

FOCUS<sup>ON</sup> THE FAMILY  
PRESENTS

# RVL

## DISCIPLESHIP™

THE STUDY

## SEASON 2

A GROUP STUDY GUIDE

Text by Brittany Grooters  
Design by Brooke Pennington

PARTICIPANT GUIDE

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*RVL Discipleship: The Study, Season 2*

*Participant Guide*

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# INTRODUCTION

*Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.*

*1 John 2:6*



In Western culture, the “living in Him” part isn’t necessarily the challenge.

We tend to think of abiding with Christ as a personal endeavor. It looks like forming individual habits of Bible reading and study. It includes spending regular time in prayer and paying attention to the Holy Spirit. It might extend to our family routines, participating in these activities together on occasion, and teaching our kids to do similarly. These are wonderful habits, and I hope you practice them.

But we generally think of “living in Him” as a form of self-care, a private code of discipline that nourishes our souls and protects our mental health. Our spiritual life becomes largely self-focused, a metaphorical shaker bottle of grass-fed, organic protein powder for our souls. Our culture makes it just a little too easy to form a solitary spiritual life, journaling our prayers from the safety of a nice house and privately thanking God that we’re not like those unbelievers who can’t seem to get their lives together.

Prioritizing our personal relationship with Jesus is crucial, and these individual habits are good and necessary. But as we are beginning to discover, it’s not enough to think of our faith as inward improvement. A disciple is not just someone who is “saved”—who believes in Jesus privately. A disciple is someone who is actively participating in the mission; someone who is willing to walk as Jesus walked.

In Western culture, it’s the *living like Jesus did* part that really feels like a challenge.

In *RVL Discipleship: The Study*, we are exploring this idea of discipleship through the lens of its original definition in Scripture. What did it mean to be a disciple of Jesus back then, and what does that mean for us today? This study is organized into four seasons, each building on the last as we explore how to walk the path God has set before us.

The seasons are organized like this:

**SEASON 1** | Jesus’ original disciples really *knew* their Bible. As modern-day followers of Jesus, it is vitally important that we value Scripture in the same way. Season 1 of *The Study* outlines how we are meant to interact with the Text: 1) approaching it from the context in which it was written; 2) exploring how Jesus used the Scriptures in His teaching; 3) understanding how His followers were meant to be changed by what they learned; and 4) identifying the major paradigm that ties the whole Bible together.

**SEASON 2** | Discipleship was formalized with the rise of rabbis in Jewish culture, but the concept really started much earlier than that. This idea of knowing God's path and faithfully walking in it began when He called Israel out of Egypt, setting them apart as a kingdom of priests to show the rest of the world what He was like. Building on the tools and central themes from the first season, season 2 of *The Study* explores the roots of discipleship, examining how God trained and established the nation of Israel in preparation for Jesus' ministry to come.

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

**SEASON 4** | What did it mean to be the disciple of a rabbi in Jesus' day? How did someone become a disciple, and what were they meant to do? The fourth and final season of *The Study* focuses on the practical role of a rabbi's followers in the first century, unpacking cultural and scriptural implications and applying them to our lives as modern-day followers of Jesus

We concluded season 1 by recognizing that a disciple is someone who joins the mission God has had since the very beginning: to bring *shalom* to the chaos of a broken world. Season 2 will build upon this by examining how God trained Israel to join that mission as His first disciple. Coming out of Egypt, how would they have understood their relationship to God? How had He been unfolding His story, even with their ancestors? What cultural and spiritual building blocks were in place by the time Jesus began His ministry? And what does all of this have to do with us today?

If we truly want to be disciples of Jesus, we must learn how to live as He did. God began this training with Israel when He first called their ancestors out of Babel, long before Jesus was born. With this as our lens, let's jump into season 2, learning from Israel's experience as we discover how to walk as Jesus walked.

### **Should I start *The Study* in Season 2?**

If you haven't gone through season 1 yet, you should!

Each individual season presents valuable material about discipleship, so if you're just joining the series here in season 2, there is plenty to benefit from. However, each of the four seasons is designed to build upon the previous material. You will find you get the most out of this study by working through the episodes in order from the beginning.

That said, if you're part of a group that's ready to begin season 2, don't quit! You can certainly start here. Consider watching through the season 1 videos on your own in between group meetings, just to make sure you don't miss out.



# HOW TO USE THIS PARTICIPANT GUIDE

This Participant Guide for season 2 of *The Study* is organized into ten **episode guides**, each of which corresponds to a video. Each episode guide is broken up into the following movements:

**The Shema** | (*optional*) Groups may choose to begin each meeting by reciting the *Shema* together, as a reminder of what we are committing to. Read “The Words of the *Shema*” section in the next few pages to refresh your memory on what we learned about the *Shema* in season 1.

**Introduction** | Groups are encouraged to read this aloud together, either choosing one reader or taking it in turns.

**Talk about It** | To prepare for the video lesson, groups will discuss one simple conversation starter in response to the introduction.

**Watch** | The video episode will be viewed as a group, using the provided outline to take individual notes.

**Video Discussion** | After the video episode, groups will use discussion questions to dig deeper into the content.

**To Wrap It Up** | Just like the introduction, this conclusion should be read aloud together.

**End in Prayer** | End each meeting by praying for one another, making use of the prayer prompts if your group finds them helpful.

**PS** | (*optional*) Each episode guide includes a PS section, which is full of additional material to read and respond to on your own between meetings.

## Can I go through season 2 on my own?

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

# THE WORDS OF THE SHEMA

## What is it?

The words of this ancient Jewish prayer first show up in Deuteronomy 6, as Moses encourages the Israelites to keep God's commands when they enter the Promised Land:

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is **one**.  
Love the Lord your God with all your **heart** and  
with all your **soul** and with all your **strength**.  
Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (emphasis added)*



We see throughout the Hebrew text (the Old Testament) that sometimes Israel did a great job with this—and sometimes they did the exact opposite. By the time of Jesus, religious Jews were determined to get it right, to be as faithful as humanly possible to every word that came from the Lord's mouth. With the pressure to worship the gods of Greece and Rome ever increasing, the *Shema* became a sort of pledge of allegiance, an expression of Israel's mission. It was recited first thing in the morning, last thing at night, and many times in between as a reminder to be "all in."

This practice continues among religious Jews to this day—and they don't like saying it alone. Recognizing the power of accountability, the *Shema* is often recited in groups as a reminder that people need each other.

## What does this have to do with discipleship?

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

*"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."  
Mark 12:29-31 (emphasis added)*





In season 1, we learned that the Hebrew word *shema* means “to hear and obey accordingly.” For this study, we use the *Shema* prayer in the same way as the Jews of Jesus’ day: a loyalty oath that reminds us to be “all in” to the mission of God as His disciples. Groups have the option to recite it together at the beginning of each meeting, reminding themselves that we aren’t meant to do this alone. We recite it in Hebrew to remember it was relevant for God’s people thousands of years ago. Then, we recite it in English to acknowledge it is just as relevant for us today.

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

### **HEBREW**

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

### **ENGLISH**

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





## EPISODE 1

# THE FATHER'S HOUSE

*My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?*

*John 14:2*



# THE SHEMA

To refresh your memory about what the Shema is and why we say it, jump back to “The Words of the Shema” section just before this episode guide.

## ON YOUR OWN

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

## TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English, together as a group.

### HEBREW

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

### ENGLISH

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

# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to season 2 of *RVL Discipleship: The Study*! As we consider what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, let's do a quick recap of what we've learned so far.

We spent season 1 building a foundation for how Jesus' original followers would have understood discipleship. We recognized the high importance the Jews placed on knowing their Bible, and we outlined how we are meant to approach the text. We built a toolkit of ways to read the Bible from the context in which it was written, explored how Jesus used Scripture in His teaching, and understood how His followers were meant to be changed by what they experienced with their rabbi.

We wrapped up season 1 by looking at the central thread of Scripture, the paradigm that ties the whole Bible together. Out of *tohu v'vohu*—the Hebrew phrase meaning chaos, disorder, dysfunction, and meaninglessness—God created the universe to work in perfect *shalom*. We learned that *shalom* means more than simply peace: It's perfect harmony, balance, purpose, meaning, and joy. It is a reflection of God's own character. God created human beings to be His partners in cultivating that *shalom* in creation. They sinned, and chaos began to creep back into everything God had made. But His mission from the beginning was to restore *shalom*—and He wanted the same human beings who messed it up in the first place to be His partners.

As we begin season 2, all this begs the question: How can a people who are just as susceptible to chaos as the rest of creation still live as God's partner? How can someone who is broken help others who are also broken? God would have to do something to restore human beings, to atone for their chaos and equip them to join His story once more. Let's look at how God would begin to build a people who could become His first disciples.

# TALK ABOUT IT

Your group may have gone through season 1 together, or perhaps you are jumping straight into season 2. You may all know one another well, or there may be new faces seated around you. Begin this first meeting by (re)introducing yourselves! Share a few details about where you are in your faith journey and why you decided to join season 2 of *RVL Discipleship*. What are you hoping to take away from this study?

# WATCH THE VIDEO

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

*Ga'al* means:

*Beth ab* means:

Details about the *beth ab*:

Four groups of people who would be disconnected from the *beth ab*:

Other notes:



# VIDEO DISCUSSION

## QUESTION 1

---

When you think about the metaphor of the *beth ab*, it's probably pretty easy to picture God as the patriarch. In what role do you most often see yourself—as the marginalized person who needs redemption or as a member of the family? Why is that?

## QUESTION 2

---

When we think of the marginalized in a modern context, this includes both people who have strayed from their relationship with God and people who have never truly known Him. Who are the marginalized in our culture? What groups do you observe feeling rejected by the church, specifically?

## QUESTION 3

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How can we be a redeeming community—a group of people who are committed to welcoming the marginalized into the *beth ab* in everyday life?

# TO WRAP IT UP

If you're familiar with the gospel, it's easy to connect to this metaphor when we think about our relationship to Jesus. We were marginalized from God's *beth ab* by our sin, and Jesus died on the cross to "redeem" us. He paid the price to get us out of that slavery so we could be brought back into the family. And it follows that once we're brought back in, we would join Him in the mission to bring *shalom* to chaos.

But there's the second piece to *ga'al*, to redeeming the marginalized back into the *beth ab*. In biblical culture, once the patriarch did whatever was needed to get the lost person back, the family's job was to *make him or her welcome*. Not just once. Not just saying hello or dropping off a meal. The family was meant to graciously, continually reintegrate that person back into the everyday life of the *beth ab*.

If everybody liked that person, this would be easy. It's easy to celebrate when someone you love is found and brought back safe. But God doesn't only redeem the lost people everybody likes. God is interested in redeeming *all* of humanity—even the ones we don't like. God is even interested in redeeming the people who have caused great harm, because the goal is always to bring human beings back into the family. Period.

So, what does this mean for a disciple?

If we are God's *beth ab*, if we have been redeemed by our patriarch, we must be willing to practice showing redemption to others. This isn't just about being generous to the poor around the holidays—that's part of it. It's not just handing people money and sending them on their merry way. To redeem the marginalized means to make them a welcome part of your community's daily life. This is how we partner with God in the mission to bring *shalom* to chaos.

If you're anything like the rest of Western culture, this idea is probably raising the hair on the back of your neck, in a sense. We are often used to compartmentalizing, separating our work life from our church life from our personal life, with any number of subcategories mixed in. We love to talk about boundaries, and the idea of stepping into the chaos with someone on a regular basis is, shall we say, less than appealing. If you're feeling intimidated, you're not alone. Stick with it as we continue to unpack these ideas.

Let's keep two questions in our minds throughout season 2: One, are we willing to love marginalized people in such a way that they become part of our daily lives? And two, do we even have a faith community that we can invite people into? If the answer to either of these is no, then this is a great place to start wrestling over those answers with Jesus.

Let's move into a time of prayer as we consider all we learned today.



# END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

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

If you'd like some ideas, here are some points you might pray into:

- Ask God to open your eyes to the marginalized around you. Ask Him for courage and inspiration as you consider how to reach out to them.
- Are you part of a faith community that could join you in this mission? If not, ask God for help in finding one.
- Are there any physical or spiritual needs among the members of your group? Pray for one another individually. Consider how you might care for each other between now and your next group meeting.

**END GROUP MEETING**

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

# A FEW PPS

## **Let's Talk about the Patriarchy**

This metaphor of the *beth ab* will continue to be central as we build on these ideas over the course of this study. With that in mind, there are a few things that we should remember as we look at the patriarchal society of the Bible:

### **Familiar metaphors**

As RVL touched on in this episode, the patriarchal system is not the “correct” way of living, or the only system God approves of. But when God called Abraham and Sarah to start building this family that would eventually become Israel, they were living within a patriarchal system. It was what they knew best. So, when God chose things that would become metaphors for His kingdom, He picked examples from their daily life that they would fully comprehend: The Father’s house. Redeeming a marginalized person. Welcoming lost family members back into the *beth ab*, and so on. These practices were easy to understand for those who lived in this culture, and most importantly, they provided good examples of the way God wanted His kingdom to work.

Like any way of life, there were both positive and negative aspects of the patriarchal system. Using *beth ab* as a metaphor for the kingdom doesn’t mean God approves of everything about that system. It means some elements of the existing culture provided a profound picture of how God cares for His people. He met them where they were, teaching and preparing His people with a metaphor they could understand.

### **West is best?**

The second thing we should keep in mind is that we must not become ethnocentric. It’s easy to judge other cultures, whether historical or contemporary, by the culture we belong to. We tend to value what we know and like, and systems that are different or unfamiliar can make us uncomfortable. As we read the Bible, we must be careful not to critique things simply because they’re not what we would do in our culture.

### **If only we were all Jewish . . .**

Conversely, we must also be careful not to canonize culture. As easy as it is to judge another way of life, it can be just as tempting to think that the Jewish model is the only way we should do things. “If only we were all Jewish, we would finally get it all straight!”

But God didn’t come down and say, “Every other culture is inferior, and you must all become desert nomad Semitic peoples like Abraham and Sarah.” The cultural diversity of the world is a beautiful thing, and every human being was created to reflect unique elements of the character of God. God trained His first disciple, Israel, based on what they already knew, using helpful elements of their culture to put Himself on display to a broken world.

We should learn everything we can from Israel's experience as God's disciple, while recognizing the unique ways that God's character is reflected in our own and other cultures.

### **His Thoughts Are Not Our Thoughts, and His Ways Not Our Ways**

Many times in Scripture, God also chose to be countercultural in the way He used *beth ab* as a metaphor for His kingdom. If you follow the family line of Israel—and more specifically, of Jesus—you will quickly notice God doesn't always choose the heirs you might expect. In contrast to the custom of the culture, He often passes over the firstborn in favor of younger sons. Think of Jacob, who continued Israel's line instead of his older brother, Esau. Think of how the Holy Spirit inspired Jacob to bless Joseph's sons at the end of Genesis, prophesying that Ephraim would become greater than his older brother, Manasseh (see Genesis 48). And think of David, who was the youngest of all of Jesse's sons! God was certainly countercultural in choosing a boy shepherd from nowhere to become Israel's king, the ancestor of the Messiah Himself.

But perhaps the most countercultural thing of all is the way God highlights women in the line of Israel. Matthew's account of Jesus' genealogy includes not just one but five women—something unheard of in the culture! In keeping with the theme of *beth ab* and the mission to redeem the marginalized, you could also make the case that each of these women was redeemed into the family of God in a profound way.

