

A large, bold, black calligraphic word, 'Faith', is written vertically across the center of the image. The letters are thick and fluid, with some overlapping. Three black rectangular labels with white text are placed over the word: 'ALL' is over the 'F', 'YOU NEED' is over the 'i', and 'IS' is over the 't'.

ALL
YOU
NEED
IS

A 35 DAY JOURNEY
AT FAITH

GROUP AGREEMENT

PURPOSE

To provide a small group environment where people pursue authentic community and spiritual growth.

GROUP ESSENTIALS

STAY CONNECTED

While prayer and discussion of curriculum are key elements, the main emphasis of the group is the building of relationships to foster connection with Jesus and one another.

CULTIVATE RELATIONSHIPS

Group members demonstrate the priority of relationships as they intentionally invest in each other inside and outside of regular group meetings.

SHARE OWNERSHIP

Group members agree to encourage one another to participate in broad ownership of the group.

PROVIDE CARE

Group members choose to be fully present and provide care and support for one another.

FOSTER AUTHENTICITY

The atmosphere should encourage openness and transparency among members. This is an environment where people should feel free to be themselves.

PROVIDE CONFIDENTIALITY

For authenticity to occur, members must be able to trust that issues discussed within the group will not be shared outside the group.

DEMONSTRATE RESPECT

Group members should never say anything that will embarrass their spouses or other members of the group.

GROUP DETAILS

Group members will attend and participate on a regular basis.

The group will meet from _____ through _____ .

The group will meet on _____ (day of week)

and begin at _____ (am/pm) and end at _____ (am/pm).

This group will be a closed group unless all members agree to add members.

SESSION ONE

Love Gives

MEMORY VERSE

*God so loved the world that he **gave** his one and only Son, that whoever trusts in Jesus shall not die but have eternal life. (John 3:16, emphasis added)*

INTRODUCTION

Love, the apostle Paul writes, is “the most excellent way.” It is the goal and focus of our Christian life. When we talk about being formed spiritually into the image of Christ, we are really talking about becoming loving as he was loving.

In our culture, *love* is a word that is overused and has many different meanings. We might say we love a sports team or we love a good movie or novel. We claim to love pizza or chocolate. We also love our friends and family—hopefully in a different sort of way than we love pizza!

The love Paul writes of—and the love we are talking about in this study—is *agape* love. Selfless, generous, not expecting anything in return, abundant—that is *agape* love. It is the kind of love God has for us and the kind of love God invites us to live in. It is part of the with-God life, which is the best way to live. Although *agape* is selfless and even self-sacrificing, it is also the most satisfying kind of love to both give and receive. This is a beautiful paradox: The more we give love, the more we receive it.

How can we live in this most excellent way? That is what we are going to talk about in this first session.

SHARE YOUR STORY

Each of us has a story. The events of our lives—good, bad, wonderful, or challenging—have shaped who we are. God knows your story, and he can redeem every struggle and heighten every joy to help you be who you were created to be by his loving hands.

When we share our stories, we realize that we are not alone. We can connect with people who have experienced similar things. Likewise, sharing our stories gives others the opportunity to see God at work. Your story can encourage someone else, and telling it can be a path to freedom for you and for those with whom you share it .

Open your time together with prayer. This should be a brief, simple prayer in which you invite God to be with you as you meet. You can pray for specific requests at the end of the meeting or pause to pray if a particular situation comes up during your discussion .

As you begin this first meeting, have everyone introduce themselves and then discuss your responses to the following questions:

What in particular are you hoping to experience as we practice how to love through this study?

HELPFUL HINT #1: THE FIRST MEETING

Consider making the first meeting a little longer than the others so that group members can take time to get acquainted . It may help to have name tags.

If you are a new group, collect everyone's contact information at this first meeting. Ask someone in the group to make sure everyone gets a copy.

Think back on your life. Remember someone you knew—or still know—who you would describe as a loving person. What do they do and say that makes you describe them as someone who loves well?

HEAR GOD'S STORY

God uses stories to guide us. When we read the true stories of Scripture, we learn what God is like, we see his plan unfolding, and we learn principles for our own lives. Read the Bible passage below. Then use the questions to guide your discussion.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13

I will show you the most excellent way.

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

- In the first part of this passage, Paul writes about things that are good, but not the best. What is Paul saying about things like generosity, prophecy, and faith?
- Next, Paul describes what love is, rather than telling us what we should do. How are these different? Why do you think Paul expresses his thoughts on love this way?
- The passage says that “love is patient .” What keeps you from being patient? Where do you find yourself being impatient? (Think about your coworkers, your spouse, your family.)
- The passage from 1 Corinthians can be summed up with two formulas: **EVERYTHING - LOVE = NOTHING** and **LOVE + NOTHING = EVERYTHING** .

What is the biggest barrier that keeps you from living and expressing love?

NOTES

Use this space to record your thoughts, questions, and ponderings as you discuss the Bible passage.

