

PEOPLE POSITIVE

People Positive:

Reflecting God’s Love and Truth in Every Relationship, No Matter What, Always

Teacher’s Manual

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INTRODUCTION

About this Study

We wrote this study to help you and your students explore what godly, healthy, hope-filled relationships can look like. Relationships may differ, but as we abide in God’s love and truth, we can reflect His grace no matter our situation.

This study covers biblical principles related to the following:

- **Unit 1:** You and Your God
- **Unit 2:** You and Your Family
- **Unit 3:** You and Your Friends
- **Unit 4:** You and the Church
- **Unit 5:** You and Your Community
- **Unit 6:** You and the Other Sex

Class Prerequisites

These lessons assume little familiarity with the passages discussed, but in general, we designed this study for Christian young people with at least some knowledge of the gospel. We review essential principles of the gospel in Unit 1, but by Unit 2, we assume that the audience affirms or at least acknowledges the identity and work of Christ.

That said, we do not enforce belief in any graded component of this study, nor do we attempt to assess spiritual growth as a curriculum objective. A non-Christian student should be able to achieve a solid grade in this study, even if many of the reflective activities will seem less helpful from a secular perspective.

We intended this material for senior high students, but lectures and exercises assume a reading level appropriate for the tenth grade or above. Given the sensitive nature of some topics—such as abuse, gender, and sexuality—we encourage you to preview and adjust lessons with your students in mind. Since the material focuses on biblical principles and philosophy, you should not need to separate classes by age or sex. But depending on your students’ background or maturity, you may find that temporarily separated classes lead to better, more open discussion.

Lesson Features

Content Objectives

These summarize the primary biblical doctrines or points supported by the lesson.

Learning Objectives

These are expected student outcomes. By the end of the lesson, students should be able to recall, explain, or discuss these points. Some of these objectives will be assessed in the *Lesson Quizzes* or *Unit Tests*, while others may be assessed during the course of the lesson. You may wish to reinforce these points with additional discussions, projects, or other activities.

Vocabulary

Students may first encounter these terms in the *Teacher’s Lectures*, the *Student Manual Exercises*, or in their Scripture reading. For reference, terms and their definitions are listed in both the Teacher’s Manual and Student Manual.

Lecture Material

We’ve written these lecture notes to help you outline major themes for the lesson, generally over one or two class sessions. You’ll have the chance to explore relevant Scripture, vocabulary, illustrations, and discussion questions.

Also included are occasional *Critical View* sections, which present perspectives from notable thinkers, past and present. This material can challenge students to temper their personal philosophy by comparing and contrasting Christian principles with various secular worldviews.

As you teach, students can complete the fill-in-the-blank *Lecture Outline* in their Student Manual. Underlined words in this Teacher’s Manual correspond to blanks in the students’ own outline.

Lecture slide presentations are available for purchase as part of the *Extra Resources* packet at postiveaction.org/peoplepositive.

Student Exercises, Reflections, and Meditation

Included in the Student Manual, these activities encourage students to explore the lesson’s topics in Scripture while also applying key principles to personal or hypothetical situations. Each lesson ends with a meditative passage that emphasizes God’s care and protection.

Students should be able to work through the two *Exercises* sections on their own or in groups. The *Self-Reflections* and *Meditations* are best left for students to complete privately, even if you discuss some of this material afterward as a class.

Student Manual Pages

These facsimiles include suggested answers for the *Exercises* and *Reflections*, along with *Additional Notes* for discussion. Whether you work through the Student Manual as a class or simply review the material afterward, these notes can help you reinforce, apply, and assess what students discover in their reading.

Assessments

Reproducible *Lesson Quizzes* and *Unit Tests* are included in the back of this Teacher’s Manual, along with an *Answer Key*. These assessments mirror most of the *Content and Learning Objectives*, meaning they can help you check retention, comprehension, and application of key ideas.

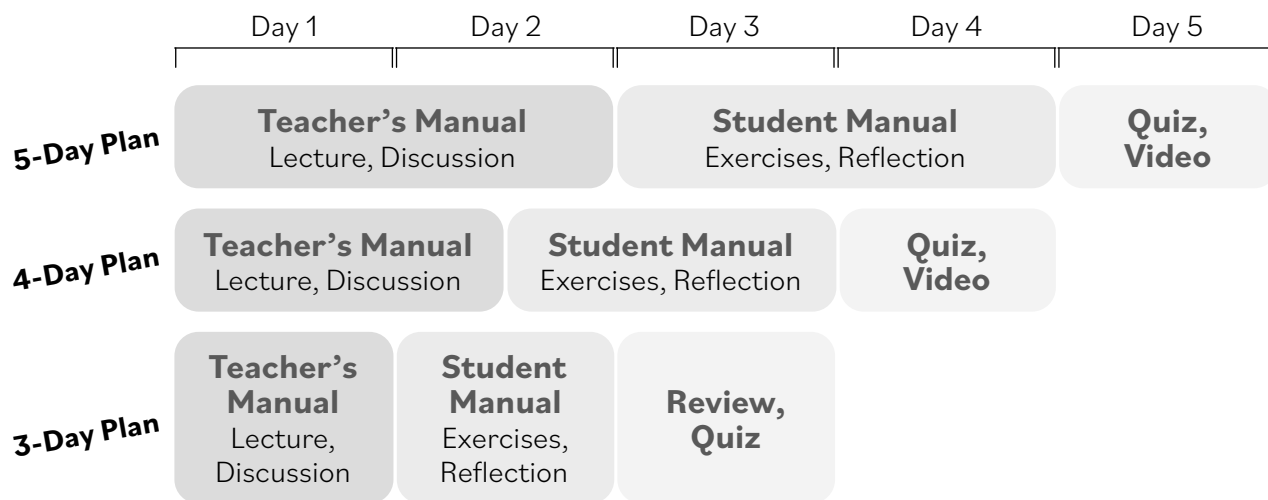
Students can study for quizzes and tests by reviewing the *Lecture Outline* and *Exercises* in the Student Manual. The assessments do not cover material from the *Additional Notes* or *Meditations*.

Video and Discussion

Available at postiveaction.org/peoplepositive, this free list of third-party videos can spark discussion relevant to the topics of the given lesson. For each video, you can print and distribute a listening handout, as well as a set of discussion questions.

Lesson Sequence

We wrote each lesson to be taught over a single school week. Depending on the number of days or sessions for your class, you can adjust the time spent on each component—or omit optional components entirely.



Scripture Memory

An optional Scripture memory program is included below and on page 6 of the Student Manual. Consider reviewing verses with students throughout the week, and ask students to write the given passage from memory on the back of their weekly quiz.

Ls.	Memory Verse	Ls.	Memory Verse	Ls.	Memory Verse
1	2 Corinthians 12:9	13	Psalms 1:1-2	25	Titus 3:1-2
2	1 John 3:2	14	John 15:12	26	Genesis 3:16
3	John 17:3	15	Proverbs 18:12	27	1 Corinthians 11:11-12
4	Ephesians 1:13-14	16	1 Corinthians 13:1-3	28	Genesis 2:24
5	1 John 4:19-20	17	Matthew 18:15	29	Ephesians 5:1-2
6	John 17:15-17	18	Review	30	Matthew 19:6
7	Luke 11:13	19	Matthew 16:18	31	1 Corinthians 7:4
8	Matthew 19:14	20	Matthew 28:19	32	Song of Solomon 7:10
9	Psalms 78:4	21	Romans 16:17	33	1 Corinthians 6:12
10	Ephesians 6:1-3	22	Proverbs 3:35	34	1 Corinthians 9:23
11	Proverbs 1:8-9	23	1 Peter 4:10	35	Review
12	Ecclesiastes 4:9-10	24	Matthew 6:33		

Extra Resources

You can purchase these digital resources from postiveaction.org/peoplepositive. The packet includes . . .

- **Lecture Presentations (PPT, KEY, PDF)** – Present lecture content while helping students fill in the outlines in their Student Manual. Using the pre-formatted slide layouts and text, you can also adapt the presentations with your own pictures and lesson content.
- **Answer Slides (PDF)** – Review the Student Manual material question by question, with suggested answers appearing as you progress.
- **Editable Quizzes and Tests (DOC)** – Edit and print your own versions of the assessments from this Teacher’s Manual.
- **Editable Quiz Slides (PPT, KEY, PDF)** – Save time and paper by administering quizzes in presentation form.

Teaching with a God-Focus

At Positive Action, we believe that the Bible is God’s self-revelation, the Word He gave to reveal His glory, grace, and love. Therefore, we write our studies to magnify His majesty, His works, and His nature. In each passage of the Bible, we look for how God reveals Himself, then how His message can shine through context, culture, language, and application. We challenge students first to stand in awe of God, to know and love Him, for that is the first step of any true change of character.

A God-focus is seeking God’s glory and grace through all things.

With this perspective, all of life, Creation, and Scripture becomes a window through which we can see the light of God’s goodness, power, and love. As His grace draws our gaze to Himself, we learn to rejoice in Him. Only then, standing before His holiness, will we repent, submit, and worship. He becomes the center of all thought, desire, and action—the focus of our love and hope.

If We Lose Focus

If We Maintain Focus

Scripture becomes a how-to manual for life, a book of arbitrary do’s and don’ts.	We see Scripture as more than just a map or rulebook—it is the story of God’s glory.
We learn only Bible history, Bible stories, Bible facts. We see only heroes and villains, not the God that guided them for His glory.	As we teach of Moses, Ruth, and David, we magnify the God that uses imperfect men and women to reflect His glory.
We mimic holiness out of obligation. We do not ask God to give us grace to reflect His love.	Before we teach of holiness and love, we point to the perfection and sacrifice of Christ.
Sin becomes a personal failure, a trip and a fall outside the fold. We consider our obedience an example of our strength.	When we sin, we do not simply break God’s law—we betray Christ’s love. And when we, by His grace, reflect His holiness, we do not just obey Him—we abide in Him.

Feedback

As a non-profit publishing ministry, we consider you our co-laborer in the faith. Each curriculum remains a work in progress, and the people who teach these studies have a great impact on the scope and format of every new edition. If you have any comments, questions, or concerns, please don't hesitate to contact us—we'd love to hear from you.

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A Final Word

We pray that this study will help you and your students know God's glory, grow in that knowledge, and share it with others. To benefit the most from this study, we'd encourage you to do the following:

- Spend time each day in the Word. Use the material in this study to guide your devotional reading so that you can present God's truth and love from the heart. Spend time marking and adjusting the lecture content to suit your students' needs.
- Pray for your students, and ask God to grow you.
- Be vulnerable to your students, expressing questions and confidence in equal measure. Encourage them to explore Scripture with you.
- Live out the love and truth that you want to see from your students.
- Depend on God's strength and grace, even in your weakness.

LESSON 1

WHY STUDY RELATIONSHIPS?

Content Objectives

- Scripture offers principles to guide our relationships with God and other people.
- Relationships present challenges that can be navigated with wisdom and love.
- Jesus responded with patience and love to relationship challenges.
- Faith and trust are critical ingredients to relationships.
- For the purposes of this study, “people positive” is an openness to the good that God performs through other people.

Learning Objectives

Students should be able to . . .

- Explain in general terms how Jesus responded to the needs of other people
- Describe the impact that choice and care can have on relationships
- Discuss relational skills or outcomes desired by the end of this study
- Discuss benefits of faith and trust in relationships

Vocabulary

- **Relationship** – A meaningful, recognizable connection between one person and another
- **Prophet / Prophetess** – In Scripture, someone with a message from God; a person who shares God’s truth, sometimes about the future
- **Disciple** – A student who follows a teacher; in Scripture, one of Jesus’ followers
- **Grace** – In Christian tradition, undeserved goodness, favor, or blessing from God
- **Synagogue** – A gathering place for Jews to learn and worship
- **Priest** – A person who performs religious duties; in Israel, a man who helped people worship God

Lecture & Discussion

Icebreaker Activity

Consider leading students through an icebreaker to ease them into discussion. Copy and cut out the cards at the end of this lesson (p. 17), and distribute them randomly to your students. Give the class about 10 minutes to find at least one student that matches the statement on each card.

Afterward, discuss ways that students discovered common ground with each other. Which statements would take a long time to come up in normal conversation?

We all have a lot in common. These similarities—and sometimes our differences—can form the basis for our relationships.

Defining Relationships

Discuss: What is a relationship? How could we define this word? What qualifies as a relationship?

Relationship can be difficult to define. It's one of those things that we all have but may not think about very often. Our relationships can be good or bad, close or distant. They shape our choices and alter the direction of our lives.

For this study, we'll use *relationship* very broadly.

