

*Ginormous*  
*Week 1*  
*By: Kevin Bobrow*

This week we're kicking off a brand new series called "Ginormous!" During the next few weeks we will be studying some passages in the Bible that are extremely important. These passages will help us understand what it means to follow Christ and crucial to each of us having a full picture of who God is and who we are in him. They represent key truths that *every* Christian should understand in a deep way, truths that ought to be at the core of who we are and what we believe. Quite simply, these passages are ginormous! These key truths are ginormous. So each week we are going to dive into a different ginormously important passage, in the hopes that all of us at CCC will have these truths lodged deeply within us.

Each of us has skills or abilities that are absolutely crucial to our daily success. Perhaps we have skills that are necessary if we are to complete our tasks at work successfully and with excellence. Perhaps we have knowledge and understanding about how to relate to our family members, and if we were to have this knowledge taken from us we would have a very difficult time being the best spouse or parent we could be. Such crucial knowledge or skill is at the core of what makes us the people we are; take it away and we are fundamentally changed!

The same ought to be true for us as Christians. We each must have a core of understanding and a base of knowledge that is deep within us and which defines us as followers of Christ. We ought to have certain understandings and beliefs about who God is and who we are in relation to him and to the world. We ought to have certain ways of thinking about Christ and about the Kingdom of God. These ginormous truths are what we are going to be diving into over the next few weeks.

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## Day 1

Our first ginormous passage is found in the New Testament book of Galatians. We will get to the specific passage tomorrow, but today we are going to spend some time looking over the entire book of Galatians, because it is impossible to accurately understand the passage without an understanding of the book as a whole. In reality this "book" is a letter, written by the apostle Paul to the church, or the group of Christians, at Galatia. He had shared the good news about Christ in Galatia during his missionary journeys, and the Galatians had eagerly accepted the truth about Jesus. A church was founded and Paul was seemingly excited about their growth and faith. However, shortly after Paul left Galatia things changed, disruptions came, and Paul wrote this letter as a response to these changes and disruptions. In Galatians, Paul passionately confronted the issues that had arisen, in an attempt to ensure the Galatian church stayed on the right path in following Christ.

Take 10-15 minutes and read through the book of Galatians.

Perhaps it is clear to you after reading through the book that Paul was ticked! He was VERY upset with what had occurred in Galatia. He says in Gal. 1:6-7a, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all.” Wow. Paul is very upset, and what makes these words even more striking is where they are located. There was a certain structure that letters followed in the first century Greco-Roman world, and you can see this structure by looking at other letters of Paul found in the Bible. In almost every letter he introduces himself (seen in Gal. 1:1-2), then greets those he is addressing (seen in Gal. 1:3-5), and then offers thanksgiving for all God had done in and through them. This “thanksgiving” section was a standard part of the letters of this period, and Paul nearly always follows this convention—but not here. He is angry, and it seems he cannot even bring himself to offer thanksgiving. Instead, in the spot where he normally would offer words of thanks the verse above comes: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you...”

[[ Have you ever had a conversation like this? A time when you were so upset about something that you could not even bring yourself to go through the typical pleasantries on the phone? Instead of “What’s new?” or “How’s it going?” you just start into the issue at hand. This is what is going on here. ]]

It has been argued that no other New Testament letter is as emotional or passionate in tone as Galatians. Paul believes the crisis in Galatia threatens the very heart and foundation of the gospel of Christ. So what was going on? What had him so upset? Scholars have several views about what may have been going on in Galatia, but what seems clear is that Paul was responding to a group of teachers who had come into Galatia after Paul left. These teachers said that the Christians in Galatia had to follow the laws of Judaism if they really wanted to be God’s people. They were urging the non-Jewish Galatians to be circumcised, saying that if they were not circumcised they could not be counted among Abraham’s descendants. In other words, they must become like Jews if they wanted to be saved. These teachers are called “Judaizers”, because they were seeking to subject Christians again to the laws of Judaism.

What more can we learn about this group of outsiders who had come into Galatia and disturbed the unity of the church? First, they were cunning and deceptive—before they arrived, the Galatians were growing and making progress in their faith, but after they arrived they “bewitched” the Galatians (3:1) and stopped their growth in Christ. Paul argues that the motivation behind this bewitching is to gain the favor of the Galatians so they can isolate them and make them totally dependent on these new teacher (4:17).

Second, central to their message is circumcision and law observance. In and of themselves, being circumcised and observing the law were fine, even good things. After all, they were instituted by God. Yet, in this case, these Judaizers were making these things central and pushing the core of the gospel to the side. They were making Old Testament law more important than Christ! And Paul is arguing that the only true gospel is one focused on the grace of God, offered through Christ Jesus. We are saved through trusting in Christ and not through doing all the right things, or through our own efforts. This

group was pushing the Christians at Galatia to try to attain perfection by their own efforts, and this was completely contrary to the gospel message Paul had preached to them! That's why Paul says in 3:2-3: "I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?"

What a great question—a stirring and challenging question. And we could ask the same question of ourselves. After starting our journey in Christ with the full realization that our salvation is only by God's grace, do we now try to earn God's favor? Are we trying to please God through our own efforts?

In what ways do you slip into trying to earn your salvation?

Have you tried to check off a list of good deeds, instead of seeking to walk with Christ and be filled by the Spirit?

Do you find yourself constantly feeling inadequate, like you can never measure up?

Do you feel far from God, as if you are consistently disappointing him?

If you answered yes to any of the questions above, perhaps you have been bewitched like the Galatians! There may not be false teachers among us at CCC, but perhaps you have bought into the lies of the enemy, lies that whisper to you that you aren't really forgiven, that you can never measure up. Perhaps you've let your struggle with sin define you, so that you see yourself primarily as a prisoner to sin instead of as one set free by Christ.

The ginormous truth for this week has to do with the fact that we are God's children, and he is our Father, and he loves us. We will dive into this more tomorrow, but perhaps today you need to be reminded that your sin does not define you. Perhaps you need to be reminded that you do not need to earn your salvation—Christ has already accomplished that for you! Rest in the truth that when God looks at you, he sees a beloved son or daughter. Thank him for his grace that has saved you and set you free from trying to earn his favor.

## Day 2

As we saw yesterday, Paul was passionate about the Galatians remembering that the core of the gospel is about God's grace. God has forgiven us through Christ not based on our good deeds but only because of his compassionate grace. When we turn it around and try to earn God's favor or work toward perfection based on our own merits, we have completely distorted the good news.

This leads us into our ginormous truth for this week: we are God's children. Because we are his children, we follow his commands and do his work. We do NOT follow his commands and do his work *in order*

to *become* his children. If you accept the free gift of Christ's sacrifice, you *are* God's child, fully forgiven and set free from bondage to sin. We do not relate to God as a slave to a master, nor as a worker to a boss. We relate to God as our Father. And regardless of our experience with our earthly fathers, God is unique from any earthly father. He is the perfect Father—always patient, always kind, always loving, always with our best interest in mind. He has great plans for us and will help us fulfill those plans. He meets every need we have but does not spoil us or give us everything we want. He is warm and has a sense of humor. He is compassionate and always there when we are hurting. He is the perfect Father, the Father some of us cannot even imagine.

The Judaizers had been emphasizing to the Galatians that unless they were numbered among Abraham's descendants by following the Jewish laws, they could not be saved as a part of God's people. But Paul responds that they are in Christ—and Christ is THE promised seed of Abraham. Therefore, if they are in Christ, they are *certainly* descendants of Abraham. More importantly, if they are in Christ, they are *certainly* God's children.

Paul gets to the core of these arguments in 3:26-4:7. Here are some of the crucial words from these verses, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ... If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise... When we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of this world. But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.' So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir."

This is the crux of Paul's argument: the Galatians are no longer in slavery but are now children, with full rights! They are God's sons and daughters through Christ.

And so are we. We do not seek to earn the favor of a heavy-handed master, but have a gracious father who has redeemed and forgiven us and called us children with full rights—even rights of an inheritance! **You** are God's son through Christ. **You** are God's daughter through Christ. He wants to love you and be loved by you; he wants a deep and open and life-giving relationship with *you*. Why? Because he loves you, and he's your Father.

What does this mean for us? How might it change the way we live? What difference should this ginormous truth make in our lives? (Think about those questions and write what comes to your mind).

One obvious difference that this truth ought to make in our lives is in the way we see ourselves. If we saw ourselves on a daily basis as empowered sons and daughters of the King, we might approach life differently. We might stop seeing ourselves as victims, or as failures. We might begin to approach life more boldly, knowing we have been redeemed by Christ and empowered by the Spirit. We might know that we truly *can* do all things through Christ, who gives us strength (Philippians 4:13). How do you

need to begin seeing yourself differently? Or how should you be approaching life differently, since you are a son or daughter of God?

Another difference this truth ought to make is that the way we see sin should be permanently altered. If we were a slave, we might see sin as something we should try to sneak in once in a while, when our master might not be paying attention. If we were a worker with a boss, we might see sin as an outlet or something to have a little fun with, since we have to work so much. But since we are beloved children who have been given full rights by a loving Father, our view of sin must change. We must see it an assault on our relationship with our Father, action that will drive a wedge between us and the most important relationship in our lives. How have you been viewing sin? How does your view of it need to change?

One more difference this truth should make is that it should change the way we pursue a relationship with God. Spending time with him should not be viewed as something to fit in or check off a list, or something to do in order to gain favor. Spending time with him ought to be our greatest delight, the time we long for and are energized. Seeing our relationship with God as a duty, or spending time with him as a requirement to check off a list, is a symptom of a master-slave view of the relationship. But when we understand we are God's son or daughter, and that he is our perfect Father who loves us no matter what, it should change things. How have you been pursuing (or failing to pursue) a relationship with God? What might this show you about your view of this relationship?

What needs to change in this area?

*Prayer Focus:*

*-Thank God that you are his beloved child.*

*-Ask him to help this truth change the way you see yourself, the way you see sin, the way you see your relationship with him. Ask his forgiveness for not living as his child.*

*-Spend a few minutes listening to what your Father wants to say to you, his child.*

### Day 3

Today we are going to take our ginormous truth—this idea of God as our Father and us as his children—and rewind to the Old Testament. We are going to explore some of the origins of this Father-child language to see what we can learn. The concept of being God's child was developed in various ways in different eras of biblical history—it came to be used metaphorically to designate a special or privileged spiritual relationship with God.

The notion began with the covenant relationship established between God and Israel, most obvious in the story of the exodus. Prior to this, in Genesis 17, God had established a special covenant relationship with Abraham and his descendants, promising to make Abraham's descendants numerous and promising to make his people into a great nation which would bless the world. In the years after Abraham, this covenant promise seemed to be in jeopardy as Abraham's descendants were enslaved in Egypt. However, God worked miracles to free Israel from this slavery, bringing them out into freedom. At Sinai God established this ragtag group consisting largely of illiterate slaves used to manual labor, into a nation. Israel would be God's special people, and he would be their God.

How is God's establishment of this ragtag group into a special nation similar to his establishment of the church as his people? How is it different?

In Exodus 4:22-23, God calls Israel his "firstborn son." In Jeremiah 31:9 God says he is "Israel's father", and in Hosea 11:1 God says through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son." This father-son language continues throughout the Old Testament, and indicates that God somehow gave birth to the nation of Israel through his choosing them and saving them. This language is eventually also extended beyond the nation as a whole to the individual Israelites, who were corporately called the children of God. For example, Deuteronomy 14:1-2 says, "You are the children of the Lord your God...you are a people holy to the Lord your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession." Because this is the case, they are to be different.

There is another important Old Testament concept related to the Father-child relationship. Because God's people are his children and he has chosen them, they are to be different from their neighbors. They ought to be holy like God (see Leviticus 19:2, 20:7) and live according to his laws (see Exodus 19:5-6, Deuteronomy 10:12-22). This is a major aspect of the faith for Israel that is in continuity with the faith of Christianity: we, too, are to be different from our neighbors. We are not to cut off contact with them as the Israelites were often did, but nonetheless we are called to be distinct from the world around us.

In what ways is it important for us to be distinct from our neighbors who do not know Christ?

How do we balance this need to be distinct with the need to love people who are far from God and invite them to explore a relationship with Christ?

If you have any familiarity with the Old Testament, you know the Israelites did not always live up to the call to be different and holy; in fact, they rarely lived up to it. They grumbled against God, they turned away from him to worship idols and other gods, and they forgot all he had done for them. This pattern of unbelief consistently cost them, as God did what any good father does and disciplined them.

One of the clearest and most unbelievable examples of this pattern comes shortly after the exodus, in Numbers 13-14. Right after God has performed all these miracles to free Israel from slavery, after he led them through the desert and provided for them in supernatural ways, he is prepared to bring them into

the Promised Land. The Israelites send twelve men into the land God has promised to give them to check it out. Ten of these men return and give a negative report, saying how huge the inhabitants are and emphasizing how they will surely be crushed in battle against them. The people respond with amazing unbelief! They cry out in lament, saying they wished they were still slaves in Egypt. They whine about how God has brought them out of Egypt only to allow them to be slaughtered in battle. How quickly they forgot, and how little faith they had! God punished them by not allowing that generation to enter the land, meaning that the Israelites had to wander in the wilderness for 40 more years!

