

# Orientation

## What is God's Good News about Politics?

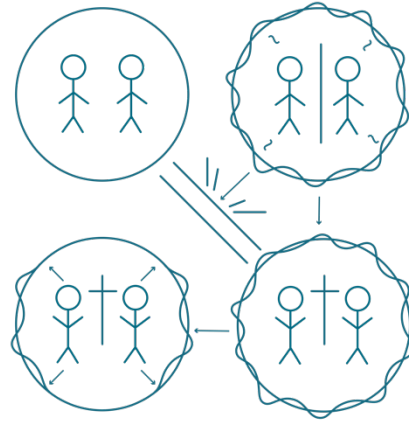
By Connie JG Anderson, Andrew Berg, and Jonathan Walton

We believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ is always Good News to all people in all situations – this includes politics. When the disciples declared “Jesus is Lord,” this was a political statement, not just a theological one. The coming of the Messiah was fused with political implications for the Jewish people and the Roman Empire, and it is true for us in the United States. The English word “politics” comes from the Greek word “polis,” meaning “city-state.” It refers to the way that people living in a large community (such as a city, state, or country) make decisions about power and resources. And since Jesus calls his followers to love our neighbors, obedience to Jesus will necessarily mean every Christian is involved in “politics”—broadly speaking—in one way or another. While words and actions must be contextualized, the question is *how* Jesus’ people should be involved in politics, not only *if* we should engage at all.

So, every believer should be well-informed about what Jesus has to say about political discipleship and civic engagement. Our goal with this guide is to wrestle faithfully with the teachings of Scripture, not to confirm everything you already believe about politics or to convert you to what we believe. *Instead, this guide is designed to take a broader look at how God’s people have engaged with issues of power, justice, and political organization, and consider His invitation to faithful engagement in our time.*

In some contexts, it is taught that the only fruit of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection is victory over one’s personal sin and eternal life in Heaven. In other contexts, formation and discipleship dismisses this reality and only focuses on the systemic and institutional renewal that Christ and the Kingdom of God promises. Fortunately, the Hebrew Scriptures and the Greek texts that we get our current Bibles from don’t separate the two. Our personal and collective sin is met with individual and institutional renewal. Praise God that Jesus came, died, and rose not only for our lives to be redeemed, but for our freedom from personal, relational, and systemic sin and brokenness. This includes civic and political structures that govern our everyday lives. Wherever there is brokenness and injustice, the Kingdom of God came to make it right.

In InterVarsity, we use the [Big Story Gospel Diagram](#) as a visual representation of this holistic Christian gospel message. It consists of four key components:



- **God's Design:** The top left circle of the diagram illustrates God's original plan for humanity, emphasizing that God created humans to be in a loving relationship with Him, and to reflect His image. We were made in the image of God to flourish, work, steward, and create, living in blessed shalom with peace between all relationships. That is peace between humanity and God, peace with one another, peace within ourselves, and peace with creation.
- **The Problem of Sin:** This top right circle illuminates humanity's rebellion against God and the personal, relational, and systemic brokenness that results. Due to our desire to live outside of what God intended, we see abuse, violence, jealousy, racism, and all sorts of addictions and afflictions. And this brokenness is not confined to individuals, but afflicts families, communities, and countries as well.
- **Jesus' Solution:** The image on the bottom right proclaims that Jesus Christ is Messiah, Redeemer, and Liberator. He is the solution to the problem of sin. It portrays Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as the means through which God reconciles humanity to Himself, offering forgiveness and restoration. But the Gospel story does not stop there; it includes the coming of the Kingdom of God to renew all of creation. This includes all individuals, institutions, and every power and principality.
- **Faithful Response:** The final part of the diagram is the personal and collective response to this radical love and justice. And that is faithful, loving obedience where the fruits of our repentance lead to flourishing communities where Christ comes close, and the Kingdom of God is reflected in the lives and environments of those around us. We have been healed, and God has sent us out as ambassadors, testifying to the same freedom and reflecting the same love and justice He has shown to us.

Often, there is a temptation to move from the second circle to the fourth and skip Jesus altogether. But, as followers of Jesus, that would mean we are again, moving out of our own will, means, and preferences. As His witnesses, we are to be living testimonies to His love, freedom, and justice, and that is impossible to do unless we have encounters with Him and cultivate that relationship. This is an especially important point when we are approaching costly and contentious areas of life like politics and civic engagement where brokenness, frustration, rage, anger, and fear are pervasive. Jesus shows us a better way.

The Scriptures that we chose, stories in the introductions, and “Beyond the Text” highlight these four realities. For example, in our first discussion we look at the creation story, reflect on what it means to be made in His image, and contemplate a world where we believe that as a community. This encompasses circle one of the diagram. Later in the study, our engagement with Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion forces us to confront the consequences of our sin alongside Jesus’ resistance to temptation and obedience to His mission, bringing circles two and three to life. Lastly, we look at leaders like Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and Sophie Scholl who lived out circle four. These two people were willing to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Jesus in obedient resistance to segregation in the United States and antisemitism in Nazi Germany, respectively.

In all these discussions, we see that the Gospel is not only Good News for us personally, but speaks peace, love, freedom, and justice in the face of immense suffering and injustice. Jesus has won the victory, and that victory extends to our political systems and structures. And that is Good News!

*Scan the QR code for more resources  
on God’s Good News About Politics*



# Format and Content

## A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Written thousands of years ago, these passages may feel challenging to you, or distant from the political questions we face today. You may read a story or consider an idea that feels unfamiliar or hard to imagine. It may be tempting to try to fit the Bible or Christian teaching into your pre-existing categories. We invite you to resist the urge to stay comfortable, and instead, to engage thoughtfully, wrestle with the text in small group discussion, and seek to *observe*, *interpret*, and *apply* God's words. You might be surprised by how relevant, wonderful, and timely engaging with these ancient words and historical contexts can be.

It is important to emphasize that the four passages we chose do not cover all God has to say about political life. In fact, it would be difficult to find a single page of the Bible that doesn't have some reference to rulers, justice, laws, wars, or another political topic! Instead, we chose a variety of passages from both the Old and New Testaments that take different looks at how God's people engage with political power. Our invitation is to genuine reflection, honest critique, and an openness to what God might be saying to us through these examples and experiences.

## WALKING THROUGH THE STUDIES

Each participant should receive a printed copy of the handout and the leader should print out the notes for the entire study. At the bottom of the handout, there is a QR code anyone can scan to access the notes for the study. This way, participants can review the material and/or use it to lead this study with others after going through it themselves.

Here is our format:

- **Opening:** This section includes notes to the leader and an icebreaker question.
- **Story:** This section includes a personal story from one of the primary authors of this series. They are designed to draw participants in and raise interest in the topic of that particular session. Discussion questions are included after each story.
- **Scripture Study:** In this section you will find a brief introduction to the passage, the passage itself, and a series of discussion questions grouped under the headings of Observation, Interpretation, and Application (OIA). If you don't have

time to discuss all the questions, please select at least one from each of those categories.

- **Conclusion:** This paragraph reviews the main points of each Bible study and makes connections that participants may have missed.
- **Challenge:** These are invitations to take a concrete step in response to the session.
- **(OPTIONAL) Beyond the Text:** The studies were designed to last an hour. If time permits, this additional 30-minute section connects the central point of each session to more contemporary political applications. If there is not enough time, point people to the QR code at the bottom of their handout for access.
- **Closing:** To close each meeting please thank people for coming, confirm the next meeting, and pray.

As mentioned earlier, these studies are designed to take a broader look at how God's people engage with issues of power, justice, and political organization and consider His invitation to faithful engagement in our time. Instead of conversion to a particular party, politician, or platform, we believe Christ followers should be well-informed about what Jesus has to say about civic engagement, so that we can respond as faithfully as possible.

When we say well-informed, we are not saying that we decide what the "righteous" political positions are, and then go to Scripture to justify our political platforms and preferences. We are explicitly saying the opposite. It is Scripture and the teachings of Jesus that inform our politics and shape our civic engagement. We long to have our political lives be determined by our lives with God—not the other way around. Our goal is not to be right or to be self-righteous, but to orient our politics around the love of God, neighbor, and ourselves. We invite you to faithfully wrestle on this side of heaven with what it means to steward our power and resources in ways that are honoring to God and to our neighbors in and through our systems and institutions.

## TOOLS TO HELP YOU ALONG THE WAY

[Discussion Tips:](#) Want ideas for how to facilitate your group? Check out this link!

[Navigating Conflict:](#) Conflict is normal, healthy, and should be expected.

