

COVENANT

bible study 



CREATING LIVING TRUSTING

HEBREWS 10:16 

This is the covenant that I will make with them.

*After these days, says the Lord,
I will place my laws in their hearts
And write them on their minds.*

A fresh look at a timeless promise.

THE BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF COVENANT speaks to an enduring commitment between God and God’s fruitful people. It’s a promise—to live in a loving relationship with and for each other.

So the purpose of **COVENANT BIBLE STUDY** is to engage participants in conversations about this unique and special relationship—as well as our relationships with each other and the world around us—as we study the Bible together.

COVENANT is based on the understanding that it is through community—through shared reflection and engagement—that we can best discover the Bible’s transformative power. It is rooted in the simple idea that we live well when we love well.

The goal of **COVENANT BIBLE STUDY** is to deepen our understanding of scripture while also helping us respond together in answering God’s call to a faithful life in Jesus. So it embraces a learning experience that builds trust in others and confidence in scripture for each participant—leveraging not just scriptural examples but also personal memories of God’s faithful love.

It helps participants, through sharing and conversation, apply the Bible to their personal story.

Which not only helps cultivate a lifelong trust in God, it helps each participant discover the Bible as a friend for life.

In-depth study. An accessible message.

COVENANT IS A 24-WEEK, IN-DEPTH GROUP BIBLE STUDY in which people read and discuss the Bible together; learning how to love God—and others—better.

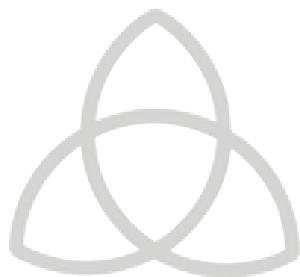
It differs from other Bible studies in that it emphasizes the biblical concept of covenant as a unifying pattern throughout the entire Bible. It underscores the unique relationship that God chooses with us as his people.

The program covers both Testaments—discussing books from each in a way that shows the interconnectedness of scripture as a whole.

But deep, committed study needn't be complex. It should be flexible. Relevant. And engaging.

That's why **COVENANT BIBLE STUDY** is broken into three eight-week modules—each dealing with a different aspect of what covenant means:

CREATING
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TRUSTING



CREATING

GENESIS 9:12a CEB

*God said, "This is the symbol of the covenant
that I am drawing up between me and you
and every living thing with you."*

GOD ESTABLISHES THE COVENANT to be in relationship with us. So the first eight weeks, **Creating the Covenant**, examines how the covenant community is created and established—highlighting several examples throughout scripture.

It discusses the story of our origins in Genesis, the Exodus narrative, the teachings of Moses, the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, as well as other books from each Testament that focus on the foundation of Christian faith.

In doing so, it lays out the framework for a life lived in concert with God and others.



LIVING

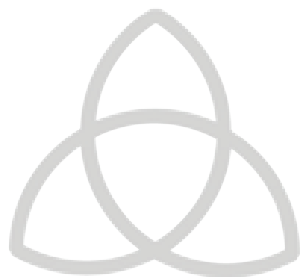
2 SAMUEL 23:5a CEB

*Yes, my house is this way with God!
He has made an eternal covenant with me,
laid out and secure in every detail.*

COVENANT TRANSLATES INTO ACTIONS—into how we behave in our everyday lives. That’s why the second module, **Living the Covenant**, focuses on how the community lives out its covenant in faithful love—how it’s applied to actual relationships in daily life.

The books included in these eight episodes examine the practical challenges of faithful covenant life. In them, we explore leadership problems among tribal chieftains, kings, and prophets during spiritual and political crises. The leaders look for practical wisdom and guidance in the teachings of Israel’s sages, the letters of Paul, and more.

And by demonstrating how people of vastly different culture come together in a common purpose, the episodes show how faithful love is the root of the covenant life.



TRUSTING

JEREMIAH 31:33b CEB

*I will put my instructions within them
and engrave them on their hearts.*

I will be their God, and they will be my people.

LIFE, AS WE KNOW ALL TOO WELL, IS IMPERFECT. Trials are inevitable. That's why the final eight-week module, **Trusting the Covenant**, looks at the crises that sometimes call covenant life into question, and how we are restored to trust in God when troubling things happen.

This module discusses the loss of hope, and how it is restored by faithfulness in the midst of suffering. From the story of Job, to the Hebrew exile, to the apocalyptic visions in Daniel and Revelation, we learn how faithful love is at work in everything—to restore hope, freedom, and wholeness to our lives.



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Scripture quotations are from the Common English Bible

CREATING the Covenant

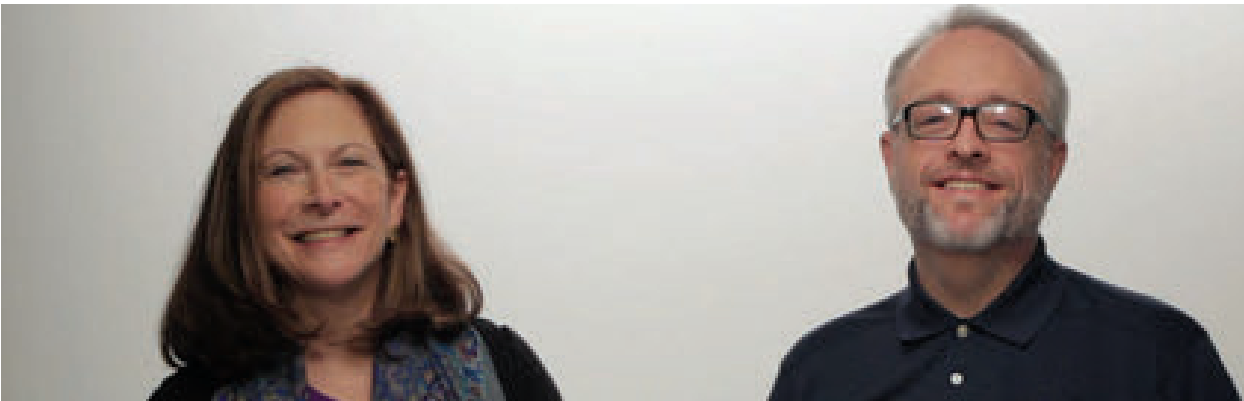
Episode	Theme	Title
1	Relationships	Creating the Covenant
2	Who Are We?	Torah: Genesis
3	Freedom and Instruction	Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers
4	God's Kingdom	Gospels: Matthew and Mark
5	Grace	Letters: Romans and Galatians
6	Witness	Hebrews
7	Logic of the Cross	1 and 2 Corinthians
8	Covenant Renewal	History: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1 Samuel

LIVING the Covenant

Episode	Theme	Title
9	Faithful Love	Ruth, Esther, Song of Songs
10	The Spirit-Led Community	Luke and Acts
11	Leadership	2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings
12	God's Household	1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus
13	Discernment	Wisdom: Proverbs and Ecclesiastes
14	Reconciled	Philemon, Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians
15	Act Like a Christian	James, Jude, 1 and 2 Peter
16	Doing the Right Thing	Prophets: Isaiah 1–39 and the Book of the Twelve

TRUSTING the Covenant

Episode	Theme	Title
17	Life Together	John; 1, 2, and 3 John
18	Praise and Lament	Psalms
19	Tragedy	Job
20	Crisis and Starting Over	Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel
21	Exile and Renewal	Isaiah 40–66
22	Restoration	1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah
23	Hope	Apocalyptic: Daniel
24	New Creation	Revelation



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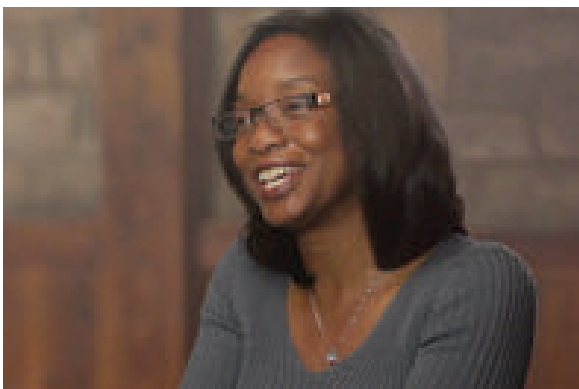
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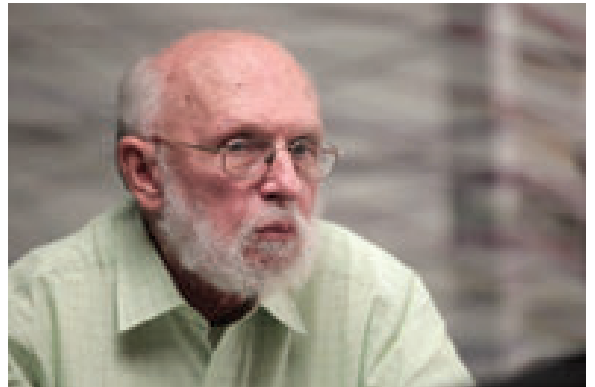
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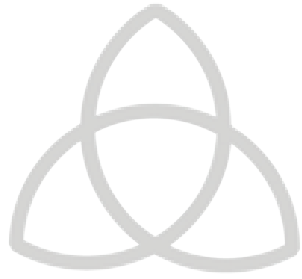
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S
A
M
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L
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CREATING

EPISODE 1

Creating The Covenant

Leader Guide

Participant Guide

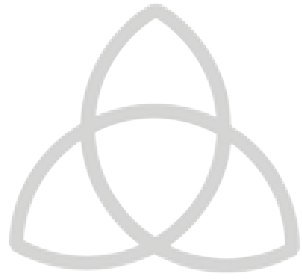
EPISODE 1

Torah: Genesis

Leader Guide

Participant Guide

Meditation Guide



PARTICIPANT GUIDE 1

EPISODE 1—Creating the Covenant

RELATIONSHIPS

Reading the Bible to live and love well

EXPECTATIONS FOR THE COVENANT EXPERIENCE

During the first group meeting experience (Episode 1), you should try to accomplish the following things:

1. Give the participants a taste of the Covenant group experience.
2. Explain why covenant is a very important concept and pattern throughout the Bible.
3. Establish the expectations for the group: regular attendance, confidentiality, and respect for each other in conversation.
4. Show the brief orientation video presented by the cohosts.
5. Explain how to use the episodes in each participant guide and how they establish a daily and weekly rhythm for in-depth Bible study.
6. Talk briefly about the parts of a study Bible (table of contents, maps, notes, and so on) and other tools for Bible study (concordance, Bible dictionary, Gospel parallels). Direct participants to CovenantBibleStudy.com for other reliable online resources for Bible study.
7. Explain that you are signing up the group at CovenantBibleStudy.com to receive daily readings, calendar information, and more via e-mail. You will need each participant's e-mail address to register the group. Encourage participants with smart phones or tablets to visit the website and purchase the Covenant Bible Study app. They can view the participant guides digitally within the app. Other digital tools can be purchased there, as well.
8. Collect contact information for each participant (and have the group record e-mail addresses and phone numbers in their participant guides). Discuss child care needs, transportation concerns, and so on.
9. Pray for each other.



Materials needed: Covenant leader guide, participant guides, *CEB Study Bible*, *Creating the Covenant* DVD (or video download), extra pens or pencils, nametags, a scrapbook or family photo album, a story or memory from your own family's past that locates and somehow defines who you are. Optional: Have your group read Deuteronomy 10 before this first session (or budget time to read it in the group meeting). Find more online resources, including bonus video content, at CovenantBibleStudy.com.

THE GOAL AND SCOPE OF COVENANT BIBLE STUDY

This Covenant experience will guide participants in a comprehensive, in-depth study of the Bible over the next several months. Unlike the learning participants may have experienced in other groups, this in-depth study of the whole Bible emphasizes the biblical concept of *covenant* as a unifying pattern through all the books in the Old and New Testaments. It underscores the unique relationship that God chooses to have with us as God's people. This relationship is grounded in the faithfulness of God's love and on our ongoing commitment to stay in love with God while we share signs of that love with others.

Each episode connects to an aspect of this covenant relationship, which is summarized in the heading of each participant guide:

Creating the Covenant: The first participant guide in eight episodes explores how a biblical covenant is created and established. It covers the stories about our origins in Genesis, the critical Exodus narrative about the freedom of God's people, the stories of a new teacher in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, and other biblical books that highlight foundational aspects of Christian belief and practice.

Living the Covenant: This participant guide builds on the concept of covenant by applying it to actual relationships in everyday life. The books included in this set of eight episodes are instructive, such as the accounts of emerging leadership problems among the tribal chieftains, and then among the kings and prophets. It presents the spiritual and political crises that formed the early church; it searches for practical wisdom in the teachings of Israel's sages; and it considers the practical guidance found in Paul's letters as the emerging church learned how people of very different cultures can join together in a common mission.

Trusting the Covenant: This final participant guide tackles the loss of hope, which is restored by faithfulness in the midst of suffering. It explores the many ways that the biblical narrative encourages commitment to God when it is unreasonable and costly. The compelling story of Job, the stirring prophetic oracles during the Hebrew exile, and the imaginative symbolism of apocalyptic literature challenge and encourage us to faithful living.

During this first meeting, pass out participant guides and ask your group to open them.

Tip: Have participants pay for their guides at the first session. Some groups prefer to circulate a weekly envelope so participants can pay later (or even pay a little at a time, depending on your church's reimbursement policy or budget). Some participants, of course, will be purchasing the Covenant app on their smart phones or tablets.