- **Tamar** was mistreated terribly by Judah's family, angering God so much that He actually put the two oldest sons to death. Judah refused to let Tamar marry his youngest son (as was the custom), which left her disconnected from his *beth ab*. She took matters into her own hands and tricked Judah into giving her a son (twins, actually). When he realized what had happened, he acknowledged his own errors and redeemed Tamar back into his household (Genesis 38).
- **Rahab** wasn't Jewish at all; she was a Canaanite prostitute from Jericho! But recognizing the power of the God of Israel, she hid Joshua and Caleb and the other spies, becoming an instrumental partner in God's plan to give victory to His people. Because of her courage, Rahab and her family were spared. She was redeemed into God's people by marriage and became part of Jesus' family line (Joshua 2, 6:17-25; Matthew 1). Paul even mentions her in his "Hall of Faith" chapter in Hebrews 11.
- Like Rahab, **Ruth** was also a Gentile. In fact, she was a Moabite, a people born of incest (Genesis 19) who constantly instigated violent conflicts with Israel. She married into an Israelite family, something which isn't explained, but that we know was explicitly forbidden. And yet, she recognized that there was something different about the God of her husband's family. When he died, she told Naomi, her former mother-in-law, that she would rather be a marginalized woman among God's people than to return to the culture of her birth. Naomi's relative, Boaz, redeemed them both by marrying Ruth, and they became the close ancestors of King David (Ruth 1-4).

- Then we come to **Bathsheba**, who eventually married King David. In many ways, her story in Scripture is full of tragedy. We don't know for sure whether she was Jewish, but when we first meet her in 2 Samuel, she's married to Uriah the Hittite. This places her outside the family of Israel, at least in some ways. We all know the story: David sees her bathing and decides to sleep with her. The Bible doesn't say what Bathsheba thought of this arrangement, but David should have known better. She gets pregnant; David has Uriah killed; and he marries Bathsheba. God is not pleased with David's choices, and as a result, their child dies. But God redeems this relationship that began in dysfunction by giving them another son, Solomon. Solomon was far from David's firstborn, yet it was he who would go on to become king and build the first temple.
- **Mary** might be the only woman listed in Jesus' genealogy who was Jewish by birth. (Tamar's ancestry is not specified, and we don't know for sure about Bathsheba.) Scripture tells us she was "highly favored" by the Lord, but she and Joseph would almost certainly have experienced marginalization at some level because of her "mysterious" pregnancy. God sent angels to both Mary and Joseph to explain what He planned to do, but what would their communities have thought? And yet, God would redeem all of humanity through Mary's son.

Among the many themes Matthew communicates with his genealogy, it's clear he wanted to emphasize the redemptive nature of God's kingdom—especially as it was countercultural to what his audience would have been used to. *Beth ab* and the cultural practice of redeeming were excellent metaphors for God's kingdom, but a metaphor is not greater than the truth it represents. God used these themes to point to His kingdom, something much bigger and greater and not altogether the same—and this often meant doing the unexpected.

### **THE FIRSTBORN TAKES IT ALL**

In this Old Testament culture, when a patriarch died or became incapacitated in some way, his firstborn son (or the next-oldest capable male) would usually inherit everything. Every dime, regardless of how many other children the former patriarch had. To a Westerner, this might seem grossly unfair. But remember, those resources were meant to care for the whole *beth ab*. The firstborn inherited everything so he could become the new patriarch. Now it would fall to him to have a well-cared-for *beth ab*.

Inheritance wasn't always linear, however. If a patriarch had only daughters, he might choose one of their husbands to become his heir. They would then leave that husband's *beth ab* to inherit from the father-in-law. A patriarch could also adopt a new heir, such as a nephew or the younger son of a friend. Before Ishmael and Isaac were born, Abram (Abraham) had actually chosen one of his servants to inherit everything, safeguarding his *beth ab* in the event of his death.

After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision:

*“Do not be afraid, Abram.  
I am your shield,  
your very great reward.”*

*But Abram said, “Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and **the one who will inherit my estate** is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so **a servant in my household will be my heir.**”*

*Then the word of the Lord came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”*

*Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.  
Genesis 15:1-6 (emphasis added)*



As an aside, it’s interesting that Abraham picked Eliezer, a servant, as his heir over his own nephew, Lot. It makes sense; after all, Lot wasn’t known for making great life decisions. But it’s interesting that in this system, there was room for the heir to be whomever the former patriarch deemed capable, rather than simply the man most closely related by blood.

Many times in the Text, God called Israel His firstborn:

*The Lord said to Moses, “When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go. Then say to Pharaoh, ‘This is what the Lord says: **Israel is my firstborn son**, and I told you, “Let my son go, so he may worship me.” But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son.’”*

*Exodus 4:21:23 (emphasis added)*



Israel was supposed to inherit everything God has, to use all the Father's resources to redeem the marginalized and put Him on display to the other nations. Their job was not to bring the rest of the world in, necessarily. That redemption would come with Jesus' death and resurrection when the time was right. But God's firstborn was supposed to have the most-well-cared-for *beth ab* in the world, so that they could show the other nations what it looked like to have God as a patriarch.

Jesus came as God's "second firstborn," the one who would show us what it looked like to carry out the role perfectly. He would redeem humanity in the name of our patriarch, laying down His own life to ransom us out of slavery to sin and bring us back into God's *beth ab*. Paul said it this way to the believers in Colossae:

*[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, **the firstborn over all creation.** For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. **And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.** For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. **Once you were alienated from God** and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now **he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death** to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.*

*Colossians 1:15-23 (emphasis added)*



Elsewhere, Paul would also remind believers that we have now become co-heirs with Christ, sharing in His inheritance of all the resources of our patriarch:

*For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, **the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship.** And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that **we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.***

*Romans 8:14-17 (emphasis added)*



Why do we inherit all of God's resources, as co-firstborns with Jesus? Why do we get to have access to the Gospel, to the complete Scriptures, to the power of the Holy Spirit, to the very throne room of our Father in prayer, to everything on earth that belongs to God, which is literally all things?

**Because now it's our job to care for the *beth ab*.**

Do you have any idea how wealthy you are if you are a follower of Jesus? Do you have any idea what "depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God" you now have access to (Romans 11)? As the new firstborn with Jesus, our mission is to seek out the marginalized and use the family resources to partner with Him in redeeming. And we are so *well-equipped* for the job.

What an incredible patriarch we have, that He would watch the first human beings bring sin into the world and think, *I'm going to redeem them so fully that someday, they will inherit My entire household along with My Son. You're going to try and marginalize them, Satan? I'm going to redeem until death itself is broken.*

### **NOW IT'S YOUR TURN**

In the time before the next meeting, take a few minutes to consider where your heart is when it comes to the marginalized. How do you respond to the single parent or the troubled kid in our culture? To your wealthy neighbor who stopped believing in God a long time ago? How about the immigrant, the homeless addict, or the coworker whose lifestyle you don't agree with? Do you see only brokenness that you have no interest in dealing with, or do you see a lost family member whom God really, *really* cares about?

Spend time considering these ideas in prayer before the next group meeting. You may find it helpful to record your thoughts in a journal.





## EPISODE 2

# THE COVENANT

*When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.*

*Genesis 15:17*





# THE SHEMA

To refresh your memory about what the Shema is and why we say it, jump back to “The Words of the Shema” section just before this episode guide.

## ON YOUR OWN

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

## TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English, together as a group.

### **HEBREW**

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

### **ENGLISH**

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

# INTRODUCTION

If someone were to ask you, “Why did Jesus die?” you would probably have some quick answers. You’d say something like, “He died for my sins so I could go to heaven,” and you would be absolutely, theologically correct.

We learned in the previous episode that when someone is marginalized from the *beth ab*, the patriarch’s job is to redeem that person—to pay his debts, rescue him from trouble, or repair whatever relationship was broken in order to restore that person to the family. Jesus’ death did just that for us. The firstborn of our patriarch, Jesus the Messiah, did whatever it took to legally redeem us back into God’s *beth ab*.

Long before Jesus’ time, God would call a people to be His first disciple: Israel. Their mission would be to become God’s partner in bringing *shalom* to the chaos of a broken world. Not necessarily to bring in all the Gentiles, yet. Jesus would do that redemptive work through His death and resurrection when the time was right. But as God’s first disciple, Israel was meant to set up the story, to show the world what it looks like when God is the patriarch.

But Israel was just as affected by *tohu* as the rest of humanity. How would God make this flawed group of people capable of being His partner? How would He begin to redeem them back into His family? And how does all this lead to our ultimate redemption through Jesus’ death on the cross?

Let’s discuss as we prepare for today’s episode.

# TALK ABOUT IT

We know that Jesus died to take the penalty for our sin. But why did He have to *die*, specifically? Couldn’t God, as merciful and loving as He is, have just decided to forgive our sin? Why was death the payment for redemption? Discuss as a group.

# WATCH THE VIDEO

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

## THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

*After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision:*

*“Do not be afraid, Abram.  
I am your shield,  
your very great reward.”*

*But Abram said, “Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”*

*Then the word of the Lord came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”*

*Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.*

*He also said to him, “I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.”*

*But Abram said, “Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?”*

*So the Lord said to him, “**Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.**”*

***Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half.** Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.*

*As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. Then the Lord said to him, “Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace*

and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”

**When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram** and said, “To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.”

Genesis 15 (emphasis added)



Definition of a covenant:

Which five animals did God instruct Abraham (Abram) to bring?

Did Abraham ever go through the pieces? Who did?

Other notes:



# VIDEO DISCUSSION

## QUESTION 1

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How did the sacrificial system restore Israel's relationship to God?

## QUESTION 2

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How does understanding Abraham's covenant with God change your perspective of Jesus' death?

## QUESTION 3

---

Why do you think Jesus yelled, "It is finished!" just before He died? When you think of your sin, do you think of it as "finished"? Explain why or why not.

# TO WRAP IT UP

When God acted to restore flawed human beings as His partners, He knew exactly what He was getting into. The terms of the covenant weren't Abraham's idea—in fact, the old man gives absolutely no input in Scripture. But God was determined to restore what Satan had broken in leading humanity astray, and He was going to do it in a way that gave dignity back to the human beings who had so completely failed.

God knew exactly what it would cost to repair that broken relationship, and He still went through the bloody pieces twice.

The grand narrative of Scripture then becomes the playing out of this story. When God called Israel out of Egypt, He began to redeem them back into His family through the sacrificial system that was foreshadowed with Abraham. The blood of those five animals would pay for Israel's sins temporarily so that they could learn how to join God in restoring *shalom* to chaos, bit by bit. When the time was right, Jesus' death would be the ultimate sacrifice, fulfilling God's part of the covenant with Abraham and making a way for all of humanity to be restored to His family once and for all. But until that time, God would continue to work with Abraham and his descendants, eventually forming them into a nation that was meant to show the rest of the world a glimpse of what He is like.

# END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

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

Here are some things you might pray about:

- Spend time as a group thanking God for His sacrifice, for being willing to take both sides of the covenant.
- Are there any physical or spiritual needs among the members of your group? Pray for one another individually. Consider how you might care for each other between now and your next group meeting.

## END GROUP MEETING

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

# A FEW PPS

## COVENANTS IN BIBLICAL TIMES

In this episode, we learned that a covenant was a cultural practice in the patriarchal system. It was not just a promise; rather, it was an agreement that created an ongoing relationship. When a king made a covenant, his subjects called him “Father.” He would call them “my children,” because there was the assumption a relationship had been created.

We see two types of covenants in the Text (the Old Testament). The first is a covenant between equals. Two kings, two patriarchs, two families creating a marriage—two parties of comparable stature who would both stand to gain from an agreement. Each side would state its terms, they would come to an agreement, and the deal would be struck.

We see an example of this in Genesis 26, where Isaac and Abimelek, the Philistine king of Gerar, formed a peace treaty. Isaac had moved his family to the land of the Philistines to flee a famine, but Abimelek was intimidated by the man’s wealth and asked Isaac to move elsewhere. Not one to push buttons, Isaac obliged. Later, the Philistine came to Isaac with a proposal that would ensure peace:

*Meanwhile, Abimelek had come to him from Gerar, with Ahuzzath his personal adviser and Phicol the commander of his forces. Isaac asked them, “Why have you come to me, since you were hostile to me and sent me away?”*

*They answered, “We saw clearly that the Lord was with you; so we said, ‘There ought to be a sworn agreement between us’—between us and you. Let us make a treaty with you that you will do us no harm, just as we did not harm you but always treated you well and sent you away peacefully. And now you are blessed by the Lord.”*

*Isaac then made a feast for them, and they ate and drank. Early the next morning the men swore an oath to each other. Then Isaac sent them on their way, and they went away peacefully.*

*Genesis 26:26-31 (emphasis added)*





Both parties agreed to keep the peace, a meal was shared, and the oath was sworn. Both parties gained what they felt was appropriate from the bargain.

But there's a second type of covenant in the Bible, and that is a specialized agreement called a "suzerainty treaty." This type of covenant would be made between two unequal parties—one greater and one lesser, such as a conquering king and a conquered people. God and Abram (Abraham) were most definitely not equals, and this is the type of covenant we encounter in Genesis 15.

In this form of covenant, the greater party set the terms. They would say, "Here's what I'm going to do in this relationship, and here's what I want you to do. Take it or leave it." The lesser party could object, but they were at the mercy of the greater party—objections were generally inadvisable if one wanted to keep living.

In Abraham's case, God promised in Genesis 15 and elsewhere to give Abraham land and descendants, and to bless the whole world through Abraham's family. (Think about Jesus, who came from Abraham's line. What greater blessing could there be?) As for Abraham's part in the deal, God instructed him in multiple commands throughout Genesis, including the circumcision of all males in his household. But the most intimidating—and impossible—was the command to never sin, not even once. These were the terms God set out for the covenant, and as the lesser party, Abraham did not object.

The practice in the culture was to make this type of covenant by shedding blood. The blood was a symbol to say, "I'm going to stake my life on being faithful to the terms of this agreement." God had Abraham set up for this ceremony by bringing five kinds of animals to slaughter: a cow, a goat, a ram, a dove, and a pigeon. Tradition dictated that these animals would be killed, cut in half (the larger ones, at least), and arranged in a line so the two halves spewed blood into a horrifying kind of river down the middle.

The two parties would then swear their agreement to the terms and walk barefoot through the blood path, first the greater party and then the lesser. It was an R-rated way to say, "I will stake my life on this covenant. If I ever break my end of the bargain, you may do to me what was done to these animals." And once both parties passed through the blood, the covenant was binding.

But as we see in Genesis, Abraham never walked down the blood path. God went through twice, first in the form of a smoking firepot and then in that of a blazing torch. We see these symbols associated with God throughout Scripture. When God came down to Mount Sinai, the mountain was covered in smoke. When Isaiah saw the Lord in His temple (from the back, presumably), smoke filled the room. God appeared to Moses through fire in the burning bush. Fire came down on the tabernacle and later the temple when God's Spirit filled it for the first time. Fire came down when Isaiah was in the temple. And fire came down upon the heads of the disciples when the Spirit filled them on Pentecost.

In the form of these symbols, God passed through the pieces twice: first for Himself, and then in Abraham's place. And in that moment, Jesus was reminded that in order to get us back, He would have to endure a violent death someday.

## 9:00 AND 3:00

In this episode, we discussed how the covenant with Abraham sentenced Jesus to death, in a sense. Mark recorded that moment in this way:

*And it was **the third hour** when they crucified him . . .*

*And at **the ninth hour** Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And some of the bystanders hearing it said, “Behold, he is calling Elijah.” And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.” And Jesus uttered a loud cry and **breathed his last**.*

*Mark 15:25, 34-37 (ESV, emphasis added)*



Why did Mark include these details? What does it matter when they crucified Him, or when He died? What are those details there for?

In season 1, we learned that during their teaching, the practice of Jewish rabbis was to allude to other places in the Bible by simply including a word or a phrase. Their audience would hear something like “burning coals,” and because they were so biblically literate, they would immediately go, “Ah! He’s saying God is present!” Likewise, Jesus used this technique of allusion, later called *remez*, to bring details and context from the Hebrew text into His teachings.

(If you haven’t gone through season 1 yet, here’s your nudge to do so!)

Mark was writing to a mostly Jewish audience, so this was how they were used to receiving teaching. When they heard those details, “the third hour” and “the ninth hour,” they would have known exactly what Mark was communicating.

