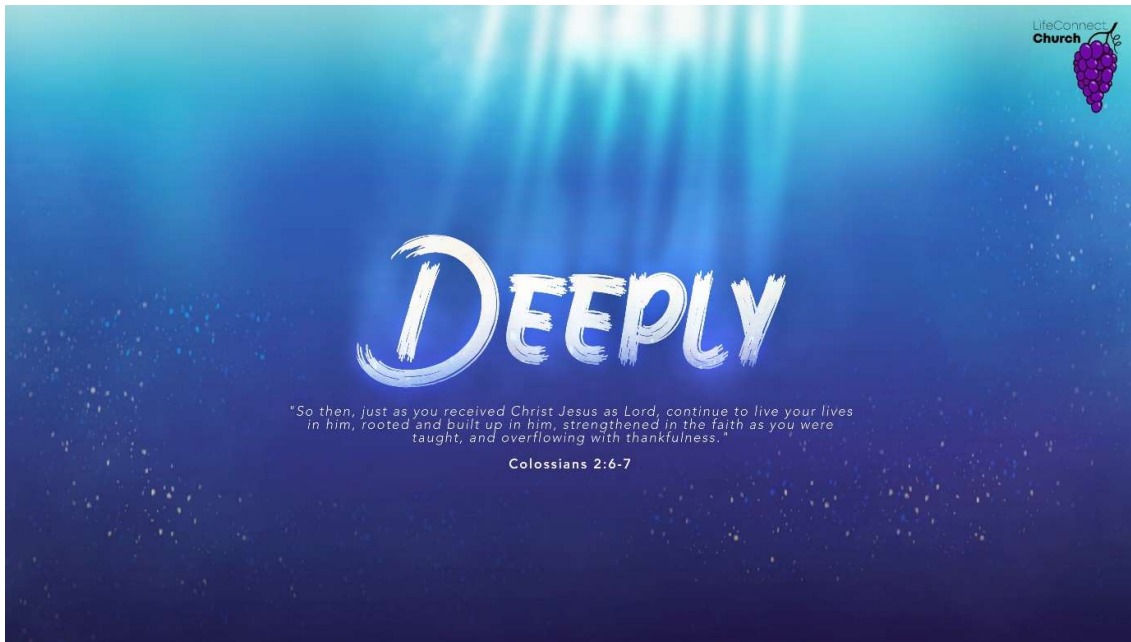




2023 LifeConnect Group Material

About Deeply

Deeply is an adverb and means 'far down' or 'intensely'. This year, we as a church will go deeper in knowing, following, and being with God, while also seeking to go deeper in His word, in worshipping and in serving Him.

Indian revolutionary Mahatma Gandhi made this disturbing comment: "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." While this statement was made several decades ago, the sentiment and resulting admonition still ring true in our times. Our Christian values must mirror the values of Christ that He modelled in the scriptures. Micah 6:8 states what God requires of us: "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." The word of God inspires and encourages us but also serves to correct and reprove us. It is a 'double-edged sword', intended to complete and equip us for the Christian life.

Jesus' first sermon - "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand" - both encourages and convicts. Repentance is a relational word. We must not shy away from this act of repentance as it is God's ordained means by which we grow in sanctification. It is for this reason that much of the Apostle's writings to the church, particularly those of the Apostle Paul, are written not only in encouragement but in admonition (warning and correction). God's Word must deeply burn in our hearts to convict us.

God has forewarned us in Revelation Chapter 3, in which Jesus speaks to the Church of Laodicea and confronts their 'lukewarm' state. Lukewarm means neither hot nor cold. God prefers that we be either hot or cold in our pursuit of Him, not a lukewarm mixture of both. To those who remain on the fence He warns, "I will spit you out of my mouth." The worst possible situation for one who identifies themselves as a follower of Christ is half-heartedness - mediocrity. Mediocre is a term used by mountaineers when they tramp a treacherous mountain but failed to reach the summit. Read and take heed the warning in the parable of the five foolish virgins (read Matthew 25).

All this to say, we must not compromise, we must not be double minded. We must have a pure and sincere devotion to Him. If we believe the Christian faith to be true, then that belief must permeate our behaviour, thinking, and lifestyle, else it is of no benefit to us. Let us be genuinely inspired to do what the Apostle Paul encouraged us to strive after - to press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:14).

