

A rustic wooden desk with a lamp, books, and scrolls. The desk is made of light-colored wood with a dark wood top. On the desk, there is a silver desk lamp, a dark mug, a notebook with a pen, a blue inkwell, and several rolled-up scrolls. In the background, there are framed documents and a stack of books. A window with a brick wall is visible on the left.

entrusted

A Study of 2 Timothy

BETH MOORE

entrusted

A Study of 2 Timothy

BETH MOORE

with articles by
MELISSA MOORE

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Dedication



Travis and Angela Cottrell,
my son and daughter-in-law in the faith,

I knew from the start that, if Jesus graced me
to see this series to a finish, I would dedicate it to you.
You are second in my heart to my own children
and there you will stay,
come rain or shine, until I see Christ's beautiful face.

I don't think the apostle would mind if, on this occasion,
I borrowed the fitting words he used to describe his beloved Timothy.

"For I have no one like him."

Philippians 2:20, ESV

Contents

About the Authors	6
About This Study	7
Introduction	10

WEEK ONE

DIVINE TRIANGULATION

Viewer Guide	12
Day One: A Trail of Two Cities	15
On Reading Scripture	21
Day Two: Meet the Teacher	23
Day Three: Where Was He When	28
Day Four: A Beeline to City Three	33
Theology: A Collective Struggle.	37
Day Five: A New Son and A Circumcision	39

WEEK TWO

PURPOSE AND GRACE

Viewer Guide	44
Day One: A Clear Conscience.	47
Timothy, the Corinthians, and Paul's Way of Life in Christ	53
Day Two: I Remember	55
Day Three: His Own.	60
Day Four: Because I Know the One	65
Let No One Despise Him	71
Day Five: Left and Found	73

WEEK THREE

STRONG IN THE GRACE

Viewer Guide	78
Day One: Entangled.	81
We Believe	86
Day Two: The Boundless Word of God	88
Day Three: God-Approval	93
Day Four: Everyone and Anyone.	98
Paul's Use of Traditions	103
Day Five: Caught Alive	105

WEEK FOUR

DIFFICULT TIMES, DIFFICULT PEOPLE

Viewer Guide	110
Day One: In the Last Days	113
The Laying on of Hands, Part 1	117
Day Two: The Character Crash	119
Day Three: Strong-Willed Women	125
Day Four: But As For You	130
The Laying on of Hands, Part 2	136
Day Five: God-Breathed	139

WEEK FIVE

FULLFILL YOUR MINISTRY

Viewer Guide	144
Day One: Beyond Inconvenience	147
Things on My Mind, Part 1	153
Day Two: An Itch to Hear	155
Day Three: Every Last Drop	160
Day Four: A Pair of Wayfarers	165
Things on My Mind, Part 2	171
Day Five: But the Lord	173

SESSION SIX VIDEO

FACE TO FACE

Viewer Guide	178
Handwrite 2 Timothy	180
Epilogue Assignment	186
Endnotes	191

About the Authors



Beth Moore is a best-selling book and Bible study author and a dynamic teacher whose conferences take her across the globe. Beth lives in Houston, Texas, where she leads Living Proof Ministries with the purpose of encouraging and teaching women to know and love Jesus through the study of Scripture.

Beth and her husband, Keith, have two adult daughters and three delightful grandchildren. They are devoted to the local church and have the privilege of attending Bayou City Fellowship in Houston, Texas.

Her life is full of activity, but one commitment remains constant: counting all things but loss for the excellence of knowing Christ Jesus, the Lord (Phil. 3:8).

Melissa Moore has served as research and writing assistant to Beth Moore since earning her M.A. in Biblical Exegesis from Wheaton College in 2007. She has since received her Th.M. in New Testament from Columbia Theological Seminary. She currently resides in Houston, Texas, with a poorly behaved and not-so-suitable companion named Shadowfax the Weimaraner. When she is not working on a teaching or writing project with her mom, she enjoys working part-time on a M.A. in Biblical Languages at Houston Baptist University. She loves the arts, the outdoors, and all things related to Bible and theology.



About this Study

entrusted is designed for both interactive personal study and group discussion. Here are a few suggestions for making your time with the study more meaningful.

To enhance your learning and application of Scripture, the study is written in an interactive format. I encourage you to complete all of the written work in your workbook. This isn't just fill-in-the-blanks. The interactive questions represent the very places where we'd look together in Scripture as we shared a cup of French roast coffee together. Please don't let the word "homework" scare you. The Holy Spirit uses your efforts as you respond to the activities in your own words.

I so wish I could be personally present with you each week in your personal study time and in your group time. This interactive format provides the most personal contact possible until the time we can share that cup of coffee. Then I'll look forward to listening to you as you have graciously listened to me through all these studies. I pray that you will gain as much from this journey as I have. Thank you for the privilege to serve you.

This may be our first series together, and, if so, I pray with all of my heart that this in-depth study and others like it will fan a lifelong flame in your heart for God's Word. Perhaps we've studied together before and, if so, I'm thrilled to tell you that this one earned its own place in my heart. Each series from *A Woman's Heart: God's Dwelling Place* to this one has been used by God to accomplish a distinctive and lasting work in me. The mention of each name stirs up the remembrance of that prevailing revelation.

I won't tell you in advance what God worked in my life through this journey, because the fun of it for me is to process the material along the way with you. When I pen Week One, Day One of any study, I have no clearer idea where we are headed than you do right now. When you get to difficult material, you will see that I am struggling through it, too. When you're convicted, you can be pretty certain I'm squirming, too. I love the uncertainty of what's ahead as long as I'm in the security of God's hands. It's like driving a winding highway in a convertible for the very first time. I want to feel the wind in my face. If you do too, we're going to make good traveling partners.

As we have in the last two Bible studies, we are offering you options. Goodness knows we need a few of those amid frantic schedules and demanding roles.

You get to choose your own level of participation.

Level 1: *Participate in the video sessions only*

Through the years I've watched people drop out of weekly Bible study because they couldn't keep up with the homework. Don't think for a moment that if you can't do all of it, you're better off doing none of it. A shorter time in Scripture is far better than none at all. Watch the video sessions even if you can't get your homework assignments accomplished.

LEVEL 2: Participate in the video sessions
+ *do the weekly homework assignments*

Moving up to level 2 in which you meet with God on the pages of Scripture numerous times each week exponentially increases your experience. When you turn the last page, you will truly know 2 Timothy and the important circumstances surrounding Paul's final letter. If you've got the stamina to do the homework (and you do!), you've got it in you to view the sessions. Keep in mind that many of the larger themes are addressed in the sessions, so try your hardest to view the coinciding ones at the end of each week of homework.

LEVEL 3: Participate in the video sessions
+ do the weekly homework assignments
+ *handwrite 2 Timothy*

I'm really excited about this level! For the third time in more than 20 years of writing Bible studies, we've arrived at a book of the Bible short enough to invite this exercise. During Session One of this series, and in the homework that follows we'll set the context for the letter. Session Six video will wrap everything up with a final challenge. But in sessions Two through Five, and the corresponding weeks of homework, we'll dig into the actual letter of 2 Timothy. Each time we come to a new segment of the letter, I will ask you to read it and then handwrite it in the back of your Bible study book on the pages designed for this exercise. If you don't choose level 3, you'll simply read the portion—without a hint of self-condemnation, I pray. This option is simply available for those who want to take the next step to retain what they're learning.

LEVEL 4: Participate in the video sessions
+ do the weekly homework assignments
+ handwrite 2 Timothy
+ *read "Next Level with Melissa"*

You might say I'm particularly partial to this level since I'm her mother. I say that with a grin but, while that's true, the real reason we incorporated this level is because you—or people like you—asked for it. Many have written me after a series and asked how they could go even deeper in the material. We first responded to their request with Melissa's articles in *James: Mercy Triumphs*. She's back this time by popular demand.

Woodrow Wilson once said, "I not only use all the brains I have but all I can borrow."¹ Good advice, if you ask me; so once again, I've borrowed my daughter Melissa's brain. And it's a big one. She has far surpassed her mother in formal theological training and the use of original languages, so I've asked her to bring a more academic approach to several of our concepts each week. Please keep in mind that her portions are options and that, stylistically, they are exactly what I asked of her.

Melissa and I know up front that neither of our writings will suit everyone's tastes, but we partner with a deep and sincere desire to serve you more fully. I would gladly have added her name to the cover, but she asked that I refrain. In years past, my daughter Amanda was very involved in the Bible study process as my first reader and editor. These days she has her hands full as mom to my beloved grandchildren and as pastor's wife to a rapidly growing church in Houston. You can know that she joins Melissa and me in serving you through this series as your number one intercessor. We wrote and she prayed.

