
GRACE CULTURE

TRANSFORMED
BY THE LOVE
OF JESUS

D.A. HORTON

Lifeway Press®
Brentwood, Tennessee

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ISBN 978-1-0877-7602-6

Item 005839872

Dewey Decimal Classification Number: 242

Subject Heading: DEVOTIONAL LITERATURE / BIBLE STUDY AND TEACHING / GOD

Printed in the United States of America.

Student Ministry Publishing

Lifeway Resources

200 Powell Place, Suite 100,
Brentwood, TN 37027

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INTRO

Every neighborhood, school, and even church you visit has a unique culture. What I mean by culture is a vibe, a feeling, an understanding of how things work and flow. Sometimes the culture in these places is fun, friendly, and positive; sometimes it's not. Today we live in a culture that likes to project itself as fun, friendly, and positive, but at its root, it's anything but. Don't believe me? Just mess up and see what happens. See how fast you get canceled from this current culture as soon as you do something that whichever group in power doesn't like or agree with. To be canceled means to be kicked out from influence, invalidated, and shamed. It's a tough place to be.

This is why we are in such desperate need of grace culture. Grace culture occurs when forgiveness, accountability, and love are truly at the center of everything. It's the culture Jesus set up with His disciples so many years ago, and the one He wants the church to display and carry to a lost and dying world. Grace culture requires patience, understanding, and a willingness to "go there" with people. Everyone will make mistakes, but how we respond when someone fails defines what kind of culture we have created.

This book is a guide to help you build a culture of grace in your community. Grace culture doesn't turn a blind eye to sin—just the opposite. Grace culture helps us come back when we have sinned. It doesn't leave us abandoned, alone, depressed, and desperate. Neither does our heavenly Father. God never leaves us or kicks us out of the family. He deals with us in grace, and we should deal with each other the same way.

I'm excited for you to begin this journey. So, let's get started.

HOW TO USE THIS BIBLE STUDY

This Bible study book includes six sessions of content. Each session includes video teaching, followed by content designed to be used by groups and individuals.

VIDEO

Each teaching video is 10-12 minutes long and is designed to help students think about the topic for the session and engage in discussion. There is a guide with blanks to fill in as students watch the video teaching. Video content can be purchased at lifeway.com/graceculture.

GROUP DISCUSSION

These pages include teaching, questions, and activities that guide students to respond to the video teaching and to relevant Bible passages. It's important to consider the age, maturity level, and needs of students as you tailor this content for your group.

PERSONAL STUDY

Three days of personal study are provided for each session to take students deeper into Scripture and to further the biblical truths introduced in the group discussion and teaching time. These pages challenge students to grow in their understanding of God's Word and to make practical applications to their lives.

LEADER HELPS

At the back of the book is more content to help walk students through the material. There you will find a summary from D.A. Horton and an icebreaker activity.

HOW TO ACCESS THE VIDEOS

This Bible study has six videos—one for each session. These videos enhance the content and launch discussion.

To stream the Grace Culture teen Bible study video teaching sessions, follow these steps:

1. Purchase the group video bundle at lifeway.com/graceculture.
2. Go to my.lifeway.com/redeem and register or log in to your Lifeway account.
3. Enter the redemption code provided at purchase to gain access to your group-use video license.

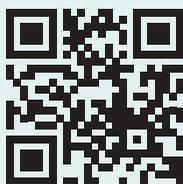
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Stream on these devices:





SESSION ONE

THE POWER
OF STORIES



2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-21

From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

VIDEO



That night, I heard a message that changed my life forever—it was _____.

“My parents were tired of me chasing the things that I thought were the most valuable things in the world: money, drugs, and anything the street life could offer.”

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”
—2 Corinthians 5:17

Everyone is made in the _____
_____.

God has given us:

_____ was introduced.

Sin comes with a penalty and a price. The penalty is _____. The price is the shedding of blood of an _____.

Jesus absorbed the wrath of God on the _____.

We can now be connected with God through Christ because Jesus offers everyone who hears this message and turns from a life of sin _____ . That’s the gospel.

Conciliation: The removal of animosity, distrust, and _____.

GROUP DISCUSSION

FOCUS STATEMENT:

**The gospel
connects
God's
story to
our story.**

Our brains and our bodies naturally react to stories. Studies have shown how the human brain triggers emotional responses when we hear a story.¹ This helps explain why our hearts begin beating faster and why we may feel happy or sad when watching a movie. Stories carry power. Good stories change even lives.

