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**ADVANCE
GROUP
MENTORING
GUIDE
YEAR 2**



YEAR TWO CONTENTS

YEAR TWO

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SESSION ONE

THE CHALLENGE AND FRUIT OF EVANGELISM

This session sets up the second year of Advance by exploring the challenges we face in our evangelism and the fruit of the message we carry.

SESSION IN A SENTENCE

We want to be fruitful messengers of the gospel but as we go into the world we will face challenges.

SESSION BACKGROUND

In the Greek myth of Herakles, the son of Zeus is tasked with twelve seemingly impossible labours to overcome. Being half man, half god, he eventually manages to accomplish these tasks and establishes himself as the most famous hero in all of Greek literature – so famous and revered that the Romans would eventually claim him as their own, renaming him ‘Hercules’. His name lives on today in the very idea of taking on and succeeding in a huge task – ‘a herculean effort’.

Ancient mythological stories were told for a variety of reasons, including for entertainment and as a way to pass on moral values. But figures such as Hercules were also supposed to be inspirational to those who heard of their deeds.

Christians don’t need to look to flawed mythological figures for inspiration to persevere in the ‘herculean’ task of being God’s faithful messengers to an often hostile and dark world. We look to the reality of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus doesn’t merely inspire us in what it looks like to continue on in challenge, persecution and suffering, but tells us that he is actually *with us* as we face these things (Matthew 28:20). He is both the model for persevering faith, and the one who sustains and empowers us on the journey.

Psalm 1 offers us a simple and profound truth. There is a way to life and a way to destruction. All who root themselves steadfastly in God, no matter what storms come their way, can know true life and produce good fruit from it. The harvest of these lives doesn’t depend on the ever-changing circumstance of the world – which can toss you around in the wind to the point of destruction – but the unchanging truth of God himself. We can be planted in streams of living water, and it is that water that will see us not just survive the storm, but be fruitful in it.

Challenge and fruit (struggle and progress) often go hand and hand. The greatest suffering of God – Jesus on the cross – brought about his greatest success on our behalf, that we could have restored relationship with him and know true life. Our daily response to the circumstances of life as Christians is to delight in God even as we recognise the reality of the struggles we face. In doing so, we will not wither even when life is painful and our evangelism feels overwhelmingly challenging. We will persevere to proclaim to a world facing the beyond-herculean challenges of identity crisis, suffering, idolatry, and death that there is a beyond-herculean God-man who is no mere myth – he is the historically and presently real Jesus Christ, the saviour of the world.

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CATCH UP (10–20 MINS)

Take time to catch up with one another, sharing stories, feedback on opportunities and anything else that would encourage the group. Check in with each other to see if anyone has launched their own Advance group yet – if so, celebrate and pray for them and their group. Encourage

others to keep thinking about starting a group of their own this year.

PRAYER

Pray to commit the time to the Lord and over any situations, positive or challenging, arising from the catch up time.

TEACHING (30–40 MINS)

Work through the following teaching material in your own way, either by reading it word for word, or by reworking it into your own presentation.

- 'A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognise them.'

• MATTHEW 7:18-20

In our first year together, we focused on the kind of character that God is looking to develop in his people, not least those who will be his gospel ambassadors. This year, we will turn our attention to the fruit of the gospel we carry into the world alongside the challenges we can face as we do.

John Wesley preached more than 40,000 sermons in his lifetime, travelling more than 4,000 miles a year on horseback to do so! Even a brief look at Wesley's diaries would reveal the extent of challenge, obstacle and persecution he faced as he took the gospel the length and breadth of Britain in the eighteenth century. These challenges would make for bitter reading if not set alongside the reality of how the gospel changes people's lives. The struggle may be real, but when it comes to the gospel, the struggle is worth it.

The life of someone like John Wesley is a helpful reminder of both the joy and the

challenge of what it looks like to serve God on the front lines of evangelism. But what about your own experience?

Discuss: What are some specific challenges you have faced in your evangelism?

Sometimes, challenge can be a good thing – like the challenge of counting the cost of our daily faith, developing self-discipline, prioritising the worship of God above other idols and distractions, fellowship with other believers and working out how to stir and equip others for works of service.

There are other experiences which are not *good things* in themselves – persecution from the world, the fear of man, temptation and accusation from the enemy, idolatry around performance and comparison to others. And yet, these challenges can still be used by God in his grace to help us grow as we persevere on the road of obedient faith.

How do we face the challenges that we encounter, and develop spiritual perseverance that will see us continue in God's calling and service rather than be crushed by it? Even though it might sound overly simple, the answer is to follow Jesus.

In both the first and the last chapters of John's gospel, Jesus invites his disciples to 'follow me'. In between these two callings the disciples face physical danger, failure, disappointment, persecution, disagreement, and a variety of other challenges. After Jesus' ascension to heaven, the disciples work out what it means to follow Jesus as they preach the gospel and give birth to the church – but they still face the same challenges as before! Except there are two big differences. First, having seen Jesus resurrected, they no longer know Jesus as a messiah figure, but as Lord and God. Secondly, they have been given a gift by him that changes everything.

Following Jesus means *knowing* Jesus. When soon-to-be disciple Nathanael first hears about Jesus of Nazareth, he quickly writes him off with a comical put-down: 'Nazareth? Can anything good come from there?' But Nathanael quickly moves from insult to insight when he meets Jesus for himself and experiences his prophetic power first-hand (John 1:43-50). Nathanael's encounter with Jesus moves him from writing Jesus off to following him.

Every journey has a starting point and every relationship has a 'hello'. In time, Nathanael and his friends discover who Jesus really is and, as confusion gives way to confidence, his original put-down gives way to proclamation: 'Nazareth? Let me tell you what good came from there!'

Discuss: How have you seen Jesus transform you as you have followed him? What fruit can you see?

Following Jesus means that even when everything in the world seems to be against us, we can find true joy in our relationship with him. We don't merely survive our challenging circumstances, we thrive. We do this by receiving the gift he offers us – the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the fruit that flows from it.

- 'But the fruit of the Spirit is love,
- joy, peace, forbearance [patience],
- kindness, goodness, faithfulness,
- gentleness and self-control. Against
- such things there is no law.'

• GALATIANS 5:22-23

This is the effect of God at work in our lives, the evidence of character and virtue that flow when we give ourselves completely to God's presence and power.

The challenge of evangelism is not found in the individual problems, obstacles, persecutions and difficulties that litter the road of service before us, but in the full reality of what it means to know and follow Jesus day by day.

It is not uncommon to hear people refer to the 'fruits' (plural) of the Spirit, but in the original language (Greek) the word 'fruit' is singular (and translated as such in our English Bibles). Does this distinction matter? Perhaps Paul wanted to be understood as speaking of one spiritual fruit (one life) with nine discernible attributes ('graces' or 'virtues' as they are sometimes described). This is Paul's expression of what the Christian life looks like.

Over the coming sessions of Year Two we will break down the fruit of the Spirit in such a way that will help us understand it as a whole. It is worth stating that while we separate the segments of the one fruit in the sessions to come, in order to explore them more closely, it is not possible to separate them in our lives.

When it comes to the effect of God's Spirit in your life and the fruit that flows from it, God is all or nothing. That's his call on your life in every area (Matthew 16:24-27). While we may see greater gains and successes in certain areas of our character at certain times, we should desire to grow in all these ways, to be consistently real in our representation of his glory. In our own strength this would be impossible, which is why it's the fruit of the Spirit rather than the fruit of the person!

- 'Following Jesus is simple, but not easy.
- Love until it hurts, and then love more.'

• MOTHER TERESA

We could never love the world enough to fix it, but God can. When we commit to the simple but costly reality of following Jesus we can love beyond our own capacity. We can love beyond our circumstances. We can love beyond any challenge we are facing. We can love with the strength of heaven, the love that has the power to save the world. We can love with the full flavour and power of the fruit of the Spirit.

We could adjust Mother Teresa's quote to help us keep the main thing the main thing:

- 'Evangelism is simple, but not easy.
- Proclaim the gospel until it hurts, and
- then proclaim some more.'

DISCUSSION (15 MINS)

1. What does it truly mean to follow Jesus?
2. What is the power of declaring Jesus as Lord in the midst of our challenges?
3. How do you recognise and celebrate the fruit of your faith?

- 'When the darkness of dismay comes, endure until it is over, because out of it will come that following of Jesus which is an unspeakable joy.'

• OSWALD CHAMBERS

APPLICATION (5 MINS)

At the start of this second year of Advance, make a fresh commitment to following Jesus by praying for the fruit of the Spirit to be outworked in your life day by day. If you started a prayer diary in Year One, make use of it as part of this practice, noting challenges you face in your evangelism and how God's spiritual fruit is revealed in your responses. If you haven't started a diary yet, now is the perfect time.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND PRAYER (15 MINS)

Fill in accountability forms, share in pairs or smaller groups and pray for each other.

'Lord, thank you that you are with us always. Help us by your grace to follow you in every season and through whatever challenges we face. Would your Holy

Spirit at work in our lives lead to ever more fruit within us and through us.'

Take some time to pray together through some of the challenges that arose during the discussion time and through the accountability form. Pray the fruit of the Spirit over each other that God would help you grow daily in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

DON'T FORGET... (10 MINS)

If you haven't already, set the dates for as many of the upcoming sessions as you can. Six months or more is advised so that people can commit to the dates early and make them a diary priority.

SESSION TWO

THE CHALLENGE FROM GOD – WORSHIP AND OBEDIENCE

In this session we will explore what it means to worship God in spirit and truth, and how our evangelism will flow from our worship.

SESSION IN A SENTENCE

God is looking for worshippers who will worship in spirit and truth – a holy people who will count the cost of following Jesus and be obedient to him in all things, not least the proclamation of his hope into the world.

SESSION BACKGROUND

Every human being will answer a basic worship question with their lives. The question is not, 'Will you worship?' for everyone worships something. The question is: 'What or who will you worship?'

The French philosopher Blaise Pascal famously proposed the idea of a God-shaped hole:

- 'What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.'

PASCAL

We were made for worship, and if we do not fill the worship void in our lives with

its proper object – God himself – we will always be unfulfilled. We would be like a car that's never been driven, a meal that's never been tasted, a football that's never been kicked, or a symphony that's never been heard. We would exist, but we would be unfulfilled in our purpose.

- 'If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.'

C.S. LEWIS

We were made to inhabit the kingdom of God where worship of the king is the ultimate reality of life, love and fulfilment. Worship is our right and proper response to God as we turn from rebellion against him to relationship with him.

What does worship look like? The most frequently used word in the New Testament for worship is *proskuneo*, which means to 'bow with reverence before and pay homage to' the one who is worthy. The second most translated word for worship is *latreuō* which means 'to serve'.

Think about the implications of these words as you come across them translated simply as 'worship' when you read the Bible. Think about the implications of these words as your church leader invites you to stand and 'worship' next time you gather.

Whenever we encounter the word worship, we should remember that God alone is worthy of our full submission, obedience, service and gifting. In response to God's own sacrifice, we offer our own as we bow before him and say, 'Here I am Lord, you are worthy, may your will be done in my life as I serve you for your glory, whatever the cost.'

God desires for us to worship him in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). God has given us the truth in Jesus Christ and has given us his Spirit by whom we are empowered to worship our holy God as his holy people.

This is the worship he desires.

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CATCH UP (10–20 MINS)

Take time to catch up with one another, sharing stories, feedback on opportunities and anything else that would encourage the group. Ask how people have been getting on with prayer around the fruit of the Spirit and their prayer diaries (Session One – Application). Continue to encourage each other in this.

PRAYER

Pray to commit the time to the Lord and over any situations, positive or challenging, arising from the catch up time.

TEACHING (35–45 MINS)

Work through the following teaching material in your own way, either by reading it word for word, or by reworking it into your own presentation.

- ‘Therefore, I urge you, brothers and
- sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer
- your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy
- and pleasing to God – this is your
- **true and proper worship**. Do not
- conform to the pattern of this world,
- but be transformed by the renewing of
- your mind. Then you will be able to test
- and approve what God’s will is – his
- good, pleasing and perfect will.’

• ROMANS 12:1–2, EMPHASIS ADDED

Discuss: How is worship expressed in your life and church community?

To pursue our evangelistic ministry while neglecting our daily devotion, our commitment to love our families, and our responsibility to meet the needs of those around us would be to fall into the trap of offering something to God that on the surface might look good, but under the surface would be deficient.

Before God is looking for evangelists, he is looking for worshippers.

- ‘It is often said that the church’s
- priority task is evangelism. But
- this is really not so. Worship takes
- precedence over evangelism, partly
- because love for God is the first
- commandment and love for neighbour
- the second, partly because, long after
- the church’s evangelistic task has been
- completed, God’s people will continue
- to worship him eternally, and partly
- because evangelism is itself an aspect
- of worship, a “priestly service” in
- which converts “become an offering
- acceptable to God.”

• JOHN STOTT

The core message of the evangelist is to call people to worship only the one who is worthy. It isn’t possible to divide our worship – either we worship God, or we worship something else. Only God is worthy of our worship, and only through worshipping him will we achieve true life and fulfilment.

As evangelists, our challenge is to make sure that we worship God first – before our ministry, before our talent, before anything else.

It’s easy to fall into the trap of thinking that worship is simply about singing songs to God. While music is an amazing tool for expressing our worship to God, it is just that: a tool. The essence of worship is faithfulness – or put another way, **obedience**.

The most frequently-used word for 'worship' in the New Testament is *proskuneo*, which carries ideas of submission and obedience. It's like falling on your face before God and saying, 'Lord, only you are worthy of worship. I adore and revere you. I submit my life to you, I give my life to you, let my life be an offering of worship to you.' This kind of worship honours God for who he is and submits in obedience to his authority.

Discuss: Here are five ways we can practically develop our worship mindset. How do they bring evangelism into focus?

1. TIME IS FINE

We often use the expression, 'now we will have a time of worship' in our church gatherings to mean that we are going to sing together. This could be unhelpful, as it promotes the idea that our sung worship is the total expression of our worship. What would happen if we referred to other aspects of our response to God as a 'time of worship'? Why not get a group together from church to have a 'time of worship' this weekend by going out on the streets to offer to pray for people and share your faith in Jesus with them? The more we connect our evangelism with our worship, the more we will experience worship for what it is – a pleasing response from our lives to God.

2. AMAZE WITH PRAISE

Our praises to God should amaze us as we celebrate who he is and what he has done. But how often do the songs we sing become too familiar or too generic? What could happen if we were specific with our praise, prioritising testimony, so that people can be amazed by what God is doing in people's lives? How might our worship look if we wrote songs that could only be sung by our own community because they speak of specific things God is doing among us? The fruit of our evangelism is a wonderful focal point for

celebrating who God is as we continue to be amazed by his saving power at work among us.

3. SPECTATE TO PARTICIPATE

By definition, any expression of corporate worship involves participation – whether it's reciting a creed, singing a song, or celebrating a testimony. But before we participate, we often need to spectate first. We need to learn the melody of a new song before we can join in with the singing. How would it look if we encouraged people to come and see evangelism in action? Would it help them to become more confident, and give them the chance to see 'success' and 'failure'? Starting as an observer is a great way to get into worship – especially evangelism.

