



**[CRAP]
HAPPENS**



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INTRODUCTION

Why, God?

A faithful Christian donates part of his liver to his dying brother, but then he dies in recovery leaving behind a wife and three children—ages 7, 5 and 3. Why, God? A baby with a deadly form of dwarfism dies 15 minutes after she is born. Why, God? A 20 year old who has the functionality of a toddler has seizures leaving her worse off than before, and the insurance has run out. Why, God? Why does this crap happen?

Who hasn't asked a question like this? Even if our situations are not as tragic as these, things happen every day that cause us to ask questions.

- Why did I have a car accident? If I had prayed more, could I have avoided it? Or did God ordain it?
- Why are we in bankruptcy? Do we have less faith than other people who seem to be succeeding?
- Why can't I just be happy? Did I do something to deserve this depression?

Let's not forget about the global issues that only seem to be getting worse. War, fear of terrorism, cruel actions by leaders and corporate scandals. Why, why, why, why?

Where can we ask these types of questions? Too often the church has said asking them at all reveals a lack of faith. Others have been told God is in control and “everything happens for a reason.” This makes it difficult to have honest dialogue about our pain, questions, frustrations, and even anger. The questions and pain end up being forced below the surface, ignored and unanswered. The church should be the safest environment to deal with these questions, yet, many times this is not the case.

Over the years, a focal point of Woodland Hills has been our perspective on why “crap” happens. We’ve found this perspective can bring healing because it provides an understanding that is biblical and simply makes sense. As we work through this series, we’ll use six different situations to delve into some of the “crap” we encounter in life.

Our hope and prayer is that you are able to be honest with what you think and feel each week. Even if you have previously heard some of the teachings, we invite you to go deeper and sit with the activities and writings. Listen to your heart and pay attention to your feelings. We will be providing a strong theological foundation for thinking about these issues, but don’t stop there. Allow the Spirit to speak, heal, and transform you.

To help with this, we’ve provided some unique sections in this book. Each week includes an email dialogue between a pastor and someone in his church. While the emails are fictional, they are not exaggerated. We’ve had many interactions and times of prayer with people dealing with issues similar to those in the emails. After each email, you will find a page to write down your own thoughts and feelings. This will work best if you set aside a few minutes and find a quiet place away from the chaos of life to read and reflect.

We’ve also provided pages for sermon notes, some small group dialogue questions, and a list of key points and scriptures for each week.

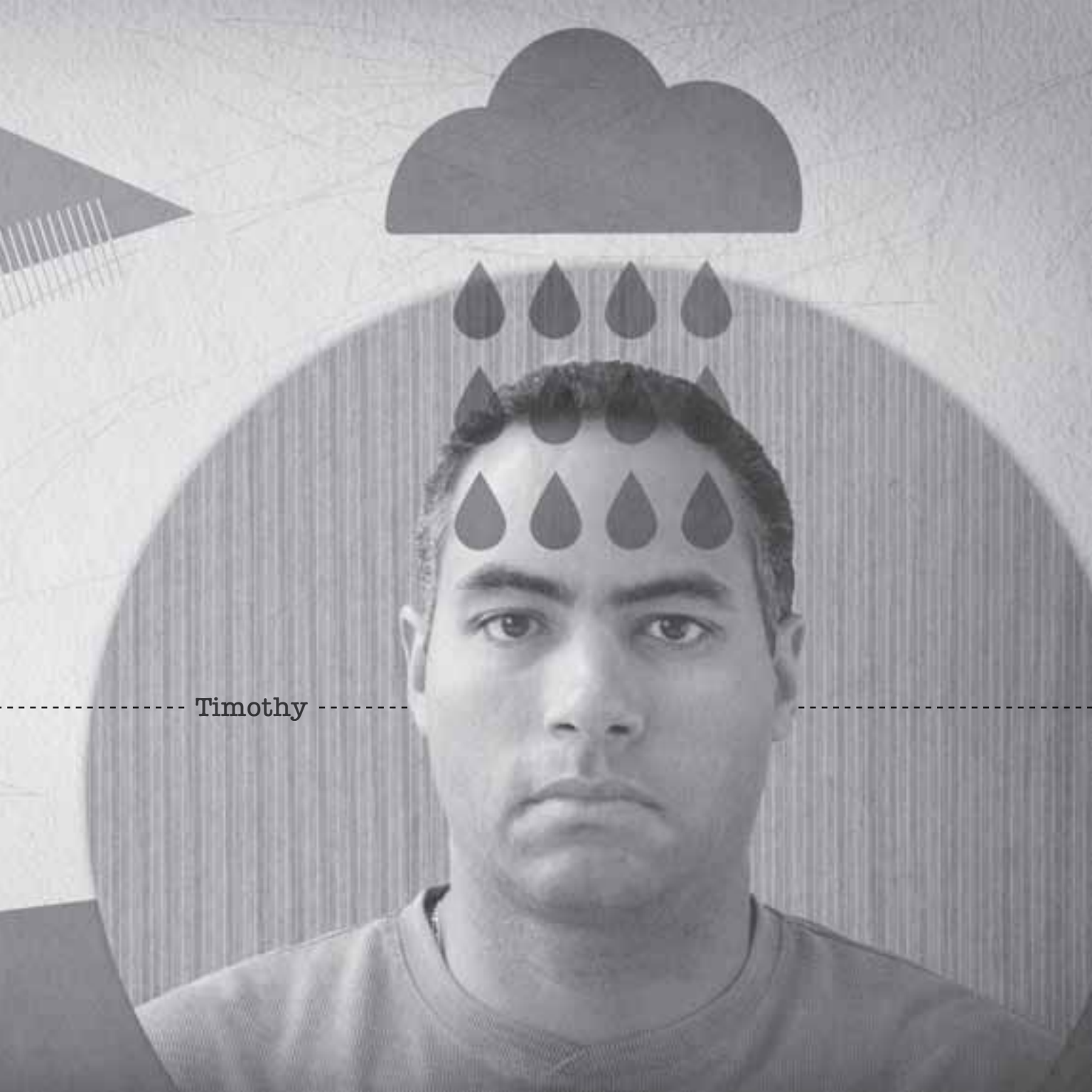
One other thing: If you want to go deeper and do some additional reading on this topic, we recommend the following books, which can be purchased at the Woodland Hills Resource Center.

- Letters from a Skeptic
- Is God to Blame?
- God at War
- Satan and the Problem of Evil

[SUFFERING] HAPPENS

Why doesn't
God just wipe
out evil and
suffering?





Timothy

From: Timothy
To: Pastor Jim
Subject: Is God Not Paying Attention?

Hi Pastor Jim – I’ve been having a difficult time lately and wanted to ask you a few questions.