[InterVarsity's Approaching Differences tool](#) can help you and your group engage with dissonance and differences with love.

# Starting Points

Total Time: 50-75 min

## INTRODUCTION | 10 min

Introduce yourself! Please share your name, where you're from, and your major.

**Opening Question:** What brought you to a discussion about politics and faith?

*As the leader, go first and share something light to set the tone. For example, "I came to this meeting because I was really hoping to make friends - and there's free food!"*

**Pray to Begin:** Let's begin by centering ourselves with The Lord's Prayer<sup>1</sup>.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.

## STORY | 10 min

### Same Faith, Different Starting Points

In this story, Andrew and Liz discovered that even though they shared the same faith, the starting points of their political perspectives were different. Let's read this story together.

*Have someone read this story by InterVarsity Area Director Andrew Berg aloud.*

It was spring of my freshman year, and I was sitting with my friends Molly and Liz in the student union building at Franklin & Marshall College in Pennsylvania. Molly and I were eagerly discussing our International Politics class, which emphasized the foreign policy perspective of Realism. This is a worldview that argues that intangible values like morality and justice are impossible to enforce in a chaotic world, so the nations with the most power are the ones who ultimately define reality. A Realist would say that regardless of what political leaders claim

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<sup>1</sup> English translations of *The Lord's Prayer*, © 1998, English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC), and used by permission. [www.englishtexts.org](http://www.englishtexts.org)

about their intentions, all countries ultimately make foreign policy decisions based on their own selfish interests.

To Molly and me, Realism seemed self-evident based on what we observed in the world. And as Christians who are called to live in this world, don't we need to adapt to the way the world actually works? We agreed that basing our politics on intangible spiritual values is not a winning strategy, especially when the opposition doesn't limit itself to playing by those rules!

But as Liz listened to us, she felt a deep contradiction in her soul. Liz was raised to believe that Christians are called to follow Jesus' teachings, even when doing so feels costly and unrealistic. Though I was also a believer and involved in the Christian fellowship with her, Liz could not see how my worldview could possibly mesh with hers. But rather than flipping out on us, or checking out of the conversation, Liz pressed in. Liz stayed engaged even when she was experiencing dissonance because of her commitment to Jesus and to her friends.

Over the years, I slowly experienced an ideological transformation as I had long conversations with friends like Molly and Liz. And now, twelve years later, Liz and I are happily married! We continue to learn and discuss what it looks like to be *in* this world but not *of* it, with one another, our friends, and community. But this was all possible because when the conversations got tough, we pressed in.

## RESPONSE

Let's take a moment to reflect on how we are responding emotionally to this story.

1. What emotions came up for you as you heard this story?

*Potential Examples:*

- *"I felt apprehensive because so often friendships end because of political differences."*
- *"I felt happy that they kept pressing in with respect for one another. That's refreshing to see – I didn't think it could be possible."*
- *"I felt challenged in a good way because it has never occurred to me to ask these kinds of questions."*

2. Which starting point did you most resonate with and why? **Write down your answer at the top of your handout** and share it with the group if there is time.

*If there is hesitation or reluctance, share that we all have starting points for our political perspectives, whether we realize it or not. If helpful, share some examples:*

- *"I related to Andrew and Molly. Jesus' teachings seem like great ideals to aim for, but you can't live that way in the real world because you'd just be a doormat."*
- *"I related to Liz. Even if it seems impossible, we need to apply Jesus' teachings to all of life, accept the consequences, and trust God with whatever happens."*
- *"I didn't relate to either one because I've never thought about these things before."*

## SCRIPTURE STUDY | 25 min

# In The Beginning

### INTRODUCTION

This series asks us to consider what the Bible has to say about how we engage with politics. As we discuss starting points, today we look at the starting point of the Bible, Genesis 1 and the Prologue to the First Nations Version of the Bible. Let's explore together what God's starting point for humanity looks like. As you read this silently, **make notes in the second box on your handout**. What does this passage tell us about God? What do you notice about humanity in the passage?

### PASSAGE: GENESIS 1:26-31 (NRSVue)

<sup>26</sup>Then God said, "Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

<sup>27</sup>So God created humans in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

<sup>28</sup>God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." <sup>29</sup>God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. <sup>30</sup>And to every beast of the earth and to



every bird of the air and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. <sup>31</sup> God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

*Leader reads:* The following is an excerpt from the Prologue to *First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament* (IVP):

"On the sixth day, Creator made the first man and woman and placed them in the Garden of Beauty and Harmony to be caretakers of the earth. On the seventh day the Great Spirit rested from his work of creation, not because he was tired but because he was finished. The Great Spirit blessed the seventh day and made it a holy day. So humankind was created to enter into his day of rest and remain in harmony with Creator and care for all of creation."

### OBSERVATION QUESTIONS

1. What are God's actions and qualities in this passage?
2. Make a list of statements made about the humans in this section.

### INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS

1. What is the significance of humans being made in God's image and likeness?
2. Why would God give humans the responsibilities and authority described in this passage? How did he intend them to use it?

### APPLICATION QUESTIONS

1. We see here that for God, concepts like stewarding, growing, multiplying, and spreading across the Earth are "very good" things. As God's image-bearers, what would it look like if all humans showed up in the world with God's orientation to expressing and exerting authority in caring for all that He created? How does this compare to the ways that humans today demonstrate power, especially political power?
2. How would the world be different if we all viewed each other and ourselves as bearing the image of God (including those who disagree with me politically)?

### CONCLUSION

God's desire for all of creation is to live in *shalom*—the Hebrew word that means peace, wholeness, prosperity, completeness, health and deliverance. Therefore, His starting point for the intersection of faith and politics is that we are made in His image to flourish, work, rule, and create individually and collectively. We reflect the Father, Son, and Spirit's *shalom* in and through our relationships because the flourishing of all

creation is interdependent. This impacts how we steward our power, influence, and authority. This is our starting point as followers of Jesus.

## CHALLENGE

In our opening story, Andrew was willing to consider Liz's starting point and he gradually rethought his own. Liz was willing to stay in conversation and continue the friendship with Andrew and Molly, even though their viewpoints differed vastly from her own because of Jesus' teaching.

Using a "fist-to-five," how willing are you to stay in relationship with those who disagree with you and consider another point of view when it comes to faith and politics? (Fist = not at all. All fingers up = eager to listen respectfully and learn more.) Share those thoughts and feelings with someone from the group this week and listen to theirs as well.

## CLOSING | 5 min

*If you have time, please continue to the Beyond the Text section!*

*If not, wrap up the time by making sure to thank those who gathered for coming and invite them back, sharing the date, time, and location for the next meeting.*

*Ex. "Thank you for joining in this conversation. Today we leaned into the idea that we all have starting points for our political frameworks. Next time (remind them of the date, time, and place) we'll continue the conversation and look at a different passage of Scripture. I hope you'll join us again—and feel free to bring friends. While these sessions are designed to build on one another, we'll always make sure newcomers can fully participate!"*

*If you look at the bottom of your handout, you'll see a QR code. This code takes you to an electronic version of today's study. And if you'd like to dig deeper, the electronic version also includes an excerpt from the book Twelve Lies that Hold America Captive and the Truth that Sets Us Free by one of InterVarsity's national leaders, Jonathan Walton. You may or may not agree with him, but as we learned in this session, it's good practice leaning in and challenging ourselves, and I think you'll find it interesting.*

*Please save this handout along with the ones you will get in each succeeding session. We'll refer back to them as a way of reviewing what we've learned."*

**Closing Prayer:** Lord, thank you for your love towards us, your love for all people, and Your Will for us to be reconciled to you, one another, and all of creation. Give us the strength, courage and wisdom to love you with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.

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BEYOND THE TEXT (OPTIONAL) | 10-25 min

## America's Seeds and the Spirit's Fruit

*Introduce the text<sup>2</sup> and orient your group to the next section of your discussion. Beyond the Text is a space to discuss faithful civic engagement and political discipleship in our current context.*

*For example: "In the final portion of our meeting, we're going to read an excerpt from a book by Senior Resource Specialist with InterVarsity, Jonathan Walton. He shares his own reflections on how this passage from Genesis impacts his framework for a faithful civic engagement and political discipleship. Before we begin, I want to say that some of his words might feel extreme to you. For some, you might find him more conservative than you. Others might find him too liberal or progressive. My hope is that you will be open – like Liz was – to listening and engaging with his ideas. We'll have time to talk about it after."*

*The leader can read this section aloud OR invite folks to scan the QR code at the bottom of their handout to read along or on their own.*

"Genesis 1:26-27 states that every human is made in God's image. The Genesis creation accounts also highlight humanity's mandate to flourish, work, rule, and create as caretakers of God's good world.