Frank Turek once made this simple yet profound statement: "Christianity is not Christians, Christianity is Christ." The intrinsic value of Christianity is that we are connected to Christ. Like a famous dress sold for \$1,267,500 in an auction, it was sold for that price not because of the fabric it comprised, but because it was the dress worn by Marilyn Monroe at President JFK's birthday. It's not the object but rather the source of the object that makes it valuable.

You are God's masterpiece. This is what the Word of the Lord says about the Church in Ephesians 2:10; "For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things He planned for us long ago." You are valuable because of Spirit of Christ dwells within you and you are being conformed to His image (Romans 8:29).

In Ezekiel 47, God brought Ezekiel to an ankle-deep, knee-deep, and waist-deep water experience but did not allow him to pass through the deeper water. I believe it was not intended for him to do so, as Jesus was not yet revealed. Rather we, the Church, are the ones intended to enter into the deeper waters of experiencing God. By His death, Jesus bridged the infinite divide between us and God, preparing the way for us to know God in relationship. He wants us to follow Him that He may show us the Father. He wants us to grow in our relationship with Him. It is only by being with Him, that we can worship Him for who He is.

Going deeply is an invitation made available by Christ. Come, let us experience Him deeply.

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1. Deeply knowing Him
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4. Deeply in His Words
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Instructions

This material contains six topics to help LifeConnect group leaders facilitate their group's discussion. It is designed to stimulate healthy conversation. It is intended to make the job of leading less burdensome. Read it through prayerfully. Add your own "flavour" to it within the confines of the teaching of God's Word.

Some topics are designed for more than one session. Break the topic into several sessions as you see fit. Go through each topic slowly. It is important that the group absorbs the topic well before progressing to the next.

Avoid leading LifeConnect groups like a bible study (i.e., only one person talking for the entire session). The LifeConnect environment is meant to provide opportunities for us to learn from one another. Gently guide the conversation back to the topic when it is veering away from it. Ask the questions, listen emphatically, and discern how the Spirit is leading you to progress.

God's grace is sufficient for you.

Deeply knowing Him

And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

John 17:3

Ice Breaker

Ask the group if they have been to a country or a place that is foreign to them. Somewhere where the language, culture, food, and the way they do things are different. What was it like? What thoughts and emotions did being in a foreign environment evoke? How did you approach the experience?

If any have not been to a foreign place, ask them what thoughts and emotions they expect they would experience in such a situation?

Introduction

The profound teaching of John 17:3 is that the gift of eternal life is about much more than a destination; it is predominantly about truly, deeply and intimately knowing God. Heaven will not be a place full of foreigners, but citizens who are familiar with its ways and 'lingo'. The defining characteristic of Heaven is the unveiled presence of God - the place where we will see Him as He truly is (1 John 3:2). Without God, it would not be Heaven. Thus, eternal life is the state of our being *in Christ*.

For Christians, earthly life becomes a preparatory place where we get to know and grow in our knowledge of Him – his ways, his character, and his language. It was not intended to be our destination. It is not our eternal state. Jesus exhorted us to not lay up treasures on earth as these are not permanent, but rather to lay up treasures in heaven as these are eternal (Matthew 6:19-21). Isaiah 55:8 says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord." This passage alone makes it clear that there are a lot of things to learn and know about God.

1. Get to know His ways.

People often say, "God works in mysterious ways," because they do not put sufficient effort into learning of His past deeds, His nature, or His character. The truth is, God wants us to understand His ways (Deuteronomy 29:29). It is for this reason that He made and is making Himself known to us through His words.

As for God, His way is blameless; The word of the Lord is tried; He is a shield to all who take refuge in Him.

Psalms 18:30

a. God works in His own time.

There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every matter under heaven.

Ecclesiastes 3:1, NASB

God's chosen timing of events is His way of displaying that our life is in His hands.

b. God works in seasons.

"While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."

Genesis 8:22

He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding. he reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him.

Daniel 2:21-22

Seasons are a demonstration of the fact that God has designed this life to consist of new beginnings and necessary endings.

c. God works according to His Sovereign will.

Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.

Psalms 115:3

Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.

Proverbs 19:21

God has given us the freedom to make choices and act according to our desires, but our freedom exists within the domain of His Sovereign will.

Group Discussion:

- Which of God's ways do you find it difficult understand or accept. Why?
- Knowing that these are some of the ways in which God chooses to act and work, how can you live your life to, for, and with God?

2. Get to know His character.

Ask your group what some of God's attributes are.

Loving, compassionate, gracious, kind, and merciful (Nehemiah 9:31, 1 John 4:8, Psalm 86:15) are some of His many attributes. But for the purpose of discussion, we will focus on four.

a. God is absolutely good.

For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving,

1 Timothy 4:4

And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments."

Mark 10:18

God is the definition of good. Everything God does is an expression of His goodness. As believers, God always has our best interest at heart (Romans 8:28).

b. God is wholly just.

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you.

Psalm 89:14

For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

Colossians 3:25

Do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.

Zechariah 7:10

God is the definition of just. Justice is the foundation of His throne. He is perfectly upright and fair in His treatment of His creation. He does not like partiality and mistreatment of others. He will punish wrongdoers.

c. God is totally holy.

There is none holy like the Lord: for there is none besides you; there is no rock like our God.

1 Samuel 2:2

...but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

1 Peter 1:15-16

God's holiness sets Him wholly apart from other beings. There is no stain of evil or impurity in God. As He is holy, He hates sin and does not take pleasure in wickedness (Psalm 5:4). Holiness is imputed; therefore, we can only attain holiness through our relationship with Christ.

d. God is surely faithful.

God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

1 Corinthians 1:9

He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

1 Thessalonians 5:24

If we are faithless, he remains faithful— for he cannot deny himself.

2 Timothy 2:13

God is faithful and true. His faithfulness will be on full display in the last days as He makes good on every promise He has ever made, both to bless and redeem the righteous, and to judge and condemn the wicked. He is steadfast, firm, and loyal even in our struggles and failures.

Group Discussion:

- Which of God's characteristics you can identify with? Which of God's characteristics do you have difficulty in understanding?
- Knowing God's character and attributes, how would you appropriate your life to His character?

3. Get to know His language

Understanding God's language is not about knowing some heavenly tongue or being able to speak Hebrew, Greek or Latin. It's not about the structure but rather the mode - understanding how He speaks to us when we are spending time in His Word, in prayer, seeking Him in times of decision, engaging with people, and facing circumstances in life.

a. Love is a language of God.

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

1 John 4:7-8

Whenever God communicates through instruction, encouragement, commendation, affirmation, discipline, or admonition He does so out of His love for us. The best way to respond is to be honest with Him even in times when we are hurting, anxious, afraid, or in doubt. We ought to walk in this same language of love here on earth by loving one another through the manner we speak and speaking the truth in love.

b. Faith is a language of God.

For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame."

Romans 10:11

...for we walk by faith, not by sight.

2 Corinthians 5:7

Jesus answered them, "Do you now believe?"

John 16:31

God desires for us is to communicate with Him in belief, because without faith it is impossible to please Him (Hebrews 11:6). For He calls into being things that do not exist. (cf Genesis 1:3, Romans 4:17)

Group Discussion:

- Which of God's modes of language do you need to grow in your understanding of? Why?
- How can we develop this language over time? What baby steps could you take to learn God's 'lingo'?

Summary:

We grow in knowledge of God's ways and character as we put our faith and trust in Him. By faith we pursue His promises in the knowledge of His mighty deeds, and through trust we live in reliance upon Him in light of who He is. God wants us to believe in His power and trust in His nature. Faith compels us to act in accordance with His ways. Trust compels us to rest in His ways. We get to know God as His works unfold.

Deeply following Him

And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

Matthew 4:19

Ice Breaker

Ask the group which leader they would prefer: A leader who leads from the front or a leader leading from behind? Why?