What is a story you love? Why?

The most remarkable story ever told is the one revealed by God to humanity—the Bible. It takes us from creation to the fall to redemption to how it all applies to us. But it's not about us. The main character in God's story is not the reader or the original audience, it's Jesus.

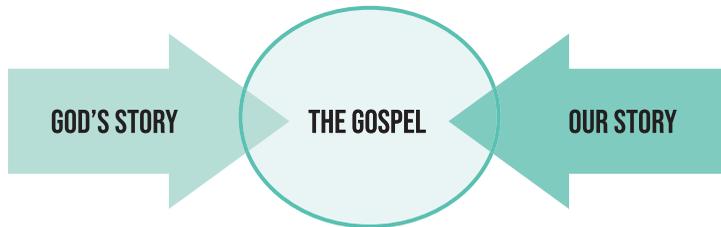
JESUS'S STORY

Jesus—God in human skin—perfectly obeyed God in every way and took the place of humanity on the cross. He received the punishment that was due to every person who has lived or ever will live. Jesus was tempted and challenged to disobey God, yet He remained faithful. Had Jesus sinned, He wouldn't have been a perfect sacrifice and couldn't have been raised from the dead. Since Jesus rose from the grave, He now offers freedom to people of every ethnicity, culture, class, and gender.

What has been your experience with Jesus up to this point in your life?

Jesus’s story is summed up in one word—*gospel*. The gospel announces the good news that God made a way for people to be forgiven of their sins, and in exchange, receive life in Jesus so that we can live with God for all eternity.

We all have a story filled with our own unique life experiences. And the gospel connects God’s story to our story.



MY ORIGIN STORY

On Friday, March 29, 1996, I found myself hiding from the police in my friend’s mother’s closet. She wouldn’t let them in her house without a warrant, so they left. Then she told me in no uncertain terms to leave or she’d turn me in. The week before, I had run away from home. Now, the only thing I could do was go back home and face my family.

The four-block walk seemed like an eternity. When I arrived at my house, my mom, dad, brother, and his wife were all waiting for me. The gravity of the guilt and shame for my actions weighed heavily on me. My family was exhausted from my constant running away from home to pursue life on the streets.

As I sat there seeing my family weep, God removed the scales from my eyes, and I realized how my choices were hurting the people who loved me the most. I reached down into the depths of my soul and shared my heart. With tears streaming down my face, I said, “Today, I realize how much I have hurt you all, and I hate the person I have become.” I had to find a way to show them I was serious and wanted to change. I said, “I don’t want to keep living this way. I want to ask permission to go to church Sunday night.”

When have you found yourself at a point where you wanted to change your lifestyle and choices?

It was Sunday, March 31, 1996, and I had not left my room for the past two days. I thought about how all my meaningful relationships were falling apart. I still wanted to go to church that night. We sat in the front row, and our pastor preached the gospel like always. However, this was the first time in ten years of hearing him preach that it cut me to the heart. I realized I did not know God; I loved my sin; and there was nothing I could do to stop myself from the life I was living. I knew that if there was going to be a change, I needed Jesus to give me the strength to make new life choices that glorified Him and no longer allowed my sin to run my life.

I cried uncontrollably and fell to my knees. I crawled to the bottom of the altar, yelling, “Jesus, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” Then I felt my pastor’s hand on my back. He whispered in my ear, “Welcome home, Damon,” and tenderly led me in a prayer in which I confessed I was a sinner; I couldn’t save myself; and I wanted Jesus to save me from myself and the wrath I deserved. At that moment, the old Damon died, and the new Damon was given life. That’s when my story and Jesus’s story connected.

When did your story connect with Jesus’s?
If it hasn’t yet, what is holding you back?

A NEW CREATION

Even though my life had changed the night before, on Monday, April 1, 1996, I still lived in the same neighborhood and had to walk the same streets that I did before I gave my life to Jesus. That morning my mom challenged me to read 2 Corinthians 5:16-21. She told me that I was a new creation in the eyes of God.

I read 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 and didn’t understand what it meant. I remember wishing I had someone who could explain it to me. Maybe you find yourself in a similar situation. I would like to walk you through this passage with the hope that it gives you clarity, comfort, and conviction.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-21.

