

COVID-19 Grow Guide
Bible Studies

HOPPE

FEAR LOVE

ANIC FATH

SOLA TION

Coronavirus COVID-19 has come bringing death and disruption into the world. As we wonder how to feel our feelings and be resilient in a new normal, it helps to look to people who have gone before us into seasons of trouble. This series of Bible studies are excerpts of letters from the first parents of Christian faith to communities of new Christians. All were experiencing trial, hardship, famine, persecution, and - yes -, many, many plagues. May the Holy Spirit's voice through their ancient words mentor us as we hold our souls and each other.

A pastoral word: these studies and their questions are guidelines to help small groups look for Jesus together. If the Holy Spirit leads you towards a different way than the questions here, you have every freedom to go there. Pray for wisdom (James 1:5), listen for God's leadership, and follow. Trust God will give you the way forward.

These small group Bible studies point us and our communities towards Jesus and our neighbors in this time of trouble. We feel the temptation to enter into denial or panic, to self-medicate or self-soothe. Going to God in intimacy, yielding to God's leadership, and practicing faithfulness to lead in the places God has called you develops resiliency and helps us become who God has called us to become.

An Adjusted Prayer of St. Francis:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace
Where there is fear, let me sow love
Where there is isolation, friendship
Where there is panic, faith
Where there is despair, hope
Where there is darkness, light
And where there is sadness, joy
O Divine Master, grant that I may
Not so much seek to be healthy as to heal
To be comfortable, as to bring comfort
To be loved, as to love
For it is in Christ's giving that we receive
And it's in His hands that we are made clean
And it's in His death that we are born to Eternal Life
Amen.



Romans 8:18–28

¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the good children of God; ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it and patience. ²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes as sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. ²⁸ We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

Discuss

You're reading part of a letter written from a church planter named Paul to the church in Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire and full of people who had just become Christians. Thus the book is called, "Romans". Paul was explaining the suffering of this world and how to live in it as God's children. The good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection allows people to become God's children and gives them God's Spirit living inside them.

- 1) Paul is familiar with suffering. With powerful metaphors of birth (v. 22) and adoption (v. 23) in the context of groaning and suffering how does Paul interpret this present pain and trouble?
- 2) What actions do you see God taking in this passage? What does the Holy Spirit do?
- 3) What is Paul's hope for the future, hope that helps him and his present suffering any troubles?

Apply

- 1) Even though we do not know how to pray, the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness and is interceding for God's people "with sighs too deep for words", according to the will of God. Share some current situations where you don't know how to pray and where you feel weak.
- 2) Name the "groaning" in creation that you see in the world currently - both locally and globally. Paul writes how God redeems all circumstances for people who love God. Together, name the situations where you want to invite God to work together for good. Pray for each other.
- 3) Ask the Holy Spirit to name 2+ people in your relational network that you should connect with this week and offer to pray with them.

1 Peter 5:1-11

¹ Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you ² to attend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it – not for sordid things but eagerly. ³ Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. ⁵ In the same way, you who are younger must except the authority of the elders. And all of you must close yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. ⁶ Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that He may exalt you in due time. ⁷ Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. ⁸ Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. ¹⁰ And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.



Discuss

Peter is one of the first followers of Jesus (see Luke 5:1-11) and one of the first people to recognize him as God (see Matthew 16:13-20). In this letter, he's encouraging those who feel separated from friends and experiencing suffering and persecution. He wants them to journey with courage towards Jesus, all which requires the true grace of God. In his own faith journey, Peter moved from faith in Jesus as a good teacher, to disillusionment, to recognizing Jesus as the one who leads him and saves him.

1) In verses 1 to 4, Peter writes to the elders of early Christian communities who are learning to lead in difficult circumstances. He points them to Jesus, the Chief Shepherd. What are some of the characteristics of "shepherds" Peter invites the elders to become?