Point out these features:

1. Notice the three distinct participant guides. There are three guides because some groups will meet for eight weeks, take a break, and then meet for the next set of episodes. A cautious participant may limit their investment to an eight-week experience, though the life-giving relationships formed in the group will usually draw reluctant participants into the full transforming experience.
2. Open the first guide, *Creating the Covenant*, and look at Episode 2 together. Describe the rhythm of the daily readings. Note:
3. The title (Torah: Genesis), episode theme (Who Are We?), learning objective (Creating covenants with God and others), list of daily Bible Readings, and "Our Longing for Relationship." Highlight the Covenant Prayer section where they will read aloud the prayers and scripture passages at the beginning of the session. Explain that the space between each prayer and scripture is for writing down individuals who come to mind as needing prayer. Let the participants know you will write down prayer concerns at the end of their session each week.
4. Point out the genre and scripture book introductions (such as Torah and Genesis) that participants will read on Day 1 each week. Emphasize that each daily scripture reading includes questions for thoughtful reflection. They will want to write any questions they have about the reading in the shaded area beside each reading summary. These questions and thoughts will stimulate group discussion at the weekly group meeting where the group will study a particular passage together.
5. Describe the Covenant Meditation exercise on Day 6 and how it may occasionally be done with the group in the weekly meeting.
6. The last section is the Group Meeting Experience discussed below.
7. Mention that in addition to the participant guides, each person should obtain a study Bible. The Covenant Edition of the *CEB Study Bible* is preferred. The digital edition of the *CEB Study Bible* is also available for purchase in the Covenant mobile app, and online access is available for purchase at CovenantBibleStudy.com. Other study Bibles are acceptable too, but trying a new study Bible that participants haven't used before will likely awaken fresh meaning. The notations in the *CEB Study Bible* will answer most questions or trigger new ones while the participant reads a biblical passage.



THE GROUP MEETING EXPERIENCE

Each *Covenant Bible Study* episode follows the same essential structure by balancing conversational teaching from biblical experts with engaging discussion among the participants. *Covenant* is designed so that the meaning of the Bible isn't found in just listening to a biblical scholar or listening to one's own inner voice. Only through conversation in community, in the Covenant Group Meeting Experience, can we discover the Bible's transformative power. During some weeks the group might be so full of energy and questions that conversation leaves less time for the video. That's okay. The spiritual energy that wakes up and transforms a life is the most important result from this kind of Bible study.

The structure of the Covenant leader guide is designed to create options for facilitators so the weekly group experience creates an encounter with scripture that changes lives. You will discover in the coming weeks what strategies work best in your group. There is often more to do in the leader guide than your group has time to accomplish in one sitting. Schedule a break in your group meetings (for a stretch or restroom break). Whether your group meets for seventy-five minutes or two hours (ninety minutes is the sweet spot), you can try each section in the leader guide during the first few weeks and see what works best with your group.

GATHERING TOGETHER (10 min)

The opening questions of this segment in each episode are designed to prompt conversation on a general topic that connects to the main theme of the episode. Begin by reading the scriptures in the Covenant Prayer section for Episode 1. Have one person say the phrase, "For those who . . ." and then the whole group responds by reading the scripture passage aloud (Neh 8:8 and then 8:10).

At this first meeting, ask the participants to think about a close personal relationship. The relationship might be with another human being, or it might be with an animal such as a dog or cat. Make a list of the relationships treasured in the group. In a column next to the list, write down the feelings that these relationships produce (e.g., contentment, anxiety, joy, avoidance, anger, safety, and so forth). Encourage someone to explain his feeling about this relationship through a story or anecdote. It might be a love story, or perhaps it comes from remembering a parent. (Examples: the day my dad taught me to drive; when my mom helped me shop for a prom dress; when my best friend introduced me to my future husband; when my brother wrecked my car.)

Ask the participants to reflect on why personal relationships with others and with God are important. (Answers might include: preventing loneliness, overcoming selfishness, managing appetites, sharing, forgiving wrongs, providing patience, humility, caregiving, children, and so forth.)

REFLECTING TOGETHER (10 min)

This segment guides participants to share what they learned from the week's scripture readings with questions that tie their discoveries into a central theme. The study also encourages participants to memorize and share verses from the readings that they found particularly meaningful.

In the first participant guide, we establish the purpose of covenant in the Bible. The covenants are based on memories of God's promises to the families of Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus. Give participants a few minutes to scan over the section in Episode 1 titled "Life that Fits and Connects." Memories of divine promise are based on retelling stories, much like we retell a story by means of a scrapbook.

Bring a scrapbook or family photo album to the first group meeting (and consider asking participants in advance to bring one, too). Ask the participants to describe how their families preserve and remember ancestors and relatives. Ask for stories, and be prepared to tell a memory from your own family's past that locates and defines who you are, or perhaps that defines the hope and expectation you have for future generations. (Here is an example of a fruitful response: "After our parents divorced, my sister and I moved with my mom from California to North Carolina, where we started at a new school in a very different culture. I found that being the new kid was tough, but it also gave me a reboot on my self-image, and I have used that skill to restart my life several times over the years.")

The optional Tips sections offer leader reminders and practical suggestions for improving your Covenant group experience as a facilitator.

VIDEO SEGMENT (25 min)

Play the orientation video for Episode 1. The cohosts for this opening conversation are Reverend Shane Stanford, senior pastor at Christ United Methodist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, and Reverend Christine Chakoian, senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Lake Forest, Illinois. They will meet with a different biblical scholar in each video episode.

Each video in the coming weeks features a conversation between the hosts and a biblical scholar around the Covenant table. Their conversation is a model for the kind of learning dynamic that is central to this study. The questions in this section of the Leader's Guide can be used at the conclusion of the video to prompt participants to reflect on the scholar's words in the context of their own discoveries. Encourage them to write down their own questions while they watch the video.

TAKE A BREAK (10 minutes)

Never underestimate the power of a well-placed break! Participants come back better able to focus and learn if they stretch, take a bathroom break, and talk to each other outside of the formal discussion. Be strict about time, though. Whether it's five or ten minutes, choose a time for breaks that works best with your group. Offline conversations and interactions with the group are key to your success as a group leader. The relationships you strengthen during these breaks are as important as any of the biblical ideas discussed.



DISCOVERING TOGETHER (15 min)

This segment in the following episodes builds on the insights of the biblical scholar and analyzes a single passage from the week's readings. The questions in the Group Meeting Experience section of the participant guide encourage a comprehensive look at the form, style, and central meaning of the scripture text. This segment will teach participants how to "go deeper" in the way they explore the Bible's meaning.

If you handed out the participant guides before the first meeting, or if individuals downloaded the participant guides to their mobile devices, assign a single Bible passage (Deuteronomy 10) to be read before the meeting, as well. It will be discussed briefly at the first meeting during this segment. Alternatively, if you wait for the first meeting, read Deuteronomy 10 aloud together, taking turns. Then ask the participants to separate into two groups and discuss by using the following questions:

1. How does the story in Deuteronomy 10 build on the story of the two stone tablets in Exodus 24:12-18? What did Moses do with those tablets? Why are the tablets still needed?
2. The covenant chest (called an "ark" in the KJV) is a container for God's presence, and the two tablets are a reminder of God's ten important expectations. Ask the two groups of participants to make a list of ten expectations they have for their closest personal relationship.

Bring the whole group together and discuss how committed relationships are based in faithful love and mutual responsibility. Be sensitive to those who have been hurt by broken relationships or betrayals, and explain how scripture can guide us through forgiveness and reconciliation from painful experiences in our past.

CENTERING TOGETHER (10 min)

This segment provides a meditation, which is a devotional way to read the Bible. This is a critical part of the experience because it ensures the study experience is not only informative for the mind, but also formative for the heart. It will teach participants how to use imagination, prayer, and listening while reading scripture. These spiritual practices can strengthen their relationship with God. You may choose to have willing participants report on this experience (always located on Day 6 in the participant guide) if they are trying it at home. As an alternative, the leader guide includes this as a weekly group practice every week because some individuals are unfamiliar with this kind of meditation. Decide the best fit for your group; try it both ways, as individuals and as a group.

An additional book of *Covenant Meditations* (sixty-six distinct meditations, one per book in the Bible) is available for participants who find this type of scripture reading practice enriching. Here is an example from Ezekiel 36 in *Covenant Meditations*:

A new heart

When I make myself holy among you in their sight, I will take you from the nations, I will gather you from all the countries, and I will bring you to your own fertile land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be cleansed of all your pollution. I will cleanse you of all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove your stony heart from your body and replace it with a living one.

Ezekiel 36:23c-26

Praying the word

At times our hearts harden. We become stubborn toward other people, different opinions and points of view, situations that make us uncomfortable, and even toward ourselves. After reading this scripture passage, sit quietly and reflect on the last time you felt your heart harden—or become “stony”—toward someone or something. What was happening at the time? Why did you respond with a stubborn heart? What would it take for your heart to soften again toward this person or circumstance? Offer a prayer that God might help your heart come alive again toward whatever caused your heart to become stony.

SERVING TOGETHER (5 min)

Read together the “Signs of Faithful Love” at the end of this episode. Then remind them that they are committing to a twenty-four-week Covenant experience together where they will:

- read the Bible daily and write responses in their participant guides;
- pray for other members of the group each day;
- meet with the group every week;
- listen for God speaking through the Bible and each other; and
- invite the Holy Spirit to change their lives through exposure to the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ encountered in the scriptures.

Participants are encouraged to conceive and share *tangible* ways that each week’s readings will alter their priorities and perspectives and shape their behavior.

Ask group participants who are willing to share how each has volunteered to serve or help others in the past. Make a list of the tangible things they have done for others, and affirm the scope and range of their experiences. (Some examples may include: mowing an aging neighbor’s lawn as they recover from surgery; mission trips to build housing for impoverished families at home or abroad; repairing playground equipment at a local park; providing transportation to doctor visits for those who no longer drive; tutoring second graders in basic math at a local elementary school; honoring first responders; and so on.) More examples of concrete things your group can do together or individually are found at CovenantBibleStudy.com.



CLOSING PRAYER (5 min)

Each session closes with a time for sharing prayer requests and concerns with each other. Encourage participants to write down each other's needs (in the next episode of their participant guides) and remember them each day in the upcoming week. Point out the particular concern for individuals who are struggling to find themselves, to know who they are or where they belong. Ask them to write these requests under the Covenant Prayer segment for Episode 2.

Finally, be sure to draw the group's attention again to "Our Longing for Relationship" at the beginning of each episode and "Signs of Faithful Love" at the end of each episode—at the times designated in the leader guide. These handles serve as helpful starting and ending markers for your group discussion, moving participants from positions of marginal commitment to high commitment in their path toward discipleship.

Creating the Covenant

RELATIONSHIPS

Reading the Bible to live and love well

Covenant Prayer

For those who want to learn how to love God and others

They read aloud from the scroll, the Instruction from God, explaining and interpreting it so the people could understand what they heard. (Nehemiah 8:8)

For those whom God makes new

This day is holy to our LORD. Don't be sad, because the joy from the LORD is your strength! (Nehemiah 8:10)

OUR LONGING FOR RELATIONSHIP

Covenant names our yearning to live and belong in loving relationships with self, God, and others.



LIFE THAT FITS AND CONNECTS

.....

We probably have seen scrapbooks or family photo albums (in binders, books, or online). What kind of pictures or mementos do you find in books like this? Did your family keep a scrapbook or photo album from your childhood?



Covenant Bible Study promises new life that fits and connects with God and others. Life that makes sense. Life that finds its source in God. Life lived together.

The Bible is a book like no other, and reading it is a rewarding experience. The assumption is that reading the Bible will improve our lives. But in spite of this assumption, many of us try to read this book and give up—usually after trying to read it from cover to cover. We often become confused by the strange names, places, and events that seem so distant from our daily lives. It can make us feel defeated, and so we throw in the towel and trust that someone else (pastor, scholar, or teacher) will make sense of this book and pass on the “high points” to the rest of us.

But our anxiety about reading the Bible may be connected to a deeper frustration and longing—a longing to connect with and come alive to something real, something lasting that promises to help us live well. Awash in a world of flickering words and images on glowing screens, we thirst for depth, for something that faithfully delivers on a promise to make a difference where we learn, work, and play. We want more than a superficial faith. Yet for many, the Bible seems like the last place for this kind of reality check.

Covenant Bible Study is one way to dispel this anxiety and reconnect with the deepest realities of our faith. Its goal is to cultivate lifelong trust in God and help participants discover the Bible as a friend for life. Covenant is based on the simple idea that we live well when we love well. When we read it together, we remember and retell the deepest story we know. This is the story of who we are, where we come from, and where we go wrong. And the story ends well because faithful love is at work in everything to restore hope, freedom, and wholeness to our lives.

The Bible follows the sometimes faithful and sometimes faithless responses of Israel and the church, tracking changes in the lives of key people and the community itself as they respond to God’s call. We find ourselves in tales of rivalry and rebellion, and in stories of corruption, catastrophe, and crisis. We see our own anxious desire for security expressed in its narratives of idolatry and rigid tribal boundaries. But we also see our misplaced loyalties graced by God’s restoring love. These grace-filled stories give us hope that God will make beautiful things out of the fragments and dust of our fallen lives.

The Bible speaks in more than one voice. It contains many conversations and perspectives, inviting us to join a discussion that began with creation in Genesis and extends to our street corners, coffee shops, offices, schools, and dinner tables. Covenant Bible Study is one way to continue that conversation. When we ask questions, share stories, and wrestle with some of the biggest issues facing us as human beings, this living conversation is woven into our lives. Reading the Bible together helps us deal with questions like, “How—or even—Is God with us? Is any of this real or true?” Real experiences and real questions come together in our search for something we can trust—a scripture reliable enough to be called a friend for life.

In the process, we discover that God is not anxious about this ongoing discussion, but that God actually shows up in some powerful ways, in loyal relationship, when we open ourselves and risk joining the conversation. Covenant Bible Study is an opportunity to belong to a group of friends discovering how the Bible is a companion for life.