Relationship

A meaningful, recognizable connection between one person and another

- These connections are *meaningful*—that is, at least one person has chosen the relationship or intends some purpose for it. We're not concerned with, say, someone who bumps into us as we walk by on the street.
- These connections are also *recognizable*. We won't try to imagine how your choices might affect someone on the other side of the planet. In one sense, all humans are connected, but there are limits to our awareness and ability to respond.

Relationships include many different feelings, expectations, obligations, benefits, and costs, but these can vary by type and closeness. So at its most basic, a *relationship* is how two people view each other—and how they act on their views.

Discuss: Which relationships matter most? Are relationships really that important? Can we survive without them? What might be some challenges of life without relationships?

Why Study Relationships?

God made us to live with others.

God designed us to live around other people, and He made people essential to our wellbeing. Our relationships—or lack thereof—can deeply affect our happiness, our success, and our health. Loneliness can aggravate stress, anxiety, and depression, which in turn can hurt our heart, blood pressure, and even longevity. On the other hand, good, healthy relationships can alleviate these problems and give us tools to find joy and fulfillment.

Even babies have a deep need to form safe, close relationships with their parents. We are born utterly dependent on others, so our infant brains spend a lot of energy trying to bond with a mother and communicate our needs to anyone who will listen. We cry for help—if a baby is born silent, there's a serious problem. And if children grow up without a chance to bond, they can face deep, long-lasting challenges when they try to form healthy relationships later.

Cultures have understood this for millennia, but in the 1800s and 1900s, science explored *why* and *how* children need to bond. With the rise of large hospitals and orphanages, we started to find out what kind of baseline care is essential to a child's development.

Critical View—Romanian Orphanages

From 1967 to 1989, Romania endured the rule of Nicolae Ceaușescu (chow-SES-koo). Ceaușescu was a Communist dictator who, like many dictators, thought he could control his country with threats, government programs, and social engineering. When he saw Romania's declining birthrate, he started a

national campaign to encourage women to have children. But at the same time, his economic policies made family life expensive and difficult. As a result, Romania experienced a huge baby boom—but there were also huge numbers of abandoned children. The Romanian government scrambled to provide care and housing for so many abandoned infants.

Then in 1989, as other Soviet states collapsed, revolutionaries overthrew the Romanian government and killed Ceaușescu. The country re-opened to outsiders, and people in the West discovered what Romanians had suffered for decades.

Most horrifying were the state-run orphanages, packed with children who had debilitating health issues. The caregivers for these children were emotionally detached, often refusing to offer attention beyond whatever kept the children alive. In many cases, only bare-minimum physical needs were met, as required by government regulations.

As a result, these children struggled in more ways than you might expect. Even with basic food, water, and medicine, many children simply died, and the survivors had underdeveloped brains—with a reduction in gray matter and differences in the prefrontal cortex.¹ Many children displayed behavioral problems like head-banging, violent outbursts, and almost no social skills. The lack of good, safe relationships had devastated these kids.

In the years following the dictatorship, these children faced incredible challenges. Thankfully, those who found loving families showed great progress in developing normal, playful, trusting personalities you'd want to see in children. But it was an uphill climb.

Scripture emphasizes relationships.

We study relationships not just for our own benefit, but also to better understand Scripture.

In Creation

God never intended for us to live without relationships. From the very beginning, He designed us to connect with others. We need the support of others, and we need the chance to support others, too.

After creating the first man, Adam, God said that it was not good for him to be alone (Gen. 2:18). So God created a woman. The two complemented each other with wonderful differences so that they could rely on each other. Adam, by himself, could not express the full range of human potential and experience. Neither could Eve. The two needed each other.

In the History of Israel

Much of the Old Testament serves as a history of the nation of Israel—the people that God chose to share His truth with the rest of the world. Any head-in-the-clouds philosopher can come up with rules and principles to govern a community, but it's hard to take those ideas seriously until they succeed in the real world.

God built up Israel in part to show us that yes, when we trust God and follow Him, we can discover joy, fulfillment, and hope. And when we disobey God—when we mistreat ourselves and others—we will face consequences. In Scripture, we see countless examples of people failing or succeeding by whether they respect God or ignore Him.

In the Prophets

God didn't just send fire and brimstone, and He didn't just paint His messages in the sky. God worked and spoke through people, like the **prophets**.

Prophet / Prophetess

In Scripture, someone with a message from God; a person who shares God's truth, sometimes about the future

¹ Kirsten Weir, "The lasting impact of neglect," *Monitor on Psychology*, June 2014, 36, <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2014/06/neglect>.

And even the prophets, for all their faith, needed other people. For example, the prophet Elijah sometimes felt like he was one of the last people in Israel who still cared about God. So God brought people into Elijah's life to encourage him. One time, when Israel was suffering through a long drought, God told a destitute widow to give the prophet her last bit of food (1 Kings 17:9). She did so, and God miraculously kept her food from running out. Through this sacrifice, God showed Elijah that he wasn't alone—that other people cared, too. Later, when Elijah almost gave up hope, God showed him even more people willing to do right (1 Kings 19:14–19).

In Wisdom Literature

God gave us an entire book on relationships—the book of Proverbs offers guidance on connections of all kinds. The wisdom here can help us discern between wise, righteous people and evil, foolish people. Good people will build up others carefully, but evil people will use others and tear them down (see Proverbs 12:26; 19:26; 27:6). God wouldn't have given this book to us if relationships weren't so important to our wellbeing and success.

The other wisdom books offer a lot of advice for relationships, too. For example, in Ecclesiastes, we find a frank opinion on the value of relationships overall.

Read Ecclesiastes 4:9–12. We all make mistakes. We all suffer hardships. But those troubles aren't so bad if we're surrounded by good, loving people. Permanent solitude only works out for perfect people who never make mistakes and never face problems. In other words, permanent solitude works out for *no one*.

In Jesus' Ministry

Read every bit of Jesus' teaching on Earth, and you'll find that almost all of it revolves around relationships.

- Even when Jesus taught about God the Father, He didn't list a bunch of dry doctrines or catechisms. Instead, He told stories and drew word-pictures to help us understand how God relates to us.
- And the Sermon on the Mount—the biggest collection of Jesus' teaching in Scripture (see Matt. 5–7; Luke 6:20–45)—is about how

believers should reflect love and truth to other people.

- In fact, Jesus summarized the entire moral law of Scripture in just two commands—love God and love others (Matt. 22:36–40).

If Jesus had left us with only His teaching, that by itself would have been a gift. But He also left us His example. He lived exactly what He taught. He healed people, fed people, and gave people His time and attention. Just as importantly, Jesus built relationships:

- As He grew up, He showed respect to His earthly parents and community (Luke 2:51–52).
- He visited His close friends—Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (Luke 10:38–39; John 11:5).
- He shared meals with people rejected by the rest of society (Matt. 9:10–13; Luke 19:1–10).
- He spent time answering questions from people like Nicodemus (John 3:1–21) and the woman at the well (John 4:1–45).
- And all this Jesus shared with His **disciples** so that they could one day teach it to their own disciples—and so on and so on until God's truth reached us today.

Disciple

A student who follows a teacher; in Scripture, one of Jesus' followers

We Christians should view ourselves as disciples of Jesus—as just the latest in a long line of people who learned from other people how to follow God. Much of the New Testament was written to help disciples from all kinds of backgrounds serve together in love and in hope.

God works through relationships today.

To help us grow

God works through relationships to help us grow individually. We discover the best version of ourselves by interacting with many kinds of people.

- From Proverbs, we learn the benefits of good friends (18:24; 27:6, 17) and a great number of counselors (11:14).
- From Paul in the New Testament, we learn that the church of Jesus is like a body with many different parts (1 Cor. 12:12–27). We have different skills and different problems, but we can all endure hardship and celebrate victories together. Our brothers and sisters in Christ can make good times better and bad times less bad.

Discuss: What can make it difficult to be around other Christians? On the other hand, how can Christians support each other?

When something significant and meaningful happens to you, the natural response is to share it. Connection and communication help us . . .

- Understand our feelings
- Gauge if our view of the situation is right or wrong
- Learn about better responses to the situation
- Place this situation within the broader story of our life
- Remember that we are not alone

Through relationships, God gives us encouragement and comfort—and often a strong nudge, if we need it. No relationship is perfect, but even rocky, unpleasant relationships can help us.

- When someone is difficult to love, we can try to reflect God’s own patient love for us.
- If we hurt a friend and need to make amends, we can ask for God’s help and wisdom.

These kinds of situations prompt us to trust God and learn more about Him.

To help us serve

God works in many ways—some mysterious and incomprehensible, and some crystal clear. Perhaps the most visible work happens through people like

you and me. God has chosen to accomplish His work chiefly through the efforts of His followers.

- Believers share the gospel.
- Believers give food to the hungry, care for the sick, and comfort for the brokenhearted (Matt. 25:35–40).

All this work requires relationships—even relationships that are hard to build. So it’s helpful to remember our weaknesses.

- We will never have completely perfect relationships.
- We will never completely figure out the best response to every situation.
- We will not successfully help every person we meet.

But we can trust God to work as we work. We spread the good news of Jesus—with our words and with our service—because we expect God to shine some light through us.

Relationships Are Difficult

God designed us to thrive and grow within our relationships, but that isn’t to say all relationships are easy or even good.

Illustrate—Global Loneliness

In a 2023 study based on interviews in 142 countries, almost 25% of people reported struggling with loneliness. Young adults reported loneliness more than the elderly.²

Why are relationships so difficult?

Complex People

Every person is a complicated mix of choices, experiences, secrets, desires, hopes, fears, and burdens—and all these things can change by the minute. People may seem wonderful one day and utterly revolting the next. The worst people sometimes have something to teach us, and the best people will

² “The Global State of Social Connections,” Gallup-Meta Reports, accessed March 5, 2024, <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/509675/state-of-social-connections.aspx>.

sometimes fail us. To have a mature relational outlook, we must first accept that people are messy.

Necessary Skills

Relationships take skills. Some relationships seem easy, but most require maturity and wisdom. These tools come with time and experience.

Discuss: Have you ever offended a friend or family member on accident? What did you learn from that experience?

If you never learn from your mistakes, you may keep pushing people away, even if you mean well. Given how important relationships are to your life, take the time to think seriously about ways you can improve your attitudes and treatment of others. Learn to show love with care.

Personal Fears

Relationships can get scary. Even healthy, supportive relationships can occasionally spark some fears. Some people have been hurt terribly—maybe even by someone close, like a friend or family member. One or two bad relationships can easily convince us to give up on the idea altogether.

Relationship Alternatives

Many people don't think they need true, deep, face-to-face relationships with other people. They try to survive on shallow alternatives—things that seem to fill their social needs, but don't require any real effort.

Discuss: What kinds of fake or shallow relationships can distract people from building true bonds with real people?

People can easily lose themselves in entertainment or social media. In principle, there's nothing wrong with these platforms or technology, but they can twist our expectations of real people and warp our ability to connect with others in a healthy way.

Cultural Division

Many people of all ages have lost the ability to respect and engage others who disagree. Countries in the West are increasingly divided over cultural and political issues, and leaders see little reason to debate

and discuss respectfully. The most popular figures in media or politics won't actually debate issues or find creative, constructive compromises—they'll just talk past each other toward their own favorite audiences.

As public discourse devolves into petty attacks, people retreat into groups of like-minded individuals. They only want to hear their preferred opinions fed back to them in witty ways. They trap themselves in so-called "echo chambers" that rarely disagree or challenge their assumptions. Opinions then become more important than facts—and narratives more important than evidence.

But if we surround ourselves only with those who look, think, or act like us, we stunt our growth and our empathy. We find it harder and harder to break out and talk calmly with someone who disagrees with us. We view all conflict as a threat to our identity, our safety, or the fate of our country. That fear can paralyze us and keep us from doing good in the world.

How do people respond badly to difficult relationships?

Relationships are difficult to begin with, but when people respond badly to bad relationships, they compound the difficulty further.

Complete Withdrawal

Again, some people decide that relationships will never work out. They give up trying to have deep, meaningful, encouraging friendships or connections. They may live alone, or they may simply never share their thoughts with others.

Shallow Relationships

Again, some people try to meet their social needs by hundreds and hundreds of shallow, meaningless connections—like someone trying to build a balanced diet out of just candy and soda.

Shallow relationships are especially popular in online communities, especially one-dimensional groups built around topics like movies, sports, hobbies, or gaming. But these rarely give us a chance to connect with others in a way that lets us feel and express like a whole person. These communities don't ask much

from us, and they also don't want us to share the messy, complicated parts of ourselves. As a result, they don't provide an enduring sense of belonging.

