

STUDY GUIDE

In the beginning, God created everything. Before anything existed, God was already there. Nothing came into being by accident—Creation begins with him.

What stands out to you about the way God created the world?

What does that teach you about him?

Throughout the Creation narrative, God called his Creation good. But only when he created human beings does it become very good. Humans are set apart because they are made in God's image, created to reflect him in a unique way.

God gave people the responsibility to care for what he has made. From the very beginning, humans were created with purpose, not just to exist, but to live meaningfully within God's world.

What does this show you about how God sees people?

God placed people in a good and complete world. There was no sin, no brokenness, and no separation from him. Everything was as it should be—full of life, unity, and peace.

God finished his work and rested.

From the very beginning, we can see that God's design was not just functional—it was good, whole, beautiful, and perfect.

What's your favorite part of God's creation to spend time in? How does time there draw you closer to your Creator?

DIG DEEPER

To this day, humanity has been asking the fundamental questions: Who are we? Where are we? As you look into the night sky and observe the billions of stars, you might be tempted to think that you are just another cog in the machine of the universe. The opening of Genesis answers these fundamental questions and banishes that thought.

So where are we? We are in God's world. He is the greatest engineer, architect, and artist. Who are we? The pinnacle of his creation— not just another thing he put into his world but the kings and queens to rule over it and take care of it. He created humanity to be his image-bearers, to carry his likeness. What do we learn about God in these opening verses of the Bible? He loves to create. And all of it is good.

In verse 2, the universe is described as formless, empty, dark, and covered by a fluid mass. From that, God continued his Creation. He made an ordered world where the sun rises and sets and winter turns to spring. He created a good world where humans lived in harmony with one another and took joy in caring for the creation they were blessed with. The order of the world points to a Creator. God loves to create, and he passed this passion on to the pinnacle of creation: humanity.

Look at all the things humans have created over millennia— artistry, architecture, engineering, technology, and so much more. Why do humans love to create? Because whether they realize it or not, they are reflecting their Creator. Humans love to create beautiful, orderly, efficient things. We find joy when others enjoy our creations. Humans love to create because we were made by a Creator who loves to create and passed that love on to us.

Yet sometimes we create things that are not so beautiful or orderly. Adam and Eve were created in God's image, but then lost it. The image of God is not humanness, self-consciousness, or intellect. When Adam and Eve sinned, they still retained those things. It is not a physical resemblance either, because God is a spirit. The image of God is a special knowledge—knowing God as the one who gives all good things—and holiness, meaning the absence of sin. The apostle Paul writes about this in Colossians 3:10 and Ephesians 4:24.

While we still live in a sinful world, the image of God is only partially restored to us by faith in Christ Jesus. We still struggle between our new nature given by the Holy Spirit and our sinful nature. But someday that will end. The apostle John wrote that "when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). When we enter eternal life, the image of God will be completely restored in us.

REFLECTION

What stands out to you most about God from the way he created the world?

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Everything in God's creation was good, whole, and at peace. Humans lived in perfect harmony with God, with each other, and with the world around them. Satan entered the story in the form of a serpent and questioned what God had said. Instead of trusting God, Adam and Eve began to doubt him. They listened to a different voice.

What do you notice about how the serpent challenges God's words?

Adam and Eve ate the fruit God told them not to eat and chose to disobey God. Sin is going against what God commands, and their sin broke what was whole and good.

What changes do you see in Adam and Eve after they sin? In what way can you relate to what Adam and Eve felt?

God didn't ignore what happened, but sought out Adam and Eve to address it. There are real consequences for sin. Life now includes pain, struggle, and brokenness. The world was no longer the way it originally was.

How has God been direct with you?

In the middle of this, God made a promise. He told the serpent that one day, someone will come who will defeat evil and restore what had been broken (verse 15). This was the first promise of a Savior.

What is an example of a time you needed help to get out of a situation? What happened?

DIG DEEPER

This is the first of only three instances that Satan's words are recorded in the Bible. The other times are at the beginning of Job and during Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Maybe that is surprising to you. We hear about Satan so often, yet he actually talks so little in the Bible. God does not want us to be too curious about Satan—God knows the harm he can cause us. Why would God want the words of the world's best liar to be recorded in the Bible more than necessary? As always, God knows best. He lets us know what we need to know but does not tell us more.