4. HOLY AS HOLY

Both the gospel and our worship are centred on holiness. God's desire is that we would be holy as he is holy, to be a holy people who worship him and the glory of his holiness. How often do we talk about holiness in connection with the gospel or our worship? We are used to devoting time that is 'set apart' to worship God – could we do the same with our evangelism?

5. CONFRONT THE COMFORT

It can be all too easy to reduce our worship to a series of experiences to enjoy. Sacrifice lies at the heart of true worship. We can only worship God because the sacrifice of Jesus has made our worship possible through restored relationship with him. In what ways do we 'count the cost' of our worship to God? In which areas of our lives is God calling us out of comfort to obediently serve him as an offering of sacrificial worship to him?

True biblical worship is rooted in the cost and delight of our response to God in every moment of our lives – and, this side of heaven, it will always involve

seeking and saving the lost as part of that response.

- 'The highest form of worship is the
- worship of unselfish Christian service.
- The greatest form of praise is the
- sound of consecrated feet seeking out
- the lost and helpless.'

• BILLY GRAHAM

DISCUSSION (15 MINS)

1. What is worship?
2. Why is holiness central to worship?
3. How do worship and evangelism work together?

APPLICATION (5 MINS)

Consider the five practical suggestions from the session and how you can apply them to your life and church. Revisit Session Eight of Year One (The Character of the Evangelist) and take some time to consider why holiness is so central to both the gospel and the worship that flows in response to it.

PRAYER

'Heavenly Father, help us to worship you in spirit and truth. Would the worship we offer you reflect your own love and sacrifice. As we offer our lives to you as a living sacrifice, would that worship reveal the hope of your truth to the world around us, that the sound of our worship would be the sound of your church living out and speaking out the gospel in the power of your Spirit.'

ACCOUNTABILITY (15 MINS)

Fill in accountability forms, share in pairs or smaller groups and pray for each other.

DON'T FORGET...

The Advance Essentials series is about providing you with practical tools for evangelism. *World-Winning Worship* explores the relationship between worship and evangelism. Discover more at advancegroups.org/AES

SESSION THREE

THE FRUIT IN THE DISCIPLE – FAITHFULNESS AND SELF-CONTROL

In this session we will explore the spiritual fruit of faithfulness and self-control. What does it mean to be faithful to God? How does self-control play out in our lives?

SESSION IN A SENTENCE

Jesus challenges every person to take up their cross and follow him in complete faithfulness, which includes being faithful to proclaiming the truth of the gospel when it's inconvenient.

SESSION BACKGROUND

Marriage is probably the most universally-recognised commitment to faithfulness. Across history and cultures, people make a commitment of total fidelity to another person out of their love for them. Faithfulness is a key aspect of marriage, and the self-control of each partner is essential for faithfulness to be achieved.

There are several passages in the New Testament which refer to the church as the bride and Christ as the groom (2 Corinthians 11:2-3; Ephesians 5:22-31; Revelation 19:7-8; 21:2-14), all of which mirror the image found in the Old Testament of Israel being God's bride (Jeremiah 2:2; Hosea 2-3). The implication could not be clearer: in the same way that marriage is a commitment of exclusive faithfulness between husband and wife, so are God's people to be faithful to him, as he is perfectly faithful to them.

Those who dedicate their lives to Christ by becoming nuns are sometimes known metaphorically as being 'married' to

Jesus. They forego the possibility of marriage to anyone else in favour of complete and undivided faithfulness to God. As profound as such a calling is, we should resist the thought that somehow those called into a monastic life have a greater calling of faithfulness upon their lives than anyone else.

Look at how Peter encourages believers to respond to God:

- 'His divine power has given us
- everything we need for a godly
- life through our knowledge of him
- who called us by his own glory and
- goodness. Through these he has
- given us his very great and precious
- promises, so that through them you
- may participate in the divine nature,
- having escaped the corruption in the
- world caused by evil desires.

- 'For this very reason, make every
- effort to add to your faith goodness;
- and to goodness, knowledge; and
- to knowledge, self-control; and to
- self-control, perseverance; and to
- perseverance, godliness; and to
- godliness, mutual affection; and to
- mutual affection, love.'

• 2 PETER 1:3-7

We could never be perfectly faithful to God, but because of his Spirit at work in our lives, we have what we need to live faithfully in response to him day by day. Living in a way that honours Christ involves two things: **trust** and **treasure**.

We **trust** God to give us his power, and we **treasure** that power by putting it to work in our lives. Look again at the list Peter offers us for our response to God. Think of each of these things as something

to trust God for, and treasure enough to put into practice in our lives:

- Goodness
- Knowledge (of God's truth and character)
- Self-control
- Perseverance
- Godliness (holiness)
- Mutual affection
- Love

Each of these things can be given to us by God's power, and each of these things needs to be exercised in our lives day by day.

This is where we meet God in his perfect faithfulness and provision for our lives. We put his provision into action in our daily experience as we seek to offer faithfulness back to him as we lovingly live for him.

By his empowering, we can become the faithful bride his perfection desires.

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CATCH UP (10–20 MINS)

Take time to catch up with one another, sharing stories, feedback on opportunities and anything else that would encourage the group. Ask if anyone has begun to implement any of the five practical suggestions about worship from the last session in their lives and/or church community (Session Two – Application).

PRAYER

Pray to commit the time to the Lord and over any situations, positive or challenging, arising from the catch up time.

TEACHING (30–40 MINS)

Work through the following teaching material in your own way, either by reading it word for word, or by reworking it into your own presentation.

- If we die with him, we will also live with him;
- if we endure, we will also reign with him.
- If we disown him, he will also disown us;
- if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself.

2 TIMOTHY 2:11-13

In the last session we explored what it means to be obedient to God, to worship him in spirit and truth. The fruit of our obedience is faithfulness.

But Paul reminds Timothy of the problem we all face: we are unfaithful to God, and our unfaithfulness is a catastrophic problem because it brings chaos into the peace of his creation. But there is good news. God is perfectly faithful, and his faithfulness is not based in any way on our own! The consistency of his faithfulness means that peace wins over chaos.

God is always faithful to us – it is a fundamental reality of who he is. Look at what these Psalms have to say about God's faithfulness"

- 'But you, O Lord, are a God of compassion and mercy, slow to get angry and filled with **unfailing love** and **faithfulness**.'

PSALM 86:15 (NLT)

- 'Your **unfailing love** will last forever. Your **faithfulness** is as enduring as the heavens.'

PSALM 89:2 (NLT)

- 'For the Lord is good. His **unfailing love** continues forever, and his **faithfulness** continues to each generation.'

PSALM 100:5 (NLT)

Do you notice the link between God's love and his faithfulness? It gets better still...

- 'For the law was given through Moses, but God's **unfailing love** and **faithfulness** came through Jesus Christ.'

JOHN 1:17 (NLT)

Jesus is the physical embodiment of God's love and faithfulness, given to us so that we can move from unfaithfulness to faithfulness. Jesus is the greatest commitment to love and faithfulness the world has ever seen.

According to *Psychology Today*, marriage – the globally-recognised commitment of love and fidelity – is the process by which two people make their relationship **public, official** and **permanent**. When Jesus died on the cross, God made his faithfulness to the world **public, official** and **permanent**. He committed himself to us as a perfect husband, that we might come back into relationship with him even though we had acted as an unfaithful spouse. When Jesus rose from the grave, God made his faithfulness to dwell within us forevermore as the gift of new life.

When we question God's faithfulness to us in light of the challenges we face – whether that question comes from the devil, the world, or our own flesh – asking: 'Are you really sure that God loves you, that he is faithful?' we can continue to point to the cross, the sign of his unfailing love and faithfulness and say:

'Yes, I'm sure.'

Pray: Take a moment to pray and thank God for his faithfulness, and if you are aware of any challenges that members of the group are facing, commit these things to the Lord. Ask for his help to trust him in the trial.

What does it look like for us to respond to God in faithfulness?

Sometimes our commitment to faithfulness can hinge on our feelings, which change day by day, but God wants *all of us, all of the time*. He's after complete commitment, complete obedience, complete faithfulness, in the good times and the bad, anchored in the hope of the cross.

Faithfulness means living with **integrity**, which can best be described as **living consistently**. Integrity is about being intentional with our faith, about choosing the right way – the faithful way – even when it hurts, even when it costs us more than we think we can afford to give. Living with integrity helps us move away from hypocrisy and shows the world that we are prepared to live for greater things, no matter what the personal cost.

Spiritual discipline is not just about giving things up. God wants to be in relationship with us, to help and guide us, and to reveal his purposes for our lives. Spiritual discipline helps us in our relationship with God when we commit to praying, studying his Word, worshipping, meditating, fasting, and giving. Through these disciplines we begin to find our identity in Christ more fully, and our obedience to God brings about transformation.

Discuss: Many view Christianity as a strait jacket, restricting fun and limiting flourishing, but Jesus says that he came to give us a rich and satisfying life. How do these two things get disconnected, and how do faithfulness and self-control help us?

There's a very good reason self-control is an aspect of the fruit of the Spirit. God is asking us to think carefully about the things in our lives that do not glorify him, especially those things which lead us into sin. Jesus is quite clear on this front:

- '...if your right hand causes you to sin,
- cut it off and throw it away.'
-
-
-
-
-

MATTHEW 5:30 (ESV)

Before you start reaching for the hacksaw, realise that Jesus is calling us to identify the areas of our lives that lead us away from him and to cut ourselves off from them.

Think of your own life and the areas where maybe you need more discipline. It might not be an obvious area relating to the substances you put in your body or the images you allow into your eyes. You may find that you need to think about being more disciplined with how you express opinions on social media, with making time for spiritual practices such as prayer and Bible study, with not overpromising and underdelivering, with time-keeping, with choosing to think the best of people, and so on...

The challenge from God is not just faithfulness to *him* in our lives, but faithfulness to his *gospel* in our evangelism. As we live for him faithfully, so we will also speak of him faithfully. To be truly faithful to God is to live in the fulness of the life he has for us – to work out, live out and speak out our faith as a love offering to the one who loves us unfailingly.

DISCUSSION (20 MINS)

1. How has God demonstrated his faithfulness in your life?
2. What do you think of when you hear the words 'discipline' and 'self-control'?

3. What are the areas of your life in which you struggle to be faithful to God?
4. How might living a self-controlled life impact your evangelism?

ACCOUNTABILITY (20 MINS)

Alongside filling out your accountability forms, ask each other the questions relating to these four key areas of our lives as we think about faithfulness and self-control.

TIME

We live in a busy world. There is so much competition for our time, which is our most valuable commodity. For some, busyness has even become a badge of honour, but we have to face up to two important questions. First, are you busy with things that really matter? Second, who ever said it was good to be busy?

RELATIONSHIPS

How disciplined are you in your relationships? The time you spend with your family and friends is one aspect, but what about the *quality* of the interactions that you have with them? It's one thing to be *in their presence*, another thing entirely to actually be *present with them*.

MIND

We are bombarded with imagery, information and ideas all day long. Our minds are constantly being fed, but are we filling them with junk food instead of healthy nutrients? Being disciplined in the things we watch, look at, read, say and think about is deeply important. What needs to get cut out in your life to keep your mind healthy?

SPIRIT

How do we discipline our spirit? By submitting our spirit to God's Holy Spirit. Ask yourself this simple question: what does it look like for me to truly submit my spirit to his Spirit each day?

Fill in accountability forms, share in pairs or smaller groups and pray for each other.

PRAYER

'Faithful God, thank you for your unfailing love. I am sorry for the times when I do not live faithfully for you. Help me to have more self-control in my life. I want to know you more and commit to spending more time with you every day. I ask forgiveness for the times when I sin, and I give over to you the areas of my life that I struggle to have discipline in. Thank you that you will never let me down, and that you are always with me. I pray that you will help me live in a way that honours you and encourages others. Amen.'

APPLICATION (5 MINS)

Be sure to let your most trusted friend know the area of your life that you need to either lay down or pick up, so that they can hold you to account. Ask them to check in with you over the coming weeks and to ask you the following three questions:

1. How has it been going so far?
2. Are you seeing God at work in the process?
3. What have you learned or discovered so far?

SESSION FOUR

THE CHALLENGE FROM OURSELVES — PERFORMANCE AND COMPARISON

In this session we will explore a challenge that often originates within ourselves: the challenge of comparison and finding value in performance rather than in the grace and love we receive from God.

SESSION IN A SENTENCE

Comparison is one of the easiest ways to blunt and kill our calling and potential, but learning to trust in the sufficiency of Christ in all things brings freedom to follow his call – despite our limitations and beyond our talents.

SESSION BACKGROUND

Sometimes the greatest expectations are the ones we place on ourselves. Rarely do they come from a vacuum, but rather they are influenced by family, community, culture or society. When it comes down to it, the person who is hardest on us is... us.

Israel had a comparison problem. Even with their long history of God coming through for them, time and again, leading them out of slavery, leading them through battle after battle, and leading them into the promised land, there was still something missing. They wanted a king.

Royalty was far more important in the ancient world than it is in the world today. A monarch would lead their nation in a number of specific and important ways as a representative of their gods. For example, Egyptian pharaohs were expected to bring cosmic order to existence, bridging the gap between divinity and humanity through their reign.

One common expectation of the role of ancient kings is to defend their land and where necessary lead the nation into battle – at times, literally leading the charge.

Israel looked at the nations around them and realised they didn't have a king of their own. Even though their God was the King of kings, they coveted an earthly figurehead who could go toe-to-toe with the kings of other nations. Through the prophet Samuel they asked God if they could have an earthly king of their own (1 Samuel 8).

Comparison often leads to us dethroning God. It usually starts in a subtle way. If we compare favourably, we dethrone God and our ego and self-sufficiency take his place. If we compare unfavourably, we dethrone God by believing even he is not powerful or loving enough to use us in our weakness. Israel wanted a king who would be the divine representative of God, but subtly and inevitably this road would lead to a diminishing of their trust in the Lord and an over-reliance on their trust in men.

Israel's story also has something to teach us about performance. Rather than rooting their identity in their loving and faithful God, they were looking to demonstrate their value through how they were performing in the world's eyes.

We can easily fall into the same trap, measuring our performance in any number of ways:

- Ministry performance: How successful we are
- Leadership performance: How respected we are
- Work performance: How busy we are
- Sacrificial performance: How generous we are
- Spiritual performance: How disciplined we are
- Moral performance: How holy we are
- Family performance: How relational we are
- Intellectual performance: How cultured we are
- Talent performance: How skilled we are

We should aim to be diligent in these areas and to give our best, but we should not find our value and identity in them. We find our identity and value in God – enabling us to live and serve with passion, grace and humility.

SESSION GUIDE

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CATCH UP (10–20 MINS)

Take time to catch up with one another, sharing stories, feedback on opportunities and anything else that would encourage the group. Ask the group to share how they have been getting on with their accountability commitment from the last session (Session Three – Application).