CREATE A NEW STORY

God wants you to be a part of his kingdom and invites you to weave your story into his. That will mean making some changes as you choose to follow his way rather than your own. This will not happen overnight, but it can happen over time. By starting with small, simple choices, we begin to change our direction. The Holy Spirit helps us along the way, giving us gifts to serve the body, offering us insights into Scripture, and challenging us to love those both near and far from God.

In this section, consider how you will apply the wisdom you learned from the teaching and Bible study . Below are some practical steps you can take during the coming week.

- Love is an action by which you “will the good of another, as God defines the good.” Think of a person in your life. What would it look like to will their good?
- The enemy of love is hurry. How do hurry and busyness keep you from being able to give love?
- Read the three questions below and carefully consider which action step God is challenging you to take this week.
- One action that is the signature of love is giving. Love gives attention, time, and help. Who is God asking you to give attention, time, and help to in the coming week?
- Look again at the passage from 1 Corinthians: “Love is patient, love is kind.” This describes how we should love, but also how God loves us. When has God been patient and kind to you? How did that impact your relationship with him? What is one step you could take to be more patient?
- Write the names of two or three people who you could express love to in the ways you have explored in this lesson. Think of people who

might be spiritually curious but might not yet have a relationship with God. Commit to praying for God's guidance and for an opportunity to have a conversation with each of them.

Mark your chosen question and write your response below . When everyone is ready, share your choice with the group.

To close your time together, pray for the commitments each person has made for the coming week. You can have one person pray or, if the group is comfortable, take turns with each person praying for the person on their right side.

FOR ADDITIONAL STUDY

If you would like to explore related Bible passages on your own, read the passages below and record your reflections in a journal. A great way to gain insight about a passage is to read it in several translations. You may want to use a Bible app or website to compare translations.

Read 1 John 4:19-20

We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.

- According to these verses, what motivates us to love?
- Which is easier: to love God or to love people? Why? Write down your thoughts.
- Who is your “brother or sister”? What does love for people you disagree with look like?

Read 1 John 3:16-20 (NLT)

We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So we also ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters. If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion—how can God’s love be in that person?

Dear children, let’s not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions. Our actions will show that we belong to the truth, so we will be confident when we stand before God. Even if we feel guilty, God is greater than our feelings, and he knows everything.

- How do we know what love is?
- In our group time, we talked about the idea that “love gives.” What specifically is this passage asking us to give?
- How can you show love with your actions, not just your words?

DAILY DEVOTIONS

Use these devotions to meditate further on this week's topic. On the first day, you may want to read over all the week's verses to get the big picture of the passage. Then, each day, read that day's verse. Take your time; ask God to speak to you through his word; notice which word or phrase stands out to you. Then take time to journal your response to him. Listen to what God wants to say to you through his word and respond to him as you meditate on the truths of Scripture. This week's devotions are taken from The Message translation.

Day 1

Read Psalm 145:8

*God is all mercy and grace—
not quick to anger, is rich in love.*

Reflect: Do you ever find yourself “quick to anger”? What does it mean that God is “not quick to anger”? What does it mean to be “rich in love”? How have you experienced God's love?

Day 2

Read Psalm 145:9

*God is good to one and all;
everything he does is suffused with grace.*

Reflect: What is one specific way God has been good to you? Spend some time journaling—or even drawing—what it means to be “suffused with grace.”

Day 3

Read Psalm 145:10-12

*Creation and creatures applaud you, God;
your holy people bless you.*

*They talk about the glories of your rule,
they exclaim over your splendor,*

*Letting the world know of your power for good,
the lavish splendor of your kingdom.*

Reflect: Imagine creation applauding their Creator. Think of a whale breaching in the ocean, trees waving and bowing in the wind, waves breaking on a beach, an eagle soaring on a clear day. How do these things “exclaim” God’s splendor? How can you echo that praise?

Day 4

Read Psalm 145:13

*Your kingdom is a kingdom eternal;
you never get voted out of office.*

*God always does what he says,
and is gracious in everything he does.*

Reflect: God not only keeps his promises, but he does so graciously . What promises has he kept for you? How have you experienced his grace?

Day 5

Read Psalm 145:14-16

*God gives a hand to those down on their luck,
gives a fresh start to those ready to quit.
All eyes are on you, expectant;
you give them their meals on time.
Generous to a fault,
you lavish your favor on all creatures.*

Reflect: What promises do you find in these verses? In what ways has God provided for you, whether physically, spiritually, or emotionally? What does it mean to “lavish [God’s] favor”?

Day 6

Read Psalm 145:17-18

*Everything God does is right—
the trademark on all his works is love.
God’s there, listening for all who pray,
for all who pray and mean it.*

Reflect: What does it mean that God’s trademark is love? What do these verses tell us about God’s consistency and reliability? Spend some time right now talking with God, who is always listening.