In Genesis 3, we see one of Satan's favorite questions: "Did God really say...?" How often have you fallen for that lie and questioned God's authority and wisdom? How often have you seen someone in the middle of temptation and done nothing to help them? Our first parents fell into these traps too—that is why our world is not perfect.

The serpent spoke to Eve, beginning his deception against humanity. Some question why Eve did not find it strange that a snake was talking to her. But the bigger problem is that Eve did not flee from temptation and that Adam did nothing to stop it. The Bible makes it clear that Adam was with her when this was all happening (verse 6). As her husband, he failed her by not protecting her from something that was clearly evil, contrary to the will of God. By not stepping in, Adam sinned too.

God had gifted them the Garden of Eden, and what a wonderful gift it was! God only gives good gifts. But it's so easy to focus on the gifts we've received, only to forget the One who gave them to us. Adam and Eve lost sight of the Giver. Then their eyes were opened and they hid. They recognized their nakedness and sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves, but this could not hide their sin from God. Leaves crumble easily. You can see through them. That is what it is like when we try to cover our sins from God; he sees right through it. But when our sin should cause God to walk away from us, he does the opposite.

God knew that Adam and Eve were not going out to find him. So God came to them. He makes the first move. He finds them and still loves them. In your sin he still finds you, he still sees you, and he still loves you. In this reading we find the first gospel promise about Jesus. God says to the devil that his Son "will crush your head and you will strike his heel." The God of the Bible is a God who makes the first move. The devil will strike, but he cannot win. Before Scripture was recorded, the Gospel promise was already in the world from the very voice of the One who only gives good gifts.

REFLECTION

What stands out to you about the problem of sin and how God responds to it?

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God's people were no longer at the very beginning of their story. They had been enslaved in Egypt, rescued, and led by God through the wilderness. In Deuteronomy 6, he taught them how to live in a way that reflects who he is.

What stands out to you about why God gives His people these commands?

Who or what is God protecting with these commands?

Why would God command people to love him?

The commands are meant to be remembered and talked about often— at home, on the road, in daily life. God also told his people to teach these things to their children. Each generation is meant to pass on what they know about God, so his ways are not forgotten.

Living God's way sets his people apart. Other nations noticed that something was different—not just in what they did, but in who they were and how they lived.

How might living differently today point others toward God?

What do your words and actions tell people about you?

DIG DEEPER

The land of Canaan that God promised to the Israelites was rich in vegetation and abundant in resources. Sometimes, when we picture ancient Palestine, we may think of sand and dryness. That is more true of the southern region, but the north received abundant rainfall and cooler temperatures. It was not hyperbole—Canaan truly was a land "flowing with milk and honey" (verse 3). God continued to give good gifts to his people.

But God gave them an even better gift than any land: his law. God calls the people to "fear and love" him. Fear is the utmost respect one has for God, who is majestic, holy, righteous, and always good. When sinful human beings recognize the perfection of their God, they fear him. We have every reason to be scared of him since he is just and holy—that fear only fades when we see how he loves us and forgives us.

That is why God gave the children of Israel his law. He loved them! He did not want them to be like the other nations who worshipped other gods and caused so many problems for themselves. God wanted his people to be set apart—because when you are different, people notice.

The Old Testament ceremonial laws are no longer required for New Testament Christians to follow. Christ fulfilled all of those obligations. But our Lord still wants us to follow the moral law, God's will for all people of all time (summarized in the Ten Commandments). Many in the world do not want to follow God's moral commands, and our sinful nature wrestles against it every day. Sometimes it feels like God uses his moral law to take our fun away, but that could not be further from the truth. God's moral law is one of the many ways he protects you.

When God says not to give false testimony, he is protecting both your reputation and your neighbor's. When God says to flee from sexual immorality, he is protecting you from binding yourself to someone who is not your spouse and the painful emotions that could arise from that. When God says not to have any other gods, he is protecting you from relying on something other than him. When we put our hope in money, other people, or our own self-worth instead of the God who is in control of all things, we will be left disappointed every time.