What is important to notice here, despite this example of God disciplining his children, is his patience with them. He does not write them off, nor does he decide to choose a new people. He is their Father, and his love for them does not change. He simply disciplines them for their utter lack of faithfulness and trust; he wants them to understand they must trust him.

In what ways do you fail to trust God as your Father? What miracles do you fail to trust him to accomplish in your life?

Eventually Israel did enter the promised land with God's help, but unfortunately this did not put a stop to their pattern of faithlessness, and over the years even their kings forgot God and worshipped other gods. Eventually this pattern led them to be kicked out of the land and spread out across the world, no longer a powerful representation of God's people. But even this wasn't the end of the story, for God promised through his prophets that a Messiah would come to rescue Israel and reign forever.

Jesus was that promised Messiah who came to save God's people; through his death and resurrection he established a new family for God, a new Israel. All who trust in him and follow him are set free from sin and are now the children of God. No longer are we enslaved to sin; neither are we in bondage to the law; and no longer must one be a biological son of Abraham to be a child of God. The way is opened for any and all to come to God, through Christ. We can be forgiven, and we can become his daughter or son—with full rights! In addition, *part of being God's child is the bestowal of his Spirit on us, to change us and lead us and help us to know how to please our Father.* As Paul says elsewhere in Romans 8:15-16, "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."

If you have accepted Christ, you have the Spirit of God within you. What does this mean to you?

The Spirit assures us that we are God's children; the Spirit helps us not to be afraid but to know that we are God's beloved son or daughter. How should this knowledge change the way we live?

*Prayer Focus:*

*-Confess the areas where you, like Israel, are unfaithful to your Father.*

*-Thank God for his incredible faithfulness to you, despite the ways you fail him.*

-Ask for help to remember you are God's child and to live like it.

-Spend some time in silence, listening to what your Father needs to say to you.

## Day 4

John the Baptist had some nerve; he had guts. The words he spoke were searing rebukes, very challenging and hard to swallow. Yet people flocked to the desert to hear him. He was saying *something* that got people's attention, something that resonated with them. We are going to focus on his words in Luke 3 briefly to explore another angle of our ginormous truth for this week.

As people were flocking to the desert to be baptized by him, the first words out of John's mouth according to Luke are: "You brood of vipers!" It is hard for us to understand what that phrase means, but we can probably tell he is not being encouraging! Basically brood means offspring, or children. John is calling the crowds coming to him the offspring of vipers—what does this mean?? Most likely John was making a reference to Genesis 3, where the devil is represented as a snake and where God says to Eve that he will put strife between her seed and the devil's seed. So for John to call these people the brood of snakes, or the seed of snakes, is another way to call them children of the devil! He is telling them they are in bad shape, and are far from what God wants them to be.

Those must have been tough words to swallow, but he was just getting started. His next words give us insight into the New Testament view of being God's children. He says in Luke 3:8-9, "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

First he calls them children of the devil, and then he warns them not to comfort themselves by saying they are Abraham's children. They might have said to themselves, "We may be far from who God wants us to be, but we will be okay because we are the children of Abraham. We are God's people. Everything will be alright." And John tells them they are dead wrong—in fact, God can create children for himself from stones! *Out of nothing God can raise up an army of children!* And if they want to remain God's children, they better produce fruit—they better start *acting* like his children.

This is the gist of the New Testament view of who God's children are: God's children are those who act like his children. They are those who act like *him*.

What are some ways you act like God's child? What are some ways you fail to act like his child?

As you may know, John the Baptist was the forerunner of Jesus, and Jesus seems to share John's view of who God's children really are. While he is teaching a large crowd in Luke 6, he says, "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that. And if you lend to those

from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ lend to ‘sinners,’ expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (Luke 6:32-36)

Did you catch that? Jesus is saying not to act like most of the world does in only being kind and merciful to those whom you love and who love you. The reason why we ought to go further and show love and mercy even to our enemies is because this is the way God acts! If we want to be God’s children we must act like he acts, and God is *constantly* showing love and mercy to ungrateful, sinful people. If we want to be God’s children, we ought to act like him, and not only show love to those who love us, but also to those who will never say thanks, who will never pay us back, who may not even notice we have done anything.

Is it difficult for you to show love and kindness to those who don’t appreciate it? If so, why do you think this is the case?

The main thing to notice here is that Jesus defines for us who the children of God are: they are those who act like God. If our Father is merciful to all, we should be too. This is very similar to John the Baptist’s statement that we must produce fruit if we are truly God’s children.

All of this is reminiscent of Jesus’ scathing words to the Pharisees in Matthew 23. Take a minute and read this chapter.

Here are some of the highlights:

“The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.”

“Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them ‘Rabbi.’

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.”

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.”

“You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?”

Wow. Jesus certainly took exception with the Pharisees, and laid out his problems with them in this chapter. His primary issue with them was that they did not practice what they preached. They loved the recognition of being a religious leader, but they didn't actually help anyone! They didn't actually point people toward God or reflect God. In fact, Jesus says anyone who listens to them and converts they make twice as much a son of hell as they are! *They cared about how they looked, but they didn't care about the condition of their hearts.* This, in Jesus' words, made them children of the devil, not children of God.

Do you find yourself caring more about how you appear to others than you do about the actual condition of your soul? Do you want to be *known* as a child of God more than you want to *live* like one?

What areas of your life need to change so you can actually live like his child?

We are often just like the Jews John and Baptist was talking to: feeling comfortable as God's children, we sit back and are unconcerned with the fruit coming from our lives. But we do not get a free pass, and accepting Christ does not excuse us from living like we should. It does not excuse us from producing fruit, from *acting* like God's children. John's words did in fact come true—God *did* raise up an army of children from nothing! He brought a new people into being through Christ when he established his church. And he can still bring a new people into being whenever he wants. We must produce fruit so that *we* will not be in danger of being “cut down and thrown into the fire.” God is patient with us, and we do not have to fear that God will cut us off at any moment simply because we are not perfect. God is slow to anger and abounding in love. But that does not excuse us from acting like his children.

This may seem to contradict our passage in Galatians at first. There Paul emphasizes that we do not need to follow every Old Testament law in order to be God's children. We do not need to become Jews to be saved. We are God's children through Jesus, and we are not in a slave-master relationship but a Father-child relationship. God, more than anything, loves us and wants a deep and life-giving relationship with us. These deep truths do not contradict this second truth from the New Testament that as God's children, we must produce God-like fruit. If we love our Father, this is not a duty or a burden; it is a natural part of being in a loving relationship with him. As we spend time with him and grow closer to him, we naturally begin to act like him and produce fruit that pleases him. It is not that we must produce fruit in order to become his child; instead, because we are his children and he has accepted us and loved us and forgiven us, God-like fruit comes from our lives. Being holy does not make us God's children; rather, because we have been made his children by his incredible grace, we try to act like our Father. We seek after holiness...

What does the fruit that comes from your life look like? Is it evident from your words and actions and thoughts and attitudes that you are God's son or daughter? In what areas have you been failing to produce fruit? What sin have you been neglecting to deal with?

*Prayer Focus:*

*-Confess the areas of sin in your life, areas where you have not been producing fruit.*

*-Ask for help to avoid the sin of the Pharisees, only caring about your appearance and not being concerned with the condition of your heart.*

*-Thank God for his incredible patience and grace, even when you don't act like him.*

## Day 5

We are going to close out this week by focusing on our passage in Galatians one more time, only from a different angle. The passages we have looked at so far this week about being the children of God might lead us to confusion—are we God's children by his grace or because we produce God-like fruit? We don't need to follow all the Old Testament laws to be his child, but we need to practice what we preach. Where is the balance? Let's try to find it by diving again into Galatians. Read through the verses below carefully.

Galatians 3:26-4:11

“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, *Abba, Father.* So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.”

Paul emphasized a few things in the above words. First, if we have been baptized into Christ, we are Abraham's seed and God's son or daughter. This is the fundamental truth we must remember. We are God's beloved child and everything we do must flow out of this truth. We should not act out of fear or obligation but out of love for our Father—because he has loved and accepted us.

Do you find yourself acting out of fear or obligation in your relationship with God?

Second, Paul emphasized that we are no longer under the law. He explains that being under the law was sort of like a prince who is too young to exercise any authority and is under the guidance of guardians. In

other words, the time of the law in salvation history was a time of servitude and immaturity, whereas the time of Christ and the Spirit is a time of sonship and inheritance. Before Christ, God's people had to be subject to the "guardianship" of the law, but now that Christ has come, we have the Spirit and the full rights of sons!

Finally, Paul emphasizes that the Galatians, who had been given the full rights of children and were no longer slaves to sin or to the law, had been deceived by these Judaizers into becoming slaves again! They had taken the yoke of slavery back upon themselves! And he is so upset that he even wonders whether he has wasted his efforts on them. They have forgotten the very core of the good news about Jesus, that he had set them free from bondage to the regulations of the law and had brought them into the freedom of life in the Spirit.

It seems clear that we often forget the core of the good news as well. It seems that often we would rather a list of rules we must follow than a loving relationship with Christ. When we have a *relationship* with a living Lord, we must give our whole lives to him—our hearts, our passions, our desires, our plans. Often in our selfishness we would rather assent to doctrines and follow rules than really dive into this loving relationship that requires it all. When Jesus called his disciples, for example, they did not ask for a list of Jesus' core beliefs so they could agree to them, nor did they ask for a list of what they should do and should not do from here on out, as his followers. They realized that his call meant their entire lives would be about following him and learning from him, and they chose to follow. In following him they submitted their passions and plans and wills. There was no list of rules or doctrines; there was only following him and seeking to please him every day. There was no religion, only a relationship.

In what ways are we sometimes like the Galatians, leaving behind our relationship with Christ for a list of rules or doctrines?

Are you living as a child of God, in relationship with him, or are you seeking religion (a list of rules or beliefs)?

Are you seeking to follow Christ every day and submit your passions and plans to him, or are you still trying to measure up, as if you can earn your salvation?

In what ways have you become burdened again by some yoke of slavery, despite the fact that Christ has set you free?

May you never forget that you are a beloved child of God, and that your Father's greatest desire is that you walk with him—in a deep, life-giving relationship. May you never forget that he has set you free from slavery to sin and also to rules and regulations. And as you are filled with the Spirit, may your life produce fruit, so that everyone around you knows how great your Father is.

*Prayer Focus:*

*-Confess the ways you have allowed yourself to be enslaved, despite the fact that Christ has set you free.*

*-Ask forgiveness for the ways you have fallen into the same trap as the Galatians, seeking out religion over a relationship.*

*-Ask for help in developing a deep relationship with your Father, one where you walk with him and produce God-like fruit.*

*-Thank God for his indescribable love—for you! Thank him for being the greatest Father, full of patience and grace and love.*

## *Ginormous* *Week 1 Small Group Discussion*

Open your group time by praying together. Ask God to use this time to challenge yet encourage everyone in the group.

Discuss these questions as a group.

- What are some things you know, understand, or have studied and learned during your life that makes you who you are? What piece of knowledge or acquired skill would you be lost without (at your job, at home, in social situations, etc.)?
- If this skill or piece of knowledge were taken from you, what would be the consequences?

This series is about some *really important* (or GINORMOUS) core passages from the Bible, and some core truths every Christian ought to understand.

- What do you feel are some of the most important aspects of the Christian faith?
- What aspect of the faith, if you took it away, would drastically change what it means to be a Christian?
- Why is it crucial for Christians to properly understand their faith? What can happen if they are confused about what it means to follow Christ?

The ginormous truth from this week is that you are a child of God. You are his son or daughter. And his greatest desire is that you walk with him in a genuine, life-giving relationship.

- What difference should this truth make in our lives?

- How would we live differently if our relationship with God was like a master-slave relationship, or a boss-employee relationship? What impact does it make that God wants a Father-child relationship with us?

Read Galatians 3:26 – 4:11 out loud together.

Paul tells the Galatians that they are “Abraham’s seed” – what did he mean by this? Why was it important that these Christians see themselves as the children of Abraham?

More importantly, he emphasized that they were God’s children—no longer “minors” with the need for the Law to be their “guardian”, but adult children with “full rights” (4:5)! What rights might he have been talking about? What privileges has God granted you as his child?

If you read the entire book of Galatians this week, you saw that Paul was upset! He was very angry about how some “Judaizers” had come into the community at Galatia and had planted seeds of doubt in the minds of the Galatian Christians. These people had been telling the Galatians that they must be circumcised and follow the laws of the Old Testament to be part of God’s people. This is why in these verses Paul so adamantly stresses that the Galatians are in fact already children of God through Christ, and they do not need to become Jewish to be a part of God’s people!