SESSION TWO

Love Hurts

MEMORY VERSE

Copy a portion of Scripture on a card and tape it somewhere in your line of sight, such as your bathroom window, car dashboard, or kitchen table. Every day this week, think about it when you sit at red lights or while you are eating a meal. Reflect on what God is saying to you through these words. On the sixth day, summarize what God has shown you throughout the week.

Love never gives up.

Love cares more for others than for self.

(1 Corinthians 13:4 MSG)

INTRODUCTION

In his book *Love Within Limits: Realizing Selfless Love in a Selfish World*, Lew Smedes wisely observes that “love is an uncommon power to cope with common suffering.”

Suffering happens in this world. The question is not whether we are going to suffer. In this life, Jesus said, we will have suffering (John 16:33). The question is, are we able to respond to suffering—whether our suffering or other people’s—with love?

Love never gives up. Love is—to use an old-fashioned word—long-suffering. To be long-suffering means to be willing to hang in and hold

on. We may be able to grit our teeth and do this ourselves, but God has a more excellent way. When we are filled with God’s love, we are able to endure more and love better. That begins with learning how to receive love.

SHARE YOUR STORY

When we share our stories, we give others the opportunity to see God at work. Others listen and learn from our experience, and we find courage to be open and receive support from those who listen well. As God moves both in and through you, your story is being shaped, even in this moment, by your being a part of this group.

Open your time together with a brief, simple prayer inviting God to be with you. You can pray for specific requests at the meeting’s end or pause to pray for a particular situation during your discussion.

Discuss your responses to the following questions:

- When do you find it most difficult to love someone?
- What risks are involved in love?

**HELPFUL HINT #2:
BUILDING THE GROUP
TOGETHER**

Every group is a mix of people with different gifts and abilities, and every small group needs that variety to function well.

How can each person contribute—perhaps with hospitality, prayer, organizing an event, researching a topic, leading worship, inviting new people, or something else?

Have each person share what their gift or passion is and how they could use it to strengthen and build up the group.

HEAR GOD'S STORY

God uses stories to guide us. When we read the true stories of Scripture, we learn what God is like, we see his plan unfolding, and we learn principles for our own lives. Read the Bible passage below. Then use the questions to guide your discussion.

Read 1 Corinthians 13 (MSG)

If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate.

If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, "Jump," and it jumps, but I don't love, I'm nothing.

If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love.

Love never gives up.

Love cares more for others than for self.

Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.

Love doesn't strut,

Doesn't have a swelled head,

Doesn't force itself on others,

Isn't always "me first,"

Doesn't fly off the handle,

Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,

Doesn't revel when others grovel,

Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,

Puts up with anything,

Trusts God always,

*Always looks for the best,
Never looks back,
But keeps going to the end.*

Love never dies. Inspired speech will be over some day; praying in tongues will end; understanding will reach its limit. We know only a portion of the truth, and what we say about God is always incomplete. But when the Complete arrives, our incompletes will be canceled.

When I was an infant at my mother's breast, I gurgled and cooed like any infant. When I grew up, I left those infant ways for good.

We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us!

But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love.

- What are your thoughts about the assertion that “love cares for others more than for self”? In what ways is this countercultural?
- Who is someone you have known who loved sacrificially, even loving when it hurt them? What was your response to that love?
- Our primary job is first to learn to Receive love. What surprises you about this statement? What gets in the way of your being able to receive love?
- How does learning to receive love help us to become better at giving love?

NOTES

Use this space to record your thoughts, questions, and ponderings as you discuss the Bible passage.

CREATE A NEW STORY

In this section, consider how you will apply the wisdom you learned from the teaching and Bible study, including taking some practical steps during the coming week.

- Love is “enabled in seasons of suffering.” Tell about a season of suffering you have experienced. What did you learn about love during that time?
- Love is risky and requires vulnerability. What scares you about offering love to someone?
- Divide into pairs to form accountability partners. Once you have your partner, read and share your thoughts about the following question. Help each other identify one concrete way that you can demonstrate love to the person you choose.
- Who is one person you want to give love to this week? Pick someone you know and already like but want to focus love on. Do not pick a family member or an enemy. Focus your efforts on loving that person. Pray for them, look for opportunities to show them support and/or care, and see what God does.

Last week, there were three options for an action step. Have everyone in the group give a brief update on how that step went.

- How did you give attention, time, and help to someone?
- How did the one step you took to be more patient work out?
- How did you interact with any of the people you identified last week who might be spiritually curious but might not yet have a relationship with God?

**HELPFUL HINT #3:
ACCOUNTABILITY
PARTNERS**

Accountability partners create an opportunity for more in-depth sharing and personal encouragement as you pursue goals you each set during this study. Having a partner cheering you on increases the likelihood that you will follow through—plus it's more fun!

To close your time together, spend time in prayer. Prayer is not just asking God for things, but it is also worshipping God and telling him how much we love him. You may want to have everyone share something they are grateful for or some way that God touched their life this week.