Introduction:

There are two major schools of leadership thought within the military academy: to lead from the front or lead from behind. US Generals George Patton and George Marshall are examples of military leaders who effectively led from the front and from behind respectively. This style of leadership is not just confined to the military. Martin Luther King Jr. was an exemplary leader who led from the front to advance the American civil rights movement, while Nelson Mandela is a great example of a leader who led his people from behind (from a prison cell in fact) to fight for the anti-apartheid cause.

We lead from the front to model, to inspire, and to connect with people. This is best practice for start-ups and new endeavours. We lead from behind to direct, to empower, and to innovate. This leadership style is best used to sustain and grow an organisation. Jesus displays both styles of leadership. While on earth, He led from the front. Since His ascension to Heaven, He has led the church from behind (figuratively as 'the head of the church').

Jesus' manner of developing leaders is by calling them to follow Him. As Christians, we ought not seek to develop new leadership principles. Whilst God given us our own unique personality and character, we have only one model we look to as an example to develop good leadership – Christ. The Apostle Paul said, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ!" (1 Corinthians 11:1). Good leadership is sustained fueled and sustained by constant following of Christ.

As you follow Christ more and more deeply, you will develop an understanding of there is "one thing" constant in following God. This "one thing" is evident in the lives of a number of faithful men of God who did great exploits for His glory.

1. Elisha's "one thing".

And Elisha said, Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me."

2 Kings 2:9b

The prophet Elijah did many mighty exploits for God (*read 1 Kings 17 and 18 for those accounts*). But his apprentice, the prophet Elisha, received a double portion of his anointing. Elisha's secret? He kept on following Elijah. Three times Elijah told Elisha not to follow him. Instead, Elisha said, "Nope, I will not leave you." (2 Kings 2). His persistent pursuit of his master resulted in him receiving a double portion of Elijah's anointing from God.

2. David's "one thing".

One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in His temple.

Psalm 27:4

David became one of the greatest kings of Israel, perhaps even one of the greatest kings of all time. David's exploits done for God are legendary. He killed the best and fiercest fighter of Philistines, Goliath, with a single stone. He slew the Syrian armies of seven hundred chariots and forty thousand horsemen in battle (2 Samuel 10:18 | 1 Chronicles 19:18). Israel was feared by all her enemies under his leadership. Just as David's son, Solomon, testified:

When a man's ways please the Lord, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him" (Proverbs 16:7).

David's secret? His undivided devotion and attention to God.

3. Paul's "one thing".

Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:13-14

Paul was a latecomer as an apostle. And yet his missionary achievements are unparalleled. He was a staunch Jew and a former pharisee, yet he dedicated his life to minister to the gentiles. Under inspiration of the Holy Spirit he wrote two thirds of the letters (epistles) in the New Testament. The impact of his work and ministry for God still reverberates throughout the Church and indeed the whole world and will continue to do so until Christ's return.

Paul's secret? His relentless pursuit of God through Christ Jesus.

4. Jesus' "one thing".

For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.

John 6:38

Jesus, the Son of Man, is the role model for all to emulate. Jesus, being the Son of God, lived on earth with one objective – to do the will of the One who sent Him. This is the ultimate expression of unity, oneness, and relationship of the triune God. We sing this contemporary song in church, *My life is not my own, to you I belong. I give myself; I give myself to you"* But for Jesus it was more than a song or creed. He lived it.

No wonder His mission was a complete success when He completely abided in the will of the Father.

Group Discussion:

- What is following Jesus for you? How do you do it?

Summary:

This idea of a “one thing” is also known as a rule of life. Your mission, your purpose, and your reason for existence. Have you ever thought about your “one thing” about your relationship to God? If not, start with following Him. Start with baby steps. Commit to reading and reflecting upon His Word. Devote yourself to a regular prayer time in which you can count your blessings and give thanks to Him. Commit your life to serving others through the ministries provided for by the Church. As you deeply follow him, your “one thing” will become easy to articulate.

Deeply being with Jesus

Ice Breaker

Ask the group if they have ever been in love? What behaviour and actions do you display when you really like a person? *(If you have not experienced this, try to provide a hypothetical answer.)*

(Answers you should expect to hear: "You want to spend time with the person.", "You want to get close with the person", etc.).