I’ve stopped watching the news. It just got to be too much. Kids shot simply for wearing the wrong color shirt in the wrong neighborhood. The dirty little secrets of leaders we once trusted put on display for all to see. A teenage boy so fed up with life, lies, and bullies that he takes the lives of his classmates and finally his own. A little boy kidnapped from the safety of his front yard. A wife grieves over the loss of her husband and son to a drunk driver. Drug lords wage gruesome battles over territory without a care for who gets in the way. Terrorists plot death and destruction using methods too horrible to think about. Wars leave thousands homeless, orphaned, starving, and desperate. Atrocities and unspeakable evils are committed daily in the name of politics, hunger, power, and religion.

I couldn’t handle it anymore. I shut it off, but that didn’t stop it from happening. Despite my turning off the television and avoiding news sites, the horror goes on around the world, in my own city, and in my own home. Yes, even here, with the television safely turned off, I’m not immune. Empty liquor bottles litter our kitchen. No matter what I do, no matter how hard I plead or threaten, she won’t stop. She says she can’t stop.

But God could put a stop to it. God could save the little girl about to be raped and sold into slavery. God could defuse the bomb about to go off. God could change the heart of the warlord kidnapping boys and girls from their huts in the night. God could stop my wife from drinking and tearing our family apart.

But God doesn’t. Where is he? Why isn’t he doing anything to stop it? If God loves us like he says, why is he letting this happen? I’ve heard it said God only wants what’s best for us, but if this is the “best” God can do, I want my money back. I want it all back.

Confused and angry,

Timothy

Let's Get Honest

1. Can you relate to what Timothy expressed on the previous page?
2. What are your own feelings and questions about evil and suffering in the world?
3. What thoughts have you had about God's role in relationship to this evil?
4. As you reflect on Timothy's thoughts and the evil in the world, listen to your heart. What do you sense going on?

*If this is the "best" God can do,
I want my money back.*

From: Pastor Jim
To: Timothy
Subject: RE: Is God Not Paying Attention?

Hey Timothy! First off, I want to say I'm sorry to hear you and your family are going through such a difficult time. Thank you for your honest thoughts and your willingness to share them with me. I am honored that you would trust me with what you feel. And while I will give you some things to think about below, I want to say that these answers are just a starting point. It's important to have right thinking about God and evil, but it's equally important for you to put your feelings and disappointments on the table. God wants to bring healing to you even in the midst of the evil that surrounds you and your family. You've taken a good first step with your honesty. For many, unforgiveness and bitterness fester in deep wounds of disappointment. I don't want that for you.

I'll come back to that, but for now, let me respond to your last two paragraphs where you address your thoughts about God. Let me know if I understand your frustration correctly. It seems you want to know why God doesn't stop evil, especially in the light of the truth that God is love. You want to know why a loving God would allow evil things to happen, especially to innocent people. Does that sound about right?

If so, you're asking an age-old question whose answer some have spent their entire lives in search of. It's a question I've wondered myself many times. Here are some things I've found helpful to remember. First, God is love. Love, by nature, allows a person the freedom to choose good or evil. If God intervened and took away the ability for one to choose evil, then by definition, he takes away the choice of love. God created us this way because the alternative would be to have a world full of robots that cannot make a choice to love. They would only be able to do what God programmed them to do, and that works against the very nature of God. God created us with a choice between love and evil. His desire is that we choose love, but he will not force us to make that choice.

This freedom to choose is irrevocable. God cannot give us freedom to choose and then take it away when we're about to make a choice he doesn't agree with. It's our freedom to choose love and our freedom to choose evil. Sadly, your wife chose to drink, and you are caught up in it.

But your wife is not doing this to hurt you and your family. The evil choices we make are always part of a larger story. Most likely, she doesn't understand how her choices affects those she loves. I'm sure if someone were to really get inside of her head and help her understand what's going on in her life, she would see there is much that lies behind her choices. She has been hurt by others in the past and is using alcohol as a way to medicate the pain. Yes, she is choosing evil, but there is also a back-story to her life

[SUFFERING] HAPPENS

where evil has been at play. It is a painful back-story that, I assure you, God weeps over. He loves your wife as his beloved child, and to see her making such choices based on what has happened in her past breaks his heart. This is the case for every evil choice we make in our lives.

When you put together our freedom to choose and personal histories often filled with pain and rejection, it's clear the Devil has a lot of ready material with which to work. Many people don't give much credit to the fact that there is a Devil and a legion of his followers called demons. The Bible calls Satan "the father of lies." Demons use lies to ensnare and trap people. Lies that tell us, "You cannot trust God's love and His instructions to you. You're on your own. Liquor is better medication than God's love and forgiveness." These lies are endless, and they create other lies which become patterns of evil that fill our world. God, in his love, longs for his creation to know the difference between truth and lies, but the lies have become so abundant that they often look normal and sometimes even good.

I encourage you to trust God with your heart and continue to be honest with yourself and others. God isn't afraid of your doubts or questions—rather, he encourages you to bring them to him in prayer. It is clear that you have been exposed to some lies about God, which could fester and drive a deep wedge of mistrust between you and God. Much more could be said about God and His relationship to evil, and you might have more questions as a result of my response. That's great. Let's keep talking—would you have time this week to meet?

Jim



Your Questions

After reading Pastor Jim's response, what stood out to you and why?
What answers do you find helpful? What additional questions do you have?

KEY POINTS AND SCRIPTURES

1. Love requires that a person has the freedom to choose between love and evil.
2. Evil is based on lies.
3. There is a being named Satan who is called the Father of lies.
4. Satan propagates entire systems of lies that become so abundant, they seem normal.

Key Scriptures: Psalm 6:2-7, John 16:33, Romans 8:35-39, Ephesians 6:10-17, I Peter 5:7-10

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What stood out to you from the readings or sermon?
2. How have you experienced frustration with the evil that you have seen or experienced?
3. Have you viewed God as responsible for this evil since he did not stop it?
4. What questions do you have for God related to evil?
5. Why does love require the freedom to choose between love and evil?
6. Since the Devil is behind evil, does that change the way you think about evil?
7. What can we as a group do differently to combat the evil that surrounds us?

[INSIGNIFICANCE] HAPPENS

Is God really
involved in
my life?





----- Janet -----

From: Janet
To: Pastor Jim
Subject: Does God really care about me?

Hi Pastor Jim,

I'm fairly new to your congregation, but I've been struggling lately with some things and thought maybe you could help.

I moved here last year with dreams of finding a great job, new friends, and the "good life." Instead, I've got a tiny apartment I can barely afford in which I sit alone most nights. I wake up every day to a job I hate, and I come home to microwaved meals and a few hours of mind-numbing television before bed. Each morning, I walk into a world that doesn't know me and doesn't care to. I pass people on the street who don't make eye-contact, who refuse to acknowledge my existence. I'm surrounded by people and yet utterly alone. I feel so lonely sometimes, it physically hurts. A tightness in my chest squeezes any trace of joy and life out of me.