When God established the sacrificial system with Israel, He told them to make a tent. In front of that meticulously designed structure, they were to construct an altar. The priests were commanded to make all kinds of sacrifices on that altar, varying by season and circumstance. But every day, twice a day, including the Sabbath, they were supposed to sacrifice two lambs on behalf of all the people, restoring their relationship to the Lord:

*This is what you are to offer on the altar **regularly each day: two lambs a year old. Offer one in the morning and the other at twilight.** With the first lamb offer a tenth of an ephah of the finest flour mixed with a quarter of a hin of oil from pressed olives, and a quarter of a hin of wine as a drink offering. Sacrifice the other lamb at twilight with the same grain offering and its drink offering as in the morning—a pleasing aroma, a food offering presented*

*to the Lord. For the generations to come this burnt offering is to be made regularly at the entrance to the tent of meeting, before the Lord. There I will meet you and speak to you; there also I will meet with the Israelites, and the place will be consecrated by my glory.*

*Exodus 29:38-41 (emphasis added)*



We know from traditional religious Jewish scholarship that “twilight” was thought of as a mid-afternoon hour. Throughout Israel’s history of tabernacle and temple worship, these sacrifices were offered at the third hour (about 9:00 a.m.) and the ninth hour (about 3:00 p.m.).

Mark’s Jewish audience would have caught the connection immediately. Jesus was nailed to the cross at 9:00 a.m., as the shofar blew for the morning sacrifice. The crowd stood there watching Jesus’ blood flow as the throat of the first lamb was cut. And hours later, as the shofar blew for the 3:00 p.m. sacrifice, they heard Jesus cry out, “It is finished!” Jesus gave up His spirit, and the throat of the second lamb was cut. And although no one in that crowd realized it, for the first time in history, humanity’s relationship to God could be fully restored. The curtain in the temple tore, and the Presence that Israel could never encounter without first shedding blood was ready to dwell in our very hearts.

### **NOW IT’S YOUR TURN**

In the time before the next meeting, consider reading these two chapters daily: Genesis 15 and Mark 15. Make a point of spending a few minutes of your quiet time in worship, praising Jesus for His sacrifice that fulfilled a covenant so we could be with Him forever.





### EPISODE 3

# THE FINEST FLOUR

*He told them another parable.  
"The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and  
hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened."*

*Matthew 13:33 (ESV)*



# THE SHEMA

To refresh your memory about what the Shema is and why we say it, jump back to “The Words of the Shema” section just before this episode guide.

## ON YOUR OWN

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

## TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English, together as a group.

### **HEBREW**

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

### **ENGLISH**

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

# INTRODUCTION

For many reasons, and among its other roles as a book of the Bible, the book of Ruth is a clear picture of what “redeem” looks like. You have a Jewish couple, Elimelek and Naomi, and their two sons. They leave Israel because of a famine and settle into the land of Moab. While there, the two sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Now, the Bible doesn’t say much about this—Jews were not supposed to intermarry with the Canaanite nations. But these pagan girls became part of Elimelek and Naomi’s family.

Elimelek and both his sons die suddenly, and the three women find themselves widowed, which, if you recall, is a big deal in a patriarchal culture. They are now marginalized from their *beth ab*.

Naomi tells the girls to go home. “Go back to where you came from. Maybe your fathers will take you back in. Maybe someone else from your hometown will want to marry you. But I have nothing left to give you.” Orpah agrees with this assessment, and she leaves. But what does Ruth say?

*But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.”*

*Ruth 1:16 (emphasis added)*



The story continues toward a happy ending. Ruth earns the favor of Boaz, who turns out to be a close enough relative to redeem her and Naomi back into the *beth ab* by buying the family land and marrying Ruth. Ruth goes on to have a son, Obed, who would be the grandfather of King David—and thus, an ancestor of Jesus Himself.

The point is this: Can you imagine that Ruth would have wanted to return with her mother-in-law if Naomi and Elimelek hadn’t been good to her? What incredible hospitality and care must they have shown to this outsider, this woman who was never supposed to be a part of their family, to convince her that this people and this God were worth knowing?

So far, we’ve learned that as God’s first disciple, Israel was meant to partner with God in bringing *shalom* to the *tohu* of a broken world. They were supposed to be God’s *beth ab*, using the family resources to care for the marginalized. But what did that mean in a practical sense? What does *shalom* look like in chaos?

Let’s continue with today’s episode and find out.

# TALK ABOUT IT

When you try to translate these ideas of “redeeming the marginalized” and “bringing *shalom* to chaos” to a modern, Western culture, what do you picture? What comes to mind when you try to imagine these ideas in your own context? Discuss as a group.

# WATCH THE VIDEO

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

## THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

*The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and **saw three men** standing nearby. When he saw them, **he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.***

*He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. **Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant.**"*

*"Very well," they answered, "do as you say."*

*So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get **three seahs of the finest flour** and knead it and bake some bread."*

*Then **he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf** and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. **He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.***

*Genesis 18:1-8 (emphasis added)*



*He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in **three measures of flour**, till it was all leavened."*

*Matthew 13:33 (ESV, emphasis added)*





Four counterculturally hospitable things that Abraham did:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Other notes:

# VIDEO DISCUSSION

## QUESTION 1

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Why was Abraham so overly hospitable? Why did he want to bring these strangers into the *beth ab*? How does this translate to our role as God's *beth ab*, His disciples?

## QUESTION 2

---

We don't come from the same culture as Abraham and Sarah, but how would you have reacted to three strangers showing up at your house? Why?

## QUESTION 3

---

What might baking sixty-five pounds of flour into bread look like in your life? Who can you think of who might need this sort of hospitality from you?

# TO WRAP IT UP

Why was Israel meant to imitate this sort of extravagant hospitality they saw in Abraham and Sarah? Why is this also meant to be part of our nature as disciples of Jesus? Because this is how we all live out the mission as God's partner. This is how *shalom* enters into chaos.

When Elimelek and Naomi were so welcoming to their pagan daughters-in-law that Ruth wanted to be a part of God's people, there was an opportunity for *shalom* to come. When Abraham and Sarah welcomed in strangers instead of overvaluing their privacy and possessions, there was an opportunity for *shalom* to come. And when a shepherd boy gave a group of tourists everything he had to eat for the day, there was an opportunity for *shalom* to come.

When we mirror God's desire to care for the marginalized, we invite Him into the situation. We give others a glimpse of who He is. We cannot participate in God's mission as His disciples unless we're willing to take on His character, and this is what His character is like.

Israel was meant to put God on display to the rest of world. They were meant to learn from the hospitality of their ancestors and to become the kind of nation that really cared for the needs among them. Jesus would come to finally graft the Gentiles into this family once and for all, but Israel was meant to help lay the foundation. When the other nations saw how Israel cared for the marginalized, it gave them a glimpse of what God is like.

The fact that Jesus used this example of Abraham and Sarah's hospitality to drive His point home in a parable about the kingdom of heaven is a significant clue that this is really, really important to Him. If we want to be disciples of Jesus, we need to have the same attitude toward the "strangers" in our world.

Let's ponder all we have discussed today as we move into a time of prayer.

# END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

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

Here are some things you might pray about:

- Ask God for opportunities to show Abraham's kind of extravagant hospitality for the sake of His kingdom.
- Are there any physical or spiritual needs among the members of your group? Pray for one another individually. Consider how you might care for each other between now and your next group meeting.

**END GROUP MEETING**

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

# A FEW PPS

## The God-Fearers

Many have asked the question, why did God choose Israel as His people? Why pick Abraham out of Babel? Why his descendants, who were just a bunch of slaves? The Bible doesn't give an answer to clearly explain God's choice, but we might consider an interpretation. Perhaps God decided to start with a hospitable culture because He knew that redemption involves welcoming marginalized people.

Israel sometimes did a great job with their role as God's disciple—and sometimes they did not. But even before Jesus died and rose, we see in Scripture that there were, in fact, times when Israel's culture of extravagant hospitality really touched people.

God certainly gave Moses plenty of instructions for how to integrate foreigners into Israel's daily life. Clearly, He expected that some Gentiles would be so attracted by Israel's witness that they would want to join, even a long time before Jesus came. And this certainly turned out to be the case.

Some scholars believe there were Egyptians who joined Israel in their Exodus. Rahab the prostitute, a Canaanite, switched allegiances to protect the Israelite spies who had entered Jericho. She ended up marrying into Israel and becoming one of Jesus' ancestors. Uriah the Hittite, Bathsheba's first husband, had at least joined Israel inasmuch as he lived among them and served faithfully in King David's army (although David was not properly hospitable to him). And the New Testament records that even before Jesus, there was a well-established group known as "God-fearers" who participated in temple worship!

When the Holy Spirit was given in Acts, Peter preached to a mixed crowd of worshippers from, it says, "every nation under heaven." Many were biologically of Jewish descent, likely scattered during the Exile, but Luke wrote that the crowd included Roman converts as well:

*Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"*

*Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"*

*Acts 2:5-12 (emphasis added)*



Later in Acts, Peter would be sent by the Spirit to the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion who worshipped God. The text says that without knowing anything about Jesus, this man “gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly” (Acts 10:2). Cornelius caught the mission before ever hearing about Jesus—just from experiencing the Jews! Somehow, despite all their flaws, Israel had managed to put God on display in such a way that some citizens of Rome were bending their knees to the God of Israel.

Paul would even encounter God-fearers as far away as Greece and Turkey. In Philippi, he shared the gospel with a pagan woman named Lydia, who already worshipped the God of Israel even though she hadn’t heard anything about Jesus:

*On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. **One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God.** The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. “If you consider me a believer in the Lord,” she said, “come and stay at my house.” And she persuaded us.*

*Acts 16:13-15 (emphasis added)*



Even before there was any good news to share about Jesus, the way that Israel displayed God’s redeeming character to the other nations was enough to pique their interest in Him. Today, we’re living after the cross, after our redemption back into God’s family has been completed. If just a glimpse of God’s character was enough to bring people into the family way back in the Old Testament, how much more can God do if we will show that same extravagant hospitality today, in light of the gospel?

### **Entertaining Angels**

Imagine Abraham and Sarah’s surprise when their eyes were suddenly opened and these three men turned out to be two angels and God Himself. What a thunderbolt of a revelation! Can you imagine such a thing happening in the twenty-first century?

***Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.***

*Hebrews 13:1-2 (emphasis added)*



These are Paul's words in the book of Hebrews. It's likely an allusion to Abraham and Sarah, with the implication that this sort of thing has happened more than once. But this idea also shows up elsewhere in the New Testament, from Jesus Himself:

***"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."***

*"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'"*

***"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"***

*Matthew 25:35-40 (emphasis added)*



Jesus took upon Himself the marginalized status of those who are outside God's *beth ab*, both those who have wandered and those who have not yet heard the good news. He redeemed all of that on the cross. When we show extravagant hospitality to someone in need, we are hosting the Messiah Himself.

We do it because He commanded us to. We do it because the Holy Spirit teaches us to have the mind of Christ, to take on God's character. But at the heart of it all, we're meant to be hospitable for Jesus' sake.

Don't you think He deserves that kind of effort from us?

## Hospitality Is a Team Sport

It's easy to hear a teaching like this and think, *Oh man. Now I've got to go out and redeem the marginalized, whatever that means. I've got to put all my responsibilities on hold and feed bread to everyone I see, and I've got to figure all this out by myself.*

It's true; sometimes God will ask us to be extravagantly hospitable all on our own. But that's not what we see in Scripture most of the time.

In Genesis 15, we see the three strangers being cared for with the resources of the whole *beth ab*. Servants and other relatives were there with Abraham and Sarah, helping with the washing and cooking and lighting fires and preparing the butchered calf. Abraham directed the day, but he wasn't alone, and neither was Sarah. The *beth ab* did the hosting together.

God didn't call Moses to be His disciple all by himself. He called all of Israel to develop an entire culture that would collectively become His disciple. They were all in this together.

We've mentioned a few times that when religious Jews recite the *Shema*, they don't like doing it alone. Why? Because being "all in" is something we need each other to accomplish!

What if the church in the West were able to work together to develop this kind of extravagantly hospitable culture? What if we were known far and wide for being the most welcoming and hospitable group of people anyone has ever heard of? What if every time the single parent, the troubled kid, the ex-Christian, the (possibly illegal) immigrant, the LGBTQ community, or the homeless encountered a disciple of Jesus, they came away from the exchange having been loved and understood and carrying sixty-five pounds of fresh bread?

It's not just an ideal—this is our job. But we were never meant to shoulder this alone. If we want to become a redeeming community, we will need each other to do it.

## NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

In the period before the next meeting, take time to talk with God about all the emotions this teaching brings up in your heart. What feels intimidating, or even impossible? What excites you? What do you think your community needs in order to take the first step in hospitality? You may want to record your thoughts in a journal.







## EPISODE 4

# THE IMAGE

*So God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.*

*Genesis 1:27*



# THE SHEMA

To refresh your memory about what the Shema is and why we say it, jump back to “The Words of the Shema” section just before this episode guide.

## ON YOUR OWN

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

## TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English, together as a group.

### **HEBREW**

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

### **ENGLISH**

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

# INTRODUCTION

When God was ready to call the nation of Israel to be His disciple, they were living in Egypt as slaves under a brutal tyrant. God had informed Abraham much earlier that his descendants would spend four hundred years in a foreign nation before He called them back to the Promised Land:

*Then the Lord said to him, "Know for certain that **for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.**"*

*Genesis 15:13-16 (emphasis added)*



But four hundred years is a long time to spend in another culture! By the time of the Exodus, the people of Israel would have known nothing but Egypt, with only stories passed down about their ancestors and the land they were supposed to inherit. Not only would they have to deal with the traumatic repercussions of slavery, and all that does to one's identity, but they also would have been steeped in Egyptian worldview. What Egypt valued, they would have wanted to value. What Egypt worshipped, they would have been tempted to worship. And what Egypt expected from their pantheon of more than a thousand gods and goddesses, Israel likely expected from the true God.

God would need to do something powerful to get His people out of Egypt. But He would also need to take some drastic steps in order to get *Egypt* out of His people. Once redeemed back into God's family, Israel would need to learn what it really meant to be His partner.

As we continue to compile the building blocks of discipleship by examining how God established Israel, we must understand how they would have experienced this process of becoming God's first disciple. Coming out of Egypt, how would they have understood a human being's relationship to God? How would they have expected to worship Him? How would He teach them about their mission to help Him bring *shalom* to chaos?

# TALK ABOUT IT

As a group, take a few minutes to put yourselves in the minds of those Israelites leaving Egypt. Once they had crossed the Red Sea, what do you imagine they would have expected to do next? What would you have expected from God in this situation?

