

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY

PRESENTS

RVL

DISCIPLES TM

THE STUDY

SEASON 1

A GROUP STUDY GUIDE

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PARTICIPANT GUIDE

RVL Discipleship: The Study, Season 1

Participant Guide

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INTRODUCTION

If you're anything like the rest of us in the Western world, the word *discipleship* probably makes you think of a church small group activity. You might attend (most of) the meetings, until you run out of video episodes or everyone gets too busy around the holidays. Ironic that life can sometimes get in the way of learning how to live, right? But we often think of discipleship in this way: a short-term program meant to teach and entertain us along with some people we kind of know from church.

And if we're honest with ourselves, might that be why we picked up this study? Because this is what Christians *do*?

Imagine that God outlined a clear map for His people—the Bible. We took that map, and, in true “group project” fashion, some of us studied it more than others. (I mean, why trudge through the book of Numbers when you’ve got a well-paid teaching pastor for that kind of thing?) But imagine that we took that map, collectively learned the facts and how to explain the map and teach it and use it to support our arguments . . . and then we stopped there.

God didn’t stop there.

What if we not only knew the path God had mapped out for us, but we also chose to walk in it? That, in its simplest form, is what it means to be a disciple.

In *RVL Discipleship: The Study*, we will consider what it meant to be a disciple of Jesus in a first century Jewish context—and what it means for us today. This study is organized into four seasons, each building on the last as we uncover how to walk the path God has set before us.

The seasons are organized like this:

SEASON 1 | As we will unpack throughout the study, Jesus’ disciples really knew their Bible. It is vitally important for us to value Scripture in the same way. Season 1 outlines how we are meant to interact with the text: 1) approaching it from the context in which it was written; 2) exploring how Jesus used the Scriptures in His teaching; 3) understanding how His followers were meant to be changed by what they learned; and 4) identifying the major paradigm that ties the whole Bible together.

SEASON 2 | Discipleship was formalized with the rise of rabbis in Jewish culture, but the concept really started much earlier than that. This idea of knowing God’s path and faithfully walking in it began when He decided to choose a partner, one who would be His ambassador to a broken world. Building on the tools and central themes from season 1, we will follow Israel’s story as God’s partner throughout the Old Testament, ultimately building up to Jesus’ arrival.

SEASON 3 | What was daily life like for the Jews of Jesus' day? How did they practice their faith under Roman occupation? And most importantly, what did it mean to be a rabbi? This season focuses on Jesus, the man: our God made flesh, who chose to reveal Himself as a first century rabbi to a first century Jewish audience.

SEASON 4 | The final season of this study focuses on the practical role of disciples in the first century, unpacking the cultural and scriptural implications and applying them to modern-day followers of Jesus.

God is on a mission, and it's the same mission He's had since Genesis 1. The truly mind-blowing thing about it is, we get to join Him.

Wherever you are in your faith journey, this group study is a great place to start.



HOW TO USE THIS PARTICIPANT GUIDE

RVL Discipleship: The Study, Season 1 is organized into ten episodes, each of which corresponds with a video lesson. Each episode in this guide is arranged in the following sections:

THE SHEMA | After this is unpacked in episode 1, groups have the option to begin each meeting by reciting the Shema together as a reminder of what we are committing to.

INTRODUCTION | Read this aloud together, either choosing one reader or taking it in turns.

TALK ABOUT IT | Groups will discuss one simple conversation starter in response to the Introduction, in preparation for watching the video lesson.

WATCH THE VIDEO | The video lesson will be viewed as a group, using the provided outline to take individual notes.

VIDEO DISCUSSION | After the video lesson, groups will use the discussion questions to dig deeper into the content.

TO WRAP IT UP | Just like the Introduction, this conclusion should be read aloud together.

END IN PRAYER TOGETHER | End each meeting by praying for one another, making use of the prayer prompts if your group finds them helpful.

P.S. | Each episode in this guide includes a P.S. section with additional material for individuals to read and respond to on their own between meetings.

This study is designed to be accessible not only for small groups, but also for individual users. If you are going through this study without a group, simply follow the order of each episode in the guide on your own. You may wish to record your answers to the discussion questions in a journal.

THE WORDS OF THE SHEMA

The full text of the Shema includes two passages from Deuteronomy and one from Numbers. For this study, we will focus on the first part only, along with the passage Jesus added in the Gospels:

HEBREW

*Shema Israel,
Adonai elohenu-Adonai echad
Ve'ahavta et Adonai eloikah,
b'khol levavkah,
uve'khol naphshekah,
uve'khol me'odekah.
Ve'ahavta l're'acha comocha. Amen.*

ENGLISH

*Hear O Israel!
The Lord is our God—the Lord alone.
Love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your might,
and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.*





EPISODE 1

THE COMMITMENT

Hear O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart,
all your soul, and all your might,
and love your neighbor as yourself.*

Amen.



INTRODUCTION

If you spend time in the devout Jewish world, you will quickly notice how often they say the *Shema*. This most important prayer is recited in the morning to begin the day, in the evening to end it, and many times in between to refocus and reframe during important moments.

It first shows up in Deuteronomy 6, as Moses encouraged the Israelites to keep all God's commands when they entered the Promised Land:

*"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.
Love the Lord your God with all your heart and
with all your soul and with all your strength."*

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (emphasis added)



Since then, *Shema* (which also includes additional passages from Deuteronomy and Numbers) has become not only a statement of belief for Jewish people, but also a sort of pledge of allegiance. Oppressors like the Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans served many gods at once, and things did not go well for anyone who refused to bow to them. In a world where there was intense pressure to compromise, the *Shema* became a way for the Jews to say plainly, "We will not serve any god except the Lord."

And they don't like saying it alone. As is true with just about everything, having others around to encourage you greatly increases your likelihood of follow-through. Saying *Shema* together implies that loving the Lord should be done in community. It acknowledges that they need each other to make it happen.

Now, what does all this have to do with discipleship?

When Jesus was asked which was the most important of all God's commandments, He had an answer instantly—and it's a direct quote from the *Shema*:

*"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel:
The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with
all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and
with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor
as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."*

Mark 12:29-31 (emphasis added)



In the coming weeks, we will consider how to approach the Bible as disciples, looking at the context in which it was written and understanding how Jesus used Scripture throughout His teaching. Since this part of the *Shema* is what He considered to be the greatest commandment in the entire text, this is where our journey begins.

TALK ABOUT IT

As you prepare to watch video lesson 1, "The Commitment," take a few minutes to discuss your hopes for this study with the group. What made you want to participate? What are you hoping to get out of this study?

WATCH THE VIDEO

As you watch the video for episode 1, you may use the following outline to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

THE WORDS OF THE *SHEMA*:

This is the portion of the Shema that we will use for this study, along with the part that Jesus added in the Gospels.

HEBREW	ENGLISH
Shema Israel,	Hear O Israel!
Adonai elohenu-Adonai echad	The Lord is our God—the Lord alone.
Ve'ahavta et Adonai eloeikah, b'khol levavkah,	Love the Lord your God with all your heart,
uve'khol naphshekah, uve'khol me'odekah,	with all your soul, and with all your might,
Ve'ahavta l're'acha comocha. Amen.	and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.

Expanded meanings of key Hebrew words:

1. *Shema* means:
2. *Echad* means:
3. *Ve'ahavta* means:
4. *Levavkah* means:
5. *Naphshekah* means:
6. *Me'odekah* means:

Other notes:

VIDEO DISCUSSION

QUESTION 1

An important part of studying discipleship together is getting to know one another. Each member of the group should take a few minutes to (briefly!) say a bit about his or her faith journey. Would you consider yourself a follower of Jesus, and how did you come to know Him? If not, what has your spiritual journey been like so far?

QUESTION 2

Totally committing to anything might seem like a daunting task. It's intimidating to make a lifelong commitment to something or someone—not a decision to be taken lightly. If you have experienced any of these feelings, you're certainly not alone! What might make you more comfortable with the idea of being "all in" with your faith?

QUESTION 3

As a group, consider some ways in which you can encourage each other to *shema* for the duration of this study. Some ideas could be:

- Commit to daily Bible reading, and form a group chat in which each person posts a verse from whatever he or she read that day. You might choose to read the same book together as a group.
- Have each member choose a partner and commit to checking in regularly with each other between meetings.
- And so on . . . anything that will help your group to encourage each other to be "all in."

TO WRAP IT UP

Maybe you're not sure what it looks like to be "all in" when it comes to your faith—or even if you're ready to make such a commitment. That's okay! The purpose of this study is to walk through what it looks like to be a disciple of Jesus, and you don't have to have it all figured out in order to participate. There's not a human being on earth who has *arrived*, or who is done being "in process." You'll no doubt find that all your group members are at different places in their faith, and that will almost certainly grow and change throughout the weeks of this study.

Disciples are meant to do this together. Have patience with yourself and with one another, and let this study be a safe place to take the next step on that path.

END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

Close your time together in prayer, praying for each other's needs and encouraging one another to *shema* until you meet again.

Here are some things you might pray about:

- Ask God for specific ideas for how to love Him and your neighbor with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate your personal time in the Scriptures, revealing more of His heart and character every time you read.

END GROUP MEETING

To dig deeper into the content from this episode, check out the P.S. section on your own before the next meeting.

A FEW PS.'S

On Your Heads and Your Hands

When the *Shema* is given in Deuteronomy, notice that these words are to be in our hearts, on our hands, and on our heads:

*"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be **on your hearts**. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. **Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.** Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates."*

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 (emphasis added)



What does this mean, practically speaking?

Recall that in the Hebrew way of thinking, your “heart” is your operating system, your will, your decision-making center. This includes your mind as well—everything that keeps your body operating. Your “head,” then, is more specifically your feelings and emotions, how you react to the world around you. Your “hands” are your strength, your actions. God calls His people to love Him (and their neighbors) with each one of these.

Many Jews like to remind themselves of this by taking this passage literally—by physically attaching these words to their hearts, heads, and hands. They use small boxes called *tefillin*, which contain all the times the *Shema* is mentioned in Scripture. One *tefillah* is bound to the forehead. The other is placed on the bicep of the left arm, against the heart, and the straps of the box wind down the arm to the hand. These straps are tied in a specific way around the finger, in what looks like a W. This is the Hebrew letter *shin*, which stands for “Shaddai the Almighty.”

This is a way of honoring both the letter and the spirit of God’s command in Deuteronomy 6. It’s a way to remind themselves: “When we say *Shema*, we commit to love the Lord our God with *levavkah* [our hearts], *naphshekah* [our heads], and *me’odekah* [our hands].”

And On Your Doors and Your Gates

*"Write them on the **doorframes of your houses** and on your **gates**."*

Deuteronomy 6:9 (emphasis added)



The idea of someone's house extends far beyond just a building in the Hebrew language. This will be unpacked in more detail throughout this study, but in the broadest sense, your "house" is not just the place where your family lives. It represents the foundation upon which you build your entire life.

