spiritual servants to other Korean women. They pass along the **Good News** to their sons who lead the next generation. Their lives, although still marked by difficulty, oppression and even death for the sake of the **Good News**, leave a legacy for the **kingdom community** in Korea.

Thank God for the **sent-out disciples** who listened to the Holy Spirit and reached out to women who became the means for **naturally spreading** God's word through their families and to their neighbors. God uses these women to transform not just one society, but through them and their descendants, many other parts of the world.

Throughout the ages, the family is the community through which the **kingdom of God naturally spreads**. Adam and Eve pass their story to their descendants. The family of Abraham shares in the covenant. Because it is the most basic group of relationships in any society, the family most often passes the **Great Story** from one generation to another. Faithful mothers, fathers, and grandparents pass the legacy of the **kingdom of God** on to future generations.

Relationships within a business or a trade group form another kind of community. For example, in our day, when Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of traditional companies in China encounter the **kingdom of God**, their companies become centers for | *Faithful* 

gathering the kingdom community.

They **naturally spread** the **Good News** among their employees, their distributors, their customers and other CEOs who are often friends or former classmates. They do this intentionally, as the Holy Spirit directs them, to influence the people they see every day.

Businesses and other job-related groups, like guilds and trade organizations, are a valuable means of **naturally spreading** the kingdom from one place to another.

Faithful mothers, fathers, and grandparents pass the legacy of the kingdom of God on to future generations.

In the early 1900s, a Canadian **sent-out disciple** named Jonathan Goforth develops a good relationship with the Chinese warlord Feng Yu-hsiang. Feng—also known as the Christian General—requests that Jonathan preach and work among his Chinese troops. Goforth and his wife Rosalind become strong supporters and friends of the general. They welcome the opportunity to **introduce the kingdom** to his troops. They use their membership in this existing community in a way that honors God and serves others. They do so with the blessing of its leader, the general.

Opportunities opened by governments can be temporary. Those who receive invitations must understand their importance for the people groups who need to hear and believe. We must be ready to respond quickly. Government organizations provide communities throughout which God's kingdom can **naturally spread**.

- What is a community? What is the role of communities in the natural spread of the kingdom?
- » List all the communities of which you are a part. How is God calling you to live and work in those communities to **naturally spread** His kingdom?

### The Enemy Opposes the Spread of the Kingdom

# **STORY FOR STUDY: I CORINTHIANS 4:9-13 and II CORINTHIANS 4:1-5:10**

Paul faces much opposition as he shares the **Good News** with those who have not heard it. People in the city of Lystra beat him and Barnabas,

leaving them for dead. In the city of Thessalonica, a mob riots because of who Paul is and what he says. Eventually, the Romans unfairly put Paul in jail and, later, execute him (Acts 14, 17 and 21).

In the early 1800s, an American named Adoniram Judson is sent-out to the peoples of Burma. After living and working there for over a decade, the authorities put Judson in prison on false charges where they hold and torture him for over a year. Soon after the authorities release him, his wife becomes sick and dies. He marries again and after several years, his new wife dies of sickness.

Throughout history **sent-out disciples** face opposition. This opposition seems to be from other people. However, the source of all opposition is really Satan and his original act of rebellion against God. Satan is a rebellious creature destined for destruction. He resists the spread of the **kingdom of God** and the spread of the **Good News**.

When William Carey tells the members of his local **kingdom community** that God wants them to bless the peoples of South Asia, they treat him badly. They consider him unskilled, uneducated, and foolish. They tell

Through His Holy Spirit, sent-out disciples receive strength to do difficult things for God. him that if God wants to bless those peoples, He will do it without Carey's help. They misunderstand their covenant responsibility.

When Gladys Aylward, a twentieth century British woman, asks to serve as a **sent-out disciple**, her local **kingdom community** rejects her request.

They think she is too uneducated for the task, and too unfit as a small young woman. She eventually finds a way to go to China on her own, and finds God uses her small size and appearance and servant heart to bless many people in China.

Visible opposition from the enemy is only part of the story. Satan also tries to destroy God's kingdom from the inside. He promotes lies, confusion, and division among members of the **kingdom of God**. Among your own people, do all members of the **kingdom community** join in unity to take part in His **Great Story**?

For a practical guide to making peace in times of conflict, see page 198, "Biblical Peacemaking" in *Appendix D: Additional Articles*.

Thank God that He is much greater than Satan. His Spirit strengthens us in the battle for the truth. Many who follow Jesus die because of their loyalty to Him, and even consider it a privilege to do so. Other times suffering causes God's people to experience Him in very deep ways. King David writes psalms that still encourage us today. A woman in China today writes beautiful songs to encourage her people, who suffer persecution. Through His Holy Spirit, **sent-out disciples** receive strength to do difficult things for God.

What are some ways Satan tries to weaken the kingdom of God and resist God's work to spread it?

### God's People Sometimes Suffer for the Wrong Reasons

We see that God does not excuse His people from experiencing hardship, suffering, and even persecution at the hands of others. We know we can expect to face this in our lifetime if we **obey** Him in **faith**.

In some cases, however, followers of Jesus bring unnecessary suffering upon themselves if they do not understand well the teachings of Jesus and Paul about the **kingdom of God** and **natural identity**. We see throughout the **Great Story** that God values and works through the culture of each people group, and that the **kingdom of God** grows up inside a people group. We do not have to change our **identity** in order to follow Jesus.

When new followers of Jesus decide to make changes to **natural identity** that are not required by Jesus, this may offend a father, mother, family and community. But God commands, "*Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you*" (Exodus 20:12). Jesus and Paul both repeat this command (Matthew 15:4, Ephesians 6:2).

Beyond causing offense, these unnecessary changes may separate new followers from their own people, and the **kingdom of God** cannot **naturally spread** among them. This is not God's **purpose**.

We can expect others to persecute us as they did Jesus (John 15:20) for doing what is right (I Peter 3:13-17). It is important that our persecution comes because of our right and good deeds and because of Jesus, but not because we are acting in ways that bring unnecessary shame to our family. Then we remember the encouraging words of Jesus and the early disciples, and their instruction to resist the temptation to sin, but instead to respond with love and endurance.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:10-12).

### **Explore the Scriptures**

- » Read I Corinthians 7:1-24. The strongest community we are a part of is the household.
  - » What responsibilities does a wife have in her household? How might a wife who follows Jesus influence her unbelieving husband and children?
  - » What responsibilities do children have? How might a son or daughter who follows Jesus influence others in the unbelieving household?
  - » What responsibilities do other men and women—including helpers have in the household? How might a daughter-in-law, a cook, or a field worker who follows Jesus influence others in the unbelieving household?
  - » What responsibilities does a husband have in his household? How might a household leader who follows Jesus influence his unbelieving household?
- Paul writes, "Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to" (I Corinthians 7:24).
  - » What does this verse say about community?
  - » What impact could obeying this verse have on the actions of a new follower of Jesus in his household, community, workplace, or other groups?
  - » What might God accomplish through this new follower of Jesus, if he chooses to follow the instructions of Paul?

#### **Reflect on What God Teaches You**

- Consider both the past history and the present state of your people group. Are your people going astray to seek after their own way, or do they regularly receive more truth? To what do you attribute your answer?
- >> How might God be sending your people out to be in contact with other people groups? How might He be bringing other people groups to you, either willingly or unwillingly?

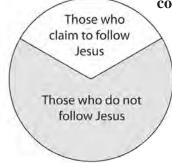
#### **Pray against Oppression**

For many men and women in the world—including sent-out disciples or others in kingdom communities—oppression and the resistance of Satan are part of daily life. Pray that God will give you wisdom to perceive the schemes of Satan. Pray for those around you who are experiencing the effects of Satan's rebellion whether or not they are already part of the kingdom of God.

# Lesson 14. Our Generation and God's Covenant

In our generation, the **kingdom of God** grows and spreads very quickly throughout the world. About one-third of the world population now claims to be following Jesus. Of the other two-thirds who are not following Jesus, less than half of them live among people groups who already have **kingdom communities naturally spreading** among

them. The rest live among people groups with no known **kingdom community** and few or no followers of Jesus among them.



Learned men and women today think that there are now about 24,000 distinct people groups on earth. As God carries out His **plan**, the nations—or people groups—of the earth receive blessing through Abraham's blessing. God restores good relationship to them and a **kingdom community** grows among them.

What do Abraham, writers of the Old and New Testaments, and Jesus mean when they use the word nation? In our day, we often define a nation by its politics or its international borders as seen on maps. The authors of Scripture use nation to refer to the families or people groups of the earth mentioned in all our previous lessons.

How many of these 24,000 groups have received this blessing at this time in history? How many groups have not yet heard the **Great Story**? They wait for God's people to **introduce the kingdom** to them, so that they might enter it through Jesus and find blessing and new life.

#### **Progress in Our Day**

Today it is much easier than before to travel to all parts of the world. For example, you can fly from Paris, France, to Sao Paulo, Brazil in less than a day. People from

all over the world share ideas that spread quickly. The Internet and other new forms of communication allow us to interact effectively with people who are very far from us.

However, these advances do not mean the people of God have **introduced His kingdom** to all people groups. Of the approximately 24,000 people groups on earth, about 14,000 have **kingdom communities** among them that are able to **naturally spread** the **Good News**. The Han Chinese, the Indonesian Daris, and the Koreans are examples of these Learned men and women today think that there are now about 24,000 distinct people groups on earth.

groups. Though not every person in a people group like these follows Jesus, there is a **kingdom community** within that is able to effectively share **Good News** in that language and culture.



We also remember the 10,000 people groups that are not yet able to **naturally spread** the **Good News** among their own people. We look forward to the day when some from among them will worship God with us. The Afghan Tajiks, the Sinhalese of Sri Lanka, the Tatars of Russia, the Ilavan and the Chamar of India are all examples of these remaining people groups. They have no known **kingdom communities** among them and there is no way for them to hear God's **Great Story** in a way they might recognize and accept. Among them there are very few known followers of Jesus. Many in these people groups have never even met a follower of Jesus.

As the people of God, what do these large numbers and serious facts mean for us? Will your people take part in this **Great Story**? God has blessed you to be this kind of blessing to the nations.

Paul writes, "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'" (Romans 10:14-15)

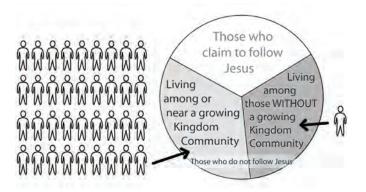
Would you say that, within your people group, the kingdom of God is naturally spreading? What factors allow this spread to happen among your people? What barriers keep the kingdom from spreading among your people?

#### The Harvest is Plentiful, the Workers are Few

According to recent estimates, most **sent-out disciples** today who live and work among people groups that are not their own, work among the 14,000 people groups where other **sent-out disciples** have already **introduced the kingdom**. They train and encourage the local disciples from that people group, serve needs of communities there, or assist local **kingdom communities** to **naturally spread** the kingdom

Of the approximately 24,000 people groups on earth, about 14,000 have kingdom communities among them that are able to naturally spread the Good News. throughout that people group.

All work done for the Lord is worship to God. All work done for the Lord is valuable to His **purpose** of **restoring His relationship with individuals** and **restoring His kingdom rule**. However, God's people could better distribute our forces of labor. Out of all **sent-out disciples** who go to live and work among another people group in our day, only a few of them go to one of the 10,000 people groups waiting to hear the **Good News**. The majority go to one of the 14,000 people groups where there is already a **kingdom community**, to work alongside followers of Jesus in that place. While continuing important work among every people group, we must also find a way to send out many more disciples to these 10,000 people groups with no **kingdom communities** growing among them. Paul shares his own desire: "*It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known...*" (Romans 15:20).



#### The Peoples of the World Without a Kingdom Community

Large Group	Primary Location	Estimated Number of People Groups in this Socio-Religious Group
Muslim	North Africa, the Middle East,	3,700
	Central Asia, and South East Asia	
Hindu	India	2,700
Buddhist	Asia	1,000
Non-Religious	Eastern Europe, Former Soviet	50
	Union, and China	
Tribal or Animistic	Africa, the Americas, and Asia	2,000
Chinese Folk Religion	China and Southeast Asia	150

We can generally organize the 10,000 people groups without a **kingdom community** into the following six large social or religious groups.

The six large groups in the chart above do not include about 400 people groups of other social or religious groups. This chart does not carefully define all the people groups of the world. However, it gives us a general idea of who these groups are and where they live.

- In your opinion, in which of the large groups of people from the chart above will sent-out disciples face the most barriers to introducing the kingdom in a way the people can receive and understand? Discuss why do you think this is true.
- » Which of these social or religious groups live closest to you?

#### Learn About the Peoples of the World

A community in Asia trusts a white man who comes to their village and offers jobs for the young women if they come with him to a far away city. Many families need the money these jobs offer and send away their daughters with this man. When the young women reach the new city, the white man tricks them. He sells them as slaves to a woman there who treats them harshly. This community hears the news and refuses to allow any other white men or families to enter their village. They believe all white people are criminals and play tricks.