LEVEL 5: Participate in the video sessions

- + do the weekly homework assignments
- + handwrite 2 Timothy
- + read "Next Level with Melissa"
- + *memorize 2 Timothy*

Trying to picture some of your faces almost has me tickled. But don't blame me. Remember all those who kept asking for more? Blame them. Beloved, if you commit to all five of these levels, 2 Timothy will live in the marrow of your bones—probably for the rest of your life. You'll find a short tutorial on the *Entrusted* website (lifeway.com/entrusted) and in the DVD bonus material that may help you if you're interested in this level.

Needless to say, we're not recommending trying to memorize all of 2 Timothy in the five short weeks of this series. The best recommendation for setting your pace is whatever works.

Because God led me to take this challenge, in the process of writing this study I've recited the four chapters of 2 Timothy aloud more times than I can count. I'm not the only one who recited it as the study was underway. I was beside myself with delight when Mike Wakefield, my editor on this project, told me he was memorizing it, too. We have each loved Paul's final letter all the more because God embedded it in our hearts. Not one second you spend on Scripture memory is ever wasted. Think about doing it! Pray about it! Then, some of you, do it!

Okay, friend, which level seems the most doable for you right now?

1 2 3 4 5

I'm asking you up front because I'd like to challenge you to go one level above what seems reasonably attainable. If you're willing, stretch yourself one more level! If you're pretty sure you can reach level 1, try stretching yourself into level 2 and see what happens. All you overachievers, keep in mind that higher levels and harder work won't make God love you any more than He already does. Nor will memorizing the letter make us superior to someone else who can barely manage a few sessions. We are secure in Christ and acceptable to God through Him.

We have nothing to lose here but much Scripture to gain if we're game for a challenge. Do only what blesses and not what burdens.

I wish I had a way to express the depth of my gratitude for the privilege to walk with you through a study of Scripture. I was on a walk recently in the woods near our home and a wave of emotion overtook me as I absorbed the reality of another study coming to fruition. I said aloud to Jesus, "How could You be so kind to me? How could You have such grace? Why have You done this?" I will never be able to wrap my mind around His kind of love. His depth of mercy. Jesus pulled me out of tremendous bondage and despair. I come to you with no worthiness of my own but this I promise you, my friend: together we will pursue the One who is worthy of all the glory, honor, and praise the two of us can offer. Let's not wait another moment.

Introduction

Dear Fellow Traveler,

On a flight to Miami several months ago, I pulled two slender folders out of my briefcase containing a cross section of letters I'd received in previous weeks. Several of my team members oversee our ministry correspondence, but they keep me in the loop so I don't disconnect from the very people I yearn to serve. Detachment would stick my calling in a coffin and nail it shut. Like most people, I flourish in lively relationships and community, but spending copious hours alone is an occupational hazard all full-time writers have to accept. A simple letter can be like a long arm reaching into the vortex to pull a lonesome sanguine like me back to the sidewalk.

In this case, the sidewalk was flying through the air in a silver cylinder at an altitude of 30,000 feet. Soon I was swept into each sender's story, awed by the ways Jesus customized His signature across the snippets of their autobiographies. As I made my way to the bottom of the stack, I had a "wait a minute" moment. The thought occurred to me how many letters referenced specific ages.

I fanned them out on my tray table from the oldest to youngest and nearly wept.

Elsie was 82. She'd been involved in children's ministry at her church for 69 years. Try to wrap your mind around that kind of faithfulness. She let me know how much she loved studying the Bible and that she still had lots to learn. I knew the feeling. Angelee was turning 40. Jesus had taken her by surprise in the sacred pages and she'd fallen head over heels in love with Him. Courtney was 32. She'd given her heart to Jesus in the 8th grade and made a commitment to serve Him and to show His love to her own flesh and blood. She'd kept her commitment even at the tender age of 14 when her mother passed away. She let me know she'd soon finish up her doctoral work in the field of Biblical interpretation.

Wednesday was 21. She'd been a believer for a while but had never experienced anything particularly traumatic until two weeks earlier when her little brother was struck and killed by a car. God was carrying her through. She wanted me to know. Olivia was 15. She'd just been awarded first runner-up in a beauty pageant she'd endured with grace and integrity by keeping her darling head in the Book of Esther. Sarah was 13. She'd been in daily turmoil with all sorts of doubts and had bought herself the book, *Believing God*. The testimony in her young curly cursive of how God awakened her faith almost unraveled me.

Other writers didn't specify age but the descriptions of their seasons of life filled in the age gaps. Josh had been a pastor for 16 years. In the previous year his wife had forgiven him for a heartbreaking betrayal. Their lives were being sewn back together one stitch at a time. Chris had watched God bring his young bride back to the land of the living after a season of severe depression.

Their backdrops, settings, struggles, circumstances, and writing styles differed dramatically, but each letter, without exception, shared three gorgeously glaring denominators: *Jesus. Scripture. Transformation.*

The blood flows hot in my veins with an ever-intensifying belief in the epic fusion of those three. This is my passion. This is why I've continued to hang on tight to my desk and attempt to write Bible studies while life bucks like a bronco. This is why I have guts enough to say to anyone who will listen, *No matter who you are, where you've been, or what list of demands vies for your time, do whatever you have to do to get with Jesus and study the Scriptures.*

Because the words of Christ are spirit and life.

Because God sends forth His Word with accomplishing power.

Because the Holy Spirit can bring the Scriptures to life in any life.

Because those who let Scripture sink into their bones are transformed.

Because nothing renews our minds like the Spirit of Christ working through the Word of God.

Because God could say your name before He said, "Let there be light."

Because He's got a plan for you that you don't want to miss.

Because you matter on this planet.

And because right now, in this very season, He wanted you and me in this very Bible study. Welcome, my friend. Because Jesus is mighty, miraculous, and merciful, neither one of us will be the same when we turn the last page.

Beth Moore

Group Session One

WATCH THE VIDEO—DIVINE TRIANGULATION

INTRODUCTION

Though we won't find the younger man's name anywhere in sight, Paul's last letter to Timothy originates in Acts 14. This chapter will be our preoccupation today.

1. We will establish one enormous goal for our series:

_____ of God _____
on _____ in the _____
of _____.

2. Note the NIV wording of Acts 14:1. We are going to ask God from the beginning and throughout our series to blatantly _____
_____.

How should we communicate our faith?

_____ story
_____ story
_____ story

A big part of our effectiveness is our _____.

Ministry is the collective works God has called us to do in our lifetime upon this planet for _____ .

3. Walking with a _____ of effectiveness
_____ .

A launching challenge: Who among us is _____ to _____
the power of Jesus could _____
something that has been _____ of you _____ ?

4. We will deal with _____ of others
all _____ .

Be forewarned: Those _____ can as
_____ .

5. Five words for the journey:
_____ .

WEEK ONE

Divine
Triangulation



Day One

A TRAIL OF TWO CITIES

FLASH FORWARD: *Now the time had come ...* LUKE 1:57

The exact year circled the neighborhood of A.D. 30 with a circumference perhaps as wide as A.D. 33. The English word *thereabouts* seems embarrassingly weak-willed to attach to certain historical events of eternal proportions, but this side of the sky we're forced on occasion to embrace it. Our journey begins by wrapping our fingers around that circular band of time and stretching it into a scalene triangle connecting three diverse cities and three very different lives. History has a remarkable way of jumping to life when we give place and face to time. This will be our first task.

Scalene triangle: a triangle with three unequal sides.

FIRST, JERUSALEM. Circle Jerusalem on the map in the margin.

It's half past three in the afternoon in the dead center of the month of Nisan (March-April, according to our calendar). The thick crowd has slowly dispersed. All but one of His closest associates fled early on, most out of fear of guilt by association. Some spectators wandered away in weariness. It takes a long time to watch a person die like that. Perhaps others exited the scene motivated by eeriness, their sandals slapping the rocks with haste amid an ominous midday darkness cloaking the gleaming city of God. In a lightning-quick descent of maddening events, their master, teacher, and miracle worker had been arrested, tried, mocked, slapped, spit upon, and beaten with a blood lust that left Him almost beyond recognition. He was hammered to a cross, gasping for breath for six solid hours until He breathed His last.

And He'd let it happen, too. He'd given Himself over. For years He'd escaped and outwitted His haters. He'd slipped right through crowds. Why didn't He do it this time? He knew He was being betrayed. He'd said it that Thursday night at



supper, and yet He went exactly where His betrayer would know to find Him. Like He'd planned it. Like He'd done it on purpose. The kiss of death smacked the face of the Son of God. By the time the sun slid down the warm back of Jerusalem, His body would be stone cold in a hewn tomb, shut tight with a boulder.

SECOND, TARSUS. Circle Tarsus on the map on the previous page, and then draw a line between Tarsus and Jerusalem.

