



Headlines and Heartaches

Leader Notes

Current Events in Light of the Gospel

by Rev. Ken Chitwood

The world is always changing. Religion, technology, education, the environment, eating habits, dress—there seems to be nothing that does not change. Some of these changes we like, others make us afraid, angry, or full of anxiety.

In the middle of all this change, we wonder what will happen to us. We question God as we see news of tragedy and death, chaos and uncertainty. We fear others even as we also want to experience and enjoy the world that is evermore at our fingertips.

How do we faithfully follow Jesus amidst all these changes, questions, and feelings? The good news is that in this world of uncertainty, we can be certain that God is in the world. God is at work in the world bringing love, hope, and peace. What's more? God is calling us to do this work in the world as well.

This four-part study helps groups explore current events, worldviews, and the calling of Christians in the world through biblical narratives that offer followers of Jesus timeless truths for navigating a world of change.

Study One: The World looks at how God's promises and blessings remain, even though the world is constantly changing.

Study Two: God in the World considers God's work in the world in light of the tragedy, chaos, and pain we often see in it.

Study Three: Me in the World examines the calling of Christians who are told to be "in, but not of" the world.

Study Four: "Us" and "Them" in the World takes the lessons above and helps students consider how God's real presence in the world, and their calling as Christians, can shape their relationships with "others."

Leader's notes are in red throughout.

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STUDY 1: THE WORLD

Keep the main thing, the main thing: The world changes constantly, dramatically even. God doesn't change. He is who He always is. God does what He always does. God loves how He always loves. His commandments, promises, and blessings remain even though this world changes and will eventually pass away.

Introduction

THE WORLD IS ALWAYS CHANGIN'...

- **Take out your phone, open your laptop, or unlock your tablet and take a look at the recent news headlines. Identify four to five different news items or headlines. What's going on in the world? Who is in the news? Where is it happening?**

Lead students through this activity and help them identify headlines, news stories that move them, and narratives that pop off the page. These can be local, regional, national, or global. Try to get a mix. You might also note what websites your students naturally gravitate toward...

- **Take some time to reflect on the news headlines. How do they make you feel? What do they tell us about the world? Does the news fill you with hope or fear? Why? Anger or joy? Hate or compassion? Why?**

As you lead students through this discussion you might want to note some of their reactions. There are no right answers here. This is a time for honest reflection and transparency.

Our Look in the Book

Take a look at the headlines in Habakkuk (the various section titles) and take some time to discuss the historical background and general outline of this Hebrew book.

WHAT WAS GOING ON IN THE TIME OF HABAKKUK?

Have you ever complained to God? Do you ever wonder if you can/should complain to God? Have you ever wondered how God can let evil happen and seemingly not do anything about it? Have you ever wondered how you are supposed to be content in a world of pain, suffering, and evil?

A guy named Habakkuk wondered all of this, complained to God about it and not only lived to tell others, but in fact, was given some great answers to his questions. Studying Habakkuk is as timely as ever. As we look around at our world and see evil running rampant, frequent destruction and widespread suffering, most of us wonder to ourselves, "Where is God in all of this?"

The book of Habakkuk deals with the problem of theodicy. Theodicy concerns the discussion of God's goodness and omnipotence in view of the existence of evil. How do we call God "a good God" when we know that so much evil, pain and suffering exists in this world?

To get a sense of how Habakkuk's time connects to ours, it's helpful to know some of the historical background of Habakkuk. Feel free to explore the context a bit more, but here is what was happening right around the time Habakkuk would have been prophesying to the people of Judah.

Key Question:
How do we call God "a good God" when we know that so much evil, pain and suffering exists in this world?

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609 B.C.E. — Josiah, attempting to halt the advance of the Egyptians into Palestine and onto fight against the Chaldeans, attacks the Egyptian king Neco and is killed by Egyptian archers at the battle of Megiddo. Judah is placed under the reign of an Egyptian vassal, Jehoakim, whose only interest is his own self advancement.

Habakkuk's ministry seems to fit best here, between 612 and 605 B.C.

605 B.C.E. — Egyptian armies ride out to meet Babylon (the Chaldeans) at Carchemish and are soundly defeated by the crown prince Nebuchadnezzar (Nebuchadrezzar). This victory signals the irreversibility of Babylon's rise as the dominant power in the Near East.

605 B.C.E. — Babylon's Nebuchadnezzar comes to Jerusalem, establishes his control over Judah, and deports Judah's "aristocrats" to Babylon.

Injustice, corruption, pain, and suffering have plagued the world ever since humans first fell into sin. The very existence of widespread injustice has raised concerns among many over God's role in the world. Habakkuk questioned God on the seeming injustice of the world, but who was Habakkuk upset about?

Surprisingly, Habakkuk was not complaining to God about the sinful Assyrians or the abominable Canaanites or the rising superpower Babylon. Instead, Habakkuk's complaint is about his own people, the people of Judah. Habakkuk laments:

"Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted."

In these words, we hear clues to who Habakkuk is talking about. We hear that he sees the iniquity, he does not just hear about it. The destruction and violence are before him, the wicked surround. Furthermore, he mentions "the law." Now, this does not mean governmental laws; rather, Habakkuk is talking about God's Law, the Torah, as given specifically to the Hebrew people to order their lives by. Habakkuk is speaking of the over 600 commands (of which our ten are a part) that righteous Hebrews took seriously. Thus, from reading these few verses we hear that the Hebrew people of Judah have deviated from God's Law and instead chosen to follow their own ways, as destructive and unrighteous as they may be.

What are some of the parallels between Habakkuk's time and our own? Some of the differences?

Answers may vary. Try to lead students to connect the headlines from earlier to the uncertainty, fear, and sense of hopelessness in Habakkuk's time.

How does Habakkuk react to the headlines of his own day? In fear or hope? Anger or joy? Hate or compassion?

Have students scan the book for Habakkuk's reactions. Note in chapters 1 and 2, Habakkuk complains about the situation to the Lord. He is not happy. Habakkuk is calling out to God in regard to the wrongs of his day. He is calling out to the LORD who apparently remained indifferent to conditions in Judah and did nothing to stop injustice; these actions seemed incompatible with God's holiness. Habakkuk doesn't understand how the Holy Yahweh can stand by while violence, oppression, injustice, and strife continue day-by-day.

Habakkuk knows that Yahweh has always intervened for His people, He has always come to stop the wicked and help the righteous; what is He doing now? Habakkuk, like Job before him, is not hesitant to question God if his theological understanding of Him does not correspond with his experienced reality. Nor should we.

Key Point: Habakkuk not only calls out to God, but he calls out to God because he trusts Him. Although Habakkuk questions God on life, he never questions God. God is LORD, God is to be trusted, God is real, He is present with us; it is Habakkuk's perception of reality and current events that he questions, not necessarily that the LORD was not being faithful.

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However, Habakkuk is a man who wrestles with the evil of the world in prayer, not purely philosophical debate. Often times our theological understanding of God does not seem to match up with our experience of the world (e.g. God is good, the world contains evil). Yet, instead of taking these thoughts captive to the LORD we discuss them amongst ourselves and philosophically debate the implications of believing in a good God with a world full of evil. This leads to more questioning, despair, and at worst, a loss of faith. We abandon God based on our experience and without ever having called out to Him or called on Him to answer our questions with the reality of His power, His compassion, His love. We try to bail ourselves out of this philosophical conundrum and end up confused, disappointed, and potentially without hope. We, like Habakkuk, should take our difficult questions of faith, of goodness, of evil, etc. to God.