2) Humility is learning to see ourselves as we truly are. In times of trouble and suffering we can be tempted to see untrue versions of ourselves. What are you tempted to see of yourself that is untrue? (Hint: our anxieties give us clues about what we believe about ourselves, about God, and about our situations.) How might "casting your anxiety on him" help you in growing humility?

Apply

1) Name what is making you anxious and pray for each other, giving that anxiety to Jesus.

2) Where are you called to lead like Jesus – with humility, compassion, and care for others? Make a network map of your relationships that have shifted since the disruption and displacement of the virus. Ask the Holy Spirit who you should reach out to. When you connect with those people, listen to their anxieties, ask them if you can pray for them, and practice "casting their anxieties" on Jesus. If there is an appropriate action to take in caring for those in your network, do it.

Philippians 4:4-13

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ⁹Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. ¹⁰I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹²I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³I can do all this through him who gives me strength.



Discuss

Philippians is named for the people in the city (Philippi) that this letter was sent to. Philippi was a former army colony of Rome, composed mainly of retired soldiers and Roman citizens. Paul, the author of the letter, is in prison (most likely in Rome) and has received gifts and provision from the Philippians via Epaphroditus who almost died on the journey to Paul. He writes this letter to thank the Philippians, encourage them, stop any false teaching and call them to unity in Christ.

- 1) What four sets of practices does Paul encourage the Philippians to engage with in verses 4, 6, 8 and 9? What's the result of these practices?
- 2) What are the range of circumstances Paul says he's encountered in verses 12 to 13? How does he deal with these different situations?

Apply

- 1) Anxiety can feel like a song stuck on repeat that plays a chorus of worry again and again: worry about COVID-19, about family, about finances, about friends. Paul gives the Philippians a brilliant idea: purposely change the song and your mindset will also change as you call to mind good things (v.8) and rejoice in the Lord (v.4). Share something good you're thankful for. Keep calling it to mind this week.
- 2) The other practice that's important in hard times is to live like Jesus did – that's who Paul imitated. Paul and the Philippians also know a secret: in God's economy, you don't go into scarcity by being generous – you actually experience joy and deeper trust that God will look out for you. With this in mind, think about someone that you can extend forgiveness, generosity, peace, hope, kindness or encouragement to and do it this week.

Isaiah 46:1-7

¹Bel bows down, Nebo stoops low; their idols are borne by beasts of burden. The images that are carried about are burdensome, a burden for the weary. ²They stoop and bow down together; unable to rescue the burden, they themselves go off into captivity. ³"Listen to me, you descendants of Jacob, all the remnant of the people of Israel, you whom I have upheld since your birth, and have carried since you were born. ⁴Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you. ⁵"With whom will you compare me or count me equal? To whom will you liken me that we may be compared? ⁶Some pour out gold from their bags and weigh out silver on the scales; they hire a goldsmith to make it into a god, and they bow down and worship it. ⁷They lift it to their shoulders and carry it; they set it up in its place, and there it stands. From that spot it cannot move. Even though someone cries out to it, it cannot answer; it cannot save them from their troubles.



Discuss

This passage comes from the Old Testament, the scriptures Jesus would have grown up hearing and reading (for example, he reads from Isaiah in Luke 4:16-21). Isaiah is a prophet: someone who *forth-tells* truth more than *foretells* it, meaning he often is speaking the truth to power more than predicting the future. In this case, God is about to allow a large empire to take over Israel because Israel has worshiped other gods and abused the vulnerable in their society. Isaiah is bringing his message to the leaders of Israel to warn them and to call them to turn back to trusting God alone.

1) This passage is highly poetic, so words and images are very important. Look at how Isaiah observes Bel's and Nebo's behavior – they were two ancient false gods Israel made into idols (vv. 1-2). Contrast this with how God cares for his people (vv. 3-4). What differences between the idols and God do you notice? Who is a burden? Who is carrying God's people?

2) In verses 5 to 7, Isaiah describes the common ancient practice of using gold to make an idol which is then carried to a spot, set in place and worshipped, hoping it will save God's people from their trouble. How is God's power and ability described differently than an idol's in verses 3 to 4 (note that "descendants of Jacob" is a way of talking about Israel since Jacob's sons became the twelve tribes)?