Over 350 miles north of Jerusalem, Hebrews who hadn't made the pilgrimage gathered beneath their roofs by sundown for the high Sabbath of Passover week. They were Jews of the Diaspora scattered far from their ancestral homeland centuries earlier by foreign conquerors and captors. The ground where these Judean seeds took root had not been unkind. The Jews who gathered around Sabbath meals that night were urbanites. This grand city of the Roman province of Cilicia sprouted from the fertile fields at the mouth of the river Cydnus where Alexander the Great once bathed. Fed by the snowy crests of the Taurus mountains north of the city, its crisp river waters spilled into the Mediterranean Sea about a dozen miles south. Hills, fields, a river, and sea: its latitude and longitude marked the map of Asia Minor as a mecca for commercial trade. Tarsus was the celebrated meeting place of Cleopatra and Mark Antony and, by A.D. 30, a land of poets and philosophers. In this city, scholarship was the trophy cheered by spectators and held high in the hands of winners in the competitive game of education. In these pursuits, Tarsus exceeded both Athens and Alexandria according to the ancient Greek geographer Strabo.¹

Jews in Tarsus were Jewish by blood and belief, Greek by common language, Roman by rule and, select ones, by citizenship.

The soles of the feet in Tarsus were embedded in what has been called “the heart of the Greco-Roman world.”² Give that statement pause until that heart gets a pulse. These were bilingual Jews, Hebrew by lineage, covenant, and practice, adapted to Greek and Roman culture. At the risk of overselling the point, they were Jewish by blood and belief, Greek by common language, Roman by rule and, select ones, by citizenship.

A notable young man, about 26 years old in our circle of time, knew his way around that city like the back of his hand. But make no mistake, he would have washed that hand the moment he got home to cleanse himself of unavoidable Gentile smudge. Born and reared on the lush soil of Tarsus, he'd no doubt dipped the sidelocks (Lev. 19:27) of his hair in both the Cydnus and the Great Sea. He'd been a small kid, but a bright one, and from no run-of-the-mill family in the Jewish quarter of the city. His father was a Pharisee and, likely, his father's father, too.

PHARISEE. What comes to mind when you hear that word?

“The term ‘Pharisee’ means ‘separated ones.’ Perhaps it means that they separated themselves from the masses or that they separated themselves to the study and interpretation of the law. ... They apparently were responsible for the transformation of Judaism from a religion of sacrifice to one of law.”³ Take a moment to let that sentence sink in. Unlike the Sadducees, they shoved a sharp elbow into the stomach of skepticism. “They accepted all the [Old Testament] as authoritative. They affirmed the reality of angels and demons. They had a firm belief in life beyond the grave and a resurrection of the body.”⁴

The Pharisees “tended toward political conservatism and religious liberalism. They had developed the oral law as a ‘fence around the Torah,’ which included detailed interpretations, applications, and amplifications of the written Scriptures to enable people to obey them properly.”⁵ To Pharisees, the way to God was obedience to the law and yet they “were the progressives of the day, willing to adopt new ideas and adapt the law to new situations.”⁶

These insights roll fresh color on the walls of the home where our young man of interest was raised. When his father named him Saul (from the Hebrew *Sha'uwl*, which means *asked for*⁷), few would have pondered why. Saul was the big and bold neon name in the small black print of the ancestral tribe of Benjamin. He was the first crowned head of Israel around 1000 B.C. Never mind that he didn't turn out so well. The Hebrew name was a badge of honor for this up-and-coming urbanite Jew, this native son of Tarsus. His Greco-Roman name was Paulos, meaning *small*. The designation would have no small place later in his life, but in the days his young, yet-to-callus feet clipped those Tarsus streets, it likely meant little more to him than a slight toward his height.

From what you know of Paul through Acts and his letters, how would you picture him?

According to the earliest physical description on record, Saul was “a man of small stature,” but he'd become a towering oak in New Testament history, known to Bible lovers as the apostle Paul. Before we crane our necks upward to the sprawling branches on that tree, we stare downward at his impressive roots.

In this first week, you will see both Saul and Paul used as names for the apostle. Saul was his Hebrew name, while Paul was his Roman name. The first mention of the Roman name is in Acts 13:9, at the beginning of Paul's ministry to the Gentiles.

“The earliest physical description we have of Paul comes from *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, a second-century apocryphal writing that describes the apostle as ‘a man of small stature, with a bald head and crooked legs, in a good state of body, with eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked, full of friendliness; for now he appeared like a man, and now he had the face of an angel.’ Although written many years after his death, these words may well reflect an authentic tradition about Paul's actual likeness.”⁸

Note the following two-part diagram. The cradle represents Saul's birth and infancy (estimated around A.D. 4). The second image represents him as a grown young man, most likely in his mid- to late-twenties at the time of Christ's crucifixion (around A.D. 30-33).

Search the references underneath the diagram and note every piece of biographical information pertaining to Saul before the crucifixion of Christ. Label each fact below the figures based on where they make the most sense to you in general chronology. In other words, would you relate the information to his birth/infancy (i.e., the city where he was born) or to who Saul had become by his young adulthood? Underline your phrases to indicate facts based on solid Scripture. Leave ample space between the two figures for the additions you will make toward the end of our lesson.



PHILIPPIANS 3:4-5 • GALATIANS 1:14 • ACTS 21:39 • ACTS 22:2-3 • ACTS 22:27 • ACTS 23:6 • ACTS 26:5

Peruse the biographical sketch you've drawn from Scripture and labeled on the diagram. Do any of those pieces of information carry fairly strong implications about what Saul might have been like?

For example, I wore wires on my teeth for 12 years of childhood. From that one biographical fact you could rightly assume my mouth was a mess. But if you further assumed I inherited that gruesome overbite, you'd be mistaken. The truth is, I tripped and fell face-first into a coffee table when running full

blast to my big brother when I was five. Drawing reasonable implications from factual information can wrap skin around a skeleton in a character study. Likewise, plausible theories can stick some muscle between the skin and bones and give history's corpse a moment's mobility. Both are valid aspects of a study experience as long as we keep them categorized and don't confuse them with facts.

With these rules of engagement in mind, if any of Saul's biographical facts on your diagram carry reasonably strong implications, draw a dotted line from them to a blank space in the margin and jot down the possibility followed by a question mark. The dotted line and question mark will differentiate what is theoretical from what you underlined earlier as Scriptural.

Done? Excellent job. Flip back to Acts 22:2-3 and read it once more. Did you catch Paul's reference in verse 3 to "this city" earlier? Follow your fingertip back to Acts 21:17 to identify what city he meant. There you will find the bold line between the first two cities in our triangle of three. There in the Holy City, 355 miles south of Tarsus, Saul's sandals found full traction.

Let's trace the path that took him there. Based on common Jewish practices in an orthodox home around the first century, picture this: Saul would have recited Deuteronomy 6:4-9 before the age the rest of us were in preschool. Through constant repetition of the *Shema*, the Jews reminded themselves of the chief aim of God's chosen people: instruction in the words and ways of *Hashem*, the One they called *The Name*. The little boy, Saul, would soon have begun memorizing Psalms 113-118. By five years of age, he would have begun reading Scripture. By six, he was under a rabbi's instruction in Tarsus. By ten, he was in the classroom throes of oral law. By thirteen, he'd come of age as a son of Israel and was responsible for knowing and living the 613 *mitzvot*, commandments derived from the Hebrew Bible. By fifteen, small Saul was in tall training to become a rabbi.

Return to your diagram and label these in the space between the cradle and the young man. Omit underlining them since they are not stated clearly in Scripture, but they are well established enough by historians of ancient Jewish tradition to forgo the question marks.

Finished? Okay. We have now arrived at the point when young Saul, around thirteen to fifteen years of age, having advanced far beyond his peers and slacked the jaws of his teachers, transfers to Jerusalem to ultimately study under the most renown rabbi of the day, Gamaliel. This is where we will pick up tomorrow.

Listen, Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is One. Love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. These words that I am giving you today are to be in your heart. Repeat them to your children. Talk about them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them be a symbol on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

DEUTERONOMY 6:4-9

Our own biographies are still underway. They are subtotals—bits and pieces of our stories vulnerable to recalculation with every next ordeal.

Do you feel like yours is under recalculation as you begin this series?
If so, in what way?

We are a
holy collision
of the natural
and supernatural,
sparks constantly
flying.

Our stories are woven inextricably and often indiscernibly into the thick of our DNA where, to our eyes, the line between what we decided and what was decided for us is a blur. We are a holy collision of the natural and supernatural, sparks constantly flying. We are complicated marvels of genetics, relationships, experience, circumstance, age, education, talent, giftedness, intellect, personality, memory, and physicality. We are dust and spirit handcrafted by a Creator, known and fully understood by Him alone.