A Covenant Bible Study consists of:

1. A **small group** of adults who pledge to read and study the Bible individually and together for an extended period of time. The group’s purpose is to deepen commitment to live as faithful followers of Jesus Christ.
2. An **experience** that trains participants in disciplined daily Bible reading, prayer, and holy conversation. Participants learn these skills by responding to participant guides, study Bibles, videos, and devotional meditations. The experience becomes accountable at weekly meetings in a group setting for fellowship, learning, and the shared practice of interpreting scripture. This setting is where scripture meets everyday experience within and beyond your church life.
3. A **promise** to cultivate practical wisdom, so that the knowledge of the participant and the group is enlarged when interpreting the Bible and conversing about life. What results is a covenant relationship with God that will redeem a broken world in need of transformation.

.....
Do your parents or grandparents ever tell competing versions of the same events? Do you have any “memories” that turned out to be the story you’ve always been told? Does that make them more or less reliable?
.....

.....
The Bible is a conversation partner for life. Reading it recalls and even rewrites our deepest stories, helping us recognize and respond to the true God who saves a suffering, shattered world.
.....



The Covenant Bible experience helps participants:

1. **learn** by dispelling anxiety about understanding the Bible;
2. **grow** by practicing conversation about scripture and relationships in a group;
3. **change** by improving skills for reading the Bible and living faithfully;
4. **discover** by naming your unique identity and purpose through the scriptural witness;
5. **share** by belonging to a group of friends in faith;
6. **experience** by invoking God's power and presence through spiritual reading and listening practices; and
7. **serve** by responding to what you learn and bringing covenant love to others.

Living well depends primarily on the attachments that we form. These bonds can be described in terms of who and what we love. Who and what we love expresses who we are (our identity) and also shows what matters most to each of us (our purpose).

In the Old Testament, Deuteronomy insists that the basic human yearning for healthy relationship is based in faithful love: "Israel, listen! Our God is the LORD! Only the LORD! Love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength" (Deut 6:4-5). In the New Testament, Jesus acknowledges Deuteronomy ("love the Lord your God") as the greatest expectation in the scriptures, and then he preaches: "You must love your neighbor as you love yourself" (Matt 22:39). Jesus confirms that you will find it hard to love a neighbor if your well-being (your whole heart and mind) is fragmented or distracted by substitutes for loyal love or by selfish desires.

Love has a learning curve. When we better understand God's faithful love expressed through scripture in the stories, songs, instructions, prophecies, and prayers for help, we find that living well together is always about our relationships.

Covenant is an organizing pattern for studying the whole scripture

“Covenant” is the solemn and enduring commitment made between God and human beings to be in a fruitful and creative relationship. When Christians speak about a relationship with God, we invoke the language and images of covenant. To express the relationship, we might say, “God is my father,” or “Jesus is my friend,” or “I am God’s child.” These expressions invoke commitment and loyalty.

This emphasis on covenant in the Bible is one way to get the big picture. It helps make sense of a long, ancient book that seems very strange and overwhelming. The Christian Bible is actually a library of sixty-six interrelated books. Think of the Bible as a quilt with sixty-six squares. Covenant is a dominant pattern that runs through this quilt because:

1. In the Torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy), God’s relationship with God’s people is grounded in a series of covenants. Torah is the Instruction (or Teaching; also called “the Law” in the King James Version) that maintains the relationship between God’s word (the expectations established by God) and God’s faithful or loyal people. The Torah shows that what we put in our mouths and consume with our minds will affect our well-being, the health of our relationship with God, and our relationships with others. As you will learn in Episode 2 on the Torah and Genesis, covenant in the Bible is based on the relationships formed by the first human families. Our best (and sometimes most painful) experiences in life come from learning how to love each other in a family.
2. Sometimes covenant is also understood in contractual and legal terms. We use the word *covenant* when describing how a group of neighbors might agree to get along with each other for mutual benefit. This sort of “neighborhood agreement” goes back to ancient times, when a tribal leader or ruler would “cut a covenant” with a neighboring tribe. These legal analogies can stimulate useful conversation about the responsibilities that are embedded in contemporary relationships with our families, friends, and government. However, the legal sanctions and retributions that were prescribed for violating a covenant in ancient societies can raise difficult issues that require thoughtful Christian reflection. A Covenant Bible

The Christian Bible is actually a library of sixty-six interrelated books. Think of the Bible as a quilt with sixty-six squares. Covenant is a dominant pattern that runs through this quilt.



Study group is a safe place to discuss the expectations we have for each other in our homes and communities.

3. Covenant is the dominant theme of the core stories (about the leading personalities) in the Bible, including the five major covenants that are based in promises and fulfilled through Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus. A story is a great way to show us (rather than simply tell us) what faithful love looks like. The books of Esther and Ruth, for example, are examples of faithful covenant love. The history writings from Deuteronomy through 2 Kings are also based in covenants that show how the well-being of God's people is determined by their loyalty to God and their commitment to this relationship.

4. Many of the prophets, but especially Hosea and Jeremiah, are schooled by covenant theology as they confront leaders who have responsibilities toward God and their communities. A breached covenant is how the prophets eventually explain the exile and the near extermination or scattering of Israelites by Babylon and Assyria. Jeremiah, in the "Book of the Covenant" (Jer 30–33), yearns for a new covenant that is cut into our hearts.

5. We look back at that expectation and yearning for a covenant inscribed on our hearts, and we as Christians realize that this new life is possible through Jesus, the one who reconciles us to God through his faithfulness on the cross. In the Gospels, God's kingdom is a vision of a better future for the new community of Christ-followers.

6. When the early Christians were "born again" and referred to each other as "sister" or "brother," they established their kinship through a family. Covenant life was the context for the letters to the Christian communities (for example, at Corinth or Ephesus) as they grappled with the ethical implications of living in relationships. This kind of covenant community is apparent when referring to Jesus as the head and the church as the body. This is also why Paul often refers to himself as the father of his parishioners. When we think of the most intimate relationships known to human beings—mother, father, sister, brother, lover, child, partner, spouse, friend—each of these identities was and is used by Christians to describe the covenant relationships between the people, their Lord, and their community.

Many Christians make a promise to read the whole Bible in a year. That is really hard to do, especially alone. Most people stall

before Leviticus. To gain an in-depth understanding of the whole Bible, Covenant offers patient and flexible guidance. The three participant guides encourage your group to meet in eight-week segments:

1. Creating the Covenant
2. Living the Covenant
3. Trusting the Covenant

It feels great each time your group finishes working through one of the participant guides, because it means you've also finished working through about a third of the Bible. The books of the Bible are arranged to cover the whole scripture while emphasizing the themes that are drawn from the covenants in the Bible.

The initial eight weeks feature how the covenant community is created and established. The next eight weeks feature how the community wisely lives out their covenant in faithful love. The final eight weeks feature how the community and individuals are restored to hope—to trust God when troubling things happen.

Because the Christian Bible is fixed in a certain order from Genesis to Revelation, people often try to study scripture in that order. Typically Christians end up neglecting the unfamiliar Old Testament books and sticking to the New Testament (and perhaps some of the psalms). While it might seem surprising to mix the books of the Old Testament and the New Testament, this Bible study's three-part covenant pattern will help us see that the New Testament writers are in conversation with the covenant themes of the Old Testament books.

Loving others in your group

Holy conversation about the Bible is vital to your spiritual health. You are part of a covenant group. In a group, the participants get more than knowledge about the Bible. Knowledge isn't enough to sustain or deepen trust in God. Group participants actually form covenant relationships with each other as they examine and practice what it means to stay in love with God. As you learn to share and love and serve together, the members of the covenant group make a commitment to each other. They learn to forgive each other if offended,



and they make a commitment together to deepen their relationship with God.

Your leader will convene the covenant group each week and help you develop a transforming conversation about the scriptures. This conversational approach is modeled for you in the weekly video episodes about the books you are studying. The Bible is most transformative when it is read and discussed together. Your understanding and life experience is shared, and as you listen to another's understanding of the story or hear about their practical experience, God's presence (the Holy Spirit) begins to turn and change hearts and minds. Amazing hope suddenly seems possible because God's love is discovered through these personal relationships.

Resources for the Covenant experience:

1. *Participant Guides*: The three Covenant participant guides show you what to read and offer space to interact personally with the daily Bible readings, the prayers, and the weekly covenant meditations. The guides are available from Cokesbury as a print set (or individually); or as enhanced eBooks in the Covenant Bible Study app (iOS and Android) for tablets and personal computers from CovenantBibleStudy.com.
2. *Covenant Meditations*: Many participants find great personal benefit and contentment in an intimate connection with God through “praying scripture.” In addition to the once-weekly meditation in the participant guides (on Day 6), a set of fifty-two additional covenant meditations is available in print or as an eBook.
3. *Covenant CEB Study Bible*: Participants and leaders are encouraged to obtain and use this study Bible (published in 2013) to inform the daily readings and the group meeting experience for Covenant. The *CEB Study Bible* is available in print, and it is also an option within the Covenant Bible Study app.
4. *CovenantBibleStudy.com*: Encourage your leader to collect everyone's email address and register your group online. In addition to

meeting reminders, benefits include a daily e-mail of the assigned Bible reading to everyone in the group. You can also download the daily Bible readings for Covenant as a navigable MP3 audiobook, based on the enhanced audio edition of the Common English Bible. At the website, participants can also download or stream the weekly video episodes (for a small fee), perhaps for a weekly meeting that was missed or to see what is ahead in the next weekly episode. Bonus videos (including Bible stories retold) are mentioned occasionally in the text of the participant guides. These are also located at the website for personal or group viewing.

Guidelines for reading the Bible

Covenant is explained above as the key pattern throughout this in-depth Bible study. However, many participants will come to the Bible with further questions about how we got the Bible, when the stories or writing of the Bible took place, why we have an Old Testament and a New Testament, or who decided that we should read the Bible. These questions are answered in the articles of the *Covenant CEB Study Bible*. When you feel lost, get your bearings from the following articles, cited by page number and found toward the end of the *CEB Study Bible* (after the book of Revelation and before the phrase concordance):

The Authority of Scripture	527–31
The Bible’s Unity.	532–37
How We Got the Bible	538–44
The Bible and Its Chronology	545–50
Guidelines for Reading the Bible	551–55

You can find more Bible study resources with the Covenant smartphone/tablet app or by visiting CovenantBibleStudy.com.

Next week in Episode 2 we will start with a fundamental human question: Who are we? In Genesis and the rest of the Torah, we learn about creating covenants with God and others. You will encounter God's covenant with all creation and then God's particular covenant with the people who descended from Abraham and Sarah.

SIGNS OF FAITHFUL LOVE

Covenant people read the Bible together to learn how to love God and others better.

PARTICIPANT GUIDE 1

EPISODE 2—Torah: Genesis

WHO ARE WE?

Creating covenants with God and others

The book of Genesis begins with the wide-angle view of God’s love—love for all of creation—and gradually zooms in to the love that shapes our relationships with each other. The daily readings from this week sequentially follow that progression:

- Day 1:** beginning with creation;
- Day 2:** Noah, Babel, and the human community;
- Day 3:** Abraham and the establishment of nationhood;
- Day 4:** Jacob and Israelite community; and
- Day 5:** family and kinship ties.

Each level of magnification has a unique way of supporting the overall theme of Genesis: God’s loving relationship with all of life and our call to be in loving relationships with God and each other.

This session will help your group:

- become familiar with the important biblical concept of covenant;
- discover how relationships in community can be broken and then restored through God’s love; and
- identify the different voices that tell the stories of Genesis.

Materials needed: Covenant leader guide, Creating the Covenant participant guides, *CEB Study Bible*, Creating the Covenant DVD (or video download), extra pens or pencils



1. GATHERING TOGETHER (10 min)

Genesis uses ancestral stories to give meaning to community and to our relationship to God and the wider world. After the opening Covenant Prayer, divide participants into pairs, and invite them to share any stories they can think of that have been significant in shaping their family origins and their own identities. For example, to where does your family (birth or adopted) trace its origin, and what are the earliest stories you know about ancestors? How did your childhood experience in your family shape who you are today? Where does your name come from?

If participants prefer, they can also share stories related to any community to which they belong: their church, their neighborhood, or their country. How do these stories reveal insights into the character and identity of the participants' particular communities?

Tip: Before your group arrives, preview and test the DVD or video download on the television or computer you will be using. Listen for anything that seems unclear to you or challenging to your group's presuppositions about the Bible or about Genesis.

2. REFLECTING TOGETHER (10 min)

Read together "Our Longing for Relationship" at the beginning of the episode. Invite participants to break up into pairs and share any passages from the week's readings that were particularly meaningful, along with any insights they received from the readings. They might also share any verses they chose to memorize for the week.

Read together the second paragraph of the introductory essay "Torah" on page twenty-two of the participant guide, and remind participants that the purpose of covenant is to explain:

- the purpose of a community,
- our relationship with God, and
- our role in the larger world.

Invite them to analyze the scripture readings from the week using these three criteria.

Divide participants into two groups, and have each group look more closely at the two main covenants introduced in this session: (1) Noah in Genesis 9:1-7 (God's covenant with all of life) and (2) Abraham in Genesis 15 and 17 (God's covenant to form a great nation). For each passage, have them answer these questions:

- What does this story tell us about God’s expectations for the community?
- What is God’s desired relationship to this community?
- What is the role that God calls this community to have with the outside world?

Each of these stories also contains evidence that human communities often fall short of God’s intent and become broken. Keeping the same two groups, have one group look more closely at the stories of Noah (Gen 6:5-22) and Babel (Gen 11:1-9), and have the other group look at the story of Joseph (Gen 37 and 45). For each story, have participants answer these questions:

- What is the threat facing God’s community in this story?
- Where do you see evidence of God’s love at work to restore community in this story?
- How are the people in this story called to be part of the solution?