Introduction:

In contemporary education, one of the practices theorised to be optimal for learning among students is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) method. This is based on the "Proximity Principle". Proximity simply means to be near or close to something or someone. The key concept is to be close with something or someone to achieve a desired goal.

This is not a novel concept. In the old days, young people would acquire skills through apprenticeship. They would go under the tutelage of an expert. First, they would watch and learn; then they would do it under supervision until they become skillful. In an apprenticeship, proximity with your *maestro* is the key to mastery. Proximity leads to impartation. It is by being close with the master of our soul that we get to know Him. He is always inviting us to come to Him:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Matthew 11:28

"Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool."

Isaiah 1:18

Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

James 4:8

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

Matthew 19:14

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Colossians 2:6-7

Steve Jobs, found of Apple, liked to hold meetings with his 'think tank' by calling them to walk with him. Innovations, 'light bulb' moments, and breakthroughs at Apple occurred during these walks. Similarly, God wants us to walk with Him and in Him so that we can be:

1. Rooted in Him.

The word rooted is a perfect term for this context. It connotes two things: being fixed and receiving life (nutrients) from a life-giving source. Roots provide nutrients to the vines which enables the tree to bear fruit. The deeper the roots, the more nutrients and the stronger the tree.

2. Built up in Him.

In scripture, “built up” is used as a present participle, which is to say it means it is an ongoing process; we have been and still are being “built up”. We are a work in progress. It also connotes the idea of “building upon”, in reference to Christ as the main foundation of our life and our faith.

3. Established in the faith.

“Establish” is also a present participle, which means we are continually being established in the faith. We are being settled in our faith. Only when we go through life’s experiences do we strengthen our faith and trust in Him.

Summary:

Rooted, built up, and established are all terms related to an implied foundation. Just like foundations are critical to the building of structures, being with Jesus is critical to our Christian resolve and must not be neglected. When Mary chose to stay with Jesus, Jesus said to Martha, “Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.” (Read Luke 10:38-42)

Group Discussion:

1. What are your current obstacles in being with Jesus?
2. In what ways you can develop and nurture the practice of deeply being with Him?

Deeply In His Word

...like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation...

1 Peter 2:2

For though by this time, you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

Hebrews 5:12-14

Ice Breaker

As a group, discuss the ways in which a deprivation of the physical essentials of life - food, water, and sleep - can impact the ability of the human body to function and to grow. Has anyone in the group ever experienced a prolonged period without food, water or sleep, or witnessed someone who has? If so, what was it like?

Introduction:

In his first epistle, Apostle Peter adjures us to desire knowledge from the Word of God in the same way an infant desires to be fed its milk. A hungry baby will cry relentlessly until it is fed; its need to be nourished becomes its singular focus until its desire is fulfilled. Without that milk, the baby cannot grow, and if deprived for too long it will become malnourished and underweight, and in extreme cases, starve to death.

Spiritually, the situation is no different. If we fail to feed regularly on the Word of God, which is the only source of spiritual nourishment available to man, then we will cease growing in our faith and our understanding of God. Go too long without this food for our spirit and we will starve our soul.

The scriptures attest to our need of them in all areas of life:

But He answered and said, It is written, MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD.”

Matthew 4:4

The unfolding of Your words gives light; It gives understanding to the simple.

Psalms 119:130

Heaven and earth will disappear, but my words will never disappear.”

Matthew 24:35

As in our physical bodies we cannot remain infants forever, nor can we afford to do so spiritually. The writer of Hebrews also employed milk as an analogy in writing to believers, but in a slightly different manner to Peter. Hebrews 5:12-14 exhorts us to grow beyond milk (a bare-minimum understanding of God's Word), instead feeding our souls on solid food (committed, deep, lifelong study of the scripture) as we mature. Practically speaking, there are three key things we must do to go deeper in God's word.

1. Read

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge...

Hosea 4:6

God spoke through the prophet Hosea to rebuke the nation of Israel for neglecting the reading and teaching of His law. At this point in their history, the Israelites were not merely neglecting to obey God's word, but they had even abandoned their duty to know what it said. Their lack of interest in God's Word led swiftly to their violent downfall as a nation at the hands of ungodly kings, after which they were carried off into slavery in foreign lands and away from the favour of God.

...it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.