One of the things Paul laments at the end of this section is that the Galatians have believed these Judaizers and have allowed themselves to become enslaved again to rules and regulations. They have given up their freedom in Christ, the freedom won at the cross, and have begun focusing on minor details of the Law again.

- In what ways do we, as Christians, add onto the gospel with rules and regulations?
- What minor issues do some Christians seem more concerned about than the core of the gospel, a loving relationship with Christ through the Spirit?

God gave the prophet Jeremiah a vision of the future in Jeremiah 31. God had already driven his people out of the promised land because of their sin, but this vision looks forward to a time when God will restore “the remnant of Israel” (31:7). Their mourning will become dancing, and they will be with God and will be his people. It is a vision of God’s people restored. In this chapter Jeremiah says:

“The time is coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a *new covenant* with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD.

“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

This is a beautiful passage about God’s restoration of his people, and most Christian scholars read these verses as a prophecy about the new covenant established in Christ. Though Israel broke their covenant with God, he still did not forget them but made a new covenant. This covenant is different, these verses say. No longer will men teach each other the rules and regulations to follow to “know” God; rather, we will all actually know him! And we won’t need to have a list of laws, because his law of love will be written on our minds and hearts!

- In what sense have these words of prophecy been fulfilled, and how have they not yet been fulfilled?
- Do you feel that the “law” of Christ is written on your heart? Do you sense the Spirit’s presence in your life?
- God has accepted you and forgiven you as his child—what difference should this make in your life this week?

Pray together: as his children ask your Father to remind you every day that you are his beloved children, and ask him to help that truth change the way you live—the way you see yourself, the way you see sin, the way you see your relationship with him.

## **Ginormous** **Week 2**

*How to use this guide:*

*This weekly devotional guide is intended to help further our thoughts on the topic of the Sunday morning message. There are questions throughout the reading that can also be used in a small group setting or for discussion.*

We are in the second week of our series “Ginormous” where we’re looking at some of the most important, vital, huge, and essential passages from the Bible. The truth is, there are passages from the Bible we all should know, whether we’ve been trying to follow Jesus all our lives or if we’re just getting started. But for many people, the Bible is completely overwhelming. Where do you start? What do you pay attention to? What parts are the most important?

If anyone ever told you the Bible was easy to understand, they were lying.

**[Q] Describe the first time you remember engaging with the Bible. What were some of your first impressions?**

So even if you’ve been trying to follow Jesus for a while, maybe even your whole life, I hope this series is a chance to make sure we have these ginormous verses in our minds and hearts. Or maybe you’re pretty new to this journey, or you haven’t started the journey at all, maybe you’re just curious what this whole thing is all about, the verses we’re going to talk about over the next few weeks are a great place to focus our attention and to learn more about God. Because it’s just too easy to miss the most important things.

**[Q] What is something important which might be over looked in our lives?**

This week we’re going to be looking at a verse from the book of Colossians. But before we can fully dive into our ginormous verse for this week, we need a little bit of background information.

The book of Colossians was originally a letter written by a man named Paul to the church in Colossae, a town on a thoroughfare between several major cities of the ancient world. Having travelers and visitors coming into and out of the city on a regular basis, carrying with them their own belief systems and religious faiths, impacted Colossae dramatically. This formed the church at Colossae into an eclectic place, where Christian beliefs became confused and intermeshed with other thoughts and beliefs.

Paul writes this letter to address some serious theological and ethical problems, which have gained a foothold in this budding church. Paul calls these beliefs a philosophy and a deception with empty promises (Colossians 2:8). While we might not know the specific details of what this philosophy taught, but by looking at the instructions and teaching Paul presents in this letter, we can piece together what the Christians at Colossae were dealing with (Colossians 2:9-23).

What we can tell from this letter is that a teaching sprung up inside the church that offered a syncretistic belief system. Syncretism is when a set of beliefs are melded together to create a unified, and ultimately different, religion from the ones originally combined. The fact that these belief systems might be contrary to each other or completely inconsistent is irrelevant to someone desiring to create a syncretistic set of beliefs.

**[Q] How have you seen syncretism in our culture?**

This is exactly what happened in Colossae. The church was being bombarded by teaching that combined Christianity with different beliefs including: the use of visions, the worship of angelic beings, festivals and rituals tied to the calendar, moon, and stars, and asceticism (a view that religions fulfillment came from abstaining from anything that brings about pleasure). In this syncretistic belief system Jesus plays only a partial role, is only a supporting character.

Fullness, perfection, and spiritual satisfaction, these teachers proclaimed, was available not through Jesus, but through an odd hodgepodge of beliefs and actions which had Jesus as only a beginning step. The new Christians in this church were becoming increasingly seduced by this teaching and were walking away from the faith they were originally taught.

**[Q] We might not believe the same things the people of Colossae did, but what are some ways people have their faith in Jesus sidetracked or distracted by teachers outside the church?**

It is this specifically that Paul addresses throughout the letter to the Colossians and which leads us to our ginormous passage in the Bible for this week, near the end of the book of Colossians.

*And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

*Colossians 3:17*

Paul wants to remind the people of Colossae one thing toward the end of this important letter, and it's that everything they do, whether in their words or in their actions, they should do it all in the name of Jesus, who is Lord, and give thanks to God his Father.

Into this mixture of beliefs and thoughts, where Jesus is only a minor character, Paul wants people to know the true place Jesus should have in their lives. How should they worship? In the name of Jesus. How should they speak? In the name of Jesus. How should they act? In the name of Jesus.

Should we worship angels or seek visions? Should we tie our faith to rituals and festivals of the new moon or of the stars? Should we seek a life where we abstain from everything which might bring us pleasure? The answer, Paul says, is to do everything in the name of Jesus, which naturally precludes worshipping angels or anything other than Jesus Christ and God his Father. And our faith isn't about rituals or calendars or the moon or stars, but about Jesus. And while there are activities which are unhealthy and unwise for our faith and lives, we don't need to avoid pleasures or pain, but instead need to focus our attention on bringing what we do and say in line with the name of Jesus.

**[Q] What do you think it means to live our lives in "the name of Jesus?" How might this change the way the people of Colossae lives?**

The phrase “in the name of” carried a different weight in the ancient world than it does today. We don’t always pay attention to names, but in the ancient world a person’s name was a means of identification and authority.

**[Q] Do you know what your name means? Does this carry any significance to you? Would it carry more significance if your name was picked for you when you were an adult to fit the sort of person you were?**

We’ve become so familiar with the word “Christian” many people might be surprised to know the word Christian appears in the Bible only three times. In fact, the word first was used as an insult and was used with contempt as a way of belittling people who put their faith in Jesus. (Originally, people who followed Jesus were called “people of the way.”) Yet, over time, what was intended as an insult became a badge of honor as people who followed Jesus began to identify themselves with his name.

**[Q] What does it mean to you that you can identify with the name of Jesus in your life? What do you think this looks like on a daily, practical level?**

Paul wants us to know we belong to Jesus. We can claim the name of Jesus and we can identify ourselves with Jesus in our actions and in our words. This is a great responsibility.

When we identify ourselves with Jesus, our words and actions reflect on him. We can suffer because we identify ourselves with the name of Jesus. We can be mocked or persecuted. If in the midst of a conversation you make it known that you are identified with Jesus, it’s amazing how fast that conversation can change, often negatively.

Our words and actions also reflect upon Jesus. When a watching world looks for God, they often look to those people who claim to be followers of God. I wonder what they see sometimes from people who claim the name Jesus.

**[Q] In what ways do the actions of Christians reflect upon God?**

Every parent tries to instill in his or her children a respect for their family’s name. It means something to have honor for your name, because we all know that it takes only a few minutes to bring dishonor and disgrace to a family name that had taken generations to build. You will run into people named Paul and Mark and Peter almost everyday. When was the last time you met someone named Judas? A single act can ruin a name.

What we do and what we say when we’re identified with Jesus reflects on his name and on God. What we do and say matters. It matters a lot.

**[Q] What are examples of ways people’s actions reflect poorly on Jesus and God?**

But it's also a great honor, because the name of Jesus means authority. A signature of a person's name can authorize a check. The president's signature can make a bill into a law. A name can open or close a door. With Jesus we have access to his authority. We are told to pray in the name of Jesus, and it is through his name we have the authority to bring our petitions and requests before God. With the name of Jesus the power of sin and death are broken and we have access to life, full and complete life.

If we read through the letter of Colossians, we might be tempted to think we're not reading anything out of the ordinary. Paul is giving instructions, and it at first seems like nothing unique. There doesn't seem like anything distinctive about Paul's instructions to avoid vices or to pursue virtues. These instructions are not so unfamiliar, even to us today. We desire to pursue some things that we see as helpful and to avoid other things we perceive as causing us or others harm. Yet, this verse creates a new general principal for someone who desires to follow Jesus, a principal we can use in guiding their choices, evaluating their judgment, and making wise decisions.

Should I do something or shouldn't I? It might be helpful to have a list where good things are on one side and bad things on the other and all I have to do is find my potential choice on the list to see which category it falls into. Of course, the Bible does have lists of things we should avoid, but it doesn't include everything. How could it? The Bible makes no mention of the internet or cars or capitalism (it would be a couple thousand years before these existed). But even if it did, life doesn't work that way, does it? We're really good at finding loopholes and justifying our choices. Even if there was an exhaustive list in the Bible of things to avoid and things to pursue, this wouldn't bring about the lives God desires from us. What God desires from us are lives dedicated to following Jesus.

**[Q] Do you agree or disagree with the idea that a list of “dos and donts” could never bring about the lives God desires from us? In what ways does this verse from Colossians strike against simply following a list of “dos and donts” in our lives?**

What this ginormous verse from the Bible does is shift our focus from a list of rules toward a unifying principal of life. Our guiding principal isn't about whether something is on a list or not, but about whether our actions and words are in line with the name of Jesus Christ.

This strikes against the idea there is a secular and a spiritual part of our lives. We are often tempted to view our lives as if it was a cabinet with many drawers. In one we place our family life, the interactions we have with our spouse and kids, our parents and siblings. In another drawer we place our work life, the time we spend at the office or with our coworkers. In another drawer we place the life of our hobbies, the things we choose to do for fun and what we spend our discretionary income on. Finally, in a different drawer we place our spiritual life, including all our religious obligations and activities.

When we view our lives in a fragmented way, we miss what God truly desires from us. God does not want the spiritual part of our lives, God wants every aspect of our lives.

**[Q] To what degree do you live a fragmented, compartmentalized life? What would it look like if you had a more unified life, all lived out in the name of Jesus? What things would have to change in your life if this were to happen?**

Whatever you do and wherever you find yourself, live for Jesus. Whatever words you say and whoever you say them to, say them in the name of Jesus. Whatever deed you perform, whether at work or at home, do them in the name of Jesus.

Paul knows very well what it means to use his words and actions, no matter what the circumstance, in the name of Jesus. After all, this letter was written while Paul was in prison for his faith. But without wavering, Paul does everything in the name of Jesus with thanksgiving to God. He wasn't teaching an idealistic philosophy, but something he lived out in his life.

I hope the same can be said of us. I hope when we look back at the totality of our lives we'll see words and actions which reflect well on Jesus, which honor and glorify his name, and which are overflowing in thanksgiving for God. That would truly be a life worth living.

**[Q] What aspects of your life, in word or in deed, are done in the name of Jesus? What parts are not? What are some steps you can take this week to make more and more of your words and actions align with the name of Jesus?**

## **Ginormous Week 3**

Every now and then we all come face to face with something huge. Whether it's standing on the shore of the ocean or at the base of a mountain, we all know what it's like to see something enormous, something gigantic, something that makes us realize how small we really are.

**[Q] Describe a time when you came face to face with something huge.**

There's something about massive things that fascinates us. People continue to climb Mount Everest and sail along across the Pacific Ocean, testing themselves against the biggest and the highest and the strongest. Just look at all the people who are willing to eat the world's largest burger for a t-shirt.

**[Q] Why do you think people risk life and limb to challenge themselves against the biggest, tallest, largest things in the world?**

We are in week three of our series “Ginormous” where we’ve been looking at some of the most vital and largest verses from the Bible. There are verses from the Bible that everyone who wants to follow Jesus needs to wrestle with, think about, and have deep inside of them. And just like all the adventure seekers who test themselves by climbing the highest mountains, anyone who seeks to follow in the steps of Jesus needs to be sure they’ve worked at knowing these ginormous passages out of the Bible.

Our ginormous passage for this week comes from the letter to the Philippians, written by a man named Paul, and is a verse we might be tempted to skip over if we aren’t paying close enough attention, because it is at the very beginning of the letter. The letters we read in the Bible follow a certain pattern. There is an introduction, a greeting, and a prayer (most often a prayer of thanksgiving).

If we aren’t being careful, we might simply skim over these introductory part of the letters in the Bible to get into the body of the letter itself. If we did, we’d miss out on this ginormous verse.