But still, many people rely on online networks and social media to meet their need for a community. This can take up time and energy better spent on face-to-face friends.

- **Distortion** – When we connect with people online, we can't appreciate the whole of their personality, flaws, strengths, knowledge, and biases. Online discussions are mediated and filtered so heavily that we lose any realistic sense of what so-called "normal" people look like, feel like, or act like. In fact, we often can't ensure we're connecting with real people at all. We might be directing all our anger, envy, or concern toward a corporate-funded brand personality or even just a mindless machine. This can radically distort expectations for ourselves and our real-life communities.
- **Unreliability** – We may know a lot of people online without actually reaping the benefits of a face-to-face relationship. We feel good if a thousand people like a picture we've posted, but how many of those people can we trust to feed our dog if we go to the hospital, or listen to us talk after a grandparent dies?
- **Danger** – If our online communities encourage us to share too much of ourselves, we risk exposing ourselves to mockery, threats, and exploitation. It's not safe to share personal details online.

Online communities are often a mile wide and an inch deep—meaning they can help us learn about important topics and even offer some great advice and support, but they usually can't address the full range of day-to-day social needs met by true, dependable, face-to-face friends and family.

Online tools can help us keep up with our family and friends—they are great supplements to our relationships. But we should take care that these tools do not distort or replace our real-world connections.

Radicalized Communities

There are groups, on the other hand, that offer an intense level of community or belonging, usually at great personal sacrifice. Gangs and radical political movements seem attractive to people who want power and purpose. For a while, at least, the group offers its members a way to channel their anger and violence.

Transactional Relationships

Some people want connection so badly that they're willing to buy it—maybe with money, with gifts, favors, or whatever else. They just want someone to at least pretend to be their friend.

It might sound extreme to pay someone for a relationship, but people often try to earn their way into relationships—giving while expecting others to give back in the same way.

Discuss: Have you ever been given something—only to find out that the giver expected something in return?

Abusive Relationships

We'll talk about this later in the study, but many people stay in harmful and demeaning relationships just because they're scared to try leaving. They'll put up with terrible treatment in exchange for some kind of security.

About "People Positive"

What does it mean?

Our communities, our society, and our world face incredible challenges. And precisely none of those problems can be solved by one person alone. People need each other, and that's how God works—through the bonds of family, friendship, and faith.

But relationships may still sound useless or even scary to you. You may have seen plenty of bad relationships up until now. You may have given up on your family or community or church. You may have decided that if some space agency calls for a single volunteer to take a one-way trip to Neptune, you'd go in a heartbeat.

But during this study, consider for a while that relationships, communities, and people in general can offer you a world of incredible experiences and fulfillment. Look for God’s *grace* in others.

Grace

In Christian tradition, undeserved goodness, favor, or blessing from God

To bless us, challenge us, and grow us, God often works through other people. These lessons will hopefully give you some social and emotional tools to help you connect without losing your sanity or your sense of self. It is possible to build good, healthy, safe relationships, and it starts with a positive attitude—that is, an openness to the good that comes through others.

So to be “people positive” . . .

- We reflect God’s love and truth to others as best as we can.
- We challenge ourselves to learn and grow and connect.
- And we look for ways that God works in and through others.

All this takes love, faith, and wisdom—and thankfully, God offers all these things to His children.

What will we study?

In our study this year, we’ll focus on six major areas of relationships.

- **You and your God**—Why did God create us? What has He done for us? Can we trust Him?
- **You and your family**—What does a good home look like? Is any family perfect? What makes a good parent? What’s our responsibility as children?

- **You and your friends**—How can we find good friends? How can we *be* good friends? How can we fix relationships that are falling apart?
- **You and the church**—What is the church for? Where do we fit in it?
- **You and your community**—What do we owe our community? How can we develop and use our gifts? How do we think about ideas like work, charity, and government?
- **You and the other sex**—How do we relate to men and women in respectful, godly ways? What makes a good spouse? How do we build a relationship that might lead to marriage?

Conclusion

People can be a huge pain. We can’t ignore that. We live in a fallen world, and some people are just mean and hurtful. If we only looked at their faults, none of us would be “people positive.”

But people are also God’s instruments of healing and growth. With time, experience, and maturity, we can choose and build good relationships.

And as we connect with others, we can see that God has our good in mind (Rom. 8:28). He can work through many kinds of relationships—even bad ones—to help us become more like Jesus. The greatest joys and successes can come to us through people.

It takes faith to believe this and stay positive, especially when we feel doubt and fear. But as we take tiny steps of love and wisdom, God will work through our effort and build our trust in Him.

I speak more than one language fluently.

Names:

I've never played a video game on a console.

Names:

I've never ridden on a bus, train, or plane.

Names:

I can spell the word *conscientious* without help.

Names:

My favorite academic subject is math.

Names:

I've watched a black-and-white film in the last year.

Names:

My favorite academic subject is literature.

Names:

I play at least three musical instruments.

Names:

I don't use social media.

Names:

I have green eyes.

Names:

I've lived in one town or city my whole life.

Names:

I have a parent who has served in the military.

Names:

I have a relative who works in farming or agriculture.

Names:

I've read the entire New Testament.

Names:

I like pineapple on my pizza.

Names:

I've been to Europe.

Names:

I've read at least ten books this year.

Names:

I've been to South America.

Names:

I worked an hourly job before this school year.

Names:

I've sewn at least one article of clothing.

Names:

I've broken a bone.

Names:

I've played at least three different league sports.

Names:

I went camping last summer.

Names:

I've cooked a meal for my family in the past week.

Names:

I have at least one grandparent living at my home.

Names:

I dislike any kind of tea.

Names:

LESSON 1
WHY STUDY
RELATIONSHIPS?

Relationship

A meaningful, recognizable connection between one person and another

God made us
to live with
others
(Gen. 2:18).

WHY STUDY
RELATIONSHIPS?

Relationships
are difficult.

Scripture emphasizes relationships.

- In Creation
- In the History of Israel
- In the Prophets
- In Wisdom Literature
- In Jesus' Ministry

God works through relationships today.

- To help us grow
- To help us serve

Why are relationships so difficult?

Complex People

Necessary Skills

Personal Fears

Relationship Alternatives

Cultural Division

How do people respond badly to difficult relationships?

Complete Withdrawal _____

Shallow Relationships _____

Radicalized Communities _____

Transactional Relationships _____

Abusive Relationships _____

PEOPLE POSITIVE

Grace

In Christian tradition, undeserved goodness, favor, or blessing from God

What does it mean?

To be “people positive” . . .

- We reflect God’s *love and truth* _____ to others as best as we can.
- We challenge ourselves to *learn, grow, and connect* _____.
- And we look for ways that God *works* _____ in and through others.

What will we study?

We’ll focus on six major areas of relationships:

- You and your *God* _____
- You and your *family* _____
- You and your *friends* _____
- You and the *church* _____
- You and your *community* _____
- You and the *other sex* _____

Exercises

The Neverending Crowds

Jesus’ ministry revolved around people. Our Messiah—God in the flesh, the all-powerful Lord of Creation—chose to live among us. Day after day, Jesus reached out to others, even when He felt tired.

- ▶ Let’s look at just one slice of Jesus’ time on Earth. Read the following passages in **Matthew 13-14** and mark the correct ending for each sentence.

Matthew 13:53-58 – When Jesus taught at His hometown *synagogue* in Nazareth, the people there . . .

<input type="checkbox"/> trusted Him because of His family reputation.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> did not believe Him.	<input type="checkbox"/> did not even remember Him.
--	--	---

Matthew 14:9-13 – After hearing that His relative John had been killed by King Herod, Jesus . . .

<input type="checkbox"/> preached against the king.	<input type="checkbox"/> spent time with His friends.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> went to a quiet place alone.
---	---	--

Matthew 14:13-21 – When Jesus saw a huge crowd that had followed Him around the Sea of Galilee, He . . .

<input type="checkbox"/> blessed them and got back into the boat.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> felt compassion, healed their sick, and fed them.	<input type="checkbox"/> condemned them for ignoring His grief.
---	---	---

Matthew 14:22-23 – When Jesus was finally alone, He chose to . . .

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> hike a mountain and pray.	<input type="checkbox"/> walk along the sea.	<input type="checkbox"/> travel back to His hometown.
---	--	---

Matthew 14:24-27 – Meanwhile, Jesus’ disciples got caught in a storm. So Jesus . . .

<input type="checkbox"/> prayed for them.	<input type="checkbox"/> found new followers.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> walked out to them on the sea.
---	---	--

Matthew 14:28-36 – After Jesus calmed the storm and made it back to shore, another crowd surrounded Him and tried to . . .

<input type="checkbox"/> attack Him.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> touch His robe.	<input type="checkbox"/> offer Him food.
--------------------------------------	---	--

The Synagogue

In Jesus’ day, the nation of Israel had been conquered by the Roman empire. At times, the Romans restricted worship in the Temple at Jerusalem, and many Jews had scattered far beyond the old borders of Israel. Wherever possible, Jews formed *synagogues*, or places of assembly. Tradition required ten adult males (called a *Minyan*) to establish a spiritual community. These assemblies helped maintain Jewish beliefs and culture.

Throughout the New Testament, we read about early Jewish Christians teaching at synagogues (Acts 13:4-5, 15-16, 42-43), even though some Jews later viewed Christianity as a distortion of their religion.

Man of Sorrows

Jesus likely dealt with grief after John’s death, but there’s an even clearer example with the death of Lazarus. **Read John 11:33-36.** Lazarus was Jesus’ friend, and when Jesus saw Lazarus’ sisters weeping, He wept, too. He was moved and troubled, and He didn’t hide His sorrow. The prophet Isaiah called Jesus a “man of sorrows” (Isa. 53:3)—someone who knew grief well.

Jesus didn’t have an easy, peaceful life, and as we read in Hebrews 4, that was on purpose. Jesus endured weakness, temptation, and sorrow to become a sympathetic priest for us. Jesus could have avoided all this. He could perform miracles, command angels, and do anything else He wanted, but He chose to walk our path and feel what we feel. Now, Jesus is the perfect mediator between us and the Father—fully God and fully human.



Understand that Jesus was both fully God and fully human—meaning He always did the right thing, but He also felt pain and weariness, just like us.

▷ In Matthew 13-14, how did Jesus show His Godhood?

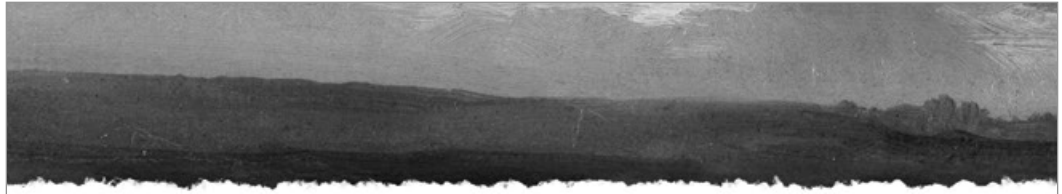
Answers will vary. Jesus showed love, and He performed miracles like feeding the crowds and walking on water.

▷ In those same passages, how did Jesus show His humanity?

Answers will vary. Jesus got tired, weary, and sad. He needed rest.

Discuss

- What verses in Matthew 13-14 implied Jesus' deity or humanity?
- Why do you think Jesus put up with difficult, tiring people?
- If we're supposed to follow or imitate Jesus, what do you think we can learn from His example here?



The Nature of Faith

Read Hebrews 11:1. This is perhaps the simplest definition of faith in Scripture—it is a firm belief in things we haven't yet seen. Faith doesn't depend on evidence or logic or feelings; it's a willingness to give God the chance to prove Himself.

Hebrews 11 surveys a handful of believers from the Old Testament, all of whom put their faith in God. Many of them suffered, and all of them died before seeing God fulfill His biggest promises, but that was OK—because they viewed themselves as travelers or refugees in this world (v. 13). God will not fully reward our faith until we reach heaven.

In the meantime, every day, bit by bit, as we follow God, He will hold us up.

Weakness and Faith

Some parts of Jesus' ministry don't make sense, at first. If Jesus was God and could do anything He chose to do—like feed thousands of people or walk on water—why did He let Himself be tired or hungry?

▷ Read **Hebrews 4:14-16** and complete the following summary statements.

- Because Jesus _____ is our **priest**, we should cling to our belief.
- He understands and empathizes with our weaknesses / infirmities _____.
- He was tempted _____ just like us, but He did not sin.
- Now we can go confidently to the throne of grace _____.
If we ask God for help, He'll give us what we need.

Jesus became human to show us empathy and hope. He suffered the same kinds of stress and pain we do, but instead of falling into sin, He proved that there's always a way to do right and show love, no matter the situation.