It's a big city in an even bigger world in an even bigger universe, and it just doesn't seem like I matter. I mean, how could I? I remember lying in my backyard as a kid and gazing up at the stars. They twinkled so brightly in the vast darkness. If I squinted and looked really hard, I could sometimes glimpse the dim, distant stars that lay behind the brighter ones. It was all so big. With so many people, creatures, planets, and stars, a single individual like me who doesn't have anything special to offer couldn't be anything but insignificant! If God is up there, if he really is looking down on the world and all that, why would he care about me? I've obviously got nothing to offer, or I'd have known it long ago. Which makes me wonder if he's even there at all, at least in the way we say he is. What if the world really is a meaningless jumble of particles all smashed together by some giant explosion millions of years ago? Then I really don't have any importance at all. I'm just another highly-evolved amoeba rambling through life on my way to death.

Janet

Let's Get Honest

1. How do you relate to what Janet expressed on the previous page?
2. What are your own thoughts and questions about how you experience feelings of insignificance?
3. What questions do you have about God's actual involvement in your life? Do you truly experience him? Or do you simply go through life assuming that he is involved because that is the right answer?
4. As you reflect on Janet's thoughts and how she experiences insignificance, listen to your heart. What do you sense going on?

*If God is up there...
why would he care about me?*

From: Pastor Jim
To: Janet
Subject: RE: Does God really care about me?

Before I respond to the rest of your email Janet, I want you to know that you are not alone in wondering this. It's a question many people ask. I know I have, and I've found that many times religious conversations don't allow us to be honest like this. Too often, we go through the motions—doing the right things, saying the right words—instead of truly wrestling with what's going on inside us.

One of the lies that Satan likes to spread is that we are too small to be of any significance to God. But the truth is that small doesn't mean less significant. Jupiter is hundreds of times larger than Earth, but God did not make it more special. He sent his son to Earth, after all. The grey whale is the largest animal in the world, but is it more significant because it is bigger? Your blood vessels are small, but they are essential to your being alive.

The problem is that, in this world, lies of Satan rule. These lies tell us that some things, and some people, are more significant while the rest are left to fight over the scraps of significance dropped off the table. You mention the hope for the "good life," and while there is nothing wrong with having dreams, many people are trapped by Satan's definition of what the "good life" really is. This is one of the main lies facing our culture. It can make it seem as though those who are able to find worldly success, money, and fame are significant while those who don't, well, just don't measure up.

You even find this lie in the church. You addressed me as Pastor Jim in your email, and in other traditions, people use the title Reverend or even Father. But are those in my position a little more significant, somehow more holy or righteous, than those who are simply a part of the church? I'm just Jim, a man with as much significance, or lack thereof, as anyone else on this planet.

The world teaches us that significance is based on outward success. What kind of job do you have? What's going on in your family? What's your income? Do you have the right friends? It's the lie that significance is found by comparing and contrasting ourselves with others. When we do this, we become trapped in a never-ending cycle of judgment. We judge ourselves, and we judge others. We even judge God when we make him into something that is the opposite of what he is.

Scripture reveals that Jesus is the complete expression of who God is, and if we look at his life when he walked this earth, we clearly see what God finds significant. First, he went to specific locations and towns and met with specific individuals. God so loved the world, that is true, but he loved the world by entering the lives of specific, individual people. He didn't come as a cosmic guru who tried to change the entire world from a distance. He revealed love by meeting people in very ordinary, often hidden ways.

[INSIGNIFICANCE] HAPPENS

Second, Jesus met with those labeled as “insignificant” in his day: The outcasts, the failures, the jobless, and even the sinful. The socially significant people didn’t understand this about Jesus and criticized him for it. Even the disciples, who were his closest friends, often had trouble understanding His love for those pushed aside by society. In one story, the children of a village were gathered around him, yet the disciples tried to disperse them, thinking Jesus was far too important to be bothered by little kids. The passage reads: “Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them. Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’” (Matthew 19:13-14). The disciples wanted Jesus to be the “right” kind of leader, and in their culture, “true” leaders did not see children as worthy of time or energy. But Jesus saw children as highly valued and even told his followers to have the simple, trusting, and loving attitude that children possess.

In what ways are you like the children in this story? Are you judging yourself according to the standards of this world or do you see yourself as a prized child of God? Do you feel you need to impress God and the world with great accomplishments and by achieving “the good life” in order to have value and worth, or are you able to accept the fact that God loves you and gives you incredible worth just as you are? It’s impossible to avoid feelings of insignificance when we participate in this world. Judgment surrounds us. However, we can begin to accept the truth that we are significant in God’s eyes, whose opinion far outweighs the world’s. The way we combat the lies of Satan is with the truth of God, and as this truth becomes more and more a part of who we are, the power of the lies diminishes. I have attached a document which includes some key Biblical truths regarding God’s view of you (see page 66). Take five minutes each day this week and read through them, asking the Holy Spirit to make them come alive in your mind and heart.

Let me know how it goes—I’ll be praying for you!

Jim



Your Questions

After reading Pastor Jim's response, what stood out to you and why?
What answers do you find helpful? What additional questions do you have?

KEY POINTS AND SCRIPTURES

1. The world's way of doing life is based on a lie of judgment.
2. If we believe these lies, then we will be trapped in judgment and feelings of insignificance.
3. The way to combat the lies is with God's truth.

Key Scriptures: Psalm 8:3-5, Ephesians 1:3-8, I Peter 2:9-10, Ephesians 2:4-7, Genesis 1:26-27

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What stood out to you from the readings or sermon?
2. In what ways do you experience feelings of insignificance?
3. In what ways do you see people stuck in the pattern of insignificance and judgment?
4. What are some ways that we can battle against feelings of insignificance?
5. Which of the “I am” statements do you find the most meaningful? Why? (See page 66.)

[UNANSWERED PRAYER] HAPPENS

Why doesn't
prayer work?





Sara

From: Sara
To: Pastor Jim
Subject: God and Our Prayers

Pastor Jim,

You know some of the hardships our family's been going through, and we appreciate all you and the church have done for us. I'm feeling extremely discouraged and emotionally and physically exhausted, and I feel I've got a million questions in my head with no answers.

I remember the day we brought Jeremy home. It was joyful and bewildering and terrifying all at the same time. I must have checked on him twenty times during that first night. Maybe I'm biased, but I don't think there's a cuter kid on the planet. You've seen his smile—it lights up the room! His imagination and brilliance astound me, and his energy and enthusiasm for life have always kept us on our toes.