If you've seen *Fiddler on the Roof*, you're familiar with *mezuzahs*. These small boxes can be simple or ornate, but just like the *tefillin*, each *mezuzah* contains the words of the *Shema*. Jews who choose to use them will attach a *mezuzah* to the right-hand post of all major doors in their homes (except the bathroom, small rooms, or places without a proper door as an entrance). Every time they enter or leave the house, they will touch the *mezuzah* and kiss their fingers, as if to say, "May Your commands be sweet to me, Lord God!" In other words, "May I always long for Your will to be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Mezuzahs would also be affixed to the gates of Hebrew towns and cities. Not only did they function as public reminders, like their counterparts on a private home's doorway, but the city gates were also where help would be distributed to the poor. If you were in need, you could go to the gate and receive aid. If a city was functioning in the way God intended, citizens would want their poor to be in the city gate, where they could be provided for.

Legal proceedings would often take place at the gate as well. This was where justice would be dispensed, where God's people could go to ensure that His law was being upheld.

In this way, all aspects of Hebrew daily life, private and public, would take place under the shadow of the *Shema*—a physical reminder of who God is and who He asks us to be.

Now It's Your Turn

In the time before the next meeting, take a few minutes to consider your own relationship with God. Is your knowledge of God more intellectual, or is it living in your heart? How can you take one more step to be living into the *Shema* regularly? As you pray through these thoughts, consider recording your responses in a journal.



EPISODE 2

THE POND

*Taste and see that the Lord is good;
blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.*

Psalm 34:8



THE SHEMA

ON YOUR OWN

Take a moment to reflect before beginning the meeting. Consider the emotions, experiences, and thoughts that are most on your mind right now. Lay them before the Lord, and prepare your heart for the prayer you are about to speak, the commitment you make with the words of the *Shema*.

TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English.

HEBREW

*Shema Israel,
Adonai elohenu-Adonai echad
Ve'ahavta et Adonai eloeikah,
b'khol levavkah,
uve'khol naphshekah,
uve'khol m'odekah.
Ve'ahavta l're'acha comocha. Amen.*

ENGLISH

*Hear O Israel!
The Lord is our God—the Lord alone.
Love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your might,
and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.*



INTRODUCTION

The Bible is a fascinating book. It has stories that were easy to understand and connected with us as small children, yet it also includes passages we wrestle with as adults. It's a library of sixty-six volumes, inspired by God, written by human beings, and handed down through generations to show us who God is and who we are. But you may have noticed—for a book that is meant to teach us how to walk God's path, it's awfully full of storytelling.

Roughly 70 percent of the Bible is made up of stories: mostly historical, some parables. Much of the New Testament is composed of letters between the people in these stories. And when Jesus was asked a direct question in the Gospels, He almost always responded not with a direct answer, but with a story. Why is that?

Wouldn't it have been easier—dare we say, more *efficient*—for God to have just one person write up a summary of everything we need to know? The whole thing could reasonably have been done in a series of essays. Why so many stories?

This also begs the question: Are there tools we can use to deepen our understanding of the Bible? How can we better understand the parts we know and love, while also wrestling well with passages that are confusing or hard to apply?

Let's get into today's content and take a look.

TALK ABOUT IT

Why do you think the Bible is so full of stories, as opposed to bullet points of information? As you prepare to watch episode 2, "The Pond," discuss this as a group.

WATCH THE VIDEO

As you watch episode 2, you may use the following outline to take notes.

Western (Greek) Thinking:

SEEK TRUTH

Emphasis on the:

EXPRESS TRUTH

Eastern (Hebrew) Thinking:

SEEK TRUTH

Emphasis on the:

EXPRESS TRUTH

Other notes:

VIDEO DISCUSSION

QUESTION 1

As RVL says in this episode's intro, the Bible was written *for us*, but not *to us*. Why does it matter for us to consider the original authors and audiences?

QUESTION 2

Describe your reactions to RVL's concluding story about the rabbi putting a drop of honey on each student's copy of the Torah (which contains the first five books of the Old Testament). When have you "tasted that the Lord is good"—when you experienced God with your heart and not just your head? What did that do for your faith? Discuss as a group.

QUESTION 3

How might understanding the differences between Eastern and Western thinking change the way you think about the Bible in your own reading time?

TO WRAP IT UP

In modern Western culture, stories can certainly be used to communicate truth, but far more often, we value them for entertainment. Think of how many streaming services you pay for, or how many books or audiobooks you've plowed through this year. In the West, stories are generally what we *escape reality into*, for a time.

As we consider how to approach the Bible, recognizing the way the original writers and hearers communicated truth is one way for us to experience it "in the pond" in which it was written. We can reset our thinking to remember that these are not stories meant to pull us *out of our reality*, but rather, to give us a clearer understanding of *what reality is*.

Think of the most important person in your life. Anyone on earth could, if provided the information, list a million things about that person—his or her eye color, blood type, hobbies, fears, and so on. With the correct facts, anyone could give a reasonably accurate description of this person. This describes the Western approach: learning a list of facts that allows you to describe someone or something. Meeting or encountering that person or thing becomes largely unnecessary.

When we read the Bible, it's not enough to learn a list of information about God. We need to get into the mindset of the people who first wrote it, Eastern thinkers who wanted their audience to have a sensory, heart-centered chance to *meet* God. The Bible is a sixty-six-volume love story meant to engage us at a heart level. It's there to introduce us to a God we can *actually know*.

We must learn to approach the Bible with both a Western and an Eastern mindset: studying and treasuring all the facts, while pursuing an experiential knowledge of the God whom it reveals.

END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

Close your time together in prayer, praying for each other's needs and encouraging one another to *shema* until you meet again.

Here are some things you might pray about:

- Pray that each one of you would meet God in a new and real way, instead of only learning about Him.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate your personal time in the Scriptures, revealing more of His heart and character every time you read.

END GROUP MEETING

To dig deeper into the content from this episode, check out the P.S. section on your own before the next meeting.

A FEW PS.'S

A Western List with an Eastern Challenge

Yes, it's ironic that after all that talk about the importance of story and the Hebrew mind, you would scroll to the PS section, only to find an informational list of how the Bible is laid out. But again—Western ways of study are not bad! It's just important for us to be able to recognize, value, and experience **both** worldviews when we approach Scripture.

If you have ever felt unable to explain how the Bible is actually organized (and maybe thought it was too late to ask), keep reading. Don't worry—we'll keep it simple.

Some very general background

The Christian Bible has its roots in the Hebrew Bible, which includes what we now call the Old Testament. After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, some of the apostles and early believers wrote down their accounts of His ministry on earth for future generations. That is where the Gospels, the first four books of the New Testament, come from. As the church grew beyond Israel, letters from leaders like Peter and Paul were shared between faith communities, and many of these letters became the rest of the New Testament. Early church councils eventually settled on a completed canon, a collection of Old and New Testaments that would officially be called Scripture.

How is the Bible organized?

Into two big parts

First, there's the obvious separation: the Old and the New Testaments. To generalize, this separates "the Hebrew text" (OT) from "the Christian text" (NT). The Old Testament is everything before Jesus, and the New Testament is everything leading up to and after Jesus' birth. But it is absolutely crucial that we recognize that **they are one story**.

For this reason, the classes seen in these videos are always invited (but not required) to rip out the empty page between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament. The goal is not to be disrespectful; it's to respect the fact that the Bible is all one story. As you go through this study, you might consider doing the same as a reminder.

Organized by genre, but . . .

Many books of the Bible end up being laid out chronologically in terms of historical events, but you'll notice that's not always the case. That's because the Bible is primarily organized into groups by **genre**, not necessarily by dates and events.

That being said, thinking of any one of these books as belonging to a single genre does it a real disservice. Each one includes aspects of many genres, and these categories are necessarily connected. You can't divide Law from Histories. In fact, Prophecy and Histories and Law are inseparable. The Bible's Poetry is likewise intimately connected to History and Prophecy.

And then you get into the books themselves. Revelation is categorized as Prophecy, but the whole thing is a Letter. Lamentations is usually considered Poetry, even as it's placed in the middle of the Prophets section. The Letters in the New Testament are meant for teaching and instruction, but they can never be separated from the History told in Acts. And Malachi is not nearly as far removed from the Gospels as that empty page between the Old and New Testaments makes it feel. It's a very intentional cliffhanger that flings us headfirst toward Jesus' birth.

The timeline of the Bible goes forward and backward, retelling the same story in both Old and New Testaments, inviting us to learn, remember, and participate. Each part connects and invites us into the one big story of God and His creation.

Remember, as we just considered in episode 2, God did not reveal Himself through a bunch of organized Western essays! Instead, God wrote His story with a community. Every book of the Bible tells, builds upon, and retells the story of that community, ultimately pointing us to an immeasurable God who went to unimaginable lengths to be with us.

The order of the books

With these nuances in your (Western and Eastern!) mind, here's the breakdown of the books. There are, of course, subcategories and endless additional details, but this is the most standard simple description of the Protestant Bible's organization.

OLD TESTAMENT THE HEBREW BIBLE		NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTIAN TEXT	
THE LAW	GOSPELS		
Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy		Matthew Mark Luke John	

OLD TESTAMENT THE HEBREW BIBLE		NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTIAN TEXT	
HISTORY		HISTORY	
Joshua	2 Kings	Acts	
Judges	1 Chronicles		
Ruth	2 Chronicles		
1 Samuel	Ezra		
2 Samuel	Nehemiah		
1 Kings	Esther		
POETRY		LETTERS	
Job		Romans	Titus
Psalms		1 Corinthians	Philemon
Proverbs		2 Corinthians	Hebrews
Ecclesiastes		Galatians	James
Song of Songs		Ephesians	1 Peter
		Philippians	2 Peter
		Colossians	1 John
		1 Thessalonians	2 John
		2 Thessalonians	3 John
		1 Timothy	Jude
		2 Timothy	
MAJOR PROPHETS		PROPHECY	
Isaiah		Revelation	
Jeremiah			
Lamentations			
Ezekiel			
Daniel			
MINOR PROPHETS			
Hosea	Nahum		
Joel	Habakkuk		
Amos	Zephaniah		
Obadiah	Haggai		
Jonah	Zechariah		
Micah	Malachi		

Now It's Your Turn

If you made it all the way through the PS section, you will have just digested a massive amount of information *about* the Word of God. That's a wonderful thing; the Bible is not an unknowable book that is too lofty to understand and describe to others. But a disciple cannot stop at knowing these things abstractly, with a Western mind only. A disciple takes these facts and learns to know the Word of God in the way it was intended to be known—*by experience*.

In the time before your next group meeting, consider your own commitment to reading and studying the Bible. Is that something you prioritize? How can experiencing the Word of God become something you do on a regular basis?





EPISODE 3

THE TREE

*Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there
he called on the name of the Lord, the Eternal God.*

Genesis 21:33



THE SHEMA

ON YOUR OWN

Take a moment to reflect before beginning the meeting. Consider the emotions, experiences, and thoughts that are most on your mind right now. Lay them before the Lord, and prepare your heart for the prayer you are about to speak, the commitment you make with the words of the *Shema*.

TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English.

HEBREW

*Shema Israel,
Adonai elohenu-Adonai echad
Ve'ahavta et Adonai eloeikah,
b'khol levavkah,
uve'khol naphshekah,
uve'khol m'odekah.
Ve'ahavta l're'acha comocha. Amen.*

ENGLISH

*Hear O Israel!
The Lord is our God—the Lord alone.
Love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your might,
and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.*



INTRODUCTION

Imagine that your neighbor posted a photo of his car with a flat tire, along with the caption, “I’m mad about my flat.” What would you assume? *Oh, Kevin’s upset about his flat tire. That doesn’t look like fun.*

Now imagine you scroll past the same exact caption, but this time, it’s posted by a British influencer with a reel of a beautiful London apartment. Changes everything, doesn’t it? You think, *This girl must love her place in London.* Perhaps you’ve consumed enough British media to recognize that in the U.K., “mad about” means “I’m crazy about,” and a “flat” is an apartment. But regardless, the content of the video gives you enough context to infer the meaning of the caption.