PRAYER

Pray to commit the time to the Lord and over any situations, positive or challenging, arising from the catch up time.

TEACHING (40–50 MINS)

Work through the following teaching material in your own way, either by reading it word for word, or by reworking it into your own presentation.

• ‘As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”

• “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

• LUKE 10:38–42

Martha gets so caught up in trying to serve Jesus that she forgets to be blessed by his presence. Not only that, but she gets frustrated when she compares her efforts to her sister Mary who seems to be leaving all the hard work to her. Performance and comparison are revealed in this story to be a barrier to the presence of God. And yet in all our effort and evaluation against others’ efforts, Jesus offers us a simple but deeply profound reminder: ‘My presence is enough.’

Each of us can find ourselves struggling under the pressures of our lives, especially when it comes to performing to a certain standard. For many, performance results in putting food on the table for our families. Performance is need.

For others, performance is about getting ahead and achieving more than a colleague, peer or rival. Performance is success. Performance is about the achievement of aspiration. Performance is often about ego.

Discuss: How do you evaluate 'performance' in your life? What about in evangelism?

Comparison is a sure-fire way to ruin your character. Compare favourably and you build up your ego and give your pride muscles the workout they really don't need. Compare unfavourably and you crush your own spirit, demotivating yourself. There will always be a more charismatic preacher, better-read theologian, more natural conversation starter, committed prayer, better-looking version of you.

Comparison isn't always negative. At times it can be helpful to watch how others are learning and growing. Observing others and learning from their successes and failures is a natural part of the human experience, but the difference between positive observation and negative comparison is found in the roles of **inspiration** and **condemnation**.

As we see others doing well, are we **inspired** to keep going on our own journey? As we see others struggling are we **inspired** to help them where we can? Or, as we see others doing well, do we **condemn** ourselves for not doing as well? As we see others struggling, do we **condemn** them for not being as 'good' as us?

It can be a fine balance to keep our hearts in check, so here are six things we can watch out for as we seek to be faithful in serving the Lord and avoid some of the pitfalls of comparison and the pressure to perform.

Discuss: Talk through the following points, and if any of these are a particular problem for anyone in the group, make a note of them and return to them in the accountability time later, where you will have a chance to pray for each other.

WATCH OUT FOR DISCOURAGEMENT

Discouragement is the first problem with comparison. If we compare unfavourably to those around us, then we can quickly become discouraged and ineffective. We mustn't let unfavourable comparison steal the joy of our calling, and blunt the effectiveness of the witness God has positioned us to be faithful in. Instead of being discouraged by others' successes, we should celebrate each one as a win for the kingdom of God. We must choose to give thanks for the kingdom win of others instead of lament for our personal frustration and limitation. If we honour the Lord with the posture of our hearts in this way, we will discover a joy that transcends performance.

WATCH OUT FOR ENCOURAGEMENT

The problem of encouragement goes hand-in-hand with the problem of discouragement. We don't usually consider encouragement to be a problem, but when we are encouraged through favourable comparison to others we can all too easily end up feeling superior, 'getting high' on our own success. We should be careful not to massage our own ego by indulging in the thought that we are 'better' in some way than someone else. We must be generous in giving our time, skills, gifting, and resources to those who have a call similar to our own but who are growing in their gifting.

WATCH OUT FOR TALENT

Comparison can cause us to put too much stock in talent or gifting. While talent can be used to glorify God, we should never be under the illusion that talent itself is going to get the job done in evangelism. Performance based on talent can quickly lead to minimising the power of God. Not only that, but often those with a talent for preaching or communication are lifted up as the gold standard for evangelism. But God is far more concerned about character than skill sets. Thank God for every talent you have that can be used for

his glory, but ask him to bless you even more abundantly with the wisdom and grace of heaven that you might steward his gifts faithfully.

WATCH OUT FOR FALSE HUMILITY

Humility is essential in evangelism, but false humility can be toxic. As we compare ourselves to others and evaluate our performance, it can be all too easy to project humility while cultivating a need for affirmation. Ask yourself this question: How do you demonstrate humility in response to success? One way to evaluate this can be to consider how you respond when receiving a compliment. Do you dismiss and downplay, or say thank you and offer it back to the Lord in worship? Dismissal can be seen as a humble response, but true humility doesn't dismiss, true humility graciously receives and lovingly redirects to God.

WATCH OUT FOR RESULTS

How do you evaluate evangelistic success? If you are a full-time evangelist you may even feel the pressure to get 'results' (i.e. number of responses) to justify your calling. If you measure success in evangelism by numbers, you are in danger of taking credit for something you have no right to claim credit for. Only God has the power of salvation. Temptation to validate our calling or ministry can take hold and we can become 'evangelistic' as we report back the fruit of the response, saying to ourselves: 'Well, ten raised their hands, but a dozen sounds more biblical and I'm sure there were some who responded in their hearts...' We mustn't play this game of deception. God doesn't need us to prove his greatness by massaging the numbers to make them sound more impressive. And were those numbers being reported as a mark of *his* greatness rather than ours? Success in evangelism is not based on people being won to Christ, but in being faithful to the task of revealing him to the world around us. God will take care of the rest.

WATCH OUT FOR PEOPLE PLEASING

Sometimes our performance can be based on a desire to please people rather than God, but we are under no obligation to outwork our witness to the world for the pleasure of anyone except our heavenly Father. The 100m sprinter and Christian missionary Eric Liddell famously won a 400m gold medal at the 1924 Paris Olympics after choosing to run that event instead of his usual discipline to avoid competing on a Sunday. God was the most important thing in his life, and he was prepared to sacrifice a shot at Olympic gold to hold on to his Christian principles. Running was an important part of his life, but not because of his or anyone else's pleasure. He said, 'When I run, I feel God's pleasure.' We mustn't settle for anything less than the pleasure of the Lord – it will elevate our own pleasures and passions from being merely activities on this side of heaven to worship that will resonate throughout eternity.

Our goal in being Christlike is not to **compare** ourselves to him, but to **remain** in him and as we do, to **reveal** him (John 15:5-8). It is about his presence – to sit at his feet day by day and say, 'Lord you are enough.' When we serve from a place of performance, we open ourselves to pressure – often a pressure that builds until it explodes in an unhealthy way. But when we serve from a place of presence we discover the passion of God for us, we become more passionate about him, and we can serve passionately in the world.

Jesus will always be greater, but with his Spirit at work in us we can reveal his greatness precisely because we compare unfavourably to him in our own strength. By his grace and power, he makes his perfect presence known through our transformed yet work-in-progress lives.

DISCUSSION (20 MINS)

1. How do you evaluate the success of your ministry?
2. What might cause you to feel the need to 'perform' to a certain standard?
3. Who are you most likely to compare yourself to and why?
4. How can you protect yourself from 'condemnation' and instead press into 'inspiration'?

ACCOUNTABILITY (20 MINS)

Return to some of the six areas of weakness from the teaching section and honestly reflect on your own struggles in any of these areas by discussing together in pairs or threes.

Fill in accountability forms, share in pairs or smaller groups and pray for each other.

PRAYER

'Father God, help us to see ourselves as you see us and to learn that our identity is not based on the fame of our name, our achievements, the number of likes and follows we have online, or our earthly success, but on the fact that we are your children. Would this identity be a blessing to the world as it reveals you as the one to be known. Help us delight in you and to desire your presence above all things. Thank you that you love us perfectly as we are and that you love us perfectly enough to help us grow into who you created us to be. Amen.'

APPLICATION (5 MINS)

Over the coming weeks, reflect on one of the following verses each day and remind yourself who God says you are. Ground

yourself in his identity. Share what you discover about your identity with someone each day, even using it as an opportunity for witness about the identity that they too can know in relationship with God.

- Genesis 1:27
- Romans 8:37
- 1 Corinthians 3:16
- 2 Corinthians 5:17
- Ephesians 2:10
- 1 Peter 2:9
- 1 John 3:1-2

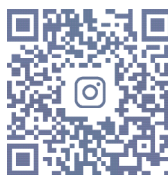
DON'T FORGET...

Social media can be a danger zone for comparison, but it can also be helpful for inspiration and keeping our eyes fixed on the main thing. The Advance Groups social media pages are designed to do exactly that. Follow us on Instagram and Facebook:

📷 **advancegroups**

f **advancegroups.org**

Or scan the QR codes below:



SESSION FIVE

THE FRUIT IN THE MESSAGE – GOODNESS AND PEACE

In this session we will explore the spiritual fruit of goodness and peace and how they sit at the very heart of the gospel message.

SESSION IN A SENTENCE

At the heart of the gospel is the truth of God's perfect goodness which leads to perfect peace – bringing hope to a chaotic, anxious and suffering world.

SESSION BACKGROUND

Awards ceremonies are commonplace in the entertainment industry. The worlds of film, television and music host a series of international awards shows each year to highlight the brightest and best within their respective industries. It must be a special feeling to receive recognition, validation and acceptance from your professional peers.

Acceptance speeches are a delicate art. Pitch it right and you can come across as witty, humble and sincere. Pitch it wrong and you can leave behind a sour taste of ego, arrogance and worthiness. One of the most-ridiculed Oscar acceptance speeches was from actress Sally Fields when she won her second Academy Award in 1985:

'I haven't had an orthodox career and I've wanted more than anything to have your respect. The first time I didn't feel it but this time I feel it and I can't deny the fact that you like me, right now, you like me!'

Sally Fields' acceptance speech was ridiculed because she was too open in

admitting that what she wanted was the acceptance of her peers. It felt needy. In truth though, Fields was honestly expressing what most people are probably thinking and experiencing – the need to be liked and accepted. If we can be 'good enough' we will be accepted, and if we are accepted, we can know peace.

Our desire for acceptance is wrapped up in our quest for identity, and the most fundamental of all human questions: 'Who am I?'

What do you think an awards ceremony in heaven would be like? Perhaps there would be awards for the most righteous, the kindest, the most humble and the most loving... To secure a nomination in any category you would presumably need to live the life of a saint, or, more likely, Jesus would just sweep the board every year. And yet, the amazing reality is that God has already held an awards ceremony of sorts. There was one ultimate prize available, and the announcement of the result came as a great surprise. We all won.

- 'But because of his great love for us,
- God, who is rich in mercy, made us
- alive with Christ even when we were
- dead in transgressions – it is by grace
- you have been saved. And God raised
- us up with Christ and seated us with
- him in the heavenly realms in Christ
- Jesus, in order that in the coming ages
- he might show the incomparable riches
- of his grace, expressed in his kindness
- to us in Christ Jesus.'

• EPHESIANS 2:4-7

and reality. Goodness isn't an attribute of God, he is goodness itself.

Without God, objective moral values cannot exist. Without an absolute lawgiver saying that an action like murder is *always* wrong, we could make a claim that on some occasions it could be okay. Because God is the king of the universe, he sets the framework based on his own character. When he declares something 'good', it's because he is good. When he says something is evil, it's evil because it is counter to his perfect goodness.

Sometimes people misunderstand this point and assume it means that those who don't follow God can't be good in any way. Not so – we are all made in the image of God who is good. The point is that goodness only makes sense if God is real. If he's not, then all ideas of right and wrong are subjective – we make it up as we go. But we know in our gut and our heart that this is not the case – we sense there is an objective standard for our morality. Not only that, but without God our ideas of whether we are good or bad have no anchor. Are the things I do good or bad? Do they make me a good or bad person? Who gets to decide which is which?

There is only one way to escape this endless cycle of moral philosophy: taking God at his (good) word.

Even those who want to trust and believe that God is good can struggle with the idea of God's goodness set alongside the sufferings and evils we see in creation. If God is so good, why is there suffering? If God is peace, why is there chaos? This is a powerful and deeply important question because it is asked in response to one of the few uniform experiences of humanity: we all experience pain. We all suffer.

There are many helpful ways to approach the question of suffering, but here are four points for reflection:

1. THE WORLD WAS NEVER MEANT FOR SUFFERING

When God created the world he looked at it and said it was good. Through our rebellion against his perfection we have brought chaos into the peace of God's creation. Suffering entered the world. The reason it hurts so much is that we were never created to suffer.

For those who don't believe, the question of suffering is an even harder problem to solve because there is no objective reason to assume suffering is wrong or bad (only that it *feels* bad). In a random universe, suffering is the inevitable reality of random processes. In a created universe, suffering is the inevitable reality of rebelling against the perfection of the creator. In a random universe there is no real hope even though we suffer. In a created universe, there is a perfect hope even though we suffer.

2. THERE IS HOPE BECAUSE OF JESUS

God loves us and cares about our suffering. God does not abandon us to suffering, but meets us in our sufferings by choosing to suffer. He is the God who understands our suffering through Jesus' saving work on the cross. We have been saved from sin (rebellion) and death and can now know true life and have a present and future hope that helps us persevere, even in the face of our greatest sufferings. Being a follower of Jesus doesn't mean you stop suffering – in fact, Jesus says his followers may even experience more suffering for following him (John 16:33). Being a follower of Jesus means we are not alone in our suffering. He is with us, and our suffering is not in vain, nor will it put us to shame.

3. WE CAN BE THE SOLUTION TO THE SUFFERING IN THE WORLD

God is calling his people to be his light in the world, to reveal hope where there is despair. Having given us the solution to suffering through the cross, he tells us to offer that solution to the world. We are to be God's hands and feet on the earth, bringing goodness until the day he restores this world to the perfect state in which he originally created it. Empowered by the Holy Spirit we can bring comfort, healing, and hope.

4. ONE DAY EVERYTHING WILL BE PUT RIGHT

God's perfect justice will be restored and everything will be made right forevermore on the day Jesus returns. The Bible tells us that there will be no more sorrow or pain, and that every tear will be wiped from our eyes. We will live in the perfection of God's peace and in his presence for all eternity.

Discuss: What resonates with you from these four points about your own suffering? How might you help someone who doesn't yet know Jesus to journey through their own?

The gospel gives us peace in the chaos of the world. Paul tells us to equip ourselves with the gospel as shoes that can carry us into the world as people graced with peace:

- 'For shoes, put on the peace that
- comes from the Good News so that
- you will be fully prepared.'

• EPHESIANS 6:15 (NLT)

Peace is not simply an emotional state. It is a spiritual quality that God desires for us to be clothed in through the power of his good news. It is fruit that flows from a life that trusts in God, even in the most chaotic and confusing circumstances of life.

Once we understand that we can find peace through the saving work of Jesus, his Spirit enables us to go into the world and live with new confidence and authority. Jesus says that *all* authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him, and he sends us out into the world to make disciples in that authority, and in the power of his Spirit (Matthew 28:16-20; Acts 1:8). When we clothe ourselves with peace, we are prepared for the darkness of the world. Whatever unpredictability it may throw at us, we can live confidently in Jesus' strength. That doesn't mean everything gets instantly easy, but it does mean we can be prepared to face the trials, challenges, and chaos of life with confidence and hope.