Unfortunately, that's often not what we see in America today. Instead of humans being treated as made in the image of God, throughout American history numerous groups of people have been oppressed and treated as less-than human. Instead of humans using their power to create flourishing on the Earth, we see people abusing their power, pursuing selfish gain, and polluting the environment.

Frequently, the United States is referred to as a Christian Nation. A more accurate description is that the United States is a nation based on what I am calling 'White American Folk Religion' – a race, class, gender and environmental hierarchy that prioritizes racially assigned White, wealthy, men – and the people who live according to this ideology. (By White, I do NOT mean White *people*, I mean the system created to claim that those of darker skin color are inherently inferior.)

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Twelve Lies That Hold America Captive: And the Truth That Sets Us Free by Jonathan P. Walton Westmont: IVP, 2019, 16-20.

Allow me to define what I mean by White American Folk Religion. In the US, the formal designation of who is considered 'White' has included components of family, national background, and class. At its core, the concept of 'Whiteness' was created solely to subjugate one group of people and elevate the other and justify theft of people, land, and resources. Lastly, a Folk Religion is the common set of popular beliefs and practices under the guise of true religion but outside of the faith's official doctrines and practices.

White American Folk Religion or WAFR claims to be biblical Christianity. It is not. White American Folk Religion does not treat all people with God-given dignity, nor does it encourage all people to use their power to care for the Earth and others around them.

Instead of a God-given rhythm of healthy work and rest, most American institutions are based on what's known as the 'Protestant work ethic,' which emphasizes success through endless hard work, and thrift as a sign of salvation. Instead of a reliance on God and His abundance, this system links human worthiness to productivity. Activity, accumulation, and appearance to others became the measure of a person's worth in our society. Generations of people internalized this value system and passed it on to their children. And so it reigns to this day in the hearts of men and women, and in the institutions in which we operate and lead.

In White American Folk Religion, early American leaders such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson are moved from mere leaders to forefathers, as if to make all Americans their descendants. Instead of being made in the image of God, we live in the shadow of the images on Mount Rushmore. The men are elevated to mythical status. Our freedom then was not afforded by the blood of Jesus but by the blood of soldiers who took and defended our right to liberty as they defined it. Our Father is not Yahweh but a nonspecific Creator, and the Bible is replaced by the Constitution. Instead of the Ten Commandments, we have the first ten Amendments, known as the Bill of Rights. The law and our leaders, not the Messiah, will set us free because we look to politicians to deliver us. This narrative isn't just false, it's idolatrous; we center our identities on the accomplishments of humans, not God and His will for all creation. Claiming Christ while holding and acting on those beliefs compromises genuine witness to Jesus and is incompatible with allegiance to Him.

The roots of White American Folk Religion run deep, and few Christians are even aware of how far we've strayed from God's good plan. When we don't study the teachings of Jesus in community, it is very difficult to cultivate a mature relationship with God. Our starting points for approaching politics are often defined more by our family, culture and personal beliefs than the teachings of Jesus.

A good way to begin untangling the Good News of Jesus from the brokenness we see in our country is by carefully studying Scripture and comparing it to the systems around us. Let us each have a humble learning posture as we continue to study Scripture together.”

### DISCUSS THE TEXT

*After reading, invite the group to take a few minutes to reflect on the text. Ask the following questions as time permits:*

1. White American Folk Religion may be a new term for you. Where does it resonate for you? Where do you still have questions?
2. Have you ever considered a contrast between White American Folk Religion and the teachings of the Bible? Where did you feel challenged or appreciative while listening or reading?
3. How would you describe the differences between how White American Folk Religion orders the world and how God orders creation in Genesis 1:26-31?

*After your discussion is over, close in prayer and make sure to invite everyone back! See “Closing” for a script.*

# Choosing Jesus as King

Total Time: 55-85 min

## INTRODUCTION | 10 min

*If there are new people, be sure everyone gets introduced (name, where you're from, major). Even if everyone was here last time, make sure everyone knows each other's names.*

**Opening Question:** What are you looking forward to during this time?

Last time as we began our five-part discussion of the intersection of faith and politics, we looked at Starting Points—our personal starting points and the starting point of the Bible, God creating humans in His own image and giving us a role to play, stewarding this amazing and interdependent world that He had created. We considered what it would mean to treat others as image-bearers and discussed the challenge of pressing in and continuing to do that, especially with people who differ from us politically.

**Pray to Begin:** Let's begin by centering ourselves with The Lord's Prayer<sup>1</sup>.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.

## STORY | 10 min

### Who Will Sit on the Throne?

As with the story from our first study, InterVarsity Area Director Andrew Berg was challenged because real world events seemed to make Jesus' clear teaching impossible.

*Please have someone read this story by Andrew aloud.*

I still remember exactly where I was when Scripture began to shake the foundations of my political convictions. Late one Thursday night, I sat with a few

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<sup>1</sup> English translations of *The Lord's Prayer*, © 1998, English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC), and used by permission. [www.englishtexts.org](http://www.englishtexts.org)

friends in a musty, third-floor lounge of a college dormitory. We were studying a passage from the Bible, Matthew 5:38-48. Chris and Joe, the two student leaders, were guiding us through Jesus' command to "love your enemies." Candidly, I pushed back hard against it. As a New Yorker, I had grown up in the wake of 9/11 and supported the American invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq. Clearly, these were very real enemies; how could I be expected to love them? Chris and Joe acknowledged the tensions the passage might bring up, but gently challenged me. They asked me if being obedient to Jesus might require decisions that are unexpected, costly, and countercultural.

**I realized I had a choice.** I could choose to follow Jesus as King and find ways to love these enemies, or sit on the throne of my life myself. I could insist that my theology and political understanding supersedes what Scripture says, or I could choose to sit in the tension and wrestle with the implications of Jesus' words—even if I felt deeply uncomfortable—and yield to Him.

It was not quick or easy, but I ultimately chose the second option. That night initiated a long process of choosing to intentionally let Jesus challenge my beliefs and actions. Since then, I have attempted to pray for my enemies and bless those who I see as persecutors. I try to consider what it might mean to "turn the other cheek" when I face acts of aggression and hold in tension different ideas about war and conflict. And as I've grown older, though who I consider my "enemies" has changed, the call of Jesus remains the same – to see them as people made in the image of God and love them, just as God loves them.

## RESPONSE

Let's take a moment to reflect on how we are responding emotionally to this story.

1. What emotions came up for you as you heard this story?

*Potential Examples:*

- *"I felt defensive and confused because loving a wartime enemy doesn't even make sense."*
- *"I felt inspired when Andrew decided to let Jesus challenge him like this. I don't know if I could ever have that much faith."*
- *"I felt encouraged because this study is going in a different way than I had expected. I was afraid we would just argue about who to vote for, but this is getting at deeper issues."*



2. Have you ever allowed Jesus to challenge your beliefs and practices? Right now, would you say that you are on the throne of your life, or that as much as you can, you try to yield to Jesus as King? **Write down your answer in the first box on your handout.**

## SCRIPTURE STUDY | 30 min

# The Israelites Demand a King

### INTRODUCTION

This week we are looking at a passage of Scripture that takes place after God's people, the Israelites, have multiplied and become a nation (large people group made up of various tribes). This is in the Old Testament, so it takes place long before Jesus' birth.

Up to this point in the Bible, the Israelites' leaders were various judges and prophets that God appointed from the various tribes. In a political move to be like the surrounding nations, the Israelites asked God for a king. The Prophet Samuel took this personally, and God reminded Him that it was not Samuel who was being rejected - they were rejecting the Lord. This shift in the political system marked a significant period in Israelite history spanning many years. There were some kings that obeyed God and pursued justice, but there were others that disobeyed God, seeking after dominance and power.

Before we look at the text on your page, I'm going to read the verses that precede this. Context is an important part of studying Scripture. (*Read verses 1-10 aloud. It's not on their handout.*)

<sup>1</sup>When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. <sup>2</sup>The name of his firstborn son was Joel, and the name of his second was Abijah; they were judges in Beer-sheba. <sup>3</sup>Yet his sons did not follow in his ways but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice. <sup>4</sup>Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah <sup>5</sup>and said to him, "You are old, and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations." <sup>6</sup>But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us." Samuel prayed to the Lord, <sup>7</sup>and the Lord said to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. <sup>8</sup>Just as they have done to me from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. <sup>9</sup>Now

then, listen to their voice; only, you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”

God told Samuel to give the people the following warning. As you read this silently, **make notes in the second box on your handout.** What observations can you make about the who, what, where, and why of this passage?