Apply

We might not make idols out of gold anymore, but just like God's people, we feel vulnerable. We feel weak and exposed to all that COVID-19 has done globally as stock markets crash, as we consider friends and family who are high risk, and as hospitals reach capacity. In this experience, an idol is anything we turn to, hoping to relieve our vulnerability and increase our sense of being able to act. Put simply, idols offer us control when things feel out of control.¹

1) Think about TV, relationships, sex, your phone, food, even exercise. Are you using any of these things to deal with the pain of having our vulnerability exposed? Are you seeking to gain control through any of these?

2) The only person who can truly carry our burdens is God himself. Peter, Jesus' disciple, tells us to bring our burdens to Jesus: "Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you." (1 Peter 5:7). Read again God's promise to his people in verse 4. Then, take a moment in silence to close your eyes and ask God to show you how he's carrying you and those you care for. Try this daily for a week.

¹I'm grateful for the wisdom and insight Andy Crouch brings to examining our modern idols in pp. 92-99 in *Strong and Weak: Embracing a Life of Love, Risk and True Flourishing* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016).

John 11:21-27, 32-44

²¹"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." ²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." ²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷"Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world." ³²When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴"Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. ³⁵Jesus wept. ³⁶Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" ³⁸Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹"Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." ⁴⁰Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" ⁴¹So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."



This is a passage from the Gospel of John ("John" for short). The Gospels are four books at the beginning of the New Testament that combine ancient historical biography with persuasion to write eye-witness accounts of Jesus. The first half of John is organized around seven signs that Jesus performs to show that he is sent from God. These signs all have deep connection to the Old Testament. In the OT, God met his people in profound ways. For example, when he rescued them from slavery in Egypt and they were in the desert, he fed them with manna, bread from heaven. So, it's really significant that Jesus says, "I am the bread of life" (6:35). It's not just that he wants to feed his people and provide, he is helping those listening to see that his very life is what the manna miracle was pointing towards—he himself provides them with life.

Just like Jesus tying the manna miracle to himself when he says he's the bread of life, Jesus is about to tie another promise of God—God's biggest promise—to himself. The Jews believed that one day God would restore his good and perfect reign and bring the world to justice. This was called "The Resurrection" and is at the heart of psalms like Psalm 16:9-10: "Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay." The trust in God's justice and faithfulness extended even to God's power over the grave. The Jews couldn't see the full scope of what God was up to; it was like they were looking through a dirty window - seeing some things, but missing the bigger thing.

Discuss

- 1) How do you see Martha taking what she knows about the OT and applying it to Jesus in verses 21-27?
- 2) How does Jesus expand what Martha knows into something even bigger?
- 3) Jesus has come to heal Lazarus, yet in front of his tomb, he weeps. Why do you think Jesus cries?

Jesus knows the pain of the world. He knows that fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters and children die too soon. He knows that even though God is good, there is still evil, sin and death that wreak havoc in the world. The right response is lament; Jesus later laments on the cross through Psalm 22. This passage isn't about Jesus showing up and fixing everything that goes wrong when we or those we love get sick. Jesus heals Lazarus at great peril: it's the last miracle that clinches the religious leaders' desire to kill him.

This passage is about Jesus standing in the great tension of human life with us. He stands with us and looks, as we do, at our broken world and sees those we love who are sick and even dying. He sees eyes meant for laughter, feet meant for running and dancing, arms meant for hugging loved ones; fingers meant for painting and dribbling basketballs and playing guitar strings. He sees what we were meant for and he weeps that death and brokenness try to steal this. He then also does something profound: he embodies the hope that is so powerful that it transforms death into a new kind of life.

Apply

- 1) How is COVID-19 affecting you right now? Where are you seeing pain, sickness and even death? What would it be like to picture Jesus standing with you and weeping at this, like he did with Mary and Martha at Lazarus' tomb?
- 2) COVID-19 has reminded all of us that life is very fragile and none of us are safe: the following is an invitation to respond.