So were the men and women on the pages of Scripture. Let's welcome the Holy Spirit to huff and puff warm life into the print and rescue us from thinking complicated thoughts of ourselves while making mannequins of the mortals in Scripture. This process begins for us with a young man named Saul, the bright star of his class, before he'd quite seen the light. So happy you came along.

As you close today, share what brings you to your side of this page.

On Reading Scripture

During my growing-up years around our house, Mom used to say, “The Bible isn’t just any book.” I like to think about the ways in which the Bible differs from other books—how it is a book, but how it far surpasses them all too. To me, the Bible is wild and mysterious. As we read Scripture, guided and enlightened by the Holy Spirit, we encounter Jesus Christ. I believe there is real power in engaging this text and that it uniquely energizes us for the work God has given us to do in the world.

Since you and I don’t know each other just yet, let me give you a little insight. Sometimes my adult self gives people the impression that I am a “natural student” (their words, not mine—that would be embarrassing!). Although I have, over time, made a decision to dedicate myself to being a lifelong student of Scripture, I don’t think it’s my nature at all.

I wasn’t a bookish kid. I studied for a test at intermittent stoplights while driving to school. Frankly, I preferred higher impact sorts of things. I was the lone girl playing kickball or home-run derby with the squirrely neighborhood boys. I won the “Miss Fitness” award in fifth grade. Reading wasn’t exactly the sport I was looking for. So, to set the record straight, I’m not a natural student at all. I am simply and utterly captivated by the Bible.

It is an absolute testimony to the awesomeness of Scripture that someone who hated Spanish and French as much as I did would spend the past decade learning Greek and Hebrew.

I have a vivid memory of the first time I sat down of my own volition with a Bible. It was during the summer of my fifteenth birthday, on a day when no one else was home except me. I remember the state of my heart that day. I was crushed. And not because someone else had crushed me. I had done something stupid. I realized, as much as my adolescent self could, my own capacity for destruction. I felt completely alone and ashamed. That day, I recalled the words of a verse that is pretty well known to most of us in the church: “You will

seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart” (Jer. 29:13, ESV). I wrote to God in my journal and told Him that I was seeking, whatever that meant, and I hoped to find Him, if He even existed.

Then I literally just opened up the Bible at random and pointed at a line. My best recollection is that my finger fell on some verses either in Numbers or Deuteronomy because I remember tassels being involved. All I can really say is that during the process of reading those few pages, something happened. I had an encounter with God. N. T. Wright suggests that Scripture “is one of the points where heaven and earth overlap and interlock.”¹ That is a beautiful thought, isn’t it? In those earliest days, reading the Bible was mostly about me; I had no sophisticated method. And there was a grace for it. At first I didn’t really know how the parts fit in with the whole, but I went back for more, time and time again. I felt like the Bible had this mysterious way of reading me and perhaps even changing me. I knew even then that I needed a lot of changing.

Sometimes we read the Bible because we’re desperate. We pick up the Psalms and read:

“If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me” (Ps. 139:9-10, ESV).

Invoking those words with the psalmist helps us get through the day, illuminating the darkness in front of us. But other days we pick up the Scriptures and read with just as much zeal purely because we’re part of the Bible’s grand narrative. The God we worship is the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Deborah, Isaiah, Jonah, Micah, Mary, Mary Magdalene, Jesus, Paul, Junia, Phoebe, and John, the beloved disciple. When we engage this book we begin to lift up our eyes and gaze at something cosmic God is doing that surpasses our own generation. His

work of redemption and renewal spans centuries and civilizations. When we read this text, we are called to play our part in the drama of redemption.

It’s worth stating that Christians don’t worship the Bible by any means, but we believe there is tremendous power in it. We believe it is the revelation of God. We read the Bible because we need an encounter with God; we need to hear His words. These days we are always reading words—scrolling Twitter, reading emails, text messages, and the pretty Instagram quotes. We want quick inspiration. Reading Scripture, however, is slower, quieter work. It takes time, patience, and attention, but if we’re looking to nourish our souls, nothing can compete with it.

Not long ago I was at a retreat where a well-known poet challenged us to memorize poems. Someone in the crowd asked him to explain why. He said, “So you will have them when you need them.” I get that. I feel the same way about Scripture. I am not talking about memorizing Scripture, but reading it. Really reading it. More importantly, allowing it to read us. Sometimes we don’t know Scripture has taken root in us until we realize, in light of a particular circumstance, it was there, written on our hearts, preparing us to navigate the moment. That particular word was alive in us and changed the way we acted or reacted in that impossible situation. It brought us hope in a moment of soul-shaking despair. We were also able to pass it along to someone else who needed it. And it impacts us in more subtle ways, too. We find we’re more content and satisfied than we were before, though our circumstances haven’t improved at all.

We are encountering Jesus when we read this text and over time, despite what we originally thought, we are making it; the Word of God is sustaining us.

Day Two

MEET THE TEACHER

FLASH FORWARD: *I am a Jewish man, born in Tarsus of Cilicia but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel and educated according to the strict view of our patriarchal law. Being zealous for God, just as all of you are today. ACTS 22:3*

We've dedicated Week One to constructing a scalene triangle between three different cities to connect three different lives in one loose circle of time.

How many cities have we accrued so far? _____

By the end of Day One, we established the first link between them.
What was it?

I've steered you wrong if I've left you picturing Saul's entire childhood consumed with religious training. Jewish fathers were also responsible for teaching their sons a viable trade to earn a living. To do otherwise, according to an ancient Jewish saying, was to train his son to be a thief.⁹

ACTS 18:3 PEGS SAUL'S TRADE. (Forgive me. I can't resist a pun to save my life.) What was his trade?

Tarsus was known all over Asia Minor for tents composed of ebony hides and woven coats of long-haired goats native to the Taurus mountains. Saul's tent making was fund-raising to support what he loved most. And what Saul loved most was studying, articulating, interpreting, reciting, instructing, and debating the Hebrew Scriptures and oral traditions. A prodigy of rumination, he could gnaw a scroll like a bone.

The eyes of the pupil would have been wide with wonder the first day of class with the great Gamaliel. The name of this acclaimed rabbi shows up twice in the New Testament, both times in the Book of Acts (5:34; 22:3). We saw the latter reference in our previous lesson straight from Paul's own mouth. Glance up at today's Flash Forward for a reminder. Let's camp on the first reference to him in Acts 5:34. For now, please read the one verse only, and, after we take a moment to applaud it, we'll go back and consider the context.

What can you unearth about Gamaliel from Acts 5:34 alone?

If your translation speaks of Gamaliel serving “in the council” but does not identify which one, the phrase refers to the Sanhedrin. Comprised of 71 elite men and chaired by the high priest, the Sanhedrin was the preeminent Jewish council in the first century A.D.¹⁰ That is an impressive pedigree, but the implication of his inclusion on the council throws Gamaliel into a league of his own: “The Sanhedrin included both of the main Jewish parties among its membership. Since the high priest presided, the Sadducean priestly party seems to have predominated, but some leading Pharisees also were members (Acts 5:34; 23:1-9).”¹¹

Circle the minority party in the previous quote. Was Gamaliel a Sadducee or a Pharisee?

According to Acts 5:34, which group held him in high esteem?

God be praised. Somebody put down your pen and give the man a hand. Throw some confetti. Gamaliel somehow managed to be respected by two completely different parties notoriously prone, as leaders often are, to rabid competition. We could use some Gamaliels on our religious landscape today and some prominent leaders with enough security and humility to honor one another even on different sides of issues.

A belief system that will not tolerate respectful debate and disagreement within its ranks is terrifying.

Social media has done an embarrassingly good job of capturing the snarling face of Christian sectarianism on camera. Worse yet, it holds a megaphone to its mouth. Few of us would argue against the right to practice faith and closest fellowship in churches where we’re most comfortable doctrinally or even stylistically in worship. Further, a belief system that will not tolerate respectful debate and disagreement within its ranks is terrifying. Rebuke can even be godly, but, according to Jesus, a public rebuke was the last resort, not the first retort, and was primarily for issues of sin, not variance of stands (Matt. 18:17). We are unspeakably privileged in our culture to have the microphone of social media put to our mouths to spread the gospel and great love of Jesus Christ. But many of our parties—I wish I meant the dancing kind—are so publicly slanderous of one another that we’ve compromised our

credibility and cut the legs out from under our table of fellowship. You and I could be part of propping that table back up. We don't have to have matching plates to sit at the same table as long as Christ is seated at the head. I tend to like having a person next to me with something different on her plate. Don't you? If we stare at it long enough, she might offer us a bite and who knows? We might come to appreciate a whole new taste at the broad and beautiful table of Jesus. If, on the other hand, something doesn't taste right on her plate, we'll know to keep our fork out of it.

Now let's widen the lens to the context around the first mention of Gamaliel.