With that said, we should note that Habakkuk's complaints are in the form of traditional Hebrew lamentations. Hebrew lamentations always expressed or presupposed a deep trust in Yahweh (see Psalm 13). Without trusting in Yahweh, why would you cry out to Him with the deepest worries and concerns of your heart?

Thus, Habakkuk not only calls out to God, but he calls out to God because he trusts Him. Although Habakkuk questions God on life, he never questions God. God is LORD, God is to be trusted, God is real, He is present with us; it is Habakkuk's perception of reality and current events that he questions, not necessarily that the LORD was not being faithful.

Now, READ Habakkuk 2:4 and 3:17-19. How does Habakkuk respond to the events of his time now? What changed? What remained the same?

HABAKKUK IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted in several different places in the New Testament: Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38 (and loosely in 2 Corinthians 5:7). Studying the New Testament quotation of this Old Testament truth helps us bridge some of the historical gap between our day and Habakkuk's time.

In Romans 1:16-17, Paul says:

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’”

Paul starts the body of his letter to the Romans by quoting Habakkuk. In fact, vv. 16-17 are Paul's basic theme throughout the epistle—the basic gospel, God's plan for salvation and righteousness to all humankind, Jew and Gentile alike. Paul quotes Habakkuk in order to underline the fact that the righteousness of God (standing right and justified before God) is revealed “from faith for faith.”

What the heck does that mean? “From faith” is the ablative source ek pisteos (ἐκ πίστεως) meaning from the faith of God Almighty reposing in the person of Christ Jesus. The latter “for faith” is eis pistin (εἰς πίστιν) referring to the attitude of faith on the part of the sinner, the recipient of God's faithfulness in Jesus. Thus, even though Paul does not use the word “faithfulness” and drops the pronoun “my” or “his,” He still communicates the central truth that righteousness is given not by human faith, but by the faithfulness of Yahweh. As Paul later says in Romans, “—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (5:8) and, “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law...the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.” (3:21-25).

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The righteous shall live, no longer because of the Law, but through the faithfulness of Yahweh to save His people through Jesus Christ who is to be received by faith. In Galatians 3: 10-14 Paul reiterates this same point saying,

“For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’ Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’ But the law is not of faith, rather ‘The one who does them shall live by them.’ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’— so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.”

In fact, these verses remind us that Jesus was made to be a curse for us, according to Yahweh’s faithfulness. Just as Judah bore punishment in the form of Babylon, so has Jesus born our punishment in the form of the curse of the cross.

Finally, Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted in the book of Hebrews. The unknown author of this book writes:

“For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. For, ‘yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.’ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls. Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 10: 36-11:1)

Here, the author of Hebrews urges his readers to endure in the face of persecution and injustice (does that bring to mind any other familiar context?) The word for endurance is *hupomoné* (υπομονης) meaning “endurance” or “remaining under” as in “remaining under a wave after it breaks.” The author encourages readers to keep faith as they remain under the persecution of a greater power (Babylon, Rome, other kingdoms, powers, and empires) keeping faith since in “a little while” the “coming one will come.” The author reminds readers to keep faith since we know that Jesus has come and will return. Thus we wait in faith assured of the things we hope for and convicted of things we do not see, knowing that Jesus has come, died, and rose again and “is seated at the right hand of the Father from thence he will come to judge the living and the dead.”

So, looking at Habakkuk 2:4 more in-depth and as it is quoted in the New Testament we hear a very important truth for today. In the midst of injustice, persecution, pain, and suffering we (the righteous) can live in faith because of Yahweh’s faithfulness, and only because of His faithfulness.

Having faith in God amounts to little unless God was first faithful to us. Even then, Yahweh’s faithfulness is the central point of the Gospel, not ours. God’s faithfulness is so much greater than any faithfulness we can give Him. We can live knowing that Yahweh is faithful to His promises and that He will sustain us even in the midst of pain and suffering. We can live by faith knowing He is faithful to us in the person of Jesus Christ. We live only because Yahweh has been FAITHful to His promises to Abraham and sent a Savior (Habakkuk 2:4, Galatians 3:10-14). We receive the power of that good news which gives us salvation and makes us righteous by believing through FAITH and as people who are righteous by faith (Romans 1: 16-17). God calls us to live out our faith, to live in FAITHfulness to Him even in the face of injustice, persecution and pain (Hebrews 10:36-11:1).

In any situation where there is chaos, Yahweh is there to comfort, to bring order, restoration, and new life. Nowhere is this more evident than in Habakkuk 3:17-19. The words of Habakkuk are:

“Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls,

Key Point:
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yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places."

Here Habakkuk ends his prophecy and prayer with words that say that despite what is about to come (destruction and deportation at the hands of the Babylonians) he will still rejoice in the LORD and will take joy in God's salvation. Habakkuk is expressing trust in the LORD in the face of disparity.

In v. 17 Habakkuk highlights the coming suffering of judgment by way of listing all the sources of food and agricultural commerce of the ancient world. However, instead of listing the prosperity of these things in Judah's hands (compare 1 Kings 4: 22-28) he laments the disparity of these things in the time to come. Read in context of v. 16 the day of trouble is going to come and with it will come a time of difficulty and despair where all sources of food and income will be barren. To most, this would seem the most obvious time when Yahweh was forsaking His people.

Not so to Habakkuk. He knows that Yahweh is faithful and that He will bring order out of chaos yet again. He will rejoice in the Lord even though there would be no reason to sing, he will take joy in the God of his salvation even though there will be no wine to celebrate with. It was common in Psalms to praise the LORD, to rejoice in Him and take joy in His salvation (e.g. Psalm 5: 11-13; 13: 5-6; 16: 5-11; 47:1-4).

However, a central difference is that the Psalmists usually rejoice over God's good gifts and protection, whereas Habakkuk rejoices despite the lack of goods and protection. Paul speaks in the same vein when in Philippians he remarks, "Rejoice in the LORD always, again I say rejoice" (Philippians 4:4). Paul says this to the Philippians in order to encourage them to stand firm in the face of persecution, to take joy even in the direst circumstances.

Habakkuk goes on to say that GOD (Yahweh) is his strength and that He makes his feet like the deer's and that he treads on high places. This imagery is actually militaristic. The line "the LORD is my strength" is again typical of the Psalms (e.g. Psalm 28:7; 59:10; 17; 118:14 cf. Exodus 15:2; Isaiah 12:2; 49:5; Jeremiah 16:19); however, in those instances the word *choz* is used whereas in Habakkuk 3:10 the word is *hayil*, which can also mean "army." The imagery of a deer taking the high ground also points to the militaristic strength of those who could tread upon the high ground and thus gain the upper hand on their enemies. God is Habakkuk's army, standing against the Babylonians, "whose own strength is their god" (1:11). Likewise, God is our army, standing against the painful circumstances of our life. As Paul says, "...for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:11b-13).