God's law is good. It shows us our need for a Savior, but it also sets us apart. The apostle Paul writes in Romans 12:2, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world." When we follow what God commands rather than cultural ways, people notice. We can bring glory to God through that. "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

REFLECTION

What is one way you can keep God at the center of your everyday life?

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This passage was written about 700 hundred years before Jesus was born, yet the “He” in this section is Jesus. God gave his people a picture of the Savior long before he arrived.

What would you expect or hope the Savior of the world would look like?

What stands out to you about how this person is described?

His suffering had a purpose. He did not suffer for his own wrongdoing—he suffered for others. He took on pain, sin, and consequences that did not belong to him.

God’s plan was not to ignore sin, but to address it through sacrificial love.

How is this different from how people might expect sin to be dealt with?

How can God be both the one demanding justice and the one sacrificing himself for us?

Even though the servant suffered and died, that was not the end of the story. God’s plan succeeded, and in what seemed like defeat he accomplished something greater.

From far in advance, God showed that the Savior was coming.

Have you ever seen someone take the blame for something they didn’t do or pay a debt that wasn’t theirs? What was that like?

Say a prayer thanking Jesus for his sacrifice. Ask him to help you trust that he did it because he loves you perfectly— all so that you could be set free from sin.

DIG DEEPER

Isaiah was a prophet who lived centuries after Moses and centuries before John the Baptist, yet these three prophets declared the same message: The Savior is coming.

Isaiah gets special attention for the sheer amount of prophecies he has concerning Jesus—the virgin birth in chapter seven, the Savior's titles in chapter nine, and the ministry of Jesus across chapters 42, 49, 50, 52, 53, 61, and 63. It is no wonder Isaiah is sometimes referred to as the Messianic Prophet.

Chapter 53 shows us the New Testament Gospel so beautifully and clearly, maybe more so than any other passage in the Old Testament. In these words we see the crucifixion centuries before it happened. We see a Savior who looked at a world that could not save itself and carried the world's debt on his own shoulders. How amazing it is that we have a God who willingly took on flesh and let that flesh be pierced and killed so that we would never have to taste eternal death.

People were expecting a Messiah who would come with great showy power and might. Many expected a kingly, handsome, unmistakable hero to be their champion, but Isaiah gives a different picture of Jesus. In 1 Samuel 9, Israel chose Saul as king — a head taller than everyone else, "an impressive young man without equal." Jesus would not look like this. He would be born in a manger, not a palace. He would not lead armies or be sought after by political rulers. That is often the way God works.

God on numerous occasions uses the weak, the humble, the unshowy. He recruits from the pit, not the pedestal. He does not send some magnificent prince by worldly standards. Instead he sends the Prince of Peace, who never shows off but uses his power to help others. Who did not ride into Jerusalem on a chariot but instead chose a donkey. Who did not crush his enemies in vengeance, but instead saved his enemies in love. This is the Savior that Isaiah prophecies. This is the Savior that you have.

REFLECTION

What stands out to you most about how God chose to punish sin?

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At the time of Jesus' birth, a decree from Caesar Augustus required people to travel to be registered. Joseph and Mary left their home and went to Bethlehem, a small and relatively unimportant town. When they arrived, there was no proper place for them to stay, so they found shelter in a stable (likely a small cave or shed.) Jesus was born in a very humble environment and laid in a manger, a feeding place for animals.

What stands out to you about the setting of Jesus' birth?

Nearby, shepherds were out in the fields at night. Shepherds were not highly regarded and lived simple, yet difficult lives.

An angel appeared and told them that a Savior had been born. The message is described as "good news of great joy for all people."

What stands out to you about the exchange between the shepherds and the angels?

The shepherds went to Bethlehem and found everything just as they were told. After they saw the child, they began to tell others what they had heard and seen.

How do you suppose people responded to the news the shepherds shared with them?

What is some news you have received, or something that happened to you, that you couldn't wait to share with others?

DIG DEEPER

Caesar Augustus was one of the longest reigning emperors in the history of ancient Rome. His rule lasted from 27 BC to 14 AD. He needed much of that time on the throne to conduct a census—a task that would take a very long time. Augustus' empire stretched from Europe into Asia and parts of Africa. A census like this would be a major operation that would take several years to conduct.