READ ACTS 5:12-42. The segment isn't short but it's rich. Once you've read it, complete the following:

Who were the people arrested, imprisoned, and then threatened again by the Sanhedrin?

What had they been strictly charged not to do (v. 28)?

What was their response in verse 29?

Peter, in effect, switched sides of the courtroom and issued a countercharge to the Sanhedrin in verse 30. What was it?

How did the council react according to verse 33?

NOW FOCUS ENTIRELY UPON GAMALIEL. Review Acts 5:34-39. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you score his extemporaneous speech?

How did he build his case with the council members in verses 35-37?

In your own words, what was Gamaliel's counsel to his colleagues in verses 38-39?

The Q & A's you see sprinkled throughout the study were generated from a blog that I posted for the sake of gaining insight right before we taped the sessions. Here was my request: *Think about what you wish you and I could talk about if we could grab a Starbucks® together. Form it into a clear question and present it in a succinct blog comment to this post.* I was overwhelmed with the response. Praying you will be encouraged by these brief conversations.

Q & A

Carmen:

What's been the hardest thing for you to let go of?

Beth:

For many grueling years, the hardest thing for me to let go of was regret. I fixated on how deeply I regretted certain terribly consequential decisions in my past and I could not stop grieving my foolishness. My regret lingered many years beyond genuine repentance and finally became so oppressive that I begged Jesus to deliver me. It has been a lengthy process but I'm deeply grateful to no longer be in bondage to it.

Do you know a man you could picture in Gamaliel's shoes? A man with both courageous and careful speech who is respected even by those on opposing sides of multiple issues? Or, as a second option, if this were a scene in a movie, what actor would you handpick to play Gamaliel's role? Answer either question or both as a reminder that Gamaliel was not faceless.

Gamaliel's voice wasn't generic. It had pitch and cadence. His heart thundered in his chest as he stood to his feet and took command of the room. The hero in this scene was Saul's teacher. Saul sat at those very feet. Store that fact somewhere for keeps.

Keep in mind throughout our series that Saul and Jesus were contemporaries, though of very different geographical origins.

The events in Acts 5 take place before we are introduced to Saul but certainly not before he'd come to Jerusalem to sit under the teaching of Gamaliel. Keep in mind throughout our series that Saul and Jesus were contemporaries, though of very different geographical origins. Jesus was born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth, a small town in the hill country of Galilee hundreds of miles south of Tarsus. However, like most devout Jewish households in Israel, His family would have traveled to Jerusalem multiple times.

CHECK EXODUS 23:14-17. How often were the men of Israel summoned to "appear before the Lord GOD"?

List the occasions below. (And, if you were the kid in high school who couldn't resist the extra credit assignment, you can easily find out online what times of year those occasions occurred. If you do so, record them as well.)

-
-
-

These were the pilgrimage feasts and, once God established one city for His name and circled it with a crown, to "appear before the Lord GOD" (v. 17) meant showing up in Jerusalem.

Saul was younger than Jesus, perhaps by seven or eight years, but their age gap is no wider than that of many brothers. According to Acts 22:3, Saul was “brought up in [Jerusalem] at the feet of Gamaliel” and “educated” there. He would have been within those city walls for a number of years, at the very least throughout his rabbinical training. Later in the Book of Acts, his nephew is referenced in Jerusalem (23:16). Think how many times Jesus and Saul may have been within the same city walls at the same exact time. Don’t you find the thought fascinating? It piques my curiosity in all sorts of ways.

Does it rattle up any questions in your bones? List a few.

Keep that curiosity of yours kicking up dust until our next lesson. Under the teaching of Rabbi Jesus, curiosity is the shovel that turns an everyday class into an archaeological dig and it’s the canvas that turns a black and white scroll into a kaleidoscope. In Matthew 7:7-8, Jesus said, “Keep asking, and it will be given to you. Keep searching, and you will find. Keep knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who searches finds, and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.” Here’s the thing. You will not always find the answer to your question but you will find the better treasure God buried where He knew your curiosity would send you searching. Embrace the mystery.

All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Him.

COLOSSIANS 2:3

Day Three

WHERE WAS HE WHEN

FLASH FORWARD: *For I didn't think it was a good idea to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.* 1 CORINTHIANS 2:2

Where were you when _____?

Every generation gasping for air right now can fill in that blank several times over with events big enough to be known by anyone paying a whit of attention to world news. For my parents' generation, the blank was filled first by the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963 and, second, by Neil Armstrong's left foot stepping off the ladder of Apollo 11 and onto the moon. The year was 1969.

My generation's coming of age could fill the blank with Nixon's resignation over Watergate in 1974 and the death of Elvis Presley in 1977.

My firstborn, Amanda, and her friend Jenny were standing in front of our television in 1986 waiting for the afternoon kindergarten bus when a special report bellowed the news of the Challenger Space Shuttle explosion. I snatched the children into the kitchen and then stood in horror as the screen captured white ribbons of smoke curling like monstrous antennae against a cerulean sky. Eleven years later, I was in New Orleans in a convenience store parking lot on my way to speak at a church when news came over the radio that Princess Di was dead. You also remember exactly where you were when certain world-news events took place. Maybe it was 9/11 or the Boston Marathon Bombing. Whatever the event, that moment is cemented in your memory.

Go back to the question that began our lesson and fill in the blank with your most prominent example, and then answer the completed question in the margin. Add a second example and your whereabouts below it.

The popular unifier *where were you when?* didn't originate in the 20th century era of broadcast news. Actually, the Bible posed it first in what many scholars believe could well be its oldest book.

Look up Job 38:4. Who asked the question, who was addressed, and what was the occasion for the “where were you when”?

The glaring event that filled in the blank for the early church took place on a hill outside Jerusalem circa A.D. 30. The completed question: Where were you when Jesus was crucified?

That was hands-down my most pressing question for Saul of Tarsus at the end of our previous lesson. Did it make your list? So, where was Saul when Jesus was crucified? Was he in Jerusalem where Jesus was accused, tried, and condemned, then crucified just outside the city? Scripture offers no definitive answer. Therefore, at the end of this lesson and this lifetime, we still won't know, but let's follow a few trails and think in terms of likelihood.

We'll start with the yes-spectrum among scholars and theologians. Their views range all the way from “*of course* Saul was in Jerusalem when Jesus was crucified” to “most likely the man was in Jerusalem when Jesus was crucified.” Saul's own testimony of his lifestyle prior to his encounter with Christ offers substantial support for the yes-spectrum. As we documented on Day Two, he'd been “a Hebrew of Hebrews” (Phil. 3:5), a Pharisee, and a strict adherent of the law who'd made Jerusalem his second home. His practices after his conversion weigh heavily as well.

READ ACTS 20:16 FOR A PRIME EXAMPLE. Why didn't he stay in Ephesus?

The New King James rendering of Acts 18:20-21 is often cited as major support for the yes-spectrum: “When they asked him to stay a longer time with them, he did not consent, but took leave of them, saying, ‘I must by all means keep this coming feast in Jerusalem; but I will return again to you, God willing’” (NKJV). And he sailed from Ephesus.

If he still longed to keep the feasts in Jerusalem after his conversion when he was no longer bound to the law, imagine his devotion prior to his conversion when a Pharisee's adherence was paramount.

The Feast of Harvest in Exodus 23:16 is also called both the Feast of Weeks and Pentecost.

The question currently on the table is whether Saul was in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' death. The crucifixion of Christ took place during the Passover event. The Passover, also known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread, was the most prominent pilgrimage feast of all. For this reason, we could lean toward a yes.

Now let's back up to our starting point and take the other trail in support of the no-spectrum. Search the verses below and document both the occasion and the location mentioned either by Paul (post-conversion Saul) or in reference to him.

REFERENCE	OCCASION	PAUL'S LOCATION
Acts 20:5-6		
1 Corinthians 16:8-9		

Both of these feasts followed Saul's conversion to Christ so they aren't airtight evidences to support the possibility that Saul was away from Jerusalem on Passover circa A.D. 30. They do suggest, however, that, if he could not be in Jerusalem at the time of the feasts, his practice was to observe them wherever he was. This might not have been out of the box for him even prior to his encounter with Jesus.

Glance back at Day One to record the distance between Tarsus and Jerusalem.

Diaspora Jews planted woefully far from Jerusalem soil still practiced the grueling pilgrimage (Acts 2:9-11), but sometimes circumstances forced devotees to observe the feasts in their local communities. Was Saul perhaps back in Tarsus when the violent stir broke out in the city of God over Jesus? Or could he have been elsewhere?

