THE CONNECT SERIES

GOD



Outrageous Love

Ten 30-minute stops on the way to knowing you are loved.

A personal and small-group study of God's love, truth and presence

THE CONNECT SERIES

GOD

Connecting with His Outrageous Love

Ten chapters, 30 minutes each

by Ralph Ennis, Judy Gomoll, Dennis Stokes and Christine Weddle



© 2006 by Ralph Ennis. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, in any form or by any means, without written permission from the author or publisher.

Content development team: Ralph Ennis, Judy Gomoll, Dennis Stokes and Christine Weddle. **Original cover and interior design:** Christine Weddle. **This edition:** adapted for younger readers, with shorter chapters, plain language and new images.

Special thanks go to Sara Wevodau, Paul Steinke and the Navigator students and staff who field-tested the original material, and to the young adults whose honest questions shaped this edition.

Some of the stories in this book are true to life and are used with the permission of the people involved. All other stories are composites of real situations, and any resemblance to people living or dead is coincidental.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Other translations are credited where they appear.

INSIDE

Your ten stops

Each chapter starts with a question you may already be asking. Each one takes about 30 minutes.

GOD REACHES OUT			
1	**Initiating Love** *Who makes the first move?*	God always goes first. You don't have to get it together before He shows up.	1
2	**Longing for Love** *Do I deserve it?*	You were made to need love. Find out why you can't earn it, and don't have to.	12
YOU BELONG			
3	**Being Adopted** *Where do I belong?*	Through Jesus, God makes you part of His forever family. You are wanted.	24
4	**Loving God** *Can I even like Him?*	If God feels harsh or far away, there is another way to see Him.	36
YOU HEAR AND ANSWER			
5	**Listening to God** *Does He speak?*	He does. Learn the ways He talks and how to tune in.	47
6	**Speaking to God** *Does He listen?*	Bring Him the real you, with every feeling. He is paying attention.	57
YOU CAN TRUST HIM			
7	**Determining What's True** *How can I know?*	So many voices claim to be right. Here is how to sort out what is real.	65
8	**Becoming Convinced** *Who can I trust?*	Jesus says He is the Truth. See why that is worth betting your life on.	72
YOU LIVE IT OUT			
9	**The Holy Spirit** *How does He help?*	God doesn't just save you and leave. He moves in and gives real power.	79
10	**Worshiping God** *Is it more than music?*	Everyone worships something. Discover worship that fits your whole life.	86
AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK			
	Celebrate your group *Look back, look ahead, say thanks and pray together.*		93
	Why memorize Scripture? and ten memory verses *One verse for each chapter.*		94–95
	The Connect series, About the authors *What to study next, notes and sources.*		96–97



WELCOME

You were wanted before you did anything

You live in a loud, fast, connected world. You can message anyone, anywhere, in seconds. And still, a lot of people your age feel alone in it. You can see the whole world on your phone and quietly wonder: Does anyone really know me? Does God?

Here is the good news. Jesus said God is not far away or hard to please. He is a Father who loves you, and He is the one who reaches out first.

This study calls that love **outrageous**, and we mean it. It is over the top. God loves you before you clean up your life. He loves you when you doubt Him. He loves you when you walk away. Most of us have never been loved like that, so it can feel too good to be true.

> **WHAT THIS STUDY IS, AND ISN'T**
>
> - **It is** ten short chapters about who God is, how He loves, and what that means for you.
> - **It is** a place for honest questions. Doubt is welcome here.
> - **It isn't** a test. Nobody is grading you, and there are no right answers to impress anyone with.
> - **It isn't** a to-do list for earning God's approval. You already have it.

You can work through it on your own, with a friend, or in a small group. If you get stuck or a question hits a sore spot, that's okay. Skip it, come back later, or talk it through with someone you trust.

HOW IT WORKS

Think of each chapter as a short trip

Every chapter follows the same path, so after the first one you will know what to expect. You stop four times along the way. A timer helps: the whole trip is about 30 minutes.

4 min	9 min	5 min	8 min	4 min
THE STORY	PAUSE 1 · Explore	PAUSE 2 · Be honest	PAUSE 3 · Respond	PAUSE 4 · Move

The story	A short, true-to-life story to get you thinking. Some are real, and some are composites of real situations.
Pause 1 *Exploring what God says*	You look at what the Bible actually says. Most verses are printed for you, so you don't have to hunt. Nothing beats opening your own Bible too.
Pause 2 *Exploring your reality*	You get honest about where you are right now, and how you got there. No one has to see your answers.
Pause 3 *Coming alive to God*	You respond to what you've read, in prayer, in a few words, or in a creative way. This is where it moves from your head to your heart.
Pause 4 *Journeying forward*	You decide one small step to take this week, and you work on memorizing the chapter's key verse.
Digging deeper *(optional)*	Extra questions and ideas if you want more. Skip it and you won't miss anything.

ABOUT THE PICTURES

Each chapter has photos and art. They're not decoration. Take a moment to look at them and picture yourself in the scene, especially when words fall short. If an image bothers you, that's okay. Ask yourself why.

THREE HABITS

Get the most out of every chapter

1

Read slowly

Read each verse like a message meant for you. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand it.

2

Mark it up

Underline, circle, highlight, draw arrows. Make the page yours, or use your notes app.

3

Pray as you go

Not only when a question says "pray." Tell God what you're thinking, even if it's "I'm not sure about this."

Finding your rhythm. Most people finish a chapter in one 30-minute sitting. If that's too much, try three 10-minute sessions, or one Pause a day. After a chapter or two you'll find what fits your schedule.

If you're doing this in a group

A group works best when everyone feels safe. Read these agreements out loud together at your first meeting.

1. **What's said here stays here.** Don't repeat what you hear in the group to anyone outside it.
2. **Share only for yourself.** Use "I" statements. Talk about your own life, not "we" or "you."
3. **Listen, don't fix.** Skip the advice and the "me too" stories. Let each person finish.
4. **Go at your own pace.** Nobody has to share. Nobody gets pushed. Silence is okay.
5. **All feelings are allowed.** Tears, anger and quiet are all welcome. Ask before you hug or touch.
6. **God does the changing.** The group's job is to make a safe place. The Holy Spirit does the rest.
7. **Know the limits.** A group isn't therapy. If someone needs more help, encourage them to talk to a pastor, counselor or trusted adult. If someone is in danger or being hurt, tell a trusted adult right away.

> TALK ABOUT IT TOGETHER
>
> After you read these agreements, finish this sentence out loud: *"One thing I can do to help make this group a safe place is …"* Then pray together before you start.



THE STARTING LINE

Before you start

Take about five minutes. Be honest. You'll come back to this page after Chapter 10 to see what has changed.

1 Finish this sentence: *When I think about God's love for me, I feel …*

2 How sure am I that God loves me? Circle a number.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

0 = not at all *10 = completely*

3 What do I hope to get out of this study?

4 What's one question about God I'd love to have answered?

A PRAYER TO START

God, I want to know You, not just know about You. Help me be honest as I read. Show me Your love in a way I can actually feel. Amen.

IF THINGS FEEL HEAVY

If you're going through something painful, talk to a trusted friend, pastor, counselor or parent. If you're thinking about hurting yourself, call or text **988** (the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline in the U.S.), or call **911** if you're in immediate danger. You matter, and you don't have to carry it alone.

Ready? Turn the page to Chapter 1: Initiating Love

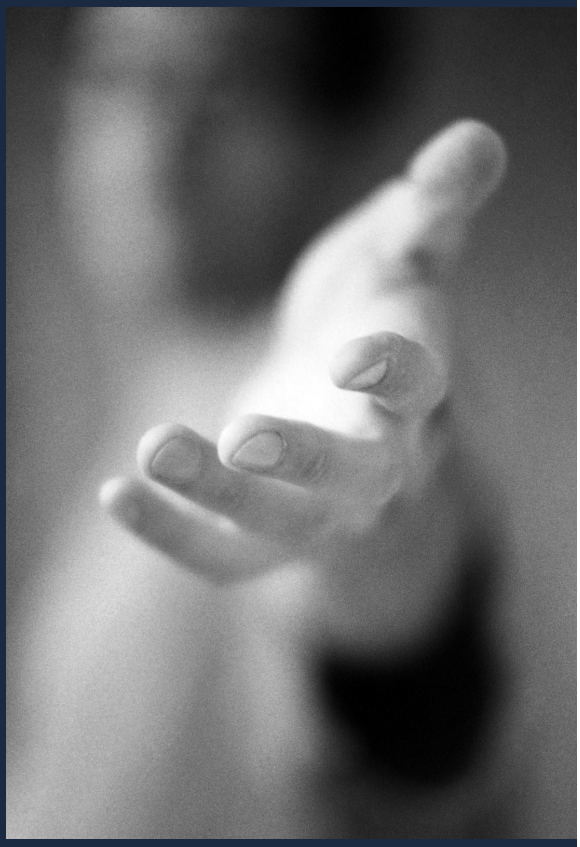
GOD: CONNECTING WITH HIS OUTRAGEOUS LOVE

CHAPTER 1

Initiating Love

Who makes the first move?

About 30 minutes



THE BIG IDEA

God always makes the first move. You don't have to earn His attention, chase Him down, or clean yourself up first. He already reached out. Your part is to respond.

YOUR 30 MINUTES

4 min	9 min	5 min	8 min	4 min
THE STORY	PAUSE 1 · Explore	PAUSE 2 · Be honest	PAUSE 3 · Respond	PAUSE 4 · Move

Grab a pen (or open a notes app) and set a timer. Short on time? Answer the questions that matter most to you and skip the rest. Honest beats fast.

BY THE END OF THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL

- **Explain** who makes the first move in your relationship with God.
- **Name** one thing that makes it hard for you to receive love.
- **Say** Zephaniah 3:17 from memory, and reply to God in your own words.

KEY VERSE

The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing. **Zephaniah 3:17 (NIV)**

START HERE

A short story

4 min

Waiting for someone to text first

Picture this. It's an imagined scene, but you may know it well.

It's almost midnight. You're in bed with your phone six inches from your face. Your friends' group chat is blowing up. Everyone is laughing about something you missed.

You type, Wait, what happened? Then you delete it. You type something else. Delete that too. Finally you set the phone face-down on your chest.

You're not sure they want you in the conversation. So you wait. Maybe someone will reach out to you first.

Most of us know that feeling. Reaching out is risky. The person who goes first might get ignored, laughed at, or left on read. So we hold back and protect ourselves.

Here's the surprising idea behind this whole chapter: **with God, you are not the one taking the risk. He is.** He reached out first. And He is still reaching.

A true story: the skeptic on the sidewalk



Illustrative photo

> *"He is not dead. He is alive. You will know He is alive when you meet Him."*
>
> A street preacher in Madras, India, speaking to a university student

Shankar was a university student in Madras, India. He was a Hindu, and he was a deep thinker. One day on a crowded sidewalk, he stopped to listen to a team of street preachers. One of them was talking about "meeting Jesus Christ."

Shankar thought, How can you meet someone who died 2,000 years ago?

It was as if the preacher heard him. "He is alive," the man said. "He will release you from the relentless struggle with guilt, shame, and the pursuit of perfection."

Shankar pushed back. "But I am not a Believer. I am a Hindu."

"I was a Hindu before I met Him," the preacher answered. "What He did for one Hindu, He will do for another."

So Shankar knelt down right there on the sidewalk. But he set a test. If Jesus did not make a real, measurable change in him, he would reject Jesus, just as he had already rejected 360 million Hindu gods. He told no one. He wanted to see if the change was real enough for someone who wasn't expecting it to notice.

A week later, his roommate noticed. Shankar seemed free from habits that used to control him. "You are changed!" the roommate said. "You see it?" Shankar asked. Then he smiled. "It must be Jesus. I met Him!"

That roommate, Samuel Kamaleson, later wrote this story down. Shankar had led him to Jesus too.

Notice who really moved first. Shankar thought he was making the first move when he knelt down. But Jesus was already moving toward him, through a singing street team on an ordinary afternoon.

Source: Samuel Kamaleson, Pray!, Jan–Feb 1998.

> **JESUS IS READY TO MEET ANYONE**
>
> **Anyone. Anywhere. Any time.** He always takes the first step because He loves you and wants what is best for you. Your part is to say yes to His invitation.

PAUSE 1

Exploring what God says

9 min

> **HOW TO READ**
>
> Slow down. Read each passage twice. Underline words that jump out. Write in the margins, or in a notes app. Your group won't talk about every question, so think about each one first.

Is He really alive?

> **HEBREWS 7:24–25 (NIV)**
>
> *but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.*

Q1 How sure are you that Jesus is alive today? Circle one.

1 (not at all) 2 3 4 5 (completely)

Passage A: When did God love us?

> **ROMANS 5:6–8 (NIV)**
> *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*



Q2 Circle the words still and while. Did God show His love after we cleaned up our act, or before? Why does that matter?

Passage B: Who goes first?

> **1 JOHN 4:10, 19 (NIV)**
> *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*
>
> *We love because he first loved us.*

Q3 In your own words, who goes first in this relationship? What is left for us to do?

Passage C: What does He say to you?

God spoke these words to people who felt abandoned. About 700 years before Jesus, the nation of Israel was in big trouble. Many thought their struggles proved God had stopped loving them. They were wrong.

ISAIAH 43:1–4 (THE MESSAGE)

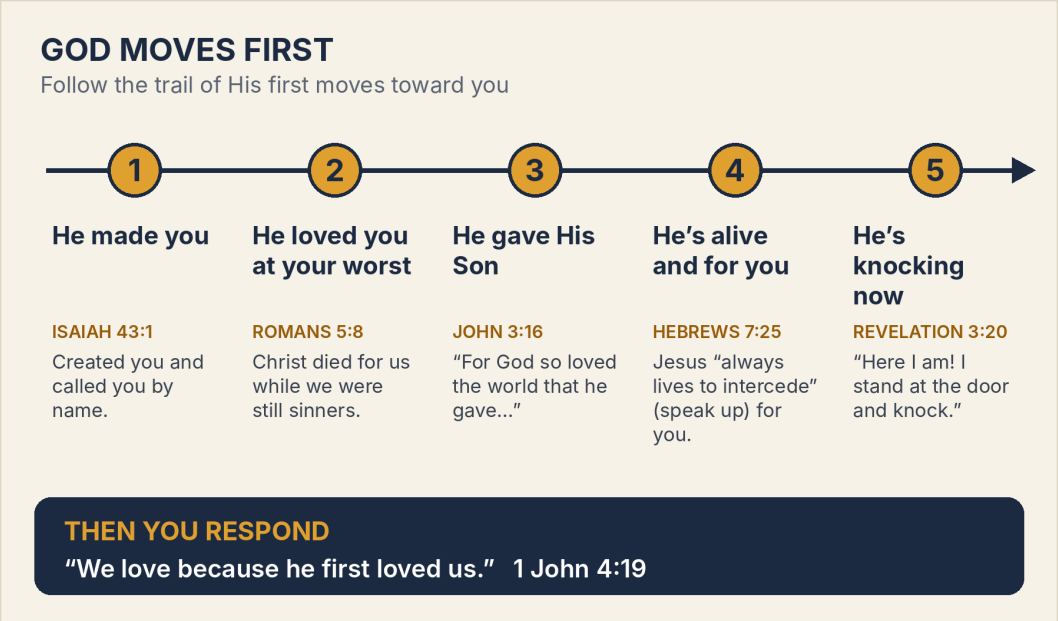
"Don't be afraid, I've redeemed you.
I've called your name. You're mine.
When you're in over your head, I'll be there with you.
When you're in rough waters, you will not go down.
When you're between a rock and a hard place,
it won't be a dead end—
Because I am God, your personal God…
I paid a huge price for you…
That's how much you mean to me!
That's how much I love you!"

Try this: Read it out loud. Replace every "you" with your own name, or say "me." Whisper it once. Then say it like you mean it.

Q4 Which line do you most need to hear today? Copy it here and say why.

Put it all together

Here are God's first moves from these passages and a few more. Notice that every arrow points toward you.



PAUSE 2

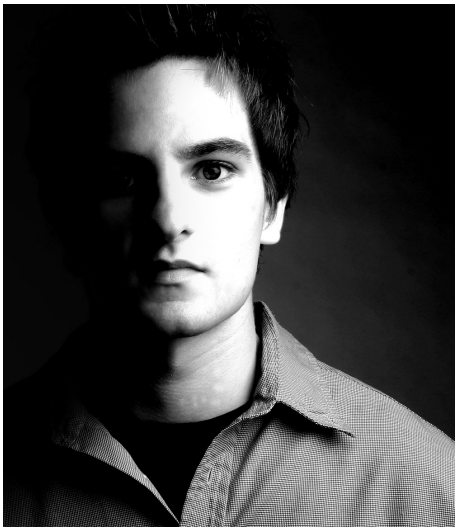
Exploring your reality

5 min

Why is love so hard to receive?

Knowing that God reached out first is one thing. Letting it sink in is another. Most of us have a hard time receiving love we didn't earn, and our world doesn't help. Likes, streaks, and followers teach us that attention has to be earned. Look at the difference:

LOVE WE'RE USED TO	GOD'S FIRST-MOVE LOVE
Earned. You get it for your grades, looks, game, or posts.	**Given.** He moved toward you before you did anything.
Conditional. Mess up and it can disappear.	**Unconditional.** "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."
Public. It's counted in likes, views, and followers.	**Personal.** "I've called your name. You're mine."
Fragile. People get busy, ghost you, or change their minds.	**Steady.** "When you're in over your head, I'll be there with you."



LOVE BLOCKS

Which of these make it hard for you to receive love? Check any that feel true.

- ☐ I don't trust it. What's the catch?
- ☐ I've been hurt before, so I keep my guard up.
- ☐ I know I don't deserve it.
- ☐ If you really knew me, you'd back away.
- ☐ I'm afraid of what you'll expect from me.
- ☐ I don't want to get too close or too committed.
- ☐ I'm used to earning love with grades, looks, sports, or likes.
- ☐ Other: _____

Q5 Which block is loudest right now? Where do you think it came from?

Q6 Be honest: do you believe God *likes* you, not just loves you because He has to? What makes that easy or hard to believe?

SOMETHING TO CHEW ON

"If you get convinced from the top of your cap to the soles of your slip-ons that your Abba loves, cares, and yes! LIKES you, you'll start experiencing a calm and tender compassion for yourself that changes—well, everything."

Brennan Manning and Jim Hancock, Posers, Fakers and Wannabes. (Abba is an affectionate word for "Dad.")