# WATCH THE VIDEO

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

## THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

*Lift up your heads, you gates;  
be lifted up, you ancient doors,  
that the King of glory may come in.*

*Who is this King of glory?  
The Lord strong and mighty,  
the Lord mighty in battle.*

*Psalm 24:7-8*



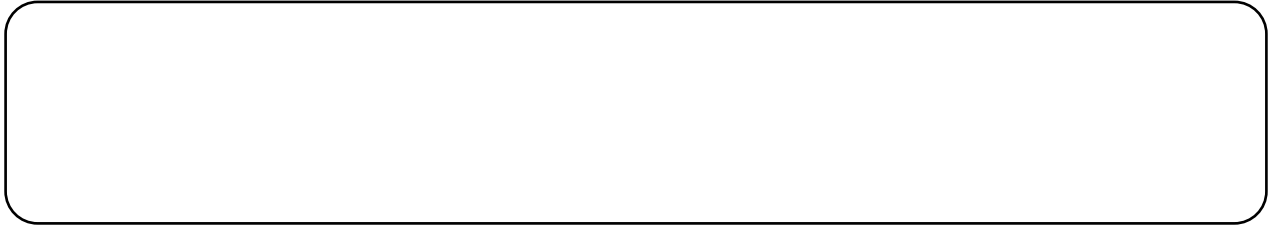
*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted,  
seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple.*

*Isaiah 6:1 (emphasis added)*

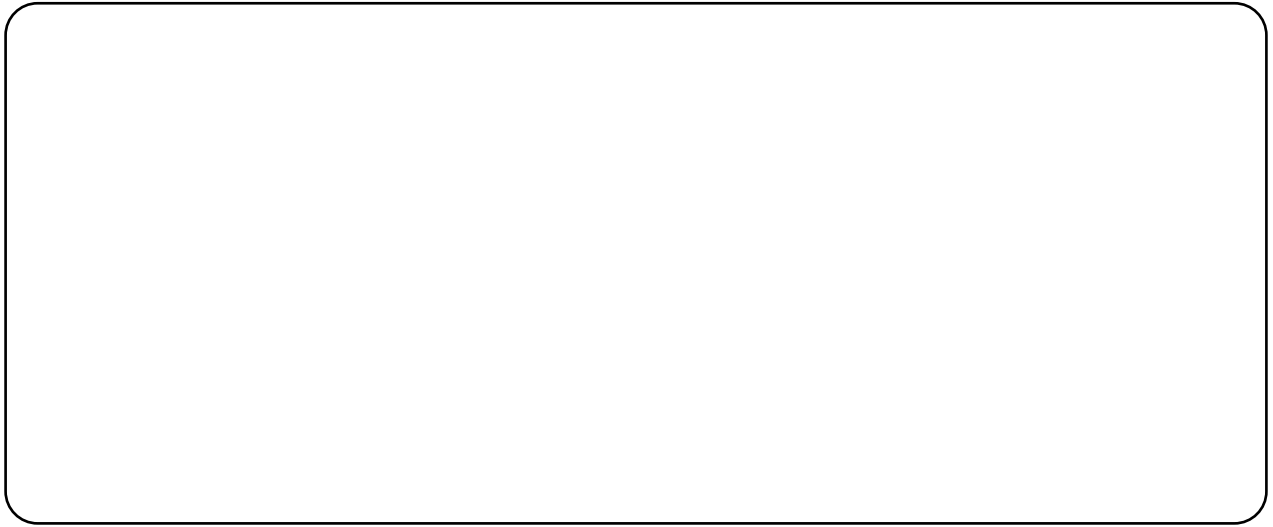


*Tselem* means:

What is God's *tselem* in the world?

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Other notes:

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# VIDEO DISCUSSION

## QUESTION 1

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How did biblical cultures like Egypt understand the statues of their gods? What were the statues meant to do, in their minds?

## QUESTION 2

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One of Israel's greatest temptations in the Old Testament was the worship of idols. This can be hard for us to understand today, but what do you think the modern equivalent of idol worship might be? To what do we find ourselves giving loyalty, approval, compromise, or the bulk of our time?

## QUESTION 3

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When you think about being the bearer of God's presence to those around you, what feelings or thoughts come to mind? Do you expect God's presence to go with you throughout your day? Why or why not?

# TO WRAP IT UP

God's *tselem*, the bearer of His presence, was meant to reflect what God is like. This is what God made humanity to do, right from the very beginning.

When God called Israel to be His first disciple, He was determined to mold them into a redeeming community, because that is what He's like. He didn't want them to make any other images to mark His presence. Even the Ark of the Covenant, upon which God's presence rested, was never meant to be the image of God. God intentionally said He would dwell only in the empty space between the wings of the cherubim on the cover. Human beings were, and are, the only *tselem* He will accept as He unfolds this grand story.

In the modern West, our temptation is often to put the pressure of God's reputation onto churches. A specific church—its programs, its pastors, its activities in the city—often bear the expectation of being God's image, while individuals participate to varying degrees.

It's easy to forget that we, each one of us, were meant to be God's *tselem*. Not just our leaders or a few representatives among us. Not just in our social media presence as Such-and-Such Community Church. Each and every one of us bears God's image every moment of every day, whether we want to or not.

A disciple is someone who chooses to live in such a way that God's redeeming character is correctly displayed. A disciple is also someone who trusts God to be present. As we join His story, as we become *shalom*-bringers, we must remember we are God's *tselem*, and that He has promised to be with us wherever we go.



# END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

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

Here are some things you might pray about:

- Spend time asking the Lord to show you if there's anything you're idolizing right now.
- Ask God for insight into how to be His image in your daily life.
- Are there any physical or spiritual needs among the members of your group? Pray for one another individually. Consider how you might care for each other between now and your next group meeting.

**END GROUP MEETING**

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

# A PS

## What Is the *Tselem* Communicating?

As we discussed in today's episode, the cultures of the Bible wanted to reveal their deities by creating images of them. The statue itself was not thought of as the deity—it was simply the marker of the deity's presence. If you saw a statue of Amun-Ra, that meant (in the cultural mind) he was there. The statue was also supposed to give people an idea of what that god was like, and of what he wanted from people. With that in mind, let's take a look at what some of those ancient statues would have communicated.

Ba'al was a Canaanite god of war and fertility. Statues of him would often choose specific aspects of his character to emphasize, perhaps depending on what the worshippers were most interested in receiving from him. His fertility was usually communicated through exaggerated genitals, making it clear what kind of benefits he was meant to offer his followers. As the god of war, it was said that lightning bolts were his arrows and thunder was his voice. His *tselem* would communicate this with thunderstorm imagery, making people think of a raging army coming upon them like a storm cloud. Many of his statues included a furnace inside, with his burning arms extended to receive sacrifices. People would sacrifice children on those red-hot arms in the hope that Ba'al would look favorably upon them. Imagine the brutal character of such a god, and how his followers would have come to imitate him.

Ba'al's mistress or consort was Asherah, the mother earth goddess. Her maternal benefits were communicated through emphasized breasts, or sometimes with a pregnant belly. People would look at her and know that this was the goddess who, together with Ba'al, promised fertility. Imagine the character of such a goddess, who *might* give you the desire of your heart if only you worship her and her lover in the way they demanded. Israel fell time and again to the worship of these two—and you can imagine what that did to their character.

An example from Egypt is the god Osiris, the god of life. He often held a pleasant expression, as if he had all the joy of life and would consider giving it to you. He was usually depicted holding two *ankh*, which was the Egyptian hieroglyph for life. If you thought he was the one who could give or take away life, what lengths would you go to in order to keep his favor?

A Greek example is Athena, the goddess of wisdom. She was also the warrior who protected the city of Athens, and most statues would depict her in armor and a helmet, wearing a fierce expression that was meant to strike fear into the hearts of her enemies. Would you look at this *tselem* and want to challenge her?

And by Jesus' day, Rome was doing the exact same thing with the statues of its gods and deified ones: humans believed to have achieved a god-like status because of their accomplishments. Roman emperors were considered deified in this way, and they used a technique called "the divine pose" to signify this in their sculpture.

An emperor's statue in this pose would be naked to the waist, which communicated his status as a god. A carved fig leaf adorning the head was another common symbol of deity in this pose. One arm would be

extended, either pointing or holding a scepter to signify authority. And the statue's legs would be posed as if he were in mid-step. One foot would be behind the body to symbolize the past. The body itself symbolized the present, and the other foot would be placed in front to signify the future. The idea was to say, "I am the same yesterday, today, and forever, and I will lead you into the future." These were the kind of images the Jews were surrounded by under Roman oppression. Imagine the arrogance of a deified one who had done whatever it took to put himself above everyone else.

When God created *tselem* for Himself, it wasn't statues. As if a statue could ever communicate the smallest fraction of the greatness of our God! No, it was human beings. And it would take an entire community of diverse, unique *tselem* to communicate just a glimpse of how incredible He is.

This is why it's so important for disciples to faithfully become a redeeming community, because God is nothing like the gods the world is familiar with. He doesn't want cruel sacrifices. He's not dangling life and death out of reach like a carrot. He doesn't glory in war. And when He came to earth as a human:

*[Jesus] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.  
Philippians 2:6-7 (ESV, emphasis added)*



(Can you tell Paul was writing to a Roman colony, which was littered with statues of emperors in that divine pose? What a not-so-subtle jab at Caesar, who did everything he could to grasp equality with the gods!)

We are God's *tselem*, and He wants us to communicate His character to nations who have never experienced such kindness. In the mission to join God in bringing *shalom* to chaos, it's crucial that we take this seriously.

### **NOW IT'S YOUR TURN**

In the time before the next meeting, consider memorizing Philippians 2:1-11. Spend time in prayer asking God to teach you how to be His *tselem* to those you meet in your daily life.





## EPISODE 5

# THE COIN

*Then he said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."*

*Matthew 22:21*



# THE SHEMA

To refresh your memory about what the Shema is and why we say it, jump back to “The Words of the Shema” section just before this episode guide.

## ON YOUR OWN

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

## TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English, together as a group.

### **HEBREW**

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

### **ENGLISH**

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

# INTRODUCTION

In the previous episode, we talked about how God needed to redefine His image in the minds of the Israelites who were first leaving Egypt. They needed to learn that they, and not a statue or a temple, would be the place where God wanted His presence to rest. He wanted to teach them how to put Him on display to a broken world by being a redeeming community, one that would show the other nations a glimpse of what their God was like.

For much of Israel's history, this was one of their biggest struggles. Instead of behaving like God's representatives, they fell again and again to the temptation of bowing to other *tselem*—of giving other gods their loyalty. Israel was caught in a vicious cycle of short-lived obedience, followed by idol worship, followed by captivity to other nations as God allowed. They would repent and cry out to Him, and God would raise up a leader, first judges and later kings and prophets, to lead the people back to faithfulness. And then the cycle would begin again. Eventually, God allowed Babylon and Assyria to carry His people into exile for their refusal to live like His *tselem*.

But by Jesus' time, Israel had returned to the Promised Land. For the most part, the Jews of Jesus' day were fiercely determined to be faithful to their mission as God's partners. The problem was, now their nation was controlled by the Roman Empire. This people who were supposed to be the only image of God were surrounded by the images of thousands of false gods—including Caesar himself.

How would Jesus teach His disciples—and through them, all of Israel and later the world—to be God's *tselem* in conditions like this? What can we learn from this for our lives today?

Let's continue in our discussion of *tselem* and find out.

# TALK ABOUT IT

What situations have you encountered where you had the choice to either go along with the crowd or stand up for what you believe in? What did you do? Share as a group.

# WATCH THE VIDEO

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

## THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

*Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay **the imperial tax** to Caesar or not?"*

*But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? **Show me the coin used for paying the tax.**" They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, "**Whose image is this? And whose inscription?**"*

*"Caesar's," they replied.*

*Then he said to them, "**So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.**"*

*When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.*

*Matthew 22:15-22 (emphasis added)*



*Give them a message for their masters and say, "This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says:*

*"Tell this to your masters: With my great power and outstretched arm I **made the earth and its people and the animals that are on it, and I give it to anyone I please. Now I will give all your countries into the hands of my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; I will make even the wild animals subject to him. All nations will serve him and his son and his grandson until the time for his land comes; then many nations and great kings will subjugate him.**"*

*Jeremiah 27:4-7 (emphasis added)*



*And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit*

*2 Corinthians 3:18 (emphasis added)*

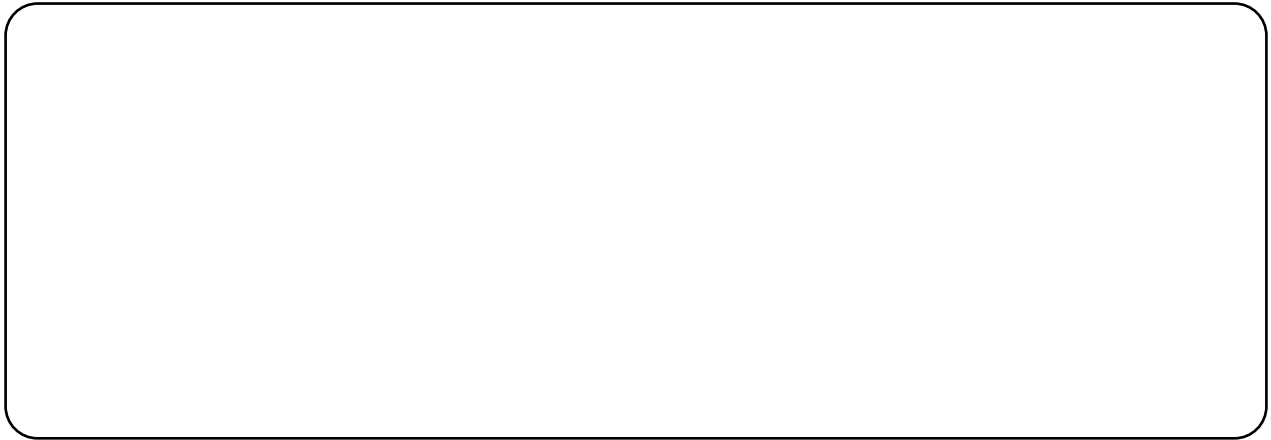


What does *kensos* mean? What was the purpose of this tax?

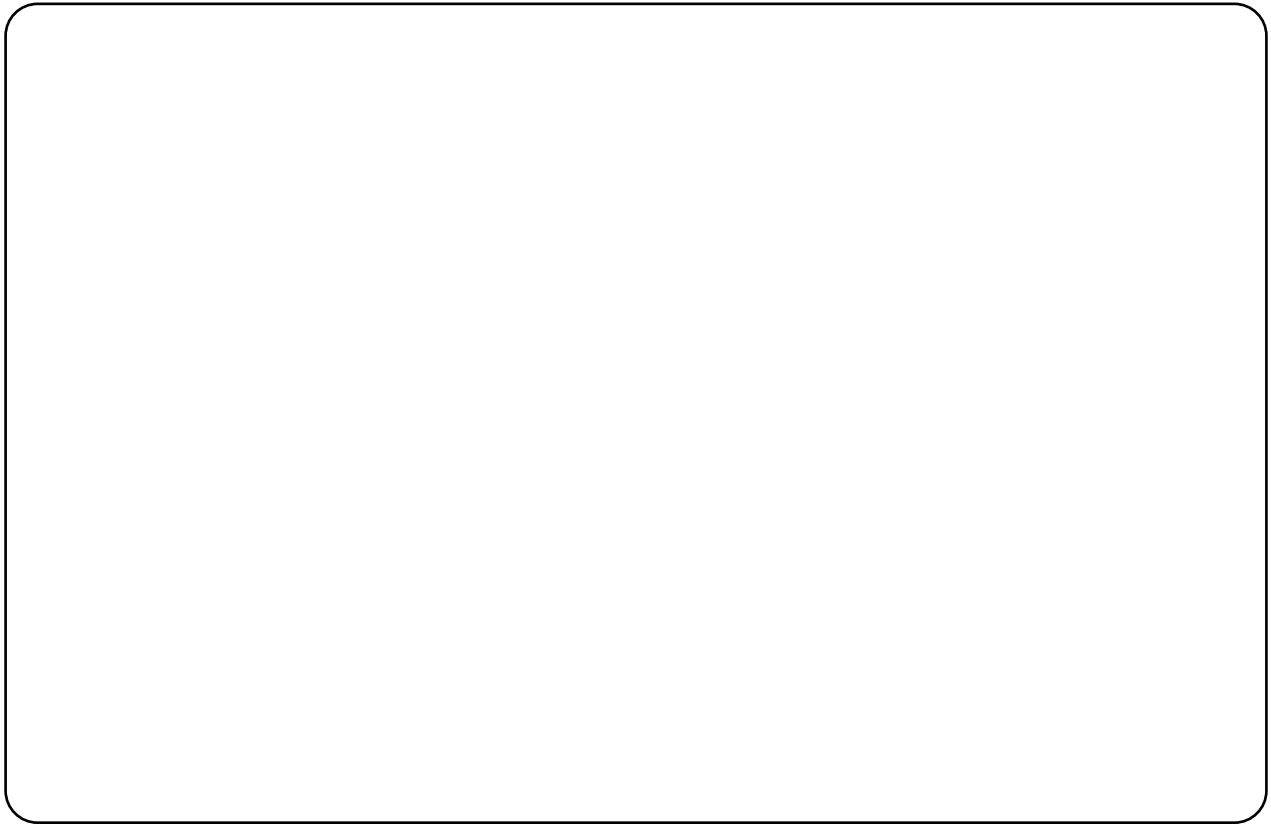
Why did Jesus say the coin belonged to Caesar? What was on the coin that indicated this?



What belongs to God? What carries His image?



Other notes:



# VIDEO DISCUSSION

## QUESTION 1

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What was the Hillel School's answer to, "Should we pay the tribute tax?" How did Jesus add on to this?