It's not fair! He's so young, so full of life and promise. How could this be happening to him? We've been praying for months and months, but it doesn't seem to do any good. Jeremy's only getting sicker. When the doctor told us yesterday the tumor had grown, all I could do was stare at him. How is it possible? We've taken our boy to countless doctors, prayer groups, healing services, and therapists, and none of it has made a difference! Our boy is slipping away before our eyes, and there's nothing we can do about it—It's not fair! I love him so much, and the thought of losing him rips the heart right out of my chest. The other day, after dropping him off at my mom's, I had to stop the car because I was crying so hard I couldn't breathe. Our marriage is falling apart as frustrations build up, and our patience with one another grows thin. I don't know how long I can keep living like this.

Why is God not doing anything to help? We've been on our knees every day since the diagnosis, pleading with him to heal Jeremy. Our friends and family have prayed, and still, it does no good. Can't he hear us? Did we do something wrong? Is this some kind of cruel punishment for something we did? If that's the case, then God should take my life. He can throw me into whatever hell he wants, but he shouldn't take Jeremy. It is not fair.

Is God even listening?

Sara

Let's Get Honest

1. How do you relate to what Sara expressed on the previous page?
2. Can you express your own thoughts and questions about how you've experienced prayer and answers to petitions that you have offered to God?
3. What questions do you have about how God answers prayer?
4. As you reflect on Sara's thoughts and how she experiences prayer, listen to your heart. What do you sense going on?

Why is God not doing anything to help?

From: Pastor Jim
To: Sara
Subject: RE: God and Our Prayers

Sara, my heart goes out to you and Rob. From Jeremy's first diagnosis, I've been praying for him and for your whole family. There are times when I feel hopeless and angry at God for not answering our prayers, even though I have never felt the pain and anguish of seeing my child suffer as Jeremy suffers.

I can only imagine the turmoil and sense of helplessness you must feel, and I understand your frustrations as you experience what feels like an absence of God's response to your prayers. You have poured your heart out to God in prayer, but what do you do when it seems prayer just isn't working?

First, let me say that I absolutely believe praying for Jeremy makes a significant difference in what comes to pass. God's influence in the world increases when we align our wills with His through prayer. Sickness and death are not a part of his intentions for us. But prayer is not magical. Asking for God's healing doesn't guarantee that Jeremy will be healed, and the reason is not because it's God's will for him to be sick. Contrary to much that has been taught in the church, God doesn't have some master plan choosing who lives and who dies. His will is only a part of what impacts life here on earth. There are many things that affect what comes to pass, including the free choices of humans and of spirit agents (e.g. angels, demons).

Many assume that if prayer makes any difference it must make all the difference and thus guarantee a particular outcome. This is why most Christians assume that God's will is the only variable affecting whether a person's prayer is "answered" (that is, they "get" what they prayed for). If God wills what you pray for, in this view, God makes it happen. If he doesn't will it, then it won't happen.

If we understand there are many variables influencing Jeremy's physical state, then we see that prayer is a crucial part of the whole. We live in a war zone between love and evil, and there are many factors affecting the potency of prayer. Consider things like the faith and number of people who are praying, the persistence of those praying, and the kind of relationship that those praying have with God. There is much more to prayer than just asking God for something because we want it. In addition there are angels and demons who are free agents, warring for and against what God desires. We must consider our experience of God's response to prayer within the larger picture of the war that is going on.

Things really do hang in the balance on whether or not we pray! Prayer is our greatest asset in the spiritual warzone. The Bible says, "If my people...will humble themselves and pray...then I will hear from heaven...and will heal their land" (2 Chron. 7:14). Our prayers make a difference because they influence what happens here on Earth.

[UNANSWERED PRAYER] HAPPENS

However, prayer doesn't automatically override the multitude of variables that affect what comes to pass, but prayer is a powerful variable. We can take it on faith that prayer is "powerful and effective" (James 5:16). In some situations, variables are such that the increased divine influence is able to bring about what we pray for, in others not. Yet, if what we pray for is in line with God's character and will, we can trust that things would have been worse had we not prayed.

I know things are undeniably painful right now and beginning to think about prayer in a different light might be difficult while you are in the midst of the pain. But let me give you this encouragement: Jesus came in the midst of the pain of this world, walking amongst the worst of sin, death, and destruction. He did not avoid the works of the enemy. Instead, he entered into our mess and prayed from within the evil that surrounded him.

One of the names of Jesus is Immanuel, which means "God with us." God is with you now. He knows exactly what it's like to watch your son suffer because his son also suffered in this world. I encourage you to continue to pray for Jeremy's healing. Ask others to continue to pray even though you haven't seen your son healed. I will continue to pray as well.

Pray that Jesus will reveal to you how he is sitting with you in the midst of the pain, in the midst of the tears, disappointment, and your marital strife. Ask him for eyes to see him and how he is crying with you and even praying for you, Rob, and Jeremy right now. Jesus prayed for the same thing before he was to suffer. If Jesus felt such emotions, don't be afraid as you feel them yourself. That's where Jesus is most present. We don't often think this way, but I know it's true.

Please continue to let us know how we can help you and your family and how we can be praying for you all.

Jim



Your Questions

After reading Pastor Jim's response, what stood out to you and why?
What answers do you find helpful? What additional questions do you have?

KEY POINTS AND SCRIPTURES

1. Prayer is not a magic wand to get what we want.
2. There are many factors that influence the outcomes we experience in life.
3. We are caught in the midst of a war between God's love and Satan's evil.
4. The outcome of this war is influenced by our prayers, even when we don't see the results we want.

Key Scriptures: Psalm 13:1-3, James 5:16, James 1:5-8, Mark 11:25-26, Luke 18:1-8