We will also be better equipped to tackle injustice. There are many in the world who don't know God and yet have a deep sense of grief at injustice, even going so far as to devote their time and resources to fighting against these things. We can applaud these people for their justice efforts and we can partner with them and unite in our objection to the injustice we see that offends God above all. But through the goodness of the gospel, we can also reveal that there is a greater righteousness than our own. A greater power than the abuses of power in this world. A greater hope than the despair of injustice. True justice belongs to God.

Discuss: How does the goodness and peace at the heart of the gospel help us in responding to the injustices we see around us?

As we begin to act and speak out against injustice, so we may encourage others to do the same. As we reveal God's goodness, we invite others to encounter his true justice and true peace.

DISCUSSION (20 MINS)

1. How do we know that God is good?
2. How can we cultivate the goodness of God in our lives?
3. What does it mean to be an ambassador of peace when it comes to evangelism?
4. How do evangelism and social justice work together?
 - ‘So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death.
 - But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace.’
 - ROMANS 8:6 (NLT)

APPLICATION (5 MINS)

Be the answer to someone’s need in the coming weeks. Reveal the goodness of God within someone’s struggle and suffering by being present with love, kindness and service. Even the smallest act of love can have a big impact in the life of someone who is experiencing difficulty. This could look like:

- Running errands for someone housebound with illness or disability.
- Visiting an elderly person in your community who longs for relational interaction.
- Listening to someone who is struggling without the need to offer ‘advice’ in response.
- Sharing about your Advance experience with someone struggling with the idea of evangelism (or even start a new group that they can join).
- Praying with or reading the Bible with someone.
- Offering a public encouragement to someone on social media.

- Blessing someone with a gift.
- Cooking someone a meal.

PRAYER

‘Father God, you are good. I am sorry, Lord, that I do not always live in a way that shows your goodness to others. Help me maintain a pure heart and be wise about how I fuel my heart, mind and soul. Thank you that you love me as I am, and that I can know true peace because of that. Give me the confidence and wisdom to stand up for justice, and in so doing, reflect something of your goodness that the world may be changed by it. In the name of Jesus. Amen.’

ACCOUNTABILITY (15 MINS)

Fill in accountability forms, share in pairs or smaller groups and pray for each other.

SESSION SIX

THE CHALLENGE FROM THE WORLD — FEAR AND PERSECUTION

This session considers how we can persevere in light of the challenges faced as we witness into the world – specifically the fear of man that can grip and blunt us, and persecution that can take many forms and lead to hurt and discouragement.

SESSION IN A SENTENCE

Every Christian will face persecution against and opposition to their faith, and the Bible gives clear instruction on how to persevere in every trial – not trivialising persecution, but acknowledging it and practically working through our response to it.

SESSION BACKGROUND

It is estimated that there are more Christian martyrs around the world today than at any other point in history. The Christian persecution advocacy organisation Open Doors suggests that at least one in ten Christians around the world face serious persecution for their faith. Right now, somewhere in the world, a follower of Jesus is suffering to the point of imprisonment, torture, or death.

Persecution can take a variety of forms. In essence, persecution is the experience of cruel or hostile treatment by another because of your faith. For many Christians the persecution they experience is limited, perhaps coming in the form of workplace bullying or unpleasant social interactions as people negatively react to your Christian faith. As frustrating and upsetting as this can be, we should always be sober to the fact that there are many Christians around the world whose experience of

persecution is much graver. Any hostility to our faith can be challenging, but we should be careful not to play the victim as Christians when we are in fact the victors in Christ.

Jesus makes it clear that those who follow him will face persecution (John 15:19–20). This can be an alien concept to many Christians who seek to make their faith as comfortable as possible, but true faith lived out in the world will always find opponents who rally against the offensive nature of the gospel and its unique and ultimate claims.

On the way to face trial and martyrdom in Rome, Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, wrote the following letter to Christians facing persecution:

- ‘Pray continually for the rest of
- humankind as well, that they may
- find God, for there is in them hope of
- repentance. Therefore allow them to be
- instructed by you, at least by your deeds.
- In response to their anger, be gentle; in
- response to their boasts, be humble; in
- response to their slander, offer prayers;
- in response to their errors, be steadfast
- in the faith; in response to their cruelty,
- be civilised; do not be eager to imitate
- them. Let us show by our **forbearance**
- that we are their brothers and sisters,
- and let us be eager to be imitators of the
- Lord.’

Do you see the opposite spirit to which Ignatius is inviting his fellow believers to live in?

As we face anger, be gentle

As we face boasts, be humble

As we face slander, offer prayers

As we face errors, be steadfast in the faith

As we face cruelty, be civilised

Responding in this way means conquering our fear: the fear of pain and suffering, the fear of shame and humiliation, the fear of injustice and defeat, the fear of loss and death – the fear of man.

Ignatius urges believers to show *forbearance* rather than fear in response to the mockery, scorn, cruelty and persecution we may face as we are faithful to Christ. The dictionary defines *forbearance* as ‘patient self-control; restraint and tolerance.’ When conflict arises in our lives as a result of our faith in Jesus, are we able to show patient self-control, restraint and tolerance?

Not in our own strength. But in dying to ourselves every day, we have the hope of being reborn with a spirit of power, love and self-discipline – a sound mind rather than a fearful mind. The Holy Spirit empowers our forbearance and leaves us able to offer forgiveness to those who persecute us, just as Christ himself did upon the cross: ‘Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.’

May our faith-empowered forbearance do more than help us endure persecution and overcome fear – may it help to open the eyes of the blind.

SESSION GUIDE

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CATCH UP (10 MINS)

Take time to catch up with one another, sharing stories, feedback on opportunities and anything else that would encourage the group. Share stories of how you have met people’s needs in the past month (Session Five – Application).

PRAYER

Pray to commit the time to the Lord and over any situations, positive or challenging, arising from the catch up time.

TEACHING AND DISCUSSION (60+ MINS)

In this session, the teaching and discussion are bound together as we explore ten ways in which we can persevere through persecution, with space to discuss each point. Don’t feel the pressure to rush – be sure to create lots of space for discussion around the various ways we are encouraged to keep going in the face of persecution and trial. You may want to choose to explore only the ways which are most relevant to your group, or split this session into two and meet twice this month.

- ‘Consider it pure joy, my brothers and
- sisters, whenever you face trials of many
- kinds, because you know that the testing
- of your faith produces perseverance.
- Let perseverance finish its work so that
- you may be mature and complete, not
- lacking anything.’
-
- JAMES 1:2-4
-

James calls believers to persevere in times of testing and suffering. He tells us that perseverance is something that will help us grow into maturity, and as we mature we will lack nothing for the life that God has for us. He even goes so far as to say we should consider it pure joy when trials come our way! James goes on to offer ten practical ways in which we can do so.

1. PERSEVERE IN JOY

- ‘Consider it pure joy, my brothers and
- sisters, whenever you face trials of many
- kinds, because you know that the testing
- of your faith produces perseverance.’
-
-
- JAMES 1:2-3
-

The joy of the Lord is our strength, and it is never more needed than when we are facing persecution! Joy acts as an anchor for our soul. As a storm may drag a boat

far from the safety of the shore, so may trials drag us from the presence of God. Remembering the joy of our salvation in every circumstance helps us to stay rooted in that which is of first importance, the power, presence and peace of God.

Discuss: What does it look like to persevere in joy even when facing 'trials of many kinds'?

2. PERSEVERE IN PATIENCE

- 'Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.'

• JAMES 1:4

Many of us treat patience as something passive. When difficulties come our way, we simply sit patiently and try to wait them out. But biblical patience – the patience that is fruit of the Spirit – is an active patience. To be actively patient is to be proactive in trusting God.

Discuss: What is the difference between a passive and an active patience?

3. PERSEVERE IN WISDOM

- 'If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.'

• JAMES 1:5

One of the most important things we need is the wisdom of heaven, and never more so than when we are facing persecution. King Solomon was blessed by God with great wisdom because he had asked God for it above all other things, including long life and wealth (1 Kings 3:4-15). It can be hard to maintain a heavenly perspective when we are facing trials, so seeking the Lord's wisdom to help guide us is essential and he delights in blessing us in this way.

Discuss: How have you seen the wisdom of heaven help you at specific times of your life?

4. PERSEVERE IN FAITH

- 'But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.'

• JAMES 1:6-8

Trusting God is essential if we are going to weather the storms of persecution. As flaming arrows fly our way, we extinguish them with the shield of faith (Ephesians 6:16). While we may be vulnerable to physical harm, there is no work of spiritual persecution that can overcome the one who trusts in the Lord. Our faith is built on grace: not only do we persevere in the faith we have, we continue to extend the grace we have received, especially to those who persecute us.

Discuss: How do you take up the shield of faith against the persecution you face and offer grace in response?

5. PERSEVERE IN DEVOTION

- 'Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.'

• JAMES 1:19-20

Our relationship with God means everything. When the world is against us, we must remember that he is for us. This remembrance begins in the secret place as we spend time in his presence – adoring him, seeking him, asking him for help and being formed into his likeness. When others mock us, do we listen to them or to

God? Are we quick to speak in anger to those who persecute us, or in love back to our Father? In his presence we can be prepared to respond to the world, not in self-righteousness, but in the holy and gracious righteousness of God.

Discuss: When trial or persecution comes, how quick are you to prioritise devotion as an antidote?

6. PERSEVERE IN THE TRUTH

‘Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says... whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it – not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it – they will be blessed in what they do.’

JAMES 1:21-22, 25

When life gets tough, we can all-too-easily retreat into our comfort zone to make ourselves feel better. The things we eat, watch, play and consume can act as pleasure-bringing antidotes to the displeasure we experience in the trials we face. These things can easily become unhealthy in our lives, especially as we push into greater excess to ease our discomfort. How quickly do we to get into the Word of God for comfort and direction? How instinctively do we allow the Bible to be our compass, our daily bread, the bedrock of truth upon which we can build our firm foundation while the sands of circumstance shift around us?

Discuss: Where do we find assurance and perspective when discomfort distorts our faith?

7. PERSEVERE IN HOLINESS

‘When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.’

JAMES 1:13-14

The devil tempts, God tests. Whenever the devil tempts you, his desire is that you would fail and your faith would be destroyed. When God tests you, his desire is that you would succeed and that your faith would be developed. Whether we are facing temptation or testing, our prayer can be the same: ‘Lord help us to persevere in the holiness you have saved us for through your Son, and empowered us for by your Spirit.’

Discuss: What does it look like to live out holiness in the face of persecution?

8. PERSEVERE IN SERVICE

‘Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.’

JAMES 1:27

Persecution is designed to stop us in our tracks. It can make us afraid, apathetic or angry. Our best response therefore is to be *active*, continuing to serve selflessly, compassionately and graciously in the face of opposition.

Discuss: What is the power of persevering in service even while we are mocked or abused?

9. PERSEVERE IN HOPE

- Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

- JAMES 1:12

Paul encourages believers that 'our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us' (Romans 8:18). Paul goes on to say that this hope is not just for us, but as we persevere in hope we will reveal that same hope to a world in need. Hope is a powerful force that has often been shown most clearly in the face of the greatest suffering.

- 'Suffering is not an embarrassment to the Christian faith. It is the thread with which Christ's name is stitched into our lives.'

- REBECCA MCLAUGHLIN

Discuss: How might hope be revealed in the suffering of Christians?

10. PERSEVERE IN FELLOWSHIP

James' letter is not written to individuals in isolation, but to a church community. Fellowship is essential. Persecution should drive us to greater fellowship – not so that we would hide ourselves away from the harsh world outside, but so that we can refresh ourselves, encouraging and blessing one another, and then going together into the world to face trials and triumphs together.

Discuss: Does your church community make space for people to talk about the trials of life and Christian witness into the world? Do you pray for, encourage and support one another in this area? If not, what could this look like?

APPLICATION (5 MINS)

Visit the World Watch List on opendoors.org and choose a country to pray for each week. As we pray for our brothers and sisters around the world who are facing persecution for their faith, we can be encouraged that we never suffer alone. God is with us by his Spirit's power and through the prayers and actions of his church.

PRAYER

Give plenty of time to prayer, specifically focusing on three areas of persecution:

1. Pray for specific areas of persecution that individuals in the group are experiencing.
2. Pray for general areas of persecution that challenge the spread of the gospel in your context.
3. Pray for the persecuted church in the world.

ACCOUNTABILITY (15 MINS)

Fill in accountability forms, share in pairs or smaller groups and pray for each other.

DON'T FORGET...

Advance is a global movement – so visit advancegroups.org/global and alongside the Open Doors Watch List be sure to pray for all the nations where Advance Groups are meeting each month. If you know someone in another nation who would be blessed by Advance (whether we have groups there already or not) then connect them to us via the website.

SESSION SEVEN

THE FRUIT IN THE MESSENGER – KINDNESS AND JOY

This session will explore how we, as messengers of the gospel, need to live in the joy of our salvation and reveal the kindness of God to the world. What does it truly look like for our evangelism to be kind-hearted in word and action, and strengthened by the joy of the Lord?

SESSION IN A SENTENCE

God's kindness is powerful enough to restore a hopelessly-rebellious humanity back into a hope-filled relationship with him, and it is this same kindness that fills all believers with joy and releases our potential to be his servants in the world.

SESSION BACKGROUND

The Bible tells us that God 'regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled' (Genesis 6:6).

God saw how much evil there was in the world – and it was *particularly* awful at this point, a real rock-bottom moment – and it broke his heart: so much so that he expressed the feeling that it would be better if humanity had not been created. We shouldn't be surprised at his reaction – the people's complete wickedness and lack of repentance was completely opposed to his nature.

Genesis 6:6 presents us with a question: what does it mean for God to 'regret'? One way to begin to find an answer is to remember that we are always limited to our human language when talking about the divine. While we may never fully grasp the complexity of what's being described

here, we can begin to understand the idea of God's regret as a human way of expressing how troubled and displeased he was by the evil before him.

The world should have ended in that moment of God's regret, but it didn't. Why? Because even though God was distressed by humanity's sinfulness, he still had an eternal perspective – defined by his overwhelming and indescribable loving kindness.

Despite our depravity, God does not abandon us to complete destruction – even though that is what we deserve. Every single one of us has fallen short of his standard (Romans 3:23). But God, in his loving kindness, gives us what we don't deserve: a second chance. Genesis 6 goes on to tell us that the reason why the world is not destroyed in an instant is because a man called Noah found grace with God.

There's an important detail here: the Bible doesn't tell us that Noah *earned* grace with God. God's grace fell upon Noah because God is gracious. Noah's righteousness was in response to God's grace, not the other way round. The grace given by God to Noah would not be wasted. We can never earn God's grace, it is offered freely and undeservedly to us because of the kindness of God.

It wasn't that Noah found potential hope in God's kindness, it was God's kindness that found the hope of potential in Noah.

As we go into the world carrying God's story, we are not offering the hope of God's kindness as an abstract idea. His kindness is already at work in our potential to serve him faithfully.

SESSION GUIDE

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CATCH UP (10–20 MINS)

Take time to catch up with one another, sharing stories, feedback on opportunities and anything else that would encourage the group. During the previous session (Session Six – Application) did you identify any other Advance groups meeting around the world that you know? Pray for them together.