While Caesar was busy counting citizens, God was counting souls. He knew everyone in human history needed a Savior from sin. So at the perfect time, in little Bethlehem among cattle and hay, wrapped in strips of linen, lay the subject of the Old Testament prophets...Jesus Christ.

For centuries, God's people had been talking about their Messiah—this baby boy.

- The Seed of Eve (Genesis 3:15)
- The Seed of Abraham (Genesis 22:18)
- Judah's Hero (Genesis 49:8–10)
- David's Son (2 Samuel 7:12–16)
- The Virgin's Son, Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14)
- Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6)

This is the greatest news in the world. When the angels announced Jesus' birth, even the shepherds could not contain their excitement. Have you ever seen a Nativity set where the shepherds' faces appear stoic? Based on what Luke records, that could not have been the case! Imagine the thrill the shepherds experienced that night. Imagine how hard their hearts must have been beating in their chests—the smiles that they could not wipe off of their faces. They joyfully spread the message they heard because they could not keep such good news to themselves.

Luke tells us that Mary reflected on these things throughout her life. She had witnessed a world-changing, history-making miracle firsthand—she could not let it fade into the past. She pondered and treasured these events not just as happy memories, but as assurance of her salvation through her Son and Savior. Do you want to find Jesus? He won't be in a manger, but you find him right in his Word. Even amongst the busyness of life, ponder on these things. Reflect on them. Treasure them up in your heart. The Bible is where Jesus speaks to you, not as a baby crying in a manger, but as your Savior from sin.

Caesar Augustus ruled the Roman empire for just over forty years. Jesus rules the world forever.

REFLECTION

What stands out to you most about the arrival of Jesus in this story?

PSALM 22

STUDY GUIDE

This psalm was written by David during a time of deep distress. As a shepherd boy and the eventual King of God's people, his life had plenty of struggles and devastating times. We are not told which specific event was happening when he wrote this. It's interesting to note that much of what David described parallels Jesus's experience on the cross, including the opening words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

What stands out to you about how David begins this psalm?

For more than half the psalm, David used vivid language to show how serious and personal this suffering was.

What descriptions of his sufferings stand out to you the most?

What do you notice about how David talks about God in the middle of his suffering?

How does the tone of the psalm change from beginning to end?

How and why does a believer continue to put trust in God, even when suffering greatly?

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DIG DEEPER

A thousand years before Jesus hung on the cross to pay for mankind's sin, King David penned these words by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He is not just idly writing down words to put to music, he is prophesying the death of his Savior—one who would come from his own family line. Jesus even said some of these very words from the cross. This psalm is sometimes referred to as the Messianic Psalm, and the connections it makes to Jesus are undeniable.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Matthew records this in 27:46, Mark in 15:34. In Galatians 3:13, Paul expands on Christ becoming a curse for us. In Psalm 22:2, David laments that God does not seem to answer him—and when Jesus cried out to his Father on the cross, God the Father did not answer him a word.

The connections do not stop there. In verse 7, David writes of the mocking, the insulting, the shaking of heads from those who oppose Jesus. Verse 8 reads, "He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him since he delights in him." Compare this to Matthew 27:39–43. The people saying these things at the crucifixion did not even know they were fulfilling prophecy.

It doesn't even end there. Verse 15 says "my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth". In John 19:28 Jesus asks for a drink, thirsting with a dry mouth. Verse 16 speaks of hands and feet being pierced, centuries before crucifixion was even invented. Verse 17 reads, "They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing." Read John 19:23–24 and check back in. In 1 Peter 1:20, Peter makes it clear that God had this planned before the creation of the world. God didn't "wing it" when he executed the plan for salvation. He didn't make it up as he went along. This is the holy, righteous, omnipotent, omniscient God who created heaven and earth, doing exactly what he has always done. The accuracy is astounding—but it's no surprise.

REFLECTION

What is your takeaway from David's response to suffering in this psalm?

STUDY GUIDE

As we study the Story of the Bible, we are discovering that the entire book points us toward one central event: a sacrifice.