An American man travels to Africa with his company. While in a large city, a group of young men attacks him and steals his money and identification. He returns home very angry and does not wish to return to that foreign country for any reason. When a family from that same country moves into his neighborhood, he forbids his wife and children

We must humbly admit that we do not know all we think we know about an individual or another group. from greeting and befriending them. He believes all people from this African people group are criminals and thieves and cannot be trusted.

A well-known Christian leader in the West makes statements on television that dishonor

Muslims. A Muslim woman living in Europe hears the comment and forces her children to break all friendships with Christians in their community. This woman believes that all Christians in the West follow the teachings of this leader and dishonor Muslim peoples.

It is dangerous to make assumptions about a people's religion, society, culture or country. Believing and acting on negative assumptions about others creates unnecessary barriers to friendship and creates hostility between peoples. Taking an experience with one group or individual and assuming all groups or individuals from that people group are the same causes misunderstanding.

What can we do to avoid making this mistake as we learn about other peoples? We must humbly admit that we do not know all we think we know about an individual or another group. When we recognize this, we open ourselves to learn directly from others about their own people, their society, their culture, their religion and their families. We can learn some things about people groups from books and from the experiences of others. We must also remember even the authors of these sources make mistakes.

We must learn about Islam from Muslims. We must learn about Americans from Americans. We must remember that not everyone in a group has the same beliefs or behaves the same way as others in that group. As Paul writes to the disciples at Philippi: "*Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things*" (Philippians 4:8).

>> Have you or others you know made negative assumptions about another people group? Have you experienced other peoples making negative assumptions about you and your people? How does this work of the Enemy affect God's **plan** to spread His kingdom from one people group to another people group? If another people wants to learn about your people, how do you suggest they do this? How does your answer affect the way you seek to learn about other people groups?

#### **Great Opportunities in Nearby or Similar People Groups**

There is a large **kingdom community** of nearly 20 million people in the northern and central parts of Nigeria. In Niger, the neighboring country, the people groups are mostly Muslim and the number of known followers of Jesus is very low.

Look at the examples below of how the followers of Jesus from people groups in Nigeria are, in many ways, very close to their neighbors in Niger:

- Location: They are sometimes only a few kilometers apart and only one international border separates them.
- Culture: Customs in rural Nigeria and in rural Niger are very similar and are understandable to both followers of Jesus and those who do not follow Him.
- Language: They speak the same trade language.
- Society: They have the same family and social structures.
- Economics: They are primarily rural and, by trade, agricultural workers.

People groups who need to hear the Good News may be living physically close to your own people group.

• Ways of thinking: Both have a more educated urban population and a less educated rural population.

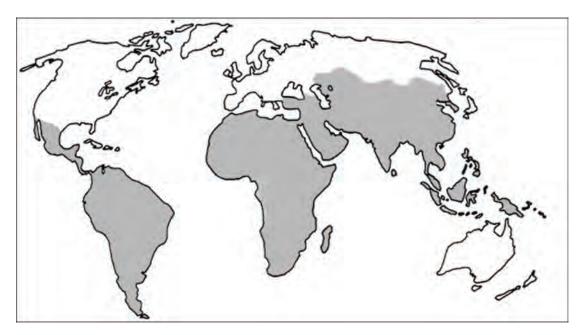
In addition to their similarities, there is an agreement between the governments of the two countries that allows Nigerians to travel, work and live in Niger without a visa or work permit. The people in some **kingdom communities** of Nigeria are similar to the people groups of Niger that have not yet heard the **Good News**. These nearby followers of Jesus have many things in common with their neighbours. This gives them an amazing opportunity to **send-out disciples** to serve and **introduce the kingdom** to them.

Sometimes followers of Jesus have natural opportunities to move to nearby people groups in order to **introduce the kingdom**. People groups who need to hear the **Good News** may be living physically close to your own people group. Maybe they live in the same area of your city or in a nearby village. Often they are similar in other ways, such as ancestry or common stories, language or trade.

Your people have a good opportunity to **introduce the kingdom** to similar people groups with no known **kingdom community**. There are still barriers and

differences—maybe even prejudices or rivalries—that you must overcome through the power of the Holy Spirit. However, watch for opportunities where you might naturally connect with other people groups in a way that spreads the kingdom across barriers and borders.

What are some different ways that one people group can be nearby or similar to another people group other than geographically? Why is this important for the spread of the kingdom of God?



#### The Power of the Global South

In our day, the **kingdom of God** spreads like yeast through dough within thousands of people groups in the Global South (Latin America, Africa, Asia). In the Global South, many followers of Jesus live in people groups near the large groups mentioned above with few or no **kingdom communities** (Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists, for example). God uses the rapidly growing **kingdom communities** in the Global South to lead the way in **introducing the kingdom** to the remaining 10,000 people groups.

Where are your people mostly located in the world? What people groups without a kingdom community are closest to you, geographically or in other ways?

God does not give any single individual or people the responsibility of blessing everyone in the world. If we work together wisely, we might see followers of Jesus and growing **kingdom communities** in every people group in our own generation. In our day, the way **sent-out disciples** work to **introduce the kingdom** brings about great fruit. Many people groups receive the blessings of God and join in His work. "I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you" (Matthew 17:20).

#### A New Source for Multitudes of Workers—the Global South

Many Chinese who follow Jesus believe God wants them to take the **Good News** from China to countries and people groups west of them as far as Jerusalem. This plan is known as the Back to Jerusalem movement because it follows the path early traders take thousands of years ago between the Middle East and China.

Traveling this path, the Chinese encounter persons from nearly all of the six large groups of peoples we learned about earlier in this lesson. The families and individuals with whom they interact are from people groups with few or no known followers of Jesus among them. These Chinese **sent-out disciples** will **introduce the kingdom** to many. They will share the **Great Story** of God's blessing.

Chinese disciples are already actively **sending off disciples** from their own **kingdom community** to other people groups living along the way in countries of Central Asia and the Middle East. Pray for these Chinese **sent-out disciples** who face many difficulties and challenges. Pray they

are examples of **faith** who show their **obedience** to the Word of God.

This great work of God continues. Followers of Jesus from people groups in Nigeria plan to **send out disciples** to people groups across Northern Africa and the Middle East, supported only by Nigerian funds. This plan is known as Vision 50-15 because they hope to appoint Today, most followers of Jesus live in Latin America, Africa or Asia. Also, most of the people groups that do not yet know the Good News live in Africa or Asia.

50,000 **sent-out disciples** within fifteen years. Some Nigerians joke that they will meet the Chinese in Jerusalem for a tea party!

Following this path, the Nigerians encounter many tribal and Muslim people groups. Most of these have no **kingdom community**. These Nigerian **sent-out disciples** will **introduce the kingdom** to many. They will share the **Great Story** of God's blessing with many.

Today, most followers of Jesus live in Latin America, Africa or Asia. Also, most of the people groups that do not yet know the **Good News** live in Africa or Asia. Many followers of Jesus from the Global South actively **introduce the kingdom** to people groups throughout the world. They are also, in many ways, more similar to the many people groups who still need to hear the **Good News** than Western disciples are.

Many other groups from the Global South—like the Chinese and Nigerians—are also setting out on journeys to serve and bless the people groups who have not heard the **Good News**. Will your people join this global effort to reach the remaining 10,000 people groups?

- >> How might God's people from all over the globe expect to see God's plan completed in our generation?
- What are some advantages that disciples from the Global South have in our day over disciples from the West in completing the task of introducing the kingdom among all people groups?
- What are some barriers to unity that God's people face when they work together? What can you do now to prepare for these conflicts? How will you allow the Holy Spirit to bring unity in difficult situations?

#### **Explore the Scriptures**

- » Read Matthew 24:14 and Ezekiel 18:32.
  - » What do these verses indicate about the size of God's **plan** for the world?
  - » What challenges remain before God fulfills Matthew 24:14?

#### **Reflect on What God Teaches You**

- >> Make a list of all the people groups near you or in your area. Do these groups have kingdom communities spreading within them? If you send out disciples to that group, could they work alongside other followers of Jesus from that group or would there be no followers of Jesus to work alongside?
- » Now consider those people groups with no known **kingdom communities** who are near you or similar to you in some way.
  - » What people groups have a culture or traditions similar to yours?
  - » What people groups have common ancestors with yours?
  - » What people groups are near you socially—with similar government, similar jobs or trades, similar education or resources?
  - » What people groups speak a language similar to yours?
  - » Into which of the people groups do God's people still need sent-out disciples to introduce the kingdom?
- By which of these groups has God put your people so that His kingdom might spread? In what ways has He made you so that you connect with those people in a unique way? What skills or abilities do your people possess that you might use to bless that group?

#### **Pray for Other People Groups**

Pray for the 10,000 or so people groups of the world that still need to hear Good News. Pray that God will establish His kingdom in places where no one has heard the truth about who Jesus is. Pray that the kingdom would spread quickly to the ends of the earth. Pray that God uses you to build His kingdom nearby or far away. Praise God for the way He introduces the kingdom to your own people and causes you and your ancestors to receive it.

# Lesson 15. Our Role in God's Great Story

The global church can work together to fulfill our covenant responsibility in this generation by sending out multitudes of faithful disciples to people groups with no known followers of Jesus or **kingdom communities**. Our responsibility in the **Great Story** is the same as many who go before us, yet the way we fulfill our role may be different and unique to the world today.

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: I SAMUEL 17**

Before the shepherd boy, David, goes out to face the warrior, Goliath, King Saul offers him the use of his own armor and weapons. Saul cannot imagine how David—clothed and armed as a shepherd—could possibly be effective against a giant.

David recognizes the value of the armor and usefulness of the weapons. Maybe he even enjoys the thought of dressing like a king. However,

The global church can work together to fulfill our covenant responsibility in this generation. after putting the armor on, young David decides not to use what Saul offers, even though it is very expensive and elaborate.

David is wise and knows the armor does not fit him well. The weapons are too big and heavy. It feels strange to him. In order to be effective wearing the armor, he would have to act in a way that is strange to him. David is a shepherd. He usually fights with the resources he

has in the pasture. David wisely chooses to use his own simple weapons and to wear his own clothing. They fit who he is.

For the past 200 years, many of the **sent-out disciples** start from countries in the Western world. Like Saul's armor, the models they develop for work have been useful. They fit the cultures of Western people groups of the past. Like David, who recognizes Saul's armor does not fit him, we are wise to see that many previous Western models do not fit all people groups or all generations. New and different ways might better serve and bless others in our day.

#### New Ways of Supporting and Funding Sent-Out Disciples in Our Day

We need new sources of **sent-out disciples**. We must find multitudes of workers all over the earth to send out to the remaining 10,000 people groups. We also need new ways of **sending out disciples** to those people groups, and new ways of supporting them in the work while they are there. To send multitudes, our current method of supporting **sent-out disciples** may not always be practical.

#### Paul is a tent maker.

#### STORY FOR STUDY: ACTS 18:1-4 and ACTS 20:33-35

Besides being a **sent-out disciple** and a messenger of **Good News**, Paul is a tent maker by trade. He works at his trade as he travels and shares **Good News** with Gentile peoples. He does this to support himself and those working with him. He also works at tent making so that he will not be a financial burden to the people of the community where he lives.

He provides an example of what it looks like to be a good worker and community member—a follower of Jesus and citizen of the kingdom. He

gives away the message of **Good News** without charge. No person can say he makes a profit from the work of the kingdom (I Corinthians 9:18). Paul also wants to have resources available from his tent sales to help the needy in the community.

Sometimes Paul receives resources from **kingdom communities** to cover his travel expenses. Rather than doing only what is best for himself or his

We must find multitudes of workers all over the earth to send out to the remaining 10,000 people groups.

team, he carefully considers each unique people group and decides how to live among them in a way that best serves and honors them.

Today there are followers of Jesus who talk about **sending out disciples** as tent makers. This does not mean the workers make tents. It means they want to follow the example of Paul, working in a trade while bringing the **Good News of the kingdom** near to a people. Tent makers in our day might perform many trades. Some work on computer software and others farm.

Tent making is a good way for **sent-out disciples** to live among people groups with no **kingdom community** because they do not have to depend on that people group for financial help. There are similar benefits to those Paul experiences:

- Sent-out disciples can be examples for a community of good workers with kingdom values. They live out the command of Paul: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving" (Colossians 3:23-24).
- Working together with new friends from the people group that a **sent-out disciple** lives among is a good way to join and serve a new community.
- The **sent-out disciple** and his family do not create a financial burden for the new community they enter because they are able to support themselves.
- There may be excess resources available at times to share with others who have needs.
- When the new **kingdom community** in that people group **sends out disciples**, they will have a good tent making model to follow.

Paul does not always work at his trade in every community where he stays. In our day it may be difficult to find and begin a job in a new community when the language and culture are unfamiliar. It might be more effective to go to a people group that, in some ways, is more similar to our own.

Another difficulty with tent making is that some jobs—like those within very competitive industries—have very long hours and provide no stable family life. These trades are not ideal for tent making. However, God uses even the most difficult situations for His glory. Let the Holy Spirit guide you in planning and making decisions.