I'll tell you why I'm probing. If Saul was in Jerusalem at the time of the trial, the public flogging, and the crucifixion, why didn't he make reference to being there in the copious ink of 13 letters or in one of his addresses recorded in Acts? Even if he'd somehow managed to be in the city and remain oblivious to it—a thought highly unlikely for a Pharisee of his caliber—why didn't he tell on himself? After his conversion, he was fixated on the cross of Christ.

What did he say to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 2:2?

Paul certainly made mention of witnessing Stephen's martyrdom (Acts 22:20).

And rightly so. Faith in Christ's work on the cross was and still remains our single saving grace. No voice in Scripture more loudly proclaims the gospel than Paul's, yet he never mentioned being in Jerusalem the afternoon the crucifixion occurred. His time line doesn't start circling like a vulture around the name of Jesus until Acts 7:58–8:3.

Read these six verses and record the events surrounding the first mention of Saul.

Now, glance at the next mention of him in Acts 9:1-2 and record his activities.

Faith in Christ's work on the cross was and still remains our single saving grace.

Wait a second. Do these sound to you like the actions of a devout student of the Rabbi Gamaliel whose cool head simmered down the entire Sanhedrin and spared the apostles' lives? Me either. Let me throw something out to you that I found fascinating. By the time Saul came of age as a young Pharisee, lines within the sect were drawn sharply between two dominant schools of thought: the Hillelites and the Shammaites. Hillel and Shammai were the two most influential teachers in Pharisaism during the reign of Herod the Great, just one generation prior to Saul's. In documentations in the Jewish Mishnah compiled around A.D. 200, "almost always Hillel is the 'lenient' one, and Shammai is the 'strict' one."¹²

If you're sufficiently caffeinated, you might jump to the same conclusion I would have: clearly, Saul was a Shammaite. But this is where the plot thickens. If he was, he bucked the ranks of his own primary teacher. Gamaliel was Hillel's grandson. That Gamaliel was a chip off the moderate old block is evident in his address to the Sanhedrin. It was Hillel who said, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation. Now go and learn."¹³ His school of thought, "broadly speaking, pursued a policy of 'live and let live.' Let the Herods and the Pilates ... rule the world—let them even rule Israel, politically—just as long as we Jews are allowed to study and practice Torah (the Jewish law) in peace. The Shammaites believed this wasn't good enough."¹⁴

So don't bother picturing Gamaliel's feet beside Saul's where garments of those stoning Stephen were stacked. Don't envision the face of the teacher nodding in tandem approval with his student's as Stephen's flesh was pummeled crimson and purple. The zeal that drove Saul of Tarsus to soon burst through doors, breathing threats and murder (Acts 9:1), to drag men and women to prison wasn't lit by the lamp on Gamaliel's desk. How on earth was the wick lit? All is conjecture but Saul wouldn't be the first hot-blooded student to cast off a gentle mentor's mantle at the first blush of revolution.

In his later testimonials, he makes no mention of being in Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion, yet, soon after, he is a leader of the pack in the persecution. All we can offer the silence is a scribbling theory, but Saul seems to me like a man making up for lost time. Like a man making up for the embarrassing transgression of missing out, perhaps, on the biggest story to hit Jerusalem in circa A.D. 30. His fellow Pharisees in the city would have been neck deep in the fray and maybe it wouldn't have been such a big deal had it fizzled out. But then those rumors spread like a plague that the blasphemer's body was missing from the tomb and, by Pentecost, the menacing handful following The Way had multiplied into thousands. No way were they getting away with that. Not on Saul's watch.

On the high road of that rabid zeal we land our lesson. Read Acts 9:1-9 and, if you've read it many times, try to read it with new eyes. If you're like me, some responsive thoughts are rolling around in your head as you raise your chin from that page. Record two of them as your conclusion today:

- 1.

- 2.

Last of all, as to one ripped from the womb, he appeared even to me.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:8¹⁵

Day Four

A BEELINE TO CITY THREE

FLASH FORWARD: *Then he went on to Derbe and Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a believing Jewish woman, but his father was a Greek. ACTS 16:1*

We've devoted our first week of study to a circle of time around A.D. 30 stretched into a scalene triangle connecting three cities and three key lives. Our first stop was Jerusalem where Jesus of Nazareth had been arrested, tried, and, His back whipped to shreds, forced to carry a criminal's cross outside the city walls. Nailed to that wood in public view for six gruesome hours, He'd just taken His last breath as we opened Day One. We then set our GPS 355 miles north to Asia Minor where we parked in Tarsus, the hometown of a brilliant young student of the Jewish dispersion named Saul, approximately seven years younger than Jesus. Surpassing his peers, Saul relocated to Jerusalem for an aspiring rabbi's Ivy League equivalent. During the years of Saul's study, the Galilean family of Jesus would have traversed in and out of the city on pilgrimage.

Fill in the names of our first two cities accordingly.

First, _____

Second, _____

Today we draw a line to the final city in our divine triangulation and establish the connection between the three lives that drive our five-week study. Travel north again from Jerusalem to Tarsus on your map. From Tarsus, head west, veering slightly northward through the Roman province of Cilicia into the region of Lycaonia in the province of Galatia. You'll need to hike over the Taurus mountains as part of your journey. Close to the 90-mile marker, you can stop in Derbe for a cup of good, strong *Türk kahvesi* (Turkish coffee) to shake your drowsiness. With the last sip, you hit the road, setting your sights about 35 miles northwest to your final destination, the city of Lystra.



“Derbe was a city in Lycaonia about 35 mi (60 km) southeast of Lystra. It was about 90 mi (145 km) from Tarsus.”¹⁶

They called the little guy Timothy, “a personal name meaning ‘honoring God.’”

Fill the name of the city in the blank:

third, _____.

In Lystra, you’re looking for the home of Eunice. You can’t assume you’ll find it in the Jewish quarter of Lystra like you could have found Saul’s residence in Tarsus. Eunice married a Gentile. To what degree this broke the heart of her mother, Lois, remains unknown to us, but to the elder woman’s credit, she did not shun her. Whether or not most Diaspora Jews in Lystra responded in kind also remains a mystery. If they were devout law-keepers, Eunice was, at best, coolly treated for her compromise. By the time a gust of wind on her way to market could betray her rounded tummy, she was one midwife away from the biggest complication of her eclectic wedding vows.

It was a boy. They called the little guy Timothy, “a personal name meaning ‘honoring God.’”¹⁷ In the event you’re smiling, I am, too. I love that Eunice might have hoped against hope he’d have a fighting chance to honor God despite coming from a union thought to dishonor Him.

This slice of information will find a significant place in Timothy’s biography: “The marriage of a Jewish woman to a non-Jew was considered a nonlegal marriage; and in all instances of nonlegal marriages, the lineage of the child was reckoned through the mother.”¹⁸

Not the dad. The mom.

READ GENESIS 17:9-14. What would have been the first step of obedience for a boy counted in the lineage of Abraham?

How serious was this command? Explain.

Store that information and we’ll loop back to it on Day Five.

The traditional date of Timothy’s birth was A.D. 17. However, if recent estimates of many Bible scholars are more accurate about Timothy’s age at certain key events in his story, he was born closer to our circle of time (A.D. 30-33). We will do the math in tomorrow’s lesson. Whether Timothy was a newborn, a young child, or not quite yet conceived, his mother would have been completely unaware of the spotless Lamb of God slain for the sins of the world in Jerusalem that fated Passover. All of us to one degree or another are, at first, oblivious to the fact that, one afternoon just outside the holy city, a sinless Savior gave His life, covering us under a blanket of blood to save our lives and cloak us in white.

She would not remain oblivious, nor would her son. If you joined us for our first video session, we’ve explored the events in Paul’s initial missionary

journey that first exposed Timothy and Eunice to the gospel of Christ. If not, please take a moment to read Acts 14:1-22. If you are already familiar with Paul's first journey to Lystra, proceed straight ahead to Acts 15:36-16:5 and complete the following:

What happened to a team of gospel laborers in Acts 15:37-39 and why?

REWIND PAUL'S STORY TO SHORTLY AFTER HIS CONVERSION BY READING ACTS 9:26-27. What significant part did Barnabas play?

READ ACTS 13:1-3. How did the two men end up officially serving together?

Two immensely devoted servants of Jesus, godly men, who'd shared miles of territory, thousands of conversations, innumerable joys, harrowing close calls, near-deaths, divine wonders, and God only knows how many hours in prayer, suddenly shot apart like shrapnel in an explosive argument. Through the power of the living Christ, they'd scaled insurmountable obstacles elbow-to-elbow but they couldn't survive disparity over the cousin of Barnabas (Col. 4:10). One of the baffling elements of human relationships is how little it can take to plummet from such a hard-earned, fought-for summit. We stuck together through all of that and we're going to fall apart over this? I have a strong feeling you can relate on some level to what happened between Paul and Barnabas. I can, too.

*Sharp disagreement is the English translation of the Greek *paroxysmos* (Acts 15:39).*

Share your story.