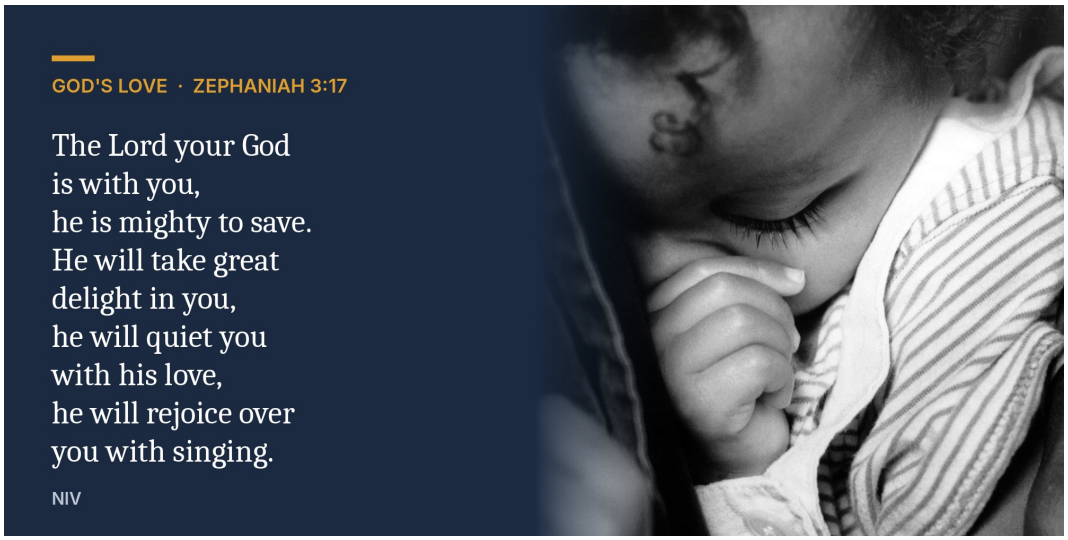
PAUSE 3

Coming alive to God

8 min

Keep one verse with you (5 min)

Memorizing a verse gives God fresh words to speak into your day: on the bus, before a test, at 2 a.m. Nobody is grading you. The goal is to let the truth sink in. Here is your verse for this chapter.



Phone tip: On a computer, right-click the card and save it. Set it as your lock screen so you see it every day.

HOW TO MEMORIZE IT

1. Say the topic, the reference, and the first line out loud three times: “God’s love, Zephaniah 3:17. The Lord your God is with you.”
2. Add the next line, “he is mighty to save.” Say everything so far out loud again.
3. Keep adding one line at a time until you can say all five lines. Go slowly and think about what each line means.
4. Cover the verse and write it from memory below. Check it word for word.

Why this works: one line at a time, out loud, slowly, and repeated.
Write the verse from memory:

THINK ABOUT IT

- **“With you.”** God isn’t far away. He’s next to you on the bus, in class, and in your room tonight.
- **“Delight in you.”** He doesn’t just put up with you. He enjoys you.
- **“Rejoice over you with singing.”** The Creator of the universe sings about you.

Text God back (3 min)

When someone reaches out first, the natural thing is to reply. So reply. Three sentences is plenty, and it doesn’t have to sound religious. You could start with one of these:

- *God, when I think about You reaching out first, I feel…*
- *Thank You for…*
- *Honestly, I’m not sure about…*

IF YOU’VE NEVER SAID YES TO JESUS

You can do it right now. You don’t need special words, but this prayer can get you started:

> *Jesus, thank You for reaching out to me first. I believe You are alive and that You love me. I’m sorry for the ways I’ve pushed You away. I say yes to Your love. Come into my life and make me new. Amen.*

If you prayed that for the first time, tell a trusted Christian friend, pastor, or group leader today. That is your next step. Not ready? That’s okay. Keep going. Honest questions are welcome here.

PAUSE 4

Journeying forward

4 min

1 JOHN 2:6 (NIV)

Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.



God moved first. Now it's your turn to move.

Remember the group chat? Jesus said, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you" (John 15:12). Since God didn't wait for you, you don't have to wait for others. **Pick one move for this week.**

- ☐ **Receive.** Say Zephaniah 3:17 out loud each morning, maybe right when your alarm goes off.
- ☐ **Reach out first.** Text or talk to one person you've been waiting to hear from, or someone who might feel left out.
- ☐ **Share.** Tell one friend or leader something you learned today.
- ☐ **Pray.** Set aside five minutes a day this week just to say thanks to God.

My move this week:

The person I'll ask to check in with me:

JOURNAL (CHOOSE ONE)

A Look back on your life. Where can you see God's fingerprints, even small ones, showing love to you? Think of a person, a moment, a song, or good timing.

B What touched you or bothered you most in this chapter? Why do you think it did?

> **CLOSE IN PRAYER**
> *Lord, You moved first. Thank You. Help me trust that You like me, and show me one way to walk like You this week. Amen.*

✓ You made it. That's 30 minutes well spent.

OPTIONAL · NOT PART OF YOUR 30 MINUTES

Digging deeper

MEDITATE ON JOHN 3:16

You may know this verse by heart. Read it slowly, one phrase at a time. Pause on each "greatest" and thank God for it.

For God	**The greatest Lover**
so loved	**The greatest degree**
the world	**The greatest crowd**
that he gave	**The greatest act**
his one and only Son,	**The greatest gift**
that whoever	**The greatest invitation**
believes	**The greatest simplicity**
in him	**The greatest person**
shall not perish	**The greatest deliverance**
but	**The greatest difference**
have	**The greatest certainty**
eternal life	**The greatest possession**

John 3:16 (NIV)

FOR GROUP CONVERSATION

1. If you're comfortable sharing, which "love block" did you check? (Share only what you want to share.)
2. What changes for you if God really does move first?
3. Who is one person you could reach out to first this week?

Scripture quotations marked NIV are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Scripture marked The Message is from THE MESSAGE, copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved.

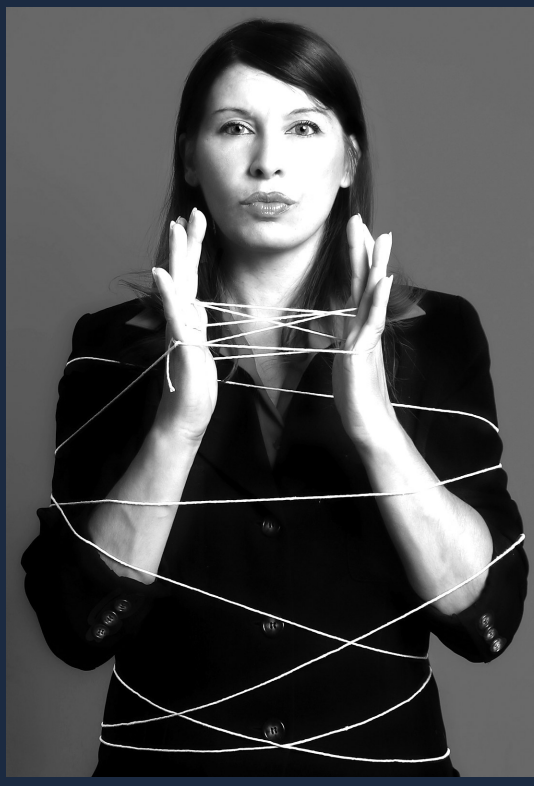
GOD: CONNECTING WITH HIS OUTRAGEOUS LOVE

CHAPTER 2

Longing for Love

Do I deserve it?

About 30 minutes



THE BIG IDEA

You were made to need love, and God's love isn't something you earn. That also means it's not something you can lose. You don't have to deserve it. You only have to receive it.

YOUR 30 MINUTES

4 min	9 min	5 min	8 min	4 min
THE STORY	PAUSE 1 · Explore	PAUSE 2 · Be honest	PAUSE 3 · Respond	PAUSE 4 · Move

Grab a pen (or open a notes app) and set a timer. Short on time? Answer the questions that matter most to you and skip the rest. Honest beats fast.

BY THE END OF THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL

- **See** why your need for love is built in, and why that is not weakness.
- **Spot** where you've been looking for love instead of going to the source.
- **Hear** the Father's welcome in the story Jesus told about a lost son.
- **Say** Ephesians 2:4–5 from memory.

KEY VERSE

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. **Ephesians 2:4–5 (NIV)**

START HERE

A short story

4 min

The question under the question

Picture this. It's an imagined scene, but you may know it well.

You spent twenty minutes picking the right photo. Right light. Right caption. You post it. Then you check. Then you check again. Fourteen likes. Twenty-two. The one person you hoped would notice hasn't.

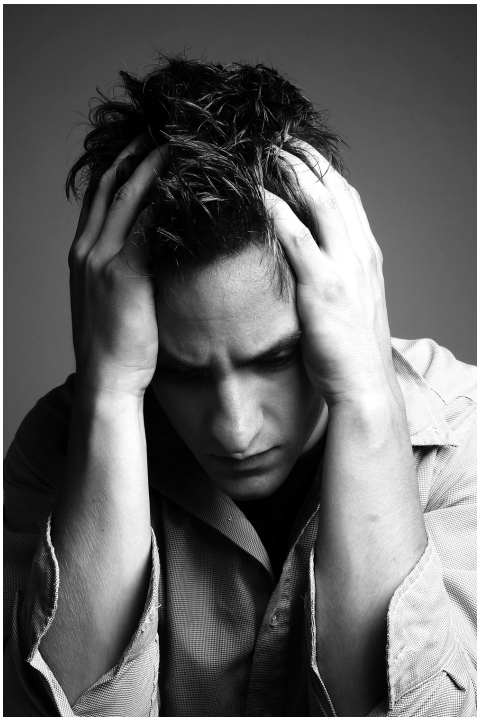
It's not really about the photo. Underneath is a question most of us never say out loud: **If people saw the real me, the unedited one, would they stay?**

That question has a twin: **Do I deserve to be loved?** We ask it when we get left out, when we fail a class, when we hurt a friend, or when we're lying awake at 2 a.m.

You're not strange for asking. You were made to need love. It's one of the deepest longings a person has.

A true letter

Here is part of a real letter from a young Russian man named George, written shortly after the fall of Communism. His English isn't perfect, but he says out loud what many of us feel. (A few lines are left out.)



Illustrative photo

Hello Dear friends!

Here I am, George. I am 22, that is very many years. But I don't know why I live. What is this life for? … I need any love. I feel tragedy everywhere. I feel soul my pain.

Who is God? Do I really need to Him? I'm tired. Afraid. I can't anymore be waiting happiness. …

I hope hear from you soon. Don't keep me waiting.

Best wishes, George

No sense in life. Tired. Afraid. I need any love. George was 22, maybe close to your age. We all reach for love to give life meaning, especially when life is hard. But is there really enough love out there to quiet a heart like his, or yours?

Q1 Why do you think the need for love is so universal and so urgent? What happens to people who don't get enough of it?

IF YOU'RE STRUGGLING

If George's words sound like you right now, please don't carry it alone. Tell a trusted adult or friend today. In the U.S., you can call or text **988** (the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) any time, day or night. If you are in danger right now, call 911. Outside the U.S., search online for your local crisis line.

HERE'S WHERE WE'RE HEADED

God has more than enough love. And He offers it without asking you to earn it first.

PAUSE 1

Exploring what God says

9 min

A lost son and a running father

It's one thing to know in your head that God loves you. It's another thing to feel it. Jesus told a story to help us feel it. Read slowly, mark what stands out, and notice your emotions as well as the facts.

The set-up (Luke 15:11–16, summarized). A man had two sons. The younger one said, "Father, give me my share of the estate." He left for a faraway country and wasted it all. Then a famine hit, and he ended up feeding pigs, so hungry he envied their food.

LUKE 15:17–20 (NIV)

When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.'

So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

> **LUKE 15:21–24 (NIV)**
>
> *The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'*
>
> *But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.*

The older brother (Luke 15:25–30, summarized). The older son heard the party and got angry. He said he had been "slaving" for his father for years and never even got a young goat to celebrate with his friends. His father came out and said:

> **LUKE 15:31–32 (NIV)**
>
> *'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'*

When you have time, read the whole story in your Bible: Luke 15:11–32.

Q2 What does each person in the story teach you about giving or receiving love?

The younger son:

The older son:

The father:

Q3 Who do you identify with most right now: the son who left, the son who stayed and kept score, or the father? Why?



Engraving: the father's welcome

> *"…while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."*
>
> Luke 15:20 (NIV)

What this story meant in Jesus' day

Jesus' first listeners heard things we can miss. Scholar Kenneth Bailey, who studied Middle Eastern village life for decades, helps us see them.

THE STORY SAYS…	IN ITS DAY THIS MEANT…
"Father, give me my share of the estate." (v. 12)	A son got his inheritance only when his father died. Asking early was like saying, *I wish you were dead.* The father was expected to explode. Instead he gave his son the freedom to leave, even the freedom to walk away from love.
"…while he was still a long way off, his father saw him… he ran." (v. 20)	Respected older men did not run. This father had been watching the road. He ran, even though it humiliated him, to reach his son before the village could shame and shun him. His public kiss said, *This boy is mine.*
The older brother's anger. (vv. 28–30)	He thought he had earned his father's love by working hard and obeying. But love you earn is love you can lose. This love was a gift, so it could not be lost. He missed that the party was never about him. It was about his father's love.

Insights based on Poet and Peasant by Kenneth E. Bailey (Eerdmans).

And the gifts the father gave were no accident. Each one sent a message the whole village could read:

WHAT THE FATHER GAVE BACK

Each gift sent a message the whole village could read



ROBE

You belong.

Accepted back into the community



RING

You're trusted.

Given the family's authority again



SANDALS

You're a son.

Free, not a hired servant



FEAST

You're welcome.

Restored to good standing

Q4 Now that you know more of the story, what new thing do you notice about how your Father in heaven feels about you?

PAUSE 2

Exploring your reality

5 min

Where do you look for love?

Maybe you're thinking, Okay, I guess God loves me, but… Being told you're loved isn't the same as feeling loved. Love has to be trusted before it can be received. Start with a quick check. Which of these are true for you?

- ☐ I can freely admit that I need love.
- ☐ Needing love makes me feel weak or vulnerable.
- ☐ I can accept love when someone offers it.

NEEDS AREN'T WEAKNESS

God made you with needs so you could experience being loved. Needs feel risky because they make us vulnerable, and you will never outgrow them. That's not a flaw. That's the design.

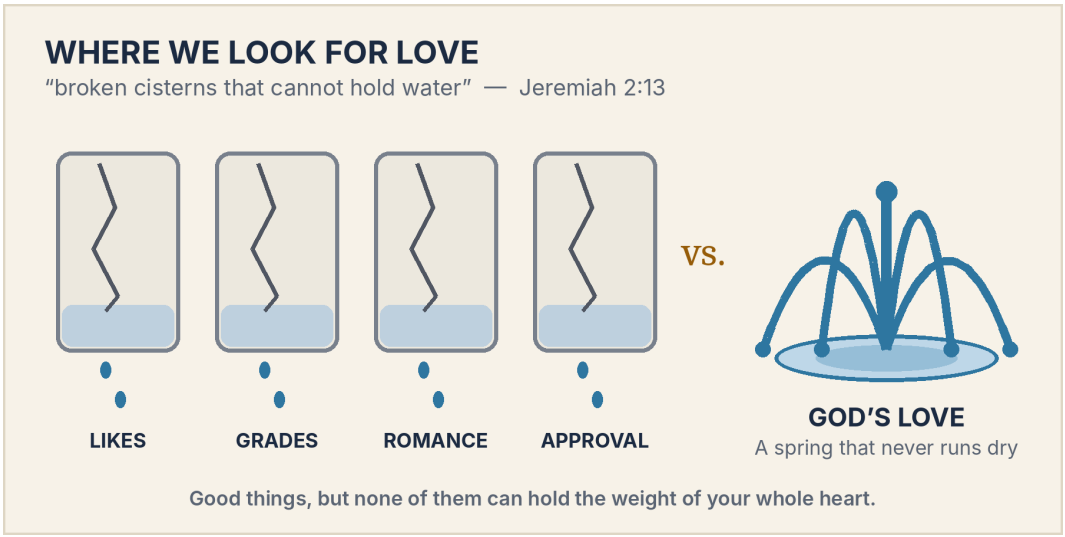


When our needs go unmet, we go looking. The prophet Jeremiah described it this way:

JEREMIAH 2:13 (NIV)

My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.

A cistern is a tank for storing water. A broken one leaks.



WHERE I'VE LOOKED FOR LOVE

Check any that fit. None of these are bad in themselves. They just can't carry the weight of your whole heart.

- ☐ Likes, followers, and views
- ☐ A romantic relationship
- ☐ Grades, sports, or achievements
- ☐ How I look
- ☐ Pleasing people or being needed
- ☐ Escapes like scrolling, gaming, or partying
- ☐ Other: _____

Q5 Which of these have you tried? What happened?

SOMETHING TO CHEW ON

"I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found. Why do I keep ignoring the place of true love and persist in looking for it elsewhere?"

Henri Nouwen, The Return of the Prodigal Son

Q6 Love can only be received as far as it is trusted. How safe do you feel with God? Circle one, then say what would help.

1 (not safe) 2 3 4 5 (very safe)

PAUSE 3

Coming alive to God

8 min

When it hurts: "God, where were you?"

Almost everyone feels rejected or let down at some point. Maybe it was a friend, a parent, or a breakup. Maybe something painful happened that never should have. It's okay to ask God where He was. The Bible has whole prayers that ask exactly that.

> **PSALM 13:1–2, 5–6 (NIV)**
> *How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart?*
>
> *But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me.*

Q7 Finish this sentence as honestly as you can: "God, where were you when…"

You don't have to fix or explain it today. Being honest with God is a form of trust.

Nothing can separate you

Most relationships don't last forever, even ones that start out loving. So how does God's promise compare? Read these slowly.

> **HEBREWS 13:5 (NIV)**
> *…God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'*

In the original Greek, this promise piles up negatives to say "never, ever."

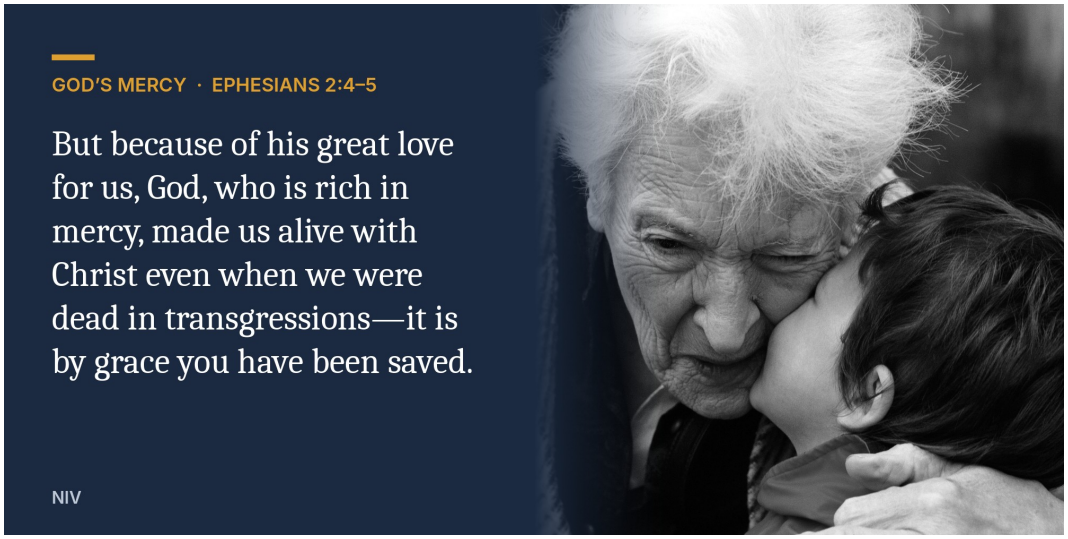
> **ROMANS 8:35, 37–39 (NIV)**
> *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? … No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*
>
> *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither 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.*

Try this: Read the Romans passage out loud. Swap "us" for "me."