Luke 1:3-4

While we know almost nothing about the man to whom Luke addressed His gospel (Theophilus), the reasoning he provides as the motivation behind his writing speaks volumes to us. Luke understood that knowledge - indeed, a grasp of the *exact truth* - of God's work in the world was essential. Other biblical writers expressed similar sentiments in their own gospels and epistles. By reading the Word of God, we may know the truth of what we have been taught concerning Him. In order to believe, to trust, and to obey, we must first have knowledge, and the scriptures are the means by which God has seen fit to share that knowledge with us.

Group Discussion:

- How often to you feed your spirit by reading God's word? Are you nourishing your soul enough for it to grow, or are you starve?
- Do you have knowledge of what God says throughout the scriptures, or only in certain books or verses?

2. Study

The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.

Acts 17:10-11

The scriptures commend to us the behaviour of the believers in Berea, who went deeper into the scriptures than a mere cursory reading and instead carefully studied God's word to test everything they were taught.

Once we know the words that God has preserved for us in scripture by reading them regularly, we must commit ourselves to carefully study to turn our knowledge into

understanding. The bible is not written in the form of an encyclopedia, instruction manual or textbook. We must invest time and effort ourselves to discover the consistent themes and instructions that are present throughout God's Word, growing our relationship with Him in the process.

Ways we can study to go deeper in the Word include:

- Reading more slowly through a single book, possibly multiple times, focusing on the flow of thought and key points made by the author.
- Highlighting verses or passages we don't understand during regular reading, and spending time after to research the meaning or historical context. A good biblical commentary can be useful for this.
- Searching the entire bible for all teaching on a particular subject, so that we can develop a full understanding of everything God says (or doesn't say) about a particular issue.

Group Discussion:

- Do you take time to study the bible, rather than just read it? What methods of study seem the most beneficial to you at the current moment? Do you have any other suggestions for good study methods?

3. Memorise

Your word I have treasured in my heart, That I may not sin against You.

Acts 17:10-11

When our knowledge and understanding of the scriptures truly become part of us, such that we can say we "treasure it in our heart", it will then begin to change the way we act. In Hebrew understanding, the heart was the centre of thought (the bowels were the centre of emotion, not the heart). Accordingly, we should understand the psalmist as saying that he has treasured God's Word in his thoughts, and that is what he relies upon to help him act in a way that is pleasing to God.

Memorising scripture - quite literally storing it in our heart - should be our endeavour. Regular reading and study will naturally lead to some level of memorisation, but we can benefit greatly from making a specific effort to memorise particular promises, instructions and encouragements from the bible.

Group Discussion:

- Have you ever tried to memorise parts of God's Word? If you have, in what situations do you find these scriptures come to mind encouraging you or help you act in a godly way?
- Do you have any good strategies to make memorisation easier?

Summary:

It is an unavoidable truth that we cannot follow what we do not know. If we want to follow God and be with Him, we need to know him. God has chosen to make himself known to us through His Word, and it is by reading, studying, and memorising the scriptures that our relationship with Him will grow deeper.

Deeply Worshipping

But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

John 4:23-24

Ice Breaker

As a group, discuss the ways that you behave towards people, things and/or ideas that you respect and cherish. Are there particular reasons why you behave this way towards those things?

Introduction:

Ask a non-religious person "What, or who, do you worship?", and you'll likely receive a slightly confused look. "Worship? I don't believe in God. I don't worship anything."; a response like this is something you might reasonably expect.

In our modern cultures, particularly in the West, our understanding of the word 'worship' has become very simplistic. Most have a poor understanding of worship as a concept, including a failure to recognise that worship is inseparable from our human nature.

Even secular scholars agree (and struggle to explain the reason) that from the very beginnings of recorded human history, man has consistently gravitated towards religious behaviour made evident by acts of worship. The simple reason is because worship is the natural human response to our Creator. It is the way He has designed us, and we can no more choose to stop worshipping than we can choose to shut off our natural sensations of hunger or thirst.