The Christian life is not always one of plenty and "blessing." Too often people believe it is. The Christian life is also one marked with pain, suffering, persecution and judgment; just like all other humans in the world. The central difference is that the Christian has reason to live a tumultuous "without form and void" (Genesis 1:2) of a life in contentment. Why? Because the Christian is called to live by faith in the LORD's faithfulness, not our own.

In Habakkuk's time, the people of Judah would face a terrible day of judgment and trouble because they had ceased to rely on Yahweh and follow His commandments and instead had turned to trust in their own ways and follow the commands of the world. Because of this they were going to face judgment in the form of Babylon. However, even in this time, the Creator-Warrior Yahweh would not leave them or forsake them (Deuteronomy 31:6); rather, by His faith He would redeem them and send the vision, the coming one, at the appointed time to redeem them and all of creation. In this way, Yahweh would not leave them to evil, but would lead them to wholeness and give them a future and a hope (Jeremiah 29:11).

Key Point:
The Christian is called to live by faith in the LORD's faithfulness, not our own.

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DIAGRAM AND DISCUSS:

Use this chart below and in a small group or with your leader to discuss each of the points in each section:

The world...	God...
Changes	is <u>IMMUTABLE</u>
Hurts	is <u>HEALER/RECONCILER</u>
Isn't all there is	is <u>OMNIPRESENT, OMNISCIENT, ALL-CONSUMING,</u> and <u>ALL LOVING</u>

Our Feet in the Streets

How might our life change in light of what we learned from our reading and discussion?

Answers may vary. Take time to listen to each student and connect them back to the readings and the lesson.

How might we respond to the headlines knowing that God doesn't change, brings healing to the world, and is with us at all times, bringing His all-consuming love and compassion to bear on His creation?

Refer back to what we learned from Habakkuk about God's powerful presence in our personal lives

The Psalms are a prayerbook/hymn book that give voice to the truth of God as it takes shape in the lives of His people, and it captures their response to His work in the world. With that in mind, READ Psalm 102 and turn it into a prayer. Work on your own, in small groups, or with your leader to paraphrase (put into your own words) the Psalm (you can also use Habakkuk 3:17-19 if you'd prefer).

Let students work freely here. Decide what is best for your group in terms of making this an individual exercise or a group one. Bigger groups may consider breaking up into smaller groups. Smaller groups can work on this together on a large sheet of paper or on a whiteboard.

When you are done, use this prayer to intercede on behalf of the world and devote the fears, anger, and hate in the headlines to God. Using your interpretation of Psalm 103 entrust the headlines—in the newspaper and your own life—to our real, present, God.

As a result of what you have heard from God's Word today, what is He giving you to believe or do this coming week?

Again, answers may vary. Take the time to listen and acknowledge what each student is saying. This is an opportunity for dialogue and discernment in your group.

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STUDY 2: GOD IN THE WORLD

Keep the main thing, the main thing: God is a Real. Present. God. He doesn't just create the world, set it spinning on in its axis and then recede into the cosmos only to come again some unknown day in the future and destroy the world when He sees fit. By no means! He is active *in* the world, sustaining it, keeping it from devolving into ultimate chaos, re-creating it, and redeeming it.

Introduction

WHERE WAS GOD WHEN _____?

- **Can you name a time in your life when you wondered where God was? Maybe it was personal. Maybe a family tragedy. A death at school. Maybe it was in the news. A natural disaster. A mass shooting.**
Answers will vary to this question. Be sure to give proper time for students to come forward with difficult situations and scenarios. It may take them time. You know your group, so guide the conversation appropriately. Be prepared for some heavy stuff.
- **What are some of the questions that raged in your mind at the time? Why did you wonder if God was present in that situation? Why didn't what was happening seem to match up with the God you know or what others say about God?**
Again, answers will vary, but be sure to give room for all questions to be asked and voiced. Resist the temptation to answer the questions and doubts now and instead let them sit there in the room. They will be answered as the study progresses.

Our Look in the Book

Read the first few verses of Genesis 1 and scan the remainder of the chapter.

- **What is God doing in Genesis 1?**
- **How does God feel about what He has done? Is it good, bad, or in between?**
- **Look at the headlines in chapters 2 and 3 in Genesis. What happens in these chapters?**
- **What have the consequences of those events been? What has God been doing about it?**
- **Why do we sometimes think God doesn't care, or isn't involved, in His created order anymore?**

The main point for this section is to grasp three key things about God and two key things about the world. First, about God:

1 - God creates, sustains, and rules over the world.

Perhaps connect this belief to Martin Luther's comments on the First Article of the Apostle's Creed ("I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.") and his point that God has not only created all things and given us all good things, but that He also "still takes care of them" and "defends [us] from all danger and guards and protects [us] from all evil" and this He does so out of "divine goodness and mercy."

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2 - God brings order out of the chaos.

Ancient rabbinic sources make much of the Hebrew phrase “tohu va vohu,” which describes the pre-formed earth and is widely translated as “without form and void.” This is chaos, total and complete. It is unknown in its depth and unsearchable in its muddled mess. Connect this to our feelings in the face of evil and death, sin and turmoil. The promise of Genesis 1 and following is not only that God created and filled the world, but that He brought order out of chaos. Peace out of turmoil. Clarity out of confusion. He promises the same to us today. The sociologist Peter Berger made the case in his book A Sacred Canopy that all religion is a search for a way to guard against the “anomy” (literally, “without law/order”) of the world with a certain “nomos” (law/order). The message of Genesis 1 is that in the face of “anomy,” God brings “nomos” through His Word.

3 - God fills the world with goodness.

This order is not only peaceable and pleasant, it is downright good! We are given this world to not only live in, but also to enjoy. Spend some time reflecting on how God loves this world. He cares for this world and ALL people, creatures, and elements in it. The cosmos is God’s creation, He wanted it to be good, and made it so. What kind of implications does that have for us who live in it and are called to be its stewards? Also, think through the good things we love about this world. We spend enough time thinking about the bad, playing the doubting game, and seeing the chaos of the world. Where is the good? What can we find in the world to believe in? To hope in? To see God’s good order in? God speaks to us through the created world around us. He speaks there of His goodness. His desire for order. His creativity. His passion for this world and all that fills it (even mosquitoes, cockroaches, and smelly siblings). While this “natural revelation” does not reveal all there is to know about God (the fullness of God comes to us in the flesh-and-blood-yet-still-holy Jesus), it does tell us plenty about the character of God and his desire for a good, ordered, just, and peaceful world.

Now, about the world:

1 — The world was, as we just discussed, originally good.

Be sure to show that the fallenness of the world is a consequence not of God’s original design, but because of our neglect of God’s Word and our rebellion against His good order.

2 — The world is full of chaos, death, and evil.

Be sure to point out that evil DOES exist. There are those who would have us believe that “evil” is just a matter of morals created by ancient religions to control people. However, it does not take us long to look at the world and realize that evil is potent and present in our world. Scripture helps us see that evil is real and call it out. Perhaps spend some time talking about what is evil in this world. Resist the temptation to make it all about morals or to just blame the “devil” or “bad people” for evil. We are responsible for the evil in the world, as well. We are part of the problem. We are sinners. These are the consequences of our sin and they have been raging since almost the beginning of time. We cannot change this despite our best efforts, most well-laid plans, or political platforms. The reality of evil in our world is something that we all share the responsibility for creating and sustaining. We cannot free ourselves from the cycle of evil existence and the chaos of our own creation. Instead, we must look elsewhere for hope and healing...