Q8 How does it feel to hear that *nothing* can separate you from God's love? Does it feel too good to be true? Why?

Hold on to one verse (3 min)

Your verse for this chapter is about God's mercy. Mercy means not getting the punishment we deserve.



Phone tip: On a computer, right-click the card and save it. Set it as your lock screen.

1. Say the topic and reference out loud, then the first half three times: "God's mercy, Ephesians 2:4–5. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy…"
2. Say the second half three times: "…made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved."
3. Put both halves together. Then cover the verse and write it from memory below.

Write the verse from memory:

THINK ABOUT IT

- **"Rich in mercy."** God's love isn't rationed. It overflows.
- **"Even when we were dead."** He moved first (Chapter 1), when we had nothing to offer.
- **"By grace."** Grace is a gift. You can't earn it, so you can't lose it.

PAUSE 4

Journeying forward

4 min

> **1 JOHN 2:6 (NIV)**
> *Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.*



Love the way you've been loved

When you really feel God's love, it spills over. Everyone feels loved in different ways. People often call these "love languages," an idea made popular by Gary Chapman. Check your top two:

- ☐ Words of affirmation
- ☐ Quality time
- ☐ Thoughtful gifts
- ☐ Acts of service
- ☐ Affectionate touch
- ☐ Expressions of beauty

Q9 Who could you love this week in the way that speaks to *them*? Write their name and what you'll do.

JOURNAL (CHOOSE ONE)

A God's love is like… Finish the sentence your own way. (F. B. Meyer wrote, *"God's love is like the Amazon River flowing down to water one daisy."*)

B In the story of the lost son, where do you most need to hear the Father's voice this week?

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father, I've tried to earn love in a lot of places. Thank You that Yours is a gift. Help me trust that I can't lose it, and show me one person I can love this week. Amen.

✓ You made it. That's 30 minutes well spent.

OPTIONAL · NOT PART OF YOUR 30 MINUTES

Digging deeper

IS GOD'S CORRECTION REALLY LOVE?

God's love makes you feel valued and secure. It also helps you live well, and that can include training and correction. Here is how two writers describe it:

PROVERBS 3:11–12 (NLT)

My child, don't ignore it when the Lord disciplines you, and don't be discouraged when he corrects you. For the Lord corrects those he loves, just as a father corrects a child in whom he delights.

HEBREWS 12:5–7 (THE MESSAGE)

My dear child, don't shrug off God's discipline but don't be crushed by it either. It's the child he loves that he disciplines; the child he embraces, he also corrects.

God is educating you; that's why you must never drop out. He's treating you as dear children. This trouble you're in isn't punishment; it's training, the normal experience of children.

IMPORTANT

Training is not abuse. If the discipline you grew up with was harsh, humiliating, or hurtful, that was never God's heart, and it's not His picture of a Father. If that's part of your story, consider talking with a trusted pastor, counselor, or mentor.

1 How did correction feel in your home growing up? How might that shape how you hear "God disciplines those He loves"?

2 Of all the responses to God's love in this chapter, which one would you like to express to Him this week? Why?

FOR GROUP CONVERSATION

1. Which person in Jesus' story do you see in yourself? (Share only what you want to share.)
2. Where do people your age look for love besides God?
3. What would change if you really believed you couldn't lose God's love?

Scripture quotations marked NIV are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Scripture quotations marked NLT are from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved. Scripture marked The Message is from THE MESSAGE, copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved. Henri Nouwen quotation from The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming (Image Books/Doubleday, 1994), p. 43. George's letter and the Kenneth Bailey insights are from the original study.

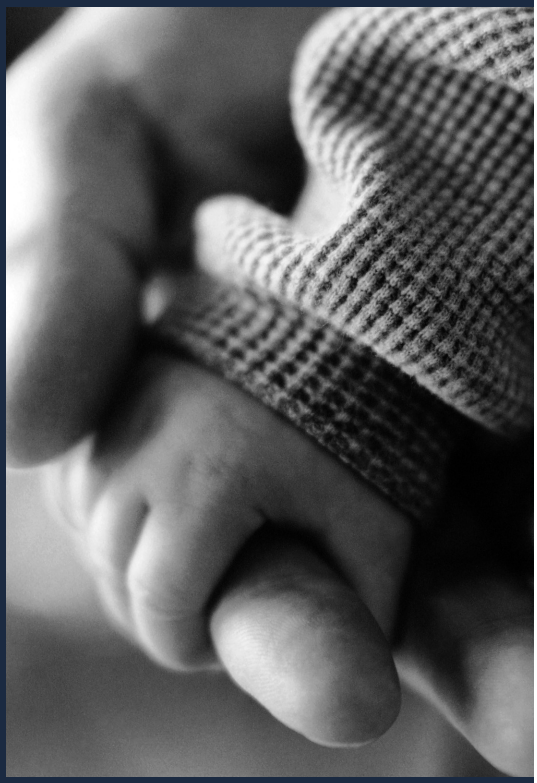
GOD: CONNECTING WITH HIS OUTRAGEOUS LOVE

CHAPTER 3

Being Adopted

Where do I belong?

About 30 minutes



THE BIG IDEA

You don't have to earn a place in God's family. He chose you on purpose. Through Jesus, God adopts you as a full member with a full inheritance, and that doesn't expire.

YOUR 30 MINUTES

4 min	9 min	5 min	8 min	4 min
THE STORY	PAUSE 1 · Explore	PAUSE 2 · Be honest	PAUSE 3 · Respond	PAUSE 4 · Move

Grab a pen (or open a notes app) and set a timer. Short on time? Answer the questions that matter most to you and skip the rest. Honest beats fast.

BY THE END OF THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL

- **Name** what it feels like to be chosen, and what it feels like to be left out.
- **See** that God has been adopting people since the beginning of the Bible.
- **Learn** what changes when you become God's child.
- **Say** Ephesians 1:5 from memory.

KEY VERSE

In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will. **Ephesians 1:5 (NIV)**

START HERE

A short story

4 min

Does anyone save me a seat?

Picture this. It's an imagined scene, but you may know it well.

It's your first day somewhere new: a new school, a new job, a new dorm. You walk into the cafeteria holding a tray. Every table looks full. Everyone seems to know exactly where they're going.

You scan the room for one open seat, one face that looks up and nods. Nobody does. So you do what most of us have done. You pull out your phone and pretend to be busy.

Underneath that moment is a question: **Where do I belong? Is there a place that's actually mine?**

We all want to be picked: for the team, the group chat, the friend circle, the family table. And we remember, sharp as a bruise, the times we weren't.

A true story

Writer Anne Lamott tells about a woman at her church who stood up one Sunday to explain how she and her husband had adopted their little boy. They went through an agency for children who are hard to place. Before they could adopt, they had to fill out a long form. It asked things like:



Illustrative photo

> *Could you adopt a baby born addicted to drugs?*
>
> *A child with a serious illness?*
>
> *A child with a disability?*
>
> *A child who has been hurt so badly that he might lash out at others?*

She checked yes to every question, and then she cried. Her friend Veronica stepped up beside her and said, "God is an adoptive parent too. And He chose all of us." Lamott's own take (in our words): God loves the person at their meanest as much as a sweet newborn. So of course He loves ordinary, scared, petty, messed-up me.

Jesus is ready to take anyone. Not just the best-behaved, the most talented, or the most put together. He takes those who say yes.

Q1 What does it feel like to be left out? What does it feel like to be chosen? Think of a real moment.

Q2 What do you know about adoption, from your own life or from someone you know?

IF ADOPTION OR FOSTER CARE IS PART OF YOUR STORY

This chapter may stir up strong or mixed feelings. Adoption can be beautiful and painful at once, and both can be true. Go at your own pace. Skip anything that feels too heavy, and consider talking it through with a trusted friend, pastor, or counselor.

HERE'S WHERE WE'RE HEADED

God doesn't just love you from a distance. In the Bible, He adopts. And He does it on purpose.

PAUSE 1

Exploring what God says

9 min

God has been adopting people from the start

The Bible often pictures God as a parent who adopts. In the Old Testament, His adopted "child" is the nation of Israel, the descendants of Abraham. Like a lot of families, theirs was rocky. As you read, mark every way God makes the first move (remember Chapter 1) and how Israel responds.



Engraving: Israel rescued from slavery in Egypt

> *"...you are a people holy to the Lord your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession."*
>
> Deuteronomy 14:2 (NIV)

But Israel kept drifting. Here is how God described it:

DEUTERONOMY 32:18 (NIV)

You deserted the Rock, who fathered you; you forgot the God who gave you birth.

> **HOSEA 11:1–4 (NIV)**
> *When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more they were called, the more they went away from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images.*
>
> *It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them.*

Ezekiel 16 (summarized). God pictures Israel as a newborn left in a field to die, unwanted. Then God walks by and sees her:

> **EZEKIEL 16:6 (NIV)**
> *Then I passed by and saw you kicking about in your blood, and as you lay there in your blood I said to you, 'Live!'*

God cares for her and clothes her, and she grows up and forgets who gave her everything. The chapter gets very graphic later on. You can read it in your Bible, but you don't need it for today.

Q3 Fill in the chart. One row is done for you.

PASSAGE	GOD'S LOVING MOVE	ISRAEL'S RESPONSE	HOW GOD FELT
Deuteronomy 14	Chose Israel out of all the nations	Was meant to live as His holy, set-apart people	Saw them as His treasured possession
Hosea 11			
Ezekiel 16			

Q4 What stands out to you about how God treats His children, even when they walk away?

The adoption gets bigger

Maybe you're thinking, What does Israel's story have to do with me? Here's the surprise. In the New Testament, God's family is open to everyone who comes to Him through Jesus. Read slowly, and notice what Jesus has to do with it.

ROMANS 8:14–17 (NIV)

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

Abba is an everyday, close word for "father." An heir is someone who receives the family inheritance. "Sonship" means the full rights of a child, for women and men alike.

Paul says this was God's plan long before you were born, and that it gave Him pleasure to do it (Ephesians 1:3–7). Then John adds how a person joins the family:

JOHN 1:12 (NIV)

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

Q5 From these passages, how does someone become part of God's family? Why do you think Jesus is necessary?

Q6 How is being adopted into a human family like being adopted by God? How is it different?

WHEN THE PICTURE IS HARD

Adoption and family can be painful in real life. If a "father" is a hard word for you, that makes sense, and Chapter 4 takes it on directly. For now, notice that God's promise to stay doesn't depend on anyone's track record, including yours.

PAUSE 2

Exploring your reality

5 min



Which heart are you living from?

Here's a hard truth: you can be adopted and still live like an orphan. Plenty of us do. We know the facts, but we act like we're on probation. Look at the two pictures below.

TWO WAYS TO LIVE

Same person. Different picture of who you are to God.

THE ORPHAN HEART		THE CHILD'S HEART
"I have to earn my spot."	→	"I was chosen before I did anything."
"I hide the real me."	→	"I can come out of hiding."
"I'm afraid of being left."	→	"I can call Him Abba: Dad."
"What's His isn't mine."	→	"Everything He has is mine too."

Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:7 say the second column is who you are in Christ.

Check any that sound like you lately:

- ☐ I feel like I have to earn my place, with God or with people.
- ☐ I hide parts of myself so nobody sees the real me.
- ☐ I'm afraid people (or God) will leave if they really know me.
- ☐ I feel like an outsider in my family, friend group, or church.
- ☐ Sometimes I feel safe enough to just be me.

Q7 Which column describes you more days than not? What makes you say that?

Q8 Be honest: if you were a perfectly holy God, would you adopt someone like you? Why do you think God does?

> **SOMETHING TO CHEW ON**
>
> *Writers Brennan Manning and Jim Hancock say that no amount of spiritual makeup makes us more presentable to God. He takes us "as is" and says, in effect, "I've been looking for you!"*
>
> Paraphrased from Posers, Fakers, and Wannabes

Q9 If you could ask your Father one question about belonging in His family, what would it be?

PAUSE 3

Coming alive to God

8 min

Who you are now

Being God's child connects you to a brand-new family, one that is wide and diverse and doesn't depend on your résumé. Read these two passages and mark every word that describes your new identity.

GALATIANS 4:5–7 (NIV)

…to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

1 JOHN 3:1 (NIV)

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!



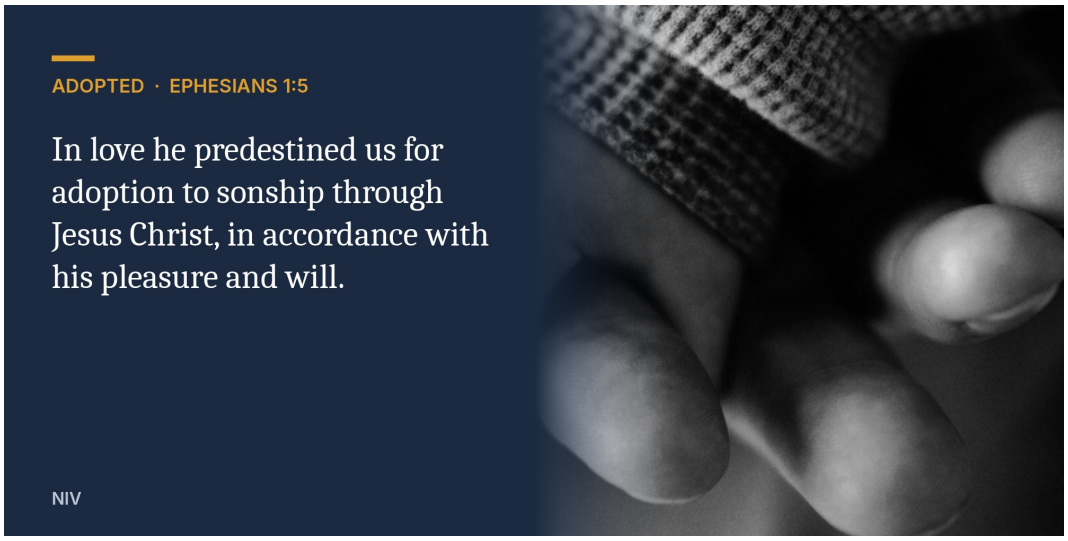
Illustrative photo. Family is the ones who stay close in the hard moments.

Q10 What are some "family traits" and privileges of God's children in these verses? Look for words like *heir*, *Spirit*, *Abba*, and *no longer a slave*.

Q11 What does it mean to you that you belong in God's family forever? Tell Him in your own way: a prayer, a line from a song, a quick sketch.

Hold on to one verse (3 min)

Your verse for this chapter is about being adopted. A person adopted in Bible times got every right a biological child had, including the inheritance.



Phone tip: On a computer, right-click the card and save it. Set it as your lock screen.

1. Say the topic and reference out loud, then the first half three times: "Adopted, Ephesians 1:5. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship…"
2. Say the second half three times: "…through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will."
3. Put both halves together. Then cover the verse and write it from memory below.

Write the verse from memory:

THINK ABOUT IT

- **"In love."** Adoption wasn't Plan B. Love came first (Chapter 1).
- **"Predestined."** God planned ahead. He had you in mind before you did anything good or bad.
- **"Adoption."** You get the full rights of a child, not the leftovers.
- **"His pleasure."** It made God happy to do it. You're not a burden to Him.

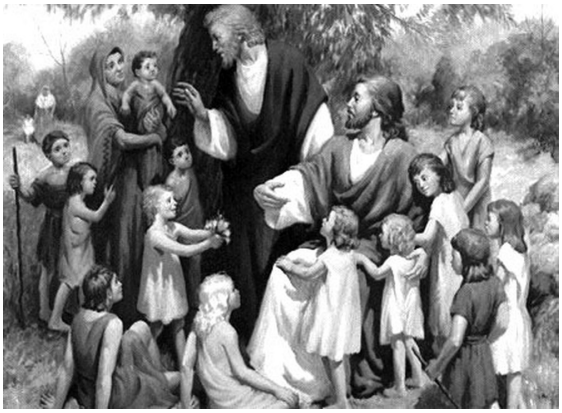
PAUSE 4

Journeying forward

4 min

1 JOHN 2:6 (NIV)

Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.



Jesus welcomes children (painting)

Because you were welcomed, welcome someone.

"Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." *Romans 15:7 (NIV)*

Q12 Who around you might feel like an outsider: a new student, a coworker, someone sitting alone? What is one way you can make room for them this week?

JOURNAL (CHOOSE ONE)

A What does it do to my heart to know I was chosen on purpose?

B Which verse from this chapter do I most need to hear this week? Write it here, then say why.

YOUR RESPONSE

Check the one that's closest to where you are:

☐ I'm still thinking about whether I want to be part of God's family. That's okay.

☐ I've already been adopted into God's family, and I'm grateful.

☐ I'd like to say yes to God today.

If that last one is you, you can pray something like this, in your own words:

God, I know I can't earn my way into Your family. Thank You for sending Jesus to take my place. Please forgive me. I want to be Your child. Thank You that You promised to take me in. Amen.

Then tell someone you trust: a friend, pastor, or mentor. The Digging deeper page explains more.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father, thank You for choosing me on purpose. Help me stop living like an orphan and start living like Your child. Show me one person I can make room for this week. Amen.

✓ You made it. That's 30 minutes well spent.

OPTIONAL · NOT PART OF YOUR 30 MINUTES

Digging deeper

HOW DO I JOIN GOD'S FAMILY?

The Bible says our core problem is a relationship problem. We're far from God, not because He walked away, but because of our own choices. Here's the short version.

The gap. We all fall short of the standards we expect from other people, let alone God's. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Inside, a voice often says, I'm bad. I don't deserve to be loved. The problem isn't only what I did. It's who I am. So we hide, and hiding leaves us lonely.

God's plan. Relationship problems need relational solutions. Before time began, God planned to bring us home through Jesus. Jesus lived a perfect life, died to pay what we owed, and rose from the dead.

EPHESIANS 2:8–9 (NIV)

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.

YOUR PART	GOD'S PART
Admit you can't make yourself good enough. Ask for forgiveness. Trust that Jesus is the one who stands between you and God. You don't have to clean yourself up first.	He keeps His promise. He forgives, adopts you as His child, and loves you without limit. He doesn't need you to be perfect first.

The invitation is open, and you can say no. Many people have, not because they were unqualified but because they were unwilling. To say yes, use the prayer on your Pause 4 page or put it in your own words.

BUT CAN I TRUST THIS GOD?

It's a fair question. Is God distant or harsh? Does He just let suffering happen? The Bible describes Him as powerful, kind, honest, merciful and holy, and as someone who feels your pain and loves you fiercely. Chapter 4 digs into that.

1 If you're still thinking about being adopted into God's family, what do you think and feel about it right now?

2 If you've been adopted, how might God want to use you to encourage someone who is still considering? (Pray for them, serve them, share your story.)