3. VIDEO SEGMENT (25 min)

The video for Episode 2, on the DVD or available by download, allows the group to overhear a conversation with Theodore Hiebert, who is Professor of Old Testament at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois. Before showing the video, have the participants listen for one or more of the following conversation points:

1. The book of Genesis is more than a book of beginnings; it answers the deepest human questions about who we are in the scheme of things. It’s about where we fit and what our responsibilities are as members of the human community and the broader community of life.
2. Family is the biggest and deepest influence on the understanding of covenant relationships in Genesis. The family relationships that define covenant for these writers are understood in terms of gift (it chose us, we didn’t choose it) and responsibility (there is a fitting way to respond).
3. The family/covenant relationships of Genesis are characterized by sibling rivalry, conflict, and the ever-present danger that the family will disintegrate. While wrong decisions and disobedience define the human characters from the first age (and beyond), these decisions are always about relationships: choosing for or against the relationship. However, with the exception of the brothers Cain and Abel, the family of Abraham finds a way to resolve differences through forgiveness and generosity.
4. God’s hand is seen in these stories as the power that works toward keeping all things together. God also calls privilege and authority into question by leveling the playing field on behalf of women, second sons, and others diminished by the dominant culture.

At the end of the viewing, ask them one or two of the questions below:

1. Did you grow up hearing any stories of how your “tribe” came to be a family? How did your parents or grandparents (or even great-grandparents) meet? Was there doubt or peril that put



your family tree in danger? Do you define who you are (and where you fit) more in terms of family relationships or something else (career, friendship groups, college sorority/fraternity, church, and so on)?

2. How or in what ways is your family a gift to you? What are the house rules or basic responsibilities that come with being part of a family (a daughter, son, sister, brother, mother, father, aunt, uncle, cousin, godparent)?
3. The Genesis families are plagued by rivalry and conflict. Can you think of any famous family rifts that didn't end well? What about in your own family? What role has forgiveness or generosity played in healing these family conflicts? Who has been Esau to Jacob (or Joseph to his brothers) in your clan?

TAKE A BREAK (10 min)

Learn something about someone in the group that you didn't already know.

4. DISCOVERING TOGETHER (15 min)

Break the participants into two subgroups and invite them to work with the Group Meeting Experience from Genesis 9:7-17 outlined in their participant guides.

5. CENTERING TOGETHER (10 min)

Genesis reminds us that we are created in God's image and therefore have the same kind of imaginative capacity as the God who envisioned creation out of chaos. Reading the scriptures with our imaginations can therefore be an exercise of divine creativity, and it is an effective way to engage the stories of the Bible. Lead the participants through the Covenant Meditation on Genesis 1:26-31 found in their participant guides.

6. SERVING TOGETHER (5 min)

Read together the "Signs of Faithful Love" at the end of the episode, then break the participants into pairs. Have them review for a moment any notes they recorded and any insights they gained related to the human responsibility of restoring broken communities back to God's loving intent. Just as the flow of the Genesis stories suggests, those responsibilities can range from the global (our responsibility to the environment and the whole created world) to our personal relationships with others (family and community). Have them share with each other how they feel called to particular service this week.

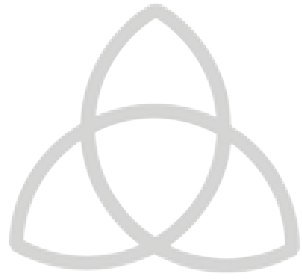
7. NEXT WEEK (5 min)

Turn to Episode 3 and briefly introduce next week's title and theme. Encourage participants to select a verse from the readings that they might commit to memory and share next week.

8. CLOSING PRAYER (5 min)

Ask for any prayer concerns or joys, and invite participants to write these items down in the space provided under next week's Covenant Prayer. This way, they will have them in front of them as they read throughout the week. Close in a prayer together.





WHO ARE WE?

Creating covenants with God and others

Bible Readings

Day 1: Genesis 1–3

Day 2: Genesis 6:5–9:17; 11:1-9

Day 3: Genesis 12; 15; 17; 22

Day 4: Genesis 27; 28; 32; 33

Day 5: Genesis 37; 41; 43; 45; 50

Day 6: Covenant Meditation on Genesis 1:26-31

Day 7: Group Meeting Experience with Genesis 9:7-17

Covenant Prayer

For those who are suffering in chaos

*Hear my prayer, LORD! Listen closely to my cry for help!
(Psalm 39:12)*

For those who celebrate new creation

Your word gives me new life. (Psalm 119:50)

OUR LONGING FOR RELATIONSHIP

*We get into trouble—
hurting ourselves,
those we love, and
the world—when we
forget who we are
and to whom we
belong.*



.....
The Torah presents the instructions or teaching for worshipping God and living in a covenant community.
.....

TORAH

The Christian and Jewish communities consider the first five books of the Bible as a separate portion of scripture. Christians call these books the Pentateuch, or “five books.” The books tell stories about the earliest events in God’s relationship with God’s people. Jews call these books the Torah, which the Common English Bible translates as “Instruction.” Beginning with the King James Version, however, *Torah* was often translated as “the Law.” By calling these books the Torah, our attention is focused on the great covenant God made with the Israelites at Mount Sinai—described in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Torah presents the instructions or teaching for worshipping God and living in a covenant community.

The aim of the Torah is to answer the question, “Who are we?” and the answer is vast and all-encompassing. Torah explains not only the unique character of the people of Israel and of God’s relationship to the people, but also their role in the larger world. To do this, the Torah explains the nature of humanity in all of its cultural diversity. The Torah also explains God’s relationship to Israel, and even more broadly, God’s relationship to the created world in which Israel lived. The Torah’s authors do all of this by telling the story of their own past, of how God brought nature, humanity, and Israel itself into being at the very beginning of time.

The Torah story is structured around crucial, community-shaping events. It begins with the creation of the natural world and the human role within it, followed by the first age of history, in which the human community fell into violence and perished in the great flood (Gen 1–8). In the new era of history following the flood, three great covenants redefine the human community and the role of the people of Israel within it.

Optional: *A bonus video on the tower of Babel and the unique role of Israel is available for download from www.CovenantBibleStudy.com.*

The first is God’s covenant with Noah, humanity, and all living things (Gen 9:1-17). The second is God’s covenant with Abraham and with his descendants, by which God selects a particular line of humanity for a particular role within it (Gen 15; 17). And the third is God’s covenant with Israel itself, the descendants of Jacob’s twelve sons, at Mount Sinai (Exod 19; 24; 31), where the great body of

.....
In the new era of history following the flood, three great covenants redefine the human community and the role of the people of Israel within it.
.....

instructions that would define Israel as a community were collected and recorded.

The Torah, like many books in the Old Testament, and like the Old Testament as a whole, is the product of multiple voices from ancient Israel. Jewish and Christian traditions eventually came to regard the entire Pentateuch as transcribed by a single individual Moses, but biblical scholars in recent centuries have noticed evidence of multiple authors: double accounts of the same event, contrasting styles and theological perspectives, and knowledge of events later than Moses' time.

The liveliest stories in Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers come from the Torah's two earliest authors, who both lived during the Israelite monarchy: the Yahwist, so named because he used God's personal name, Yahweh (rendered "the LORD" in the CEB); and the Elohist, so named because he used the common word for "God," *Elohim*, in his narrative. The third contributor, a Priestly Writer, added his own traditions to the Yahwist's and Elohist's stories and organized them around God's three great covenants with Noah, Abraham, and Israel. He also contributed most of the expectations and instructions related to the Sinai covenant in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. The fourth contributor's work, the book of Deuteronomy, was included in the Torah because it provided another record of the Sinai covenant. But based on style, theology, and vocabulary, we can tell that it was originally intended as the introduction to the historical books (Joshua through 2 Kings) that follow it. For this reason, it has been placed with the historical books in Episode 8.

GENESIS

The book of Genesis tells the first two parts of the larger Torah story: (1) how the world came into being and what role Israel's ancestors were given within it; and (2) how Israel itself emerged as a distinct community within the human race.

The first part of this story is described especially in the creation narratives at the beginning of Genesis (Gen 1–3). The authors of Genesis describe who they are in relation to the natural world, which they inhabit. In these creation stories they show themselves not merely as members of the Israelite community, or even of the human community, but also as members of the larger community of life in the entire creation, within which they are given clear roles and responsibilities. These roles and responsibilities reflect Israel's



.....
*The stories of Israel's
origins and identity are
family stories.*
.....

own understanding of its connection with nature and its place in the particular landscape and environment it inhabited.

In the second part of this Torah story in Genesis, when the new world is re-created after the flood, the authors of Genesis explain who they are in relation to the larger world of human cultures that they inhabit. To do this, they employ a complex web of genealogies with family stories to accompany them. These genealogies provide a comprehensive cultural map that documents how all of the peoples descended from the single family of Noah. This map shows how the different peoples are related to each other within the cultural world experienced by the authors of Genesis, and where exactly Israel fits into this larger human family.

In these genealogies and family stories, the main characters stand not only for themselves but for the people who descended from them and who made up the nations with which the authors of Genesis were familiar. Jacob and Esau, for example, in this week's reading for Day 4 (Gen 27; 28; 32; 33), represent the brothers in a family, but also the nations of Israel and Edom that descended from them.

In the stories of Genesis, community is conceived in terms of family and kinship systems. The stories of Israel's origins and identity are family stories, largely because the family is its basic unit. Its families are grouped into clans, its clans into tribes, and its tribes into a people, the nation of Israel. The authors thought carefully about their relationships in terms of the privileges and responsibilities of kinship. They examined Israel's relationship to God and its covenants with God, Israel's relationship to other cultures, and the family, clan, and tribal relationships within Israel itself. This kinship culture had consequences for entering into covenants and building community.

Day 1: Genesis 1–3

Creation and the human role within it

The Bible begins its account of who Israel was as God's people by describing who they were in relation to their environment, the world of nature that surrounded and sustained them. By starting their story at the creation of the world, the biblical authors affirm that the first and most basic community of life is the entire natural world.

Genesis actually preserves two traditions about the world's beginnings and Israel's place within it. Both of these traditions view the world from Israel's ancient understandings of the world and their particular geographical location within it—not from the new knowledge of the cosmos gained by modern science.

The first creation tradition (Gen 1:1–2:4a, probably from the Priestly Writer) describes creation in seven days. This description establishes the Sabbath on the seventh day as part of the world's own rhythms and orders. It's written in a very orderly style that may have been intended for reading in a worship setting. It gives humans a high role in creation: We are made in God's own image and commissioned to take charge of the animal world. The second creation tradition (Gen 2:4b–3:24, and probably from the Yahwist, who uses the divine name Yahweh) describes creation in a small, local garden. It's more earthy and is written in a more informal, story-like style. And it gives humans a much more modest role in creation: They are made out of the earth's topsoil and commissioned to farm (or “serve”) the fertile land from which they were created.

As you read these two creation stories, note their similarities and differences and consider how more than one perspective provides a deeper understanding of the world and humanity than a single account could.

Day 2: Genesis 6:5–9:17; 11:1-9

End of the old world—beginning of the new world

Biblical writers shared the common ancient idea that a great flood brought an end to the first age of human history and introduced the new age of history in which they themselves lived. In these ancient stories, something went wrong in the first age that required starting over. Humanity had become violent and corrupt. So God selected Noah, the moral and exemplary man of his time, together with his family and a pair from each species of animal, to survive the flood and begin the world anew.

God begins the new world by establishing a covenant relationship with all living things. The covenant offers them life, protection, and a



relationship with God for all time (Gen 9:1-17). Included in the Bible's first covenant are the entire human race descended from Noah's family and all of the living things who survived the flood. The story of the city of Babel that follows (Gen 11:1-9) explains how the human members of God's first covenant became culturally diverse, even though they descended from a single family and wished to preserve a single culture. Because some readers have misread the story of Babel as a story of human pride and God's punishment for it, they have claimed that God rejected God's covenant relationship with the human race in order to make a covenant with Abraham alone. This biblical story, however, tells us that God's covenant with Abraham was a particular covenant within God's larger covenant with the human race as a whole.

What feelings do you have about cultural and racial differences in your neighborhood? In your church?

Day 3: Genesis 12; 15; 17; 22

Abraham and nationhood

God's covenant with Abraham is the Bible's second covenant, preserved by the Yahwist (Gen 15) and the Priestly Writer (Gen 17). It shows that within God's larger covenant with all of humanity and all living things (Gen 9:1-17), God established a particular kind of relationship with this line of Noah's descendants. This relationship is one that will define the people of Israel as a unique community within the human race as a whole. That community will be established as a nation among other ancient nations (Gen 12:2; 17:6), with a flourishing population (Gen 15:5; 17:2), and a land to sustain them (Gen 12:7; 15:18).

This model of a community in covenant relationship with God is based in kinship, culture, and politics. It mirrors the religious life and practices of its time and place, when culture, politics, and religion were a single integrated system. It contains a number of powerful ideas that sustained the lives of these people: the confidence in an enduring relationship with God, the belief that their lives and identities played an important part in God's world, a strong national and communal solidarity, and a

close relationship to the land. At the same time, this model of community is packaged with specific cultural, ethnic, patriarchal, and political aspects that contemporary Christians may no longer wish to define in their own communities.

Both the Yahwist and the Priestly Writer have preserved records of the covenant with Abraham. Compare the Yahwist's style and theology of covenant in Genesis 15 with the style and theology of his creation story (Gen 2:4b–3:24). Compare the Priestly Writer's style and theology of covenant in Genesis 17 with the style and theology of his creation story (Gen 1:1–2:4a) and his record of the covenant with Noah (Gen 9:1-17).

Compare the covenant story in Genesis 15 with the covenant story in Genesis 17.

Day 4: Genesis 27; 28; 32; 33

Jacob and the biblical family

While Abraham is Israel's most typical ancestor to whom the promises of nationhood were first made, Jacob, his grandson, is the ancestor who received the nation's name, Israel, and whose twelve sons became ancestors of the twelve tribes that made up the nation (Gen 29–30). These stories about Jacob explain how he, rather than his older brother, Esau, became Isaac's primary heir, and they reveal traits of biblical characters and their families that puzzle and trouble modern readers. Jacob, Israel's namesake, and his mother, Rebekah, had to deceive Isaac and Esau to acquire the blessing that God gave to Jacob.