PRAYER

Pray to commit the time to the Lord and over any situations, positive or challenging, arising from the catch up time.

TEACHING (45–50 MINS)

Work through the following teaching material in your own way, either by reading it word for word, or by reworking it into your own presentation.

- ‘Since God chose you to be the holy
- people he loves, you must clothe
- yourselves with tenderhearted mercy,
- kindness, humility, gentleness, and
- patience.’

• COLOSSIANS 3:12 (NLT)

There is something powerful about a simple act of kindness that can have a transforming effect on the person it benefits. In recent years, Christian social action movements have often been based around donating ‘hours of kindness’. In an increasingly individualistic society, kindness becomes one of the most powerful resources we have. Acts of kindness can see previously closed doors opened, cold hearts warmed, stubborn attitudes softened, and lives transformed.

Simple acts of kindness can be beautiful, but to truly reveal the kindness of God to the world, our kindness must move beyond individual actions to the foundation of who we are as ambassadors of his kingdom. When Jesus takes his rightful place at the centre of our lives, we grow in spiritual kindness.

Putting Jesus at the centre of our lives goes beyond inviting him ‘into your heart.’ It involves choosing to submit to his lordship and allowing him to shape our character. Think of these two ways of offering an invitation to respond to the gospel:

1. Will you accept Jesus into your heart?
2. Will you give your life to Jesus?

Discuss: Which of these better explains what God is asking of us? Why?

You don’t have to look far to see people living in hopelessness. It’s one of the greatest tragedies of human existence. When Jesus took our sin on the cross, he took the hopelessness of the world upon himself. Because of this we need never feel hopeless again. Isn’t that amazing? But still we see hopelessness. Perhaps you are even experiencing hopelessness today. Be reminded that God’s kindness towards us through Jesus’ sacrifice can wipe that hopelessness away forever and replace it with the anchoring hope of joy that goes beyond simple happiness.

Happiness is important to people. It’s so important that the United States Declaration of Independence lists it among the sovereign rights of man: ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’ Ask the people around you what they want most in life, and there’s a good chance that happiness will feature in their answer.

But what is happiness, and how do we evaluate it in our lives? One person’s happiness can be another person’s misery – you don’t need to look much further than the two sides of a football stadium after the final whistle in a championship match.

The elation of the winning side is in stark contrast to the despondency of the losing team. Can we ever live in a world where everyone can be happy all the time?

Discuss: How do you evaluate happiness in your life? Is there a difference between the way you understand happiness and the way those who don't yet know Jesus might understand happiness?

Happiness is a temporary emotion. It can be tempting in our evangelism to promise that becoming a Christian will lead to a life of happiness. It's an enticing sales pitch. But it's not true. And there is nothing kind about deceiving people. The kindness of the gospel is not found in how nicely packaged we can make it, but in the power of its truth and hope.

Jesus didn't die to give us easy lives and permanent happiness. Jesus died so we could have life in place of death. One day, the life we choose will be perfected in eternity where there will be no sadness or pain (John 10:10; Revelation 21:4). But until either we die or Jesus returns, we are faced with the reality that we live in an imperfect world where people choose to reject God. Sadness is very much a part of life. The good news is that Jesus offers us a profound hope:

- 'So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again; then you will rejoice, and no one can rob you of that joy.'

• JOHN 16:22 (NLT)

Jesus' death and resurrection have made it possible for us to have the joy of full, eternal life. No one can take away from us the joy of the Spirit. Our joy is different to happiness – our joy is spiritual and everlasting. Paul explains this to us:

- 'Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of

- undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory.'

• ROMANS 5:1-2 (NLT)

Paul is pointing out that wearing our faith well comes down to how much we put our trust in God in our everyday lives. When our trust is bigger than our emotional state of mind, we react to life differently. No matter how tough things might get, we have hope in God's promises about the future. It doesn't mean that life gets easier, and it certainly doesn't trivialise the reality of the pain that we or others might experience, but it does mean that even in the most difficult times, we have hope. Paul goes on to say:

- 'We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.'

• ROMANS 5:3-5 (NLT)

This is not just about a positive mental attitude. It's about learning to trust God in every situation – especially when at first he might seem absent or indifferent. God assures us that he is always with us, and he is more invested in every situation we experience than we are!

Here's an outline of how we can maintain the Romans 5 mindset of joy in all situations:

- Bad things happen. Hard times come.
- We endure the rough times with God's help and learn through them.
- We grow in character, we become more like Jesus.
- We increase our confidence in a perfect heaven.

- We live to share heaven with others so they may know eternal joy.
- We become part of the solution to pain, where we were once part of the problem.

Discuss: Can you relate this outline of Romans 5 to an experience from your own life?

Our hope and joy rests in Jesus, not in our circumstances. It all starts and ends with him. When we realise this, it changes our life – and in turn, it will impact those around us who witness our own change of heart, mind and attitude.

Our joy is at work when we proclaim the good news about the kindness of God and the hope we have in Jesus with our lips and our lives. Just like life, evangelism can be challenging, and the joy of the gospel is strength enough for us to keep going.

DISCUSSION (15 MINS)

1. How can we reveal grace and kindness to the world?
2. What do you think it means to bring heaven to earth today?
3. What role does joy play in our testimony as we explain how life is better with Jesus?

- ‘Here is an important distinction with far-reaching implications for Christian behavior. The deeds of Christians in this present time – however insignificant they may seem, however “vain” they may appear to those who value worldly success – are already being built into God’s advancing kingdom.’

FLEMING RUTLEDGE

APPLICATION (5 MINS)

Revisit your personal testimony. Consider how you talk about and express the joy of the Lord as a core part of your story of God at work in you. How much time is spent in your testimony explaining who you were and how much time is devoted to who you have become? Who gets the most glory in your testimony? Your past, your self or your king?

PRAYER

‘Father God, we are so humbled by the grace we have received from you. If we have ever taken your grace for granted, forgive us now. We ask your Spirit to help us to reveal your grace to the world around us. Lord Jesus, thank you that, because of your death and resurrection, we have a hope for the future, and an everlasting joy in our hearts today. May your joy be our strength, impacting all that we are and all that we do.’

ACCOUNTABILITY (25 MINS)

Fill in accountability forms, share in pairs or smaller groups and pray for each other.

DON'T FORGET...

You can read encouraging and inspiring testimonies from our ‘How I Came To Faith’ series at advancegroups.org/blog. Advance is a story-driven movement and we love to hear about how God is at work in and through his people. Send us your stories at advancegroups.org/stories

SESSION EIGHT

THE CHALLENGE FROM THE ENEMY – TEMPTATION AND ACCUSATION

In this session we will explore the challenge of temptation, both from the world and from the enemy, along with the accusations he throws at us to discourage, discredit and destroy our faith. How can we journey through temptation with faithfulness, and fight off accusation so that we can carry the gospel into the world as holy messengers?

SESSION IN A SENTENCE

The devil wants to destroy our faith and discredit our witness, but in God we are already victorious: we have been given the power of heaven to overcome both the challenges of the enemy and our own frailty.

SESSION BACKGROUND

The name *Satan* is a transliteration of the Hebrew word for *accuser* or *adversary*. Satan's accusations take two primary forms: **manipulative lies** and **condemning truths**.

Through his lies, Satan wants to manipulate our understanding of the truth. He will often attack our emotions in an attempt to move us from security in our knowledge of God to an insecure foundation of doubt and distrust. Think about a time when you haven't received an immediate or obvious answer to prayer: Satan will have been quick to whisper in your ear that your prayer remains unanswered because God isn't really trustworthy, or because he isn't really there.

Satan also confronts us with the truths of our failures and seeks to bring condemnation. The difficulty here is that Satan has a valid point – we *have* missed the mark, we have fallen short of the perfect standard of God. But his manipulation comes through fogging our vision with shame so that we cannot see God's grace in our failure. Satan wants us to forget that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).

Marina Cantacuzino, author of *The Forgiveness Project*, notes that in all her hundreds of interactions with stories of forgiveness, it can be hard to pin down exactly what forgiveness looks like. She writes,

- '...the only thing I know for sure is that
- the act of forgiving is fluid and active
- and can change from day to day, hour
- to hour, depending on how you feel
- when you wake in the morning or what
- triggers you encounter during the day.'

• MARINA CANTACUZINO, THE FORGIVENESS PROJECT

Satan loves to play on our complex human experience of forgiveness. He wants us to believe that God's forgiveness is as fluid and as active as our own, as subjective to fluctuating emotion as ours. But this is not true. God is *faithful* to forgive any and all who sincerely seek his grace (1 John 1:9). Our forgiveness flows from the perfect forgiveness of God.

- 'Forgiveness liberates the soul, it
- removes fear. That's why it's such a
- powerful weapon.'

• NELSON MANDELA

Forgiveness is powerful – and the greatest power in our forgiveness is that it reveals the forgiveness and grace we have first received from God. Jesus makes it clear that

if we don't forgive others, we are showing that we are not forgiven (Matthew 18:21-35). Forgiven people forgive people.

We face a powerful adversary who wants to steal and destroy our faith. Thankfully, we serve the all-powerful king of creation who wants to keep us in his love and gives us all we need to respond to Satan's accusations and manipulations.

We rebuke Satan's lies through the powerful and unchanging truth of God's Word. We rebuff Satan's shaming schemes through the faithfulness of God's forgiveness. And we rejoice that the one who is in us is greater than the one who is in the world (1 John 4:4).

SESSION GUIDE

CATCH UP (10-20 MINS)

Take time to catch up with one another, sharing stories, feedback on opportunities and anything else that would encourage the group. For smaller groups, ask each person to share one win and one struggle since your last meeting. For larger groups, ask four or five people to share a specific testimony since your last meeting.

PRAYER

Pray to commit the time to the Lord and over any situations, positive or challenging, arising from the catch up time.

TEACHING AND DISCUSSION (60 MINS)

This teaching section includes room for discussion throughout. Work through the following teaching material in your own way, either by reading it word for word, or by reworking it into your own presentation.

- 'No temptation has overtaken you
- except what is common to mankind.
- And God is faithful; he will not let you
- be tempted beyond what you can bear.
- But when you are tempted, he will also
- provide a way out so that you can
- endure it.'

1 CORINTHIANS 10:13

God does not tempt: that is the devil's playground (James 1:13-15). God will test us - not to learn something about us that he doesn't already know, but that we might grow and learn through the process. Here's the difference: when the devil sends temptation, his hope is that we will always fail, but when God tests us, his hope is that we will always succeed. Both the method and the motive are different. Half the battle is being aware that we are in a battle. The other half is working out how to respond. Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians that our response to temptation and our hope to overcome it is rooted in God himself.

We fight against three primary areas of temptation in our lives: the world, the flesh and the enemy. God equips and empowers us to overcome them all.

THE WORLD: THE EXTERNAL BATTLE

The world can be an attractive place. There are many treasures and pleasures in the world that are in no way counter to our faith. But there are also many that jostle for attention and threaten to dethrone Christ from his rightful place in our lives. These things either become too important to us, or lead us into sinfulness. Increasingly the world promises fulfilment as we drink deeply of its pleasures and promote ourselves, but God calls us to drink deeply of his living water and promote him (John 4:14).

THE FLESH: THE INTERNAL BATTLE

In our fallen world we are fighting against our own corrupted flesh. Paul says that the deeds of our flesh are immorality, impurity,

sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing and more (Galatians 5:19–21). That’s quite a list!

This list is the direct counterpoint to the fruit of the Spirit we are exploring in this year of Advance. Paul tells us that walking by the Spirit is the way to overcome the genuine challenges of our own fallenness. When we let the Spirit of God take control of our lives, we instead put on love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23).

Discuss: Which areas of temptation from the world and from your own flesh do you struggle with? How have you seen growth or victory in these areas?

THE ENEMY: THE SPIRITUAL BATTLE

Either discuss each of these areas of temptation as you go, or work through them all first and then have a longer time of discussion using the questions at the end.

Satan hates our faith. He hates that our faith leads us to worship God rather than himself. He will do whatever he can to get to our faith. He doesn’t care about our finances, our health, our family, our career, or anything else about us, but he will manipulate and use all of those things if it gets him what he really wants: our destruction (John 10:10). Here are some of the ways in which Satan attacks us and how we can respond:

Satan will speak deceit into our lives – store up truth

The devil is liar. His lies are used to confuse and corrupt us, to pull us away from the life that God has for us and to lead us into death. We must build our faith on the solid foundation of the Word of God. The wise man builds his house upon

the rock, but the foolish man upon the sand (Matthew 7:24–27). Every accusation from the enemy comes with an attempt to move our house from its firm foundation onto shaky ground so that the storms that come our way destroy our relationship with God.

To recognise and rebut the lies of Satan we must store up the truth of God’s Word in our hearts and minds. Reading the Bible is essential, but what about memorising scripture? Choosing to store the truth of God in our hearts and minds is a powerful way to respond when Satan attempts to confuse us with his lies (Psalm 119:11).

Satan will exploit our isolation – prioritise community

It’s no coincidence that Satan waits until Jesus has been alone in the wilderness for forty days before he begins to engage with him (Matthew 4:1–11). It is when we are in isolation that Satan plans his strongest attacks. Jesus rebuffed Satan by standing firm on the truth of God’s Word, and we can do the same. But we should also be strongly on our guard when we are isolated. It’s why fellowship must be our priority: finding ways not to be alone after ministry, even something as simple as calling a friend to chat, can be a protection against the isolation attacks of the enemy.

Satan will encourage our shame – be accountable and trust in God’s grace

The devil is a liar, but also uses some strategically-placed truths. He will remind us of the truth of our sin and failure so that he can trap us in defeat and despair. He will combine truth with lie: the truth of what we have done with the lie that this time there is no forgiveness for us. He takes the truth of our sin and through lies and manipulation draws us into the shadow of shame and debilitates us with condemnation.

Satan wants to put us under a curse from which we can never get out, but the curse of sin, shame and death has already been dealt with by Jesus. The blood of Christ washes us clean and gives us life (Romans 5:9). Condemnation is no more (Romans 8:1). Those who are in Christ have the gift

of his Holy Spirit. Unlike Satan, when the Holy Spirit brings to mind our sin it is not to bring us to shame, but to bring us to repentance. We must hold ourselves accountable to the Spirit of God through trusted friends. We must not let the devil keep our failures in the dark, but let them come into the light where they can be met with hope and healing.

Satan will manipulate our doubts – seek out the mercy of gospel-centred fellowship

Jude tells believers to show mercy to those who doubt (Jude 22). This tells us three things:

1. Doubt will be present in our lives at times.
2. Doubt is not ultimately a good thing, otherwise it would not require mercy as a response.
3. We can support and encourage each other with love, humility and grace.

When Satan attempts to manipulate the inevitability of our human doubt, we should connect with brothers and sisters who can journey with us through our questions, ground us in the truth of the gospel and love us through prayer. Doubt itself is inevitable, but through the mercy of God at work in his people it need not be inevitable that our doubt crushes our faith.