Jesus was led away to be crucified. Crucifixion was a Roman method of execution used for criminals. It was designed to be public, painful, and humiliating. Along the way, a man named Simon was forced to carry Jesus' cross, because Jesus was physically weakened from the beatings and torture he endured after his arrest.

Why do you suppose God's plan to pay for sin involved his Son going to the cross?

Identify the ways different groups of people treat Jesus in this reading and how he responds.

While he was on the cross, darkness came over the land. Jesus cried out using the opening words of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Now that you've read Matthew's account of Jesus on the cross, what similarities do you notice with what David writes in Psalm 22?

The temple curtain, which separated people from the most sacred place, was torn from top to bottom. The barrier between man and God was removed.

What do you notice about the response from the Roman soldier at the cross?

Jesus was then buried in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph was a wealthy man and a member of the Jewish council—the same group that had opposed Jesus. However, he was also described as a follower of Jesus. It took courage for him to step forward publicly and ask for Jesus' body.

Why do you think the details about the burial are included?

It is profoundly bittersweet to study this section of Scripture and bring to mind all that Christ suffered for the sake of sinners.

As you prepare to carry this story into another normal morning, afternoon, or evening, write a prayer about the impact Jesus' sacrifice has on you (spiritually, physically, and/or emotionally).

DIG DEEPER

This is when everything changed. The entire hinge of human history turns at this moment. This is what the prophets foretold. This is what Jesus repeatedly told his disciples would happen. This changed all of human history. The temple curtain was torn. The earth shook. Darkness covered the land. Even some of the dead were raised to life. The Roman centurion could not contain his amazement: "Surely he was the Son of God!"

Crucifixion had only been around for a few hundred years by the time Jesus was crucified. Believed to have been invented by the Persians, Rome quickly adopted crucifixion on a much broader scale. While Persian King Darius I had used it primarily against political opponents, Rome wielded it empire-wide as another means of maintaining their grip on power. It was reserved for slaves, the vilest criminals, and those without Roman citizenship—a public, brutal display designed to discourage the worst sorts of people from breaking the law.

Golgotha, the Place of the Skull, was outside the city of Jerusalem; many executions took place there at the hands of the Romans. According to tradition, some women would mix gall with wine and offer it to the crucified as an act of pity, to help numb the pain. This same thing happened to Jesus, but he refused once he realized what it was. He did not want anything to numb his suffering. He needed to carry all of it. All for you.

Not everyone could stomach performing such acts of mercy for the crucified. Many people would turn away, horrified and disgusted by what they saw. Some would pass by with their children, covering their eyes so as not to expose them to such a gruesome sight. Yet for you, God has changed this instrument of torture into a reminder of your living hope.

When you feel trapped in sin and temptation, God does not want you to cover your eyes from him; he wants you to fix your eyes on Jesus. Focus on the cross, not because it hurts, but because it's where your sin was paid for. We tell our children the same thing. We do not pass crosses and say "look away." Instead, we tell them how the cross is our hope—that's why we put them all over our churches and our homes and wear them around our necks! The apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:55–57, "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

This is when history changed. When a method of torture became a symbol of hope. When the curtain separating God from man was torn in two. When what looked like defeat was actually the ultimate victory for all people of all time.

"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2).

REFLECTION

What does this story teach you about God's love for you?

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Early on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene (a follower of Jesus who had been close to him) went to Jesus' tomb. When she arrived, she saw that the stone covering the entrance had been moved. This was unusual and alarming—imagine finding a grave disturbed in a graveyard! Mary assumed that Jesus' body had been stolen, which is ironic. Jesus' tomb had been specially sealed by the Romans to ensure that none of his friends or followers would take his body. (See Matthew 27:62–66)

Throughout this chapter we get to watch as the resurrected Jesus appears to several of his friends.

What strikes you about the way Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene in verses 10–18?

Later, Jesus appeared to His disciples. They were gathered together with the doors locked out of fear. His presence was unexpected, and he showed them his hands and side to confirm his identity. Thomas (one of the twelve disciples) was not there at this first appearance, and had a hard time believing what the others told him.

What stands out about Thomas's response?

How does Jesus respond to Thomas' doubts and questions? How doesn't he respond?

Why would it be important for John to include a story like this in his gospel account?