FOR GROUP CONVERSATION

1. Share a time you felt chosen, or a time you felt left out. (Share only what you want to.)
2. Which column of "Two ways to live" is the hardest for you to believe about yourself?
3. Plan a time when members can share their stories of how they came to belong to God's family.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Adoption story: Anne Lamott, Traveling Mercies (Pantheon, 1999), paraphrased. Manning and Hancock idea: Posers, Fakers, and Wannabes (NavPress, 2003), paraphrased. Both are from the original study.

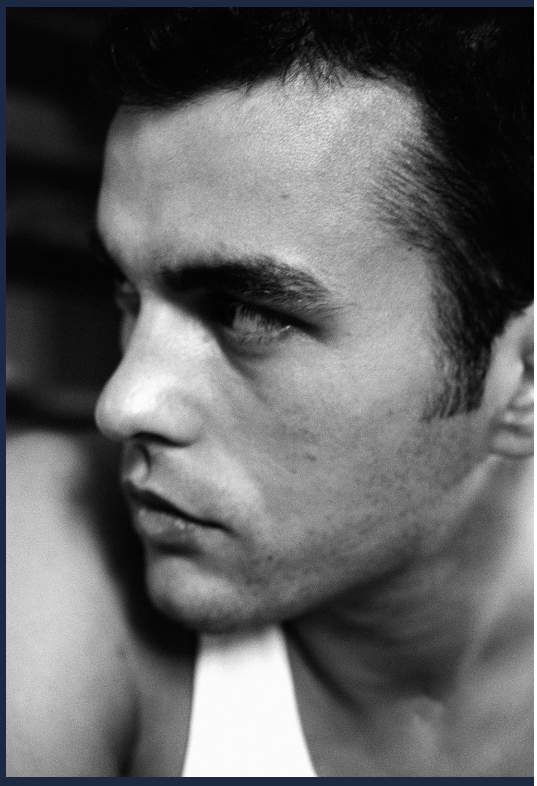
GOD: CONNECTING WITH HIS OUTRAGEOUS LOVE

CHAPTER 4

Loving God

Can I even like Him?

About 30 minutes



THE BIG IDEA

You can't force yourself to love God, and you don't have to. He loves you first, and He gives you what you need to love Him back. That love starts with honesty, even when what you feel is anger or doubt.

YOUR 30 MINUTES

4 min	9 min	5 min	8 min	4 min
THE STORY	PAUSE 1 · Explore	PAUSE 2 · Be honest	PAUSE 3 · Respond	PAUSE 4 · Move

Grab a pen (or open a notes app) and set a timer. Short on time? Answer the questions that matter most to you and skip the rest. Honest beats fast.

BY THE END OF THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL

- **Name** what has made it hard to like or love God.
- **See** what loving God looked like for people in the Bible.
- **Practice** being honest with God, including the angry and hidden parts.
- **Say** Matthew 22:37–38 from memory.

KEY VERSE

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. **Matthew 22:37–38 (NIV)**

START HERE

A short story

4 min

Stuck between "I should" and "I can't"

This is a composite, based on real situations.



Illustrative photo

Josh is 22. His parents split when he was eleven, and he's been angry ever since. His dad was brilliant at business and absent from almost everything else.

Now Josh has a good job and a girlfriend, Mia, who's talking about the future. But he's terrified he's turning into his dad. Every time Mia brings up the future, he changes the subject.

And somewhere in the back of his mind is a bigger question. Where was God when all this happened? If He really loves me, why did He let it hurt so much?

"How can I like a God like that," Josh says, "let alone love Him?"

Maybe you've been where Josh is. Maybe you've never said it out loud. The good news is that the Bible doesn't ask you to fake it. **Loving God isn't something you can squeeze out by trying harder.** It starts when God loves us first (Chapter 1) and gives us the ability to love Him back.

Q1 Think of a time someone made the first move to show love to you. How did you respond? What shaped that response?

Q2 Imagine God filled you with all the love your heart could hold. What would change in your life?

HERE'S WHERE WE'RE HEADED

You don't have to earn the right to love God. You get to learn to like Him, one honest conversation at a time.

PAUSE 1

Exploring what God says

9 min

What does loving God look like?

A religious expert once tried to trap Jesus with a question: What's the most important commandment? Read His answer slowly.

> **MATTHEW 22:37–40 (NIV)**
>
> *Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*

The Message puts it this way: love God with all your "passion and prayer and intelligence."

Q3 Why do you think these two commandments matter more than all the others?

One man who loved God with all of that was King David. He wrote songs, fought battles, and made huge mistakes, and the Bible still calls him a man after God's own heart. Here are parts of one of his prayers. Mark whatever shows you David's heart for God.

> **PSALM 27:4, 8, 10 (NIV)**
>
> *One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.*
>
> *My heart says of you, "Seek his face!" Your face, Lord, I will seek.*
>
> *Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me.*

Q4 From what you marked, how would you describe "having a heart for God"?



Illustrative photo. Liking someone means enjoying their company.

A crowd that loved God

David wasn't the only one. Here are other people who loved God. In the right column, put what you notice in your own words. The first one is done.

VERSE (NIV)	WHAT IT SHOWS ABOUT LOVING GOD
PSALM 63:3 *Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you.*	God's love is worth more than anything, even life itself. Loving Him means valuing His love above everything else.
PSALM 73:25 *Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.*	
JAMES 4:8 *Come near to God and he will come near to you.*	
1 PETER 5:7 *Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*	

Q5 Which verse is closest to where your heart is right now? Why?

Q6 When do you simply *like* being with Jesus? What gets in the way of that?

TRY THIS (ABOUT 30 SECONDS)

David loved to think about how beautiful God is. Don't write anything. Just pause and think about what's good about God. Then tell Him one thing you see in Him that you like.

PAUSE 2

Exploring your reality

5 min

When it's hard to like Him

Not liking God usually comes from misunderstanding Him, and a lot of that misunderstanding comes from what we've lived through. If you've ever been angry or disappointed with God, you're in good company. Many of the psalms are full of exactly that.



Illustrative photo: "Stay out."

A four-year-old asked his babysitter why Mommy and Daddy work so much. "So you can have this nice house," she said.

"If we had a small house," he asked, "would they spend more time with me?"

Sometimes we hold back love because the people who should have been there weren't. That can color how we picture God.

Check any that sound like you. “God, where were You when…”

- ☐ my parents split up
- ☐ someone I loved died
- ☐ a tragedy on the news hurt innocent people
- ☐ a relationship ended
- ☐ an injury or illness wrecked my plans
- ☐ someone who should have protected me didn’t
- ☐ I was rejected, or lost something I’d hoped for
- ☐ Other: _____

Q7 How have these experiences affected your love for God? Have you been disappointed or angry with Him?

Q8 Is any part of your life “off limits” to God, something you’ve kept shut out on purpose or without realizing it?

> **GOD CAN HANDLE YOUR HONESTY**
>
> He would rather have you come close with your pain than keep Him at a polite distance (James 4:8). There is no feeling you’re not allowed to bring to Him. If something happened to you that was never okay, that’s not your fault. Please talk with a trusted counselor, pastor, or adult. If you ever feel unsafe or in crisis, call or text **988** (U.S.), or **911** for an emergency.

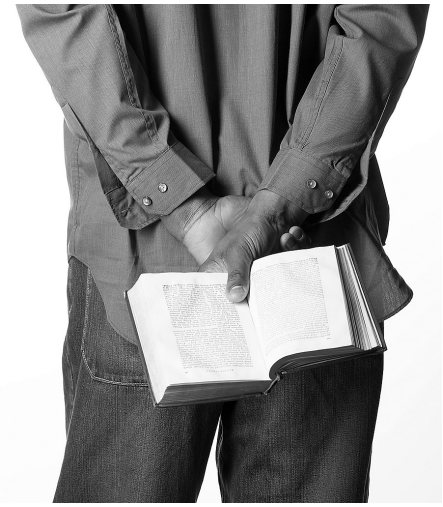
PAUSE 3

Coming alive to God

8 min

Come into the light

A real friendship can’t run on masks. Some people say, “If you really love someone, you never have to say sorry.” Jesus wouldn’t agree. Loving God honestly means being willing to face what’s wrong in us. The word for that is confession: agreeing with God about the truth. It’s not groveling, because He already knows. It’s opening the door so He can heal.



Illustrative photo: what are you holding back?

PSALM 139:23–24 (NIV)

Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

1 JOHN 1:9 (NIV)

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Q9 From these verses, what happens when we admit what's true and step into God's light?

PAUSE FOR TWO MINUTES

Ask God to bring up anything you've been hiding or holding against Him. Don't rush and don't beat yourself up. If something comes to mind, name it to Him. If you want to go deeper, see Digging deeper at the end.

Make yourself at home

We want to live with the people we love. Jesus said goodbye to His friends by asking them to stay close. Coming home to Him isn't a one-time event. It's something even older believers do again and again.

JOHN 15:9–10 (NIV)

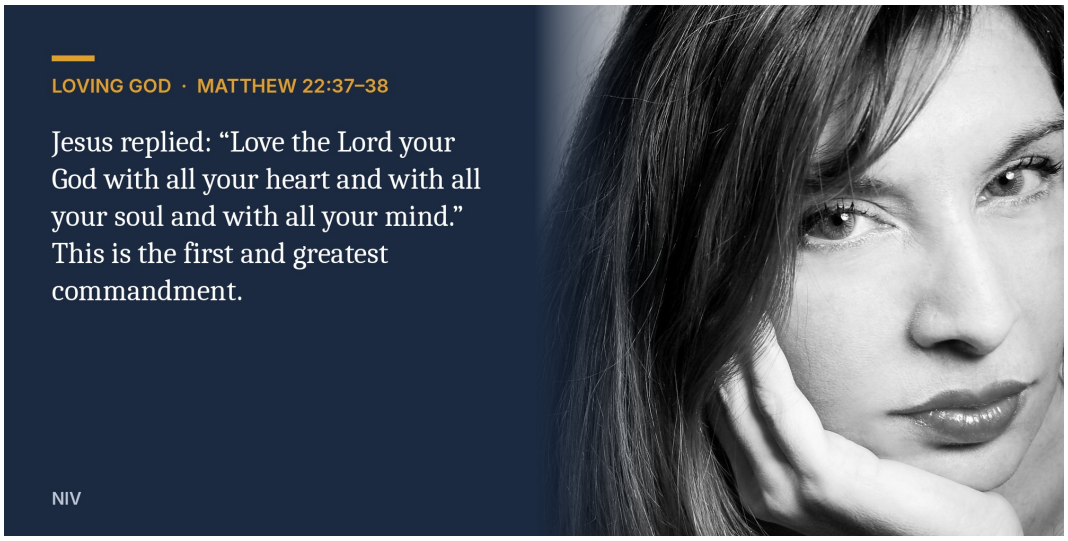
As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love.

The Message says it like this: "Make yourselves at home in my love."

Q10 What do you think it means to "remain in" or "make your home in" Jesus? What would that look like for you this week?

Hold on to one verse (3 min)

Your verse for this chapter is the one Jesus called the greatest commandment. Notice the three words: heart, soul and mind. God wants your feelings, your whole self, and your honest questions.



Phone tip: On a computer, right-click the card and save it. Set it as your lock screen.

1. Say the topic and reference out loud, then the first half three times: "Loving God, Matthew 22:37–38. Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God…'"
2. Say the second half three times: "…with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment."
3. Put both halves together. Then cover the verse and write it from memory below.

Write the verse from memory:

THINK ABOUT IT

- **Heart:** your feelings and desires, including the messy ones.
- **Soul:** your whole self and your whole life.
- **Mind:** your thinking and your questions. God can handle them.

PAUSE 4

Journeying forward

4 min

1 JOHN 2:6 (NIV)

Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

Say it your way

Bible writers only occasionally said, "I love You, God" (Psalm 18:1 and Psalm 116:1 are two). More often they showed it. Look at the five ways below. Think about how you connect best, whether that's music, writing, walking, or serving, and invite God to meet you there.

FIVE WAYS TO SAY "I LOVE YOU" TO GOD

The Bible's writers rarely said it outright. They showed it like this.

PRAISE	THANK	TRUST	SERVE	OBEY
Tell Him who He is	Tell Him what He's done	Put yourself in His care	Offer your life for His purposes	Live out what He says

Pick the one that feels most like you. You don't need all five at once.



Everyone connects differently

Try one this week:

- ☐ Praise: write or play a song, or list five things you love about God.
- ☐ Thank: text a friend one thing God has done for you.
- ☐ Trust: hand Him one worry out loud.
- ☐ Serve: do one thing for someone, and tell no one.
- ☐ Obey: do the thing you already know He's asked.

Q11 Which one will you try this week? When and how?

JOURNAL (CHOOSE ONE)

A Where do I need to be honest with God right now?

B What is one way I can show love this week, without words, to the people I live or work with?

CLOSE IN PRAYER

God, some days I don't feel love for You, and that scares me. Thank You that You don't need me to fake it. Show me what's beautiful about You, and help me bring You the parts I've kept hidden. Amen.

✓ You made it. That's 30 minutes well spent.

OPTIONAL · NOT PART OF YOUR 30 MINUTES

Digging deeper

LOVE ALSO MEANS SAYING "I'M SORRY"

King David once abused his power. He took another man's wife and then had the man killed to cover it up (2 Samuel 11). Psalm 51 is David's prayer after he faced what he'd done. It's raw, and it's a model for bringing hidden things to God.

PSALM 51:1–4, 10–12 (NIV)

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight…

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

Sin. Shame. Distrust. Dislike. Disappointment. These are the things God wants His kids to bring to Him. You have His undivided attention.

TRY THIS

- Spend a few minutes alone with God. Ask Him to show you anything you feel guilty or ashamed about.

- Pick a phrase from David's prayer that touches you, and pray it back in your own words.
- Read James 5:16 below. Is there someone safe you could tell?

> **JAMES 5:16 (NIV)**
> *Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*

> **A NOTE ABOUT SHAME**
> Confession is about specific things you did ("I lied."). Shame says "I am the problem." God forgives the first and heals the second. If shame is heavy, talk with a trusted counselor or mentor.

Ask yourself: If I leave some sin or shame hidden and off limits to God, what might that do to my closeness with Him? Who is a safe person I could talk with?

FOR GROUP CONVERSATION

1. Where have you felt disappointed with God? (Share only what you want to.)
2. What makes it easier or harder to be honest with God?
3. Which of the five ways of showing love to God feels most natural to you? Which feels hardest?

Scripture quotations marked NIV are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. The Message: copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson, used by permission of NavPress. Josh's story is a composite from the original study.

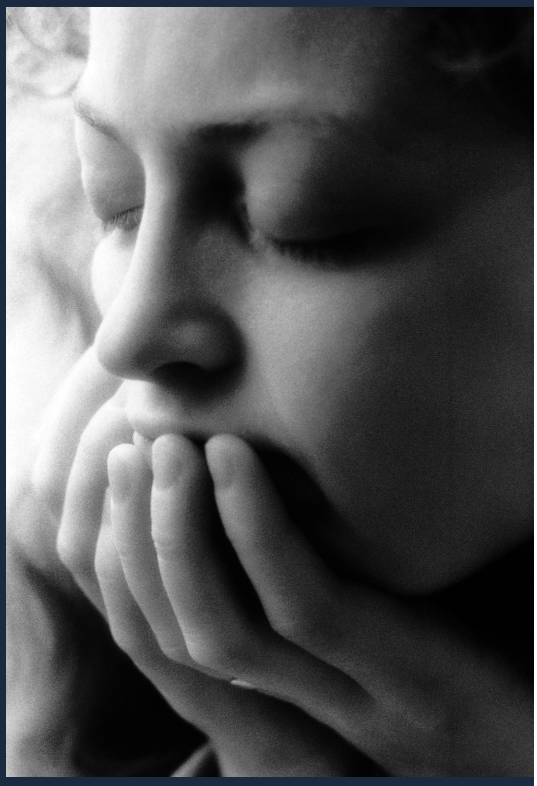
GOD: CONNECTING WITH HIS OUTRAGEOUS LOVE

CHAPTER 5

Listening to God

Does He speak?

About 30 minutes



THE BIG IDEA

God isn't silent. He has been speaking since the beginning, and He wants to talk with you. Listening is learning to recognize a voice that's usually gentle, not loud.

YOUR 30 MINUTES

4 min	9 min	5 min	8 min	4 min
THE STORY	PAUSE 1 · Explore	PAUSE 2 · Be honest	PAUSE 3 · Respond	PAUSE 4 · Move

Grab a pen (or open a notes app) and set a timer. Short on time? Answer the questions that matter most to you and skip the rest. Honest beats fast.

BY THE END OF THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL

- **See** that the God of the universe chose to speak, and why.
- **Notice** what drowns out His voice in your life.
- **Learn** seven ways God speaks, and how to test what you hear.
- **Say** Hebrews 1:1–2 from memory.

KEY VERSE

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. **Hebrews 1:1–2 (NIV)**

START HERE

A short story

4 min

Whose voice is the loudest?

Picture this. It's an imagined scene, but you may know it well.

Your alarm goes off. Before your feet hit the floor, your phone has shown you forty-one notifications. The group chat is arguing. A teacher emailed. Your mom texted. A video you didn't ask for is already playing.

By lunch you've heard from hundreds of voices: friends, strangers, brands, your own anxious thoughts. Somewhere in there, you're supposed to hear God?

It's a fair question. **If God speaks, how would I even know?**

A true-to-life story



Illustrative photo

No one had ever really listened to Linda. So when someone told her to listen to God, it felt backward. She was the one who needed to be heard. Her own thoughts and needs were so loud there wasn't room for anyone else.

And why would God need to be listened to? He's God.

At a head level she knew He deserved it. But sitting still and letting someone else talk first felt strange, and also, somehow, a little appealing.

So she decided to try: five minutes, no agenda. Linda's question may be yours. **What if the Creator of the universe has something to say to me, and the only reason I haven't heard it is that I've never made room?**

Q1 Can you remember a time you felt sure God was speaking to you? How did it come? What was it about?

Q2 What are the loudest voices in your life right now?

HERE'S WHERE WE'RE HEADED

God has chosen to reveal Himself, and most likely because He wants to be friends. Let's see how He talks.

PAUSE 1

Exploring what God says

9 min

He speaks through what He made

The most universal language God speaks is creation. Read Psalm 19 slowly and underline the words about "speech."

PSALM 19:1–4a (NIV)

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour out speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.



Illustrative photo. Creation can't be missed, if you're paying attention.

Think of creation as a symphony. Some people hear only instruments. Others who know the Composer hear meaning in the music.

Q3 What is one thing in nature that makes you think of God? What does it say about Him? (Example: there are hundreds of thousands of kinds of beetles, so God must love variety.)

He speaks most clearly through Jesus

> **HEBREWS 1:1–3 (NIV)**
> *In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.*

> **JOHN 1:14 (NIV)**
> *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

> **JOHN 6:68 (NIV)**
> *Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."*

Q4 From these passages, how has God spoken, and what is He speaking about?

How:

About what:

Q5 God could run the universe in total silence. Why do you think He chose to speak? What does that say about how much He wants a relationship with us?