Paul continues his prayer of thanksgiving in the letter to the Philippians by praying about not only what he is grateful from the past, but praying with thanksgiving for what is to come in the future. In verse six we read:

**. . . being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.**

**Philippians 1:6**

A pretty straightforward passage of twenty-five words, yet there is a lot we can learn from this one verse.

The first is that we are able to have great confidence in God’s working.

**. . . *being confident* of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.**

**Philippians 1:6**

The great confidence Paul has is something on which he can rest assured. This is more than hopefulness or wishful thinking, Paul rests in the firm belief that God is at work and will complete what he started.

We sometimes take a dim view of people who we think are dreamers or idealists. We tell people to get their heads out of the clouds or to be realistic.

**[Q] When are times when we might try to convince someone to stop daydreaming in his or her life?**

But this assurance Paul has is not a sort of starry eyes, pie in the sky hope. The word used here for “confident” is the Greek word *peitho*. This word carries with it the connotation not only of confidence, but of an assurance built on reason and rationality, the sort of confidence you are convinced of out of

experience. If anyone had reasons to doubt God's good work in his life, it would be Paul. It seems he was constantly on the run from people who wanted to arrest and attack him because of his faith. He was beaten and imprisoned and hated because of his belief in and teaching about Jesus. It even seemed like nature itself was set against Paul; he was ship wrecked twice!

But Paul, who had reasons to say otherwise, came to the conclusion that God is working and he could rest in that assurance. He was convinced. He was persuaded. To Paul, this belief was not just a hope, it was a firm fact.

**[Q] What would change in your life if you lived with the firm assurance and steadfast confidence that God was at work in your life?**

Another thing we all need to grasp is that it is God who has started a good work in us.

**. . . being confident of this, that *he who began* a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.**

**Philippians 1:6**

In a world where life can seem like a series of random, meaningless events, we are told that God purposefully began a good work in each of us. We are not random and we are not accidents. We are God's handiwork.

Don't you believe for a second that you are a sort of cosmic accident and that your life doesn't matter. God began his work in you and in me on purpose and the work God sets his hands to matters deeply. This truth brings me great hope, to know that I matter and that my life has a meaning simply because I'm the handiwork of God.

This is also a challenge because it means that other people matter too. When I might be tempted to look around at the people I encounter on a given day and place myself above them, this verse reminds me that every person I met is God's handiwork in the world.

**[Q] Have you ever struggled with the idea that your life is nothing more than random or meaningless? What difference do you think it makes whether or not our lives are God's handiwork?**

But more than that, we are not just any work, we are good work.

**. . . being confident of this, that he who began *a good work* in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.**

**Philippians 1:6**

When God set out to create the heavens and the earth and everything in between, we read in the Bible that God evaluates each step of creation and declares that it is good. Don't miss the importance of this. God doesn't say that his work is efficient or competent. God doesn't even say it is useful or practical. God doesn't point out how well it functions or how handy his creation is. God states that his creation and his work is good.

In the end, God doesn't describe his work like an engineer pointing out the technical specifications, but like an artist describing a project he loves.

We are not just any work, but we are a good work.

**[Q] Do you often feel like your life is God's good work? Why or why not?**

What this verse also reiterates is the fact that not only did God create a good work in the past, but God is still actively working.

**. . . being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you *will carry it on* to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.**

**Philippians 1:6**

There is a philosophy of belief called deism. Deism asserts the idea that there is a supreme being or supernatural power, god if you will, that once upon a time created. He (or she or it) set things in motion, created all that we know, designed the rules of the universe, and all the laws of physics. Then this deity stepped aside to let the world run on its own. This theory, sometimes known as the Clockwork Universe theory, says god constructed the clock and set the time and wound the springs and then stepped back to let it run without any further interference on his (or her or it's) part.

Without meaning to or naming it, many people live as though this theory is true. They might be comfortable with the idea that there's a supernatural being out there somewhere, but it doesn't really matter. Some people, even those who call themselves Christians, live with the *idea* of God but not with the present reality that God is alive and active and interested in us.

This verse forces us to realize that God is active and one of the things he is a focused on is you and me. I think there times when everyone feels alone. It's easy sometimes in our lives and in our world to feel like a cork bobbing on the ocean. But the truth we see in the Bible about God is that we are never alone. No matter where we are, who we are, or what we've done, God desires to relentlessly work in our lives.

**[Q] We all struggle from time to time with feeling isolated or alone. What do you think this passage says to someone struggling with these feelings in their life?**

Another thing we can learn from this ginormous passage from the Bible is that we are not yet completed.

**. . . being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.**

**Philippians 1:6**

God isn't done with us yet. God will be faithful and he will complete his work in us, but not yet. We are all works in progress. You have never met a finished human being.

For me this is greatly encouraging, but also challenging. It's encouraging because when I look at myself and the mistakes I've made in my life, I can rest in the hope that I'm not a finished project. God still wants to work in my life. I'm not a final draft. God still wants to correct and polish and help me grow. Your life and my life is not set in concrete or written in permanent marker; there is room for change and development.

It is also a challenge because it means that there will never be a time in my life when I have "arrived" and can simply coast. There will never be a time in my life, this side of heaven, when God will look at me and not see things he still wants to work on, still want to bring into completion. Sometimes Christians will live and act as if they have already finished their race. Yet, God assures us that he has a good work in us that he is working to bring into completion, but we have not achieved that completion yet.

**[Q] In what ways is it hopeful to you that God's work in your life is not complete? In what ways is it a challenge that God's work in your life will never be complete on this side of heaven?**

Finally, one more thing we can learn from this passage is that God is faithful and he will complete the work he began.

**. . . being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.**

**Philippians 1:6**

It is God who will complete his work in us. We are not completed by our own efforts or our own willpower, but through God's working. We like the idea that we can pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and carry on, but we can't. We're not big enough. The work that God began, only God can complete. We are not large enough to step into those shoes, no matter how much we might want to.

Don't get me wrong, we can hinder the work of God. We can get in the way and prevent God from working in us. God is not a dictator or a tyrant; he will not force himself or his work upon us. He allows us to go our own way if we choose.

But if we do let him work, if we do decide that what God wants for our life is also what we want for our life, then God works in us until we are brought into completion.

I'm something of a handyman. Nothing extravagant and I'm not going to be applying for my contractor's license any time soon, but I've been known to work around the house from time to time. For me, the easiest part of a project is the beginning. There's a lot of excitement for me to jump into a project, to begin tackling a problem. I get to plan. I get to make trips to the various home improvement stores in the area. I get to watch Youtube videos explaining how the job is done. I like starting projects.

What I'm not as good at is finishing projects. At any given time, there are a handful of half-completed projects around my house, each waiting to be completed. It takes a good deal of faithfulness to complete a project, especially when it's a long, difficult one.

God is faithful to us. We are all long and difficult projects that sometimes decide we don't even want to be completed. But God is at work and he is faithful and it is he who will complete the work he's begun in us.

**[Q] How do you think people try to “complete” themselves? We often hear about people being faithful to God. What is your reaction to the statement that God is faithful to us?**

It is our hope and dream that every person here at CCC will have this one verse, these twenty-five words, dwell deep inside us. Because if we lived daily with the realization that we are God's good work and that God is working in our lives, it might just change the way we think about ourselves, our church, and each other. It might change our lives.

That would be simply ginormous.

**[Q] How would your life be different if you lived with Philippians 1:6 in your heart and mind?**

## **Ginormous** **Week 4**

There are some things that are almost too large to comprehend. When you stop to think about the number of stars or the number of grains of sand on the shore, the number is simply overwhelming. When we stop to ponder the depths of the ocean or the heights of the sky, we have trouble even grasping the size. Some things are just too large, too huge, too enormous, too ginormous.

**[Q] How many words can you come up with for “large?” What's the first thing that comes to mind when you read the word ginormous?**

We are in the fourth week of a series called “Ginormous,” where we’ve been investigating passages from the Bible which are simply huge, massive, gigantic, and ginormous. Some of them might actually be too large to wrap our minds around fully.

That’s certainly the case with the passage we’re going to be looking at for this week. I think it’s possible to be overly familiar with part of the Bible, so much so that we forget to notice how large and amazing it really is. Or perhaps you’ve never really engaged with the Bible or have never read some of these huge verses. I hope, no matter what situation you find yourself in, this week will be a chance to look more closely at one of the most ginormous passages in the Bible.

**[Q] What difference do you think it makes if you know and understand a passage in the Bible and what it means for your life? How can a single passage make a difference?**

The passage we’re going to look at for this week comes from the book of Ephesians. In the Bible, we have a record of many of the letters of Paul, an early leader of the church, wrote to fledgling churches he helped start.

The letter to the church at Ephesus was not a letter written to correct some form of immoral conduct (like he does for the Corinthians) nor does he write to correct a theological error (as he does with the Galatians). Instead, Paul is writing with great joy because he has the opportunity to explain God’s eternal purpose for their lives.

The people in Ephesus were surrounded by other religions and other voices competing for their attention. This included strong voices from Jewish people who thought it was only right and fitting that the former pagans in Ephesus, who once honored and venerated the temple of the goddess Diana, should shift their focus to the Jewish Temple and follow Jewish restrictions.

In the face of all sorts of opposition, Paul wants to ensure the people at Ephesus know what Jesus means for them. But before that, Paul needs to remind the people of their previous condition.

Paul writes:

*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.*

*Ephesians 2:1-3*

Paul paints a pretty stark picture of what things looked like for these people before they knew Jesus in their lives. They were once dead, the living dead you might say. They walked and talked and carried out their lives, but they were not truly alive. Instead, they were subjects of a different ruler, the adversary of God, described here as “the ruler of the kingdom of air.” Satan, God’s adversary, has limited power on

earth to rule and to work in the lives of “those who are disobedient.” But what power he does he, he used to enslave and trap all he can.

**[Q] What do you think it means to say someone was “once dead in their transgressions and sins?”**

Paul wants to be sure the people know exactly who he’s talking about. To clarify, he writes that “all of us” once lived in that situation, far from God and his desire for our lives. That included the pagan people of Ephesus. That included the Jewish people who were pressuring others to follow their restrictions and rules. That included Paul himself (notice the use of the word “us”). That includes you and me.

**[Q] Why do you think Paul makes a point include himself along with those he is writing this letter to? What is your reaction to him doing this?**

Like all people, we are pulled to satisfy our own lusts and desires, to gratify our own appetites and cravings. And what did this ever get us? It made us subjects of God’s wrath, because we were far from God and were living opposed to his plan for our lives. We were naturally enemies of God, deserving only his punishment and anger.

Paul continues:

*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*

But . . .

We were the walking dead. But . . .

We were subject to the ruler of the kingdom of air, following our cravings and desires, but which led us to nothing but emptiness and futility. But . . .

We were objects of god’s wrath and His enemies. But . . .

All of that changed. And why did all of it change? Because of God’s great love for us, shown through his Son Jesus Christ. We were dead, but now we are alive. We were enemies, but now we are able to be co-heirs and children of God. Just like Jesus was raised from the dead, we too can be raised from our deaths into God’s glorious life.

**[Q] In what ways does this passage give you hope or encouragement?**

God longs for this to be true of everyone, so He can pour out his riches on us, his amazing love and his incomparable grace, all given to us through Jesus Christ.

This is the good news Paul spent his life sharing. It was for this good news that Paul endured time in prison and beatings. It was because of this good news that Paul started new churches and wrote letters. And it is because of this good news that we can lead lives worth living.

**[Q] Does this passage sound like good news to you? If you lived as if this passage was true in your life, what might change?**

But humans can be a strange lot, can't we. Sometimes we have trouble seeing things the way they really are. Paul knows this propensity in the human heart and mind. And just in case we aren't seeing things clearly, he continues:

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.*

*Ephesians 2:8*

How did we come by this wonderful good news, that we were once dead but are now alive? How is it that we have access to the incomparable riches of God? How is it that we are no longer objects of God's wrath? How is it that the power of sin is broken in our lives?

It's not by our own power or our own intelligence. It's not by our obedience or our morals. It's not by our bank accounts or our college degrees or our good looks or anything we might want to take pride in. It is only by the grace of God, a grace given freely to us because of Jesus.

**[Q] Why do you think we are constantly tempted to take credit and boast in things for which we have no right to do either? How much of an issue is this for you?**

Of all the things we might be tempted to take pride in, Paul wants us to know this free gift from God is not one of them. People who look down their noses at others and who are impressed by their own righteousness have forgotten that the great grace of God, the grace that saves us in the first place, was a free gift given by Jesus. No one can boast in it. No one can withhold it from other people, because it is God's gift to give, not our own.

This ginormous passage is central to what it means to be a Christian and to follow Jesus with our lives. It is central to what it means to be a church that helps others find their way back to God. It is vital to understand what it cost to win our freedom and why we have no room to boast. This ginormous passage is one we all need to have dwelling inside our hearts and minds. Because when we do, when we remember we were once dead but are now alive, when we remember that we were once enemies of God

but are now reconciled to Him, when we remember how this is all because of a free gift, it can change our lives.