Same exact words. Completely different meanings. Your brain automatically interprets the words because the accompanying imagery gives you the right context.

The Bible is the same way. Recall from last episode’s discussion that the Bible was written by Eastern thinkers, people who often express truth in story and picture rather than by making direct statements and propositions. It’s important to understand that these stories, metaphors, and word pictures are all connected to a specific time and place, one the original audience would recognize.

Remember, the Bible was written *for* you. God intended for you, in your time and place, to read the Bible and get everything you need out of it. But it was not originally written *to* you.

Knowing about the world in which it was written—seeing the imagery attached to the caption, if you will—makes all the difference in understanding how the original audience would have experienced Scripture’s words.

As we continue to highlight tools for approaching the Bible, always remember: the context matters.

TALK ABOUT IT

As you prepare to explore the context of the Bible, consider your own experience with it. When have you felt a story come alive after learning something about the background? Or, when have you sensed there was more going on in a story than meets the eye, but you had no clue what that might be?

Discuss as a group.

WATCH THE VIDEO

As you watch the video for episode 3, you may use the following outline to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

*Abraham planted a **tamarisk tree** in Beersheba, and there he called on the name of the Lord, the Eternal God.*

Genesis 21:33 (emphasis added)



Six major categories of context to consider when reading the Bible:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

Details about the geography near Beersheba:

Details about the tamarisk tree:

VIDEO DISCUSSION

QUESTION 1

Discuss the categories of context that RVL lists in this episode: language, literature (genre), geography, history, culture, and the grand narrative. How might you go about researching each of these categories when you're considering a passage of Scripture?

QUESTION 2

As you read the Bible on your own, how can you begin to look for context clues on a regular basis? Has anyone in the group practiced approaching the Bible in this way? If so, what did you find helpful?

QUESTION 3

RVL explains how planting the tamarisk tree was Abraham's way of declaring that he trusted God to fulfill His promises. As a follower of Jesus, what "tamarisk trees" might you plant in your own life? That is to say, how might you express your own trust in God? How might you leave a spiritual inheritance for those who will come after you: your children, siblings, friends, community, and so on?

TO WRAP IT UP

It can seem intimidating to start thinking about the Bible in terms of its context. You probably don't read ancient Hebrew or Greek, and you may never visit Israel. If you live in the twenty-first century Western world, you would probably relate far more to the worldview of the Roman Empire than to the Jewish culture in the Bible.

But that's okay!

As we explore discipleship throughout this study, we will emphasize the importance of making a lifelong commitment to study the Bible. But remember, a lifelong commitment is just that—something you can spend your entire life doing. You probably won't feel you're good at digging into biblical context right away, and that is completely normal.

A simple way to start looking at the context of the Bible is to pay attention to anything that stands out to you. Do the actions of a character seem odd or illogical? It might be a cultural detail you're unfamiliar with. Does the passage mention where the story took place? Look up the geography of the area and see what you can learn. Does a phrase or story sound familiar to you, as if you may have read it elsewhere in the Bible? Use a Bible app to look up all the places that phrase shows up in Scripture and see what connections you can make. Often, you will find that many of these "odd" details lead you to insightful or interesting information about the context, which will give you a deeper understanding of the passage you're studying.

To go back to our example in the Introduction, having a clear view of "the image attached to the caption" will always help you to better understand the caption itself.

And don't worry, we will continue to practice this approach to Scripture throughout this study.

END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

Close your time together in prayer, praying for each other's needs and encouraging one another to *shema* until you meet again.

Here are some things you might pray about:

- Maybe there are specific areas of your life where you feel like Abraham, waiting to see the fruit of God's faithfulness. Pray over these circumstances together.
- Ask God what "tamarisk trees" He might have for you to plant in your own life—how you might show your trust in Him and bless those around you.

END GROUP MEETING

To dig deeper into the content from this episode, check out the P.S. section on your own before the next meeting.

A FEW P.S.'S

Luke 15: An Example of Cultural Context

In Middle Eastern culture, honor is vitally important. There is immense pressure to avoid anything that could cause shame, especially to your family.

One action that is particularly shameful in this culture is for an old man to run. You might see an elderly woman hurrying along, but a man of a certain age is expected to behave with utmost dignity. Imagine seeing an old man dance to music in his headphones and sing at the top of his lungs on the side of the road. You might feel a twinge of embarrassment for him—and probably wonder if he was okay. Maybe his mind isn't sound and he needs help. Whatever the reason, this is not expected behavior for a man of his age in our culture.

An old man running in the Middle East is considered even more undignified than this, and such an action would be grounds for village gossip. "Did you see Shimon? He ran down the road. In his robe. How shameful!"

And in a culture with deep roots in oral tradition, memories run long. Years later, people would still say to one another, "You know that family? One of their old men actually *ran* in public."

Now, what Bible story does this insight into culture illuminate for you? Luke 15, with the prodigal son! What does the father do when he sees his younger son approaching? Does he wait for him at the gate, standing tall and dignified, protecting his own honor while his son approaches, tension mounting? Absolutely not—he runs! He makes *himself* the object of shame so that he can restore dignity to his son as quickly as possible. His love for the young man is greater than even the need to keep his own honor, and he doesn't care one bit what anyone else might think.

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

Luke 15:20b (emphasis added)



Jeremiah 17: An Example of Language and Geography Context

Jeremiah was one of the major prophets in the Bible, a significant messenger whom God chose to communicate a warning to Israel. At this point in history, God's people were stubbornly wandering from their covenant with the Lord, and they were about to be exiled for their failures.

Chapter 17 continues to describe how far Israel had fallen. They had ceased to trust in God for their security and were living exactly like the pagan nations around them. Verses 5-6 rebuke them for their choices, saying, "Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the Lord. That person will be like a bush in the wastelands; they will not see prosperity when it comes. They will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives" (Jeremiah 17:5-6).

As twenty-first century Westerners, what do we get out this passage? That a person who trusts in human beings instead of in the Lord will be like a desert plant, dry and dying, and will end up lonely and in need.

This is an accurate interpretation; the English translation is well done, and the words are true and trustworthy. But knowing something of the original language and setting can drive the passage home even further.

In Hebrew, the term we translate as bush is the word *a'ra'r*. What is an *a'ra'r*?

Well, it's a bush. But it's a specific *type* of bush.

If you go into the desert in Israel, there is little in the way of vegetation. You might stumble onto an acacia tree here and there. Maybe you will even find a tamarisk, which some loving family has looked after for generations. But every so often, you will come upon an unbelievably lush-looking shrub, green and full of fruit. After any amount of time in the desert, the sight of this bush will make you rub your eyes in disbelief.

The fruit is the size of a large orange and feels heavy, like it's full of juice. But when you break it open, you will hear a small "gasp" of air escaping the rind, then discover that it's empty.

And then it gets worse; along with the nothing inside this fruit, you will notice little strands dripping a white juice. This liquid is extremely poisonous if it gets into your bloodstream.

This deceptively dangerous bush is an *a'ra'r*.

*Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the Lord. That person will be like [an *a'ra'r*] in the wastelands; they will not see prosperity when it comes. They will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives.*

Jeremiah 17:5-6 (author's insert)



Putting the PPS Together

Now, in order to understand the main point, did you need to know which desert bush was specified in the original Hebrew? Or that it's shameful for an old man to run in the Middle East? Not necessarily. God's Word communicates truth wherever it is read, whether you know these things or not.

Considering the context is not about obtaining some secret knowledge that unlocks a bonus level of your relationship with God. As God Himself said about His words through Isaiah:

*"As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return to it without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."*

Isaiah 55:10-11 (emphasis added)



God's Word accomplishes His purposes no matter where you're from or what language you speak. But by reading the Bible from the context in which it was written, each passage is deepened. The consequences of not trusting in the Lord feel more dire. The emotional high point of the parable hits home a bit harder—especially when you understand that the father's response is a metaphor for how God feels about *you*. Considering the context helps the Bible go from some old book to a real, relatable story about real people.

This is the power of Eastern communication in the Bible; the sensory details communicate truth in a way that elicits a heartfelt response. And the more of the context you can uncover behind this wonderful book, the more it will grab you by the shirt and shake you, in all the best ways.

Now It's Your Turn

As you read your Bible in the time before the next meeting, practice paying attention to the context. Make note of any words, references, actions, or phrases that stick out or seem odd to you, and then try looking them up. You may find it helpful to keep notes in a journal.





EPISODE 4

THE COALS

When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

John 21:9



THE SHEMA

ON YOUR OWN

Take a moment to reflect before beginning the meeting. Consider the emotions, experiences, and thoughts that are most on your mind right now. Lay them before the Lord, and prepare your heart for the prayer you are about to speak, the commitment you make with the words of the *Shema*.

TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English.

HEBREW

*Shema Israel,
Adonai elohenu-Adonai echad
Ve'ahavta et Adonai eloikah,
b'khol levavkah,
uve'khol naphshekah,
uve'khol m'odekah.
Ve'ahavta l're'acha comocha. Amen.*

ENGLISH

*Hear O Israel!
The Lord is our God—the Lord alone.
Love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your might,
and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.*



INTRODUCTION

Peter once asked Jesus, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" (Matthew 18:21).

Kind of makes you wonder what his brother Andrew, another of Jesus' disciples, did to Peter that day, doesn't it? In classic Eastern fashion, Jesus answered with a parable. But first, He corrected Peter's suggestion with an odd and seemingly random number:

*"I tell you, not seven times, but **seventy-seven times.**"*

Matthew 18:22 (emphasis added)



It's not difficult to intuit that Jesus was telling Peter (and later, us) to forgive people over and over. But why not just say that? Why say, "seventy-seven times"? Why is that number even there?

In the last meeting, we talked about how important it is for us to consider the context in which the Bible was written. That means considering things like the original language, the geography of the place where the story happened, cultural details, and so on. One of the most helpful ways to do this is to ask that very question: what is this here for?

Let's get into today's content as we add one more strategy to our toolkit for approaching the Bible.

TALK ABOUT IT

In your personal Bible reading time since the last meeting, what interesting connections or discoveries did you make by paying attention to the context? Discuss as a group.

WATCH THE VIDEO

As you watch the video for episode 4, you may use the following outline to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

*When they landed, they saw a fire of **burning coals** there with fish on it, and some bread.*

John 21:9 (emphasis added)

*"In my distress I called to the Lord;
I called out to my God.
From his temple he heard my voice;
my cry came to his ears.
The earth trembled and quaked,
the foundations of the heavens shook;
they trembled because he was angry.
Smoke rose from his nostrils;
consuming fire came from his mouth,
burning coals blazed out of it."*

2 Samuel 22:7-9 (emphasis added)

*If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap **burning coals** on his head.*

Romans 12:20 (emphasis added)



Allusion (**Remez**) means:

What do burning coals represent in the Bible?

Other notes:

VIDEO DISCUSSION

QUESTION 1

Describe in your own words what allusion is and how it's used in the Bible. What remaining questions do you have about allusion, if any?