### **PASSAGE: 1 SAMUEL 8:10-22 (NRSVue)**

<sup>10</sup> So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. <sup>11</sup> He said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots, <sup>12</sup> and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. <sup>13</sup> He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. <sup>14</sup> He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. <sup>15</sup> He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. <sup>16</sup> He will take your male and female slaves and the best of your cattle and donkeys and put them to his work. <sup>17</sup> He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. <sup>18</sup> And on that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you on that day.” <sup>19</sup> But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, “No! We are determined to have a king over us, <sup>20</sup> so that we also may be like other nations and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.” <sup>21</sup> When Samuel heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the Lord. <sup>22</sup> The Lord said to Samuel, “Listen to their voice and set a king over them.”

### **OBSERVATION QUESTIONS**

1. Who are the characters and what is happening?
2. What tensions or challenges between characters do you see in the text?
3. What are God’s warnings to the people about life under a king?
4. What else stands out to you?

### **INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS**

1. Imagine you were a witness in this story. What might you be feeling as you heard what Samuel said or observed the people’s response?

2. The Israelites wanted a king. What are their motivations for this, and what do you think of their reasons?
3. Why do you think the people dismissed God's warnings?

### APPLICATION QUESTIONS

1. The Israelites mirror the practices of other nations, asking for a king, even if it's not God's best. In politics, we might be tempted to mirror the behaviors and practices of the people around us or those we see on social media, justifying anger, impatience, or shady tactics to get ahead. Where do you see this happening in modern politics?
2. Reflect on the recent social media posts, conversations, and news stories around politics that you've seen or engaged with. Do you notice any patterns of expectation that the solution to many of the problems in our world centers around getting the right human leader or leaders in place? What have you been asking God for?

### CONCLUSION

Just as the Israelites wanted a human king, we are tempted to look to political leaders for hope in hard times, deliverance from troubles, and even our salvation. Human leaders can have a lot of power, but they are nothing compared with almighty God. God might not be the political king in our country, but as Andrew learned in our opening story, He can be King in our lives as we look to Him instead of insisting on doing things according to our own ways. Daily praying "Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" as a discipline is a formative practice that can lead us away from this temptation, deliver us, and give Him the glory and honor He deserves.

### CHALLENGE

In Matthew 6:10, Jesus said that we are to pray, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Spend 5 minutes going to your favorite news site or social media feed and praying that God's will would be done for two situations that concern you. Take out your calendar, set a reminder and repeat this process for a week. Come back to your group next week and share how doing this impacted you.

## CLOSING | 5 min

*If you have time, please continue to the Beyond the Text section!*

*Make sure to thank participants for coming and invite them back, sharing the date, time and location for the next meeting.*

*Ex. "Thank you for joining in this conversation. Next time (remind them of the date, time, and place) we'll continue the conversation and look at a different passage of Scripture. I hope you'll join us again—and feel free to bring friends. While these sessions are designed to build on one another, we'll always make sure newcomers can fully participate!"*

*If you look at the bottom of your handout, you'll see a QR code. This code takes you to an electronic version of today's study. And if you'd like to dig deeper, the electronic version also includes several images that illustrate how politics and Christianity can be intertwined along with reflection questions.*

*Please save this handout along with the ones you will get in each succeeding session. We'll refer back to them as a way of reviewing what we've learned."*

**Closing Prayer:** Lord, thank you for your love towards us, your love for all people, and Your Will for us to be reconciled to you, one another, and all of creation. Give us the strength, courage and wisdom to love you with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.

*Scan the QR code for more resources  
on God's Good News About Politics*



## Which King Do You Serve?

*This session requires viewing images by a QR code. Have them ready so that students can scan the QR codes.*

The Israelites chose a king after being warned by Samuel to do otherwise. For followers of Jesus in our context, our call is to follow Jesus as King. But often in the United States, we are tempted to believe otherwise. Both political parties, their politicians and promoters often conflate their candidates and platforms with Christ and His Kingdom. This entangling of Christianity and politics is unfaithful to the teachings of Jesus.

Take a close look at the following images using the QR code or links below:



*Painting of George W. Bush as Jesus Christ*

George W. Bush was one of the most publicly religious presidents in recent US History. This image, lifted from [a profile by GQ magazine](#) explains that the dominant philosophy of his time in office was American evangelicalism. Yet to fuse faith and politics in a way that makes them one in the same – an act that is incompatible with the word and work of Jesus.



*Painting of Obama crucified*

This painting is by [New York-based artist by Michael D'Antuono](#). The title is "The Truth" and featured former Obama with a crown of thorns on his head and arms outstretched like Christ during the crucifixion at the hands of the Roman government and religious leaders. Like the Bush photograph, the image conflates a politician with the Messiah. This is not faithful civic engagement but another example of a false Gospel that is not the Good News at all.



*Painting of Jesus surrounded by American individuals and institutions*

In this painting called, ["One Nation Under God" by Jon McNaughton](#), we see a Jesus figure of European heritage holding the Constitution of the United States. The central image implies that our founding document equals Holy Scripture. Many people today venerate America's Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Pledge of Allegiance as if they are part of the Bible itself. The people surrounding the Christ-figure represent significant individuals and institutions in our country (see key). This painting reinterprets the past, recasts important Americans as apostolic figures, and portrays the United States as being uniquely Christian and God-ordained.

### DISCUSS THE TEXT AND IMAGES

*After reading, invite the group to take a few minutes to reflect on the text images. Ask the following questions as time permits:*

1. What are your thoughts and feelings when you consider that neither political party is the "Christian" party? What resonates with you, and where is there tension?
2. We all can feel tempted to pledge allegiance to a party, politician, or platform, especially during an election season. Let's pray this closing prayer together:

*"Our Good Father, we ask for your kingdom to come to this country as it does in heaven. Only You are worthy of our worship, honor and glory. Guide our leaders, whoever is elected, and give them wisdom, courage, and strength to love and serve the least of these, especially those most vulnerable. Help me not to bless things you would curse and curse things you would bless. Keep me from idolatry and my identity rooted in you. Amen."*

*After the closing prayer, make sure to invite everyone back! See "Closing" for a script.*

# Choosing the Kingdom of God

Total Time: 55-85 min

## INTRODUCTION | 10 min

*If there are new people, be sure everyone gets introduced. Even if everyone was here last time, make sure everyone knows each other's names.*

Our last session ended with this challenge: In Matthew 6:10, Jesus said that we are to pray, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Our challenge was to spend five minutes going to our favorite news site or social media feed and praying that God's will would be done for two situations that concern us, and to repeat that process every day for a week.

**Opening Question:** Would any of you like to share if you did this and how it impacted you? *(Be ready to share your own experience in this if the participants don't have much to share.)*

The first time that we began our four-part discussion of the intersection of faith and politics, we looked at the reality that God made all people in His image and examined the implications of that truth.

Last time, we looked at what happens when humanity chooses to follow our own way and leave God behind. This week, we'll look at what happened when Christ faced that same temptation.

**Pray to Begin:** Let's begin by centering ourselves with The Lord's Prayer<sup>1</sup>.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> English translations of *The Lord's Prayer*, © 1998, English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC), and used by permission. [www.englishtexts.org](http://www.englishtexts.org)

STORY | 10 min

## Ma Chose the Kingdom

In this story, Jonathan Walton, an author and Senior Resource Specialist with InterVarsity, reflects on the death of his mother, the economic realities of his upbringing, and what he pursued as a result. Let's read this story together.

*Please have someone read this story by Jonathan aloud.*

Ma's gravestone said, "August 24, 1952 – September 13, 2015." Seeing the date written out like that made it so final. She was gone. I realized that I had judged her and her choices. I said in front of crowds and in private conversations that the life she provided for us was "poor," and I subconsciously hoped that she would come to see the city and university she sent me to the way I did, as more valuable than ... the place she sent me from. I did not realize that this attitude was going to be one of the outcomes of my education, and I am disappointed that I could draw such a conclusion about the woman who raised me and the place she raised me in. I wanted Ma to see jazz and ballet at Lincoln Center, hear poetry at the Nuyorican Cafe, and smell the autumn air in a stroll down the Museum Mile to the Met while tasting different flavors of gelato. I wanted her to experience what is supposed to be the richest congressional district in the country, taking a break from one of the poorest places in America. She responded that she liked her simple life.