## QUESTION 2

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It can be difficult to live in a country where you disagree with the prevailing politics or rulers. What aspects of or situations in our society make you feel uneasy, like what the Jews felt about the tribute tax?

## QUESTION 3

---

Taking our role as God's *tselem* seriously means taking other human beings seriously as well. Even people who are not serving God were created to be His image and have great value in the eyes of the Lord. What individuals or groups do you have a hard time seeing as made in the image of God? Why?

# TO WRAP IT UP

Caesar made some pretty coins with his face on them. That's cute. He can have them. But you and I? We have been stamped with the image of the Creator of the universe.

For much of history, the church has lived under the thumb of rulers who did not make it easy to follow Jesus. In fact, that's still the case today for many, if not most, believers worldwide. Even in the West, we will not always be comfortable or agree with the decisions of our government leaders. And yet, God gave them control of our nation for this time.

As much as we should work for justice and peace in our society, it's important to remember that a disciple's primary identity is not with a political party. The kingdom of heaven does not require the church to gain a political upper hand. God's kingdom comes when His people live out their role as His *tselem*—when our hearts belong to Him and Him alone.

So, what do you give your heart to? What do you find takes up most of your time and energy? Where do you put most of your resources? And what claims most of your thought life?

*Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's  
and give to God what is God's.*

*Matthew 22:21*



Let's move into a time of prayer as we consider all we have learned so far.

# END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

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

Here are some things you might pray about:

- If the idea of putting your identity as God's image above your loyalty to your party or nation struck a chord with you, spend some time in prayer about it. You might break up into smaller groups for a more-focused experience.
- Ask God to show you what things capture your heart the most right now, and how you might begin to give them to God more fully.
- Are there any physical or spiritual needs among the members of your group? Pray for one another individually. Consider how you might care for each other between now and your next group meeting.

**END GROUP MEETING**

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

# A FEW PPS

## Turning Over Tables

In this episode, we looked at Jesus' response to the question about Caesar's tribute coin. But that wasn't the only coin that wreaked havoc in the lives of the Jews.

When God established worship in the tabernacle, He had long lists of different types of offerings and sacrifices. One of these was a money offering, which Israel was supposed to bring to the Lord once a year. Males aged twenty or older had to bring a half shekel each to the tabernacle, and later the temple, as an atonement offering. This half shekel went above and beyond their usual tithe.

Fast-forward to Jesus' time, when Rome controlled the temple in Jerusalem. Everyone in the Roman Empire was required to use Roman money. Like the tribute coin, the Roman denarius also had an image that proclaimed Caesar was a god. This created a huge tension for the Jews; how could they offer atonement money to God in His temple with coins stamped with a false god's image?

Even King Herod, who wasn't Jewish and cared nothing for God, recognized the gravity of the situation. Apparently he said to Caesar, "Look, I'm ruling this country on your behalf, and I want to keep it that way. But if you don't allow the Jews to use another coin, you're going to have a full-on uprising on your hands. These people will die by the thousands, and it's going to decimate one of your provinces, because these people simply will not use Roman money."

So, Rome allowed the Jews to mint temple money, which had no images on it. When a Jew went to the temple, he or she would stop in the Court of the Women (which was as close to the Holy Place as women could go) to exchange their Roman money for temple money. This currency couldn't be used outside—you couldn't go buy groceries with it or spend it anywhere else. It could only be used for a money offering or to buy sacrificial animals or goods from the sellers in the outer courts.

What story are we leading up to here?

*Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. "It is written," he said to them, "My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it 'a den of robbers.'"*

*Matthew 21:12-13 (emphasis added)*



Those money changers were swindling people! We often think Jesus was upset because people were buying and selling in the house of God. That doesn't seem to be the case, in context. The Jews who controlled the temple were setting exorbitant exchange rates between the Roman coins and the temple money. Jews who were financially stable might roll their eyes at the rip-off, but the faithful poor suffered most cruelly from this extortion.

Jesus was furious at this! God sternly warned Israel to never, ever, under any circumstances, mistreat the widow or the orphan or the poor. John even recorded that Jesus made a whip of cords to deal with those crooks (see John 2).

### **Who Else Was in Jesus' Audience?**

In Jesus' day, the Jews had organized themselves into what were known as "schools." These groups were somewhat like our political parties today. Each had distinct views on how to interpret Scripture, which commandments were the most important, and how the Jews should approach their situation with Rome. So, when Jesus was asked, "Should we pay the *kensos* tax to Rome?" each of these schools would have had its own answer—and many followers would have been present in His audience.

#### **Sadducees**

The traditional religious figures, known as Sadducees, were in the priestly school. Most people didn't like them because they were corrupt (think of the money changers in the temple). They generally lived well under Roman rule, and their policy was to avoid making waves with Caesar. They would have said, "Rome lets us control the temple, and we like that. We don't want to lose our control. Just cross your fingers behind your back and pay the tax."

#### **Essenes**

A group of those priests were disgusted by the corruption and broke away. They hated how willing the Sadducees were to compromise, and they didn't think the priestly school was strict enough in its interpretation of Scripture. The priests who broke away formed a new school out in the desert, calling themselves the Essenes. The Essenes mostly lived an isolated life, somewhat removed from the reach of Rome and avoiding the corruption of Jerusalem. This is also the group that wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls. It's unlikely there would have been many Essenes in Jerusalem when Jesus was asked about the tribute tax, but they would have said, "Absolutely not. It's unthinkable."

## **Herodians**

A third school was a group of nonreligious Jews known as Herodians. We have few historical references to this group; the Jewish historian Josephus didn't mention them at all. They are referenced three times in the Gospels, but with no description. That said, based on what we do know, many scholars—and RVL agrees—have suggested they were usually connected to the government. This likely-despised school often worked for Herod directly, buying and selling for the tetrarch, which is probably where their name comes from. Their connection to Herod, and thus Rome, coupled with their complete lack of religious fervor, earned the Herodians the hatred of the rest of the Jews.

Interestingly, this is also the group that killed Jesus. We often criticize the crowd who waved palm branches on Sunday and then screamed, "Crucify Him!" on Good Friday, but it wasn't the same crowd! The Palm Sunday group included many from the Pharisee school, while those who actually put Jesus to death were Herodians in cahoots with Rome.

What would they have answered when questioned about the tribute tax? "Who cares? Just pay the tax and get on with it."

## **Pharisees: Two Sub-Schools**

Then we come to the Pharisee School, which gets the most representation in the Gospels. The Pharisees were the religious party, and they were the most influential because the ordinary people liked their dedication. Pharisees tend to have a bad reputation among Christians today because Jesus spent a lot of time pointing out the hypocrites, but not all Pharisees were guilty of this. There were certainly Pharisees among Jesus' larger body of followers. Perhaps one of the most prominent was Nicodemus, who first met with Jesus by night. He followed Jesus secretly at first, but he ended up being one of only two Jews who were willing to defile themselves during Passover in order to bury Jesus.

The apostle Paul was also trained as a Pharisee rabbi, and he turned out to be one of the most influential Christians in history. All this to say—the Pharisees had plenty of problems for Jesus to correct, but they really did want to be faithful to God.

## **Sub-School 1: Shammai's Disciples**

As we touched on in this episode, the Pharisee School was divided into two major sub-schools. The first subgroup were the followers of a rabbi named Shammai. He taught just before Jesus' time, but he gained quite a following, and his disciples were active during Jesus' ministry. At the time when Jesus was teaching, the Shammai School was known as the strictest sect of the Pharisees: hyper-Pharisees, if you will. They tended to prefer a very literal interpretation of Scripture.

The Shammai School also included the group known as the Zealots, whom we learned a bit about in season 1. These were a military resistance group who believed the Messiah would bring His kingdom through bloodshed. Their guerrilla fighters would assassinate Romans at every chance they got—and sometimes, they would even target Jews who assisted Rome in any way. Among the Twelve, Jesus included Simon the Zealot, who was trained to kill Romans, and Matthew the tax collector, who had previously worked for the empire! It was like having a Navy SEAL and an al-Qaeda member in the same Bible study group—and Jesus made it work.

If you were to ask the Shammai School about the tribute tax, they would definitely not have approved. The Zealots may even have wanted to assassinate anyone who paid that tax.

### **Sub-School 2: Hillel's Disciples**

Finally, we come to the second sub-school of the Pharisees: the followers of the rabbi Hillel. The Hillel School preferred a less-strict interpretation of Scripture, erring on the side of the human if faced with a choice between preserving life and, let's say, not working on the Sabbath. While not identical, this school's approach was by far the closest to Jesus' teachings, and we can see that clearly in this story.

When they were asked about the tribute tax, the Hillel School pointed to Jeremiah 27. Their answer went something like this: "In Jeremiah, we learn that it is the Lord who owns the earth. He gives it to whomever He wishes. We saw Him do this with Nebuchadnezzar. I don't know why God gave our land to Rome, but we have to trust Him. If you pay the tax, you're just giving Caesar back what God already gave him."

Jesus took the Hillel School's answer and astounded the crowd by adding to it:

*Then he said to them, "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."*

*When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.*

*Matthew 22:21-22 (emphasis added)*





### **NOW IT'S YOUR TURN**

Consider how you approach the political landscape of your country today. When you think about living in a place where Christians have dwindling political power, what feelings rise up in you? What would you do if you suddenly found yourself living under the thumb of an empire like Rome? Could you still trust God if believers in your country began to face physical persecution? Make it a point to spend time talking through these ideas with the Lord before your next meeting. You may find it helpful to record your prayers in a journal.





## EPISODE 6

# THE DESERT

*When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.*

*Genesis 3:6*



# THE SHEMA

To refresh your memory about what the Shema is and why we say it, jump back to “The Words of the Shema” section just before this episode guide.

## ON YOUR OWN

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

## TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English, together as a group.

### **HEBREW**

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

### **ENGLISH**

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

# INTRODUCTION

We think of Genesis 1 as the beginning of our story with God, and it is. But it's interesting to note that Genesis was not written before Israel came to Egypt. The people of Israel had oral accounts of their ancestors, knew they belonged to a God who was supposed to deliver them, and knew which land He had promised them. But the book of Genesis wasn't given to the people until later.

In looking back at the inspired account of their ancestors, those slaves being redeemed out of Egypt would have discovered that the *tohu* they had experienced—and all the *tohu* in the whole world—came about because of our eyes. When the serpent lied in the garden, the woman looked at the fruit of the tree, and what did she think?

*When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.*

*Genesis 3:6*



Adam and Eve had heard God say not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But when they looked at the fruit, it was pleasing to their eyes, and they desired it. So, they ignored what they had heard God say. All the mess we live in today came about because people did what was right in their own eyes.

Imagine the Israelites hearing this story, some of them for the first time. Egypt, the only culture they had ever lived in up to that point, was truly a land for the eyes! Think massive pyramids, beautiful statues, enormous and intricately designed temples. Ornate clothing and furniture. Hair and makeup styles that people still imitate to this day.

And the Egyptian culture went beyond simply designing to impress the eyes; the dominant value was to prioritize one's own desires. In their minds, to see something was to desire it, and the goal was to have everything you desired. In fact, this was how Egypt defined peace, their version of *shalom*.

But God wanted a people who would not live only by their eyes and their desires, both of which had been corrupted by *tohu*. If Israel was going to be His disciple, they would need to learn how to become a people of the *ears*, a people who would live by every word that came from His mouth. God would take Israel out of the land of the eyes and bring them somewhere they could learn to hear Him.

# TALK ABOUT IT

Thinking about Egypt as a culture that impresses the eyes and prioritizes personal desires, in what ways does this remind you of our culture? How might the dominant Western culture of today be described as “a land of the eyes”?

# WATCH THE VIDEO

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

## THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

*When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.*

*Genesis 3:6-7*



*In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*

*Judges 21:25 (ESV)*



Why was Egypt called a land of the eyes?

What was the land of the ears? Why?

*Ruach* means:

How are sheep led in the Middle East?

Other notes:

# VIDEO DISCUSSION

## QUESTION 1

---

Where else in Scripture do you see this theme of people doing what was right in their own eyes? What was the result?

## QUESTION 2

---

What do you find your eyes leading you to? What desires, distractions, or worries tend to capture your attention?

## QUESTION 3

---

How can we practice being a people of the ears? In what ways can we pursue God's voice in our lives?



# TO WRAP IT UP

We live in a generation of the eyes. As in Egypt, the dominant messages in our culture are: “Do what feels good. Don’t settle for things you’ve lost interest in. If you want it, stop at nothing to get it. Speak your truth.”

God knew that once He had redeemed Israel out of slavery, they were still going to be affected by *tohu*. He gave them the sacrificial system to continually restore their relationship to Him, foreshadowing the ultimate redemption that would come in Jesus. But He knew the danger of trusting eyes and desires broken by sin. The safest way for His first disciple to live was by trusting His words instead of their eyes.

The same is true for us today. Jesus’ death and resurrection restore our relationship to God forever, but we still live in a broken world, and our eyes don’t always work properly. God is looking for a people who test what their eyes want against what their ears hear. For a disciple, there is no other way to live.

This brings us to another important point: if God wants His people to live by what they hear from Him, we must then believe He will speak to us. We have His voice in the form of His Word, the Bible. We have the body of believers, whom God will often speak through. And we have the very Spirit of God living inside us, the Counselor that Jesus asked the Father to send to teach and disciple us personally.

Do we trust God to speak to us? Do we pursue His voice in our lives? Or do we settle for church on Sunday and the occasional small group meeting, letting the chaos of our culture drown out the voice of God?

A disciple of Jesus is someone who values every word that comes from His mouth more than the desires or judgments of his or her eyes.

# END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

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

Here are some things you might pray about:

- Ask the Lord to show you what your eyes are most distracted by. Ask Him to reveal any lies you are believing, either about yourself or about Him. If anything comes to mind, pray through these points with each other.
- Ask God for a greater awareness of His voice through Scripture, through other believers, and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.
- Are there any physical or spiritual needs among the members of your group? Pray for one another individually. Consider how you might care for each other between now and your next group meeting.

**END GROUP MEETING**

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

# A FEW PPS

## ***Ma'at vs. Shalom***

In ancient Egypt, all of life depended on the Nile River. Every year, almost without fail, the great river would flood its banks in season, leaving behind rich silt that created some of the most fertile farmland in the world. Even to this day—although the Aswan Dam has messed with the flood cycle—these fields need little fertilizer because they are just so rich! But it's jarring to observe, because as soon as you reach the end of the flood zone, mere inches past where the water rose, you hit desert. It's a stark line of green against brown, of life against death. *Shalom* meets chaos.

This contrast provides a clear picture of how Egypt viewed *shalom* versus chaos. Their word for *shalom* was *ma'at*, which is connected to the goddess by the same name. It was her influence, they believed, that made the Nile flood in its season and gave her people the prosperity they desired. Egyptians defined *ma'at* as having everything your heart desired—a field full of crops, two chariots in the garage, expensive clothing, lots of gold in the pyramid. In a kingdom of the eyes, accumulating everything your eyes desired was the ultimate way to find peace.

You can imagine why Israel would have been reluctant to cross that green line when they realized God was going to lead them through the desert.

*Shalom* is not the same as *ma'at*. It's not necessarily bad to have everything you want. But *shalom* can only be restored when a human being's connection to God is restored. No matter how many good harvests or comfortable homes or stable bank accounts the Israelites accumulated, it was never going to restore what had been lost in the garden. God needed to take Israel out of *ma'at* so He could teach them about *shalom*.

## **Green Pastures**

In the desert, God would teach Israel to follow His voice instead of what seemed good to their eyes. The psalmist would later write:

*You led your people like a flock  
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.  
Psalm 77:20*



In this episode, we learned that in the Middle East, sheep (and goats) are always led by voice. The shepherd will talk to the flock all day long to let them know where he or she is, and they're trained to respond to it. They know by experience that it's for their own good to follow the shepherd, because the shepherd knows where food and water can be found.

But what food is there for a flock in the desert?