Satan will offer us treasures – delight in the Lord

The external and internal temptations of the world and the flesh are areas in which Satan loves to play. He is an expert at telling us that we deserve something and asking why don't have it. The more we listen, the more we become unfulfilled in Christ: bitter and resentful, jealous of others, selfish and self-righteous.

What are we living for? If we settle for anything less than to be in the presence of the Lord, to delight ourselves in him, we will be at risk of being won over by Satan's promises of fortune and fulfilment

in the world and the flesh. We all face temptation in this way. The grass often does look greener on the other side of the fence. If our roots run deep in the perfect soil of God's eternal kingdom, we will stay on the right side, so we must invest in our faith with deep devotion and realise that Christ truly is enough (Psalm 1).

Satan will play on our fear – know the one in us is greater than the one in the world

We live in a fearful world. Satan loves to exploit our fear, causing us to distrust God and making us ineffective in our witness. Every time Satan speaks into our fear, he is attempting to move the love of God aside. The opposite of love is not hate, but fear.

Fear steals peace. Fear ruins trust. Fear generates selfishness. Fear leads to apathy. Fear corrupts joy. Fear hides truth. Fear brings death.

When the Bible tells us, 'There is no fear in love. But perfect love casts out fear..' it is telling us something profound and eternally important (1 John 4:18). God says we need not fear. We can choose love instead of fear.

Love gives peace. Love builds trust. Love generates selflessness. Love leads to passion. Love empowers joy. Love reveals truth. Love brings life.

The world is messy and complex. In our human frailty, we will undoubtedly experience fear, but we need not be defeated by it. We can rebuke the fear games of Satan and trust in the one who is greater, the one who is in us by his Spirit, the one who took fear upon himself on the cross so that one day we will never know fear again.

Discuss: In what areas of accusation and temptation do you need to be more intentional about your readiness to respond?

In all these areas let us listen to the warning of Peter as he writes:

- 'Be alert and of sober mind. Your
- enemy the devil prowls around like a
- roaring lion looking for someone to
- devour.'

1 PETER 5:8

Awareness allows us to recognise the attack. God enables us to respond in victory.

PRAYER AND ACCOUNTABILITY (30 MINS)

This session leaves extra time for accountability, so that we can be honest about the temptations we are facing and pray for one another.

In response to spiritual warfare, reflect prayerfully together on the following statements:

- When the whisper of the enemy says, 'You're not good enough,' we can respond, 'But Jesus is.'
- When he tries to convince us that God has let us down, we can respond that our faith is in the unchanging and unwavering faithfulness of our Father.
- When the enemy taunts us with our past failures, we can respond that Jesus has taken our sin.
- When he points out the sin of today, we can respond, 'God's grace is sufficient.'
- When the enemy lies to us, we can respond with the truth of the Word of God.
- When his accusation seems too much to handle, we can respond to the enemy by calling upon the Holy Spirit to help us overcome, and by seeking out fellowship with our Christian family.
- In any and every accusation of the enemy, we can trust in Jesus who has already claimed victory through the power of the cross, and who

responds on our behalf with the eternity-transforming words of victory and peace: 'It is finished.'

Spiritual warfare is not an attempt to gain the victory, it is standing firm in what we already possess in God.

Fill in accountability forms, share in pairs or smaller groups and pray for each other.

APPLICATION (5 MINS)

Think again about the role of accountability in your life. Do you honestly, transparently and vulnerably share your life with trusted people? Are you confessing your sin to another brother or sister in the Lord? Are you seeing progress in areas of sinfulness? If not, make yourself accountable to a couple of trusted friends and see if you can support one another.

Accountability is not a system for behaviour management. It is an opportunity for you to humbly grow your faith, and, through fellowship with other believers, thwart the schemes of the enemy, reset perspectives on the world, encourage one another in resisting the flesh – and best of all, delight in the presence of the Lord together.

that we don't only repent to enter relationship with Jesus, but to remain in it day by day. God is gentle and patient with us even while he is offended by our sin (2 Peter 3:9). His compassion is wonderful. As we grow in our faith, our desire to root out areas of sin in our lives also grows, as we partner with God's Spirit to allow him to do his work (healing and delivering) while being faithful to what he asks us to do for ourselves (like fleeing temptation).

God's grace, seen in the death and resurrection of Jesus, covers and corrects our sinful nature, allowing us as imperfect creations to dwell in true relationship with the perfect creator. God is not trying to force us to live a certain way through his grace, he is making it possible for us to live the life we were created for in the first place: true life.

Another way we can abuse grace is to fail to offer the same grace we have received to others. It's true: this is an abuse of grace. Freely we have received, so freely we must give (Matthew 10:8). Sometimes we fail to offer grace to others because we are struggling to accept the truth that God forgives and accepts us – perhaps because we can't forgive and accept ourselves. Remember this: God is willing to forgive us for the death of his Son. We are all guilty of putting Christ upon the cross, but God does not hold it *against* us, he holds it *for* us. There is no sin, no rebellion, no failure that he cannot or will not forgive if we ask him, and that is also true for the rest of the world.

The grace of God is enough for us (2 Corinthians 12:9). We must not abuse it, but live in it humbly and joyfully by offering the very same grace we have received to the world – so that they may be blessed by the compassion of God.

SESSION GUIDE

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CATCH UP (10–20 MINS)

Take time to catch up with one another, sharing stories, feedback on opportunities and anything else that would encourage the group. Ask if any of the group would feel comfortable sharing their experience of accountability (Session Eight – Application) to encourage the rest of the group.

PRAYER

Pray to commit the time to the Lord and give thanks for the opportunities that the group has had in the past month to share the gospel. Pray for those who have put their trust in Jesus through these opportunities.

TEACHING (30–40 MINS)

Work through the following teaching material in your own way, either by reading it word for word, or by reworking it into your own presentation.

- 'Be completely humble and gentle; be
- patient, bearing with one another in
- love. Make every effort to keep the
- unity of the Spirit through the bond of
- peace.'

• EPHESIANS 4:2-3

Throughout our lives, We each have to put our trust in various things. Some things we put our trust in are more significant – like the doctors who treat us when we are sick, giving us advice and the right medicine to make us healthy, or the laws of physics and the skill of the engineers when sitting on an aeroplane at 35,000 feet. Others might carry more personal significance – like keeping a secret between friends.

No one likes to have their trust broken. And yet at some point we have all been let down in some way by somebody we trusted.

We can put our complete trust in God. He will never let us down. It's truly remarkable to know that the awesome God of all creation is interested in us as individuals. He loves each one of us perfectly.

During times of uncertainty or even suffering, our patience can be the first thing to go out of the window. What does that say about our trust in God? Complete trust in the almighty God and complete submission to his will develops spiritual patience in our lives. When we demonstrate our willingness to be patient in our walk with Jesus we demonstrate real faithfulness, real trust.

Worry, anxiety, distrust, fear, annoyance and anger – these are all things that are completely against patience. Can you see how damaging those things can be in your life? God's Word consistently speaks against such things.

Take a moment to look up these verses in the group and read them out to each other.

- Luke 12:22-26 (Worry)
- Philippians 4:6-7 (Anxiety)
- Proverbs 3:5 (Distrust)
- Hebrews 13:6 (Fear)
- Proverbs 12:16 (Annoyance)
- James 1:19-20 (Anger)

Discuss: Which of these verses challenge you the most? How many of the world's problems can you categorise under one of these headings?

Job is one of the most misunderstood books in the Bible. Job is a faithful worshipper of God who suffers incredible loss and personal affliction. Throughout his ordeal Job refuses to curse God for what has happened, but he does have some big questions – including the one we

have probably all asked within our own sufferings: 'Why?'

God doesn't offer Job an easy answer – in fact, he asks Job more questions.

God asks Job if he was there when the stars were hung in the sky, or if he was present when the very fabric of reality came into existence. God reminds Job that human beings are created, and that he is the creator. Suddenly, the lightbulb flicks on for Job as he is reassured of the truth that, no matter what challenges the world throws up, God who hung the stars in the sky is still in control. God is good and he loves his people (Job 38-41).

If we want to persevere with patience through the ups and downs of life, this is the reality we must accept – as hard as that might seem. God's response to Job is a beautifully gentle rebuke. He simply offers Job the opportunity to reset his perspective.

The book of Job is not primarily a story of suffering, but a story of faithfulness and submission. Throughout his difficulties – even as he wrestles with tough questions – Job finds a place of *submission* to God. It is in this submission that Job finds his peace restored, not through having all his questions answered. How often are we willing to be content without having all the answers we seek?

Job teaches us that, even though heart-breaking and difficult times may come, trust in God and submission to his authority enable and equip us to persevere. We can endure. We can become spiritually patient people who are not quick to anger, not quick to reject God when life doesn't go the way we'd hoped it would. We can become people who recognise that God's perspective is bigger than ours. After all, he was there when the stars were hung in the sky, and we weren't.

From this perspective Job is able to, 'rejoice in his confident hope and be patient in trouble,' as Paul instructs in Romans 12:12.

The call is clear.

- “Now which of these three would you say was a neighbour to the man who was attacked by bandits?’ Jesus asked. The man replied, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Then Jesus said, “Yes, now go and do the same.””

• LUKE 10:36-37 (NLT)

DISCUSSION (15 MINS)

1. If trusting God is the key to patience, how can we learn to trust God more?
2. What things in life cause you to lose patience?
3. What might compassion (gentleness) look like in evangelism?

- ‘What then are we to do about our problems? We must learn to live with them until such time as God delivers us from them. We must pray for grace to endure them without murmuring. Problems patiently endured will work for our spiritual perfecting. They harm us only when we resist them or endure them unwillingly.’

• A. W. TOZER

APPLICATION (5 MINS)

Use the ‘penalty, power and presence’ motif from the **Session Background** to focus your prayers over the coming month. Consider how it could be expressed in the gospel conversations you have in the next few weeks.

- We are saved from the **penalty** of our sin in the past through the work of Jesus on the cross
- We are saved from the **power** of sin in the present through the work of the Spirit in our lives

- We are saved from the **presence** of sin in the future through the eternal reign of the Father and his coming kingdom

PRAYER

‘Father God, help us to put our complete trust in you. Thank you that you will never let us down. Help us to effect change in the world by setting an example of patience and revealing you as the hope for the world to trust in. We pray that in the hardest times of life, your Spirit will help us endure and keep our eyes fixed upon Jesus. Would our lives reflect the gentleness of the Father, so that people may know his mercy. Amen’

ACCOUNTABILITY (15 MINS)

Fill in accountability forms, share in pairs or smaller groups and pray for each other.

DON'T FORGET...

One way to develop patience and renew our minds is to *wait in the Word*. You could use the Advance devotional Bible studies available for free on YouVersion such as ‘Exploring Evangelism Myths’ to go deeper in your evangelism-focused Bible study.



SESSION TEN

THE CHALLENGE FROM THE FAMILY – FELLOWSHIP AND DISTRACTION

In this session we will consider the challenge to evangelism that we might face from our church community. In diverse communities, not all will share our passion for evangelism. What should our response be? How can we be an encouragement to our brothers and sisters and remain in fellowship with a local community, even if we have a travelling ministry?

SESSION IN A SENTENCE

We must encourage our church family in the gospel, being quick to lovingly equip and affirm each other in taking it into the world, rather than choosing to forsake fellowship when our church family doesn't share our evangelistic passion.

SESSION BACKGROUND

Solitary confinement is a particularly unpleasant punishment used in prisons around the world. The impact of this kind of isolation has been studied extensively and the results make for grim reading. Those subjected to even short-term solitary confinement are at risk of high levels of anxiety, stress, depression, anger, panic attacks, violent outbursts, psychosis, paranoia, hallucination, memory problems, self-harm and suicide.

We shouldn't be surprised by these findings. Solitary confinement denies a person the very thing they were created for: relationship, community and fellowship. Whenever we become isolated from these things the results are never positive.

Throughout human history, community has always been essential to survival. In tribal societies everyone has a clear role to play – from hunting and fighting off threats, to foraging and cooking, education, healthcare, and leadership. For most of us in the developed world today, community is about finding our identity: where do we belong and where will we be accepted for *who we are*?

The internet has made it possible for people to find *their* tribe. Whether it's fan groups for a pop star or television show, a sexual orientation, a hobby or skillset, a political, moral, or religious worldview, or an online community for fans of sloths, you will be able to find a tribe if you look hard enough. These communities can do plenty of good, but they carry an inherent problem: they can form a culture that treats community as commodity, where we become consumers of community rather than contributors within it. If we choose our community based on the value it gives us – and when we don't like it anymore, we leave to find another one – it has become all about us.

There are plenty of people looking for a community where they can find value because they feel isolated, alone and undervalued. The quest for identity, meaning and purpose is powerful because we were created to know all of those things through a relationship with our creator. When we step away from God's community, we experience disconnection that leads us to the same problems faced by the prisoners in solitary confinement.

The church represents the ultimate community – the perfect and eternal community of God himself, Father, Son

and Spirit. But – being made up of people – the church is not perfect. We make mistakes, and at times church communities can be as isolating and painful as any other broken community in this world. But there is a hope within the imperfection. Hope comes as we remember that the church is not merely a group of people rallying around a shared interest, but the church is God’s plan for revealing himself to the world. If we make it about him rather than us, there is hope that his perfection, even *through our imperfection*, will be revealed.

- ‘While loneliness engenders despair
- and ever more isolation, togetherness
- raises optimism and creativity. When
- people feel they belong to one another,
- their lives are stronger, richer, and more
- joyful.’

- VIVEK MURTHY, SURGEON GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

This is a powerful reality in any community setting, but it finds its truest form and hope in the community of God. We don’t just belong to one another – we belong to Jesus. Our community is stronger, richer and more joyful because it is about him rather than us.

To truly be the church means to truly be in Christ. We are baptised into the family of God and become one body, one community with many parts (1 Corinthians 12:12–13). Following Jesus means joining a diverse community where we each serve and play our part for the benefit of the whole (the whole glory of God). Christians should spend time alone (for example, in solitude for devotion) but we cannot live in isolation. From the community of the church, we are able to offer the world a glimpse of the perfect community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

SESSION GUIDE

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CATCH UP (10–20 MINS)

Take time to catch up with one another, sharing stories, feedback on opportunities and anything else that would encourage

the group. Give extra time to share about opportunities that arose over the last month in light of the previous session and any encouragements or challenges that came from them.

PRAYER

Pray to commit the time to the Lord and give thanks for the opportunities that the group has had in the past month to share the gospel. Pray for those who have put their trust in Jesus through these opportunities.

TEACHING (45–50 MINS)

Work through the following teaching material in your own way, either by reading it word for word, or by reworking it into your own presentation.

- ‘Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we
- profess, for he who promised is faithful.
- And let us consider how we may spur
- one another on toward love and good
- deeds, not giving up meeting together,
- as some are in the habit of doing, but
- encouraging one another – and all the
- more as you see the Day approaching.’