#### William Carey and others introduce the modern mission society.

In the late 1700s, William Carey travels to India. Before leaving England he forms a society or group within his own people with a goal of taking **Good News** to people groups with no **kingdom community**.

This group collects money or other resources from individual disciples, their families, and the **kingdom community** within their own people group. The resources are pooled together and, as there is need, they are given to the **sent-out disciples**.

William Carey and many others who serve after him receive this kind of support from such societies within their own people group. These supporters commit to send funds, supplies, and encouragement to the ones they send out from their midst. This model—now known as a mission agency—has been effective for hundreds of years at **sending out disciples** to people groups all over the earth.

Some people groups from the Global South have also used this model effectively in our day. This strategy has the benefit of allowing **sent-out disciples** to concentrate on learning a new language and culture, spending time with people and sharing **Good News** while receiving funding from the agency. However, using mission agencies to **send out disciples** also comes with challenges:

- Success depends on fully funding the sent-out disciples for an extended period of time. This model is very expensive and difficult to maintain if the senders are not able to give large amounts of money for many years. When there is no more money, sent-out disciples must return home.
- It is expensive to begin and to continue the work. The home office must pay honest workers to handle funds, legal issues, communication and other needs of the sent-out disciples. Often purchasing or renting a building is another expense.
- If the **sent-out disciples** do not have a job in their new community, people may misunderstand why they are there. This leads to mistrust and suspicion. In some places, those who do not work in a community do not receive respect. They may become outcasts.

Some mission agencies now begin to **send out disciples** from the Global South, gathering resources from various individuals and churches across the world. God uses

Western or international agencies to help fund the work of the **sent-out disciples**. This can also come with challenges.

- Because funds and other resources from individuals and churches are limited, the number of sent-out disciples is also limited. We must find ways to equip multitudes of sent-out disciples.
- Funding from outside sources might be viewed as potentially harmful if sent-out disciples are not observed doing meaningful work. The community might think sent-out disciples represent a foreign religious or political group who seeks to rule them.
- It takes a long time to apply and receive training from mission agencies. Maybe this process does not need to take so long.

In some cases, Western groups provide resources for people groups in the Global South to begin and maintain their own agencies to **send out disciples**. This helps many effective workers go out to people groups who need to hear the **Great Story**.

However, funding from the West to the Global South often comes with guidelines or restrictions. Those who receive the funding might be told they must not spend it in the way the Holy Spirit directs or guides them. They must instead respect the wishes of those who provide the funds. This can be a source of conflict and resentment because it is an unequal partnership. The desire to control can slow the spread of the kingdom.

The mission agency model is useful in its place and time, but it limits the number of **sent-out disciples**. There are other effective ways to send out multitudes from the Global South.

#### New Ideas emerge from the Global South.

This idea comes from Ben Naja's book *Releasing the Workers of the 11<sup>th</sup> Hour: The Global South and the Task Remaining.* 

A **kingdom community** within a people group in East Africa prepares to **send out a disciple** and his family to another people group that has no known followers of Jesus. The man and his people are farmers. They learn that the new people group also farms. Because of this shared occupation, they might possibly be effective in **introducing the kingdom of God**.

The East African **kingdom community** believes that it might be too expensive and too complicated to send the man through Western or international mission agencies. They ask the Holy Spirit to lead their own people group in practical and effective ways to join the work of God.

As the man prepares to leave his home, the local **kingdom community** gives him two cows, a plow, and money for the journey. He enters the new community and works to support his family. Because the plow helps him to quickly farm more land, he also plows the fields of other farmers who hire him for the day. He earns some money using the cows to carry

goods and people to market and back. While supporting his family he is providing services to help and bless the farming community.

This model combines the idea of a **sent-out disciple** receiving funding from his own people—by way of an initial gift—with the tent making model, where he works for his income. This model not only effectively uses existing resources of the sending **kingdom community**, but it also meets the needs of the people group among whom the **sent-out disciple** lives. This same idea is also applied in the following examples.

- The sent-out disciple goes out to a community that raises sheep, goats, or chickens. The initial gift might be a pair of breeding animals.
- The **kingdom community** does not have enough money for the initial gift. They choose to partner with a foreign supporter for some of the needed equipment. The one-time gift is not as difficult on the relationship as continuous funding might be. Also, the people themselves—not the foreigner—determine how the money is spent.
- The **sent-out disciple** receives a loan to cover his initial expenses. He makes plans to pay back the loan over the course of the first few months or years of work.
- A partnership effort is created when the **kingdom community** throughout the people group of the **sent-out disciple** contributes toward the initial gift for his family. This brings a unity of **purpose** to God's people among that people group.

Other ideas come through the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we pray and use our God-given minds to plan for His work. Jesus tells us that loving God with our minds is as much a part of His command as loving Him with our hearts, souls and strength (Mark 12:30).

We must find ways to send out disciples to the nations that allow...

... The greatest number of disciples sent off...

... To the greatest number of people groups...

... In ways that effectively communicate Good News...

... And quickly spread God's kingdom ...

... So that He is glorified in all the earth!

- >> List some of the positive and negative sending and funding issues your people face in sending out disciples to other people groups. Evaluate the solutions you choose.
  - » What is the typical Western model for this work?
  - » In what ways does that model fit your situation and needs?
  - » In what ways does that model not fit your situation and needs?
  - » Is there a different way to do this work that better fits your people?
- » Discuss what God is teaching you with others in your study group.

#### Prepare to Introduce the Kingdom

A **kingdom community** within one people group **sends out disciples** to a Muslim people group many miles away. Among their own people, the disciples work as pig farmers to support themselves. When they leave their people group they expect to earn money by raising pigs when they arrive to live among the Muslim people group. Their

**kingdom community** sends them out with money for the journey and money to buy pigs.

When they arrive in the new community, there are no pigs to buy. Pigs offend this people group. Only the

Jesus teaches us to be wise and make plans for the future.

enemies of this people raise and sell pigs. Because of the work they seek, the community does not respect the **sent-out disciples**. They are discouraged. They do not speak the new language yet and are not able to find other jobs. Without income, they return to their own people.

Can we avoid problems like these the **sent-out disciples** face? Can we avoid the expense and discouragement of so quick a return home? Not always. Some things we learn only when we arrive and begin to understand a new community. However, before we send out disciples, we prepare by learning what decisions might present barriers to kingdom work or waste kingdom resources.

This is what we know:

- We must be willing to go to the people groups that have few or no known followers of Jesus or **kingdom community**.
- It is best to select groups that are, in some way, similar to our own people group, unless the Holy Spirit directs us specifically to another group.
- We must make an effective plan to engage and live among this people group.

As we humbly listen to the Holy Spirit and learn more, we sometimes need to make changes to our plan. We must continue to move toward completing the task we begin.

Making plans or strategies is not a waste of time. Jesus teaches us to be wise and make plans for the future (Luke 16:1-13). Paul shows us how to make careful plans and to listen to the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:21, 21:4, 22:11, 22-28).

Strategic thinking and intentional planning are important ways of spiritually participating in God's **plan**. Paul instructs us to "...offer [our] bodies as living sacrifices, which is [our] spiritual act of worship" (Romans 12:1) The word "spiritual" means rational or thoughtful. It refers to thoughtful action. Thinking and planning must come from thoughtful reflection that glorifies God. We offer our bodies, including our minds, for His use to prepare us to go out to other peoples.

The Holy Spirit uses the **Bible** and prayer to teach us how to obey God. He gives us insight beyond what the world offers. Remember, the wisdom of God may seem foolish to the world, but it is infinitely more powerful than anything else. Read Mark 4:2-20 and Luke 16:1-13. How do these parables of Jesus instruct us about making intentional plans? What are your thoughts about creating and using plans? Will you make thoughtful plans under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as a spiritual act of worship?

For a detailed planning guide, see *Appendix B: Making Plans—Imagine What God Can Do Through You.* 

#### **Overcome Evil with Good (Romans 12:12)**

When Jesus teaches us to ask of God, "... *Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*" (Matthew 6:10), what does He teach us to ask? What does it mean that we ask for the **kingdom of God** to come and **naturally spread** throughout the earth as it is in heaven?

The evil that plagues and corrupts God's good creation is a daily barrier to the **natural spread** of His kingdom. We know God seeks to rule over the thoughts and attitudes of all humanity. He also seeks to rule over His glorious creation, once perfect but now corrupted by the works of the Enemy. It is God's **purpose** to establish His kingdom rule over all (Genesis 1:31, Romans 8:18-24).

The world is full of evil. Disease, poverty, water shortages, corruption, war and slavery all affect both the righteous and the unrighteous (Matthew 5:45). Even communities with a growing and strong **kingdom community** face daily suffering and experience evil. Consider the following situations prevalent in our day.

The owner of a brick kiln promises work to a thousand people from rural villages. Then he tricks them, forces them to work in brutal conditions

It is God's purpose to establish His kingdom rule over all. and refuses to pay them or allow them to leave. He beats them and starves them. Several die before the authorities see what is happening and free them.

A country is in civil war for many years. Their people do not know peace. Often bombs destroy the lives

and homes of the innocent because of a political message others send. People capture and kill other people. Soldiers rape women and torture children, leaving them as widows and orphans and bringing shame to the family. Families flee the country and discover there is no better place to go. As refugees their conditions are as bad as those they left behind.

A **kingdom community** desires to **naturally spread** the **Good News** among their own people, but many of their people are sick. Some die. Others are too weak to work and cannot support their families or the community. Diseases like malaria and tuberculosis plague their own people, leaving many people too sick to do the work they desire to do for God. The Enemy's work includes temptation, deception, and sin. The rebellion of humanity and the rebellion of Satan produce many problems in society such as abuse of women and children, corruption and the violence of war, addictions, and the destruction of families and communities.

Yet, many evils that affect us do not seem to be problems caused by human sin. Many diseases greatly damage and even kill the human body. Diseases also kill plants and animals. Hurricanes and tsunamis destroy the land and people living on it. Satan begins to mar and distort all of God's good creation when he rebels. God designs many living things for good purposes. The Enemy changes them, using them to harm and destroy what is good.

- In what ways and places do you see the kingdom of God rule and reign today over global problems—disease, war, and slavery, for example—that still destroy lives?
- >> How do you think that, as part of our covenant responsibility to bless all peoples, we must pray for and work toward overcoming these types of global and community problems?
- » If the kingdom is here now on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10, Luke 17:20-21), how does this relate to the description of the new heaven and earth (Revelation 21:1-4)?

#### Address Global Problems at their Roots

Imagine you come home one day to find there is something wrong with a water faucet in your house. Water is running out of the faucet into the sink and spilling all over the floor. What do you do?

You might grab a bucket to catch the water. You might use cloths to soak up the water and squeeze it into the bucket. Maybe this helps. You work very hard to remove the water but there is always more spilling out of the sink and onto the floor.

You must take time to fix the source of the problem. You must turn off the faucet and stop the flow of water. Cleaning up the spilled water is important, but it does not solve the problem. It does not stop the flow of water.

Working to fix the problems that trouble humanity is much the same. Cleaning a mess and fixing the damage done is important work. However, if we focus all our effort on cleaning and fixing and no effort on the source, the problem does not go away. For example, if all who fight against slavery in our day work to rescue slaves from their captors, and none are available to work on preventing humans from being tricked or sold into slavery, or preventing others from buying and selling slaves, the problem does not go away.

- » Are all human problems solved when people repent of sin and follow Jesus? Why or why not?
- What human problems today most greatly affect your people group? What human problems most afflict the people group where you will send out disciples to introduce the kingdom?
- Discuss ways to address these problems by cleaning up the mess and fixing the damage already done. Discuss ways to address these problems by stopping it at the source or root.

To read more about addressing community problems at the roots, see page 201, "Helping a Community Meet its Physical Needs" in *Appendix D: Additional Articles*.

Do Good Works for the Glory of God

If God's **purpose** is to restore His rule over all creation, then His people must reveal that **purpose** to all. Overcoming evil with good is part of the blessing we receive – the blessing with which we bless all peoples.

#### **STORY FOR STUDY: MATTHEW 5:13-16**

Jesus teaches us to let our good works shine before men, so they can see them and glorify God. The apostle Paul tells us, "We are God's

Overcoming evil with good is part of the blessing we receive – the blessing with which we bless all peoples. workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). One of the reasons God rescues us and brings us into His kingdom is so we can do good works that glorify God.

Jesus does not ask God to take His followers out of the world. Instead, He prays that God will protect His followers from the Evil One (John 17:18). Jesus

sends us into the world just as God sends Him into the world (John 17:18). We follow the example of Jesus to do good works and address the destructive works of the Enemy. Jesus "*went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the Devil*" (Acts 10:38).

God blesses us so we might be a blessing to all people groups. When we ask ourselves how we can bless those around us, we begin to think about identifying their needs. Then we might help them meet those needs. James says, "*Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world*" (James 1:27).

Real change happens when the Holy Spirit changes individuals and communities from the inside out. When God restores us to good relationship with Him, we receive a new

**identity** and begin to live our lives in a new way. We live in the truth of God, in a restored relationship with Him, with our families, with our communities and with ourselves.