- **NEW LENS:** In verse 16 the apostle Paul explained how judging people based on the way they looked on the outside was part of the old way of life. For his original audience, this included rejecting Jesus as Messiah because He didn't look like a Savior since He was crucified like a criminal. New life in Jesus means to look at people through a new lens.
- **NEW CREATION:** Verse 17 helps us understand that when we embrace Jesus as Savior, we become new creations. This does not mean we won't face consequences for past mistakes. This means we die to our former way of living; we have new life; and the Holy Spirit influences our decisions moving forward.
- **RECONCILIATION:** In verses 18 and 19, Paul explained that the gift of life we have received through faith in Jesus comes from God alone. We were reconciled to God through Christ. To be reconciled means to have a restored relationship.

Why do we need a reconciled relationship with God?

In Genesis 3, because of Adam and Eve's disobedience to God's direct command, sin and death were introduced into the world. This broke our relationship with God and separated the whole human race from Him. Since then, all people have suffered the consequences of sin and death and need a restored relationship with God.

- **NEW MINISTRY:** Verses 20 and 21 explain that the death and resurrection of Jesus is what can bring the human race into a right relationship with God again. We who have embraced Christ as our Savior are now His ambassadors. This means we are His messengers at home, school, and everywhere else we go. Our mission is to communicate God's desire for all people to be reconciled to Him through Jesus.

OUR STORIES HAVE POWER

Since the gospel connects God's story to our story and we have embraced Christ who sends us out to be His ambassadors, we must share this story.

The greatest news we have ever heard is what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:21—because of what Jesus has done for us, we are righteous in the sight of God. We have a new identity in Jesus. My greatest prayer is for you to realize that although this journey is long, once you have embraced Christ, you are in the family of God. He will never leave you or forsake you (see Heb. 13:5). He is trustworthy, and His Word helps understand just how amazing He is toward His children. You are God’s child, and He loves you always.

LET’S WORK ON TELLING YOUR STORY

What was your life like before you met Jesus?

When did you become convinced of the gospel’s truth and embrace Jesus as your Savior?

What has life been like since you placed your faith in Jesus?

As you close this time of discussion with your group, pray for one another as you seek to share your gospel story. Ask for God’s help as you extend grace culture to the world around you, where you have been called as ambassadors of reconciliation.

DAY 1

PETER THE FISHERMAN

READ LUKE 5:1-11.

On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

As you read Luke 5:1-11, did you notice how the crowd was pressing in to see Jesus to the point that He needed to get in Peter's (also called Simon) boat so He could speak to the crowd? Imagine what Peter felt while listening to Jesus teach the people. This passage shows that Peter at least respected Jesus because when Jesus told him to row out to the deep water, Peter did. Peter had just come in from a disappointing night when he caught no fish. Yet, Peter said, "But at your word I will let down the nets" (v. 5). And sure enough, they caught so many fish that the weight of the net began to sink the boat!

When have you reluctantly obeyed Jesus? What did He ask you to do?

Peter noticed how big the catch was and immediately said to Jesus, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (v. 8). Peter felt unworthy to be in Jesus’s presence. How often do you share this same feeling? It’s not always a bad feeling because this understanding helps us see we need to run to Jesus, who is willing to embrace us even when we feel unworthy of His love. The truth is, we are unworthy, but Jesus loves us despite our unworthiness! Peter had no filter and confessed he was a sinner and shouldn’t be near someone who was so righteous.

What helps you have confidence to approach Jesus even when you feel like you are unworthy?

I love how Jesus responded to Peter, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men” (v. 10). Jesus saw what Peter would become even when Peter only saw himself as a fisherman who was far from God. Jesus knows that people who were once far from God and embrace Him are the best people to reach those who are still far from God.

Do you feel like you are unworthy? Do you find it hard to see how God can change your heart and make you new? Do you still feel shame because of past decisions or sinful choices? Be encouraged by Peter’s story. Over the next few days, we will read more of Peter’s story and see how God worked in his heart until he took his last breath. What God did for Peter, He also desires to do in you.

Close this day in prayer. Confess to God where you have feelings of unworthiness. Ask Him to fill you up with confidence in His love and desire to continually change you and transform your heart.

DAY 2

PETER THE FOLLOWER

Here's a hard truth: You will never be perfect as you follow Jesus. However, when you fall short, remember Peter and be encouraged that Jesus will never quit walking with you. Prior to Jesus's crucifixion, Peter boldly proclaimed he would lay down his life for Jesus. Jesus responded by telling Peter he would deny Jesus three times (see John 13:36-38). Peter did just as Jesus said he would. Look at this interaction after the resurrection.

READ JOHN 21:15-19.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me."