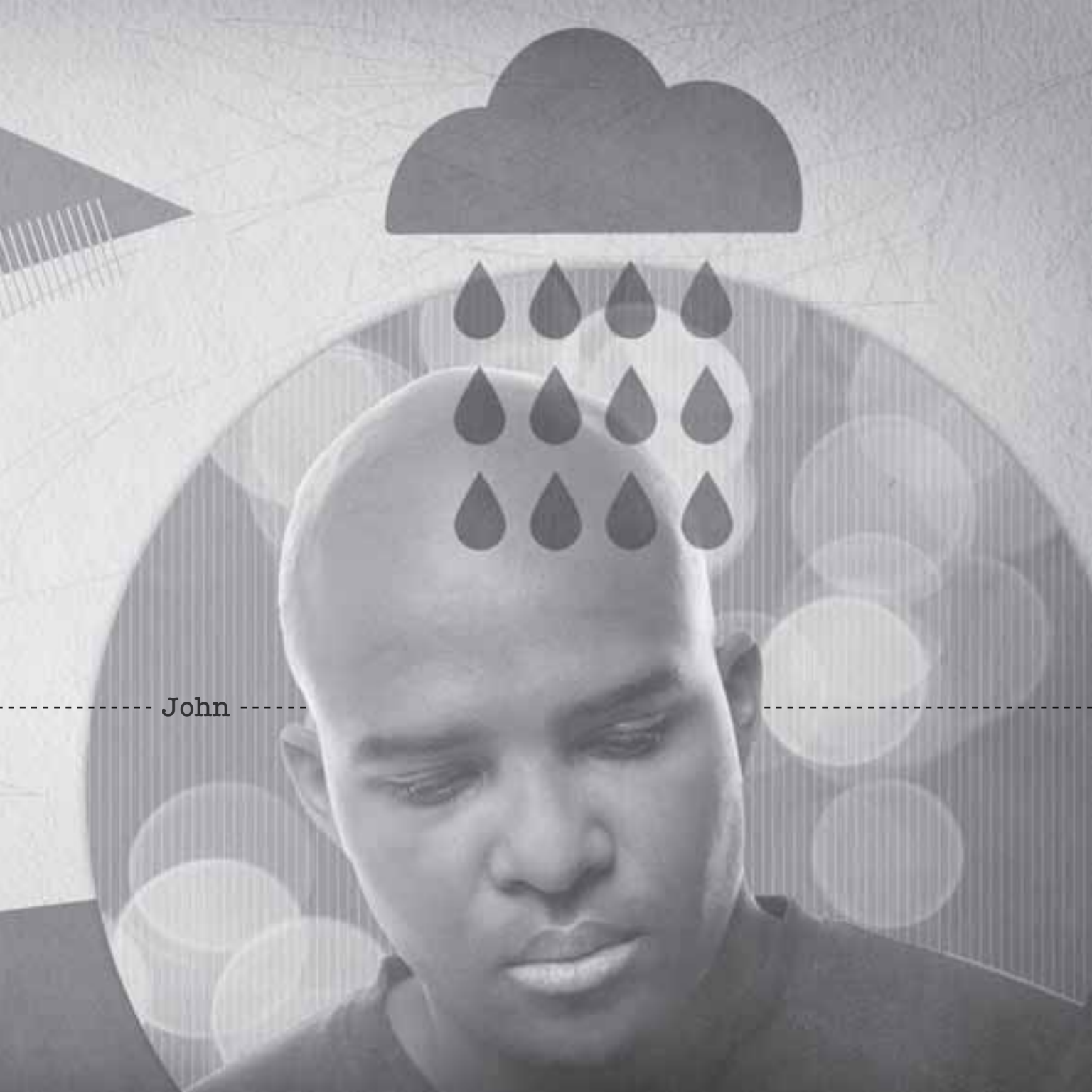
SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What stood out to you from the readings or sermon?
2. How can prayer be viewed as a magical act to get something from God?
3. What does it mean to say we live in the midst of a war zone?
4. What are some of the factors that impact the outcomes for which we pray?
Is this different from your previous thoughts on prayer?
5. In what ways can we do battle for each other through prayer?

[UNFAIRNESS] HAPPENS

Why don't
good people
get blessed?





John

From: John
To: Pastor Jim
Subject: Where are my blessings?

Hey Pastor Jim,

I'm so sick of work, I'm thinking of getting some easy, mindless job so I don't have to deal with it anymore. Maybe I'll become a pastor so I can just worship God all day. Just kidding—I know how hard your job is and really do appreciate all you do :)

All the same, though, I've hated going to work lately. I've worked the same job for the last eleven years. I don't cause problems, I always get my work done on time, and it's almost always done right. I'm kind and loving to my co-workers, my reviews have always been good, and I've heard countless times from my boss, "We couldn't run this place without you." So, why is it that for the third year in a row, I've been shoved aside while some kid gets promoted over me? I've worked my butt off for this company, often putting in extra hours I know I won't get paid for and doing so without complaint. I say all the right things, do all the right things, and still, some twenty-three year-old kid with a flashy smile and a brown-nose gets promoted while I stand aside and pretend I don't mind.

But I do mind! God knows I try to do what's right. I read my Bible, I volunteer at the shelter and the nursing home, I pray for others, and I donate money to charities and church as often as I can. So why is it that I have to take the hit while some kid who lives a lifestyle full of booze, girls, and greed gets the blessing? I've worked so hard and tried to do good, and I get nothing while he gets everything! I'm a good person, so why can't I get blessed for once?

But maybe being good isn't good enough. If that's the case, then why do good things at all? If God loves me and wants to bless me and give me good things, where are they? Why does some shallow kid get the good life while I have to settle for what's in front of me? If this is my reward for being good, it's a pretty crappy reward.

Sorry to unload all that on you, but I'm just so frustrated and not sure who else to turn to.

John

Let's Get Honest

1. How do you relate to what John expressed on the previous page?
2. Can you express your own thoughts and questions about how you've experienced the fact that blessings in life seem to be unfair?
3. What questions do you have about how arbitrary and random blessings seem to be?
4. As you reflect on John's thoughts and how he is disappointed with his life situation, listen to your heart. What do you sense going on?

*I'm a good person, so why can't
I get blessed for once?*

From: Pastor Jim
To: John
Subject: RE: Where are my blessings?

Hi John – I’m glad you emailed your questions. Hopefully I can be of some help—It’s certainly a topic many people wonder about. It’s the universal question of “Why do bad things happen to good people?” It’s been asked by great thinkers throughout history and was even pondered by some of the writers of the Bible. You’re not alone in asking it. I often look around this world and ask why bad things happen as well.

Consider the little girls in China who are disowned by their parents because their government penalizes couples that have more than one child. In the Chinese culture, girls are often seen as having less value, so many are disowned and abandoned. What’s fair about this? These little girls are punished simply for being born female.

In our modern worldview, success is often equated with God’s blessings. Promotions, raises, and even fame are viewed as blessings, and in some places it’s been taught that those who really trust God should expect God to bless them in such ways. Of course, I sometimes wonder what the persecuted Christians around the world would say about this. I would bet they consider themselves blessed beyond measure by God even though they face terrible hardships and suffering.

This kind of thinking about blessings was common in the time of Jesus as well. At one point, the disciples saw a man who was born blind. They asked Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Their assumption was this: A person was diseased because someone hadn’t been good enough, which meant those who were healthy, wealthy, and whole were somehow better people. Thankfully, part of why Jesus came was to turn this point of view upside down. He taught that the poor, the mourners, and the meek were actually blessed (see Matthew 5).

Of course, I’m not saying that God doesn’t bless people with things that look like success. I’m simply saying that we can’t automatically attribute the usual marks of worldly success as blessings from God. Life on this Earth is unfair, even for God’s son. Jesus died a discredited criminal, and history tells us nearly all his closest followers were martyred. It’s far from fair that the one who walked the Earth sinless was actually killed for being good. We’re called to be followers of Jesus, and being good doesn’t always lead to success.