But why don't we all worship our Creator? Why do we so often worship other gods, animals, celebrities, and even ourselves instead? The Apostle Paul explains:

...For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

Romans 1:20-23

Paul makes it clear that humanity has exchanged our worship of God for cheap substitutes - worship of images in the form of people and creatures. Instead of honouring God and giving thanks to Him, mankind has become fools and chosen to pursue sin instead of Him.

The good news is that Christ has freed believers from slavery to sin. We are now free to worship God in the way we ought - *in spirit* and *in truth*.

1. “Not Whether But Which.”

*The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; **and whatever is not from faith is sin.***

Romans 14:22-23

With this statement, the Apostle Paul puts to rest any concept of a ‘neutral’ activity. Whether we’re speaking of religious acts like prayer and singing praises to God, or seemingly mundane and everyday activities like emptying the dishwasher or working our 9 to 5 job, everything we do in life is either an act of worship done in faith, or it is sin because it is not done in the light of faith.

For many of us, grasping this reality will require us to expand our understanding of the word ‘worship’ from the bland, oversimplified definition our culture has assigned to it into the true meaning as defined by scripture.

Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

Colossians 3:17

When we realise that every choice we make and every act we undertake is an act of worship towards something - either towards God in faith or towards something else (becoming a sin of idolatry) - our awareness of our capacity for worship will increase dramatically.

The question is no longer whether we will worship, but what or who will we worship? “Not Whether But Which”.

Group Discussion:

- Before today, how did you tend to view worship? Did you see it as limited to religious activities, or did you see opportunities for worship in your everyday tasks? Has this discussion changed your view in any way?

2. In Spirit...

God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit...

John 4:24a

Jesus defines true worship as a *spiritual* act, not a *physical* one. God (here Jesus is referring particularly to the Father, rather than Himself or the Holy Spirit) is spirit - that is to say He is not a part of His physical creation but rather is *transcendent* (outside and ruling over His creation).

While Jesus (the second person of the triune Godhead) added to Himself a physical nature in the miracle of His incarnation, the other members of the Trinity (Father and Holy Spirit) have no physical nature.

For this reason, we cannot truly worship God - Father, Son & Spirit - by purely physical means. To truly worship, and to worship deeply, we must worship with our inner being - in spirit; we must worship with our heart, our mind, and our soul.

And He said to him, YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND. This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.

Matthew 22:37-39

When we act with our heart, mind and soul directed toward God in reverence, gratitude, and love, we are worshipping Him. Obviously, some physical acts - such as lying or theft - are sinful by nature and are incompatible with a heart, mind and soul directed toward God. But among those that are not inherently sinful, simple acts such as making your bed each morning can be just as much an act of worship as singing in church or feeding the poor. Equally so, outwardly godly acts such as giving to charity or caring for the sick can be acts of idolatry and sin. It is the condition and the focus of our inner being that makes the difference.

Group Discussion:

- Think of a seemingly insignificant activity from your day-to-day routine. How might you adjust your perspective of this activity so that your inner being is directed towards God in reverence and respect, thankfulness, and/or love as you do it?

3. ...and truth.

*God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit **and truth**.*

John 4:24b

In addition to worshipping *in spirit*, Jesus remarked that we must also worship *in truth*. Proper worship that is acceptable and pleasing to God requires both an inner being that is directed towards Him, and a knowledge and understanding of who He truly is. We cannot worship what we do not know.

Without the knowledge of Himself that He has revealed to us through His Son as recorded in scripture, we cannot worship the true God and will instead find ourselves worshipping a god of our own imagination.

Deeply knowing God - digging deep in His Word and deepening our relationship with Him as we obey His commands - is absolutely essential if we are to render to Him the worship He deserves.

Group Discussion:

- Discuss any personal experience / testimonies of how growing in your knowledge of God has changed the way you worship Him or has increased your awareness of desire to worship.

Summary:

Worship is inevitable - it's a part of who we are. The question is whether we will worship or not, but who / what we will worship. When we act with a heart, mind and soul that is directed towards honouring God and in accordance with the truth revealed in His word, we are worshipping Him.

Deeply Serving

Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

James 1:27

Keep your behaviour excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.

1 Peter 2:12

Ice Breaker

Ask the group how they feel about people whose behaviour is not consistent with the things they say they think or believe.