OPTIONAL: If a group member has a worship song that they find significant, they can play it for the group on their phone or other device.

Ask, “How can we pray for you this week?” Invite everyone to share, but do not force the issue . Be sure to write prayer requests on your *Prayer and Praise Log*.

FOR ADDITIONAL STUDY

If you would like to explore related Bible passages on your own, read the passages below and record your reflections in a journal. Select a few verses and paraphrase them (i.e., writing them in your own words). If you like, share your paraphrases with the group the next time you meet.

Read Hosea 11:8-9

*“How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, Israel?
How can I treat you like Admah?
How can I make you like Zeboyim?
My heart is changed within me;
all my compassion is aroused.
I will not carry out my fierce anger,
nor will I devastate Ephraim again.
For I am God, and not a man—
the Holy One among you.
I will not come against their cities.”*

- We can sometimes think of God’s love as being in opposition to God’s judgement. What does this passage say about the relationship between God’s love and God’s judgement?
- Spend some time reflecting on the idea that when God sees your pain, “all [his] compassion is aroused.”
- Knowing that God feels deep compassion for you, what is one thing you could do this week to express that kind of compassion for someone else?

Read Hebrews 12:5-11 (MSG)

*My dear child, don’t shrug off God’s discipline,
but don’t be crushed by it either.
It’s the child he loves that he disciplines;*

the child he embraces, he also corrects.

God is educating you; that's why you must never drop out. He's treating you as dear children. This trouble you're in isn't punishment; it's training, the normal experience of children. Only irresponsible parents leave children to fend for themselves. Would you prefer an irresponsible God? We respect our own parents for training and not spoiling us, so why not embrace God's training so we can truly live? While we were children, our parents did what seemed best to them. But God is doing what is best for us, training us to live God's holy best. At the time, discipline isn't much fun. It always feels like it's going against the grain. Later, of course, it pays off handsomely, for it's the well-trained who find themselves mature in their relationship with God.

- Have you ever felt like God was disciplining you? What happened? •
- Think about your experience with the child-parent relationship. How did love inform how your parents raised you, and/or how does love inform how you raise your children?
- This week, we looked at how love hurts. How does that hurt ultimately impact our ability to receive and give love?

DAILY DEVOTIONS

The first step toward serving others is, paradoxically, spending time alone with God, praying and studying and reflecting on God's word (i.e., the Bible). In our hurry-up world, we often move too quickly through everything—even reading God's word! Slow down. Do not just skim; take time to read and reflect on the text. Ask God to speak to you through his word. Notice which word or phrase stands out to you. Then take some time to journal your response to him. Listen to what God wants to say to you through his word, and respond to him as you meditate on the truths of Scripture.

Day 1

Read 2 Corinthians 4:6 (NLT)

God, who said, "Let there be light in the darkness," has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ.

Reflect: What actions can result from God's light shining in our hearts? How can you let God's light shine on those around you this week?

Day 2 Read 2 Corinthians 4:7 *We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves.*

Reflect: Think about the metaphor of a fragile clay jar. Even if you are in good shape physically, in what ways are you fragile? What does your weakness allow others to see?

Day 3

Read 2 Corinthians 4:8-9

We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed.

Reflect: Read these verses out loud, slowly. Which word or phrase resonates most deeply with you? Spend some time reflecting on that. What promises do you find in these verses?

Day 4

Read 2 Corinthians 4:10

Through suffering, our bodies continue to share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies.

Reflect: This verse explores the connection between our spiritual and physical realities. How does overcoming physical challenges strengthen us spiritually? How does overcoming physical challenges help us to shine the light of Jesus?

Day 5

Read 2 Corinthians 4:11.

Yes, we live under constant danger of death because we serve Jesus, so that the life of Jesus will be evident in our dying bodies.

Reflect: While you may not live under the threat of martyrdom, in what ways do you think God wants you to embrace difficulties and die to selfishness?

Day 6

Read 2 Corinthians 4:12.

So we live in the face of death, but this has resulted in eternal life for you.

Reflect: Writing these words to the church in Corinth, Paul notes that his suffering had a positive benefit for them. Who in your life is encouraged or drawn to God by seeing your response to difficulties or pain? How might you want to change your response to challenges, knowing that others are watching and impacted by it?

SESSION THREE

Love Hopes

MEMORY VERSE

We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.
Hebrews 6:19

INTRODUCTION

Love believes all things, which does not mean love is gullible. Instead, love helps us to believe in the goodness of God and in the goodness of his intentions toward us. Love also gives us hope and allows us to give hope to others. In this session, we are going to focus on just that—hope. We are going to talk about what it means to put our hope in God and then, filled with his marvelous hope, give it to others.

Hope both lifts our spirits and grounds us. It is the water that buoys us up and the anchor that keeps us from crashing into the rocks of cynicism and despair. These seemingly opposite metaphors, held in tension, help us to understand the beauty of a love that hopes.