If we are being good so people will recognize us and think we’re successful, we’re turning goodness into a pattern of performance. There’s a huge difference between performing goodness and doing good because it’s who we are. Jesus wants us to be transformed from the inside-out so the way we live is simply who we are, not a performance. This transformation shouldn’t depend on who recognizes us or what earthly rewards come from it.

[UNFAIRNESS] HAPPENS

I've come to realize that when life doesn't work out like I wanted it to or circumstances just don't line up in a way where I come out on top, it might be because I am actually right where God wants me to be. I've seen people who've gone through financial failure ask, "What did I do wrong?" when the fact was they hadn't necessarily done anything wrong. A few years before, they had been the poster children of blessing and success. Then, without reason, nothing worked out right. Could it be that Satan, the father of lies, wants to strip us of our trust in God in the midst of our struggle?

I've seen people like yourself who have been passed over for promotions simply because they're not willing to lie, cheat, or push the boundaries of what's right and wrong. Could it be that Satan and his demons are using this opportunity to feed you all sorts of lies about you, your co-workers, and your perspective on how life is supposed to work?

What if instead of complaining about those who get the promotions you were to begin to pray for them and bless them? What if you became their servant and asked Jesus to love them through you? How would this impact your attitude? How might you be free from pent up frustrations and bitterness?

I'm not saying the situation is fair. It sounds to me like it's far from it. But that's not the point. As long as you are caught in the fairness trap—which is the way the world thinks about things—you will never be free to be the person God made you to be. When you compare yourself to everyone else, you miss God directing you to be yourself.

I hope this is helpful, John, and I'm glad you're willing to voice your questions.

Jim



Your Questions

After reading Pastor Jim's response, what stood out to you and why?
What answers do you find helpful? What additional questions do you have?

KEY POINTS AND SCRIPTURES

1. Blessings fall on the righteous and the unrighteous.
2. Not all of what might be labeled “blessings” are from God.
3. Jesus died a discredited criminal.
4. Following Jesus means we find blessings as we serve as Jesus did.

Key Scriptures: Jeremiah 12:1, Matthew 5:1-12, Ephesians 1:3, I Peter 3:9

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What stood out to you from the readings or sermon?
2. From the world's point of view, what do blessings look like?
3. In what ways does Jesus change this way of seeing God's blessings?
4. How does this definition of blessing help you deal with the unfairness you experience?

[SIN] HAPPENS

Why can't
I get over
my struggle
with sin?





Mary

From: Mary
To: Pastor Jim
Subject: Why can't I stop?

Pastor Jim,

I'm so mad at myself! I can't believe I did it again. You'd think I'd be able to stop, but it's like some kind of disease that refuses to be cured. My mouth starts talking, and before I know it, I'm spouting off gossip and rumors like a slot machine that's hit the jackpot. It all comes spilling out. Ugh!

I hadn't planned on gossiping or anything, but I was talking with a co-worker and Jeff from accounting came up. Before I could stop myself, I'd said something I shouldn't. Of course, Cheryl would walk in at that moment and overhear me. Cheryl works with Jeff, and everyone knows she likes him, so I'm sure she went right back and told him what I said. I feel like such a jerk. No, I am a jerk. I know gossip's hurtful and shouldn't be repeated, but in that moment, I can't stop myself. I'm a gossip-aholic! If I hear the slightest hint of something in someone else's conversation, I'm all ears, and if someone's willing to listen, I'll repeat it all in stunning detail.

I know it's wrong, and I hate that I do it. I've lost so many friends over the years because of secrets I've slipped or rumors I've helped to spread. And each time, I swear I'm going to stop, that I'll only speak loving truth from now on and avoid all gossip. And I'll be good for a couple of days, maybe even a week. But before long, that old love for a juicy bit of gossip slips into my mind, and I'm done for. It's like some kind of feel-good drug I'm addicted to. In some sick way, I feel better by learning the dark secrets of other's lives and spreading them around.

Oh, why can't I stop? I've prayed and prayed about it, hoping God would take away my craving for it. I want to be a loving, kind, and responsible person whom people can trust. Someone that people actually want to befriend instead of avoid out of fear and loathing. But I can't seem to do it! Why? Why won't God take away my struggle with sin?

Frustrated and angry with myself,

Mary

Let's Get Honest

1. How do you relate to what Mary expressed on the previous page?
2. Can you express your own thoughts and questions about your personal struggle with sin?
3. If you were walking in a park with Jesus right now, what would you ask him—or tell him—with how you struggle overcoming sin?
4. As you reflect on Mary's thoughts and how she is disappointed with her life situation, listen to your heart. What do you sense going on?

*Why won't God take away
my STRUGGLE with sin?*

From: Pastor Jim
To: Mary
Subject: RE: Why can't I stop?

Hi Mary,

Have you ever heard the saying “you can't teach an old dog new tricks”? Well, there's a reason for this saying. Our brains are wired in such a way that we become better at the things that we do repeatedly. In fact, our habits shape our brains so much we tend to perform these habits without even thinking. Of course, our experience tells us this is true, but there's even recent brain research confirming this.

Old habits truly die hard. Changing a habit can be quite challenging, as you've noticed with the habit of gossip. It's not that you want to do it or that you want to sin. Your brain has simply learned to gossip well.

The fact that we create habits can actually be a good thing. There are things that we do every day that we know how to do without even thinking. Grooves have been cut into our brains like a riverbed cut by flowing water. From driving a car to cooking dinner, we have these patterns that help us navigate through life. God designed our brains this way.

But there is hope for changing sin habits. Romans 12:2 says: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” The Apostle Paul told us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. I don't think he would have written this unless we have the ability to “learn new tricks.” We can, by the power of God's Spirit within us, develop new habits and break old ones.

However, this kind of change does not come magically. It's hard work! We have to develop habits that stand in contrast to those of this world and practice disciplines that reshape our brains. You've already started this. Imagine if you were to gossip and not feel bad about it. What kind of person would you be then? But you do see your problem and have confessed it. You're on the right path. Yet, some people stop at confession and expect their pastor to perform a magical prayer that changes everything. Or they go forward week after week at the end of a church service and ask the prayer teams to pray for them. These people feel guilty, but they never get to the root of the problem, and the habit of sin remains.

A better approach would be to gather a few friends with whom you can open up to about your struggles with gossip. Then take it a step further: What if you and a couple of friends began to combat gossip with a positive alternative? At our church, we have a list of statements which the Bible declares about how God sees us. (See page 66.) They are called the “I am Statements.” Pick out a few of them, memorize the



[SIN] HAPPENS

corresponding scriptures, and begin to put names of people you gossip about to those statements. For instance you might begin by praying, “Thank you God that Jeff is your creation and that he is completely and fully loved by you.” Jeff may have been a target of gossip in the past, but when you begin to see him as God’s beloved child, it makes it harder to gossip about him.