QUESTION 2

Where else in the Bible are burning coals mentioned? Feel free to use a concordance or the search function in your Bible app. How does knowing that burning coals are associated with God's presence deepen your understanding of these passages?

QUESTION 3

It's never easy to love our enemies, as commanded in the Romans passage in this episode. Describe a time when you were at odds with someone and either did or did not "heap coals on his or her head." What happened? How might "loving your enemy" have changed the outcome?

TO WRAP IT UP

By asking the question “What is that there for?” we discover that, yes, Jesus was telling Peter to forgive others many times. But He included the number seventy-seven to allude to another story in the text, driving the point home even further.

Genesis 4 tells the story of Cain and Abel. It’s one we learn about in Sunday school: Adam and Eve had two sons, and out of jealousy, Cain killed his brother, Abel. Cain was punished by God, who drove him away from his family. Yet, at Cain’s despairing request, God placed a mark on him to signify that anyone who killed Cain would suffer vengeance seven times over.

Later in Genesis 4, we learn that one of Cain’s descendants, Lamech, also killed a man out of offense. Lamech then boasted to his wives,

*If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech **seventy-seven times**.*

Genesis 4:24 (emphasis added)



It was a show of force from Lamech, a way to threaten anyone who might try to take revenge for the man he murdered. By alluding to this story, Jesus was telling Peter, “Not only do you need to forgive others many times, but you actually need to out-forgive Lamech—the most vengeful person you’ve ever heard of.”

Hearing that number, seventy-seven, Peter (and the wider Jewish audience) would have known instantly that Jesus was alluding to Lamech. Why is that? *Because they knew their Bible.*

As disciples of Jesus, it’s important to value knowing the Scriptures. The more familiar we are with the text, the easier it becomes to recognize the use of allusion and deepen our understanding of the story as a whole.

END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

Close your time together in prayer, praying for each other's needs and encouraging one another to *shema* until you meet again.

Here are some things you might pray about:

- Is anyone dealing with a difficult relationship or set of circumstances? Pray for one another that God would give each the courage to "heap burning coals" on those heads. Ask God to bring His presence into these situations.
- Pray that God would give all the ability to show love to their enemies.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate your time in Scriptures, revealing more of His heart and character every time you read.

END GROUP MEETING

To dig deeper into the content from this episode, check out the P.S. section on your own before the next meeting.

A P.S.

From Matthew to Isaiah

Matthew 21 records Jesus entering Jerusalem shortly before His death. As He taught in the Temple courts, the chief priests and elders of the people asked what authority He had to teach and perform miracles, and where that authority came from. Jesus, as He often did, answered with a question of His own. Then He continued His response with two related parables (a classic rabbi's teaching technique, which we will discuss in more detail later in this study).

The second parable goes like this:

*"Listen to another parable: **There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower.** Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.*

"The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said.

"But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

*"Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes,
what will he do to those tenants?"*

Matthew 21:33-40 (emphasis added)



If you read through the end of the chapter, the leaders clearly recognized Jesus was comparing them to the wicked tenants. How did they know this? Well, Jesus said as much: "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (verse 43).

But these Jewish leaders didn't need to hear Jesus say this explicitly; they knew from the beginning of His parable what His point was going to be. Why?

Because Jesus used allusion.

*"I will sing for the one I love
a song about his vineyard:
My loved one had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside.
He dug it up and cleared it of stones
and planted it with the choicest vines.
He built a watchtower in it
and cut out a winepress as well.
Then he looked for a crop of good grapes,
but it yielded only bad fruit."*

Isaiah 5:1-2 (emphasis added)



Isaiah 5 condemned God's people, and especially its leaders, for yielding only bad fruit. Not long after this message was given, Israel and Judah would be forced into exile for nearly a century. The wicked leaders would die in a foreign land, and the first Temple in Jerusalem would be brutally destroyed.

By alluding to this passage, Jesus didn't simply confront the Jewish leaders for their failure to faithfully lead God's people. He explicitly warned them that they were in the same danger of destruction that Israel faced in Isaiah's day. And to an audience who knew their Bible inside and out, this warning was anything but subtle.

Now It's Your Turn

As you practice paying attention to the context of the Bible, keep this idea of allusion in mind. Do you recognize any phrases or word pictures from elsewhere in the text? Try searching these phrases in a Bible app and see where else they show up in Scripture. You may find it helpful to keep notes in a journal.





EPISODE 5

THE WINE

What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

John 2:11



THE SHEMA

ON YOUR OWN

Take a moment to reflect before beginning the meeting. Consider the emotions, experiences, and thoughts that are most on your mind right now. Lay them before the Lord, and prepare your heart for the prayer you are about to speak, the commitment you make with the words of the *Shema*.

TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English.

HEBREW

*Shema Israel,
Adonai elohenu-Adonai echad
Ve'ahavta et Adonai eloeikah,
b'khol levavkah,
uve'khol naphshekah,
uve'khol m'odekah.
Ve'ahavta l're'acha comocha. Amen.*

ENGLISH

*Hear O Israel!
The Lord is our God—the Lord alone.
Love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your might,
and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.*



INTRODUCTION

Life was lousy for the Jews of the first century. They were back in their own land; the Temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt and beautifully renovated; and most of the population was deeply committed to being faithful to the Lord. But they were always under the brutal shadow of the oppressive Roman Empire. Even the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem smelled of corruption, often more concerned with amassing wealth and currying Roman favor than they were with faithfully leading the people. (If you read the PS section from the last episode, you know Jesus sternly warned these leaders about this corruption.)

But the Jews of Jesus' day waited in eager anticipation for the fulfillment of prophecy, for the day when God would send someone to deliver them. This figure would be a second Moses, a second David, a great king whose reign would never end. One day, this king would come to His people and make everything right again. That day was foretold throughout the Hebrew Bible, and it was known as "The Day of the Lord."

As Christians, our entire faith is founded on the fact that Jesus is that deliverer. He is the promised king, God-made-flesh who came to save the world.

How might such a Messiah announce Himself? How would His audience be able to recognize Him?

In today's episode, let's take a look at how one Gospel writer communicated this announcement—and how his technique can help us to better understand the Bible.

TALK ABOUT IT

If you had lived in Israel in the first century, how would you have expected the Messiah to reveal Himself? What do you think would have made people believe in Him? Discuss as a group.

WATCH THE VIDEO

As you watch the video for episode 5, you may use the following outline to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

*Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from **twenty to thirty gallons**. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet."*

They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."

*What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and **his disciples believed in him**.*

John 2:6-11 (emphasis added)

*Let all who live in the land tremble,
for **the day of the Lord** is coming. . . .
In that day the mountains will drip new wine,
and the hills will flow with milk;
all the ravines of Judah will run with water.
A fountain will flow out of the Lord's house
and will water the valley of acacias.*

Joel 2:1; 3:18 (emphasis added)

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me."

John 2:13-17 (emphasis added)

*"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; **he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver.***

Malachi 3:1-3 (emphasis added)

And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day.

Zechariah 14:21 (ESV)



The Day of the Lord:

Other notes:

VIDEO DISCUSSION

QUESTION 1

The idea of theological chronology might be new to you. Does it make you feel uncomfortable to consider that the Gospel writers arranged their stories in different orders? Why or why not?

QUESTION 2

What shame has Jesus taken away from us as believers? How about from you personally?

QUESTION 3

As people who are two thousand years removed from the situation, it can seem like a no-brainer that Jesus wasn't interested in killing Israel's enemies. But for the Jews of Jesus' day—even for the twelve disciples—this was hard to accept. In fact, this is why Judas betrayed Jesus; he couldn't accept his rabbi's message.

As we consider what it means to be a disciple today, what do you find hard to accept from Jesus' teaching? What social issues, political events, or circumstances in your own life make it seem difficult to follow Jesus?

TO WRAP IT UP

Changing the water to wine is recorded as Jesus' first miracle in Scripture. It was not only an announcement that the Day of the Lord had arrived; it was a foreshadowing of how that Day would play out. In the same way that He took away the shame of one family, Jesus went to the cross to remove the cosmic shame of everyone who believes in Him.

So far in this study, we have understood that it's vitally important for disciples of Jesus to be committed to knowing the text. To that purpose, we've explored a handful of tools we can use to study the Bible. We have:

- Recognized the *Shema* as a loyalty oath, and began to consider our own commitment;
- Compared the difference between Western and Eastern mindsets, recognizing that the Bible was originally written by Eastern thinkers to an Eastern audience;
- Unpacked the importance of studying the Bible in its context;
- Discovered the use of allusion in the Bible, recognizing that it is one story with sixty-six volumes;
- And learned to consider theological chronologies in the Bible, which will help us to better understand what the original author wanted to emphasize.

As we explore what it means to be Jesus' disciple, keep these tools in your toolkit. Continue to encourage each other to stick with it, to *shema* (both hear and obey) the Word of God.

Remember, it's not about measuring your knowledge of God or the Bible against anyone else's. The question a disciple should ask him- or herself is, am I committed to knowing God and His Word better than I did yesterday?

END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

Close your time together in prayer, praying for each other's needs and encouraging one another to *shema* until you meet again.

Here are some things you might pray about:

- Pray for one another concerning the group's responses to questions 2 and 3. Thank God for what He has already done, and ask Him for whatever you need.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate your time in the Scriptures, revealing more of His heart and character every time you read.

END GROUP MEETING

To dig deeper into the content from this episode, check out the P.S. section on your own before the next meeting.

A FEW P.S.'S

The Land of the Zealots

The name *Cana* is often translated into English as “zealot.” It refers to someone with fierce, intense, unbelievable passion—even to the point of violence. In the first century, there was actually a political movement of Jews known as the Zealots, and Cana was their place.

The Zealots were fiercely committed to the kingdom of God, but they believed that this kingdom would come through the sword. They did everything they could to drive out the Romans, waging guerrilla warfare against their oppressors. Zealots were known for carrying small daggers, called *sicae*, hidden in their cloaks. They would target key Roman officials and sympathizers in public places, discreetly knifing them to death and then slipping back into the crowd unseen.

Imagine Jesus, this patient Messiah who preaches “turn the other cheek” and “love your enemies,” attending a wedding in Zealot country. You might expect him to overturn tables and rebuke their behavior, the way He did in the Temple. Instead, He calmly performs a miracle—and later chooses one of those Zealots, a man named Simon, to be His disciple (not Peter—the other Simon).

Interestingly, Jesus also chose a tax collector to join His group. Matthew (also called Levi) worked closely with Rome, which made him just the sort of guy a Zealot would want to murder. Imagine the glaringly obvious message this would have sent to Eastern thinkers: The kingdom of heaven is coming, and it's not going to be through bloodshed. Messiah will bring His kingdom by loving His enemies, to the point that they become His friends.

After Jesus' ascension, the Zealots would incite the people to a full-scale rebellion, briefly taking over Jerusalem. Their version of kingdom didn't last long, however. The Roman army came and destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70, about four years after the revolt began. But the real kingdom of heaven had already come to conquer sin and death, and God already had a new temple. This one is made of living stones, and no power on heaven or earth will be able to shake it.

From Shame to Honor

Let's take a closer look at the cultural context of this wedding in Cana. In these communities, the mother of the bride was usually responsible for planning the wedding. If you have been involved in a wedding in any capacity, you know how stressful this can be. If you've married off a daughter yourself, you're probably already weeping for the poor mother of the bride in John 2.