If you haven't done so in your previous answer, focus specifically on how one of your own relationships was compromised by differences of opinion on a third person. Share to the degree you feel comfortable.

Make that third person your own flesh and blood and the stakes shoot sky high. I don't know about you but I'm grateful God saw fit to weave this part of their story into the fabric of Scripture because torn relationships happen to us, too, and they are deeply painful. We'd like to think mutual love for Jesus inoculates us against a falling out of this sort, but we are still so vulnerably human. Scripture never says who was right or wrong in this case. Perhaps God took neither side. That's the beauty of the cross anyway. No human ax can split its wood. Even when flesh tears, Jesus is indivisible and seamless, like the tunic snatched by the soldiers who crucified Him. He can be grieved but He can't be ripped to shreds by relationships and parceled piecemeal between

We'd like to think mutual love for Jesus inoculates us against a falling out of this sort, but we are still so vulnerably human.

two parties. No judge on earth can limit His visitation rights. Where He goes, He goes in one piece. He is always and only whole. That day when Barnabas and Mark sailed away to Cyprus, Christ went fully with them. And, when Paul and Silas departed, He also went wholly with them.

Check your map on the inside back cover and record which directions on a compass Barnabas and Paul went (Acts 15:39-41).

Barnabas:

Paul:

If an indivisible Savior on an indestructible cross is the beauty in the ugliness of division, this is surely the redemption: what flesh had divided, the Spirit multiplied. One ministry team turned into two. You and I both know it doesn't always happen that way. It takes cooperation. We can stunt God's redemptive work in our midst with our bitterness, unforgiveness, slander, blame, chronic regret, and unresolved guilt. Or we can go face down and beg God in our fractures to do something bigger with the broken pieces than He might have done with the whole.

We're left to wonder all sorts of things. How long did Paul and Barnabas harbor negative emotions? How did each process the breakage? Did one talk incessantly about it to anyone who'd listen? Did the other refuse to speak of it, almost like none of it ever happened? Did observers take sides? Did Paul and Barnabas miss one another or were they each easily replaced?

In our yearnings for significance and some semblance of uniqueness, none of us wants to feel easily replaced. Have you ever felt that you were? If so, share as much as you are willing in the margin.

Humans are not
one-size-fits-all.

Humans are not one-size-fits-all. For one human being to perfectly replace another, leaving no lacks, gaps, or empty edges, somebody gets dehumanized. Only compromised hearts are no worse for the wear in the wake of relational carnage. Healthy skin scars when it's torn. That's the way we were made. The wonder of long-term relationships is that fragile pieces prone to part instead hold fast. Don't take them for granted. Marvel over the miracle of long-time loves and friendships. I write these words with a very tender heart the day after my thirty-seventh wedding anniversary.

We have no facts to fill in the blanks of Acts 15:39 but we may have one little hint that speaks above a whisper. The hole Barnabas left in the life of Paul was so deep, so wide, it left room enough for two: Silas and a young half-breed named Timothy.

Theology: A Collective Struggle

Whether you're joining us with a group or going solo with this study, I'm happy you're here. In my first article I shared a bit about my experience reading Scripture. The time I spend alone reading Scripture is sacred to me and essential to my life. I intend for it to stay that way until the day I die. But intellectual community is also necessary for me. I need people who will talk with me about the theological ideas I am processing and who will share with me the ideas they're processing, too. I need people who will theologially wrestle with me and disagree with me and push me to see things from a different perspective. I need people to affirm that my thoughts aren't insane or heretical or just plain silly. Thanks be to God, I have a few of these people in my life. I can honestly say that Mom is my primary dialogue partner. When we're together we usually talk Bible and theology at some point and we are together often. Also, it's common to receive a text from her by 7:30 a.m. that says something like, "I can't wait to tell you what I am learning about the Widow of Nain!"

In 2012, while reading Benjamin Myers' excellent book on the theology of Rowan Williams, I came across these unforgettable sentences:

"Theology ... is not a private table for one but a rowdy banquet of those who gather, famished and thirsty, around Christ. The lonely work of reading and writing is not yet theology but only its preparation. Theology happens wherever we are drawn together into the congenial and annoying labour of conversing, listening, and disputing—in short, where we are drawn into a collective struggle for truthful speech."²

When I read those words for the first time, I must have sighed loudly enough for everyone in my building to hear.

Studying is necessary but the theological task is not complete until our private readings have joined "a collective struggle for truthful speech."

And this struggle involves all of us who are united in Christ. Theology is not just for the guy with the theology degree who wears tweed and smokes a cigar. You, yes you, are part of this process. You don't have to do all the talking, but your voice needs to be heard. You might not get all the jargon yet but you need to enter the conversation. We need the teachers, yes, but we need the beginners, too, and everyone in between.

You know, we may especially need the beginners. For people like me, who were exposed to Scripture from infancy, there is a danger of over-familiarity. Too often we assume we already

know what the Bible says or means. Or, we are so familiar with certain language that we simply stop noticing its beauty. George Milligan said it best: “We know how our very familiarity with Scriptural language is apt to blind us to its full significance.”³ One of the best examples of this is the word *gospel*. A lot of us have heard this word our whole lives but we could not coherently explain its true meaning to someone if they paid us to.

Frequently a new reader of the Bible is able to point out something we have never seen before about the most common word or phrase.

Many people I know, women in particular, are suspicious of theological conversation. Mean-spirited people who use Scripture as a weapon have turned off a lot of us at some point along the way. Most of us know “that guy.” You know, the one who stands in line after Sunday’s sermon with his Greek New Testament delightfully waiting to show the preacher where he got it dreadfully wrong. This sort of thing has understandably made us a little shy about or disinterested in theological conversation. But there is a better way to discuss theology and that better way is usually around a table. That’s why I so appreciate these words:

“We don’t come to the table to fight or to defend. We don’t come to prove or to conquer, to draw lines in the sand or to stir up trouble. We come to the table because our hunger brings us there. We come with a need, with fragility, with an admission of our humanity. The table is the great equalizer, the level playing field many of us have been looking everywhere for. The table is the place where the doing stops, the trying stops, the masks are removed, and we allow ourselves to be nourished, like children. We allow someone else to meet our need. In a world that prides people on not having needs, on going longer and faster, on going without, on powering through, the table is a place of

safety and rest and humanity, where we are allowed to be as fragile as we feel. If the home is a body, the table is the heart, the beating center, the sustainer of life and health.”⁴

This is the kind of place we need when we’re talking about ideas that really matter to us. Some people don’t believe in talking religion or politics at the table, but what better place would there be as long as the people at the table are mutually dedicated to a posture of humility? Part of caring about something deeply is opening oneself up to vulnerability.

One of my best memories from Bible study comes from a few years ago when I was in a group of about ten. It’s not a coincidence that we all gathered in a breakfast room around a big farm table covered with easy casual food and coffee mugs. I was co-leading the group with a friend and one of the girls in our group disagreed with most everything I suggested. This caused some awkward moments. If my position was far right, she was far left, or vice versa, on whatever subject we were discussing. She didn’t disagree with me just to be argumentative. She had her reasons. But she cared enough about the material to talk about it. I grew to greatly appreciate her as she often pushed me to my intellectual limits. Sometimes I ended up moving closer to her perspective and other times I ended up disagreeing with her even more firmly, refining and solidifying my initial arguments. In the end, she made me a better reader of the Bible. I think of her often and fondly. I am not really suggesting that all of our Bible study groups should meet around a dinner table, though I am glad some of them do.

Mostly I just hope you have a few human beings you can be vulnerable with, process with, talk eye to eye with about Scripture, theology, and ideas that matter to you most without fear of ridicule or rejection. I find that I do that best with my people around a table.

Day Five

A NEW SON AND A CIRCUMCISION

FLASH FORWARD: *But you know his proven character, because he has served with me in the gospel ministry like a son with a father.* PHILIPPIANS 2:22

Like you perhaps, I'm a thinker. Well, maybe I'm more of an over-thinker. In fact, if life is going too fast and I don't get time to myself to mull over recent events or conversations or shared experiences, where they fit and if and how they have meaning, I start getting grouchy. It's the meditation that brings home the satisfaction to me. An experience is left hanging until I've gathered it up in my thoughts, mulled it over, then laid it, if it begs a place, on an open page of Scripture.

I've come to believe there is a divine plan, an orchestration of events, opportunities, and encounters, not only historically and eschatologically regarding the people of God but for each person of God individually. In the blinding ambush of the present, so much that happens in our lives seems random. However, retrospect helps us see those happenings through the lens of order, which may reveal something shocking. Ink splotches start to form edges and the edges start to look like puzzle pieces, and, lo and behold, a handful of them actually fit. It's far from a comprehensive landscape, but often all it takes for us to hang in there is the merest hint that something means something.