Community in ancient Israel, as in these stories of its ancestors, is grounded in family structures. These structures privilege the oldest male member of the family, the patriarch, and his oldest son, the family's legal heir. These same structures exclude women and secondary sons from the status and agency to participate in family decisions and to carry on the family's legacy. Rebekah and Jacob find ways to subvert traditional structures in order to claim their voices and their places in the family. Against convention and cultural expectations, God sides in each generation in the book of Genesis with those excluded from power and privilege



within these kinship systems. The story of Rebekah and Jacob is one example of this (Gen 25:21-23; 28:13-15).

What puzzles or troubles you in the family stories about Jacob and Rebekah?

Day 5: Genesis 37; 41; 43; 45; 50

Joseph and his brothers in Egypt

The stories about Jacob's sons that conclude Genesis are some of the most colorful and emotional in the book. A key theme in them, as in every family story in Genesis, is sibling rivalry. As the first and most basic conflict in life, sibling rivalry in Genesis represents the conflicts that arise not just in the family, but also within the larger community of Israel, and even between Israel and its neighboring nations. The conflicts between Jacob's sons also represent the conflicts between the later tribes made up of their descendants, just as the conflict between Jacob and Esau also represents in a larger scope the conflict between their descendants, the Israelites and the Edomites.

In every family in Genesis but one, this deep and primal conflict that threatened to tear apart the fabric of the community was resolved through generosity and a great capacity for understanding. The one exception is the family who lived in the troubled age before the flood when Cain killed his brother, Abel (Gen 4:1-16). In all of the other family dramas, bloodshed was averted. In the stories of Jacob and Esau and of Joseph and his brothers, the wronged brother, with good reason and enough power to take revenge, instead forgave and restored the relationship that was broken.

The other key theme in these concluding stories in Genesis is God's protection of Jacob's family from death by famine. This protection extended beyond Jacob's family, however, to include all of Egypt and all of the known world that came to buy grain (Gen 41:57; 45:5). Before Egypt became a furnace of oppression in Exodus through Numbers, it was a refuge from hunger that shared its bounty with the world.

How did Jacob's troubled family resolve their conflicts?

Day 6: Genesis 1:26-31

Covenant Meditation: Who are we?

Each week on Day 6, we will approach and encounter scripture in a different way than in our study on Days 1–5. Through the following exercise, we will practice one form of spiritual reading that has been taught in the church for many generations—the practice of using our imagination. This practice is designed to deepen our ability to listen for what God is trying to reveal to us through scripture. It represents one way that we can learn to read the Bible devotionally, while also participating in study of the texts.

Read Genesis 1:26-31 again, but do so slowly, paying attention to each word, phrase, and action. In this passage, God addresses our question, “Who are we?” even before humanity is added to the scene of creation. Notice that what God says, God then does, and that we as human beings take form in God’s imagination and words before we become part of the created order on earth.

Now read these verses of Genesis once more, using your imagination to place yourself nearby as God speaks and creates. What do you see? What colors, shapes, animals, and movements? What do you hear? What sounds come to mind as you read these words? Are there aromas or scents that you might associate with this scene as you take your time reading: the scent of the earth, of water, of animals? Can you imagine the feel of any textures, objects, or movements: breeze, rain, dirt? Allow all of your senses to bring your imagination to bear on this passage in Genesis, and notice what is stirred up for you. If you would like, write down your reflections as you follow this practice of spiritual reading, and then look back over how this way of reading may have opened the passage to you in a new way.



Group Meeting Experience

Genesis 9:7-17 | The Bible's first covenant

At the beginning of the new world following the flood, God makes the covenant that becomes the foundation for the Torah covenants that follow: the covenants with Abraham and with the people of Israel at Mount Sinai.

1. To gain an appreciation for the style of the Priestly Writer who structured the Torah around three great covenants, compare the language, vocabulary, and style of this covenant with the covenants with Abraham in Genesis 17 and with Israel in Exodus 31:12-18. Also compare to these the Priestly account of the world's creation in seven days in Genesis 1:1–2:4a. What are the key words, phrases, and features of Priestly style and thought?
2. With whom does God enter into relationship in this covenant?
3. What does this covenant claim about God's relationship to the world as a whole?
4. The Priestly Writer probably lived during the time of the exile (after 587 BCE), when his people's past had been destroyed and their future was in doubt. In this context, how might such a covenant provide hope for survival and a way forward?
5. In the Bible's first covenant, how might God's relation to the world, to all its forms of life, and to all its people inform our own understanding of our place and role in the world?

SIGNS OF FAITHFUL LOVE

God's covenant with us returns us to our true selves—made in the image of God—and sends the Covenant people out to be a blessing to the world God loves.

Genesis

World's creation

When God began to create the heavens and the earth—the earth was without shape or form, it was dark over the deep sea, and God's wind swept over the waters—God said, “Let there be light.” And so light appeared. God saw how good the light was. God separated the light from the darkness. God named the light Day and the darkness Night.

There was evening and there was morning: the first day.

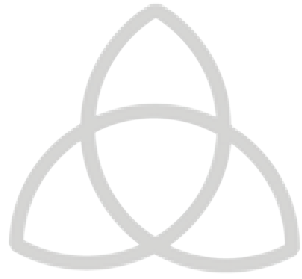
Genesis 1:1-5

Praying the word

Silently read the passage from Genesis, paying attention to each word and phrase. Pause for a moment of quiet, then read it again, this time using your imagination about the appearance of light on the first day of creation. What color is the light? How does it appear? What does it reveal?

Offer a prayer for a person or circumstance that you know about where God's good light is needed this day.





LIVING

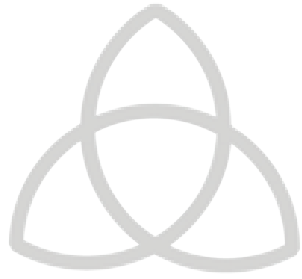
EPISODE 9

Ruth, Esther, Song of Songs

Leader Guide

Participant Guide

Meditation Guide



PARTICIPANT GUIDE 2

EPISODE 9—Ruth, Esther, Song of Songs

FAITHFUL LOVE

Committed relationships

Lest we think that the theology of covenant is an entirely cerebral enterprise, the stories of Ruth and Esther, and the poetry in the Song of Songs, remind us that covenant is primarily encountered through relationships. It connects us in a deeper way to God and to each other, strengthening bonds of trust and shaping the way we live. And just as with any relationship, covenant relationships are rooted in longing: a desire for unconditional love, intimacy, and fidelity. That desire is the foundation for all three books in this week's readings:

Days 1 and 2: a longing grounded in loyalty and obedience (Ruth);

Days 3 and 4: a longing conveyed through courage and self-sacrifice (Esther); and

Day 5: a longing expressed in passion and intimacy (Song of Songs).

This episode will help your group:

- recount the stories of Ruth and Esther and identify the ideals of faithful love contained in them;
- identify signs of faithful love contained in the poetry of Song of Songs; and
- discover ways to enhance their relationship with God through intimacy and obedience.

Materials needed: Covenant leader guide, Living the Covenant participant guides, *CEB Study Bible*, Living the Covenant DVD (or video download), extra pens or pencils



1. GATHERING TOGETHER (10 min)

Given that human love in general, and marriage in particular, will be a recurring theme throughout this week's episode, recognize at the outset that participants will bring in a range of perspectives, history, and emotional attachments to the experience of human love in relationships. After the Covenant Prayer, invite participants to reflect on their own difficulties with human relational love for a few moments. In what ways do they experience relational love as a true reflection of God's love? How has it illuminated their relationships with God? How has it fallen short in their experiences of pain, betrayal, or resentment?

2. REFLECTING TOGETHER (10 min)

Read together "Our Longing for Relationship" at the beginning of Episode 9 in the second participant guide. Invite participants to break up into pairs and share any passages from the week's readings that were particularly meaningful. Specifically, have them explore the question, "What did you glean from these readings about both human love and divine love?" Have them share any insights they gained from the questions in the daily readings section of their participant guides. They might also share any verses they chose to memorize for the week.

Ruth and Esther are compelling stories of heroism, sacrifice, and loyalty. Break the participants into two groups, and invite each group to write a timeline of major events in the plots of both Ruth and Esther (Days 1–4). For each main plot point, have them identify what a character's actions reveal about faithful love, both between human beings and between humanity and God. For example, one might say that Ruth's choice to stay with Naomi is an example of loyalty and fidelity, similar to God's faithfulness to us.

Next, divide the participants into four groups. Have each group take two chapters of Song of Songs (chapters 1–2, 3–4, 5–6, and 7–8). Invite them to make a list of all the verses that reveal longing and desire. For each verse, reflect on how one might apply the longing and desire in that verse to one's relationship with God. How might applying the verse in this way help us develop intimacy with God? Allow time for the groups to report their discoveries with everyone.

Tip: Most of us have a story about a time when we chose to identify with our tribe or leave it (like Esther). Remind your group that faithful love takes risks.

3. VIDEO SEGMENT (25 min)

The video for Episode 9, on the DVD or available by download, allows the group to overhear a conversation with Judy Fentress-Williams, who is Professor of Old Testament at Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia. Before showing the video, have the participants listen for one or more of the following important conversation points:

1. Ruth, Esther, and Song of Songs are part of the festival scroll and are linked to the Festival of Weeks (Shavuot), Purim, and Passover respectively. Shavuot celebrates the giving of the Instruction (Torah) at Mount Sinai, which the people continue to receive. Esther is read during Purim to celebrate the people's rescue from Haman's treachery by Mordecai and Esther's risky faith. Song of Songs is read during Passover, celebrating Israel's liberation from Egypt.
2. The story of Ruth is a tale of identity and redemption where both Ruth and Boaz risk caring beyond the roles required of them. Ruth reveals a love motivated by more than contractual obligation, a faithfulness that is more than duty. Boaz takes a financial risk to redeem Ruth beyond the family obligations of levirate marriage (levirate means that a man must marry his brother's widow). Esther cleverly risks everything to identify with her people and rescue them from a genocidal plot.
3. Song of Songs puts passion and love on full display. It hints at a new creation where shame is banished, and it celebrates human love as a clue to grasping the intensity of God's longing and love for us. The passion of this "crazy love" is self-sacrificing, and it encompasses the faithfulness that helped give rise to Israel's greatest king and lead ultimately to the birth of our savior.

At the end of the viewing, choose one of the following questions to ask:

1. Think of a carol or song that brings back memories of Christmas from your childhood. What songs do you sing now to get in the mood for Advent or Christmas? Does your family read a certain book or poem, or do they tell the same story during this sacred season? Similarly, Ruth, Esther, and Song of Songs provide a sacred sound and story track for key Jewish festivals celebrating the remarkable gift of covenant love that the people must continue to receive.
2. Recall a time when you or a friend decided to take a risk for love. Has anyone ever had to take a chance on you (hire you, trust you with more responsibility, or put you in charge of something precious or costly)? What would you risk for the ones you cherish most?
3. Song of Songs uses words to fill the space of longing, to approximate what we miss when we can't be with one we love. Can a song or story fill a space in our hearts when we're separated from someone we love? How about a yellow ribbon around a tree or a crooner's promise to "be seeing you in all the old familiar places"? Song of Songs is a duet that the singers must wait to sing together. It reminds us that love—God's and ours—is a longing that intensifies with waiting and celebrates with reunion. How will you wait for God's love this week?



TAKE A BREAK (10 min)

Covenant living has a conversational soundtrack. During the break, listen for signs of group life: laughter, continued scripture discussion, casual sharing of struggles, or small celebrations.

4. DISCOVERING TOGETHER (15 min)

The Group Meeting Experience investigates the beautiful and poignant exchange between Ruth and Naomi and elevates it as an example of true covenant fidelity. Invite the group to work in pairs on the questions for Ruth 1:8-18, and then invite the whole group to share their conclusions with each other. How does the relationship between Ruth and Naomi exemplify our ideal relationship with God?

5. CENTERING TOGETHER (10 min)

The Covenant Meditation for this week is immersed in Song of Songs 8:6-7a. Lead the group in this meditation as described in the participant guide. Help them articulate whether they sense and embrace God's love deeply and passionately. Explore how our memory and experience of human love is connected to our perceptions of God's love in daily life.

6. SERVING TOGETHER (5 min)

Read together the "Signs of Faithful Love" at the end of the episode. Break the participants into pairs and have them review for a moment any notes they recorded and any insights they gained throughout this episode. Invite them to share how these insights will encourage them to pursue loyalty and intimacy in their relationships with God and fidelity in their relationships with others.

7. NEXT WEEK (5 min)

Turn to Episode 10 and briefly introduce next week's title and theme. Encourage participants to select a verse from the readings that they might commit to memory and share next week.

8. CLOSING PRAYER (5 min)

Ask for any prayer concerns or joys, and invite participants to write these items down in the space provided under next week's Covenant Prayer. This way, they will have them in front of them as they read throughout the week. Close in a prayer together.

Ruth, Esther, Song of Songs

FAITHFUL LOVE

Committed relationships

Bible Readings

Day 1: Ruth 1–2

Day 2: Ruth 3–4

Day 3: Esther 1–4

Day 4: Esther 5–8

Day 5: Song of Songs 1–2; 4:1-7; 5:10-16

Day 6: Covenant Meditation on Song of Songs 8:6-7a

Day 7: Group Meeting Experience with Ruth 1:8-18

Covenant Prayer

**For those who are suffering in the
midst of a dysfunctional family**

*Your faithful love is priceless, God! Humanity finds
refuge in the shadow of your wings. (Psalm 36:7)*

**For those who celebrate their
identity in God's family**

*Heaven thanks you for your wondrous
acts, LORD—for your faithfulness too—
in the assembly of the holy ones.
(Psalm 89:5)*

OUR LONGING FOR RELATIONSHIP

*A covenant creates a
new identity, making
a family out of
unrelated individuals.
A covenant expects
faithfulness but also
the possibility for love.*



.....
The marriage covenant creates a new identity, making a family out of unrelated individuals. A marriage covenant expects faithfulness but also allows the possibility for love.
.....

