



Unplugged Summer Reading Plan July 2022

The Goal of this Summer Reading Plan is to engage with the word of God! That's it! I have presented to you a plan after praying over you and this season of our community. I'm excited to see how God will challenge and enrich you. I'm Praying for you!

Suggested Questions to Ask as you approach Scripture

- - What words/phrases stand out to me?
- - What is God Saying to Me?
- - What Is my heart compelled to do?
- - What is God challenging become because of this text?
- - What/Where am I called to repent?

Week One: Trusting God's Promises

God's promises are for all His kids, even you
Read: Psalm 36:5-9, Romans 8:35-39, Proverbs 3:5-12

Some of us have a hard time trusting God's promises because we think they only apply to other people. You know, perfect people. The ones who seem to do everything right and have it all together.

The truth is no one is perfect, and God's promises apply to all of His kids. What makes God's promises different are who they are coming from.

Unlike our human affections, God's love never fails and never ends. Romans 8:38-39 boldly promises, "neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." No matter who we are, how much money we make, or how many times we've failed or disappointed God, He never stops loving us.

We will make mistakes, but those mistakes don't disqualify us from experiencing God's promises. Like a good father, God disciplines His children for their protection and their good (Proverbs 3:12). But don't mistake God's discipline for Him giving up on you.

Even our failures can be fertile ground to experience God's promises. It was through tough times that the psalmist learned to trust God (Psalm 119:71). It was after failing time and time again to keep the law that God's people received eternal rescue through Jesus (Micah 7:8).

Life on earth can feel like a never-ending avalanche of broken promises. People leave or neglect to follow through. Confidences are broken, and trust erodes. We begin to buy the lie that people will only love us when we're at our best. God is not like us. His love is unending. He has never lost track of time or forgotten about His creation (Psalm 36:5-9). And it's because God is not like us that we can have confidence in His promises.

Reflect:

- Do you struggle to trust God's promises? Why or why not?
- Have you ever felt like you weren't "good enough" for God? What does God say to that?
- How does it feel knowing God's love never ends and never fails? As you sit in that feeling, take a few minutes to speak back to God in prayer.

What happens when we begin to trust God
Read: Psalm 112, Isaiah 26:3-4, Psalm 119:165

Have you ever done a trust fall? It's an exercise that businesses, sports teams, and organizations use to build trust among employees and teammates. One person blindly falls backward putting all their trust in the person behind them to catch them before they hit the ground.

Learning to trust God's promises can feel a lot like a trust fall. It won't happen by accident. You have to choose to let go. But when we do, we experience God's unmistakable, unexplainable peace.

We all want peace. But too often, we look for it in all the wrong places. How often do you catch yourself thinking:

If I can just _____, I'll have peace.

If I only had _____, I'd be OK.

Peace isn't found in obtaining a position or more possessions. And peace isn't always found in the absence of conflict. Psalm 112 (MSG) describes the person who trusts God as unperturbed, ever blessed, unfazed by rumor and gossip, and relaxed among their enemies.

Real, lasting peace only comes from trusting God's promises. The prophet Isaiah recognized this, writing, "[God] will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you" (Isaiah 26:3).

Our hearts can remain steadfast because God's promises remain steadfast. We don't have to fear falling because we know God promises to catch us. God is a promise maker, but more importantly, God is a promise keeper. Stand firm in the steadfastness of God's promises.

Reflect:

- Do you struggle to find peace? How do you respond when it seems like your world is in chaos?
- How many times a day do you find yourself fearful of receiving bad news? Where does that fear come from?
- What's one way that trusting God's promises has brought you peace in the past? Which promises do you need to lean into to experience that same peace today?

God doesn't need a back-up

Read: Hebrews 6:11-20, Numbers 23:19, 1 Samuel 15:29

Remember the first big purchase you made? Whether it was a car or a house, chances are you took out a loan. If it was your first time borrowing money, you probably had to get a parent or relative to co-sign the loan.

When a bank takes a risk on a new client, they cover that risk by asking someone who has a steady income and reliably pays their bills to put their name on the loan as well. If the new client falls behind on their bill, the cosigner who vouched for them is responsible for picking up the debt.

Risk management makes sense for a bank, but it's not the kind of life we're called to as believers. God tells us to trust Him, not to hedge our bets or make backup plans. He is more than our plan A. He is our everything.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that God doesn't need a cosigner. There is no one higher or greater who can vouch for Him. When God makes a promise, it's a rock-solid guarantee (Hebrews 6:17, MSG).