**[Q] As you reflect upon this passage, what strikes you about it? Why is this a ginormous passage? In what way is this central to the Bible and to following Jesus?**

## **Ginormous Week 5**

Mount Rushmore National Memorial is one of the most well recognized monuments in the United States. Construction on it began in 1927 and continued until 1941, when the now famous faces were completed. At the end of construction, the faces of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln stood looking over the Black Hills of South Dakota. Each face, etched in granite, stands 60 feet tall.

**[Q] What is the largest monument you've ever seen? What was it commemorating or remembering?**

There is no denying the sheer size and scale of the monument. Perched over 5000 feet above sea level, people from miles around can look upon the faces of men who are recognized as some of the most important in our nation's history.

**[Q] Why do you think we often choose to honor people with statues and monuments that are larger than life? What do you think is the significance behind this?**

We are in the midst of a series called "Ginormous" where we are focusing on some of the most vital, large, important, and massive passages from the Bible. Just like Mount Rushmore highlights important people, throughout the series Ginormous we are highlighting parts of the Bible anyone who wants to follow God well needs to know.

The passage we're looking at today comes from the book of Colossians from the Bible. This book is written by a man named Paul, whose mission it was to bring the news of Jesus to people who were far from God. Though Paul was from a Jewish background, the focus of his life was to bring the good news about Jesus to non-Jewish people, to Gentiles.

We might forget, largely because Christianity has become mainly Gentile in its composition, that the mission of Paul to the Gentiles was hugely controversial in the early church. After all, what were the differences between the church and the synagogue? What requirements from the Jewish faith were still in place after Jesus and which of these applied to Gentile Christians? Remember, the early church was born out of the Jewish faith, so it was a real question to determine what a truly Gentile faith in Jesus looked like.

**[Q] Why do you think it was so important for the early church to understand the differences between Judaism and Christianity?**

Paul spends a good deal of time concerned with this very question. Over and over again, Paul writes letters to Jewish and Gentile Christians to help them understand the good news about God. The same is true for the book of Colossians, a letter written to the church at Colossae.

With all of the confusion about what it meant to be a Christian, whether it be as a Jew or a Gentile, Paul wants to ensure everyone has the same starting point, the same core beliefs. Which brings us to our ginormous passage for this week, which is all about Jesus.

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*

*Colossians 1:15-20*

So, who is Jesus? What is his relationship with God the Father? What is his relationship with all of creation and humanity? It is these questions Paul sets out to answer in this ginormous passage. These questions get at what is known as Christology, our understanding of Jesus, something Paul is deeply concerned about and which he places a great deal of importance on getting right.

**[Q] How can having a limited understanding of Christology affect our faith and our lives? Why do you think Paul was so deeply concerned with how people understood who Jesus really was?**

There are some key aspects of Christology we can see in this passage.

First, Jesus is the creator, not created. This might seem like splitting hairs, but it's an important distinction to make. Jesus was not created by God, but was beget, or born from, God. God is Jesus' Father, not his creator. The Bible describes Jesus as the "one and only begotten son" (John 3:16). God chooses to adopt people as his children through Jesus, but Jesus alone is his true son.

**[Q] What difference does it make that Jesus was begotten and not created? How would (or does) this understanding affect your faith?**

Because Jesus was born and not created, Jesus existed from the very beginning with God as the “firstborn of all creation” and it is from him that all of creation is made. Whether it is something we can see or something invisible to our eyes, whether it is something in heaven or on earth, no matter how powerful or important, all things were created by and through Jesus. In fact, the only thing not created by Jesus is God.

Not only did Jesus create all things, he is the glue that holds all things together. Jesus is the unifying power that brings an order to the chaos of the universe. There is a cohesion that exists in all creation because of Jesus.

**[Q] What does it mean for your life that Jesus is not only the creator but also the sustaining force that holds all life together? In what areas of your life does Jesus long to create something new or to bring order out of chaos?**

Second, when we look at Jesus and listen to his words, we are looking at and listening to the fullness of God’s image. Was Jesus a good teacher? Absolutely, the best. Is Jesus a good example to follow? He sure is. Could you take his teachings and create a philosophy of life to follow? You certainly could. Did Jesus perform miracles? He did, time and again. Is Jesus our true friend? Yes, better and more true than anyone we know.

But all of these things fall well short of who Jesus really was and who Jesus really is. Jesus is God. Within Jesus the fullness of God dwells. When we look at Jesus, we are looking at the image of the invisible God.

God, all throughout the Old Testament portion of the Bible, was so overwhelming to look at that to do so was tantamount to taking your life in your hands. People who looked upon God were left blind or dead. The sheer radiance and power of God was enough to kill a person outright.

We see in this passage that the fullness of God and the image of God dwell in Jesus. Jesus was fully a man, fully human. But he was also fully God. Jesus had dual natures, and it is precisely because of these dual natures that he can save us. It took the power of God to save us. It took the sacrifice of someone fully human to take our place of punishment, and someone fully divine for that punishment to be applied to all people and all times.

It is vital we understand this about the nature of Jesus. There are many people who venerate and honor Jesus as a great moral teacher and as a prophet, but this falls far short of who Jesus really is. Jesus is God.

Some people want to listen to Jesus’ teachings on love, justice, and serving people in need, yet do not want to believe he is (and was) God. This is simply not an option available to us. We can not remove

Jesus' own claim about being God from his life in order to keep some other parts and teachings we enjoy. In Jesus, we see the fullness of God, the invisible made visible, made into flesh. There are many people and teachers who claim Jesus is something less than God, but to do so is to miss who Jesus really is.

**[Q] Why do you think some people are comfortable with Jesus as a teacher, but not as God? Do you agree or disagree with the statement we can not remove Jesus' claim to be God from his life? Why or why not?**

Third, Jesus is the head of the church. It is from Jesus that the church springs, and it is because of Jesus the church has meaning now, and it is because of Jesus the church has hope for the future. If Jesus is the head of the church, we must follow his lead and be guided by him in all we do.

The word "head" in this passage can mean both leader and ruler and also source or origin, like the head of a river. Jesus is the origin and source of the church and to him is all supremacy over the church. As J.B. Lightfoot puts it, Jesus is to the church the "inspiring, ruling, guiding, combining, sustaining power, the mainspring of its activity, the center of its unity, and the seat of its life."

If, as a church, we forget that Jesus is the head and the source and the sustainer of all we do, then we are nothing more than an organization trying to make something happen on our own. We might be able to have a limited amount of success at that, and there might be some limited amount of good we can do. But Jesus longs for us to turn to him as the head of the church, to do immeasurably more than we could ever dream. As the head of the church, Jesus longs that we use his power and wisdom and grace to do his work on earth, not the small good we can do on our own, but the ginormous good he wants to accomplish through us.

**[Q] Describe what you think a church would look like if it truly had Jesus as it's head. What would your life look like if Jesus was truly your leader?**

If this passage is true, and I believe it is, they draw a line in the sand. We don't always like lines drawn in the sand, they can make us uncomfortable. But when we come face to face with a passage that so clearly articulates who Jesus is, we must confront what this means for our lives.

Jesus isn't just another part of a fallen creation, but is the very son of God. It is in Jesus that the fullness of God dwells, and when we look upon Jesus we are seeing the very image of the invisible God. And Jesus is the head of the church, from which it springs and through which it is sustained.

**[Q] In what ways does this passage challenge you? How might your life change in light of this ginormous passage?**

## Ginormous Week 6

We are in the sixth week of our series “Ginormous,” where we’ve been looking at some of the largest, hugest, most massive verses from the Bible and what they mean for our lives. And on this Easter Sunday, we will look at what is probably the most important verse in the Bible.

But before we can get to our ginormous verse for today, we begin with this: Jesus died. Don’t miss the significance of this short sentence. God died. The creator of the universe and everything in it died a gruesome and brutal death. The maker of the heavens and the earth was killed. The one who’s hands formed the mountains was buried beneath the stone.

**[Q] Why is it significant to pause and remember that Jesus died? In what ways can we become so familiar with this story that it loses its impact on us? To what degree do you think this is the case in your life?**

The Jewish leaders remembered some of the claims Jesus made about himself, including the claim that he would come back to life. The fact that they remember these claims when Jesus’ closest friends and disciples don’t is ironic, and leads them to take steps to prevent any funny business on the part of Jesus’ followers.

*The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. “Sir,” they said, “we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise again.’ So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first.”*

*Matthew 27:62-64*

The religious leaders requested Jesus’ tomb be sealed and guarded. Pilate, the Roman governor who sentenced Jesus to his fate, further attempts to wash his hands of the whole incident and tells them to do whatever they choose.

*“Take a guard,” Pilate answered. “Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how.”*

*Matthew 27: 65*

A large stone is rolled over the front of the tomb and guards are posted to stand watch to make sure no one came to steal Jesus’ body. Jesus’ male disciples, the very ones the religious leaders were worried

would do the stealing, are nowhere to be seen. Instead, it is two of his female followers who come to the grave first thing in the morning.

What they found there wasn't what they expected, and it changed history, and their lives, forever.

No sooner had they arrived at the tomb, then an earthquake shook the ground and, before their very eyes, an angel descended from heaven, rolled away the huge stone blocking the entrance of the tomb, and sat upon it.

*After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.*

*There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow.*

*Matthew 28:1-3*

The powerful governmental decree, including the soft, clay seal placed upon the stone at the entrance of the tomb, was broken. It would have been a great crime to defy a decree of the governor and to break his seal, and it would have brought about a severe punishment. But the power of God is greater than any power of man.

**[Q] What does it mean for your life to be reminded that the power of God is greater than the power of men? What stones would you love to see God roll away from your life or our world?**

Nor should we assume the angel rolled away the stone to let Jesus out, but rather to let these two women into the tomb. The stone blocking the entrance to the tomb would have been massive, requiring a group of men to move it. We know even the women had such mundane concerns on their minds when we see in Mark's account of this occurrence and the women talking amongst themselves saying, "Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the tomb?" (Mark 16:3).

Their angelic visitor defied easy description, and is said to appear like lightning. The women, as you might assume, were terrified. The guards were even worse, falling over in their fear and were "like dead men."

*The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.*

*Matthew 28:4*

The greatest power of man is countermanded by a single heavenly messenger.

The angel offered what comfort he can, telling the women to fear not (he might as well tell them not to breathe, but I guess he had to say something). He told them he knew they were there looking for Jesus, who had been crucified.

*The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified.*

*Matthew 28:5*

It's worth pausing here to acknowledge the slight differences in each of the gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) regarding the details of the resurrection stories. In some accounts, there are two angels, in another there are only one. In some, the angels stand and in others they sit. The truth is these minor variations provide strong support to the validity and authenticity of these accounts. If different people attempt to recall an event, especially an event so fraught with emotions and fear, there will be discrepancies in the details. In fact, if all the stories were identical, as if they were all parroting the same story, it would raise serious questions. We expect natural variations in eyewitness accounts.

**[Q] Why do you think natural variations are normal and support a true story, where as identical stories do not?**

It would also be a gross error to focus on minor variations and miss the importance of what is taking place here. Do not miss the significance of the wonderful events of the first Easter. The big news of the day, apparently even in heaven, was the crucifixion of Jesus. Even God and the angels seemed to be following closely the events that took place on Calvary.

Which brings us to our ginormous passage for this week and what might be the most ginormous verse in the entire Bible. If it was not for this verse, everything we believe as Christians and everything we do at church would be completely pointless. If it wasn't for this one verse, Christ would be just another in a long list of people who suffered and died at the hands of the Romans, largely forgotten by the world and by history. If it wasn't for this one ginormous verse, we would be without hope and joy.

The angel, just like they had some thirty years before, bring tidings of great joy, this time not of Jesus' birth from his mother, but of his birth from the grave.

“He is not here,” the angel said, “for he has risen, just as he said.” The angel then invites the women to inspect the grave and to see the place where there should have been a dead body, but where instead there is nothing but folded grave clothes and hope for us all. Jesus was no longer dead, but was alive, resurrected.

*He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.*

*Matthew 28:5*

**[Q] Do you agree this is one of the most important verses in the Bible? Why or why not? What significance does this verse have for your life?**

The empty grave stands as the one incontestable proof which confounds all attempts to disprove or cast doubt upon the resurrection. Because if Jesus was not raised from the dead, where was his body? The flimsy story the guards give, that the disciples of Jesus came and stole his body while they were sleep doesn't hold up to even the most rudimentary examinations. After all, if someone is asleep, how could they know who stole the body?

The thief of the body would require motivation. But what motivation was there to risk breaking a very serious governmental seal to take the body of Jesus? If the disciples had stolen the body, would every last one of them spend the rest of their lives traveling the earth to spread the good news that Jesus was alive, suffer torture and eventually be killed as martyrs, all for a lie? People will die for something they firmly believe is true, and they might even die for something they mistakenly think is true, but people do not die for something they know to be a lie. What possible gain would they have in doing so?