In Christianity, weakness is nothing to fear or condemn. After all, compared to God, we're all weak and helpless.

▷ Read **2 Corinthians 12:9**, where Paul shares something Jesus told him. Summarize Paul's view of human weakness.

Answers will vary. Paul believed that his weakness gave him an opportunity to see the strength of Christ.

Our weakness reminds us that we need God. To see God work through us, we just need humility and faith.



▷ Look back at **Matthew 14:24–32** and mark the correct answers.

• **Out on the sea, what was Peter willing to do (v. 28)?**

- Throw a rope out to Jesus
- Row the boat closer to Jesus
- Walk out on the water to Jesus

• **Peter trusted at first, but what distracted him (vv. 29–30)?**

- Jesus' instructions
- The wind and the waves
- The shouts of the disciples

• **After taking hold of Peter, what did Jesus ask him to think about (vv. 31–32)?**

- How anyone could walk on water
- Why he doubted
- The danger of storms

We're all like Peter. We have a little faith, but we can get distracted. It's in our nature to fear and to doubt—and in a way, that's healthy. Caution keeps us from stumbling into danger. Storms *should* be a little scary.

But if we want a good relationship with God—and other people—we must learn to trust and follow Jesus. We might take little steps at first, careful of the waves, and we might even start to sink. But as we keep our eyes on Jesus, walking toward Him, He will keep us in His hands (John 10:29).

▷ The writer of Hebrews pictures our faith as a race. Read **Hebrews 12:1–2** and finish the following summaries.

- As believers, we should lay aside / put away / throw off / rid ourselves of every sinful distraction.
- We should run this race with patience / endurance / perseverance .
- And we should look to Jesus, the author / founder / pioneer and perfecter / finisher of our faith.

We can't force ourselves to have more faith. We need God to build that up inside us. We can only seek Him, follow Him, and watch Him fulfill our trust. He will lead us to a better, closer relationship with Him, which will help us build better, closer relationships with other people.

The Source of Faith

Jesus is the source of all true faith:

- He gave us a reason for faith by dying on the cross and rising again.
- And He builds up faith inside us as we follow Him.

Faith doesn't come suddenly from nowhere, nor does it grow in our hearts because we work really hard. To build our faith, we must depend on God and watch for ways He rewards our trust.

Self-Reflection

Discuss

- Thinking about your best and most important relationships—how can even those be difficult, sometimes?
- What’s the biggest thing today keeping teenagers from building healthy relationships?
- How many deep, healthy relationships do you think the average person needs? Is quantity or quality more important?
- What kinds of relationship skills have you learned even in the past few years?
- Would you want to share any of your responses to the last prompt? What are some things you hope to learn about during this study?

▷ Think about the relationships you consider the most important. Write down three people—close or distant—that have a big impact on your life.

- _____
- _____
- _____

▷ What about relationships seems difficult? What could keep you from connecting to others in healthy ways?

▷ Think about one relationship that sparks some worry or fear. How would you like to improve your relationship with this person?

▷ As you work through this book, what are some relationship skills you’d like to learn?

▷ Finally, write at least three relationship questions you’d like answered by your study this year.

- _____
- _____
- _____

Meditation

▷ Read **Hebrews 11**.

- What things cannot be proven—that is, what beliefs can we accept *only* by faith (vv. 1-3, 6)?
- What did God do through the faithful people listed in this chapter?
- What do we have that these Old Testament believers did not (vv. 39-40)? What truth has God given us to make our faith stronger?

Vocabulary

- **Relationship** - A meaningful, recognizable connection between one person and another
- **Prophet / Prophetess** - In Scripture, someone with a message from God; a person who shares God's truth, sometimes about the future
- **Disciple** - A student who follows a teacher; in Scripture, one of Jesus' followers
- **Grace** - In Christian tradition, undeserved goodness, favor, or blessing from God
- **Synagogue** - A gathering place for Jews to learn and worship
- **Priest** - A person who performs religious duties; in Israel, a man who helped people worship God

LESSON 2

GOD OUR CREATOR

Content Objectives

- Scripture describes a God very different from pagan deities.
- God is powerful, holy, and good.
- God created humanity in His image, thereby allowing us a relationship with Him.

Learning Objectives

Students should be able to . . .

- Summarize biblical descriptions of God’s power, holiness, and goodness
- Explain ways in which God exemplifies an ideal parental figure
- Discuss the significance of God’s image to our identity and morality
- Describe at least two tensions or conflicts in building our personal identity

Vocabulary

- ***Yahweh*** – Term used in the Hebrew Bible to refer to God; means “I am”
- ***Covenant*** – A strong, binding promise, often between two parties
- ***Sovereignty*** – In Scripture, God’s absolute control over all things, despite acts of evil and rebellion against Him
- ***Holiness*** – In Scripture, a word to describe God’s unique perfection and exaltation
- ***Sin*** – The rejection of God and His goodness; disobeying God’s commands
- ***Materialism*** – The view that all things can be explained by physical processes and that no spiritual realms exist
- ***Determinism*** – The view that all events and choices are actually dictated by natural processes or a higher will, and that individuals have no true freedom
- ***Egocentrism*** – The attempt to understand others entirely through our own experiences and values; an unwillingness to accept that other people think and feel differently than we do
- ***Integrity*** – The commitment to personally held beliefs and morality; intrinsic strength

Lecture & Discussion

God is our heavenly Father. It's easy to forget what a privilege it is to call Him that. He created us, and despite our ignorance, hatred, and sin, He chose to build a relationship with us.

Views of God

Consider asking students to share different perspectives on God's character and work:

- What words do people use to describe God?
- How is God portrayed in storybooks, online discussions, and popular media?
- What negative views of God have you heard from friends or family?

Describing the Iron Age Gods

When you study other religions—especially ancient religions—you'll realize why the God who spoke with Abraham is so unique. To people living in the Old Testament era, the God of Israel seems strange. He wasn't like the Iron Age gods who demanded only war, blood, and depravity.

Illustrate—Ra

Ancient Egyptians worshiped many gods, but a favorite was the sun god. This god had many forms throughout history—including Amun, Horus, or Khepri—but perhaps the most famous was Ra.

People worshiped Ra as the first life, a being born out of ancient chaos before anything else existed. He created the first set of Egyptian gods, who would in turn create water, earth, and sky. During the day, he sailed his sun-ship across the sky, and then at night, he traveled through the underworld to return to his original position before morning.

Egypt's rulers, the Pharaohs, eventually claimed to be Ra's children. They presented their power as fixed and unmovable—as sure as the sun rising each morning.

Illustrate—Baal

In ancient Hebrew, the word *baal* means “lord” or “ruler.” So when we read of people worshiping capital-B *Baal* in the Old Testament, they were probably worshiping their own local version of a popular god-concept.

The most common version of Baal was the god of storms, wind, sky, and clouds—in a farmer's mind, the god most vital to life and fertility. When Baal was pleased, he offered rain and dew. When angry, he let loose the worst kind of weather. Baal didn't offer many scriptures or promises, so his followers didn't know how to keep him happy.

As a god of fertility, Baal served as a focus for cultural depravity. People portrayed him as the husband or lover of a number of popular feminine deities—including his sister and at least one divine cow. Worship of Baal could involve ritualistic prostitution, mutilation, and even human sacrifice.

Baal and Ra were just two popular deities in a pantheon of gods worshiped by ancient cultures. But these gods, like all other made-up idols and ideologies, simply reflected human nature. They were corrupt, fickle, irrational beings who promoted debauchery, despair, and death.

Describing Yahweh

Imagine, then, how surprising the God of Scripture could be.

- What if there was a God who didn't cater to our base desires? What if God told us not to care about wealth and fame? What if He challenged us to do better and be better?
- What if there was a God who didn't exist to support a ruling class—who didn't serve the whims of a small elite? What if there was a God that kings and queens could not control?
- What if there was a God who ruled everything because He created everything? What if He offered salvation to all people?
- What if there was a God who offered us more than chaos? What if God told us clearly what He

expected? What if God offered promises and then kept them?

You may already know of Moses, the prophet that helped lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. But for a long time, Moses didn't seem destined to be a spiritual leader.

- Moses was born to Hebrew slaves, but through an apparent coincidence, he was raised by the daughter of a Pharaoh.
- Around the age of 40, Moses killed an Egyptian and had to flee the country. He settled down in the desert, married, and worked as a shepherd.
- Finally, at the age of 80, he discovered his life's true purpose. One day, in the wilderness, he heard God's voice coming out of a burning bush. This might have been the first time an Israelite had heard from God in hundreds of years.

Moses probably knew little of God—maybe only stories and oral traditions. So God had to reintroduce Himself.

Discuss: If you were introducing or describing God to someone, how would your introduction change if the person . . .

- Grew up in a culture that worshiped many gods and idols?
- Did not believe in any spiritual or supernatural things at all?
- Was raised in a harsh, unloving family that claimed to be Christian, but didn't live like it?

When Moses asked for God's name, God offered the word **Yahweh**—the “I am,” the One who is eternal, who holds the past, present, and future of the universe in His hands.

Yahweh

Term used in the Hebrew Bible to refer to God; means “I am”

This was the all-powerful Being who promised that He would always be with His people (Gen. 17:1–8). Unlike other gods, Yahweh related to His people through

covenants so they'd always know where they stood with Him.

Covenant

A strong, binding promise, often between two parties

Unlike a god of the weather or the sun, Yahweh chose to form relationships, communicate expectations, and establish trust. He created people with an ability to know Him. No, we can't *comprehend* Him or fully understand all His attributes, but we can relate to Him in some way. We can know enough.

But what is God like? How can we at least begin to describe Him? Here are three big ways.

God is powerful.

God calls Himself almighty (Gen. 17:1), the King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Rev. 19:16). He sees everything (Ps. 139; Prov. 15:3), knows everything (Ps. 33:13–15; Heb. 4:12–13), and can accomplish anything He chooses. Theologians call Him omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. We can use pictures or metaphors to describe God's power, but every example falls short of His majesty. The entirety of Scripture gives us only the faintest glimpse of His glory (see John 21:25; 1 Cor. 13:12).

Illustrate—God's Work of Creation

We read about God's power at the very beginning of the Bible, in Genesis 1, where God creates Earth and everything else in the universe—all its laws, order, meaning, and even time itself.

First, He filled this Creation with *objects*—things that could eat, move, walk, and even think—but these things couldn't talk with God.

Then God created a man, Adam—a being that could reflect God's own thoughts. Adam looked around for a companion among the animals, but couldn't find one. He was a *subject* in a world of *objects*. He understood the meaning of *you* and *me*, along with concepts like freedom, joy, identity, knowledge, and foresight—but nothing else on Earth did.

So God, using Adam’s own flesh, created another person—somewhat different, somewhat the same. She was the first woman, Eve, and she, just like Adam, could talk with God.

Now, not only could these two people relate with God, but they could also appreciate each other as eternal persons. Animals could only interact with each other as objects in the here and now, but humans could connect with each other as subjects—intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually.

God called His Creation very good. And even though the first man and woman sinned—even though they turned from God and loosed death on the world—the created universe still reflected part of God’s majesty.

Since all Creation depends on its Creator, God maintains His control. His **sovereignty** does not waver.

Sovereignty

In Scripture, God’s absolute control over all things, despite acts of evil and rebellion against Him

Throughout Scripture, God reminds people of His power—even when they made up other gods to replace Him. In fact, many miracles in the Old Testament specifically reveal God’s power over false deities.

Illustrate—The Plagues of Egypt

When the Egyptians refused to free the people of Israel from slavery, God released ten disasters, or plagues, on the country. During the first plague, the entire Nile turned to blood (Exo. 7:20–24)—utterly dismissing the power of Hapi, the river god. The plagues continued, each undermining the Egyptians’ trust in their pantheon. And with the ninth plague, God sent three days of total darkness (Exo. 10:21–22). Where was the sun god Ra then?

Illustrate—Fire on Mount Carmel

Likewise, when the people of Israel worshiped Baal, God sent the prophet Elijah to call them back. On Mount Carmel, Elijah challenged the priests of Baal to a test—if two altars were built and two sacrifices

were offered, which deity would show up to accept worship?

So the priests of Baal spent hours praying and dancing and begging and even cutting themselves to get the attention of their god—but Baal never appeared.

Elijah, on the other hand, rebuilt a fallen altar to God, drenched it in water, and said a simple prayer. **Read 1 Kings 18:36–39.** Scripture doesn’t record this event just to amaze us with some divine pyrotechnics. This is a challenge to compare Yahweh with the false gods around you—and ask the real power to show up in your life.

But God’s power is just one part of the picture. What is this power used for? What is God’s character?

God is holy.