Three years later, as I sat in Grand Central Station writing these words on my laptop, I thought about how Ma knew something about being rich that economists and my humanities professors missed. I remembered the words that echoed in my mind as she slipped from life to death and life again with God: "What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Mark 8:36 NKJV). I thought that advocacy would mean ensuring that the person I loved more than anyone in the world experienced the best of what this world had to offer. What I learned was that in Christ she had all that she needed, and I was forced to reflect on why I wanted these other things in the first place.

## RESPONSE

Let's take a moment to reflect on how we are responding emotionally to this story.

1. What emotions came up for you as you heard this story?



*Potential Examples:*

- *"I felt sad because I know what it's like to lose a parent or loved one."*
- *"I felt understood because that's my experience as the first one in my family to go to college."*
- *"I felt surprised because I had never considered this before."*

2. When you think of "the best the world has to offer," what comes to your mind?  
Write your response in the first block of the handout.

## SCRIPTURE STUDY | 30 mins

# Jesus Chose His Father's Kingdom

### INTRODUCTION

This week, we are looking at a passage from the New Testament. It centers around when Jesus first began His public ministry. The context is important; just before this passage, Jesus was baptized and the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove, with a voice from heaven saying, "You are my son, the Beloved, in you I am well pleased."

After His baptism, Jesus was tempted for 40 days in the desert. His time in the wilderness is reminiscent of the 40 years that the Israelites wandered in the desert after being freed from enslavement in Egypt. Both were times of temptation and formation. In this passage, we will examine what tempted Jesus and why, to better contrast the kingdoms of this world with the Kingdom of God.

*Invite someone to read the passage aloud.*

### PASSAGE: LUKE 4:1-13 (NRSVue)

<sup>1</sup> Then Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, <sup>2</sup> where for forty days he was tested by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over he was famished. <sup>3</sup> The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." <sup>4</sup> Jesus answered him, "It is written<sup>a</sup>, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" <sup>5</sup> Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup> And the devil said

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<sup>a</sup> verse 4: see Deut. 8:3

to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. <sup>7</sup> If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." <sup>8</sup> Jesus answered him, "It is written<sup>b</sup>, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'<sup>9</sup> Then the devil led him to Jerusalem and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, <sup>10</sup> for it is written<sup>c</sup>, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' <sup>11</sup> and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'<sup>12</sup> Jesus answered him, "It is said<sup>d</sup>, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' " <sup>13</sup> When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

### OBSERVATION QUESTIONS

1. Who are the characters and what is happening?
2. What repetitions, patterns, or themes do you see?
3. What else stands out or resonates?
4. What tensions or challenges between characters do you see in the text?

### INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS

1. What are the three temptations, and what makes them unique to Jesus?
2. How does Jesus resist these temptations?
3. Were you surprised that Jesus didn't contradict the devil's claim to have been given authority and glory (v. 6)? What do you make of that? What insight might this provide about the state of the world today?
4. Jesus received a blessing from the Father at His baptism, "You are my son, the Beloved, in you I am well pleased." The devil tempted Jesus around similar questions of identity, confidence, and authority. How might that blessing from His Father have strengthened Jesus as He faced these temptations?
5. What do you think temptations say about Jesus' relationship to power, and about how the Kingdom of God is different from the kingdoms of this world?

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<sup>b</sup> verse 8: see Deut. 6:13

<sup>c</sup> verse 11: see Psalm 91:11-12

<sup>d</sup> verse 12: see Deut. 6:16

## APPLICATION QUESTIONS

1. Which of these three temptations resonates with you the most, and why?
2. Consider where you feel most tempted. What scriptures, prayers, or songs help you now, or could help you in the future to overcome temptations and resist worshipping idols, seeking power or glory for yourself, or testing God?
3. How can those around you encourage and support your pursuit of the Kingdom of God, instead of political power or another idol?

## CONCLUSION

As humans, we are easily tempted by money, power (including political power), and status. In the opening story, Jonathan was ashamed when he reflected on the fact that after he moved to NYC and to attend Columbia University, he began to view his mom's simple lifestyle back home as inferior. In contrast, his mom was not impressed by all of the city's displays of wealth and power because she knew that her life with Jesus was more than enough.

Jesus, too, was tempted by the devil. He resisted by quoting Scripture and refusing to take shortcuts to get what he needed (bread), rightfully deserved (worship), and what He had access to (protection). Instead, he obeyed His Father, even though that meant suffering.

We can resist temptation through being immersed in Scripture and surrounding ourselves with voices that encourage us to pursue the Kingdom of God. Even though pursuing God's Kingdom involves sacrifice for the sake of others, it is, as Jonathan's Ma knew, the only path to true joy.

## CHALLENGE

- Take an inventory of what you stream on YouTube or Netflix, what you see in your feeds on TikTok or Instagram, and topics you discuss with your friends and family. Do they inspire you to build yourself and others up toward the ways of the Kingdom of God, or do they urge you toward selfishness, comfort and/or the suspicion of others?
- Invite Jesus to show you specific actions that He is calling you to take to surround yourself with voices that point to the way of Jesus, and then follow His lead in that.
- Pay attention to how changes in your awareness of the content you watch and conversations you have impact your tendencies to choose (or not choose) the way of the Kingdom of God this week.

## CLOSING | 5 min

*If you have time, please continue to the Beyond the Text section!*

*Make sure to thank participants for coming and invite them back, sharing the date, time and location for the next meeting.*

*Ex. "Thank you for coming today!"*

*If you look at the bottom of your handout, you'll see a QR code. This code takes you to an electronic version of today's study. And if you'd like to dig deeper, the electronic version also includes four quotes about temptations we face in the United States.*

*Please save this handout along with the ones you will get in each succeeding session. We'll refer back to them as a way of reviewing what we've learned."*

**Closing Prayer:** Lord, thank you for your love towards us, your love for all people, and Your Will for us to be reconciled to you, one another, and all of creation. Give us the strength, courage and wisdom to love you with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.

*Scan the QR code for more resources  
on God's Good News About Politics*



BEYOND THE TEXT (OPTIONAL) | 20-30 min

## Leaving Temptation for the Kingdom of God

*Please read the following excerpt silently.*

After Jesus was tempted in the desert, his first words in the synagogue were “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me...,” reading from Isaiah 61. In Luke 4:14-20 Jesus announces that He is going to “preach the good news to the poor, proclaim liberty for the captives, make the blind see, and release the oppressed.” Because Jesus was faithful to His mission, God brought His vision to fruition. That vision includes total flourishing for all of creation, with the marginalized, under-resourced, and disenfranchised as the priority. The most pervasive temptations in our society are greed, pride, and a lust for power. We try to build our own versions of sovereignty in pursuit of independence, autonomy, and control. This is in opposition to the Good News of Jesus. With that in mind, consider these four quotes:

“God’s gift of a call to be Christ’s ambassadors of reconciliation intends to unseat other lords—power, nationalism, race or ethnic loyalty as an end in itself—and give birth to deeper allegiances, stories, spaces and communities that are a “demonstration plot” of the reality of God’s new creation in Christ. Put simply, reconciliation both names the church as and requires the church to be the sign and agent of God’s reconciliation.”

— Emmanuel Katongole, [Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing](#)

“When people of privilege pursue affluence, autonomy, safety, and power above everything else, not only do they miss out on the liberating and restorative work of Jesus, but they participate in greater inequality, segregation, and suffering for the most marginalized people in their community. When people of means pursue what is best for them and their own in an unequal society, their actions inevitably harm the common good. People like myself end up disobeying the central commandment of Jesus - to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves - all in the name of pursuing a dream life for ourselves.”

— D.L. Mayfield, [The Myth of the American Dream: Reflections on Affluence, Autonomy, Safety, and Power](#)

“Money cannot save you from tragedy, or give you control in a chaotic world. Only God can do that. What breaks the power of money over us is not just

redoubled effort to follow the example of Christ. Rather, it is deepening your understanding of the salvation of Christ, what you have in him, and then living out the changes that that understanding makes in your heart—the seat of your mind, will, and emotions. Faith in the gospel restructures our motivations, our self-understanding and identity, our view of the world. Behavioral compliance to rules without a complete change of heart will be superficial and fleeting.”

— Timothy Keller, [Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters](#)

Christian nationalism is impoverished as it seeks a kingdom without a cross. It pursues a victory without mercy. It acclaims God’s love of power rather than the power of God’s love. We must remember that Jesus refused those who wanted to make Him king by force just as much as He refused to become king by calling upon ‘twelve legions of angels’. Jesus needs no army, arms, or armored cavalry to bring about the kingdom of God. As such, we should resist Christian nationalism as giving a Christian facade to nakedly political, ethnocentric ventures.