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Read John 1:1-14.

- **What are the parallels between John 1 and Genesis 1?**
- **How does John seem to connect the coming of Jesus to the creation of the world in Genesis 1?**
- **How does John describe Jesus' presence? What is significant about these words and promises?**
- **What are the effects of Jesus' real presence in the world? (See also Revelation 21:1-8)**
- **What does Jesus' presence seem to say to us about those "where was God when _____?" scenarios we discussed earlier?**

Be sure to point out the parallels between Genesis 1 and John 1. In particular:

- *Point out the significance of the term "logos" in Greek culture. It stood not only as a term for "word," but as the divine order that held the universe together. In one stroke, John not only connected the presence of Jesus on earth with the creation of the world in the Hebrew Scriptures, but also to the core principles of Greek philosophy. That's a brilliant move.*
 - *An interesting anecdote to consider sharing: when translators were working on John 1 in Hungarian they had to choose between two words for "word" in the Hungarian language. There is one word for "noun" and another word for "verb." They decided that in trying to translate the significance of Jesus' re-creating presence they did not want to imply that Jesus just is, but that he is on the move, he is living and active, he is doing. So, they translated John's "Word" as "verb." And so, a literal translation of this Hungarian Gospel would be, "In the beginning was the Verb, and the Verb was with God, and the Verb was God...." God is not a god who just sits there, He is a God on the move, in the world, in and through His Son Jesus and His Holy Spirit.*
- *Note also that John re-tells the creation narrative in the beginning of his Gospel. In John 1:1, with the words "In the beginning..." we get a sense that John is re-telling the creation of the world in the story of Jesus. John 1:1 is the first day. There are then five more days that come in John's "re-creation narrative" (John 1:29; 1:35; 1:43; 2:1, which skips forward three days). While John skips the birth narrative of Jesus, he is re-telling the re-birth and re-creation of the world in and through the NEW seven days of Jesus' real presence in the world. The culmination of this re-creation is at the "Wedding at Cana." Here, Jesus reveals Himself in His first "sign" or miracle, and it is one of celebration. God is good. Jesus is good. And He is here to make all things new and celebrate with all of us.*
- *Above all, be sure to focus on how God sent His Son into the world to re-create and transform the world—to make all things new (the language of Revelation 21:1-8 is helpful here and parallels that of John and Genesis. See also how God deals with the evil of the world in this vision.). Spend some time helping students connect the promises and reality of Jesus with the problems and reality of the world. God confronts the chaos of our world with the order and goodness of Jesus. Just as He brought order and goodness to the world in the first creation, now He brings order and goodness in the re-creation of Jesus.*
- *Again, this re-creation is not just about what Jesus does for the "sinful world" and all of its evil, but about our own sinful, chaotic, and evil hearts and wills. Jesus came to save us, too.*

Key Point:
God sent His Son into the world to re-create and transform the world—to make all things new.

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Read Hebrews 4:14-16.

- **What does the author of Hebrews have to say about Jesus, “our great high priest?”**
- **Is Jesus removed from the world or present with it?**
- **What does that mean for our reactions to what the world has to throw at us? How are we to respond when we face times of need, times of sadness, times of want, and times of doubt?**

It is one thing to tell students that God is real and present in our world and bringing order out of chaos, goodness out of evil. There are still going to be plenty of emotions and questions, doubts and feelings of helplessness in view of all the evil and chaos that still reigns in our world.

The message of this portion of Hebrews is that more than saving us, Jesus is sympathetic with us and wants us to reach out to Him in our time of need. This goes way beyond the job description for a typical high priest. There was a high standard put on priests in Jesus’ day, but Jesus took things to the max. He was perfect, sinless, without chaos, and without evil in His life. That is why He could make the ultimate sacrifice—Himself—to save us from ourselves and our sin and rescue us from the evil and chaos of the world.

Moreover, Jesus has not removed Himself from the pain and evil of the world, but has been in our shoes. He knows what it is to suffer. To lose. To question. To be uncertain. To be at a loss in the face of the chaos of the world. He knows what we are going through. He knows how this world sometimes doesn’t make sense. He knows how we feel. The Greek word from which we derive our word, “sympathetic” means “to be touched with the exact feeling of” or “to know how someone feels.” It literally translates as, “to feel together with.” It means, “to understand completely how one feels,” “to feel in one’s own heart the feelings of another,” “to be touched with the exact feelings as another.” Jesus has been touched with the feelings of the world, crushed by its evil, and crucified because of its sin. There is nothing that we are going through in life—or that our world is suffering from—that Jesus does not know, understand, or feel.

This means that while the evil of the world may rage, we can “hold fast our confession” and look to Jesus, the “founder and protector of our faith” even when doubts bubble up and questions become serious conundrums. Instead of turning away from God, we are invited into His awesome and holy presence. This is no small thing. In the past, only the high priest could come before God in the temple—and then, only on one day (the Day of Atonement). Now, because of Jesus, we are invited into God’s holy, awesome, and peaceful presence. We can confidently come before Him with the words of the world, the deepest of our doubts, and the most powerful of our pain. What we will find is mercy and grace to help in time of need.

To the right you will see a text box with the definition of “theodicy.” Scholars, sages, and street-side philosophers have long debated the topic of the problem of evil in our world in light of our claim that God is good, loving, and really present and active in the world. Odds are, we are not going to “solve” the problem of theodicy today. But, if you were to make the case for God’s goodness in view of the “problem of evil” what would you say? Spend some time working with your group to come up with a vindication of the goodness and presence of God even if there is a lot of pain, death, chaos, and evil in our world.

Answers may vary to this, but help students turn away from purely philosophical arguments against the problem of evil and instead focus on the flesh-and-blood, real, present, goodness of God and grace of Jesus. Resist the temptation to offer clichés or “easy answers.” Evil is not going to leave this world until Jesus comes again to offer healing and restoration. As much as we may want to, we will not solve the problem of evil in this session. That is God’s work. And that’s the point. If your group continues to struggle with the problem of evil, consider pointing them to the suffering of Jesus on the cross. There, the pain of the world meets the pain of the creative Word

Theodicy — the defense of divine goodness and God’s provision of spiritual care and protection in view of the existence of evil, death, and chaos.

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and is defeated and consumed. While some questions will still linger (and sometimes being in the question is more important than exiting with shallow answers), we Christians must lean on the hope of the cross even, or especially, when we cannot turn to our own understanding.

Our Feet in the Streets

- The Psalms are a prayerbook/hymn book that give voice to the truth of God as it takes shape in the lives of His people, and it captures their response to His work in the world. With that in mind, READ Psalm 139 and turn it into a prayer. Work on your own, in small groups, or with your leader to paraphrase (put into your own words) the Psalm (you can also use words, phrases and promises from Genesis 1, John 1:1-14, or Hebrews 4:14-16 as well).

Let students work freely here. Decide what is best for your group in terms of making this an individual exercise or a group one. Bigger groups may consider breaking up into smaller groups. Smaller groups can work on this together on a large sheet of paper or on a whiteboard.