PAUSE 2

Exploring your reality

5 min



Illustrative photo. So many voices, so little quiet.

Do you want to hear Him?

Q6 Do you feel that God wants to speak to you? How much attention do you give His voice? What makes you want to listen?

Sometimes God seems quiet. The prophet Amos described a "famine of hearing the words of the Lord" (Amos 8:11). If you've gone through a stretch where God felt silent, you aren't alone.

Q7 Have you had a season when God felt silent? What do you think about that?

A warning: not every voice is His

The Bible says not every spiritual voice comes from God (1 John 4:1), and that the enemy lies (John 8:44). So God warns against trying to get messages from mediums, psychics, or the dead. Today that includes things like tarot cards, Ouija boards, and astrology readings. Why? Because God wants to speak to you directly, not through a middleman. And those voices can leave people anxious, dependent, or trapped.

Q8 Have you ever tried one of these? What happened? Why do you think God is so protective?

IF YOU'VE DABBLED

You're not in trouble. Just bring it to God honestly and talk with a trusted pastor or mentor. If you feel afraid or stuck, you don't have to figure it out alone.



Illustrative photo

GOD'S INVITATION · ISAIAH 55:1–3a (NIV)

"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters… Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good… Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live."

Say it to Him if you'd like: *"Lord, I'm thirsty. I want the drink You offer."*

PAUSE 3

Coming alive to God

8 min

Tuning in

God is creative. Like friends who can talk by text, voice, or a look, He speaks in more than one way. Here are seven. In the margin, rate how often you tune in to each.

SEVEN WAYS GOD SPEAKS

Different ways, one voice. Test everything you hear against the Bible.



CREATION
What He made points to Him



THE BIBLE
His written words, read and reread



MEMORIZED VERSES
Words that surface when you need them



TEACHING
Others explaining Scripture



STUDY
Digging into what you read



THE HOLY SPIRIT
A quiet inner nudge, never against Scripture



SILENCE
Making room to be still

HOW OFTEN DO I TUNE IN?	RARELY	SOMETIMES	OFTEN	LOVE IT
Creation	☐	☐	☐	☐
The Bible (reading)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Memorized verses	☐	☐	☐	☐
Teaching from others	☐	☐	☐	☐
Bible study	☐	☐	☐	☐
The Holy Spirit	☐	☐	☐	☐
Silence	☐	☐	☐	☐

> **JOHN 10:27 (NIV)**
> *My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.*

The Bible is where you can always check what you hear. “All Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16).

WHY DOES GOD OFTEN WHISPER?

The prophet Elijah once waited for God in a powerful wind, an earthquake and a fire. God wasn’t in any of them. Then came “a gentle whisper” (1 Kings 19:12). God rarely shouts. Most of the time He speaks

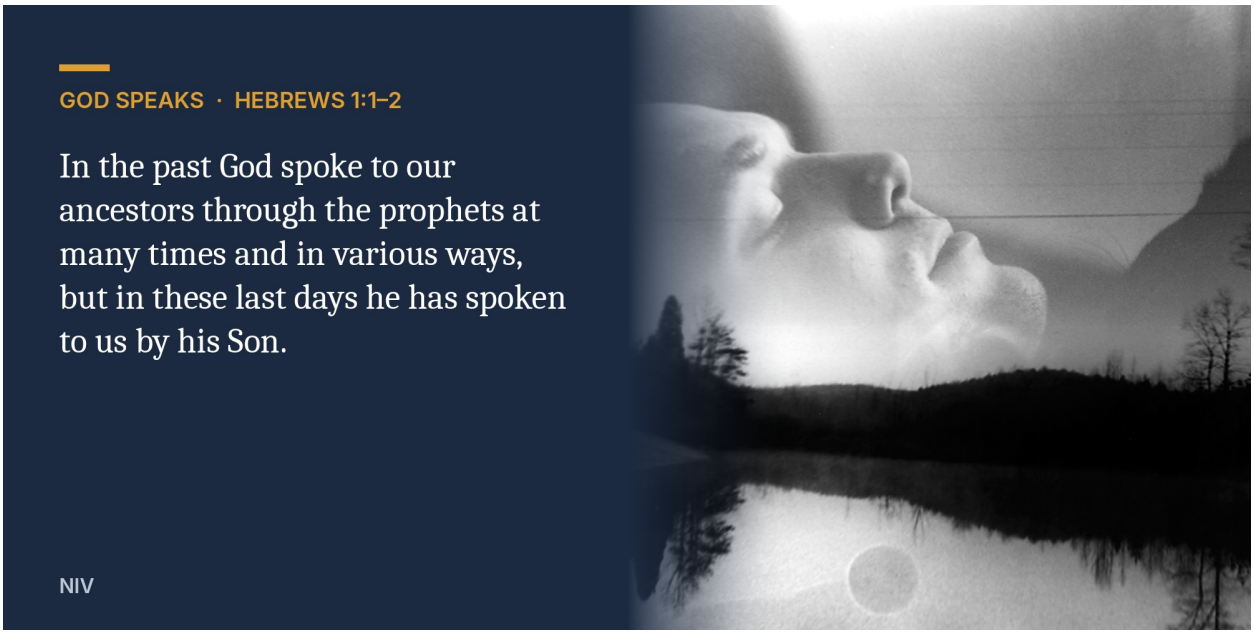
softly, like a friend sitting next to you. We miss Him because we're busy, looking in the wrong places, or listening to other voices.

Q9 Why do you think God usually whispers instead of shouting? Which of the seven ways would you like to focus on this month?

> **A CAUTION ON BALANCE**
> God never contradicts Himself. So when you sense something from the Spirit, a person, or your own heart, test it against what the Bible says (1 John 4:1). If it doesn't match, it's not from Him.

Hold on to one verse (3 min)

Your verse for this chapter says God has spoken, in many ways, and most clearly through His Son.



Phone tip: On a computer, right-click the card and save it. Set it as your lock screen.

1. Say the topic and reference out loud, then the first half three times: "God speaks, Hebrews 1:1–2. In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets…"
2. Say the second half three times: "…at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son."
3. Put both halves together. Then cover the verse and write it from memory below.

Write the verse from memory:

PAUSE 4

Journeying forward

4 min

> **1 JOHN 2:6 (NIV)**
> *Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.*

Try a 5-minute listening prayer

You don't need a special place or special words. Pick one time this week, put your phone in another room, and try this. (It isn't all about asking for things. Listening can simply be sitting with God and enjoying Him.)

1. **Get still.** Take a few slow breaths. "I have calmed and quieted myself, like a weaned child with its mother" (Psalm 131:2).
2. **Invite Him.** Say, "Come, Lord Jesus." Ask Him to guard this time (James 4:7).
3. **Ask.** "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:10). You might ask whether there's anything He wants to say about your week, your fears, or someone you love.
4. **Wait in silence** for a minute or two. Don't force anything.
5. **Write down** any words, pictures or thoughts. Later, test them against the Bible.

Q10 When and where will you try it this week? Which one of the seven ways will you focus on this month?

JOURNAL (CHOOSE ONE)

A What is God's voice like to me? Is it hard to imagine Him speaking kindly?

B What would I say if I knew He was listening right now, and then waited to hear back?

CLOSE IN PRAYER

God, thank You for speaking first. Quiet the other voices. Teach me to recognize Yours, and help me trust that You want to be heard. Amen.

✓ You made it. That's 30 minutes well spent.

OPTIONAL · NOT PART OF YOUR 30 MINUTES

Digging deeper

TOOLS FOR YOUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

These are classic habits that help people listen to God. Like a carpenter's tools, they're not meant to be used all at once. Try one for a month or two, then add another.

Read the Bible	Start with the New Testament in an easy-to-read translation (NIV, NLT, or The Message). Pick a pace you can keep. Fifteen to twenty minutes a day takes you through the New Testament in a few months.
Memorize verses	Understand it first, then learn it word for word (you don't paraphrase your phone number). Review it daily for a month. Jesus used verses He knew by heart when He was tempted (Matthew 4).
Hear it taught	Listen to sermons, podcasts, and others' experiences with God. We stand on the shoulders of 2,000 years of believers. Just remember to go back to the Bible for yourself.
Study deeper	Studying means looking for patterns and asking questions about a verse, a passage, a whole book, or a topic. Write down what you find and what you'll do about it.

A LONGER LISTENING EXERCISE (45–60 MINUTES)

Some people set aside a longer stretch once in a while. Use the five steps from Pause 4, and add one more: ask God to search your heart (Psalm 139:23–24) before you ask Him to speak. Go slowly. Write down what comes, then check it against Scripture and talk it over with someone you trust.

Ask yourself: Which tool or way of listening will I practice in the next month or two? When and how will I begin?

FOR GROUP CONVERSATION

1. What are the loudest voices competing for your attention? What helps you quiet them?
2. Share a time you sensed God speaking. (Share only what you want to.) How did you know it was Him?
3. How can a group help each other test what they hear against the Bible?

Scripture quotations marked NIV are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. The story of Linda is a composite from the original study.

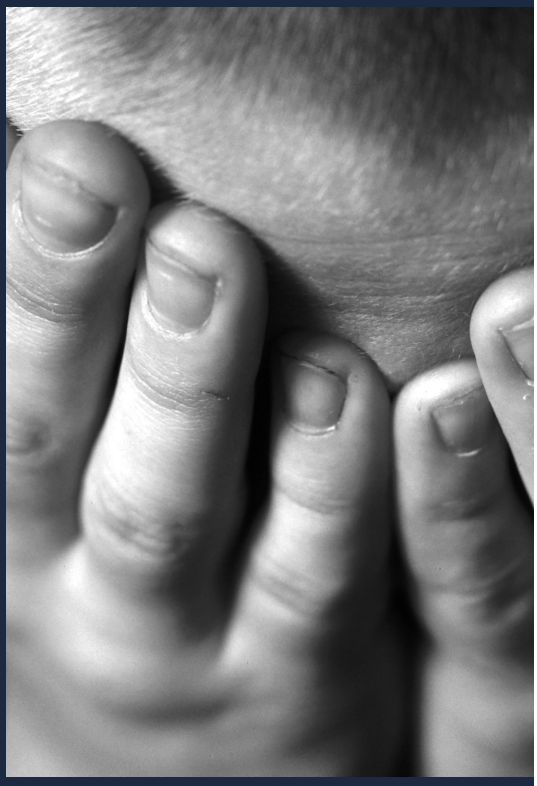
GOD: CONNECTING WITH HIS OUTRAGEOUS LOVE

CHAPTER 6

Speaking to God

Does He listen?

About 30 minutes



THE BIG IDEA

You don't need perfect words. God listens like a loving dad, not like a busy boss. He wants your honest prayers: the thankful ones, the angry ones, and the ones you can barely get out.

YOUR 30 MINUTES

4 min	9 min	5 min	8 min	4 min
THE STORY	PAUSE 1 · Explore	PAUSE 2 · Be honest	PAUSE 3 · Respond	PAUSE 4 · Move

Grab a pen (or open a notes app) and set a timer. Short on time? Answer the questions that matter most to you and skip the rest. Honest beats fast.

BY THE END OF THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL

- **See** why you can come to God with confidence, just as you are.
- **Compare** God to a distant boss and to a loving dad, and notice which one you pray to.
- **Try** five ways to pray, including the honest, messy kind.
- **Say** John 16:24 from memory.

KEY VERSE

Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete. **John 16:24 (NIV)**

START HERE

A short story

4 min

Is anyone there?

Picture this. It's an imagined scene, but it may be close to home.

It's 2 a.m. The house is finally quiet. Everyone who came to the funeral has gone home, and the casseroles are stacked in the fridge. You're lying in the dark, and you don't know what to do with the hole in your chest.

You've heard people say, "Just pray." But what do you even say? Will it matter? Is anyone there?

It's a fair question. **If God exists, does He really hear me?**

A true-to-life story



Illustrative photo

Maya was fifteen when her dad died. In the days that followed, she felt too numb to pray and too angry to try. But one night she got out of bed, sat on the floor, and said, "God, if You're there, I don't know what to say. I'm just so sad."

She didn't hear a voice. But she stayed there on the floor, and the weight lifted a little. For the first time in a week, she cried.

Over the next months she kept talking to God, often angry, sometimes silent. She began to sense He had never left the room.

Maya's story is where many of us start: **desperate, honest, and unsure anyone is listening.** The surprising news is that this is a good place to begin.

Q1 When you pray, what do you usually say? Or if you rarely pray, what stops you?

Q2 Is there something heavy on your heart right now that you've never said out loud to God?

> **HERE'S WHERE WE'RE HEADED**
>
> We'll look at what the Bible says about whether God listens, and then try praying in ways that feel more like talking to a friend than reciting a speech.

PAUSE 1

Exploring what God says

9 min

God leans in

Many people picture God as far away. But listen to how He describes Himself.

> **ISAIAH 49:15–16a (NIV)**
>
> *Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.*



Jesus praying in the garden

> **JESUS KNOWS WHAT IT'S LIKE · HEBREWS 4:15–16 (NIV)**
>
> *"We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are… Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."*

Q3 Which picture of God feels more real to you: a God who's far away, or one who leans in? What in these verses surprises you?

Jesus invites us to ask



Illustrative photo. The door isn't locked.

> **MATTHEW 7:7–8, 11 (NIV)**
>
> *"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened… how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"*

Q4 God already knows what you need (Matthew 6:8). So why do you think Jesus still tells us to ask?

PAUSE 2

Exploring your reality

5 min



Illustrative photo. Praying can feel like sitting next to someone who loves you.

Boss or Dad?

Imagine your prayers are going to a CEO. You'd book an appointment, polish your words, and keep it short. Now imagine going to a dad who is glad to see you. Jesus called God "Father," and the Bible even uses the affectionate word Abba (Romans 8:15), something like "Dad."

PRAYING TO A BOSS	PRAYING TO A DAD
Polished words. Short and formal. Only "important" requests. Keep emotions hidden.	Plain words. Take your time. Big or small, it all matters. Bring your real feelings.

Q5 When you pray, does it feel more like talking to a boss or to a dad? What makes you say that?

What if the answer isn't what I wanted?

A good dad doesn't say yes to everything. Sometimes the answer is **yes**, sometimes **no**, and sometimes **wait**. A no or a wait can hurt, especially when you're praying for healing. You're allowed to be disappointed and to ask, "Why?" God can handle it.

Q6 Think of a prayer that went unanswered, or answered differently than you hoped. How did you feel toward God afterward?

IF YOUR HEART IS REALLY HEAVY

Praying is good, and so is telling a real person. If you're grieving or thinking about hurting yourself, call or text **988** (U.S. Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) any time. In danger? Call **911**.

PAUSE 3

Coming alive to God

8 min

Five ways to pray

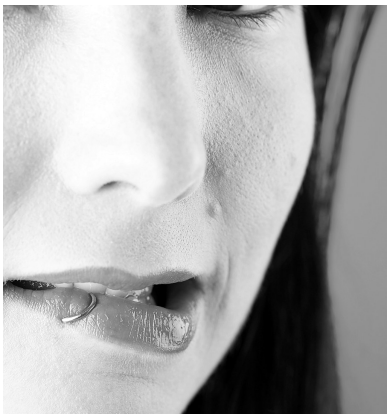
Prayer is more than a wish list. The Bible shows people praying in lots of ways. Circle the one you most need today.

FIVE WAYS TO PRAY

No script needed. Every one of these shows up in the Bible.

ASK	PRAY FOR OTHERS	COME CLEAN	POUR IT OUT	PRAISE
Tell Him what you need	Carry a friend to God	Be honest about where you missed	Bring your pain and questions	Enjoy who He is
Hannah, 1 Samuel 1	Paul, Ephesians 3	Tax collector, Luke 18	Lament psalms, Psalm 13	Psalm 100, Psalm 103

Ask. Hannah, desperate for a child, "poured out her soul to the Lord" (1 Samuel 1:15). **Pray for others.** Paul prayed that his friends would grasp how wide and deep Christ's love is (Ephesians 3:16–19). **Come clean.** In one of Jesus' stories, a man who could barely look up prayed, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner," and Jesus said he went home right with God (Luke 18:13–14).



Illustrative photo

POUR IT OUT · PSALM 13:1–2, 5–6 (NIV)

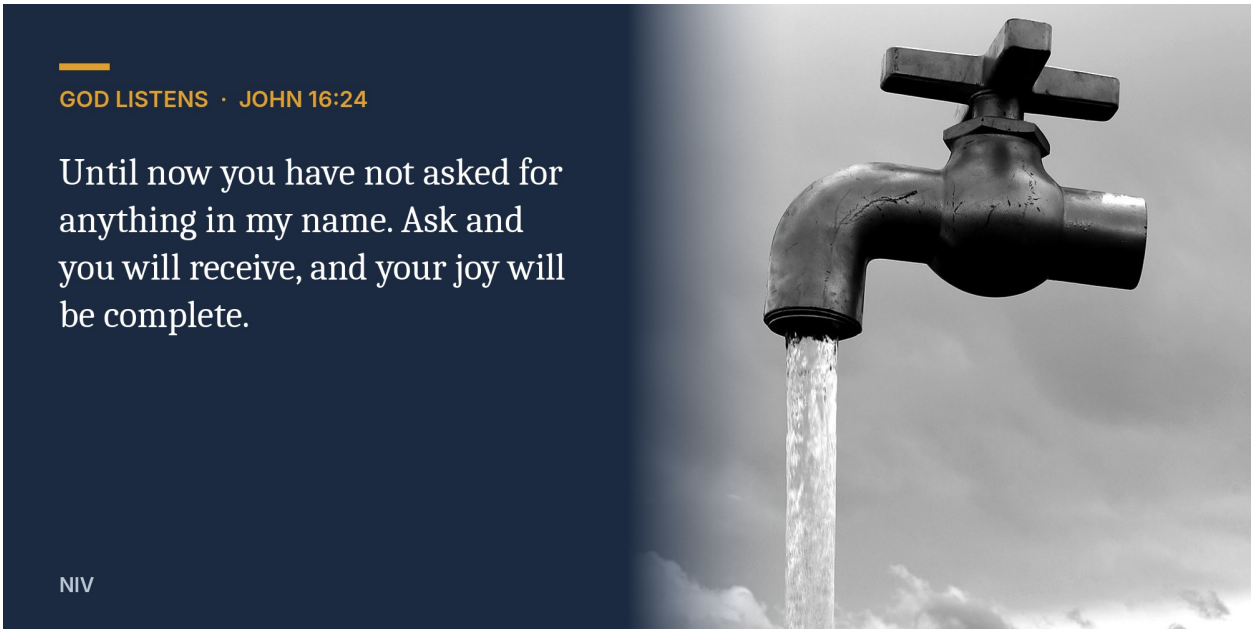
"How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart?... But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me."

About a third of the Psalms are laments like this. **Praise** shows up too (try Psalm 100 or 103). Notice how David starts with raw honesty and ends by trusting.

Q7 Which of the five do you pray most? Which do you almost never pray? What would it look like to try the one you skip?

Hold on to one verse (3 min)

Your verse for this chapter is Jesus' invitation to ask, with a promise attached.