Notice how Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved Him. There is some nuance lost in the Bible's translation from the original language. The first two times Jesus asked if Peter loved Him, He used the Greek word for unconditional love. Peter responded with a Greek word that meant, "I dearly love you." It is possible Peter softened his response because he did not want to overcommit to Jesus as he did before when he boldly proclaimed he would die for Jesus and then denied Him three times instead.

Have you ever overcommitted to Jesus? What happened?

When Jesus asked the third time, He said, “Do you dearly love me?” Jesus’s asking the same question three times hurt Peter. He might have thought Jesus doubted his commitment and love; however, Jesus was allowing Peter to reaffirm his love for Jesus once for every time Peter had denied Him.

How has Jesus restored you after a time of failure?

Peter’s story reminds us that Jesus loves us perfectly, and when we don’t love Him ideally, His love for us covers up all our shortcomings. Look back at verse 18. Jesus was telling Peter that in spite of his failures, Peter would follow Jesus until the end of his life. Don’t miss two significant elements in Peter’s story.

- Jesus told Peter, “Follow me” (v. 19). In the original language, the way Jesus said these words meant “keep following me.” So, no matter how many times Peter may have fallen or failed, Jesus’s command was “keep following Me!” Jesus says the same thing to His followers today: In spite of sin or continued struggles with your old way of living, don’t believe the lie that God is done with you. Keep following Jesus daily.
- Peter would eventually fulfill his commitment to Jesus and die for Him. Verse 19 revealed that Peter never again rejected Jesus and his death glorified God.

Although we may not die for Jesus under persecution like Peter did, we must make the daily choice to live for Jesus and not deny Him. We should take encouragement from Jesus’s words to Peter. No matter how many times we fall into sin or fail, we must keep following Jesus!

Close today in prayer. Thank Jesus for His restorative, unconditional love. Ask Him to encourage you to keep following even when you fail. Never believe the lie that God is done with you!

DAY 3

PETER THE FINISHER

As we have witnessed Peter's story as a follower of Jesus unfold, we now arrive at the end. Today, we will read Peter's last documented words and the challenge he gave to his readers to finish our race with Jesus as strongly as possible.

READ 2 PETER 3:17-18.

You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

Let's take a moment to reflect on what we have learned about Peter's story so far. His first encounter with Jesus led him to believe he was unworthy to be embraced as one of Jesus's followers. Yet when Jesus asked Peter to leave his career as a fisherman and follow Him, Peter left his job and went with Jesus. As Jesus's disciple, Peter made many mistakes and fell into sin more than a few times. He even boldly claimed he would be willing to die for Jesus, but instead ended up denying Him three times.

Jesus's unconditional love was revealed by how He restored Peter. Remember, this entire time, Jesus saw who Peter would become, even when Peter failed to see it in himself. Now, we find Peter at the end of his life, finally seeing himself as Jesus has, as one who would finish his race and cross the finish line and fall into the arms of Jesus.

How do you see yourself at this stage in your journey of following Jesus?

Our encouragement comes from seeing how Jesus never quit on Peter and, in spite of his failures, Peter never stopped following Jesus. Peter challenges his readers to not be carried away by the lies we hear in our heads, on social media, and in our broken world. Peter said we can only do this and remain steady as a followers of Jesus through being lifelong learners at the feet of Jesus. This is the process we call discipleship. Discipleship is how we “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:17).

From the time we were very young the world has been trying to disciple us. We learn words and actions that show us how to live a life of sin long before we even know it. So, to grow as disciples of Jesus, we need people who have been following Him longer than us to walk beside us and show us how to read Scripture, pray, and make God’s story known to others.

In each box, list the name of a person who has or can walk alongside you in that specific area.

	Scripture	Prayer	Gospel Sharing
Person			

Think of it this way:

- You’re around people like Peter when he was just the fisherman. They are lost and don’t want to be around Jesus because they feel unworthy. Remember how you used to feel this way too?
- You’re also around people (maybe in your student ministry or school) who are followers of Jesus but have failed and fallen into sin. They need to be reminded that Jesus still loves them and sees who they will become.
- God has also put people in your life who are following Jesus that are closer to being finishers, so you can follow their example until you cross the finish line, just like Peter!

Close today in prayer. Ask God to show you someone who needs encouragement to embrace Jesus. Ask Him to lead you to other Christ-followers who need to be reminded that God loves them no matter how they’ve failed. Finally, ask Him to direct you to someone who can walk alongside you and be an example for you to follow.