When others see the love, justice and mercy we begin to show others, God reveals His character and kingdom through us.

When God's people work to serve, honor, and bless all people groups, God reveals His **purpose** to bless all peoples through them.

When God's people work to overcome the evil surrounding them with good, God powerfully works through them to establish His kingdom rule in their families, communities, and on earth. He reveals His kingdom of goodness, justice and mercy for all peoples.

- What does it mean to "let your light shine before men?" What are some good deeds you can do to bring glory to God in the world?
- Read I John 3:8. What does it mean for us as disciples of Jesus to follow Him if His work includes destroying the works of the Devil?
  - » How do we view human problems that surround us?
  - » How do we combine our view of human problems with what we already know about our part in the **purpose** of God?

Scientists and doctors search for ways to treat diseases such as malaria. This is a very important and good work. Many suffering people need treatment. But will this good work overcome the evil of malaria, a disease that destroys lives and harms communities?

Could God's people also search for a way to rid the world of malaria so no one else suffers and dies from this horrible disease? If we focus on getting rid of the disease in addition to treating it, we address the source or root of the problem. We can see the evil of malaria overcome with good for the glory of God.

Some problems we face result from the presence of evil—as yet incurable diseases and global climate changes, for example—in the good creation of God. Some believe these problems are too big to solve and do not even try. Others try to provide temporary relief. This is like soaking up the water spilling onto the floor while the faucet still runs.

It is difficult to rid the world of a disease or to end a global evil such as slavery. God gives people the ability to study, understand, and learn about such things. By His grace, He causes some people to find solutions and persevere in work toward this end.

We must encourage and support followers of Jesus who seek to overcome evil with good in every domain of life whether medicine, government, media, business, education, or another. This is part of our responsibility to bless all peoples. We must not make the mistake of separating the work of **introducing the kingdom** from the work of overcoming evil with good in all parts of life. They are God's

We must not make the mistake of separating the work of introducing the kingdom from the work of overcoming evil with good in all parts of life. **purpose** for humanity and the world. They are the blessing we share with all peoples. They are the **Good News of the kingdom of God**. They are the work of the worldwide **kingdom community**.

We are born into the **kingdom of God** once, but we must learn to live in it every day. Submitting our lives to the rule of God is a life-long process. We learn how to do this as we obey His commands in the **Bible**. We do not know the solutions to all problems

facing humanity today. However, when we seek God, He guides us to the truth.

- The works of the enemy include disease, sickness and other destructive evils. Why must we be aware of his schemes in relation to human problems? If we know these evils are the devil's schemes, what must God's people do in response?
- » In what ways does the Enemy distort the **plan** of God for creation?

#### The Kingdom of God Naturally Spreads If...



**The kingdom community grows within the existing community.** Followers of Jesus continue to honor their family and community, while changing their loyalty and worship to Jesus. With Jesus' followers living within households and working among their people,

the  ${\bf Good\ News\ naturally\ spreads}$  to others in the family and community.



New followers of Jesus keep their natural identity and remain part of their people. Followers of Jesus recognize God values their people and their culture, and do not adopt a foreign identity in order to enter the kingdom of God. They demonstrate that the

**Great Story** is not a story for foreign people, but the story of their own people. The Holy Spirit leads them to repent and change the parts of their worldview and culture that dishonor God.



#### Community and family leaders lead their people well.

Leaders of the community continue as elders in the local **kingdom community**. Elders and leaders naturally provide the best leadership for the **kingdom community** and the Holy Spirit guides them to

make wise decisions that honor God. God's people experience the work of the Holy Spirit when they see God grow His church by using the gifts of all members of the **kingdom community**.



**The kingdom community grows under authority of Scripture and guidance of the Holy Spirit.** Followers of Jesus experience God's presence and guidance among their people. The Holy Spirit helps them find solutions for their troubles or questions and helps

them find ways to live together in community and honor God according to their own traditions and customs. **Sent-out disciples** come alongside and help as needed, but can come and go as needed.



#### Sent-out disciples fulfill their covenant responsibility.

Followers of Jesus spread the **Good News** naturally among their people, and **send out disciples** to other people groups, taking their place in God's Story. **Sent-out disciples** help connect the new

**kingdom community** to other **kingdom communities** as they work together to **introduce the kingdom** to even more peoples.



**Kingdom communities use existing resources or find new resources.** Followers of Jesus use resources God already provides to live and worship together in ways that fit their culture. They gather in places where they already spend time together. They

follow leaders who are already leaders. The kingdom **naturally spreads** when it grows inside the culture without having to depend on others for resources to find new programs, buildings, or jobs. The **kingdom community** is recognized as part of the people group.



God's people engage in the world to overcome evil with good at every level of society. Followers of Jesus recognize God's purpose to restore His kingdom rule over all creation. The Holy Spirit inspires and empowers them to do good works that reveal His glory and

kingdom rule. Good works are small acts of love and mercy, but also large acts to rid the world of disease, corruption, wars, slavery, and other global problems.

- Discuss with your study group some ways that sent-out disciples can unintentionally hinder the natural spread of the kingdom through their efforts. List and discuss ways your sent-out disciples must be intentional about introducing the kingdom in ways that allow it to naturally spread.
- >> Make a list of principles or guidelines for good practice you wish for all your sent-out disciples to follow in every people group they enter.

# Explore Lesson 15 with this case study: Three Solutions for a Village Problem

A mountain community only has one way to the nearest town, down a narrow, dangerous road. The road is full of holes and there are many slippery spots. Villagers often fall off the road and die or are badly injured. The community faces a difficult problem because they must travel back and forth to town in order for the village to survive.

» What is the problem facing this village? Discuss with your group the possible root problems to address.

#### Solution #1

An outside group from a **kingdom community** far away learns about the problem. They raise money to build a clinic at the bottom of the mountain for the injured that survive falls off the road. This seems like a good solution. Now when villagers are hurt, the clinic helps them. Several lives are saved. However, when the group with the money and staff to run the clinic leaves, the clinic closes.

- » Describe solution #1.
  - » What was helpful about this solution?
  - » What problems did it solve?
  - » What was not helpful about this solution?
  - » Did it create any additional problems for the community?

#### Solution #2

A second outside group from another **kingdom community** learns about this new problem. They raise money to buy an ambulance to take the injured to the nearest hospital, many miles away. This seems like a good solution. However, when the group with the money leaves, the ambulance sits unused because there is no money to buy gasoline for it.

- » Describe solution #2.
  - » What is helpful about this solution?
  - » What problems did it solve?
  - » Was it better or worse than Solution #1? Why?
  - » Did it create any additional problems for the community?

#### Solution #3

A third outside group from a distant **kingdom community** learns about the continuing problem. They ask to meet with the leaders of the mountain community in order to ask them what needs to happen to solve this problem of the dangerous road and injured villagers. The community discusses the problem together with the outsiders and they decide the best solution is to fix the road.

The leaders of the community organize the villagers who gather supplies and begin work on the road. The outsiders volunteer to help the villagers. Together they fix the holes and build small bridges or guard rails at the most dangerous places. Finally, the road is fixed. The villagers no longer fall off the road. They are proud of the way they work together to solve their own problem and begin to meet regularly to address community needs. They are glad the solution remains even when the outsiders leave. They address the root of their problem.

- » Describe solution #3.
  - » What is helpful about this solution?
  - » What problems did it solve?
  - » Was it better or worse than Solutions #1 and #2? Why?
  - » Did it create any additional problems for the community?
- >> How does the work of the outsiders reveal the kingdom of God to this mountain village in each situation?

#### **Reflect on What God Teaches You**

- Reflect on the section in this lesson called "New Ways of Supporting and Funding Sent-out Disciples in Our Day." It is important to consider these ideas if we are to see multitudes of sent-out disciples reaching all people groups.
- » Prayerfully consider the following:
  - » What are some practical ways that your people might support your sent-out disciples?
  - » What are some ways your people group might **send-out disciples** that allows the greatest number of them to be sustained for many years?
  - » With whom might you partner?
  - » Who has resources to help your people group **send out disciples** to the nations who have yet to hear the **Good News**?
  - » What resources do your people have to help those from other people groups **send out disciples**?
  - » What things need to change in the way you support and fund **sent-out disciples** so you might better serve the Lord in His plan to restore His rule and reign on the earth?

#### Pray for the Glory of God to Fill the Earth

- Pray for the people of God to work together for His coming kingdom and for His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Pray that God reveals His glory as His people labor to do good on every front where evil is found, in every domain of life. Pray that God reveals His glory as men and women fight the disease, injustice, abuse, corruption, poverty, war and all evil around us.
- Pray that God reveals His glory as His people discover and apply solutions to problems in our family, in our community and in our people group. Pray that God works through us, His people, to bless others and restore His rule over creation.
- Pray that God glorifies His name by bringing in a great harvest in the world. Pray that the Father will establish a kingdom community in every people group on earth. Pray that He actively involves multitudes of His people in His work among all peoples. Thank him for the vision of the Nigerian church and the Chinese church and pray for fruitful work among the sent-out disciples from each group.
- Pray that God will heal and restore families to loving relationships so the hearts of parents turn toward children and children toward parents. Pray, "Your kingdom come, and Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Amen.

# Apply What You Learn

#### Share the Great Story

Gather your family to share the last part the **Great Story**—how God carries out His **plan** from the end of the New Testament record until our own day. Share how the **Good News** spreads from Jerusalem, throughout the Roman world, to all parts of the earth in the modern world. Include different ways the kingdom grows and spreads, and different challenges it faces as it grows. Explain how other disciples work through these challenges.



When you meet again with your study group, discuss your experience sharing the **Great Story** with your family. Discuss the response each family has when faced with truth about their true **identity** and **purpose**. Share how God is at work in your family, and in your local **kingdom community** in these days.

#### **Be Transformed**

Meet with the leaders and elders of your local **kingdom community**. Make a list of the problems and evil that cause suffering in your community, for your people, and for your families. Make a list of challenges you need to solve together in order to send off multitudes of disciples into people groups with no **kingdom community** and no known followers of Jesus.

Discuss which of the problems you identified most hinders your ability to fulfill your covenant responsibility at this time. Reflect together on the roots or sources of these problems. Then pray. Ask God to show you a solution to this problem. Ask Him to reveal who among you must work on addressing this problem. Ask Him for grace and power to work together to overcome the evil and suffering around you for His glory.

#### **Get Involved**

Together with your study group, consider the families in your local **kingdom community**. Reflect on the domain or area of your society where they work and live. Are some in government work, or teachers, or working in business? Are some doctors or nurses? Are others engineers, farmers, or community workers? Make a list of all these domains or areas. These are the areas where your local **kingdom community** has opportunity to overcome evil with good through God's power. God transforms society through His people.

Organize meetings for all the people working in a certain domain, such as in business, so that they might talk together about ways to overcome evil with good works in their unique domain.

Organize separate meetings to discuss problems off of your original list so that all families in the local **kingdom community** might discuss ways to work together across domains to overcome that evil with good works.

Actively engage in overcoming evil with good in your community and among your people so that you might reveal the glory of God and His kingdom rule to all who see your local **kingdom community**.

### Conclusion

Once we know the **Great Story**, God opens our eyes and ears to understand the **Bible** more clearly. He reveals His work in history, and in the world around us in our own generation.

The revelation of God changes our lives. It assures us of our true **identity**. It gives us **purpose**. It awakens us to our own covenant responsibility, and the part our people must play in His **plan** to bless all peoples.

#### **Reflect on Your Journey**

As your study group concludes your time together, reflect on the ways God opened your ears and eyes to the **Bible** and the **Great Story** during this season together.

Make a list of challenges you need to resolve together in order to send off multitudes of disciples into people groups with no **kingdom community** and no known followers of Jesus. Begin to organize the life of your own **kingdom**  **community** around your true **identity** and **purpose** as God's people.

#### Celebrate

Plan a time to celebrate God's work among your people as a conclusion to this study. Celebrate His blessing on your people and the opportunity He gives you to bless others on His behalf as His ambassadors.

Create a special prayer, song, poem, drama, dance, or other expression that tells God what you think and how you feel about His work to **restore you and your people to good relationship with Him**. Tell Him your thoughts and feelings about His work to **restore His rule over all creation**.

Offer Him **acceptable worship** from a pure heart. Celebrate God with your people in ways that reflect the unique nature of your own culture. Worship Him as only your people can.

Celebrate His blessing on your people and the opportunity He gives you to bless others on His behalf as His ambassador.

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To purchase many of these resources or others like them, contact William Carey Library (www.WCLBooks.com)

# Appendix A

### For Leaders—How to Use This Resource

*The Blessing: God's Promise, Our Purpose* can be adapted for formal training in a classroom, or used informally to train your family or community group. All the information you need to guide yourself and others through the material is included. There is not a separate leader manual or instructor guide.

Each people group passes on knowledge and experience in different ways. We believe you are best qualified to decide how the stories and learning experiences in this material will best be passed on to your group. We provide only a few helpful guidelines for using this material.