Call To Faith

Just like Jesus says he's the bread of life and the water that quenches our deepest thirst, he also embodies one of God's biggest promises: that he can bring our human bodies, frail, broken, and ravaged by sickness and disease to full healing and to a new kind of life - one that is free of sickness, pain, and disease forever—the very body Jesus received after he rose from the dead. The word for this is *resurrection*. It's not coming back from the dead to die again. It's not becoming a wispy spirit that floats around in the clouds. It's becoming even more physical, more real and more fully human than we ever thought possible—our bodies free of all that's wrong in us and in the world.

So, when Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb, the sign he is giving is that God has the power to do what he promised: raise us from the dead to resurrection life. Martha and Mary receive their brother back from the dead, and all who witnessed now see the power of God through Jesus. However, Lazarus will die again. What Jesus has given is a down payment on a much bigger miracle that God will do when Jesus dies on a Roman cross. Three days later, Jesus is not simply brought back from the dead, but is resurrected. He is given his redeemed body that eats fish, walks through walls, appears and disappears, and is free of all brokenness. Seeing this and being around him is so incredible, so awe-inspiring and so good that it starts the spread of Christianity to the whole world. The spread has never stopped for over 2,000 years; it has survived empires, plagues, wars, and all other kinds of persecution because Christians for centuries have believed the witness to Lazarus pointed to what God can and did do in Jesus. "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?" (1 Cor. 15:54-55).

DEATH, WHERE
IS YOUR
VICTORY?

Small Group Invitation to Faith

Prepare the group for a next step

"We don't just want to talk about the Bible, we want to live it out. If you have been following Jesus for a while, I would like us to consider responding by joining the mission and sharing Jesus' good news. More on that in a minute. If you are considering following Jesus, I would like to give you an opportunity to take a step. First, let me share what it means to be a Christian and follow Jesus, and then see how we each may want to respond."

Read the Big Story



Designed for Good

In Genesis we see that God created the world to be a perfect place. He created us for right relationship with him, with each other, and with creation. Things were perfect!



Damaged by Evil

We all long for that kind of right relationship with each other. But we thought we could run our lives better than God. Instead of placing God at the center, we put our own selfish desires at the center. And as a result, everything fell apart. We broke our relationship with God, with each other, and with all creation. Today we live in a broken, messed-up world. We have war, depression, child abuse, suicide, drug addiction, school shootings, etc. Fortunately, God didn't leave us in this mess.



Restored for Better

God relocated into our world in the person of Jesus. Jesus took all our brokenness onto himself. By dying on the cross and rising again, he broke the power of our broken world. If we're willing to let God take his place at the center again, and if we are willing to trust Jesus with our lives, we can be restored to a right relationship with God. But that's not the end of the story.



Sent to Heal

Once we choose to follow Jesus, he sends us into the world to bring his love, power, and justice wherever we go. We get to live and declare this good news.

Who's at the Center?



But, we have to make a decision. Will we live with ourselves at the center of the story or will we let God become the center of our story? In order to be sent to heal, we must turn from our selfishness and trust Jesus with our lives. This is what the Bible means when it says, "Repent of your sins." If we are at the center of the story, our attempts to heal will be warped by our brokenness, which is not very effective. What would it take for you to trust Jesus with your life?

First, this means accepting that through the cross and resurrection, we can be different people and receive a change of heart both now and for eternity. And that means making him the center of your life and following his leadership for you. Are you ready to do that?

Second, we join in his mission on campus and in the world to live and share his good news. That might mean telling a friend about Jesus. Are you ready to do that? How do you anticipate that following Jesus will shape your life?

PONDER YOUR RESPONSE

It's important for you to interact with God about this. Let's take a moment of silence. Ask God if he is inviting you to follow him. (20 seconds of silence) Let's each share how we are feeling or how we want to respond today. [Thank you.](#) [Let's get a follow up conversation.](#)