I often think about what I would have missed had my path been one straight line from A to B and B to C, rather than a sharp turn here and a soft veer there. With every curve and corner God was sketching unforeseen triangles between Jesus, me, and a handful of unrelated others. Second only to Scripture, God has used and continues to use key people to shape the phases of my calling. Key, not because they're superior to others, but because God uses them to unlock something in me that proves crucial or stunningly directional in the next season. Don't miss the present tense in the phrase *continues to use*. Callings are organic just like the people God uses to invest in them. To decide at 25 that we know exactly what this thing is supposed to look like is to set ourselves up for failure, faithlessness, and boredom and to miss some of the most meaningful relationships of our lives. Don't fix your feet in concrete. Keep moving and savor the fellow sojourners God deposits along your path, remembering to look back every now and then. A purposeful glance in the rearview mirror will clearly show how desperately we needed what somebody brought us.

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So, what does all this mulling-over have to do with Jesus, Paul, and Timothy? Well, everything. What if Paul had shut down after the falling out with Barnabas? Or, what if he'd decided to keep everything strictly professional and to forgo all things personal? What if he'd bought into staying ahead of the game by withholding his heart? Or what if he'd played "tick tock, the game is locked" and refused to make room in his life for anyone new? Or, what if he'd decided Silas was the only companion he needed? Or—humor me here a moment—what if Silas had gotten all pouty and jealous and Paul had pandered to the codependency?

READ PHILIPPIANS 2:19-24 CAREFULLY. List exactly what Paul would have missed.

A relationship can either be so good we make no room for another or so bad we refuse to take a second risk.

What if the next person on your path is meant to become one of the most important people in your entire journey? One of the very dearest? Most influential? What if he or she is the extension of God's index finger pointing you that way? Here's the scary part: the biggest obstacle we have to our next relationship may well be our previous relationship. This could be true whether our last relationship proved fabulous and satisfying or disastrous and terrifying. A relationship can either be so good we make no room for another or so bad we refuse to take a second risk. Our last loss can forfeit our next gain. A nightmare can kill our lifelong dream.

The word "triangulation" has met us at the door all five days this week. Perhaps seeing it each day has made your skin crawl, because you've experienced the negative side of it. You've encountered triads of people in which one person is detrimental to the relationship between the other two. So have I. It's enough to unsettle any of us. Connectedness has too important a place in Christian theology for the enemy not to attempt to counterfeit it with disastrous triangulations. If he can't ensnare us then he'll try to scare us. When the pen is in the hand of God, however, and He's the one connecting the dots and drawing triangles, mutual joys abound, missing pieces are found, and a network emerges for the sake of the gospel.

Of course, that doesn't mean it's all fun and games. Adjustments often need to be made and some of them are painful. Take Timothy, for instance.

REREAD ACTS 16:1-5. What was the first thing Paul insisted he do and why?

Many students and scholars of Paul's letters through the centuries have found his insistence on Timothy's circumcision intriguing if not baffling. After all, he profusely opposed believers in Christ being forced under the yoke of the Old Testament law.

TAKE THE TIME TO READ ALL 21 VERSES OF GALATIANS 2, AND THEN COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING:

Who had also accompanied Paul according to Galatians 2:3?

Give Titus 1:4 a quick glance. How did Paul describe him?

Yet, how did his inclusion with Paul recorded in Galatians 2:3 differ from Timothy's?

Carefully compare Galatians 2:3 and Acts 16:1. Record any other technical differences between the two young men.

Why did Paul confront Cephas (another name for the apostle Peter) (Gal. 2:11-13)?

How can you know for certain this conflict preceded Timothy accompanying Paul? (Hint: Gal. 2:13)

On Day Four you read God's command to Abraham regarding circumcision in Genesis 17:9-14.

When were boys supposed to be circumcised (Gen. 17:12)?

Timothy was a long way from infancy in Acts 16:3. Why do you suppose he hadn't been circumcised (Acts 16:1,3)?

Timothy's precise age when Paul circumcised him is unknown but we can hover over the neighborhood based on a few indications. Our series is based on Paul's second letter to Timothy but we will often cross-reference the first letter he wrote him.

Q & A

Ruth:

I'm wondering, have you gone through seasons in ministry where you felt devalued and opposed and it seemed easier to quit and save yourself the conflict?

Beth:

Can you turn up the volume really loud for this answer please? YES! Sometimes God used those things to prepare me for a move or a major transition, almost as if He were weaning me off my attachment to an environment that had served its purpose in my life. He never fails to put insult, conflict, and opposition to some kind of use. Sometimes He uses them to show me I'm in the wrong or to simply test my perseverance, humble me, and starve my approval addiction. The reason I haven't quit serving in 30 years truly has nothing to do with me and everything to do with Jesus. In all the ups and downs, tears and fears, conflicts and disappointments, Jesus was still infinitely better than the circumstances were hard. He was just worthy of hanging in there for.

What indication did Paul give about Timothy's age in 1 Timothy 4:12?

“Young” gets younger and younger as our postmodern culture grows more and more youth-obsessed. To the ancients, however, the term applied all the way up to the age of forty. See there? In the course of one sentence of Bible study, some of you just hopped in a time machine and, voilà, you were young again. According to Irenaeus, one of the early church fathers, “The first stage of life embraces thirty years, and that this extends onwards to the fortieth year, everyone will admit.”¹⁹ At the time Paul wrote the first letter to Timothy, referring to him as “young,” Timothy was serving as leader of the church in Ephesus.

Luke called Paul a “young man” (Acts 7:58) when he was of the same age range as Timothy [in 1 Timothy 4:12]. Timothy's age, in his thirties (the estimate most would agree on), might seem to be a handicap in the Ephesian community, where some of the other believers and other elders are older.²⁰

Okay, let's do the math. First Timothy was written between A.D. 62 and 64. Scholars estimate that Timothy joined Paul approximately A.D. 49 (Acts 16:1). If Timothy was in his thirties when 1 Timothy was written in 62-64, subtract about 13 years and you have a young man hovering somewhere around 20 years old when he joined Paul. Don't go swearing by it though. He could have been as young as fifteen. Jewish boys entered manhood with adolescence and Timothy's parents could conceivably have sent him off with a hug and a sack lunch by that time. Here's a firm grasp of the obvious: the man considered “young” in 1 Timothy 4:12 was very young in Acts 16:1. In all the subtraction, don't miss the fine impression. As young as he was, “the brothers in Lystra and Iconium” already “spoke highly of him” (Acts 16:2). By late adolescence, that young half-breed's godly reputation left footprints all over Lystra then marched all the way to Iconium.

Many of us have walked onto the path of our divine calling with a wounding. Perhaps it's time we quit thinking that it's accidental.

We'd be tempted to say Timothy hit the ground running on his missionary journey if not for that circumcision. Chances are, he limped a little, a gait similar to his forefather Jacob who got to embrace his new God-given identity with his hip popped out of socket (Gen. 32:25-28). Many of us have walked onto the path of our divine calling with a wounding. Perhaps it's time we quit thinking that it's accidental.

Imagine Titus hearing about Timothy's induction into ministry. Don't you know he was immediately relieved to be full-blood Greek? You see, this was the line in the sand drawn by the flint knife of Paul: Timothy was considered a Jew because his mother was Jewish. If he were uncircumcised, he'd pose a stumbling block to virtually every Jew he and Paul would encounter for the

sake of the gospel. The Jerusalem Conference recorded in Acts 15 had already landed a decision regarding Gentile converts:

Gentiles would not be required to become Jews in order to be Christians. The converse was also true: Jews would not be required to abandon their Jewishness in order to become Christians. There is absolutely no evidence that Paul ever asked Jews to abandon circumcision as their mark of membership in God's covenant people ... Paul always worked through the Jewish synagogues where possible. To have had a member of his entourage be of Jewish lineage and yet uncircumcised would have hampered his effectiveness among the Jews. It was at the very least a matter of missionary strategy to circumcise Timothy (1 Cor 9:20). It may have been much more. Paul never abandoned his own Jewish heritage. He may well have wanted Timothy to be true to his (cf. Rom 3:1f.).²¹

You've been called to a missionary journey of your own.

Good job this week, student of Scripture. I hope the journeys of Paul and Timothy are causing you to think about yours. After all, you've been called to a missionary journey of your own. During our five weeks together, we will work on documenting ours through parallels to Paul and Timothy's.

Our first step involves the keys below. They represent key people who have been used by God to unlock something that turned out to be crucial on the path of your divine calling. You may be too new to the faith to list as many as five, so please feel no pressure to do so. Just list the ones who have intersected your journey so far.

Write each name beside a key. What did God unlock in you through each key person? Share in the space provided.



I'll see you in the Session Two video!