SHARE YOUR STORY

Open your time together with a brief, simple prayer inviting God to be with you. You can pray for specific requests at the meeting's end or pause to pray for a particular situation during your discussion.

Telling our personal stories builds deeper connections among group members. Use the following question and activity to get started.

- Last week, we were challenged to show love to someone. Whom did you show love to? How did that go? Sit with your accountability partner. If your partner is absent or if you are new to the group, join with another pair or someone who does not yet have a partner. If you have not established your partnership yet, do so now. (See the “Share Your Story” section in Session Two.) Spend a short time praying for the person you each chose to love this week.

HEAR GOD'S STORY

Begin by reading the Bible passage below. Then use the questions to guide your discussion.

Read 1 Corinthians 13 (NKJV)

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice

in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

- In this passage, we read that love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” What do you think it means that love “hopes all things”?
- How are hope and endurance related? • Some people view hopeful people as being gullible or cynical, but those who express love that hopes are neither of these. How do you normally respond to situations that require hope? Do you find yourself being be more gullible or more cynical? Explain.
- A spiritually mature person is not necessarily someone who has a lot of knowledge about God or the Bible, but is instead someone who is immersed in love and able to both receive and give love . In light of this definition, what is your next step toward greater spiritual maturity?
- What would it take for you to grow in your ability to both give and receive love?
- Where do you need to “put away childish things”? How do you think doing so might that impact your experience of God’s love?

NOTES

Use this space to record your thoughts, questions, and ponderings as you discuss the Bible passage.

CREATE A NEW STORY

In this section, consider how you will apply the wisdom you learned from the teaching and Bible study, including practical steps you can take during the coming week.

- In some ways, being more loving is inconvenient, yet it is fulfilling. How did you experience this tension over the last week?
- Decide if you will continue your experiment of love with the person you chose last week or if there is someone different that you need to focus on.
- How can you improve your spiritual vision—your ability to see what God sees in this person he made?
- What encouragement will you share with them this week? For example, what God-given gifts, unique character qualities, and/or struggles they have persevered through might you name and affirm?

To close your time together, pray for the commitments each person has made for the coming week. You can have one person pray or, if the group is comfortable, take turns with each person praying for the person on their right side.

HELPFUL HINT #4: HAVE FUN TOGETHER

Groups that connect outside of the regular meeting time build stronger bonds and feel a greater sense of purpose. Plan a social outing with group members by first brainstorming ways that you could do something fun together, like sharing a meal, doing an activity, or attending a local event.

FOR ADDITIONAL STUDY

If you would like to explore related Bible passages on your own, read the passages below and record your reflections in a journal. You may even want to use a Bible website or app to look up commentary on these passages. If you like, share what you learn with the group the next time you meet.

Read Hebrews 6:17-20

Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.

- What does this passage tell us about God's purposes?

- Who are the “heirs” mentioned in this passage? What does it mean to be an heir? What privileges or rights come with that?
- What do you think “take hold of hope” means?
- Reflect on a time when hope in God’s love felt like an anchor of the soul for you . Spend some time thanking God for his steadfast love that provides hope .
- **Extra:** Research what it means to be a priest “in the order of Melchizedek .” Share what you learn with the group the next time you meet .

Read Romans 5:1-5 (NLT)

Since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory.

We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.

- According to this passage, how are we “made right in God’s sight”?
- What do you think it will be like to “[share] God’s glory”?
- The second paragraph of this passage describes a progression that begins with trials and problems . Write out the progression below:
Trials and problems _____ strength of _____
confident _____
- Though we often try to avoid problems, what does this passage promise will happen when we go through them?
- When we put our hope in other people or institutions, they may let us down . But when we put our hope in God, where does that lead us?

DAILY DEVOTIONS

Use this section to stay connected with Jesus during your week. Each day, read the verse given. Take your time and ask God to speak to you through his Word. Notice which words or phrase stands out to you and then journal your response. Listen to what God wants to say to you through his word and respond to him as you meditate on the truths of Scripture.

Day 1

Read Psalm 33:4

*The word of the Lord holds true,
and we can trust everything he does.*

Reflect: Sometimes we don't understand everything God does because we cannot see the whole picture . So why do we trust God? Why do we put our hope in God?

Day 2

Read Psalm 33:5

*He loves whatever is just and good;
the unfailing love of the Lord fills the earth.*

Reflect: Do you tend to see God's love as limited and too busy with other things to care about you? What does this verse say to counter that kind of thinking? Underline the words whatever and unfailing and spend some time thinking about how they build your hope in God's love.

Day 3

Read Psalm 33:18-19

*The Lord watches over those who fear him,
those who rely on his unfailing love.
He rescues them from death
and keeps them alive in times of famine.*

Reflect: What promises do you find in these verses? From what do you need to be rescued physically, emotionally, or spiritually? Where are you experiencing a famine or shortage?

Day 4

Read Psalm 33:20

*We put our hope in the Lord.
He is our help and our shield.*

Reflect: Where, specifically, do you need God to help you and shield you? How can you put your hope in God today?