— N.T. Wright, Michael F. Bird, authors of *Jesus and the Powers: Christian Political Witness in the Age of Totalitarian Terror and Dysfunctional Democracies*.

## DISCUSS THE TEXT

1. What narratives did you hear from your family around money and status? For example, which universities, professions, or neighborhoods communicated value and prestige? And conversely, which ones were considered dangerous, uncomfortable, or beneath you?
2. If a group of people were to leave their love of money, power, and status behind and pursue the kingdom of God, what might that look like in your community? What needs might disappear and what problems may not exist? Brainstorm a list.
  - a. Share your list in pairs or as a group and take time to pray.
  - b. Ask God for freedom from unhealthy narratives related to money, power, or status.
  - c. Ask God to give your vision, community, and resources to bring those dreams to reality.

# Sharing the Shalom of God's Kingdom

Total Time: 55-85 min

## INTRODUCTION | 10 min

*If there are new people, be sure everyone gets introduced. Even if everyone was here last time, make sure everyone knows each other's names.*

Welcome to part four of our five-part discussion of the intersection of faith and politics!

In our first session we looked at Starting Points—our personal starting points and the starting point of the Bible, God creating humans in His own image and giving us a role to play, stewarding this amazing and interdependent world that He had created. We considered what it would mean to treat others as image-bearers, and discussed the challenge of pressing in and continuing to do that, especially with people who differ from us politically.

Our second session was about Choosing Jesus as King. The opening story was about Andrew Berg choosing to follow Jesus as his King instead of sitting on the throne of his life himself. The Scripture was about God's people demanding a human king. We discussed ways that we all tend to look for political leaders who will function as our saviors, deliverers, and protectors as we navigate this fallen world.

Last time we talked about turning from temptation to the Kingdom of God. We read about the example of Jonathan Walton's mother and how she had set her sights on Jesus and wasn't enamored with all the trappings of success. We looked at the story of Jesus resisting the temptation to disobey God in order to gain the power and acclaim that is His due, and how He chose the way of the cross instead of the way of power.

**Opening Question:** Did any of you make changes to your media input this past week? (See *last session's challenge*.) How did that go? Did you notice any impact on your internal life?

**Pray to Begin:** Let's begin by centering ourselves with The Lord's Prayer<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> English translations of *The Lord's Prayer*, © 1998, English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC), and used by permission. [www.englishtexts.org](http://www.englishtexts.org)

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.

STORY | 10 min

## Seeking the Shalom of the City

Let's begin with a story from InterVarsity Multiethnic Resource Specialist Connie Anderson.

*Please have someone read this story aloud.*

In my family growing up, conversations about politics were steeped in cynicism. "Politician" was a dirty word. My parents voted, but otherwise were disengaged.

When my husband and I moved our family into a small, very secular, inner-ring suburb, I prayed for opportunities to share the love of Jesus. In my mind, there was a clear distinction between "spiritual" activities like leading Bible studies and "secular" activities like getting involved in community organizations, and I was focused on the spiritual. But when a neighbor asked if I would help with a simple door-to-door survey about a bike race in our community, I agreed. It seemed like a good way to meet some neighbors.

Several of us attended a City Council meeting to present the results of our survey. I fully expected the meeting to be utterly boring, but I was in for a shock!

Clearly, most of the Council members were true public servants. They listened respectfully and gave well-reasoned explanations for their votes on the bike race. One member, however, was irrationally argumentative about the most trivial things. He showed several other signs of dementia, too. His behavior made it very difficult for the City Council to move through their agenda. I was only visiting that night, but was totally frustrated; I couldn't imagine how the other Council members could be expected to work in that situation.

I wondered how in the world this man could ever have been elected! Then the realization hit me – *I had voted for this man, simply because his name was familiar! People like me were the reason we had such a dysfunctional City Council!*



In that moment, I determined never to vote in ignorance again. I realized that I was overly informed on national races – I knew the names of the candidates’ dogs! – but I knew very little about local politics. In various casual conversations I shared my City Council experience and my subsequent realization with various friends and neighbors. These were very well-educated people, yet almost all of them also admitted that when it came to local politics, they had been voting in ignorance. I was embarrassed by my own irresponsibility and horrified to realize that I was not the exception.

My concern for the well-being of my community led me to get to know the City Council and School Board members and candidates personally. When elections neared, I sent emails to my local friends, sharing who I was voting for and why. I was careful to speak about each candidate factually and respectfully, even if I didn’t recommend voting for them. Soon I discovered that my emails were being widely shared and had gone “small-town viral.” Community members regularly thanked me for taking the time to learn about local politics because they did not have the bandwidth to do it themselves.

In each subsequent election cycle, I shared my personal recommendations for City Council and School Board races, and the people I recommended, whether they were Republicans or Democrats, won the seats. Fortunately, these public servants were able to work well together to bring greater flourishing to our little community. I definitely had to laugh when local leaders started referring to me as the community’s “kingmaker” because this was so unexpected, and so far from the cynicism and disengagement of my parents’ kitchen table.

According to my earlier categories, my political involvement was “secular,” yet I knew that a big part of loving my neighbors involved taking the time to serve my community in this way. Interestingly, because I had earned so much trust by doing this, numerous people began to turn to me as an unofficial community chaplain, too. I had many opportunities to pray with people who would never have opened up to a pastor or priest, and I even had the honor of leading an elected official to faith on our screened porch! When we moved away, one very secular acquaintance posted on my Facebook wall: “I hate to see you go. Every time I walk my dog past your house it gives me a sense of peace to know that you are there. Thank you for all the ways you have served our community through the years.”

God had invited me to seek the shalom of the city, and I’m so glad I said yes!

## RESPONSE

Let's take a moment to reflect on how we are responding emotionally to this story.

1. What emotions came up for you as you heard this story?

*Potential Examples:*

- *"I felt skeptical because I can't imagine a community that wouldn't be entrenched in warring political parties. I feel cheated and angry that our generation has never experienced this."*
- *"I felt challenged by the idea that what I would have considered secular activities could be part of following God. That feels hopeful and affirming."*
- *"I felt inspired to learn more about local politics as a way of loving the literal neighbors in my community."*

2. How do you want to serve those around you individually and what policies that you can advocate for that would lead to their flourishing? **Write down your answer in the first box on your handout.**

## SCRIPTURE STUDY | 30 min

# Reflecting God's Shalom in Our Communities

## INTRODUCTION

This Scripture passage is from the Old Testament again, meaning that it was long before Jesus was born. Taking place around 590 BCE, the book of Jeremiah is actually a letter from the Prophet Jeremiah to Jewish exiles in Babylon, the pagan empire that had defeated Israel and taken many captives. Jeremiah wrote this letter to combat the false prophets who were wrongly assuring people that their exile was ending soon, implying that the Israelites should live with a short-term view, not bothering to build or plant or care about their current context. In contrast, Jeremiah accurately prophesied that they would still be living in Babylon another 70 years.

Jeremiah 29:11 is an oft-quoted (and often misused) verse in Christian circles. It frequently shows up on graduation cards, implying that God's plan is for the new graduate to experience nothing but happiness and success in life. In context, however, it is written to a distraught and grieving people living as a persecuted minority in a

strange land, and it's God's instructions for them as exiles who will not be released nearly as soon as the false prophets had been telling them they would.

Even though we are not in the Israelites' situation, in a broader sense, those of us who are followers of Jesus live as spiritual exiles. Our true citizenship is in the Kingdom of God, but we live in a world that operates very differently. We, too, have a choice to make: do we just focus on getting to our real home, heaven, or should we spend time and energy caring for the people and environment around us? Is this an either/or proposition?

### PASSAGE: JEREMIAH 29:4-14 (NRSVue)

<sup>4</sup> Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup> Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup> Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. <sup>7</sup> But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. <sup>8</sup> For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to your dreams that you dream, <sup>9</sup> for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord. <sup>10</sup> For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup> For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. <sup>12</sup> Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. <sup>13</sup> When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, <sup>14</sup> I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

### OBSERVATION QUESTIONS

1. Who are the characters and what is happening?
2. What instructions does God give to the Israelites? What promises does he give them?
3. What tensions or challenges between characters do you see in the text?

## INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think God told the Israelites to build houses, plant gardens, marry, and have children in Babylon? How would you imagine they felt about these instructions? What might this reveal about His character?
2. In verse 7, the word “welfare” is the Hebrew word “shalom,” which often means peace between all relationships and points towards collective prosperity and wholeness. What does this say about how God views the Babylonians?
3. What resistance might the Israelites feel toward God’s call in this passage? Do you see anything in this passage that might make it easier for them to obey God in this?

## APPLICATION QUESTIONS

1. In the United States, many people feel like politics is a strange and maybe even hostile land. Perhaps some feel exiled like political wanderers. What would it look like to metaphorically “build houses, plant gardens, and have children” in this current situation?
2. When we are under oppression, it feels extremely difficult to seek the welfare of our oppressors. Yet God commands it here, and even says that the fate of the Israelites is linked to the fate of Babylon. What would it look like to love those who look like political oppressors, to pray for them, and to seek their shalom? Take a moment to write down a prayer and possibly share it with those in your group.
3. Christians are not in the Israelites’ political conditions in the United States. Yet, all followers of Jesus live as spiritual exiles. Since our true citizenship is in the Kingdom of God, until Jesus returns, we recognize that our world operates very differently. Jeremiah instructs the Israelites to put down roots and to seek the good of their Babylonian neighbors and communities. He also assures them that their situation of exile is not permanent, that they have a future hope. As followers of Jesus, it can be wearying to keep seeking justice and shalom in our very broken world. How can the assurance of Jesus’ return give us hope and endurance?

## CONCLUSION

In this session, we started with Connie’s story, where she initially distinguished between “spiritual” and “secular” activities and was surprised when Jesus led her to serve her

community through getting involved in local politics. In our Scripture, we saw the people of God being instructed to put down roots and seek the well-being and flourishing of their surrounding communities – even though they were living as exiles in enemy land. Along with this instruction, though, they were given the promise that their exile would end and that God had a future and a hope for them. As we consider how we are called to engage with politics, we are called to seek shalom right here in our broken world – including God’s shalom for those who would harm us. And we can do this with confidence and joy because the Scriptures promise us that we have an assured future and hope; King Jesus has promised to return and make all things new!

### CHALLENGE

Ask Jesus to show you your next step toward seeking the welfare of your neighbors and even oppressors (either those in your immediate community or across the globe) through political involvement or social action.

*Potential Examples:*

- *Participate in a protest/speak out about oppression that you have not personally experienced.*
- *Attend a meeting of your local school board, city council, or student government so that you can start to become better informed about issues, needs, and leaders in your community.*
- *With your Christian community, find practical ways to partner with others in seeking the flourishing of your campus.*
- *Ask a friend to hold you accountable to take that next step.*

### CLOSING | 5 min

*If you have time, please continue to the Beyond the Text section!*

*Make sure to thank participants for coming and invite them back, sharing the date, time and location for the next meeting.*

*Ex. “Thank you for coming today!”*

*If you look at the bottom of your handout, you’ll see a QR code. This code takes you to an electronic version of today’s study. And if you’d like to dig deeper, the electronic version also includes an excerpt from the book Twelve Lies that Hold America Captive and the Truth that Sets Us Free about Shalom versus the American Dream.*

*Please save this handout along with the ones you will get in each succeeding session. We'll refer back to them as a way of reviewing what we've learned.*

**Closing Prayer:** Lord, thank you for your love towards us, your love for all people, and Your Will for us to be reconciled to you, one another, and all of creation. Give us the strength, courage and wisdom to love you with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.

*Scan the QR code for more resources  
on God's Good News About Politics*



BEYOND THE TEXT (OPTIONAL) | 30 min

## Seeking God's Shalom Means Leaving the American Dream

*Please read the following excerpt silently.<sup>1</sup>*

*Read time: 5 mins*

Jeremiah and the Israelites suffered brutal oppression under the Babylonians. Yet, God called them to seek the shalom of those who oppressed them along with their own. Mirroring this reality, the Israelites suffered under a violent, exploitative Roman occupation and Jesus commands Peter and the disciples to love and pray for their enemies and practice generosity towards them. In Luke 5:1-11, we see Peter's call to ministry. This is Peter's moment of profound obedience, courage, and faith. First, in response to Jesus' entering his fishing boat, Peter pushes out from shore and allows Jesus to teach the crowd. Second, Peter is willing to push farther from shore even after he had fished all night with no success. Peter was likely exhausted and discouraged. If there were no fish, he would have no food and no income. And now here was Jesus, a carpenter's son, telling Peter, a fisherman who knows his trade, to go into deeper water and drop his now clean nets in the middle of the day where no fish would be anyway. Peter knows this isn't the best time or place to fish, but he obeys. And because of his obedience, Peter witnesses a miracle. At a time and in a place where it made no human sense for him to catch fish, there are more fish than he can carry to shore, and he has to ask for help.

So what could be Christ's call to us in our context? In White American Folk Religion, under the banner of the American dream, Peter would try to hire Jesus and compliment him on his natural talents and abilities to catch fish. Or perhaps he would interview Jesus or try to get his three-step process for what to do when he can't catch fish. At a minimum, in the American dream, Peter would have taken the fish to market and cashed in on this great catch. But instead, Peter takes a step of courage. He leaves his business, training, income, and all that comes with that to be with Jesus and learn the ways of God. By faith, he puts down his nets and accepts the invitation to become a fisher of men and one of Jesus' disciples.

Upon graduating from Columbia, I told billionaire entrepreneur John Kluge that I would be coming on staff with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship to direct the New York City

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<sup>1</sup> Walton, Jonathan P. *Twelve Lies That Hold America Captive: And the Truth That Sets Us Free*. Westmont: IVP, 2019, 99.

Urban Project. Bear in mind that between 2006 and 2008, John had purchased more than six hundred copies of my books of poetry to share with his family, friends, and colleagues. He and his wife sponsored my spoken word workshops and performances in schools, prisons, and churches. He shared honestly that he thought this job wasn't a good idea and offered to connect me with publishers to continue to grow my career and platform in writing.

I considered his advice and wrestled with what it would mean to raise financial support and live in complete dependence on God and other people for my provision. I struggled with saying no to becoming famous and the idea of exchanging performing in front of fans with sitting in front of fidgety college students. Ultimately though, no matter how I sloshed it around in my brain, the choice was between doing what I was good at and utilizing my gifts for my own comfort and benefit, or being who God called me to be and walking in obedience to Christ. I believe this invitation from God in 2008 set the stage for him to speak clearly to me in 2011 to commit twenty years to his work through me in InterVarsity. I said yes, but not because I believed it was the best idea and would maximize my personal growth and impact. I responded like Peter in Luke 5:5, "I will do as You say."

Now, if this was the American dream at work, at this point in the essay I would give three action steps to be faithful, obedient, and courageous in your own life. But the beginning, middle, and end of this story are about Jesus and what he is doing in the world. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not a road map to "my best life now." It is Christ crucified, buried, and raised from the dead that we might have an eternal place in an eternal family. Peter's story continues not only with faithfulness and courage, but also with disobedience to and rejection of Jesus. We see these difficult moments in Luke 22:54-62. Here the Gospel writer recounts Peter's denials of his relationship with, allegiance to, and knowledge of Christ. Earlier in Luke 22, Jesus said he prayed that Peter's faith would be strengthened to withstand Satan's challenges. Peter asserted that he would follow Jesus to prison and even death. Peter's assertion is met with a predictive rebuke, "I say to you, Peter, the rooster will not crow today until you have denied three times that you know Me" (Luke 22:34).

The next day Jesus was in a vulnerable position, surrounded by enemies, betrayed by a friend, and certainly about to be put to death. And Peter, the rock on which the church is to be built, denies its Cornerstone, Jesus Christ himself—not just once but three times, just as Jesus had said he would.

Because the kingdom of God comes close to us in the person of Jesus, Christ exercises His power to confer an identity on us that is rooted in a place that is unshakeable. Our



actions don't determine our access to his table; his act of sacrificing himself confirms our entry. Jesus modeled for us how to seek shalom and pursue it. And so we follow His example, seeking the shalom of all people made in the image of God.

### DISCUSS THE TEXT

1. Followers of Jesus are not primarily citizens of the world, but citizens of the Kingdom of God. So, how does God's vision of our lives in the United States conflict with the American Dream?
2. If you were to "leave your net" like Peter to "seek the shalom of Babylon" like the Israelites were called to, what might that look like? What resistance would you face?
3. Ask God for a vision of what a life fully given over to Him might look like and for the courage and community to live it out.