When something is hard to believe, how do you go about deciding if it's true?

Write a prayer asking God to make Jesus' resurrection a focal point in your life.

DIG DEEPER

The resurrection means everything to Christianity. It needed to happen, otherwise we could never trust that Jesus is truly the Savior since he said he would rise from death. The apostle Paul expounds on this writing, "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.... But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:17, 20–22). This is the most significant event in human history. Witnesses were overjoyed, baffled, astounded, and willingly died preaching this message because they knew that this changed everything for everyone.

Because of the magnitude of this event, you should have an opinion on Jesus Christ. People have opinions on all sorts of politicians, celebrities, and thought leaders from centuries ago, but there is no one else who has impacted history like Jesus has. Here are your options. Jesus was a...

- Legend - like King Arthur. You could hold this viewpoint, but the problem you would run into is that we have more historical evidence of Jesus than of some of the emperors at that time.
- Liar - you would not be the first to think this. The people shouting "crucify!" in Pilate's court would agree. The problem with this thought is explaining why a man would willingly endure the most horrific and painful death humanity could muster just to perpetuate a lie he invented.
- Lunatic - maybe he was just crazy. Many have suggested this. And yet in the Gospel accounts he often appears to be the only sane one in the room. Besides, you cannot crazy yourself from death back to life.

So if Jesus is not a legend, a liar, or a lunatic, then we have to take him at his word and trust he is who he says he is. The clear testimony of Scripture demonstrates time and time again that . . .

Jesus is Lord! - He loves you. He died for you. He cares about you. If someone says they will rise from the dead and then they do, you can trust them. Jesus kept his promise about dying and rising, so you can fully trust every other promise he makes to you.

Christianity is built on the testimony of those who saw Jesus and all that he did. As we saw in our reading, even the disciples did not believe until they saw it themselves. You can trust these words— recorded by eyewitnesses and supported by Jesus, who affirmed both the Old Testament and the testimony of his apostles.

The resurrection is the turning point. Any real historian acknowledges that Jesus was a real person who died at the hands of the Romans. He was buried in a known location (do we always appreciate just how famous he was at the time?) The tomb was empty, and people were so convinced they had seen the risen Jesus that they were willing to die for it. This is real. You can trust it. This is history. This is his story.

REFLECTION

What impact does Jesus' resurrection have in the everyday life of a believer?

STUDY GUIDE

Fifty Days after Jesus rose from the grave, His followers gathered together in one place, waiting, just as he had told them to do. The day was Pentecost, a Jewish harvest festival that brought people from different regions to Jerusalem, likely a similar group of people who saw Jesus crucified as they left Jerusalem following the Passover festival.

Read verses 2–4. What stands out to you about how the Spirit's arrival is described?

What do you notice about how the crowd reacts to what they are hearing?

Peter (one of Jesus' closest disciples) stood up and began to speak to the crowd. He explained that what they are seeing was spoken about earlier by the prophet Joel.

What does Peter choose to explain to the crowd, and why?

As Peter explained his quotation from Joel, he held everyone present responsible for Jesus' murder.

How does Peter display God's attitude toward guilty sinners?

As Peter spoke, many people were affected by what they heard. They began to ask what they should do in response. Peter told them to repent (to turn away from their sins) and be baptized.

What do you notice about how people respond to Peter's message?

This moment is often understood as the beginning of the early church—a group of people now centered around the message about Jesus.

Peter was not known for having the right words to say at the right time.

How does Peter's testimony in Acts 2 reveal God's desire to use sinners to share the gospel?

What is it like to be part of a "hard-to-explain" situation? How does it feel to tell people about it?

DIG DEEPER

The account of Pentecost in Acts 2 gives us many stunning pictures. We see the flames above the apostles' heads and the blowing wind of the Holy Spirit coming from heaven. We see the gospel message being spoken in many different languages. But the most beautiful picture of all is one of repentance and forgiveness.

The crucifixion of Jesus was a major event in Jerusalem. The disciples on the road to Emmaus make clear that anyone in Jerusalem at the time had to have known what happened to Jesus of Nazareth (Luke 24:18). Pentecost was only fifty days later. The event would still be fresh in people's minds, and it is more than likely that some of those who shouted "Crucify!" before Pilate were also among the crowd that day.