Phone tip: On a computer, right-click the card and save it. Set it as your lock screen.

1. Say the topic and reference out loud, then the first half three times: "God listens, John 16:24. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name."
2. Say the second half three times: "Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete."
3. Put both halves together. Then cover the verse and write it from memory below.

Write the verse from memory:

PAUSE 4

Journeying forward

4 min

1 JOHN 2:6 (NIV)

Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

Try a 5-minute honest prayer

Jesus prayed often, sometimes alone, sometimes with tears (Hebrews 5:7). There are no magic words (Matthew 6:7), so just be real. Pick a time this week, silence your phone, and try these steps, out loud or in writing.

1. **Start with what's true.** "God, right now I feel…" Name it, even if it's anger, boredom, or doubt.
2. **Say thanks** for one real thing from this week (Philippians 4:6).
3. **Ask** for one thing you need, and one thing for someone you care about.
4. **Come clean** about anything weighing on you. Then take in His forgiveness (1 John 1:9).
5. **Finish with a line of praise.** Something true about God, like "You are good," or "You are near."

Q8 When and where will you try this? Is there a friend you could pray with or ask to pray for you?

JOURNAL (CHOOSE ONE)

A Write a prayer that starts with "God, I'm not sure how to say this, but…"

B Write about a time you felt God heard you. Or write what you'd need to see to believe He does.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Father, thank You for listening. I don't always know what to say, so I'm coming as I am. Teach me to pray honestly, and help me trust that You hear me. Amen.

✓ You made it. That's 30 minutes well spent.

OPTIONAL · NOT PART OF YOUR 30 MINUTES

Digging deeper

A PATTERN FROM JESUS

When His friends asked, "Lord, teach us to pray," Jesus gave them a model, often called the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9–13). It isn't meant to be recited on autopilot. Think of it as an outline: honor God, trust Him with today's needs, ask for forgiveness, and ask for protection. Read it slowly, one line at a time, and put each line in your own words.

A SIMPLE WAY TO REMEMBER: A.C.T.S.

Adore	Start by praising God for who He is: good, patient, powerful, near. Psalms like 100, 103, and 145 give you words.
Confess	Be honest about where you've fallen short, and receive His forgiveness. You aren't bargaining. You're coming clean.
Thank	Name specific things He has given you. Gratitude shifts your focus from what's missing to what's here.
Supplicate	That's an old word for asking. Bring your needs and the needs of others, without editing.

HABITS THAT HELP PRAYER STICK

- **Pray with a friend.** Pick a psalm, read it together, and pray it back to God.
- **Keep a prayer journal.** Write requests on one side and leave room to record how God answers.
- **Pick a daily time.** Even five minutes in the same place builds a habit. Many people pray first thing or right before bed.
- **Take a prayer walk or a quiet half day.** Go somewhere outdoors, leave your phone off, and just talk with God.

Ask yourself: Which habit could I try for the next month? Who could I invite to join me?

FOR GROUP CONVERSATION

1. Do you picture God as a boss or a dad when you pray? What shaped that picture?
2. Share a prayer you've seen answered, or one you're still waiting on. (Share only what you want to.)
3. How can we pray for each other this week, and check in on how it went?

Scripture quotations marked NIV are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. The story of Maya is a composite adapted from the original study.

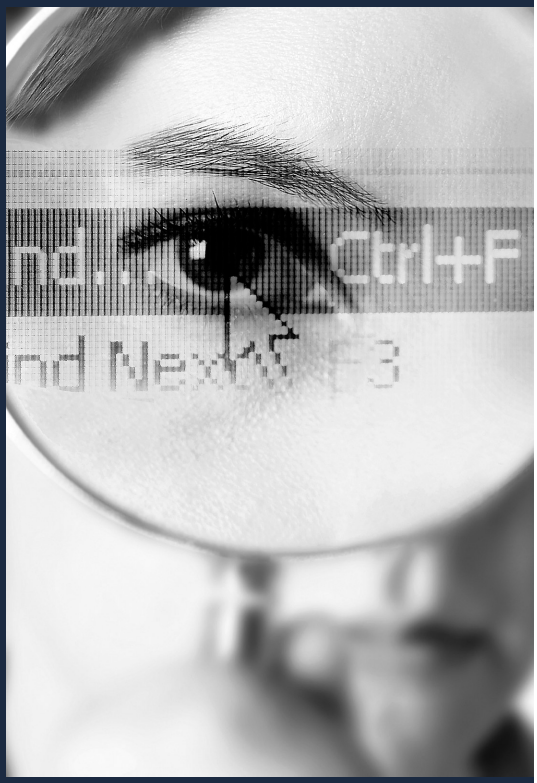
GOD: CONNECTING WITH HIS OUTRAGEOUS LOVE

CHAPTER 7

Determining What's True

How can I know?

About 30 minutes



THE BIG IDEA

You don't have to turn off your brain to trust God. Test claims with real tools: facts, logic, experience, and results. Then see how the Bible holds up. Honest questions are welcome.

YOUR 30 MINUTES

4 min	9 min	5 min	8 min	4 min
THE STORY	PAUSE 1 · Search	PAUSE 2 · Examine	PAUSE 3 · Respond	PAUSE 4 · Move

Grab a pen (or open a notes app) and set a timer. Short on time? Answer the questions that matter most to you and skip the rest. Honest beats fast.

BY THE END OF THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL

- **Spot** how you decide what's true, using seven everyday tests.
- **See** what the Bible claims about itself, and why you don't have to take that on blind faith.
- **Test** one Bible claim for yourself.
- **Say** 2 Timothy 3:16–17 from memory.

KEY VERSE

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. **2 Timothy 3:16–17 (NIV)**

START HERE

A short story

4 min

Who can you believe?

Picture this. It's an imagined scene, but you've probably lived a version of it.

You open your phone. One video says a certain diet will fix everything. The next says that diet is dangerous. A comment section is on fire. A friend sends an article you're pretty sure is fake, but you can't say why.

In a world this loud, how does anyone decide what's actually true? And when it comes to God, who gets to say?

It's a fair question. **How can I know what's true, especially about the big things?**

A true-to-life story



Illustrative photo

Jamaal was the star of his debate team. He could argue either side of a question, and win both. One weekend he defended a position with airtight logic. The next weekend he argued the opposite, just as convincingly.

That bothered him. If logic could prove opposite things, how would he ever know what was really right? And while he racked up trophies, he felt lonely at school.

One night he prayed, "God, I need to know what's really true. If You made everything, You must know. Would You show me?"

Jamaal's question may be yours. **Is there a way to sort truth from spin, without just taking someone's word for it?**

Q1 Where do you usually get your answers about what's true? (Friends, family, social media, a teacher, your own gut?)

Q2 Think of a time you believed something that turned out to be false. What fooled you?

HERE'S WHERE WE'RE HEADED

First we'll look at how you already decide what's true. Then we'll test what the Bible says about itself.

PAUSE 1

Exploring the search for truth

9 min



Illustrative photo. We have more information than ever, and more spin.

Not all "truths" are the same

A feeling	"This deadline has me exhausted."
A fact	"The earth orbits the sun."
A personal rule	"I recycle because I care about the planet."
A universal moral truth	**"No one should murder."**

This chapter is about the last kind: **moral and spiritual truth that applies to everyone.** Here's the key: truth is only as trustworthy as its source. So how do we test sources? We already do it all the time.

SEVEN TESTS FOR TRUTH

We use these all the time, often without noticing. Most claims need more than one.

1 FACTS
Can others check it? (Rome ruled Israel in Jesus' day)

2 LOGIC
Does it hold together, with no contradictions?

3 MY EXPERIENCE
Has it worked for me, again and again?

4 OTHERS' EXPERIENCE
Do people I trust say it's true?

5 GOOD FRUIT
Does it make life and people healthier?

6 TIME-TESTED
Has it held up across centuries and cultures?

7 HEAD AND HEART
Do my reason and my gut both say yes?

Q3 Which three tests do you use most? When your gut says "don't trust that," which test is it listening to? (Why this matters: only the truth you actually trust can change you.)

PAUSE 2

Exploring what God says

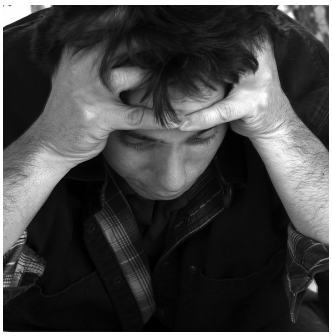
5 min

What the Bible says about itself

The Bible makes a bold claim: it's not just wise advice but God's own word. You don't have to accept that blindly. Read these, then think about which of the seven tests fit.

WHERE	WHAT IT SAYS	TEST
2 Timothy 3:16	"All Scripture is God-breathed." It comes from God and is meant to shape how we live.	**Time-tested**
John 17:17	Jesus prayed to His Father, "Your word is truth."	**Others' experience**
Matthew 24:35	Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away."	**Time-tested**
Deuteronomy 18:22	A true prophet's predictions come true. If they don't, that message wasn't from God. (Many Bible prophecies, like those about Jesus' birth and death, were written centuries before.)	**Facts, time-tested**
Hebrews 4:12	"The word of God is alive and active." It speaks to our thoughts and attitudes.	**Experience, head and heart**

Q4 Finish this sentence two different ways: "According to these verses, I can trust the Bible because…"



Illustrative photo. Doubt isn't a dead end.

TEST EVERYTHING · ACTS 17:11 (NIV)

"Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true."

The Bible praises people for checking. Paul also said, "test them all; hold on to what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

Q5 If you could ask God one question about truth or the Bible, what would it be?

PAUSE 3

Coming alive to God's Word

8 min

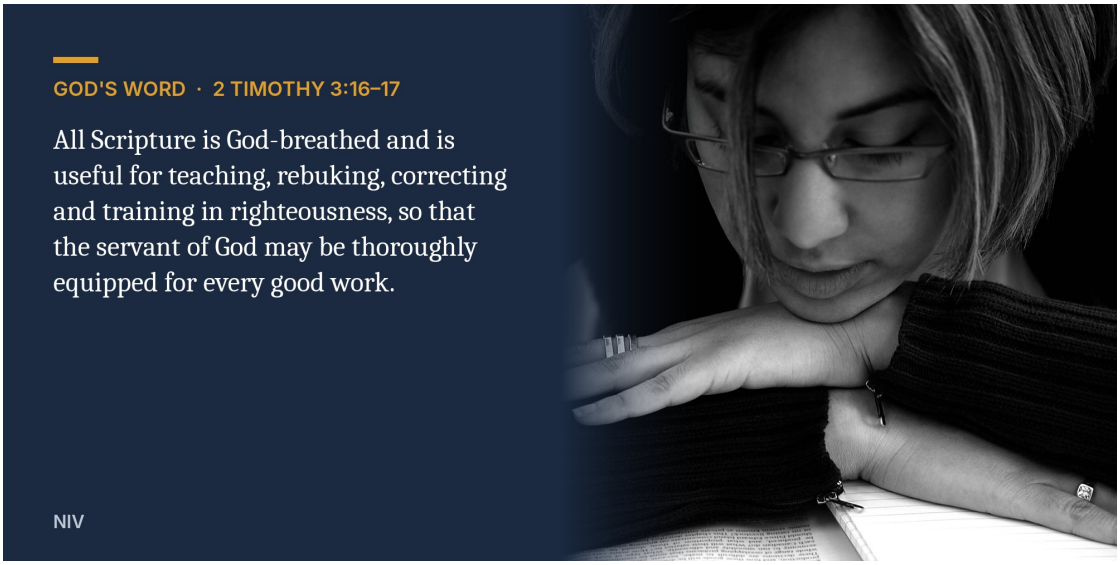
Take a claim for a test drive

The Bible isn't just something to believe. It's something to try. Here's a simple claim: "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Proverbs 15:1, NIV).

Q6 Think of a recent argument. What happened when someone answered harshly, and when someone answered gently? Which tests does Proverbs 15:1 pass? (Passing one test doesn't prove everything. Big claims need several tests together.)

Hold on to one verse (3 min)

Your verse says what the Bible is for.



Phone tip: On a computer, right-click the card and save it. Set it as your lock screen.

1. Say the topic and reference out loud, then the first half three times: "God's Word, 2 Timothy 3:16–17. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness…"
2. Say the second half three times: "…so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."
3. Put both halves together. Then cover the verse and write it from memory below.

Write the verse from memory:

PAUSE 4

Journeying forward

4 min

1 JOHN 2:6 (NIV)

Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

Be a Berean this week

Choose two of these and do them this week:

- **Run one claim through the tests.** Pick something you saw online or heard from a friend. Ask: Who's the source? Can I check it?
- **Try Proverbs 15:1.** Answer one hard conversation gently, then note what happens.
- **Read for yourself.** Read one chapter of the Gospel of John (start with chapter 1) and write down one thing you notice.
- **Ask a question.** Take your question from Q5 to a trusted friend, pastor or mentor.

Q7 Which two will you do, and when?

JOURNAL (CHOOSE ONE)

A What would it take for me to trust the Bible more? What's stopping me?

B Who or what do I trust most for truth? Is that source reliable?

CLOSE IN PRAYER

God, You made my mind, so I know You're not afraid of my questions. Show me what's true, and give me the courage to follow it. Amen.

✓ You made it. That's 30 minutes well spent.

OPTIONAL · NOT PART OF YOUR 30 MINUTES

Digging deeper

AN EXPERIMENT: SPOT THE CLAIMS

Pick an ad, a viral video, or a product review. Fill in the chart below, using the numbers from the seven tests. (Example: a new energy drink.)

PRODUCT OR CLAIM	WHAT THEY CLAIM	WHICH TEST? (1–7)
Energy drink (example)	A famous athlete says it works. "Tested by 10,000 people."	4, others' experience. 1, facts (if you can check).

Ask yourself: How much do I trust the people making these claims? How much do I trust God's truthfulness, and why?

IS GOD "INTOLERANT" OF OTHER VIEWS?

If some things are truly right or wrong for everyone, then some views are mistaken. That doesn't mean treating people badly. Jesus was fiercely honest about truth, and He was also kind to people who disagreed. He reserved His sharpest words for religious leaders who used faith to hurt others. You can respect a person without agreeing with their idea.

FOR GROUP CONVERSATION

1. Which of the seven tests do you lean on most? Which do you tend to skip?
2. How can we respect people who see truth differently, without giving up what we believe? (Read Judges 21:25 and discuss.)
3. What is one honest question about the Bible you'd like the group to help you explore?

Scripture quotations marked NIV are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. The story of Jamaal is adapted from the original study.

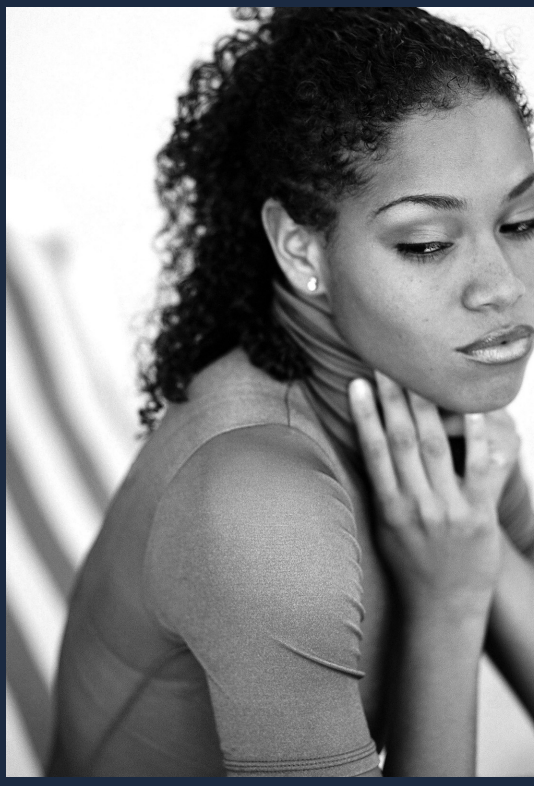
GOD: CONNECTING WITH HIS OUTRAGEOUS LOVE

CHAPTER 8

Becoming Convinced

Who can I trust?

About 30 minutes



THE BIG IDEA

You're not just trusting a book. You're trusting a Person. Jesus didn't only tell the truth. He said He is the Truth, and He invites you to check Him out.

YOUR 30 MINUTES

4 min	9 min	5 min	8 min	4 min
THE STORY	PAUSE 1 · Explore	PAUSE 2 · Be honest	PAUSE 3 · Respond	PAUSE 4 · Move

Grab a pen (or open a notes app) and set a timer. Short on time? Answer the questions that matter most to you and skip the rest. Honest beats fast.

BY THE END OF THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL

- **Weigh** whether the Bible is enough to build your life on.
- **Spot** four common "truth systems" that compete for your trust.
- **Meet** Jesus as the One who brings truth, is the Truth, and tells the truth.
- **Say** John 14:6 from memory.

KEY VERSE

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." **John 14:6 (NIV)**

START HERE

A short story

4 min

"But how do you know?"

Picture this. It's an imagined scene, but you may have been here.

You're hanging out with a friend you really like. Somehow the conversation turns to faith. You mention you believe in Jesus. Your friend tilts their head and asks, not meanly, just curious: "Okay, but how do you actually know it's true?"

Your mind goes blank. You've believed this for years. Why can't you explain it?

It's a fair question. **Who or what can you really trust?**

A true-to-life story



Illustrative photo

Dani grew up in church, and she liked it. But in her first month of college, her roommate asked the same question: "How do you know?"

Dani realized she'd never tested what she believed. She had always trusted it, but she couldn't say why. It scared her a little.

So she started looking, at the Bible, at Jesus, and at herself. A year later she said, "I'm not certain about everything. But I'm convinced enough to bet my life on Him."

Dani didn't get **absolute** certainty. She got **reasonable** certainty, the kind you use when you trust a bridge or a pilot. Even scientists trust their instruments and logic.

Q1 Has anyone ever asked how you know what you believe? How did you respond (or wish you had)?

Q2 On a scale of 1–10, how convinced are you that Jesus and the Bible are trustworthy? What's behind that number?

HERE'S WHERE WE'RE HEADED

We'll see if the Bible is enough to build on, watch out for rival "truths," and then meet the One who says, "I am the truth."

PAUSE 1

Exploring what God says

9 min

Is the Bible enough?

Chapter 7 asked whether we can trust the Bible. This chapter asks something bigger: is it **enough** to guide your life, with tough choices, a changing culture, and real pressure?



Jesus said that hearing His words isn't enough. Wisdom is **hearing and doing.** Here's what else the Bible says about its own sufficiency:

2 Peter 1:3	*"His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness."*
John 8:31–32	*"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."*
Romans 15:4	Scripture was written to teach us, so we'd have endurance, encouragement and hope.
Psalm 1:2–3	Someone who delights in God's word is like a tree planted by streams of water.

Q3 From these passages, what makes the Bible a trustworthy guide? What makes you hesitate?

KNOWING VS. TRUSTING

One person says, "God is in control, so I'll take the risk." Another says, "God is in control, but what if it all goes wrong?" Both **know** the same truth. Only one is **living** from it.