Day 5

Read Psalm 33:21

*In him our hearts rejoice,
for we trust in his holy name.*

Reflect: Hope grows when we realize we can trust . What specific things do you want to rejoice about today?

Day 6

Read Psalm 33:22

*Let your unfailing love surround us, Lord,
for our hope is in you alone.*

Reflect: How does this verse describe God’s love? What does it mean to “hope in [God] alone”?

SESSION FOUR

Love Hates

MEMORY VERSE

Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

Ephesians 4:15

INTRODUCTION

As we have said previously, the goal of this study is more than to learn about love or to do loving things. Rather, our goal is to change our very selves, to become loving persons.

You have spent the last few weeks trying to love a specific person. Hopefully that is changing both you and the person to whom you are showing love.

This week we are looking at an act of love that might surprise you. We are going to talk about how love hates. That may sound like a contradiction, yet there is something you must hate if you are going to love. What is that thing? That is what we are going to explore in this session.

SHARE YOUR STORY

Open your time together with prayer.

You can pray for specific requests at the meeting's end or pause to pray for a particular situation during your discussion.

Telling our personal stories builds deeper connections among group members. Begin your time together by using the following questions and activities to get people talking.

- How is your relationship developing with the person you have chosen to love? What obstacles or barriers have you encountered? What unexpected joys have come your way? The term “tough love” is often
- used to describe a love that speaks truth even when it is hard. What is an example of tough love? Sit with your accountability partner . If your
- partner is absent or if you are new to the group, join with another pair or someone who does not yet have a partner. (See “Share Your Story” in Session Two.) Share one prayer request and one thing for which you want to thank God. Pray together about what you have shared.

HEAR GOD'S STORY

Begin by reading the Bible passage below. Then use the questions to guide your discussion.

Read 1 Corinthians 13 (NRSV)

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions,

and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

- Verse 6 says that love “does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.” What do you think it means to “[rejoice] in the truth”?
- Hearing the truth sometimes hurts. Why is truth-telling, even when it is painful, ultimately an act of love?
- Without truth, love will sweep painful realities under the rug. What painful realities is God lovingly asking you to bring to light?
- Love is courageous. Tell about a time you had to be courageous in order to love someone.

NOTES

Use this space to record your thoughts, questions, and ponderings as you discuss the Bible passage.

CREATE A NEW STORY

In this section, consider how you will apply the wisdom you learned from the teaching and Bible study.

- Where is God calling you to hate evil? What do you think that will look like specifically?
- We are to hate evil not only in the world around us, but in ourselves . What keeps us from seeing the evil in ourselves? What are some ways that we can more clearly see ourselves, including our flaws?
- What you love most gets your ultimate allegiance. What things compete with God for yourallegiance (e.g.,possessions, accomplishments,people,etc.)? What is one step you can take this week to move toward putting God first and loving him more than anything else?

**HELPFUL HINT #5:
SERVE OTHERS**

There is power when groups serve together. While there is an additive effect when one person's work is duplicated by others, there is multiplicative effect when many people's gifts and abilities are aligned toward a common purpose.

How can you as a group serve someone in need? You may want to visit a shut-in neighbor, provide a meal for a family who is going through difficulty, or give some other practical help to someone you already know is in need of support and encouragement. You can also look into volunteering with a local organization. If nothing comes to mind, spend some time as a group praying and asking God to show you who needs your help. Have two or three group members organize the service project for the group—and then do it!

To close your time together, pray for the commitments each person has made for the coming week. Have one person pray or, if the group is comfortable, have each person pray for the person to their left.

FOR ADDITIONAL STUDY

If you would like to explore related Bible passages on your own, read the passages below and record your reflections in a journal.

Read Luke 14:25-30

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

"Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'"

- Imagine yourself in the crowd that is following Jesus, intrigued by his teachings. Then he turns and says these words. What is your initial reaction? What questions come to your mind?
- Jesus was not advising us to be cruel to our family. Rather, he was talking about our priorities. Where does your primary allegiance lie?
- What do you think Jesus meant when he said we are to hate our own life?

- What do you think Jesus's point was in using the metaphor of building a tower? In what ways is building a life of love like building a physical structure?

Read Ephesians 4:11-16

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

- In the first paragraph, Paul writes about several goals . What are a few of those goals? (Hint: look for the verbs.)
- In the second paragraph, Paul sets up a contrast between being infants and being mature. What does maturity look like? How is speaking the truth in love related to maturity?
- Balancing truth with love is never easy, and we can tend to lean one way or the other. When it comes to speaking truth, are you more direct and confrontational or more nonconfrontational and cautious? With that in mind, what do you need to find the balance between truth and love?
- How can we as a community “build [ourselves] up in love”?