We designed this material for use in community. While you may study it alone, you will receive the most benefit from sharing it together with your family or others you engage with regularly. This allows you to search the Scriptures together and see what God reveals to you. Remember to include women, youth, and even interested children, as God speaks through the mouth of a meek child as readily as a learned pastor or educated leader.

Part One. General Information Part Two. A Guide to Leading a Lesson Study

## Part One. General Information

#### Who are the right students for this study?

This study will most benefit families, groups, or individuals who desire to learn more about God's story, and about how their own people's story connects with God's story.

Knowledge and wisdom in this material comes through stories from the Bible, history, and the experiences of others. The study will also provide valuable training for those already at work sharing His story with other peoples of the world as well as those preparing to go.

Because the foundation for this study is a story, there are no age limits for students. It is helpful to have some knowledge of the Bible before you begin the study, but there are no requirements for what a student must already know. A man with training in a seminary may benefit as

greatly as a youth with little training at all, provided both have interest.

#### Where should you meet together?

While you may adapt this material for use in a classroom setting, we recommend most groups use it in whatever place and fashion you normally pass on stories, knowledge, wisdom, and experience to your own family and community. Perhaps you meet at home, or around the evening fire, or under a tree. Perhaps you have some other community building you use for such purposes. Meet wherever your group will most recognize this study as a time for community learning, discussion and interaction, and as a time for meeting God.

#### How often should you meet together?

This text tells God's Story from the beginning to the present day. We tell the story across five chapters.

- Chapter One reveals God's story as recorded in the Old Testament of the Bible.
- Chapters Two, Three, and Four reveal God's story as recorded in the New Testament of the Bible.
- Chapter Five reveals God's story as recorded in the records and traditions of world history from the first century until our own day.

Each chapter contains three lessons full of stories from that time in history. There are fifteen lessons all together.

Each lesson contains several stories to read, tell or act out. Each story teaches something important for you to know about God, His story, and humanity. Additional information provides explanation or extra insight about the story. There are questions to discuss and activities to complete. These give the Holy Spirit opportunity to reveal Himself to you and your group as you engage with His story in a new way. Finally, there are prayers for your group to pray together.

There are several ways to cover the material in this course. You can meet once or twice a week for fifteen weeks to study one lesson each week. You can meet for one to two days on five different weekends or holidays to study one complete Chapter each time. You can meet for one to two full weeks for an intensive study of one Chapter every one to two days. You must decide the schedule that will best meet the needs of your group.

#### What is the role of the teacher or leader?

This study moves away from a traditional lecture format of learning. The knowledge and wisdom in this material comes through key stories selected from the **Bible**, from history, and from the experiences of others. It is our hope that you will allow the Scripture itself, along with the Holy Spirit, to be the teacher or instructor. Learning and transformation take place as your group experiences these stories, discusses them, searches the Scriptures together, prays together, and listens to the Holy Spirit.

The telling of the story has larger margins, like the text in this paragraph. The margins are wider than those in the rest of the text. This helps you separate the story from the information about it.

The text that explains or gives more information about a story looks like the text in this paragraph. The margins are normal. This text helps you understand the main points of the story, and helps you see how each story you study reveals something important about God's **Great Story**.

You will find questions throughout the lesson in boxes like this. Whenever you come to questions, stop and discuss them.

This gives God the opportunity to work the truth you have seen and heard in the stories into your mind and heart. As we allow Him the chance to do this, God turns our information into true knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. He turns our hearts and minds towards Him. He uses this process of studying the Bible this way to change us. The questions are a crucial part of this study and time should always be given to discuss them.

Therefore, the responsibility of the group leader is to engage the community in the story, then to guide the discussion The responsibility of the group leader is to engage the community in the story, then to guide the discussion and reflection that takes place.

and reflection that takes place through use of the questions and activities. There will be some need at times to read or teach some of the material to emphasize key ideas. However, most of the teaching comes through the stories themselves.

# Part Two. A Guide to Leading a Lesson Study

#### How should you prepare for each meeting?

While you know best how to lead a meeting with your own group, we think you will find the following considerations helpful as you prepare to guide others in this study. As you prepare a lesson, we suggest you do the following.

- 1) Reflect first on the lesson title and how this lesson connects with the **Great Story** unfolding throughout this material.
- 2) Once you have a clear sense of how this lesson fits with the others, look through the section titles to see the important events and topics covered in this lesson.
- 3) Make a note of each place you see questions in the lesson text. When your group meets together to study this lesson, make sure you stop at each question box to discuss and reflect on what God reveals to you.
- 4) Once you have a clear sense of how the lesson flows, make yourself familiar with the stories and text in this lesson by reading them through.
- 5) Look at the questions and begin to think about how you might answer each question. Many of these questions do not have one right answer, but ask you to reflect and allow God to reveal Himself to you. Therefore, it is important to consider your answers but also be open to how God will reveal Himself to your group as you study together.

Pray for your group, your family, your community, and all who study this material with you. Ask God to faithfully come to your people as you meet together, revealing Himself to you. Ask Him to reveal any obstacles your group must deal with in order to see and hear from God together so that you might address the obstacles and overcome them.

#### What should you do when you come together?

Discuss and seek answers together, so that you may experience the Holy Spirit building up your group through the contributions of each member. Make time to review the material you have learned so far. Discuss how you are applying it, and how it is making a difference in your group. Discuss how God is revealing Himself and demonstrating His love and power through this study, perhaps even since the last time you were together. You can do this every time you meet, or as you prepare to begin a new chapter. Be sure you hear from everyone in the group, as God will speak through weak and strong, old and young, men and women. When you are ready to begin a new chapter or a new lesson, help the group step back and look at the big story of all history, from Creation to the present. Introduce the new chapter and new lesson in the context of this **Great Story**.

You will need to design your time together around your own practices or traditions for learning. However, we suggest that you always include the following elements in your study design.

1) Engage in the stories. Connect others to the stories in some way. You can read a story aloud, tell a story, act out a story together, or use pictures or other objects to represent the story. There are many ways to share each story with others, but learning the stories in the Bible is a very important part of this study. For instructions on how to study the stories in the Bible in a way that allows God to reveal Himself to you, see *How to Study the Bible to Be Transformed* on page 5.

2) Discuss the questions provided and do the activities suggested. You can usually find the answers to these questions in the section above

them. In many cases, there is not one right answer. Instead, the answer is for you to explore through discussion with your group, praying, searching the Bible, and hearing from God.

If you think about answers to these questions before the group meeting, that is good. Make sure you open the questions for discussion and allow others to reflect and answer during the meeting time. Be open to learning something new as God reveals Himself to your group. We designed these questions for your group to discuss and seek However you conduct your study, whether in a formal training setting or informally with others, allow yourselves to experience God's story.

answers together, so that you may experience the Holy Spirit building up your group through the contributions of each member.

3) Make time for listening to and responding to God together in prayer.

If you give assignments for students outside of the meeting time, we suggest you assign them the study of the stories from a lesson. Follow the guidelines for study in *How to Study the Bible to Be Transformed* on page 5. You can choose to assign the stories from the lesson you covered, for further study. Or, you can choose to assign the stories from the lesson you will study next, in preparation. At the end of each chapter, you may also assign activities from the section called "Apply What You Learn."

However you conduct your study, whether in a formal training setting or informally with others, allow yourselves to experience God's story. We experience this through the stories of others, and as we consider our own experiences and stories. We learn to connect our stories to the greater story God reveals throughout history.

Allow God to instruct you through these experiences, as you gain understanding and wisdom, and knowledge of principles you can use the rest of your life. This is the

normal way of learning—through stories and experiences. We invite you to learn normally, not just academically.

Finally, we urge your group to remember Paul's good teaching for Timothy, "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Timothy 2:2).

We specifically designed this manual for use in this manner. Entrust the knowledge you find here to reliable men and women who will be qualified to teach others. Expect that those who receive the knowledge through your efforts can go out from your study and entrust it to others in like manner, all for the glory of God.

# **Appendix B**

# Making Plans—Imagine What God Can Do Through You

The questions at the end of lesson 14 help you identify a people group to whom your people can go and **introduce the kingdom**. The first step is to select a specific people group to pray for regularly. Maybe God has already instructed your people to go to a specific people group. Maybe through answering the questions in this section, God will direct you further in this area.

The questions below will help you make plans to **introduce the kingdom** to another people in a way that best suits your people and best honors that people and God.

Get to Know Another People Group Learn the Story of Another People Consider What Your People Can Do

## Get to Know Another People Group

Once you select a people group, you can begin learning about that group, praying for them, and, hopefully, getting to know some families from that group. There are several ways to do this.

#### Read what others write about them.

If you have access to a library, either in a city or at a university, you can likely find books with information about peoples. If not books, you may find magazine or newspaper articles. You can read about them on the internet.

Remember that all information others write reflects their own perspectives, biases, and perhaps even prejudices. Consider the information you read carefully, but do not assume it is all true for everyone in the people group you selected.

The following resources are prepared by Christian groups for finding information about the peoples of the world.

- *Operation World* by Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk (<u>www.</u> <u>operationworld.org</u>)
- *The World Christian Encyclopedia* by David Barrett, George Kurian, and Todd Johnson (<u>www.gcts.edu/ockenga/globalchristianity</u>)
- The World Christian Database (<u>www.worldchristiandatabase.org</u>)
- The Joshua Project database (<u>www.joshuaproject.net</u>)

You can also find information about the languages of the world at <u>www.ethnologue.com</u>.

These are just a few of the resources available. While we recommend you make use of resources prepared by Christian groups, we also recommend you use resources from other groups as well.

#### Talk to people from this group.

A good way to learn about a people group is to get to know someone from that group and his or her family. You can interview them, asking them questions to help you learn more about their culture, their way of life, the things they do, and more. Interview many people if you can, since every individual will understand his or her people in a different way.

Remember that an interview is a chance to learn, not a chance to judge or teach others. Listen and allow God to reveal to you how He is at work in this person's life, family, and people.

#### Talk to others who know this people group.

If others you know live or work among this people, interview them to find out what they know.

# Learn the Story of Another People

The following sections give you ideas for areas to explore as you learn about another people group. It will take a long time to learn the answers to all of these questions. Use this section as a map to guide you as you open your hearts to this people and allow God to reveal more to you about them.

- » What is this people's unique story?
  - » Who are these people, where do they come from, and what is their history? Who are their ancestors? How large is their group? What are the important smaller stories that make up their story?
  - » Where do they live? What is life like in that environment? Are they cut off from other peoples and difficult to reach? Are they mixed into large cities and difficult to reach? Is this people group scattered across a large area, covering multiple countries? Is this people group congregated together in a small region?
  - » In what ways do you see their story as part of God's Great Story? Apart from the smaller stories in Genesis 1-11, are there other parts of their story, or references to their people, in the Bible?
- » What is the **identity** of this people?
  - » What do these people do? What is their trade or profession? What unique skills or crafts do they possess? What are the events and traits about the story of this people that make them feel most proud of their **identity**?
  - » What languages do they speak? Which language is their heart language, or the language in which they most comfortably communicate?
  - » What do you know about this people's worldview? What do they know about life and death? What do they understand about humanity – our origins and purpose on earth? What do they know about Creation – the plants, animals, the universe?

A good way to learn about a people group is to find someone from that group and get to know that person and his or her family.

- » What do you know about their societies and families? How are families organized? Who are the family and community leaders? How are decisions made? How do they pass along knowledge from one generation to another? Who teaches the customs and traditions?
- » Where do you see the **kingdom of God** already present among this people?
  - » Has anyone introduced the Kingdom of God to this people at some point? Is there already a kingdom community growing among this people in their villages, towns, or cities? Is the Good News of the kingdom spreading naturally among the people like yeast through the dough?
  - » Are there any known followers of Jesus from this people group? How do the followers of Jesus relate to their own people? Have they

changed their own **natural identity** in important ways to separate themselves from their people? Is the **Good News** able to spread through them like yeast spreading through dough? If the followers of Jesus are cut off from their people, is there any way they might be encouraged to restore relationship with their people for the sake of the **kingdom of God**?

- » Are there **sent-out disciples** already at work among this people?
  - » Are there others followers of Jesus living or working among this people who are already seeking to **introduce the kingdom**?
  - » Are there other people groups living among or near this people that have kingdom communities growing within them? Are there any barriers that might keep this people from accepting the Good News from those nearby kingdom communities? Is there any way these nearby kingdom communities might be encouraged to reach out and bless this people group?
  - » Is the **Bible** available in the heart language of this people either in book or audio form? Is any part of the **Bible** available? If there is no **Bible** available now, is anyone working on that project? Are there any resources available in this language that might be appropriate (and not confusing or offensive) for these people to see or use?
- » In what ways is God already at work among this people group?
  - » What is the religious life of this people like? Are they very religious? Do they practice their religion often? Are they devout and sincere in their faith? Is their religion an important part of their **identity** and their culture?
  - » What is the spiritual life of this people? Are they eager to talk about a creator? Do they believe the story of the Creator God is part of their own story? Are they open to speaking of God's story? Do they already include Jesus as part of their story in some way? Do they include and understand a **kingdom of God** and a kingdom of darkness?
  - » Where do you see God already at work among this people? In what places and ways are they already seeking truth, seeking righteousness, or seeking the **kingdom of God**? What traditions or customs reveal that this people once knew the truth about God, and once had good relationship with him?
- » What is life like for this people today?
  - » What are the challenges currently facing this people? Are they facing political challenges, such as oppression, occupation or war? Are they facing economic challenges such as food shortages, unemployment, or other hardships – including too much wealth? Are they facing social challenges, such as young people leaving families for the city and falling into various forms of destructive behavior? Do they face other significant social challenges?
  - » What concerns them most? What things most worry or frighten them? What would they most like to see happen for the good of their people?
- » Dream and pray about what God might want to do in and through this people group.
  - » Where do you see places to **introduce the kingdom** into communities

and families so that it can **naturally spread** like yeast through dough throughout this people group?