Imagine this woman on the day of the wedding. By this point, she is *exhausted*. She probably hasn't had a good night of sleep in days, and everyone is looking to her to make sure the wedding comes together.

She's checking things off her list. It's all going to plan. Crazy Uncle Mordecai is passed out inside and

not bothering anyone today, thank heaven. And then all of a sudden, the wine runs out.

If you ran out of food or beverage at a wedding in Western culture today, it would certainly be embarrassing. But it would be far from the end of the world. You might have your M.C. make a sheepish announcement. The guests might laugh or roll their eyes. But ultimately, you would send some sober uncle out for pizzas or to grab cans of something cold, and it would be quickly forgotten.

As RVL touched on in the video, this would not have been the case at a wedding in Cana. This was an honor/shame culture, and your goal in life was to bring honor to your family. You would do everything you could to avoid causing shame. And now, this poor mother of the bride had not only embarrassed herself by failing to plan properly, but she had shamed her entire family. She had shamed the *bride herself*, her own daughter, who would now begin her married life with a stain on her reputation. And this mother knew it was all her fault.

But it gets worse. Not only did they run out of wine, not only did they fail to plan properly—but Cana is *wine country*. This was the Napa Valley of this part of the world. Every house in town had plenty of wine—every house except the one who should have known better. This was like running out of chocolate in Hershey, Pennsylvania—it's the most ridiculous thing you've ever heard of. They would never live this down.

Imagine this mother panicking, knowing what's at stake, knowing that it's all her fault, and being completely powerless to do anything about it.

And then this kind carpenter from Nazareth, her friend Mary's son, started telling her servants to fill some jars with water . . . and the impossible became possible.

Doesn't it just make you want to cry?

To think that Jesus would begin His ministry by restoring dignity to a woman who made a poor judgment call, when that's exactly what got us all into this mess in the first place . . . What a thing for this Messiah to do!

Imagine what He can do with *your* shame.

Now It's Your Turn

As you continue to practice using all the study tools in your toolkit, spend time in prayer considering what shame you might be carrying. Ask the Lord to show you what you need Him to redeem for you. Take time to thank Him for what He has already done for you, remembering always that you are His great workmanship, and He will not give up on you.





EPISODE 6

THE STONE

"This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down . . . that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel."

1 Samuel 17:46 (ESV)



THE SHEMA

ON YOUR OWN

Take a moment to reflect before beginning the meeting. Consider the emotions, experiences, and thoughts that are most on your mind right now. Lay them before the Lord, and prepare your heart for the prayer you are about to speak, the commitment you make with the words of the *Shema*.

TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English.

HEBREW

*Shema Israel,
Adonai elohenu-Adonai echad
Ve'ahavta et Adonai eloikah,
b'khol levavkah,
uve'khol naphshekah,
uve'khol m'odekah.
Ve'ahavta l're'acha comocha. Amen.*

ENGLISH

*Hear O Israel!
The Lord is our God—the Lord alone.
Love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your might,
and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.*



INTRODUCTION

It's easy to imagine that someone like Moses would count as a disciple. I mean—burning bush? Parting the sea? *Seeing God face to face?* Come on.

It's easy to imagine other famous believers making the cut as well. Think William Wilberforce, Corrie ten Boom, or Richard and Sabina Wurmbrand. They were faithful against impossible odds. Think Billy Graham. Elisabeth Elliot. John Chau. The list goes on and on.

If you don't recognize some of these names, look them up. Their lives were *extraordinary*. When we look at the history of God's people through the ages, it can be easy to assume that only those with incredible stories are qualified to be disciples.

So, what if you're not Moses? What if you're a software engineer from Ohio? Or you drive a garbage truck in middle-of-nowhere Oklahoma? What if you're a dentist, a college student, a janitor, a stay-at-home parent? What does it mean to be a disciple when you think your life looks kind of *ordinary*?

So far in this study, we've looked at how to approach the Bible. We have formed a toolkit of ways to consider the context and to begin understanding how the original writers and readers would have experienced it. We have also talked about how the Bible is one story, an idea we will continue to develop throughout the study.

It's time to consider what to do with all this information. What's the next step? How does an ordinary person like you or me become the disciple of such an extraordinary God?

Let's get into today's material and discuss.

TALK ABOUT IT

Who are your heroes of the faith, either from the Bible or from throughout history? Why are they inspiring to you? As you prepare to watch today's video, discuss as a group.

WATCH THE VIDEO

As you watch the video for episode 6, you may use the following outline to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

*Then David said to the Philistine, "You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head. And I will give the dead bodies of the host of the Philistines this day to the birds of the air and to the wild beasts of the earth, **that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel**, and that all this assembly may know that the Lord saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the Lord's, and he will give you into our hand."*

1 Samuel 17:45-47 (ESV, emphasis added)



Yadah means:

Other notes:

VIDEO DISCUSSION

QUESTION 1

When have you experienced the feeling of being in God's story in your own life? It might have been a big moment, a time when you watched God show up powerfully in a time of ministry. It might have been a more everyday experience, sensing God's presence over coffee with a friend or in a conversation with a coworker. Both are profound! Describe the experience that comes to mind to the group.

QUESTION 2

The prophet Samuel anointed David as the future king of Israel long before the young shepherd ever faced Goliath, let alone took the throne. How would you have expected God to prepare David for such an important future? How might this reframe the way you think about the ordinary types of skills you're developing today?

QUESTION 3

So, what's your stone? What are your skills or passions? What jobs or responsibilities do you find yourself occupying right now? How can you throw these "stones" as a disciple?

TO WRAP IT UP

It would be easy to count David along with the list of heroes we considered in today's Introduction. But when David faced Goliath, God didn't ask him to be anything other than himself: a backwoods kid who could throw rocks.

David knew God's story. He believed in God's story. But most importantly, he was willing to be in God's story, whatever that looked like. Somehow, this young shepherd understood that if he would bring his one reliable skill to the table, God could turn him into the man He had created David to be. And because he was willing to throw his stone, the world had a chance to *yadah* the power of God.

So, will you join the story? You just have to throw your stone. Nobody else can do it for you. Will you be a software engineer, a dentist, a garbage truck driver, a stay-at-home parent in that story?

Will you throw your stone as a disciple, that the world may *yadah* God and His kingdom?

END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

Close your time together in prayer, praying for each other's needs and encouraging one another to *shema* until you meet again.

Here are some things you might pray about:

- Pray over each member of the group as you consider what your individual stones are. Pray for courage and passion to throw your stones as disciples of Jesus.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate your time in the Scriptures, revealing more of His heart and character every time you read.

END GROUP MEETING

To dig deeper into the content from this episode, check out the P.S. section on your own before the next meeting.

A FEW P.S.'S

Geography and Five Boys from Nowhere

Most of Jesus' ministry took place in a relatively small area, in the Galilee region north of Jerusalem. He spent much of that time in three small towns: Capernaum, Bethsaida, and Chorazin. Arranged not far from one another on the west side of the Sea of Galilee, these three towns were known as the Triangle.

Most of Jesus' miracles recorded in Scripture took place in these towns, which makes them seem highly significant to us today. But back then, these towns were nothing special. Bethsaida, for example, probably housed about 800 people. The residents were mostly lower class, blue-collar workers, eking out a simple existence in a rural setting. Nobody would have given the time of day to someone from a place like this.

Why does this matter for you and me? Because as it turns out, five of the original disciples came from this rural village in the middle of nowhere. Peter and Andrew (brothers) lived in this town. Phillip may or may not have been related to them, but they all grew up together there. The Bible doesn't say exactly where James and John lived, but we do know they were in a fishing business with Peter and Andrew, which implies that they were from Bethsaida as well.

Being a fisherman was nothing glamorous, either. It was kind of like working at a fast food restaurant—perfectly respectable, but not something most people aspire to. These five certainly weren't the kind of men that other rabbis would have wanted as disciples, as we will explore in more detail later in this study. And yet, Jesus came to the middle of nowhere and asked five completely average boys to be His disciples. They had basic education and one discernible skill—fishing. But because they were willing to join the story, God used them, along with seven other men and seven women, to turn the entire world upside down.

If you've ever felt as if you came from nowhere, that you weren't important enough, or that there was nothing particularly special about you—just know that none of that matters. It doesn't matter where you come from. It doesn't matter how important or interesting you think your job is. All that matters is, are you willing to join the story?

Now It's Your Turn

In the time before your next group meeting, practice asking God each morning, "How should I throw my stone today?" Consider carrying a small stone in your pocket as a reminder throughout the day that when you're in God's story, what you do matters.



EPISODE 7

THE BLIND MAN

"Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?"

Mark 8:18



THE SHEMA

ON YOUR OWN

Take a moment to reflect before beginning the meeting. Consider the emotions, experiences, and thoughts that are most on your mind right now. Lay them before the Lord, and prepare your heart for the prayer you are about to speak, the commitment you make with the words of the *Shema*.

TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English.

HEBREW

*Shema Israel,
Adonai elohenu-Adonai echad
Ve'ahavta et Adonai eloikah,
b'khol levavkah,
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ENGLISH

*Hear O Israel!
The Lord is our God—the Lord alone.
Love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your might,
and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.*



INTRODUCTION

Studying the Bible in its context will inevitably lead to seeing it in a new light. It's a perspective shift that makes the text go from what some see as a dusty, old book to a story *you can participate in*. It's tremendous to have those "Aha!" moments when something just clicks, when we suddenly see God and His story with fresh eyes. You've probably experienced some of those moments yourself in the episodes we've watched so far. The more we delve into the context of the Bible throughout this study, the more "Aha!" moments are bound to happen.

Mark 8 records the story of Jesus performing several miracles. You can bet that His disciples had plenty of their own "Aha!" moments in this chapter, watching their rabbi multiply food and heal the blind and do the impossible over and over.

At this point, the disciples had certainly "joined the story," as we discussed in the last episode. While Jesus was the one actually performing the miracles, it's clear that the twelve were actively participating. But how do you suppose Jesus would have wanted them to react to their "Aha!" moments? How were these "mountaintop experiences," these spiritual highs, meant to affect how they lived in God's story? Let's get into today's content and consider.

TALK ABOUT IT

What are some of your "Aha!" moments so far, either from this study or in your faith life in general?
Discuss as a group.

WATCH THE VIDEO

As you watch the video for episode 7, you may use the following outline to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance."

His disciples answered, "But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?"

"How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked.

"Seven," they replied.

He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people, and they did so. They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them. The people ate and were satisfied.

Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. About four thousand were present. After he had sent them away, he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the region of Dalmanutha.

The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven. He sighed deeply and said, "Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to it." Then he left them, got back into the boat and crossed to the other side.

The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. "Be careful," Jesus warned them. "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod."

They discussed this with one another and said,

"It is because we have no bread."

Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?"

"Twelve," they replied.

"And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?"

They answered, "Seven."

He said to them, "Do you still not understand?"

They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, "Do you see anything?"

He looked up and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around."

Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Jesus sent him home, saying, "Don't even go into the village."

Mark 8:1-26 (emphasis added)



Other notes:

VIDEO DISCUSSION

QUESTION 1

In this episode, RVL teaches that Jesus' miracles are meant to change us. In what ways do you think they should change us?