Obviously, the desert is quite dry. It almost never rains. But hard as it is to believe, there actually is the smallest amount of moisture in the air. In the cool of the night, that moisture will condense into tiny beads among the rocks and pebbles. Wherever that moisture drips into the dry soil, tiny shoots of grass will pop up. Each patch will be just enough for one mouthful of food. The shepherd will lead the sheep among these shoots to make sure they get just enough.

David would write of the Lord:

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures.  
He leads me beside still waters.  
He restores my soul.  
He leads me in paths of righteousness  
for his name's sake.  
Psalm 23:1-3 (ESV, emphasis added)*



When we think of this psalm, we probably picture a deep green English countryside, with fat, fluffy sheep enjoying alfalfa to their hearts' content. But that's not what David was talking about. David spent his early life as a shepherd—he knew exactly what kind of “green pastures” those Middle Eastern sheep have to work with. He was saying that God is like a shepherd who leads His flock on the same ancient paths through the desert, finding those tiny shoots so each sheep gets just enough for the day.

Interestingly, the paths that today's flocks use are the same ones Middle Eastern shepherds have been using for millennia. And do you know what those well-worn tracks are called? “Paths of righteousness.”

This is the discipleship training God gave Israel in the desert. He would take them out of the lush fields of Egypt, out of *ma'at*, into the desert to teach them to trust His voice by leading them like those flocks. In Deuteronomy we read:

***Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you.***

*Deuteronomy 8:2-5 (emphasis added)*



In the New Testament, Satan would find Jesus in the desert and try to tempt Him with *ma'at*. And what was Jesus' first answer to the deceiver?

***Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"***

*Matthew 4:4 (emphasis added)*

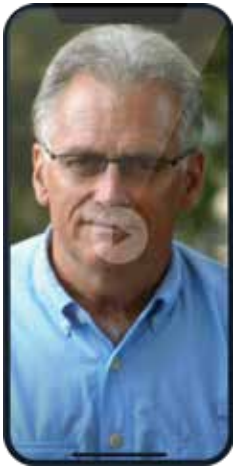


The contest between *ma'at* and *shalom* had come full circle. Jesus was the ultimate man of the ears as He showed us what it looks like to trust God's voice more than the desires of our eyes.

### **NOW IT'S YOUR TURN**

In the time before the next meeting, ask God to identify the areas of your life where you're tempted to follow your eyes, to do what you want instead of what He asks of you. You may find it helpful to record your responses in a journal.

# MORE TOOLS FOR DEEPER STUDY



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## EPISODE 7

# THE CRY

*During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God.*

*Exodus 2:23*



# THE SHEMA

To refresh your memory about what the Shema is and why we say it, jump back to “The Words of the Shema” section just before this episode guide.

## ON YOUR OWN

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

## TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English, together as a group.

### **HEBREW**

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

### **ENGLISH**

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



# INTRODUCTION

If you're a human being, you've seen suffering around you, and you've likely experienced it yourself. War and violence, overseas or in your own country. Earthquakes leaving thousands dead and others homeless. COVID shutting down the world for a time, killing many and crippling the mental health of many more. Families broken—parents struggling with addiction, children experiencing heartbreaking rejection from those who were supposed to love them.

At some point, you've likely wondered why God allows such suffering in the world. Can't He prevent it some way? Why does He allow His people, specifically, to go through times of pain and sorrow?

This episode won't have a complete answer for you. But God is faithful and trustworthy to wrestle over this with you, if you let Him. So, as we consider what it means to be a disciple, it's important to ask another question along with that first one: How does God want me to respond to suffering, especially when it's out of my control?

As we hold these questions in tension, let's explore how God's first disciple, Israel, experienced suffering, and how God called them to respond to it.

# TALK ABOUT IT

How do you see people suffering throughout Scripture? How about in modern times? What feelings do these stories stir up in you?

# WATCH THE VIDEO

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

## THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

*Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this.*

*When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.*

*Deuteronomy 24:17-22 (emphasis added)*



*During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.*

*Exodus 2:23-25 (ESV, emphasis added)*

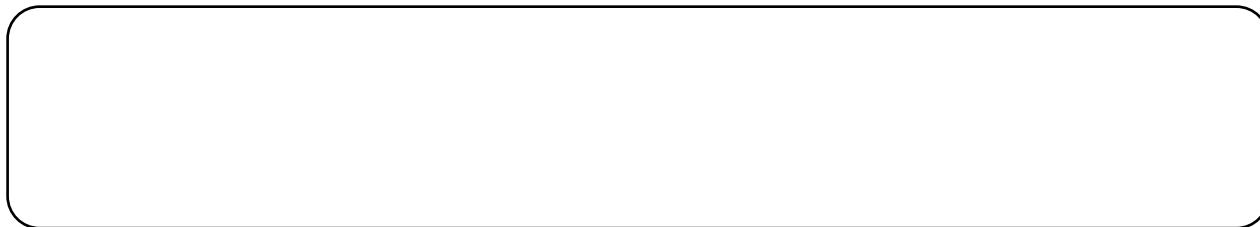


*Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.*

*Exodus 22:22-24 (emphasis added)*



*Zakar* means:



*Ze'ekah* means:



Other notes:



# VIDEO DISCUSSION

## QUESTION 1

---

Throughout the Old Testament, God reminded Israel of their deliverance from Egypt. In Deuteronomy, God repeatedly told Israel, “Remember you were slaves in Egypt.” Why do you think God wanted Israel to remember their time as slaves?

## QUESTION 2

---

What does it mean to have Jesus’ heart for those who suffer? How can we be compassionate in our response to the *ze’ekahs* we hear around us, both from fellow believers and from those who are marginalized?

## QUESTION 3

---

Think about times of pain or suffering you have experienced personally, either in the past or in the present. Tell the group your story, if you’re comfortable doing so. How have you seen God working through that situation? Or are you still waiting to see what God could possibly do with it? As we conclude this episode, prepare to pray with and for anyone who is willing to share.

# TO WRAP IT UP

As God brought Israel into the desert to become a people of the ears, He wanted them to learn how to recognize and value His voice more than the desires of their eyes. But if they were going to become His *beth ab*, His redeeming community, and His *tselem* in a broken world, they would also need to become empathetic to the needs of those around them.

***Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there.***

*Deuteronomy 24:18 (emphasis added)*



We haven't answered the question of *why* God allows suffering. We may never have a satisfactory answer this side of heaven. But it's clear that no matter why suffering happens, disciples are those who allow their experiences to help them care for others in pain.

Love the immigrant, give justice to the widows and orphans, care for the poor. And don't forget your brothers and sisters who are enduring suffering for their faith around the world. Paul said in Hebrews of persecuted believers:

***Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them,***

***and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.***

*Hebrews 13:3 (ESV, emphasis added)*



We will find people, believers and nonbelievers alike, who are experiencing *tohu* everywhere we go. How can we, as the family of God, allow our experiences to give us a compassionate heart for those who are suffering? How can we do a better job of caring for our fellow believers who are in pain? Are we willing to *zakar* our own experiences with hard times? Do we hear the *ze'ekahs* around us the way Jesus does?

# END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

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

Here are some things you might pray about:

- Prioritize praying for any group members who shared answers to discussion question 3.
- Ask God for a greater awareness of the *ze'ekah* around you, and for the wisdom to know how to respond.
- Are there any physical or spiritual needs among the members of your group? Pray for one another individually. Consider how you can care for each other between now and your next group meeting.

**END GROUP MEETING**

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

# A PS

## **A Man of Sorrows and Acquainted with Suffering**

Jesus suffered on the cross. Science has given us a great deal of insight into what would have been happening in the human body while being crucified, and let's just say it's not a good way to go. That kind of physical agony is truly unimaginable unless you've gone through torture yourself.

But Jesus knew pain and suffering in plenty of other ways, too. Long before the cross, He lost His earthly father. Joseph just disappears from the story altogether. Whether Joseph left or passed away, Jesus knew what it felt like to be fatherless.

His mother was there for Him, but even she had times when she didn't understand what Jesus was trying to do. The Gospel of Mark records that when crowds began to gather around Jesus to hear His teaching, she and Jesus' brothers thought He was "out of His mind" (Mark 3:21).

Judas sold out Jesus for money. Peter, who was probably His closest friend, denied Him three times. The other disciples ran away when Jesus needed them most. And the religious leaders, those who should have been the first to recognize the Messiah, denied and persecuted Jesus before handing Him over to be executed for crimes He didn't commit.

Jesus was so concerned that His people would learn to have empathy and compassion for others that He endured deep suffering Himself, just so He could have empathy for us.

## **NOW IT'S YOUR TURN**

In the time before the next meeting, consider the following:

- Do you need someone to walk with you through suffering?
- Do you know of someone else who might need such compassion from you?

Make a point to reach out to your group members to pray for them and check in between now and your next meeting.





## EPISODE 8

# THE FINGER OF GOD

*On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord.*

*Exodus 12:12*





# THE SHEMA

To refresh your memory about what the Shema is and why we say it, jump back to “The Words of the Shema” section just before this episode guide.

## ON YOUR OWN

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

## TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English, together as a group.

### **HEBREW**

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uve’khol naphshekah,  
uve’khol me’odekah.  
Ve’ahavta l’re’acha comocha. Amen.

### **ENGLISH**

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

# INTRODUCTION

Let's do a quick recap of what we've learned so far. We know that God's mission from the beginning has been to create *shalom* (peace). We've seen that He created human beings to be His partners in this mission. When Adam and Eve sinned and brought chaos (*tohu*) back into the world, God put His great plan of redemption in motion, preparing to redeem a people (Israel) as disciples and call them to once again partner with Him in mission. And we learned that before it was time to establish Israel as a nation, God prepared their ancestors to become a redeeming community, the kind of people who could correctly live as His *tselem* (image) in a world of chaos.

But when will we talk about Jewish rabbis and their disciples? When will we get to Jesus and the twelve guys He called? Hang in there—it's almost time! To be a disciple of Jesus today, we must recognize and understand the foundation God laid with Israel—how He wanted them to understand their role and the way He wanted them to live.

So far in season 2, we've examined Israel's story up until their time as slaves in Egypt. We've considered how God interacted with their ancestors, such as Abraham and Sarah. We've talked in depth about how Israel would have understood a human being's relationship to deities and idols, and how God would need to change that perspective. We saw how God would need to correct Israel's definition of *shalom* as they came out of Egypt. And we also explored the topic of suffering, recognizing that the Bible may not give a satisfactory answer to why God allows it, but that He expects His people to grow in empathy and treat others with compassion.

Now at last, we come to that incredible moment in history when God rescued Israel from slavery—when He would finally call them out to be His first disciple. They weren't really a nation yet. They were just a group of connected tribes who knew God had made promises to their ancestors. But God would take this group of nobodies and empower them to change the whole world.

Let's discuss a bit as we prepare to get into today's episode.

## TALK ABOUT IT

During the time of the plagues in Egypt, who was God angry at? What were the plagues meant to communicate? Discuss as a group as you prepare to watch today's episode.

# WATCH THE VIDEO

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

## THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

*Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Matthew 6:9-10 (emphasis added)*



*I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God.  
Then you will know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out  
from under the yoke of the Egyptians.  
Exodus 6:7 (emphasis added)*



*And the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I stretch out  
my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it.  
Exodus 7:5 (emphasis added)*



*And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord.*

*Exodus 14:4 (emphasis added)*



*Moses replied, "... so that you [Pharaoh] may know there is no one like the Lord our God."*

*Exodus 8:10 (emphasis added)*



*On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord.*

*Exodus 12:12 (emphasis added)*



*They sacrificed to demons that were no gods,  
to gods they had never known.*

*Deuteronomy 32:17 (ESV, emphasis added)*



*What pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God.*

*I do not want you to be participants with demons.*

*1 Corinthians 10:20 (ESV, emphasis added)*



*The magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God."  
But Pharaoh's heart was hard and he would not listen, just as the Lord had said.*

*Exodus 8:19 (emphasis added)*



Brief definition of a kingdom in the biblical sense:

Who is God at war with?

Other notes:

**The Plagues Versus the gods of Egypt:**

<b>WATER TURNED TO BLOOD</b>	<b>Osiris:</b> god of the underworld, whose bloodstream was the Nile <b>Hapi:</b> frog goddess associated with the Nile
<b>FROGS</b>	<b>Heqet:</b> another frog goddess responsible for healing the Nile
<b>GNATS OR LICE FROM THE DUST</b>	<b>Geb:</b> god of the earth
<b>SWARMS OF FLIES</b>	<b>Nephtys:</b> goddess of the air, also called “Mistress of the House”
<b>LIVESTOCK DYING</b>	<b>Hathor:</b> cow goddess who nursed the pharaohs
<b>BOILS</b>	<b>Serapis:</b> god of healing
<b>HAIL</b>	<b>Seth:</b> chaos god of storm
<b>GRASSHOPPERS DESTROYING THE GRAIN</b>	<b>Min:</b> god of harvest and fertility
<b>DARKNESS</b>	<b>Amun Ra and/or Horus:</b> god(s) of the sun
<b>DEATH OF THE FIRSTBORN</b>	<b>Osiris:</b> mentioned previously, also associated with resurrection <b>Nekhbet:</b> protector of Pharaoh and the crown prince

# VIDEO DISCUSSION

## QUESTION 1

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What might the common people of Egypt have thought during the time of the plagues? If you were an Egyptian, what would your reaction have been?

## QUESTION 2

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When you think about this idea of two kingdoms and the involvement of the spiritual realm in our lives, what questions does this bring to mind? What thoughts or emotions?

## QUESTION 3

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How can we as disciples understand what God's will is in our daily lives?

# TO WRAP IT UP

This clash of kingdoms in Egypt was the same conflict present at the beginning of Genesis. The mission of God's kingdom is always to bring *shalom*, and Satan's kingdom always wants to bring *tohu*. When God rescued Israel from Egypt, He wanted everyone involved—including Pharaoh and the Egyptians—to experience His power. Not just for the sake of saving His people, and not just to prove His strength, but so that all the human beings involved would know Him by experience.

Throughout Scripture, we see that God's kingdom always has a show of power on His part, with Him directly confronting some form of *tohu* or chaos to bring *shalom*. But how does it expand? The kingdom of God grows every time His disciples do His will.

As RVL concluded in today's episode, the source of so much of the *tohu* in our lives isn't just that we live in a broken world, though we certainly do. So much of the chaos we experience comes from the decision to follow the wrong king. Every time we decide—consciously or not—to contradict God's will, we invite *tohu* by giving away an inch of God's kingdom. And as His disciples, we simply cannot do that.

So, how do we know what God's will is? Well, knowing our Bible is the best place to start. What did Jesus say is the most important of God's commandments?

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

*Mark 12:29-31*



Love God with everything you have, remembering that all resources belong to the Father. Help the foreigner. Do justice to the widows and orphans. Engage the marginalized—everyone from the ex-believers to the ones who have never known the Father. Behave like God's *tselem* in every situation, whether you're on a date, doing your job, loving your friends, or dealing with difficult people.

Every time we do God's will, we bring a bit of *shalom*. We show the world a glimpse of what God is like. And when we're willing to live like this, we partner with God in growing His kingdom, inch by inch by faithful inch.



# END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

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

Here are some things you might pray about:

- Ask God to reveal specific, practical ways in which you can do His will and expand His kingdom in your daily life.
- Are there any physical or spiritual needs among the members of your group? Pray for one another individually. Consider how you might care for each other between now and your next group meeting.

**END GROUP MEETING**

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

# A FEW PPS

## Rats to Garbage

In Egypt, Satan's power flowed through their religious systems, particularly represented by their gods. Not that each god was an individual demon, but certainly, there was demonic involvement in that pantheon. The man-made religious system of Egypt provided a perfect avenue for the kingdom of darkness to flourish, because anything that separates us from God causes *tohu*. What could cause greater separation than the worship of a false god? Just as garbage will always attract rats, this system of idol worship created a nest of chaos that was just begging for Satan's kingdom to enter.