Q4 Can you think of a time you knew something about God but didn't live like it? What happened?

PAUSE 2

Checking out your reality

5 min

Rival voices



Illustrative photo

A WARNING · JOHN 8:44 AND COLOSSIANS 2:8

The search for truth is hard because **it's not neutral.** The Bible says there's a real enemy, a "liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44), who works to twist what's true. His oldest line is "Did God really say…?" (Genesis 3:1). That's no reason for fear. Jesus is stronger. It's a reason for awareness.

"See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy…" Colossians 2:8

FOUR COMMON "TRUTH SYSTEMS"

Each has a grain of truth. Each breaks down when it's your only guide.

RATIONALISM
"My mind decides what's true."

FATALISM
"It's all predetermined, so my choices don't matter."

TRADITIONALISM
"It's right because we've always done it."

PRAGMATISM / FEELINGS
"If it works or feels good, it's right."

Q5 Which of these four most shapes what you believe? How has it helped or hurt you?

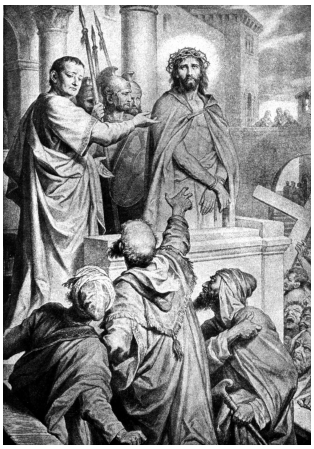
It's an old problem. At one low point in Israel's history, "everyone did as they saw fit" (Judges 21:25), and things fell apart.

Q6 Is there something you already sense is true, but you've been resisting? What would trusting it cost you?

PAUSE 3

Coming alive to Jesus

8 min



Jesus before Pilate

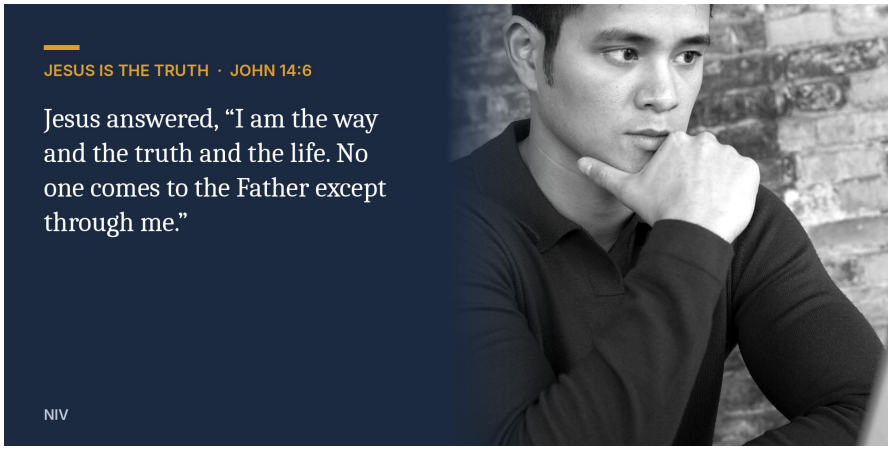
WHAT IS TRUTH? · JOHN 18:37–38 (NIV)

"You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." "What is truth?" retorted Pilate.

Pilate asked a great question and walked away before the answer. Jesus didn't argue. He stood there. **The answer was Him.** In John 14:6 He says it plainly: He doesn't just have the truth. He **is** the Truth.

Q7 What's the difference between someone who knows the truth and Someone who is the Truth?

Hold on to one verse (3 min)



Phone tip: On a computer, right-click the card and save it. Set it as your lock screen.

1. Say the topic and reference out loud, then the first half three times: "Jesus is the Truth, John 14:6. Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life.'"
2. Say the second half three times: "No one comes to the Father except through me."
3. Put both halves together. Then cover the verse and write it from memory below.

Write the verse from memory:

PAUSE 4

Journeying forward

4 min

1 JOHN 2:6 (NIV)

Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

Be ready with an answer

Peter was no stranger to skeptics. He gave three reasons he was convinced (2 Peter 1:16–19): **"We were eyewitnesses"** (he saw Jesus), **"We heard the voice from heaven"** (God confirmed Jesus), and **the prophets' words came true.** Notice he didn't say, "Just believe." He pointed to evidence and to what he had lived.

Q8 Suppose a friend asks tomorrow, "How do you know Jesus is real?" In 3–4 sentences, write your honest answer. (Mention what you've seen, what you've heard from others, and what you're still working out.) Then say it out loud.

JOURNAL (CHOOSE ONE)

A Where do I most need to move from knowing about Jesus to trusting Him?

B What's one question I'd like to bring to Jesus, and what would I do if He answered?

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Jesus, You say You are the Truth. Help me trust You with what I know and with what I don't. Show me where I've been relying on other voices, and lead me back to You. Amen.

✓ You made it. That's 30 minutes well spent.

OPTIONAL · NOT PART OF YOUR 30 MINUTES

Digging deeper

PROPHECIES ABOUT JESUS

Remember the "time-tested" test from Chapter 7? The Old Testament was written centuries before Jesus, yet it points to many details of His life. Here are a few.

TOPIC	PROPHECY	FULFILLMENT
Birthplace	A ruler will come from Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), about 700 B.C.	Jesus is born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1)
Rejected	"Despised and rejected" (Isaiah 53:3), about 700 B.C.	His own people did not receive Him (John 1:11)
Betrayed by a friend	A close friend who shared bread turns against him (Psalm 41:9), about 1000 B.C.	Judas betrays Jesus (Mark 14:10)
Counted with criminals	"Numbered with the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12), about 700 B.C.	Crucified between two robbers (Matthew 27:38)
Pierced hands and feet	His hands and feet are pierced (Psalm 22:16), about 1000 B.C.	The nail wounds are shown to Thomas (John 20:27)
Not abandoned to death	"You will not abandon me to the realm of the dead" (Psalm 16:10), about 1000 B.C.	God raised Him from the dead (Acts 3:15)

Ask yourself: How does this change the way I think about the Bible's authority? What questions does it raise?

FOR GROUP CONVERSATION

1. Which of the four "truth systems" is strongest in our culture? In your own life?
2. Share a time you knew the truth but didn't trust it enough to act. What helped you move?
3. How would you answer a friend who asks, "How do you know?" How can we help each other get ready?

Scripture quotations marked NIV are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. The story of Dani is a composite written for this edition.

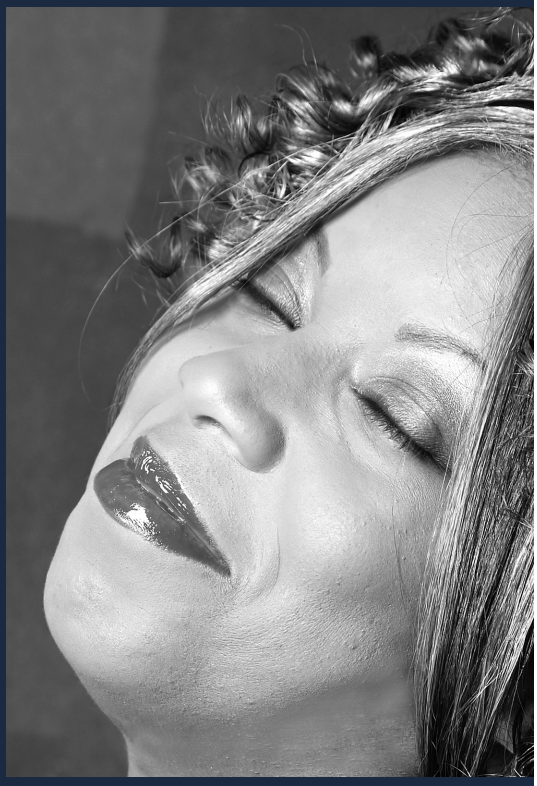
GOD: CONNECTING WITH HIS OUTRAGEOUS LOVE

CHAPTER 9

The Holy Spirit

Who is He in me?

About 30 minutes



THE BIG IDEA

The Holy Spirit isn't a force or a feeling. He's a Person. If you follow Jesus, He lives in you as your Helper, Comforter, and Guide, and He's gentle, not scary.

YOUR 30 MINUTES

4 min	9 min	5 min	8 min	4 min
THE STORY	PAUSE 1 · Explore	PAUSE 2 · Be honest	PAUSE 3 · Respond	PAUSE 4 · Move

Grab a pen (or open a notes app) and set a timer. Short on time? Answer the questions that matter most to you and skip the rest. Honest beats fast.

BY THE END OF THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL

- **Meet** the Holy Spirit as a Person, not an "it."
- **See** where He is and what He does in your life.
- **Spot** the fruit He grows, and what can grieve Him.
- **Say** John 14:16–17a from memory.

KEY VERSE

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. **John 14:16–17a (NIV)**

START HERE

A short story

4 min

The mysterious One

Picture this. It's an imagined scene, but it may be familiar.

You've heard a lot about God the Father and about Jesus. But the Holy Spirit? Maybe you picture a ghost, or a vague "force." Maybe you've seen someone talk about the Spirit in a way that made you uncomfortable.

Or maybe you just don't know where He fits. One thing's for sure: it's hard to build a relationship with Someone you're unsure about.

It's a fair question. **Who is the Holy Spirit, and what does He have to do with me?**

A true-to-life story



Illustrative photo

Maria grew up believing in God and Jesus. The Holy Spirit was a Bible fact to her, not someone she knew. The idea of the Spirit living in her felt intrusive. Her life already felt scattered, and she was afraid that giving God more of herself would leave nothing that was hers.

But she couldn't deny what she saw in some of her friends: real joy, kindness, and peace. They seemed to know Someone she didn't.

She longed for what they had, but she was wary of being controlled.

If Maria's fears sound familiar, you're in good company. **Spoiler:** the Holy Spirit is gentle, and He's not out to take your life but to give you one.

Q1 When you were growing up, how did you picture the Holy Spirit? What have you heard that confused or worried you?

Q2 What would you need to know about the Spirit to feel safe getting to know Him?

> **HERE'S WHERE WE'RE HEADED**
>
> We'll look at who the Spirit is, what He does, and how you can start a friendship with Him.

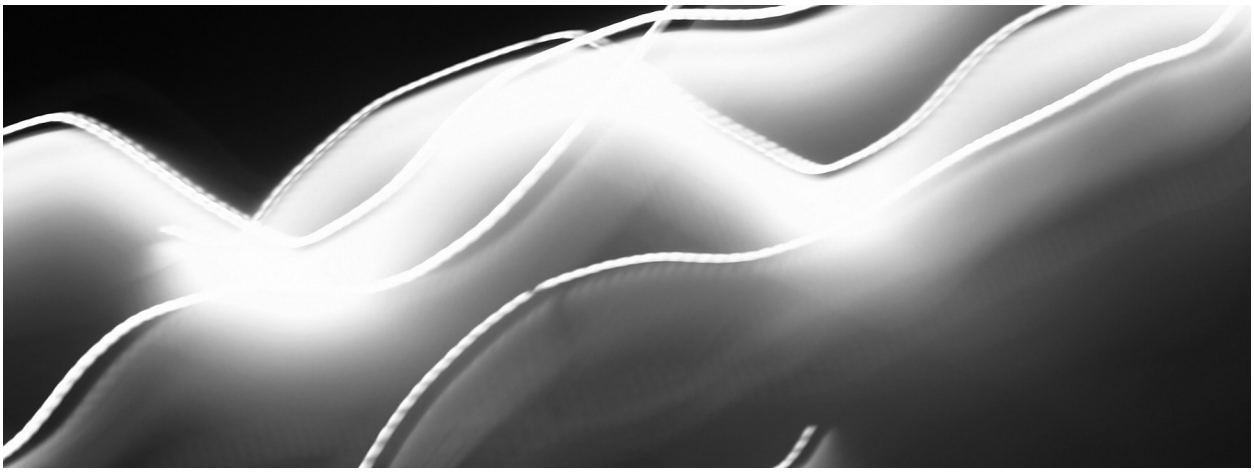
PAUSE 1

Exploring what God says

9 min

He's a Person, and He's everywhere

The Holy Spirit is one of the three Persons of the Trinity: one God in three Persons. That's a mystery no one fully figures out. But the Bible makes one thing clear: **the Spirit is God, and He's close.**



Illustrative photo. The Spirit can't be seen, but He's real.

> **PSALM 139:7–8 (NIV)**
> *Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*

Genesis 1:2	Before Jesus was born, God's Spirit was already at work. He was "hovering over the waters" at creation.
Ezekiel 36:26–27	*"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you… And I will put my Spirit in you."*
John 14:16–18	Jesus promised a Helper who would be with us forever. "I will not leave you as orphans."
1 Corinthians 6:19	*"Your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God."*

Q3 From these verses, where is the Spirit, and what does He do in you? What stands out?

Q4 The Spirit knows your every thought. Do you like that idea, or does it feel scary? What feelings come up?

PAUSE 2

Who He is and what He does

5 min

A Person, not an "it"

One of the Spirit's names is **Paraclete**, a Greek word meaning "one called alongside to help." (Think paramedic or paralegal.) The Bible calls Him "He," never "it," because He's a Person. He teaches, speaks, and gives. And He can be hurt. Paul says, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God" (Ephesians 4:30). The verses right around it name things like lying, holding grudges, harsh words, and bitterness.

WHAT THE SPIRIT DOES FOR YOU

POINTS TO JESUS
Teaches and reminds you of what Jesus said, and makes Him real.
John 15:26; 16:14

LEADS TO LIFE AND PEACE
Guides you step by step, without forcing, and gives you power to change.
Romans 8:6; Galatians 5:25

HELPS AND COMFORTS
Stays with you in doubt and pain, and speaks to God for you when you have no words.
Romans 8:15–16, 26

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT · GALATIANS 5:22–23

Fruit grows over time. It's what the Spirit produces in you, not what you force.

- **LOVE** — Wanting what's good for others
- **JOY** — Gladness that doesn't depend on circumstances
- **PEACE** — Calm in the middle of chaos
- **PATIENCE** — Staying kind under pressure
- **KINDNESS** — Small, real generosity
- **GOODNESS** — Doing right when no one sees
- **FAITHFULNESS** — Showing up and keeping your word
- **GENTLENESS** — Strength under control
- **SELF-CONTROL** — Saying no to what harms you

Q5 Which of these nine do you see growing in you right now? Which do you most want? (Circle one.)

Q6 How do you feel knowing the Spirit is a Person who can be hurt, and who also loves you?

PAUSE 3

Coming alive to God's Spirit

8 min



Illustrative photo

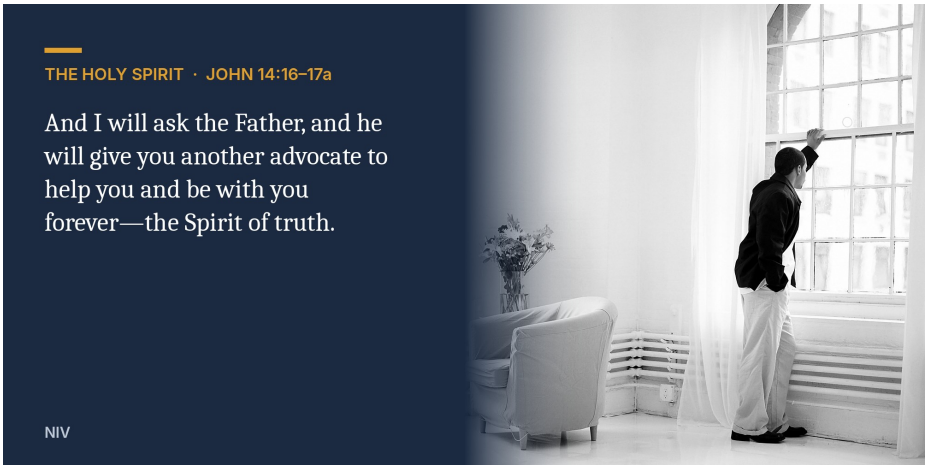
HE HELPS WHEN YOU HAVE NO WORDS · ROMANS 8:26 (NIV)

"In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans."

Paul adds that the Spirit helps us cry out to God as "Father" (Romans 8:15). You're never praying alone.

Q7 Think of a time your heart broke. Did you sense God with you? How might the Spirit have felt your pain?

Hold on to one verse (3 min)



Phone tip: On a computer, right-click the card and save it. Set it as your lock screen.

1. Say the topic and reference out loud, then the first half three times: "The Holy Spirit, John 14:16–17a. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate…"
2. Say the second half three times: "…to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth."
3. Put both halves together. Then cover the verse and write it from memory below.

Write the verse from memory:

PAUSE 4

Journeying forward

4 min

1 JOHN 2:6 (NIV)

Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

Say hello to Him

Friendships start with conversation. Set aside five quiet minutes this week and talk to the Spirit as a Person:

1. **Thank Him** for being with you, even if you haven't noticed.
2. **Be honest** about any fears or doubts, like Maria's. He can handle them.
3. **Ask Him** what's on His heart for you, and for help with something that's on yours.
4. **Wait quietly** for a minute, then write down any thoughts. (Test them against the Bible, as in Chapter 7.)

Paul calls this being **filled with the Spirit** (Ephesians 5:18), which means letting Him lead your day, not just visit it.

Q8 When will you try this? Which fruit of the Spirit will you ask Him to grow in you?

JOURNAL (CHOOSE ONE)

A Write a note to the Holy Spirit about how you feel about Him right now.

B What's one way I could "keep in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25) tomorrow?

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Holy Spirit, thank You for living in me. I'm sorry I've kept my distance. I want to know You. Teach me, comfort me, and grow Your fruit in my life. Amen.

✓ You made it. That's 30 minutes well spent.

OPTIONAL · NOT PART OF YOUR 30 MINUTES

Digging deeper

ABIDING AND LIVING BY THE SPIRIT

Jesus told His friends to "abide" in Him (John 15:1–7). Paul said to live by the Spirit (Romans 8:1–17). Read each passage and jot notes in the chart.

JOHN 15:1–7	ROMANS 8:1–17
How to abide in Christ:	**How to live by the Spirit:**
Results of abiding:	**Results of living by the Spirit:**

NAMES FOR THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Bible uses many names for Him. A few: **Counselor, Helper, Comforter, Spirit of Truth, Spirit of Life, Spirit of Wisdom, Spirit of Grace, Spirit of Christ, Spirit of Power.** (They all describe the one Holy Spirit.) Pick one that fits where you are today. Look up where it appears in the Bible, and write what it tells you about Him.

FOR GROUP CONVERSATION

1. What did you think of the Holy Spirit growing up? What has changed?
2. Which fruit of the Spirit do you see in someone you know? How does it draw you?
3. How could our group help each other keep in step with the Spirit this week? (Spiritual gifts come up later in the series.)

Scripture quotations marked NIV are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. The story of Maria is adapted from the original study.