Psalm 139 is a “psalm of lament.” The term “lament” comes from the Hebrew word, “lamah.” “Lamah” was often used in the Hebrew Scriptures to question God. It was a word of pain, suffering, and doubt. It was used to ask, “Why God?” or “How long O Lord...?” Connect this back to the study and what you learned together about chaos and death, evil and pain, and God’s response to these questions. Think also on the previous study on Habakkuk who asked, “How long O Lord...?”

- **When you are done, use this prayer to “with confidence draw near to the throne of grace and receive mercy and grace to help in time of need.” In particular, as you pray your paraphrase of Psalm 139, keep those “where was God when _____?” scenarios in mind. Meditate on them as you pray and reflect on how God is at work in those kinds of situations.**
- **As a result of what you have heard from God’s word today, what is He giving you to believe or do this coming week?**

Again, answers may vary. Take the time to listen and acknowledge what each student is saying. This is an opportunity for dialogue and discernment in your group.

One thing to consider as part of this closing discussion is the desire of people in the world to see Christians combine prayer with action. In the wake of natural disasters and mass shootings Christians are quick to offer “thoughts and prayers.” But people want, and need, more.

Talk about this with your group. This is a challenging point and it is important that you take this discussion and apply it in practice somehow, someday, this week.

While we can trust that God hears our prayers and wants us to come to Him with them (see Hebrews 4:14-16), we can also trust that God works through the means of this world to enact and make real His “grace and mercy to help in time of need.” His means include His church, His people—us. Help students see this and consider some concrete scenarios of pain and suffering in the world and how followers of Jesus might not only pray for them, but also be moved to “faith made active in love” and service to our neighbors. This will serve as a good segue to the next study.

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STUDY 3: ME IN THE WORLD

Keep the main thing, the main thing: As a follower of Jesus, your identity is founded in Christ. You are a citizen of the “Kingdom of God” in this world. Similar to how Jesus came into the world, so, too, you are sent into the world to make disciples as you are going about the callings of your daily life.

Introduction

DIVINE DISCONTENT

- **Thinking back on the last two studies, what in the headlines gets you mad? What about the world breaks your heart? What issue keeps grabbing your attention?**
- **If you could solve one critical issue that the world is facing right now, what would it be? Why?**

Answers may vary to these questions, but help students start to think about these frustrations, burdens, or pet peeves as possible callings from God. Pastor Bill Hybels coined the term “holy discontent” to refer to those things that really get our blood boiling or set us off and that God might be calling us to confront through ministry and prayer. The idea is that you could convert the frustration you feel into “fuel for changing the world.” We Lutherans might think of this “divine discontent” along the lines of “vocation.” Jacob A. O. Preus III wrote that, “We are called by the Gospel to faith in Christ and through and from that Gospel we are called to a life of love and service.” More than that, we are called to live our faith active in love toward others in many other callings in life—as siblings, as children, as members of our church community, as part a sports team or drama club, in our future and present jobs, through our friends, and perhaps through ministries that are fueled by our “divine discontent.” We can trust that through our labor, no matter how humble, God is at work in the world through these “vocations”—through you and me.

- **What would your life look like if you started to pursue education or a career along the lines of your “divine discontent?”**

Let students dream here and consider pursuing a calling. Again, they don’t have to make their calling a job. A calling can be something you volunteer for, do on the side, or do alongside your work. The main thing is to be faithful to your calling and not shirk your call. Calls are given to us by God. We are called first to faith by the Gospel and then to serve our neighbors by faith made active in love. We are going to explore this idea more in the discussion below, but the main thing to know is that God will call us to certain things and give us the gifts to fulfill that calling. It doesn’t mean we will necessarily solve all the problems or fix the world, but it does mean we will try to do our best according to the calling God has given us.

Key Point:
We are called to live our faith active in love toward others in many other callings in life—as siblings, as children, as members of our church community, as part a sports team or drama club, in our future and present jobs, through our friends, and perhaps through ministries that are fueled by our “divine discontent.”

Our Look in the Book

Split up into small groups and read Matthew 28: 16-20; John 17:6-19; 20:19-23.

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- **For each reading write down what Jesus seems to be saying about His followers, His disciples. What is He calling them to do?**

There are lots of fascinating things to be pulled from these passages, and whole books have been written about each. Let students explore the various promises and callings embedded in each passage. Consider having students write them on a large sheet of paper or adding them to a Google Doc that your entire group can contribute to.

Here are some highlights from the passages you might want to draw out as a leader:

From Matthew 28:

Worship is part of our callings as Christians. The disciples showed up at the mountain as they were called to do so by Jesus. Sometimes, the greatest calling of a Christian is to just show up. At church, yes. But also other places in the world where God is present and at work. Our calling is to be there. To go where Jesus calls you to go (consider the story of Jonah, for example, or all the events of Acts and where the Apostles were called to go...sometimes kicking and screaming). It's okay if you doubt, if you're unsure, if you have questions. You can still step forward in faith, following your calling, because the authority and the power for your callings do not come from you. They come from Christ. Note how He doesn't say "all power and authority" belong to us. It belongs to Him and He sends us out in it as His emissaries, His messengers, His representatives. He is at work in worship, he is at work in the world. He is serving us in worship and He is serving the people of the world. Our vocation is to be there. To receive what He has to give us and pass it on, to further His work and deliver the Good News that He has given us as an inheritance, as a gift, and as a calling. This happens in worship through the Means of Grace—baptizing, teaching, and communion. God is also at work in our communities, our cities, our nations, and throughout the world as well. The way He works in these places is perhaps more subtle than what we see at church and in Christian worship, but it is holy work nonetheless and we are called to go there with Him and to further His work in that place as well.

There is a lot of emphasis placed on the baptizing and teaching, all the nations and the discipling. That's all fine and good (in fact, it's central to our calling as the Church), but we often miss the simple "as you are going" call that is embedded in v. 19. The verb is often translated as a command—"Go!" It is that, but it is also an (Greek nerd alert) aorist, passive, participle. That is to say that while it does have some imperative force (meaning, it IS a command) it is also a way of saying, "as you are going..." Reading the verb "go" this way fits with our understanding of vocation—that discipling, teaching, baptizing, etc. can all occur not only in the context of full-time missionary life, but through our various vocations and situated callings (what some call a "missional life").

It is true that we are the "sent ones," commissioned by Jesus to teach, Baptize, love, and serve our neighbors. But the beauty of the commission in Matthew 28 (and also in the "High Priestly Prayer" of John 17:6-19) is that it is book-ended by great Gospel. First, we go forth in the authority of Jesus, who sits at the right hand of God (a nod to royal authority back in the day). Second, Jesus promises to be with us. Just as He calls us to be present, to show up, to follow our callings, so, too, He promises to follow His own—

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to be the ever-present Son of God with us always, through eons and eons, no matter where we are or what we are doing.

From John 20:19-23:

The centrality of the Gospel in our callings as Christians is made super evident in this passage. First, our calling as Christians is founded in the peace given to us in Jesus—the shalom of God made possible through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Second, forgiven by God we forgive others as they have sinned against us (Lord’s Prayer connection, hello!).

This connects with what Lutherans call the “Office of the Keys.” The Small Catechism contains these words about this office:

“The Office of the Keys is that special authority which Christ has given to His church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent.”