- HEBREWS 10:23-25

Evangelists – or those who are especially passionate about evangelism – have sometimes been seen as mavericks (someone who operates in an unorthodox or independent way) in church communities. They might be the outlier in the community who is more concerned with what happens outside the church than inside. Some evangelists are even completely absent from local church fellowship – at best because of a busy itinerant ministry (not ideal), or at worst because of ongoing frustration with the church that leads them to self-exile (not acceptable). Neither is healthy, and neither helps the evangelist fulfil the primary purpose of their calling – to stir and equip the church for evangelism (Ephesians 4:11–12).

The writer of Hebrews urges believers not to give up meeting together. The language

used could be read as strongly as not to forsake meeting. No matter what frustrations we might have, what diary commitments may arise, we must make space for fellowship so that we can be encouraged and be an encouragement to our church family. We must not forsake the church for any reason.

Discuss: Whether you feel called as a full-time evangelist or are someone trying to be faithful to gospel witness day by day, how is your relationship with the local church? What is your personal church engagement?

The writer of Hebrews asks us to consider – to *pay attention to* – the ways in which we can help each other live in and live out the love of God. We are to be planted in his gospel and to be a planter of the gospel into the world. We must be fully engaged in our local church community, modelling what it looks like to be an accountable disciple-making disciple.

Sometimes the problem we face is not being disconnected from the church, but being distracted within it. As Jesus gives his final instructions to his disciples in Acts 1 – before the Spirit comes at Pentecost and the church was born – we see the disciples distracted in two key ways.

Open Acts 1 together, we will be looking at verses 1–11 together for the rest of this session.

- ‘Then they gathered around him and
- asked him, “Lord, are you at this time
- going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”’
-
- ACTS 1:6

Here, the disciples are distracted by *what they don’t know*. Jesus responds by telling them not to be distracted by the things that only God can know.

- “‘Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do
- you stand here looking into the sky? This
- same Jesus, who has been taken from you
- into heaven, will come back in the same
- way you have seen him go into heaven.”’
-
- ACTS 1:11

Then, the disciples are distracted by *what has happened and what is still yet to happen*. After Jesus ascends they are confronted by two angels who ask them what they’re doing.

How often are you or those in your church community distracted by what you don’t know? How often are you distracted by things that *have* happened, or what you hope *might* happen, rather than concentrating on what God has called you to do right here and now?

What things distract you or those in your church family from being a witness for Christ? Perhaps:

- You don’t think you *know enough* to share the good news
- You are *waiting for God* to send someone else
- You are distracted by *past failures*
- You are distracted by *future plans*
- You are side-tracked by *other passions or pressures*

Discuss: What things in your life and church community that distract you from gospel witness?

These distractions are disturbing because they pull us away from the fullness of life that God offers us. These distractions can lead us to fear, apathy, disempowerment and dispassion, and they put us in danger of being closer to the existence we have escaped than the life we have been saved for.

Rather than let these disturbing distractions take hold, we need to disturb the distractions in our lives by shaking things up and moving into the life God gives us and empowers us to live. The key to shaking off these distractions is found sandwiched between the two distractions of the disciples.

- 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses...'

ACTS 1:8

Four times in the first eight verses of this chapter, Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit. These four mentions serve as a powerful model through which we can disturb the distractions that dull us from what God has asked us to do, and act as encouragements for the whole body of the church to serve together.

1. WE ARE GIVEN INSTRUCTION

- '...after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles...'

ACTS 1:2

We must not be distracted by waiting – for gifting, a specific calling, or even for someone else to do it! God is already waiting for us to respond to the gospel call he has for every believer.

- 'We must let go of the life we have planned so as to accept the one that is waiting for us.'

JOSEPH CAMPBELL

Stop waiting. Go and tell people about Jesus! Be his witness in whatever area of life, ministry or circumstance you are in – he's already called you (Matthew 28:16–20). Listen to the Holy Spirit as he leads you and instructs you to be faithful to the grand call of being ambassadors of God's kingdom the world.

2. WE ARE BLESSED WITH A GIFT

- '...wait for the gift my Father promised...'

ACTS 1:4

What is our response when we receive a gift? We say, 'Thank you.' We have the best gift possible in the Holy Spirit, and in receiving the gift, we adopt a posture of thankfulness – both as individuals, but also as a family,

where we celebrate together what God has blessed his church with.

Thankfulness is essential if we are to disturb the distractions in our lives. If we live in a posture of thankfulness we will not lose focus on the life we have been saved for and the ways in which God is at work in us. Scripture repeatedly commands us to 'remember' – the instruction features in Matthew's account of Jesus' final charge to his disciples:

- 'And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age'

MATTHEW 28:20 (NRSV)

3. WE ARE BAPTISED WITH THE SPIRIT

- '...you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.'

ACTS 1:5

To be baptised with the Spirit means to submit to the presence of God. As we dwell in his presence we are changed. The gospel itself is the ultimate story of presence.

Walking in the Father's presence in Eden, rejecting his presence through rebellion, needing his presence to know life, Jesus coming to be present with us and reveal the Father, the restoration of our ability to enter his presence through the cross, the gift of the Holy Spirit taking up presence within us to enable us to live until we are perfectly in the presence of God for all time when his kingdom comes.

We are to be present with one another in Christian community that binds us together in the presence, fellowship and love of God. We are to be present in the world so that the presence of God can be made known.

4. WE ARE EMPOWERED

- 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you...'

ACTS 1:8

We must not be distracted by other people's gifting, charisma or calling. God has positioned us to serve where we are, and the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is alive in us (Romans 8:11). We should thank God for the diverse gifts he has given to our brothers and sisters in Christ rather than being distracted by them. Encourage one another in the ultimate gift that all believers have – the Holy Spirit, through whom ordinary people are used for the extraordinary mission of God.

The church is our family. Let us neither disconnect ourselves from or forsake the church, nor allow ourselves to become distracted within it from our witness. Instead, through faithful fellowship, would we be a blessing to each other, spurring one another on to love the world. Let the gospel be lived and proclaimed in us by the power of the Spirit so that the world would know they can come home to the family of God through the Father's love.

And let us go with urgency, for as the great missionary Amy Carmichael reminds us:

- 'We will have all eternity to celebrate
- our victories, but only a few short hours
- to win them.'

DISCUSSION (15 MINS)

1. Why is local church engagement not optional for believers?
2. How do we encourage the church family in evangelism in a healthy and positive way?
3. What place does the church occupy in our gospel communication to the world?

APPLICATION (5 MINS)

Be in church this Sunday. Make yourself accountable to the leadership. Offer to serve beyond your gifting – preachers, help with car parking duty. Musicians, make yourself available to serve refreshments. Encourage evangelism in every way you can. Seek to be a blessing rather than a

burden. Be humble within the life of the church and committed to fellowship with your brothers and sisters.

If you haven't started your own Advance group yet, talk to your church leadership and see if you could launch a group within your church as a way of encouraging your church in its evangelism.

PRAYER

Pray for your own church – that you would be a blessing to and be blessed by the fellowship.

Pray for the local church – that it would effectively disciple believers and be a witness in the local community.

Pray for the global church – that through it, the gospel of Jesus Christ would be revealed across national, cultural, linguistic and historical borders as the hope of the world, for all people in all places at all times.

ACCOUNTABILITY (15 MINS)

Frame your accountability time around the church engagement question from earlier in the session and the application section. How will you encourage each other to stay committed and connected to the local church?

Fill in accountability forms, share in pairs or smaller groups and pray for each other.

DON'T FORGET...

This Group Mentoring Guide is available for free as a digital download from advancegroups.org/resources. It's a great way to introduce your church leadership and congregation to the Advance journey to see if they might be interested in starting a new group. At the same link, check out the short 'Principles of Advance' animations that explain simply what Advance is and how it works.

SESSION ELEVEN

THE FRUIT IN THE WORLD – LOVE

In this session we will explore the love of God and why it is the chief virtue of the fruit of the Spirit. We'll discover why love should be the motivation for our evangelism.

SESSION IN A SENTENCE

Love is the chief virtue of the fruit of the Spirit, and it is on love we should build our lives and from which our evangelism should flow – for it is the very identity of God himself.

SESSION BACKGROUND

We love 'love.' But what *kind* of love do we love? For many, the idealised picture of love shown in Hollywood movies is what most readily stirs the heart. It often takes the form of perfectly imperfect romances that overcome the odds to result in a happy ending. But it's not the only kind of love we see in the movies, and movies are not the only outlet for this type of love story and expression. Throughout history – in music, art, theatre, poetry and storytelling of all shapes and flavours – love is present in some way. If our artistic and creative expressions are anything to go by it would be fair to say that human beings are love-obsessed.

For a world so obsessed with the idea of love, it's amazing how wrong we often seem to get it. The world is trapped in a cycle of weak, diluted, distorted and perverted imitations of love, while true love often sits on the sidelines of our lives, rejected because true love is costly.

Imagine having been without food or drink for days. Just when hunger and thirst threaten to overwhelm you completely, the purest and most thirst-quenching fruit ever to be grown is placed on a table in front of you. The smell of the fruit is so good it is almost

enough to quench your thirst there and then. Before you can consume the fruit, it needs to be peeled to give you access to the goodness inside. But instead of doing that you pick the fruit up and smash it into the table. From there you hit it as hard as you can a few times with your fists until all the juice inside is splattered across the table. You scrape up a little of what remains into a glass, but it doesn't even fill half of it. Needing a full cup to quench your thirst you decide to spit into the cup but soon run out of saliva. Still not enough. You have no choice but to top up the glass with the only source of fluid you have left – your own urine.

This is a horrible thing to read and think about. You may not even want to verbalise this in your group setting because it is so disgusting. But sometimes we need to express things in all their ugliness to realise the seriousness of the problem. We do ourselves and the world no favours in sanitising our sin and using comfortable language to describe horrid reality.

As disgusting as it sounds, if you were thirsty enough you would drink this horrible cocktail. The tragic irony is that if you had taken the time to peel the fruit and prepare it properly, instead of going for the quick 'smash and juice' option, you would have had the perfect drink for your thirst.

- 'The love of God! We have lost it
- to-day; we have turned our back on the
- ocean and are looking out over barren
- colourless hills for the ocean's fullness.
- We need converting again – turning
- round, and there basks the ocean's
- fullness, whose waves sparkle and ripple
- on fathomless deeps and fulnesses.'

OSWALD CHAMBERS

The world is so thirsty for love that it will choose the watered-down-with-saliva version of love over the perfect and true love of

God because, although it is freely offered, accepting it comes at great cost. The cost is laying down the rights to the thrones of our hearts, letting love himself take his rightful place. The cost is to die to ourselves so that we can be reborn in him. In knowing him, we can know love.

• 'I still believe that love is the most durable
• power in the world. Over the centuries
• men have sought to discover the highest
• good. This has been the chief quest of
• ethical philosophy. This was one of the
• big questions of Greek philosophy. The
• Epicureans and the Stoics sought to
• answer it; Plato and Aristotle sought to
• answer it... I think I have discovered the
• highest good. It is love. This principle
• stands at the centre of the cosmos. As
• John says, "God is love." He who loves
• is a participant in the being of God. He
• who hates does not know God.'

• MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR

The world is longing for Hollywood love because it is an echo of the true godly love that we were created to hold at the centre of our lives – the love that overcomes the odds of our destructive rebellion and results in eternal relationship. It's the ultimate happy ending.

SESSION GUIDE

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CATCH UP (10–20 MINS)

Take the time to catch up with one another. How has church life been since the last session? Have you been engaging well this month and have you had opportunities to be a blessing in the community? Share stories, feedback on opportunities and anything else that would encourage the group.

PRAYER

Pray to commit the time to the Lord and over any situations, positive or challenging, arising from the catch up time.

TEACHING (40–50 MINS)

Work through the following teaching material in your own way, either by reading it word for word, or by reworking it into your own presentation.

• "As the Father has loved me, so have I
• loved you. Now remain in my love. If you
• keep my commands, you will remain in
• my love, just as I have kept my Father's
• commands and remain in his love. I have
• told you this so that my joy may be in
• you and that your joy may be complete.
• My command is this: Love each other as I
• have loved you. Greater love has no one
• than this: to lay down one's life for one's
• friends."

• JOHN 15:9-13

God loves us.

We do not deserve his love, we are not worthy of it – and yet, there is nothing we can do to make God love us more, nor anything we can do that would make him love us less. He loves us perfectly, and from that love he made a way for our salvation – not because we earned it, but because he loves us and extends his perfect grace to us all (Ephesians 2:4–9). John 3:16, the most famous verse in the Bible, couldn't make it clearer that it was God's love for us that sent Jesus to the cross.

• 'If the depth of love is measured by the
• value of its gift, then God's love could
• not be greater, for his love-gift is his most
• precious possession – his only, eternally
• beloved Son. He could not love more.'

• BRUCE MILNE

While freely offered, there is a cost to accepting God's love. In order for God's love to truly transform us, we must accept it fully and be prepared to say goodbye to our old life and enter into new life (2 Corinthians 5:17). We receive the free gift that God offers, but receiving it means we cannot stay the same. The wonder of God's love means we must give up everything that is counter to life in him and walk into all that he desires for us to be.

- '...the Holy Spirit produces this kind
- of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace,
- patience, kindness, goodness,
- faithfulness, gentleness, and
- self-control...'

• GALATIANS 5:22-23 (NLT)

In presenting his vision of a united Christlike character, Paul appears to arrange his list in three triads of virtues – with love being the first and most important:

- Love, joy, peace
- Patience, kindness, goodness
- Faithfulness, gentleness and self-control

- 'Where love is present, the other virtues
- will not be far away; it is love that binds
- them all together in perfect harmony.'

• F. F. BRUCE

Love binds all good things together because God is love and in him all good things are found. The love of God is both profoundly simple and overwhelmingly complex. We can know the truth of God's love as we encounter him in a moment, but will spend a lifetime growing in knowledge of that same love and seeing its effects continuously at work in our lives.

There is a specific word used in the Old Testament for the love of God, the Hebrew word *hesed*. There is no single English word that can convey the full meaning of the word but here are just some of the ways the word appears in English in our translated Bibles:

- Steadfast love
- Mercy
- Loving kindness
- Grace
- Loyalty
- Fidelity

Discuss: How do these alternate words about God's love shape your understanding of the love God has for you?

God's love is unique. That's why it needs a unique word like *hesed* to help us understand

its never-ending wonder. What really distinguishes God's love from any other is that it is holy – perfectly and unendingly true. His love never fails (Lamentations 3:22; Psalm 136). We show the world the fruit of love when we reflect the truth of God's love in our own lives. God's love makes us who we truly are: not the best version of ourselves, but the best versions of *himself* – his love makes us more like Jesus.

In John 15, Jesus' love is revealed in two distinctive ways.

First, Jesus' love for his Father is revealed in his obedience to him. Loving like Jesus means loving our heavenly Father faithfully and obediently, by dwelling in his presence and by knowing him.

Second, Jesus' love for us is revealed in his willingness to take our place. Jesus says that there is no greater love than to lay down your life for your friends. Loving like Jesus means loving with more than emotion – it means loving with action. We are to love sacrificially, knowing that we have true joy in the resurrection.