Discuss: How would you define the words *holy* or *holiness*?

When we say that God is holy, we mean that He is both perfect and exalted.

He is perfect.

God is Himself light, truth, and justice. In Him exists no sin or wrong thing (1 John 1:5).

We could say that God is good, righteous, and perfect. Those adjectives *describe* Him well, but no words can give us a complete picture of Him. They cannot *define* Him. In fact, the opposite is true—it’s God who defines ideas like *good*, *righteous*, and *perfect*. These concepts are rooted in His character. If we want to understand goodness, righteousness, and perfection, we must look to God.

Contextualize—What Is Good or Bad?

Something is only good to the extent that it reflects God.

- For example, *truth* is good because it accurately reflects God and the world He created.
- *Lies* are bad because God does not lie. Lies reject and twist God’s truth.

So at a higher level, we could define **sin** as a turning from God.

Sin

The rejection of God and His goodness; disobeying God's commands

- We sin when we turn away from God.
- We sin when we step away from what God says is good and right (1 John 3:4).
- We sin when we worship someone or something other than God.
- We sin when we spread a lie that contradicts God's truth.
- We sin when we harm other people—God's created—for selfish reasons.

When we talk about sin, we shouldn't focus on superficial concepts like what makes us feel bad or what seems wrong. Sin is just the opposite direction of God's goodness and light. It's hiding in the shadow of our pride and selfishness.

When we understand the nature of sin, it's easier to talk about God's holiness. God does not sin because He will never *not be God*. He is unchangeable, always the same (Mal. 3:6). He reveals different facets of Himself throughout the Bible, and He may help different people in different ways, but He will always be the same God.

He is exalted.

In Isaiah 6, the prophet had a vision of God on His throne in heaven. Around God, angels repeated one phrase. **Read Isaiah 6:3.**

This vision of perfection struck Isaiah so deeply that he despaired over his sin. Isaiah saw that God was *exalted*—lifted high above everything and everyone else. Nothing could compare to God—He is in a category of one.

God is above, and God is eternal. He has no beginning, middle, or end. As Yahweh, He always simply *is*. Again, time means nothing to Him (Ps. 90:4)—He transcends time, space, and all our understanding. To Him,

everything that *was, is, and will be* lies entirely within His view.

Illustrate—A Cloud of Darkness

This is why God, especially in the Old Testament, shrouded His majesty in things like clouds or pillars of fire or even darkness. God told Moses that the fullness of His glory would be too much for any person to see and survive (Exo. 33:20).

So God's might and wisdom transcends the knowable universe. How then can we know Him? This only makes sense when we consider the last big idea.

God is good.

Why does God connect with us? Because He is good. From Him comes every good thing (James 1:17). He *is* love, and He shares all His goodness with those He calls sons and daughters (1 John 3:1–3).

Illustrate—The First Man and Woman

Before the first sin, God walked and talked with Adam and Eve around their garden home. Even after the Fall, God gave people hope with a promise—the promise of a Savior who would build a bridge across the void of sin and death, all the way back to God.

Illustrate—To Israel

Many years later, God created a special relationship between Himself and the family of Abraham and Sarah. Their descendants, the people of Israel, would be God's chosen people, and they would serve as examples of God's truth and love. Not all of them would trust God—some would even reject Him—but through them, God would reveal Himself to the rest of the world.

So, long after Abraham, God freed Israel from slavery in Egypt and then led them to a new home. On the way, the people made a tabernacle—a large tent that served as a temple wherever they made camp. There, in that place, in that time, the eternal, all-powerful God rested His presence. The tabernacle—and later, a more permanent temple—became the intersection of the finite and the infinite. Though God could be anywhere and do anything, He chose to focus His

love on a group of ex-slaves and nomads—people that the rest of the world didn't care for.

Pictures of God's Care

God's love takes many forms—sometimes soft, simple instruction and sometimes firm, strict correction. Scripture includes many images to help us.

A Shepherd - Psalm 23

In Psalm 23, David presents God as a shepherd, one who leads His sheep through green pastures and even dark valleys. In God we find care and security that no one else could give us.

A Rock - 2 Samuel 22:3

God is our rock—our refuge, our shield, our fortress, our stronghold. He exercises His power to protect us. We can suffer physical harm, but He allows no one to touch our eternal soul. Our fate and destiny lie safe with Him, and no one can pluck us out of His hands (John 10:27–30).

A Bear, a Lion, and a Hen - Hosea 13:4–8; Matthew 23:37

In Hosea 13, God compares Himself to a mother bear and a lion, saying that those who threaten His children will invite His anger and destruction. God's love is personal, and it responds to threats the way that true love should.

Elsewhere, God describes His love as the kind of comfort and nourishment a mother provides her young children (Isa. 49:15; 66:13), and Jesus compares His care for Israel to a mother hen who gathers her chicks under her wings (Matt. 23:37; Luke 13:34). Jesus taught us that God has the same natural affection for His children that an earthly father should have for his own. God will not deny us the spiritual food and support we need (Luke 11:11–13), nor will He give us anything that would damage our relationship with Him (James 1:13). We can approach God with the trust and affection of little children (Rom. 8:14–15) who leap into their dad's arms.

Our Rescuer - 2 Timothy 4:18

God is the God that rescues people despite their sin. In countless stories, God shows His willingness

to redeem everyone who trusts Him. We made this mess, but God still offers to pull us up and out of it.

- God took Moses, a murderer with a speech problem, and made him into His chosen spokesperson.
- God redeemed Rahab, a prostitute living in the pagan city of Jericho, as well as Ruth, a homeless Moabite woman caring for the mother of her dead husband. Both of these amazing women were ancestors of Jesus, who was unashamed to be their descendant.
- David, Ruth's great-grandson, was a mere shepherd boy when God protected Him against a lion, a bear, and a gigantic Philistine warrior. And despite David's many faults and failures, God made him king of Israel and an ancestor of Jesus, just like Rahab and Ruth.

Missing Theology

Ask students to think briefly about the three attributes discussed—God's power, holiness, and love—and try to describe a concept of God that lacks one of those attributes. How can we pervert our theology when we neglect a critical part of God's character?

The Gift of God's Image

Power, holiness, and goodness—all three are important facets of God's unique nature. As we study these ideas, we can develop a closer relationship with Him.

But how can such a relationship even be possible? Because God, in His power and love, gave us His image.

Read Genesis 1:27. God made the first man and the first woman in a way that somehow, indescribably, reflected His own Person. Perhaps the first gift that God gave humanity was the capacity to have a one-to-one, I-to-You relationship with their Creator. We were designed from the ground up to need God, love God, and reflect God. If the universe is God's painting, we are His signature.

Contextualize—Different Conceptions of God’s Image

Scholars of the Bible have suggested different ideas about what “God’s image” actually is.

- **Image as Being** – Some believe it’s inside of us—as some intrinsic part of our self or soul.
- **Image as Doing** – Some believe the image describes a role or calling that we can fulfill. In this view, the image is something we can accomplish or earn by following God or taking control of His Creation.
- **Image as Relationship** – Finally, some scholars believe that the image emerges only when we have a relationship with God. In this view, we can see the image when someone walks and talks closely with God.

Our Opinion

The authors of this study lean toward the first view—that God’s image is an intrinsic part of each of us, no matter who we are or what we do, and this image somehow helps us connect with God.

The Student Manual exercises in this lesson will explore more about our identity as image-bearers.

Conclusion

The Bible is full of unlikely people showcasing God’s love—because *all* of us are unlikely. We all sin (Rom. 3:23), and we all deserve death (Rom. 5:12–14; 6:23). But God offers us life.

That life came in the form of Jesus Christ (John 14:6), God in the flesh, who showed us God’s power, God’s holiness, and God’s love in a way that no symbol, no picture, no parchment ever could. Jesus was and is the clearest image of our Creator God (Heb. 1:3).

Why must we study God when we study relationships? Because His goodness should be the model and template for all our earthly ties.

As our Creator, God is the perfect example of a parent. Unlike earthly fathers and mothers, He will never fail us. And as we rest in that kind of love, His grace overflows from our lives into the lives of others.

In the next lesson, we’ll continue to study God—specifically, the life of Jesus and the relationship He offers us.

LESSON 2

GOD OUR CREATOR

Describing the Iron Age Gods

- Reflected human desire and depravity
- Reinforced a ruling class
- Often bound to a land or tribe
- Unpredictable and unstable

Describing Yahweh

- Does not cater to our base desires
- Cannot be controlled by earthly rulers
- Created all and offers salvation to all
- Offers promises and keeps them

Yahweh

Term used in the Hebrew Bible to refer to God; means “I am”

God is *powerful* _____.

- He calls Himself Almighty (Gen. 17:1).
- He sees everything (Ps. 139; Prov. 15:3).
- He knows everything (Ps. 33:13-15; Heb. 4:12-13).
- He created the universe and humanity (Gen. 1).
- He shows power over false gods (Exo. 7-12; 1 Kings 18).

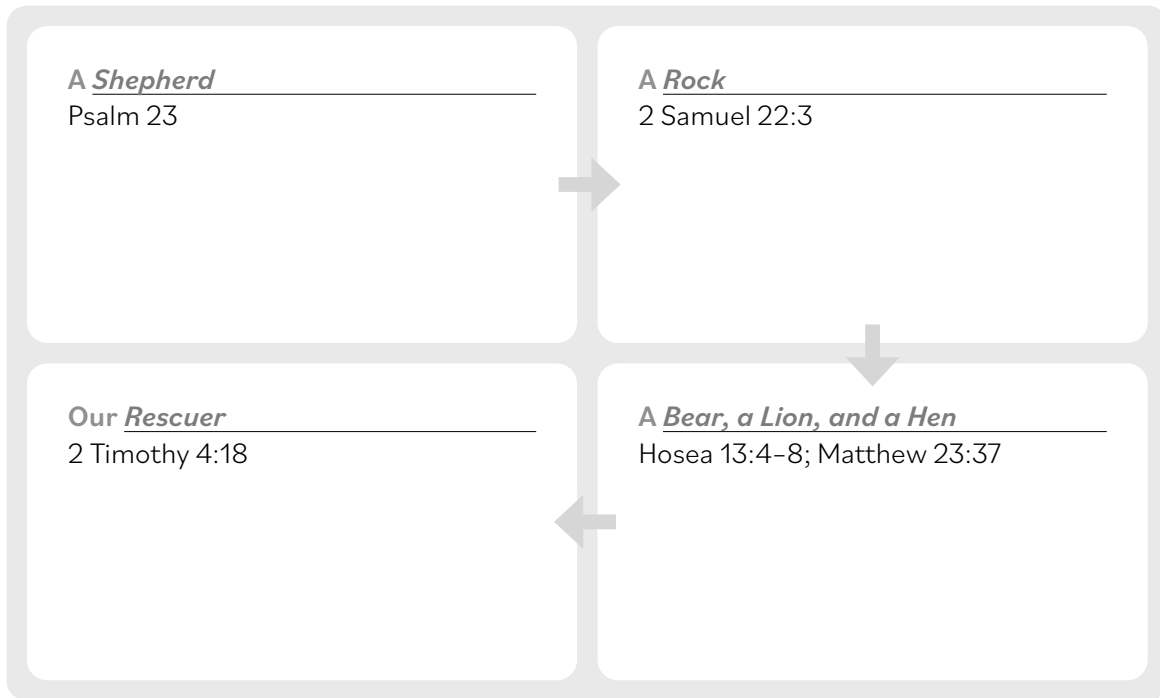
God is *holy* _____.

- He is
perfect _____.
- He is
exalted _____.

God is *good* _____.

- From Him comes every good thing (James 1:17).
- He is love, and He loves His children (1 John 3:1-3).

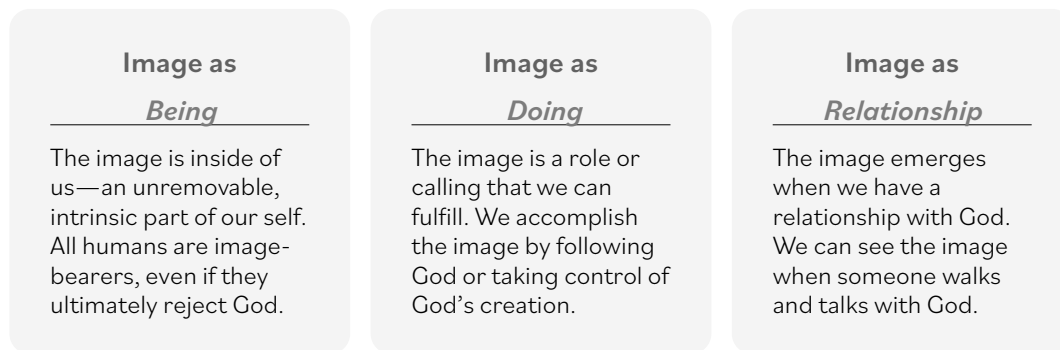
PICTURES OF GOD’S CARE



THE GIFT OF GOD’S IMAGE

God made humanity in His image (Gen. 1:27). This gift allows us to have a relationship with Him.