This does not mean that you won’t continue to struggle with this sin. For some, things change quickly. For others, it’s much harder. Regardless of how much time it takes, as you choose to practice an alternative to gossiping, you will see results. The new habits will become more natural, new ways of thinking will develop, and you will be shaping habits that fit God’s desires for your life.

I know you can do this, Mary! Let me know if there’s anything else I can do to help.

Jim



Your Questions

After reading Pastor Jim's response, what stood out to you and why?
What answers do you find helpful? What additional questions do you have?

KEY POINTS AND SCRIPTURES

1. Breaking old sin habits does not happen magically.
2. The enemy wants to keep us trapped in our sin patterns.
3. It takes work to develop new habits.
4. The Spirit of God empowers us to make changes and develop new practices that line up with the Kingdom of God.

Key Scriptures: Romans 7:21-25, Galatians 2:20, Romans 6:12-14, Colossians 2:13-15

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What stood out to you from the readings or sermon?
2. Have you ever expected spiritual change to happen quickly and easily just because you want it?
3. Reflect back on how you have overcome a sin. Describe what happened that led you to change?
4. What are some practices or habits that you have developed that help you overcome sin?

[CHURCH] HAPPENS

Why doesn't
the Church
live up to
expectations?





Harold

From: Harold
To: Pastor Jim
Subject: Thanks, but I won't be there Sunday

Hi Pastor Jim,

It was nice to meet you at Jackie and Peter's wedding. Thanks for your invite to come to church, but I like I said, I don't go to church. Don't get me wrong—I believe in God and Jesus and the Bible. I love my neighbors, and I want to bring God's healing and grace to this hurting world. But I don't go to church. I'll step inside for the occasional wedding or funeral, but other than that, you won't see me there. To be perfectly honest, I'd rather not spend time with a bunch of hypocrites. You seem like a really nice guy, and I'm sure you are, but I've been burned a few times too many.

I used to go to church. I grew up in a family where going to church wasn't an option—it was a rule. We went to church, we tithed, and we attended every prayer gathering and Bible study we could, and somehow that made us "holy" and "good." What a load of crap. By the time I was sixteen, I could see through it all—the lies, the hypocrisy, the performances, the surface-relationships, and the broken promises. Church wasn't a place where you worshipped God—it was where you went to pretend you were perfect and good, and where you could stand on your pretty little soap box and judge the sins of others. Talk about pointing out the speck of dust in another's eye with a 2x4 sticking out of your own!

So I stopped going, and I haven't looked back. I mean, if the church was doing what the Bible says it's supposed to be doing, it'd look a heck of a lot different, wouldn't it? Instead of being a hub of judgment and self-righteousness, it would be a home for those in need of healing, love, and grace. Perhaps instead of talking about the tragedies in the world, it would actually be getting out there to do something about them. Instead of creating carbon-copy cut-outs of the "perfect Christian," it would be celebrating the diversity found within the Body of Christ. Rather than being a place where the "right" ideas are worshipped, it would be a place where people worshipped God despite their differing ideas.

But the church isn't like that. At least, I've yet to see one that is. So I don't go.

Again, you seemed like a truly genuine person and most of what I've just said probably doesn't apply to you, but I'm fine with my life the way it is. Thanks, anyway.

Harold.

Let's Get Honest

1. How do you relate to what Harold expressed on the previous page?
2. Can you express your own thoughts and questions about your church experience?
3. What frustrations with the church would you like to express to God?
4. As you reflect on Harold's thoughts and his church experience, listen to your heart. What do you sense going on?

*I used to go to church....
What a load of crap.*

From: Pastor Jim
To: Harold
Subject: RE: Thanks, but I won't be there Sunday

Thanks for your email and your honesty! Let me begin by stating I share much of your perspective on the church. You might be shocked to hear this from someone employed by a church, but I'm not afraid to talk about the weaknesses of the church. Why would I be? I'd have to be ignorant not to do so.

The fact is the church has done some atrocious things in the name of God. The Bible has been used by the church to support things like The Crusades of the Middle Ages, the witch hunts of American Colonialism, and slave trading to name a few.

On a much more personal level, many have experienced great pain in the church due to judgment. Established church people tend to make people who don't fit their Christian norm feel unwelcome. There are expectations to conform to—most often unspoken but always heard—and if someone new doesn't change to fit this mold quickly, then the “you don't fit” message becomes obvious.

This makes it hard to be real and honest with the struggles we face in life. The very place where we should have freedom to wrestle with tough questions about God and our personal lives is often the last place people actually feel the freedom to do so. Sadly, judgment isn't alone in causing pain. For many, the pain from hypocrisy and rejection they have experienced results in the reaction of “I don't go to church.” They don't want the kind of church they know, so they just opt out of church completely.

My question for you is this: Is the only alternative that of trying to follow Jesus alone? In my experience walking with Jesus and in talking with many people through the years, I have found it next to impossible to be a faithful Christ-follower while living in isolation from other Christians.

Here's a hard truth that you probably won't want to hear, but I'll take the risk of saying it anyway. One of the things God uses most often to bring transformation in our lives is fallible people. Every church is comprised of hurting, broken people who all too often hurt others. But when we opt out because others aren't what they should be, we opt out of the real-life situations where God is at work. Yes, even in the midst of hypocrisy and judgmentalism, God is changing people. And I have yet to find a church with a single infallible person.

It sounds to me that, intuitively, you know some things about what church should be like, and I agree with your desire for things like honest worship, celebrating diversity, and getting beyond performance. I'm not saying you simply need to get back in church and put up with the things that you despise. Yet, there

[CHURCH] HAPPENS

are churches that are struggling to become the kind of people that I think you would want to worship with. They are all far from perfect. Most still have a residue of what you call “the lies, the hypocrisy, the performances, the surface-relationships, and the broken promises.” All of us have our issues. We can sit back and judge others who have judged us, but who has a plank in the eye then? We might be safe from their judgment, but it keeps us from entering into the messy, difficult realities that the Spirit of God uses to transform us.

As followers of Christ, we are all a part of a long tradition, parts of it great and wonderful, parts of it disturbing and sinful. We cannot say that we are not part of this imperfect tradition because God has moved and continues to move through imperfect people. But you can take advantage of your desire for something more and find others who want the same thing. Join with them in worship and loving service. Even in our congregation there are people like this.

I hope you will reconsider—you are welcome at our church any time!

Jim



Your Questions

After reading Pastor Jim's response, what stood out to you and why?
What answers do you find helpful? What additional questions do you have?

KEY POINTS AND SCRIPTURES

1. The church is not perfect and never will be.
2. We grow in Christ together through our relationships with imperfect people.
3. There is much that needs to change in the church.
4. We all can participate and contribute to being the kind of church that God wants us to be.