POSSIBILITY OF LOYAL LOVE

The biblical understanding of the covenant relationship between God and God's people, and among God's people themselves, is shaped and informed by the actual covenants, or agreements, common in Israel's social life. The books of Ruth, Esther, and the Song of Songs explore the committed relationships that are the basis of a covenant.

Sometimes we wonder why these books (especially Song of Songs) were included in the scriptures. But they are an important part of the canon because they use marriage as an analogy for God's covenant love. The marriage covenant creates a new identity, making a family out of unrelated individuals, and unlike economic or political contracts, a marriage covenant expects faithfulness but also allows the possibility for love. Some think a covenant is a contract. A contract, however, is usually a last resort, invoked after a relationship has already failed and is unlikely to recover.

By exploring these stories of marriage relationships and the loyalty and love within them, we can learn more about the nature of covenant relationships in the Bible. We can also learn more about the relationship of women and men in biblical society. While biblical society was patriarchal, investing men with primary prestige and power, these are stories of strong women who work in and around male structures with strength, dignity, and integrity. For Ruth and Esther, their futures and the futures of their people lay in their hands.

RUTH

Ruth is a beautifully written story of loss and recovery, famine and harvest, death and new life. The family of Elimelech and Naomi experiences a series of tragedies. Naomi loses the things that define her and faces an uncertain future. The family's very survival is in jeopardy. As a woman and an outsider, Ruth is the unlikely heroine. Her faithfulness to the covenant she made with her husband and with Naomi's family enables the family to survive.

The narrative of this family's destruction and reconstruction can be dated to the time of the exile, the time of Israel's national destruction. The exiled people of Israel were worried about survival and identity. In the narrative of Ruth, they heard a story of a foreign woman who ensures the family's survival and allows for a

renewed identity. The story invites its hearers to consider whether God's covenant relationship is for Israel and Israel alone.

ESTHER

The book of Esther takes place in the Persian court. It was written when the people of Israel were no longer in their homeland. The events in the narrative take place during the fourth or third century BCE, the time of the Jewish diaspora, when Jews had been dispersed throughout the countries of the Mediterranean world. Many of the practices unique to Judaism were lost over the years as later generations of Jews took on names and practices that reflected the languages and cultures of their conquerors. In this new situation, assimilation was necessary for survival. Once assimilation became a way of life, the community had to determine what the core elements of Jewish identity were when their nation, king, temple, and priesthood were long gone. What were the terms of the covenant in Persia? Would God be faithful?

Optional: *A bonus video on Ruth and Esther is available for download from www.CovenantBibleStudy.com.*

Esther can be described as a court tale, a narrative that portrays Jews living under foreign rule and subject to the laws of a king who doesn't know their God. In the majority of these stories, a crisis arises when the rules of the king stand in opposition to the covenant practices or God-given commands that are unique to Jewish identity as God's chosen people. In Esther, the reader is introduced to a community whose lives are in danger. The community is threatened not only with the loss of life but with the loss of identity, essential to survival. Esther finds herself in a place of privilege and must decide if she will identify with her people and thereby expose herself to the dangers they face as a community under foreign rule.

SONG OF SONGS

The Song of Songs, also known as the Song of Solomon, is a collection of love poems that has long intrigued and confused its readers. Written in the late fourth or third century BCE, the expressions of affection and desire between the two lovers form a dialogue, or



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Ruth, Esther, and Song of Songs are grouped together in the Megilloth, or festival scroll. Ruth's story is retold during the Festival of Weeks (a harvest celebration commemorating the gift of Torah instruction at Sinai). Esther's story is told during Purim (celebrating deliverance from Haman's plot to kill the Jewish people in the Persian empire). Song of Songs is recited during Passover, celebrating the rescue and liberation of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt.
.....

a call and response between the woman and the man. The poetry is sensual. It appeals to the senses of taste, touch, smell, sound, and sight, describing a human love that is without restraint. The sensuality of the poetry and the imagery of the garden evoke Eden's garden, with two people in a sanctuary where all their needs are met. However, as the poetry reveals, the lovers aren't always together. When they aren't together, the energy of the poetry is focused on being together. The lovers fill the space that separates them with language, imagining the dearly loved partner, making promises for the next meeting, or simply expressing the all-consuming desire to be reunited.

Both the woman and the man use symbolic language to praise the dearly loved partner and to convey the urgency of longing and desire. Metaphor and simile are used in analogies. The lovers use the language of familiar things to describe the indescribable. This symbolic language invites us to enter the garden of delights and experience agony with the lovers. Like the speakers, we know the experience of closeness and separation in our own relationships.

And like Israel, we also know what it is to be intimate with and alienated from God. Over the years, interpreters have taken the real and intense human love reflected in this poetry as symbolic of the love between God and God's people. The dialogue of the poetry invites us to embrace the dynamic of longing that comes from being apart and the joy that comes from being united because it sheds light on our relationship with the creator.

The Festival Scroll: Purim, Weeks, and Passover. In the Hebrew text of the Bible, Ruth, Esther, and the Song of Songs are grouped together within the festival scroll known in Hebrew as the *Megilloth*. These three narratives are associated with specific festivals that are a part of the Jewish calendar. Esther is associated with the celebration of Purim. The celebration of this holiday includes the reading and retelling of Esther's story. Ruth is associated with the Festival of Weeks (Hebrew *Shavuot*), a harvest celebration, and the Song of Songs is read during Passover. These three books continue to be part of the ongoing life in communities of faith. They demonstrate that the covenant is more than a contract. Rather, these books vividly present in story and song the responsibilities and privileges of a committed relationship.

Day 1: Ruth 1–2

Famine, loss, and exile

The book of Ruth is a beautifully constructed narrative with shifts in location and plot twists that create a crisis for the family of Elimelech and Naomi. These elements are also signs of comedy. In the story of Ruth these elements are used to explore the theme of identity. The characters in the story are subject to loss of identity through famine, migration, and death. For them (and us), key markers of identity are name, homeland, and people (including family, tribe, and nationality). In Ruth 1, the family moves away from their homeland, the men die, and—since lineage and descent are reckoned through males—the name or identity of this family is facing certain extinction.

The names of the characters provide clues to the reader: *Elimelech* means “my God is king.” His wife’s name, *Naomi*, means “full and/or pleasant.” The names of the sons are *Mahlon* and *Chilion*, “sickly” and “destruction,” or “frail,” respectively. *Orpah* means “back of the neck,” and *Ruth* means “to saturate” or “to water.” As you read, consider the extent to which the characters live up to their names or reputations.

Optional: *A bonus video retelling the story of Ruth is available for download from www.CovenantBibleStudy.com.*

Ruth’s ethnicity as a Moabite is important. Though this story doesn’t speak disrespectfully of the Moabites, they were despised by some Israelite writers. When the text describes Ruth as a Moabite, it is identifying her as a person who some would have considered an outsider of the worst kind. Early hearers of this story would have had contempt for the Moabites. Ruth’s story forces us to think about how God may work through those we designate as “outsiders,” “opponents,” or “enemies.”

What type of person would you (or the people in your zip code) think of as an outsider?



Day 2: Ruth 3–4

Redemption and restoration

The second half of the narrative about Ruth is focused on levirate marriage as a form of redemption. Levirate marriage is a practice that allows for the closest living male relative to “marry” a childless widow. This is for the purposes of providing a male child and ensuring that there is someone to inherit on behalf of the deceased for his surviving family members. It is a useful image of redemption because redemption means to buy back that which was lost. Boaz is the closest male relative who is willing to play the role of redeemer, but in this role he marries Ruth, a Moabite. Ruth’s first marriage to an Israelite, Mahlon, occurs under the circumstances of famine, death, and displacement for the Israelite family. Her second marriage takes place during the season of harvest. Boaz is a dutiful redeemer, but he is impressed by Ruth’s faithfulness. The term “faithfulness” is often used to describe God’s undying commitment to Israel. In this story, a Moabite woman embodies that faithfulness and undying love that God has for God’s people.

It shouldn’t be lost on the reader that the redemption and restoration of the family involves a plan that takes place under the cover of darkness in Ruth 3, and at the city gate, a public place, during the day in Ruth 4. Similarly, God’s work of redemption and restoration can take on a variety of patterns and include unlikely characters. David’s genealogy at the conclusion of the book includes a Moabite woman.

How does Ruth’s relationship to Israel’s dearly loved king change the way Israel feels about the Moabites?

Day 3: Esther 1–4

Plot

This story is a court tale, a literary form used for the narratives in Daniel 1–6 and for the book of Esther. In this story type, the hero or heroine is in the court of a foreign king who is temperamental and easily manipulated by his advisors, who are enemies of the Jewish people. A crisis arises when the advisors convince the king to issue an edict that goes against a covenant practice



central to the Jewish faith. In the book of Daniel, the king forces the main characters to take a stand on issues such as dietary teaching and worship practices and to risk their safety in order to abide by the instructions of God's covenant. The story ends with the triumph of the hero (Daniel), and the message to Jews in the diaspora is that God is faithful to the covenant and to God's people who are loyal to the covenant.

Esther is a court tale with a heroine and with a twist. When Esther, or Hadassah (her Hebrew name), becomes queen, she finds herself in a position of privilege, but her identity as a Jew is unknown. We don't have any indication that she is observant of Jewish instruction and practices. When Haman plots to kill the Jews and a crisis arises, Esther must decide whether or not she will reveal her Jewish identity and risk her life. If she doesn't, she can't save her people (Esth 4:13-14).

The narrative uses elaborate and excessive detail to describe the Persian Empire. By contrast, there is no mention of God. In Esther 4, Mordecai takes on the traditional signs of mourning, and Esther fasts. The turning point in the narrative comes when Esther decides to disclose her Jewish identity and face the king on behalf of her people. Her fate and the fate of her people lie on her shoulders.

Think of a time when you had a choice about disclosing personal information to a group or to another individual. Perhaps it was at school, at work, with friends, or in a congregation. What are the risks of disclosing or not disclosing identity?

Day 4: Esther 5–8

Counterplot

Once Esther accepts her role as a champion for her people, the narrative moves quickly to resolution. The action of the narrative is connected with banquets. The opening banquet in Esther 1 leads to Queen Vashti's expulsion. In the second half of the narrative, Esther's disclosure of her identity takes place through two banquets that she prepares for the king. The book concludes with the festival banquet of Purim, celebrating God's salvation of the people (Esth 9).



At the beginning of the story in Esther 1, the king and his queen are at separate banquets, and he sends a request to her, which she refuses. In the second round of banquets, the queen Esther invites the king and Haman to one banquet for the purpose of inviting them to a second one, where she makes her request known. Esther's decision to identify with her people leads to Haman's demise and allows for an edict that permits Jews to defend themselves against any who would attack them. This self-defense looks like revenge at the end of the book, and it raises concerns about how the experience of oppression can lead to similarly oppressive behavior when the power is reversed.

In an environment where God isn't readily apparent, how do we as readers discern God's presence in the story of Esther?

Day 5: Song of Songs 1–2; 4:1-7; 5:10-16

Love unplugged

“Set me as a seal over your heart . . . for love is as strong as death” (Song 8:6). The Song of Songs means “the best of all songs.” It is about unrestrained, passionate love. The lovers talk to each other, and their dialogue celebrates the joy of being together. When they are apart, theirs is the language of longing, and their words fill the void created by the absence of the dearly loved partner.

It's hard to ignore the lush imagery of this poetry and how it evokes Eden's garden—the place where humanity and God were together. In the ancient Near East, gardens were walled for protection and often elevated. For this reason, in biblical tradition the garden also becomes a metaphor for Jerusalem, the holy city on a hill, where the temple is the point of contact for God and God's people.

The unmitigated passion and longing of this poetry has caused Jewish and Christian interpreters to gravitate toward allegorical and symbolic readings, seeing this human love as symbolic of the divine-human relationship. However, the experience of human passion and longing is a fitting lens through which to explore the power of relationship and



the meaning of the covenant. Through the Song of Songs, we see with new eyes the depth of the agony we experience when we are separated from our dearly loved partner. The experiences of exile and life in the diaspora were challenging not only because all of the practical uncertainties. They were also times of deep longing for what was lost and for restoration of union with God in the garden, that place where the lovers are unencumbered and free to satisfy their desires.

Jot down some feelings or images that describe a time when you were passionate about a relationship, or deeply loved through a relationship. Now imagine what it would feel like to physically lose a relationship with that person. List some words that describe this feeling.

Day 6: Song of Songs 8:6-7a

Covenant Meditation: God loves you.

Before you begin today's reading practice, make the space in which you will be reading as quiet and separated from distractions as possible. You will be using Song of Songs 8:6-7a as the text for your reading. Locate these verses and mark the place so that when you begin, it is easy to find. Now get as comfortable as you can, choosing a position in which you can be most relaxed and at ease with your imagination. If this means that you would rather sit or lie on the floor, don't hesitate to do so. Sometimes a change in posture or position can help us to move into a new way of living with God's word. (In several psalms we read about thinking of God's word as the psalmist lies in bed at night.)

Now, recall that our theme for this week is "faithful love." Our readings led us into stories and poetry about God's faithful love for human beings and about faithful love between humans arising from a deep, faithful love for God. Covenant love is at the center of our love for each other and for God.

With this in mind, now read aloud Song of Songs 8:6-7a. When you have finished this first reading, imagine that these verses are God's request to you. Imagine God speaking these words to you, describing the



love God has for you, asking that you set God's love for you as a seal upon your heart. Read the verses again, aloud or silently, as though you are hearing God telling you about the depth of love God has for you. Take this to heart. Live as deeply as you can with this idea of how much God loves you.

Now take a minute or two of silence and rest, then read these verses again, aloud or silently. But this time, let this be your prayer in response to God. Offer these same words back to God, asking that God place your life and love upon the divine heart so that you might grow in your love for God, one love bound to the other. Ask God to help you grow in such unrelenting, unquenchable love for God and for others. Let your imagination help you form an image of this fierce and passionate love that you and God have for each other, out of which your love for others and for all creation can live and move and have presence. Close with, "Amen."

Group Meeting Experience

Ruth 1:8-18 | *Solemn promise for life*

On the way back to Bethlehem, the widowed Naomi offers her widowed daughters-in-law a unique opportunity. She gives them the option to return home to their families of origin. Ruth responds with a solemn promise that expresses her covenant commitment.

1. Look for repetition in this passage. Are there actions or motifs that we have seen in other parts of the Ruth narrative? How often do we see terms like "return" or "go back"? What themes does the repetition evoke?
2. Ruth's solemn promise to Naomi is a turning point in the narrative. What are the elements of Ruth's promise, and how do they reflect the aspects of the marriage covenant Ruth made when she married Mahlon and joined the family of Elimelech and Naomi? What do the elements of the covenant tell us about the "family values" of the time? In other words, based on what Ruth promises, what are the markers of family?

3. The exchange between Naomi and her daughters-in-law takes place in between Moab and Bethlehem. What is the significance of this location?

4. Ruth seals her promise by pledging, “May the LORD do this to me and more so if even death separates me from you” (Ruth 1:17). When she invokes this curse, she makes it impossible for Naomi to send her back. What are the theological implications of this part of the story? How would Israelite audiences have responded to a Moabite making a solemn pledge in the Lord’s name?

5. How do the major women characters in this story, Ruth and Naomi, reflect the love, loyalty, and faithfulness that exemplify true covenant relationships in the biblical world?

SIGNS OF FAITHFUL LOVE

*Covenant people say to God, “Wherever you go, I will go.
Wherever you stay, I will stay.”*





Ruth

Wherever you go

But Ruth replied [to Naomi], “Don’t urge me to abandon you, to turn back from following after you. Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.”

Ruth 1:16

Praying the word

Reflect on this past week and on its events and activities for you. As you do, think of the people you spent time with. Allow time to recall each day, where you were, and who was with you. Now prayerfully consider who in these past days needed you to be with *them*. Whether this was for a few minutes or a few hours, who did you spend time with this week who really needed you to be present with them? Remember how your presence was significant to that person, and thank God for allowing you to take that time for the ministry of presence. Hold that person in God’s light for a few more moments.

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TRUSTING

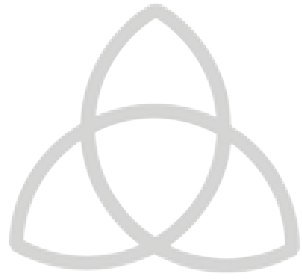
EPISODE 17

John; 1, 2, and 3 John

Leader Guide

Participant Guide

Meditation Guide



PARTICIPANT GUIDE 3

EPISODE 17—John; 1, 2, and 3 John

LIFE TOGETHER

Abundant, eternal life with others

John's Gospel and John's Letters offer a framework for mature Christian beliefs and behaviors. The good news demonstrates how a Christian community is to live well together, even under stress and during dangerous times (especially by 100 CE, some seventy years after Jesus' resurrection). Jesus encounters many kinds of people (for example, Nicodemus or the Samaritan woman), and he performs signs that bridge our differences into common identity and purpose. The daily readings from this week highlight how the dearly loved community should be formed:

- Day 1:** as people of the light;
- Day 2:** as healed disciples;
- Day 3:** through an intimate connection to Jesus;
- Day 4:** by resurrection; and most importantly,
- Day 5:** through love of God and each other.

This episode will help your group:

- become familiar with John's use of imagery in his account of Jesus;
- encounter unique people in John's Gospel who embody a healthy response to Jesus; and
- discover the identity and the purpose of Jesus' dearly loved community.

Materials needed: Covenant leader guide, Trusting the Covenant participant guides, *CEB Study Bible*, Trusting the Covenant DVD (or video download), extra pens or pencils



1. GATHERING TOGETHER (10 min)

Invite participants to consider how shared imagery defines many communities today. After an opening prayer, divide participants into groups of two or three, and invite them to reflect on this question: What examples can you give, either personally or culturally, of people groups who are shaped by common symbols?

Examples might be visual (a family coat of arms, a denominational logo, a national flag) or verbal (a family saying, the motto of an alma mater, a cultural idiom [e.g., the “Volunteer State”], or a corporate slogan). How do these symbols carry great meaning in defining the ideals and purpose of a community?

Tip: In theater and film, a character secret often motivates an actor’s performance. This secret is something about the character that no one except the actor knows that explains why that character feels and acts the way he or she does. Is there a story in the Gospel of John that resonates with your own experience of Jesus as God with us? Without sharing it with the group, let this be your own character secret as a leader, shaping your interaction with the group during your conversation about the Gospel of John.

2. REFLECTING TOGETHER (10 min)

Read together “Our Longing for Relationship” at the beginning of Episode 17 in the third participant guide. Invite participants to break up into pairs and share any passages from the week’s readings that were particularly meaningful. Have them share any insights they gained about John’s Gospels and Letters from the questions in the daily readings section of their participant guides. They might also share any verses they chose to memorize for the week.

Divide the participants into small groups of two or three, and have each subgroup explore further one of five characters that John shares either exclusively or uniquely in his Gospel: Nicodemus (John 3:1-21), the Samaritan woman (John 4:4-42), the blind man (John 9:1-38), Lazarus, Mary, and Martha (John 11:1-46), and Pilate (John 18:28–19:16a). For each of these characters, have them answer the following questions:

- What choices does this character face in response to the words and actions of Jesus?
- Why are these choices difficult for this character?
- What are the positive and negative consequences of the choices this character makes?

After all the subgroups have reported to the whole group, discuss how these choices might constitute John’s ideal definition of the faithful community.

Next, divide the participants into two subgroups, and have one group look at the reading for Day 3 (John 14–17) and the other group look at the reading for Day 5 (1 John 2–4, 2 John, and 3 John). For those looking at John 14–17,

invite them to come up with a list of adjectives that should describe the community of believers according to John. Invite those reading John's Letters to come up with a list of verbs that should describe the mission and purpose of the community of believers. After both groups have reported, discuss how close your own congregation is to embodying the qualities of both lists.

3. VIDEO SEGMENT (25 min)

The video for Episode 17, on the DVD or available by download, gives the group a chance to overhear a conversation with Jaime Clark-Soles, who is Associate Professor of New Testament at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, Texas. Before showing the video, have the participants listen for the following key conversation points:

1. God in Jesus is the one who keeps coming into the world, always reaching out to us and going out of the way to be in relationship with us.
2. Jesus meets his followers in whatever ways they need with new life, drawing them back into the community.
3. We have access to the same Someone to get us through tough times that Jesus promised to all who follow him: the Holy Spirit.

At the end of the viewing, choose one or two of the following questions to ask:

1. How does the “looking-for-us-first” God fit with the picture of God’s faithful love in the Old Testament? What does this mean for those of us who are more (or less) inclined to be “seekers”? Where would Jesus find you if he were seeking you out this week?
2. John is a very relational Gospel with “room to spare” in God’s household and at God’s table. Can you think of people that some might feel uncomfortable welcoming in God’s “room to spare” household? What are some practical ways we can share God’s welcome with people in everyday life (at work, school, on our street)?
3. Has the risen Jesus drawn you (or someone you know) back into the community of followers? What happened?

TAKE A BREAK (10 min)

During the break, ask someone to share his or her favorite “I am” saying of Jesus: living bread (John 6:51); light of the world (John 9:5); the gate of the sheep (John 10:7); the good shepherd (John 10:11); the resurrection and the life (John 11:25); the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6); or the true vine (John 15:1).



4. DISCOVERING TOGETHER (15 min)

Invite someone in the group to read aloud John 12:1-6, and have someone else read aloud John 13:1-17. Invite the group to reflect together on the power of human touch evident in both stories. Ask them to discuss how touch creates intimacy and deep connection between people, and what these two stories might suggest about the relationship between believers and each other and with Jesus.

Divide the group into pairs and invite them to work from their participant guides through the three questions in the Group Meeting Experience together. Allow time for the pairs to share their findings with the full group.

5. CENTERING TOGETHER (10 min)

John's Gospel is a visual book. It's loaded with visual and verbal images that define the ideals of the faith community. Therefore, it is best experienced visually, drawing together the meaning that individuals elicit from an image as a way of forming common bonds. Lead the group in an experience of meditating on scripture by following the instructions for the Covenant Meditation on John 15:9-13 in their participant guides. Be sure to allow time for them to share with others what words or phrases are meaningful to them.

6. SERVING TOGETHER (5 min)

Read together the “Signs of Faithful Love” at the end of the episode. Break the participants into pairs, and have them review for a moment any notes they recorded and any insights they gained throughout this episode. Invite them to consider how John's Gospel and John's Letters might shape the identity and mission of their congregation. Ask, “What tangible actions are you challenged to undertake as a result of this week's experience?” (for example: visiting a lonely person who has too little physical contact). By now in the Covenant study, the group may be thinking together about a service project to meet a need in their community.

7. NEXT WEEK (5 min)

Turn to Episode 18 and briefly introduce next week's title and theme. Encourage participants to select a verse from the readings that they might commit to memory and share next week. Invite them to bring an mp3 player, smart phone, or other mobile device with music they like to listen to when they are happy, resting, worshipping, or exercising (see the Gathering Together exercise in Episode 18).

8. CLOSING PRAYER (5 min)

Ask for any prayer concerns or joys, and invite participants to write these items down in the space provided under next week's Covenant Prayer. This way, they will have them in front of them as they read throughout the week. Close in a prayer together.



John; 1, 2, and 3 John

LIFE TOGETHER

Abundant, eternal life with others

Bible Readings

Day 1: John 1:1-18; 3-4

Day 2: John 5; 9; 11

Day 3: John 14-17

Day 4: John 18-21

Day 5: 1 John 2-4; 2 John; 3 John

Day 6: Covenant Meditation on John 15:9-13

Day 7: Group Meeting Experience with John 13:1-17

Covenant Prayer

For those who walk in darkness

The word was life, and the life was the light for all people. (John 1:4)

For those who flourish for others

This is the testimony: God gave eternal life to us, and this life is in his Son. (1 John 5:11)

OUR LONGING FOR RELATIONSHIP

We are created to be in relationship— with God and with God's creation. Our tendency to separate from God and others disrupts the rhythms of life and leaves us unsettled, undone, and unsure.



JOHN'S GOSPEL

John's Gospel points us to an authentic community characterized by trust, intimacy, love, and abundant, eternal life. The purpose of the Gospel is clearly stated in John 20:31: "These things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name." The fourth Gospel is a narrative, not a newspaper account. John writes not simply to convey information but to draw you into an encounter with the risen Christ, into a relationship that from then onward will shape every minute of your precious life—every thought, deed, habit, and desire.

John's Gospel was written in stages over decades, taking its final form in approximately 100 CE. This makes it the last Gospel of the four in our New Testament, and right away you'll notice that it's quite different from the other three Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), called Synoptic Gospels because they share many phrases and stories in common. (A good tool for comparing the phrases and stories in these books is *CEB Gospel Parallels*.) We avoid trying to force John into the framework of the Synoptic Gospels. More than 90 percent of John's content doesn't appear in the Synoptics. Many of the dearly loved stories about individuals who encounter Jesus (Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, Lazarus, Thomas) appear only in John. Sometimes we see characters who appear elsewhere, but the particular stories about them told in John are stunningly unique (Mary and Martha, Mary Magdalene, Peter, Thomas). Events sometimes even occur in a different order: In John, the "temple tantrum" occurs at the beginning, not the end, of Jesus' public ministry. Jesus also dies on a different day in John. Don't fret over the differences, but instead ask what John is trying to signify through his way of presenting the story.

John is obsessed with the power of words, so much so that he identifies Jesus as the Word (Greek *logos*). Words can surely lead to life. In John 6, Jesus speaks difficult words that cause him to lose many disciples. At that point he turns to his other disciples and asks them if they, too, would like to leave their committed community. Peter responds, "Lord, where would we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

But words can destroy, as well. That's why any responsible study of the fourth Gospel requires a word of warning about the role of "the Jews" in the narrative. Obviously, Jesus and all of the first disciples were Jewish, as was the early Johannine community. Before the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, Christianity was another form

.....
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.....

of Judaism. But after the destruction of the temple, Christianity began the lengthy process of becoming a separate tradition. As that happened, sadly, this separation sometimes led to Christians using John's Gospel to insult or harm Jews because the original historical context of the Gospel's composition wasn't properly and intelligently tended. To avoid anti-Semitism, unintended or otherwise, the CEB translates the phrase *the Jews* as "Jewish leaders" or "religious leaders" to indicate that the debate was between the Jewish establishment and the Jewish reformers (for example, Jesus of Nazareth).

When the Gospel reached its final draft, the community that read John's story consisted of an amazingly diverse population in terms of culture, religion, race, and ethnicity: Jews, Samaritans, Gentiles, John the Baptist's former followers, Greeks, and Romans. Such diversity is always a gift and sometimes a challenge.

The fourth Gospel engages us with a masterful literary design:

Prologue: John 1:1-18 This rich text reveals much about who Jesus is and who we are in relation to God and each other. Think about how Genesis begins (covered in Episode 1). The prologue establishes all of the major themes that matter to John; everything after 1:18 fills in the details.