If the religious or political leaders of the day took the body, as soon as reports of Jesus being raised from the dead surfaced they would have been able to put an end to them simply by producing the body. The rise of Christianity was a huge thorn in the side of Rome and the Jewish leaders in the first century alike, and they would have liked nothing more than to be able to point to the dead body of Jesus to put a stop to it all. But they couldn't.

Even the argument that the women were at the wrong tomb, that they had somehow been lost and ended up in the wrong place is ludicrous. This would still mean the body could have been displayed once reports of Jesus resurrection came to light.

**[Q] In what ways does Jesus' "missing" body pose a huge problem for the leaders of the first century? In what ways does it pose a stumbling block for people today?**

Jesus died. God died. We know the name of the man who signed his death warrant and we know how the gruesome thing was pulled off. We know the mocking words that were hurled at Jesus as he suffered and we know how he was wounded during the execution. We know the place where he was crucified and we even know the exact hour he breathed his last breath. We know the name of the man who paid for Jesus' tomb and we know how he was wrapped in linen and prepared with spices. We know the fears of the leaders of the day and we know guards were posted to watch over a dead body. And we know Jesus was raised from the dead, that his tomb was empty, just as he said it would be.

Something profoundly important took place that Sunday morning all those years ago when two women, out of love and respect, came to Jesus' tomb. They expected to find a dead body, but instead they found the one truth that changed all history. They found an empty grave. The angel pointed it out, invited the women to check for themselves, and to see with their own eyes that Jesus was not there. He had risen.

"Now go," the angel said, "and tell his friends and followers all you have seen here and let them know it has happened just as Jesus said it would. He is alive."

*Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."*  
*Matthew 28:6-7*

The women left the tomb running, their minds racing as fast as their feet. Battling in their chests were the dual emotions of fear and joy. We know what that's like too, I think, when something amazing and wonderful and unexpected sweeps us off our feet and we know, deep in our bones, that nothing will ever be the same again. Anyone who has ever had a child knows the combination of fear and joy it brings to invite a new life into the world. Fear, because it is almost too good to be true, almost too sweet to imagine. Joy, because we know, more deeply than words can express, that life just became more full and hopeful and wonderful.

Fear and joy.

*So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.*  
*Matthew 28:8*

**[Q] In what ways do fear and joy intermingle in our lives? When have you experienced this? In what ways do you think these two women encountered both fear and joy that morning?**

Like the ocean tide, the fear began to recede. Could it be true? Is it possible? What if he really is alive? What if . . .

Then, heaping unexpected joy atop of unexpected joy, Jesus is there with them. "Do not be afraid," he tells them, dispelling their fears as much with his presence with them as with his words. "Go and tell my brothers I'm alive and will be with the shortly."

Go and tell them their worst fears aren't true. Tell them their wildest hopes and dreams are coming to life. Tell them that I've defeated death. Tell them, I'm alive.

*Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."*  
*Matthew 28:9-10*

And everything changed. The rulers tried to cover it up, but no one was really buying it. You can pay for people to lie, but you can't ever really cover up the truth. Not a truth this wonderful.

And our faith and our hope and our future rests in this one verse, he is risen. He is no longer dead. He was in the tomb, lifeless, but now his is alive. He is risen. This is the one central fact of our faith, the one core belief we must never lose, and the key to hope and joy in our lives.

He is risen.

He is risen indeed.

**[Q] What does the resurrection of Jesus mean to you and your life? In what ways does it give you hope, peace, and joy? If it never happened, how would your life look difference?**

**Ginormous**  
**Week 7**  
*By: Kevin Bobrow*

We continue the Ginormous series this week by looking at one of the most challenging, inspiring, hopeful, and confusing books in the Bible – Revelation. Most likely, no written work in history has been so consistently misunderstood or misconstrued as Revelation has been. Through this week of devotionals, we hope you will come to understand Revelation better, and more importantly we hope you will come to understand God and his great Story more deeply.

**Day 1: Overview of Revelation**

Before we dive into our passage, we are going to spend this first day “flying over” the book of Revelation as a whole, so that we can try to gain an understanding of its genre and purpose. In other words, we are going to explore what Revelation *is* and what it’s *for*. Perhaps you already find yourself yawning, but be assured that this information will be helpful in grasping this challenging book and perhaps the entire story of Scripture.

Let’s begin by briefly considering Revelation’s genre. What, you may be wondering, is a *genre*? Genre is defined by the dictionary as “a category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content.” Every work, whether literary or musical, can be placed within a category based on its style, form, or content. And this is certainly true of the books of the New Testament. Contrary to the opinion of some, the books of the Bible did not fall from heaven. Though they are inspired by God and are distinct from any other works because of this, they are not unique in their form or style. Instead, they tend to follow the conventions of other works in their genre from the same time and place. For example, Paul’s letters, like Galatians or Romans, conforms to the style of letters written in this time period and part of the world. His letters, though they are unique and

inspired, follow the structure of thousands of other letters archaeologists have found that would be defined as Greco-Roman letters.

So, what is Revelation's genre? Are there any other works written in history similar to this strange book? The genre of Revelation is **apocalyptic literature**, and in fact, we have access to many works written around the same time and in the same part of the world that conform to the very same style and form. In other words, Revelation is part of a genre that was quite well known at the time it was written, and its features are very similar to the features in these other works. John J. Collins, one of the foremost scholars on apocalyptic literature, has defined this genre, and the beginning of his very long definition is: "a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient."<sup>1</sup> In Revelation, we have John, the writer of the book, being shown a revelation by an angel, and similarly in other apocalyptic works a human is shown a revelation by an otherworldly being. And in many other ways, works that are a part of this genre match up with Revelation.

What does this all mean? What it **does not** mean is that Revelation is just like all these other works and is not unique. It does **not** mean we should see it as just another work, since it fits into this common genre of apocalyptic literature. The fact that it conforms to a genre has nothing to do with whether it is unique, or special, or inspired. While it conforms to much of the form, content, and style of other works in this genre, it is also distinct from them. It is special because the vision in it is true. It is a vision from God's angel – from God!

What it **does** mean, however, is that we must read and interpret and understand this work in the ways that apocalyptic works the way they were meant to be read and interpreted and understood. Reading and interpreting works in ways they were not meant to be read or interpreted can cause all sorts of problems; foremost among those problems is that we make works say things the authors never intended them to say. If we read a work of poetry as if it is a historical account, or if we read a tabloid as if it is a recipe, it will lead to confusion, misunderstanding, or results that are even more disastrous. We must read and interpret and understand each written work according to its genre.

Applying this to Revelation, we must read it and understand it and interpret it in light of its genre. This means that we do not read it as if it is a blueprint or breakdown for what events are going to happen at the end of time. This is not what apocalyptic literature was for, and this is not how we should interpret Revelation. Rather, the purpose of apocalyptic literature was to encourage. It was to cause those who were going through terrible times to see behind and beyond the difficulties, and to realize that salvation was coming. Evil would be toppled. Good would prevail. Salvation was coming.

This is the purpose of Revelation. It was an encouragement, originally, to the 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians who were being persecuted at the hands of Roman emperors. In this vision John basically gave these persecuted Christians a glimpse into the truth that God would prevail, no matter how bad their situation

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<sup>1</sup> Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 5. In this work Collins covers many of the other works that fit in this genre and compares them to Revelation. It is a challenging read but helpful.

was right then. God would swallow up the evil they were being confronted with, and good would reign. God will win in the end, so they should keep going! They should persevere! They must not give up, because all their struggles and pain were not in vain!

It is in this way we must read this book today, as an encouragement to us. Just like those Christians, we have struggles and we confront evil. For us in America, this does not result in outright persecution or martyrdom (although there are thousands of Christian martyrs every year around the world). But whatever the struggles and evil we face, we must take encouragement, and remember that God will win in the end. Evil will be destroyed, and good will reign. There is much imagery in this book we may not understand, and we should do our best to study and learn so that we can understand better. But the bottom line is that God is in control, no matter how out of control this world seems. And God and good will win. This ought to bring us comfort and encouragement in the midst of life's challenges and hardships.

How is this understanding of Revelation's genre and purpose different from your understanding, or from what you have previously been taught?

What challenges or evil are you facing in your life? How could the truth that God is in control in the midst of these things help? How could the truth that God will win, and evil be destroyed, help get you through?

Pray:

- Ask God to help you remember he is always in control, no matter how out of control life feels.
- Thank God for his promise through Scripture that he will conquer evil and good will win.
- Ask him to help those for whom persecution and martyrdom are real evils they must confront.

## **Day 2: A Picture of Shalom**

Today we will move on to our ginormous passage for this week, Revelation 21. This is a beautiful vision, the climax of John's vision, and a passage full of hope and wonderful imagery. Take a couple minutes and read slowly through this chapter.

What stood out to you from this chapter?

What did you have a question about or not understand?

What was hopeful or encouraging?

This chapter is a beautiful picture of what John calls the New Jerusalem, or the Holy City. When we describe John's vision, we speak of *heaven*. The central thrust of this chapter is that we, as God's people, will be together with God! We will be his people, and evil will be no more.

The situation being described in this vision is a picture of the Hebrew idea of *shalom*. *Shalom* was a word loaded with meaning. It meant peace, health, and wholeness in relationships, completion. If *shalom* exists, there is no strife, no sickness, no damage. Before sin entered the world, there was perfect *shalom*, but after sin, there was never true *shalom*. Even in the purest love strife came; even in the healthiest person sickness loomed; war would eventually destroy even the most stable times of peace. Throughout the Bible, we see God's people longing for the reversal of the effects of sin, longing for the return of *shalom*. The Israelites tried to get a taste of it by going to the Temple and worshipping, and the prophets prophesied about it. Finally in Jesus, the way was opened for a return to *shalom*, a return to true and lasting peace with God. And here in this chapter, John receives a beautiful vision of what that final return to *shalom* will look like.

What will be true of this *shalom*? We will consider three important details. In verse 1 we see that John mentions that "there was no longer any sea." We might gloss over this detail, but it is significant. In Old Testament times, the sea was always equated with chaos, uncertainty, and danger. The sea was unpredictable, and powerful. At that time, no one had ever been able to go to the bottom of bodies of water or explore them; hence, their understanding of the sea as a deep, dark, scary place they could not control. Many myths in Old Testament times personified the sea as a powerful god that was terribly frightening and threatened to swallow up sailors or flood the land if it was not appeased. This is similar to the way the sea is spoken about in the Old Testament, so when this verse says there is no longer any sea, it is suggesting that there is nothing to fear. There is no more deep, dark, scary force out there; there is security.

Second, we learn that this glorious city has twelve gates, each made of pure pearl. Certainly, John's vision of the Holy City is symbolic here, as is common in apocalyptic literature. Most likely, the twelve gates and the twelve foundations represent the twelve tribes of Israel or the twelve disciples, although it is debated what precisely was intended with this imagery. Regardless, what is important for us is that although these gates are marvelous, in verse 25 we learn that apparently they are merely for adornment. John says "on no day will its gates ever be shut." This is a picture of utter peace; there are no enemies to lock out!

Finally, there is no more strife or separation in our relationship with God. We are with him, face to face. And all is right between us. Verse 4 even tells us that God will wipe every tear from his peoples' eyes. He is with us and comforts us and takes away all the scars of this life, of what John calls "the old order." In this perfect *shalom* there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain. We are in God's presence,

where there are no more tears. In fact, verse 22 tells us there is not even a temple in the city, because the Father and the Son are its temple! This is a beautiful picture of God and his people reunited.

The promise of Revelation 21 to the first century Christians who were being persecuted and killed because of Christ is that *shalom* is coming. Peace and security and wholeness of relationships are coming. As God says in verse 7, “He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son.”

It is clear what these Christians of the first century needed to overcome: persecution, pain, sin, and fear. Our lives are different, but we still need to overcome many things. What do you need to overcome so that you can “inherit all this”?

Which part of this picture of *shalom* do you long for the most? Which part of this picture seems the most out of reach?

Is this picture of wholeness and peace encouraging to you?

Is there any sense in which the “passing away of the old order of things” frightens or threatens you? Spend some time pondering this question and we will pick it up tomorrow.

Pray:

-Thank God for this promise in Scripture that perfect *shalom* is coming, and that when we are with him there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.

-Ask God for help to overcome the challenges and obstacles in your life.

-Confess the areas of your life where you have failed to overcome, where you have sinned, where you have participated in the “old order of things.”

-Thank God that even now you can be in his presence and receive his comfort, even though he does not physically wipe every tear from your eyes.

### **Day 3: Passing Away of the “Old Order”**

We closed yesterday with a very important question: Is there any sense in which the “passing away of the old order of things” frightens or threatens you? After having more time to consider this question, how would you answer?