DAILY DEVOTIONS

Use these daily devotions to go deeper into this week's topic. This week's devotions take you through Psalm 97. Each day, read the verses given. Take your time. Ask God to speak to you through his word . Notice which words or phrase stands out to you . Then take some time to journal your response to him . Listen to what God wants to say to you through his word and respond to him as you meditate on the truths of the Scripture.

Day 1

Read Psalm 97:1-2 (NLT)

The Lord is king!

Let the earth rejoice!

Let the farthest coastlands be glad.

Dark clouds surround him.

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.

Reflect: Why would the earth rejoice about the fact that the Lord is king? What kind of king causes his subjects to rejoice? How are righteousness and justice related to truth and love?

Day 2

Read Psalm 97:3-4

Fire spreads ahead of him

and burns up all his foes.

His lightning flashes out across the world.

The earth sees and trembles.

Reflect: What are the fiery metaphors in these verses meant to convey? What is the psalmist trying to tell us about God?

Day 3

Read Psalm 97:5-6

*The mountains melt like wax before the Lord,
before the Lord of all the earth.*

*The heavens proclaim his righteousness;
every nation sees his glory.*

Reflect: What is this poetic language trying to tell us about God?
According to these verses, what is God like?

Day 4

Read Psalm 97:7-8

*Those who worship idols are disgraced—
all who brag about their worthless gods—
for every god must bow to him.*

*Jerusalem has heard and rejoiced,
and all the towns of Judah are glad
because of your justice, O Lord!*

Reflect: While our culture does not set up statues as idols to which we bow, we do worship many other things besides God (e.g., money, success, comfort, celebrities, sports heroes). What idols are you tempted to worship? What things are you tempted to prize more highly than God?

Day 5

Read Psalm 97:9-10

*For you, O Lord, are supreme over all the earth;
you are exalted far above all gods.
You who love the Lord, hate evil!
He protects the lives of his godly people
and rescues them from the power of the wicked.*

Reflect: What do these verses instruct us to do? What promises do we find in this text?

Day 6

Read Psalm 97:11-12

*Light shines on the godly,
and joy on those whose hearts are right.
May all who are godly rejoice in the Lord
and praise his holy name!*

Reflect: What does it mean to have your heart “right”? If God is love, what does it mean to be “godly,” as mentioned in these verses?

SESSION FIVE

Love Heals

MEMORY VERSE

These three things continue: faith, hope, and love. And the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13:13 (ERV)

INTRODUCTION

Congratulations! You have made it through this study . Today is our final session. By God's grace, you are hopefully a more loving person than you were when you started this journey.

We have talked about several aspects of love: love hopes, love hurts, and love even hates. Love is not just feeling good about something or even desiring something; rather, love is the God-powered orientation of your entire being to will and to work for the good of those around you.

In this last session, we are going to look at one more important truth about love: love heals. So much in our culture, our families, and even our churches is broken, injured, and fractured. But love heals; love brings wholeness. It mends that which is broken, binds up that which has been shattered, and brings together what has been torn apart.

How can we live in *agape* love, in a love that brings healing? That is what we are going to talk about today.

SHARE YOUR STORY

Open your time together with prayer. You can pray for specific requests at the meeting's end or pause to pray for a particular situation during your discussion.

As we have said in previous lessons, sharing our personal stories builds deeper connections among group members. Your story may be exactly what another person needs to hear to encourage or strengthen them. In turn, your listening to others' stories is an act of love and kindness to them, and being heard could very well help them to grow spiritually. Begin your time together by engaging in some of the following questions and activities.

What has surprised you most about this group? Where did God meet you over the last five weeks? Take time in this final session to connect with your accountability partner. Talk about what God has been showing you about love. Check in with each other about the progress you have made in your spiritual growth during this study. Consider whether you will continue your accountability partnership after your Bible study group ends. Have each person share how the individuals you have been intentionally praying for and interacting with over the last several weeks have responded. How has the person changed? How have you changed?

HEAR GOD'S STORY

Begin by reading the Bible passage below. Then use the questions to guide your discussion.

Read 1 Corinthians 13 (ERV)

I may speak in different languages, whether human or even of angels. But if I don't have love, I am only a noisy bell or a ringing cymbal. I may have the gift of prophecy, I may understand all secrets and know everything there is to know, and I may have faith so great that I can move mountains. But even with all this, if I don't have love, I am nothing. I may give away everything I have to help others, and I may even give my body as an offering to be burned. But I gain nothing by doing all this if I don't have love.

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous, it does not brag, and it is not proud. Love is not rude, it is not selfish, and it cannot be made angry easily. Love does not remember wrongs done against it. Love is never happy when others do wrong, but it is always happy with the truth. Love never gives up on people. It never stops trusting, never loses hope, and never quits.

Love will never end. But all those gifts will come to an end—even the gift of prophecy, the gift of speaking in different kinds of languages, and the gift of knowledge. These will all end because this knowledge and these prophecies we have are not complete. But when perfection comes, the things that are not complete will end.