The Book of Signs: John 1:19-12:50 This section tells about Jesus' public ministry. He performs seven signs in John (as compared to approximately twenty signs in Mark), and they are never called miracles or deeds of power. They are signs, and signs point to something. In John, they point to the fact that Jesus is equal to God and, therefore, has power to grant life even in the face of death, especially in the face of death.

The Book of Glory: John 13:1-20:31 At this point in the narrative, Jesus turns inward to train his closest disciples as he prepares for his crucifixion, exaltation, and glorification on the cross. The words *glory* and *glorify* appear forty-two times in John, far more than in any other book of the New Testament, and they congregate in these later chapters. Jesus is not a victim—he knows what he has come to do and does it all with calm and peace.

Epilogue: John 21:1-25 John's Gospel has two endings. The first occurs at John 20:31. Chapter 21 was probably added later, perhaps by the same author or perhaps by a later editor. The last chapter is deeply poignant and speaks to our various diverse callings, including our tendency to get into competition with each other even as disciples; the importance of love in action; and the potential sacrifice and humility involved in answering Christ's call.

.....
As you move forward in accordance with God's will, do you proceed deliberately with calm and peace? Jot down some thoughts about when you proceeded with confidence in helping others or standing up for the right thing.
.....



1, 2, and 3 John The letters of John reflect a later phase of the community that produced and read John's Gospel. We don't know whether all three letters were written by the same person (the elder) or whether that person had a hand in writing the fourth Gospel. Thematically speaking, the letters care about many of the same issues that we saw in the Gospel: testifying to truth, believing in Jesus as the incarnate Word, and unity among believers. Upon what should that unity be based? Doctrine, behavior, or love? How are those three related?

Optional: *A bonus video on incarnation and abundant love is available for download from www.CovenantBibleStudy.com.*

But most importantly, the letters announce God's love for us (1 John 4:19), the call to love each other (1 John 4:11), and the promise that fear is not our fate: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment. The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love" (1 John 4:18).

Day 1: John 1:1-18; 3-4

God's children love the light.

When you read John 1:1-18 in the CEB, you will see that it's indented and presented in poetic form because it's a hymn. If you compare John's opening to those of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), you will see that John goes back farther than anyone else, to the very beginning when God and Jesus created every single thing that exists. Jesus is presented in terms of Woman Wisdom, whom John would have known from Proverbs 8. She tries to teach wisdom through the Instruction (Torah), but people tend to prefer foolishness, even though that path never leads to life. But those who do listen to Wisdom, to God's Word, become enlightened by the light of the world and enjoy life as children in God's household.

Optional: *A bonus video retelling the story of Nicodemus is available for download from www.CovenantBibleStudy.com.*



Not long after the prologue we meet Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus “by night” and hears about being born from above. He misunderstands and is stuck at the literal level, wondering how he might be born again, a second time. But Jesus is speaking metaphorically. He appears again in John 7:50 and John 19:39-42 (where he is once again identified as the one who came by night).

Does Nicodemus ever see the light? If not, what stands in his way? If so, how does it affect his life?

The next individual to encounter Jesus is the Samaritan woman in John 4. Unlike Nicodemus, she encounters Jesus in the brightest light of day, at noon. Notice that she engages Jesus in a theological debate and, as a result, receives a revelation that Jesus is God (John 4:26). She then immediately testifies to her neighbors and invites them to encounter Jesus for themselves.

Why is the time of these meetings, night or day, a crucial detail, given what has been said in John 3:17-21?

Day 2: John 5; 9; 11

From healing to discipleship

These chapters share the idea that Jesus provides healing, but the stories differ in certain ways. Compare the behavior of the man in John 5 to the behavior of the Samaritan woman one chapter earlier (John’s placement of material isn’t accidental) and the behavior of the blind man in John 9. Both the Samaritan woman and the blind man are models for the kind of discipleship that John has in mind. John 9 opens with the disciples revealing their assumption that illness is caused by sin. Throughout the chapter, Jesus reorients our vision to show us what true sin and true blindness are: the willful rejection of God and of abundant life, and resignation to existence in a dark, dank spiritual tomb where fear, death, and violence reign.

What makes the blind man an exemplary disciple? First, he is open to the creative power of Jesus: When Jesus spits and makes mud and wipes it on the man’s eyes, we are supposed to remember the Genesis



story where God uses the earth to create human beings. Second, the man tells his truth as he knows it, and he never allows anyone—the neighbors, the educated or powerful religious authorities, not even his own family members—to deny his own experience. He keeps his integrity throughout, no matter what the cost. Third, he publicly testifies to his healing relationship with Jesus. Fourth, the more he encounters Jesus, the deeper his knowledge and faith become. He first calls Jesus just a man (John 9:11), then a prophet (John 9:17), and finally he proclaims, “Lord, I believe,” and worships him (John 9:38).

Compare this story about the blind man with John 11.

Day 3: John 14–17

So that they will be made perfectly one

John 14–17 is known as the farewell discourse. Here Jesus teaches the disciples everything they will need to know to be mature Christian leaders who can create spaces for healthy, authentic, and fruitful communities of dearly loved disciples. In John 14 he assures them that though he will no longer physically be with them, he is always present, as is the Companion. Against the notion that God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are “up there” somewhere, and that we will all eventually get a room in God’s heavenly resort, Jesus once again insists that the movement is always in the other direction. God has always come to us and is always coming to us. In John’s Gospel, Jesus is described as “the one who is coming into the world” (John 11:27). There is no separation between heaven and earth (see John 1:51). As Jesus says of himself and God in John 14:23, “we will come to them and make our home with them.”

In John 15, Jesus warns the disciples that their future won’t be easy, but as long as they love each other and stay connected to him, they will experience peace and joy, even in the midst of the world’s hatred. The discourse concludes with Jesus’ prayer on behalf of his disciples, then and now, that we may all be one in Christ expressly for the sake of the world (John 17:20-21)—the very world that may hate them.

Think of a difficult time in your life. Did you experience peace and joy by loving someone else and staying connected in thought and prayer to Jesus?

Day 4: John 18–21

Resurrection community

In John 14:6, Jesus confidently declares himself to be the way, the truth, and the life. Yet by John 19:30, the truth is put on trial and killed at the hands of the same Pilate who had recently wondered aloud to Jesus, “What is truth?” After birthing the church at the foot of the cross (John 19:25-27), blood and water come out of Jesus’ side—and one is reminded of all the language in John about birth and wombs (John 3:4; 7:38; 16:21). Then one thinks of our rituals for baptism and holy communion. All the makings of being in God’s family are there, but Jesus’ followers are too blinded by grief and fear to move forward into their future story. Only Mary Magdalene ventures to the tomb and finds it empty. Peter and the dearly loved disciple come to see for themselves, but they go back home. Mary remains, stays put, and, by doing so, she receives the first vision of the resurrected Christ and becomes the apostle to the apostles, proclaiming the good news to her community. The disciples fearfully lock themselves in a room, but nothing can separate us from Christ, so Jesus appears to grant them peace and the gift of the Holy Spirit that he had promised earlier. So what do the disciples do? They go back to living their pre-Jesus life. Again, Jesus comes to them. He frees Peter from his shame and infuses them with a sense of calling. They answered it, and the world hasn’t been the same since.

If we acknowledge that each person can find a calling or purpose in life, what calling gives you purpose? What type of service or ministry is engaged through that calling?



Day 5: 1 John 2–4; 2 John; 3 John

Hospitality is Christian love in action.

The Johannine letters worry about Christians who deny the incarnation, the fleshly nature of Jesus, preferring to keep him an abstract doctrine. The author knows that the minute we deny the true humanity of Jesus and the scandal of that uncomfortable, messy truth, we are also likely to turn our eyes away from the true humanity of each other. Incarnation means that Jesus had flesh and blood like us and that we, too, live on this earth embodied and located in very specific circumstances, including our gender, sexuality, race, class, ethnicity, and levels of able-bodiedness.

*Do we value certain bodies more than others in our society?
In our church?*

Surely the Letters teach us about Christian hospitality, which is love in action. We see this in 1 John 3:17: “If a person has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need and that person doesn’t care—how can the love of God remain in him?” Compare 3 John 5: “Dear friend, you act faithfully in whatever you do for our brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers.” Since there was no hotel system in the New Testament era and certainly no welfare system, Christians depended on each other for sustenance, and Christian travelers stayed with other Christians as they traveled.

But the letters display a real tension between hospitality and hatred, between orthodoxy and tolerance. For every verse that commands hospitality, one finds a verse that commands one to refuse hospitality to those who don’t subscribe to proper belief (see 2 John 1:10-11). The letters reveal the tendency for disagreements to lead to schism. It is clear from 1 John 2:18-19 that this church has experienced the painful loss of some of its members. The author goes on the attack and declares those who left to be antichrists and deceivers.

*Is it inevitable that Christians (or even human beings)
consistently choose sides over issues so that the choice
is either/or? Reflect on a situation where someone left a
church or a group where you participated. What might
have prevented that separation?*

Instead we can rely upon the truth expressed, ironically, by the very same author just a few verses earlier: “The person loving a brother and sister stays in the light, and there is nothing in the light that causes a person to stumble. But the person who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and lives in the darkness, and doesn’t know where to go because the darkness blinds the eyes” (1 John 2:10-11).

Day 6: John 15:9-13

Covenant Meditation: Living well for others

Today’s practice focuses on reading scripture in a structured, prayerful way in order to grow more attuned to God’s presence in our daily lives. The classic name for this ancient pattern of praying the scriptures is *lectio divina*, which in Latin means “divine reading.” Traditionally in *lectio divina*, there are four key movements through which we listen to a brief selection of scripture: reading, meditating, praying, and resting (contemplating) in God’s word.

Our passage for today is John 15:9-13, in which Jesus addresses the essence of living well for others by experiencing God’s love. Open your Bible to this scripture and mark its location. Get comfortable where you are seated, placing both feet on the ground and letting your breathing calm.

Read the passage slowly, aloud or silently, paying attention to the whole text—every sentence, phrase, and word. Approach the scripture as though it is new to you. When finished, wait in a minute of silence.

Read the passage again, now listening for one word or phrase that catches your attention. Try not to analyze why a specific word or phrase stands out to you, but receive it as something God invites you to hear. If desired, write this word or phrase in your participant guide. Take three minutes of silence to reflect on what has caught your attention. What does this word or phrase bring to mind for you? Let your mind engage with the word or phrase, and consider what it means to you right now. Resist editing your thoughts.

Read the scripture one last time. Now reflect on feelings or memories your word or phrase evokes. Does your word or phrase point to something that you or someone you know longs for or needs? In as much or as little



silent time as you need, write down any reflections that come to your mind or heart.

When you are ready, offer back in prayer to God all that you have heard, thought, and felt in this spiritual reading practice. Entrust to God any insights, questions, worries, and longings that this scripture brings to light for you. Before you end this time of praying the scripture, ask yourself if you sense an invitation from God to act or respond in some way. There may be a small invitation (to check on a friend) or a broad one (to begin to recycle), or you may not yet sense an invitation. Stay open to the possibility that in the days ahead, an invitation may be revealed through this reading. Offer God thanks, and end the practice with “Amen.”

Group Meeting Experience

John 13:1-17 | Foot washing

We noted in the introduction that John 1–12 can be called the book of signs. That’s where Jesus performs his public ministry. Chapter 12 ends with the story about Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus (not Mary Magdalene and not the sinful woman from the other Gospels), anointing Jesus’ feet as a foreshadowing of his burial, using her hair to wipe his feet. In John 13–14, Jesus wipes the feet of his disciples as he prepares them for his departure, calls them to become mature disciples who serve others in the name of Jesus, and equips them to do greater works than he himself did (John 14:12).

1. Compare the foot washing to John 12:1-6. What do you think about all of the physical touch present in these stories and many others in John’s Gospel? Did you realize that the dearly loved disciple is reclining upon Jesus’ chest, not next to Jesus? Who is touching whom in each story? How would the same kinds of interactions go over in your community today? How does the Gospel’s intimate touching relate to recognizing Jesus as a human being among us?
2. In biblical times, it was usually the job of a Gentile (not Jewish) slave or of a woman to wash the feet of her husband. Why does Peter resist having his feet washed by a person considered

to be his superior? What is Jesus trying to teach his disciples about power in this story? How does this relate to Jesus' proclamation in John 15:15: "I don't call you servants any longer. . . . Instead, I call you friends." Do you think of yourselves as a community of Jesus' friends or as servants submitting to a master? What difference does it make for relating to God and each other in covenant relationship?

3. In John 13:15 Jesus says, "I have given you an example: Just as I have done, you also must do." Have you ever participated in a foot washing? If so, what was it like? Does your community practice foot washing? If so, what effect does that practice have?

SIGNS OF FAITHFUL LOVE

The signs pointing to Jesus (who serves and lives for others, who brings about new birth) are visible through the intensity of personal actions, such as foot washing.

1 John

The message: God is light

This is the message that we have heard from him and announce to you: “God is light and there is no darkness in him at all.” If we claim, “We have fellowship with him,” and live in the darkness, we are lying and do not act truthfully. But if we live in the light in the same way as he is in the light, we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from every sin.

1 John 1:5-7

Praying the word

After reading the scripture passage assigned for today, focus on the imagery used about light and darkness. Intercessory prayer will be your practice today, guided by the scripture. First, think of the news from around the world or in your region or neighborhood, and recall where there are people living in “dark” and heavy circumstances. This may be under the threat of war, hunger, human trafficking, addiction, loneliness, incarceration, poverty, genocide, job loss, or other circumstance brought on by human conflict, neglect, or hunger for power. For each



COVENANT Meditations

circumstance that comes to mind, pray: “God, let your light shine in that place.” If, at the end of this time of prayer, one particular situation stays with you, learn more about it this week, and continue to pray for light to reveal what is happening to the people there.



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