The only way to experience what God says is true is to take Him at His Word. If that prospect terrifies you, you're not alone. God promised to bless Abraham with many descendants. But when years passed, and Abraham still didn't have kids, the fear of not having an heir got the better of him and Abraham fathered a child with a surrogate (Genesis 16:1-4).

Trusting someone fully and completely doesn't come naturally. That's why faith is called faith. God kept His promise to Abraham. He and his wife miraculously conceived. Then their son married and had kids, and many generations later, Jesus came to the world through their family tree.

When trusting God feels crazy, remember: God doesn't go back on His Word (Numbers 23:19 and 1 Samuel 15:29). He never has, and He never will.

Reflect:

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how much do you trust God? Now be honest: As you look at your life, are you living like you trust God's promises?
- Is there anything you need to start doing or stop doing to take God at His Word?

God's answer to all His promises
Read: 2 Corinthians 1:15-22

What comes to mind when you hear the word “promise”? Do you remember an unmet expectation? Maybe distrust rises within you at the mention of the word.

For many of us, the connotation isn't positive. Life has thrown curveballs. People have let us down. No matter our experiences in the past, God invites us to think differently about His promises.

In a letter to the church in Corinth, Paul assured people that Jesus' message was trustworthy. Jesus' promises were for them because they believed. Paul's travel plans may have swayed a bit, but the Jesus he told them about is steadfast and unchanging.

Jesus is God's “yes” to every promise He ever made. All the longing, waiting, and wondering about what God is up to is answered in the life of Jesus. Trusting God's promises means trusting in Jesus as the fulfillment of those promises.

As proof, Paul tells of two gifts God gives us. First, God brings us into His family. God has set us aside as His own. Nothing can remove the “seal of ownership” we receive when we're in Christ. Second, God put His Spirit in our hearts. God is with us always. He is guiding us into the days to come.

God shows us through Jesus' life and His Word that He fulfills every promise He makes. We don't have to wonder how the story ends because it's already written. When we question whether God will fulfill His promises, we can look to Jesus and remember God's love, faithfulness, and grace.

Reflect:

- Is there a promise you feel God has left unfulfilled in your life? What is it?
- How do Jesus' life and character change your perspective of that unfulfilled promise?

Why are you winging it?

Read: Psalm 119:9-16, Psalm 119:89-96, Psalm 119:140, Psalm 119:148

Imagine you had one shot to get the job you've been dreaming about your whole life. This job would be life-changing not just for you, but for your family. Would you prepare for the interview? Would you make sure you knew your stuff? Or, would you wing it and hope for the best?

Just like that interview, we get one shot at life on Earth. And, we don't have to wing it. God shows us what He wants for us through the promises He makes in the Bible.

As we read the Bible, we see the possibilities available to us. Knowing God's Word leads to greater trust in His promises. Each time we open the Bible, we learn a little bit more about who God is and all that He wants for us. Each time we take God up on a promise and see it fulfilled, our faith grows.

So how do we get to a place where we love the Bible like the writer of Psalm 119?

First, pray. Seek God with all your heart (Psalm 119:2, Psalm 119:10). Ask Him to help you understand what you're reading (Psalm 119:18). You have the maker of the universe on your side, offering His power to help you. Why not ask Him?

Next, know your Bible better than you know your Netflix queue (Psalm 119:11). Memorizing Scripture allows us to recall God's promises throughout the day. When a tough day gets us down, we find hope in remembering that this life is temporary and God can work even the hard things together for our good (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Finally, praise the Lord. The word "praise" is repeated over and over in Psalm 119. Praising God takes our eyes off our circumstances and puts them on God. We can praise God for what He has already done and what He promises to do in the future. God is not hiding His desires for us. Learning God's heart starts with learning His Word.

Reflect:

- What's one way reading the Bible has made a difference in your life?
- Do you ever struggle to understand what you're reading?
- How does it feel to know that even the psalmist asked God for help understanding His Word?

How do I know God really cares about me?
Read: 2 Peter 1:3-8, Philippians 2:12-16, 1 Corinthians 3:7-9

It is amazing to consider how big God is. He created the universe, set our whole world into motion, and orchestrated the perfect plan to redeem mankind. God is big and unimaginably powerful.

But sometimes, it's difficult to believe that God — being so big and powerful — would choose to love us individually. How could the person who created the world and saves humanity have time to care about you and me?

God is not finite like we are. He never runs out of time or energy. He is never too busy or distracted to spend time with His kids. He is an all-powerful creator and a loving Father. He cares about the big and the small aspects of our lives, and He loves each and every one of us on a deep and personal level. He loves us so much He invites us to be a part of His work on earth (Philippians 2:13).

Instead of leaving us to our own devices, God allows us to work alongside Him, enabling us to share His promises with others (2 Peter 1:4). Every promise we read in the Bible requires some participation on our part. Sometimes, our part is to believe and pray. But almost always, our part will require us to live differently.

This is going to take faith — faith that as we act in accordance with what God says, He will do what He promises to do. As we act in faith and follow where God leads, we become [His] fellow workers, carrying out His plan for our lives and watching Him do incredible things in others (1 Corinthians 3:9).

Reflect:

- Do you consider God a close, personal Father or a distant creator? Why?
- Why do you think it matters that God invites us to work alongside Him to share the Gospel?
- What's one way that participating in God's work has taught you to trust in His promises?

Week Two: **Showing Visible love**

Where you get the ability to love

Read: 1 John 4:7-21

“What if I get hurt?” “What if they take advantage of me?” “I’ve tried helping before, and it didn’t do any good.”

For all of the reasons we avoid letting people into our lives or getting involved in theirs, John gives us one good reason we should. It’s what God did for each of us.

When we were uninterested in God, He pursued us. God sent His only Son into the world so our sin could be removed and our relationship could be restored (1 John 4:10-12).

When we realize the depth of God’s love, it changes us. We want to spend time with Him, to know Him. We find joy in bringing Him joy. And after a while, we become so familiar with His character that we know what He would say or have us do. Like a couple who has been together for decades, we begin to move in sync with one another (1 John 4:13-15).

That’s why the real test of our love for God is how we treat the people in front of us. God is love. When we are living in step with God, love is what comes out of us. When we love one another, the invisible God reveals Himself to others through us, and His love is made complete.

God knows better than anyone that love can be costly. You might get hurt, and people might take advantage of you. But the way to quiet those fears is not by retreating. We get past the fear of putting ourselves out there by remembering God’s love and choosing to treat others the way He treated us.

Reflect:

- Who were you when you asked Jesus into your life? How has your life changed since then?
- How would you describe the way God has loved you?
- When it comes to loving others that way, are you retreating in fear or reaching out in faith?

Are you doing enough?
Read: Matthew 22:34-40

You're serving at church, volunteering with local charities, and helping at school. Every second of the day is accounted for, yet so much is left undone. Your days are long, and your body is exhausted. At the end of the day, you wonder, When will it be enough?

It's overwhelming to look at a hurt and broken world. Too often, we see all the needs at once. We want to love others, but in our striving, we leave ourselves burned out and too busy to hear from God.

In Matthew 22, Jesus reminds the religious elite (and all those listening) to make the main thing the main thing. If we'll focus on loving God and loving our neighbors, it will result in us fulfilling God's commands.

We don't have to end world hunger in an afternoon or heal every broken heart in a day. Instead, Jesus says the most important thing we can do is love Him and love others. That's our charge.

So rather than getting overwhelmed by all that we can't do, we start with what we can do. Loving our neighbors can be as simple as cooking an extra lasagna to bring to the new mom next door or the widow across the street.

When we are loving God with our heart, soul, and mind, we are more in tune with His Spirit in us. The Holy Spirit is a helper and a guide. We can trust the Holy Spirit to show us opportunities to love people one at a time.

That's how we make a difference — not by running down a list or striving to hold everything together. We change the world by loving God and showing visible love where He tells us to.

Reflect:

- Why do you think Jesus put the emphasis on loving God and others instead of following all the laws?
- Is there a big need you feel overwhelmed by?
- What is one thing you could do to meet that need today?

What is love?
Read: 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

Spending time with family. Sleeping in late. Reading a good book. A pint of cookie dough ice cream.

We could make lists of people and things we love. "Love" is a word people use frequently, but how often do we mean it when we say it? A wife doesn't mean the same thing when she says she loves her husband and when she says "I love college football."

So, what is love? What does it do? Why does it matter?

1 John 4:8 says, "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." God doesn't just show us love. God is love. Without Him, there is no love. With Him, it is impossible not to love.

God's love in us changes us. Love is the difference between caring for someone and using someone. Love makes our actions and spiritual gifts useful. Great faith, acts of service, and miracle-working power produce very little without love. Love involves unselfish service to others. To show it is evidence that you care.

In Mark 12:30-31, Jesus says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength...[and] love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these."

As Christians, our love for others is a reflection of who God is. We are called to love God and love others. When we do this, our loving behaviors and attitudes point back to God and who He is.

Reflect:

- What's one way God's love has changed you?
- How is God's love moving you to show love to others?
- What is one way your love for others can point them back to Jesus?

This kind of love cannot be overlooked
Read: John 13:35, James 2:14-26, Matthew 5:13-16

When you think of standing out, what comes to mind?

Perhaps it's the celebrity with thousands of Instagram followers. Maybe, it's the colleague who hits every goal or the girl every guy seems to like. How about the athlete who plays every game while your kid sits on the bench? There's also the gigantic house that towers over its neighbors or the teenager whose bright pink hair and wild fashion make people look twice.

To most of us, standing out means having to be bigger or bolder. But Jesus describes a different way to get others attention — through the way we love one another.

We don't have to push the boundaries with what we wear or climb the corporate ladder to stand out. As Jesus followers, we are called to love others as Jesus loves us (John 13:35). That kind of love can't be hidden. Like a light breaking into a dark room, Jesus' love shining through us breaks through the mundane of our day to day (Matthew 5:14-16).

Anyone can profess love verbally. But the selfless, unconditional love Jesus demonstrates is more than just words (James 2:17). Jesus proved His love for us through action. He left heaven and came to Earth to live among us. He traveled from town to town healing and helping those who were hurting. And in His greatest act of love, Jesus gave His life so we could experience forever with Him.

These days, love that proves itself through action is scarce. Many people don't even know such a love exists, nor do they recognize their need for it. That is why Jesus put so much emphasis on freely and consistently loving those around us.

Real love is more than surface level. It is not fickle, and it does not demand anything in return. When we've been loved well, we know it. It causes us to do a double take, to feel deeply, and to tell others about it. A tangible love that reflects Jesus' heart shines too brightly for people to ignore.

Reflect:

- Do your actions match what you say about love? Why or why not?
- What's one way you can love someone intentionally and actively today?

Love will always lead you to be more generous
Read: 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

No one likes being told what to do, especially when it comes to giving away money. In 2 Corinthians 8:1-15, Paul tells the Corinthian church to give, not because they feel obligated to, but as a reflection of their love for others. As an example, he points to the church in Macedonia.

Believers there were facing extreme poverty and trials. Yet in the midst of their suffering, the people had overflowing joy because they were generous in giving and sharing with others rather than holding tightly the little bit they had. That's the kind of love Christians are to show to one another — real, tangible, practical, and sacrificial generosity.

Being generous doesn't happen without intentional effort on our part (2 Corinthians 8:7). Every married couple knows the words "I love you" don't carry much weight unless they are supported by actions. The same is true with our love for others. Saying "I love you" is not nearly as impactful as showing someone you love them.

The beauty of learning to excel in the grace of giving is that generosity is a natural response to love. Generosity isn't something that has to be forced. When we love someone, we want to give them our time and attention.

God gave us the perfect example of sacrificial generosity in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). As followers of Christ, let's put action behind our declaration and be generous in our time, finances, and love.

Reflect:

- When was the last time you did something crazy generous for someone else?
- What's one way that you can show love by being generous today?

Do you love me enough to tell me the truth?
Read: 2 Corinthians 7:8-10, Proverbs 27:6, Ephesians 4:15

We all know what it's like to have a difficult conversation with someone you love. You know, the one you put off having because it's awkward.

We wonder, *What do I say? What if they never speak to me again?*

Hard conversations are not fun, but they are necessary. One of the most difficult ways to love someone is to be willing to tell them the truth, even when it hurts.

Hard conversations, like the one Paul had with the church in Corinth, can lead people away from sin and into the abundant life Jesus has for them. Being truthful with each other pushes us forward and helps us become more like Jesus.

So how do you have a hard conversation with someone? Start by praying. Ask God what He thinks about the situation and what He wants you to say. Ask God for clarity and courage as you prepare for the conversation. Once you're sure your motives are pure and you have the other person's best interest in mind, it may be helpful to write out what you want to say as a reference.

Next, ask the other person to sit down and talk with you in private. Let the person know you love them and have their best interest in mind. Say what you need to say, and be kind but clear. Give the other person time to respond or ask questions. When you both feel the conversation is finished, pray and remind the person how much you love them.

It may take time to process what was said, and that's OK. Stay connected, so you can encourage and support each other in your next steps.

Flattery feels good, but a real friend won't stand idly by while we wreck our lives. We all need people who will do more than support our decisions. We need people who will love us enough to tell us when we're wrong and help us change.

Reflect:

- Is there anyone you need to have a hard conversation with? Pray and ask Jesus what He wants you to say.
- Has someone recently had a hard conversation with you? What is Jesus teaching you through that hard conversation?

Week Three: Pursuing Uncommon Unity

Why unity in the church matters so much

Read: John 17

Politicians seem to thrive on division. Income brackets separate communities into one side of the tracks or the other. Even people who share the same beliefs bicker about how to live out those beliefs.