This is where we see the beautiful work of repentance and forgiveness that only God can give. Peter addresses the crowd and does not sugarcoat his words when he says, "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah" (verse 36). Peter points out their sin — their rejection of Jesus, their calling him a blasphemer when he was telling the truth all along. Their venomous hatred had led to his death.

The guilt weighed upon the crowd. Some may have remembered standing in Pilate's court, shaking their fists and shouting "Crucify!" Some may have even remembered crying out, "His blood is on us and on our children!" (Matthew 27:25). How much they must have wished to take those words back. But you cannot take back sin. Once committed, it can only be punished or forgiven. "When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'" (verse 37).

Peter answers by taking those very words from Good Friday and turning them: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off —for all whom the Lord our God will call" (verses 38–39). From words of regret to words of hope. They had wanted Jesus' blood on themselves and their children—and they received it, just not as they expected. His blood wouldn't condemn them, but instead freed them from their sins. Know that forgiveness is a gift, but it wasn't free — Jesus bled, died, and rose for you. Repent. Remember your baptism. Look to the cross. This promise is for your children. This promise is for you.

REFLECTION

What makes the events of Pentecost so important?

STUDY GUIDE

This passage is part of a letter written by Paul (an early Christian leader and missionary) to believers in Rome. Instead of telling a story, Paul explained what the message about Jesus means for people. He began by talking about “righteousness,” which means being right with God—being in a good and restored relationship with him.

What effect does our sin have on our righteousness?

Paul explained that this righteousness is not something people can earn by following rules or doing good things.

Paul wrote in verse 23 that all people have sinned—meaning everyone has gone their own way instead of God’s way. This connects back to the problem that began in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). Because of sin, being right with God has to come from beyond ourselves.

Paul explained that this comes through Jesus. Instead of people fixing the problem themselves, God provided a way.

Paul used the word “justified” in verse 24, which means being declared right or cleared of wrongdoing. It’s like being given a new standing, not based on what you’ve done, but on what has been done for you. It seems unthinkable that such a powerful, transformational status could be given to us as a gift from God.

Why do you think it’s so hard for us to wrap our heads around the fact that justification is a gift?

Paul further emphasized in verses 27 and 28 that our justification comes through faith (trusting in what Jesus has done) rather than through works (things people do to try to earn it).

How does having faith differ from trying to earn something? Compare and contrast how the two look in day-to-day life.

Righteousness—which was fully out of mankind’s reach—is now available to everyone in the same way: not by effort, but by faith in Jesus.

Are you more of a perfectionist or a go-with-the-flow type of person? How does that tend to affect your walk with Jesus?

Write a prayer thanking him for the grace that makes you right with God.

DIG DEEPER

Ask a child for a definition of sin, and you'll likely receive an answer along the lines of "bad." And the child is not wrong. Sin is bad! It causes us to be bad and to do bad to others. But sometimes that is where we leave it: just bad. That is an understatement. Sin kills. Sin kills marriages. Sin kills friendships. Sin kills trust. Sin even kills us—before there was sin in the world, people would not die! But because of sin, humans do succumb to death.

So you can imagine how impossible it is for a sinful human being to earn righteousness. Imagine wondering if you have done enough good for God to love you. That is not a certain hope. That is a questioning, doubting, scared hope. But Paul tells the Romans, and us, something different. It has nothing to do with you! It has everything to do with God and his love for you. Paul even emphasizes, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." This righteousness is given to you through Jesus Christ. Paul even highlights that this was given freely. In fact, the Greek word Paul uses is δωρεάν (dorean), which literally means "gift." You could understand Romans 3:24 as "justified as a gift by his grace." Isn't that such a beautiful picture? Even in our sin, God comes to us, finds us, and says, "This is my gift to you." Justification. Free forgiveness. You can even understand justification with the helpful memory hook "just-as-if-I-never-sinned." That's how God sees you, because Jesus' blood has washed you clean.

God had this picture in mind long before Jesus was born. In Leviticus 16, God commanded that on the Day of Atonement, when the bull was sacrificed, its blood would be sprinkled over the ark of the covenant. The significance of this cannot be understated. Inside the ark of the covenant were the ten commandments, God's law. The blood of the bull would cover the law.