QUESTION 2

If Jesus could meet the needs of His audience on the hillside in Mark 8, He can certainly meet ours. When we ask Him for something, He might answer immediately, in the way we want or expect. Or, He may show up in a different way. As Jesus' disciples, how should we respond in both cases?

QUESTION 3

Are there any circumstances in your life where you need a miracle from the guy in your boat? Discuss as a group as you prepare to pray with each other.

TO WRAP IT UP

If you follow Jesus, you will see the evidence of His work. A disciple of Jesus is going to *yadah* the power of God—in the Scripture, from the testimony of others, and also firsthand.

The disciples knew they had witnessed a miracle. And yet as soon as they got hungry again, it never occurred to them to ask Jesus to meet their needs. They believed Jesus had done the impossible; they just didn't expect Him to do the same for them. Is there any part of you that can relate?

As disciples, we believe in Jesus' power and authority, but we must take this one step further. Our belief must also become trust. Are we willing to trust that when we join the story, God can supply everything we need? Or are we simply following Jesus for the dopamine rush of seeing something cool? Do we enjoy those "Aha!" moments because they give us more knowledge than others, or are we truly willing to let Jesus change the way we see the world?

The same guy who fed the 4,000 is in our boat, too. Let's be the kind of disciples who don't worry about our next lunch. Let's be the kind of disciples who are willing to let our belief become trust.

END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

Close your time together in prayer, praying for each other's needs and encouraging one another to *shema* until you meet again.

Here are some things you might pray about:

- If anyone had answers to question 3 in the discussion, spend some time praying for God to do a miracle in those situations.
- Maybe you haven't truly let your belief in Jesus become trust. Spend time talking this through and praying for one another.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate your time in the Scriptures, revealing more of His heart and character every time you read.

END GROUP MEETING

To dig deeper into the content from this episode, check out the P.S. section on your own before the next meeting.

A P.S.

Some Context—Geography and Culture

The story in Mark 8 began on a mountainside, about a mile and a half east of Bethsaida. We can't say for sure *which* mountainside, but we do know the area is quite steep. People would have spread out all across the surrounding area, stretching as far as the eye could see, straining to see and hear Jesus from a distance.

Interestingly, this was actually a Gentile area. It would have bordered the Decapolis, a collection of ten (more by Jesus' day, but originally ten) Greek cities that had been absorbed and renovated by the Romans. We will go into more detail about this area later in this study. The Romans poured a ton of money into these cities, and they boasted the best amenities of their day. Think paved streets, running water, theaters and arenas, music and art. Even the ruins are still impressive today.

And yet, the Decapolis was full of all kinds of chaos—slavery, idolatry, violence, sexual immorality. It was everything God's people were supposed to avoid, and the Jews would do all they could to stay away from this area. They wouldn't pass through if they could help it. They wouldn't eat food that had been prepared there. They wouldn't even interact with one of these Gentiles unless they had absolutely no choice.

And this is where we find Jesus teaching in Mark 8, to a massive crowd that almost certainly included both Jews and Gentiles. Somehow, both groups recognized that this moment was important enough to ignore the cultural tension. In fact, Mark tells us these people stayed there listening for *three days*, just mesmerized by this man from Nazareth.

Mark records that there were 4,000 people spread out on these steep mountains or hillsides. This means 4,000 males, aged twenty and older. If you account for women and children, we're probably talking about 10,000 people in all. Can you imagine sitting with 10,000 people for three days straight and with nothing to eat? Would He have kept your attention?

And then Jesus multiplied the food and told the disciples to distribute it . . . to 10,000 people . . . spread out all across *a mountain*. How long would this have taken? Can you see the disciples climbing up and down the hillsides, carrying basket after basket, being forced to interact with Gentiles as well as Jews? Imagine them finishing their task and just collapsing at the bottom of the mountain, totally winded. And then Jesus told them to go collect all the leftovers.

They didn't just see this miracle—they really *yadah*-ed it! It's no wonder that when they started arguing about food a short time later, Jesus called them out for not letting that experience change them.

*"Do you have **eyes but fail to see**, and ears
but fail to hear? And **don't you remember?**"*

Mark 8:18 (emphasis added)



The disciples were fully engaged in this miracle, fully participating in all that went on. In fact, they were exhausted by the experience!

As we continue to unpack what it means to be a disciple, don't let the effort you put in for the kingdom distract you from who is doing the miracle, and why. Remember, it is God who brings the harvest. And if He did it for these people, He can do the same for you.

Now It's Your Turn

In the time before your next meeting, consider what parts of your life you may not fully trust to the Lord. Spend time in prayer, asking God to show you these areas and to give you everything you need to let Him change your heart. You may find it helpful to keep notes in a journal.





EPISODE 8

THE SAND

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock."

Matthew 7:24



THE SHEMA

ON YOUR OWN

Take a moment to reflect before beginning the meeting. Consider the emotions, experiences, and thoughts that are most on your mind right now. Lay them before the Lord, and prepare your heart for the prayer you are about to speak, the commitment you make with the words of the *Shema*.

TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English.

HEBREW

*Shema Israel,
Adonai elohenu-Adonai echad
Ve'ahavta et Adonai eloeikah,
b'khol levavkah,
uve'khol naphshekah,
uve'khol m'odekah.
Ve'ahavta l're'acha comocha. Amen.*

ENGLISH

*Hear O Israel!
The Lord is our God—the Lord alone.
Love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your might,
and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.*



INTRODUCTION

So far in this study, we have understood that Eastern thinkers often communicate truth in sensory ways—with metaphors, word pictures, stories, and actions. It's no wonder, then, that so much of Jesus' teaching comes in the form of parables. In fact, Matthew records that Jesus taught the crowds nothing without including a parable:

All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable.

*This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet:
"I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has
been hidden since the foundation of the world."*

Matthew 13:34-35 (ESV, emphasis added)



Why would Jesus teach the crowds nothing without including a parable? Were these stories meant to confuse people and disguise His real meanings? Are they meant to confuse readers today?

Earlier in Matthew 13, Jesus explained to His disciples that those with hard hearts would not understand His teachings. Rather, they would insist on "seeing people looking like trees," as we talked about in the last episode. But then Jesus went on to assure His disciples that He came to reveal truth that was hidden since the foundation of the world.

So, were the parables meant to confuse or to clarify? As we continue in our study of discipleship, let's consider how rabbis, including Jesus, used parables in their teaching.

TALK ABOUT IT

What is one of your favorite parables, or perhaps one that has been most influential in your life? What parables do you find more difficult to understand? Discuss as a group.

WATCH THE VIDEO

As you watch the video for episode 8, you may use the following outline to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

"Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

Matthew 7:24-27 (emphasis added)



Parables were called “basket handles.”:

The “basket” is the:

The “handles” are:

Where is this sand that Jesus was talking about?:

Other notes:

VIDEO DISCUSSION

QUESTION 1

What does it mean, practically, to build your house on the rock? You might open your Bible or app to Matthew 5–7 to refresh your memory of the Sermon on the Mount.

QUESTION 2

Why do you think God allows floods to come, whether we build on the rock or not?

QUESTION 3

What floods have you experienced in your own life? How did you get through them, and how did you experience God in those situations?

TO WRAP IT UP

The parable of the wise and foolish builders was a basket handle for the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' longest set of teachings in the Gospels. It challenges us that as disciples, our commitment must extend to every aspect of our lives—most especially, into every relationship we have. This teaching spends so much time advising us how to behave in all forms of relationship, from the way we treat our spouses to the way we react to those who cause us harm. It brings us back to episode 1, when we considered that Jesus made loving your neighbor just as important as loving the Lord your God.

It requires trust to try to live like this—trust that God will protect us, and trust that God is still good even when people hurt us. It requires trust that God will give us the power to live this way at all—conquering our thoughts and actions, prioritizing humility, and valuing His kingdom more than our own comfort or safety. None of these teachings is easy—or even necessarily possible—to put into practice without the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. It's meant to be this way; we are meant to depend on our partnership with God for everything we need.

As disciples, we must be committed to building the kind of life that is founded on this trust. Remember, the flood came for both men in the parable. The one who built on the rock couldn't avoid disaster any more than the other man could. The difference is that when we build our lives on Jesus' teaching, we will have everything we need to weather those floods, no matter when or how they come.

END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

Close your time together in prayer, praying for each other's needs and encouraging one another to *shema* until you meet again.

Here are some things you might pray about:

- Pray with each other about the floods you are experiencing. Pray for wisdom as you commit to building your lives on the rock.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate your time in the Scriptures, revealing more of His heart and character every time you read.

END GROUP MEETING

To dig deeper into the content from this episode, check out the P.S. section on your own before the next meeting.

A P.S.

Mashal and Moshel

As we learned in this episode, the Hebrew word for parable is *mashal*. It means “a story,” specifically the kind of story that explains and applies a text. For a community whose life was centered on the *Shema*, the ability to interpret and apply the Scripture was a sign of great wisdom and authority. Parable-tellers were highly respected in the culture of the Bible.

Until more recently, the Hebrew language did not use vowels; words were formed with consonants only. So, the word *mashal* would have been written with the Hebrew letters for m, s, h, and l. MSHL. (The language is actually written from right to left, but you get the idea.)

There was another Hebrew word with the exact same letters: *moshel*, which means “ruler” or “a wise ruler.” MSHL. In the Hebrew mind, wise rulers demonstrated their wisdom and their authority by being able to tell parables. Think of King Solomon:

***God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and
a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand
on the seashore. . . . He spoke three thousand proverbs
and his songs numbered a thousand and five.***

1 Kings 4:29, 32 (emphasis added)



This is a Jewish way to say, “How do we know he was wise? How do we know he had great authority? Well, he could tell parables.”

Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would be such a ruler, wise and with great authority:

*Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this.*

Isaiah 9:7



Imagine what Jesus' audience would have thought when this man from Nazareth came telling some of the best parables they had ever heard. Could this be the Messiah—the *moshel* who comes telling *mashal*?

Now It's Your Turn

As you read the Bible on your own this week, spend some time in the Gospels, and pay attention to Jesus' parables. What teachings do they become “basket handles” for? Does each Gospel writer organize the same parables with the same teachings? You may find it helpful to keep notes in a journal.





EPISODE 9

THE TOHU

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over
the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering
over the waters.*

Genesis 1:1-2



THE SHEMA

ON YOUR OWN

Take a moment to reflect before beginning the meeting. Consider the emotions, experiences, and thoughts that are most on your mind right now. Lay them before the Lord, and prepare your heart for the prayer you are about to speak, the commitment you make with the words of the *Shema*.

TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English.

HEBREW

*Shema Israel,
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ENGLISH

*Hear O Israel!
The Lord is our God—the Lord alone.
Love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your might,
and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.*



INTRODUCTION

Every culture in the biblical world had its own creation story, elaborate accounts of how people and the world around us came into being. The real stars of each account were usually the gods themselves. Cultures like Egypt and Babylon included detailed backstories for their entire pantheon of deities. This was the kind of information they thought their people needed to know—extensive accounts of their gods and goddesses and how to keep them happy.

Traditionally, Genesis was written by Moses before Israel entered the Promised Land. For this creation account, he wrote down everything he thought would be important for Israel to know, and it simply starts:

In the beginning God . . .

Genesis 1:1



That's it. No details about who this God was or where He came from. Just—God. How, then, would He reveal Himself to His people? What was He up to? And how were human beings meant to relate to a God like this?