Unity may seem far-fetched, but unity is what Jesus prayed for us before going to the cross.

More than anything, Jesus' desire was for the church to be one because their uncommon unity would be a powerful witness to God's love. In John 17, Jesus prays, "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:23).

With so much division over so many things, Christians' ability to be unified, even when we're not the same, is what will set us apart. This kind of unity doesn't happen naturally. It comes from above. As we experience God's love for us, it leads us to love other believers with pure, unselfish motives. We stop trying to push ourselves to the top and begin submitting to God and one another.

Just as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are united, we are to be united in order to bring God glory. Jesus knew He wouldn't be on Earth forever, and we are His plan to reconcile people with God (John 17:11, John 17:18). But reconciliation has to start with us.

When believers live in harmony, people take notice and get a glimpse of Jesus' love (John 17:21).

Reflect:

- When you look at your relationships, how much unity do you see at home, at work, or at school?
- What is one practical way you can build unity in the church and your community?
- When is the last time you prayed for the church? Take a moment to follow Jesus' example in praying for your church family. Pray that we would experience the same unity that Jesus had with God and the Holy Spirit.

Is it really all about me?
Read: Colossians 3:1-17

Have you ever seen a kid's eyes light up as they listen to a story or transform a block into a high-flying airplane? Watching kids grow up is fascinating and fun, but there's another side you may have seen, too.

At around age 2 or 3, kids start to say "Mine!" when you take away a toy and "Me!" when they want to go first. Toddlers don't learn this from watching their parents or guardians because all kids do it.

As we get older, we learn to disguise selfishness. But if we are making decisions based on what makes us feel good or holding on to what we think is ours, we are living with a toddler's mindset.

Colossians is a letter, originally written to the church in Colossae. The author, Paul, reminds the church that believing in Jesus and following Him means no longer living for ourselves. Our lives have shifted from being all about what we want and what we desire, to what God wants and desires.

It doesn't matter where a person comes from, what language he speaks, or the amount of money he makes (Colossians 3:11).

All that matters is Jesus. And if we are living for Jesus, that's all that should matter to us. Instead of worrying about how we look or what others think, we are to wear "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (Colossians 3:12). But above all else, we are to put on love. To put something on is a choice. Just as we choose to put on a coat when it's cold or a rain jacket when it's raining, we have to choose to put on love. Without love, our lives are like that of a toddler, focused on ourselves and what we feel is ours. It is in Jesus' love, and us putting on His love, that we experience uncommon unity and peace.

Reflect:

- What is one way pursuing love leads to unity?
- Do you find yourself putting on love, compassion, kindness, and gentleness? Or, do you find yourself holding tightly to what's yours and demanding to be first?
- Colossians 3:12-14 explains how we can clothe ourselves to reflect Jesus to others. As you get ready for your day, ask God to clothe you with these things as well.

You were made to be different and not divided

Read: Ephesians 4:1-13

Have you ever wished a parent, child, spouse, co-worker, or friend saw life the way you did? Or maybe, you hoped they understood an issue from your point of view?

Sometimes, our differences cause conflict. But can you imagine if God made us all the same? How boring would that be! We are individuals with unique tastes, and this is a blessing from the Lord. He didn't make a bunch of robots without preference or free will.

God made each of us in His image with perfect precision (Psalm 139:13-14). Our skills, talents, and abilities are gifts from our heavenly Father. Every bit of our bodies, from the shape of our noses to the color of our skin, was designed with tender, loving care.

We were meant to be different, and we are called to live unified. This is what the apostle Paul calls us to when he says "live a life worthy of your calling" (Ephesians 4:1). God doesn't want us to ignore what makes us special or to try to be like everyone else. Instead, He tells us to embrace our differences, to bear with one another when we're annoyed, and to work toward peace (Ephesians 4:2-3).

What unites us as believers — our shared belief in Father, Son, and Spirit — is greater than any disputes or difference of opinion we face (Ephesians 4:4-5). Some believers prefer to worship with a band while others like singing with a choir. Some wear suits to church while others throw on jeans. Some vote Democrat and others vote Republican. We can debate these things all day long, but they won't matter in eternity.

What will last forever are our relationships with Jesus and others. To live in unity requires us to keep this eternal perspective and focus on the main thing: the good news that Jesus saves us, sets us free from sin, and gives us a future and a hope.

Unity is not always easy, but it is worth the effort. When Christians stop fighting, Jesus' message is declared more clearly, His grace is experienced tangibly, and His people grow in maturity (Ephesians 4:12-13).

Reflect:

- How would you describe the church's reputation for unity? Why do you think that is?
- What are some beliefs you hold tightly about the church? Ask God to show you if any of those beliefs are opinions not based on His commands.

**Are you following the wrong person?
Read: 1 Corinthians 1:10-17**

Somewhere along the way, relationship has turned into follow-ship. We follow celebrities, sports teams, and friends on Instagram. We find people who like what we like, who follow who we follow, and we divide into smaller and smaller circles.

This doesn't just happen in politics and pop culture, but among Christians as well. We follow a favorite pastor, worship leader, or church, and soon we know more about what they say than what Jesus says.

The apostle Paul noticed the same thing happening in the church in Corinth. People in the church were saying, "I belong to Paul" and others, "I belong to Apollos." They began to follow their favorite pastors rather than following Jesus, and division soon followed.

It's good to appreciate leaders and churches (Hebrews 13:7). But when appreciation for a person creates a deeper association with them than we have with Jesus, our affections are misplaced. Our pastors didn't die for us; Jesus did. We aren't baptized in the name of our church; we're baptized in Jesus' name.

People who are "perfectly united in mind and thought" make the conscious choice to pursue Jesus above all else (1 Corinthians 1:10). This is the unity Jesus' church is to be known for. When we remember who we follow and that we're all one family in Christ, the Gospel begins to sound like good news again. The world is familiar with division. But heads turn when a group of people put preferences aside and declare, "In Jesus name, we are one."

Reflect:

- Have you ever let allegiance toward a person or place create division in your life? What was that season like?
- Has a disagreement kept you from unity with another Christian? What's one step you can take to resolve that dispute today?

What stops you from pursuing unity?
Read: Psalm 133, Acts 2:41-47, Acts 4:32, Romans 14:17-18

Not many people are against the idea of unity. We vote for people who promise to bring unity. We sing songs about unity and give awards to those who work toward unity.

So if we can agree that unity is important, what keeps us from pursuing it in our own lives? The answer is embedded in the question. Unity doesn't just happen. It takes an ongoing active pursuit. Unity will require us to take risks, enter uncomfortable situations, and face the possibility of getting hurt.

Acts 2:42 says the first Christians devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. Sounds like a sweet gathering of friends and family, right?

The people in the early church weren't all Jewish, and they probably weren't from the same neighborhoods. Yet, they opened their homes to each other. They shared what they had, and they welcomed teaching and correction. They didn't stumble upon unity by accident, they pursued it. And as they worked as a unit, God worked through them.

"Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles ... And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:43, Acts 2:47)

Fear, pride, and hopelessness will always talk us out of pursuing unity. We'll second guess the decision to reach out or to have a hard conversation because we fear what the other person will think. Instead of taking a step in, we'll tell ourselves, "I can do this on my own." Or, we'll stop pursuing unity before we start, assuming, "It'll never work. Why even bother?"

Unity doesn't come easy. But if we'll accept the challenge and push through the awkwardness, like the early church, we might see God move in miraculous ways.

Reflect:

- How many of your friends are different from you?
- What, if anything, do you find scary about building relationships or getting to know new people?
- Has there been a time when you talked yourself out of pursuing a friendship? What did God teach you through that experience?

The power of one team with one mind
Read: Romans 15:1-13, Galatians 3:26-28

If you are a fan of any sport, you've heard the deafening noise of adoring fans speaking as one. While watching on the couch might give you a better view of the game, it's never as exhilarating as cheering on your team from the stands.

A special energy comes from being part of a shared mission, whether that mission is to win a game or to bring heaven to earth. When we ask Jesus into our lives, we give Him permission to reshape our values and our perspective. That's what it means to make Jesus our Lord. We put Him in charge of how we live today as well as where we spend eternity. We join His team, His mission.

Rather than fielding a select few, Jesus sends all of His people out to share the good news that He has set us free and He will set things right forever. We might seem like a rag-tag bunch. But when it comes to this mission, no one is too old or too young. Wherever we've come from and whatever we've done, we all have a place on this team (Galatians 3:26-28).

At times, we are going to get tired and want to give up (Romans 15:1-2). But the same way a team feeds off the energy of its fans, we can draw strength from one another. When our minds are unified with Jesus the way He is unified with His Father, anything is possible. Paul reminds the church in Rome of the special power that comes through unity in Christ. "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 15:5-6).

Jesus calls us to be one, working together for His glory. When we say yes to Jesus, we are clothed with His jersey. And everyone — regardless of skin color, age, social status, or past life experience — has a role to play.

Reflect:

- When was the last time you drew strength from someone else's faith? Is there someone you need to bear with or build up this week?
- Is there anyone you have a hard time accepting as part of Jesus' team? Rather than hide that feeling, pursue unity by asking Jesus to help you see that person through His eyes.

Week Four: The Way, The Truth, The Life

What it looks like to experience a new life

Read: Colossians 3:1-16

Remember when you were a kid how fun it was to get really dirty? We're talking grime in your nose, eyes, mouth, hair, and ears. Dirt crammed under your fingernails, and down your shirt. Cleaning up was no small feat. It took a hard scrubbing, and often more than one.

We often think we have to clean-up to come to Jesus. But just like your mom welcomed you home, mud and all, Jesus welcomes us, mess and all. And just like your mom was not content to let you walk around the house covered in dirt and grime, Jesus doesn't stand idly by while we track mud everywhere. He loves us too much to leave us as we are.

Colossians 3:12 says God chose us to be His holy people. To be holy is to be sanctified, cleansed, set apart for something special. God doesn't expect us to become holy by ourselves. He sent the Holy Spirit to help us live the new life we've received.

Putting on this new nature can feel a lot like those scrubblings we got as kids. Sometimes, things get messier before they get better. But as we get to know Jesus and become more like Him, we shed our old selves. Like chunks of mud washing down the drain, our old habits and ways of thinking slowly disappear. And after a while, the person we see in the mirror looks a whole lot different than the one who first walked in the bathroom.

The same way we don't put dirty clothes back on after a good scrub down, Jesus gives us new spiritual clothes to wear. Instead of clothing ourselves in greed, anger, lust, and impurity, we put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, and love (Colossians 3:12-14). Those characteristics are what set God's people apart.

Becoming holy as God is holy isn't something we can do on our own, and it isn't something that happens quickly. Rather, it takes a lifetime of partnering with the Holy Spirit and saying, "What do you see that I can't?"

Reflect:

- How has your life changed since you met Jesus?
- What's one remnant of your old life that you still want to change?
- What is one way you can put on mercy, kindness, gentleness or patience today?

How knowing the truth changes you

Read: John 17:15-19

Have you ever stared at a Magic Eye picture, knowing there is something there, but all you see are blurry lines and colors? Some can see the hidden image right away, while others are left frustrated and confused.

Sometimes, our lives feel like a Magic Eye picture. We can't make out what is true, and it leaves us feeling frustrated, confused, and not knowing where to turn.

In John 17:17, Jesus prays, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth." This word "sanctify" means to be set apart for the use intended by the designer. We are sanctified when we live according to God's design and purpose for our lives.

Jesus asks God to sanctify His people by the truth. The Bible is truth.

The Bible helps us discover more about who God is and what He wants for His people. It also helps us see our need to turn away from things that do not match God's design for our lives. As we confess and turn from sin, we are being sanctified by the truth from our Creator.

God wants our lives to be full of joy, peace, and freedom. In John 8:32, Jesus tells a group of believers that the truth of God's Word sets us free. When we apply what we read in the Bible, we are set free from our past and free to live the life He has planned for us. The truth in the Bible sanctifies us, and people around us are changed by the change they see in us!

Reflect:

- What is one way you are being sanctified, set apart or made more like Jesus, as you read the Bible?
- Who do you know that is being changed because of the change they see in you? How?

How the Gospel continues to change us
Read: Colossians 2:6-7

Whether you asked Jesus into your life as an adult, were led in prayer by a camp counselor as a teen, or met Jesus as a child, we all have a story about how we gave our lives to Jesus. But our stories don't end there. Surrender is just the beginning!

Jesus wants you to "continue to live your lives in Him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness" (Colossians 2:6-7). As we spend time with God, our priorities change and our hearts tune into what He values. We begin to invest selflessly in relationships and share the Gospel as we "are rooted and established in (His) love" (Ephesians 3:17).

God knows everything we have done or will do, yet He chooses to love and bless us in ways we can't imagine, much less deserve. We can't begin to "grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ" (Ephesians 3:18). Understanding His mercy and goodness, our hearts overflow with thankfulness.

Reflect

- What is one way you can be rooted in God's Church and in His Word?
- How can you let your thankfulness for His goodness pour out into relationships in your life?

Where you'll find the peace you're looking for
Read: Psalm 27:4-5

Every day, we move from task to task, checking items off our ever-growing to-do lists. But no matter how much we check off, we can still feel overwhelmed and underqualified. This constant state of pressure leaves us anxious and exhausted.

In Psalm 27:4, David says, "One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life." He earnestly sought to be in God's presence every single day because he knew only God could provide peace, protection, and provision in his life. An active and intimate relationship with Jesus was where David found peace, security, and tranquility. And God offers the same for us today.