As we discussed in day 1, the purpose of apocalyptic literature was to encourage. And the first century Christians for whom Revelation was originally intended needed encouragement! They needed assurance! And they needed hope. They were being persecuted, tortured, and killed for their faith in Jesus, and things only seemed to be getting worse. Evil seemed to be taking over, and the hope of Christ's resurrection, hope that had changed their lives and brought them redemption, may have seemed far off. They needed to hear that this Jesus was still in control, that evil would be overcome, and that all of the pain they were experiencing would pass away.

To these weary Christians the words of Revelation must have been an incredible comfort: "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!'" They were hungry for the order of things to be shifted, for the current power structures to be toppled, for everything to change. The promise that God was making *everything* new, and that the old order had been toppled, would have surely brought about loud celebrations!

Likewise, for those among us who deal with daily injustices – who are poor or discriminated against, who lack physical or mental abilities, who don't have enough money or enough power or enough to eat, who struggle with health or who feel powerless to change their situation – for these the thought of everything being made new is thrilling.

What about the passing away of the current order is exciting to you? What in your life would you really like to be different, but you feel powerless to change it?

However, the thought of power structures being toppled, of everything changing, might not be so exciting. The thought of our lives being uprooted and changed completely might be more than a little unsettling. It might frighten us, because a lot of us actually like how our lives are going pretty well. Sure, there are things we would change if we could, but on the whole, we like life. We have people we love, we are very successful, and we have hope for the future. And in the midst of being so comfortable, the promise that it will all be overturned, that the entire order will pass away, and that *everything* will be made new, is scary.

What area(s) of your life are you very comfortable with? What aspects of life would you rather not be altered?

The truth is that this promise from Scripture ought to bring nothing but hope and joy, no matter how we are feeling about life right now. This world, at its very best, is but a shadow of what it was intended to be. The greatest joys we feel in this life are but a taste of the ultimate joy we will feel when we are in God's presence. Paul talks about his relationship with God by saying, "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am

fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Even a great apostle of God who spent his entire life seeking Christ and sharing his love knew he had only experienced a hint of the joy he would feel when he could see God face to face!

If we like our lives the way they are right now, we must remember this truth. The best of life is but a small taste of the goodness that has always been intended for us, the goodness we are promised if we are in Christ. We also must remember that the trappings of this life are not what life is about; life is about our relationship with Christ and the redemption he is bringing to our lives and to the world.

And if we are longing for Christ to redeem the whole world, we must never be too comfortable, because the world is very far from a state of *shalom*. The injustices of the world, the sufferings of those we know and don't know, must make us uncomfortable. *We must so identify with those who are persecuted and disenfranchised and poor and sick that we long with them for the current order to pass away.*

Spend a few minutes asking God to help you have eyes to see the injustices around you, and to have a heart that cares for the hurts of those you know and don't know.

Thank God for the good that is in your life, for whatever aspects of life that are good and peaceful and comfortable. Thank him for all the good things he has blessed you with, good things you might be resistant to changing.

Ask God to help you have a loose grip on the comforts and joys of this life, knowing that even the wonderful things in this life are a shadow of the good that is coming to those in Christ.

Pray for a passion to help those without Christ, who still must find their way back to God. Ask God to break your heart, even in the midst of the many blessings of your life, for those who do not have the hope and joy and peace and purpose that are found in Christ.

#### **Day 4: Partners on a Mission**

Our ginormous passage for this week, Revelation 21, provides a beautiful glimpse into what John calls the new heaven and new earth. It is all about our ultimate hope, being with our Maker in heaven and everything being set right. Along with everything being made new, Revelation speaks a lot about the old order of things passing away.

Take a couple minutes and re-read Revelation 21. Pay attention to what is promised and to what is passing away.

What did you notice? What stuck out to you that you did not see the first time you read the chapter?

As we discussed yesterday, this vision of the old order of things passing away can inspire either incredible excitement or uneasiness. Yesterday we were challenged to consider other perspectives if this inspires fear or discomfort. If the passing away of the current order makes us nervous, this means we are probably too comfortable with our lives and must long with the hurting and broken of our world for the renewal of all things.

Perhaps part of our discomfort with the passing away of the old order is that we are frightened for those we love who do not know Christ. This chapter makes it clear that there is incredible joy awaiting those in Christ but punishment for those who reject him (see verses 8, 27). While we must be careful not to formulate too much of our theology of salvation or the afterlife from Revelation, since it is apocalyptic literature and must be read in light of that fact, it is still true that the Bible as a whole promises that those who reject Christ will in the end be rejected. Maybe this is the reason why you get uncomfortable when thinking about the current order passing away.

Whatever the reason for our discomfort, though, we ought to have nothing but joy about what awaits us. Nothing we are experiencing now is even worth comparing to the glorious joy we will experience when everything is made new in heaven (Romans 8:18). And as for those we love who do not know Christ, this must not bring fear but must make us passionate to share Christ with them and do whatever we can do to help them find their way to God.

This is what we are speaking about today: partnering with God in his mission, which is to save the whole world through the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross. He is making everything new, and he is restoring all of creation to his original intention, and he has called his people, the Church, to partner with him in this great mission. We are to partner with him to bring his Kingdom, his reign, and his rule to bear on the world right now. We are to help make things right even now, even before he does in a final fashion in the end.

We as Christians are not called to hunker down in our church huddles, keeping all interactions with that sinful world to a minimum, while we wait for God to come back and finally set everything right! That is not what God wants—an idle Church that does nothing to set the world right *now*! Rather, God wants his people to be his partners, loving others with the hands of Christ, addressing injustices in our neighborhoods and around the world, sharing the good news with everyone we encounter, and influencing the world and those we know for the good.

Just like the promise that the current order of things will pass away should not inspire fear, it also should not inspire such excitement that we begin only living for heaven. There are many Christian circles where the focus of Christianity becomes heaven, becomes the *next* life. “This world is sinful,” they say, “but just keep your eyes focused on heaven, that glorious place where we do not have to deal with all this sin!”

Have you ever been around Christians whose only focus is heaven? Have you encountered Christians who seem disconnected from the world because they are trying so hard to stay separate from its sinfulness? What are your thoughts on this attitude?

This mindset is also flawed. We cannot be so excited about heaven and about everything being made right that we miss living the lives God has called us to live. We cannot be so excited about seeing God one day that we miss the ways he is asking us to partner with him right now!

We have a role in bringing God's reign to this earth right now. We have a role as his partners to do his work—to share his love with those far from him, to address the injustices in our neighborhoods and the world by acting to bring justice, to care for others with the love of Christ, and to do whatever else our Father leads us to do.

Do you see yourself as God's partner in your daily life? If you always saw yourself as his partner, what difference do you think this could make in your life?

The picture of perfect *Shalom* we see in Revelation 21 is a beautiful picture, and we ought to long for that day with joy. At the same time, we must not so long for that day that we fail to do what he has asked us to do in the world. We are his partners, his hands on earth, and we are on a mission to help bring healing to the world right now, just as Christ did in his daily life. To love those around us, to address injustices in the world, to restore relationships, to make wrongs right through the love and power of Christ. It is our job to partner with God in what he is already doing to redeem the world and bring his *shalom* to it.

Pray:

- Ask God to help you see yourself as his partner.
- Thank God that he has considered you worthy of joining him in the most important work.
- Thank God for the great blessings he has promised in the future.
- Ask God to help you not be overly focused on the future but to work toward his mission in the here and now.
- Talk to God about whatever is on your heart: your fears, your struggles, your frustrations, your joys, your hurts, and your hopes.

## Day 5: A Return to Eden

More than anything, this chapter of Revelation is one that should make us celebrate. It is one that ought to make our hearts leap at the goodness of God. This chapter and the following verses in chapter 22 make it clear that the entire Bible is about God creating and then finding a way to redeem his creation. Here at the very end of the Bible we find ourselves again in a garden.

Read Revelation 22:1-7.

These verses continue chapter 21 and give further detail of John's heavenly vision. We learn here that there is a river of life in this Holy City, and it flows from the throne of God through the middle of the city. On both sides of the river is the tree of life, with loads of fruit, and its very leaves provide healing for the nations. What a beautiful picture! In this perfect, glorious place is a river, right through the middle of the city, with trees of life on either side that heal the nations!

What is more, verse 3 tells us that there is no longer any curse! No more is there sin and no more are there the effects of sin. There is no guilt or shame or hurt or pain! And most importantly, there is no separation from God—we are told that his throne will be right there, and we will serve him, face to face! Many see in this passage a sort of inclusion, which is a term that means there are two similar items at the beginning and ending of a work that sort of bracket the work and tie it together. In other words, people see the garden depicted in Genesis 2-3 and this garden as one gigantic bracket around the Bible, which ties it all together. I think this is a beautiful way to see this chapter: a return to Eden. God finds a way through his work of redemption to reclaim what he intended for his creation all along: his people living with him and serving him and loving him face to face.

Not only will there be the river of life and the tree of life as there were in Eden, and not only will we be able to walk and talk with God as his first creation could, but it will be as if the effects of sin had never tarnished humanity and the world! We will be as we were intended to be, free and unsoiled and beautiful. And not only will we be who we were intended to be, but sin will not be present. As chapter 21 said, there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. This is a place to get excited about!

Throughout the Scriptures, we get glimpses of God's people longing for this place, longing for Eden restored. Ezekiel receives a similar vision to John hundreds of years earlier, even before Christ. Listen to these similar words from the mouth of the prophet Ezekiel:

“Then he led me back to the bank of the river. When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river... Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing.” (Ezekiel 47:6-7, 12)

Here God's prophet received a similar vision to John, the author of Revelation. God's people have been hungering for this promise and for this place for generations, and God has been giving us glimpses of this place to remind us that he is at work. He has a plan to redeem his creation!

What excites you most about this picture, this return to Eden?

What effects of sin in this world are you most looking forward to being rid of?

Pause to really imagine being face to face with God, able to walk with him and talk with him without separation and without the effects of sin. When you imagine it, what emotions or feelings come?

When I imagine it, I feel freedom. And love. And peace. No more questions without answers. No more shame or guilt or doubt. And no more struggle to be who I am supposed to be.

I also feel satisfaction when I ponder this. The job will be done. God will have renewed everything, restored all of creation to its intention, and conquered evil forever. I hope on that day I also feel satisfaction that I partnered with him to help bring this reign. John's vision actually hints at this when he says that God's servants will reign with God forever and ever (22:5). We will conquer with God as his partners, and we will reign with him forever.

May this ginormous passage live in your heart. May it not overpower your heart so that you forget to live in the here and now, to partner with God on a daily basis to help make the world what it should be. But may you live with it in your heart, knowing that whatever struggles you are facing, one day sin and the effects of sin will be no more. While you partner with him to bring his reign, may you long for the day when you can see him face to face and reign with him forever.

Pray:

-Thank God for the ways he is restoring his creation, including in your life.

-Ask God to make this vision of Eden restored live in your heart and inspire your daily partnership with him.

-Confess the ways you have failed to partner with him, either because you have been too wrapped up in the daily grind or because you have been checking out of this life and longing for heaven. Ask for God to help you find the proper balance of longing for fellowship with him while staying rooted and invested in this world.

### **Small Group Guide**

Open your group time by getting to know each other a little better. Let's get started by sharing ginormously embarrassing moments. What is a REALLY embarrassing moment from your own life? If you can't think of one (or are too nervous to share), that's okay. But if you have one, share and laugh *with* each other.

We continue the ginormous passage this week by diving into Revelation 21, which gives us a wonderful glimpse into what heaven will be like. Read Revelation 21:1-22:7 together.

- What stands out to you from the passage?
- What excites you and what frightens or unnerves you?

The situation being described in this vision is a picture of the Hebrew idea of *shalom*. *Shalom* was a word loaded with meaning. It meant peace, health, wholeness, and rightness in relationships, completion. If *shalom* exists, there is no strife, no sickness, no damage. Before sin entered the world, there was perfect *shalom*, but after sin, there was never true *shalom*. Even in the purest love strife came; even in the healthiest person sickness loomed; war would eventually destroy even the most stable times of peace. Throughout the Bible, we see God's people longing for the reversal of the effects of sin, longing for the return of *shalom*. The Israelites tried to get a taste of it by going to the Temple and worshipping, and the prophets prophesied about it. Finally in Jesus, the way was opened for a return to *shalom*, a return to true and lasting peace with God. And here in this chapter, John receives a beautiful vision of what that final return to *shalom* will look like.

- Talk about ways this world is far from *shalom*.
- Talk about ways your own life is far from a state of *shalom*. How is a lack of peace evident? A lack of wholeness? How are relationships broken?
- Which part of this picture of *shalom* do you long for the most? Does any part frighten you?

One of the things this passage is doing is describing the passing away of the current order. When God makes everything new (21:5), the old will be no more. The way the world works today will pass away. This might cause you to be uncomfortable, especially if you like how the world works!

- What about God making *everything* new is not necessarily appealing to you? What do you love about life that you do not want to change?

The truth is that this promise from Scripture that God will restore all things ought to bring nothing but hope and joy. This life, even when we dwell only on the good, is but a shadow of what it was intended to be. The greatest joys we feel in this life are but a taste of the ultimate joy we will feel when we are in God's presence. Beyond this, we must never get too comfortable with how the world works, because the world as a whole is very far from a state of *shalom*. The injustices of the world, the sufferings of those we know and don't know, must make us uncomfortable. *We must so identify with those who are persecuted and disenfranchised and poor and sick that we long with them for the current order to pass away.*

- What injustices can you identify in this local area? Who might be longing for God to make all things new, and why do you think they feel this way?

- What injustices and challenges are people dealing with around the world? How might we make an impact on these situations?

It is crucial for all followers of Christ around the world to see themselves as not only God's children, and not only his servants, but also his partners. God is at work in the world, saving and restoring people and also making wrongs right. He is at work to reverse the effects of sin, to love and save and redeem the whole world. And he does not want his people to huddle up and shut out the world; rather he wants us to engage it, to love it, to make an impact on it! We are called to partner with him in what he is already doing to bring his Kingdom, his reign, to the world.

- How could this small group help to accomplish this? How could *we* partner with God to make an impact in our neighborhoods and around the world? Be specific!
- How could each of you, individually, partner with God to impact those in your lives or places of work or neighborhoods or social circles?

As we work together and partner with God to help bring his Kingdom to earth, we stay rooted in the world and do not disconnect from it. As we do that, we can keep this ginormous passage in our hearts, knowing that God has promised to make everything new! He has promised we will see him face to face, walking and talking with him in perfect peace. He has promised that when he makes everything new, there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. And he has promised that we who partnered with him on earth will reign with him forever and ever! Keep these promises in your heart as you serve him and partner with him this week, and may they inspire you to serve him and share him!

Pray together:

-For each other, about whatever is on your hearts

-For wisdom in knowing how to partner with God to bring his *shalom* and his Kingdom to your world

-For the strength to keep this passage and its promises in your mind and heart, so it can inspire your partnership with God and your witness to others

## **Ginormous** **Week 8**

We are in the last week of our series "Ginormous" where we're looking at some of the most important, vital, huge, and essential passages from the Bible. The truth is, there are passages from the Bible we

should all know, whether we've been trying to follow Jesus all our lives or if we're just getting started. This week we'll be looking at a passage everyone who is a part of a church needs to know.

There's something about human nature that causes us to divide ourselves from each other. We see it all the time. Even a superficial look throughout history shows the propensity people have to create divisions, to separate one group of people from another. Whether it's because of race, religion, nationality, or socioeconomic class, dividing lines are drawn over and over again. Take a peek at any high school cafeteria and you'll see the same phenomenon at work.

[Q] What are examples of divisions between people throughout history?

Yet, this inclination to create divisions isn't some relic of the past which we have gratefully advanced beyond. It's something alive and well in our present and it's something that's potentially alive and well here at CCC.

The early church certainly wasn't immune to these divisions. The division which was most prevalent in the early church was between Jewish people and non-Jewish people, known as Gentiles. Continuously the early church had to fight against and understand how this dividing line was at work, because the separation between Jew and Gentile was an ever-present threat to splinter the church.

[Q] Why do you think it mattered that the early church was unified?

Both sides had their reasons to dislike the other. Jews looked at Gentiles and saw people who were inferior, below them in virtually every way. Unlike Jewish people, the Gentiles were not the chosen people of God. They were unclean, spiritually speaking. They were ignorant of God and instead of trying to know God, they were content to be far from him. They were so unclean that restrictions were made to ensure the Gentile's "uncleanness" didn't spread to the Jewish people.

If a Jewish person touched a Gentile, their uncleanness would pass onto the Jew. If they shared a meal with a Gentile, the Jewish person was considered unclean. In order for a Jewish person to be set right again, they would be required to go through ceremonial washings so they could once more be clean.

It's almost as if the Gentiles were harboring some vile disease which was fatal to the touch. And so Jewish people took these restrictions very seriously. They donned these laws the ways someone might wear a hazmat suit during an outbreak of the plague. And if you were unlucky or unwise enough to actually come in contact with a contaminated person, you had to go through a lengthy (and sometimes costly) procedure to decontaminate yourself.

And as a physical sign that the Jewish people were different from the rest of the world and that they alone were the chosen people of God was circumcision. It was more than just a physical act to them, but it represented, in very deep ways, belonging to God. These unclean Gentiles weren't given the sign of

circumcision to mark them as belonging to God, but instead seemed willing to worship any god that came along. To the Jews, Gentiles were atheists because they refused to worship God alone.

As if that wasn't enough (and trust me, it was), the Jewish people had been conquered over and over by Gentile nations. During the time of Jesus and the forming of the early church, the Roman Empire, which was the poster child for Gentile nations, held the Jewish people under its thumb. Jewish people in the ancient world had their list of reasons why they didn't associate with Gentiles.

[Q] If you were a Jewish person from the first century, why do you think you would want to be separated and divide from other people?

The Gentiles didn't like Jewish people all that much either. Jewish people were arrogant enough to not only claim there was only one God (a preposterous notion to ancient Greeks and Romans), but they went so far as to suggest anyone who didn't worship their God lacked true religion. As far as the Gentiles were concerned, Jewish people were atheists because they refused to believe in the Greek and Roman Pantheon or even acknowledge any other gods than their own.

Jewish people isolated themselves into closed communities that were defined by strange beliefs and even stranger practices. The Jewish people imposed dietary restrictions on themselves and avoided some of the foods Gentiles considered staples in their diet. Even worse, Jewish people mutilated themselves in one of the most unthinkable ways with the act of circumcision. This alone was enough to make the Gentiles uncomfortable being around Jews.

These Jewish people didn't even know when they were conquered. Even though the Roman's were in charge and had all the power, these Jewish people demanded special treatment and were always threatening to revolt if they weren't treated the way they liked. Besides, its hard to like and associate with people who call you unclean and who wont eat a meal with you.

The Gentiles had their own list of reasons to dislike the Jews.

[Q] If you were a Gentile in the first century, why do you think you would want division between yourself and Jews?

These divisions, which were fundamental to the culture, were alive and well in the early church. Can you even imagine what a church gathering might have looked like in the first century? Jews and Gentiles sitting next to each other, sharing meals and singing together, learning about God side by side.

You can almost picture the Jewish people looking at each other, maybe rolling their eyes, thinking, "There goes our faith, straight to the dogs." You can almost picture the Gentiles exchanging glances, maybe with a sneer, thinking, "These arrogant jerks, looking down on us as if we'd want to be a part of anything Jewish, like we're asking for favors." There's a clear line between one group and the other.

It's into this setting we come across our final ginormous passage. Paul, a leader of the early church, spent most of his life trying to create healthy communities of people who were able to know and worship God through God's one and only son, Jesus Christ. Since the sort of community Jesus initiated was something brand new, Paul constantly had to instruct people on what it meant to be a part of God's church. This means teaching people about division and unity. We read in the book of Ephesians:

*Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men)— remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.*

*For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Ephesians 2: 11-18*

Paul wants to remind Gentile Christians that they were once far away from God. They used to be foreigners, aliens, and without hope. And then those two beautiful words,

*"But now . . ."*

But now, Paul wants to make sure Gentiles know, all that is gone. But now, all that is in the past and you are brought near to God. You used to be . . . but now.

[Q] What do those two little words "but now" mean to you and your life?

And Paul wants to remind Jewish Christians that the things they used as a reason to judge Gentiles, the same criteria they used to hold up as reasons why the Gentiles were far from God, are all gone. God wants Gentiles to belong to him just as much as he wants Jewish people to belong to him. The things that made Jews unique and the reasons they used to look down on Gentiles have all been eliminated.

What had the ability to create unity among Jews and Gentiles? What had the power to break down the walls that existed between these two diverse groups of people? What was able to create unity where there was once only animosity?

The blood of Jesus, the sacrifice of God.

Jesus broke down the barrier between them. He broke down the hostility and the regulations and the animosity, so these two groups of people could be made into something new and united.

[Q] In what ways was the unity Jesus was creating something brand new?

Notice the phrasing used in this ginormous passage out of Ephesians. When we read Jesus has broken down the barrier and the wall between Jews and Gentiles, this isn't just a metaphor. In the Jewish temple, there was a wall that separated the main area of the temple from the outer courts. The main area of the temple was limited to Jewish people alone (Jewish males actually, Jewish women were not allowed into the main area). The outer court of the temple was known as "the court of the Gentiles" because it separated Gentiles from the rest of the temple by a stone wall. Historians tell us that on the wall was an inscription that read:

"No one of another nation to enter within the fence and enclosure round the temple. And whoever is caught will have himself to blame that his death ensues."

This is no idle threat. Paul himself, who is writing this letter, was arrested because he was accused of bringing a Gentile past the wall into the main part of the temple. This arrest eventually led to Paul's death.

But God says no more. No more insiders and outsiders. No more second hand citizens. No more looking down at each other. No more dividing walls. All the hostility and anger and separation is over. It was all put to death along with Jesus.

Paul is writing to say that no longer can Jewish people think that they alone can come to God. What Jesus did was to show that the only way to come to God was through him and the division and superiority the Jewish people felt over the Gentiles needed to be done away with. The way to come to God was now the same for Jews and Gentiles. The dividing wall, which used to separate the Jews and Gentiles, was destroyed.

As a familiar saying puts it, the ground at the foot of the cross is level. We all have the same access to come near God. No one starts ahead. No one starts higher. No one starts superior. No one is better. At the foot of the cross, we are all even. The sacrifice of Jesus, the only thing which can bring us near God, makes us all even.

We are all in the same boat and both the Gentiles and the Jews were brought close to God. And when they were brought near to God, they were brought near to each other. Their differences were overcome by Jesus.

This was a new thing being created. Jesus was forming something brand new from this diverse group of people. But in order for that to take place, they needed to get rid of their disunity.

I would bet that most of us know what its like to have disunity in our lives. And when there's disunity, it hurts. When we have disunity in one area of our lives, it messes up almost every other area as well.

Notice one little word at the end of our passage for today, the word “access.” Jesus died so that we would have access to God. This portion of the Bible was originally written in Greek, and the word “access” in the passage is the Greek word “*prosagogeus*.” This word gives a very rich meaning to what the sort of access Jesus offers us looks like.

Prosagogeus is the word used for a person who worked at the royal court for a King. If you were visiting the king in order to ask for his help or to petition him for justice or to have him act as a judge in a court case, you would first come face to face with the prosagogeus. And the role of the prosagogeus was to introduce people to the king. Before you walked into the king’s royal presence, the prosagogeus would announce your name.

Jesus is our prosagogeus, the one who introduces us to the King, who presents us to God.

When we’re being introduced to the King and when your focus is on the King, there’s no time, energy, or attention left to judge and condemn and be divided from the other people who are also being introduced to the King. We are not called to fight or focus on the divisions, but to put our focus on God our King.

[Q] What is your reaction to comparing Jesus with someone who introduces people before the king? How does this change or effect your understanding of access to God?

What this all comes down to is unity. The Jews and Gentiles both had a list of reasons why the other wasn’t a part of *their* community, why they could never be a part of *their* community. But God wants them to know, and he wants us to know, that we are called into his church and his family.

This isn’t the only place where Paul writes to emphasize the call to unity.

In the book of Galatians:

*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*  
*Galatians 3:29*

And in the book of Colossians:

*. . . put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.*  
*Colossians 3:10-11*

Paul isn’t naive enough to think that people are literally no longer men or women or slave or free or Greek or Jew. What Paul is saying is that those divisions are nothing compared to the amazing unity we have in Jesus.

Think of the divisions we create in our world, even among Christians. Republican and Democrat, rich and poor, black or white, white collar and blue collar, popular and unpopular, successful and unsuccessful, American and non-American, strong and weak, educated and uneducated . . . all of the divisions and walls we build. Jesus breaks them down.

**Jesus is more of a unifying force than any dividing force.**

[Q] In what ways is Jesus more unifying than any force that seeks to divide?

Look around you any Sunday morning at CCC. Literally, look around you. There are people from different backgrounds, with different economic situations, with different education levels. Why in the world would such a diverse group of people meet together in an office park behind White Marsh Mall? Because the unity we have in Jesus is greater than all the other things that act as dividing forces. All the dividing walls we are tempted to build are nothing compared to the unity we have in Jesus.

[Q] And I think the question this raises for us is what are we doing to preserve and fight for unity here at CCC? If we are going to take seriously that God has broken down the barriers between people and that we are called to find our unity in Jesus, what does that mean for us here at CCC?

We can't control unity, understand, but we can control ourselves. In the bible we are told:

*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*

*Romans 12:18*

[Q] What about you? Are you fighting for unity? Or do you allow walls to be built between yourself and others?