This means that when “called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.”

Essentially, the Office of the Keys is the power that Jesus gave His Church and its members to forgive the sins of others or withhold forgiveness. This is a serious calling, a critical responsibility. Every individual person in this world carries the burden of mistakes they have made, hurts they have caused, or terrible things they’ve thought, said, or done (or good things they should have done, but didn’t). Every person on this planet carries the burden of pain caused by others’ sin as well. The Office of the Keys is given to the Church to ease these burdens, forgive these sins, and set these people free. How beautiful. How wonderful. How awe-full a responsibility and calling!

As the Lord’s Prayer makes evident (and Peter’s conversation with Jesus about forgiveness in Matthew 18:21-22) we are also called to forgive. The pursuit of our callings should be saturated with grace. Overflowing with forgiveness. Made of mercy. Punctuated by the peaceful presence of Jesus.

- ***From what you know about the Bible, the way of Jesus, and these passages, what do you think it means to be a “Christian?”***
- ***Are Christians meant to be rulers or stewards? Royals and kings or servants and slaves?***

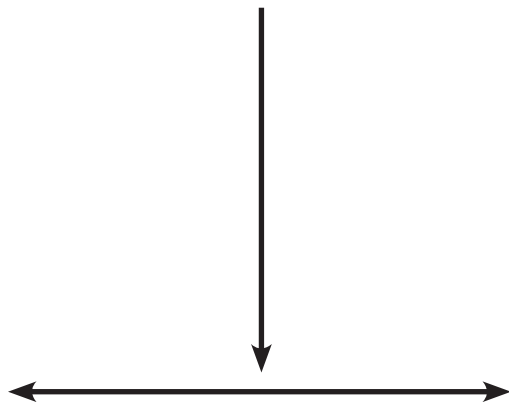
The answer to this question is “yes.” We are both. Connecting back to the discussion above about the passages in Matthew and John, we see that Jesus has given us His authority, has sent us in His power and peace, and is with us through the work of the Holy Spirit, our helper and advocate. We are royals and kings as children of God through Jesus, no doubt. But, being so blessed, we are called to be a blessing. Or, as Luther put it in his work On the Freedom of a Christian, “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” Both are true.

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It might be helpful to bust out a trusty diagram that has been referred to as a diagram about “Two Kinds of Righteousness.” Have students fill in notes around the following diagram as you talk:



Martin Luther wrote that “there are two kinds of Christian righteousness...The first is alien righteousness, that is the righteousness of another, instilled from without. This is the righteousness of Christ by which he justifies though faith...Through faith in Christ, therefore, Christ’s righteousness becomes our righteousness and all that he has becomes ours; rather, he himself becomes ours....The second kind of righteousness is our proper righteousness, not because we alone work it, but because we work with that first and alien righteousness. This is that manner of life spent profitably in good works...This righteousness is the product of the righteousness of the first type, actually its fruit and consequence, for we read in Gal. 5:22, “But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” All of these good fruits are to be directed toward the neighbor in their weakness and sin, their difficulties and troubles, their needs and requests.

Or, to put it another way, the line coming down in the diagram is what we might call “alien” or “passive” righteousness. We do NOTHING to receive it. We are given the full benefits of Jesus as a pure gift. It’s all grace. This is the real presence of God in our lives.

The lines headed out horizontally, however, are the second kind of righteousness. What we might call “active” righteousness. This is a result and outpouring of the first kind, and it is done in the peace and authority and power of God and His presence with us, but it is also where our good works and callings kick in. This is where our faith is made active in love toward our neighbor, where what we do becomes a real way to make the presence of God felt in our communities. It is not that God was not already active in the world, but it is that He calls us to be active with Him.

We receive everything from God as a gift (we are made royals by “alien” righteousness from above) and then are freed up to give everything away to others (we are servants in our “active” righteousness toward the world).

As Christians we are what J.A.O. Preus III called “inside-out” people. We live outside of ourselves in service to others. Luther wrote that Christians ascend above ourselves to God in faith, and in love we descend beneath ourselves to the neighbor. No matter what, “The Christian always lives outside of himself—he lives in God and in his neighbor. If he lives inside himself, he is not a Christian.”

- **With all of this in mind, what do you believe God is calling you to?**

Let students really wrestle with this one. Let them dream. Let them talk about callings like that of pastor or Concordia professor, DCE or deaconess, missionary or Christian math teacher.

Key Point:
We receive everything from God as a gift...and then are freed up to give everything away to others.

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BUT, resist the temptation to focus only on church professions. The scope of God's calling is WAY bigger and grander and greater than that. God can, and does, use all of our various callings to His ends (the growth of His kingdom, which is the presence of God made manifest) and we can use all of our callings to serve and love our neighbor and address the problems of the world.

There is a story, most likely apocryphal (it never actually happened, but has become a popular legend attached to Luther) that a recently converted cobbler came up to Martin Luther and asked the Reformer what he should do now that he was a Christian. Luther is supposed to have said, "The Christian shoemaker does his Christian duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes..." Although Luther didn't say this it does help remind us that Luther's doctrine of vocation extended to all people in all professions (not just pastors and DCEs, monks and middle school teachers) and that the main point of God's calling is that the work done in our vocations is meant to be a service to the neighbor and of the world. For the shoemaker story, it means God likes shoes (and good ones at that) not for their own sake, but because the neighbor needs shoes.

Our Feet in the Streets

- The Psalms are a prayerbook/hymn book that give voice to the truth of God as it takes shape in the lives of His people, and it captures their response to His work in the world. With that in mind, READ Psalm 145 and turn it into a prayer. Work on your own, in small groups, or with your leader to paraphrase (put into your own words) the Psalm (you can also use words, phrases and promises from Matthew 28:16-20 and John 17:6-19; 19:20-23 as well).

Let students work freely here. Decide what is best for your group in terms of making this an individual exercise or a group one. Bigger groups may consider breaking up into smaller groups. Smaller groups can work on this together on a large sheet of paper or on a whiteboard.

- Consider this prayer as well: O God, who always renews our spirits by the world's joy and challenges us with the world's pain; we are glad that we have inherited the mystery and artistry of existence in this world, that we are called by You to the humble service of our neighbor in the midst of it, that we have been given some small part in making rough places plain, transfiguring ugliness into beauty, and bringing good out of evil. Strengthen us in our callings and teach us always to pray: Our Father, who art in heaven...
- **As a result of what you have heard from God's Word today, what is He giving you to believe or do this coming week? In particular, consider how you (or your group) can bless others in your context and in light of your calling(s)...**

Help students to think about calling along the lines of good work for the good of people. What do they want to do with their lives? What are they already called to? How can they do this to the glory of God and the service of their neighbor? Spend some serious time considering this as individuals and as a group. What are the areas of great need or "divine discontent" that you could be called to right now? How can God's real presence be made known through you and your calling today, tomorrow, next week?

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STUDY 4: US AND “THEM” IN THE WORLD

Keep the main thing, the main thing: Knowing that your identity is founded in Jesus, you are not bound by “identity politics” anymore. You are set free to see others as Jesus sees them— as beloved creations of God in need of re-creation and transformation just like you. Your call is to expand the community of “us,” not close it off.