And the Bible makes it clear that this is exactly what happens when people worship false gods. When confronting Israel about their own idol worship in Deuteronomy, God would say of them:

*They stirred him [God] to jealousy with strange gods;  
with abominations they provoked him to anger.  
They sacrificed to demons that were no gods,  
to gods they had never known,  
to new gods that had come recently,  
whom your fathers had never dreaded.  
You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you,  
and you forgot the God who gave you birth.  
Deuteronomy 32:16-18 (ESV, emphasis added)*



Paul likewise warned the believers in Corinth, a city built on worshipping the Greco-Roman pantheon, to have nothing to do with idols because it would connect them to that other kingdom:

*Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that **what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?***

1 Corinthians 10:14-22 (ESV, emphasis added)



If you look at the Exodus story in this way, the plagues suddenly make much more sense. They weren't just random attacks on Egypt. If you examine them in context, each plague directly challenged specific Egyptian gods—facades behind which Satan's kingdom was growing. And God was not having it.

### **Sticks and Snakes**

When God first met with Moses in the burning bush, the man was tending sheep in the wilderness. Apparently, God thought shepherding was going to be important training for Moses, and he spent forty years doing so before God decided he was ready. (Never underestimate the mundane things God has you doing, no matter how long He calls you to do them.)

Moses was skeptical that anyone in Egypt would listen, especially Pharaoh. As usual, God was completely unbothered.

*Then the LORD said to him, "What is that in your hand?"*

*"A staff," he replied.*

*The LORD said, "Throw it on the ground."*

*Moses threw it on the ground and it became a snake, and he ran from it. Then the LORD said to him, "Reach out your hand and take it by the tail." So Moses reached out and took hold of the snake and it turned back into a staff in his hand.*

*Exodus 4:2-4 (emphasis added)*



It's fascinating that God chose Moses' shepherding staff (and later Aaron's as well) to be the symbol of His power, because Pharaoh had a staff, too. In Egyptian artwork, Pharaoh is always depicted holding a striped shepherd's crook, a straight stick with a curved hook on one end. This was an important symbol in the Egyptian

mind. In their writing, one of the hieroglyphs needed for the word *ruler* was that shepherd's crook. Pharaohs would carry it to communicate their authority over the people, as if to say, "I am the shepherd, and you are my flock. My authority over you is absolute." Pharaoh, in his own might and backed by the gods, decided who lived and who died, who was free and who was a slave, who prospered and who was doomed to suffer.

Does it begin to make sense why God made Moses work as a real shepherd for forty years? Or why He used so much sheep-and-shepherd imagery when He brought His people into the desert? The Good Shepherd is nothing like Pharaoh! God needed to reorder Israel's perspective so they could understand He was not like the rulers of Egypt—or indeed, like any other earthly ruler. God's disciple needed to see what He was like if they were going to imitate Him.

Picture Moses showing up in Pharaoh's palace with a shepherd's crook of his own. Imagine the sound of the wood tapping the floor in time with his footsteps as he entered—a sound Pharaoh would come to know well. And that sound would always be accompanied by the message: "The God of Israel demands you let His people go."

Also in Egyptian artwork, depictions of Pharaoh always include cobra imagery. Think of that iconic royal headdress with the hooded cobra affixed in the middle of Pharaoh's forehead. The snake was known as the protector of Pharaoh, and you always see it accompanying him in statues and paintings. Well, before any of the plagues occurred, God took that ordinary shepherd's staff and turned it into what?

A *snake*. God seems to have a real literary flair, if you haven't already noticed. He just can't resist a good metaphor.

*So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the LORD commanded. Aaron threw his staff down in front of Pharaoh and his officials, and it became a snake. Pharaoh then summoned wise men and sorcerers, and the Egyptian magicians also did the same things by their secret arts: Each one threw down his staff and it became a snake. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. Yet Pharaoh's heart became hard and he would not listen to them, just as the Lord had said.*

*Exodus 7:10-13 (emphasis added)*



The Egyptian snakes, those symbols of Pharaoh's protection, were swallowed up by the symbol of God's power. It's interesting that the Text says, "But Aaron's *staff* swallowed up their *staffs*" (verse 12). Not snakes—staffs. It's almost as if the writer wanted to highlight it: This isn't about the snakes. It's about the powers behind them, the powers that are gearing up for another clash in the war of the two kingdoms. God was not so subtly warning Pharaoh: "The might of My little finger is going to swallow up the strong arms of your so-called gods."

## By the Finger of God

As we've discussed, this conflict shows up all throughout Scripture, as the kingdom of Satan challenges the kingdom of God. In fact, one of Jesus' most common miracles in the Gospels was casting demons out of people. On one such occasion, the crowd accused Him of doing so by the power of the evil one. Jesus responded with an interesting allusion to the story of the Exodus:

*Jesus was driving out a demon that was mute. When the demon left, the man who had been mute spoke, and the crowd was amazed. But some of them said, "By Beelzebul, the prince of demons, he is driving out demons." Others tested him by asking for a sign from heaven.*

*Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them: "Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall. If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? I say this because you claim that I drive out demons by Beelzebul. Now if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your followers drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if I drive out demons **by the finger of God**, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."*

*Luke 11:14-20 (emphasis added)*



By alluding to the "finger of God," Jesus called His audience back to that contest in Egypt. (Not that it was much of a contest—God wiped the floor with the powers behind Egypt.) Recall what the magicians said to Pharaoh when they began to understand the gravity of their situation:

*The magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God."  
But Pharaoh's heart was hard and he would not listen, just as the Lord had said.*

*Exodus 8:19 (emphasis added)*



Jesus' audience, as biblically literate as they were, would have recognized this allusion immediately. It's as if Jesus was communicating, "Remember where *tohu* comes from? Remember what that chaos did to our ancestors in Egypt? God can crush the power of that other kingdom with just a flick of His little finger, and I have that same power to bring My kingdom here today."

Jesus then continued:

***When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up his plunder.***

*Luke 11:21-22 (emphasis added)*



Remember that this was a continuation of His answer about whose power was driving out demons. The strong man, therefore, represents the power of Satan—the same power behind the gods of Egypt. That “someone stronger,” the one who can overpower the strong man, is God Himself—fully present here in the person of Jesus. In freeing the man who had been mute from the demon, Jesus was using His little finger to bind the power of Satan’s kingdom enough to take away his possessions: in this case, the man himself.

What a fascinating picture of the kingdom of heaven! In the continuing war of the two kingdoms, God’s has always been the stronger. In Matthew, Jesus told Peter:

***I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.***

*Matthew 16:19 (emphasis added)*



In a very real sense, Jesus has bound “the strong man” enough that His disciples, by His authority and through the power of God’s finger, are able to join Him in expanding the kingdom of heaven. The evil one is a strong guy—don’t underestimate him. But there’s nothing about the kingdom of darkness that Jesus can’t handle, that can’t be overcome by the power of God.

### **NOW IT'S YOUR TURN**

In the time before the next meeting, consider how you have seen God's kingdom come in your own life. How can you expand it by doing His will? Spend time in prayer, asking God to convict and inspire you in practical ways. You may find it helpful to record your thoughts in a journal.





## EPISODE 9

# THE SHEPHERDS

*But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered,  
"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

*Luke 15:2*





# THE SHEMA

To refresh your memory about what the Shema is and why we say it, jump back to “The Words of the Shema” section just before this episode guide.

## ON YOUR OWN

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

## TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English, together as a group.

### **HEBREW**

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

### **ENGLISH**

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

# INTRODUCTION

We've followed Israel's redemption from slavery and their training as God's first disciple—His “firstborn son,” as it says many times in the Old Testament. But once Israel entered the Promised Land, equipped with the Law and the sacrificial system and a new identity as God's chosen people, they did what human beings usually do. They struggled to stick to the mission. Sometimes they did a great job living out their new identity, and sometimes their failures were truly spectacular. God finally allowed them to spend seventy years in exile before they could return to the land and rebuild the temple.

But by Jesus' day, most Jews were doing their best to be as faithful as possible to God's mission, to follow all God's commands. They didn't want to repeat the experience of exile, and they were waiting desperately for their Messiah to come and rescue them (in their understanding) from the oppression of Rome.

Part of this determination to be faithful showed itself in their collective attempt to stay as far away from *tohu* as they possibly could. As we've discussed before, the religious Jews of Jesus' time saw Rome as the ultimate source of chaos, and they avoided Gentiles like the plague. But the pendulum of their commitment to be faithful had swung so far in the opposite direction that they even avoided their own people who had become marginalized. The emphasis was on keeping God's commandments at all costs, no matter what. The problem was, this often came at the expense of being a redeeming community.

So, when Jesus began His ministry and spent much of His time eating with “sinners,” He surprised people. This rabbi from Galilee, the one people said might be the Messiah, was spending time with *those* people? What on earth was He thinking?

How would Jesus react to Israel's departure from the mission God had given them all those years earlier in the desert, when they had learned to be redemptive?

## TALK ABOUT IT

When you consider the struggle between avoiding a side of culture that might cause you to stumble and reaching out to people who reside there in the chaos, what values help you decide where to get involved?

# WATCH THE VIDEO

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

## THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

*You led your people like a flock  
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.*

*Psalm 77:20*



*When David saw the angel who was striking down the people, he said to the Lord, "I have sinned; I, **the shepherd, have done wrong.** These are but sheep. What have they done? Let your hand fall on me and my family."*

*2 Samuel 24:17 (emphasis added)*



*The word of the Lord came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: **Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and **no one searched or looked for them.****'"*

*Ezekiel 34:1-6 (emphasis added)*



*Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

*Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he*

*joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."*

*Luke 15:1-7 (emphasis added)*

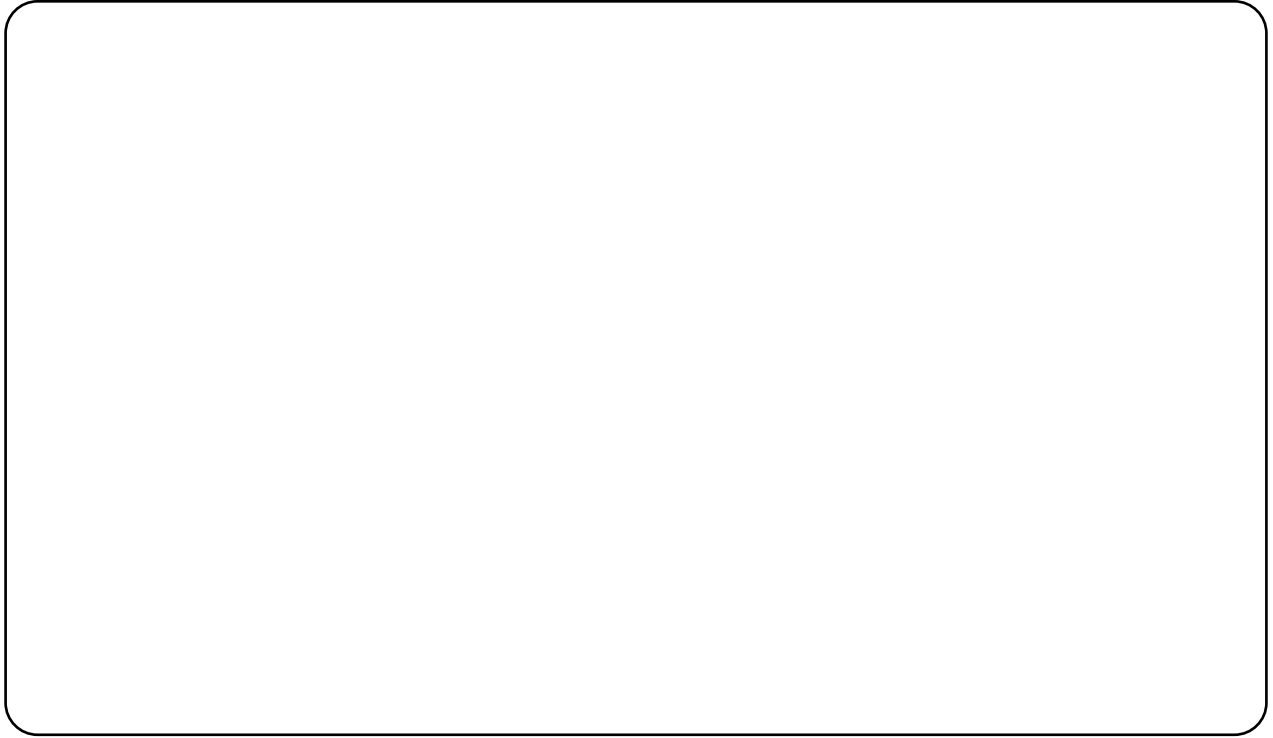


Who were the shepherds of Israel in Jesus' day?

Definition of "sinners" in Jesus' day:

Who are the "sheep" and "shepherds" in this part of Jesus' Luke 15 parable?

Other notes:



# VIDEO DISCUSSION

## QUESTION 1

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As a group, recall the categories of people in Jesus' day who were considered "sinners." How is this different from the way we might define sinners today?

## QUESTION 2

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What, if anything, is surprising or confusing about Jesus' establishing long-term relationships with these people? How might these relationships have implied an approval of their life choices? How might it not?

## QUESTION 3

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In our culture, who might be the equivalents of the sinners of Jesus' day? What might it look like to "eat with them"?

# TO WRAP IT UP

We may not have a specified class of people called “sinners” in today’s Western culture, but we can certainly understand the Jews’ hesitation to associate with people they considered bad news. That desire to avoid anything that might cause us to stumble is still alive and well in the church today, and not without good reason. Perhaps you were taught in Sunday school that “bad company corrupts good character” (1 Corinthians 15:33). Or perhaps you worry that building a relationship with someone implies an approval of his or her choices. In a society where there’s little room for healthy disagreement, and where being “cancelled” is just as common among believers as it is in the secular world, the stakes can feel high when it comes to deciding who we spend time with.

It’s fascinating that Jesus didn’t seem to consider this much of a problem. He was as unconcerned by the Pharisees’ opinion of Him as He was by the danger of associating with people in *tohu*. He knew exactly who He was and what He had come to do, and He approached these situations through the lens of a shepherd seeking lost sheep.

Once again, we see a big theme of discipleship: If we want to be disciples of Jesus, we must walk as He walked (see 1 John 2:6). We must learn to be so confident in who we are as His partners that we can seek the lost with the same determination Jesus had. It doesn’t mean shouting Bible verses at people. It’s not railing against the behavior of someone you barely know. It’s taking the time to build relationships with the marginalized, both those who are lost by choice and those who are lost because of the *tohu* of others.

Whatever it looks like in your context, seeking the lost is an essential piece of becoming a disciple of Jesus.

# END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

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

Here are some things you might pray about:

- Ask God for wisdom in how you might “eat with sinners” around you.
- Are there any physical or spiritual needs among the members of your group? Pray for one another individually. Consider how you might care for each other between now and your next group meeting.

**END GROUP MEETING**

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



# A FEW PPS

## Clean and Unclean

When God gave Israel the sacrificial system and the Law in Leviticus, this concept of being “clean” or “ritually pure” was a huge deal. To boil it down, the idea is basically that God is holy, which in the biblical sense means “unique or set apart.” He is completely morally righteous, and He is completely unique as the creative force that formed and sustains everything that exists. He is Creator, the one and only.

In the beginning, human beings were set apart as holy, too, because they were created in God’s very image. Adam and Eve walked freely with God in the garden. But when sin entered humanity, it broke the relationship between God and humankind. God’s presence became dangerous for these newly imperfect people to come near—not because His presence was suddenly bad, but because it is so intensely, purely good that anything antithetical to His nature cannot exist there.

Fast-forward to later in the Old Testament, when God established Israel as a nation. For these morally flawed, now-mortal human beings to come into His presence, they would need to become holy again, in some sense. God gave them the sacrificial system to cover their sin, but in order to participate in that system in the first place, they needed to be in a “ritually pure” or “clean” state.

Leviticus outlines many things that could make a person ritually impure—not necessarily “sinful,” but simply unfit to participate in tabernacle (and later, temple) worship. This includes things like childbirth, bleeding, disease, sex, contact with death, consumption of unclean food, and so on. Not all these things were bad—God made sex and babies to be good things, for example—they were just considered “unclean” or “ritually impure.”