Introduction:

James, one of the brothers of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem, strongly exhorted believers to display and confirm the genuine nature of their faith in Christ by good works and acts of service to others (see James 2:18).

While we must be careful to understand the book of James properly - as a perfect complement to the truth that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone (Ephesians 2:8-10) and not inconsistent with the teaching of scripture as a whole - we ought to joyfully acknowledge that service to God is indeed a defining part of true faith.

One well known commentator put it something like this; salvation is *determined* by faith alone but *demonstrated* by faithfulness to obey God's will alone. In other words, our works cannot earn God's favour, but are an unavoidable result of the free gift of salvation that we - as followers of Christ - have already received.

Sadly, many people, even within the church, imagine the Christian life of obedience to God as one of little more than a joyless avoidance of wrongdoing. In truth, acts of Christian service are a glorious *privilege* - we can follow the guidance of the creator and sustainer of the universe in doing things that will have significance not only for our lifetimes, but throughout all eternity.

1. Serve others.

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."

Hebrews 6:10

If we consider the whole teaching of scripture, we will see that the scope of true worship and service extends beyond the realm of our private worship to God and includes our love for and service to others.

In summarising the entire Old Testament law, Jesus provided two commands; “YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND. This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF’” (Matthew 23:37-39).

A lack of love for others - fellow men and women who are made in God’s image - is incompatible with love for God. If we don’t love others, we don’t truly love Him. Service to others, when done with a pure heart, is service to God. Every act of love, kindness, and generosity we undertake as believers, no matter how small, brings glory to God who is the source of all goodness.

Group Discussion:

- What is one new thing you could start doing to serve others, motivated by the love that God has shown you?

2. Serve the church.

For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot says, Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body,” it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear says, Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body,” it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired.

1 Corinthians 12:14-18

The scriptures use the analogy of ‘the body’ of Christ to describe the proper function of the church. God has uniquely gifted each follower of Jesus with the nature and talents to fulfil the purpose He has prepared for them within the church. No one person can fill all the roles required within the church. Rather, God has designed His church specifically so that we must rely upon one another, growing in our relationships with one another as we serve Him together.

When one believer chooses not to serve in the church, we all suffer, as we miss out on the unique talents and abilities that God has gifted them with for the purpose of serving.

Group Discussion:

- What talents and abilities do you have that you could (or already do) us to service the body of Christ? If you’re not sure, what gifts do other members of the group see in you that you could consider as possible opportunities for service?

3. With excellence

Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

Colossians 3:17

Sing to Him a new song; Play skillfully with a shout of joy.

Psalms 33:3

Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will stand before kings; He will not stand before obscure men.

Proverbs 22:29

When people do things for others, the level of effort and care they invest is always indicative of the level of respect and love they have for the beneficiary of their work. As followers of Christ, we serve the Lord of Heaven and Earth, and we should strive for excellence in all that we do for Him. Perfectionism isn't the goal (none of us can do anything perfectly), but we shouldn't settle for any less than our best.

Group Discussion:

- Do you struggle with either perfectionism or complacency in your service to God? If so, how can you adjust your mindset to serve Him with a correct perspective?

4. With hope in His promises

...For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints.

Hebrews 6:10

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

2 Corinthians 5:10

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Matthew 6:19-21

God is not only perfectly just but also eager to pour out His grace and blessing upon His children. He does not expect us to work, strive and sacrifice for His glory for no reward. In fact, Jesus explicitly instructed His disciples to store up treasure in Heaven, rather than on earth.

When you serve God, whether inside or outside the church, you can do so knowing that the Almighty Creator Himself will reward you when you stand before Him on the last day.

Group Discussion:

- When you serve, do you do so with a mind towards God's promised reward? How do the promises recorded in God's Word impact your desire and joy to serve?

Summary:

Deeply serving God is the unavoidable outcome of deeply knowing and deeply being with Him. When we have an accurate understanding of who He is, we will be filled with the desire to act in ways that glorify Him and display His love to others. This is why Christian service is always an act of joy and a privilege, even in times when it may also be an act of great sacrifice and effort.

Let us draw near to God, that He may draw near to us (James 4:8), and in knowing Him may we render to Him the worship and service He rightly deserves.