Introduction

“US” AND “THEM”

- **Who is “we”? Who is “them”?**

This could be a tense conversation, but let this play out. It could also be turned into a silly conversation. Use your wisdom and knowledge of your group to help guide students to think seriously about “us” versus “them” divides that exist in our world, in your particular context, or that have come to split or define your group in the past. This could go in multiple social, political, or spiritual directions. Above all, emphasize respect and willingness to listen to one another throughout the course of this discussion.

- **As a group (or in small groups) fill out this chart. What characteristics, identities, ideas, places, issues, concerns, or actions define “us?” What characteristics, identities, ideas, places, issues, concerns, or actions define “them?”**

“Us”	“Them”

- **Now, consider what “we” share with “them.” Make a separate list of characteristics, identities, places, issues, concerns or actions we share in common.**

Let this conversation flow naturally, but you might start to help students see some of the things we have in common as all being humans created in the image of God and all sharing in the fallenness of creation as a result of the death and chaos released upon the world through both original sin and our ongoing sin. Think about the issues and situations that plague everyone in the world. Think about positive things we share in common as well—shared celebrations, hopes, dreams, daily experiences, etc.

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- **Looking at your chart, consider why you put the various identifiers where they are. What made you start with differences? What did you realize as you considered the similarities between “us” and “them”?**

Let the students struggle with this for a while. It might be hard to come to this point, so feel free to interject as the conversation develops that the very assumption of “us” and “them” in the activity led you to think according to what divides people rather than what unites them. Framing is IMPORTANT. The way we think about the world and the people in it is often determined by the assumptions, or frames, we bring in the first place. These are sometimes called “presuppositions”—a thing assumed beforehand without critical thought or even being consciously or explicitly known to us.

If we start by thinking there is an “us” and a “them,” then we will naturally find things that separate us into those two groups. If we start with the assumption that we are all in this together, then we will be able to find things we share in common.

While it is naive to pretend things don’t divide us, it is equally naive—not to mention disingenuous and dangerous—to assume that there aren’t things that we share with others, even if they are our deepest enemies.

Lots of identities divide us (social hierarchies, religion, politics, culture), but this study is going to help point us to what we share with “others”—from a biblical perspective—so that we can not lose sight of the compassion, charity, and care that we are called to in Christ (see the last study, for example). If we let ourselves continue to demonize the “other,” we not only allow the tentacles of bitterness wrap themselves around us and control our lives, but they also end up strangling the compassion, charity, and care we are called to share with “others.”

Furthermore, as we will see in the next section, Scripture has some pretty clear things to say about identity, “us” and “them,” and Jesus. So, let’s take a look...

Key Point:
If we start by thinking there is an “us” and a “them,” then we will naturally find things that separate us into those two groups. If we start with the assumption that we are all in this together, then we will be able to find things we share in common.

Our Look in the Book

Split up into small groups and read Ephesians 2.

- **How can Ephesians 2 speak to the conversation you just had? What does Ephesians 2 have to say about God, “us,” and “them?”**
- **Read also Galatians 3:23-29. How can this passage speak to the conversation you just had? What does Ephesians 2 have to say about God, “us,” and “them?”**
- **Are Christians meant to play the “us” versus “them” game? If so, how should we view it? If not, how does that change our view of the world and the people we share it with?**
- **How might an “us” versus “them” outlook shape our thoughts, words, and deeds about and in the world?**
- **How might taking a Christ-centered view of the world and the various “thems” we are taught to distrust, fear, and hate change the way we think, speak, and act toward so-called “others?”**

Let these conversations and discussions play out among the students. Let their voices and perspectives be heard. They will most likely have some profound and insightful things to say. Be an example of gracious hospitality by listening to them and their perspectives on these topics.

But here are some notes to consider for background as you lead this conversation:

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- *There are a couple of different ways we can deal with the diverse social, political, cultural, and religious viewpoints that exist in our world today. We can either confront them with a posture of aggressive and confrontational engagement or address them with a posture of friendly and compassionate engagement.*
- *The latter is what Scripture invites us to. It is what our foundational understanding of “human being” is and what a realized vision of God’s kingdom should lead us into.*
- *If we look back to Genesis, we can quickly note that there are a couple of things that all humans share in as creatures of God. We are all created with the “imago dei” (image of God) imbued within us. There are a whole bunch of interpretations of what this imago dei, or image of God, is and there are many different ways you can see it (that we are given responsibility over creation, given knowledge and wisdom by God, or that we are so devilishly good looking as human beings...others say it is our inherent ability to make and create, to dream and develop). There is also the theory that at the core, God is relationship. God is this eternal relationship, or dance, between Father, Son, and Spirit. People have said that the foundational element of what God is, is what John Zizioulas called “being in communion,” or “essential unity in diversity.” From this perspective, we can affirm that when God created us in His image, He created us for relationship. You see this with Adam and Eve. You see this with the symbiosis between creation and the first humans. You see this in the fellowship that God enjoyed with His people as He walked in the garden with them. The imago dei says we are created for communion, relationship, all of us—Christian and non-Christian, no matter if we agree politically or come from the same social or cultural community. We are all interwoven into a divine tapestry of humanity that understands interconnection as a fundamental aspect of what it means to live in this world. But that isn’t, unfortunately, the end of the story. We fell from this. We lost this. And just as we all share in the imago dei—being in communion—we also all share in the fallenness of humanity and creation. When we fell, when we sinned, we walked away from this beautiful fellowship, this being as communion. Now, we live with this heritage, this original sin, this “us” v. “them” divide. Where once we shared in a pure imago dei, we now share in an impure “imago ipsum”—an image of selfish desire. The many tensions that exist between our conflicted communities come not from our differences, but from one thing we share in common: an oppositional identity that derives strength from hostility. So, part of the restoration project of the universe that we see in Jesus is the goal of bringing unity out of diversity, wholeness out of division, communion out of disunion and discord.*
- *Jesus is the realization of a new genesis that interrupts business as usual in human history. He is the embodiment of divine creativity, and as such Jesus = an end to the era of hostility. Instead, He ushers in an age of peace.*
- *Indeed, it is an essential aspect of Christian faith that we, who were once far off—strangers, aliens, and outsiders—have now been brought near in Jesus. As the apostle Paul put it, “the dividing wall of hostility” has been broken down in Christ, “who is our peace” (see Ephesians 2).*
 - *Reading Ephesians 2, we might wonder a bit about the setting of the church community in Ephesus. What kind of world did they live in? Like us, the church in Ephesus lived at*

Key Point:
We see in Jesus is the goal of bringing unity out of diversity, wholeness out of division, communion out of disunion and discord.

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a crossroads of cultures and perspectives, religious traditions and political perspectives. Ephesus was an important city in Asia Minor that laid at the intersection of multiple trade routes and was situated upon the second busiest trade route from the “East” and the “West” of the Roman Empire and its neighbors. It was a commercial center and boasted a pagan temple to Diana. It was very famous and populous. It was also a place of paramount religious interest and significant religious diversity. It was the center of worship for Artemis/Diana. The temple erected in her honor was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and made Ephesus extremely important in ancient times.