So far in this study, we've spent a lot of time talking about how the Bible is all one story—a library with sixty-six volumes, connected from Genesis to Revelation by one central thread. In today's episode, let's unpack that central thread, the theme that reveals what God has been up to from creation until today.

TALK ABOUT IT

From what you know about the Bible, what common themes do you see running through it? Discuss as a group.

WATCH THE VIDEO

As you watch the video for episode 9, you may use the following outline to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was **formless and empty**, darkness was over the surface of **the deep**, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, . . .*

Genesis 1:1-3 (emphasis added)



Tohu means:

Vohu means:

Put together, **tohu v'vohu** means much more:

Tehom:

Shalom:

Other notes:

VIDEO DISCUSSION

QUESTION 1

RVL told the story of the day he lost his mom as an example of *tohu*. When have you witnessed or experienced *tohu* in your own life? How did God show up?

QUESTION 2

In your role of throwing your stone, how can you imagine partnering with God to bring *shalom* in your home, in your church or community, in the workplace, and so on?

QUESTION 3

What obstacles might you need to overcome in your own life in order to become a *shalom*-bringer?

TO WRAP IT UP

This is it—the amazing, mind-blowing, glorious central thread that ties the whole Bible together. God created the world to be in *shalom*, everything working in perfect harmony, purpose, and happiness. Satan tempted God's partners, Adam and Eve, into sinning, and *tohu*, or chaos in English, began to creep back into the creation. But instead of burning it all down, God decided to partner with the same humans who messed it all up, working out His plan to bring *shalom* back to every corner of the earth.

We see this thread forming the cornerstone of everything God is doing throughout the Bible. Later in Genesis, He partnered with Abraham and Sarah, making a covenant to bless all the families of the earth through them. Their family would grow into the nation of Israel, which was meant to show the world what it looks like when God is king. Sometimes they did well; sometimes they did an awful job of it. But from Israel would finally come Jesus, God Himself as a human being, who would defeat the power of *tohu* once and for all. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we become His partners in bringing *shalom* to the broken world around us, making disciples of all nations until the day Jesus returns.

This is what God has been up to since the beginning, the mission that weaves through and drives the entire story of the Bible. This is the story we join; the reason we throw our stones; the character of this God whom we *yadah*. This is the mission of the God who has the power to fix everything that is broken, to do the impossible in ways we can't even begin to imagine.

We will continue to engage this central thread throughout the rest of this study. In the meantime, the question is, will you follow as a disciple? Will you engage the brokenness of the people around you, partnering with the Lord to restore *shalom* in your home, your neighborhood, your community?

END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

Close your time together in prayer, praying for each other's needs and encouraging one another to *shema* until you meet again.

Here are some things you might pray about:

- Spend some time thanking the Lord for all He's done, for not giving up on us but pursuing us while we were stuck in tohu.
- Spend some time praying against any tohu you feel present in your own lives, inviting the power of God to bring shalom into those situations.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate your time in the Scriptures, revealing more of His heart and character every time you read.

END GROUP MEETING

To dig deeper into the content from this episode, check out the P.S. section on your own before the next meeting.

A P.S.

Starting with “Part B”

The book of Genesis begins in Hebrew with the word ***beresheet***. This word, which means “in the beginning,” begins with the Hebrew letter ***bet***, the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

To a Western thinker, this makes no difference whatsoever. Who cares what letter it starts with?

But to a Jewish audience, this was unexpected. As Easterners thinking in terms of metaphor, it seemed to the rabbis that it would make sense for Genesis to start with the first letter of the alphabet. So, why doesn’t it?

Recall as well that the original audience of Israelites was used to hearing elaborate creation stories from other cultures, full of details and backstories about the false gods of the other nations. Not only does Genesis leave out any background information about God, the rabbis observed, but it starts with ***bet***. To an Eastern-thinking audience, this choice would seem intentional. Perhaps it was a way to say, “God isn’t going to give us an elaborate backstory such as the other cultures used. He’s going to reveal Himself in a different way, a way that would have been unexpected for our ancestors coming out of Egypt.”

And so, the rabbis concluded, the use of ***bet*** may or may not be an intentional metaphor. But either way, let us use it as a reminder that God reveals to us what He wants us to know. The stories of God’s creating heaven, His creating the angels, and the nitty-gritty of what went down with Satan—that’s not what we need to know in order to understand our relationship with God. What matters for God’s people is to recognize how He revealed Himself to us, and to join His story of bringing ***shalom*** back to ***tohu***.

The Bible is clear that God created everything, that He is ***Creator*** and not ***creation***. God could have used the Bible as a well-crafted argument to reveal Himself to the world, but He didn’t. Instead, He revealed Himself through a community, through a real, living, growing relationship with the people He had made. He wanted them to know Him by experience. And He wants the same for His people today.

As we unpacked in episode 2, the Western mindset wants exact answers. We want to know exactly what happened and when, why, and how. As we practice approaching the Bible with an Eastern mindset, let us follow the example of the rabbis, who were comfortable accepting that there are simply some things we won’t know for now. Whether or not the ***bet*** was intentional, let us use it as a reminder that our Creator is so much bigger than we are. Let it be a reminder that what matters for a disciple is to join His story.

Some Language Context

Let's look at some of the other Hebrew words used in the first few verses of Genesis:

*In the beginning God created **the heavens** and **the earth**.*

*Now the earth was formless and empty,
darkness was over the surface of the deep,
and **the Spirit of God** was **hovering** over the waters.*

Genesis 1:1-2 (emphasis added)



Shemayim

To the original audience, "the heavens" were not the place where you go when you die. *Shemayim* was their way of describing everything that is outside the earth—the stars, the planets, the universe, and so on. In other words, the writer was saying that God is the Creator, and absolutely everything was made by Him to be good.

Ruach

We will explore this in more depth later in this study, but the word used for God's Spirit in Genesis is *ruach*. It means "wind, spirit, breath." The Bible plays on this word throughout the text, describing God's presence as spirit. Jesus would have also used this play on words in Hebrew when talking to Nicodemus about being born again:

*Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the **ruach**. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the **ruach** gives birth to **ruach**. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The **ruach** blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the **ruach**."*

John 3:5-8 (author's inserts)



In English, we usually translate this word as *spirit*. Most Jewish Bibles translate it as *wind*. In whichever form, as wind or spirit, this is how God was present in Genesis 1, hovering over the *tohu v'vohu*.

Merechefat

This word means “to hover,” and that’s a helpful translation. The image of *merechefat* can be seen in a small bird found often in Israel, especially near the Jordan River. You will be standing on the bank, and all of a sudden you look up and see this bird hovering, absolutely motionless in thin air. It uses the very tips of its wings to turn and stay balanced on the air currents. But from the ground, it looks as if it’s simply floating in midair. This is *merechefat*, hovering over the waters.

When God was hovering over the formless and empty earth, it was an intentional action. He stayed with His creation, and with the power of His word, He turned *tohu v'vohu* into *shalom*.

Genesis 1 and Jesus’ Baptism

Genesis 1 is one of the most-well-known passages in the Bible. To recap from this episode’s discussion: The earth was *tohu v'vohu*, and God’s Spirit hovered over the deep (the *tehom*, the abyss). Then God spoke to the *tohu* and brought forth *shalom*. At the end of the seventh day of creation, He looked and said that it was very good (see Genesis 1:2-3).

So, we have this picture of the deep, dangerous water, which later becomes a metaphor for *tohu* (“chaos” in English) in the Bible. We have God’s Spirit hovering over it, speaking into the situation. We see that when God interacts with the *tohu*, He turns it into *shalom*.

Let’s practice using our tool of recognizing allusion. Where else do we see this imagery in the Bible?

In the Gospels, we see another picture of churning water, the biblical symbol for chaos:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John.

Matthew 3:13



In the north of Israel, the Jordan River is a rushing, turbulent body of water, especially during the flood season. This would definitely be a symbol of *tohu* in the minds of the Jews. Plus, the crowd was there in the first place to be baptized in repentance for their *sin*, the result of *tohu* reentering the earth. These people came to the river because they recognized their own brokenness, and they knew they could never escape it unless God did something.

We see the churning water. We see the effects of *tohu v'vohu* on God’s creation, on the human beings themselves. Now, where was God in this story?

God was present as Jesus the Messiah. But did He hover above everyone, telling them it was their own fault the *tohu* is here? Did He stand on the bank, lecturing them on how to behave better?

No, that’s not what He did.

He got into the water.

But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water.

Matthew 3:14-16



He was the sinless one! He had no *tohu*! He could snap His fingers and start the whole thing over without us, and it would be exactly what we deserve. Why would He get into the churning water with the sinners?

Because *He wants to be where you are.*

Jesus came to earth, fully God and fully human, not to stand on the bank and shout at people in *tohu*. He came to climb into *tohu* with us, to restore the *shalom* we so desperately need. What an unimaginable thing for Him to do!

Jesus' baptism became a beautiful picture of how He's going to fulfill this mission that God has been up to since the beginning. It's an astounding metaphor for how much this God *loves* us, that He would enter *tohu* just to be where we are.

And then *ruach* hovered over the water and spoke:

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Matthew 3:16-17 (emphasis added)



Jesus got out of the water, and the *tohu* couldn't touch Him. And from there, bit by bit, *shalom* started to spread.

Some time later, John the Baptist would send Jesus a message from prison, asking, "Are you the Messiah or not?" (see Matthew 11). And what did Jesus say?

*"Go back and report to John what you hear and see: **The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.**"*

Matthew 11:4-5 (emphasis added)



He didn't heal every blind person at that time. He didn't heal every leper. He didn't raise every dead person, but it was starting. Jesus was beginning the process by partnering with twelve men and seven women to find people in *tohu* and bring them back to *shalom*. He was taking back His kingdom one inch at a time—and He was doing it in a way that gave dignity and value to the human beings who messed it up in the first place.

This is a clear picture of what it means to be a disciple: to get off the bank and into the water where Jesus is. And every time we join this story by sitting with someone in *tohu*, God enters the situation, and the kingdom of heaven grows a little bigger.

Now It's Your Turn

In the time before the next meeting, spend some time in prayer to seriously consider this mission as God's partner. Will you join Him in bringing *shalom* to *tohu* as you faithfully throw your stone? What questions or fears does this raise in your heart? Bring them before the Lord, and talk this through with Him. You may find it helpful to keep notes in a journal.





EPISODE 10

THE SHALOM

*That day when evening came, he said to his
disciples, "Let us go over to the other side."*

Mark 4:35



THE SHEMA

ON YOUR OWN

Take a moment to reflect before beginning the meeting. Consider the emotions, experiences, and thoughts that are most on your mind right now. Lay them before the Lord, and prepare your heart for the prayer you are about to speak, the commitment you make with the words of the *Shema*.

TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English.

HEBREW

*Shema Israel,
Adonai elohenu-Adonai echad
Ve'ahavta et Adonai eloikah,
b'khol levavkah,
uve'khol naphshekah,
uve'khol m'odekah.
Ve'ahavta l're'acha comocha. Amen.*

ENGLISH

*Hear O Israel!
The Lord is our God—the Lord alone.
Love the Lord your God
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your might,
and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.*



INTRODUCTION

It's easy for modern Christians to assume that Israel was full of hard-hearted people in Jesus' day. Jesus spent plenty of His time rebuking the Pharisees and the Jewish leaders for their hypocrisy, for failing to lead the people as the good shepherds they were meant to be.