What do you think are some of the most significant barriers that will hinder your people from communicating the Good News well with this people? What do you think are some of the most significant barriers that might hinder this people from receiving and accepting the Good News? How might God want you to overcome those barriers?
In what w
God alread

» What do you think are some of the most significant bridges or helps to your people communicating the Good News well with this people group? What do you think are some of the most significant bridges In what ways is God already at work among this people group?

or helps to this people receiving and accepting the **Good News**? How might God want you to use these bridges or areas of common ground to connect your people and theirs?

## Consider What Your People Can Do

As you reflect on the information you gather in your work above, ask God to reveal what He wants to do in and through this people group, and how He wants your people to be part of that.

- » Pray specifically about the following decisions.
  - » Who will you send to live and work among this people group? What families or groups are able and best suited to go to this people? Where will they go to live among them?
  - » How will they go about learning the language and new culture? What will they do to support themselves while living there? How might they fit into and bless the community where they go to live and work?
  - » What will your communication and reporting structure be between those sent out and those that remain among your people? How will you support and stay connected with those you send out while they are there?
- » Think about your plan.
  - » What can you do to demonstrate God's love and lift up Jesus and His kingdom? How can you take precautions to be servants of God, introducing His kingdom, and not servants of your own people, introducing your own **natural identity** and religious practices? How will you know when you have earned the privilege to speak to this people?
  - » How can you make the Bible accessible to these people in their own language, and in a format that is sensitive to their own culture and easy for them to understand?
  - » What needs does this community feel they have that your people could help them to meet? Where are the suffering? In what ways could you serve and honor them?
- » Keep the end goals in mind.
  - » How will you know when God has introduced the kingdom to the new people group? How will you know when it is time to leave and allow the gospel to naturally spread there through the work of the Holy Spirit and the new kingdom community?
  - » How will you make sure the natural leaders lead the work of naturally spreading the kingdom among them, so that the new kingdom community does not depend on outsiders to grow and spread?
  - » How will you quickly involve new followers of Jesus as sent-out disciples to bless other people groups?
- » Consider how you might collaborate with others.
  - » How might you work together with others to introduce the kingdom to this people? What might your people contribute? What might others contribute?
  - » How will you learn from the **Bible** and from others about the work you set out to do? How will you allow the Scripture to train and guide you in your work among another people group? Who will hold you

accountable to following the Word of God rather than your own way?

» How will you share what God does in and through you with others? How will you share with your own people? How will you share with others in the global body of Christ? Remember to share your mistakes as well as your successes, so that we can all learn and grow together. Ask God to reveal what He wants to do in and through this people group, and how He wants your people to be part of that.

» What will it take to see multitudes of people follow Jesus from among this people group? What will it take to see the kingdom of God spread throughout their people in miraculous and exciting ways, and from them to others as well? Whatever God reveals to you, work towards that end! The Blessing: God's Promise, Our Purpose

# **Appendix C**

# **Optional Chapter—The Story of Your People and the Great Story**

The **Bible** reveals the **Great Story** of God at work in history. It connects us all to the story, and the role we can play in it. The **Bible** is a record of many smaller stories that together reveal God's **purpose** and **plan** for humanity. These smaller stories tell the story of God at work among the peoples of the Middle East from the beginning of time until the first century A.D.

There are many other smaller stories we could tell. Every people has a collection of smaller stories that together reveal the story of God at work among their own people, within their own region, interacting with peoples from all over the world. Do you know your own stories?

This *Optional Chapter* gives you help in gathering the stories of your people that reveal God's story in and through you. We provide a general outline you can follow to create three unique lessons on this topic to include in your study. However, you are free to compile and share these in the way that is best for your people.

This Optional Chapter gives you help in compiling the stories of your people that reveal God's story in and through you.

We recommend that before you begin you consider the following general guidelines for development:

- 1) A project like this is best done with others. We recommend you find a group who will commit to developing this *Optional Chapter* together with you.
- 2) This is an opportunity to explore God's story among your people. That means it is important for you to look with a wide view to see God at work. This should not be a history of only your denomination or church tradition. That would result in too narrow an understanding of the **Great Story** and God's purpose for your people. Keep this in mind as you proceed.
- 3) Spend time exploring resources to learn all you can about this topic. Find written records of history, or other written works. More importantly, talk to people who know the stories and traditions of your people. Always remember to give others credit for their work in the end.

Finally, consider the world's common understandings of history as you examine your own. You will find these perspectives reflected in the records and stories of history. Some believe that history repeats itself in endless cycles, with no purpose or goal or meaning for life and events. Some see history not as God's story, but as Man's story, as he conquers nature and overcomes his primitive ways by increasing in knowledge and skills. Some see history as a collection of chaotic and diverse events with no story or sequence to them at all.

The **Bible** reveals another understanding of history. It demonstrates that God creates the world and initiates work throughout history in order to accomplish a specific **purpose**. History has a beginning and an end, and the time between reveals God's work in the world and humanity's response to God. History is a story, revealed through His work in, among, and through us.

Lesson A. The Great Story is the Story of Your People Lesson B. The Kingdom of God Comes Near to You Lesson C. Your People and God's Covenant

# Lesson A. The Great Story is the Story of Your People

We know that the **Great Story** is the story of all peoples. We all descend from the same ancestors. While there are tens of thousands of peoples living in the world today, we all trace our stories to the seventy families scattered throughout the earth in Genesis 11 and, before that, to the sons of Noah in Genesis 10 or even to the sons of Adam in Genesis 5.

This lesson allows you to collect the stories of God revealing Himself to your people in the earliest days of your ancestors from the Creation until the time Jesus comes to earth.

## The Early Story of Your People

How far back can you trace your ancestors? Can you trace your history to the families of the earth in Genesis 11, or to the descendents of Adam or Noah? Not all peoples have enough information to make these specific connections, but many do.

Even if you do not know details, you know these are the stories of your people, as they are the stories of all peoples. This part of lesson A is a place for you to tell the early stories of your ancestors.

## Your People and Abraham's Family

Once God selects Abraham and makes His covenant promise with him, Abraham's family is set apart with a blessing so that they might bless all the other peoples of

earth. God leads Abraham's family, later called Israel, the Hebrews, and eventually the Jews, to encounter many peoples of Africa, Asia, and even Europe. The Old Testament contains stories about many of these encounters.

Are there stories about your ancestors in the Old Testament record? Do your people interact with Abraham's natural family at any point in your history? This part of lesson A is a place for you to tell the stories of your people from the time they were scattered in Genesis 11 until the time that Jesus comes to earth.

## **God Reveals Himself to Your People**

Collect the stories of God revealing Himself to your people in the earliest days of your ancestors from the Creation until the time Jesus comes to earth.

We know God and His story, because He chooses to reveal Himself to us. The Apostle Paul teaches that, "...since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (Romans 1:20). At one time, our ancestors know and worship the Most High God.

However, most of our ancestors begin to **seek their own way**. They allow God's enemy to distort what they once knew about God. They even forget Him. They begin to worship other gods. Paul describes how this happens, "*For although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles*" (Romans 1:21-22).

All our traditions and customs contain reminders of a time when our ancestors worshipped God. We can find eternity and truth in the hearts of our people, and in our ways of living.

Our disobedience is a sad and shameful part of all our stories. But merciful God desires to restore a good relationship with each of us. God reveals Himself directly to us again, through prophets, visions, dreams, and through Jesus. He reveals Himself

Recognize the many ways God reveals Himself to your people throughout the ages. through Creation. He reveals Himself through our very conscience and soul, and through the culture of our own people.

This part of lesson A is a chance to recognize the many ways God reveals Himself to your people throughout the ages. Where do you find evidence that your ancestors

knew and worshipped the Most High God in your traditions and customs? After your people forget God and begin to **seek after your own way**, how does God continue to reveal Himself to you? Does He send prophets to your people at different times? Do your ancestors see visions or dreams, or encounter holy men and women of God?

This part of lesson A gives you a chance to explore how God is at work among your people from the beginning of time, revealing Himself and His story to you. Lesson B is a time to explore how the **Good News of the kingdom** and of Jesus comes to your people.

# Lesson B. The Kingdom of God Comes Near to You

God loves you and desires to restore His good relationship with you and His kingdom rule among your people. At some point in your story, He sends the **kingdom of God** near to you in a new way. You receive His blessing and learn the story of Jesus alive on earth. Your people remember God's love for them. Some of your people choose to repent and follow God again. They become followers of Jesus, God's **Promised Son**.

Perhaps it begins with one individual in one family who hears of Jesus and shares it with others. Perhaps it begins with God revealing Himself to a larger group. Once God **introduces the kingdom**, it **naturally spreads** throughout your people. A **kingdom community** grows among you.

Lesson B explores this part of your story, remembering the important people and events that brought the **Good News of the kingdom of God** very near. Remember, as you tell your story, that God works through all events of history, including our sorrows and tragedies, as well as through our victories. They are all part of His story. God works through all events of history, including our sorrows and tragedies, as well as through our victories. They are all part of His story.

Governments and cultures and ideologies, as well as catastrophes and injustices and foreigners, all play a part in His work. They might at times quicken or even help the **Good News** to **naturally spread** across geographical areas, or across generational lines. They might at times suppress or even hinder this spread altogether. God's adversary is at work among your people, too. Remember that **life is a war** between the **kingdom of God** and the kingdom of darkness, and this is all part of your story.

## Your People Encounter the Kingdom of God

This section gives you a chance to tell the stories about how the **kingdom of God** and the **Good News** of Jesus come to your people. Perhaps God **introduces the kingdom** to you across many years, through a number of people and events. Perhaps God **introduces the kingdom** to you in a dramatic, supernatural way, as a group. This part of lesson B is a chance to tell how your people received the blessing promised to Abraham in Genesis 12.

Does someone come to your people to **introduce the kingdom**? Do they come of their own will, or does someone bring them to your people against their will? From what people group do they come?

Do your people learn about the kingdom by going to someone who knows of it? Do you go of your own will, or does someone or something force you there against your will? What people introduce the kingdom to you? Whose story touches your story as

God carries out His plan of using His people to carry the blessing to other peoples? What people group does God use to bless your people?

How do your people respond to the **Good News** of the Kingdom? How do you understand and receive this news? How does God change your understanding of your identity? How do you grow in knowledge and understanding of God and His purpose? When does the Bible come to you in your own language? Who brings it to you?

As you reflect on these events, and thank God for including some from among your people among His people, remember to tell the stories as they are. The **Good News** comes through peoples who are not perfect, and who sometimes do harm as well as good. This is true through all of history.

In some places, the **Good News** comes to people through conquest or oppression. In other places, it comes to people when others take them as slaves to another place.

Celebrate God, who in His mercy made His love known to you, made His blessing available to you, and gave you an identity and purpose. There are often times of sorrow in your story that you may not wish to remember. But God knows them, and He loves you. He knows your grief. He wants you to turn to Him for healing from the pain of injustice and suffering.

God always sees the good deeds people do, as well as their mistakes or sins. Remember this as you tell these stories. Give honest assessments of the other peoples involved in your story, but remember to avoid speaking evil of others. Retell your stories justly, but beware of judgmental or evil

talk about other peoples or individuals. Most importantly, celebrate God, who in His mercy made His love known to you, made His blessing available to you, and gave you an **identity** and **purpose**.

## The Kingdom of God Naturally Spreads Through Your People

Jesus says, "*The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough*" (Matthew 13:33). Once God **introduces the kingdom** to your people, it begins to spread. This part of lesson B gives you a chance to retell the story of how the yeast of the kingdom works its way through the dough of your people group.

There are several ways to tell the story of the kingdom spreading through your people. Consider the following ideas.

- You can tell about how the kingdom spreads geographically, from one village, area, or region to another, then on to another, and so on over time.
- You can tell about how the kingdom spreads across the years. Sometimes it is a good idea to do this by describing what is happening among your people every 100 years, or perhaps every 500 years.
- You can tell the story by highlighting the most important events or turning points in the spread of the kingdom through your people. For example,

are there key times when God moves in miraculous ways? Are there times when there are surges in the movement, and it spreads very rapidly to many people?