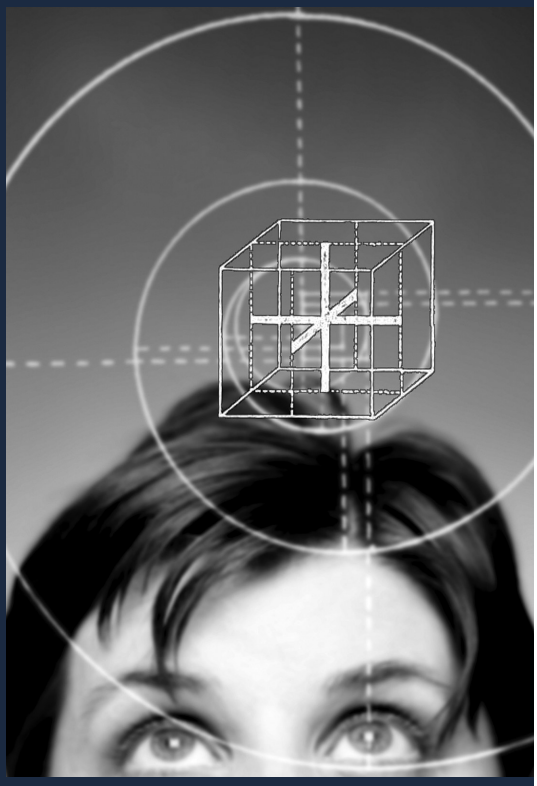
GOD: CONNECTING WITH HIS OUTRAGEOUS LOVE

CHAPTER 10

Worshiping God

More than music?

About 30 minutes



THE BIG IDEA

Worship isn't just a song or a Sunday. It's giving God your whole life, because He is worth it. Everyone worships something. The question is what, or who.

YOUR 30 MINUTES

4 min	9 min	5 min	8 min	4 min
THE STORY	PAUSE 1 · Explore	PAUSE 2 · Be honest	PAUSE 3 · Respond	PAUSE 4 · Move

Grab a pen (or open a notes app) and set a timer. Short on time? Answer the questions that matter most to you and skip the rest. Honest beats fast.

BY THE END OF THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL

- **Define** worship, and see why God is worthy of it.
- **Spot** the things that compete with God for your heart.
- **Explore** seven ways to worship, beyond music.
- **Say** Romans 12:1 from memory.

KEY VERSE

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. **Romans 12:1 (NIV)**

START HERE

A short story

4 min

Church or the trail?

Picture this. It's an imagined scene, but it may sound familiar.

It's Sunday morning. Your alarm goes off, and so does the same old debate. Part of you wants to sleep in. Part of you wants to hit the trail, where God always feels closest. And part of you knows you'd actually love the singing and the people, if you got up.

Is one of these "real" worship and the others just filler? Or is there more going on?

It's a fair question. **What is worship, really?**

A true-to-life story



Illustrative photo

Two friends, James and Jana, keep having the same Sunday argument. Jana loves worshiping with people she knows. The singing lifts her out of a stressful week.

James feels closest to God outdoors. A mountain sky makes him feel small and God feel huge. A church service feels shallow next to that.

They compromise: church first, then the lake. They get along, but both sense they're missing something. What is worship, really?

Neither friend is wrong. But maybe they're both thinking too small. **Worship isn't a place or a playlist. It's a response to who God is.**

Q1 Are you more like James or Jana when it comes to worship? Explain.

Q2 When has worship (in any form) made you feel close to God?

HERE'S WHERE WE'RE HEADED

We'll see why God deserves our worship, what competes with Him, and how worship can fill your whole week.

PAUSE 1

Exploring what God says

9 min

Worship starts with who God is

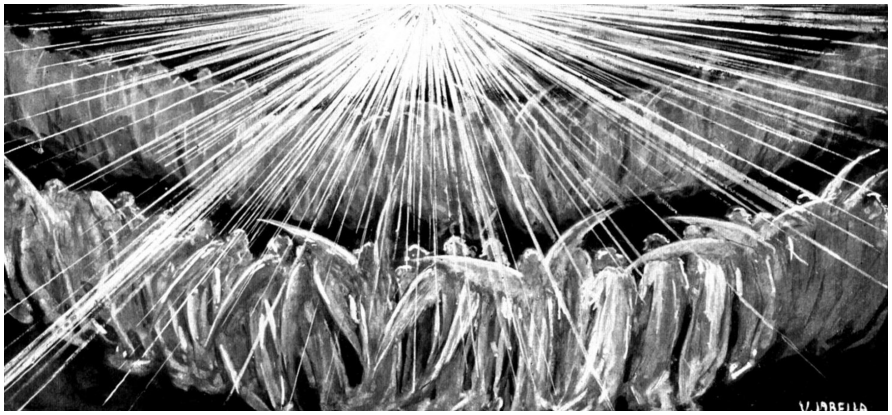


Illustration. Scripture pictures all creation worshiping God.

PSALM 95:1–3, 6–7a (NIV)

Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song. For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods… Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.

Q3 From these passages and Revelation 4:11 ("You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things"), what about God inspires such worship?

What Jesus said about worship

JOHN 4:23–24 (NIV)

"A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

Q4 Jesus says worship should be "in spirit and in truth." What do you think that means? (Hint: from the heart, and based on who God really is.)

PAUSE 2

Exploring your reality

5 min

Worship gone off track

We're made to worship. The real question isn't **whether** you'll worship, but **what**. The Bible says people can trade "the truth of God for a lie" and worship created things instead of the Creator (Romans 1:25). Jesus said, "You cannot serve both God and money" (Matthew 6:24). He also warned about worship that's only on the lips: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Matthew 15:8).



Q5 Which of these (or something else) most competes with God for your attention and heart?

In the Ten Commandments, God says He is "a jealous God" (Exodus 20:5). That's not insecurity. It's the jealousy of someone who loves you and wants you to have what's best, like a friend who doesn't want you wasting yourself on something that will hurt you.

Q6 How does it feel to know a God who loves you that fiercely? Does it comfort you, scare you, or both?

PAUSE 3

Coming alive to God

8 min

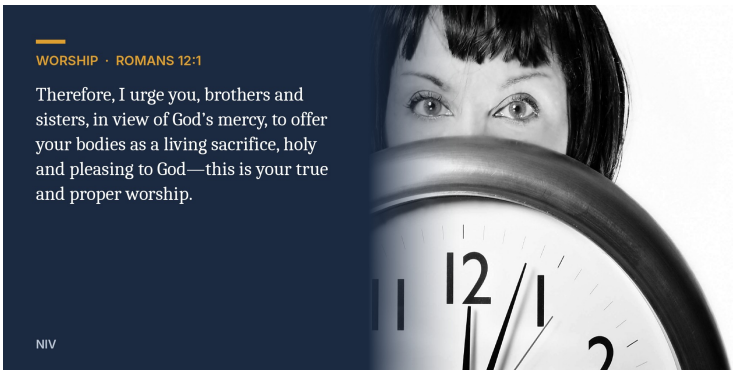
Worship is a lifestyle. Singing is one way, but the Bible shows many. Circle one you rarely do.



Fasting note: Skipping food isn't safe for everyone. If food is complicated for you, fast from social media or screens instead.

Q7 Which ways come naturally to you? Which will you try this week, and how?

Hold on to one verse (3 min)



Phone tip: Save the card as your lock screen.

1. Say the topic and reference out loud, then the first half three times: "Worship, Romans 12:1. Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy…"
2. Say the second half three times: "…to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship."
3. Put both halves together. Then cover the verse and write it from memory below.

Write the verse from memory:

PAUSE 4

Journeying forward

4 min

1 JOHN 2:6 (NIV)

Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

Try a 10-minute worship break

You don't have to do it "right." God wants sincerity, not perfection, and it's about Him, not you. Pick a time this week:

1. **Get quiet.** Put your phone on silent. Take a few slow breaths.
2. **Read Psalm 95:1–7 out loud,** slowly. Pause after each line to respond to God in your own words.
3. **Name three things you love about God.** Say them as thanks: "God, You are ____."
4. **Choose one way to express it:** sing or play a song (Jana), step outside and look up (James), or write God a note.
5. **Offer Him something.** "Lord, today I give You my ____." (Your time, a worry, a goal.)

Q8 When and where will you try this? Which way of worship will you add this week?

JOURNAL (CHOOSE ONE)

A What does "making much of Christ" look like in my ordinary week?

B What is one thing I need to take off the throne so God can have it?

CLOSE IN PRAYER

God, You are worthy of all I am. Forgive me for the things I've put in Your place. Take my everyday life, my sleeping, working, and playing, and make it an offering to You. Amen.

✓ You made it. That's 30 minutes well spent.

OPTIONAL · NOT PART OF YOUR 30 MINUTES

Digging deeper

WORSHIP BEFORE THE BATTLE

Read 2 Chronicles 20:1–30. A huge army was coming, and King Jehoshaphat's people were terrified. They prayed, admitted they had no plan, and trusted God. Then the singers went out in front of the army, praising God, before anything had changed. What role did worship and risky trust play?

Ask yourself: What "vast army" am I facing? What would it look like to worship first, and trust Him with the outcome?

A LONGER WORSHIP EXPERIENCE

Find a quiet spot for 20 to 30 minutes. Read 1 Chronicles 16:23–36 aloud, one verse at a time, and respond to God after each one in your own words. When you finish, say "Amen." (If you're in a group, share one highlight.)

FOR GROUP CONVERSATION

1. Are you more of a James or a Jana? What does each of them teach the other?
2. What "good things" are hardest for you to keep in their place?
3. How could our group worship together this week in a way that isn't just singing?

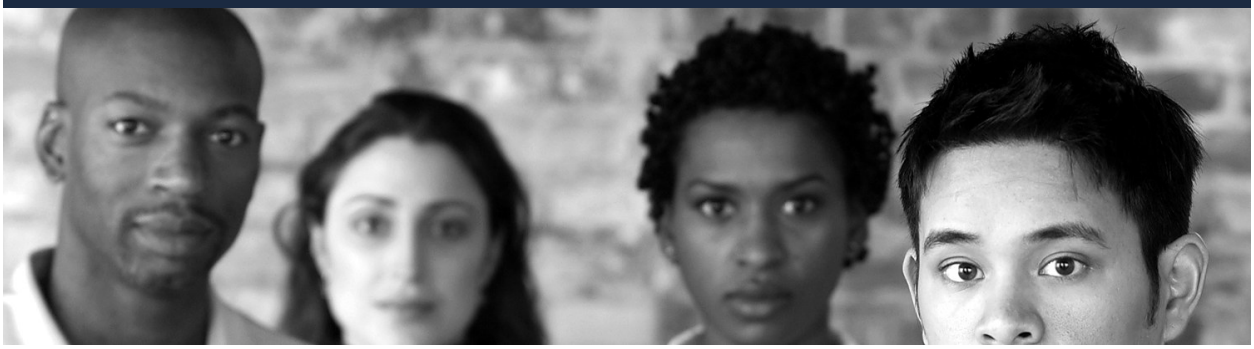
> **YOU'VE REACHED THE END OF THE STUDY**
>
> Take a moment to look back. How has your walk with God changed? Who has helped you along the way? What's your next step? Consider celebrating with your group and thanking those who journeyed with you.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. The story of James and Jana is adapted from the original study.

AFTER CHAPTER 10

Celebrate your group

You finished. Take a moment to notice what God has done.



You've spent ten chapters asking big questions about God's love. Before you move on, **pause and celebrate.** Your friendships have deepened. You've learned from each other: truths, joys, even some pain. Set aside one meeting (45–60 minutes is plenty), bring snacks, and walk through the four moments below. Studying on your own? Do this with a friend or mentor, or write your answers in a journal.

1 · REFLECT BACK

1. What's one thing you learned about God, or about yourself, that you didn't expect?
2. How has your time with God changed? Think prayer, the Bible, or how you handle a rough day.
3. Which chapter hit you hardest? Why?
4. What feelings come up as you look back? Gratitude, relief, leftover questions. All of it is welcome.

2 · LOOK AHEAD

1. What do you need most in your next season with God?
2. Where could you find it? A friend, a mentor, a church, a campus group, another Connect study?
3. How will you stay connected? A group chat, a monthly dinner, a weekly walk?
4. Who else could use this study? Could two of you start a new group?

3 · SAY THANKS

Go around the circle. Tell each person one thing you appreciate about them: how they showed up, or something they said that stuck with you.

Be specific. Two real sentences beat "you're awesome."

4 · PRAY TOGETHER

Thank God for this part of the journey. Tell Him what you love about Him. Use words from the chapters if they help.

Then **linger.** No rush, and nobody has to pray out loud.

WHY COMMUNITY MATTERS

"Our individuality only makes sense in the context of community, where we are free to become ourselves." Jonathan S. Campbell with Jennifer Campbell, *The Way of Jesus*

KEEP IT WITH YOU

Why memorize Scripture?

Words hidden in your heart are there when you need them.

You won't find the word "memorize" in the Bible, but the idea is everywhere. God's people are told to **treasure** His words, **store them up,** and **write them on their hearts.** Here's what that looks like, and what it does for you.

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS TO DO

- **Treasure** God's words and guard them like your most precious possession (Proverbs 7:1–3).
- **Write them deep within your heart,** like a necklace you always wear (Proverbs 3:3).
- **Let them sink in,** and pay close attention (Proverbs 4:20–22).
- **Think about them** day and night (Joshua 1:8).

WHAT IT DOES FOR YOU

- **Helps you resist sin:** "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you" (Psalm 119:11).
- **Brings life and health** (Proverbs 4:22).
- **Builds your trust in the Lord** (Proverbs 22:18–19).
- **Brings joy:** "Your words were my joy and my heart's delight" (Jeremiah 15:16).

TWO PEOPLE WHO KNEW IT BY HEART

Jesus. In the wilderness, Satan tempted Him. Jesus answered each time with a verse of Scripture (Matthew 4:1–11). He knew God's words well enough to use them in the moment.

Peter. On the day of Pentecost, a huge crowd gathered. He had no time to look anything up, yet he spoke from the Old Testament, including the Psalms and the prophet Joel (Acts 2). About 3,000 people believed that day.

> **DENNIS STOKES, CO-AUTHOR**
> *"I am amazed at the countless times God pulled from my mind a memorized verse that has been exactly the right thing at the right time. At times it was comfort, at times guidance. A push ahead or a pull to stop."*

HOW TO START (PICK TWO)

- ☐ **Put it on your phone.** Lock screen, notes app, or a daily reminder.
- ☐ **Say it out loud.** Walking or driving works great.
- ☐ **Write it out** until you can get every word right.
- ☐ **Pray it back to God,** line by line.
- ☐ **Text it to a friend** with one sentence on why it matters.
- ☐ **Review before you sleep.** Fall asleep thinking about it.

CARRY THESE WITH YOU

Ten verses to know by heart

One from each chapter. Check the box when you can say it.

1 GOD'S LOVE

Zephaniah 3:17

The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.

☐ I can say it

2 GOD'S MERCY

Ephesians 2:4–5

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

☐ I can say it

3 ADOPTED IN CHRIST

Ephesians 1:5

In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.

☐ I can say it

4 LOVING GOD

Matthew 22:37–38

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment.

☐ I can say it

5 GOD SPEAKS

Hebrews 1:1–2

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.

☐ I can say it

6 GOD LISTENS

John 16:24

Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.

☐ I can say it

7 GOD'S WORD

2 Timothy 3:16–17

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

☐ I can say it

8 JESUS IS THE TRUTH

John 14:6

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

☐ I can say it

9 THE HOLY SPIRIT

John 14:16–17a

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth.

☐ I can say it

10 WORSHIP

Romans 12:1

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

☐ I can say it

Scripture quotations are from the NIV (2011). Check any verse against your own Bible.

WHAT'S NEXT

The Connect series

Keep going. There's more to discover.

Connect is a series of personal and group studies built to help you know God's truth, rest in His love, and live in His hope. They're made for small groups, where friends can encourage, trust, and support each other on the journey. Jesus said what life is all about:

> **MATTHEW 22:37–39 (NIV)**
> *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself."*

Growing in love for God, for others, and for yourself, and living in ways that honor Him: that's a real spiritual journey. Here's the whole road.

1 GOD	**Connecting with His Outrageous Love** YOU ARE HERE Receive God's love, and love Him back. This is the study you just finished.
2 IDENTITY	**Becoming Who God Says I Am** Discover who God says you are, and learn to live out of that true identity.
3 SOUL	**Embracing My Sexuality and Emotions** See how loving God, others, and yourself helps you handle your inner life in ways that honor Him.
4 RELATIONSHIPS	**Bringing Jesus to My Community** Learn to love people, all kinds of people. If you're loving God and yourself, loving others follows.
5 LIFE	**Thriving in a Complex World** Explore time, money, decisions, and commitment, and how they fit into living well with Jesus.
6 FREEDOM	**Breaking the Power of Shame** Face shame, whatever its source, and experience God's mercy, healing, and freedom.

> **OUR PRAYER FOR YOU**
> *That you will grow in deeper closeness with God, from a heart of worship, as you humbly follow Jesus' way, His truth, and His life.*

THE PEOPLE BEHIND THIS STUDY

About the authors

Ralph Ennis

Intercultural Training and Development, The Navigators

Ralph and his wife, Jennifer, have served with The Navigators since 1975, from military bases in Norfolk to Princeton University, Richmond, the Glen Eyrie Leadership Development Institute, and The CoMission in Moscow. Ralph has a master's degree in Intercultural Relations. They live in Raleigh, North Carolina, with four married children and nine grandchildren.

Judy Gomoll

Resource Development, The Navigators National Training Team

Judy was an educator who specialized in curriculum development. She and her husband, George, served as missionaries in Uganda and Kenya for fifteen years. She helps research and field-test tools for spiritual transformation. She holds master's degrees in Curriculum and Instruction and in Organizational Leadership, and lives in Parker, Colorado.

Dennis Stokes

National Training Director, U.S. Navigators

Dennis has served with The Navigators since 1973, as collegiate staff, trainer, and training coordinator for The CoMission project to the former Soviet Union. He is ordained and speaks at conferences and churches in the U.S. and twelve other countries. He and his wife, Ellen, live in Erie, Colorado, and have three children: Christopher, Cheryl, and Amy.

Christine Weddle

National Training and Staff Development, The Navigators

Christine joined The Navigators in 1997 through The CoMission Training Team and has helped plan staff training events in the U.S., Russia, and Ukraine. She moved to Colorado Springs in 1998 and specializes in adult learning environments and visual resources.

Author information is from the original 2006 edition.

Notes and sources

Chapter 2. Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (Image Books/Doubleday, 1994), p. 43. Insights from the parable are based on *Poet and Peasant* by Kenneth Bailey (Eerdmans).

Chapter 3. The adoption story is adapted from Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (Pantheon, 1999). The idea of the "poser" is from Brennan Manning and Jim Hancock, *Posers, Fakers, and Wannabes* (NavPress, 2003).

Celebrate your group. Jonathan S. Campbell with Jennifer Campbell, *The Way of Jesus: A Journey of Freedom for Pilgrims and Wanderers*.

About the stories. Stories introduced with "Picture this" are imagined. Other stories are composites based on the original study. Names and details are changed.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Scripture quotations marked NLT are from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved. Scripture marked The Message is from THE MESSAGE, copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved.