



## Introduction

**About This Study.** This study is a little different than what we have done the past year and a half. We are focusing on encouragement, our theme for 2018. Instead of working systematically through a book of the Bible, verse by verse, we are asking each pastor “What Bible passage encourages you the most, and why?” So we are looking at several seemingly disconnected passages, but the connecting theme is encouragement.

**Important Wrinkle In This Study.** On the first page, there will be a space dedicated to encouragement. For week one, you should be prepared to share as follows.

1. What Bible passage is the biggest encouragement to you?
2. When did you encounter this passage?
3. When do you find it encouraging?
4. Why is it encouraging for you?
5. Anything else you would say about this passage?

Then, after you share, ask other people to share each week at the start of the study after the icebreaker.

**We Will Still Use the Inductive Method.** The word “inductive” means to make conclusions about God and his ways by way of careful observation and analysis of the Bible. The three steps are observation, interpretation, and application. In other words, “What does it say,” “What does it mean,” and “What does it mean to me?” This way of studying the Bible helps us follow 2 Tim 2:15, that we would properly handle the word of truth. *The observation and interpretation questions are put together.*

**Expect & Pray for God to Teach You.** It is critical to come to God's Word with a sense of expectation. God wants to speak to us, that we would be encouraged and grow.

Also, prayer is more important than you think. Throughout the day, think of the people in your group and lift them up to the Lord.

**Look for Action.** James says, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." When we start doing what God wants, we will see him take our baby-steps of faithfulness and turn them into something much greater than we could do on our own.

**Don't Stop Building Your Group.** Consider pursuing some new people for your group. If you would like to have a few more in your group, go out and ask someone. There are many who would benefit from a group who don't join because no one asked them. The worst thing that can happen is they say no.

**Don't Talk Too Much.** A last reminder for your group – a good leader is one who is asking good questions and then stepping out of the way. People are prone to taking the path of least resistance. This means they would rather you answer their questions than think it through themselves. Instead of answering, ask, "What do you all think about that question?"

## **THROW A PARTY!!!**

Do it again. I put this one in big bold font because it may be one of the most important things you do. Feel free, once a session, to cancel the study and have a feast of some sort. Enjoy each other's company, have some fun! This is a time to invite spouses who do not regularly attend, or a neighbor or friend who might not come otherwise. You can do it at a different location than you normally meet if that is better.

## **WELCOME TO SMALL GROUP WINTER 2018!**

**This study is about encouragement.** Did you know that the most repeated command in the Bible is for us to be happy? The commands, “praise the Lord,” “do not be afraid,” “rejoice,” and “give thanks...” They are all basically about being happy.

As Christians, we can be happy even when our circumstances are less than perfect. This is because of God and all his promises. I am convinced that “encouragement” taps into this basic idea. We are most encouraged when we are most reminded of who God is and what he has said and done.

In order to foster this atmosphere of God-centered encouragement in our church and in our small groups, we are handing out a simple assignment to each person, and your small group leader will take week 1. Two people can go on the same day if needed. Keep it to around five minutes. Here are the five questions to answer as you share how you are encouraged by the Scriptures:

1. What Bible passage is the biggest encouragement to you?
2. When did you encounter this passage?
3. When do you find it encouraging?
4. Why is it encouraging for you?
5. Anything else you would say about this passage?

### **January 7 – Your Small Group Leader**

**January 14 – \_\_\_\_\_**

**January 21 - \_\_\_\_\_**

**January 28 - \_\_\_\_\_**

**February 4 - \_\_\_\_\_**

**February 11 - \_\_\_\_\_**

## **“The Unearned Gift of Forgiveness”      Week 1**

Romans 4:1-8

January 7, 2018

**Icebreaker question.** Let each person answer this question as we get to know each other: “If you had lots of money, what unnecessary thing would you splurge on (private plane, concert tickets).”

**Encouragement.** Whoever's turn it is, have them share which passage of Scripture is the most encouraging to them, and why, according to the guide on the first page.

**Prayer (now or end of study).** Today, if anyone has any urgent prayer requests, share them and make sure that everybody gets prayed for.

**Studying the word.** *Ask God to guide your study of His Word.*

### **OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS**

*Context: Paul is making a case that justification (being made right with God) is by faith alone, not by anything we do.*

1. Read today's passage in two different translations. Pray for the Spirit's guidance of your study.
2. What biblical characters are used here as an example?
3. Why was Abraham held in a high regard?
4. What words do you find repeated in this passage? Spend a couple minutes looking over the Scripture.

**Abraham (3x), blessed/blessing (3x), counted (3x), works (3x), justify (2x), believe (2x)**

5. Have someone look up Genesis 15:6. How did God justify people in the Old Testament? How did he justify Abraham?

6. Look up Psalm 32:1-2. How did God justify King David?
7. Why do you think that God gave us these Old Testament examples of grace working through faith?
8. Why did the Pharisees and other Jewish people at the time of Jesus think that their relationship with God was based on works? How did the pagans do the same?

There were many passages in the OT about keeping God's covenant, and obeying all the laws handed down by Moses. But in their attention to the details of the law, they missed the greater issue, which is the gracious character of God. Pagans were always trying to appease their gods.

9. Regarding verses 4 & 5: What is the difference between a wage and a gift? Similarly, what is the difference in attitude between a person who receives a wage and receives a gift?
10. Why is it true that God won't hold a person's sin against them? (look at Romans 3:23-25).

### **QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION**

1. How would you respond to someone who says, "I believe good people go to heaven and bad people go to hell?" Does that match up with what God says in this passage?
2. Do you find yourself trying to measure up for God? How? What does this passage say to you when you are doing that?
3. Since salvation is not by works, what are some possible motivations in the Christian's life for good works? (Check out Luke 7:40-43 if there is time)
4. What is your response to salvation being by faith? Confidence? Thankfulness? Joy? Peace? Do you have a negative reaction for some reason? Explain.
5. How could this passage encourage you? How could it encourage someone you know?

## **“The Do-Over”**

## **Week 2**

Mark 2:1-17

January 14, 2018

**Icebreaker question.** Let each person answer this question as we get to know each other: “If you could eliminate one food that nobody would ever have to eat again, what food would you destroy?”

**Encouragement.** Whoever's turn it is, have them share which passage of Scripture is the most encouraging to them, and why, according to the guide on the first page.

**Prayer (now or end of study).** In addition to praying for each other's requests, spend some time adoring God for his *faithfulness, goodness, mercy, love, and forgiveness.*

**Studying the word.** *Ask God to guide your study of His Word.*

### **OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS**

1. Have someone read the entire passage.
2. What do you think the paralytic's (quadriplegic's) life was like?
3. How would you describe the scene in verses 1-4?
  - a. Why were people attracted to Jesus? Because of his \_\_\_\_\_. **Preaching – but also, perhaps his miracles... that's why the paralytic's friends came**
  - b. How many people were there?
  - c. What types of people were there?
4. What is the surprising thing Jesus does in this passage that creates the tension?

**Jesus forgives the man's sin in verse 5. This is a surprise, because only God can forgive sin (verse 7).**

5. How do the scribes respond to Jesus forgiving the man's sin?

- a. Is their response out loud?
- b. Is their response logical?
6. What do we learn about Jesus in this passage?

He could read minds. He could forgive sins. He could work miracles. We see his love, compassion, and power.

7. How did Jesus reply to the thoughts in the scribes' heart?

Not just with words, but with the healing to help address their doubt.

8. How do you think the paralytic felt when Jesus said, "your sins are forgiven." When he said, "get up and walk?"
9. So think about it. There was a paralyzed man. And Jesus said, "Your sins are forgiven." Is Jesus implying a connection between physical ailment and sin? Why or why not? If not, then what was the point of this whole drama?
10. Look again at verse 5. Jesus responded to "their" faith. How can the faith of a friend bring a sinner to Jesus?

### **QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION**

1. What are some practical ways you can follow the example of the friends in this passage? Can we follow Jesus' example?
2. In Bob's sermon, he said that the most encouraging moment of his life was when his father believed in Christ. Where do we want to see Jesus work powerfully?
3. The people went to great lengths to get to Jesus (peeled back the roof on a house!) Do we show the same dedication?
4. Jesus was misunderstood and hated, yet he tried to reveal himself to the scribes. Is there any way that you can help to show who Jesus is to those who do not like or understand him?



**“Courage for the Mission”****Week 3**

Joshua 1:1-9

January 21, 2018

**Icebreaker question.** Let each person answer this question as we get to know each other: “If you would create a holiday, what would it be? When would it be?”

**Encouragement.** Whoever's turn it is, have them share which passage of Scripture is the most encouraging to them, and why, according to the guide on the first page.

**Prayer (now or end of study).** Spend time praying for one another as usual. Also, spend some time praying for our church's annual meeting next Sunday. Pray that it would go smooth, that there would be unity, and wise decisions would be made on any business items that are considered.

**Studying the word.** *Ask God to guide your study of His Word.*

**OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS**

1. Read today's passage aloud.
2. What is the general, big picture context of this passage? Use a Bible reference to find out, Study Bible, etc.

40 years of wilderness wandering due to disobedience and unfaithfulness, because the people refused to take the land. So the previous generation passed on, and now the next generation was to take the land.

3. Make a list of the commands and promises of God in this passage.
4. Verses 2-5 are about taking over the land promised to Abraham's descendants. In order to understand this in its

current, Christian application, we need to understand how the land promises were to be fulfilled...

- a. Who are Abraham's true descendants? (Romans 4:12-13, 16).
- b. What is the ultimate goal of the land promise (realized through the Gospel, through Christ)? (Genesis 12:3, 22:18, 26:4, Psalm 2:8, Matthew 28:18-20, Acts 1:8).
- c. How do God's promises to be with Joshua in the conquest of the land mirror God's promises to be with his people in the spread of the Gospel to the ends of the earth? (Luke 12:12, Heb 13:5, Matt. 16:17-19).

Abraham's true descendants are those who have faith in Christ. The ultimate goal of the land promise is the blessing of all families of the earth through Christ. This is being realized, even now, as the Gospel goes forth. The instruction to Joshua is thus extremely relevant for us as Christians today in fulfilling the mission.

5. How did God encourage Joshua to faithfulness?
6. What is the importance of God's Word to his mission?
7. How often should believers be in God's Word? How should they think of it?
8. The word courageous is repeated. Why should a person be courageous? What does courage look like in action?

### **QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION**

1. How does your life need to change to be a part of God's mission to "take the land for God?"
2. How does courage relate to being a part of God's mission?
3. Do you keep the "book" in front of you day and night?
4. There is the promise of success (!) in verse 8. What do you think about that? Do you expect to see God work mightily? Why do we sometimes doubt him?

**“The Gospel Experienced”****Week 4**

Galatians 4:1-7

January 28, 2018

**Icebreaker question.** Let each person answer this question as we get to know each other: “If you could pick one job to do forever (and money wasn’t remotely an issue), what would it be?”

**Encouragement.** Whoever’s turn it is, have them share which passage of Scripture is the most encouraging to them, and why, according to the guide on the first page.

**Prayer (now or end of study).** Pray for each other, and spend some time thinking and lifting up those you know who are sick, lonely, or hurting. Remember to pray for orphans and widows, and others in distress.

**Studying the word.** *Ask God to guide your study of His Word.*

**OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS**

1. Read today’s passage in a couple different versions of the Bible.
2. Look at the previous verse (3:29). Today’s passage is addressing whom?

**This passage is specifically for people who are coheirs with Christ – those who have been adopted into his family.**

3. Look carefully at verses 1-3. Why is a child no different than a slave? (verse 1) What is the point of that?

**When a son is too young to receive his inheritance, he might as well be a slave. This was the situation of Paul and his fellow Israelites under the Old Covenant.**

4. What are the elementary principles of the world? Use a Study Bible or some other reference to help you.

This phrase is used because Paul is writing to Jews and Gentiles. It refers to their way of living before Christ – the rituals of the Jewish law for the Jews, the pagan ways of the Gentiles. They were both under a legalistic system of performance, which is counter-Gospel. Instead, we know God because of grace.

5. Why is living under the law slavery?
6. How would you feel if you were a slave and a very rich family came along and not only freed you, but also adopted you and made you an heir?
7. What did God do to make us his sons? (Verses 4-6?)
8. How does the Spirit assure us of adoption?

#### **QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION**

1. Look at Romans 8:15-17. It speaks of what it means to call God "Abba." Read that verse and discuss what that means for you, today.
2. How does your future inheritance in Christ encourage you?
3. How does your position before God – as his child – encourage you?
4. What voices in your life (inner voices, external voices, or anything else) try to dissuade you of your status before God? What is the best way for you to stay centered in the truth – that you are a child of God?

**“Life as a Movie”****Week 5**

Psalm 37

February 4, 2018

**Icebreaker question.** Let each person answer this question as we get to know each other: “What’s your best idea for a reality TV show?”

**Encouragement.** Whoever’s turn it is, have them share which passage of Scripture is the most encouraging to them, and why, according to the guide on the first page.

**Prayer (now or end of study).** In addition to praying for each other’s requests, spend some time adoring God for his *sovereign control of all things, for the gift of Jesus, and for the glory of his return.*

**OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS**

1. Read Psalm 37. We are going to focus especially on verses 1, 2, 35, and 36.
2. What are the main themes of this psalm?
3. The word “wicked” shows up 12 times in this passage. The word “righteous” shows up 9 times.
  - a. Look carefully through the passage and observe what it says about the righteous and the wicked. What do you see?
  - b. Are there any phrases that you do not know what they mean? Look them up in a Study Bible or reference guide.
4. What sort of real world situations make psalms like this relevant/important?
5. Do any parts of this passage stand out to you? What do you notice?
6. What is promised for the wicked? What is promised for the righteous?

7. What does it mean to inherit the land for an OT Israelite? For a Christian today?

To inherit the land was a sign that you were inside of God's covenant, because he promised that to those who obeyed his commandments, he would give the land. It was a sign of God's blessing and favor. For the Christian, the promised land is ultimately a restored and renewed heaven and earth which we receive after the resurrection of the dead.

8. What do you learn about God in this passage? Make a list of what you find.

### **QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION**

1. What does this passage tell us about the life God desires for a person to have?
2. How often do you see the wicked flourishing? How do you deal with it in your heart/mind?
3. Have someone read the below list of what God promises in this passage:
  - 1) God will give you the desires of your heart. 2) God will do "it." 3) God will bring forth your righteousness as a light. 4) You will inherit the land. 5) You will delight in abundant prosperity. 6) You will be sustained, your inheritance will be forever, and you will not be ashamed in times of evil. 7) The righteous will have abundance in famine. 8) They will not fall hard or be forsaken by God. 9) The righteous will not need to beg for bread, and their descendants will be a blessing. 10) The righteous will abide forever and be preserved forever. 11) Their steps will not slip 12) They will not be condemned, but will be blessed with prosperity and salvation. 13) God will exalt the righteous, and strengthen them in trouble.
4. Which of these things is an encouragement to you, and why?
5. Are you going through anything that makes you need to remember that life is a movie?

## **“Ditching the Need for Approval”      Lesson 6**

Isaiah 51:1-16

February 11, 2018

**Icebreaker question.** Let each person answer this question as we get to know each other: “Who is your craziest/most interesting relative?”

**Encouragement.** Whoever’s turn it is, have them share which passage of Scripture is the most encouraging to them, and why, according to the guide on the first page.

**Prayer (now or end of study).** Pray for the persecuted church worldwide. Lift up those meeting in homes or caves, who would lose jobs, homes, or family if their faith was discovered. Pray for wisdom and protection as they seek to witness Jesus to those around them. Pray for their continued faithfulness.

**Studying the word.** *Ask God to guide your study of His Word.*

### **OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS**

1. Have someone read this passage aloud.
2. What is the historical context of this passage? Use a Study Bible to look this up.

The Jewish people were in exile. They were awaiting salvation from God, to be brought back to Jerusalem, and to be restored. They were not experiencing the abundance of God according to the promises of Moses’ covenant, which they broke.

3. Verses 1-2 – who is God addressing?
4. Verse 3 – what does God do for his people?
5. What repeated idea is found throughout the beginnings of these verses? Do you think God is trying to get your attention?

6. What repeated command is the central idea of this passage, found in verses 7 & 8, 12 & 13?

It is the command not to live for fear of man.

7. Name all of the reasons not to live for fear of man found in this passage?

Some of them: verse 6 – heaven and earth will fade away, but God's salvation is forever. Verse 8 – those who oppose God's word will perish. Verses 9-11 because we know of God's mighty works of salvation in the past. He is way more powerful than Rahab (the Egyptians). Verse 12 Man will die like grass. Verse 13 he made the heavens and the earth. Verse 14 – if he dies he will not go to the pit. If he lives his bread will not be lacking.

8. There are many mentions of God giving "this-life blessing" in this passage. (verses 2, 3, 12). Is there a connection between holding fast to God's Word and experiencing this life blessing?

#### **QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION**

1. When do you find yourself more concerned about what other people think than what God thinks?
2. Do you live for the approval of others? Do you find yourself hiding your faith in difficult situations, or with people you know will be hostile to your beliefs?
3. How do some Christians or ministries cave to the world in order to be accepted? Do you think this approach will yield lasting results?
4. What does someone risk, humanly speaking, when they boldly declare God's truth?
5. What do they risk, spiritually speaking, when they shrink from the truth?
6. Are there any ways that this passage would have you grow as a disciple of Jesus?