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, and I made plans like a child. When I became a man, I stopped those childish ways. It is the same with us. Now we see God as if we are looking at a reflection in a mirror. But then, in the future, we will see him right before our eyes. Now I know only a part, but at that

time I will know fully, as God has known me. So these three things continue: faith, hope, and love. And the greatest of these is love.

- In your family of origin, what did you learn about dealing with conflict? Did you learn to be afraid? To spew out anger? To simply avoid it?
- Over time, if irritation isn't healed, it can turn into resentment . Is there a place in your life where hurt has festered over time that caused you to feel resentment?
- Recovery begins by looking at resentments. Where does your heart need to be healed?

NOTES

Use this space to record your thoughts, questions, and ponderings as you discuss the Bible passage.

HELPFUL HINT #6: NEXT STEPS

If your group will continue meeting after this study, make time before you close to review your *Small Group Agreement* and evaluate how well you met your goals. Discuss any changes you want to make as you move forward.

If you plan to continue meeting and your group starts a new study, this is a great time to take on a new role or change roles of service in your group. Other questions to tackle include what you will study, who will lead, and where andwhen you will meet.

Since it may take some time to decide what your next study will be, this next week may be a great time to do a service project or social outing.

CREATE A NEW STORY

How has God changed your story during this study? What new things is he asking you to do? What truth has transformed your heart? Think about specific steps you want to take to live a new story and walk more closely with God so that you can be a part of his story, engaged in his kingdom.

- Where does love need to do its healing work in your life?
 - What do you sense is a next step for you to become a more loving person?
 - When it comes to love in the context of resolving conflict, what do you want to do differently than your family of origin did?
 - Is there a broken or strained relationship where you want to pursue healing? Explain.
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Since this is the last meeting in this study, take some time to celebrate the work God has done in the lives of group members. Have each person affirm the growth that they have noticed in *another* member of the group. In other words, no one will talk about themselves but will affirm someone else. Make sure that each person is celebrated whether the steps they have made are large or small. If the group is larger than eight people, divide into smaller groups to do this exercise.

Close by praying for your prayer requests and take a couple of minutes to review the praises you have recorded on the *Prayer and Praise Log* over the past five weeks. Spend some time praying, singing, and thanking God for all he has done in your group during this study.

FOR ADDITIONAL STUDY

If you would like to explore related Bible passages on your own, read the passages below and record your reflections in a journal.

Read Matthew 5:23-24 (NLT)

“So if you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God.”

- While we may not be “presenting a sacrifice” at an altar, we often attend worship services or even serve others while ignoring relational conflicts in our life . What do you think it means to “leave your sacrifice” in our modern context?
- What does it mean to be “reconciled” to someone? How does that definition relate to the power of love to heal?
- Often, reconciliation begins with admitting our part in a conflict . As you read these verses, what person or situation comes to mind? What would be the first step toward reconciliation?

Read 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

- In your own story, what about you has changed? When you think of “the old has gone, the new is here,” what specifically comes to mind? In other words, how has God’s love healed you?
- What do you think it means to be given “the ministry of reconciliation”? To whom do you need to be reconciled?
- What does it mean to be Christ’s ambassador? And who needs to experience his healing love through you?

DAILY DEVOTIONS

Continue in your journey. In this last week, begin to pray about your next step in growing closer to Jesus. Each day, read the given verse. Take your time. Walk slowly, verse by verse, listening to Jesus and responding to him as you meditate on the truths of Scripture and experience his presence.

Day 1

Read Psalm 34:14

*Turn from evil and do good;
seek peace and pursue it.*

Reflect: How can you seek and pursue peace today by loving those with whom you have had conflicts?

Day 2

Read Psalm 34:15-16.

*The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are attentive to their cry;
but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil,
to blot out their name from the earth.*

Reflect: What promises do you find in these verses? We learned last week that love hates evil, but we are also called to seek healing and forgive those who have committed evil against us. What does living in this tension look like for you?

Day 3

Read Psalm 34:17

*The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them;
he delivers them from all their troubles.*

Reflect: What do you need to cry out to the Lord today? What kind of healing and deliverance from troubles do you need? Talk to God about that.

Day 4

Read Psalm 34:18

*The Lord is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*

Reflect: What breaks your heart these days? Where are you feeling crushed in spirit? For what do you need love that heals?

Day 5

Read Psalm 34:19-20

*The righteous person may have many troubles,
but the Lord delivers him from them all;
he protects all his bones,
not one of them will be broken.*

Reflect: Think about a time when God delivered you from troubles. Thank him for the love that healed you in the past. Then bring your current situation before him, trusting he will deliver you.

Day 6

Read Psalm 34:21-22

*Evil will slay the wicked;
the foes of the righteous will be condemned.
The Lord will rescue his servants;
no one who takes refuge in him will be condemned.*

Reflect: From what do you need to be rescued? What does it mean to “take refuge in God”? What promises do you find in this passage?

PRAYER AND PRAISE LOG

PRAYER AND PRAISE LOG