This can be difficult to understand, or even feel downright offensive to the modern Western mindset. Childbirth is a natural process that leads to one of life’s greatest blessings, after all! A simple way to look at it is that all the things that made a person “unclean” were either literally messy or somehow connected to *tohu*. When people entered God’s presence, for their own good they needed to be in a holy state.

If a person became ritually impure, the law outlined ways for that person to become clean again. When a woman gave birth, she would be unclean for a temporary period (during which, to be honest, it was probably really nice for her to rest and recover without having to go anywhere or see lots of people). When that time was up, she would bring the required offerings to the Lord and become clean again (see Leviticus 12). When someone came in contact with a dead body, such as having to bury a relative, that person would be unclean for a week. He or she would need to be purified with water on the third and seventh days, and then ritual purity would be restored (see Numbers 19).

You can see how this mindset would make the Jews of Jesus’ day intensely reluctant to come in contact with anything that represented *tohu*. To be unclean or ritually impure meant to be cut off from much of the community life. Who would want to be marginalized, even temporarily?

## Who Were the Sinners?

This is the context into which we find Jesus eating with “sinners.” In a community obsessed with ritual purity, Jesus formed deep relationships with those who were excluded from community life. The group known as “sinners” went beyond those who were simply unclean because of everyday or common circumstances. Sinners were those who consciously and over a long period of time separated themselves from the religious life of the community—or even from their own *beth abs*.

This included those who were ritually impure because of an unresolved medical issue, such as lepers or the bleeding woman who touched Jesus’ cloak (see Luke 8). For varied reasons, the lame and the otherwise handicapped were also considered sinners, likely because there was the idea that physical ailments could be punishment for sin. This was the Pharisees’ attitude toward the man who was born blind, whom Jesus healed in John 9. Even if these people wanted to be faithful to all God’s commands, they could not rejoin the religious life of their community because their physical issues made them ritually impure on a permanent, or at least long-term, basis.

“Sinners” also included those who mingled regularly with Gentiles, because that meant they were constantly coming in contact with unclean things. Tax collectors were one such example—not only did people hate them because they were often corrupt, but they were also constantly ritually impure from their contact with Rome. To become a tax collector was often to reject your own *beth ab*.

Finally, there were the morally impure, who were excluded from the community because of their actions. Think thieves, murderers, prostitutes, criminals of all kinds, the demon-possessed, idol worshippers—all those who might fall into the modern definition of “sinner.”

Jesus saw these people not as enemies or problems to be ignored, but as lost sheep who needed someone to love them. He constantly initiated relationships with these people, inviting Himself over to their homes (think Zacchaeus the tax collector) and building long-term trust with them. And in His parable about the lost in Luke 15, He made it clear that God’s people are meant to do likewise.

## NOW IT’S YOUR TURN

In the time before the next meeting, consider your answers from question 3 in the group discussion. Who might fall into the category of “sinners”—people who are marginalized or excluded from God’s family, either by choice or because of hurt? How might God be calling you to seek after one or two of these lost sheep in your life? You may find it helpful to record your thoughts in a journal.



## EPISODE 10

# THE LOST

*But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.*

*Luke 15:32*



# THE SHEMA

To refresh your memory about what the Shema is and why we say it, jump back to “The Words of the Shema” section just before this episode guide.

## ON YOUR OWN

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

## TOGETHER

Stand together and recite the *Shema* in Hebrew and in English, together as a group.

### **HEBREW**

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

### **ENGLISH**

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

# INTRODUCTION

As we reach the halfway point of this four-season study, season 2 has laid down a broad foundation for understanding discipleship. We have explored how God established Israel as His first disciple, examining how He prepared and trained them and what He expected them to do. We have unpacked the central principles of being God's image to the rest of the world, recognizing the importance of giving others an accurate glimpse of what He is like. And we have emphasized, over and over, how important it is that God's people live as a redeeming community, understanding ourselves as God's family members who help Him welcome marginalized people back into the Father's house.

It goes without saying that in His time on earth, Jesus lived out that role perfectly. As God in human form, He showed us both the heart of God and the ideal that God wants His people to be. And what is that ideal? It's the kind of people who will partner with God in bringing *shalom* by loving the marginalized.

Let's continue our exploration of Jesus' parable of the lost in Luke 15, recognizing how Jesus walked this out perfectly so we can follow His example.

# TALK ABOUT IT

As we conclude season 2, what are your major takeaways? What did you like? What was challenging or left you with questions?

# WATCH THE VIDEO

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

## THE VERY WORDS OF GOD

*Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

*Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. **Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?** And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I **have found** my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.*

*"Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. **Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?** And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*

*Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.*

*"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.*

*"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: **Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.**' So he got up and went to his father.*

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

*"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'*

*"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.*

*"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'*

*"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'*

*"My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"*

*Luke 15 (emphasis added)*



*Pharaoh quickly summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "I have sinned against the Lord your God and against you. Now forgive my sin once more and pray to the Lord your God to take this deadly plague away from me."*

*Exodus 10:16-17 (emphasis added)*



What was the shepherd celebrating? What did the sheep contribute?

[Empty rounded rectangular box for notes]

What was the woman celebrating? What did the coin contribute?

[Empty rounded rectangular box for notes]

What were the father and the *beth ab* celebrating? What did the son contribute?

[Empty rounded rectangular box for notes]

Other notes:

[Empty rounded rectangular box for notes]



# VIDEO DISCUSSION

## QUESTION 1

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How have you seen God welcome you into His family in your life?

## QUESTION 2

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Who are you in the parable of the prodigal? When faced with “lost” people, do you find yourself reacting more like the father, or like the older brother? Why is that?

## QUESTION 3

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What thoughts or emotions hold you back from engaging marginalized people in your life—people who have either walked away from their faith or who have never known God?

# TO WRAP IT UP

When we disagree with the choices or the behavior of others, it's easy to think we need to cut them off. We think that if only we can make them uncomfortable enough, they'll repent and change their ways to repair the relationship. The onus of reconciliation is thus placed on the people who have been marginalized. We make them responsible to find themselves.

Jesus made it clear in this parable that this sort of thinking is backward. Lost sheep don't come home on their own. Lost coins don't come home on their own. Lost sons don't make it all the way home on their own. It is the patient, dedicated, loving seeking by the shepherd, the woman, and the father that makes it possible for the lost to truly become found. As Paul would later write, it is the kindness of God that leads us to real repentance (see Romans 2:4).

It's not the job of God's *beth ab* to follow in the footsteps of the Pharisees, responding with rejection and avoidance every time we encounter someone who's lost. That kind of behavior is exactly what Jesus wanted to correct.

Disciples of Jesus don't burn bridges. We build them. Whether the marginalized choose to cross is their own affair, but our job is the same either way. And remember, we're meant to do this together.

At the end of episode 1 of this season, we asked the questions: Are we willing to love marginalized people in such a way that they become part of our daily lives? And are we part of a faith community that we can invite people into?

As we conclude this season, consider your current answers to these questions. Ask God to give you whatever you need to say yes in both cases, molding your heart after His own as He trains you to be His disciple, to walk as Jesus walked.

# GET READY FOR SEASON 3

This is the end of season 2 of *RVL Discipleship: The Study*. You've made it so far! In this season, we focused on:

- Understanding the *beth ab* as a metaphor for how God's kingdom works
- Understanding the role of redeeming and hospitality in how God brings *shalom* to chaos

- Examining how God wants His people to be a redeeming community
- Unpacking what it means to be God's *tselem*, His image in the world
- Understanding how God prepared and trained Israel to be His disciple
- Recognizing that a disciple is someone who walks as Jesus walked, and that means seeking the lost

With the foundation from the first two seasons under our feet, season 3 will explore discipleship in the context of the first century. How did Jesus carry out His ministry as a Jewish rabbi, and how can our insight into that culture help us to understand Him better? Get ready to find out with the next season of *RVL Discipleship*.

## END IN PRAYER TOGETHER

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

Here are some things you might pray about:

- As a group, ask God to fill you with His Spirit and to give you courage and passion to live as His *beth ab*, His *tselem* who is willing to seek the lost.
- Are there any physical or spiritual needs among the members of your group? Pray for one another individually, and consider how you might continue to care for each other regularly, even if your group meetings are pausing for now.

**END GROUP MEETING**

*To dig deeper into the content from this episode,  
check out the PS section on your own.*

# A PS

## ***Haverim***

The word *haver* in Hebrew means “friend.” *Haverim* is the plural form. “Friends” in this sense did not mean affinity groups, necessarily—people who were friends because they just “clicked” or because they got along easily. *Haverim* were people who consciously decided to establish a dedicated relationship for the purpose of helping each other achieve a common life goal.

In that sense, it was almost like the covenant between equals that we talked about in episode 2: people who came together for a purpose. *Haverim* may or may not have liked each other naturally, but they forged deep personal relationships through serious commitment to one another.

This is what the Pharisees called each other. They were *haverim*, deeply committed to being faithful to God’s commands and keeping each other accountable to them. They argued like cats and dogs, but at the end of the day, their level of commitment to one another was extremely high.

Now, some—but certainly not all—Pharisees were hypocrites, failing to practice what they preached or focusing on those practices that would benefit them personally. Jesus certainly rebuked them on occasion. But it is fascinating that in two of the three celebrations in Luke 15, *haverim* is the word He used for “friends.”

*Then he calls his friends [haverim] and neighbors together and says, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.”*

*Luke 15:6*



*She calls her friends [haverim] and neighbors together and says, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.”*

*Luke 15:9*



It's easy to see two implications here. One, Jesus was continuing His invitation to the Pharisees to join Him in eating with sinners. As the de facto "shepherds" of Israel at the time, they should have seen it as their job to seek after marginalized people. By choosing the same word the Pharisees used to describe each other, He was saying, "Hey, I'm glad you're united in a common goal! But that goal needs to include eating with sinners."

Two, Jesus implied that we all need *haverim*! It's not easy to use our resources to redeem the marginalized. It's not easy to practice extravagant hospitality. It's not easy to behave like God's *tselem* in every single situation. It's not easy to let suffering move us to compassion. And it's not easy to eat with sinners. God knows that the bar to be His disciple is a high one, and that's why He never meant for us to do it alone.

Whether or not we agree on all points of theology . . .

or our personalities click . . .

or our political views align . . .

or our expression of worship is similar . . .

or we're at compatible levels of maturity . . .

or we feel called to the same ministries . . .

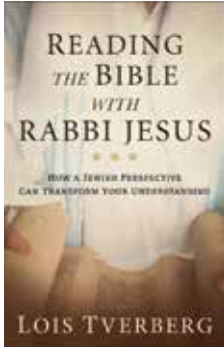
or we even like each other . . .

followers of Jesus must, without exception, be committed to supporting each other to the bitter end. And really, now, are you going to let the Pharisees do a better job of this than you?

If we want to be disciples of Jesus, we've got to find some *haverim*. And when one of us brings home a lost sheep or coin or son, we'd better be ready throw a great party!

### **NOW IT'S YOUR TURN**

This concludes season 2 of this study. Take some time to consider and pray about what you've learned so far. How might God be calling you to take the next step in living as His disciple?



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**TEXT RVL to 32728** for updates on new seasons and additional resources from Ray.



# HEBREW WORD GLOSSARY

**Beth ab** | literally, “the father’s house.” The dominant patriarchal social construct of biblical Jewish culture, spanning from the Old Testament to the New. A *beth ab* was an extended family unit that lived together, in tents or, later, in houses. This group would include the patriarch, his wife or wives, any young children, and their adult sons and their sons’ families. Daughters would join the *beth ab* of their husbands when they got married.

**Ga’al** | “to redeem.” Refers to the Middle Eastern practice of addressing whatever has disconnected an individual from a *beth ab*, using the family’s resources to bring that person back into the family.

**Haverim** | serious, personal friends who are deeply committed to each other in pursuit of a common goal

**Ruach** | spirit or wind or breath

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

**Shema** | to hear; to obey or respond to

**Tohu v’vohu** | formless and empty; also conflict and disharmony; disorder and dysfunction; deterioration or decay; confusion and brokenness. The opposite of the character of God. Symbolized in Scripture by churning water.

**Tselem** | image or likeness

**Yadah** | to know intimately, through deep experience

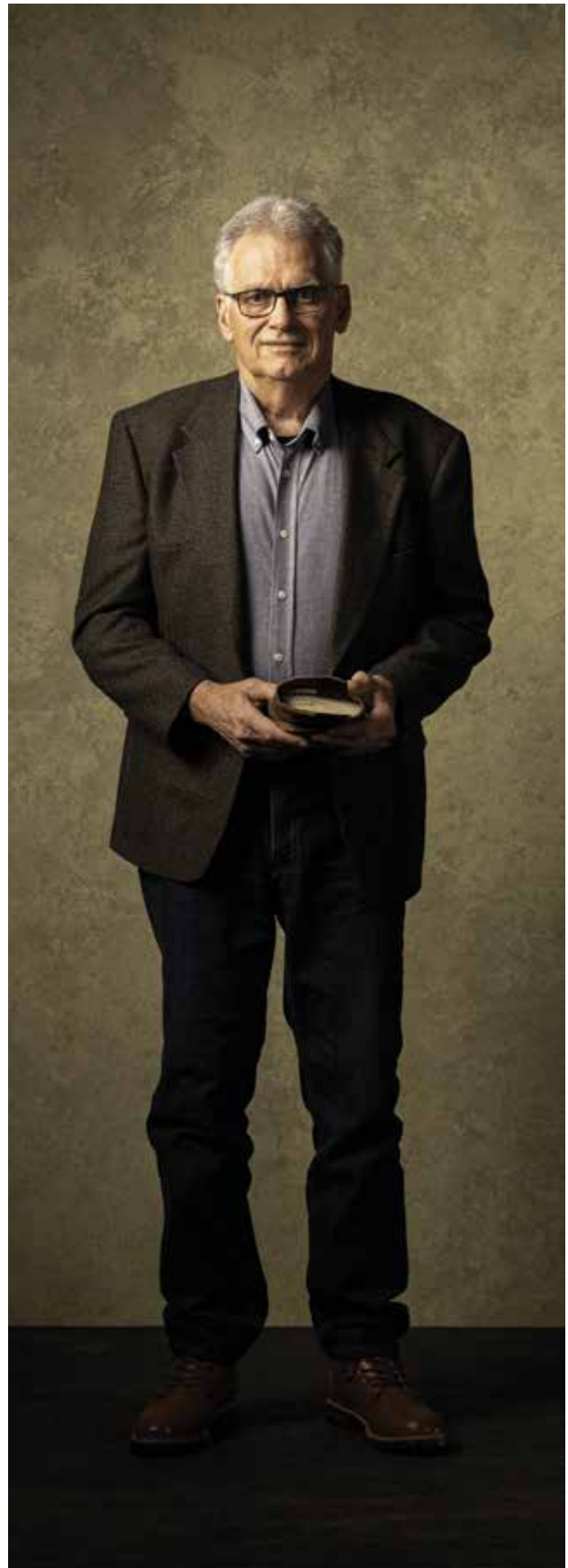
**Zakar** | remember and respond accordingly

**Ze’ekah** | a wordless cry of hopelessness or despair

# ABOUT RVL

Since receiving his Master of Divinity from Westminster Theological Seminary in 1976, Ray Vander Laan has been actively involved in studying and teaching Jewish culture using the methods of Jewish education. He has continued graduate studies in Jewish Studies in the United States, Israel, Turkey, and Egypt. He has been a teacher for more than thirty-five years and is an ordained minister with the Christian Reformed Church. He has also authored a book titled *Echoes of His Presence*, published by Focus on the Family. Vander Laan founded That the World May Know Ministries in 1998 and has taken more than 10,000 people with him on his study tours of Israel, Turkey, and Egypt.

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





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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES – WEBSITES

**Our Rabbi Jesus:** [www.ourrabbijesus.com](http://www.ourrabbijesus.com)

**Bible Project:** [www.bibleproject.com](http://www.bibleproject.com)

**En Gedi:** [www.engediresourcecenter.com](http://www.engediresourcecenter.com)

# ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

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

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

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