- *Paul wrote to the Ephesians to expand their horizons and help them understand the universal dimensions of God’s eternal purpose and grace and come to appreciate the high goals God has for the church.*
- *In particular, Paul wanted the church to realize that they, who were once “foreigners” had been brought near to God through Jesus. In light of this, Paul wanted the church to not close itself off to “others” – people who were different – but instead be open to how God’s vision for his church – his people – includes all types of folks from across the globe. Those we like, those we dislike. Those we consider “us” and those we consider “them.” Those who think, act, and dress like us and (shocker) those that don’t. Paul wrote to remind the church in Ephesus that anything that seems strange, foreign, or alien can be “brought near” through the blood of Christ, which brings peace to reconcile Gentile and Jew, “us” and “them.”*
- *This point becomes concrete (almost literally) when we consider Paul’s talk of “dividing wall of hostility” in Ephesians 2. The culture of Judaism in the first-century could be quite hostile towards Gentiles (the “nations” or non-Jews), especially when it came to the temple. The temple itself was organized into rooms and courts. At the core of the temple was the Holy of Holies, the dwelling place of God, which was separated from the outer room of the temple by a thick curtain. Only the high priest was allowed into this room, the Holy of Holies, and there he offered the sacrifices of the people. There then was an inner court for Jewish men, an outer court for women and then beyond that a Court of the Gentiles. It was in this court that Jesus would overturn tables in John 2, and a tax collector would pray in Luke 18. Any non-Jew trying to go beyond this court would find themselves staring at a posted sign on the wall to the outer court that would warn them of their impending death if they went any further. To say the least, tensions were high between Jews and proselyte-Gentiles and other non-Jews at the time of Jesus. That same culture was still prevalent at the time of writing for Ephesians chapter 2 when Paul informs the church that the walls that separate Jews and Gentiles, “us” and “them” have been torn down in Jesus. Thus, we are compelled to reach beyond cultural barriers and social distinctions to plant peace in the fertile soil of relationships with supposed “others.”*
- *Not only are Christians compelled to do something by the commands of Scripture and the example of Jesus, but we are liberated to do so as well.*
- *Much of an aggressive, and even hateful, attitude’s energy comes from what is called “identity politics.” The pervasive feeling that is plaguing the U.S. tells us that we must define*

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and protect our own identity against others. Not only does such a view neglect the darkness inherent in our own culture and wrongly imply that all “others” typify a certain set of traits, but it also imprisons us in defining our identity in fleeting feelings and philosophies that are temporal, fallen, and misguided.

- *For followers of Christ, our identity is not wrapped up in our culture, our creed, our country, or our carefully constructed conception of the “religious other.” Instead, our identity is founded in Christ, and Christ alone.*
- *This message is immensely liberating. We, who are no longer defined by our animosity to God and our alienation from His family, likewise no longer need to identify ourselves by our opposition to the other. We are no longer enslaved to cultural constructions of antipathy such as Islamophobia.*
- *Looking to the example of Jesus, who sat with Samaritans, ate with tax collectors, and became friends with other groups who ranked low on first-century public opinion surveys (see John 4, Luke 7, 14) Christians are called to take up His cue and pursue radical relationships in the face of these destructive attitudes—even if they exist within our own hearts.*
- *Jon Huckins, co-founding director of The Global Immersion Project said that hateful attitudes toward “the religious other,” “force people to pursue a different set of questions about safety, security, and persecution and not about hospitality, collaboration, and faithfulness.” And when we are preoccupied with our own safety, he explained, this “removes any ability to see the humanity and dignity in the situation and plight of many [others] throughout the world.” Huckins exhorts American churches to move from a posture of defense to one of hospitality, to foster peacemaking in “the fertile soil of relationships.”*
- *You see, our call is not to another crusade of conflict, but one of compassion. This is REVOLUTIONARY in a charged atmosphere of ignorance and hate. It CHANGES the narrative from one of contempt to one of concern. It tosses the world on its head and re-inaugurates the Christian role of PEACE MAKING in a caught in the grips of a trumped up and imagined “clash of civilizations.”*
- *Let’s be real...it’s easy to adopt an “us” v. “them” mentality, when it comes to people from other religions...particularly if we have some hurt or pain that has been caused by them in the past. But, not only does that attitude cause us to ignore our own idolatries, our own misconceptions, our own self-served, pick and choose, buffet-style religious preferences, but also goes against God’s vision for humanity to be one in Him.*
- *It’s not easy to let that settle in and to live in that reality, but that’s where Jesus comes in. He comes in to rescue us from our own idolatry and then heal and restore others who have lost their way. The truth is we need Jesus to convert us from a strong, aggressive Christianity to a strong, but compassionate one that reaches out to others with the confidence of Christ’s authority on heaven and earth, but the humility of Jesus upon the cross.*
- *Jesus’ restoration first deconstructs our “us” v. “them” mentality, resurrecting an “us” for “them” attitude from the ashes. It turns “us apart from them” to “us with them.” It takes*

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“us over them” and puts “us alongside of them.” It transforms “us in spite of them” into “us because of them.”

- *How can we walk with those we still disagree with? Look to Jesus’ example and His table fellowship, and invite others over for dinner. For a conversation. Sit with the “sinners”—those that are outcast by society, feared by others, hated and reviled. Seek compassion and love in the fertile soil of relationships. Play the “believing game” and not just the “doubting game.” This means giving people the benefit of the doubt (see Martin Luther’s explanation of the 8th commandment) and putting the best construction on things we may at first not understand or disagree with. Don’t give in to fear, hate, or the “dark side” (perfect love casts it out anyways—see 1 John 4:18; 2 Timothy 1:7). Practice charity. Practice hospitality. Give lavishly. Practice the discipline of unconditional friendliness. While you may disagree, have conflict, and perhaps not see eye-to-eye, stay committed to the relationship and seek grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation at all times.*
- **What group or community do you distrust, fear, or hate the most? How might your thoughts, words, and deeds toward them be transformed in light of this conversation?**
This will be highly personal for your group. Take this challenge to heart and pick an example from the earlier conversations you had about “us” and “them.”

Our Feet in the Streets

- The Psalms are a prayerbook/hymn book that give voice to the truth of God as it takes shape in the lives of His people, and it captures their response to His work in the world. With that in mind, READ Psalm 146 and turn it into a prayer. Work on your own, in small groups, or with your leader to paraphrase (put into your own words) the Psalm (you can also use words, phrases and promises from Ephesians 2 and Galatians 3 as well).
Let students work freely here. Decide what is best for your group in terms of making this an individual exercise or a group one. Bigger groups may consider breaking up into smaller groups. Smaller groups can work on this together on a large sheet of paper or on a whiteboard.
- **As a result of what you have heard from God’s word today, what is He giving you to believe or do this coming week?**
 - **You might consider (as a group, at your church, or with your family) inviting “them” over — for dinner, a conversation, or a shared work project (like “Habitat for Humanity” projects or other service opportunities in your shared community). What do you think? What could you do together with a group of supposed “others” to help break down walls and bust through barriers the world has taught us to put in place?**
Again, this will be highly personal for your group. Take this challenge to heart and pick an example from the earlier conversations you had about “us” and “them.” Or, consider reading the article, ‘A Radical Response to Islamophobia.’ In particular, focus on the story featured in the beginning. If this happened in your community, how would you respond? How can you take the lessons learned in this study and apply them to your neighborhood, your church, your context?