# God's Good News about Politics for You

Total Time: 50 min

## INTRODUCTION | 10 min

*If there are new people, be sure everyone gets introduced. Even if everyone was here last time, make sure everyone knows each other's names.*

Welcome to the final session of our discussion of the intersection of faith and politics! We have covered a lot of ground in the Bible—In Genesis, we looked at God's creation and our place in it. In 1 Samuel, we examined the Israelites' desire for a king. Then in Luke, we looked at the temptation of Jesus. Finally in Jeremiah, we reflected on the Israelites' call to seek the shalom of their oppressors.

**Opening Question:** Which of the past four sessions have resonated the most with you? Why?

**Pray to Begin:** Let's begin by centering ourselves with The Lord's Prayer<sup>1</sup>.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.

## STORY | 10 min

### Looking Back

Looking back, in Session 1 of this five-part series, we saw that God's starting point is that humans were created in His image and given the responsibility of stewarding His creation here on earth. We were challenged to lean in when we experience dissonance with others, to seek to view others (including political opponents) as God's image-bearers, and to look at politics as one important means to live as God's image-bearers in caring for others and for the earth.

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<sup>1</sup> English translations of *The Lord's Prayer*, © 1998, English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC), and used by permission. [www.englishtexts.org](http://www.englishtexts.org)

Then, in Session 2 we saw the dangers of putting ourselves and our ideas of what's best on the throne of our lives, and the need to bow to Jesus as our King. We also discussed the human tendency to look to kings or political leaders to do what only God can do - deliver us from evil, protect us, and provide for us. Political leaders can have a huge impact, but as followers of Jesus, our true hope can never be in humans, but only in King Jesus.

Next, in Session 3 we looked at the temptations that this world offers, especially the temptation of power and the temptation of seeking "good" results through ungodly means. It's so tempting to try to justify mean-spirited words and actions in the political realm because "it's a dirty game," but God's work must be done God's way, and that is always the way of sacrificial love, the way of the cross.

Lastly, in Session 4, we started with Connie's story, where she initially distinguished between "spiritual" and "secular" activities and was surprised when Jesus led her to serve her community through getting involved in local politics. In the Scripture study, we saw the people of God being instructed to put down roots and seek the well-being and flourishing of their surrounding communities – even though they were living as exiles in enemy land. Along with this instruction, though, they were given the promise that their exile would end and that God had a future and a hope for them. As we consider how we are called to engage with politics, we are called to seek shalom right here in our broken world – including God's shalom for those who would harm us. And we can do this with confidence and joy because the scriptures promise us that we have an assured future and hope; King Jesus has promised to return and make all things new!

## RESPONSE

Take out your worksheets from the last four weeks and reflect on your responses. Looking at the session five worksheet, answer the question in the first box: **What is God's good news about politics to you and your community?**

Take some time to reflect and write, then discuss your answers.

## Politics with the Mind of Christ

### INTRODUCTION

Preston Sprinkle in his book, *Exiles: The Church in the Shadows of Empire*, highlights a key passage in Philippians that can help us understand how to live out God's good news about politics. Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Philippi while he was enduring a two-year prison sentence in Caesarea. Philippi had been founded as a Roman colony, with most residents proudly possessing Roman citizenship. The Christians in Philippi knew that if they didn't fully embrace the Roman way of life, they could end up imprisoned like Paul or crucified like Jesus. In spite of this certain suffering, Paul's invitation is not to embrace the empire but to follow Jesus.

In Philippians 1:27a, Paul writes, "Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." Preston Sprinkle points out that the word translated to "live your life" is actually the Greek word *politeuomai*, which has the root word of "polis/politics" embedded in it. In a sense, Paul is commanding the Philippians to "do politics" in a manner worthy of the gospel of Jesus! Paul is reminding them to live as citizens of Jesus' kingdom, not as citizens of the empire around them. He continues on with a call for believers to adopt the "mind of Christ."

### PASSAGE: PHILIPPIANS 1:27, 2:3-11 (NRSVue)

<sup>27</sup> Only, live your life [Greek: *politeuomai*] in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel [...] <sup>23</sup> Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, <sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, <sup>8</sup> he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. <sup>9</sup> Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

## OBSERVATION QUESTIONS

1. What repetitions, patterns, or themes do you see?
2. What else stands out or resonates?
3. What tensions or challenges between characters do you see in the text?

## INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS

1. Imagine that you were in the congregation receiving this letter from Paul. He is in prison and you don't know how long he is going to be there, if he will be martyred or if he will be released. How might people be feeling in response to his suffering?
2. How do you think the Philippians would have reacted when Paul wrote to have the mind of Christ? What about the other commands in the passage (i.e., humble yourself, do nothing out of vain conceit, look after the interests of others, etc.)?
3. What might be some of the obstacles for those in Philippi responding to this call from Paul? What opposition might they face from family, friends, or the government?

## APPLICATION QUESTIONS

1. Unlike the Philippians, American Christians are not an oppressed minority. If "live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" is to be applied in how we steward our power and resources toward the flourishing of all people with our institutions, what might that look like?
2. In the United States, going to prison or being killed for how we decide to steward our resources and positions of power because of our faith is highly unlikely. But opposition and suffering can take different forms. What might you and your community encounter in choosing faithfulness to Christ?

### *Potential Examples:*

- *"Because of my faith, I started speaking out about injustices I saw in local politics, but my friends didn't understand. They think Christians shouldn't bring their beliefs into the public square."*
- *"I invited an international friend to my home for a holiday. My family shared offensive stereotypes during a meal and I lovingly confronted them. My parents were angry and ultimately my friend and I decided to leave."*

- *"I chose to mobilize voters and vote differently from my family in an election. I got angry phone calls, emails, texts and DM's from family members questioning my faith, calling me names, and threatening to never to talk with me again."*

## CONCLUSION

In each of our 4 Sessions, you read stories from the authors of this discussion guide and their wrestling with Jesus and politics. In Session 1, Area Director Andrew Berg shared that even though he shared a faith with his classmate Liz, they differed greatly on how they approached politics. And in session 2, Andrew shared vulnerably about how studying scripture in a community where he could bring his beliefs and his questions set him off on a journey where God could reveal Himself in new and powerful ways. In Session 3, Senior Resource Specialist, Jonathan Walton reflected on the simplicity of his upbringing and the challenge of how his mother followed Jesus in rural Virginia. And then in Session 4, Connie Anderson, Multiethnic Resource Specialist with InterVarsity, opened up about how far God has brought her from a family where talk of politics was forbidden to actively participating in city council meetings.

Each of these stories required conflict, confrontation, and vulnerability.

Jonathan entered into the tension with his mother and the physical and emotional distance between where he is now and where he came from. Connie did similar work to live differently from her background for the sake of the Gospel and vulnerably confessed her ignorance while engaging in the political process. And Andrew and Liz lovingly confronted one another in pursuit of faithfulness at the intersection of their faith and their politics. Though certainly not perfectly, Jonathan, Connie and Andrew sought to put their thoughts, actions, and feelings under the lordship of Jesus.

Answer one of the following questions and discuss with a partner in your group:

1. How do your friends and family approach conflict and confrontation?

*Potential Examples:*

- *"We sweep things under the rug and avoid hard topics like politics. We just don't want people to be upset."*
- *"We acknowledge what's happening, schedule time and have honest conversations."*
- *"My \_\_\_\_\_ dominates the conversation. Everyone has to think like them."*

2. Who are the people and what are some of the circumstances that help you feel safe to be vulnerable?

*Potential Examples:*

- *"I can always talk with \_\_\_\_\_. They listen, don't argue, and we can share honestly with each other."*
- *"I like my/our \_\_\_\_\_ group. We have been together for a long time and been through so much."*

## CHALLENGE

You wrote down what God's Good News about politics is on your worksheet. Take a few minutes now to consider who in your life you could talk to about this (friend, family, neighbor, pastor, etc). Share about it with a partner and pray for an opportunity to talk with this person in this coming week.

## CLOSING | 5 min

*Make sure to thank participants for coming and invite them to whatever opportunities you have next for continuing life together. Share the dates, time and location.*

*Ex. "Thank you for joining in this conversation. We invite you to stay connected and consider checking out these next steps (ex. Bible study, InterVarsity Conference, Large Group gathering, worship night, etc).*

*If you look at the bottom of your handout, you'll see a QR code. This code takes you to an electronic version of today's study."*

**Closing Prayer:** Lord, thank you for your love towards us, your love for all people, and Your Will for us to be reconciled to you, one another, and all of creation. Give us the strength, courage and wisdom to love you with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.

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