By spending time in His presence through prayer, reading the Bible, and open and honest community with other Christians, we are inviting God to pour out His peace, protection, and provision into our lives. Putting Jesus first, not completing our to-do lists, is the only way to experience true peace and security (Matthew 6:33).

Reflect:

- Has the busyness of life been stealing the peace Jesus has for you? What's one thing you can do today to make time to seek peace in His presence?
- Do you feel overwhelmed by the daily grind? Begin praying specifically about what overwhelms you. Ask for Jesus' peace, provision, and protection in your life.

This is not as good as it gets
Read: Romans 8:18, Matthew 25:3-13, Revelation 7:15-17

Suffering, hunger, and pain are part of living in a broken world. If we are not in a season of suffering, we know someone who is.

Suffering shows up in the hopelessness of infertility, the chains of addiction, the pain of illness, or the heartache of divorce. Disappointments and tragedies can consume our present thoughts and obscure our future.

But in Christ, we have a promise for more. When we're suffering, we can take comfort in the fact that what we experience on Earth is temporary. Our forever home is in heaven with Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who will lead us there.

Although we desire an immediate fix, Romans 8:18 promises that the difficulty of our current situation is nothing compared to the goodness that is to come. In eternity, there will be no hunger, thirst, or pain. Jesus will wipe away all of our tears, and we will not suffer anymore. When we view our lives from God's perspective and through the lens of eternity, we can trust the best really is yet to come.

Regardless of where we find ourselves presently, Jesus is sitting on His throne. He is a fair judge and righteous king who reigns supreme always. He is our healer who brings restoration physically and spiritually. And, God, as our heavenly Father, gives us unending mercy and grace.

Reflect:

- When the Lord separates those before Him as a shepherd separates his herd, on which side will you be?
- Who do you know who needs the reassurance of eternity to battle their present struggle?
- How does your view of your problems change when you see your life with a heavenly perspective?

Where you'll find real freedom

Read: John 8:31-32, 2 John 1:9

Most of us think freedom is the right to decide our will. For example, we think about freedom of speech, freedom in how we parent and where we live, the right to bear weapons, freedom to hang out with whoever we want, that kind of thing.

To live in true freedom, we must first hear the Gospel. Romans 3:23 says we all are sinners who fall short of the glory of God. No one is an exception to needing God's grace. Believing Jesus died on the cross to save us, frees us from sin's control and allows us to repent.

Repentance provides victory over sin. Romans 10:9 says, "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord', and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved."

Hearing the Gospel, believing it, repenting of sin and making a confession of faith leads to true freedom. Only then are we able to discern and live out God's "good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:2).

John 8:31-32 says, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." Jesus is the truth; real freedom is eternal life. Only Jesus can free us from the bondage of sin and lead us into the freedom of eternal life with Him. "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).

Jesus does not give us freedom to do as we wish while present on Earth, but the freedom to follow God's will. As we seek God's perfect will for our lives, His perfect truth frees us of our own self-deceptions as well as Satan's.

Reflect:

- Do you live in freedom with Jesus? In what way?
- What is one thing you're doing to follow God's will? What is one thing you need to start or stop doing?
- Have you stepped into the freedom of a relationship with Jesus? If not, you can do it today.

You don't have to wander anymore

Read: Isaiah 53:4-6

When is the last time you were lost trying to get somewhere on time? It is not a good feeling. We use tools to find our way back on track. We call a friend, use GPS, or stop and ask for directions. We don't accept remaining lost in these scenarios. Why would we settle there in our spiritual lives?

Isaiah compared the nation of Israel to sheep that have gone astray. They were a group seeking their own path instead of following the shepherd's lead. Isaiah 53:6 says all of us, like sheep, are lost. Unlike the Israelites at the time, we have the gift of seeing how Isaiah 53:4-5 was fulfilled in Jesus death and resurrection. We have the hindsight of knowing how God fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy.

Jesus suffered, was pained, stricken, afflicted, pierced, and crushed on the cross — for us. He loves us so much that He was willing to take the punishment for our sin (Romans 5:8).

Romans 10:9 says, "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." When we take to heart what Jesus did for us, it changes us from the inside out.

Isaiah 53:5 says, "the punishment that brought us peace" was on Jesus. Do you have peace? Or are you still searching, trying to find your way? You don't have to search or wander anymore. In a relationship with Jesus, we find peace and freedom. He doesn't give up on us when we get off track or force us to submit to His will. Instead, He waits patiently for us to come to Him.

Reflect:

- Is there an area of your life where you feel lost?
- What is one step you can take today to bring that part of your life to Jesus?
- Have you started a relationship with Jesus? If yes, thank Him for this precious gift. If not, what is holding you back?