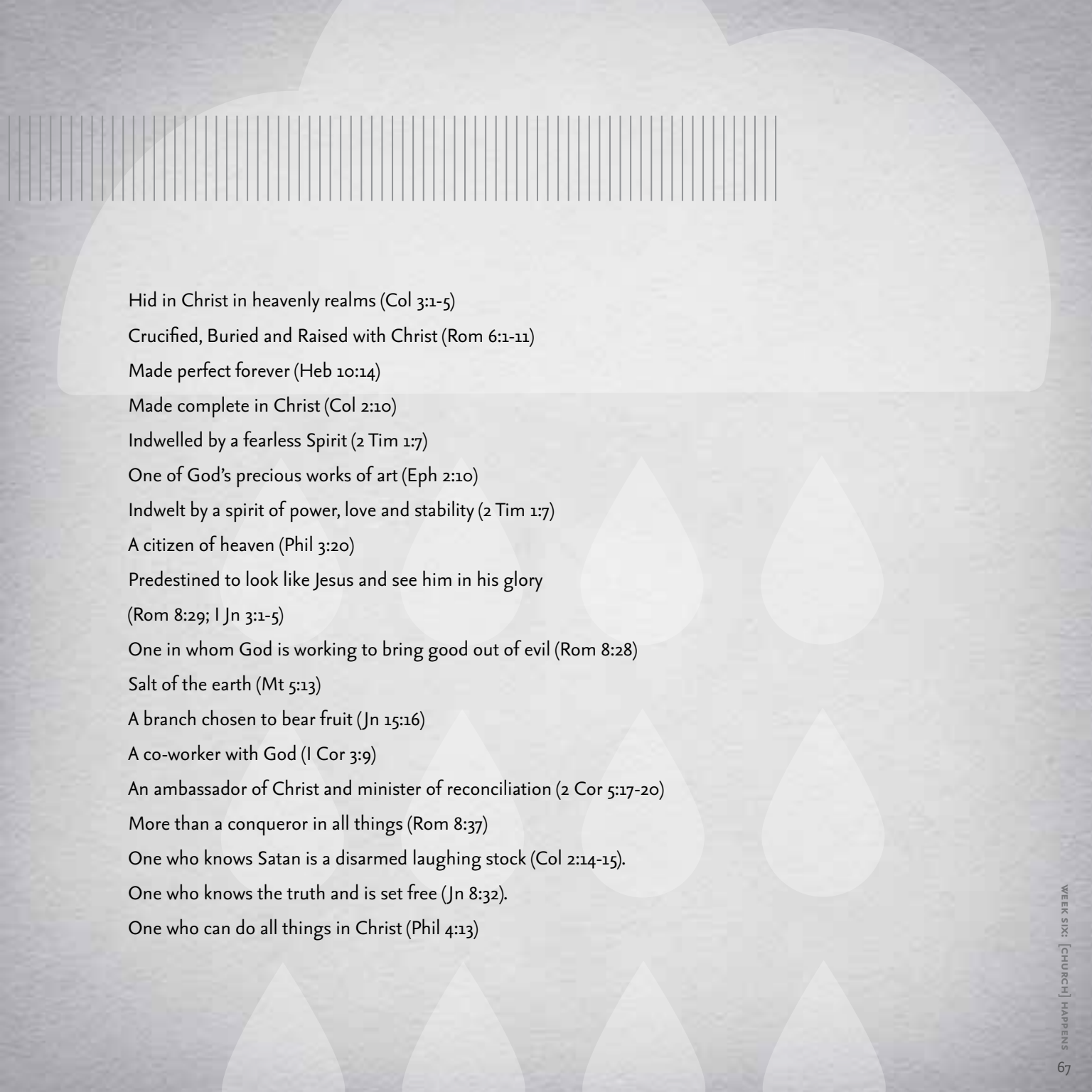
Key Scriptures: John 17:20-23, Matthew 7:1-5, Hebrews 10:24-25, Ephesians 1:18-23

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What stood out to you from the readings or sermon?
2. In what ways have you experienced the church as being less than you hoped?
3. What are the hopes and dreams you have for the church?
4. How can complaining about the church actually be a trap? How can it be more constructive?
5. What can you do to contribute to the dream of what the church should be?

In Christ, I am...

- God's beloved child (Jn 1:12; Eph 1:5)
- Christ's dear friend (Jn 15:5)
- Declared righteous, holy and blameless (Rom. 5:1; Eph 1:4)
- Free from condemnation (Rom 8:1; Col 2:14-16)
- United with Christ, "one spirit" with Christ (I Cor 6:17; Eph 5:31)
- A member of Christ's body (I Cor 6:15/ 12:27)
- The Temple of God (I Cor 6:19)
- Filled with the "fullness of God" (Eph 3:19)
- Blessed with every spiritual blessing (Eph 1:3)
- Bought with an infinite price and forgiven (I Cor 6: 20; Eph 1:7; Col 1:14)
- Bathed with wisdom and understanding (Eph 1:8)
- The recipient of an eternal, infinitely rich, inheritance (Eph 1:11, 18)
- Inseparable from God's love (Rom 8:35-39)
- One who will NEVER be abandoned (Mt 28:20)
- The beautiful bride of Christ who "ravishes" the heart of God (Song of Songs, 4:1ff; 6:4ff).
- One over whom the Lord rejoices, sings and claps (Zeph 3:17)
- One for whom the Lord throws a party (Zeph 3:17; Lk 15:7-10)
- A recipient of God's own peace and joy (Jn 14:17, 27)
- One for whom Jesus gladly suffered (Heb 12:2)
- Christ's joy is fulfilled (Jn 15:11)
- Seated with Christ in heavenly realms (Eph 2:6)



Hid in Christ in heavenly realms (Col 3:1-5)
Crucified, Buried and Raised with Christ (Rom 6:1-11)
Made perfect forever (Heb 10:14)
Made complete in Christ (Col 2:10)
Indwelt by a fearless Spirit (2 Tim 1:7)
One of God's precious works of art (Eph 2:10)
Indwelt by a spirit of power, love and stability (2 Tim 1:7)
A citizen of heaven (Phil 3:20)
Predestined to look like Jesus and see him in his glory
(Rom 8:29; 1 Jn 3:1-5)
One in whom God is working to bring good out of evil (Rom 8:28)
Salt of the earth (Mt 5:13)
A branch chosen to bear fruit (Jn 15:16)
A co-worker with God (1 Cor 3:9)
An ambassador of Christ and minister of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:17-20)
More than a conqueror in all things (Rom 8:37)
One who knows Satan is a disarmed laughing stock (Col 2:14-15).
One who knows the truth and is set free (Jn 8:32).
One who can do all things in Christ (Phil 4:13)