You can tell the story by highlighting the most important people involved in spreading the kingdom among your people. Are there stories of great men or women of faith who allow themselves to be used by God in amazing ways in order to see the kingdom spread among your people? Focus on the people who worked to see the kingdom spread into new areas, or advance into new ground. Focus on those who were pioneers in new work. Tell their stories and remember to be honest and fair about both their strengths and their weaknesses. Remember that God, not man, is the Allow God to instruct and encourage us today through the stories of men and women, weak like us, who allow themselves to be moved by the power of God.

hero of His story. Allow God to instruct and encourage you today through the stories of men and women like you who allow themselves to be moved by the power of God.

- You can tell the story by explaining how it spreads from one family to another, or from one clan or group to another within your people.
- You can tell the story by describing how God transforms and changes your society to reflect the principles and teachings of His kingdom over time. Tell about how He changes the hearts of your people over time to make them more like His own heart.
- You can tell the story by describing the different strategies your people use as they work to spread the Good News among your people. Remember to tell the things that worked well, as well as the things that failed. This is how we learn and instruct those who follow us.

However you tell the story, reflect with gratitude as you consider the story of God loving you and pursuing a good relationship with your people. Thank Him for the many lives and events He uses to **introduce the kingdom** and to **naturally spread** it throughout your own people. Pray that He will continue this work among your own people.

# Lesson C. Your People and God's Covenant

It is a joy to recall the story of God revealing Himself to your people, then of Him **introducing the kingdom** and the **Good News** of Jesus to you. God loves you so much He extends the blessing of Abraham—of God's People—to you.

These stories give us **identity** as His people and **purpose** for living. They validate our people—our traditions and the lives of our ancestors. They show His creative work in designing each of us to love and serve Him in unique ways.

Just as God made a way for the blessing of Abraham to flow to you, He intends the blessing to flow out from you to others, as well. The covenant responsibility to bless the nations is now your responsibility, too. This is part of your inheritance as the people of God. It is part of your story that you must tell for generations to come.

## Your People Send Out Disciples to Bless Other Peoples

Whether your people received God's blessing many years ago or only very recently, God wants you to be involved in His work of blessing all peoples. This part of lesson C allows you to tell the stories of your people at work among the peoples of the earth.

Just as God made a way for the blessing of Abraham to flow to you, He intends the blessing to flow out from you to others, as well.

Have your people **sent out disciples** to work with a **kingdom community** within another people group, in order to help the kingdom **naturally spread** throughout that group? When did they go? How did they go? What happened? Tell their stories.

Have your people already **sent out disciples** to **introduce the kingdom** to another people group? When did they go? How did they go? What happened? How did God use them? Tell their stories.

Remember to share the victories and the defeats, and the struggles and failures and the triumphs. Celebrate God for giving you this significant part in His story. Celebrate the ways your people learn and grow through relationship with peoples of other cultures and traditions.

## Join With God in Blessing All Peoples in Our Generation

Often in history before a people **sends out disciples**, God sends His Holy Spirit to move among them in a special way, compelling them to go and bless other peoples. Sometimes this burden spreads like a movement throughout a people, with many families—young and old alike—volunteering to leave their own people and go out for the sake of the **Good News of the kingdom**.

Have you seen God move among your people in this way? How and where did these movements begin? How did they spread? What was the result? If the movement has slowed or stopped, what happened to cause this?

Often as these movements spread, people develop groups or even official organizations to help **send out disciples** to other peoples. Has this happened among your people? This part of lesson C gives you a chance to tell about how the Holy Spirit has moved among your people, compelling you to **send out disciples** to other peoples. It also gives you a chance to tell about how the organizations, groups, or How will your people fulfill their covenant responsibility in the days to come, and in this changing world?

communities who send out these disciples begin. Tell how they grow to their current state. Tell about associations your people join or partnerships they form with other peoples or groups as you go about this work.

## **Planning for the Future**

Think about the stories you want your children and grandchildren and descendents to tell about your people and the **Great Story**. How will your people fulfill their covenant responsibility in the days to come, and in this changing world? How will you learn from the success and failure of your past in order to let God transform you and shape the future of your story?

This part of lesson C gives you a chance to imagine together with others in your study group how God will use you to carry out His plan to reach the peoples of the earth for the sake of His glory.

The Blessing: God's Promise, Our Purpose

# **Appendix D**

# **Additional Articles**

The following articles each explore in more detail important topics mentioned in the material.

Biblical Peacemaking	198
Helping a Community Meet Its Physical Needs	201
Life is a War Between Spiritual Kingdoms	203
The Necessity of Bible Translation	206
What is God Doing in the World Today?	208

## **Biblical Peacemaking**

The biblical principles addressed in this article are adapted from Ken Sande's book The Peacemaker (Baker Books, 2004). To find this resource and other useful resources on this topic see <u>www.</u> <u>peacemaker.net</u>.

#### STORY FOR STUDY: ACTS 15:36-41

What happens when there is conflict among God's people? Paul and Barnabas disagree about John Mark going with them on their next journey.

Paul does not want to take him. Barnabas wants to take him. They each have reasons for their positions. Because of their disagreement they do not continue to travel together (Acts 15). John Mark travels with Barnabas and Paul travels with Silas.

However, we know from II Timothy 4:11 that Paul later changes his attitude about John Mark. This change shows the work of the Holy Spirit among followers of Jesus to heal disagreements and bring peace. How does this change occur? How does peace come out of conflict?

Answers to these important questions will determine the success of God's people in expanding the **kingdom of God** on earth in our generation. There are many examples from history of disagreements within God's people that destroy opportunities for them to show the glory of God to the rest of the world. May it not be so for our generation!

We must accept the following truths.

• There will be conflict when we try to work with others.

- Conflict has the possibility of causing damage to ourselves, to our families and to our communities, which limits the growth of the kingdom of God.
- God makes a way for His people to resolve conflict and establish peace.

When we are in conflict God wants us to work through disagreements in truth and love. Then peace and spiritual growth may result. Being at peace does not mean we agree on everything. It does not mean that everything changes.

Peace is not the absence of conflict. Sometimes conflict is small and simple, like disagreeing about what to eat. Other times conflict is widespread and complicated, like the current disagreements between the Jewish people of Israel and the Palestinian Arabs.

Conflict itself is neither good nor bad. It is not a problem. It defines one way people relate to one another. Conflict exists wherever two or more people exist.

Many people do not resolve conflict well. Conflict becomes a problem when we shame and dishonor others or when we do not resolve it correctly.

- We avoid it or pretend we are at peace when we are not.
- We hide from the results of our wrong behavior.
- We use force to resolve it. We try to attack or accuse others or control situations so we can get the results we want.

Each of these approaches is a mistake that leads to death or destruction. Each approach makes conflict worse. The **Bible** teaches us a better way.

Conflict becomes a problem when we shame and dishonor others or when we do not resolve it correctly.

## **Glorify God (Proverbs 3)**

We glorify God by obeying His teachings and seeking to live like Jesus. Conflict is an opportunity to show we trust God. We must ask ourselves how we might please God and bring Him glory through current conflicts.

## **Examine Ourselves Carefully**

Conflict is seldom the fault of one person or group. When we think someone else is entirely to blame, we must consider our own responsibility in the situation.

We must ask ourselves how we contribute to the conflict through our own wrong attitudes, thoughts and actions. How do we contribute to the conflict through sinful words and behavior?

Remember that even good intentions might lead us to think or act wrongly toward others and God.

We must be willing to first look at our own attitudes and actions. In a conflict, Jesus might want something in our own life to change.

 We ask God to reveal our own failures so that we might confess them, find healing, and show the power of Jesus at work in us. We might also ask others we trust to point out our sin (Psalm 139:23, Proverbs 27:6).

- We repent and confess our sins before God and before others (Matthew 7:1-5, Proverbs 28:13, James 5:16, I John 1:9).
- We seek to restore what we have taken from others, whether material goods or honor or safety (Numbers 5:5-7, Proverbs 19:19, Luke 19:1-10).
- 4) We worship God, seeking our joy and fulfillment from Him alone (Hebrews 12:28-29, Romans 12:1, Psalm 100).

## **Care for Others**

If we see a brother or sister caught in sin, we want to find a way to restore him or her to fellowship with God and with the **kingdom community**. We have a responsibility to share truth with one another. This is an act of kindness and love, not an act of anger or punishment.

We must be gentle and not cause shame for the person or family involved. Peace not only depends on our message, but also on how we deliver it. Gentle answers turn away anger but a harsh answer makes the problem worse (Proverbs 15).

The bruises of a friend are far more valuable than the kiss of an enemy (Proverbs 27). Be ready to be a friend who gently speaks truth. Speaking the truth is a loving thing to do. It has the possibility of being used by God to heal a brother, a sister, or a relationship.

Consider how you might lovingly serve others by encouraging them to take responsibility for their contribution in a conflict (Matthew 18:12-35, Galatians 6:1, Ephesians 4:29, Romans 12:18).

#### **Be Reconciled to Others**

Actively seek ways to show the forgiveness and love of God to others. Focus on finding solutions to conflicts that will help everyone involved.

If two brothers fight over an inheritance, they might consider ways to divide it that benefits both of them and the **kingdom of God**. Practical steps might include canceling debt, signing an agreement, or merely showing that both opinions are valuable and worth listening to.

It is more important to get reasonable and workable solutions to a conflict than to get exactly what we want. It is also important thatallindividualsarerespected and honored as men and women made in the image of God. This allows God the opportunity to restore loving relationships. How can you demonstrate the forgiveness of God and encourage reasonable solutions to a conflict (Matthew 5:21-26, Colossians 3:12-17, I Corinthians 6:1-8)?

The way we respond to conflict might be a great witness of the love of God to the world around us. He teaches us to deal with conflict in ways that are different from what we might naturally do. Only God creates the resulting supernatural unity.

Paul finally values and loves John Mark (II Timothy 4:11). Through the Holy Spirit, even those of us who have conflict with one another see the value we each have.

*"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone"* (Romans 12:18).

# Helping a Community Meet Its Physical Needs

How might a community address specific needs they face?

Many communities need clean drinking water, health care, basic literacy, education, and skills to find work, keep jobs, and support families. Some need training in agricultural methods, animal husbandry, food preservation, and in how to overcome addictions.

Many individuals also have significant emotional needs. Many are recovering from the trauma of war or forced relocation, coping with death and grief, looking for hope for the future, trying to forgive things from the past.

We may need to learn new skills and seek more training to help a community meet some of these important needs. Whatever issues a community faces, we can help by remembering the following basic principles.

## Work Within the Community Itself

Contact leaders of households or people of influence. Find those already working to bring change in the community. Join with those who already care for and love the community.

It is important to work with and through the leaders of the community. This releases more resources and avoids damaging relationships.

## Encourage Others to Take Responsibility to Change Their Own Community

Help people identify their own needs. Avoid telling them what you think their biggest problems are. Because you are an outsider, you probably do not fully understand the situation.

God will give wisdom and direction for even the most difficult and complicated problems.

A community usually knows what its own needs are. Talk about problems with the appropriate people in the community. Find solutions that get many people working together. Help people think of their own solutions to their own needs. They know what is best to do.

## Make Use of Local Resources

Do not focus on what the community does not have. Help them use the resources they have—their God-given minds and their own natural resources.

Many times, good solutions to problems use resources from local businesses, the government, aid agencies, churches, and other civic organizations working together.

Beware of taking money from foreigners because this might come with hidden expectations that are not good for the community or, later, create more problems.

#### Seek Wise, Thoughtful Solutions

Remember to make sure a solution will actually address the problem at its source, and get rid of the problem rather than addressing one part of a problem.

Consider how solutions that solve one problem might create other problems. Remember that solutions must always build up and strengthen both the families and the whole community.

## Find Solutions That Spread Through Families and From House to House

Involve as many people in the community as possible to work toward a solution. Information spreads and ideas are implemented effectively when members of the community go from house to house teaching and discussing the problem and solutions with one another. All members of households can be involved, even the children.

#### Seek God's Direction and Remember That Change Takes Time

New ideas and new ways of doing things take time to gain acceptance. Be patient. Do not give up or lose hope. God will give wisdom and direction for even the most difficult and complicated problems.

# Life is a War Between Spiritual Kingdoms

Conflict between the spiritual kingdoms of light and darkness is present and real for all of us, every single day. We, as citizens of the kingdom of light, have a role to play in this war between the kingdoms. This makes us enemies of the evil kingdom, open to attack from Satan and his demons.

Paul writes, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). We must prepare to engage these forces.

## **Our Enemy**

Our enemy goes by many names in Scripture, including Satan, our adversary, the Devil, the ruler of this world, the father of lies, the prince of the power of the air, and the accuser of our brethren.

Look at the following passages to learn the names and descriptions of the enemy: Matthew 4:3, 12:24, 13:39; Luke 11:21; John 8:44, 12:31; II Corinthians 4:4, 11:14; Ephesians 2:2; I Thessalonians 3:5; I Peter 5:8; I John 2:22, 4:3, 5:19; Revelation 12:9-10, 20:2.