Different Conceptions of God’s Image





Exercises

God's Image in You

Important to your relationships is your concept of *self*. You can't relate to people well unless you first have an idea of who and what you are.

- ▷ Think about how other people your age form their identity. What things do they base their identity on?

Answers will vary.

Different people construct their self-concept in different ways:

- Some people depend on their family.
- Others point out what makes them different or unique.
- And some define themselves by what they do.

These ideas are all part of us, but as believers who trust Christ, we can find a new and even better self through God.

In the Beginning

- ▷ Read **Genesis 1:27** and complete the following:

- God created man / mankind in His own image.
- God created both male and female.

God gave us His image, even if we don't fully understand the idea. But Scripture does explain that we have a spiritual dimension to our being—something that points to a higher reality.

Just like a painting is more than simply brushstrokes on a canvas, we are more than atoms and cells and organs. Our thoughts can, in a tiny way, reflect the thoughts of God Himself. We can know truth, beauty, and a joy that transcends the physical world. Most importantly, we can know God.

Respecting God's Image

Yes, we have tarnished God's image with our sin. With our hatred, our lies, and our selfishness, humanity has twisted this likeness into something often grotesque. But the image is still there, and we should honor it out of respect for God Himself.

Male and Female

God created both men and women in His image (Gen. 1:26–27). Individually, any one of us can reflect God.

But God also created us to depend on each other. At birth, we need others to care for us. To bear children, society needs both men and women. And for culture to stay healthy, we need all kinds of people with all kinds of gifts and experiences.

Forbidden Images

When God gave Moses and Israel the Ten Commandments (Exo. 20:1–17), the second command warned against making any images of God (vv. 4–6). God did not want people to picture Him like they pictured false gods.

Read Deuteronomy 4:15–19. We cannot and should not reduce God to a cheap earthly picture. He is not male or female, human or animal. He is

an invisible, eternal Spirit. If we use metaphors, anthropomorphisms, or pronouns to refer to God, it's only to *describe* His work, not *define* His being.

Ultimately, God chose to reveal Himself to us through His Word. We have His promises, His laws, His teaching, and a record of Jesus' work. Today, people should see God through us as we try to imitate Jesus (John 17:20–26).

Stewardship of Creation

When God formed Adam and Eve, He blessed them and told them to multiply, fill Creation, and exercise dominion over it (Gen. 1:28-30). Everything in this untarnished world had a purpose and a place, and God told humans to go find all the blessings He left for them.

God gave humanity stewardship of Creation. As stewards, we do not own the world, but we do have the privilege and responsibility to care for it. And stewards don't just preserve—we co-create, in a way. We mold and direct Creation toward something more useful and more lovely, so that, ideally, future generations live in a better world.

Hypocrisy

God hates *hypocrisy*, or pretending to be holy while also degrading others. It's among the seven abominations in Proverbs (6:16-19), and it's a sin that Jesus condemned repeatedly (Matt. 6:2, 16; 15:7-8; 23:13).

Our speech is the clearest window to our soul. It's so easy to say something hurtful. Many sins take at least a little effort, but almost anyone can make a snide comment. No wonder James writes that the tongue is impossible to control (3:2-10).

▷ After the flood, as Noah and his family prepared to rebuild society, God gave them some instructions. Read **Genesis 9:1-7**.

- What did God tell the people to do (v. 1)?

Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the world.

- What would be the penalty for murder (vv. 5-6)?

Death

- This punishment seems paradoxical, so what's the reason for it? What makes murder so bad (v. 6)?

God made humanity in His own image.

▷ To dishonor God's image, we don't even need to do something so extreme as murder. Read **James 3:8-10** and complete the following summaries:

- No one can seem to control the *tongue*.

- Ironically, we can use this to bless *our Lord / God and Father* and also *curse* the people made in His image.

- From the same mouth comes both blessing and cursing. This should *not be (so)*.

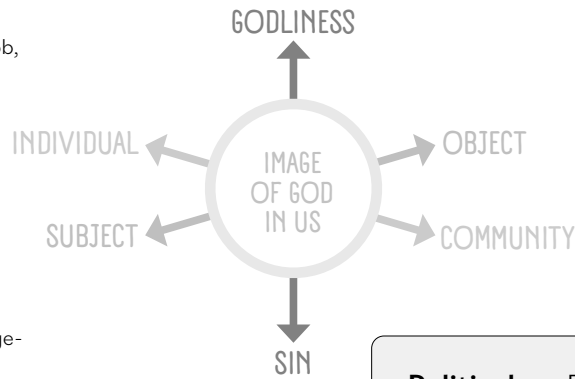
How can we better honor God's image—in ourselves and in others? By imitating Jesus. He is the perfect image of God (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3), and He showed us how a human could act exactly as God intended. If we love like Jesus loves, we too can reflect God to others. We can bear His image proudly, and we can help other people discover His blessings.

Identity Conflicts

Many people experience crises of identity throughout their lives.

- We wonder about our own likes and dislikes, needs and wants.
- We wonder how we'll present ourselves to the rest of the world.
- We wonder about the kinds of people we'll build our lives around.
- We wonder what to choose for a job, career, or course of study.
- We wonder how people will remember us after we've died.

Most of these conflicts boil down to three tensions of identity, illustrated to the right. As we learn to recognize these tensions, we can better navigate conflicts and establish a meaningful identity as image-bearers of God.



Tension 1: Godliness vs. Sin

This will remain a moral conflict our entire lives: will we follow Jesus or will we follow sinful desires? No matter how old or wise we get, we'll always struggle with sin, at least in some way. The minute we think we've conquered sin, we've fallen to perhaps its oldest expression—pride.

▷ Read the following passages and match each sentence to its best ending.

E	Romans 12:2 – We should not conform to the world around us, but rather be . . .	A. a new creation.
A	2 Corinthians 5:17 – If we are in Christ, we are . . .	B. an example to follow.
C	Ephesians 5:1-2 – We should imitate God just like . . .	C. beloved children.
B	1 Peter 2:21 – Christ suffered for us and left us . . .	D. commands.
D	1 John 2:3-4 – We show that we know Jesus by keeping His . . .	E. transformed by the renewal of our mind.

Models of Identity

There are many different conceptions of identity—some helpful, some not:

Tribal – Throughout history, many people have identified as members of a family, tribe, or nation. Even today, many consider their family relationships to be the most important part of their self-concept.

Material – Some people reduce humans to a set of biological or chemical processes, considering us no different than animals.

Political – Different political movements might frame humans as participants in some grand struggle. Historically, fascists have told their followers to consider themselves soldiers against some foreign enemy. Marxists divide people into economic classes and argue that conflict is inevitable.

Functional – Capitalism encourages people to identify with their job or career. People define themselves by what they *do*—so much so that if they retire or lose their job, they may have a crisis of identity.

Illusory – Some religions de-emphasize individual identities. For example, in traditional Hindu teaching, the human soul isn't necessarily human. It can reincarnate from one life to another—perhaps from a human to an animal and back again—and may eventually reach *moksha*, or freedom from the cycle of reincarnation. The soul then dissolves back into the cosmic whole.

Branded – Today, if people don't find belonging in family, religion, politics, or a career, they may identify with something that *acts* like a tribe. They may gather around fashions, corporate brands, pop culture, sexualities, or other interests.

The Flesh

In the New Testament, the word *flesh* (Gr. *sarx*) can refer to a couple different concepts:

- **The *flesh* can be our body**—the material that makes up our physical form (see 1 Cor. 15:39; Heb. 5:7). This can serve as shorthand for our weakness—that is, the limitations of our bodies, which can get tired and hungry (see Matt. 26:41).
- **The *flesh* can also refer to our sinful nature**—the part of us that opposes God (see Gal. 5:16–24). There’s nothing inherently immoral about our bodies, but they can represent a battleground between self-discipline and desire.

Discuss

How can young people get caught in the extremes of either side?

- What happens when people think they can be anything if they just try hard enough?
- On the other hand, what happens when people believe that their lives are predetermined by their circumstances?

Christian maturity is recognizing when we can act and when we must wait on God. Regardless, we can always show love.

Tension 2: Subject vs. Object

We have both *objective* and *subjective* dimensions:

- **In a way, we are objects.** We have human bodies vulnerable to weakness, sickness, and injury. Much of our environment is outside our control. We didn’t choose our parents, our biological makeup, or our birthplace. These things all shape our identity.
- **And we are also subjects.** We are self-aware beings with a mind and a will. We can choose how to respond to our challenges, and we can use our gifts for good or evil. We can shape our own identity.

▷ Read the following passages and complete the summaries:

- **Psalm 139:13–14** – Here David writes that God formed his body in his mother’s womb—and that he was fearfully / awesomely and wonderfully made.
- **1 Peter 2:16** – We believers should live as free people, using our freedom not as an excuse to do evil, but to serve God.

If we view ourselves only as objects . . .	If we view ourselves only as subjects . . .
<p>We hold a materialist worldview, thinking we’re animals made of organs, cells, and atoms—and nothing more.</p> <p>We succumb to determinism, believing our choices are the result of biological, social, and environmental factors. We have no freedom and therefore no responsibility.</p>	<p>We fail to recognize the effects of our culture and environment. If we’re not aware of our unique background and influences, we may become egocentric, expecting everyone to act and think exactly like us.</p> <p>We may also become detached from physical reality, thinking we can <i>do</i> or <i>be</i> anything we choose.</p>

This tension between *freedom* and *limits* is not a moral conflict between good and bad. Wise Christians will recognize both dimensions and choose to do right, no matter the circumstances.

Can Christians Disagree?

Even Christians differ on how best to view our identity. Some scholars argue over how much our being is physical and how much is spiritual. Some teachers say that we shouldn’t acknowledge any identity outside our relationship to God. And some believers treat their faith as just one part of their public identity—about as important as their political views, their ethnic background, or their career.

We can think of ourselves as many things. But we should distinguish between the core of our identity—God’s image—and all the other temporary interests and roles that fill our earthly life.

Tension 3: Individual vs. Community

Finally, there’s always some tension between our individual *integrity* and our communal relationships. We all have unique strengths, needs, and experiences, but we also find belonging in groups.

- **We are individuals.** God has a unique purpose and plan for each of us. We don’t always need to follow the rest of the crowd. We must do right even when no one else will. By God’s grace, we can stand alone against a hostile culture.
- **We are also members of communities.** No one is truly alone. God gave us families, churches, and communities, and these relationships strengthen us. By learning, serving, failing, and succeeding in these groups, we find belonging and purpose.

▷ Read the following passages and complete the summaries:

- **Daniel 1:8-9** – After Daniel was kidnapped from his homeland and taken to Babylon, he still followed God’s law and refused to _____
eat the king’s food / meat and drink _____.
- **1 Corinthians 12:12-14** – Here Paul pictures the church as a body with many *parts / members* _____, all of which can work together, no matter our background.

If we view ourselves only as individuals . . .	If we view ourselves only as members of a community . . .
We may withdraw from others, considering only our own wants and needs. We may struggle to find any purpose or meaning higher than ourselves.	We may ignore our own needs. We may go along with whatever the crowd chooses—good or bad—and spend our lives trying to copy whatever group we’re in.

Again, this is not a moral conflict. In some ways, we must think and act alone, depending only on God. But often we should relate and respond to people around us. Godly wisdom can help us apply these perspectives at the right time and place.

Conflict Examples

Ask students to imagine tensions or conflicts between the individual and communal facets of their identity. Examples might include . . .

- Someone who wants to study a new trade instead of the family business
- Someone who disagrees with their local church on a single decision
- An adopted child, now grown, trying to find their birth parents and family
- Missionaries who are disliked because of the actions of their home country

East and West

Western societies often emphasize individualism and freedom, whereas Eastern societies have traditionally focused on communal responsibilities and predetermined roles.

Western philosophers like René Descartes and Immanuel Kant argued that knowledge, understanding, and morality start with individuals. Descartes and Kant focused their attention on how individual people could make reasonable and ethical choices on their own.

On the other hand, the Chinese teacher Confucius (*Kǒng Fūzǐ*) organized much of his ethics around

predetermined roles that individuals did not choose. He explored what children owe their parents and what citizens owe their country—not just for the good of the individual, but for the good of society.