Jesus is not offering us good advice about how to live better lives when he talks about love. He is both announcing and making the way by which we can have life which is made possible by the love of God himself.

In this announcement of love, Jesus is reminding us of the motivation for our evangelism. Evangelism is not only about obeying his great commission. It's not about winning favour with God or looking good in front of other people. It's because evangelism is the most loving thing we can do.

How do we carry this love into the world so that others are drawn into a loving relationship with God? We know that our words are important so that people can have clarity about who God is and what he has done (Romans 10:14, 17). We also know that Jesus is looking for us to love in action (1 John 3:16–18). With these two realities in mind, consider this summary of the explanation of the love of God found in 1 John and its implications for our evangelism (1 John 4:7–21):

- Love comes from God, for he is love.
- We did nothing to earn God's love.
- God's love is revealed to the world through Jesus Christ.
- Those who do not love do not know God.
- We must love each other, and God is revealed through this love.
- His Spirit empowers us to love and gives us confidence he is with us.
- We must rely exclusively on the love of God.
- Love drives out fear, and we can be confident of salvation through God's love.
- We love because God first loved us.

Discuss: How will these statements shape your evangelism?

You may have heard the expression 'love makes the world go round'. The sentiment is that love is a good force, something that keeps us progressing and flourishing in an often cold and cruel world. But the reality is better than the sentiment. Love makes the world go round because the one who set the world in motion IS love. In his love we find meaning, identity and hope. In his love we share true love with the world. Love empowers our evangelism because our evangelism is an act of love as we share the message of love with our lips and our lives.

Love makes the gospel go around the world.

DISCUSSION (15 MINS)

1. How would you describe true love?
2. Why is sharing the gospel the most loving thing we can do in the world?
3. Why should love be the motivation for our evangelism?

- 'Two things there are that move us to love God for himself: nothing is more reasonable; nothing is more profitable.'

ST BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

APPLICATION (5 MINS)

Spend some time this month reflecting on Psalm 136. The psalmist expresses gratitude to God, proclaiming who he is and what he does. How can you follow this same pattern in your own devotional life? How might it pour out into your witness?

PRAYER

'Father God, thank you that you loved us so much that you would send your son Jesus to die for our sins. I want your love to transform my life so that others may see you through me. I want to show your love to the world so that they might know the truth. Amen.'

ACCOUNTABILITY (15 MINS)

Fill in accountability forms, share in pairs or smaller groups and pray for each other.

DON'T FORGET...

If you want to give a year of your life to growing in your understanding of the gospel and your ability to share it with the world, consider applying for The Message School of Evangelism. The Message Trust in partnership with The Global Network of Evangelists offers a ten-month course on the theory and practice of evangelism, based in Manchester, UK. Find out more at: message.org.uk/MSE



SESSION TWELVE

RETREAT

The climax of each year of Advance is a time of retreat. How you decide to do this is up to you, but here you will find suggestions for how to spend the time together in keeping with the general principles of Advance group meetings and to bring the second year to a focused end.

HOW TO RUN AN ADVANCE GROUP RETREAT

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The general idea is to get away from your normal location and set aside a longer period of time than you would normally for your Advance group sessions. If you can only spare a morning, afternoon or evening, then do what you can in this time, but retreating for a whole day is especially beneficial.

Here are some ideas of what to do during your retreat.

KEY SCRIPTURE

The following passage from 2 Timothy will work well as a key scripture for your time together if you are looking for a specific focus during the retreat:

- 'In the presence of God and of Christ
- Jesus, who will judge the living and the
- dead, and in view of his appearing and
- his kingdom, I give you this charge:
- Preach the word; be prepared in season
- and out of season; correct, rebuke and
- encourage – with great patience and
- careful instruction. For the time will
- come when people will not put up with
- sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own
- desires, they will gather around them a
- great number of teachers to say what
- their itching ears want to hear. They will

- turn their ears away from the truth and
- turn aside to myths. But you, keep your
- head in all situations, endure hardship,
- do the work of an evangelist, discharge
- all the duties of your ministry.'

2 TIMOTHY 4:1-5

The passage features twelve distinctive ideas we can explore as we reflect on and persevere in the challenges we face in our evangelism:

1. Evangelism is achieved in God's presence and authority (*'In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus'*)
2. God is our judge, not the world (*'who will judge the living and the dead'*)
3. The task is urgent (*'in view of his appearing and his kingdom'*)
4. We have been sent (*'I give you this charge'*)
5. We proclaim the word, not our own ideas (*'Preach the word'*)
6. Prepare yourselves for daily service (*'be prepared in season and out of season'*)
7. Find balance in encouragement and challenge (*'correct, rebuke and encourage'*)
8. Humility is essential (*'with great patience'*)
9. Know and trust God's Word (*'people will not put up with sound doctrine'*)
10. Don't pander to culture and fashion (*'what their itching ears want to hear'*)
11. Keep perspective, prioritise devotion (*'keep your head'*)
12. Keep going, never give up (*'endure hardship'*)

How you study the passage together or alone (see below), how you bring these points out, and how you discuss them together is entirely up to you depending on how you are running your retreat time. But

keep this passage and these points in mind as you look at the suggested activities below.

WORD

A key aim of the Advance group is to help each other grow as evangelists who are committed to the Word of God. This retreat time is a great opportunity to go deeper into his word.

EXTENDED BIBLE READING (SOLO READING)

Extended time spent with the Word of God is never time wasted. Perhaps 2 Timothy could be the focus of your time together beyond any study of 2 Timothy 4 as outlined above. The whole letter deals with instruction from Paul to Timothy around the task and challenge of doing the work of the evangelist. John Stott proposed a four-part overview of the book, which could be a good discussion or study focus:

Chapter One: Evangelist, Guard the Gospel (1:14)

Chapter Two: Evangelist, Suffer for the Gospel (2:3, 8, 9)

Chapter Three: Evangelist, Continue in the Gospel (3:13-14)

Chapter Four: Evangelist, Preach the Gospel (4:1-2)

Alternatively, taking the time to read alone through all of Mark's gospel or one of the New Testament letters in one sitting is a great way to get a full perspective on the contents of that book. If it is a shorter book, why not re-read it multiple times, praying and reflecting between each reading, making notes, and then going again? You could all choose to read the same thing, or have a few different options that people then share about their time of reading and reflection.

BIBLE STUDY (GROUP READING)

There are a number of ways that you could facilitate Bible study together on the retreat. Perhaps you will want to revisit some of the key passages you have explored over

the Advance group sessions. Alternatively, you may feel led to a particular passage or theme that will set the tone for the retreat. As ever, be sure to keep it in line with developing each other as evangelists.

You could also work through the Advance 'Guardians of the Gospel' Bible study on 2 Timothy on YouVersion.



PRAYER

Set aside significant time for prayer during the retreat. Plan for prayer times with a specific focus, as well as time for both praying through scripture and spontaneous prayer. Whatever else you do in prayer during the retreat, the following three focuses are recommended.

PRAYING FOR EACH OTHER

Be sure to pray for one another as a primary element of your time together. Ask people to share one area they are feeling thankful to God for and one area in which they need provision or breakthrough. Encourage people to be specific and honest in their requests, and don't rush through each person but dedicate real time to one another. Be sure to keep a note of words and encouragements that come from this time.

PRAYING FOR THE LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL

Take time to pray for your local context and also the global spread of the gospel. If there are specific situations you have a heart for in either a local or global context then pray for them. Lift up individuals, churches, ministries, missionaries, situations from the news and so on.

PRAYING FOR THE ADVANCE JOURNEY

Give thanks for the journey that you have been on in this group, reflecting on personal growth and stories of fruitfulness and salvation. Ask the Lord to continue the work in you that he has begun, and that you would be transformed into his image with ever increasing glory (you could pray through 2 Corinthians 3:17-18).

WORSHIP

Time spent in God's Word, prayer and fellowship are all part of worship. But spend time in additional specific acts of collective devotional worship – whether it's through singing or other creative expressions.

SUNG WORSHIP

If you have someone who is musically talented, invite them to lead a time of sung worship. Alternatively, there are many great collective worship apps and videos available online, many of which are free. A quick YouTube search for your favourite worship songs will likely bring up a version of the song with lyrics that can be played for the group to sing along to. There is power in the people of God joining together in song to declare his glory.

STORIES AND PRAISE

Spend time sharing stories of how God has been at work in your life this year – stories of growth, breakthrough, evangelistic opportunity and fruit. After each story spend time praising God through prayer, song or any method that works for your group as you seek to give thanks to God for who he is and what he has done/is doing.

COMMISSIONING

Another way in which you could share in a corporate act of worship would be to commission each other before God in the evangelistic task that he has called you to and empowered you for. At the end of this

first year of your Advance group it will be encouraging and affirming to recognise this milestone, so give thanks to God for it and pray over each other as you look to go again with the gospel for the salvation of the world and to the glory of God.

ANNUAL REFLECTION

Using the form found on page 58 create space to reflect on the questions provided, fill in the form and pray over the answers given. You may also want to look back on last year's form to help you reflect on your growth. This can be done individually or as a group.

FELLOWSHIP

As we gather together, we grow in friendship with and trust of one another. The fellowship of your Advance group has hopefully been a blessing to each person, and on retreat you can continue in your commitment to hold each other to account and your enjoyment of each other's company.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability has been a core part of every session so far, and in this final session of the year, once again commit to the same process to ensure you are living holy and humble lives.

FASTING/FEASTING

You may want to commit to a period of fasting as part of the retreat, or base your time together around meals through which you can gather together and make space for discussion. There is no right or wrong way to do this – all that matters is that it helps you achieve the goals of your retreat time.

ACTIVITIES

You may want to plan an activity together – for example, if you are retreating into nature somewhere, go on a walk together

and fold some of the devotional activities above into this time. If based in a more urban environment, you could visit an art gallery together and do the same thing, using some of the art as a stimulus for reflection and devotion.

Equally, you might want to do something simply for fun together – a team activity, sport, entertainment option... Whether it's fellowship to encourage devotion, or fellowship to enjoy each other's company and grow in relationship with each other, invest in quality time with each other.

NEXT STEPS

The second year of Advance is done. Before you bring the year (and the retreat) to a close, be sure to look at the next steps for this group.

THIS GROUP

Create space for people to share about how the Advance group experience has been for them. Share feedback about how you've all grown and developed, and think about what the biggest learning has been from the year. Encourage each other in these things.

Take a look at the Advance Group Mentoring Guide Part Three and encourage each other to start thinking about how to make this upcoming year truly bespoke for the needs of this group. Talk about what people are most excited about in the upcoming year together. If you haven't already, pray and give thanks for the second year of Advance, and commit what is ahead to the Lord.

Take the opportunity to set dates for starting Year Three together.

NEW GROUPS

Make space to talk about the development of new groups that have been launched throughout this year. Multiplication is an important part of the Advance group journey. If you need any support in launching new groups, get in touch with us via the

Advance website and your local Advance Ambassador will be in touch to support you in any way possible.

Ask how everyone is getting on with any groups they have started and pray over them.

However you run your retreat time, keep the core values of Advance in focus, reflect on the journey you have been on as a group, and pray for what lies ahead. Give thanks to God for the growth and fruitfulness you have experienced together and commit the future to him.

YEAR TWO

REFLECTION

HOW DID YOU HOPE TO GROW THROUGH THIS SECOND YEAR OF ADVANCE?

HOW HAS THIS YEAR BEEN DIFFERENT TO YEAR ONE?

HOW HAVE YOU GROWN?

WHAT IS YOUR BIGGEST LEARNING FROM THIS YEAR?

WHAT IS THE MOST SURPRISING THING TO COME OUT OF THIS YEAR IN ADVANCE?

WHAT HAS BEEN THE GREATEST ENCOURAGEMENT IN YOUR EVANGELISM (DID YOU GET THE OPPORTUNITIES YOU HOPED FOR FROM LAST YEARS REFLECTION)?

WHAT HAS BEEN THE GREATEST CHALLENGE?

WHAT SCRIPTURE HAS MOST IMPACTED YOU THIS YEAR AND WHY?

HOW HAS GOD BEEN AT WORK IN YOUR PRAYERS THIS YEAR?

WHAT ARE YOUR HOPES FOR YEAR THREE OF ADVANCE (AND WILL YOU SET UP YOUR OWN GROUP THIS YEAR IF YOU HAVEN'T ALREADY)?

At the end of this second year of Advance, use this form to reflect on what you've learned, how you've grown, and what your hopes are for the next year of the Advance journey. If there are any stories you reflect on here that you think would encourage others, share them with us at advancegroups.org/stories

ACCOUNTABILITY FORM

KEY

✓ Good

— Okay

✗ Bad

• ‘Search me O God and know my heart’ (Psalm 139:23)

Accept one another (Romans 15:7)

Confess your faults to one another (James 5:16)

Encourage one another and build each other up (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

• ‘Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously towards others the way God lives towards you.’ (Matthew 5:48, MSG)

How clear is my vision for my life?	Are my relationships with those I serve healthy? (Peers, leaders, the opposite sex)
How clear is my vision for the work I'm involved in?	How healthy is my response to being hungry, angry, lonely, or tired?
Am I enjoying what I do?	Am I engaging in inappropriate lustful thoughts?
Do I feel God's pleasure in what I'm doing?	Am I getting enough rest?
How passionate am I?	Am I managing my time well?
Am I pursuing intimacy with Jesus?	Am I spending my spare time in a healthy way?
Am I making enough space for prayer?	Am I keeping a healthy balance between church, work and home life?
Am I spending time in personal Bible study?	Am I forming and maintaining relationships with non-Christians?
Did the Bible come alive for me today?	Am I exposing myself to sexually alluring material?
Am I seeking evidence of God's power in my life and ministry?	Am I defeated in any part of my life: jealous, impure, critical, irritable, touchy or distrustful?
Is Jesus real to me?	Am I managing my money well?
Am I teachable and accountable?	Am I giving generously?
Am I available and approachable?	Am I choosing not to envy other people?
Am I listening well?	Am I choosing to not grumble or complain?
Am I making myself vulnerable to others?	Am I walking with integrity?
Am I leading with a servant heart?	Am I decisive and confident?
Am I trustworthy?	Am I willing to take risks?
Am I keeping my promises?	Am I making goals and reaching them?
Am I holding on to healthy perspective?	Am I willing to make sacrifices?
Am I handling pressure well? (from people, work, circumstances)	Am I keeping my cutting edge?
How is my health?	Am I moving in the power of the Spirit?
Am I eating healthily?	Am I withholding forgiveness from anyone?
Am I sleeping well?	Am I pursuing freedom from destructive patterns and strongholds?
Am I allowing my mind to dwell on inappropriate thoughts?	
Am I remembering the sick, hurting and needy?	
Are my family happy?	
How are my friendships?	

• ‘Trust God from the bottom of your heart. Don't try to figure out everything on your own. Listen for God's voice in everything you do, everywhere you go. He's the one who will keep you on track. Don't assume that you know it all. Run to God! Run from evil.’ (Proverbs 3:5-7, MSG)

THE GOSPEL. THERE IS NO PLAN B.



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