But for the most part, the people were extremely serious about their faith. Not long before this time, they had been in exile for failing to obey the Lord. They had returned to their land and rebuilt the Temple, only to be oppressed by the Greeks and then the Romans. The Jews of Jesus' day were passionately waiting for their Messiah to come, and they were determined to obey God to the best of their ability.

In the Old Testament, the Law demanded that Israel remain separate from the other nations in many ways. They understood that God wanted them to stay as far away from *tohu* as they possibly could. By the time Jesus was teaching, the Jews were determined to separate themselves from the Gentiles and from the chaos of the Roman Empire.

But if Jesus is the Messiah who was promised, the God-made-flesh who has come to restore *shalom*, then He isn't going to stay away from *tohu*. He's going to engage it.

In the last episode, we talked about how this is what it means to be a disciple: to partner with Jesus in this mission. How will Jesus demonstrate to His followers that they're supposed to engage *tohu* without being overcome by it?

Let's begin today's episode and find out.

TALK ABOUT IT

The Jews of Jesus' day wanted absolutely nothing to do with the Gentiles around them. As you consider the people in your life, are there any groups or individuals you really don't want to engage with?

Discuss as a group.

WATCH THE VIDEO

As you watch the video for episode 10, you may use the following outline to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, “Let us go over to the other side.” Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?”

He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” They were terrified and asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”

Mark 4:35-41 (emphasis added)

The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord. Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep.

The captain went to him and said, “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish.”

Jonah 1:1-6 (emphasis added)

*When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways,
he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had
threatened. **But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became**
angry. He prayed to the Lord, “Isn’t this what I said, Lord, when I was still
at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. **I knew**
that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and
abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now,
Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”
But the Lord replied, “Is it right for you to be angry?”*

Jonah 3:10-4:4 (emphasis added)



The “other side” is:

Jonah’s approach to *tohu*:

Jesus’ approach to *tohu*:

Other notes:

VIDEO DISCUSSION

QUESTION 1

At this point, as we wrap up season 1, how would you describe the mission of a disciple? Discuss as a group.

QUESTION 2

As an electrician, how might someone bring *shalom* into his or her daily life? How about a teacher? An accountant? How about someone in your role or profession?

QUESTION 3

What fear or other emotions might hold you back from engaging the *tohu* in your life?

TO WRAP IT UP

When you think about how utterly devastating *tohu* is, it's unsettling to consider how easy it is for us to ignore it. When we compare Jonah's behavior to Jesus', it's not hard to recognize that Jonah made the wrong choice. But when we're in the thick of it, when we are dealing with people who are difficult or situations that are horrible, it can be so tempting to simply walk away from the *tohu*.

In episode 8, we talked about how building our life on Jesus' foundation requires trust. We have to trust Him to provide the very ability to obey in the first place. We must do the same as we learn to enter *tohu* with Jesus; we must trust Him for the ability to engage it without being overcome by it. And most of all, we must trust Him to bring the *shalom*, even if we don't see it right away.

As you wrap up season 1 of your group meetings, spend time together asking the Holy Spirit to fill you and equip you to be a disciple in this way.

GET READY FOR SEASON 2

This is the end of season 1 of *RVL Discipleship: The Study*. In these ten episodes, we focused on:

- Understanding the *Shema* as a loyalty oath
- Building a toolkit for approaching the Bible in its context
- Examining how our knowledge of God should affect the way we see the world
- Unpacking the central thread of the Bible, which is also our mission as disciples: to partner with God in bringing *shalom* to *tohu*

As we continue to discover what it meant to be a disciple in the first century, we must also consider where the idea of discipleship originally came from. In fact, though the role was formalized with the rise of rabbis in post-exile Jewish culture, the concept started much earlier. In season 2, we will explore how Israel was God's first partner, following the story of the disciples who came before us throughout the Old Testament.

END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

Close your time together in prayer, praying for each other's needs and encouraging one another to *shema* until you meet again.

Here are some things you might pray about:

- As a group, ask God to fill you with His Spirit and give you the courage and the passion to join Him as He brings *shalom* to *tohu*, whatever that looks like in your life.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to continue illuminating your time in the Scriptures, revealing more of His heart and character every time you read.

END GROUP MEETING

To dig deeper into the content from this episode, check out the P.S. section on your own before the next meeting.

A P.S.

Can You Obey a God Who Would Forgive Your Enemies?

Early in this season, we looked at the metaphor of burning coals, discovering that this is often used as a picture of God's presence in Scripture. One use of this imagery can be particularly challenging:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary:

***"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.***

*In doing this, you will heap **burning coals** on his head."*

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:17-21 (emphasis added)



In this final episode of season 1, we saw how Jonah could not stomach the idea of a God who would forgive His enemies. Jonah did everything he could to prevent the Ninevites from knowing how to repent—yet somehow, they felt the burning coals on their heads anyway. Even when all was said and done and God had clearly forgiven Nineveh, Jonah could not get on board with the mission. But God promises that if we will show love to those who cause us *tohu*, His presence will enter the situation.

In the 1940s, a woman named Sabina Wurmbrand was living in Nazi-occupied Romania. She was a Jew by birth, and she and her husband, Richard, had met Jesus not long before World War II broke out. Sabina and Richard, who had become a Lutheran pastor, spent the war doing everything they could not only to protect the oppressed, but also to evangelize to the invading German army. But while many came to Christ, and the Wurmbrands were able to help many of their Jewish neighbors, they could not save Sabina's family. Her parents, her sisters, and her brother were taken to a concentration camp in Soviet Ukraine and executed there.

Some time later, one of the very soldiers who had carried out those executions quartered himself in their neighbor's house. Realizing who this man was, Richard invited him over one evening. After confronting the man, Richard informed Sabina that this was one of the soldiers who had murdered her family.

What would you expect Sabina to do? What would you have done?

Sabina, knowing full well that she needed God to enter the situation, heaped burning coals on this man's head. She put her arms around him, kissed him, and forgave him. And then she made him dinner.

And you know what? This Romanian Nazi in the clutches of bloodthirsty darkness met Jesus that night—all because one disciple was willing to follow Jesus into *tohu*. He met Jesus, and in turn he became a *shalom*- bringer for others.

You're probably not reading this in the middle of a war zone, with the man who murdered your family sitting in your kitchen. But the world is full of *tohu*, and all of it is horrible. As you partner with God to engage the chaos around you, will you do what Jonah could not? Will you let the Holy Spirit give you the ability to forgive your enemies, as God has forgiven you?

Now It's Your Turn

This concludes season 1 of this study! Take some time to consider what you've learned so far. Will you value knowing God's Word and spending time with Him? What is your stone, and will you throw it? What steps can you begin to take to walk this path in everyday life?



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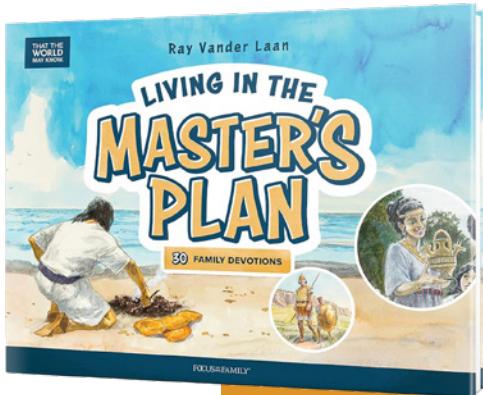
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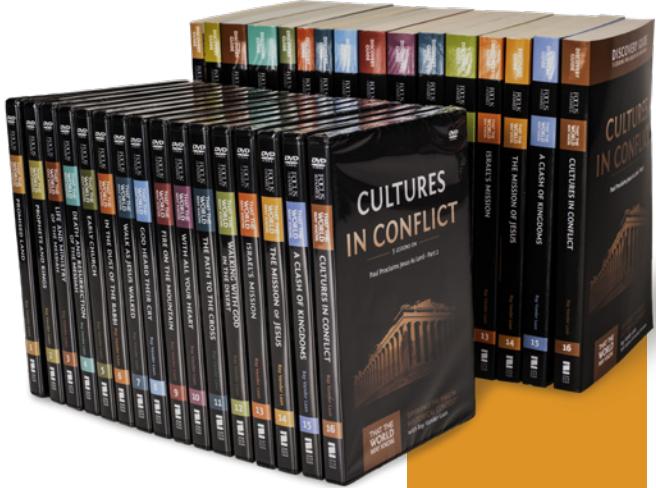
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GLOSSARY OF KEY WORDS

SHEMA | to hear; to obey or respond to

ECHAD | one; only or alone

VE'AHAVTA | to love

LEVAVKAH | your heart; your operating system, what physically keeps your body alive. Jews would include one's mind in this category.

NAPHSHEKAH | your soul; your emotions, feelings, passions

ME'ODEKAH | your might; your physical strength or actions; the assets, resources, or sociopolitical capital that gives you power on some scale

REMEZ | an allusion, a hint or clue that connects one idea to a separate story or idea by using the same words or phrases. While this practice was widely used by Jesus' day, it was not referred to as *remez* until later.

YADAH | to know intimately, through deep experience

MASHAL | a story, often fictitious, that explains and applies a text

MOSHEL | a ruler, or wise ruler

BETH | house; one's home or the place where one lives; a family group; that place where your whole life is built

TOHU | formless

VOHU | empty

TOHU V'VOHU | formless and empty; also conflict and disharmony; disorder and dysfunction; deterioration or decay; confusion and brokenness. The opposite of the character of God. Symbolized in Scripture by churning water.

TEHOM | the abyss; the dark and the deep; sometimes used to describe hell

SHALOM | perfect peace and harmony; ordered and flourishing function; deep meaning and completeness. Describes the character of God Himself.

ABOUT RVL

Since receiving his Master of Divinity from Westminster Theological Seminary in 1976, Ray Vander Laan has been actively involved in studying and teaching Jewish culture using the methods of Jewish education. He has continued graduate studies in Jewish Studies in the United States, Israel, Turkey, and Egypt. He has been a teacher for more than thirty-five years and is an ordained minister with the Christian Reformed Church. He has also authored a book titled *Echoes of His Presence*, published by Focus on the Family. Vander Laan founded That the World May Know Ministries in 1998 and has taken thousands of people with him on his study tours of Israel, Turkey, and Egypt.

Ray's preaching and teaching ministry is focused on understanding the Bible in light of the historical and cultural context in which God placed it. This perspective on the Bible highlights God's call for His people to be a transforming influence on their culture. He uses research of the top scholars in the fields of archaeology, history, and biblical study as tools to explore the scriptural text ever more deeply. His gifts, expertise, and calling are to link that cultural information and the Bible so that its message applies to our lives today in very practical ways.



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ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

Focus on the Family is a global Christian ministry dedicated to helping families thrive. We provide help and resources for couples to build healthy marriages that reflect God's design, and for parents to raise their children according to morals and values grounded in biblical principles.

We're here to come alongside families with relevance and grace at each stage of their journey. We support families as they seek to teach their children about God and His beautiful design for the family, protect themselves from the harmful influences of culture, and equip themselves to make a greater difference in the lives of those around them.

No matter who you are, what you're going through, or what challenges your family may be facing, we're here to help. With practical resources—like our 1-800-AFAMILY help line, counseling resources, and websites—we're committed to providing trustworthy, biblical guidance and support.