Jesus' blood is so much more precious. It covers your sin and washes you clean of your failures to keep God's law. Jesus kept it for you. His death has freed you—it has justified you! Just as if you never sinned.

REFLECTION

What is your takeaway from reading about righteousness and justification?

STUDY GUIDE

This passage comes from a vision given to John (one of Jesus' disciples), who wrote it while in exile. Revelation uses vivid and symbolic language to describe what God showed him.

Here, John described "a new heaven and a new earth." This points to a complete renewal of creation—not just fixing what is broken, but making all things new.

What strikes you about the idea of a "new" heaven and earth?

He also described a "holy city" coming down from heaven. In Revelation, the Holy City refers to all believers. Earlier in the story, all people were separated from God because of their sins, but things will be different in the new heaven and earth.

Read verses 2 and 3. What do you notice about how this picture portrays God and his people?

Read verse 4. Why do you think John described heaven by saying what will not be there?

How does God describe his actions in verses 5–6?

What does this tell you about his plans for you?

The passage ended with a promise of relationship—God will be with his people, and they will belong to him.

When you think about the future, what do you find hopeful or difficult to imagine? How does this vision of the new heaven and earth affect your view of the current heaven and earth?

DIG DEEPER

Good storytelling, whether fictional or real, often follows a simple roadmap. The narrator begins with an introduction, then the rising action, the climax, the falling action, and finally the resolution. The story of the Bible is no different. God in his Word tells us the greatest story ever told, and every part is true. Every detail is factual. Through this study of the Story of the Bible, you may have even noticed these storytelling fundamentals. Genesis serves as a wonderful introduction, explaining where we come from, where we are, and what the problem is. Through the rest of the Old Testament and into the Gospels, we see a beautiful rising action of prophecies, successes, failures, and a God who sees it all and is there through it all. The crucifixion and resurrection are the climax of the story—the most important events in human history. These events change everything and mean everything for us. Then we get the falling action of Acts and the epistles, explaining what all of it means for us. Finally, we get to the end of Revelation, the resolution. And what a happy ending it is!

John sees a new heaven and a new earth for God's people to live in peace with him. Does that mean our earth and sky will be destroyed and completely new versions will replace them? Will our present world be demolished and then renewed to be our eternal home? Scripture does not tell us outright. All we know is that we will be with God and it will be perfect.

It is interesting that God uses the picture of a marriage between the Church (all believers of all time) and Jesus. In Genesis 2, after showing the first marriage between humans, Moses writes, "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife." Husbands and wives don't hang on to their parents like they did before. Now they cling to each other. In the same way, when Christ returns and we live forever with him, we need not look back on our lives on the former earth. It will be new. It will be better. It will be the best thing that has ever happened to you, and you will get to enjoy it forever. An additional verse added to the popular hymn "Amazing Grace" describes eternal life with Jesus like this: "When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we'd first begun."

REFLECTION

What stands out to you most about this vision?

PSALM 98

What are some “marvelous things” God has done in your life that give you reason to praise Him? What “new song” might you respond with today?

PSALM 98

DIG DEEPER

Unlike many other psalms, this is almost pure praise. No mention of God's enemies, no lament over sin, no vivid pictures of judgment, death, or destruction. Just praise. Just peace.

You can think of this psalm as an "expanding song." The call to worship expands. The first stanza of this psalm calls on the worshiping congregation at the temple to praise the LORD. Then, the second stanza expands the call to include all the people on earth. Then, the third stanza expands the call to go out even wider, to all creation. Let it all praise the LORD!

We have so many reasons to praise God, don't we? You can come up with a list of all the blessings God has granted you, but the best one is salvation. As you have studied the Story of the Bible you have seen how God has brought salvation to the world. You also got a glimpse into God's revelation to the apostle John that he recorded for us to know. And now, after studying the Story of the Bible, we spread its message. As the psalm expands its audience, so do we spread this joy to new people who may not have heard this message. Let all people praise the Lord!

Live in this peace! Live in praise to your God. You know the story—now share it!

REFLECTION

What stands out to you about this "new song" of praise?