Both philosophical traditions have their upsides and downsides. Western individualism can liberate us from social constraints—but at the same time, we can find ourselves isolated without a sense of community. Traditional Eastern philosophies can offer direction and belonging, but the responsibilities might feel overwhelming.

Self-Reflection

▷ Describe yourself below using the fewest, most important words possible.

Answers will vary.

My Heritage

- Where I came from
 - What I've done
 - Who I used to be
- See **Genesis 1:27** and
 ● **Romans 3:9-18**.

My Identity

- Where I am now
 - What I do now
 - Who I am now
- See **Romans 5:6-10**
 and **8:14-17**.

My Destiny

- Where I'm going
 - What I hope to do
 - What I hope to be
- See **1 John 3:2-3** and
1 Corinthians 13:11-12.

Abba Father

Read Romans 8:15. Thanks to the work of the Spirit, we are freed from our sins and brought into God's family. We can now call out to God as our own Father. This is the most valuable part of our new identity as believers.

If we trust Christ, we can embrace our roles as sons and daughters of God. He gives us an identity more secure—and a hope more certain—than any we'd find on Earth. People will fail us, and we will fail ourselves, but God will never let us fall out of His hands (John 10:28-29).

When Reflection Is Painful

If much of your life is painful to think about, or if you feel hopeless where you are now, please reach out to your family, your pastor, a teacher, a counselor, or some other mature Christian you can trust. God did not expect you to walk your path alone, so don't hesitate to ask someone to come alongside you. As a believer, you may feel lonely, but you will never be alone.

Meditation

▷ Read 1 John 3.

- For believers, what part of our destiny is certain (vv. 2, 23-24)?
- If we choose to abide in Christ, what will we put away (vv. 4-6)?
- If we choose to follow Christ's example, what will we do instead (vv. 11, 16)?

Vocabulary

- **Yahweh** - Term used in the Hebrew Bible to refer to God; means "I am"
- **Covenant** - A strong, binding promise, often between two parties
- **Sovereignty** - In Scripture, God's absolute control over all things, despite acts of evil and rebellion against Him
- **Holiness** - In Scripture, a word to describe God's unique perfection and exaltation
- **Sin** - The rejection of God and His goodness; disobeying God's commands
- **Materialism** - The view that all things can be explained by physical processes and that no spiritual realms exist
- **Determinism** - The view that all events and choices are actually dictated by natural processes or a higher will, and that individuals have no true freedom
- **Egocentrism** - The attempt to understand others entirely through our own experiences and values; an unwillingness to accept that other people think and feel differently than we do
- **Integrity** - The commitment to personally held beliefs and morality; intrinsic strength

LESSON 3

GOD OUR SAVIOR

Content Objectives

- Jesus is the Messiah promised by God in the Old Testament.
- Jesus is fully God as one of the Trinity, and He is also fully human.
- Through His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus offered us restoration with the Father.

Learning Objectives

Students should be able to . . .

- Recall examples of Jesus showing God’s power, holiness, and love
- Explain key principles of the gospel of Christ
- Discuss ways they may have grown or matured spiritually

Vocabulary

- **The Fall** – Humanity’s turn from God toward sin and death; the universal consequences of the first sin
- **Messiah** – An “anointed one,” or someone chosen to fulfill a special purpose; in Scripture, the Savior Jesus
- **The Trinity** – A word referring to three equally divine Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—existing as one unified God
- **Gospel** – The “good news” of Jesus; one of four New Testament books that chronicle the work of Jesus
- **Miracle** – A divinely caused event that does not follow the normal laws of nature; often used by God to mark His presence or approval
- **Parable** – A short story or analogy used to teach a lesson

Lecture & Discussion

Review

Consider asking students to name and describe the three major attributes of God from the previous lesson.

- **God is powerful.** He created the universe, and He sees everything, knows everything, and can do anything He chooses to do. He holds complete sovereignty over all things—even the forces and events we don't yet understand.
- **God is holy.** He's perfect, sinless, and exalted over everything. He exists above all. His frame of reference is higher and more comprehensive than we can imagine. He created the very idea of time and space, and the universe rests in His hands.
- **God is good and loving.** He does not express His power only in anger. He reaches down and communes with us. In the Old Testament, He revealed Himself through the people of Israel. And in the New Testament, He sent Jesus, who offers God's love to everyone.

The Messiah

God is powerful, holy, and loving—all three, all the time, forever. He does not change.

But we humans change. After the first man and woman sinned, they brought death and corruption into our world. We call this the **Fall**.

The Fall

Humanity's turn from God toward sin and death; the universal consequences of the first sin

But very quickly, God offered hope. He said that one day, a woman would bear a child that would defeat evil (Gen. 3:15). Later, through Israel's prophets, God promised someone that would bridge the gap between God and humanity—to save anyone who put faith in Him. This person was called the *Messiah*.

Background

Discuss: So who is a messiah? What does the word *messiah* even mean?

The English term *messiah* is a transliteration of the Hebrew word *mashiach*, which means “anointed one.” In some ancient cultures, people would pour oil or fragrance over the head of a person chosen to fulfill a special purpose. This was a way to mark someone with the approval of the community or of God Himself.

Illustrate—Anointing David as King

We see an example of this kind of ceremony when the prophet Samuel anointed David to be king of Israel. Samuel poured oil on the boy's head to symbolize God's choice and blessing (1 Sam. 16:1-13).

This happened before David became a hero—before he defeated Goliath with a sling, and before he saved Israel from the Philistines. The anointing showed that God had chosen David to do great things.

So David served as a kind of messiah to his people. Eventually, he became Israel's king, and he encouraged the people to worship God. But David, like all of us, was human and sinful. He could not be *the* Messiah—he could not save Israel or the world from sin.

In the New Testament, we read about the Messiah—Jesus. He is the Savior that God promised to send, so He is often called *Christ*. This comes from the Greek term for *messiah*—both words refer to someone anointed, or chosen. When we call the Savior “Jesus Christ,” we fit His given name together with His title.

Messiah

An “anointed one,” or someone chosen to fulfill a special purpose; in Scripture, the Savior Jesus

His Purpose: The Way

Discuss: So why did the Messiah Jesus come to Earth? What was His purpose?

Consider asking students to look up and read the following verses.

In Scripture, we can read many answers to this question:

- **Matthew 5:17** – He came to Earth to fulfill the Old Testament Law and prophets.
- **Matthew 20:28** – He gave us an example of sacrificial love by caring for others and by giving up His life for us.
- **Mark 2:17** – He reached out to sinners in a way no one else could.
- **John 3:16-17** – He offered salvation with eternal life.
- **John 10:10** – He offered abundant life, as well.
- **John 12:44-50** – He gave us light and truth through the knowledge of God the Father.
- **Galatians 4:4-5** – He established believers as heirs of God—as His own children, who could claim their Father’s blessing.

Discuss: How would you summarize all these answers? What is the big *why* behind Jesus’ ministry on Earth?

All these reasons generally boil down to one idea—Jesus came to Earth to connect us back to God. He is the way back to the Father (John 14:6).

Jesus redeems us if we trust Him. Anyone who places their faith in Jesus can now have a relationship with God—the kind of relationship that sin prevented us from having before. Jesus bridges the gap between us and God.

His Identity: God and Man

How could Jesus save us? Because He is God Himself, in human form. Somehow, when Jesus was born on Earth, He was both fully God and fully human, a perfect image of the Father to us (Phil. 2:5-7).

He is the Son of God.

When we call Jesus “the Son of God” (Matt. 14:33), we’re translating a Greek phrase that means Jesus is of the same “essence” as God. He is not God’s Son in a literal, biological sense—rather, He is the only

begotten of God because He is God. He *is* the same kind of unique being that *only God can be*.

He is one of the Trinity.

Read John 1:1-3, 18. Jesus was *with* God—and *was* God—when the universe began, and for the eternity before that.

If that sounds confusing, it’s because it *is* confusing. Again, we can’t *define* God—we can only describe Him a little. One word often used by Christians is the **Trinity**.

The Trinity

A word referring to three equally divine Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—existing as one unified God

The word Trinity doesn’t appear in Scripture, nor does it solve the mystery represented by this doctrine. How can a single, unified God also exist as three distinct persons? Teachers and scholars have suggested many different pictures or models to try to explain the Trinity, but they all fall short in some way.

- The Persons are not *parts* of God—like leaves on a clover—because they’re all fully God.
- The Persons are not *forms* of God—like water, ice, and gas—because they remain distinct.
- The Persons are not *modes* or *expressions* of God—like one man who acts as a father, son, and husband—because they relate to each other.

Ultimately, God is a unique, incomprehensible being with qualities and attributes that cannot compare with anything we know. No one and nothing else is truly like Him. When we read an impossible description of Him in Scripture, we can simply reject it, or we can accept it by faith and trust Him to explain it one day.

In the meantime, even if we don’t understand God’s unity, we can learn from it. On the night before Jesus’ death, as He prayed to the Father, He said that He had come to Earth so that we could all be “one” in Him—just like Jesus is “one” with God (John 17:20-26). Our relationship with other believers should be loving (John 13:35), and we should seek unity.

Consider reading through **John 17:20–26** together. How can we model this prayer as we talk to God about other people? What are ways that we can pray like Jesus did? See also the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:9–15).

His Ministry: Teaching and Miracles

Jesus spent most of His life on Earth growing up and likely working to help His earthly parents and siblings. Then, around the age of 30, He began the ministry we read about in the *gospels*.

Gospel

The “good news” of Jesus; one of four New Testament books that chronicle the work of Jesus

During Jesus’ ministry, He did a lot of things for a lot of people.

- **Jesus taught people about God.** He re-explained a lot of things that people had forgotten from the Old Testament, and He corrected a lot of errors in the theology of His day. He spoke with confidence, authority, and consistency—so much that people eventually realized that He was claiming to be God Himself.
- **Jesus corrected the religious leaders of His day.** As Jesus taught truth, He also tore down many lies. He condemned religious hypocrisy and refuted false teaching about God. Jesus explained that God didn’t care about fancy, expensive shows of worship—just faith and obedience. Sincerity mattered more than sacrifice.
- **Jesus fed the hungry and healed the sick.** Jesus met people’s physical needs as well as their spiritual needs. He showed them a concrete form of love while He described God’s intangible love. He worked *miracles* to show that He had God’s power.

Miracle

A divinely caused event that does not follow the normal laws of nature; often used by God to mark His presence or approval

- **Jesus trained disciples.** Many people followed Jesus around Israel, and twelve men in particular became His close students. In the years to come, Jesus’ disciples would become leaders in the church.

The most important and influential ministry in history lasted only about three years, but the disciple John speculated that the entire Earth couldn’t contain a complete record of everything Jesus did (John 21:25). His impact was immeasurable.

We could spend a lifetime studying Jesus’ ministry, but in this study, we’ll focus on two facets of His work: truth and love. We’ll define and discuss these terms more later, but remember for now that Christ gave us an amazing example of both. Sometimes He taught simple lessons that comforted people, and sometimes He taught things that were difficult to understand and accept. But everything He said and did was for the good of those who followed Him—and for the good of those who would trust Him many years later, like us (John 17:20–21).

His Sacrifice: Death on the Cross

Jesus’ teaching, preaching, and miracles are important—from those we learn a lot about God. But perhaps the clearest expression of God’s character is the sacrifice Jesus made for us on the cross.

Contextualize—Old Testament Sacrifices

After humanity fell into sin, God commanded that people sacrifice animals to symbolize their guilt and sorrow. Sacrifices showed repentance—a turn back to God. They also showed faith that one day, a Savior would come as the true sacrifice for all.

After three years of Jesus’ ministry, the religious leaders finally had Him arrested for defying them and claiming to be God. Jesus stood silently while they accused Him. A mob called for His death, and Pilate, the Roman governor who wanted to keep everyone happy, ordered that Jesus be executed by crucifixion.

Roman soldiers then stripped Jesus of His clothes and lashed Him with a whip. They forced Him to carry a cross of wood toward the site of His execution—at

least, until a man named Simon stepped in to carry it for Him (Matt. 27:32). On a hill called Golgotha, just outside of Jerusalem, the soldiers nailed Jesus' hands and feet to the cross, and they raised the beam high up over the ground. There hung the Messiah, naked, bleeding, and suffocating, between two thieves. It took hours for the three men to die.

This shows us how far God was willing to go to restore our relationship with Him. On the cross, Jesus cried out, "My God, My God—why have You forsaken Me?"

Contextualize—The Cry of David

Read Psalm 22:1, 14–18. This psalm is attributed to King David, but in it we find echoes of Jesus' own experience. He was beaten and stabbed by soldiers, who later gambled over His clothing.

When Jesus became sin, He became the object of the Father's judgment. Everything we deserved, God bore it all Himself (2 Cor. 5:21).

Whether from blood loss or suffocation, Jesus died there, nailed to a post. His followers buried Him in a donated tomb.

This is where the gospel—the good news—comes in. On the third day after Jesus died, to prove once and for all that sin and death had no power over Him, He rose again (Luke 24:5–7). His enemies were horrified, His followers were amazed, and He spent 40 days convincing them that He was truly, literally, physically alive again. Then He ascended back to heaven (Luke 24:50–53).

But before He left, He commanded His followers to go and share the gospel with others (Matt. 28:16–20). In short, the good news is this:

- We are lost and powerless in our sin. We deserve death, judgment, and separation from God (Rom. 3:23). Anyone paying attention can see that the world is messed up, and our sin is the reason why.
- But Jesus died to pay for our sin, and He rose to show His power over death (1 Cor. 15:3–4, 56–57). Jesus is alive—this is the central truth of Christianity.

- If we trust Jesus—if we accept His sacrifice for our sin—God will forgive us and consider us righteous (Acts 16:31; Rom. 3:22).
- We who have trusted Jesus no longer need to fear punishment for our sin (Rom. 6:23). We're not trapped by sin—we can say no to it.
- Instead, we can now live in a way that is holy and acceptable to God (Rom. 12:1). We can reflect His love and truth. We can talk with Him again. We are part of His family forever.

We can now reflect God's holiness, grace, and love—because we can fellowship with Him. We know Him—however imperfectly—and one day in heaven we'll know Him even better.

The God of the Gospel

Remember—God is holy, powerful, and loving. To be honest, when we look at the world around us, or when we think through all the troubles we've faced, it might be hard to imagine a God that is all three of those things. Two seem possible, but three almost seem contradictory. How can evil exist if God could prevent it? Why does evil seem to go unpunished?

But in the sacrifice of Jesus, we find all three attributes acting in harmony.

Holiness

God's holiness does not mingle with the sin and corruption of humanity. For reasons we don't yet understand, God decided that only a perfect, holy sacrifice could pay the penalty for our sin.

Jesus was perfect—He kept the Law entirely, never once sinned, and remained always in complete communion with God. He faced the same weaknesses and troubles we do, but He remained holy. He satisfied His own requirement for justice.

Power

And Jesus accomplished this through His own power. Only God could defeat death. Only Christ could become sin, take on its punishment, die, and rise again. And only He could make that act count as holiness for the people who trust in Him.

Love

But Jesus didn't exercise that power for His own sake. He could have lessened the suffering or ended it early (Matt. 26:52-54), but He bore it all for us. He endured the cross to bridge the divide between Himself and us—even though we didn't deserve it, and even though people mocked Him and rejected Him.

How else could an all-powerful God prove love—but to give up the bliss of heaven, come down to Earth, live like us, suffer like us, spend years teaching about love and truth, and finally let people kill Him as a way for us to join His family, all while He remained the God of perfect holiness and justice?

That might seem complex, but God took care of the difficult part Himself. We don't have to understand it all right away—we just have to trust Him.

Conclusion

God is the perfect example of a loving parent and a savior. Yes, He died for us, but He didn't stop there. Today, He promises to grow us, and in the future He promises to glorify us in ways we can't yet imagine. God's love doesn't just save us from death—it gives us a new life.

If you do not yet know this love—if you have not yet joined God's family, but would like to—please do not hesitate to ask. Talk to someone who can share with you how they trusted Christ—and how you can, too.

And remember—God did not save us just to leave us alone. His love endures with us day after day after day. So in the next lesson, we'll look at how God relates to us today as a sustainer, helper, and friend.

LESSON 3

GOD OUR SAVIOR

Messiah

An “*anointed one* _____,” or someone chosen to fulfill a special purpose; in Scripture, the Savior Jesus

His Purpose: *The Way* _____

Ultimately, Jesus came to Earth to connect us back to God.

His Identity: *God and Man* _____

- He is the Son of God (Matt. 14:33), meaning He is of the same “essence” as God.
- He is one of the Trinity (John 1:1-18; Col. 2:9)

The Trinity

A word referring to three equally divine Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—existing as one unified God

His Ministry: *Teaching and Miracles* _____

- Jesus taught people about God.
- Jesus corrected religious leaders.
- Jesus fed the hungry and healed the sick.
- Jesus trained disciples.

His Sacrifice: *Death on the Cross* _____

- He became our sin and endured our punishment for us (2 Cor. 5:21; Matt. 27:46).
- But He rose again, showing power over sin and death (Luke 24:5-7).

The Gospel of Christ

- We are lost and powerless in our sin. We deserve death, judgment, and separation from God (Rom. 3:23).
- But Jesus died to pay for our sin, and He rose to show His power over death (1 Cor. 15:3-4, 56-57).
- If we trust Jesus—if we accept His sacrifice for our sin—God will forgive us and consider us righteous (Acts 16:31; Rom. 3:22).
- We who have trusted Jesus no longer need to fear punishment for our sin (Rom. 6:23).
- Instead, we can now live in a way that is holy and acceptable to God (Rom. 12:1).

THE GOD OF THE GOSPEL



Holiness

Jesus is the perfect, spotless sacrifice.

Power

Jesus won victory over death and sin.

Love

Jesus offers us freedom and family.

Exercises

The Ministry of Jesus

▷ You may already know a lot about the teaching and miracles of Jesus, but to refresh your memory, look through the following passages in Matthew and match each sentence to its best ending.

F	Matthew 4:17 – Jesus told people to turn from their sins because . . .	A. a man who was paralyzed.
H	Matthew 5:1-12 – Jesus taught that God’s kingdom belonged to . . .	B. He would die and rise again.
I	Matthew 7:12 – Jesus challenged people to do for others . . .	C. hypocritical false prophets and teachers.
C	Matthew 7:15-17 – Jesus warned His followers against . . .	D. <i>parables</i> —that is, brief stories with a lesson.
A	Matthew 9:1-8 – To show His power, Jesus healed and forgave . . .	E. the God of Israel.
D	Matthew 13:1-3 – Jesus often taught using . . .	F. the kingdom of heaven was coming soon.
E	Matthew 15:29-31 – When Jesus healed many people, they praised . . .	G. the Messiah, the Son of God.
B	Matthew 16:21 – Jesus warned His disciples that . . .	H. those who showed love, humility, gentleness, and mercy.
G	Matthew 26:63-66 – When arrested and questioned by the high priest, Jesus acknowledged that He was . . .	I. what they wished others would do for them.

To minister means to serve, and Jesus surprised everyone by dedicating His time on Earth to service. He was supposed to be a king, but He acted like no other king has. Day after day, as His followers slowly realized His identity as Messiah and Son of God, He continued to show gentleness and humility—even taking time to wash His disciples’ feet on the night before He died.

Parables

Jesus did not teach with dry catechisms or long lists of arbitrary trivia. He animated truth by presenting it in stories and word-pictures—some ironic, some sad, some funny, all memorable. These parables include . . .

- **The Parable of the Sower**
Matthew 13:1-9
- **The Parable of the Lost Sheep**
Matthew 18:10-14
- **The Parable of the Prodigal Son**
Luke 15:11-32
- **The Parable of the Good Samaritan**
Luke 10:29-37

. . . and many more. Jesus used these parables to teach things about God that many people wouldn’t understand until later (Matt. 13:10-13).

The Prophesied Resurrection

As the all-knowing God, Jesus came to Earth knowing that He would die and rise again. This was no surprise to Him. On at least three separate occasions, Jesus told His disciples that He would die, but then come back to life (Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19).

Despite this, His resurrection still came as a surprise. Most of His disciples didn’t quite understand what He meant, and some even forgot about this prophecy until after the resurrection (Luke 24:1-9).

▷ Read **John 13:12-17** and summarize why Jesus served His disciples in such a menial way.

Jesus set an example of the kind of humility and care that His followers should show each other.

We can't do everything Jesus did, and our own ministry will look very different. But everything we do should reflect this same kind of love.

The Sacrifice of Jesus

As the Creator God Himself, Jesus designed the laws of right and wrong. He alone decides whether we are perfectly righteous or we deserve eternal punishment. Yet because He loves us, He bore all the punishment that we deserve. He chose to take all the consequences of sin on Himself.

▷ Read **Matthew 27:24-61** and in the following table, briefly describe the suffering that Jesus endured for our sake.

v. 26	<u>Pilate ordered Him whipped.</u>
vv. 28-30	<u>Soldiers mocked Him and beat a crown of thorns into His head.</u>
v. 31	<u>He was crucified.</u>
v. 35	<u>Soldiers gambled away His clothing.</u>
vv. 37-44	<u>He was mocked by those watching Him die. People blasphemed His work.</u>
vv. 46-50	<u>He died after crying out to God.</u>

In this passage, we see just a glimpse of what we deserve without God—pain, derision, and separation from Him. But as we read this horrific account, we can begin to appreciate God's love for us. We see how far He went to redeem us back to Himself.

Foot-Washing

In Jesus' day, most people walked barefoot or in sandals. But despite the dirt and grime outside, many Jews, Greeks, and Romans tried to keep their inside spaces clean and fragrant. So after a long day trudging through dust, people would at minimum wash off their feet. If they were wealthy enough, they'd leave this task to a hired servant.

On the night before Jesus' death, as He and His twelve disciples celebrated the Jewish holiday of Passover, Jesus knelt down and washed each of their feet. The disciples were clearly uncomfortable with this—one even protested at first. But Jesus explained that this was a necessary picture. His followers needed to accept His work and His love (John 13:6-10).

Crucifixion

The Romans used crucifixion as a method of both torture and execution for the worst criminals. A person nailed to a cross could take hours to die, often needing to pull up against the nails to even breathe. Suspended up high for all to see, the victim also served to warn other would-be criminals. Though many Christians today view the cross as a symbol of Jesus' love, it was for centuries a mark of public shame and judgment (Heb. 12:2).



Beginning Your Journey

If you have not yet accepted Jesus as your Savior, please consider talking with a mature Christian in your family, church, or school. God offers salvation for free. We can't earn it—we simply *ask* for it. This book will encourage you to have better relationships, but no relationship is more important than the one with your God.

▷ Read **Matthew 28:1-7**. Did sin and death defeat Jesus? *No.* _____

By rising again, Jesus showed His power to save us from sin and death. We don't deserve this gift, but He offers it out of love. To accept it, we simply believe in the *Lord Jesus Christ* (Acts 16:29-31).

- **Jesus**—because He is the real, historical figure who died and rose from the dead
- **Christ**—because He is the Anointed One sent to save us from sin
- **Lord**—because He is God our Ruler, who deserves our worship and obedience, who has the standing to forgive us when we ask

• We trust God to make us righteous. Our actions do nothing—He simply saves and grows those who ask.

Self-Reflection

For this section, take some time to think about your spiritual journey thus far. Answer the following questions as best you can, even if you don't remember some of the details. No one's story is the same, so don't worry if your memories don't sort neatly into the questions below.

▷ How would I describe myself before accepting Christ?

Answers will vary throughout.

▷ Who helped turn me toward God?

▷ How did I accept Christ? What prompted the decision, and what followed?

▷ How do I enjoy helping others now? What am I good at? What skills would I like to develop in the future?

Discuss

Ask students to think about their written responses and then discuss the following:

- How do you believe God steered you toward Jesus? Who or what helped you learn about Him?
- How would you like to see yourself grow spiritually? What does maturity look like for you?
- If you found yourself in a crisis, who could you turn to? What resources do we have? Do you know someone who'd be willing to stand by and help, if you asked?

▷ What struggles in my life most concern me now? What things still don't make sense?

▷ Where can I go for advice? What resources has God given me? Who can listen or help?

By answering these questions, you've begun to meditate on God's work in your life. Your story has just begun to take shape, but even now you should be able to see God's grace on display.

Meditation

▷ Read **John 17**, which records Christ's prayer the night before His death.

- What was Christ's primary purpose in coming to Earth (vv. 1, 6)?
- Who was Christ praying for (v. 20)?
- What was His motivation? What blessing did He want for us (v. 26)?

Vocabulary

- **The Fall** - Humanity's turn from God toward sin and death; the universal consequences of the first sin
- **Messiah** - An "anointed one," or someone chosen to fulfill a special purpose; in Scripture, the Savior Jesus
- **The Trinity** - A word referring to three equally divine Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—existing as one unified God
- **Gospel** - The "good news" of Jesus; one of four New Testament books that chronicle the work of Jesus
- **Miracle** - A divinely caused event that does not follow the normal laws of nature; often used by God to mark His presence or approval
- **Parable** - A short story or analogy used to teach a lesson