Now look at these passages to learn the ways the enemy works against God's kingdom and its citizens: Matthew 13:19; Mark 4:15; Luke 22:31; John 8:44, 10:10; II Corinthians 2:11, 4:3-4, 11:3, 11:13-15, 12:7; Ephesians 6:11, 16; I Thessalonians 2:18, 3:5; I Timothy 3:7; I Peter 5:8; I John 3:8; Revelation 12:10.

Does this enemy sound frightening? Truly he is powerful and seeking to steal, kill,

and destroy us. But Peter reminds us to "cast all (our) anxiety on (Jesus) because He cares for (us)" (I Peter 5:7).

## **God's Victory**

The **Bible** also teaches us truths about the victory of the kingdom of God over evil through Jesus, and about the position and weapons we have to win battles over Satan and his evil kingdom.

Look at the following verses to learn about the victory of Jesus and the destruction of the evil kingdom: John 12:31-32, 14:30, 16:11; Hebrews 2:14-15; I John 3:8.

God gives Jesus authority and victory over the enemy and all his power. Jesus gives that same power to His disciples (see Luke 10:17-19). Jesus even says He gives us the power to "...*overcome all the power of the enemy*..." Jesus' disciples experience this power over demons. Paul does, too (Acts 16:18).

God gives Jesus authority and victory over the enemy and all his power. Jesus gives that same power to His disciples.

Jesus comforts us by adding, "...nothing will harm you" (Luke 10:19). Paul encourages us, saying "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31) and "...I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us

from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

#### **Our Weapons**

God gives us weapons to fight against the enemy. These weapons are not worldly weapons, but have divine power to destroy evil strongholds (II Corinthians 10:4).

Look at the following passages to learn about the weapons God gives you: Genesis 3:14-15 (God's curse of Satan); Matthew 4:4-10 (the Word of God); Mark 16:17 (Jesus' name); Romans 12:21, 13:12-14; II Corinthians 2:10-11 (forgiveness), 6:7; Ephesians 6:13-17; Philippians 2:9-10; I Peter 4:1-2 (armed with Christ's intention to suffer); Revelation 12:11.

#### Victory over Evil

When the enemy attacks, we need to fight back. The best way to fight back is to declare truth out loud. Truth is the best kind of attack on the father of lies. Satan will try to accuse you and make you lose your confidence.

- Declare truth about who you are in Jesus. Use verses like Romans 8:31, Ephesians 1 and 2:4-6. Do not believe the lies. Jesus will help you.
- Declare the truth that Jesus has given you authority over all the power of the enemy (Luke 10:19). Declare that you are speaking in Jesus' name and by His authority.
- Declare truth about the destruction of Satan, his demons and his kingdom. Jesus has defeated them and they have no power over Him, His disciples, or His creation.
- Declare truth that Satan will be cast out (John 12:31-32) and that he has no power over Jesus (John 14:30).

Declare truth about Satan's future in hell (Matthew 25:41 and Revelation 20:10).

We only do battle in the name and under the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. His power and truth are victorious over the evil kingdom.

#### Victory in Prayer

We defeat the work of evil by doing battle against the enemy and his strongholds through prayer. Praying is a way of declaring there are things very wrong with the world, and pleading with God to change them.

Paul writes, "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (II Corinthians 10:3-5).

We pray for individuals, families, areas, people groups and entire regions. We intercede and do battle through prayer on their behalf. People need release from strongholds that keep them blinded to truth and bound to the enemy and his kingdom. "*The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God*" (II Corinthians 4:4).

#### **Binding the Strong Man**

Jesus speaks of the Enemy as a strong man who must be bound. How do we bind this strong man (Luke 11:21-22)?

Jesus gives us the power to bind the Enemy (Matthew 16:19 and 18:18).

- Bind the strong man through prayer. Declare, in the name of Jesus Christ and by His power, that you bind the spirit afflicting the person or people. Declare that you break its power, and release the Holy Spirit to work freely for God's good purposes. Be specific and name people, regions, or areas.
- Declare truth about the Enemy's defeat and destruction.
- Believe by faith that the Enemy is bound and commit the person or people to God. Do not give up believing.
- Pray for the removal of things that keep people and even people groups from God. Pray that lies and false teachings be torn down. Pray for deliverance from the love of this world and the lust of the flesh. Pray God will grant repentance and forgiveness.
- Pray Jesus will draw individuals and peoples to Himself and out of bondage to sin, death, and Satan. Pray God will remove obstacles so that they may worship Him. Pray that the Word of God is known to be truth, and that Jesus is known as the revelation of God.
- Let the Holy Spirit teach you how to pray. For focused prayer, ask Him to reveal to you specific spirits of evil and specific areas of bondage under which the enemy holds people.

- Keep alert so that you do not also fall into sin or temptation. "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall" (II Corinthians 10:12).
- Be persistent in fighting the enemy. Keep praying.

Praying is a way of declaring there are things very wrong with the world, and pleading with God to change them.

Use prayer as a strategy to push forward in the battle against the Evil One and to defeat evil. Prayer is central to joining God in His purposes of restoring humanity and restoring His kingdom rule.

Prayer movements go before the spread of the kingdom among every people group. There are many ways for you and your family to labor for God's purpose by engaging in prayer for the peoples of the world.

Armed with truth about the enemy and the war, about Jesus and the power of the kingdom, and about the power Jesus gives us over evil, we can be confident and prepared for whatever trials we face.

# The Necessity of Bible Translation

The facts and statistics used in this lesson come from the following useful resources:

- Todd Johnson's article "World Christian Trends, Update 2007" published in the Lausanne World Pulse online magazine, August 2007 (www.lausanneworldpulse. com).
- The Joshua Project Database of people groups (<u>www.</u> <u>joshuaproject.org</u>).
- The June 2000 issue of Mission Frontiers entitled "The State of World Evangelization" (<u>www.</u> <u>missionfrontiers.org</u>).
- Facts about the progress of Bible translation today come from Wycliffe Bible Translators (<u>www.</u> wycliffe.org).

The **Bible** is the written truth of the **Great Story**. Men and women from Adam and Eve until our own day pass along the story and eventually write it down for everyone to read.

The authors of the books of the **Bible** write the stories in their own languages. Over time, men or women who know more than one language translate the **Bible**.

An important work in progress is the translation of the **Bible** so others can know the truth of the **Great Story** in a language they understand. Today there are almost 7,000 languages. About 400 language groups have the whole **Bible** in the language they best understand. Many groups have only parts of the **Bible**. Over 2,000 groups have none of the **Bible** translated into their language.

Since God uses His Word to tell His story and to communicate with us, it is very important for us to hear, read or know His Word in a language we understand well.

It is also important for all peoples to understand God's love for them, their culture and their language. Many years ago, when a **sent-out disciple** named Cameron Townsend visited a people group in Guatemala, he learned they believed God does not speak their language. They believed this because the only **Bible** they knew about was in a different language. However, God knows every language and wants His story known in every people group, in every language.

An important work in progress is the translation of the Bible so others can know the truth of the Great Story in a language they understand.

The task of translating the **Bible** requires much time and hard work. It is not a simple process of replacing the words in one language with words in another language. Translating the **Bible** correctly requires an excellent understanding of culture so that people understand the message.

This means a word for word translation is not possible. For example, the prophet Isaiah says our sins will be white as snow or wool (Isaiah 1:18). How do you translate this for someone who lives in a desert, has never seen snow or wool, or does not understand that it is pure and clean? Translators must be creative and receive help from others who understand the meaning of the message and who help find a way to communicate it effectively. For example, they might replace the word "snow" with something else that is very clean and pure in that culture which makes the message clear to that people.

Translators must also choose words for "God" and "Jesus" that people understand. If they use unfamiliar words for either, it can be confusing or offensive. All languages have a word for the Most High God.

Sometimes people have an incorrect understanding of what the Most High God is like and do not understand the truth about His ways on earth. However, if translators use the word for God in the language of the people while revealing His true character and purpose, the people will understand Him better than if they use an unfamiliar or foreign word. God knows every language and wants His story known in every people group, in every language.

There are many people and organizations around the world dedicated to the task of translating the **Bible**. Wycliffe Bible Translators is one such organization. They have many workers and many years of experience. They use many resources to communicate God's Word clearly to people in a language they understand well.

Working with organizations like Wycliffe is one way you might connect with people who are spreading the kingdom around the world. We must remember the importance of the Word of God to the spread and growth of **kingdom communities** in people groups where the truth of Jesus is not yet known.

## What is God Doing in the World Today?

The Bible describes the men of the tribe of Issachar as those "...who understood the times and knew what Israel should do..." (I Chronicles 12:32). Like them, we must seek to understand our time, so that we might know what the people of God must do.

We have the privilege of seeing God's kingdom spread in the world in our own day. Current events provide unique opportunities for this, different from events at any other time in history.

Each opportunity comes with unique challenges or obstacles that we must face.

Ask God to give you understanding as you read below about five significant trends that are changing the world in our day.

## The Global Shift of God's People

For many years after the time of the apostle Paul, the majority of Jesus' followers live in the West (Europe and North America). Today, according to author Philip Jenkins in his book *The Next Christendom*, three out of every four followers now live in the **Global South** (most parts of Latin America, Africa or Asia).

Also, the people groups that do not yet know the **Good News** live mostly in the **Global South**, near the majority of Jesus' followers.

Who will be responsible for going to these peoples and sharing this **Great Story**? All God's people must be involved. It also seems God now prepares a large number of His people in the **Global South** to lead the effort to complete His **plan** to bless all peoples. Look for more about these efforts in lessons 14 and 15.

## The Age of Information

Information now spreads all over the earth at a faster rate than ever before in history. Through the Internet and mobile phone technology, we connect to many people very quickly. We also get more information for our daily life, for business, for farming or for education.

We can even keep up with the daily life of people on the other side of the world. Information is both easier to access and harder to hide.

Our way of life is different from previous generations because of new information technology. We do business differently. We farm and trade differently. We fight wars differently. We work differently to see change in our community.

Communication has also changed. More people can read than ever before. There are more opportunities to give messages to those who cannot read by way of television, radio and film.

Like the Roman road system in Jesus' day, in our day God uses the Internet and global connections as a way for His **Good News** to spread quickly to many peoples of the world it has not reached before.

These changes bring both benefits and challenges for God's people. Some benefits are that we are better informed, better connected with others, and better equipped to reach those with the **Good News** who are far from us. We are challenged to be careful to use information cautiously. We must work harder than ever to guard our speech and conduct in every area, so that nothing we say or do can become a cause for offense to others who hear our message. We must be more careful than ever to state our message clearly.

Information technology has a potential to be used for great good or for great evil. We must strive to use it to communicate the **Good News** in both what we say and in what we do.

We must seek to understand our time, so that we might know what the people of God must do.

#### The Increased Interaction Among Peoples

People move and travel all over the world more quickly and easily than ever before. Different people groups are interacting with each other. Foreign ideas and opportunities are more available, especially to young people. Our children often select careers and lifestyles very different from ours.

The West sends its products and services east, and the East sends its students and ideas west. As different people groups come face to face, they change and adapt. Some change completely. Some change only on the surface. Some clash and resist change. Some appreciate change. Some make changes they later regret.

God's people must understand these things. We must understand that people

seek to preserve their own traditions. We must understand those who desire to break from the past and adopt the traditions of another people group.

These changes are important because they affect how the **kingdom of God** becomes real and grows inside a people.

God's people also have new opportunities to reach many other peoples by interacting with students, migrants, or other foreigners now living among them.

There are Somalis in the United States, Filipinos in the Middle East and Latinos in India. When the **kingdom of God** spreads to communities in our midst, they go on to share Jesus with their own people in other parts of the world.

We know God's **plan** is for His people to go to bless other peoples. We also praise Him for bringing many peoples to us.

#### **Social Awareness**

People all over the world show increased concern and now take action to make society better. There is awareness of injustice and of new ways to bring about change.

Local and international organizations work to combat many evils including disease, corruption and oppression. They work through governments, faith groups and businesses. They might use the Internet or work with local leaders.

God's people must recognize that many of these people are working toward the kind of restoration that pleases Him. God wants evil and rebellion destroyed and He invites His people, in His strength, to join Him in this.

We must work together with those who are pursuing the same **purpose** that God pursues.

#### **Rise of Cities**

Today there are more people living in cities than there are people living in rural areas. There are more than twenty-five cities with populations over 10 million. This is a major historical change that is changing global economics and politics.

Sometimes men or young people leave their families in rural areas and move to the city to find work. In the cities there are shortages of jobs and housing. Government services are not prepared to help so many people at the same time. There are new problems to face.

Families are separated, creating many serious problems for wives, children, and for men living alone and far away. There

are many homeless young people in cities because they are away from their families and unable to afford housing. There are many older people living in rural areas with no one to care for them as they age because sons or daughters move away.

We must think about how we, as God's people, might meet the challenging problems raised by this trend. Part of the solution is strengthening the relationships within families and households. This is important for the individuals, for family groups, and for the spread of the kingdom.

As we consider these changes and others like them, we seek to understand the times in which we live and know what God might have us do. Appendix D - Additional Articles